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Anti-Machiavellian Rancière: Aesthetic Cartography, Sites of Incommensurability and Processes of Experimentation*

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ABSTRACT | I argue that Rancière's philosophy is anti-Machiavellian in the sense that his distinction between police and politics is not an originary division, but rather a gap in the sensible fabric of society. He thus moves from politics as a theory of agency to an aesthetic cartography of situations. It is a question of mapping the emergence of a political problem within a singular situation, and the *ethics* of such mapping is the insistence on the irreducible contingency of an existential choice of the problem. I will elaborate some new concepts ("sites of incommensurability," "experimentation," "fragmentation of social space") and specify how the three logics of identification, dis-identification, and over-identification are three ways of constructing and dealing with situated problems.

KEYWORDS | Politics, democracy, social sciences, political conflicts, ethics, political movements (Thesaurus).

Rancière antimaquiaveliano: cartografía estética, sitios de inconmensurabilidad y procesos de experimentación

RESUMEN | Defiendo la idea que la filosofía de Rancière es antimaquiaveliano, en el sentido en que su distinción entre policía y política no es una división primaria, sino una brecha en el tejido sensible de la sociedad. No piensa entonces la política en términos de una teoría de agencia sino como una cartografía estética de situaciones. Se trata de trazar la emergencia de un problema político dentro de una situación singular, y la ética de tal cartografía es la insistencia sobre la contingencia irreductible de una elección existencial del problema. Elaboro conceptos nuevos ("sitios de inconmensurabilidad", "experimentación", "fragmentación del espacio social"), y específico como las tres lógicas de identificación, desidentificación y sobreidentificación son tres maneras de construir y tratar problemas situados.

PALABRAS CLAVE | Política, democracia, ciencias sociales, conflictos políticos, ética, movimiento político (Thesaurus).

Rancière antimaquiaveliano: cartografia estética, lugares de incomensurabilidade e processos de experimentação

RESUMO | Defendo a ideia de que a filosofia de Rancière é antimaquiaveliana, no sentido em que sua diferenciação entre polícia e política não é uma divisão primária, mas sim uma brecha no tecido sensível da sociedade. Não pensa então a política em termos de uma teoria de agência, mas sim como uma cartografia estética de situações. Tenta-se estabelecer a emergência de um problema político dentro de uma situação singular, e a ética dessa cartografia é a insistência sobre a contingência irreductível de uma escolha existencial do problema. Elaboro conceitos novos ("lugares de incomensurabilidade", "experimentação", "fragmentação do espaço social") e específico como as três lógicas de identificação, desidentificação e superidentificação são três maneiras de construir e tratar problemas situados.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE | Política, democracia, ciências sociais, conflitos políticos, ética, movimento político (Thesaurus).

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Jacques Rancière conceives of the political situation as a paradoxical “disagreement” between two incommensurable ways of investing and configuring the sensible—a consensual police logic and a dissensual democratic logic. There is a strong tendency in contemporary French political philosophy to understand this distinction between police and politics as an originary division in the Machiavellian sense of the term—as a dichotomy in which the constant renewal of conflict between the nobles who want to dominate and the people who do not want to be dominated is what keeps society together and “indefinitely delays” its dissolution into civil war. That is to say, conflictive disorder is “paradoxically” generative of political order, an order that lasts only in so far as conflict is kept alive through the different struggles that traverse the social sphere and resist domination by the nobles. This Machiavellian originary division is reconceptualized in contemporary French political philosophy as being constitutive of democracy. Democracy is the political regime based on indeterminacy and contingency because it is nothing other than the space in which these conflicts take place—where the terms of the people against the nobles are substituted, as in the case of Miguel Abensour, by democracy versus the state. This democratic remobilization of Machiavelli constitutes a predominant branch of contemporary French philosophy, one that typically and quite uncritically includes Rancière and his concept of dissensual democracy among its proponents.

I will argue that Rancière cannot be subsumed into this tradition, and that he is in fact anti-Machiavellian in the sense that the distinction between police and politics is not that of an originary division, but rather of a *gap* in the very fabric of the sensible between two incommensurable logics (*l'écart*). This hypothesis will permit us to reconstruct and radicalize Rancierian philosophy. More concretely, it will enable us to define some new concepts from within his thought, revolving around the idea of the gap, namely the concepts of “sites of incommensurability,” “experimentation,” “fragmentation of social space” and “utopian over-identification.” In order to specify the singularity of his political philosophy, we will define how he moves from politics understood as a theory of agency to politics as an aesthetic cartography of situations, and how he “decenters” traditional philosophical-political thought by dissolving conceptual guarantees that any logic or agency is adequate to a situation. More precisely, for Rancière it is a question of mapping the emergence of a political problem within a singular situation, and the *ethics* of such mapping is the insistence on the irreducible contingency of an existential choice of the problem.

Machiavelli in Contemporary French Political Philosophy

Marxism has undoubtedly shaped the landscape of French political philosophy in the 20th century, as such

an ever-present current of thought, especially from the 1940's through the 70's with Jean-Paul Sartre and Louis Althusser as its central proponents, that a large number of important emerging thinkers have formulated their positions either through solidarity with, critical reconceptualization of, or “constructive” rejection of Marxism. The last case is characteristic of the above-mentioned branch of contemporary French philosophy based on a democratic remobilization of Machiavelli, the origin of which can perhaps be traced back to the founding of the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie* by Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis in 1948, in which Jean-François Lyotard participated notably until its dissolution in 1967. Lefort and Castoriadis also wrote for the journal *Textures*, which lasted from 1969 to 1975, along with Miguel Abensour, who may also be considered the most important proponent of this Machiavellian-democratic branch today.

