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journals.sagepub.com/home/psc**Michael Räber** 

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Abstract

This essay argues that an alternative conception of time to that underlying the ideology of productivism and growth is not only possible, but desirable. The creation of this time requires what I refer to as the practice of refusal via taking time: the self-determined arrangement of the nexus of time, action and utility that begins with the a-synchronous insertion of unproductive time into the synchronous horizontal time of productivism. The essay is divided into three sections. The first offers the reader a discussion of Jacques Rancière's notion of time as a social and political medium that partitions and distributes actions and utility. The subsequent section of the essay elaborates in aesthetic terms an account of unproductive time that is indifferent to the time of productivism. In the final section, I discuss examples that show how taking time to do 'nothing' can elicit an emancipatory politics that seeks to liberate us from the hegemony of productivism. I conclude that political theory should attend to time as a political medium and to the possibilities of its occupation, and that picturing the taking of time in terms of stopping the force of productivism's normalized horizontal time by entering the unproductive time of reverie and aesthetic experience, provides a promising perspective from which to apprehend a time for thriftless refusals, deliberate dis-identifications, and the forging of cooperation among people(s) and with nature.

Keywords

time, productivism, aesthetics and politics, democratic emancipation, Jacques Rancière, Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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Time's specificity is not only to be slow. It is never to stop. For their part, human beings have, we know, a distressing tendency to stop.

- Jacques Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times* (2010)

In recent years, productivism – the belief that measurable productivity and growth are the purpose of human organization – has become the subject of critical attention in political theory and the social sciences.¹ Scholars from different theoretical traditions have been theorizing the negative effects that this belief has in practice and offered possible remedies. Particular attention has been paid to how productivism, in the context of waged work (Anderson 2017; Cray 2014; Jaeggi 2014; Rose 2019; Shippen 2014; Weeks 2011) and in the Anthro-/Capitalocene era (Connolly 2019; Daggett 2019; Dryzek and Pickering 2018; Moore 2016; Wainwright and Mann 2020), creates and maintains conditions that are detrimental to ideals of political freedom, social justice, and, more generally, to the well-being of humans and nature: The unequal distribution of leisure, the sleeplessness and mortality caused by the blurring of boundaries between work and leisure, the increasing control of employers over their workers, the precariousness and forced flexibility of many employment relationships, the alienation caused by the fragmentation and meaninglessness of work, the pollution of air and water, deforestation, greenhouse gas emissions, etc.

The purpose of this essay is to contribute to this growing body of literature, but from the perspective of a political theory of time. I argue that many sites of arbitrary domination, inequality and destruction in contemporary neoliberal capitalist democracies – but in all societies, ancient and modern, that have been organized around productivism – are underpinned by deeply rooted narratives and practices of the continuity, synchronicity and inevitability of time, and that a critical political theory interested in conceptualizing possibilities of emancipation from productivism should seek to articulate the political value of the suspension of 'productive' action and of the time wherein such suspension can occur, which requires a fundamental shift in our political understandings and practices of using time. In proposing an argument for the emancipatory potential of 'unproductive' time, my focus is on the liberation from productivism – rather than envisioning emancipation through the reformation of conditions of production.

Such a focus will allow us to better understand productivism as a normative code that occupies our sense of time. As such a code, it disposes a general model of the utility of time, which distributes actions along a horizontal line and according to criteria that determine which actions are possible, necessary, or relevant, and which are impossible, contingent, or irrelevant. In particular, such focus will allow us to picture possibilities for articulating and enacting radically alternative organizations of action and utility in time, and thus to break with this temporal model. This requires what I call the practice of *taking time*: the self-determined arrangement of the nexus of time, action and utility that begins with the a-synchronous insertion of unproductive time into the synchronous horizontal time of productivism.

In my approach, I take inspiration from two recent political theories of refusal: Bonnie Honig's enlistment of the category of 'refusal' (Honig 2021) for an emancipatory feminist

politics, and Cressida Heyes' notion of 'anaesthetic time' (Heyes 2020). Anaesthetic time, according to Heyes, is 'a diffuse, drifting, unpunctuated, unproductive, and unsynchronised temporality' (Heyes 2020, 22), paradigmatically induced by drug use or sleep, and is the logical response to a productivist temporality that is relentlessly depleting. What is important about this notion for me is that it captures a key aspect of the practice of taking time that represents its democratic-egalitarian core: its *indifference* to authority's powers to deactivate and suppress the capacity of citizens to determine the utility of actions and events in time. The indifference engendered in 'anaesthetic time', however, can have only limited emancipatory potential (as Heyes acknowledges), since it represents the surrender of consciousness and agency, providing only a transient individualist escape from productivism. In this regard, I agree with Honig's general worry that political conceptions of refusal and inaction that promote purely subtractive practices run the risk of producing isolated individuals removed from any transformative power of collective agency.²

In what follows, I will proffer an aesthetic conception of time as an alternative form of temporality by turning to Jacques Rancière's (and to a lesser extent Jean-Jacques Rousseau's) explorations of the emancipatory potential of purposeless action and useless time in aesthetic experience. Their explorations offer a way to theorize the taking of time, in terms of both the subtractive move from the colonizing temporality of productivism *and* the additive practice of subversion and inversion of use that can become operative breeding grounds for a shared emancipatory politics. Hence, I will also be concerned with showing that entering *aesthetic time* can be a substantive moment (certainly more substantive than Honig imagines) within a broad 'arc of refusal' (Honig 2021, xiii).

There are three main reasons why a critical political theory should seek to rework the nexus of action, time and utility. The first is that suspension of productive action can be a political tool within a larger process of emancipatory change, or, as Rancière puts this, 'there is something active to inaction, because it allows you to get out of the system' (Rancière 2014). Note that I am not suggesting that emancipatory change simply consists in a negative retreat from the productivist imperative (as it were, in a kind of temporary vacation from productive action in order to be all the more productive afterwards). Rather, the suspension of productive action is itself an active intervention – stopping and subverting productivism – with the aim of reoccupying time in practices that adopt other rhythms, other forms of relativity. In other words, the goal of this suspension is not purposeless action as such. Instead, the goal of purposeless action is to create temporal openings in order to allow for a reshaping of the nexus of time, utility and action and of the way we humans and nature are involved in productive, consumptive and political activities. The second reason is that this reworking gives us a critical perspective for analysing contemporary political problems in terms of productivism's occupation of this nexus. The third reason is that this helps us articulate a conception of democratic emancipation that is premised on the idea that citizens are equally capable of determining the utility of actions and events in time.

