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Thinking Practice:
Jacques Rancière and the division of reason

Shannon Joseph Walsh

Abstract
The university is moving through a sequence of radical and irreversible change. The forces of finance, commercialisation and anti-democratic managerialism join together in staging a perpetual siege; eroding the university as they attempt to turn its energies into profit. Yet this high stakes engagement also opens up the space for intervention. In order to wrest the university from the grips of these agents what is needed is new and powerful ideas. Rather than offering another documentation of this already well documented process, this thesis offers a rethinking of academic practice and argues that things can be done differently today. An extended engagement with the thought of French Philosopher Jacques Rancière, this thesis questions the many boundaries internal to academic practice: the boundaries between disciplines; between teachers and students; between science and ideology; between reality and fiction. As well as those boundaries that determine this ‘within’ from its outside such as the division of labour. With Rancière I argue that such a rethinking can and must be achieved without compromising the dual demands of reason and equality. Organised into four key sections: ‘Practicing,’ ‘Explaining,’ ‘Reasoning’ and ‘Creating,’ this study explores Rancière’s thought via the specific question of academic practice.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière, Practice, Praxis, Equality, Education, Rationalism, Post-Rationalism
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Introduction

Today we are faced with an urgent need to rethink the question of academic practice. As embedded professors sit contemplatively at their desks, business as usual, the comforts of their tenure are being increasingly interrupted by the din of student protest (see Ratcliffe, 2015). The situation is global. At universities in New Zealand, Canada, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, to name only a few locations, students and academic staff alike are demanding radical change within the university. At the same time the common targets of these protests – the commercialisation of education; the financialisation of every facet of the university; the accompanying culture of anti-democratic managerialism that seeks to enforce such a transformation – all point to major global processes that exceed the very institutional bounds that such protests aim to address. The struggle for ‘the university’ is also a struggle that points beyond the particularities of what ‘the university’ conventionally signifies.

If the current conjuncture calls for a ‘new university,’ as students from the University of Amsterdam are currently demanding, then what is needed are new ideas (see Grey, 2015). The university is undergoing a radical transformation and much is at stake. Whatever the results of this sequence, we can be certain that there will be no romantic return to a warm collegial bath. In truth, such a bath has only ever existed in the imaginations of its mourners. Nor is the game up and all hope lost. Rather than presenting a choice between a romantic return and inevitable eclipse, the defining feature of the current situation is one in which the university itself becomes a site of conflict and contestation. And, as with any crisis or conflict, such an event opens the possibility to do things differently. There is a battle being fought and we have an opportunity to intervene. As Campbell Jones rightly notes: ‘if the university is to be
radically reconfigured then the terms on which this reconfiguration will be effected are in fact up for grabs’ (2015: 138). The situation we find ourselves in today is therefore one of both urgency and opportunity, calling for a radical rethinking of academic practice.

Such a rethinking must involve questioning the many boundaries internal to academic practice: the boundaries between disciplines; between teachers and students; between science and ideology; between reality and fiction. As well as those boundaries where a particular vision of work determines this ‘within’ from its outside: the division of labour and specifically the division between intellectual and manual labour. The latter is especially important. In order to rethink academic practice, and therefore to rethink the university, it is necessary to understand how such practice defines itself against other activities. It is necessary to think about how the work of ‘the academic’ is constituted by the work of others. It is necessary to challenge the mechanisms that keep this division in place. It is therefore necessary, for example, to challenge the division that separates those who speak in lecture theaters from those who clean them.

It is my contention that contemporary French philosopher Jacques Rancière has, for some time now, developed a line of thinking in complicity with such a task. Rancière can help us think the university and its outside as well as those divisions within. His thought brings light to the carefully guarded lines of demarcation that establish disciplinary territories, exposing and challenging those practices that maintain them. And while his thought exposes such functions it does not end there. Rancière offers a method: a method of equality. If the terms on which the university is to be reconfigured are indeed up for grabs, then it is over the question of equality that the
stakes are highest. If the university is to ever become something other than an appendage to capital then this must be achieved by inscribing an equality at its very core that capital could never abide.

A brief introduction to the trajectory of Rancière’s work will serve to show the importance of his thought to these questions, while it is the purpose of all that follows to argue this at greater length. Originally a key member of the Althusserian camp and a contributor to Althusser’s collective *Reading Capital* project, following the events of May 1968 Rancière broke with his master precisely along the very lines of demarcation outlined above. In his first book *Althusser’s Lesson*, published in France in 1974, Rancière (2011a) argued that Althusser’s concern with scientific Marxism was nothing more than an attempt to preserve the privilege and autonomy of theory, and with this the freedom of academic practice against the base necessities of ‘lived experience’. The charge against ‘lived experience’ – central to Althusser’s challenge to phenomenology during the 1960’s and 1970’s – became for Rancière a theoretical mechanism that served to relegate the miseries of ‘daily life’ to the realm of ideology and illusion (2011a: 42). Such a mechanism pitted the rational and scientific over and against the illusory and overdetermined world of ‘social practice’.

With this the task of the intellectuals was to enlighten the ‘deluded’ masses as to the truth of their plight (2011a: 47). Rancière came to see the Althusserian project as a reactionary policing tool: a control mechanism that traced ‘a security line around the sciences, like the security lines others were starting to trace around factories’ (2011a: 67). What Althusser’s ‘class war in theory’ then amounted to in practice and effect was merely the repetition of the ‘practical ideology of the bourgeoisie’ (Rancière,
This was ‘an ideology of surveillance and assistance’ that bore a striking resemblance to the kind of thinking that gave rise to Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, a form of thinking that Michel Foucault would come to discuss at length in *Discipline and Punish* (Rancière, 2011a: 4; see Bentham, 1843; Foucault, 1977).

According to Rancière, Althusser’s persistent emphasis on scientific Marxism attempted to preserve the privileged autonomy of intellectual specialists while keeping the worker firmly in their place. This repeated ‘the old bourgeois song’ entrenching the division of labour, ground up, from the instrumental technique of the worker to the lofty speculative heights of intellectual labour (Rancière, 2011a: 10). This logic mapped knowledge and technique onto the particular function of each assigned station: ‘theirs is the nobility of artisanal production, the concrete experience of matter and the charms of the rustic life’, while the intellectuals were left with ‘the hard labour of organizing and thinking’ (Rancière, 2011a: 10). Importantly, this division ensured that revolutionary transformation no longer fell to the subject of history, the proletariat, but to experts and intellectuals. As Rancière argued, the revolutionary question would then pivot on the question of ‘the competence of the masses’ (2011a: 14, all following emphasis original unless otherwise stated).

For Rancière, Althusser’s position was clear enough: the masses simply did not have the skill or competence to make or indeed understand history, their *technê* only being suited to the transformation of material ‘stuff’:

> when it is a matter of organizing to make history, the masses must rely on the wisdom of the Party. As for knowing history, the masses should wait for the
‘theses’ that specialists in Marxism work out for their benefit. Roll up your sleeves and transform nature; for history, though, you must call on us. (2011a: 10)

From this early intervention to the present day Rancière has been relentless in his critique of the way in which the ‘intellectual world’ enacts the very divisions that legitimate and ensure its autonomy. Such a critique reached its zenith in a much later text, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, where Rancière (1991) affirms the equality of intelligences. In this text Rancière recalls the story of Joseph Jacotot, a nineteenth century French school teacher exiled to the Netherlands and forced to teach a class with whom he shared no common tongue. Jacotot’s success in teaching his Flemish students French, without himself being able to speak Flemish, leads both Jacotot and Rancière to argue that it is possible to teach with no knowledge of the subject matter, thus questioning the near universal assumption that ‘the important business of the master is to transmit his knowledge to his students so as to bring them, by degrees, to his own level of expertise’ (1991: 3).

Against a significant swathe of opinion that would claim the contrary, Rancière and Jacotot’s argument was that any individual can teach any other individual without themselves possessing knowledge of the taught material. Thus reversing the ordinarily supposed relationship of dependence between teacher and student: ‘It is the explicator that needs the incapable and not the other way around: it is he who constitutes the incapable as such’ (1991: 6). With this reversal, an illiterate parent is then able to teach their own child how to read without employing an expert educator, thus threatening the very intellectual inequality between teacher and student that pedagogy
is routinely based on. We return to this thought in chapter three where we consider Rancière’s thought with respect to pedagogy and specifically the ‘pedagogisation’ of society.

Rancière has to a large extent already interrogated those very divisions that I seek to investigate with this thesis: the boundaries between disciplines; between teachers and students; between science and ideology; between reality and fiction. As well as the boundaries that determine the intellectual ‘within’ from its outside: the division of labour. What is at stake for Rancière is the ‘distribution of territories’ enacted by such divisions. These divisions serve to separate those who are ‘regarded as qualified to think from those regarded as unqualified; those who do the science and those who are regarded as its objects’ (Rancière, Baronian and Rosello, 2008: 3). While this corresponds to the ‘intellectual world’ and its outside it also corresponds to the divisions between disciplines where ones ability to think and speak is often tied to a particular disciplinary object, field, or simply to a professional ‘position.’

With this being said, it is crucial to note that Rancière’s thought is in no sense ‘anti-intellectual.’ This is on the strict the condition that the ‘intellectual’ is taken here to signify something beyond its designation as a position within the university. Contrary to the anti-intellectualism currently rampant both within and beyond the university, Rancière is emphatic in his assertion of the power of reason and thought. Some have gone as far as to offer the title of ‘utopian rationalism’ to Rancière’s particular style of thinking (Power, 2010). Although there are reasons to doubt this particular designation – crucially the caveat of utopianism, of which Rancière is likely to reject – it does underline Rancière’s strong commitment to rationalism. To be fair, a certain
amount of negotiation is needed in order to dispel what Rancière’s rationalism amounts to and in what follows below I hope to make this clear. Such a commitment places Rancière within a much larger current of French thought, tracing back to Descartes, yet largely playing out in the tumultuous twentieth century (see Eyers, 2013; Peden, 2014). Importantly, and certainly complicating the ‘trajectory’ stated above, this places Rancière back ‘in touch’ with his former master Althusser.

For Rancière, if reason is to have any meaning then it must be universal in scope. It cannot be the privileged domain of philosophical practitioners who oversee its terms, acting as an army of bailiffs, enforcing reasons laws and dethroning pretenders. Reason, for Rancière, is a synonym of equality and any attempts to localise or fix its boundaries is meet with great suspicion (1991: 133):

If emancipation had a meaning, it consisted in reclaiming thought as something belonging to everyone – the correlate being that there is no natural division between intellectual objects and that a discipline is always a provisional grouping, a provisional territorialisation of questions and objects that do not in and of themselves possess any specific localisation or domain (Rancière et al. 2008: 3).

What you have before you is, very generally, a critical exercise in understanding the connection between thought and activity, and especially the activity of thinking. This is why the term ‘academic practice’ has been adopted. This needs to be taken in a general sense: if, for example, this is read as an investigation into ‘the role’ of the intellectual in society we have already taken a step too far. This would presuppose –
as given or natural – the place and function of the intellectual, as well as entering some far reaching presuppositions about the ‘society’ they are situated within. It is precisely this ‘parceling out’ of places and functions that Rancière meets with a formidable challenge. My task here certainly concerns the kinds of things that are done in the ‘academy’ or university – explaining, reasoning, creating – but it does not presuppose as final or given those professional and economic structures of inclusion and exclusion that come with the university in its current form. Indeed, my argument is that in the final analysis those places and functions that the university parcels out – student, professor, graduate teaching assistant, cleaner – have little to do with the practices of explaining, reasoning and creating that form its ‘day-to-day’ activity.

It is therefore necessary to start from the beginning and, so far as it is possible, construct an idea of academic practice that does not assume its own necessity or ‘good.’ It is equally necessary to acknowledge that this ‘academic’ space is already occupied, it is already composed of subjects explaining, reasoning and creating. This is to signal the importance of beginning from where we already are. To the reader it might seem naïve but with this thesis I hope to suggest that it is possible to do things differently right now – today. The point is not to do away with the professional academic and my argument here is certainly not anti-intellectual in any sense. Indeed, if such a formulation were not so incredibly trite, I would say that the argument forwarded in this thesis is anti-anti-intellectual. My position here is an optimistic one. Against a tide of mourning and lament over the death of the university – or the process of ‘killing thinking’ as Mary Evans (2004) has put it in her analysis of the situation – I want to think through the possibilities and stakes of doing things
differently today, as well as one day creating something better, more equal, more inclusive.

Rancière offers a theoretical and practical framework for thinking through these very possibilities: for thinking through those questions of academic practice outlined above, which is to say that he shows a route toward a critical rethinking of ‘what we do’ as academics and how the intellectual space we occupy is shaped, guarded and, most importantly, subverted. Crucially, Rancière throws into doubt the particular relation between practice and knowledge that, as we saw with Althusser above, is often assumed to accompany the division of labour. While the question of practice remains central and a constant point of reference to this thesis, this question is placed within a more general exercise in understanding Rancière’s work.

Ultimately this thesis involves two main tasks. The first is to articulate Rancière’s thought in detail. This involves moving with him across different terrains and between different disciplinary areas. Below I introduce Rancière’s concept of ‘indisciplinarity,’ which is a way of thinking ‘in between’ the disciplines and can, with some qualification, be considered the methodological framework within which this thesis was conceived. The second main task of this thesis is to draw out Rancière’s critique of the various ways in which specific academic practices seek to preserve their own privilege through the very theoretical and conceptual devices they construct, and to question the practices that seek to maintain such divisions.

In the first chapter I introduce the question of practice. Organising the chapter around Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ – a crucial document for any serious question of
practice – I consider the historical and theoretical stakes of Rancière’s break with Althusser, drawing out the precise significance that this controversy has for the question of academic practice. Importantly, this chapter argues against the thought that takes thinking to be on the side of passivity and practice on the side of action. Rather than this being a question of bridging the gap between the two, I argue, with Rancière, that we must rather question what divides them. Finally I introduce Rancière’s concept of ‘indisciplinary thought’ as mounting a challenge to the divisions between disciplines as well as reinscribing the political into academic practice, a political that such divisions will often seek to foreclose.

In chapter two I consider Rancière’s thought on education and the equality of intelligence. Drawing parallels with Michel Foucault’s conception of ‘pastoral power,’ I consider Rancière’s thought on the ‘pedagogicisation’ of society and the specific pedagogical practices that function to maintain structures of inequality. This chapter also seeks to develop Rancière’s critique of those academic practices that protect their own privilege through the separation of those who are ‘regarded as qualified to think from those regarded as unqualified; those who do the science and those who are regarded as its objects’ (Rancière, Baronian and Rosello, 2008: 3).

In chapter three I extend on the arguments of chapter two by closely considering Rancière’s conception of the distribution of the sensible, showing how this concept seeks to account for the operation and maintenance of closed communities and specifically academic communities. Rancière’s arguments as to how such communities are constituted and operate in the realm of politics is extended to the question of academic practice and the division of the disciplines. In this chapter I also
return to the idea that thought is somehow passive and practice active by considering
the question of beginning and the significance of this question for academic practice.
Finally in this chapter I consider Rancière’s materialism and what this means for his
method of equality.

In chapter four I consider Rancière’s ‘poetics of knowledge’ as an attempt to make
visible the fundamentally active nature of any academic practice, or indeed any
attempt to construct and express an idea or argument. Here Rancière’s genealogical
analysis of ‘aesthetic practices’ is also evoked to underscore the question of action.
Rather than taking ‘art’ as something concerned with the beautiful or the sublime,
what I hope to show in this chapter is the thoroughly artificial nature of any academic
practice and the way in which this presents a serious problem to any vulgar
empiricism, especially as practiced within the social sciences.

This journey – or in Rancière’s terms ‘intellectual adventure’ – traces a particular line
through the work of Rancière, a line that Rancière himself does not trace in any single
work, but diagonally across many works, spanning interventions within politics,
history, aesthetics, education and literary studies as well as engaging his particular
position with regard to philosophy. At base, this text offers a reading of Rancière that
attempts to articulate the importance of his thought for questions of practice. Such a
reading is, however, also something done, an exercise in thinking practice, performed
not alone, but in concert with a formidable ally.
1. Practicing

Now I say to you: Give up your abstraction and you will also give up your question. Or if you want to hold on to your abstraction, then be consistent, and if you think of man and nature as non-existent, then think of yourself as non-existent, for you too are surely nature and man. Don’t think, don’t ask me questions, for as soon as you think and ask, your abstraction from the existence of nature and man has no meaning. Or are you such an egoist that you conceive everything as nothing, and yet want yourself to exist? (Marx, 1976a: 305)

No question of practice would be complete without a discussion of Marx’s eleven ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, and the famous eleventh thesis that informed us that philosophy had ‘only interpreted the world in various ways’, when the point was to change it (Marx, 1976b: 5). This memorable criticism, which has become the catch line for all manner of anti-philosophical charge, evokes for many the image of the ‘armchair’ academic; the ‘navel gazer’ detached from reality. It recalls Rodin’s The Thinker, bent over, introspective, contemplating a terrible scene. That lonely figure perched atop The Gates of Hell, Dante himself, perhaps, paused in deep reflection, alone on a different plane; at one remove from the wretched torment directly behind his back.

The eleventh thesis is a favourite of all those who would denounce the practice of philosophy and its pretense to speak the truth; of those who see in philosophy nothing but the practice of intellectual parthenogenesis: a profound yet ultimately empty self-
generating movement. And although some one hundred and seventy years later philosophical practice has, for the most part, failed to heed Marx’s lesson, we should not forget that conveying such a lesson was not the sole purpose of Marx’s eleven theses.

As well as serving as a study for the first chapter of *The German Ideology*, the aim of Marx’s eleven theses was to repurpose the question of practice as a question for materialism (1976b: xiv). According to Marx, all previous materialisms had thought of ‘things *Gegenstand*, reality’ only in the passive mode, ‘only in the form of the object, or of contemplation,’ but had not thought practice. Only idealist philosophy, meaning predominantly Hegel, had ‘set forth’ activity. Accordingly, materialism had hitherto failed to think practice (1976b: 3).

1.1 Theory and practice

The problem with the popular uptake of the eleventh thesis is that in isolation it can be taken to suggest the operation of two distinct modes. First, the *passive* interpretive mode as the side of thought. And second the transformative *active* mode as the side of practice. More often than not Marx’s famous utterance is offered to legitimate arguments that detract from the former while endorsing the latter. Indeed, in his introduction to *For Marx* Althusser (1969) critiques the ‘theoretically ambiguous’ eleventh thesis for this very reason. In counterposing ‘the transformation of the world to its interpretation’, Althusser sees in this thesis a formulation that is, ‘*and always will be*, only a short step’ away from ‘theoretical pragmatism’ (1969: 28).
Such pragmatism was a target for Althusser due to its complicity with the subordination of philosophy to the practical demands of politics; a problem that he saw as intrinsically connected to the French Communist Party (PCF) and the apparently isolated and inward looking culture of French communism at the time. In the same chapter Althusser laments the ‘theoretical vacuum’ into which French communism was born: ‘Despite itself it has been marked by this primacy of politics and a certain failure to appreciate the role of theory, particularly philosophical theory as opposed to political and economic theory’ (1969: 26). As Knox Peden notes, the subordination of theoretical considerations to clearly defined political ‘ends’ was for Althusser ‘the universal marker of teleology’ (2014: 144). It is therefore unsurprising that Althusser would resist the pragmatic appropriation of the eleventh thesis.