Largely as a reaction against the totalitarian experiences of communism in the Stalinist USSR, and as an attempt to locate totalitarian tendencies on a theoretical and conceptual level in Marxism, this Machiavellian tradition defends democracy as a regime of perpetual indeterminacy and division which—through its very dynamics of conflict—wards off totalitarian unification, bureaucratisation and State domination. As Lefort puts it in commenting on Machiavelli: “Order is not instituted through a rupture with disorder; it merges with a continual disorder” (Lefort 2010, 518, my translation).

This is what he calls “the principle of the internal division of society,” based on the Machiavellian idea of an originary division between the nobles who seek to dominate and the people who seek to avoid being dominated. As Machiavelli famously puts it in his analysis of the Roman Republic: “I think that those who condemned the tumults between the nobles and the plebe blame what was actually the principal cause of liberty in Rome and that they are more attentive to the noise and cries caused by the tumults than the good effects that they produced” (Machiavelli 1987, 39, my translation). Reconceptualized as a conception of democracy, this tradition thus recasts conflict as central to the vitality of society. One might say that the whole network of concepts—conflict, democracy, the state, emancipation, and so forth—is based on the logic of this originary division. As Abensour puts it: “The conceptual horizon according to which the idea of savage democracy is to be approached is thus that of the originary and irreducible division of the social, its enigmatic identity—the ordeal of the uncontrollable that allows the indetermination of the social realm, and its necessary inner opposition, to unfold freely” (Abensour 2007, 251, my translation).

We might, in order to introduce the concept of this Machiavellian originary division, insist on two of its basic elements. *Firstly*, the originary division exists

only insofar as there are opposing forces actively keeping it alive through the constant renewal of conflict. Machiavelli understood these opposed forces as the nobles versus the people, whereas Abensour reconfigures this distinction in terms of the state as the agent of domination and democracy as the agent of emancipation: “if the State is inseparable from servitude, inversely the democratic revolution is inseparable from a destruction, or from an intention of destruction, of State power” (Abensour 1998, 127, my translation).¹ Secondly, the constant renewal of conflict is actually what accounts for the health and vitality of the political regime. If the conflict ceases, the originary division dissolves, and—as Machiavelli would put it—the city-state deteriorates into civil war. The opposed forces produce, through their very conflict, the vitality and sustainability of democracy. Abensour says: “Is democracy not the form of society that, unsatisfied with merely recognizing the legitimacy of internal conflict, comprehends conflict instead as the originary source of an ever renewed invention of liberty” (Abensour 2007, 251, my translation).

By suggesting that it is in the dynamics of perpetual democratic conflict that liberty asserts itself and that a sustainable political regime constructs itself, this tradition carves out a theoretical position *between* Marxism and liberalism, criticizing them both for their inability to recognize conflict as both irreducible and generative of a democratic society. As Martin Breaugh puts it in commenting on Abensour: “For our divided societies haunted by the spectre of secession, the political will of fabricating unity and harmony is irresistible” (Breaugh 2006, 133, my translation). The criticisms they propose are thus negative descriptions of the specific ways in which this self-perpetuating democratic conflict is displaced by ideas of unification and consensualization.² In other words, in the logic

of this Machiavellian tradition, both Marxism³ and liberalism⁴ depoliticize politics by displacing its very essence—democracy understood as originary division or as self-perpetuating conflict.

There is a strong tendency to read Rancière as part of this tradition, which implies supposing that his distinction between police and politics is an originary division. It seems to me that by dispelling this Machiavellian reading of Rancière, his philosophy becomes much more complex and, I would add, much more interesting and important.

Anti-Machiavelli

The hypothesis that we will develop is thus the following: Rancière is anti-Machiavellian because the distinction between police and politics is *not* an originary division. There is nothing in Rancière that would permit subsuming local, singular struggles to the general regime of savage democracy, inscribing a locally situated political actor within the generality of struggle against forces of domination—as Abensour puts it: “Is democracy not the form of society that institutes a

1 We note the similarity with the Aristotelian concept of *energeia* that is *being as pure actuality*: the constant renewal of conflict generates its own condition of possibility wherein it actualizes itself. Democracy, as the regime wherein constant conflict is possible, is sustained by nothing else than the constant conflict that generates it. Democracy, in this conceptualization, is *energeia*, which also explains why Hannah Arendt is an important reference point for both Lefort and Abensour, since her concept of *bios politikos*—the specifically political “mode of being” of man—is in fact an elaboration of the Aristotelian concept of *energeia*.

2 As Abensour puts it: “Under the influence of a reinterpreted Machiavelli (*Le travail de l'oeuvre*, 1971), Claude Lefort defends the idea that every human city is ordered and constructed by an originary division in which the division of desires manifests itself: the desire of the nobles to command and oppress, and the desire of the people to be neither commanded nor oppressed—the desire of freedom. We see that within this intelligibility of the political, every manifestation of the social is inhabited, haunted, by the threat of its own dissolution” (Abensour 2007, 250, my translation).

3 This Machiavellian-democratic tradition rejects Marxism on account of its “economic determinism” which is supposed to reduce the political to the social, or to turn politics into an epiphenomenon of the economic base. According to this logic, Marxism displaces the originary division by defending a model of unification through the universal project of revolutionary emancipation of the proletariat. It is thus criticized for being based on a teleological rationality, on a hierarchical and bureaucratizing organization of any political movement due to its avant-garde-party structure, on displacing the contingency and indeterminacy of democracy and replacing it with a process of fabrication of the new society yet to come, on an instrumentalization of politics, etc. As Lefort puts it: “Unlike Marx, Machiavelli understands social division as constitutive of political society, and, thus, as insurmountable. [...] It is clear that praise of the tumults is not linked to any faith in a final stage, as in the case of Marx, a stage in which the causes of the division would be suppressed. Tumults, insofar as they are stirred up by the people’s desire for freedom, are good” (Lefort 2010, 568, my translation).

