

**"fore me, this fellow  
speaks!": rancièrè and  
plebian equality**

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It once happened that all the other members of a man mutinied against the stomach, which they accused as the only idle, un-contributing part the whole body, while the rest were put to hardships and the expense of much labour to supply and minister to its appetites. The stomach, however, merely ridiculed the silliness of the members, who appeared not to be aware that the stomach certainly does receive the general nourishment, but only to return it again, and redistribute it amongst the rest. Such is the case," he said, "ye citizens, between you and the senate. The counsels and plans that are there duly digested, convey and secure to all of you your proper benefit and support.<sup>1</sup>

The first to tell us of the *Secessio Plebis*—the retirement of the plebeians from Rome in 494 BC—are Livy and Plutarch.<sup>2</sup> According to the story, the plebeians, the majority in Rome and in the Roman army, decided to retire from the city and set camp on the nearby Aventine hill. Deprived of political power by the patricians, and intimidated by their wealth and control over the army, the plebeians left the city and conducted what can be regarded as the first ever 'general strike.' The senate decided to reconcile with the plebs, and the popular former consul Menenius Agrippa was sent to negotiate with them. When addressing the people, Agrippa told the famous fable of the belly and the limbs, in which the members of the body (representing the plebeians), refused to continue feeding the stomach they accused of idleness and lack of contribution to the whole body. The stomach

(representing, of course, the patricians) ridiculed the members' silliness and assured them that all nourishment it receives is redistributed among them again. Agrippa concluded by saying that the patricians do take care of all the residents of Rome, appeased the seceding, and the plebs agreed to return to the city.

What is the value of this historical episode and moral tale for contemporary politics? For Jacques Rancière, not only is this event much more than an irrelevant ancient dispute, but it constitutes no less than 'the beginning of our history' and the point where self-knowledge and radical equality start. For him, the *Secessio Plebis* signifies an irreducible and constitutive moment of equality.<sup>3</sup> However, the identity of the plebs, the meaning of their actions, and their contemporary implications are far from obvious. The aim of this essay is to gain a better understanding of Rancière's concept of equality, analyzing the Plebeians' secession in order to put it in the larger context of egalitarian political thinking.

First, I briefly describe Rancière's concept of the presupposed 'equality of intelligences,' which is present in his account of the plebs' secession. I then address the problems that arise from Rancière's description of the event, and especially what seems to be his overenthusiastic evaluation of what could also be viewed as the exact opposite of equality—the silence of the plebeians and their quiet approval of the fable's 'truth.' To settle this possible contradiction, I draw on the literary descriptions of the episode by Shakespeare in his play *Coriolanus*, as well as adaptations of this play by Bertolt Brecht and Gunter Grass. Finally, I discuss the philosophical use of the term 'pleb' in Andre Glucksmann's work, and its continuation but also transformation by Michel Foucault. By conducting this short genealogy of the term 'pleb,' I suggest that, for Rancière, equality is primarily an equal capacity for political articulation in which speech itself is key. This notion of equality is strikingly opposed to normative egalitarian politics, and it enables us to think of equality beyond the hierarchic logic of distribution.

## RANCIÈRE'S EQUALITY AS A PRESUPPOSITION

One of Rancière's most original and influential ideas is that of equality as a presupposition.<sup>4</sup> For him, equality is not something that can be given or distributed by the state or by any other agency, but should be presupposed in order for it to take place. Rancière opposes, both, those who claim that an inequality of intellectual capacities exists as a biological or social fact, and those who view equality as a normative value to which egalitarian society should strive. As a radical alternative,

he suggests treating an equality of intelligences “between anyone and everyone”<sup>5</sup> as a point of departure, and for him the basic challenge of all egalitarian politics is therefore: to affirm equality as an axiom, as an assumption, and not as a goal. But also to refuse a partition between intellectual equality and social inequality; to believe that even if egalitarian assumptions are alien to social logic and aggregation they can be affirmed there transgressively, and that politics consists of this very confrontation.<sup>6</sup>

