

# DEMOCRACY IS WHERE WE MAKE IT: THE RELEVANCE OF JACQUES RANCIÈRE<sup>1</sup>

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*How might we think about equality in a non-hierarchical fashion? How might equality be conceived with some degree of equality? The problem with the presupposition of liberalism is that, by distributing equality, liberals place most people at the receiving end of the political operation. There are those who distribute equality and those who receive it. Once you start with that assumption, the hierarchy is already in place. It's too late to return to equality. Equality, instead of being the result of a political process, must be conceived as the presupposition of those who act. It must be the expression of political actors rather than the possession of a political hierarchy. In the formulation of Jacques Rancière, whose ideas form the framework of my thinking in this paper, "Politics only happens when these mechanisms are stopped in their tracks by the effect of a presupposition that is totally foreign to them yet without which none of them could ultimately function: the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone."*

There is a lot of talk about democracy today, and frankly, much of it seems pretty elitist. The most obvious example of this elitism is in the discourse of the Bush administration. We in the U.S. are told that our mission, God-given as it is, is to bring democracy to places that lack it. This is especially true of those places that have a lot of oil. For some reason, oil seems to require more democracy than other natural resources. The character of this oil-driven democracy, obvious and banal as it is, should not escape our notice. Democracy is a system of elections and capitalist economics that revolves around ceding political and economic power to those who know best how to utilise that power. Democracy, in this view, is an agreement between those who are governed and who work, on the one hand, and those who govern them and who control

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the places they work, on the other, that all of this is a very good arrangement.

It is perhaps no surprise that many places in the world that have been subject to that arrangement, perhaps most especially in the Middle East and in Central and South America, have periodically wondered about it, and are wondering about it once again.

If we turn our attention from the administration to the academy, we find that there is elitism not only in our leaders but in ourselves. There is elitism at the heart of philosophical reflection on democracy, an elitism I would like to take a moment to expose before turning toward a view of democracy that turns against it. This elitism lies, ironically, in the use to which the concept of equality is put. The theorist Amartya Sen remarks, rightly in my view, that “a common characteristic of virtually all the approaches to the ethics of social arrangements that have stood the test of time is to want the equality of *something*—something that has an important place in the particular theory.”<sup>2</sup> We can locate this idea not only in his views but also in those of all the central traditional liberal democratic theorists. If for Sen the equality to be accorded is one of capabilities and functionings, for John Rawls it is one of liberty and opportunity, while for Nozick there must be an equality solely of liberty. It is the central project of recent liberal theories of justice to answer the question of what kind of equality is to be distributed, and how. Thus, there is at the heart of the liberal project a democratic equality.

And yet, at the heart of this democratic equality, there lies elitism. What those in this tradition do not question in their disagreements about what type of equality people deserve is a presupposition informing the question they seek to answer. There is general agreement that equality is, first and foremost, a matter of what people deserve. Otherwise put, it is a matter of what they should receive. This is why these theories are often called *distributive* theories. Distributive theories address what kinds of distributions ought to be made of the social goods. To think about equality, as these theories do, in terms of distribution has at least two implications we should reject.

First, distribution implies a distributor. Once the type of equality to be distributed is decided upon, the distributor is responsible for ensur-

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<sup>2</sup> Amartya Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), ix.

ing both the distribution and the maintenance of the proper distribution. Most often, this distributor is the state, although it need not be.

Second, following from this, distribution implies a passivity on the part of those who receive the distribution. The people living in a particular society do not, unless they form part of the distributing class, have anything to do with equality other than to be the object of it.

We can readily see the politics of traditional liberalism at work in these implications. Taken together, they help sustain a hierarchical view of society in which the members of that society are conceived as individuals pursuing disparate and unrelated ends that the state helps them more or less to achieve.

We can see, then, that there is a thread that connects the elitism of traditional liberal theory with the more cynical uses to which it is put by the Bush administration. The game is given away at the outset. Once you posit the idea that equality is to be distributed, then the only questions left are those of which equality and how most efficiently to get it to people. The current administration has, of course, arrogated to itself the decision on both issues. This should not be surprising, since one of its central employees is The Decider. Nevertheless, one should not miss the structural similarity between distributive theories of justice and what might be called the Bush administration's distributive theory of Halliburtonian capitalism. Both imply a hierarchical order in which those who are the object of equality are not its subject.

