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Rethinking 'Consensus' as a Justification for Claims of Oppression

Abstract: This paper critically examines the role of consensus as a justification for claims of oppression in Rachelle 'Dara' Bascara's standpoint epistemology of oppression. It reads Bascara's emphasis on agreement among epistemically privileged groups alongside Jacques Rancière's critique of consensus democracy. Bascara emphasizes agreement among epistemically privileged groups as a marker for legitimizing claims of oppression. However, while consensus can highlight shared experiences, it risks marginalizing dissenting voices and non-discursive expressions of oppression. Drawing on Rancière's concept of dissensus, I argue that disagreement and non-discursive gestures are crucial for revealing the miscount of marginalized voices in political and social spaces. Disagreement interrogates consensus-based approaches for claims of oppression which could possibly exclude those unable to articulate their oppression within dominant frameworks. By incorporating Rancière's idea of dissensus, the paper proposes a broader approach to Bascara's theory, recognizing affective, performative, and otherwise non-discursive expressions of oppression as essential to pursuing justice, equality, and the full acknowledgment of marginalized experiences.

Introduction

In her work 'Towards a unified theory of oppression', Bascara developed an 'epistemology of oppression'.[1] According to her perspective, a claim of oppression can only be deemed justified if it satisfies two conditions. Firstly, the claim must originate from an epistemically privileged social location. Secondly, there must be consensus among individuals in similar social positions regarding the alleged wrong or injustice. This consensus can be either actual or, approximated by imagining hypothetical deliberation among the epistemically privileged (Bascara, 2020: 170). I will focus my discussion on the second condition that Bascara's argument above stipulates. The emphasis on consensus among individuals in similar social positions for justifying a claim of oppression is noteworthy in this second condition. It highlights the importance of shared experiences and perspectives in understanding and addressing issues of injustice. Most importantly, it emphasizes the agential dimension of the recognition of one's oppression. However, I make the claim that although consensus among

1 It is a privilege to engage with the work of a feminist Filipina philosopher, whose life and intellectual contributions were a testament to philosophical praxis. I extend my gratitude to the editors for coordinating this special issue dedicated to shedding light on Dara's impactful work.

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those who experience injustice is necessary in the recognition of oppression, we should be wary of how consensus can be problematic and still respond to the requirement of objectivity in making claims of oppression. Moreover, consensus is dependent on a discursive gesture of 'speaking' in agreement with others. With this turn to consensus as a condition for the self-emancipation of the oppressed, there remains the tendency to persist at an abstract, objective level of identifying oppression. Such an approach can be neglectful of unique experiences of injustice that cannot be articulated discursively as well as forms of disagreement or dissensus that demonstrate self-emancipatory capacities of the oppressed.

My analysis draws from Jacques Rancière's discussion of consensus democracy specifically its tendency to undermine visibility and silence voices of dissent.[2] I provide examples from real political attempts to practice this model of democracy and highlight the negative implications that I have identified above. Responding to Bascara's nuanced definition of consensus as hypothetical intersubjective agreement under certain idealized conditions, I offer Rancière's compelling critique of consensus democracy to highlight consensus' flaws as a condition for the recognition of oppression. My reading of Rancière, which is focused on political subjectivity and specifically the embodied subject (Demandante, 2019), argues that disagreement/dissensus should be considered in an epistemology of oppression to account for the non-discursive, non-articulatable dimensions of oppression.[3] This move aims to refine Bascara's unified theory of oppression by incorporating the nuances of consensus and emphasizing disagreement/dissensus as equally important in identifying oppression.

Rancière and Politics

In *On the Shores of Politics*, Rancière (1995) characterizes the contemporary political landscape as one in which politics is no longer oriented toward fostering collective energies but has become preoccupied with preventing internal conflict

2 For Rancière, consensus becomes problematic when it is institutionalized as a mode of governance, what he calls consensus democracy. In this form, consensus is not merely agreement but a political logic that determines in advance who counts as a political subject, frames disagreements as technical problems to be managed rather than as political disputes, and eliminates dissensus, which Rancière understands as the very condition of politics. His critique therefore targets the depoliticizing effects of consensus when it functions as a governing principle. Consensus democracy replaces politics with administration, expertise, and management, rendering existing distributions of power natural or inevitable. Although Rancière does not reject consensus as such, his critique has direct implications for how consensus operates politically, as I elaborate in the discussion below.

3 I suggest a reading of Rancière that is focused on the 'experiences' of the subject of politics. This alternative reading proposes that underneath the famous model presented in *Disagreement*, which is premised on a formal theory of the subject and the principle of the equality of intelligence, there lies a thick layer of subjective experiences. This is a reading of Rancière's work that has not received substantial attention among critics.

by appealing to unity. Rancière's interest lies in the strange relationship between the assertion of the global triumph of consensual and peaceful democracy, and those new forms of violence that accompanied it. Consensual democracy, while seemingly successful in overthrowing authoritarian regimes through championing a specific definition of liberty that uses the language of rights and inclusion, with its emphasis on unity has allowed for new paradoxes of exclusion to emerge as well as disguising old ones.

