

Rancière and the poetics of the social sciences

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Abstract

This article reviews the significance of Jacques Rancière's work for methodological debates in the social sciences, and education specifically. It explores the implications of framing methodology as an aesthetic endeavour, rather than as the applied technique of research. What is at stake in this distinction is the means by which research intervenes in social order and how it assumes political significance, with Rancière arguing against a notion of science as the other of ideology. Rancière's argument for a democratic research practice organised around a 'method of equality' is situated in relation to openly ideological' feminist ethnography. The implications of Rancière's work for investigating affect in academic discourse and subjectification in education are reviewed in the conclusion.

The work of Jacques Rancière is increasingly influential in research concerned with the relationship between education and democracy. His delineation of two conflicting but interdependent ways of doing democracy – democracy as a form of governance, or as the stable ordering of social functions, versus democracy as an action which disrupts social ordering – has created an intellectual space from which to gain a new perspective on education’s progressive claims. Biesta (in press and in press a, 2007, 2006) draws on Rancière’s critique of the deliberative model of democracy to highlight the colonial logic at work in models of democratic education which define inclusion as a process by which those who are already ‘included’ reach out to those who are not and bring them into the existing order. In the light of Rancière’s (1987) study of the republican argument for a public education system, Ruitenberg (2008) re-examines the claim that democratic education involves teaching students about democracy or fashioning a progressive pedagogy which privileges students’ voices, and points to the exclusion of those treated as “not really speaking beings” – as people who don’t make sense - precisely, and perversely, because they lack the qualifying evidence of education. Citton (forthcoming) explores the political implications of Rancière’s challenge to the “self-evident equation between authority and knowledge”, and his claim that anyone – even ‘ignorant’ people – can teach, because anyone can govern.

These researchers, among others (e.g. Hey 2009, Greco 2007, Nordmann 2006, Burbules 2004ⁱ), draw on Rancière’s work to elaborate a research agenda for education which is not articulated primarily in terms of methods for doing pedagogy more effectively, but which concerns itself with how education, as institutionalised practice, orders people into the more and the less valuable, the more and the less significant. This ‘critical’ research agenda has often been framed in relation to the work of Foucault and Bourdieu. What Rancière’s work effects is a re-centering of this agenda around the other of power, and the other of domination: what he refers to, in various but equivalent terms, as politics, equality, democracy, and emancipation.

Because Rancière’s argument about education as a practice has already been presented elsewhere, my focus in this article is on the implications of his work for research methodology. This is rather paradoxical, because his work is a refutation of the primacy given to methodology in scientific claims to truth or credibility. His argument with (Bourdieu’s) sociology and (Marxist) social history stems from the epistemic difference that these disciplines establish, and legitimate in relation to methodology, between the truth of their own research statements and the falseness, or ideological fantasy, they find in the statements of their research objects. Rancière’s point here is not to deny ideological fantasy, or indeed to undermine a concept of truth, but rather to question the partition by which two kinds of discourse - the discourse of research objects and the discourse of science – are differentiated from one another. This differentiation is often justified in relation to specialist ways of knowing, such as reflexivity, (Marxist) theory, techniques of research: in other words, the staples of social science methodology courses. Rancière challenges the notion that these practices produce a discourse which is of a different order to that which is their object of study: non-illusory knowledge, or knowledge which is not rooted in ideological fantasy.

Rancière here echoes some of the criticisms of ‘critical pedagogy’ – Gore (1993) for instance refers to ‘critical discourses’ as regimes of truth - in highlighting how ‘critique’ claims a position of mastery over its objects, and thereby reproduces the very hierarchy it criticisesⁱⁱ. Rancière’s attention to poetics and aesthetics – the discursive organisation of scientific accounts - as opposed to methodology – that which is positioned as before/beyond scientific accounts - is a counter to the claim there are techniques of knowing which enable the scientist to extricate him/herself from a position in the social order, and which enable him/her to overcome the ideological restrictions of that order. This claim, Rancière states, is precisely the means by which the scientist/science constitutes itself as other (i.e. not knee deep in ideology/illusion/habitus) than its object and as its epistemological master, since the domain of science is then cast as that which its object (ideological subjects) cannot know.

Rancière’s position here is not relativistic, in the sense of all claims to knowledge being equally valid, or equally illusory. It is rather a defence of the possibility of politics, on the basis of the equality of speaking beings. Making this equality visible means undoing the basis on which discourses legitimate themselves as epistemologically superior to one another. This is the basis of Rancière’s accusation against the paradigm of social science – the social as science – which defines its object of study in terms of its social attributes (e.g. by gender, ethnicity, occupation, and so on) – or more precisely, its position in the social order. This order – society - is unequal, precisely because it is an ordering. By defining its object in terms of its social attributes, then, social science restricts its object of study to its social location, and effectively denies the possibility of collectivity on the basis of a *lack* of social attributes – in other words, on the basis of equality, as Rancière defines this. More ‘reflexive’ social science discourses, which address the problems of ‘critical theory’ by owning up to their own location in social order, end up, from the perspective of Rancière’s argument, simply re-confirming its hegemony, or its lack of difference from itself. The problems of (Marxist) positivism are not, Rancière suggests, to be countered by reflecting on the sociological location of one’s own scientific discourse, but by challenging the equivalence established between discourse and social location in both the object and the subject of study – in other words, by challenging the idea that a statement, or discourse, is the expression of a sociological condition (i.e. of the utterer’s position in the social order).

