Non-Reproductive Futurism

Rancière's rational equality against Edelman's body apolitic

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Lee Edelman's recent queer theory polemic against 'reproductive futurism' seeks to align his project against all reason and against all politics. This paper argues that to write from 'the space outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears and so outside the conflict of visions that share as their presupposition that the body politic must survive' as Edelman puts it, involves deliberately superimposing various 'political' categories with various non-political categories. Thus Edelman elides democracy with the Child, rationality with a naïve concept of progress, and heterosexuality (straightforwardly) with reproduction in a bid to ward off the threat of collective organisation and action. Against Edelman's attempt to rid thought of all politics, Rancière's conception of politics will be presented as capable of avoiding many of the main targets of Edelman's attack, as not being committed to a notion of politics that is based on reproduction, but is nevertheless 'rational' in a specific way. The paper will also draw on empirical historical examples of certain left-wing and alternative political movements, such as early kibbutzim, collectives and groups that explicitly refused reproduction, but that nevertheless were most definitely political, and quite often 'queer.'

Introduction

Lee Edelman's attempt to subtract queer theory from any positive political project is both incredibly compelling and, at the same time, historically dispiriting. Compelling because, along with recent theorists of biopolitics, he isolates and critiques the idea that 'life' is the central category of contemporary politics; dispiriting because Edelman thinks that we ultimately need less politics, not more, or, in his words, that 'the queer comes to figure the bar to every realization of futurity, the resistance, internal to the social, to every social structure or form'

(Edelman, 2004: 2). The queer is thus anti-social, anti-society and above all anti-natal. The image of the child (the 'fascism of the baby's face', Edelman, 2004: 75) symbolises, for Edelman, the concerns of politics as a whole. In fact, 'we are no more able to conceive of a politics without a fantasy of the future than we are able to conceive of a future without the figure of the Child' (Edelman, 2004: 11). The main term of opprobrium that Edelman repeatedly uses, 'reproductive futurism,' incorporates, according to him, all political thinking about the future, whilst queerness '*should* and *must* redefine such notions as "civil order" through a rupturing of our foundational faith in the reproduction of futurity' (Edelman, 2004: 16-17). The queer, on its own terms, disrupts the social and takes pleasure in its pleasure: 'to the threat of the death drive we figure with the violent rush of a *jouissance*' (Edelman, 2004: 153).

But, for all the talk of disruption and a paradoxical outside, there is something overly neat about Edelman's formulations. Is politics really exhausted by the formulations of the Christian right, the source of many of his examples of reproductive futurism? Is the only obvious alternative, 'the other side' of this image as it were, an overly earnest, well-meaning and equally futurist left humanism? In other words, is the child-as-future really the *only* image of all political desire? Edelman's polemic, as welcome as it is within a certain (albeit highly American) context, is at the same time depressingly compatible with a general epochal turning away from politics, what Alain Badiou calls the imperative to 'live without ideas' (Badiou, 2007: 117). In a very real sense, 'no future,' far from being a rallying cry towards some subversive celebration of a pleasure that destabilises and yet subtends the political order, has been the very ordering principle of our recent political reality. Hedonism may not be exactly what Edelman means by *jouissance*, but it has certain structural similarities: a disregard for what comes next (the hangover, the come down, the mopping up), a certain self-satisfaction and insularity (*jouissance* cannot be universalised) and disruptive in a relatively containable way (it may have been 'subversive' at various points to watch porn, take drugs and engage in risky sex, but most of these things have been relatively subsumed into a wider culture of permissiveness, what Marcuse called 'repressive desublimation' (Marcuse, 2002: 59)). If there has in fact been a widespread feeling of 'no future' it is because it has been impossible to imagine anything different; capitalism depends upon the reproduction of sameness in the guise of difference, the idea that there is no alternative, and no future (in the sense of new ways of living) is possible. This epochal de-politicisation of politics is also identified by Jacques Rancière in one of his major works, *Disagreement*, the main text examined here alongside Edelman's *No Future*. Against Edelman's powerful but overly general attack on politics, this paper will argue for forms of politics that are *not* predicated on the overlap of reproduction with the future, and for a kind of rationalism that escapes Edelman's equation of 'reason' with futurity. Rancière will instead be invoked as thinker of a tentative 'queer rationalism,' one predicated on subtraction and a non-futural power to disrupt (it is politics that disrupts, not *jouissance*, despite

