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Conceding to the Current Order:

Comparing Georg Lukács’ and Jacques Rancière’s Visions for a More Egalitarian World

**Introduction**

To earnestly pursue a more egalitarian world we must believe that such a world is possible. What image we hold of said world will inform the tactics we employ in order to bring reality closer to our vision. Therefore, if we want our activity to effectively contribute to the actualization of a more egalitarian world, what kind of world *should* we construct in our imagination? And, how much should we allow our experiences to inform our estimation of what is possible? Perhaps we should not confine our ideal to what has been and envision a world of perfect social and economic equality. As Hume said, “if something is intelligible and can be distinctly conceived, it implies no contradiction and can never be proved false by any demonstrative argument or abstract *a priori* reasoning” (1748, p. 16). There is no argument, no reason we know of, that justifies our assumption that the future will resemble the past (Hume 1748, p. 17). But, will a utopian ideal lead us onto foolish paths, away from opportunities to realize more equality as we pursue a fantasy? Might we justify brutal measures chasing this illusion? As Hume also asserted, “only a fool or a madman would ever challenge the authority of experience or reject it as a guide to human life” (1748, p. 17). Perhaps we are better off confining ourselves to those visions experience tells us are achievable. But, if we limit our imagination, pursuing only the feasible, will we concede too much to the status quo and fail to manifest the way we wish the world were? Might we allow unnecessary brutalities to continue, thinking that they are impossible to overcome?

In “What is Orthodox Marxism” (1919), Georg Lukács attacks the “vulgar Marxists” who have conceded too much to the bourgeois order. These Marxists, Lukács contends, cannot see outside the contingent arrangements of their historical context. Instead, they interpret these arrangements as immutable, transhistorical truths. They, Lukács asserts, have unwittingly abandoned the ideal of a wholly egalitarian, Marxist order. To truly grasp the whole of reality, Lukács contends, (via the dialectical process, as he has), is to know that the egalitarian world orthodox Marxists envision is impending. In *Hatred of Democracy,* Jacques Rancière rejects such an ideal; he focuses on how things are, not how they should be*.* Rancière’s critique of the “hatred of democracy” exposes his love of the same. For him, better governments are less repressive governments: governments that allow for more democratic action. But, “There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as democratic government” (Rancière, 2005, p. 52). Instead, all political regimes, according to Rancière, are inherently oligarchic, and our definition of democracy should cohere with this fact. Using Lukács’ argument, we can accuse Rancière of being conditioned by the dominant political and social order, of believing that the world we live in is the world we must live in. But is this fair?

In this paper, I critique Rancière’s understanding of democracy by employing Lukács’ argument against “vulgar Marxists.” I begin by examining Rancière’s discussion of democracy in the first section. In the second section, I consider Lukács’ understanding of “bourgeois thought.” I use Lukács’ work to question whether Rancière’s definition of democracy attributes too much permanence to contemporary power structures. More specifically, I ask: Does Rancière’s contention that there can never be a democratic regime, but only democratic action, unnecessarily limit our vision of achievable, more egalitarian political orders? Following this, I suggest how Rancière might respond by analyzing his charges against Marxists. Rancière argues that Marxists’ visions of non-oligarchic rule are utopian. Furthermore, he asserts, Marxists unfairly blame those most oppressed by the contemporary political order for failing to deliver a more egalitarian future. Ultimately, I return to Hume’s aforementioned insights: Because, epistemologically speaking, we cannot rule out the unexpected, and, because “only a fool or a madman” would count on the unexpected occurring, whether we believe Rancière’s definition of democracy is overly conciliatory to today’s oligarchs is a matter of faith.

**Section I**

**Rancière’s Definition of Democracy**

According to Rancière, “democracy is neither a society to be governed, nor a government of society” (2005, p. 49). Instead, those countries that claim to be democracies are duping their citizens: the many are told that the power lies with them while the few rule. Deliberately or not, the few operate using the logic Quentin Skinner identified; that to claim to be a democratic state is tantamount to claiming to be a “commendable” state.In Rancière’s words, “‘Democratic society’ is never anything but an imaginary portrayal designed to support this or that principle of good government” (2005, p. 52). Rancière justifies this claim, that “democracy is not a form of State,” on both historical and theoretical grounds (2005, p. 71).

