

Disagreeing before acting: The paradoxes of critique and politics from Adorno to Rancière*

Abstract

This article develops the hypothesis that the paradoxical character of critique (the fact that it questions its own grounds) is not an obstacle to, but a condition of, its theoretical and practical effectiveness. In order to clarify and expand this hypothesis with regard to its political implications I examine Rancière's distinction between "politics" and "police," his appraisal of "disagreement" (in contrast to Lyotard's "différend"), along with his thesis that the rationality of "disagreement" sheds light on the paradox of politics (which consists, to paraphrase Rancière, in the very absence of any ground for the power of ruling). This will help counter the well-known criticism raised by Habermas against Adorno according to which a non-normative understanding of critique entails a "performative contradiction." Against this assumption, I argue that to foster "disagreement" over what constitutes politics, in order to stimulate new ways of imagining what might be done – rather than to promote "consensus" on what should be done – is hardly an inappropriate goal for a politically focused philosophical critique.

KEYWORDS: *Politics; critique; disagreement; Adorno; Rancière; Lyotard; Habermas; theory; praxis.*

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I. Barely, or all too, critical?

Paradoxes, as such (i.e., not the willingness or the ability to solve them), are far from having a good philosophical reputation. They often sin against common sense, as Deleuze – albeit in approbatory tone – has suggested.¹ Indeed, not even the great popularity of controversy has been enough to prevent paradoxes from being seen as anything more than merely a stylistic or rhetorical device. Part of the aim of this article is to reconsider this negative appraisal of the role of paradox, particularly regarding issues associated with critique and politics. These considerations are already implicit in my title, in that it somehow suggests that disagreement, rather than consensus, lies at the basis of critical practice and political action.

Let me though start with a detour by quoting an apparently dislocated statement (from a quite controversial author), which, however, also concerns critique, as well as its political consequences:

The discontent in our culture has assumed a new quality: It appears as a universal, diffuse cynicism. The traditional critique of ideology stands at a loss before this cynicism. It does not know what button to push in this cynically keen consciousness to get enlightenment going.

Modern cynicism presents itself as that state of consciousness that follows after naive ideologies and their enlightenment. In it, the obvious exhaustion of ideology critique has its real ground . . . Thus, we come to our first definition: Cynicism is *enlightened false consciousness*.²

Long before the *Philosophenstreit*, which opposed Sloterdijk to Habermas on the threshold of the twentieth-first century, the latter's *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* (1983), from which I extracted the quotation above, ruthlessly questioned Critical Theory, blaming it for having enthroned a certain self-indulgent theoretical stance. Sloterdijk's criticism, however, was not a reformist-minded one. Polemically, he equated critical theory with *cynicism*, and defined the latter as *enlightened false consciousness*. To counter such a state of affairs, he called for a contemporary reappraisal of Diogenes' *kynicism*, which he construed as a subversive, resistant practice, indeed as the only true antidote to contemporary *cynicism*. Sloterdijk's point, at the same time, was not so much to oppose a certain practice to theory – even less in a Marxist manner, claiming that the latter should give rise to the former and assume collective shape – but to advocate a new theoretical, in most cases individual, practice. Only such a practice, according to Sloterdijk, would counter inertia and prompt true controversy without losing its affirmative core.

Today, more than a quarter of a century later, we have almost forgotten that Habermas initially praised this *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, as a compelling analysis of the post-1960s intellectual scene, notably on account of its rather sceptical appraisal of Adorno's philosophy. Not by chance, the author of *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns* (1981) was at that time also working on a new book, with the goal of furthering, mainly in one of its chapters, the criticism of the legacy of Frankfurt School's first generation, epitomized in Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*.³

This decisively provides us with a background for discussion. And yet, the views presented so far are not to be equated with my own view about Adorno's philosophy. Nor should they lead the reader to lose sight of the extent to which Adorno remained aware of and tried to counter the tendency to fetishise the vantage point of criticism.⁴ In his essay "Cultural Criticism and Society," for instance, he dialectically observes that "[t]he position of the cultural critic, by virtue of its difference from the prevailing disorder, enables him to go beyond it theoretically, although often enough he merely falls behind," so that "[e]ven the implacable rigor with which criticism speaks the truth of an untrue consciousness remains imprisoned within the orbit of that against which it struggles, fixated on its surface manifestations."⁵

The passages in which Adorno reflects on the danger of reifying critique and thus implicitly discusses conformism in order to exorcize its charm are innumerable. However – and this is why I began by recalling Sloterdijk's *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* – those critical aspects of Adorno's philosophizing which prove the resistance of his work to conformism go hand in hand with a radicalization of critique. Indeed, according to Adorno, only if critique questions its own underpinnings, can it be said to unfold at a philosophical level. So, in a sense, that which enables us to rescue Adorno from Sloterdijk's criticisms, at least to a certain extent, is surprisingly what exposes him to Habermas' most well known invectives against the radicalization of critique.

