Ten Theses on Politics

5:3 | © 2001 Jacques Rancière

Thesis 1:[1]

> Politics is not the exercise of power. Politics ought to be defined on its own terms, as a mode of acting put into practice by a specific kind of subject and deriving from a particular form of reason. It is the political relationship that allows one to think the possibility of a political subject(ivity) [*le sujet politique*],[2] not the other way around.

1. To identify politics with the exercise of, and struggle to possess, power is to do away with politics. But we also reduce the scope of politics as a mode of thinking if we conceive of it merely as a theory of power or as an investigation into the grounds of its legitimacy. If there is something specific about politics that makes it something other than a more capacious mode of grouping or a form of power characterized by its mode of legitimation, it is that it involves a distinctive kind of subject considered, and it involves this subject in the form of a mode of relation that is its own. This is what Aristotle means when, in Book I of the *Politics*, he distinguishes between political rule (as the ruling of equals) from all other kinds of rule; or when, in Book III, he defines the citizen as 'he who partakes in the fact of ruling and the fact of being ruled.' Everything about politics is contained in this specific relationship, this *'part-taking'* [*avoir-part*],[3] which should be interrogated as to its meaning and as to its conditions of possibility.

2. An interrogation into what is 'proper' to politics must be carefully distinguished from current and widespread propositions regarding "the return of the political." In the past several years, and in the context of a state-consensus, we have seen the blossoming of affirmations proclaiming the end of the illusion of the social and a return to a 'pure' form of politics. Read through either an Arendtian or Straussian lens, these affirmations focus on the same Aristotelian texts gestured to above. These readings generally identify the "proper" political order with that of the *eu zen* (i.e., a conception of the good) as opposed to a *zen* (conceived as an order of mere living). On this basis, the frontier between the domestic and the political becomes the frontier between the social and the political; and to the idea of a city-state defined by its common good is opposed the sad reality of modern democracy as the rule of the masses and of necessity. In practice, this celebration of pure politics entrusts the virtue of the 'political good' to governmental oligarchies enlightened by "experts;" which is to say that the supposed purification of the political, freed from domestic and

social necessity, comes down to nothing more (or less) than the reduction of the political to the state [*l'étatique*].

3. Behind the current buffooneries of the 'returns' of the political (that include 'the return of political philosophy'), it is important to recognize the vicious circle that characterizes political philosophy; a vicious circle located in the link between the political relationship and the political subject. This vicious circle posits a way of life that is 'proper' to politics. The political relationship is subsequently deduced from the properties of this specific order of being and is explained in terms of the existence of a character who possesses a good or a specific universality, as opposed to the private or domestic world of needs or interests. In short, politics is explained as the accomplishment of a way of life that is proper to those who are destined for it. This partition -- which is actually the object of politics -- is posited as its basis.

4. What is proper to politics is thus lost at the outset if politics is thought of as a specific way of living. Politics cannot be defined on the basis of any pre-existing subject. The political 'difference' that makes it possible to think its subject must be sought in the form of its relation. If we return to the Aristotelian definition, there is a name given to the subject (*politès*) that is defined by a *part-taking* (*metexis*) in a form of action (*archein* -- ruling) and in the undergoing that corresponds to this doing (*archesthai* -- being ruled). If there is something 'proper' to politics, it consists entirely in this relationship which is not a relationship between subjects, but one between two contradictory terms through which a subject is defined. Politics disappears the moment you undo this knot of a subject and a relation. This is what happens in all fictions, be they speculative or empiricist, that seek the origin of the political relationship in the properties of its subjects and in the conditions of their coming together. The traditional question "For what reasons do human beings gather into political communities?" is always already a response, and one that causes the disappearance of the object it claims to explain or to ground -- i.e., the form of a political part-taking that then disappears in the play of elements or atoms of sociability.

Thesis 2:

> That is proper to politics is the existence of a subject defined by its participation in contrarieties. Politics is a paradoxical form of action.

5. The formulations according to which politics is the ruling of equals, and the citizen is the one who *part-takes* in ruling and being ruled, articulate a paradox that must be thought through rigorously. It is important to set aside banal representations of the *doxa* of parliamentary systems that invoke the reciprocity of rights and duties in order to understand what is extraordinary in the Aristotelian articulation. This formulation speaks to us of a being who is at once the agent of an action and the one upon whom the action is exercised.[4] It contradicts the conventional

'cause-and-effect' model of action that has it that an agent endowed with a specific capacity produces an effect upon an object that is, in turn, characterized by its aptitude for receiving that effect.

