

Rancière as Foucauldian? On the Distribution of the Sensible and New Forms of Subjectivities.

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In his own words, Rancière's *method* resembles Foucault's. But, even if only in passing, Rancière has also touched on some of the divergences existing between his own work and Foucault's. These aspects can be found in *La Méésentente*, along with two interviews—the first of which was conducted by Eric Alliez and the second with one of his translators, Gabriel Rockhill.¹ Among the major points sketched in these texts—and on which this paper will be based—is Rancière's brief but frank criticism of the notion of biopolitics. The aim of the present paper is not to produce a systematic commentary on the similarities and differences that can be said to exist between these two thinkers, but rather to discuss Rancière's criticism on the basis of an empirical case, namely contemporary claims made around autism as a form of subjectivity. The scope of the paper is thus not exegetical. Rather, what it shall seek to discuss is the operativity of Rancière's critical remarks in fields studying subjectivities such as autism. Yet, as the criticism leveled at Foucault by Rancière is a corollary of a discrepancy present between their respective methods, and, moreover, as such a difference will be addressed through the lens of a central category from the latter's theoretical repertoire—namely, the “distribution of the sensible”—it will be necessary to start with a brief account of its most fundamental points.

¹ Jacques Rancière, *La Méésentente: Politique et Philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995); “Biopolitique ou Politique? Entretien recueilli par Eric Alliez,” <<http://multitudes.samizdat.net/Biopolitique-ou-politique>>, last accessed May 12, 2009; “Interview for the English Edition (with Gabriel Rockhill),” in Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 47-66.

Rancière: The distribution of the sensible

On a few occasions, Rancière has explicated some similarities, as well as divergences, characterizing both his own and Foucault's methods. One such site for disagreement is what both thinkers mean by "politics." In *La Méésentente*, Rancière formulates a critique of biopolitics, extending Foucault's understanding of the "police," from which a critique of this concept can be formulated. Indeed, *La Méésentente* is an attempt to think the specificity of the political, which requires, Rancière says, a strict distinction from the "police." What he calls "the distribution of the sensible" is the principle governing our sensible order, creating shared understandings of what is visible and sayable. Also, as suggested by the original French *partage du sensible*, this principle of governing both divides but also creates common parts within the sensible, and by extension, modes of participation within this order:

I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.²

Within this ordering of the sensible, Rancière distinguishes two logics, and which can only be sketched here. First, basing his argument on Foucault's essay "Omnes et singulatim: Towards a critique of political reason," Rancière describes a logic that sees harmony in a given ordering of bodies, of their visibility or invisibility, and of the modes of saying and doing. This order is that of the "police." Rancière agrees with Foucault's analysis on the point that the "police" as a form of government extends beyond what he calls "the lower police" (the police of policemen and their sticks) and is thus part of "a social apparatus in which the medical, assistance and culture were entangled" and "bound to become a form of counselor, manager as well as an agent of the public order."³ Yet, at the same time, Rancière distinguishes the order of the "police" from a second logic, which consists in the "suspension" of this order deemed harmonious. It is from the suspension of this given ordering of bodies and the way they participate in it as appearing and being heard that "politics" emerges. For Rancière the latter results from the suspension of the harmony of a sensible partition:

² Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 12.

³ *La Méésentente*, 51. All translations from this text are mine.

“Politics” should be used exclusively to characterize a clear-defined activity, which is also antagonistic to the former—the police. This activity, is one that disrupts sensible configurations in which shares, parts or their absence are defined in regards to the presupposition that there is, by definition, no share: the share of the share-less ones.⁴

The conditions for the appearance of the political are organized around a specific terminology that denotes dissensus and what Rancière calls “the wrong,” in contrast to the consensual order of the police. Unfortunately, due to the limited scope of this paper, I will not be able to expand on this, but we have to retain that, in their most generic acceptance, the notions that Rancière develops denote the emergence of conflicting positions within the sensible, which question the very terms of those positions, producing thereby a conflict over the very definitions of those modes of saying and doing. In other words, politics doesn’t emerge on a plane of actuality ordered by the police, but from the *presupposition* that another logic exists, that of equality, and that certain singular events confirm its existence. Thus politics does not exist *per se* but only from the encounter of the police and equality. In order to think this encounter one has to abandon certain concepts, the first of which is power. Indeed, for Rancière:

The concept of power leads to the conclusion that if everything is police-related (*policier*), everything is political. Thus the following negative consequence: if everything is political, nothing is. If, as Foucault did, it is important to show that the order of the police extends beyond its institutions and specialised techniques, it is equally important to affirm that no thing is in itself political by the mere fact that power relations are exercised.⁵

Biopolitics is not politics

From this distinction between the police and politics, Rancière is also able to extend his critique to the concept of biopolitics and its contemporary vicissitudes. He formulates two problems. First, according to Rancière, an understanding of biopolitics and biopower, such as the one developed by Giorgio Agamben, has brought these notions into a domain alien to

⁴ Ibid, 52-53. Hereafter, with respect to the terms being defined, I shall drop the use of quotation marks for “police” and “politics,” except when quoted as such.