How might we think about equality in a non-hierarchical fashion? How might equality be conceived with some degree of, well, equality? The problem with the two presuppositions of liberalism is that, by distributing equality, they place most people at the receiving end of the political operation. There are those who distribute equality and those who receive it. Once you start with that assumption, the hierarchy is already in place. It's too late to return to equality. Equality, instead of being the result of a political process, must be conceived as the *presupposition* of those who act. It must be the expression of political actors rather than the possession of a political hierarchy. In the formulation of Jacques Rancière, whose ideas form the framework of my thinking in this paper, "Politics only happens when these mechanisms (to be described below) are stopped in their tracks by the effect of a presupposition that is totally foreign to them yet without which none of them could

ultimately function: the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone.”<sup>3</sup>

Rancière’s political and aesthetic views are beginning to take hold in the English-speaking world, especially in the wake of the spate of recent translations of his work. However, they are still unfamiliar to many people. Before turning to the use I would like to make of them, it would perhaps be best to offer a quick, if a bit sketchy, overview of his political thought. It is perhaps worth noting that Rancière had been a student of Louis Althusser’s, but then repudiated his teacher in the wake of the events of May ’68.<sup>4</sup> The events of that May, which helped form the intellectual orientation of many recent French thinkers, also had its effect on Rancière. When the French Communist Party repudiated the uprising, Rancière came face-to-face with its hierarchical character, and especially the division of labour it posited between those, like Althusser, whose job is to think and to formulate theory and projects, and those others—the workers—whose job is merely to carry out blindly the projects of the thinkers. Rancière then broke with Althusser, immersed himself in archives of nineteenth-century worker writings<sup>5</sup>, and eventually formulated a view of political action that focused on the presupposition of equality.

How might we conceive this equality out of which people act? Is there some sort of content to the presupposition of equality, or is the term *equality* merely a rhetorical device to motivate political action? In Rancière’s thought, the idea of equality can be an elusive one. This is because, on the one hand, he wants to resist assimilating it to any form of identity politics. On the other hand, however, he does give it some content. In his major theoretical text *Disagreement* he often refers to equality in terms of an “empty freedom” that everyone possesses.<sup>6</sup> That would lead one to believe that there is no content to the concept of equality. There is a way in which this is right. There is nothing to the concept of

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<sup>3</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, (tr.) J. Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 17.

<sup>4</sup> See, especially, Jacques Rancière, *La leçon d’Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> Much of this work is discussed in Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth Century France*, (tr.) J. Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).

<sup>6</sup> “Politics begins with a major wrong: the gap created by the empty freedom of the people and the arithmetical and geometrical order.” *Disagreement*, 19.

equality that would distinguish any particular group of people from any other group. In other words, politics cannot rely on an essence, whether it be blackness, the feminine, an indigenous character, etc., out of which it emerges. Politics is not the protection of particular qualities or the expression of particular essences. The equality, as he says, is an equality of anyone and everyone.

This does not mean that the empty freedom of which he speaks is without content. The equality that is presupposed in political action is a certain equality of intelligence. In an earlier text, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière tells the story of Joseph Jacotot, a refugee from post-Revolutionary France, who found himself in Flanders trying to teach a group of students who only knew Flemish, while he could only speak French. Working with a dual-language copy of a single text, he assigned his students to write a paper on the text in French. When they turned in their assignments, it emerged that their papers were of superior quality. Jacotot decided that all people were of equal intelligence; differences in performance stemmed from inability to attend rather than from innate intellectual differences. And, furthermore, these latter stemmed in turn from the presupposition inculcated in many students that they are of lesser intelligence.