I also take inspiration from theorists who argue that the problem with work today is that it has become the dominant and normalized way of life in contemporary societies, as its

inhabitants have internalized an ultimately irrational belief in the normativity and inevitability of work, which consists of the conviction that work is not only necessary to produce certain vital goods, but that it should be the key mechanism by which income, health, social status, self-worth and other goods are allocated and distributed.³ As such, it organizes the social meaning, value and organization of action and time far beyond work itself. As Jonathan Crary notes, this has resulted in the occupation of people's time by the organizing forces of neoliberal capitalism – not by mass-deception, but by self-imposed 'states of neutralization and inactivation, in which one is dispossessed of time' (Crary 2014, p. 88). Similar to Crary and Weeks, Daggett has put forward an argument about the destructiveness of a global system that never stops. In *The Birth of Energy* (2019), she shows how the fossil-fuelled industrialism has been transforming the notions of work and energy to normative master codes for understanding and acting in the world, 'imbuing the drive toward efficiency and productivity with an aura of natural timelessness' (Daggett 2019, 133). But intensive energy consumption and work correlate with human and non-human well-being only up to a certain point – hence the calls for 'post-work' (Weeks) and 'post-carbon' (Daggett) societies, where the revaluation of 'sleep' (Crary; Heyes) takes on a revolutionary status.

Building on their arguments, my addition is twofold. First, I show that the problem with productivism is partially a problem with its underlying temporal logic that occupies the lives of many contemporaries, and that cutting through the gospel of productivism requires the disruption of this logic. Second, I maintain that the time of aesthetic experience and play – the time of 'doing nothing' of productive value – is paradigmatically opposed to the temporal logic underpinning productivism, and that it represents a temporal opening for a collective emancipatory politics from the purported naturalness and normativity of productivism.

I have organized the article into three sections. The first offers the reader a discussion of Jacques Rancière's notion of time as a political medium that partitions and distributes actions and utility, a notion which helps us to understand productivism. In the ensuing section of the essay, I elaborate in aesthetic terms an account of unproductive time that is indifferent to the time of productivism and that constitutes a temporal opening for the emancipation from productivism. In the final section, I discuss examples that show how taking time to suspend productivist action in *reverie* can elicit an emancipatory politics.

I. Plotted and unplotted times: time as a political medium

Productivism is the belief that growth and more productivity are necessarily good, both for individuals and for societies as a whole. It has been a key element of the most dominant political ideologies (Liberal, Socialist, Marxist) since the 19th century, and was constituted against the backdrop of a secularized creed of the Protestant work ethic and 'of a generalised cult to industrial and scientific progress as the condition for abundance and social progress for all' (Audier 2019, my translation). As such, it has been both a spiritual calling and utilitarian imperative. Audier shows how this backdrop fostered the technophile enthusiasm of the elite of the time, among others influenced by social utopists and socialist leaders supporting the productivist dimension of Marxism beholden to an

‘unbridled romanticism of productivity’ (Baudrillard 1975, 17). In the 20th century, the rise of productivism during the interwar period came to full fruition after the Second World War, both in Western capitalism and in the USSR and Communist China, in the form of the prioritization of and the commitment to economic growth. While this commitment has been reinforced by neoliberalism’s ascent since the 1970s and 1980s, in the form of an explicit struggle against any regulation of production and growth, it today not only keeps underpinning the ideological agenda on the political Right, but also that on the Left, in the form of an internalized belief in the gospel of productive work.

Productivism entails an image of what it means for a person, and for a people, to be rational and responsible, namely, to efficiently use and maximize the intellectual, bodily and natural resources in order to produce economic and social goods that are beneficial for society as a whole. We can find this image, for example, in the political theory and epistemology of Locke, who narrows the concept of productivity to include only man as a productive force (Locke 2014, II.21), and introduces a normative hierarchy between more productive and less productive individuals and peoples, which, among other things, leads him to defend violent expropriation (Locke 1988; Tully 1994). We can also find it in Rawls’ difference principle, which is based in part on the idea that those who are better off must be productive bearers of economic growth for those who are worse off, making productive growth a necessary condition for social justice. Anson Rabinbach shows how the normative image of man as a productive force in the Industrial Revolution intersected with a notion of ‘the protean force of nature’, and ‘the productive power of industrial machines’, resulting in the metaphor of the ‘human motor’: the working body as a motor that is resistant to fatigue and capable of infinite production and growth (Daggett 2019, 79–80; Rabinbach 1992, 1–4). The analogue of this image of a person as a human motor is the image of time as a quantifiable currency, something that can be gained, saved or lost, something that is either used for and directed at productive ends, or is wasted. This brief historical and conceptual outline of the concept of productivism shows how it occupies citizens’ habits of linking action, time and utility through a normative ethic of growth and efficiency in production, which holds that the more their actions and uses of time contribute to continued growth and production, the more useful they are.

In the remainder of this section, I will draw on Jacques Rancière’s reflections on time to conceptualize this occupation in terms of the occupation of time as a political medium. Yet first note that from Rancière’s perspective, productivism is not an ideology that critical theory needs to unmask, but a normative regime of perceptions, meanings and sensibilities that it rather needs to articulate and counteract.⁴ To understand this difference, consider in what sense time is a political medium for him. The issue of time and of its place in narratives, of its significance to practices, ideas and sensibilities, and of its formative function in the distribution and redistribution of the sensible, is at the heart of Rancière’s thought. Throughout his *oeuvre*, Rancière thinks about time through its reception, its functions and its fields of operations in society, whereby time functions as a socially constructed medium that organizes and regulates the social world in relation to human life.⁵ As a political medium, it is integral to what he calls the ‘distribution of the sensible’ – a notion that refers to a set of possible modes of perception, sensibilities and dispositions that foreground action and thought; it functions as a historical a-priori, a

