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Rancière and Queer Theory

On irritable attachment

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The article begins by examining the obstacles to an encounter between Rancière's work and queer theory, Foucault and psychoanalysis, and by questioning Rancière's own view of queer theory. The article then argues that Rancière's formalist account of political subjectivation is open to a queering which allows his assumptions about queer theory to be set aside. It goes on to outline a Rancièrian queer theory which is methodologically egalitarian in its commitment to taking seriously the self-understandings of ordinary queer subjects and which remains true to Rancière's scepticism about 'theoreticism' and his critical perspective on disciplinary formation. It finds in Rancière's critique of progressivism and the value he places on singularizing self-realization in the present the sources of a queer understanding of futurity and kinship in certain respects consonant with Lee Edelman's. The article concludes that the affective disposition and relational mode implicit in Rancière's practice of irritable attachment offer queer theory the vision of a less fraught and more liveable response to ambient heteronormativity.

[!]n our examination of left-wing politics today we have been superficial or, so to speak, epidermic [*épidermiques*]. For it is in the touchiness of our skin's sensitivity [*la sensibilité des épidermes*] that we are perhaps most confident of having preserved, amid the daily round of compromises and the carnival of modish transgressions, something of what changed in 68. (Rancière et al, 1978: 5)[1]

In this opening presentation, by Rancière and the other members of the *Révoltes Logiques* collective, of a special issue of the journal commemorating the tenth anniversary of May 1968, the intriguing suggestion is that in the susceptibility of the epidermic surface to irritation is to be found both something essential about May 68 and

the basis of an enduring attachment to its notoriously elusive spirit: their task, self-appointed, is to remain “epidermically” sensitive’ [*“épidermiquement” sensible*] to hierarchy and authority and to see past the temptation of unspecified forms of ‘modish transgression’ (Rancière et al, 1978: 6, 5).[2] Superficiality is salvaged from ordinary language and tentatively advanced as a methodological principle; irritability or touchiness is reclaimed from the conventional archive of negative affect as the basis of a new epistemology, an emotional disposition capable of bearing historical and political meaning. Before ‘*le sensible*’ becomes synonymous in Rancière’s work with the sensory, with that which is available to perception, and before, in the expression ‘*le partage du sensible*’, it features in the key connecting term of his new politics of aesthetics, perception stood in an essential relation to the touchiness of the skin’s surface [*la sensibilité des épidermes*]. Before ‘*le sensible*,’ the sensory, occupies its pivotal position in the seamless assertoric formulations of Rancière’s mature politico-aesthetic thought, its close adjectival relative denoting sensitivity first figures a susceptibility to irritation, an ‘allergic’ awareness, a raw exposure to potentially excoriating trauma and also a mode of transmission or filiation: in our irritability lies our fidelity to May 1968. Irritable attachment, I shall argue, is at once a distinctively queer and a characteristically Rancièrian form of relationality and one which better captures the nature of much of our affect-laden and embodied social and political experience than ‘disagreement’ and ‘dissensus,’ the more detached and rationalistic conceptions which prevail in Rancière’s mature work.

As well as being premised on and generated by irritable attachment, the Rancièrian queer theory I shall go on to elaborate will have the following characteristics: it will start by demonstrating that the logic of Rancière’s own formalist account of political subjectivation allows some of his more problematic assumptions about queer theory to be set aside; it will argue that his account of the radical contingency of existing political structures necessarily includes the array of practices, structures and modes of kinship known to queer theory as ‘heteronormativity’; it will offer a critique of the ‘progressive’ as a concept central to heteronormativity, as well as to certain forms of gay and lesbian identity politics; it will seek to elaborate distinctively queer forms of filiation and influence which work beyond heteronormative conceptions of parenting; it will be radically egalitarian in its assumption that, just as everyone thinks, all queer subjects, without exception, are queer theorists in the making; it will seek to explore and foster the complex self-understandings of non-academics and non-specialists while avoiding deterministic and sociological modes of inquiry; it will challenge established academic disciplinary formations, specializations and cases of ‘theoreticism,’ including those of queer theory itself; it will, naturally, defy consensus within and beyond the university, yet it will also trust the surface. Some of these traits are already established within queer theory, independently of Rancière, and they will be identified.