Disagreement, Rancière's major work on political theory, centers on an observable problem in the politics of our time: the lack of correspondence between the name 'democracy' and its practice. He focuses on the widespread definition of politics as consensus democracy – a political regime that, as Rancière argues, collapses politics into the police order by turning democratic life into a managerial project aimed at preserving social harmony, eliminating dissensus, and recasting disagreement as noise to be absorbed or suppressed. In *Disagreement*, Rancière describes consensus as 'the reduction of politics to the police,' a process that neutralizes the conflict at the heart of democracy by denying 'the part of those who have no part'. Here, Rancière also allots a chapter to Habermas's linguistic pragmatic method, which offers an alternative notion of political speech grounded in the 'rationality of disagreement'. Contrary to Habermas,[4] who assumes that political rationality relies upon the a priori possibility of consensus inscribed in the logic of speech acts, Rancière (1999: 43) argues that 'political rationality is only thinkable precisely on the condition that it be freed from the alternative in which a certain rationalism would like to keep it reined in'. In politics, which depends on a dual understanding of speech – both as *logos*, the capacity to participate in rational discussion, and as an account of one's own speech – the question of who counts as a legitimate speaker is central. Disagreement, understood broadly as a demand for recognition, is essential because it ensures that politics can include those who would otherwise be excluded. By contrast, consensus democracy works against this aim, since it privileges only the rational account of speech, thereby limiting who is recognized as a political actor.

Having provided an overview of Rancière's critique of consensus, the next section summarizes Bascara's use of consensus as a criterion of objectivity in her unified theory of oppression. This is significant in demonstrating where Rancière's critique of consensus and argument for disagreement/dissensus

4 Habermas' communicative action centres on consensus as the goal of politics which could be achieved through communicative rationality. For secondary literature on the Habermas-Rancière connection, see Matheson Russel and Andrew Montin, 2015.

expands Bascara's unified theory of oppression.

Bascara's Intervention: Consensus as a Criterion of Objectivity

Rachelle 'Dara' Bascara develops a method of identifying oppression by integrating standpoint theory into a pragmatist epistemology and calls this approach a 'pragmatist standpoint epistemology' (Bascara, 2020: 167–168). The combined approach posits that justifiable beliefs about oppression must come from an epistemically privileged social location and must have consensus among those similarly situated. By seeking to avoid paternalistic coercion and to secure objectivity, the method risks reproducing the same conditions of oppression it aims to uncover.

Bascara further argues that two conditions must be met to identify oppression, 1.) The epistemic privilege criterion, which means that a claim of oppression can be justified only when it emanates from the consciousness of those subjected to unjust norms or social practices or victims of injustice, and 2.) The consensus criterion is when there are agreement and uptake from exactly others who are similarly socially positioned. Bascara calls this an 'intersubjective agreement' among the oppressed. This is a form of agreement among the oppressed that they were subjected to harm, not because of a shared identity but because of a shared vulnerability. If the two criteria are met, a belief in oppression is justified; otherwise, it is not.

The consensus criterion is important as it aims to balance against the pitfalls of both paternalistic imposition of objective interests and the neglect of subjective deformed desires. A critical part of Bascara's 'pragmatist standpoint epistemology' is consensus-based deliberation. As a process it is 'a modified collective version of relying on one ideal observer applied to the hypothetical democratic deliberation and inquiry among the epistemically privileged group of the oppressed' (Bascara, 2010: 169). This model utilizes consensus-based deliberation to establish that a belief about the group's interests is justifiable if it aligned with what the group would conclude after a well-informed process of inquiry and deliberation. Moreover, it ensures that the beliefs are grounded in the actual perspectives and consensus of those directly affected and there was a democratic process in identifying oppression by ensuring that everyone agrees about specific harms experienced.

How can the problematic logic of consensus described beforehand be reconciled with Bascara's criterion of consensus for a unified theory of oppression? To engage with this question, I will discuss the problem with consensus specifically when oppression cannot be articulated discursively, and those who experience it cannot participate in a process of deliberation.

The Displacement of Bodies within the Problematic Logic of Consensus

Consensus democracy broadly defined is a kind of democracy that emphasizes the importance of the politics of inclusion that prioritizes the participation of everyone. In practice, ideal-type consensus is supposed to be actualized through proportional elections, multiple parties representing minorities as well as majorities, broad alliances or power-sharing governments, and decentralization of power (Lijphart, 1984). It is often entangled with liberalism which claims to uphold the value of the law, rights, and the freedom of 'the individual'. Liberal democracy operates on the principle that we will all reap the rewards of freedom and individual rights if we arrive at an agreement on how the *polis*, or the government does its job of distributing lots to the people. Hence, consensus democracy along with liberal democracy capitalizes on the centrality of fixed procedures and universalized structures as a politics of agreement that works on maintaining order and harmony.