Rancière views the *Secessio Plebis* as exactly such a confrontation. He regards this event as a moment of equality in which the dominant conception of the plebs as inferior was suspended. What Agrippa did was unthinkable—he assumed that the plebs’ intelligence matches his own, and by speaking with the plebeians who demanded equality, he verified this presupposition.<sup>7</sup> Agrippa’s choice of the fable is also interesting. Although the difference between the bodily organs is physical, natural and absolute, the context in which the fable is being told undermines these differences and is aimed at overcoming hierarchy. From the moment the patricians understood they had to talk with the plebs, there was already, to a certain extent, a state of equality between them. In Rancière’s own terms, we can say that Agrippa joined the plebs in presupposing and verifying equality.

Livy described the *Secessio* as no more than a simple mutiny driven by hunger. Rancière, on the contrary, quotes Pierre-Simon Ballanche, and points to the origin of the quarrel in speech itself. At stake was the possibility of a shared stage in which the plebeians could be heard as intelligent beings whose voice is not “only transitory speech, a speech that is a fugitive sound, a sort of lowing, a sign of want and not an expression of intelligence.”<sup>8</sup> Ballanche, followed by Rancière, refers, of course, to Aristotle’s famous claim that speech is what makes man a political being,<sup>9</sup> and since the very ability to speak logically is the essence of this dispute, he regards the secession not as an irrelevant ancient conflict but as “the beginning of our history: that of the self-knowledge that makes yesterday’s plebeians and today’s proletarians capable of doing anything a man can do.”<sup>10</sup>

Although Rancière’s words make some sense, I still find this account of the secession unsettling. In a reference to the fable, Proudhon ridicules the relations between the belly and limbs and states the obvious when he writes that

When Menenius related to the people his fable of the limbs and the stomach, if anyone had remarked to this story-teller that the stomach freely

gives to the limbs the nourishment which it freely receives, but that the patricians gave to the plebeians only for cash, and lent to them only at usury, he undoubtedly would have silenced the wily senator, and saved the people from a great imposition.<sup>11</sup>

So why didn't any of the plebeians give this remark? Why wasn't the senator "silenced"? And why didn't the plebs outright reject the fable, that, according to Marx, made the individual an "automatic motor of a fractional operation" and made "man a mere fragment of his own body"?<sup>12</sup> The plebs' revolt, therefore, can also be read in a totally different way than Rancière's, emphasizing this time their intellectual inferiority. From this perspective, the plebeians were too blind or stupid to figure out the blunt lies in Agrippa's fable, and only after being ridiculed and told a nice moral tale, they calmed down. They acted irrationally, until came the aristocrat and set them straight. This is hardly the way any meaningful equality should look like. Also, Rancière seems to totally ignore the content of the fable. For him, its importance lies only in the fact that every single plebeian felt that the speech was directed at his intelligence, and knew that he had full right to apply it. But did the plebeians use their intelligence at all? Rancière does not consider their reaction, and he is not concerned with the possibility that they indeed accepted Agrippa's ridiculous analogies. Was Rancière wrong to describe such a situation as egalitarian? Isn't this episode just another decisive proof of the patricians' intellectual superiority?

This seemingly contradiction between possible readings of the historical event is not trivial because it touches the very foundation of political equality—is equality realized in proper understanding of dominant metaphor for a unified society? Or is it realized through the act of introducing conflict and antagonism into both unified society and common understanding of it? We need to ask, then, what was it exactly that the plebeians did, and even more generally: what is the 'plebs'? Since their own motives are missing from the various historical accounts and even Rancière and Ballanche do not pay much attention to them, we can at least imagine their voices and thoughts. William Shakespeare, Bertolt Brecht and Günter Grass help us to do so.