The urgency that Althusser felt toward developing a theoretically rigorous communism was not, however, simply a local affair. The 1956 Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union witnessed Nikita Khrushchev’s much discussed secret speech where he denounced the ‘cult of personality’ that had severely marked the Party under Stalin. This event signaled the end of Stalinism and the beginning of a new era of Soviet communism, as well as inaugurating a period of internal revision and fragmentation across the French left. This coupled with the end of the Algerian war in 1962 saw many in France, especially militant students, turn away from directly domestic concerns toward a reflection on the international situation. As Rancière notes in a recent interview:

Political reflection at the time was about local participation in a global movement. But it was essentially a question of more or less distant sympathy,
as it would be regarding the American war in Vietnam a little later. In France people didn’t feel implicated in the same way, and we acted without the immediate problem of solidarity, the war on the home front, etc. which had been issues during the Algerian war. After 1962 the French government was no longer engaged in any colonial war, and therefore there was no reason for this aspect to be pre-eminent. Instead it was a moment of hope in a new era of global revolution, the moment of the third-world (Rancière and Hallward, 2012: 262).

In addition to being wary of its risks, Althusser was well aware of the opportunity that this moment presented. Althusser remained strategically silent about his political motives during this sequence, choosing rather to assert the purely theoretical nature of his project as something external to the immediate demands of politics. As Rancière shows in Althusser’s Lesson, however, Althusser’s return to Marx was cognisant of this very situation and intended as a strategic political intervention. Althusser’s supposed ‘theoreticism’, Rancière notes, ‘didn’t forget politics for a minute; quite the contrary: it was an actual partisanship, and not only “in philosophy”’ (2011a: 24).

As both Althusser and Rancière saw it, the greatest risk present at that moment was the potential for French communism to, on the one hand decline into a more ideologically ‘open and liberal’ approach to theory, and on the other, to embrace revisionist politics (Rancière, 2011a: 23-5; Rancière and Hallward, 2012: 259-260). Despite his supposed theoreticism, Althusser’s intervention was intended to meet both these challenges. Thus Rancière writes, ‘The only way to keep the liquidation of Stalinism from resulting in eclecticism in theory and revisionism in practice was to
restore Marx’s theory, that is to say, restore the scientific ground upon which new political problems could be discussed’ (2011a: 24).

This dual concern for rigorous theory and revolutionary politics placed the Althusserian project in line, if only for a short time, with the goals of many radical student militants. As Rancière notes, ‘at that time, to choose the camp of theory and science was also to choose the camp of rupture, of revolution’ (Rancière and Hallward, 2012: 264). As the title of a journal co-founded by Rancière in 1975 – *Les Révoltes logiques* – suggests, Rancière continued to maintain this dual concern for both rigorous theory and revolutionary politics. The inextricable relation between theory and politics is demonstrated in his stating,

> Everything is mediated by theory. The idea is to go through theory, through science, in order to have a grip on the situation […] Politics is conceived in ways mediated by theory, I would say, in theory as much as in practice, if you see what I mean (Rancière and Hallward, 2012: 264).

Such a commitment to both revolutionary politics and rigorous theoretical analysis is one of the reasons why Rancière is such an important ally for rethinking academic practice today. It is not about subordinating the demands of theory to the demands of politics, nor the other way around. What is at issue is theory *and* practice, of their immediate connection rather than their perpetual separation.
1.2 Theoretical practice

The history outlined above is useful in order to understand the political ground upon which the theoretical debate between Rancière and Althusser was played out. While it was politically expedient for Rancière to side with Althusser for some time and argue with him for a rigorous theoretical practice, a conviction that Rancière has in fact never abandoned, his break with Althusser was both politically motivated and theoretically grounded. Politically the break centred upon the place and function of the intellectual. As outlined in the introduction, Rancière questioned Althusser’s privileging of the intellectual with the role of ‘bringing theory to the masses’ (Rancière and Hallward, 2012: 265). According to Rancière, this served to maintain the freedom of the academic while keeping the worker in their place. For Rancière this repeated precisely the ‘practical ideology of the bourgeoisie’ (2011a: 4). It was along this line that Ranciere and many others broke with Althusser following the events of May 1968. As Alain Badiou notes:

With respect to the theoretical points that remain important today, there is also a struggle on two fronts. There is a struggle against the idea that politics can be dependent on science in institutional transmission, a model according to which politics should be taught to the ‘ignorant worker’ and ‘common people’ by the experts or a part of the working class (2009: 41).

For Rancière this political critique was fundamentally directed at the important theoretical role division played in Althusser’s thought:
Here we come upon the roots of Althusser’s entire theoretical apparatus, of the whole system of differences he sets in motion: the distinction amongst instances, the construction of the time specific to each instance, the severance of science from ideology, the epistemological break that allows him to discard all the themes of leftist subjectivism as part of Marx’s personal prehistory. (2011a: 28)

It will be helpful here to further reflect on the specific theoretical stakes of Rancière’s critique. This will expose the dual theoretical-political significance of Rancière’s break with Althusser. The stakes of this theoretical debate hinge on the question of division. This question is evident in Althusser’s reading of Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’.

In his critique of the pragmatic appropriation of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, Althusser ultimately affirms the exact opposite of that which he seeks to challenge, thereby maintaining a strict division between theory and practice. This division is especially characteristic of the period in which Althusser published For Marx, however is indicative of a much broader theme in Althusser’s thought. While a ‘pragmatic’ reading of the eleventh thesis would celebrate Marx’s championing of action – of changing the world – Althusser, in denouncing practice as the pragmatic subordination of theory, affirms what he would later come to express explicitly; that ‘there is no practice except by and in ideology’ (1971: 170). Despite the many modifications this doctrine would receive throughout his career, Althusser will maintain that any practice that is not purely ‘theoretical practice’ will always remain within the realm of lived ideology.
Of course for Althusser the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, along with *The German Ideology*, were part of Marx’s ‘works of the break,’ signifying a crucial turning point from an early humanist period toward Marx’s properly scientific mature works. Althusser (1969) locates this ‘epistemological break’ in the sixth thesis, arguing that it is here where Marx first confronts the idealist – and so for Althusser thoroughly bourgeois – problem of ‘human nature’. This deeply embedded problematic that had ‘for centuries…been transparency itself’ marked the barrier between ideology and science that Marx needed to pass through (1969: 227). According Althusser the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ signal the beginning of Marx’s rejection of humanism, with the sixth thesis marking the very site of ‘the break.’

What is at issue in the sixth thesis is the question of the subject. In this thesis Marx argues that, by resolving the essence of religion into the essence of man, Feuerbach must necessarily abstract from history and ‘presuppose an abstract – *isolated* – human individual’ (1976b: 4). For Althusser, Marx’s criticism here signaled a ‘rupture with every *philosophical* anthropology or humanism’ (1969: 227). This involved a rejection of the concepts of ‘human essence’ and the ‘empirical subject’ which for Althusser seem to amount to the same thing. Such concepts are postulates of the ‘whole empiricist-idealistic world outlook’ which depends upon, as a foundation for ‘all its domains and arguments’, the concept of a sovereign individual subject (Althusser, 1969: 227).

By driving off this ‘empiricist-idealistic world outlook’ Marx, according to Althusser, was – in one great sweep of negation – rejecting the philosophical categories of ‘the
subject’, ‘empiricism’ and ‘ideal essence.’ This is what was ‘radically new’ in Marx following his break with humanism. Althusser described this as ‘the absolute (negative) precondition’ upon which Marx could develop the scientific theory of historical materialism (1969: 229). Thus, ‘It is impossible to know anything about men except on the absolute precondition that the philosophical (theoretical) myth of man is reduced to ashes’ (Althusser, 1969: 229).

In his own discussion of the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ in Althusser’s Lesson, Rancière too notes that the problematic Marx confronted in the theses was that of ‘human nature’ (2011a: 4). Echoing Althusser, Rancière argues that it is precisely this text where ‘the decisive rupture between revolutionary thought and the hierarchical thought of the bourgeoisie is played out’ (2011a: 5). Rancière goes on to note, again echoing Althusser, that it is in the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ where all previous materialisms, or the ‘old materialism’, are marked off against the ‘new’ revolutionary materialism inaugurated by Marx and Engels.

Despite these similarities, the crucial difference between these two readings rests upon the question of the subject. If for Althusser it was necessary to reduce the myth of man to ashes and with it the subject, Rancière argues that Marx does not, in spite of his rejection of the bourgeois/idealist world view, entirely do away with the subject. He writes, ‘Marx doesn’t object to the fact that Feuerbach’s history has a subject; he objects to the fact that his subject has no history’ (2011a: 6). In The German Ideology Marx critiques Feuerbach’s ‘inconsistent materialism’ for this very fault: ‘As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, as far as he considers history he is not a materialist’ (Marx, 1976b: 41). Rather than representing a rejection of the
sovereign epistemological subject, and with it the category of the subject all together, Rancière argues that Marx is concerned with questioning the very basis upon which the Feuerbachian subject rests.

Marx’s second thesis on Feuerbach gives us insight into the stakes of this problem. It states:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e., the reality and power, the this-worldliness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question (Marx, 1976b: 3).

The second thesis makes three claims. First, that the question of the ‘objective truth’ of human thought is not a strictly theoretical question but one of practice. The question as to the truth or even the possibility of human thought – one of philosophy’s stalwarts – is, according to Marx, bound to the question of activity. This means, and this is Marx’s second claim, that the truth of thought must be proven in practice. Not that the truth of thought is only ever verified in its practical application, which would lead us back to the binary in which thought sat on the side of passivity and practice on the side of action, but that the truth of thought, ‘the this-worldliness of his thinking’, is proven in practice alone.

The third claim of the second thesis is perhaps the most interesting. It states that the philosophical ‘dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking,’ which is to say the
question of the possibility of thought, conceived in the passive mode, ‘isolated from practice,’ has little to do with truth and is rather ‘a purely scholastic question.’ The question of the thinking of thought, the thinking of the objective truth or possibility of thought, is a question that primarily concerns the school as the institutional body tasked with the practice of thinking. Marx is of course referring here to the specific scholastic philosophy that dominated academic practice in medieval Europe and formed an early version of what today has become the modern university. Rather than referring specifically to any scholastic doctrine however, Marx’s point is that the question as to the reality or non-reality of thinking must necessarily abstract from the truth of its own activity.

This is why in the third thesis Marx states that ‘the educator must himself be educated’ and that the doctrine that places thought in opposition to action must necessarily ‘divide society into two parts’ (1976b: 4). The ‘dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking’ is a game of high stakes for the school. Presiding over the division between thought and non-thought masks the fact that such a dispute is itself necessarily ‘thought out’. Such a question must necessarily disavow its own activity of questioning. Which is to say that, quite simply, in questioning the reality or non-reality of thinking, thought itself is exercised.

1.3 Dividing practice
This might not sit so comfortably for those practically minded sociologists who are keen to dismiss philosophical pretension. Marx is not arguing against the pretensions of abstract thought, he is affirming the truth and reality of thinking as a human activity; something done that has an effect and material conditions upon which it
relies. And indeed something that’s truth exceeds those institutional bounds that will perpetually attempt to reign it in. If the point is not to interpret the world but to change it, then this change can only be brought about by a ‘revolutionary practice’; a thinking practice that acts upon and changes the world (Marx, 1976b: 4).

This brings us back to the question of practice and with it the division between, on the one hand the passive ‘interpretive’ mode as the side of thought, and on the other the ‘changing’ active mode as the side of practice:

This is how Marx understands it. In his critique of Feuerbach, Marx does not pit the good subject of history against the bad; rather, he pits history – with its real, active subjects – against the contemplative and interpretive subjects of German Ideology. He does not defend the ‘good’ thesis that ‘It is the masses which make history’ against the bad thesis that ‘It is man who makes history’. He is satisfied to pit against Man ‘empirical’ individuals, that is, the men who are brought into specific social relations as a result of their need to reproduce their existence (Rancière, 2011a: 7).

Rancière’s argument here is that, in positing a complete rejection of the category of the subject in Marx’s text, Althusser threw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. In lumping the conceptions of ‘man’, ‘human essence’ and ‘the subject’ together, and then rejecting them together, Althusser had lost sight of the concrete base – in the strict Marxist sense of the term – that history turned upon: real, concrete, working, suffering human individuals.
While both Rancière and Althusser agree that in the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ Marx rejects a certain epistemological subject, which is to say a subject that forms the foundation of all knowledge and understanding, an ‘abstract – isolated’ subject, they differ considerably as to the consequences of this rejection. According to Rancière (2011a: 5), the ‘old materialism’ had inherited a thoroughly bourgeois view of the world; ‘the point of view of a superior class that takes in charge the surveillance and the education of individuals by reserving for itself the ability to dictate every determining circumstance’. This is the view of a theoretical practice that divides the world into ‘those who do the science and those who are regarded as its objects’ (Rancière, Baronian and Rosello, 2008, p.3). This approximates what Foucault calls ‘dividing practices’ (1982: 777). For Foucault ‘dividing practices’ were particular practices, be these disciplinary or scientific, that divided the subject ‘inside himself’ or divided the subject from other subjects (1982: 777-8).

This is the practice of a ‘superior class’ who task themselves with the rational management and administration of the social whole. Such practice is informed – and importantly justified – by a certain form of empiricist rationalism that has as its foundation the sovereign epistemological subject. Rancière’s references to Jeremy Bentham’s ‘Panopticon’ in the same chapter are in this sense revealing as to the specificity of which ‘subject’ is at stake in Marx’s critique of Feuerbach: ‘At its core, bourgeois man is far from being the conquering subject of humanism. He is, instead, the man of philanthropy, of the humanities, of anthropometry – he is formed, assisted, kept under surveillance and measured’ (Rancière, 2011a: 4). This is a thinking that must divide ‘man’ from the very outset. On the one hand, ‘man’ as the
epistemological basis of all possible knowledge, and on the other, ‘man’ a possible object of this knowledge.

For Althusser things are quite different. The complete rejection of the subject as a theoretical foundation allowed Marx to develop a structural account of social transformation based on concrete practices of production. Importantly, this allowed for the differentiation of various forms of social activity abstracted from the concrete individual: ‘In a word, Marx substituted for the ‘ideological’ and universal concept of Feuerbachian “practice” a concrete conception of the specific differences that enables us to situate each particular practice in the specific differences of the social structure’ (Althusser, 1969: 229). The complete rejection of the subject as a foundation was thus for Althusser the sole condition upon which Marx was able to arrive at an analysis of the concrete and contradictory relations of production that formed the capitalist mode of production. For Althusser, contra Marx, practice needed to be split from the very beginning if it was ever to be anything other than ideological. Within practice there was only difference. Only upon this condition was Marx able to develop his own specific theoretical-scientific practice, wrested, as it were, from the murky ideological world of social practice.

Due to this apparent necessity to abstract from concrete individuals, Althusserian ‘theoretical practice’ operates on the condition that it can never know itself and the conditions upon which it operates. While rejecting the pragmatic reading of Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ might have been a politically expedient intervention into the specific situation in which Althusser found himself (as outlined above), his argument does nothing to alter the terms of the debate. For Althusser practice will always
remain ideological if it is welded to an individual subject, to its ‘consciousness, belief, actions’; to the subjects *identification* with, and action towards, the ends of a political community (1971: 170). Practical practice will always remain within the realm of lived ideology while theoretical practice can step outside of this only at the cost of abstracting from the concrete actions of an individual and forgetting itself. In this sense theoretical practice *cannot know itself*. Or, in a stronger sense, *must* not know itself if it is to achieve the signature of science. And so it remains: practice on the one side, theory on the other.

With this being said, there remains a vitally important lesson to be found in Althusser’s resistance to the political instrumentalisation of thought and theory. Theory is not, as some would have it, a tool or a weapon. Hammers do not think. At the same time, and if we are to rethink academic practice and one day create a ‘new university’ that does not operate on the structures of inclusion and exclusion that so forcibly mark it today, it is crucial not to immediately foreclose the political. Revolutionary practice must be a thinking practice. It cannot be a practice that needs to foreclose the political in order to think. Indeed, it might be the very mark of irrationality to do so. Below I introduce Rancière’s concept of indisciplinary thought, a method of engagement that reinscribes the political into academic practice.

1.4 Thinking practice

The problem with Althusser’s position, a problem that Rancière has ultimately overcome, is that within this position it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to think practice. This is due to Althusser’s persistent division between theory and practice. As we have seen, for Althusser it is only possible to think practice by
abstracting from the activity of questioning itself. It is only possible to think practice as difference, and to think this only from the perspective of a theoretical practice that forgets itself. Although it is Althusser’s commitment to rationalism that sees him forcefully resisting the subordination of theoretical concerns to political ends, with Althusser it becomes impossible to think practice reflexively. Which is to say that it becomes impossible to question the political grounds upon which theoretical practice practices.

Althusser approached this limit in his own thought during his seminar on *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* (1990). This seminar included lectures from both Althusser as well as Pierre Macherey, Étienne Balibar, François Regnault, Michel Pêcheux, Michel Fichant and Alain Badiou, and ran up until ‘the eve of the great events of 1968’ (Althusser, 1990: 71; Macherey, 2009). The question of scientific practice was the focus of this seminar and specifically the relationship between scientific practice and ideology. In Althusser’s first presentation he outlines a series of questions that establish the scope and purpose of the seminar:

What place can we occupy in the world today, given its uncertain future?
What attitude should we adopt with regard to our work, to the general ideas that guide or hinder our research and may guide our political action?
Behind the question: where are we going? there is an urgent, crucial practical question: how do we *orientate* ourselves? Which direction should we follow?
What is to be done?
For intellectuals, scientists or literary specialists, the question takes a precise form: what place does our activity occupy in the world, what role does it play? What are we as intellectuals in the world? For what is an intellectual if not the product of a history and a society in which the division of labour imposes upon us this role and its blinkers? Have not the revolutions that we have known or seen announced the birth of a different type of intellectual? If so, what is our role in this transformation? (1990: 82).

These existential questions posed by Althusser are not, as we have seen, particularly new – in this instance they were uttered in 1967 – nor are they particularly unique. We can gather from them a few crucial themes that motivate the problem of the very possibility of thinking practice. First, and perhaps most important, is the question of work and with it the division of labour. Above it was shown that Althusser saw in Marx’s rejection of ‘Feuerbachian practice’ the crucial break that led towards a concept of the division of labour, thus allowing for a scientific analysis of historical transformation. This was premised on a division within practice: ‘a concrete conception of the specific differences that enables us to situate each particular practice in the specific differences of the social structure’ (Althusser, 1969: 229).

In the above passage from *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, Althusser is concerned with the role of the intellectual and how this corresponds to and interacts with ‘the world’. What the intellectual does; what place their activity occupies; what their ‘function’ is. Within this analysis Althusser offers no clear distinction between the intellectual as a subject and the intellectual as a role within the division of labour. Intellectuals are ‘a product of a history and a society in
which the division of labour imposes upon us this role and its blinkers’. The intellectual is simply the result of this historical determination.

Yet if the division of labour somehow imposes blinkers over the eyes of the intellectual then the question still remains as to the possibility of their removal. Althusser seems to suggest that these blinkers do not belong to the intellectual as such, but to their role, which is to say to their position within the division of labour. The division of labour, according to Althusser, determines this blindness. How exactly, we might ask of Althusser, does our position in the division of labour determine what we can see? Why does the place that one occupies render one partially blind? Yet Althusser also suggests something beyond this: a ‘new type of intellectual.’ Does this new type of intellectual see in a way that is somehow different to the previous type?

If we follow Althusser’s announcement, it is clear enough that the problem encountered here concerns a supposed connection between the division of labour and what can be seen. With this thought, and if we are indeed, after Jacques Lacan, *not only an eye*, then the question equally concerns what can be said and therefore *who can speak*:

The whole of science is based on reducing the subject to an eye… In order to reduce us for a moment to being only an eye, we had to put ourselves in the shoes of the scientist who can decree that he is just an eye, and can put a notice on the door – *Do not disturb the experimenter*. In life, things are entirely different, because we aren’t an eye (Lacan, 1988: 8).
If a particular position within the division of labour has ‘its’ blinkers, then does it offer a corresponding gag? How are such disciplinary devices supposed to correspond to the various places and functions operating both inside and outside of academic practice? How does what we do and where we are placed within the division of labour concern what we can see and what we can say about it? Who, or what, is responsible for the distribution of such impedimenta?