regime that pre-structures what is possible and acknowledged in space and time: who and what can be felt, heard, seen, perceived and imagined within space and time, included or excluded (Rancière 2009, 24–25). Simply put, any distribution of the sensible is based on ‘a distribution of temporalities’ (Rancière, 2017b, 18), that is, what is temporally possible and necessary, impossible and unnecessary, and productivism, as a temporal regime, distributes time, through narratives and through articulations of the sensorium (in which narratives are organized, distributed and incorporated). An example of how productivism is a regime that organizes our habits, beliefs and sensibilities along Rancièrian lines might be a 2017 advertising poster by the gig economy company Fiverr.⁶ On this poster, a young, tired woman looks directly at us, emblazoned on her face is the text: ‘You eat a coffee for lunch. You’ll follow through on your follow through. Sleep deprivation is your drug of choice. You might be a doer’. Below the text is the company’s logo with the telling tagline ‘in doers we trust’. The message is clear: Being a productive ‘doer’ puts you on a par with God (and, in a way, strangely confirms Weber’s predicted future path of a self-secularizing Protestant ethic), provided you internalize, take pride in, and strive for self-exploitation, sleep deprivation, workaholism, etc. – all things that obviously organize our physical and sensual existence.

Rancière holds that ‘time is the best medium for exclusion’, and, equally, for establishing identity and commonality (Rancière 2013b). For one, it is constitutive of what we sense as the common world that we share, as it defines what is given as the ‘now of the present, the way in which this present depends on a past or breaks away from it, whereby it allows or forbids this or that future’, and in doing so, it draws ‘lines of separation between the possible and the impossible, the necessary and the contingent’ (Rancière 2017b, 13). For the other, it defines the ways of life in one’s time, the ‘ways of being in tune or out of tune with’ one’s time (Rancière 2017b, 13). These two functions of time are closely linked in narratives of time (that are part of temporal regimes), which constitute a specific connection between possibility and capacity, insofar as they designate at once what a time makes possible, and to what extent the subjects of this time are capable of seizing the possible.

Among the narratives of time he discusses, the most relevant for my purposes here are the contemporary narrative of short-term progress (which I associate with productivism), the modernist narratives of historical progress and decline, and Aristotle’s understanding of temporality. According to Rancière, Aristotle articulated a logic of ascribing possibility/impossibility and necessity/contingency to actions and events in time that corresponds to an aesthetic-political principle of value distribution, which Rancière also finds operative in these other temporal narratives. This logic makes time to advance with a relentless and ultimately *unstoppable necessity*, distinguishing equally what is possible and what is impossible to do or strive for. Another way to put this is to say that time in this logic is constructed along the *line* of a plot structure. A good plot, Aristotle says in *Poetics*, has inner coherence and unity in that it represents a unified and self-contained composition of parts and assembly of events (Aristotle 2009, 1450a15; 1450b30; 1451a13). A bad plot, in contrast, merely lets actions, characters and events appear in succession as particular and episodic, and the linkage between them is merely contingent. This temporal dichotomy, importantly, argues Rancière, relies on a social hierarchy that

‘opposes two forms of lived time and two classes of human beings’ (Rancière 2017b, 18): on the one hand, the active men of leisure that have and take time to truly act, and on the other hand, those who passively receive time as subjects of work. Truly acting is only possible in the time of leisure, Aristotle says, and should be distinguished from play and relaxation on the one hand, and from work on the other, in both cases by virtue of leisure being an intrinsically noble and liberal end, because it leads to happiness, but happiness ‘cannot exist without excellence’, and thus not every man will ‘be at once farmer, artisan, councillor, judge’ (Aristotle 2014, 1328 b35–36; b25–26). The Aristotelian distinction between leisure and labour thus partitions time into two, by measure of two fundamentally different ways of acting in it, only one of which (the noble leisurely activities of citizens) qualifies for political action. According to Rancière, this temporal partition coincides with the Aristotelian poetic principle of arranging a temporal plot of a fictional narrative: the men of labour live in the particularity of things, in which their actions and events are episodic and, as it were, randomly strung together in equal measure, as is the characteristic of bad plots: that which is merely contingent and episodic cannot belong to a time that enables noble and liberal action viz. the good plot.

The narrative of time that underpins productivism, in turn, assigns the good plot and the bad plot in exactly the opposite way. In this narrative, the unproductive use of time constitutes the bad plot because it strings together episodic and contingent actions and events in a purposeless and fragmentary manner. Productive working time, on the other hand, is the good plot because it is purposeful, insofar as this time relates actions, people and resources to productive ends. Based on a hierarchical separation between the time of individuals living in the episodic time of unproductive idleness and a rational time of production, the time of productivism narrows what is possible in the future to what emanates from the necessity of the present, in a way that makes this future appear as the only possible future that must emerge from the optimization of the existing present order. This is what Rancière calls the narrative of short-term progress (Rancière 2017b, 15). This narrative involves the picture of time managed, that is, the calculation of the chances for measures taken now to yield prosperity in the immediate future. Ironically, managed time is dependent on a future that makes demands on the present, but the future in this narrative of time promises nothing, it does not hold any possibilities for utopian ideas or ideals, rather it is supposed to make us presently ready for that future, and thus is continued duration without breaks. Thus, while the rhetoric of this narrative pulls toward an attainable and ultimately necessary future, it simultaneously pulls in the opposite direction, requiring people to turn towards the necessary demands of a present in which they can no longer pursue utopian goals, but must envision time through the lens of a disenchanting realism. Time thus becomes an external force that relentlessly pushes forward and thereby dictates what is possible and what is necessary. There is never a moment where sufficiency can be reached; there is always the future whose needs must be served. We can recognize productivism’s infinite nature in phenomena like the re-conflation of work and life, multitasking, but also in age-old reproductive activity, which has its own never-ending temporality (the sense that the same activities must be repeated, often each day, to stay alive and keep others alive). The time of productivism is ruthlessly linear, but in its focus on the present also has a looping and repetitive quality.

