

2008

What if Democracy Really Matters

Claudia Ruitenberg
University of British Columbia, Canada

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec>

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ruitenberg, Claudia (2008) "What if Democracy Really Matters," *Journal of Educational Controversy*. Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://cedar.wvu.edu/jec/vol3/iss1/11>

This Article in Response to Controversy is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer-reviewed Journals at Western CEDAR. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Educational Controversy by an authorized editor of Western CEDAR. For more information, please contact westerncedar@wwu.edu.

ARTICLE

What If Democracy Really Matters?

Claudia Ruitenberg

University of British Columbia

What if. . .

What if, in order to examine the phrase *schooling as if democracy matters* in North America, we—scholars and readers—turn not to the more obvious American theorists of democracy and schooling, such as John Dewey or, more recently, deliberative theorists such as Amy Gutmann or critical theorists such as Peter McLaren, but to the French radical philosopher of democracy Jacques Rancière? What if Rancière compels us to think quite differently, even controversially, about democracy? And what if, as a result, we reject the very possibility of schooling as if democracy matters, not because democracy does not matter, but because it is fundamentally at odds with the institution of schooling?

. . . equality?

The logic of the “what if” is at the heart of Rancière’s philosophy, particularly in the form “what if equality?” Rancière, now Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the University of Paris VIII, studied with Louis Althusser and co-authored *Lire le Capital* with him in 1968, before breaking with him over the 1968 student protests. Rancière was particularly interested in the tensions between Marxist interpretations of working-class, or proletarian, life, and the lived experience of working-class life. According to Kristin Ross (2007), translator of and commentator on Rancière’s work, the “profound gesture of non-identification with one’s supposed being or condition,” such as the refusal of workers’ experiences and actions to fit into the categories that Marxist theorists devised for them, permeates Rancière’s work.

His various texts—which, on the surface, seem to be about disparate topics such as pedagogy (e.g., *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 1987/1991), politics (e.g., *On the Shores of Politics*, 1992/1995), and aesthetics (e.g., *The Future of the Image*, 2003/2007)—share a concern with equality not as ethical or political ideal, a condition yet to be achieved, but as a principle from which to think and act. Instead of operating as if inequality is the case and equality a desirable but elusive ideal, Rancière posits equality as the condition that makes inequality possible, and suggests we operate from the assumption of equality. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987/1991), he writes,

It is true that we don’t know that men are equal. We are saying that they *might* be. This is our opinion, and we are trying, along with those who think as we do, to verify it. But we know that this *might* is the very thing that makes a society of humans possible. (p. 73)

If “men” might be equal, what happens if they are treated as such?^[1] What new possibilities emerge when one ceases to take inequality as basic condition? In the words of Ross (1991):

What if equality, instead, were to provide the point of departure? What would it mean to make equality a presupposition rather than a goal, a practice rather than a reward situated firmly in some distant future so as to all the better explain its present infeasibility? (p. xix)

In his 2002 Afterword to *The Philosopher and His Poor* Rancière writes in even stronger terms:

Equality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. To pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they

promise they will abolish. Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom—or it is nothing. (p. 223)

In this short essay, I engage Rancière's thought experiment, in order to see what challenges this radical philosophy of equality and democracy poses to those who seek to improve democratic education in schools. What if equality were an axiom in education? And more specifically, what if equality were an axiom in democratic education?

Equality, for Rancière, is central to democracy, and he insists that neither equality nor democracy can be a quality of societies or states. "Democracy is the paradoxical power of those who do not count: the count of 'the unaccounted for,'" writes Rancière (2000, p. 124). In other words, democracy is the radical equality of "men" asserting themselves, in spite of the inequality of the society in which they are citizens. Rancière (1987/1991) distinguishes "man" from citizen and asserts that "there is no equality except between men, that is to say, between individuals who regard each other only as reasonable beings. The citizen, on the contrary, the inhabitant of the political fiction, is man fallen into the land of inequality" (p. 90). The school pupil, the inhabitant of the pedagogical fiction, can likewise be considered "man fallen into the land of inequality." In order to explain this seemingly outrageous claim, let me follow Rancière's reasoning in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, all the while keeping in mind that his argument there is not intended

to propose a new pedagogy. There is no 'Jacotist' pedagogy.^[2] Nor is there a Jacotist anti-pedagogy in the sense that we ordinarily give to that word. In brief, Jacotism is not an educational thought that one could use for reforming the school system. (Rancière, n.d.)

