

## **Emancipation, Equality and Education: Rancière's Critique of Bourdieu and the Question Of Performativity**

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*Abstract: Jacques Rancière's work has had significant impact in philosophy and literary theory, but remains largely undiscussed in the field of education. This article is a review of the relevance of Rancière's work to education research. Rancière's argument about education emerges from his critique of Bourdieu, which states that Bourdieu reinforces inequality by presuming it as the starting point of his analysis. What is at stake is the question of performativity, and the means by which discourse has effects. This debate has implications for considering the basis of claims to truth in literary and social science discourse. Parallels are drawn between Judith Butler's and Rancière's portrayal of the relationship between discourse and subjection, as well as their attention to discursive 'imitation' in making inequality representable. The article concludes with a discussion of the problematic which Rancière's work suggests for education research.*

Keywords: Jacques Rancière; Judith Butler; performativity; subjection; emancipation; inclusion; pedagogy; research ethics; mimesis

The work of Jacques Rancière has, over the last twenty years, been the focus of attention in the fields of political sciences, philosophy, literary and art theory, and history, but remains largely undiscussed in education. This is due in part to the difficulty of situating Rancière's work in terms of both discipline and genre. In English-language publications, he seems to be referenced most frequently in history journals, where his work shares affinities with Hayden White's (1973), exploring the ways in which 'history' is constituted discursively as an object of study. However, his theorisation of democracy and political subjectification as disruptive acts (rather than stable states) invites comparison with the ideas of Badiou in political philosophy, as well as the 'Lacanised' conceptions of hegemony in the works of Žižek, Laclau, Mouffe, and Butler (Butler, Laclau, & Žižek, 2000; Mouffe, 1993). Placing Rancière is problematic not only because of his cross-disciplinary concerns, but also because of how he writes. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: five lessons in intellectual emancipation* (1987 / 1991) is difficult to classify: at once a kind of novel, a militant treatise, and an archival study, it recounts the life of a 19<sup>th</sup> century teacher and his experiments in emancipatory education. Although published at a time when the French socialist government looked to researchers to identify ways of creating a more egalitarian school system, the book's apparent concern with dramatising the polemics of another era meant that its argument went largely unheard amid the brouhaha pitting universalist against culturally 'inclusive' visions of the curriculum (Ross, 1991).

In this paper, I review Rancière's writings on education. Some of his major works have only become available in English in the last few years, and his contemporary publications are attracting increasing commentary (see notably the introductions by Hewlett, 2007; Rockhill, 2004; Deranty, 2003; as well as Žižek, 2000, chap. 4). Another reason for examining Rancière's work is his critique of Bourdieu, a well-established figure within education studies. This critique is a precisely, but virulently, argued demolition of Bourdieu's whole enterprise. It is unlikely to convince Bourdieu's committed admirers. Rancière does not draw out ambiguities or methodological shortcomings, but attacks those aspects of Bourdieu's argument which he denied it had: its ethics, in the sense of its political, pragmatic effects. Rancière targets an often noted tension in Bourdieu's work, between the denunciation of domination and the modelling of its ineluctable reproduction. It is not uncommon to see the absence of an account of political agency described as a 'limitation' of Bourdieu's work (e.g. McLeod, 2005); Rancière, however, sees in this the truth of Bourdieu's entire discourse. It is a discourse, Rancière argues, which places the poor in one position in society, and the sociologist in another; in which the poor are objects of study rather than intellectual subjects. Rancière traces a continuity here between Althusser and Bourdieu, one which Bourdieu (2003) firmly rejected.

Rancière (2007, p. iii) indicates that his intellectual journey from the 1970s onwards can be understood in terms of a rejection of two divergent traditions within Marxism: one which upheld that working class consciousness could only develop with the assistance of a science external to itself; and another, emerging from the study of popular culture,

which argued that such a consciousness would emerge from working class activities, conviviality and culture. These ways of conceptualising emancipation either devalued a necessarily misrecognised experience; or celebrated a popular authenticity. However, both understood the working class as being incapable of having any other thought than that which their mode of life imposed.

