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There are no Queers

Jacques Rancière and post-identity politics

Todd May

Clemson University

Much of the discussion of homosexuality and homosexual rights these days centers on issues of identity. Is homosexuality natural? Are there genetic or other physiological predispositions for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and others?

Many of us are uncomfortable with these questions. They seem, like so many questions in identity politics, to isolate political struggles against oppression of homosexuals from other solidarity struggles. And yet we wonder how to conceive such struggle without returning to the liberal politics of individualism.

Here is where the thought of Jacques Rancière becomes useful. For Rancière, any democratic politics is a collective struggle from the presupposition of equality. The question for him is not one of identity, then, which presupposes orders and hierarchies. It is rather one of equality, which undercuts identities and orders. This paper investigates Rancière's view and what it might mean for GLBT political thought and resistance.

Progressive politics has entered what might be called a post-identity politics phase. And, like most 'post' phases, it is being defined by what it no longer is rather than by what it is now. There is good reason for this. The project of identity politics, which I will define broadly as politics grounded in particular posited identities (whether seen as essential or non-essential), has foundered. Although identity politics was grounded in an important insight – that not all political struggle is reducible to class struggle[1] – its trajectory took it to a place where each struggle was isolated from every other struggle, and political solidarity was lost.[2] We have seen the damage done by identity politics, and it no longer holds the imagination of many. Indeed, as

early as the misnamed 'anti-globalization' movement, which was really an anti-neoliberalism movement, solidarity began to return to the scene in place of ghettoized identities. However, we have yet to develop a common theoretical framework, something that can play the binding role that Marxism once played without the Marxist reductionism that spawned identity politics.[3] Thus we remain in the phase of post-identity politics.

Much of the discussion of homosexuality and homosexual rights in particular has centered on issues of identity. Is homosexuality natural? Are there genetic or other physiological predispositions for gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and others? Is homosexuality found in every culture and society? What characteristics, if any, are to be associated with homosexuality aside from attraction to someone of the same gender (and what do we mean by the term 'gender')?

Many of us are uncomfortable with these questions, not because we are squeamish, but because they seem somehow like the wrong questions. They seem, like so many questions in identity politics, to isolate political struggles against oppression of gays and lesbians from other solidarity struggles. (I should note here that I use the term 'gay and lesbian' throughout this paper solely as shorthand, standing also for transgendered, bisexual, etc.) And yet we wonder how to conceive such struggle without returning to the liberal politics of individualism. We seek to maintain the vibrancy of an agenda committed to an emancipatory gay and lesbian politics, without it being simply an emancipatory *gay and lesbian* politics. There must be connections to other struggles, or else we risk marginalizing the struggle and undercutting that agenda. The difficulty of forging and maintaining such connections was brought home to the gay and lesbian rights struggle with the 2008 vote on Proposition 8 in California. This Proposition overturned the legality of gay and lesbian marriages in California by declaring marriage to be solely between a man and a woman. Unfortunately, the African American vote was overwhelmingly in favor of the proposition, evidence of the difficulty of maintaining solidarity through group identity politics.

Essentially, articulating a post-identity politics faces a trilemma. There are three separate dangers that must be navigated, each of which threatens to push us into one of the other two. The three dangers are these: identity politics, reductionist Marxism, and liberalism. If we are to avoid both the marginalization of identity politics and the reductionism of Marxism, we seem to be forced into saying that each person must be thought of and treated separately and regardless of his or her particular identity. That is the formula of liberalism. If we reject liberalism for its individualism and identity politics for its ghettoization of struggles, then we seem to be faced with a return to a single type of struggle of the kind reductionist Marxism proposes. Finally, if we reject the reductionism of Marxism and the individualism of liberalism, we find ourselves thrown toward identity politics.

This trilemma is not, of course, a logical one. The rejection of any of the two does not inferentially entail that we must embrace the third. It is more a political than a logical trilemma. Given the character of our political space, these seem to be the options. The question is one of how to escape this trilemma in the context of a progressive politics. How do we recognize the irreducibility of different struggles, the need for solidarity, and the integrity of individual participants within the framework of a single compelling political theory? How do we avoid betraying one of these commitments when we embrace the other two?

