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## The Centrality of Disagreement

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**THE CENTRALITY OF DISAGREEMENT**

A Dissertation Presented

by

BRIAN T. CONNOR

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Sociology

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# THE CENTRALITY OF DISAGREEMENT

A Dissertation Presented

by

BRIAN T. CONNOR

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**ABSTRACT**

THE CENTRALITY OF DISAGREEMENT

SEPTEMBER 2014

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This dissertation brings the philosophical writings of Jacques Rancière to sociology through the examination of women's suffrage in the US from the late 18<sup>th</sup> through mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. The issue of equality takes center stage here, as Rancière's politics is based on the alteration of symbolic categories of equal and unequal. The result is a sociological theory of politics that claims disagreement, not consensus, must be at the base of any democratic politics that broadly seeks equality. Women's limited suffrage in New Jersey from 1776-1807, and the build up and proclamation of equality at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 are the cases examined to show the necessity of disagreement for equality in democratic politics.

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## CHAPTER 1

### RANCIÈRE AND SOCIAL THEORY

#### 1.1 Introduction

The study of politics has been a staple of sociology. From the discipline's theoretical forbearers to contemporary works in sub-disciplines as diverse as culture, organizations, and identities, politics has remained at the front of both sociological research and theory. Introducing a new theory of politics to an already large field of theories on the topic requires highlighting some new contribution or synthesis of ideas that can lead to a new understanding of politics at the empirical level.

The philosophy of Jacques Rancière is worthy of such incorporation into a sociological understanding of politics. His work is unique in two ways. First, it is a theory of politics as equality, yet not in a traditional Marxist sense of linking equality largely to anti-capitalist politics. Second, it is a generalist theory of politics, bringing together diverse strands of theories and epistemologies to create a theory that can apply to both macro and micro-analyses of politics. Rancière's work finds many analogues across social and sociological theory. Combining insights from Marx, Durkheim, symbolic interactionism, and intersectionality, among others, Rancière's philosophy takes up issues from numerous theoretical and epistemological traditions. The result is a theory that is centered on equality yet non-determinist; focused on both everyday moments of resistance and mass movements. The general versatility of a Rancière-inspired theory of politics for sociology gives it play in disciplinary subfields such as political sociology, social movement studies, cultural sociology, and other fields focused on identity and stratification.



Jacques Rancière's philosophy has yet to have much presence in US sociology, but has begun to take root in the US in fields such as literature (Rockhill 2004; Parker 2009), cultural studies (Conley 2009; Ferris 2009), political science (Dean 2009; Tambakaki 2009; Schaap 2011), philosophy (Hallward 2006; May 2010; Ularly 2011), and education (Pelletier 2009a; Den Heyer 2009). The breadth of his disciplinary reach reflects the range of writings he has done over the course of his career, from histories to art criticism to traditional philosophy. A student of Althusser's in the late 1960s, Rancière's work is centered on questions of equality and democracy, but his break with Althusser places him outside a traditional Marxist theoretical position. His approach to discipline, power, and social reproduction at times draws comparisons to Foucault (May 2010), and his optimism regarding 'common people' and the political capacities of the excluded put him in company with Paulo Freire and John Dewey (Liang 2009). The paradoxical qualities of his writings also bears resemblances to Gramsci, but the non-material foundations of his theory, and at the same time his emphasis on equality make him distinct from all of them.

Because of his myriad writings, a selective reading of his works is necessary to focus on his theory of democracy. These four main works – *Disagreement* (1999); *On the Shores of Politics* (1995); *Ten Theses on Politics* (2001); and *Hatred of Democracy* (2006) – lay out a democratic theory based on radical assumptions of democratic society and our understanding of equality. Drawing largely on these works, I will expand and bridge the main theoretical points necessary for a sociological theory of politics. The assumptions and terms are: the distribution of parts in democracy (and its miscount); the community of equals; interruption; and the politics/police distinction at center of

Rancière's theory of democracy. These four points (along with a few other minor ones) form the basis of a sociological theory of politics primarily concerned with radical equality. Where this chapter analyzes these concepts in relation to other popular social theorists, the following chapter will compare the concepts to sociological theories, creating a set of concepts better translated for sociology.

## **1.2 Democracy as Equality**

Equality is a central part of all democratic theories. In its simplest sense, democracy is a form of governance where all citizens have a say in the workings of the state. From representative democracy to deliberative or direct democracy, these models are premised on the assumption that all citizens are politically equal. This version of equality tends to be a limited version. In the public and political spheres, democratic theory in general requires equality among citizens. Non-public spheres are unrelated to this public equality, allowing the justification of various forms of inequalities in private spheres, so long as these do not (greatly) affect relations among citizens in the public sphere.

Rancière's theory of politics is centered on a radical conception of democracy, one that posits absolute equality in all aspects of life. This treatment of democracy expands the boundaries of political systems beyond the realm of state and civil society, opening up myriad locations for where democracy exists. Democracy as equality is a mode of being that can manifest itself in any social location, between any social groups or actors.

Linking democracy and equality to all human existence or social spheres has been a common theme in contemporary post-Marxist theories of democracy.<sup>1</sup> Chantal Mouffe, Ernesto Laclau, Alain Badiou, and Jean-Luc Nancy all theorize about democracy and politics centered on its relation to equality in any human or social relationship. What sets Rancière apart from these other theorists, and why his work is more relevant to sociology, is: (1) his creation of a theory of politics that remains linked to the social as opposed to strictly the philosophical; (2) a critical understanding of democracy and equality that rejects any romanticism or notion that democracy can by itself create equality, or that equality is some state that can be achieved.

### **1.3 Rancière's Politics**

#### **1.3.1 The Parts and Miscounts of Democratic Society**

Rancière starts *Disagreement* with a dialogue on the classics, drawing on Aristotle and Plato to find what the foundation of democratic politics might be. The ideal city for these philosophers was one where *blaberon*, or the harm or unpleasantness that can happen to someone, was eliminated, leaving only its supposed opposite, *sumpheron* (Rancière 1999: 3-4). This is a city where justice is not based on interpersonal harm, but on "...the way the forms of exercising and of controlling the exercising of this common capacity are divided up" (5). From this vantage point, justice means, "not taking more... or less than one's share..." of advantageous or disadvantageous things (5).

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<sup>1</sup> Theories of democracy have always centered on equality, but in many, if not most instances, that equality has only been granted to some of the population. From the slaves of Athens to the various restrictions of democratic politics throughout the history of the US, the practice of democracy has rarely, if ever, been centered on equality for *all*.

This conception of justice is flawed, Rancière argues, because in its attempt to create a simple mathematical harmony of the common and of parties in the city, it creates the wrong, or *blaberon*, it seeks to avoid.

For the city to be ordered according to the good, community shares must be strictly in proportion to the *axia* of each part of the community: to the *value* it brings the community and to the *right* that this value bestows on it to hold a share of the common power (Rancière 1999: 6).

The classics treat these values as representative of three groups: the wealth of the *oligoï*, the virtue of the *aristoï*, and the freedom of the *demos*. These parties, or parts, make up the (ancient) community, where each of these groups counter each other (“the oligarchy of the rich, the aristocracy of the good, or the democracy of the people” (6)), and produce the ideal, non-democratic society based in justice. The problem with this accounting of parts is that, at least for the *demos*, it is a false count. The freedom of the *demos* is merely the freedom from enslavement by the *oligoï*: it “was transformed into the appearance of a freedom that was to be the positive property of the people as part of the community” (7). In other words, the *demos* supposedly has freedom because it lacks the other values of the community, yet these other parts have freedom because their wealth and virtue provide them the ability to exercise their wills. The *oligoï* and *aristoï*, by virtue of possessing qualities the *demos* lacks, make up what Rancière calls the rich. The *demos* are the poor.

However, Rancière claims the *demos* provides themselves with one unique quality – equality with all other citizens (Rancière 1999: 8). Because freedom is the only thing that links rich and poor, it challenges the making of the city parts. There can be no construction of the just based entirely in *sumpheron* because the division of parts is a miscount. “The people [*demos*] are not one class among others. They are the class of the wrong that harms the community and establishes it as a ‘community’ of the just and

unjust” (9). The poor receive no real part compared to the rich. Having a part in this system is being the rich. This is the paradoxical founding of politics for Rancière: any foundation of the just is in fact based on injustice, or the miscounting of parts.

Rancière’s use of the terms rich and poor to describe those with and without parts can help clarify what a part is, especially when thinking about politics outside the civil sphere. As mentioned, a part represents some advantageous quality, value, or resource that a group of people possesses. Having a part puts one into the group of the rich. The poor lack this part: “[w]hoever has no part – the poor of ancient times, the third estate, the proletariat – cannot in fact have any part other than all or nothing” (Rancière 1999: 9). Having a part in a certain sphere means having power in that sphere: the rights of a citizen in a democratic civil sphere; the possession of wealth and the means of production in the economic sphere; or self-determination in the domestic sphere. This power gives rise to equality among the rich. The poor, or those without part, create moments of politics through reconstructing the boundaries and relationships between the rich and poor. This reconstruction, Rancière warns, will then create a new grouping of rich and poor. In all social formations, there will be a miscount, and a part without part (Rancière 1995: 84).

This continuous process of miscounts, interruptions, and new (mis)counts raises the question of who is doing this counting of parts? This counting is part of the problem with the foundation of politics. Though Rancière does not directly address this question, the count is done by those who make up the community of equals in that sphere. Discussed in more detail below, the community of equals is a group that holds all rights and privileges that one could acquire in a particular sphere. This community maintains

their borders of included/excluded through police. A new count would only take place after a moment of politics, where some excluded subjectivity demands inclusion to this community of equals. The paradox of counting is that any new count only consists of the newly formed community of equals, again miscounting some other excluded subjectivity. Only those who are equal, or more specifically equal in terms of holding power in that sphere, can count.

### **1.3.2 Community of Equals**

Building up from a miscounted distribution of parts, Rancière sets up the distinction between those who are considered full members of society with an equal share of parts, and those excluded, or “the part with without a part.” The former is the community of equals, a grouping of subjects who are entitled to the rights and privileges the society has to offer. This group is contingent and shifting, yet always constructing itself as natural (Rancière 1995: 84). The community of equals is a symbolic, socially constructed, and malleable marker between those who have full equality and those who lack it to varying degrees. It’s opposite is the part without, or the excluded. In democratic society, this part without is often times hidden, or its existence is denied entirely (Rancière 1999: 14). The community of equals then is never fully inclusive, as it produces its own inequalities.

Hannah Arendt’s work on rights and the difference between human and citizen mirror some of Rancière’s concerns on surrounding the community of equals and those excluded from it. However, as Schaap (2011) forcefully argues, there is a sharp

difference between the two when analyzing the rights of the excluded compared to the included.

Arendt speaks of rights while analyzing the problem of statelessness. In her discussions, she sets up a dichotomy between the human, which represents mere life, and the citizen, representing the good life. Being a citizen means belonging to a community – a political one that allows for members to speak and be heard (Arendt 1958). For those who are stateless or not citizens,

...they no longer belong to any community whatsoever. Their plight is not that they are not equal before the law, but that no law exists for them; not that they are oppressed but that nobody wants even to oppress them (Arendt 1968: 295-6).

The non-existence, or at least undesirability, of the stateless matches Rancière's "part without a part" fairly well. Both confront exclusion to a larger community that denies or hides their existence. However, Arendt takes the difference between those with rights and the rightless to a level that creates an ontological gap between herself and Rancière.

The rightless for Arendt are denied more than equality, or access to a community of equals. They are denied human rights, or lack the right to have rights (Arendt 1968: 296). The lack of access to the political community leaves the stateless without human rights, "...the loss of the relevance of speech... and the loss of all human relationship... the loss, in other words, of some of the most essential characteristics of human life" (Arendt 1968: 297). This linking of human rights as the rights of the citizen is problematic, Rancière claims, as it places human rights in a paradox: they are either the rights of the citizen or nothing, the rights of the poor and excluded (Rancière 2010b: 67). In other words, just like the problem of the miscount discussed earlier, the stateless either lack human rights, or it is a false right that results in it becoming meaningless. Schaap

(2011) notes that in Rancière's politics, the subject as citizen or stateless is not the defining marker of rights (or equality). "The subject that claims its human rights emerges in the interval between the identities of citizen and human..." (Schaap 2011: 34). There is no room for the rightless in Arendt's political community; Rancière's politics as an enactment of equality allows subjects to move from excluded to included, from rightless to citizen. Rancière's politics affords the excluded both rights and the ability to express them against the lack of inclusion to the community of equals (34). The ontological difference between Rancière and Arendt on rights and politics leads to competing characterizations of subjects and their relation to the community of equals. Arendt creates a static division between citizen and the rightless that leaves little room for the excluded to actively achieve equality. Rancière's focus on the expressive and performative aspects of politics allows for subjects to recognize their unequal state without giving up any semblance of human rights.

Agamben draws on Arendt's ideas of rights and incorporates a Foucaultian analysis of biopower to create a contemporized theory of rightlessness. Like Arendt, Agamben sets up a distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, mere life and political life (Agamben 1998:1). Instead of staying with Arendt's distinction between those who have rights and those who do not, Agamben draws on Foucault to show how modern states use biopolitical practices to erode the distinction between *zoe* and *bios*. The result is the creation of bare life, a state of existence between inclusion and exclusion, between oppression and freedom (38). Agamben's theory is one that deconstructs the community of equals, as his argument is centered on the trend in governance from freedom to



surveillance (174-76). Those with and without a part in this theory are being lumped into one category – perhaps as equals but all as equals in a system of biopower.

The same critique that Rancière levels against Arendt can also be applied to Agamben. Though Agamben attempts to show a new grouping of individuals between the realms of rights and rightlessness, this positioning of subjects in a state of exception still is one that precludes these subjectivities from acting with regard to the political community. Biopower, Rancière argues, is tied entirely to Agamben's conception of politics, creating a depoliticizing trap where "...politics gets equated with power and power itself gets increasingly construed as an overwhelming historico-ontological destiny from which only a God can save us" (Rancière 2010b: 67). Once again, the subject is ontologically defined in a way that seemingly precludes the subject living in a state of exception to act politically so to enter a community of equals. For Rancière communities of equals can never be understood as static entities where the excluded are incapable of acting on their own to gain equality.

### **1.3.3 Politics**

Politics for Rancière is ineluctably tied to police. These concepts form the content of what we normally consider all political action to fall under. Rancière, however, considerably narrows the definition of what politics can be. To say it briefly, politics is the struggle over the distribution of parts and membership in the community of equals.

Whether this [excluded] part exists is *the* political issue and it is the object of political litigation. Political struggle is not a conflict between well defined interest groups; it is an opposition of logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways (Rancière 2001: 6:19).

Rancière's unique definition of politics shows that the foundational aspect of politics is inclusion. Subjectivities are struggling not over resources but logics – ones that recognize the excluded as deserving membership to the community of equals versus others that do not. Challenging the exclusion from the community of equals addresses a fundamental wrong that transcends typical conflicts, as it represents a “radical otherness” between parts of the society (Rancière 1995: 97). Politics is an attempt to address, and ultimately solve, the problem of otherness so that the excluded no longer represent that radical outsider. This changes the nature of politics compared to traditional political theory. Material interests and pre-existing subjectivities (such as class-based ones), both popular explanations for how politics emerge, are rejected. Replacing these is a theory of politics that is not based in pre-existing subjects but in the relationship of ruling and being ruled, “which is not a relationship between subjects, but one between two contradictory terms through which a subject is defined” (Rancière 2001: 1:4). Politics attempts to uncover this other definition of the subject, one that posits no one person or group can hold mastery over another.

The interruption of a political moment is more than the performance of politics. It is the dissensus that is the essence of politics (Rancière 2001 8:24). Rancière draws on a metaphor of two worlds – one is the police order, or “natural” order with its partition of parts and the divisible, and the second is the world of the new subjectivity or demand. “Politics makes visible that which had no reason to be seen, it lodges one world into another...” (Rancière 2001: 8:24). In other words, politics is an interruption into the realm of what exists in its divisions and parts with the demand for equality. Politics as interruption makes the form of politics contingent and ephemeral. Contingent in that

there is no predetermined subject or place of politics, and ephemeral in that it is present only when there are subjects demanding equality:

A political subject is not a group of interests or ideas: It is the operator of a particular mode of subjectification and litigation through which politics has its existence. Political demonstrations are thus always of the moment and their subjects are always provisional. Political difference is always on the shore of its own disappearance... (Rancière 2001: 8:25).

If we are concerned with a politics of radical equality, then disagreement (in the form of interruption) becomes the key component of a democratic politics of equality.

Jean-Luc Nancy and Alain Badiou both center their own versions of politics on the question of equality. Nancy's conception of democracy and politics is taken as a spirit before a form (Nancy 2010: 14-15). Rather than speak about democracy in terms of social equality, Nancy uses commonality as the base of democracy, which is a will "...where what is expressed and recognized is a true possibility of being *all together, all and each one among all*" (Nancy 2010: 14). Politics in this form of democracy is recognizing the incommensurability between individuals. There is no liberal, individualized equivalence among actors. It is the nonequivalent affirmation of equality that forms the base and space for politics (24-5). Democracy, in fact, makes the political possible (Brault and Naas 2010: xi). Where Rancière's politics shares this affirmation of equality as the basis of politics, Nancy's treatment of democracy as a spirit leaves his politics as a psychological-philosophical.

Rancière's limited but radical definition of politics is also similar to Alain Badiou's. In fact, Badiou "sees himself" in many of Rancière's concepts (Badiou 2005: 116). Both Badiou and Rancière offer theories of politics and the political that are based in the idea of politics as an opening that can bring about equality. What sets Rancière

apart, and what makes his work a better fit for the social sciences, is his rooting of politics in history as opposed to Badiou's non-temporal treatment of political moments (116-7).

Badiou treats politics as a matter of truths – the implementation and deconstruction of truths, and the process of creating and challenging these truths. This “truth procedure” becomes politics through the complex relationship between the multiplicity and infinity of human existence meeting the particular and singular moments of (political) events that challenge the “state of the situation,” the presented composition of the collective (Badiou 2005: 141-4). Politics interrupts this “state” by rejecting the closed boundaries and particular truths that this state presents as being universal. Politics as emancipation opens up what Badiou calls the “infinity of the situation,” the open ontology of human relations (142-3). “The infinite comes into play in every truth procedure, but only in politics does it take first place. This is because only in politics is deliberation about the possible (and hence about the infinity of the situation) constitutive of the process itself” (143).