It was the desire, Rancière (2007, p. viii) notes, to rebut the philosophical gesture which separated those ‘dedicated’ to work from those dedicated to (its) thought which led initially to his break from Althusser (Rancière, 1974 – he had produced *Reading Capital* with Althusser a decade earlier), and subsequently Bourdieu (Rancière, 2007, 1984). Although *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* makes no explicit reference to Bourdieu, its logic can be framed as a direct negation of Bourdieu’s own work on education. I will therefore start by outlining Rancière’s argument with Bourdieu, and then present his ‘vision’ of an emancipatory education, ending with a consideration of the significance of Rancière’s work for education research.

## **Rancière on Bourdieu**

### ***The opposition of science and ideology in scientific Marxism***

Rancière’s argument with Bourdieu’s work reiterates his main criticism of Althusser, which can be summarised as follows: “the opposition of science from ideology, the theory of a discourse which pretended to speak the truth on what was practised by political and social actors, and which they did not or could not think” (Rancière, 1999). This opposition divides the social into, on the one hand, ineluctable processes, and on the other, controlling illusions. The role of the scientist, consequently, is to highlight the gap between science and representation, and to explain how the latter prevents access to the former. Emancipation, within such a scenario, is a question of knowledge: it is constituted by knowing the world in a way which transcends a subjective perspective rooted in the system of domination.

This knowledge emerges, however, only as a result of specialised, exclusive methods to perceive the means by which illusions are produced. The scientist is thereby granted a central role in delivering his ‘lesson’ (Bourdieu, 1982; Rancière, 1974), with ‘the dominated’ posited as unable of themselves to emerge from their own modes of thinking and being which the system of domination has assigned to them. This ‘lesson’, in penetrating social illusions, assumes a purer, ‘reflexive’ form than other kinds of knowledge. It ‘works’ by being transmitted from those who possess it to those who do not.

Rancière’s key argument, however, is that rather than closing the gap between ‘intellectual’ and ‘manual’ workers, this conception of emancipation, or emancipated discourse, founds the very distinction between the two. In other words, it is precisely by opposing social truth and ideological illusion, or scholastic and practical reason, that the scientist can give himself the task “of speaking for those whose presumed ignorance grants [him his] domain” (Ross, 1991, p. xviii).

### ***Reformulating the effect of misrecognition***

It follows from this line of reasoning against scientific Marxism, resonant of certain appraisals of ‘critical pedagogy’ (Gore, 1993), that Rancière’s argument with Bourdieu hinges on the phenomenon of misrecognition, and Bourdieu’s definition of sociology as a science of the hidden: “The particular difficulty of sociology stems from the fact that it teaches what everyone already knows in some way, but which one does not or cannot know because the law of the system is to hide this” (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 198). In explaining educational exclusion and differential outcomes, Bourdieu’s (1964, & Passeron, 1970) argument is that schools exclude precisely by making people believe the educational system does not exclude, so forcing people who are excluded to accept its judgments. Schools teach content which is alien to working class students. By this means, ‘gifts’ manifest themselves only in those for whom such content has meaning outside of school.

This critique of ‘giftedness’, Rancière states, cannot be refuted. However, it presumes that those who are marginalized in the education system are so *because* they are fooled (i.e. they lack knowledge of the real reasons for inequality of outcome). Yet who are these people who believe schools offer equality of opportunity? Who believes ‘giftedness’ is divorced from social background? “Has the great mystification of equality of opportunity and inequality of ‘giftedness’ ever existed other than in the trenchant discourse of the demystifiers?” (Rancière, 2007, p. 250).

This mystification should be understood, according to Rancière, as the consequence of a desire to carve a disciplinary space distinct from (militant) politics and (Marxist) economics. It is not sufficient in Bourdieu’s critique, therefore, to say that the working class are excluded from university; that differential educational outcomes are due to economic inequality; that people have different aesthetic tastes. This itself is not scientific. Sociology therefore has to produce a layer of meaning which is hidden, and is misrecognised by agents. So what is it that can be made ‘hidden’, what is it that the sociologist can reveal? Rancière concludes that it is the very fact of dissimulation. Consequently, in Bourdieu’s framework, it is precisely the fact of misrecognition which fixes agents in their sociological location.

