# The Emancipated Student: Rethinking Knowledge, Equality and Democracy

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**Abstract**

This paper's ambition is to act as a short memento for novice language teachers. It is based on a reflexive practice that stems from my personal work experience as secondary school language teacher. Drawing upon Jacques Rancière's portrayal of the paradoxical relation between explanation and emancipation, and Gaston Bachelard's notion of epistemological obstacle, the article aims at giving way to a reflexion on the challenges of teaching a foreign language to a group of students coming from a particular cultural linguistic background in a secondary school. According to this perspective, which breaks away from common sense, the difficulties to learn of new language should not be understood in terms of lack or impairment, but rather as the presence of an a priori significant knowledge. From this alternative way to engage with education research emerges a political argument that does not envision equality between teachers and learners, and their emancipation, as a postponed goal, but instead as a presupposition to any democratic teaching practice.

**Keywords:** Language Teaching – Reflexive Practice – Crisis in Education – Epistemological Obstacle – Jacques Rancière – Emancipation

## Introduction

The series of thoughts exposed in this paper is based on my experience as English teacher in a francophone public high school in Schaerbeek, a very multicultural district in Brussels with an important Turkish community. As a consequence, the Turkish language is present intra- and extra-muros, from home to the classroom, passing by the baker's shop and the playground. As a beginning language teacher I was thus facing, on one hand, a majority of students who would benefit from the advantages of bilingualism, moving from French to Turkish, and vice versa, according to the circumstances – like many of their other comrades with an immigration background. On the other hand, in some minor but still significant cases, I witnessed disequilibrium in the mastery and use of the two languages. To be more precise, there was a clear dominance of the use of the mother tongue over the use of French. If this phenomenon was not a subject for concerns in the private social spaces, it might become problematic at school.

Before going further, it is important to clarify from this early stage that this essay – which will find, I hope, a watchful, but also lenient readership – is trying to offer an exhaustive and quantitative study of a complex phenomenon. I would like the reader to avoid any simplistic and fatalistic reading of the remarks of this essay, or to attribute to it any similitude with a theory of *social-cultural disability*.[1] Indeed, I do not intend here to offer a reductionist portrait of the uses of the two

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[1] The studies from this current that emerged in the 1980s usually offer a very miserabilist and unidimensional depiction of the situation. Usually, they consider that the cause of the difficulties to learn that some students has to be found in the existence of a cultural deficiency in the domestic environment. Gerard Chauveau and Eliane Rogovas-Chauveau compares this perspective to what "Pierre Bourdieu calls 'the logic of the stigma'" *(la logique du stigmate)*: it refers to 'representation judgements' (underperforming at school is seen as a characteristic of the working classes) (1995: 67).

languages, but it does not take too long to understand the impact of this issue in the relationship between students and teachers in the Belgian francophone educational system where, like in many other countries, the (official) language is the basis of the pedagogical methods and culture taught to and by the teachers.

Therefore, it should not surprise the reader to comprehend my first impressions as a novice teacher, confronted to the (omni-) presence of another language that supplants the official language of the institution. In the first semester, I content myself with the passive position of the "observant": after only a few weeks of teaching, it was obvious that some students were struggling, even when I was using French to explain some simple grammar points. It is only in the second semester, when I was appointed head master of one of the classes – a position that comes with a certain moral responsibility – that I felt that I had to move from observation to a position that requires an understanding of the mechanisms of the causes of this situation, and eventually help the students to go over it. It is only from that moment, by lifting a bit of the veil, that I had a glimpse of the immense challenge that awaited both students and teachers.

## On the Issue of common sense

By focusing on this specific phenomenon, I realised progressively that the obstacles were not purely linguistic, but were in certain cases, also based on *ideological* roots. It is worth to insist that I am using expressly "ideological" rather than "cultural" to avoid the reasoning of some theorists or education professionals that think that "if there are deficiencies, one just need to fill the gap and the problem will be solved. One needs, according to a well-known catchphrase, 'provide to those who have less' (*apporter à ceux qui ont moins*). If the problem is identified in terms lack, the response will therefore be in terms of supply" (Fijalkow, 2000: 148). The latter comes usually in forms of reinforcement classes, which usually demands a lot of effort for a very small advancement because it does not address directly the main challenge of those students: the transfer of competences and knowledge they have acquired in private spheres into the learning methods of the class room.

