



RANCIÈRE AND THE CRISIS IN THE CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURE

REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

This review seeks to contextualize the perception that the thinker Jacques Rancière has about the contemporary political structure and the concept of democracy. The text is careful to present the author's criticism of current democracies and the way governments demonstrate and defend their structures. The French thinker is emphatic in stating that the responsibility for the removal of entities from the public environment is the result of an action by the governments themselves, which, in order to have greater freedom, encourage the masses to live only on the pursuit of the individual and private, an action the one that would generate what Rancière calls hatred of democracy.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière, Democracy, Contemporary Politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

This text aims to discuss the perspective of the philosopher Jacques Rancière on the political structure, the way that Rancière describes the political act and the democratic action[2], in a way that they can be empirically and ontologically confused. A highlight is how the author will criticize the contemporary structure of politics, in which governments are the biggest encouragers of individual action and the distancing of the entity from the public environment (RANCIÈRE, 2014). In this way, modern states, marked by democratic campaigns, maintain their oligarchic power structure hidden amidst a false image of democracy. Rancière proposes a recovery of the concept of



democracy in conjunction with overcoming the negative meaning of the concept of populism in defense of the individual among the public. The recovery of the essence of politics is the method of confronting the crisis of the contemporary democratic structure.

2. DEVELOPMENT

At first, it is essential to understand that Rancière relates politics, or the political act, with democracy. In the words of the author himself: “[...] Politics is the activity whose principle is equality, and the principle of equality is transformed into the distribution of the parts of a community in the manner of an embarrassment [...]” (RANCIÈRE, 1996).

In Rancière, democracy is nothing more than the pure expression of political action, it is in the act of giving voice to the voiceless, or the part of the “without-part”. The foundation of politics, therefore, is found in the conflict between these individual spheres in the public environment, in their social dispute. It is important to understand that, when talking about the relationship between politics and democracy, in Rancière, it is possible that ontological confusion occurs between the two, an idea that the thinker does not support, quite the contrary, the relationship between the political structure and politics itself comes from causality, does not give ontological relationship between concepts. Democracy is the effect of the political act, not its *arché* (ARDITI, 2019), it is the space of interaction between social subjects. The author will identify politics as the possibility of speaking and claiming one's part in the social environment (RANCIÈRE, 2001).

Rancière bases his thinking on the perspective that society is a great theatrical spectacle, in which men participate by interpreting social roles. Each individual has their pre-established function based on their “name”, as Rancière says:

Isso se deve simplesmente ao fato de que as partes não existem anteriormente à declaração do dano. O proletariado não tem, antes do dano que seu nome expõe, nenhuma existência como parte real da sociedade. Assim, o dano que ele expõe não poderia ser regulado sob a forma de um acordo entre partes. Ele não pode ser regulado porque os sujeitos que o dano político põe em jogo não são entidades às quais ocorreria



acidentalmente esse ou aquele dano, mas sujeitos, cuja própria existência é o modo de manifestação desse dano. (RANCIÈRE., 1996, p. 53).

When speaking of aesthetics in politics, Rancière does not aim at an “aestheticization of politics”, but rather a re-signification of the relationship between aesthetics and politics. One would see the action of politics based on dissent, however, not in a conflict of values or interests, but of “competing worlds” (RANCIÈRE, 2011). What is interesting from the perspective of the French thinker is that these “competing worlds” can be understood as spaces or parts, thus characterizing a dispute that seeks recognition by those who do not have it, being bound by the obligation of social nominalism.

When thinking about the figure of a butcher or postman, actors who would fulfill their function within their work environments, in the name of each one, one also finds their theatrical essence and social role. The point that draws attention is when the author speaks of politics as a separate stage, which allows men to participate in the social environment beyond their own name, or function. It would be in politics the opportunity for entities to get rid of their “name” and play another role[3] or fight for recognition on stage. Thinking about the postman, who previously had the right to speak about what represented his role, now, on the political stage, he can also speak for another. Someone who does not have a specific function can speak about and even take a position in the political environment. In this way, politics is characterized as an act, not an environment. According to the aforementioned author:

Existe política porque aqueles que não têm direito de ser contados como seres falantes conseguem ser contados, e instituem uma comunidade pelo fato de colocarem em comum o dano que nada mais é que o próprio enfrentamento, a contradição de dois mundos alojados num só: o mundo em que estão e aquele em que não estão, o mundo onde há algo “entre” eles e aqueles que não os conhecem como seres falantes e contáveis e o mundo onde não há nada. (RANCIÈRE, 1996, p. 40-41, grifo nosso).