4 The Machiavellian-democratic tradition rejects liberalism as a consensual or technocratic logic that “closes” the spaces of conflict and insurgency by seeing them as a threat to “good order” instead of understanding them as generative of democracy and liberty. Liberalism thus depoliticizes conflictive democratic life by seeking principles of good governance or justice, by conceiving of a deliberative democracy through consensual registers, by reducing the political to the legal, by emptying spaces of conflict through representative democracy, or by delimiting politics to discussions on the just distribution of goods. This logic is quickly assimilated with the state, understood as the institutionalized organization of society that wards off any (originary) division and dissensus in its consensualized spaces. Philosophically, we find a critique of thinkers like Rawls and Habermas, or Plato and Hobbes here, because they seek principles of consensus and order and conceive of conflict as undermining the well-functioning bases of society.

human link across political struggles and that, by this very institution, renews its tie with the origin of liberty that is always in need of rediscovery?" (Abensour 2007, 274, my translation). Disagreement, the relation between police and politics, is not an originary division between opposed and distinct agents or agencies, but a gap in the fabric of the sensible between incommensurable logics.

By moving from the concept of originary division to the concept of gap, one uproots and modifies the whole network of concepts and fundamentally alters the very logic of politics. The difference between the Machiavellian tradition and the anti-Machiavellian thought of Rancière is that of a complete rupture and thus a paradigmatic difference. Before explaining the concept of the gap more precisely, I will indicate the difference with four ideas that I will develop and justify throughout the text.

Firstly, we are moving from a theory of political agency to an aesthetic cartography of political situations. Secondly, we are moving from a social space *divided* by an originary division to a social space *fragmented* by multiple gaps. Thirdly, we are moving from a binary logic for thinking about *contradictory* relations of forces to a fluid and strategic field of *incommensurable* relations of forces. Fourthly, we are moving from politics as resistance against domination and as the ever-renewed construction of liberty, to politics as strategic experimentation and the construction and treatment of situated problems.

In order to better understand these differences between the originary division and the gap, I will first develop the idea of what it means for the relation between police and politics to be a gap.

Rancière describes this relation as "the contradiction of two worlds lodged in a single world" (Rancière 1995, 49, my translation). How should we understand this paradoxical definition? Initially we can point out that "two worlds lodged in a single world" means that there are two different types of territories investing the *same* space, that is to say, two different modes of organizing the connections and oppositions between the same bodies, things, and words in one social space. More precisely, whereas the social order identifies and codifies these bodies, things, and words according to a consensual register, democracy dis-identifies and decodifies these same bodies, things, and words according to a dissensual register, with the two laying out very different "landscapes of the possible." But with respect to this initial observation we have to specify the type of relation that exists between these two territories in the same space. This relation is not really one of contradiction; it is rather one of incommensurability. As Rancière puts it: "In this way the bringing into relationship of two unconnected things [namely the police and politics] becomes

the measure of what is incommensurable between two orders: between the order of the unequalitarian distribution of social bodies [...] and the order of the equal capacity of speaking beings in general. It is indeed a question of incommensurables, but these incommensurables are nevertheless measured in regard to each other" (Rancière 1995, 67, my translation). Let us first emphasize the paradox of what Rancière claims here: By definition, if two things are incommensurable they cannot be measured one against the other because there is simply no common measurement between them. However, it is precisely this paradox that Rancière seeks to think about and to elaborate; it is this paradox that characterizes the disagreement or more generally the concept of the gap. We can thus understand the incommensurable relation between police and politics in the following way: The two worlds, or the two territories, invest the *same* social space, the same surface, the same bodies, things, and words, and they are at one and the same time incommensurable (they have no common measurement) *and* measured one against the other. Two worlds then, with modalities and dynamics so different that they have no common measurement, but which are nonetheless tangled up in a single space, joined together in the form of a knot, precisely because they invest and overlap in the same space.

This concept of the gap will allow us to define a Rancierian concept of experimentation, as well as the idea of social spaces as being *fragmented* by gaps. The gap is, as we have defined it, a site of incommensurability, a space of connections between two incommensurable logics. Because of the incommensurability of the connections, there is no internal contradiction that already carves out a path of resolution or that already privileges a certain constellation of connections as the outcome of a dialectical process. If we are dealing with a form of anti-Machiavellianism, we are thus also dealing with anti-dialectics. In the space of this incommensurability, there can only be processes of open, contingent and strategic *experimentation*. We can thus conceptualize experimentation as the concrete processes that play, join, disconnect, fumble, strategize, configure and create within the spaces of these gaps. And we can define a social space as a space fragmented by gaps inciting experimentations. In relation to experimentation, we are here generalizing what Rancière says about thought: "Thought, for it to have something to work on, has to have points where it jams, where it measures itself against something that it cannot absorb" (Rancière 2012, 101, my translation). We might say that what puts not only thought, but also social landscapes or political situations to work, are the aporias, the tensions, or the gaps that traverse their fabric and rationality, because it is precisely there that they are pushed to experiment, at the point where they measure themselves against what they cannot absorb, against their sites of incommensurability.

It is thus possible to specify why we are moving from a theory of political agency to an aesthetic cartography of political situations. This is because it is no longer a question of identifying the *function* of politics or of defining what actually makes a political agent political—which is what Abensour is doing in defining democracy as the perpetuation of the originary division through conflictive resistance against the state.⁵ What Rancière proposes is an aesthetic cartography of the sites of incommensurability that fragment social spaces and that constitute the aporetic points of open and contingent experimentation reconfiguring the coordinates of the distribution of the sensible. It is no longer a question of conceptualizing the role a political actor plays in relation to a political regime such as democracy, but rather a question of mapping the concrete experimentations taking place in a given situation—the reconfigurations of the sensible in terms of temporalities, horizons, inventions of practices and reinvestments of laws and institutions, reterritorializations within the network of social codes and concrete spaces, modes of critique and polemic rearrangement of social relations. The Machiavellian-democratic originary division is supposed to explain “what is really taking place” in a political situation (inscribing the singularity of the conflictive situation into the generality of democracy as a self-perpetuating regime of indetermination), whereas Rancière’s aesthetic cartography searches for the gaps and the processes of experimentation in the very immanence of the situation.

