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CHAPTER 1
ON IGNORANT SCHOOLMASTERS

by Jacques Rancière

We are gathered here to speak on the qualities of schoolmasters. I have written a work called The Ignorant Schoolmaster (Rancière 1991a). It is thus logically up to me to defend a most unreasonable position: That the most important quality of a schoolmaster is the virtue of ignorance. My book recounts the history of a teacher, Joseph Jacotot, who caused quite a scandal in Holland and France of the 1830s. He did so by proclaiming that uneducated people could learn on their own, without a teacher explaining things to them, and that teachers, for their part, could teach what they themselves were ignorant of. In addition to the risk of dealing in simplistic paradoxes, there is, then, the added risk of revelling in the old-fashioned ideas and exaggerations of pedagogical history. I would like to show, though, that it is not a matter of taking pleasure in paradox, but of fundamental inquiry into the meanings of knowledge, teaching and learning: not an amusing journey into the history of pedagogy, but a matter of timely philosophical reflection on the way in which pedagogical logic and social logic bear on each other.

So, let me get to the heart of the question. What is this quality, this virtue, of ignorance? What is an ignorant schoolmaster? To respond well to this question, it is necessary to distinguish between a few different levels. At the most immediate empirical level, an ignorant schoolmaster is a teacher who teaches that which is unknown to him or her. It is thus that Joseph Jacotot unexpectedly found himself, in the 1820s, teaching Flemish students whose language he did not know and who did not know his, by using a fortuitous text, a bilingual edition of Télémaque being published in Brussels. He put it in his students’ hands and told them, through an interpreter, to read
half of the book with the aid of the translation, to constantly repeat what they had learned, to read the other half quickly, and to write in French what they thought of it. He was said to be astonished at the way these students, to whom he had not transmitted any knowledge, had, following his command, learned enough French to express themselves very well, how he had thus educated them without teaching them anything. From this, he concluded that the act of the teacher who obliges another intelligence to exercise itself was independent of the possession of knowledge, that it was indeed possible that one who is ignorant might permit another who is ignorant to know something unknown to both, possible that a common, illiterate person might, for example, permit another illiterate person to learn to read.

And there is a second level to the question, a second sense of the expression ‘ignorant schoolmaster’: An ignorant schoolmaster is not an ignorant person who is thrilled by playing teacher. It is a teacher who teaches – that is to say who is for another a means of knowledge – without transmitting any knowledge. It is thus a teacher who enacts a dissociation between the mastery of the schoolmaster and his or her knowledge, who shows us that the so-called ‘transmission of knowledge’ consists in fact of two intertwined relations that are important to dissociate: a relation of will to will and a relation of intelligence to intelligence. But, one must not be wrong about the meaning of this dissociation. There is the usual way of understanding it: the desire to undermine the relation of educational authority in order that one intelligence might enlighten another more effectively. Such is the principle of numerous anti-authoritarian pedagogies whose model is the maieutic of the Socratic pedagogue, of the pedagogue who feigns ignorance in order to provoke knowledge. But, the ignorant schoolmaster conducts this dissociation in a different manner. He or she indeed knows the double gambit of the maieutic. Under the guise of creating a capacity, the maieutic aims, in fact, to demonstrate an incapacity. Socrates not only shows the incapacity of false savants, but also the incapacity of whoever is not lead by the teacher down the right path, through the proper relation of intelligence to intelligence. The ‘liberalist’ maieutic is just a sophisticated variation of ordinary pedagogical practice, which entrusts to the teacher’s intelligence the ability to bridge the gap separating the ignorant person from knowledge. Jacotot inverts the meaning of this dissociation: The ignorant schoolmaster exercises no relation of intelligence to intelligence. He or she is only an authority, only a will that sets the ignorant person down a path, that is to say to instigate a capacity already possessed, a capacity that every person has demonstrated by succeeding, without a teacher, at the most difficult of apprenticeships: The apprenticeship of that foreign language that is, for every child arriving in the world, called his or her mother tongue.

Such is indeed the lesson of a chance experience that made the learned teacher Jacotot into an ignorant schoolmaster. This lesson bears on the very logic of pedagogical reasoning, on its aims and its means. The usual aim of pedagogical logic is to teach the student that which he or she doesn’t know, to close the gap between the ignorant one and knowledge. Its usual means is explanation. To explain is to arrange the elements of knowledge to be transmitted in accordance with the supposed limited capacities of those under instruction. But, such a simple idea of being in accordance shows itself to be characterized by infinite regress. An explanation is generally accompanied by an explanation of that explanation. Books are necessary to explain to students the knowledge to be learned. But, such explanation is apparently insufficient: Teachers are still needed to explain, to those who are ignorant, the books that explain this knowledge. Explanations are needed so that the one who is ignorant might understand the explanation that enables his or her understanding. The regress would be in principle infinite if the teacher’s authority did not in fact stop it by acting as sole arbiter of the endpoint where explanations are no longer needed. Jacotot believed that he could sum up the logic of this apparent paradox. If explanation is in principle infinite, it is because its primary function is to infinitize the very distance it proposes to reduce.

The practice of explanation is something completely different from a practical means of reaching some end. It is an end in itself, the infinite verification of a fundamental axiom: the axiom of inequality. To explain something to one who is ignorant is, first and foremost, to explain that which would not be understood if it were not explained. It is to demonstrate an incapacity. Explanation offers itself as a means to reduce the situation of inequality where those who know nothing are in relation with those who know. But, this reduction is, rather, a confirmation. To explain assumes that the material to be learned has a specific sort of opacity, an opacity that resists the types of interpretation and imitation used by a child, a child who can already translate the signs received from the world and from the speaking beings around him or her.
Such is the particular inequality that normal pedagogical logic orchestrates. This orchestration has three particular traits. First, it supposes a radical distinction between two types of intelligences: on one hand, the empirical intelligence of speaking beings who speak and interpret one another; on the other, the systematic intelligence of those who understand things according to their particular articulations: For children and common minds there are stories, for rational beings there are reasons. Instruction thus appears as a radical point of departure, or a new birth, as soon as it not a matter of telling and interpreting, but of explaining and understanding. Instruction's first accomplishment is to split the intellect in two, to consign to the everyday life of students the procedures by which their minds have heretofore learned everything they know.