The narrative of decline, most prominently elaborated in the twentieth-century Marxist tradition, in turn, is a story based on a historical time that ultimately cannot be resisted. In its disgruntled disdain for the rule of the sole present and its ubiquitous consumerism and spectacle, it portrays the time of productivism as a system that – by virtue of a lack of knowledge of the individuals living in it – endlessly reproduces itself and that consumes any deviant subversion as part of its own dynamic. What is assumed in this narrative is that ‘greedy democratic individuals lead us all toward apocalypse’, as Rancière puts it (Rancière 2013b). In this way, it operates with the same logic of assigning temporal necessity and (im)possibility, as we found in Aristotle and the narrative of short-term progress. Despite their apparent differences, they all similarly follow the logic of placing characters, actions and events in necessary relations to one another, based on a normative, hierarchical division of temporalities that dictates what time and whose time is relevant and necessary on a horizontal, straight line stretching from the past to the future. For Rancière, the problem with these temporal narratives (and regimes) is not only that they literally dispossess some individuals of time (which is primarily true of productivism, insofar as it does not leave us enough free time), but more fundamentally that they regulate our senses of reality, history and possibility in a too narrow way, regulating the field of what modalities of time are even possible and valuable by excluding or suppressing alternative, plural temporalities. In other words, in addition to the problem of the normative devaluation of episodic time and the problem of teleological directionality, the problem with these narratives for Rancière is further that they assume time to be homogeneous, singular and continuous. But time is, he insists, heterogeneous, plural, and exists, as a function of its heterogeneous-plural nature, in an irresolvable tension between a continuous time and a discontinuous time. ‘Time in the singular does not exist’, he says, ‘only times each of which is always itself a way of linking several lines of time, several forms of temporality’ (Rancière 2003, 7 – my translation). From this perspective, we can understand Rancière’s reflections on time as a project that explores ways to de-naturalize, pluralize and democratize lived time. What, then, would a politics look like that pushes beyond our familiar time horizons, toward a politics of many rhythms and temporalities, open to, chosen by, and enjoyed by all citizens? And what is needed for such a politics to emerge?

2. Taking time to do ‘nothing’

What is required for a different partition of time is to create a ‘vertical’ dimension of time (Rancière 2017a, 61), as Rancière elaborates most prominently in his discussions of artistic and cinematic modernity in *Aisthesis* (2013c) and *Béla Tarr* (2013a). He refers to this vertical dimension of time as ‘gaps, [and] positive ruptures’ (Rancière 2017a, 33) in the normal, universal (globalized), horizontal time. This notion of a vertical dimension of time coincides with his conceptualization of politics: ‘Politics occurs when those who ‘have no’ time take the time necessary to front up as inhabitants of a common space’ (Rancière 2009b, 24–25). The interruption of the continuity of normal time occurs when those actors and events that do not have a determining function in this normal time, partake in the medium of time that belongs to all equally. What the notion of the vertical

dimension of time suggests, then, is that the insertion of ruptures in the temporal structure of normal time, including the hegemony of productivism, cannot occur from within the temporal logic underlying it, but must occur as a break from it. How can this be done?

My answer is the following: not by force nor by negation, but by an indifferent retreat into a time of unproductive doing. To elucidate this time, I draw on Rousseau's *Reveries* (1979) and on Rancière's aesthetics and politics. Both authors articulate a new modern condition of freedom as a state of willed uselessness that consists of the radical absence of any reference to productivity, to a purpose or achievement: *reverie*, the experience of a dreamer in a waking state. In the following, I want to highlight three different but interrelated aspects of this time: (i) its subtractive logic; (ii) its episodic character; (iii) and its aesthetic nature.

- (i) In an essay on Rousseau's *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, Gourevitch offers this felicitous characterization of the idleness (*l'oisiveté*) of *reverie*: 'To be *oisif* is not so much to do nothing as it is to do whatever one is doing solely for its own sake, and not because it is the useful or the prudent or the virtuous thing to do' (Gourevitch 2012, 499). In other words, *reverie* should not be confused with laziness, the unwillingness to use one's energies, nor with rest, the inactivity between two moments of work, and neither with leisure in an Aristotelian sense, where leisure is a required component of virtue ethical activity. Rather, it marks a specific kind of reflexive-contemplative attentiveness, yet one that is neither directly epistemic nor directly moral, but aesthetic. In *Proletarian Nights* (2012b), Rancière famously lets the worker-poets have their say, who did not rest at night during the revolution of 1830, and instead took a time that did not belong to them, by taking walks through the countryside, talking metaphysics, writing poetry, and using the time for political reflection. They also took parts of the actual working time to *rêve*, as exemplified by the carpenter/floor-layer Gauny, who interrupted the exertions of his manual work to direct his gaze and his thoughts into the distance and to his own bodily movements (Rancière 2012b, 3–99). Such moments of withdrawal and abdication, I suggest, constitute *reverie*'s subtractive logic. Rancière's worker-poets attempted to escape the hierarchical social norms and practices that determine the proper use of their bodies and minds in time, by retreating into a time of unproductive doing. The daydreaming subject of Rousseau's *Reverie*, too, follows this logic, when subtracting from all determinations and entanglements with the social. Thus, to *rêve* in the sense of Rancière and Rousseau is to enact a subtractive logic: escaping the denial of freedom and equality that is entailed in a structure of time that assigns identities, roles and actions to subjects by necessity or probability, and thus breaking with the linear continuity of horizontal time.
- (ii) The subtractive logic of *reverie* renders time formless, thus foregrounding the episodic. Rousseau describes *reverie* as a state where there is 'no need to remember the past or reach into the future, where time is nothing to it' (Rousseau 1979, 88). A state where 'time is nothing to it', does not possess a definite temporal form. What Rousseau does when he rows out alone on Lake Biel and

then stops in the middle of the lake, to let himself be guided by the movement of the water and to indulge in a daydream, is an aimless drifting, both literally and figuratively, without a clearly defined form, characterized essentially by the absence of any determination of purposeful time. Put differently, the state of *reverie* constitutes a formless way of being-in-time that is opposed to the Aristotelian form of structuring poetic time, and to the temporal divisions structuring modern and contemporary narratives of time. Its subtractive logic frees time from the hierarchical formal regime of mimetic poetics that identifies and relates elements as part of a whole by necessity or probability, hence temporarily foregrounding episodic time: a time of the democratic-egalitarian coexistence of ‘micro-events’ (Rancière 2017b, 37). The drifting subject finds itself between fixed relations, identities and norms, exercising the practice of freely mixing and combining thoughts, sights and sensations, a practice that in turn has its counterpart in the modern aesthetic and democratic revolutions, as Rancière never tires of pointing out, in the wake of which every action, every subject and every event was in principle seen as equally legitimate as part of a work of art or a political community.

