

# “How Is Innovation Possible?”: An Analysis of Rancière’s Post-Marxist View on Innovation

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**Abstract:** As a representative figure of contemporary left-wing and post-Marxism, Rancière answers the question of how innovation is possible from the perspective of aesthetic politics. In his view, innovation is only possible when reformatory “undivided division” takes equality as a prerequisite, thus breaking the division of sensible space by the capitalist security order and achieving “sensible redistribution.” Although Rancière’s view on sensible innovation recognizes the confinement of sensible space by capitalist rule, it is ultimately reduced to post-Marxist discourse critique because it loses the practical orientation of Marx’s innovation theory. The analysis of Rancière’s innovation does not only help to discover the “bright spots” and defects in his thought, but also provide new ideas for us to consider the aforementioned question in contemporary times.

**Keywords:** Rancière; Marx; Human innovation; Post-Marxism

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## 1. Introduction

Innovation, as an inquiry into the ideal state of human existence, is a common concern of contemporary left-wing and post-Marxist scholars. From a Hegelian universalist theory, Laclau points out that the “dichotomous dimension” and the “fundamental dimension” contained in traditional innovation discourse are logically incompatible, which leaves the idea of innovation in a state of collapse, while real innovation should be the hegemonic act of universal negation of a specific identity. Based on a Lacanian psychoanalysis, Žižek highlights the role of ideology in the politics of innovation through the relationship between the master’s energy and subject as well as the construction of illusion. Balibar sees innovation as the autonomous dimension of politics, in which the indivisibility of equality and freedom required by autonomy is, in his view, the very essence of the politics of innovation. However, from the perspective of bio-politics, Negri and Hardt appeal to the participation and sharing of the common world by the “multitude.”

Unlike them, Rancière sees innovation as an equal division of sensible space in terms of aesthetic politics. As a favorite student of Louis Althusser, Rancière’s early knowledge of Marxism was mostly derived from Althusser, which has led to the discussion of Rancière’s relevance to Marxism in the domestic academic community, mainly centering on his relationship with Althusser. However, a few people have systematically studied him in juxtaposition with Marx. Although Rancière himself was never willing to be associated with Marxism or post-Marxism, it is undeniable that the content of his thought, the subject of his research, and even the beginning of his academic career, are inextricably linked to Marx <sup>[1]</sup>.

## **2. Subject of innovation: The “undivided division” that fills the structural void**

On thinking about how innovation is possible nowadays, the first question to deal with is who will emancipate. Marx’s answer to this question is the proletariat. However, Marx did not provide a clear definition of “the proletariat” but often used it as an opposing concept to the bourgeoisie. Since workers are the major group exploited by capitalists, the proletariat is often assumed as equals with the working class in Marx’s discourse. For Marx, the innovation of the working class encompasses the innovation of man in general, for the whole of human slavery is contained in the relation of workers and production, and all relations of slavery are merely deformations and consequences of this relation. However, today, with the prevalence of consumerism, workers have gradually become “one-way people” who have lost their critical power as in Marcuse’s book, and whether they can still bear the responsibility of the subject of innovation is a question worth exploring. As Laclau points out, “The death of the ‘Subject’ has been the main precondition of the renewed interest in the question of subjectivity [2].”

Like Marx, Rancière also saw the proletariat as the subject of innovation. However, he did not see it as a particular class, but rather as a general reference to all the “undivided classes” that have been excluded from the existing social system. The term “undivided classes” primarily refers to those who do not own any share, including the poor, the third class, and the modern proletariat, as well as those who are not, in fact, anything but all or nothing. In his view, the “undivided” can be either slaves who are regarded as animals by their owners, workers who are seen as machines by capitalists, artists who are classified as non-mainstream by the art circle, or businessmen who are not acknowledged by the industry. It is in this sense that Rancière argues that the proletariat is in fact “a class that is not a class.”

The reason why Rancière saw the proletariat as “a class that is not a class” is that his definition of a class begins with the division between police and politique. The dichotomy between police and politique is the basis of Rancière’s political philosophy. The former refers to a technique of governance, i.e., an orderly distribution of society according to a certain consensus that determines what is included in the political calculus of the existing system. The latter refers to an activity of conflict that breaks down the existing distribution system, with the aim of bringing back the “undivided parts” that have no place in the perceived system into the political calculus. In short, the former emphasizes on consensus and order, while politique emphasizes on dissent and conflict. In Rancière’s view, the erasure of dissent by the police order effectively eliminates politics, which is precisely what he opposes. He argues that class has a dual nature. From the perspective of police, class is a group of people assigned a particular status and hierarchy according to their origin or activity. From the political point of view, class is something else entirely: the creator of conflict, the name used to count the uncounted, and a pattern of subjectification superimposed on all social groups.

## **3. Drive of innovation: The “intellectual innovation” of inverted equality**

After Rancière has filled the oblivion of the subject of innovation today through the “undivided parts,” the next question is how to achieve innovation. After all, these “undivided parts,” being excluded from police order, can be both an impetus for innovation and a generator of terror as well as violence. How to lead the subject to the right path of innovation is therefore a question that every innovation theorist must consider. In Marx’s view, for one class to truly become a class of liberators, the other must conversely become a class of enslavers. This shows that Marx’s view on innovation is based on class antagonism, in which innovation can only be promoted through proletarian reformation. However, since the proletariat in general was economically enslaved and unaware of its historical mission, no effort was spared to educate the workers to be as clear as possible of the hostile antagonism of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In other words, the proletariat, as the subject of innovation, must rely on the guidance of its vanguard.