This supposed connection between one’s place within the division of labour and their ability to think and speak is a theoretical limit that must be surpassed. Surpassing this theoretical limit is an important political task. To reiterate, it is my contention with this thesis to show the extent to which Rancière has overcome this limit. As we have seen the most vital and difficult question for any investigation into the question of practice is that of the possibility of thinking it. We know that thinking is something done, it is itself a practice. But usually when we think, we are thinking about something, and not the activity of thinking itself. Which is precisely Marx’s point in the first ‘Theses on Feuerbach.’ In order to one day create a practice that thinks, which is to say, after Marx, a revolutionary practice, understanding the way in which thinking and practice are entwined within one another is a vitally important task. What this involves is questioning how particular theoretical structures correspond to and divide between different practices. Rancière’s thought gives us analytical tools in pursuit of this task.

The question of the connection between theory and practice has a long history and neither Althusser nor Rancière are unique in exploring such questions. In this thesis I
make no attempt to recount this history. Rather I consider Jacques Rancière’s contribution to the question of practice; I consider both Rancière’s thinking of practice and his practice of thinking. Rancière’s approach to the question of practice differs significantly from what this investigation commonly entails, which is an exploration into an apparent gap between theory and practice. Such investigations centre around the problem of application and privilege how one is to ‘put theory into practice.’ Underlying such arguments is the division between theory and thought as passive and practice as active. Ultimately the question of practice then becomes that of application; of putting thought into practice.

For Rancière the point is not to find a method to connect theory and practice, but to question what divides them. The questioning of this very division is in fact an aspect of what he calls his ‘method.’ Rancière states his position very broadly in an article somewhat confusingly titled ‘A Few Remarks on the method of Jacques Rancière,’ within which Rancière insists on referring to himself in the third person. Discussing ‘Rancière’s method’ in the sober tone of the learned observer, Rancière states: ‘This is the main intuition underpinning Rancière’s “method”: there is not, on the one hand, “theory” which explains things and, on the other hand, practice educated by those lessons of theory’ (2009a: 120). For Rancière there are only ‘configurations of sense, knots tying together possible perceptions, interpretations, orientations and movements’ (2009a: 120). In the following chapters I explore the political stakes of this claim in order to show how a ‘configuration of sense’ – what Rancière also calls a ‘distribution of the sensible’ – is used to delimit and configure a community.
A configuration that ‘distributes sensibility’ across a social body, dividing between those who can think and those who cannot, between those who can speak and those who cannot, divides reason itself. This does violence to reason from the beginning by bluntly dividing it in two. Herein lies the basis of Rancière’s rationalism. The precise shape of this rationalism will become clearer in the following chapters. As mentioned in the introduction, this places Rancière within a long history of rationalism in French thought, especially that of the twentieth century. This history runs counter to the all-too-common characterisation of twentieth century French thought as ‘obscurantist’ or ‘Fashionable Nonsense’ as one of the more forceful manifestations of this pejorative discourse has suggested (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998).

Two recent books have done much to draw out the history of twentieth century French rationalism and its stakes: Knox Peden’s *Spinoza contra Phenomenology* (2014) and Tom Eyers’ *Post-Rationalism: Psychoanalysis, Epistemology, and Marxism in Post-War France* (2013). Both of these texts have been important points of reference for the particular reading of Rancière elaborated in this thesis, despite the fact that neither involve much engagement with Rancière’s work. Peden is content with mentioning Rancière a handful of times as a detractor of Althusser (2014: 148; 172). While Eyers dedicates a ‘brief case study’ to Rancière’s *Disagreement* in his conclusion (2013: 198-200). Throughout this thesis I would like to emphasise Rancière’s strong commitment to rationalism, and to underscore the particular form of rationalism that this entails. Without disappearing into its margins, this places Rancière as a unique voice within a much larger tradition of French thought.
Rancière will argue that questioning the reality or non-reality of thinking is in the final analysis the same as questioning the reality or non-reality of reason. We have seen that for Marx such questions were ‘purely scholastic’. The allocation of reason to a particular group of individuals or type of discourse is only one form of academic practice amongst many that must ignore the reality of its own activity in order to secure its privilege. Importantly this includes those activities that preside over the social whole, those sciences that are concerned with ‘the surveillance and the education of individuals’ (Rancière, 2011a: 5). However this extends to any ‘territorialisation’ or delimitation of a practice that is itself based upon a primary division between those who can think and those who cannot. Rancière traces the many lines of division and demarcation that separate academic practice from other kinds of practice; divisions of time; between bodies; between discourses and disciplines and most importantly divisions between those who can think and speak and those who cannot; between what counts as legitimate speech and what is registered as mere noise. Historically philosophers; political scientists; sociologists; educationalists; etc., have all in their own way come to rely on such divisions.

Drawing these practices out and making them visible is of vital importance to the present task of rethinking academic practice.

The stakes of this could not be clearer. It is about affirming the equality of thinking beings and exposing those mechanisms that seek to preserve legitimate thought and legitimate speech for a privileged few. This affirmation is required if there ever is to be a ‘new university.’ At base this is a question for communism, and therefore a question for everybody. As Rancière notes in a discussion of Plato’s Republic: ‘In
short, to say that the worker cannot be a guardian or warrior is simply to say that he is unworthy of being a communist’ (2004c: 21).

1.5 Indisciplinary practice

The so-called division of labour between disciplines is, in reality, a war. It is a war over fixing boundaries. No positive boundary severs the field of sociology from the field of philosophy, or the field of history from the field of literature. No positive boundary separates the texts that make up the discourse of science from those which are merely the objects of science. Ultimately no positive discourse separates those who are fit for thinking from those who are not fit for thinking (Rancière, 2009d: 281-2).

The ‘diagonal’ reading that this thesis offers, as outlined in the introduction, enacts what Rancière has called ‘indisciplinary thought’ (2006b: 9). Indisciplinary thought resists the artificial boundaries that constitute specific disciplines and questions what divides them. Indisciplinary thought and practice need to be considered against what is usually gathered around the idea of the interdisciplinary ‘round table’; a collegial yet empty notion of collaborative scientific practice, still quite fashionable today, as it was almost fifty years ago when Althusser held his seminar for scientists:

This myth enjoys a wide currency in the human sciences and in general. Sociology, economics, psychology, linguistics and literary history constantly borrow notions, methods and procedures from existing disciplines, whether literary or scientific. We are speaking of the eclectic practice of holding
disciplinary ‘round tables’. All the neighbors are invited, no one is forgotten – one never knows. Inviting everyone so as to leave no one out means that we do not know precisely who to invite, where we are and where we are going. The practice of ‘round tables’ is necessarily accompanied by an ideology of the virtues of interdisciplinarity, of which is the counterpoint and the mass. This ideology is contained in the formula: when one does not know what the world does not know, it suffices to assemble all the ignorant; science will emerge from an assembly of the ignorant (Althusser, 1990: 97).

Here Althusser is not so far from Rancière’s position when dismissing this ‘ideological’ notion of interdisciplinary practice, despite the fact that it is around the very question of ‘ideology’ that their differences are most apparent. The point Althusser is making is that such a conception often has very little to do with genuine scientific progress. For Althusser ‘interdisciplinarity’ is merely a slogan for ‘the spontaneous ideology of specialists’; a practice ‘oscillating between a vague spiritualism and technocratic positivism’ (1990: 97). The spontaneous ideology of scientists that forms around the slogan of indisciplinarity gathers disparate practitioners without any clearly defined end in sight. This form of interdisciplinary practice is for Althusser an ideological ‘cure-all’, ‘a widely diffused slogan which is expected to provide the solution to all sorts of difficult problems’ (1990: 84).

For Althusser the convenient notion of interdisciplinary practice merely repeats the dominant idea held by scientists as to the relationship between their own practice and the outside world. Which is to say, in the language of Althusser, those ‘imaginary identifications’ that scientists make between their own practice and the place and
function of this practice within wider society. Thus fitting with the formula offered in the ‘Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses’ essay; ‘Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence’ (1971: 162).

If interdisciplinary practice is for Althusser an ideological ‘assembly of the ignorant,’ it is important to note that the question of ignorance also enters into Rancière’s conception of ‘indisciplinary thought,’ albeit with an entirely different focus. This is not the ignorance of scientific goals or lack of direction in research that Althusser laments but a strategic ignorance toward disciplinary boundaries:

Indisciplinary thought is thus a thought which recalls the context of war, what Foucault called the “distant roar of battle”. In order to do so, it must practice a certain ignorance. It must ignore disciplinary boundaries to thereby restore their status as weapons in a dispute (2006b: 9).

The use here of Foucault’s phrase the ‘distant roar of battle’ – uttered in the closing sentences of *Discipline and Punish* (1977: 308) – suggests that what is at stake here is the very way in which academic disciplines themselves form distinct mechanisms emerging from and operating within the ‘disciplinary society.’ ‘It is to recall that a discipline is always much more than an ensemble of procedures which permit thought a given territory of objects’ (Rancière, 2006b: 8). As well as presiding over who is qualified to think and speak about a particular ‘territory of objects,’ a discipline itself is something that emerges from the ‘bourgeois world view’ that justifies the practice.
of a ‘superior class’ who task themselves with the rational management and administration of the social whole.

Indisciplinary thought involves an awareness of the social spaces of inclusion and exclusion carved out by the academy and those disciplines within it. Disciplines are formed as distinct spaces to be occupied by individuals that have received the ‘correct training’; those who know the specific rules of a given discipline and, often more importantly, observe its boundaries. It is a certain practical know-how; a knowledge of the ‘rules of the game.’ It involves an awareness of the type of actions and dispositions required to be a ‘team player’ within the disciplinary territory in question.

Indisciplinary thought reinscribes the political into academic practice. Rather than subordinating the theoretical to the demands of the political, such as Althusser lamented above, indisciplinary thought returns the truth of a particular disciplines ‘descriptions and methods’ to an always already existing war between discourses. This is fundamentally a war over fixing boundaries, of establishing and maintaining an inside and an outside. It is not the application of the theoretical an external political territory, but the explosion of the political within the territories of theoretical and academic practice.

This is not to say that everything then becomes political. Indeed, for Rancière politics is rare (1999: 17 also 139). It is to say, however, that with indisciplinary thought politics becomes possible within academic practice, and this despite the position one occupies. With this we can also begin to identify the way in which certain academic
practices form what Rancière calls ‘the police’ or police logic. These terms – politics and the police – will be detailed below in chapter two.

Practicing indisciplinary thought involves actively resisting and challenging the boundaries that constitute specific disciplines. Such practice is never without difficulty. Roland Barthes, who has had an undeniable influence on Rancière, also saw that anything amounting to a truly ‘interdisciplinary’ practice could never be the peaceful round table meeting of well established disciplines. Barthes argued that any true ‘interdisciplinary’ practice must be something that ruptures with the received disciplinary forms of academic practice:

Interdisciplinarity is not the calm of an easy security; it begins effectively (as opposed to the mere expression of a pious wish) when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down – perhaps even violently, via the jolts of fashion – in the interests of a new object and a new language neither of which has a place in the field of the sciences that were to be brought peacefully together (Barthes, 1977: 156).

It is not about ignoring the truth or non-truth of each disciplines claims. Nor is it to deny that individual disciplines do in fact investigate specific objects and that such specialisation has been crucial to scientific ‘progress’ and the expansion of knowledge. Rancière does not want to ‘disqualify’ the disciplines and he certainly does not claim to speak from some overarching meta-disciplinary perspective (2006b: 8). Instead, it is about being aware that such territories are never neutral and that, regardless of the object a particular discipline might take as its own, its actors still act
socially and they are still constituted within the social division of labour. The young Marx will again have something to tell us: ‘But also when I am active scientifically, etc., an activity that I can seldom perform directly in community with others, then my activity is social, because I perform it as a man’ (1976a: 298). Such are the stakes of thinking practice. It has nothing to do with the truth or scientificity of the discipline in question, but the constitution of each and every discipline as a sovereign territory. It is about acknowledging that academic practice acts within the division of labour. As such it depends upon its many ‘goods,’ as well as often sharing in its violence.
2. Explaining

There is a life to reason that can remain faithful to itself within social irrationality, and it can have an effect. This is what we must work toward (Rancière, 1991: 97).

The adventure of Joseph Jacotot that forms the central focus of The Ignorant Schoolmaster resulted in an ‘illumination’ that placed into sudden and sharp relief a common assumption at the heart of pedagogy: that all education was based on a fundamental inequality between a master and their student, and that as such the task of the master was to ‘transmit his knowledge to his students so as to bring them, by degrees, to his own level of expertise’ (1991: 3). This ‘blindly taken for granted’ assumption of the inequality of intelligences is an axiomatic ‘point of departure’ for this conventional understanding of pedagogy. Such a vision of education has its historical roots in a – still widespread – vision of education that sees the cultivation of ‘the people’ as crucial in establishing the stable operation of the social whole.

This approximates what Foucault has called a ‘pastoral technology’ (1981; 1982). Tracing this back to ancient Oriental societies, Foucault describes the ‘pastoral modality of power’ as an idea that imagines power relationships in society as being analogous to that of the relationship between a shepherd and their flock (1981: 227). According to Foucault this ‘technology of power’ gained a foothold in Europe during the middle ages, yet only to become manifest in diffuse and contradictory ways. It was not until ‘our’ times, Foucault argues, that it found its fullest and most violent expression in Western Europe with the formation of the modern nation state (1981:
230-1). It was those large, bureaucratic and centralised Western European societies that ‘alone evolved a strange technology of power treating the vast majority of men as a flock with a few shepherds’ (1981: 231).

Foucault’s reason for entering such an investigation was to question the relation between an increasingly ‘rationalisation-prone society’ and the apparent excesses that this evidently leads too. Noting that ‘the men of the nineteenth century soon started wondering whether reason weren’t getting too powerful in our societies’ Foucault identifies two main themes arising from this history that he traces back to pastoral power (1981: 225). The first arose from a certain fear of intellectual parthenogenesis and stressed the need to give limits to reason, to bind reason to empirical controls. This is exemplified by the Kantian philosophy (1981: 225). While the second is the relationship between this process of ‘rationalisation’ – for Foucault this is a ‘dangerous’ word – and the excesses of political power that became forcefully evident in the bureaucracies and concentration camps of twentieth century Europe. Aligning his task with that of ‘some of the members’ of the Frankfurt School, Foucault’s analysis of pastoral technology intended to investigate the links between rationalisation and power. Importantly for Foucault, the problem of rationalisation is not found in questioning whether or not this process conforms to principles of rationality, but in investigating the specific forms of rationality used in specific fields. The point, Foucault argues, is to think of rationalisation not as a general historical process, but as a series of separate and diverse tendencies emerging in distinct ways across different fields.
2.1 Police and politics

Rancière’s conception of police logic appears to have been influenced by this period of Foucault’s work. In ‘Omnes et Singulatim: Towards a Criticism of “Political Reason”’ Foucault traces the genealogy of two specific forms of rationalisation linked to the development of pastoral power (1979; Rancière, 1999: 28). These are the ‘reason of state’ and the ‘theory of police’ (1979: 242). The ‘reason of the state’ is the specific form of rationality by which a state comes to think of itself and its operations. This involves more than the simple rationalisation of governmental procedures and has to do with the accumulation of a specific form of knowledge and the application of specific practices. This is a positive form of knowledge that pertains to the state’s own strengths and weaknesses as well as those of its enemies (1979: 245). The task of gathering and organising this knowledge falls to the police: ‘the doctrine of the police defines the nature of the objects of the state’s rational activity; it defines the nature of the aims [objectifs] it pursues, the general form of the instruments involved’ (1979: 242, modified).

The specific form of rationality that we are concerned with here is state reason. Ordinarily these practices might be considered to form the basic functions of a state’s political practice, however Rancière places strong emphasis on the distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘the police’ and it is important to make this distinction clear. For Rancière politics is rare, it signifies something entirely different to the procedural and representative form of ‘democratic’ politics that is commonplace today, as well as something completely foreign to what is generally represented by those academic disciplines that preside over what they deem proper to this word. Thus Rancière writes, ‘What is usually lumped together under the name of political history or
political science in fact stems more often than not from other mechanisms concerned with holding on to the exercise of majesty, the curacy \textit{[vicarial]} of divinity, the command of armies, and the management of interests’ (1999: 17, modified). Which is to say, those practices and knowledges that serve to maintain the administration of the social order and keep its foundation in place. This mechanism is what Rancière terms the ‘police.’

Rancière wants to distance his concept of the police from that of Foucault’s, however there are important crossovers. This is especially apparent in the case of education explored by Rancière in \textit{The Ignorant Schoolmaster}, where he develops a critique of pastoral educational technologies. Although Rancière does not use the term pastoral, his critique of pedagogy bears many affinities to Foucault’s conception of pastoral power discussed above. More generally Rancière’s thought with respect to the police reveals his proximity to Foucault and it will be useful here to briefly expand upon this before launching into this chapter’s main discussion.

The ‘police’ is not limited to the forceful administration of the law through specialists in violence as the conventional understanding of the word indicates. This is certainly part of its function however it does not stop there. Rancière states that police logic ‘is the logic that simply counts the lots of the parties, that distributes bodies within the space of their visibility or their invisibility and aligns ways of being, ways of doing, and ways of saying appropriate to each’ (1999: 28). This involves ‘a configuration of \textit{occupations} and the properties of the spaces where these occupations are distributed’ (Rancière, 1999: 29).
In the original French manuscript Rancière also uses the term ‘occupation’ here (1995a: 52). This gives sense to the double meaning of the word ‘occupation’ as something possessed or held by an individual – to ‘have’ an occupation – as well as the actions associated with this particular position. It connects a place with its function. This is not to say, however, that police logic is solely limited to the distribution of bodies within the division of labour. In using this term Rancière does not mean solely those official occupations involved with the private or public sectors, but the indexing of bodies – real human individuals – to any visible social position, and the actions and predicates associated with and expected of such positions. Indeed, for Rancière the distinction between the public and private sectors is itself a police operation: ‘It is police law, for example, that traditionally turns the workplace into a private space not regulated by the ways of seeing and saying proper to the public domain, where the worker’s having a part is strictly defined by the remuneration of his work’ (1999: 29).

The police is, more generally, an ‘order that arranges that tangible reality in which bodies are distributed in a community’ (Rancière, 1999: 28). It is a form of positively indexing a community, of making visible various groups and their interests. Importantly this ordering governs the mode of their appearing by designating what is proper to each group. Rancière explains, ‘The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task’ (1999: 29). Here the police logic begins to look a lot like the all invasive ‘panoptic gaze’ described by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977). It was shown in chapter one
how Rancière traces the critique of such a point of view back to Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach,’ albeit via ‘the teachings of Michel Foucault’ (Rancière, 2011a: 158n4).

The police involves an elaborate connection between an authority and a specific kind of knowledge, that ‘great empirical knowledge that covered the things of the world and transcribed them into the ordering of an indefinite discourse that observes, describes and establishes the “facts”’ (Foucault, 1977: 226). Rancière does not, however, recognise such a tight binding between knowledge and power as does Foucault. If Foucault was interested in the way social divisions between the normal and abnormal, sane and insane, shepherd and flock, etc., act as structuring conditions for the modern epistêmê, Rancière is more interested in the ineffectiveness of such designations. If Foucault encloses individuals within cages of visibility, Rancière makes visible the shadows that such cages will necessarily cast in order to show that escape is always possible. And if Rancière admits a certain proximity between his ‘distribution of the sensible’ and Foucault’s concept of the epistêmê, this is grounded in a much different conception of knowledge and history. In Rancière’s own words, ‘where Foucault thinks in terms of limits, closure and exclusion, I think in terms of internal division and transgression’ (Rancière, Guénoun and Kavanagh, 2000: 13). Such a difference hinges on Rancière’s presupposition of the equality of intelligences: ‘it’s the question of equality – which for Foucault had no theoretical pertinence – that makes the difference between us’ (2000: 13).