Both Badiou and Rancière focus on the emancipatory potential of politics. Their theories both treat politics as a process meant to deconstruct and overturn a set of relationships between subjects or truths. Badiou claims one difference between himself and Rancière is how the two of them root politics in universalities and historical contexts.<sup>2</sup> For both theorists, politics is taken as a singular moment of a “mode of

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<sup>2</sup> Badiou criticizes Rancière on a number of fronts in *Metapolitics*. One in particular worth mentioning is Badiou's claim that Rancière ignores the militancy of a political moment, instead viewing politics as “...phantom masses against an unnamed State. But the real situation demands instead that we pit a few rare political militants against the ‘democratic’ hegemony of the parliamentary State...” (Badiou 2005: 121-2). These interruptions, in other words, do not originate as mass movements. They are radical demands coming

subjectification” (Badiou 2005: 116). The difference lies in their conception of political moments as singularities:

...Rancière’s understanding of singularity, as pure historical occurrence, ...must be ‘carried’ as it were by the unequal of the State, or in other words by history. This is not the case with my thought of politics as truth process, for singularity is determined in its being (this is generic reality) and has no relation as such to historical time, for it constitutes its own time through and through (Badiou 2005: 117).

Badiou’s politics is one that is universal and non-temporal. It is a general interruption that is not bounded to specific historical contexts. Rancière’s politics, however, is one that is completely tied to the historical contingencies surrounding the event. Because politics is an ephemeral moment, it remains tied to the conditions that allowed the possibility of the moment to occur. While Badiou’s critique of Rancière may be an important philosophical one, for the social sciences it is in fact a positive trait of Rancière’s politics. To make use of his theory in the social sciences, some connection must be made between the political (as opposed to the philosophical) and the social. Badiou seeks to erase this connection.

#### **1.3.4 Police**

Police is generally what happens when questions of equality and parts are absent from what we usually consider to be political actions. Rancière first characterizes police in *Disagreement* as “the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution” (Rancière 1999: 28). In *Ten Theses*, Rancière focuses on the symbolic form of police as the “partition of the sensible,”

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from counter-hegemonic discourses, and must be built up and strengthened to become some form of enacted change.

...characterized by the absence of a void or a supplement: society consists of groups dedicated to specific modes of action, in places where these occupations are exercised, in modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this fittingness of functions, places, and ways of being, there is no place for a void. It is this exclusion of what “there is not” that is the police-principle at the heart of statist practices (Rancière 2001: 7:21).

Police both “allows participation” and “separates and excludes,” yet it is “neither repression nor even control over the living” (Rancière 2001: 7:20). This challenging conceptualization of police can make its application to sociology appear daunting.

However, it is best applied by thinking what is at stake in the action – does it demand an entirely new configuration of relations between subjectivities or do they remain given?

Rancière writes, “[a] strike is not political when it calls for reforms rather than a better deal or when it attacks the relationships of authority rather than the inadequacy of wages.

It is political when it reconfigures the relationships that determine the workplace in its relation to the community” (Rancière 1999: 32). Looking at the “there is not” or the void is exposing the contradictory logics over parts and doing politics. This disrupts a

“natural” order, or the community with its naturalized division of parts and roles (Rancière 2001: 6:19). The absence of this disruption is police.

To better understand police, it can be helpful to see it as two interrelated parts: the boundaries of the natural order and the management of that order. “[Police] structures perceptual space in terms of places, functions, aptitudes, etc., to the exclusion of any supplement” (Rancière 2010c: 92). In this sense, police attempts to create a total social order where all groups and parts are accounted for. However, this order is based on a false count, so a “supplement” exists that makes itself known through politics. This understanding of police and the natural order has parallels between it and hegemony studies based in the works of Gramsci, where hegemonic orders allow or ignore various

identities, cultures, or actions depending on their fit in capitalist society (Hall et al. 1978; Willis 1977). Discussed in more detail in chapter four, the natural order is the result of successful police practices. A stable natural order is one where certain inequalities are justified, naturalized, or ignored and invisible. Politics, because it deconstructs the relationship between subjectivities, also deconstructs a given natural order.

The second understanding of police is akin to governmentality studies, where social order is maintained but done so without fundamental shifts in the distribution of parts (Ong 2003, 2006; Miller and Rose 2008; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Brown 2006). Police is not a *force* such as a police officer or other coercive officer of the state. It is a *logic* that is part of the everyday functioning of society: in symbolic and material aspects of life, in coercive force and consensual action. Police links the divisions of parts in society with the management and governance of subjects in that society.

Foucault's work on governmentality and biopower are the closest analogue to this understanding of police. In fact, both police and governmentality have a similar genealogy and concern for the "health of the state" (May 2008: 41). Foucault's lectures on political governmentality (Foucault 2007) and neoclassical governmentality (Foucault 2008) both show the operations systems of governance for political and economic subjects, or the structuring of "perceptual space" of police. Baiocchi and Connor (2013) analyze the similarities and differences between police and governmentality, arguing that while the two concepts are similar, Rancière's rests in a larger theory of politics that differentiates politics geared towards enacting equality versus politics that is rooted in the technocratic management of the self and state.

Rancière argues that he and Foucault have different ontological standpoints from which to address politics. Foucault's politics is reduced to biopower and biopolitics, "an ontology of individuation" rather than something where the subject and community intersect (Rancière 2010c: 94, 93). Politics is reduced to (bio)power, leaving no room for the supplement. A total social system is created in Foucault's biopower that depoliticizes because it ignores the miscounted part. Like Arendt and Agamben, Foucault leaves no room for the excluded and their ability to demand inclusion to a community of equals.

#### **1.4 Conclusion**

Rancière's theory of politics, as outlined above, is a unique take on politics as equality. It is the demand for equality from a "part without a part" or "supplement" to the natural order that is the essence of politics. Rancière celebrates the abilities of these excluded subjectivities to enact politics, setting his theories apart from the depoliticizing tendencies of Arendt, Agamben, and Foucault. Where these theories set up totalizing theories of inclusion/exclusion or control, Rancière's politics allows room for the excluded to act on their own behalf. At the same time, his theory of politics remains connected to temporal contingencies, creating a theory better suited for the social sciences compared to the more abstract philosophies of Badiou and Nancy.

To create a sociological theory of politics based in Rancière's work, however, some of these concepts need tailoring to fit a sociological framework. The following chapter will reconstruct a sociological version of Rancière's theory, looking at how this theory of politics has many similarities, yet remains distinct, from major sociological theories.



## CHAPTER 2

### RECONSTRUCTING RANCIÈRE: THE POLITICS OF EQUALS

#### 2.1 Introduction

Rancière's political philosophy, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a unique symbolic take on politics, democracy, and equality. Treating politics in a narrow but radical sense as the interruption of regimes of governance with the demand for equality, Rancière challenges traditional sociological assumptions of what politics is and where a political moment comes from. Rather than ignore this challenge as something incommensurable with sociology, his political philosophy has the potential to enliven sociological debates on topics like resistance, equality, and civil society.

To bring Rancière's philosophy into dialogue with the social sciences means providing more concrete definitions to relevant sociological concepts. This process of translation makes Rancière more accessible to social science, but runs the risk of limiting or expanding the meanings of key concepts and ideas. The result is a sociological theory of politics that is, if not Rancièrean, at least Rancière-inspired. Philosophy taken in its abstract sense makes for a difficult translation to the social sciences. Rancière's philosophy must undergo considerable reconstruction to be useful for sociology, and the process of translation leads to the unpacking of philosophical "black boxes" that philosophers take for granted (Latour 1987). These black boxes are concepts and ideas that are taken as vague givens, and lack detailed description or analysis. For philosophy, concepts like society, the state, and institutions make up black boxes of the discipline. They remain vague givens because they generally fall outside the purview of philosophy,

and extended discussions and definitions of them provide little benefit for many philosophical works. Building a sociological theory based on these philosophical black boxes in effect creates a new theory – one that is largely based in Rancière, but incorporating various sociological insights and concepts when necessary.

This chapter turns Rancière’s political philosophy into a sociological theory of politics – the Politics of Equality. The Politics of Equality is based on a sociological reconstruction of a number of Rancière’s concepts – equality, community of equals, police, and politics. Re-imagining these concepts for sociology highlights a particular paradox of democratic politics where the institutionalization of emancipatory moments creates new forms of inequality. It is largely a symbolic theory, based in the challenge of an unequal distribution of “parts,” or places in a community of equals. It is also decentered, meaning that politics can occur in any sphere – public or private – and though these spheres may be connected, equality must be fought for in each sphere. Equality is an ongoing project with constantly shifting borders in each sphere. Myriad fields of politics are constantly in flux, with actors pushing for more or less equality for particular subjectivities. The Politics of Equality is a theoretical lens that seeks to uncover and explain how this struggle over equality emerges and can bring about concrete changes in the status of subjectivities in society.

## **2.2 Equality**

The concept of equality is simple in its abstract form, but increases in complexity when used closer to the empirical world. Equality for Rancière is based on two interrelated ideas. First, equality means no person holds mastery over another (Rancière

1991). In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière argues that in an equal relationship the teacher does not transmit knowledge but instead provides the tools for the student to utilize in order for her to gain that knowledge. When a teacher lectures, only selected parts of that knowledge are transmitted; the teacher withholds certain information and retains mastery of the subject over the student. The illiterate father, Rancière argues, can teach his son how to read, negating the need for the “expert” teacher. The student has the possibility and ability to learn as much as the expert, without that person confining what is or is not relevant or useful for attaining that knowledge. While certainly controversial, this take on expertise and mastery is meant to apply to any and all social constructions of mastery and expertise over others. To be equal means rejecting and fighting relationships where the expert or a position of power allows for domination and control over others.

Second, Rancière’s equality also means everyone holds the same rights and privileges as any other. As discussed in Chapter One, democratic societies naturally produce inequalities, where certain subjectivities are placed in unequal standing, or even outright excluded from being considered part of the community. Equality that entails sharing all rights and privileges means parsing down the specific sphere or community of equals in question, and understanding what this absolute equality would look like in that community.

Finally, Rancièrian equality focuses less on some version of absolute equality as an end state, and instead examines equality as a process that drives politics. Politics, simply put, is a subjectivity that is enacting or verifying the actual equality between all (Rancière 1991: 138). Inequality is also treated as a process, or something that emerges from the police order (governmental politics) and naturalizes supposed differences

between subjectivities. Treating equality as a process helps sociologists from taking a utopian or romantic stance on fighting inequality that posits real equality will arise with some specific challenge to the political, economic, or some other sphere. Inequalities will always exist and be justified or ignored, and focusing on equality as process is meant to keep sociology focused on excluded subjectivities and their “unintelligible” discourse, forgotten issues, or even reactionary claims against equality for some.

### **2.2.1 The Problem of Equality in Sociology**

This conceptualization places equality at the starting point of any analysis of the social world. For Rancière, the problem with sociology is that the discipline starts with the opposite – inequality – and only seeks to reaffirm or recreate that inequality. Pelletier (2009a; 2009b) argues that Rancière’s critique of social science finds two problems: the scientist and the social.

The scientist, even one attempting to fight inequalities, tends to reproduce inequalities through their production of “expert” knowledge (Pelletier 2009a). Analyzing Rancière’s critique on Bourdieu and education, Pelletier claims,

From this perspective, Bourdieu’s analysis of the division of knowledge between social groups appears as an *explanation* of inequality: the poor do not succeed academically *because* they cannot formulate scholarly discourse, as a consequence of their habitus. Rancière’s counter to this is that the poor do not succeed academically because their discourse is not treated or ‘heard’ as scholarly – and that this is precisely what Bourdieu’s sociology also does (Pelletier 2009a: 10 emphasis in original).

Equality, or the verification of it, should be the starting point of social analysis (Pelletier 2009b). Assuming the poor “cannot formulate... discourse,” in any sphere or field leads to a reconstruction of inequality where the sociologist-as-expert does not recognize the

discourse of an Other as befitting that sphere. The reflexive sociologist, Rancière argues, is only reflexive regarding their position as expert in scientific discourse. They remain unreflexive of their role as creator of inequality by virtue of claiming their science gives them expertise and knowledge that is more valid than non-scientific discourse (Pelletier 2009b).

Social science is also problematic because of the depoliticizing action of much research that roots actions to social locations and groups, cementing these categories (Pelletier 2009b). This second problem stems from tendencies in social science to treat identity categories and social locations in a fixed manner. Though most social scientists would recognize the complexity of identities, categories, and social locations, much research brackets that complexity in favor of a generalized black box or ideal type. In doing so, social science oriented towards equality at best achieves partial success. The fixity of categories may benefit some, but it leaves some Other as a poor fit for the category or location completely outside of the ideal type. Pelletier writes,

Rancière's point is to show the way in which critiques of domination based on presumed 'dominated' identities pre-empt the very possibility for equality that such critiques are supposed to open up. In other words, the presumption of a pre-constituted... identity works to reinforce inequality rather than the other way round (Pelletier 2009a: 10).

What Pelletier (and Rancière) call for is not entirely new. Feminist theory, and the work of Judith Butler (1990; 1997) in particular, has shown the limitations of taking broad identity categories and the exclusion and even oppression that comes from this system of generalization. However, taken with Rancière's critique of the social scientist as expert, the two critiques point to the stratifying tendencies of social science research.

One solution for social science – in both the problems of the social *and* the

scientist - is based in performativity and the struggle against static conceptions of identity. “[E]quality is made perceivable or imaginable, by representing it as a kind of doing, in and through which political subjects are constituted” (Pelletier 2009a: 10). It means distancing studies from the social because society itself is ordering, and therefore hierarchical (Pelletier 2009b). Social science research should turn away from looking at specific *categories* and *identities* and their hierarchical placement in a sphere, and instead focus on the *processes* that lead to distinctions between “...intelligible and unintelligible, essential and inessential, theoretical and practical...” (Pelletier 2009a: 13-14). Sociological research then confronts (in)equality through analyzing discursive formations and actions that either uphold or challenge a natural order.

The limits of this approach is that the study of equality becomes limited to either descriptions of ephemeral, individualized moments of politics or Foucaultian genealogies of repressive discourses that separate discourse from noise. The morphology of politics from moment to movement to institutionalization is ignored, as singular political demands provide equality for some and deny it to others. This is the paradox of politics for sociology. Any and all political moments that move beyond individualized performances narrow the scope of discourse and intelligibility. Rather than ignoring the larger process of politics as a whole, the Politics of Equals must build off performatives of equality and explain and theorize how these moments succeed and fail, and show the subjectivities who remain relevant to the political moment and those who are ignored or excluded. Tracing the “verification of equality” from localized moments to potential institutionalization provides sociology a way to recognize and move beyond the paradox of politics.

### 2.2.2 The Communities of Equals

The community of equals, as defined in the previous chapter, is a symbolic, malleable grouping of those who have the full rights and privileges of a particular community or sphere. Rancière labels those outside the community of equals as “the part without a part,” and claims their existence is usually ignored, hidden or denied (Rancière 1999: 14). While this has certainly been true for some subjectivities, others hold tiered membership in a community of equals. Some rights may be conferred, but others denied. Sociological theorists have written extensively on both communities/spheres, and degrees of inequality in and among spheres. These works all point to a commonality between Rancière’s philosophical community of equals and sociological conceptions of spheres, fields, identities, and inequality.

Where Rancière treats membership in a community of equals as an all or nothing proposition, sociological works show that this is rarely the case. The works of Simmel, Bourdieu, and Alexander all show that the relationship of equal/unequal is the result of individualized action in group formation (Simmel 1955a), interactions between capitals and habitus (Bourdieu 1984), and structuring codes that delineate roles and parts in a sphere (Alexander 2006). However, a Rancièrian community of equals remains unique through its treatment of equality, and treating the “poor”<sup>3</sup> as being denied the ability to be properly heard, instead of unable to achieve or succeed in a community (Pelletier 2009b). Where, for example, a Bourdieusian field or Durkheimian solidarity sphere describe the situations of actors within the sphere, Rancièrian communities show the false distinctions

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<sup>3</sup> “Poor” being a generalized marker Rancière uses as marker for the excluded and forgotten subjectivities in a community of equals. See Rancière (2004).

and dichotomies that deny the excluded and forgotten the ability to be heard in the same manner as the included.

At the level of individualized interaction, the Politics of Equals challenges conceptions of “understanding” between subjects interacting in a particular sphere. A community of equals puts forward particularized sets of social relationships and meanings between people. Some hierarchies are open and public, others hidden or obfuscated. These specific relations emerge through processes of conflict and cooperation that set boundaries of groups and relations between individuals. Conflict, Simmel argues, is a necessary component of society because it helps define boundaries between an “us” and “them,” and is “...designed to resolve dualisms; it is a way of achieving some kind of unity, even if it be through annihilation of one of the conflicting parties” (Simmel 1955a: 13). If inter-group conflict produces some degree of hierarchy in society, then competition brings about intra-group hierarchies. A group has leaders and followers, and people of various statuses in the group (Simmel 1955b: 152-3). However, these groups and hierarchies merely reinforce the natural order of the community of equals. Understanding in this community comes from communicating via accepted discourses that place specific subjectivities into specific roles. Unequal subjectivities are not heard in terms of their own discourse, they are only heard when communicating through the hegemonic discourse of the community of equals. In this sense, understanding is not merely successful communication, it is communication that deconstructs the relationships between subjects in a community.

Bourdieuian sociologists and field theorists would reject the simple equal/unequal divide of Rancière’s community of equals, arguing that fields are more



broadly structured and represent hierarchies based in various intersecting forms of economic, cultural, and social capitals (Bourdieu 1984; Martin 2003; Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984) is perhaps the most detailed account of a field, mapping the relationship between economic and cultural capitals and tastes in various cultural products. This work, and the numerous others inspired by it (Peterson and Kern 1996; Bryson 1996; Hennion 2001; Johnston and Baumann 2007) argue that elites in various fields have specific tastes that separate them from people of lower classes. The conclusion of this and other Bourdieusian works, at least from a Rancièrian perspective, is that those who are poor or lacking in capitals are perceived to be incapable of understanding or appreciating certain cultural products (Pelletier 2009b: 14). The poor are not allowed a public voice to appreciate these things (such as classical music) in their own discourse. Appreciation of "elite" cultural products can only be understood with elite discourse.

The community of equals is not structured like a field in the sense that a topic like taste is not based in a singular discourse. A community of equals (in its most ideal-typical sense) allows for differing discourses to be taken at the same face value. There is no singular way in which to appreciate or understand a cultural product. Rather, any and all interpretations must be understood in their own terms, separated from the symbolic power of those expressing judgment on that object. Applying this to communities and fields that are seen as more politicized than aesthetics means understanding the discourse of others as they do, not from our own preconceived definitions of politics, identity, or equality.

The issue of being heard, or being intelligible as an excluded or unequal member in a community brings the community of equals into dialogue with Durkheimian studies on solidarity spheres and civil repair. Alexander (2006) persuasively theorizes on the relationship between sacred codes and the relationship of actors in the democratic civil sphere. This sphere, as opposed to others, is structured by codes of equality for all citizens. Equality in the democratic civil sphere is both a guiding principle and a state of being that is constantly coming closer to being fully enacted (9). The relationship between the democratic civil sphere and other non-civil spheres such as the economic, religious, or domestic spheres is a contested one where solidarity replaces equality as the guiding principle. Hierarchy and inequality can exist in non-civil spheres, so long as these relationships are not terribly exploitative or affect relations in the civil sphere (266, 241).

