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Review of Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta, *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*

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Picture a scene in which two people talk to each other about something, anything. Add a caption to this picture, to the effect of 'Person A explains X to person B'. Add whatever touches might be needed to make the scene convey notions of benefaction, supportiveness, generosity, charity, gift-giving, solidarity—as in the style of paintings which represent Christian virtues through the depiction of biblical events. What might be said about this scene? It could be said to symbolise—or caricature—a certain idea of education: of what education is or ought to be like. Education can sometimes be spoken of as a kind of gift, in which knowledge is given by one and received by another. It is not so much what is given that is important, but what it can symbolise: self-realisation, empowerment, autonomy, security. Education is thus a prominent concern of many philanthropists and overseas development agencies. Public funding for universal education is also often treated as one of the benefits, and characteristics, of democratic states. This vision of education resonates with some psychologically oriented accounts of learning: the argument that learning happens in a zone of proximal development separating a learner from a more capable other figures the latter as a benevolent guide to the former, and the relationship between the two as progressive, centred around the learner's developmental needs—starting from where the learner is 'at', cognitively.

A contrasting image of education emerges from some more sociologically grounded accounts, in which learning is figured as a process of disciplining the soul, and constitutive of a classed habitus. In this scene, the gift of education is not 'free': it forces injurious social norms onto the recipient of knowledge, hidden beneath a guise of welfare, and as a condition of identity. Education here appears as a successful mechanism of social reproduction, where the knowledge gained by individuals is matched to their social destinies—where they are 'at', sociologically and historically. Poor people learn ways of knowing appropriate to being poor, rich people learn ways of knowing appropriate to being rich, and neither group knows this (more precisely, the latter deny this). Such accounts explain the

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failures of education to achieve benevolent exchange. Some may go on to recommend that knowledge be re-distributed more justly, or that what is taught relates more closely to—and thus validates—the experiences, circumstances and culture of the poor.

Bingham and Biesta's book could be read as an endeavour to articulate an argument for, and about, education which deviates from each of these traditions. This ambition is particularly salient in Chap. 5, on recognition theory. The authors begin this chapter by stating that education is normally seen as an area of work informed by other disciplines, notably psychology and sociology. In contrast, they aim to explore the implications of treating a discipline—here, political philosophy—as an educational practice: a form of teaching, and a means of making learning/not learning visible. The move here then is to treat education as a way of constructing an object, to see it in a particular way, rather than as a particular object of study, such as what goes on in schools and universities. Bingham and Biesta demonstrate this move in their analysis of the work of Frasier and Honneth. Although Fraser and Honneth argue with each other about how political forms of recognition take place, each constructs their argument, poetically, as a form of expert teaching. Fraser justifies her work in the name of turning 'folk theories' into an explicit system of categories (i.e. 'real theories'); the assumption this reveals is that it is because people do not know the logic of their actions that such logic needs to be explained to them by someone who does, to enable political action by such people. The continuity between Fraser and Honneth is that the latter also knows what others need to know in order to free themselves from their own limited view on the world: "Honneth aims to teach political subjects a political Esperanto that will enable them to understand their own feelings of disrespect as feelings that are typical to other members of the entire group of subjects who have such feelings" (p. 103). In other words, Honneth's work is the offer of a language of recognition by which those who do not have fluency in such language can come to articulate their experiences. Fraser's and Honneth's students are those who are unable to carry out political action because of where they are 'at': stuck in the mire of 'folk theories' and using individual/localised, and thus inadequate, terms of description.

Bingham and Biesta stress that this critique is not a matter of accusing Fraser and Honneth of being 'out of touch' with the gritty realities of political conflict; what is at stake here is not whether these two academics have lost themselves in sterile theoretical debate and strayed too far from the empirical concerns of people on the ground. Rather, the issue is how disciplinary speech, including the speech of Philosophy, positions itself with respect to the speech of its object of study. The distinction between 'folk theory' and disciplinary theory, or between individual utterances and a 'grammar of social conflict' (Honneth, quoted p. 103), constructs the latter as more developed, systematic, explicit versions of the former. The difference then between the speech of science and the speech of its objects is not a matter of different genres, but of a more 'developed' genre, which can assist the objects of science to develop their own understanding. In effect, Fraser and Honneth construct their work as 'more capable' speech which enables learners traverse a zone of proximal development, to see things more scientifically and thereby to become more effective political actors. This 'more capable' speech is offered to help political actors/learners develop their capacities. The practice of offering such help, however, constructs the speech of the objects of science as inherently unscientific; inherently incapable of political action without the assistance of experts. Experts in what? Precisely in other people's incapacities. In other words, it is the very classification of theories as 'folk' or as inexpert which enables Fraser and Honneth to make a claim to knowledge, or science and expertise.