The assumption that people are of equal intelligence does not need to be a fine-grained one. In other words, it does not require that we hold people to be equally capable of doing high-level theoretical physics or solving difficult mathematical problems. What Jacotot—or at least Rancière’s Jacotot—is after is more concrete, especially with regard to politics. We are, unless we are deeply damaged in some way, capable of creating meaningful lives with one another, talking with one another, understanding one another, and reasoning about ourselves and our situations. Our social and political contexts, while sometimes difficult and complex, do not involve essential mysteries that we are in principle incapable of comprehending without the assistance of a savant of some sort. In short, we are capable of formulating and carrying out our lives with one another. This, in Rancière’s view, is the assumption—the presupposition of equality—with which politics begins. “[O]ur problem isn’t proving that all intelligence is equal. It’s seeing what can be done under

that presupposition. And for this, it's enough for us that the opinion be possible—that is, that no opposing truth be proved.”<sup>7</sup>

The difficulty faced by those who embrace the presupposition of equality is precisely that societies, instead of being arranged on the basis of that presupposition, are instead arranged precisely on the opposite one. Societies are hierarchically ordered. Roles are distributed on the presupposition that certain people are just not as intelligent as others. Think, for instance, of the history of gender or racial relations. Think of the assumptions made by managers about the inherent limits of worker ability. The divisions between intellectual and manual labour, between the private and the public sphere, between the government and the governed, are guided by a hierarchy founded in the presupposition of inequality. One of the reasons we find it so difficult to imagine another social order is that these hierarchies present themselves as natural or inescapable, because the presupposition of inequality has been ingrained in us.

These hierarchical orderings, and the principles that guide and justify them, are often called politics. Rancière proposes instead to call them the police. “Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organisation of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimising this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution another name. I propose to call it *the police*.”<sup>8</sup> In utilising the term police, Rancière makes it clear that he is not simply thinking of folks in uniform with truncheons and guns. “Michel Foucault has shown that, as a mode of government, the police described by writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries covered everything relating to ‘man’ and his ‘happiness.’”<sup>9</sup> The police, then, refers more broadly to the structure and justification of a social hierarchy. Furthermore, a point that will be central to his later works on aesthetics, the police order as also a matter of how we perceive ourselves, one another, and our world. It consists in a partition or division of the sensible, a *partage du sensible*. (We will return to this point below.) There is a partitioning not solely of so-

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<sup>7</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, (tr.) K. Ross (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1991), 46.

<sup>8</sup> *Disagreement*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

cial space but also of our perception of things, that reinforces social hierarchies.

On this view, much of what passes for politics is simply policing. This does not mean that all policing is equally bad. A police order that refuses to educate people of a certain race or ethnicity, or one that denies support to poor people, is worse than a police order that functions otherwise. The distinction Rancière draws between the police and politics is not drawn simply along the normatively bad/normatively good axis. While politics is better than policing, there are normative degrees within the police order itself.

What, then, is politics? “I...propose to reserve the term *politics* for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration—that of the part that has no part...political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of the part who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.”<sup>10</sup> Politics concerns what Rancière calls *the part who have no part*. That is the people, in a particular social arrangement (or in one aspect of it), who are thought less than equal to others. They are the blacks, women, the indigenous, workers, those who have no part to play in deciding the shape of the police order, because they are inferior. And politics consists in disrupting the police order that excludes or marginalises them through the assertion, often both in word and deed, of their equality in that police order. That assertion, that *heterogeneous assumption*, disrupts the police order by showing its contingency. There is no reason why those on top are there, and those on the bottom or outside are over there. That arrangement is due to the contingencies of history rather than the necessities of nature. Politics is the assertion of equality among those who presuppose it among themselves.

It would seem that this is the only way for equality to work if it is to be a presupposition rather than a distribution. If equality were to offer another, better set of roles for people to play, that would merely be a

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 29–30.

matter of social distribution, akin to what theorists like Rawls and Nozick and Sen have offered. But that is not, in Rancière's view, how equality should work. By presupposing equality in the face of a police order, roles are subverted, not just rearranged. "The essence of equality is in fact not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division."<sup>11</sup>

On the surface, Rancière's perspective may sound like a variation on liberalism. After all, doesn't he start from the presupposition of the equality of intelligence and then argue that people should all be treated the same way? And isn't this a form of liberalism? This, however, is not what Rancière does. The addressee of his discourse is not the state or its institutions; it is the people, what he sometimes calls the *demos* or the part that has no part. His proposal does not answer the question of how people ought to be treated by the state; it is not a distributive theory of justice. Rather, it concerns how people ought to act if they are to act politically. In that sense, the entire structure of his discourse diverges from liberal theory.