Rancière (1984, p. 28) formulates the logic of Bourdieu’s argument on education as follows:

1. the working class are excluded from University because they do not understand the real reasons for which they are excluded (The Inheritors)
2. the misrecognition of the real reasons for which they are excluded is a structural effect produced by the very system from which they are excluded (Reproduction in education, society and culture).

Each proposition serves to conceal the other. The dominated misperceive the system; the dominating deny it; each are condemned to reproduce the system because they cannot see

it for what it is. The sociologist's revelation can consequently be neither productive, in the sense of enabling reform, or enable 'radical' critique, since it is impossible to imagine, within this vision of the social, that the social order could produce anything else than its own misrecognition. Boudieu's sociology is thus a description of domination, but it is also a description of why only a small elite will ever understand such a description.

Rancière attributes the success of Bourdieu's framework to the fact that it worked – it offered the best explanation, following 1968, for the collapse of 'radical' politics. On the ruins of militant pedagogy, Bourdieu builds a science which maintains a critical attitude towards social arrangements, whilst uncoupling this from the naiveties of (other sciences') social optimism. This discourse is perfectly fitting for a time that combines the "orphaned fervour of denouncing the system with the disenchanted certitude of its perpetuity" (Rancière, 1984, p. 7). It is this novel combination which makes for "an unusual militant science, in which all the militancy is invested in the tacit and interminable work of mourning the socialist and democratic hopes of durkheimian sociology" (p. 25).

Bourdieu's vision of the social world is motivated, according to Rancière, by nostalgia for class struggle, and the desire to re-enact it. In its staging of social relations, the inheritors are characterized by 'bad faith' and 'hypocrisy', for they deny precisely that which is obvious. The poor, as the idealized and romanticized heros, appear somehow closer to nature, placing only use value on belongings, eating only to stave off hunger (Rancière, 1984, p. 24). Society is thus split into two camps: those who set out to distinguish themselves, and those who simply reproduce. Above them both is the sociologist, with the intellectual insight to know how things are, and the ethical superiority derived from dramatizing this truth for the dubious benefit of those who cannot grasp it or who repress it. In this respect, Bourdieu upholds the very hierarchy he describes, "granting [sociological] science a position of eternal denunciator of its eternal repudiation" (Rancière, 2007, p. 258).

### ***The Other in Bourdieu's social world***

This depiction of the social world in Bourdieu's work caricatures texts such as *Distinction* (Bourdieu, 1979) – but this is exactly Rancière's point. He does not target the methodological validity of Bourdieu's research - its 'veracity' as it were – but rather its performative effect. Other critics of Bourdieu have pointed to the contradictions in the notion of misrecognition and its necessary corollary, reflexivity, in Bourdieu's account of the status of his claims (Alexander, 1995). Rancière's specific methodological approach is to ask, of any discourse: what image does it project of the subject? What has to be included and excluded from such an image for it to hold together?

This involves treating social sciences texts in a similar way to literature, questioning 'empirical' research on the basis of the image of the social it projects and the ideological effects this has. What is at stake therefore is the boundary between the social sciences and literature and the epistemological basis of their claims to truth. This approach is not an attempt to deny the difference between science and literature or to treat science as a kind

of ‘fictional’ discourse. Instead, it can be understood in terms of Law’s (2004) characterization of social sciences methods as performative. If methods are performative, it follows that they discriminate by trying to enact realities into and out of being: “In its different versions [method] operates to make certain (political) arrangements more probable, stronger, more real, whilst eroding others and making them less real” (p. 149). Rancière’s argument with Bourdieu’s discourse is precisely with its ‘politics’, in the sense in which Law uses the term here; with the way in which it makes certain things more real than others.

