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Chapter 18
Social work through the pedagogical lens of Jacques Rancière

Stephen Cowden

Introduction

Equality is not a goal to be reached. It is not a common level, an equivalent amount of riches or an identity of living conditions that must be reached as the consequence of historic evolution and strategic action. Instead it is a point of departure. This first principle immediately ties up with a second one: equality is not a common measure between individuals, it is a capacity through which individuals act as the holders of a common power, a power belonging to anyone.
(Rancière, 2017)

This chapter explores the idea of equality through the prism of a case study from practice, by drawing on the pedagogical lens of Jacques Rancière. It highlights the complexities of power relations inherent in social work practitioners' relationships with service users and points to the implications for a critical pedagogic approach to social work education. As a student social worker in London in the early 1990s there was a particular case I had on my first placement that really stayed with me. The placement was a social services office in south London – it was a typical inner London borough prior to the gentrification that later took over; very ethnically mixed, poor, scruffy looking, but also with a kind of vibrant energy. One of the pieces of work given to me by my Practice Teacher was writing court reports for various young men who had been in trouble with the police. There was one sixteen-year-old man, David F, who was a complex character and someone who intrigued me. His mum was a single parent to him and his younger half-sister. His mum was studying accountancy to try to improve the family's situation, but this seemed to mean that while she was out most evenings attending classes, the care of his younger half-sister, who was aged 10, was left to a large extent with David. He was extremely attentive to her; he would cook for them both, help her with her homework, and was in general very caring and protective toward her. I was really surprised (and impressed) by the way he helped her so much with her homework, as he was himself 'persistently truanting' at the time. This was one of the reasons he was referred to me. The context for his unlawful activity was a gang he was part of. He was the only white boy in a gang made up of all young black lads; something he was quite proud of. The gang used to go around stealing portable radios and CD players from cars. David's nickname was 'lightning' as he claimed he was able to smash car windows and remove these from cars faster than anyone else in the gang. He claimed he was able to do this in 30 seconds. Sometimes the gang would also attempt to rob kebab shops in their local areas, so while he justified his robbery of cars on the basis that the owners would 'get it all back on insurance', he was also involved in some nasty aggression with shop owners. When I had put all this information together, I felt a real sense of contradiction in my feelings about him. I really disliked the aggression and violence he was involved in, yet I did not feel that completely defined him. I struggled with the idea of what my role was in writing a Court Report on his behalf, and when I took this to my Practice Teacher, he explained that our role here was to speak for people who were not able to be 'the judge of their own best interests' – yet I felt very unsure how I was supposed to be playing that role. On a practical level I was aware that the violence and aggression he was involved with were really wrong, but at the same time a trajectory into the criminal justice system would only brutalise him still further, emphasising all the worst aspects of his character, as well as taking him away from his half-sister; a relationship that seemed to have brought out the best in him. I did the work as well as I could – as it was, the magistrate brushed over my report in seconds and made the decision herself, but the case stayed with me for the issues it raised about the nature of the social work role.

The International Federation of Social Work defines social work as a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central

to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.

(IFSW, 2014)

For me, this summarises the social work mission at its most positive. But experience demonstrates that the reality of doing social work is not only a lot more mundane, but also could be often quite removed from these principles. When you are a social work practitioner, this is the contradictory space that you occupy, and the work I was doing with David seemed to embody those contradictions. I was attracted to social work because it seemed to allow the possibility of doing work based on ideals of 'equality and social justice', and the material I was studying on the social work course also promoted this as the basis of the profession. Yet I was also acutely aware

that when you were out in practice, there were real questions about how those commitments were realised. Not only are there a whole series of organisational and institutional structures and imperatives that you are working within – and there were issues about how well and how badly some social workers negotiated these – but there was also a real question about what judging someone else's 'best interests' actually meant. Social work's claim to being a profession is based on the application of specialist knowledge – and I do not want to suggest for a moment that this is not important. But what I was really struck by was how differently this assessing the 'best interests' of another could play out with different social workers in different situations.

