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How Queer is the *Demos*?

Politics, sex, and equality

Hector Kollias

Department of French, King's College, London

This article stages a confrontation between Jacques Rancière's political philosophy and the figure of the queer, particularly as reconfigured recently by Lee Edelman with his Lacan-inspired notion of the 'sinthomosexual'. Starting by investigating the currency of Rancièrean terms such as the demos, equality, and subjectivation for an articulation of queer politics, the article moves on to argue that Edelman's notion of the queer as a figure constitutively outside politics may be located both outside what Rancière calls 'the police,' and also outside what he calls 'politics' altogether, thus highlighting an optimistic (Rancière) and a pessimistic (Edelman) conception of the queer political subject. The article then considers the fundamental difference between Rancière's and Edelman's conceptual worlds, locating it in the psychoanalytic configuration of the queer subject, before arguing for the necessary though impossible choice queer theory is faced with when considering these two seemingly opposed viewpoints.

In his introduction to *Fear of a Queer Planet* Michael Warner asked: 'what do queers want?' The answer was 'not just sex' (Warner, 1993: vii). Ever since then, if not before, queer theory has sought to branch out from the narrowing confines of sexuality studies and identity politics to embrace the big bad world of minoritarian solidarities, interdisciplinarity, and collective struggles, all of which should also by rights be seen as the fruitful continuation of a much longer tradition of queer activism and politics. It is with this expansive, inclusive thrust that queer theorists have now been called upon, if only by the editors of this volume, to meet the political thought of Jacques Rancière, whose radical articulation of politics, equality, subjectivation, and emancipation speaks loudly to queer ears attuned to the noises of strife and recognition. But the degree to which this meeting will prove

to be felicitous, the extent to which Rancière's carefully developed political philosophy is a match for the multifarious desiderata of queers, will ultimately depend on what it is that one means by queer, what kind of political, social, sexual or other subjects queers make, or indeed, what it is that queers want. And inversely, Rancièrian eyes will only see in the various provocations of queer theory a glimpse of the elusive political subject at certain moments with certain preconditions, failing which there is nothing to stop queers being, like the rest, like the others, like everyone, subjects of the police order, content capitalist citizens and consumers, or even wilful members of the multitude obsessed with its own unification.

In what follows I shall try to trace such moments within the queer past and the queer present, allowing for a Rancièrian interpretation of queer political events and achievements, in order to see how we square up with Rancière's trenchant and indefatigable egalitarianism. I shall also, however, argue that given a certain denomination of the meaning of queer, Rancière's notions of politics and emancipation become rather more problematic. I am here referring to queer as reconceptualized in Lee Edelman's *No Future* as the figure of the *sinthomosexual*, who programmatically resides 'outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears' (Edelman, 2004: 3). Is this the space outside the police order that would be confluent with Rancière's politics proper? Or is it a space outside even Rancière's universal presupposition of equality as the condition of all politics, thus effectively giving the lie even to this most elegant and most credible conception in Rancière's work? It should be evident as well that in this particular encounter between Rancière and Edelman, there are intermediaries whose voices are crucial in the understanding of any disagreement here presented, and there are clashes of vocabulary which could end up being far more than merely terminological inconsistencies. The elephant in the room here is psychoanalysis: Lacan as understood by Edelman on the one hand, and Freud (and to a lesser degree Lacan) as understood by Rancière on the other, as well as the ramifications of what Rancière intends by what he calls the 'ethical turn' in contemporary politics. I shall not try to present a concise and coherent account of the complex relationship Rancière has with psychoanalysis, other than a few words on his engagement with it in his book *L'Inconscient esthétique* (Rancière, 2001). Instead I shall begin by looking at queer politics with Rancièrian eyes and gradually allow psychoanalytic conceptions and interjections to creep in, aiming to reach a potential 'impossible identification' between what lies at the core of Rancière's concept of equality, and the Lacanian Real necessitated by Edelman's provocations of the *sinthomosexual*. Clearly this is not the easiest path to take in organizing a meeting between Rancière's political thought and queer theory, precisely since it encourages the negotiation of several crossroads before it can even hope to reach a conclusion. It is, however, one that will allow something to come out concerning the impact of queer theory now, its future expansion or contraction, its politics and its logic.