Today’s “democracies” are *representative.* This qualification in and of itself discounts the possibility of a state being truly democratic. Representation is “by rights, an oligarchic form, a representation of minorities who are entitled to take charge of public affairs” (Rancière, 2005, p. 53). While the people may choose their leaders in representative democracies, the people do not rule. Moreover, said democracies are not simply *de facto* oligarchies, they are oligarchies by design. Rancière uses the founding of the United States and the French Revolution to emphasize this point: “Originally representation was the exact contrary of democracy. None ignored this at the time of the French and American revolutions. The Founding Fathers and a number of their French emulators saw in it precisely the means for the elite to exercise power *de facto*” (2005, p. 53). Sheldon Wolinaffirms that the Founding Fathers devised a political system that would suppress the rule of the people. As Wolin notes, “the Founders, almost without exception, believed that democratic majority rule posed the gravest threat to a republican system. It stood for collective irrationality, or, as Madison put it, the ‘wishes of an unjust and interested majority” (2008, p. 229). John P. McCormick further supports Rancière’s contention that holding free elections with universal suffrage not only fails to constitute “rule of the people” but also dovetails with oligarchic rule. In McCormick’s words:

Wealth enables such citizens to cultivate greater reputation, a more distinctive appearance, and (traditionally at least) better public speaking skills such that voters almost inevitably choose them in electoral contests…Put simply, election is a magistrate selection method that directly and indirectly favors the wealthy and keeps political offices from being distributed widely among citizens of all socioeconomic backgrounds. (2005, p.148)

For Rancière, that “‘Representative democracy’ might appear today as a pleonasm” is a product of collective forgetting: the phrase “was initially an oxymoron” (2005, p. 53).

When advocates of representative democracy are posed with these challenges, they defend themselves on pragmatic grounds:

People like to simplify the question by returning it to the opposition between direct democracy and representative democracy…So one says that direct democracy was good for Ancient Greek cities or Swiss cantons of the Middle Ages, where the whole population of free men could gather in a single place. But for our vast nations and our modern societies only representative democracy is suitable. (Rancière, 52)

Rancière rejects this defense. In the first place, “direct democracy” is possible in any age: simply limit suffrage to a small minority (Rancière, 2005, p. 52). Indeed, direct democracy has always involved curtailing who can participate. In ancient Athens, the classical example of direct democracy:“Women were excluded from politics, and, despite a large population of foreigners in Athens, it was extremely difficult for them to acquire citizenship. Hence the citizen body consisted of a relatively small percentage of the Athenian population: some scholars have estimated 14 percent” (Wolin, 2008, p. 243). As Rancière argues, the inherent exclusion involved in direct democracy is fundamentally anti-democratic. Even direct democracies separate those who have a title to rule from those who do not. This separation not only explains why there has never been a democracy but also why a democratic state is wholly impossible.

To fully grasp Rancière’s argument here, I believe it is best to start with his understanding of a political order. A political order distinguishes the rulers from the ruled. For this order to be distinct from a natural order, the rulers cannot be those who are naturally disposed to lead. Rancière does not *explicitly* delineate who is intended to rule from who is not, however, he consistently uses “birth” and “wealth” as identifiers.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, Rancière clearly has a much broader understanding of what determines a born ruler. “If politics means anything,” Rancière writes, “it means something that is added to all these governments of paternity, age, wealth, force and science” (2005, p. 45). Presumably, then, personal attributes such as appearance, charisma, intelligence, or wisdom—in addition to age, force, wealth etc.—also characterize an innate leader. If those who govern possess these natal gifts, then their government is apolitical. Yet, how does Rancière get from this assertion to his conclusion that a political state is impossible; that those who have no innate title to rule *can never* have a title to rule?