2.2 The abyss of explication

Education has for some time been a crucial tool in the management of the population. An apparently unruly and unorganised mass are seen as either (or indeed, often both)
a threat to the stability of the ‘public order’, and thus problematic from the point of view of policing, or a wasted source of energy, and thus problematic from the point of view of exploitation. Education is tasked with bringing this wayward rabble into line with the interests of the state and the movement of capital. Experts in education are called upon to oversee the procedure, officially establishing, by way of state decree, ‘the intelligent caste’s management of the stupid multitude’ (Rancière, 1991: 131). This establishes a primary division between those ‘thinkers’ presiding over the science of education and those who are merely the objects of this science.

Specifically for Rancière, such a vision of education sees the explication of taught material as its primary task (1991: 4). It is assumed that the purpose of a master is to explain, to ‘shatter the silence of the taught material’ (1991: 4). While this might seem at first altogether innocent or obvious, Rancière notes that such an understanding leads immediately to an infinite regress:

Consider, for example, a book in the hands of a student. The book is made up of a series of reasonings designed to make a student understand some material. But now the schoolmaster opens his mouth to explain the book. He makes a series of reasonings in order to explain the series of reasonings that constitute the book. But why should the book need such help? Instead of paying for an explicator, couldn’t a father simply give the book to his son and the child understand directly the reasonings of the book? And if he doesn’t understand them, why would he be any more likely to understand the reasonings that would explain to him what he hasn’t understood? Are those reasonings of a
different nature? And if so, wouldn’t it be necessary to explain the way in which to understand them? (1991: 4).

This is the abyss of explication. While the explicator might claim to offer light to the darkness of a text, or to turn its mute presence into speech, what their practice has as its true function is ‘to recognize the distance between the taught material and the person being instructed’ (1991: 5). This enacts a division of discourses. First between the discourse of the text and the discourse of the explicator, with the latter somehow presumed to be of a more accessible nature to the student, more within their ‘grasp.’ Here explication concerns less the communication of the truth or science of the taught material than it concerns the division of bodies and the establishment of a hierarchy. Indeed reason or truth has little to do with such practice: what is truly at stake is the establishment and maintenance of the social relation of inequality. Reason is, in the final analysis, disavowed and only the crude division between knowledge and ignorance remains. The stultifying lessons of the explicator place the social relation of inequality before the student’s mastery of the material, and as such ‘the lesson is never finished. The master always keeps a piece of learning – that is to say, a piece of the students ignorance – up his sleeve’ (1991: 21).

As the explicative order is fundamentally based on the inequality of intelligence, it puts into play this constant deferral of equality. And although such an order claims as its goal the reduction of inequality, it is precisely this founding distance that ensures ‘an indefinite process of coming closer’ (1991: 120). This process involves a conflation between place and time. The place of the teacher is closed off to the student by a temporal deferral – the abyss of explication – that ensures the
maintenance of the structure of inequality. ‘Disciplinary thinking uses time itself as a principle of spatialization. It makes time a place that encloses and defines those who are in it’ (Rancière, 2009d: 282). Student’s are ‘not-yet’ teachers, anchored in place by the weight of their ignorance. And while it was initially this ignorance that supposedly divided the student from the teacher, it is ultimately the abyss of this ‘not-yet’ that maintains the structure of inequality. Explication is the proper name for the practice that maintains this division.

Of course in concrete practice the deferral inaugurated by the abyss of explication could never continue indefinitely: even those most stubborn and entrenched masters must eventually lay down their truncheons: they are finite, they die, someone else takes their place. Yet the structure remains. This is clearly seen in education when the student finally becomes the peer of the master; suddenly cleansed of their ignorance the student-now-master takes up the explicators baton:

The child *advances*. He has been taught, therefore he has learned, therefore can forget. Behind him the abyss of ignorance is being dug again. But here’s the amazing part: from now on the ignorance is someone else’s. What he has forgotten, he has surpassed. He no longer has to spell out loud or stumble his way through a lesson like those vulgar intelligences and the children in beginning classes. People aren’t parrots in his school. We don’t load the memory, we form the intelligence. I understood says the child, I am not a parrot. The more he forgets, the more evident it is to him that he understands. The more intelligent he becomes, the more he can peer down from on high at those he has surpassed (Rancière, 1991: 21-2).
2.3 The ‘pedagogicisation’ of society

The abyss of explication concerns not only the knowledge or ignorance of classroom materials but that of the operation of society itself. Within the logic of explication rests an entire social logic: the police logic which places bodies within a hierarchical ordering of places and functions; superiors and inferiors; insiders and outsiders; masters and slaves. All in the supposed interest of the ordered progression of the whole.

Indeed, the particular mode on which this social logic operates is really captured by the phrase that adorns the Brazilian flag – ‘order and progress’ – each word presupposing a certain regime of division and inequality. It is perhaps unsurprising that this phrase was taken from August Comte’s motto for positivism: ‘Love as principle and order as ground; progress as goal’. Of course ‘positivism’ has its base in the Latin *positus*, the past participle of *ponere*; to ‘put’ or ‘place’. This is moreover a question of the division and allotment of an empirical ‘given’. For Rancière ‘Progress is the new way of saying inequality’ (1991: 119). With the idea of the ‘social order’ comes the idea of a division of bodies: ‘Whoever says order says distribution into ranks’ (1991: 117). This repeats the classical law of identity that states each thing is equal to itself and no other, and affords the neat ‘packaging up’ of bodies into places and functions.

The logic of ‘progress’ is that which, from the very beginning, opens a gap – an abyss – between those who know and those who do not know in order to progressively and indefinitely close this gap. We can see this social logic at work in the sudden
importance of ‘life-long learning’ to education policy across the globe. Something Deleuze (1992) took note of as part of the emergent disciplinary mechanism he named the ‘Societies of Control’. A situation where ‘one is never finished with anything’ (1992: 5). The pedagogicisation of society begins with the supposed truth of inequality only to immediately and perpetually renounce this as something to be overcome in time. The lovers of order and progress find justification for their practice in this temporal abyss that forms a defensive wall around their place and function. As Caroline Pelletier puts it, ‘In a democratic society in which all men are equal, it is therefore the role of public education to justify inequality whilst promising to perpetually reduce it’ (2009: 144).

The pedagogical fiction, the fiction of the inequality of intelligences, is thus also the ‘representation of inequality as a delay [retard] in ones development: inferiority, in its innocence, lets itself be taken in; neither a lie nor violence, inferiority is only a lateness, a delay’ (Rancière, 1991: 119, modified). Rancière’s point is not that such a logic does not ‘work,’ or that we could somehow ‘do it better.’ It is rather that the explicative order tells us much more about its practitioners than those subjects to whom it is applied. According to Rancière, the lovers of order and progress will posit an incurable inequality in order to put themselves ‘in the position of curing it’ (1991: 119).

For those ‘progressives’ who subscribe to this narrative inequality is axiomatic, a point of departure, and it is this axiom which, as a ‘justificatory fiction’ aims at ensuring domination and subjugation. Thus the logic of perpetual explication extends beyond the school and from it we can gather an entre social logic. Progressives, who
know how society works, task themselves with presiding over the proper operation of the social whole; ‘the intelligent caste’s management of the stupid multitude’ (1991: 131). This managerial freedom is defended by an old and well worn idea: that intellectual work requires the freedom of leisure of which manual work strictly forbids. Time again becomes a principle of enclosure and exclusion. As such, overcoming inequality is, from the very beginning, something only to ever come by degrees. It is destined to imitate the perpetual squaring of a circle; a profitable exercise for those lucky enough to find employment as mathematicians.

Rancière calls this idea that a worker is only able to do one thing ‘monotechnics’. The hierarchies of the pedagogicised society are maintained through this simple assertion. In a society defined by monotechnics the individual amounts – fully and without remainder – to that which is signified by their occupation, and their individual knowledge, capacities and behaviour are supposed to reflect this. The intelligent cast are those privileged ‘aristocratic’ few who have had the time for learning. Some have used this freedom to learn pastoral techniques. Of course the ‘intelligent caste’ do not always actually operate the social machine, but they are certainly concerned with what is proper to it. And this is precisely the point: the intelligent class occupy themselves with the management of the stupid multitude. Which is to say they think for the multitude, but only on the presupposition that the multitude are incapable of thinking for themselves. They are, after all, so very busy: it is well known that work does not wait. This is one element of what Rancière has elsewhere called ‘the hatred of democracy’ (2006a).
2.4 The irrationality of the social

So the explicative order is ‘not only the stultifying weapon of pedagogues but the very bond of the social order’ (1991: 117). And although this logic lays claim to a certain rationality, this is only in the interest of the ordered progression of society, which is to say in the interest of domination. A certain logic does indeed accompany this ordering and it is not a mystification or a trick. Logics of domination have their own perverse clarity. Yet if these logics are consistent with themselves this is only because they gain this consistency through their founding divisions: their ‘rationality’ is won through the exclusion of the ‘irrational,’ or simply what does not count as belonging to their own specific rationality.

Such logics also do violence to reason from the very beginning by presupposing the inequality of intelligences. This presupposition, which is a presupposition about the capacities of subjects, renounces reason through that blunt instrument which divides the intelligence into two. Such a social division is irrational in the sense that it places this division as primary. It makes this division axiomatic, a starting point or beginning, and as such reason will only ever be secondary to this primary division: ‘Thus the social world is not simply the world of non-reason; it is that of irrationality, which is to say, of an activity of the perverted will, possessed by inequality’s passion’ (Rancière, 1991: 82). And so the explicative order contains a certain irrationality at its core – the irrationality of the social – which does not think but only divides.

The irrationality of the social works as an abstract guarantor, providing an alibi for perpetual inequality. The social whole is seen as an abstract source of life and energy and, from such a perspective, it seems the individual has little option but to submit to
this inherently good and emphatically unstoppable movement: ‘It’s society that perfections itself, that takes perfectibility as the watchword of its order. It’s society that progresses, and a society can only progress socially, that is to say, all together and in good order’ (1991: 118-9). The social whole then becomes the body of Christ: a symbol of our debt and reminder of our place.

This recalls Foucault’s conception of pastoral power discussed above. Pastoral technology developed in Europe through Christian institutions, yet according to Foucault, ‘spread and multiplied outside the ecclesiastical institution’ (1982: 783). While pastoral power is not limited to the institutions of the church, its function retains something of the Christian ‘code of ethics’ upon which it was developed. For Foucault pastoral power is ‘oblative’, something offered in ritual or worship. Unlike the repressive power of the state or monarch pastoral power offers salvation. With the decline of Christian pastoralism, Foucault argues, the promise of salvation becomes something offered in this world, rather than something only to be found in the next. Here ‘the social’ steps in to replace God as the benevolent force promising salvation.

Yet it is important to be careful here. This is not the operation of an empty symbolic authority, nor is it the operation of a master signifier; it rather has to do with the particular logical form that such progress entails. Submitting to the explicative order is of a fundamentally different nature than that of submission to a repressive authority: ‘He is no longer submitting to the rod, but to the hierarchical world of intelligence’ (Rancière, 1991: 8). Which is to say that what is at stake here is not a relation of force or will, of the weak versus the strong, but one of sense or ‘knowing’ tied to places and functions. What is crucial to note is that for Rancière it is not the
‘duped’ worker or student who submits to this world, but the enlightened expert of the intelligent caste, the individual who wins their place in the privileged ranks of ‘aristocratic space’.

Such an incorporation does not involve the misrecognition of some other ‘real’ scene, nor is it a form of apperception or interpellation, nor is it Pascallian assent. In fact the entire ideological edifice which supposedly binds the subject to their symbolic masters seems at odds with this way of thinking. It is not a mystification, or a veil to be lifted; it makes sense, it adds up and is consistent with itself. This consistency comes at the expense of excluding all that cannot be counted within its logic, the ‘exclusion of what “is not”’ (2010b: 36). In the case of the intelligent caste tasked with the management of the stupid multitude, it is precisely the universality of logos – the equality of speaking beings – which is forbidden. The individual who wins their place in the privileged ranks of ‘aristocratic space’ shares in the logos of this community. But this sharing is only possible through the condition that the community excludes what it can not abide: intellectual equality.

To achieve this exclusion the lover of order and progress takes their own particular founding assumption, the assumption of inequality, and extends this universally: ‘But now a man of progress is something else as well: a man whose thinking takes the opinion of progress as its point of departure, who erects that opinion to the level of the dominant explication of the social order’ (Rancière, 1991: 117). While ‘the rod’ relies primarily on submission, the hierarchical world of intelligence works, fundamentally, by way of an operation of exclusion. ‘The progressives’ presuppositions are the social
absolutizing of what is presupposed by pedagogy’ (1991: 119). This is the reign of a particular distribution of the sensible that Rancière calls ‘the explicative order’.

2.5 The good lie

Although the presupposition of inequality wants to give itself a ‘natural’ foundation, it is necessarily artificial; it ‘is a story declared to be as such’ (Rancière, 2004c: 18). It is the ‘good lie’ of Plato that minted the souls of the members of his ideal city; ‘the necessary and sufficient lie, the axiom or undemonstrable principle that bears a resemblance to the end of his work, nature’ (Rancière, 2004c: 18). Thus Rancière writes, ‘Only lying permits a radical separation of the royal science from the division of competences’ (2004c: 27). It is the freedom to make this good lie that marks the dividing line between the intelligent practice of the enlightened social expert or philosopher and the simple artisanal technique that is grounded in necessity:

The difference in nature is not the irrational that thought runs up against, nor is it the ‘ideology’ where the history of social oppression conceals itself.

Nothing in fact is concealed. Plato says openly that nature must be an object of decree in order to become an object of education. It is the presupposition laid down by the selector breeder [sélectionneur-éleveur] of souls to begin the work of forming natures. Nature is a story declared to be as such. As the only one who knows the relationship between suitable means and desirable ends, the engineer of souls is the only one who has the power and the knowledge to lie – the lie that is an imitation of truth, the good lie; the lie that suffices to establish an order safe from the true lie [du veritable mensonge], the
technological ignorance of principles and ends (Rancière, 2004c: 18, modified).

While this presupposition divides intelligences through the good lie that serves as its foundational decree, the apparent neutrality of this steps in to justify the resulting structure. The pedagogicised society offers a tight circle of tautology: the division of labour is grounded in the natural inequality of subjects and the natural inequality of subjects is proven in the division of labour. ‘Pedagogic action justifies pedagogic authority which legitimates it in turn – an unvicious circle authorising pedagogic work without failure’ (2004c: 177). This result, which is merely the repetition of its own presupposition, is the Platonic image of justice: learn your place, know your place. Indeed, everything is reduced to place and function. Monotechnics reigns: ‘The image of justice is the division of labor that already organizes the healthy city: “It is right for the shoemaker by nature to make shoes and occupy himself with nothing else, for the carpenter to practice carpentry, and similarly all others”’ (Rancière, 2004c: 25; Plato, [Republic 443c]).

This is what ‘virtue’ amounts to in a pedagogicised society. This is its ethics: to know ones place and act in accordance with such decree. Within this distribution knowledge is a privilege of one’s position in the division of labour, which is to say it belongs to the particular position or function in which a subject resides. This is why Rancière will say that, in terms of education, there is ‘only one way for the students to be able to criticize their professors’ and that is ‘to become their peers’ (2011a: 40). This particular structure operates exclusively through the distribution of places and functions within the division of labour; places of which subjects may, or may not,
come to occupy. In this sense the structure of exclusion ultimately has very little to do with the capacities of subjects, that is despite the fact that it is based upon an original division that claims as such.

2.6 Practice and ‘nothing else’

While such an order is based axiomatically on the presupposition of a natural subjective incapacity, the structure itself tells very little about the capacities of a subject. Indeed, from an institutional and organisational perspective, knowledge is seen as ultimately non-subjective: it is a predicate of the place to be occupied within the division of labour, but not of the subject itself. Of course this is not to say that certain skills are not needed for the performance of certain jobs, certain ‘know-how,’ technical specialty, tricks of the trade, etc. However it is to say that in the final analysis, those particular places and functions designated by the police order tell us very little about the thinking and speaking subject. Knowledge becomes the predicate of place and function and occupation is all that matters: ‘Their virtue is only ranking [classement]’ (Rancière, 2004c: 167). The point is precisely that, from the point of view of the state or police, which is to say the dominant mode of appearing, or simply the official account of what can be seen: the identity given by an occupation is all that matters: the subject amounts to; the subject is the place it occupies.

Although from the perspective of the police the subject is the place it occupies, it is not necessary for a subject to completely identify with their allotted place. From the perspective of the state it suffices for them to merely appear as such: ‘how is one to recognize potters if they are not at their wheel? It may suffice, indeed, for them
simply to appear to be at work’ (Rancière, 2004c: 22). No subjective identification with the job is needed:

Were so many shoes needed, and so much time to learn how to make them? Now we know that a true shoemaker is not someone who makes good shoes but someone who does not pass himself off as anything other than a shoemaker. Indeed, ignorance of the craft may be even better than expertise in it to guarantee the monotechnics that alone constitutes the virtue of the artisan. Idleness and incompetence are the dispossessions best suited to ensuring what is singularly important, that the artisan does only one thing, the thing that marks him off and serves to put him in his place (2004c: 22).

What is eminently important to the police logic is this strict correspondence between the subject and their place and function. Nothing that does not conform to this distribution is counted. Crucially, this counting has a function well beyond that of productivity: ‘The state does not need so many pieces of pottery; it merely needs to know how to recognize potters’ (2004c: 22). And so long as the police can recognize a potter, then it matters little if the potter recognises themselves to be so. As long as things appear to conform to the police order a potter is free to harbor a cynical consciousness and disavow their own craft. While maximum utility is not the ultimate end of the police logic, function – which is to say those ways of doing attributed to a particular social position or ‘place’ – remains crucial. There is no code for a non-function. There are codes for more or less desirable functions. More or less costly or profitable functions. But no code for a non-function: ‘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’ (Rancière, 2010b: 36).

Yet here is the crucial point, what is revealed in the incommensurability between the police logic and the equality of speaking beings is the fact that the police logic tells us, in the final analysis, very little about the capacities of the subject. This is true of both artisans and workers – ‘the stupid multitude’ – as well as the ‘intelligent caste’ who form the community of specialists in police logic (1991: 131). Thus in the example of the Platonic city ‘it is not necessary for the specialists to be competent – or, if you wish, that their competence has nothing to do with truth and can even be a lie in order to preserve the only important thing: the ‘nothing else,’ the virtue of those to whom the philosophic lie concerning nature has bequeathed iron as their portion’ (2004c: 27). Which is to say the virtue of a society of monotechnicians.

What is final in such thinking is the preservation of this ‘nothing else’ of the police logic, which is at the same time the exclusion of what to it ‘is not’ (2010b: 36). The police logic strives for total establishment, however such a totality is always threatened by the fundamental equality of speaking beings: a truth upon which it necessarily relies yet must constantly disavow. Faced with this void, social irrationality steps in to suture the present lack. The function of specialisation serves this suturing role yet does so only by emptying out its foundational specificity, which was the affirmation of the natural incapacity of subjects. While the police order is destined to only ever count places and their functions, in practice such functions are secondary to the maintenance of inequality.
The barrier of orders is the barrier of the lie. Nothing remains of the fine functionality of the division of labor. Each was obliged to do the one task for which nature destined him. But the function is an illusion just as nature is. All that remains is the prohibition. The artisan in his place is someone who, in general, does nothing but accredit, even at the cost of lying, the declared lie that puts him in his place (2004c: 29).

