

**paradoxes of equality-
jacques ranciere's politics
and nonhumans**

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There is a curious tension at the heart of Jacques Rancière's work. It concerns his conceptualization of equality. On the one hand, we are presented with equality in the sphere of human action, where equality is presupposed by the oppressed group, asserted and verified in a political action. On the other hand, there is equality in the realm of literature, where mute matter is deciphered and made to speak. This doubling of equality in Rancière—a human-centred equality in his early work on social movements and a matter-centred equality in his later work on literature—is thought-provoking because it captures the difficulty of thinking matter politically, in the same way as one would think proletarians politically. Rancière admits that

the equality found in literature is not ‘homologous with [equality] which brings about a political action’ but he does not provide much explanation on the precise difference between the two types of equality.¹ Is the only possible intuitive response that matter has no *logos*, hence it cannot presuppose equality, hence it cannot be a political subject? And is an ability to speak the defining point where the ontological equality of matter differs from the active equality of proletarians?

The tension between the two equalities sends ripples right across Rancière’s philosophy. It translates into a fundamental discrepancy between his ‘human politics’ and his ‘politics of literature’. Even though the definition of politics as aesthetics is the feature which connects the two, there is an internal contradiction in Rancière regarding the question of who is allowed to become a political subject. Rancière’s politics of literature challenges his human politics and, in this article, I would like to explore the implications of this challenge for thinking politics in the context of nonhumans. It is worth mentioning that several scholars and interlocutors have pinpointed, in brief, a potential affinity between Rancière’s ideas and those of neomaterialist and posthumanities scholars with regard to nonhumans.² However, Rancière flatly refuses any possible extension of political subjectivation to nonhumans or any inclusion of nonhumans into his concept of politics.³ Even though his reasons might be understandable, it seems that they stem from ideological commitments and his own biographical trajectory rather than from the internal logic of Rancière’s philosophy. Therefore, despite Rancière’s explicit reservations about the political potential of nonhumans, I wish to argue in this article that the unacknowledged doubling of his concept of politics has the potential for thinking nonhumans politically. Rancière relegates matter to a different sphere—that of literature—and there he engages with it politically. This is because he assumes that the conceptual framework that he uses to consider proletarians does not allow him to expand this thinking to include nonhumans as well. Yet, as I will show, this shift to a different way of knowing (i.e. literature) to include nonhumans in politics is problematic, contradictory, and perhaps even unnecessary. My key thesis is that Rancière’s human politics could actually tackle

the inclusion of nonhumans, *pace* Rancière. One could even risk a claim that it *needs* to do so, for his conceptualization of politics to remain internally coherent.

The article will demonstrate how Rancière sketches the contours of two different equalities, one in human politics and the other in literature, and how these equalities exponentially multiply and contradict each other. First, the article will focus on the diverse meanings and paradoxes of equality in Rancière's writing on human politics. Importantly, it will point out a paradox with regard to Rancière's interpretation of Aristotelian *logos*. Second, the article will demonstrate that Rancière's turn to literature to deal with a 'politics of matter', whilst understandable, was not strictly necessary, if we consider the parameters of his philosophical work. I will argue that, if we take his human politics to its logical conclusion, we have to include nonhumans too. I will also show how the internal tensions between various paradigms of equality can be productively explored for nonhumans and politics. The main claim of this article is that Rancière's philosophy, with its tacit assumptions and internal logic, can be made to think nonhuman politics without a detour into literature.

TWO EQUALITIES: POLITICS AND THE ARTS

Rancière places the concept of equality at the very heart of politics. He first engages with equality in a political context in his early writings on the proletariat and, in later years, he increasingly reflects on the question of equality in the arts. Equality guides his engagement with various objects of study—historical and contemporary events, art works, films, novels, poems—and allows him to propose a compelling link between aesthetics and politics. Yet, the more Rancière engages with aesthetic equality, the more complicated equality as a concept becomes: it multiplies its meanings and modes of operation in a way that seems, at times, incongruous. As he himself admits: 'The more I work on aesthetic equality, the more the relationship between aesthetic equality and political equality becomes problematic.'⁴ On the one hand, equality works as an 'empty' operator combining all objects of Rancière's analyses, a concept that spans the entirety of his work and

determines his approach to particular objects of study. This aspect can be traced back to Rancière's Althusserian legacy.⁵ On the other hand, equality is radically heterogeneous: it mutates considerably according to, and between, the changing environments and objects that Rancière analyses. It lacks stable foundations and is undetermined in its content. The tension between equality as a formal operator and, alternatively, as its circulation as a family resemblance, in its various guises and incarnations, allows us to pinpoint precisely the challenges of thinking politics and nonhumans together.