Unlike Marx’s proletarian reformation, Rancière believes that the impetus for innovation cannot be sought from outside as “it is not the ability of a small group of elites that contributes to our intellectual

innovation, but innovation should come from our preconceptions of equality.” By transforming equality from a goal to a premise, he developed his own unique theory of “intellectual innovation.” Rancière’s concept of “intellectual innovation” came from a French educator, Jacotot. It mainly refers to the innovation of self that breaks the limits of intellectual hierarchy. In his view, traditional education divides intelligence into different levels, and only those of a higher level can be teachers of a lower level, while those of a lower level can only remain as subordinates. This unequal educational model does not only dull the human mind, but also regenerate social inequality. Intellectual innovation is the determination to set out to exercise one’s intellectual capacity and to insist that it is the capacity of all people; the determination to behave as an equal inhabitant of the world; the determination to make men and women strive through the forest of things and symbols, enjoy their own intellectual adventure, and be seen by others as well as to see others as inquirers and artists of constant labor, not as beings who have learned only to command and obey or to flatter and discriminate. By analyzing the issue of contemporary capitalist globalization, he points out that human wisdom is actually a whole, in which there is no such division as teacher’s wisdom, student’s wisdom, or craftsman’s wisdom, but rather, wisdom belongs to all. However, due to the privatization of this collective wisdom by some so-called great powers, economic or academic groups are rejecting the possibility of innovation through the denial of “dissent.” True innovation refers to the appropriation of this collective intelligence and the confirmation of the potential of intellectual equality, so only those politics based on dissent can embody the power of innovation and construct real “intellectual innovation,” thus breaking this monopoly on wisdom. By absorbing the core idea of Jacotot’s “universal teaching method,” Rancière believes that only “intellectual innovation” based on intellectual equality can truly realize human innovation because innovation is the realization of this equality. He insists that intellectual equality is not a goal to be pursued, but rather a starting point for action, an assumption that must be maintained in all circumstances, and that innovation is possible only if this assumption is constantly tested through “intellectual innovation.”

#### **4. Purpose of innovation: “Sensible redistribution” as a mobile community**

For Rancière, the “reality” of communism bears two meanings: first, communism is a feasible solution to the injustice of capitalist society and an effective way to deal with the problems of capitalism; second, communism is not just an ideal in a sense, but a reality that exists. Rancière argues that neither has capitalism become more intolerable today, nor is communism any more or less realistic than it was in 1847 or 1917<sup>[3]</sup>. If there is anything special about today’s communism, it is that communism already exists in a new form of capitalist production. This new form refers to the shift from the production of material goods to “digital capitalism” based on the production of a global network of information interaction. Capitalists collect information and intelligence through vast computer networks, privatizing the collective intelligence that should belong to all, while the workers who produce computer hardware are reduced to the “undivided parts” of digital capitalism. In order to break the capitalist monopoly on collective intelligence, Rancière argues that it needs to be redistributed through the power of sensibility. This is why he argues that communism should be a quest for the promise of freedom and equality in the form of a sensible community of collective intelligence that would break down the boundaries separating the various worlds of common experience<sup>[4]</sup>. For Rancière, the present union of a belief in historical inevitability and a culture of distrust has produced a particular kind of “communism”; that is, communism as the appropriation of the productive forces by the state power or as a society run by a communist elite, but in fact there is only one form of communism under discussion today; namely, a sense of the affirmation and demonstration of the capabilities of any human being. This particular “communism” can only be the future of capitalism but not the future of innovation, which can only mean the autonomous growth of a common space created by the free association of men and women implementing the principle of equality. In this sense, communism is not an ideal, rather it is implicitly present in contemporary capitalism as a reality, except that the capitalists’

appropriation of collective wisdom has severed this sensible community. Therefore, he believes that the end of innovation lies in breaking down the division of sensible space through “sensible redistribution” and ultimately achieving true freedom.

As one of the representative figures of contemporary post-Marxism, Rancière’s pursuit of human innovation shares some similarities with that of Marx. Marx made freedom the first essential of human innovation, yet the false freedom of capitalism based on private property makes each person see others not as the realization of his own freedom but as the limitation of his own freedom. In order to eliminate the oppression and enslavement of men in the capitalist society, the proletariat must establish a communist society through reformation to eliminate private ownership and finally realize true freedom. Rancière also recognizes communism as an effective solution to overcome slavery from the capitalist society, but unlike Marx, he discusses the issue of human innovation from the perspective of aesthetic politics. The difference between Rancière’s and Marx’s logic of innovation is that Marx insists on the materialist concept that social existence determines social consciousness, so he believes that the prerequisite for human innovation is the transformation of the material sphere, and only after the transformation of the productive forces and social relations can human equality be finally realized. In that way, equality exists in his case as a goal and a result. The core of Rancière’s intellectual innovation is that innovation is possible only when all people assume equality as a prerequisite in their consciousness so that changes in other spheres of society can be realized. His concept of innovation has an idealistic tendency. It is exactly this epistemological difference that leads to a significant difference in their views on the subject of innovation, the dynamics of innovation, and the purpose of innovation, although the starting point for both is a response to the question of how innovation is possible. Although Rancière and Marx provide different answers to this question based on aesthetics and political economy, respectively, they do not completely oppose to each other. On the one hand, Marx’s idea of innovation actually contains aesthetic and sensible dimensions, and because of this, Rancière’s challenge to Marxism offers the opportunity to relive certain elements of the Marxist tradition, thus bringing Marx’s idea of innovation to blossom with new vitality; on the other hand, the practical orientation in Marx’s emancipatory thought can compensate for the lack of realism in Rancière’s perceptual view on innovation.

### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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