The reading of Rancière that I propose can thus be summed up in two points. Firstly, we no longer understand the distinction between police and politics as an originary division, as a dichotomy or as any kind of binary logic, but as a specific gap between two incommensurable logics that fragments the social space and incites processes of open, contingent and strategic experimentation.⁶ And therefore,

5 As Abensour says: “Democracy is not the accompaniment of a process that would entail the disappearance of the State in a smooth space without any rough edges, but rather the determinate institution of a conflictive space, of a space *against*, of a agonistic scene where two antagonistic logics face each other, where there develops a struggle without respite between the autonomization of the State as form and the life of the people as action” (Abensour 1998, 126, my translation).

6 This point leads, perhaps surprisingly, to relativize and even minimize the importance of the idea of equality within Rancière’s specifically *political* work. Even if Rancière retains equality as a central notion in *On the Shores of Politics* and *Disagreement*, it is nevertheless reconceptualized with respect to his earlier work. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* equality was a social relation based on horizontal principles, but in his political thought equality becomes an operative principle related to *interruption* of the police order. This means that equality is merely the logic of the actions that interrupt and block this order, the actions that *open* up the political space of dissensus, *but* equality in this sense does not predetermine the social relations that populate this

secondly, we no longer understand his conceptualization of politics as a theory of agency or of action; we are rather dealing with an aesthetic cartography mapping the fragmented construction of social spaces through its gaps as experimental sites of incommensurability. We will introduce a third point here to which we will return later: There are not just two incommensurable logics—police and politics—that fragment social spaces and dynamics, but in fact three—police, politics, and utopian over-identification.

Police and Emancipation as Operative Concepts

Starting with these three points, it is possible to elaborate some immediate consequences for Rancière’s main political concepts. Firstly, the category of the police is not, as is commonly supposed, a static order of conservative domination, but rather a dynamic and strategic order that can be better or worse depending on the problems that it constructs and seeks to deal with. Secondly, the state cannot be understood as a domain of domination or as any kind of predefined agency (as Abensour intends), but one that should be understood as a multitude of laws, practices, institutions, spaces, actors, etc. that can function according to different logics. There is thus a very important difference between the police as a consensual logic, and the state, in the sense that the devices of the state can be configured in both consensual and dissensual ways depending on the immanence of the situation.⁷ Thirdly—and this is the point that perhaps most obviously presupposes a complexification of Rancierian philosophy, but from within said philosophy—*because* the gaps are not incarnated by any agency, but rather form part of a situation as sites of experimentation. This opens up conceptually due to the fact that emancipatory movements are themselves ambiguously traversed

political space—which might be, for strategic reasons and to a certain extent, hierarchical. The political criticism that Rancière directs at the logic of equality in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*: Jacques Rancière, *La Mésentente*, (1995, 58–59). This political reconceptualization of equality is not taken into account in the reading of Rancière (1991) by Todd May, who thinks of political dissensus in terms of the horizontal social relations outlined in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, thus presenting an “anarchistic” version of Rancière, Todd May (2008). Our reading of Rancière is thus opposed to May’s, due to a different reading of the political concept of equality.

7 As Rancière puts it: “The forms of democracy [...] are in no way oblivious to the existence of elected assemblies, institutional guarantees of freedom of speech and expression, state control mechanisms. They see in these the conditions for being exercised and in turn modify them. But they do not identify with them.” (Rancière 1995, 141, my translation.) And: “That which is normally seen to be the place of politics, that is, the set of State institutions, is not a homogeneous place. Its configuration is determined by the relations between the political logic and the police logic” (Rancière 1995, 56, my translation).

by these three different logics. A consensual police logic and an over-identificatory utopian logic may be part and parcel of a dissensual emancipatory movement. That is to say, democratic movements may be fragmented by these gaps from within, just as the state may be.

Thus, an important difference in relation to the Machiavellian tradition is that emancipation is not *the* dynamic that carries the fate of the world on its shoulders due to the way in which it is to democracy as a regime of self-perpetual conflict, it is rather *a* dynamic that inserts itself singularly into and reconfigures a network of practices, laws, words, spaces and institutions. It has its own horizons, distributions of possibilities and impossibilities, strategies, capacities and workings that might as well, for strategic reasons, reproduce domination as dispel it. In other words, Abensour believes there is a conceptual guarantee that emancipation is the adequate dynamics for the problem of politics because its fundamental or “real” role is to perpetuate the originary division of democracy against the state.⁸ Emancipation is thus the answer to the problems of politics. With Rancière, however, it seems that this conceptual guarantee is dissolved. Because emancipation is no longer rooted in a theory of agency, it becomes instead an operative concept in the aesthetic cartography. It is an operative concept in the sense that what matters is its singular and territorialized reconfigurations—the specific procedures, horizons, strategies, tensions and problems produced by its dis-identification—but it can no longer conceptually guarantee its own adequacy in relation to the situation it reconfigures. The consequence may be surprising and will almost certainly seem perverse in the eyes of democratic Machiavellians: In certain cases, a police logic may be better than an emancipatory logic; in certain cases, consensus may function better than dissensus. This is related to a connected decentering: What matters here is not the quality of the agent and the logic of the agency, but the choice of a problem and the capacity to deal with it.

We are thus facing one of the most mysterious claims of *La mésentente*, one that Rancière only mentions in passing: “The police can procure all sorts of goods,

and one police can be infinitely preferable to another one. This does not change its nature, which is the only thing we are questioning here” (Rancière 1995, 54, my translation). What if, going beyond the consideration of its “nature” (its consensual logic) only, and contextualizing its functioning in concrete situations, we had to relativize it in the sense that it is not simply a domain or agency of domination but a strategic dynamic that may also have positive impacts depending on the problems it chooses and the way it deals with them? What if the question is not simply one of domination versus emancipation, but the ability to pose the “right” problems and to experiment in dealing with them?

