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# **Beyond Macro- and Micro-emancipation: Rethinking Emancipation in Organizations Studies**

Isabelle Huault, Véronique Perret, André Spicer

## **Abstract**

Organizational life is replete with claims for emancipation. Existing approaches understand these claims either through theories of macro-emancipation (which focus on larger social structural challenges) or micro-emancipation (which focus on everyday challenges). However, these theories fundamentally misrecognise many emancipatory challenges in organizations. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, we argue that this philosophy is fertile for shifting or unframing traditional approaches of emancipation in organization studies. Emancipation is triggered by the assertion of equality in the face of institutionalized patterns of inequality, it works through a process of articulating dissensus, and it creates a redistribution of what is considered to be sensible. By focusing on these three aspects, we argue a whole range of emancipatory struggles that had previously been disregarded by studies of macro-emancipation and micro-emancipation come back into view. This significantly extends how we conceptualise emancipation in organizations and allows us to address some of the shortcomings of existing theories.

Keywords: Jacques Rancière, Emancipation, Critical Management Studies.

## Introduction

Emancipation is usually a rallying cry we associate with revolutionaries, intellectuals and oppressed peoples. We may think that last place we might expect to find concerns about emancipation is within the walls of our large organizations. Surprisingly, emancipation appears to be central theme in corporate life. Much new-wave management discourse places inordinate emphasis on emancipatory themes like self-discovery, freedom, and rebellion (Fleming, 2009). Emancipatory themes are present in many forms of modern management theory, which frequently 'is concerned with freeing employees from unnecessarily alienating forms of work organization' (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, p.433). Emancipatory themes are particular prevalent in theories which promote a more humanistic workplace (Alvesson, 1982). Emancipation has also proved to be an important theme which has driven many struggles from highly individualized forms of rebellion through to far more pronounced collective movements (*e.g.* Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). Furthermore, the experience of emancipation is one that many studies have widely reported as something that employees seek and indeed sometimes find in the workplace (Fenwick, 2003). The desire for emancipation from the drudgeries of organizational life is often an important force, which drives many entrepreneurs (Rindova, Barry and Ketchen, 2009; Goss, Jones, Betta and Latham, 2011). Finally, emancipation has appeared as an important normative aspect of research, teaching and public engagements (Wright, 1993). Put together, this evidence suggests that emancipation is not some kind of diversionary question designed to entertain tenured rebels, or a rallying cry for revolutionaries, or even a dream of oppressed peoples throughout the world. It is actually a central aspect of understanding organizational life in large companies in many highly developed economies.

While emancipation may be an important (if relatively under-recognised) theme in organizational life, it is less clear how we might understand this idea. Emancipation has typically been thought about as a wide-scale social transformation achieved through intellectuals enlightening dominated people (Stablein and Nord, 1985). The result was that research on emancipation tended to focus on either documenting large-scale challenges to capitalism and management or agitating for emancipation through a progressive enlightenment of the audience. This approach to emancipation began to fall out of favour as it was accused of being too grandiose - subjects were positioned as victims of managerial knowledge that they could only escape from through progressive enlightenment under the tutelage of critical intellectuals (Alvesson and Deetz, 2006). Such disenchantment led researchers to turn their focus towards more minor forms of 'micro-emancipation' whereby people momentarily escape from domination in their everyday life through pedestrian activities (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). This focus produced a body of literature that documented the various ways individuals seek out micro-emancipation in the workplace (*e.g.* Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). However, recently we have witnessed some important concerns being raised about this research agenda. In particular, some are concerned that it has constrained how we think about forms of emancipation, creating a myopic focus on small-scale struggles and fundamentally ignoring many of the broader social struggles that challenge management (Ganesh, Zoller and Cheney, 2005). In addition, they have pointed out that a simple division between macro-emancipation and micro-emancipation often ignores many of the important imbrications between the two (Taylor and Bain, 2003; Fleming and Spicer, 2007). This has led many to suspect that the division between micro- and macro-emancipation may indeed be an untenable dichotomy.

In this paper, we seek to move beyond this false dichotomy by drawing on a new approach offered in the work of the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière. For Rancière, emancipation should not be thought about as a kind of grand-revolt (as studies Macro-emancipation assume) or temporary attempts to find a semblance of freedom through everyday transgressions (as studies of Micro-emancipation assume). Rather, emancipation should be understood as attempt to actualise equality through creating a dissensus which interrupts the order of the sensible. We think this unique conception enables us to register the kinds of movements that have, until now, been left out of accounts of emancipation in organization studies, because they are neither quotidian modes of micro-emancipation (such as humour, cynicism, sabotage etc) or more full-blown struggles for macro-emancipation (such as revolutionary movements). More precisely, it allows us to comprehend the individual and collective emancipatory actions that seek to actualize equality. Some examples which Rancière gives, include self-education movements (Rancière, 1987), proletarian intellectual movements (Rancière, 1981), and forms of emancipatory art (Rancière, 2006). We think that Rancière's approach also allows us to register emancipatory struggles in the workplace that seek to advance the claims of equality for oppressed groups. Some instances of this include the Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Bisexual struggle for workplace equity, the recent precarious workers movement, and the Occupy movement which has targeted the financial sector.

Rancière's approach allows us to extend how we think about processes of emancipation in and around organizations in three ways. First, it allows us to register emancipatory activities in our theoretical gaze that we had previously ignored or discounted. Macro-emancipation focuses our attention on collective movements that are organized and micro-emancipation focuses our attention on every-day activities that are not formally organized. In contrast, Rancière draws our attention to various emancipatory movements that are often collective, but are not formally organized. This broadens the range of forms of emancipation we can study. Second, Rancière allows us to rethink how these forms of emancipation works. Instead of focusing on creation of new states of freedom (as studies of macro-emancipation do) or attempts to seize fleeting forms of freedom (as studies of micro-emancipation do), Rancière's work allows us to see how emancipation involves the transformation of what is considered to be sensible. This re-orientes our studies to how emancipation movements seek to change what and how we actually sense the world. It also trains our focus on how individuals and various groups engage in emancipatory struggles using a whole range of aesthetic tactics, which disturb accepted patterns of what is considered to be sensible. Finally, Rancière allows us to move beyond the assumption that contemporary resistance is fragmented, by registering how individual forms of emancipation are part of a more universal claim for equality. Doing this, allows us to recognise the link between the specific demands of many emancipation movements and the more universal demands for equality. By making these three contributions, we hope to move beyond both an elitist account found in studies of macro-emancipation and the pedestrian account found in studies of micro-emancipation. We also hope to sidestep the troubling and often unhelpful dichotomy, which sometimes divides these two modes of emancipation.

In order to make this argument, we proceed as follows. We begin by reviewing two dominant conceptions of emancipation – 'macro-emancipation' and 'micro-emancipation'. In this review, we highlight the shortcomings of these two existing conceptions. We then introduce a third conception of emancipation inspired by the work of Jacques Rancière. After we have outlined this, we then draw out its implications for the study of emancipation in organizations.

We conclude by sketching out what new areas of emancipation this allows us to understand and engage with.

## **Emancipation in Organization Studies**

Emancipation is the ‘process through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions, in particular those that place socially unnecessary restrictions upon the development and articulation of human consciousness’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: 432). The concept of emancipation is closely aligned with other well-known concepts in the sociological lexicon such as freedom. This is typically defined as ‘the state which allows the person to remove himself (sic) from those dominating situations that make him simply a reacting object. Freedom may therefore involve the possibility of movement in a physical or social sense, the ability to walk away from a coercive machine process, or the opportunity of quitting a job because of the existence of alternative employment’ (Blauner, 1964: 16). In this sense, freedom can be understood as a capacity or ‘state’ (to use Blauner’s terms) which allows an employee to engage in emancipation at work. Blauner’s classic study of freedom points out that what shapes the scope of employee freedom at work is the nature of the technical work process. He argues that there is a ‘U’ shaped relationship with the degree of the technological sophistication of the production process and the scope for worker freedom (and hence emancipation). This means in ‘craft’ based industries with relatively under-developed production systems, employees report a sense of freedom; in production line based-systems with semi-developed technologies, employees report a marked absence of freedom; in continuous flow production systems with very advanced technologies employees again report relatively high experiences of freedom. Blauner’s ideas have been called into question given radical changes in production technologies since the 1960s and the rise of various forms of worker participation. However, more recent work has partially confirmed Blauner’s findings that the nature of technology (in conjunction with modes of control) has an important effect on worker freedom. In a meta-analysis of over eighty ethnographic studies of work, Hodson (1996) found that there is an inverted ‘J’ shape relationship between employees’ experiences of freedom at work and the mechanisation and control of the workplace. This means employees in craft organizations experience the most freedom, with this falling significantly for workers on a production, and there be a partial recovery of freedom for employees working in participative work groups.