Rancière identifies at least two ways of thinking about equality. First, he considers it in the political realm in terms of the intellectual emancipation of the *sans part*, who assume their equality and verify it in practice. The *sans part* in Rancière's thinking are those who do not count, who have no part in the social order, such as the plebeians in Ancient Rome, the nineteenth-century proletariat, or women throughout history. Second, he considers equality in terms of an 'indifferentiation of a collective speech, a great anonymous voice' that is found in nineteenth-century literature and in the sciences (PAI 203). It is 'the idea that speech is everywhere, that there is speech written on things, some voice of reality itself which speaks better than any uttered word' (PAI 203). Rancière diagnoses a problem that fundamentally undercuts his initial definition of equality which was first developed for social movements, one which haunts his writing on equality in politics and art:

The obvious problem is that these two paradigms, these two ways of thinking the equality of the nameless, which are opposed in theory, keep mixing in practice, so that discourses of emancipation continually interweave the ability to speak demonstrated by anyone at all together with the silent power of the collective. (PAI 203)

As we can see, Rancière is aware of the contradictions between the different types of equality. He tries to come to terms with them in a productive way. This endeavour, however, is not always successful. In what follows, I will trace the consequences

of this conceptual hybridity in equality. However, the aim here is not simply to point out inconsistencies in Rancière's philosophy, but instead to reflect on how the identified paradoxes offer us ways to think about politics and nonhumans. In the next section, we will begin this work by briefly analysing three important paradoxes at the heart of equality in human politics that Rancière identifies which are constitutive of his concept of equality. I will point out a different, fourth, paradox—which Rancière does not identify but that follows from the internal logic of his conceptualization—and argue that this paradox challenges how Rancière conceives politics as an exclusively human affair. One could say that searching for productive paradoxes in historical situations make up Rancière's *method* in his early writing on social movements.⁶ This is because he always pinpoints the discrepancy between what the established order says and what it produces as a result of a distribution of social roles. Let us first start with political equality and its contradictions and then move on to its tensions within literature.

HUMAN POLITICS

For Rancière, 'Politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable' (DIS 37). His politics differs from traditional politics, understood as governance of people and resources, by its radical reorganization of how we perceive the world around us. Politics is a rupture in the status quo that reveals a new world and a new logic. The concept of equality is important for Rancière's politics in a number of ways, not least because it serves him as a kind of failsafe: the stipulation of equality's radical openness pre-empts, and proactively counteracts, any right-wing misappropriation of his politics. The main thrust is that equality is meant to foreclose any form of exclusion from politics based on an essence inherent to an entity, for instance, race or gender. Therefore, a complete rupture with the status quo is not sufficient as a definition of Rancière's politics; a continuous openness towards accommodating new beings as possible political subjects is also fundamental.

Rancière defines equality as a presupposition. This means that equality is not an

ontological foundation or a human predisposition but rather ‘a condition that only functions when it is put into action’ (PA 48), that means when it is verified by the ones who claim it. Equality is the very condition for entities to become political subjects. As such, however, equality is neither peculiar to politics nor political in itself (D 31): it ‘only generates politics when it is implemented in the specific form of a particular case of dissensus’ (PA 49). And it can take effect in situations that do not have anything political about them *per se*: for instance, when two people speaking to each other are able to understand what the other says (PA 48). This counts for Rancière as a basic case of equality because, without equality, it is impossible to transmit any knowledge nor have an order executed. What is more, Rancière identifies this phenomenon as a paradox and claims that it lies at the very foundation of social order. The paradox is that, even in an unequal society, the equality of those who have to follow orders is automatically assumed. This is because it is taken for granted that those who obey an order are able to understand what is being asked of them. As Rancière argues:

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. [...] In the final analysis, inequality is only possible through equality. (D 17)

This paradox is fundamental to Rancière’s thinking because it shows a double logic at the heart of social order and points to the inherent potential for dissensus in hierarchical societies.

The second paradox that we need to consider, and that Rancière points out, is to be found in the process of the verification of equality in historical contexts. Equality creates politics when it is enacted and verified. Something needs to happen, a sort of event—in Alain Badiou’s sense—for politics to emerge out of the egalitarian presupposition. Equality necessitates a clash between two worlds. Rancière traces with precision the historical instances in which such radical confrontations take

place. One example he gives is of the nineteenth-century French feminist and socialist Jeanne Derooin, who in 1849 presented herself as a candidate for legislative office, thereby becoming the first woman in France to stand in a national election. Had she won, Derooin would not have been permitted to take up the office due to her gender. Through the action of running for office, Derooin revealed a contradiction at the heart of ‘universal suffrage’, a right from which her sex was excluded. She showed that women were necessarily included in the category of French people, being equal before the law as they could be charged and sentenced for infractions, yet at the same time they were radically excluded by neither being allowed to vote nor take a seat in the parliament if elected (cf. D 41). A paradox like this shows a logical gap that points to social bias and sets the stage for a dispute (PIS 60). The gap is demonstrated well by a nonsensical question that Rancière provocatively formulates: ‘Do French women belong to the category of Frenchmen?’ (PIS 60). Such a paradox forces an identity out of the alleged obviousness of what is meant to be, for instance, a ‘woman’ and points towards a gap between the acknowledged part that she plays in the society (as a neutral, gender-less subject with full rights) and the instances where she has no part (*sans part*) due to her gender (like elections and political office) (D 36). Finding and analyzing such concrete historical moments of paradox is fundamental to Rancière’s method.