The specialist in police logic, be this the philosopher-king of *The Republic* or the modern day policy expert, political scientist, chief economist for a bank, etc., mark off their practice from the simple *technê* of the worker or artisan, or indeed any other practitioner that does belong to their community of scholars. This practical division operates both within and beyond the university in order to secure aristocratic privilege. Justifying this is the division between freedom of thought, or ‘critical distance’ gifted by nature to the ruling class, and the instrumental action of workers grounded in necessity. The affirmation of the equality of intelligences is revolutionary precisely in the way that it exceeds this logic.

It is for this reason that Rancière gladly admits a certain proximity to the ‘good lie’ of Plato’s *Republic* that minted the souls of its citizens, albeit with one fundamental basic difference:

Are we then that far from Socrates? He too taught, in the *Phaedrus* as in *The Republic*, that the philosopher will tell the good lie, the one that is exactly necessary and sufficient, because he alone knows what lying is. The whole difference is precisely this: we suppose that everyone knows what lying is. It
is even by this that we defined the reasonable being, by his incapacity to lie to
*himself*. We are thus not speaking at all about the wise man’s privilege, but
about the power of reasonable people. And this power depends on an *opinion*,
that of the equality of intelligence (1991: 95).

So there is a fundamental difference between the axiom of inequality and the
presupposition of the equality of intelligences and this difference hinges on the
question of rationality. The presupposition of the equality of intelligences is an
axiomatic affirmation of rationality, while the presupposition of inequality splits a
reason in two, tying reason to subject positions across a division of labour that, as we
have seen, tell us very little about the actual capacities of the subject. A potter does
not need to be particularly good at making pots, nor is it necessary for them to see
themselves as potters.
3. Reasoning

Whatever rationality is given to society is taken from the individuals that make it up. And what is refused to the individuals, society can easily take for itself, but it can never give it back to them. This goes for reason as it goes for equality, which is reason’s synonym. One must choose to attribute reason to real individuals or to their fictive unity. One must choose between making an unequal society out of equal men and making an equal society out of unequal men (Rancière, 1991: 133).

It is hopefully clear by now what challenges a rethinking of academic practice must overcome. The need for this rethinking emerges out of a situation of both urgency and opportunity. It was argued that as the university passes through a sequence of reconfiguration it is of crucial importance that egalitarian ideas are revitalised to combat those blunt and violent forces of division and inequality that currently erode it. In the chapter one, as well as further underscoring this need, the question as to the very possibility of thinking practice and the difficulties this gives rise to were discussed. Specifically it was argued that such an exercise must resist the binary that holds thought on one side as passive and practice on another as active. In chapter two I looked at Rancière’s thought on pedagogy and the ‘pedagogicisation’ of society, considering those practices that place themselves in the position of social expert and in doing so win their own privilege. In this chapter I consider Rancière’s rationalism and the specific relations between thought and action that this entails.
Take, for example, the question of beginning. Beginning is, in a concrete sense, something immanent to any academic practice. Deciding on a topic, starting research, beginning to read, write, formulate a particular problem or hypothesis; in short deciding what to do and why to do it. These are the basic starting points of any academic practice. It might seem tautological to further note that beginning is the first practical step taken in academic work, which is to say that practice begins at the beginning, to begin is to act. Yet beginnings in academic practice are not often challenged or questioned and often remain assumed or presupposed; implicit and unannounced.

For those engaging with the work of Rancière, beginnings take on a special significance due to his specific method and the specific form of rationalism that he has developed. For Rancière beginnings are absolutely crucial. Beginnings are foundations. However, for Rancière, to speak of foundations is always to speak of ‘a “might be” or an “as if”, which is reached afterwards, at the end of a process’ (2009a: 119). In order to better illustrate this point it will be helpful to turn to another great thinker of beginnings: George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

In a few remarkable passages from The Science of Logic Hegel discusses the importance and difficulty of beginning (2010: 45-55). Asking ‘with what must the beginning of science be made?’ Hegel notes that the problem of beginning had been neglected by the philosophical thought of his time. This was largely due to the failure to conceive the problem beginning as a moment in the process of thinking, which is to say as a ‘subjective activity’ that begins a practice of thinking (2010: 46):
The beginning as such, on the other hand, as something subjective in the sense that it is an accidental way of introducing the exposition, is left unconsidered, a matter of indifference, and consequently also the need to ask with what a beginning should be made remains of no importance in the face of the need for the principle in which alone the interest of the fact seems to lie, the interest as to what is the truth, the absolute ground of everything (Hegel, 2010: 45).

Much like Marx’s critique of scholastic philosophy in the second thesis on Feuerbach, discussed in chapter one, Hegel here questions a form of philosophising that, in its quest to find a ground for what it already takes to be given – ‘the fact’ – ignores the reality of its own activity. A form of thinking that thinks about things but not the activity of thinking itself.

Hegel does not argue against all thought that begins with ‘facts,’ but questions what exactly these ‘facts’ are taken to amount to. For Hegel, regardless of what it is that one begins with, such a beginning cannot be thought as complete or concrete. Completion is – equally for Rancière as it is for Hegel – only ever reached at the end of a process. What this means is that beginnings are always ‘abstract’ in the sense that while they are indeed posited or advanced they cannot have any ‘determinate content’ as this would presuppose a process of mediation. Such a beginning would therefore be no beginning at all:

Here we then have the precise reason why that with which the beginning is to be made cannot be anything concrete, anything containing a connection within its self. It is because, as such, it would presuppose within itself a process of
meditation and the transition from a first to an other, of which process the concrete something, now become a simple, would be the result. But the beginning ought not itself to be already a first and an other, for anything which is in itself a first and an other implies that an advance has already been made (Hegel, 2010: 52).

This is how we are to understand Rancière’s assertion that to begin is to start from ‘a “might be” or an “as if”, which is reached afterwards, at the end of a process’ (2009a: 119). While ‘as if’ is an essentially hypothetical formulation, it is better described as an axiomatic decision – a leap of faith perhaps – that forms the basic assumption upon which a logical system is then constructed (see Power, 2010).

To begin in this way is to not presuppose any determinate content but to operate upon an abstract assumption, or presupposition, the truth of which is only realised in the process itself. To begin is to act. This statement – to begin is to act – acknowledges that beginnings are always artificial. Rather than something given – God given perhaps – which we then question the truth or falsity of, beginnings are for Rancière always made. Indeed, the process of questioning God-given dogma, back and forth, was precisely the method of the medieval school men that Marx draws attention to in his ‘Theses on Feuerbach’. It is in this sense that beginnings might be classed as axiomatic. Beginnings are a matter of practice which is why it pays to think about them. With what one begins will always shape whatever follows. Where one begins will always influence where one will end up.
3.1 The distribution of the sensible

Chapter one considered the question of practice. It was noted that for Rancière the point was not to find some means to connect theory and practice but to question what divides them. Here we saw how for Althusser the primacy of division, especially of the division of labour, led to a limit as to the very possibility of thinking practice. If there is a direct connection between a subject’s position in the division of labour and what they can see and say, then thinking practice becomes impossible for everyone apart from a privileged sect of theoretical practitioners who must differentiate the ‘aristocratic space’ from which they speak from the murky world of social practice (see Badiou, 2009: 37). It has also been shown that such groups must necessarily forget their own activity, or at least exclude this from their ‘serious’ considerations as we saw in the case of Althusser.

For Rancière the establishment of a community, be this political, scientific, or otherwise, is always tied to a distribution of ‘sense’ – hence his renowned ‘distribution of the sensible’. A distribution of the sensible is that ‘generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed’ (2010b: 36). The significance of this plays off the dual meaning given to the French partage which means both a division; ‘that which separates and excludes’, and a sharing; ‘that which allows participation’ (2010b: 36). As Rancière writes, ‘This is what a distribution of the sensible means: a relation between occupations and equipment, between being in a specific space and time, performing specific activities, and being endowed with capacities of seeing, saying, and doing that “fit” those activities’ (2009d: 275). It is about knotting certain forms of knowing to certain forms of doing and mapping these onto a social body.
The divisions between the disciplines, Rancière argues, are also distributions of territories that establish what can be seen and what can be said. Such distributions are always legislative arrangements that sort between those who are qualified to think and speak in a particular field or about a particular object, and those who are not. These divisions will consist of an implicit or explicit understanding of what counts as reasoned or logical discourse. For Rancière, this understanding of ‘what counts’ is always local to a particular distribution. What counts is therefore also what belongs to the particular territory or community in question. Nothing outside of this distribution is counted as logical or sensible: ‘The community of science is that of the cloth that leaves no void available to either one or the other group’ (Rancière, 2004b: 138).

The security and autonomy of such territories will often rely on a foundational division between speech that counts as legitimate, logical or sensible, against the illegitimate, illogical, misplaced or simply nonexistent speech of others. Another way of saying this is that these ‘rational’ or ‘sensible’ communities, in order to maintain their identity as ‘rational’ or ‘sensible,’ rely on a division of bodies – real human individuals – in order to establish an outside or absolute other: not-rational, not-sensible. This ‘outside’ acts as a negative correlate lending consistency to the ‘inside’ of the community. The consistency of these communities rely on the exclusion of what does not belong to them, or simply of what, for them, ‘is not’.

In Rancière’s work there are ultimately two conflicting yet intertwined logics that he brings together across a variety of analyses. The first begins with the presupposition of the equality of intelligences. This asserts, as a point of departure, that no positive
discourse ‘separates those who are fit for thinking from those who are not fit for thinking’ (2009d: 281-2). While the second logic divides the intelligence into two by positing a hierarchy of discourses or a hierarchy of intelligence, often both, that serve as a foundation for a particular distribution of the sensible or ‘community of knowledge’ (2004b: 135).

Rancière traces these logics back to ancient philosophy. In Aristotle the possession of *logos*, or speech, marks the human as a logical animal distinct from the animal whose voice (*phônê*) can only indicate pleasure or pain. It is the difference between a logical ‘discursive articulation’ and the mere ‘phonetic articulation of a groan’ (Rancière, 1999: 2). That is to say, the division between sensible discourse and nonsensical noise (1999: 30). This makes the human animal a fundamentally political animal. To quote Aristotle:

> Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure or pain, and the intimation of them to one another and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore the likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone have any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state (1984: 1988 [1253a 15-20]; Rancière, 1999: 1).
The attribution of this power of the *logos*, or ‘sense’, marks the condition for the political animal’s inclusion in a community or ‘association of living beings’: ‘The supremely political destiny of man is attested by a *sign*: the possession of the logos, that is, of speech, which *expresses*, while the voice simply *indicates*’ (Rancière, 1999: 2). This shared capacity of *logos*, the ability to articulate and express oneself, is the basic condition that divides the human animal from other animals and makes a political community, ‘a family and a state’, possible.

What is crucial for Rancière is not the historical genesis of such a division nor its justifications, but the way in which it can come to operate in the local establishment and maintenance of a political community. While the possession of the *logos* marks the simple division between humans and animals, it is repurposed in order to mark the division between humans and other humans in the establishment of a social hierarchy. This division between humans and other humans splits the *logos* from within, distributing it unevenly across a social body. Importantly this division lends consistency to a community by clearly constituting its outside. This outside is to a community that which does not count as belonging to and sharing in ‘its’ *logos*. With the *logos* now elevated to the status of a privileged ‘sovereign’ possession, the establishment of a territory in which some individuals count as sharing in the *logos* while others do not returns a particular strata of human individuals to the status of mere animals.

While the power of the *logos* was that which originally defined the political animal, as well as being the absolute precondition upon which any political community ultimately rests, Rancière notes that this ‘is in no way the given on which politics is
then based’ (1999: 22). Rather, the uneven distribution of this capacity, of the *logos*, is precisely that which ‘orders’ a political community. Such an ordering divides bodies between rulers and subjects, between those who give orders and those who follow them, between those who think and those who merely act. This enacts a ‘symbolic distribution of bodies’ between those who possess the *logos*, ‘those who really speak’, and those who are only a voice (*phônê*) that ‘merely mimics the articulate voice to express pleasure or pain’ (1999: 22). Which is to say a division between true speech and those voices whose speech is false or illegitimate, mere imitations of the genuine political animal’s speech.

For Rancière this is the ‘fundamental conflict’ that lies at the heart of politics: a conflict between the universal capacity of the political animal as the ‘speaking being who is without qualification’, and this speaking being’s participation in a political community. A community closed in and delimited via the hierarchical distribution of the *logos* across a social body (1999: 22). In the history of democracy, no single body better represents this division than that which is represented by ‘the people.’ This collective designation is precisely what enacts a division within the *logos*, establishing a conflict between the speaking being, of which by its very definition possesses the *logos*, and a distribution of the *logos* across a social body. The people is the *demos*; a wide and undifferentiated collective which is seen to exceed or overwhelm the *logos* of the speaking being; it is the source of *doxa*, of common belief or opinion that is not the reasoned speech of the *logos* but the cry of an excited flock, the delighted cheer of a crowd or the growl of an animal.
‘The people’ are often seen as a threat to reason and as such their discourse – *doxa* or ‘opinion’ – needs to be expunged from the reasonable discourse of those who really speak and think. In book V of the *Republic*, Plato sees ‘the people’ as a ‘large and powerful animal’ that threatens the order of the city (1997: 1115 [*Republic V*, 493a-c]). Like animals in a zoo, the large and powerful animal must be controlled and subdued by wise masters if anything apart from anarchy is to reign. The sophist’s skill or *technê* is found in their ability to recognise this beast’s ‘moods and appetites’ and of anticipating and giving it what it wants. Whereas a guardian knows what is best for the beast in spite of itself. The guardian thinks on behalf of the beast, knowing what is good and bad, just and unjust, and this despite the beast’s demands or desires. As Rancière notes however, this metaphor has a function far beyond that of description: ‘The metaphor of the large and powerful animal is no simple metaphor: it serves to rigorously reject as animals those speaking beings with no position who introduce trouble into the logos’ (1999: 22). That large and powerful animal ‘the majority’ are simply without reason, they do not *think*. According to Socrates ‘the majority cannot be philosophic’ (Plato, 1997: 1116 [*Republic V*, 494a]).

In *Disagreement* Rancière refers specifically to the establishment of political communities, of rulers and the ruled, yet this argument extends to the establishment of sovereign academic territories as well as more generally the establishment of ‘the university’ as a gathering of those qualified to think and speak. Certain practices in empirical sociology, for example, rely on this very distinction between, on the one hand, the secondary discourse of what it takes to be its object ‘the social’ – *doxa*, opinion, noise, revolt – and on the other *its own* reasonable and austere scientific discourse. Research participants cannot simply speak for themselves, this would never
suffice: the sociologist is expected to code and analyse their utterances; to repackage them in a form fitting with the conventions of social science. While many insights and ‘goods’ emerge from the type of analysis that abstracts from individuals, treating ‘the social’ as a wide, differentiated collection of objects, Rancière wants to question what these very divisions that constitute such a scientific community do, how such logics themselves organise and partition the world.

These divisions are fundamentally political and the point is to make this apparent. It is crucial to note that in the specific case of academic practice this does not amount to the complete rejection of the methods and findings of sociology or any other discipline that begins from such a division. To dismiss the truth or scientificity of a particular discipline is completely beside the point. What is important, as was shown above in the discussion of ‘indisciplinary thought’, is to return to the political question of division and to show how such divisions are constitutive of the very scientific ‘aristocratic space’ from which such analyses are made. Once this political dimension is apparent we can, for example, question the political motives of those who would very much like to foreclose this political aspect and just ‘get on’ with their pure scientific work.

The question of who can speak and who cannot, of whose speech can be heard and whose is merely noise is then ‘one of the stakes of the very dispute that institutes politics’, and the disciplines cannot so easily excuse themselves from this dispute (Rancière, 1999: 22). For Rancière, it is this very conflict over what counts as belonging to the logos, over what can be heard and what can be said, that is fundamentally at stake in politics. Speech situations are always logical demonstrations
as well as an account of the speech situation itself. Any ‘scientific’ practice that would claim the *logos* as its own is therefore implicated in this fundamentally political dispute. Indeed, the struggle over *logos* is the very reason why we have such a thing as politics:

Politics exists because the logos is never simply speech, because it is always indissolubly the *account* that is made of this speech: the account by which a sonorous emission is understood as speech, capable of enunciating what is just, whereas some other emission is merely perceived as noise signaling pleasure or pain, consent or revolt (1999: 22-3).

To reiterate: the human animal is a political animal because they are endowed with *logos*; the sign of an intelligence that differentiates them from other animals. This shared capacity, an *equality*, is both the condition of possibility for any social collective as well as that which marks the absolute contingency of any social order whatsoever. It is the condition of possibility for the simple fact that for any social ‘order’ to operate, a base level of understanding must be shared. Thus Rancière writes, ‘There is order in society because some people command and others obey, but in order to obey an order at least two things are required: you must understand the order and you must understand that you must obey it’ (Rancière, 1999: 16). It is contingent because it relies on this foundational, yet artificial, splitting of the *logos*.

The ‘order’ established by police logic is contingent for the simple fact that it must necessarily split the *logos* – the common equality of speaking beings – in order to establish a hierarchy and territory. It is in this sense that Rancière claims ‘inequality is
only possible through equality’ (1999: 17). All political subjects must be assumed to share in the *logos* for the very reason that without this shared capacity domination would cease to function; it simply would not work. Yet this ‘ultimate equality on which any social order rests’ must be constantly disavowed in the name of domination and inequality (1999: 16). Divisions must be made: between speech and noise, between genuine and insincere speech, between scientific and ideological discourse, etc… In short, between what counts and what does not.

It is well known that the ruling elite have always resisted acknowledging this *logos* of ‘the people,’ or indeed any other collective noun that it does not care to recognise as sharing in ‘its’ *logos*, for the precise reason that such a recognition announces the absolute contingency of any social order whatsoever. This is the same with academic practice. To affirm the equality of intelligence, the *logos* of all individuals, is to announce the absolute contingency of *any* social order. This includes those groupings – communities of scientists or scholars – that make up the various sects of academic practice. To announce the equality of intelligence is not to announce the contingency of the results or methods of a discipline, but it is to announce the contingency of the sovereign disciplinary territory that takes such methods and results to be its own. This is not a relativist argument, it is an egalitarian argument premised on the universality of reason.

If humans are political animals, all sharing equally in the *logos*, then there is no natural justification for domination. Such equality is scandalous, it reveals ‘the ultimate *anarchy* on which any hierarchy rests’ (Rancière, 1999, 16). It proves that there is no foundation for domination to be found within the order of things: ‘Politics
exists simply because no social order is based on nature, no divine law regulates human society’ (1999, 16). This is simply unacceptable for those who love order and domination. For them a community needs an arkhê, meaning a foundation, an order, but also a beginning (Liddel & Scott, 1940). This beginning must always be given artificially, it must always be made: ‘anyone who wants to cure politics of its ills has only one available solution: the lie that invents some kind of nature in order to provide the community with an arkhê’ (Rancière, 1999: 16). Thus, any system of domination must begin by dividing the logos in two, separating those who think and speak from those who do not. This is why beginnings are so important for Rancière. They are never natural or neutral, rather they always artificial, they must always be made.

3.2 The anarchy of opinions

While in the sense discussed above beginnings are always artificial, we must still always begin. If to begin is to speak of ‘a “might be” or an “as if”, which is reached afterwards, at the end of a process’, then it is important to be explicit as to what it is that is being supposed (Rancière, 2009a: 119). It is important to be clear as to what this ‘might be’ or ‘as if” is. Rancière’s method of equality begins from the presupposition of the equality of intelligences. In The Ignorant Schoolmaster Rancière uses the term opinion to indicate this beginning or ‘point of departure’. It should now be clear that this must be understood against the conventional meaning of ‘opinion’ as a kind of secondary discourse. Indeed, to begin with the presupposition of the equality of intelligences is to modify what ‘opinion’ is usually intended to mean.
While opinion might otherwise suggest some kind of secondary discourse, aggregated from the utterances of ‘the people’ – the large and powerful animal that does not think but only feels – for Rancière the term ‘opinion’ can have an effect. The term ‘opinion’ can arrange and divide: it can act as a ‘device’ in the sense given to it by its root in the Old French *devis*; to divide yet also to plan, to ‘devise.’ When used as a theoretical device the term ‘opinion’ can enact an arrangement of bodies between those who partake in the *logos* of a community and those who do not; between those who ‘really’ speak and those who’s speech merely imitates true speech; between those who think and those who only feel. In this sense we should not be too hasty in dismissing Rancière’s use of the word ‘opinion’ as a mistake as Adam Bartlett does in an otherwise sympathetic and programmatic text (n.d: section 3). Such a dismissal fails to engage Rancière’s specific theoretical position which, as we have seen, offers an understanding of why he would intentionally use such a term.