The queer *demos* and the queer *ochlos*

The *demos* is the term Rancière uses to designate ‘those who have no part’ in what he calls ‘the distribution of the sensible.’[1] In his ‘Ten theses on Politics,’ he states: ‘The one who speaks when s/he is not to speak, the one who part-takes [*prend part*] in what s/he has no part in – that person belongs to the *demos*’ (Rancière, 2001b). Thus, the *demos* for Rancière ‘designates the category of peoples who do not count, those who have no qualifications to part-take in *arkhe* [rule, or the fact of ruling and being ruled], no qualification for being taken into account’ (Rancière, 2001b). The inaugural moment of politics thus becomes the moment in which those who have no part and cannot be counted make a claim for this part. This moment coincides with what Rancière calls ‘subjectivation,’ ‘the process by which a political subject extracts itself from the dominant categories of identification and classification’ (Rancière, 2004b: 92).[2] In *Disagreement*, Rancière makes clear that this process of subjectivation effectively produces hitherto unnameable and unimaginable political subjects: ‘By *subjectivation* I mean the production through a series of actions of a body [*une instance*] 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). It is a process wherein a group of people ‘stands up to be counted,’ declaring itself as a political force, effectively ‘taking part’ by demanding its own part: ‘Any political subjectivation holds to this formula. It is a *nos sumus, nos existimus*’ (Rancière, 1999: 36). Subjectivation does not create political identities *ex nihilo* but it does introduce new political identities into a unified sphere of experience (what Rancière often refers to as ‘the One’), which is therefore no longer the same as it was. He cites two such subjectivations that allowed for the creation of new political identities, ‘workers,’ and ‘women’:

“Workers” or “women” are identities that apparently hold no mystery. Anyone can tell *who* is meant. But political subjectivation forces them out of such obviousness by questioning the relationship between a *who* and a *what* in the apparent redundancy of the positing of an existence. 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. (Rancière, 1999: 36)

The ‘new’ political subject that emerges from this process is thus a subject that names the division, the gap between how it is ‘naturally’ perceived – a woman, one of the two sexes - and how it had hitherto *failed* to function as political subject, having no right to take part in the exercise of power *as a woman*. Subjectivation then, and the *demos* that is born with it, is also a process of sense-giving, of naming, and of categorisation, a process whereby an entity which was never suspected to enter into the arena of political categorisations demands entry, and gains it insofar as its ‘new’ identity transforms this arena and creates a new political agency.

Subjectivation for Rancière also entails two other crucial moments, that of a 'wrong', and that of an 'impossible identification.' The wrong [*le tort*] is that over which the *demos* finds its voice and challenges the established order's categorisations and classifications: 'The mass of men without qualities [*propriétés*] identify with the community in the name of the wrong that is constantly being done to them by those whose position or qualities [*dont la qualité ou propriété*] have the natural effect of propelling [the mass of people] into the nonexistence of those who "have no part in anything"' (Rancière, 1999: 9). The 'wrong' is thus, as Gabriel Rockhill has it, 'a specific form of equality' (Rancière, 2004b: 93), and equality for Rancière is not an equal distribution of rights but, as we shall see in more detail later, an *a priori* that becomes the locus of disagreement and dissensus. Those who have no part 'discover' in this equality the means whereby they can contest the distribution of rights in the name of a universal equality that is shared even by those who have no share. 'Correcting' the wrong then, involves reorganizing the given classifications of a society by appealing to an element that transcends classification. Women asking for the right to vote, in this instance, do so not out of their position as the sexual counterpart of men, but out of their equal share in what was hitherto unacknowledged as the principle whereby the right to vote is bestowed: humanity as such, without gender distinctions. Therefore the subjectivation of 'women' entails their *disidentification* from their 'natural' gendered identity in order to effect an identification in a space which has hitherto not been identified: 'Any subjectivation is a disidentification, removal from the naturalness of a place, the opening up of a subject space where anyone can be counted since it is the space where those of no account are counted, where a connection is made between having a part and having no part' (Rancière, 1999: 36). Disidentification is thus also an identification with other peoples and parties of those 'who have no part' between whom there is no possible identification under the terms of the system in place. This is what Rancière calls an 'impossible identification,' an example of which is the slogan heard during the May 1968 revolution according to which 'We are all German Jews' (Rancière, 2004b: 92).

From this it would not be a stretch to imagine the emergence of another political subject, that of 'gay men and lesbians' at the moment which in shorthand is called 'Stonewall'. That moment did indeed entail the creation of a hitherto unimaginable political category, and it did entail the transformation of the categories applied to homosexuals. One can read in 'Stonewall' all the facets of a Rancièrian subjectivation, from the revolt against a police order (and against the actual police) intent on disallowing homosexuals from presenting themselves as a unified *political* community, to the forceful 'correction' of a 'wrong,' the wrong of disallowing assembly and recognition to a category of people who were therefore devoid of rights given to 'everyone else.'^[3] The inaugural moment of gay liberation, and arguably also the struggles over HIV/AIDS politics in the eighties and nineties, manifest all the signs of what Rancière means by the emergence of politics, and can show us how a certain kind of gay or

queer rhetoric is very much capable of being read in Rancièrian terms. What is more, Rancière may offer queer politics a way to circumvent the dilemma presented by the opposition between a strict sexual identity politics and the inclusive tendencies of queer theory towards dissemination into any number of other political fields. We *could* be asking the question as to whether or not the disputes we are engaged with are confluent with impossible identifications (as they surely were when these identifications were with blacks or women in the sixties and seventies), whether or not a dispute in the name of sexuality can bring forth the recognition of a group hitherto unimaginable as political agents (as was the case with HIV/AIDS).

