Jacques Rancière: aesthetics, time, politics

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Jacques Rancière’s critique of political philosophy. I argue that, to understand this critique, it is necessary to explore the aesthetic dimension of philosophers’ politics, pointing out that, at its foundation, lies a certain understanding of time that, paradoxically, negates political practice. To get out of this paradox, I point out that Rancière proposes a politics of writing that allows us to understand political practice from the point of view of a heterochrony and conflictive form of time. This approach, which distances itself from the Western tradition of political thought, allows us to address the concepts of contingency and equality in a radical way.

KEYWORDS

Aesthetic dimension; time of progress; heterochrony; J. Rancière; political practice; political philosophy

Introduction

Times have changed. In Jacques Rancière’s opinion, this statement is an operator of domination that presupposes the idea that, what was once possible, cannot take place today (Rancière 2013b). It is worth noting that, for Rancière, this statement is not a rhetorical affirmation, but rather a distribution of the sensible, an aesthetic dimension of human experience that allows us to divide the actual and the unactual, the present and the past.¹ In our days, it is expected that the actual is the fact that the political is the management of the common following the mandates of capital valorisation. On the other, it seems obvious that the unactual is the resistance and disobedience of people seeking to protect themselves from the violence of the processes of capitalist accumulation. In accordance with this distribution of the sensible, we are no longer in the times of social mobilizations, the great strikes or the emancipations that once interrupted the valorisation of the capital. Rather, we are in the times of entrepreneurship, competition, and management of market externalities. Domination is thus a distribution of the sensible, because it creates a world where prohibition is not repressive, but a configuration of sense, an aesthetic dimension of human experience. However, I would like to highlight that for Rancière (1995, 71–72), political practice is an operator of emancipation that produces its own distribution of sense or its own rationality. This distribution of sense, unlike that of domination, seeks to show the actuality of the unactual. In other words, political practice problematises the progressive understanding of the time of domination through a distribution of sense whose principle is disagreement (mésentente).

In this article, I am interested in articulating how Rancière’s thought understands both domination and emancipation from the point of view of the aesthetic dimension of human experience, taking as a point of reference the critique of the notion of progress that appears in his 1995 work La mésentente. From my point of view, this work develops a critique of the conditions of possibility of domination that can be put in dialogue with perspectives such as those of L. Althusser and Walter Benjamin. In the same way, in this reflection we find a new way of understanding political practice or a politics of writing that has as its horizon a form of time that is opposed to that of progress. I will call this logic the time of interruption. To develop this hypothesis, I will consider time as the fundamental axis of these forms of aesthetic experience.² While domination presupposes a progressive and homogeneous experience of time, political practice institutes a conflictive experience that is itself a conflictive experience of time. This conflictive experience is a distribution of the sensible that brings heterogeneous dimensions of time into interlocution. For this reason, Rancière’s interest is to show that political practice does not confront the classes that dominate a society, but rather the conditions of possibility that make it possible for some to rule over others. His concern in exploring this dimension of human experience is thus to understand domination as emancipation from the point of view of its aesthetic conditions of possibility.

In order to develop this argument, firstly, I focus on the aesthetic experience of the time of domination. Following the first chapter of La mésentente, I suggest that political philosophy since antiquity has
attempted to justify domination in order to preserve the order of the common. I will point out that the aesthetic gesture of political philosophy is to prohibit any act that interrupts the flow of events, marking it as erratic and harmful to the order of common life. Secondy, I point out that Rancière’s political thought allows us to make a critique of the time of progress by suggesting that there is a political and emancipatory form of time, namely, an emancipatory form of the aesthetic dimension of human experience. Finally, I explore the politics of writing, that Rancière proposes as an alternative to political philosophy. In this part I argue that for political practice to emerge in our sensitive experience it is necessary to put forward an alternative political thought. I will call this thinking that makes the rationality of political practice visible the “politics of writing”.

The time of domination or the idea of a city without blaberon

Many commentators on Rancière’s work have focused their attention on characterising the relationship between the aesthetic dimension and time in his recent work devoted to reflection on art and its relation to his research on the workers’ archive La nuit des prolétaires. In my view, this position, while very plausible and rigorous, has neglected the critique of the notion of progress in his reflection on political philosophy in La mésentente. For this reason, I would like to focus on the first chapter entitled “Le commencement de la politique”. In this part, in my opinion, Rancière condenses his critique of political philosophy from the point of view of the aesthetic dimension of human experience. Now, following a recent essay by Rancière (2009), I will understand by aesthetics not the sensible, but a certain distribution of the sensible. As we shall see below, this aesthetic dimension of human experience has two functions: on the one hand, it allows us to perceive the given and, on the other, to give it sense. Accordingly, the acuteness of Rancière’s analysis lies in the fact that at the foundation of political philosophy there exist a certain distribution of sense that is not entirely evident. As we will see, this distribution is implied in a way of understanding time and giving sense to it.

This point of departure allows Rancière to problematise the first book of Aristotle’s Politics, arguing that it is not evident that logos, which differentiates us from animals, allow the emergence of a life in common. The reason for this objection can be stated as follows: to consider the function of logos, we have to explore the emergency conditions of a suspiciously divided language. On the one hand, we find a logos that serves to manifest the useful and the harmful, on the other, a logos that allows us to understand what is just and unjust. While the former proposes an experience of language as an instrument of manifestation, the latter invites us to build a life in common that allows us to reach a consensus on justice. In Rancière’s opinion, the enigma of political philosophy, its scandal, rests on this distinction, because “It seems hard to draw the line here between the community of Good and the utilitarian social contract” (Rancière, 1995, 21, 1999, 3). The question that arises then is the following: What is the condition that allows the distinction between a speech act as an instrument for maximizing the utility of a given subject and a speech act as a manifestation of the common good? Is it possible to say that the way of giving sense to time influences the distinction that political philosophy wants to draw?