6. This problem is in no way resolved by reverting to the classic opposition between two modes of action: *poiesis*, on the one hand, governed by the model of fabrication that gives form to matter; and *praxis*, on the other, which excludes from this relation the 'inter-being' [*l'inter-être*][5] of people devoted to politics. As we know, this opposition -- replacing that of *zen* and *eu zen* -- sustains a conception of political purity. In Hannah Arendt's work, for instance, the order of *praxis* is that of equals with the power of *archein*, conceived of as the power to begin anew: "To act, in its most general sense," she explains in *The Human Condition*, "means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word *archein*, 'to begin,' 'to lead,' and eventually 'to rule' indicates);" she concludes this thought by subsequently linking *archein* to "the principle of freedom."[6] Once Arendt defines both a proper mode and sphere of action, a vertiginous short-cut is formed that allows one to posit a series of equations between 'beginning,' 'ruling,' 'being free,' and living in a city-state ('To be free and to live in a *polis* is the same thing' as the same text puts it).

7. This series of equations finds its equivalent in the movement that engenders civic equality from the community of Homeric heroes; equals, that is, in their participation in the power of *arche*. The first witness against this Homeric idyllic, however, is Homer himself. Against the garrulous Thersites -- the man who is an able public speaker despite the fact that he is not qualified to speak -- Odysseus recalls the fact that the Greek army has one and only one chief: Agamemnon. He reminds us of what *archein* means: to walk at the head. And, if there is one who walks at the head, the others must necessarily walk behind. The line between the power of *archein* (i.e., the power to rule), freedom, and the *polis*, is not straight but severed. In order to convince oneself of this, it is enough to see the manner in which Aristotle characterizes the three possible classes of rule within a *polis*, each one possessing a particular title: 'virtue' for the *aristoi*, 'wealth' for the *oligoi*, and 'freedom' for the *demos*. In this division, 'freedom' appears as the paradoxical part of the *demos* about whom the Homeric hero tells us (in no uncertain terms) that it had only one thing to do: to keep quiet and bow down.

8. In short, the opposition between *praxis* and *poiesis* in no way resolves the paradoxical definition of the *politès*. As far as *arche* is concerned, as with everything else, the conventional logic has it that there is a particular disposition to act that is exercised upon a particular disposition to 'be acted upon.' Thus the logic of *arche* presupposes a determinate superiority exercised upon an equally determinate inferiority. In order for there to be a political subject(ivity), and thus for there to be politics, there must be a rupture in this logic.

Thesis 3:

> Politics is a specific rupture in the logic of *arche*. It does not simply presuppose the rupture of the 'normal' distribution of positions between the one who exercises power and the one subject to it. It also requires a rupture in the idea that there are dispositions 'proper' to such classifications.

9. In Book III of the *Laws*, Plato devotes himself to a systematic inventory of the qualifications (*axiomata*) for ruling, along with certain correlative qualifications for being ruled. Out of the seven he retains, four are traditional qualifications of authority based on a natural difference; that is, the difference in birth. Those qualified to rule are those 'born before' or 'born otherwise.' This grounds the power of parents over children, old over young, masters over slaves, and nobles over serfs. The fifth qualification is introduced as the principal principle that summarizes all natural differences: It is the power of those with a superior nature, of the stronger over the weak -- a power that has the unfortunate quality, discussed at length in the *Gorgias*, of being indeterminate. The sixth qualification, then, gives the only difference that counts for Plato; namely, the power of those who know [*savoir*] over those who do not. There are thus four couplings of traditional qualifications to be had, along with two theoretical couplings that claim priority over them: namely, 'natural' superiority and the rule of 'science' *qua* knowledge.