Before elaborating this Rancièrian queer theory, however, I want to explain why any encounter between Rancière's work and queer theory is destined to be fraught with a certain amount of mutual irritation. For, despite the striking resonance of his formalist account of political subjectivation with the moment in the history of gay and lesbian liberation for which the US symbolic shorthand is 'Stonewall,' this is a single isolated point of congruence; this one similarity aside, at first sight Rancière may seem irrelevant to queer theory and vice versa. Indeed it would be difficult to find a contemporary French thinker less overtly interested, in his work, in either sexuality or indeed sex. So incongruous may the pairing of Rancière with queer theory seem that it looks not unlike the guessing game he plays in 'The Surface of Design,' in which he begins by asking the 'apparently idiotic' question of what Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* has in common with the work of the German industrial designer, engineer and architect Peter Behrens, who conceived the clean Modernist lines of AEG's domestic appliances, buildings and advertisements of the early twentieth century (Rancière, 2007 [2003]: 92). There is something methodologically queer about the marrying, or partnering, of both of these unlikely pairs. Before closing the distance between Rancière and queer theory, I want first to try to account for the apparent incongruity and spell out what I take to be the risks inherent in any such encounter.

The obstacles: Foucault and psychoanalysis

There is plenty for a queer theorist to find irritating in Rancière's work and Rancière, for his part, has expressed openly what it is only fair to describe as 'irritation' with queer theory and specifically with the use allegedly made of Foucault by US queer theory, in a short journalistic article marking the twentieth anniversary of Foucault's death, entitled 'The Difficult Legacy of Michel Foucault' [*L'héritage difficile de Michel Foucault*] (Rancière, 2005a: 183-7).[3] The piece is notable because it constitutes one of few direct engagements by Rancière, albeit at twenty years' distance, with a thinker whose intellectual preoccupations and some of whose political sympathies lay very close to his own.

Rancière's work tends to navigate very carefully around territory already marked out as Foucauldian. Indeed, for an earlier example of so direct and sustained an engagement with Foucault we must return, again, to the 1970s.[4] The fourth issue of *Révoltes Logiques* contains a written interview with Foucault in which he presents an overview of his theory of power as productive and multiple, a theory elements of which are already present in earlier work but which is most fully elaborated in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, published that same year (Rancière et al, 1976a: 89-97; translated in Gordon, 1980: 134-45 and in Morris and Patton, 1979: 49-58). In the interview Foucault argues for the superiority of his account of power over a binary and unidirectional model of oppressors dominating the

oppressed. In the opening editorial of the journal's next issue, the collective begs to differ:

However great the multiplicity of the power relations may be which hold captive the woman who asserts her rights, the worker who is made to work for the state or the Communist local councillor, does this very play of multiplicities not itself depend on the overriding relationships of oppression which operate, in the final analysis, in one direction only: oppression of women by men, of individuals by the state and of labour by capital? (Rancière et al, 1977: 6)

The editorial is remarkable for its refusal even to register the specific context of this theory of power in a history of *sexuality*. The collective's triple reassertion of the primacy of unidirectional patriarchal, state and capitalist oppression goes hand in hand with its reluctance even to mention, let alone engage with, the specific object of Foucault's inquiry in the first volume of his history of sexuality.[5] While it should be said that this rejection of Foucault's theory of power is not attributable simply and solely to Rancière but expresses the view of a collective of which he was a leading member, its interest is nonetheless more than merely historical: for it would appear that, in some respects, little has changed in his view of Foucault by the 2004 article. This article, marking the anniversary of Foucault's death, can no longer plausibly just ignore the specific object of Foucault's last works, sexuality, and does mention the uptake of Foucault's work by queer theorists. Yet it does so in order roundly to contest the legitimacy of their endeavours, first by pointing to what Rancière takes to be, in my view mistakenly, the opposing uses to which his theorization of the 'repressive hypothesis' have been put in the US:

It has readily been used to draw the conclusion, especially in the United States, that minoritarian sexual identity politics are invalid. Conversely [à l'inverse], with David Halperin's *Saint Foucault*, the philosopher has found himself beatified as the patron saint of the *queer* movement [*mouvement queer*], denouncing the play of sexual identities constructed by homophobic tradition. (Rancière, 2005a: 183-4, underlining added)

The 'conversely' [*à l'inverse*], which I have underlined, betrays what I respectfully submit is a misunderstanding of Anglo-American queer theory's engagement with Foucault: in fact, the possibility of a critique of minoritarian identity politics premised narrowly on sexual object choice was precisely what Foucault, as interpreted by Halperin and notably by the surprisingly unmentioned Judith Butler, brought to queer theory. Foucault's 'saintly' patronage of '*le mouvement queer*' and the role his work has played in critiquing minoritarian sexuality identity politics are continuous, all of a piece. Later in the article, Rancière tries a different approach. He suggests that queer theory has relied unduly on late interviews and has this to say about Foucault's answers:

All his answers, we clearly sense [*nous le sentons bien*], are just so many traps [*autant de leurres*] which reintroduce the position of

mastery his work had entirely discredited. The same can be said of all those rationalisations which draw from his work the principle of the queer revolution [*le principe de la révolution queer*], or that of the emancipation of the masses or a new ethics of the individual. Foucault's thought cannot form the basis of a new politics or ethics. (Rancière, 2005a: 187)