To answer this question, Rancière renounces Marxism and liberalism, because he considers that this distinction is not a deception that hide the true interest of class domination (Marx, 2010), nor is it the discovery that language has a superior and normative function in the human relations (Habermas, 1989, 2000). Rancière emphasizes that the distinction between the world of utility and the world of the common good is a distribution of the sensible, namely, a distribution of our ways of perceiving the world that cannot be explained from the pragmatic freedom that allows us to reach consensus (Habermas), nor from the idea that there is a class domination (Marx). Rancière’s concern lies in the condition of possibility that allows language to transit from the instrumental reason to the consensus on justice. To this condition, he and many of his commentators have given the name of police distribution of the sensible, a way of ordering our experience that seeks to give a necessary order to our shared life. There is a police distribution of the sensible when a community can distinguish an instrumental action, which maximizes the utility of a certain subject, and a just action, which allows the stability of the common. Now, to show how this distribution makes possible a consensus on justice and how, in a certain way, it produces violence, I would like to suggest that the foundation of this police dimension of the aesthetic experience is a progressive form of temporality.

In the first chapter of La mésentente, Rancière proposes that the transition from instrumental action to action that seeks justice has, at least, one condition: the mediation of their opposites, which, in my view, is a way of configuring time:

The problem here is not to ennoble acceptance of the useful to bring it up to par with the ideality of the just that is its goal; rather, it is being able to see that going from the useful to the just can only happen through mediation of their opposites. It is in the play of opposites, in the obscure relationship of the
“harmful” and the “unjust;” that the heart of the political problem lies the problem politics poses for philosophical thinking about community. (Rancière 1995, 21, 1999, 3).

According to the quote, this mediation is a condition of the transition from the useful to the just, because it allows balancing two terms that do not have a necessary relationship: the harmful and the unjust. When this balance occurs, which for Rancière is false, arises the possibility of instituting justice as a regime whose aim is to eliminate what is harmful and, therefore, what is unjust. This fight against what is “harmful” then leads us to justice, namely, to a society that is fully certain that any harmful human action prevents the realization of justice. But what is harmful? How to understand that idea that seeks to get rid of the harmful, and therefore the unjust, in the project of political philosophy? In what way does political philosophy produce these criteria that distinguish what is harmful and what consequences does this have from the point of view of emancipatory political practice?

From my point of view, in order to understand this gesture of political philosophy, which seeks to balance the harmful and the unjust to reach justice, we need to develop an archaeological approach to the concept of time that is found in its presuppositions. I understand by archaeological, following Foucault, all forms of philosophical criticism that does not seek to think about phenomena, rather about their historical conditions of possibility. For this reason, it is useless to state that in the development of political philosophy there is an equivalence between the harmful and the unjust to understand justice. We must investigate what that equivalence presupposes. In accordance with this, I suggest that Rancière’s critique can be elucidated if we consider that at the heart of the transition from the useful to the just, there is a progressive form of time which is a certain distribution of what is sensible. Continuing with the argumentation of La mésentente, it is significant that Rancière concentrates on that transit, considering the meaning that the Greeks gave to the concept of “the harmful” which in Greek is Blaberon (βλαβερόν).

Rancière notes that for both Aristotle and Plato, blaberon is an equivocal logic of time. In fact, a few pages later in the first chapter of La mésentente, Rancière says, following Plato’s Cratylus, that blaberon “signifies an interrupted current, the original twist that short-circuits the natural logic of properties” (Rancière 1995, 33, 1999, 13). In the same vein, Plato say that blaberon “means that which is harming the flow (Platón 1987, 417d-e). Common to these definitions is that blaberon means the interruption of the normal functioning of time. This leads us to the following consideration: the harmful (blaberon) is a distortion of time that does not allow things to have a free course. According to this suggestion, political philosophy, which seeks to make a transition from the useful to the just through the mediation of their opposites, is a way of configuring the sense that allows us to find that things have a natural course and that there exists a false form of the common that tends to break the natural order of time. That false form is evidently the time of the blaberon interruption. Accordingly, the problem posed by the blaberon to political philosophy is not the harm that some inflict on others, but the equivocal logic of time that this way of establishing relationships presupposes.

What is notable about this meaning of blaberon is that the condition of political philosophy is an order of time. It presupposes that there exists a necessity that impulses events to happen in a certain mode. According to Rancière, this argument allows the founders of political philosophy to claim that human beings become just, and therefore political, when they understand the need for a progressive order of time, eliminating the equivocal logic of the blaberon from the common horizon. The challenge of political philosophy is, then, the need to find an order of the common that is not determined by the subjection of blaberon, rather by the free flow of events. This would allow the emergence of command and obedience relations that do not have as a horizon the arbitrary domination of one class over another, but an order of the common that necessarily requires harmony and coordination of actions, namely, a just order.