This seems to me to express a tension between those aspirations to social justice, and the need to 'get on with the job'. As someone coming into social work at the height of the Thatcher period, I was also really conscious of the way an emerging anti-state welfare rhetoric coming from the Tory government grabbed onto a lot of these tensions around the power differential between professionals and service users through a language of service users now needing to be 'in control'. This was the beginning of what we would now call 'neoliberalism' (though that word was not used until quite a bit later), and I felt that Stuart Hall was really insightful in the way he used the term 'authoritarian populism' (Hall & Jacques, 1983) to describe Thatcher's stance toward social welfare. She always positioned herself as 'out there with the people', which also always meant she was with them *against* the welfare state and the 'nosey' professionals who worked within it. This appeal to the idea of 'people wanting to stand on their own two feet' instead of being 'dependent on' or controlled by the state became the basis of the way the Tories created a social consensus for retrenching and privatising social welfare. However, rather than

address the issue of the power professionals had in relation to service users, the imposition of neoliberal principles onto social work has made the tensions between professionals and service users much worse. A recent report from the UK Family Rights Group about the experiences that families had with social workers, epitomises this. It noted that 'while there are structural problems that make everyone feel overstretched, families face a system which is not just at crisis point, but one where everyday humanity can be forgotten' (Community Care, 2018). This is one small instance of the way neoliberal managerial imperatives which dominate now are crushing

the soul of social work. At the same time, however, it is important not to blame everything on neoliberalism, as many of the contradictions involved here already existed, as they were to a large extent built into the way social work was constituted in the UK in the period after the Second World War.

Social work developed as a salaried profession in the process of social rebuilding that took place at this time, which in Britain saw the creation of the welfare state through massive increases of state investment in education, health and social services. These represented huge social advances, which improved life expectancy, social mobility, employment opportunities and prosperity for many, but it was also the case that poverty and exclusion were contained rather than eradicated. Social work's ideological framework, as it grew in this period, came from the philosophy of Fabianism – an evolutionary and gradualist form of socialism. As Fred Powell (2001:46) has noted, at the centre of this reformist tradition in social policy was the concept of social obligation – that public services represented a social contract between the citizen and state, whose good intentions the individual was expected to respect, as the basis of being entitled to assistance. While rhetorically collectivist, the social work practice that grew out of this represented 'an essentially individualised response based on humanistic values, rather than structural change.' Taylor et al. (1995:12–13) point to some further implications of this when discussing

the growth of social work during the 1960s:

Social work treatment, however much it can be described as being in the client's own interest, could often result in spiral of further labelling, further deviant commitment, and finally the irreversible channelling of individuals into careers in prison, mental hospitals or skid row. Placing the activities of social welfare agencies into political and ideological context, it is easy to see that the everyday decisions of workers in those agencies, flow not from an ill-informed understanding of 'deviant' or 'maladjustment' but from a clearly formulated, Fabian-conformist, and essentially *liberal* ideology … – the encouragement 'to adjust', 'to encourage good citizenship' to 'mature' – and indeed to accept the good offices of the helping agencies themselves.

It was the gap between David F as he sat in front of me, with all his particular experience of life, and this notion of 'good citizenship' that I was supposed to be promoting that seemed most problematic to me at the time, and it is this that brings me to a discussion of the meaning of the 'equality' in social work, which is the focus of this

chapter. I want to open this up through a discussion with the work of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1940–present), someone who has written extensively on the meaning and significance of equality. At the time of being a social work student, I was not aware of the Rancière's work. That came quite a bit later, but Rancière's work links with this case that I have discussed above because of his very original ideas about how teachers, and other professionals by implication, work with their students or service users in situations like the one I have been describing. He is also really interested in the way professionals such as social workers can profess a belief in 'empowerment and liberation' but, in reality, be doing something not that much like that, not always in a bad way – but I still think it is important to try to understand why that happens as it does.