10. The list ought to stop there. But there is a seventh qualification: 'the choice of god,' otherwise referring to a drawing of lots [*le tirage au sort*] that designates the one who exercises *arche*. Plato does not expand upon this. But clearly, this kind of 'choice' points ironically to the designation by god of a regime previously referred to as one only god could save: namely, democracy. What thus characterizes a democracy is pure chance or the complete absence of qualifications for governing. Democracy is that state of exception where no oppositions can function, where there is no pre-determined principle of role allocation. 'To partake in ruling and being ruled' is quite a different matter from reciprocity. It is, in short, an absence of reciprocity that constitutes the exceptional essence of this relationship; and this absence of reciprocity rests on the paradox of a qualification that is absence of qualification. Democracy is the specific situation in which there is an absence of qualifications that, in turn, becomes the qualification for the exercise of a democratic *arche*. What is destroyed in this logic is the particular quality of *arche*, its redoubling, which means that it always precedes itself within a circle of its own disposition and its own exercise. But this exceptional state is identical with the very condition for the specificity of politics more generally.

Thesis 4:

> Democracy is not a political regime. Insofar as it is

> a rupture in the logic of *arche* -- that is, in the anticipation of rule in the disposition for it -- democracy is *the* regime of politics in the form of a relationship defining a specific subject.

11. What makes possible the *metexis* proper to politics is the rupture of all those logics of allocation exercised in the part-taking of *arche*. The 'freedom' of a people that constitutes the *axiom* of democracy has as its real content the rupture of the axioms of domination: a rupture, that is, in the correlation between a capacity for rule and a capacity for being ruled. The citizen who partakes 'in ruling and being ruled' is only thinkable on the basis of the *demos* as a figure that ruptures the correspondence between a series of correlated capacities. Democracy is thus precisely not a political regime in the sense of a particular constitution that determines different ways of assembling people under a common authority. Democracy is *the* institution of politics -- the institution of both its subject and its mode of relating.

12. As we know, democracy is a term invented by its opponents, by all those who were 'qualified' to govern because of seniority, birth, wealth, virtue, and knowledge [*savoir*]. Using it as a term of derision, they articulated an unprecedented reversal of the order of things: the 'power of the *demos*' means that those who rule are those who have no specificity in common, apart from their having no qualification for governing. Before being the name of a community, *demos* is the name of a part of the community: namely, the poor. The 'poor,' however, does not designate an economically disadvantaged part of the population; it simply designates the category of peoples who do not count, those who have no qualifications to part-take in *arche*, no qualification for being taken into account.

13. This is exactly what Homer describes in the Thersites episode evoked above. Those who want to speak, though they belong to the *demos*, though they belong to the undifferentiated collection of the 'unaccounted for' [*l'hors-compte*] (*anarithmoi*), get stabbed in the back by Odysseus' scepter. This is not a deduction but a definition: The one who is 'unaccounted-for,' the one who has no speech to be heard, is the one of the *demos*. A remarkable passage from Book XII of the Odyssey illustrates this point: Polydamas complains because his opinion has been disregarded by Hector. With you, he says, 'one never has the right to speak if one belongs to the *demos*.' Now Polydamas is not a villain like Thersites; he is Hector's brother. *Demos* thus does not designate a socially inferior category: The one who speaks when s/he is not to speak, the one who part-takes in what s/he has no part in -- that person belongs to the *demos*.

Thesis 5:

> The 'people' that is the subject of democracy -- and thus the principal subject of politics -- is not the

> collection of members in a community, or the laboring classes of the population. It is the supplementary part, in relation to any counting of parts of the population that makes it possible to identify 'the part of those who have no-part' [*le compte des incomptés*][7] with the whole of the community.

14. The people (*demos*) exists only as a rupture of the logic of *arche*, a rupture of the logic of beginning/ruling [*commencement/commandement*]. It should not be identified either with the race of those who recognize each other as having the same origin, the same birth, or with a part of a population or even the sum of its parts. 'People' [*peuple*] refers to the supplement that disconnects the population from itself, by suspending the various logics of legitimate domination. This disjunction is illustrated particularly well in the crucial reforms that give Athenian democracy its proper status; namely, those reforms enacted by Cleisthenes when he rearranged the distribution of the demes [8] over the territory of the city. In constituting each tribe by the addition of three separate boundaries -- one from the city, one from the coast, and one from the countryside -- Cleisthenes broke with the ancient principle that kept the tribes under the rule of local aristocratic chieftainships whose power, legitimated through legendary birth, had as its real content the economic power of the landowners. In short, the 'people' is an artifice set at an angle from the logic that gives the principle of wealth as heir to the principle of birth. It is an abstract supplement in relation to any actual (ac)count of the parts of the population, of their qualifications for part-taking in the community, and of the common shares due to them according to these qualifications. The 'people' is the supplement that inscribes 'the count of the unaccounted-for' or 'the part of those who have no part.'

