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Cases of Equality: Idle No More and the Protests at Standing Rock

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Abstract

Jacques Rancière's work has offered some insightful and provocative ideas on the nature and meaning of democratic politics. Recently, he has suggested that the Occupy movement presents "the most interesting" example of what he defines as radical democratic politics. Using this observation as a starting point, this paper applies Rancière's ideas to two recent political events that carried within them a strong Indigenous voice—the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests and the Idle No More (INM) movement. The argument put forward is that both the DAPL protests and the INM represent examples of democratic politics as envisioned by Rancière, politics which emerge from a general assumption of equality.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière, politics of equality, Indigenous politics, radical democracy

Résumé

L'œuvre de Jacques Rancière a contribué quelques idées provocantes sur la nature et le sens du régime politique démocratique. Ce dernier a récemment postulé que le mouvement Occupy est un des exemples de politique démocratique radicale « [des] plus intéressants ». À partir de cette observation, cet article applique les idées de Rancière comme grille d'analyse de deux événements politiques récents associée à une forte présence Autochtone—les manifestations contre le Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) et le mouvement Idle No More (INM). L'argument avancé est que les manifestations contre le DAPL et le INM constituent des exemples de politiques démocratiques comme l'envisageait Rancière, soit une politiques issues d'une supposition générale d'égalité.

Mots clés : Jacques Rancière, politiques d'égalité, politiques Autochtones, démocratie radicale

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Introduction

In his book titled *Red Skin, White Masks*, Glen Coulthard (2014, 161) has suggested that Idle No More (INM), due to its “sustained, united and coordinated mobilization,” represented a truly significant political event. Idle No More not only disrupted Canadian politics, creating a “national stir,” (Coulthard, 2014, 161) but also went past the borders of a single state, drawing support from across the globe. Therefore, at the height of the movement, on January 11, 2013, 3000 protesters gathered in Ottawa at Parliament Hill; and at the same time, 265 rallies were held across North America, Australia, Europe and Asia (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014a, 399-400). Such support allowed the movement to develop a multitude of demands. Thus, while INM was at its core “a defense of Indigenous land and sovereignty,” the movement attracted a variety of voices with a multitude of interests (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014b, 22-23): these ranged from environmental concerns (Idle No More 2013a) to demands for better healthcare (Idle No More 2013b).

The scope and intensity of INM have allowed Coulthard to claim that the events of INM can pave the way for other similar organized resistances. And indeed, in the years following INM, there has been an upsurge of protests directed primarily towards the construction of oil and gas pipelines, such as Keystone XL and Enbridge, or more recently, the Dakota Access Pipeline. The North Dakota protests seemed, due to their level of mobilization, to resemble the most characteristics of INM. The protests managed to gather the support of 300 Indigenous tribes, as well as that of non-Indigenous groups, who protested in 300 cities around the globe during a similar International day of action (Carasik 2016). Both INM and the North Dakota protests represented therefore, due to their size and international scope as well as their capacity to draw together Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, quite unique political events.

Movements and protests such as the one above, albeit very interesting from a political perspective, do not easily fit common political categories. For example, it is not entirely clear why, although having a strong Indigenous character, and being ignited by the wrongs of colonialism, movements like INM transcended the borders of a single state, drawing non-Indigenous participants and encompassing a multitude of demands. How, therefore, can these political situations be understood? What allowed these movements to become something significant politically and to spread throughout Canada and then internationally? Furthermore, if these movements are to be linked with ideas of democracy—as they often have been—then where exactly does their democratic character lie? Do they represent expressions of democracy or do they create challenges for democracy? Finally, what insights can be drawn from the aftermath of a movement? What exactly is its political potential?

For such a purpose, this paper will make use of Jacques Rancière’s insightful and provocative ideas on the nature and meaning of democratic politics. Rancière (2012) has not written anything specifically on Indigenous politics, however, he has recently suggested that the Occupy events (which just like INM, took on the label of a ‘movement’), present “the most interesting” example of what he defines as radical democratic politics. Given this context, this paper aims to suggest that both the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) protests and the INM movement, represent examples of democratic politics as envisioned by Rancière, politics which emerged from a general assumption of equality. To discuss this hypothesis, the paper will develop as follows: the first section will present a theoretical overview of Rancière’s political thought. In the second section, the paper will discuss how INM and the events at Standing Rock can be understood, to one degree or another, through Rancière’s conception of democratic politics. Finally, the paper will conclude by briefly discussing the potential of Rancière’s theory for the study of contemporary political movements.

Rancièrian Politics

Rancière’s conception of politics departs from conventional understandings. The politics that Rancière proposes deals with equality. More specifically, it deals with how we can act upon this equality in order to put into question the mechanisms established by what has been traditionally identified as ‘politics.’ Thus, politics, as envisioned by Rancière (1999, 17), “happens very little or rarely” more specifically, it only occurs “when these mechanisms [to be described below] are stopped in their tracks by the effect of a presupposition that is totally foreign to them yet without which none of them could ultimately function: the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone.”

