

# Jacques Rancière and Critical Theory

## Issue Introduction

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## Introduction

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For all of the popularity and critical analysis that Jacques Rancière's work has received in English over the last two decades, including several edited volumes and journal special issues, there has been less discussion than one might have thought about the relationship between his work and Frankfurt School critical theory. The 2016 English publication of the 2009 encounter and discussion between Rancière and Axel Honneth clarified that relationship to some degree, and also provides us with a variety of entry points for expanding on Rancière's disparate remarks over the years about Frankfurt School thinkers.<sup>1</sup> In her introductory essay to that volume, Katia Genel outlines two distinct strands of critical theory in the twentieth century: the more narrow (yet nonetheless complex) Frankfurt School tradition running from Horkheimer and Adorno, through Habermas and Honneth, to Rahel Jaeggi; and the broader critical tradition more evident in France, Italy, and the United States, embodied by different fields of critical area studies and neo-Marxist thought.<sup>2</sup> Rancière's work has been much discussed in the context of the latter milieu, but relatively little in the former, though there are of course exceptions.<sup>3</sup> This special issue of the *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* seeks to build on this recent work, which points us in exciting new directions for scholarship that engages themes central to both Rancière and the German tradition of critical theory.

At the outset it is worth explaining why one might think it worthwhile that Rancière's work and that of the Frankfurt School be brought into further critical and productive contact. At a general level, there is significant overlap of conceptual concern between them, much of which will be explored in the essays in this special issue. That concern includes the goal of emancipation, intellectual and otherwise, as well as the critical evaluation of contemporary

society, including understanding that society within the context of modernity. More specifically, in one way or another, at the heart of both Rancière's writings and that of the Frankfurt School thinkers is the conviction that history is key to understanding concepts, their meanings, and their functions.

There are, however, clear differences between the two approaches that indicate to some extent why there has not been more engagement. Rancière's response to the forces of history is to insist on finding the many ways that they have been resisted, reshaped, undone, and transformed. His archival work in *Proletarian Nights* is an early example of this career-long search, illustrating how nineteenth-century French workers sought to reimagine themselves against a backdrop of what appeared as the immovable reality of their work lives.<sup>4</sup> Politics, for Rancière, does just that—takes social formations that present themselves as historical givens and intervenes to disrupt their fullness.

In contrast, early Frankfurt School thinkers such as Adorno and Horkheimer can sometimes appear to interpret modernity as wielding such an all-encompassing influence on us in the present that resistance is futile. This is certainly a disputable characterization, but it is one consistent with Rancière's critiques of many philosophical figures across traditions, from Aristotle and Plato, to Marx, Althusser, and Bourdieu. Even though later Frankfurt School philosophers, such as Habermas and Honneth, actively resist what they see as a totalizing strain of thought in their forbears, their chosen direction is no closer to Rancière's chosen methodology—they remain far too abstract and idealized. This leads to the most obvious difference, in that Rancière is clear about not wanting to author any kind of social or political theory. Much of his work is avowedly antitheoretical in the sense that, rather than abstract claims or ideas, he attempts to focus on specific contexts and their moments, drawing lessons from them that can be tested in other moments, but that are never guaranteed to function in the same way elsewhere. He has written that he sees his work as a series of interventions into specific political contexts, and has rejected the entire tradition and project of Western political philosophy due to its myriad attempts to impose order where there is none.<sup>5</sup> These self-characterizations add up to what appears to be a statement of intent, namely, that he is "not a political philosopher."<sup>6</sup> It seems clear that Rancière is rejecting the label of philosopher while at the same time not denying that he is a political thinker. Indeed, it is his particular way of understanding "politics" that stands at the center of much of his work.