15. These expressions should not be understood in their more populist sense but rather in a structural sense. It is not the laboring and suffering populace that comes to occupy the terrain of political action and to identify its name with that of the community. What is identified by democracy with the role of the community is an empty, supplementary, part that separates the community from the sum of the parts of the social body. This separation, in turn, grounds politics in the action of supplementary subjects that are a surplus in relation to any (ac) count of the parts of society. The whole question of politics thus lies in the interpretation of this void. The criticisms that sought to discredit democracy brought the 'nothing' which constitutes the political people back to the overflow of the ignorant masses and the greedy populace. The interpretation of democracy posed by Claude Lefort gave the democratic void its structural meaning.[9] But the theory of the structural void can be interpreted in two distinct ways: First, the structural void refers to *an-archy*, to the absence of an entitlement to rule that constitutes the very nature of the political space; Secondly, the

void is caused by the 'dis-incorporation' of the king's two bodies -- the human and divine body.[10] Democracy, according to this latter view, begins with the murder of the king; in other words, with a collapse of the symbolic thereby producing a dis-incorporated social presence. And this originary link is posed as the equivalent of an original temptation to imaginatively reconstruct the 'glorious body of the people' that is heir to the immortal body of the king and the basis of every totalitarianism.

16. Against these interpretations, let us say that the two-fold body of the people is not a modern consequence of the sacrifice of the sovereign body but rather a given constitutive of politics. It is initially the people, and not the king, that has a double body and this duality is nothing other than the supplement through which politics exists: a supplement to all social (ac)counts and an exception to all logics of domination.

17. The seventh qualification, Plato says, is 'god's part.' We will maintain that this part belonging to god -- this qualification of those who have no qualification -- contains within it all that is theological in politics. The contemporary emphasis on the theme of the 'theologico-political' dissolves the question of politics into that of power and of the grounding event that is its fundament. It re-doubles the liberal fiction of the contract with the representation of an original sacrifice. But the division of *arche* that conjoins politics and democracy is not a founding sacrifice: It is, rather, a neutralization of any founding sacrifice. This neutralization could find its exact fable at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*: it is at the price of the disappearance of the sacrificial body, at the price of not seeking Oedipus' body, that Athenian democracy receives the benefit of its burial. To want to disinter the body is not only to associate the democratic form with a scenario of sin or of original malediction. More radically, it is to return the logic of politics to the question of an originary scene of power; in other words, to return politics to the state. By interpreting the empty part in terms of psychosis, the dramaturgy of original symbolic catastrophe transforms the political exception into a sacrificial symptom of democracy: It subsumes the litigiousness proper to politics under any of the innumerable versions of an originary 'crime' or 'murder.'

Thesis 6:

> If politics is the outline of a vanishing difference, with the distribution of social parts and shares, then it follows that its existence is in no way necessary, but that it occurs as a provisional accident in the history of the forms of domination. It also follows from this that political litigiousness has as its essential object the very existence of politics.

18. Politics cannot be deduced from the necessity of gathering people into communities. It is an exception to the principles according to which this gathering operates. The 'normal' order of

things is that human communities gather together under the rule of those qualified to rule -- whose qualifications are legitimated by the very fact that they are ruling. These governmental qualifications may be summed up according to two central principles: The first refers society to the order of filiation, both human and divine. This is the power of birth. The second refers society to the vital principle of its activities. This is the power of wealth. Thus, the 'normal' evolution of society comes to us in the progression from a government of birth to a government of wealth. Politics exists as a deviation from this normal order of things. It is this anomaly that is expressed in the nature of political subjects who are not social groups but rather forms of inscription of 'the (ac)count of the unaccounted-for.'

19. There is politics as long as 'the people' is not identified with the race or a population, inasmuch as the poor are not equated with a particular disadvantaged sector, and as long as the proletariat is not a group of industrial workers, etc… Rather, there is politics inasmuch as 'the people' refers to subjects inscribed as a supplement to the count of the parts of society, a specific figure of 'the part of those who have no-part.' Whether this part exists is *the* political issue and it is the object of political litigation. Political struggle is not a conflict between well defined interest groups; it is an opposition of logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways. The clash between the 'rich' and the 'poor,' for instance, is the struggle over the very possibility of these words being coupled, of their being able to institute categories for another (ac) counting of the community. There are two ways of counting the parts of the community: The first only counts empirical parts -- actual groups defined by differences in birth, by different functions, locations, and interests that constitute the social body. The second counts 'in addition' a part of the no-part. We will call the first *police* and the second *politics*.

