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Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization

JACQUES RANCIÈRE

In a sense, the whole matter of my paper is involved in a preliminary question: In what language will it be uttered? Neither my language nor your language, but rather a dialect between French and English, a special one, a dialect that carries no identification with any group. No tribal dialect, no universal language, only an *in-between* dialect, constructed for the aims of this discussion and guided by the idea that the activity of thinking is primarily an activity of translation, and that anyone is capable of making a translation. Underpinning this capacity for translation is the efficacy of equality, that is to say, the efficacy of humanity.

I will move directly to the question that frames our discussion. I quote from the third point of the list of issues we were asked to address: "What is the political?"

Briefly and roughly speaking, I would answer: the political is the encounter between two heterogeneous processes. The first process is that of governing, and it entails creating community consent, which relies on the distribution of shares and the hierarchy of places and functions. I shall call this process *policy*.

The second process is that of equality. It consists of a set of practices guided by the supposition that everyone is equal and by the attempt to verify this supposition. The proper name for this set of practices remains *emancipation*. In spite of Lyotard's statements, I do not assume a necessary link between the idea of emancipation and the narrative of a universal wrong and a universal victim. It is true that the handling of a wrong remains the universal form for the meeting between the two processes of policy and equality. But we can question that encounter. We can argue, for example, that any policy denies equality and that there is no commensurability between the two processes. In my book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, I advocated the thesis of the French theorist of emancipation, Joseph Jacotot, according to whom emancipation can only be the intellectual emancipation of individuals. This means that there is no political stage, only the law of policy and the law of equality. In order for a political stage to occur, we must change that assumption. Thus, instead of arguing that

policy *denies* equality, I shall say that policy *wrongs* equality, and I shall take the political to be the place where the verification of equality is obliged to turn into the handling of a wrong.

So we have three terms: policy, emancipation, and the political. If we want to emphasize their interplay, we can give to the process of emancipation the name of *politics*. I shall thus distinguish policy, politics, and the political—the political being the field for the encounter between emancipation and policy in the handling of a wrong.

A momentous consequence follows from this: politics is not the enactment of the principle, the law, or the self of a community. Put in other words, politics has no arche, it is anarchical. The very name *democracy* supports this point. As Plato noted, democracy has no arche, no measure. The singularity of the act of the demos—a *cratein* instead of an *archein*—is dependent on an originary disorder or miscount: the demos, or people, is at the same time the name of a community and the name for its division, for the handling of a wrong. And beyond any particular wrong, the “politics of the people” wrongs policy, because the people is always more or less than itself. It is the power of the *one more*, the power of *anyone*, which confuses the right ordering of policy.

Now for me the current dead end of political reflection and action is due to the identification of politics with the *self* of a community. This may occur in the big community or in smaller ones; it may be the identification of the process of governing with the principle of the community under the heading of universality, the reign of the law, liberal democracy, and so on. Or it may be, on the contrary, the claim for identity on the part of so-called minorities against the hegemonic law of the ruling culture and identity. The big community and the smaller ones may charge one another with “tribalism” or “barbarianism,” and both will be right in their charge and wrong in their claim. I don’t assume that they are practically equivalent, that the outcomes are the same; I only assume that they stem from the same questionable identification. For the *primum movens* of policy is to purport to act as the self of the community, to turn the techniques of governing into natural laws of the social order. But if *politics* is something different from *policy*, it cannot draw on such an identification. One can object that the idea of emancipation is historically related to the idea of the self in the formula of “self-emancipation of the workers.” But the first motto of any self-emancipation movement is always the struggle against “selfishness.” This is not only a moral statement (e.g., the dedication of the individual to the militant community); it is also a logical one: the politics of emancipation is the politics of the self as an other, or, in Greek terms, a *heteron*. The logic of emancipation is a heterology.

Let me put this differently: the process of emancipation is the verification of the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being. It is always enacted in the name of a category denied either the principle or the consequences of that equality: workers, women, people of color, or others. But the

enactment of equality is not, for all that, the enactment of the self, of the attributes or properties of the community in question. The name of an injured community that invokes its rights is always the name of the anonym, the name of anyone.