No argument is offered in support of these assertions but how could anyone be so sure that 'all' of Foucault's answers in these late interviews were 'just so many traps', illusions, lures or decoys? These interviews, like his other work, are so enormously wide-ranging: how could the two contradict one another as straightforwardly as Rancière pretends here? What exactly is the basis for 'our' strong intuition ('we clearly sense') about the unreliability of these interviews and what assumptions are being made about those capable of sharing in this intuition and the subject position it presupposes? If it were true that these late interviews had generally been used naively by queer theorists in the US either as a substitute for a careful reading of the work, or as an authoritative extra-textual interpretation of that work in terms of authorial intention, then Rancière would certainly have a point.[6] Yet as far as Halperin, Butler and numerous other prominent queer theorists are concerned, this is manifestly not the case.

Rancière's treatment of Foucault's legacy in France is no less perplexing. He singles out one of the two principal editors of Foucault's posthumously published *Dits et écrits*, François Ewald, and describes him as 'the official theorist of the employers' confederation' [*le théoricien attitré du syndicat des patrons*] (Rancière, 2005a: 184). While Ewald's subsequent activities are used to insinuate that Foucault's intellectual legacy lends itself to reactionary political projects, the other principal editor, Daniel Defert, is not even mentioned. Yet not only was Defert Foucault's lover but the founder, in 1984 no less, of the French HIV-AIDS charity AIDES (Martel, 1996: 252). Rancière's silence about Defert is all the more surprising given the discussion in this article of the GIP (*le Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons*), a radical prison campaign group founded by Foucault and others, which may have been short-lived (1971-2) but nonetheless constituted a critical moment in the history of political activism by French intellectuals. The GIP was in part a radical political formation, intended to rehouse former members of a banned *gauchiste* revolutionary party, *La Gauche Prolétarienne* (GP), and in part a group campaigning for prison reform; it was a response to the authoritarian crackdown which followed May 68, in the course of which hundreds of GP activists had their first experience of imprisonment. The significance of the GIP for the history of intellectual activism lies in its unprecedentedly egalitarian conception of the role of intellectuals and other experts and their relationship to those on whose behalf they were campaigning: rather than the haranguing conscience of the nation or the spokespeople of a particular class, as Sartre had often been, the GIP marshalled relatively non-hierarchised networks of experts and specialists whose objective was not to speak on behalf of prisoners but to exploit their own prestige as recognized

public figures, their own cultural capital and institutional connections, in order to let prisoners themselves speak and be heard (Artières et al, 2003; Mauger, 1996; Rancière, D., 1998). Given his evident sympathy for the GIP and his familiarity with the group, he might have mentioned that a prominent member of the GIP was Defert. There was, moreover, a Foucauldian continuity between the GIP and AIDES, to which Defert himself draws attention:

When, with Michel Foucault, we founded [...] the *Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons* (GIP), he drew my attention to the fact that the 'I' was there to mark the iota of difference which intellectuals were to introduce into the practice of the *Gauche Prolétarienne* [...]. As a gesture of recognition, I forced myself to find a name which could have two meanings. This is how AIDES came into being, a word which contains both the French word 'aide' (assistance) and AIDS. (Martel, 1996: 252; Artières et al, 2003: 320)

This anecdote does not, in itself, suffice to overturn Rancière's assertion in the article that there is a basic disjunction between Foucault's thought and his activism. I disagree with this characterization and would argue instead that their relationship is more plausibly construed as one of mutual implication but this is not a discussion I can pursue further here. The point I do want to make is that Rancière's article on Foucault's 'difficult legacy' is problematic. Admittedly it is only a short journalistic piece and such a format does not lend itself to complete or, arguably, to especially probing coverage. Nonetheless, the impression it would have conveyed to its Brazilian readership both of Foucault's legacy in France and in US queer theory was misleading: not only is the characterization of US queer theory's use of Foucault inaccurate but also, given that he mentions Ewald and the GIP but not Defert and AIDES, the piece is one-sided. Moreover, in projecting the queerness of Foucault's legacy outside French national and linguistic borders and occluding his relation to the struggle against HIV-AIDS, the article recalls the same tendency identified by Murray Pratt (Pratt, 1999) in mainstream French discourse on AIDS of the 1980s and early 90s. So much so that the reader is left wondering for whom exactly Foucault's legacy is 'difficult'.

