

**Rancière's Lesson:  
October '17, May '68, October '17**

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FROM THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY TO THE TWENTIETH: *LE SIÈCLE*

What can be said of Marxism in the twenty-first century? How can we speak of Marxism a century and a half after *Das Kapital*, a century after October '17, and half a century after May '68? What is Marxism in a time when Marxists mainly look back, commemorating spectacular anniversaries of their greatest achievements, while the future seems to be left to reformist projects like *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, a book with the kind of sales for which even Slavoj Žižek would “sell [his] mother into slavery”? (Žižek 2014)<sup>1</sup>

In 2014, when Marxists were still mesmerized by the 2012 English translation of Michael Heinrich's 2004 introduction to Marx's *Capital* (see Heinrich 2012), and anarchists by David Graeber's 2011 book on debt (see Graeber 2011), readers of all persuasions became enchanted by *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, the English translation of a 2013 French book by Thomas Piketty that “did not get much coverage except among non-English-speaking economists” until it was translated “in the language of modern imperialism” (Roberts 2015, 86 n.1). There may be many reasons for this outcome, but one of them surely lies in the fact that, unlike Heinrich and Graeber, Piketty assigns knowledge of the history of capitalism not to historians of capitalism but to its natives. Natives as perceptive as Jane Austen and Honoré de Balzac, but natives nonetheless. “These and other novelists,” says Piketty early on in his “Introduction,” “depicted the effects of inequality with a verisimilitude and evocative power that no statistical or theoretical analysis can match.” (Piketty 2014, 2)

This is how Piketty favors Balzac over political economists—including the political economist who also favored Balzac over political economists, only 125 years earlier than Piketty, namely Friedrich Engels: in 1888, Engels claimed to have learned more from Balzac

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“than from all the professed historians, economists and statisticians of the period together” (Engels 1987, 91). So, even before there is anything wrong with Piketty’s literature (like the fact that he reads novels as illustrations), something is lacking in his political economy itself; strictly as an economist, Piketty neglects Engels as someone who, together with Karl Marx, saw in *La Comédie humaine* a literary model of the totality of French society, rather than a mere illustration of inequalities. A native model, yet nonetheless a model, of totality that could help Piketty supersede his abstract account of inequality—the chief illustrator of which, incidentally, is not Balzac but Zola, whom Engels explicitly rejects on behalf of precisely Balzac (“a far greater master of realism than all the Zolas *passés, présents et à venir*” [Engels 1987, 91]) but whom Piketty’s readers might not enjoy in just such enormous numbers. Read in terms of modern society as such, rather than just social inequalities, Balzac could perhaps even help Piketty see that, as Žižek notes (see Žižek 2014; 2017, 27–28), to fight inequality with a tax reform today demands the tax reform, of course, but also, as a condition for this very reform to be passed, the undoing of the concrete totality of unequal society. But to achieve this kind of estrangement of Balzac’s native point of view, Piketty would have to acknowledge Engels, who, however, would most likely drive away even more readers than Zola—even though even a year before the fall of the Berlin wall it was still possible in the West (e.g., in Petrey 1988, 448) to use Engels’s Balzac to dismiss not Engels but, on the contrary, the kind of dismissal of Engels reproduced today by Piketty.

But this is not a Marxist reply to Piketty. (This was offered by many, and by now we even have book-length Marxist replies to Marxist replies [see, e.g., Kaufmann and Stützle 2017].) It is merely a reminder that, at the moment—five decades after May, ten decades after October, and fifteen decades after *Das Kapital*—the twenty-first century can only be the object of fortune-telling, and that “Marx was a prophet, not a fortune-teller,” as a certain Marxist (Eagleton 2011, 67) reminded us just two years before Piketty published his book. In other words, there is no coincidence that there is no real space for Marx and his historical materialism in a 2013 book on capital in the twenty-first century—just as there is no coincidence that Marxists today talk so much about *Das Kapital*, October ’17, and May ’68. In other words, that these historic events have aligned themselves in such neat fifty-year intervals may very well be a coincidence (rather than evidence of some cyclical process, like Nikolai Kondratiev’s sixty-year-long waves of capital accumulation or Kojin Karatani’s twice as long periods of liberalism alternating with equally long periods of imperialism); that they are the focus of today’s Marxism precisely as historic events is not.