## THE MYSTERY OF THE PLEBS' RETURN TO THE CITY

Shakespeare, in his political play *Coriolanus*, gives us fascinating insights into the plebs' motives. By examining the plebeians' words and actions in the play, it be-

comes even more apparent that the source of the dispute is political articulation, and not merely hunger. The play is based on the life of Roman leader Caius Marcius Coriolanus, and it takes place in 494BC right after the return of the plebeians from their first retirement.<sup>13</sup> There is a food shortage in Rome, and the hungry plebeians threaten to rebel (again) against the patricians. They agree to give up the rebellion once they are guaranteed representation in the senate, but as soon as they hear this good news, a war with the Volscians breaks out. Caius Marcius, an arrogant and hot-tempered military leader, fights for Rome, for his triumphs in the battlefield, and for the successful occupation of the Volscian city of Corioli. For this, he is rewarded with an honorable name: Coriolanus.

He is then asked to become consul, but continues to look down at the plebs even though he needs their votes. The tribunes, who are the representatives of the plebs, conspire against him. He is accused and convicted of treason, and subsequently he is banished from the city. In his trouble he joins his former enemies, the Volscians, and leads their attack on Rome. He stops only when his mother begs him to spare the city that was once his home, and eventually he is killed by the Volscian leader Aufidius.

The play opens with Menenius Agrippa offering the plebeians the story of the belly and the limbs. As someone who is considered a friend of the people, Agrippa gets to speak but he is constantly interrupted. When he asks the plebs to let down their bats and clubs, and claims that the leaders of Rome love them and take care of them, the plebs laugh at the possibility.<sup>14</sup> However, one of the citizens is willing to hear the fable, and yet warns Agrippa not to think that the tale will ‘fob off [their] disgrace.’ When he interferes further, angrily supporting the “oppressed” organs, Agrippa seems surprised and says “fore me, this fellow speaks!” as if the fact that a plebeian can articulate himself clearly is not obvious. Eventually, Agrippa completes the tale but we do not know the reaction of the plebs because Coriolanus enters the room and insults the plebeians.<sup>15</sup>

Bertolt Brecht, who adapted the play in 1954, wrote with his colleagues a detailed analysis of this scene in which they discussed some of the difficulties and complications caused by absences and ambiguities in Shakespeare’s text.<sup>16</sup> They were especially concerned with the plebeians giving up the intentions of their revolt, whether this happened as a result of Agrippa’s phony tale or for the fear of upcoming war. One of the participants in the discussion suggested that the declaration of a revolt, followed by an immediate retreat from this intention, is supposed to

have a comic effect. Brecht did not agree. He claimed that “if they let themselves be taken in [by the fable], I wouldn’t find them comic but tragic. That would be a possible scene, for such things happen, but a horrifying one.”<sup>17</sup> He was of the opinion that the rebellion did not happen at the same moment, not because the plebs were persuaded to believe that the patricians are essential to their well-being, but because choosing to rise up is the hardest, most intimidating course of action the oppressed can choose:

Think of how reluctantly men decide to revolt! It’s an adventure for them: new paths have to be marked and followed; moreover, the rule of the rulers is always accompanied by that of their ideas. To the masses, revolt is the unnatural rather than the natural thing, and however bad the situation from which only revolt can free them, they find the idea of it as exhausting as the scientist finds a new view of the universe.<sup>18</sup>

Brecht’s solution to the plebs’ silence in front of Coriolanus, and to their retreat, gives us further insight. He suggested that Coriolanus would enter the scene accompanied by armed Roman soldiers and watch the heated conversation even before Agrippa greets him. Performed like this, the scene reveals the oppressive foundations of the ideology presented in the fable, and sufficiently explains the fear and retreat of the plebeians. In other words, for Brecht the ‘pretty tale’ was not convincing at all. Instead, his version of the scene demonstrates intellectual equality—both sides proved they are able to speak, create metaphors and poetically interpret their political situation. In a small addition to the original text (one of very few strategically placed edits), Brecht also hints at the reason for which the plebeians agreed to hear Agrippa’s tale in the first place. When Agrippa asks for attention to his story, a plebeian citizen replies: “It’s hardly a time for stories. But I for my part have long wished to learn how to make a pretty speech. And that can be learned from you, Agrippa. Fire away!”<sup>19</sup> It is speech that the plebeians wish for, not only food.