Thesis 7:

> Politics is specifically opposed to the police. The police is a 'partition of the sensible' [*le partage du sensible*] whose principle is the absence of a void and of a supplement.

20. The police is not a social function but a symbolic constitution of the social. The essence of the police is neither repression nor even control over the living. Its essence is a certain manner of partitioning the sensible. We will call 'partition of the sensible' a general law that defines the forms of part-taking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed. The partition of the sensible is the cutting-up of the world and of 'world;' it is the *nemeïn* upon which the *nomoi* of the community are founded. This partition should be understood in the double sense of the word: on the one hand, that which separates and excludes; on the other, that which allows participation (see Editor's note 2). A partition of the sensible refers to the manner

in which a relation between a shared 'common' [*un commun partagé*] and the distribution of exclusive parts is determined through the sensible. This latter form of distribution, in turn, itself presupposes a partition between what is visible and what is not, of what can be heard from the inaudible.

21. The essence of the police is to be a partition of the sensible characterized by the absence of a void or a supplement: society consists of groups dedicated to specific modes of action, in places where these occupations are exercised, in modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this fittingness of functions, places, and ways of being, there is no place for a void. It is this exclusion of what 'there is not' that is the police-principle at the heart of statist practices. The essence of politics, then, is to disturb this arrangement by supplementing it with a part of the no-part identified with the community as a whole. Political litigiousness/struggle is that which brings politics into being by separating it from the police that is, in turn, always attempting its disappearance either by crudely denying it, or by subsuming that logic to its own. Politics is first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable.

Thesis 8:

> The principal function of politics is the configuration of its proper space. It is to disclose the world of its subjects and its operations. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one.[11]

22. Let us begin from an empirical given: police intervention in public spaces does not consist primarily in the interpellation of demonstrators, but in the breaking up of demonstrations. The police is not that law interpellating individuals (as in Althusser's "Hey, you there!") unless one confuses it with religious subjectification.[12] It is, first of all, a reminder of the obviousness of what there is, or rather, of what there isn't: "Move along! There is nothing to see here!" The police says that there is nothing to see on a road, that there is nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation. Politics, in contrast, consists in transforming this space of 'moving-along' into a space for the appearance of a subject: i.e., the people, the workers, the citizens: It consists in refiguring the space, of what there is to do there, what is to be seen or named therein. It is the established litigation of the perceptible, on the *nemeïn* that founds any communal *nomos*.

23. This partition constituting politics is never given in the form of a lot, of a kind of property that obliges or compels politics. These properties are litigious as much in their understanding as in their extension. Exemplary in this regard are those properties that, for Aristotle, define a political ability or are intended for

'the good life.' Apparently nothing could be clearer than the distinction made by Aristotle in Book I of the *Politics*: the sign of the political nature of humans is constituted by their possession of the *logos*, the articulate language appropriate for manifesting a community in the aisthesis of the just and the unjust, as opposed to the animal *phone*, appropriate only for expressing the feelings of pleasure and displeasure. If you are in the presence of an animal possessing the ability of the articulate language and its power of manifestation, you know you are dealing with a human and therefore with a political animal. The only practical difficulty is in knowing which sign is required to recognize the sign; that is, how one can be sure that the human animal mouthing a noise in front of you is actually voicing an utterance rather than merely expressing a state of being? If there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths. And the same goes for the opposition so readily invoked between the obscurity of domestic and private life, and the radiant luminosity of the public life of equals. In order to refuse the title of political subjects to a category -- workers, women, etc… -- it has traditionally been sufficient to assert that they belong to a 'domestic' space, to a space separated from public life; one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger, or anger could emerge, but not actual speeches demonstrating a shared *aisthesis*. And the politics of these categories has always consisted in re-qualifying these places, in getting them to be seen as the spaces of a community, of getting themselves to be seen or heard as speaking subjects (if only in the form of litigation); in short, participants in a common *aisthesis*. It has consisted in making what was unseen visible; in getting what was only audible as noise to be heard as speech; in demonstrating to be a feeling of shared 'good' or 'evil' what had appeared merely as an expression of pleasure or pain.

