



Jacques Rancière
Peter Engelmann
Politics and
Aesthetics

POLITICS AND AESTHETICS

Politics and Aesthetics

Politics and Aesthetics

Jacques Rancière
Peter Engelmann

Translated by Wieland Hoban

polity

First published in German as *Politik und Ästhetik*, © Passagen Verlag, Ges.m.b.H., Wien, 2016. English language edition published by arrangement with Eulama Lit. Ag.

This English edition © Polity Press, 2019

Author image on page vi © Marina Faust

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
101 Station Landing
Suite 300
Medford, MA 02155, USA

All rights reserved. Except for the quotation of short passages for the purpose of criticism and review, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3501-9
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-3502-6 (pb)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ranciere, Jacques, interviewee. | Engelmann, Peter, interviewer.

Title: Politics and aesthetics / Jacques Ranciere, Peter Engelmann.

Other titles: Politik und Asthetik. English

Description: Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA : Polity Press, [2019] | Translation of: Politik und Asthetik. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018059986 (print) | LCCN 2019005001 (ebook) | ISBN 9781509535033 (Epub) | ISBN 9781509535019 (hardback) | ISBN 9781509535026 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Aesthetics--Political aspects. | Political science--Anthropological aspects. | Political psychology.

Classification: LCC BH301.P64 (ebook) | LCC BH301.P64 R3613 2017 (print) | DDC 111/.85--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018059986> or this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset in 12.5 on 15 pt Adobe Garamond by
Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ International Limited

The publisher has used its best endeavours to ensure that the URLs for external websites referred to in this book are correct and active at the time of going to press. However, the publisher has no responsibility for the websites and can make no guarantee that a site will remain live or that the content is or will remain appropriate.

Every effort has been made to trace all copyright holders, but if any have been overlooked the publisher will be pleased to include any necessary credits in any subsequent reprint or edition.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: politybooks.com

Contents

First Conversation	I
Second Conversation	64
Afterword by Peter Engelmann	113
Notes	120



First Conversation

Peter Engelman I suggest we begin by talking about your intellectual career, which began with Althusser and followed a structuralist approach, though you soon moved away from this. You could describe your political concern and outline your research on the social movements of the nineteenth century, and explain how you proceeded from there to develop a new perspective on politics and art. After that I'd ask you to explain the major lines of your current critical thought and its theoretical foundations.

Jacques Rancière Agreed.

PE So let's start from your encounter with Althusser. Perhaps you can talk about how you ended up collaborating on *Reading Capital*,¹ and why you subsequently distanced yourself from that structuralist interpretation of Marx. Or perhaps you want to go even further back?

JR Well, in 1960 I started at the École Normale Supérieure, where Althusser was teaching at the time. I was a young man who had first become acquainted with Marxism more through reading existentialist or religious texts, because in France it was mainly Jesuits who had written good theoretical texts about Marx.

PE You were a Jesuit?

JR I wasn't a Jesuit, but back then there were practically no theoretical texts on Marx that had been written by communists. And the texts with the most detailed commentary on Marx were by Jesuits, especially Père Calvez, who had written a very extensive book entitled *Karl Marx*.² It was he who introduced many readers to Marx's thought by trying to uncover its philosophical dimension, taking an interest in the young Marx's begin-

FIRST CONVERSATION

nings and showing the continuity of his thought. And there was Sartre too, through whom I also became acquainted with communism. Sartre pursued a philosophical, existentialist approach that heavily emphasized the problematics of praxis and alienation. But then I went to the École Normale Supérieure, where Althusser questioned this approach on the grounds that it didn't concentrate on the real Marx. He explained that the young Marx on which the commentaries focused was the ideological, pre-scientific Marx, and that one should abandon this existentialist discourse. That was the moment when structuralism emerged, and Althusser's reading forced me to abandon my first approach to Marx. I had pursued it with great enthusiasm and become something of a specialist in early Marx, and I had also written a final dissertation on the subject. I attended Althusser's seminars on *Capital*, which were intended to show the rupture between the young and the later, mature Marx. Althusser's concern was to rediscover Marx's true theory, which would form the point of departure for rethinking the revolution – but above all to enlighten all the young 'petty bourgeois' who lived in such ignorance of the system's laws that they couldn't

help going astray. This insistence on the theory of ideology was at the core of Althusser's thinking. And structuralism reinforced a scientistic reading of ideology theory, namely that all people were trapped in an illusion out of structural necessity, and science was needed in order to free them. I followed this direction, which, in a sense, also corresponded with the position of a young student at an elite university. Essentially there was a kind of Marxist aristocracy back then.

PE At the École Normale Supérieure?

JR Yes. You could say we were the best students, the best philosophers, and Marxists at the same time! We were conscious of our role as the intellectual avant-garde. Then came May 1968, a movement that ensued in a way that totally contradicted Althusser's theory, a movement that consisted of students who should really have been knee-deep in petty bourgeois ideology, with no ability to develop a scientific, Marxist, proletarian consciousness. It was this movement that triggered an enormous subversive movement all over the country, extending to all walks of life. So in 1968 one had the impression of a complete

FIRST CONVERSATION

rupture between the Marxist scientific theory previously adhered to and the reality of this movement, the reality of workers' revolts, people's revolts, youth revolts. From that point on I began to criticize this structuralist Marxism, and all the more so when the University of Vincennes was founded after 1968.

PE How did this university come into existence?

JR Essentially, one can say that the state gave the radical leftists and the Marxists a university of their own. A university where one could truly practise Marxist, structuralist, semiological science. Those who were there had two choices: either one played along – and Althusserianism was the theory for entering into this schema, as it were – or one didn't want to be co-opted, and refused to be the Marxist poster-child of bourgeois culture. In my case that led to a critique of all the theoretical preconditions from which people had been proceeding until then. I decided on a critique of Althusser, and of all theories which claimed that Marxist science had to help those people who live in a state of illusion to attain consciousness. Then I told myself that to