

Rethinking Emancipation



Conversations with Aliocha Wald Lasowski

Jacques Rancière

Rethinking Emancipation

In memory of Jean-Luc Nancy

Jacques Rancière

Rethinking Emancipation

Conversations with Aliocha Wald Lasowski

Translated by Andrew Brown

polity

Originally published in French as *Penser l'émancipation. Dialogue avec Aliocha Wald Lasowski*. Copyright © Éditions de l'Aube, 2022

This English edition © Polity Press, 2024

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
111 River Street
Hoboken, NJ 07030, 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: 978-1-5095-5922-0 – hardback
ISBN-13: 978-1-5095-5923-7 – paperback

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
Library of Congress Control Number: 2024932923

Typeset in 12.5 on 15pt Adobe Garamond
by Cheshire Typesetting Ltd, Cuddington, Cheshire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by TJ Books Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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

<i>Foreword by Aliocha Wald Lasowski</i>	vii
1 Politics: The Democratic Paradox	I
2 Aesthetics: Aesthetic Democracy and Social Emancipation	3I
3 Literature: The Politics of Writers and the Revolution in Literature	5I
4 Philosophy: Althusser, the Theoretical Weapon of Marxism's Revival	69
5 Cinema: The Sensible Fabric of the New Life	85
<i>Notes</i>	III

Foreword

Understanding Emancipation

Aliocha Wald Lasowski

The historical sequence we are currently living through began in 2020, marked by the Covid-19 pandemic and combining a sense of hope with concerns for what would come afterwards. It is a period that has again forcefully raised the major question of the political: faced with the powers of exploitation and domination, can the movement of emancipation take on new life, or has it been arrested by the powers of neutralization and normalization? Inequalities are skyrocketing: billionaires' fortunes increased by 86 per cent between March 2020 and October 2021, while seven million people in France need food aid to survive. The global situation of SARS-CoV-2 has reinforced

FOREWORD

the hardening of the sense of identity, the consolidation of the state as a security apparatus, and an increase in the pre-existing authority wielded by experts. If the social processes of otherness and plurality are to reinvent a concrete collective project, then we need to recall, as Rancière reminds us in a recent book, that a 'future is built only in the dynamic movement of a present'.¹

In order to free up new democratic practices, and to allow new capacities for subjectivation, 'the dynamics of a present' consists in viewing afresh the possibilities of tearing ourselves away from the necessities of reality. In order to listen out for the forces of mobilization, like a sonogram whose auditory apparatus registers acoustic pressure, we need to grasp the level of social mobilization in the zeitgeist, perceiving the vibratory strings of an ongoing protest and measuring the decibel level of the political sound system. The deafening hubbub of media verbiage produces white noise, and sometimes drowns out the call to invent new forms of action. Conversely, carefully gauging the timbre of a society's upheavals demands a reflection sensitive to the magnetic frequencies of public life. Finding the right way to grasp 'the recognition of the contingency of

FOREWORD

the political order':² this is the challenge launched by Rancière.

The philosopher questions the relationship between democracies and the very concept of democracy, and questions what, in the world, offers a possibility of emancipation, through a diversity of protagonists both female and male from the social and cultural fields, faced with a variety of situations. Emancipation means breaking out of the established hierarchies, proposing a space of equality, playful and subversive, to replace the dominant order of inequalities. Rancière writes: 'Emancipation is the way out of a situation of minority.'³ His texts decipher the sociopolitical rhythms of our time, listening out for the figures of trembling, displacement, and oscillation. While society can lose itself in the aphasia of a news drowned in an excess of commentary, Rancière's innovative thinking – drawing on the themes of 'dissensus', 'misunderstanding', 'mute speech', and the 'part of those who have no part' – takes a step back from the events of which we are the contemporaries, and broadens our horizon in order to identify other ways of acting. By relying on a precise political sequence or a local aesthetic moment,

FOREWORD

he takes a step aside, traces a critical distance, produces a creative gap. At the May 2005 symposium ‘Rancière and Philosophy in the Present’ at the International Cultural Centre of Cerisy-la-Salle, the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, who died on 23 August 2021, shared with Rancière the goal of creating subversive scenes of equality. This *dispositif* serves to reconfigure the sensible, far from the institutions of power that maintain a monopoly on public life. Nancy clarifies the similarity between his position and Rancière’s: ‘It seems to me that, these days, there is without doubt nothing more necessary than turning away in this fashion from supposedly “democratic” horizons and trusting solely in the tenacity of an action that is both without horizon and yet also definite.’⁴