How to Constitute a Political Problem Identification, Dis-Identification, and Over-Identification

I think this is where we can see why Rancière claims he is not a political philosopher. The reason lies in the way he rethinks what constitutes a political problem. Instead of defining the “real” problem of politics, as Abensour does—perpetuating the originary division through a constant renewal of democratic conflict—it seems to me that Rancière focuses instead on the concrete conditions of the emergence of a problem: In what circumstances does the problem arise? How is it situated? Who enunciates it? And who is able to hear, understand, and invest it? With his aesthetic cartography, Rancière is precisely trying to think of the network of subjective investments revolving around the constitution of problems addressing society. If there is a scene of disagreement, there is a group of people dis-identifying themselves from the social order by interrupting its functioning in order to materialize the problems. Take for instance the Arab Spring: There was a large group of people in Tahrir Square calling themselves the “people of Egypt,” who dis-identified from their social roles, functions and identities, thus creating a rupture in the functioning of the social order by this demonstration of equality and materializing radical problems, metonymically concentrated in this case in the name of “Hosni Mubarak.”

There is a critical capacity here, an effort to address problems facing society, emanating from this demonstration of equality by people with no title or formal right to pose such problems—*problems too radical* to be posed within the specific consensual police configuration of Egyptian society. The question that Rancière asks, it seems to me, is not how these people configure a public space of plurality or a savage democracy resisting the domination of the Egyptian state; it is rather what the problems expressed by these voices are, how they concretely reconfigure social spaces and temporalities, how they reinvest their social roles and functions in order to give weight to these problems, how these

8 This idea of defining what politics is “really” about is part of the definition and the critique that Rancière proposes of political philosophy. As he puts it: “This operation by which philosophy expels from itself the disagreement is therefore naturally connected to the project of ‘really’ doing politics, of realizing the true essence of what politics talks about. Philosophy does not become ‘political’ because politics is an important object that requires its intervention. It becomes so because settling the situation of the rationality of politics is a condition for defining what is supposed to be properly philosophical” (Rancière 1995, 15, my translation).

problems and subjectivations interact with the social order in the form of the police, and how the different forces investing or resisting these problems deal with them. It is through such processes that we can see change, if we can see it at all—considering that the disagreement between police order and politics is precisely a site of incommensurability that incites processes of open and strategic experimentation on both “sides.”

The political question for Rancière is therefore not the traditional “What is politics?” question of political philosophy, but rather “What are our concrete existential problems and how can we deal with them?”

As Gilles Deleuze puts it in his book on Henri Bergson: “It’s the solution that counts, but the problem always gets the solution that it merits on account of the way it is posed, the conditions in which we determine it to be a problem, the means and the concepts that we have to pose it” (Deleuze 2011, 5, my translation). So, how is a problem to be posed with Rancière? That is, how is the way a political problem is constructed within the different logics of identification (police, consensus), dis-identification (politics, dissensus), and over-identification (political philosophy, utopia) to be analyzed?

Utopian Over-Identification

Let us start with the third logic. In addition to consensual police logic and dissensual political logic, in *La mésentente* Rancière defines a third logic that he denominates “political philosophy.” This is often passed over as being simply a criticism of philosophical *theory*, rather than a third logic on the same level as police and politics, a third way of configuring the sensible that functions in concrete situations. We will instead pose the hypothesis that it is a logic to be included in the aesthetic cartography, so that the political situation is not simply the disagreement between police and politics, but a field of gaps engendered by the incommensurable “relations” among three different logics: identification, dis-identification and over-identification. Rancière says that in political philosophy it is a question of “suppressing the difference between politics and police. The principle of the philosophers’ politics is the identification of the principle of politics as an activity with that of the police as a determination of the distribution of the sensible that defines the parts of individuals and of parties” (Rancière 1995, 97, my translation).⁹ Political philosophy is thus different from the police, because it is

the *a priori* suppression of the difference between police and politics. It configures a horizon wherein disagreement would be impossible, a horizon wherein the social order is, or rather will be, organized in such a way that every part will necessarily correspond to its identity—a horizon that excludes from the outset any excess, dissensus or democracy. If this is the role of political philosophy in relation to police and politics, then how can its internal functioning as a utopian over-identification be analyzed more precisely?

It seems to me to function according to a logic of *correspondence*: On the one hand, correspondence between an everyday social identity or function—such as that of a bus driver, an immigrant, a philosopher, a woman, a carpenter, a prisoner, etc.—and on the other, a utopian over-identification—the territories to which this social identity is assigned in a harmonized or “utopianized” web of social relations. It is a correspondence between a determinable material (social identity) and a determinant ideal (utopian over-identity). Political philosophy in this sense is the project of configuring the utopian over-identification of every social function, of realizing the correspondence between the social identities and the utopian over-identities, of fabricating a new world that corresponds to the utopian distribution of social relations.¹⁰

If over-identification thus functions according to a logic of *correspondence* between a determinable material and a determinant ideal, or between an identity and an over-identity, the form of the problem is that of teleological *adjustment*: the task of balancing the two variables of the correspondence. Any social problem or disorder thus becomes a *symptom of the lack* of the over-identity. This logic seems to be evident among the utopian socialist societies in 19th century France, where all the problems of (capitalist) society are understood as symptoms of the lack of the utopian society that is yet to come, and where the concrete, utopian societies were spaces of experimentation with the teleological fabrication of this utopian society. However, we will focus our study on how this over-identificatory logic seems to have been operative in the French government policy that created the first undocumented workers known as the *sans-papiers* in France in 1972.

⁹ Rancière also says the following about political philosophy: “What is called ‘political philosophy’ might well be the set of operations of thought whereby philosophy tries to rid itself of politics, to suppress a scandal in thought proper to the exercise of politics. This theoretical scandal is nothing more than the rationality of disagreement” (Rancière 1995, 15, my translation).