In fact, though they both feel unsatisfied with Adorno's "melancholy science" – which has come to be seen as a kind of euphemism for "resignation"⁶ – Habermas' criticism has not so much to do with an alleged "lack of combativeness," as to with a "normative deficit." According to Habermas, Adorno and Horkheimer had engaged in what he accusatorily claims to be a "performative contradiction," in that they totalize critique with the claim that not only society with all its contradictions, but reason itself, to the extent that it lies behind the historical unfolding of every form of society, should be submitted to criticism. Now, Habermas argues, if critique raises suspicions over reason (with the claim that

rationality and domination are historically intertwined), it also deprives itself of its own ground. It becomes paradoxical, and does nothing but move in circle:

Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* reads like a continuing explanation of why we have to circle about within this performative contradiction and indeed even remain there . . . Twenty-five years after the conclusion of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno remained faithful to its philosophical impulse and never deviated from the *paradoxical structure* of thinking as totalizing critique (emphasis added).⁷

Much has been said and written on Habermas' critical appraisal of Adorno's legacy, which, to a certain extent, also provided an ambivalent background to the well-known polemic involving Habermas and Foucault.⁸ The latter went as far as to claim that his work somehow complements Frankfurt School's critical approach to *Aufklärung*,⁹ but this did not prevent Habermas – for reasons that would become clearer in *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (1985) – from accusing Foucault, along with the authors of *Dialektik of Aufklärung*, of indulging in incongruous argumentation as regards the normative grounds of critique. Judith Butler later disclaimed this accusation, arguing that a notion of critique is precisely at work in Foucault's work, “which is not only more complex than the usual criticism assumes but which has . . . strong normative commitments that appear in forms that would be difficult, if not impossible, to read within the current grammars of normativity.”¹⁰

As for Adorno, it has also been argued that negative dialectics is not as completely devoid of normative aspects as his critics – and some defenders – suggest. I am not totally at odds with those who make this claim; nor am I, by the way, with those who argue that a *quantum minimum* of normativity is unavoidably inherent in any critical judgement (given its intrinsic evaluative nature). Nevertheless, I must say that this somehow defensive perspective – as far as the assessment of Adorno's philosophical legacy is concerned – is not the one I feel more in tune with.¹¹

Moreover, it is far from granted that such a concern with the normative foundations of critique does not end up obliterating what could be deemed (for not completely unreasonable reasons) the core of a philosophically radical critique: the possibility of questioning its own conditions of possibility. So here is the first question I hold worth raising in this context: what if the paradoxical dimension of critique were not a flaw (that is, a residue of a “performative contradiction” keeping the exercise of critique constantly stuck in unproductive aporias), but rather the very principle of its strength, and even an antidote against cynicism?¹²

Rather than hastily formulating an affirmative answer to this question, I would like to bring up for discussion some aspects of Rancière's conception of politics that might help us tackle Habermas' criticism without rejecting his claim that Adorno's philosophising is to a certain, crucial extent paradoxical. The fact that Rancière stresses that a paradox lies at the core of politics explains, at least tentatively, why his work might provide a touchstone to reassess the debate on the politics of critique. This move should also allow me to clarify that to acknowledge the paradoxical character of critique does not amount either to advocating a merely rhetorical strategy of critique or to indulging in any kind of discursive irrationality, but indeed to suggesting, on the one hand, that the rationality of critique is intrinsically paradoxical (inasmuch as the possibility of questioning critique's own standards belongs to the seminal characterization of *critical*, as opposed to *traditional*, theory¹³) and, on the other hand, that trying to get rid of that paradoxical seed may have pernicious consequences as to the practical unfolding of critique, wherever and whenever it aims to become political.

As any reader interested in radical political thought is likely to know, the concept of “disagreement” [*mésentente*] is crucial for grasping how Rancière – who is also, to a certain extent, a

critic of critique¹⁴ – understands not only politics as such, but also the way in which it becomes an object of inquiry for philosophy. In his book *La Méésentente* (1995) he states that “[p]hilosophy does not become ‘political’ because politics is so crucial it simply must intervene. It becomes political because regulating the rationality situation of politics is a condition for defining the proper of philosophy.”¹⁵ Politics occurs, however, as a scandal; a scandal because politics “is that activity which has the rationality of disagreement as its very own rationality.”¹⁶ This is why philosophy – as more than speculation, as thinking that cannot unfold unless a *point of disagreement* is reached – encounters politics as an unavoidable object of inquiry. In what follows I will try, on the one hand, to elucidate how Rancière’s philosophical account of politics, as far as it draws a transcendental distinction between “politics” and “police” (II), and has in its core the rationality of disagreement, as opposed to the logic of “différend” (III), may shed light on how a paradoxical concept of critique is anything but irrational, and, on the other hand, to discuss such a claim and its implications in the light of the question of how theory relates to or becomes practice – the question, in other words, of the politics of critique (IV and V).