Reading queer politics with Rancièrian eyes, it seems to me, does not always lend itself to celebratory conclusions. I shall try to elaborate how more recent struggles (and acquisitions) on a subject such as gay 'marriage' or civil partnerships are more ambiguous when looked at through the prism of Rancière's thought. To do this I shall have recourse to a few more of Rancière's terms, those of emancipation, the police, and the *ochlos*. The police, or police order for Rancière is not, or not merely, the enforcement of law, but 'the general law that determines the distribution of parts and roles in a community as well as its forms of exclusion' (Rancière, 2004b: 89). Thus the police represents what is already set out, categorized and classified in a given political system; it represents the distribution of roles and rights within that system as well as the borders and partitions between those who are included in the role- and right-giving and those who are not. The police functions as a distribution and classification machine, sorting out what is proper and what is improper. Emancipation is a moment concomitant with that of subjectivation, 'the polemical verification of equality' (Rancière, 2004b: 86), and entails a logic of heterology insofar as, for those who have no part to demand a part amounts to a re-distribution of parts in the name of something *improper* to the logic of parts. 'Stonewall' is a moment of emancipation in that it is a moment when the *demos* constitutes itself in the name of something, namely sexuality, which had not until then been recognized as a *political* category, had not been distributed by the police order, and does so by appealing to a wrong and an equality which the police order cannot categorize. But I am not certain the same can be said about the rights to civil partnership, even less for gay marriage. It could be argued that the demand for legal recognition of same-sex relationships is tantamount to Rancièrian emancipation in that it would entail the levelling of the distribution of legal rights between gay and straight partnerships – but in whose name, and with what recourse to an *improper*, heterogeneous element? Is it not rather the case that demanding such recognition is precisely a demand to accede to full recognition within the *proper*, already existing classifications of the police order? It might depend on whether one views the acquisition of legal rights by same-sex couples as radically reconfiguring the existing institutions of rights pertaining to couples, or rather as merely the addition of a new group of people on whom these rights are bestowed. If one understands, as I have to confess I do, the demand for 'gay marriage' as a wish to be unified with those who

already have that right, then the outcome is that the group who is demanding this would be, in Rancièrian terms, much less a *demos* and more an *ochlos*. In contradistinction to the *demos*, the *ochlos* is, in Gabriel Rockhills' gloss 'obsessed with its own unification' (Rancièrè, 2004b: 88). Rancièrè differentiates the two in the following way:

If the *ochlos* from the outset is not the disordered sum of appetites but the passion of the excluding One – the frightening rallying of frightened men – the relation [between *demos* and *ochlos*] must be conceived otherwise. The *demos* might well be nothing but the movement whereby the multitude tears itself away from the weighty destiny which seeks to drag it into the corporeal form of the *ochlos*, into the safety of incorporation into the image of the whole. (Rancièrè, 1995: 31-2)

If the *ochlos* is the throng desiring its incorporation into the One, the whole of society, at the cost of divisions and differences, saying that the queer 'struggle' for same-sex partnerships to be legally recognized is reminiscent of the *ochlos* may well ring alarm bells. Civil partners, just as married couples, are *by necessity* classified under the existing categories set up by the police, and acceding to such a status, from a Rancièrian perspective, looks more like capitulation than emancipation.

Queer: outside politics or outside the police?

Such an injunction for queer politics to be placed not within but resolutely outside the political/police order is certainly not new in queer studies, but it resurfaced most trenchantly in Lee Edelman's *No Future*, where it is polemically stated almost at the very start: 'Impossibly, against all reason, my project stakes its claim to the very space that "politics" makes unthinkable: the space outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears' (Edelman, 2004: 3). In what follows I shall try to read Edelman's polemic alongside Rancièrè's political theory, firstly to understand whether Edelman's claim to the space outside politics corresponds to what Rancièrè would understand as 'outside the police,' but also to consider the possibility that Edelman's project may actually undo or subvert Rancièrè's commitment to democracy and equality. When Edelman writes that '*queerness* names the site outside the consensus by which all politics confirms the absolute value of reproductive futurism' (Edelman, 2004: 3), or when he writes that 'the only queerness that queer sexualities could ever hope to signify would spring from their determined opposition to this underlying structure of the political' (Edelman, 2004: 13), it would be quite appropriate to interpret 'politics' and 'the political' as what Rancièrè identifies with the police. What is at stake in Edelman's analysis is a structure of *consensus*, which is entirely concomitant with the police order and not at all concomitant with the divisionary disagreements necessitated by the politics of the *demos*. I am even tempted to read an analogy between what Edelman calls 'the impossible project of a queer

oppositonality that would oppose itself to the structural determinants of politics as such' (Edelman, 2004: 4) and Rancière's 'impossible identifications' that take place at the moment of emancipation and make of the *demos* a force which in essence *does* 'oppose itself to the logic of opposition' (ibid). It would also be plausible to suggest a congruence between Rancière's analysis of the police order and Edelman's understanding of the involvement of fantasy in politics in the following:

politics may function as the framework within which we experience social reality, but only insofar as it compels us to experience that reality in the form of fantasy: the fantasy, precisely, of form as such, of an order, an organisation, that assures the stability of our identities as subjects and the coherence of the Imaginary totalizations through which those identities appear to us in recognizable form. (Edelman, 2004: 7)