This question is particularly difficult to answer in light of Rancière’s advocacy for governing by lot. According to Rancière, lots—randomly selecting leaders from the general population—would promote good government given that “good government is the government of those who do not desire to govern” (2005, p. 43). Moreover, Rancière suggests that the “drawing of lots” is the basis of *democratic* governance (2001, p. 5).[[2]](#footnote-2) When rulers are chosen by lot, what “characterizes a democracy is pure chance or the complete absence of qualifications for governing” (Rancière, 2001, p.5). In *Hatred of Democracy,* Rancière acknowledges that selecting leaders via lot is, lamentably, dismissed out of hand today. This dismissal—like the fact that representation is inherently oligarchic—is also a product of collective forgetting: “if the drawing of lots appears to our ‘democracies’ to be contrary to every serious principle for selecting governors, this is because we have at once forgotten what democracy meant and what type of ‘nature,’”—i.e. the desire for power— “it aimed at countering” (Rancière, 2005, p. 42). But, despite his commendation of lots, Rancière does not discuss the possibility of institutionalizing a lot based political system further. This invites the question: If we selected leaders via lot, would Rancière concede that a political state is in fact possible?

Perhaps Rancière views drawing lots as an ideal means of selecting leaders but as fundamentally impracticable. Or, perhaps, even if a ruler selected via lots is more likely to govern well, she would still have gained a title to rule and no longer be identified with those who have none. Indeed, Rancière’s argument suggests this latter response. His point here is not semantic. It is not about the title gained once selected to rule so much as who you become once you gain said title: you become a natural ruler and you forgo your ability to be a political actor, or rather, a democratic actor. The title to rule, then, inherited by birth *or acquisition,* makes you a “natural” ruler. Moreover, only those who *remain* without a title to rule are capable of democratic leadership.

Before continuing, it is important to note that Rancière implicitly argues that democracy is *the* manifestation of politics.“Democracy,” he writes, “is not a regime or a social way of life. It is the institution of politics itself” (1999, p. 101). In fact,Rancière often seems to use “democracy” and “politics” interchangeably. For example, Rancière notes that “the condition under which a government is political is that it is founded on the absence of any title to govern” (2005, p. 44). Similarly, when defining “democracy,” Rancière writes, “Democracy first of all means this: anarchic ‘government,’ one based on nothing other than the absence of every title to govern” (2005, p. 41). When contrasting the political with the natural, Rancière states, “politics commences…when the principle of government is separated from the law of kinship” (2005, p. 40). Once again, Rancière speaks of democracy in the same manner when he writes, “democracy signifies a rupture with the order of kinship” (2005, p. 45). While political theorists usually see democracy as a subset of politics, for Rancière they are apparently synonymous.

We are now equipped to understand Rancière’s assertion: A democratic government is an oxymoron. In order to govern, one must have a title to govern. In order to be democratic, a government must be ruled by those who have no title. This makes the notion of a democratic regime contradictory and its reality impossible. What, then, does “democracy” mean?

Rancière argues that “democracy” “is simply the power peculiar to those who have no more entitlements to govern than to submit” (2005, p. 46-47). [[3]](#footnote-3) In this way, “democratic” qualifies actions, not states. However, not every action performed by one without a title to govern is a democratic action. A democratic action “constantly wrests the monopoly of public life from oligarchic governments” (Rancière, 2005, p. 96). In other words, democratic actions are ones that disturb the social and political order performed by those without a title to rule.

As mentioned, Rancière argues that “every state is oligarchic” (2005, p. 71). Oligarchs preside over an order of domination: a particular “distribution of the political and the social, or of the public and the private” (Rancière, 2005, p. 56). In order to establish this distribution, oligarchs designate characteristics and behaviors as belonging either to the public sphere or the private sphere. Whether or not health care is universal, abortion is illegal, higher education is free, prayer is allowed in schools, gay marriage is legal etc., all identify what characteristics—one’s health, maternity, education, religion, sexuality etc.—are confined to the private sphere and which are sanctioned in the public sphere. In other words, oligarchies establish a “monopoly of public life” by dictating which characteristics qualify someone for participation in public life and which do not.

Democratic action “counteract(s) the perpetual privatization of public life” (Rancière, 2005, p. 62). Such actions—getting an illegal abortion, kissing someone of the same sex publically, refusing to pay student loans—undermine the oligarchic order by bringing “private” matters into the public sphere:

Democracy…is a process of struggle against this privatization, the process of enlarging this sphere. Enlarging the public sphere does not entail, as it is claimed in liberal discourse, asking for State encroachments on society. It entails struggling against the distribution of the public and the private that shores up the twofold domination of the oligarchy in the State and in society. (Rancière, 2005, p. 55)

Democratic actions and movements occur when those who have been excluded from the public arena demand inclusion. Or, more to the point, when those for whom equality has been denied enact equality.