Furthermore, in a consensus democracy, an agreement is built based on the capacities of only those political subjects who are free, rational, and equal (Liiphart, 1984).[5] Central to the idea of consensus in Habermas' work is the importance of 'rational discourse' as the ideal speech situation wherein participants in discourse assume that all moves except the cooperative search for the truth are bracketed under conditions of perfect dialogical symmetry (Ingram, 2021: 60). Habermas' communicative action focuses on consensus as the goal of politics which could be achieved through communicative rationality (Habermas, 1996). The main aim of a consensus of democracy is to find common ground amidst pluralities existing in a particular society. Often this goal ends up in a call to unite to share political power. Consensus therefore goes against an existing split or is willing to cast aside this split in the social field for the goal of reaching an agreeable situation which would benefit those whose interests are at stake. In theory, consensus democracy draws its appeal from advancing democracy's goal of counting everyone. This materializes in real politics as moves towards enhanced diversity in political representation, equity in gender representation in politics and policy making, and advocacy for minority and

5 This is typical in the works of thinkers who belong to the social contract theory tradition, such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, wherein they argue that to leave the 'state of nature', it is best to enter a mutual agreement of cooperation between individuals who are free, equal, and rational. The roots of liberal and consensus democracy can be traced back to the social contract theory thinkers. However, as critics such as Mills (1997) and Pateman (1988) have shown, the social contract tradition systematically fully or partially excludes many groups, including women, colonized peoples, and the unpropertied.

underrepresented group rights.

Such strong motivation of conflict reduction however, often takes place at the expense of some who cannot be part of the consensus due to a form of otherness. For consensus democracy to function it ends up doing two kinds of exclusion, 1.) undermining the visibility of various forms of otherness that do not fit the category of recognized subjects and 2.) silencing voices of dissent which can potentially be emancipatory.

Consensus democracy undermines the visibility of various forms of otherness for the sake of reducing conflict. It is because of the congenial specular unity offered by consensus democracy that has allowed it to thrive as a form of governance suited to our time where citizens are exasperated of political disputes. As a model of democracy that is aimed at finding a common ground among dissenting pluralities, it has become the preferred form of democracy in many supposedly democratic countries.[6] However, inasmuch as consensus democracy presents itself to be the ideal political setup wherein there is a reasonable agreement between individuals and social groups that would allow both to negotiate and reach a situation wherein everyone's interest is considered, and wherein both could hope for a position that is preferable over conflict, the manner of avoiding conflict is also exclusionary of those who are not deemed as rational. For consensus democracy to be able to work, it needs to cancel out what is irrational, what is different, and that which could not be included in the count because of the absence of an identity that can be incorporated into the unity that is being established. Consensus democracy is dependent on a social ontology of who should be counted as subjects and who should not, based on the category of rationality.

Rancière argues that in a consensus democracy, there is a presupposition of pre-given identifications that could potentially reach an agreement.[7] By focusing on management and governance of the space, what is only allowed to be visible are those which can be controlled. It is therefore akin to a space

6 Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, Belgium, some states of Canada are examples of countries which could be considered as consensus democracy. Recently there has also been a shift to consensus democracy in Asian countries. Although some studies show that challenges to this shift have not allowed the full transition from majoritarian democracy to consensus democracy, many Asian countries claim to be consensus democracies (Kasuya and Reilly, 2022: 4-6).

7 An example of this is how contemporary technocratic policymaking treats social issues such as migration, poverty, or public housing as problems to be managed rather than matters of political dispute. In such settings, only those actors who already fit into established categories, such as stakeholders, experts, service users, or taxpayers, are recognized as legitimate participants. Their positions are assumed to be identifiable in advance, and the aim becomes finding a workable compromise among them. Anyone who does not fit these pre-given identifications, for instance undocumented migrants, homeless people, or those whose claims disrupt the neat distribution of roles, is rendered invisible or classified as a problem population to be governed.

in which the police operates, since consensus annuls dissensus by nullifying surplus subjects, reducing the people to the sum of social parts, and collapsing politics into a form of policing.

Consensus reduces conflict through the recognition of given identities which are already counted, with little to no consideration of the not counted. It functions as a form of meta-police that 'closes spaces of dissensus' for the purpose of avoiding divergences. Conflict is put under control through limiting what could be allowed to be visible in public. Here, we find the transformation of the public space from a space of contestation into a space of rational deliberation (Rancière, 1999: 99).

A direct consequence of this spatial transformation is the erasure of what can possibly come from a space of contestation. Because only those who have always been allowed to participate are given the same entitlements, nothing new emerges and the same kinds of discourse remain. There is little room for hope in this kind of arrangement, and the same injustices will repeatedly perpetuate the system.