Rancière writes that equality is an empty freedom that everyone possesses. This means that there is no particular quality that one needs to hold or acquire in order to be equal to everyone else. However, this does

not imply that equality is entirely devoid of content. Rancière discusses a certain equality of intelligence. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière presents the story of Joseph Jacotot, who is forced to flee post-Revolutionary France, and who, as a result, ends up living in Flanders. Jacotot, who can only communicate in French, takes a job as a teacher and is immediately faced with the conundrum of trying to teach to a group of students who only know Flemish. Using a dual-language edition of *Telemachus* as his only tool for navigating the language divide, Jacotot assigns to his students a paper to be written in French on a topic related to *Telemachus*. And to his surprise, Jacotot finds that the students' papers were excellently written. From this, Jacotot draws the conclusion that the students (and thus people in general) were of equal intelligence; the difference in performance was given from an inability to attend classes rather than intellectual criteria. This story allows Rancière (1991, 39) to argue that “[w]hat stultifies the common people is not the lack of instruction, but the belief in the inferiority of their intelligence.”

The assumption of a certain equality of intelligence need not be very sophisticated. It does not mean that each and everyone of us is able to write a dissertation and obtain a doctoral degree; rather—and as far as politics is concerned—it means that everyone is able to think and act upon the world in such a way that they can influence it positively (May 2008, 57). While our social and political contexts might at times seem difficult and complex, they nevertheless do not require a special skill set since they are within everyone's intellectual grasp. The presupposition of equality, then, represents the very possibility of politics. “[O]ur problem,” Rancière (1991, 46) writes, “isn't proving that all intelligence is equal. It's seeing what can be done under that presupposition.”

To better understand the difference between politics of equality (or what will be identified as *democratic politics*) and conventional politics, Rancière introduces the concept of the *police*. Here it might be helpful to note that Rancière utilizes a process that can be identified as “re-definition.” That is, he starts with concepts that his readers have a clear sense of, and then he unexpectedly renames these phenomena—a conceptual move that has important consequences for his theory of politics (Chambers 2014, 57). Therefore, Rancière (1999, 28) remarks that “[p]olitics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution.” He “propose[s] to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. [He] propose[s] to call it *the police*.” Rancière (1999, 28) agrees that presented in such a way, the term “police” “no doubt poses a few problems”, and this is because we typically take “police” to refer to uniformed officers, to patrol cars, and to “the truncheon blows of the forces of law and order.” However, police should clearly be understood to mean more than a state apparatus put in place to maintain the social order. Police in its military form—or the “petty police”—is for Rancière only a particular form within the system of distribution and legitimization that he broadly identifies as the police (Rancière 1999, 28). This particular form of police, becomes necessary only when the general police order has somehow been threatened or called into question (Chambers 2014, 62).

The concept is similar to that of Foucault. For Foucault—who located the origin of the term *policing* in the seventeenth century—the police is a mechanism that works to regulate the lives of its citizens so that it can foster the well-being of the state. The police is a matter of what Foucault (2004, 347) calls “governmentality,” the practice of governing; thus “[t]he police is governmentality directed by the sovereign insofar as he is sovereign.” Both Foucault and Rancière therefore link the police with ideas of social ordering that go beyond any representations of bodies in uniform. However, for Rancière, the police extends beyond governmentality and state rationality to include the rules that inform the organization (i.e. the dividing up and distribution of the various parts) of the political community (Chambers 2014, 61). That is why “[p]olicing is not so much the “disciplining” of bodies as a rule governing their appearing, a configuration of *occupations* and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed” (Rancière 1999, 29). As such, the police can be understood as the mechanism that establishes the organization of society through the dividing up and distribution of the various parts that make up the social whole (Chambers 2014, 61). Furthermore, it is important to highlight that this configuration (or partition), aims to control not only the space of the community, but also our perception of ourselves, one another, and our world. Seen from this perspective, the police, according to Rancière, represents a particular *partage du sensible* [partition of the sensible], since it is an order of distribution and correspondence that works equally effectively as a principle of organization for sense perception (Panagia 2014, 97).

Rancière is here once again indebted to Foucault's work. Foucault's archeological method sought to uncover how the order of things was dependent on the configuration of the visible and the sayable, that is, on what one can see and not see, hear or not hear, and understand either as noise or as discourse. Similar to Foucault's

conception then, the partition of the sensible represents the ways in which the forms of inclusion and exclusion that define participation in a community are first and foremost configured within our sense experience of the world (Palmieri 2002, 34). That is why, as Rancière (2010, 36) writes, “society... is made up of groups tied to specific modes of doing, to places in which these occupations are exercised, and to modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this matching of functions, places and ways of being, there is no place for any void. It is this exclusion of what ‘is not’ that constitutes the police-principle at the core of statist practices.” From this perspective, politics for Rancière begins when there is a contestation directed at a particular partition of the sensible. While the police aims to bring consensus in a society through the establishment of a partition of the sensible, democratic politics attempts to achieve the opposite—that is dissensus. As Rancière (2001, 36) explains: “[d]issensus is not the confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the manifestation of a distance of the sensible from itself.” Thus “[d]issensus is the essence of politics.”

