

Equality and agency - a response to Patrick Ainley

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I want to begin this response to the review above by thanking Patrick for reading and reviewing *The Practice of Equality*, and for offering the thoughtful and intelligent response which he has made. Patrick has offered a useful summation of the book and offers some interesting discussion about David Ridley's chapter in particular. However while Patrick commends our account of Ranciere and his context, he concludes by stating that what he can't see is what 'the added-on value of Ranciere's radical pre-supposition of equality between learners and teachers' actually is. In other words is there anything in Ranciere's work that is significant and which hasn't already been said by others? This is a genuine point, and one which many people have raised. What I want to do here is respond to Patrick and also address this point more broadly, arguing that Ranciere genuinely does have something significant to say to us. This is important both at the level of debate about educational theory and practice but also for the politics of the Left, with which Ranciere remains unequivocally though not uncritically associated.

A good start in addressing Ranciere's significance is the issue of where we situate him. In a somewhat off-the-cuff comment, Patrick refers to him as 'the latest go-to French educational philosophe, successor to Deleuze, Bourdieu and Foucault'. This is not an unusual view of Ranciere in the English speaking world - but a misleading one. Our book sought in various ways to situate Ranciere in a Marxist historical and theoretical tradition, but here I want to make the argument more strongly that he isn't the successor to either the French sociological tradition, represented by Bourdieu, or the post-structuralist tradition of Deleuze and Foucault. Ranciere's differences with Bourdieu were publicly and directly expressed, and Jeremy Lane's chapter in our book offers an excellent account of these. Ranciere isn't a sociologist and has never claimed he was. Jones Irwin's chapter on Ranciere and

Lytard does talk about his relationship with postmodernism - he isn't a postmodernist either - but one of the things we didn't take up really at all in the book is his difference with Foucault and post-structuralism. These differences are important not just theoretically but politically as they revolve around the idea of 'equality' which is a central theme for Ranciere. Foucault developed the ideas that came to be defined as 'post-structuralism' around the problematisation of the Enlightenment, which he characterises as initiating 'the contract of *rational despotism* with free reason' (1984:37 my emphasis). Foucault emerged as a vehement critic of bourgeois liberalism and the way its emergence was built on a process of social and political exclusion. Foucault's research charted the way different forms of exclusion were constructed historically - he has written specifically on prisoners, insanity and 'sexual deviance' - and central to this process was the predominance of Reason; that Reason asserted itself as the basis of bourgeois rule by creating an excluded 'other'. Foucault's view of modern power - 'governmentality' - thus emerges clothed in the garments of universal ideals, rational scientific objectivity and liberal humanitarianism; behind which is a regime of surveillance in which various forms of deviance are under constant scrutiny for the places where they may reveal themselves.

Some of Foucault's historical work owed a debt to Marx, particularly his understanding of the emergence of the state in capitalist society, but while Marx saw the political language of 'rights' as a countervailing development to the growth of state power and something which progressive forces should support, Foucault characterised these as simply another way in which the state drew people into the logic of its will to power, making them willing and compliant subjects of 'governmentality'. It was in this way that the political project of post-structuralism became the assertion of 'difference', while questions of 'equality' came to be viewed

suspiciously as a universalism cast in the mould of the white Western male. But nothing illustrated the problems with Foucault's rejection of the principle of equality more than his enthusiasm for the Iranian revolution in the late 1970s. In his search to elevate pre-Enlightenment traditions Foucault became highly enthused by what he saw as the 'political spirituality' of 'the movement that aims to give a permanent role in political life to the traditional structures of Islamic society'. He even went on to say that within these structures 'between men and women there will not be inequality with respect to rights, but difference, since there is a natural difference' (Foucault, 1978). On February 1st 1979, five million people were on the streets of Tehran to welcome back Ayatollah Khomeini after 14 years of exile, but by the end of that month public whipping was introduced for alcohol consumption and libraries were attacked if they held books that were 'anti-Islamic'. By March women were legally required to wear the chador and as it gained more power the regime went on to imprison and murder thousands of leftists, feminists, trade unionists and lesbians and gays. This has become something that Foucault's many supporters have either ignored or glossed over as a minor incident of poor political judgement which does nothing to damage the overall value of his work. I would argue instead that this is highly significant because it points to the real problems of where the post-structuralist pre-occupation with 'difference' against 'equality' was taking us politically. And just as post-structuralist theory has grown and multiplied in its influence, becoming entirely hegemonic within the humanities particularly as championed by Foucault's student Judith Butler, so have the problems it represents (1).

