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PEDAGOGY AND RADICAL EQUALITY:
RANCIÈRE'S IGNORANT SCHOOLMASTER

*I would say that, if there is any chance of grasping something called
the real, it is nowhere other than on the blackboard.*

-Jacques Lacan, Seminar XVII

Plato founded his Academy in Athens in 387 BCE, and it was destroyed by the Romans in 86 BCE. The Greek ideal of education, or *Paideia*, has informed Western civilization ever since. Ancient philosophy pursues wisdom, and often does so in a quasi-religious mode whereby a master educates a disciple. The Platonic notion of education, however, is elitist and anti-democratic. The contemporary French philosopher and political theorist Jacques Rancière argues that Plato's critique of democracy prefigures and informs contemporary criticisms of the excesses of democracy.

In his book *Hatred of Democracy*, Rancière claims that politics begins "when the principle of government is separated from the law of kinship, all the while claiming to be representative of nature."¹ There is something intrinsically democratic in this separation, according to Rancière, even if later philosophers and politicians attempt to contain or undo it. "Democracy signifies a rupture with the order of kinship," he writes.² Rancière argues that societies ruled by birth or wealth are the norm, but "for politics to exist a title of exception is required" to limit the power of birth and wealth. "What remains," he claims, "is the extraordinary exception, the power of the people, which is not the power of the population or of the majority, but the power of anyone at all, the equality of capabilities to occupy the positions of government and of the governed."³

¹ Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 40.

² *Ibid.*, 45.

³ *Ibid.*, 49.

Although classical Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle follow this opening of politics as beyond birth and wealth, and stress that politicians should be educated and fully capable, they disparage democracy as an incoherent political regime because it is too democratic; it is too chaotic and undisciplined. Many elitists, both ancient and modern, follow suit.

Education is education for political life, and it is democratic when it is based on a principle of equality and open to anyone, not simply dependent on the privileges of birth and wealth. During the European Enlightenment, the modern ideal of democracy was formed as a kind of repetition of ancient democracy. Democracy as a challenge to existing political power based on wealth and birth functions as a compelling ideal, but most forms of modern democracy are limited to representative democracy, which constrains and contains the sovereign power of the people. Modern education is based on encyclopedic knowledge grounded in a regularized scientific understanding of nature that is applied to other aspects of human life. This encyclopedic mastery of knowledge also functions to liberate new bourgeois social classes based on the capitalist production of wealth from more traditional aristocratic ones based primarily on birth and inherited wealth. Later I will consider Rancière's treatment of a modern experiment in democracy that is more comprehensive, radical and direct, as detailed in his book *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. I will connect Rancière's idea of equality to Catherine Malabou's conception of plasticity in terms of contemporary pedagogy.

During the twentieth century, education has become more about the processing of information than the acquisition of knowledge or the attainment of wisdom. As James Gleick explains, information itself is a measure of chaotic randomness rather than useful knowledge. Claude Shannon and other pioneers of information theory developed mathematical algorithms to calculate the complexity of information. "The complexity of an object is the size of the smallest computer program needed to generate it," writes Gleick.⁴ The key insight is the difference between the simplicity of the computer program or algorithm and the massive amount of information it can encompass.

The growth of information technologies accompanies the intensification of corporate capitalism and the hyper-specialization of areas of knowledge, and contributes to the corporatization of the university. Knowledge is commodified as information, and few students appreciate that it is not the amount of information itself that is important, but rather the relationship that expresses the amount of information that can be captured in a simple algorithm. According to the journalist and writer Chris Hedges, "most elite schools do only a mediocre job of teaching students to question and think." Instead, our educational institutions focus on "creating hordes of competent systems managers" to oversee streams of information.⁵ We pursue a simulacrum of education that garbs itself with the illusion of wisdom even as more and more teachers and students wither under the ideological assaults on "liberal" ideas and practices in addition to the

⁴ James Gleick, *The Information: A History A Theory A Flood* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011), 337.

⁵ Chris Hedges, *Empire of Illusion: The End of Literacy and the Triumph of Spectacle* (New York: Nation Books, 2009), 89.

economic assaults on the poor and middle class. The great experiment of democratic public education for all Americans that was hastily constructed and unevenly instituted after World War II is being deliberately dismantled as more and more wealth is redistributed from the poor to the rich. We can no longer afford to educate our people.

