

EQUALITY AND EMANCIPATION IN EDUCATION AND POLITICS

It seems that the notion of inequality never posed a problematic issue for the philosophers of education. It can be observed that many of them seemed to have assumed that the process of education *par excellence* requires inequality, which constitutes the natural starting point and should not be denied, but rather taken good advantage of. The presupposed inequality not only governs the student-teacher relation, but also determines the basic dynamics of the educational process. From a philosophical perspective – which may in fact actually represent the most natural perspective on the process of learning –, the initial disproportion of knowledge and experience is not only the necessary condition of a teaching-learning relation, but reflects – to certain extent – the very nature of every type of human relationship. Although we are usually prone to accepting the initial inequality, we presume that the main goal of the educational process should eventually lead to overcoming the original asymmetry. Therefore, it seems that it can be rightly stated that culture as such is a general mechanism of transgressing the natural inequalities.

Michel Foucault, the French philosopher, who is renowned for his radical critique of the modern system of education, which he developed in his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, returned to the fundamental question of power pertaining to the traditional teacher (master)-student rela-

tion in the last volumes of *History of sexuality*. In his earlier book Foucault focused his attention on the genealogy of modern education, which displayed the classroom as a nexus of power-knowledge relations, whereas towards the end of his life he returned to the traditional model of master-student relation perceived as a counterweight to the model of modern education. Foucault seemed to have agreed that inequality of power is the foundation and elementary mechanism of human relationships.

Consequently, from such a perspective the student-teacher relation appears to be a quite peculiar type of relation. However, it should be emphasized that, according to Foucault, power is the internal force shaping every human relationship. Therefore, it cannot be rejected as an external, unwanted factor, but accepted as the inevitable order of things. Nonetheless, even for Foucault not every power relation merits to be sustained. However contradictory his standpoint may seem, it still can be defended. For Foucault, the power relation as the struggle between individuals is a positive phenomenon, a necessary condition of personal development. The only form of power relation that pose a veritable danger for an individual is domination, i.e., the power relation in its most extreme form, aiming at a complete subjugation of the other person. Nevertheless, the philosophical origin of the Foucauldian concept of human relationships is quite clear. It incorporates Nietzsche's concept of power relation as developed in *Genealogy of Morals*. Foucault also followed the German philosopher in his perception of the ancient culture as the opposing model of a social order, serving as an anchorage for his own proposal.

Foucault's late writings and lectures include not only a clearly positive image of the ancient culture with its different concept of individuality, but also the praise of education perceived as a way towards gaining autonomy. Foucault, much like Nietzsche in the concept of *morality of custom*, sees the process of subjugation of an individual as beneficial only within the frames of Greek and Roman cultures and stresses the fact that although Christianity took over the majority of Greek and Roman techniques for the shaping of individuals, it radically changed their meaning. For Foucault as well as for Nietzsche, the birth of Christian culture marks the eclipse of ancient culture with its ideal of an autonomous individual.

Both Nietzsche's and Foucault's critique of Christian and modern culture is of great significance to indicate the bond linking specific forms of power and

types of individuality or subjectivity which the latter one requires. From that perspective, the place and the function of the process of education, its goals and, which is probably even more important, the type of power sustaining that process, became one of the crucial points of cultural critique. Critical analysis connecting reflection upon current politics with an overview regarding education has become common in contemporary philosophy. Suffice it to mention that Rorty, Nussbaum, Derrida or, more recently, Wendy Brown and Maurizio Lazzarato all developed a similar kind of critical reflection upon the future of Western politics taking as a point of departure the evolution of the educational system. Education alongside with politics are treated as inseparable parts of a normative project founding the Western concept of egalitarian society. Education used to be considered something more than just a process of gaining or acquiring a certain amount of knowledge, skills and competitions. Education used to be considered something more than just a process of gaining or acquiring a certain amount of knowledge, skills and competitions. True and genuine education should prepare students for their future professional life, but – more importantly – it should, provide them also with all the necessary knowledge and skills for becoming a citizen. However, the problem of interdependence between education and politics should not be understood in purely empirical categories. For that relation involves more fundamental question concerning the place and function of truth in social and political life. The dispute concerning the nature of politics, education and their mutual interrelation in regard to truth began within Greek philosophy and therefore even the most recent debates relating to those questions seem to merely repeat the main arguments and standpoints established by the ancient tradition. Perhaps the endless feud reflects a more fundamental question, namely the question of nature of philosophy and its actual function in the society.