Here, I believe, the appeal to Jacques Rancière's thought can assist us in finding our way forward. Rancière opens a path toward a progressive post-identity politics with a positive content, one that, in addition, navigates through the trilemma of our current situation. In what follows, I will offer a sketch of that thought, show how it navigates the trilemma, and end with a couple of quick suggestions regarding the relevance of all this to gay and lesbian politics.

No quick summary can avoid neglecting or simplifying nuances of Rancière's thought, not to mention several of its suggestive ambiguities. I hope that some of what I gloss here will receive more detailed treatment by other articles in this volume, or by the reader's own research into his work. What will be highlighted here are several central elements of his political thought that have bearing on the question of how to conceive a post-identity-politics progressive thought.

For Rancière, much of what goes under the name of politics is actually not really politics at all. It is simply a matter of the hierarchical administration of society, to which he gives another name. 'Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution another name. I propose to call it *the police*' (Rancière, 1999: 28). The police referred to here are, of course, not simply the folks with guns and truncheons. Rancière borrows the term *police* from the research of Michel Foucault, explaining that, 'Michel Foucault has shown that, as a mode of government, the police described by writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries covered everything relating to 'man' and his "happiness.'" (Rancière, 1999: 28) The police, then, is the broad administration of society, the hierarchy that governs its citizens in the name of their welfare.

This hierarchy finds expression in a number of state institutions, but it would be mistaken to reduce policing to the state. This is not only because private institutions are also contributors to a particular police order – think, for example of the role of corporations in transnational neoliberal capitalism – but also because non-institutional practices can play a role in creating or maintaining a police order. The practices

of dating, for instance, help sustain and reproduce particular gender hierarchies.

In a police order, there are those who benefit and those who do not. In addition, and perhaps more important, there are those who have a say and those who do not. As Rancière sometimes puts the point, there are those who are counted and whose views count, and then there are the uncounted, those who have no part to play. We must be careful in how we understand this counting and not counting, or else we will be tempted to read Rancière's work as some sort of reductionism to a single class division of counted and uncounted. In a given society, there is not one particular body of people who are counted and another who are not. Societies, particularly complex ones, function with a number of hierarchies. There are gender hierarchies, racial hierarchies, sexual hierarchies, religious hierarchies, economic hierarchies, and others. Who is among the counted and who is among the uncounted, who has a part to play and who does not, depends on which hierarchy one is looking at. Rancière's thought, sensitive to the truth we cited earlier in regard to identity politics that not all oppression occurs along a single register, utilizes the concept of police in a fluid way. It refers not to a particular hierarchy but to the various hierarchies that govern societies. It is entirely possible for one to be a member of the uncounted in one part of the police order and among the counted in another part, as the recent example of California's Proposition 8 demonstrates.

Much of what is discussed in traditional liberal theories of justice is, in Rancière's schema, a matter of policing. Distributive theories of justice, which dominate the liberal theoretical tradition, concern how the benefits and burdens of a society should be distributed. As such, they concern the institutional arrangements of a particular police order.[4] If we are to discuss what Rancière calls *politics*, and what, for the sake of clarity, I will call *democratic politics*, we must look elsewhere. Rancière defines his vision for such a politics this way:

I...propose to reserve the term *politics* for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration – that of the part that has no part...political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of the part who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being. (Rancière, 1999: 29-30)

There are several elements of this definition of politics, of democratic politics, that are worth unpacking: the equality of every speaking being, the heterogeneous assumption, and the contingency of the order. The equality of every speaking being lies at the heart of any democratic politics. Rancière appeals to the idea of a speaking being

for a simple reason. Those who can speak to one another are capable of forming plans for their lives and enacting those plans alongside others. Rancière writes, 'There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it. And to do that, you must already be the equal of the person who is ordering you. It is this equality that gnaws away at any natural order' (Rancière, 1999: 16). In what sense must the person who understands an order be the equal of the one who issues it? Precisely in the sense that they can communicate with one another and conduct their own lives on the basis of these communications. Thus the equality of every speaking being with every other one is an equality that undermines the claim of anyone to be *entitled* to give orders. One may be in a position that permits one to give orders, but that position is never justified by any inequality between those who give and those who receive orders.