This is the second reason why an article on Rancière and methodology is paradoxical. His work is anti-social science, because it challenges not only the status of scientific knowledge of social order (the science bit), but also the descriptive capacity of its categories (the social bit), such as ‘woman’, ‘jewish’, ‘black’, ‘carpenter’, or ‘scientist’. The argument here is resonant of Butler’s (1999, 182) in *Gender Trouble* when she suggests that sociological categories (notably a feminist ‘we’) hold a constituency together by means of the exclusion of some part of that constituency: “the theories of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of colour, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed etc. at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to complete”. The name given to this failure – this etc. - in Butler’s work is supplement, or excess, and it arises due to the instability and the illimitability of

identity categories, including 'I' or 'We'. Rancière's endeavour can be figured as an effort to make such a supplement visible, without simply widening the initial identity category (i.e. like Butler, he would not call for feminist politics to become simply more 'inclusive' of different subject positions, such as 'lesbian women'). Because of this, his work shares affinities with that of Žižek (e.g. 2005) and Lacanian and feminist theorists who explore the repressions and foreclosures which accompany any effort to posit identity. Rancière looks for such repressions in disciplinary identity – in other words, in the claims to specificity of a disciplinary account of the world. His focus, one could argue, is on what Butler, above, refers to 'the failure to complete', a failure Rancière makes visible by de-differentiating social categories. As Hallward (2006, 110) states: "In general terms, [Rancière] has always sought to explore the various resources of displacement, indistinction, de-differentiation or de-qualification that are available in any given field". This makes his work profoundly antithetical to a conception of methodology as an ordering mechanism, as that which enables the perpetuation of a discipline's categories. By implication, it is also profoundly antithetical to a conception of discipline.

In being anti-social science, Rancière's work is however also profoundly indebted to it. His work does not offer an alternative to social science knowledge, but rather aims to explore what this knowledge disavows, and how it thereby constitutes its identity. This makes his work significant to research practice which sees itself as feminist and Foucaultian, as his interest is in the labour of constituting discursive categories in the social science disciplines and the excess which is thereby generated. This labour is traced as affectively loaded: the exclusions required to sustain disciplinary identity are framed not simply as oversights to be corrected, but denials, repudiations – the rejection of an abject other. This makes his work relevant also to researchers investigating the relationship between body, speech and subjectification in research practice – three elements, which, in Rancière's work, are always at odds with each otherⁱⁱⁱ. Rancière's writing itself works as a claim to affect: it frames research as a particular kind of combative enterprise, to make visible what has been denied, to argue with widely used systems of categorisations. This makes his writing very different in tone to feminist accounts which foreground the uncertainty of their own claims to knowledge (Lather 2007), a difference with conceptual implications^{iv}.

The significance of Rancière's work for research practice is not specific to education. Most of this article focuses on the argument he has with social science as a paradigm. In doing this, I am treating education as a social science discipline, rather than as a discipline with specific ways of constituting its object/subject of study. However, I endeavour to highlight alignments between Rancière's work and that of education researchers, notably feminist researchers who have been working on similar intellectual terrain for the last 20 years. I start by analysing how Rancière constructs research as democratic practice, and then go on to situate his work in relation to feminist debates concerned with 'methodology as subversive resignification' (Lather 2007). Finally, I examine the implications of his work both for methodological debates and for a research agenda in education.

Rancière's critique of the social sciences: the aesthetics of knowledge versus the sociology of knowledge

The word aesthetics in Rancière's work does not refer to matters of adornment or stylistic embellishment. In referring to the aesthetics of knowledge (e.g. 2006), Rancière discusses the way in which discourses of knowledge – discourses which make a claim to know the world, including research accounts – constitute themselves as coherent, valid, and credible, in opposition to forms of ignorance. When knowledge is proffered, what form of ignorance is thereby produced? When social science accounts make a claim to generate scientific knowledge of social groups, how do they generate a category of accounts which are non-scientific? What role is ascribed to ignorance/non-science, and under what condition is ignorance/non-science transformed into knowledge? 'Ignorance' here is clearly not defined in terms of the bad thing which science fights to eradicate, but is instead treated as a necessary corollary of knowledge production, insofar as knowledge implies a certain relation to ignorance.

To put this into more concrete terms, we can examine the two traditions of 'critical' thought which Rancière (2007, iii-xiv; 2007a) states were the occasion for him to develop his own work against. A central question for both traditions, as well as for Rancière's work, is how can someone at a particular time and place perceive their world. One way of answering this is in relation to a concept of ideology, defined in Marxism as a set of false beliefs or, post-Althusser, as a set of practices which bring about false judgements / perceptions / sensibilities / actions – as in Bourdieu's notion of practice. False here does not mean untrue, but that which sustains domination, or dispossession. In this figuration of domination, which Rancière (2007) traces from *The German Ideology* to Bourdieu's entire corpus, people are represented as having perceptions which are determined by their place in society, and by their incapacity to 'see' (name, signify, or know) this place within the social order – in other words, by their ignorance of the means and fact of domination. Within this tradition of critical thought (e.g. Bourdieu and Passeron 1970), what school produces is precisely ignorance of domination and its reasons. In other words, what the social order produces is ignorance of how the social order really, in essence, functions. To make this claim means extricating oneself from that social order: extricating oneself from the source of ignorance. This is how Rancière reads Bourdieu's concept of reflexivity: it partitions knowledge from ignorance by situating knowledge as that which is other to the division of labour (or in difference to the social order), and then claims ignorance as its object of knowledge. Rancière's move here is to treat Bourdieu's discourse as performative rather than descriptive: the ignorance (the logic of practice) which Bourdieu's discourse posits exists in the first instance as a product of that discourse. In effect, therefore, its figuration of domination/dispossession creates a domain of knowledge from which the ignorant are, by definition, excluded. In other words, Rancière reads the modelling of ineluctable social reproduction in Bourdieu's discourse not as a description of a state of affairs, but as a performative securitisation of a domain of knowledge. Sociological discourse can safely critique domination whilst 'knowing' it can never change, since this knowing is precisely of other people's ignorance^v.

