

# Ignorance of Inequality: A Response to David Waddington

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In “Wrong Place, Wrong Time: The Ignorant Schoolmaster Comes to America,” David I. Waddington argues that Jacotot’s universal teaching would not be a good pedagogy to implement in contemporary U.S. schools. As Waddington admits, he is concerned more with Jacotot in this piece than with Rancière. I will respond to Waddington on Jacototian grounds *in part*, but I will focus mostly on how Rancière might still insist that we welcome the Ignorant Schoolmaster to at least visit the U.S. It is important to note that Rancière is skeptical of applying methods in general, much less to an entire country.<sup>1</sup> He writes that methods “are not tools which facilitate the examination of a territory but weapons which serve to establish its always uncertain boundary.”<sup>2</sup> I hope that my response does justice to Waddington’s focus on Jacotot, but also stays true to Rancière’s worries about institutionalizing methods.

To be fair, if I were to accept that Trumpism, or the “grit” pedagogies of some charter schools (which do not make up even close to a majority of schools in the U.S.) were perfect representations of the concepts of *equality of intelligence* and the *power of the will*, then I would disparage them, too. In my reading, Trumpism is used by Waddington as an example of why it is important to differentiate between kinds of intelligence. The outcome matters, Waddington might say. Grit pedagogies are used by Waddington, it seems, to speculate as to the viability of relying solely on will in education. There is more to student success than the *will* students apply, Waddington might say. While I return to these notions of outcome and student success, it is important to first address the tone and analogy Waddington uses.

## TONE AND ANALOGY

Regarding tone, disparaging the brazen attitude of Jacotot does not

interest me, for I don't think I would have gotten very far in my education if I rejected ideas merely on the basis of the bravado with which white male writers articulated them—Rancière included. Regarding analogy, there is one made at the heart of Waddington's critique of Jacotot:

Not only does Jacotot maintain that intelligence starts out equal, but he also claims that it continues to remain so despite any actions that the person might take. Thus, on this theory, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Donald Trump are perhaps not equally learned, but they are equally intelligent, and if they apply all of their attention to a particular problem (let's say, "Race in America today"), they should be able to achieve the same results eventually.<sup>3</sup>

There are two layers to this that I would like to respond to.

Firstly, there are different criteria we set for different kinds of problems as well as different kinds of results. The comparison between Coates and Trump here assumes that there is a shared problem and that there are shared desired results, when there are not. There is no race problem for Trump, and for Trump, the ideal results do not amount to the destruction of white supremacy. As such, it is a given that the same 'results' cannot not be reached. Having a text before us in a language we cannot read or speak, and having to learn how to understand and differentiate the words, is more fixed. While we might end up with different interpretations of metaphors within the text, and can never get around the ambiguities of translation, the context or parameters confine us to a reasonably similar set of 'results'—if we are to simply stay within Jacotot's examples of studying the *Telemaque*. For social problems we largely cannot foresee the desired solution, and I do not imagine thus that Jacotot's claim is that for any *type* of given problem, equal intelligences will find *one* solution.

We might put this into the context of a contemporary fourth grade classroom: students don't understand how fractions work, and the goal is for them to understand them. The "problem" assumes the solution. Whether the

universal teaching method is the most effective in reaching the solution (students understanding fractions), seems separate from whether this can be applied to social issues (such as white supremacy) for which we have yet to find or agree on a solution. However, the social implications of assuming an equality of intelligence, I argue, with Rancière, should be the focus when philosophizing about the Jacototian pedagogy.<sup>4</sup> The social implications of teachers and administrators assuming that there is no fundamental difference between their own intelligence and that of their students may not be controllable, but it certainly puts some onus on those in power to treat their power with care.

Returning to Waddington's question about Trump and Coates, the second layer I'd like to respond to is the assumed relationship between intelligence and results. As I've just noted, context—the alleged problem and relative constraints upon the results—is important. Yet Rancière takes major issue with the desire to measure intelligence. Indeed, one of the arguments Jacotot makes about intelligence, that Waddington sites, is that “intelligence” is often used to explain differences in performance, when all that is being explained is that there *are* differences in performance; intelligence does not manifest by itself as something measurable but can only be referred to as a supervening phenomenon. What is really taking place is an *explanation*, resulting in *stultification*. Waddington is not exempt from this tendency either, for he insists that “even if we grant equality of intelligence, he (Jacotot) still has to explain differences in performance somehow.”<sup>5</sup> Waddington goes on to ask, “How does one explain the differences between Donald Trump and Ta-Nehisi Coates?”<sup>6</sup> We could *explain* this by saying that Trump is just not as intelligent as Coates, but this puts us right back in that “anti-intellectual” camp Waddington is worried about. What we need to look at is the nature of the *police order*, as Rancière would have it, and even U.S. history. Explaining the differences between Coates and Trump by way of an inequality of intelligences only further commits us to the notion that power disparities are substantiated by innate qualities, rather than by social constructs we can and ought to rectify when necessary.