The Politics of Equals sociology recognizes the importance of sacred codes in various spheres that help structure communities of equals. However, a Rancièrian perspective, concerned with equality above all else, challenges the valuation of solidarity above equality. A sphere with high solidarity may in fact merely be one in which excluded subjectivities either accept their position or are unable to be heard properly. The Politics of Equals turns the solidarity-equality relationship on its head: only the constant enacting of equality by all, in any community, produces solidarity. It is through verifying equality and understanding the discourse of all subjectivities that any solidarity can be produced.

### 2.3 Politics

From studies on mobilization and consensus building (Polletta 2006; Snow and Benford 1992; Lichterman 1996, 2005; Auyero 2001; Jacobs 2000) to strategies of action (Wood 2002; Fantasia 1989) and even inaction (Eliasoph 1998), great attention has been paid to the processes and actions of an organized movement in regards to social change. Yet when much of this literature discusses outcomes, gains and losses are largely taken at face value. A wage increase is treated the same as collectivizing a factory. Rancière challenges us to look beyond simple results to see what they mean in terms of equality in a particular community of equals. The politics of equality centers on *symbolic* markers of equality that alter the material composition of roles and parts in that community of equals. Disagreement over the rights and roles of subjectivities must be paramount concern in the Politics of Equals, not the resources various groups may or may not receive.

Other types of political action fall into what Rancière calls police. Though lacking the radical demand for equality, many forms of police are in fact quite beneficial to society as a whole, from environmental movements to improving the quality of life of the working poor. Rather than dismiss these political actions from being considered politics, it is better to label them as a separate form of politics. Baiocchi and Connor (2013) call police *governmental politics*, noting the similarities between Rancière's police and Foucault's governmentality. Both concepts focus on the governing and managing subjects under a stable system of parts and roles. Resistance to governmental regimes typically centers over issues of resources and their distribution, not symbolic questions of who holds rights and privileges in that community of equals (Baiocchi and Connor 2013:

97). This distinction between the Politics of Equals and governmental politics is a reminder that not all forms of progressive politics do the same thing – some are concerned with bettering the material conditions of unequal groups, where others are concerned with being accepted as fully equal members in a community of equals. Understanding this difference allows us to see trajectories and potential long-term effects that a movement has on society.

Rancière treats politics as a theatrical interruption where the excluded perform or enact politics (Hallward 2006). An interruption is a break in the logic of dispositions and parts in a society (Rancière 2001). The break, he argues, is a radical one because it deconstructs the relationships between subjectivities and more importantly the logic of exclusion (Rancière 1999: 39). The interruption, or moment of politics, needs further elucidation for sociological studies of politics. The theatrical or performative aspects of politics must be examined to uncover a bridge between the everyday politics of performativity, the large movement-based politics of performance studies, and the institutionalization of the claims of successful social movements. Further theoretical extension is needed to see both how the Politics of Equals arises, and what happens between that movement and some institutionalized change. Rancière leaves both, and particularly the latter, under-theorized. Sociological studies of politics already do much of this work, providing heuristics and methodologies of understanding what happens before and after a political interruption.

Sociological translations of Rancière also question the nature of the interruption, specifically its radical nature. Neo-Durkheimian research has provided the strongest case that the politics of equality may not always be as radical as advertised. In many instances

of politics in the US, they find that previously existing cultural codes are merely re-applied onto an excluded subjectivity. Finally, the politics of equality must look beyond celebrations of increased equality in society and examine the opposite: attempts to reduce spheres of equality in various communities of equals. Myriad political parties and movements seek to reduce the rights and privileges of subjectivities in various spheres, be they undocumented migrants, racial and ethnic minorities, or members of the LGBT community.

### **2.3.1 Politics, Performatives and Performance**

As previously discussed, Rancièrian politics is best described as the enactment of equality. In this sense, politics is performative, as it is a discourse that produces both specific logics (of a subjectivity as an equal) and real effects in society where others must address this political enactment (Wedeen 2008: 15). At its core, the Politics of Equals is an individualized action meant to both deconstruct previous constructions of subjects and discourse and replace it with a new one that includes this subjectivity.

Like other performative theories (Butler 1990; Austin 1975; Derrida 1988), Rancièrian politics has been best understood through analyzing specific acts of politics (Rancièrè 2012 [1989]; May 2010; Chambers 2009) or from highlighting structures that construct and maintain dichotomies between expert and layperson, intelligible and unintelligible discourse, and equal or unequal in a sphere (Pelletier 2009a; Den Heyer 2009). Rancièrian politics has deliberately been unconcerned or vague about the relationship between these moments of politics and institutional change. This is largely

due to the paradox of democratic politics mentioned above, where any movement towards institutionalized change leads to larger amounts of depoliticization.

Sociologists must live with this paradox, and instead of rejecting social science as part of the problem of depoliticization (Rancière 2004, 2001; Pelletier 2009b), the discipline should examine both how performatives move from individualized action to collective action, and how members in collective movements navigate this paradox. Performance theory (as opposed to performative theories) provides a conceptual bridge that can link individualized resistance to collective social action. Alexander (2004) and others (Reed 2006; Giesen 2006; Eyerman 2006) have shown how public performances are attempts to place a particular group's claim as just. The social group in question, Alexander argues, must be perceived as fitting the role denied to them, such as equal member in the democratic civil sphere. By drawing on sacred codes of that sphere, actors' demands are performances that link their unjust position to an understanding of what it should be. Connecting performance to performative in no way solves the democratic paradox. However, it does open up a heuristic from which to understand how demands for equality become institutionalized, and how these performances recreate some other form of inequality.

If politics is based in a performative enactment of equality, and institutionalized through the performance drawing on existing cultural codes, how radical is the Politics of Equals? As Alexander argues, the civil sphere as a relatively autonomous sphere can produce civil repair in non-civil spheres. Assuming that actors are relatively equal in the civil sphere, their ability to use that space as equals can translate into addressing and even eliminating inequalities in other spheres (Alexander 2006: 266-8). This formulation of

democratic politics provides an alternative reading to Rancière's politics as a radical reconstruction of relations between included and excluded subjectivities. In the examples of Civil Rights or Women's Rights in the US, the same structuring democratic codes are merely adjusted to include new identities. If there is radical change in the neo-Durkheimian perspective, it comes from those in a community of equals recognizing the sameness and equality of the excluded subjectivity. For Rancièrian politics to bring about some form of institutionalized equality, it must resonate with the symbolic codes of that particular sphere.

However, this model of civil repair does not operate similarly at the individualized level of the performative. Politics itself is the enactment of equality, which entails that others understand this enactment as a unique discourse (instead of noise or something unintelligible) (Rancière 2001). This unique form of discourse cannot already exist in the natural order – the one doing politics has been silenced or misunderstood until this point. It is the process of moving from atomized *moments* of politics to a political *movement* where this new discourse of equality must dialogue with existing codes of that particular sphere. The navigation of new and existing discourses through collective performances creates an understanding of that movement as being just or unfounded. In the transition from performative to performance we not only see the democratic paradox, we see how an emergent, deconstructive discourse can re-create a community of equals that now includes a new subjectivity.

### 2.3.2 The Double Movement of Politics

A shortcoming of Rancière's theory of politics, continued by many celebratory applications of Rancière's theory to contemporary politics, is the unidirectional examination of equality. Rancière claims politics is solely the demand for equality by some excluded subjectivity. May (2010) uses this definition to celebrate various forms of resistance and movements as part of Rancière's politics. What this conceptualization and work built on it lacks is an understanding of politics where both demands for equality and *exclusion* can equally be present in politics.

Looking at the exclusionary aspects of politics means drawing on the same logic of equality that separates the politics of equality from governmental politics. The key is to understand the relationship between the excluder and (potentially) excluded. A struggle to keep or to further exclude some subjectivity from a community of equals would fall under governmental politics. In this instance, the members of the community of equals are attempting to cement the boundaries of that community so that the excluded part remains outside the community. But when some members of a community of equals seek to remove another group from that community, the Politics of Equals is in play. Here the boundaries of equality are in question, and membership in the community is at stake in the struggle.

The history of the double movement of politics in the US is quite apparent in the civil sphere, especially surrounding voter rights. The rise of Jim Crow laws sought to deny African Americans the nominal equality they were granted with the passing of the 15th amendment. In a lesser-known example, single and widowed female property owners in New Jersey had voting rights from 1776 until 1807, but became



disenfranchised as political opportunism and gender ideologies of domesticity placed this version of civil equality on the chopping block (Klinghoffer and Elkis 1992). Members of democratic society often restrict the boundaries on who is a member of the community of equals in various spheres. The result is a theory of politics that is potentially as much about the politics of *inequality* as it is the politics of equality.

### **2.3.3 The Politics of Equals**

The Politics of Equals is built around a peculiar paradox of democracy: no matter the attempts to create or claim equality in a democratic system, inequalities persist (Rancière 1999: 16). Applied to sociology, this means recognizing the narrowing effects of the coalescence and institutionalization of social movements. Radical reconfigurations of society may only apply to a narrow grouping of subjectivities, or only in one particular sphere. Other subjectivities and spheres remain based in some form of unequal relations seen as just, “natural”, or even as a positive factor in building solidarity. Because politics is based in performatives of equality, the Politics of Equals cannot locate politics in particular spheres or based in particular social causes. Politics must remain non-determined and de-centered in order for sociology to capture any and all political moments. Finally, moments of politics must also be viewed as reconstructing the social order to produce *more* inequality. The history of democratic politics shows the continual struggle between granting or removing rights to some portion of the population. The Politics of Equals moves beyond Rancière’s one-way formulation to argue that politics cannot be viewed entirely in a celebratory manner that suggests society is moving towards a more equal condition. Instead, the Politics of Equals takes for granted that the

equality of subjectivities in any sphere is continually in question, and can be altered in any fashion.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

At first glance, translating Rancière to the social sciences appears to be a fool's errand. A version of politics that goes beyond social identities and locations seems incompatible with a discipline that tries to root human action and behavior in the social world. Rancière says as much through his critiques of Bourdieu, where a sociological framework meant to fight inequality in actuality recreates it in multiple fields (Pelletier 2009b). However, the attempts across the social sciences to integrate Rancière's philosophy with empirical works on the social field shows the appeal of understanding politics as the enactment of equality.

To successfully translate Rancière to sociology, it means accepting the democratic paradox in terms of politics itself and the study of it; recognizing the difference between a politics of equality and governmental politics when studying political moments and movements; and recognizing the nondetermined relationship between the social world and political moments. The paradox, as discussed above, is the difference between the radical enactments of equality at an individualized level with the limited institutionalizations of equality that may result from these political moments. This movement expands on Rancière's definition of politics by looking at how society responds to political moments. In accepting this paradox, sociology can incorporate Rancière's insights on the ephemeral nature of politics alongside social mechanisms of politics and political movements.

The difference between the Politics of Equals and governmental politics provides an analytic framework from which to understand the stake of action in political movements. Be they progressive or regressive, actors and groups make and re-articulate demands that may or may not affect the membership of a community of equals. This difference in political logic can be found at any level of politics – individualized moments and collective action. Knowing the difference between the two allows sociology to better understand how politics can affect the larger social world.

Finally, the political must remain undetermined by social factors. Elaborated in more depth in the following chapter, this aspect of Rancièrian sociology is meant to minimize the impact of research that denies the voice to unseen or unrecognized subjectivities. When social scientists base their analysis on already existing social categories or identities, the possibility of other or new identities is removed. This is not to say that the social world is unrelated to the emergence of politics. Instead, it is meant to leave open the possibility of politics in locations and subjectivities that we as researchers cannot see in this or any particular moment. Politics here is a universal concept, and must be separated from our particular, contextualized understanding of the social world.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE POLITICS OF EQUALS AND THE BOUNDLESSNESS OF POLITICS

#### 3.1 Introduction

The question of equality has been a central feature of myriad sociological studies of politics. Equality has been treated as the end goal of politics in general, to the goal in certain spheres of life, to one claim among many in a political field. The relationship between politics and equality is simple: politics is the means for some excluded group to gain equality. But what if, drawing on the philosophy of Jacques Rancière, one treats equality not as an end goal, but a starting point (Rancière 1991: 138)? Rethinking what equality is opens up commonly held assumptions in sociology about the definition of the political, or the essence of politics, and what studying politics entails.

This chapter seeks to build a blueprint for a generalized theory of politics as the process of equality, be it the increase or decrease of equality in a specific setting. Inspired by the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière, the question of politics and the political is examined next to some common theories and epistemologies of politics in sociology. Though this Rancière-inspired discussion finds sympathies and analogues in sociology, none of these theories provide a generalized or universal understanding of the politics of equality free from reductionist and determinist thinking. Sociological studies of politics suffer from ontological and epistemological problems that lead to an overly narrow analytical framework from which to understand politics in relation to society.

Jacques Rancière's unique definition of politics treats the political solely as the demand for equality coming from an excluded subjectivity. This definition, which is limited in scope yet radical in form, has increasingly been studied, applied, and critiqued

in the social sciences (Schaap 2011; Pelletier 2009a; Dean 2009; Tambakaki 2009). Yet Rancière himself appears wary of such translations to the social sciences. In his *Ten Theses on Politics* (2001) and “L’*éthique de la sociologie*,” (1984) Rancière uses Pierre Bourdieu as a foil to show the problem of having social scientists study politics and equality. The problem, from Rancière’s standpoint, is that social studies of politics reduce the political, or the essence of politics, to the social. Rancière sees the social as meaning three distinct things,

First, it can mean ‘society’, that is, the set of groups, places and functions that the police logic identifies with the whole of the community... There is also a notion of the social as polemical *dispositif* of subjectivation, constructed by subjects who rise up to contest the ‘naturalness’ of these places and functions by having counted what I call the part of those without part. Lastly, there is the social *qua* invention of modern metapolitics: that is, the social as the – more or less hidden – truth of politics, whether this truth is conceived in the manner of Marx, Émile Durkheim, of de Tocqueville or of Pierre Bourdieu (Rancière 2010c: 95-6).

Rancière’s critique of sociology is largely based in this third meaning. Be it economic determinism, cultural determinism, or some other ontology of the social, Rancière finds that these versions create an intermixing of police and political logics that have brought on “the end of politics” (Rancière 1999: 92). The result is a depoliticizing action that in fact cements certain forms of inequality (Rancière 2001; Rancière 1991: 133-4). Drawing on this insight, but denying that sociological studies of politics are always depoliticizing, this chapter seeks to rethink the relationship between the political and sociological theories of politics. Instead of seeing overdetermined theories of politics where actors are merely reacting and responding to causative social structures, a sociological theory of the politics of equality takes account of social structures without placing them as causative forces. Social structures and institutions set the stage, so to speak.

From works based in the classical theoretical positions of Marx and Weber to contemporary research of identity politics, Foucault, and Bourdieu, Rancière's theory of democracy and equality has a number of similarities yet remains distinct from these avenues of research. Compared to how sociologists define the political, the Rancièrian version of the political is a radical re-imagining of the constitution of politics. In fact, sociology lacks a strong dialogue over what constitutes the political, especially in the sub-discipline of political sociology. Rancièrian political sociology explicitly bases studies of politics in a definition of the political as the logic of disagreement, or the demand for equality.

This sociological model is similar to what Nash (2000) calls "New Political Sociology." This category, generally speaking, deals with issues of culture, identity, and power. These works move political sociology away from political economy, the state, and power, yet keep politics in dialogue with other social forces and the state. A Rancièrian-inspired version of politics is broad enough to incorporate numerous frameworks of studying politics, so long as the autonomy of the political remains. In order to keep this autonomy, social institutions must be seen as mechanisms that can allow a possibility of the political moment to happen, and to show how the demand for equality becomes (or fails to become) institutionalized and part of a new social order.

Compared to the generalized epistemology of political sociology, this version of political sociology – *the politics of equality* – is unique in its use of a different set of assumptions surrounding both politics and society. It is a symbolic theory centered on equality, but in a non-determinist way. Social forces are important to understand the mechanisms of the political process, though they cannot predict how or when a political

moment can arise. This theory treats the state as neither essential nor inessential to politics, focusing more on the emergence and content of the political moment. Though not all aspects of the politics of equality can be discussed here, this paper seeks to construct the ontological and epistemological bases of this decentered, symbolic, and non-determining theory.

### **3.2 Ontology: The Political and Politics in Sociology**

Before a discussion of how *politics* is understood in sociology, its relationship to *the political* needs further clarification. To repeat, the political for Rancière is the logic of disagreement, or the demand for equality. A particularized form of conflict, then, makes up the essence of what constitutes politics. Sociology often directly adopts influences from political philosophers like Arendt (Krause 2008; Somers 2006; Orloff 2012), Tocqueville (Bellah et al. 1985; Putnam 2000; Goldberg 2001), Dewey (Emirbayer and Goldberg 2005), and others (Calhoun 1992; Nash 2002; Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Bilici 2012). Some of these works, like Calhoun's edited volume on Habermas, build an explicit sociological framework that incorporates the normative bases of that theory into a functioning sociological theory. Sociological studies do engage with political philosophy (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Goldberg 2001; Krause 2008), and major debates in that field, from the Dahl (1961) and Mills (1956) split between pluralist and elite theories of governance to Marxist works on the autonomy of the state, have at the least been based in debates surrounding theoretical interpretation and epistemological assumptions on the political. Krause's (2008) use of Arendt to analyze the condition of undocumented migrants and refugees in contemporary Europe expertly shows the degree of their

domination and lack of rights while at the same time show how these groups can mobilize and gain rights from the state. Political philosophy and social science intertwine to further our understandings of rights, statelessness and domination among migrants and refugees. Yet many times theoretical works in political sociology fails to carry on an explicit dialogue with the political philosophers they reference, even though the dialogue may be implicit (Dahl 1961), or some concepts made “testable” (Bellah et al. 1985). Political philosophy remains in the background providing base assumptions in sociological works of politics, and the normative base of these theories are there but not dealt with in any reflexive method.

On the other hand, political philosophy and theory lacks a detailed understanding of the social, or the institutions, structures, identities, and practices that shape human action. From Arendt’s “right to have rights” to Agamben’s “state of exception,” political philosophers have drawn on history to further their own argument to varying degrees of success. However, these works generally lack a sophisticated dialogue with social and political structures as they exist, and at times critique other philosophers for adding elements of contextualization or temporality. Badiou (2005), whose version of politics is in many ways similar to Rancière’s, criticizes Rancière for having a temporal version of politics. For Badiou, a true philosophy of the political must transcend the contextual, temporal mess of the social world. Jean-Luc Nancy (2010), though more concerned with the social world than Badiou, bases democracy in a determining spirit of “man who infinitely transcends man” (15). Democracy is not a political form per se, but a relational form where politics can arise (15). Again, political philosophy looks for the base of democracy in something other than the social, be it some essence or philosophical truth.



To build a sociological theory of the political, society and practiced politics must not be taken as “black boxes” (Latour 1987), yet they cannot be determining factors of the theory. An integration of philosophical and sociological insight is needed.