Finally, the third paradox that Rancière identifies at the heart of equality in human politics relates to the issue of scaling equality up. Equality is not an aim to be achieved but a dynamic: as a group, ‘[o]ne does not gather to realize equality. One realizes a certain type of equality by gathering’ (M 207).⁷ For Rancière, one should assume equality as a starting point for any collective or individual action and ‘work towards expanding it indefinitely.’⁸ Expansion of this kind means both keeping constantly open the scope of entities that could be included in politics and scaling up the operation of equality. Rancière claims that, even though equality is the founding presupposition of any community, it cannot be a principle of a society. This is because a continuous process of verification cannot be fixed in a social institution. It has to emerge on a case-by-case basis: ‘No matter how many

individuals become emancipated, society can never be emancipated. Equality may be the law of the community, but society inevitably remains in thrall to inequality' (SP 84). That is also the reason that a community of equals cannot coexist with a society built on inequality but, at the same time, one cannot exist without the other: 'They are as mutually exclusive in their principles as they are mutually reinforcing in their existence' (SP 84). For this reason, a 'community of equals is an insubstantial community of individuals engaged in the ongoing creation of equality' (SP 84) that presupposes and acts on equality but does not aim for it. It constantly creates equality but does not make it permanent by establishing institutional structures that would automatically reproduce it. In Rancière's philosophy, therefore, equality is 'fundamental and absent, current and untimely [*actuelle et intempestive*]' (AWPP 223). It is about a constant practice of verification that has to be re-enacted anew every time, but which can never operate according to a set of predefined rules.

The three paradoxes described above are constitutive of Rancière's concept of equality. They also account well for the dynamic of social movements in the past. Let us now turn to a further paradox of equality—one that Rancière does not consider himself—but which is nevertheless fundamental to the concept of equality in his human politics. The problem with this particular contradiction, I contend, is that, in contrast to the previous three paradoxes, it runs the risk of rendering Rancière's philosophy incongruous. Whereas the other paradoxes contributed constructively to Rancière's conceptualization of equality, and constituted, as it were, the building blocks upon which Rancière's conceptual edifice is constructed, the fourth paradox undermines, to some extent, the egalitarian gesture at the heart of his philosophy. What is at issue concerns those who possess *logos*.

As mentioned above, Rancière describes equality in human politics by looking at concrete historical examples of its verification and the dissensus that this verification produces. The secession of the plebeians at the Aventine Hill in the 5th century BC that Rancière describes in his *Disagreement* (1995/1999) serves as a paradigmatic example. The plebeians leave Rome for the Aventine Hill as a protest

against the concentration of power in the hands of higher-status patricians. What Rancière finds interesting in the story is that the plebeians presuppose their equality with the patricians in the negotiations. Before this moment, the plebeians were considered incapable of politics because they were considered as beings who were devoid of *logos*, that is, as entities who emitted noise rather than meaningful speech. As Rancière points out, this reasoning overlaps with Aristotle's famous distinction between humans and animals in *Politics*. Humans are animals capable of *logos* (reason, speech), while nonhuman animals are capable only of *phōnē* (mere voice), which is equivalent to noise. According to Aristotle's definition, only entities capable of *logos* can be truly political beings. Rancière identifies 'a primary contradiction' in the Aristotelian *logos* and this serves as one of the central arguments in his conceptualization of politics. As Rancière explains:

Man, said Aristotle, is political because he possesses speech, a capacity to place the just and the unjust in common, whereas all the animal has is a voice to signal pleasure and pain. *But the whole question, then, is to know who possesses speech and who merely possesses voice.* For all time, the refusal to consider certain categories of people as political beings has proceeded by means of a refusal to hear the words exiting their mouths as discourse. (AD 24, my emphasis)

Here Rancière identifies as the key problem of politics the question of who counts as a political subject. The fundamental conflict over political subjectivation refers to a disagreement about the basic assumptions made of an entity that is meant not only to understand but also to possess speech. Rancière picks up on this issue in the context of specific human beings that can be admitted into the realm of politics. He challenges Aristotle's categorization by pointing to the dissensual nature of *logos*. He shows how the category of human who, it would seem, is by definition capable of *logos*, is further restricted to a particular type of a human being, in this case a patrician. In contrast, plebeians are beings 'deprived of *logos*', they are 'nameless beings': 'The order that structures patrician domination recognizes no *logos* capable of being articulated by beings deprived of *logos*, no *speech* [*parole*] capable of being proffered by nameless beings, beings of no *ac/count* [*compte*]' (D

24). In this version of a world and its social order, plebeians are intelligible only as entities akin to beasts, rather than humans.

According to Rancière, a true political act on the plebeians' part is when they challenge the distribution of the sensible that does not recognize them as political beings. By distribution of the sensible (*partage du sensible*)—which in French means both a *division* and a *sharing*—Rancière understands a system of self-evident facts structuring the common world. It is a configuration of the perceptible world: a set of coordinates concerning whether and how particular entities are perceived, recognized, acknowledged, understood, and engaged with. In this historical context, plebeians challenge the distribution of the sensible when they behave as if they were equal to the patricians, even though they are not acknowledged as such. They do this by establishing another order, another distribution of the sensible, in which they do not act as enslaved people—in this situation, simply by building a camp and fighting—but as entities that share the same properties as the patricians and act as the patricians would in this situation. They constitute themselves not as 'warriors equal to other warriors but as speaking beings sharing the same properties as those who deny them these' (D 24). What they then do is to 'execute a series of speech acts that mimic those of the patricians [...] they delegate one of their number to go and consult *their* oracles; they give themselves representatives [...]. In a word, they conduct themselves like beings with names' (D 24). Owing to these acts, 'they find that they too, just like speaking beings, are endowed with speech that does not simply express want, suffering, or rage, but intelligence' (D 24-25). In this historical example, Rancière demonstrates how entities, who previously were considered incapable of *logos*, rupture the established distribution of the sensible. A situation is engendered in which such beings introduce themselves into the community, thereby radically changing its parameters. They stage an event in which equality is enacted: presupposed, demonstrated, and verified in a concrete case. The operation of politics is then 'to make the invisible visible, to give a name to the anonymous and to make words audible where only noise was perceptible before' (SP 85).

