
**Abstract:**
This essay examines Jacques Rancière’s concept of subjectivation, the coming into being of a political subject as the substance of radical democratic politics. In particular, it provides a detailed reading of disidentification and impossible identification as they relate to figures of the Other. I present some possible points of intersection between subjectivation and hybridity, and explain why these concepts may ultimately be incompatible in their most common formulations. Examining closely a few recurring figures of alterity (“the Algerian” and “the immigrant”), I show that, in each case, the Other is used principally as an abstract figure, a procedure which risks effacing historically-situated political voices in the name of universalism. Moreover, I argue that decisions regarding which subjects authentically enact politics and which remain in the realm of the police can themselves turn out to be politically neutralizing.

**Keywords:** Rancière, subjectivation, politics, alterity, hybridity

**Politics and Its Others: Jacques Rancière’s Figures of Alterity**
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Jacques Rancière’s concept of *subjectivation* forms the foundation of his account of dissensual political action. It refers to the impromptu formation of a political subject through the process of a demonstration of radical equality. For Rancière, equality is neither a value nor an objective, but rather an immanent social fact that is periodically “verified.” His work constitutes an illuminating recounting of major and minor historical moments in light of this affirmation of equality through subjectivation, from the Aventine Secession to workers’ strikes, from early feminism to May ’68. In what many would call “post-democratic” times, subjectivation can be viewed as the subversive aesthetic infusion needed to revive politics. It is not surprising, then, that readers and commentators have often offered contemporary political supplements to Rancièrian evenementality: GDR demonstrations (Žižek 2000), activism without borders (McClure 2003), racial and ethnic minority militancy (McClure 2003; May 2008), the Zapatista movement (May 2010), the Occupy movement (Clarke 2013), queer theory (Chambers 2009), just to name a few. Furthermore, as Peter Hallward has also noted, Rancière’s “method of
equality” and his intertwined concepts of subjectivation and dissensus seem particularly compatible with postcolonial studies (Hallward 2005, 45). It is a testament to the empowering nature of Rancière’s conceptualization of the political that the reader feels prompted to remark other locations of politics, other moments that perhaps exemplify the emancipatory performance of democracy.

Rancière’s stance for emancipated readership would seem to encourage such appropriation and expansion. Given his frequent insistence on the rarity of politics, however, we can wonder whether such a multiplication of instances is entirely compatible with the philosopher’s thought. While political subjectivation “has no ‘proper’ place nor does it possess any ‘natural’ subjects” (Rancière 2001), Rancière designates only certain subjects as political and explicitly refuses that name for others. Each time we seek to add an occurrence of the political in Rancièrian terms, we are then forced to evaluate whether it indeed enacts subjectivation. We must ask, ultimately, what counts as political.

This is the question at the core of this essay. I examine in detail Rancièrian subjectivation, in an attempt to clarify its criteria, as well as its potentials and limitations. On the one hand, Rancière is profoundly committed to equality and to a “steadfast subversion of any form of authority or mastery” (Hallward 2005, 26). On the other hand, however, his work may performatively reintroduce authority through numerous interpretative decisions about when the criteria of political mise-en-scène have been met and who successfully becomes a political subject. Politics can, in theory, go by any name. Yet, while certain actors are emblematic of political disagreement—most notably proletarians and May ’68 protestors—others are regularly designated as “pre-political” or relegated to the realm of the police via the label of identity politics. This is the case of two recurring figures of alterity: “the Algerians” in Rancière’s
discussion of the October 1961 Paris massacre and “the immigrant” facing contemporary forms of French racism and xenophobia.

Rather than dwelling on the applicability of Rancière’s thought to the various political movements mentioned above, these pages seek first of all to understand the methodological and ideological reasoning behind Rancière’s own choice of examples. I explore possible intersections and incompatibilities with postcolonial studies, and discuss what I view as an uneven treatment accorded to different potential candidates for subjectivation. My aim is to make visible the ways in which the highly abstract treatment of figures of the Other risks effacing historically-situated political voices and may ultimately contribute to fixing these others in apolitical positions of radical alterity. On a more fundamental level, this essay examines the effects of the authoritative task of separating authentic political actors from the others of politics. If politics reasserts the universality of an equal capacity for speech against some form its denial, what happens when what is arguably political speech is denied by the philosopher himself? Could Rancièrean subjectivation perhaps be both the promising source of radical democratic emancipation and the site of a crucial performative contradiction in the philosopher’s thought?

Police, Politics and Subjectivation

Subjectivation, or the political becoming of a subject, is a process that is nearly consubstantial with politics itself. For Rancière, what we commonly call ‘politics’—parties, elections, administration, laws, policies, etc.—are in fact various spectacular means of establishing hierarchies and regulating public and private space. This constant production and reproduction of order is synecdochally referred to through one of its most visible and forceful manifestations: police.
The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise. (Rancière 2004b, 29)

The police goes far beyond the State and its official modes of constructing hierarchies. In a supposedly neutral way, it refers to the collection of omnipresent processes that work to assign roles and capacities to bodies, activities and spaces. It includes modes of creating collective consent and systems that legitimate distributions of power. The media, for example, plays its crucial part in maintaining consensus and complacency, and in ensuring that everyone who counts is transparently accounted for without remainder, without excess. Against this logic that puts everything in its proper place, politics introduces dissensus, disrupts, and displaces. It “shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise” (Rancière 2004b, 30). Politics is thus a reconfiguration of some given social arrangement by means of which a part of those who had no part begin to be seen or heard.