By shifting his attention from the state to the people or the *demos*, some might see the hand of Habermas at work. The picture might seem something like this. We are to regard everyone as equally intelligent. Thus, everyone should have an equal say in dictating the norms of the polity. This equal say, of course, is not a matter of one person, one vote. Rather, it is a matter of allowing the best reasons to emerge for the policy norms that are proposed. Is that not what it means to treat people as equally intelligent—not to take them at their word but to consider them as interlocutors in a search for reasonable norms? Isn't that how we should read Rancière when he writes that, "Reason begins when discourses organized with the goal of being right cease, begins where equality is recognized: not an equality decreed by law or force, not a passively received equality, but an equality in act, verified, at each step by those marchers who, in their constant attention to themselves and in their endless revolving around the truth, find the right sentences to make themselves understood by others?"<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, (tr.) L. Heron (London: Verso, 1995), 32–3.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 72.

What this reading of Rancière's work misses, however, is that the purpose of politics is not, as Habermas would have it, consensus. It is dissensus. Habermas, writing in the contractarian tradition, sees people in a situation abstracted from their real conditions. In fact, he would like to bring these people together, outside those conditions, in order to have them discuss the norms that would govern the conditions into which they would be placed. Thus, consensus would precede the concrete society in which one is to live, since it must be on the basis of such a consensus that such a society is to be constructed.

Rancière's project is wholly different. His thought does not take place in a context outside of or abstracted from social conditions. Even when, as in *Disagreement*, he refers less often to *particular* social conditions, the starting point for his reflections is always the fact that politics must take place from within those conditions. There is always a situation, always a police, always a particular *partage du sensible*, a partition of the sensible. Politics, then, is not a consensus about a particular partition of the sensible; it is a dissensus from it.

Here we begin to glimpse a relation that can be drawn between equality and the embrace of difference common to much recent French philosophy. In contrast to liberal theory, equality is not a matter of distributing the same. In contrast to Habermas, it is not a matter of coming to consensus. If people are equally intelligent and are to act out of the presupposition of that equal intelligence, it is neither to confirm any particular identity nor to propose one. It is instead to refuse the identities that are on offer, the roles that have been proffered by the current police arrangement. To put the point another way, it is not in the name of an identity or of a sameness that equality is acted out; it is in the name of difference. Equality, as Rancière tells us, does not unify; it declassifies. The "heterogeneous assumption" that politics offers is not simply a matter of an assumption with a different conceptual content—that of the equality of intelligence—but, following from that, a heterogeneity to the established police order that is not recuperable in the form of a different police order.

The affinity of such thought with that of, say, Derrida's reflections on democracy is manifest. Like Derrida, Rancière keeps democracy under the banner of a declassification rather than an identity. And like Derrida, the banner of declassification serves to preserve an equality that goes missing in traditional liberal theory. However, Rancière's ap-

proach to this declassification reveals an elitism in Derrida's thought as well. It is different kind of elitism from that of traditional liberal theory. Rather than an elitism of hierarchical structure it is what might be called an elitism of theoretical comfort. I can only gesture at it here.

For Derrida, democracy can never coincide with itself. It is always to come. And this to-come is not simply a deferral into the future but a deferral from itself at every moment. As Derrida puts the point in *Rogues*, "The 'to-come' not only points to the promise but suggests that a democracy will never exist, in the sense of a present existence: not because it will be deferred but because it will always remain aporetic in its structure."<sup>13</sup> He emphasises that this aporia does not imply any sort of passivity. Rather, it implies both an acting toward and a self-critical stance. Democracy becomes that which guides our action but which must remain open as a guiding concept, lest we fall into the trap of deciding what it is and how it is to be imposed.