The importance of public speech for Brecht’s plebeians appears in a few other changes he made to the text. Whereas Shakespeare characterized the tribunes as deceptive conspirators, and nothing more, Brecht unsurprisingly presents them as authentic and dignified representatives of the people. For example, in Shakespeare’s text there is a scene where Coriolanus, in order to serve as consul, must show his war scars to the tribunes, thus presenting both his loyalty to Rome and his submission to the will of the people.<sup>20</sup> Shakespeare stressed the humiliating el-

ements of the ceremony (from the perspective of Coriolanus, of course), whereas Brecht's tribunes did not seek to exercise power for the sake of it, and they needed no humiliation. Instead of examining scars they conducted something like a 'public hearing,' in which they demanded to hear Coriolanus' intentions for the distribution of the wheat delivery that recently arrived to Rome.

Brecht also claimed that equality should be demonstrated not only through the play's content but in its basic focus as well. He thought the play illustrates the fact that Coriolanus was not irreplaceable for Rome, as much as he is not irreplaceable as the protagonist of the play itself, and it is asserted that "we must at least be able to 'experience' the tragedy not only of Coriolanus himself but also of Rome, and specifically of the plebs."<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, the only purely original addition to the play that Brecht made is in the final scene. Shakespeare ended the play with Coriolanus' tragic death; yet, Brecht wrote another scene in which a meeting of the senate takes place. The meeting, which concerns the construction of a new pipeline amongst other routine issues, is interrupted by the news of Coriolanus' death. The senators and tribunes are completely indifferent to this news, and reject the family's request to mourn him publicly. Agrippa's suggestion to commemorate Coriolanus for deeds before his treason and exile is simply put aside.<sup>22</sup> This addition to the original play highlights, both, the tragedy of Rome that is prevented, and the victory of the people, but also it is a stand against the uniqueness of Coriolanus and his supposed irreplaceability. Politically, and narratively, the equality of the people is far more important than the exceptional individual.

Shakespeare certainly gave voice to the plebeians, but he still described them as cowardly, untrustworthy, opportunistic and easy to manipulate. Through the words of Coriolanus, who swears and humiliates the plebeians, Shakespeare characterized them as a monstrous mob lacking any self-control. Brecht's plebeians, on the other hand, are honest, active and truly responsible for Rome's fate. They express themselves clearly and their mouths produce, not a stinking breath as Coriolanus often accuses them, but insights, demands, and eventually, political decisions. In fact, it is Coriolanus the patrician who is not good enough at public speech because his pride guides him to view the art of war as superior to any other. He does not recognize the plebs as his equals, and for that, he is punished. Coriolanus is rude, irrational, unstable and motivated only by his frequently changing impulses and desires. The plebeians compare him to an animal and claim that he is subjected to his nature.<sup>23</sup> The play portrays him as somewhere between nature and culture, animal and man, aristocracy and plebness—without truly belonging

to one of them. The plebeians fear Coriolanus for clear reasons and the patricians, considering his “nature,” are recoiled by him. In short, the real “plebeian” stereotype in the play is Coriolanus himself! His “plebeian” nature can also explain the difficulty to feel empathy for his tragedy, and maybe even his lack of popularity as a Shakespearian hero.

While in Brecht’s version of the play the plebs appear as strong and independent political subjects, they are people who can represent themselves without ‘noble’ mediation. In the reality of where Brecht’s ensemble rehearsed for the show, things were quite different. On June 16, 1953, a short-lived uprising broke out in East-Germany, led by workers from East Berlin. The workers were trying to fight an increase in production quotas, which meant a direct assault on their working conditions. Strikes and demonstrations quickly spread all over the country and becoming outright political, demanding the government’s resignation. It took only a few days for soviet army units assisted by German policemen and soldiers to brutally crush the mutiny.

