Key Contemporary Thinkers

Jacques Rancière

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Jacques Rancière
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Jacques Rancière, the philosopher of equality, is now in his eighth decade and interest in his work has never been greater. His singular intellectual project, which spans a daunting range of disciplines, has been steadily and patiently elaborated in numerous books, articles, lectures and interviews since the mid-1960s. While it would be misleading to suggest that he languished in complete obscurity after his contribution to Louis Althusser’s *Reading Capital* [1965], it is only really relatively recently that this professional philosopher has risen to public prominence in his own right in France and that his impact has begun to be felt in the English-speaking world. Within academia the opening decade of the millennium saw several high-profile international conferences devoted to Rancière’s work, a flurry of keynote addresses, an ever-diminishing time-lag between the appearance of his writing in French and its emergence in English translation, as well as translations into a number of other languages (including a recent Hindi translation of *The Nights of Labor*), a plethora of journal special issues and a growing tide of single-author studies and essay collections dedicated to aspects of his thought and his relationship with other thinkers. This, however, is the first book-length study by a single author, in any language, which is devoted entirely to Rancière’s thought and engages with all of his major interventions in and across the fields of politics, pedagogy, history, literature and aesthetics. At the time of writing, we are still in that particular moment in the reception of his work in the English-speaking world when editors and authors grapple to derive an adjective from his name (‘Rancierian’ will be used
and translators seek to stabilize the English versions of his key terms. Perhaps it is fitting, if only trivially so, given Rancière’s critique of consensus, that little consensus has yet to emerge on these issues.

Bridging the gap between academia and the wider world are his invaluable interviews, a selection of which, running to over six hundred pages, was published in French last year, in 2009, under a title apt for an interviewee who has pursued and continues to pursue his intellectual project with indefatigable tenacity, *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués, And Too Bad for the Weary.*2 Outside academia rumours continue to circulate of the influence of Rancière’s political thought over Ségolène Royal in particular, the former presidential candidate of France’s Socialist Party. And his work on aesthetics is now displayed prominently on the philosophy shelves of many a contemporary art bookshop and is rapidly becoming established as an essential point of reference for artists and curators.

Such an explosive moment in the reception of any thinker’s work is hazardous for aspiring explainers and not just because of the ordinary scholarly dangers of missing or failing to account for significant new material. The desire to promote work which one finds exceptionally enabling and transformative can easily give rise to the sort of unbalanced enthusiasm which eventually does it a disservice, particularly if that enthusiasm attracts the resentful attention of others less favourably disposed to the initial premises, the intentions and the manner of the thought in question and who, in rage, see fit to rubbish it. It then invariably takes years of painstaking sifting by fairer-minded commentators to set the record straight. This unfortunate pattern, which draws strength from the inherent conservatism of the academic establishment and the anti-intellectualism of the wider culture in Britain and the United States, has been repeated all too often in the reception of French-language philosophers from the Continental tradition whose work is taken up in the English-speaking world as French Theory: Sartre, Foucault, Althusser and Derrida, to name but four, have all shared a similar fate in this respect. If the tone in the main chapters which follow is sometimes more sober and the approach more directly contestatory than some other work on Rancière, this is my attempt to avoid the kind of overinflation which feeds that dispiriting pattern of reception. Yet at the same time I have tried to avoid replicating the no less disheartening cross-Channel division of labour identified by E.P. Thompson in his assessment of the
relationship between French and English Marxism: ‘they propose and we object’. Nevertheless, for unalloyed enthusiasm and an unqualified statement of the importance of Rancière’s work, the reader will have to wait until the Afterword.

