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Publication Date

2023-12-11



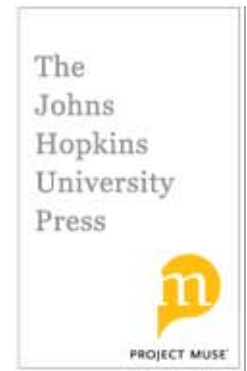
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Theory & Event, Volume 20, Number 1, January 2017, pp. 87-91 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press



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Kairos and Affect in Rancière's "Ten Theses on Politics"

Dean Mathiowetz

A commentary on "Ten Theses on Politics" by Jacques Rancière, *Theory & Event*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (2001)

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The event of Rancière's essay "Ten Theses on Politics" included not only its 2001 appearance in *Theory & Event*, but also a symposium on it published two years later.¹ Thus my comment here, on the occasion of *Theory & Event's* 20th Anniversary, marks only the most recent of several returns to Rancière's essay in the digital flows of this journal. The 2003 symposium offered compelling entry points for commenting again upon "Ten Theses," now fifteen years after its publication. One might ask, as did two of the symposium's interlocutors in the immediate shadow of the 9/11 attacks, what it means to read the "Ten Theses" in contexts rendered by major political shifts, like the more recent 11/9.² Or one might engage "Ten Theses" at the level of philosophical critique.³ In this short reflection, I instead approach the "Ten Theses" along lines suggested by Samuel Chambers: I accept the invitation, announced by the essay's title, that Rancière's polemic offers to think through and beyond this text in honor of its spirit.⁴

I will never the less take as my point of departure an essay from the 2003 symposium: Michael Dillon's, which develops a critique of (what he calls) Rancière's "structuralist ontology" of the political.⁵ More particularly, I take up Dillon's claim that Rancière unhelpfully accepts a chronological image of time as *the* trajectory along which political events can be located. In the spirit of Rancière's intention to disrupt our thoughts about politics by thinking divergently, I want to explore briefly the alternative presented by a kairological conception of time, and ask how attending to it can introduce dissensus into our thinking about politics. Attending to kairological time, I argue, draws out partitions of the sensible within which Rancière's argument in "Ten Theses" takes place. Further thinking (and doing) politics may hinge, in part, on these partitions' disruption.

The "Ten Theses on Politics" is the English translation (and edition) of work that Rancière delivered and composed some years earlier. Generally speaking, the essay distills key themes in his book, *Dis-agreement*.⁶ But it also stands on its own. Whereas *Dis-agreement*

is principally oriented toward disputing classical topoi of political philosophy, “Ten Theses on Politics,” is marked by some of political theory’s preoccupations at the turn of the Twentieth Century – Arendt and Schmitt, Strauss and Heidegger.⁷ These theses’ reception into the American scene of academic political theorizing energized readers attuned to debates around those figures, as well as readers of Sheldon Wolin’s writings on “the political” and “fugitive democracy.”⁸ For fugitive democrats, Rancière’s work supplemented Wolin’s assiduously American orientation with more evident philosophical rigor and a continental flair. And more so than *Disagreement*, in “Ten Theses” Rancière thinks democracy not only against, but also through and thus beyond Aristotle, claiming territory for left Aristotelianism outside of Hannah Arendt’s well-known (and at times dubious) appropriations of *The Politics* in *The Human Condition*.⁹

By alluding to Luther and Marx in its title, “Ten Theses” announces itself as a polemical intervention.¹⁰ Given professionalizing forces that these days encourage most political theorists to engage less as political thinkers in their own right, and more as decoders and transmitters of others’ political ideas (or as political thinkers by way of decoding or transmitting), it’s not surprising that the default practice of most commentators has been to treat “Ten Theses” as a text to be explicated rather than as a provocation to political thinking.¹¹ In the spirit of taking the “Ten Theses” invitation to think politically by thinking polemically, I propose to do with Dillon’s critique of Rancière what Rancière does with his critique of Aristotle – stage a disagreement through which to carry the latter’s thinking beyond his thought.

