Toward a New "Logic" of Emancipation: Foucault and Rancière

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Where one searches for the hidden beneath the apparent, a position of mastery is established.

—Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*[1]

INTRODUCTION

The idea of emancipation plays a central role in modern education. To the extent that education is about more than the transmission of content and culture but involves an interest in fostering independence and autonomy, education can be said to be a process that aims at the emancipation of the child or the student. This is not only true of those traditions within educational theory and practice that are informed by an explicit political agenda. It can be said of any approach that acknowledges that there is a fundamental distinction between education and indoctrination. Although there is likely to be widespread support among educators for the "sentiment" of emancipation, there may well be quite different views about what emancipation actually entails and how it can be achieved through educational processes and practices. My purpose in this essay is twofold. First, I wish to articulate and problematize what I see as the prevailing understanding of emancipation in modern educational thought. Against this background I will then sketch the outlines of a different conception of emancipation, one which might be able to overcome some of the problems and contradictions within the prevailing view. To develop the contours of this new "logic" of emancipation I will draw upon Michel Foucault's work and, to a lesser extent, that of Jacques Rancière. This essay is an attempt to think emancipation differently and to begin to explore how and why this might matter for education.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EMANCIPATION

The concept of emancipation stems from Roman law, where it referred to the freeing of a son or wife from the legal authority of the *paterfamilias* — the father of the family. Emancipation literally means to give away ownership *(ex:* away; *mancipum:* ownership). More broadly it means to relinquish one's authority over someone else. 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 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.[2] Yet 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 step in the history of emancipation was taken in the eighteenth century when emancipation became intertwined with the Enlightenment and

enlightenment became understood as a process of emancipation. We can see this most clearly in Irnmanuel Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?" in which he defined enlightenment as "man's release from his self-incurred tutelage" and saw tutelage or immaturity as "man's inability to make use of his understanding without the direction from another."[3] Immaturity is self-incurred, Kant wrote, "when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without the direction from another."[4] Enlightenment thus entailed a process of becoming independent or autonomous, and for Kant this autonomy was based on one's use of reason. Kant contributed two further ideas to this line of thinking. First, he argued that the "propensity and vocation to free thinking" was not a contingent, historical possibility, but should be seen as something that was an inherent part of human nature; it was man's "ultimate destination" and the "aim of his existence."[5] To block progress in enlightenment was therefore "a crime against human nature."[6] Second, Kant argued that in order for this "capacity" to emerge, we need education. In his view the human being can only become human — a rational autonomous being — "through education."[7]

Kant's position clearly exemplifies what I refer to as the modern educational nexus: a set of interlocking ideas that characterizes modern educational thinking and that, through both education and psychology, has had a profound impact on modern educational practice. Kant assumes that there is a fundamental difference between immature and mature beings and that this difference maps onto the distinction between childhood and adulthood. He defines maturity in terms of rationality — the (proper) use of one's reason — and sees rationality as the basis for independence and autonomy. Education is seen as the lever for the transition from immaturity to maturity, which, in turn, means that education is intimately connected with the question of freedom. All this is aptly summarized in Kant's formulation of the "educational paradox": "How do I cultivate freedom through coercion?"[8]

From this point onward we can trace the history of emancipation along two related lines: one is educational, the other philosophical. The idea that education is not about the insertion of the individual into the existing order but entails an orientation toward autonomy and freedom played an important role in the establishment of education as an academic discipline in Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It also was a central element in "Reformpädagogik," "New Education," and "Progressive Education," which emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century in many countries. In most cases the argument against adaptation was expressed as an argument in favor of the child. Many educationalists followed Jean-Jacques Rousseau's insight that adaptation to the external societal order would corrupt the child. This led to the idea, however, that a choice for the child could only mean a choice against society. This was further supported by theories that conceived of "the child" as a natural category, a "given," and not as something that had to be understood in social, historical, or political terms.