It can be easily understood why, from such a perspective, much of what passes as politics, represents in fact, for Rancière, the police. The concept of police is something that is in many respects, antagonistic to politics. In an important paragraph, Rancière (1999, 29-30) writes that:

I now propose to reserve the term politics for an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presupposition that, by definition, has no place in that configuration—that of the part of those who have no part. This break is manifest in a series of actions that reconfigure the space where parties, parts, or lack of parts have been defined... political activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogenous 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. Politics occurs when there is a place and a way for two heterogenous processes to meet. The first is the police process in the sense we have tried to define. The second is the process of equality.

Thus, politics always concerns those which Rancière identifies as the part who have no part. In other words, those who in a social arrangement are placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy can, through their assertion of equality—both in word and in deed—disrupt the police order that excludes and marginalizes them. The heterogenous assumption of equality exposes the contingency of a particular police order, by showing that hierarchies are the product of history rather than the necessities of nature. If it is presupposed that everyone is equally intelligent, then it becomes clear that it is a matter of contingency if one group is higher in a hierarchy than other. This is often a difficult idea to come to terms with since most police orders have tried to reinforce the notion that power should always be reserved to those few that somehow deserve it more than others. That is why Rancière (1999, 14) writes that: “[f]rom Athens in the fifth century B.C. up until our own governments, the party of the rich has only ever said one thing, which is most precisely the negation of politics: there is no part of those who have no part.”

Two further aspects need to be highlighted at this point. Firstly, the purpose of politics under the assumption of equality is to declassify: “[t]he essence of equality is not so much to unify as to declassify, to undo the supposed naturalness of orders and replace it with the controversial figures of division” (Rancière 1995, 32-33). This means that the purpose of politics of equality should entail the rejection of a marginalized position to which one has been assigned, not for the sake of another and better position, but rather for the sake of nothing at all other than one’s equality (May 2008, 49). Preserving a particular label, or identity, will likely run the risk of either reinforcing the hierarchies established by the police, or establishing a new police order. Thus, politics can only be possible if the new collective subject cannot be identified or named since “the name of an injured community that invokes its rights is always the name of the anonym, the name of anyone” (Rancière 1992, 60). Secondly, while a declassification from the identities of the police order represents an important feature, this does not mean that a politics of equality does not also unify. In fact, such politics must necessarily unify, since it involves collective action. This collective action produces, in turn, a collective subject which Rancière (1999, 35) identifies as a process of *subjectification*: “[p]olitics is a matter of subjects or, rather, modes of subjectification. By subjectification I mean 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.”

According to this definition, subjectification implies three distinct elements which need to be further elaborated. Firstly, as already suggested, subjectification implies the emergence a collective subject or “body.” This means that before democratic action, there did not exist a ‘we,’ there existed only individuals going about their business. It is true that in some situations individuals may also act against a police order. However, their resistance will usually be driven by self-serving reasons. Such acts, therefore, are not political, since they do not strive for equality or for the betterment of the community. What is needed, therefore, in order for a ‘we’ to emerge and in order for political subjectification to occur, is a group of individuals that come together under coordinated actions and enunciations. These individuals need to act and speak as a whole, as members of a collective (May 2010, 47). A democratic politics, therefore, is a politics of the formations of subjects. This is what Rancière (1999, 11) means when he writes that “[p]olitics does not happen just because the poor oppose the rich. It is the other way around: politics (that is, the interruption of the simple effects of domination by the rich) causes the poor to exist as an entity.”

Secondly, this collective subject, as Rancière explains, was something that was not “previously identifiable.” In other words, the ‘we’ that emerges through sayings and doings could not be initially identified within the field of social experience. To better understand this aspect, Rancière uses the example of the trial of the revolutionary Auguste Blanqui in 1832. When Blanqui was asked what his profession was, he replied that he was a proletarian. The magistrate, in turn, challenged Blanqui’s answer by saying that proletarian is not the name of a profession. Blanqui, in turn, responded that “[i]t is the profession of thirty million Frenchmen who live off their labor and who are deprived of political rights” (Rancière 1999, 37). In this example, therefore, ‘proletarian’ serves to describe more than an individual worker. ‘Proletarian’ is a term that describes a collective subject, one which prior to political action was not identifiable. The individual workers became ‘proletarians’ only when they came together under the presupposition of equality. Women are a similar example to that of the proletarians. Normally, ‘women’ is an identity that holds no mystery; everyone knows *who* and *what* is meant by it. However, political subjectification challenges the obviousness of that *who* and *what* (Rancière 1999, 36). For example, the women who took part in the suffragist movement were identified for its duration not as individual women, but as a collective subject—as a group of women equal to men (May 2010, 48). It should also be pointed out here that political subjectification does not work to assign a particular identity—even though it might assume a name that would seem to imply it. The element that brings people together to form a collective subject, whatever its name might be, is not a specific identity, but rather equality. In this sense, the term by which subjectification goes is simply a placeholder (May 2010, 49).