Coming from the field of philosophy, Rancière builds a theory of the political based on the unequal distribution of parts in a society and the interruption of this distribution by those without a part.<sup>4</sup> Like Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction, this relationship and interruption *must be present* for any form of politics to occur. Politics, as opposed to the political, is paradoxically both central and peripheral to the philosophy of Rancière. Chambers (2011) argues that Rancière’s politics-as-interruption places it squarely in the realm of action, leaving “pure” politics (or the political) as something that cannot be entirely removed from social relations. On the other hand, politics entails a specificity and temporality that distances an instance of politics from the universality of the political.<sup>5</sup> Rancière’s definition of politics *is* based in an abstracted ideal – the interruption of an excluded subjectivity with the demand for equality. Sociology, however, starts from the realm of politics (in society) and uses insights based in empirical studies of politics to move towards a definition of the political. With exceptions coming from certain strains of identity politics and “power relations” of gender, race, or class, the political in sociology is generally referred to as the public relationship between a

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<sup>4</sup> Chambers (2011) argues that Rancière himself claims his work does not constitute a theory of politics or the political. This debate, however, is not germane to the project of relating his philosophy to political sociology.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say other philosophers have not tried to bring Rancière’s political towards empirical politics. May (2010) analyzes an anarchist social movement to show Rancière’s political as a practiced form of politics. His work, while showing the relevance of the interruption and disagreement for equality in democratic politics, lacks a key component of analyses of politics in sociology: links to the social.

collective and the state.<sup>6</sup> While this inductive approach to understanding the political is fruitful for understanding the basis of politics in society, Rancière critiques it for reducing the political to part of the social realm (Rancière 2001). In other words, sociological approaches to *politics* turn any *political* into the *social*.

Addressing the two fields in his “Ten Theses on Politics,” Rancière believes that the “end of politics” and “return of politics” camps exemplify the problem of contemporary understandings of politics – that they in fact suppress politics:

the debate between the philosophers of the ‘return of politics’ and the sociologists of the ‘end of politics’ is thus a straightforward debate regarding the order in which it is appropriate to take the presuppositions of ‘political philosophy’ so as to interpret the consensualist practice of annihilating politics (Rancière 2001 10: 33).

Speaking to sociology specifically, Rancière argues that politics is reduced to studying the social, and that the moments of politics, or the interruption, cannot be properly seen or understood through a sociological lens. There is a logic of the political and a logic of the social, and neither can replace or determine the other (Rancière 2001 10: 33).

Rancière’s critique need not be taken as a paralyzing one that prevents any use of his philosophy in the social sciences. Rather than having the social or political replace one another, this project attempts to keep the political as an autonomous ontological space, but to show how it is related to the social when it becomes *politics* in the empirical world. The problem with the common definition of the political in sociology is only partially based in its reliance on the social to understand the political. Its main problem is that it is limiting the boundaries of where politics can occur. The political as a public,

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<sup>6</sup> This definition is most clearly seen in Tilly’s (2006) stated preference for defining politics as involving the “government,” though he accepts a broader version of politics as “interactions involving the exercise of power...” (410). Similar state-centric definitions are found in Orloff (2012). Orloff draws on Zerilli’s (2005) definition of the political in her own argument to go beyond the current Instrumentalist-Culturalist divide in political sociology.

collective relationship with the state makes the “space” of politics take precedence over any logic or analytic of politics. A theory of politics based in Rancière’s political cannot be predetermined by place, setting, or institutions. This theory, the *politics of equality*, provides a sociological account of politics and political action attuned to allowing any excluded subjectivity to be heard and understood in their own voice.

Politics need not be collective in its traditional sense. Collective is often used as a “black box” meant to mean a sizable group of people. The politics of equality can be found in any relationship between subjects, as any and all relationships contain roles, parts, and (in)equality. The personal can in fact become the political, as Rancière writes,

The domestic household has been turned into a political space not through the simple fact that power relationships are at work in it but because it was the subject of argument in a dispute over the capacity of women in the community (Rancière 1999: 32-33).

At the same time, we see that politics need not be public as well. The household, and challenges to domestic roles are clearly part of the private sphere, and need not enter into the public sphere for equality in the household to occur. The same can be true in other spheres, like labor.

A strike is not political when it calls for reforms rather than a better deal or when it attacks the relationships of authority rather than the inadequacy of wages. It is political when it reconfigures the relationships that determine the workplace in its relation to the community (Rancière 1999: 32-33).

A strike is not necessarily part of the public sphere, as it can take place entirely in the workplace, and may not enter into the public sphere. Yet a strike can be politics. Again we see the limits of space placed on politics by the normal conception of the political in sociology.

Finally, the politics of equality challenges the assertion that the state must be present for politics to exist. Both the examples of the husband and wife and the strike present politics where the state can, but is not necessary for politics to occur. The state can be, but is not necessarily present when workers are attempting to reconfigure their relationship with management, or a spouse challenges their role in the household. Because the political for Rancière is based in the interruption of the system of parts and places in a community, this interruption can happen in spheres that are separated from the state.

This politics of equality must treat the political (or the moment of politics itself) as something separate, though not completely autonomous, from the social. The emancipatory potential of Rancière's politics comes from the fact that it is not determined by social causes, which as part of the police, put blinders on what is "there," or what identities and subjectivities may or may not exist in society. Politics emerges from beyond the social and the limits it sets on who or what is "there." What needs to be shown is the social, historical, or cultural contingencies that allow for the possibility of the interruption to occur, and how the interruption can move from a singular moment to some form of enacted change in the community of equals. Sociological forces shape the landscape in which the political moment may arise, what form it takes, and how it produces change. The result is a theory of politics that is attuned to, but not determined by, the social.

### 3.3 Epistemology: Strains of Political Sociology

Rancière argues that the social sciences are guilty of two depoliticizing tendencies. The first is to reduce the political to the social, and the second is to keep the political confined to the actions of the state, which annihilates politics (Rancière 2001: 10:33). Instead of rejecting any possibility of reconciling Rancière's harsh critique of sociology with empirical versions of political sociology, a close examination shows both the problems Rancière mentions and certain similarities between the two projects that allow for the possibility of politics that keeps the political autonomous to a degree. Rancière's politics can, to varying degrees, be used alongside many versions of political sociology to create a more nuanced understanding of equality, so long as the political remains relatively autonomous and decentered. Autonomy of the political means sociology must deconstruct traditional determinist narratives that link political action to other social factors, such as economic or cultural ones. This is not to say there is no relation between these factors, but that social factors in themselves cannot predict when political moments will occur. At the same time, decentering politics opens the space from which we can look for politics. Politics need not be limited to the state and civil society.

Treating the political as a logic both opens up the location of where politics occurs and challenges sociologists to not simplify a political event to a social one. Social structures, be they class, culture, institutions, and even history are not causal factors leading to political interruptions. These forces show how a moment *can* arise, but not predict *if* it will happen. These moments of politics are ephemeral and semi-autonomous from the social, challenging determinist and reductionist theories of politics that root political action in other social factors. From traditional works in the discipline on power

and domination (Domhoff 1996; Jessop 1999, Burawoy 1979), to more sophisticated theories of politics and the social (Bourdieu 1984, 1991; Foucault 2007; 2008), these works show how structures, institutions (Berezin 1997; Adams 2010), culture (Bellah et. al 1985; Putnam 2000), and power (Rose and Miller 1992; Miller and Rose 1995; Gupta 2012) create particular forms of politics and political identities. Where the politics of equality shares general similarities, in particular with works treating politics as a disruption of power relations, Rancière's philosophy challenges one to create a sociological theory of politics that is relatively autonomous from these social forces. Rancière's non-determining theory, and its recognition of stratification in all spheres independently of others sets his work apart from this group. Politics cannot be entirely reduced to a social cause. In the politics of equality, social forces are the cause of politics, but instead work as explanations that show how a political moment can emerge.

The politics of equality also continues the tradition of broadening the space or location from where politics can occur. In the same vein as some feminist (Butler 1990, 1997), critical race (Omi and Winant 1994), and Marxist theories, the politics of equality looks to private spheres and private lives as potential spaces of politics. This framework is in direct contrast to dominant theories of political sociology. Seen in the classical work of Weber, and contemporary works of Tilly (1978), Skocpol (1979) and others (Foucault 2007; Orloff 1999; Steinmetz 1999), tying politics to the state has a long and dominant position in political sociology.<sup>7</sup> For this approach, politics cannot exist without the state being involved in some way. Through examining topics such as state building (Steinmetz

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<sup>7</sup> This is by no means the only tradition though. Feminist politics, for example, often times locates politics in the private sphere, and as will be discussed, the literature on labor movements oftentimes treats politics as something occurring between owners and workers. Anthropology also has a broader conception of where politics can occur (see Baiocchi and Connor 2008).

1999); the welfare state (Offe 1984; Hicks and Misra 1993; Orloff 1999); social movements (McAdam 1982; Snow and Benford 1992; Paley 2001; Fantasia and Hirsch 1995; Berezin 2009); nationalism (Smith 1983; Gellner 1983; Calhoun 1997; Anderson 1991; Brubaker 2004); and electoral politics (Mahler 2006; McAdam and Su 2002), this strain of political sociology's strength is its ability to see the permeations of the state in myriad facets of society. Yet the politics of equality does not limit politics solely to the state. This conception of politics is limited in terms of content, but broad in terms of location. Private spheres and everyday life become potential sites of politics, locations where the state may or may not be present. There is no primacy of location.

### **3.3.1 The Overdetermination of the Social**

For sociology, linking social factors to politics is obviously and justifiably at the center of sociological studies of politics. From classical works tying class and status to political organization (Weber 1978; Mills 1956) to contemporary works studying culture and politics (Alexander 2003; Jacobs 2000; Smith 2006) and the state's role in reproducing inequalities (Bourdieu 1996; Ong 2003), sociology provides rich evidence linking politics to myriad social structures, forces, and identities. The politics of equality is sympathetic to, but quite distinct from this version of political sociology. It is sympathetic with Marxist and post-Marxist political sociology, Bourdieu, and Foucault in its concern with equality and systems of domination. It is distinct in that while it is necessary to understand politics in relation to the social, it cannot be determined by the social. The social, Rancière argues, sets limits to the boundaries of who and what are "there," or who exists as a subjectivity and what rights they are entitled to (Rancière

1984; Ross 1991; Pelletier 2009). There is no constant social factor that can explain or predict a moment of Rancière's politics. Economics, culture, patriarchy, racism, and more do not cause politics in and of themselves. The political moment is ephemeral. Political moments are rooted in social conditions, but they cannot be the cause of the politics. Instead, the social should be viewed as the realm where the conditions for a political moment are constructed, but there are no guarantees a political interruption will happen.

The economic sphere is one, but certainly not the only social factor that oftentimes is used to explain and predict politics. Power, culture, sexism, racism, and colonialism, among others, are all institutions and mechanisms that have been claimed as the basis of politics in certain settings. As such, they all determine politics to be based in their structure or mechanism of choice. Economics is perhaps the most noted of these thanks to myriad discussions of determinism and the role of the state in Marxist circles. However, the use of determinism here is meant to apply to all forms social explanations of politics, a different definition than the traditional Marxist one. The economic sphere is examined as one example of sociological theories of politics reducing the political moment of interruption into something caused by the social.

Generally found in empirical works that study resistance and compliance to domineering forms of labor and the state (Burawoy 1979, 1985; Fantasia 1989; Clawson 2003), and in works that relate the state in terms of global capitalism (Jessop 1999; Appadurai 1996), politics-as-economics understands politics as a vehicle that manages citizens and produces resistance under the constraint of the global capitalist system. The struggle for equality is central to some, though not all of these works. No matter the focus on equality or the state or any other factor, politics-as-economics ineluctably reduces



politics as the result of actions in the political-economic order. The determining force of the economic sphere, and capitalism in particular, takes primacy as the main force that creates politics and can lead to political change.

Rose and Miller (1992) examine welfarism as a technology of governance, or “a domain of strategies, techniques and procedures” where authorities attempt to make passive connections to various subjectivities (183). The point, they argue, is that the liberal state attempts to manage realms outside of politics, drawing on myriad actors and experts in the private sphere to further their goals. Doctors, philanthropists, and other actors outside the realm of the state work alongside state agencies and institutions to help manage citizens for the neoliberal state. Citizenship has shifted from based in civic obligations to being based “in the energetic pursuit of personal fulfillment and the incessant calculations that are to enable this to be achieved” (Rose and Miller 1992: 201). While this analysis rightly shows the shifting nature of state-society relations in the neoliberal state, it is worthy of critique. Technologies of governance reduce politics to decentered power relations, turning Rancière’s politics into police. Police, as Rancière envisions it, suppresses the political by focusing solely on managing relations as they exist, not examining the possibility of subjectivities excluded from this process.

A more complex conceptualization of politics comes from Bourdieu. His nuanced account of the interrelation of fields, capitals, and habitus in the reproduction of inequality makes him more attuned to material and symbolic forms of power and domination. Though Bourdieu never created an explicit theory of politics, his work does understand politics in a sophisticated relation between actors, structures, and power (Wacquant 2004). Bourdieu’s conceptions of field and symbolic power provide an

explanation of “normalized” social relations that are quite complimentary with Rancière’s police and natural order. Where Rancière sees police as the mechanism that (re-)produces the stable, natural order that maintains an unequal distribution of parts in society, Bourdieusian politics would characterize this as the presence of symbolic power in the political field.

Where symbolic power provides a strong sociological analogue to Rancière, his other major concepts start to move Bourdieu’s politics away from Rancière’s non-determined theory of politics, especially in terms of the relationship between those who hold and exercise power and those who do not (Bourdieu 1991: 170). For Bourdieu, this formation is based in the relationship between social classes, cultural capital, and state institutions that reproduce these structured relationships. The state and state-run education systems, he argues, produce a system where elites and other high-capital classes are given the legitimacy to enter politics and others are largely excluded from entering into positions of power in the state bureaucracy (Bourdieu 1996; 1999). In other words, people entering the world into privileged positions have the economic, social, and cultural capital to reproduce the social system that provides them with a disproportionate amount of those capitals.

Despite some similarities that translate well to Rancièrian political sociology, Bourdieu’s politics and sociology lead to depoliticizing outcomes. Alexander (2003) critiques Bourdieu’s conception of culture, arguing that Bourdieu cannot separate culture from the economic sphere, leading to a version of culture that is not autonomous from the economic sphere (18-19). Ultimately, Alexander claims, Bourdieusian politics reduce culture to be an affect of economic relations, which bestow actors with a base amount of

various capitals. Bilici (2012) also criticizes Bourdieu in similar terms, claiming that Bourdieu reduces all social relations to power relations (20). In terms of politics, Bourdieu's theories have the same risk – the political, and those who gain power in politics, is largely determined by one's habitus and set of capitals.<sup>8</sup> The field of politics and the rules that structure it are largely static, leaving the possibility of deconstructing stable relationships in the field impossible. Rancière (1984) critiques Bourdieu and sociology in general for this type of reductionist thinking. The result of basing studies of politics in existing boundaries of the social order and determining forces leads to a depoliticization that denies the possibility of some outside discourse that can challenge the current order (Ross 1991; Pelletier 2009a). Through studying the political field *as it exists*, Bourdieusian studies of politics merely confirm the inequalities present in the field. There is no space for other subjectivities or other forms of discourse. Rancièrian political sociology attempts to keep in mind “democracy to come,” Derrida's (1994) formulation of the promise of democracy:

A democracy to come... is not a democracy that will come in the future, but a democracy emploted within a different time, a different temporal plot. The time of a ‘democracy to come’ is the time of a promise that has to be kept even though – and precisely because – it can never be fulfilled. It is a democracy that can never ‘reach itself’, catch up with itself, because it involves an infinite openness to the Other or the newcomer (Rancière 2010a: 58-9).

This openness is not present in Bourdieusian sociology. Bourdieu's fields and structuring structures close off potentialities for the Politics of Equals to exist.

The politics of equality shares a number of features with this approach in political sociology. First, like many Marxist versions of political sociology, absolute equality is, if

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<sup>8</sup> A related critique from Rancière (2004) is that Bourdieu (and sociologists in general) reproduce inequality by focusing only on what exists as they see it. By creating scholarship on inequality and measuring the degrees of inequality and separation, this work reinforces the boundaries between equals and the excluded (See Pelletier 2009a, 2009b).

not a goal, then a process worth striving towards. However, the drawbacks to this epistemological tradition are the reductionist tendencies to place social explanations as the defining, and at times determining sphere of politics. This approach clearly shows Rancière's critique that sociology destroys the political by turning it into the social. To use more abstract language, sociological studies of politics predetermine what is "there." Sociological studies of politics cannot account for anything beyond the gaze of the social scientist, who depoliticizes because they set boundaries on who or what is "there." Sociology then can only study political moments that have happened. The field lacks an ability to predict or understand a moment of politics that could emerge from a new subjectification, or something beyond the realm of what sociology defines as "there."

Sociological studies of politics are in fact studies of police. Rancière defines police as both the totality of governing activity that falls outside politics and as the "partition of the sensible,"

...[C]haracterized by the absence of a void or a supplement: society consists of groups dedicated to specific modes of action, in places where these occupations are exercised, in modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this fittingness of functions, places, and ways of being, there is no place for a void. It is this exclusion of what "there is not" that is the police-principle at the heart of statist practices (Rancière 2001: 7:21).

For Rancière politics emerges from this void. "Politics," he writes, "is not made up of power relationships; it is made up of relationships between worlds" (Rancière 1999: 42).

The void is the space from where subjectivities draw on the world where all speaking beings are equal to alter the distribution of parts and bodies in the police order (Rancière 2001: 7:21). Sociological analyses that attempt to explain politics where the social is used as the causal factor leave no space for this void. The boundaries of the political are already inscribed; no new relationships between worlds are possible. The politics of

equality keeps the political (relatively) autonomous from other spheres in order to study politics. The result is to provide a deeper, more contextualized understanding of the relationship between society and the political where neither factor determines the other.

### **3.3.2 Decentering Politics**

For much of political sociology, politics is ineluctably linked to the state. Either in terms of groups in civil society engaging the state through social movements, electoral politics, and revolutions, or from the state's role in managing populations and dealing with social movements and various other citizen demands, the state plays a major role in what is traditionally considered politics. From revolutions (Skocpol 1979) to community-building (Lichterman 1996), the former grouping shows how actors and institutions play a part in the potential change of some aspect of the state. The latter, found in governmentality studies (Gupta 1995; Ong 2003) and studies of the state or state institutions themselves (Scott 1998; Glaeser 2000), focus on how a state incorporates, manages, includes and excludes various subjectivities. Rancièrian political sociology does not reject the importance of the state in politics. But it does recognize that the state is only one sphere in which politics can occur. Politics – the interruption of the natural order with the demand for equality – can occur in any sphere of life, from the civil sphere to the economic or domestic spheres. The incorporation of private spheres as locations of politics makes Rancièrian political sociology unique from models that are state-centered or “bring the state back in” (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1985). The state is merely one location, albeit a central one, out of many where politics can occur. Decentering politics from the state places Rancièrian political sociology alongside

theories of identity politics that stress the importance of the private sphere and struggles for rights and equality in those spheres. Not all claims for equality happen, or can be resolved in the civil sphere.