The hazards to aspiring explainers inherent in the explosive moment in its receptional lifetime at which Rancière’s thought has now arrived are compounded considerably by some of the specific asperities of a body of work which make it especially resistant to the kind of explanatory critical exposition offered in this book. I wish briefly to survey these here, in order to measure and acknowledge the particular presumptuousness of my undertaking and as a prelude to defending what I hesitate to call my method. First among those features of Rancière’s work which make it resistant to explanation is its own intense and principled suspicion of the very act of explaining. According to the nineteenth-century maverick pedagogue Joseph Jacotot, the subject of Rancière’s most seductive book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* [1987], explaining stultifies because it is premised on and perpetuates intellectual inequality between teacher and student. The detail of these claims and Jacotot’s radical pedagogical alternative will be examined in Chapter 1. The point I want to make here is more about the implications of the particular ways in which Rancière’s work as a whole fights to avoid the explanatory mode. His philosophical style, in the main, is declarative or assertoric rather than explanatory: even when he analyses an existing body of thought or discourse, as he does in his ongoing project on aesthetics, the analysis proceeds not by explaining but by proposing theses and constructively elaborating new conceptual configurations and frameworks of understanding.

Whereas explainers have explicitly to establish hierarchies, both at macro level in their selection and presentation of the material and at sentence level in their use of subordinating and coordinating structures, Rancière’s thinking and writing are egalitarian: parataxis, or juxtaposition, is his favoured linguistic and conceptual mode. Equality is not just declared by, but enacted in, the Rancierian sentence, which tends to eschew both hierarchizing constructions and qualifiers expressive of degree: the preponderance of on-or-off assertoric structures, notably ‘it is a question of’ and ‘it is not a question of’ (*il s’agit de* / *il ne s’agit pas de*), lends the thinking an impassioned drivenness at local level but makes systematization challenging, to say the least. And of course this is part of the point. Readers have responded to the very particular
texture of Rancière’s work differently. I have analysed it elsewhere as a productive performance of textual, conceptual and affective irritability; Hayden White has expressed somewhat puzzled appreciation of its ‘aphoristic, almost oracular’ tone. Yet the crucial point is that the declarative approach, as practised by Rancière, differs decisively from the lecturely authoritarianism for which it can risk being mistaken in that it assumes the reader is on an equal footing and leaves him or her radically free before the thought, free to take it or leave it, free to disagree or remain unconvinced. Or free, as in my case, to rub against its grain by trying to explain it, even if the only explanation I can in all conscience hazard is one which explicitly disavows its own authority and assumes, from the outset, the equal capacity of any reader to make sense of the work, as well as his or her freedom to disagree with, or to remain unconvincing by, the reading I propose.

Explanation, in Rancière’s case, is also difficult for pragmatic, as well as ethical, reasons because of the sheer range of his work over so many disciplines and debates and the particular way his thought has of lodging itself in the interstices of discussions which are often already complex in their own right. As he has said himself, his books are ‘always forms of intervention in specific contexts’. But what exactly is an ‘intervention’? S/he who intervenes etymologically ‘comes between’. In normal English usage ‘intervention’ is seldom far from interference and readily implies meddling with something which could have been left alone, intruding to prevent things taking the course they might otherwise have taken. In French, however, and in English uses of the term which play on its resonances in that other language, such as Rancière’s in the article, first published in English, from which the above quote was taken, the scope of the verb intervenir and its noun intervention is wider in normal usage and more detached from the notion of obstructive interference. Indeed legitimate examples of interventions include not only short presentations at conferences and, historically, the act of speaking up for one of the parties in a courtroom, but in principle almost any act of interceding. The English ‘intervention’, as it is ghosted by its French intervention, is thus a term which is wide open and so already predisposed to egalitarian uses: given application, there is no debate, or issue, or arena, which is in principle off-limits to anyone. Rancière is by no means an autodidact, and few of us who have any first-hand experience of institutional education can meaningfully claim to be one; yet in his practice of the intervention, in this augmented bilingual sense, he renews with the
nineteenth-century autodidact’s egalitarian (self-)confidence that, given need, desire and tenacity, knowledge is open to anyone and everyone.