Then, its second feature: pedagogical logic appears as the act that lifts a veil off the obscurity of things. Its topography is that of top to bottom, of surface to depth. The explicator is the one who carries obscure depth to the clear surface, and who, conversely, brings the false appearance of the surface back to the secret depths of reason. This verticality distinguishes between the depths of reason's learned order, and the horizontal ways of the self-taught who move from proximity to proximity, comparing what they don't know to what they do know. Thirdly, this topography itself implies a certain temporality. Lifting the veil from things, bringing back the surface to its depth and bringing all depth to the surface, this not only requires time. It supposes a certain temporal order. The veil is lifted progressively, according to the ability attributed to the infantile mind, or to the one who knows nothing at this or that stage. In other words, progress always goes hand in hand with a certain regress. A reduction in distance never ceases to reinstate, and to verify, the axiom of inequality.

Ordinary pedagogical logic is supported by two fundamental axioms: First, one must start from inequality in order to reduce it; second, the way to reduce inequality is to conform to it by making of it an object of knowledge. The success of knowledge that reduces inequality works through a knowledge of inequality. This is the 'knowledge' that the ignorant schoolmaster refuses. It is the third sense of his or her ignorance. It is ignorance of this 'knowledge of inequality' that is supposed to prepare the way to 'reduce' inequality. About inequality, there is nothing to know. Inequality is no more a given to be transformed by knowledge than equality is an end to be transmitted through knowledge. Equality and inequality are not two states. They are two 'opinions', that is to say two distinct axioms, by which educational training can operate, two axioms that have nothing in common. All that one can do is verify the axiom one is given. The schoolmaster's explanatory logic presents inequality axiomatically. Following this logic, there is inequality among minds but one can make use of this very inequality, putting it at the service of a future equality. The teacher is the non-equal who works to abolish his or her own privilege. The art of the schoolmaster, who methodically lifts the veil from that which the student could not understand alone, is the art that promises the student will one day be the equal of the schoolmaster. For Jacobot, this equality-to-come simply comprises the unequal equality which will, in turn, drive a system that produces and reproduces inequality. The overall logic of this process that presumes inequality, this logic merits for Jacobot the name of stultification.

The ignorant schoolmaster's logic poses equality as an axiom to be verified. It relates the state of inequality in the teacher-student relation not to the promise of an equality-to-come that will never come, but to the reality of a basic equality. In order for the ignorant one to do the exercises commanded by the master, the ignorant one must already understand what the master says. There is an equality of speaking beings that comes before the relation of inequality, one that sets the stage for inequality's very existence. This is what Jacobot calls the equality of intelligences. This does not mean that all the actions of all intelligences are the same. It means that there is only one intelligence at work in all intellectual training. The ignorant schoolmaster—only one who is ignorant of inequality—addresses him or herself to the ignorant person not from the point of view of the person's ignorance but of the person's knowledge, the one who is supposedly ignorant in fact already understands innumerable things. He or she has learned them by listening and repeating, by observing and comparing, by guessing and verifying. This is how one's mother tongue is learned. It is how he or she can learn written language, for example, through comparing a prayer known by heart to the unfamiliar patterns that form, on paper, the written text of the same poem. One must have the student relate what he or she does not know to what is known, to observe and compare, to recount what has been seen and to verify what has been said. If there is a refusal to do this, it is because the student does not think it possible or necessary to know any more.

The obstacle stopping the abilities of the ignorant one is not his or her ignorance, but the consent to inequality. The ignorant one holds the opinion that intelligences are not equal.
But, this opinion is precisely not a matter of individual failure. It is a systemic axiom, an axiom by which the social system generally operates: the axiom of inequality. Those who do not want to develop their intellectual powers further are satisfied with not ‘being able’ to do so, satisfied with the assurance that others are even less able. The axiom of inequality is an axiom that underwrites inequalities operating on a societal scale. It is not the teacher’s knowledge that can suspend the operation of this machine, but the teacher’s will. The emancipatory teacher’s call forbids the supposed ignorant one the satisfaction of what is known, the satisfaction of admitting that one is incapable of knowing more. Such a teacher forces the student to prove his or her capacity, to continue the intellectual journey the same way it began. This logic, operating under the presupposition of equality and requiring its verification, this logic deserves the name ‘intellectual emancipation’.

The distinction between ‘stultification’ and ‘emancipation’ is not a distinction between methods of instruction. It is not a distinction between traditional or authoritarian methods, on the one hand, and new or active methods, on the other: stultification can and does happen in all kinds of active and modern ways. The distinction is properly one of philosophy. It concerns an idea of intelligence that guides the very conception of intellectual training. The axiom of equality of intelligences does not affirm any particular virtue for those who do not know, no science of the humble or intelligence of the masses. It simply affirms that there is only one sort of intelligence at work in all intellectual training. It is always a matter of relating what one ignores to what one knows; a matter of observing and comparing, of speaking and verifying. The student is always a seeker. And, the teacher is first of all a person who speaks to another, who tells stories and returns the authority of knowledge to the poetic condition of all spoken interaction. The philosophical distinction thus understood is, at the same time, a political distinction. It is not political because it would denounce high knowledge in the name of a common intelligence. It is at one level much more radical, because it concerns the very conception of the relation between equality and inequality.

It is indeed the very logic of the usual relation between these terms that Jacotot throws into question by denouncing the paradigm of explanation, showing that explanatory logic is a social logic; it is a way in which the social order is presented and reproduced. If this history of the 1830s concerns us directly, it is because it provides an exemplary response to the establishment of a new political system: a system where inequality is no longer supposed to rest on a reality that is sovereign or divine; a system, in short, of immanence, of the equalization of inequality. The years of the jacobin polemic indeed correspond to the moment when a reconstituted social order is being put into place after the upheaval of the French Revolution. It is a moment when one wants to achieve revolution, in all senses of the word ‘achieve’, to pass from the age of critique with its destruction of monarchical and divine transcendencies to the ‘organic’ age of a society based on its own, immanent reason. That is to say a society putting into harmony its productive forces, its institutions, and its beliefs, making them act according to a singular regime of rationality. Such is the grand project that cuts across the nineteenth century — understood not simply as a chronological break but as an historical project. Passing from the age of critique and revolution to an organic age is primarily about regulating the relation between equality and inequality. One must, said Aristotle, ‘reveal democracy to democrats and oligarchy to oligarchs’.