The second tradition of critical thought which Rancière seeks to counter focuses not so much on the incorporation of domination as on the finding of a true, authentic popular culture, defined in terms of its autonomy from dominant values. The target of Rancière's evocation of this tradition are social histories produced in the 1970s and 80s which conceptualised a 'working class culture' in terms of 'resistance' or 'agency'. Celebrations of popular authenticity, he suggests, function as injunctions that 'popular people' should remain authentic to their own culture, and by implication, avoid becoming tainted by middle class 'intellectualism' – a move he refers to as "exclusion by homage" (p. xxiv of the introduction to the English edition of *The Philosopher and his Poor*, 2004). Rancière's argument here suggests that when 'intellectual' readings by 'popular people' are classified as "populist ventriloquism" (David Morley in Curran *et al* 1996, 290), what is effectively claimed is the incapacity of 'popular people' to think 'authentically' (as popular people). 'Popular people' are granted their 'own' domain of knowledge, all the better to preserve the domain of 'intellectual' knowledge from intrusions by non-scientists. What then is this 'popular' knowledge? It is defined in opposition to science: in other words, it is constituted by ignorance of science.

What both traditions have in common, according to Rancière, is that they exist by virtue of claiming knowledge of 'the poor' – more specific terms could include women, children, workers, ethnic minorities, and so on – on the basis of 'the poor's' ignorance. What Rancière points to is the way in which sociological knowledge emerges as the surplus value of the poor's labour: it is produced by them, but is claimed by the owners of the means of production (social scientists). Or as Ross (1991, xviii) succinctly phrases it, the scientist, in both traditions, gives himself the task "of speaking for those whose presumed ignorance grants [him his] domain".

This move, Rancière argues, is effected in the alignment between sensibilities (judgements, perceptions – ways of being) and social location. What is claimed thereby is that people in a social location can only 'be' in a way which is determined by their social location. This ordering, by which are established "stable relations between states of the body and the modes of perception and signification which correspond to them", sets the scene for a dramatisation of social practices in which a certain social location coincides with a certain type of thought (Rancière 2006, 9). Rancière describes this construction of the social as the expression of a disciplinary 'want', a phrase which constructs disciplines as desiring entities:

Before being 'the science of society', sociology was first historically the project of a reorganisation of society. [...] It wanted to reconstitute the social fabric such that individuals and groups at a given place would have an ethos, the ways of feeling and thinking which correspond at once to their place and to a collective harmony. Sociology today has certainly distanced itself from this organicist vision of society. But it continues, for the benefit of science, to want what science wants for the good of society, to understand [savoir] the rule of correspondence between social conditions and the attitudes and judgements of those who belong to it.
Rancière 2006, 7 – original italics

What this mapping effects is a refusal of the contingency, or arbitrariness, of domination, because domination is figured as incorporated, and the corporeal is figured as a place in the social order. Consequently, and tautologically, the fact of being in a certain social location (e.g. being poor) becomes the reason for being in such a location, since people can never do anything else but ‘be’ an instance of a social location.

Rancière’s argument is that both traditions of critical thought posit their own knowledge as explanations of domination. Their ‘critique’ is critical insofar as it explains the mechanisms of domination – it generates consciousness of domination. What is thereby deemed to be lacking is understanding of domination. Although both traditions owe much to Althusser’s (1971) reconfiguration of ideology as a practice rather than as cognitive ‘impediment’, the logic of their discourse is that what is lacking is knowledge. This ‘knowing’ however is itself a practice; and as a practice, it divides the world into two: people who are ignorant, and people who know. This is what Rancière means by the aesthetics of (scientific) discourse – it refers to the way in which a discourse performatively divides up the world into people who speak and people who merely ventriloquise, people who can think the social order and people who can only obey its logic, people who can contribute to discussions about how society should be organised and people who are too caught up in their own economic occupation/culture to apply themselves authentically to the affairs of society. ‘Knowing’ a situation of domination thereby quickly becomes a way of participating in it, because what is banished in this allocation of knowledge and ignorance is the possibility of social disorder – in the sense of the objects of science (the poor) doing anything else than that which has already been ordered by science, a science which is precisely a knowledge of domination.

Rancière’s disagreement with sociology and social history is not with the quality of their methodology – he does not highlight shortcomings or contradictions in how researchers went about collecting and analyzing data. It is rather with the presuppositions made in reading data, or more specifically, with the way a discipline positions its own discourse with respect to that of the object of study. Rancière’s work here has some affinities with Foucault’s archaeology in analysing the conditions under which objects become objects of knowledge:

A discipline, in effect, is not first of all the definition of a set of methods appropriate to a certain domain or a certain type of object. It is first the very constitution of this object as an object of thought, the demonstration of a certain idea of knowledge – in other words, a certain idea of the rapport between knowledge and a distribution of positions.
Rancière 2006, 6 – my italics

The specificity of a discipline is ‘demonstrated’ in the way it distributes positions – one might say ‘roles’ or ‘parts’ in the theatrical sense (Hallward 2006) – which distinguish what the objects of knowledge themselves can think and know, and the rapport this knowledge has with disciplinary knowledge. Rancière does not situate this distribution as anterior to the production of disciplinary thought but as the same as that production – it is in “the texture of its narration” (Rancière 2005). Disciplinary discourse therefore functions as a distribution of positions, and as the demonstration of the truth of this

distribution. This means that the construction of the object of study is not primarily methodological – in the sense of methodology as epistemological starting point or as procedure of verification. It is aesthetic, because a research-based account dramatises the world in a particular way.

The aesthetics of knowledge as a practice of equality

Rancière sets up two alternatives: research accounts can either explain domination – in other words proffer knowledge of domination as a remedy to people’s ignorance of domination. Or they can become ignorant of domination and offer knowledge of equality – this is the alternative he defends. The logic of Rancière’s argument is as follows: if knowledge production necessarily implies generating a type of ignorance (an ‘other’ to knowledge), then what needs to be ignored in order to challenge inequality? Inequality itself. If one is ‘ignorant’ of inequality, if one denies the reality of inequality, one is in effect asserting and instantiating equality. Another way of putting this is that rather than setting out to ‘know’ or verify inequality (or researching the perpetuation of domination), one can instead set out to ‘verify’ equality.