The equality of every speaking being is precisely the heterogeneous assumption that every democratic politics posits against a police order. Police orders work on the assumption of inequality. Some are to give orders, others to receive them. Some are to order the lives of others, others to have their lives ordered. Racial, sex, gender, and class distinctions (and these are not all) ground themselves in the police assumption that there is an inequality between those who can order the lives of others – those who have a part – and those who do not. The heterogeneous assumption introduced by a democratic politics is that every speaking being is equal to every other one. Its heterogeneity lies at two levels. First, and most obvious, it poses equality against inequality. It challenges the right of those who are positioned to decide upon the character of the lives of others. Those who fail to have a part do not do so because of some lack they possess. They find themselves where they are, not because it is right that they be there, but because the police order just happened to place them there. It could well have been that they were placed elsewhere, better positioned in the police order, and the order would be no worse off for that.

Which leads to the second level of the heterogeneity of the assumption: the contingency of the order itself. If everyone is equal, then the fact that some have a part and others do not is not a naturally justified fact, but a purely contingent one. Being in the position to decide for others is never justified. This does not mean that people ought never to agree to delegate authority to one or another of their members. But the fact of delegation itself presupposes the participation of the delegators, and presupposes their equality. Police orders, in dividing along various registers those who have a part – those who count – and those who do not, refuse to recognize the contingency of their divisions. They take those divisions as justified, and even as natural. That is why a democratic politics, in positing the equality of every speaking being, 'gnaws away at any natural order.'

In order to clarify these ideas, let's take as a brief example gay marriage, leaving aside (for the sake of simplicity) the question of whether marriage itself is an oppressive and inegalitarian practice. The refusal to allow gays and lesbians to marry is presented as grounded in a natural fact: that marriage is between a man and a woman. This supposed natural fact generates the inequality of two sets of people before the law. If, by contrast, we suppose the equality of homosexuals and heterosexuals as speaking beings, this directly challenges their unequal treatment before the law. And in doing so, it claims the contingency of the restriction of marriage to a man and a woman. What is taken by the police order to be a justified restriction, grounded in the nature of things, is revealed by a democratic politics to be a contingent practice that, without reason, denies the equality of all speaking beings.

What is a democratic politics then? We might define it as collective action that arises out of the presupposition of equality. If we define it this way, though, we must be careful. There does not need to be an explicit recognition of that presupposition among the individual members of a collective process. Rancière writes that, 'Equality is not a given that politics then presses into service, an essence embodied in the law or a goal politics sets itself the task of attaining. It is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it' (Rancière, 1999: 33). Participants in a collective action do not need to be telling themselves that they are acting from the presupposition or assumption of equality. They need not even use the term *equality* to characterize what they are doing, although it is likely that at least some among them will. It is, rather, those who interpret the action, whether participants or not, that will recognize the equality out of which people act. They will recognize it in the collective actions that are taken by the group.

This seems to leave open the question of whether a particular collective action can be seen as democratic or not, depending on how it is interpreted. Indeed that is the case. However, this does not mean that interpretation is purely subjective. Although we cannot linger over this point, there are certainly signposts for interpreting a collective action as being from the presupposition of equality or not.[5] To take an obvious contrast, many of the actions of the civil rights movement of the 1960's clearly emerged from a presupposition of equality; the movement of the Christian right to ban equality of gays and lesbians before the law, although sometimes taken in the name of banning 'special rights,' just as clearly does not.

In order to see how Rancière's politics point a theoretical way forward, we need to introduce one more term: *subjectification*. It is a term that has been associated with Foucault's work, and has come to mean the way power circulates among daily practices in order to create people to be the subjects they are. In a sense, Rancière, like Alain Badiou,[6] uses the term with an almost opposite inflexion. This does not mean that Rancière denies Foucault's studies. In fact, he does not, as we

have seen briefly above. The difference is solely terminological. While Foucault uses the term to describe particular historical unfoldings, Rancière uses it to describe a political phenomenon associated with a democratic politics.