This approach avoids the problem of hierarchy inherent in traditional liberal theory, but at the cost of being pragmatically inert. What exactly is it that would constitute democratic action, exactly, aside from deconstructing the commitments of any particular political action? This remains entirely unclear. It is not that Derrida has nothing to say on the matter. For instance, in *Spectres of Marx* he cites the rise of the New International: those who, ignoring national borders, seek solidarity in confronting the oppressions of our time. These would be the participants in what was called the anti-globalisation movement, the human rights workers aligned with NGO's, the union organisers who seek to remove unions from their traditional national alignments, etc. However, the activity of this New International, if that would be the name for it, is not well described as deconstructive. It is, instead, centred on the idea of the equality of anyone and everyone. It is animated by a spirit (to use Derrida's term) of solidarity that recognises no classification and that acts as though democracy is to be created from below rather than imposed from above.

To put the point another way, the movements cited by Derrida as examples of democracy to come are better understood as examples of politics in Rancière's sense. They need not be read as deconstructive,

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<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, (tr.) P.-A. Brault and M. Nass (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 86.

and they do not clearly exhibit the complex aporetic structure that Derrida embraces as the character of democracy. Perhaps one can interpret them that way. However, to do so seems more an intellectual exercise than a political one. It foists a messianism upon a set of movements that seem more concerned with solidarity across police orders. These movements are, simply put, exercises in creating democracy through acting on the presupposition of equality. To remain at the level of deconstruction is not to inform politics but to rise above it. It is to remain above the fray rather than engage it.

However, here we might be faced with an objection, one that returns us to traditional liberal theory. To see this objection, let's turn for a moment to the role equality plays in justifying a traditional distributive theory of justice. Consider Rawls' justification of the difference principle. The difference principle, many of you will recall, states that the worst off in a given social arrangement should be better off than they would be in any other arrangement. That is, those at the bottom should have a better level of existence than they would if the society they live in were arranged according to any other distributive pattern.

Rawls' justification for this principle involves an appeal to equality. Specifically, it appeals to the equality that structures the veil of ignorance. Behind the veil of ignorance, one does not know where one is going to find oneself in the society for which one is choosing principles. One has an equal chance of being anybody or anywhere: rich or poor, athletic or physically handicapped, religious or atheist, etc. Therefore, one must treat all possible social positions with equal respect. One must, in short, choose principles of distributive justice impartially. Roughly, the motivation for the difference principle is that those who have an equal chance of landing anywhere in a society will worry more about how badly off they can be rather than how well off, and will therefore choose to protect themselves from the effects of the worst possible scenario rather than take a chance on doing really well.

Now who would be the object of this demonstration? Who might Rawls be trying to convince? In some philosophical sense, of course, he's trying to convince everyone of the justifiability of the difference principle. However, those at the bottom will hardly need convincing. It is those who are going to give something up, those who are the beneficiaries of a given social arrangement, that need to be convinced that redistributing some of their benefits is a just thing to do. The appeal

to equality here serves not to address those at the bottom—or at least not fundamentally to address them—but instead to address those in the middle and particularly at the top.

We have already said that Rancière's view of equality does not address those in the middle or at the top; it addresses those at the bottom, those whose lives take place at the wrong end of the social hierarchy. The presupposition of equality is not a distributive principle. It does not address those who either support or benefit from inequality. It does not constitute a justification for redress. In an important way, the presupposition of equality does not address those people at all, at least not directly. Rather, it is a call to those who struggle or who have reason to struggle, a way to conceptualise the fundamental character of that struggle.