II. Politics versus police in a transcendental mood

To begin with, let me note that Rancière’s theorization of “disagreement” and “dissensus” arises from a certain diagnosis of the relation between the use of the concept of consensus and the contradictory self-legitimation of contemporary neo-liberal democracies:

“Consensus” was presented [particularly after the collapse of Soviet Union] as the pacification of conflicts that arose from ideologies of social struggle, and yet it brought about anything but peace. Not only have a number of states liberated from the Soviet system fallen prey to ethnic and religious conflicts – occasionally in radical forms – but a number of consensual-democratic states have also witnessed the re-emergence and success of racist and xenophobic movements.¹⁷

Consensus, in this sense, consists not so much in a general agreement regarding a given issue, but rather, as Rancière puts it in an interview conducted by Bensaid, in “the monopoly regarding the description of situations and the enumeration of actors.”¹⁸ Even when two contrasting positions are at play, and their seemingly radical differences are at the centre of debate, consensus prevails as long as the terms of discussion and the sense of how legitimate (or illegitimate) is one’s participation in it remain unquestioned. Consensus thus stands for a presupposition according to which each part of the population and its specific problems are incorporated within a social order, an order Rancière calls “police.” Accordingly, as strictly opposed to the latter, “[p]olitics is not primarily the exercise of power or the deciding of common affairs.”¹⁹ Rather, it denotes an interruption, a precarious disruption of the “police order,” which is construed as a well-ordered “distribution of the sensible” [*partage du sensible*] – that is to say, a system of coordinates that defines modes of being, doing, communicating and thinking, and so establishes borders between visible and invisible, audible and inaudible, thinkable and unthinkable. Consequently, as the rare – though not in the “evenemential” sense of Badiou – opposite of police, politics consists in reconfiguring those modes of being, in transgressing those empirical borders, by means not only of actions, but also of words, discourses, and sensible forms. Hence the possibility of conceiving of a politics of art, a politics of literature, a politics of philosophy and, to be sure, of critique.

In short, the singularity of politics according to Rancière is due not only to its rarity, but more specifically to the fact that a political event, while consisting in the reconfiguration of a field of experience, also corresponds to the displacement of its underlying conditions of possibility. At the final analysis, the distinction between police and politics appears to be “transcendentally” meaningful. So viewed, the “radicality” of politics for Rancière – in that it consists in a reconfiguration of what is visible, sayable or thinkable, and not so much of what one incidentally sees, says or thinks in a given

situation – seems surprisingly akin to the “radicality” of critique, when it conceives of reason (historically construed as a framework of possible experience and thought) as susceptible of being criticized. Foucault – in whose steps Rancière admittedly followed – summarized such a task in a quite illuminating way, when he stated, in an interview conducted by Gérard Raulet, that

[w]hat reason perceives as *its* necessity, or rather, what different forms of rationality offer as their necessary being, can perfectly well be shown to have a history; and the network of contingencies from which it emerges can be traced. Which is not to say, however, that these forms of rationality were irrational. It means that they reside on a base of human practice and human history; and that since these things have been made, they can be unmade, as long as we know how it was that they were made.²⁰

Quite similar words could be employed to characterize the task of reconfiguring – at once unmaking and remaking – the “distribution of the sensible.” Hence, one could even see Rancière as a contemporary practitioner of that “ontology of the present,”²¹ in which Foucault saw the hallmark of the critical tradition he himself hoped to work in. Be that as it may, the turn to Rancière is justified, I believe, by the specificity of his work. So the choice to rely on his approach to politics – rather than, for instance, on Foucault’s approach to critique – is due not only to the fact that the aim of this article is to address the politics of critique against the background of *our* present, but also to a more crucial reason: Rancière’s approach, precisely because it does not deal with the notion of critique directly, provides a unique conceptual tool to question it with an eye on its political implications without constantly having to deal with the alleged contradictions a non-normative perspective on critique supposedly entails. Conversely, at the same time, Rancière’s views also enable us to spot the concealed conformism of the “normative grammar” of critique. Such a conformism, as I hope to clear up by the end of this article, would have much less to do with the alleged intellectualism of critics than with a hierarchical and unidirectional view of the relation between theory and practice (which Adorno, who has also been accused of assuming an intellectualist stance, constantly rejected as well).

III. The path of disagreement

However revealing it might be to bring together different ways of approaching politics and critique transcendentally, further analysis is required, notably about the concept of “disagreement” [*mésentente*] and its rationality, before we can adequately understand how Rancière’s approach to politics proves helpful to discuss the paradox of critique. In a laconic but allusive definition, Rancière states that

[d]isagreement is not the conflict between one who says white and another who says black. It is the conflict between one who says white and another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness.²²

This apparently anodyne definition has nonetheless a clear advantage: it prevents an understanding of a specific situation of conflict, and incomprehension,²³ as a simple discord between two or more rational speakers, or as a sheer mismatch of mutually unintelligible stances, let alone as an illusory conflict resulting from mere “misconstruction” [*méconnaissance*] or “misunderstanding” [*malentendu*]. As a matter of fact, the conflict could neither be dissolved nor rendered transparent by providing more information or clarifying language. The notion of “disagreement” is thus clearly designed to grasp what Rancière holds to be the constitutive litigation of politics. It is precisely this litigation that “consensus” is unable to render (misrepresenting it as a transparent opposition between two perspectives on the same subject), and “differend,” to take Lyotard’s concept into account too, somewhat fetishizes (ascribing the

misrepresentation of the “wrong” at stake in certain situations of radical conflict and incomprehension to a constitutive difference between completely heterogeneous genres of discourse).