Are there universal values transcending particular identifications? If we are to break out of the desperate debate between universality and identity, we must answer that the only universal in politics is equality. But we must add that equality is not a value given in the essence of Humanity or Reason. Equality exists, and makes universal values exist, to the extent that it is enacted. Equality is not a value to which one appeals; it is a universal that must be supposed, verified, and demonstrated in each case. Universality is not the *eidos* of the community to which particular situations are opposed; it is, first of all, a logical operator. The mode of effectivity of Truth or Universality in politics is the discursive and practical construction of a polemical verification, a case, a demonstration. The place of truth is not the place of a ground or an ideal; it is always a *topos*, the place of a subjectivization in an argumentative plot. Its language is always idiomatic, which, on the contrary, does not mean tribal. When oppressed groups set out to cope with a wrong, they may appeal to Man or Human Being. But the universality is not in those concepts; it is in the way of demonstrating the consequences that follow from this—from the worker being a citizen, the black being a human being, and so on. The logical schema of social protest, generally speaking, may be summed up as follows: Do we or do we not belong to the category of men or citizens or human beings, and what follows from this? The universality is not enclosed in *citizen* or *human being*; it is involved in the “what follows,” in its discursive and practical enactment.

Such a universality may develop through the mediation of particular categories. For instance, in nineteenth-century France, workers might construct the logic of a strike in the form of a syllogism: Do French workers belong to the category of Frenchmen? If not, the Declaration of Rights has to be changed. If so, they must be treated as equals, and they act to demonstrate it. The question might become more paradoxical. For instance, does a French woman belong to the category of Frenchmen? The question may sound nonsensical or scandalous. However, such nonsensical sentences may prove more productive in the process of equality than the mere assumption that a woman is a woman or a worker a worker. For they allow these subjects not only to specify a logical gap that in turn discloses a social bias, but also to articulate this gap as a relation, the non-place as a place, the place for a polemical construction. The construction of such cases of equality is not the act of an identity, nor is it the demonstration of the values specific to a group. It is a process of subjectivization.

What is a process of subjectivization? It is the formation of a one that is not a self but is the relation of a self to an other. Let me demonstrate this with respect to an outmoded name, “the proletarian.” One of its first uses occurs in

nineteenth-century France when the revolutionary leader Auguste Blanqui was prosecuted for rebellion. The prosecutor asked him: "What is your profession?" He answered: "Proletarian." Then the prosecutor: "It is not a profession." And the response of Blanqui was: "It is the profession of the majority of our people who are deprived of political rights." From the vantage point of policy, the prosecutor was right: it is no profession. And obviously Blanqui was not what is usually called a worker. But, from the vantage point of politics, Blanqui was right: *proletarian* was not the name of any social group that could be sociologically identified. It is the name of an outcast. An outcast is not a poor wretch of humanity; outcast is the name of those who are denied an identity in a given order of policy. In Latin, *proletarii* meant "prolific people"—people who make children, who merely live and reproduce without a name, without being counted as part of the symbolic order of the city. *Proletarians* was thus well-suited for the workers as the name of anyone, the name of the outcast: those who do not belong to the order of castes, indeed, those who are pleased to undo this order (the class that dissolves classes, as Marx said). In this way, a process of subjectivization is a process of disidentification or declassification.

Let me rephrase this: a subject is an outsider or, more, an *in-between*. *Proletarians* was the name given to people who are together inasmuch as they are between: between several names, statuses, and identities; between humanity and inhumanity, citizenship and its denial; between the status of a man of tools and the status of a speaking and thinking being. Political subjectivization is the enactment of equality—or the handling of a wrong—by people who are together to the extent that they are between. It is a crossing of identities, relying on a crossing of names: names that link the name of a group or class to the name of no group or no class, a being to a nonbeing or a not-yet-being.

This network has a noticeable property: it always involves an impossible identification, an identification that cannot be embodied by he or she who utters it. "We are the wretched of the earth" is the kind of sentence that no wretched of the world would ever utter. Or, to take a personal example, for my generation politics in France relied on an impossible identification—an identification with the bodies of the Algerians beaten to death and thrown into the Seine by the French police, in the name of the French people, in October 1961. We could not identify with those Algerians, but we *could* question our identification with the "French people" in whose name they had been murdered. That is to say, we could act as political subjects in the interval or the gap between two identities, neither of which we could assume. That process of subjectivization had no proper name, but it found its name, its cross name, in the 1968 assumption "We are all German Jews"—a "wrong" identification, an identification in terms of the denial of an absolutely essential wrong. If the movement began with that sentence, its decline might be emblemized by an antithetical statement, which served as the title of an essay published some years after by a former leader of

the movement: "We were not all born proletarians." Certainly we were not; we are not. But what follows from this is an inability to draw consequences from a "being" that is a "nonbeing," from an identification with an anybody that has no body. In the demonstration of equality the syllogistic logic of the *either/or* (are we or are we not citizens or human beings?) is intertwined with the paratactic logic of a "we are *and* are not."