While studies in the tradition of Blauner tell us something about the structural conditions which shape employees experiences of freedom, they tell us less about the processes actually involved in seeking out this freedom. This focus on the active and processual aspects of seeking freedom is the focus of studies of emancipation. This is because ‘emancipation is not a gift bestowed upon employees; rather it necessitates the (often painful) resistance to, and overcoming of, socially unnecessary restrictions’ (p.433). The focus of studies of emancipation is therefore the active struggles which employees engage. In order to register these emancipatory struggles, researchs drawing on critical management studies have put forward two possible modes – macro-emancipation and micro emancipation. Let us look at each of these forms of emancipation in some more depth and considering their shortcomings.

### ***Macro-Emancipation***

In studying emancipatory struggles, some have turned to ideas found in the tradition of Critical Theory (Stablein and Nord, 1985). At the heart of this work, at least as it has been

received in Critical Management Studies, is a demand for the radical transformation of not only the workplace, but also society more generally (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: 435-438). This is premised on the assumption that critical social science should fundamentally contribute to liberating people from various forms of oppression and limitations that distort patterns of communication, construct a series of false needs and create questionable relationships between people. To achieve this, critical theory seeks to increase the capacity to critically reflect on the broad structures of society and how ideology structures have shaped and constrained our sense of self in various repressive ways. This involves a through-going critique of technocratic reason associated with managerialism (*e.g.* Alvesson, 1987). Seeking to challenge such changes through incremental modifications to existing social structures is thought to be a questionable, if not illusory approach (Burrell and Morgan, 1979: 365-385; Clegg, 1979; Clegg and Dunkerly, 1980). This is because, at best, such piecemeal changes do not adequately challenge processes of domination that are deeply rooted in existing structures. At worst, such piecemeal changes are seen as a kind of alibi which can be used by the powerful to provide immediate satisfaction to the demands of the oppressed without actually transforming the most important underlying causes of oppression. Therefore, the only possible route to emancipation involves a radical challenge to existing social structures and ideological co-ordinates. Earlier accounts of this radical challenge point out it means fundamentally questioning dominant obsessions with the profit motive, constant growth, and the dominance of technocratic reason in organizations (Benson, 1977). A major reform and reworking of social structure (such as hierarchical relations and the international division of labour) is an essential part of creating meaningful emancipation. The central assumption here is that emancipation involves a radical break whereby the entire socio-symbolic structure is fundamentally changed, and this change is brought about by intellectuals encouraging critical self-reflection that allows people to see the conditions of oppression they suffer.

This vision of emancipation has been the subject of criticism. For instance, Alvesson and Willmott (1992) point out three central problems. First, a focus on macro-emancipation adopting an overly intellectual approach that assumes the unfettered use of human reason will result in opportunities for critical thinking that create widespread emancipation. They point out that this is not necessarily the case because many forms of domination are not just sustained through reason, but actually involve a bodily and emotional hold over people. Therefore, just examining macro-emancipation will lead the researcher to ignore how intellectual challenges to an oppressive social structure may do little more than create a kind of cynical distance from it, that actually ends up sustaining it in practice (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). The second problem with a focus on macro-emancipation is that it often seeks to totalize a phenomenon so it is treated as a coherent whole without attending to many of the ambiguities and contradictions that are often associated with such structures. The result is that a social structure that we seek emancipation from is treated as being highly integrated and solid, even when it may not be (Latour, 2004). This can lead researchers to ignore many of the contradictions, paradoxes and tensions that typically characterise any social structure or set of power relations (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009). The final problem with grand conceptions of emancipation is that they can foster an overly negative outlook. This means that they can lead researchers to ignoring or dismissing many of the important and relevant advances associated with management. It can also make it difficult, if not impossible for proponents of critical theory to reach out to wider social groups who might be attracted by potentially more hopeful and engaging visions. Indeed, the negativism presented by grand forms of critical theory can result in researchers focusing on cynical resignation rather than looking for the necessary hope that is required for emancipatory change (Spicer *et al.*, 2009).

Taken together, these charges of intellectualism, totalization and negativism have led many to be profoundly suspicious of the potential and possibility of grand visions of emancipation.

### ***Micro-Emancipation***

To address some of the shortcomings of macro-emancipation, others have sought to develop a more limited and circumspect approach. Perhaps, this is best captured in Alvesson and Willmott's (1992) concept of 'micro-emancipation'. Broadly, this involves a more narrow and focused search for 'loopholes' in managerial control that provide local and temporary emancipation. Engaging in such an activity requires a focus on 'concrete activities, forms, and techniques that offer themselves not only as means of control, but also as objects and facilitators of resistance and thus, as vehicles for liberation. In this formulation, processes of emancipation are understood to be 'uncertain, contradictory, ambiguous, and precarious' (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: 446). Studying this requires close attention to the various forms of everyday emancipation which people mobilize to challenge managerial domination. This call has led to three important shifts in how emancipation is studied. The first entails attempts to re-orient methods of research away from intellectual enlightenment through distanced critical thinking to a much more engaged form of research involving close research subjects life worlds, more creative and engaged forms of writing, and the search for emancipatory elements in apparently mainstream texts (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992: 453-460). Some of these tactics have certainly been taken up in many critical studies during the last two decades. However, a more important aspect is attempts to investigate and unveil forms of micro-emancipation that occur in workplaces. One example is a study of how immigrant employees in Belgium sought minor loopholes in the managerially imposed employment practices (Zanoni and Janssens, 2007). These included changing working schedules or even using some aspects of management as a way of escaping from forms of domination. This is just one study in what has become a lengthy catalogue of employee micro-emancipation through practices as varied as day-dreaming, developing cynical counter-cultures, engaging in private activities in the workplace such as sexuality and sleeping, and strategically opposing managers on particular issues (for review, see: Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Fleming, 2005; Spicer and Böhm, 2007).

The study of micro-emancipation has certainly provided an important and notable break in how we understand the pursuit of emancipation in organizations. In many ways, it has brought us closer to people's lived experiences of emancipation in their working lives. However, in recent years there have been an increasing number of questions about the usefulness of the term and the kind of research trajectory it has established for Critical Management Studies. The first of these questions addresses the issue of banality. By this, we mean micro-emancipation tends to train the attention of researchers onto increasingly minor and insignificant acts of resistance. Indeed, Alessia Contu (2008) mockingly refers to this as researchers seeking to find radical intent in the flatulence of employees. The foci of many of these studies tends to be everyday life that gives employees a sense they are being rebellious and seriously questioning the structure or practical functions of organizations. This examination of increasingly banal activities has the result of shifting researchers' attention and interest from important collective struggles that seek to institute more meaningful collective change towards highly transient and individualized forms of resistance that may have little impact on creating a meaningful sense of emancipation – aside from momentary hedonic pleasure which might come from breaking the rules (Spicer and Böhm, 2007).

The second problem is that a strict focus on micro-emancipation may mean researchers ignore the broader consequences of everyday misbehaviour. In particular, just looking at the jolt of emancipatory intent which comes from deviant activities ignores how these forms might not actually lead to meaningful emancipation, but create the conditions that actually firm up relations of domination. This might be so in two ways. First, various forms of micro-emancipation could actually act as a kind of 'safety-valve' which discharges the pressure built up in an organization as employees routinely face forms of domination (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). This pressure is discharged through minor actors that do not have a profound impact on the daily functioning of organizational life. By creating some space for micro-emancipation, organizations are actually able to ensure the relatively smooth functioning of the overall system (Fleming and Sewell, 2002). Another way that micro-emancipation may bolster existing forms of resistance and struggle is by serving as a kind of creative laboratory that gives rise to new forms of social organization and innovation which can subsequently be incorporated by the dominant groups in an organization (Fleming, 2009). One example of this argument can be found in Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) study of the rise of new wave management in France. They argued that the demands for authenticity and creativity associated with new-wave management were actually created by many of the post-1968 social movements who actively set out to challenge management. They point out how resistance to the bureaucratic forms of management which dominated 1960s France created the cultures of flexibility and change which we see in contemporary managerialism. A similar point can be found in a range of studies of resistance to change which point out that various forms of minor struggles within organizations do not need to be opposed by management but are sometimes embraced (*e.g.* Ford, Ford and Amelio, 2008). This is because embracing resistance will help management not only to deal with troublesome dissent, but also to learn from the potential innovations that these dissenting groups may have created (Courpasson and Thoenig, 2010).

The third problem lurking within a focus on micro-emancipation is that it can create an unhelpful and somewhat artificial separation between macro and micro struggles. By training a keen eye on the pedestrian rebellions of organizational life and analytically bracketing out broader macro-emancipatory struggles, many of the important overlaps and imbrications are put aside. For instance, a study of micro-emancipation may turn up instances of anti-managerial humour in the workplace. However, such instances of humour may be connected with broader collective struggles against management strategy (*eg.* Taylor and Bain, 2003) or even attempts to bolster a sense of occupational, class or gender-based identity in the face of impending threats (*eg.* Collinson, 1992). By only considering the more minuscule manifestations of resistance without contextualizing them in terms of broader struggles means that research can ignore what are commonly crucial dimensions of emancipatory struggles. Indeed, research on social movements suggests that most meaningful forms of emancipation have a root in both the more everyday activities and behaviours of people, as well as broader more formalized challenges to relations of power and domination (Spicer and Böhm, 2007). This means parsing modes of emancipation into 'micro' and 'macro' effectively ignores most of the important forms which actually existing somewhere between the two. Even making an incision between the two for purposes of analytical clarity can effectively sever important connections, which help us to understand the nature of emancipatory struggles at work.

