Highlighting the Importance of Education and Work in Rancière

An Encounter with:

[Jean-Philippe Deranty and Alison Ross, eds. *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene: The Philosophy of Radical Equality*. London and New York: Continuum, 2012. 269 pages.](#)

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Given the recent proliferation of English-language commentary on the thought of Jacques Rancière, it is appropriate that the title of this recent collection pairs the philosopher's name with the "contemporary scene." That there has been so much written about Rancière over the past few years necessitates a "lay of the land," and in their selections for this volume Deranty and Ross offer such a view. As the subtitle suggests, the editors use their introductory chapter to position the collection around the performative nature of equality in Rancière's work:

Equality for Rancière cannot be demonstrated through induction or deduction; it can only be verified locally and problematically in practice ... in other words, the practical verification of equality aims to achieve 'real life' effects, but in all necessity is also waged in discourse and in thought, and thus necessarily enrolls the theorist in its process.
(1)

This final point is one that I want to emphasize, as I believe it to be critical for philosophers and social theorists who assess, analyze, and extend of Rancière's philosophy in our own work.

In much of his writing Rancière is quick to criticize the entire history of political philosophy. This can easily be read as a condemnation of theory in general, but that would put him in the strange position of a performative contradiction. It is true that Rancière never offers

any kind of unified theory of politics or aesthetics, but his works always retain a theoretical component. The rejection of political philosophy plays a certain role for him, and is a rejection of a concrete history of a specific way of trying to explain or justify societal arrangements; it is not a rejection of any abstract theoretical category.¹ His works take up particular issues or localized practices and attempt to see how equality can make itself manifest. Though Rancière often leaves it implicit in his work, these localized interventions of his are sensitive to the role of the theorist and her role in shaping and constituting the situation itself. This is exactly the type of necessary demonstration of equality noted by Deranty and Ross in their introduction.

It is illuminating to compare this collection with two other recent volumes of essays on Rancière's work, *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics*, edited by Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (2009), and *Reading Rancière*, edited by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp (2011). The essays contained in these volumes cluster primarily around politics and aesthetics, with history present in a secondary role, and sociology making the occasional appearance. All of the contributions on offer in Deranty and Ross's text are of a high quality, but there are two elements of the present volume that make it stand out in comparison with these other new releases: the question of education and the significance of work.

The first distinguishing feature of *Jacques Rancière and the Contemporary Scene* is the inclusion of a discussion of education, a crucial element of Rancière's thinking that is often either ignored altogether or only attended to in a cursory way. Though only the focus of one essay, Caroline Pelletier's "No Time or Place for Universal Teaching: *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and Contemporary Work on Pedagogy," its placement between the first section of essays on aesthetics and the subsequent section on politics is instructive. Deranty and Ross make brief note of this in their introduction, drawing a parallel between, on the one hand, the fact that Pelletier's

essay comes at the midpoint of the volume, and on the other, their claim that the progression of Rancière's work hinges on the notion of "universal teaching" (see 8). This is an important insight because it hints at the overall cohesion of Rancière's corpus in a way that doesn't get recognized enough. There is no essay on education in either of the two aforementioned collections on Rancière's work. Furthermore, of two recent monographs on Rancière's work there is only a discussion of education in one: Oliver Davis (2010) devotes ten pages in his introduction to the topic, while Joseph J. Tanke (2011) is altogether silent. The one exception to this trend is *Jacques Ranciere: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, by Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta (2010).

My point is not in any way to condemn these other works. Rancière's writings have, since the mid 1990s, been dominated by the twin themes of politics and aesthetics, so it is no surprise that these two themes are responsible for the vast majority of the secondary literature. What I do want to insist upon, however, is the essential relevance of the education question to an understanding of how Rancière's writings fit together as a coherent whole. This is a point that Pelletier's piece implies through the paths of discussion that it opens to some of Rancière's other works. I will make some of these links explicit later when I turn to a fuller discussion of Pelletier's essay.

The second element that distinguishes Deranty and Ross's book comes at the end of the collection in Deranty's own contribution *and* through Rancière's response to this piece. This is another element of Rancière's corpus that receives too little attention, although it is significant for a few reasons. Rancière's education was steeped in Marxism, so it is no surprise that the theme of work plays a role in his philosophy. He has, however, rejected much from his teacher, Althusser, most notably the notion of the intellectual vanguard. Since he has moved away from being any kind of straightforwardly Marxist philosopher, however, his relationship to work he

become less clear. Though he often references work in terms of the laborers that would be recognizable to orthodox Marxists, Rancière wants to broaden its meaning and significance. His rejection of the traditional Marxist notion of work is most obvious in the rejection of such Marxist standbys as false consciousness and conceiving of the proletariat as a class. Yet, work is a mainstay in his political writings up to the present day. Deranty's essay is an attempt to take stock of Rancière's consistent invocation of work in order to see if there is something more to it than merely a series of loosely connected historical examples. He is investigating whether there is a robust concept of work.

