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Two Forms of ‘Disidentification as Political Subjectivation’: A Critical Interrogation of Kristin Ross’ Rancièrian Reading of May ‘68

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Abstract

This article revisits Kristin Ross’ monograph, *May ‘68 and its Afterlives* and investigates the ways in which she utilizes the Rancièrian concept of disidentification in order to understand the process of students’ political subjectivation during May ‘68 in France. It argues that she interrogates students’ practices of disidentification in terms of their political opening to the figure of the Worker and that she puts forth two forms in which this relation unfolds, one “impossible

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identification” which rises upon paradoxically identifying with a name (“Worker”) that is not assigned to the person and the other solidarity with the workers. It claims that Rancière’s two different interpretations of emancipatory political heterology can actually help us grasp the core features of these two forms respectively. While in one of his interpretations Rancière reads political heterology as the staging of the Self as Other without being bound by any social determinations, in his other interpretation he instead reads it as a socially-grounded process that takes place through political transformation of one’s assigned social identity from within. These two distinct understandings are crucial for unearthing Ross’ particular comprehension of the two forms of students’ disidentification as subjectivation. In the final part, this article revisits some of Rancière’s and Ross’ works to explore whether students’ practices of disidentification during May ‘68 can in fact be grounded in the latter’s critique of the university apparatus as a site of bureaucratic-capitalist power. It argues that only such a grounding would fully appreciate the solidarity between students and workers as political subjects.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière, Kristin Ross, May ‘68, Disidentification, Subjectivation.

‘Politik Özneleşme olarak Özdeşleşme’nin iki Biçimi: Kristin Ross'un Rancière'ci Mayıs '68 Okumasına Dair Eleştirel bir Değerlendirme

Özet

Bu makale Kristin Ross’un *Mayıs '68 ve Geriye Kalanlar* isimli monografisini yeniden gözden geçirir ve yazarın Fransa’daki Mayıs ‘68 olayları esnasında öğrencilerin politik özneleşme sürecini anlamak üzere Rancièreci özdeşleşme kavramını hangi şekillerde kullandığını araştırır. Yazarın, öğrencilerin özdeşleşme pratiklerini İşçi figürüne siyasi olarak açılmaları üzerinden incelediğini öne sürerek bu ilişkinin kitapta iki farklı biçimde ortaya konduğunu iddia eder: kişinin kendisine tahsis edilmemiş bir isimle (“İşçi”) paradoksal biçimde özdeşleşmesine dayanan “imkansız özdeşleşme” ve işçilerle dayanışma. Bu makale, Rancière’in özgürleşimci siyasi heterolojiye dair ortaya koyduğu iki farklı yorumun sırasıyla yukarıda bahsi geçen bu iki biçimin en temel özelliklerini kavramamıza yardımcı olacağını iddia eder. Rancière yorumlarından birinde politik heterolojiyi Ben’in hiçbir toplumsal belirlenime bağlı olmadan kendisini Öteki olarak sahnelemesi şeklinde okurken, diğerinde kişinin kendisine atfedilen toplumsal kimliği içeriden politik olarak dönüştürdüğü bir süreç olarak okur. Bu iki farklı yorum, Ross’un öğrencilerin “özneleşme olarak özdeşleşme”sinin iki biçimini nasıl idrak ettiğini ortaya koymak açısından hayli önemlidir. Bu makale, son bölümde Rancière ve Ross’un bazı çalışmalarına yeniden dönerek öğrencilerin Mayıs ‘68 esnasındaki özdeşleşme pratiklerini kapitalist-bürokratik bir iktidar mahali olarak üniversite düzeneğine yönelttikleri eleştirilerde temellendirmenin mümkün olup olmadığını araştırır. Bu makalenin iddiasına göre ancak böylesi bir temellendirme politik özneler olarak işçi ve öğrencilerin dayanışmasını tam anlamıyla kavrayabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Jacques Rancière, Kristin Ross, Mayıs ‘68, Özdeşleşme, Özneleşme

Introduction

Since its publication, Kristin Ross' ground-breaking work entitled *May '68 and its Afterlives* (2002) has been a major source of influence for scholars who deal with the question of the construction of memory around the events of May 1968 in France, particularly for those who are interested in what commemorations of May simultaneously remember and forget. What is usually undermined though is the way in which she endorses and utilizes Rancièrian emancipatory politics in the service of countering the "official" memory constructed and circulated around May '68.

Taking this political and polemical nature of Ross' argument as its point of departure, this paper critically engages with her particularly Rancièrian understanding of the political nature of student-led rebellions in May '68. It aims to excavate and investigate her Rancièrian move to identify the events with practices of *disidentification*, i.e., the form of political subjectivation (the process of interrupting the *status-quo* via enacting and demonstrating the hitherto denied political equality) acquired via disputing the identities given by the predominant socio-political order of things (see Rancière, 1999, p. 36). According to this paper, the essential characteristic that defines her Rancièrian reading of student protestors' disidentification is the premise that it unfolds through relating with and opening to the figure of the Other emblemized most prominently by the figure of the Worker. It argues that she delivers two complimentary forms of students' 'disidentification as subjectivation' that are grounded in their particular response to and engagement with the figure of the Worker *and* these are impossible identification and solidarity. While impossible identification, as will be made clear in the proceeding pages, entails the process of students' unidirectional embrace of and identification with the cause of the Worker, solidarity entails a conjoining and merging of different political *subjectivities* ("students and workers"). To understand the differences between these forms, this paper revisits Rancière's account on the general heterological nature of 'political subjectivation' which can only make sense against the background of his unique affirmation of the intertwinement between political emancipation and equality. For Rancière, political emancipation can only occur through the disruption of the given hierarchical socio-political order and structures upon reclaiming and demonstrating the equality of those people who are relegated to the margins of society with everyone else. Thus, it is precisely the space of those that are marginalized and exposed to injustices

