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Book Review

Jacques Rancière, *Uncertain Times*[1]

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In the Preface of his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel writes: "each individual is any case a child of his time; thus philosophy, too, is its own time comprehended in thoughts."[2] At any rate, what are we to think of today's times and how can we—as its children (and practitioners of philosophy)—comprehend it? Furthermore, once grasped by thought, what are we to do? These are some of the questions one might consider when engaging with Jacques Rancière's newest book *Uncertain Times*. In this text, he provides (un)timely interventions spread across fifteen essays and speeches written between 2010 to 2022. Throughout, Rancière gives his analyses on various matters ranging from racism, populism, the COVID-19 pandemic, and politics. Far from being simply opinion pieces on the political state of the world, Rancière's book is enriched with its use of the conceptual tools found in his œuvre. With the book's structure and its commentary on contemporary events through the lens of Rancièrian concepts, one could claim that it is an accessible text for those who wish to acquaint themselves with its author's works.

The book's discussions are divided into two parts. The first part titled "The Violence of Consensus" dwells on the current state of affairs. The title of the text comes into full force when Rancière reframes questions on racism, populism, and the pandemic, particularly in the context of Western liberal governments. Here, Rancière challenges our presuppositions on who the perpetrators of racism are, what populism actually is, and how medical action during the pandemic was decided. So-called "liberal" governments which present themselves to be against the conservative right are no different from them, as these governments also institutionalize racist and anti-immigrant policies (e.g., The Islamic veil law and the expulsion of Roma people). These policies are enacted and justified by liberals in order to supposedly curb

[1] trans. by Andrew Brown (New Jersey: Polity Press, 2024), 166pp.

[2] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. by Allen W. Wood, trans. by H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 21.

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disorder among minority groups that become the fuel of far-right rhetoric.[3] These discriminatory laws are introduced under the pretext of equality, asserting that everyone must conform to their supposed universality. Yet, paradoxically, those who do not conform to these universals are unequal and are not deemed worthy to be considered part of society.[4] Meanwhile, Rancière further brings the reader to the realm of uncertainty by reassessing what the term "populism" actually entails. In recent years, figures such as Trump, Bolsonaro, and Duterte have been regarded as populists and threats to democracy. Populism, according to its classic definition, is:

> a style of interlocution that addresses the people directly, independently of their representatives and notables; the affirmation that governments and ruling elites care about their own interests more than public affairs; and an identity-based rhetoric that expresses a fear and rejection of foreigners.[5]

For Rancière, however, populism is "elusive." The reduction of populism to its supposedly three essential characteristics is problematic insofar as the three features are not inherently linked to one another. For one, "the people" is not pre-given, but is constructed; "What exists," Rancière maintains "are diverse, even antagonistic figures of the people, figures constructed by highlighting certain modes of assembly, certain distinctive traits, certain capacities or incapacities."[6] Hence, populists and "the people" it supposedly finds its power in are simply one of many peoples. On the other hand, Rancière also argues that populist figures will never affirm the idea of governments and ruling elites only caring for their interests.[7] To bring Rancière's ideas closer to home, was not Duterte's brand of leadership marked by the motto "*Tapang at malasakit*" (courage and care)? Such a motto does not allude to self-interest, but rather an interest for the welfare of the masses. The third essential feature of populism, racism, bears an important part in the construction of the people of populism. The critics of populism accuse the people of being inherently irrational, always tending toward xenophobia and racism.[8] Yet, as discussed by Rancière, the actual source of racism is not found within the people, but rather in liberal governments. The decoupling of the essential features listed is a decisive move that affects our

[3] Rancière, *Uncertain Times*, 4.
[4] *Ibid.*
[5] *Ibid.*, 12.
[6] *Ibid.*, 13.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Ibid.*

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very understanding of democracy and populism. Political commentators, especially from the Center and Left, criticize populism in the name of defending democracy. Paradoxically, this critique of populism produces an anti-democratic effect. The idea of an "ignorant mass" prone to being hoodwinked by charismatic authoritarians justifies for the need for a "rational leader" to whom the ignorant masses must submit.[9]

