

Book Review / Recension d'ouvrage

Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation

by Charles Bingham & Gert Biesta

New York: Continuum, 2010, 176 pages.

ISBN: 978-1-4411-9095-6 (HB), 978-1-4411-3216-1 (PB)

Reviewed by

Sardar M. Anwaruddin

PhD Student, OISE, University of Toronto

In the title under review, Bingham and Biesta show how Rancière's thought sheds light on various dynamics of power and oppression in (the name of) education and how Rancière's logic of emancipation enables us to interrogate the existing approaches to anti-oppressive and emancipatory pedagogies. The traditional notion of emancipation implies that the person to be emancipated will be free from oppression as a result of the act of emancipation. Therefore, anti-oppressive education focuses on freeing students who are marginalized by various forms of domination. In contrast to this, Rancière provides a radically different view of emancipation. For him, emancipation is the opposite of stultification, which happens "whenever one intelligence is subordinated to another" (Rancière, 1987/1991, p. 13). This notion of emancipation unearths a fundamental contradiction in the contemporary approaches to anti-oppressive education that install dependency, inequality, distrust, and suspicion in the *processes* of emancipation. These processes keep those to be emancipated "dependent upon the intervention of the emancipator, an intervention based upon a knowledge that is fundamentally inaccessible to the one to be emancipated" (Bingham & Biesta, 2010, p. 31).

The book begins with a chapter written by Rancière in which he defends a position he took in his earlier book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* that "the most important quality of a schoolmaster is the virtue of ignorance" (p. 1). Rancière describes a teacher, Joseph Jacotot, who demonstrated that "uneducated people could learn on their own, without a teacher explaining things to them, and that teachers, for their part, could teach

what they themselves were ignorant of” (p. 1). From the ideas introduced in this chapter, Bingham and Biesta choose six themes—emancipation, the child, inclusion, recognition, truth, and speech—and elaborate on them in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two deals with the notion of emancipation, which, as an important goal of the critical tradition of education, urges educators “to make visible what is hidden for those who are the ‘object’ of the emancipatory endeavours” (p. 26). Rancière is critical of this logic of emancipation because in this mode of thinking, “the ones to be emancipated remain dependent upon the ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’ revealed to them by the emancipator,” and thus it creates “a fundamental dependency” (p. 26). This logic creates inequality between those to be emancipated and the emancipators.

Chapter Three draws on Rancière’s ideas regarding children with specific focus on learning one’s mother tongue. He calls it the most difficult apprenticeship because a child learns a “foreign” language without a teacher and this language is then called her or his mother tongue. Learning this mother tongue is also a political act because “the child must force his or her will onto another in order to be understood in a way that reconfigures the distribution of the sensible” (p. 59).

In Chapter Four, the authors present Rancière’s conceptions of democracy and inclusion. They argue that recent discussions on inclusion in education are “actually about the construction of a particular police order and of the insertion of those outside of this order into the order” (p. 82). In the end, those who are already *inside* the order assume the power to guard the borders and set entry conditions for outsiders. Rancière’s emphasis on equality is not simply a plea for inclusion because adding more people to the existing order will not be beneficial unless there is a qualitative change.

Chapter Five delineates Rancière’s thoughts on education that “offer a concrete way to understand that current debates over recognition in political philosophy are actually part of a stultifying pedagogy that is more policing than political” (p. 86). In a *pedagogicized* society, all lessons for recognition take place in an explicative fashion and start with a binary of equality and inequality.

In Chapter Six, the authors argue that all three major approaches to education—traditional, progressive, and critical—“have a view of truth that stems from Enlightenment, objectivist thought” (p. 111). For the traditionalists, there is the objective truth, and students must seek it as an educational goal. The progressivists believe that we must share truth in a pragmatic way, and the critical educators claim that “the truth isn’t so

easy to attain because it is hidden behind a veil of ideological obfuscation” (p. 111). Arguing that none of these approaches to truth “is *educationally* grounded” (p. 111), the authors turn to Rancière who has “a more agnostic version of truth that does *not* normally get promulgated by education” (p. 112). Truth cannot be told and explained; it is a whole and it becomes fragmented during explanation.

In Chapter Seven, the authors analyze three words—learner, student, and speaker—with reference to their implications for education and emancipation. The label “learner” connotes that a person is lacking or not yet complete. Thus, the need of an educator’s intervention on the transition from ignorance to knowledge assumes equality as a destination and treats students as incapable of learning for themselves. Bingham and Biesta summarize Rancière’s arguments that “the only thing that is needed, therefore, is to remind people that they can see and think for themselves” (p. 138).

In the concluding chapter, the authors wrap up their arguments by showing how explanation works at different levels in society. The explicative order always offers a promise that things will be better in the future, that situations will be changed if those who lack the knowledge follow the explanations. Rancière (1987/1991) argues that “what stultifies the common people is not the lack of instruction, but the belief in the inferiority of their intelligence” (p. 39). His extraordinary thoughtfulness helps us see how the contemporary approaches to emancipatory education take an *explicative order* by viewing equality as a destination, not a starting point.

Reference

- Rancière, J. (1991). *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five lessons in intellectual emancipation* (K. Ross, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. (Original work published 1987)