



## **Critical Review *Jacques Rancière's The Master and the Ignorant***

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### **Introduction**

"Down with the teachers and the punishments!"  
(Jean Vigo)

In *The Ignorant Master*, the philosopher Jacques Rancière proposes a disruptive reflection on the philosophy of education, questioning the hierarchical model of teaching by arguing that everyone has an equal capacity to learn. Based on the experience of the French pedagogue Joseph Jacotot (1770 – 1840), the book raises a problem that crosses time: *What is the purpose of education?* Entrenched in this battlefield, Rancière-Jacotot's thought confronts the barbarism of stultifying teaching while

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defending the position of another education for the people: an emancipatory pedagogy.

Rancière transforms Joseph Jacotot into a philosophical character in his work, by narrating the dissonant intellectual adventure of this peculiar pedagogue, in the context of the post-French Revolution (1789-1799). In 1818, Jacotot was forced into exile in the Netherlands. In Flemish lands, the foreigner accepts the challenge of teaching French literature to students who did not know their language. In turn, he also ignored Dutch. *How then can a teacher explain something to someone who is not able to understand it?*

Using a bilingual edition of *Telemachus*, Jacotot asked the students to learn the French text by comparing it with the Dutch translation. The unexpected success of the students revealed that learning does not depend on a master explainer, but on the intellectual emancipation of the learner. This experience confronted the myth of the pedagogized society, in which inequality is perpetuated by the student's dependence on the master's knowledge.

In contrast, Jacotot proposed Universal Education, founded on the principle that every person is endowed with intellectual equality. This is the radical idea that "you can teach what you don't know, as long as you emancipate the student; that is, that the student is forced to use his own intelligence" (Rancière, 2023, p.39). The role of the ignorant master is to instill in any individual the will to exercise his intelligence autonomously and learn for himself. This is called emancipation. On the contrary: when the master explains, by

the simple fact of judging the other as incapable, brutalization occurs.

The 3rd Brazilian edition of *The Ignorant Master*, published by Editora Autentica, in 2023, reaffirms the relevance of the work in the political, philosophical, and pedagogical context of education. Today's teacher needs, more than ever, to ruminate on Rancière-Jacotot's rebellious thought and the radicality of his aphorisms "so that the act of teaching never entirely loses awareness of the paradoxes that give it meaning" (2023, p.12). Intellectual equality remains fundamental and absent. Current and untimely. Something to be conquered. It always depends on the courage of individuals capable of inventing ways to verify it (Rancière, 2013). Therefore, this essay aims to think about the impacts of the ignorant teacher's lessons on *the school floor*. In particular, to reflect on how reading this book is capable of subverting principles and emancipating educators.

### **Theoretical foundation**

The epigraph of this text refers to the student riot portrayed in the film *Zero de Conduta* (Vigo, 1933). In the comedy-drama, the rebels declare war on the authoritarianism of the educational system and occupy the boarding school building. In its place they build a free, egalitarian and provisional zone. The libertarian insurrection prophesies the end of the pedagogical myth. "Down with the teachers and the punishments!" - They say. The master explainer only has to witness his deconstruction in the anarchic utopia of the incapable.

For now, Jean Vigo's omen is nothing more than a fictitious delusion of emancipation. Progressive changes in the educational system only reaffirm and strengthen the old pedagogical myth. This belief is based on the premise that every apprentice needs a master explainer to guide him. Rancière (2023) reiterates that the explanation is the great myth of pedagogy. This belief is based on a supposed inequality of intelligences and divides the world into capable and incapable; wise and ignorant; intelligent and failed.

It is no longer the paddle that threatens the bored young man trapped in a cubicle, but the fear of not understanding the teacher's explanation and remaining incapable. Incapacity is synonymous with failure, while progress justifies the misery of the people based on the inequality of intelligences. The master no longer needs to force the rebellious student to kneel in the corn. It is enough to submit it to the scaffold of the intellectual hierarchy. The pedagogized society maintains teachers and punishments in order to explain and preserve its social order.