A critique of a "cultural disability" theory would therefore interrogate the meaning those students give to what happens at school. Indeed, the acceptance of the *common sense* of the educational system – its symbolic order – can be seen as a new opening up to the world be understood, which might also be experienced as a rupture with what they already knew. The concern for the teachers and educators is thus to avoid insofar as possible that this rupture, this passage, becomes an abandonment or "betrayal" (*trahison*) of their community (Marage 2010: 130). On the symbolic level, their mission is thus to ensure that this rupture is not experienced as a betrayal, but rather as a *crisis*. This crisis has to be understood in the old Greek way: a critical moment when one understands her contingent condition – as a subject to a pre-existing world – and has to make a choice – as agent of this same world that brings something new to it. As Hannah Arendt points out:

"A crisis forces us back to the questions themselves and requires from us either new or old answers, but in any case direct judgements. A crisis becomes a disaster only when we respond to it with performed judgements, that is, with prejudices. Such an attitude not only sharpens the crisis but makes us forfeit the experience of reality and the opportunity for reflection it provides" (2006: 171).

This phenomenon is experienced by all human subjects as part of their process of personalisation, their participation in the symbolic and social functions that both inscribe them and potentially allow them to escape the intersubjective frame of what French sociologists since Auguste Comte traditionally call social cohesion or *le vivre ensemble*. Besides, it is worth noticing that this process in modern societies is intrinsically interwoven in the process of literacy and education, with the school as indispensable institution. Of course, these elements are not new to hear of the majority of young teachers trained to work in the pedagogical framework of public schools: most of this narrative is taught in the teaching degree programmes.

Nonetheless, as I have already mentioned, many of the young teachers are disconcerted when confronted to the learning difficulties of some students that come from a non-native socio-cultural backgrounds. Their intuitive reaction is usually to reduce these obstacles in learning to a kind of social-cultural disability present in the domestic milieu of these students, and later interpret them as a deficiency or even a refusal to access the *sens commun* (commun sense) necessary their education, and lato sensu to their socialisation. This scenario is usually reinforced by the fact that some students would justify their presence at school by very pragmatic reasons: a school degree is a just necessary to get a job. This utilitarian representation of the education institution is often surprising for a young teacher passionate about the education, even humanistic, mission entrusted to her or him. The reaction would then be one of frustration, discouragement or even anger: why do *these* students do not seize the opportunity given to them?

I take the opportunity here to tell a short anecdote that illustrates well my remarks. On the third week, after starting to teach, seeing that there was a small group of students slightly older than the other students – some of them have repeated the same class two or three times – in one of my classes (4rd year) that were always talking Turkish in class, I took the decision to follow the policy of the school board which implied forbidding students to speak Turkish, in order to favour the use of French – English or Dutch for the language classes. My main arguments were that this would improve their language skills and it would be a form of respect for the other students, the teacher and the institution. Of course, this strategy proved to be ineffective, and it did not last long before the situation escalated to the point that one day, one the students, after one of my umpteenth summons, shouted in an angry tone: "Sir, you are racist! Why don't you want us to talk *our* language? You're insulting *our* culture." When I tried to calm him down, he replied: "English is important for money and work, but *I* don't forget that it is the language of the US!" Immediately, another student, visibly in order to calm down his comrade, joined the heated discussion and added "Sir, you shouldn't bother so much…*it's too late for us*. We have been taking the same class for three years now, and as you can see: *we haven't learned anything*."

This little incident was a tipping point in my short teaching experience. Later that week, when I had the opportunity to talk about it to other colleagues in the staff room, many told me that they had heard similar discourses, and that these clashes were not exceptional in classrooms. This was a relatively clear illustration of what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coins as *symbolic violence,* which peculiarity compared to the notion of manipulation, "resides precisely in the fact that it requires of the person who undergoes it an attitude which defies the ordinary alternative between freedom and constraint" (Bourdieu, Wacquant 1998: 168). Pushing the discussion a bit further, I also realised that some of the teachers explained this defiant narrative – which it is worth to remind that it was only relevant for a very small minority of the students – in terms of "lack," was mainly due according to them to individual laziness or motivation of a category of students they called "rebels", and also to a cultural and symbolic deficiency due to the *habitus* of that particular community of the latter, to keep using Bourdieu's terminology.[1] This type of reasoning brought me back to the theory of social-cultural disability which, as I have already mentioned, delegates most of the reasons for the underperformance at school of those students to their domestic spheres.