The striking workers addressed Brecht, who was considered a friend to the common people, and asked him to express their demands in words. Brecht hesitated and took his time. It was only after his reaction was already irrelevant that he wrote a public letter to Walter Ulbricht—East Germany’s leader, calling for a dialogue between the government and the workers. The official press quoted only the last sentence of the letter in which Brecht confirmed his trust in the socialist party.<sup>24</sup>

Günter Grass harshly criticized Brecht for his lack of action in this situation, and in 1966 he wrote about the affair in a play called *The Plebeians Rehearse the Uprising: A German Tragedy*.<sup>25</sup> Grass’ protagonist was a theatre director known as ‘The Boss’ who is trying to present Shakespeare’s Coriolanus in Berlin. There is an obvious analogy between ‘The Boss’ and Brecht. The play takes place on June 17, 1953, and the rehearsals are constantly interrupted by clashes between demonstrators and soviet soldiers. The workers ask ‘The Boss’ to write them a letter of support, and he agrees on the condition that he would be able to interview and record them so he can know them better. He invites his actors to come and see the revolting workers, who are the real ‘plebeians,’ so that they can play their part more authentically.<sup>26</sup> The parallel between Coriolanus, ‘The Boss’ and Brecht himself (and, therefore, also a more general type of left-winged intellectual), is not perfect, but many motives from the original play appear here too—the contempt for the plebs,

the fable of the belly and the limbs, and even the protagonist's silence at the end of the play—unlike Coriolanus, 'The Boss' keeps on living but he is stricken by hiccups that prevent him from speaking. The play ends with 'The Boss' acknowledging his failure, and retiring from the theatre.

## PLEBNESS AS A CONTINUED EFFORT IN SPEECH

Going back to evaluating the actions of the plebs and their relation to equality, we need to ask what exactly is the quality that distinguishes their appearances in the various versions of the play, and what motivates their actions. Or, in other words, what did the plebs achieve with Brecht that they failed to do in Grass' version? It is clear that the Roman plebeians were not only after wheat, and the East German workers' did not merely aspire to leave production quotas as they were. If so, what consists the equality for which they struggled?

Besides the demand for improvement in material conditions (food, work, etc.) there were also political demands, and I suggest that the key to them is to be found in the use of language, which is a main issue in all versions of the play. Both the plebs and the German workers asked to learn from the noble and the intellectual, respectively, the art of using words in order to fulfill their goals. In other words, they wished to learn how to make their words sound like those of intelligent beings and create a state of equality through language. The tragedy of the protagonists in both versions is that they failed a test, which is hardly ever introduced to people from their class—they had to demonstrate their ability of speech. 'The Boss' failed to find the right words for his actor-workers and Coriolanus refused to change his military-style language so it could fit politics.

There is a famous quote attributed to Brecht that, I believe, expresses his belief in the human ability for change and renewal. When speaking about the question of adapting Shakespeare's plays he asked "are we permitted to change Shakespeare?," answering that "We may, if we are able to."<sup>27</sup> I suggest the question of an ability to 'change Shakespeare' should be understood in a much wider sense, and to regard general limitations that apply to language and the ability to poetically represent ideas and social reality. Brecht admitted that changing Shakespeare is hard but he also stated that it is possible, and by doing so he announces that words can deliver even what seems to be impossible for articulation and transference. He sided with the plebeians and their fight for the use of language. His plebeians have managed to keep, both, Rome and their own well-being at peace because they believed that

language can serve *them* well, and not only the aristocracy. They further assumed that words are valid—Coriolanus’ words represent his stance, the tribunes represent the people and a decision in the senate does lead eventually to the construction of a bridge. Perhaps the plebs let down their improvised weapons in the first scene, not just out of fear from Coriolanus, but because in the struggle between the word and the war-scar, it was the former who eventually had the upper hand. That being the case, we can see plebness—the plebeians’ quality—as closely connected to public speech and political articulation, and as a continuing effort to remove external limitations over the use of words.

## GLUCKSMANN AND THE SILENCE OF THE PLEBS

The relation of the plebs with speech appears also in a completely different historical and political context. In the 1960s and 1970s, a heated argument among the French Left took place around *the gulag question*—that is, the question of the relations between the soviet concentration camps and Marxist theory and practice. In the midst of this debate, the ‘new’ philosopher André Glucksmann charged the term ‘pleb’ with new political meaning.<sup>28</sup> His goal was to offer an alternative for Marxist politics and to replace the older figure of the proletarian, as the carrier of the revolution, with the old-new figure of the plebeian, as the essence of rebellion.