The project of an organic modern society is the project of an unequal order that makes equality visible, which includes such visibility in the governing of relations between economic powers, institutions, and beliefs. It is the project of those ‘mediations’ that institute, between the top and bottom, two essential things: a minimum social fabric of common beliefs and the possibility for a limited movement among the levels of wealth and power. A plan for the ‘people’s education’ is inscribed at the heart of this project, a plan that proceeds not only by the state organization of public instruction, but also by multiple philanthropic, commercial or community initiatives devoted to a twofold task: on one hand developing ‘practical abilities’, that is to say forms of rationalized, useful knowledges that permit people to leave their present circumstances, and to improve their conditions without actually leaving those conditions behind or denouncing them; on the other, enriching everyday life by allowing participation, in measured ways, in the pleasures of art while developing a sense of community; the ‘aesthetic’ education of the people modelled after the foundation of choral societies.

The vision of community that animates these various private and public initiatives is clear: A triple effect is obtained. First, to pull people away from retrograde practices and beliefs that keep them from participating in the increase of wealth and development, and
that create resentment towards the ruling elites. Second, to establish, between elites and the people, a minimal common set of beliefs and pleasures that precludes a society fractured into two separate, and potentially hostile, worlds. Third, to assure a minimum of social mobility which gives to all the feeling of improvement, which allows the people's most gifted offspring to climb the social ladder and to participate in the ruling elite's renewal. Thus conceived, people's education is not simply an instrument, a practical means of working to reinforce the social order. It is actually an 'explanation' of society; it is a working allegory of the way that inequality is reproduced by 'making visible' equality.

This 'making visible' is not a simple illusion, it participates in a positivity I call the 'distribution of the sensible': an overall relation between ways of being, ways of doing and ways of saying. It is not the mask beneath which social inequality hides. It is the double-edged visibility of this inequality: inequality applied in the service of its own suppression, proving through its actions the incessant and unending nature of such suppression. Inequality does not hide beneath equality. Inequality has a way of asserting itself through equality. This equality of equality and inequality has a name. It is called progress. Organic, modern society, which sets itself the task of 'achieving' the revolution, sets the hierarchical order of ancient societies against the 'progressive' order, an order identical to mobility itself, to the movement of expansion, of transmission and application of knowledge. The school is not only the means towards this new progressive order. It is its very model: the model of an inequality which identifies itself with the visible difference between those who know and those who do not know and which devotes itself, visibly, to the task of teaching those who are ignorant that which they do not know, and thus reducing such inequality. But reducing by stages, according to the best methods known only to those who are unequal: methods that offer to a given population, at the opportune moment, the knowledge it is capable of acquiring for good use. Scholarly progression is the art of limiting the transmission of knowledge, of organizing delay, of 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.

The ignorant schoolmaster is the teacher who escapes from this game, by separating the sheer act of intellectual emancipation from the societal machine, and from progressive institutions. Distinguishing the act of intellectual emancipation from the institution of the people's instruction is to affirm that there are no stages to equality; that equality is a complete act or is not at all. There is a heavy price to pay for this escape. If explanation is a social method, the method by which inequality gets represented and reproduced, and if the institution is the place where this representation operates, it follows that intellectual emancipation is necessarily distinct from social and institutional logic. That is to say that there is no social emancipation, and no emancipatory school. Jacobot strictly distinguishes the method of emancipation, which is the method of individuals, from the social method of explanation. Society is a mechanism ruled by the momentum of unequal bodies, by the game of compensated inequalities. Equality can only be introduced wherein at the price of inequality, by transforming equality into its opposite. Only individuals can be emancipated. And all emancipation can promise is to teach people to be equal in a society ruled by inequality and by the institutions that 'explain' such inequality.

This extreme paradox deserves to be taken seriously. It reminds us of two essential matters. First, that equality, in general, is not an end to be attained. It is a point of departure, a presupposition to be verified by sequences of specific acts. Secondly, equality sets the condition for inequality itself. To obey an order, one must understand that order, and one must understand that one must obey it. Thus, a minimum of equality is necessary without which inequality would not make sense. From these two axioms, Jacobot drew a radical dissociation: Emancipation can never be a social logic. I tried to show in Disagreement that this could be articulated otherwise, that the egalitarian condition of inequality could lend itself to sequences of acts, to forms of verification that were properly political (1999). But, that demonstration is not part of the theme that brings us here today. I will thus take up another aspect of the problem: How, today, to think about this relation between pedagogical logic and social logic that Jacobot put at the heart of his argument? At first glance, this relation presents itself today in the form of a strange dialectic. On one hand, the school seems itself incessantly accused of failing in its task of reducing social inequality. But on the other, the school, constantly called inadequate to its social function, appears more and more as a suitable model for egalitarian functioning, that is to say for the 'unequal equality' proper to our societies.
I will begin, in order to illustrate this dialectic, with the scholarly debate on equality and inequality as it has developed in France since the 1960s, since the terms of the debate appear to me to summarize, fairly well, a problem that one finds in the same form more or less everywhere. The debate was launched by Bourdieu's thesis that can be summed up as follows. The school is failing at its assigned mission of reducing inequalities, and this is because it ignores the functioning of inequality. It pretends to reduce inequality by distributing knowledge equally, and to all. But, it is precisely this appearance of equality that is the driving force behind educational inequality. It remains up to the students and their 'individual talents' to make a difference. But, these very talents are nothing but the cultural privileges of the children of well-to-do families. The children of the privileged classes do not want to know this, the children of the dominated classes cannot know this and the latter give up due to an acute awareness of their lack of talents. The school fails to enact equality because its egalitarian appearance hides the fact that inherited cultural capital has in fact been given the new face of individual difference.

But the school, according to this logic, functions unfairly because it does not know how inequality itself functions, because it does not wish to know. But this 'refusal to know' can be interpreted in two opposite ways. It can be understood as ignorance of the conditions of transforming inequality into equality. It is thus said that the teacher misunderstands the conditions of pedagogical practice because he or she lacks knowledge, the knowledge of inequality, knowledge that can be learned from the sociologist. The conclusion drawn is that educational inequality is remediable through a supplemental knowledge explaining the rules of the game, and rationalizing educational training. This was the conclusion of Bourdieu and Passeron in their first book, *The Inheritors*.

But, the refusal to know can also be understood as a successful interiorization of the logic of the system. It can thus also be said that the teacher is an agent in the process of the reproduction of cultural capital which, through a necessity inherent to the very functioning of the social machine, infinitely reproduces its conditions of possibility. Every program of reform thus appears immediately futile. It is in this vein that Bourdieu and Passeron conclude their next book, *Reproduction*. There is thus a duplicity in their argument. It concludes on one hand that there can be a reduction of inequality, and on the other that reproduction of inequality is perpetual. But this duplicity is none other than the duplicity of 'progressivism' itself, just as it was analysed by Jacotot. It is the logic of inequality that is reproduced by the very act of its own reduction. The sociologist introduces one more turn in the spiral by including one more ignorance, a supplementary incapacity: the ignorance of those who are supposed to do away with ignorance.