The first section of *Contemporary Scene* concerns Rancière's relationship to aesthetics. The first two of these four essays focus on film, and are described by Deranty and Ross as "case studies of the visual arts" (8). J.M. Bernstein's "Movies as the Great Democratic Art Form of the Modern World (Notes on Rancière)" argues for the equal validity of narrative and image (16). Though Bernstein affirms the democratic nature of film along with Rancière, his thesis pushes back against Rancière's privileging of the image in much of his aesthetic writings. Lisa Trahair's "Godard and Rancière: Automatism, Montage, Thinking" then takes up the specific case of director Jean-Luc Godard's video essay *Histoire(s) du cinema*. She challenges Rancière, on his own terms, to take account of the singularity of cinema as presented by Godard. That is, she wants to ask, how does the cinema think? (44).

Dmitri Nikulin's "The Names in History: Rancière's New Historical Poetics" moves from film to a discussion of narrative more broadly. The essay takes up Rancière's project in *The Names of History* to rethink the ways that we write the history of those who have been previously excluded from it (67). This is a theme familiar from Rancière's better-known political writings. That is, how do we account for new voices becoming audible and intelligible where

they were once silent or ostensibly absent? Nikulin uses the essay to make the case that “Rancière’s new historical poetics supplies a new narrative that should justify those previously excluded from history by giving the dispossessed their place in history or, rather, making history the place for them” (84). The problem with this, on Nikulin’s view, is that narrative is afforded primacy over names. Instead, Nikulin argues, it is the proper names that “constitute the properly historical,” and that should be “preserved, organized [and] supplied and clarified by a narrative” (85). In making this move, Nikulin builds nicely upon Rancière’s own insights in order to make his analysis even more democratic.

The final essay on aesthetics is Alison Ross’ “Equality in the Romantic Art Form: The Hegelian Background to Jacques Rancière’s ‘Aesthetic Revolution.’” Ross argues that Rancière is a critical heir to Romanticism, even while distancing himself from that movement through his emphasis on words over things. In marking this inheritance through reference to Hegel, she is able to make the case that Rancière’s revision of Romanticism is able to give weight to certain forms of experience that would otherwise remain formless (98).

Returning to the theme of education, Pelletier’s analysis of trends within contemporary work on pedagogy underscores exactly how Rancière’s thinking on education is able to tie together many other elements of his work. Pelletier’s discussion of J.P. Gee’s work with online gaming communities is one example that is representative of the overall methodology of the article. Gee makes the case for these online communities as being a step ahead of other ways of thinking about communities of learning because of what he calls “porous leadership” (107). This makes for a more active and critical learning environment, one without the formal distinction between teachers and learners, and therefore no formal authority either. These communities work

towards being more participative, inclusive, and authentic, communities that are ultimately based in a shared ethos (108).

At first glance, these “communities of practice” look like exactly the kind of thing that Rancière would endorse, or at least recognize as showing the practical application of his thoughts on education. Pelletier shows, however, that even the seemingly radical notion of the removal of formal hierarchies falls into the trap of positing a future goal to be realized—exactly the notion that *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is keen to deny. Pelletier writes, “it is the positing of a shared ethos as the goal of learning, to be realized at some point in the future, which is refused in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. And it is this refusal which, I think, makes it appear perpetually out of date” (108). This last remark about the untimely nature of Rancière’s thoughts on education is nicely thematized throughout the essay. Pelletier highlights this point when she notes, “what binds the schoolmaster to the student is not a common set of values, interests, or sensibilities to be achieved by the student in some future, but confrontation between what is common, and over what is common” (109). Rancière makes this very point in his political writings, arguing that it is the very definition of what is common or public that is at stake in politics.² This connection between education and politics in terms of the public and its stakes makes clear that Rancière’s thoughts on education ought not be abstracted from the rest of his work.

Deranty and Ross make note of this untimeliness almost immediately in their introduction when they note the performative nature of Rancière’s texts. They write, “it is, in fact, impossible to dissociate the conceptual tenor of Rancière’s claims from the context and manner in which they are articulated” (1). Rancière himself makes this point explicit when he describes his various works as being so many polemical interventions into specific contexts (Rancière, “A Few Remarks” 114-116). That his work is untimely stems from the fact, noted above, that his writings

are polemical interventions. They don't proffer prescriptions or methodologies, but instead offer critique by way of the presupposition of equality. This is exactly the kind of point emphasized above regarding the role of the theorist.