That Rancière’s practice of the intervention gives rise to particular practical difficulties for would-be explainers is undeniable: often the discussions in which he intervenes are already formidably complex, particularly in the case of historiography, which I examine in Chapter 2. Moreover, his interventionary approach discourages attempts to systematize his work. I have tried in the pages which follow to strike a balance between recontextualization – resituating his work in the conceptual and political contexts with which it engages – and a recognition and exploration of the singularity of his work in its own terms. Since the practice of contextualization is itself problematized in Rancière’s work and overcontextualization is certainly ‘un-Rancierian’, for reasons which will become clear, again in Chapter 2, this book about Rancière cannot with any confidence claim to be Rancierian. In defence of my ‘method’, I hazard that it would be almost impossible to grasp the real originality and interest of Rancière’s singular project without some familiarity with the varied contexts in which it intervenes. Nevertheless, I make no exaggerated claims to have somehow overcome the plurality of these interventionary contexts and explained Rancière’s thought as a systematic unity. What I present instead is an explanatory and critical analysis of his thought’s emergence, its development and its major concerns, together with a provisional assessment of its value. I focus on what I judge to be the major texts, but part of what this means is that I focus on those texts which lend themselves to the kind of explanatory project I am undertaking: if the constraints of the task in hand mean I pass over quickly some of the more oblique or highly context-specific works, for instance Short Voyages to the Land of the People or Hatred of Democracy, this implies no judgment about either their intrinsic worth or their openness for other kinds of project than the one I am undertaking here.8

Here then is a sketch-map of the ground which will be covered. Chapter 1 is concerned with Rancière’s early politics and traces the emergence of his unique conception of equality from his critique of pedagogy. His break with former teacher Louis Althusser, his reflection on the egalitarian meaning of the events of May 68 and his penetratingly oblique reflection on the Marxist tradition of social criticism, in The Philosopher and His Poor [1983], are shown to be preparing the ground for the articulation of his distinctive
conception of declarative equality in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* [1987]. Chapter 2 discusses Rancière’s historical and historiographical work, his work in the archives of French nineteenth-century worker emancipation, alone and as part of the collective behind the groundbreaking journal *Les Révoltes Logiques* [1975–81]. The multifaceted politics of his practice of the archive are explored and related to his later and ill-understood historiographical treatise, *The Names of History* [1992]. The suggestion is that this book’s nuanced critique of historicism lays the epistemological foundation for the quasi-historical concepts invoked in his later and ongoing work on aesthetics. Chapter 3 tackles Rancière’s mature politics and covers his ground-clearing distinction between politics and ‘the police’, his structural account of democracy in terms of the ‘wrong’ and the ‘miscount’, his concept of political subjectivation and his analysis of the aesthetic dimension to politics. Splitting the politics into two chapters, ‘early’ and ‘mature’, and arranging them either side of the chapter on history, does not signal either a neo-Althusserian dogmatism of the ‘break’ or a wish to downplay the ‘early’ politics, but is rather an attempt to emphasize the singular shape which Rancière’s detour via the archives imparts to the developmental pattern of his thought.

Chapters 4 and 5 show how his political and historiographical writing inform his analysis of literature, art and aesthetics: Chapter 4 examines his work on verbal art, which serves both as a partial template for, and the first phase of, his ongoing project on art and aesthetics, the subject of Chapter 5. That chapter explains this project in terms of what I think are its twin aims: to provide an analytical framework for the understanding of art and aesthetic experience and to derive a non-reductive conception of the politics of art. The middle section of Chapter 5 analyses Rancière’s film criticism and film theory. The Afterword returns to reflect on the meaning of the exemplary singularity of Rancière’s work.
I would like to thank the University of Warwick for a term of research leave and to colleagues Emma Campbell, Siân Miles and Douglas Morrey for support both moral and intellectual. For help on specific points in relation to this book and my other work on Rancière, thanks also go to Jeremy Ahearne, Daniel Andersson, Sudeep Dasgupta, Nick Hewlett, Leslie Hill, Christina Howells, Hector Kollias and Adrian Rifkin. I am grateful to the Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau Stiftung for kindly granting permission to reproduce a still image from Murnau’s *Herr Tartüff*, and to Campement Urbain for their kind permission to reproduce an image from their project *Je et Nous*. Thanks finally to Wesley Gryk for stability and sustenance while this book took shape.
This chapter traces the emergence of the central unifying concept in Rancière’s work, equality, from his reflections on pedagogy. These were shaped by his own experience of institutional education, as a student of Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser in the early and mid-1960s. He subsequently became one of his former teacher’s most trenchant critics; the May ’68 revolt crystallized his objections to Althusser’s thought and much of Rancière’s work thereafter can broadly be understood as the attempt to give discursive form to the idea of radical equality implicit in May but unrecognized, at the time, by Althusser.