The final problem associated with a focus on micro-emancipation is that it may lead to a fragmented understanding of resistance. By this, we mean that by only focusing on a multiplicity of relatively minor forms of social change, we may begin to treat these struggles as entirely separated and local, thereby beginning to lose sight of the more profound and far-



reaching dynamics that actually underlie or indeed connect such struggles. Perhaps, the most important danger here is that by looking at these multiple different struggles, the researcher simply records a whole series of conflicts. This may blind them to any common claims each of these struggles might have. It could also blind researchers to actually offering any meaningful account of potential common causes or historical processes associated with struggles for micro-emancipation. Finally, it may lead researchers to make the mistake of ignore the actual, or indeed potential, connections that could exist between these different struggles (Willmott, 2005; Spicer and Böhm, 2007). This might mean missing out on potentially powerful forms of more collective and connected modes of emancipation. It could also lead to a situation where we miss the more universal forms of struggle against managerialism because we are so focused on detailing the minutiae of micro-emancipations in particular localities (Ganesh *et al.*, 2005). The result is that the researcher develops a kind of myopic obsession with differences and locality without considering any important patterns of similarities. This can give rise to a kind of latent conservatism. This is because, training our focus on small-scale struggles may suppose we only include in our account of emancipation those struggles which have not fundamentally threatened existing structures of power and domination. By this, we mean only examining minor struggles might lead to not looking for larger-scale social struggles and including them in our account of emancipation. This could signify that the only forms of resistance we actually see are those that have the most limited scope and ambition. The result could be that much of the radical tenor found in the concept of emancipation is effectively emptied out. All that would be left is simply a collection of tactical manoeuvres. What would be left out are the utopian and wide-ranging visions of emancipation that have been an important part of many emancipation movements, no matter how deluded (Parker, 2002a). By removing this, we would be effectively providing an emaciated empirical account of emancipation. What is more, we would be emptying the notion of emancipation of much of the sense of hope for radical change that has linked many emancipation struggles together.

## **Rethinking Emancipation**

In order to begin to address some of these shortcomings in current concepts of emancipation, we would like to turn to the work of the contemporary French philosopher, Jacques Rancière<sup>1</sup>. Following recent interest in his work in the study of organization (eg. Beyes, 2008; 2009a; 2009b; 2010; Beyes and Volkmann, 2010), we would like to focus specifically on his unique conception of emancipation. Rancière's conception of emancipation is unique in three ways. First of all, in Rancière's thinking, equality is not an ideal to reach but a principle to actualise. That is, emancipation is not an ideal target that exists somewhere in the future, but rather a set of practices guided by the presupposition of the equality of anyone (Rancière, 1987). Secondly, Rancière argues that emancipatory practices do not aim for consensus but seek to bring about dissensus. Emancipatory politics are not a set of processes whereby collective groups aggregate opinions and reach consensus. Rather, emancipatory politics takes place whenever dissensus is expressed (Rancière, 1995). Lastly, emancipation does not simply

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Rancière, Emeritus Professor at Université Paris VIII, is one of the best-known French philosophers of his generation. A Post-Marxist philosopher, he has published a series of works that raise questions about the identity of the working class and ideology. Running through the wide range of topics he has worked on, one defining element shapes his thinking: the idea of emancipation.

involve dissensus over the distribution of the usual content of workplace politics such as material resources, valued identities, and opportunities for political voice (*cf.* Fleming and Spicer, 2007: chapter 8). More fundamentally, it involves an attempt to interrupt what is considered to be ‘the share of the sensible’. This involves questioning and challenging which are understood to be sensible voices and claims, and which are marginalized. This happens by ‘reconfigur(ing) the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought, to alter the field of possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities’ (Rancière, 2009a: 49). In what follows, we will look at each of these three points in some more depth.

### *Actualizing Equality*

One of the most interesting ideas in Rancière’s works is his radical premise of equality between beings. Obviously, Rancière does not refute the existence of asymmetry of power struggles, work division or unequal access to resources (Bourdieu, 1999). Nor does he deny the exploitative nature of wage relations, or the servitude and ‘deskilling’ of workers, that the Labour Process Theory precisely highlights (Braverman, 1974; Thompson and Newson, 2004). All these are important issues. However, he argues that our starting point in any analysis should not be inequality but equality. In fact, the only way to achieve equality in a given society is to assert it. This equality is not a goal to reach; it is a supposition to actualise. This fundamental reversal of what Rancière calls ‘egalitarian syllogism’ (2006: 509) is a major contribution of his work: he sees equality as a founding premise rather than a programmatic goal that needs to be achieved (Badiou, 2006: 143). Within societies that are unequal, emancipation involves asserting the logic of equality. This logic of equality is not utopian insofar as it is seen as something to come in the future. Rather equality is something that is assumed by the researcher from the outset. Beginning with the principle of equality stands in opposition to much work on emancipation in organization studies that begins with the premise of fundamental social inequality of organizational members. Rancière rails against the idea that individual potential is determined by their position and that individuals are assigned to certain places and certain roles. Whereas many accounts of emancipation claim that the research should lift the veil on the structure of established relations of domination and bring these to light, Rancière refuses to presume that subjects are simply reducible to their structural positions.

His critique is levelled at accounts of emancipation that emphasise the voluntary servitude of the dominated. As we have already pointed out, this is implicit in accounts of macro-emancipation in organization studies that often assume that the dominated are alienated and that they do not know what is oppressing them (*cf.* Costas and Fleming, 2009). The implicit assumption here is that specialists are needed to ‘access the meaning of experience’. According to this line of reasoning, because the dominated do not have access to language to explain their own conditions of oppression, they need experts, scholars, intellectuals, and an ‘endless process of mediation’ (Rancière, 2006: 516) to serve their interests. Yet, for Rancière, what the dominated need is not that their exploitation be revealed to them. After all, this happens in the various indignities suffered in everyday life. Rather, what is required is a vision of themselves, as to live more than a destiny of exploitation. Rancière by no means denies the heavy burden of social and economic inequalities. However, he points out that simply recognising and documenting inequalities does not equate with emancipatory progress. What the dominated need, Rancière says, is not so much to have their exploitation revealed to them –of which, in fact, they are already generally aware. The potential for emancipation, Rancière says, arises more from ignoring a certain type of necessity that would force you to stay at your place.

Rancière argues that any conception that sees emancipation as something which can be achieved through theory places equality as a distant ideal in the future and pushes equality away to an unreachable horizon. He sees the figure of the enlightened ‘scholar’ as the true impostor<sup>2</sup> (see also: Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). As Rancière points out (2007), the assumption that knowledge is necessary for emancipation is also an assumption that eternally postpones emancipation. This explicitly challenges the assumption in both macro and micro accounts of emancipation that ‘knowing the system’ is a pre-requisite to achieving liberation. As we have already pointed out, accounts of macro-emancipation assume, it is the critical intellectual who provides knowledge that enables emancipation, while studies of micro-emancipation see the contextual knowledge of employees as the source of various forms of momentary freedom. According to Rancière, you are not subservient because you do not know the mechanisms of subservience. After all, knowing a situation and being able to ‘see through it’ may also be one way of taking part in it (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). On the contrary, the possibility of emancipation arises from the fact of not knowing the sort of requirement that would otherwise compel you accept modes of workplace domination.

To avoid the assumption that knowledge is the royal road to emancipation, Rancière argues the basic belief that ‘the hierarchy of intelligences’ (Rancière, 1987) must be assailed and equality declared. This is the leitmotiv that runs through Rancière’s work. The ordering of intelligences is neither self-evident nor should it be taken for granted: ‘Our problem is not to prove that all intelligences are equal. It is to see what we can do on the basis of this presupposition’ (Rancière, 1987: 78-79).