A recent study about the shift to consensus democracy of some Southeast Asian countries confirm the suspicion that there is no relationship in Asia between institutional reforms aimed at creating consensus-based governance and the improvement of democratic conditions (Kasuya and Reilly, 2022: 3). The former may not necessarily bring about substantive political change in the plight of minorities and the underrepresented. For example, towards the 1990s, the Philippines started to adopt some features of consensus democracy after EDSA Revolution.[8] Court reforms and constitutional reviews played a major part in policy revisions that attempted to bring about more inclusive participation in government (Kasuya and Reilly, 2022: 7). Congress was opened to the minorities and the underrepresented, but this did not translate into substantial change in considering the welfare of these groups. A concrete example of this is the fact that despite reforms made in the Philippines party list systems to include the interests of minority groups, many party lists formed were still subject to the whims of the major political parties and were formed for the sake of the bosses. Kazuya and Teehankee in their study provided evidence that while the number of political parties has risen in more recent elections, these political parties are not for the representation of minority and unrepresented groups but rather for the formation of new alliances among local politicians (Kasuya and Teehankee,

8 The EDSA Revolution was a peaceful mass uprising in the Philippines in February 1986 that toppled the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos Sr.; it took place along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, hence EDSA.

2019: 116).

The call for unity can also be interpreted as an appeal to the rationality of consensus. Unity is undoubtedly an important ideal for nationalist projects, and it is understandable why it is used by many politicians as their bannering call in the elections. However, unity has a certain abstractness to it that remains problematic. At its core, the call to unity and consensus is based on already established identities of various groups and sectors which are recognized. It does not consider subaltern voices whose identification do not fit into pre-given visibilities (i.e., sex workers, recovering drug users, LGBTQIA++, indigenous groups, illegal migrants, refugees, cannabis advocates). Consensus often thrives on the rights of those who have been included in the count because their identities can – at least potentially – be accommodated, but what about those who cannot have opinions because they are considered as non-existent? Or those who cannot articulate their oppression because of the absence of a language legible within dominant frameworks (animals, sexual violence survivors)? In a consensus democracy, there are those whose visibilities are censored because they cannot be counted in the unity. Consensus also reduces the problem of dissenting opinions into a problem of recognition so much so that the solution that is being posed is a superficial acknowledgment of a particular group's existence without genuine effort of addressing their demands. For example, it is one thing to recognize the LGBTQIA++ community but it entails more effort to introduce policies and laws that would ensure their enjoyment of the same liberties and opportunities that typical citizens of a state enjoy.

The limiting of the visibility of those who can participate in a consensus of democracy is strongly linked to the silencing of the voices of dissent using various means. In the effort to reduce heterogeneity which might conflict with consensus, a fear of other bodies is perpetuated in the community. It is either the case that bodies of political subjects are dispossessed and displaced to silence the challenge and potentially radical transformations that can be brought about by their dissensus, or a façade of representation is created to satisfy a call for power sharing as seen in the case of the creation of political parties in Philippine politics.

Political subjects are put under control through developing a narrative against those who cannot be counted, often declaring a dispute against them or imposing measures to ensure that they will remain outside the count. In a consensus of democracy, those who fail to agree are considered as either nuisances or enemies. Bodies of political subjects which are not representative of those recognized groups are either feared or framed as uncountable. For

instance, migrants are framed as usurping the jobs of legitimate citizens, the refugees are deemed as the cause of overpopulation, the drug users are stigmatized as troublemakers, bodies of minorities such as indigenous people, women, children, and disabled people are considered as vulnerable dependents of the state. Rather than recognizing these groups as part of the political count, they are reputed to be unresolvable anomalies which can be easily purged as collateral damage.

Consensus blurs the reality of the fluidity of public spaces therefore depoliticizes democratic struggles by closing the space for contestation and only inviting certain participants. This presents a problematic conception of politics as exclusive to only a few who are afforded by the possibility of participation. In a politics of consensus, which censors the emergence of forms of disagreement, political subjects are deprived of the capacity to hope and dream for a better distribution of the sensible. Consensus presents a limited definition of politics and veers away from its basic conception as the collective organization of social life.

So far, I have set the stage for integrating Rancière's critique of consensus into Dara Bascara's theory of oppression. My aim is to deepen an account of oppression by bringing dissensus and non-discursive gestures of disagreement into view. I have outlined the limitations of consensus by drawing on Rancière's argument that consensus democracy suppresses dissent and excludes marginalized voices, and I have highlighted the need to recognize dissensus and non-discursive expressions of oppression. My goal is to refine Bascara's theory by integrating Rancière's critique so that it can respond more fully to the complexities of identifying and addressing oppression. To consider whether Rancière's critique can be accommodated within Bascara's framework, I will first examine his critique of consensus democracy in greater detail. The next section develops this critique further and then turns to Bascara's use of consensus as a criterion of objectivity, showing how Rancière's emphasis on disagreement and dissensus may expand her unified theory of oppression.

Against Consensus: Politics as Democracy

Real politics is the practice of democracy, not democracy only in name. For Rancière, politics is interchangeable with democracy because both rest on the same foundational axiom: the presupposition of the equality of anyone with everyone. In principle, the name 'democracy' bears the notion that sets it apart from other configurations of rule, namely the *demos* understood as those who assert their participation on the basis of an equality that is not grounded in birth, wealth, or competence but in the sheer capacity to speak

and act.[9] Politics, in this sense, is the activity that enacts this presupposition of equality.