Government reformers are not fond of seeing this duplicity proper to all progressive pedagogy. From Bourdieu's sociology, socialist reformers thus would draw up a plan aiming to reduce educational inequalities by lessening education's focus on high culture, by making it less cerebral and more life-embracing, more adapted to the ways of being of children from unfavourable backgrounds, that is to say, for the most part, children of immigrants. This 'dumbed down' sociology only affirmed, unfortunately, all the more, the suppositions central to progressivism, suppositions ordering those who know to put themselves 'within reach' of those who are unequal, to limit the knowledge transmitted to that which the poor can understand and that which they need. It reproduces an approach that confirms present inequality in the name of an equality to come. This is why there had to be a backlash. In France, republican ideology was quick to denounce these methods adapted to the poor, which could never be but the methods of the poor, right away driving the 'dominated' back into the situation they were supposed to be helped out of. Instead, the power of equality resided, for republican ideology, in the universality of knowledge equally distributed to all, without consideration of social origin, in a school well-removed from society.

But, the distribution of knowledge does not, in itself, include any egalitarian consequences for the social order. Equality as well as inequality is never anything but the result of themselves. Traditional pedagogies of the neutral transmission of knowledge, as well as modernist pedagogies of knowledge adapted to societal conditions, cling to the same side of the alternative proposed by Jacotot. Both take equality as an end; that is to say, they take inequality as the point of departure and work under its presupposition. They diverge only on the sort of 'knowledge of inequality' they presuppose. Both of them are ensconced in the circle of a society pedagogicized. Both attribute to the school the fantasmatic power of realizing social equality or, at least, of reducing 'social fragmentation', even if it means taking turns denouncing the failure of the other to realize this program. Sociology calls this failure the 'crisis of the school' and it
calls for school reform. Republicanism happily accuses reform itself of being the principal cause of the crisis. But, reform and crisis can lead to the same jacobist notion: Both are an explanation of school, a never-ending explanation of the reasons why inequality must lead to equality and yet never leads there. Crisis and reform are in fact the normal functioning of the system, the normal functioning of an ‘equalized’ inequality wherein pedagogical reason and social reason are made indistinguishable from one another.

It is indeed remarkable that this education declared unable to ‘reduce’ inequality presents itself more and more as an analogy to the social system. In this sense, it could be said that the jacobist analysis of pedagogical reason as a new, generalized form of inequality has been proven perfectly. Jacotot had sensed, in the role that ‘progressive’ people of his time had given to the people’s education, the premises of a new form of the distribution of the sensible, an equivalence between pedagogical reason and social reason. He sensed this, at the heart of a society where such an equivalence was still only a utopia, where the value and steadfastness of class divisions, and of social hierarchy, was blatantly affirmed by the elites, where inequality was affirmed as the legitimate organizing principle of society. He wrote at a time when reactionaries recalled, along with their intellectual vanguard, that certain persons were ‘in’ society without being ‘of’ society, and when liberals explained through the voice of their spokespeople, minister François Guizot, that politics was a matter of ‘men of leisure’. The elites of his time unabashedly professed inequality and class division. Instruction of the people was, for them, only a means of instituting certain negotiations between the top and the bottom: of giving to the poor the possibility of individual improvement and of giving to all the feeling of belonging, each in his or her own place, to the same community.

We are clearly no longer there: Our societies present themselves as homogeneous, where the lively and common pace of the multiplication of commodities and exchanges has flattened the old class divisions and has engaged all in the same pleasures and liberties. Under such conditions, the representation of inequalities tends to work more and more on the model of academic ranking: All are equal and have the potential to reach any position. No more proletarians, but only newcomers who have not yet caught up with the pace of modernity, or else the backward ones who, on the contrary, no longer succeed at keeping up with its accelerations. All are equal but certain people lack the necessary intelligence or energy to undergo the competition, or to simply follow the new exercises, that the great teacher, the grand march of Time, puts before them year after year. It is said that they do not adapt to the new technologies and mentalities, and thus flounder between the depths of class and the abyss of ‘exclusion’. Society thus presents itself as a vast school, with its savages to civilize, and its problem students to put right. Under these conditions, the school is more and more charged with the fantastmatic task of filling the gap between the proclaimed equality of conditions and de facto inequality, more and more summoned to reduce inequalities that are described as merely residual.

But, the final role of this over-inflated vision of the school is, on the contrary, to reinforce the oligarchic vision of a scholarly society. Not only are state authority and economic power tied to scholarly ranking, but also the school is presented as a school without teachers, where the teachers are those at the top of the class, they are those who adapt best to progress and who show themselves capable of synthesizing scholarly concepts, concepts too complex for ordinary minds. To those who are top in their class, there is offered, afresh, the older pedagogical alternative which has become universal social logic: The austere republicans ask them to manage with the authority and distance indispensable to orderly class progression and to the interests of society; the sociologists, political scientists or journalists ask them to adapt, through dialogic pedagogy, to the modest intelligences and day-to-day problems of the less gifted, this in order to help the backward to advance, to help the excluded reintegrate themselves and to help the social fabric heal.

Expertise and journalism are the two great intellectual institutions charged with backing the government of elder statesmen, or of those first in class, by circulating, unendlessly, this new form of the social bond, this perfected explanation of inequality that structures our societies: knowledge about why those who are left behind are left behind. It is in this way, for example, that all dissenting demonstrations – from far left social movements to the extreme right wing – are, for us, a chance for intense explanatory activity on the reasons for the backwardness of archaic trade unionists, for the little savages of immigrant families, or for the middle-class families left behind by the march of progress. In good, stultifying logic, such explaining doubles as an explanation of the means by which one can extricate those left behind from their backwardness, a means unfortunately rendered
ineffective by the very fact that they are left behind. Failing to lift
those left behind from their backwardness, such explaining is instead
perfect for solidifying the power of the advanced, which turns out to
be none other than their own advancement.