Edelman's argument that disruption is the most antithetical movement to politics as a whole). The paper will also draw on empirical historical examples of certain left-wing and alternative political movements, such as the early kibbutzim movement in Israel, which explicitly refused reproduction but were nevertheless most definitely political, and quite often 'queer' from the standpoint of the norms of the social order. There are three main areas of argument here: the concept of rationality and anti-rationality at work in the politics of Rancière and the anti-politics of Edelman; a discussion of the anti-reproductive stance of various left-wing political movements and positions that complicate Edelman's claim that all politics is by definition reproductively futural and, finally, a more polemical and speculative claim that contemporary politics' relation to the child is far less that of its future than of the mundane spectre of its always-dying. The final section will in a sense return to Edelman's claim that the defenders of futurity are indeed dependent on 'the threat of the death drive.' Edelman makes this claim in the following way:

> We, the *sinthom*osexuals who figure the death drive of the social, must accept that we will be vilified as the agents of that threat. But "they," the defenders of futurity, buzzed by negating our negativity, are themselves, however unknowingly, its secret agents too, reacting, in the name of the future, in the name of humanity, in the name of life, to the threat of the death drive we figure with the violent rush of a *jouissance*, which only returns them, ironically, to the death drive in spite of themselves (Edelman, 2004: 153).

It is indeed the case that the 'death drive of the social' is the truth of the 'they,' but the real secret of contemporary politics is not that the death drive and its queer *jouissance* is its hidden truth, but that irrationality and repetition is the very stuff of political and social life: Rationality – true politics – is, as Rancière points out, extremely rare.

1. Rationality or anti-rationality?

We are dealing with two very different notions of rationality in Edelman and Rancière. For Edelman, political rationality is always on the side of the future, is irreducibly associated with the image of the child and heteronormativity and haunted by that which it tries to repress, namely the queer. For Rancière, as we shall see below, properly political rationality must precisely address itself to the question of who gets to speak and how: 'rationality' is thus to be understood beyond the narrow meaning we tend to associate with 'normal' discourse. It points, ultimately, to something much more subversive. The definitions of reason and rationality, in their ideological and properly political definition, relate directly to the way in which states articulate the relation between their subjects (or citizens) as workers and as parents. But, first we will turn to Edelman, to understand the role the critique of political reason plays in his position.

The logic of political hope, as Edelman describes it, depends upon desperately trying to exclude from the social order the negativity of the

symbolic, or, as he puts it, 'the persistence of something internal to reason that reason refuses' (Edelman, 2004: 5). Political reason is thus characterised both by its relentless positivity and by an endless struggle to fight off the meaninglessness that Edelman characterises as 'queer.' But what if, in practice, it is politics and reason that have become dislocated and that what is ideologically positioned as rational is, in fact, the very opposite? That is to say, Edelman presupposes that there is an intimate connection, a kind of structural isomorphism between the ideology of the family (and the child) and politics, and that politics will always represent itself via a certain image of the family as a war of warding off what it fears (the non-futural, the queer, the negative). But, we know that in practice politics, and the policies of elected governments, have extremely contradictory attitudes towards families, slashing budgets for crèches here, permitting only the most minimal of paternity leave there, and so on. There are obvious imperatives behind these tendencies, of course, which explain why, for example, pregnant women are often picked out for redundancy over their childless co-workers (Gentleman, 2009). They concern far less the symbolic role of the family in the political imaginary and far more the contradictory relationship between economic demands and ideological pressures: if the image of the child and the fantasy of futurity are shared by both politics and the economy, it is not necessarily in the same way. Capitalism may in the long run need future workers, but in the short term, the conflict between paying for maternity leave, for example, and making a profit are frequently at odds.

But these economic contradictions complicate Edelman's picture somewhat, as they point to something beyond the symbolic, and beyond the sheen of ideology. Whilst it is true that politics in the main presents itself as defender of the family (although this is perhaps less the case outside of the right-wing framing of some American discourses), it is clear that in practice 'the family' is often badly treated by the very same governments who claim to defend it. Furthermore, against Edelman's opposition between the reproductively futural and the queer, there empirically exist extremely diverse kinds of family arrangements, and have done for a long time. As Barrett and McIntosh put it in *The Anti-social Family*:

> If there were a direct correspondence between the imagery of the family represented in the media and the actual composition of households, we would find the majority of the population living in nuclear residences of children and their parents. Yet, if the 1971 census is to be believed, fewer than a third of Britain's households were enmeshed in such an arrangement and only one in ten was organized in the normatively sanctioned pattern of paternal breadwinner and maternal full-time housewife (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982: 32-3).