¹⁰ This logic seems to correspond to Derrida’s criticism of Francis Fukuyama in *Espectros de Marx* as incarnating one of the Marx’s spectres, an *idealist* logic: “Let us accept, provisionally, the hypothesis that everything that *goes badly* in the world today only measures the hiatus between an empirical reality and a regulatory ideal [...] The worth and the evidence of the ideal are not compromised, intrinsically, by the historical inadequacy of the empirical realities. From here [...] the appeal to a certain *spirit* of the Marxist critique is still important and should continue indefinitely being necessary to denounce and reduce *as much as possible* the hiatus, to adjust ‘reality’ to the ‘ideal’ in a necessarily infinite process” (Derrida 1998, 100, my translation).

Said government policy was based on the idea of moving from an “endured and anarchical immigration” to an “organized immigration” (Barron *et al.* 2011, 6, my translation). The policy thus played on the projection of a social order where there would be no “anarchical” excesses to disturb the smooth running of immigration in which every part would correspond to its consensual identity. What this in fact entails is precisely an over-identification of the immigrant, in two different senses.

Firstly, the social identity of the “immigrant” is read as a negative lack of over-identity, and thus considered “anarchical and endured.” This is different from police identification, in which the “immigrant” identity is given through the distribution of laws, institutions, practices, social codes, etc., and is thus an assigned position within a functional network rather than the symptom of a lack. Secondly, this social identity is inserted into a teleological horizon measured by over-identification—the fabrication of an “organized immigration.” The problem is therefore posed as a problem of *teleological adjustment*: how to bring the social identity—the (negatively over-identified) “anarchical” immigrant—to the over-identity—the “organized” immigrant? How is the over-identity to be fabricated? This is the way a problem is posed within the logic of over-identification.

But there is a gap here that is presupposed by over-identification as part of its very logic. The way that “political philosophy” “[suppresses] the difference between politics and police” is by inscribing the *consensual identity* into the teleological trajectory of an over-identity. It thus opens up a site of incommensurability between police identification and utopian over-identification inciting processes of experimentation. The problem is the same for the utopian socialists as for the French government: how to concretize the over-identity in the police order of practices, of circulations and of discourses, in the ordered configuration of everyday life? In other words, how to reconfigure the laws, practices, institutions, social codes, etc. of the social order in order to move from anarchical immigration to ordered immigration? What the over-identificatory logic has to experiment with, as part of its very logic of teleological adjustment, is the police order.

Thus, for instance, in 1972 the government prohibited any regularization, any attribution of visas to persons already present in French territory. Before this, visas had normally been given to anyone who was working, even if they had no visa or had only a tourist visa when they were hired (Barron *et al.* 2011, 8). The new government policy thus reconfigured the police, just as it reconfigured the distribution of places, as well as the functionality and the modes of visibility of the bodies occupying them, and the set of possibilities and impossibilities attached to these places in order to ensure that immigrant workers no

longer would be able to legalize their presence in French territory. This was not a simple administrative change, but one that changed a whole constellation of codes, rules, laws, practices and institutions and relegated the undocumented immigrant worker to a condition of public invisibility and legal exclusion. Thus there was a change in the consensual identity of the immigrant worker.

But if the utopian socialists and the French state both experimented with the same gap and thus formally configured the problem in the same way (teleological adjustment) in 1972, all the difference lies in the problems they chose. The problems that the utopian socialists chose were the misery and exploitation of the working class, and the utopian over-identity they configured and tried to fabricate was supposed to be the “solution” to all of the evils and sufferings inflicted on the working class by the logic of capital. What the French state was doing was to “protect” the nation from anarchic foreign elements disturbing the “smooth” functioning of its social systems. When it comes to a choice of problems, it seems natural, at least from a leftist perspective, to sympathize with the utopian socialists and to be critical of the French state.

Let us understand this as an indication of the move from a theory of agency to the aesthetic cartography of situations. We see that over-identification is an operative concept that does not entail—as would be the case within a theory of agency—any conceptual guarantee of adequacy or non-adequacy in regards to a concrete situation. It depends on its specific construction, and more specifically on the problems it chooses and the way it tries to deal with them. As an operative concept, over-identification can prove either better or worse depending on the situation, depending on the problems it chooses to deal with. However, if over-identification incites processes of experimentation with the police order, how are problems constructed and dealt with from within the police order itself?

Police Identification

Consensual police identification is the distribution of social codes, the codification of social spaces, the configuration of proper ways of being, doing and saying, and the web of institutions, practices and laws that regulate the everyday social order within which individuals are assigned their places. It does not function by correspondence and teleological adjustment, but rather by distribution, codification and assignation. That is, the police do not presuppose any over-identity regarding which the social identities should embark on journeys of teleological adjustment; the police merely configure a certain “landscape of the possible” as the set of possibilities and impossibilities that defines a social situation by codifying an identity and assigning it a place. In other words, utopian over-identification presupposes

police identification in order to project these “everyday” police identities into a future harmonization of social relations. The police, however, merely assign a body to a place, and the police codification of a body accounts for its possibilities and impossibilities in the situation wherein it finds itself, its “modes of saying, modes of doing and modes of being.” In this sense, the form of the problem is given in *modifiable combinations* among the consensual possibilities and impossibilities that define the social order at any given time, i.e., the ways one can play with, reconnect and disconnect the relations within the entire set.

As Rancière says: “[Consensus] is the construction of a world where we are faced with necessity, where there is no possible, no choices but the choice of the best way of managing necessity” (Rancière 2012, 264, my translation). This statement might seem more restrictive than it actually is. What is necessary is the set of possibilities and impossibilities, the “landscape of the possible” that configures our consensual spaces at any given moment. What is not necessary are its various combinations—for the set is vast and can be combined in ways that were not “intended.”