This explanation was not satisfactory for me. First, because it seemed to make a clear cut division between private and public spaces, between home and school; then, it was based on a social deterministic narrative that is a fertile ground for a generalised defeatist attitude among teachers. This pessimistic explanation did not only give up on those students, but also favoured a stigmatisation of a certain category of students. This condescending attitude would then delegate all the responsibility for the issues to their community; and consequently, the role of teachers will be reduced to either one of "childcaring" (*gardiennage*): the school would be a safe sanctuary for the children who would not be in the streets; or it would take another route, and delegate most of the responsibility to the school, which would then need to go through a reform process to fit the special needs of particular minorities.

No need to say that one of these perspectives looked satisfying: they reminded me of what philosopher Jacques Rancière calls in *The Philosopher and His Poor* the confrontation of "the traditional republican explanation" and "libertarian pedagogism:" on one side, there is a discourse that would say "it is not school itself that excludes the children of the common people. It is their parents that do not have the means to let them keep up with it or faith in its effects of promotion;" on the other side, another narrative "incriminates the educational structure in itself. School crushes the children of the common people because its authoritarian structure reproduces the hierarchical structures of society in forming the disciplinary spirits of its future officers and troops" (2003: 171). On one side, one has to face the official discourse that patronises and devaluates those students; on the other, a sociological discourse that glorifies them.[2]

It is important to notice that as paradoxical as it might look, both narratives apply the same dualism that understands and reduces the students to their socio-cultural community, to their mode of life, to their *habitus*. In the same book, Rancière

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[1] This notion that can be understood as "a set of predispositions individuals develop to approaching, thinking about and acting upon their social worlds that they have come to learn over time as a consequence of their experiences. The more that they employ such thoughts and actions and find them to 'work' within particular social contexts, the more they become a durable and 'habitualised' part of their subconscious" (Connolly, Healy 2004:16). Bourdieu defines this key notion as "the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g., of language, economy, etc.), to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the organisms (which one can, if one wishes, call individuals) lastingly subjected to the same conditionings, and hence placed in the same material conditions of existence" ( 1977:85).
[2]

offers a convincing critique of Bourdieu's early works about state institutions (schools included) and their narratives about class struggle in society (and in education), which usually idealises the oppressed marginal, but does not grant her or him any right to take part in the struggle on the symbolic level: "the symbolic game is reserved for the rich and is merely the *euphemizing* of domination. As for the poor, they do not play. Indeed, their habitus discloses to them only the semblance of a game where the anticipated future is not what is possible but simply the impossible" (Rancière 2003:184). Said differently, the privilege to take part to the symbolic battle is only reserved to the bourgeois and the intellectuals.

**The re/formation of the emancipated mind**

Recently, other critics of Bourdieu have pointed out this contradiction in the Bourdeusian account, and took the discussion to the specific ground of education. Jean-Yves Rochex gives an alternative to the pessimistic narrative of just taking care of the students and the very ambitious and idealistic desire of some sociologists, committed admirers of Bourdieu, to "desinstitutionnalise" the school to become more democratic and fit the needs of the uncommon groups of students (Rochex: 1995, 2004; Bautier, Rochex: 1998). Without denying the need to reform the school programmes throughout time, Rochex gives nonetheless a warning with regard to an ambition that thinks only in terms of structures and not subjects and that would aim to an absolute school (*école totale*), which would be in charge of all the education and socialisation of young generations, reducing them to class determinism, without trying to investing "*how and what they are capable of thinking*" (2009: 31).[1]

In other words, Rochex argues that many sociologists – and one could add instructors – have forgotten what I am tempted to call Gaston Bachelard's very first rationalist counter-lesson in the two first paragraphs of *The Formation of the Scientific Mind,* where he points out that contrary to what Descartes thought, and after him, most of humanist thinkers, the formation of the (scientific) mind is primarily a negative process that moves forward not by adding or pilling up new knowledge, but rather by question itself and its old models in terms of obstacles to overcome:

"When we start looking for the psychological conditions in which scientific progress is made, we are soon convinced that the *problem of scientific knowledge must be posed in terms of obstacles.* This is not a matter of considering external obstacles, such as the complexity and transience of phenomena, or indeed of incriminating the weakness of the senses or of the human mind. It is at the very heart of the act of cognition that, by some kind of functional necessity, sluggishness and disturbances arise. (…) Even when it first approaches scientific knowledge, *the mind is never young. It is very old, in fact, as old as its prejudices*. When we enter the realms of science, we grow younger in mind and spirit and we submit to a sudden mutation that must contradict the past." (2002: 24-25)

This quote contains in a nutshell one of Bachelard's most important contributions to educational research by offering an alternative to the now mainstream cultural disability theory. A close understanding of his observations demonstrates that the French philosopher does not deny that students come with obstacles, but they do not come in the form of lacks and weaknesses that one finds their origins in complex structures such as their community or the authority of the school. By recognising the students' active role in the educational stage, he rather focuses on the individual and inter-individual levels. As a result, he considers that their mind is not young or lacking knowledge, but on the contrary, it is full of thoughts and ideas; and this fact needs to be taken into account in the equation in the process of acquiring knowledge.

This might sound obvious, but I do believe that it is still crucial to keep reminding again as many times at it is necessary to the *rational* teachers that learners, when confronted to a new situation, usually cling on their past empirical experience and their *intuition*:

"*Science teachers imagine that the mind begins like a lesson*. They imagine too that pupils can always make good the slapdash knowledge they have indifferently acquired just by repeating a year, and that pupils can be made to understand a proof if the teacher keeps going over it, point by point. They have not given any thought to the fact that when young people start learning physics they already possess a body of empirical knowledge. It is not therefore a question of *acquiring* experimental culture but rather of *changing* from one experimental culture to another and of *removing the abundance of obstacles that everyday life has already set up*. (…) Let us take just one example: the buoyancy of floating bodies is the

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[1] The force of Rochex's perspective is in that fact that he gets on the same ground of those sociologists, committed admirers of Bourdieu, by offering a very ambitious conceptual armada that finds convergences between the works of Vygotsky, Wallon and Lacan (Terrail 1997: 175).

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object of a familiar intuition that is shot through with errors. The activity here is more or less openly ascribed to the floating body, or rather to the swimming body. If we put our hands on a piece of wood and try to sink it, it will resist. We find it hard to ascribe this resistance to the water. It is not easy therefore to teach the principle of Archimedes so that it is understood in all its marvellous mathematical simplicity unless *we have first criticised and undermined this complex and impure body of primary intuitions*" (Ibid.: 28)

Bachelard's lesson aims at reminding the teachers what is at the heart of the mechanisms of the mind during the process of knowledge: it is not about *acquiring* a set of new facts, but rather *changing* from a "closed" rationality which is mainly based on intuition, to an "open" more rational one, based on scientific method. As Jean-Claude Filloux writes in a sort of maxim, with Bachelard "formation becomes *reformation of the mind*" (1996: 160).

Although Bachelard addresses his critique to science teachers (his colleagues), I do believe that it is also valid for any other field of study, all the more so for language teachers. Teachers should be aware of the obstacles of the students, before embarking upon moralistic conclusions about which entity, the community or the school, is at fault in the student's failure to take part in the educational system. By focusing on the intersubjective level, Bachelard recognises the importance of students' agency in the education scenario, but also sheds light on the responsibility of the teachers. His critical "theory of ignorance" (*psychologie de l'ignorance*) is not only valid for students, but also for the instructors – who have been students and actually never stop being one (Filloux 1996: 161).

Even though Bachelard does not mention explicitly the political implication of a potential symmetry between teachers and students, one can already envision a disruptive opportunity that has been envisioned by many other thinkers, like Antonio Gramsci, who has in several occasions advocated for such a symmetry, by writing that "every teacher is always a student and every student is a teacher" (1971: 350),and that "[w]e need to free ourselves from the habit of seeing culture as encyclopaedic knowledge, and men as mere receptacles to be stuffed full of empirical data and a mass of unconnected raw facts" (2000: 56-57).  The question is then: what is the *function* of the teacher?