Nevertheless, since both Lyotard and Rancière reject an idealistic appraisal of conflict, the differences between the concepts of “différend” and “mésentente,” important as they are, should not make us forget some common traits. In fact, it would be insufficient to suggest – as Rancière tends to do in the preface to *La Mésentente* – that, unlike differend, “[d]isagreement clearly is not to do with words alone,” that it “bears on the very situation in which speaking parties find themselves” and “is less concerned with arguing [*l’argumentation*] than with what can be argued [*l’argumentable*], the presence or absence of a common object between X and Y.”²⁴

The specificity of Rancière’s concept of “disagreement” notwithstanding, the fact is that Lyotard, as he works through his concept of “differend” in relation to situations to whose interpretation it consistently contributes, does not at all equate differend with a matter of words alone (even if understood on the basis of their belonging to certain genres of discourse or phrase regimens). Nor does he ignore the situation in which speaking parties find themselves, or the conditions under which arguing takes place. After defining it as “a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgement applicable to both arguments,”²⁵ so that “[a] wrong results from the fact that the rules of the genre of discourse by which one judges are not those of the judged genre or genres of discourse,”²⁶ Lyotard later clarifies what is essentially at stake for him by claiming that

[t]o give the differend its due is to institute new addressees, new addressors, new significations, and new referents in order for the wrong to find an expression and for the plaintiff to cease being a victim. This requires new rules for the formation and linking of phrases. No one doubts that language is capable of admitting these new phrase families or new genres of discourse. Every wrong ought to be able to be put into phrases. A new competence (or “prudence”) must be found.²⁷

A sense of the tension between what may be expressed and what remains unuttered transpires from the analysis developed in *Le Différend* – in relation, to be certain, to those involved in the situation in which a wrong is at stake, and to their arguable capacity, if not to reverse that situation, at least to bear witness of it. None of these issues is foreign to Rancière’s thought, especially as regards politics. On the contrary, his concern with the borders between mere moaning and speech, between what is and what is not audible, visible, sayable, and consequently with what and who is to be taken or not into account is at the very core of his understanding of politics as opposed to police. It is so, however, provided that the question of the extent to which a wrong is or is not visible and/or sayable is to be addressed against the background of the tension between opposed “distributions of the sensible,” rather than of the mismatch of heterogeneous “genres of discourse”.

Of course, to say the obvious, the point here is not at all to discuss the virtues of concepts like “differend” and “disagreement” in abstract terms, but to discern their *realistic* and *imaginative* “valences” – to take two concepts reckoned by Raymond Geuss particularly useful for discussing politics.²⁸ In other words, the question is how and to what extent those concepts enable us not only to account for certain situations of political conflict (in which “language” and “power” seem to merge into each other), but also to influence those taking part in such situations by means of changing the way in which one understands the situation and imagines its very changeability (or “treatability”). This second aspect seems to be of particular importance for Rancière.²⁹

Therefore, though a true political conflict (all the more when it can be defined as a speech or language situation) cannot be adequately explained, let alone settled, by supplying more information or clarifying the terms of discussion (a point at which Lyotard and Rancière are certainly not at odds³⁰) this does not mean that the only way of accounting for the intertwining of “power” and “language” is to presuppose the linguistic “entrenchment” of power. In this vein, however, *Le Différend* reads as if the political antagonism had merged into the pure linguistic heteronomy of genres of discourses. A sense of inevitability arises from the book. Accordingly, and even if Lyotard maintains that “another tribunal and other criteria of judgement (should there be any) are possible and seem to be preferable,”³¹ he ends up by claiming that “we are more depressed by the abyss that separates heterogeneous genres of discourse than excited by the indication of a possible passage from one to the other.”³²

The implicit tendency to reify the relation between power and language, bound up with the overrating of the task of bearing witness to an often unspeakable wrong³³ form the core of Rancière’s scepticism toward Lyotard’s work, which he also faults for indulging in an “ethical turn” and for plunging the Adornian notion of non-reconciliation into the religious universe of an irretrievable dept.³⁴ In any case, the important question for us here would be first and foremost whether expressing conflicts, rendering them visible and sayable (in Lyotard’s words: “finding an idiom for them”³⁵) does not fall short of the task of *treating* them (assuming that *wrongs*, not only their memory, persist today). Rancière explicitly tries to step further in this direction – while thinking of the relation between speaking and acting as a crucial, though unsettled, question – when he claims that “[p]olitics is the practice whereby the logic of the egalitarian trait takes the form of the treatment [*traitement*] of a wrong.”³⁶ In other words (to quote a particularly illuminating passage regarding the contrast between Lyotard’s and Rancière’s views of conflict):

[The wrong] is not the same as inexpiable war or irredeemable dept. Political wrong cannot be settled – through the objectivity of the lawsuit as a compromise between the parties. But it can be treated – through the mechanisms of subjectivation that give it substance as an alterable relationship between the parties, indeed as a shift in the playing field.³⁷

This is why, for Rancière, the plebeian secession on the Aventine Hill (retold by Ballanche in the nineteenth century) stands for a paradigmatic political scene.³⁸ A singular (and extreme) disagreement as to what speaking means (i.e., “a quarrel over the issue of speech itself”³⁹) lies behind it: after the initial retreat of the plebeians over the Aventine Hill, and a first unfruitful meeting between both parties, the patricians sent their delegate (the consul Menenius Agrippa) again and tasked him to convey their ultimate position, which is clear: the patricians demand the plebeians’ immediate return to their former places because, as metaphorically put in the apologia Menenius Agrippa tells the plebeians, they are nothing but the members of a body, whose vital principle is, so to speak, patrician; the supposed reasons alleged by the plebeians not to obey to this demand are simply not to be taken into account, because those who have *no* name, thus being deprived of logos (like the plebeians), *cannot* at all speak.