This is certainly what Jacotot had in mind: the way in which the
school and society symbolize each other without end, and thus end-
lessly reproduce the supposition of inequality, precisely by denying
it. If I thought it good to revive this forgotten discourse, it is not, to
repeat, in order to propose some new pedagogy. There is no jacobist
pedagogy. Nor is there a jacobist anti-pedagogy, in the sense that this
word is ordinarily used. In brief, jacotism is not an educational
idea that one could apply to systemic school reform. The virtue of
ignorance is first of all a virtue of dissociation. By asking us to
dissociate teaching from knowledge, such a virtue, such a quality,
precludes itself from ever being the principle of any institution where
teaching and knowledge would come into harmony in order to
optimize the social functioning of an institution. It is precisely against
the will to harmonize, and to optimize, social functions that this
critique is aimed. This critique does not forbid teaching; it does
not forbid the teacher’s role. It requires us instead to radically separ-
ate the ability to stand for whatever source of knowledge, and the
idea of the social, global function of an institution. It requires us to
separate the ability to be, for another, the source of an enacted equality,
and the idea of a social institution charged with achieving equality.

Equality, Jacotot maintains, only exists in the act, and only for
individuals. It is lost as soon as it is considered collectively. It is
possible to correct this verdict, to consider the possibility of collective
acts of equality. But, this possibility itself presupposes that we keep
separate various demonstrations of equality, that we consequently
refuse the idea of institutional mediation, of social mediation,
between individual demonstrations of equality and collective ones.
Doubtless, individual demonstrations and collective ones have the
same presupposition: the presupposition that equality is ultimately
the condition of possibility of inequality itself, and that it is possible
to effect this condition, this equality. There is thus an analogy between
the effects of the egalitarian axiom, just as there is between the effects
of the inequalitarian axiom. But the non-egalitarian analogy functions
as a real social operation. It is this uninterrupted operation that
Jacotot theorizes in the concept of explanation. But the same
does not go for the egalitarian axiom. The act that emancipates an
intelligence has, on its own, no effect on the social order. And the
egalitarian axiom requires refusing the idea of such an operation.
It prohibits the thought of a social logic by which individual demonstra-
tions transform themselves into collective ones. It is indeed in this
way that reasons for inequality impinge upon the reasons for equality.

The explicative-explained society, the unequal-equalized society,
such a society requires the harmonization of functions. It requires of
teachers in particular that we merge our competence as learned
researchers, our function as teachers working in an institution, and
our activity as citizens, into a single energy that advances, in one effort,
knowledge transmission, social integration, and civic conscience. It is
this requirement that the ‘ignorant schoolmaster’s’ particular man-
ner asks us to ignore. The virtue of the ignorant schoolmaster lies in
knowing that a learned person is not a teacher, that a teacher is not a
citizen, that a citizen is not a learned person. Not that it is impossible
to be all three at once. What is impossible, instead, is to harmonize
the roles of these three figures. Such harmonization only happens in
the sense of the dominant explanation. The idea of emancipation
demands the division of various logics. It shows us that, if we wish,
it is possible to engage the social machine even as it runs, through
the invention of individual and collective forms of egalitarian acts,
but never to confuse these functions. It requires us to refuse to medi-
ate equality.

Such, it seems to me, is the lesson that we draw from this particular
dissonance affirmed at the very onset of the modern educational-
social machine. Equality is enacted within the social machine through
dissensus. And dissensus is not primarily a quarrel, but is a gap in the
very configuration of sensible concepts, a dissociation introduced
into the correspondence between ways of being and ways of doing,
seeing and speaking. Equality is at once the final principle of all
social and governmental order and the omitted cause of its ‘normal’
functioning. It resides neither in a system of constitutional forms nor
in the form of societal mores, nor in the uniform teaching of the
republic’s children, nor in the availability of affordable products in
supermarket displays. Equality is fundamental and absent, timely
and untimely, always up to the initiative of individuals and groups
who, set against the ordinary course of events, take the risk of verify-
ing their equality, of inventing individual and collective forms for its
verification. Affirmation of these simple principles in fact constitutes
an unprecedented dissonance, a dissonance one must, in a way, forget
in order to continue improving schools, programs and pedagogies, but that one must also, from time to time, listen to again so that the act of teaching does not lose sight of the paradoxes that give it meaning.

AN AFTERWORD ON TRANSLATION

Jacques Rancière's 'On Ignorant Schoolmasters' establishes significant links between his various philosophical convictions, links that might otherwise be established only through conjecture, especially at this time in the English-speaking world when Rancière's work is still undergoing translation. These links concern education, politics, philosophy, language, intelligence, equality and freedom. A few small matters, to be sure. But while it is a common practice for an introduction to offer a précis of the work it introduces, it would be unfortunate to take the role of explicator of a text whose author has shown so plainly the stultifying results of a 'society pedagogicized', a society of teachers, or in this case translators, 'who show themselves capable of synthesizing scholarly concepts, concepts too complex for ordinary minds'. Thus, no more will be said about the links that should speak for themselves in the pages that follow.

In a different, if more personal, vein, we want to point out an aspect of translating Rancière's text, an aspect that seems to graft well to the beginning of his text. Then, we will offer a thought on the current, neoliberal state of educational policy, a thought that might be inserted somewhere in the middle of 'On Ignorant Schoolmasters', at the point where Rancière addresses French educational theory in the late twentieth century. Finally, we will offer a coda that might appropriately come at the end of his text since it bears on the paradox that Rancière introduces in its last few lines, a paradox he leaves unexplored yet begging for exploration. This translator introduction will thus serve as a supplement to the text's beginning, middle and end. If it nevertheless explains something and thus stultifies in the process, it is with a translator's fumbling apology.

The Translator

Translating the work of Jacques Rancière, especially a work on ignorant schoolmasters, it is impossible not to notice a certain coincidence. The ignorant schoolmaster is, after all, none other than Joseph Jacotot, who demands of his students to translate, to translate from a language unknown to the schoolmaster into a language unknown to his students. As translator of one who has introduced this schoolmaster into the crosshairs of current educational theory, it is hard not to put oneself in the place of Jacotot's students, who were set the following task:

He put it [a copy of Télémague] in his students' hands and told them, through an interpreter, to read half of the book with the aid of the translation, to constantly repeat what they had learned, to read the other half quickly, and to write in French what they thought of it.