Rancière’s most suggestive reformulation of the concept of equality takes place in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* [1987], a book about pedagogy. This chapter aims to show how the far-reaching positive conception of radical equality contained in that book emerges out of sustained critical reflection on, and polemical reaction against, the philosophical pedagogies (and pedagogical philosophies) of Althusser, Marx, Sartre and Bourdieu. Despite their reputation as pillars of the Left, Rancière argues that these thinkers share a repressive conception of pedagogical power and a commitment to the social privilege of intellect first articulated by Plato in *Republic*. As this chapter unfolds, Rancière’s critique of the pedagogy of inequality will be related to radical thinking about education from Latin America, Britain and the United States.
Althusser’s lesson

‘It is impossible to choose one’s beginnings,’ Louis Althusser once insisted, in typically vigorous italics, with reference to, and in commiseration with, the young Marx, whose university education was steeped in the ambient philosophy of German Idealism.1 With hindsight a similar remark could be made of the young Rancière’s encounter with Althusser in the 1960s, as his student. From the moment of his first presentation at Althusser’s seminar, in 1961, through his remarkably compliant contribution to Reading Capital [1965], the structuralist classic based on that seminar’s reading of Marx’s text, to the publication of his excoriating critique La Leçon d’Althusser (1974), Althusser’s Lesson, Althusser was the figure of reference.2 I cannot offer an exhaustive account of Althusser’s work and its many vicissitudes here; however, because he is so decisive an influence, those features of his doctrine and philosophical style relevant to an understanding of Rancière’s work will be briefly outlined.3

Althusser’s commiserating attitude to the young Marx’s intellectual upbringing was more than idle sympathy; it reflected a central point of Althusserian teaching. Althusser, who claimed to be rereading Marx ‘as a philosopher’, contended that Marx’s early and mature work were separated by an ‘epistemological break’ (coupure épistémologique). According to Bachelard’s philosophy of science, from which Althusser had adapted this concept, all sciences begin with a phase in which the world is understood from a perspective centred on human nature and concrete particular facts; only after an ‘epistemological break’ with this early phase does abstract and properly scientific conceptual knowledge of the world become possible.4 Althusser argued, contrary to most other interpreters, that Marx’s work after 1845, and, above all, Capital, was not continuous with that of the early period but rather constituted a radical break with it. Capital, he suggested, was a theoretical revolution which made possible knowledge of the world as it really is, or ‘Marxist science’; Marx’s early work, by contrast, exemplified an inferior, pre-scientific, form of understanding, which he termed ‘ideology’, one which sought to explain the world in terms of human nature and could therefore also be characterized as ‘humanist’ and ‘anthropological’.5 Belief in ‘the break’ is a hallmark of Althusserianism; non-Althusserian Marxists tend not to think there is so pronounced a rupture, although many would acknowledge there is a discernible general movement away from explanation in
human terms towards more abstract, theoretical, formulations. For example, Marx’s early account of the way in which factory workers are alienated by their work is centred on the human worker and the way in which his work gives rise to feelings of being divided from himself, from his fellow producers and from the object he is producing; ‘alienation’ in this early sense is a form of unhappiness, the mainly psychological quality of feeling divided from oneself. By the time of Capital, the logic of Marx’s approach, which sees him begin, in the first nine chapters, with a very abstract exposition of key economic concepts such as the commodity, value and labour, suggests he thinks that such concepts are required if the underlying mechanisms which account for the real basis of feelings of alienation are to be understood. So in Capital, the alienating effects of work can only be properly understood in terms of the structure of economic relations in the society in question. These relations are not immediately accessible, in the sense that they cannot be intuited by the factory worker as s/he works, or by an untrained observer, because they require a developed theoretical understanding of underlying economic processes and structures.