24. The essence of politics is *dissensus*. Dissensus is not the confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself. Politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen, it lodges one world into another (for instance, the world where the factory is a public space within the one where it is considered a private one, the world where workers speak out vis-à-vis the one where their voices are merely cries expressing pain). This is precisely why politics cannot be identified with the model of communicative action since this model presupposes the partners in communicative exchange to be pre-constituted, and that the discursive forms of exchange imply a speech community whose constraint is always explicable. In contrast, the particular feature of political dissensus is that the partners are no more constituted than is the object or the very scene of discussion. The ones making visible the fact that they belong to a shared world the other does not see -- cannot take advantage of -- the logic implicit to a pragmatics of communication. The worker who

argues for the public nature of a 'domestic' matter (such as a salary dispute) must indicate the world in which his argument counts as an argument and must demonstrate it as such for those who do not possess a frame of reference to conceive of it as argument. Political argument is at one and the same time the *demonstration* of a possible world where the argument could count as argument, addressed by a subject qualified to argue, upon an identified object, to an addressee who is required to see the object and to hear the argument that he or she 'normally' has no reason to either see or hear. It is the construction of a paradoxical world that relates two separate worlds.

25. Politics thus has no 'proper' place nor does it possess any 'natural' subjects. A demonstration is political not because it takes place in a specific locale and bears upon a particular object but rather because its form is that of a clash between two partitions of the sensible. A political subject is not a group of interests or ideas: It is the operator of a particular mode of subjectification and litigation through which politics has its existence. Political demonstrations are thus always of the moment and their subjects are always provisional. Political difference is always on the shore of its own disappearance: the people are close to sinking into the sea of the population or of race, the proletariat borders on being confused with workers defending their interests, the space of a people's public demonstration is always at risk of being confused with the merchant's *agora*, etc.

26. The deduction of politics from a specific world of equals or free people, as opposed to another world lived out of necessity, takes as its ground precisely the object of its litigation. It thus renders compulsory a blindness to those who 'do not see' and have no place from which to be seen. Exemplary, in this regard, is a passage from Arendt's *On Revolution* discussing the manner in which John Adams identifies the unhappiness of the poor with the fact of 'not being seen.'[13] Such an identification, she comments, could itself only emanate from a man belonging to a privileged community of equals. And, by the same token, it could 'hardly be understood' by the people comprising the relevant categories. We could express amazement at the extraordinary deafness of this affirmation in the face of the multiplicity of discourses and demonstrations of the 'poor' concerning precisely their mode of visibility. But this deafness has nothing accidental about it. It forms a circle with the acceptance of an original partition, a founding politics, with what was in fact the permanent object of litigation constituting politics. It forms a circle with the definition of *homo laborans* as a partition of the 'ways of life.' This circle is not that of any particular theoretician; it is *the* circle of 'political philosophy.'

Thesis 9:

> Inasmuch as what is proper to 'political philosophy' is to ground political action in a specific mode of

being, so is it the case that 'political philosophy' effaces the litigiousness constitutive of politics. It is in its very description of the world of politics that philosophy effects this effacement. Moreover, its effectiveness is perpetuated through to the non-philosophical or anti-philosophical description of the world.

27. That the distinguishing feature of politics is the existence of a subject who 'rules' by the very fact of having no qualifications to rule; that the principle of beginnings/ruling is irremediably divided as a result of this, and that the political community is specifically a litigious community -- this is the 'political secret' that philosophy first encounters. If we can speak of the privileged stature of the 'Ancients' over the 'Moderns,' it is a consequence of their having first perceived this 'secret' and not of having been the first to oppose the community of the 'good' to that of the 'useful.' At the head of the anodyne expression 'political philosophy' one finds the violent encounter between philosophy and the exception to the law of *arche* proper to politics, along with philosophy's effort to resituate politics under the auspices of this law. The *Gorgias*, the *Republic*, the *Politics*, the *Laws*, all these texts reveal the same effort to efface the paradox or scandal of a 'seventh qualification' -- to make of democracy a simple case of the indeterminable principle of 'the government of the strongest,' against which one can only oppose a government of those who know [*les savants*]. These texts all reveal a similar strategy of placing the community under a unique law of partition and expelling the empty part of the *demos* from the communal body.