Politics and police constitute, then, two opposing logics and modes of perception: one an egalitarian disordering of bodies and the other their hierarchical ordering. When politics happens, they lay simultaneous claims to the same objects, as heterogeneous processes of framing the perceptual space. In those moments, also called dissensus or disagreement, some object, or body or issue becomes political, as the ground of a dispute between equality and its denial. The irruption of antagonistic politics depends on this process of subjectivation, the separation of a body from its assigned place in a given police order and the production of a public subject that was not previously accounted for. By definition, then, political subjects do not pre-exist the political struggle, but rather emerge only when/as politics takes place. Importantly, the subject’s separation from an imposed role must not be an affirmation of any ‘self,’ since “a
political subject is not a group that ‘becomes aware’ of itself, finds its voice, imposes its weight on society” (Rancière 2004b, 40). Processes of identification within a group, even within an oppressed or excluded group, are thus strictly opposed to subjectivation and to the disorder it is supposed to introduce into police order.

According to Rancière, subjectivation must not simply be a different count of all the community’s parts; it must disrupt that count in a very specific way, by staging a scene where those who have no part make the impossible declaration that they are the whole of the community. In “Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization,” he elaborates that subjectivation is the simultaneous rejection of a socially-determined role and the adoption of an “impossible identification.” This latter component happens through a fictional staging of the self as an Other, as some figure of the outcast. Through this impossible identification, the subject temporarily makes visible the universal equality that is otherwise obscured or denied by any police order, by any “proper” (ac)count of a community’s bodies. Rancière’s political subjectivation or emancipation, then, is a “politics of the self as an other,” where “other” is always an abstract identity category that stands in for the whole, or the universal (Rancière 1992, 59). Politics/subjectivation/emancipation is thus the enactment of universal equality:

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. (Rancière 1992, 59-60)

Politics is always enacted in the name of an “empty” or “improper” category. It is this abstract figuration that distinguishes the improper names of politics from the proper names imposed by the police. Insofar as they are political categories, “workers,” “women,” “people of color,” do not name “any social group that could be sociologically identified” (Rancière 1992,
61). The sociological community would fall under police. Be it minoritarian or hegemonic, the community understood in its social sense is founded on “the same questionable identification,” the same consensual count that adds up without remainder (Rancière 1992, 59). Politics is therefore simultaneously at odds with two contrasting forms of identity: it rejects not only ‘externally’ imposed roles and stereotypes, but also positive cultural, religious, sexual, or other affinities. Political subjects are those who dis-identify, refusing both a socially assigned place and any identitarian specificity in order to show that “anyone could in fact be in the position of anyone else” (Genel and Deranty 2016, 66).

Rancièrian politics only happens at the level of the universal capacity to speak, think and understand, distinct from renegotiations of power based on any substantive notion of identity or embodied experience. As Todd May has concisely summarized, “the order word of subjectification is not blackness, the feminine, queerness, or any other particular content. Whatever name subjectification goes by in a particular struggle, its underlying meaning is nothing more than equality” (May 2009). Political subjects do not refer, then, to any community besides the uncounted as a figure for the universal. Jean-Philippe Deranty has insightfully explained that “political struggle, for Rancière, is waged not over a specific form of social injustice, but rather at a second-order level of the capacity of subjects to be heard about that injustice” (Genel and Deranty 2016, 51). I would argue that, in fact, Rancièrian politics takes place at a third-order level: the subject takes on an improper name which in turn is the name of radical equality. “Workers,” “women,” “people of color” in the political sense must always be figures of the outcast as figures of equality. We are thus dealing with two layers of abstraction in the creation of these “suspensive” subjects.
Political names designate “in-between” subjects enacting the conflict between police denial and the claim to universal equality. And they form a “community of interruptions, fractures, irregular and local, through which egalitarian logic comes and divides the police community from itself. […] Political being-together is a being-between: between identities, between worlds” (Rancière 2004b, 137).

Being-between

Due to a partly shared post-structuralist heritage, Rancière’s vocabulary and conceptual framework here seems to converge with those of major postcolonial scholars. Peter Hallward has also noted that, in his descriptions of democracy or political community, “Rancière is remarkably close […] to positions endorsed by postcolonial critics such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak” (Hallward 2005, 45). To take just one example, Homi Bhabha’s seminal work, The Location of Culture, published one year before La mésentente, is similarly grounded in a conflictual politics enacted by an “in-between” subject. Bhabha writes that “a knowledge can only become political through an agonistic process: dissensus, alterity and otherness are the discursive conditions for the circulation and recognition of a politicized subject” (Bhabha 2004, 34). For both Bhabha and Rancière, politics is a polemic process that occurs through interruptions of order, making visible the gaps between words and things, between the idea of equality and its empirical denial. The “in-between,” the “third space”—these terms regularly punctuate Bhabha’s work, pointing to the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications [which] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). And for the two thinkers, this “in-between” subject is subversive insofar as it is a supernumerary disturbance of the policed count of bodies, functions and meanings.
The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization – the repetition that will not return as the same, the minus-in-origin that results in political and discursive strategies where adding *to* does not add up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification. (Bhabha 2004, 232-233)

However, it is in describing this other, third space of subaltern signification that the divergence in the two scholars’ thought becomes most evident. Specifically, Bhabha’s “in-between” designates the emergence of a contestatory cultural difference that is explicitly articulated in the wake of colonization and is bound up with an awareness of continuing forms of colonial relations. Hence his privileging of the concept of *hybridity*, which carries with it the indelible mark of racial difference. It can be argued that this frame of reference allows the broadest indictment of the police, precisely because colonization has been one of its most intensive and widespread manifestations.