- (iii) In *Aisthesis*, Rancière examines the invention of the modern novel, which unlocked a subversive (democratic) power by remaining in a place between the subtractive state of *reverie* and revolutionary action (Rancière 2013c, ch. 3). *Aisthesis* is also where he develops the argument that what is characteristic of the modern work of art is that subtraction and distance have become its virtues. Subtraction effects indifference in the observer, which means, first, the breaking up of all specific relations between expressive form and exact meaning, and second, the breaking up of the sensible presence of a work of art and a public that would be its public that has clear expectations and interests (Rancière 2013c, 18). Such indifference requires aesthetic distance, and aesthetic distance requires subtraction from purposeful action. As is well known, Rancière is deeply indebted to Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1987) and in particular to Schiller’s *Aesthetic Letters* (2005), both of whom conceptualized aesthetic experience as offering a ‘certain neutralization of the social hierarchy’ (Rancière 2009a, 2). Such neutralization of hierarchy can occur in aesthetic experience because it is a ‘positive neither/nor’ (Rancière 2009a, 2): neither that the faculty of sensation (desire) takes command over the faculty of understanding (knowledge), nor vice versa, but the free play in-between those two faculties. Such neutralization opens the possibility of a dissensus, which is ‘a perturbation of the normal relation between sense and sense’ (Rancière 2009a, 3). This normal relation has a significant political equivalent for Rancière, what he calls ‘*arkhè*, the logic according to which the exercise of power is anticipated in the capacity to exercise it, and this capacity in turn is verified by its exercise’ (Rancière 2009a, 9). Dissensus, via neutralization in aesthetic experience, disrupts this logic. In this constellation, aesthetic experience takes on a key emancipatory function, namely, to offer ‘a supplement to the simple consensual game of domination and rebellion’ (Rancière 2009a, 9): it offers subjects the possibility to enact and

verify their own power to determine the purpose of their actions beyond any socially given determinations of capacities to rule or to be ruled. The key here is to understand what such positive ‘neither/nor’ unlocks: the indefinite potentiality of combining parts of a whole – both in aesthetic objects and in temporal narratives. Aesthetic experience and art, thus, take centre stage in inserting anachronistic, episodic, vertical time, especially, Rancière holds, as pertains to a ‘politics of art ... that intertwines different times within little machines or *dispositifs*, that construct other possibilities of looking at the present’ – *dispositifs* that he calls with Foucault ‘heterochronies’, defined as ‘a redistribution of times that invents new capacities for reframing a present’ (2013b).⁷

Allison Ross (2019, 88–89) has recently cautioned that the focus on aesthetics obscures the crucial point about Rancière’s conception of emancipation: aesthetics, she believes, is not fundamental to his claim that *reverie* is emancipatory; instead, she urges, emancipation is ‘a communicable experience, or it is nothing’, from which she concludes that emancipation can neither be reduced to a state of *reverie* nor have an actual aesthetic basis. Ross points to a seeming contradiction between Rancière’s early works, where he offers a conception of emancipation as verification of equality, and his later writings on aesthetics, where he valorizes *reverie* as emancipatory. The contradiction seems to be between two opposing meanings of emancipation: in his earlier writings, Ross argues, emancipation is the willed exercise of one’s own intelligence, while in his later writings, it is the suspension of willed action. However, Ross argues, ‘the two perspectives—the power to do nothing and the exercise of one’s intelligence—are able to be reconciled’ (Ross 2019, 89), namely, via the communicability of both the experience of *reverie* and the exercise of one’s intelligence.

While I agree with Ross that the seeming contradiction is just that, I disagree with her on the reasons for why this is the case. Also, while I agree with her that emancipation cannot be reduced to a state of *reverie*, emancipation for Rancière in an important sense has an aesthetic basis. What stands out about Rancière’s conception of emancipation for Ross are two things: that the will is involved in an important sense, and that an emancipatory experience is not only an experience but is communicated, she holds: ‘Like the disengaged state, the action of the emancipated intelligence communicates what it does’ (ibid.). However, we can make emancipatory experiences without communicating them. Rancière’s examples in *Proletarian Nights* of worker-poets taking the time to engage in *reverie* point to the possibility that *reverie* is emancipatory even without communication. When those workers engage in *reverie*, they do something that is not in accordance with their function in the existing distribution of the sensible and demonstrate that they too can enjoy a beautiful sunset or artwork like others and that is, it seems to me, a verification of equality, even when it is not, contrary to what Ross suggests, communicated. The reason for why I see no contradiction between Rancière’s two ways of talking about emancipation (as the suspension of action in *reverie* and as the exercise of one’s intelligence) is that both are part and parcel of what he considers the process of executing one’s will to be. Note that ‘will’ for Rancière has nothing to do with a voluntaristic notion of self-determination, but rather with the ability to apply one’s powers of

attention to one's own capacities, which are always limited by the conditions in which one finds oneself. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* he says:

By the will we mean that self-reflection by the reasonable being who knows himself in the act. It is this threshold of rationality, this consciousness of and esteem for the self as a reasonable being acting, that nourishes the movement of the intelligence. The reasonable being is first of all a being who knows his power, who doesn't lie to himself about it. (Rancière 1991, 57).

Since Rancière assumes with Jacotot the equality of intelligence among all people, a person, as Jacotot held, is not an intelligence served by a will but a will served by an intelligence. Differences in the manifestations of intelligence, therefore, are not due to differences in intellectual capacities, but due to differences in the will to make use of their intelligence. As the above quote suggests, the will to make use of their intelligence in turn depends on knowing one's power and to not lie to oneself about it. To know oneself, Rancière holds,

no longer means, in the Platonic manner, know where your good lies. It means come back to yourself, to what you know to be unmistakably in you. ... [T]he wrong is in diverging from, leaving one's path, no longer paying *attention* to what one says, forgetting what one is (ibid., my italics).

The self-knowledge required for emancipation thus accrues precisely through being attentive to ourselves, in such a way that we are attentive to our power and not to lie to us about it - in other words, to capacities and possibilities which perhaps were previously suppressed and inactivated through social conditions. (As we will see in the next section, these capacities and possibilities are for him not purely intellectual, but belong essentially to the body). We can thus see that for Rancière the absence of inattention towards those powers is key to the emancipatory act.