Finally, the appearance of a collective subject that did not initially exist, causes a disruption in the field of experience. Moreover, it allows for things to appear differently from the way they did before—in other words, it reconfigures the partition of the sensible. Thus, going back to the previous example, when women presented themselves as equal to men, the field of experience for both women and men changed. This presentation not only made men perceive women differently (perhaps as a threat), but women also saw themselves and thought of themselves differently—that is, as equals (May 2010, 49). That is why democratic action sets up communities that are “polemical” or “dissensual” communities, marked by “interruptions, fractures, irregular and local, through which egalitarian logic comes and divides the police community from itself.” They emerge from “in-between spaces” or “intervals of subjectification,” “constructed between identities, between spaces and places.” Thus “political being-together is being between: between identities, between worlds” (Rancière 1999, 137).

This type of politics, as the ones described above, is what defines democracy for Rancière. In fact, ‘true’ politics can only be democratic politics and Rancière (2010, 32) has been very clear on this point: “democracy is not a political regime in the sense that it forms one of the possible constitutions which define the ways in which people assemble under a common authority. Democracy is the very institution of politics itself—of its subject and of the form of its relationship.” However, as indicated earlier, democratic politics happens very rarely, and when it does its purpose is no more than to “mobilize an obligation to hear” (Rancière 1995, 86). This means that democratic politics may or may not effect change. Whether those from the police order will be made to hear, whether they can be mobilized to hear, is an important question. What interests Rancière however, are not necessarily the consequences of politics, but rather how politics occurs through the presupposition of equality.

Indigenous Political Movements

Idle no More

As suggested in the previous section, politics concerns action that emerges from a framework of equality. Equality is not something that is received or distributed; rather equality is presupposed by those who decide to act against a political wrong. Therefore, those who engage in political action do so not because they want to achieve equality, but rather because they assume to be the equal of everyone else who is part of their community. As Rancière (1998, 33) writes: “Equality is not a given that politics then presses into service, an essence embodied in the law or a goal politics sets itself the task of attaining. It is a mere assumption that needs to be discerned within the practices implementing it.” Thus, when people act in accordance with the democratic politics that Rancière describes, equality cannot be discerned as an end goal of politics, but rather as the animating assumption of those who engage in political action.

An important point can be drawn from the above quote, one which was not discussed in the previous section. Those who are engaged in political action might not be telling themselves in so many words that they are acting out of an assumption of equality. Equality, as a word, may not be mentioned at all during the unfolding of the movement. And indeed, when looking, for example, at the book *The Winter We Danced: Voices from the Past, the Future, and the Idle No More Movement* (a collection of essays published in the aftermath of INM), the word ‘equality’ never comes up in any of the essay titles. Equality, however, is assumed in titles such as *We Are Free Human Beings* or *Nation to Nation Now*. It is important therefore to highlight that equality is an assumption that does necessarily reveal itself in the thinking and in the organizing activities of those who act democratically (May 2010, 33). With this point in perspective, the paper will now turn to a discussion of INM in order to argue that what gave the movement its unique global character and allowed it to remain as open as possible to new, emergent forms of consciousness and lines of action was in fact the presupposition of equality that lies at the heart of democratic politics.

The INM movement was initiated by an education campaign organized by four women in Saskatchewan, Sylvia McAdam, Jess Gordon, Nina Wilson, and Sheelah McLean. Under the label of INM, the original aim of the campaign was to provide information to members of Canadian communities about the impending impacts of the Canadian federal government’s proposed legislation, Bills C-38, and C-45 on Indigenous rights. They raised particular concerns about effects on water and environmental protection, the use of First Nations land, and lack of consultation with First Peoples. This event coincided with Chief Theresa Spence’s hunger strike, which inspired and galvanized the movement. Over the winter of 2012-13, protests spread through Canada and North America, allowing INM to become an international movement of resistance against colonial state practices. Tactics for these protests ranged from ‘flash mob’ round-dances and drumming in public places like shopping malls, street intersections, and legislature grounds to more direct forms of action, such as blockades and temporary train and traffic stoppages (Coulthard 2014, 160-161).