Dillon took Rancière’s “Ten Theses” to task for “enunciate[ing] an ontology of structural difference that underwrites a process of political subjectification which owes its dynamic to the time-less universality of the paradoxical magnitude of, and contrariety in, the logos rather than to the rupture and rupturing of time.”¹² He later continues, “temporal separation does not lie within the structural principle of paradoxical magnitude itself for Rancière.... Temporal difference for him occurs in the historical contingency of dissensus.”¹³ Dillon contends that for Rancière, the realization of difference is temporal in the sense that it is historically contingent, and that the disagreements of politics can thus be located in history. They “take place.” Dillon hints at an alternative approach, but does not elaborate it: kairological time.¹⁴ Whereas chronology understands time as linear, continuous, and sequential, kairology understands it as discontinuous, marked by periods, seasons, cycles, and the indeterminate duration of an event.

For all its value, Dillon’s critique – and therefore too his account of Rancière’s thought – is proffered in a register of critical theory that neglects the polemical quality of “Ten Theses” and *Dis-agreement*. Dillon takes the “Ten Theses” as a set of philosophical propositions upon

which an account of politics can rest—only, the wrong set of philosophical propositions. In other words, he mistakes Rancière's polemic for an argument. Rancière responds to Dillon, but in so doing enters as well the register of critical theory animating Dillon's critique.¹⁵ Rancière therefore likewise misses or neglects the possibility opened when kairological time meets "Ten Theses" understood as a provocation. The polemical value of kairological time is to punch a hole that allows us to pass through, rather than set aside or abandon, the fabric Rancière's thinking. If we want to engage "Ten Theses" otherwise on the occasion of *Theory & Event's* 20th Anniversary, a polemical speculation on *kairos* could hardly be more fitting. It also, and I think helpfully, provokes further thinking politics through and alongside Rancière.

Kairos links different times by ritual, by feeling, by affect. The gathering in certain places, the eating of certain foods, the activation or relaxation of certain taboos, mark a holiday not as a re-enactment, but instead as the *re-occurrence*, of the occasion and its feelings or moods. Consider: while merchants and investors may wish for a lucrative holiday, and employers an efficient one, it is crass to wish *others* such a holiday. The "spirit" of a holiday is not that it be efficient or lucrative, but rather happy or merry. The anticipation of and nostalgia for a holiday season are linked to the activation of feelings, rather than to the linear demarcation of time. *Kairos* thus captures the lived experience of non-linear time, even in an epoch whose most salient, everyday standard is a linear one of years and capital accumulated. In this way, and importantly, non-linear *kairos* is the time of affect. It is an indispensable register of the body, whose cycles of desire, and of energy and depletion, can be neither fully captured nor completely expressed in linear frames of aging, of growth and decay. Life itself happens at the junctures and disjunctures of these registers of time. It is played out in their resonances and tensions.

Recovering kairological time for thinking politics brings paradox, and thus disagreement and dissensus—conceptions at the center of Rancière's thinking—to the matter of time itself. Chronological and kairological time are paradoxical, in that both are "true" and yet, strictly speaking, they are incompatible with each other. Time is both rectilinear and circular; thus, any account of time as strictly chronological is a miscount. This insight expands the field upon which we can think with Rancière about politics, rather than qualifying or disqualifying it. Time as both chronological and kairological, and the paradoxical relation of these accounts of time, offer further terrain upon which dissensus, and thus politics and its subject, democracy and the people, are possible.

