

critical theory today: missing emancipation

clare woodford

10-11 Pavilion Parade

School of Humanities

University of Brighton

Brighton BN2 1RA

United Kingdom

Email: c.woodford@brighton.ac.uk

Books reviewed

Recognition or Disagreement: A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality, and Identity

Axel Honneth and Jacques Rancière, edited by Katia Genel and Jean-Phillipe Deranty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 229 pp., ISBN: 978-0231177160.

The Method of Equality

Jacques Rancière (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 201 pp., ISBN: 978-0745680637.

Axel Honneth and Jacques Rancière represent two different, but complementary post-Marxist traditions in political thought. Honneth, third generation Frankfurt school theorist and student of Jürgen Habermas, has developed a social theory of recognition in response to injustice. Working across the social sciences, Honneth draws on sociology, moral philosophy and legal studies to construct a critical normative theory that can establish the social conditions for freedom and combat the injustice of late modern capitalism.

Although Rancière is also an inheritor of the broad Frankfurt School critical theory tradition, his roots lie most firmly in the Parisian poststructuralism of the late 1960s. A student of Althusser, he famously broke with scientific Marxism to denounce Althusser's epistemological break, and indeed any division of knowledge, as inimical to emancipation. Following this turn, Rancière's theoretical concerns stem from his archival work which sought to articulate the play of logic that underlies any moment of revolt or societal change. Arguing that equality is the lynchpin of emancipation, he has written widely on a range of topics stemming from film and media to literature and philosophy. Recently Rancière has identified 'misadventures' in the Frankfurt school critical theory project (2009). With this in mind, his broad interdisciplinary approach could be seen to retrace the terrain covered by Adorno and Horkheimer's first generation Frankfurt school project, salvaging the commitment to emancipation whilst scuppering the last vestiges of the division of knowledge.

This encounter between Honneth and Rancière is therefore particularly opportune. It represents not simply an engagement between two thinkers, but a chance to better appreciate the legacy of the Frankfurt school's emancipatory project whilst plotting a course for critical theory's future travails.

Despite its usual translation into English as disagreement, Rancière famously distinguishes *mesentente* as a particular type of disagreement: 'the distortion at the heart of any mutual dialogue' (*Recognition or Disagreement*, 83). The editors of *Recognition or Disagreement* claim repeatedly that such a disagreement is staged by the dialogue between Jacques Rancière and Axel Honneth that comprises the core of this book. Yet this assessment comes a little too readily to hand. More is going on in the text than we can communicate by glossing it as '*mesentente*'. Indeed, it might seem that there is also an amount of what Rancière would term simple

‘misunderstanding’, ‘mislistening’, ‘misreading’ and even a missed opportunity that are overlooked in the hasty acceptance that this is ‘*mesentente*’ at play. Ironically, this series of near misses produces something invaluable, not only to students and scholars of Rancière, Honneth, or even poststructuralism and deliberative theory more widely, but to all with an interest in political philosophy.

According to Rancière (1999, p. xi), disagreement (*mesentente*) refers to a situation in which ‘the interlocutors both understand and do not understand the same thing by the same words’. It is distinguished from misunderstanding in that the latter is simply a question of knowledge which ‘can be resolved by a simple explanation of what the other’s sentence is saying – unbeknownst to the other’ (ibid). Furthermore, ‘[d]isagreement occurs wherever there is contention over what speaking means’ (ibid.). Although disagreement and misunderstanding are not mutually exclusive categories, the majority of the dialogue between Honneth and Rancière demonstrates more misunderstanding than disagreement. Neither disputes what speaking means so much as they clarify and remedy the lack of knowledge of each other’s’ work. As too often happens with scholars working in what should be complementary traditions, there is little everyday motivation or even opportunity to work together, enhanced perhaps in this case by the historical separation between French poststructuralists and German critical theorists. In providing an opportunity for dialogue this book forces us to address the issues that are at stake. Of course, Rancière and Honneth do at times demonstrate disagreement over what they mean by the words they use (115), but in most cases where this does occur, they work through it, bringing their respective projects closer together. This is important. By referring to the entire encounter with the blanket term ‘*mesentente*’, we fail to identify and investigate where the dialogue in actual fact demonstrates misunderstanding, or indeed out and out conflict which is

to be argued over *and resolved*. Reflection on the differences between *mesentente*, misunderstanding and conflict, enables us to assess the import of this book for political theory and to see what is at stake for emancipatory politics.