After Foucault, the second potential obstacle to an encounter between Rancière and queer theory lies in psychoanalysis, or more precisely the prominence of references to it in the work of most queer theory and the success of new queer Lacanianism in recent theoretical debate (Dean, 2000; Edelman, 2004). Psychoanalysis is not at all prominent in Rancière's work, though nor is it excluded or viewed with especial hostility. Even where he engages most directly with psychoanalysis, in *L'Inconscient Esthétique*, Rancière's interest lies principally with aesthetics as he argues that the aesthetic revolution at the beginning of the nineteenth century paved the way for the Freudian unconscious (Rancière, 2001a). While Rancière is indeed reading Freud in this superficially unassuming but actually rather

provocative essay, he concentrates mainly on the writings on art. Although he denies that the essay is intended to be a contribution to work on the prehistory of psychoanalysis, it is difficult to see how it could not be read as such and moreover as an attempt implicitly to downplay the originality and significance of Freud's new discourse. In the rest of Rancière's work, however, psychoanalysis is only ever briefly referenced.

One potential advantage for queer theory of Rancière's relative detachment from psychoanalysis is discernible in the context of ongoing French public debate over the right of gay and lesbian parents to adopt (the issue known in French as *homoparentalité*). One of the intriguing things about this discussion is the way it has drawn out the ultimately heteronormative bearing of some superficially radical psychoanalytic thinking: left-leaning psychoanalysts for whom 'there is no sexual relation' might have been expected to support the extension of adoption rights to gay and lesbian parents yet many have come out with spurious but superficially sophisticated homophobic arguments in favour of heteronormative family and kinship structures. Put simply, but not inaccurately, in these psychoanalytic fantasies the Symbolic dictates that children must be brought up by a daddy and a mummy. As French sociologist Eric Fassin has argued, the susceptibility of the educated urban elite in France, on the right and particularly the left, to psychoanalytic discourse has given such arguments unduly strong purchase on political decision-making (Fassin, 2008: 86-7).

Queering Rancière's radical egalitarian politics

One advantage of the formalism of Rancière's account of political subjectivation, with its restrained treatment of 'thin' examples, is that its analytical frame can readily be applied to a wide range of concrete egalitarian political projects.[7] Its formalism leaves it open to a queer 'turning', irrespective of whether Rancière himself envisaged such a move. In the sixth of his 'Ten Theses on Politics' he states that 'political litigiousness has as its essential object the very existence of politics' (Rancière, 2001b: 17). Heteronormativity depends for its existence on the assumption that the norms which constitute it are not political and are therefore not open to political reconfiguration. Yet, as Eric Fassin has argued persuasively in the case of France, since the late 1990s sex and sexuality have been increasingly politicized in debates about prostitution, pornography, sexual harassment, the *pacs* (civil partnership) and gay and lesbian parenting, debates which have demonstrated that some of the well-established norms of heterosexual society are in fact open to political interrogation (Fassin, 2003, 2008). Fassin calls this 'sexual democracy' and argues, not unlike Rancière in Thesis Six, that 'the battle being fought is over the extent of the political sphere' (Fassin, 2008: 14). Let me now show in more detail how Rancière's politics are open to queering.

In the essay 'Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization', the 'heterologous' character of Rancière's politics of radical equality consists in the way it involves otherness in three different ways: first, political subjectivation is never simply the assertion of an identity but involves the repudiation of an identity assigned by others, by the police order.[8] Second, it involves the construction of a common 'theatrical' space, not of consensus or necessarily of dialogue, but rather 'a polemical common space for the processing of the wrong and the demonstration of equality,' a space in which the rational and performative demonstration of equality can be enacted in front of others (Rancière, 1992: 62, adapted).[9] Finally, Rancière asserts, political subjectivation 'always involves an impossible identification' (Rancière, 1992: 64, adapted). Neither of the first two conditions is remotely problematic for queer theory: the very term 'queer,' as Butler (1993) notes, is an exemplary case of a word which is a sign of the refusal of the other's negative identification, an assertion of an identity which simultaneously repudiates a pathologizing and insulting identity assigned by others, by what Rancière would term the 'police' order (Butler, 1993: 228; Rancière, 1999: 28-9). And as for the second condition, it need hardly be said that queer theory and queer activism have always been attuned to the theatrical and the performative. Not only is performativity central to one of the founding texts of queer theory (Butler, 1989), but an acute sense of the theatricality of political protest has been integral to countless examples of queer activism: 'politics is theatre,' as Harvey Milk (Sean Penn) is heard to remark in the recent film (Dir. Van Sant, 2008).[10] There are, moreover, accounts of queer politics which simultaneously address Rancière's first and second conditions: for example, José Muñoz's theorization of queer political performativity by queers of color in terms precisely of what he calls 'disidentification' (Muñoz, 1999), an expression also used by Rancière in *Disagreement* (Rancière, 1999: 36).[11]