It may sound as though Althusser had been trying to read Marx as an economist; yet he always insisted that he and his students were reading Marx ‘as philosophers’. What did he mean by this? Marx, Althusser rightly noted, was both a voracious and a remarkably perceptive reader. According to Althusser, in Capital Marx can be seen undertaking two distinct types of reading. The second type is the one which interests Althusser, and his account of it can be summarized as follows: when Marx reads the work of economist Adam Smith, for example, Marx discerns that Smith’s theory had hit upon a correct answer to a question which Smith himself did not know how to formulate but which Marx is able to pose explicitly. Althusser called this type of reading ‘symptomatic’, and, in so doing, he aligned Marx with a certain (perhaps caricaturally simplistic) kind of psychoanalyst whose therapy consists in helping the analysand formulate explicitly the problem which lies beneath the surface manifestation that is his or her symptom. So to read Marx ‘as a philosopher’ also meant reading his text ‘as a psychoanalyst’, taking what it says on the surface to be a ‘symptom’ of its underlying meaning: Althusser’s intention was to formulate explicitly, theoretically, this underlying meaning, the philosophy of Marx, which he thought was performed but not stated explicitly in Capital. Marx’s philosophy, according to Althusser, his discovery, was a theory of history as ultimately determined by relationships
of material production (a theory sometimes called dialectical materialism). *Capital* needed to be read ‘symptomatically’ because, while it demonstrated this discovery in practice when it analysed particular examples of material production, such as cotton-weaving in Lancashire, it contained no explicit theoretical statement of what dialectical materialism was. In *Reading Capital*, by applying Marx’s symptomatic mode of reading to his own major text, Althusser claimed to be formulating Marx’s philosophy in theoretical terms. The understanding of Marx’s philosophy thus obtained from *Capital* was to be supplemented by an analysis of revolutionary struggle: like Marx’s masterwork, revolutionary movements were thought to be practical enactments of Marxist philosophy in which it was Althusser’s self-appointed task to read the theory. For Althusser, books and revolutionary movements alike were deemed susceptible to his eclectic mix of self-assertingly philosophical and notionally psychoanalytic analysis.

Rancière’s contribution to *Reading Capital* followed immediately after Althusser’s prefatory essay ‘From *Capital* to Marx’s Philosophy’.11 Entitled ‘The Concept of Critique and the Critique of Political Economy from the 1844 Manuscripts to *Capital*’, the essay is a remarkably compliant rehearsal of Althusserian doctrine.12 Taking fidelity to Althusser’s concept of the epistemological break to an extreme, Rancière even enacts the break in the very structure of his contribution, which is in two parts, corresponding to early and late Marx. He argues that in early Marx the activity of critique involves identifying contradictions and then working upwards to find the general and human meaning of the contradiction; the early Marx’s approach is therefore humanist and anthropological.13 In late Marx, by contrast, the process of critique is, to all intents and purposes, synonymous with the Althusserian practice of ‘symptomatic’ reading. At the heart of Rancière’s contribution lies an Althusserian reading of Marx’s celebrated concept of commodity fetishism. Classical political economy had succeeded, to some extent, in deriving the concept of value as the content hidden beneath the various forms of riches and in grasping that this value is realized in the exchange of goods. However, classical political economy had failed to understand that this exchange of commodities (the formula of which is given by Marx and cited by Rancière as ‘$x \text{ commodities } A = y \text{ commodities } B$’) is impossible unless it is understood that the value of the commodity is the socially necessary labour exerted in producing it rather than a property of the object as such. A commodity only has a certain value because, according to Marx, a
certain minimum amount of labour is necessary to produce it; this minimum amount of labour is itself fixed by the ways in which material production operates in the society in question. Everyday perception sees value as a simple property of objects, whereas Marxist science understands it to be a function of the overall economic and social structure, ‘a metonymic manifestation of the structure’.\textsuperscript{14} Ordinary perception is ‘fetishistic’ in that it takes the complex structural property, value, to be a simple property of the object; \textit{Capital} is scientific because the relationships between commodities it describes – relationships of value – are grasped in the context of the overall economic system, as functions of the social relations of production in capitalist society. Value is a structural and scientific concept and, as such, is not accessible to ordinary perception and cannot simply be read off objects: ‘We are no longer dealing with a \textit{text} to be read in such a way as to reveal its underlying meaning but with a \textit{hieroglyph} to be deciphered. This work of deciphering is science.’\textsuperscript{15} Rancière’s contribution is extreme in its Althusserian orthodoxy because it emphasizes the opacity of the world to ordinary perception and because it holds that only symptomatic reading can give rise to a reliable understanding of the world.