He defines subjectification this way: 'By subjectification I mean the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience' (Rancière, 1999: 35). Subjectification is a production that arises through collective action. It does not give rise to collective action, and therefore does not pre-exist the action. Neither does it arise from collective action as a consequence. It arises *through* such action, within and alongside it. What is it that so arises? In essence, a collective subject, a *we*. Where there once were only individuals, each seeking to survive as best he or she can, with the advent of a democratic politics there arises a subject of action, one whose members recognize one another and those in solidarity with them, and confront the police order as such a collectivity. In a striking formulation, Rancière claims that, 'Politics does not happen just because the poor oppose the rich. It is the other way around: politics (that is, the interruption of the simple effects of domination by the rich) causes the poor to exist as an entity' (Rancière, 1999: 11). He does not mean, of course, that nobody is poor before the emergence of a democratic politics. What comes to exist is not poor people, but *the* poor, a collective subject taking action that challenges the police order's presupposition of the inequality of poor people.

We might be tempted to think that with subjectification we face the return of an identity politics. What, after all, is identity politics but an oppressed group taking action in its own name, whether that name be poor, black, queer, women, or, in another of Rancière's examples, the proletariat? This would be a mistaken interpretation of his idea of subjectification. As a first approach to this, we must recognize that for Rancière, a democratic politics is *declassifying* rather than *identifying*. A democratic politics rejects the hierarchy of a police order, not in the name of particular identities, but only in the name of equality, the equality of every speaking being. There is no black or white, no women or men, no gays or straights, but simply equals. The poor that comes to exist as an entity is not some poorness that is possessed by people without money. It is instead, if we can use a cumbersome locution, the poor-as-equal-to-the-rich. And where all are equal, there are no distinctions to be made.

The existence of the poor, then, is the existence of something previously unrecognized by the police order. Before democratic action, there were poor people, but no such thing as a poor-as-equal-to-the-rich. That collective subject – or better, collective subjectification, since we should think less in terms of a thing than a process – is one that operates not by adding a new police category, but by undercutting the police categories (ex. poor people as less

deserving) that are in play. 'The difference that political disorder inscribes in the police order,' Rancière writes, 'can thus, at first glance, be expressed as the difference between subjectification and identification. It inscribes a subject name as being different from any identified part of the community' (Rancière, 1999: 37).

One might want to object here that a vibrant identity politics does exactly what Rancière has just claimed: it inscribes a subject name that is different from anything previously identified in a given police order. However, this would miss what Rancière is saying. He is not claiming that subjectification gives us merely a new name, a name that could be added to the names already on offer in a given police order. The name of a political subject works not to posit another category, but rather to subvert a set of categories that characterize a police order. '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). A subjectification, then, regardless of what name is used, is subtended by the idea of equality, an idea that works not by distinguishing one group from another but instead by undercutting the distinctions posited by a particular police order.

We will return to the distinction between subjectification and identity below, but before doing that it is perhaps worth seeing how the idea of a democratic politics as we have sketched it helps navigate through the trilemma that seems to face progressive politics today. Recall the character of the trilemma. If we want to avoid both the reductionism of much of received Marxism and the ghettoization of identity politics, we seem driven toward individualist liberalism. If we want to avoid liberalism and seek to create an across-group solidarity that eludes much of identity politics, we find ourselves pushed toward a reductionist Marxism. Finally, if we want to avoid liberalism and the reductionism characteristic of many Marxist struggles, we seem to land in identity politics, with all the attendant difficulties of creating an overarching progressive politics.

Rancière's democratic politics is capable of recognizing the important elements of each of these politics, taking them on board, and eluding their problems. His is a theory that, with liberalism, recognizes the importance of each individual without subsuming him or her into a larger in-group identity. And, with identity politics, his theory recognizes the irreducibility of political struggles. Finally, in accordance with Marxist tenets, he offers the basis for a larger solidarity among groups. The lynchpin for all of these is the role the presupposition of equality plays in his thought.