This difference between the soothsayer and the prophet—who “is not a clairvoyant at all” but someone who warns us “that unless we change our ways we might well have no future at all” (Eagleton 2011, 66–67)—this difference might also be the reason why, in the conjuncture opened by the sudden fall of Lehman Brothers (and closed perhaps by the no less sudden rise of Donald Trump), Piketty chooses to talk at length about the twenty-first century as early as its thirteenth year, while Graeber simply writes a book about the first 5,000 years of debt, and Heinrich a preface to the English translation of his book on *Das Kapital* (along with new German-language books on this 150-year-old topic). Moreover, this difference between the fortune-telling and prophecy might also be why, in terms of centuries as objects of knowledge, Piketty treats the twenty-first simply as the hundred years between 2000 and 2099, whereas a Marxist tends to use up the entire book just to be able to delineate the twentieth beyond what the calendar says. The entire book, and entire life: Eric Hobsbawm ventured a conception of the twentieth century, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991*, only in 1994, after having written an entire trilogy just about “the long nineteenth century” (Hobsbawm 1994, 6 n. \*). Or, to think of another 1994 book, the neo-Smithian Marxist Giovanni Arrighi spent “almost fifteen years,” as he admits in the “Preface” (Arrighi 1994, xi), writing a book that simply tries to unpack its title, *The Long Twentieth Century*. Finally, farther away still from Hobsbawm’s orthodox communism than Arrighi yet still closer to it than Piketty, Alain Badiou’s *Century* is an attempt to think the twentieth century five years after its calendric end—and to think it both beyond the Hobsbawmian “short century” and, by extension, the Braudelian “long century” (see Badiou 2007, 1–3).

These are obviously just three of many leftist book-length attempts to delineate the twentieth century beyond the spontaneity of the calendar (the spontaneity discernible, say, in Piketty’s explanation of what will happen “if the trend over the period 1970–2010 is extrapolated to the period 2010–2050 or 2010–2100” [Piketty 2014, 6]). So it might not even be a coincidence that, of all the centuries that have already past, Piketty chooses the twentieth to admit that “[i]t would have been quite presumptuous in 1913 to publish a book called ‘Capital in the Twentieth Century’” (Piketty 2014, 35), before going along with his title nonetheless. But, again, this is not a Marxist critique of the notion of the century. Let us then follow for just another moment Badiou’s account of the twentieth century, the least Marxist of the above three accounts of the last of the centuries that so far can be grasped historically.

In his lecture of 28 March 2000, published in 2005 as the penultimate chapter of his above-mentioned book on the twentieth century, Badiou speaks of the intimate link between art and politics that characterized the century but seems so remote today, a link based on the thesis

“of art’s intrinsic political value and impact. The avant-gardes even went to the extreme of saying that there is more politics to be found in the formal mutations of art than in politics ‘strictly speaking’. This conviction was still held by the *Tel Quel* group in the sixties. Today, some of Jacques Rancière’s writings provide a sophisticated echo of it.” (Badiou 2007, 148) Today, this kind of link between art and politics seems even more remote than in 2005, let alone 2000, and Rancière even more dedicated to it. If Piketty sees the politics of art in the way art narrates social inequalities, and if Engels sees it in the way art models social totality, then the century that unfolds between Piketty and Engels sees, first and foremost, a link between art and politics. Badiou’s twentieth century is itself, among other things, the sequence in which this link was invented, practiced, and thought; as such, the century starts with the surrealists and ends with *Tel Quel* (Badiou 2007, 149). Or, in terms that are both less Gallocentric and more Badiouian, the century starts around October ’17 and ends around May ’68: October 1917 is a more or less obvious metonymy for most of Badiou’s entries into the century, from a Mandelshtam poem written “during the first years of Bolshevik power,” or a Perse poem published, like Mandelshtam’s, forty years before a Celan poem of the same title (*Anabasis*), to such events of the “prologue” to the century as a 1902 pamphlet by Lenin, the leader of October, and a Freud case history dating, “[l]ike the first Russian revolution,” from 1905 (Badiou 2007, 11, 88, 6, 69). May 1968, conversely, is arguably the best approximation of the end of the respective sequences inaugurated by these events, be it the “chronic preoccupation with purging” from Freud to Lacan, the above-quoted thesis linking art and politics from the surrealists to *Tel Quel*, or, indeed, the *Anabasis* topos from Perse to Celan (Badiou 2007, 149, 88, 6, 69)—so that, “[f]or Badiou, anabasis becomes the name for a ‘small century’ interrupted on the eve of May ’68,” even “a mini-century in need of subtraction from the global period of Restoration that began in the 1980s” (Apter and Bosteels 2014, xviii).

