

Wrong Place, Wrong Time: The Ignorant Schoolmaster Comes to America

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INTRODUCTION

Almost thirty years after its publication, there has been a recent surge of interest in Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, particularly in the philosophy of education. The book, in which Rancière rediscovers and builds upon the ideas of the radically egalitarian 19th-century educational thinker Joseph Jacotot, has helped inspire a number of arguments for the application of Rancièreian thinking within education, as well as some actual attempts to experiment with the philosophy in classrooms.¹

The intent of this article, however, is to pursue a radically different perspective on *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* than has been offered thus far. I wish to return directly to Rancière’s original base—the ideas of Joseph Jacotot—in order to advance an argument that these egalitarian ideas are poorly suited for the North American educational context. In order to make this argument, I will first lay out Jacotot’s core program of universal teaching and explore two of the most important principles underlying it—the equality of intelligence and the power of the will. Following that, I will link these ideas to problematic trends in American education, particularly the “grit” paradigm of educational success. It will become clear that not only is Jacotot’s program poorly laid out and unworkable both in principle and in practice, but it also intersects with some particularly dangerous trends, educational and otherwise.

JACOTOT’S EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

The Core Principles

As mentioned above, Rancière’s arguments in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*

are closely linked to Joseph Jacotot's program of universal teaching as laid out in *Enseignement Universelle: Langue Maternelle* and other major works by Jacotot. But what were the core principles of Jacotot's philosophy? One of Jacotot's most succinct statements is found in *Droit et Philosophie Panécastique*, in which he remarks, "The whole method of universal teaching is contained entirely in these words: learn one thing and connect everything else to it, according to this principle: all men have equal intelligence."²

This first part of this statement—learn one thing and connect everything else to it—implies that one must begin by taking some kind of intelligent work (e.g., a book) and learning it very thoroughly. By doing this, Jacotot thinks, one can develop a knowledge base and a competence that can then extend outward to other domains. This extension is somehow possible, Jacotot claims, because there is a core rationality at the heart of any human product that is also at the heart of any other product. Jacotot explains this with the catchphrase "tout est dans tout" [everything is in everything], which he justifies in the following way:

What the human spirit does in considering an object is what it does again in considering another object. Its procedure is uniform and its nature does not change at all depending on the facts it considers... There are not two ways of looking, of comparing, of seeking. Objects change, but the points of view from which man can study them don't vary at all... we can say: the poet that watches the dawn or the anatomist that dissects a cadaver are both admirers of nature who are studying the same connections. Fénelon who sketches Calypso's cave or Cloquet who is describing an artery are following exactly the same procedure.³

The argument here, Jacotot says, is not that one should learn anatomy [Cloquet] from a work of fiction [Fénelon], but rather that there is a way of seeing that is common across all coherent human works, and by learning to appreciate a given work in some depth, one is better equipped to appreciate other works. Both Fénelon's novel *Telemaque* and Cloquet's anatomy text are products of human intelligence, and this intelligence, Jacotot thinks, is *identical* for all human beings.

Therefore, through understanding how this intelligence manifests in one place (in Fénelon's novel), one is prepared to appreciate the power of that *identical* intelligence elsewhere (in the anatomy textbook).

This brings us to the second part of Jacotot's core principles statement—"all men have equal intelligence"—which is thus closely connected to "learn one thing and connect everything else to it" and is critical to Jacotot's egalitarian approach. However, since we are going to analyze the equality of intelligence in more depth further on, let us bracket it for now and take a more detailed look at what universal teaching actually entailed in practice.

Universal Teaching in Practice

Jacotot's system of universal teaching, which is most clearly laid out in *Langue Maternelle*, assumes very little competence or expertise on the part of the teacher (hence Rancière's title, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*), although the ability to read appears to be necessary on the part of the teacher. The teacher may use any text—Jacotot uses Fénelon's novel *Télémaque* as an initial curriculum, but he makes it clear repeatedly that any reasonably appealing text will do as a starting point, in accordance with his principle of "learn one thing and connect everything else to it."