Whereas the idea that education is about the emancipation of the individual child helped the development of education as an academic discipline, the limitations of this view became painfully clear when it turned out that such an approach could

easily be adopted by any ideological system, including Nazism and fascism. This is why, after the Second World War, educationalists — first of all in Germany — began to argue that there could be no individual emancipation without wider societal transformation. This became the central tenet of critical approaches to education. In Germany, a major contribution came from Klaus Mollenhauer, whose critical-emancipatory approach drew inspiration from the work of Jürgen Habermas.[9] Two decades later, but with precursors in the writings of John Dewey, George Counts, and Paulo Freire, a similar body of work emerged in North America, particularly through the contributions of Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren.

As a critical theory of education, the emancipatory interest of critical pedagogies focuses on the analysis of oppressive structures, practices, and theories. The key idea is that emancipation can be brought about if people gain an adequate insight into the power relations that constitute their situation — which is why the notion of demystification plays such a central role in critical pedagogies.[10] It is here that we can link up the history of emancipation with philosophy, at least to the extent that this history is part of the development of Marxism and neo-Marxist philosophy. It is, after all, a key insight of this tradition that in order to liberate ourselves from the oppressive workings of power and achieve emancipation, we first and foremost need to expose how power operates. What the Marxist tradition adds to this — and thereby has influenced critical and emancipatory pedagogies — is the notion of ideology. Although the question of the exact meaning of this concept is a topic of ongoing debates, one of the crucial insights expressed in it is not only that all thought is socially determined — remember Karl Marx's dictum that "it is not the consciousness of man that determines their being but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness"[11] — but also, and more importantly, that ideology is thought "which *denies* this determination."[12]

The latter claim is linked to Friedrich Engels's notion of false consciousness: the idea that "the real motives impelling [the agent] remain unknown to him."[13] The "predicament of ideology" lies in the suggestion that it is precisely because of the way in which power works upon our consciousness, that we are unable to see how power works upon our consciousness.[14] This not only implies that in order to free ourselves from the workings of power we need to expose how power works upon our consciousness. It also means that in order for us to achieve emancipation, someone else, whose consciousness is not subjected to the workings of power, needs to provide us with an account of our objective condition. According to this logic, therefore, emancipation is contingent upon the truth about our objective condition, a truth that can only be generated by someone who is positioned outside of the influence of ideology — and in the Marxist tradition this position is considered to be occupied through either science or philosophy.

THREE CONTRADICTIONS

What this brief history of emancipation begins to reveal are the contours of a certain logic of emancipation, a certain way in which emancipation is conceived and understood. There are several aspects to this logic. One is that emancipation requires an intervention from the outside; an intervention, moreover, by someone who is not

subjected to the power that needs to be overcome. This not only shows that emancipation is understood as something that is done to somebody. It also reveals that emancipation is based upon a fundamental inequality between the emancipator and the one to be emancipated. Equality, on this account, becomes the outcome of emancipation; it becomes something that lies in the future. Moreover, it is this outcome that is used to legitimize the interventions of the emancipator. Whereas this view of emancipation follows more or less directly from philosophical consider-ations, particularly around the notion of ideology, it is not too difficult to recognize a particular pedagogy in this account as well. This is a pedagogy in which the teacher knows and students do not know yet; in which it is the task of the teacher to explain the world to the students and it is the task of the students to ultimately become as knowledgeable as the teacher. We can say, therefore, that the logic of emancipation is also the logic of a particular pedagogy.[15] Although much of this will sound familiar — which, in a sense, proves how influential this modern logic of emancipation has been — this logic of emancipation is not without problems or, more precisely, it is not without contradictions.

The first contradiction is that although emancipation is orientated toward equality, independence, and freedom, it actually installs dependency at the very heart of the act of emancipation. The one to be emancipated is, after all, dependent upon the intervention of the emancipator, an intervention based upon a knowledge that is fundamentally inaccessible to the one to be emancipated. When there is no intervention there is, therefore, no emancipation. This does raise the question of when this dependency will actually disappear. Is it as soon as emancipation is achieved? Or should the one who is emancipated remain eternally grateful to his or her emancipator for the "gift" of emancipation? Should slaves remain grateful to their masters for setting them free? Should women remain grateful to men for setting them free? Should children remain grateful to their parents for setting them free?[16] Or could all of them perhaps have asked why they were not considered to be free in the first place?