In other words, my analysis of Rancière's thought does not serve to improve schooling by making it more democratic, but rather to illuminate why schooling as if democracy matters is not viable, and to propose, instead, that democracy and equality require that we *teach so that democracy may enter*.

Schooling vs. Universal Teaching

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière (1987/1991) recounts the insights of nineteenth century teacher Joseph Jacotot, who realized by chance that the assumption of equal intelligence worked as a self-fulfilling prophecy. Jacotot was a lecturer at the University of Louvain in what today is Belgium. When he was asked to teach some Flemish students, although he spoke only French and no Flemish (Dutch) at all, he resorted to the first bilingual text he could think of: the novel *Télémaque* by François Fénelon (1699), and suggested that the Flemish students "learn the French text with the help of the translation" (p. 2). The results of this experiment far exceeded his expectations and, as a consequence, his pedagogical beliefs were deeply challenged.

Prior to this experiment born of necessity, Jacotot had believed that good teaching required explication, the pre-digestion of the curriculum by breaking the material down into bite-size chunks and feeding it to the pupils "according to an ordered progression, from the most simple to the most complex" (Rancière, 1987/1991, p. 3). After seeing that his Flemish pupils, without any explication on his part, were able to teach themselves the novel *Télémaque* and write excellent French commentaries on the book, he realized that "the logic of the explicative system had to be overturned" (p. 6).

The explicative system proceeds from an assumption of inequality: "To explain something to someone is first of all to show him he cannot understand it by himself" (p. 6). By assuming that one is superior and acting upon that assumption, one does not express a pre-existing inequality but rather inaugurates it, calls it into being. "Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the

parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones. The explicator's special trick consists of this double inaugural gesture" (p. 6).^[3]

Instead of the explicative system, central to schooling, Jacotot proposed "universal teaching," which is based on the realization that "there is no one on earth who hasn't learned something by himself and without a master explicator" (Rancière, 1987/1991, p. 16). There is still a place for teachers in universal teaching, but the difference between teachers and students is one only of *will*, not of *intelligence*. In the process of explicating the material to the student, the explicating teacher keeps the student aware of her or his intellectual inferiority:

The master always keeps a piece of learning—that is to say, a piece of the student's ignorance—up his sleeve. I understood that, says the satisfied student. You think so, corrects the master. In fact, there's a difficulty here that I've been sparing you until now. What does this mean? asks the curious student. I could tell you, responds the master, but it would be premature: you wouldn't understand at all. It will be explained to you next year. (p. 21)

The teacher who uses the method of universal teaching, by contrast, assumes that the student is capable of learning and understanding and simply tells the student to study the work. Instead of holding the student back from learning under the guise of protecting her or him from the frustration of encountering material that is too difficult too soon, universal teaching encourages the student to use the same intelligence s/he has used for learning many other things without explication: by paying close attention, comparing and verifying. Using the example of the novel *Télémaque*, Rancière sketches the following scene of universal teaching:

Take it and read it, [the teacher] says to the poor person. I don't know how to read, answers the poor person. How would I understand what is written in the book? As you have understood all things up until now: by comparing two facts. Here is a fact that I will tell you, the first sentence of the book: 'Calypso could not be consoled after the departure of Ulysses.' Repeat: 'Calypso,' 'Calypso could'... Now, here is a second fact: the words are written there. Don't you recognize anything? The first word I said to you was Calypso: wouldn't that also be the first word on the page. Look at it closely, until you are sure of always recognizing it in the middle of a crowd of other words. [Etc.] (pp. 22-23)

Again, we must remember that Rancière is not recounting Jacotot's experience as some sort of best practice to be implemented in contemporary French education. Rather, he is analyzing the consequences of Jacotot's radical assumption of equal intelligence (although not equal will or equal attention) between all persons. That for many educators today the second scene above seems quite counterintuitive confirms, for Rancière, that assumptions of inequality, captured in theories of developmental stages and explicative pedagogy, remain dominant. The pedagogical scene of universal teaching illustrates that the assumption of inequality underpinning explicative pedagogy is not simply the representation of the fact of inequality, but rather a generative hypothesis of inequality that can be replaced by the hypothesis of equality. Put differently: teaching *as if people are equal* can be substituted for teaching *as if people are unequal*.