Edelman could of course protest that his is not an empirical point, but a symbolic one, and there is certainly something enlightening about being able to 'spot,' in the wake of Edelman's analysis, reproductive

futurism whenever it rears its smiling, big-eyed, irresistible head. But in the light of the relative empirical paucity of this normative notion of the family, and of the child taken care of by the father's wage and the mother's domestic care, a question arises as to how far Edelman's notion of the 'queer' extends. If '*queerness* names the side of those *not* "fighting for the children"' (Edelman, 2004: 3) it must by definition exclude any family arrangement, however non-child oriented. Can you have family arrangements of those who take care of children but nonetheless are not 'fighting for the children'? Can one have a generic attitude towards children, or has the logic of reproductive futurism filtered all the way down such that it is impossible to think of children as anything other than 'special,' as 'little angels'? There are, however, plenty of children being raised in situations where very little was staked on their future, and plenty of family structures in which caring for young people is far more a question of pragmatics than of ideology. Edelman makes clear that he is not talking about really existing families and actual children, but it must be noted that Edelman sometimes slips from the figural to the literal, or at least certainly seems to position the woman on the side of the children in a rather dubious way. As Fraiman puts it in her reading of Edelman: 'Figurations of women's bodies … are subtly de-eroticised and assimilated to the figurative child' (Fraiman, 2003: 131). Does Edelman fall too far into the rhetoric of the Christian Right by associating women too quickly with childbirth and some sort of supposedly natural maternal desire that in turn is supposed to characterise reproductive futurism? Edelman seems to assimilate all notions of the family with notions of the future, and to reify families as solid, reactionary entities to be opposed by identity-shaking queer negativity.

But what *is* the 'identity' of the family as such? It's not a real one in the sense of being the majority composition of living arrangements (at least in the British case, as noted above). It's not a seamlessly ideological one either, seeing as the image of the family presented by (primarily right-wing) politicians is, in practice, rife with contradiction. It seems more likely the case that the ideology must be so extreme in order to cover over the real truth of the family as the economic support for an increasingly precarious labour market. In the 1950s, a male breadwinner's wage was enough to support an entire 'classical' family, now both partners must (in most cases) work to earn anywhere near the same amount. If women are now fully included in the work-force it is because men's wages have been depressed, even as women still fail to earn as much as their male counterparts. Who looks after the children is an increasingly complicated question, and neither the state nor the classical family seem able to do it effectively and affordably. Politics is so pro-child in theory because it is so anti-child (and anti-woman) in practice.

The supposed futural 'reason' of representative politics is in effect profoundly fractured and contradictory, not in the least bit reconciled to either its image of the child, or to its image of itself. Edelman's notion of the queer nevertheless seems to depend on an overly

homogenous picture of the social world. To write, as Edelman claims to, from 'the space outside the framework within which politics as we know it appears and so outside the conflict of visions that share as their presupposition that the body politic must survive' (Edelman, 2004: 3) involves deliberately superimposing various 'political' categories onto various non-political categories. Thus, Edelman conflates democracy with the child, rationality with a naïve concept of progress and heterosexuality with reproduction, sweeping away the possibility of collective organisation and action. As John Brenkman puts it: 'Edelman compounds his reductive concept of the political realm by in turn postulating an ironclad intermeshing of social reproduction and sexual reproduction' (Brenkman, 2002: 176).

By neglecting the contradictory economic imperatives at work in political conceptions of the family and fusing politics with reason Edelman leaves no room at all for what we could call a 'queer reason'– queer from the standpoint of representational politics, and neither committed to the child nor to sexual essentialism. It is here that Rancière's ideas are relevant. If a 'queer reason' is to make any sense, it is important to separate out two different kinds of rationalism, which Edelman refuses to do. In a section in *Disagreement* entitled 'The Rationality of Disagreement,' Rancière states the following:

> Political rationality is only thinkable precisely on the condition that it be freed from the alternative in which a certain rationalism would like to keep it reined in, either as exchange between partners putting their interests or standards up for discussion, or else the violence of the irrational (Rancière, 1999: 43).