28. But this expulsion does not simply take place in the form of the opposition between the 'good' regime of the community that is both one and hierarchised according to its principle of unity, and the 'bad' regimes of division and disorder. It takes place within the very presupposition that identifies a political form with a way of life; and this presupposition is already operating in the procedures for describing 'bad' regimes, and democracy in particular. All of politics, as we have said, is played out in the interpretation of democratic 'anarchy.' In identifying it with the dispersal of the desires of democratic man, Plato transforms the form of politics into a mode of existence and, further, transforms the void into an overflow. Before being the theorist of the 'ideal' or 'enclosed' city-state, Plato is the founder of the anthropological conception of the political, the conception that identifies politics with the deployment of the properties of a type of man or a mode of life. This kind of 'man,' this 'way of being,' this form of the city-state: it is there, before any discourse on the laws or the educational methods of the ideal state, before even the partition of the classes of the community, the partition of the perceptible that cancels out political singularity.

29. The initial gesture of political philosophy thus has a two-fold consequence: On the one hand, Plato founds a community that is

the effectuation of a principle of unity, of an undivided principle -- a community strictly defined as a common body with its places and functions and with its forms of interiorisation of the common. He founds an archi-politics[14] based on a law of unity between the 'occupations' of the city-state and its 'ethos,' (in other words its way of inhabiting an abode), as law but also as the specific 'tone' according to which this ethos reveals itself. This etho-logy of the community once again makes politics and police indistinguishable. And political philosophy, inasmuch as it wants to give to the community a single foundation, is condemned to have to re-identify politics and police, to cancel out politics through the gesture that founds it.

30. But Plato also invents a 'concrete' mode for describing the production of political forms. In a word, he invents the very forms of the refusal of the 'ideal state,' the settled forms of opposition between philosophical *'a-prior-ism'* and concrete sociological or political-scientific analyses of the forms of politics as expressions of ways of life. This second legacy is more profound and more long-lasting than the first. The sociology of the political is the second resource -- the *deuteron plous* -- of political philosophy that accomplishes (sometimes against itself) its fundamental project: to found the community on the basis of a univocal partition of the sensible. In particular, de Tocqueville's analysis of democracy, whose innumerable variants and ersatz versions feed the discourses on modern democracy, the age of the masses, the mass individual, etc., fits into the continuity of the theoretical gesture that cancels out the structural singularity of 'the qualification without qualifications' and the 'part of the no-part,' by re-describing democracy as a social phenomenon, of the collective effectuation of the properties of a type of man.

31. Inversely, the claims for the purity of the *bios politikos* (of the republican constitution and of the community versus the individual or democratic mass, and the opposition between the political and the social) share in the effectiveness of the same knot between the *a-prior-ism* of the 'republican' re-founding, and the sociological description of democracy. No matter which side one rests on, the opposition between the 'political' and the 'social' is a matter defined entirely within the frame of 'political philosophy;' in other words, it is a matter that lies at the heart of the philosophical repression of politics. The current proclamations of a 'return to politics' and 'political philosophy' are an imitation of the originary gesture of 'political philosophy,' without actually grasping the principles or issues involved in it. In this sense, it is the radical forgetting of politics and of the tense relationship between politics and philosophy. The sociological theme of the 'end of politics' in post-modern society and the 'politico' theme of the 'return of politics' both derive from the initial double gesture of 'political philosophy' and both move towards the same forgetting of politics.

Thesis 10:

> The 'end of politics' and the 'return of politics' are two complementary ways of canceling out politics in the simple relationship between a state of the social and a state of statist apparatuses. 'Consensus' is the vulgar name given to this cancellation.