Bhabha’s “in-between,” then, is an internal otherness of the subject that is built through a fertile coexistence between conflicting layers of *identification*, as his theoretical prescription indicates:

The postcolonial forces us to rethink the profound limitations of a consensual and collusive ‘liberal’ sense of cultural community. It insists that cultural and political identity are constructed through a process of alterity. Questions of race and cultural difference overlay issues of sexuality and gender and overdetermine the social alliances of class and democratic socialism. [...] The very language of cultural community needs to be rethought from a postcolonial perspective. (251)

Far from relying on stable, pre-given identity categories, Bhabha’s notion of hybridity is nevertheless constructed around shifting and interacting positive elements that are inextricably bound to the social, and as such differs in an important way from subjectivation. Bhabha’s political dissensus depends on a process of subversive revision created by intersecting identifications (be they divided, ambivalent or fragmentary). The political subject is formed in
the gaps between national and class associations, between racial and gender allegiances, as a hybrid entity: “neither the One [...] nor the Other [...] but something else besides, which contests the terms and territories of both” (41, author's emphasis). Hybridity contests the fictive naturalness, unity and homogeneity of its constitutive elements, but it does so from a concrete, historically-lived position rather than from an abstract, universal otherness. Indeed, unlike the Rancièrean refusal of police identity in the name of the transcendent supposition of equality, Bhabha speaks of “negotiation rather than negation” and of a repeated articulation of “antagonistic and oppositional elements without the redemptive rationality of sublation or transcendence” (25-26). Consequently, for Bhabha, political becoming is not a rare or ephemeral event, but rather an ongoing process of negotiation occurring in everyday life. And its local manifestations are necessarily fueled by contacts on a global scale.

By contrast, Rancière’s subjectivation through “disidentification” and “impossible identification” is not concerned with cultural transformations emerging from identitarian intersections of ethnic, religious, racial, or sexual otherness (Rancière 2004b, 104). Indeed, Rancière is generally dismissive of the kinds of particularisms whose conflictual crossings constitute the politics of hybridity. Unlike the predominantly intersectional and phenomenological construction of the subject in postcolonial studies, Rancière’s subject is an “empty” and purely abstract category in accordance with his “intolerance towards all the concrete philosophies of the flesh and blood individual” (Rancière 2012, 207). In one interview, he jokingly dismisses the idea that he might relate his work to postcolonial thought, reducing it to identity politics:

As you probably know, I am French [laughter]. In France there is no identity politics, there are no postcolonial studies. This means I never had to address those kinds of issues that are crucial in other countries. They are systematically ignored in France. So my dealing with the question of the subject never was an attempt to
address issues of identity politics or hybrid, postcolonial identities and so on. (Dasgupta 2008, 73-74)

Rancière is, of course, being partly ironic here, and, in a way, he is not wrong in his assessment of a continuing lag in French institutional interest in the postcolonial. However, by claiming that “there are no postcolonial studies” in France, he appears to be minimizing a growing field of French scholarship that predominantly examines situations of extreme oppression and censorship, as well as their interruption through performative speech acts asserting equality. He chooses to overlook the global influence of postcolonial scholars who, like Bhabha, share many of his principal concerns – relations of domination and exclusion, class struggle, linguistic conflict, subversive subjectivity, interactions between politics and aesthetics, and so on. Rancière also does not mention the fact that many of the pioneers of postcolonial thought were in fact Francophone. In doing so, he may (unintentionally, of course) be giving credit to a persistent institutionalized silencing of individuals and communities within the metropole whose continued marginalization cannot be thought without the context of colonial history. Remarking Rancière’s silence on the postcolonial thus seems to be a necessary part of a commentary on his political thought, precisely because postcolonial theory (like contemporary gender and sexuality studies) may pose a significant challenge to his conception of subjectivation and to his discussions of certain figures of alterity.

Furthermore, by invoking the idea that “there is no identity politics” in French discourse, Rancière ends up aligning himself with the dominant French view regarding the postcolonial and minority issues and endorsing Republican color-blindness. Of course, his own reasons for this theoretical stance are quite complex. His position stems from an understandable distrust of identity categories, as well as a sweeping (and more problematic) dismissal of both sociology and ethics. It also has to do with his commitment to the radical potential behind the empty
universal of Republican discourse. Its laws and declarations are, for him, not accurately understood as façades masking injustice; they in fact serve as crucial political stimuli allowing people to articulate equality and make manifest the wrong of any police order. This version of the universal depends, however, on the effacement of any historical specificity of lived experiences and the abandonment of racially, culturally or sexually marked voices in political action. Any alternative articulation between the universal and the particular would require Rancière to delve into the social realm, into intertwined relations of power, into a detailed theorization of the police – something he has been unwilling to do. Many critics have taken issue with this aspect of Rancièrian politics, sometimes quite forcefully.

If Rancière avoids engaging with postcolonial thought it is not primarily an issue of emphasis or interest, but rather the result of a fundamental methodological divergence with respect to the political subject. He explains that “I don’t like so much this notion of hybridity, because it seems to refer much more to the constitution of a subject rather than to processes of subjectivization” (Dasgupta 2008, 75). Rancière seems to view hybridity as a theory of the subject that deals mainly with fixed or pre-existing identities. But as I mentioned above, for Bhabha and many postcolonial theorists, the subject is not natural or unitary, but in fact fluid and fractured. This ‘misunderstanding’ has to do with a profound incompatibility in the approach to the social. The postcolonial subject comes about intersectionally, with interacting (dis)identifications related to race, class, gender and sexuality. In other words, substance does not preclude performance, nor does specificity impede equality. A certain postcolonial “in-between” is at odds, then, with its Rancièrian counterpart, which maintains a gap without substance:

a subject is an in-between. Proletarians was the ‘proper’ name given to people who were together inasmuch as they were 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” (Rancière 2004a, 119; my translation, author's emphasis).

Both approaches designate a being that disturbs the police count of bodies, activities and discourses, but Rancière’s version of the “in-between” constitutes a subject without any specific content, made to be strictly equivalent to the “anonym” or to “anyone”.

As I describe below, the philosopher’s dismissal of the social and the avoidance of the postcolonial introduce some important limitations in his discussions of issues such as the Algerian massacre or racism and immigration in France. Without assuming that “the Algerian” or “the immigrant” have any fixed identity or that they are in themselves political subjects, I wish to question the grounds on which Rancière claims that they do not enact politics. My point is that the decision not to take into account the historical context of these recurring “figures of alterity” leads to what seems like a surprising depoliticization.