⁵ Ibid, 55-56.

Foucault, namely that of the “modes of living” (*modes du vivre*), which is based on Agamben’s wider attempt to bring Foucault closer to the concerns of both Arendt and Heidegger.⁶

It is principally on the second point of the critique, however, that I wish to focus on here. It concerns the modes of governing bodies, subjectivities as well as forms of interventions on health and disease—or to borrow the sociologist Nikolas Rose’s expression, “life itself.”⁷ Even though Rancière does not explicitly engage with the latter, such a take on Foucault’s work is well evoked by Rancière when he writes, for example, that this conception of biopolitics consists in granting a “positive content” to the notion, based as it is on an ontology of life, and remaining theoretically proximal to Deleuze’s vitalism. For Rancière, this confounds *political subjectivation* with *processes of individual and collective individuation*.⁸ Thus, within Rancière’s theoretical frame, the many fields that have come under the influence of Foucault’s work, and have been analyzed through the lens of biopolitics, are not therefore political but belong instead to the order of the police. As put by the French philosopher Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, it is as if “Foucault’s perspective could just fit within Rancière’s.”⁹ Hence, the idea that processes of individuation might be confounded with political subjectivation directly points to methods that are often a resort for fields studying contemporary subjectivities—methods that could then be “contained” within a Rancièrian frame. Trends in the history, sociology, and philosophy of psychological disciplines, could be domesticated too. Indeed, the latter examples are much indebted to Foucault’s work and biopolitics often acts as a transversal notion. In this regard, the case of the “autism rights movements” and so-called “neuro-minorities” can serve as a discussion ground upon which both biopolitics and its Rancièrian critique find embodiment.¹⁰ Here I would like to resort to the example of (bio-)political claims and identity

⁶ “Biopolitique ou Politique?,” 2.

⁷ Nikolas Rose, “The Politics of Life Itself,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 18(6) 2001: 1-30; idem, *The Politics of Life Itself: Biomedicine, Power and Subjectivity in the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁸ “Biopolitique ou Politique?,” 2.

⁹ Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, “Versions du politique: Jacques Rancière, Michel Foucault,” *La philosophie déplacée: Autour de Jacques Rancière* (Paris: Horlieu, 2006), 180. To my knowledge, this text is among the very few works that systematically engage with Rancière’s and Foucault’s conceptions of politics.

¹⁰ “Autism (rights) movement,” “neuro-diversity” or “neuro-minority” are often used indiscriminately by the members of these communities despite their different origins. I prefer to resort to “neuro-minority” for its emphasis on the minority dimension, which translates well both my empirical and theoretical interests.

claims made around autism as a form of contemporary subjectivity, in order to show how such phenomena call for a critical assessment of our critical and analytical tools and how Rancière's method can help formulate these problems.

The autism rights movement and neuro-minorities

Since its first description by Leo Kanner in 1943 until the early 1980's, autism remained a very rare condition and was considered one of the most severe forms of child psychosis. But from the 1980s onwards, there has been a proliferation of cases, with the diagnosis of autism now extending to include non-severe forms, such as the conditions known as "high-functioning autism" and Asperger syndrome, i.e. autism without mental retardation, and generically defined today as impairment in socialization. Moreover, from a clearly defined psychiatric entity, autism has been reorganized on the model of a continuum, namely the "autistic spectrum disorders" (ASD)¹¹. These changes have notably taken place, on account of the rise and mobilization of associations of parents of autistic individuals around research seeking a neurobiological or genetic basis of autism against psychodynamic ones—mostly psychoanalytical. Indeed, the latter have been attacked for the negative conceptions of mothers they have advanced, as is summed up, for example, by the expression "refrigerator-mothers." Underpinning such a label is the idea that mothers are principally responsible for the autism of their children.¹² The aim of this alliance between parents and scientists has been the search for a cure for autism, and for better care to those who suffer from the disorder.

Since the 1990s, and in parallel to this type of parental activism calling for a right to health, another type of claim has started to appear. These new claims originate from autistic individuals themselves situated on the high-functioning end of the autistic spectrum. Known as the "autism rights" or the "anti-cure" movement, these self-proclaimed neuro-minorities struggle for the recognition of autism neither as an illness nor as a handicap, but as a

¹¹ American Psychiatric Association *DSM IV. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of mental disorders*, (Washington DC: APA, 1994). At the time of writing, debates on the redefinition of several categories (including ASD) of the DSM are taking place, which will lead to the fifth revision of the manual. This is likely to produce changes in the identity/political ecology of autism.