So how does one verify equality/ignore inequality methodologically? The first step has to be to ‘ignore’ inequality in material circumstances. ‘Ignore’ here does not mean overlook or dismiss – although this is what Rancière is sometimes effectively said to do (Hewlett 2007, Nordmann 2006) – but to treat it as not relevant in differentiating between knowledge and ignorance, in the senses defined above; in effect, this means that data (e.g. an interview transcript) should not be read as the expression of a sociological condition (e.g. the condition of being female in a patriarchal system), since all one will ever see is confirmation of inequality. Verifying equality on the hand involves starting from what is common to both the object and the subject of research: the production of discourse (data and research accounts are both discursive entities).

The verification of equality has little to do with ‘respecting’ the words of others, trusting their rationality, or celebrating their existence – in other words, it is not a matter of being faithful to their content. It is about declassifying words, by re-ordering the way in which words take on meaning by virtue of the category / body to which they are assigned in the social order, such as the time and place of utterance, and the activity to which it is related. In other words, it is about reading/producing words against the guarantees, or modes of legitimation, offered by the social location of the speaker. One can for instance treat scientific statements as literary prose, ‘opinion’ as philosophy, and historical words as speaking in the present, in the texture of the historian’s narration. As an example of this move, Rancière describes his approach to writing a history of workers’ movements in France in the 1830s (1981) as follows:

In principle, my workers belonged to ‘social history’. In other words, their texts were read as documents expressing the condition of workers, popular culture, etc. I decided to read them in a different way - as literary and philosophical texts. Where others were attempting to read about workers’ problems expressed in the language of the people, I saw, on the other hand, a struggle to cross the barrier between languages and worlds, to vindicate access to the common language and to the discourse on the community. As

opposed to culturalism, which sought to restore a 'popular culture', I valorized the attitude of those workers who challenged that so-called 'popular culture' and made an attempt to appropriate another's culture (i.e. that of the 'literate'). The idea of a 'poetics of knowledge' that would cut across all disciplines thus expresses a very close relationship between subject and method.
Rancière, in Guénoun and Kavanagh 2000 – my italics

The above quotation suggests two things about the practice of verifying equality – what Rancière refers to as 'the poetics of knowledge'. Firstly, it figures equality as a type of action, rather than as the consequence of that action. The question Rancière raises here is what makes one's own research practice political, or what can one do, in research practice, to open up the possibilities for equality? In some ways, his answer is 'not very much', insofar as all one can do is enact equality in one's own writing. By which he means reconfiguring the field of knowledge to undo the partitions which divide people into territories of competence, or the territories by which people are assigned social (unequal) attributes.

There is not 'practical' consequence to this theory; it is not a programme to be implemented by others (i.e. the revolutionary agent, 'practitioners', and so on). Rancière here distances himself from a model of political theory in which intellectuals develop theory for others to apply. This 'pedagogic' model of politics, in which the scientist tells people how they can be equal (to him/her), effectively, aesthetically, defers equality, by creating a temporal structure of delay, in which equality is put off to some point in the future, once critical insights have been applied. Equality thus has to be figured differently. Rather than a state to be worked towards, it becomes, in Rancière's work, a disruption of inequality: in the quotation above, a disruption of the ways of being assigned to people on the basis of the division of labour. Rancière's position here shares many similarities with contemporary feminist work (e.g. Butler 2007, Adkins 2004) on the problems of thinking equality as an unfolding liberation. I return to this below.

The second, related point which the above quotation suggests about the practice of verifying equality is that it is concerned with 'valorising' certain actions. Those actions are characterised by the way they transgress the boundaries of categories: in this instance, the category of 'popular culture'. 'Valorise' might be read in several ways here. It implies neglecting / ignoring data which 'confirms' inequality: data which states that people with a specific role in the division of labour have a specific way of being, or specific contributions to make to the social collective. However, it is not simply a question of dismissing such data, but reading data differently. One way of understanding Rancière's point here is to compare it to Butler's (1993) strategy of 'valorising' drag. Butler's study of drag is not a celebration of the practice: she argues that drag can often re-inscribe heterosexual norms. But what drag makes sensible is the imitative nature of gender: its lack of ontology. Valorising drag is not a question of valorising people in drag as against other people, or in Rancière's case, workers who have middle class aspirations as opposed to those who don't. But it is about making prominent in one's analytic strategy discursive practices which make the contingency of inequality sensible^{vi}.

In order to examine what kind of account a ‘method of equality’ (Rancière 2006a) produces, the next section will briefly review Rancière’s most substantive ‘empirical’ study. I will then explore further some of the similarities between Rancière’s arguments and contemporary feminist debates on research methodology.

Transforming an object into a method: discourse as *mésentente* versus *méconnaissance*

One phrase keeps turning up in Rancière’s books: ‘ce que parler veut dire’ – what it means to speak, what speaking means. It sums up what his research is about. It is also the title of Bourdieu’s book, which in English is translated as *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991). Bourdieu and Rancière both set off to find the speech of the exploited, but found different things. Bourdieu found a state of misrecognition – in French, *méconnaissance*, literally ‘mis-knowing’. Speakers misrecognise what their statements mean because they do not know, or refuse to acknowledge, that what they are doing is engaging in the exchange of (symbolic) capital. Rancière found ‘*mésentente*’, which signifies through alliterative opposition: ‘disagreement’, rather than mis-knowing. One of Rancière’s books focuses on this object (1995), but it can be traced back to his study of workers’ movements in the 1830s. Rancière describes the research journey which led him to the notion of *mésentente* as follows:

For a long time, I looked for a ‘proper’ worker...in the corporatisation of crafts / cultures / forms of originary identities. This did not work. It was impossible to see working class speech constructing itself from a proper body emerging from its proper location. What instead manifested itself was a speech which sought to drag itself away from these incarnations, no longer to speak like a worker but to subjectivise itself under the name of worker in the space of common speech...I wanted to take into account this movement which implied a reversal of position: grasping the other in its separation from itself, in its will to be the same as us, in other words, other than itself in the sense that every speaking being is.