Rancière is not alone in this understanding of “democracy.” Before him, Sheldon Wolin described democracy as a form of action rather than a form of government: “Democracy needs to be reconceived as something other than a form of government: as a mode of being which is conditioned by bitter experience, doomed to succeed only temporarily” (1994, p. 23). While Wolin places greater emphasis on the role of revolution and solidarity, Rancière and Wolin both argue that democratic struggles will be “continuous, ceaseless, and endless” (1994, p. 11).[[4]](#footnote-4)

For Rancière, the democratic struggle is interminable because society will always involve a division between the public and the private: “There is no science of the just measure between equality and inequality” capable of permanently fixing the public/private division (Rancière, 2005, p. 69). Of course, oligarchies do not all relate to democratic action in the same manner: “Oligarchy can give democracy more or less room…In this precise sense, the constitutional forms and practices of oligarchic governments can be said to be more or less democratic” (Rancière, 2005, p. 72). While “democracy” connotes the power of “the part of those who have no-part,” not a type of regime, regimes can allow for democracy to greater or lesser extent (Rancière, 2001, p. 7). Moreover, because we will never settle which characteristics and behaviors should be private and which should be public, we will always need “democratic supplementation” to challenge the given order (Rancière, 2005, p. 77-78).

In the final chapter of *Hatred of Democracy,* Rancière describes the most egalitarian government we can hope to achieve: “The optimistically minded among us” might imagine an “‘oligarchy’ that leaves enough room for democracy to feed its passion” (2005, p. 74). In the next section, I draw on Lukács’ work to suggest that, perhaps, Rancière has set the bar too low.

**Section II**

**Lukács’ Critique of Bourgeois Thought**

In *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Georg Lukács argues that to understand reality, we must look beyond immediate experience and consider history in its totality. Only by *dialectically* examining past and present human relations can we expose the consonant whole of world history. The linear logic of bourgeois thought, however, takes contingent, temporary arrangements as the *sine qua non* of reality. Those who interpret the world via bourgeois logic ignore the anomalous behavior—economic crises, scientific abnormalities—that their worldview cannot explain. Worse, in mistaking temporary human relations for eternal relations, bourgeois thought is incapable of progressing mankind past the capitalist moment and into the communist future. Although the bourgeoisie contributed to the dialectical movement of history by developing the means to realize a more egalitarian world, the utility of bourgeois thought, Lukács suggests, has expired. While the essays that compose *History and Class Consciousness* were written in the late 1910s and early 1920s, Lukács’ condemnation of bourgeois logic is well suited to critique Rancière’s argument in *Hatred of Democracy*. In this section, I expound on Lukács’ understanding of bourgeois thought.

According to Lukács, non-dialectical, bourgeois thought perceives contingent arrangements as the interminable, “natural” order. This perception is largely enabled by the marriage between capitalism and “science.” Discovering principles that make the world operate predictably is fundamental to the scientific endeavor. In order to cultivate this predictability, we must develop abstract laws. Such laws can only be developed by looking for commonalities between distinct observations and using these observations to create abstract categories. As Kuhn illustrates in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, what commonalities we group together depends on our objectives: on what problems we want to solve, or rather, on what we want to produce.Lukács, anticipating Kuhn’s argument, understands scientific knowledge in the same manner. The scientific laws we develop are applicable to the specific aims of specific eras, not to the entirety of human experiences and epochs.

“When the ideal of scientific knowledge is applied to nature it simply furthers the progress of science,” Lukács concedes; “But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie” (1919, p. 10). Scientists ignore the distinct characteristics of observations in order to systemically predict phenomenon; capitalists, on the other hand, ignore the distinct characteristics of human beings and the objects they produce in order to create profit. For the capitalist, the attributes that are particular to an entity are only relevant in so far as they affect the capitalist’s ability to make money from said entity. It is the “exchange-value” (market value) of the subject/object, not the “use-value” (utility), that the capitalist desires. While the “use-value” of an entity depends on its concrete nature, the “exchange-value” is produced by transient social relations, such as market fluctuations: “the use value of the commodity bears no systematic quantitative relation to its exchange value, which is a reflection of the conditions of a commodity’s production” (*A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, 1983, p. 561). In this way, an individual’s “exchange-value” is an *abstract* value conditioned on historically contingent relations between men. Like the product she produces, a worker belongs to the abstract category of “commodity.” And, like her product, the producer’s commodity status, rather than her concrete attributes, determines her function in society. The capitalist cannot profit from the laborer as human, he can only profit from her as commodity.