Contemporary parliamentary politics is predicated on this notion of a 'certain rationalism,' the *realpolitik* of the everyday whereby some order is better than no order at all, where the threat of real public violence hovers like a shadow over a pessimistic and jaded acceptance of the venality of public life. Against this notion of 'rationalism,' which in essence is not rational at all (the idea that a vote every four or five years exhausts people's political desires, for example), Rancière posits a far subtler understanding of rationalism and irrationalism, which he discusses in terms of the 'very equality of speaking beings':

> For the idea that speaking beings are equal because of their common capacity for speech is a reasonable-unreasonable idea ... The assertion of a common world thus happens through a paradoxical mise-en-scène that brings the community and the non-community together. (Rancière, 1999: 55)

If, in fact, representational politics is *only* unreasonable, then it is to these moments of rational disruption, those events and occurrences that interrupt the everyday flow of a political discourse which thinks it's being practical but is in essence incredibly unstable, that a true kind of queerness emerges – Edelman is thus entirely right to highlight the importance of disruption against the existing order, but wrong to insist

that it must always be on the side of unreason or anti-reason. Rancière recognises instead the subversive and disruptive nature of politics: 'What makes politics an object of scandal is that it is that activity which has the rationality of disagreement as its own rationality' (Rancière 1999: xii). From the standpoint of the supposedly 'rational' state, this 'rationality of disagreement'– in other words the contention that politics, far from being a secure foundation, is predicated on a dissensus, the ability of speaking beings to disagree with one another – appears as decidedly paradoxical and threatening. It is not merely that human beings can disagree with one another, but that some cannot even be heard, and that this is where secure identification of individuals comes undone:

> For Rancière, if there are some invisible, nameless and disenfranchised people, it is because they do not participate in the public (political) life of the city (the mechanisms for dividing up legitimate shares, the police, etc.); it is because although they have an acknowledged place in society, that is to say a place viewed as useful, and are identified as such by sociology today, they are nevertheless excluded from legitimately speaking out (Déotte and Lapidus, 2004: 79).

Unlike Edelman's conception of the queer, which is purely negative, perhaps even individualistic, Rancière explicitly stresses the role that equality plays in his conception of politics. In the chapter entitled 'From Archipolitics to Metapolitics,' Rancière argues that:

> Politics only exists through the bringing off of the equality of anyone and everyone in a vacuous freedom of a part of the community that deregulates any count of parts. The equality that is the nonpolitical condition of politics does not show up here for what it is: it only appears as the figure of wrong. (Rancière, 1999: 61)

The figure of wrong (to be opposed to the 'right' of classical political philosophy and jurisprudence) could, however, be understood as 'queer,' even in some of Edelman's own senses: it is unwanted, negative, and not comprehensible from the standpoint of the existing order and the set demarcation of places. As Marx originally put it, the possibility of German emancipation could only arise:

> [i]n the formation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class [*Stand*] which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere which has a universal character because of its universal suffering and which lays claim to *no particular right* because the wrong it suffers is not a *particular wrong* but *wrong in general.* (Marx, 1974: 256)

This idea of 'wrong in general' exceeds the description of civil society with its regulated classes and parts: 'Wrong' does not refer to a group of people that have somehow been ill-treated but something structurally in excess of the very identity of groups or classes. As Rancière puts it: 'Politics ceases ... wherever the whole of the community is reduced to the sum of its parts with nothing left over'

(Rancière, 1999: 123). When Edelman talks about queerness as 'the site outside the consensus' (Edelman, 2004: 3) he comes very close to Rancière's conception of politics as exception. Except that for Edelman this 'site' would somehow be radically opposed to politics as such. But Rancière's position is less stark: there are two orders of politics and two orders of rationality. On the one hand, there is the politics that he associates with the 'police,' classical political philosophy and consensus, on the other, there is politics as disruption, and disagreement (or dissensus). As Rancière states:

> Politics, in its specificity, is rare. It is always local and occasional. Its actual eclipse is perfectly real and no political science exists that could map its future any more than a political ethics that would make its existence the object solely of will. (Rancière, 1999: 139)