The institution of a hierarchical division in the polis results in the emergence of an entity that is a product of a false count, a double count, or a miscount (Rancière, 1999: 6). There is miscount because there are parts of the community that are excluded on the basis of a lack of entitlement or a wrong entitlement that does not exclusively belong to it.[10] Parts of the whole community are excluded as parts; thus, there are parts which have no part, entities that are both part and whole but are not counted, and elements of the community that are in the community yet not considered as its composition. The miscount results from the lack of fit between a totality that is both universal and exclusionary or what is more commonly known as the *demos*.

Politics arises when the excluded, the part of those who have no part, reveals this fundamental miscount. When a group of people or class (e.g., poor, proletarian, women) makes itself perceivable in seeking inclusion, and participation in the community, it shows the paradoxical ontological structure of politics as a 'wrong' count of its parts. Politics therefore is the activity of those who are excluded, uncounted—the universal concept of the *demos* which also happens to be particularly uncounted. But politics is not so much about the call to participation, but the revelation of a fundamental wrong in the count so much so that the end goal is neither recognition nor inclusion but the disputation of one's space and place in the count.

The *demos* is the component of politics that will always escape appropriation and is often out of proportion because of the incapacity of the existing social field to accommodate real equality, full participation, and universal inclusion. From this idea of the *demos* as this community that is always split by division in such a way that these divisions are all challengeable, and an understanding

9 This does not mean, however, that historical democracies—such as Athens—embodied this principle. Rancière is careful to distinguish the democratic principle from the democratic regime. The Athenians excluded women, slaves, and metics, not because democracy as such required exclusion, but because the historical polis maintained social hierarchies that contradicted democracy's own foundational axiom. What made Athenian democracy 'democratic,' for Rancière, was not its exclusions but the moments when those without status acted as if they had an equal share—moments when the logic of equality interrupted the logic of hierarchy. Democracy therefore names not the empirical institutions of the polis but the ever-present possibility of asserting equality against the distributions that deny it.

10 In reference to Aristotle, there is a one-to-one correspondence of an entitlement to a particular class. For instance, wealth for the *oligoi*, virtue for the aristoi and freedom for the *demos*. Notice, however, that unlike wealth and virtue which exclusively belong to the rich and the wise, freedom is that to which everyone is entitled and not the *demos* alone. Freedom is a property, which is not proper to the *demos* only in as much as it shares this property with everyone in the society. This shows a miscount or the lack of proportion that prevents the institution of either an arithmetic or geometric justice.

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of a challenge to that division, Rancière draws the conclusion that politics is simply synonymous with democracy whether *demos* is the strange ontological object that is the split community or the community that is always imbued with division.

Rancière presupposes equality, not in terms of economic or social distribution of wealth but in the radical equality of anyone to everyone. Everyone thinks, and since as everyone thinks, everyone is also equally capable of making oneself perceivable. The work of Rancière is anchored on the understanding that from the very beginning, the issue is not the opposition of equality with inequality but in a definition of politics that presupposes equality. In another work, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière writes, 'equality is not a goal to be attained but a point of departure, a supposition to be maintained in all circumstance' (Rancière, 1991: 138). Equality is the very condition that makes politics possible as it is the basis of a capacity to confront the hierarchical division set up by the logic of the police and make visible the fact that everyone is equally capable of political speech and action, regardless of their social position or level of expertise. For Rancière, real politics is intrinsically linked to equality (May 2010: 70). Equality is not an external property that comes from the possession of wealth, power, status, or intelligence. It is a shared experience inherent to all individuals, arising from the fact that they are alive, possess the capacity to perceive their surroundings, and actively engage in shaping the world. This is what Rancière meant by equality of intelligence.[11]

Politics unfold as the *demos* interrupt the logic by which those who have a title to govern exercise their dominion over others. And because the *demos* does this by confronting the established hierarchy, it becomes a contestation of the police order. The *demos* introduces:

> a heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day itself, demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being (Rancière, 1999: 140).

In this confrontation between the equality embodied by the *demos* and the

11 Rancière argues that all people are equally intelligent, and what limits some from learning or participating is social and institutional structures, not innate ability. Illustrated by Jacotot's teaching, this principle shows that anyone can understand, learn, and act if trusted and given the opportunity. Politically, it implies that everyone has the capacity to speak, participate, and be heard, challenging hierarchies that claim some people are naturally superior. Equality of intelligence is thus a foundation for emancipation, recognition, and political voice. This an argument that he elaborates on *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

inequality of the social hierarchy guarded by the police, the staging of politics takes place.[12]

The *demos* thereby fulfill two important tasks in the staging of politics. First, it is the part of the community responsible for laying down equality as the prerequisite of politics. It sets the condition of equality of everyone before politics can take place. In contrast to other political models which argue that equality is yet to be gained and given, and protected by the state, the demos, by rising up and making itself known, and claiming its part in the community, is at the same time demonstrating its equality with everyone.