Ranciere is important to the Left because he returns us back to the question of equality which offers us a way out of the post-structuralist quagmire. However his conception of this is not simply about returning to the liberal idea of equality:

Equality is not a goal to be reached. It is not a common level, an equivalent amount of riches or an identity of living conditions that must be reached as the consequence of historic evolution and strategic action. Instead it is a point of departure. This first principle immediately ties up with a second one: equality is not a common measure between individuals, it is a capacity through which individuals act as the holders of a common power, a power belonging to anyone (Ranciere, 2017).

Whilst the liberal tradition of equality is expressed through abstract statements of political citizenship, Ranciere's conception sees this as something

which emerges when people reject or come out against something - the anti-poll tax movement in the UK or the Gilets Jaunes movement in France at the moment are examples of this. What Ranciere is taking us back to is the Radical Enlightenment conception of equality. This is of course where Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840), the central figure of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), comes in.

The Ignorant Schoolmaster is fundamentally a book about the kinds of social relationships we find ourselves in when 'education' takes place. While the focus of the book is education, Ranciere wanted to make the point that this is not just something that happens in schools, colleges and universities; he wants to make the point that this is what happens whenever you are in any situation when you have to be shown how to do something you haven't done before. This could be becoming part of a band, joining a political party, starting a new job, having a child and so on. In this sense the politics of education are the politics of society as a whole, as though society is like a really big school. Joseph Jacotot developed his 'universal teaching' model by having to solve a problem. Under the straitened circumstances he found himself in when he became a political exile in Belgium, he accepted the job of teaching French to Flemish-speaking students. The problem, one many teachers would consider insurmountable, was that he spoke no Flemish and the students no French. Jacotot's improvised solution involved obtaining a set of copies of a bilingual edition of a French novel as a teaching resource. He then experimented with a method of teaching where, instead of explaining to his students how the French language worked grammatically, structurally, linguistically as the vast majority of language teaching does, he required his students to learn to recite this book in French, section by section, building up into a recitation of the entire book. The success of this experiment astonished him - as his students went through the book, they figured out by themselves how to speak French. Ranciere described the emancipatory power of Jacotot's method of 'universal teaching' as showing that:

One can teach what one doesn't know if the student is emancipated, that is to say they are obliged to use their own intelligence . . . To emancipate an ignorant person, one must be, and only need be, emancipated oneself, that is to say conscious of the true power of the human mind. The ignorant person will learn by themselves what the master doesn't know if the master believes they can and obliges them to realise their capacity (1991:15).

It is here that we can see a profound critique of the whole shape of our present preoccupation with 'attainment'. Instead of presuming the student's ignorance, as much contemporary educational theory does, Ranciere asserts that the job of teachers is not explication. Rather, he argues, we need to presume the capacity of students to establish the connections themselves on which learning is based. This however doesn't mean that 'anyone can teach' - quite the opposite. It makes the teaching role absolutely crucial - but the role is not that of knowledge transmission. Rather the teacher's role lies in the insistence that students pay attention to their own intellects, and to the intellect of others around them, as the means to realise this capacity. It is in this sense that Ranciere is taking forward Marx's brilliant but fragmentary point about how 'the educators themselves need to be educated'. Citing Colin Waugh, Patrick argues that this view combines a 'labour theory of value' with a 'labour theory of cognition' - and this is itself an excellent characterisation of the pedagogical method Ranciere wants to extract from Jacotot's experiments. Learning is work - but instead of the labour of absorbing, memorising and regurgitating - it could be the labour of 'cognition' - of understanding and making the connections between the ways the different parts make up the social totality. So the presumption of equality within the classroom was not done as an expression of good intention - it was rather done so that education itself could take place. It was in this way that Jacotot's inversion of the presumption of ignorance into a presumption for capacity becomes for Ranciere the basis of a critique of contemporary pedagogy and of contemporary politics.