Analogies of individual youth, growth, senescence and death to that of societies are commonplace in historical and intellectual terms. More recently, drawing on biological sciences and systems theory, we can think about populations and environments, although these concepts also have biopolitical implications.⁶ The political economy of corporate capitalism is premised on indefinite growth, but indefinite growth is impossible given a finite material resource base. Most thinking humans understand this in theory but suspend this understanding in practice and orientation. During the twentieth century, the world's population grew from about 1.65 billion to a little over six billion. Today most estimates suggest that more than seven billion people live on the planet. The rate of increase has accelerated over the last two centuries, in conformity with a massive increase in energy exploitation, mostly fossil fuels, and food production. Unfortunately, we are running up against very real ecological limits of fuel, food, fresh water and atmospheric absorption capacity of industrial emissions.

As we reach these limits that threaten the existence not simply of lavish lifestyles of first-world peoples and global capitalism, but of many species including possibly humans, we have become more and more desperate to cling to our illusions. Hedges claims that the global financial crisis and collapse in 2008 "is more than an economic and political collapse. It is a crisis of faith. The capitalist ideology of unlimited growth has failed. It did not take into account the massive depletion of the world's resources, from fossil fuels to clean water to fish stocks to soil erosion, as well as overpopulation, global warming, and climate change."⁷ As things become more desperate, or as we become aware of these problems, we know that we need new ideas. But no new ideas are forthcoming. We have exhausted our ideas in addition to our resources. Most of us do not know how to do anything other than what we have already done, and this judgment applies to our educational institutions as well.

As Gaye Tuchman explains in "Pressured and Measured", "neoliberalism has been identifying higher education as a private good" rather than a public one.⁸ As "colleges and universities have become ever more corporatized," state funding of public schools has precipitously declined. With the decline in state funding, "colleges and universities have struggled to find alternative revenue streams, such as sales and royalties from faculty inventions. Designing new regulations to promote productivity and to spur professorial compliance, they reward

⁶ See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁷ Hedges, *Empire of Illusion*, 184.

⁸ Gaye Tuchman, "Pressured and Measure: Professors at Wannabe U," in a special issue on "The Corporate Professor" in *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, Spring 2012, 19.

conformers and punish shirkers.”⁹ We do not learn and we do not teach students how to analyze, assess, evaluate, and constructively and creatively respond to these overwhelming problems. What we do is indoctrinate them into conformity, which generally means absorbing bits of information in a pre-selected manner, even as most scholars are indoctrinated into shrinking their regions of specialization so much so that they can be and become productive experts of a measurable field of knowledge.

Colleges and universities marginalize or gut the humanities and liberal arts because they do not attract money at the level of the professional schools, and they do not obviously train students to make money. “The neglect of the humanities,” Hedges argues, “has allowed elites to organize education and society around predetermined answers to predetermined questions.”¹⁰ We effectively teach students to understand, assimilate and apply structures that have failed and are in a state of collapse. The elites are elites because they know how to make money in a corporate capitalist system. “But those in charge...have run out of ideas,” because they do not know how to think, learn, and teach outside of these structures and this system.¹¹

The predominant ideology of education is a democratic ideal of equality of persons, but this is a false equality because it conceives value and worth in monetary and financial terms. The illusion is that everyone is equal, but the reality is that some people are *worth* more than others. Furthermore, this illusion of equality is subtly racist because a large proportion of wealthy elites are white, whereas the majority of the world’s poor have darker skin. The neoconservative ideology that accompanies the neoliberal redistribution of wealth from poor to rich offers more subtle and more brutal ways to stigmatize the poor and encourage people to blame them for their lack of wealth.

During the last forty years, we have seen an incredible redistribution and polarization of wealth, as the rich have gotten richer and the poor poorer in real terms. The 2008 recession with the bailouts of banks and large corporations has only intensified this process. The reason for this polarization is that as global capitalism has started to run into real limits of growth, the only way for capitalism to work is to grow in relative rather than absolute terms. The only way for elite corporations to grow and survive has been at the cost of impoverishing others, including ‘weak’ corporations and a majority of nations and peoples. As growth is now impossible in absolute terms, people in rich first-world countries have experienced the dismantling of the welfare state that was established in the wake of World War II. Privileges of wealth and birth have reasserted themselves, although they remain cloaked in the language of democracy. Even the aggressive invasion of Middle Eastern countries such as Iraq, which is really about securing energy resources as opposed to fighting terrorism, has been justified by the claim that the United States is spreading democracy.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hedges, *Empire of Illusion*, 103.

¹¹ Ibid.

