

The Purpose of Political Imagination:
Understood Through Virno, Ranciere, and Omelas

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Political imagination, and the stories that humans create surrounding them, act as both a critique of the current society and a dream for something better. One such story, *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, is no exception to this. This is a parable about a society, where nearly everyone lives in a perfect utopia, where there is peace, and happiness without pain. However, in exchange for this utopia, one blameless child has to experience tremendous suffering for their entire life.¹ All the adults within the society are aware of this child, and their suffering. In a coming of age ritual, they are shown the child and have to choose what to do after this.² Some choose to stay and accept that their happiness comes at the expense of this child's suffering, while others choose to walk away from Omelas, and do not consent to this practice.³ Two theories can be used to better understand this story. The first theory, by Paolo Virno, in *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation* discusses the destructive capabilities of humans, and the potential for an exodus. The second theory, by Jacques Ranciere, in *Wrong: Politics and Police*, discusses Logos and Phonê and the importance of the persistent fight for equality. Both of these theories can be applied to *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* and used to understand the problems with this society and the possibility for change. This essay will argue that the purpose of political imagination is to critique the current world and help to provide solutions to the world's issues.

The first purpose of political imagination is to help people process the current state of the world, and critique it, as it makes people aware of the problems that exist in the current society. Crafting utopias can contribute to this, as the main points of certain utopias are usually the part of the current world that the theorist hates the most, or wishes to offer a critique of. Political

¹ Ursula LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," *The Wind's Twelve Corners: Short Stories*, (Harper and Row, 1975).

² LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas."

³ LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas."

imagination theorists challenge the idea that the current world is “natural” or inevitable and instead encourage people to challenge the current society and work to change it. Two problems within the society in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas* can be understood through the theories of Virno, and Ranciere.

Firstly, this parable demonstrates the harmful capacity of human nature as described by Virno. Virno argues that humans have no objective nature, and that instead human nature is open, unstable, and dangerous.⁴ This open human nature allows for evil, which occurs particularly when humans fail to recognize the humanity, and negate the humanity of others which can result in their torture and a broader abuse of power.⁵ This aspect of Virno’s theory can be applied to the treatment of the child in Omelas. The people there negate the humanity of the child, and this justifies the terrible treatment that this child is subjected to.⁶ Rather than a recognition of this child as a human, the child is seen as a necessity for the happiness of the rest of society to continue.⁷ The treatment of the child demonstrates both the harmful potential of human nature, as humans allow this treatment to continue occurring, and the negation of the child’s humanity, as this treatment would not be seen as just if the child was viewed as a human. Virno’s theory helps to understand human nature, and offers a critique of how humans allow these horrors to occur.

Secondly, this parable demonstrates the great inequalities that exist, as described by Ranciere. Ranciere describes the inequalities between people who have Logos, to those who only have Phônê. Logos is the ability to speak, and people who have Logos also have political capacity.⁸ Those who are excluded from Logos only have Phônê which is the ability to make

⁴ Paolo Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, (Los Angeles: Semiotext, 2008), 17.

⁵ Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, 20.

⁶ LeGuin, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas.”

⁷ LeGuin, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas.”

⁸ Jacques Ranciere, “Wrong: Politics and Police,” in *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1998), 22.

noise, but not speak, and are thus excluded from politics.⁹ Ranciere sees politics as the fight of those who lack Logos starting to speak, and equality as something that must be fought for.¹⁰

Ranciere's theory can be applied to how in *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*, the child is deprived of Logos and does not receive equality. In this story, everyone in society is aware of the existence of the child and makes their own decision on whether or not to stay in Omelas.¹¹ This freedom to choose demonstrates that they have Logos, or the ability to participate in the political sphere. However, the child lacks Logos. They are not able to choose to stay or leave Omelas and have no say in the conditions that they are subjected to. They are unable to speak or participate politically. Ranciere's theories applied to this story can help the reader understand the great inequality within this society, not only in treatment but also in the ability to make decisions and participate politically. Ranciere's theories can point to places where people are not allowed to participate in politics and as a result, suffer terrible conditions and can be used to understand where inequality exists in society, and the impacts of this inequality and exclusion.