The usefulness of the notion of “disagreement,” as a conceptual tool to draw as much political consequences as possible from the analysis of such a dissent, turns out to be twofold. It permits us to foreground (1) *how the wrong comes to light*, as the discussion between the plebeians and the delegate of the patricians takes place (for if the plebeians understand his apologia, it immediately follows that the plebeians are equal to the patricians, as far as their *common* speaking ability is concerned, and, as a consequence, that the fact of being treated as unequal, on the grounds of a supposed difference concerning their use of language, is thoroughly contingent and arbitrary); (2) *how the wrong may be treated*, as the plebeians carry out a series of speech acts (such as pronouncing imprecations and apotheoses, consulting oracles, giving themselves representatives, etc.), thus *practically* rebutting the patricians’ refusal to acknowledge their equality as speaking beings.

The disagreement, as a speech situation, thus unfolds into a political scene. Hence the twofold challenge at stake in conceptualizing politics by using the concept of “*mésentente*”: to account for the actual possibility of rendering not only visible and sayable (by means of discourses), but also treatable (by means of a necessarily undetermined coordination of discourses and practices) the wrong inflicted to the part of *those who have no part* (the *demos* in Ancient Greece). One might characterize this part more generally (no matter its historical instances: plebeians, proletarians, women, *sans-papiers*, etc.) as the part of those whose voice is not taken into account, because their enunciations, despite the shared ability to make use of language, are heard as noise rather than as speech, or, which amounts to the same, as irrelevant speech.

As a result, Rancière’s analysis of politics culminates in the disclosure of the pure contingency of any social order, or even – more radically put – in “the sudden revelation of the ultimate anarchy on which hierarchy rests.”⁴⁰ In other words: the contingency of equality lies behind any inegalitarian order because, simply put, the condition for any inegalitarian order to be maintained is the egalitarian use of language that guarantees that orders are understood and executed. This is why, according to Rancière, “the foundation of politics . . . is the lack of foundation, the sheer contingency of any social order.”⁴¹ A paradox thus pervades both politics and democracy. In Rancière’s words:

[T]he standard way of stating the democratic paradox, according to which democracy is a form of life that democratic government has to repress, suggests a more radical paradox. This paradox, I submit, is that of politics itself. The core of the problem, as I see it, is that democracy is neither a form of government nor a form of social life. Democracy is the institution of politics as such, of politics as a paradox. Why a paradox? Because the institution of politics seems to provide an answer to the key question as to what it is that grounds the power of rule in a community. And democracy provides an answer, but it is an astonishing one: namely, that the very ground for the power of ruling is that there is no ground at all.⁴²

Politics occurs because of, not despite, this very paradox. The rationality of disagreement – associated with the disclosure, and treatment, of the wrong pervading any social order – is thus inextricably bound up with the paradox of politics, in that it draws on the disclosure of equality at the very core of any unequal order. And so “[t]he incommensurable on which politics is based is not identifiable with any ‘irrationality’.”⁴³ Only the misleadingly simplistic alternative of “either [political rationality understood] as exchange between partners putting their interests or standards up for discussion, or else the violence of the irrational”⁴⁴ could make us think so. Politics proper is equidistant to both extremes. With this in mind, we may now turn back to the question as to how Rancière’s understanding of politics turns out to be helpful to make sense of the paradoxical nature of critique.

IV. From the paradox of politics to the politics of critique

The clue to answering that question lies in the fact that Rancière’s approach to politics culminates in the assertion according to which politics proper, precisely as it has equality as its “improper” principle, derives its *paradoxical* legitimacy from the very lack of legitimacy to establish not only *order* (i.e., social order, police order), but also – and this is of the utmost importance here – an *ordered* way of contesting and/or critiquing order. The second aspect should not be overlooked: neither Rancière’s sharp opposition to Althusser’s Marxism,⁴⁵ nor his criticism of republican pedagogy⁴⁶ would be understandable unless one takes seriously into account his scepticism towards an all too ordered (paternalistic, hierarchical, authoritarian) way of trying to bring about emancipation. In short, the *mot d’ordre* is not the basic unit in the “Rancièrian grammar” of politics.

As a consequence, and assuming that critique is inseparable from politics, if we now consider again the presumably old-fashioned question of how theory turns into practice (or discourses into actions), it may now seem less opportune to complain, against Adorno (among others, of course), that the normative grounds of critique seem feeble, are missing, or that such a normative deficit compromises critique both theoretically and practically. There are too many reasons to reject the assumption that critique should be understood and practiced as a *normative enterprise*, the least of which is not to prevent its political unfolding from yielding to the very logic it attempts to reverse.

The question, to be clear, is not only a theoretical one. So viewed, from the standpoint of its practical implications, the problem of normativity could even be addressed the other way round. In fact, doubts might be raised today not so much on whether a clarification or deepening of the normative grounds of critique is really a means to strengthen political practice, but rather on whether it may ultimately constitute a way of *policing* the political unfolding of critique. The point is not to dispute the fact that any critical judgement is at least partially “normative” (in the specific sense of being evaluative rather than descriptive), but to acknowledge that, as far as one discusses critique politically and takes the link to praxis into account, a normative conception of critique seems hardly apt to foster anything but a linear, all too linear articulation between theory and practice, according to which the former is supposed to put forward the standards on which the latter, if legitimate, should rely.