Nietzsche famously says that truth is a lie; “truths are illusions about which we have forgotten what they are.”¹² We teach lies and call them truth. We teach students ethics and at the same time our society shows them that to be rich and famous is a goal that requires sacrificing any and all morality, except possibly the appearance of morality. What is to be done? One answer is to restore truth and to rehabilitate tradition, whether it is a religious or secular, ancient or modern, liberal or conservative tradition. We have traditionalist denunciations charging that students have it too easy, that education needs to be harder and stricter. In moral terms, it is the permissiveness of modern education that is the problem. We require critical perspectives on pedagogy, but we should also be aware, as Rancière points out, that “all pedagogy of denunciation reproduces the pedagogic machine” that it criticizes.¹³ Both progressive and conservative denunciations perpetuate the very problems that they are intended to overcome, because they are based on confused ideas about equality and inequality.

Education is disciplinary; it is fearful and it causes pain. We should not shrink from this acknowledgement. While the infliction of pain is a necessary condition for learning, it is not learning itself. There is a difference between memorization and learning. In his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche explains that “if something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in.”¹⁴ But if memorization is a form of pain then it is also extremely close to punishment, whose aim can be found in “a heightening of prudence, in an extending of the memory.” Nietzsche concludes that “punishment tames men, but it does not make them ‘better’—one might say with more justice the opposite.”¹⁵ If we react against the perceived softness of contemporary education with a strict program for disciplining minds, we risk mistaking memory for learning. Memorization is not pedagogy, and it has become less important in practical terms due to the proliferation of computers with their incredible search engines that can retrieve massive amounts of information at extraordinary speed.

Nietzsche is often read as an aristocratic philosopher who attacks the leveling effects of democracy and promotes noble ideas and peoples. He claims that the future task of philosophy concerns “the solution of *the problem of value*, the determination of the *order of rank among values*.”¹⁶ A crude Nietzscheanism later celebrated by the Nazis applies this emphasis on rank to peoples and races. But what if we follow Nietzsche more literally and separate value from people who are supposed to possess or hold these values? Is there an alternative to the aristocratic and elitist view of pedagogy that affirms noble persons as those whose status acquired by birth or wealth enables them to have superior views and values, on the one hand; and the stereotypical view of democracy that holds not only that all people are equal, but all

¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1959), 47.

¹³ Jacques Rancière, *The Intellectual and his People: Staging the People 2*, trans. David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 160.

¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and RJ Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1967), 61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

values are primarily based on personal feelings and opinions and therefore equally valid? The latter view is implicated in a contemporary multiculturalism that infuses academic commitments to diversity but results in a stereotypical and often caricatured relativism. My argument is that ideas and values are inherently unequal as Nietzsche suggests, but people can be defined in *a priori* terms of equality and democracy. Jacques Rancière is the strongest and most important contemporary theorist of the intrinsic equality of people.

Instead of promoting this or that general program of education, I want to return to Rancière and consider his case study of Joseph Jacotot as presented in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Jacotot was a lecturer and teacher of French literature in the late 1700s and early 1800s who developed “a method for showing illiterate parents how they themselves could teach their children how to read.”¹⁷ Instead of presuming that the teacher has to explicate and deliver knowledge, Jacotot presupposed that students already have not only the capacity to learn, but the intelligence to read and understand complex books.

Jacotot participated in the French Revolution as a soldier, administrator and teacher. In 1818, after being exiled from France with the Restoration of the Bourbon monarchy, he was teaching for the King of the Netherlands in Louvain. When some students who did not speak French wanted to study with him, Jacotot, who did not speak Flemish, found a bilingual edition of a novel by Fénelon called *Télémaque*, and had the students read and recite it and write about it in French. Jacotot was amazed at the results, and this experience led him to a revolutionary insight about the fundamental equality of human intelligence.¹⁸

Most programs of education specify equality as the outcome, which implies that inequality is the current situation. In order to overcome inequality, it has to be recognized and understood, which paradoxically means reinforcing it at least at the level of theory. For Rancière, on the other hand, equality is the basic presupposition of pedagogy. As the translator Kristin Ross asks in her introduction, “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 unfeasibility?”¹⁹

As educators, however egalitarian our aims, we cling to the inequality that is implied by our training, our expertise, and our rank, which attests to the years of hard work that we have applied to our professions. Rancière claims that Jacotot’s experience indicates that there is an inequality of attention, but not of intelligence. The human being is “a will served by an intelligence,” and we are all as intelligent as we need to be based on our circumstances, our needs, and our desires.²⁰ The temptation is to reify this situational intelligence into a moral

¹⁷ Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), vii.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, xix.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 52.

essence that distinguishes us and our best students, who we recognize as one of us, and then help mold and shape them in our image. But this is not what Jacotot and Rancière mean by pedagogy.