As translator, one joins Jacotot's students. One compares a French text with the English text under composition. One fumbles between French and English in a way that Jacotot's students must have fumbled between Flemish and French. One experiences the defamiliarization, and, yes, the exhilaration, that ensues as one decides to proceed, by leap of faith, from one language to another. This leap of faith is all too familiar to one who must 'try on' a new language for the first time, whether it be 'trying on' the French language by students who have never known any French before, whether it be 'trying on' a new language when one finds oneself in a country where no one understands the words you speak, or whether it be 'trying on' a translation from one language to another in order to see if an original text speaks, in one language, the way the text speaks in another.

But, the aim here is not to show how a translator, one sanctioned by Jacques Rancière to translate 'On Ignorant Schoolmasters', is partaking in an act of intellectual emancipation akin to that of Jacotot's students. It is banal to mention that one who writes a text is probably as emancipated as the one who reads that text, banal to mention that Fénelon, who authored the bilingual Télémague studied by Jacotot's students, was probably emancipated at least as much as those students whose emancipation consisted of studying that bilingual addition. It is indeed hard not to say that the author of a work is at least as emancipated as those who labour at understanding the work. And when such an author's work finds its way into a classroom, as the Télémague found its way into Jacotot's classroom, it is rather safe to say that the author of such a piece of curriculum finds him or herself in a position at least as emancipated, if not more emancipated, than those students who are sent to study their curriculum.
In a similar way, it is not hard to say that the author of a translation such as the present one might be at least, if not more, intellectually emancipated than the ones who will rely on this very text, on such an author’s work, for their own English understanding of Rancière’s French words. Inconsistent with the aims of the ignorant schoolmaster, and with Rancière’s text, the above scenarios actually stray from the coincidence mentioned earlier. They stray because they establish a set of hierarchies: author over reader, curriculum designer over student, translator over one who is monolingual, one scholar over another, etc.

The coincidence of translating Rancière’s text and reading the *Télémaque* is instead a flat coincidence, a coincidence of equality. Its equality has two important aspects. First, translating without the stultification of a teacher is no different than translating for publication. One act is not more authoritative than the other. Both student and translator are thrown back to an originary state of language manipulation similar to the child who acquires language for the first time. The translator, the student and the infant are faced with the daunting task of communicating in a way that they have heretofore not experienced communication. They are faced with negotiating a relationship between ‘seeing, saying and doing’, as Rancière is so fond of putting it. The translator, in this sense, is no less obliged to struggle at his or her task than the student or the infant. All are faced with an intellectual challenge that is equal to ‘the most difficult of apprenticeships: the apprenticeship of that foreign language that is, for every child arriving in the world, called his or her mother tongue’. There is no hierarchy between translator and student. Each is in the originary, and challenging, position of the ‘child arriving in the world’.

In addition to the challenge shared equally by infant, student and translator, there is a parity of ambiguity. When the infant tries to use a new expression, he or she will be met with understanding or perhaps with bewilderment. From this point, the infant will contemplate the results of such an attempt, will reuse the expression under slightly different circumstances, will compare and contrast and will move forward only slightly better informed than before. This trial and error demands an exhilarating experience of ambiguity, but such experience, such fumbling, is the bedrock of intellectual emancipation. The student who reads *Télémaque* experiences this ambiguity, too, even if he or she is older and already understands the mother tongue. The ignorant schoolmaster’s student repeats and tests, compares and verifies, conjectures and reformulates with great tolerance for the ambiguity that must accompany any act of translation. But such a student will never be sure of accuracy; he or she will only know that communication has occurred in a way that seemed to have meaning. And this is certainly the fumbling of the academic translator. Ultimately, one never knows if one has translated ‘correctly’. Not even a person perfectly fluent in the languages under translation escapes this fumbling. One only knows that one’s way of translating has withstood a certain amount of trial and error. The infant, the student and the translator are equal as they undergo the trial of intellectual uncertainty.

**Stultification and Neoliberalism**

Towards the middle of ‘On Ignorant Schoolmasters’, Rancière introduces Jacotot’s critique of ‘society pedagogicized’ to the concerns of modern-day education in France, and in doing so provides an excellent critique of critical, traditional and progressive movements in education. It is important, though, to augment Rancière’s presentation since neoliberalism has become an additional condition of educational practices in many parts of the world. The following question arises: How does Rancière’s preliminary work on Pierre Bourdieu, Republicanism and progressivism help us to theorize the current discourses around neoliberalism in education. Picking up where Rancière left off, one might offer the following brief analysis.

Neoliberalism in education has three major attributes: accountability, competition and privatization. These attributes are embraced to a greater or lesser extent by many educational constituencies on the assumption that student underachievement will be remedied by the magic circle connecting these three points of hope. Indeed, just as Rancière summarizes the scholarly debate over education in France in the 1960s and 1970s as a debate over equality and inequality, one might summarize educational politics of the 1990s and 2000s as the decades advocating an economic model for educational improvement. Accountability, competition and privatization have been touted as solutions over these two decades. The result has been more highstakes testing of students, more media scrutiny of how one school (or school district) compares to another and more opportunities for schools to opt out (or be forced out) of the public system by means of charters or corporate take-over.
And, there has been an appropriate backlash against the three-pronged program of neoliberalism. Teachers and teachers' unions have bemoaned accountability, competition and privatization, first, on the grounds that these neoliberal practices undermine the sacred trust of public education. Under the pressure of neoliberal tendencies, the public school, and with it the public good of having an educational commons for developing democratic citizens, will continue to exist only as long as they come in ahead of the competition. Otherwise, the public school will be offered up to the mechanisms of profit maximization and free choice and teachers' unions have consistently criticized such an endgame. Secondly, teachers and their unions condemn neoliberal policies because such policies disable teachers from doing their jobs properly. On the way to the neoliberal endgame, the autonomy and expertise of teachers is notably assailed. For, neoliberalism's brand of accountability, modelled as it is after economic outcomes, constricts the realm of learning to that which is precisely measurable. Teachers end up teaching to standardized tests rather than focusing on the growth and individuality of each child.

Left-minded educational theorists have been quick to criticize educational neoliberalism as one more layer of ideological saturation. If the school is, as Bourdieu points out, a cog in the reproduction of class stratification, then the brash introduction of a neoliberal agenda only serves to intensify the separation of the haves from the have-nots. Neoliberalism is assailed as the most egregious of incursions into the school's domain. It is bad enough that schools valorize the cultural capital of children from elite backgrounds while de-valourizing the knowledge that other children bring to school. It is bad enough that teachers are unwitting accomplices in this educational reproduction of the status quo. It is arduous enough to unveil the altruistic rhetoric of the school, to expose the classroom as a site of class stratification and to re-educate unwitting teachers in order to affect some kind of educational equity. Enter now the neoliberal agenda with all its ruthlessness. Left-minded educational theorists have a brash new nemesis whose agenda is actually once removed from internecine educational squabbles. In earlier decades, critical, traditional and progressive theories of education clashed mostly over what would be taught in schools, and by which methods. (And of course, the left wanted schools to teach against the grain of neoliberal practices while they were still only 'out there' in the harsh world of the marketplace.) Now, the evil lurking in textbooks has come knocking on the school door, and there has been an appropriate critical response by the left.