In any case, October ’17 and May ’68, two of the three events Marxists around the world celebrate today in their quest for new prophecies, also delineate *le Siècle* as Badiou sees it in 2005, with Rancière constituting, according to Badiou, a rare echo of that century in the next one. When it then comes to thinking the future of Marxist thought by way of analyzing its history, the trajectory of Jacques Rancière may very well offer a productive starting point. A thinker whose interventions dedicated to the specific twentieth-century link between art and politics have only intensified since 2005, Rancière is also a contributor to the famous Leninist reading of *Das Kapital* that Althusser and his students published in 1965, a student activist by May ’68, and an early critic of Althusser’s Leninism by 1974. In this sense, Rancière’s work

on art and politics, and the way this work has been read in terms of speech and the act, seems to provide a relevant backdrop against which we can approach Marxism today, when, a hundred years after the Left seized power, and fifty years after it seized speech instead of power, the US shows the global Right how to seize, if not power, then at least power-as-speech. Power-as-hate-speech, to be precise.

#### FROM POST-MARXISM TO MARXISM: *NOUS SOMMES TOUS DES JUIFS ALLEMANDS*

Indeed, in the United States, the home of speech-act theory long before the current President's speech-act practice, Rancière's studies on aesthetics, building as they are on his archaeological phase to refashion the conceptual apparatus of continental aesthetics and political philosophy, have to a surprisingly large degree been received against the backdrop of Anglo-American speech-act theory—as it was read, granted, by Jacques Derrida's continental thought. Mark Robson, for example, has interpreted Rancière's aesthetic exposure of art to life in terms of Derrida's aesthetic potential of the speech act (see Robson 2009, 93–100; 2005, 8, 9 n.3); in the process, he has referred to Andrew Parker, who in turn has read Rancière's cases of political subjectivation as so many proto-literary speech acts (see Parker 2007, 70–77). And even back in France, Élie During, for example, has recognized in the effect of disidentification an analogy between Rancière's category of literature and Derrida's (see During 2009, 75–80, 89–92).

Instead of speaking about art as a homogenous practice, Rancière distinguishes between the ethical, the representative, and the aesthetic regime of art. Whereas the ethical regime strives for Platonic ideologically guided projection of images onto ideas, and the representative regime for Aristotelian poetologically guided projection of forms onto materials, the aesthetic regime introduces Schillerian unguided projection of words onto things. In contrast to Platonic external criteria of the social bond and truth as well to Aristotelian internal criteria of poetics, the aesthetic regime ascribes words to things without any criteria. Its distribution of the sensible is hence not reproductive and policing, but transformative and political—more precisely, metapolitical, for, by transforming the relations between words and things, the aesthetic regime not only practices but also enacts the political struggle for the recognition of voices as speech (rather than as mere signals). As such, the aesthetic regime is “autonomous/heteronomous”: free of criteria and hence penetrable by anything, as any thing is now worth mentioning (see Rancière 2009a, 28–44, 64–66).

It is not difficult to find a textual basis for the thesis that Rancière attributes to the aesthetic practice a performative force even though he does not talk about this force in terms of the theory of the performative. In “The Politics of Literature” (both the article [2004, 13–16] and the otherwise heavily rewritten chapter for the book of the same title [2011b, 12–13]), Rancière draws the line between the representative and the aesthetic regime of art precisely along the rift between the conventional speech act and the “mute letter” of the speech act that has no conventional utterer, reference, or addressee and is as such available to anyone. But he uses the same kind of distinction already in his 1998 book on “mute speech,” where the representative and the aesthetic regime are still called “representative” and “expressive poetics” respectively (Rancière 2011a, 68–69). Incidentally, in the same year, writing for the second edition of the book whose first edition was translated as *On the Shores of Politics*, Rancière (1998, 129–32) also reproaches John Searle—for whom a literary text is a speech act that is even more conventionalized than non-literary speech acts—for simply turning upside down Plato’s opposition between mute writing and living speech, a reproach unusually reminiscent of Derrida’s reply to Searle’s rejection of his deconstruction of John Austin. And as we will see, Rancière’s kind of emancipation of the speech act from conventional context is a necessary possibility for any speech act, according to Derrida, or even a necessary actuality, according to Judith Butler; moreover, both Derrida and Butler treat this de-conventionalization, this etiolation of the speech act, as a condition of possibility of the act’s aesthetic functioning.