Nevertheless, this idealization of a city without blaberon has spread throughout our tradition of political thought. Plato7 and Aristotle outlined some schemes of thought that are not only replicated in political philosophy, but also in the philosophy of law and political science. The fact of believing that the search for justice is involved in the management of a city without blaberon is part of a presupposition according to which there is a time of nature that assigns roles, times of work and unemployment; likewise, times for political participation and the management of the common. Thinkers like the philosopher and legal theorist Jürgen Habermas also fall on this horizon. For Habermas, the world of blaberon emerges in modern times or in postmetaphysical societies that have lost the religious foundations that governed life in common. In the absence of a normative authority, human beings fall into deep chaos, because they begin to inhabit a reality that is confused by the proliferation of speech acts with very weak normative forces (Habermas 2000, 64–65). To this world of human speech, following the phenomenological tradition of Husserl, Habermas gives the name of the Lifeworld (Lebenswelt) (Habermas 1989, 435). In contemporary societies, this world is characterized by having lost
the normative horizon, leaving functionalist and systemic integration to take place in a predominant way. In this Lifeworld, where solid criteria of normative integration are lacking, the powers of money and those of administrative domination come into play. Thus, the tragedy of the modern world is that of the blaberon, namely, the tragedy of an erratic humanity that does not contemplate any hegemonic criterion that allows it to orientate speech acts towards understanding. Now, what is the proposal of this political philosophy? What is there in common between these postulates and those of Plato?

Habermas, like Plato, propose to think of a common order without blaberon. Nevertheless, his thinking does not justify inequality and social hierarchies, but rather the resounding authority of the rule of law. According to Habermas, it is necessary to prevent the emergence of the blaberon (or an equivocal form of time). For this reason, he points out that there must exist a vertical state power that is deeply rooted in the freedom of speech oriented towards understanding. Habermas calls this idea “deliberative politics”. It is about the rule of law providing clear criteria for human beings to argue beyond their own self-interest. (Habermas 2000, 168). These criteria are nothing more than rules of argumentation, legal procedures that mediate human speech to prevent it from falling into the world of the blaberon. Habermas thus introduces us to a philosophical thought that presupposes that justice is the containment of that which does not allow the flow of nature, that is, the flow of argumentation oriented towards “reaching understanding” (Bohman and Rehg 2017). To that extend, the condition of political philosophy is the time of domination, a time that seeks to make possible the cycles of the reproduction of inequality (Plato) or the development of the understanding (Habermas). However, what makes one inequality preferable to another? What makes an argument rational and oriented to understanding?

Rancière’s response is overwhelming. There is no reason behind that tells us if one inequality is better than another. Nor there is a meta-argument that decides whether a speech act is oriented to understanding. There is, rather, a certain form of distribution of the sensible (partage du sensible) that makes possible the emergence of a voice that decides when a society is freed from blaberon, from the torsion that represents the harmful and, therefore, the unjust. This voice does not require a demonstration, because it is a way of configuring the sense based on the need for things to be like this and not otherwise. Rancière calls this form of distribution of the sense police order. Following his postulates, this order produces a saturation of sense, because it presupposes the necessary existence of properties, roles, ways of being and ways of saying (Rancière 1995, 51). The rule of this order of sense, at the same time, is a logic of time, since it demands that the necessity appears as a flow, as a sequence of events that happen without interruption. According to Rancière, political philosophy transforms political conflict into police, allowing consensus to emerge. (Rancière 2010b, 100). Nevertheless, the consensus is not a matter of an inter-subjective agreement, but a system of sensible evidence that has as its principle a specific way of giving sense to the given. According to this, “the consensus says that there is but a single reality whose signs must be depleted; [...] that one unique time exists, while allowing itself to multiply its figures” (Rancière 2010a, ix)

In fact, it may be said that consensus is the basis of the logic of capital valorisation. Marx rightly says that “capital is dead labor that is only vampirically revived by absorbing living labor (lebendiger Arbeit)” (Marx 1982, 239, 2017, 297). Human life begins to depend on capital when a police distribution of the sensible is presupposed. To this distribution, time must pass without any interruption. The justice of the time of progress is thus the termination of the blaberon, namely, the termination of the fundamental torsion that does not let things happen as they should. For this reason, it is crucial to keep in mind that the progress is the result of the disappearance of blaberon. This is what David Harvey means by capital as value in motion (Harvey 2018), since there exist a world of things that we, as humans beings, must maintain with our labor, precarity or poverty. The authority of the time of progress, far from being an explanation, is a fabric of the sensible that allows us to enunciate sentences such as “times have changed.” There is a before and after, that is, a progressive time that justifies why certain hierarchies and violence are just, why it is better for capital to enjoy health and why it is not worth fighting against that order of time. The condition of domination that philosophical thought institutes is then a prohibition. But this prohibition is not negative or coercive, it is, on the contrary, a way of producing sense, an aesthetical prohibition. Upon a closer look, it becomes evident that, for Rancière, there are no forms of prohibition that are not crossed “by the idea that ‘it is not the moment yet’, ‘it is no longer the moment’ or even ‘it has never been the time’ ” (Rancière 2012, 108). According to this, the traditional idea that political philosophy seeks to reflect on the best form of government, as suggested by Norberto Bobbio (1995) and Giovanni Sartori (2011), hides the reality of the role that political philosophy has played in the Western world. Undoubtedly, the majority of political philosophers have been looking for a plausible form of government of human beings, however, it is necessary to
take into account that this search aims to show that the justice of time is the need to guarantee that the flow of events takes place. It does not matter if this flow produces inequality or arbitrary forms of sense, what is important to political philosophy is to guarantee an order where no one could interrupt the time of progress, the time of the necessity of a common order. Hence, political philosophy and its many derivations (political science, political sociology) hide a primordial violence: that of making the harmful and the unjust the same thing. Rancière’s hypothesis is that politics itself is found in the blaberon. The time that political philosophy presupposes is interrupted by politics.