This is indeed the work of the police order, the work of categorization, organization and stability, creating subjects *to* this police order but not subjects *of* politics. And if we, once again, read 'police' for 'politics' in what follows, it may make perfect Rancièrian sense: 'Politics, that is, names the struggle to effect a fantasmatic order of reality in which the subject's alienation would vanish into the seamlessness of identity at the endpoint of the endless chains of signifiers lived as history' (Edelman, 2004: 8). However, glaringly absent from a Rancièrian appropriation of the above statements would be all the words lifted from the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, words such as 'fantasy,' 'imaginary,' 'alienation.' And this does entail that it would be less than self-evident that Rancière would concede to a description of the order of the police as an order of fantasy.

But what if we were to take Edelman at his word, that is to say, what if what he terms 'queerness' and defines as implying a 'determined opposition to [the] underlying structure of the political' were indeed to be understood as going not merely beyond the police order, thereby constituting a political emancipation and subjectivation in Rancièrian terms, but as going beyond politics itself, located in a no-man's-land where emancipation itself would prove impossible? The temptation to do this is strong, if Edelman's polemical tone and the negativity in which *No Future* seeks to inscribe itself are taken in earnest. Let us consider the possibility that Edelman locates the queer in a space not simply outside the regulation of the police order but untouched by any politics whatsoever – what would the ramifications of such a gesture be? First and foremost, it seems to me, this would lead us to accept the troubling thought that queer politics should mean an abandonment of all politics, or worse, political self-destruction: 'perhaps, as Lacan's engagement with Antigone in Seminar 7 suggests, political self-destruction inheres in the only act that counts as one: the act of resisting enslavement to the future in the name of having a life' (Edelman, 2004: 30). Edelman's injunction is to think the possibility of locating the queer outside *any* political field, and this should also mean outside the definition of politics announced in Rancière's work.

Therefore this is a task that would give the lie to Rancière's ultimately *hopeful*, salutary vision of politics and deliver us queers not to emancipation, much less the embrace of the police order, but to something altogether darker and more cruel. Edelman himself is lucid both about the frighteningly negative dimensions of this task and about its value as a demystification from all salutary social and political theories (including Rancière's) that would seek to avoid it. He calls it:

a truly hopeless wager: that taking the Symbolic's negativity to the very letter of the law, that attending to the persistence of something internal to reason that reason refuses, that turning the force of queerness against all subjects, however queer, can afford an access to the *jouissance* that at once defines and negates us. Or better: can expose the constancy, the inescapability, of such access to *jouissance* in the social order itself, even if that order can access its constant access to *jouissance* only in the process of abjecting that constancy of access onto the queer. (Edelman, 2004: 5)

I shall be coming back to this long and difficult citation, but for now I trust it illustrates the force of this 'hopeless wager' aiming for the transcendence of the political altogether in order to expose the hopeless wager inherent in all politics of hope. And Edelman knows, as a Lacanian would, that the place 'outside' politics, the hopeless place where queers may be located, is the place of a terrible ethics: 'queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place, accepting its figural status as the resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure' (Edelman, 2004: 3). The resistance whose figural status is discussed here may admit an analogy to the supernumerary resistance that subjectivation brings to the political in Rancière's thought, but the insistence on the *inextricability* of such resistance may be read as pointing towards a space where subjectivation, emancipation, politics itself has no place.

Equality and the Real: the uses of catachresis

It would seem that an impasse has been reached. Rancière posits the emergence of a political subject through subjectivation at those choice moments when a reconfiguration of the field of experience can take place. Edelman stakes a hopeless claim for the positing of a subject, a queer subject, whose function is to figure the very limits of this field of experience, which is what should be understood, in a general sense, by the Lacanian term 'the Symbolic'. Obviously Rancière does not use this term, but his key idea of the distribution of the sensible functions in the same way as the Symbolic does for Lacan and Edelman.[4] More importantly, a conceptual trait shared very distinctly by both Lacan and Rancière in their articulation of the Symbolic or the sensible in its distribution is the fact that it is grounded on an element that is heterogeneous to it. In Lacan, the Symbolic is grounded on an internal fissure issuing not from the Symbolic but from the order of the

Real. Edelman cites Dominick Hoens and Ed Pluth: 'The subject is able to take its place in the Symbolic order by means of an element heterogeneous to that order. Yet this element is also included in the Symbolic in some way. This order is, then, ultimately grounded in something that is not of the order itself' (Edelman, 2004: 36). The element in question is what Lacan terms the *sinthome*, the symptom of psychoanalytic practice, also extensively theorized by Žižek as a political factor (see Žižek, 1992), and this is of course the basis for Edelman's reconfiguration of the queer as the *sinthomosexual*. Rancière also 'founds' politics both in relation to the police, and as incorporating a principle completely heterogeneous to it: 'if politics implements a logic entirely heterogeneous to that of the police, it is always bound up with the latter. The reason for this is simple: politics has no objects or issues of its own. Its sole principle, equality, is not peculiar to it [*ne lui est pas propre* – not proper to it] and is in no way in itself political' (Rancière, 1999: 32).