Democracy is positive when it is related to political action, characterized as the cause of the second, however, it is negative when it leaves the action and becomes an



environment in which there is no more struggle or dissent. Rancière concludes that politics is the constant dispute between the parties:

Uma greve não é política quando exige reformas em vez de melhorias ou quando ataca as relações de autoridade em vez da insuficiência dos salários. Ela o é quando reconfigura as relações que determinam o local de trabalho em sua relação com a comunidade. O lar pôde se tornar um lugar político, não pelo simples fato de que nele se exercem relações de poder, mas porque se viu arguido no interior de um litígio sobre a capacidade das mulheres à comunidade (RANCIÈRE, 1996, p. 46).

From this litigation, or social dispute, comes political action. It is important to highlight that it is not only the act itself that gains the quality of politics, but also the subsequent impact that will come from it. Rancière highlights the example of workers' strikes (RANCIÈRE, 2012), in which the characteristic of a political act is not found in the protest for changes, but when they affect the configuration established as "normal" (RANCIÈRE, 2011). The act is political when it interferes with the other's view of the speaker, making him understood, not just heard. It is common to see acts of protest that end up not resulting in the required changes. Thinking from Rancière's perspective, this failure occurs due to the fact that the one who heard the demands did not understand what the other said, even though both spoke the same language. Think of it this way: a group of workers from an automotive parts company goes on strike because their working conditions are precarious, but the owner of the company thinks that it is ideal for the job and does not comply with the demands. What happened is that the businessman listened to their complaints, however, he did not understand the reasons for which they were complaining. Their voices sounded like the barking of a pack before the owner, while the latter is not worried, as he already feeds them daily. Politics is to make oneself recognized and understood by the other[4]. Another interesting example to think about would be the "silent protest" during the struggle for rights in the United States, when black people, who suffered segregation, were prohibited from sitting in places reserved for whites, such as seats on buses or in restaurants. To reaffirm their equality and demand its recognition, the demonstrators positioned themselves in order to occupy these spaces, sitting in the places that were intended for whites. In this way, black activists showed themselves to be equal in capacity, demanding to be recognized in this way.



The perspective of social litigation as the basis of the political act is a vision shared by Mouffe and Rancière. Mouffe keeps alive the discussion about how the democratic political structure should be based on the dispute between the parts of the social milieu. The author refers to the contemporary view, which believes that a healthy society is one that has extinguished all types of antagonism. This point is also severely criticized by Rancière, for imposing a homogeneous society. The author proposes that a society must carry within itself dissent, or “agonistic pluralism”. According to the thinker:

Tal privilegio ao consenso é, na minha visão, prejudicial à democracia porque tende a silenciar vozes dissidentes, e é por isso que acredito que uma abordagem que revele a impossibilidade de estabelecer um consenso sem exclusão é de fundamental importância para a política democrática. (MOUFFE, 2003, p.19).

The author demonstrates her similarity with Rancière by agreeing that democracy requires that there be social litigation in its midst, otherwise, it cannot be seen as a structure that promotes the equality of social parties, because, in this way, any government that it is not founded on this quest, it cannot claim to be the bearer of democracy. Within this perspective, Rancière's criticism of contemporary states and the flaws in “democracies” will come, which have become objects of hatred in the social environment (RANCIÈRE, 2014). Rancière writes how current governments have lost the right to be called democracies, stating that current political reality is imposed by oligarchic governments. In the author's words:

A ‘sociedade democrática’ é apenas uma pintura fantasiosa, destinada a sustentar tal ou tal princípio do bom governo. As sociedades, tanto no presente quanto no passado, são organizadas pelo jogo das oligarquias. E não existe o governo democrático propriamente dito. Os governos se exercem sempre da minoria sobre a maioria. (RANCIÈRE, 2014, p.68).