The blaberon time, the interruption time

How much political is political philosophy? Rancière’s work tells us that little or perhaps nothing. As we saw a few lines above, political philosophy is not a discipline or a field of the study of philosophy, but rather a predication, an aporia in which the true realization of politics is posed through its most emphatic denial: for philosophers it is necessary to build a common world based on progressive time, a time that prevents the emergence of blaberon. We can see that the knowledge that claims to be born from philosophy as such political science also falls into this predication. Although many political scientists argue that political science develops forms of research different from philosophy, it is clear that the relationship between one practice and another lies in the fact that they define politics as a way of ordering the common world.

Against this assumption of the order of the common, Rancière seems to repeat the gesture of Marx when he begins his critique of political economy. Just as political economy starts from what it must explain—private property⁸, political philosophy and political science do the same: they suppose a consensus on the meaning of politics. They do not explain why the common should pursue an order, nor do they offer the possibility of putting into dialogue why democracy should be subordinated to a party system and a representative order of participation. Many political scientists simply say “it is no longer the time” for direct democracy, “it has never been the time” for radical transformations of society, or “it is not the time yet” for the rupture with the state-form that governs our lives.⁹ Rancière’s invitation is thus to start from the beginning, that is to say, from the enigmatic transition from the harmful to the unjust and, therefore, from the useful to the just. Rancière’s strategy is then to show that the desire of political philosophy to make the harmful and the unjust equivalent hides politics itself by leaving in the shadow a different understanding of time. I will call this hidden and non-normative time the time of interruption.

My hypothesis consists in showing that Rancierean thought maintains its reflection on politics in the order of a critique in the archaeological sense. If in the previous section we saw how he attempts to think the conditions of domination from the point of view of the time of progress, here we are going to explore the conditions of political practice from a time, called by Rancière, heterochronic (Rancière 2013b). As we will see, this time allows Rancière to show that inside the blaberon there is a configuration of sense that makes political activity possible. This configuration supposes not so much a common order, but the rupture of any idea based on how just and necessary social hierarchies are. It is then a matter of elaborating a concept of time that annihilates its progressive character, in order to make possible a thought of a temporality that is not based on the necessary succession of events, but the coexistence of times. If for political philosophy the harmful is “what harms the flow,” for Rancière this torsion of the harmful invites us to think about a different justice of time. A justice in which the present is dispossessed of its obviousness, as Walter Benjamin shows in Arcades project (Passagenwerk). But what does mean a different justice of time? How from the blaberon can emerge political activity? Is it possible to create an approach that allows us to conceive politics beyond progress?

From my point of view, Jacques Rancière and Walter Benjamin intersect their paths in this instance. For that reason, I would like to put them in discussion in this section. I will then take the N section of the Arcades Project as a point of reference for Benjamin’s thought. In this text, Benjamin seems also to be interested in finding a justice of time in the rancierean blaberon. According to the Benjamin (Benjamin 2002, 476), the first thing we must consider is the need to subvert the usual notion of critique that permeates the philosophy of history and political philosophy. He emphasizes that criticism, in a usual sense, has always been an accomplice of the time of progress, by presupposing that it is possible to realize, in a definitive way, justice on earth. Now, the paradox of this criticism is that once it is accomplished in history, once the bourgeoisie is in power, the very concept of criticism loses its critical function. (Benjamin 2009, 479, 2002, 476). This self-canceling criticism is also that of political philosophy, because when justice is accomplished, that is to say, when the flow of events is harmonized in a city without blaberon, philosophical criticism is no longer necessary. The community begins to be governed by philosophers, by professional revolutionaries or by
contemporary managers of capital. Against this, Benjamin proposes an antagonistic critique that opposes the time of progress.

Benjamin and Rancière are both interested in thinking about a critique that does not lose its critical functions, highlighting a different way of seeing conflict and time. Benjamin considers that is necessary to create an approach to historical materialism “which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress” (Benjamin 2002, 460). The strategy of Benjamin’s thought is to emphasize that the main criterion of the historical materialism is not progress but actualization. It is precisely here that emerges a form of critique that put together different times in the same space, in Benjamin’s words it is about erecting “a slender but sturdy scaffolding - a philosophic structure - in order to draw the most vital aspects of the past into his net (Benjamin 2002, 459). Following this, Benjamin adds that the past is the result of a distribution of sense, in other words, the past is what is excluded when sense is ordered following the time of progress. So, statements such as “times have changed” or “the time is not yet” exclude in advance what does not fit into the flow of succession of events. We can see thus that Benjamin, like Rancière, advert that the transcendental foundation of domination is the time of progress, a time that happens in a linear and one-dimensional way. The critique of historical materialism, in the opinion of the author of Arcades Project, thus consists in opposing to the time of progress a conflictual form of time:

It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of the angle of vision (Verschiebung des Gesichtswinkels) (but not of the criterion!), a positive element emerges anew in it too-something different from that previously signified. And so on, ad infinitum, until the entire past is brought into the present in a historical apocatastasis (Benjamin 1991, 573, 2002, 459).