Politics for Rancière literally has 'no future,' or at least not one that is predictable. As Hallward puts it:

> According to Rancière, equality is not the result of a fairer distribution of social functions or places so much as the immediate disruption of any such distribution; it refers not to place but to the placeless or out-of-place, not to class but to the unclassifiable or out-of-class. (Hallward, 2006: 110)

There are indeed, as Rancière's work suggests, other ways of thinking about a politics that has 'no future,' despite Edelman's insistence that all politics is futural ('The Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics' (Edelman, 2004: 3)). It may be the case that, historically, some ways of thinking about alternative conceptions of politics vis-à-vis the child have been cut off from us: in that sense, then, Edelman's work can be seen as registering the end of a sequence of political possibilities. His central implication is that politics, in its very nature, is conservative. Edelman argues that politics 'works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child' (Edelman, 2004: 3). For him, it is clear that 'reproductive futurism' has come to subsume all kinds of politics, both left and right. It places:

> an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations. (Edelman, 2004: 2)

But the question of a 'queer' (that is, non-futural) resistance to communal relations has in fact been an issue for various twentieth century political movements. There have been various kinds of 'queer' resistance to the organising principle of heteronormativity, which have at the same time been explicitly political projects. In a sense they have been different responses to the very problem that Edelman identifies as 'reproductive futurism.' The next section looks at one of these attempts to rethink both the child and politics using the

examples of the early kibbutzim of the mid-twentieth century and historical discussions of abortion rights. Whilst the kibbutzim cannot be said to clearly express a Rancièrean politics as such, they do provide a 'queer' response to the problem that Edelman thinks can no longer be answered politically. Discussions of abortion can also be seen to have historically taken place in very different frameworks than Edelman allows, thus releasing a certain kind of rational politics from the vice-like grip of reproductive futurism.

2. Politics against reproduction

As unusual as it might seem, especially on Edelman's reading, some politically motivated groupings are nevertheless not explicitly motivated by the desire for children (whether ideal or empirical). The following is a quote from Bruno Bettelheim's *The Children of the Dream*, a study of child-raising and education in the early kibbutzim:

> As Joseph Baratz (1954) tells the story of Degania, the first kibbutz, the original kibbutzniks (of whom he was one) wanted no children in their community. Most of the settlers did not even want to marry, because "they were afraid that children would detach the family from the group, that ... comradeship would be less steadfast." Therefore it was seriously proposed that all members should oblige themselves not to marry for at least five years after joining the kibbutz, because "living as we do ... how can we have children?" (Bettelheim, 1969: 18-19)

Whilst these instances of the kibbutzim project are unusual (most of the other kibbutzim were embodiments of an openly reproductively futurist Zionism), and clearly self-defeating in the long-run (how would they replenish themselves without bringing in people from outside the community?), there is a clear indication that the very serious political project at stake (how to live and work collectively) is being addressed without positive reference to reproductive futurism of any kind. In fact, it is children who will get in the way of politics: 'they were afraid that comradeship would be less steadfast,' 'living as we do ... how can we have children?' The intimate link Edelman identifies between politics and futurism, 'the only politics we're permitted to know' (Edelman, 2004: 134) is undone here: politics is the untying of the break between collective life and reproduction. The project of these early kibbutzim is certainly not 'the arbitrary, future-negating force of a brutal and mindless drive' (Edelman, 2004: 127), as Edelman characterises the queer, but it is not reproductively futural either. So what is it? The anti-child kibbutzim nevertheless highlight the difficulty Edelman has in assimilating all politics to the image of the child. As Bettelheim goes onto explain, in the case of the anti-child kibbutzim, when children were eventually born there were serious questions to be answered, but they certainly didn't come from any 'natural' desire for the child, or any special attention paid to the children:

> When the first child was born in the kibbutz "nobody knew what to do with him. Our women didn't know how to look after babies." But

eventually "we saw it couldn't go on like this ... By the time there were four children in the settlement we decided something must be done. It was a difficult problem. How were women both to work and look after her children? Should each mother look after her own family and do nothing else?" The men did not seem to feel strongly either way.