We no longer live in the face of democracy, so acclaimed by the Greeks and by the moderns, we have returned to living under an oligarchic structure of power, in which few hold power over the majority. The conclusion reached by Rancière leads to a question: how did this change occur without being noticed? The thinker himself will respond to this, by stating that it is the governments themselves that have brought about this change in the social perspective, with the strong incentive of private life and



the distancing from the public environment. To occupy individuals' time is to take their political freedom (RANCIÈRE, 2021). For contemporary government structures, having the individual concerned with the public environment is disadvantageous, as it will disrupt oligarchic action, thus, it is necessary for the entity to distance himself from the public environment, implying a negative characteristic in him (RANCIÈRE, 2014). The centralization of public power in a few hands and the abandonment of public interest in favor of the private sector alone is the crisis faced by contemporary democracies. The public and popular becomes invasive while the private and individual is protected. In Rancière's words:

Populismo é o nome cômodo com que se dissimula a contradição entre legitimidade popular e científica, a dificuldade do governo da ciência para aceitar as manifestações da democracia e mesmo a forma mista do sistema representativo. Esse nome máscara e ao mesmo tempo revela a grande aspiração da oligarquia: governar sem povo, isto é, sem divisão do povo: governo sem política. (RANCIÈRE, 2014, pp.100-101).

The oligarchic structures of power seek to govern without the interference of the people, therefore, they need to keep them away from the public environment. The means found for this is to encourage negative thinking about the idea of populism or popular. This perception of the popular as a corruption of democracy was already seen in Tocqueville's texts (MAGALHÃES, 2000). When asking someone about populism, it is customary to hear "this is a dictatorship of the majority". The concept of popular and public has become an enemy to be fought, as it aims to destroy private life. Mouffe will also talk about the negative perception that the concept of popular gained with the advent of contemporary democratic structures:

A atual apatia com a política que testemunhamos em muitas sociedades democráticas liberais origina-se, na minha visão, do fato de que o papel desempenhado pela esfera pública política está se tornando cada vez mais irrelevante. Com a evidente hegemonia do neoliberalismo, a política foi substituída pela ética e pela moralidade, e o leitmotiv é a necessidade do consenso, de valores familiares e de 'boas causas'. (MOUFFE, 2003, p.17).

It is believed to be possible to understand, at this moment, that the way that the oligarchic governments chose to remain stabilized in power is nothing more than defending a policy without politics, disguising themselves under the mantle of noble



values and causes. A state that has abandoned the political act loses its democratic characteristic, as it eliminates the possibility of parties without parties participating in the political environment, and, consequently, disrupts the very concept of democracy. Increasingly, contemporary States distance man from the public environment, from equality, creating the illusion that only the private sector is the defender of the individual, encouraging unbridled consumption in hypermarkets, the production of personalized items, so that there is a search for individualism. It is interesting to observe that individuals end up becoming equal in the search to differentiate themselves, while fearing being equal. More and more, these states distance man from the political act, transforming the idea of politics into an environment. It is from this point that Rancière's criticism comes, it is not enough to live in a "political environment" if you do not practice the political act (RANCIÈRE, 1996).

The apathy of contemporary man towards the policy defended by governments is what provokes the "hatred of democracy":

Em certo sentido, portanto o novo ódio à democracia é apenas uma das formas da confusão que afeta o termo. Ele duplica a confusão consensual, fazendo da palavra 'democracia' um operador ideológico que despolitiza as questões da vida pública para transformá-la em 'fenômenos de sociedade', ao mesmo tempo que nega as formas de dominação que estruturam a sociedade. Ele mascara a dominação das oligarquias estatais identificando a democracia com uma forma de sociedade e a das oligarquias econômicas assimilando seu império aos apetites dos 'indivíduos democráticos' (RANCIÈRE, 2014, pp.116-117).

The structure of a society based on dissent led Rancière to the conclusion that politics cannot be based on the simple social division of functions, as is perceived through his nominalism referring to the concept of politics and the "names" resulting from the social division (BOSTEELS, 2009). In this way, the political act became more restricted and direct, even rarely occurring (RANCIÈRE, 1996), a fact that put the French thinker under various criticisms. If politics were established in a totally objective way, only the act of giving a voice to the voiceless would be forgetting the other components that occupy society.



Analyzing Rancière's structure, it is possible to identify three distinct groups: those who own a large share, those who own a small share, and those who have no share. In this way, the political act lies in the claim of this third group, but if this is the case, what happens to the other groups? Is it possible to affirm this point as the flaw of Rancière's political perspective? We believe not, as such a statement would be a simplification of the entire structure established by the thinker. Taking the concept that politics is the elevation of one group over the other is a criticism that Rancière himself carries out. In this way, it is necessary to understand that politics is a space that gives the opportunity for any group to act in order to be recognized, with social restructuring being a consequence of this act. Thus, it becomes possible to observe more closely the relationship between politics and aesthetics.