This striking analogy between the structures of Lacan's and Rancière's conceptualisations allows for a remapping of the dispute between Edelman's and Rancière's notions of politics. The subject Edelman refers to is a subject of the Symbolic order, but its entry into this order is predicated on an element, the *sinthome*, representing a remnant of an entirely different order, the Real. The *sinthome* lies 'within' the Symbolic, which is to say it is bound up in it. But it comes *from* the Real, the unsymbolizable, and it represents in the Symbolic the very rift in symbolization that the Real effects. For Rancière, politics has a principle on which it is based, but which in no way belongs to it, and this is equality. Politics is also implicated in a relation with the police order, which at first looks like the clearest analogy for Lacan's Symbolic. This need not be taken to mean that politics is the police order's *sinthome*, but it clearly points to what Jeremy Valentine argues: 'Rancière's position seems to imply that the political arises from the existence of that which cannot be symbolized by the police, or which can only be symbolized through terms that succeed in designating its anonymity' (Valentine, 2005: 47). This is crucial to the formation of subjectivation and of the moment of politics, since it is crucial for the division between what is proper and improper that political subjects come to identify. Rancière uses the concept of equality to signal the process whereby an element completely heterogeneous to the distribution of the sensible effected by the police is called upon to reconfigure and change that distribution, thus levelling the field and giving rise to the moment of emancipation and subjectivation: 'The essence of equality is in fact not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division' (Rancière, 1995: 32-3). Equality may not quite be a symptom – but it comes from a field totally heterogeneous to that of the police (the Symbolic), it comes, one could say, from the Real.

What comes from the Real, for Lacan and even more so for Edelman, is frightening, potentially paralyzing the subject as indicated in the discussion of the symptom in clinical psychoanalysis. At the same

time, it is this fear and paralysis that, if allowed to be interpreted with and in language, that is to say if allowed to be symbolized, will anchor the clinical subject in the Symbolic providing its '*point de capiton*', its quilting point.[5] What comes from the Real is both enabling, then, and disabling. My contention is that, within the framework now set up, the disagreement between Edelman and Rancière can be articulated in terms of enablement and disablement. The very role that Edelman's *sinthomosexual* is conceived to play is that of a stultifying reminder of the limits of the Symbolic, it is a *disabling* role, not in that the subjects called *sinthomosexuals* are in any way themselves disabled, but in that they figure disablement for and in the Symbolic, they represent the excessive *jouissance* that threatens it with annihilation. Edelman's polemical point is that queers *are sinthomosexuals*; their function is to represent – that is queerness's ethical value – the internal threat that the Real poses to the Symbolic. In Edelman's terms: '*Sinthomosexuality* [...] brings into visibility the force of enjoyment that desire desires to put off. In doing so, the *sinthomosexual* reveals, unendurably to the subject of the law, enjoyment's infiltration of, its structural implication in, the very law of desire that works to keep *jouissance* at bay' (Edelman, 2004: 86).

A political subject, for Rancière, does the same thing in relation to the police order: it makes visible the constitutive part of the distribution of the sensible that nevertheless the entire police order is constructed to keep at bay – equality. But it is clear from Rancière's entire work that he intends this process of political subjectivation to be the most *enabling* form of agency, allowing for new distributions of the sensible, for new conceptions of the *demos*, for new police orders to be challenged again by the same salutary process. The *optimistic* thrust of Rancière's work is unmistakable. Contrast this statement about the role of *sinthomosexuals* from Edelman: 'such *sinthomosexuals* would insist on the unintelligible's unintelligibility, on the internal limit to signification and the impossibility of turning Real loss to meaningful profit in the Symbolic without its persistent remainder: the inescapable Real of the drive' (Edelman, 2004: 106-7). *Sinthomosexuals*, queers, are *not* there to open up new avenues for the better distribution of the sensible allowing for equality to shine. They are there as a persistent reminder of a Real debt figured in the (death) drive, they are there as a nagging insistence that the Symbolic will never be completely filled with the light of order and signification.