Law (2004, p. 144) presents an argument for conceptualizing social science method as “the enactment of *presence, manifest absence, and absence as Otherness*” (author’s emphasis). According to Rancière, what is absent and ‘othered’ in Bourdieu’s discourse is the very possibility of social mixing: “there must be no mixing, no imitation [in Bourdieu’s representation of the social]. The subjects of this science, like the warriors of [Plato’s] *Republic* must be incapable of imitating something other than their craft” or culture (Rancière, 2007, p. 272). Bourdieu’s model of society, and its social subjects, Rancière argues, reiterates the main tenets of Platonism, with society divided between those able to see ‘truth’ and those only able to see appearances; a society in which people cannot ‘be’ in any other way than is ‘proper’ to their place.

For Rancière, statements should not be checked against a presumed given, empirical reality but on the basis of what a proposition brings to presence. Consequently, emancipation should not be thought of in terms of possessing ‘reflexive’ knowledge; rather it is related to changing the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière, 2000). Rancière’s summary of his book *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* explains what he means by this phrase:

I wanted to highlight that the forms of the political were in the first place those of a certain division of the sensible. I understand by this phrase the cutting up (decoupage) of the perceptual world that anticipates, through its sensible evidence, the distribution of shares and social parties. It is the interplay of these forms of sensible evidence that defines the way in which people do ‘their own business’ [what is ‘proper’ to their social function] or not by defining the place and the time of such ‘business’, the relation between the personal and the common, the private and the public in which these are inscribed. And this distribution itself presupposes a cutting up of what is visible and what is not, of what can be heard and what cannot, of what is noise and what is speech (*as quoted in Dillon, 2005, p. 432*).

Discourse, including social sciences discourse, is political precisely because there is disagreement over what is seen and perceived. This is because there is no ‘sensible’ totality of social relations, as implied in Bourdieu’s notion of ‘field’, but rather antagonistic ways of crafting and ‘knowing’ realities, and producing absence as Otherness.

### **Rancière’s conception of intellectual emancipation**

If the relationship between education and emancipation is not thought of in terms of the possession of knowledge, and the consciousness, criticality or reflexivity that this generates, how can it be thought? Rancière formulates an answer in explicit contrast to Bourdieu's position. The problem with scientific Marxism, including Bourdieu's sociology as its perceived offshoot, is that it starts from a position in which inequality is assumed, and materialized in the distance between science and ideology. Emancipation consequently emerges as a temporal issue; the end-point of a process of gradual reduction in present inequality, as people become aware of how things really are. In opposition to this, Rancière's argument is that there is no other means of achieving equality than to assume it, to affirm it, to have it as one's epistemological starting point, and to then systematically verify it.

### ***The ignorance of inequality***

This argument is dramatized in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), the tale of the adventures of Joseph Jacotot, a university teacher, who, having served as a deputy and soldier in the French revolutionary armies, is exiled in the 1820s upon the restoration of the monarchy. He secures a job as a teacher of French literature at the University of Leuven. Speaking no Dutch, and his students speaking little or no French, he organizes his lessons around an object which they can nonetheless study together – a bilingual edition of Fénelon's *Télémaque*. With the help of an interpreter, he asks the students to read it by using the translation, to review continuously what they are learning, and then to write in French what they think of the book. Having expected work of lamentable standard, he is surprised by the quality of the students' work. Although he has taught the students precisely nothing, they for their part have learned to read French literature.

This experiment leads Jacotot to revise his prior assumptions, notably the assumption that in order to teach, a teacher needs to be in possession of knowledge that s/he can then explain to students. As an 'enlightened' teacher, he had practised progressive pedagogic methods, adapting subject matter to students' level, pointing out the essential from the peripheral, providing a methodical introduction to an area of knowledge. At Leuven, however, Jacotot had explained nothing, organized no basic introduction to the French language. From this he concludes that there is no necessary link between teaching and having knowledge. In other words, the inequality which education is designed to address should be remedied not by seeking to transfer knowledge (be it through either progressive or 'authoritarian' means) but by establishing a relationship of equality between master and student, between the one who demands that intelligence manifest itself and the other who develops his or her own intellect.