What matters here are the consequences of this polemical situation:

When oppressed groups set out to cope with a wrong, they may appeal to Man or Human Being. But the universality is not in those concepts; it is in the way of demonstrating the consequences that follow from this—from the worker being a citizen, the black being a human being, and so on. [...] The universality is not enclosed in *citizen* or *human being*: it is involved in the ‘what follows’, in its discursive and practical enactment. (PIS 60)

We should emphasize here that, for Rancière, equality and politics are not necessarily bound to specific categories such as human being, citizen, worker, or proletarian. Instead, they are deeply connected to the profound transformations that political entities bring about in the distribution of the sensible, the ‘what follows’. Equality and politics are about a new regime of intelligibility that the previously ‘invisibilized’ entities create. In reference to Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the Aristotelian distinction between political (*bios*) and non-political life (*zoe*), Rancière comments that ‘politics exists at precisely the point at which this division is put into question’ (DIS 214). Politics comes into being with the dissensus about who or what counts as a political subject: ‘The question of politics begins when the status of the subject able and ready to concern itself with the community becomes an issue’ (DIS 93). Rancière radically breaks with the idea that a specific disposition or set of capacities exist to enact politics: ‘Politics [...] has no proper place nor any natural subjects’ (DIS 39). Such a definition of politics potentially opens up the concept of a political subject to include a wide variety of entities:

A political subject is not a group of interests or of ideas, but the operator of a particular *dispositif* of subjectivation and litigation through which politics comes into existence. A political demonstration is therefore always of the moment and its subjects are always precarious. (DIS 39)

In this context, we could think about nonhumans as such ‘invisibilized’ entities and their categorical exclusion from politics.

As mentioned at the start of this article, when Rancière is asked directly whether nonhumans could be considered to be political subjects, he denies the possibility point blank. He proclaims, in response to a suggested affinity with some of Bruno Latour's ideas concerning nonhumans:

There is a decisive point of difference for me. Politics has always been defined in terms of a polemic about the human, about the distribution of human groups, the capacities they're acknowledged to have, about the capacity for speech they're granted. Politics for me has always played out around these questions: are these humans true humans, do they belong to humanity, or are they semi-human or falsely human? (ME 162)

What is striking in this passage is the presence of a certain double logic at work. Here, Rancière questions the limit imposed by Aristotle. He shows how at some points in history certain beings—plebeians, women, the enslaved, proletarians—were not recognized as possessing *logos* and hence did not count as fully human. This lack of *logos* excluded them from politics. Despite this contention, Rancière moves this limit slightly further. He claims, as in the citation above, that politics is restricted to humans *only* and not to Latour's nonhumans. This is because nonhumans do not have *logos* and so cannot be political beings. He phrases it in terms of an incapacity for 'self-declaration' (*autodéclaration*) (cf. M 162-164). Yet, as Rancière argues throughout his work, politics is *precisely* about a dissensual redistribution of who is capable of *logos* and who is capable of mere noise. As he himself asserts:

If there is someone you do not wish to recognise as a political being, you begin by not seeing him as the bearer of signs of politicity, by not understanding what he says, by not hearing what issues from his mouth as discourse. (DIS 38)

And yet, Rancière refuses to grant the capacity for politics to Latour's nonhumans. He draws a hard line between beings of *logos* (humans) and beings of no *logos*

(nonhumans). This is paradoxical if we consider that the main aim of Rancière's early philosophical investigations was to expose such categorical rejections from politics.

My claim is that what allows Rancière to make his argument work with regard to Aristotle's 'tainted' *logos* is a curious sleight of hand. It is one of temporality. Rancière is extremely attentive to the specific time and place in which politics emerges. His readings are polemical interventions in selected historical moments, where he sets up contradictions that bring to the fore the rare moments when politics happens (cf. AFR). What allows him to identify such moments is, most frequently, a distance in time that also implies a difference in distribution of the sensible. Rancière instantiates clashes between two distributions of the sensible in a concrete historical situation: for instance, the dissensus between patricians of Ancient Rome, who considered plebeians incapable of *logos*, and plebeians, who acted as if they were beings in possession of *logos*. Simultaneously, he tacitly stages a confrontation between the historical moment on the Aventine Hill and his own *here and now*. We could say that in Rancière there is always a form of triangulation at play, a third perspective that implicitly maps onto the two distributions of the sensible which he identifies in history. This third perspective is the distribution of the sensible that is tied to Rancière's, and our own, historical moment. In *our* twenty-first distribution of the sensible, we recognize that, even though in Ancient Rome plebeians were considered incapable of *logos*, and hence were equal to nonhumans and so beyond the realm of politics, they 'actually' possessed *logos*. I say 'actually' because, viewed from the perspective of our present distribution of the sensible, plebeians have *always already* been in the possession of *logos*. Yet the obviousness of plebeians as political subjects comes from our own present-day temporality. This is what allows Rancière to put forward the argument about Aristotle's tainted *logos* and deftly leverage it to make a valuable point about equality.