One other connection that arises from Pelletier's discussion is between Rancière's work on education and his work on aesthetics. Rancière's notion of the "emancipated spectator" (from the essay of the same name) is built around the idea of active spectatorship. He begins the essay going back and forth between Brecht and Artaud and their differing takes on emancipatory theater. But then, instead of taking a side in the debate he has initiated, he provides a third view that opposes the other two. In doing so he moves beyond the confines of the theater, "[revoking] the privilege of vitality and communitarian power accorded the theatrical stage, so as to restore it to an equal footing with the telling of a story, the reading of a book, or the gaze focused on an image. ... An emancipated community is a community of narrators and translators" (Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator* 22). This point is another way of putting Rancière's rebuttal to Gee, in the aesthetic context instead of the educational. Pelletier's essay opens up some pathways for discussion that have been neglected in the secondary literature, which makes the essay especially rewarding. She provides some of the groundwork for thinking about how Rancière's thoughts on education resonate with his writings on politics and aesthetics, as well as offering a reminder that education is not a secondary theme in his work, but a primary idea.

The final section of Deranty and Ross's volume focuses on politics, and can be broken up into three pairs of articles. The first pair consists of essays from Todd May and Paul Patton, who both make contributions consistent with their work elsewhere. May's "Rancière and Anarchism" serves as a microcosm of May's recent work on Rancière, which makes the case for Rancière as a contemporary inheritor of the anarchist tradition. May was the author of the first single-author

English-language book on Rancière, *The Political Thought of Jacques Rancière* (2008), and since then has been one of the most prominent voices in the secondary literature. Here, he continues to make his case for the relevance of anarchist politics in the contemporary political scene, using Rancière as the figure who best embodies this stance. But this means unpacking the claim that Rancière makes in *Hatred of Democracy*: “Democracy first of all means this: anarchic ‘government,’ one based on nothing other than the absence of every title to govern” (117). May glosses this by writing, “to say that anyone is entitled to govern, however, is not the same thing as saying that no one is entitled to govern. Instead, it is to say that everyone is *equally* entitled to govern” (119). The upshot gives the people a level of participation and self-determination that moves beyond the limits of representative government (123, 127). This latter description is at the heart of classical anarchism, though May updates it using Rancière’s framework to remove all vestiges of determinism or essentialism that were prevalent in the nineteenth century iterations.³

Paul Patton’s contribution, “Rancière’s Utopian Politics,” is an extension of his work on post-structuralism and utopian political philosophy. Patton identifies Rancière’s redefinition of “politics” with definitions given by Deleuze and Foucault (133). The connection to the post-structuralist utopian political philosophy emerges insofar as Rancière’s redefinition of politics, in a certain restrictive way, “repeats certain theoretical gestures common to other French post-structuralist thinkers” (129). The aim of the essay, then, is to investigate the limits of this approach, specifically its efficacy as a form of intervention. As a more critical approach to Rancière’s philosophy, it pairs well with May’s piece, which sees Rancière’s definition of politics as a virtue. It also situates Rancière within post-structuralism, a relationship that is sometimes ignored.⁴

Rancière often remarks that politics, as he defines it, is something that happens rarely. That is, the kind of intervention into oppressive social orders that defines his “politics” is not something that happens very often. Patton’s worry is that Rancière’s redefinition of politics cannot bear the desired weight. He also questions what he sees as Rancière’s assumption that all instances of politics are positive ones: “Why is the reverse hypothesis not equally plausible? Why should we not allow that the reappearance of atavistic antagonisms directed at other races and other religions is entirely political in Rancière’s sense of the term?” (143). Rancière’s writing can be elliptical or vague, and so invites questioning. While I do think that there are at least partial answers to all of these questions, they must certainly be asked. Patton does well to ask them so that the answers will be as fruitful as possible for understanding Rancière’s political philosophy.

The second pair of essays in the text’s final section shifts to Rancière’s relation to two figures within political philosophy from whom he is often at great pains to distance himself: Arendt and Marx. Accordingly, Andrew Schaap and Emmanuel Renault argue that the divide that Rancière insists upon between himself and these figures is overstated. Schaap’s aim in “Hannah Arendt and the Philosophical Repression of Politics” is to show why Arendt and Rancière are articulating political projects that remain kindred spirits. The issue is not whether there are differences between the two philosophers—surely there are. The virtue of this essay is how Schaap shows that there very important similarities as well, similarities that Rancière more often than not ignores. These include a disavowal of political philosophy (145), avoiding the reduction of political questions to a discussion of government (146), and an understanding of politics as aesthetic in nature (147). The primary way Rancière distances himself from Arendt is in his

denial that there exists a proper sphere of politics. Schaap sums up these connections when he writes,

Arendt and Rancière both want to avoid philosophy's characteristic repression of politics, which arises because philosophy treats politics as a problem of government. Rather than a philosophy of right, therefore, they each turn to aesthetics to understand the conditions of possibility for action and appearance. (165)

That Arendt and Rancière each take this insight in different directions is not cause to avoid conversation between the two thinkers. The divide between them is not overcome by the end of the essay, but Schaap's analysis shows that we must rethink how we interpret their differences.