It is a measure of Rancière's literary skills that he not only keeps his reader gripped in telling the story of Jacotot, as the news of his discovery spreads throughout post-revolutionary Europe, but that the telling of this improbable and picaresque tale develops an argument about the relationship between education and emancipation. Equality is instantiated in the telling itself. Jacotot's and Rancière's voices become merged; no clear distinction is established between the narration of Jacotot's adventures and Rancière's

commentary. The writing effects the collapse between subject and object of knowledge advocated in the narrative.

The tale thus leads us through Jacotot's deductions. If students can learn without having knowledge explained to them by someone who possesses it, then what is the function of the teacher? Jacotot concludes that the teacher, characterized in this text in ways which are similar to 'the one who is supposed to know' in Lacanian discourse theory, has the function of eternalizing that distance between knowledge and ignorance that it putatively closes. For to speak to students on the basis of their lack of knowledge, with respect to the teacher's own position, is first of all to demonstrate to them their own incapacity: "the pedagogic myth...divides the world into two. More specifically, it divides intelligence into two. It says there is an inferior intelligence and a superior intelligence" (Rancière, 1987, p. 16). What the student learns from this, before anything else, is that "he cannot understand [the object of knowledge] if it is not explained to him" (p. 18). Such is the "stultifying effect" of pedagogy (p. 17). It is experienced particularly strongly by the poor, who are often judged to have the least capacity by the measures of the education system.

This is not a relativist argument about knowledge. Jacotot is methodical in his approach: the students learned because he told them to; because he asked them to justify their statements with respect to the object of knowledge. What is evoked here however is a vision of education in which knowledge and authority are no longer amalgamated in the body of the teacher. Teaching, in its aim of generating intellectual equality, should consequently start from the premise: "all men have equal intelligences" (1987, p. 34). This claim is performative: "the problem is not to prove that all intelligences are equal. It is to see what one can do as a consequence of this supposition" (p. 79).

It is worth emphasizing that this supposition does not spring from some sense of empathy or shared interests. The ignorant schoolmaster is uncompromising. Claims such as 'I do not understand' or 'I cannot do this', Jacotot surmises, are justified by contempt concealing itself behind false modesty: one recognises one's inferiority in one sphere of life in order for one's superiority to be recognised in another, a sphere one also judges superior. There is indeed nothing to 'understand' as such, only things to be said or observed - a point Rancière makes, one suspects, to counter the more deliberative, consensus-building notion of understanding in Habermas' work. Jacotot's concept of 'universal teaching' does not emphasise a common sphere of agreement or shared ethics; rather it appears more as a kind of confrontation between the teacher's and the student's will.

### ***From educational progress to social progress***

There is nothing novel about Jacotot's conception of 'universal teaching': Rancière notes it is an approach we use everyday, when there are no intellectual superiors to tell us what to do. So what then is the justification for the specific configuration of knower and ignorant in the education system? Rancière argues that Jacotot's 'discovery' reveals the "passion for inequality", the "contempt" which understands a lack of instruction as an



incapacity (1987, p. 134). The perpetual re-making of incapacity, as the student moves up the educational ladder, is what the education system terms individual progress.

The last chapter of the book explores the implications of this argument for the idea of progress, as it applies to society in general as well as individuals – and here the reason for Rancière’s interest in Jacotot, as well as education as a social practice, becomes apparent. Jacotot’s insight, Rancière argues, was to identify that it was this passion for inequality which underpinned the institutionalization of education in the name of social progress. From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, progressive social leaders throughout Europe advocated the founding of a mass public education system, to institutionalize the revolutionary ideals of the equality and rights of man: however, “[the democrats] know very well that the sovereign people cannot be confused with the ignorant rabble who are solely dedicated to the defense of their material interests” (p. 217). Hence the need to make people ‘ready’ to engage in democratic decision-making, through education. By this logic, the education system became not only the means to deliver social progress, but a model for the organization of the social order: “the pedagogic paradigm of the teacher as explainer, adapting itself to the level and needs of students... translates itself into a general model of a society organized on the basis of ‘progress’” (Rancière, 2004a).