This quote is scandalous for political philosophy. It is about highlighting a justice of time that interrupts the flow of events. In this interruption, the blaberon, which was excluded beforehand by philosophical thought, claims a certain belonging to our present. The task proposed by Benjamin is simply to shift the angle of vision and thus a new justice will emerge that is opposed to that of progress. Moreover, it is interesting to note that Benjamin’s reflection consists in elaborating a philosophical method that seeks to suspend the time of progress. According to him, this philosophical gesture allows multiple times to converge in the same space. In this way, it would be possible to actualize what the time of progress excludes: the past or, in Rancière’s terms, the logic of the blaberon which for political philosophy is the conflict inherent to political practice itself, ie, the action of the demos, of the part of those who have no part. Benjamin calls this space, that allows various times to coexist, the dialectical image:

It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation (einer Konstellation zusammentritt). In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill (Bild ist die Dialektik im Stillstand). For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. (Benjamin 2002, 472, 1991, 576–77).

Following this, the dialectical image does not seek to return to the past, searching for its true meaning. Rather, it is about composing coordinates of sense that reconfigure our relationship with time. This change of perspective is a composition of the sensible because it makes visible the actuality of what excludes the time of progress. It is not a non-time, but a conflictive configuration of the sense that allows various times to coexist. For this reason, the equivocal time of the harmful appears, in dialectical images, as a conflicting way of understanding the justice of time.

This Benjaminian suggestion from the early twentieth century appears, from my point of view, in Rancière’s critique of political philosophy. For Rancière, it is about shifting the angle of vision, or better yet, it is about understanding time not from the point of view of the linear and the homogeneous, but from the coexistence of times, of heterogeneous times housed in the same space. With this change of angle, the old blaberon, which harms the flow of events, ceases to be an ephemeral interruption of a noisy crowd that wants to govern without government titles. The blaberon appears here as a form of time that has its own duration, its own aesthetical dimension, since the interruption appears here as a combination of times that are normally incompatiible (Rancière 2013b). But how to understand this heterochronic time and its own duration? In what way does Rancière invite us to reflect on a way of understanding politics that is not involved in the time of domination? What role plays Rancière’s critique to political philosophy? Is it a new way of doing and practicing political philosophy?

Rancière’s politics of writing

Rancière proposes to give a political meaning to the old blaberon. He uses the expression le traitement d’un tort (treatment of a wrong) (Rancière 1995, 59, 115) to highlight the political manifestation of the
harmful, of the blaberon. If the time of progress is the order of the just that seeks to institute a society without blaberon by making the benefit of some also benefit the others (the inferiors), the treatment of a wrong is the actualization of the absence of foundation of any common order. In other words: that treatment reminds us that the transition from the useful to the just through their opposites is an arbitrary distribution of the sense that implies properties of objects and subjects, as well as forms of identity of each person and each social group. Hence, we encounter that this way of configuring the sense which points out that the time of progress -or the just- is not the truth discovered by political philosophy or the normative horizon of contemporary political scientists, but a way of assuming a connection between words and things that is, strictly speaking, arbitrary and violent. The time of progress is thus a police form of the sense that indicates, without explaining it, that each person and each group corresponds to an identity and specific roles in the common world. That absence of explanation invites us to conceive our world as if there were a necessary principle of the order of things, and therefore of time. Nevertheless, Rancière, going against the police distribution of time, says that “the wrong (le tort) is not just the class struggle, internal dissension to be overcome by giving the city its principle of unity, by founding the city on the arkhe -starting point or basis- of community. It is the very impossibility of arkhe” (Rancière 1995, 33, 1999, 13). But how to go beyond the notion of the wrong of its police use? Is it possible to give an emancipatory meaning to that notion that has been despised by political philosophy?

Rancière, like Benjamin, develops a politics of writing, that is to say, a way of elaborating political thought that allows us to go beyond the police configuration of sense. However, The Rancierian politics of writing is not a new political philosophy, but a change in our distribution of the sensible to perceive a phenomenon that has always been in history: political practice. Nevertheless, it is necessary to clarify that for Rancière the politics of writing is not equivalent to the political practice of subjects and collectives that stop the machinery of time. It is rather that writing has the power to reconfigure the distribution of the sensible in a specific way. For this reason, for him, literature and artistic practices in their aesthetic dimension have their own politics. Writing is political insofar as it is writing. Like the politics of disobedient subjects, writing reconfigures the given and the way we make sense of it. (Rancière 2007, 11). From my perspective, Rancière’s writing is placed in this dimension. His critique of political philosophy is a politics of writing that provides some coordinates to make political practice thinkable as a treatment of a wrong. For this reason, the political thought that Rancière proposes is not normative, it does not seek to say: “if this is not politics, it should be that”, but aesthethical. It is about questioning the police distribution of sense through the aesthetic dimension of emancipation. In other words: it is about showing that politics inhabits, in a certain sense, the blaberon. Preliminarily, we will say that politics occurs when certain practices pretend to take away some of the present’s obviousness (Rancière 2016, 107), or, when certain bodies interrupt the flow of events, destabilizing our experience of the present. According to this, in our world there exist an ensemble of practices that we must inquire not from a new concept of politics, rather from the rationality that we could find in the blaberon, in the “harmful” (Rancière 2012, 151). That rationality is that of disagreement (mésentente) that has equality as its “foundation”. We encounter then that the idea of the “treatment of a wrong” points to the rationality of disagreement.