The attraction of Althusser’s enterprise to Rancière and a whole generation of aspiring activists on the Left is partly to be explained by the political climate of the time: it was clear in the 1960s to all but the most ideologically self-deluding that, under Stalin, the Soviet Union had become a brutally repressive police state and ‘Althusser’s objective was at this stage to find in Marx’s own thinking the principle of a theoretical understanding of Marxism’s aberrations’.\textsuperscript{16} Only a correct understanding of the true meaning of Marx’s philosophy could serve as a reliable guide to political action and as a safeguard against those aberrations. Revolutionary political practice without correct theory was felt to be doomed to the short-sighted pursuit of ill-understood goals:

Left to itself, a spontaneous (technical) practice produces only the ‘theory’ it needs as a means to produce the ends assigned to it: this ‘theory’ is never more than the reflection of this end, uncriticized, unknown, in its means of realization, that is, it is a \textit{by-product} of the reflection of the technical practice’s end on its means. A ‘theory’ which does not question the end whose \textit{by-product} it is remains a prisoner of this end and of the ‘realities’ which have imposed it as an end.\textsuperscript{17}
Althusser’s enterprise held particular appeal to activists on the Left who were also intellectuals because it seemed to transcend the distinction between theory and practice by deftly redefining the kind of intellectual work undertaken in certain lecture theatres and seminars as a form of political action: ‘theoretical practice’. As Rancière put it: ‘We found in Althusser’s work the idea that intellectuals could have a different role, one other than cultural consumption or ideological reflection: real involvement as intellectuals in transforming the world.’ That this was a false hope, and the notion of ‘theoretical practice’ something of a sleight of hand, did not become fully clear to Rancière until the events of May ‘68, as we shall see in a moment. Yet in the early and mid-sixties, Althusser’s approach not only promised Marxist intellectuals a role in the revolution as intellectuals, it set the interpretation of Marx free from the authority of the Party, a Party which, in France, had performed a series of about-turns flagrant enough to test the loyalty of even the truest of true believers. The unqualified support by the French Communist Party (PCF) of Stalin in the fifties had given way to vigorous de-Stalinization in the sixties; simultaneously, its commitment to violent revolutionary struggle had morphed into support for the pursuit of social change by democratic means. Perhaps most damagingly of all, during the Algerian War of Independence the PCF had supported Socialist prime minister Guy Mollet’s 1956 bill granting ‘special powers’ to the governor of Algeria, thereby effectively establishing a police state; by so doing, its traditional claim to be the party of revolution and liberation was seriously compromised.

Throughout the late fifties and sixties, Althusser remained staunchly loyal, in public, to the PCF. Yet the logic of his intellectual approach was to free the interpretation of Marx from the authority of the Party, and this was undoubtedly part of his appeal to younger, ‘leftist’ (gauchiste) activists, in other words activists who positioned themselves to the left of the PCF. As Rancière put it: ‘Marx’s theory belonged to nobody but his readers and their only duty was to it. [. . .] Everyone could read Marx and see what followed. All that was required was for them to approach the text through the discipline of science.’ Althusser’s Marxist science liberated the text of Marx from the interpretative authority of the Party, just as the Protestant Reformation had sought to free the Bible from that of the Roman Catholic Church. In Reading Capital Althusser defined his own ‘symptomatic’ mode of reading against what he castigated as the ‘religious’ myth of reading, a superficial
approach to reading, and in so doing distanced himself still further from the church with which he had himself ‘broken’ at an earlier moment and, by implication, from the Party to which he remained only publicly loyal.21