It is in this sense that I think Rancière's theories offer a unique way to understand social work, as well as allowing us to think about how we can deal with these contradictions in practice. As noted, Rancière's work is intensely preoccupied by the question of equality, but the way he approaches this is very distinctive. Rather than stating what equality stands for as a positive value, which is like the IFSW statement, his work comes out of a tradition of negativity in critical thinking. What this means is that Rancière works by delving into an abstract concept, such as equality, and trying to figure out what that actually means at the level of everyday life for people. This tradition of negativity in critical thinking contrasts with the way the process of defining an abstract concept is usually approached. So in dominant conceptions of political citizenship, the starting point will be the meaning of equality as a positive ideal; Rancière's approach, by contrast, sees equality as what happens when people reject or come out *against something*. In this chapter I want to point to the ways we in social work can engage with these ideas. I begin with a discussion of his approach to philosophy and politics, moving to an outline of his distinctive ideas about equality in one of his most important books, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991).

Against abstraction: Rancière's conception of equality

Jacques Rancière was born in 1940 in Algiers, which was still a French colony at that point. He entered the elite *École Normale Supérieure* University in Paris in 1960 and became a student of Louis Althusser, who was at that stage France's leading Marxist and Communist Party intellectual. This was at a time when the Communist Party in France gained around 20% of the overall vote in elections, as well as being highly influential in the trade union movement. In 1965, Rancière was invited to join a seminar group, which became hugely influential in the humanities and among Leftist thinkers. The group's work was published in French in 1965 as the book *Reading Capital*, with Louis Althusser as the main author, and other members of the group also writing chapters (see Althusser et al., 2016). Althusser's central project in doing this work was to establish that Marxism was a 'science' and, in order to achieve this, the group undertook a densely theoretical re-reading of Marx's *Capital*. Rancière contributed a chapter to this book and during this stage was very much a loyal disciple of Althusser.

However, all of this changed when the student protests and their violent repression by the authorities exploded onto the streets of Paris in May 1968. Although the Parisian university, where all these Marxist intellectuals were based, was one of the key places where the action began, Althusser refused to join in or support the protests; instead he dismissed them as not revolutionary at all, initiated as they were by 'petit-bourgeois' students, at a time when the working class was 'not yet ready' for a revolution. Yet Althusser's proclamations were made as students were already in the process of linking politically with workers in the streets outside the *École Normale Supérieure*, an alliance that went on to build the biggest general strike in French post-war history (Figure 18.1).

Althusser's failure to engage with the reality of what was going on around him shocked, disappointed and angered Rancière, who by contrast threw himself into support of this new political movement. It also led to him thinking about how Althusser could be a great Marxist intellectual, but at the same time, entirely unable to grasp the significance of the unfolding developments among students and workers that were happening right in front of him. (This sense of the emerging political process represented by May 1968 is captured wonderfully by Kristin Ross in her book *May '68 and Its Afterlives* [2002]). Rancière went on to argue that at the core of Althusser's understanding of Marxism was an idealised notion of 'the proletariat', which ordinary flesh and blood workers had failed to live up to; that for him, the working class were not so much people as an abstraction, an idealised philosophical category. For Rancière these problems were amplified by the elevated social status of intellectuals. In his book *Althusser's Lesson* (2011), Rancière vociferously attacked his former teacher, arguing that the privileged position of theory, even really radical theory, had the effect of hugely reinforcing the privileged position of intellectuals; not just over students, but within political movements, and within society as a whole. Through getting directly involved in the protests of '68, Rancière came to experience the way intellectuals like himself had no specific place in May, no particular role; they were like everyone else, part of the crowd … like everyone else, they did not represent a concrete social category, but merely an agent at work with other agents, on the street, inscribed in the same project *(Ross, 2002:174)*. It is important to note that Rancière was not being simply anti-intellectual here; it was rather about how making sense of this whole experience was central in allowing him to re-think differently what the role of intellectuals in political movements should be. This experience was pivotal for Rancière

as it informs so much of the work he went on to produce, as well as setting out the kind of 'contrary' intellectual he went on to become. In this sense the May '68 events and his split with Althusser, form the essential background of one of his most important books, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991).