However, despite all this textual basis, the thesis about the performativity of the aesthetic regime implies a pre-theoretic notion of performativity. In other words, we should begin by noting the internal insufficiency of the thesis, namely its spontaneous notion of performativity, before we even attempt to corroborate the external equivalence between the aesthetic regime and performativity, as if these are fully produced and unquestionable concepts. For Austin’s theory of the performative constitutively presupposes a certain separation between performative and aesthetic utterances: performatives (so, orders, promises, christenings . . .) reproduce the social bond within ordinary language, while aesthetic utterances “etiolate” and “parasitize” performatives (Austin 1962, 22, 92 n.1, 104). But once we manage to avoid the pre-theoretic identification of aesthetic and performative utterances there emerges an even greater misconception of the thesis about the performativity of the aesthetic regime, namely the misconception of the subversive character of the aesthetic regime. For the thesis ascribes to Rancière aesthetic regime not only performativity but also subversivity (e.g., in Robson 2009, 95–98; Parker 2007, 71, 74, 75; During 2009, 90–92). As such, the performativity

thesis ignores not only Austin's distinction between aesthetic and performative utterances but also Rancière's differentiation between the heteronomous autonomy of the aesthetic regime and the impossible pure autonomy of art. For Austin treats aesthetic utterances as etiolations of performatives (which he in turn treats as hierarchically codified utterances that, as Rancière might say, reproduce the given distribution of the sensible), while Rancière treats them as gestures of suspending, not subverting, ideological practices (which he in turn sees as hierarchically codified practices that, as Austin might say, include performatives). In short, Austin separates aesthetic practices from performativity, and Rancière separates them from subversivity.

According to Rancière, art in the aesthetic regime subverts ideology only insofar as it is irreducibly involved in ideology. It emancipates itself from ideology merely by performing discursive operations on ideologemes; in other words, since art possesses no ideology of its own, it has to constantly rely on existing ideologies for its material. Art becomes autonomous when it relinquishes its Platonic and Aristotelian criteria—and with them its distinctiveness in relation to non-art, life; art becomes autonomous when it becomes heteronomous (see Rancière 2009a, 66–67, 100–102, 32). This insight enables Rancière to “locate the break with representation precisely in novelistic realism, the supposed crown achievement of the literature of representation” (Benčin 2010, 84; my translation). In *The Politics of Literature*, Rancière even separates political disagreement, as the relation between conventional, policing speech and new, subjectivated speech, from literary misunderstanding between conventional, canonic speech and its estrangement, the estrangement that, unlike political disagreement, produces no new speech (see Rancière 2011b, 41–45). Art in the aesthetic regime is a practice, not imitation of a practice; it is a practice of uttering, not the kind of utterance that becomes a practice only if it meets the felicity conditions of performative utterances. This concept of relative, heteronomous autonomy of art is therefore the positive concept that enables us to supplement Austin's purely negative differentiation between ordinary and aesthetic language. Moreover, aesthetic regime's heteronomous autonomy is a positive concept that we can refer back to Austin's problematic of the ordinary as the ideological if we read it, for example, with Pierre Macherey's conceptualization of theory and aesthetic practice as the two discourses that interrupt, in the sphere of ideological practices, the imaginary dialogue of spontaneous language (see Macherey 1978, 62–64): according to Macherey, a co-author, like Rancière, of *Reading Capital*, literature is autonomous only insofar as it can refract any discourse, or, as Rancière would later argue, only insofar as it can quote and displace any discourse. So, if influential representatives of the Anglo-American reception of Rancière want to grant the

aesthetic regime performativity so as to be able to grant it subversivity, they should argue that, quite the contrary, the aesthetic regime is not a performative practice but something beyond the performative, beyond interpellation, beyond that which positions individuals on positions from which they can utter felicitous and hence ideological performative utterances.

