



Jacques Rancière
Peter Engelmann
Politics and
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Translated by Wieland Hoban

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First Conversation

Peter Engelman I suggest we begin by talking about your intellectual career, which began with Althusser and followed a structuralist approach, though you soon moved away from this. You could describe your political concern and outline your research on the social movements of the nineteenth century, and explain how you proceeded from there to develop a new perspective on politics and art. After that I'd ask you to explain the major lines of your current critical thought and its theoretical foundations.

Jacques Rancière Agreed.

PE So let's start from your encounter with Althusser. Perhaps you can talk about how you ended up collaborating on *Reading Capital*,¹ and why you subsequently distanced yourself from that structuralist interpretation of Marx. Or perhaps you want to go even further back?

JR Well, in 1960 I started at the École Normale Supérieure, where Althusser was teaching at the time. I was a young man who had first become acquainted with Marxism more through reading existentialist or religious texts, because in France it was mainly Jesuits who had written good theoretical texts about Marx.

PE You were a Jesuit?

JR I wasn't a Jesuit, but back then there were practically no theoretical texts on Marx that had been written by communists. And the texts with the most detailed commentary on Marx were by Jesuits, especially Père Calvez, who had written a very extensive book entitled *Karl Marx*.² It was he who introduced many readers to Marx's thought by trying to uncover its philosophical dimension, taking an interest in the young Marx's begin-

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nings and showing the continuity of his thought. And there was Sartre too, through whom I also became acquainted with communism. Sartre pursued a philosophical, existentialist approach that heavily emphasized the problematics of praxis and alienation. But then I went to the École Normale Supérieure, where Althusser questioned this approach on the grounds that it didn't concentrate on the real Marx. He explained that the young Marx on which the commentaries focused was the ideological, pre-scientific Marx, and that one should abandon this existentialist discourse. That was the moment when structuralism emerged, and Althusser's reading forced me to abandon my first approach to Marx. I had pursued it with great enthusiasm and become something of a specialist in early Marx, and I had also written a final dissertation on the subject. I attended Althusser's seminars on *Capital*, which were intended to show the rupture between the young and the later, mature Marx. Althusser's concern was to rediscover Marx's true theory, which would form the point of departure for rethinking the revolution – but above all to enlighten all the young 'petty bourgeois' who lived in such ignorance of the system's laws that they couldn't

help going astray. This insistence on the theory of ideology was at the core of Althusser's thinking. And structuralism reinforced a scientistic reading of ideology theory, namely that all people were trapped in an illusion out of structural necessity, and science was needed in order to free them. I followed this direction, which, in a sense, also corresponded with the position of a young student at an elite university. Essentially there was a kind of Marxist aristocracy back then.

PE At the École Normale Supérieure?

JR Yes. You could say we were the best students, the best philosophers, and Marxists at the same time! We were conscious of our role as the intellectual avant-garde. Then came May 1968, a movement that ensued in a way that totally contradicted Althusser's theory, a movement that consisted of students who should really have been knee-deep in petty bourgeois ideology, with no ability to develop a scientific, Marxist, proletarian consciousness. It was this movement that triggered an enormous subversive movement all over the country, extending to all walks of life. So in 1968 one had the impression of a complete

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rupture between the Marxist scientific theory previously adhered to and the reality of this movement, the reality of workers' revolts, people's revolts, youth revolts. From that point on I began to criticize this structuralist Marxism, and all the more so when the University of Vincennes was founded after 1968.

PE How did this university come into existence?

JR Essentially, one can say that the state gave the radical leftists and the Marxists a university of their own. A university where one could truly practise Marxist, structuralist, semiological science. Those who were there had two choices: either one played along – and Althusserianism was the theory for entering into this schema, as it were – or one didn't want to be co-opted, and refused to be the Marxist poster-child of bourgeois culture. In my case that led to a critique of all the theoretical preconditions from which people had been proceeding until then. I decided on a critique of Althusser, and of all theories which claimed that Marxist science had to help those people who live in a state of illusion to attain consciousness. Then I told myself that to