“The Algerian”

The difficulties with a concept of subjectivation that is not immersed in social and historical context are perhaps most obviously visible in Rancière’s discussion of one of the better known events of the Algerian War, the October 17, 1961 police massacre of Algerian protesters in Paris. This was the French State’s brutal response to one of the first mass demonstrations of the 1960s, a peaceful protest organized by the FLN in opposition to a curfew imposed on Algerians living in the capital. Unarmed men, women and children were met by the entire Parisian police force, which had been mobilized with the understanding that they were free to use excessive force without consequences. The protestors were thus clubbed and thrown into the Seine by the hundreds, or transported to stadiums around the city serving as temporary torture centers.
In “The Cause of the Other” Rancière provides an elaborate reading of French political subjectivation triggered by the massacre. This is arguably one of Rancière’s most complex texts, and its perspective is especially valuable in that it highlights well his emphasis on disidentification and offers one of his most detailed examples the mechanics of political solidarity. It is also an excellent critique of a facile humanitarian ethics. However, since the philosopher’s political theory centers on the political agency of the poor and the uncounted, it may be surprising to some readers that, in this case Rancière claims the event “did not create a politics for the Algerians” (Rancière 1998, 30). His discussion of the political implications of the protest and its aftermath is problematic, even when looked at from the perspective of Rancière’s own framework. For example, it remains unclear why the other is, in a sense, excluded from a possible politics. Moreover, it is difficult to establish why this particular event might be singled out from the larger anti-colonial struggle as a trigger for creating political subjectivation “in France,” or indeed whether political subjectivation was unequivocally created “in France” as a result of the massacre. As I discuss below, considering the October 17 massacre in historical context puts into question both the threshold status of this event and Rancière’s redemptive reading of what could just as much be viewed as an example of French complicity with the silencing of the other’s dissensual manifestation of equality.

To be sure, Rancière’s discussion in “The Cause of the Other” is not about the protest and its politics, nor about the cause of “the Algerians”. He is explicit regarding his intentions, outlining in the very first paragraph that his text is about “the reflexive gaze we turn back on ourselves when we consider an other whose presence or absence modifies the meaning of the adjective ‘French’ and distances the ‘French’ political subject from him or herself” (25). Rancière’s argument is that the violent repression of peaceful protesters was the starting point of
a politics of French self-difference through disidentification from the ‘French people’ in whose name the State had committed this particular atrocity. October ’61 thus sets the stage for May ’68.

The State therefore made it possible to subjectivate the self-difference of our citizenship, or a gap between juridical citizenship and political citizenship. That self-difference of French/Algerian citizens could not, however, be subjectivated by fighters involved in a war of liberation who were now determined to win their Algerian identity through war. We, on the other hand, could subjectivate it as we were caught between two definitions of citizenship: the national definition of membership of the French nation, and the political definition of citizenship as a way of counting the uncounted. This did not create a politics for the Algerians. Yet perhaps that nameless subjectivation of a gap between two citizenships did find a name a few years later in an exemplary formula for an impossible identification: “We are all German Jews.” (29-30)

Rancière seems to be claiming that although the contradictory citizenship of French/Algerian citizens may have been made visible by the massacre, it could not be subjectivated by the fighters or Algerians because “the sole relationship authorized by the discourse of a war of reappropriation was one of external support for the identity that was being constituted” (30). In other words, for “the Algerians,” the event became another part of a struggle to establish an Algerian identity. As I explained above, even when it emerges in resistance to oppression, identity, for Rancière, is never politics, but police. Since Rancière is interested in politics, he looks elsewhere—to the French “we” who could perform subjectivation.

This political subjectivation was primarily the result of a disidentification with the French state that had done this in our name and removed it from our view. We could not identify with the Algerians who appeared as demonstrators within the French public space, and who then disappeared. We could, on the other hand, reject our identification with the State that had killed them and removed them from all the statistics. Insofar as it is a political figure, the primary meaning of the cause of the other is a refusal to identify with a certain self. (29)
Rancière writes that it was through French disidentification that “the political profits from this ‘cause’ of the other were reaped” (30). This French political moment, he says, is thus an “unpaid debt” (30). Several such formulations create a rather puzzling effect by which the other seems somehow stripped of a possible politicity of their cause. The political value of “the cause of the other,” Rancière is explicit, ends up largely restricted to a particular French collective’s mise en cause or mise en crise of the self. As Bruce Robbins has also remarked, what is at stake here is not “what war means to the Algerians; it’s what anti-war politics means to the French” (Robbins 2014, 263). What emerges from the body of Rancière’s text is then not that Algerian subjectivation might be beyond the scope of his article, as he announces at the start. Instead, he appears not to entertain its possibility.

This attribution of authentic politics to one subject but not the other seems to be somewhat overreaching. For instance, the protest itself can be read in Rancière’s own political terms, as a disidentification of French-Algerians from the role of invisible and silent (yet threatening) migrant workers imposed by the State through its curfew, doubled by a declaration of equality and impossible identification with the ‘people’ as a whole. After all, throughout his work, Rancière shows that subjectivation and political disagreement do not depend on the conscious intentions of the actors involved, nor on a successful outcome, since the fictive stage of equality created by the political process is often not recognized by the dominant party or the police. The political event is rather a matter of political interpretation.8 Similarly, one might consider the political dimensions of the larger war, if only the fact that an anti-colonial struggle is always in some sense also a disidentification from an imposed subaltern identity in the name of the radical equality of the uncounted. Perhaps Rancière views these dimensions as self-evident?
Beyond this question of emphasis or of possible depoliticization, the exclusively abstract treatment of “the Algerians” in Rancière’s description has the effect of creating a second invisibility, this time theoretical. The political subjectivation of the French “we,” its disidentification and “nameless” impossible identification triggered by the violent action of the State, occurs via a figure of alterity that only functions as a figure. As Rancière explains, impossible identification is not “compassion” or empathy with a concrete other; rather it is a strategic use of a certain outcast/victim category in order to perform disidentification.