For instance, we can think about how the above-mentioned change in the consensual identity of immigrants in France in 1972, with modifications of laws and practices, facilitated ways of combining these new possibilities that engendered systemic exploitation of the *sans-papiers* in different sectors of the labor market in France. Certain employers took advantage of this change in the social order by employing undocumented immigrants and taking advantage of their precarious situation to impose harsh working conditions on them in order to produce greater profit than with workers in less precarious situations. Even though this practice is illegal, the logic is entirely consensual: The employer takes advantage of the place to which the undocumented immigrant has been assigned, combining and articulating different elements of the set of possibilities and impossibilities that characterize it. We thus see that the connection between legality and consensus is not simply a question of what is legal as opposed to what is illegal: the consensual logic can function in illegal ways. The question is rather the distribution of what is possible and the ways in which one can combine and articulate certain possibilities against certain impossibilities (for instance, the undocumented immigrant’s impossibility of reporting this illegality to state authorities).

Political Dis-Identification

It is also this way of posing and dealing with problems within the established set of possibilities and impossibilities that explains the “disagreement” between police and politics. The police are only able to situate themselves within their own consensual set of

possibilities and impossibilities, and are thus neither able to “hear” nor to take into account the radical nature of the problems posed in politics—radical because what politics seeks is precisely to reconfigure and alter the very distribution of possibilities and impossibilities. This is why Rancière claims: “The police order constructs itself as that which no longer confronts legitimate conflictive instances [...], but only erratic, pathological or criminal acts” (Rancière 2012, 266, my translation).

We can see a concrete example of this in the *State of Alabama vs. M. L. King, Jr.* trial on the 19th of March 1956 in the context of the Montgomery bus boycott at the beginning of the civil rights movement in the United States to struggle against the segregation laws. During the proceedings, the judge questions Gladys Moore, who participated in the boycott (Burns 1997, 72):

JUDGE: Why did you stop taking the bus the 5th of December?

MOORE: Why did I stop?

JUDGE: Yes.

MOORE: Nobody told me to stop taking the bus.

JUDGE: That is not what I asked you.

MOORE: I’ll explain it to you. I had nothing to do with it.

JUDGE: That is not what I asked you.

MOORE: What is your question?

JUDGE: I asked you why you stopped taking the bus on the 5th of December. I would like to know, in order to understand, why you didn’t take the bus anymore after the 5th of December.

MOORE: I stopped taking the bus because we have been mistreated for so many years that we decided never to take the bus again.

JUDGE: Whom are you referring to in saying “we”?

MOORE: The fifty thousand black people in Montgomery.

In the police order of the United States where segregation laws were in force in the southern states, the skin color “black” was an essential, identificatory mark for conduct in social spaces, for institutional possibilities and guarantees, for social codes and violence, for the labor market, etc. In other words, if the skin color “black” was heavily codified, it was because a whole social order was organized on the basis of it—its landscape of the possible and its construction of consensual spaces. In this court scene, the judge is trying to “understand” the abnormal act of the bus boycott. The act was not a crime as such, but seeing that two thirds of the bus passengers were black, it posed, on the one hand, an important economic problem for the city bus company and thus for the mayor of Montgomery, while on the other hand, it involved a

different visibility and a polemical presence of blacks in Montgomery because 30,000 black people organized their daily transportation to school and to work in a new and different way —by walking and by collectively organizing free transport service. This was a political dis-identification: It was a reconfiguration of the givens that structured the social spaces in Montgomery, a reconfiguration of the functionality and the modes of visibility of the elements occupying said space, of the existential territories and the possibilities attached to those territories. It was a form of dissensus that, by interrupting the normal functioning of social space in Montgomery, gave new meanings to bodies, things and words, changing their connections, oppositions, contents and functions, thus rearranging their network of interactions and thereby installing a new, polemical “landscape of the possible” in the heart of the social order. What we see in the above-mentioned court scene is the condensation of this dis-identification: Gladys Moore re-signifies this abnormal act in a political register as a protest against the social order as such, as a dissensual act that materializes a wrong involving the global structure of that social space in the United States —i.e., the heavy codification of “black” skin color through segregation laws and their very real, existential consequences for marginalized black people. In other words, the radical nature of the problem exceeds what the consensual set of possibilities and impossibilities of the police is able to take into account —because the political wrong is directed directly against this set and is materialized by dissensual acts at the heart of the matter. There is thus a gap between police and politics, a site of incommensurability that incites processes of experimentation on both sides —for the police to resist the contingency of their own order, and for politics to redistribute its own set of possibilities and impossibilities for defining the social order.

If the problem in utopian over-identification is constructed as teleological adjustment, and in police identification as recombinations of the consensual set of possibilities and impossibilities, how is the problem then to be constructed in terms of political dis-identification? Whereas in the case of the police, the problem is always to a certain extent predetermined by the set of possibilities and impossibilities within which they must situate it — thus making all problems dependent on the consensual landscape of the possible— the horizon of the problem is “broken open” in politics by dis-identification from this consensual landscape of the possible. The problem is thus “freed” from its consensual predetermination. What matters in politics is not the “reasonability” of the problems, but the need to deal with them, to experiment with them, to restructure the social order in which they are systemically reproduced. The horizon of possible solutions is open, something to be constructed along the way; it is one of open and collective experimentation with everything that is possible in our world.