The third condition in Rancière's account of political subjectivation is more complex and may be harder for queer politics to satisfy. In the first of two relatively thinly treated examples he gives of political subjectivation in the aforementioned essay, the 'impossible identification' is the politically formative identification of his generation of left-wing activists, in the France of the 1960s, with the bodies of the Algerian French demonstrators massacred 'in the name of the French people' in Paris in October 1961 (Rancière, 1992: 61).[12] This involved a 'disidentification,' or the repudiation of an identity (satisfying condition one), namely that of the French citizens in whose name the massacre had been perpetrated; it involved a 'theatrical' element (condition two), not just in the marches and other actions to demonstrate solidarity at the time but also in the way that a political consciousness of the extremes to which police repression was prepared to go in 1961 led to the anticipation and strategic incitement of the police response in May 68, through such performative provocations as the slogan 'CRS=SS' (Ross, 2002: 107). The object of the 'impossible identification' (condition three) in this case is clear, namely the dead Algerian demonstrators. The second example of political subjectivation in the essay is potentially more problematic:

that signalled by the May 68 slogan, 'We are all German Jews' (Rancière, 1992: 63). Conditions one and two are satisfied (they are *French* and they are *demonstrators*) yet this example seems to imply that political subjectivation, for any given group, must involve establishing a connection with the incommensurable oppression of a different group. I would argue that queer politics, however much it seeks to embrace, or look outward to, other forms of oppression, will always involve an irreducible element of identitarian self-assertion; otherwise it dissolves into a sea of undifferentiated altruistic ethical concern. Although Rancière never makes clear precisely how important this third condition is and what exactly the criteria are for its being met, it looks as though, in his account of politics as 'heterology' in this essay, its residual investment in identity means that queer politics risks being subsumed under the police order.

If the account in 'Politics, Identification, Subjectivization' emphasises an undoing of socially-given identity positions, then in *Disagreement* the emphasis falls more on the 'wrong' (what Aristotle calls the *blaberon*). It is in the name of this wrong that the disadvantaged make their claim for equality; this is consistent with a queer politics which retains a provisional investment in identity in so far as identity is formed by the repeated social and psychic wrongs of a heteronormative police order. This continued attachment to identity-as-wrong would only be provisional because politics needs to attend to these wrongs if it is to accomplish the role Rancière reserves for it, namely to 'process' [*traiter*] them (Rancière, 1999: 39). So if the account of the third condition, 'impossible identification,' in the earlier essay implied a potentially problematic overemphasis on hybridity and mixity, consonant with post-structuralist critiques of identity and, surprisingly, with the widespread mistrust of minoritarian politics in mainstream French political discourse, in *Disagreement* the assertion of the need to attend to the grievance of the disadvantaged in order to 'process' it is consistent with any queer politics which has a critical understanding of identity and no more than a provisional investment in it.[13]

An outline of Rancièrian queer theory

The starting point must be Rancière's assertion of the absolute contingency of the social and political order. The possibility of politics in his sense of the term is coextensive with this anti-foundationalism: '[t]he foundation of politics is not in fact more a matter of convention than of nature: it is the lack of foundation, the sheer contingency of the social order' (Rancière, 1999: 16). The 'scandal' of democracy, in Rancière's account, which has made it difficult to accept for social theorists since Plato, is that 'the act of governing appears to be entirely contingent, not based on any entitlement of birth, age, knowledge or any other obvious superior quality' (Rancière, 2005a: 180).[14] Even though Rancière's work, as I have noted, including his more recent political writing (Rancière, 2005b), gives no specific encouragement to do so, it is vital we insist that Rancière's assertion

of the an-archic contingency of the social order include recognition of the contingency of heteronormativity.

If Rancièrian queer theory will posit the absolute contingency of the heteronormative social order, it will also seek to honour the commitment to radical methodological egalitarianism which emerges from Rancièrè's disagreements with Althusser and Bourdieu on the nature of pedagogy, as well as from his key work on Jacotot (Rancièrè, 1991).[15] Just as Jacotot's method of intellectual emancipation starts out from a presumption of intellectual equality which it seeks to demonstrate, Rancièrian queer theory will take seriously the complex self-understandings of ordinary queer subjects and seek to investigate what follows from these. This implies a rejection of 'theoreticism' and an enduring scepticism about the status and value of professionalized academic, disciplinary, knowledge. I do mean scepticism rather than nihilism. A Rancièrian queer theory must remain true to the resistance his work embodies to the political self-legitimation of knowledge-based elites, to his democratic and egalitarian questioning of authority rooted in technocratic claims to specialist 'expertise.'