For many the term ‘opinion’ suggests a sort of flat equivalence across the universe of utterances. For Rancière things are quite different. We have already seen how the division between *logos* and *phônê* serves as a foundation, a divisive lie lending consistency to the supposed anarchy of the social. The term ‘opinion,’ more often than not, enacts this very division. Rather than designating something clear and established, the term opinion can be used toward different effects and ends.

Accordingly the same word ‘opinion’ can define two opposing processes: the reproduction of governmental legitimizations in the form of the ‘feelings’ of the governed or the setting up of a scene of conflict between this play of legitimizations and feelings; choosing from among responses proposed or the
invention of a question that no one was asking themselves until then. But it should be added that such terms may also, and mostly do, designate the very entanglement of both logics (Rancière, 1999: 33).

The presupposition of the equality of intelligence breaks with the logic that offers inequality as an abstract artifice, or ground, be this in order to provide the community an arkhê, or otherwise. It is precisely this unequal and ‘hierarchical world’ that Rancière’s thought interrupts: ‘Equality was not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a supposition to maintain in every circumstance’ (1991: 138). Equality is a beginning, a point of departure. There is no need to turn to educational psychologists or cognitive science to ‘shore up’ this presupposition. Before beginning with such doubt one would be wise to recall Hegel’s important lesson from the introduction to the Phenomenology, and question whether ‘this fear of error is not just the error itself’ (1977: 47). Such fear will only ever reveal itself as the fear of truth; the truth of the equality of speaking beings. The presupposition of the equality of intelligences is an axiomatic intervention that has an effect in reality. It signals the meeting of two incommensurable logics, making visible the gap between these two orders: ‘the order of the inegalitarian distribution of social bodies in a partition of the perceptible and the order of the equal capacity of speaking beings in general’ (Rancière, 1999: 42).

What then differs formally between the axiom of inequality and the axiom of the equality of intelligence turns on the question of rationality. Rancière is happy for the presupposition of the equality of intelligences to have the status of an ‘opinion’ due to the fact that this opinion affirms the life of reason from the beginning as a point of departure. This is opposed to the axiom of inequality which begins by dividing reason
in an act of violence – the violence of the irrational – performed on behalf of
inequalities passion (Rancière, 1999: 43, also: 105-6).

As Peter Hallward notes: ‘Rancière’s most basic assumption is very simple: everyone
thinks, everyone speaks’ (2005: 26). This is the presupposition of the equality of
intelligences, the particular point of departure where Rancière begins. This is also the
site where the distance between the thought of Rancière and his contemporary Badiou
becomes quite apparent, despite their many proximities (see Badiou, 2009: 37). In his
own discussion of the two theorists Bartlett, in order to avoid the ‘anarchy of
opinions’, rushes to employ Badiou’s set theoretical conception of state or
encyclopedic knowledge in order to stand in for an apparent theoretical lack on behalf
of Rancière (n.d: section 3). This signals a decision from Bartlett against the specific
kind of equality proposed by Rancière, an equality that finds its truth in the rationality
of disagreement. While Bartlett is correct in asserting that Rancière does not explicitly
articulate a theory of the event, he is wrong – granted this point is only implicit – in
suggesting that this position might approximate relativism (n.d: section 3).

Due to his immediate recourse to Badiou, for Bartlett ‘the “part of no part” is a set
theoretical precept […] because this recourse to mathematics allows Badiou to take a
step outside the paradoxes of language that Rancière does not take’ (n.d, section 3).
Leaving aside the fact that mathematics is still, despite its formalism, a language – in
the sense that it must be written – two things must be said here. First, that Rancière
does indeed ‘take a step outside the paradoxes of language,’ and second, that it is
neither a set-theoretical precept, nor a strictly linguistic one, but rather a materialist
precept. The point is not to denounce the importance of Badiou’s work, nor the
relevance of the question of mathematics as ontology. And it is certainly not to detract from Bartlett’s current deployment of Badiou and Rancière’s thought in the field of education, an admirable project equally as radical as it is rigorous (see Bartlett 2011; 2013). The point is, rather, to engage Rancière on his own terms. What is missed in Bartlett’s account is the precise nature of what, for Rancière, exceeds the count of the state of the situation, or in other terms what breaks with and renders unstable the ‘police logic.’ As we have seen, it is not so easy to dismiss the ‘anarchy of opinions’ when considering the specific form of rationalism at the heart of Rancière’s thought.

3.3 A book in the hand

To further underscore this I return to the question of explication discussed in the previous chapter. There it was argued that the explicative order opens an abyss of explication between the master and the student, and that this abyss had as its function the maintenance of the social relation of inequality. While explication was the practice that ensured this inequality, Rancière and Jacotot offer another practice that breaks with the method of the explicator. This Jacotot calls ‘Universal Teaching’. Universal teaching presupposes the equality of intelligences and its method of verification (of the equality of intelligence) relies on the materiality of a book. Covering this argument as it is presented in The Ignorant Schoolmaster will help give a sense to Rancière’s materialism.

While the masters of the explicative order are always able to keep a piece of the student’s ignorance up their sleeve, the book, on the other hand, cannot keep such secrets. It is material, a closed totality, a thing ‘that the student holds in his hand, that he can span entirely with a glance’ (Rancière, 1991: 23). The ‘material ideality’ of a
text is that which the emancipated intelligence can engage and eventually master without the aid of the explicators discourse of demystification: ‘There is nothing behind the written text, no false bottom that necessitates the work of an other intelligence, that of the explicator’ (1991: 9-10). It is precisely the lack of any other text within the book that makes it a materially enclosed totality. Such closure is simply impossible with a master-explicator where there is always another discourse at work, a ‘language whose words and sentences are able to speak the reason of the words and sentences of a text’ (1991: 10). This is where we are to locate Rancière’s materialism. Rancière’s materialism is closely associated with his thought on aesthetics of which I turn to in the following chapter.

Rancière reverses the Platonic critique of writing as a bastard discourse that, abandoned by its father and unable to ‘defend itself’, does not know ‘to whom it should speak and to whom it should not’ (Plato, 1997: 552 [Phaedrus: 275e]; Rancière, 1991: 38). This is a view that takes writing to be ‘forgetful of its origin and heedless of its audience’ (Rancière, 2011b: 94):

‘Writing’ is a modality of the rapport between the logos and aisthesis, which, since Plato and Aristotle, has served to conceptualize the political animal. The concepts of writing and of literarity allow us to consider the political animal as a literary animal, an animal in the grip of letters, in as much as letters belong to no one and circulate from all quarters (Rancière et al, 2000: 12-13).

The materiality of language stops short the abyss of explication opened between the master and the student. For Rancière the method of intellectual emancipation
‘institutes a third element’ between the master and the student ‘that allows for the work of verification to be carried out’ (Rancière and Davis, 2013: 204). This is the base of Rancière’s materialist theory of knowledge: ‘All the power of language is in the totality of a book. All knowledge of oneself as an intelligence is in the mastery of a book, a chapter, a sentence, a word’ (1991: 26).

For Rancière, understanding or ‘common sense’ is not about reducing the cognitive dissonance between the subject and an object – of getting at the ‘thing-in-itself’ – nor is it an issue of turning inward and rejecting all externality. Indeed, when one presupposes the equality of intelligences the solipsistic ‘problem of other minds’ is much less of a problem. If we assume the other is not an idiot, that they possess an intelligence just like any other, then we can speak to them and try to understand what they have to say. The possibility or impossibility of subjective knowledge then seems a somewhat one sided question. For Rancière what is at stake in the workings of intelligence is the issue of transmission between intelligences; of understanding and of making oneself understood: ‘Intelligence is not a power of understanding based on comparing knowledge with its object. It is the power to make oneself understood through an other’s verification’ (1991: 72-3).

Yet we might rightly ask: if establishing and verifying the distance between the intelligence of the master and that of the student is the function of the explicative order, then how does this differ to ‘making oneself understood through an other’s verification’? The answer to this question is found precisely in the materiality of language as a ‘a thing in common, placed between two minds’ (Rancière, 1991: 32). This is not to say that some community of absolute understanding will emerge from
the presupposition of the equality of intelligences. Rather it is to stress how language, in its material and mute insistence, is always that which stands between subjects, as well as that which connects them. The book, indeed language itself, is the material thing that connects these minds. Yet it is also that which keeps them ‘at an equal distance’ apart (1991: 32).

For the explicator language is transparent, there are only minds. In a unidirectional manner the explicator proceeds to verify the student’s understanding against the indexical hierarchy of intelligence: ‘Such is the concern of the enlightened pedagogue: does the little one understand? He doesn’t understand. I will find new ways to explain it to him, ways more rigorous in principle, more attractive in form – and I will verify that he has understood’ (Rancière, 1991: 8). This act of verification, the verification of the inequality between master and student, is precisely what splits the intelligence into two – an inferior intelligence and a superior one, knowledge and ignorance – dividing bodies; between the master who understands and the student who is obliged to understand that they do not understand.

It is however precisely this thing in common – the materiality of language – that provides the condition of possibility for any communication whatsoever. The materiality of language is at once the enabling and disabling condition of any communication. Indeed, the ‘book is the equality of intelligence’ (1991: 38). This is Rancière’s fundamentally materialist precept, at work not only in his thought on writing and literature, but importantly in his work dealing with aesthetics. The paradoxical figure of the ‘third-element’ is not the figure of the sublime guarantor of meaning but that of the material and banal fact of language, that thing which is at
once the enabler and disabler of any distribution of the sensible whatsoever, which is to say the enabler and disabler of any shared ‘common sense.’

3.4 Rancière and ‘post-rationalism’

This places Rancière’s work in line with a group of his contemporaries assembled around the Cahiers pour l’analyse. An exceptional and short lived journal that meditated on the questions of structure, the subject and science, the Cahiers pour l’Analyse was assembled by students of Lacan and Althusser, appearing in 1966 and lasting only up until the events of May 1968 when it was dissolved (see Hallward, 2012). Renewed interest in this particular moment in the history of French thought has emerged in the Anglophone academic world largely due to the recent translation of some of the journals key texts (Hallward and Peden, 2012). Though Rancière was not a contributor, his shared intellectual origins and theoretical proximity to these thinkers (even if this was often by way of negation) makes for a particularly productive comparison.

One text to emerge from this renewal of intellectual activity is Lacanian scholar Tom Eyers Post-Rationalism: Psychoanalysis, Epistemology and Marxism in Post-War France (2013). In this, Eyers recasts debates in structuralism and poststructuralism under a banner of his own invention: ‘post-rationalism’. While this serves to question the more commonplace assumptions tied to structuralism, poststructuralism and the unstable separation of the two, Eyers also extends his analysis to include the concerns of the French philosophy of science, notably through resourceful readings of Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem.
It would be wrong to place Rancière against this current of thought as generally ‘anti-theoretical’ as Peter Hallward has done in an overtly dismissive portrayal of Rancière’s position apropos a theory of knowledge in general: ‘Rancière’s more general answer to questions about knowledge, science, or skill has long been one of indifference or impatience, as if the only available alternative to the extreme scientism he embraced in his youth is an almost equally extreme antiscientism’ (Hallward, 2009: 155). As we have seen, in maintaining and thoroughly fleshing out the consequences of his break with Althusser, Rancière has in a completely singular way developed a theory of knowledge of exceptional consequence for academic practice.

This being said, apart from a few speculative pages in his conclusion, Rancière is notably absent from the pages of Eyers Post-Rationalism (2013: 198-200). This is certainly understandable given the breadth of proper names Eyers book engages with, however there are moments within the text that touch on themes close to Rancière’s thought. For this reason, it will be helpful here to briefly reconstruct aspects of Eyers argument in order to pave the way for a discussion of Rancière’s position.

A sustained engagement with key texts of the Cahiers pour l’Analyse, Post-Rationalism interrogates the intellectual foundations of this particular moment in French thought. Eyers rejects the more superficial characterisation of structuralism as a rigid and ‘arid formalism’ and rather teases out those aspects of structuralism that attend to the instability of structures and create the possibility for novelty (2013: 10). Echoing Althusser, Eyers notes the particular relevance this period of thought has to the contemporary state of Anglophone academia: ‘My hope is that some of the
thinking discussed here will place in sharp relief the inadequacies of the spontaneous philosophy of science that prevails in so many corners of Anglophone life’ (2013: 1).

The field of ‘post-rationalism,’ as Eyers constructs it, centres around the complex theoretical question of a subject’s relation to structure. Particular focus is placed on the diversity of ways in which theorists working in this area account for the uneasy delineation between scientific knowledge and ideology. In other words, between properly scientific discourse and its other. Crucial for all of these thinkers is an acknowledgement of the impurity of this division. Scientific constructs are seen as necessarily contaminated by the ideological or unscientific. This contamination is seen as necessary in the sense that, despite the diversity of ways in which Eyers’ interlocutors place it, an ‘eccentric element’ – an otherwise excluded or empty element within a scientific structure – while being in some sense excluded or illegitimate is also the element responsible for the consistency of the structure itself.

Importantly it is the ‘eccentric element’ that dynamises structure from within: it is both formative and deformatrive. With this two interlaced ‘eccentric elements’ become the main focus of Eyers’ close reading. First is the split ‘non-identical’ subject of which Eyers largely draws from Jacques-Alain Miller’s ‘Suture’ (Miller, 2012b). According to Miller, it is the non-identity of the subject that affords the self-identity of the concept. Miller draws an analogy with Gottlob Frege’s number theory, where the positing of 1 and the generation of succession, according to Miller, relies on the construction of the non-identical zero and its exclusion from the domain of truth. Thus ‘the very act of rejection, the concept of the nonidentical qua zero acts negatively as the foundation of the self-identical’ (Eyers, 2013: 33). In other words,
though this element is disavowed by the positive consistency of the concept, it is this very disavowal, or ‘suture’ of lack that is responsible for its apparent purity. Thus ‘suture’ comes to name ‘the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse’ (Miller, 2012b: 93).

The second element however, suggested in Miller’s ‘Action of the Structure’ but largely drawn from Lacan, falls on the side of the signifier (Miller, 2012a; Lacan, 2007: 412-441). Eyers places special emphasis on the material insistence of the letter – what he calls the signifier in-isolation – as the mute signifier responsible for lending consistency to the subject. It is this second sense of the ‘eccentric element’ that I would like to focus on here. Indeed, as Eyers shows, any clean cut between these elements is highly problematic, and his frequent repetition of Lacan’s well known ‘a signifier is a subject for another signifier’ intends to accent this point. This ‘signifier-in-isolation’ is mute and nonsensical. While sense itself is only relational and only achieved when a signifier is ‘in-relation’, that is ‘in a situation of negative codetermination’ with another signifier (Eyers, 2013: 64). Importantly, for both Lacan and Eyers, the insistence of the letter in-isolation paradoxically marks the determinate yet impossible condition for any process of formalisation. As Eyers notes:

Lacan associates this psychoanalytic conceptuality with “letters,” or signifiers as they are abstracted from relations of meaning. The “letter,” defined by Lacan 20 years earlier as material and indivisible, is the signifier as it exists outside the production of sense, and it is this dimension of language, its material persistence, that forms the link between the matheme and language,
while gesturing toward the generation of a “new” signifier coextensive with a new take on the stakes of scientific formalization (2013: 66).

Eyers shows that, for Lacan, the paradoxical status of formalisation rests on the insistence of the nonsensical letter that at once grounds and jeopardises the very process of formalisation. Importantly, ‘What indexes this failure for Lacan is the status of mathematical formalization as a form of *writing*, as interlaced with the logic of the signifier’ (Eyers, 2013: 61). To gloss Eyers detailed exposition, it is specifically the question of the materiality of language where he sees the potential for an extension of the logic of the signifier to literary questions, and it is this aspect of his argument that pertains to Rancière. Eyers achieves this in the first instance by a reading of Pierre Macherey, repeating the gesture later in the text through a reading of Jacques Derrida’s *Cahiers pour l’Analyse* contribution.

While Eyers deals here with a singular ‘literary object’ in isolation, it is the mute material nature of a text which for Rancière threatens to disrupt and reconfigure a given distribution of the sensible. To generalise what has now been discussed at length, a distribution of the sensible, in simple terms, involves a determinate fixing of the subject to an allotted place. In this, the place serves to circumscribe the subject: the subject is the place it occupies. The place endows the subject with a *sensible* identity, yet this identity is only meaningful within the logic of that distribution. The price of this sensibility, as we have seen, is the subject’s subordination to place, yet the meaningfulness of all this to the subject remains a question. As we have seen these determinations are always unstable and susceptible to dissolution.
An important condition for this very susceptibility is the wandering virtual nature of the literary ‘blocks of speech circulating without a legitimate father’ which can fall into the ‘wrong’ hands and obliterate the logic of the established distribution (2004d: 39-40). Rancière calls this structural capacity of language its literarity. Recalling the Platonic critique of writing as a bastard discourse, unable to ‘defend itself’ and not knowing ‘to whom it should speak and to whom it should not’, Rancière argues that it is precisely this mute and wandering potential of language as a material thing available to anyone that makes it radically disruptive:

The availability of a series of words lacking a legitimate speaker and an equally legitimate interlocutor interrupts Plato’s logic of “the proper” – a logic that requires everyone to be in their proper place, partaking in their proper affairs. This “excess of words” that I call literarity disrupts the relation between an order of discourse and its social function. That is, literarity refers at once to the excess of words available in relation to the thing named; to that excess relating to the requirements for the production of life; and finally, to an excess of words vis-à-vis the modes of communication that function to legitimate “the proper” itself (Rancière and Panagia, 2000: 115; Rancière, 1994: 24-41).

The instability of any distribution of the sensible seems to be due to this very muteness of the literary, the ‘potential of meaning in everything silent’ (Rancière, 2004d: 37). It is also at this point where Rancière’s interventions into the aesthetic and literary domains find common ground. Here we might recall Rancière’s frequent reference to Schiller’s discussion of the Greek statue of Juno Ludovisi, referred to in
his fifteenth of *Letters Upon The Aesthetic Education of Man*: ‘The statue thus comes paradoxically to figure what has not been made, what was never an object of will. In other words: it embodies the qualities of what is not a work of art’ (Rancière, 2010b: 117). If for Rancière ‘aesthetics’ denotes the domain of what can be seen and what can be said about it, then the *Juno Ludovisi* is exemplary in the very freedom it inspires, much like the mute presence of books and words.
4. Creating

It is both the equality of speaking beings and the mute speech of the text that renders any distribution of the sensible susceptible to subversion and dissolution. As the previous chapter argued, while the universal possession of *logos* serves as the disavowed truth of any social order whatsoever, it is the structural capacity of language, its literarity, that threatens any ‘proper’ distribution of the sensible and therefore any ‘legitimate’ division of speakers. As Rancière notes, these two factors working together form the dynamic core of the political:

Humans are political animals, then, for two reasons: first, because we have the power to put into circulation more words, ‘useless’ and unnecessary words, words that exceed the function of rigid designation; secondly, because this fundamental ability to proliferate words is unceasingly contested by those who claim to ‘speak correctly’ – that is, by the masters of designation and classification who, by virtue of wanting to retain their status and power, flat-out deny their capacity to speak (Rancière and Panagia, 2000: 115).