This commodification of producers and their products conceals the ephemeral nature of capitalism from owners and laborers alike. “In capitalist society,” Lukács asserts, “man’s environment, and especially the categories of economics, appear to him immediately and necessarily in the forms of objectivity which conceal the fact that they are the categories of the *relations of men with each other”* (1919, p. 14). How is it that these invented economic categories, and the laws that unite them, come to be seen as transcendent?

Abstraction is by definition divorced from the concrete. When we use abstraction to describe the physical world we inhabit, we disguise the origin of the abstraction and treat it as though it were an *a priori* category.[[5]](#footnote-5) Moreover, when abstract categories determine our lives—e.g. as bourgeois or proletarian—the “reality” of the abstraction is further validated. The category “commodity” or the law of “supply and demand,” for instance, appear to be timeless forces rather than created dynamics. We come to feel that we are controlled by these forces: we feel powerless against them rather than that we are the architects of them. The result is that “man in capitalist society confronts a reality ‘made’ by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its ‘laws,’” (Lukács, 1923, p. 135).

When we fail to see the provisional nature of abstract laws including, and most importantly for Lukács, economic laws, we become myopic, unable to understand human existence in totality. The bourgeoisie and those who share their worldview are guilty of this failure. “Thus,” Lukács argues, “only when the theoretical primacy of the ‘facts’ has been broken, only when *every phenomenon is recognized to be a process,* will it be understood that what we are wont to call ‘facts’ consists of processes” (1923, p.184).

It is not the proletarian nor the capitalist that Lukács is attacking in *History and Class Consciousness*: it is his fellow Marxist philosophers. He blames those he calls “vulgar Marxists” (the utopians, the opportunists) for abandoning dialectical thought and historical materialism—the foundations of Marx’s theory—for ahistorical, irrational, bourgeois logic. According to Lukács, these theorists have uncritically accepted “the nature of the object as it is given and the laws of that society as the unalterable foundation of ‘science’” (1919, p. 7). In so doing, the vulgar Marxists have given up on a communist future. Of course, we cannot attack Rancière with this specific charge. In *Hatred of Democracy,* Rancière never calls himself a Marxist nor does he claim to desire a communist future. Nonetheless, it is evident that Rancière advocates for a more egalitarian future: he supports those who “exercise, by their action, the citizen’s rights that the law refuses them” (2005, p. 61). In other words, Rancière champions those actions in which the oppressed demonstrate their equality and demand that it be recognized where it has been denied.

In the final section of this paper, I suggest that Lukács’ critique against those who have adopted bourgeois logic can appropriately be leveled against Rancière. I also imagine Rancière’s likely response to this charge as well as his presumed counterargument against Lukács. In so doing, I hope to show what is at stake for both theorists in the discussion I’ve presented. For Lukács, to adopt bourgeois thought is to abandon the possibility of an egalitarian political and social order. For Rancière, to cling to a Marxist vision of the future is to inevitably blame those very people Marxists intend to liberate.

**Section III**

**Comparing Lukács’ and Rancière’s Visions for a More Egalitarian World**

In discussing the worker’s alienation from the objects he produces, Marx writes “Not gods, not nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over man”(1932, p. 1164). Marx’s point here, as elsewhere, is that the forces that dominate our lives are not eternal. Men have created the conditions that rule them and men are capable of altering these conditions. Throughout *History and Class Consciousness,* Lukács evidences Marx’s assertion and criticizes his fellow Marxists for having forgotten the same. I argue that the criticisms Lukács levels against the vulgar Marxists may also be used to challenge Rancière’s argument that the current governing order is not, in fact, political: it is natural. In this way, Rancière accepts “that the economic or juridical forms of bourgeois society constitute the ‘eternal’, the ‘rational’, and the ‘natural’ environment for man” (Lukács, 1922, p. 334).[[6]](#footnote-6)

As discussed in Section I, Rancière explicitly concedes that oligarchic rule is natural and that democratic government—indeed, that political government—is impossible. In so doing, Rancière yields one of the—if not *the*— most potent tools for affecting egalitarian change to the “oligarchs” rather than “the people:” government. Like the vulgar Marxists, Rancière promotes the bourgeois notion that the rule of the few over the many is not a contingent historical arrangement based on human relations, but an eternal, natural order. Although Rancière *does* argue that *better* governments are possible, for him, the progressive ideal of a government by and for the people is wholly unimaginable. By refusing the possibility of democratic government, Lukács might argue, Rancière creates a self-fulfilling prophecy and thereby makes democratic government impossible.