Yet, a significant problem arises if we want to think about the *sans part* from within our own twenty-first century temporality and are thus not in a position to

use this triangulation. How can we think about politics with regard to entities that are considered incapable of *logos* from within our own distribution of the sensible? This means not only 'semi-humans' or 'falsely humans' but also entities such as animals, plants, the environment, the planet, AI, etc.? What are the conditions of possibility to allow us to think that animals, plants, and other nonhumans possess *logos* as well? And to what extent does Rancière's contemporality with these types of nonhumans prevents him from recognizing that they could be political beings? Rancière's concept of politics is explicitly restricted to human beings and, in that sense, he only slightly shifts the limit that Aristotle initially imposed. He imposes it again with respect to 'our' twenty-first century nonhumans because they represent a certain excess that he is not able to incorporate into his human politics. The question of *logos* is the ultimate frontier that yet again marks the difference between humans and nonhumans. Even in Rancière, who questioned this exact point in Aristotle, *logos* is a trump card that is used as a minimal condition for an entity to count as a political being. Can we successfully navigate this question of *logos* with respect to nonhumans? In other words, how can we think about them as being capable of politics? It is necessary to note that the question is not so much about a limitless expansion of the category of the human to include all living beings. Such a homogenous set would be problematic in multiple ways. Nor is it about human essence or human identity, but rather the part nonhumans play in politics. Here we can see that, at the level of human politics, the excess of nonhumans is contained by Rancière's explicit rejection of these entities as political beings. This excluded group, however, invades Rancière's work on the politics of literature.

POLITICS IN LITERATURE

Let us now turn to literature. Strikingly, nonhumans as political entities reappear with full force and cause disarray in Rancière's conceptualization of equality and politics. Here, the paradox of equality is, however, of a different nature to the one evident in human politics, and Rancière is keenly aware of the ensuing problems. The contradiction comes from a constant tension between, at least, two

types of equality that Rancière develops through a close reading of nineteenth-century novels, particularly works by Honoré de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert. It is encapsulated by the phrase ‘mute speech’ or ‘mute *logos*’ (*la parole muette*), that is, a form of speech that is simultaneously silent and chatty (AU 32). Rancière focuses on the nineteenth-century novel because it allows him to theorize an aesthetic regime of art, and with it a specific politics of literature.

In brief, the aesthetic regime of art that was constituted in the nineteenth century, according to Rancière, radically breaks with the codified ways of expressing feeling and thinking in works of art, which was emblematic of the earlier, representative regime. The representative regime, Rancière argues, was characterized by a system of genres with a clear hierarchy of subjects and social functions, and which established formal conventions for literary works. In the aesthetic regime, there is neither a hierarchy of subjects—noble or vulgar—nor any separation between ‘important narrative episodes and accessory descriptive ones’ (AU 36). ‘Everything is on an equal footing, equally important, equally significant’ and every element bears ‘the signifying power of the entire work’ (AU 36). The aesthetic regime of art is ‘a way in which things themselves speak and are silent’ (FI 13). For Rancière, literature was first formed in the nineteenth century as part of the aesthetic regime, and this happened only by literature establishing ‘its own proper equality’ (PA 49). Literature asserted its radical difference in its vision and execution from previous works of art. It established its own rules and modes of operation. It demonstrated a radical openness towards those that could become the hero of a story (not only a prince but a farmer’s daughter) and towards the topics of a piece of art (a farmer’s daughter’s private life rather than the struggle for the throne). Rancière’s thesis is that, with this shift, the question of literary style became increasingly important.

What, then, does the paradoxical doubling of mute *logos* in literature precisely mean? Rancière identifies two meanings of mute speech: on the one hand, the deciphering of hieroglyphs written on the bodies of things and, on the other, the uncontrolled and unintelligible chatter of matter. Let us focus on the former first.

Mute speech as a ‘material hieroglyph’ is ‘an order of truth written on things themselves’ (PL 157). It is ‘the capacity to exhibit signs written on a body, the marks directly imprinted by its history, which are more truthful than any discourse proffered by a mouth’ (FI 13). This means that anything from a sewer, a building’s façade, or a glove ‘speaks more eloquently than any speech, because it isn’t trying to say anything, because it can’t lie, because it is the pure writing on things of their own specific history’ (PL 157). Rancière summarizes this capacity for signification, the fact that ‘everything speaks’, by reference to the ‘poet-mineralogist’ Novalis (AU 34, PM 185 n.11). Literature is a way of deciphering and rewriting a world where, as demonstrated in Novalis’s work, ‘[e]verything is trace, vestige, or fossil. Every sensible form, beginning from the stone to the shell, tells a story’ (AU 34). A novelist has therefore a function to fulfil not unlike that of a scientist: she makes matter speak. ‘The writer is the archaeologist or geologist who gets the mute witnesses of common history to speak’ (PL 15) and who explores the labyrinths of human and more-than-human worlds. As Rancière claims:

[I]n the age of archaeology, paleontology and philology, stones, too, speak. They don’t have voices like princes, generals or orators. But they only speak all the better as a result. They bear on their bodies the testimony of their history. And this testimony is more reliable than any speech offered by human mouth. It is the truth of things as opposed to the chatter and lies of orators. (PL 14)

The engineers of the Saint-Simonian utopia, in turn, by building and shaping matter around them, are capable of writing on the body of things. Through this ‘poetics of writing on the surface of things’, they undertake a specific ‘politics’ (PM 105). In the context of material writing on things, Rancière underlines his point by referring to the main female character of Balzac’s *Le curé de village* (*The Village Rector*) who decides to repent for her acts by transforming the landscape of her village. She says that her influence ‘is *written* [écrit] on those fertile fields, in the prosperous village, in the rivulets brought from the mountains to water the plain once barren and fruitless, now green and fertile’⁹. The decoding and

shaping of matter by writers, scientists, and engineers is both part of wrestling with mute matter and a form of specific politics that can be found in literature and the sciences. Both literature and the sciences operate like ‘a machine for making life talk’ (PL 14). There is a curious parallel between the novelist’s and the scientist’s task to ‘get lifeless debris to talk’ (PL 16). Both literature and the sciences are modes of truth-telling that allow us to engage with nonhumans in a way that gives them access to *logos*. The sciences, in particular, offer a means to make nonhumans talk in an ordered way. Rancière was highly skeptical of Latour’s nonhumans. And yet, this deep interconnection of matter and *logos* seems to be present *in nuce* in Rancière’s writing on literature. Indeed, this politics found in literature could be tentatively considered as a kind of ‘politics of matter’.

As Rancière himself points out, the flipside of ‘everything speaks’ is that ‘everything talks equally’ (PL 157) and so meaning is lost in the complete undifferentiation of matter. ‘No one thing talks more than any other thing’ (PL 157). Here, matter is at the same time uncontrollably noisy and stubbornly silent. It is noisy in the way that it produces only sounds of atoms:

The abundant difference of signs is [...] lost in the equal insignificance of states of things. The written sign turns into any old bit of garbage or into sheer difference in intensity—to the point where nothing more can be read except the indifferent vibration of atoms in their random variations. (PL 157)

At the same time, it is silent because it is incapable of adequately transferring signification (FI 14). With reference to Balzac and Flaubert, Rancière claims that ‘literature is this new regime of the art of writing in which the writer is anyone at all and the reader anyone at all. In this respect, the sentences of those novelists could be compared to mute stones’ (PL 12). This means that, by exiting the world of the hierarchized and ordered discourses of the representative regime in which the relationship between things and words was clear, and by entering the aesthetic regime, mute speech becomes a soliloquy, ‘speaking to no one and saying

nothing but the impersonal and unconscious conditions of speech itself' (AU 39). In his analysis of Flaubert and his writing style, Rancière notes in particular how style is 'the very rhythm of things dissolving, yielding to the lack of reason, their baselessness' (PL 158). And this dissolving can only be heard rather than seen:

The noise of the equal insignificance of all these words that compose one and the same piece of music. The word written everywhere is answered by the word that no longer says anything, that no longer transmits anything but the rhythm of things without rhyme or reason. The journey of literary hermeneutics is this trajectory that takes the hieroglyphics of sense to the noise of non-sense. (PL 158)

As we can see here, there is a tension between mute speech that needs to be 'restored to a linguistic signification' by the work of decoding and 'the voiceless speech of a nameless power' that is inherent in all matter, that all matter screams (AU 41). The struggle between 'the word written everywhere' and 'the word that no longer says anything' (PL 158), between 'the hieroglyphics of sense' and 'the noise of non-sense' (PL 158) comes, for Rancière, from the same principle of a 'disjunction between meaning and intention'. Whereas in the representative regime there was one expression of will with one addressee, literature in the aesthetic regime disrupts the connection between words and actions. 'The essential word then becomes the word that doesn't *intend* to say anything, the mute word, manifested in the very flesh of the real or picked up in the indifference of its noise' (PL 158). With the aesthetic regime, command over meaning ceases: 'it is the will's descent into the underworld' (PL 159). Literature in the nineteenth century becomes a new ordering (cf. PL 153), a new structure of rationality and, we could also say, a new *mode* of operation. Rancière points to a sort of excess that literature emphasizes, which, in turn, points to an excess in things and an excess in people. This excess, however, 'has nothing to do with the many but with a splitting of the count. It consists in introducing another count that spoils the fit between bodies and meanings' (PL 41). It is these excessive entities that constantly defy a certain distribution of the sensible. A politics of literature is a politics of things

that do not fit, the excess of matter that invades and changes the way matter itself is experienced and described, by *'telling all, telling in excess'* (PL 38). As we can see, nonhumans acting as initiators of a new distribution of the sensible are much more present in Rancière's writing when he analyses literature. Nonhumans are acknowledged as the very tissue of politics, as entities that orient, or perhaps even determine, the structures of rationality and whose significance is recognized far more clearly than in Rancière's human politics.