Rancière 2005

‘Grasping the other in its separation from itself’ – what does that look like in practice? In *The Nights of Labour: archives of the proletarian dream* (1981), Rancière examines what workers did at night, in their ‘free’ (because unproductive) time - in that time which suspended the cycle of work and rest. The book takes us through poems composed by metal workers, letters written by builders who dream of being artists, interior décors which aspire to a bourgeois aesthetic, newspapers written by carpenters in which they represent their work to themselves and respond to the images of work by others - such as Gauny, a carpenter, who writes: “Ah! Old Dante, you have not travelled in the real Hell, in the Hell without poetry, adieu...” (29).

This ‘time of day’ – not sleep, not work - is treated as a moment when workers spoke in ways which exceeded any coincidence with themselves as occupants of a specific social place, or doers of an economic practice. Rancière’s argument is that the workers whose lives he examines aspired, in this time, to be something other than what they were, to

make ‘useless’ non-functional things, to escape the workshop’s boredom and discipline, the stupid productivity of servitude, and the injunctions of older workers to take pride in their craft. In other words, to have the forms of time (leisure) and forms of being (non-worker) of the other. They behaved as if they had this leisure at their disposal, as if they were equal to those who did not work. The term ‘worker’ here does not designate particular individuals, an identity category, but an instance of subjectivation: “‘Worker’, or better still ‘proletarian’ is...the subject which exists as a measure of the gap between the part played by work as a social function and the absence of a part [in the sense of both ‘share’ and ‘role’] in the definition of what is common to the community by those who carry out this work” (Rancière 1995, 60).

What is ‘valorised’ in this account then is not an external object doing/being politics; ‘empirical’ workers are not shown to be moving towards particular progressive goals. The workers are not illustrated as ‘resisting’ or exercising ‘agency’; neither are they displayed as victims, as exemplars of misery (c.f. Bourdieu 2003). What is made sensible is the equality of workers as a part of society (rather than as individuals), because they are doing something else than their social identity. This doing is a claim, a rendering sensible of commonality. Equality here is not something with a substantive content; it is not a theme in their/the writing. Rather, it is the performative enactment of a lack of a specific identity, a lack which is delineated in the blurring of a distinction between data and commentary: “If we are unable to differentiate systematically Rancière’s working assumptions from Gauny’s [a carpenter featured in the book], if we fail to disentangle ‘objective’ narration from free indirect discourse, this reflects the book’s commitment to an equality legible even in the form of its *Darstellung* [narration]” (Parker 2004, xiii).

The untangling of words from their social places is achieved in part by taking issue with more conventional social histories and what they fail to symbolise. The construction of this time of day as an object of study is designed to counter the assumption that workers are productive in terms of their work only – in other words, produce nothing except their own occupational particularity. Against the anticipated criticism that this time, and its workers, are not representative, Rancière argues that he does not seek to destroy the images of work and workers generated in more statistically-based social histories, but to multiply the images of workers – and to evoke images which suggest that workers have something else to contribute to communal life, or society, than their labour, whilst not thereby losing their identity as workers, as individuals confronting the social order.

This is what is at issue in the concept of *mésentente*, or disagreement. Whereas misrecognition posits the epistemological and ethical value of science as its countervailing force, disagreement insists on the disputed status of speech. To sustain this claim, Rancière fragments the concept of speech into two: there is speech in its positivity, and there is the outside of speech, that which is not heard as speech, but rather as noise, or as ventriloquism. Cases of disagreement are those where there is a lack of agreement not only about the object of debate (what constitutes audible speech in the study of workers) but also the status of the speakers themselves, as speakers who speak, rather than emit noise or ventriloquise.

Situating the method of equality - Does Rancière share his method with that of feminist 'science'?

The debates which Rancière holds with sociology and social history over how to treat the speech of the researched are reminiscent of those which have animated feminist research, particularly ethnography, in the last 20 years. The question revolves around how 'openly ideological' research represents the other (Lather 2007). How does one tell the lives of others whilst not standing in for them? How does one go about removing oneself from a position of mastery in conveying "subaltern ways of knowing" (Lather 2007, 37) whilst simultaneously retaining a notion of science / research? How does one address the question of the status of the object after the concept of knowledge / power?

In exploring the methodological debates sustained by concerns about how to represent the ways of knowing of those traditionally excluded from legitimate knowledge – in other words, those deemed to have knowledge of only particular (not common) value – Lather emphasises the necessity of developing a 'doubled science': "[New feminist ethnography] calls for a doubled epistemology where the text becomes a site of the failures of representation and where textual experiments are not so much about solving the crisis of representation as about troubling the very claims to represent" (37). This conception of science counters the view that a distinction between subject and object is necessary to produce a 'critical' research account (Adkins 2004). It also questions the ethics of speaking with or for the 'voiceless' on the basis of a presumed self-identity of (other people's) lived experience. As Lather notes, this turn in ethnography has led to greater emphasis being placed on issues of textuality and disciplinary history, as well as on more personal or intimate data sources, including diaries, journals, and dialogic interview formats. The aim has been to find a way of writing which is less exploitative, whilst not eradicating from view the power imbalances of research situations. Lather describes her own work in terms of realising "a dream of science outside of mastery and transparency" (42), a line which Rancière might have written about his own body of work.