Some of this is already happening in queer theory. Judith Halberstam's work, for example, has already questioned the usefulness of queer theory's analytical frame in a manner which recalls Rancièrè's critique of Bourdieu's sociological determinism, as well as the 'alienating' effects of queer theory's theoreticism (Halberstam, 2005: 4). Moreover, while Halberstam's work takes seriously the radical intellectual equality of non-academic queer subjects and expresses a scepticism of theoreticism and a critical awareness of disciplinary history which is relatively rare within queer (and gay and lesbian) studies, her approach is far from flatly sociological in the narrow, deterministic, sense that would be problematic for Rancièrè.[16] Halberstam's investigation of what she refers to as 'archives' of queer subcultures in *In A Queer Time and Place* is attentive to the way in which queer subcultural practices aspire to modify the space and especially the time of heteronormativity by giving prominence to forms of immediate gratification and exploring ways of lending non-pathologizing significance to the ephemeral. This may include dancing (as opposed to 'dance'), slam poetry, drug-taking and relentless sexual experimentation. These are all activities which can imply and assert a new vision of what Rancièrè calls '*le partage du sensible*': queer subcultures, as Halberstam analyzes them, are capable of being egalitarian laboratories of a certain kind of political subjectivation, are capable of exploring 'a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience' (Rancièrè, 2004: 13). Such projects are political because 'politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time' (Rancièrè, 2004: 14).

There is undoubtedly a risk of complacency here and I make no attempt to conceal the fact that my sketch of the political potential in queer subcultural experience is an optimistic one. I am not suggesting, by any means, that every dance- or sex-club, or every slam poetry competition, or every piece of self-described 'queer' performance art, still less every instance of drug-taking, or every 'addict,' is 'political' in Rancière's terms – and for Rancière, in any case, politics is rare – but rather that some of what already takes place in queer subcultures is already Rancièrian in a meaningful sense. I am also asserting that the methodologically Rancièrian approach to queer experience is to start with the complex self-understandings of ordinary queer people, assume their equality, and ask 'What follows?' By its very nature there can be no overarching general or theoretical answer to this question of 'What follows?' and the form of these investigations, though they need not be flatly empirical, may well resemble the sort of fascinating, careful, highly particularized, analyses which fill the pages of *Révoltes Logiques*.

Futurity and the progressive are problematized by Rancière and have always been difficult categories for queer theory, bound up as they usually are in their prominent socio-cultural expressions with heteronormative patterns of reproductive inheritance. Lee Edelman (2004) launches a blistering attack on what he calls 'reproductive futurism,' an assault which seeks to identify and reflect back the excoriating violence of a heteronormative society organized around a sacralization of the figure of 'The Child,' yet which paradoxically inflicts on its flesh-and-blood children 'a near-universal queer-baiting intended to effect the scarification (in a program of social engineering whose outcome might well be labeled "Scared Straight") of each and every child by way of antigay immunization' (Edelman, 2004: 49). Edelman's challenge in *No Future* is to imagine forms of political arrangement which are free of the heteronormative focus on the child. One question which this 'anti-social turn' in queer theory raises is whether the repudiation of 'reproductive futurism' inevitably leads to queer subjects being marooned on an island of self-fulfilling self-satisfaction, immured in a pristine, angry and arguably 'masculinist' homoness.[17] Can we look to Rancière for an alternative to heteronormative modes of thinking the future, filiation and kinship which take a different path from Edelman's declaration of narcissistic self-sufficiency?

Rancière's ventriloquizing reanimation of the maverick nineteenth-century pedagogue, Joseph Jacotot, envisages a form of kinship between student and teacher which is radically egalitarian rather than subordinating. It also presents a conception of futurity which shares some of Edelman's scepticism about the value of deferral, while also offering an understanding of the affective disposition necessary for self-realization in the present which is less fraught and more liveable (Rancière, 1991 [1987]).[18] Jacotot proceeds on the basis of the presupposition that all, including the students and their teacher, are intellectually equal; he rejects a prominent traditional model of pedagogy as the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student

in favour of one in which the student's intellectual equality is presupposed from the outset, declared and verified. Most institutional education, Jacotot/Rancière argue, even when its explicit purpose is the socially 'progressive' one of bringing about greater equality in the end, serves in practice to reinforce and legitimate inequality. Jacotot's egalitarian model of intellectual emancipation as something which takes place most readily outside established educational institutions supposedly dedicated to the transmission of knowledge is a major challenge to the connection between power, knowledge and pedagogy, a connection which goes back as far as Plato's account of the elite of philosopher-guardians who, as well as ruling over the entire city, educate and select their successors. By suggesting that any individual is capable of intellectually emancipating another, Jacotot, as interpreted by Rancière, disturbs the dominant model of the transmission of knowledge and power and points to an egalitarian rather than a subordinating kinship between student and teacher.