The pedagogical experiment that Rancière recounts in *Le maître ignorant* (1987) forms an empirical cornerstone of his thesis. *Le maître ignorant* (The Ignorant Schoolmaster) is the story of the endeavours in 1818 of Joseph Jacotot, a French schoolmaster and revolutionary émigré living in Flanders. His task was to teach pupils who did not speak his language. To do so, he gave them a bilingual edition of Fenelon’s *Télémaque* (1699). After some time, he asked them to express in French what they thought of what they had read. At first, he was not very optimistic about their ability to recount the text, but he was very surprised by the quality of their work. His method, consisting of learning a section of the text in French with an eye on the Flemish text, proved to be highly successful. The pupils did not need an explanation, nor did they need a schoolmaster to guide them. They had learned on their own how to combine words in order to build sentences in French. Rancière claims that by proceeding by association with what we know and we don’t know, the use of explanation is no longer needed. No doubt the schoolmaster fulfilled a function other than transmitting knowledge; no doubt, as Rancière underlines (1987), the schoolmaster was master of the classroom ‘due to his command imprisoning his pupils inside a circle from which they could only escape by removing his intelligence in order to let their own intelligence engage with that of the book’ (p.25). What the schoolmaster did accomplish was to reveal to his pupils their own intelligence<sup>3</sup>. For them, it was not a matter of moving from ignorance to knowledge, but of

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<sup>2</sup> Very much at the opposite extreme of the thinking of Pierre Bourdieu who maintains that the intellectual should lift the veil on the structure of the established order and bring to light relationships of domination, Rancière refuses to presume the imbecility of subjects. Breaking with his former mentor Althusser, Rancière contends that no vanguard of the proletariat exists that is apt to enlighten the masses.

<sup>3</sup> This approach, Rancière points out, has nothing in common with Socratic maieutics. What Jacotot was driving at was to show that the figure of Socrates was not that of the emancipator but that of the destroyer of thinking,

moving from something they already knew and already possessed to acquiring new knowledge. The ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ is therefore ignorant of inequality, he ‘who does not want to know anything of the reasons for inequality’ (Rancière, 2009a: 118).

The aim of ‘normal’ pedagogy is for the pupil to learn what the Master teaches her. However, the position traditionally granted to the teacher stems not from necessity but from a social hierarchy. Jacotot—and through him, Rancière—argues that the logic of the explanatory system must be reversed. This is because ‘the explanation is the myth of pedagogy, the parabola of a world split into knowing minds and unknowing minds, mature and immature minds, able and unable, intelligent and stupid’ (Rancière, 1987). For Rancière, explanation and instruction are associated with inequality. It is the role of ‘instructor’ that makes the ‘instructed’ unable. He pulls down the veil of ignorance that he himself then lifts (Rancière, 1987). This creates a position of the superior intelligence (of the instructor) and an inferior intelligence (of the instructed).

In Jacotot’s view, equality arises from the will to power. An individual can learn on her own, driven by her own desire or by the constraints of a situation; and, in so doing, she can break away from the logic of subordination. Intelligence therefore works autonomously and, according to Rancière, it moves from knowledge to knowledge, not from ignorance to knowledge. In contrast, imbecility stems from an individual’s belief in the inferiority of her intelligence. ‘To unite humankind, there is no better link than this intelligence which is identical in all beings’ (Rancière, 1987). Wherever ignorance is traditionally claimed to be, some knowledge can always be found. Yet, the social world remains obsessed by a passion for inequality, where individuals never stop comparing themselves with others and where conventions separate human beings into hierarchies.

*Le maître ignorant* only deals with one particular case in the history of education. However, in it we can identify broader lesson about the study of emancipation that resonates throughout Rancière. In particular, this study reminds us that emancipation refers back to the interplay of practices guided by the postulate of equality and by a drive to constantly verify this (Rancière, 1998). Emancipatory struggles for Rancière involve trusting in the intellectual ability of every human being, because emancipation means learning to be equals in an unequal society. Accordingly, Rancière (2009a) constantly comes back to ‘the power of those who are supposed incompetents and of those who are meant not to know’. In this respect, Rancière’s thinking seeks to bring down the idea of macro-emancipation by stigmatising the elitist and overbearing posture of the intellectual critic.

### ***Creating Dissensus***

A second component of Rancièrean conception of emancipation is the aim of creating dissensus. Rancière’s interrogates accounts that claim that emancipation involves a collectively negotiated attempt to move towards consensus. For instance, he challenges Habermasian approaches that assume that emancipation can be achieved through collective deliberation (eg. Gilbert and Rasche, 2007; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007). Theories of deliberation assume that it is possible to find a common ground for recognising problems and ways of defining them (Dryzek, 2002). In line with this theoretical approach, emancipation is considered through the lens of the regulating attributes of dialogue and participation and is

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because he staged his lessons in such a way that the pupil was confronted with the gaps in his own thinking and he, the master, would then lead the pupil to conclude that what he had said was either inconsistent or inadequate.

seen as the result of a series of processes by which communities endeavour to find aggregation and agreement.

In stark contrast with the Habermasian conception, Rancière argues that politics involves a fundamental break in consensus. Politics is in no way the art of pacification or a lever to ensure agreement between citizens. Emancipatory politics involves transgressive and conflictual challenges being made to consensus frequently defined by powerful groups. These rules set boundaries around what the common problem that is taken to be the target of deliberation and establish who is able to talk about it (Rancière, 2007). In *Aux bords du politique* (The Shores of Politics), Rancière (1998) differentiates between *policing* as the management of communities and *politics* as the enacting of the egalitarian principles. Policing includes acts that lay out order, assigns roles and places, and legitimises the ordering of existing social space. This happens far beyond the security forces including policy makers, regulatory bodies, managers and administrators and so on. In many ways, this reflects Michel Foucault's broadened conception of 'police' that includes a whole range of disciplinary agents throughout society (Elden, 2003). In contrast, politics is consubstantially anarchic. It disrupts the traditional democratic order organised around dominant groups. Politics involves those who do not count ('those who have no part' in Rancière's phrase) interrupting the debate by interjecting their voice. A political approach seeks to bring down the separated worlds of the dominant and the dominated. It creates 'polemical scenes' in the very places where a police logic propagated by various agents of disciplinary power depoliticises contentious issues, suppresses political conflicts, and neutralises debate. When those who are not traditionally authorised to participate in deliberations interject, it is the beginning of the construction of a common world. This common world is polemical because it draws out the inherently conflictual character of situations that are thought to be obvious, natural and taken for granted. This stands in stark contrast with a common world governed by a police logic that demands increased similarity.

In line with the idea of consensus, politics is often falsely viewed as being the art of pacification or seen as a lever to ensure concord between citizens. It is understood as a way of erasing dissensions and conflicts, without ever considering that this process 'throws certain human beings over board' (Ruby, 2009: 93). Within a political framework, discussion certainly plays an important role. In contrast to Habermasian ideas of collective deliberation, any discussion occurs on the basis of dissymmetry between positions and focuses on recognition of what the object of discussion is and what the abilities of the interlocutors are. This opens the question of who participates and how they are able to participate in a controversy (Rancière, 2007). Politics occurs precisely and only as long as there is no agreement on the elements of a situation. For Rancière, such a logic of politics (rather than the logic of police) infuses properly democratic communities. Conversely, totalitarianism is the result of a shrinking of the political space and expansion of a policing logic. It is associated with the rise of a consensus culture, which restricts debate to the political elites and experts. In Rancière's view, democracy can only be promoted through the development of political discussion and 'dissensus'. Politics comes into play once imaginations are deployed and the 'temporality of consensus is interrupted' (Rancière, 2009b: 9).

Accordingly, politics must be understood as a 'transgression of the rules defined by official political oligarchies' (Rancière, 1998: 225). This involves a struggle between the world of the experts who tend to naturalise and depoliticise issue, and the world of 'those who have no part' who must fight to define what should be the object of discussion. Thus, for Rancière politics is conflict insofar as there is disagreement about the very issue which is posed for

deliberation and the subjects deemed fit to participate in this process of deliberation. The logic of politics operates on a logic of division rather than unification, of disagreement rather than collaboration. This is precisely what Rancière calls ‘dissensus’ (1995: 12), the ‘conflict between one who says white and another who says white but doesn’t mean the same thing or who doesn’t understand that the other is saying the same thing by using the word whiteness’ (1995:12). Emancipation thereby refers to ‘an activity that goes beyond the logic of management or of common meaning fictively stated as being present’ (Ruby, 2009: 51).

For sure, consensus is certainly present in political struggles. Almost all political movements require some degree of consensus to engage in collective action. For instance, social movements require some degree of consensus around methods of organizing in order to undertake collective action to express their own dissensus with dominant social conditions. Furthermore, most political movements eventually establish at least some degree of consensus or settlement with opponents if they hope to institutionalize their concerns. Although these consensual moments are certainly important as part of broader political cycles, Rancière highlights that it is in moments of dissensus and disagreement where the experience and moment of emancipation is to be found.

### ***Reconfiguring the Share of the Sensible***

The final aspect we would like to draw out of Rancière’s conception of emancipation is the idea that it involves reconfiguring what is considered to be the sensible and what is not. The sensible refers to the ‘system of sensible evidences that allows us to see at the same time the existence of something common and the cutting up that defines the respective places and the parts therein’ (Rancière, 2000: 12). It is a space we use to order our perception of our world and how we connect our sensible experience to intelligible modes of interpretation. Emancipation, for Rancière, involves splitting open these configurations of what is considered sensible (Rancière, 1998: 16). This happens through the interruption and reconfiguration of what Rancière calls the share of the sensible (Ruby, 2009: 21-22).