While those theorists of the police order will tell the good lie that posits a natural or given foundation to the supposed anarchy of the social, this is threatened by the equality of speaking beings ‘fundamental ability to proliferate words’. The privileged ‘masters of designation’ begin by dividing society into two parts, and are left with the task of explaining why some parts of society do not, or cannot, partake in ‘their’ reasonable discourse. The masters of designation are committed to explaining why the other’s reason is non-reason, why it is something else: opinion, noise, anarchy, revolt… all in order to protect the privilege of their domain.
The political act that affirms the equality of speaking beings will not make such divisive gestures. As we have seen, for Rancière, foundations are never given but are always made. The affirmation of the equality of intelligences is the affirmation of this fundamentally creative capacity of anyone whatsoever. As Rancière notes in the above quote: this capacity, this ‘fundamental ability to proliferate words’, is seen by the masters of the police order as a threat to the very aristocratic space they occupy.

In the specific case of academic practice, the resistance staged by the masters of the police order relies on distinctions between knowledge and ignorance, the rational and irrational, the logical and illogical, science and ideology, etc., and the positing of these as a given point of departure. What this amounts to is a veritable *enclosure* of reason. As has been argued at length, such designations form limits that serve to establish the territorial boundaries of these closed academic communities. These territories rely on the exclusion of an absolute other that operates as their ‘outside,’ and it is this exclusion of this outside that lends consistency to the ‘inside’ of such territories.

This is, of course, strongly stated. Yet these divisions are practical divisions, which is to say that they are made and actively maintained. These borders will remain well protected so long as their guardians stand post. What this means for Rancière is that the establishment of academic territories is both an utterly contingent and thoroughly historical process. What this means for us is that, by tracing these contingent histories, we can begin to undo them. In Rancière’s terms this has to do with the procedures by which specific disciplines come to achieve ‘the signature of science’; by which
particular discourses emerge as ‘knowledge-discourses’, separate and distinct from the vagaries of fiction and the production of stories (Rancière and Panagia, 2000: 116). In order to account for such operations Rancière offers what he terms a ‘poetics of knowledge’. In this chapter I introduce Rancière’s poetics of knowledge paying particular attention to the case of social science.

4.1 The poetics of knowledge

Two important aspects of a poetics of knowledge relate to the question of academic practice. The first is the way in which a poetics of knowledge makes visible the fundamentally creative nature of any academic practice. This restores the thoroughly active status of thinking and reasoning, removing them from their passive slumber. The second related sense has to do with the way in which a poetics of knowledge interrogates the boundary between reality and fiction. This has to do with the particular way in which certain disciplines constitute themselves as a science, winning their own space from the murky world of doxa and opinion, yet also, and as we have seen, creating this very world through the action of their theoretical constructs.

In this sense a poetics of knowledge gathers together much of what has already been discussed. In the first chapter, for example, a discussion of Marx’s ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ introduced the question of practice. My task in that chapter was to challenge the binary thinking that placed thought on the one side and practice on the other. Such thinking placed the question of activity as the dividing line between the two, positing thought as passive and practice as active. It was shown, with both Marx and Rancière, that such a thought must necessarily deny its own activity of thinking. Or, to say the same thing, that a practice that takes this division as primary must
necessarily exclude itself from its analysis if it is to achieve the signature of science, reason and so forth. This was exemplified by Althusser’s insistence on Marx’s epistemological break, and further developed in chapter two through a discussion of pastoralism and education.

The theme was picked up again in chapter three where the question of beginning was considered a moment in the activity of thinking. This challenged the thought that takes thinking to be passive by showing that a thinking that begins with ‘facts,’ the given or ‘natural,’ will often not consider its own activity of questioning. The poetics of knowledge pertains to this by making visible the fundamentally creative – and therefore active – nature of any academic practice. It also brings to the surface those operations by which, in general, specific disciplines or fields can come to establish their bounds and determine their identity. Importantly, through such analysis a poetics of knowledge aims to return the truths and methods of these closed territories to the realm of common understanding and application.

The poetics of knowledge has an interest in the rules according to which knowledge is written and read, is constituted as a specific genre or discourse. It attempts to define the mode of truth to which such knowledge is devoted – not to provide norms for it, nor to validate or invalidate its scientific pretense (Rancière, 1994: 8).

It is important to stress that this does not amount to relativising the many discourses and methods of academic practice. It is not about denying the truth or scientificity of the disciplines and ‘their’ discourses, but it is to assert that one need not pass through
the gatekeepers of specialisation in order access such truths. This is crucial:

Rancière’s analysis seeks to interrogate the specificity of the objects and methods of a discipline – their practice – in order to expose the common ground upon which they are constructed, thus making visible the fact that they are each born from the fundamentally creative capacity common to all humans. The point of such an operation is not simply to revel in the subversion of mastery, but to show that academic discourse is always, at base, made from the same intelligence that uses language to try and express something. As Rancière notes, a poetics of knowledge does not mean having to assert these discourses are nothing other than fictions or processes of metaphorization, as some would have us believe. Rather it requires the assertion that these knowledge-discourses, like other modes of discourse, use common powers of linguistic innovation in order to make objects visible and available to thinking; in order to create connections between objects, etc. (Rancière and Panagia, 2000: 116).

A poetics of knowledge underscores the fundamentally artificial nature of any academic discourse in the sense that such a discourse – indeed any discourse – must always be made. This operation removes these discourses from their sovereign territories and ‘the forms of autolegitimation’ upon which they rest, reintegrating them ‘into a generally accessible mode of reasoning or form of language’ (Rancière and Panagia, 2000: 116).

To put it simply, the point of a poetics of knowledge is to remove these various ‘knowledge-discourses’ from their constitution as the property of a particular
academic community by making visible the common methods of construction that they employ. Recall, for example, the discussion of *logos* in chapter three. There a certain ‘commons’ of *logos*, which is to say the capacity of anyone to think and speak, was transformed into the privilege of a specific community that saw itself as being in sole possession of the *logos*. *Logos*, or simply reason, was then seen as the privilege of the community in question while it was denied to all that did not fall within this communities jurisdiction. A poetics of knowledge calls into question the specificity of the objects and methods of such closed communities in order to expose their constitutive divisions.

Again, the point is not to deny the truth or scientificity of a given academic discourse, but it is to affirm that any academic discourse is constructed through the universal capacity of humans to reason. It is to claim that the discourses of science rely on that very same ability shared by anyone and everyone to think and create; to construct ‘constellations of sense’; to reconfigure signs and words into a transmissible discourse. It is to expose the arbitrariness of the disciplines in spite of the truth of their findings. If indisciplinary practice, as discussed in chapter one, signifies a certain strategic ignorance toward disciplinary boundaries, then a poetics of knowledge traces the construction of such boundaries in order to expose their artificiality. As Rancière notes, much like indisciplinary practice, ‘a poetics of knowledge presents a challenge to the divisions between the disciplines and the discourses of knowledge’ (Rancière and Panagia, 2000: 116).

Although the concept of a poetics of knowledge is intimately tied to Rancière’s thought on aesthetics, his most sustained engagement with the idea of a poetics of
knowledge is found in *The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge*. A somewhat local consideration of debates in French historiography, this apparently circumscribed focus might explain why this book has received much less attention from Rancière’s English readership that it deserves. Stopping short of entering into the specificity of these debates, however, I will briefly introduce the general problem that opens *The Names of History* here in order to gain a better grasp of the poetics of knowledge, its significance for academic practice, and its specific relevance to social science. The consequences of the arguments found in *The Names of History* are broad in scope and form an important part of Rancière’s wider project.

Rancière begins by recounting an ‘unfortunate homonymy in the French language’ that captures the stakes of the poetics of knowledge. This homonymy is found in the French word *histoire*, which can mean both story and history: ‘Things would be too simple if one could say of any history, as the expression goes, that it’s only a story. The distinctive feature of a history is that it may always be either a story or not a story’ (Rancière, 1994: 1). Rancière further notes that this ambiguity does not always survive translation, citing the English distinction between ‘story’ and ‘history,’ and the German distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* as examples where the avoidance of this homonymy has been built into language (1994: 3). While these distinctions are well established in English and German, in French the ambiguity remains: *histoire* ‘designates lived experience, its faithful narrative, its lying fiction, and its knowledgeable explanation’ all at once (Rancière, 1994: 3).

This homonymy proves productive and this very ambiguity leads Rancière to locate a ‘revolution in historical study’ in the French historiography of the late nineteenth and
twentieth centuries. Namely through the work of Jules Michelet, Lucien Febvre and the *Annales* group. What Rancière attributes to this particular sequence in French historical thought is an impossible attempt to elevate historical study to the ‘dignity’ of science, over and against the ‘deceptive language of stories’ (Rancière, 1994: 6).

According to Rancière, in exploring this problem as well as maintaining and fleshing out its ambivalence, such attempts challenged, ‘in the practice of language, the opposition of science and literature’ (1994: 7). As such Rancière argues that the architecture of historical study is condemned to perpetually maintain the ambivalence signified by *histoire*. Indeed, according to Rancière, this ambivalence is proper to the very scientificty of historical study:

only the language of stories was suited to the scientificty proper to historical science: a matter not of rhetoric, putting the young science in accord with the prejudices of the old masters and the rules of the institution, but of poetics, constituting, in the language of truth, the language – as true as is false – of stories (1994: 7).

While Rancière focuses his study on this particular sequence in French historiography, he notes that a poetics of knowledge equally concerns the ‘so-called human or social sciences’ (1994: 8). Underpinning all of this is Rancière’s more general position on the materiality of language: a bastard discourse available for the use and, importantly, misuse of anyone at all, and especially those not authorised to do so. The perpetual disharmony between words and things inherent to any language that refers to something outside of itself authorises this ‘play’ (Rancière, 1994: 29). So while an academic community will exclude those who do not share in the
community’s territorial *logos*, those whose discourse, for such a community, does not count, the boundaries of this territory is perpetually threatened by ‘a discourse that is always susceptible of allowing entry into its community of those excluded when its circle is drawn’ (Rancière, 1994: 29). According to Rancière this ‘excess’

belongs to human language in general, to human language before science put it in order: the fact that the same word could at once designate several entities and several properties, that it could designate properties that did not exist or were still to come. The evil that social interpretation must relentlessly confront is that of homonymy (1994: 33).

This excess inherent to language is a threat to those discourses that would like to posit a smooth and stable connection between words and things. This is especially true of those positivist discourses within the human sciences that, from the very outset, take things as given and words as their incontrovertible index. Which is to say those supposedly scientific discourses that take a collection of preconstituted things as *their* objects, *their* domain, and carefully preside over the mapping and description of this territory with words. What is at stake here is the capture of a collection of objects that, in their very constitution as objects to be measured, observed and analysed, become available for such capture.

A poetics of knowledge thus gives insight into the common assertion that the human or social sciences are ‘soft’ sciences. This widely held view insists that somehow the particular objects or methods adopted by the social sciences are resistant to the rigors and apodicticity of ‘true’ science. This softness is usually attributed to problems in
measurement or methodological rigour. The idea is that, while sciences such as physics or chemistry are able to accurately observe, measure and quantify the data that they have collected, there is something inherently resistant about the objects of the social sciences that creates problems for this capture. This complicates any ‘hard’ application of the scientific method of observation and hypothesis testing. Despite this some enclaves of the social sciences, in an attempt to achieve the signature of science, strive for the same standards of isolation, measurement, validity and verification as those ‘hard’ sciences that they seek to imitate. It is clear that the police order shares in such a desire, and the distribution of places and functions that it pursues, far from being a simple control mechanism, is the embodiment of this positivistic desire.

A poetics of knowledge interrogates this particular impasse in the social sciences by positioning them within ‘the space of homonymy of science and nonscience’ (Rancière, 1994: 9). The point, however, is not to render sociology’s or history’s pretences to science illusory, but to analyse how these specific discourses seek to achieve the status of science and how within these discourses the scientific itself is conceived and defined. Against those social scientists nervous as to their scientific credentials, a poetics of knowledge does not set out to confirm this suspicion, to take history or sociology away from their scientific ambitions, back to their literary procedures and political presuppositions. The human and social sciences are children of the scientific age, the age that conceives of the rationality of every activity according to a certain idea of scientific rationality that has no necessary connection to the revolutions in question. But – we forget this too easily – the age of science is also that of literature, that in which the latter names itself as such and
separates the rigor of its own action from the simple enchantments of fiction (Rancière, 1994: 8).

The first crucial point to be made about a poetics of knowledge is that it makes visible the fundamentally creative nature of any academic practice. This ‘practical’ aspect of the poetics of knowledge is intimately tied to Rancière’s work on art and aesthetics. To the reader it might not be immediately apparent why Rancière’s work in this area could possibly offer anything to a thinking of practice. At home in philosophy departments or the art school, aesthetics seems at one remove from the serious inquires of social science, even if this science admits to a certain ‘softness’.

4.2 Aesthetic practices

For Rancière aesthetics does not denote a field of inquiry that is the privileged domain of artists, art critics, or philosophers of art. Nor does it signal a theory of the beautiful or the sublime. As Rancière argues in uniformity across an otherwise diverse scope of inquiry: to limit the scope of aesthetics to reflections on ‘art’ alone entirely misses the specific place occupied by aesthetics in contemporary thought. Rancière’s thought on aesthetics is far reaching in both its political and epistemological significance, however it would take another thesis to cover this in sufficient detail. As such, here I limit myself to emphasising the thoroughly practical focus of Rancière’s thought on aesthetics.

This aspect of Rancière’s thinking of art and aesthetics is found in his consideration of ‘aesthetic practices’. Around the words ‘art’, ‘image’ and ‘aesthetics’ exist a long history of practice: of doing and making, of particular places and functions attributed
to real bodies; of symbolising; speaking and inscribing; reading and interpretation. These practices do not exist in a void but emerge on the social stage amongst other practices gathered around words such as ‘science’, ‘religion’ or ‘production.’ Each themselves entailing their own ways of doing and making, of particular places and functions attached to real bodies: of symbolising; speaking; inscribing; reading; interpretation. In short of thinking, knowing and creating.

This emphasis on the active and creative is crucial. If the term ‘art’ is used here, then this is strictly in the sense given by something being artificial or an artefact, placing emphasis on the creative and constructive, rather than the beautiful or sublime. It is about analysing how these creative practices are placed within a particular community, how they are legitimated on the social stage or denounced as illegitimate. For Rancière ‘aesthetic practices’ are the ‘forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community’ (2004d: 13). It is important to pass through these considerations of art in order to investigate what constitutes ‘the space of homonymy of science and nonscience’ in which historical and social science find themselves (Rancière, 1994: 9). Such an exercise underscores the active constitution of such spaces.

Poetics emerges as a specific moment in Rancière’s genealogical analysis of artistic practices with what he calls the representative (or poetic) regime of arts. It is in this regime that, for Rancière, artistic practice first gains autonomy as a social practice separate and distinct from the general productive activity of a community. Thus the question of practice or work, in Rancière’s terms ‘ways of doing and making,’ is
central to the argument. In the representative regime of arts ‘artistic practice is not the outside of work but its displaced form of visibility’ (Rancière, 2004d: 43). This separation is foundational in the sense that it announces the emergence of ‘a specific domain for fiction’ (Rancière, 2004d: 91). This is crucial: with the emergence of poetics work itself is split in two, and this ‘mimetic act of splitting in two, which is at work in theatrical space, consecrates this duality and makes it visible’ (Rancière, 2004d: 43). What Rancière is concerned with here is a division of practices and how the making of fictions emerges as a legitimate activity on the social stage.

The specific ‘aesthetic practice’ that Rancière finds within the representative regime of arts is this work of fiction. The work of fiction signifies a foundational division within work that engenders a particular form of visibility. This is the visibility of a particular form of work that is charged with the construction of fictions. The work of fiction is not simply the making of false or imaginary stories, but of making artefacts or artifices; making artificial constructions and arrangements. The opposite of the work of fiction is not the work of truth, as one might suspect, but rather the work of ‘God given’ nature.

Rancière’s poetics of knowledge has its conceptual origins in Aristotle’s Poetics. For Rancière, Aristotelian poetics rescues mimesis from ‘the Platonic suspicion concerning what images consist of and their end or purpose’ (2004d: 35-6). Rather than being considered with regard to the ethical ends of a community, poetry is seen as an end in itself, designated with the purpose of the construction of fictions. This is the significance of poetics: ‘Poetry owes no explanation for the truth of what it says
because, in its very principle, it is not made up of images or statements, but fictions’ (Rancière, 2004d: 36).

The work of fiction is not simply recounting events or the creation of scenes or images of which are the imitations or simulacra of some presupposed reality. Nor is it simply untruthful or illusory. The work of fiction is the artificial construction of a particular ‘common sense’ or community of understanding. This signals an important difference between the construction of fictions and simple illusion or mystification. In the logic of the representative regime of the arts fiction is two things: ‘imagination deprived of reality’, as well as that which ‘lends consistency to this non-reality’ (Rancière, 2013: 100). So while the work of fiction is a work of the imagination beyond empirical determination, it its also, necessarily, the creation of an intelligible series of actions, causes and effects. The construction of fictions does not then simply offer fantasies or illusion but elaborates ‘intelligible structures’ (Rancière, 2004d: 36).

Poetics signifies the difference between a practice that is aware of itself, in the sense that it knows what it does – or better, a practice that knows that it acts – and a practice that necessarily forgets its own activity in an analysis of the given.

Here Aristotle’s distinction between poetry and history is important. In his Poetics, Aristotle makes a distinction between the stories of poets and the history of historians. Poetry is seen as philosophically superior: ‘more philosophic and of graver import than history’ (1984: 2323 [Poetics, 1451a38-1451b10]). Poetry is speculative and more universal in scope, speaking ‘of what might be’, while history is bound to the particular, speaking only ‘of what has happened’ and thus to recounting a succession of empirical events (Rancière, 2004d: 35-8). Poetry signifies the construction of
fictions in the sense that it can interpret, connect and speculate, while history offers only testimony, only the mere presentation of facts. Poetry’s superiority is due precisely to this ability to make sense of events, to construct the necessity of the sequence, to connect events in a series of actions, of cause and effect. Aristotelian poetics creates a ‘system of action’; inventing intelligible structures, circling out and articulating sequences from the disorder of the empirical:

It is not the meter but the invention of a plot that makes a poem, the Poetics tells us. Only at this cost can fiction be something other than an illusion. This is also the cost at which an artisan’s or gymnast’s skills count as art. Such a rule is codified by the classical age: to know if a bodily performance deserves the name art, one must know whether it tells a story. But a story, in this logic, is not a simple series of events; it is an articulated body, with a beginning, a middle, and an end (Rancière, 2013: 100).

Under this regime the historians science, if we can use that term, is ‘condemned to presenting events according to their empirical disorder’, which is to say the presentation of mere data (Rancière, 2004d: 36). With this there is no room for connection or interpretation and it is left to the work of fiction to create intelligible structures, to posit cause and effect and turn empirical disorder into an intelligible body. While history here may be more ‘scientific’ in our contemporary understanding of the term, which is to say that it has a closer correspondence to the confusion of empirical ‘reality’ and is less susceptible to the errors of the imagination, it does not tell us much.
For Rancière, ‘The real [le réel] must be fictionalised in order to be thought’ (2004d: 38. modified). The ‘real’ that Rancière speaks of here is not that of ‘reality [la réalité]’ taken as a collection of hard and immutable facts about the world, but better understood in the Lacanian sense as neither symbolic or imaginary. The former sense of ‘reality’ as a hard and immutable collection of facts is the domain of what Rancière calls ‘managerial realism [du réalisme gestionnaire]’: a very specific system of belief that strongly marks contemporary consensus democracy. For Rancière this realism is in harmony with the ‘nothing else’ of the police logic, taking as ‘solid axioms’ the following precepts: ‘the whole is all, nothing is nothing’ (1999: 124). While realism might claim ‘to be that sane attitude of mind that sticks to observable realities’ for Rancière it is simply ‘the police logic of order, which asserts, in all circumstances, that it is only doing the only thing possible’ (Rancière, 1999: 132).