which has the potential to undo the oppressive regime of inequalities. This space of the “part of those who has no part”, i.e., the outcast is the space through which political emancipation unfolds through demonstrative acts of equality and it is precisely this space that accounts for what Rancière deems the Other.

As part and parcel of this particular reading, Rancière identifies (political) heterology as the necessary counterpart to political emancipation that is grounded in equality. He equates it with a “politics of the self as an Other”, where the “Other” entails the space of aforementioned political equality that arises from the very condition of marginalization (Rancière, 1992, p. 59). What this means for Rancière, is the following: political emancipation necessarily passes through the Other that opens up a polemical space in which the hitherto denied equality is demonstrated. The Other in this sense designates that figure or space which is the outcast- workers, women, or people of colour: “(The process of emancipation) 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 other.” (Rancière, 1992, p. 59) However, this article argues that the ways in which this Other comes to appear or “is always enacted” during political subjectivation are twofold. On the one hand, it simply comes as a figure that can be performatively claimed and enunciated as the name of an outcast by anyone (“*We, Workers*”). On the other hand, it emerges as a space of equality emerging from the very social conditions of the outcast who, by problematizing and transforming these same conditions, enact equality (“*We, Workers*”). This paper argues that the first mode of politics approximates a socially-weightless staging of the Self as Other, while the second mode invites a more socially-grounded inquiry into the intricate links between politics and social determinations. This paper’s suggestion is that these two understandings of political heterology can be utilized in order to understand the differences and tensions between students’ impossible identification with the Worker on the one hand and solidarity with the workers on the other in Ross’ monograph.

Ross’ Reading of May ’68 in France: Some Preliminary Remarks

In most general terms, Ross associates May ‘68 in France with a cluster of events that ultimately rises upon the conjoining of anti-Americanism, anti-capitalism and anti-Gaullism and that reaches its peak in the general strike of nine-million people across the

whole country in June (Ross, 2002, p. 8). A global movement and rebellion mostly led by students in countries that include countries like United States, Italy and Germany as well as the former Czechoslovakia, Turkey and Japan, '68 revolts had driven their force from, in Balibar's words, the virtual horizon consisting of the three main themes of anti-imperialism, anti-capitalism and anti-bureaucratism (including rebellion against State Communism in Eastern Europe) *and* sought "to reshape local political and cultural contexts... linked by a dense web of transnational connections..." (Klimke and Nolan, 2018, p. 1) What made French '68 the main and iconic representative of this global movement though was both the joining of workers in the movement on a massive scale and the speed and race of it, shaking the De Gaulle regime to its core in the span of a month (see Bourg, 2007; Çıdam, 2016). As the story of the unfolding of the events is conventionally told, May '68 was in fact the cluster of rebellious and "anti-systemic" events that took place between May 3rd and May 30th, the dates marking the intervention of the forces of order in Sorbonne against the student protestors and President De Gaulle's dissolution of the National Assembly respectively (Ross, 2002, p. 8). What makes Ross' wealthy analysis noteworthy here though is the fact that while she acknowledges the unique, distinct and *singular* character of French '68 within the larger transnational framework of '68 movements, does not simply isolate May as the month of 'sublime' insurrectionary events and adopts the perspective of the "long 60s", mainly addressing the anti-colonial resistance in France preceding, grounding and giving birth to May '68 (Ross, 2002, p. 26; see Ross, 2018). She traces the political nature of May '68 to its prehistory, especially the effects of Algerian War in France and the American War in Vietnam in triggering a decolonial and *Tiers-Mondiste* mindset as well as an anti-Gaullist response amongst students. She particularly discusses how the anti-colonial cause merges with the anti-capitalist one ('internationalism') in the course of which university students reaches out to the 'workers' in France who have gradually begun to replace and stand in for the figure of the colonial subject from Vietnam, Cuba and Algeria (2002, p. 80-81). For Ross, reaching out to the workers, especially as they are conceived as the emblematic political subjects of anti-capitalist insurrection in France at the time, entails a process of disidentification: the students fleeing their given corporate identities of being students as allocated and defined by the *status-quo* and interrupting the very premises upon which

the social division of labour between mental and manual labor rises (Ross, 2002, pp. 9-11, 74, 78).

However, Ross imagines and articulates the particular form of this opening to the Worker and hence, disidentification as political subjectivation in two different ways: ‘impossible identification’ and solidarity which are, as we will see, traceable in the two different comprehensions of politics and levels of political analysis pursued by Rancière. Thus, before moving onto a deeper exploration of her account, we first need to revisit Rancière’s stance with regard to the question of politics and disidentification.