The striking contentions of Rancière would find further lucidity in his analysis of how governments responded to the recent COVID-19 pandemic. The anti-democratic effect of the pandemic was the obedience to science and the State. The irrational many must be dependent on the rational few whose responses and policies are based on science.[10] However, we must qualify Rancière's statements on science. Rancière's critique might appear similar to anti-lockdown protesters back in 2020 claiming the virus was a hoax, but what Rancière wants us to cast our doubt upon is not medical science per se, but rather economic science as the basis for the pandemic response.[11] I see that Rancière's apprehensiveness with what regards itself to be "scientific" is an apprehensiveness toward those institutions that claim scientific authority in determining and regulating the actions of people, and not as an apprehensiveness with scientific disciplines. The monopolization of knowledge, if we may recall from Rancière's earlier work, leads to stultification[12] by rendering individuals incapable, therefore having no right in participating in the construction of the common world. This was precisely one of the reasons why Rancière has distanced himself from Louis Althusser since the events of May 1968. It was Althusser's Leninist approach which became anti-democratic, believing that spontaneous action was "unscientific" and ideological. One's position relative to knowledge becomes the basis of inequality and an obstacle to democracy. Whether it is in the context of the pandemic or of political action, the problem Rancière sees is science qualifying itself to be the sole arbiter of a set of practices warranted by its adherence to "objectivity." This is how he defines "consensus," as a certain way of affirming the objectivity of reality necessitating a certain course of action with no alternative. Moreover, consensus is a source for the anti-democratic policies of a state; it is because we have no other recourse to solve racism, populism, and the pandemic that we must put all our trust in one institution and blindly follow its orders because reality cannot be otherwise and it forces us into this moment.

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[9] See *Ibid.*, 15.

[10] See *Ibid.*, 49.

[11] *Ibid.*, 63.

[12] See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. by Kristin Ross (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 1–18.

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From inequality and consensus, the second part, titled "Moments of Democracy" moves toward how we may imagine and constitute a democratic reality. Fittingly, the second part begins with the notion of "event." In contrast to consensus and the status quo, an event "appears as the unexpected occurrence that upsets the order of expectations."[13] Similar to Alain Badiou's,[14] Rancière's idea of an event is that which allows novelty and separation from the current state of affairs. It is therefore an event, like that of May 1968, which allows us to find something new and different from the present. May 1968 defies the "sociological mode of interpretation." We have to note how Rancière uses the word "sociology." Sociology in this context is not simply a discipline, but rather, a way of defining society within a certain set of quasi-natural laws allowing it to remain cohesive.[15] May 1968 was an event since 1) it disrupted the normal flow of things marked by the occupations of universities and factories and 2) it did not follow the interpretation of Marxism, highlighting an objective evolution of society with its final phase being led by the working class and its Party; instead, at the forefront of the struggle were students and non-PCF aligned groups. These were exactly "moments of democracy" for they questioned hierarchies on who is supposed to lead society and make revolutions happen.[16]

Events (in the Rancièrian sense) are a source of politics (also in a Rancièrian sense). Politics, as defined by Rancière elsewhere and in the book is characterized by a "displacement of social identities" wherein social actors disidentify themselves from conformity to the present distribution of the sensible.[17] Disidentification allows political subjects to emerge. Rancière's take on political subjectivity is unique because while he agrees with his contemporaries that a subject does not exist as a given, he also insists that a subject bases itself in activity rather than passitivity. The Rancièrian notions of politics and subjectivity are more relevant in today's context, especially in how political commentators from all across the spectrum understand activity and freedom. Although the majority thinks of democracy as having the

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[13] Rancière, *Uncertain Times*, 70.

[14] Badiou defines his own notion of event as a "rupture" with the present. He writes: "A truth is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order. I have named this type of rupture which opens up truths 'the event'." See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005), xii.

[15] Rancière, *Uncertain Times*, 72.

[16] Rancière further elaborates the PCF position as seen in Althusser's 1964 article "Student Problems." The latter criticized students of the Sorbonne who were asserting that they should also have a place in the administration of the university. Althusser maintained that students are not on equal footing with their professors and that such mentality is an anathema to science. See Louis Althusser, "Student Problems," in *Radical Philosophy*, 170, (Nov/Dec 2011): 11–15 and Rancière, *Uncertain Times*, 74.