But the women wouldn't hear of giving up their share of the communal work and life ... Somebody proposed that the kibbutz should hire a nurse ... we didn't hire a nurse, but we chose one girl to look after the lot of them and we put aside a house where they could spend the day while the mothers were at work. And so this system developed and was afterwards adopted in all the kibbutzim, with the difference that in most of them the children sleep in the children's house, but with us [at Degania] they stay at night in their parents' quarters ... Only recently have we built a hostel for children over twelve where our own children live (Bettelheim, 1969: 18-19).

It is interesting to note that Bettelheim's entire argument about the kibbutzim regards the extremely low incidence of mental illness coupled with very high rates of academic success: what turns out in the end to be a kind of reproductive anti-futurism is incredibly effective at de-neuroticising the bearers of the future that Edelman argues characterises all politics. But how does the kibbutzim relate to Rancière's notion of politics? Isn't it too overcoded by divisions and roles, however ill worked out? Perhaps. Politics for Rancière is ultimately anarchic: 'In its strict sense, politics only exists in intermittent acts of implementation that lack any overall principle or law' (Rancière, 2006b: 90). But there is something of the kibbutzim's attempt to reorganise communal life along the lines of politics, but not with the family first and foremost in mind that troubles the way in which Edelman links politics to reproduction so cleanly.

Edelman's desire to conflate all politics with reproductive futurism does an injustice to the politics behind some of the historical shifts in the way abortion, for example, has been conceived. Even in the examples Edelman himself gives of anti-reproductive movements, he is quick to state that these campaigns for abortion rights frame the argument in terms of a 'fight for our future – for our daughters and sons' (Edelman, 2004: 3). But, whilst it is true that the anti-abortion debate (especially in America) is often played out on the territory of the right (where the rhetoric of pro-life reigns), it is certainly not the case in other parts of the world that abortion is defended in the name of those children already born, i.e. trapped in the framework of reproductive futurity. Elsewhere, it is the rationality of the woman, her ability to make economic and pragmatic decisions that feature foremost in any debate about the rights and wrongs of abortion. Historically, too, discussions about abortion took place in broader contexts that stressed abortion alongside questions of the equal right to work, progressive notions of family structure and so on. Before Stalin repealed the laws, the Soviet Union under Lenin was the first to provide free and on demand abortions. These laws were couched not

in terms of 'life,' but in terms of pragmatism predicated on a notion of political equality. As Wendy Z. Goldman puts it:

> Soviet theorists held that the transition to capitalism had transformed the family by undermining its social and economic functions. Under socialism, it would wither away and under communism, it would cease to exist entirely. (Goldman, 1993: 11)

Unless the family is considered in its social and economic function, it makes no sense to speak of its power as an image, however powerful this image might be. Edelman ultimately concedes far too much to a very narrow ideological image of the family that, whilst pernicious, is easier to undo with reference to history and practice than he seems to think. As Tim Dean puts it: 'the polemical ire that permeates *No Future* seems to have been appropriated wholesale from the right-wing rants to which he recommends we hearken' (Dean, 2008: 126).

In the first section I tried to identify some of the contradictions between the contemporary family and the demands of capitalism, while above I gave examples of politics not based on reproduction and reproduction not based on futurity: what follows from this is that there are important historical shifts in the way in which the family and the image of the child comes to shift in and out of focus. Take the discussions surrounding in vitro fertilisation. First viable as a reproductive practice in the late 1970s, early artificial insemination was regarded as a 'paganistic and atheistic' practice (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982: 11). Now, however, despite the wastage of potential viable embryos in the process, it is generally regarded as a practical option for infertile couples. Here the contradictions of contemporary social feeling towards children is exposed once again: reproductive futurism turns out not to be invested in all children, but only those it chooses to keep out of a pragmatism enabled by technology. Edelman talks about the 'morbidity inherent in fetishization as such' when opponents of abortion use photos of foetuses to highlight the proximity of the foetus to the 'fully-formed child' (Edelman, 2004: 41). He is right that morbidity and the politics of life seem to go hand-in-hand, but then proceeds to argue that it is the queer alone that has a duty to remain true to this morbidity, to expose the 'misrecognised' investments of 'sentimental futurism':