Liberalism seeks to protect the integrity of each individual, and it does so by invoking the concept of equality. In liberal thought, particularly that of recent liberals like John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Amartya Sen, each individual is to be treated equally by the governing institutions of a society. There are differences, of course, in what that

equality consists in. For Rawls it is liberty and opportunity, for Nozick only liberty, and while for Sen it is capabilities as measured by functionings and freedoms to function. Like liberal thinkers, Rancière also appeals to equality. And, like them, his concept of equality protects individual integrity. Each speaking being is presupposed to be equal to every other speaking being. Nobody is inferior. Therefore, each person in a democratic politics is to be treated with equal respect.

There is a common ethical root that binds both liberalism and the democratic politics we have sketched here. It lies in the Kantian idea that nobody is to be treated solely as a means. Rawls, Nozick, and Sen explicitly embrace this idea. Rancière does not appeal to Kant, but its influence shows in his writings. However, having said that, we should immediately note that for liberal thought the Kantian idea issues out directly into some form of individualist liberalism. That is where Rancière's thought breaks from liberal thought. Equality does not arise at the same point in his thought as in that of liberalism. For liberals, equality is what must be granted and/or preserved by state institutions with regard to citizens. For Rancière, equality is what is presupposed by those who act. Otherwise put, while for liberalism equality is a constraint on government in its relation to individuals, for a Rancièrian democratic politics, it is a presupposition of those in political struggle. If we can put the point quickly, equality is bottom-up rather than top-down.

It is because of the role that equality plays in Rancière's thought that it can escape the individualism of liberal theory. Equality arises within the arena of collective struggle. It structures that struggle, at least when the struggle is democratic. Therefore, equality, rather than being offered to individuals as individuals, is instead an element of a struggle from below. People act collectively out of the presupposition of their equality, both to one another and to those in the police order that are said to be superior – those who have a part, those who count. They press equality upon the police order, which, one hopes, has the effect of declassifying its terms, those terms that hold the hierarchical order in place. Equality, then, cuts against individualism and toward solidarity. In that way, it is closer to Marxism – at least the reductionist Marxism we have invoked here – rather than to liberalism.

Consonant with this type of Marxism, Rancière's thought recognizes that political struggle cannot be ghettoized into particular non-communicating identities. What reductionist Marxism hoped to accomplish – and, for a time and to a certain extent, succeeded – was to align large swaths of oppressed people under a single banner, that of the proletariat. One might ask how accurate the term *proletariat* was for certain groups of people, but nonetheless it served to unite many of those who have no part, who do not count, in the capitalist order. In Rancière's framework, the term *equality* performs the same function. Regardless of the specific struggle that one is engaged in, one is equal to everyone else, everyone who struggles and everyone

against whom one struggles. People involved in labor organizing, for instance, can see their immediate solidarity with those engaged in gay and lesbian rights work, as long as they are both committed to a democratic politics. They share a common presupposition of equality that subtends their particular issues, a presupposition that crosses the boundaries of those issues.

I would argue, in fact, that the term *equality* works better than the term *proletariat* for creating solidarity. This is for two reasons. The first is that it is unclear who is and who is not among the proletariat. The term proletariat refers to those who work for those who own the means of production. Are housewives among the proletariat? For the *autonomia* movement in Italy they certainly were. It is unclear, however, how they work for those who own the means of production, except perhaps indirectly. On the other side of the coin, many high-level managers, whose interests are aligned with large stockholders, do not actually own the means of production. They are aligned with the *bourgeoisie*, but are not technically owners (unless, of course, they also receive stock options as part of their compensation). What is it that aligns housewives with the proletariat and high-level managers with the bourgeoisie? We might say that if it is not precisely their relation to the ownership of the means of production, it is instead their place in the social order. Housewives are among the oppressed, high-level managers among the oppressors. There is, however, another way to put this point. Housewives – at least many of them – do not count; they do not have a part. Unlike high-level managers, they are presupposed by the social order to be less than equal to those better placed in the social order. Equality, then, captures more accurately the issue at stake between various kinds of oppressors and various kinds of oppressed in a given social order.