Although *Recognition or Disagreement* emerged from a short exchange between Rancière and Honneth in Frankfurt in 2009, it is the work of the editors that contributes the most novelty. Katia Genel's opening chapter provides a fantastic introduction to the two thinkers, mapping their position carefully within a wider reconstruction of the critical theory tradition. Jean-Phillipe Deranty's essay then analyses the convergence and divergence of these thinkers, summarising and critiquing the encounter, while highlighting the underlying unresolved debate at its core between normative and anti-normative theory.

However, neither Genel nor Deranty identify the cause of all the 'missing' that takes place in the subsequent dialogue. This is brought into focus by Honneth's penultimate comment in his dialogue with Rancière. He states that his work aims 'to explain why specific groups do dissent or do start to rebel' (128). His is a theoretical project about 'what is really going on' (128) aiming to bring about conditions for self-realisation (23). In contrast, Rancière famously insists that he is not doing theory. He does not seek to 'explain' anything, least of all to claim he could know what is really going on (see *The Method of Equality*, 95), instead observing and describing what he has seen, weaving narratives, he polemically challenges his readers to reinvent politics, for the rest 'is up to them' (*The Method of Equality* 91). Yet, in *The Method of Equality*, he emphasises that there are two kinds of work that contribute to politics:

there is an attempt to shatter – as much at the level of the conceptual, supposedly theoretical, analysis as at the level of ticking off current police

watchwords – common notions that are most often shared by upholders of a certain order and those who think they are contesting that order. But these interventions are deployed against a certain backdrop, which is the work that constructs the sensible fabric and allows us to think that the people who are talking about emancipation are reasonable and that they are proposing desirable things. (156)

Although the first – the ‘shattering’ which is also referred to as ‘breaking and entering’ (e.g., 72) – is Rancière’s speciality, the second, is much closer to the work that Honneth proposes. Indeed, there is something of a chicken and egg problem here. Recall that, for Rancière, politics is a staging that scrambles as much as it can the existing conceptual field. It could therefore be argued that where recognition is most difficult we will first need politics to help bring it about; yet conversely, we may worry that to enable politics to be effective (rather than suppressed) we first need conditions for recognition to provide a receptive terrain for politics.¹ In this sense we could suggest that the task of critical theory is to engage both Rancière and Honneth’s projects in tandem in the service of emancipation.

Recognition or Disagreement interestingly effects less recognition and disagreement between the thinkers, so much as it stages a conflict, cordial and mutually informative, but urgent all the same, about the future of critical theory and its emancipatory aims. It stages little breaking of thought, and instead sees the interlocutors remaining in their trenches, although perhaps a little closer than they once were. Yet it is this that makes the text worth reading. Genel and Deranty summarise and situate Rancière and Honneth’s work while the philosophers critique each other’s theories and clarify their own positions. This is accompanied by a

thorough bibliography of primary and secondary texts. The book thereby serves to precisely locate and explore the points of convergence and the sharp contrasts that remain between the thinkers, whilst also acting as an excellent gateway to further research.

The exceptionally long interview published as *The Method of Equality* marks a departure for Rancière. Although he has given many interviews, this is the only one to clarify and document his work on this scale. It appears to explain his ideas and motivations in a manner that he had, up until now, assiduously avoided. Nonetheless he still seeks to eschew the status many might ascribe to him, asserting that all a master does is merely to provoke (49); and despite the interviewer's early probing questions, his life, family, and upbringing, remain in the shadows, illuminated in brief moments and then hidden again. He stridently disavows his status and role as anything other than a researcher and writer. He is not a sociologist, philosopher, theorist, or historian; nor did he set out with a method (25, 33, 36, 47). He has many influences and interests, seeing no reason to be restrained by disciplinary boundaries. He draws widely on the classics, literature, art, philosophy, music, film, and even at times a kind of critical mathematics, yet in a way that shows how interdisciplinarity need not be contrived. It is the simple art of refusing artificial partitions of knowledge.