Teaching as if people are equal, however, cannot become the guiding principle of schools or school systems. Although moments of universal teaching may occur in classrooms in spite of their institutional context, schools and school systems as a whole are state institutions predicated upon ideas of social order. In a manner reminiscent of Foucault's analysis of schooling, Rancière (1987/1991) explains, "Whoever says order says distribution into ranks. Putting into ranks presupposes explication, the distributory, justificatory fiction of an inequality that has no other reason for being" (p. 117). Because the social order of institutions is driven by the assumption of inequality, "universal teaching

isn't and cannot be a social method. It cannot be propagated in and by social institutions" (p. 105). The best schools and other institutions can do is to get out of the way as much as possible and leave room for universal teaching to occur between persons. Democracy cannot be a principle guiding schooling for the same reason that universal teaching cannot be a principle guiding schooling: Both universal teaching and democracy are expressions of equality, while schooling is not.

Society vs. Democracy

Having provided only a glimpse of Rancière's ideas about democracy, in this section I will describe these ideas in more detail, in order to arrive at the difference between schooling as if democracy matters and teaching so that democracy may enter. In *Hatred of Democracy*, Rancière (2005/2006) reasserts that the concept of *democracy* in his writing signifies something different from *democracy* as it is used by many other political theorists:

Democracy is neither a form of government that enables oligarchies to rule in the name of the people, nor is it a form of society that governs the power of commodities. It is the action that constantly wrests the monopoly of public life from oligarchic governments, and the omnipotence over lives from the power of wealth. (p. 96)

This is more than a definitional move to distinguish his writing from that of other authors. Rancière insists that democracy is never a stable state of affairs, but rather a principle of equality that is affirmed only when it is enacted. Similar to his analysis of explication as a gesture that inaugurates inequality, democracy here is posited as action that inaugurates equality. Democracy can be enacted only by persons who enact their freedom and equality. This, in turn, is possible only when those persons are operating in their capacity as men and women rather than as members of institutions, e.g., as citizens, teachers and pupils, since the institutions and their forms of membership are based on assumptions of inequality.

Rancière often refers to the *secessio plebis* (literally, "withdrawal of the commoners") on the Aventine Hill in Rome (494 BCE), to remind the reader that democracy is an enactment rather than a state of affairs. Rancière (2004) emphasizes not the plebeians' withdrawal from the city to the hill, but their demand to be recognized and heard as persons:

Plebeians, gathered on the Aventine Hill, demanded a treaty with the patricians. The patricians responded that this was impossible, because to make a treaty meant giving one's word: since the plebeians did not have human speech, they could not give what they did not have. They possessed only a 'sort of bellowing which was a sign of need and not a manifestation of intelligence.' In order to understand what the plebeians said, then, it had first to be admitted that they spoke. And this required a novel perceptual universe, one where—contrary to all perceptible evidence—those who worked for a living had affairs in common with free men and a voice to designate and argue these common affairs. (p. 5)

The plebeian secession on the Aventine Hill is emblematic of democracy as enacted equality or, more precisely, as "the symbolic institution of the political in the form of the power of those who are not entitled to exercise power—a rupture in the order of legitimacy and domination" (Rancière, 2000, p. 124). Schooling as state institution is firmly inscribed in the "order of legitimacy and domination." Since the principle of schooling is inequality, schooling as if democracy matters would mean, in Rancière's work, something self-contradictory like *practicing inequality as if equality matters*. Following Rancière, democracy, when it is enacted, does not enhance or ameliorate schooling but rather intervenes in it and refuses the inequality inaugurated by schooling.

Before I go on to sketch the difference between schooling as if democracy matters and teaching so that democracy may enter, let me say a few words about the phrase *institution of the political* that I quoted above. Similar to his use of the concept of democracy, the *political* for Rancière is not a descriptor of the formal social sphere or the institutions and practices of government others might refer to as *politics*. Instead, for Rancière (2000),

the essence of the political is dissensus; but dissensus is not the opposition of interests and opinions. It is a gap in the sensible: the political persists as long as there is a dissensus about the givens of a particular situation, of what is seen and what might be said, on the question of who is qualified to see or say what is given. (p. 124)