The majority of contemporary philosophers referring to the interrelation of education, politics and truth support a rather peculiar, but at the same time traditional way of settling the issue, which might appear paradoxical since the main goal of contemporary continental thought is to keep its distance from the philosophical tradition. Jacques Rancière and Alain Badiou represent the intellectual current aiming at a radical transformation of traditional solutions; however, their attitude towards philosophical heritage is more complex and

deeper than just a critical reflection. Badiou's and Rancière's works reveal that both of them established an ambiguous relation towards tradition, which, on the one hand, they attempt to transform, but which, on the other hand, they still remain closely connected to. However, in some cases their entanglement in the philosophical tradition remains latent and as a result they both risk transferring old and unwanted arrangements. The question remains, though, what consequences and conclusions stem from Rancière's and Badiou's standpoints.

The main trait of Rancière's and Badiou's approaches to the problem of education is its inherent normativity and its relevance for politics. Regardless of the discrepancies in their approaches both Rancière and Badiou make the same theoretical gesture, namely they establish a philosophical isomorphism between education and politics. That step can be interpreted as a way of challenging philosophical tradition, since both thinkers try either to redefine the concept of education (Rancière) or change the function and place of philosophy (Badiou) concurrently conserving the fundamental relation between education and politics. It should be pointed out, however, that the connection between these two areas cannot simply be limited to empirical issues of adjusting education to the requirements of politics. That analogy reveals the fundamental mechanism applicable to both politics and education alike.

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Upon a maturer reflection there follows the conclusion that contemporary outlook regarding education focuses on the impact of neoliberal economy on education as well as on politics. Protagonists of the critical attitude generally point to the destructive influence of neoliberalism on fundamental norms of democratic society. The process of the dismantlement of democratic state, depriving it of its democratic institutions and organizations, involves also the use of education as the necessary foundation of democratic society. Contrary to critiques of neoliberal rationality, Badiou and Rancière stress a more elementary connection between education and politics and treat the former as a model for the latter. In Rancière's writings emerges a strong connection between his reflection upon education and democracy, and even Badiou in one of his essays, devoted to his endless debate with Rancière, uses the term "ignorant schoolmaster" referring to the formula explaining essential differences between Rancière's standpoint and his own approach. However, the above mentioned oxymoron can be actually treated as the key or a summary of Rancière's thought.

The figure of an “ignorant schoolmaster” is the stance taken by Rancière in the discussion concerning equality as main goal of the educational process. By evoking the historical example of Joseph Jacotot, Rancière questions the popular perception of the place and function of emancipation in the process of teaching. It should be emphasized, though, that Rancière aimed both at the traditional concept of teaching and at the progressive one, whereas his perspective on the mode of thinking regarding education within the framework of the educational process can be summarized as follows: indeed, there is no difference between the strictly conservative approach and the more progressive one. From Rancière’s point of view they share the same fundamental conviction concerning the proper place of equality. The progressive approach fathoms equality as the aim of a learning process, while according to Rancière equality is to a large extent the necessary presumption of every process of education, not its consequence. Thus it can be observed that he reversed the elementary assumptions concerning the prime goals of education.

Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta in their book on Rancière’s concept of education noted that three types of educational concepts can be distinguished: the traditional, the progressive and the critical. Regardless of differences among the various concepts they all remain deeply connected with the tradition of the Enlightenment.¹ At the same time, Bingham and Biesta rightly claim that all three perspectives on education tend to use the same scheme linking truth to education. It can be argued that there is another common element linking these approaches, namely the student-master relation. Despite certain discrepancies between them, they remain faithful to the scheme presented in the first paragraphs of the article. As already mentioned before even in the writings of modern education model adversaries, like Foucault, the master-student model relation is still present. The initial asymmetry underlying the relation is recognized as the core mechanism of every learning process. The initial interdependency should finally be overcome, but the main problem, at least for Rancière, is that we assume that inequality is natural and to some extent beneficial. Moreover, the conviction that we need inequality is present

1 Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, Continuum, London-New York 2010, 110–111.

even in very radical standpoints like the one developed by Ivan Illich. What may be surprising, though, is the fact that the author of *Deschooling Society*² presents himself as the protagonist of quite a conservative vision of knowledge transmission. As a matter of fact, Ivan Illich put up a set of truly revolutionary and surprising proposals regarding social transformations based on institutional education. Additionally, Illich stressed the necessity of introducing the democratic dimension into our thinking and, more importantly, the necessity of acting within the existing social institutions. Notwithstanding the emphasis put on the implementation of democratic rules and egalitarian learning webs, Illich seemed to have retained the old concept of mastery. His critique focuses on the dismantling of the artificial system of knowledge transfer, which is the main reason for his interest in alternative and more egalitarian modes of learning and teaching. However, regardless of his efforts Illich still conserved the core element of the learning process in the person of a master. His argument aims at disclosing the fact that the modern, institutionalized learning system leaves no place for true masters, replacing them with educators who practically act as administrators of the learning system. We can thus legitimately ask whether we are able to think of a learning process without making direct reference to the person of the master.