Against explication: *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*

The Ignorant Schoolmaster (1991) is fundamentally a book about the kinds of social relationships in which we find ourselves when 'education' takes place. While the focus of the book is education, Rancière wanted to make the point that it is not just something that happens in schools, colleges and universities; instead this is what happens whenever you are in any situation when you have to be shown how to do something you have not done before. This could be becoming part of a band, joining a political party, starting a new job, having a child and so on. In this sense the politics of education are the politics of society as a whole, as though society is like a big school. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991) does not involve Rancière setting out his views directly; rather, Rancière's views are expressed through an account of an unusual and once famous eighteenth-century Enlightenment educator, Joseph Jacotot (1770–1840). Although Jacotot's influence was huge in his day, his writings had been largely forgotten until their resuscitation by Rancière.

As a young man Jacotot had been actively involved in the French Revolution, and during the very open and experimental period of the revolution, he worked as an educator at the *École Polytechnique* in Dijon. While working here Jacotot began to conduct experiments in 'democratic teaching methods' which were highly regarded by students and staff. The success of these brought him into politics and in 1815 he was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in the French parliament. However, with the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy to power in France, the tide turned against this radicalism and Jacotot was forced into exile in Belgium in 1819, where in his changed circumstances he had to accept 'a position of Professor at half-pay' at the University
of Louvain (Rancière, 1991:1). Here he was given the job of teaching French to Flemish-speaking students, only there was one fairly enormous problem – he spoke no Flemish and the students spoke no French. Faced with what might have seemed to many teachers an insurmountable problem, Jacotot improvised a solution. He managed to obtain a set of copies of a bilingual edition of a French novel called *Les Aventures de Télémaque* (which recounted the travels of Telemachus, son of Ulysses) and made these available to his students. He then experimented with a method of teaching where instead of explaining to his students how the French language
worked grammatically, structurally, linguistically as the vast majority of language teaching does, he adopted a highly unorthodox method of asking his students to learn to recite this book in French, section by section, building up to a recitation of the entire book. What he discovered, to his own astonishment, was that the experiment was more successful than he could have imagined; as his students went through this book, they figured out themselves how to speak French. As Rancière (1991:4) notes:
Jacotot had not explained spelling or conjugations to them. They had looked for the French words that corresponded to the words they knew and the reasons for their grammatical endings by themselves. They had learned to put them together to make, in turn, French sentences by themselves; sentences whose spelling and grammar became more exact as they progressed through the book.

It was out of this that Jacotot developed a method that came to be known as 'Universal Teaching'. Rancière described the emancipatory power of Jacotot's method of 'Universal Teaching', as an experiment that demonstrated:
One can teach what one doesn't know if the student is emancipated, that is to say they are obliged to **use** their own intelligence … To emancipate an ignorant person, one must be, and only need be, emancipated oneself, that is to say conscious of the true power of the human mind. The ignorant person will learn by themselves what the master doesn't know if the master believes they can and obliges them to realise their capacity.
(Rancière, 1991:15)
Jacotot's method was one in which instead of presuming his students' ignorance, which he needed to address through an extensive process of explanation, Jacotot presumed their capacity; that is, their ability to themselves establish the connections on which their learning was based. Of course, the teacher still had a role to play, but this was not one of knowledge transmission. Rather, the teacher's role lay in requiring the student to pay attention to their intellect, as well as that of others, and in this way 'realise their capacity'. In developing a pedagogical method based on this, Jacotot radically overturned the dominant conception of the pedagogical relation. Rancière characterises this as the initiation of a *presumption of equality* within the classroom. This
approach to equality was also not simply theoretical or rhetorical, but deeply practical – and indeed the method developed had a highly successful outcome. It was the way Jacotot inverted the presumption of ignorance into a presumption for capacity that Rancière seized upon as a means to critique contemporary pedagogy and the power relations that surround it.
This is significant because the vast bulk of contemporary learning theory gestures to an ideal of educational equality, but in practice defers this as an ideal to aspire to – as something that can only be approached when the students

have diligently listened to and absorbed that which their teacher has explained to them. What Rancière saw in Jacotot was the way this assumption was turned on its head – so instead of being something to be aimed for, the enacting of equality became the very basis of the process and practice of teaching. As Rancière puts it, 'equality exists as the ensemble of practices that mark out its domain; *there is no other reality of equality than the reality of equality*' (1991:79, italics added). Thus it was the presupposition of equality *at the outset* that made a democratic pedagogy possible. In developing these radical conclusions, we can see how Rancière was drawing on his experience with Althusser, the revolutionary intellectual who was afraid of what would happen to his own power as an intellectual by getting involved in an actual revolution. In this book Rancière returned Jacotot to the present, as someone who was able to show that intellectual discovery is not something conferred by the master onto the student; it is instead something that needs to be appropriated by the student through an act of 'transgressive will':