In the case of INM, equality was presupposed in several ways. Firstly, those who participated in INM showed a commitment to equality. This is evident from the organization of INM. Although inspired by the initiatives of the four women, INM displayed a lack of hierarchy and formal leadership. In an interview, Sylvia McAdam claimed that “Idle No More has no leader. The founders might be considered guides for maintaining the vision, but Idle No More has no leader or official spokesperson” (Carlson 2013). Furthermore, as it evolved, INM actively sought to resist any leadership and maintain its ‘horizontal’ character. Mi’kmaq legal scholar Pamela Palmater has explained in an interview that “Idle No More is not led by any elected politician, national chief or paid executive director;” [i]t is a movement originally led by indigenous women and has been joined by grassroots First nations leaders, Canadians, and now the world” (Petrina 2013). Thus, INM rejected the temptation of dictating to people where their interests lie and how their struggle should unfold. This, of course, would have been contrary to democratic politics. It is easy to understand then, that the horizontal character of INM would not have been possible without a general assumption of equality. By refusing any formal leadership, INM presupposed the equality of anyone with everyone. It presupposed that everyone was equally capable of participating in the political life of its community. Rancière (1999, 29-30) writes that democratic action assumes the “equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.” INM displayed such equality through its decentralized character, which allowed a diversity of voices with a multitude of demands to emerge. The Kino-nda-niimi Collective (2014, 23), in the introduction to *The Winter We Danced*, highlighted the equality of voices

among the INM participants by writing that:

As it grew, the movement became broad-based, diverse, and included many voices. There were those focused on the omnibus legislation, others who mobilized to protect the land and support the resurgence of Indigenous nations, some who demanded justice for the hundreds of missing and murdered Indigenous women, and still others who worked hard to educate and strengthen relationships with non-Indigenous allies.

Furthermore, equality was not only assumed among participants in the movement but also in relation to the Canadian state. Although most participants were in many respects a part of Canadian society that had no part, they did not accept the state's refusal to give them a part in the discussion of Bill C-45 and C-38. They did not make a plea to political representatives but instead acted with the assumption that everyone holds an equal part in the taking of political decisions such as those linked to Bill C-45 and C-38 that concern the community. In this way, INM exposed the hierarchies inherent in the Canadian political order and challenged its legitimacy.

The movement also disrupted the consensus formed around a social whole that sought to deny their equality. One way in which this disruption was produced was through the occupation of spaces. INM resorted to tactics such as blockades, traffic, and train stoppages (CBC 2013a). These tactics culminated with a national day of protest on December 21, 2012, during which protesters temporarily blocked the entrance to Parliament Hill in Ottawa (CBC 2013b). The occupation of "in-between" spaces in the urban centers and economic areas played an important role in the movement's impact. This is because it subverted the "normal distribution" of police spaces, "detouring" this spatial logic for political effect (Rancière 2006).

As explained in the previous section, the partition of the sensible is an essential element of the police order. Rancière suggests that the police partitions and distributes our sense experience of the world in a way that supports and reinforces the established hierarchies. However, if hierarchies operate at the level of the sensible, at the level of people's experience of the world, then dissensus can operate there as well (May 2010, 24). Thus, the participants of INM, through their political actions, reconfigured the field of experience and revealed something that was not previously seen or heard within the police order. INM certainly became heard through social media and national and international media coverage (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014b, 25). It also became visible to the police order. For example, due to the disruption caused to the "police community," (Rancière 1999, 137) the Prime Minister's office saw itself forced to respond by calling a meeting with some of the informal leaders of INM (CBC 2013c). Moreover, it not only became visible and audible, but it also succeeded in appealing to various segments of the Canadian society, which began to see themselves as part of the collective subject (Denis 2014, 217-218). And thus what was not previously identifiable, became identified as "a global movement with manifold demands" (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014b, 22).

By occupying spaces and challenging the police order through the assumption of equality, the participants in INM became part of a collective subject that did not previously exist. Rancière (1999, 35) writes that the subject that is produced by political action is one that is "not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience." This means that a subject appears, is produced, and occupies a place in the social whole that had formerly not existed. As it was often pointed out by those directly involved with the movement, the name of INM did not suggest that Indigenous peoples have been idle until then. Instead, INM simply represented the culmination of the anti-colonial struggle of Indigenous peoples (The Kino-nda-niimi Collective 2014b, 21). However, what distinguished INM from other anti-colonial political events was that it allowed the emergence of a collective subject that was previously invisible. Thus, participation in INM (through democratic action) temporarily blurred the particular identities (a particular nation, race, or gender) of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and instead allowed them to merge into a collectivity, a 'we' that was the 'we' of a divided people (Dean 2011). The assumption of equality allowed people of various backgrounds to see themselves in one another, and to intersect in a common front. As Judy Rebick has explained: INM "is a movement of a group of people with a common identity and despite the different history and cultures of their nations, a common history in relation to Canada," furthermore, INM is "better compared to the civil rights movement and women's movement," because, as Rebick (2014, 236) has noticed, the struggle concerns, first and foremost, equality. Thus, protests carried under the banner of INM took on many of the characteristics of "insubstantial communities"—that is, communities that exist only in the act of their own verification of equality (Rancière 1995, 84).