Disidentification and Political Subjectivation: A Rancièrian Framework

Rancière’s particular take on the question of disidentification as a political practice can only be grasped against the background of his opposition between politics and the police. His conceptualization reformulates the relation between insurrectionary ‘political’ acts and the *status-quo* in terms of encounters or confrontations between the incommensurable and “heterogeneous” logics and perceptive forms of politics (*la politique*) and police (*la police*) (Rancière, 1999, pp. 31-33). Part and parcel of his polemically driven intervention into the debates of his time, he scrutinizes this antagonistic relation via the gesture of twisting the conventional uses of the two terms (Davis, 2010, p. 76). On the one hand, ‘police’ transfigures the usual connotation of the term, i.e., the officer on the street that defends ‘law and order’ and broadens it to refer to the general logic of the pervasive ‘order’ that hinges on an unequal and hierarchical distribution of places and roles to certain groups of people *and* the systems for legitimizing this distribution (Rancière, 1999, p. 28-29). For Rancière, this distributive functionalism of the police order is inherently linked to a particular aesthetic configuration which designates a specific form of *partage du sensible*, i.e., partition of the sensible: a police order is also “an order of the visible and the sayable” (Rancière, 1999, p. 29) which means that it governs and determines which groups and subjects’ appearances and words are “counted” as intelligible (Chambers, 2010, p. 63). Thus, the police order does not only distribute places, roles and functions but also link them to particular ways of being, speaking and doing in such a way that “that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.” (Rancière, 1999, p. 29) It is particularly this latest bifurcation between *logos*

(discourse) and *phone* (noise) which introduces us to the more fundamental level of police's aesthetic partition of the sensible since what is accepted as discourse or noise depicts the police order's primary role in constituting the very framework of intelligibility with regard to certain acts.

This fundamental level at which police order functions, i.e., the overarching and constitutive hierarchical grid of intelligibility accounts for the police's primary role in the "symbolic constitution of the social", i.e., a way of representing society to itself such that everything is presumed to be naturally accorded a place and a way of being in the order of things without remainders (Magnusson, 2015, p. 190). Thus, the police order rests on the premise of a "saturated" social space within which there is no party that is not accounted for, with the reservation that some parts are so inferiorized in the hierarchy that they become invisible or unheard (Shaw, 2020, p. 9; Rancière, 2010, p. 36-37). As Arditì wonderfully puts it, police order inaugurates an "asymmetric common where everyone is counted but some count less than others." (2019, p. 59)

When we come to his particular deployment of the notion of 'politics', we see that he makes a similar twist by challenging its conventional semantics around the institutionalized, delimited and specialized sphere of 'political activity' and transforms it in the direction of a non-institutionalized egalitarian practice (see Marchart, 2011, p. 130). In fact, Rancière's most essential move resides in registering what is conventionally known as politics within the overall logic of the police and in opposing it to 'politics' which now stands for emancipatory political subjectivation (Samuel Chambers, 2011, p. 310; Rancière, 1999, p. 28). In this double gesture of twisting though, Rancière does not only intend to unveil the antagonistic logics -of inequality and equality- that belong to these two registers -of police and politics- but also show how politics is *nothing but* an egalitarian disruption of the police: it is the name of the operator for the (egalitarian) interruption and contestation of the hierarchical and inegalitarian premises of the police order (Samuel Chambers, 2011, p. 310). Put in a nutshell, Rancière deems politics to be a *dissensus*, an interruption and contestation of the inegalitarian partition/division of senses, especially the one between what is audible and what is not in the police order via the premise of equality (Rancière, 2010, p. 36). Thus, politics mainly targets the constitutively exclusionary nature of the sensible configuration that pertains to the police order, dismantling its naturalized appearance of saturation and consequently, revealing

its contingency and historical situatedness through the acts of those who are excluded, who comprise the “part of those who have no part”. (See Rancière, 1999, p. 9,11,14). For Rancière, the excluded claim but most importantly *display* that there is a fundamental ‘wrong’ and injustice structurally imbued in the police order of counting and challenge it by making it an object of litigious demonstration and common concern (Ingram, 2006, p. 238; Genel, 2016, p. 40; May, 2010, p. 75). Since inequality is the very ground of exclusion and “the logic of the wrong” (*la logique du tort*), the ones who are excluded challenge the latter, as might be obvious, via reclaiming equality. Here, the premise of equality has a precise meaning insofar as it concerns politics as a process of subjectivation, i.e., a sequence within which equality actually arises as a polemical “supposition that must be verified continuously- a verification or an enactment that opens specific stages of equality.” (Rancière, 2004, p. 305; Rancière, 2011, p. 16) The enactment of this presupposition *immediately* puts equality into practice as a political statement, rendering visible the inegalitarian premises of the police order (Rancière, 2010, p. 37; Hallward, 2009, p. 147). Rancière explicates this disjuncture between politics and police, or in other words, between equality and inequality through reference to particular historical/ political figures which stage, on the public scene, a scene of political equality and thus, render visible their hitherto denied equality (see Asenbaum, 2021, p. 95; Gündoğdu, 2017, p. 190). For instance, the Roman plebs confronting the inegalitarian premises of the patrician order in Ancient Rome, the women ‘declaring’ equal rights with men and thus, challenging the very distributive principle according to which they should remain within the reproductive/ private domain or the working class emerging as a political actor and undoing its own status of being simply a group of laborers within the social organization of labor all exemplify this type of an immediate enactment of equality (Rancière, 1999, pp. 24-27, 59, 89).