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It is worth demonstrating that even in Rancière's perception of egalitarian education we can find a residue of the master. In consequence, we can argue that inequality connected with the person of a master is indeed a necessary element of the learning process. According to Rancière, the history of Western education offers an example of a successful experiment in radical egalitarian education conducted by Joseph Jacotot, who created and implemented a method of universal teaching. *Prima facie*, his method seems to be absurd, for it presumes that anyone can be a teacher, even without knowing the domain of their teaching. A teacher or, following Jacotot's terminology, the "ignorant schoolmaster" can, according to Jacotot, successfully teach students just by encouraging them to make an effort and assisting them actively in their own learning process.

2 Ivan Illich, *Deschooling society* (Harlow Books, 1973), accessible at: <http://www.ecotopia.com/webpress/deschoolingillich.pdf>.

Here is what Jacotot's experiment involved. The French academic lecturer and pedagogue from the turn of 18th century was, by sheer concurrence of events, forced to teach French to non-francophone students. What made the situation even more complicated was the fact that Jacotot himself did not speak Flemish. Nevertheless, he made the decision to carry out a teaching experiment. In order to perform that challenging task he chose a bilingual edition of Fénelon's book and with the help of a translator he continued to relentlessly encourage his students to read and analyze the book with the aim to try and deduce the meaning of words, phrases and eventually whole sentences and then paragraphs. Then he asked the students to express their opinions on the book, expecting them to use the target language only and he shortly realized that they were able not only to comprehend the content of the chapters they studied, but also made visible progress at mastering the French language by frequent and systematic practice because they were made to express their opinions solely in French. Quite surprisingly, even for their teacher, they were able to complete the task at hand and get their message across in the target language.³ Therefore, in face of that experiment, there emerges a vital question: is the person of a teacher really indispensable in the process of learning? In fact, Jacotot's students were left to themselves with a challenging task and minimal support of a bilingual edition of the book, but the essential work, however, was accomplished by them themselves in an unassisted teaching arrangement.

For Rancière, Jacotot's experiment is more than simply an atypical teaching technique, because the concept of universal teaching which evolved from Jacotot's peculiar experience is by Rancière consequently interpreted as the metaphor of a new type of emancipation. According to his theory, teaching does not require any specific competence or skills: anyone can, thus, become a teacher enabling others to self-teach themselves. For Rancière, Jacotot's universal method of teaching brought to light the essence of the process of emancipation, since for both Jacotot and Rancière the process of self-education poses a path leading to intellectual autonomy. However, one must realize that there exists an immense difference between traditional and new outlook on

3 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2007, 8–10.

the nature of emancipation. Traditionally, emancipation was perceived as a process of achieving autonomy through knowledge transmitted to a student, while within the new model the student is expected to learn by himself, and thus the transfer of knowledge from the knowledgeable master to an ignorant student does not occur. Consequently, there appears a question: what does then make a teacher?

Contrary to the traditional mode of perceiving equality, Rancière considers it a *conditio sine qua non* of education. However, on what ground can it be assumed that there is no difference between the teacher and the student? Rancière, following Jacotot's thought, claims that equality of intelligence denotes that humans seen as speaking subjects remain equal in terms of the educational potential. Rancière further states that: "In order for the ignorant one to do the exercises assigned by the master, the ignorant one must initially understand what the master says. There exists an equality of speaking beings which comes before the relation of inequality, one that sets the stage for inequality's very existence."⁴ Hence, equality in Jacotot's and Rancière's perspective refers to the fact of belonging to the shared world of meanings. It seems clear now that both models: the traditional one and the one proposed by Jacotot, focus on different spheres of understanding education as a social process. While the traditional one was interested in the sphere unknown to the student, the other one is directed towards the common ground of shared ability to understand each other.