As Rancière admits, political and aesthetic equality are not equivalent (PA 49). Literary equality is 'a certain way in which equality can function that can tend to distance it from any form of political equality' (PA 49). He gives the example of Flaubert and shows how several kinds of equality are at play in his work: the 'molecular equality of affects' that Flaubert instantiates with his writing style and which stands in direct opposition to 'the molar equality of subjects constructing a democratic political scene' (PA 52). The two are, in turn, not the same as a 'universal exchangeability of commodities' or equality as a lifestyle (PA 50). These equalities, instead of being analogous to each other, are in a constant conflict within a literary work and outside of it (cf. PA 51): 'equality of style aims at revealing an immanent equality, a passive equality of all things that stand in obvious contrast with the political subjectivization of equality in all its forms' (PA 49). The wild proliferation of equalities in Rancière's later work, mainly catalyzed by his writing on literature, is striking. On the one hand, we have a concept of equality which, to begin with, was relatively well defined as a localized case of dissensus in social movements. On the other hand, we end up with an extremely broad, almost all-inclusive and constantly paradoxical collection of various operations in literature. We can see how the nonhumans of literary equality invade and challenge Rancière's thinking on political equality. Equality in literature becomes so expansive in its scope, so paradoxical and diverse, that it seems barely to have anything to do with equality as we know it, and especially with Rancière's political equality. One could even claim that there is only a nominal connection between all these equalities. The problems inherent in thinking politics with nonhumans are inadvertently captured here, in

the problems that Rancière encounters with these different forms of equality.

What is more, it seems difficult to engage with such a hybrid concept of equality in any meaningful way on the level of concrete political practice. Rancière is aware of this problem and that might be one of the reasons that he rejects the inclusion of nonhumans in his human politics. However, I wish to argue that the problem, perhaps, has little to do with a radical opening towards nonhumans in politics. Instead, the key challenge revolves around the formulation of concrete theoretical tools to integrate nonhuman entities in a meaningful way into familiar political practices. Equality does not seem to be the most fruitful way to think about nonhumans politically. The question to be posed, then, is whether speaking in terms of *modes* in this context—and more precisely in terms of *modes of existence*—would be a more apt way to appreciate the different forms in which literature, politics and the sciences operate. Here we could name such thinkers of modes as Etienne Souriau, Gilbert Simondon and, more recently in this context, Bruno Latour and his *Inquiry into Modes of Existence* (2012/2013).¹⁰ Perhaps the task is less about forcing a link based on equality between all these different spheres in which equality is perceptible but, instead, about considering these spheres as coherent systems with their own ways of establishing truths and verifying their claims. As a result, we would avoid ending up with a myriad of equalities that are unproductively contradictory, paradoxical and conflictual, but, instead, we would talk about a term, such as equality, in a specific system such as literature, politics, or economics, and consider it from within its own mode of operation. This would mean that we would not necessarily try to reach a meta-level of bringing all of these different equalities together. Instead, there would be a new question—that of *translation* between different modes—and how we could move and communicate between them.

Pursuing a *modal* understanding of equality might offer promising theoretical prospects. This could be compatible with Rancière's work to the extent that he speaks about distributions of the sensible as types of worlds, types of logic that operate according to their own internal rules. Politics is then a way of creating

a new world within an old one, generating a new political subject that does not have a part in the old distribution of the sensible. Even though Rancière does not properly develop *modes*, apart from speaking about ‘modes of subjectivation’ in his works, this approach could accommodate the paradoxes of equality in different spheres and would allow us to take his concept of politics further. After all, a vital aspect in both Rancière’s politics of literature and his human politics is not necessarily the question of who the agent of political action is—in a way, who the hero of the story is—but rather how a new structure of rationality emerges together with a litigious *sans part* and how this rationality concretely operates.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I traced the tensions between different paradigms of equality that can be found in Rancière’s work. I argued that, despite Rancière’s powerful reading of Aristotle in favour of unintelligible entities, we can nevertheless see that in his human politics it is entities who, in a way, *always already had logos*—if considered from within *our* contemporary distribution of the sensible—that have been granted *logos* in his framework. Rancière never questions the strict distinction between beings of *logos* and beings of no *logos* in contemporary society, in contrast to the rigour with which he conducts his historical analyses. This points to a problematic hard line that Rancière erects between beings of *logos* (exclusively humans) and beings of no *logos* (all nonhumans). Rancière’s shortcomings on this front open up a space for reflection on entities that are considered incapable of *logos* from within *our* twenty-first century distribution of the sensible, compelling us to recognize our unexamined biases in terms of who or what we consider to be capable of political subjectivation. The incorporation of nonhumans in Rancière’s politics means taking his politics to its logical conclusion: allowing the category of the political subject to remain open towards new entities, ‘newcomers’ that still lack a name in our distribution of the sensible. That is also why, despite his flat rejection of this possibility, Rancière’s philosophy is both compatible with, and even necessitates, the accommodation of nonhumans in human politics.