Numerous studies of politics have studied how social movements and other organizations have made claims on various state institutions. These activities have ranged from typical community organizing and action (Lichterman 2005; Eliasoph 1998; Wood 2002) to clientalist networks (Auyero 2001) and even forms of occupation, protest, and revolution (Chatterjee 2004; Tilly 1978; Skocpol 1979; Hansen 1999). What ties these studies together is their centering of the state in examining political action. In these examples, politics occurs when a group of actors make claims on some level of the state for action, services or change. The political moment may or may not be present in these accounts. When politics is present, like in Chatterjee's (2004) study of an excluded group acting "as if" they had the right to services the government denied them, we see how the state can play a role in the political moment. This role is often as the excluding force, or part that attempts to keep the natural order of inequality intact. When the political moment is absent, these works are part of Rancière's police. Police is generally what happens when questions of equality and parts are absent from what we usually consider to be political actions. Rancière first characterizes police in *Disagreement* as "the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution [of places and roles]" (Rancière 1999: 28). In focusing on processes between movements and the state, and by taking all gains or losses at face value, works in this vein depoliticize by uncritically treating all forms of politics as the

same. There is no differentiation between a politics of equality and governmental politics (police).

Another type of politics centers the story more on the state or agents of the state themselves, showing how governance affects daily life. From following state institutions like the police (Glaeser 2000); welfare and planning agencies (Orloff 1999; Steinmetz 1993; Ong 2003; Gupta 1995); state building (Skocpol; Adams 1999; Steinmetz 2007; Scott 1998); to the state's presence in public and private life (Berezin 1997; Rose and Miller 1992; Navarro-Yashin 2002; Mahmood 2005; Wedeen 1999), these works draw on numerous theoretical frameworks to understand how the state deals with, and reacts to, demands placed on it. The influence of Foucault is seen in many of these works, since Foucault's conceptualization of power as productive rather than repressive opens up avenues from which to see how power operates in regards to the state and various subjectivities. Like the previous examination of politics as the social, these works centering on the state can contain Rancière's politics. At the same time, these works, especially Foucaultian-inspired works, can easily ignore that moment of interruption, focusing entirely on mechanisms of discipline and governmentality, ignoring whether or not a political interruption can or did take place. Rancière critiques Foucault on this count, claiming "nothing is political in itself merely because power relationships are at work in it. For a thing to be political, it must give rise to a meeting of police logic and egalitarian logic that is never set up in advance" (Rancière 1999: 32).

While all of these accounts of political sociology provide unique insights to a generalized definition of politics, it is their location that in fact limits their compatibility to a Rancièrian political sociology. All of these works, to paraphrase Tilly (2006), have

the state, or at least the specter of it, as an integral part of politics. Rancière's politics cannot be reduced to a singular location. Rancière briefly mentions domestic relations as an example of politics. This space, like any other, is built on specific relations between parts. The dispute between this relationship is the basis of politics.

The domestic household has been turned into a political space not through the simple fact that power relationships are at work in it but because it was the subject of argument in a dispute over the capacity of women in the community (Rancière 1999: 32-3).

Both the public and private spheres can have political interruptions. So long as a relationship of inequality is being challenged, Rancièrian politics is occurring. "Nothing is political in itself for the political only happens by means of a principle that does not belong to it: equality" (Rancière 1999: 33). Politics transcends any specific, predetermined location. Equality, no matter the sphere, is at the essence of politics. There is no primacy of location for a decentered politics.

Of course, not all studies of politics in sociology have the state as a central part of the analysis. Marxist and neo-Marxist works ranging from workplace strikes (Fantasia 1989) to culture and resistance (Hebdige 1979) look at challenges to the capitalist system. Race and critical race theorists have also uncovered moments of politics outside the state, examining the role of racist and anti-racist politics in everyday lives (Omi and Winant 1994). For theorists that treat power relations as politics, the state can also be absent from much of their work. This version of politics, oftentimes influenced by Foucault, can take place in working life (de Certeau 1984; Pun 2005), the doctor's office (Miller and Rose 2008; Cruikshank 1999), and everyday life (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Brown 2006). Finally, feminist theory has long championed the "personal as political," with numerous strains of feminism that examine the politics of (in)equality in the household, workplace, and



global landscape (Butler 1990; Mohanty 2003). However, with some exceptions, these works are not based in a larger, universal theory of politics and the political. Each of these strains of research examines politics in a specific sphere or field, but limits theoretical speculations to that field. Rancière's political philosophy goes beyond specific spheres and fields and instead looks for unifying themes in political action that can be seen across settings. The politics of equality is a theoretical model that can apply to all settings where politics can occur, providing a more generalized theory of politics sympathetic to many specific theories of politics.

### **3.4 Politics as Equality**

Reading through some examples of contemporary political sociology alongside a Rancièrian model of politics leaves us with a number of criticisms and provides some openings for the politics of equality to take root. Though this perspective shares similarities with other concepts and ideas in political sociology, its unique set of assumptions surrounding the political keep it distinct from these other theories of politics. So what is the politics of equality, or a Rancière-inspired theory of politics for the social sciences? Many sociological theories of politics, to varying degrees, fail to live up to their radical instincts. By focusing on issues like what causes politics, where it can occur, and what relationships can constitute political ones, sociologists in fact preclude subjectivities and spaces from which politics can emerge. As Pelletier (2009a) notes, these studies merely cement the unequal relationships present in society. The poor and excluded can only remain as such in these studies. What is needed is a way to allow the excluded to speak and be heard in their own language. The politics of equality seeks out spaces,

discourses, and actions that refute or disrupt constructions of citizen/subject, owner/worker, sophisticate/plebian, and any other where some subjectivity is precluded from being treated and heard as an equal.

The politics of equality must treat politics and equality as a process of challenging and moving the symbolic borders of who is equal or unequal, and who “exists” as a real subjectivity whose rights cannot be alienated.<sup>9</sup> It must keep the political autonomous, yet at the same time show how the moment itself is related to various social factors. As much as political moments are related to social forces, these social forces and structures cannot predetermine the subjects or sites of politics. Not allowing the political any autonomy is a depoliticizing action that prevents social scientists from understanding how radical demands for equality can emerge. Finally, the place of politics must be de-localized. Since the process of politics and equality can challenge any relationship or community, the place of politics also cannot be predetermined. Distinctions between public and private spheres, or politics and power fail to understand that even though everything is *not* political, everything *has the potential to be* political. Taking these lessons into account helps create a sociological theory of politics that is irreducible and non-determining, and also connected to society and institutions. For this to happen, the focus should be on the *process* of politics, not on any defining structure, location, or essence.

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<sup>9</sup> These borders of equality have the potential to both expand and contract. Rancière does not look at politics as the contraction of the community of equals; however, the history of democracy has numerous examples of people losing previously held rights.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE NATURAL ORDER AND ITS CONTRADICTIONS

#### 4.1 Introduction

Interruptions of the police order with demands for equality do not emerge out of nothing – they are the products of myriad social, historical, and cultural conditions that have created exclusions to the community of equals. A “natural order” exists that precludes various subjectivities from being truly equal. This natural order for Rancière is a social construction that treats the given unequal distribution of parts and roles in a community as natural (Rancière 1999: 16). In the case of women’s rights, the natural order placed women in a more or less separate caste than men – one that excluded women from active participation in democratic governance, certain legal rights, and religious roles, among other things.

Often understood as “republican motherhood,” women in the early and mid 19<sup>th</sup> century found themselves based largely in the private sphere, based in the rationalization that women’s moral qualities precluded them from participating as equals in the larger public sphere (Ryan 1992; Gurko 1976; Isenberg 1998). The recognition that the “natural order” was one where women were without part comes from the condition of women in numerous spheres of life. Marilley (1996) lists four intertwining premises for this natural order. These justifications were used as a response for women’s equality in both public and private spheres:

- (1) that God ordained women to serve men’s desires, (2) that women consented to obey men in exchange for protection, and so, as men’s natural subjects, women can never be men’s equals, (3) that if women vote, put earning first, or become too educated, the family will lose its main caretaker and society will lose one of its basic structures, and (4) that because women are ‘good persons,’ they cannot

be ‘good citizens’: good citizens must sometimes engage in bad behavior (Marilley 1996: 9).

During the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, more women began to notice cracks in these orders that placed women in subordinate positions. Women began to more publicly question their roles in Church, state, the home, and work. It was the rejection of these unequal orders and the demand for equality – democratic, legal, domestic, and religious – that was at the heart of the Seneca Falls Convention.

To show how the natural order excluded women, and how these orders themselves contained contradictions that allowed for a political moment to happen, natural orders of the civil and religious spheres will be examined. The main organizers of the Seneca Falls Convention, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, drew from lived experiences and cultural codes in these spheres in coming to their demands for equality. The resulting examination points to two avenues of discussion in terms of resistance and solidarity. Resistance to a natural order, or politics, comes from the disconnect between lived experience of inequality and the belief that one is in fact equal. Instead of treating this resistance in relation to the bourgeoisie; as a minor act against insurmountable disciplinary powers (de Certeau 1984); or as a reform of the democratic civil sphere (Jacobs 2000; Alexander 2006), Rancière’s politics treats resistance to the natural order as something that reconstructs relations between subjects. Treating politics in a deconstructive manner gives it an emancipatory potential that Foucaultian and Durkheimian theories of politics and resistance lack. A second, more critical dialogue arises when placing the question of equality against that of solidarity. Solidarity, as taken up by Durkheim and Neo-Durkheimian scholars, is a project that seeks some “ideal” social relations that provides a sense of togetherness in a community, where some

iteration of it exists as an imperfect, yet relatively ideal solidarity sphere (Alexander 2006: 31, 194). The relationship between solidarity and the natural order needs critique to show that treating solidarity as the “real utopia” (Alexander 2006: 550) emphasizes a form of governmental politics that establishes and legitimizes unequal distributions of parts and roles. This Rancièrian critique places solidarity studies in the same vein as hegemony studies. While both concepts look at social organization from vastly different perspectives, for Rancière it makes no difference whether this organization is coercive or consensual, forced or spontaneous.

#### **4.2 The Natural Order**

Rancière does not spend a great deal of time on the concept of the natural order. Sometimes referred to as the social order (Rancière 1999: 16), the natural order represents the stable, symbolic order that results from police logic and processes (Rancière 1999: 31; Rancière 2001: 7:20, 8:22).<sup>10</sup> In this order not only are the distributions of parts and roles seen as natural, those entirely excluded from this distribution are not visible. Police is essential in the maintenance of a natural order, as it “asserts that the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation” (Rancière 2001: 8:22). The natural order and police work together to treat the given, arbitrary division of the community as the only imaginable, and therefore natural one. The natural order then is a depoliticizing order, as it attempts to define relations among

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<sup>10</sup> Chambers (2011) critiques Rancière scholars, in particular May (2009), for using the term natural order. His critique comes from the philosophical tradition that treats terms like “natural” in their normative and existential senses, where “natural” refers to the “ought” or “real.” For social scientists, the natural and social orders are taken together more liberally with the assumption that all orders are socially constructed. See May (2009), Tambakaki (2009), Hewlett (2007), and Bingham and Biesta (2010) for works that treat the natural order as a socially constructed concept.

subjectivities as static. There is no place for a subjectivity outside this order to demand equality, as the order defines the boundaries of who is “visible” and counted among the parts of the community.

The natural order, however, should not be thought of as a singular one. As discussed in chapter two, politics can occur in numerous spheres, each having their own community of equals that places certain groups in positions of privilege and excludes others from having that place. It is best to think of the natural order as natural *orders*, where each sphere – civil, religious, economic, etc – contains its own natural order where police processes create and maintain a system of inclusion and exclusion. By opening up the spheres in which natural orders exist, Rancière differentiates himself from Marxian studies of ideology and hegemony, in particular Althusser and Gramsci, but also Williams, Laclau and Mouffe, and Žižek.

The natural order also brings a critical eye to a second form of understanding social order – solidarity. A natural order is based in solidarity to varying degrees. Subjects in a community oftentimes view their place in that community as relatively just. Political moments break down the bonds of solidarity, as bonds between members in the community are broken down and re-imagined. Solidarity, like hegemony, is similar to the natural order in that they all deal with social order. But because Rancière links the natural order to police practices, it remains linked to the police order, or one that masks and justifies inequalities. There may be better and worse forms of solidarity, but like hegemony, it masks and naturalizes the inequalities that order is founded upon.

## 4.2.1 Ideology, Hegemony, and the Natural Order

### 4.2.1.1 Ideology

The natural order has a number of similarities to Gramsci's hegemony and Althusser's ideology and ideological state apparatus (ISA). What separates Rancière from these cultural Marxists is his resistance against placing the economic sphere or capitalism in particular as a semi-determining base of the natural order. For Althusser, ideology and state apparatuses exist in order to reproduce the relations of production for the economic sphere (Althusser 2008 [1971]: 22). As stated in chapter three, Rancière's politics rejects any form of determinism alongside any base-superstructure relation between the economic sphere and non-economic ones. This rejection of base-superstructure radicalizes the project of equality in that natural orders for each sphere can exist and change without ineluctable links to any other sphere. The women's movement in general was related as much to capitalism as it was to Quakerism, abolitionism, and liberal political thought, among other influences. Therefore, the natural order should be thought of as natural *orders* of each sphere. Without a singular, semi-determining influence, the natural orders of each sphere can all take shape differently.

A second difference between Rancière and Althusser is in their use of the terms natural order and ideology. For Althusser, ideology is something that creates subjects through the process of interpellation (Althusser 2008 [1971]: 45, 48). Ideology here has a constitutive force that turns individuals into subjects under that ideology, which allows for the reproduction of the relations of labor to continue. Rancière, however, treats the natural order as the result of police processes. The natural order (and police) do not

produce subjectivities, they attempt to define what exists, or what is “there.” Directly addressing Althusser, Rancière says,

The police is not that law interpellating individuals (as in Althusser’s ‘Hey, you there!’)... It is, first of all, a reminder of the obviousness of what is there, or rather, of what there isn’t: ‘Move along! There is nothing to see here!’ The police says that there is nothing to see on a road, that there is nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation (Rancière 2001: 8:22).

The natural order itself is not creating subjects; it arises from police processes meant to manage and maintain the current boundaries of (in)equality in the community of equals.

The resulting difference between ideology and the natural order is most important when considering the issue Rancière considered essential to politics and struggle in general: the role of individuals to speak up and resist. In Althusser’s construction of ISAs and interpellation, limits to the possibility of action are extremely constrained. Schools, religion, family and the like produce a system of beliefs and action that can only be countered through class struggle (Althusser 2008 [1971]: 59-60). The problem with Althusser’s ISA and ideology in general is that it is a totalizing structure. It ignores how politics and the emergence of new subjectivities can emerge outside of class struggle. ISAs do not interpellate us, Rancière argues. Instead, we must think of how they attempt, but ultimately fail, to put blinders on what is “there” through the processes of police. For Rancière this means jettisoning the concepts of ideology and hegemony, and replacing them with the natural order and police, which provide a more concrete definition of how stability is created and how resistance can emerge from within that system.

Slavoj Žižek’s work on ideology is at first glance nearly identical to Rancière’s natural order. Both concepts look to move beyond the problem of false consciousness, trying to see how the excluded or unequal generally are aware of and accept their unequal



position in society. Their differences lie in the ontological base of their philosophies. For Zizek, ideology masks the Real, or the actual conditions of existence for subjects.

What they overlook, what they misrecognize, is not the reality but the illusion which is structuring their reality, their real social activity. They know very well how things really are, but still they are doing it as if they did not know. The illusion is therefore double: it consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality. And this overlooked, unconscious illusion is what may be called the *ideological fantasy* (Zizek 1989: 32-3).

Drawing on Lacan, he argues that subjects can only experience the Real as a dream (47). The Real is represented as a radical desire based in some “traumatic, real kernel, ” or a “traumatic social division which cannot be symbolized” (45). The social desire, equality, is traumatic because it uncovers the degree of inequality the oppressed find themselves mired in. Subjects choose to ignore the Real, or at least its possibility, and therefore partake in the ideological fantasy. Zizek’s ideology accounts for individual agency on this count, but by drawing on Lacan’s use of the Real, this agency places subjects in a position of retreating from the inequalities that make up their social lives.

Rancière’s political philosophy does not reach back into the mind to find the Real. For him, the only assumption he makes on the nature of humans is that they are unequivocally equal. The natural order, maintained through police processes, is an attempt to mask this truth and to justify exclusions and inequalities. Like Zizek’s ideology, we can see the natural order as a structuring element of social life. However, even though political interruptions are rare, they show subjects confronting the contradictions between the natural order and the equality of all. Or in Zizek’s terms, subjects pull the veil on the ideological fantasy masking the traumatic Real of equality.

Rancière's natural order is more fragile, more open to challenges from the part without a part.

#### **4.2.1.2 Hegemony**

Hegemony as a concept is closer in meaning to Rancière's natural order, though it too remains distinct. Based largely in the writings of Gramsci, hegemony is generally taken as system of control where dominated classes actively consent to participate in the system that creates their own inequalities. Located in the realm of civil society (as opposed to the state), hegemony works to ensure stability through consent, with the state using coercion to repress challenges to the hegemonic order (Gramsci 1971: 12). Taken together, Gramsci sees the state and civil society work together to maintain a stable system of control:

The school as a positive educative function, and the courts as a repressive and negative educative function, are the most important State activities in this sense: but... a multitude of other so-called private initiatives and activities tend to the same end – initiatives and activities which form the apparatus of the political and cultural hegemony of the ruling classes (Gramsci 1971: 258).

Hegemony, then, is a form of control that is meant to keep the ruling class – the bourgeoisie – in power.

Though both hegemony and the natural order both attempt to show how stable, unequal systems of governance and rule are maintained, there are two main points of contention between Rancière and Gramsci's definition of hegemony. The first comes from his separation of coercion and consent, or placing hegemony on the side without coercion. For Rancière, the process of police is integral in creating a natural order, as it maintains the places and standings of subjects within an order. As Baiocchi and Connor

(2013) and May (2008) have argued, Rancière's police is quite similar to Foucault's governmentality and discipline. These two forms of control, like Rancière's police, do not make a distinction between public and private, or coercive and consensual forms of control and power. The distinction between state and civil sphere, or hegemony and coercion is not relevant to the same degree for Rancière's natural order. Police processes, be it the courts, classroom, or doctor's office work together to create the natural order.

Second, even though Gramsci uses the organic intellectual and wars of position to show where resistance and counter-hegemonic forces can emerge from, at base in his theory is an economic determinism, where hegemony and coercion are used to maintain the bourgeoisie, or economic elite, as the ruling class. Specifically, Gramsci's hegemony is a theory of the economic sphere. Rancière's natural order is not a singular one. As politics can occur in numerous private or non-civil spheres (as well as the civil sphere), a natural order exists in each one, where some group is member of a community of equals, and others are excluded from that equality.