It is hard to find a more fitting supplement to Rancière's account of educational politics in France. Rancière has pointed out that the two strains of educational thought once current in France, Republicanism and school reform, both partake in the very logic that the school uses to stultify students:

Sociology calls this failure the 'crisis of the school' and it calls for school reform. Republicanism happily accuses reform itself of being the principal cause of the crisis. But reform and crisis can lead to the same jacobit notion: both are an explanation of school, a never-ending explanation of the reasons why inequality must lead to equality and yet never leads there.

That is to say, conservatives and liberals spend their time explaining things, like all good teachers. But explanation is precisely the social mechanism that keeps stultifying students, just as it stultifies a society at large that depends upon expert after expert for explanations that could not possibly be formulated by one person on his or her own. Explanations serve to cover up the fact that explanations are themselves the problem.

When it comes to left-oriented critiques of neoliberalism, the same phenomenon obtains. If accountability, competition and privatization are wrong, it is because accountability, competition and privatization are wrong. It is not because neoliberalism has some magical and nefarious shadow to cast on whatever institution comes under its spell. Yet, the critique of neoliberalism incessantly explains and teaches the base of market thinking to all educators, and to all students, who will listen. As in the case of French educational politics, 'Pedagogical reason and social reason are made indistinguishable from one another'. Explanation becomes the order of the day. Critical explanation denounces not accountability, competition and privatization per se, but the underlying social logic of these practices which must be exposed as the enemy they are, the enemy called neoliberalism.

In a troubling reversal of roles, those who champion the neoliberal agenda are currently the reformers. It is they, the 'new conservatives', who have a theory for change in the fashion of criticalists of old. Of course, the neoliberal theory for change has nothing to do with education per se. Accountability, competition and privatization are
themselves explanatory schemes. They explain the shape of the educational landscape rather than intervening in any way on educational practices. And in our pedagogized society, it is no wonder that people respond so well to these explanations. People like new explanations, especially ones that claim to improve education. Following this role reversal, today's critical theory, like traditional theory of old, ‘happily’ accuses reform itself of being the principal cause of the crisis’. Critical theory is in the unenviable position of explaining neoliberalism’s faults at a distance even further removed from education than ever. Critical theory explains neoliberalism. Neoliberalism, in turn, explains education. Education itself remains as explanatory as ever, as explanatory as either one.

Paradoxes That Give Meaning to Teaching

In his final lines on ignorant schoolmasters, after establishing a wide-ranging critique of the social logic of teaching, Rancière rescinds his message somewhat, noting that the explanatory backwardness of education is

a dissonance one must, in a way, forget in order to continue improving schools, programs, and pedagogies, but that one must also, from time to time, listen to again so that the act of teaching does not lose sight of the paradoxes that give it meaning.

This statement certainly calls for further comment. By way of finishing this introduction, and to offer a glimpse of sense to these enigmatic last lines, one can draw on Rancière’s distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘policing’.

As Rancière details in a number of his works, most notably in Disagreement (Rancière 1999) and Hatred of Democracy (Rancière 2006c), what currently goes by the name of politics is not politics at all. It is policing. Politics, rightly identified, happens less frequently, only when a person or group of people gain voice in a heretofore unimaginable way. This latter form of politics cannot obtain under the calculating, participatory norms of societal or institutional programs. As Rancière puts it in Disagreement,

Politics doesn't always happen – it actually happens very little or rarely. What is usually lumped together under the name of political history or political science in fact stems more often than not from other mechanisms concerned with holding on to the exercise of majesty, the curacy of divinity, the command of armies, and the management of interests. Politics only occurs when these mechanisms are stopped in their tracks. (Rancière 1999, p. 17)

As Rancière’s essay on ignorant schoolmasters makes clear, there are direct lines to be drawn between intellectual emancipation and politics on the one hand; between schooling, as it usually happens, and policing, on the other. Hence, the ‘dissonance’ and ‘paradox’ mentioned in those last few lines: Schooling as we know it is dependent upon a calculable if unnoticed absence of true education just as politics as we know it is most often dependent upon a similar absence in true politics. Education is, for the most part, part of the police rather than part of politics.

But while it is easy and provocative for Rancière to end this essay noting such a dissonance between educational emancipation and what is usually called schooling, it is required of Rancière’s readers, or at least those readers who are concerned with ‘improving schools, programs and pedagogies’, to tease some sense out of this particular dissonance. For such teasing, it is helpful to turn to Rancière’s work on politics per se, where he accounts for the tandem inconsistencies of politics and policing. In the political context, Rancière has indeed given sense to the above educational paradox. Noting the interaction of politics and policing, ‘Rancière writes in Disagreement: ‘Politics occurs when there is a place and a way for two heterogeneous processes to meet. The first is the police process in the sense we have tried to define. The second is the process of equality’ (Rancière 1999, p. 30). Then going on to compare one police order, ‘the Scythians’ practice of gouging out their slaves’ eyes’, to another, ‘the practices of modern information and communications strategies’, he makes the following distinction:

There is a worse and a better police – the better one, incidentally, not being the one that adheres to the supposedly natural order of society or the science of legislators, but the one that all the breaking and entering perpetrated by egalitarian logic has most often jolted out of its ‘natural’ logic. (Rancière 1999, pp. 30–31)

In terms of improving schools, programs and pedagogies, the same sentiment might obtain. While there might not be a generalizable
Jacotist method for intellectual emancipation, while any such method might itself join the police order it aims to subvert, this is not to say that all schools, programs and pedagogies are the same. Some educational endeavours will be troubled by the presumption of equality more frequently, and some less. Improvement, in this sense, means more trouble. One can indeed improve the police order of schooling in order to foster events of intellectual emancipation, but such improvement will not happen under the register of what is usually understood as the improvement of schools, programs and pedagogies. Improvement in this sense would never consist of importing some new method for teachers to use, or some new program for schools introduce. Instead, because improvement means more trouble, improvement will happen when methods and programs get interrupted, get troubled, by students who are determined, as Rancière describes in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, to take their own ‘orbit’ about some ‘truth’ that is to be learned (Rancière 1991a, p. 59).