For Rancière though, such a polemical enactment/demonstration of equality can only occur within and through the practice(s) of disidentification (1999, p. 36). From the outset, while police order strictly adheres to the logic of identification by way of which it controls and reifies identities of groups of people ideally commensurate with their assigned roles, places and functions, polemical enactment of equality disrupts this very identificatory pursuit of the police and thus, entails disidentification (Asenbaum, 2021, p. 94). In more concrete terms, while plebs, women or working class as “groups” remain

tied to their naturalized “allocation of functions and places” which relegates them to the margins of political community on the level of identification, disidentification *undoes* this hierarchical classification: it occurs through “the denial of an identity given by an other, given by the ruling order of policy”. (Rancière, 1992, p. 62) Thus, it simultaneously exceeds the preexisting identitarian framework of the police (“workers as labour-force”) by enunciating the name of a political subject (“We, workers”).

However, as we will see in the proceeding pages, the essential point of controversy here lies with the question of whether one performs political subjectivation and thus, disidentification through a socially unbound performative acclamation of a name (“*We, Workers*”) or, on the contrary, through a socially grounded dispute and transformation of the assigned identities (“*We, Workers*”).

One other point to underline -and this is essentially linked with the interests of this paper- is that Rancière also explicates the emancipatory dynamics of ‘disidentification as political subjectivation’ in terms of an “heterology”. Partly linked to his aversion to an understanding of emancipation as the liberation and consequently, the identitarian affirmation of the “self” of community, he thinks disidentification in terms of a “heterology” or “politics of the self as an Other, or in Greek terms, a *heteron*”. (Rancière, 1992) More precisely, as he adds in a further formulation, such a practice involves “the formation of a one that is not a self but is the *relation of a self to an other*.” (1992, p. 59) When the (collective-) self breaks from the identitarian “naturalness of a given place” and starts building up a new political community based on reclaiming and demonstrating equality, it effectively relates to the Other which now appears as the new subject space, i.e., “the figure of the outcast as the figure of equality”. (Pribiag, 2019, p. 451) Thus, disidentification forges an ‘interval’ in the form of a relation which locates the subject between self and Other, i.e., an “in-betweenness” which brings two separate worlds, statutes and places together and hence, manifests the conflictual logics of police and politics, inequality and equality (Rancière, 1992, p. 61-62; 1999, p. 137; 2010, p. 39). Returning to one of the examples above, when women disidentify with their naturally given places (“reproductivity, domesticity and private sphere”) and occupy the space reserved for male population (“public space”) through the simultaneous act of demanding and demonstrating equality, they “paradoxically” bring “two worlds into one”- the world where they have no voice and the Other world where they are equal with men (see

Rancière, 2004, p. 304) It is precisely the manifestation and demonstration of the gap between the two worlds that account for political subjectivation inherent to disidentification. Although Rancière's political heterology seems straightforward, it still presents us with certain controversies and ambiguities when given a closer look.

A Critique of Rancière's Ideas on Disidentification as Political Subjectivation

A closer inspection of Rancière's take on the question of disidentification as the very form of political subjectivation unveils some controversial aspects of his work, especially when we bring the above mentioned heterological aspect of this process into sharp focus. Many scholars until now have critically attested to the shortcomings of Rancière's approach to politics, mainly addressing its formalism, social weightlessness and inability to conceive democratic/egalitarian disruption within the problematic of the transition to a new institutional/social order. For instance, Anita Chari critically addresses Rancière's preoccupation with the "form" of politics (egalitarian torsion of the police order) that neglects "content", i.e., the historical variability as well as conditions of democratic/egalitarian politics (Chari, 2015, p. 56-57). In a similar vein, Toscano and Lois McNay criticize Rancière's move to dissociate politics of emancipation from any kind of social order of being which ends up rendering it synonymous with a pure and sublime 'act' of disrupting the police order (Toscano, 2011, p. 220; Lois McNay, 2014, p. 137; also see Hewlett, 2007, p. 108). Or, similarly, Peter Hallward and Aletta Norval suggest that Rancière reduces politics to a negative moment of disruption at the expense of any positive moment of institutional re-ordering, accusing him of promoting a "sporadic and intermittent" process of political subjectivation with no "foothold in extant orders". (Hallward, 2009, p. 152; Norval, 2012, p. 812). What lurks behind these critiques, one could argue, is the idea that Rancière *generally* tends to neglect the possibility of a link between politics of emancipation and social processes or determinations, resulting in his endorsement of a purely formal, empty and negative political gesture of emancipatory/egalitarian interruption of the *status-quo* with no institutional consequences. Coming back to the question of disidentification via heterology, one could contribute to these critical accounts by addressing two forms of Rancièrian "disidentification as political subjectivation" that have their distinct relations with social determinations or processes.