Rancière’s counterargument is clear. He provides an implicit critique of Lukács via his critique of Marxism in general. Marxists, he contends, fail to acknowledge the impossibility of a democratic regime. Instead, they indulge in dangerous, utopian fantasies:

It is this vision that even today sustains the hope of a communism or a democracy of the multitude: the notion that the increasingly immaterial forms of capitalist production concentrated in the universe of communication are, from this moment on, to have formed a nomadic population of ‘producers’ of a new type; to have constituted a collective intelligence, a collective power of thought, affects and movements of bodies that is liable to explode apart the barriers of the Empire. Understanding what democracy means is to renounce this faith. The collective intelligence produced by a system of domination is only ever the intelligence of that system. *Unequal society does not carry any equal society in its womb. Rather, egalitarian society is only ever the set of egalitarian relations that are traced here and now through singular and precarious acts.* (2005, p. 96-97). [[7]](#footnote-7)

Against this charge of utopianism, Lukács asserts that “This ultimate goal is not an abstract ideal opposed to the process, but an aspect of truth and reality” (1919, p. 23). Indeed, Lukács goes to great lengths to dispute the criticism that his belief in a communist future is utopian. In order to do so, Lukács claims 1) that the victory of the proletariat is not inevitable but depends on the proletariat’s developing class consciousness and 2) that he *does* believe that reality is discoverable via a proper understanding of science and history.

As to the first point, Lukács counters charges of utopianism by demonstrating that he *does not* think that proletarian revolution and an age of communism is inevitable. Both depend on the proletariat developing class consciousness: “dialectical materialism…does not deny that men perform their historical deeds themselves and that they do so consciously,” he asserts (1920, p. 50). Instead, consciousness is the most essential component of the dialectical process. “*The fate of the revolution (and with it the fate of mankind),”* Lukács emphasizes, *“will depend on the ideological maturity of the proletariat, i.e. on its class consciousness*” (1920, p. 70).

Indeed, it is his belief that arriving at an egalitarian future depends “*entirely upon the class consciousness of the proletariat and not on victory or defeat in isolated skirmishes,”* that explains Lukács’ vehement rejection of those vulgar Marxists who adopt bourgeois thought (1920, p. 73). To confine ourselves to bourgeois logic, according to Lukács, means we will never realize the fully attainable communist order. Once again, Rancière falls victim to Lukács’ attack against the vulgar Marxists. Like Lukács’ adversaries*,* Rancière suggests that democratic advancement can only occur via “singular and precarious acts”—e.g. via “isolated skirmishes”—not via the “collective intelligence” of a “nomadic population of ‘producers’” (2005, p. 96).

As to the second point above, Lukács does indeed reject the “truth” and “science” of the bourgeoisie but not because he rejects “truth” and “science” *in toto*. Referring to bourgeois logic, Lukács contends, “The unscientific nature of this seemingly so scientific method consists, then, in its failure to see and take account of the *historical character* of the facts on which it is based” (1919, p. 7). To be scientific, Lukács asserts, is to understand that one’s immediate experiences depend on contingent arrangements. Accordingly, to base scientific discoveries on proximate circumstances is myopic and fails to conform to the scientific ideal of objectivism. To be truly objective is *not* to isolate individual epochs but to examine the historical whole:

In order to progress from these ‘facts’ to facts in the true meaning of the word it is necessary to perceive their historical conditioning as such and to abandon the point of view that would see them as immediately given: they must themselves be subjected to a historical and dialectical examination. (Lukács, 1919, p. 7)

Only via “dialectical materialism is the road to truth,” according to Lukács, because only the dialectic can resolve “the contradictions that have emerged in the course of history” (1919, p. 1; 10). For Lukács, to comprehend the truth is to see how all historical facts contribute to a consonant whole without contradiction. This “Concrete totality is…the category that governs reality” (1919, p. 10). Because he depends on this “concrete totality” to predict the communist future, Lukács argues that his understanding is based on facts rather than fantasy.