More contemporary uses of hegemony to varying degrees have deconstructed and expanded definitions of hegemony that are closer analogues to the natural order, but by and large they do not capture the plural, de-centered order Rancière describes. Williams (1977) gives hegemony new life by breaking down the determinism of base-superstructure relationships in traditional Marxist analysis. Hegemony, he argues, is a constant, unfinished relationship, and as such, must always be presented next to counter-hegemonic. In other words, there is a dominant force, but it is always being recreated and contested.

A lived hegemony is... a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits... Moreover... it does

not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own (Williams 1977: 112).

The similarities to Rancière, in particular his concept of police, are clear. Both argue that a hegemonic or natural order is one that is continually reproducing itself. Williams even goes so far as to deconstruct the determinist relationship between capitalism and the superstructure, creating a non-determined theory analogous to Rancière's. Where Williams draws on the traditional vocabulary of Marxism to show this, Rancière instead looks for new concepts that highlight the role of the excluded and ignored in the process of constructing a stable order.

Yet the natural order remains distinct due to Rancière's openness towards numerous spheres of society. Williams, in all his talk of hegemony and counter-hegemony, treats counter-hegemonic forces as plural, but keeps hegemony as singular. Society, despite being free of capitalist determination, has one hegemonic force. There is resistance to that force, but there is also no articulation of dominant *hegemonies* in spheres such as the economic, civil, domestic, etc.

Laclau and Mouffe's work on hegemony moves the concept furthest away from traditional Marxist usage of hegemony as a form of class domination. This movement gives their version of hegemony a number of similarities with Rancière's natural order, and in fact contains much more depth of meaning, as they weave issues of subjectification, politics, and police into hegemony. Both Rancière and Laclau and Mouffe treat politics and hegemony as contingent, non-determined events that surround subjects' multiple identity positions. Focusing on Laclau and Mouffe's use of hegemonic articulations and their relations to subjects places it on equivalent terms with the natural

order. Two differences arise from this limitation. First, where the natural order is the result of police practices, hegemony is taken as a form of politics itself. Hegemony is an active force for Laclau and Mouffe, whereas the natural order is a passive one. Second, Laclau and Mouffe claim that subjects are the product of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 115). It is unclear how or who produces this structuring discourse. Rancière's focus on the agentic capabilities of individuals leads to a questioning of Laclau and Mouffe's assertion that discourses produce subjects.

Laclau and Mouffe speak of hegemonies rather than a singular hegemony. Hegemonies emerge out of practices of articulation, or practices that attempt to fix meanings and alter identities of the hegmonized (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105). Hegemony itself is not based in some privileged position, instead coming from "political construction and struggle" (65). Laclau and Mouffe's hegemony is based on contingent articulations and non-privileged field of politics where multiple identities, articulations, and antagonisms confront each other and attempt to construct and fix particular meanings of subjects. "Hegemony is, quite simply, a political *type of relation*, a *form...* of politics; but not a determinable location within a topography of the social" (139). The openness of Laclau and Mouffe's hegemony, taken as a whole, places it in a very sympathetic position with Rancière's politics. When comparing hegemony to the natural order, however two differences can be seen.

First, Rancière treats the natural order as the result of police practices. Police, the process of governing subjects without questioning their roles, sets up the system where the meanings of subjectivities become relatively fixed (Rancière 2001). Politics and police hold the force of hegemonic articulations, so to speak. Police maintains and

politics transforms hegemonic articulations or natural orders. For Laclau and Mouffe, it is the antagonism between hegemonies that creates and maintains various hegemonic articulations. Compared to Rancière, hegemonic articulations are more similar in scope to his entire theory of the political.

The second difference is on how each theory treats identity. Subjectification is “...the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience” (Rancière 1999: 35). Rancière points to a rift inherent in the subjectification process between the subject as one given in the natural order, and the other as “disidentification” with that role in the natural order. Where Laclau and Mouffe claim that the subject is the product of a discourse that allows for multiple meanings of the subject (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 115), Rancière’s focus on the active role of subjects points to subjects and discourses producing each other. Rancière questions “the relationship between a *who* and a *what* in the apparent redundancy of the positing of an existence” (36).

In politics “woman” is the subject of experience – the denatured, defeminized subject – that measures the gap between an acknowledged part (that of sexual complementarity) and a having no part... “[P]roletarian” is similarly the subject that measures the gap between the part of work as social function and having no part of those who carry it out within the definition of the common of the community (Rancière 1999: 36).

One is simultaneously a part (as unequal) in the community, and without part, or lacking equality in that community. As such subjectification is not entirely derived from discourse in Laclau and Mouffe’s sense. One is shaped by the discourse of subjectification (as a worker or member of a specific sex), but at the same time politics deconstructs previous structuring discourses of Proletarian/Bourgeoisie, woman/man,

citizen/non-citizen. Proletarian itself becomes a term designating the foundational wrong of democracy: exclusion (Rancière 1999: 37).

#### **4.2.2 Solidarity and the Natural Order**

Solidarity and the natural order are both abstract concepts meant to show the symbolic underpinnings of group cohesion and social order. However, where Rancière considers the natural order a depoliticizing force in society, the Durkheimian usage of solidarity points to a more positive, unifying function of this symbolic force. For Durkheim, solidarity works to build group cohesion through individuals drawing on the same moral values (Durkheim 1984 [1893]: 21). When a society shares the same set of sacred and profane codes, and individuals act within the bounds of those codes. There is always deviance from these codes, but punishment itself provides society with a re-unifying ritual reinforcing collective bonds (63). Alexander (2006) takes up the project of civil solidarity by tying this form of togetherness in the democratic code of the nation. This code, based primarily in the ideas of civil liberty and equality, provides a structuring, unifying force in a diverse society. Civil solidarity faces a challenge, Alexander writes. It both affects and permeates into other spheres (where solidarity based on both liberty and equality is weaker) and must weather challenges from these non-civil spheres that do not share the democratic code (Alexander 2006: 194). Alexander remains hopeful that civil solidarity eventually affects other spheres in a positive manner because the civil sphere is in continual contact with non-civil spheres. The differences and cleavages of those spheres must confront the bases of equality and liberty at the heart of civil solidarity (194-5). Civil repair, the act of correcting various social wrongs in the

civil sphere that affect relations in non-civil spheres, becomes the process of universalizing solidarity (207-8).

The normative base of Alexander's theory of civil solidarity and repair is that the process is ultimately progressive. Society, he argues, is slowly moving towards a more democratic and solidaristic state. However, when one does not assume the natural progression of democracy exists, the negative affects of solidarity must be reckoned with, especially when solidarity groups from non-civil spheres gain power in the political system. Lamont's (2000) study of working class men in the US and France points to the double-edged nature of solidarity. While sharing the same class or racial or national identity provided a source of belonging and togetherness, it also created a strong divisive boundary between an "us" and "them." The difference between the constructions of "us" and "them" were quite marked, with subjects often times spelling out their distrust and dislike of groups that were different. The dangers of particularized solidarities are evident in her work, as the strong us-them distinction can easily give rise to racist, xenophobic, or class-based political demands that seek to take away the rights or equality of an Other. The result of this type of politics is twofold: it attempts to universalize a particular form of solidarity as ideal, and it attempts to naturalize it where the Other is no longer equal.

Rancière's democratic paradox shows us that democracy attempts, yet will always fail to create an entirely equal democratic system. Each new version of equality masks some hidden inequalities and justifies others as natural or given. Civil solidarity as Alexander imagines it suffers from the same problems as a white, working class solidarity sphere in the US. Both set up systems of what is "there." The democratic code, even though it is a universalizing one, still sets up a field of vision that decides who



exists, and how they can exist. This is a natural order, albeit a decent one in its utopian state. However, replacing utopian project of equality with one of solidarity as Alexander calls for is a dangerous project (Alexander 2006: 549-50). From Durkheim to even further back to scholastic theologians, ideal social orders have been described with biological metaphors. These descriptions recognize the differences between and specializations of individuals, and argue for some ideal construction of these differences into a harmonious whole. The problem with descriptions of solidarity systems is that they predetermine the existing parts and roles individuals can have in a society. In other words, these systems attempt to create a natural order that depoliticizes through justifying or ignoring inequalities.

Rancière would likely question whether the civil sphere, based in the codes of equality, could even coexist with non-civil spheres driven by segmentation and inequality. The economic sphere, for example, *precludes* most workers from having equality with economic elites. These workers, supposedly, are granted equality with elites in the civil sphere, where every voice is heard. But at this point we return to the problem of the miscount – the workers' (or the *demos*' ) political equality is a miscount compared to the rights and equality of the *oligoi*. Inequality in non-civil spheres makes the democratic miscount possible. Political equality is no equality at all, and any solidarity built upon civil equality is one built upon miscounting the parts of society.

### **4.3 Contradictions in the Natural Order: Towards a Political Moment**

The natural order, despite its depoliticizing tendencies, does not prevent political moments from happening that challenge the conceptualization of who can be equal and what is “there.” These moments happen, and the natural order is disrupted because of the miscount that is at the foundation of democratic society. There is no question over whether or not an excluded other exists. The real question is how and when some excluded subjectivity makes the demand for inclusion. The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 was one example of an excluded subjectivity demanding equality. For this convention to occur, though, a break from the natural order was needed, one that led women to challenge their place in various spheres of life. These breaks did not come from some radical outside position though. The natural orders in which the women lived provided the space for them to challenge their own places and roles. In particular, the interrelated spheres of politics and civil society, religion, and the legal sphere each opened up space from which the political moment at Seneca Falls could be possible.

#### **4.3.1 Religion and Conflicting Boundaries of Equality**

In the writings and transcribed speeches of feminists like Lucretia Mott and Sarah Grimké, belief in the spiritual equality of men and women under God drove efforts to equalize gender relations in society. Based largely in Quaker religious beliefs, this particular spiritual mediation of the sexes challenged other Christian understandings of gender roles and equality in both religious and civil spheres. Bartlett (1988) argues that three factors of Quakerism were important to see the relationship between Quakerism and women’s equality. The first was the doctrine of “inner light,” or the belief that all people

should act based in an inner moral conscience that comes from God. Since God bestows this equally on men and women, the result is the belief that both sexes are morally equal (Bartlett 1988: 9-10). Second, in marriage a husband and wife were to be “spiritually equal” (10). This spiritual equality translated to the material world through a more (though not entirely) equal distribution of household labor (Bartlett 1988: 10; Hewitt 1986). Finally, Quakerism gave women roles in the church as ministers and administrators, meaning women had the ability to preach and make decisions regarding the functioning of the church. (Bartlett 1988: 10). Though these three factors did not make women entirely equal to men in the Quaker religious sphere, their position relative to men was much closer to equal than other religions where women were excluded from preaching and managing the church, and relegated to an unequal member of the household. The boundaries between gender roles in Quaker and non-Quaker religions provided a contradictory space for Quaker women to take a larger stage to call for women’s equality as a spiritual right.

Sarah Grimké’s *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, originally published together in 1838, provides perhaps the clearest example of how religious codes of equality were used to promote women’s rights. Grimké’s *Letters*, published ten years before Seneca Falls, provided an influential text for moral arguments for equality. Grimké’s Quakerism stressed the importance of moral equality, the spiritual equality of husband and wife, and the belief women should have a voice in the functioning of the church, with the Hicksite sect of Quakerism taking a more democratic approach to the role of women in the church (Bartlett 1988: 10-11). Sarah Grimké and her sister Angelina were some of the first female abolitionists to speak in public in New England in the 1830s. Sarah’s *Letters* were

responses, based in Biblical exegesis, to the question of whether or not women should be taking up this role as political actor (1-2). In a letter from July 1837, Grimké argued that women should take up the cause of “public salvation,” claiming that it is not “unnatural” but “...in exact accordance with the will of Him” (Grimké 1988: 41). Grimké’s justification for public speaking in the abolition movement comes from the scriptural belief in the equality of men and women, and that it is women’s duty to follow the will of God, which in the case of abolition meant speaking and acting *in public* so to end slavery.

Grimké based her argument through Biblical interpretations that claimed God created man and woman in his image as equals. Basing the claim for equality in the story of the origins of humans, Grimké shows that the fundamental relationship between men and women is one of equals. Drawing on the book of Genesis, Grimké quotes: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them” (Gen. 1:26-7; in Grimké 1988a: 32). Grimké follows this with the claim for equality:

In all this sublime description of the creation of man (which is a generic term including man and woman), there is not one particle of difference intimated as existing between them. They were both made in the image of God; dominion was given to both over every other creature, but not over each other. Created in perfect equality, they were expected to exercise the vicegerence intrusted [*sic*] to them by their Maker, in harmony and love (Grimké 1988a: 32) (ellipses in original).

Equality, in the religious sphere, is a naturally given right coming from God. Whether or not this is an accurate reading of the Bible is irrelevant. What matters is that Grimké and other women were drawing on sacred religious codes in order to argue for their equality in the religious sphere. This moment of politics in the religious sphere was a disruption of the general Protestant one that unquestioningly placed women in secondary position to men.

Lucretia Mott also drew on her Quaker beliefs to make the claim that women are equal to men. In a sermon delivered in 1841, Mott argued that men and women were in fact spiritual equals and both had the right to preach:

Was it not one of the first acts of the apostles, to announce, in the words of the prophet Joel, that the spirit of the Lord was poured out upon all *flesh*; -- and was this not quoted to convince the people, that prophesying and preaching of both sexes was in fulfillment of ancient prophecy? (Mott 1980a: 27-8).

From there Mott attacked those who use the Bible to deny women a voice in the church. Mott, claiming she can “find no such passage” that places women as silent members of the church, called on women to fight for equality in the church (28).

...[W]hat a different and nobler generation should we behold in the next ... if the high duties of women were all fulfilled! I believe the tendency of truth, on this subject, is to equalize the sexes; and that, when truth directs us, there will be no longer assumed authority on one side or admitted inferiority on the other; but that as we advance in the cultivation of all our powers, physical as well as intellectual and moral, we shall see that our independence is equal, our dependence mutual, and our obligations reciprocal (Mott 1980a: 28-9).

Mott’s sermon, focused here on religious equality, shows that an already-present political demand for women’s equality existed in the religious sphere. The natural order of the religious sphere was already in some state of contestation, with Quaker women challenging the place of women in the larger Christian religious sphere.

The writings and speeches of the Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott proved to be challenges against the given, unequal religious natural order. These challenges showed the underlying forms of exclusion that has been built into most sects of Christianity. Their writings and speeches also show that solidarity in the Christian religious sphere has been based in women’s subjugation to men. Religion provides a sense of belonging in its community, but it has long done so through a demarcation of unequal parts based in sex and gender differences. Grimké and Mott’s challenge to the traditional religious natural

order meant to replace it with one where equality of the sexes was the foundation of the new natural order.

#### **4.3.2 Civil Codes: Democratic Ideals and Lived Experiences**

The same religious beliefs that placed men and women as spiritual equals also led Quakers and other Protestant groups to claim that whites and blacks were also spiritually equal. For both the Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott, their involvement in the abolition movement came from the same religious codes of equality. However, their political actions in this sphere drew as much on civil codes of equality as religious. Civil codes of equality follow the tradition of Enlightenment philosophy and its political applications that individuals are endowed with natural rights like freedom and equality. Yet the state of women in the civil and political sphere was not based in freedom or equality. Women were part of a separate sphere outside the realm of politics, deemed unfit for the impure world of politics and the public sphere (Ryan 1992; Isenberg 1998; Norton 2011). The natural order of the civil sphere was one where women were precluded from being full citizens, or members of a political and civil community of equals. Civil codes of equality, present in abolition debates at the time, are most clear in the eponymous document of the Seneca Falls Convention – the *Declaration of Sentiments*. This document, rephrased from the *Declaration of Independence*, makes the demand of absolute equality largely from the base of republican tradition of natural rights in governance. Before that political moment happened, however, the women who organized and participated in the Seneca Falls Convention were active in another political movement – abolitionism. While fighting for

equality and rights for another excluded group, these women began to look at their own condition of exclusion relative to white men.

Based in the same codes of equality, abolitionism was an ongoing movement that was challenging the “natural order” of relations between whites and African Americans. Abolitionism provided one of the first venues for women’s groups to enter into the public sphere (McMillan 2008). The abolition movement could lead to this break not only through democratic codes themselves, but also from the segmented private and public spheres women in the movement inhabited. Jacobs (2000) argues that due to racism and exclusion from white America, African Americans in the US developed an alternative public sphere from which to build new narratives and strategies to fight discrimination. This segmented sphere worked as the space for Rancière’s politics. Their demands for equality were constructed in a similar public sphere, but one that disrupted the natural order that excluded African Americans from full membership in the political and civil community of equals. For women involved in progressive religious societies in the 1830s and 1840s, their separate sphere provided them space to enter into the abolition debates, and eventually demand equality for women.

Women-based anti-slavery societies provided segmented access to the civil sphere for bourgeois women in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. Based in the style of previous benevolent societies – local women’s organizations geared towards community service – women found space to address a larger political issue than the typical mundane issues benevolent societies addressed (Isenberg 1998: 59-61). Women’s increasing participation in the abolition movement, especially in the northeast, was also aided by William Lloyd Garrison’s efforts to target these benevolent societies to support the

abolition movement. Garrison was a figurehead of the abolition movement, helping to establish the journal *Liberator* and the Anti-Slavery Society. Through aligning himself with emerging women's religious-based abolition groups, Garrison tapped into women's religious organizations as a way to further his own version of abolitionist politics (Marilley 1996: 43; Wellman 2004: 48-9, 54-5).<sup>11</sup> Of particular note, in 1835 Garrison published a private letter sent to him by Angelina Grimké in his abolition journal, *Liberator*. This letter changed the Grimké sisters' role in the movement, from relatively new members to active speakers and leaders (Wellman 2004: 49). The sisters began giving public speeches in 1836, at first only to women but later to mixed audiences. No matter Garrison's intentions in publishing Grimké's letter and general support of female abolition societies, the result was a shift for many women from private sphere participation to a public sphere discussing matters of equality. In 1840, the Garrison-led Anti-Slavery Society appointed the first woman, Abigail Kelly, to the business committee of the society (Gordon 1997: 26-7 n. 7). Women were able to take part as equals in the Anti-Slavery Society, allowing women the opportunity to act as full members of the civil and political sphere.

When women did speak publicly on abolitionism, however, the public reaction was mixed, and often critical. In a public letter sent by the Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, a women's abolition group, they asked their members and sympathizers to attend a forthcoming public speech by Sarah Grimké. Noting the hardships Grimké will face for speaking in public, they ask:

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<sup>11</sup> Marilley (1996) notes that though Garrison relied on women's religious groups to fill the ranks of his cause, he would not use scriptural reasoning to argue for the abolition of slavery, claiming that those opposing him the most were fundamentalists. Instead Garrison drew entirely on reasoning based in liberal thought (60).



She must encounter not only the sneers of the heartless multitude, which are the portion of every faithful abolitionist, but grave charges of infractions of the laws of female delicacy and propriety... While, then, our sister is willing to dedicate herself to this arduous part of the work, and for Christ's sake and the gospel's, welcomes the keen reproach and bitter contempt incident to it, we entreat you to give her your support, your sympathy, and your prayers (Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society 2002: 36).