¹² The most iconic being Bruno Bettelheim's *The Empty Fortress*.

*different way of being.*¹³ For these autistic individuals, no cure is needed for autism, as for other neuro-minorities (such as people with ADHD), as it is a cognitive and cerebral variation that simply exists within humanity. Similarly to racial and sexual diversity, neuro-diversity should be accepted, thus curing it would equal curing gay or colored people. The conditions of possibility for such claims can be understood within a larger frame, namely the emergence of bio-subjectivities and identities, which take the brain as their reference. Moreover, notions such as Paul Rabinow's "Biosociality," Nikolas Rose's "Biological Citizenship," "Neurochemical Self," and "Bio-subjectivity" have been formulated, mostly by anthropologists or sociologists. All have enabled a greater emphasis and more sophisticated theorization of the ever-growing entanglement between the spheres of life—as defined by the life sciences—and life as experience, on its social, political, and juridical levels.¹⁴ In the case of autism, while controversies still exist, genetics and neurobiology have offered semantic references to thematize common features that give rise to autistic subjectivities. While defined as impairment in socialization, skills associated with autism have made possible the advancing of claims for its acceptance as a different way of being. Indeed, if autistic individuals suffer from a lack of social intelligence necessary to socialize within society at large, they are thought to have a higher cognitive intelligence.¹⁵ Moreover, regarding biosocial factors, autistic traits are widely found within populations of mathematicians and scientists, as suggested by the colloquialism "geek syndrome," and also with respect to ongoing studies as to whether Einstein, Newton but also Warhol had, or had not, Asperger syndrome.¹⁶ Of course, not all individuals on the spectrum are savants, but the mere reference to brains capable of superior "sequential thinking" allows for claims to skip over any mention of dis-

¹³ See for instance Michelle Dawson, *We Are Not Your Community: In Response to Autism Society Canada's Open Letter*, <http://www.sentex.net/~nexus23/naa_asol.html>, last accessed September 1, 2009.

¹⁴ See the two texts by Nikolas Rose (as in note 7), and Bernard Andrieu, "La fin de la biopolitique chez Michel Foucault," *Le Portique*, 13-14 (2004), <<http://leportique.revues.org/index627.html>>, last accessed September 1 2009; Francisco Ortega "The Cerebral Subject and the Challenge of Neurodiversity," *BioSocieties*, Vol. 4 (2009): 425-445.

¹⁵ Nicholas Putnam, *Kids Called Nerds: Challenges and Hope For Children With Mild Pervasive Developmental Disorders*, year not indicated, <<http://www.aspergersyndrome.org/Articles/Kids-Called-Nerds--Challenge-and-Hope-For-Children.aspx>>, last accessed August 29, 2009.

¹⁶ See for instance Muhammad Arshad, & Michael Fitzgerald, "Did Michelangelo (1475–1564) have High-Functioning Autism?," *Journal of Medical Biography*, Vol. 12 (2004): 115-120; Steve Silberman, "The Geek Syndrome," *Wired* 9/12 (2001).

ability. This strict focus on talents and skills, alongside the statement that autism is simply an “alternative cognitive style,” has almost made it a desirable way of being. As a contemporary figure of subjectivity, autism has shifted into the terrain of singularity and uniqueness. Furthermore, claims are made for the acceptance of autism as a mere difference, in the name of a popular understanding of humanism. Indeed, as one can read on the website of TAAP’s (The Autism Acceptance Project, a self-advocacy project), accepting autism is about “tapping into human potential and dignity,” while “the joy of autism” could “redefine ability and quality of life.”¹⁷

The biopolitics or politics of neuro-minorities?

The case of autism and the claims concerning the acceptance of difference raise the following questions. First, claims surrounding identity are effectively locatable at the intersection of the biological, genetic, social and psychological and allow, through the reference to the brain, the contestation of “normality” as bio-socially normative. Indeed, for members of neuro-minorities, we are living in a neuro-typical world, neurotypicality being ironically defined by the autistic community as “a neurobiological disorder characterized by preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity.”¹⁸ Moreover, neuro-minorities’ references to other identity-based social movements, as well as its neo anti-psychiatry accents and humanistic claims, add to its emancipatory dimension. Yet, since its actual potential to suspend a harmonious order requires better scrutiny, one should remain critical towards the latter. Indeed, the emphasis on the uniqueness and singularity of the autistic condition, paired with its cerebral ontological substrate, actually makes neuro-minority people representatives of one of the anthropological figures of contemporary individualism enabled by neurosciences. Indeed, difference is here conceived in neurobiological terms while the conception of subjectivity is paired with the plasticity of the brain, a conception, which is for Rose, “bound with more general norms of enterprising and self-actualizing.”¹⁹ Autistic subjectivity thus echoes late capitalist’s imperative to become a flexible subject. But paradoxically, it also echoes formulations addressing the identity politics of minorities, as articulated by Foucault himself and for