One might worry, however, that this way of putting things neglects what is crucial to Marx's analysis: the role capitalism plays in sustaining oppression. This, however, would misconceive the theoretical framework of a Rancièrian politics. In the kind of democratic politics we have sketched here, there is certainly a role for the term proletariat to play. Those who own the means of production in a capitalist economic system indeed oppress those who work for them. And this form of oppression is neither marginal nor irrelevant. In our neoliberal world, it is crucial and inescapable. One might argue about whether the proletariat is exploited in the strict Marxist sense, for example whether exploitation requires Marx's labor theory of value and whether the labor theory of value is true. However, it is difficult to deny that large sections of the proletariat under neoliberal capitalism do not have a part to play other than to contribute their labor to sustaining it.

Rancière's political view does not deny any of this. His goal, rather, is to point out that while all forms of oppression are inegalitarian, not all forms can be given the specific economic inflection implied by the distinction between proletariat and bourgeoisie. High-level managers,

while technically among the proletariat, are complicit along a variety of registers with a police order that denies various groups, including particular subgroups of the proletariat, a part to play in that order. And this is the second reason that the term *equality* works better than *proletariat* to ground solidarity among oppressed groups. What identity politics understood is that there are a variety of oppressions that, while often related, are irreducible. It could be argued that this is the founding insight of identity politics. Historically, if we see identity politics as emerging from the left's rejection of traditional Marxist reductionism and the consequent turn to feminism, gay and lesbian politics, and African-American political expression, then it is precisely the left's rejection of a solely class-based politics that grounds it.

By invoking the concept of equality, Rancière's democratic politics allows one to preserve this insight while, as we saw, retaining the solidarity identity politics has found so elusive. Why can it do this? The concept of equality is not only a different concept from that of the proletariat. It is also a different *kind* of concept. The proletariat is generally used referentially. It refers to a class of people. Sometimes, it is utilized to refer to a class in the making; that is, it might be composed of people to come as well as people already existent. And, once in his writings, Rancière refers to the historical example of Auguste Blanqui's invocation of the concept as a form of subjectification (Rancière, 1999: 37).[7] However, he maintains that that invocation does not refer to a specific class of people defined by their place in the capitalist order. In a recent interview, he says, 'I have in fact always insisted on the difference between worker or proletarian subjectivation and all forms of economic, social or cultural identification of the worker which seek to make a subversive potential coincide with a certain place in a certain type of productive apparatus' (Rancière, 2008: 180).

Equality is both a descriptive term and a normative one. When Rancière uses the term descriptively, he gives it minimal content. Roughly, the idea is that everyone is equal who can speak with and understand one another and conduct their lives with one another in ways that are meaningful to them. This does not refer to a given class of people, but to more or less everyone. As a normative concept, it refers to how people *ought* to interact with one another. The appeal to equality, then, is an appeal that has minimal referential content combined with a certain normative force. This allows it the plasticity to be invoked in a variety of political contexts while at the same time maintaining an undergirding solidarity across those contexts. Women, gays and lesbians, African Americans, and others, can all struggle in the name of their equality, because all of them are capable of conducting meaningful lives with one another – i.e. all are speaking beings – and all ought to be accorded and to accord one another the respect founded on that capacity.

Here we can see how Rancière's democratic politics combines the insight of Marxism – the need for a democratic politics to have

solidarity – with that of identity politics – the need for struggles to be irreducible. And because this politics does so at the collective level, it maintains the recognition of individual worth without falling into the individualism of liberalism. We can see these elements at work in Rancière's concept of subjectification. Subjectification refers to a collective process in which each member acts with others on the presupposition of his or her equality. Subjectification, as we have seen Rancière insist, is not to be confused with identification. Identification imposes qualities, usually qualities associated with a particular police order. The order word of subjectification is not blackness, the feminine, queerness, or any other particular content. Whatever name subjectification goes by in a particular struggle, its underlying meaning is nothing more than equality. This is the force of Rancière's declaration that, 'when demonstrators in the Paris of 1968 declared, against all police evidence, 'We are all German Jews,' they exposed for all to see the gap between political subjectification...and any kind of identification' (Rancière, 1999: 59).