This indicates that the suspension of action in *reverie* and its quality as aesthetic experience is a key part of the emancipatory process for Rancière: Insofar as emancipation involves the enactment of one's intelligence by focusing one's attention on the oppressive and inactivating conditions that deny one freedom and equality, and on one's power to move, shift and change in the face of these (equally malleable) conditions, this halting, disruptive movement that *reverie* induces can be understood as a key shifting moment for emancipatory transformation processes. Entering the time of *reverie* by creating a vertical break with horizontal time, as I understand Rancière, effects a particular form of attention, as so described above in terms of aesthetic experience, that neutralizes the logic of *arkhè* by directing us to our own powers and the conditions limiting them.

3. The politics of taking time

What I have been arguing so far suggests that counteracting the horizontal regime of progressive time requires us to 'do nothing', and that only constant purposeless inaction can bring about emancipation and liberation from it. It might seem that one key

implication of this is that individuals, to emancipate themselves from the demands of productivism, must be constantly disconnected from the forces that put them in a state of alienation, as well as from other people, leading to idiosyncratic, solipsistic, and, ultimately, disengaged subjects. With respect to Rousseau, Prozorov (2021) has recently argued just this, pointing out that a collective reorganization of time cannot consequently be effective with Rousseau's daydreaming subject, as this would require a collective, purposeful commitment. Indeed, Rousseau's daydreaming subject experiences daydreaming as liberating only because it has isolated itself and is withdrawn from society, feeling connected only to nature. Rancière's daydreaming subjects, however, insofar as they engage in the practice of what I call 'taking time' are not isolated and withdrawn from society, because the practice is, first, both subtractive and additive, and second, involves the resonance between individual emancipation and collective emancipation.

The practice of taking time to *rêve* is an emancipatory practice because it entails both the subtractive pull of suspending productive action on the one hand and the additive rearrangement of time, action and utility on the other. The 'acquisition of the most precious of goods that the men of action had so far kept to themselves; that is, the power to do nothing and to want to do nothing', Rancière says, is that which 'emancipation [is] at its heart', because it consists in a 'fundamental tension' between 'the promises of the reign of work, and the vertigo attached to the experience of leisure' (Rancière 2012a, 216). Emancipation, however, consist not in going back and forth between work and leisure, between engaging in productive action and being disengaged from it, rather in consists in the acquisition of the power to do nothing and to want to do nothing, and this acquisition, as which the practice of taking time is, requires both the tension of subtraction and addition. 'Subjectivization' is another term Rancière uses to describe the simultaneous subtractive and additive nature of emancipatory practices:

Political subjectivization is the enactment of equality... It is a crossing of identities... In sum, the logic of political subjectivization, of emancipation, is a heterology, a logic of the other ... it is never the simple assertion of an identity; it is always, at the same time, the denial of an identity given by an other, given by the ruling order of policy. (Rancière 1992, 61).

Hence, political emancipation viz. political subjectivization requires the subtractive pull of disidentification and the additive push of assertion of identity. The practice of taking time is the disidentification from the horizontal time (of productivism) and the additive rearticulation of an alternative linkage between utility, action and time.

The resonance between individual and collective emancipation results, for Rancière, from the fact that the double movement of subtraction and addition can and must take place both at the micro-level of the subject's everyday experiential horizon (the level of sensation and sense-making) and at the macro level of collective, institutional rules and practices. When Rancière says that the ruling order of what he calls 'police' is 'first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying' (Rancière 1999, 29), he is precisely concerned with marking this every day, experiential horizon of the subject as a collective horizon in which subjects are always already located, and also with emphasizing the continuity and resonance between the

micro and the macro level. Quintana has argued that although for Rancière there exist no necessary, causal relations between emancipatory transformations at the level of sensation and sense-making on the one hand and emancipatory political transformations at the level of institutionalized politics on the other, he

has also suggested that the latter level cannot occur without the former. In fact, once processes of political subjectivization or collective emancipation are produced, other quotidian transformations of the sensory fabric or, in Rancière's terms, of 'intellectual emancipation' can be prompted, the effects of which may be unforeseeable. It is, perhaps, for this reason that the level of everyday transformation of bodies tends to be given a certain preeminence in his reflections (Quintana 2019, 213).

This suggests that we have to think political (collective) emancipation with Rancière as inextricably bound up with transformations of the bodily self.⁸

Indeed, in *Proletarian Nights*, Rancière describes how Gauny starts his daydreaming sequences by pausing and suspending the bodily movements that are given to him by his mechanical work, its utilitarian tasks, and the productive goals associated with them. In this pausing and suspending, he takes the time to direct his contemplative attention to the episodic micro-events of his own bodily movements and their rhythms in time, beyond the predetermined confines of what the body is supposed to do. Contemplative attention is the seed of a rearrangement of bodily movements in time, wherein subtle changes in movement, and affective and experiential perceptions of these changes, generate new images and rhythms of what movements the body could make. Through this attention, the self can project itself into other temporalities (and spaces), by way of 'an imaginative reflection (a reflection that produces other images of the world) on what it is that robs bodies of their mobility, their possibility of displacement, their freedom, and their desire for a different world' (Quintana 2019, 218). This brief recourse to Gauny is meant to illustrate in more detail what it means when I say that taking time is an emancipatory act: it is the capacity to set in motion the disassembling and reconfiguration of a body's mobility prescribed by its social positions, functions and meanings, and to imagine a different temporality. It is a capacity that is common and belongs to all, exemplified by the communal engagement of the worker-poets in artistic and intellectual nocturnal pursuits of literary writing and discussion together and in solidarity. The fact that Rancière sees such examples as paradigmatic of the emancipatory power of aesthetic experience thus suggests that the taking of unproductive time is simultaneously a withdrawal from economic and social relations in which subjects find themselves entangled *and* involves the creation of a time full of relations in concert with others.

We can describe this process of creating a time full of relations with Honig as a process of the 'intensification of use' (Honig 2021, 22), which she likens to a shared, mutually reinforcing joy, resulting from a manipulation of the speed of time, as found in the *Bacchae*: 'The slowed time and slow motion of Cithaeron, the slowed tempos of transcendence that refuse, by intensifying, everyday normativity and make alternatives imaginable' (Honig 2021, 43). Both the moment of intensification and that of changing the speed of time, I suggest, can also be found in the *reveries* of Rancière's worker-poets.