The second aspect that will be discussed is what political imagination says about the possibility of change, and how this change should occur. Political imagination points out the flaws and critiques current society, but also offers possible solutions to the current state. While these solutions may not be exact blueprints, they inspire people to dream of how life can be better. Omelas is not a good society. It is a place where one blameless child experiences all of the pain, while everyone else benefits from the suffering of the child. Different solutions and ways to address this pain and inequality are proposed by each theorist.

Virno proposes that to fix Omelas, people should participate in an exodus, an idea he references the Israelites for. Rather than experiencing the oppression of, or overthrowing the

⁹ Ranciere, "Wrong: Politics and Police," 22.

¹⁰ Ranciere, "Wrong: Politics and Police," 30.

¹¹ LeGuin, "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas."

Pharaoh, they choose to leave.¹² This allows them to try a new form of society and governance that would not otherwise be possible. While this may not be the final solution, and the group participating in the exodus may simply begin to oppress someone else, it allows for the possibility of a better system. Those who participate in the exodus challenge the nature of power and political structures, refuse to accept how these function, and instead choose something else. Applied to Omelas, Virno would propose that the one solution to the oppression is for the people to choose to walk away and to no longer benefit from this system, in the hopes of creating a less oppressive system. Walking away from these systems demonstrates that people no longer support them, are not willing to be oppressed by them, and are not willing to oppress others through them, and thus is a form of resistance, and a way of creating change.

Ranciere proposes that to create change and fix the problems seen in Omelas, people should stay, and fight for increased equality within the current system. He argues that equality is not a given and that people should fight for it.¹³ He primarily understands this fight as one directed by the marginalized and excluded, and for this, he gives the example of the Plebs of Aventine Hill. Ranciere discusses how the Plebs left Rome and formed a new society where they gave themselves Logos.¹⁴ By doing this, they forced the Patricians to negotiate with them, and recognize their ability to speak.¹⁵ Ranciere says that politics continues because different groups that are denied Logos continue to fight for it.¹⁶ While the child in Omelas may not be able to fight for Logos by themselves, this idea of trying to include more people in the political system can be applied. The people in Omelas who do not agree with this system can fight for the inclusion of the child in politics, and to give the child Logos. Thus, the capacity for change

¹² Virno, *Multitude: Between Innovation and Negation*, 24.

¹³ Ranciere, "Wrong: Politics and Police," 30.

¹⁴ Ranciere, "Wrong: Politics and Police," 24.

¹⁵ Ranciere, "Wrong: Politics and Police," 26.

¹⁶ Ranciere, "Wrong: Politics and Police," 26.

comes from people fighting for more to be included in the political system. Ranciere suggests that change can be caused through more people fighting to be included in the political system and to be recognized as having Logos meaning that their issues will be heard and that their quality of life will improve.

Political imagination is seen by some as not being effective, and it does have pitfalls. Solutions proposed in political imagination theories may not be seen as achievable, they are often not transhistorical or transcultural, and solutions may inadvertently lead to the victimization of a different group. While these concerns are valid, and anyone who tries to apply these political theories should be aware of these concerns, they do not mitigate the potential benefits of many aspects of political imagination. These theorists identify problems that they see within the context in which they live. However, not every aspect will always be applicable. The overall theories of Virno and Ranciere are applicable to Omelas, and by implementing either of their suggestions for change, Omelas could be a better society. However, the interpretation of their theories may have to change to be applicable to a different society. The main goals of many of these theorists is to inspire people to think more about their society and its problems and propose ways that these issues can start to be addressed. Most do not provide an exact blueprint for how to solve each problem. There may be no perfect solution to Omelas, as taking the child out of the box would mean that everyone suffers. However, political imagination gives people the capacity to think critically about the system in which they live, and their complicity in it, and it allows them to begin to think and dream about new possibilities and ways to create change.

Overall, political imagination serves to critique the current world and help to provide possible solutions to the problems discussed. Due to this, political imagination, and the theories associated with it have great value in the modern world. The critiques that Virno and Ranciere

propose regarding Omelas are valuable, and these theorists also present a way by which the society of Omelas can be improved. These theorists and the messages learned from Omelas can be applied to the world seen today, and the societies within it, to make them more humane, and equal. There are examples throughout history of change and progress, and through learning from theorists like these, the problems of the world can be better understood, and effectively addressed.

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