This equation of aesthetic practice, performativity, and subversivity seems to reflect the influence of Butler's intervention in Derrida's deconstruction of speech-act theory. But if we actually compare this intervention to Rancière's, it becomes obvious that his aesthetic regime cannot be reduced to performativity-as-subversivity. Between Austin and Butler, aesthetic utterances transition from the constitutive other of speech-act theory to the very object of a conception of performativity. When Austin discovers performatives, that is, utterances that perform an act in naming it, he relegates their etiolation by way of quotation (as in a joke, a recitation, or a poem) to a mere possibility that says nothing about non-etiolated performatives. According to Derrida, this possibility is in fact a necessary possibility that makes any speech act precarious and hence non-redundant, meaningful: the performative's "possibility . . . to be 'quoted'" is "the very force and law of its emergence" (Derrida 1988, 16–17). Butler takes this point, but her actual report reads as follows: "Derrida claims that the failure of the performative is the condition of its possibility, 'the very force and law of its emergence.' (17)" (Butler 1997, 151). Thus, in Butler, "the very force and law of its emergence" no longer resides in the performative's "possibility . . . to be 'quoted'," as Derrida claimed, but in "the failure of the performative." The performative's possibility to be quoted becomes the failure of the performative; a possibility in Austin becomes a necessary possibility in Derrida—only to become a necessary actuality in Butler. For her, every speech act, even hate speech, is sooner or later "aesthetically reenacted" (Butler 1997, 99), resignified by the addressee.

So, whereas Butler translates Derrida's necessary possibility of etiolation as necessary actuality, Rancière reaffirms Derrida's necessary possibility. And, unlike both Butler and Derrida, he reaffirms Derrida's necessary possibility of etiolation not in order to ontologically limit politics to a necessary possibility that only is to come (*à venir*) but, on the contrary, in order to recognize politics in etiolation itself, in the emancipation from the master-signifier, from the ideology according to which the sensible is distributed. Rancière is interested less in Derrida's testamentary character of writing, the irreducible possibility of etiolation-as-disidentification, than in writing's emancipatory character, the irreducible possibility of etiolation-as-subjectivation. For Rancière, the possibility of etiolation, where the master-signifier can be appropriated by anyone, is less the condition of a certain impossibility, the



impossibility of an original imaginary intention and an original context of the signifier, than the condition of a certain possibility, the possibility of a symbolic, discursive functioning of the signifier; less the necessary possibility of the utterer's loss of origin than the necessary possibility of the addressee's emancipation from his or her original part in the given distribution of the sensible. In Rancière, writing is not, first and foremost, the testament of the writer but the birth certificate of the reader—any reader.

Because Butler grants the status of universality only to the Derridean universality to come, only to universalization-as-etiolation, only to universalization-as-resignification-of-master-signifiers (see Butler 1997, 90), she must misread “the failure of the performative” as “the condition of its possibility” and treat etiolation as a necessary actuality, if she wants to present universalization as a necessary actuality itself. And vice versa, because Rancière sees in universality equality presupposed, and in etiolation subjectivation of this equality (rather than a Butlerian automatic outcome of uttering performatives), he treats etiolation, that is, emancipation from the signifier that distributes the sensible, as a necessary potentiality: because equality of everyone in their relation (or, subordination) to writing is already here, already a given, while “the failure of the performative” is, for Rancière, not simply “the condition of its possibility,” etiolation as emancipation from hegemonic speech is a necessary potentiality. Rancière therefore replaces not only Butler's necessary actuality with a necessary potentiality, but also Derrida's necessary impossibility of originality with the necessary possibility of verifying equality. Rancière himself differentiates between Derrida's deferral of equality and his own presupposition of equality in terms of the difference between *à venir* as Derrida's supplement-to-democracy and *à venir* as his own supplement-as-democracy (see Rancière 2009b, 275–78; see also Rancière 2010, 52–53, 59–60).