The moment when the daydreaming workers stop the working time by means of a change of their bodily movements is also, obviously, a change in the speed of time, which too offers an intensified attention to these movements, and thereby affirms the body's power 'to act by its *own* movement' (Rancière 1991, 54). In this sense, the workers' reveries are what Honig calls 'gestures of refusal' (Honig 2021, 16), the taking back of gestures by using one's bodies in ways that are unleashed from normative use, not unlike what Rancière says about the meaning of the serpentine in Loie Fuller's 'Danse Serpentine' in *Aisthesis*: namely, the destruction of the organic as the natural model of the beautiful and the opposition of the ever-changing line, whose properties are constantly merging, to the order of geometric proportions. Further, the power to act by one's own movement, Rancière claims, must be imagined as belonging to all equally, and hence to be emancipated 'one must know oneself to be a voyager of the spirit, similar to all other voyagers: an intellectual subject participating in the power common to intellectual beings' (Rancière 1991, 33). In other words, the individual affirmation of this power can only develop as a movement that affirms it both individually and socially – through a form of mutual affectation. Rancière undoubtedly assumes here that this power of bodies must be affirmed as a common power through which 'the voice of the great collectivity of workers' (Rancière 2012b, 22–23) can be configured, certainly also through the mutually reinforcing joy experienced in the workers' nocturnal communal activities of *producing* poetry, literature, philosophy.

In *Modern Times* (Rancière, 2017b) and other texts, Rancière alludes to social and political movements (the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring, the Sans Papiers, etc.) as examples for how the enactment of a different temporality can become part of a collective political effort, on public stages, the loci where various fragmented experiences of time and bodies can be assembled, organized, and can become operative. Beyond such examples provided by Rancière, the contexts of chattel slavery in the Americas, the forced cultivation and indenture in the colonies of Asia, or of the colonial practice in Africa, also offer examples for how the taking of time to *rêve* can be conceived in collective terms. In these contexts, the emancipatory struggle against discursive constructions of innate racial difference, which invoke inactivity and idleness as special dispositions of the social and racial other in order to legitimize the forced extraction of labour, was a struggle for time and for acknowledgement of the equal ability to dispose of time. During the time of South African British colonialism in the 19th century, black workers took the 'image of swell from a radical caricature owned and operated by whites', and transformed it to 'a figure of critique and transcendence owned and operated by blacks', as Zina Magubane has argued (Magubane 2003, 160). This image of African Americans was portrayed in the popular culture of the time primarily on the minstrel stage, a place where leisure was depicted to facilitate white pleasure, primarily in the form of a spectacle of black unproductivity and laziness. By recreating a version of the dandy, dressing in fine clothes in their spare time, and strutting through the cities together, these workers were able to create in assembly an autonomous image of black pleasure and the black body beyond exploitative labour. Picturing themselves in unproductive time, where the demands of productive work are absent, offered black workers one of the few possibilities of exercising emancipatory power and of forging solidarities among themselves. Also in this example, taking time is

emancipatory through its dual function of subtraction and addition, insofar as here the subtraction from the forces that put those workers in a state of alienation simultaneously is the necessary condition for the self-imposed construction of a black identity via the occupation of the time of pleasure and enjoyment.

Another example for the politics of ‘taking time’ is the civil disobedience exercised by some climate activist groups. Take the case of ‘Extinction Rebellion’ (*ER*), the group of climate activists that go on the street to literally stop traffic and people’s habitual, unquestioned temporal rhythms, thereby not only occupying space but also time. At first sight, it might be a stretch to classify these protests as a form of daydreaming in the sense suggested here. For example, it is clear that the group acts in highly strategic ways and talks about the future as making pressing demands on the present, thereby expressing a grim realism and acts of desperation. At the same time, however, the rhetoric of this movement, as one recent commentator of the movement has put it, ‘is grounded in a critique that targets both how the past has blocked alternative futures and the now that they inhabit, but it is also directed toward the future in the sense of including an element of possibility, that is, it contains acts of hope and utopian impulses’ (Friberg 2022, 52). Further, one of the main strategies used by *ER* to reoccupy time (and urban space) is mass *arrest*: not only the stopping of work traffic, or the suspension of its purposes, but the mass arrest of protesters on the hands of the police as an effective strategy for achieving large media coverage and a high level of disruption; a strategy that has been employed already in earlier protest movements such as the civil rights and women’s suffrage movements. In this sense, *ER* is an example for the practice of taking time to daydream that offers a view of future times as a realm of imagination upon which humans can act and which they can influence, and in the course of which the boundaries between what is possible to do in time and what is impossible to do are blurred. What this example shows, too, is that political attempts to reoccupy the nexus of time, utility and action will require a concomitant reoccupation of space.⁹

Such examples illustrate the extent to which taking time to imagine alternative temporalities, where the utility of time remains open and indeterminate, is instrumental in countering productivism’s hegemony in the unequal political struggle over who can and cannot determine the utility of time. At the same time, it shows that taking time to ‘do nothing’ expresses an ideal of democratic time that does not follow the structure of a plot, but that allows different and plural temporalities to emerge and coexist amorphously, implying that everyone in this time is equally granted the capacity to exercise their sensibility, imagination and intelligence and to partake in the shared political struggle of organizing the nexus of utility, action and time.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that an alternative conception of time to that underlying the regime of productivism and growth is not only possible, but desirable. I have conceptualized such a time in aesthetic terms as a time that, on the one hand, is subtracted from criteria that plot the legitimacy, relevance and necessity of action in time, and that maps out the pattern and direction of future action, and on the other hand is open to novel pattern

combinations and principally all possible directions. I have discussed time as a medium that operates politically and socially in narratives of time, which determine how time can and cannot be used and by whom and which actions in it are legitimated as usable and useful and which are not. While time cannot truly be possessed as a property by anyone, following Rancière, it can be (and is) taken, occupied, and used by those who dispose of time. Based on these considerations I have introduced the notion of ‘taking time’ to designate the act of breaking free from dominant temporal regimes on the part of those who do not dispose of time. I have also argued that a political theory of work or the Anthropocene should attend to time as a political medium and to the possibilities of its occupation, as discussed in this essay, and that picturing the taking of time in terms of stopping the force of productivism’s normalized horizontal time by entering the unproductive time of *reverie* and attentive aesthetic experience, provides a promising perspective from which to apprehend a time for thriftless refusals, deliberate dis-identifications, and the forging of cooperation among people(s) and with nature.