Not the least of the aims of stressing the paradoxical character of critique is to undermine the implicit hierarchy between thinking and acting, which a strictly normative concept of critique seems unable to dismiss. Indeed such a concept might be criticized not only for lack of realism (as Raymond Geuss claims), but also for arguably impoverishing our understanding of both critical thinking and political action, specifically with regard to the question of how the former may dispose, rather than prescribe or guide, the latter.

In this context, it should be noted that the unrealism of certain philosophical accounts of politics (in *Philosophy and Real Politics*, Geuss focuses on Rawls’ work, but many others authors could be criticized in the same vein) is not exclusively due to an abstract, ahistorical, away of distilling the normative foundations of critique. Unrealistic – and so viewed, the difference between constructive and reconstructive ways of establishing a normative framework for critique (no matter how informed by genealogical concerns) turns out to be irrelevant⁴⁷ – is the very assumption according to which practice would smoothly ensue from theory according to its reliable standards, as if politics were not “more like the exercise of a craft or art, than like traditional conceptions of what happens when a theory is applied.”⁴⁸ Such an assumption, by the way, might fail not only for being unrealistic, but also for falling short of another task ascribed by Geuss to a realistic approach to politics: the not outrageous task, as he ironically refers to it, of analyzing and criticizing ideologies. In fact, the question is not so much about how political theory *idealistically* understands its relation to practice, but rather about how it *concretely* prevents or encourages certain practices, and thus determines the way in which they come to be understood and evaluated.

A poor – too ordered, too predictable – understanding of how critical thinking relates to political action might consequently have serious ideological consequences. Or, to put it another way, it might constitute an operator for *reducing politics into police* – which is, ironically enough, the very definition Rancière gives of consensus.⁴⁹ Such a reduction might occur both retrospectively and prospectively. In fact, while establishing a clear distinction between legitimate and illegitimate political practices (on the basis of how normatively justified one is able to prove them to be), any theorist particularly engaged in establishing the normative foundations of critique is not only putting forward an evaluative framework for understanding past, or on-going, events (think, for instance, of the recent

proliferation of protesting activity, from the Occupy movement and Arab Spring of 2011 to the latest protests in Brazil). He or she is also shaping in a restrictive way our imagination as to *what might be done* in the future. At least two pernicious consequences may arise from this state of affairs. On the one hand, very concretely, one tends as it were to invert the burden of proof, as if protesters should justify their actions before the very power against whose oppression they fight. On the other hand, at a more general level, one simply fails to do justice to the unpredictability of politics.

Consequently, the charge according to which critical thinking goes astray into resigned intellectualism (which is another way of saying that a depoliticization of theory might take the lead) unless it clearly points towards practical solutions is flawed. It is rather a shortcut to reify the very relationship it endeavours to stimulate. Adorno, therefore, might have been right when he claimed that “the recovery of theory’s independence lies in the interest of practice itself,”⁵⁰ if only because “thinking, as a mere instrument of actions, atrophies like all instrumental reason.”⁵¹ To be sure, however, the point – even for Adorno – is not to get practice and action apart from each other, for “[o]pen thinking points beyond itself . . . [and] is more akin to transformative praxis than comportment that is compliant for the sake of praxis.”⁵² Although such a kinship remains rather undefined in Adorno’s work (as a kind of reminder of utopia in need of being actualized), one thing is certain: politicizing thinking cannot amount to elaborating a doctrine that only needs to be put into practice. The opposite is true, and the major task of a politicized critique, with regard to the problem of theory and praxis, might be seen to lie first and foremost in countering the tendency to policy politics and critique, that is to say, to make both theory and praxis obey a pre-given schematization of the way in which they should be bound together.

V. In search of what *might be done*

It is often said that one should think before acting (and those who say it, in any case, are not necessarily wrong). But, in a political context, what does thinking mean in the first place? Could it mean the same regarding individual and collective actions? Certainly not. In the latter case, a certain distribution of roles concerning who is supposed to think and who is supposed to act comes generally to the fore. Obviously, such a distribution is not politically neutral. The question here, however, is not so much how whoever acts politically (so, in that case, from the standpoint of “praxis”) relates to or makes use of theoretical stances (even of “ideals”) in order to organise action, but how whoever reflects on the relationship between thinking and acting (so, in that case, from the standpoint of “theory”), understands that relationship in the light of the question of how useful, stimulating, thought-provoking such an understanding might be, considering the consequences it might have for the actualization of that relationship.

While asking whether one should *disagree before acting*, and, to be clear, suggesting that one can, or even should, answer that question in the positive, I am not implying – turning the common criticism on resignation on its head – that those engaged in practice should get rid of thinking and rush into unreflecting political activity. Nonetheless, I am certainly intimating that *critical thinking*, for the sake of its political consequences (paradoxical as it may sound), is definitely not to be equated with the attempt to find an agreement on *what should be done*, or, more generally put, to bring together the theoretical conditions that allow for normatively justified action. Disagreeing, or finding points of disagreement, in order to reconfigure the very way of imagining *what might be done*, is likely to be a more apt goal for a philosophical critique – for reasons that hopefully seem now less intangible, not the least of which is to avoid, now as before, even the most unsuspected forms of cynicism and resignation.