Modern emancipation is not only based upon dependency — it is also based upon a fundamental inequality between the emancipator and the one to be emanci-pated. According to the modern logic of emancipation the emancipator is the one who knows better and best and who can perform the act of demystification that is needed to expose the workings of power. According to the modern logic of emanci-pation the emancipator does not simply occupy a superior position. It could even be argued that in order for this superiority to exist the emancipator actually needs the inferiority of the one to be emancipated.[17] Again we can ask when this inequality will actually disappear. After all, as long as the master remains a master, the slave can only ever become a former slave or an emancipated slave — but not a master.

The third contradiction has to do with the fact that although emancipation takes place in the interest of those to be emancipated, it is based upon a fundamental distrust of and suspicion about their experiences. The logic of emancipation dictates, after all, that we cannot really trust what we see or feel, but that we need someone else to tell us what it is that we are really experiencing and what our problems

really are. And once more we can ask what it would mean for those "waiting" for their emancipation to be told the "truth" about themselves, their situation, and their problems.

These contradictions not only permeate the general logic of emancipation; they are also present in this logic's manifestation in a particular modem — or, as Rancière has argued, progressive — pedagogy.[18]

The ambition of this essay is to explore whether we can think emancipation differently and, more specifically, whether we can do so in a way that is able to overcome the contradictions of the modern logic of emancipation. Now that we know what the modern logic of emancipation looks like and what its contradictions are, I wish to turn to Foucault's work in order to proceed toward the articulation of a different conception of emancipation.

FOUCAULT'S METHODOLOGY

Many would argue that Foucault has helped us to understand the workings of power in a new, different, and deeper way and that, for precisely this reason, he has made a major contribution to the work of demystification and emancipation. If we read Foucault only as a new theory of power, this conclusion is probably correct. But what complicates the matter is that Foucault's writings on power not only have implications at the level of theory but also at the level of our very understanding of theory and critique; that is, at the level of methodology. At this level Foucault's writings about power and knowledge entail an explicit rejection of the idea that we can use knowledge to combat power. Central to this argument is his rejection of the Manichean foundations of the Enlightenment that are expressed in the idea that power and knowledge are ontologically separate "entities" and that emancipation consists in the "victory" of knowledge over power.[19] For Foucault power and knowledge always come together — something that is expressed in his notion of "power/knowledge." Thus, he argued that we should abandon "a whole tradition that allows us to imagine that knowledge can only exist where the power relations are suspended."[20]

This is not to say that for Foucault change is no longer possible, or knowledge has become futile. But what it does signify is the end of the 'innocence' of knowledge, the end of the idea that knowledge is pure, simple, or uncontaminated by power and thus can be used to reveal how power operates. Foucault urges us to acknowledge that we are always operating within fields of power/knowledge — of power/knowledge against power/knowledge, not of power against knowledge or knowledge against power. This implies, however, that any application of Foucault's theory of power should *not* be understood as a contribution to demystification. It is, therefore, not an avenue toward overcoming the workings of power.[21]

Does this mean that for Foucault we live in an iron cage with no escape possible? Is it the case, as some critics have argued, that Foucault's work has an "anaesthetizing effect," because the "implacable logic" of it leaves "no possible room for initiative"?[22] These questions only make sense as long as we assume that it is possible to occupy a place outside of the system from which we can analyze and

criticize the system. They only make sense, in other words, as long as we assume that knowledge is "outside" of or "beyond" power. But what Foucault has urged us to do, is precisely to move beyond this inside-outside thinking. There is, still, potential for action, change, and critique, but it requires an approach that is distinctively different from the Enlightenment approach. According to Foucault it is true "that we have to give up hope of ever acceding to a point of view that could give us access to any complete and definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits." But this does not mean that there is nothing to do. Foucault agrees that criticism "consists of analyzing and reflecting upon limits." But,