The critique of 'reproductive futurism' mounted by Edelman, who refuses to conceive of the future in terms of heteronormative filiation, echoes an important but undervalued aspect of Rancière's work. Perhaps it is time to acknowledge that there is an unresolved, productive, tension in Rancière's thought between a future-oriented, collective, conception of emancipatory politics and an emphasis on singular self-realization by individuals. While those who want to argue for Rancière's 'usefulness' for a range of emancipatory political projects tend to stress the collective side (Chambers, 2005; May, 2008; Davis, 2010a), as indeed do those who are disappointed that it does not lend itself more readily to such projects (Hallward, 2005; Hewlett, 2007), this tends to mean that its countervailing movement towards *singularization* is neglected. If the future-oriented collective mode is consonant with a heteronormative understanding of filiation and kinship, the singularizing tendency towards self-realization in the present can be thought of as queer. Rancière often stresses that political subjectivation is the realization of singularity (Rancière, 1999: 99, 123; Rancière, 2005a: 118). While sometimes this singularizing movement describes the self-realization of collectivities, in the case of Jacotot and his students, as with many of the extraordinary worker-poets discussed in *The Nights of Labor* (Rancière, 1989 [1981]), the emphasis is on the extent to which *individuals* are capable in the present of an emancipatory self-realization which sets them apart and, only in so far as it sets them apart, unites them. This productive tension between the collective and the singular surfaces in Rancière's description, in *The Emancipated Spectator*, of the power of the declaration of intellectual equality as,

the power each man and woman has to translate in his or her own fashion what he or she perceives, to connect it to the singular intellectual adventure which makes that man or that woman resemble every other to the extent that this adventure is unlike any other. (Rancière, 2008: 23, my translation)

And the affective disposition of the Jacotian pedagogue who seeks to exploit the power of the declaration of intellectual equality may fairly be described as 'irritability': he or she is enjoined to be 'intractable' [*intraitable*] and to manifest 'unconditional exigency' (Rancière, 1991: 38). The attachment of the Rancièrian teacher to the student is thus an irritable attachment: an attachment in which the distance and the friction between the parties is part of their bond. Indeed, once the transmission of knowledge has ceased to be part of the teacher's role, in his or her uncompromising irritability lies the substance of the teaching, the stimulus to the student's realization of his or her potential for intellectual singularity. While there is no doubt that Rancière is often concerned with the logic of collective political projects, his work also articulates the demand for what I take to be a queer form of non-progressive self-realization in the present. His work, like Edelman's, has a narcissistic dimension in the strict rather than the pejorative sense. Yet whereas in Edelman's case the associated affective disposition is one of angry self-detachment, what the concept and practice of irritable attachment in Rancière's work suggests is a less fraught and perhaps therefore more liveable queer relational mode.

Rancière's own intellectual trajectory, especially in his formative engagements with Althusser and Bourdieu (as well as Plato, Marx and Sartre), is unsurprisingly marked by numerous examples of irritable attachment. For while Plato's account of politics in the *Republic* is rejected by Rancière, as is Althusser's view of the primacy of theory and the importance of pedagogy, Sartre's vision of the role of the intellectual and Bourdieu's suspicious analysis of art, literature and education, these rejected positions are not simply discarded or repudiated. The tenacity with which Rancière's work retains an attachment to these rejected accounts which, although rejected, are frequently rehearsed and serve as the negative foundation of Rancière's own positive account of radical equality, is suggestive of the methodological or epistemological possibilities of 'irritable attachment' for queer theory.

Looking back at May 68 after ten years, Rancière and the other members of the *Révoltes Logiques* collective dared not only to admit that their sensitivity to authority was excessive and their political analyses were superficial but to reclaim this sensitivity to and of the surface as both a methodological virtue and a form of political filiation. Just as a *gauchiste* consciousness of the mid-70s would have found manifold occasions for irritation (for where is there not evidence of authority and hierarchy?), so queer theory and queer subjects today cannot readily escape the irritations of heteronormativity. Irritability can signify the affective and cognitive expectation of disagreement, a propensity to take offence but not the excoriated woundedness of victimhood or the curse of paranoid anticipation. If all that heteronormativity is is irritating then, in historical and global terms, this may well count as an achievement. Queer subjects will always be surrounded by and variously attached to the heteronormative so it may be better in the long run to *want* the irritation which this

predicament implies. Perhaps it is preferable to be attached to irritability, at the risk of appearing oversensitive, self-dramatizing, self-pitying and over-emphatic. For all that touchiness implies a propensity to take offence, it can be distinguished from paranoid knowing which, as Sedgwick (2003) has observed, always has to anticipate the worst and in so doing fails to see anything but that. Irritability, unlike paranoid hyperaesthesia, or the 'suspicious' analyses of Bourdieu and Althusser, works on the surface and is not incompatible with trust, though nor is it naïvely optimistic. If Sedgwick is right that life in heteronormative society predisposes queer subjects to paranoid forms of knowing and feeling then perhaps it may even be time to aspire to irritability and its attachment to the surface.