This brings me back to the anecdote I have mentioned in the previous section. I became aware that in the eye of some of my students, I was an agent, a visible face of the authority that imposes them rules and, according to some of them, even an imperialist ideology through the language. My "rebelious" students, to refer to same terminology used by some teachers, were holding tight on a rationale very close to the one of master-student dialectic, where I was to play the villain oppressor. Fortunately, the tension cooled down when we had the parents coming to discuss the mid-semester reports. I have to admit that I was pretty nervous to meet the parents of some of the students, especially the "rebels." More specifically, I was fearing a confrontation with them, expecting them to come with horrible a priories about me and the school. This clash did not happen. Quite on the contrary. The so called lazy ones, agitators or rebels were quiet and ended up being extremely helpful. Indeed, since many of the parents did speak a very basic or broken French, the students did they best to translate what I was saying to their relatives, and vice versa. One could say that *they were not students anymore, but mediators, translators, interpreters* that were helping the two figures of authority, their parents and me, to communicate.

Somehow, we switched roles during these meetings that were actually a grey zone, where home and school meet, a zone of translation, of passage between the educational and extra-educational "intersignification" (Rochex 2009: 29). It is important to notice that this intersignification is always partial, because the student never stops being a teenager; this process is not about accepting the narrative of the institution, and forgetting about the community, but rather about potentiality, affordance and psychological plasticity.[1] The spotlight is back on the students, and what they think – or should I say *what they are capable of thinking and doing*.

But how does this answer the question about the teacher's function? It certainly does not give a direct and absolute answer, but exposes *what the teacher probably should not be*, which brings us back to the Rancièrian critique of progressive intellectuals, who despite their best-intentioned efforts, stay very suspicious of the non-intellectuals in their attempts to *explain* from their superior position to the masses what is in their best interest: "[a]ccept to submit your (lower) intelligence to my (higher) understanding today, in order to be my equal tomorrow!" (2010: 32).

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[1] As Ruth Sonderegger argues, this exchange of roles is not only is frequent but also necessary in order to keep alive what she calls "communality of collective intelligence;" its frequency is also an antidote to "the reification of emancipation as a stable position" (2014: 61)

The humanist conception of teachers as educators, a term that derives from the latin word *ex-ducere* (to lead out). This is the conception that has been at the centre of the Platonist hierarchical models that positions the educators as the agents of a superior and primordial entity (school) that will extract the pupils from their natural and enlighten their path to the realm of ideas, lead them out of the cave of ignorance to a rational and modern knowledge of the world. This vision is perfectly illustrated by Arendt when she writes:

"In education this responsibility for the world takes the form of authority. The authority of the educator and the qualifications of the teacher are not the same thing. Although a measure of qualification is indispensable for authority, the highest possible qualification can never by itself beget authority. The teacher's qualification consists in *knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it*, but his authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for that world. Vis-a-vis the child it is as though he were a representative of all adult inhabitants, pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world." (2006: 186).

In this paradigm, that goes right back to the division of labour delineated by Plato in the *Republic*, the students are always deficient and dependent of an exterior entity and should stay in their "proper" place, which is right below the masters who have the crucial task to enlighten them. According to this dialectic model, there will always be a distance –eventually it will be reduced in order to reach emancipation through knowledge – between the master and the student, between the one who knows and the one who still has to learn it. This distance in the traditional humanist narrative is usually represented as a synonym of autonomy that permits *traditional intellectuals* to exist as a category through history:

"Since these various categories of traditional intellectuals experience through an "esprit de corps" their uninterrupted historical continuity and their special qualification, they thus put themselves forward as autonomous and independent of the dominant social group. The whole of idealist philosophy can easily be connected with this position assumed by the social complex of intellectuals and can be defined as the expression of that social utopia by which the intellectuals think of themselves as 'independent', autonomous, endowed with a character of their own, etc." (2000: 303).