This is why public education is central to the version of democracy which is legitimized in relation to an ideal of social progress; for it is the means by which equality is to be realized, and in Jacotot’s view, perpetually deferred. For in the ‘pedagogised society’ (Rancière, 2002), inequality is no longer the arbitrary distribution of wealth and power, but a supposedly ‘rationalised’ order, which puts people in their ‘proper’ place; in other words, it is an explanation for inequality. A progressive social order calls for the justified distribution of ranks. In a democratic society in which all men are equal, it is therefore the role of public education to justify inequality whilst promising to perpetually reduce it. The idea of social progress in effect is the idea of pedagogy applied to the whole of society; it is the idea of those who give themselves the authority of reducing the inequality of others with respect to themselves: “Jacotot was the only egalitarian to perceive the representation and institutionalisation of progress as the renouncing of the intellectual adventure and ethics of equality, and public education as a mourning process for emancipation” (1987, p. 222-3).

## **Progress, pedagogy and performativity**

### ***Equality repressing inequality or vice versa?***

Rancière and Bourdieu share a skeptical stance towards the Enlightenment view of education as emancipatory. In Bourdieu’s work, the education system’s democratic claims conceal the reality of inequality. In Rancière’s work, the visibility of such claims, their proclamation and celebration, is the naturalization of inequality. In other words, equality is not an illusion that conceals inequality; rather, equality (in the future) is precisely that which legitimizes the presupposition of inequality (in the present). The notion of social progress does not therefore make people misrecognise inequality; it is that which is used

to make inequality appear utterly apparent and obvious – or ‘sensible’, to use Rancière’s term.

This difference offers some light on the virulence of Rancière’s critique of Bourdieu. For what Rancière hears in Bourdieu’s discourse is the voice of the pedagogue, who speaks on the basis of a supposed inequality, founded on an epistemic difference between sociologically located statements and their sociological theorization, a presupposition which grants him his object of knowledge. Bourdieu teaches what he ‘knows’ to those constituted as unable to overcome an incapacity, because they are captured by the logic of bodily practice. From this perspective, Bourdieu’s analysis of the division of knowledge between social groups appears as an *explanation* of inequality: the poor do not succeed academically *because* they cannot formulate scholarly discourse, as a consequence of their habitus. Rancière’s counter to this is that the poor do not succeed academically because their discourse is not treated or ‘heard’ as scholarly – and that this is precisely what Bourdieu’s sociology also does.

### ***Mimesis and emancipation***

Rancière’s argument here can be illuminated by comparing it to Butler’s on gender. For what is at stake here is the question of how to maintain the possibility of emancipation without presupposing fixed identity categories – which themselves reinforce the constraints on the very subjects to be liberated. Where Butler (1999) argues that feminist politics which pre-suppose a foundational identity fix in their place the very subjects such politics hope to represent, Rancière’s point is to show the way in which critiques of domination based on presumed ‘dominated’ identities pre-empt the very possibility for equality that such critiques are supposed to open up. In other words, the presumption of a pre-constituted (working class) identity works to reinforce inequality rather than the other way round.

Rancière and Butler both focus on the expropriation of statements assigned to specific bodies. Butler’s analysis of drag (the imitation of heterosexual norms) makes gender ‘sensible’ as a kind of doing, an imitative discursive practice. Drag itself is not necessarily subversive, Butler states; indeed, it works by rearticulating gender norms. But presenting drag and heterosexuality as equally imitative challenges the ontological assumptions of sex-based identity politics. Butler’s attention to drag is not a celebration of parodic performance, therefore, but a strategy by which to undermine the presupposition of an original gender, and to show “that hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations” (1997, p.125).

Rancière’s archive studies similarly examine practices of imitation by workers of their social ‘betters’. What gave these actions political efficacy, he suggests, is not that they embodied a specific class identity but that they disrupted such identities in imitating the norms of a culture foreign to the actors’ origins. As in Butler, equality is made perceivable or imaginable, by representing it as a kind of doing, in and through which political subjects are constituted.