In their emphasis on disagreement and dissensus rather than agreement and consensus as the essence of the political, Rancière's ideas converge with those of Chantal Mouffe, who also focuses on conflict and disagreement. Although Mouffe's conception of disagreement is somewhat different from Rancière's, her conception of the political as "the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 15) and "constitutive of human societies" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 9) positions her beside Rancière in critiquing dominant deliberative conceptions of democracy and politics.^[4]

I emphasize Rancière's and Mouffe's agonistic or disagreement-oriented conception of the political because it is uncommon in political education today. Most commonly, political education, or education for democratic citizenship, employs a deliberative conception of democracy and politics; i.e., it is focused on rational decision-making and agreement rather than disagreement and questions of power. In order to hear the challenge Rancière's work poses to teachers concerned with equality and democracy, we should be willing to rethink the conceptions of democracy and the political that guide our teaching. What if democracy matters so much that we are willing to rethink democracy and recognize it as the enactment of equality? What happens to schooling as if democracy matters when democracy is recognized as "the instituting of a quarrel that challenges the incorporated, perceptible evidence of an inegalitarian logic" and "the power of the people with nothing, the speech of those who should not be speaking, those who were not really speaking beings" (Rancière, 2004, p. 5)?

Teaching and Learning so that Democracy May Enter

In asserting a difference between schooling as if democracy matters and teaching so that democracy may enter, I emphasize the notion of entrance. Schooling as if democracy matters suggests that democracy is already in place as a model of government, however imperfectly executed, and that we should make this model matter more. With Rancière, I want to emphasize that democracy is never in place but always *enters*; it enters the scene of inequality, in schooling or other institutions; it inserts itself, intervenes and interrupts. Democracy cannot be institutionalized, in schools or otherwise, so if democracy really matters, perhaps the best that can be done at the institutional level of schools and school systems is not to seek to offer democratic education, but rather to leave a space where democracy may enter.

Jacotot, in his time, insisted that "universal teaching belongs to families, and the best that an enlightened ruler can do for its propagation is to use his authority to protect the free circulation of the service" (Rancière, 1987/1991, p. 103). Today, perhaps the best that "enlightened rulers" in school administrations, school boards and ministries can do is to use their authority to protect the spaces where women and men, girls and boys, can manifest the fundamental equality of their intelligence, and their agency as free persons, capable of observing, recognizing, and verifying.

If democracy really matters, those who have a voice in schools and school systems can ask themselves

what structures currently prevent democracy from entering the scene and equality from asserting itself. For instance, who are “not really speaking beings” (Rancière, 2004, p. 5) in scenes of schooling? How might they institute the political in schools by raising questions about “what is seen and what might be said” and about “who is qualified to see or say what is given” (Rancière, 2000, p. 124). Raising questions about who is seen and heard, and who is considered qualified to see and speak, is precisely what Pedro Noguera (2008) did when he asked school administrators in marginalized communities whether they were truly ready for parent engagement: “Are you ready for poor parents *to behave like middle-class parents*?” What Noguera was getting at was not that poor parents should act like middle-class parents because these middle-class ways are the standard for how poor parents should act in schools. What, in effect, he asked school administrators was: Are you ready for poor parents to assert their equal intelligence, and are you ready for the shift in the “division of the sensible”—the division between those who can be seen and heard and those who cannot—that this will inaugurate?

Today, increasingly, those without *evidence* of schooling, whether they are the students themselves, their families, or school workers, are “not really speaking beings” in scenes of schooling. They are the educational equivalent of *sans papiers*, or undocumented aliens; uncertified and unaccredited, their insights into the assumptions of inequality that guide schooling, and their understandings of teaching and learning are heard as, to borrow Pierre-Simon Ballanche’s (1830) description of the Aventine secession, a “sort of bellowing which was a sign of need and not a manifestation of intelligence” (as cited in Rancière, 2004, p. 5).