These fault lines between the Rancière and the iterations of the Frankfurt School are ripe for interrogation and analysis, and the five essays published in this volume, along with an interview with Rancière himself, capitalize on the opportunities provided by other recent work. The first three essays by Seth Mayer, Michael Feola, and Danielle Petherbridge stage a confrontation between Rancière and specific Frankfurt School thinkers. The final two shift gears to ask questions about the meaning of critical theory more broadly and Rancière's potential relationship to it. Opening the issue is a pair of essays

analyzing the relationship between Rancière and Jürgen Habermas. Though Rancière does in fact explicitly engage with the Frankfurt School tradition in several moments in his work, it is often to contrast his work on the logic of disagreement with Habermas's political philosophy. Central to Rancière's work is a rejection of the political value of consensus, which he replaces with dissensus, which has made Habermas's consensus-themed work on democracy an obvious foil. This strategy on Rancière's part invites us to ask, is the disagreement between them as stark as Rancière would have it? Though disagreement is foundational for his understanding of politics, Rancière aims to outline scenes of communication and disagreement that yield new political situations and new political subjects. What can Habermas's employment of the transcendental and the ideal speech situation tell us about Rancière's political subjects? More specifically, do we find any rules implicit in scenes of politics that would lend Habermasian insight to Rancière's thought?

Seth Mayer's essay takes up these questions in order to defend Habermas against Rancière's charge that the former's philosophy of communicative rationality and consensus lacks radical bite, arguing that the Habermasian framework of language, disagreement, and democracy can account for the types of political ruptures Rancière outlines. The result is a more radical reading of Habermas than Rancière allows. Mayer positions third-person speech as the hinge of disagreement between the two philosophers. Specifically, he makes the case that Habermas can in fact make sense of "the dynamics of command, exclusion, resistance, and aesthetic transformation" so important to Rancière. At the heart of Mayer's defense is the Habermasian idea that there is no way to get completely outside of our lifeworld, and so the only way to critique it is from within.

Rancière seems to offer a challenge to this idea when he describes politics as an interruption of the prevailing structure of society. At stake in the disagreement between Habermas and Rancière on this point is the status of Rancièrean politics and what exactly it attempts. If it can successfully be described in Habermasian terms, then perhaps Rancière's critique of Habermas is less successful than he believes. Mayer's essay therefore proposes a challenge for Rancière and his supporters that is worth responding to.

Following Mayer, Michael Feola outlines how Rancière and Habermas begin from a similar starting point but end up with very different ideas about the relationship between politics and speech. Rejecting a Habermasian model of political speech focused on consensus, Feola instead endorses Rancière's "excess of words" in order to articulate a view of democratic political agency. At stake here is, in Feola's words, "the normative term of universality." Rancière understands politics and political actors as unable to lay absolute claim to any universalism, which puts him at odds with Habermas' universal conception of rationality. Feola uses this differentiation between Rancière and Habermas to ground an investigation into the possibilities for speaking citizenship. He writes, "At stake is not simply *who* can speak in the idiom of citizenship, but

rather the linguistic resources that can contribute to a politics of equality.” Seen from this angle, Feola argues that Rancière is better positioned to answer questions about how to think about access to more equal speech in circumstances of inequality and unequal power.

With this confrontation between Rancière and Habermas in view, Danielle Petherbridge turns our attention to the next generation of Frankfurt School thinking, contrasting Rancière and Axel Honneth through the lens of recognition alongside Judith Butler, who has her own intriguing relationship to the German tradition of critical theory. In part, Petherbridge argues that Rancière’s politics of subjectivization can be understood in terms of recognizability, a term she understands as crystallizing a series of problems surrounding the processes that either enable or disable recognition. Recognizability is linked to perception and how it structures our lived experiences and through which various elements of our surroundings become visible to us—or not. As such, recognizability exists at a stage prior to normative acts of recognition. Petherbridge examines how Butler, Honneth, and Rancière each offer their own set of relations between recognition, perception, and recognizability. The remainder of her argument, accordingly, asserts that Rancière’s conception of recognizability has room for the possibility for the disruption of domination in a way that Butler’s and Honneth’s do not.