And here is where the problem lies. The power of Rawls' invocation of equality is that it offers a justification for redistributing social goods that addresses those who will have to suffer the redistribution. Those who will receive it do not need to be convinced. Rancière, on the other hand, does not address them at all. He addresses precisely the people for whom justification is not needed: the people, the *demos*. This is not, it should be emphasised, to say that the people, the *demos*, do not need a proof of their equality. Rancière is at pains to show that one of the most powerful aspects of the presupposition of equality is that it offers a proof to those presumed less than equal, a proof that arises from the character of their political action. "This is the definition of a struggle for equality which can never be merely a demand upon the other, nor a pressure put upon him, but always simultaneously a proof given to oneself. This is what 'emancipation' means."<sup>14</sup>

A proof of this kind, however, is not the same thing as a justification of the type that Rawls' theory offers. Rancière's proof is a verification to oneself of one's own equality, and as a result is, as he says, emancipating. It does not offer a justification to those who do not benefit from the enacting of the presupposition. Rawls' concept of equality, on the other hand, acts precisely to justify his principles to those who would not otherwise be inclined to be sympathetic toward them. At the risk of oversimplification, we might put the issue this way: while Rawls' appeal to the concept of equality acts as a justifier to those who need justifica-

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<sup>14</sup> *On the Shores of Politics*, 48.

tion, Rancière, by placing equality as a presupposition for politics rather than as a distributive principle, can only use equality as a justifier precisely to those who do not need justification. What, then, is the normative force of his concept of equality? Does it really perform the justificatory task that equality does for more traditional theories of justice?

I believe that it does perform this task, but in a very different way. It is true that the presupposition of equality does not appeal directly to those who are the beneficiaries of a given police order. This does not mean, however, that it does not affect them or that they do not have to face its justificatory power. To see why, consider what happens in a moment of politics, that is, a moment in which the *demos* is acting upon the presupposition of equality. As we have seen, to act politically in Rancière's sense is to create a dissensus. It is refusal of a given police order. This will not be without effect on those who are at the top of that order. They will be confronted with this presupposition, often in a very direct, if not very philosophical, way. To be confronted by a people acting out of the presupposition of equality is to have the police order one takes for granted challenged in the name of that equality. And the question that challenge raises is one of whether, indeed, one does believe in equality, whether one's response in the face of that challenge ratifies that presupposition or betrays one as a supporter of inequality.

In his book *On the Shores of Politics*, Rancière offers an example of how the presupposition of equality can work on those not involved in acting out the presupposition. He refers to a tailors' strike that occurs in the wake of the French charter of 1830, a charter that states the equality of every French citizen in its preamble. The strike seeks higher wages so that the tailors can live equally to their supervisors and owners. In analyzing this example, Rancière offers a syllogism: "the major premise contains what the law has to say; the minor, what is said or done elsewhere, any word or deed which contradicts the fundamental legal/political affirmation of equality."<sup>15</sup> What the strike accomplishes is to force the hand of both the master tailors and the legal authorities regarding the question of equality. They face a choice. Either they can ratify the presupposition of equality acted upon by the tailors or they can admit that they do not really believe in equality. As Rancière puts the point, "If Monsieur Persil [the French prosecutor] or Monsieur Schwartz

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

[the head of the master tailors' association] is right to say what he says and do what he does, the preamble of the Charter must be deleted. It should read: the French people are not equal. If, by contrast, the major premise is upheld, then Monsieur Persil or Monsieur Schwartz must speak or act differently."<sup>16</sup>

The presupposition of equality does, then, perform a similar role to that of Rawls' concept of equality. It does have a normative force, even upon those it does not directly address. It appeals to those who benefit from inequality, although it does so in a very different way. The presupposition of equality works as a challenge, but only in political situations. It does not have a hypothetical or abstract character in the way traditional theories of equality do. In other words, the presupposition of equality does not offer a justification of equality outside the contexts in which it is enacted. One cannot, as with Rawls, invoke the presupposition of equality outside of a given political context in order to justify a particular set of principles. Instead, the presupposition acts from within a situation of dissensus as a challenge to those who uphold a particular police order. This, of course, is in accordance with Rancière's conception of politics as something performed by the *demos* rather than distributed to them.

If we are to embrace Rancière's approach to politics, if we are to allot the honorific term *democracy* to it, we must ask what democracy might look like. Until now, we have offered a theoretical alternative to traditional views of democracy. We cannot remain at the theoretical level, however, if this sketch is to be compelling. What might democracy in action look like, and do we have examples of it?