The second task of the *demos* is to reveal the political order's lack of an *arkhe*.[13] The *demos* reveal that politics does not stand on any firm ground and that the ground on which it stands is fundamentally empty and lacking an *arkhe* (Rancière, 1999: 16). The truth revealed by the demos is that there is no universal foundation for all established orders. 'Democracy is the specific situation in which it is the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *arkhe*' (Rancière, 1999: 62). True politics therefore is the politics of the *demos*, the part of those who have no part taking part. It is the moment when those who are excluded from participation demand that they be heard regardless of their lack of entitlement, based on an inherent equality (Rancière, 1999: 15). The essence of politics is inherently a democracy, and such a democracy is possible because of the intrinsic equality of anyone to everyone (Rancière, 2011).

Democracy as Political Subjectivation

Given the discussion of democracy above, we ask 'how are political subjects involved in all the political processes, namely processes of social and political contestation, and of the reconfiguration of the social field based on these contestations'? Previously, I mentioned Rancière's claim that real politics is a quarrel over who has the right to be counted as speaking beings. It is therefore a dispute about whose speech should be recognized as worthy of attention. By speaking up and exercising their equality of intelligence, those who have been excluded from the count based on an absent *arkhe* can pinpoint the misconception of exclusion caused by organizing societies according to social qualifications such as birth, social class, and the like. However, in *Disagreement*,

12 Samuel Chambers has done an extensive discussion of the notion of politics in Rancière. He also engages on a serious debate with other thinkers who have interpreted Rancière. See Samuel Chambers (2011).

13 This is derived from a Greek work which means foundation, origin or beginning. In the context of Rancière's work, it pertains to the 'bases of politics'.

Rancière also writes that political subjectivation is not purely discursive but also 'the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience (Rancière, 1999: 35).

There are two identifiable dimensions of subjectivation here. One is subjectivation as the action of a body, which alters the field of experience through its demand for recognition. The other, which has become the distinctive character of Rancière's subject according to an orthodox reading of his work, refers to the subject's capacity for enunciation as demonstrated through disagreement. Rancière's notion of politics is often interpreted as a politics that takes place through the emergence of a political subject whose defining activity is to pinpoint the wrong in existing structures of hierarchies and order through speech. However, a close reading of his works reveals that politics as subjectivation is not purely discursive (Rancière, 1999: 35–36). A subject is formed in relation to another that is originally excluded or considered as an outcast or those who are denied recognition by the police order (i.e., those who are part of the miscount – the poor, the proletariat, people of color, women, and the like) not only through speech but also through bodily gestures. The political subject is an individual who places herself at one of the points where the wrong of the community is disclosed, and where she eventually acts on it. Her action as described in the passage is initially discursive; it is a demand for recognition and inclusion that first becomes possible by reclaiming the right to speak. Building on the foundation of such discursive actions, subsequent political actions may unfold, ranging from the organization of strikes to steadfastly refusing to yield one's seat in situations where the law upholds the privileges of certain individuals.[14]

This claim by Rancière suggests an alternative way of looking at politics through hyper-individualized moments of subjectivity – a politics that is localized, particular, specific, and concrete as it zooms into moments in which individuals decide to act in a manner that is unexpected of them based on their perceived social class or identification.

Political subjectivity is 'a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order through a demonstration of equality of intelligence' (Rancière, 1999: 30). What the subject does is to demonstrate its equality of

14 Claudette Colvin played a significant role in the civil rights movement in the United States. She is known for her refusal to give up her seat on a bus to a white person, an act of civil disobedience that predated Rosa Parks' more famous protest by several months.

intelligence that, in turn, alters what is visible, speakable, and doable in the community, for it introduces new ways of seeing, speaking, and being which have been previously ignored. Here we see that for Rancière, the subject is the embodiment of equality. Equality becomes real and concrete through the subject whose action is a demand for such equality to be recognized (Rancière, 1992: 61).

At the moment of confrontation between equality and the hierarchical logic of the police, the subject becomes an operator who connects and disconnects 'different areas, regions, identities, functions, and capacities existing in the configuration of a given experience-that is, in the nexus of distributions of the police order and whatever equality is already inscribed there, however fragile and fleeting such inscriptions may be' (Rancière, 1999: 140). This leads to the production of speaking bodies not identifiable with a previously existing field of experience, and who come into existence to change the very configuration of these fields of experience (Rancière, 1999: 35–36). It is that moment when one shows the possibility of being a subject where one is not supposed to be one, which defines one as a political subject.

Subjectivation is a moment of political dissensus and disagreement in which a new world is opened, a new world that is a common world where both the uncounted and the counted coexist. Indeed, this theory of political subjectivity is unique because it shows the concrete instances where individuals become political subjects by being a body that asserts its visibility.[15]

Rancière, particularly in his early writings, capitalizes on the importance of the power of spatio-temporal arrests of the senses as a mode of political contestation. The stopping of mechanical logic and linear time by the 19th century workers who were the subject of his archival work demonstrates that the political actions of the workers are rooted in their lived experiences (Rancière, 1989). Their dreams and feelings were not mere chance encounters or surges of inspiration. Every suffering in the workshop due to tedious labor contributed to their process of political subjectivation.