The Problem with Explanations

Bingham and Biesta's point here is to show how (mis)recognition theory, and by extension much academic/disciplinary research on the social order more generally, emerges as pedagogy: how it constitutes itself as a form of teaching, which constructs the ignorance of its object in order to offer itself as ignorance's remedy, or ignorance's other—i.e. knowledge.

The move to treat disciplinary discourse as pedagogy responds to Rancière's portrayal of the principle of explanation, succinctly presented as the first chapter of the book, in a new essay by Rancière. The principle of explanation is Rancière's account of the relationship between equality and inequality, one which the school institutionalises. In the essay for this book, Rancière revisits the argument developed in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: five lessons in intellectual emancipation* (1987/1991), which tells the quixotic adventures of Joseph Jacotot, a nineteenth century French teacher and revolutionary, whose pedagogic experiments lead him to conclude that one does not need to know something in order to teach it. This is because teaching, as all good, progressive teachers know, is not about transmitting knowledge, but enabling another to learn. However, the school, with its ordered, hierarchically organised curriculum and its expert teachers, institutionalises the assumption that this 'enabling' is achieved through explanation: "To explain is to arrange the elements of knowledge to be transmitted in accordance with the supposed limited capacities of those under instruction" (Rancière, p. 3)—in other words, starting from where students are supposedly 'at' and explaining to them what intellectual progress consists of. The problem which Rancière identifies is that explanations institute a principle of infinite regress: there is always more to be explained. Explanations themselves need explaining. So how is this regression stopped? By the teacher stating when a certain point has been reached. What then do explanations achieve? Although justified in terms of closing the gap between the teacher's and the student's learning, they effectively—in practice—perpetually defer the very distance they are supposed to close: "if explanation is in principle infinite, it is because its primary function is to infinitise the very distance it proposes to reduce" (Rancière, p. 3).

When Rancière states that the problem with 'explanation' is not whether it is an effective method of instruction or not, but instead a matter of politics, he establishes a continuity between the explanations offered to students to enable them to learn, and the explanations offered to those deemed unequal to enable them become equal. This continuity is visible in the school itself, when schooling is treated as a solution to the problem of social inequality (such 'treatment' being always at work in the justification for a public education system). Such a solution makes inequality visible in a particular way: inequality becomes a problem of the distribution of knowledge, an 'explanation' which makes the social order a reflection of the ordering of intellectual capacity. Of course, this was precisely, perversely, Bourdieu's conclusion: people in specific sociological locations have specific ways of thinking/being/learning, a move which condemns inequality whilst making it appear real, 'empirical'. Rancière's argument with Bourdieu, rehearsed briefly here again, is that it is the attribution to education of a fantastic power of realising social equality which makes inequality 'understandable'; which 'explains' inequality, representing it as a developmental delay or difference. The school does not merely offer explanations to its students therefore: as an institution, it also models explanation as a way of making inequality apparent: "Scholarly progression is the art of limiting the transmission of knowledge, or organising delay, or deferring equality. The pedagogical paradigm of the master explicator, adapted to the level and needs of students, provides a model

of the scholarly institution's social function, which itself translates to a general model of a society ordered by progress" (Rancière, p. 8).

Why Write a Book on Rancière and Education

Since Rancière's writing on pedagogy is a demolition of the conceit of explanation/inequality, Bingham and Biesta are at pains to present the book as an intervention on, rather than an introduction to, his work. The book is not therefore organised to isolate, define and evaluate a panoply of Rancièrian concepts for the benefit of a hypothesised nervous newcomer unable to formulate a response to the original source text. It does not extend an offer of help to any who might not 'understand' Rancière, a move which would have erected a distinction between 'understanding' and (merely) 'interpreting'. To practice what they preach, and demonstrate how preaching works as practice, the chapters are written as an encounter between Rancière's writing and arguments familiar in education.