From my point of view, the rationality of disagreement is the opening to a space of criticism that allows us to investigate the condition of politics. If we let political thought change its point of view and find the rationality that blaberon brings, a different way of assuming the justice of time will emerge. It is about a time whose principle is coexistence, the possibility that various times meet in such a way that statements of temporary prohibition such as “the time has never been” become impossible or lose their effectiveness. Rancière’s proposal then becomes clearer: it is necessary to assume that in the blaberon there is a form of justice that the time of progress does not allow us to see. The rationality of politics then comes to interrupt the enigmatic and suspicious transition from the harmful to the unjust, by showing that what interrupt the time of the progress does not necessarily have to be equated with the unjust. The justice of the time of politics is that of a certain type of the harmful. But how to understand this rationality?

To understand this rationality, I will return to Plato and the tradition of political philosophy that began with him. As we noted, the Athenian philosopher found an understanding of politics, which has geometric equality as its principle. This equality would be in charge of creating a hierarchical order of the common whose horizon is the birth of a society without blaberon, i.e., a common space in which justice “is virtually each person’s advantage without being to anyone’s disadvantage” (Rancière 1995, 35, 1999, 15). However, the Rancière’s politics of writing seeks to problematize the heart of that presumed equality when he emphasizes the need to reflect about a controversial and radical form of equality. It is thus about a matter of showing that geometric equality is a police equality, because it supposes the assignment of hierarchies, the distribution of time
and the assignment of roles within a common world; instead, there is a political form of this equality, which, in Rancière’s opinion, has two characteristics: i) the equality of any time with any other and ii) the absence of the *arkhe* of the common on which all social order is instituted. These two characteristics of equality allow us to make the inquiry into politics not based on police time, but on heterochronic time. Rancière’s proposal is then to think about the condition of possibility of politics, through a polemic understanding of time. I will specify what is at stake in this form of time by following the two mentioned characteristics of equality.

The equality of any time with any other is, from my point of view, the first characteristic of equality as a condition of political practice. According to this political equality, there exist a certain actuality of past which, from Benjamin’s point of view, is what is excluded from a distribution of the sensible or from a progressive form of time. Rancière in *La Mésentente* uses the notion of *demos* and the *proletariat* to think about the subject of this actualization of the past (or the excluded). Seen from the time of progress, both the Athenian *demos* and the modern *proletariat* are names of identities whose idealizations and ways of understanding the world are rejected as not belonging to the present. The rejection of direct democracy, the refusal to recognize the legitimacy of workers strikes and the witch hunt that is supported by the exclusion of women from public and political affairs are, in this way, the result of the exclusion of time of progress. Women, students, workers, precarious workers, black and indigenous are the names of identities that are out of date, since their idealizations interrupt the flow of the time of justice or the time of a society without torsion.

It is true that these identities in a political philosophy like Habermas’s are not rejected but included. However, the scheme of the inclusion of liberal consensualism leaves the logic of progress intact: any proletarian who wants to extend his or her idealizations in the world of the rule of law must demonstrate that his or her speech acts are integrated in the time of democratic procedure. This logic of progress, which is faced by the time of equality, is also found in the time of the valorisation of capital. The current managers of capital consider that all human action that goes against the valorisation of capital is unactual, since it constitutes the erratic manifestation of a past in which the predominance of capitalism in the world was not entirely clear. To this time of the domination of capital Marx gives the name of the real subsumption of capital. In this subsumption it is not merely a question of labor time, but of all human action that contributes to the valorisation of capital without being directly subordinate to the capital itself. (Marx 2017, 591). The conflict of politics then comes to interrupt the valorisation of capital, the logic of the inclusion of liberal consensualism, and social hierarchies by proposing not so much a new progress, as a heterochronic time, a time that makes inoperative the transition from useful to just through their opposites. Rancière’s lesson thus consists in showing that the *blaberon* inhabits a human practice that has always existed, the point is to learn to see them. In the same direction, Benjamin says that all thought that has managed to annihilate the time of progress is a different way of seeing, since in his opinion heterochronic time, which take away the present of its obviousness, is art to locate itself in a certain position through words (Benjamin 2009, 475). What is the result of this experiment? What is at stake in this politics of writing that seeks to make political practice itself thinkable?

For Rancière, this thought manifests itself in aesthetic scenes or, in Benjamin’s words, in dialectical images. In them, the past claims its rights by appearing in our present. Now this past claim those rights when, for example, the victims of the armed conflict in Colombia reappear to denounce the violence of the civil war, which occurred in the name of progress. The equality of any time with any other time is then the actualisation of a certain *blaberon*, which denounces the violence and injustice that the transition from the useful to the just brings with it. In this case, the time of the heterochrony tries to show a certain justice of the time in the *blaberon*. Not everything harmful is part of the unjust. Now, I will specify the second characteristic of the logic of equality: the absence of *arkhe* of the common.