Waddington professes that more Trumpism and more profit-driven

gritty charter schools will result from implementation of Jacotot's ideas, presumably because we would apply the strategy of learning the *Telemaque* to all activities in U.S. schools. I object that this analogy is not so simple. It is one thing to argue that everyone could theoretically understand the same book, but it is another to argue that if this pedagogy were applied in schools, we would end up with a homogenous, Trumpy, gritty society—like a really bad nationwide book club. While I would oppose such a book club, I disagree that Jacototian equality of intelligence and power of the will necessarily leads to Trumpy grittiness. A very important part of the intelligence or will of students is that their power, while equal, is ready for anything. The *outcome* cannot be dictated.

## CONCLUSION

Rancière argues that the desire for homogeneity and total equality is naive. There will always be inequality, for indeed, this is the basis of specialization and social organization. Whether this inequality of appearances (social roles/titles) maps on to an inequality of what is actually important (basic needs, fulfillment, self-advocacy, trust, etc.) is Rancière's interest, and he argues that it should not. We are mistaken when we look for explanations of socio-economic disparity in some kind of innate feature within and across individuals. Focusing on fixing or assessing innate features in order to "right" society is dangerous and flawed.

Waddington takes issue with Jacotot's depiction of *the will* as some kind of determining factor in achieving ends. I argue, however, that it is those ends, and not the will, that we ought to focus on. For Jacotot, the ends—at least in the excerpts Waddington cites—were comprehending the *Telemaque*. If we are to insert universal teaching into the ends set by gritty charter schools, some students will inevitably have 'failures of the will,' because schools are premised on evaluation toward set ends. Rancière insists that "there [can be] no social emancipation, and no emancipatory school,"<sup>7</sup> so we might argue that the project is failed to begin with, but we cannot conclude that it is the students or teachers who fail; it is the project of schooling, and our notions of

student success, that we need to question.

If we let go of the expectations that schools will bring social harmony or effectively sort students based on intelligence, we may be able to give *the will* of students more attention than we often do. As Ignorant Schoolmasters we can be ignorant of our students' educational ends, and instead, perhaps, let our students determine what those ends are.<sup>8</sup> Rancière insists that by *assuming* an equality of intelligences we can control against arbitrary power—whether it be coming from Trump or philosophers of education. Rancière writes, “the very idea of a class in society whose specific role is to think is preposterous and can be conceived only because we live under a preposterous social order.”<sup>9</sup> Trumpy grittiness exists, as do schools. The mere act of *assuming* that students, and not just authority figures, have the capacity to recognize and respond to Trumpy grittiness can help mitigate the harms of this reality. The U.S. needs this kind of egalitarianism.

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1 Charles Bingham, “Under the Name of Method: On Jacques Rancière’s Presumptive Tautology,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 3 (2009), 419.

2 Jacques Rancière, “Thinking Between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge,” trans. Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia* 1, (2006), 11.

3 David Waddington, “Wrong Place, Wrong Time: The Ignorant Schoolmaster Comes to America,” in *Philosophy and Education Society* 2018, ed. Megan Laverty (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019).

4 Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (New York: Verso, 1992), 36; Yves Citton, “The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Knowledge and Authority,” in *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 25-37.

5 Waddington, “Wrong Place, Wrong Time.”

6 Ibid.

7 Jacques Rancière, “On Ignorant Schoolmasters,” in *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*, trans. Charles Bingham, ed. Charles Bingham and Gert Biesta (New York: Continuum, 2010), 15.

8 Rancière, “Thinking Between Disciplines,” 5-6; Tyson Edward Lewis, *The Aesthetics of Education: Theatre, Curiosity, and Politics in the Work of Jacques Rancière and Paulo Freire* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 9-55.

9 Jacques Rancière, *Moments Politiques: Interventions 1977-2009*, trans. Mary Foster (New York, NY: Seven Stories Press, 2014), xiii.