> if the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge had to renounce transgressing.. .the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?[23]

Foucault refers to this approach as "eventalization." He characterizes it as a "breach of self-evidence": "It means making visible a singularity at places where there is a temptation to invoke a historical constant, an immediate anthropological trait, or an obviousness which imposes itself uniformly on all." Rather than looking for a single explanation of particular facts or events, eventalization works "by constructing around the singular event...a 'polygon' or rather a 'polyhedron' of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and can never properly be taken as finite." Eventalization thus means to complicate and pluralize our understanding of events, their elements, their relations and their domains of reference. It does, therefore, not result in a "deeper" understanding, an understanding of underlying structures or causes. In this respect eventalization does not generate a kind of knowledge that will set us free from the workings of those structures or causes. But Foucault has been adamant that this does not mean that such analysis is without effect.[24]

What eventalization does *not* generate is advice or guidelines or instructions. But it can bring about a situation in which people "'no longer know what they do,' so that the acts, gestures, discourses which up until then had seemed to go without saying become problematic, difficult, dangerous" — and this effect is entirely intentional.[25] Foucauldian analysis therefore does not result in a deeper or more true understanding of how power works — it only tries to unsettle what is taken for granted — nor does it aim to produce recipes for action. Rather than replacing judgment it actually opens up a space and in a sense even a demand for judgment. And rather than taking some experiences and interpretations as more true and valid than others, eventalization can actually validate everyone's experiences.

This kind of analysis is therefore not meant to solve problems, nor to give reformers and emancipators the knowledge to make the world better. It is meant for the subjects who act. As Foucault explains:

> Critique doesn't have to be the premise of a deduction which concludes: this then is what needs to be done. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is. Its use should be in processes of conflict and confrontation, essays in refusal. It doesn't have to lay down the law for the law. It isn't a stage of programming. It is a challenge directed to what is.[26]

WhatFoucault is arguing for is therefore not only a different style of critique but also a different audience for critique. He does not want to provide demystified insights that can be used by emancipators to set others free. Rather, he wishes to connect to those who are struggling to make different ways of being and doing possible — that is, "the only important problem is what happens on the ground."[27] In more practical terms the crucial step is to show — and in a sense, through experimentation and action actually prove — that things can be different, that the way in which things are is only one, limited possibility. This, in turn, opens up the possibility "of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think" — and in precisely this sense, as Foucault has put it, "it is seeking to give a new impetus... to the undefined work of freedom."[28]

TOWARD A NEW LOGIC OF EMANCIPATION

"Old" emancipation — the emancipation of the modern tradition — is based upon what we might call a vertical way of thinking. It talks about underlying structures, about deeper insights, about lifting people from the workings of power, and it puts the emancipator as a master-explicator in a position above the everyday world. Old emancipation is based upon what Gaston Bachelard has called a "science of the hidden," a science which fundamentally distrusts experiences and appearances.[29] Moreover old emancipation, as I have shown, is conceived as something that is done to people, as it is based upon a fundamental inequality and a relationship of dependency.

With Foucault we can begin to see things differently. If the term is not too pretentious, we can refer to this set of ideas as "new" emancipation. The first thing to take from Foucault is the insight that there is no escape from power. But this, as I argued, is only a problem as long as we think that such an escape is possible. New emancipation is not an escape from power. If it is an escape at all, it is an escape — or better, a move — from one particular power/knowledge constellation to another. This other power/knowledge constellation might in some respects be better, but it is not itself beyond power. Yet actually making the move is of crucial importance because it proves that the existing power/knowledge constellation was not a necessity but just one contingent, historical possibility. This, in turn, implies that new emancipation is not something that is done to people but instead is something that is done by people. Hence new emancipation no longer relies on a relationship of dependency. People need not wait until their emancipators tell them that they can move; they can make the move right here and right now.[30] This also shows that new emancipation starts from the assumption of equality, in that everyone is considered to be able to make the move. This is not to suggest that society is equal. But what it aims to do is to take away from the logic of emancipation the idea that there is a fundamental, almost ontological inequality that only can be overcome through the interventions of the emancipator. Finally, new emancipation no longer works as a science of the hidden. It can take experiences and appearances seriously. This does not mean that they have to be accepted as they are, but it does mean that it is no longer the case that some experiences and appearances — or, more importantly, the experiences of some — are, by definition, invalid. New emancipation, we might say,