Flash-mob round dances, as suggested earlier, represented a particular form of protests—one which became essential to the movement. The first round-dance took place in a shopping mall in Regina, Saskatchewan, a few days after Bill C-45 became law. Indigenous activists began beating drums and singing and were soon joined by other people who joined hands to form a moving circle. In the next few months, the dance was repeated in hundreds of malls, intersections, highways, and reserves across the U.S. and Canada (Weir 2017, 31). This type of protest reinforced quite well the democratic elements of the movement as a whole. The round dances, just like the collectives formed in protest, unfolded within a framework of equality: Allison Weir noted that “[t]he round dances were multiethnic and multigenerational: people from diverse communities joined hands and moved in circles in support of First Nations communities” (31). Thus, the very act of coming together and dancing by holding hands suggested the emergence of a collective subject—a subject that was animated by the presupposition of equality. Furthermore, the dances occupied spaces that were considered part of the police logic, disrupting and eventually turning them into sites of democratic politics. The occupations of such spaces combined with an absence of any specific demands, allowed the people to distance themselves from consensual politics. Essentially, what the participants in the round dances sought to expose was the contradiction that existed between two worlds: the world in which they are equal, and the world in which they are not and in which there is only a pretense for equality (Rancière 1999, 27). The following phrase by Rancière perfectly summarizes the activity of the round-dancers: “[g]enuine participation is the invention of that unpredictable subject which momentarily occupies the street, the invention of a movement born of nothing but democracy itself... The test of democracy must ever be in democracy’s own image: versatile, sporadic—and founded on trust” (Rancière 1995, 61).

Towards the end of January of 2013, INM protests began to decline in intensity, allowing the media to suggest that movement’s purpose and effectiveness had deteriorated. Moreover, INM did not prevent Bill C-45 (the omnibus bill that gave rise to the movement) from becoming law (Coulthard 2014, 165). The lack of any significant political changes might represent a reason to suggest that INM failed as a political movement. However, this outcome was more or less predictable. The movement arose from below, from that part that usually did not have any part, that part that was placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. The chances, therefore, of effecting real political change were always small, since INM developed in resistance to a police order that had already monopolized most of the political resources. From a Rancièrian perspective however, INM did not fail because the very existence of the movement disrupted the partition or distribution of the sensible. Rancière (1995, 86) writes that a democratic politics “causes equality to have a real social effect, only when it mobilizes an obligation to hear.” From this standpoint, INM certainly mobilized under the assumption of equality. Ken Coates (2015) observed that: “Idle No More sought no singular or technical outcome... It was more about community building, about finding both common cause and a shared voice.” At the same time, it also created an obligation to hear. This can be observed in Coulthard’s (2014, 165) comments:

Indeed, the recent escalation and increased public visibility of Indigenous anti-fracking protests in places like Elsipotog, New Brunswick, along with the anti-oil sands activism led by Native communities in northern Alberta, and the unrelenting antipipeline campaigns mounted by First Nations communities across British Columbia, are a clear demonstration of Indigenous peoples’ continued resolve to defend their land and sovereignty from further encroachments by the state and capital.

More often than not, politics does not go beyond dissensus—if it would, it would betray the democratic character that Rancière has posited. This is because, as suggested in the previous section, the success of democratic politics does not depend on the reactions of those within the police order. If it would be otherwise, then the existence of democratic politics would become contingent on the response of those who seek to deny equality and implicitly democracy. Therefore, the assumption of equality, as the animating condition of politics, ensures that the existence or non-existence of democracy lies in the hands of those who struggle, rather than in those of the elite (May 2010).

Dakota Access Pipeline Protests

The Dakota Access Pipeline is a project that was started in December 2014 with the intention of transporting crude oil from North Dakota to Illinois. The actors involved in the construction of the pipeline had planned

to have it cross under the Missouri river and over cultural lands that belong to the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe (SRST). The Standing Rock Sioux presented the argument that they have not been sufficiently consulted on the DAPL project and that a possible completion of the pipeline will have two important negative implications: 1) the pipeline will pose a contamination threat to the tribe's main source of water, since it will pass under the Missouri river, within half a mile upstream of the tribe's reservation; 2) the pipeline will traverse areas of cultural significance, such as sacred sites and burial grounds, which the tribe seeks to protect. In reaction to the overall decision, the tribe has sued the government body involved in the issuance of the construction permits. The decisions behind the construction of this pipeline soon sparked protests from the local tribe members, who, in the summer of 2016, set up a camp on the pipeline's construction grounds. Within a short time, the camp grew to number a few thousand participants, sparking solidarity at both a national and an international level. Such solidarity allowed protests to continue throughout the remainder of the year (Sammon 2016). As it will be explained in the following paragraphs, a closer look at this political situation reveals a number of elements that belong to the form of radical democratic politics that Rancière has imagined.