The above defense of Lukács also presents an additional charge against Rancière. Like the vulgar Marxists, Rancière might similarly be seen as neglecting the truly objective perspective of historical materialism. The materialist’s approach to an examination of democracy would—at the very least—involve an assessment of *divergent* ways “democracy” has been mobilized and defined throughout history. A materialist’s case for a new definition of democracy would also identify *why* a new definition is necessary: i.e. what end a new definition promotes. In establishing his conception of democracy, Rancière provides neither a genealogy of the term nor a political project that his definition might serve.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Rancière’s understanding of democracy is fundamentally anchored in Platonism. The explanation of his third thesis on politics is exclusively predicated on Book III of Plato’s *Laws* (Rancière, 2001, p. 5-6). Moreover, in *Hatred of Democracy,* Rancière writes, “Democracy, Plato tells us in Chapter VIII of the *Republic*, is a political regime that is not one” (2005, p. 36). That Rancière draws on Platonic thought when discussing democracy is not unique, problematic, nor anti-materialist. However, that Rancière implicitly advocates—without justifying why he does so—that Plato, the nearly 2,500-year-old thinker, *ought to* serve as the authority on how we understand democracy today, *is* anti-materialist. Through this implicit advocacy, Rancière tacitly contends that time has not altered how we would, or should, understand democracy.

Rancière’s description of the democratic subject is more clearly at odds with historical materialism. “Democracy,” he writes, “is the designation of subjects that do not coincide with the parties of the state or of society, floating subjects that deregulate all representation of places and portions” (1999, p. 99-100). Elsewhere he states, “The ‘people’ is the supplement that inscribes ‘the count of the unaccounted-for’ or ‘the part of those who have no part’” (2001, p. 8). For Lukács, identifying the democratic subject—or any subject—means identifying a material being: a person with discernable experiences and articulable ideas and desires. “Floating subjects,” or, “the part of those who have no part,” are especially abstract categories. As Lukács argues above, such abstraction might cause us to forget the contingent nature of our sociopolitical relations.

In spite of these tensions, there are parallels between Lukács’ and Rancière’s worldviews as presented in the works discussed here. For example, Rancière agrees with Lukács that states use science to bolster their legitimacy. According to Rancière, today there is “an oligarchic alliance of wealth and science” (2005, p. 78). The powers that be appeal to science because it is able to “objectively” “choose the best solutions for societal problems” (Rancière, 2005, p.78). Science, the oligarchs assert, has no masters, and “if science did not impress its legitimacy upon the people, it is because the people is ignorant” (2005, p. 79). Both Rancière and Lukács challenge the assertion that science is impartial, and both suggest that rulers use science to disseminate the belief that the dominant order is the permanent order and that the preferred solutions of the oligarchs are the objectively correct solutions.

Furthermore, both Lukács and Rancière suggest that praxis is essential. Like Rancière, Lukács believes that only the actions of those with no title to rule—if we may parallel Rancière’s “those with no title to rule” with Lukács’ proletariat—can bring about a more egalitarian order. Lukács suggests this when he writes, “the proletariat…can be transformed and liberated only by its own actions” (1923, p. 208). However, beyond the fact that both authors contend that actions, and not theory alone, is essential to change, I believe the theorists’ arguments are irreconcilable. Rancière discredits those who “find it [hard] to cope with the fact that Marxism disappointed their expectations” (2005, p. 87). We will never arrive at an age of complete, governmentally enforced egalitarianism, Rancière insists. The most we can do is work to make the order we have fairer. Lukács, in turn, would argue that once we have abandoned the anti-bourgeois “dialectical conception of totality,” we have undermined the possibility of achieving a new, egalitarian sociopolitical order.

For Rancière, Lukács’ worldview leads to the unfortunate disparagement of the very proletariat he lauds. “As soon as the Marxist rupture failed to accomplish what the denunciation required,” Rancière writes, referring to the denunciation of capitalism, “the denunciation was turned round: the individuals are not victims of a system of global domination. They are the ones responsible for it, the ones who impose the ‘democratic tyranny’ of consumption” (2005, p. 87-88). In other words, Lukács’ argument leads to the inevitable charge that we don’t have a communist order because the proletariat failed; because they never developed class consciousness. For Lukács, Rancière has left those same proletarians to suffer eternally, to never overturn the order that dominates them. For Lukács, “the proletariat to become aware of the dialectical nature of its existence is a matter of life and death” (Lukács, 1920, p. 164).