Public participation in the abolition movement itself was a moment of politics in terms of women's equality. Their presence in the civil sphere was a rejection of the natural order of republican motherhood, which placed women solely in the private sphere (Ryan 1992; Norton 2011). Though this interruption was not aimed at achieving women's equality, it can be viewed in the larger picture as an act that helped normalize women's presence in politics and the civil sphere.

Abolitionism not only provided the symbolic resources that helped the Seneca Falls convention emerge, it also created ties among women in the northeast US. The barring of women from participating in the World Convention on Slavery in London in 1840 provided a moment that brought Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott together (Stanton 1993 [1898]; McMillan 2008). At the Convention in London, women traveled from America expecting to participate in the proceedings, only to find that the British organizers refused to allow women to participate. In her memoirs, Stanton recalled the harsh lesson she and her colleagues learnt on the trip:

To me there was no question so important as the emancipation of women from the dogmas of the past, political, religious and social. It struck me as very remarkable that abolitionists... should be so oblivious to the equal wrongs of their own mothers, wives, and sisters... (Stanton 1993 [1898]: 79).

The shared experience of exclusion raised the question of the role of women for both Stanton and Mott, as their own unequal status was made explicit surrounding the question of the status of slaves (McMillan 2008; Wellman 1991). With women engaging in

debates and actions on abolition, the question of the place of women in society continued to be raised, as both groups were denied the full rights of citizenship to varying degrees. Though the abolition movement did provide women with various social and cultural capitals needed to further the cause of women's rights (Bartlett 1988; Marilley 1996; Wellman 2004), this chapter's concern with the Seneca Falls Convention's interruption into the police with the demand of equality (Rancière 1999: 30) makes symbolic concerns more salient. Women were organizing, speaking, and acting in the abolition movement, and seeing how their own position related to the same discourse.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

The natural order is a minor concept of Rancière's, but in the movement from philosophy to sociological theory, it becomes a necessary part of the theory in order to understand how political moments can arise. Its importance lies in the fact that it is the result of efforts to depoliticize, demarcate certain inequalities as natural, or that it attempts to ignore the existence of other inequalities. From differing sociological viewpoints, this stability can be seen as hegemonic or solidaristic social formations. However, the natural order consisting of multiple orders broadens it from hegemony, and the ineluctable relationship between democracy and inequality makes it critical of solidarity as a utopian endpoint. Natural orders mask and justify inequalities, and as such cannot be taken as an ideal state or system.

In the religious and civil spheres examined in this chapter the established natural orders were in clear view. In the religious sphere, Biblical interpretations of gender roles were used to create and justify both the exclusion and inclusion of women as equals

depending on the sect. In the civil sphere, the supposed purity of women and impurity of politics and the world outside the household were justifications for keeping women out of politics and the civil sphere. These natural orders, though largely effective in maintaining their respective systems of inequality, did not prevent the political moment at Seneca Falls from happening. This is due to the fact that the natural order attempts to mask inequalities or justify them as natural. Lived experience and cultural codes of equality together challenge the masking and justifying of inequalities.

In terms of gender equality, where the general Christian-based religious natural order was already facing challenge from Hicksite Quakerism, the civil sphere's natural order was about to face serious challenge due to the dissonance between the democratic code of equality and the lived experience of inequality women faced. Women's involvement in abolitionism and property reform in the 1830s and 40s only made this disconnect more apparent, as well as challenge old justifications of women being unsuited for the impurity of politics. It was the combination of their own lived experiences as unequal yet active in politics, as well as their engagement of religious and civil codes of equality that help produce a new political moment. The Seneca Falls Convention emerged as an attempt to replace the unequal natural orders of the civil and religious spheres with ones that included women as equals.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE MOMENT OF INTERRUPTION: POLITICS AT SENECA FALLS

#### 5.1 Introduction

Though not the first,<sup>12</sup> nor even perhaps the most influential,<sup>13</sup> the Seneca Falls Convention can be clearly conceived as an instance of Rancière's politics, and therefore a version of the Politics of Equals. As argued in chapter two, the Politics of Equals is a limited yet radical understanding of politics as a non-determined moment that attempts to reshape the placement of excluded subjectivities in society. The convention at Seneca Falls gave voice to a number of avenues of exclusion women faced in their lives. The convention most notably gained renown for the document produced, "The Declaration of Sentiments."<sup>14</sup> Copying the model of Jefferson's "Declaration of Independence," the Declaration of Sentiments tied women's inequality to an injustice against their natural and political rights as human beings. Women were remaking their subjectivity from one that precluded them as political and civil equals to one that was based in gender equality. In doing so, the question of equality became central to all spheres of life the women were part of – civil and non-civil.

In their attempt to disrupt the symbolic place of women in US society, the convention can be clearly viewed as an instance of the Politics of Equals. Based on their previous experiences of exclusion, their involvement in the abolition movement, Hicksite Quakerism, and the struggle for property rights, the women at the convention could

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, the Grimké sisters, and Margaret Fuller (1980 [1845]) all had made similar interruptions previously or near the same time.

<sup>13</sup> Hewitt (1986) and Isenberg (1998) both argue that other conventions were more influential for the growth of the movement – Rochester in 1848, and Salem, OH in 1850, respectively. However, both agree that Seneca Falls was still a major Convention in its own right.

<sup>14</sup> Also known as "The Declaration of Rights and Sentiments."

clearly articulate: (1) how they were excluded (or in Rancière's terms, a part without a part), and (2) how and why they deserved to be equal to men in civil and non-civil spheres (or why they deserved entrance into Rancière's community of equals).

The method in which they made these demands, however, may not be as radical as Rancière imagined interruptions to be. In fact, the process clearly is analogous to sociological works on civil repair (Alexander 2006), cultural repertoires (Steinberg 1999; Lamont and Thévenot 2000) and symbolic boundaries (Lamont 2000; Lamont and Fournier 1992). Codes of liberty and equality are at the base of the democratic civil sphere. Political movements discursively draw on these codes in their demands, attempting to liken themselves or their cause to the sacred underpinnings of civil life. While the focus of works in this tradition has been the civil sphere, the same process can be said of action in non-civil spheres as well. Each sphere has its own system of codes, values and placement of people or institutions in regards to them. It follows then that political demands made of non-civil spheres are similar.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on democratic codes of equality as well as Biblical interpretations that denied essential differences between men and women, the convention utilized existing cultural codes in civil and non-civil spheres as a means to gain equality.

Lamont and Molnár (2002) define symbolic boundaries as "tools by which individuals and groups struggle over and come to agree upon definitions of reality" (168). These boundaries can be over mundane aspects of life such as one's tastes or over existential markers of inclusion and exclusion into civil, political, and economic life. At

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<sup>15</sup> This generalizing statement does bring up the question of politics emerging in non-civil spheres yet being debated and acted upon in the civil sphere. In this case, Alexander (2006) argues that codes from each sphere attempt to permeate the other, and complimentary codes between spheres are the base from which disputes are resolved (266-8; 404-5).

this broader level, distinction between included and excluded takes on greater symbolic weight, as those falling outside the markers of the boundary embody some degree of the profane that prevents them from being a member of that community. Rancière's community of equals works at this macro level of a subjectivities' relation to particular communities. For women at the convention, their noted placement as outsiders in gender, religious, economic, civil, and political boundaries was motivation for calls of equality. Their placement outside the community of equals in political, civil, and non-civil life was unjust. A symbolic shift in the role of women in society was needed.

The *Declaration of Sentiments* is worthy of detailed examination because it details how the Convention was part of the Politics of Equals. First, the language in the document clearly and effectively links the demands for equality with sacred codes of the nation, codes that structure our political and social life (Alexander 2006: 57-9). Second, the document is political through the way it "plays" with the Declaration of Independence to redefine who can be an equal (Sewell 1999: 51). This "playing" can both reshape meanings of the original cultural object (Declaration of Independence) or help shape the meaning of the new one (Declaration of Sentiments) (Schudson 1989). The result was a document that attempted to place women inside the boundaries of "equals," or in Rancière's language, to become members of the community of equals. The document also highlights one paradox found in the struggle for equality, that equality itself can have varied meanings, and that these meanings can at times conflict with other codes of the civil sphere. In other words, being "equal" in a hierarchical structure like capitalism can have two meanings – equal with everyone in terms of their role to labor and capital, or equal as able to fully enter the same system of inequality that others already are part.

## 5.2 The Interruption

Though Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott had discussed holding a convention on women's rights after their exclusion from participating at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, only in 1848 did concrete plans emerge (Stanton 1993 [1898]: 83; 147-8). As Stanton recalled, it was in discussion with Lucretia Mott and others in Waterloo, NY that led to the concrete plans for the convention (Stanton, Anthony and Gage 1889). A call for the convention was printed in the *Seneca County Courier* on 14 July 1848, calling for the convention in Seneca Falls for 19-20 July 1848 (Wellman 2004: 276 n. 16). In a letter to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott described her hopes for the convention: "...[I]t will be a beginning and we may hope it will be followed in due time by one of a more general character" (Mott 2002: 163). Despite this short notice, the convention had 83 women sign their names to the document. No written accounts of the entire convention remain; however what is most important about the convention is the *Declaration of Sentiments*. The eleven resolutions adopted and numerous claims on the unjust position of women in society clearly and succinctly demonstrate women's exclusion, how it has been turned into a naturalized difference compared to men, and an instance of Rancière's politics, where an excluded subjectivity demands membership to the community of equals. While the majority of the demands centered on the political and civil spheres, a number of resolutions demanded equality in non-civil spheres such as religion, work, family, and education. These will be examined here in order to show the radical demands presented, how equality in one sphere is

intertwined with equality in others, how codes of equality can sometimes conflict with codes of liberty, and how codes of equality tied these demands together.

### **5.2.1 Political and Civil Equality**

Mimicking Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, as main author of the *Declaration of Sentiments*, starkly shows the inequality between men and women in the civil sphere:

The history of mankind is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her. To prove this, let facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has never permitted her to exercise her inalienable right to the elective franchise.

He has compelled her to submit to laws, in the formation of which she had no voice.

He has withheld from her rights which are given to the most ignorant and degraded men – both natives and foreigners.

Having deprived her of this first right of a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides (*Declaration of Rights and Sentiments*: 238).

In these statements, the Declaration argues a number of points. First, it argues that women do not have any semblance of equality in politics or as citizens. There is a complete exclusion, placing them without a part in functioning of democratic politics.

The question becomes, in Rancière's language, whether women can exist in the counting and distribution of parts, and providing a new logic that includes women in this process.

The state of politics, where women are denied the right to vote and have no say in the laws she must submit to, is one where its logic is formulated without women. Women as



a subject were not supposed to be a part of this political logic. This idea had roots since colonial times – women’s moral qualities and position as wives, mothers, and daughters made them unfit for the “impurity” of politics (Kerber 1980; Gurko 1976: 28; Isenberg 1998: 43-5; Ryan 1992; Norton 1980, 2011; Bloch 2003)<sup>16</sup>. For women to challenge their position meant countering this with a new political logic, or “...an opposition of logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways” (Rancière 2001: 6:19). In the language of cultural sociology, the women argue that there is a disconnect between their lived experience as citizens and the sacred codes of the nation based in equality.

Second, in creating this opposing political logic, women (re-)create themselves as a subjectivity that has inalienable rights that are equal to the rights of men. While seemingly a minor point, for Rancière this becomes a central feature of his philosophy. Rancière has built his work around the belief that no one subjectivity or group can claim mastery over another, be they workers (Rancière 2012 [1989]), teachers (Rancière 1991), or citizens (Rancière 1999). The process of attaining equality begins with acting “as-if” the excluded subjectivity is in fact equal (Schaap 2011). By asserting the right to vote as inalienable, the authors of the Declaration are acting “as-if” this right to political equality already exists. It is from this base that the excluded can achieve equality. This acting is evident in their demand for suffrage:

*Resolved*, That it is the duty of the women of this country to secure to themselves their sacred right to the elective franchise (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 240).

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<sup>16</sup> Hewitt (1986) argues that notions of separate spheres for women were found largely in urban settings, and the experiences of rural, and especially rural Quaker women, were different.

The resolutions in the Declaration build upon the recognition of oppression and demand the equality that is their natural right. These resolutions are the interruption Rancière speaks of, as they are, "...a significant interruption of the assumptions and logics of subjects' parts and roles in a society" (Connor and Baiocchi 2011: 9). This break was based in the idea of natural rights of people and their equal treatment under the law, ideas based in Enlightenment philosophy (Bartlett 1988; Marilley 1996; Blackstone 1979 [1841]) and a sacred code of the democratic system (Alexander and Smith 1993). Like the abolition movement, women's rights emerged with the belief in natural rights of women and men.

*Resolved*, That all laws which prevent woman from occupying such a station in society as her conscience shall dictate, or which place her in a position inferior to that of man, are contrary to the great precept of nature, and therefore of no force or authority (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 240).

Like Enlightenment philosophers before, tying gender equality to natural rights intertwined the non-civil religious sphere with the civil sphere. Political equality in any form could not be imagined without this. The women at Seneca Falls note this in their resolution:

...That woman is man's equal – was intended to be so by the Creator, and the highest good of the race demands that she should be recognized as such" (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 240).

The linking of civil and religious codes was the basis for their initial support. As Hewitt (1986) argues, the women attending the Seneca Falls Convention, as well as the convention in Rochester in August 1848, were largely rural, Quaker women's lives were less segregated from men compared to their urban counterparts (Hewitt 1986: 29). The tie between civil and religious codes in the US was, and is, an enduring feature of political life in the US (Connolly 2008). As numerous works in the social sciences have argued

(Wood 2002; Lichterman 2005; Mahmood 2005; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Hansen 1999; Williams 1999), the ties between organized religion and the civil sphere are constant and strong in democracy throughout the world. Drawing back on the earlier discussion of Quaker interpretations of gender roles in society, these initial claims of equality, at least from a Quaker standpoint, showed that the religious-sacred code of equality was the same as the national-sacred code. Simply put, women's equality inexorably linked the civil and Quaker religious spheres, where equality was a natural right in both.

### **5.2.2 Religious Equality**

Religious codes are commonly found in social movements in the US, from major movements like civil rights (McAdam 1982: 48-9) to more mundane ones affecting local neighborhoods and communities (Wood 2002; Lichterman 2005). Religion, especially versions where women were already relatively equal to men, provided a space for religious codes to enter into the question of women's equality. Hicksite Quakerism, as previously noted, held men and women as equals under God's eyes. As such, Hicksite Quaker women had a larger active presence in religious practice and administration compared to other Protestant sects (Bartlett 1988). Their claim for religious equality, however, did not go unchallenged. Within the Quaker community and other Protestant sects, gender difference and female subordination, was argued to come from the Bible (Bartlett 1988; Greene 1980). The struggle in the religious sphere for equality needed to address the fact that in most other Christian sects, women were precluded from if not spiritual equality under God, then material equality centering on the roles of women in the everyday functioning of the church:

He allows her in Church as well as State, but a subordinate position, claiming Apostolic authority for her exclusion from the ministry, and, with some exceptions, from any public participation in the affairs of the Church (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 239).

The religious interruption at Seneca Falls centered on this debate. Women had a right to be equal as speakers and members of a Church because the right of equality came from God. Equality for them was a sacred religious right, and the Convention became a means to re-assert this.

*Resolved*, That woman has too long rested satisfied in the circumscribed limits which corrupt customs and a perverted application of the Scriptures have marked out for her, and that it is time she should move in the enlarged sphere which her great Creator has assigned her (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 240).

Equality was demanded in the same way political equality was. The difference, however, was the basis from which the demand was made. Instead of using liberal philosophical codes, equality in religion comes strictly from *religious* codes. These codes of equality function very much in the same manner as codes of the civil sphere, and in effect the result leads to similar demands of equality:

*Resolved*, therefore, That, being invested by the Creator with the same capabilities, and the same consciousness of responsibility for their exercise, it is demonstrably the right and duty of woman, equally with man, to promote every righteous cause... [A]nd especially in regard to... morals and religion, it is self-evidently her right to participate with her brother in teaching them, both in private and in public, by writing and speaking... and in any assemblies proper to be held... (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 240-41)

The right of equality in religion here goes beyond basic religion and into general roles and behaviors expected of women. Because women's equality is a God-given right, they argue, it means that they must be allowed to behave like men in the exercise and teach religion in the same manner, "both in private and in public." By linking religious teachings to a generalized public sphere, the women at Seneca Falls rejected traditional

republican norms that placed women under a different set of morality and bound to a separate sphere. Practically, this meant the linking of two (not always separate) groups of women that made up the base of those who signed the Declaration – abolitionists and Quakers (Wellman 1991: 24). Because the same code was present in the two spheres (though with differing origins), it effectively shaped the interruption to bridge the civil and religious spheres, leading to a larger claim for equality.

### **5.2.3 Conflicting Codes: Labor and Equality**

The economic sphere presents a challenge to any conceptualization of equality, and shows how codes of equality can conflict with ones of liberty. Specifically, a capitalist economic sphere questions the claims of a non-stratified society by drawing on codes of liberty in economic settings. A political interruption in this sphere, because it disrupts the basis of relationships between parts, disrupts the capitalist order of classes. In other words, politics in this sphere would resemble some form of communism. This radical break puts a limit on how far economic politics can bring about equality. After all, the civil sphere is built upon codes of liberty as well as equality. Inequalities in non-civil spheres can be seen as natural results of individual action and effort. If women demand equality in the economic sphere, is it politics?

Though Stanton and Lucretia Mott focused much less on the topic in their collected writings and memoirs, equality in labor surfaced at the convention.<sup>17</sup> The women note the second-class status women faced in regards to work:

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<sup>17</sup> In collected copies of letters and speeches (Greene 1980; Palmer 2002; Gordon 1997; Stanton 1993 [1898]), issues surrounding labor and equality are scant.

He has monopolized nearly all the profitable employments, and from those she is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration.

He closes against her all the avenues to wealth and distinction, which he considers most honorable to himself... (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 238).

The demand is simple – women should have the same rights in the sphere of labor as men, “...even to the wages she earns” (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 238).

However, the question of equality in the sphere of work has two meanings. In one sense, the demand for equality is to be the same as men in a capitalist economy, or to have the same rights to own business, work as a wage, laborer, or any other working condition men faced. While women were not completely excluded from the workforce, their position was secondary. In the other sense, equality has a more radical meaning, one that dismantles distinctions between owners and workers. The two meanings of equality have completely different trajectories – where one allows for the equal entrance into the capitalist field, the other attempts to dismantle that field as an unjust method of distributing subjects and resources in society. Rancière refers to the two meanings of equality when he states: “A choice must be made between being equal in an unequal society and being unequal in an ‘equal’ society, a society which transforms equality into its opposite” (Rancière 1995: 84). The demands made at Seneca Falls fall into the former category; a more radical demand would attempt the latter. The demand to gain work and profit, from this standpoint at least, places women in the same tiered capitalist system that men currently were part of. Though Rancière treats a fully egalitarian society as utopian (83-4), a demand for this type of equality would be one that attempts to dismantle the capitalist economic order. While not necessarily “police,” economic equality at Seneca Falls was not a radical version.