What interests Rancière and Butler is the way in which imitation or expropriation challenges ‘visions’ of social totality. It is the imitation of enunciations by those who have no part in the discursive order, who are its abject remainders, which makes visible the contingency of such totality:

It is precisely the expropriability of the dominant, ‘authorised’ discourse that constitutes one potential site of its subversive resignification. What happens, for instance, when those who have been denied the social power to claim ‘freedom’ or ‘democracy’ appropriate these terms from the dominant discourse? (*Butler, 1997, p. 158*)

What happens? In her weighing up of Bourdieu and Rancière, Nordmann (2007) also makes a comparison between Butler and Rancière, but suggests that Rancière goes much further than Butler in arguing for the political, emancipatory effectivity of performativity. Butler (2007) does indeed explore specific cases of ‘what happens’ in contemporary culture; she gives the example of the Dutch government using claims articulated by the queer movement to justify judgments about whether Muslim immigrants are ‘ready’ to integrate into its democracy – her argument showing how emancipatory discourse can be deployed to create new categories of abject beings.

However, it is not faith in the effectivity of performative discourse which underpins Rancière’s emphasis on presupposing equality as a starting point in researching and writing about the social. Rather, it is concern with the effectivity of his own discourse. His preoccupation, throughout his work, is with forms of ‘learned discourse’; with the analysis of subjectivation, and the status of the speech that gives rise to it, in academic or disciplinary discourse. One consequence of this is the peculiar instability to his own discourse; it reads like an experiment *in* politics (as Rancière defines this, in terms of a disruptive act) rather than *about* any ‘external’ circumstances.

For the problem which Rancière raises is how to speak about inequality without offering (one’s own) knowledge as its remedy or positioning oneself above or behind the back of those being discussed. This problematic is not played out in discrete sections headed ‘ethics’, ‘methodology’ or ‘conclusions’, but in the obfuscation of the division between subject and object. The aim, it seems, is to dramatise equality at the level of discourse, to treat discourse as a kind of practical interaction.

The products of this experiment in politics are texts whose epistemological status is ambiguous: “[Rancière’s] own speech is to be taken neither literally nor figuratively; his own mode of address is to be taken as neither active nor passive; and his assertions are to be taken as neither denotative nor connotative” (White, 1994, p. xix). Such a succession of negatives contrasts with the positivity of Bourdieu’s discourse, and is suggestive of the uncertainty generated by Rancière’s efforts to re-work the “poetic structures of knowledge” (as quoted in White, 1994, p. xv). What is at issue here is the ethics of writing in the social sciences. Rancière’s work can be read as a consideration of the significance of performativity for social sciences research and writing, and the ethical questions which follow a conception of discourse as bringing subjects into presence – a consideration which suggests some affinity between his approach and that of Law’s

(2004) and Latour's (2005), who emphasise the 'allegorical' status of sociological research and writing.

### **Rancière and education research**

Given the 'unclassifiable' status of Rancière's writing, how should one interpret the significance of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* for contemporary education research?

It would be difficult to read it in terms of putting forward a pedagogic method; Jacotot resists attempts to turn his approach into a Socratic-like pedagogic exercise (in which a master dissimulates his knowledge all the better to lead the ignorant to it). The story is not a description of the techniques teachers might adopt to disassociate knowledge from authority. In this respect, the book has a very different status to Freire's (1971) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which suggests how education can be made emancipatory.

The book is also not a critique of teaching *per se*, in the sense of aiming to prevent people from teaching or criticizing teachers' themselves – in many ways, it is a celebration of the educational endeavour, as the production of a shared and open space in which different visions of the world are made sensible. Neither is the book a utopian manifesto for the abolition of the public education system; the use of historical sources serves to locate a moment of transformation in the practice of 'doing' equality, rather than to resurrect a romanticized past.

One way of interpreting *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is as the reformulation of the problematic of education, as a mass public system. This system's claims to democracy and social progress are based on the premise that the democratic distribution of knowledge leads to the democratic distribution of social functions. Social injustice can, in this view, be tackled by 're-distributing' knowledge – for example by improving the educational outcomes of the poor. Education is then understood as a way of leveling out opportunities.