Paradoxically, Glucksmann’s plebeian is strong due to its absolute lack of political power. His resistance, completely absent of hope, carried an aura of transcendence that arouses empathy and motivates change. Dews suggests that for Glucksmann, because the plebeian’s situation is unique, there is specific knowledge only he can acquire. He is no longer part of the poor, worthless and unorganized *lumpenproletariat*, as often regarded in Marxist tradition, but one who has access to immediate knowledge, which springs from a reality of suffering and resistance.<sup>29</sup> In short, Glucksmann announced that the plebeians’ point of view was that of the truth, and that their resistance is the right political choice.<sup>30</sup>

But, if so, then what political actions can the plebs commit? Are they restricted to mere resistance, and what precisely is its meaning? The problem is that although he enjoys immediate access to knowledge, Glucksmann’s plebeian cannot create political organizations and structures at all, since these would involve him in power relations, and his impulse to resist would not remain pure and natural. Practically, the plebeian as an authentic essence of rebellion is neutralized; once he enters the realm of politics, he changes and loses his power.

Rancière claims that Glucksmann created a discourse based on “the silence of the masses, on their plaintive and pathetic cry,”<sup>31</sup> and by confirming the authority of his own discourse through the suffering of those who are far away, he made sure that he is not contradicted by those for whom he speaks. Glucksmann’s plebeians are not supposed to demand, and for their silence they are valued by the intellectual. Rancière even suggested that the western-leftist critique of communist Russia was not caused by (late) awareness to the atrocities caused by the Soviets but rather by the surprising encounter between intellectuals and workers during the events of May 1968. The ‘people’ that were imagined by the French intellectuals were quite different from the actual people they met. In other words, it was much easier speaking for the oppressed Russian plebeian than deal with tensions arising from a conversation with French workers—that is, from hearing an actual ‘pleb’ who is present, speaking and demanding.<sup>32</sup>

### FOUCAULT’S ‘PLEBEIAN ASPECT’ AS RESISTANCE

Foucault also referred to the concept of the plebs, and although supporting Glucksmann’s initial position, his pleb was still quite different; one that is better understood as a general feature and not a specific human type or determined social group. Like Glucksmann, Foucault views the pleb as the ultimate victim of the gulag, and criticizes Marxist theoreticians for regarding him as one who’s (class-) consciousness is not ‘developed’ enough, and therefore his words as a political agent are meaningless. According to Foucault, the plebeians should be heard, not in order for their speech to be analyzed, but because their voice delivers ‘facts.’ In his laudatory review of Glucksmann’s book, entitled “*The Great Rage of Facts*,” he stated that the testimony of the plebs is what enables the intellectual to know the facts themselves, and that this is a source of the plebeian’s power.<sup>33</sup> Up to this point Foucault agrees with Glucksmann, but in another place he raises another question which dramatically changes the concept and presents a new way to think about the plebeian – as a general feature and not a specific human being or a social group. In a 1977 interview Foucault gave to *Révoltes logiques*, a journal founded and edited by Rancière, among others, he asked what is the nature of “the existence of the plebs, the permanent, ever silent target for the apparatuses of power.”<sup>34</sup> And he asked further,

What enables people there, on the spot, to resist the gulag, what makes it intolerable for them, and what can give the people of the anti-gulag the courage to stand up and die in order to be able to utter a word or a poem?