If the time of progress, that is based on a police distribution of sense, starts from necessity as the principle of all social order, the heterochronic time of equality takes contingency as its starting point. In *La mésentente* it appears repeatedly that there is politics at the moment in which the absence of a foundation, the pure contingency or the egalitarian contingency of all social order becomes evident (Rancière 1995, 36, 46, 57, 107) However, beyond that statement, Rancière does not clearly develop what he means by the idea of contingency. Now, to mobilize this idea, I would like to put Rancière in discussion, very briefly, with his teacher Louis Althusser. However, beyond the repeated distances that Rancière himself has been in charge of showing between him and Althusser, I would like to bring the interpretation of Althusser’s late works that Tony Negri (2004) and Etienne Balibar (2011) have tried to comment. This Althusser, who emerged towards the end of the seventies, develops his enigmatic concept of *aleatory materialism* or *materialism of the encounter* (1994). At this stage of his thought, the Marxist philosopher dedicates himself to developing an understanding of time that has as its correlate the
profound contingency on which all order of sense is instituted. Following this indication, there is a lack of foundation in sense, in logos and in historicity because, ultimately, there is a primacy of contingency over necessity, i.e. there is no necessity that makes things happen in a certain way, but a deep contingency that makes things exist.16 Althusser gives this contingency, which makes the existing possible, the name of clinamen, namely, the decline that makes it possible for events, bodies and things to meet contingently and form a historical tissue. However, this contingency of the encounter does not suppose the absence of historical laws, nor is it a demand for a relativism without direction or horizon. Althusser prefers to say that every law, every tendency or every social formation, despite conditioning our life in common, could not have occurred because its principle is not necessity, but the equivocation that the encounter supposes. From his point of view, for example, capitalism is a social formation that emerges from a set of misunderstandings and encounters, from intentions and from an unexpected unleashing of events that distance themselves from those intentions. In Althusser’s words:

I am repeating myself, but I must: what is remarkable about the first conception [...] is the idea that every mode of production comprises elements that are independent of each other, each resulting from its own specific history, in the absence of any organic, teleological relation between these diverse histories. This conception culminates in the theory of primitive accumulation, from which Marx, taking his inspiration from Engels, drew a magnificent chapter of Capital, the true heart of the book. Here we witness the emergence of a historical phenomenon whose result we know - the expropriation of the means of production from an entire rural population in Great Britain - but whose causes bear no relation to the result and its effects. Was the aim to create extensive domains for the hunt? Or endless fields for sheep-raising? We do not know just what the main reason for this process of violent dispossession was (it was most likely the sheep), and, especially, the main reason for the violence of it; moreover, it doesn’t much matter. The fact is that this process took place, culminating in a result that was promptly diverted (détourné) from its possible, presumed end by ‘owners of money’ looking for impoverished manpower. This diversion (détournement) is the mark of the non-teleology of the process and of the incorporation of its result into a process that both made it possible and was wholly foreign (étranger) to it (Althusser 2006, 199; 1994, 572).

With those words Althusser intersects his path with Rancièrée. The contingency on which all common order is instituted is that of the time of contingency, a time that for Althusser is that of diversion (détournement) or, said from Rancièrée, a time of interruption. The Marxist philosopher warns that the time of progress loses its effectiveness whenever the time of the blaberon, of the torsion or of the deviation appears. Its foundation is not necessity, but clinamen. With this, Althusser allows to illuminate the rancièrée concept of contingency that appears timidly in La mésentente. Therefore, it is a question then of showing that every order in the world is equivocal, that nothing ensures its permanence. The social formations, which today condition our existence, are not necessary and unquestionable; rather, they are driven by a negativity that makes them possible, but also impossible. The time of contingency reminds us that, as Marx points out in the epilogue to the second edition of the first volume of Capital, the condition of possibility of what exists is the intelligence of its negation, that is, the impulse that makes the capitalism comes into existence, but also the urge to disappear from the world.

The absence of foundation of our common world is then the condition of the encounter between heterogeneous times that dispossesses the present of its obviousness. If the equality of any time with any other supposes the actualization of what is excluded from the police distribution of time, the absence of a foundation of the common makes a heterochronic time appear, namely, an encounter between times, events, things and bodies. Rancièrée’s lesson, following Althusser in a way, is that we are heteronomous of contingency, of the negativity that the clinamen or the contingency of the world supposes. The justice of the time of the rancièréean politics of writing allows us to find the duality of logos, namely, the always latent possibility of dividing the sense of the world. This division occurs when the contingency of the world or the absence of the arkhe of the common emerges. Rancièrée’s lesson is thus the following: From the blaberon emerge bodies, voices and inactive memories that make the sense distance itself from itself. In this distance appears a logos that does not exclude the blaberon from itself but transforms it into a contingent justice of time. This is not a new political philosophy, but a way of political thinking that allows us to realize that political philosophy and political science have had a clear ideological function: to make political activity unthinkable.

Conclusion

The preceding paragraphs developed Rancièrée’s critique of political philosophy. As we could see, this critique aims to highlight two things: on the one hand, that the condition of the politics of the philosophers, which emerged in the ancient Athenian world, is that of the time of progress that seeks to eradicate the different regimes of the wrong implied by political practice itself; on the other, that politics emerges when the time of progress is suspended at the moment when heterogeneous times converge in
the same place. These two edges of Rancière’s perspective allowed us to show that political philosophy and its contemporary derivations (political science) intend to paradoxically make political practice itself unthinkable. For this reason, our tradition of political thought has been in charge of conjuring up politics by promoting police distributions of the sensible that have as a condition the idea of a community without torsion. In this community, typical of political philosophy, one can justify, without incurring in any contradiction, the subjection, hierarchies and the sending into the night of silence of the voices of the subjects of politics. We were also able to realize that the denial of politics is a way of configuring the sensible that has allowed most political theories to start from a very problematic assumption: the idea that justice emerges where the violence of social formations is harmonized following a teleology of time, a course in which the reproduction of violence appears necessary for the triumph of a society reconciled with itself. Thus, the position that I developed in this text consisted in showing that, for Rancière, the sensible distribution of time is a condition both of political philosophy and of a new politics of writing that would destroy the normative character of political thought, making visible practices that they have not stopped happening since political philosophy was born. These practices are those of subjects who risk actualizing the lack of foundation of the common order. Women, proletarians, precarious young people, workers, who for the capitalist police of sense only count as bodies of the valorisation of capital, are the subjects of politics because they have always experienced ways of inhabiting the world that annihilate time in its progressive form. The justice of time proper to political practice has always been there: certain blaberon that holds the free flow of events.