Education research, from this perspective, becomes about improving the distribution of knowledge, through ever-better, modernized methods. Emphasis is consequently placed on meeting the contemporary needs of learners, particularly those who are falling behind, who are demotivated, who, in all sorts of inventive ways, are not keeping up. It can appear outdated, in both policy and research literature, to refer to the problem of differential outcomes in terms of class. In contemporary policy debates, the problem is often articulated in terms of gender; for example, the 'problem' of boys' literacy difficulties, or girls' rejection of ICT. The problematic however remains the same: making the unequal equal by means of the improved distribution of knowledge.

The telling of Jacotot's story is a way of showing that the distance between the 'gifted' and the 'unmotivated' learners, which education and education research is charged with reducing, functions as the very legitimization of inequality; it makes the distribution of social functions appear rational. It is precisely because of this that public education will always be deemed to be 'failing'. It is indeed almost impossible to imagine a mass

education system which would not be in some state of crisis, failing to teach basic standards or pay heed to the special needs of ‘gifted and talented’ learners or the exceptional ‘bright working class youngster’ – to use a favourite phrase of the New Labour government in the UK.

But it is precisely this highly visible ‘failure’ which justifies the ordering of social functions in a democratic state. For the argument that it is education which is ‘failing’ to equip students with the necessary tools for democratic participation is the same argument which sustains the view that education is a means of ordering capacity. In this way, inequality is made innocent: it is simply an ordering of capacity. The state or economic power which follows from academic achievements is consequently framed as properly assigned, a justified difference, a justified inequality. Claims about the redistributive power of education serve therefore to justify hierarchy – to *explain* inequality. The presumption of inequality which underpins the setting of equality as the goal of the education system is the very means by which the actualization of equality is infinitely deferred.

Biesta (2007, p. 9) argues that Rancière’s argument about equality challenges notions of democratic education which define inclusion as “nothing more than bringing more people into the existing democratic order”. This ‘colonial’ understanding of inclusion is based on the premise that “the political order itself, the democracy in which others are being included, is taken for granted; it is the starting point that itself cannot be questioned”. In Rancière’s work, a different vision of inclusion is evoked, according to Biesta (p. 9): “the inclusion of what cannot be known to be excluded in terms of the existing order” – what Biesta refers to as the ‘incalculable’. Jacotot’s tale suggests that making room for this ‘incalculable’ in schools and universities would at least involve ending the effect of verdict or judgment by authoritative ‘superiors’, and the ranking of students / knowledge. In fact, this was precisely the recommendation Bourdieu made, Rancière (2007, p. xiii) notes, when he commented on proposals to reform the education system in 1985 – a pointed aside which highlights the similarity in Jacotot’s and Bourdieu’s ideas about the basis on which education should take place, and also, therefore, the specific scope of Rancière’s critique.

Beyond his critique of the problematic of ‘pedagogic effectiveness’, Rancière’s work suggests a new problematic – one which is concerned with performative subjectification in the act of interpreting the world. This can be framed as a call for the politicisation of knowledge (Nordmann, 2007, p. 151-157) – not in the sense of incorporating ‘political’ issues in curricula, but rather in terms of dealing with the consequences of judging better and worse ways of representing the world whilst presuming the equality of those making such judgments. This is a statement of the political nature of schools and universities, as sites governed not by consensus but by the division of beings / knowledge into representable and non-representable. If, as Rancière, suggests, the ‘underachievers’, the ignorant, cannot tackle their powerlessness by gaining knowledge, but rather by contesting the hierarchy which prevents their speech from being heard, the problematic in education can be re-formulated in terms of the means by which equality is denied and inequality justified; the means by which discourse and subjects are split into intelligible

and unintelligible, essential and inessential, theoretical and practical, academic and vocational, abstract and concrete; the way in which transgressions of such boundaries, including those performed by academic research, are performatively constitutive of subjects and reconfigurations of the sensible. The issue then is not to prove equality, nor to know the causes of domination, but to see what is made perceptible in the verification of equality.

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Note: all translations from the French are my own.

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