Let us take a look at an example that, as it were, condenses the difference between the Derridean performativity and Rancière's, while also pointing to the dimension where this difference shrinks and allows us to approach both Rancière's thought and the Anglo-American Derridean “misreadings” of it as a certain totality where Rancière's thought is the source, rather than the victim, of the “misreadings.” What might Derrida and Butler have to say about the May '68 slogan “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands” (“We are all German Jews”), an utterance Rancière likes to quote as a case of political subjectivation—moreover, the utterance that opened up for him, as he claims, “an entire field of understanding speech acts as political gestures” (Rancière 2000, 114)? On 22 May 1968, student demonstrators in Paris used the first version of this slogan—“Nous sommes tous des Juifs et des Allemands” (“We are all Jews and Germans”)—to respond to the interdiction of the stay in France issued

against Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a student leader whom as early as 2 May the far-right-wing newspaper *Minute* had called “a Jew and a German, who, as such, acts like the new Marx,” which the very next day the French Communist Party echoed in its newspaper *l’Humanité* by calling him a “German anarchist” inclined to “fascist provocations.” The slogan was made famous by the demonstrations of 31 May, the day after the term “German Jew” had allegedly been used by Raymond Marcellin in his inauguration speech as the Minister of the Interior.

Derrida would perhaps approach the slogan as a speech act of identification that, as an identification with a predicate of the other, is etiolated, “non-serious” (as Austin might say [Austin 1962, 121]), and as such an embodiment of the necessary possibility of any act of identification, a supplement without which “serious” identifications would be redundant. Butler, for her part, could perhaps recognize in the slogan’s etiolation the truth of the neo-fascist, communist, and Gaullist utterances about Cohn-Bendit that the slogan reappropriates: as a resignification of these utterances, the slogan embodies the necessary actuality of their etiolation and thus secures an identity to its own utterers, who, as a group claiming “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands,” can now participate in and thereby universalize the universal. Rancière, however, interprets the slogan “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands” neither as an etiolated identification nor as a resignified one, but as a disidentification, an identification with an identity that, as an excluded, empty identity, is available to anyone, not just to the utterers, and as such a source of the verification of equality (see Rancière 1998, 89–92, 157; 1999, 126–27, 59). In other words, in Derrida’s horizon, the slogan could be read as an etiolated identification and hence a testament to the potential etiolation that is universal to identity utterances; in Butler’s horizon, it could be viewed as a reappropriated identification and hence a universalization of the field of identities that have received recognition so far; Rancière, however, approaches the slogan as a disidentification and hence a verification of a universal competence, the constant possibility of rejecting one’s part in the distribution of the sensible. In Derrida’s horizon, “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands” could become political only with something like the addition of negation: “Nous sommes (et ne sommes pas) tous des Juifs allemands”; in Butler’s, it would probably be most political if Cohn-Bendit himself were to say: “Oui, je suis un Juif allemand” (which is more or less what he actually said in 2005 when the secretary of the French Communist Party suggested he should not campaign for the French European Constitution referendum); Rancière, on the other hand, is able to grant politics to the utterance as it is, the actually existing slogan, insofar as for him, as mentioned above, the possibility of politics is presupposed, rather than deferred to *à venir*.

But if we add the perspective of the theory of the signifier we notice that what “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands” also does to the neo-fascist, communist, and Gaullist utterances about Cohn-Bendit is to reproduce them as its own pretext, that is, as both its textual material and its excuse. The utterance “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands” includes a signifier, “Juifs allemands,” that has no linguistic signified (or else the slogan would simply be contradictory), but instead has two loci of inscription: the utterance to which it belongs, and the neo-fascist, communist, and Gaullist utterances to which it refers. The signifier “Juifs allemands” starts making sense and thereby totalizes the whole utterance only after it is inscribed in a chain of signifiers that, unlike “Juifs allemands” itself, are absent from the utterance “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands” but can nonetheless be reconstructed as the utterance’s pretext, namely all the hateful utterances about Cohn-Bendit. As such, the signifier “Juifs allemands” represents for these hateful utterances the subject that is the metaphor “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands,” the subject that is split between the position of enunciation (“Nous”) and the position of the enunciated (“Juifs allemands”), the zero-degree difference whose meaning—a parodic rejection of the hateful utterances that make up the pretext—is discernible only to those who always already know these hateful utterances. “The subject is only a moment in the putting-together of the utterance, a function of its construction,” writes Rastko Močnik (2013, 315) in a formalization of “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands” that, incidentally, acknowledges an unpublished version of the interpretation presented here (see Močnik 2013, 321 n.35).