On the one hand, Rancière deems disidentification to be a process of *self-othering* which:

does not create subjects *ex nihilo* but creates them by transforming identities defined in the natural order of the allocation of functions and places into instances of experience of a dispute. (1999, 36)

Andrew Schaap argues that Rancière's reference to "transformation" rather than "transcendence" when comprehending politics attests to the fact that he attributes a role to the underlying social conditions for the possibility of an effective political agency (Schaap, 2012, p.164). Although one could still detect some form of a formalist abstraction in this distinctive idea(l) of politics insofar as different figures such as plebs, women or proletariat all manifest the identical logic of an emancipatory egalitarianism, his emphasis on social conditions implies that disidentification is grounded in the injustices and "wrong"s experienced by those same figures who *proceed* to disidentify (Deranty, 2016, p. 50). Needless to say, this form of political subjectivation is nothing less than a practice of disidentification anchored in one's own social conditions of existence. What is more is that it brings forth the Other as the very space of political equality that emerges as complimentary to self-transformation, clashing with the social inequalities that still persist.

On the other hand, there is, in Rancière's reading, also the form of political subjectivation/ disidentification that is grounded in a "response" to the injustices and inequalities experienced by Others who, precisely because they are the outcast, materialize and propose the position of political equality. One could argue that such a move incessantly leads to unidirectionality, social-groundlessness and formalist abstraction. Here, as Pribiag critically puts it, there is the fictional staging of the self as the Other ("impossible identification") which opens up the controversial possibility for a "strategic use of the outcast category to perform disidentification". (Pribiag, p. 457)

In order to give a better sense of this latter dimension -of staging of the self as Other- and to account for the differences between the two modes of heterology more clearly, one might revisit one of Rancière's key texts which is entitled *Politics, Identification and Subjectivization* (1992). In this piece, he elaborates on working-class politics as well as proletarian political subjectivation. First, he gives us the example of

workers questioning their status within French citizenship in the 19th century: Do French workers belong to the Frenchmen as declared in the Declaration of Human Rights? If not, the *Declaration of Human Rights* has to be changed (1992, p. 60). This dispute is a particular instance of working-class politics emerging from the very gap between their social identities as non-equals and their claim to be heard as equals. Thus, it is clearly an index of the emergence of the scene of Other as the stage of equality through the practices of working-class members themselves, disputing and transforming their own ascribed status as *nothing but* “labourers.” However, a couple of sentences later, this time, Rancière gives us the example of Blanqui’s famous reply to the judge when asked about his profession as a form of proletarian political subjectivation: “I am a proletarian.” (1992, p. 61) Rancière depicts this “speech act” as one of disidentification because neither Blanqui is part of the socially identifiable (“sociological”) group of manual-laborers nor “proletarian” is the name given to this group: Blanqui disidentifies with ‘self’ and declares to be a part of proletariat, i.e., the outcast which is now conceived as the political subject (p. 61, see Rancière, 1999, 38). “Proletariat” is the very figure/name of the Other as the space of the “uncounted” that only “exists in the very declaration in which they are counted as of those who are unaccounted.” (Rancière, 1999, p. 37) In this rather distinct formulation, Rancière seems to ground politics, not in the experiences of a working-class member disidentifying with her identity in the interval between identity/identification and subjectivation, but rather in the “performative” speech act of a revolutionary who responds to the conditions of people who “live off their labor and who are deprived of their political rights” (Rancière, 1999, p. 36).¹ Thus, the Other here acquires a different meaning insofar as it emerges as the figure of the outcast that calls for its political resignification by a respondent.

¹ One could also detect Rancière’s formulation on human’s “literariness” in this particular account on performativity. He defines human’s “literariness” as an endowment that has the potential to undo the naturalized relationship between the order of words and order of bodies (1999, p. 37). His presumption of excess of words over things as the condition of politics, at least in this case, perforce brings forth a socially unbound linguistic performativity within which the utterance *as such* (“I am a proletarian”) has direct practical consequences in the form of a political effect (Karen Zivi, 2016, p. 444). In this sense, Rancière’s account on this performative utterance seems closer to the classical one defined by J.L. Austin as a speech act that does not “constate” anything, but rather enacts in their very utterance, the reality it describes (See Austin, 1975)

To sum up the differences between these two forms of disidentification which unfold via heterology, one could say that while the first form depicts a process of emancipation grounded in the social conditions of those who enact emancipation, the second one entails a socially unbound espouse of the “cause of the Other.”

Ross on May '68: Two Forms of Rancièrian Disidentification

“Impossible Identification” and its Ambiguities

In this section, we will be dealing with the question of how and in what ways Rancièrian's two modes of disidentification reverberate through Ross' inquiry into students' “impossible identification” and solidarity with the workers in the context of May '68.

At one level, Ross deems students' impossible identification with the figure of the Worker as the central dynamic of their practice of disidentification (p. 10). She invokes Rancièrian and thinks “impossible identification” in terms of the “discursive construction of the relation of the self to the Other” which inaugurates political subjectivation that emerges in the gap between two identities neither of which can be assumed (Ross, p. 108; Rancièrian, p. 61). In our example, this process basically means students becoming neither students nor workers but political subjects emerging in-between. However, she clarifies what she concretely means by this phrase of ‘impossible identification’ when she particularly discusses two modes of relating to the Other (“Algerians” and “German Jews”) that presumably emblemize May '68's authentic politics within the latter's aforementioned wider periodization.