While this managerial realism certainly marks the rhetoric of contemporary politicians, it has also deeply colonised the academy. It is, for example, this same realism that will often inflame sociology’s pretences to science in attempts to firm up its discourse. For the ‘managers of the only thing possible’ reality [la réalité] is steeped in necessity (Rancière, 1999: 133). Indeed with managerial realism reality and necessity become conceptually coterminous. Realism becomes ‘the absorption of all reality and all truth in the category of the only thing possible’ (Rancière, 1999: 132). While this realism in social science may stem from a desire to avoid the errors of the imagination, such suspicions are equally aroused by the poetics of possibility and speculation. And this despite the fact that in practice social science will always rely on poetics – in the active sense discussed above – in order to organise and make sense of ‘given’ empirical data.
4.3 The mimetic act

Rancière’s conception of *mimesis* is crucial for a poetics of knowledge. The activity proper to artistic practice under the representative regime – the construction of ‘fictions’ – is to enact mimetic divisions that operate on the real. This practice has the freedom to make ‘new relations between words and visible forms, speech and writing, a here and elsewhere, a then and now’ (Rancière, 2009c: 102). While the construction of fictions enacts material rearrangements of data, and is opposed to the passive presentation of empirical disorder, within the representative regime this work of fiction remains welded to strictly artistic work. Which is to say that within the representative regime of arts such a capacity is only attributed to the places and functions proper to artistic practice, rather than to any individual whatsoever.

The emergence of ‘aesthetics’ signifies, for Rancière, the end of artistic practice’s monopoly over *mimesis*: ‘The aesthetic regime of the arts is the regime that strictly identifies art in the singular and frees it from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres’ (2004d: 23). This positioning of art in the singular also erases the hitherto socially determined link between the freedom of artistic practice and its proper position within an ontological distribution of places and functions. With the aesthetic revolution art is considered in its singular material insistence. Art, thus severed, is for the first time identified with a specific mode of thought, and this mode of thought bears the name ‘aesthetics’:

I do not consider aesthetics to be the name of the science or discipline that deals with art. In my view it designates a mode of thought that develops with
respect to things of art and that is concerned to show them to be things of thought. More fundamentally, aesthetics is a particular historical regime of thinking about art and an idea of thought according to which things of art are things of thought (2009b: 4-5).

Art no longer simply designates a particular technique or function proper to artistic practice. What is introduced with the aesthetic revolution is a particular thinking of the thought that takes art to be its ‘things,’ and this freedom is no longer the privilege of artistic practitioners.

The ‘mimetic act’ then becomes something that anyone is capable of – an act, an intervention – something done that divides a world from within. In the representative regime of arts the threat of mimesis was neutralised and given its proper place in artistic practice, with aesthetics this threat is radicalised. Mimesis becomes the practice of representing actions or sequences of events; the construction of fictions indeed, but also the creation of intelligible structures; the practice of making sense. This fundamentally creative capacity for invention and intervention is understood by Rancière as the general process by which any constellation of sense is made. It is therefore crucial to the question of academic practice, or simply ‘what we do’ as academics. While poetics begins as the privileged activity of artists, it extends to those creations that we make as practicing academics, and it extends further to those sensible creations made by all other reasonable human beings. For Rancière the fundamentally creative capacity of mimesis is the practical correlate of the universal capacity of humans to reason:
For this is precisely what mimesis was: not that obligation to resemblance with which our schoolchildren and quite a few of their teachers stubbornly persist in identifying it, but a principle of discrimination at the heart of human activity, one that delimits a specific realm and that allows us to include objects and to compare classes of objects within it (2004a: 220).

In this sense mimesis becomes very close to what Althusser sees as the practice of philosophy. According to Althusser what philosophy ‘does’ is trace lines of demarcation: ‘They always do it, but they do not say (or only rarely) that the practice of philosophy consists in this demarcation, in this distinction, in this drawing of a line’ (1990: 75). The minimal difference between Althusser and Rancière, then, is that while for Althusser only the philosopher has this freedom to carve up the universe, for Rancière this freedom is the capacity of everyone and anyone.

Aesthetics is concerned with the fundamentally paradoxical experience of encountering the mute material ‘third-element’ discussed toward the end of chapter three. Art is a ‘thought that has become exterior to itself’ precisely because of this severance from its own process of production. The products of art become evidence toward ‘the existence of a particular relation between thought and non-thought, a particular way that thought is present within sensible materiality, meaning within the insignificant and involuntary element within conscious thought’ (Rancière, 2009b: 3). We have arrived back at that material ‘third element’ that kept the minds of the master and student ‘at an equal distance apart’.
While the word ‘aesthetics’ signifies the thought of art in the singular, this thought is identified with ‘a certain idea of “confused knowledge”’ (Rancière, 2009b: 6). The concept of ‘confused knowledge’ is taken from eighteenth century German philosopher of aesthetics Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who also happens to have coined the word aesthetics in his 1735 masters thesis as a term intended to mean *epistêmê aisthetikê*, or the science of what is sensed and imagined (see Guyer, 2014; Guénoun, 2004: 32).

For Rancière, aesthetics combines thought and non-thought into the singular object of the aesthetic experience, thus shattering any local claim to thought or reason premised on the absolute exclusion of its outside: ‘This new and paradoxical idea makes at the territory of a thought that is present outside itself and identical with non-thought. […] Henceforth confused knowledge is no longer a lesser form of knowledge but properly *the thought of that which does not think*’ (2009b: 6). ‘Confused knowledge’ is not the secondary or illusory knowledge that must be decoded by the discourse of science, but the perpetual presence of negativity in all positive discourse. It is the threat of the ‘is not’ bearing on the police logic, always present and promising to interrupt.

This severance introduces a fundamental gap between art as know-how [*savoir-faire*], which is to say strictly technique, and art as an object of knowledge [*savoir*]. And it is this gap that releases the logic of fiction from the artists grip. Art ceases to be a specific domain of work but an experience available to anyone: ‘the autonomy staged by the aesthetic regime of art is not that of the work of art but of a mode of experience’ (Rancière, 2010b: 117). This visible gap between art as know-how and art as an object of knowledge is translated into the mute presence proper to the object of
aesthetic experience. And the ‘aesthetic experience’ is precisely what denotes a subject’s – any subject’s – encounter with the mute material presence of the symbolic universe. While in the representative regime poetry’s logic of fiction entailed the artist’s invention of sensible causal sequences – the telling of stories – as opposed to the historian’s mere presentation of facts, in the aesthetic regime of art ‘fictionality’ simply becomes the artificial arrangement of signs.

The work of fiction is no longer the privileged and isolated practice of artists and poets but the simple acknowledgement that constellations of sense, arguments, logical constructions, etc., are always made. This signals a blurring of ‘the dividing line that isolated art from the jurisdiction of statements and images, as well as the dividing line that separated the logic of facts from the logic of stories’ (Rancière, 2004d: 36). Fiction moves from the arrangement of actions, causes and effects, in the construction of stories, to the arrangement of signs. This is not to say that language then covers everything, barring reality, but to signal ‘a way of assigning meaning to the “empirical” world’ (Rancière, 2004d: 36). This disrupts the separation of empirical presentation and poetic construction introduced by Aristotle in his Poetics:

The aesthetic revolution drastically disrupts things: testimony and fiction come under the same regime of meaning. On the one hand, the ‘empirical’ bears the marks of the true in the form of traces and imprints. ‘What happened’ thus comes directly under a regime of truth, a regime that demonstrates the necessity behind what happened. On the other hand, ‘what could happen’ no longer has the autonomous and linear form of the arrangement of actions. The poetic ‘story’ or ‘history’ henceforth links the
realism that shows us the poetic traces inscribed directly in reality with the artificialism that assembles complex machines of understanding (Rancière, 2004d: 27-8).

Arts privileged activity under the representative regime of the arts – the work of fiction – thus comes under threat with aesthetics as its monopoly on storytelling is transformed into the capacity of anyone whatsoever to arrange signs. Not tied to any distribution of places and functions and available to anyone whatsoever, the aesthetic experience signifies a particular capacity for thinking and creating shared by everyone.
Conclusion

A society, a people, a state, will always be irrational. But one can multiply within these bodies the number of people who, as individuals, will make use of reason, and who, as citizens, will know how to seek the art of raving as reasonably as possible (Rancière, 1991: 98).

The arguments presented in the above four chapters have each, in their own way, been an attempt to undo certain conceptual knots. We will recall that for Rancière ‘there is not, on the one hand, “theory” which explains things and, on the other hand, practice educated by those lessons of theory’ (2009a: 120). Rather there are only ‘configurations of sense, knots tying together possible perceptions, interpretations, orientations and movements’ (2009a: 120). These knots, or distributions of the sensible, are each tied slightly differently. What binds the knots that I have sought to undo here is a certain idea of inequality: an inequality that is natural or given, an inequality that is taken as a point of departure. Undoing these knots was an idea of equality: the equality of intelligence. In this contest of ideas several elements were at play, each element being a certain modality of thought and action, or, to say the same thing, thinking and practice.

The equality of intelligence is, for Rancière, ‘the necessary and sufficient condition for a society of men to exist’, which is to say the necessary and sufficient condition for any social organisation (1991: 73). However to presuppose the equality of intelligence is not merely to posit the equal distribution of intelligence across a social body. Rancière is very clear on this point: equality ‘is not, let it be understood, a
founding ontological principle’ (2004d: 52). This is lost on many of Rancière’s readers. Equality is not an ontological principle, it is not ‘out there,’ given in the pure positivity of observable reality, rather, Rancière continues, equality is ‘a condition that only functions when put into action’ (2004d: 52). It is this active sense of the presupposition of the equality of intelligence that I have tried to stress at various points throughout this thesis.

Furthermore, to presuppose the equality of intelligence is to challenge the thought that places thinking on the side of passivity and practice on the side of action. In this sense Rancière is the direct descendant of the Marx of the ‘Theses on Feuerbach’ and The German Ideology. The Marx who knew that we ‘must prove the truth, i.e., the this-worldliness’ of our thinking in practice (1976b: 3). With this I have also attempted to underscore the specific rationalism that is at the heart of Rancière’s thought. Reason, as we have seen, is equality’s synonym. Reason, and therefore equality, are questions of practice, of action, and not questions of right or wrong. Truth, as Hegel reminds us, ‘is not a minted coin that can be given and pocketed ready-made’ (1977: 22). Equality is the condition of reason’s movement toward truth:

Reason begins when discourses organized with the goal of being right cease, begins where equality is recognized: not an equality decreed by law or force, not a passively received equality but an equality in act, verified at each step by those marchers who, in their constant attention to themselves and in their endless revolving around truth, find the right sentences to make themselves understood by others (Rancière, 1991: 72).
While ‘the police’ might be a key antagonist in Rancière’s thought, his true adversary is dogmatism. Dogmatism is the thought that takes truth to be a fixed, ‘ready-made’ or ‘God-given’ proposition; something immutable and given. Untruth is then anything fabricated or constructed. The affirmation of the equality of intelligence is thus also the affirmation of thinking in practice. In this sense the dogmatic logics of inequality have – retaining the full sense of irony that this conveys – come to meet their maker.

The affirmation of the equality of intelligence is an affirmation of reason against the thought that does violence to reason from the very beginning by dividing it in two: in which case reason can only persist at the absolute exclusion of non-reason.

The reader may interject: this is all very well, but what we are interested in is making equality a reality in the here and now. In a discussion of the ‘trouble’ with Rancière’s ‘axiomatic approach’, Ella Myers, for example, sees the conception of axiomatic equality as ‘a frustrating impasse for those seeking to instantiate equality’ (2014: 2). For Myers, the question of practice, which by her understanding is the ‘question of how to create more equal relations within society’, is ‘barred in advance’ by an account of axiomatic equality (2014: 11). Thus, according to Myers, axiomatic equality has little to do with reason: equality is only ever ‘a hidden mechanism or an evanescent display, but not a characteristic of our on-going relations with one another or of the institutions – socio-cultural or politico-legal – in which we participate (2014: 11).

Myers argument repeats the common criticism that Rancière is anti-institutional. These criticisms are, moreover, always questions of practice. Rancière is not adverse to institutional politics, he is indifferent. It is completely possible for institutions to do
good, they just cannot be premised on the equality of intelligence. The police is not
intended to be a derogatory term: it is thoroughly neutral (Rancière, 1999: 29).
Rancière addresses this in a few short lines from Disagreement:

The police can procure all sorts of good, and one kind of police may be
infinitely preferable to another. This does not change the nature of the police,
which is what we are exclusively dealing with here. The regime of public
opinion as gauged by the poll and of the unending exhibition of the real [du
réel] is today the normal form the police in western societies takes (1999: 31,
modified).

Myers seems to want more from Rancière here: ‘Indeed, there is almost no attention
paid in his key political works to this distinction between “better and worse” police’
(2014: 12). Yet is it really necessary for Rancière to make such arguments? Have not
sociology, criminology and political science already furnished us with enough data on
the many instantiations of the police, their faults and merits, strengths and
weaknesses? Myers reveals her position when she characterises the police order as
‘where we actually live our lives’ or ‘the order in which we live out our lives’ (2014:
11). This gives undue weight to the police and leads Myers to posit axiomatic equality
as ‘society’s secret’ (2014: 6).

It was shown in chapter two that the police logic tells us, in the final analysis, very
little about actual subjects. It is not possible to ‘live out our lives’ within the police
order. Rancière’s critique of the police logic is first a critique of positivism and vulgar
empiricism, and, as such, it is first a critique of certain academic practices. It has far
more to do with an epistemological division between those who do the science and those who are its objects than a theory that is supposed to account for our day-to-day experience. If any experience has any meaning, or relevance, for Rancière it is in the sense of aesthetic experience discussed in the previous chapter. The critique of police is not a critique of things as they actually are, but of a particular subject, the observant subject of the scientific gaze, the subject that is ‘only an eye’. We have seen this in both Rancière’s early critique of Althusser as well as in his identified affinities with Foucault.

This is why institutions cannot be premised on the equality of intelligences. Equality is reason’s synonym. The logic of institutions must split reason from the very beginning in order to distribute places and functions. Institutions require the same division of reason as the explicators classroom. Thus Rancière writes: ‘Every institution is an *explication* in social act, a dramatization of inequality’ (1991: 105). The positivistic police logic might work very well in the lab, producing all sorts of revolutionary results, but when it comes to real human beings we must proceed with caution:

Physicists and Chemists isolate physical phenomena and relate them to other physical phenomena. They set themselves to reproducing the known effects by producing their supposed causes. Such a procedure is forbidden to us. We can never say: take two equal minds and place them in such and such a condition. We know intelligence by its effects but we cannot isolate it, measure it (Rancière, 1991: 46).
Whatever we decide to call it – police logic, positivism, vulgar empiricism – they all have the common feature of the absolute exclusion of any void or ‘is not’. Recall the discussion of ‘managerial realism’ in the previous chapter: what was crucial was a particular idea of reality that took as ‘solid axioms’ the following precepts: ‘the whole is all, nothing is nothing’ (Rancière, 1999: 124). When emptied of all content what remains of the police is the pure knot of positivity with which it views the world; the absolute exclusion of the ‘is not’.

Rancière’s apparent charge against institutions does not, as it might seem, suggest an implicit anarchism lurking within his thought. If, for a moment, we were to adopt the scientific or police gaze and limit our analysis to that of pure positivity, which is to say all that is visible to this gaze, and set our instruments to measure equality, we doubtless see inequality everywhere. And, if it was our desire, we could do a lot of good with this data by eliminating inequality through measured redistributions. Rancière’s minimal addendum to this thought is to stop and ask who, exactly, this ‘we’ is that has paused to measure and map the social. The proper name for the ‘good’ policeman is the pastor.

Yet might all this talk of the role of institutions be merely an excuse for inaction? Myers thinks that Rancière does not place enough emphasis on the ‘recognition that institutions can play a vital role in fostering equality’ (2014: 18). The point is precisely that institutions do not act in and of themselves, only real concrete human beings act. Rancière tells us that we have a choice: ‘to attribute reason to real individuals or to their fictive unity’ (1991: 133). The critique of Rancière’s anti-institutionalism then begins to look like an excuse not to act: to wait – ‘frustrated’ –
until Rancière, finally, delivers us the thesis showing the way, finally, toward the ‘instantiation’ of equality.

Rancière will not tell us what to do. In Myers reading, Rancière’s axiomatic equality is ‘a starting point, an assumption that informs action’ (2014: 2, emphasis added). As we have seen, however, to proceed from the presupposition of the equality of intelligence is to begin with an ‘as if’ or a ‘might be,’ not from a blueprint: ‘it’s enough for us that the opinion be possible – that is, that no opposing truth be proved’ (Rancière, 1991: 46). The axiom of equality does not in itself tell us what to do and it certainly does not protect us from failure. To proceed as such is to see ‘what can be done under that supposition’ and that is all (Rancière, 1991: 46). It then matters little where one is when they decide to proceed from the supposition of the equality of intelligence, be this a school, the university, a union, the family, etc… The equality of intelligence can always be verified ‘at the heart of egalitarian madness’, Rancière continues:

There can not be a class of the emancipated, an assembly or a society of the emancipated. But any individual can always, at any moment, be emancipated and emancipate someone else, announce to others the practice and add to the number of people who know themselves as such and no longer play the comedy of inferior superiors (1991: 98).

Moreover, this is already being done. The ‘experiments inspired by that opinion’ are indeed ‘multiplying’ (Rancière, 1991: 46). One particular example is the experimental placing of a ‘Hole-in-the-wall’ computer in the slums of New Delhi where slum
dwelling children were able to learn to use the computer with no instruction and little knowledge of the English language by which it operated (see Stamp, 2013). Although the experiment was not directly inspired by Rancière, Richard Stamp’s analysis shows its proximity to the method of ‘universal teaching’ practiced by Joseph Jacotot and discussed at length in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Another example, one that the author was involved with first hand, was the ‘Undirected Study’ project: a diverse group of students and non-students who, in the first semester of 2015, began meeting regularly at the University of Auckland, pooling their resources and teaching themselves (Roberts, 2015). This latter experiment began explicitly from the presupposition of the equality of intelligence and the positioning of this experiment within the university intended to explore the limits of an emancipatory pedagogical project working within an institutional setting.

While the above experiments are ultimately questions of education, a field where Rancière’s thought is fast gaining influence, there are other, more direct, and perhaps more difficult lessons that academic practitioners can learn from Rancière. These concern those very academic communities that form the university and those very practices that maintain them. It concerns how we carve out disciplinary space and establish a disciplinary identity. Again, it is not about discounting the disciplines or the truth of their findings, but about challenging those defensive lines drawn around the disciplines, lines that have little to do with reason or truth, but seek to protect such spaces from some imaginary other. As Jones notes:

> A good part of our social sciences and the humanities have sought to defend themselves by building a thick layer of insulation between themselves and a
hostile outside in which unknown practices and forms of knowledge circulate in lands of mystery. In the names of the disciplines questions such as ‘is it sociology?’ or ‘is it philosophy?’ are taken to trump questions of the reality that the discourse evokes or its veridical and moral grounds (Jones, 2015: 134).

A playful rivalry has, perhaps, existed between disciplines for as long as they have differentiated themselves from one another, but when this rivalry turns into the blunt policing of boundaries it is reason that suffers. When work is merited against the presupposition of a well established sovereign territory, where what ‘counts’ as sociology or philosophy is that which respects the limits and boundaries set down by the tired masters of these disciplines, in spite of truth or reason, then it seems academic practice has somehow lost its way. Overcoming these arbitrary boundaries is an important task in the struggle for the university and Rancière is certainly a powerful ally in this, yet it is up to us to think, to act. After all: plenty remains to be done.
References