In the case of the Algerian war, there was no identification with those fighters, whose motives were not ours, or with those victims, whose very faces were invisible to us. But an identity that could not be assumed was included in a political subjectivation—in a rejection of an identity. (29)

Rancière’s interpretation of the Paris massacre thus operates a kind of redemptive displacement: the invisible bodies of anonymous victims, killed by the police in the name of the French people serve an impossible identification. They become a nameless “identity that could not be assumed,” a “gap between two citizships” (juridical/political) that can be subjectivated by the French self (30). Transformed into an empty symbol, the massacred Algerians are then appropriated in the name of the political othering of French identity. The precise structure of this interpretative reconstruction of the event thus renders the bodies invisible once again. The Algerians only ‘count’ here in order to make the already counted French see that there's a miscount, without ever needing to see the other as such.

It is not clear what criteria determine Rancière to isolate this moment of the Algerian War for this “we” as a kind of political threshold or trigger. For Rancière, it is not the Algerian subjectivation of the demonstration itself that triggered French politics; rather it was its police repression and cover-up. But then the massacre falls in line with a long string of other State acts of violence against the Algerians, other moments of rupture and political solidarity, which
preceded it, such as the publication of Henri Alleg’s *La question* (1958). Alleg’s explosive account of the systematic use of torture in Algeria, including against French journalists and anti-colonial activists, sold more than 60,000 copies in the two weeks before it was banned in France, and tens of thousands more abroad by the end of the year. Sartre’s graphic preface to Alleg’s testimony leaves no room for ambiguity: “it is in our name that [Alleg] was victimized” and that Algerians must wait in line for their turn on the torture plank – “the torturers are overloaded by their task,” he writes (Alleg et al. 2006, xxxi; xxxiii; my emphasis). And what about the case of Djamila Boupacha, and Simone de Beauvoir’s article in *Le Monde* (June 2, 1960) detailing her torture and rape? Beauvoir succeeded in galvanizing an international group of prominent intellectuals to organize on her behalf, efforts that contributed to saving the young FLN member’s life. Or the actions of the Jeanson Network and the “Manifesto of the 121”? These were just some of the most wide-reaching confrontations of the official State line on “events in Algeria” occurring prior to the Paris massacre, and each could reasonably be said to have constituted or triggered some form of political subjectivation.

It may be that Rancière’s choice is the result of the temporal and spatial constraints he places on subjectivation in his theoretical system. Let’s recall that “politics, in its specificity, is rare. It is always local and occasional” (Rancière 2004b, 139). However, a framework of rare and discrete confrontations between police and politics makes it difficult to account for protracted political struggles. Rather than an ongoing negotiation or progressive disidentifications from the State, we are presented with an all-or-nothing politics occurring through isolated events, which makes it seem as though the brutality of the war had been entirely invisible or acceptable throughout France prior to this moment. Moreover, the fact that events occurring in the colonial space remain unthinkable in political terms with respect to both the Algerian other and the
French self may point to a geographic distribution of politics. The “cause of the other” can only trigger an appropriative politics for the French when it directly enters the public space of the Hexagon. Bruce Robbins also views Rancière’s exclusive focus on the Paris massacre as a matter of geographic separation:

other things had also been done in our name, but they were done elsewhere. Things done in other spaces did not become a matter of French politics even if they were done in the name of all Frenchmen. [...] It is strange that Rancière is not willing to consider the possibility that what France was doing in Algeria might have produced a politics in France, even a politics of ‘not in our name.’ It’s as if for Rancière ‘our name’ is not strong enough – as if events cannot become political unless they literally happen on French soil. (Robbins 2014, 264)

Indeed, Rancière’s interpretation makes politics “local” in the strictest sense. It excludes theoretically the colonial space from French public space, thereby creating its own form of differentiation and occultation. And it leads to an unnecessarily extreme conclusion, that French political subjectivation ultimately required no less than a sacrifice of the other on the cobblestones of Parisian streets.

Finally, Kristin Ross’s edifying discussion in *May ’68 and Its Afterlives* reminds us that it was another event, Charonne, that served as the greatest catalyst of French politics in the pre-’68 period. Ross and Michael Rothberg have both discussed the ways in which police aggression during this anti-OAS protest came to function as a “kind of screen memory blocking access to October 17” (Rothberg 2009, 359). Unlike the media blackout that attempted to push hundreds of Algerian bodies into oblivion and the small displays of solidarity with the victims, the nine French killed in the Charonne metro station stampede and police beatings were identified immediately and mourned publicly by over 500,000 people a few days later (Ross 2004, 42). Moreover, the media and French public often refer only to Charonne, or sometimes conflate the two events under that name, “giving precedence once again to the nine French dead over the
uncounted Algerians” (48). French disidentification from the State then, was actually much more powerfully triggered by French victims than by the Algerian other. The timely commemoration of Charonne (by contrast with the Paris Massacre, which was not officially acknowledged until the late 1990s) can make us wonder whether the predominant lack of reaction to October 17 was not more of a display of complicity with the State rather than an exemplary political moment. Rothberg is much less optimistic than Rancière and Ross in this respect, denouncing the “French public’s general disinclination to concern itself with the fate of its Algerian-Muslim neighbors” and drawing a parallel with widespread complicity with Vichy policing during World War II (232). In other words, October 17 as precursor of May ’68 is a possible, but also a problematic narrative. While selecting this event and framing it in terms of French subjectivation can be said to resurrect a forgotten moment of solidarity, without paying attention to the Algerian perspective, and without placing the event in historical context, one runs the risk of creating a distorted account of its political value.