**Conclusion**

What, then, should we believe? According to Rancière, if we don’t accept the natural fact of oligarchic rule, we blame the victims of that rule, not the perpetrators. Utopian visions only enhance the hatred of democratic actors: “they are unable to liberate themselves,”we reprimand*.* But to accept oligarchic rule as natural is, according to Lukács, to give up on a better future: “The view that things as they appear can be accounted for by ‘natural laws’ of society is, according to Marx, both the highpoint and the insuperable barrier of bourgeois thought” (1923, p. 174). Of course, what Rancière would have thought in the early 1920s and what Lukács would have thought in 2005 is impossible to know, and unnecessary, I believe, for the discussion presented here. However, in the last essay presented in *History and Class Consciousness,* Lukács acknowledges that “what was right today can be wrong tomorrow” (1922, p. 334). “Every communist organization,” he continues, “must be prepared to increase as far as possible its own sensitivity and its own ability to learn from every aspect of history. It must make sure that the weapons used to gain victory yesterday do not become an impediment in future struggles” (1922, p. 334). Perhaps today, unlike one hundred years ago, it is indeed absurd to believe in the possibility of an egalitarian political and social order. Ultimately though, what one believes is possible is a matter of faith.

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1. In his “Ten Theses on Politics,” Rancière is more explicit. He writes, “The ‘normal’ order of things is that human communities gather together under the rule of those qualified to rule — whose qualifications are legitimated by the very fact that they are ruling. These governmental qualifications may be summed up according to two central principles: The first refers society to the order of filiation, both human and divine. This is the power of birth. The second refers society to the vital principle of its activities. This is the power of wealth” (2001, p. 10). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Here, Rancière is recounting Plato’s understanding of democracy. Therefore, it may be unfair to suggest that he is offering his own perspective on lots. However, throughout “Ten Theses on Politics,” Rancière routinely defers to the authority of Plato to validate his assertions. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rancière’s understanding of who qualifies as a democratic actor is somewhat inconsistent. At times he implies that the democratic actor is identifiable: they are “those who have no more entitlements to govern than to submit” (2005, p. 46-47). However, elsewhere, Rancière suggests that we cannot identify the democratic actor prior to his or her action. This is because Rancière resists equating these untitled ones with any specific identity group or set of experiences. Rancière’s fifth thesis on politics states: “The ‘people’ that is the subject of democracy…is not the collection of members in a community, or the laboring classes of the population. It is the supplementary part, in relation to any counting of parts of the population that makes it possible to identify ‘the part of those who have no-part…with the whole of the community” (2001, p. 7). If “the people” are not a “collection of members in a community,” we must then dismiss the idea that we can readily identify a democratic actor. Instead, a democratic actor must be a person who is currently performing democratic action. What is clear is that, for Rancière, “democracy” qualifies actions first and foremost. What is unclear is who, specifically, is positioned to carry our democratic action. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The full quote from Wolin is, “Politics is continuous, ceaseless and endless” (1994, p. 11). Unlike Rancière, Wolin believes that “Democracy is one among many versions of the political” (1994, p. 11). Nonetheless, I believe it is fair to assert that as a subset of the political, the struggle for democracy is also “continuous, ceaseless and endless” by Wolin’s estimation (1994, p. 11). Indeed, Wolin suggests this throughout “Fugitive Democracy.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The contention that we always describe the world via abstraction (as language is an abstraction) does not, I suggest, undermine Lukács’ argument here. Even if we concede that comprehending the world necessitates abstraction, we can still maintain that we mustn’t forget that these abstractions are human/social creations. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. My point here is not that Rancière accepts that capitalism is the natural order. Instead, I am challenging Rancière’s acceptance that oligarchy is the only possible form of government. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Emphasis mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In redefining “democracy,” Rancière is clearly advocating for an *intellectual* project. But it is unclear if this intellectual project has a corollary sociopolitical project outside of the academy. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)