I want to add two final points, whose thorough treatment is beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, I will briefly address them here. First, the practice of taking time elucidated here in aesthetic terms seems vulnerable to its reabsorption into the very structures of temporal privilege that it seeks to change. How to sustain the ephemeral effect of the practice of taking time, which breaks with the never-ending demands of increased production? Indeed, part of the fantasy of productivist subjects is to work hard to take time off, to ‘do nothing’ on vacation as a reward, and then to return to work – in this respect, taking time off from work is part of the productivist imaginary already. Clearly taking time off is not the same as the *reverie* I have described in this essay. The unceasing extraction of ever more surplus value out of everyone and everything, is what *reverie* prevents, but it does so not just by interrupting the time of productivism but by posting a counter to it. But how can we ensure that the practice of taking time can be sustained beyond a period of rest between times of (re)productive action? Part of my answer to the challenge of reabsorption coincides with the demand made on behalf of a post-work, post-carbon, or post-growth society, namely, to reduce the amount of time we are engaged in activities of increasing production – spend less hours occupied in waged work, extract fewer natural resources, consume less, produce less pollution and waste, etc. These demands would require political programs that equally redistribute the material and organizational resources to take time.¹⁰ The second part of the answer derives from the basic idea of this essay, which is to open our imagination up to possible reworkings of the nexus of utility, action and time. In other words, ensuring that the taking of time is emancipatory rather than simply recuperating workers to return to productivity, or to enjoy their status as part of a leisure class, requires not only aforementioned efforts of redistribution and policy intervention, but also utopian gestures towards new imaginaries of how time could be used differently – new imaginaries for how to re-organize work, production and consumption, and for how to re-organize our political imagination and action to soften the dividing lines between nature and culture, a line that often serves to exclude concerns of and for nature in contemporary forms of political and economic organization.¹¹ Rather than (solely) trying to fix the problem of productivism through production-based policies and social engineering, the practice of taking time for evoking

alternative usages of time might help confronting the contraction of possibilities and the suppression of imagination on how production and growth structure a precarious world and thus help creating political drive for inventing new practices of using time.

Finally, challenging productivism is not a rejection of the idea of production *tout court*, nor does it entail implicit demands towards sacrifice, or asceticism, or a general reduction of diversity. On the contrary, it is a rejection of a very specific form of production – that which reduces the utility of actions in time to the *infinite* increase of economic and social growth¹² – in favour of richer imaginaries about what counts as worthy of production and as desirable: in short, an expansion of our understandings of what time affords and of our qualitative understandings of pleasure and desire. In unproductive time, questions become legitimate about who is supposed to produce what for whom, in what quantity, and why. In other words, taking time to be unproductive emancipates from such reductive tendencies and makes available openings towards the pluralization of time and the actions considered useful in it. The experience of taking time might teach us the benefits of devoting more time to community and nature, and to activities that generate well-being and sustainable quality of life without ecological destruction, where what Whitman called ‘higher progress’ (1964, 410) becomes possible: a life where time is principally unscripted and unstructured, and is instead filled with free activities, play and pleasure.

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Notes

1. I follow here Anthony Giddens, who follows Max Weber (1992), in his understanding of productivism as ‘an ethos where work has a very distinctive and central role ... in the life of modern society’, and growth and more production are viewed as necessarily good (Giddens 1994, 175).
2. For example, regarding Agamben’s concept of ‘inoperativity’ (Agamben 1999), she argues that it cannot produce emancipatory collective agency, instead merely evoking ‘aestheticism, purism, or passivity’ (Honig 2021, 15).
3. Recent appropriations of the idea that freedom requires the liberation from work, which goes back to Marx (1992, 958–959), include Weeks (2011) and Shippen (2014). Other important contemporary treatments of the politics of work, but which attempt at reforming work rather than liberating us from it, are Rose (2019) and Jaeggi (2014).
4. One of the central features of his thought, ever since his break-up with Althusser, has been a refusal to sign onto a conception of political theory that has the desire to reveal the ‘real’ problems that are veiled by mere appearances. Rather, I understand the practice of taking time in

terms of what Samuel Chambers calls a Rancièrian ‘critical dispositif’ (Chambers 2014, 36) aimed at demonstrating the presumption of equality. While I use Rancière to show how a Western tradition from Aristotle through modern life is premised upon the continuity of a horizontal time, and the commitment to a ‘plot’ involving judgements about useful actions, I also derive from his reflections on *reverie* a practice of taking time, to which I ascribe the emancipatory function of freeing us from this tradition, a function that is not dependent on any knowledge of this tradition itself.

5. On the centrality of time to Rancière’s thought, see Robson (2015).
6. I thank Cressida Heyes for drawing my attention to this example.
7. On the central role that Rancière assigns to the creation of temporal openings for the occurrence of ‘heterochronic’ times both for the practice of political philosophy and for political action, see a recent essay by Fajardo (2022).
8. See Quintana (2020, 2019) on how Rancière’s notion of emancipation crucially relies on an examination of the body and its capacities.
9. A vivid example of how the reoccupation of times and spaces are interconnected in political protest movements is the ‘Reclaim the Night’ movement against sexual harassment, which seeks to reclaim the nocturnal street.
10. Weeks (pp. 138–9), for example, has argued for a basic guaranteed income to make waged work a choice rather than a necessity (thereby also separating the idea of income from the work ethic as its justification and enforcing the abolishment of a gendered division of labour), and for shorter working hours with no reduction in pay. See also, for example, (Aronowitz and Cutler 1998) and (Lehr 1999).
11. See Kalonaitye (2018) for an argument along these lines, from the perspective of Rancière.
12. In other words, it is not so much production or growth themselves that are problematic, but that they must be never-ending, as was suggested in section one, and this infinite time is what marks the distinction between productivism and other productive activity.

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