The primary practice of education that sustains inequality is the need for explication. Professors are necessary to explicate material for students, who then take it up and learn the methods for analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating knowledge and information. But Rancière claims that explication is stultifying! If a student is reading a book, "the book is made up of a series of readings designed to make a student understand some material. But now the schoolmaster opens his mouth to explain the book."²¹ Why does the book need to be explained? Why does the teacher have to intervene and insert himself into the circuit created by the student and the text? Because explanation concerns understanding, and understanding is what the student cannot do by herself "without the explanations of a master."²²

According to Rancière, the logic of explication does not remedy but rather reinforces the incapacity to understand on the part of the student. He claims that "explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid."²³ Explication and understanding leads to the need for more explication and understanding, which in fact perpetuates the very inequality that education is supposed to overcome.

The master explicates, and the students learn, most of all, their own incapacity, their own ignorance compared to the master. This pedagogical practice sets up a "hierarchy of capacities." But Jacotot "had a different notion of teaching in mind: that each ignorant person could become for another person the master who would reveal to him his intellectual power."²⁴ Jacotot's practice is one of emancipation, and it is based on the presupposition of a radical equality of all persons at the level of intelligence. According to Rancière, "whoever teaches without emancipation stultifies. And whoever emancipates doesn't have to worry about what the emancipated person learns. He will learn what he wants. Nothing, maybe. He will know he can learn because the same intelligence is at work in all the productions of the human mind, and a man can always understand another man's words."²⁵ Of course, the exclusively masculine language that Jacotot and Rancière use remains hierarchical, and this should not be overlooked. But the point is that "there is no hierarchy of *intellectual capacity*," for men or for women. "Emancipation is becoming conscious of this equality of *nature*. This is what opens the way to all adventure in the land of knowledge."²⁶

²¹ Ibid., 4.

²² Ibid., 6.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 17.

²⁵ Ibid., 18.

²⁶ Ibid., 27 (emphasis in original).

What drives learning? For Jacotot, it is the book rather than the teacher that serves this purpose. "The book prevents escape."²⁷ The book, in this case *Télémaque*, creates the condition for the focus of attention and seeing. A text creates a limit that is not absolute but provisional and necessary for learning. The book is entirely present; there are no hidden parts that are accessible to the master but not the student. "There is nothing to understand. Everything is in the book."²⁸ The book is the object that allows for learning and emancipation, given the equality of intelligence of all persons.

Today the book is no longer autonomous. We have opened up and we think and live beyond the book, even if we still live with books. Today "the brain is the screen," as Gilles Deleuze asserts, and this cinematic brain involves experiencing and processing images. Most of the time images induce passivity and stupidity, but sometimes images solicit thinking, and contribute to the creation of a brain. For Deleuze, "the screen itself is the cerebral membrane where immediate and direct confrontations take place between the past and the future, the inside and the outside, at a distance impossible to determine, independent of any fixed point."²⁹ In his important books on cinema, especially *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Deleuze suggests that we can learn from how great films work to conjoin images together to form a time-image. A time-image is a special type of image because it reveals something of the nature of time itself, rather than just the movement of the images as they pass before us on the screen. A time-image is "a little time in its pure state," and this crystallization of pure time expresses a gap, or a synapse, which allows cinema to become or construct a brain.³⁰ Time-images compel us to think, not simply to react. We can participate in the construction of a cinema-brain (in which the non-biological brain is the screen) by following the linkages among and between multiple images and discerning how to select an image that forces an association and creates a thought. Deleuze conceives the concept of brain in an extremely broad way, where the brain expands to incorporate the entire world. According to Deleuze, "The world has become memory, brain, superimposition of ages and lobes, but the brain itself has become consciousness, continuation of ages, creation or growth of ever new lobes, re-creation of matter as with styrene."³¹

How can we direct and concentrate attention and contribute to building a brain rather than having our attention dispersed into a cloud of dissociations and impulses that serve neoliberal capitalism? In her book, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, Catherine Malabou proposes plasticity as a motor scheme to replace the motor scheme of writing. A motor scheme is a kind of root-metaphor for how we organize knowledge in practical and theoretical ways. During the twentieth century, writing served as a motor scheme to organize and transmit knowledge. We could say that due to the influence of structuralism, genetics, linguistics, and information

²⁷ Ibid., 23.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 125.

³⁰ Ibid., 17.