Chapter 3, on the figure of the child in the work of Freire and Rancière, is exemplary of this tactic. The difference between these two writers is established in terms of what a child's speech means. In Freire, the child's speech is treated either as a symptom of oppression, or as the practice of an emancipated person. Most of the time, of course, it is the former, a diagnosis which calls forth the emancipated teacher who works with the child, using particular pedagogic methods, so that the child can become free of domination. The argument then is that there is a particular technique or method by which the speech of the child is transformed from symptom to meaning. This argument makes the child's speech appear, in the first instance, as false, unreliable, incapable of real meaning; and meaning-full only as a consequence of dependence on the emancipated teacher. Although Freire's technique is meant to 'help' the emancipated then, it is based on a primary disqualification or delegitimisation of their speech. The child's speech is thereby split into two kinds: noise, and meaning, a split from which the pedagogy of the oppressed is born.

This critique of critical pedagogy is not new. What Bingham and Biesta add to it is a comparison between the psychological figure of the child in Freire's writing, in contrast to the child as political figure in Rancière's work. Bingham and Biesta tease out the implications of the justification for universal teaching, given in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, which is that "the 'most difficult' apprenticeship of all happens to be learning one's mother tongue" (p. 57): it is by seeing that anybody learns to speak without being taught that Jacotot/Rancière verify equality. Learning to speak then is not a sign of psychological development, but the very demonstration of political capacity: the capacity to learn something without being taught. Bingham and Biesta here frame Rancière as a kind of 'empirical philosopher' (I take the term from Mol 2002), whose arguments invite verification through observation. Indeed the chapter includes descriptions of a child learning to speak. 'Empirical philosophy', if one can hold those terms together, is very different from what might count as empiricism, for instance, testing a hypothesis through neutral observation. The aim is not to test a claim, but to describe what one can see as a result of an assumption: here, the assumption of equality in/through speech. Equality then becomes performative: it is instantiated in the account generated from an initial opinion. If equality is a matter of performativity, rather than method, it follows that no (pedagogic) method leads to equality or emancipation; rather, it is a point one starts from and then verifies, by hearing, feeling, seeing the world in the light of a claim. What Freire sees in a child learning to speak is someone who cannot yet speak authentically, who is internalising

oppression. What Bingham and Biesta see through their reading of Rancière is a child taking its first steps as a political agent, who makes sense of the world by acting within it.

In treating the image of a child learning to speak as a verification of equality, Bingham and Biesta 'ignore' the way in which representations of the family have changed since Jacotot's time (since the nineteenth century, childhood and the family have also been represented as institutions, just like the school, with their own distinctive explanatory techniques), as well as certain tensions within *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and between this book and others by Rancière. It is one of the problems of writing a book on someone's work that one treats that work as a broadly unified body, rather than a series of narratives. And it is this treatment which raises questions which might not arise from reading Rancière's books individually. The portrayal of learning to speak as a political act seems to sit uneasily with the depiction of politics as a 'rare' and 'occasional' (p. 37) event which reconfigures the police order, Rancière's term (i.e. not Jacotot's) for an existing order of categorisation by which a world is perceived, or appears sensible. Also, if such is politics, in what sense can it be the basis for educational practice? And if the problem with Freire is the distinction he establishes between emancipated and non-emancipated speech, what then to make of the distinction Rancière draws up between police and politics? The police/politics distinction serves a specific purpose in Rancière's books that use it; in writing about Rancière's work, however, it appears in new places, and can seem rather incongruous as a consequence. Is that a defect of Rancière's work? It depends whether one thinks it ought to be a unified theory, philosophy, or even practice, an 'ought' which usually accompanies the curricularisation of someone's writings. Rancière is quoted in this book as saying that theory is what he tries to avoid. But when Bingham and Biesta refer to the child as 'a political being' (p. 72) and then comment on the rarity of politics as event and as an instance of subjectification, terms such as politics/political become very fluid, more so than in specific books by Rancière. The issue here is not that Bingham and Biesta should/could have used terms more precisely. Instead, their book raises questions about how to write an intervention on writings which are themselves interventions on specific concerns, rather than a theory of something. (I'm reminded here of a talk by Zizek in which he said, in reply to a question about contradictions across his body of work, that he only ever wrote a book to try and correct the manifest failure of the previous one—a publishing strategy usually ignored in books on the topic 'Zizek').