The interview comprises four parts: geneses, lines, thresholds and present tenses. This format jars somewhat with Rancière's own writing, which never follows a chronological path. Rather than seeking to mirror or substitute for his written work, the interview is better seen as an accompaniment to his writing. As a voice over, it traces the links, the developments, and clarifies argument in places correcting misunderstandings or infelicitous wording of earlier texts (e.g., 70, 134). It could

never replace the experience of reading Rancière's writings for it has none of his usual narrative form, poetry, stagings, fables and characters. There are no surprises, twists or turns. His writing usually avoids explanation of the sort provided here, assuming an audience of equal intelligence (86). The drawback is that readers sometimes discover that equal prior knowledge, or equal understanding of the history of French literature or indeed the nuances of Ancient Greek cannot be presumed. The interview thus functions as a guidebook for readers. It may help them to begin their foray into Rancière's work whilst never fully preparing them for the unique discoveries and chance encounters that come to define any journey.

Reading these texts together juxtaposes the way that Rancière's writing moves between space and time (*The Method of Equality*, 57-61) with Honneth's respect for the space and time of our world. Honneth works with the possible, Rancière pushes to challenge the possible world with that which, up until now had been considered impossible (*The Method of Equality*, 147-8). His scant regard for proper boundaries problematises obedience to laws, including those of science, time, and history.² His commitment to humour and provocation (*The Method of Equality*, 91) are profoundly political tools,³ enabling him to emerge from this interview as the joker to Honneth's tragedian. He laughs not at suffering, but in the face of adversity. Honneth is reverential, Rancière an irreverent reminder that democrats have a duty to play at the boundaries of the possible, and toy with the impossible to reveal its latent possibility.

The emergence of both of these books in the same year draws attention to Rancière's project and indicates that publishers are identifying a need for explanatory texts that seek to both introduce and situate Rancière's work within the philosophical discipline more broadly. Indeed, the often puzzled reception of Rancière's work no doubt does arise from a lack of understanding, yet is undoubtedly exacerbated by his

challenging strategy of doubling that exploits *mesentente* to problematise how we think and live. His method breaks the binaries that the study of politics is expected to maintain, and refuses the rigid policing of our disciplines. He undermines the distinctions we take for granted: art/science, poetry/philosophy, equality/freedom, normativity/anti-normativity and relativism/universalism, showing that it is only by doing differently that we make the impossible possible.

Rancière emphasises to Honneth that politics is not an exceptional moment (*Recognition or Disagreement*, 129), but when two worlds hang in the balance. Honneth works in the world, Rancière remains steadfastly on its margins. It is left to us readers to figure out how we can benefit from the wealth of both these traditions in the struggle against injustice and inequality. Following the example set by the encounter between Rancière and Honneth we must work to remedy misunderstanding and confront areas of conflict between these traditions. If we continue to write off these encounters as *mesentente* we may too easily allow critical theory to miss its mark.

References

- Rancière, J. (1999) *Dis-agreement: politics and philosophy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Rancière, J. (2009) 'The Misadventures of Critical Thought', in *The Emancipated Spectator*, London: Verso, pp. 25-50
- Woodford, C. (2015) 'Modes of Dreaming and Doing – Jacques Rancière and Strategies for a New Left', *Journal of Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 41 (8): 811-36.

Woodford, C. (2016) *Disorienting Democracy: Politics of Emancipation*, London: Routledge.

About the author

Clare Woodford is senior lecturer in critical political philosophy in the Humanities School at the University of Brighton, member of the Brighton Centre for Applied Philosophy, Politics and Ethics and co-editor of the Polemics book series (Rowman and Littlefield).

Notes

¹ For further discussion of this problem, see Woodford (2015) and (2016, particularly pp. 11-13).

² I do not agree with Deranty's assessment that Rancière historicises aesthetics, but not politics. Instead, I read Rancière as always between the two: historicist inasmuch as he is aware that context provides particular conditions for the particular modes of staging, but never limiting staging to any specific historical era.

³ Woodford (2016, chapter 5).

@article{863af00ea373405ba4517443ffb1743b, title = "Critical Theory Today: Missing Emancipation", author = "Clare Woodford", note = "This is a post-peer-review, pre-copyedit version of an article published in European Political Science. The definitive publisher-authenticated version Woodford, . Eur Polit Sci (2018) 17: 313. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41304-017-0108-9> is available online at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41304-017-0108-9>, year = "2017", month = "2"