³¹ Ibid., 125.

theory, writing was liberated from its enclosure in a book. However, based on the recent findings of neuroscience, Malabou suggests that plasticity is a better way to think about how thinking and knowing works, based on the plasticity of the brain. She explains that “the plasticity of the brain refers to the capacity of synapses to modify their transmission effectiveness,” which means that they do not simply transmit nerve information; rather, “they have the power to *form* or *reform* information.”³²

According to Malabou, plasticity indicates both an active ability to give form and the passive capacity to receive form. At the same time, based on the paring down of neurons that are not used during the formation and wiring of the brain, plasticity also has a third characteristic, which is the ability to destroy given forms. Malabou says that “plasticity is also the capacity to annihilate the very form it is able to receive or create,” and this would be a sublime element of immanent to form that works to unground itself.³³ Plasticity involves the folding, refolding, and even the auto-destruction of form. The plasticity of our brains makes us who we are.

In *What Should We Do with Our Brain?* Malabou distinguishes plasticity from flexibility. Plasticity is not simply elasticity or the passive malleability of form that would “*coincide with the spirit of capitalism*.”³⁴ Even as our brains make us who we are, we are constantly shaping and reshaping our brains. Malabou suggests that human neuroplasticity replaces the traditional nineteenth-century intellectual focus on history, because it reproduces as well as relocates the same aporia between freedom and determinism. If our brain makes us who we are, then on the one hand it seems like our biological brains determine our self. On the other hand, if the plasticity of our brain is such that we participate in shaping our brain, then there is an openness and a kind of freedom we can make use of. Malabou says that there is a “connection between the role of genetic nondeterminism of the brain and the possibility of a social and political nondeterminism, in a word, a new freedom, which is to say: a new meaning of history.”³⁵ The brain is not simply a biological organ but the site and sign of creative transformation that exceeds capitalist flexibility, from which she is clear to distinguish plasticity. Flexibility conforms to the spirit of capitalism, and the ability to passively absorb new information, but plasticity offers a more radical form of resistance, because it informs what Malabou calls an “alter-globalism.” Malabou calls for a “biological alter-globalism,” or *altermondialisme*, an alter-worldliness that is opposed to the devastatingly superficial capitalism that goes by the name of globalization.³⁶

We all have essentially the same kind of brain, with the same plastic capacities, which means that we are intrinsically equal. If the brain is not simply deterministic, then this complex

³² Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. Carolyn Shread (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 59.

³³ Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

freedom to shape and mold itself and us is available for anyone. Malabou does not state that everyone is equal, but her work strongly implies it, and her vision of brain plasticity updates and in some respects transforms Rancière's retrieval of an Enlightenment model of knowledge. We don't all have the exact same brain, but we all possess the same intrinsic plasticity.

We do not exist in a state of equality; we reside in a state of inequality. Rancière realizes that society is composed of inequalities, but he claims that inequality in social and political terms is only possible based on a prior equality. He quotes Jacotot: " 'It's precisely because we are equal by nature that we must all be unequal by circumstances.' " ³⁷ We cannot reasonably expect that everyone will be or become equal in society. However, we can expect that people have the capacity to reason and be reasonable based on the equality of their natures and their thinking—the plasticity of their brain. "Society as such will never be reasonable," Rancière admits, "but it could experience the miracle of reasonable moments arising not in the coincidence of intelligence—that would be stultification—but in the reciprocal recognition of reasonable wills." ³⁸

We want to believe in social progress, but this is paradoxically predicated on inequality. For a progressive reform of human society, the more intelligent would have to lead and guide the less intelligent. But this is precisely the denial of equality. Rancière says that the proclamation of utopia is a daydream. At the same time, the recognition of equality "is not *nothing*." He writes:

There cannot be a class of the emancipated, an assembly or a society of the emancipated. But any individual can always, at any moment, be emancipated and emancipate someone else, announce to others the *practice* and add to the number of people who know themselves as such and who no longer play the comedy of the inferior superiors. A society, a people, a state, will always be irrational. But one can multiply within these bodies the number of people who, as individuals, will make use of reason, and who, as citizens, will know how to seek the art of raving as reasonably as possible. ³⁹

This is what radical pedagogy is about. Not the creation of a society of the emancipated by making equal what is naturally unequal, but the practice of emancipating individuals by giving them the means to recognize their equality and the freedom to revel in it, to invite them to participate in the plasticity of their brain. Instead of teaching students what we presume we know and they do not, what if we 'teach' them what we do not know and what they already have the capacity to know and to live, which is their own power, plasticity, and emancipation?

³⁷ Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, 89.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 96.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

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