Rancière argues that the point of difference between human beings and animals is the rational act, *logos*, which allows understanding between the parties, this is the starting point of the thinker's political discussion. In relation to rationality, there is the sensible, or the sharing of the sensible (RANCIÈRE, 2009), a characteristic that is common to all men. In this sharing, there is the possibility of actions being understood by entities, aesthetics takes advantage of this fact and communicates directly with the sensitive. Politics is space, space is *aesthetic* and *aesthetic* is politics.

3. CONCLUSION

This concludes the way in which Rancière observes the crisis of contemporary politics with the hatred of democracy. Rancière writes that contemporary government structures, which claim to be democratic, are in reality oligarchic, the rule of the few over the many. In this way, the author emphasizes the danger that is found in the removal of the individual from the public environment. When talking about contemporary democracy, one instantly thinks of the representative method, when the people elect an entity to represent their will in the political environment, however, the representative act also demonstrates distancing, as people do not believe they have another need for social manifestation as long as there is someone to represent them. The removal of public entities, encouraged by contemporary governments to reduce, or even annul, the possibility of the masses expressing their dissatisfaction with the



oligarchic structure, hidden by the democratic image, is the crisis of contemporary governments that Rancière wants to expose through his construction.

The thinker is clear in stating that the distance from the public in favor of total individualism conditions the being to the end of politics, that is, to the end of the possibility of a space for participation and social dispute between the parts of society. The entity ends up forgetting that it is also a social being, believing that politics is someone else's responsibility, that public things are inferior and that democracy is a tyranny of the majority. In this view, populism becomes an evil to be fought. The removal of social actors from the public environment in defense of a homogeneous society, without dissent, would condition the States to totalitarian and dominant structures of power based on the consensus of the *ethos*, and those who did not share this dissent would be considered an enemy. In this way, governments would lead their people towards hatred of democracy and the end of politics itself.

The crisis in which Rancière establishes on contemporary democratic structures is a perspective of a tragic end, doomed to collapse and total oligarchic domination, encouraged by governments themselves, which have identified that the method to possess freedom of action is to remove other entities from the political means. However, the author does not want to present only a negative view on the path of politics, but to demonstrate that through its recognition it is possible to draw a positive line, based on a resumption of the concept of democracy and politics, together with the encouragement of the participation of peoples in the public environment. Recovery through the desire for participation and respect for the public environment is the main means of combating such a crisis.

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APPENDIX - REFERENCE FOOTNOTE

2. Rancière is an avid reader of the Greek classics, Plato and Aristotle. Through direct contact with the political philosophy of the Greeks, the contemporary thinker wants to carry out a reinterpretation of the concept of current democracy. Thinking about its original meaning and the way it was applied in the social environment, Rancière performs a rereading of contemporary democracy.

3. "There are only subjects, or, better, modes of political subjectivation, in the set of relationships that the we and its name maintain with the set of "people", the complete set of identities and alterities implied in the demonstration, and of the worlds, common or separate, in which they define themselves. (RANCIÈRE, 1996, p. 73)



4. Rancière is inspired by the Aristotelian vision, which speaks of the difference between the phone and logos. In the author's speech: “[...] but, in turn, the false continuity from the useful to the just comes to denounce the false evidence of the opposition so incisive that it separates men adopted from logos from animals limited solely to the instruments of the voice (phone). The voice, says Aristotle, is an instrument destined for a limited purpose. It serves animals in general to indicate (semainein) the sensation they have of pain and pleasure. [...]” (RANCIÈRE, 1996, p.35). Pure sound is an animalistic remnant of man, a characteristic he shares with other animals, since his rational capacity is his main differential. The author continues: “There is politics because the logos is never simply the word, because it is always indissolubly the account that is made of these words: the account by which a sound emission is heard as a word, capable of enunciating what is right, while another it is only perceived as noise that designates pleasure or pain, consent or revolt.” (RANCIÈRE, 1996, p.36). Speaking and being heard is different from speaking and being understood, the latter is what is sought when speaking of the recognition of men and their identification in the midst of the social stage. Social disputes are struggles for understanding.

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