Irritable attachment must be part of the experience of reading Rancière's work for a reader with attachments both to queerness and to Rancière's thought. As a form of filiation and a mode of relating to other people and other ideas, irritable attachment is, I would suggest, a productive and distinctively queer way of thinking about the human propensity to form attachments to even the most problematic of influences, one which moves outside more heteronormatively-inflected models such as inheritance, polemic, struggle and the Oedipal drama. It is a queer mode well established in Rancière's work, particularly in its relationship to the intellectual influences which form the negative bedrock of his account of radical equality, but also in the often underplayed singularizing tendency which emphasises individual self-elaboration in the present at the expense of what can be bequeathed to class or community, to the struggle, or to the future.

Oliver Davis is currently writing a critical introduction to the work of Jacques Rancière, which is scheduled to appear with Polity Press in their Key Contemporary Thinkers series early in 2010. The book will present a reconstruction and comprehensive critical analysis of Rancière's work from 1965 to the present. He has published on modern and contemporary French fiction, literary-critical methodology (in particular *la critique génétique* and issues in psychoanalytic criticism) and queer literary politics in France. He teaches in the Department of French Studies at Warwick University.

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Notes

1. This and all subsequent translations where no published translation is cited are my own.
2. The members of the collective are also committing themselves here to being 'oversensitive' to hierarchy: "*épidermiquement*" sensible'

refers literally to the sensitivity of the skin and figuratively to excessive sensitivity, or 'touchiness.'

3. The articles collected in Rancière (2005a) originally appeared in the Brazilian daily newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*.

4. I am leaving aside, in the intervening period, a glancing acknowledgement in the context of Rancière's elaboration of his theory of the police order (Rancière, 1999 [1995]: 28, 32) and a passing objection to Foucault's analysis of the prison (Rancière, 1989 [1981]: 90-1).

5. Kristin Ross offers a rather different interpretation of this same interview and the collective's response (Ross, 2002: 127-8).

6. Foucault famously denied the relevance of authorial intention to interpretation. See Burke (2008).

7. For examples see Chambers (2005) and May (2008).

8. I shall render Rancière's 'subjectivation' (French) with the English 'subjectivation'.

9. The adaptation of this and the next citation are to bring them in line with the French text of this talk in Rancière (1998).

10. In the French context another good, indeed foundational, example would be the sudden interruption by queer activists of a television talk show entitled 'L'homosexualité, ce douloureux problème', the inaugural performance-protest of the activist group le FHAR, le *Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire* (Martel, 1996: 24-5).

11. Muñoz's understanding of 'disidentification' is derived from Althusser's later work (after Rancière's break with him), as mediated both by linguist Michel Pêcheux and subsequently by Judith Butler (Muñoz, 1999: 11-13).

12. The definitive account of the massacre is now House and MacMaster (2006). For their discussion of Rancière's analysis of it see 200-201.

13. Consistent, although Rancière remains committed to a different understanding of the role of power in subject-formation from that of much queer theory. Queer theory tends to adopt the Foucauldian conception of what Butler usually calls 'subjection' (her rendering of his '*assujétissement*'), which is simultaneously 'both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection' (Butler, 1997: 83). Yet 'subjection' in Butler's sense credits power with the productive role Rancière and his collaborators denied to it in their abovementioned response to Foucault's interview in *Révoltes Logiques*. Butlerian 'subjection' is therefore markedly different from what Rancière, in

French, terms 'subjectivation' and what I am calling, in English, 'subjectivation.' This is not primarily a question of how to render his term in English, although this can and has been done in a number of different ways (see Chambers, 2005: n. 2), but rather of distinguishing conceptually between two understandings of subject-formation which involve very different understandings of the role of power in that process. Political subjectivation, in Rancière's sense, is the intermittent, precarious and readily reassimilable breaking away from power by way of the presumption, assertion and demonstration of equality.

14. As Todd May has indicated, Rancière's anti-foundationalism, his emphasis on the absolute contingency of the socio-political order, aligns aspects of his political thought with elements within the communist anarchist tradition (May, 2008: 78-99). I identify and explore other affinities between this tradition and Rancière's work in the field of pedagogy in Davis (2010a) and (2010b, ch. 1).

15. See Nordmann for Bourdieu (2006) and Davis (2010b) for Bourdieu and Althusser.

16. Indeed Halberstam's approach to the subcultural archive has certain striking similarities with the archival practice of the *Révoltes Logiques* collective. For a fuller discussion of the former see Davis (2009). For more on the latter see Davis (2010b, ch. 2). I am grateful to have had the opportunity to discuss the work of the collective and some of the other issues raised in this article with Judith Halberstam, who led a workshop entitled 'New Trends in Queer Theory' at Warwick University (17 February 2009).

17. The expression 'anti-social turn' is taken from Dean et al (2006) and Halberstam (2008). Halberstam is troubled by the 'masculinist' overtones of Edelman's work and claims furthermore that it 'coincides uncomfortably with a fascist sensibility' (Halberstam, 2008: 143). I am not persuaded by Halberstam's argument for the second of these claims.

18. See also Davis (2009) and Davis (2010b, ch. 1).

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