At first sight, it seems that this political situation revolves around Indigenous rights and sovereignty. For example, in one of the statements given by a representative of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, it was observed that "it is time the United States finally and consistent with its legal and international obligations fully recognize our right to be treated like human beings and as sovereign nations" (Stand with Standing Rock 2016a). However, a closer look reveals that there is a transition from a claim to Indigenous identity to one for universal equality. The request to be treated like human beings and sovereign nations is based on a presupposition of equality. This is so because if some would willfully accept that they are less human and less sovereign than others, then they would do so because inequality—rather than equality—would be assumed. Furthermore, images in the media which captured protesters holding a feather in their hand while being met by armed police officers put forward a similar message: 'despite the disproportion in power, we stand in front of you as equals, as human beings (Patinkin 2016).'

And in another statement, the claim for universal equality was even more clear: "in honor of our future generations, we fight this pipeline to protect our water, our sacred places, and all living beings." This type of statement is what Rancière (2006) has referred to as a "political proposition"—meaning a situation "when people are able to think not only for themselves, but for anybody." Therefore, rather than taking on a struggle that exclusively concerned the members of the tribe, the Sioux at Standing Rock instead took on a struggle that focused on the equality of every human being. This approach allowed them to address not only local issues but also issues that possibly affected everyone on the planet—such as the environment (Carasik 2016). The expression 'all living beings' served as an invitation for all those who were at the wrong end of the police hierarchy, an invitation for people to see themselves in one another and to act on behalf of the equality that others were seeking to deny.

As a result, the protesters appeared not as a particular tribe, but as a people (a demos) standing together to resist the imposed hierarchies. In Rancier's terms, what emerged was a 'polemical' political community, one that was not anticipated by the police. Thus, although the SRST were the ones who initiated the protests, they were soon followed by other groups who were neither Indigenous, nor local. For example, the SRST's demand for equality also attracted the support of environmental groups—with the most notable being Earthjustice, a legal organization that offered pro bono representation (Earthjustice 2016). Moreover, approximately 2000 US military joined the protests in North Dakota, (CBC 2016a) while in Manitoba large groups of protesters took to the streets of Winnipeg (CBC 2016b).

As mentioned earlier, political subjectification is produced through a series of actions and enunciations. Thus, the participants at Standing Rock not only assumed equality by enunciating it but also by acting upon it. By occupying spaces (such as the pipeline's construction site, or major city streets) that were within police control, the protesters turned these spaces into sites of democratic politics. The very fact that people came together on a day by day basis demonstrated that the spaces had become spaces of equality. And by detouring those spaces for political effect, the protesters exposed the contradiction of what Rancière (1999,116) has identified as "two worlds in a single world:" the world where they count as members of a society, and the world where they are not acknowledged; the world where they can participate in politics and be heard as speaking beings, and the world where their presence and their voice is reduced to mere noise.

Moreover, the collective subject brought a rearrangement of the partition or division of the sensible through the identification of something that had previously been invisible. Rancière (1995, 48) presented the claim that “[t]his is the definition of a struggle for equality which can never be merely a demand upon the other, nor a pressure put on him, but always simultaneously a proof given to oneself. This is what ‘emancipation’ means.” The events at Standing Rock were in many ways an emancipation for the participants. This is because the emergent collective subject allowed those involved to see themselves and their worlds differently—that is, it allowed them to see politics not in terms of their inferiority but in terms of their equality. Those who faced armed police officers with feathers in their hand were a clear proof of that emergent political attitude. Viewed from this perspective, therefore, the protesters’ field of experience changed because they began to think and act as an equal people.

Furthermore, the partition of the sensible changed not only for the protesters but also for the police order. It can be argued that the ‘we’ that was not there before managed to disrupt the normal distribution of police spaces because it emerged in those “in-between” spaces that were initially within the control of the police. The attempts to remove the protesters from their initial space and relocate them to a more ‘organized’ one—one which was identified as a ‘free speech zone—’ clearly revealed a conflict over the logic of police spaces (Stand with Standing Rock 2016b). By disputing these spaces, the protesters also exposed the weakness of the general order of the police, who—in its attempt to restore consensus—has resorted to high numbers of military police officers (Democracy Now 2016).

Just like in the case of INM, the democratic politics at Standing Rock had caused an “obligation to hear.” This is evident from the behavior of the police, who through its government bodies not only temporarily halted the construction of the pipeline, but also acknowledged that “this case has highlighted the need for a serious discussion on whether there should be nationwide reform with respect to considering tribes’ views on these types of infrastructure projects” (The United States Department of Justice 2016). However, despite the fact that the call for a serious discussion was heard, the protests have recently faded away. And on top of this, DAPL has recently become fully operational (Stand with Standing Rock 2017).