32. The essence of politics resides in the modes of dissensual subjectification that reveal the difference of a society to itself. The essence of consensus is not peaceful discussion and reasonable agreement as opposed to conflict or violence. Its essence is the annulment of dissensus as the separation of the sensible from itself, the annulment of surplus subjects, the reduction of the people to the sum of the parts of the social body, and of the political community to the relationship of interests and aspirations of these different parts. Consensus is the reduction of politics to the police. In other words, it is the 'end of politics' and not the accomplishment of its ends but, simply, the return of the 'normal' state of things which is that of politics' non-existence. The 'end of politics' is the ever-present shore of politics [*le bord de la politique*] that, in turn, is an activity of the moment and always provisional. 'Return of politics' and 'end of politics' are two symmetrical interpretations producing the same effect: to efface the very concept of politics, and the precariousness that is one of its essential elements. In proclaiming the end of usurpations of the social and the return to 'pure' politics, the 'return of politics' thesis simply occludes the fact that the 'social' is in no way a particular sphere of existence but, rather, a disputed object of politics. Therefore, the subsequently proclaimed end of the social is, simply put, the end of political litigation regarding the partition of worlds. The 'return of politics' is thus the affirmation that there is a specific place for politics. Isolated in this manner, this specific space can be nothing other than the place of the state and, in fact, the theorists of the 'return of politics' ultimately affirm that politics is out-dated. They identify it with the practices of state control which have, as their principal principle, the suppression of politics.

33. The sociological thesis of the 'end of politics' symmetrically posits the existence of a state of the social such that politics no longer has a necessary *raison-d'être*; whether or not it has accomplished its ends by bringing into being precisely this state (i.e., the exoteric American Hegelian-Fukayama-ist version) or whether its forms are no longer adapted to the fluidity and artificiality of present-day economic and social relations (i.e., the esoteric European Heideggerian-Situationist version). The thesis thus amounts to asserting that the logical telos of capitalism makes it so that politics becomes, once again, out dated. And then it concludes with either the mourning of politics before the triumph of an immaterial Leviathan, or its transformation into forms that are broken up, segmented, cybernetic, ludic, etc… -- adapted to those forms of the social

that correspond to the highest stage of capitalism. It thus fails to recognize that in actual fact, politics has no reason for being in any state of the social and that the contradiction of the two logics is an unchanging given that defines the contingency and precariousness proper to politics. Via a Marxist detour, the 'end of politics' thesis -- along with the consensualist thesis -- grounds politics in a particular mode of life that identifies the political community with the social body, subsequently identifying political practice with state practice. The debate between the philosophers of the 'return of politics' and the sociologists of the 'end of politics' is thus a straightforward debate regarding the order in which it is appropriate to take the presuppositions of 'political philosophy' so as to interpret the consensualist practice of annihilating politics.

Notes

[1] The original translation of the "Ten Theses" was done by Rachel Bowlby. However, some phrases were modified by Davide Panagia in consultation with Jacques Rancière. Terms in square brackets are Rancière's original French expressions.

[2] Our English 'political subject(ivity)' does not give an adequate sense of Rancière's "le sujet politique," a term that refers both to the idea of a political subjectivity and to the 'proper' subject of politics.

[3] Rancière plays on the double meaning of the *avoir-part* as both a 'partaking' and a 'partition.'

[4] The reference is to Arendt's claim that "the human capacity for freedom, which, by producing the web of human relationships, seems to entangle its producer to such an extent that he appears much more the victim and the sufferer than the author and the doer of what he has done" (*The Human Condition*, p. 233-234; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989).

[5] The word-play, here, is on the idea of an *'inter-est'* referring both to a principle of inter-relating and to the idea of societal 'interest.' Rancière is invoking an Arendtian distinction found in her *The Human Condition* (see pages 50-58).

[6] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 177.

[7] Though the literal translation of the French is "the count of the unaccounted-for" the formulation found in the English translation of *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, (Julie Rose trans., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) is retained for the sake of consistency.

[8] Demes were townships or divisions of ancient Attica. In modern Greece the term refers to communes.

[9] See *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) especially Part IV: "On the Irreducible Element."

[10] Rancière is invoking Ernst Kantorowicz's work on medieval political theology, also present in Lefort's study.

[11] Rancière's conception of dissensus counts as an instance of the paradox of the 'one and the many' characteristic of democratic politics.

[12] Rancière here refers to Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (see *Lenin and Philosophy*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

[13] See Arendt's chapter entitled "The Social Question" from *On Revolution*; especially pages 68-71 (New York: Penguin Books, 1990).

[14] See Rancière's *Dis-agreement* (Chapter 4) for an extended discussion of this concept.

Jacques Rancière is professor of aesthetics at the University of Paris VIII (St.-Denis). He is the author of numerous books including: *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy (1998), On the Shores of Politics* (1995), and *The Names of History* (1994).

letter to the editors

muse search contents top