Rancière mobilizes what Nancy calls ‘tenacity’ in order to ‘liberate the real scene of discourse, that of silent witnesses’.⁵ As a cartographer of the field of possibilities, Rancière upsets the hierarchical divisions that control the social, cultural, and political universe. He grasps emancipation and the redistribution of allotted places based on forms of self-transformation. Doing politics means suspending what is taken for granted,

FOREWORD

questioning imposed loyalties, and inventing new relationships. Emancipation requires a modification of the citizen's participation in public space. The liberation of speech and body is part and parcel of the tearing open of our common dissensual fabric. Working in the margins and on the edges, where politics is often invisible or sidelined, Rancière reminds us that what is at stake is 'the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization'.⁶ At the heart of the material texture of social experience lies the possibility of the emergence of a speech that has often been mute or forbidden. History, for example, with its episodes and events, carries with it a force, a meaning, and a mode of utterance. It also indicates the constitution of the silent mass – a collective voice, undifferentiated and anonymous, doomed to silence. History reveals the power of speech and also, conversely, that of silence, of the excluded, of the forgotten. How can this sidelined discourse be brought back to life? 'What determines the life of speakers, as much as and more than the weight of labor and of its remuneration, is that of names or their absence.'⁷ In his books and articles, Rancière deploys the equal capacity

FOREWORD

of subjects to make history and to participate in social realities. New forms of solidarity and action, of identity and struggle, involve ‘speech events’⁸ which finally offer a voice to the anonymous women and men who make history. This is the project implemented here: to offer ‘the possibility of extending the power of the people, the possibility of creating ever greater equality’.⁹

Words are the sensible matter of democracy. How are we to promote discussion in factories and workshops, and encourage the living thought of a social class to emerge? Rancière notes the ability to speak that can emerge from the mute power of the collective: ‘It begins in literature, for example in Victor Hugo, with the word of the sewer which says everything or in Michelet with the voice of mud and harvests.’¹⁰ To make the dreams of the proletariat and social utopias audible, and to gain a hearing for new practices of solidarity and struggle, Rancière works on rare documents such as the archives of the world of labour. Bringing together trade union texts and corporative manifestos, *La parole ouvrière* (*The Speech of the Workers*) captures the living voice of ‘the typographers, shoemakers and tailors of the 1830s’.¹¹ So, if ‘the age of history is when anyone

FOREWORD

at all can make that history because everyone is already making it',¹² how can we also turn the silence of images and the anonymity of creations into stories? How, for example, was the hierarchical opposition between 'popular' craftsmanship and 'artistic' inventiveness able to prevail? It is a question, once again, of overthrowing barriers, of tearing ourselves away from the dominant classifications assigned to us, by relaunching a movement of new affirmations and unprecedented capacities. Following the living principle of equality, Rancière aims to reconfigure the 'distribution of the sensible'.

Starting out from the concrete situations that are woven in the real, the philosopher detects and recognizes the possibility of new practices. He fosters these forms of action and anxiously tends the alternative universe that they gradually constitute. Sensitive to the political significance of speech, Rancière identifies and forges the connections – initially underground and invisible – that lie at the heart of ordinarily separate spheres of language. To shift the levels of discourse to a new level, he deciphers the projects of workers' emancipation, in *Proletarian Nights*,¹³ or the educational politics in the texts of Joseph Jacotot, a

FOREWORD

young teacher who made freedom a crucial element in the pedagogical project he developed in 1818, a method presented and developed by Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.¹⁴ And, against a logic which works in a hierarchical, partitioning, and inegalitarian way, Rancière gives an unsuspected philosophical dimension to the texts he mobilizes, like those of the carpenter and parqueter Louis-Gabriel Gauny.¹⁵ By creating a plane of equality between philosophical declarations recognized as such and declarations that are excluded from philosophy, Rancière opens the way to the existence of ‘a multiplicity of phenomena coexisting in a time without hierarchy’.¹⁶ Thanks to these movements of thought which encourage protest, interruption, and subversive repurposing (*détournement*), a new dynamic in life is emerging, one ‘which can be objectified in a thousand ways in the ordinary details of our lives’.¹⁷

Just as the dramaturgy of Charlie Chaplin’s films upsets the hierarchy of temporalities – the mechanical time of work and the playful time of the tramp –, Rancière’s *modus operandi* resides in a writing of upheaval that displaces the barriers between domains traditionally disjointed