

Clare Woodford, *Disorienting Democracy: Politics of Emancipation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2017)

Lisa Disch

Department of Political Science, University of Michigan
ldisch@umich.edu

In this impassioned and eloquent book, Clare Woodford focuses in a distinctively political way on the question of order. Order and ordering are central categories of contemporary political theory, and theorists like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler have made them central by way of the concepts governmentality and subjectification. Fair or not, one of the criticisms that is often raised against both of these thinkers is that they present too totalizing a view of power.

Woodford intervenes at precisely this point of criticism by focusing not principally on the question of how order functions in politics but on how it can be disrupted. She asks, “how orders become more and less restrictive,” and proposes to consider “features of order that may make it more possible for dissent to be articulated and responded to without the need for mass unrest, violence and loss of life” (6). These questions are resolutely political because she asks about action and resistance in the midst of order, and because she asks specifically about *action* not violence.

Jacques Rancière is both companion and muse to Woodford in this task. Rather than offer another interpretation of his work, she undertakes to elaborate Rancière’s notion of “dis-identification” into a full-blown politics of democratic action. This elaboration begins conceptually, with Woodford clarifying what makes dis-identification distinctive, and then by elucidating – again, conceptually at first – the two practices that it entails: “appropriation” and “subjectification.” Once having established this conceptual framework, Woodford undertakes the important political theoretic project to give specificity to the practice of dissensus – a richly suggestive term that Rancière himself does not fully redeem. She enlists the work of Stanley Cavell, Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler to develop the different modes in which dissensus might be enacted as a way to “disrupt ways of being” (15).

Dis-identification is the moment where a person stops seeing themselves in the terms of the dominant order. If this seems easy, it is not. Terms of the dominant order give our lives purpose and meaning even as we are subordinated to them.

In *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago, 2005) Linda Zerilli makes a powerful argument against the “gender skepticism” of Judith Butler and the French materialist feminists, whose critical denaturalization of sexual difference she reads as a failed political project precisely because it calls for dis-identification. Zerilli cautions that however theoretically powerful gender skepticism may be, it is politically tone deaf to the ways in which so many women – even those who might be critics of sexual domination – identify as women and need to be hailed as women.

Woodford is well aware of just how much dis-identification potentially costs those who practice it, recognizing it as a “challenge to the existing community” that “momentarily leaves those who dis-identify without a place” (33). The central task of this book is to identify such moments, which Woodford certainly does not expect to manifest in grand gestures and dramatic transformations. This is the power of her account. She offers a language in which to capture practices of dis-identification on the scale of the everyday. She finds these, first, in “appropriation”, which can involve taking a space, taking a view when you should be working on and looking at a floor, taking up a term that would not be used to refer to you. Appropriation in this sense is not “simply a material taking but the taking of a ‘way’” (31). If identity orients us in a way of being, then dis-identification cannot proceed by denying that way. If it is to be political (and not merely skeptical), it must indicate another way to be, if only momentarily. Acts of appropriation open onto the second practice, subjectivation, which is the moment of emergence of a new political subject who no longer relates “to the dominant order as a subordinate,” but acts “as an equal who, in that moment, is in charge of his/her own actions” (32).

Woodford puts this careful conceptual work to use as a theoretical frame for thinking about occupation, which despite being much celebrated has been little interrogated as to how it works to “enact democracy” (50). Woodford uses her tripartite conceptual scheme to more precisely theorize occupation, as “effect[ing] politics through bringing together appropriation, dis-identification and subjectivation,” and also to criticize it. Whereas occupation has tended to focus on taking space, Woodford suggests that it need not. She points to Argentinian “barter clubs” and debt cancellations schemes as practices that “appropriate the behaviour of creditors and brokers” but, as they occur without taking over the physical institutional space of those actors, they may not register as disruptive (52). Drawing on her careful elucidation of appropriation, Woodford argues that highly visible and publicized disruptions that take over space (like Occupy Wall Street and its spin-offs) may shut “down activity” but are “less able to demonstrate alternative ways of being, doing and saying than disruption that produces or creates” (52).

By exploring Rancière's relationship to both Stanley Cavell and Jacques Derrida, Woodford elaborates practices that "could help to weaken our attachment to ways of doing and saying" (151). In her final chapter, she brings Rancière into dialogue with Judith Butler to recover the political aspects of Butler's notion of subversion, which Butler may well have let fall in her turn to theorize the psychic life of power and to elaborate an ethical project. Dissatisfied with Butler's own responses to such critics as Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib, who have argued that Butler cannot account for the possibility of transformative political agency "without having to commit to an untenable notion of a volitional subject," Woodford charges back onto this field of battle bearing Rancièrian reinforcements (165). Woodford astutely argues that with her theorization of unintelligibility, Butler makes her conceptualization of subject-formation a closed circle. Seemingly like Rancière, Butler "sketch[es] the sensory domain as one of intelligibility versus unintelligibility, real versus unreal" (169). Yet, by mapping this distinction onto that which "structures whether or not one is compelled to live a liveable or an unliveable life," Butler closes the circle. Butler's "unintelligibility" is not unintelligible in Rancière's sense of that "which cannot be identified on a scale of either sense or nonsense"; it is "intelligible as lesser, lacking, non-human, derisory or subordinated" (169). Put simply, Butler's unintelligibility "is intelligible" after all and this is what makes her unable to elaborate the possibility of performativity to do precisely what Rancière so powerfully offers: "force open the sensory order and create the possibility for reconfiguration" (170).

As Woodford rightly notes, her post-2008 project was launched at a time of "a growing sense of optimism and anticipation" (4). That it finds publication at an unquiet moment, where political theorists and political actors struggle to understand and respond to right-wing authoritarianism around the globe, makes it no less pertinent. This time, our time, lends to the words of her title – "disorienting democracy" – a dual meaning: they name at once the practices of hope that she so eloquently theorizes and the state of questioning in which many of us find ourselves as events test our faith that democracy breeds freedom rather than its opposite.