How, therefore, can these outcomes be interpreted? As previously mentioned, Rancière (1999, 31) is quite sober when it comes to democratic politics. Politics is always contingent on a police order, “doesn’t always happen—it actually happens very little or rarely.” Thus, democratic politics, as presented by Rancière, cannot offer a recipe for social change; what it can offer instead, is a framework through which we can understand and practice democratic action. The strength of such democratic politics lies precisely in the fact that it is indeterminate, since one cannot know where and how it will emerge. It is this indeterminacy, that gives strength to politics that mobilizes our equal capacity as humans (Magnusson 2015, 190).

Conclusion

Both INM and the protests at Standing Rock were shown to exemplify the democratic elements that Rancière has envisioned: the presupposition of equality, subjectification, and dissensus from the current police order. It is these elements that allow Rancière’s account of democracy to become useful for thinking and practicing of contemporary political movements. As Jean-Philippe Deranty (2010, 183) has noticed, what makes Rancière’s thought so appealing, is the fact that it not only takes “political emancipation as its object of study but aims to participate practically in emancipation.”

As such, there is, first of all, an aesthetic dimension to the creation of cases of equality. This is because it is at the level of sense experience that the police order operates those implicit decisions about who is included and in what way, and whose voice counts in politics. As it has been discussed, Rancière describes the police as a more complex form of governmentality¹, therefore, the activity of politics must go beyond the institutional level, and must, first and foremost, focus on contesting the police distribution of the sensible. In other words, a collective struggle cannot be satisfied with simply negotiating for a better position within a police order (in this sense legal reforms or media recognition cannot suffice). For it to be successful, it must produce dissensus — i.e. it must altogether challenge the hierarchical and exclusionary distributions of the police and must create new spaces and new capacities in which equality can be attested. From this perspective, INM and the DAPL protests were able to challenge the police logic of places such as private lands and urban spaces (shopping malls and road intersections) by asking whether these are in fact democratic spaces. Such contestations revealed that government decisions such as the construction of pipelines were in fact matters of public concern. (Tanke, 62)

Thus, both case studies discussed were successful because they were able to question what it means to be a political subject, as well as what is a legitimate object of political discussion.

The two case studies also revealed that thinking and practicing political struggles in terms of equality puts a clear emphasis on solidarity because it opens up the possibility not only for an excluded group to be heard but also a space for those allotted a part to work on behalf of equality. Such solidarity, goes of course, by the name of subjectification—i.e. the process by which the part of those without a part struggle, in spite of their differences, to constitute themselves as a political subject. Even though collective struggles can sometimes develop without the presupposition of equality, the divisions that exist between people who occupy different positions in the police order usually prevent the kind of solidarity that would form the basis of meaningful resistance. That is why, without a driving assumption for equality, a collective struggle cannot often be more than an alliance between those whose individual interests find a temporary convergence. In order for a struggle to bind people together into a large democratic movement, there needs to be a strong sense of commonality among its members. This commonality does not require that everyone be the same—since the real differences that exist between people cannot be effaced—but rather that everyone sees himself or herself in connection with others (May 2010, 147). As it was argued in the previous section, subjectification—by way of the presupposition of equality—is of sufficient generality to make such a connection. Once this presupposition disappears, then so does the incentive to progress from a local struggle to the type of mass resistance that INM or the DAPL protests achieved.

From what has been discussed so far, equality is clearly the central aspect of Rancière's theory. His focus on this principle might seem trivial as it has been the focus of discussion among social and political thinkers for several centuries—that is why equality is now a fundamental principle of western democracy, embedded within most of its political institutions and practices. However, equality for Rancière is neither something to be taken for granted once it has been inscribed within the trajectory of western political thought, nor a timeless, a priori principle to which institutions can appeal. Rather, equality must be continually verified and demonstrated through the speech and political action of a collective subject. It is this reliance upon its own demonstration that greatly expands the potential of this principle.

The uniqueness of equality therefore, as described by Rancière, lies in the scope of its application, in the fact that there are no limits to its reach. The empty freedom which everyone possesses brings to light the collective power that can be assumed by those without a voice in the world. It unites those thought to be dissimilar in a fundamental rejection of identitarian police logic and the affirmation of a community that has been fairly counted and organized. The part without a part, be it the refugees, the workers, the women, the colonized, or the LGBTQ, through the assertion of equality, expose the world that has been established through their exclusion (Tanke 2011, 70-72). The political task, therefore, is to continually challenge our institutions, practices, and discourses, as Rancière writes, countering them by way of equality remains the “most untimely/excessive of exercises” (Rancière 2007, 342).

Notes

¹ Several political theorists have suggested that settler colonialism is a form of governmentality. See for example: Alfred 2009; Simpson 2011; Snelgrove, Dhamoon and Corntassel 2014.

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