... What is it that sustains them, what gives them their energy, what is the force at work in their resistance, what makes them stand and fight?<sup>35</sup>

For Foucault, the intellectual's will or ability to listen to the plebeians is much less important than the thing which is "in their bodies, their energy, what they say, think and do."<sup>36</sup> He was also cautious not to identify the plebs with a particular group of people, and asserted that,

No doubt it would be mistaken to conceive the plebs as the permanent ground of history, the final objective of all subjections, the ever smouldering centre of all revolts. The plebs is no doubt not a real sociological entity.<sup>37</sup>

Here Foucault had already diverted from Glucksmann's approach, and he maintained this distance by defining plebness as a general feature with a unique relation to power:

... There is indeed always something in the social body, in classes, groups and individuals themselves which in some sense escapes relations of power, something which is by no means a more or less docile or reactive primal matter, but rather a centrifugal movement, an inverse energy, a discharge. There is certainly no such thing as 'the' plebs; rather there is, as it were, a certain plebeian quality or aspect. There is plebs in bodies, in souls, in individuals, in the proletariat, in the bourgeoisie, but everywhere in a diversity of forms and extensions, of energies and irreducibilities. This measure of plebs is not so much what stands outside relations of power as their limit, their under-side, their counter-stroke, that which responds to every advance of power by a movement of disengagement.<sup>38</sup>

Further, he noticed that 'plebness' can be reduced by effectively subjecting it, utilizing it or stabilizing it as a 'strategy of resistance,' since it marks the limits of power it is essential for every analysis of a political apparatus and should serve as the starting point for any understanding of their function and development. In conclusion, plebness, for Foucault, is an irreducible aspect of politics that is not detached from power relations but necessarily limits them.

Although Foucault does not explicitly consider plebness in thinking and speech, I think this precondition can be extracted from his words. He chose to speak of

people who are ready to die for a word or a poem, and he mentions resistance that appears in thinking, speech and action. Contrary to Glucksamnn, Foucault's plebeian is nothing but silent. We can define plebness, then, as an equal ability to think and speak that is neither conditioned by power nor totally subjected to it, and the existence of this equal capacity is exactly what Rancière is asking us to presuppose and to verify.

A word of caution is required here. It seems that to follow Foucault, looking instead at the plebs as a feature of class, the concept changes into nothing more (or nothing less) than a general abstraction, still yet another 'great' humanistic theme, similar to those that Foucault had so strongly opposed. It looks like the specificity of the plebs is lost again, replaced by a general form of resistance detached of time and place. Therefore, a refinement of the concept is still necessary. First of all, it must be stated clearly that there is no general plebness, but only a situated one. That is to say, the plebs might exist only in specific conditions and environments, and further still, speaking about a generic plebness is meaningless and possibly misleading. Secondly, plebs should be better understood as an event and not as a stable essence. We can say that there are *moments of plebness* in a specific environment at a certain time, moments in which the plebs become visible, if only temporarily; moments when the people "write... 'a name in the sky': a place in the symbolic order to the community of speaking beings."<sup>39</sup>

In his later writing, Rancière moved further away from traditional Marxism, bringing in two other terms for this plebeian political potential that are both more accurate and less anachronistic. First, by devising a strict dichotomy between the philosopher on the one side and the *poor* on the other, he gave the term 'poor' a broader meaning than simply signifying those without money or other resources. In *The Philosopher and his Poor*, the poor are those who are considered as incapable of thinking, and therefore do not (or should not) participate in public life.<sup>40</sup> And later in *Disagreement*, Rancière reached an even more fitting term—*the part-of-no-part*.<sup>41</sup> The concept touches the core of exclusion by addressing the fact that this part of society—more than being a specific group, such as women, workers, blacks, etc.—are unheard, unseen, uncounted and unaccounted for. Like Coriolanus, they don't truly belong anywhere. Their contribution and belonging to the public discourse seems to be nonexistent and undermined.

Visibility, and sensual perception in general, is an important aspect to Rancière's understanding of the plebs. This is because the uncommon appearance of the

*part-with-no-part* (the poor, the plebs) is sensual and “politics is a question of what is seen and heard, and what can be said about it, [and] who has the possibility of seeing and talking.”<sup>42</sup> His political theory emphasizes this aesthetic dimension. Yet, I believe there is a certain aspect of this political exclusion that becomes too abstracted and lost in the transition from a pleb to a *part-with-no-part*. While the term ‘poor’ retains the tension between material scarcities and poverty in its common meaning and political capability, the paradoxical *part-with-no-part* seems to lose its association to materiality and productivity. Here is where plebness might prove to be a relevant concept, despite its archaic origin. Since it lies between the need for bread and the will for speech, and between the plebian as primarily a worker and being a political agent, it can prove useful in a world in which both work and political articulation are in question and rapidly changing.