To explain something to someone first of all is to show them they cannot understand it by themselves. Before being the act of the pedagogue, explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing ones and ignorant ones, ripe minds and immature ones, the capable and the incapable, the intelligent and the stupid. *(Rancière, 1991:6)*

Rancière's conception of the role of the teacher is thus not the person who graciously shares their knowledge with the uneducated. It is rather that of a person who insists that education is what happens when students begin to pay attention to the development of their own and others' intellects. This is the process Rancière tries to capture when he describes work of the teacher as 'revealing intelligence to itself ' (Rancière, 1991:28). The method of equality demands that the capacity for intellectual engagement is taken as a starting point, rather than as something that can only be achieved through quantitative or qualitative changes in consciousness in the student, which must be led by the all-knowing teacher. A pedagogy that is not 'stultifying' is one that brings forth the capacity for intellectual engagement and knowledge formation which every human being possesses, and it is this deeply democratic and egalitarian dimension of the Enlightenment that Rancière wants to return to as a means of challenging the assumptions of contemporary educational and pedagogical practice. On a number of occasions throughout the book, Rancière reiterates one of the key principles of Jacotot's 'Universal Teaching' method; that 'everything is in everything' (Rancière, 1991:41). What this means is that it is in the process of discovering the connections between one thing and another that students discover not just their own intelligence, but the joy of intellectual discovery. In describing Jacotot as an 'ignorant schoolmaster' Rancière is of course being ironic. The method of 'Universal Teaching' that Jacotot developed through his experiments came from a huge amount of effort, commitment and insight. But the word 'ignorant' articulates the idea that the job of the educator is not to explain, but rather to compel the will of the student to take seriously their own intellect, and those of others, and in doing so uncover their own capacity for independent critical thought.

Against knowing best: the ignorant social worker

At the beginning of this chapter I talked about my work with David F and I want to return to the discussion of him and his situation as a way of thinking about what all this means for social work. I previously discussed the way the magistrate brushed over my report and made her own decision regarding David, and the decision she made was not to give him a custodial sentence. However, she did require him to return to attending school, a decision that was seen as a process of re-integrating him into some kind of normal path for a young man. My Practice Teacher at the social services office where I was based explained to me that the job of making this school re-integration happen now fell to me, and it was with considerable self-doubt and dread as to how I was ever going to achieve this, that I began this work. As I noted earlier, David had been 'persistently truanting' from school for at least a year, and more to the point, was manifestly disinterested in attending again. Indeed, I could see that my many entreaties to him about the benefits of doing so, and numerous meetings set up to appeal to him to do that, were having zero impact. The problem for me was that I could see at the outset that re-integration into the existing system was not going to work, not because he was not capable of learning, but because the manner and attitudes he had were entirely contrary to those which schools require of their pupils.

My placement was nearing its conclusion and I really wanted to leave having offered him something, but I was, at the same time, uncertain as to what I was going to be able to do if he simply continued to reject everything that was on offer. With nothing organised, I could see the streets and career criminality beckoning. I decided to work with something he had consistently told me he felt really passionate about – music. Eventually I came across a further education course that would accept him for a programme in music production. When I introduced him, the teachers there evinced a scepticism of having seen 'people like him' many times before, to which he responded by slouching on the chair, looking out of a window and confirming every pre-conceived idea they already had about him. But as I left, they said to me that they would do what they could in working with him, and it was clear that they were really passionate teachers who cared about what they did. They also said to me

that my enthusiasm for his success was all very good but at the end of the day he had to attend and do the work if he wanted to stay there.