Perhaps the best place to observe Edelman's persistent assertion that queerness as *sinthomosexuality* is designated to figure a limit in the distribution of the sensible rather than a point at which this distribution can be reconfigured by a series of subjectivations and emancipations is his trenchant critique of Judith Butler's reading of (Lacan's reading of) the figure of Antigone (Butler, 2000). Butler goes against the anti-political thrust of Lacan's reading of the Sophoclean heroine's actions and fate by insisting that Antigone's fateful act can be reincorporated in the workings of a new system of kinship and law, even a new conception of the human. Antigone represents or figures the limits of the Symbolic order, the limits of the system of kinship and symbolic

exchange that bestows social intelligibility and coherence. For Butler this is the limit of the Symbolic, and Antigone's act and claim *figuring* it means that the Symbolic itself is subject to a potential transformation: 'If, as Lacan claims, Antigone represents a kind of thinking that counters the Symbolic and, hence, counters life, perhaps it is precisely because the very terms of livability are established by a Symbolic that is challenged by her kind of claim' (Butler, 2000: 54). Therefore Antigone's act and claim are fundamentally political. Butler names this action whereby the Symbolic is challenged and potentially transformed 'political catachresis.' Antigone becomes an oddly triumphant figure, heralding the potential of a new dawn of kinship and a new future for humanity: 'If kinship is the precondition of the human, then Antigone is the occasion for a new field of the human, achieved through political catachresis. She acts, she speaks, she becomes one for whom the speech act is a fatal crime, but this fatality exceeds her life and enters the discourse of intelligibility as its own promising fatality, the social form of its aberrant, unprecedented future' (Butler, 2000: 82). Edelman's critique consists of recalling that catachresis, as Butler understands it, is precisely the way in which the Symbolic order works, and that therefore 'Butler's Antigone, far from transforming Symbolic law, *repeats* it – and repeats it, in fact, as nothing less than the law of repetition by which our fate is bound to the fate of meaning' (Edelman, 2004: 105).

How may this debate about catachresis inform our understanding of Rancière's theories of emancipation and subjectivation? I would suggest that these moments when a political subject emerges are precisely moments of 'political catachresis,' the moments when the order of the distribution of the sensible is challenged by an act that reconfigures it. Butler's reading of Antigone appears in this light as Rancièrian, in that she sees in Antigone's act a radical reconfiguration of the field of human experience that leads into the salvation of the 'promising fatality,' the 'aberrant, unprecedented future.' Clearly Rancière does not use such exalted vocabulary but the main elements of his own ideas on the ever-changing reconfigurations of the political field by the irruptions of different kinds of *demoi* share both the structure of aberration and the mode of the promise with Butler's reading. Edelman is far less promissory and far less 'hopeful,' seeing in the reconfiguration of the Symbolic only the deathless repetition whereby the Symbolic will incorporate the challenge it was facing, precisely by reconfiguring itself, but with such a repetition yet another figure of 'those who cannot be counted' will always emerge again:

No doubt, as Butler helps us to see, the norms of the social order do, in fact, change through catachresis, and those who once were persecuted as figures of "moralized sexual horror" may trade their chill and silent tombs for a place on the public stage. But that redistribution of social roles doesn't stop the cultural production of figures, *sinthomosexuals* all, to bear the burden of embodying such a "moralized sexual horror". For that horror itself survives the fungible figures that flesh it out insofar as it responds to something

in sex that's inherently unspeakable: the Real of sexual difference, the lack that launches the living being into the empty arms of futurity. (Edelman, 2004: 107-8)

Nothing in Rancière comes close to this conception of 'the living being', and this is not only because his preoccupation is with political subjects, peoples, and not sexual subjects, or even what Lacan would have called 'pure being.' But the disagreement between Edelman and Rancière can now be seen not merely as a matter of stress, enabling versus disabling, hope in the future versus the deathless repetition of the same, but rather as two versions of that element which subtends political or Symbolic experience but which is heterogeneous to it. I would want to argue that Edelman's (and Lacan's) Real is structurally analogous to Rancière's equality, but *reversed*, flipped over into a form of negative, impotent, and yet constitutive and effective equality. If for Rancière equality is what is called upon whenever a political subjectivation occurs and a reconfiguration of the field of experience takes place, for Edelman/Lacan the Real is the point at which every inexorable attempt at radical reconfiguration will clash with the persistence of a repetition that never ceases. This is no longer politics: it is the political and polemical manifestation of an impasse of politics, which we may as well call 'political self-destruction.'

