Rancière, Public Education and the Taming of Democracy
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Edited by
Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein
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As Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, the editors of this monograph, explain Jacques Rancière from the very beginning of his career has pursued the philosophy of democracy and its relations and implications for equality and education in novel ways that began by splitting with Louis Althusser over the significance of the events of 1968. As his biography at the European Graduate School puts it: ‘He first came to prominence under the tutelage of Louis Althusser when he co-authored with his mentor Reading Capital (1968). After the calamitous events of May 1968 however, he broke with Althusser over his teacher’s reluctance to allow for spontaneous resistance within the revolution.’

Jacques Rancière was born in Algiers in 1940 and he grew up with the Algerian War. He is Professor Emeritus at the Université de Paris (St. Denis) and currently Professor of Philosophy at the European Graduate School where he conducts an Intensive Summer Seminar. One of the attractions of his work for educational philosophers is that it has been explicitly pedagogical even though his oeuvre is difficult to place. As Kristin Ross makes clear:

Ranciere’s books have eluded classification. His treatise on history, The Names of History: On the Poetics of Knowledge (Les Mots de l’histoire: Essai de poétique du savoir, 1992), angered or bewildered historians but was embraced by literary critics. The volume by Ranciere most read by artists, it seems, is not his recent work on aesthetics–The Politics of Aesthetics (La Partage du sensible: Esthetique et politique, 2000)–but a little book I translated sixteen years ago called The Ignorant Schoolmaster (Le Maitre ignorant, 1987). An extraordinary fable of emancipation and equality, it tells the story of a schoolteacher who developed a method for showing illiterate parents how they themselves could teach their children to read. Set in the post-Revolutionary period, it was written at the height of the hypocrisies and misdeeds of Reagan, Thatcher, and Mitterand—the moment when consensus first comes to be taken for granted as the optimum political gesture or goal, and disagreement or contradiction vaguely, if not explicitly, criminalized.

In an interview for Radical Philosophy in 1997 Ranciere explained the starting point for his trajectory:

Given the historical and political conjuncture of the 1970s, which I certainly did not foresee, I wanted to look again at certain of the concepts and conceptual logics that Marxism used to describe the functions of the social and the political. For me, that wish took the form of a decision, which might be
described as purely empirical, to look at the contradiction between the social and the political within the working-class tradition. Basically, I wanted to know how Marxism related to that tradition. I wanted both to establish what that working-class tradition was, and to study how Marxism interpreted and distorted it. For many years I took no more interest in philosophy. More specifically, I turned my back on what might be called political theories, and read nothing but archive material. I posited the existence of a specifically working-class discourse. I began to suspect that there was once a socialism born of a specifically working-class culture or ethos. Years of work on working-class archives taught me that, to be schematic about it, ‘working-class proletarian’ is primarily a name or a set of names rather than a form of experience, and that those names do not express an awareness of a condition. Their primary function is to construct something, namely a relationship of alterity.3

Rancière engages with the philosophical tradition and with his contemporaries in unusual ways and he subsequently developed in the *The Politics of Aesthetics* a description of the the logic of police order stifles political thinking and activity by prescribing our sensibilities. Liberation from the logic of police order by attempting to redistribute what is perceived is based on the notion of universal equality. Aesthetics for Rancière is related to ‘the distribution of the sensible’—‘a way of mapping the visible, a cartography of the visible, the intelligible and also of the possible’ where free speech emerges as a form of transgression and as a basis of the politics of aesthetics that forms political communities by establishing what can be said and done.4

I am delighted to offer a Foreword to this monograph *Rancière, Public Education and the Taming of Democracy* which brings together eleven essays by a group of prominent international scholars. Both Rancière and this volume expertly edited by Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein are bound to become more important to educational philosophy and theory in the coming years.

Notes

1. For his biography at the European Graduate School see his Faculty page http://www.egs.edu/faculty/jacques-ranciere/biography/.

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Introduction: Hatred of Democracy ... and of the Public Role of Education?

MAARTEN SIMONS & JAN MASSCHELEIN

Introduction

Democracy and equality through (and in) education appears to be a major concern today: the organisation of democratic schools, the development of competencies for democratic citizenship and participation, policies on equal opportunities ... . Most of the current initiatives assume that the reduction of inequality and the development of democracy are essentially policy concerns and objectives, and a matter of organisational reform or curriculum reform. The French philosopher Jacques Rancière does not take this (policy, organisational, curricular) concern for democracy, inclusion and equality for granted. Indeed, he is somehow a provocative voice in the current public debate; he wants to challenge the insistence on current procedures of deliberative democracy, participation, consensus and agreement (e.g. On the Shores of Politics (2007a); Hatred of Democracy (2007b)), as well as the taken for granted (unequal) pedagogic relation between master and pupils (e.g. The Ignorant Schoolmaster (1991)). Instead of merely criticizing current practices and discourses, the attractiveness of Rancière’s work is that he does try to formulate in a positive way what democracy is about, how equality can be a pedagogic or educational (instead of policy) concern, and what the public role of education is (since equality and democracy are for Rancière closely related to ‘the public’).

The aim of this book is twofold. First, it is an introduction to the political and educational ideas of an author who is not well known in the field of educational theory and philosophy—although he is one of the leading philosophers in and outside France. Second, the contributions not only present scholarly work ‘on Rancière’, but attempt to explore ‘in line with Rancière’ the current concern for democracy and equality in relation to education. Before we introduce the different contributions to this book, we briefly indicate some of the main tenets of Rancière’s work as well as some of his basic ideas that can help us to clarify the overall focus of this book.

Of Masters, Intellectuals and Inequality

As a brilliant student of Louis Althusser at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris in the 1960s, Rancière immediately set the tone for his future work when he distanced himself radically from his ‘master’ in La leçon d’Althusser published in 1974.1 This work indicated a general line of argument that has continued throughout his subsequent work. As one of the leading Marxist theorists at that time, Althusser had been very critical about the