The student's first lesson is simply to speak and write the initial line of *Télémaque* ("Calypso could not get over Ulysses' departure.") over and over again until he has it down pat.⁴ Within this process of repetition and writing, the teaching is supposed to ensure that the student understands all words, syllables, and letters. Jacotot warns that there is no point in talking about overarching principles of language or proceeding from the "building blocks" of syllables—his idea, rather, is to force the student directly into reading and writing. The student, who is assumed to have no prior knowledge of reading and writing, thus simply jumps into the deep end and swims for all he's worth until he starts getting somewhere. The second and third lessons simply add extra lines of *Télémaque* to be repeated and studied, and the student is to keep this up, says Jacotot, until he is reading well. Once this is done, Jacotot maintains, the student is ready for

the fourth lesson, in which he can begin to analyze the letters and the syllables, coming to understand the underlying principles of grammar. Jacotot comments:

One must, insofar as it is possible, ask the student, who now knows the words, to pay attention to letters and syllables, as this will be useful for grammar. In “pouvait,” a, i indicates the imperfect, and t denotes the presence of the third person singular—the student will understand this, but he must perfectly understand the spelling of this word.⁵

In the fifth lesson, the student learns the spelling of all the words by heart, and starts reading and writing some phrases by himself. Then, in the sixth lesson, once he has gotten through the first couple of pages of *Télémaque*, the teacher is not supposed to worry about reading any more—the students learn the book by heart and practice writing from memory. There are further lessons, but Jacotot maintains that at this point, a critical threshold has been passed: “The student already can read well enough to decode and comprehend any book he likes, linking what he does not yet know to what he already knows.”⁶ He then offers us a concrete example of how the child might be encouraged to make precisely this kind of link on his own:

I imagine that a child would know the words *hiatus*, *noctescit*, *undarum aquis*, and let’s say that he asks you what *biscentibus undis* means. You’ll see right away that this is a vague and ill-formed question from a lazy person. Show him the syllables...and ask him which ones he doesn’t know? He’ll be really embarrassed by the question. Help him if you have to, but mock him a bit, and make sure to explain again so that he doesn’t forget it.⁷

Given the implausibility of this scenario, it is not surprising that a contemporary critic of Jacotot’s called this particular example “crazy.”⁸ At any rate, from this point on in Jacotot’s system, other lessons are offered which are, for the most part, variations on the theme of what has been outlined above. The students are supposed to repeat large sections of *Télémaque* over and over, such that they learn

much of the novel by heart. At one point, Jacotot notes that although one can't recite the first six chapters of the novel every single day in the school, one can ensure that these chapters are recited by all the students at least twice a week.⁹

Jacotot's system of universal teaching, at least as it is laid out here, does not encourage much optimism. In effect, it's a radical immersion scenario, in which the students are thrown into the task of reading and writing until they (one hopes) master the skill. It does have some notable virtues: its core principles are clear, it requires few resources (any book will do), and it asks little from the teacher beyond the ability to read and a faith in the capacity of the students. However, especially compared to other contemporaneous ideas (e.g., the Lancasterian monitorial system) that are better elaborated and much more plausible, universal teaching inspires skepticism. How is the student supposed to get from Lesson 1, in which he is illiterate, to Lesson 6, in which he is somehow able to export the lessons of a 19th century novel to other key texts? How can such a haphazard, faith-based educational effort possibly work?

It is hard for us to imagine that this system ever worked very well. Yet Jacotot clearly had great confidence in the results of his schools, and although he was frustrated by the skeptical reception that universal teaching received, he had faith that eventually, the world would see the light. In the forward to *Langue Maternelle*, he compares himself to Galileo: "Those who don't wish to see will never see. Galileo lent his telescope to everyone: some saw the satellites that the philosopher had discovered; others didn't see the satellites."¹⁰

For the moment, let us suppose that we are open to seeing the satellites. If so, we must put aside our skepticism and deal with a further question: why did Jacotot think that his system worked? To what did he attribute the apparently spectacular results that the rough and ready system of universal teaching was able to achieve? In the next section, we will see that the answer has to do both with both the equality of intelligence and in Jacotot's belief in the power of the will.