One might wonder here whether some of the terms of solidarity used in identity politics could be constructed as names of subjectification. There is no bar to this, as long as one recognizes that those names would no longer refer to identity characteristics within a particular group, but to everyone as a matter of equality. One can imagine, for instance, in the wake of the murder of Matthew Shepherd, buttons appearing that said, 'We are all gays and lesbians,' or even, in an inversion of the title of this paper, 'We are all queer.' In this context, however, the references of the nouns would be to equality, not to any particular characteristic that some had or constructed for themselves but others did not.

One might further wonder, however, whether it would really be possible to engage in a democratic politics of this kind in particular conditions when the motivating concept is bereft of all but the barest content. Is the concept of equality, shorn from any identity, capable of supporting a politics directed at specific hierarchical conditions? Or, put another way, don't we need the specific content of an identity in order to struggle against the identity imposed upon a part that has no part by the police order?

Rancière's politics does not deny that people in struggle see themselves as having particular identities. What is at issue is how the politics defines itself, or at least how its unfolding reveals it to be. We might put the point this way: an identity may be motivating for political actors, and it may structure the way they act, but what is politically relevant for a democratic politics does not have to do with any of that. It only has to do with whether the presupposition of equality is in play: that is, whether the action taken is reasonably seen as an expression of that presupposition.

In order to illustrate this point, we can refer briefly to an example I have discussed at length elsewhere: the Zapatista movement in

southern Mexico (May, 2010: Chapter 4). The Zapatistas have struggled for indigenous rights, particularly around the area of Chiapas. This struggle has emphasized the ways in which the Mexican government in particular, and neoliberalism in general, have marginalized the indigenous people of that region, both economically and politically. The struggle has focused on gaining recognition of the legitimacy of indigenous cultural practices and allowing for political respect for the indigenous groups of southern Mexico. Moreover, many of the leaders of the Zapatistas have commented on how their struggle has been structured by lessons taught to them by the indigenous groups, particularly that of communal decision-making rather than avant-garde politics.

This would seem to be a classic sort of identity politics. However, it is not. One might refer to the various declarations issued by the Zapatistas, which see their struggle as part of a larger struggle against neoliberal capitalism, and state their solidarity with other oppressed groups, such as the following:

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation speaks:

To all who struggle for human values of democracy, liberty, and justice.

To all who force themselves to resist the world crime known as "Neoliberalism" and aim for humanity and hope to be better, be synonymous of future.

To all individuals, groups, collectives, movements, social, civic, and political organizations, neighborhood associations, cooperatives, all the lefts known and to be known; non-governmental organizations, groups in solidarity with struggles of the world people, bands, tribes, intellectuals, indigenous people, students, musicians, workers, artists, teachers, peasants, cultural groups, youth movements, alternative communication media, ecologists, tenants, lesbians, homosexuals, feminists, pacifists.

To all who, with no matter to colors, race or borders, make of hope a weapon and a shield. (La Jornada, 1996)

Even more relevant, however, has been the Zapatistas' attempt to promote equality within the indigenous population. This is seen especially with regard to women. In the indigenous societies of southern Mexico, as in many places, women are marginalized from participation in the community. The Zapatista movement has not accepted this marginalization, and has struggled within those communities for the recognition of women as equals. This struggle has been called 'the revolution within the revolution.' Its significance for our discussion here is manifest. When an element of the identity of an indigenous group comes in conflict with the presupposition of equality, that element must be sacrificed if the movement is to remain

a democratic movement and not simply a movement of identity politics.

What this example shows is that it is possible to construct a politics that is rooted in particular local practices and traditions while at the same time presupposing the equality of every speaking being. Otherwise put, the generality of the concept of equality does not prevent one from organizing against particular hierarchies of particular police orders.