Shifting from particular disagreements to more general issues surrounding Rancière’s place in our understanding of critical philosophy, Alison Ross analyzes the relationship between leisure, reverie, and emancipation in Rancière’s work. Emancipation has long been central to Frankfurt School thought, marking a point of convergence with Rancière. Ross examines this convergence by asking just what constitutes emancipation for Rancière. Going back to Aristotle, the distinction between leisure and work has been key to understanding freedom. Marxism’s understanding of alienation, and the emancipation that would overcome it, is likewise rooted in the dichotomy between leisure and work. And Rancière has certainly focused much of his scholarship on workers and the time they spent doing things other than working, with *Proletarian Nights* being the most famous example.

The protagonists of that work spend their time dreaming of and, importantly, enacting lives other than that of the worker, which might seem to mark Rancière as a theorist of leisure. But, as Ross argues, this would be a mistake. For rather than think within in the distinction between work and leisure, in which each is necessary for the other to be understood, Rancière invokes reverie—the power to do nothing at all—as a state of emancipation. Ross argues that such an understanding of reverie undercuts the work/leisure distinction altogether but does not exhaust the possibilities for emancipation for Rancière. Alongside reverie is emancipation as an act of will, the intellectual emancipation of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which is a certain kind of practice. These two forms of emancipation, one grounded in the will and the other

defined by its absence, are nonetheless connected insofar as they are both understood as communicable experiences. In offering such a theory of Rancièrian emancipation, Ross illustrates an aspect of Rancièrè's work that sets him apart from the critical theory tradition.

In the issue's final essay, we arrive at a fundamental question that underlies the entire problematic of an encounter between Rancièrè and critical theory, namely, what is a "critical" theory? Both Rancièrè and the Frankfurt School philosophers analyze contemporary society, diagnosing its ills. As we survey the contemporary world and the potential of these thinkers to illuminate it for us, we might ask ourselves how we should understand the "critical" aspects of their work. Rancièrè often denies that he has any theories at all, while Adorno is well known for his retreat to abstract theory. How should we take Rancièrè's disavowals? Is there a more robust theoretical apparatus underlying his corpus that draws him closer to the Frankfurt School's methodology, or are his specific interventions and historical examples enough to provide the critical edge he seeks?

Matthew Lampert identifies what he views as the central tenets of Frankfurt School critical theory in order to ask whether or not Rancièrè's philosophy might live up to the name. In arguing that the two are ultimately mutually exclusive he simultaneously shows how, even though Rancièrè would reject the essential components of critical theory, the latter nonetheless can mount a productive critique of his work. The result is a powerful gesture toward a Rancièrian critical theory that lives up to the spirit of Rancièrè's work while also managing to capture its shortcomings. Lampert mines Rancièrè's work in order to find a compatible place within it for the contributions of the social sciences as well as reorienting the concept of emancipation along the lines of the critical self-reflection of the theorist, retaining a core concept of critical theory without running afoul of Rancièrè's insistence on the agency of the oppressed.

Lastly, we present an interview recently conducted with Rancièrè on his relationship with Adorno, appearing in English for the first time here. Conducted by Andrea Allerkamp, Katia Genel, and Mariem Hazmoune, the interview concerns Rancièrè's relationship with Adorno's aesthetics. The interviewers' questions and prompts provide Rancièrè with the opportunity to both distance himself from Adorno in a number of ways as well as to clarify his own views on aesthetics. Most pointedly, Rancièrè marks his own path off from Adorno's by noting that the latter is uninterested in a collective politics of the oppressed. The interview's wide-ranging topics, from literature, poetry, and music to the functioning of the dialectic and the possibilities for emancipation, serve as an apt culmination of this special issue. The fault lines that Rancièrè draws between himself and Adorno complement the readings of his relationship to the Frankfurt School in the preceding essays, as well as prompt further inquiry into how to understand Rancièrè in historical context.