In sum, the logic of political subjectivization, of emancipation, is a heterology, a logic of the other, for three main reasons. First, it is never the simple assertion of an identity; it is always, at the same time, the denial of an identity given by an other, given by the ruling order of policy. Policy is about "right" names, names that pin people down to their place and work. Politics is about "wrong" names—misnomers that articulate a gap and connect with a wrong. Second, it is a demonstration, and a demonstration always supposes an other, even if that other refuses evidence or argument. It is the staging of a common place that is not a place for a dialogue or a search for a consensus in Habermasian fashion. There is no consensus, no undamaged communication, no settlement of a wrong. But there is a polemical commonplace for the handling of a wrong and the demonstration of equality. Third, the logic of subjectivization always entails an impossible identification.

Only by dismissing the complexity of this logic can one oppose the past grand narratives and the universal victims to present-day little narratives. The so-called grand narrative of the people and the proletariat was in fact made of a multiplicity of language games and demonstrations. And the concept of narrative itself, like the concept of culture, is highly questionable. It entails the identification of an argumentative plot with a voice, and of a voice with a body. But the life of political subjectivization is made out of the difference between the voice and the body, the interval between identities. So narrative and culture entail the reversion of subjectivization to identification. The process of equality is a process of difference. But difference does not mean the assumption of a different identity or the plain confrontation of two identities. The place for the working out of difference is not the "self" or the culture of a group. It is the *topos* of an argument. And the place for such an argument is an interval. The place of a political subject is an interval or a gap: being *together* to the extent that we are *in between*—between names, identities, cultures, and so on.

This is, to be sure, an uncomfortable position, and the discomfort gives way to the discourse of metapolitics. Metapolitics is the interpretation of politics from the vantage point of policy. Its tendency is to interpret heterology as illusion, and intervals and gaps as signs of untruth. The paradigms of the metapolitical interpretation approach is the Marxist interpretation of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* of 1789. It assumed that the very difference between *man* and *citizen* was the hallmark of delusion: lurking behind the celestial identity of the citizen was the mundane identity of a man who was

in fact an owner. Today the current style of metapolitics teaches us, on the contrary, that man and citizen are the same liberal individual enjoying the universal values of human rights embodied in the constitutions of our democracies. But the style of politics as emancipation is a third one: it assumes that the universality of the declaration of 1789 is the universality of the argument to which it gave way, and that is due precisely to the very interval between the two terms, which opened the possibility of appealing from one to the other, of making them the terms of innumerable demonstrations of rights, including the rights of those who are counted neither as men nor as citizens.

My conclusion is twofold: both optimistic and pessimistic. First, we are not trapped within the opposition of universalism and identity. The distinction is rather between a logic of subjectivization and a logic of identification—between two ideas of multiplicity, not between universalism and particularism. The discourse of universalism may be as “tribal” as the discourse of identity. We could experience this during the Gulf War, when many heralds of universal culture turned out to be heralds of clean universal weapons and undetailed death. The true opposition runs between the tribal and the idiomatic. Idiomatic politics constructs locally the place of the universal, the place for the demonstration of equality. It dismisses the desperate dilemma: either the big community or the smaller ones—either community or nothing at all. It leads to a new politics of the in-between.

My second conclusion is less optimistic. Much of the discussion this morning dealt with new forms of racism and xenophobia and our failure to formulate effective responses. There is more at issue here, however. In France, for instance, the new racism and xenophobia should not be viewed as consequences of social problems that we cannot confront, e.g., as the effects of objective problems raised by the immigrant population. Rather, they are the effects of a void, of a previous collapse—the collapse of emancipatory politics as a politics of the other. Twenty years ago we were “all German Jews”; that is to say, we were in the heterological logic of “wrong” names, in the political culture of conflict. Now we have only “right” names. We are Europeans and xenophobes. It is the demotion of the political form, of the political polymorphism of the other, that creates a new kind of *other*, one that is infrapolitical. Objectively, we have no more immigrant people than we had twenty years ago. Subjectively, we have many more. The difference is this: twenty years ago the “immigrant” had an *other* name; they were workers or proletarians. In the meantime this name has been lost as a *political* name. They retained their “own” name, and an other that has no *other* name becomes the object of fear and rejection.

The “new” racism is the hatred of the other that comes forth when the political procedures of social polemics collapse. The political culture of conflict may have had disappointing outlets. But it was also a way of coming to terms with something that lies before and beneath politics: the question of the other

as a figure of identification for the object of fear. This morning Cornel West told us that identity is about desire and death. I would say that identity is first about fear: the fear of the other, the fear of nothing, which finds on the body of the other its object. And the polemical culture of emancipation, the heterological enactment of the other, was also a way of civilizing that fear. The new outcomes of racism and xenophobia thus reveal the very collapse of politics, the reversion of the political handling of a wrong to a primal hate. If my analysis is correct, the question is not only "How are we to face a political problem?" but "How are we to reinvent politics?"