[17] See Rancière, *Uncertain Times*, 78–79.

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freedom to choose, the valid Rancièrian response to this is in a form of a question: do the choices that we make challenge the hierarchies we encounter and reorganize the distribution of the sensible?[18] This critical question adds another layer to our conceptual understanding of democratic politics, different from liberal and traditional Marxist models. The underpinnings of societal change in Rancière's politics are its use of space and time in constructing social reality. What makes politics possible is how political actors intervene through occupation of space and creating a temporality of their own, different from that of the existing order. The unique use of space and reclaiming of time have become hallmarks of important anti-capitalist struggles in the 20th and 21st centuries in the form of May 1968 and the Occupy movement of the 2000s and 2010s. The primary relevance of these movements was its method of protest which was occupation rather than a march. In both cases of May 1968 and the Occupy movement, they were successfully able to reconfigure the use of space and therefore also alter the "mode of visibility of the common."[19] The occupation of space allowed for a disruption of the normal flow of life. The Philippines has had this kind of moment, too. The case of the 1971 Diliman Commune is another clear example of how a space was used in a different manner from what it was originally assigned. From a site of knowledge production as a university campus, the University of the Philippines became a bastion of resistance against the Marcos regime, albeit for a short span of time. A common thread among the three is their ephemerality. None of them lasted longer than three months. As Rancière points out, an event's ephemerality is always seen as a weakness, particularly from an orthodox Marxist standpoint which favors "long-term" strategies. However, far from being a weakness, a movement's ephemerality is its strength for it is through this transience that ruptures within the normal flow of time are created.[20] This move of "politicizing" time is present not just in this book, but in many others written by Rancière. His use of temporality in politics is essential in understanding his emancipatory project as it further brings our imaginaries to new terrains. A tendency in sociopolitical philosophy is to ignore how one's actions and social identity are determined by time. Thus, it prevents us from questioning the status of our freedom in the present time. Are we only capable of changing our reality in times of elections? If this is so, then we must reexamine our definitions of democracy, since we are constrained by time. Perhaps this is one of Rancière's most valuable lessons to liberal democratic states constantly threatened by the far-right. There is a danger in waiting. The idealization of

[18] See Rancière, *Uncertain Times,* 132.
[19] *Ibid.,* 91–92.
[20] *Ibid.,* 80–81.

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electoral politics as the only avenue for change constrains us to the status quo and its own time. Obviously, this has had its major consequences here and abroad. The constraints of time and electoral politics disallows people to completely challenge political threats such as fascism. Should we desire to challenge the political status quo, we must seek routes other than elections, and Rancière's discussion on the relevance of temporality offers us a critical perspective. To think of change, one must not simply wait for the "right time" as the right time we may be anticipating is the time of those in power.

I chose to highlight temporality last for the reason that it is a theme which undergirds the entirety of the book. For most scholars, it is common practice to arrange a book or a compilation of essays chronologically. The peculiar arrangement found in this book, however, shows an organization that lacks temporal structure and hierarchy. This is perhaps where the uniqueness of the book is found as it in itself practices the democracy Rancière professes. A chronological sequencing of chapters in this book based on publication date may entail that an older essay can no longer keep up with a more current one in terms of social commentary, but as the text shows, even essays describing the events of the 1960s can still exercise political force not merely through memory. The methods of equality exercised in the Sorbonne during the merry months of May are not dead relics from a past nor images of nostalgia for the disgruntled leftist, but an active component of more recent protest movements such as Occupy. Furthermore, such method of sequencing presents an active opposition to a type of thinking that presents the past as a dead, accomplished set of facts. As Walter Benjamin argues, "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history."[21] It is this living past and its effective presence in the present that also contribute to the uncertainty of our times, apart from the fact that the lines which we thought were clear-cut are in fact actually blurred. This imparts an important reminder to us: nothing is certain and nothing is set in stone. Rancière makes readers find more questions just as much as they think they could locate answers. On one hand, Rancière does provide timely insights; on the other, they are untimely as they open up to us new ways to imagine life, different from our times. This is why I described Rancière's reflections as "(un)timely." My enclosure of the prefix "un-" within parentheses represents my own *uncertainty* in giving a description of the author's interventions.

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[21] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 254.

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