If Althusser implicitly revoked the authority of the Party to decide on the meaning of Marx’s philosophy, this proved in practice to be less emancipatory than many of his students had hoped. For behind ‘the discipline of science’, as Rancière terms it – parodying Althusser’s grandiose rhetorical claims to scientific ‘rigour’, claims which he had echoed altogether more faithfully in his contribution to Reading Capital – lay another form of authority: pedagogical authority. The art of the ‘symptomatic’ reading was not open to all and sundry given sufficient investment of effort and attention, but required instruction: as Althusser had warned, ‘We need something quite different from an acute or attentive gaze; we need an educated gaze.’22 Marxist science had been set free from the authority of the Party only to become dependent instead on that of the pedagogue, Althusser. This helps explain why Rancière’s repudiation of Althusserianism is entitled Althusser’s Lesson and why, at key junctures, it frames his argument against Althusser as an argument against pedagogy. Althusserianism is ‘fundamentally a theory of education’, Rancière argues, and ‘every theory of education strives to maintain the source of the power it seeks to shed light on’.23 The promise of Althusser’s theory – that only by a correct, rigorous, understanding of theory would a political practice be possible which avoided the aberrations of Stalinism and the compromises of democratic socialism – proved to be hollow. Because of Althusser’s investment in the privileged position of the pedagogue, it would never be time for his students to fulfil the promise of political action: ‘It followed from the logic of Althusserian discourse that the moment would never come: the antagonistic struggles of empirical politics would never allow philosophy the opportunity to conclude.’24 Although Althusserianism seemed to be at the very forefront of progressive Left discourse, Rancière came to the conclusion that it functioned in accordance with a pedagogical temporality of delay: the time to act would never come, the inequalities which were to be eliminated would always remain in place. Rancière’s later critique of progressive pedagogy in The Ignorant Schoolmaster is informed by these reflections on his experience of Althusserianism as an endlessly procrastinating process of instruction. Althusserianism served only to emphasize the gap of inequality between the instructed and those unschooled
in Marxist science and hence to strengthen the authority of the teacher, Althusser, whose position in Rancière’s later thought Alain Badiou has described as that of ‘the master who knows’, *le maître savant*, by contrast with *le maître ignorant*, the ‘ignorant schoolmaster’ named in the title of Rancière’s book on Jacotot.\(^{25}\)

Rancière’s transition from compliant student to outspoken critic of Althusser did not happen in a vacuum: as Badiou has asserted, Mao’s Cultural Revolution (at its height in the period 1965–8) and the near-revolution, in France, of May ’68 both exerted a similar kind of pressure on the young Althusserians. The Cultural Revolution questioned – often with murderous violence – the social and institutional privileges accorded to scholars, teachers and bureaucrats by virtue of their knowledge. May ’68 began as a student revolt and, whatever else it was besides, it was without doubt a questioning of the power and the processes of pedagogy. For Michel de Certeau, writing later that same year, May ’68 was, in essence, a challenge to established conceptions of pedagogy in an extended sense: ‘Fundamentally, it concerns the pedagogical relation in that it touches on academic, but also familial, institutions and, in a broader sense, the relation between cadres and their adherents, executive officers and those administered, those who govern and those who are governed.’\(^{26}\) Moreover, May ’68 saw students and factory workers engage in revolutionary action without the guidance of the Party and often to its consternation: indeed the PCF, instead of leading the revolt, was instrumental in ending it. Althusserian science and the Party to which it publicly deferred seemed similarly redundant: ‘Althusserianism met its death on the barricades of May along with many other ideas of the past,’ as Rancière put it conclusively.\(^{27}\) The trouble was that Althusser did not seem to realize this. Before publishing his excoriating repudiation, *La Leçon d’Althusser*, Rancière had already written a sceptical book chapter and an article in which he described Althusser’s work as ‘reactionary’ and labelled his own contribution to *Reading Capital* ‘rustic’ because of the crudeness with which it reproduced the Althusserian dogma of the epistemological break.\(^{28}\) Rancière presents his book-length critique, *La Leçon d’Althusser*, as an exasperated reaction to his former teacher’s failure to take on board the political lessons of May ’68. Rancière complained that Althusser’s *Réponse à John Lewis* (1973), a counterattack against the eponymous British Communist, simply restated in more accessible language the same ideas he had advanced eight years before, as though May had changed nothing.\(^{29}\)