

***The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality***

**Todd May**

**University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2008; 224 pages.**

Todd May has written, as he tells us in the closing paragraph, not a politics but a way of thinking about politics. This difference is important, for given the work's guiding distinction between passive equality and active equality, any programmatic statements about how politics should proceed would undermine the work's overall message that people themselves must decide the nature of struggle. May's project takes aim at a particularly American malady: the absence of real participation in the creation of common life. He traces this to a number of sources, but most of his energy is devoted to a critique of liberalism for the way it conceives of citizenship in negative terms, that is, according to a distributive paradigm where equality is something *given to* the people rather than actively created. In the first chapter, May reads Rawls, Nozick, and Amartya Sen to clear the ground for the active version of equality that follows. These readings are subtle and clear, even as they trace commonalities between these different thinkers. May critiques their suggestion that equality should be "guaranteed by the state rather than expressed by the people." (20) As May says several times, equality is not distributed, but taken. To receive equality is to be less than equal. "Distribution itself is of the police order of inequality." (73) His book, then, is designed to challenge the prevailing notions of equality, both in political theory and practice, and to construct an account wherein equality is conceived in radically democratic terms. This is the import of the work of Jacques Rancière, with whom May fashions his account: Rancière provides a deeper, more robust account of equality.

May's book has at least two major aims. On the one hand, it is an introduction to the political thought of Rancière, and, on the other, it is the attempt to bring these ideas to bear upon contemporary discourses and political struggles. May achieves these aims, however, in an unusual way. He introduces readers to Rancière's major ideas without constructing a commentary. Throughout, he discusses, among other things, the landscape of political philosophy, his own participation in struggles for racial equality in the American South, and the machinations of the Bush administration. This makes for a lively read, and an important original work. The combined effect is that May walks *with* readers through some

of Rancière's contributions, and thereby, one might argue, avoids instituting the position of the explicative master of whom Rancière is so critical. While from a political point of view this is commendable, it is questionable how well this strategy serves readers with little familiarity with Rancière's works. May relies upon some notions that for many may remain underdeveloped, for example, Rancière's theorisation of the equality of intelligences and his analysis of the exchanges between politics and aesthetics.

The former idea was developed in Rancière's book on the revolutionary pedagogue Joseph Jacotot, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, a text to which May alludes but all too briefly, given that it is the bedrock of Rancière's thoughts on equality. Jacotot, faced with desperate circumstances, developed a method for teaching what one does not know. In Rancière's telling, his practice provides the occasion for displacing forms of pedagogy that only succeed in impressing upon students their intellectual dependency. A closer reading of that work by May would provide a fuller picture of what is meant by active equality as well as some interesting material for thinking about political practices of equality. It is here, in the elaboration of this ethics, that Jacotot could further the contemporary political imagination by providing a richer sense of what becomes possible under the presupposition of equality. That said, May shows remarkable sensitivity to the risks intellectuals run when they struggle alongside oppressed peoples, and there are many compelling passages about what solidarity means when conceived from the standpoint of radical equality.

Given Rancière's analysis of the aesthetic dimensions of politics, and the role he ascribes to art in creating scenes of dissensus, many of Rancière's readers will be surprised to find little mention of these recent interventions in May's work. It is always somewhat specious to critique a book for what is not in it, and May's project is not intended to be a survey of Rancière's forty years of intellectual production. Nevertheless, I think a consideration of aesthetics is relevant to May's study. In the first instance, Rancière's writings on politics show how participation is, to some degree, an aesthetic question. Not to be confused with Benjamin's thesis about the aestheticisation of politics, the aesthetics of politics expresses the idea that politics is a struggle over what it means to have a voice. The *demos* become the subject of politics when they struggle against the oligarchs' refusal to acknowledge their full possession of the

*logos*, and thus their right to fully participate in community. As Rancière explains in *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (1999), “Politics is primarily conflict over the existence of a common stage and over the existence and status of those present on it.” (*Disagreement*, 26–7) For Rancière, politics consists of creating the conditions through which those thought to be unequal demonstrate their equality. May considers politics as a form of creation, but it would be interesting to hear him reflect upon what dissensus borrows from aesthetics and thus what art might contribute to contemporary political movements. Interestingly enough, Rancière frequently cites art as integral to the creation of equality. One of the lessons we can draw from his work, from *The Nights of Labor* to his most recent writings, is that aesthetic experience is one way marginalised peoples convince themselves and others of their equality. The important essay, “The Emancipated Spectator,” published in *Artforum* in March 2007, even argues that spectatorship itself is a type of *activity* that undoes hierarchical forms of community.

May develops Rancière’s contributions to political theory by placing his thought alongside various theoretical accounts of anarchism. His third chapter gives substance to the oft-repeated claim that Rancière’s politics is a type of anarchism. May’s central claim is not that Rancière is an anarchist, but that the trajectory of anarchism provides a means of understanding Rancière’s sense of equality, as well as the analytical priority he ascribes to the political concept of domination, rather than the economic category of exploitation. However, I wonder why, given that Rancière’s references are to Greek democracy and nineteenth-century workers’ movements, May does not cite these as sources and use them to fill out the conception of active equality. There are many instances where this would provide readers with a fuller sense of Rancière’s understanding of politics. It could bolster May’s efforts to resolve some of the normative questions—and here May is at his best—that arise with respect to Rancière’s work.

I was struck, in particular, by May’s discussion of whether or not Rancière can consistently claim the demos *should* act on the presupposition of equality. (117–21) If Rancière is simply describing democratic action, there is little problem but also little reason to act. If, however, he offers normative reasons for why people are obliged to struggle under the banner of equality, he runs the risk of reinstating the theoretical privilege rejected in his break with Althusser. May solves the dilemma by ar-

going, “There is no normative obligation to create democratic politics, but the existence of a democratic politics introduces norms into a situation where they did not previously exist.” (120) I agree that norms are created *in* the movement of politics and do not preexist it. Indeed, in Rancière’s presentation of Greek democracy, it is through the *demos*’ struggle that equality is invented to combat domination. I have never, however, been troubled by Rancière’s role in articulating this position because I have always viewed his efforts as a contribution to the *demos*’ continuing process of self-definition. Rancière does not speak to or for the *demos*, but with it. This is not to reduce his position to one of description, nor to ignore its normative claims. The universality that belongs to equality will re-emerge wherever a group is struggling against oppression because the part of those with no part possesses little else to deploy. Rancière’s theoretical clarity facilitates those struggles not by dictating the terms in which they must be waged, but by outfitting them with resources that emerge from the inside of the democratic struggle. He can, therefore, make these claims in the same fashion as all others who inscribe equality within Western institutions and discourses.

These differences by no means detract from a fine study that is a valuable contribution to our understanding of Rancière’s politics. It is remarkable for its ability to situate Rancière with respect to both European philosophical discussions and Anglo-American accounts of politics and meta-ethics. Rancière’s texts are deepened by these encounters. Throughout, May demonstrates a tremendous sensitivity to these debates and composes many nuanced arguments that extend the range of Rancière’s thought. His work develops Rancière’s own onto an activist plane, and May has written a timely book of ethics for those who struggle with and for equality.

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