So, it can be said that there are better and worse schools just as it can be said that there are better and worse police. But the better school will not be one whose programs and policies are more effective than the programs and policies of the worse. The better school will be the one that is porous to the incursion of intellectual emancipation. Such emancipation will begin when the student decides it will begin, and it will belong only for the student, not for the school. It will not begin because of a policy or practice, but in spite of a policy or practice. A policy or practice can only set the orbit of learning for a student, while intellectual emancipation happens when a student sets out on an orbit that is wholly his or her own. As Rancière puts it in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, ‘No one has a relationship to the truth if he is not on his own orbit’ (Rancière 1991a, p. 59). The greatest conceit in education, then, is the one that is constantly embraced by so many who try to improve schools, programs and pedagogies. It is the conceit that there is some institutional means by which to improve education in order to emancipate students.

CHAPTER 2

A NEW LOGIC OF EMANCIPATION

Equality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. To pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise that they will abolish. Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom – or it is nothing. (Rancière 2003a, p. 223)

INTRODUCTION

The work of Jacques Rancière deserves an educational point of entry. Or so this book will endeavour to prove. Rancière’s work, at large, is more reliant on a certain vision of education than is commonly acknowledged. And in turn, educational thought could be more clearly informed by his particular vision. This is not to say that Rancière has not already intimated the significant links between educational thought and his political, historical and aesthetic ‘interventions’. Certainly, the essay ‘On Ignorant Schoolmasters’ does much by way of such intimation. It is rather to say that these links have themselves yet to be intervened on in a more extended manner. Indeed, it might be said that this entire book is an intervention on Rancière’s ‘On Ignorant Schoolmasters’. If that essay provides an account and a context for Rancière’s primary book on education, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (Rancière 1991a), then this book, in turn, provides an account of that account. To establish such an account, we have chosen six themes – emancipation, the child, inclusion, recognition, truth and speech – the first of which we will begin to address in this chapter.

The idea of emancipation plays a central role in modern educational theories and practices. Many educators see their task not simply as that of modifying or conditioning the behaviour of their students. They want their students to become independent and autonomous, to be able to think for themselves, to make their own judgments and
to draw their own conclusions. The emancipatory impetus is particularly prominent in critical traditions and approaches where the aim of education is conceived as that of emancipating students from oppressive practices and structures in the name of social justice and human freedom (see, for example, Gur Ze’ev 2005). What is needed to bring about emancipation, so educators in the critical tradition argue, is an explanation of the workings of power, as it is only when one sees and understands how power operates that it becomes possible to address its influence and, in a sense, escape from it. This is why notions like ‘demystification’ and ‘liberation from dogmatism’ play a central role in critical education (see, for example, Mollenhauer 1976, p. 67; McLaren 1997, p. 218; see also Biesta 1998; 2005). Because it is assumed that power also operates upon people’s understandings of the situations they are in, there is an important strand within the critical tradition in which it is argued that emancipation can only be brought about ‘from the outside’, that is, from a position which, itself, is not contaminated by the workings of power. This line of thought goes back to Marxist notions of ‘ideology’ and ‘false consciousness’, and finds a more recent expression in Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘misrecognition’ (see Rancière 2003a, pp. 165–202). Hence, it becomes the task of the critical educator to make visible what is hidden for those who are the ‘object’ of the emancipatory endeavours of the critical educator. Similarly, the task of critical social science becomes that of making visible what is hidden from the everyday view.

Rancière has raised some important questions about the logic of this particular model of emancipation. Whereas according to this logic the explanation of how the world ‘really’ is leads to emancipation, Rancière has argued that instead of bringing about emancipation, this logic introduces a fundamental dependency into the attainment of emancipation. This is because the ones to be emancipated remain dependent upon the ‘truth’ or ‘knowledge’ revealed to them by the emancipator. The problem, as he puts it in The Politics of Aesthetics, is that ‘where one searches for the hidden beneath the apparent, a position of mastery is established’ (Rancière 2004a, p. 49). In The Ignorant Schoolmaster (Rancière 1991a), Rancière has shown in great detail how educational practices based on this logic of emancipation lead to ‘stultification’ rather than emancipation. In other work, particularly The Philosopher and his Poor (Rancière 2003a), he has shown that a relationship of dependency is, in a sense, constitutive of Western philosophy and social theory more generally. Rancière’s contribution not only lies in highlighting this contradiction within the logic of emancipation. Throughout his career, he has worked consistently on the articulation of an alternative approach – an alternative way to understand and ‘do’ emancipation. He has done so using a form that aims to be consistent with his ideas on emancipation in that it is a kind of writing that tries to avoid a position of mastery. Rancière has referred to this as a ‘topographical’ way of writing that articulates ‘an egalitarian or anarchist theoretical position that does not presuppose this vertical relationship of top to bottom’ (Rancière 2004a, pp. 49–50; see also Rancière 2009a).

The purpose of this chapter is to reconstruct and review Rancière’s ideas on emancipation. We begin with a brief discussion of the history of the trajectory of the idea of emancipation, and we highlight the main contradictions within this trajectory. We then discuss aspects of Rancière’s work that pertain to emancipation in order to show how and in what ways one might understand and ‘do’ emancipation differently. We do this from three angles: the angle of political theory, the angle of political practice and the angle of education.

EMANCIPATION AND ITS PREDICAMENTS

The concept of emancipation has its roots in Roman law where it referred to the freeing of a son or wife from the legal authority of the pater familias, the father of the family. Emancipation literally means to give away ownership (ex: away; mancipium: ownership). More broadly, it means to relinquish one’s authority over someone. This implies that the ‘object’ of emancipation, that is, the person to be emancipated, becomes independent and free as a result of the act of emancipation. This is reflected in the legal use of the term today, where emancipation means the freeing of someone from the control of another, particularly in the form of parents relinquishing authority and control over a minor child. In the seventeenth century, emancipation became used in relation to religious toleration, in the eighteenth century in relation to the emancipation of slaves and in the nineteenth century in relation to the emancipation of women and workers. The Roman use of the term already indicates the link with education, in that emancipation marks the moment when, and the process through which, the (dependent) child becomes an (independent) adult.

A decisive turn in the trajectory of the idea of emancipation was taken in the eighteenth century when emancipation became intertwined