To illustrate what he means by ‘reconfiguring the share of the sensible’, Rancière often refers to the Plebeian secession on the Aventine. This occurred in 494BC when the majority Plebeian class of ancient Rome left the city en-mass and threatened to found a new town. This mass action gained a series of political concessions from the ruling Patrician class. Rancière notes that the Plebeian secession reconfigured the share of the sensible because:

“The patricians do not hear the plebes speak. They do not hear that it is articulated language that comes out of their mouths. The plebes must not only argue their case but also set the stage on which their arguments are audible, on which they are visible as speaking subjects, referring to a common world of objects that the patricians are required to see and to recognise as encompassing both parties” (Rancière, 2009a: 176).

It was, then, a question of transforming the map of what is conceivable, sayable, and realisable by stepping out of the places that the Plebeians were assigned to, in order to make themselves seen and heard. This theme of the struggle by oppressed groups to disrupt the share of the sensible runs throughout Rancière’s work. He looks at the labourers of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris who used their leisure time to participate in cultural pursuits which were reserved for the bourgeoisie such as reading literature, participating in political discussion groups and writing poetry (Rancière, 1981). We have already mentioned Rancière’s study of the pedagogue, Joseph Jacotot, and the educational movement he founded which reconfigures the teacher/pupil relationship. Each of these endeavours involved oppressed groups seeking to gain ground in areas forbidden to them in their times. What is notable in these studies is the

emancipation was not strictly limited to gaining political voice (as the Plebians gained). Rather it involved previously disenfranchised groups (19<sup>th</sup> century workers) inserting themselves into the cultural sphere. The emancipatory dimension of these activities is that each of these groups showed that their voice could be deemed sensible in the cultural and educational sphere. Furthermore, by inserting their voice into this sphere, they also disrupted it and caused a reordering of it in important ways.

Rancière's studies of how disenfranchised groups inserted themselves into the cultural sphere led him to focus on cases where there was a blurring of who has the capacity for action. He explains this in relations to letters exchanged between two workers in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris which recounts their various (aesthetic) activities:

'That is what the word 'emancipation' means: the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body. What these days (of aesthetic activity) brought the two correspondents and their fellows was not knowledge of their condition and energy for the following day's work and coming struggle. It was a reconfiguration in the here and now of the distribution of space and time, work and leisure' (Rancière, 2009c: 19)

The crucial point in this passage is that emancipation involves 'reconfiguration in the here and now' through the immediate experience of engaging in (aesthetic) activity. This involved grabbing hold of a share of the sensible in the here and now. Doing this 'reconfigure(s) that landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought' thereby 'alter(ing) the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities' (Rancière, 2009c: 49)

In his most recent work, Jacques Rancière has focused on how the reconfiguration of the sensible occurs in art and aesthetics (Rancière, 2000; 2009c). He challenges the widespread assumption in much critical thought that many artistic practices turn people into passive and indulgent spectators rather than active political participants. In contrast, he points out that in arts with an emancipatory focus 'the passive audience of spectators must be transformed into its opposite: the active body of a community enacting its living principle' (Rancière, 2009c: 5). Although Rancière is writing about the emancipatory desire to overcome the split between an audience and action in 19<sup>th</sup> century German theatre here, the principle holds for many forms of emancipatory art – the desire to make the spectator politically active and overcome 'the gulf separating activity from passivity' (p.12). For Rancière, overcoming this gulf does not necessarily mean focusing on art that inspires participants to engage in formal political action such as participating in a social movement or lobbying an elected politician. Rather, the emancipatory potential lurking within some art which 'challenge(s) the opposition between viewing and acting' (p.13) and recognises that 'viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts . . . She observes, selects, compares, interprets' (p.13). This leads him to focus how in some aesthetic experiences, emancipation is not a result to come following an audience being 'instructed' by a particular work of art. Rather, it is something which occurs in the here and now of our engagement with the work of art itself. In Rancière's analyses of contemporary art, he highlights how it can transform our share of the sensible – that is our sense of what role we have in what is considered to be thinkable and not thinkable. Engaging with a work of art can bring us into touch with a common human sensation. Doing this involves participating in 'a human collective (which) is an intertwining and twisting together of sensations' (Rancière, 2009c: 56). But the way people can participate in such a community of sensation is to interject themselves into it. This leads to not only a radical transformation of the participants' sense of the world in the here and now, but also a potential transformation on the regime of the sensible.

The most important aspect Rancière associated with the transformation of the share of the sensible is the fact that it involves a sense of disconnection and dissensus. This happens when aesthetic representations render familiar patterns of representations strange and shock our existing assumptions about what is sensible and what is not (Beyes, 2009a, 2009b). This involves a ‘rupture of the harmony that enabled correspondence between the textures of the work and its efficacy’ (Rancière, 2009c: 62). Such a rupture tears apart existing patterns of sense, transforming what we consider to be sensible and what is not. Such ruptures not only throw into question our sense of the world around us (by making what seemed familiar into something strange), but also disrupting our own sense of self or political subjectivity. This is what he means when he points out that ‘the aesthetic effect is initially an effect of dis-identification ... an emancipated proletarian is a dis-identified worker’ (p.73). That is, aesthetic experiences can emancipate us from what we take to be frozen and fixed identities (such as being a worker) and open up space from exploring new identities. These kinds of ruptures provoke ‘a shift from a given sensible world to another sensible world that defines different capacities and incapacities, different forms of tolerance and intolerance such breaks can happen anywhere and at any time. But they cannot be calculated’ (p.75).

Equality, dissensus and claims for a reconfiguration of the share of the sensible, provide us with a set of unified principles that allow us to think about the link between individual and collective struggles. This idea refers to the Rancierian concept of the ‘singularisation of the universal’, *i.e.* individuals’ ability to ‘construct cases’ and to move away from the pre-established social order. Neither politics nor political theory exist in a broad sense; rather, there are circumstances and contingencies that each time force us to discern politics, to spot the places and the times when it intervenes, the objects that arise from its action, and the subjects that take part in it (Rancière, 2009b: 14). In this sense, the space that Rancière invites us to occupy is not the space for institutionalising practices that carry forth the ideal of emancipation<sup>4</sup>.

But Rancière allows us to move beyond the idea that emancipation is forever condemned to being localised and fragmented. He invites us instead to examine in emancipatory struggles—always contingent, specific and spontaneous as they are—the expression of their universality. His conception of emancipation encourages us to shift our focus onto the moments when and the ways in which all forms of struggles, action and intervention, both individual and collective, construct a ‘political scene for dissensus’. This political scene is constructed from the moment the universal principle of equality is asserted and a space opens up for the reconfiguration of the sharing of the sensible. The principle of equality and the effects of actualising it are thus elements of a universality—at least theoretical, if not empirical—that separates political subjects from their local and community-based claims, whether they be ethnic, social, religious or sexual in nature.

By dismissing the two alternatives of macro- and micro-emancipation embraced in CMS, Jacques Rancière’s thinking offers material to rethink the issue of emancipation (see Table 1).

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<sup>4</sup> Here, Rancière’s approach is slightly different from that of theorist Paulo Freire. Rancière considers emancipation as an individual process that cannot gain substance in a group setting. This means that emancipation can become political, not through its collective foothold, but through the individual’s ability to universalise the construction of her individual case. Besides, Rancière does not believe that an institution in itself can be considered emancipatory. Reasoning in terms of institution reflects a configuration of order and the manner in which distribution is determined.



Table 1: Beyond micro- and macro-emancipation: a Rancièrian reading of emancipation.

<i>Main critiques with respect to:</i>	<i>Rancièrian conception of emancipation</i>
<p><b>The goal of emancipation</b> - Ideal to reach, always situated in the future</p>	- Postulate of equality to actualise
<p><b>Macro-emancipation</b> - An elitist and overbearing view</p>	- Postulate of equality and absence of a hierarchy of intelligences
<p><b>Micro-emancipation</b> - Insignificance and banality - Collaboration and search for consensus - Fragmentation of struggles</p>	<p>- Interruption and reconfiguration of the ‘share of the sensible’. - Dissensus - Singularisation of the universal</p>

## **Discussion: Reframing the Question of Emancipation in Organization Studies**

In the previous section, we sought to draw out Rancière’s unique conception of emancipation. We argued that he conceives of emancipation as attempts to actualise equality in day-to-day practice by creating dissensus which reconfigures the share of the sensible. Now, we would like to move from Rancière’s broad theory of emancipation to develop a more refined understanding of how emancipation might work at the organizational level.