Now, by using “Juifs allemands,” an empty signifier that only makes sense against the backdrop of the hate speech of de Gaulle, *Minute*, and *l’Humanité*, the slogan “Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands” is closer to an acting out than to a genuine Lacanian passage to the act; closer to reproducing hate speech than to suspending it. From the fact that Cohn-Bendit’s nationality is referred to both by *Minute* and by *l’Humanité* the protesters somehow derive not that the Other is barred but, on the contrary, that it is ubiquitous. Even before neoliberalism becomes hegemonic, the neo-fascists and the PCF seem to form two sides of the same evil coin. Just as, say, “la pègre” (“riff-raff”), a signifier used, less than a week earlier, both by Minister of the Interior Christian Fouchet and the PCF’s *l’Humanité*, was immediately reappropriated by Marguerite Duras, Maurice Blanchot, and other members of the Action Committee (“We who have participated in the actions attributed to a so-called *pègre*, we affirm that we are all rioters, we are all ‘*la pègre*.’” [Quoted in, and translated in English by, Ross 2002, 108.])—so too, the hate speech about Cohn-Bendit launched by both *Minute* and *l’Humanité*, and most likely also by the new Minister of the Interior, is resignified by

demonstrators without delay, instead of being read as a final bar over the Other (A), the final proof that power is ready to be seized. “The two rival organizations of Gaullism and the ‘Communist’ party, in solidarity with one another in the police order of the time, . . . did not realize that they were already running on empty, like those characters in comic books who continue their chase beyond the edge of the cliff. It took a bit of time to look at the ground and begin the famous nosedive,” writes Éric Hazan in 2002 (Hazan 2010, 310). The problem is that the majority of the protesters, too, acted (or, acted out) as if they did not realize that the two rival organizations had already been running on empty. That is at least what Kristin Ross seems to suggest in her Rancièrian account of May ’68, written in the same year as Hazan’s: “To look back at a moment after it has passed—a moment . . . when the government had become a shadow and had all but evaporated into smoke or dust like the witch in the *Wizard of Oz*—is to raise the question in all its poignancy of a missed opportunity, despite the fact that the notion of ‘seizing state power’ was for the most part not central to the workings of May.” (Ross 2002, 79.)

Hence the abstract and institutionally naïve character of the slogan that has “allowed for the easy (although obviously unfair) analogy between the de Gaulle government, Petain, and, by proxy, National Socialism” (Hammerschlag 2010, 3). And although the unfairness of the analogy might not be as obvious as it seems to Susan Hammerschlag, its easiness is, at least in the sense in which Mladen Dolar—building on Frantz Fanon’s critique of both victimization and culpabilization to comment on the current global refugee crisis—warns us that, in political struggles, the term *fascism* tends to function “as the name of the absence of the concept. . . . The implication of the term is: don’t think, condemn.” (Dolar 2017, 74) It is in this sense that Jacques Lacan warns the student radicals, in December 1969, that their revolution is a plea for a master and that it will succeed (see Lacan 2007b, 207); aligning himself neither with the conservative nor with the liberal faculty, Lacan simply accuses the students “of not being radical enough” (Copjec 2006, 90)—an accusation not unlike the one voiced in 1975, during his imprisonment and four years before his assassination, by militant Pierre Goldman, for whom “the students spreading out onto the streets, in the Sorbonne, represented the unhealthy tide of an hysterical symptom” (quoted in, and translated in English by, Ross 2002, 66). And it is in this sense that the political potential of May ’68 might not lie in the transgressive slogans that capital had no problem quilting onto a new signifying chain, the one that quickly gave the slogans against the family, the factory, and the school a neoliberal meaning. The signifier “Juifs allemands” has become the object of Derridean etiolated identification and Butlerian resignification as well as Rancièrian universalization;

what it has not become is the object of a revolutionary institutional sanction capable of subverting the signifier and quilting it onto a new signifying chain.