Although Lather and Rancière share many concerns about the practice of research, the differences in the tone of their writing are telling, and consequential. The landscape of research which Lather evokes is one of "ruins" (2007, 40), "aporetic suspension" and "constitutive unknowingness", in which roam 'partial' truths of questionable legitimacy, disrupted claims, and "ethical practices[s] of undecidability" (2006, p 4-5): "my interest is in practices that enact a stammering relationship towards the incompletely thinkable conditions and potential of given arrangements" (2007, 43).

There is no trace of a stammer in Rancière's prose. He certainly depicts a partial truth, but partial in the sense of partisan, not castrated.

To establish what is at issue in this stammering and its absence, it is helpful to draw an analogy with Hey's (2006, 2008) exploration of academic melancholia. Hey uses Freud's concept of melancholia to analyse the methodological commentaries of feminist academics who construct their research object in reference to their own working class origins: "we are beginning to speak of our histories...and expose the terrifying

fraudulence of our subjugation” (Walkerdine 1985, quoted in Hey 2006, 297). Although the idea of grounding research in personal experience has been put into question by the poststructuralist conception of the subject, the ‘passionate attachment’^{vii} to the autobiography of a research question remains, Hey suggests: “I conceptualise them [expositions of class anger and origin in feminist work] as a defensive aggressive melancholic feminist formation expressing personal and political attachments to that which has been lost” (300). Lather’s evocation of a research landscape in ruins seems to betray a similar attachment to that which has been lost. This is not expressed in relation to class as a sensible, collective experience, but rather in relation to the project of science in bearing witness to the lives of marginalised others: “what does it mean to see these women as data, as victims, as AIDS patients [...] Personally, it is a chance to get myself into a situation where I cannot use my poststructuralist affiliations to undermine emancipatory intentions and practices” (Lather 2007, 50). It appears to be this tension between emancipatory desires and poststructuralist suspicions that leads Lather to articulate such hybrid concepts as ‘partial knowledge’ and fraught ambitions such as “grasp[ing] the *limits* and possibilities of our grasp” on research objects (42 – my italics).

Rancière does not appear affected by ‘scientific’ melancholia – one way of interpreting the conceptualisation of a ‘doubled science’. His argument that disciplinary thought offers the possibility of altering the distribution of the sensible – of what can be heard and seen – gives research a heroic allure. As Citton (Forthcoming a) suggests, Rancière’s theatrical conception of political agency, in which academic writing can instantiate equality by re-constituting the world, grants (academic) writing the kind of political significance which has been put into doubt by both poststructuralism and ‘evidence-based’ policy: “we like it whenever someone suggests that we can be ‘subversive’ by simply sitting there with our eyes open”. Although Rancière’s writing lacks the self-doubt that might open up a space for examining the effect of verifying equality beyond the text, the differences with Lather’s approach are also suggestive of the way in which desires for emancipation and theoretical consistency in ‘openly ideological’ poststructuralist research can become sublimated in somewhat contradictory cognitive ideals; Lather (2007, 42) for instance maintains that she is “try[ing] to understand” the world, in contrast to Rancière’s (1987) blunt argument that there is nothing to understand, there are only things to be said about the world. One could argue that it is precisely the endeavour to understand the world that makes for a ‘ruined’ research practice.

There are thus many similarities between Rancière’s methodological concerns and those of contemporary feminist ethnography, although Hey’s conception of melancholia teases out the implications of differences in poetics, and helps to clarify Rancière’s (2004) disagreement with the ‘pathos of the impossible’ in some strands of postmodernism^{viii}.

Affect as an object of study

Hey deploys the concept of melancholia to investigate the affective investments in sociological research, which feature prominently in feminist methodological thinking, including Lather’s. This again is a concern Rancière’s aesthetics of knowledge shares with feminist ‘science’. Rancière’s notion of a poetics of writing foregrounds the affective dimension of accounts. His argument that research is ‘a distribution of sensible’

seems to be a re-working of Foucault's notion of discursive regimes, with affect treated in terms of its relation to subjectification, rather than as a genetic property of the body (Potte-Bonneville 2005). The significance of this conceptualisation of affect can perhaps best be seen in the way Rancière challenges Bourdieu's conceptual framework.

Rancière insists on the desires which Bourdieu's discourse articulates - what it wants. When Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1979) states that people of different classes have different aesthetics tastes – different ways of feeling –, and that working class people do not/cannot appreciate the music of Schubert, what Rancière (2007, 1984) reads is a re-articulation of the perennial concern of elites to protect a language and a culture from the attention of those without distinction. This argument is based on asking: who benefits from the narration of a 'story' in which poor people cannot understand the beauty of fine art or non-realist drama, since it is beyond their reach in terms of cultural capital? Precisely *The Inheritors* (Bourdieu 1964). If Bourdieu's books satisfy this rich clientele, on what basis is a depiction of a rigorously classed habitus persuasive? Rancière answers: on the arousal of disgust. The persuasive power of *Distinction*, in this account, is that it forces its privileged readers to contemplate the fascinating horror of popular culture, of a lumpen proletariat unable to do anything else except reproduce. 'The empirical' in Bourdieu's social world, Rancière concludes, is nothing but flesh given to the Platonic fantasy that those who work cannot 'feel' in the same way as those whose social role is to think.

Rancière's critique opens a chasm between Bourdieu's intolerance of hierarchy and the aesthetics of his discourse. This is made possible by treating disciplinary theory as the expression of disciplinary 'wants' rather than as a model of the world - in other words, as structured by fantasy.

Rancière stresses that his work is not a theory of individual psyche (2007a); the fantasies he explores operate at the level of discourse. His argument seems to echo Hey's in treating 'passionate attachments' to visions of class identity in terms of a 'defensive aggressive formation expressing personal and political attachments to that which has been lost', although Rancière is less generous than Hey in identifying such a formation also as the occupation of disciplinary territory. In both the work of Hey and Rancière, however, the aim is not to get away from fantasy in academic writing, but to structure it in more egalitarian ways.