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Endnotes

¹ See Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 2005 [1969]), 92-100.

² Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason [Kritik der zynischen Vernunft]*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001 [1983]), 3-5.

³ See Jürgen Habermas, “Die Verschlingung von Mythos und Aufklärung: Horkheimer und Adorno,” in *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne. Zwölf Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988 [1985]), 130-157.

⁴ For criticisms of Habermas’ appraisal of Adorno’s (and Horkheimer’s) philosophy, see Claudia Rademacher, *Versöhnung oder Verständigung? Kritik der Habermasschen Adorno-Revision* (Lüneburg: Dietrich zu Klampen, 1993), and Robert Hullot-Kentor, “Back to Adorno” [1989], in *Things Beyond Resemblance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 23-44.

⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, “Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft” [1947], in *Prismen, Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 11.1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 11-12; English-language edition, *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen and Samuel M. Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 19-20.

⁶ For a criticism of this rather simplistic view of Adorno’s “traurige Wissenschaft,” focused on its ultimate irreducibility to resignation (construed as infinitely deferred practice), see Wesley Phillips, “Melancholy Science? German Idealism and Critical Theory Reconsidered,” *Telos* 157 (Winter 2011): 129-47.

⁷ Habermas, “Die Verschlingung von Mythos und Aufklärung: Horkheimer und Adorno,” 145; English-language edition, “The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno,” in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 119-120.

⁸ For a timely reappraisal of the encounter between Habermas and Foucault, see Samantha Ashenden and David Owen, eds., *Foucault contra Habermas: Recasting the Dialogue between Genealogy and Critical Theory* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage, 1999).

⁹ See, for instance, Michel Foucault. “Qu’est-ce que la critique? Critique et Aufklärung,” *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* (May 1978): 35-63.

¹⁰ Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” in *The Political: Readings in Continental Philosophy*, ed. David Ingram (London: Basil Blackwell, 2002). <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/butler/en>. Accessed June 25, 2013.

¹¹ For recent discussion on this issue, see Fabian Freyenhagen, “No easy way out: Adorno’s Negativism and the Problem of Normativity,” in *Nostalgia for a Redeemed Future*, ed. Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi (John Cabot University Press, 2008), 47-59, and James Gordon Finlaysson, “Morality and Critical Theory: On the Normative Problem of Frankfurt School Social Criticism,” *Telos* 146 (Spring 2009): 7-41. Given that Fabian Freyenhagen identifies, as one of the major aims of his article, the refutation of a “non-normative’ strategy” to defend Adorno’s critical philosophy (a strategy I would tend to approve), a brief discussion of his approach will not seem out of place here. Freyenhagen argues that “a non-normative defence of Adorno’s theory would have to show . . . (1) that Adorno’s theory is merely descriptive or explanatory, not also critical, and (2) that it contains no ethical claims” (50-51). Let us

admit, however, that to stress that Adorno's philosophy is not merely descriptive or explanatory, and to state that it contains a strong ethical dimension (which is not to say, however, that ethics underpins Adorno's understanding of social criticism) are hardly astonishing claims. By the same token, the point is that it remains unclear why someone holding a "non-normative" view of Adorno's philosophy would have to reject the previous two assumptions. Freyenhagen takes for granted such an implication (between defending a non-normative view of Adorno's theory and claiming that it is merely descriptive, explanatory, or absolutely devoid of ethical concerns), and he does so, it seems, because he seeks to reduce ad absurdum a "non-normative" approach (to deny the evaluative dimension of critique would be nonsense), but, along the way, he has to presuppose that the "normative" and the "evaluative" aspects of critique are one and the same thing, and somewhat suggests that "critique" is to be equated with "normativity." Such a characterization of critique as almost definable by the problem of normativity is made by James Gordon Finlayson, who claims that "[c]ritical theory's diagnosis of the social world is inherently a normative enterprise, since it involves judgements that the world *ought not* to be as it is, or about what is *wrong* with it" (12). At first sight, this claim seems unproblematic (if one takes "normative" as an approximate synonym for "evaluative"), but it fails to do justice to the complexity of the problem of normativity. In fact, the notion of normativity entails not only the assumption *that* society should be criticized, and an idea of *how* such a critical judgement should theoretically unfold (by recourse to norms), but also a specific, though often implicit, view of *how* that very theoretical judgement is to give rise to political actions – that is, of *how* theory is to become praxis. What I am implying here is that the question of normativity cannot be envisioned as theoretical problem alone; the particular way in which it points toward social transformation should also be taken into account and discussed: the problem, in short, is that specific "how." So the crucial point is not first and foremost that the problem of normativity is inseparable from the problem of the relation between theory and praxis (certainly, neither Freyenhagen, nor Finlayson would deny that such a link exists), but that a conception of critique focused on the problem of normativity (and presenting its resolution as a *conditio sine qua non* of the very exercise of social criticism), simplifies such a relation misleadingly, in that it favours a normative understanding of *how* theory becomes practice – as if the core of the "politics of critique" were simply the question of what *ought to be done* in order for what *ought not to be* as it is to cease being as it is and evolve into a more positive situation. It would not be the least among the tasks of a non-normative approach to critique, as I will try to clarify later in this article, to counter such an authoritarian simplification of the theory-practice link.