Finally, as mentioned above, Rancière's reading of "Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands" can help us escape the lure of treating his thought as a mere victim of the Anglo-American Derridean misreadings, and instead delineate a certain totality where Rancière's thought is the very source of the misreadings. The performativity thesis, the misreading according to which Rancière equates the aesthetic regime with political subversivity, can indeed be justified, yet not because the aesthetic regime is nonetheless somehow politically subversive but because Rancièrian politics itself is not truly subversive. As argued by such readers of Lacan as Jelica Šumič-Riha (see Sumic 2012) or Žižek (see Žižek 1999, 228–38, 169 n.27), Rancière's own examples of political subjectivation imply and thereby reproduce a non-barred Other, the Other as an autonomous instance of granting words to bodies. In this sense, Rancière's own horizon ought to be broadened in the direction that can be traced, with some charity of interpretation, already in Austin, especially in those propositions in which he effectively presents speech-act theory as a theory of the Other as convention and institution.

#### FROM MAY '68 TO OCTOBER '17: *OCTOBRE 2017*

Our critique of both Rancière's theory and its Anglo-American reception is, of course, already presupposed in his theory itself. There, it is called "metapolitics," the kind of politics that, starting with Marx, is said to look hysterically behind the appearance of actually existing politics to uncover, via symptomatic reading, its anti-political truth (see Rancière 1999, 81–93). Needless to say, "metapolitics," with its opposition between truth and appearance, is rejected by Rancière (who, however, strangely gives the alternative, the politics of aesthetic regime, the same name, as he incessantly ascribes to this regime of art "a politics or, more exactly, . . . a metapolitics" [Rancière 2009a, 99]). Yet our critique has uncovered the truth (the insufficient subversivity of the aesthetic regime, of the May '68 slogan, and of political subjectivation itself) in the appearance itself (that is, in an influential "misreading" of the aesthetic regime, in the materiality of the slogan's empty signifier, and in the aesthetics of political subjectivation), rather than behind it. And as a result, both the appearance and the truth behind the appearance have become parts of the same surface (and even this reflection on our critique, far from offering a metanarrative, sees the truth of the critique in its appearance, its manifest unfolding). As such, our critique has analyzed hysteria, rather than

practicing it, insofar as it has granted appearance the dignity of a staging, a hystericization, of truth. This critique of both the aesthetic regime and its performativist reception participated in symptomatic reading merely in the strict psychoanalytical sense in which the notion of the symptom was introduced precisely by Marx (see Lacan 2007a, 164) and in which Rancière's theory itself was reproached for clinging to a certain hysterical presupposition of the existence of the Other—the Other whose only actual existence, namely the non-all realm of institutions (starting with the institution of language), is the focus precisely of symptomatic reading.

It is this focus that ought not to be lost today, when, again, a century after the Left seized power, and half a century after it seized speech rather than power, the US shows the global Right how to seize power-as-hate-speech. In the US, a year before student protesters shouted “*Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands*” in front of the National Assembly in Paris, Martin Luther King had wanted “to get the language right”: “I want to get the language so right that everyone here will cry out: ‘Yes, I’m Black, I’m proud of it. I’m Black and I’m beautiful!’” (Quoted in Marbury 2015, 228 n.5.) Today, in the same country, it is political correctness that tries to get the language right. In this framework, “cultural and identity struggles inspire so much more passion and engagement than the political and the economic issues” that we now have a full-fledged academic culture of safe spaces and trigger warnings that, however, cannot “shield anyone from stepping outside the university and being exposed to the crudest kind of politically incorrect speech by none other than the American president” (Dolar 2017, 72, 73). It is not difficult to agree with the way Kristin Ross builds on Rancière's reading of “*Nous sommes tous des Juifs allemands*” (see Ross 2002, 57–58) to praise the grassroots tendencies of May '68, where change came from below rather than from a Leninist vanguard party (see Ross 2002, 75–79). It is more difficult to come to terms with the fact that this entailed the kind of change where what was meant to be seized was not power per se but speech. Perhaps the time has come to disentangle these two pairs—vanguard vs. grassroots, power vs. speech—as the first year of the current American president's first term is coming to an end without being bothered by the hegemony of political correctness. Perhaps change in October '17, that is, October two thousand seventeen, demands a seizure of power, not just speech; grassroots if not party-led, but nonetheless a seizure of power.

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