Emancipation and critique, recognition and recognizability, speech and disagreement in politics—each of these concepts calls us to seek out the contours of Rancière’s work alongside that of the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory. The essays and interview collected here illustrate some of the different ways that these concepts intersect through this array of thinkers. Other terrain is left to be traversed. Accordingly, I want to end here by gesturing toward some additional ways that the relationship between Rancière and critical theory might be taken up and issue a call to philosophers working on both to do so.

Perhaps Rancière’s most well-known contribution to philosophical discourse is his idea of the *distribution/sharing of the sensible* (*le Partage du sensible*). Both art and politics are aesthetic insofar as they order our senses and how we understand and feel the world around us. From Horkeimer and Adorno’s analysis of the culture industry, to Benjamin’s interpretation of our aesthetic categories, and Adorno’s final grand work on aesthetic theory, the Frankfurt School has scrutinized the connections between aesthetic production and our social world. How does Rancière’s notion of the sensible critique or modify those approaches? Is his idea of the world exhausted by the split between art and politics as distributors of the sensible, or do Frankfurt School thinkers modify his social calculus? Lastly, which methodology allows us to approach art criticism in order to better understand our social world? Rancière gestures toward the possibilities for such engagement in the interview included here.

Finally, writings on ideology and ideology critique have seen a resurgence in the last decade, both within the paradigm of critical theory and without. This trend has brought together philosophers from different traditions, such as Rahel Jaeggi, Karen Ng, Sally Haslanger, and Jason Stanley, among many others.<sup>7</sup> Oddly, though, Rancière has not been taken up in these discussions. While ideology in the traditional sense is left unspoken by Rancière he does, in my view, transform and redeploy the concept. It seems to me that in his understanding of politics as the articulation of a wrong by the “part that has no part,” which unmasks contradictions in the self-understanding of the ruling class, we get much of the same structure as in more traditional philosophical discussions of ideology and ideology critique. The primary conceptual motor has shifted from freedom to equality, but some form of internal critique and the unmasking of contradictions remains. How significantly can the Rancièrian notion of “politics” be understood as a form of ideology critique? Both are deployed in the service of removing domination, so how close does Rancière’s view of equality come to the sort of freedom envisaged by more traditional theorists of ideology?

The work presented here pushes us, even after all that has been written about Rancière, to think of his work in new contexts. It also hopefully sets the groundwork for a new set of discussions of his conception of politics, as the

world around us calls for disruptions and interventions day after day in the name of equality and against the reinforcement of the status quo.

1 Jacques Rancière and Axel Honneth, *Recognition or Disagreement: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*, eds. Katia Genel and Jean-Philippe Deranty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

2 Katia Genel, “Jacques Rancière and Axel Honneth: Two Critical Approaches to the Political,” in *Recognition or Disagreement: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity*, 6-7.

3 Jean-Philippe Deranty, “Jacques Rancière’s Contribution to the Ethics of Recognition,” *Political Theory* 31, no. 1 (2003): 136-156. Matheson Russell and Andrew Montin, “The Rationality of Political Disagreement: Rancière’s Critique of Habermas,” *Constellations* 22 (2015): 543.

4 Jacques Rancière, *Proletarian Nights: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (London: Verso, 2012).

5 Jacques Rancière, “A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière,” *Parallax* 15, no. 3 (2009): 114-115; Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xii.

6 Jacques Rancière, “Comment and Responses,” trans. Rachel Bowlby and Davide Panagia, *Theory & Event* 6, no. 4 (2003): ¶ 10.

7 Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Jason Stanley, *How Propoganda Works* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Rahel Jaeggi, “Rethinking Ideology,” in *New Waves in Political Philosophy*, eds. Boudewijn de Bruin and Christopher F. Zurn (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 63-86; Karen Ng, “Ideology Critique from Hegel and Marx to Critical Theory,” *Constellations* 22, no. 3 (2015): 393-404.