In *Hatred of Democracy* Rancière (2005/2006) analyzes the contemporary elitist hatred of democracy, which consists in a disdain for the people’s assertion of our/their fundamental equality as men and women. Put succinctly, “Individuality is a good thing for the elites; it becomes a disaster for civilization if everybody has access to it” (p. 28). In the name of democracy, the opportunities for the enactment of democracy are further and further reduced:

Our governments’ authority thus gets caught in two opposed systems of legitimation: on the one hand, it is legitimated by virtue of the popular vote; on the other, it is legitimated by its ability to choose the best solutions for societal problems. And yet, the best solutions can be identified by the fact that they do not have to be chosen because they result from objective knowledge of things, which is a matter for expert knowledge and not for popular choice. (p. 78)

The authority of schools and school systems is caught in the same two opposed systems of legitimation: on the one hand, parents are told to assert their right to choose their child’s school, and to influence curricular decisions; on the other, they are told that schooling is so complex these days that it is best left to the experts. Only the experts can determine whether their child has a learning disability; only the experts can assess what educational software produces the best results on standardized tests; only the experts can tell parents how they should support their child in her or his homework. What the experts cannot tell parents and other non-experts is why we/they should not enact democracy and assert our/their fundamental equality as women and men. For that, “faith is required. The ‘ignorance’ that people are being reproached for is simply [a] lack of faith” (Rancière, 2005/2006, p. 81).

What if democracy really matters? What if men and women *sans papiers* have more faith in their equal intelligence and less in the experts? What if we/they inaugurate equality by speaking where we/they are supposed to have no voice? What if democracy enters the scene of schooling and disrupts the order of rank, degree, and inequality? What if?

References

Gutmann, A. & Thompson, D. (1996). *Democracy and disagreement*. Cambridge MA: The Belknap

Press of Harvard University Press.

Mouffe, C. (2000). Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism. *Political Science Series*, 72, 1-17.

Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. New York NY: Routledge.

Noguera, P. A. (2008, March 24). *The schools we need: The role of education in developing and empowering marginalized communities*. The John Dewey Society Annual Lecture, presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York.

Rancière, J. (1987). *The ignorant schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation* (K. Ross, Trans., 1991). Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Rancière, J. (1992). *On the shores of politics* (L. Heron, Trans., 1995). New York NY: Verso.

Rancière, J. (1995). *Disagreement: Politics and philosophy* (J. Rose, Trans., 1999). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rancière, J. (2002). Afterword. *The philosopher and his poor* (A. Parker, C. Oster, & J. Drury, Trans.). Durham NC: Duke University Press.

Rancière, J. (2004). Introducing disagreement. *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, 9(3), 3-9.

Rancière, J. (2005). *Hatred of democracy* (S. Corcoran, Trans., 2006). New York: Verso.

Rancière, J. (2003). *The future of the image*. (G. Elliott, Trans., 2007). New York NY: Verso.

Rancière, J. (n.d.). Sur « Le maitre ignorant ». *Multitudes: Bibliothèque Diffuse*. Retrieved on June 22, 2007, from <http://multitudes.samizdat.net/article1714.html>

Rancière, J. & Panagia, D. (2000). Dissenting words: A conversation with Jacques Rancière. *Diacritics*, 30(2), 113-126.

Ross, K. (1991). Introduction. In J. Rancière, *The ignorant schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation* (K. Ross, Trans.). Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Ross, K. (2007, March). Kristin Ross on Jacques Rancière. *ArtForum*. Retrieved on June 22, 2007, from <http://artforum.com/inprint/id=12842>

Notes

^[1] Rancière follows the masculinist bias of the writing of Jacotot and his nineteenth-century contemporaries. I will follow Rancière, and, rather than correct this bias by inserting [*sic*], I will lift the term out of the fabric of the text through quotation marks.

^[2] ‘Jacotist’ is a reference to Joseph Jacotot (1770-1840), about whom I say more in the following section.

^[3] The influence of Althusser’s work on “interpellation” is noticeable in Rancière’s analysis of the “inaugural gesture” of the pedagogue.

^[4] See Mouffe's (2000) "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism" for a more detailed critique of especially Habermas' (and Habermasian) and Rawls' (and Rawlsian) deliberative approaches. Another way of getting at the distinction between deliberative and agonistic conceptions of democracy and politics is Rancière's (1995/1999) distinction between politics, on the one hand, and the police (*la police*) or police order (*l'ordre policier*), on the other. For example, deliberative theorists Gutmann & Thompson (1996) explain that they are concerned with democratic politics in the sense of the institutions and procedures for making, justifying and revising public decisions. Rancière (1995/1999), by contrast, refers to such institutions and procedures for making, justifying and revising public decisions, including "the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution" (p. 28) as "police," reserving "politics" for the moment in which "the count of parts and parties of society is disturbed by the inscription of a part of those who have no part" (p. 123).