¹⁷ <http://www.taaproject.com/>

¹⁸ <http://isnt.autistics.org/>

¹⁹ Nikolas Rose, “The Politics of Life Itself,” 18.

whom the affirmation of a minority required the “creation of new forms of lives and cultures.”²⁰ Both situations share the same coordinates and precisely echo what Rancière describes when he states that Foucault’s method is too bound by its “schema of historical necessity” and thus rendering certain things unthinkable. Indeed, as Rancière writes:

I would say that my approach is a bit similar to that of Foucault’s. It retains the principle from the Kantian transcendental that replaces the dogmatism of truth with the search for conditions of possibility. At the same time, these conditions are not conditions for thought in general, but rather conditions immanent in a particular system of thought, a particular system of expression. I differ from Foucault insofar as his archaeology seems to me to follow a schema of historical necessity according to which, beyond a certain chasm, something is no longer thinkable, can no longer be formulated.²¹

This thing—in the case of autism but also certainly for most processes of subjectivation—concerns, on the one hand, the political potential at work in strategies of self-definition. Such a potential should go beyond mere resistance. On the other hand it concerns the very theoretical apparatus and the intellectual tools we use to describe and analyze them. This double-bind both relates to empirical and theoretical/methodological aspects. One must effectively ask, first, if neuro-minorities suspend our sensible order and if the claims around autistic subjectivity can give rise to political subjectivation or if they simply reiterate positions within a consensual order. The second point, and an important corollary, relates to methodology. In an interview conducted by Rancière in 1977, Foucault, speaking of his famous metaphor of theory as a “toolbox” stated that it meant, notably, producing thoughts on *given situations*. He added that such research was “necessarily historical regarding some of its dimensions.”²² Today, following Foucault’s steps, Rabinow and Rose have attempted to safeguard the concept of biopower from Agamben on the one side and Hardt and Negri on the other. In their enterprise, they stated that biopower—including biopolitics in the same schema—should “designate a plane of actuality.”²³

²⁰ Michel Foucault, “Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,” in *Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1997), 166.

²¹ Jacques Rancière, “Interview for the English Edition,” 50.

²² Michel Foucault, “Pouvoir et stratégies: Entretien avec J. Rancière,” *Dits et Ecrits II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 427.

²³ Paul Rabinow & Nikolas Rose, “Biopower Today,” *BioSocieties* 1 (2006): 197.

Doubtless, biopower, biopolitics and other “bio-” conceptual tools forged in a Foucauldian mould are very accurate in describing and analyzing situations of “governmentality” in which action upon life and practices of the self are at stake. But to analyze and to formulate political subjectivation, as Rancière understands it, or any other form of minor subjectivity that produces conflicting positions, we must allow ourselves a shift of focus and question thereby the relevance of the historical and the empirical. Such a shift might be seen as the site where boundaries between the actual and the virtual are negotiated. As suggested by the example of autism, describing but also producing knowledge on a plane of actuality renders processes of individuation barely discernable from what seems to be political subjectivation, even more so when the former is biopolitical. If we agree that political subjectivation takes place in a heterological mode, then perhaps the latter should become the site of our very theoretical tools too.

Formulated in a different context and drawing on Deleuze, the following thought from Mariam Fraser nevertheless sheds light on our problem. Effectively, as the sociologist has shown, the empirical is not, in itself, a guarantor of *relevance*. Rather, relevancy is gained when a problem serves as a “lure” for a virtual problem. She thus calls for the possibility to submit research problems to virtual rather than social and historical structures.²⁴ The virtual is precisely, for Rancière, what allows us to think the unthinkable, which cannot take place within the order of the police. The virtual requires one to think and to do “as if” (*comme si*). Indeed, Rancière writes, “the political is the production of a theatrical and artificial sphere.”²⁵ Moreover, historicism can only relegate the possible to its temporal dimension, only foreseeing other modes of existing in near-future occurrences. The virtual, on the contrary, is superimposed on the given world. Yet, this does not proscribe Foucault, nor does it attempt to play on a straightforward opposition, Foucault versus Rancière. On the contrary, one can follow Foucault who—as Potte-Bonneville reminds us—saw his own work as “philosophical fragments put to work in historical fields of problems,” and—as much as his perspective fits within Rancière’s²⁶— those fragments could, virtually and through an act of superimposition, contain questions brought by Rancière’s philosophy too.

²⁴ Mariam Fraser, “Experiencing Sociology,” *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 12(1) (2009): 63-81.

²⁵ Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 4.

²⁶ Potte-Bonneville, “Versions du politique,” 179-80.