First, she discusses the ways in which French citizens/students responded to the massacre of French Algerian citizens in 1961 within the larger context of the Algerian War and associates this response with impossible identification. At this point, it might be helpful to revisit Rancièrian's dense text, *The Cause of the Other* insofar as it is actually the main source of Ross' arguments (1998). In this text, Rancièrian argues that those French citizens who respond to and protest against this massacre perform political subjectivation through the act of disidentifying with the French state as the massacre had taken place (yet hidden from view) on behalf of French national identity. The state's brutal repression of the French Algerians' protests against the curfew issued against them had been

effective in creating political subjectivation -through and as disidentification- for the French political generation (“us”) simply because it “made it possible to subjectivate the self-difference of our citizenship, or a gap between juridical citizenship and political citizenship.” (Rancière, 1998, p. 29) In other words, the French “we” had been able to perform disidentification with their juridical citizenship (“membership of the French nation”) by way of contrasting it with political citizenship, i.e., a form of citizenship which amounted to “counting the uncounted.” However, in a rather unexpected move, he erases the Algerian protesters in 1961 from the scene of political subjectivation simply because he thinks their own actions are subordinated to the cause of liberating the “colonized” Algerian identity/self in the long run, making them susceptible to the identitarian “police” logic. Deprived of their own process of political subjectivation and disidentification, Algerians turn into empty names that are only present as mere leverage points for the political subjectivation of French citizens. In other words, the Algerians only count as the scene of the Other which is fictively claimed by the French protestors. What is yet a more interesting aspect of this embrace of the “cause of the Other”, at least for the concerns of this paper, is its social groundlessness and weightlessness as the inequality inscribed in the national membership of French polity does not actually “wrong” the protesting French citizens. It does not rise upon the “miscount” of the French citizens that presumably perform disidentification. The case is rather that “Algerians only ‘count’ here in order to make the already counted French see that there’s a miscount.” (Pribyl, 458). Ross strictly adheres to this interpretation when she analyzes the political dynamics that precede, ground and set the stage for the novel experiments of May ’68.

According to Ross, such embrace of the cause of the Other finds its new momentum in the speech act of “we are all German Jews” in May ’68 which arose following the interdiction of stay in France issued against Daniel Cohn-Bendit -who happened to be one of the prominent leaders of May ’68 student uprising with a Jewish descent - after his declaration that “the French flag was made to be torn apart and turned into a red flag”. (see Habjan, 2020, p.112) The slogan of “We are all German Jews” chanted in the streets of Paris emblemized politics precisely because it materialized the students’ disidentification as French citizens by way of reappropriating the stigmatizing name, “Jew” and turning it into the space of the uncounted from where equality could be enacted (Rancière, 1999, p. 216). For Ross, since the students assumed the place of the

Other in a mode of impossible identification, a collective political subject (“we, the German Jews”) with no solid *sociological* identity was effectively created (Ross, 57, p. 108). However, just like the case of Algerians, the “Jews” functioned here only as the figure of the Other calling for its resignification or as Hammerschlag insightfully puts it, simply as “an empty-signifier, one whose significance arises merely from its position as off-limits”. (Hammerschlag, 2010, p. 6)²

There are in fact three major controversial aspects that should be emphasized in Ross’ Rancièrian interpretation, particularly with respect to the meanings attached to the slogan of “We are all German Jews”. These three controversial aspects however do not only relate to the specific details of such interpretation but to the very model of ‘impossible identification’ endorsed and idealized as ‘authentic’ politics. Two of them concern the above-mentioned social weightlessness of this interpretation. In Ross’ particular reading of “We are all German Jews”, there is less emphasis on the circumstances which make this performative statement “work”, i.e., find resonance among the protesting students, than its presumed formal “political” logic. What makes such a performative statement “work” or in other words, find resonance among the students is in fact the circumstances into which it is born, namely the state officials’ harassment towards one of the prominent student leaders at the time and the solidaristic response it triggers amongst students. Rather than emphasizing this aspect, namely the context of the slogan, what we come across in Ross’ interpretation is the association of emancipatory/egalitarian politics (and its formal logic) with a socially ungrounded performative assumption of the name of the Other (For a critique of this approach, see Zivi, 2016). As an extension of this recourse to a “purified” conception of performativity - bringing into existence the very thing that is enunciated-, this interpretation also suffers from the presumption of a total break or delinking between students as (French) citizens and students as carriers of political subjectivation. Just like in the case of Algerian massacre, politics’ paradoxical logic of bringing “two worlds in one” loses its ground as these worlds lose contact- students do not create a scene of the Other where their *own* place in the police order is contrasted with their political claim to be heard as equals but

² Here, it is important to recognize that for Ross- as well as for Rancièrian- this “performative” speech act is not incidental to what goes on in the rebellion but is in fact a constitutive “authentic” event that emblemizes the whole politics of May ’68 (see Chambers, 2013, p.117).