The lack of interest shown in the issue of collective forms of organization or institutionalised emancipatory practices could however imply that it is difficult for Rancière’s work to be operational in the field of organization studies. Indeed, it fails to provide direct or mechanical answers to the questions raised by CMS regarding the question of emancipation. Democracy occurs without planning or pre-design: ‘These fugitive instances in which equality challenges unequal conditions and reasserts itself are outside the sphere of any efforts to design society (...)’ (Friedrich, Jaastad and Popkewitz, 2011: 72).

Yet, Rancière’s philosophy does not attempt to discredit the principle of the organization in favour of an exclusive promotion of ‘explosive scenes’. It is not meant to set in stone the conflict between ‘organization’ and ‘spontaneity’ either (Huault and Perret, 2011). On the other hand, it does point to a need to understand politics from its starting point (equality) rather than its final end, as well as the means to get there (Rancière, 2009b: 183). Rancière focuses on the prerequisites that are likely to lead to the emergence of fragments or moments of emancipation in organizations. It is on this basis, above all, that we argue for a reframing of the question of emancipation in organization studies.

We will argue that struggles for emancipation at work are prompted by the desire to *assert one's equality* in the face of experiences of inequality manifest at work. This takes place through the *creation of dissensus* in and beyond the organization, which is expressed in the *reconfiguration of what is considered to be sensible* (or not) within the organization. In what follows we will look at each of these three dimensions of emancipation at work in some more detail.

### ***Triggers: Assertions of Equality***

As we mentioned in the previous section, Rancière's conception of emancipation is founded on the notion of equality. In particular, he argued that emancipation involves the assertion of equality in the face of institutional conditions which systematically asserted inequality. In Rancière's study of educational reform, conditions of inequality were established by assumptions about a hierarchy of intelligence which was systemic in the education system. The assertion of equality occurred through Jacotot's insistence that everyone had equal intelligence to enable them to read and write. We think these insights can be also applied to understanding the prompts of emancipation in organizations. Thus following Rancière, we can understand emancipation at work to be prompted by attempts to assert equality in the face of institutionalized patterns of inequality. Let us look at these aspects in some more depth.

Following Rancière's arguments, we start with the assumption that organizational members seek to assert their equality with other members of an organization. By this, we mean organizational members seek to show that they are endowed with at least nominally similar worthiness. Such attempts to assert equality come in a wide range of forms, but are an important aspect of organizational life. This is very well illustrated in studies which have considered the ongoing peer-to-peer interaction which are at the heart of the work undertaken in many knowledge intensive contexts. For instance, a study of a team of engineers found that an important part of co-ordinating production involved a process of peer-review whereby members of the team would comment on each-others work and make mutual improvements (Renstam, 2007). Though this practice of peer-reviewing, the engineers were able to assert their equality with one another and reinforce a process of mutual co-ordination. Other forms of asserting equality have been noted in studies of other, less knowledge intensive, settings. For instance, in Donald Roy's (1959) classic study of an assembly line, we find employees who assert their equality and common membership of a work group through the ritualized sharing of snacks, set-piece humour and the passage through each work day. What is crucial for us here is that the assertion of equality should be seen as a start point – or at least analytically apriori.

Clearly there are very few workplaces which are characterised by pure equality between employees. Even within relatively equal work-groups, informal status hierarchies are likely to appear. For instance, in Roy's (1959) study, he noted an informal status hierarchy between the men in the work group based on the number of years that each of the men had been in the company. Similarly, studies of organizations which deeply value notions of equality often produce various informal modes of inequality (Stohl and Cheney, 2001). However, it is well known that there are a wide range of inequalities which become deeply institutionalized within organizations. Some of the core-institutionalized inequalities in organizations are unequal distribution of opportunities for voice and recognition (Fleming and Spicer, 2007, chapter 8). Following Rancière, we claim that such inequalities clash with the assertions of equality. This clash is the key prompt for expressions of emancipation. One example of the inequalities associated with voice can be seen in the dynamics of humour in the workplace. The study of workplace humour has been shown in a number of setting where employees feel

that the voice of management is too dominant or over-bearing (whether that be in the form of new strategies or pure stand-over tactics), employees seek to asserting the equality (or even superiority) of their own voice using heavy doses of humour (eg. Collinson, 1988; Rodrigues and Collison, 1995; Taylor and Bain, 2003). A common finding is the employees seek to assert their equality through slyly cutting management down to size with various jibes and parodies. If an employee is faced with a situation where valued aspects of their identity are systematically degraded and misrecognised (Hancock, 2008), then they are prompted by (re)assert their equality. For instance, Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) employees faced with heterosexist norms in some North American workplaces have asserted their desire for their own identities to be recognised as being equal to heterosexual identities (Creed, Scully and Austin, 2003). The prevalence of the concept of 'assertion' in Rancière's philosophy invites us to also emphasize the importance of the physical and spatial dimension of emancipation. This includes physical or symbolic acts by those who are not authorized to participate into deliberations, and then who disturb the social and physical order of things, transgress the rules and interrupt the debate. An example of this kind is the attempt by temporary migrant workers to assert their presence in the production chain (Jones and Spicer, 2009, chapter 7).

To summarise, struggles for emancipation are prompted by organizational members who presume some degree of equity being faced with an experience of unequal distribution of opportunities for voice and recognition. By considering the importance of claims for equality, we are able to dramatically broaden the kinds of actors who we register as agents of emancipation. This approach moves beyond seeing claims for emancipation as motivated by some kind of broader revolutionary goal associated with the transformation of all aspects of society, as accounts of macro emancipation focus on. It also side-steps attempts to find temporary spaces of emancipation by 'valuing the small pockets of resistance that make a difference to how people live their lives and live with themselves' (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 701) - as studies of micro emancipation focus on. Rather, Rancière's work pushes us to how emancipation is driven through by the desire to exercise equality. This conception allows underlining the fruitful dimension of 'assertion'. Rancière calls on us to defy the idea of resistance that reduces down the egalitarian assertion to a mere reaction to a system of domination (Rancière, 2009b: 167) and sometimes reinforces it. In this sense, resisting means 'asserting the power of equality in every place where it is in fact confronted with inequality' (Rancière, 2009b: 168).

### ***Process: Creating Dissensus***

In the previous section, we argued that when assertions of equality clash with patterns of inequality they trigger emancipation. But what form do these take? Building on Rancière's conception of emancipation, we would like to argue that they take on the form of articulations of dissensus. This happens when 'words break in, because they are the words of those who are not supposed to speak out' (Rancière, 2009a: 113). Registering emancipatory politics therefore involves tracing out interruptions of established social places (Ruby, 2009: 7). Such a focus on emancipatory knowledge draws our attention to acts which disrupt or seriously challenge the existing social order in some way. Far from looking for marginal forms of resistance that can help people cope with the boredoms associated with a normal workday, the focus of emancipatory studies following Rancière are those that create a fundamental disturbance. At the organizational level, this dissensus takes the form of disagreement and articulated clashes of interpretation between organizational actors. This means looking for

acts which in some ways fundamentally upset or throw into question the existing 'symbolic matrix' which provides the co-ordinates that we use to navigate organizational life (Contu, 2008).

Within organizations, the articulation of dissensus can take on a variety of different forms. Sometimes, dissensus can take place at a more grass-roots and loosely organized modes of calling into question officially sponsored ways on thinking about an interpreting organizational life. For example, in their empirical study on micro-politics of resistance in the UK Public Services, Thomas and Davies (2005) explore how individuals express dissent to proscribed discourse of New Public Management (NPM). They find that public service professionals are active in their engagement with the discourse of NPM. They draw on dissenting discourses to assert, deny and rewrite the subject positions offered by NPM discourse (Thomas and Davies, 2005: 700). Employees create a form of dissensus through asserting their preferred understandings of their own working identities as professionals (rather than being managers, leaders or something else promoted by NPM). This kind of 'subterranean' articulation of dissensus can also take on a wide range of forms including humour, irony, and cynicism which are aimed at questioning managerial dictates. However these more subtle or underground forms of resistance are not the only way which dissent is articulated – there are often more organized and publically voiced forms of dissent which beset organizational life. Perhaps the most well-known form which these take are workers movements in the form of strikes, go-slows, work-to-rule, protests and other activities organized by labour unions. Although such activities are often used ritualistically and tactically by labour unions as a process of bargaining (Hyman, 1972), they are also an important mode of expressing dissent with existing managerial policies or activities. They are an important way which employees can seek to articulate the equality of their own concerns and voice in the face of what is often deeply institutionalised inequalities.