Let me approach these questions by isolating several elements of a democratic politics. These elements are not meant to be exhaustive, but they will give us criteria of what to look for when assessing whether a movement is democratic or asking how to go about forming or participating in one. There are five elements I would like to focus on. The initial two can be drawn directly from what has been said so far. First, a democratic politics is one that emerges from below rather than being granted from above. Second, a democratic politics is egalitarian in what might be called a *horizontal* sense. That is to say that those participating in it consider one another to be equal.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

The second two elements have to do with the relation between those engaged in the politics and those who might be thought of as its adversaries. The third element is that a democratic politics must also be egalitarian in what might be called a *vertical* sense. Those against whom dissensus or resistance is to occur, those who the police order places at the top, are also to be treated as equals. The fourth element, derived from the third one, is that a democratic politics must be oriented toward nonviolent action. There may be a place for violence, but that place can only be where there are no other alternatives and where the denial of equality is both egregious and steadfast.

The fifth element, which will involve returning to a Rancièrian term referred to quickly above—*le partage du sensible*—is that politics can happen anywhere, or almost anywhere. Although Rancière concedes that politics happens rarely, this is not because there are few places where it can happen. Rather, it is because it is so urgently discouraged. A democratic politics can emerge anywhere from the workplace to the classroom to the theatre to the street.

The first element follows directly from Rancière's theoretical structure. A democratic politics is a creation of those who participate by acting together out of the presupposition of equality. As such, it is made rather than granted. As the title of this paper suggests, democracy is not where we receive it but where we produce it. This idea should be read alongside oft-quoted pronouncement that freedom is not given, it is taken.

The second element refers to the formation of a community in the creation of a democratic politics. Rancière writes that, "Democracy is the community of sharing, in both senses of the term: a membership in a single world which can only be expressed in adversarial terms, and a coming together which can only occur in conflict."<sup>17</sup> To be engaged in a movement of political democracy is to be involved in a collective action, one that sees its fellow members as equal participants in a struggle that is not a struggle *for* equality but rather out of its presupposition. This does not mean, of course, that everyone in a democratic politics must perform the same task. There are those who have expertise in some areas, and those who have more time to give. However, in accordance with the presupposition of the equality of intelligence, expertise and time are contin-

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

gent matters. They do not confer a special status upon those who possess them.

The third and fourth elements are not discussed by Rancière. He posits dissensus at the heart of politics, but does not tell us how those who dissent are to treat those from whom they dissent. The proposal here is that the presupposition of equality must extend not only to those who struggle but also to the elites who, willingly or unwillingly, wittingly or unwittingly, oppress them. The failure to do so is a failure of the presupposition of equality itself. The elites are not elite because of their superiority, to be sure. But neither are they elite because of their inferiority. Their actions must be resisted, as must the police order that benefits them. However, that resistance must recognise the equal humanity of those who see themselves as greater than equal to the rest of us.

This is why nonviolent action must be the default orientation of any democratic politics. We must be clear here. Nonviolent action is not passivity. It is a mistake to call it, as it has been called, passive resistance. On the contrary, most nonviolent action requires a greater degree of creative intervention than violence. To resist with weapons those who also possess weapons is an old story, and not a very interesting one. To resist without weapons those who have them requires a greater reflection on one's resources and one's tactics. As we all know, there is a sad and tired history behind us of progressive movements gone bad because the resort to violence evolved from a strategy of resistance to a strategy of governing. It would be well to recognise that danger at the outset and keep, as best one can—and admittedly sometimes one cannot—an orientation toward nonviolent action.