rather, they allegedly make a gesture of “transcendence” in the form of a total break from their national identities on behalf of an “impossible” identification with German Jews. The presumptive model endorsed behind such politics deems *anyone* (“*any* French citizen/student”) capable of political subjectivation, disconnecting the actuality of a particular experience of injustice and inequality from political subjectivity (see Deranty, 2016, p. 51). The third and final major controversial aspect concerns the limits that pertain to this *anyone that can perform political subjectivation*. As is stated above, for protesting French students, both the Algerians and German Jews materialize the space of the Other as the space of political equality.³ However, a closer look at the example of the protesters’ embrace of the Algerian cause might help us in disclosing the contradiction within this assumption. Ross’ Rancièrian interpretation still presumes a form political subjectivity that relegates “Algerians” or “German Jews” to the Others “stripped of the politicity of their Cause.” (Pribiag, 2019, p. 457). It is as if these figures embody the space of political subjectivity paradoxically on the condition that they are stripped of their own political subjectivation. Even though one could contend that the “German Jews” in the protests only emerge as a reference point in terms of a litigious speech act, this does not change the fact that they are only visible as non-visible (inverting Rancièrè’s own formula) in the form of an Other that only function to generate the students’ disidentification and hence, political subjectivation.

Such an endorsing view of “impossible identification” invites certain deadlocks when it is transposed into the context of the students’ “impossible identification” with the worker. While the two figures of the Other mentioned above (“Algerians” and “German Jews”) are stripped of their own political subjectivation, workers in Ross’ account are already political subjects indulged in anti-capitalist resistance during and before May ‘68. Thus, collapsing all three figures into the objects of impossible identification misrepresent one central feature of May ‘68 and that is the aspect of solidarity and alliance between students and workers as political subjects.

Solidarity: The Workers and Students as Political Subjects

Interestingly though, this notion of solidarity acquires its deserved attention in Ross' second level of analysis. In this level of analysis, she rethinks the heterological aspect of students' disidentification not merely in terms of performatively claiming the space of the Other but also, in terms of solidarity with the worker as a political *subject*. However, while she profoundly undertakes a wealthy analysis of how students respond to and conjoin forces with the workers, she refrains -at least in this monograph- from exploring these students' own dispute concerning their own conditions. However, it is only by giving due attention to this practice that one can fully appreciate the solidaristic relationality between workers and students.

As mentioned above, on this second level of analysis, Ross' main emphasis is on the students' political opening to the experiences of workers who are conceived as concrete political subjects struggling in anti-capitalist resistance. Workers emerge as the nodal points of anti-capitalist resistance that are already visible in the "savage" or wildcat strikes that occurred in the mid-60s like miners' strike in 1963 and Renault workers' strike in 1964 in France. These strikes- along with the ones that occurred in 1966 and 1967- had expanded the "field of the possible" insofar as the workers on strike questioned the whole police logic of relegating their demands to "corporate" interests and attempted to figure out the possibilities of a new social organization (Ross, 2002, p. 32-33) Thus, one could claim that the dynamics of students' political opening to this figure of the worker rested primarily on joining forces with workers as political *subjects*. As Bourq underlines, leftist 'direct democratic' practices, such as the Maoist 'investigation' (c.1966-74)⁴, the militants in factories (*établissement*)⁵ and the multiple, leaderless *Comités d'action*⁶ were all indicators of such a reaching out to the workers as concrete political subjects (Bourq, 2003, p.122).The contrast here with the above-mentioned examples of impossible identification ("Algerians" or "German Jews") is clear: The Other is not an *abstract* and

⁴ The *établissement* movement was inspired by Mao's call to "intellectuals" to settle in the production sites in order to directly contact with the masses over a particular period of time. (Zedong: 1957)

⁵ The "investigation" was in fact a practice developed by Mao who sought to ground and flourish Marxist theory in direct experiences of the local conditions of the working class: "Everyone engaged in practical work must investigate conditions at the lower levels. Such investigation is particularly indispensable for those who know theory but do not know the actual social conditions, since otherwise they will not be able to connect theory to practice "(Zedong quoted in Bosteels,2005: 579).

⁶ "*Comités d'Action* sprung up in Paris. They were organized in order to provide material aid to the workers on strike and help sustain the latter (Reed, 2018-2019).

empty name of the outcast that could be fictively claimed but rather a concrete subject to join forces in the revolutionary struggle against capitalism. The one-sidedness that prevails in the presumption of (students or a political-generational “we”) becoming politicized through the abstract Other gets replaced by a solidaristic response to the workers’ struggle.

What is yet more crucial in the practices of students’ solidarity with the workers, at least for the interests of this article, is the dissolution of social division of labour as well as its hierarchical premises during the process. As social division of labor entails a police conception of the social that identifies workers as the bearers of physical labor and students as the bearers of (future) intellectual/mental labor, its dissolution amounts to a new conception of disidentification: both workers and students perform disidentification with their *corporate* identities/interests and new space of *immediate* equality emerges through an interactive cooperation between them (see Bencin, 2020). Thus, it is not enough for students to (impossibly) identify with the cause of the Worker since their particular political subjectivation necessarily entails a transformation of their *own* corporate identities as students. Only such a transformation embedded in their own experience would lead to the construction of a new space beyond social division of labor as it appears in “direct forms of democracy and collective self-organization.” (Ross, 2002, p. 75)