Mésentente, methodology and education research

How might one interpret the significance of Rancière's work for research practice in education? It might be best to start with what Rancière's work does not help achieve. His books are not prescriptions in how to make research practice more 'effective', reflexive, literary or political. In treating 'empirical' research as fictional, as the demonstration of fantasy, Rancière challenges claims that social science research can reveal a given situation which lies elsewhere than in its own materialisation, as discourse. More significantly, his work also problematises constructivist epistemologies which suggest

that, through reflexivity, at least ‘partial truths’ or Lyotardian ‘small narratives’ can be produced. These make frequent appearances in ethnographic accounts in education.

Rancière claims his own research as unequivocally true, fictional and structured by the political fantasy of equality. For this claim to make sense means configuring the relationship between these terms in such a way that they do not mutually exclude each other. How is this to be done? Many of Rancière’s books can be read as genealogies of research objects prominent in the social sciences: the poor (2007), the image (2003), the school (1987), the unconscious (2001). Genealogies fuse ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ by demonstrating the way in which truth emerges within historical ‘regimes’ of thought. The genealogy as a method / object of research appears differently than in the work of Foucault, however, because of Rancière’s displacement of the presupposed ‘historical’ time difference between the discourse of the past (the ‘data’ of genealogies) and the discourse of the present (the writing of genealogies). Rancière’s genealogies trace/are moments of enacted equality in the construction of research objects. They are not ‘reconstitutions’ or historical descriptions of such moments, as in Foucault’s early work, but interventions in contemporary scientific debates which intervene precisely by collapsing the apparent oppositions in such debates – in other words, by creating a situation of *mésentente*.

Rancière’s (1987) genealogy of the school as an object of thought is an example of this. Written at a time when the recently elected French Socialist government looked to education researchers for ways of creating a more egalitarian school system, the book positioned the two options under debate – a standards-based republican universalist curriculum and a pedagogically and culturally ‘inclusive’ curriculum – as rationalisations of inequality, both (Ross 1991). This positioning was achieved through the telling of the story of Jacotot, a 19th century revolutionary lecturer whose claim ‘all intelligences are equal’ made visible the contempt for ‘the People’ effected in the institutionalisation of education and its ordering of unequal capacities.

Rancière’s genealogy of the unconscious (2001) could be read in a similar way, in highlighting the fusion of truth, fiction and fantasy in the creation of a new science. The study starts by arguing *against* critiques of Freud’s work which focus on the reductiveness of his interpretations and dubious claims to evidence. The Freudian unconscious, Rancière demonstrates, turns a literary ‘truth’ into a scientific one, by recruiting literary works in the defence of the claim that fantasy has significance – that it constitutes a kind of knowledge, and is not mere ignorance / false beliefs^{ix}. This is what Freud finds in the story of Oedipus. Its centrality in Freud’s work is not because of the sex: there are several Greek myths featuring incestuous couples who do not suffer for it (e.g. Zeus and Hera). What is significant in Oedipus is that he does not know he is committing incest; it is learning of his situation that afflicts him. What Freud finds in Oedipus, then, is a model of knowledge as affect, in which it is knowing a situation – rather than the substantive content of that situation – which is traumatic. It is Freud’s invention of the death drive which transforms this logic into a *common* condition, as opposed to the trace of childhood trauma. Through this genealogy, Rancière constructs an image of the unconscious as a statement of equality - in stark contrast to its common

figuring in the social sciences as an esoteric / particular object, of questionable ethical value, whose study / statement of existence functions to secure epistemic mastery over research participants. This account also gives rise to two ways of demonstrating equality: “equality as a capacity to be verified by anybody” - equality as the indeterminate signifier figured in *The Nights of Labour*; and equality as the “indifferentiation of a collective speech, a great anonymous voice” (2004, 203), a description which invites comparison with Lacan’s Real. Rancière’s genealogy here is not simply ‘about’ Freud – it is also about how fantasy can be thought as knowledge, and thus as endemic to research, rather than as the opposite of ‘reality’; and also how fantasy becomes politically salient. The book is as much about demonstrating what is at stake in contemporary (scientific) research as it is about Freud.

So where does this leave social science methodology? Rancière’s argument does not weaken the claims of science, but it does give science a different status. Rather than being the means to translate the properties of the object of research, methodology becomes about building a stage and sustaining a spectacle (Hallward 2006); it constitutes an act, a way of configuring and dividing the domain of the sensible. Scientific statements produce effects: “they draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making” (Rancière 2004, 39). This argument widens the role of research ethics beyond sections in methodology chapters, to embrace the poetics of academic discourse and how they performatively constitute the world^x. This is suggestive of the way in which ethnographic accounts can, without apology, reject positivistically inflected conceptions of methodology – if science is thought of as constituting the world rather than understanding it, the problem of how to account for a ‘ruined’ research practice, or ‘partial’ truths, is removed. This is not to say that writing research becomes less problematic, less difficult affectively, or simply fiction. Indeed, Rancière suggests that the difficulty of reflexivity is not so much related to how one can account for one’s position in the social, but rather with the labour of articulating one’s fantasies, or the fantasies of one’s disciplinary identity and the ‘wants’ satisfied in return for producing knowledge. These fantasies are rendered in the way one’s own claim to knowledge posits its other: the ignorance to which it replies.

In education, research funding is often predicated on knowledge of inequality, and ignorance of how to reduce it. This knowledge of inequality underpins programmes focused on developing methods for helping those who are falling behind, establishing a curriculum which allows students to fulfil their personalised potential, finding more accurate ways of classifying people by ability so as to develop strategies to counter exclusion. Rancière’s work is an argument against these problematics.