As a direct consequence of the process of subjectivation, a subject becomes a subject 'in between' identification (Rancière, 1992); thus, it is not a fixed

15 Although, this Rancièrean position sounds very close to Badiou, the central differentiating factor lies in the notion of the subject itself. For Badiou, the subject exists before politics. The subject's encounter with truth, experience or event compels it to 'decide a new way of being' and 'invent a new way of acting' (Badiou, 2012 41-42). Whereas the subject for Badiou is an ontological fact, for Rancière on the other hand, the subject only begins to exist the moment that it speaks up and confronts the hierarchical order. Hence it is dependent on the forms of exclusion that it points out and is always in a process of becoming.

ontological entity as it is continuously in the process of dis-identification. It is not an established ontological agent who first has to exist before politics can ensue, but an actor who is an embodiment of politics. Rancière's political subject does not have a fixed identity but emerges through action, moving across roles and labels and asserting equality whenever the occasion demands. It is not a particular human or a collective body in the conventional sense, but a 'surplus subject' that reveals the gap between the common world of equality and the world of the excluded. It exists as a series of operations, relations, and performances through which those who assert themselves are recognized as participants within a political space. Initially, its presence is marked through discursive and linguistic acts, but the bodily and experiential dimension of political subjectivation is equally important. Through speech and gestures, the subject enacts dissensus, demonstrating that political power and genuine democracy are realized not in consensus, but in the ongoing practice of disagreement. In asserting equality, the political subject denounces identities, capacities, habits, desires, and labels imposed by existing structures and generates new subjectivities that are not tied to any pre-existing group or category. Its emergence is thus situational, relational, and performative, arising whenever the conditions of equality are claimed and enacted.

The Challenges of Intersubjective Agreement

I aimed to clarify certain problematic aspects of consensus as a foundational concept for a theory of oppression. I do so by exploring Rancière's critique of consensus democracy. Bascara argues that to substantiate a claim of oppression, there must be some acknowledgment and acceptance from others who share similar social positions (Bascara, 2020: 170). To address this, she proposes a form of consensus grounded in intersubjective agreement. This second criterion emphasizes the necessity of dialogue and deliberation to achieve an intersubjective agreement among the oppressed (Bascara, 2020: 184). It is important to note that Bascara acknowledges her reliance on existing literature related to deliberative democracy (Bascara, 2020: 172), a topic she does not delve into extensively due to the limited scope of her project.

Bascara interestingly employs consensus not as an end goal for emancipation but as a tool for discerning oppression. She posits that effective consensus hinges on its connection to the perspective of those with epistemic privilege. She then supports this assertion through concrete examples to illustrate that within epistemically privileged groups, collective agreement on objective interests may or may not be achieved. I aimed to complement Bascara's insights by underscoring the limitations of deliberative democracy. Hence, I presented

Rancière's insightful critique of consensus democracy, providing a broader perspective on the challenges associated with relying on consensus as a basis for understanding and addressing oppression.

In the final analysis, there might seem to be no difference between Rancière's argument on politics as democracy and Bascara's identification of oppression. Both argue that political subjects should be directly involved in making claims about their experience of oppression. Bascara for example expressed this succinctly:

> I maintain that the subjective experiences of the oppressed must always be considered. Any plausible account of oppression must engage the consciousness of the oppressed, otherwise it can license forms of abusive paternalism and, as we have seen cultural imperialism (Bascara, 2020: 174).

However, whereas Bascara would make the claim that there needs to be (actual or hypothetical) consensus among the oppressed before a claim of oppression can be justified, Rancière argues that consensus claims in politics are anti-political. Consensus heavily relies on discourse, with active and meaningful exchange of ideas being integral to its achievement. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that not all forms of oppression can be rationally expressed through language. Moreover, there are examples of oppression which might seem isolated but are deeply engrained in society and which political subjects are incapable of identifying discursively. Many who are oppressed do not have the means for consensus deliberation, for example, migrant domestic workers who work 12 to 16 hours a day and cannot attend community meetings, low-income parents who cannot afford childcare or transportation to public forums, or young people in under-resourced schools who lack access to the internet or social networks needed to participate in policy discussions. Others may face knowledge or language barriers, such as refugees navigating complex bureaucracies in a foreign tongue, or feel discouraged from speaking due to experiences of discrimination, as women in patriarchal workplaces or racial minorities in decision-making bodies often do. Since some oppressions are not identifiable through language, there is also no room for hypothetical deliberation. Therefore, equal regard should be given to non-discursive means of 'speaking' against oppression, especially in situations where forms of oppression may be challenging to articulate. While consensus can be a calculated approach to politics as it leaves little to no room for surprises, the identification of oppression should not be limited to consensus but should also include dissensus- non-discursive moments and gestures of disagreement that attempts to identify the wrong count in politics.