It may seem that emancipation – intellectual as well as political – always constituted a crucial element in the Western tradition. Suffice it to recall the best-known myth of the cave, where we find all the elements of the traditional approach to the issue of intellectual emancipation, namely: there is a master who upon his own emancipation returns to the cave in order to free his unenlightened companions.⁵ The master from Plato's tale is characterized by his epistemological superiority (he knows the truth) and moral obligation to enlighten others. Apparently, the mentioned model of emancipation does not in-

4 Jacques Rancière, "On Ignorant Schoolmasters", in: Bingham and Biesta, *Jacques Rancière*, 5.

5 At this point we could ask why the master was able to emancipate himself while the others need him to start the process of their emancipation.

volve anything controversial because its goal is emancipation and enlightening others which in turn leads to the establishing of equality. However, as Bingham and Biesta notice, the situation is more complicated. They wrote: "The first contradiction is that although emancipation is oriented towards equality, independence and freedom, it actually installs *dependency* at the very heart of the 'act' of emancipation. The one to be emancipated is, after all, dependent upon the intervention of the emancipator, an intervention based upon a knowledge that is fundamentally inaccessible to the one to be emancipated."⁶ Biesta and Bingham emphasize that dependence intrinsic to the modern project of emancipation achieved through educational process has not only an epistemological character, but is also of emotional or moral nature. It produces a subject emancipated by another, more informed and better skilled subject, who is, furthermore, obliged to be grateful for receiving his emancipation. Eventually, emancipation of an individual creates a relation of indebtedness and as a result the supposed emancipator thus becomes a debtor (creditor).⁷

Rancière claims that the main goal of Jacotot's model is emancipation defined as a permanent act where the parties become conscious of the equality they acquire. However, it remains questionable whether the new model of emancipation offers a truly equal master-student relationship? Rancière repeats after Jacotot that only a person who already is emancipated is in turn capable of emancipating others. Therefore, if being emancipated is a necessary condition to encourage others to follow that path, it can thus be interpreted as a new form of division between an inferior mind and a superior one, which Rancière rejects in the classic model of education. In fact, he seems to replace the teacher's intellectual advantage over a student by means of the superiority of will proper to the ignorant schoolmaster. Thus, it can be concluded that the logic of domination is not completely repealed, but only displaced to another field. Perhaps this incoherence reveals the only necessary feature of inequality

6 Bingham and Biesta, *Jacques Rancière*, 32.

7 The relation creditor-debtor was a crucial element of Nietzsche's interpretation of Western culture in his *Genealogy of Morals*. In contemporary thought his approach, combined with the economic analysis of late capitalism, is being developed by Maurizio Lazzarato. Cf. Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles 2012.

and the basic relation of power, which does not necessarily take the form of permanent domination. However, the relation of mastery understood as the so-called “positive domination” was accepted by both Foucault and Illich who, as a matter of fact, were one of the most ardent adversaries of the latent form of social power.

Moreover, the new model of education can hardly be institutionalized because of its inherently anti-methodical nature. Rancière stresses that Jacotot’s model imitates the natural way of a person’s first language acquisition thus contraposing the notion of learning with the notion of acquisition. However, that type of learning is, by definition, incompatible with any type of methodological and institutional practice. Jacotot was convinced that “universal teaching is not and by no means can be a social method and therefore cannot be propagated in and by social institutions.”⁸ Jacotot himself even warned his students against ever attempting to establish institutions or frames for universal teaching. There comes a question then what kind of social impact may the new type of emancipation have on the society? The founder of universal teaching seemed to have evaded to provide an answer to that fundamental problem or, at least, he proposed an unsatisfactory solution. Jacotot follows Kant’s distinction between being a citizen and being an emancipated individual. An emancipated individual can at the same time remain a loyal citizen, for – according to Jacotot – the state requires from its citizens to respect the law in their speech and actions, whereas thoughts, opinions and beliefs remain private matter of every individual. Jacotot’s solution seems appealing, however, it is ineffective, because there would be no advantage in becoming intellectually emancipated, unless there was a practical application of that state of mind and intellect. Unfortunately, Jacotot’s model offers an illusion of original, authentic mechanism without presenting a sufficient definition of its function and application.

Unlike Jacotot, Rancière believes that social deployment of the new model of emancipation is possible when he declares that he attempted to demonstrate that politics can be combined with the type of emancipation described by Jacotot.⁹ Regardless of his comments on the political function of the new form

8 Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 105.

9 Rancière, “On Ignorant Schoolmasters”, 9.

of emancipation, Rancière encountered similar difficulties trying to recognize the positive function of institutional order which he described as “police” that is synonymous with the established and imposed order whose fundamental role is to divide the social ground and limit the potential actions of individuals. Real politics occurs only as a breakaway with the existing order and it is not a permanent type of action, but rather a rare intervention aiming at a transformation of the state of things. Generally, we could say that politics in Rancière’s reckoning is a reflection of Jacotot’s new emancipation, and both emancipation and politics are processes occurring beyond institutional settings. It cannot be denied that both thinkers’ projects are appealing, however their real significance for political practice may eventually turn out to be quite limited because of the distance to the institutional order *per se*.