Invoking Derrida in his response to Dillon, Rancière brings us to the threshold of the insights available here. Deconstruction, after all, introduces something like time into language. But thus confining

his response to the field of language, Rancière re-enacts a partition of the sensible that repeatedly excludes *kairos's* embodied dimension, its affective and extra-linguistic sensoria, from the field of politics. Throughout the "Ten Theses," Rancière's broad statements regarding "the partition of the sensible," of "feelings of shared 'good' or 'evil,'" the entire orientation of action in "modes of being" and "ways of life," are rapidly qualified—and, I would argue, reduced—to language, in its own particular visible and audible modes. Confident that the deconstructive turn of literary theory and philosophy will rescue him from ontology, Rancière takes the linguistic mood of twentieth century politics as an essential ground for the political itself and stresses the essential "literarity" of politics.¹⁶

I would offer that neither kairological time nor the sensorium can be confined to language. The processes of sense and feeling are not wholly narrative. In the course of disputing political philosophy, Rancière adopts philosophy's turn away from the body, and toward text- or narrative-focused theorizing. So doing, he adopts narrative-focused theorizing's concern to turn grammatical features, like subject and object, into philosophical propositions. In this way, he sets in the path of readers who wish to draw on his work the same stumbling blocks that critical theory has so labored to remove. Perhaps this is why, for Dillon, critical theory appears as the most apt path for criticizing Rancière. Returning to "Ten Theses" today, and in the wake of so much theorizing of bodies, and their affects and temporalities, we have an opportunity to declare Rancière's account of the sensorium-as-linguistic to be a miscount. So doing, we may reclaim for politics and its subject, democracy and the people, the sensualization of the political world, and engage partitions that exceed the seeable and the sayable.

The point, of course, is not to ontologize "the body" as a ground for politics, but instead to understand language as always-already alongside bodies and affects. In this way, we allow Spinoza's influences on critical theory to come forth. But we push back on Spinoza as well, understanding bodies and language as always in relations that include tensions and paradox. So, for example, transgender politics goes beyond bathroom signage, preferred pronouns, or the visibility of trans people in public spaces. Those are important, but trans politics includes the senses and feelings of misgendered bodies—feelings never independent of discourse, but which depend on no particular discourse to be relevant *as* feelings of injustice. This may be a polemical claim, but as such it honors the spirit of Rancière's fecund thinking about politics, even as it disputes the unperceived or disavowed partitions of the sensible in his writing.

Notes

1. Davide Panagia, "Thinking with and against 'Ten Theses,'" *Theory & Event*, 6:4 (2003).
2. I refer, of course, to the election of Donald Trump as US President on November 9, 2016. Regarding the symposium essays related to the themes noted here, see Aamir R. Mufti, "Reading Jacques Rancière's 'Ten Theses on Politics': After September 11," *Theory & Event* 6:4 (2003); Kirstie M. McClure, "Disconnections, Connections, and Questions: Reflections on Jacques Rancière's 'Ten Theses on Politics,'" *Theory & Event* 6:4 (2003).
3. See Michael Dillon, "(De)void of Politics?: A Response to Jacques Rancière's 'Ten Theses on Politics,'" *Theory & Event* 6:4 (2003).
4. Samuel A. Chambers, *The Lessons of Rancière*, New York: Oxford University Press (2013)
5. Dillon, "(De)void of Politics," par. 11.
6. Jacques Rancière, *Dis-Agreement*,
7. See especially Rancière's elaboration on Thesis 1. Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," *Theory & Event* 5:3 (2001)
8. Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," *Constellations* 1:1 (1994)
9. Rancière, "Ten Theses," theses 2, 4, and passim; Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013; Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958. For a critical perspective on Arendt's use of Aristotle, see Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, "Justice: On Relating Public and Private," *Political Theory* 9:3 (August 1981), pp. 327-352.
10. Martin Luther famously sent ninety-five theses (titled "A Disputation on the Power of Indulgences" to the Archbishop of Mainz in 1517, an event now considered to be the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Karl Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" (1888) announce his intention to overturn idealist modes of philosophical criticism.
11. Chambers, *Lessons*, 74.
12. Dillon, "(De)void of Politics," par. 4.
13. Dillon, "(De)void of Politics," par. 7.
14. Dillon, "(De)void of Politics," par. 15.
15. Jacques Rancière, "Comment and Responses," *Theory & Event* 6:4 (2003).
16. Chambers, *Lessons*, p. 112.