Perhaps one of the crucial insights in Ranciere's work is that emancipation through dissent by workers is by no means limited to informal and formalized activities within the workplace. As we have already pointed out in the previous section, the articulation of dissent often spreads out far beyond the employees working lives. Indeed, he points out that it was often through an escape from being simply 'workers' that employees were able to generate a sense of emancipation and express their dissent. This is very well illustrated in his study *The Nights of Labour* where he looks at the various activities beyond the workplace which workers in Paris during the 19<sup>th</sup> century would engage in – usually in their time off. These included various reading clubs, production of artistic works, and political and debating societies (Ranciere, 1989). The point he is making here is the worker's dissent is frequently found in expressions of equality outside the workplace and even, outside the co-ordinates of work. This means if we are to develop a more comprehensive understanding of emancipatory movements associated with organizations and work, it is vital that we look beyond the narrow confines of the workplace. Indeed, existing work suggests that dissent about organizational issues is likely to bubble up outside of the workplace when there are few opportunities for formal or informal employee voice (Böhm, Spicer and Fleming, 2008). Perhaps, the most obvious form which these expressions of worker dissent take beyond the workplace, is through some social movements (Spicer and Böhm, 2007). These are loosely organized challenges to powerful groups (such as organizational elites), that often take place within the space of civil society (Tarrow, 1994). There is now a growing literature which highlights the vital role which social movements play in seeking to create dissensus about organizational issues. For instance, the precarious workers movement has largely appeared outside formal workplaces as a way of articulating the demands and concerns of employees with little possibility of organizing

unions and few employment rights (Molé, 2010). Similarly, employees concerns with a range of issues such as environmental degradation (Lounsbury, 2001), the rights of ‘queer’ employees (Briscoe and Safford, 2008), and the importance of a public service ethos (Fleming and Spicer, 2007) have turned to activities in broader civil society as a way of seeking to articulate dissent. Indeed, social movement can frequently be an important aspect of more traditional workplace struggles. For instance, a study of labour union struggles in the Australian sea-port industry found that union-based protest gain significant strength through an alliance with broader social movement constituents (Selsky, Spicer and Teicher, 2003). Another form these expressions of dissent might take on, are various cultural or artistic interventions. Recent work by Timon Beyes (e.g. 2008; 2009a; 2010) points out how artistic interventions lead to the articulation of dissensus and displacement. The central point for us is that articulation of dissent about a range of issues which are immediately salient within the workplace can take place both within the direct confines of the workplace or well up among social movements engaged in protest in civil society.

In sum, following Rancière, we claim that emancipation occurs through the articulation of dissent. This can occur within the organization. However when there are few opportunities for voice within the organization, this dissent is likely to be articulated by activities in broader civil society. By registering this experience of dissensus and rupture, this vision stands in stark contrast to the emphasis on dialogue and consensus-building in some streams of CMS (e.g. Forrester, 1999; Johansson and Lindhult, 2008; Reynolds, 1999). The dissensus that Rancière advocates stems from the fact that data are never univocal and that there is always debate surrounding the very elements that constitute a problem. Focusing on dissensus implies that we do not focus our analytical gaze solely on modes of emancipation that nicely fit with dominant democratic models grounded in building a space for integration and searching for consensual agreement (Todd and Säfström, 2008). This is not to say that we do not think that modes of democratic dialogue can be important means for addressing many political issues in organizational life (Scherer and Palazzo, 2007; 2011; Spicer *et al.*, 2009). Indeed, many social movements seeking to create dissent frequently rely upon moments of consent within the movement. Moreover, dissenting movements can also seek out moments of consensus and settlement with those they target. However, what is crucial for this is that emancipatory politics involve a more contentious form of politics which creates fundamental dissensus rather than seeks to achieve democratic consensus. By paying attention to these moments of dissensus, we are able to register those actors that do not seek conciliation, but fundamentally question existing schemes of deliberation in organizations. These kinds of interjections, rather than the processes of negotiations and creation of settlements, would be the central focus of studies of emancipatory politics in organizations.

### ***Outcomes: Reconfiguring the Share of the Sensible***

For Rancière, dissent has one important result – it can lead to a re-distribution of the sensible. This involves ‘reconfig(ing) the landscape of what can be seen and what can be thought (by) alter(ing) the field of the possible and the distribution of capacities and incapacities’ (Rancière, 2009c: 49). As we have already argued, this happens when what is understood to be shared understandings of what is thought to be common, taken into account and considered are shaken up and disturbed. Rancière gives a range of examples of how dissent leads to fundamental questions and disturbances around this pattern of what is considered to be sensible such as an ancient Roman plebian revolt (Rancière, 2009a), the artist activity of labourers in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris (Rancière, 1981), and the self-education movement (Rancière, 1987). In the context of organizations, this reconfiguration of the share of the sensible occurs when particular issues that were previously marginalized or considered to be irrelevant

become seen as important. Another interlinked way that people seek to reconfigure the sensible is when particular people become rendered as being 'sensible'. This happens when participants interjected into processes that they were supposed to play no part in. Through such interjections, they not only sought to assert their own equality of voice in decision-making processes, but also fundamentally disturbed the 'common sense' around how decisions are made in organization.

Organizational life is replete with forms of dissent which have given rise to a fundamental reconstruction of what is deemed to be sensible in organizational life. One particularly good example of forms of dissent which result in a reconfiguration of the sensible are claims for greater gender equality in the workplace. Many traditional feminist readings of workplace dissent associated with gender starts from a principle of inequality between man and woman that must be reduced, if not eliminated (for review see: Calás and Smircich, 2006). The focus of these studies is how struggles for women's emancipation lead to outcomes such as the distribution of material goods (such as equal wages or conditions) and specific rights (such as similar treatment under employment law). Following Rancière's ideas, the more foundational outcome of struggles for equality is the reallocation of whom or what is considered to be sensible. For instance, some feminist struggles sought to challenge the idea that it was sensible that women might even be able to be seen as sensible figures within the workplace. Others have struggled to have women in more senior positions such as professional or managerial roles. Still other aspects of the movement have sought to render what were considered to be marginal 'women's issues' (such as child care, flexible working hours, harassment, maternity leave etc.) as sensible within the wider organizational contexts. More recent, some movements have sought to push forward and render sensible modes of working and reasoning which sit outside of the phallogocentric reason that characterises most organizations. Although each of these struggles is quite different, the core challenge which each of these groups needed to engage in was to create a sense that these issues could be seen as being sensible and appear as an important part of debates, deliberation and everyday organizational life. The impact of these struggles was to render the broader conceptual and political landscape of organizational life in such a way that these issues were considered to be sensible and perceptible. In particular, these struggles for equity in the workplace involve attempts to rework the sense of what issues are considered to be of common concern. A vital aspect of this involves the reinterpretation of women's position within an organization.

More fundamentally however, Rancière invites to question the traditional feminist conception, by calling into question the very issue of identity between men and women. The Rancièrian interpretation invites to read into some feminist movements in organizations, an attempt to construct a political scene through a work of dis-identification that the distinction between gender and sex introduces. This vision allows to foster feminist conceptions as conceptual lenses to enact a more relevant 'organization studies'; an organization studies which will bring 'into the picture' the concerns of many others, not only women, who are often made invisible in / through organizational processes' (Calás and Smircich, 2006: 286).

In sum, attempts to create dissent lead to the reallocation of the share of the sensible. This can result in fundamental transformations and shifts in what issues or which subject are considered to be acceptable, speakable or relevant issues within an organization. By focusing on the dynamics associated with the reallocation of the share of the sensible, Rancière calls into question some of the deeply ingrained ideas about what the outcomes of emancipator struggles are. Instead of assuming that the outcomes of emancipation are widespread or revolutionary social change (as studies of macro-emancipation assume) or the creation of momentary pockets of freedom (as studies of micro-emancipation assume), the focus shifts to

the question of what issues and which speakers get rendered as being sensible. This allows us to avoid the overly grandiose focus of many studies of macro-emancipation as well as the narrow and fleeting considerations of studies of micro-emancipation. Instead, it allows us to consider how particular sets of issues get rendered as being acceptable and sensible. Indeed, changes in this pattern of the sensible allows some issues to come to the fore and gain a sense of political voice and also potentially garner additional resources.

## **Conclusion**

The question of emancipation continues to haunt organizations and those who labour within them. This question takes on many forms from ‘packaged emancipation’ often marketed by purveyors of management fashion (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005) to the calls for emancipation from corporate domination heard by many anti-management movements (Spicer and Böhm, 2007). In this paper, we have argued that existing theories of emancipation in organization studies only help us to understand two forms of emancipation: macro and micro emancipation. Macro-emancipation tends to draw our attention to those acts that seek to fundamentally challenge broader social structural modes of domination such as the corporation or the State. Following existing critiques of this approach, we have argued that a strict focus on macro-emancipation tends to ignore many of the fleeting attempts to create limited zones of freedom which do not necessarily directly question broader social structural modes of domination. These issues have become the focus of studies of micro-emancipation in the workplace. While this literature has made some vital advances, we think that it has created a second set of blindspots. In particular, it has rendered us increasingly unable to account for a whole range of modes of emancipatory struggles that exist in and around organizations that do not necessarily focus on either wholesale challenge to the social structure or attempts to create momentary zones of freedom. In particular, it leads us to ignore struggles that seek to directly and practically assert their equality, create dissensus, and re-order our share of the sensible. These involve various modes of emancipation ranging from the interjection of indigenous peoples into organizational decision making processes, alternative education movements, and many workers’ arts movements, which create new patterns of what is sensible. In each of these cases, we find neither an attempt to fundamentally challenge social structures or just create momentary zones of freedom. What we do find are forms of emancipation that practically demonstrate and actualise equality (rather than making claims for it), which seek to create a disturb existing forms of decision making and various consensuses which have been built up around particular ideas, and seek to change what or indeed who is seen as sensible in organizational life.