begins to work on a science of the visible — a phrase that resonates with Rancière's notion of the politics of aesthetics. All this suggests that whereas the logic of old emancipation can be characterized as a vertical logic, the logic of new emancipation might best be characterized as a horizontal logic, a "topology that [precisely] does not presuppose [a] position of mastery."[31]

IN CONCLUSION

I am aware that this essay may well raise more questions than it is able to answer. In a sense I would count that as a success, since my aim has been to see if it is possible to think emancipation differently. One of the most pressing questions, of course, is whether the new logic of emancipation outlined in this essay makes any sense in relation to our existing educational practices.[32] Given that the old logic of emancipation is so deeply engrained in our educational practices and intuitions, particularly because of its intimate connection with the modern educational nexus, it will take time before things will begin to shift, if they will shift at all. But if one lesson can be drawn from this analysis, it is that there is no need to wait for a master-emancipator to step in before things can change. We can always just begin by doing things differently.[33]

1. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2006), 49.

2. Douglas Harper, *Online Etymology Dictionary,* s.v. "emancipate," http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?l=e&p=4.

3. Immanuel Kant, "An Answer to the Question 'What is Enlightenment?'" in *Post-Modernism: A Reader,* ed. Patricia Waugh (London: Edwards Arnold, 1992), 90.

4. Ibid.

5. Immanuel Kant, "Ueber Pädagogik," in *Schriften zur Anthropologie, Geschichtsphilosophie, Politik und Pädagogik* (Frankfurt am Main: Insel Verlag, 1982), 701 (my translation).

6. Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" 93.

7. Kant, "Ueber Pädagogik," 699 (my translation).

8. Ibid., 711 (my translation).

9. See Klaus Mollenhauer, *Erziehung und Emanzipation* [Education and Emancipation] (München: Juventa, 1968).

10. See Mollenhauer, *Erziehung, und Emanzipation,* 67; and Peter McLaren, *Revolutionary Multiculturalism* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press), 218.

11. See Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (New York: Verso, 2007).

12. Ibid., 89 (emphasis in original).

13. Engels, quoted in Eagleton, *Ideology,* 89.

14. Eagleton shows that this particular view was articulated early in Marx's career and was modified in his later work (see *Ideology,* 63-91).

15. See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

16. No factual claims are meant to be implied in these questions.

17. See Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor* (Durham, N .C.: Duke University Press, 2004),

18. See Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster.*

19. See Dick Pels, "Kennispolitiek. Een Gebruiksaanwijzing voor Foucault" ["Knowledgepolitics: A Manual for Using Foucault"], *Kennis and Methode* 16, no. 1 (1992): 39-62.

20. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage, 1975), 27.

21. See also Gert Biesta, "'Say you want a revolution...': Suggestions for the Impossible Future of Critical Pedagogy," *Educational Theory* 48, no. 4 (1998): 499-510.

22. Michel Foucault, "Questions of Method," in *The Foucault Effect,* eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 82.

23. Michael Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader,* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 47 and 45.

24. See Foucault, "Questions of Method," 76-7.

25. Ibid., 84

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 83.

28. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 46.

29. See Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics,* 49.

30. Much is implied in this simple statement but I do not have the space to elaborate. Rancière's *The Nights of Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989) provides an extremely detailed analysis of how workers in the 1830s and 1840s in a sense simply did things differently.

31. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics,* 49.

32. A fascinating example of the sense of this logic can be found in Rancière, *Ignorant Schoolmaster.*

33. Clearly, much more needs to be said about the differences that will make a difference.