¹² *Mutatis mutandis*, did not Kant himself claim that reason should present itself in the court of critique [of pure reason] simultaneously as judge and accused? See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781/1787), A xi-xii.

¹³ See Max Horkheimer, "Traditionelle und kritische Theorie" [1937], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 4 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 162-225.

¹⁴ See Jacques Rancière, "Les mésaventures de la pensée critique," in *Le spectateur émancipé* (Paris: La fabrique, 2008), 30-55.

¹⁵ Rancière, *La Méésentente. Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995), 15; English-language edition, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), xii (translation altered).

¹⁶ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 15; *Disagreement*, xii.

¹⁷ Rancière, "Introducing Disagreement," trans. Steven Corcoran, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 9(3) (December 2004): 4.

¹⁸ Rancière, *Moments politiques* (Paris: La fabrique, 2009), 181.

¹⁹ Rancière, "Introducing Disagreement," 6. On the distinction between politics and police, see primarily *La Méésentente*, 41-67 ("Le tort: politique et police"); *Disagreement*, 21-42 ("Wrong: Politics and Police"). See also "Dix thèses sur la politique" [1996], in *Aux bords du politique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998),

221-254; English-language edition, “Ten Theses on Politics,” trans. Steven Corcoran, in *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 27-44.

²⁰ Foucault, “Structuralism and post-structuralism,” interview by Gérard Raulet, trans. Jeremy Harding, *Telos* 55 (Spring 1983): 206.

²¹ Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières?” [1983], in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988*, Paris, Gallimard, 2001, 1506.

²² Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 12; *Disagreement*, x.

²³ A linguistic note might be helpful here. Translated into English as simple “disagreement,” the notion of “méésentente” also implies, besides the idea of quarrel, the fact of not hearing and/or understanding what someone else is saying, sometimes in the sense of “talking past one another.” The specificity of the term thus lies in its both communicative and agonistic connotation.

²⁴ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 14; *Disagreement*, xi-xii.

²⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend. Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988 [1983]), xi.

²⁶ Lyotard, *The Differend*, xi.

²⁷ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 13.

²⁸ Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008); *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010).

²⁹ On the implicit importance of imagination in Rancière’s work, see Joseph J. Tanke, *Jacques Rancière: An Introduction. Philosophy, Politics, Aesthetics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2011), 148-160.

³⁰ See Lyotard, *The Differend*, xiii: “[At stake is] to refute the prejudice anchored in the reader by centuries of humanism and of ‘human sciences’ that there is ‘man,’ that there is ‘language,’ that the former makes use of the latter for his own ends, and that if he does not succeed in attaining these ends, it is for want of good control over language ‘by means’ of a ‘better’ language.”

³¹ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 140.

³² Lyotard, *The Differend*, 179.

³³ Think of *Shoah*, and the way in which Lyotard took it as a paradigmatic case of unrepresentability, to which a reinterpreted concept of sublime alone, as the “presentation that there is something unrepresentable,” might do justice. See Lyotard, *L’Inhumain. Causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1993 [1988]), 131-140.

³⁴ See Rancière, *Malaise dans l’esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004), 119-173. For further debate on the relation between the concepts of “méésentente” and “différend,” see Jean-Louis Déotte, “The Differences Between Rancière’s *Méésentente* (Political Disagreement) and Lyotard’s *Différend*,” trans. Roxanne Lapidus, *SubStance* 103 (33/1) (2004): 77-90.

³⁵ Lyotard, *The Differend*, 13.

³⁶ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 59; *Disagreement*, 35 (translation altered).

³⁷ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 64; *Disagreement*, 39 (translation altered)

³⁸ See Rancière, *La Méésentente*, esp. 45-50; *Disagreement*, 23-28.

³⁹ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 45; *Disagreement*, 23.

⁴⁰ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 36; *Disagreement*, 16.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Rancière, “Does democracy mean something?” in *Dissensus. On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. and ed. Steven Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 50.

⁴³ Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 71; *Disagreement*, 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Rancière, *La Leçon d’Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

⁴⁶ Rancière, *Le Maître ignorant. Cinq leçons sur l’émancipation intellectuelle* (Paris: Fayard, 1987).

⁴⁷ About the distinction, relationship and tension between constructive, reconstructive and genealogical forms of critique see, for instance, Axel Honneth, “Rekonstruktive Gesellschaftskritik unter genealogischem Vorbehalt. Zur Idee der ‘Kritik’ in der Frankfurter Schule”, in *Pathologien der Vernunft. Geschichte und Gegenwart der Kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), 57-69.

⁴⁸ Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics*, 15.

⁴⁹ See Rancière, “Dix thèses sur la politique,” 252; “Ten Theses on Politics,” 42.

⁵⁰ Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* [1966], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 146-7; English-language edition, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York and London: Continuum, 1973), 143.

⁵¹ Adorno, “Resignation” [1969], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10.2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 798; English-language edition, *Critical Models. Interventions and Catchworks*, trans. Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 292 (translation altered).

⁵² Adorno, “Resignation,” 798; “Resignation,” 293.