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Book review:

The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons on Intellectual Emancipation (1991)

Jacques Rancière; 148 pages; Stanford: Stanford University Press

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Review

Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) (from here: TIS) was originally published in 1987 in French under the title *Le Maître Ignorant.* Attention started being given to the book in English-speaking educational theory and philosophy in the 2000s, and even more so around the early 2010s, after two book-length works were published centring on Rancière's educational thought (Biesta & Bingham, 2010; Simons & Masschelein, 2011)[1]. In the book, Rancière recounts the once popular, but ultimately forgotten, educational theory of the teacher and educationalist Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840) (see also Aldrich, 2012, for a discussion of Jacotot's theory and pedagogy). The style adopted by Rancière is such that he shifts between Jacotot's perspective and his own, as if the ideas about education he writes about are expressed by both at the same time. This leads him to use words from Jacotot's age rather than our own, in relation to which Ross (1991) argues that there is a certain 'untimeliness' (p. xxiii) to the book. A question I want to ask is whether, despite its 'untimely' language and themes, the book's popularity is justified in relation to contemporary thought on social justice and education. Though the term 'social justice' is not used by Rancière – like Jacotot, he rather writes about 'emancipation' – the work can be understood as a critique of some of the assumptions Rancière believes underly contemporary social justice discourse. These assumptions, he maintains, do not help to oppose, but rather perpetuate inequality. The main one of these assumptions is what Rancière calls the 'inequality of intelligence', which I will address in what follows.

Rancière is primarily known for his idiosyncratic thought on politics. Although TIS is his main work on education, his political thought is very much present

[1] For an overview of publications on Rancière's educational thought in English journals, see Davis (2019, p. 4).

in the book as well. In my reading of it, the book is multi-layered, and it is only on some of those layers that it is actually 'about' education. The first of those layers is the history of Jacotot. That story is deepened on a second layer, through a discussion of the pedagogical method Jacotot developed, which, according to Rancière (1991), was not really a method but rather an 'anti-method' (p. 129). By this he means that what Jacotot did was not to provide a well-defined set of steps leading to better knowledge, but to provoke students to go on their own 'research adventure'. Jacotot did not know, as a teacher, what the result of those adventures would be. He was thus, in Rancière's interpretation, driven by a deep assumption of equality between himself and his students.

This assumption of equality is what makes a teacher emancipatory. Rancière provokingly calls such a teacher 'ignorant', not because they have no knowledge, but because they choose to ignore the supposed intellectual hierarchy between themselves and their students. Social justice is, then, not something resulting from the provision of knowledge or insight, but from the demand on students to prove themselves equally capable to anyone else. The 'ignorant' or emancipatory teacher is someone who expresses in all of their actions a deep sense of faith in the child's capacity to go on their own intellectual adventure. The book's subtitle is therefore equally provocative: there are no five lessons, since to give a lesson is to start off from a position of inequality.

The third layer comprises the development of Rancière's own philosophical views. Here I observe that Rancière aims to be 'indisciplinary' (Baronian & Rosello, 2008, p. 2) in his philosophical approach. In other words: Rancière wants to break boundaries. For Rancière, political thought and action always entail forms of dissensus. Along with thinkers such as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Rancière is a 'radical democrat'. For Rancière, social justice does not refer to a state of social equilibrium, but is rather to be found in the dissent or disagreement with existing social orders. He maintains that a social order, much like a lesson, starts off from an assumption of inequality. To dissent is to perceive and to feel differently than one is (explicitly or implicitly) ordered to do. To dissent is the essence of politics and of the demand for social justice.

The way in which Rancière dissents in this book is by taking up Jacotot's notion of the *equality of intelligence*. This indicates that social injustice, for Rancière, is not only about inequalities between social groups along lines of attributes like race and gender. It goes even further: the assumption of inequality of intelligence, which is still very much accepted, is itself unjust. However, in line with his ethos of dissent, Rancière also eschews clarity in meaning in relation to the terms he discusses. The central notion of the equality of intelligence is not defined by him. Intelligence has different meanings in different places in the book. For instance, it might mean an individual's mind, or someone's capacity for speech, for understanding, for thought, or the amount of knowledge someone possesses. In my view, the opacity of meaning gives this book strength, because it does not teach a lesson and demands of the reader to think for themselves. However, it also leaves room for misinterpretation. One misinterpretation is that his notion of intelligence refers to the same kind of thing denoted by intelligence quotient (IQ) scores. Another is that his 'equality' is synonymous with 'uniformity'. I believe his notion of social justice strongly entails a celebration of difference. It is rather, in my understanding, about framing difference on a horizontal plane of equality, and not on a vertical plane of hierarchy.

Rancière's refusal to explain and give lessons is also in line with another central pedagogical premise Rancière (1991) takes from Jacotot (in gendered language that was as common in 1987 as it was in the 19th century). This is that 'to explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself' (p. 7). To explain can lead to the suppression of someone's power of thought, a process Jacotot termed *abrutir*, translated as 'stultification' (Rancière, 1991, p. 8). Explanations are those forms of pedagogical action which lead to stultification. A stultified person is someone who does not believe themselves capable of thought, and who is thus dependent on others, such as pedagogues, philosophers, or demagogues, to reveal the truth of the world to them. Rather than leading to a more just

society, this dynamic perpetuates the notion that there are people destined to think, speak, and lead and people destined to listen and comply. Therefore, Rancière seems to be arguing that it is central to an education aimed at social justice to encourage, and even demand, of children and young people to think, to ask whether something makes sense to them, and why it does or does not.

The book is thus a vehement argument for an education which stimulates a student's own intellectual adventure rather than providing them with certain predetermined knowledge. This means that they are urged to have faith in themselves, in their own capacity to think, to make sense of their experience, and to act and go out on adventures. It is especially this emphasis on the role of the teacher to incur urgency, even a *demand*, on students to think and act for themselves which gives the book power. It is at once a political and an educational argument. For Rancière, social justice cannot be bestowed upon others. It is something that has to be claimed for oneself. In his writings on politics, Rancière has described some of the historical and contemporary ways in which such an equalising claim was made. The prerequisite for someone to make such a claim is for them to believe themselves equal to all others. Therefore, the most important task of the teacher is to assume an equality between themselves and their students, and to express that assumption in all of their interactions with them. Consequentially, Rancière does not espouse a child-centred form of education (Vlieghe, 2018), nor a constructivist one (Biesta, 2017). The emancipatory educator is 'not a simple good-natured pedagogue', but 'an intractable master' (Rancière, 1991, p. 38). In other words, it is someone who never lets the other off the hook when they claim they do not possess the intelligence to proceed on their intellectual adventure.

One issue I have with the book is that Rancière frames intelligence in a very individualist manner. In this, I believe Rancière ignores the way in which the intelligence of individuals is infused with intersubjective networks of intelligence, exemplified in the way in which Rancière's intelligence expressed in this book might transform the reader's intelligence through a redistribution of their perception. Then again, perhaps to dissent or disagree with Rancière might be the best way to understand what he is trying to say. Namely, that social justice is only achieved through the active expression of self-respecting individuals and social movements, believing themselves equal to all others.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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