In view of this, it should be noted that *The Ignorant Master* is not intended to encourage anarchic insurrections or any social revolution against the education system. Joseph Jacotot's lessons seek simply to emancipate the human, that is, to return to him the intellectual equality that the pedagogized society has usurped from him. Neither parties, nor unions, nor assemblies; only the individual himself can emancipate himself. And announcing the conquest of their autonomy with a blessing, they can emancipate others like them. On the other hand, it is true that revolts and revolutions start from autonomous subjects, but it is reiterated that this is not the

purpose of the ignorant master. Jacotot developed his radical principles aimed above all at the education of the poorest, thus proposing an emancipatory pedagogy for the people.

The pedagogical rupture of the ignorant master seeks in particular the emancipation of the poorest, since the discrimination of intellectual inequality acts with greater brutality on them. However, it is necessary to reinforce that "what brutalizes the people is not the lack of education, but the belief in the inferiority of their intelligence" (Rancière, 2023, p.71). Jacotot's grace is to announce that the poorest can do everything that human beings are capable of. His concern is not that they become wise, but that they rise from the bottom of the pit of the intellectual hierarchy in which they have been abandoned. Let every father and mother of a family emancipate himself, and so may the sons and daughters of the people emancipate themselves. For the greatest dignity of the human spirit is to be able to measure its own capacities and decide how and when to use them.

Intellectual emancipation is based on the axiom of equality, that is, that all human beings have the same intellectual capacity and, therefore, are equally capable of learning and teaching. In exile, Jacotot's chance demonstrated that people can learn for themselves, without depending on the explanation of a master. The learning process occurs through observation, repetition and comparison, based on a natural curiosity and intellectual effort. In short: "*man is a will served by an intelligence*" (Rancière, 2023, p.87).

Despite this, the pedagogical myth has convinced everyone that the natural thing is that the distance that

separates the student and the object of knowledge is reduced only by the teacher's explanation. Rancière (2023) states that pedagogical brutalization is precisely this imaginary distance between the learner and knowledge. In this funeral method, the master explainer is the only one considered capable of judging whether or not the student has understood the explanation. Therefore, understanding means that the one who understands will understand nothing without the master's explanation. This eternal cycle of powerlessness is the very death of emancipation.

Subverting this stultifying logic, the ignorant teacher must teach students that he has nothing to teach them. Each one must learn for himself, and it is up to the master only to verify the equality and the search for the apprentice. This paradox is based on the idea that intelligence is common in all acts of the human spirit. Therefore, the subject must learn anything and relate it to everything else. This is the fundamental principle of Universal Education (Rancière, 2023). This strange paradox is the oldest method of all. And it is reaffirmed daily, after all: *Who has never learned something by themselves, without the need for a master explainer?*

Each one carries within themselves a vastness of knowledge, it is enough to relate it to everything else. Universal Education is based on this. There is no method of the ignorant master, but that of the student himself. The apprentice starts from a rebellious curiosity and declares the search for knowledge as an adventure. It is this anarchic intelligence that takes the risk of imitating, questioning, improvising, researching, comparing, creating hypotheses, verifying, making mistakes, reporting and repeating the entire process *ad*

*infinitum*. Universal Education is not a paved road, but the path that the wanderer himself often builds under his feet. And if by carelessness the step is taken where there is still no ground, one learns from the fall. The ignorant is the one who laughs at himself. And it moves on. It's as risky as teaching yourself to ride a bike. And at the same time beautiful, like a child who begins to whistle imitating the singing of birds.

It is worth mentioning here the strange story of an illiterate street vendor from the agreste of Pernambuco who sold *sulanca* - that is, cheap clothes - in the interior of Bahia. Interestingly, the man taught himself to read by comparing letters on road signs. His will originated by chance. After ignoring a sign that informed about the maintenance of the highway, he was involved in a serious accident. After the trauma, the survivor struggled to learn to read in a logical way, without master explainers. Starting from what I already knew and relating it to everything else. The street vendor already knew, for example, to pronounce the name of the cities he visited to sell at the fair. So, whenever he got close to his destination and saw a green road sign with a word and a number, he translated it as the written form of the name of that place and its respective distance. Over time, from imitating and repeating the words so much, he not only memorized them but also decomposed them into syllables and recomposed them into other words. Improvising is the poetic virtue of Universal Education. Thus man learned to read what is necessary to live on the road.