Researching subjectification in education

In addition to forcing a reconsideration of the status of social science, Rancière’s work is highly significant to theorising and investigating subjectification. To date, the research of identity in education has been extensively informed by the notion of habitus, particularly in terms of the relationship between students’ background, projected futures and their discursive acts in school. The argument for a more situated, embodied conception of

literacy for instance has recruited Bourdieu's framework to show that there is no universally valued form of linguistic competence (e.g. Carrington and Luke 1997). Rancière's conception of *mésentente* does not argue with this diagnostic, but it does offer a very different research agenda in response to the situation, and perhaps a more hopeful one than the mournful tracing of an inescapable symbolic violence. Not hopeful in the sense of anticipating a better future, but because exuberantly anarchic. It opens up possibilities for researching subjectification as the disruption of, and to disrupt, categories in educational practice, for instance the classification of vocational and academic speech / students, 'gifted and talented' and 'special needs' speech / students, 'satisfactory' and 'excellent' teaching / teachers. This is not to deny the parasitic nature of the endeavour, or the implausibility of winning research grants on the basis of this kind of rationale. But it does open possibilities for researching education in terms that are not predicated either on an ethic of increasing effectiveness or of hermeneutic suspicion.

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ii What is at stake here is the performativity of scientific accounts, and how they may enact mastery over 'dominated' subjects even whilst criticizing domination. The concept of performativity develops the argument that power and authority work in part through discourse, by bringing a situation into being. If an account divides people into the 'dominated' and the 'dominating', it could be said to enact performatively a social categorization by which the 'dominated' can do nothing else except be dominated. This account could consequently be said to re-inscribe hierarchy, and to assume a position of mastery over 'the dominated'. The idea that research accounts are performative thus points to the power of accounts to materialize – to bring into being - what they represent, and thus to re-inscribe hierarchy and domination, or to question their basis by pointing to the lack of foundation for domination.

iii In this respect, Rancière's work can be aligned with work focusing on the 'decentred' subject, following in the wake of the work of Foucault on the construction of the subject and the influence of the 'linguistic turn' in Lacan and Derrida – see Hall 1992 for an overview of this move towards a decentred vision of the subject. One of the characteristics of Lacanian-influenced work is the emphasis on a supplement generated from the discursive constitution of the subject: an unsignified/unnameable remnant which cannot be included within an identity category, but which secures the boundaries of that category. This is where Rancière's work is resonant of Lacanian work, because both point to a dislocation between a body and its symbolization within a discursive regime, a dislocation brought about by a supplement which remains unaccounted for (which remains unsymbolised). This is why Rancière's work is also resonant of feminist theory which emphasizes that the conflation of 'gender' with male/female, masculine/feminine dichotomies posits gay and lesbian bodies as 'supplementary' – in excess of, and not accounted for within feminist politics (Butler 2004). Butler has also pointed to the dislocation between a body, a system of symbolization, and a performative claim to subjectivity.

iv One way of interpreting this difference is in relation to Rancière's own research history. He started off writing alongside Althusser on the development of a Marxist 'science', contributing a chapter to *Lire le Capital* (Reading Capital) in 1965. After rejecting the Althusserian distinction between science and ideology, he co-wrote *La Parole Ouvrière* (which translates as 'Workers' speech') in 1976, in an endeavour to find the 'authentic' voice of a pre-Marxist workers' movement. His subsequent writings can be construed as a rejection of his own earlier work, and the traditions to which they belonged.

v See Pelletier (2009) for a fuller account of Rancière's critique of Bourdieu. Rancière's develops his critique most fully in the penultimate chapter of *The Philosopher and his Poor* (2007).

vi Rancière argues that a research account effects 'a division of the sensible', by which he means the system of distribution according to which 'the common' – a term which in English covers a range of concepts including the common good, the public realm, the community, the universal – is divided into particular parts (the private, the domain of exclusive expert knowledge): "I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it. A distribution of the sensible therefore establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts. This apportionment of parts and positions is based on a distribution of spaces, times, and forms of activity that determine the very manner in which something in common lends itself to participation and in what way various individuals have a part in this distribution". (2004,

12). Valorizing the attitude of workers who challenge a certain idea of ‘popular culture’ is an endeavour to ‘re-distribute the sensible’, by demonstrating that workers do not have ‘their own’ culture. The claim that workers have their own particular culture is a move, Rancière argues, of excluding them from the realm of the common – i.e. exclusion by homage. Rancière’s argument here is not that there is a substantive thing called ‘common culture’, but that the partitioning off of ‘popular culture’ to which are assigned particular bodies implies *either* that there is another realm of culture which is precisely not associated with particular bodies (universal culture – we might refer to this as the Leavisite argument), *or* that there is no realm of common/equal culture (Bourdieu’s argument). Rancière’s theoretical enterprise is an endeavour to avoid these two alternatives. Butler’s representation of drag practices could be viewed in a similar way. In her work, drag makes apparent that there is no authentic, ontologically-indexed way of being gendered; and that there is no distinct ‘queer culture’, defined in terms of a ‘particular’ (unique to queer bodies) set of practices. This is because she figures drag as imitative, as performative.

vii Hey draws on Butler’s concept of ‘passionate attachment’, as developed in the latter’s examination of theories of subjection (Butler 1997a).

viii In particular, Rancière distinguishes his notion of *mésentente* from Lyotard’s concept of *differend*.

ix Zizek (1989) develops a similar argument in Chapter 1 of *The Sublime object of Ideology*, in which he explores the argument, put forward by Lacan, that Marx developed the idea of the symptom in Freud’s work: what Marx showed is that aberrations in the capitalist system (depressions, market crashes and so on) were not just epiphenomena to be rectified, but the key to understanding the functioning of the whole system. In other words, what were previously ‘insignificant’ processes were transformed into knowledge of capitalism. Freud then used the same procedure with respect to dreams and slips of the tongue – also previously seen as epiphenomena - to generate knowledge of human psychology.

x For a recent, wide-ranging examination of the implications of performativity for social science research methodology, see Law (2004).