Notes

1. In Rancière (2017) and in Rancière (2018), Rancière develops this aesthetic dimension of human experience, taking into account that art in its aesthetic dimension breaks with the progressive logic of succession, which goes back to Aristotle. In the third section, I will focus on this time that problematises empirical succession.

2. Marc Robson in “Jacques Rancière and Time” points out that, contrary to phenomenological approaches, Rancière develops an aesthetic approach to time. According to him, this dimension of human experience is also a political dimension, because time responds to configurations of sense or to distributions of the sensible (Robson 2015, 301).

3. I am thinking specifically of May (2008), Quintana (2020), Fjeld (2018), Parra (2017) and Robson (2015).

4. Davide Panagia quite rightly points out that the aesthetic dimension of Rancière’s thought can be understood as a radical mediation, since all experience is conditioned by a certain sharing of the sensible. In Panagia’s own words: “Mediation for Rancière is not equivalent to the reproduction of relations of domination through time; it is the name given to artisanal acts of aesthetico-political dissensus that occupy and transform the lines of division in a systemic homology” (Panagia 2018, 29). From my point of view, this suggestion points out that every distinction rests on a certain contingency that can be actualised through dissent.

5. Michel Foucault, in Order of Things (2005), defines archeology as the reflection that is responsible for thinking not so much about knowledge, but about the conditions of possibility of the episteme, that is, the field of meaning that allows the emergence of knowledge. In this case, I will do a similar exercise, considering the notion of time or the distribution of sensible that a certain configuration of time presupposes.

6. According to Rancière, in the use of the language of Greek political philosophy, blaberon has two meanings: “in one sense it is the lot of unpleasantness that falls to an individual for whatever reason, whether it be through a natural catastrophe or human action, and in the other, it is the negative consequence that an individual suffers as a result of their action or, more often, the action of another” (Rancière 1995, 21, 1999, 3). In accordance with these two definitions, Rancière argues that political philosophy equates the harmful and the unjust in the sensitive universe that emerges with the use of the term blaberon. According to this, the task of political philosophy is to fight against what is harmful, namely, against all forms of social relations that make it possible for some to harm others. The horizon of this struggle is the need to create an order of the common that makes impossible the appearance of the blaberon, i.e. the appearance of conditions that do not allow a consensus on justice.

7. In The philosopher and his poor (2003) Rancière had noted how in Plato’s thought the arbitrary of nature and the convention of social order exchange their roles through a certain approximation of time. Time allows ordering the common following the justice of hierarchies and the way in which they contribute to the benefit of those who perform the lowest tasks in the social order.

8. Here I am referring to the critical strategy that appears in Marx’s Manuscripts of Philosophy and Economics (Marx 2013).

9. In that direction point the opinions of academics who are dedicated to political science. In one granted to theconversation.com, a political scientist from the University of Barcelona makes use of the past to refer to democracy and the present to refer to representative democracy (Calvet Crespo 2018).

10. There are a few mentions by Rancière of Benjamin’s work. In Malaise dans la esthétique (Rancière 2004, 39) he tries to distance himself from Benjamin’s position on the aestheticisation of politics, without going any further. On the other hand, there is a very plausible mention of Benjamin’s work in Rancière (1998, 44). In this text, Rancière, commenting on Mandelstam’s work, argues that Benjamin, in his theses on the philosophy of history, seeks to point
out, in a certain way, the suspension of the time of progress in events such as the French Revolution.

11. P. Hallward (2005, 39) has pointed out the importance of the reflection on equality in Rancière’s philosophy, arguing that it is the starting point of his conception of the subject.

12. Here I refer to the book by Silvia Federici Caliban and the Witch (2014). There the Italian feminist develops how the witch hunt has been transformed in the capitalist world, following the forms of misogyny that appear in the original accumulation of capital and in the capitalist production of the contemporary world.

13. In Aisthesis Rancière emphasizes that a scene is not an illustration of an idea, but a “little optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable” (Rancière 2013a, XI). According to this definition, a scene is an interruption of time progress, since it allows us to inhabit a different distribution of the sensible. In that sensible world appear objects, voices, and bodies that necessity of progress does not allow to appear together.

14. The transitional court called Special Justice for Peace (JEP) is currently updating, with its investigators, a past in which the victims appear claiming that the war, in the name of progress, has left a trail of illusions, times and of lives that, despite having disappeared, claim their place in our present. Recently, the JEP documented 6402 cases of extra-judicial executions in which the Colombian State military made people of the popular classes and social leaders pass as dead in combat (Redacción BBC 2021). All this within the framework of the State’s policy of struggle against the insurgency beginning in the 2000s, which granted benefits to the military who presented guerrillas killed in combat.

15. In La Leçon d’Althusser, Rancière criticizes Althusser because he falls within the metaphysical foundations of traditional political philosophy.

16. Elsewhere I have developed the concept of contingency in post-Marxism: (Fajardo 2021b, 2021a, 2020).

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