

# Ranciere and Jacotot

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Stephen Cowden and David Ridley (2019) *The Practice of Equality, Jacques Ranciere and Critical Pedagogy*, Peter Lang, 192pp, 978-1-78874-030, £24.94

**T**he field of radical educational theory and practice known as critical pedagogy was founded by the Brazilian educationist Paulo Freire (1911-1997). However, in the USA academic critics of authoritarianism making arguments for equity and social justice in education often identify as critical pedagogues to avoid being side-lined as Marxists. As defined by the editors in their introduction to this collection, 'critical pedagogy is both an example but more importantly a critique, of the conventional conception of critical thinking' and is committed to the idea of 'a practice of equality between teachers and students'.

For Cowden and Ridley, Jacques Ranciere affords an example of this practice that he derived from the Enlightenment schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot, who claimed to have discovered a new method of 'Universal Teaching' when he established the conditions for Flemish students to learn French by the use of a parallel text without himself knowing the language of the students. The significance of this unlikely tale that Ranciere developed in his 1991 book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is outlined by the contributors to this book in the context of Ranciere's progress from pupil of Althusser into the latest go-to French educational philosophe, successor to Deleuze, Bourdieu and Foucault.

Cowden and Ridley summarise this development in masterly manner, contextualising the chapters of their contributors in relation to it. However, they do this without avoiding what Biesta (2017) calls 'a rather problematic interpretation of the work of Ranciere in recent educational scholarship, one where the key message of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is taken to be that anyone can learn without a teacher and that this alleged "freedom to learn" would constitute emancipation'.

David Ridley addresses the notion that lecturers don't need to know how to teach in relation to the marketisation of UK higher education where it is particularly dangerous, notably in the recent fashion for 'flipping the classroom'. This mechanically contracts academic labour into a shrinking core of star professors pumped for research income to produce educational content in the form of massive online open-access courses (MOOCs), while an expanding periphery of deprofessionalised perma-temps deliver it. At the same time, research is no longer privileged within universities but outsourced as R&D. To counter this, Ridley offers an alternative 'flipping for equality' by distributing texts for students to undertake their own research without teacherly transmission - a sort of formalised autodidacticism assessed by graded essays.

Mike Neary's chapter goes further by 'Reading Ranciere Symptomatically' to side with him in his break from Althusser and seeking to recreate the conditions of May '68 in France in the emancipation of students today. Similarly, Mark Howard revisits the politics of Italian autonomous self-organisation to create a society of the self-emancipated multitude. Both reject Althusser's supposedly 'objective' and 'scientific' approach for a commitment to an immediate and subjective realisation by the students with whom they place themselves on terms of radical equality.

Yet Marx's third of his 1845 theses on Feuerbach that 'the educators themselves need to be educated' is equally radical and, moreover, linked to a labour theory of cognition - that humans know the world primarily by working in and on it, a theory of praxis if not of formal education that Robin Small argues was central to Marx's thought despite the fact that he wrote so little directly on the subject of education.

As Colin Waugh commented on Small in *PSE 73*, by bringing together a labour theory of value and a labour theory of cognition, Marx identified in human labour power the capacity to expand its own value through 'the ability to remember and, still more

significantly, to reflect on remembered experience, using both intellectual and material tools . . . to think but also to think about thinking. And human beings have organised themselves to do these things collectively . . . and diachronically - that is, to pass on the results from one generation to another - in short to train and educate themselves'.

This reviewer cannot therefore see the added-value (to turn a phrase!) of Ranciere's radical proposition of equality between learners and teachers, or teacher-learners and learner-teachers, especially as this 'new reading of Marx' jumps out of the frying-pan of objectivism into the fire of sudden subjective comprehension. For students, like everyone else, are situated in social environments where their freedom to learn may empower them but not necessarily to transform themselves totally into what they commit themselves to be.

This effect can be marked in educational institutions such as universities, which Neary quotes Ranciere as saying are 'dramatisations of inequality', accepting here Bourdieu's view that 'the university preaches only to the converted', in other words that universities select on the basis of previously more or less expensively acquired cultural capital by means of 'the trick' that Bourdieu and Passeron described in their 1964 book on students of appearing objective while actually being biased towards the reproduction of privilege. Ranciere and the editors and contributors to this collection are right to reject Bourdieu's initial effort to expose this 'trick' by means of what he called a 'rational pedagogy', which aimed to make explicit what was taken for granted in HE by those whose previous background and education had prepared them for it. However, Bourdieu himself dropped the approach after coming to accept that it only added to the demands put upon women, working-class and minority students.

This is part of the critique of much of what passes for critical education in HE today that this book seeks to make as it looks beyond what David Ridley calls 'well-meaning progressive mutual teaching activities . . . [towards] a wider vision of the democratisation of knowledge roduction and society'. This is one he outlines in his chapter and elsewhere (eg. in *PSE* 94) and in his own publications.

## References

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