It remains only to ask how one might conceive a post-identity politics gay and lesbian movement on the basis of the democratic politics we have articulated here. I can only gesture at some elements of this politics, since its specific tasks will remain with those who struggle. What should be emphasized above all, however, is that a Rancièrian politics offers a route between the alternatives of a liberal politics that would seek to bring gays and lesbians into the mainstream on the one hand and a politics arising solely out of gay and lesbian identity on the other. The first alternative, of course, is the one of making gays and lesbians 'just like everyone else.' Allow gays and lesbians to marry, and they'll be just like your straight neighbors.[8] The second alternative seeks to impose particular identities on people in order to give them a unique (essential or constructed) character. It not only can be confining for gays and lesbians, but also serves to isolate their struggle from that of other oppressed groups, with consequences that we remarked on earlier.

The alternative marked out by a democratic politics would not involve giving up practices that have been developed historically within and around gay and lesbian communities, but neither would it base a politics upon them. Rather, it would see the people involved in those practices as nothing more or less than equal to people in other practices. Whether there are particular gay and lesbian forms of sexuality, whether there is or is not a gay gene, whether there are differences in the brains of homosexuals from heterosexuals: all of this is politically irrelevant. It is also irrelevant whether gays and lesbians are just like straight people, whether, as some t-shirts say, the gay lifestyle involves doing laundry, going to work, and cooking dinner. The question is solely one of presupposing the equality of every speaking being, and of resisting the police order at the points at which it denies that equality. That gays and lesbians should have equal rights seems obvious, not because they are gays and lesbians (as the right-wing critics of 'special rights' claim), but because they are equal.

Beyond that obvious measure, however, there are likely numerous other struggles. Those struggles require confronting the historical legacy that sees gays and lesbians not only as other but as somehow damaged or inferior. That confrontation can be constructed in many ways. In the process of its construction, however, it must be kept in mind that what is at issue is not the preservation of an identity but the

equality of those who seek to live as they see fit. And within the gay and lesbian movements themselves, the subjectification they create must reflect that presupposition if it is to be able to address both those who are not involved in the subjectification process and those who are involved in other processes of subjectification. A gay and lesbian politics, if it is to be a democratic politics, will not be a politics of queers. It will instead, be a politics of those who, regardless of their sexual orientation and practices, see one another as fellow members of a police order that can incorporate and co-opt almost anything into its operation: anything, of course, except equality.

Todd May is Class of 1941 Memorial Professor of the Humanities at Clemson University. He is the author of ten books of philosophy, including *Contemporary Movements and the Thought of Jacques Rancière: Equality in Action*, forthcoming from Edinburgh University Press. He has been active in a variety of political movements over the past several decades, including the anti-apartheid movement, gay and lesbian rights, and Palestinian solidarity.

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Notes

1. Identity politics, particularly as a rejection of Marxist reductionism, manifested itself both in theory and on the ground in political practice. As for the latter, one might point not only to gay and lesbian politics but also to the rise of the black power movement and certain forms of difference politics within feminism. Theoretically, some of the touchstones would be the seminal article by Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women' (1975), as well as, on very different registers, the works of Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Mary Daly, Gayatri Spivak, Iris Marion Young, and others.

2. This loss, and the more general difficulties associated with identity politics, are detailed in a number of works, for example Wendy Brown's *States of Injury* (1995), Carol Gould's *Globalizing Democracy and Human Rights* (2004), and Wendy Williams' 'The Equality Crisis: Some Reflections on Culture, Courts, and Feminism' (1991).

3. My claim here, and throughout, is not that Marxist theory is necessarily reductionist, but that the dominant trend Marxist tradition, represented by what came to be called the 'socialist' states, has become reductionist in practice.

4. I discuss this idea more fully in the first chapter of *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière: Creating Equality* (2008).

5. For more on this issue, see the fourth chapter of *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière*.

6. For Badiou's use of the term, see his *Being and Event* (2005), Meditation 35.

7. Rancière analyzes Blanqui's use of the concept to illustrate the distinction between identity and subjectification cited above, footnote 10. However, Rancière's own reservations about Marxism appear in fourth chapter of *Disagreement*, where he argues that Marxism is a 'metapolitics,' a reduction of the political to something behind it, i.e. economics. Here the term proletariat, although Rancière does not use it in this context, would play a very different role.

8. For important discussion of issues in gay marriage, see, for instance, Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender* (2004) and Michael Warner's *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics and the Ethics of Queer Life* (1999).

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