Aesthetics versus ethics: why Rancière is not a Lacanian

Despite all the analogies that can be drawn between the conceptual frameworks of Rancière and Edelman an unbridgeable gap, a rift of incommensurability remains, and it bears the name: psychoanalysis. Edelman is not only 'borrowing' Lacanian vocabulary (Butler is very often doing just that as well), but he is resting the entire political and moral weight of the figure of the *sinthomosexual* on Lacan's work – after all, Edelman's book is subtitled 'Queer Theory and the *Death Drive*.' I have thus far attempted to 'Lacianize' Rancière's conceptual world, possibly even contorting it to a degree in order to allow for similarities and differences to be discerned in what is the main issue here: queer politics, and whether there can be Rancièrian queer politics. But it is time to address the issue of why psychoanalysis as such is considered politically suspect by Rancière. His most sustained engagement with it is in the as yet untranslated *L'Inconscient esthétique*, and this deals entirely with Freud. Lacan features very briefly in the later *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, but it is possible to discern his shadow behind a lot of the criticisms levelled at what Rancière calls 'the ethical turn.' [7]

In his book on Freud, Rancière pretty much immediately intends to subsume the unconscious into a more general paradigm shift, which he identifies elsewhere (see Rancière, 1998) as a paradigm shift between a 'regime of representation', and an 'aesthetic regime' of thought. [8] He writes: 'My hypothesis is that the Freudian thought of the unconscious is only possible on the basis of this regime of the thought of art and of the idea of thought which is immanent to it' (Rancière, 2001a: 14). The Freudian unconscious is made possible by

a general shift in the understanding of the relation between thought and art, which psychoanalysis utilizes to erect the theoretical edifice of the Oedipus complex, the theories of the drive, the hermeneutics of the symptom and the dream. Freud's thought is therefore both contextualized historically and also subsumed under the rubric of the aesthetic regime, the unconscious becoming a property of this regime, to be called 'the aesthetic unconscious': 'The aesthetic unconscious, which is consubstantial to the aesthetic regime of art, manifests itself in the polarity of this double scene of mute speech: on the one hand, the speech written on bodies, which must be restored to its linguistic signification by the work of a deciphering and a rewriting; on the other hand, the deaf speech of a nameless power lying behind all consciousness and all signification, to which a voice and a body must be given' (Rancière, 2001a: 41).[9] These two sides of the unconscious map onto two tendencies, consubstantial but contradictory, in psychoanalysis, namely the aspect of psychoanalysis dealing with the interpretation of speech in the symptom and the dream; and, on the other hand, the aspect dealing with giving voice to the effective but mute drives, including of course the death drive. And here is the rub: Rancière clearly valorizes the former over the latter, clearly advocates the Freud who is a brilliant decipherer of bodily symptoms, dreams, and 'symptomatic' texts such as Jensen's *Gradiva*; and he clearly berates the Freud who is a speculative theorist of the drives, the Oedipus complex, or the discontents of civilization – Freud the reader over and above Fred the thinker.

What is crucial is the reason why such a valorization takes place – a political reason. Rancière associates the Freud of the drives and speculation with a surrender of hermeneutics and therefore of dissensus, a surrender to a mute but effective Law of alterity which he also associates with the ethical. This Freud:

must valorize the mute power of the Other's speech, irreducible to any hermeneutics. That is to say he must vindicate the nihilistic entropy determined to transform the ecstasy of the return to the original abyss into sacred relation to the Other and to the Law. This Freudianism thus executes a turning movement around Freudian theory that brings back, in Freud's name and against him, this nihilism that Freud's aesthetic analyses never ceased to do battle with. This turning movement affirms itself as the challenge against the aesthetic tradition. (Rancière, 2001a: 77-8)

This turn is closely related to the distinctions Rancière draws between the ethical and the aesthetic. 'Aesthetic' and 'ethical' become two competing visions of the field of experience, of the responses available to thought when faced with equality and political action. And for Rancière 'ethical' responses, responses in the name of the Other who is not present to be counted, by definition run counter to his own emancipatory political ideas. An 'ethical' community is: 'raised on the ruins of the perspectives of political emancipation [...] It is an ethical community revoking all project of collective emancipation' (Rancière, 2004a: 33). Rancière's politics is resolutely an *aesthetic* politics:

Politics consists in reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible that defines the common of a community, in introducing new subjects and new objects to this community, to render visible that which was not, and to allow the voice of those who were only perceived as noisy animals to be heard. This work of creating dissensus constitutes an aesthetics of politics (Rancière 2004a: 38-39).

Rancière thus sides squarely with a vision of the political imbued with the necessity of division, dissensus, and what he calls 'impurity' (Rancière, 2004a: 173), an *aesthetic* vision going counter to the *ethical* vision of a politics indebted to an intractable Law of the Other. In so doing, he distinctly dissociates his project from the speculative enterprise of Freudianism (as opposed to its hermeneutics) and thus from Lacan, who paid such attention to the mute force of the drives, and also Edelman, who sees his queer/*sinthomosexual* subject as the avatar of the death drive.