It was at that point that my placement ended and so did my contact with him. However, the conclusion to this story came in the form of a letter to me, which arrived about a year later, right at the end of my course. It had been sent to the university and eventually arrived in my tutor's in-tray after having been sent around to various locations within the university. It was from his mother; someone whose earlier communications with me were, at the very least, dismissive of the possibility that he was ever going to 'make anything of himself'. She had told me when I first met her that David had had social work input before me – which she described as 'useless' – and the fact that he now had a student allocated to him showed how much of a priority he was. The letter was brief and to the point, thanking me for finding David a course that he had not only stayed on and really loved, but that it had been one of the first times he had found a group of peers who were 'not criminals' – I 'must have done something right' she concluded. At the time I received this I was really pleased, but I was also confused in feeling that I was not sure what it was that I had done right. It is this question that my encounter with Rancière's work has helped me think through and, by way of concluding, I want to sketch out how the ideas in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* might be applied to social work. Much of the time I was working with David I felt incredibly 'ignorant'; not just of the world he was part of, but also about how I was going to do something that would improve his situation. In spite of this, I must have conveyed to him something about the fact that he did have alternatives other than career criminality, and that these options were things he was capable of. This is, I think, how we can read Rancière when he says that 'one can teach what one doesn't know' (1991:15). The point is that while I was very inexperienced in working with young people in David's situation, what I did do was to provide a space where he could think about what he was going to do with his life in a way that allowed him to make the connections between doing something different and the kind of person he did and did not want to be. As I noted earlier, the gap between a conception of 'judging the best interests of another person' and that person's entirely different sense of their own situation, were all too apparent to me when I was working with him. In his book *Short Voyages to the Land of the People*, Rancière (2003:122) comments on exactly this issue:
All teleologies and all images of coming-to-consciousness are founded on a certainty of distribution: some people's mission is to speak for others who know not what they do. Such is … the point of view of mistrust: behind things are where their reasons lie.

What Rancière is pointing to here is that knowing best for other people involves a 'distribution' of power. He wants to question the assumption of virtuousness that is associated with those who dedicate themselves to 'speaking for others', and this parallels the way he questions the role of the teacher in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. When he talks about the 'certainty' of this distribution, he is referring to the way the person seen to be in need of help comes to be defined inherently as 'less than' the person who has taken on the role of the helper. So there are some teachers and social workers who espouse a desire to 'make a difference' to the people they work with, but end up feeling quite contemptuous toward them. What is this about? I think Rancière is suggesting to us that this reflects their personal investment, encouraged by the social position they occupy, in the idea that change will come through the people they work with accepting that they 'know best'. This embodies 'mistrust' of those people but it also fails to grasp how real change happens. The alternative to this, as with the teaching relation, lies in an inversion of that relationship. Hence, for Rancière, important change is not about imposing or cajoling someone toward a positive ideal of what you think their place in the world should be; it lies instead in the insistence that they pay attention to finding and creating an alternative – even if the shape of this is as yet unknown.

Just as Rancière saw the role of the teacher not in transferring knowledge but in compelling students to take themselves seriously as thinkers, we can see the social work role in the same way. In the violently unequal, dangerous and horribly unhealthy world we live in, we need the kind of social work that works at the level of relationships. In those relationships, we really do need to 'be there' for the people we work with, but Rancière is saying something more than that. I would sum this up in the idea that an emancipated social work is one freed from the idea that we have to know best for other people. This 'knowing best' manifests a 'mistrust'; that is a false sense of the kind of distance between ourselves and the people we work with, as well as embodying a power relation that inhibits the development of the process of change that it claims to want. We might not know all that much about what it is like to live in the shoes of our service users – we are after all only making short visits to 'their land' – but we can still play a really important role in their lives. What does matter is being there for someone through a time of difficulty and insisting on their engagement with the meaning of this difficulty, even if neither you nor they know what the 'solution' is going to be. This strikes me as a really good way of talking about what the social work relationship can offer. Even better would be to have this kind of social work positioned within a democratised and publicly accountable conception of public service, but one which takes equality rather than deficit as its point of departure.

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