Rancièrè-Jacotot's thought argues that the man of the people develops his intellectual capacity according to the need

and circumstances demand. However, it is observed that when "the need ceases, the intelligence rests, unless a stronger will makes itself heard and says: continue; see what you have done and what you can do if you apply the same intelligence you have already employed" (Rancière, 2023, p.87). At this moment, the emancipating master appears in order to catalyze the apprentice's will to follow by himself and emancipate himself.

On the other hand, Jacotot demonstrates an anarchic pessimism with regard to the institutionalization of his pedagogical lessons. For him, a school will never emancipate even one subject. Only one person can emancipate another. Nor should the ignorant teacher be concerned with proposing solutions to the serious problems of education. The education system is incompatible with Universal Education. That is why there is no Jacotot method. If it existed, it would be doomed to failure. Institutional education is not only committed to explaining the unequal society. The pedagogical myth is the very staging of inequality.

In an interview published in Brazil in 2003, Rancière commented that the educational relevance of the ignorant master "is to remember that the time is always now, that the time of emancipation is now, that there is always the possibility of affirming a reason that is not the dominant reason, a logic of thought that is not the logic of inequality" (Vermeren; Cornu; Benvenuto, 2003, p. 17). On the occasion, Rancière also warned that the function of emancipator should not be confused with the social function of the teacher. But he reinforced that the master can always in his practice announce emancipation,



intellectual equality, and stimulate the exercise of equality among students.

For Professor Walter Kohan, "what is at stake, when one reads *The Ignorant Master*, is the very meaning that the exercise of thought assumes for us, who work in education" (2003, p. 3). For him, Joseph Jacotot's revolutionary experience makes every teacher reflect on what he does with himself and with others whenever he dresses up as a master and enters a classroom. Thus, it becomes impossible for the master explainer to continue thinking about education the way he thought and to continue teaching the way he taught. However, this disruption should not become a new method. On the contrary, it brings problems that only the intelligence of the educator himself can seek to solve. Its reading is, therefore, an emancipatory exercise. The master must then emancipate himself. And announce to his students the blessing of emancipation.

Finally, returning to Jean Vigo's anarchic delirium: in the final sequence of *Zero of Conduct*, four students climb to the top of the school and celebrate by wielding a pirate flag. It is the climax of this poetic insurrection of equals. Free, they walk on the roof of the boarding school. Now, they are ready to take off. And the film comes to an end. Consequently, the reflection remains that the courage of the master, who witnesses the unexpected in bewilderment, is not to oppose the insurrection. But to support it. Declare a strike against all forms of explanation. To make oneself, therefore, ignorant. *But should the ignorant master at least explain to the rebels the inexorable effects of the law of gravity? No!* Just let it go. Falling, inevitably, is part of emancipation.

## Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach, based on a bibliographic review of the book *The Ignorant Master*, by Jacques Rancière, analyzing central concepts, such as "intellectual emancipation", "stultification" and the "axiom of equality". This analysis allowed us to understand the theoretical and philosophical bases that support the thought of Joseph Jacotot and his emancipatory pedagogy. Finally, a critical interpretation of the concepts analyzed was carried out, seeking to apply them to the contemporary school context. This stage included reflections on the impact of the lessons of the ignorant master on teaching thought and practice.

## Results and Discussion

Reflecting on the book *The Ignorant Master*, it was noted that its lessons of emancipation are incompatible with the pedagogical myth that sustains the education system. *Would the school then be condemned to always be a place of brutalization?* Faced with this question, it is recalled that Jacotot (2023) stated that in the face of the impossibility of expressing the truth, even when we feel it, we can speak like poets. It is appropriate here to appropriate this linguistic resource.