“The Immigrant”

Rancière is one of today’s most vocal critics of racism in France, lambasting the right and the left equally for colluding in the same state logic of exclusion. He denounces a national consensus that amalgamates a multiplicity of “undesirables,” all designated under the pejorative label of immigré, which includes many French citizens and their French-born descendants, who nevertheless bear the stigma of foreignness despite never having migrated. But his largely abstract, decontextualized perspective itself merges measures against clandestine immigration, restrictions on the Islamic veil and expulsions of Roma into one theoretical problem: the decline of politics and the near-total triumph of consensus. Of course, there is an element of state (and popular) racism and xenophobia that lurks under the Republican banner of universal egalitarian
values. However, each of the above cases present extremely divergent and complex circumstances, histories, and possible solutions, many of which are arguably not simply reducible to class. Like several other post-Marxist thinkers, Rancière had already announced that today’s racism is the aftermath of the end of class struggle in Disagreement, where he claims that:

We had nearly the same number of immigrants twenty years ago. But they had another name then: they were called migrant workers or just plain workers. Today's immigrant is first a worker who has lost his second name, who has lost the political form of his identity and of his otherness, the form of a political subjectification of the count of the uncounted. All he now has left is a sociological identity, which then topples over into the anthropological nakedness of a different race and skin. [...] The end of the "myths" of the people, the invisibility of workers, is the "case dismissed" of modes of subjectification that allowed a person to be included as excluded, to be counted as uncounted. The wiping out of these political modes of appearance and subjectification of the dispute results in the abrupt reappearance in the real of an otherness that can no longer be symbolized. (118-119)12

Whereas worker subjectivation is described throughout his writing using active verbs, in turning to the figure of the immigrant Rancière switches to predominantly passive constructions, his own voice treating this potential subject as an object. He simply observes the loss of worker subjectivity, which supposedly leaves nothing but the “nakedness” of skin color and “an object of absolute, prepolitical hate” (119). For Rancière, the immigrant’s political existence was thus entirely restricted to a visibility as worker, one that protectively shrouded racial difference. Class struggle is hence not only presented as incompatible with racism13, but even constitutes a kind of talisman that can “remedy radical evil”.14 It is not surprising, therefore, that this view eschews any discussion of the possibility of racial, ethnic or cultural modes of symbolization and political subjectivation. All we are left with is a totalizing narrative of de-politicization: “the ‘new’ racism is the hatred of the other that comes forth when the political procedures of social polemics collapse” (Rancière 1992, 63).
But the racism facing France’s minorities is certainly not new, and its deep roots in colonial theory and practice have as their political counterpart an equally long history of racial resistance. Rancière is technically correct about a relatively constant percentage of foreigners (not the same thing as immigrants) in France, but only in a very limited sense. As Alec Hargreaves explains, “the single most important factor contributing to the apparent overall stability of the foreign population has been the acquisition of French nationality by a steady flow of foreign residents,” about 100,000 per year (Hargreaves 1995, 24). While accurate statistics are nearly impossible to come by, it is clear that Rancière’s description does not account for the real growth in the proportion of ethnic minorities in France during the period he references, which is due to this consistent rate of naturalization, to a considerable shift in the percentage of foreigners of Maghrebi, other African, and Asian nationalities (which more than doubled between 1962 and 1990), and to the several generations of French descendants of immigrants from former colonies (Thomas 2006, 26). Furthermore, from the migrant worker to the racially-marked immigré to the designation issu de l’immigration, the changes in names and attitudes also reflect a transformation in the temporal perception of foreignness. Immigration went from being viewed as a transient phenomenon to a permanent and accelerating alteration of Frenchness. The fact that different races, languages, religions and customs were henceforth a growing part of the French social fabric became increasingly difficult to ignore. The meaning of Frenchness was being dissensually renegotiated beyond the myth of homogenous nationhood, a task inevitably perceived as a threatening fragmentation, all the more so since it came with the call to re-evaluate the wrongs of a still fresh colonial past and its reverberations into the present. The 1980s thus saw the mobilization of beur and black communities against racist violence and the formation of transracial antiracist movements. A more detailed discussion of racism and
immigration in France is beyond the scope of this article, but the elements I’ve sketched here should already suffice to highlight the effect of their ahistorical treatment.

The period Rancière refers to, then, marks in fact the emerging visibility of the immigrant as more than just a transient working body. It was precisely the political speaking out of racial minorities and the growing movements of solidarity with these marginalized communities that made racism itself more visible. Rancière’s nostalgia for the invisibility of race in Disagreement and On the Shores of Politics, while reinforcing a certain neo-Marxist narrative, precludes engagement with the multifaceted nature of racism and refuses political possibilities that might include racial or cultural particularisms. “The immigrant” seems to remain strictly a figure of radical alterity for the sake of the post-democratic argument.

Conclusion

In pointing to the disconnect between the political Other and the others of politics, this essay has sought to make visible the frequently uneven treatment of figures of alterity in Rancière’s thought. If, on the one hand, “proletarian has been the privileged name” of subjectivation and serves as a metaphorical subject emerging from detailed archival work, some possible names, such as “Algerian” or “immigrant,” tend rather to be trapped in the anti- or ante-political space of identity and racial difference. Surprisingly, consideration of their possible political speech acts is foreclosed by the police narrative. As I have shown, this depoliticization, which is taken as a given, is firstly a result of a largely decontextualized and abstract treatment. Secondly, these figures of alterity may be stripped of agency by what Peter Hallward and Lois McNay have also described as an “all-or-nothing” structure in Rancière’s political theory: either politics happens or it doesn’t; either a subject is political or it isn’t. Subjectivation is not envisaged in terms of incremental changes; it is best suited for quasi-anarchic or revolutionary
events and therefore tends to flatten out the highly diverse range of practices subsumed under the category of police. Moreover, even within this framework, the political event and the enactment of subjectivation are arguably not self-evident. They are rather a matter of hermeneutic decisions, and where one draws the line between a universal claim and an identity claim is a gray area. McNay has recently expressed similar concerns regarding the potential arbitrariness of such choices. She points out that early women’s suffrage serves as a frequent example for Rancière, whereas he tends to disregard late twentieth-century feminism, arguably more radical in its challenge to gender and sexual hierarchies (McNay 2014, 156). Similarly, she asks whether the struggle for same-sex marriage is an attempt to assert universal equality or merely a new manifestation of heteronormative dominance. Of course, it could be either (and both) depending on the specific speech acts examined and how they are reassembled from a particular perspective.16

Here we encounter a wider-ranging methodological problem discussed by Deranty, that is, a certain conceptual circularity:

> the highly specific conception of politics that separates true politics from false is justified in a circular fashion – in the end, it hangs only on a subjective decision without real justification: history provides the substance from which philosophy axiomatically deduces a definition of politics, but it is with the help of such formal categories that philosophy is able to extract the political substance from history. (Genel and Deranty 2016, 73)

In other words, we should remain aware of a (perhaps inevitable) dimension of contingency in the theoretical apparatus as such, in the choices of historical material and political actors as well as in the criteria informing those choices. Ultimately, it may be that the implicitly hierarchical position of the philosopher is inescapable, even in a corpus that wishes to be fundamentally anti-hierarchical. From this point of view, designating ‘proper’ and ‘improper’ names, separating sites of identification and disidentification is perhaps setting up a series of
false alternatives. And it is a game we do not need to play. Between fixed or proper identifications and an empty universalism there is a vast middle ground where politics can emerge. Rather than transforming the other into a pure figure or into an other of politics, and obscuring the complexity of relation under the redemptive veil of class struggle, subjectivation can be thought in a truly in-between space that allows everywhere for overlapping (dis)identifications. Perhaps this is closer to where Rancière is heading. Recall the familiar quote from *Disagreement* claiming that “politics doesn't always happen—it actually happens very little or rarely” (17). How different this austere pronouncement sounds from the fluidity at play in a very recent text, produced with the occasion of a dialogue between Rancière and Axel Honneth:

[…] there is a multiplicity of forms and scenes of dissensus. Every situation can be cracked open on the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification, altering the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought, along with the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities. The method of equality is at work everywhere at any time.

**Works Cited**


I use this variant of the term, as its spelling coincides with the French. It has also been variously translated as subjectification and subjectivization.

2 Oliver Davis provides an important commentary on this neutrality, explaining that “the sinister overtones of the term ‘police,’ try as Rancière might to neutralize them, do suggest a normative requirement to engage in politics rather than policing. Yet Rancière makes one isolated but striking admission: ‘The police can procure all sorts of good, and one kind of police may be infinitely preferable to another’” (Davis 2010, 93).

3 I am using here the more straightforward and standard reading of Rancièrian terminology, although, of course, there is a third term (le politique) and there are other possible interpretations of the two- or three-term system. Rancière has “proposed to give the name of ‘the political’ [le politique] to the field of encounter - and ‘confusion’ - between the process of politics and the process of police” (Rancière 2011, 5). However, Samuel Chambers makes an elaborate case that reading Rancière’s work through the lens of such a three-term model is a “mistake.” Insisting on
the impurity of politics, he argues that “we do not have three terms (police, politics, the political) but merely a doubling of one of the two terms. Politics is doubled, always and already” (Chambers 2011, 316). It may be that the situation is even more complex, that there is actually a great deal of ambiguity and even contradiction in Rancière’s usage of all of these terms: la police, la politique, le politique. Gabriel Rockhill’s meticulous unpacking of Rancière’s (re)definitions shows, for instance, that the philosopher has used the exact same wording in different texts to define both police and politics (as distributions of the sensible), that la politique has occasionally come to mean both distribution and redistribution (terms that were initially associated with police and politics respectively), and that the encounter between police and politics has been referred to by both le and la politique (Rockhill 2014, 166). This is a matter of inconsistency from text to text, yet within each text, some form of opposition between police and politics is ubiquitous regardless of which definitions are used. On the other hand, subjectivation has been fairly consistently defined as disidentification and impossible identification throughout Rancière’s work, and is always associated with politics and the political in the sense of an interruption of the police.

4 In his commentary on Rancière, Žižek has picturesquely expressed the same disdain towards “postmodern multiculturalist ‘identity politics’, aiming at the tolerant coexistence of ever-shifting, ‘hybrid’ lifestyle groups, divided into endless subgroups (Hispanic women, black gays, white male AIDS patients, lesbian mothers…). This ever-growing flowering of groups and subgroups in their hybrid and fluid, shifting identities, each insisting on the right to assert its specific way of life and/or culture, this incessant diversification, is possible and thinkable only against the background of capitalist globalization” (Žižek 2000, 209). In other words, for Žižek, such postmodern identities might share in a certain “fundamentalist” naturalization of their position (i.e. this is who I really am). Identity is no longer constrained by the exclusive imaginary of the nation-state, a specific religion, heterosexuality, etc., but it is now constructed in accordance with some supposedly authentic self. At the same time, this form of identity that shuns metaphoricity is made possible by and in turn sustains global capitalism, so that while everyone is busy fighting battles over political correctness and cultural appropriation, the larger economic landscape becomes ever more depoliticized. This is why both hegemonic and minoritarian identities can be seen as forms of police. We should add, as long as they don’t trouble the system, the current distribution of the sensible. Critiquing the ideological elements of today’s identity politics should not, however, lead to a wholesale dismissal of hybridity, identification, or specificity. The caricatural depiction of minorities seeking respect for their particular identity makes light of the complex networks of domination that exist beyond or intertwined with class hierarchies and dismisses in advance the claim to radical equality that can simultaneously be voiced by such groups.

5 On the other hand, some scholars have found fertile points of intersection between Rancièrian subjectivation and queer theory. See the recent issue of Bordelands entitled “Jacques Rancière on the Shores of Queer Theory” (2009).

6 The remark that, due to his anti-sociological stance, Rancière does not adequately theorize the police order is perhaps the most frequent (and polarizing) criticism of his political thought. See, for example, Slavoj Žižek’s The Ticklish Subject, Oliver Davis’s Jacques Rancière, Lois McNay’s The Misguided Search for the Political, or Peter Hallward’s “Staging Equality.” Most
recently, Jean-Philippe Deranty’s balanced commentary has noted that “political claims arguably arise as claims about aspects of social reality, and since the claims are to be made by the agents themselves some anchoring of politics within forms of experience appears inevitable” (Genel and Deranty 2016, 50). Writing from a feminist perspective, Geneviève Fraisse claims that Rancièrian equality is sexed, and that much work still remains in order to make masculine domination visible. She strongly disagrees with Rancière’s position that oppression is evident and that “the science of domination does not create emancipation” (Fraisse 2013, 48). After dwelling specifically on the domination of women, she asks “how is it possible to conceive of emancipation without confronting the materiality of domination, the recognition of its fact, […] or without confronting the multiplicity of sites to be identified where it operates, the forces of its cunning, and so on?” (64). For a highly sympathetic defense of the abstraction of Rancièrian subjectivation, which often seems to supplement Rancière’s thought, see Todd May’s work, for example “There Are No Queers” (2009).