## CONCLUSION: PLEBNESS AS ACTIVE EQUALITY

Plebness, and the productivity associated with it, suggests that equality should be understood as an active force, and not merely as a passive and receptive outcome of fair distribution. In his discussion of Rancièrian equality, Todd May distinguishes between the two, and states that,

the animating idea behind passive equality is that some form of equality is to be ensured by an institution for the sake of those whose equality is at stake. It is to be given or at least protected, rather than taken or enacted by the subjects of equality.<sup>43</sup>

Active equality, on the contrary, is about participation in its creation by practicing and exercising intellectual capacities. In other words, it is about achieving equality by actualizing it, and it has nothing to do with distributive justice.

This disconnection between the active enacting of equality and the question of unequal distribution is not free from difficulties. First, it seems as if the concept of active equality almost totally disregards the material conditions in which the celebrated intellectual abilities are activated; as if the plebeians suffering from shortage of bread is a mere background for their political aspirations. Perhaps because he wishes to reject any causal inference between the inequality of material conditions and the inequality of intellectual capacities, Rancièrè does not have any formal discussion of the connections between these two inequalities. Due to his fear of reducing equality to a simple result of progressive thought, physical

limitations on equality are hardly mentioned or theorized by him. In an interview he gave regarding the translation into Hindi of his first book—*Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream In Nineteenth-Century France*<sup>44</sup>—Rancière addressed the question of material inequality, and claimed that for the 19<sup>th</sup> century workers,

what was ironically possible was the improvement of the conditions of work and wages, but it was not enough. What they wanted was to become entirely human, with all the possibilities of a human being and not only having what is possible to do for workers.<sup>45</sup>

Although for Rancière, the two ‘impossibles’ are different, they are still connected with one another. Yet, this connection is not very clear. The only concrete example he gives concerns the worker’s sleep: “What was most materially and intellectually impossible for a worker is precisely not to sleep at night. This was entirely material and entirely intellectual at the same time. That was what made it important for me.”<sup>46</sup> This example is quite puzzling, and requires a longer discussion of Rancière’s book, but it does show that material conditions and physical limitations are both closely related to intellectual capacities, and are not directly determined by any distribution governmental authority. The difficulties and impossibilities the plebs faced in Rome, and the ones their successors face today, are material and intellectual and they are not fully determined by those in power.

Second problem with Rancière’s understanding of equality is that it is also not entirely clear what is expected to be the achievements of egalitarianism. If redistribution and constitutional changes are not considered essential to equality, then how what would a successful egalitarian politics look like? Rancière follows Foucault’s insistence on the importance of the present, his rejection of ‘great’ themes, as well as his rejection of freedom as a form of self-mastery. Rancière looks, therefore, at the internalization of ‘thoughts and practices of speech and of discourse,’ and specifically, at their critique and transformations. For him, “the discursive lines and material barriers separating the possible from the impossible, the permitted from the forbidden, the thinkable from the unimaginable,”<sup>47</sup> are subjected to a philosophical critique and emancipatory moves, which are not judged according to the ends they achieved, but only as ways of “transforming the forms of what is thinkable and possible in the present.”<sup>48</sup>

And, in Rancière’s view, this is exactly what the plebeians did, and this is therefore the reason for their importance. He does not suggest that thinking of the future

is meaningless, but asks us to change our questions regarding it. Instead of asking how long dominant organizations and ideologies will last or how should we redistribute resources and expenditures so that equality will finally arrive, we rather consider “who is capable of thinking the future?” and “which forms of the present are in themselves future-bearing?”<sup>49</sup> What is at stake is not the prevailing system’s stability, but the ways in which even transitory speech or a passing written phrase (‘a name in the sky’)—that is, enactments of plebness—are already glimpses of a future in which radical equality is a reality.

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## NOTES

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