By chance, the experience on the *school floor* can take on another function in the face of the urgency of breaking with the logic of inequality, even if it is a singular and provisional experience. He now risks briefly thinking about the school as a becoming-ruin, or rather, a place capable of sheltering abandonment. The poet Manoel de Barros said that "the

abandonment may not only be of a man under the bridge, but it can also be [...] of a child trapped in a cubicle" (2010, p. 385). Perhaps the school will be able to become a ruin: something capable of sheltering the abandonment of this man under the bridge; which is not just a man under the bridge, but a metaphor to describe one who refuses to cross an imaginary distance, invented only to separate the ignorance of man and knowledge from the wise. And who knows, maybe it will also become a place to shelter the revolt of a child trapped in a cubicle, tired of hearing explanations for questions that have never been asked. A place to shelter the abandonment of those who were judged as intellectually incapable and thrown into the mud of the hierarchy of intelligences. A place capable of stimulating them to rise up and take back the intellectual equality that was denied them. Perhaps, in this way, emancipation "was reborn from the ruins, as the lily can be born from a dunghill" (2010, p. 385).

On the other hand, it is also necessary to think about the fear that the master explainer has of becoming obsolete, outdated, abandoned in a dark corner of the classroom, without any purpose of existing. Useless like a broken bridge or a dead-end street. You need to think about your fear of becoming harmless with a dog that has lost its teeth and no one respects it anymore when it barks. The professor understood that his destiny is to explain, with the authority of a sun that clears. For him, emancipation is as dangerous as losing one's own ground under one's feet. And as beautiful as it is, it takes courage to throw yourself into the abyss.

Walter Kohan (2003) synthesized three philosophical lessons from the work *The Ignorant Master*. The first lesson

reveals that the pedagogical myth accepted as natural in the school system, is philosophically the most problematic and contradictory method of teaching. The second lesson points out the paradoxical character of education: those who have nothing to teach teach are the best to teach. The master should not transmit his knowledge, but create conditions for the other to emancipate himself, recognizing the equality of intelligences and the ability of each one to learn for himself. Finally, the third lesson highlights that the only meaningful education is the one that emancipates without imposing. It is enough for the master to emancipate himself, and announce the blessing to his equals. For no one can emancipate another; Emancipation is an individual choice.

If the reading of these lessons is not able to break with the logic of the pedagogized society and catalyze a rupture in the thought and practice of the master explainer, then it means that perhaps emancipation cannot be explained, but experienced. Rancière says that: "This discourse, a man can, with great difficulty, understand it; but no capacity will ever understand it. Joseph Jacotot, himself, would never have listened to him without the chance that had made him an ignorant master" (2023, p. 193). And he concludes that: "Only chance is strong enough to overthrow the instituted, embodied belief in inequality" (2023, p.193).

It would be political and poetic. Perhaps, even pedagogical: to see a teacher freed from his *Karma* take revenge on the school system by spraying the gray walls of the high school buildings with matte black with Jacotot's last lesson: "I believe that God created the human soul capable of instructing

itself, and without masters" (Rancière, 2002, p. 201). But such a subversion, perhaps, would lead to the error of profaning the epitaph of the ignorant master. Since the emancipatory method is neither a method nor a motto for insurrections.

Each master, then, should just be silent, that is, stop explaining a question that was not asked by anyone. The master should meditate in silence. And when chance comes, to verify in the solitude of your classroom the path that begins from equality. The desert that each one, including him, crosses alone. Finally, he must emancipate himself and, when necessary, make himself ignorant. No longer clinging to the learner's fate. In fact, let him go on with his own intelligence. Emancipating without emancipating.

### **Conclusion**

Rancière concludes his work by stating that Universal Education will not win in society, but neither will it ever die in the human spirit. It will not win: for such a feat would represent betraying oneself and institutionalizing oneself as a method of maintaining inequalities. But it will not die either: for it is the natural path of human learning. Not winning and not dying is the purpose of resistance. It is then necessary to understand the philosophy of education as a disputed territory, where the ignorant teacher remains entrenched.

This work was limited to thinking about the impacts of Universal Education in the school environment, imagining the school not only as a podium to classify subjects in an unequal society. But also as a pedagogical rupture capable of welcoming and lifting up those who bowed before a supposed hierarchy of intelligences. He also reflected on how the lessons of the

ignorant master and pedagogical chance can emancipate intellectually equal teachers. It now remains to investigate how this equality is related in practice to the emancipation of students.

### Keywords

The Ignorant Master; Jacotot; Rancière; Emancipation; Intellectual Equality

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