This is significant because the vast bulk of contemporary liberal educational theory gestures to an ideal of educational equality but in practice defers this - as that which can only take place when the students have listened to and absorbed their teacher's explications. Ranciere wants to turn this assumption on its head - so instead of being something to be aimed for, the enacting of equality becomes the praxis of teaching. As Ranciere puts it, 'equality exists as the ensemble of practices that mark out its domain; there is no other reality of equality than the reality of equality' (1991:79). On a number of occasions throughout the book Ranciere reiterates one of the key principles of Jacotot's 'Universal Teaching' method; that 'everything is in everything' (1991:41). What this means is that it is in the process of discovering the connections between one thing and another that students discover not just their own intelligence, but the joy of intellectual discovery. In describing Jacotot as an 'Ignorant Schoolmaster' Ranciere is of course being

ironic. The method of 'Universal Teaching' that Jacotot developed through his experiments came from a huge amount of effort, commitment and insight. But the word 'ignorant' articulates the idea that the job of the educator is not to explicate, but rather to compel the will of the student to take seriously their own intellect, and those of others, and in doing so discover their own capacity for independent critical thought.

What is the connection between Ranciere's educational theory and contemporary politics? Again for Ranciere it comes back to this equality as a capacity to discover and make connections, but here in a process of collective struggle. I want to conclude by referencing a recent article where Ranciere discusses the 'Gilets Jaunes' movement, talking about the difficulties they have faced in defining and achieving their objectives:

Between the power of equals and that of people 'competent' to govern there may always be clashes, negotiations and compromises. But behind them, there remains the abyss of a non-negotiable relationship between the logic of equality and that of inequality. This is why revolts always get stuck halfway, to the great displeasure or great satisfaction of scholars who declare them doomed to failure because they lack 'strategy'. But a strategy is only a way of acting within a given world. No strategy teaches us to bridge the gap between two worlds. 'We'll go all the way', they say every time. But this end of the way is not identifiable with any specific goal, especially since the so-called Communist states drowned revolutionary hope in blood and mud. Perhaps this is how we should understand the slogan of 1968: 'This is only the beginning, let's continue the struggle'. Beginnings do not reach their end, they remain halfway. But this also means that they never stop beginning over again, even if this means that the actors change. This is the realism of revolt, an inexplicable realism, one that demands the impossible. Because the possible has already been removed in the very formula of power: 'there is no alternative' (Ranciere, 2019).

Here we see the importance of Ranciere's conception of equality as the praxis of collective action, an idea he takes straight out of the radical Enlightenment. This is fundamentally a theory of agency - an idea whose complete absence in the work of both Foucault and Althusser marks a huge problem. But as he notes above, simply appealing to the importance of agency is no panacea for the Left,

because agency always takes place in a political and historical context, and at the moment we can't but be aware that forms of popular agency can be reactionary as well as emancipatory. At the present moment any form of workers' protest in the 'post-communist' period is fraught, and this is at least in part because we don't have the sense of a clear animating idea or the strong political reference points which the Left once had. What Ranciere is saying here is that we now are in the middle of trying to find this new strong thing, the idea that says what we are for, and that is a really frustrating and difficult place to be. But it is only by being in that space that we have any chance of finding that alternative.

Footnote:

1. A contemporary illustration of the political problem this approach represents was illustrated in a recent letter to the *Independent* newspaper (5/9/19) concerning the protests against Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in Birmingham. Entitled '*the government is hijacking LGBT + sex education to bolster its counterterrorism strategy - it must stop now*' the letter was concerned with the way the protests outside two schools in Birmingham with Muslim majority populations were being represented. The protests have been taking place for some months throughout 2019 in opposition to the introduction of the 'No Outsiders' (an RSE-based equalities-based teaching programme). The letter, signed by Judith Butler alongside a range of other academic and cultural figures, asserts 'The way that "No Outsiders" has been implemented and the wider embrace of LGBT+-inclusive RSE as the poster-child for the implementation of "Fundamental British Values" suggests a colonial "civilising" attitude towards Muslim communities, and contributes to a harmful and inaccurate stereotype of an uncivilised and intolerant Muslim culture.' (<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/lgbt-no-outsiders-rse-birmingham-muslim-prevent-values-a9092781.html>). While the authors assert their support for the representation of LGBT people and family diversity in the school curriculum, what is most problematic is the way it is as though they cannot but see in RSE a discourse of 'governmentality' bent on the suppression of the 'difference' of those ultra conservative fundamentalist Muslims leading the protests. The inability of the letter's authors to thereby defend a simple principle of equality, which has itself only been adopted by the state after decades of protest and argument, speaks volumes here.

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