The question of institutions, state and new politics opens the floodgates to another contemporary philosopher mentioned earlier, i.e., Alain Badiou. He develops his ideas constantly referring to and juxtaposing them with Rancière’s project. Badiou rightly points out that Rancière’s endless reservation about the problem of institution and the imposed social order is inconsistent and ineffective.¹⁰ In opposition to Rancière, Badiou perceives institutional order (Badiou writes about State, however the meaning of the term is similar to Rancière’s police) as a necessary element of stabilization. Moreover, he claims that, much like Rancière, State always includes elements which cannot have proper representation within the existing order and it, thus, should not be identified with a closed totality.¹¹

Much like Rancière, Badiou also positions the axiom of equality at the beginning of every emancipation project; he shares with Rancière the conviction that true political and emancipatory act is always destructive to a certain extent, but at the same time he argues that Rancière’s philosophy fails to provide an efficient concept of emancipation. Badiou further emphasizes that Rancière’s approach appears to be apolitical because the philosopher disregards the need for organization and institution. The emancipatory process is described by Rancière in terms of interpersonal relation or – in the case of

10 Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, Verso, London-New-York 2005, 110.

11 Alain Badiou, *The adventure of French Philosophy*, Verso, London-New York 2012, 121.

political acts – as intervention in the field of the sensible, while Badiou claims that the most important question for contemporary politics of emancipation is to find a new form of popular discipline which would make it possible to unify different groups.¹² For Badiou, political action and emancipation requires some form of organization in addition to a clearly set goal. It seems Badiou rightly reckons that Rancière's vision of political action and emancipation is empty. Unfortunately his own standpoint seem to follow the same line: it gives promises which cannot, however, be kept, and therefore it is questionable whether his own proposition of politics is able to fill the void in Rancière's approach. Although it is hard to determine whether the project of proletarian aristocracy described and developed by Badiou actually overcomes inconsistencies and shortcomings of Rancière's model, his numerous texts on ignorant schoolmaster's figure constitute an undeniable critical value.

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Democracy in education and democratic politics became one of the most vital concerns of the contemporary continental thought, although they were at times treated as purely empirical issues, like in Illich's and Lyotard's books, where school or university (Lyotard) appears to be the focal point of cultural and sociological analysis. Recently, with Rancière's and Badiou's or Foucault's contribution the problem of education became the key to understanding the fundamental rules or presuppositions determining the ways our societies and politics function. Education as a philosophical and historical concern of contemporary philosophical thought is one of the most popular themes of critical reflection aiming at ultimate disclosure of important and to some extent negative or even destructive elements of the Western culture. However, we should also bear in mind that most writings which belong to that current also bring along ideas of transformation of the existing order. In many cases philosophers

12 "The question of discipline is therefore fundamental, just as it is for an army. You cannot win the war if people do whatever they like, if there is no unity and so on. The problem for emancipatory politics today, however, is to invent a non-military model of discipline. We need a popular discipline. I would even say, as I have many times, that 'those who have nothing have only their discipline.' The poor, those with no financial or military means, those with no power – all they have is their discipline, their capacity to act together. This discipline is already a form of organization." Cf. Alain Badiou, "We Need a Popular Discipline." *Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative.* *Critical Inquiry* 34.4 (2008), 650.

go as far as to offer distinct guidelines regarding the direction in which particular institutions are supposed to alter and evolve. Additionally, apart from clear-cut programs of social transformation, there are examples of very sophisticated thoughts which imply reinterpretation of the basic ideas and concepts, while at the same time fail to provide the necessary means to implement these alterations. However, the diversity of standpoints should not obscure the common ethical and theoretical choice.

Despite all the disparities and dissimilarities in their philosophies, Illich, Foucault, Rancière and Badiou seem to share a central value of the governing politics of equality. Notwithstanding all possible discussion on the matter, alongside the endless debates regarding the status of equality, there is still room for some commonly shared agreement concerning its value and meaning. In addition to the question of equality, there exists another equally important issue, namely the link between education and politics (democracy). In conclusion, it appears that all the above mentioned philosophies are surprisingly unanimous in determining the ultimate goal of social and political order. Moreover, the idea of full and complete equality, sometimes recognized as utopian, preserves its normative and determining role. And, last but not least, there remains the question of interrelation between politics and education. In this respect, all discussed philosophers are more indebted to the Western tradition than they are ready to admit. Even if, as it in Rancière's or Illich's projects, we begin with the dismantling of existing institutions assuming their destructive impact on individuals and society, it needs to be recognized that these institutions eventually tend to establish a better form of education which could consequently shape a new emancipated individual. Hence, the fundamental conviction that every political community requires a specific tool to format individuals, remains intact.

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