Conclusion: forced choices, impossible identifications

Rancière would surely reject Edelman's claims for the *sinthomosexual* because of the necessary appeal, made manifest in Edelman's calling for queerness to attain an *ethical* value, to the Law of the Other that is revealed in the *sinthomosexual's* 'constant access to jouissance,' as Edelman's 'hopeless wager' has it in the passage I promised to return to (Edelman, 2004: 5). He would reject, perhaps in favour of Butler's notion of political catachresis, Edelman's opposing idea that 'rather than expanding the reach of the human, as in Butler's claim for Antigone, we might [...] insist on enlarging the *inhuman* instead' (Edelman, 2004: 152). Rancière associates the inhuman directly with Lyotard (see Lyotard, 1993), but a statement like Edelman's certainly sounds as if it could easily be painted with the same Rancièrian brush. Besides, it is certainly true that queer need not mean, as Edelman intends, *sinthomosexual*, that queerness may take on the mantle of political catachresis that Butler wants it to. In this case queer theory can, and probably should look to Rancière's invaluable exploration of political subjectivation, and the queer *demos* may rise again.

What if, on the other hand, Edelman's very different take on what happens when a subject, the *sinthomosexual*, figures the persistence of an element within the political constellation that lies resolutely *outside* politics, is allowed to reveal another side, an underside, to Rancière's notion of equality? What lies outside the Symbolic is the Real, and what persists in the Symbolic as a cipher for the 'constant access to *jouissance*' of the drive is the *sinthome*, and the *sinthome* can also be read as a negative Rancièrian equality. Edelman may be advocating the enlargement of the inhuman, but he does so in a way which I take to be less congruent with Lyotard's appeal to the Law of the Other, and more akin to a nagging reminder that 'the inhuman' persists *not only* when the police order attempts to subsume it through

political catachresis *but also* when that same police order (the Symbolic) assigns to a figure, the *sinthomosexual*, the role of embodying the threat of inhumanity repeated in any moment of political subjectivation when ‘the voices of those who were only perceived as noisy animals’ are heard. What if those noisy inhuman animals were the subjects of equality, an equality that has nothing to do with the political catachresis effectuated by the emergence of the *demos*?

‘What do queers want?’ In wanting ‘more than sex,’ in demanding an equal distribution of rights, in demanding a part in a political configuration that gives or gave us no part, we want to be human, and we are, were, and at other times and places will continue to be, a *demos*. But, perhaps, in *wanting sex*, or rather in wanting, claiming and being claimed for by that incessant repetition of the intractable Real of *jouissance*, we want, claim, and are claimed by an inhumanity that makes us *equal* to non-queers *just as well*. Is there a choice here? Are queers faced with what in psychoanalysis would be called a ‘forced choice’, an impossible choice between the human and the inhuman, citizenship and sex, emancipation and the hopeless wager of a terrifying ‘ethical value’? It is this forced choice, a choice which is at the same time never exactly present as an empirical choice and still always there in the very persistence of what queer may actually mean, that queer theory is, or should be, addressing. It is in this unfeasible but inexorable meeting of Rancière’s radical humanist politics and Edelman’s insistence on the value of the inhuman that queer theory finds its own impossible identification.

Hector Kollias completed his PhD in Philosophy and Literature at the University of Warwick before being appointed Lecturer in French at King’s College London. He has published articles on Genet, Nancy, Rancière, and Dustan amongst others, and is currently working on a book about the psychoanalytic concept of perversion and its uses and misuses in queer theory.

Notes

1. For ease and continuity of use I shall be referring to the definitions and translations of key Rancièrian terms offered by Gabriel Rockhill in his ‘Glossary of Technical Terms’ (Rancière, 2004b).
2. The French ‘subjectivation’ is also translated by Julie Rose in *Disagreement* as ‘subjectification.’ For reasons of clarity and fidelity to the original French I am keeping ‘subjectivation’ throughout.
3. I am not here suggesting that before ‘Stonewall’ queers did not have a place assigned to them by the police order through the criminalisation of queer sexualities, rather that the moment we have come to identify as ‘Stonewall’ represents, in Rancièrian terms, the moment of emancipation when the subjectivation of queers as sexual ‘subjects’ happens through and as the correction of a ‘wrong.’ This

also involves the disidentification of queers from the criminal category of being 'against nature' and their transformation into political agents because of their sexuality.

4. Despite the dangers that are entailed in bringing together the vocabularies of Rancière and Lacan, dangers which I have already pointed at and will have the chance to encounter further, several commentators see no problem in bringing the two conceptual worlds together, or at least to incorporate Rancière's thought in fundamentally Lacanian or structuralist-inspired frames of reference. The most obvious one is Slavoj Žižek (see Žižek (2000), and also the afterword to Rancière (2004b)), but see also Valentine (2005).

5. For the quilting point [point de capiton], a Lacanian term that is key to Žižek's thought on the subject of ideology, see Lacan (2007); Žižek (1989); Žižek (1991).

7. Translations from both these works are my own.

8. There is no space to explain adequately the meaning of these two terms here, other than to say how they affect Rancière's reading of Freud. The reader is referred to Rockhill's glossary at the end of Rancière (2004b).

9. The term 'mute speech', translating one of Rancière's key concepts, and the title of one his books (Rancière, 2008) refers to the ability of writing under the aesthetic regime to present itself in a double way. For more on this crucial aspect of Rancière's thought on aesthetics see Kollias (2007).

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