> The subject … must accept its sinthome, its particular pathway to *jouissance* … This, I suggest, is the ethical burden to which queerness must accede in a social order intent on misrecognising its own investment in morbidity, fetishisation, and repetition: to inhabit the place of meaninglessness associated with the sinthome; to figure an unregenerate, and unregenerating, sexuality whose singular insistence on *jouissance*, rejecting every constraint imposed by sentimental futurism, exposes aesthetic culture – the culture of forms and their reproduction, the culture of Imaginary forms – as always already a "culture of death" intent on abjecting the force of a death drive that shatters the tomb we call life. (Edelman, 2004: 47-8)

This does not exactly seem like a revelation. We live for the most part in pragmatic acceptance of this culture of death. It hardly shocks us when, for example, statistics reveal that, in 2004, 60% of women who had abortions had already given birth to at least one child (Sharples, 2008). Those people most identified with children – mothers – turn out, quite often, to deal with 'life' rather more pragmatically than we might otherwise believe.

Edelman has to ignore historical and current examples of abortion rights campaigns, and other attitudes towards the family, in order to shoehorn all politics into a single vision to which he then opposes his notion of the queer. As Brenkman puts it: 'To grant the Right the status of exemplary articulators of "the" social order strikes me as politically self-destructive and theoretically just plain wrong' (Brenkman, 2002: 177). There are genuine moments of historical and political importance in terms of thinking about the family that seem to escape Edelman's dismissal of politics as inevitably futural. We do not need to give up on politics altogether, whilst still accepting that the image of the child is a massive ideological obstacle. Rancière's notion of political equality ('Politics … is that activity which turns on equality as its principle' (Rancière, 1999: ix)) neither concedes ground to politics as it appears (the ordering of the state, the police, a supposed consensus) nor does it think that politics is impossible or non-desirable, as Edelman does. We must ask: is all politics conservative by definition? Does negativity or resistance to existing power structures *always* translate back into some stable and positive form? The examples of the kibbutzim and the various contradictions in the ideology and practices of contemporary reproduction make it clear that Edelman, whilst having a strong argument about the shape that the ideology of the child takes, has to ignore the unstable compromises that the contemporary world has already made with itself regarding life and death in reproduction. Alan Sinfield has questioned whether we should really conflate all political aspirations with Edelman's conception of reproductive futurism: 'perhaps reproductive futurism is capturing and abusing other political aspirations and they should be reasserted' (Sinfield, 2005: 50). It is not, then, that all politics is reproductively futural, but that this image has come to pervert other political desires, which may have a more complex relationship to children and a progressive conception of humanity.

Edelman polemically dismisses the 'left' attitude to the queer, as 'nothing more than a sexual practice in need of demystification' (Edelman, 2004: 28). Whilst a certain strain of leftist thinking does pursue this demystificatory line (arguing, for example, that many forms of sexual expression are 'natural'), Edelman reduces the left position on sexuality to a simple question of acceptance, as a way of arguing that the queer can mean nothing to the left. But there are, as indicated above, quite different ways of thinking about the family (in a non-futural, non-ideological way) and about politics, and the two together. When Rancière discusses the 'subject of politics', he makes it clear that:

> The subject of politics can precisely be identified neither with "humanity" and the gatherings of a population, nor with the identities defined by constitutional texts. They are always defined by an interval between identities, be these identities determined by social relations or juridical categories. (Rancière, 2006a: 59)

Could this 'interval between identities' be the *jouissance* that Edelman aligns with the queer? Whilst Edelman's psychoanalytic subject could in no way be understood as a similar (non)entity to Rancière's 'subject of politics,' this idea of the interval seems to indicate a site of non-capture that could be described in a certain sense as 'queer.' In Edelman's response to John Brenkman he states that: 'Sexuality refuses demystification as society refuses queerness' (Edelman, 2002: 181-5). By reifying sexuality as something that 'refuses' meaning, Edelman oddly substantialises it; Rancière's way out of the identities determined by social relations or juridical categories is much less dependent on any pre-existing identity, even though he retains the very concept of politics that Edelman rejects. There seems to be no reason why the subject of politics for Rancière couldn't be a 'queer' subject in Edelman's sense, at the same time as reclaiming a notion of rationality away from the categories of the state. Before turning to a brief summary of this tentative queer rationalism, one more structural element of Edelman's argument will be addressed: that of the death drive.