Herein lie the conflicting codes faced in the calls for economic reform, between concerns for equality among workers, and those of liberty that stress the importance of the freedom in the economic sphere. The “value regimes” (Alexander 2006: 229) of the civil and economic spheres differ, leading to limitations on the type and amount of equality that can translate from the civil sphere to the economic one. At the same time, this also limits the structured inequalities of capitalism from structuring inequality in the civil and other non-civil spheres. Each sphere’s natural order provides it with relative autonomy from other spheres, with the borders of the community of equals smaller or larger in each one. The limited community of equals in the capitalist economic sphere can conflict with, but remain stable compared to a much more broad community of equals in the civil sphere.

#### **5.2.4 Legal Equality**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the affects of an unequal legal system on women, and the efforts to change that system, were salient factors for the women at Seneca Falls to demand equality. The fact that many of the demands in the *Declaration* deal with legal equality should then come as no surprise. Generally tied to unequal domestic relations between a husband and wife, these demands sought the end of men making married women “civilly dead” (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 238).

...In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master – the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty, and to administer chastisement” (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 238).

Marriage, in their view, was an institution of oppression where women lost their freedom to their husband. Husbands were the public face of marriage, and represented both husband and wife in regards to public and political life. One result was that when the husband died, the wife was more or less “dead” in the legal sense. She could not inherit the property she shared with her husband and became dependent on her children or other family members as a widow.

Family law was a problem beyond inheritance. Divorce was another concern for the women at the convention:

He has so framed the laws of divorce, as to what shall be the proper causes of divorce; in case of separation, to whom the guardianship of the children shall be given; as to be wholly regardless of the happiness of women – the law, in all cases, going upon the false supposition of the supremacy of man, and giving all power into his hands (Declaration of Rights and Sentiments: 238).

The patriarchal legal system, they argue, denies women the right to leave a marriage or gain custody of children on their terms – women must always submit to an unjust, unequal system of law. Equality here cannot be granted merely through legal reform; it comes from allowing women to be able to create and shape laws to the same degree as men. This is the essence of Rancière’s “active equality” (May 2008). When equality is not earned, or given from a master (Rancière 1991), it is granted by others. The risk of this is that equality can be taken away as easily as it is earned. Equality here cannot occur merely through gaining a change in divorce and custody laws where men make the decisions. Equality will only occur *actively*, where women achieve a place where they make the laws as well.

Of course, equality in regards to the law relates to enforcement as well as creation. The *Declaration* also tackles this aspect of legal equality:



*Resolved*, That the same amount of virtue, delicacy, and refinement of behavior, that is required of women in the social state, should also be required of man, and the same transgressions should be visited with equal severity on both man and woman (*Declaration of Rights and Sentiments*: 240).

Under common law in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, married women were treated as “covered” by their husband, where the husband assumes the legal existence of his spouse (McMillen 2008: 19). In essence, a married woman had no legal rights, as they became her husband’s rights. The construction and application of laws completely excluded married women from any community of equals. For legal change to become politics, it must attempt to alter the legal system so that married women become legally existing citizens, where the law applies to them in the same manner as men. These demands in the *Declaration* centering on legal change, from property rights to rights of citizenship in marriage, attempt to remake women’s standing as equals under the law.

### **5.3 After the Convention: From Interruption to Equality**

The Seneca Falls Convention clearly was a moment of interruption, or politics. However, this sociological reconstruction of Rancière opens up politics to the post-interruption. How does a political interruption, which is a single, ephemeral moment, lead to a real change in the community of equals? Though this project as a whole has been concerned with documenting the emergence and moments of politics, this chapter will close with a brief discussion of what happens after the interruption. The Seneca Falls Convention did not lead to any immediate changes in the state of women in the civil and non-civil spheres of society. But it was part of the beginning of a concentrated movement towards equality. A brief examination of the rise of Women’s Rights Conventions shows

that starting from three weeks after Seneca Falls, more women wanted to meet and discuss their unequal position in society, and often asked Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott to speak at these events. From 1848 to approximately the start of the Civil War, the question of women's equality became an important question in the civil sphere. After the war and with the passage of the 15th amendment the movement narrowed its goals towards suffrage, culminating in the achievement of suffrage. Though not full political or civil equality, suffrage did create a more equal civil sphere.

News of the Convention and the *Declaration* spread quickly, discussed in newspapers and journals (Gurko 1976: 103-4). Though Elizabeth Cady Stanton recalled much of these article critiquing the event and ridiculing women (Stanton 1993 [1898]: 149), contemporary scholars have found these claims to be exaggerated and that there were many supportive articles as well (Wellman 2004: 210). Scholars of the civil sphere argue that the media is a central feature of linking political issues and problems to the concerns of the members of civil society (Alexander 2006; Jacobs 2000). For the cause of women's rights to lead to civil repair, then, the media must bring the issue to the public's attention. Regardless of the issue being portrayed in positive or negative light, it seems that treating women's equality as a legitimate topic was enough for the issue to be taken seriously.

One sign that the interruption at Seneca Falls was successful is the shifting political concerns that the organizers, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, engaged with in their lives. In collections of both of their letters and speeches, abolitionism was

their main political concern.<sup>18</sup> Examined in detail in chapter four, the two found the abolition movement to be one of the main venues for women to be involved in politics in the civil sphere. After the convention, however, their focus shifted to women's equality. Throughout the 1850s, more of their letters and public lectures centered on women's rights and equality. In a letter to Mary Ann White Johnson and the Ohio Women's Convention in 1850, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote: "Man cannot represent us... Man cannot legislate for us" (Stanton 1997b: 164, 165). In 1849, Lucretia Mott said the following in a speech delivered in Philadelphia:

...[S]he asks nothing as a favor, but as a right, she wants to be acknowledged a moral, responsible being... She is seeking not to be governed by laws, in the making of which she has no voice... She is deprived of almost every right in civil society, and is a cypher [*sic*] in the nation... (Mott 1980b: 154).

The demand for equality is made again by showing women's subordinate position in civil and non-civil spheres in life. Through basing their claims in religious beliefs and republican notions of citizenship, Stanton and Mott continued making their demands for equality.

The rise of women's rights conventions after Seneca Falls is evidence that the question of equality was moving from rare, singular moments of politics to more regular, and multiple moments of politics. Three weeks after Seneca Falls a second convention was held in Rochester, NY. Organized by some Quaker women from Rochester that attended the convention in Seneca Falls, these women wished to immediately continue the project of women's equality (McMillen 2008: 95). In 1850 conventions were held in Salem, OH and Worcester, MA, with the convention in Worcester the first National

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<sup>18</sup> Letters and speeches of the two have been collected in *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony* (1997), *Lucretia Mott: Her Complete Speeches and Sermons* (1980), and *Selected Letters of Lucretia Coffin Mott* (2002).

Woman's Right Convention (McMillen 2008: 106). This national convention was held, with the exception of 1857, every year between 1850 and the start of the Civil War in 1861 (McMillen 2008: 110). In January and February of 1855 in New York, 25 conventions were held on women's rights (Anthony 1997a: 291; Anthony 1997b: 301). The continuation of conventions for the decade following Seneca Falls was the continuation of politics, or furthering the project of equality from interruption to actual change.

It must be noted, however, that the success and growth of the movement was also based partially on women taking advantage of their racial, ethnic, class, and religious privilege at the time. Equality for women did not necessarily mean equality for all. Elizabeth Cady Stanton showed this reliance on privilege in a letter on gaining suffrage: "We need not prove ourselves equal to Daniel Webster to enjoy this privilege for the most ignorant Irishman in the ditch has all the civil rights he has..." (Stanton 1997a: 104). Drawing on anti-Irish sentiment, Stanton's argument boils down to the claim that women deserve equality if a "lower" group of people already has that right. After the Civil War and the passing of the 15th Amendment, claims for equality based in racism emerged again, where women's suffrage was at times treated as a reactionary response to African American men gaining the vote (McMillen 2008: 162). In these two cases, women could draw on their own privileged position compared to others as a method to gain political and civil equality.

There are two important things to note in how women at times used their own privilege to further their equality at the expense of others. First, this language for equality based on some form of superiority is part of a discursive repertoire in the US that has

tended to place Protestant, white, and bourgeois Americans at the head of a complex system of inequality (Collins 2000). In other words, drawing on these supposedly morally “inferior” groups as reasoning for equality provides a “...conceptual mapping of possibilities for action” based in the idea that white Protestant women are morally superior to other groups that (nominally) have civil equality (Steinberg 1999: 750). Second, it must be noted that even though at times women drew on their positions of privilege to further their project of equality, this does not negate the realness of their demand for equality. As the deconstruction of the “Declaration of Sentiments” showed, the women at Seneca Falls had real demands for equality based in their own conditions of exclusion. Their privilege and occasionally derogatory methods, while they must be noted, do not affect their condition as unequal in numerous spheres of life.

## **5.4 Conclusion**

The works of Jacques Rancière provides a compelling framework from which to understand equality in the civil and non-civil spheres, and how these spheres relate to each other. It also allows cultural sociology to deal with equality as a symbolic boundary without resorting to determinist theories of society that reduce aspects of culture to overarching material structures. Though some sociological reconstruction of Rancière’s work was made, the result is a culturally autonomous, sociological theory of equality.

This chapter argues for the use of Rancière’s work in sociology as the Politics of Equals, showing how this conception of politics can help us understand how an excluded subjectivity can begin the process of entering the civil sphere and non-civil sphere as equals. For the women at Seneca Falls, this meant arguing that women had the same

natural rights as men and that their exclusion was counter to sacred codes of each relevant sphere: civil society, religion, etc. Here we saw that equality took on various forms, from an absolute equality in the civil sphere to equally stratified in the economic sphere. Looking at this political interruption through a Neo-Durkheimian perspective shows the how of the emergence and development of politics can happen, bridging Rancière's abstract philosophy to cultural sociology. Their similar treatment of semi-autonomous spheres with their own hierarchies and the symbolic base of politics and the question of inclusion/exclusion make the two approaches complimentary. In addition, Neo-Durkheimian studies of politics provide a strong example of showing how a moment of politics can arise, and how it can lead to some form of enacted or institutional change.

But Rancière's theories do not fit entirely in the Neo-Durkheimian school. The focus on equality both limits and radicalizes cultural theories of democracy. It limits in that this focus turns us away from solidarity and the larger interplay and balance of cultural codes like liberty and equality that are part of the Neo-Durkheimian theory of democracy and civil society, and radicalizes in that Rancière provides a way to create a cultural theory of equality as praxis. Where Alexander treats equality alongside other cultural codes in the civil sphere as a means towards greater solidarity, Rancière sees equality as the goal in itself society should be striving towards. This is counter to Alexander (2006), who after lamenting the "death of the socialist dream," (549) or a utopian equality, claims "Civil solidarity – that is the real utopia" (550). Because of his insistence that equality is an always-unfinished project (Rancière 1995: 83-4), one must look critically at any natural order, or in Durkheimian terms, systems of solidarity, as these mask myriad forms of domination and exclusion. Rancière challenges us to

critically examine relationships, roles, and subjectivities in a social order to further the project of equality. These “hidden” inequalities are found in all spheres of life – civil and non-civil – making the difference between the spheres less important for Rancière. This dialogue between two goals that at times can be opposing can open up questions over the current and ideal states of various spheres, the nature of both equality and solidarity, and the value of interruptions in spheres with strong naturalized inequalities. The key difference between the approaches is lies not in the process of politics in the civil sphere, but the result – striving more towards equality or solidarity.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION: ON THE POLITICS OF EQUALS

#### 6.1 Introduction

The preceding chapters have constructed a new sociological theory of politics centered on the question of equality. Though the discipline is full of theories linking inequality to myriad social structures, the Politics of Equals is a universal theory of equality. The role of the Politics of Equals is not to explain social inequalities as a means to show what must be done to further equality. Instead, it is a theory of *equality itself*, illustrating the emergence, contradictions, and endings of political moments and movements. Studies of inequality present a danger. As Rancière (1991, 1995) argued and Pelletier (2009a) expanded on, examining unequal subjectivities may cement these or other inequalities because these works oftentimes confirm hierarchy and inequality. The voice of the researcher takes precedence in confirming this inequality. Rather than explicitly study inequality, the social scientist should study equality, or the subjectivities or groups engaged in politics. Studying the demand, or “verification” of equality (Pelletier 2009b) allows those making the demand to be heard in their own voice; they articulate the inequalities they experience, and they articulate the material and symbolic changes they want seen in society. Where traditional studies of inequality indirectly are concerned with equality, studies on the verification of equality indirectly address inequalities present in society.

This shift in focus from inequality towards equality makes the Politics of Equals a *universal* theory of equality. Rather than limit a theory to structures and identities such as class, race, gender, or the intersections between some collection of structures and



identities, the Politics of Equals is applicable across structures and identities. The focus on equality and its verification allows for a more universal approach, as the particular structures surrounding domination (capitalism, racism, patriarchy, etc.) are downplayed in favor of examining how subjectivities claim the equality they have with all others. The Politics of Equals is a theoretical lens from which a researcher can further understandings of how particular cases of politics relate to the question of equality.

## **6.2 The Politics of Equals**

The sociological theory that has been constructed here is based in four themes or guiding points. Expanded on throughout the previous chapters, these themes provide the key elements from which the Politics of Equals can be used for further empirical research. The nature of politics, the democratic paradox, the boundlessness of politics, and a non-romantic approach to democracy and equality all makeup key components of the Politics of Equals.

### **6.2.1 Politics as the Demand for Equality**

The most central of themes in the Politics of Equals is to separate politics into two forms: the politics of equals and governmental politics. This difference, based on Rancière's distinction between politics and police, shows the stakes of political actions. As discussed in chapters one and two, the difference between politics and police is the symbolic nature of the political claims being made. Where politics (and the Politics of Equals) seeks a reconstruction of existing relationships between subjectivities, police

(and governmental politics) does not. Claims here are centered on other material or symbolic gains and losses. The Politics of Equals is based on a fundamental disagreement between the included and excluded of a particular sphere. At stake in this disagreement is the conceptualization of that excluded subjectivity. How can that excluded subjectivity both show their current state of inequality and demand real inclusion in a way that the “included” understand them? Rancière is adamant that disagreement and conflict is essential for any equality to be realized (Rancière 1999). Disagreement is necessary because it disrupts stable conceptualization of the roles and parts of a society. It challenges a social order to rethink “who exists” and “in what role should they exist.” No matter the form of a moment of politics to a movement and institutionalization of that politics, this fundamental disagreement must be present for it to be part of the Politics of Equals.

### **6.2.2 The Democratic Paradox**

Rancièrian political theory posits that all democratic forms of life face a paradox: emancipatory moments, or politics itself, are ineluctably tied to oppressive outcomes (Rancière 1999). Where one claim for equality can become recognized and institutionalized, some other subjectivity is denied or ignored a part in the emancipatory moment. Even the most horizontal or democratically-organized model of collective political action inevitably produces exclusions, either internally or externally. Some subjectivities and discourses will be unheard, silenced, or excluded. Put simply, there is a difference between Rancière’s politics as an enactment of equality, and the institutionalization of equality, be it through formal or informal means. This

understanding posits that even the most seemingly radical political moments become focused on narrower groups of subjectivities as politics goes from the demand and enactment of equality to some (formal or informal) institutionalization of that equality.

Numerous democratic and social movement theorists have approached the issue of addressing the issue of inequality in democracy and democratic social movements. Stressing the importance of agonism (Mouffe 1993; 2005), participation (Laclau 2005; Baiocchi 2005), deliberation (Benhabib 1996), horizontalism (Sitrin 2006), or some other form (Melucci 1996; Matynia 2009), these works generally look to solve, or at least mitigate, inequalities that underlie democracy and the movements that struggle for social justice and equality. Instead of theorizing new models or organizational forms of movements that can supposedly address the issue, sociology should uncover both *why* and *how* democratic politics, and social movements in particular, recreate some inequalities in their attempts to address other unequal relations. This places sociology in direct dialogue with political theory, examining the empirical contours of theoretical claims in order to understand how this theory might exist in the social world.

The Politics of Equals brings to light not only the fundamental difference between politics and police for sociology, it also makes aware the limiting and narrowing of politics as it moves from moment and movement to institutionalization. Chapter Five illustrates the beginnings of a political moment and movement. The Seneca Falls convention and *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* made numerous demands for equality in multiple spheres, from civil to economic, religious, and domestic. However, the Women's Rights Movement that emerged after the Civil War was largely focused on a singular issue – suffrage. Other demands for equality receded while coalescence

emerged around suffrage. The open and radical demands at Seneca Falls found a more narrow form that could be institutionalized, thereby granting some form of equality in the civil sphere. At the same time, the first wave of the women's rights movement was focused on the issues of white, middle class women at the expense of women of color and women of lower classes, among other exclusions. While the Seneca Falls Declaration was supposedly open to all women, it was in fact excluding many women from achieving meaningful equality.

### **6.2.3 The Boundlessness of Politics**

Following the themes addressed above, it follows that the Politics of Equals must keep an open approach in order to view how and where demands for equality emerge, shift, succeed, or fail. To do this means not putting on blinders that delimit the locations or causal forces that can lead to moments of politics. Political sociology – despite insights from feminist theory and critical race theory, among others – still too often roots politics in particular settings or causal mechanisms. The result is a depoliticizing political sociology, one that turns an eye towards instances of politics that emerge in private settings or between two people or not caused by some material or symbolic structure. Chapter three uncovered this problematic political sociology faces, calling for a version of political sociology that separates the political from the social. This separation is needed because, from a Rancièrian perspective, political moments are ephemeral and unpredictable. Assuming these moments happen because of some structuring force, or in some location annihilates the possibility of politics happening in certain situations or

settings. Uncoupling the political from the social allows the researcher to study equality in the terms *set by those demanding it*.

#### **6.2.4 Non-Progressive Politics**

Finally, a more implicit theme found throughout the Politics of Equals is the non-romantic approach to understanding democracy, politics, and social movements.

Exclusion and inequality makes up a central portion of any democratically-oriented politics, as evidenced not only by discussion here of the community of equals, but also the democratic paradox. At the same time, recognizing that a political moment may be one meant to *exclude* certain subjectivities adds a dimension to Rancière's politics that recognizes that a verification of equality can be as common as a verification of an Other's inequality.

This critical approach to understanding democracy leads the Politics of Equals to challenge assumptions that progressive social movements or processes of civil repair strengthen democratic society or civil solidarity. In fact, as argued in Chapter Four, sociological arguments for solidarity as a guiding utopian goal must be treated cautiously since solidarity is merely another form of Rancière's natural order. This state either masks the ever-present inequalities in democratic society or legitimizes those inequalities as normal. It is only through disagreement – politics itself that this “better” solidarity sphere is recognized as being unjust. The process then repeats itself, *ad infinitum*. Equality must be a continual point of departure – not an endpoint – so that the risks of depoliticizing the excluded can be minimized.

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