The fifth element is that a democratic politics can be made almost anywhere. In order to see why, let me recall a term that Rancière has utilised increasingly in recent writings: *le partage du sensible*, translated as the partition or the distribution of the sensible, although we should also keep in mind the idea of *partage* as sharing. As Rancière points out, the police order is not enforced simply by the police. It is also a matter of how the sensible is distributed, partitioned, and shared. Hierarchies are imposed by people's coming to see and experience their world in certain ways, ways that sustain and nourish those hierarchies. This is a point that has been historically documented by, among others, Michel Foucault. But if hierarchies are maintained at the level of the

sensible, at the level of our experience of the world, so dissensus can operate there as well. Obviously, a politics of the kind envisioned by Rancière has nothing to do with politics in the electoral sense; that is nothing more than policing, and could not have less to do with democracy. Electoral politics has the same relation to democracy that watching a sporting event on television has to playing one.

Politics happens on the ground, where we live. However, we live in so many arenas, from our family to our work to hobbies to our civic participation, and each of these arenas participates in a *partage du sensible*. (Whether there is a single *partage* that encompasses them all or several overlapping *partages* need not detain us here.) As we intervene politically on each of these, we can make them more democratic, disrupting the police order that maintains oppressive relationships in favour of a participation that starts from the idea that each participant is equal. From gender equality to workplace equality to equality in participation in athletic events, the presupposition of equality can operate everywhere there is a partition, distribution, and sharing of the sensible, that is to say, everywhere.

One might ask whether such a politics is possible. What is the status of such a politics? Is it something that ever happens? Or is it an ideal against which we measure our actual political participation? How shall we think of it?

Surely, there are in many cases of the more and the less when it comes to the question of whether a political intervention arises out of the presupposition of equality. How much, one might ask, is equality being presupposed in a given political movement? However, there are cases in which it appears so clearly as to be unmistakable. Let me cite two: one historical and one contemporary.

The historical case, one of which many readers will all be aware, is the series of lunch counter sit-ins in the U.S. during the civil rights movement. African Americans sat at lunch counters that were restricted to whites and tried to order lunch. It is hard to imagine a more crystal-line example of acting collectively from the presupposition of equality. The message of the lunch counter sit-ins was clear: those who sat down to order a meal presupposed themselves to be equal to those who were permitted to order meals. The violence that was visited upon them was nothing other than an attempt to prove otherwise, and attempt that back-

fired precisely because the nonviolence exhibited by the protestors maintained their sense of equality.

A more recent example of democratic politics lies in the movement that has come to be called Critical Mass. This is where folks with bicycles (and less often skateboards or roller skates) come together and collectively ride through the streets of a large city, slowing the automobile traffic and, essentially, turning streets into bike-friendly paths. Their motto is, "We are not blocking traffic; we are traffic." These rides are essentially actions that presuppose the equal access to the streets of those who are involved in environmentally friendly forms of transportation with those who are not. As you can imagine, they have been met by a good deal of resistance from some motorists and from city authorities, who are not yet ready to concede such a presupposed equality. The partition of the streets has long favoured motorised traffic, the effects of global warming and environmental degradation notwithstanding.

There are other movements of democratic politics afoot as well. There is the movement of Algerian refugees in Montréal, which has a radical egalitarian orientation. There is the Zapatista movement in Chiapas, Mexico, which, although not entirely egalitarian, works on a much more egalitarian basis than many previous Marxist-inspired resistance movements. In Chicago and New York, there is a resurgence of the old IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World, a workers' movement that operates from the presupposition of equality. These are movements we hear little about, and for good reason. The mainstream media are owned by people who benefit from the current police order. They are more interested in maintaining a consensus of fear than in recognising a dissensus that emerges from the presupposition of equality. Democratic politics may be rare in its manifestations, but its inspirations are not far to seek. In a world characterised by fear and cynicism, there is more call for it now than there has been for some time.

Is democracy possible? Does it still work? The answer I want to venture here is that it is possible, that it does work, if we look in the right place for it. It does not reside with those who proclaim to lead us, too often with our assent. And it does not reside in our institutions, although they may at times allow for its appearance. Rather, it resides in us, in the decisions we take collectively to dissent from the police order that maintains itself everywhere around us. Democracy is up to us; it appears, when it does, out of our making. We must not, then, ask, as though from

a distance, whether democracy still works. That is precisely the wrong question. We must ask instead—and it is a question that has never ceased to be our question—of whether we are up to creating it.

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