By building on the work of Jacques Rancière, we have offered an approach to studying emancipation that overcomes many of the shortcomings that are implicit in studies of macro emancipation. It does not over-intellectualise because it moves the focus away from emancipation being achieved through progressive enlightenment, by an insightful master to looking at the active role oppressed groups play in their own emancipation. It also sidesteps the assumption that emancipation involves wholesale social-structural change by looking at the more immediate changes which might happen in people’s lives such as changing their sense of the world and their immediate place within it. Finally, Rancière’s theory of emancipation does not focus on more negative conceptions of protest, by looking at the positive assertions and claims for emancipation that various groups in organizational life can make. Broadly speaking, following Rancière’s approach allows us to recognise the positive assertions of emancipation which happen in the here and now of organizational life. This

means the study of emancipatory politics is not restricted to the study of large scale social movements that are often led by political and intellectual elites who ‘see the truth’.

Rancière also provides a way of addressing some of the mounting concerns with work on micro-emancipation. It sidesteps the problem of banality by moving the focus from increasingly minor aspects of organizational members’ everyday lives towards those activities which act as an important disruption of existing socio-symbolic schemes. This might include everyday acts such as forms of individual workplace resistance. But it also focuses our attention on those that are fundamentally disruptive in one-way or another. Rancière’s conception of emancipation moves us beyond the widespread view that micro-emancipatory activities are simply a kind of safety valve that helps disgruntled organizational members to ‘let off steam’ (Fleming, 2005). It directs our attention to the ways that more everyday activities can actually create a sense of fundamental disruption or break in people’s working lives. Attending to this can remind us of that even though some forms of micro-emancipation may not involve fundamental changes in the social structure, they suppose the construction of a “political scene for dissensus”. By attending to these changes, we can recognise the impact apparently minor actions can have on people’s sense and experience of the organization. By attending to these experiences of interruption, we become aware of the ways that emancipation can come in many forms of the assertion of equality and disruption of organizational life. Finally, Rancière’s approach allows us to move beyond the fragmented understanding of emancipation. Instead of only examining fragmented struggles, we are directed to the common demand for equality at the centre of these struggles. The importance of equality, dissensus and claims for a ‘share of the sensible’ all provide us with a set of more unified principles that allow researchers to identify similarities between the various forms of micro-emancipation. By identifying these similarities, it enables us to provide a more developed and full conception of emancipation. This allows us to recapture many of the emancipation wishes and desires associated with wide-ranging visions of emancipation. In sum, Rancière’s approach enables us to register the broader wishes and desires that are embedded within emancipatory struggles without taking our eye off many of the more everyday forms that these struggles take on in organizational life.

Rancière’s work on emancipation opens up at least three future lines of research on the topic. First, it pushes us to consider how equality is claimed in organization. Many of the examples that Rancière gives in his own work look at how oppressed groups seek equality through engaging in activities that they were considered incapable of. The cases Rancière explored are largely historical and rely on documents and letters from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It would be rewarding to explore how claims of equality are made in the daily lives of 21<sup>st</sup> century employees. This would involve detailed study of claims of equality made within the workplace; for instance, through claims being put forward for having voice in company decision making. However, such a study would need to go beyond the workplace, and following Rancière’s own work, look at how claims for equality are made by employees outside through a whole range of activities from education to political participation to artistic pursuits. By understanding these claims to equality, and crucially how they link back to organizational life, we can begin to register how employees seek to assert their own sense of self, worth and dignity in everyday life (Sayer, 2007). Second, Rancière’s conception of emancipation pushes us to consider dissensus in organizational life. Doing this, would involve going beyond current studies of mis-behaviour and covert forms of resistance to consider the active interjections that employees make into organizational life. In particular, the study would seek to unearth activities that disturb the shared assumptions in organizational life. This would allow us to shift the question from debates about the effectiveness of various



kinds of resistance to considering dissensus and disruption as emancipatory acts. The final question which Rancière's framework begs is a further exploration of how emancipation takes place through disturbing 'the share of the sensible'. This would direct researchers' attention to the question of how various struggles take place through disturbing the broad language and world-view of actors. Following Rancière, we would need to consider the fundamental role which aesthetics can play in disturbing our experience and 'share of the sensible' in organizational life. This does not just involve consider the aesthetic characteristics of a particular workplace. Rather, it involves considering how particular aesthetic experiences and processes of aesthetic production can fundamentally shake up and question what is considered sensible in organizational life. Furthermore, we might consider how many of the techniques of visualization (ranging from brand building images to financial software) represent one 'distribution of the sensible', which is questioned and challenged by emancipatory movements.

But perhaps most importantly, Rancière offers another potential way of studying emancipation. He argues the assumption that it is the intellectual's mission to 'demystify' and to provide the dominated with real explanations for why they are dominated must be rejected. It is not so much a question, as Thomas (1998) suggests, of providing 'discursive resources' and communicative competences to those who do not possess them. Rather, it involves recognising the reflexivity, intentionality and reason that dominated groups already poses and how this helps them to become aware of their exploitation (Rancière, 1998). Developing emancipatory knowledge would ultimately involve questioning expert's power to enlighten dominated people from their condition. Furthermore, it would involve relinquishing the role of the critic as a kind of 'resistance spotter' who seeks to document all the various forms of micro-emancipations they witness. As we have pointed out, doing this only emphasises the disparity between the enlightened critic who is able to see all manner of micro dynamics of resistance and those actually engaged in such resistance (Wray-Bliss, 2003). Moreover, it can lead to disparate resistance spotters identifying even the most inconsequential acts as modes of resistance. If we follow Rancière's conception of emancipation, then we begin to recognise that the central task of the critic would involve starting from a different set of propositions and assuming 'that the incapable are capable; that there is no hidden secret of the machine that keeps them trapped in their place. It would be assume that there is no fatal mechanism transforming reality into image; no monstrous beast absorbing all desires and energies into its belly; no lost community to be restored. What there are simply scenes of dissensus capable of surfacing in any time and in any place' (Rancière, 2009c: 48).

Shifting our assumptions in the way that Rancière suggests would lead us to fundamentally rethink how we might study emancipation in organizations. The critic would not be seen as an intellectual who has superior knowledge or a skilled resistance spotter. Rather, Rancière is clear the critical is anyone who creates scenes of dissensus (Rancière, 2009c: 49). This would mean considering all groups who dissent from dominant modes of power in organizations as a critic of kinds. The task of the researcher would not so much to do Critical Management Studies. Such critique is already done by many of the people who engage with management on a daily basis. These naturally occurring critiques come in many guises ranging from individual escape from the labour process through to informal protests and more organized formal movements (Spicer and Böhm, 2007). The task would be to engage in the study of critiques of management<sup>5</sup>. What we have in mind here is a systematic study of the ways that

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<sup>5</sup> We are borrowing this phrasing from Luc Boltanski (2011) who has recently called for an abandonment of 'critical sociology' and the adoption of a 'sociology of criticism'. For him, critical sociology involves an expert sociologist identifying structures of domination and calling these into question. In contrast, a 'sociology of

groups have engaged in active critiques of management (Parker, 2002b). Following Rancière's own empirical work, it would study various everyday manifestations of people's struggles against and with management. These might come in the form of letters (newspapers and workers literature (as Rancière used). For example, in order to analyze ethical subjectivity and politics in organizations, McMurray, Pullen and Rhodes (2010) have directed their attention to one very specific organizational artefact- a letter drafted by an employee. But it also might come in the form of more ethnographic data or new forms of communication such as online mechanisms like weblogs. The focus would be registering not just acts or resistance such as refusal or escape, which is currently done (eg. Spicer and Böhm, 2007). Rather, it would involve considering the critiques that are actually put forward by these individuals and groups, and the forms they might come. Moreover, such a study would look for how these seeming marginal acts become important forms of dissensus that unsettle shared assumptions in organizational life. Finally, the focus of the impact of such emancipatory struggle would not be tracked at the level of the decisions or resources. Rather, the central topic of consideration is how assumptions about the distribution of sense can be fundamentally called into question.

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critique' involves studying the various critiques of this structure which already exist and considering what role they play in transforming those structures. This approach was followed in Boltanski and Chiapello's (2005) study of how critiques of bureaucratic management during the 1960s drove the transformation of French capitalism in the proceeding three decades. We should note that Rancière is very critical of this study for misrepresenting the 1968 movement's demands and drawing a too strict boundary between working class desire for security and middle class desires for individual experimentation (2009c: 34-36).

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