How then, are we to understand the “internal” form of the problem in terms of political dis-identification? As Rancière says: “The relation of the local to the capacity of universalization [...] is very important for me in the definition of politics” (Rancière 2012, 275, my translation). The problems in politics exist as a type of short-circuit between the local and the universal, in two different senses. *Firstly*, because local problems become problems confronting society as such, surpassing their locality to confront the globality of the social order as the order within which these local problems are systemically reproduced. We could think of how the local bus boycott in Montgomery confronted the social order with the problem of segregation in Montgomery, which effectively exceeded its locality because segregation had structured social spaces and identities in the whole country. *Secondly*, because these local, but somehow universalized problems, have no legitimacy in themselves; they exist only by the dis-sensual *insistence* that they constitute problems addressing society as such, and thus, by their very form, they have to circulate, to create conditions of choice in spaces foreign to the movement itself, to be oriented by an open horizon where they have to pass through a multitude of wills, subjectivities and existing arrangements, to spread out, to make themselves visible, to universalize themselves as problems confronting society as such. The action of Rosa Parks can be seen in this light. Her dissensual act —her refusal to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in 1955, the dissensual act that sparked the Montgomery bus boycott— exceeded the locality of the act, of the bus company, of the city, of the specific system, in a process of universalization that continued all the way to the Supreme Court where segregation itself was eventually declared unconstitutional.

The problem of political dis-identification thus exists as a short-circuit between the local and the universal that opens an experimental and strategic horizon of the possible that extends beyond any consensual measure.

We can return rapidly here to the ideas we put forward in relation to the transition from the originary division to the gap. Firstly, when it comes to the difference between the state and the police, we can see in the civil rights movement how the dissensual problem of segregation also circulated within the state, invested different apparatuses, depended on different legal and social guarantees and protections (such as the right to question the constitutionality of a law in a court of law) —it circulated by creating conditions of choice within the state and by investing in a dissensual way a number of its devices. The devices of the state can therefore be configured in consensual, dissensual, and over-identificatory ways (the French government policy on undocumented immigrants exemplifies the last of these). Secondly, we can also see how these three logics can function at the same time within

a political movement. The civil rights movement dis-identified itself from the consensual order, from the codifications of black bodies, and from the places to which they were assigned. But this dis-identification had to invent its own practices —its own consensual distribution of roles and functions within the space of this dissensual rupture with the police. That is, in order for the universalization of its locality to last and circulate, it had to invent, as Rancière puts it in defining the police, an “order that assigns bodies to determined places because of what they have to do, because of their attributions and destinations” (Rancière 2001, 73, my translation). For instance, the Montgomery bus boycott had to experiment with an alternative transport system. As Taylor Branch says: “Each day, between 30,000 and 40,000 passengers refused to take the bus anymore. Subtracting those who walked and those who stayed at home, there was still a need to organize a transportation system for 20,000 passengers, which amounted to a total of 130 trips a day for each of the volunteer cars” (Branch 1988, 146). A total of 42 provisional stations were organized in the morning and 48 provisional stations at night in this alternative transport system, and black taxi drivers started charging only the equivalent of a bus fare for black passengers. We see here that there is a site of incommensurability existing within the political space itself, incommensurability between its dissensual logic of dis-identification from the social order and its consensual logic of redistribution of roles and functions in order to make the dissensual rupture last and to make the wrongs and problems materialized by this dissensus become universalized and circulate. This site of incommensurability incites processes of open, contingent and strategic experimentation, as can be clearly seen in the civil rights movement. We can also find elements of over-identification in the movement, such as in the way in which Christianity was mobilized: The social identities of “black” and “white” were over-identified as equal and harmonious from the perspective of Christian eternal justice, which turned the segregated social order into a symptom of the lack of this eternal justice and posed the problem in terms of a teleological adjustment between the social identity and the utopian over-identity. Once again, this was a site of incommensurability that incited processes of experimentation within the movement, particularly in relation to the very important role of the church as an institution.

We can see why there is a need to complexify Rancierian philosophy in relation to the anti-Machiavellian hypothesis, i.e., in developing the idea of an aesthetic cartography of social spaces fragmented by multiple gaps. Rancière does not provide a binary logic between police and politics, but it is not just a question of adding the third logic of over-identification either. We can see that the three logics of identification, dis-identification, and over-identification do not

simply imply that a social space is fragmented by three gaps, because these experimental gaps also deploy themselves within a dissensual, political movement, within a utopian space, within a state policy, within counter-emancipatory movements as well as among all of these constructions. This is why, with the anti-Machiavellian hypothesis, we are moving away from a binary logic for thinking about *contradictory* relations of forces towards a fragmented, fluid, strategic field of *incommensurable* relations of forces.

Conclusion

There is a *malaise* in Rancière’s philosophy, which lies in the fact that he does not tell us what our problems are. This *malaise* makes him prey to both Marxist and Machiavellian misreadings. It exposes him to Marxist misreadings, because Marxism seeks to objectify *the* problem (capitalism as such) that should unite all wills (for purpose of the proletarian revolution), and it accuses Rancière of being a postmodernist (or something similar) because he supposedly turns emancipation into a goal in itself that is disconnected from any material object. It also subjects him to Machiavellian misreadings, because the originary division actually empties the objects and instrumental rationalities of political movements in order to generalize them as forces that generate the self-perpetuation of conflictive democracy. But there is another and more important reason for this *malaise*. What both Marxism and the Machiavellian tradition seek are conceptual guarantees to ensure that their own mode of politics is the solution to the problems they define. In the logic of Abensour, democratic politics is quite evidently conceptually guaranteed as the solution to the problem of the dominant logic of the state.

These philosophies might not be guaranteed to work in reality —one might defend the idea that they are contingent, paradoxical and heroic, that they might fail miserably because of contextual contingencies, etc.— but they are conceptually guaranteed to be the “right” logic in relation to the “real” problems of politics. This plays out very differently in the case of Rancière: His philosophy does not prove what our problems are as a function of its own logic. We choose our own problems, although we always do so within concrete distributions of the sensible and through configurations and reconfigurations of the sensible network of things, bodies and words. There is thus an ethics underlying Rancierian thought, and one might say that this is our ethical-political challenge: the problems we choose and —in order to invent and deal with these problems— the capabilities we invent, the sites of incommensurability we open up, and the processes of experimentation we play with and reconfigure ourselves in.

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