3. Death and the child

One aspect of Edelman's argument is the idea that in some sense, we are all eventually returned, queer or otherwise, to the death drive. Reproductive futurism does its very best to ward off the threat of meaninglessness that the queer supposedly presents, but is ultimately complicit: 'negating our negativity … only returns them, ironically, to the death drive in spite of themselves' (Edelman, 2004: 153). Thus reproductive futurism, and the politics (all politics) that bears its mark, is, at heart, as repetitious, undead, narcissistic and meaningless as the death drive that animates the queer – it is, perhaps, just the case that the queer enjoys this more (ironically, of course). Edelman's argument is extremely clever on this point, as it avoids the conclusion that the queer is something different in kind from the social order or the symbolic. All drives are death drives, even (or especially) the ones that have little smiling children as their mascots. But, as I have tried to argue in section two, it seems clear that there are forms of repetition and meaninglessness (the discarded embryos of IVF, the sheer everydayness of abortion even by those who are already empirically on the side of reproductive futurism) that are fully recognised. We may not want to call this 'irony' as Edelman does, as opposed to 'the contradictions generated by ideology and the conflicting demands of capitalism' (which is admittedly much less catchy), but it seems clear that beyond the pro-life fury and killing of abortion doctors, there is a very-well understood relation to narcissism (choosing the children you want to survive in your own image) and the senselessness generated by arbitrarily picking one foetus to live over another. This is not a

moral point, but about the way in which the symbolic order creates certain subjects capable of living with these contradictions. The contemporary relation of the family and reproduction in relation to capitalism does indeed resemble the Lacanian death drive in certain respects, but, unlike Edelman's conception of queerness, this looks very much like a form of meaninglessness that lacks *jouissance*. Why? Because all these decisions – the supposedly private choices to reproduce, to have IVF, to abort – acknowledge in their very repetition the meaninglessness of those very choices (or at least their arbitrary nature). But this meaninglessness is not a kind of *jouissance*, it is merely the acknowledgement that children are always-dying so that others may live. As the writer Hanif Kureishi argues in relation to *Intimacy*, a film which explores, among other things, the banality of affairs:

> If Britain seems hedonistic and politically torpid, it might be because politics have moved inside, into the body. The politics of personal relationships, of private need, of gender, marriage, sexuality, the place of children, have replaced that of society, which seems uncontrollable. (Kureishi, 2001)

The relation between the public and the private, or between the social and the personal, reveals that perhaps what is even less thinkable than queer negativity is the social itself, comprised as it is of the unstable split between the public and the private: if 'society' really cared when and how individuals had children, we would no longer regard these choices as personal decisions, but rather as factors to be understood in the context of politics more broadly. It may well be the case, to go further than Edelman, that the politics of reproductive futurism does not just try to ward off the horror of queer *jouissance*, but resents it because it shares the same *structure* as the meaninglessness of contemporary reproductive behaviour, but without the thrill of being meaningless enough. Reproductive futurism may in fact *resent* the queer, realising that its own structure is indeed a 'Ponzi scheme,' as Edelman describes it, a Ponzi scheme in which even the people at the top don't really get to enjoy themselves for very long.

Conclusion

Reading Edelman alongside Rancière reveals a shared concern with the interval between identities, and a defence of the 'out-of-place,' whether it be Rancière's 'wrong' or Edelman's 'queer.' However, Rancière's double conception of politics permits a certain conception of rationality to survive, which avoids the simple fusion of reason with both the existing order and with politics *tout court*. Perhaps what Edelman refuses in the end is to think of a future that is radically undetermined, the *avenir* as opposed to the *venir*. It is compelling, but not the whole picture, to think that politics is exhausted by its futurity, if we have not yet worked out what that futurity might be. This is the 'way out' of Edelman's world that Rancière permits us to see: Rancière's notion of politics, however rare, allows us to think both beyond the ironic, undead world of queer *jouissance* that Edelman

invokes *and* the everyday world of pragmatic, ordered futurism. It does so without reducing either reason or queerness to enemies of themselves or each other. A queer rationalism would precisely reconcile the best elements of both thinkers: a disruptive, egalitarian politics of those unseen and unheard by the mainstream and that understands by 'reason' something other than 'well-ordered.' In place of a sentimental, vitalist understanding of children as bearers of the future, it would treat them as nothing special, but in a positive way. Of all the myriad family structures that exist, none would be heralded as the archetype, and whatever *jouissance* there might be left, we could start to think its disruption collectively, rather than as a hollow, selfish negativity.

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