A related question is how far, in writing about Rancière, one can or should ignore him and his work. Might there be virtue in this? In their conclusion, Bingham and Biesta quote from a critical review of Rancière's work which identifies the inadequacies of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. They then state: "While it is possible to argue against these matters, point by point, and thus to explain why this review is wrong, such an explanation is absolutely incommensurable with the intervention on Rancière's work that we have proposed in this book" (p. 147). One could say, here, that it is the very claim to refuse an explanation which functions as an explanation of why the review is wrong. In other words, it is the refusal to explain it which marks the review as incorrect/false, rather than as an arguable interpretation. Bingham and Biesta go on: "Instead of arguing with this review, let it stand as an example of what *not* to do with Rancière's work". The invitation to treat the review "as an example of what *not* to do with Rancière's work" implies that there are other examples of 'what *to do* with Rancière's work', an implication which, I think, works as explanation. Am I identifying a problem, a 'limitation', with Bingham and Biesta's argument here? No and yes. No, in that the book does demonstrate the contradictions in explaining Rancière, in 'taking him to school', as they say later in the conclusion; and it is because of this that the critical review they cite 'clearly' misses the point of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

Yes, in that the contrast, or opposition, delineated in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* between explanation and interpretation does not, I think, always work quite as clearly elsewhere (or indeed, in the book itself). The dividing line between explanation and interpretation is also a matter of sensibility, rather than prior to a distribution of the sensible. What Bingham and Biesta's conclusion stages, I think, is the difficulty of distinguishing between better and worse ways of interpreting Rancière (and by extension, the world) whilst claiming that all intelligences are equal. This difficulty is not a 'limitation' of Rancière's work; it is the dynamic which makes equality unpredictable, an experiment in seeing the world, rather than a settled state. It is the same difficulty as makes emancipatory teaching and learning difficult.

Why Education Must Not Be Inclusive

This 'difficulty'—dissensus, I would call it, after reading Bingham and Biesta's book—is one which education research works hard to ignore. This is brilliantly shown in Chapter 4, in which Bingham and Biesta explore the assumption that education should be both inclusive and democratic. They identify the two models of democracy on which much current work on inclusion draws: aggregative and deliberative. The aggregative model treats democracy as a competition between interests and preferences; this model seems to be at work in the recent higher education white paper, which states that students' given preferences should become more central to the work of democratic/publically-funded universities. The deliberative model, on the other hand, focuses on the deliberative transformation of preferences, on identifying which proposals a community agrees are supported by the best reasons. The deliberative model appears more educative, as it involves people learning from each other and being attentive to different arguments. This model is visible in accounts of the education system as central to a democratic state, as it is where people encounter and learn to respond to otherness and difference reasonably—through reason. It is also at work in many funding calls for education research concerned with identifying how the views, experiences and activities of 'marginalised' social groups can become more included in the work of education; for instance, how students identified as having 'special educational needs' can be supported in schools.

Whilst carefully examining the detail of these contrasting traditions, Bingham and Biesta raise questions about each, and particularly the deliberative model. The issue is who is included in what and on what terms:

> Inclusion appears in this discussion [about deliberative democracy] as a process in which those who stand outside of the sphere of democracy are brought into this sphere and, more importantly, are brought into this sphere by those who are already on the 'inside', so to speak. The assumption here is that inclusion is a process which happens 'from the inside out', a process which emanates from the position of those who are already considered to be democratic. The very language of inclusion not only suggests that someone is including someone else. It also suggests that someone is setting the terms for inclusion and that it is for those who wish to be included to meet those terms (p. 81).

Although democracy is often treated as synonymous with social inclusion, Bingham and Biesta re-position these terms as opposites. The work of achieving social inclusion—in education, social services, the voluntary sector, foreign policy very obviously—suddenly appears as a form of colonialism; an image which opens up the possibility of articulating

the problem, for instance, with leaving no child behind, or making every child matter, without simply accusing these efforts of either deceit/lying or operational failure. Bingham and Biesta here trace a path different from sociological and psychological critiques concerned with how to include more identities in a democratic education system. This opens the way for new arguments about how, in teaching and learning, democracy can be treated both as a starting point and as an ongoing practice with no predictable or finite outcome.

Reference

Mol, A. (2002). *The body multiple: Ontology in medical practice*. London: Duke University Press.