7 Rancière’s procedure of naming makes it challenging at times to follow his logic in this piece. In particular, “the Algerians” refers sometimes to the protestors, sometimes to Algerians living in Algeria, and sometimes to FLN fighters. The conflation and monolithic treatment of these distinct communities perhaps obscures some of the intersecting relationships between the policing and politics of the Algerian War.

8 On this point, see for example Rancière’s discussion of Pierre-Simon Ballanche’s reading of Titus Livius in Disagreement, pp. 23-27. Beyond the immediate politics of the October 17 protest and its repression, there is also an important politics of memory still emerging today, brought about by the discourse of the French descendants of the protestors. Michael Rothberg’s Multidirectional Memory offers insightful reflections regarding the politics of temporal shifts in the memory and commemoration of the Paris Massacre.

9 The Charonne protest was specifically sparked by the attempted assassination of André Malraux, which ended up blinding a neighbor’s 4-year old daughter Delphine Renard.

10 Although Ross agrees with Rancièr’s interpretation of the Paris massacre and its cover-up as creating a fundamental shift in French (student) self-identification, her description of the protest that followed also points to the minimal overall reaction of the French people. While L’Humanité was one of the only periodicals to report on this incident of police repression, it “stopped short of calling for a demonstration to protest the massacre. Only two very small groups, the Comité Anticolonialiste and the Comité du Front Universitaire Antifasciste (FUA) took to the streets to protest the police action. […] The significance of their protest, far outweighs their actual membership numbers, for in their activities we can detect the first appearance of a durable radical current within the student milieu. By this I mean the first instance of an intervention at the national level in a new mode, of students as a political force, for a cause that was not a defense of student interests” (56). While it is important to recognize the political valence of this moment, it is equally essential at the very least to remark its ambivalence.

11 Rancière is of course correct in pointing to state racism and hypocrisy on the left. In “Racisme, une passion d’en haut” and similar interventions, he refers in particular to certain kinds of legislation targeting immigrants and creating “a category of sub-French” in the name of
secularism or gender equality. However, his central argument is that “racism today is a state logic and not a popular passion” (Rancière 2010, my translation), which seems to exonerate “the people” or “the masses.” But why should these sources of racism be mutually exclusive? Why choose to protect the masses and attack only the State? Indeed, they most often work together quite effectively to exert their violence. On this point, see also Mike Watson’s interview with the philosopher, “Jacques Rancière: The Front National’s Useful Idiots.”

12 See the similar claim in “Politics, Identification and Subjectivization”: “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” (63).

13 Indeed, Rancière seems to ignore the problematic racism often found within workers’ movements, for instance in the form of slave metaphors. See for example a passage from Disagreement where he comments on an exemplary demonstration of equality in an excerpt from “Réponse au manifeste des maîtres tailleurs” (1833). The workers are outraged that they are being treated as “niggers” by their bosses. Rancière does not remark the overt racism of the workers’ text, simply glossing it in his commentary as their refusal to be treated as “noisy animals or slaves capable only of understanding orders,” (53-54).

14 See his explanation in Aux bords du politique: “Perhaps we need to rethink the meaning of democratic division, and consider that the political war between parties and the social war between poor and rich (which we have been congratulating ourselves for having overcome), in themselves and in their conflictual interrelationship, had a poorly-understood power to remedy radical evil. As though the war between poor and rich had also in its own way pacified an older war. As though the double division of the political and the social had a regulating function in relation to the more radical rift provoked by a certain passion for unity, such that the return of archaic gestures and charismas of pacification are the corollary of the erasure of division itself” (65; my translation).

15 Hallward claims, for instance, that the philosopher “seems to rely on an unnecessarily simplistic articulation of all and nothing, of ‘no one’ and ‘everyone’” (Hallward 2009, 157). Oliver Davis has also pointed out that Rancière does not dwell on “intermediate phases of partial belonging and exclusion, of limited political subjecthood” (Davis 2010, 92).

16 The problem of needing to separate politics from police is illustrated in an issue of Borderlands which aims, in a way, to queer Rancièrian thought, “despite understanding that Rancière has at best entirely ignored, at worst actively disdained, the work of queer theory” (Chambers and O’Rourke 2009, 2). Throughout the issue, the authors offer excellent accounts of Rancièrian politics and subjectivation, but are most often compelled to create a rather artificial divide between “queer” and “LGBT” politics in order to read Rancièrian subjectivation as compatible with resistance to heteronormative sexuality or normativity in general. Queer is political; LGBT is identity-based and is “subsumed under the category of police” (Chambers
The Queer Nation slogan “We’re here! We’re queer! Get used to it!” is political (Chambers 2009, 3); the struggle for gay marriage fits better with the police (Kollias 2009, 5-6). Issue available online: http://www.borderlands.net.au/issues/vol8no2.html.

It is debatable whether “queer” as such stands for a universal claim to equality or is primarily the assertion of a multiplicity of discrete identities that are perfectly compatible with the dominant socioeconomic system. One would of course always need to examine specific examples and perhaps keep in mind Žižek’s remark that “the recent proliferation of different sexual practices and identities (from sadomasochism to bisexuality and drag performances), far from posing a threat to the present regime of biopower (to use the Foucauldian terms), is precisely the form of sexuality that is generated by the present conditions of global capitalism, which clearly favour the mode of subjectivity characterized by multiple shifting identifications. (226)