In the subsequent essay, "The Many Marx of Jacques Rancière," Renault takes up Rancière's relationship to Marx. Marx is the historical figure most readily associated with Rancière due to the latter's association with Althusser. What complicates matters is that Rancière effectively broke with his former teacher with his 1974 book *Althusser's Lesson*. In subsequent books, such as *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983), Rancière heavily criticizes Marx for the way he describes the proletariat. Rancière's relationship to Marx and Marxism is therefore a vexed one. Renault sets out to map the terrain of Rancière's differing critical engagements with Marx over the years, effectively showing that, though he is certainly not Marxist in any orthodox sense, Rancière's most strident critiques of Marx belie an intimate connection to Marx's philosophy. Despite the many shifts in Rancière's own thought throughout the course of his career, he has often used his changing relationship to Marx as a way to articulate his own views, meaning that the dialogue between the two thinkers is critical to a full understanding of Rancière's philosophy. It is this insight that Renault is so adept at bringing to light.

I want to close by returning to what I identified as the second distinguishing element of this collection, engaging the third pairing of essays in the political section: Deranty's, "Work in

the Writings of Jacques Rancière,” along with Rancière’s response. This focus on work is significant because, like the question of education, it is one that is not often discussed in the secondary literature. This essay also builds nicely on the previous one, since a discussion of the changing role of work in Rancière is another dimension of the changing role of Marx. Deranty’s thesis is that it is a mistake to read the changing nature of Rancière’s discussion of work as a diminishing of the importance of work. Instead, as Rancière moves away from heavily thematizing the idea of work in his writings, “the question of work continues to cast a long shadow in his later writings” (187). If we are able to recognize why this is, Deranty thinks, we can gain a richer understanding of Rancière’s project. The key is to reinterpret the fact that in his later writings Rancière discusses work mostly through specific historical examples that are meant to be indicative of the theoretical point he is trying to make.

On Deranty’s reading of Rancière’s entire corpus, and the way that discussions of work shift throughout, it becomes clear that instead of being just one set of examples among many possible ones, work is the paradigmatic form of egalitarian politics through and through for Rancière (202-203). The way that this resists falling back into a reductive form of Marxist theory of class is in the way that Deranty sees Rancière reformulating the notion of work, similar to how he reformulates the notion of politics. Deranty puts in the following way: “We could say that work, taken in a thick sense (as culture and experience) is the negative ground of politics for Rancière: without reference to it, the interpretation of political struggle risks remaining abstract; but the reference to it cannot be in any sense positive, lest the movement is sociologized, essentialized and thereby depoliticized” (204). This opens up those working within Rancière’s paradigm to transpose this thick sense of work onto a multitude of forms of struggle. More work

certainly needs to be done to work out exactly how this would work, but Deranty begins that project here.

The collection's final essay is Rancière's response to the Deranty piece, "Work, Identity, Subject." It is notable because he all but acknowledges the centrality of work in the way described. He spends the essay going through the different ways that he has engaged with the idea of work, explaining how it relates to his different projects. As informative self-reflection it is a nice companion piece to Rancière's 2009 essay in *Parallax*, "A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière."

Overall this is a rewarding collection, and a welcome addition to the growing secondary literature on Rancière. In covering a wide array of topics within Rancière's thought, the contributions are able to make more than one unique contribution to the field. Hopefully this is a signal that the literature is beginning to widen its discussions of all aspects of Rancière's philosophy, beyond his notion of politics. The collection also lives up to its title, effectively making connections between Rancière's work and many facets of our contemporary scene: from debates in education to the possibilities of political activism; from film, that most contemporary aesthetic form, to rethinking our own place within historical narratives; and finally, to thinking about work, which not too long ago was the epitome of an outdated and narrow focus for social and political thinking. The volume shows its worth in pointing out how work, education, and these other categories can be rethought for our contemporary world and its struggles, in doing so pointing the way toward broadening the discussion of each.

Notes

¹ More space than is available here would be necessary to spell all of this out, but suffice to say that Rancière thinks of the history of political philosophy as just so many attempts to institute police orders. See “Ten Theses on Politics.”

² For more on this it would be helpful to consult Rancière’s discussion on *dissensus* in “Ten Theses on Politics.”

³ This is a project that May began with *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (1994).

⁴ Rancière has a few essays dealing with different aspects of Derrida’s and Deleuze’s work, and sometimes references Foucault to frame his ideas, but he does not spend very much time situating himself within “French Thought.”

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