For Gramsci, this autonomy is a sort of cunning of reason; therefore, the central point of his works is to find an alternative to this dichotomy between traditional intellectuals (teachers) and the people (students) in the favour of what he calls *organic intellectuals,[1]* who do not talk from outside the class struggle context, imposing a preconceived ideology on a situation, but actually emerge from it and is potentially accessible to everyone:

"The problem of creating a new stratum of intellectuals consists therefore in the critical elaboration of *the intellectual activity that exists in everyone* at a certain degree of development, modifying its relationship with the muscular-nervous effort itself, in so far as it is an element of a general practical activity (…) In the modern world, technical education, closely bound to industrial labour even at the most primitive and unqualified level, must form the basis of the new type of intellectual" (ibid.: 321).

Similarly, in his seminal work *The Ignorant School Master,* Rancière formulates, without putting in doubt the genuine willingness of these humanistic positions, an alternative answer to the crisis in education. The narrative of this early book takes the form of a historical account of the "intellectual adventure" of Joseph Jacotot, who in 1815 was exiled from France to the Netherlands after the Restoration of the Monarchy, and who was a university Lecturer in Leuven. Unable to speak Flemish himself and with a class of students who did not or barely know French, he handed them a bilingual version of Fénelon's *Télémaque,* asking them to decipher the text with a Flemish translation. Quite unexpectedly, the students after a few sessions were able to write very decent essays in French; and more importantly, they did this without any form of explanation. This experiment led Jacotot to promote a radical pedagogical theory, called "Universal Teaching" (*Enseignement universel*), as an alternative the traditional methods of teaching of his epoch. Contra the traditional assumption that the teacher needs to act as an expert, an knowledge-provider on the subject that has to be transferred to fill the lack of the docile pupils, Jacotot reveals that this old model far from promoting equality, reinforces the gap between the explainer and the explainee:

"From the moment this slogan of duality is pronounced, all the perfecting of the ways of making understood, that great preoccupation of men of methods and progressives, is progress toward *stultification*. The child who recites under the threat

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[1] For a better understanding of this concept of "organic intellectuals" and its application in contemporary social and educational issues see e.g. Frétigné 2003: 166; Le Lay 2003: 30;  Spire 2006: 171

of the rod obeys the rod and that's all: he will apply his intelligence to something else. But the child who is explained to will devote his intelligence to the work of grieving: *to understanding, that is to say, to understanding that he doesn't understand unless he is explained to*. He is no longer submitting to the rod, but rather to a hierarchical world of intelligence." (1991: 8)

There is no doubt that many Bourdieusian sociologists would agree with this passage: once again, the authority is imposing a symbolic violence, very perniciously via one of its organs of authority. The explanatory method of the educational institution, on the condition of neutrality, actually divides between those who know and those who do not. In the traditional scenario, "[knowledge] is the metaphor of the radical gulf separating the schoolmaster's manner from the ignoramus's, because it separates two intelligences: one that know what ignorance consists in and one that does not" (Rancière 2009: 9).

However, it does not take long to find Rancière's voice merged into Jacotot's story, offering in the form of a crypto-narrative of his later critique of Bourdieu's relativistic scepticism towards education. Indeed, Rancière does not reject the institution, which he still considers a primordial agent for the process of socialisation, but wants to narrow down the argument from structures to an intersubjective level, because the actual point of friction is not between structures (family or school), but between individuals: "here is stultification whenever one intelligence is subordinated to another" (Rancière 1991: 13).

**Equality as a premise for a democratic education**

Masters should promote the potential of their students to think by themselves, instead of being those silencing this potential by their expert knowledge, like I did by constantly silencing my students in class "The whole practice of universal teaching is summed up in the question: what do you think about it? Its whole power lies in the consciousness of emancipation that it realizes in the master and gives birth to in the student" (Rancière 1991: 36). During the parents meeting, they have showed me what they can be capable of, if I do not silence them, if I trust them and delegate them the power to lead the meeting, if I offer them a challenge that they had to overcome by themselves. On that occasion, I did not know what my exact function was, but it was certainly not dictated, as Citton would say, by the "Old Testament of pedagogical theory:" my role was "limited to influencing the will, and did not include any actual transfer of knowledge" (2010: 27).