In *Dissensus*, Rancière contends that politics is 'an anomaly that is expressed in the nature of political subjects, which are not social groups but rather forms of inscription that account for the unaccounted' (Rancière, 2016: 35). Rancière's approach to politics, which is focused on the political subject, allows us to rethink and re-imagine democracy far from how it has been defined by consensus-based, liberal theories of politics to find something more substantive in it. Democracy is not about agreement and not merely the simple inclusion of everyone. It is based on a paradoxical conception of the demos, which is the uncounted, the surplus created by the miscount of social structures in society. It directly leads us to think about politics away from a structural perspective and pay attention to individual members of the society who, comprise it.

When democracy is defined according to its fundamental principle as the radical equality of everyone, anyone can claim the right to speak, to be heard, to be recognized, and ultimately to disagree with a politics of representation and identification where the goal is to settle differences and arrive at a consensus. Disagreement is necessary so that real politics can happen, and this, in turn, creates the political subject. The effort of re-founding democracy and saving its fundamental principle of the radical equality of everyone pits Rancière against proponents of consensus democracy who have found several ways to discredit real, unruly subjects as it builds consensus on the basis of the rational capacities of only those political subjects who can be part of the discourse. A unified theory of oppression should be wary of justifying oppression through the intersubjective agreement of the oppressed since not all oppressions are expressible through discursive means. For example, undocumented migrant workers who cannot safely voice dissent, survivors of domestic violence whose apparent consent is shaped by fear or dependence, or individuals whose traumatic or cognitive conditions resist articulation all reveal that oppression often operates beyond what can be spoken or negotiated. Consensus can be a privilege of the few who have the means of discursively engaging with others. Therefore, dissensus with the opposite of consensus should be equally considered in a theory of oppression to give way to the non-discursively accessible, non-articulatable forms of oppression. More importantly, disagreement/dissensus is often also crucial for the emancipatory capacities of the oppressed to materialize.[16] There are forms of disagreement/dissensus that skip the deliberative process of identifying harms and proceeding to action specifically in situations when

16 A detailed exploration of this topic could be the subject of another article. However, for the purposes of the present discussion, I will not be delving into it here.

political subjects are mobilized by their effects. Such forms of dissensus can be seen in spontaneous street protests after sudden injustices, in workers' wildcat strikes triggered by shock or anger, or in immediate acts of solidarity such as bystanders blocking deportations, all which bypass deliberation and arise from the affective mobilization of political subjects.[17]

Conversely, Rancière's account of politics also has its flaws, which can be expanded by Bascara's work. For instance, due to his Marxist lineage, Rancière's concept of oppression primarily tackles class-based oppression. Bascara's unified theory of oppression alternatively provides a more comprehensive account, incorporating gender-based oppression and extending beyond the Marxist emphasis on class. Second, a typical critique of Rancière's account of politics is that it does not offer concrete solutions despite its nuanced take on politics. This is a theoretical commitment of his work to not prescribe any form of action or propose solutions because it goes against the idea of politics as democracy and harbors the danger of creating a monopoly of voice by a master thinker.

Laclau clearly describes the direct implication of this second critique when he writes that, in Rancière's work 'there is no a priori guarantee that the "people" as a historical actor will be constituted around a progressive identity (from the point of view of the left)' (Laclau, 2005: 246).[18] Since the democratic heart of politics for Rancière is anyone and everyone, even problematic ideologies can claim oppression. This is precisely where Bascara's pragmatist standpoint epistemology can be useful through the concrete method of examining forms of oppression proposed in her unified theory of oppression.

Bascara's decoupling of oppression from identification and focusing on shared vulnerabilities can be a way of concretely addressing this theoretical impasse of how to qualify 'anyone' and respond to the worry of counting those who are claiming oppression where no real harm is experienced. Through Bascara's theory, identifying oppression is not reduced to a homogenizing self-

17 A striking illustration of dissensus that bypasses deliberation is the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunisia whose act sparked the Arab Spring. Bouazizi did not participate in a formal political process, nor did he engage in structured public debate about the harms he experienced. Instead, after enduring years of harassment, humiliation, and economic precarity, he enacted an immediate, affectively charged gesture of refusal. His self-immolation was not the outcome of consensus-building or discursive deliberation but an embodied cry of despair and injustice.

18 I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing me to the direction of the critique of Rancière and for prompting me to explore the question of who can claim oppression. Laclau and Rancière had an exchange on the question of "who is the people?", a question which seeks to explore who should be counted in politics. See Kieran O'Connor "Don't they represent us?": A Discussion between Jacques Rancière and Ernesto Laclau in <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/2008-don-t-they-represent-us-a-discussion-between-jacques-ranciere-and-ernesto-laclau> 26 May 2015

identification but becomes a collective and community processing of experiences of harm. Emphasizing intersectionality—where different aspects of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic status intersect—enables a wider identification of forms of oppression. Furthermore, I have argued that this unified theory of oppression that has consensus as its ground can fruitfully be supplemented by Rancière's notion of disagreement/ dissensus, where equality as a presupposition ensures that the process of identifying harms is not limited to harms that can be identified discursively. More importantly, that the identification of oppression is not confined to a procedural deliberation and considers the multiple gestures of political subjects, the expression of their effects, and the creative means through which they speak.

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