One may ask, why insist upon the inclusion of nonhumans in Rancière's conceptualization of politics if Rancière himself is explicitly opposed to it? Notwithstanding its limitations, Rancière's conceptualization of politics is valuable: it allows us to theorize on a structural level political subjects that have not yet emerged. It gives us tools to identify, and to measure the effects of, the political intervention of entities in a given distribution of the sensible. Importantly, it is a radical left-wing form of politics. And this left-wing vision of politics needs to be developed further as the Left still lacks an appropriate conceptualization of the challenges that we face today as a result of technological and environmental developments.¹¹ In one of his articles, Rancière poses an important question: 'How are we to reinvent politics?' (PIS 64). One way to do this would be, perhaps, to open up Rancière's politics to include nonhumans.¹²

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NOTES

1. 'Le triomphe du roman comme genre littéraire par excellence est le triomphe de cette égalité qui n'est pas pour autant homologue à celle que met en jeu l'action politique' (TP 562, my translation). Rancière's works are abbreviated in the following way: AD—*Aesthetics and its Discontents* (Jacques Rancière. *Aesthetics and its Discontents*. Trans. Steven Corcoran. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009); AFR— 'A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière' (Jacques Rancière. 'A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière'. *Parallax* 15.3 (2009): 114-123); AU—*Aesthetic Unconscious* (Jacques Rancière. *The Aesthetic Unconscious*. Trans. Debra Keats and James Swenson. Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2010); AWPP—'Afterword to the English-language edition' (Jacques Rancière. 'Afterword to the English-language edition (2002)' in Jacques Rancière. *The Philosopher and His Poor*. Ed. Andrew Parker. Trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster and Andrew Parker. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003, 219-227); BF—*Bords de la fiction* (Jacques Rancière. *Les Bords de la fiction*. Paris: Seuil, 2017); D—*Disagreement* (Jacques Rancière. *Disagreement. Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. Julie Rose. London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); DIS—*Dissensus* (Jacques Rancière. *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. Ed. and Trans. Steve Corcoran. London and New York: Continuum, 2010); FI—*Future of the Image* (Jacques Rancière. *The Future of the Image*. Trans. Gregory Elliott. London and New York: Verso, 2007); LP—*Le Philosophe et ses pauvres* (Jacques Rancière. *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres*. Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2007); M—*La Méthode de l'égalité* (Jacques Rancière. *La Méthode de l'égalité. Entretien avec Laurent Jeanpierre et Dork Zabunyan*. Montrouge: Bayard Editions, 2012); ME—*Method of Equality* (Jacques Rancière. *The Method of Equality: Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan*. Trans. Julie Rose. Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2016); MS—*Méthode de la scène* (Jacques Rancière and Adnen Jdey. *La Méthode de la scène*. Paris: Lignes, 2018); PA—*Politics of Aesthetics* (Jacques Rancière. *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Ed. and Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013); PAI—'Politics and Aesthetics: An Interview' (Jacques Rancière. 'Politics and Aesthetics: An Interview', *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 8.2 (2003): 191-211); PIS—'Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization' (Jacques Rancière. 'Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization', *October*, Vol. 61, The Identity in Question (Summer, 1992), pp. 58-64); PL—*Politics of Literature* (Jacques Rancière. *The Politics of Literature*. Trans. Julie Rose. Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2011); PM—*Mute Speech* (Jacques Rancière. *Mute Speech*. Trans. James Swenson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); SP—*On the Shores of Politics* (Jacques Rancière. *On the Shores of Politics*. Trans. Liz Heron, Verso: London and New York, 2007); TP—*Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués* (Jacques Rancière. *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués. Entretiens*. Paris : Editions Amsterdam, 2009).
2. See Arne De Boever. 'The Politics of Realism in Rancière and Houellebecq.' *Rancière and Literature*. Eds. Grace Hellyer and Julian Murphet. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016, 243-4; Jane Bennett. 2010. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010, 105-8.
3. See Rancière's negative answer to Jane Bennett's question whether nonhumans can be considered as political subjects (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 106) and also in an interview (M 282-85).
4. '[P]lus je travaille dessus [l'égalité esthétique], plus le rapport entre égalité esthétique et égalité politique devient problématique' (MS 138, my translation).
5. For this interpretation see Jean-Philippe Deranty. 'Between Honneth and Rancière: Problems and Potentials of a Contemporary Critical Theory of Society' in Jacques Rancière and Axel Honneth. *Recognition or Disagreement. A Critical Encounter on the Politics of Freedom, Equality and Identity*.

- Eds. Katia Genel and Jean-Philippe Deranty. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, 67.
6. On Rancière's 'method' see AFR.
 7. '[L]'égalité [est] une dynamique et non un but. On ne se rassemble pas pour réaliser l'égalité, on réalise un certain type d'égalité en s'assemblant' (M 207, my translation).
 8. 'Qui part de l'inégalité est sûr de la retrouver à l'arrivée. Il faut partir de l'égalité, partir de ce minimum d'égalité sans lequel aucun savoir ne se transmet, aucun commandement ne s'exécute, et travailler à l'élargir indéfiniment' (LP xi, my translation).
 9. Honoré de Balzac. *The Village Rector*. Trans. Katharine Prescott Wormeley. Ed. John Bickers et al. Project Gutenberg Ebook, 2016, 617, my emphasis.
 10. See Etienne Souriau. *The Different Modes of Existence*. Trans. Erik Beranek and Tim Howles. Minneapolis, MN: Univocal, 2015; Gilbert Simondon. *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. Trans. Cécile Malaspina and John Rogove. Minneapolis: Univocal Publishing, 2017; Bruno Latour. *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013
 11. See, notably, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams. *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*. London: Verso, 2016.
 12. The present article elucidates in depth the theoretical paradigm utilized in my article 'Who Can Speak? Rancière, Latour and the Question of Articulation.' *Humanities* 9.4 (2020): 123. For reasons of space, such material could not be fully explored in the previous publication.