Revisiting Solidarity: The Students’ Critique of the University

However, what is missed out, at least in Ross’ account on solidarity, is a socially-grounded qualification of what triggers students’ political responsiveness toward workers’ movement and this last part deals with this dimension. One could argue that one fruitful way to develop an understanding of such responsiveness passes through a closer look at students’ *own* critique of capitalism which resides in their practice of questioning the role of universities as sites of (bureaucratic-capitalist) power (see Rancière, 2018, p. 290). A proper attention to the link between students’ conditions of existence embedded in the university structure and the particular ways in which they dispute these conditions can provide us with a new way to reconsider the characteristics that define students’ disidentification as political subjectivation. In fact, it can help us enrich Ross’ thinking of solidarity (“the union of intellectual contestation and worker’s struggle”) in the direction

of the aforementioned vein in Rancièrian mode of analysis which is grounded more in social conditions and their specific *transformation*. This form of analysis is in fact discernible in Rancière's texts which specifically aim at discovering the central role of the university system in explicating the university students' struggle within the span of the '60s in France. In his earliest book on the critique of Althusserianism- which rests on the general idea that Althusserianism is a form of pedagogical mastery and 'theoretical orthodoxy' that upholds the pretensions of bourgeoisie academic order/hierarchy and its underlying premise of *inequality of intelligences*, i.e. the idea that only the 'scientist-theoretician' is able to transmit the one and only 'superior' knowledge to students/militants - as well as in his one of the most latest texts (2018) on May '68, Rancière marks the university students' struggle against the particular role and function of the university within the French capitalist system as a central feature of May '68. In *Althusser's Lesson* (1974), he claims that the '60s student movements were marked by a growing impatience, first, with the ends of academic knowledge (to educate the future auxiliaries of the bourgeoisie) and second, the modes of acquiring that knowledge (the pedagogical relation based on the students' subordination and docility) (Rancière, (1974) 2011, p. 38). Regarding the first dimension, Rancière argues that the '68 movement "focused on the relationship between the University system and capitalist domination" and thus, challenged the academic system as the expression of the domination of the capitalist class that prepared the students for becoming the future agents of this particular class domination (2018, p. 290). Regarding the second dimension, Rancière marks the '68 movement's challenge to the very mode of transmission of knowledge through a broader suggestion that "Althusserianism died on the barricades of May '68". (2011, xx) Such suggestion is strictly related to the idea that the university students actually revolted against the orderly premises behind the bourgeois academic order (as well as Althusserianism) insofar as they both hinged on policing the distribution of (producers and consumers of) knowledge (Althusser, 2011, xx) Alain Badiou makes a similar argument when he states that the contemporaries of May '68, including himself and Rancière, have identified the *leitmotifs* of the student revolts as those aiming for untying the existing oppressive configurations of knowledge and authority *and* dissolving the top-down transmission of knowledge (2009, p. 33). In short, as Rancière bluntly states in an interview, the student revolts of May '68 was a "process which took place at the

university, which began with problems specific to the university” and “which linked the specific procedures of production and verification of university knowledge with the immediate destiny of the students, which was to become teachers, technicians, engineers, and managers in society.”(2022) In one of her key texts that deal with the questions of pedagogy and emancipation in the context of the university reforms in France after the ‘80s, Ross explicitly adopts Rancière’s this socially-informed analysis and identifies the university students’ struggle in ‘68 against both the content and form of the nexus between knowledge and power within the university structure: “(students) focus on the forms of the transmission of knowledge - the pedagogical relation of magisterial professors and docile students - as well as its ends: forming the future ranks and auxiliaries of the bourgeoisie.” (1991, p. 65). To reiterate a point made earlier, Ross delivers here a different understanding of May ‘68 that emphasizes how students relate to their *own* experiences and dispute the ‘police’ distribution of both roles (the anticipated functions of students as intellectual labour force in the overall capitalist order) and knowledge/intelligence (hierarchy between professors and students) through and within the university apparatus. Thus, according to this reading, the students of May ‘68 have actually disidentified with their roles as students through a processual transformation embedded in their own experiences. It is only through the critical scrutiny of the police logic inherent to the university apparatus which is thought to be inseparably linked to the general functioning of capitalism that the student revolts emerged and conjoined with the anti-capitalist struggles of the working class. Hence, such an emphasis on political subjectivation/disidentification through students’ own experiences enriches Ross’ account on the solidaristic relationality between workers and students *and* orients us to adopt the socially-informed Rancièrian mode of analysis.

Conclusion

This article indulged in a critical account of Ross’ reading of student-led rebellions in May ‘68, specifically focusing on the fact that she associates their political nature with practices of disidentification that gain their impetus through relations with the workers’ movement at the time. It has argued that there are in fact two forms of disidentification that are discernible in Ross’ reading which are “impossible identification” and solidarity with the workers. Reading these two forms through the lens of Rancière, this article has attempted to show that while impossible identification with

the figure of the Worker resuscitates the socially-weightless aspects of Rancièrian politics, the emphasis on solidarity opens up new perspectives to reimagine students - alongside workers- as political subjects who have actually contributed to the construction of a space of immediate equality based on the transformation of their own corporate identities and social conditions of existence.

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