It is worth to mention that for Rancière, Jacotot's major contribution to this argument can be found in his presupposition that, after what he had witnessed in his class, every individual must be by nature capable of learning by her or himself. Consequently, he conceives an ontological symmetry between the master and the student:

"There is inequality in the *manifestations* of intelligence, according to the greater or lesser energy communicated to the intelligence by the will for discovering and combining new relations; but there is *no hierarchy of intellectual capacity*. Emancipation is becoming conscious of this equality of *nature*. This is what opens the way to all adventure in the land of knowledge. It is a matter of daring to be adventurous, and not whether one learns more or less well or more or less quickly. The 'Jacotot method' is not better; it is different. (…)It is thus not the procedure, the course, the manner, that emancipates or stultifies; it's the principle. The principle of inequality, the old principle, stultifies no matter what one does; the principle of equality, the Jacotot principle, emancipates no matter what procedure, book, or fact it is applied to " (Rancière 1991: 27-28)

Rancière knew that this is a counter-intuitive and powerful statement that is not limited to the question of education and its crisis, but can also have an important political implication: "equality was not an end to attain, but a point of departure, a supposition to maintain in every circumstance" (ibid: 138).

By focusing on the *will* and by choosing equality as a starting point, which cannot be observed and measured as such, Rancière risked to be labelled as an anarchist or a neo-liberal thinker. Indeed, one can say that if teaching is about the direct link between individuals (without mediation), then what are the institutions and the State standing for if not as apparatuses of oppression? But as I have already mentioned in the previous section, Rancière is less interested by the question of reforming structures than by individuals:

"Every institution is an explication in social act, a dramatization of inequality. Its principle is and always will be antithetical to that of a method based on equality and the refusal of explications. Universal teaching *can only be directed to individuals, never to societies*" (Rancière 1991: 105).

Understanding this helps to envision the audacity of Jacotot's emphasis on equality as a premise of his teaching method that through Rancière's work has become a political manifesto. As Citton asserts: "[a]ll of Rancière's writings amount to a

persistent and deepening reflection on equality in general, political equality in particular, with the principle of equality of intelligence as its foundation – a foundation drawn from his study of Jacotot's intellectual adventure" (2010: 32).

The reader has to understand that what is at stake with this reversal of the traditional explanatory model to politics is that it encapsulates quite simply a reconsideration of the traditional notion of democracy, where "the postponement of equality into a never-fully-achievable future constitutes the main trap of progressive politics" (ibid). By empowering individuals, by emphasizing on the necessity for equality to operate as a premise, and position the emancipatory potential within the agent itself, *Rancière cuts with the general notion of victims* that is omnipresent in the theory of social-cultural disability, which only leads to charity and pity for the dominated groups of people (Cerletti 2005: 87). It is also important to remind that this empowerment if it is not given or awarded – by the teachers – it has to be taken – by the student. This again implies that a Rancierian conception of equality is not a natural state, but rather a question of being able to reach it, to afford it: "[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" (Rancière 1991: 73). Rancière manages thus a very difficult tour de force by unveiling the pitfalls of the notion of democracy as it is often thought by the typical leftist intellectual, "the sociologist king" as he calls it, whose works is to explain the ignorant masses what to think, replacing the division of labour by another (symbolic) division: "in place of the *doxa*, there will be a science of rakings setting individuals in their proper places and reproduced in their judgement" (Rancière 2003: 167).

By way of conclusion, I will borrow Citton's nice formula that presents his essay on Rancière as "an attempt to rewrite Rancière's rewriting of Jacotot" (2010: 26). I should then say that in this paper – conceived as a memento for my young colleagues – I did not try to explain anything as much as I went back to my experience as teacher to rethink – I would not dare to say rewrite –  Bachelard's and Rancière's works about the master and student relationship. This relation needs, today like in the 1820s and 1930s, to be constantly reassessed in order to counter the fatalist theories that promote an "intellectual hierarchy that has no other power except the rationalisation of inequality" (Rancière 1991: 129). In order to not lose faith in his students (and herself), the novice teacher should read and follow the example of Jacotot, Bachelard and Rancière – and all the other anonymous and less famous "emancipatory masters" – who do not explain, but challenge her student, as an equal, giving her the opportunity to prove to herself, that like any other human being she is *capable to think by herself.* If she is not silenced by the belief of the inferiority of her intelligence, then maybe she will realise, by experiencing it, that "[t]hought is not an attribute of the thinking substance; it is an attribute of *humanity*" (1991: 36).

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