THE EQUALITY OF INTELLIGENCE AND THE POWER OF THE WILL

Jacotot's thesis about the equality of human intelligence is a particularly radical one, and as he points out repeatedly (and often gleefully), it has drawn a lot of critical scorn. This is at least in part due to Jacotot's tendency toward trolling his audience with outrageous statements, but also due to the particularly strong way in which Jacotot maintains this thesis. Not only does Jacotot maintain that intelligence starts out equal, but he also claims that it continues to remain so despite any actions that the person might take. Thus, on this theory, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Donald Trump are perhaps not equally learned, but they are equally intelligent, and if they apply all of their attention to a particular problem (let's say, "Race in America today"), they should be able to achieve the same results eventually.

Jacotot offers several arguments in favor of this radical thesis. He draws a contrast between animal/human and human/human intelligence differences, noting that while human superiority over animals is a natural one, the alleged differences in intelligence between humans are subject to dispute and various kinds of social negotiations.¹¹ In addition, Jacotot also suggests that the concept of intelligence commits the fallacy of defining an effect as its own cause. Just as "opium puts you to sleep because it has a dormative property," adds nothing to our knowledge, the same holds true for "Josh performs more effectively than Bill because he is more intelligent." "Intelligence," in Jacotot's view, is simply a fact (differences in performance) masquerading as an explanation.

A number of other objections to the equality of intelligence thesis are tackled in *Enseignement Universel: Langue Étrangère*. Jacotot notes that an opponent might point out that natural objects (plants, animals) show differences between them, so it might seem as though human intelligence should do so as well.¹² Furthermore, the opponent might also point out things in nature appear to grow and change over time, so why shouldn't intelligences also do this? Jacotot dismisses this reasoning on the basis that intelligence is not a natural, material thing, but rather an immaterial one, and one cannot apply the rules of the material realm to that of the immaterial. He mocks the opponent with an

appeal to the changelessness of the soul:

Everything is born, develops, grows and dies, and therefore the soul must be born, develop, grow, and die. The absurdity of this is too obvious ... But when we end up in these kinds of discussion, it's clear that we're getting into a thick fog. Let your adversary blunder about alone in the fog—let's come back to Universal Teaching, which is to say, looking at the facts.¹³

This brings us back to what we might call Jacotot's pragmatic argument for the equality of intelligence. Jacotot firmly believes that universal teaching can work for everyone, that it does in fact work for most people, and that the reason that it does so is because everyone has an equal intelligence. Thus, for Jacotot, the practical success of the system of universal teaching is a kind of ongoing vindication of his theory about the equality of intelligence.

The arguments that Jacotot presents for equality of intelligence are a mixed bag at best, but let us grant his point for the sake of argument. This does not solve all of Jacotot's difficulties, since even if we grant equality of intelligence, he still has to explain differences in performance somehow. How does one explain the differences between Donald Trump and Ta-Nehisi Coates? Or, to use Jacotot's own examples, why can't we all think like Descartes and write poetry like Racine?

Jacotot has a consistent answer to this: it is all about the will. In the case of people who are seen as geniuses, they are simply people who are more attentive and more persistent in their investigations. Jacotot argues that a discovery is simply a long process of trial and error, and the people who succeed in making difficult discoveries are the people who have patiently and valiantly persisted in this process longer.¹⁴ Jacotot comments:

[One says,] "Racine is a genius." For us, this means that Racine wrote excellent plays. What is the cause of his superiority over everyone else? We don't say it is his genius; this simply goes in a vicious circle. We don't know the cause of this fact; we simply believe (according to our own experience) that *one*

has to be attentive to learn, and that one must learn to know, and one must know in order to do . . . It's probable that for others, as for ourselves, the fact of attention is the first, foremost, and indispensable cause of the facts we call genius.¹⁵

Thus, the power to be a genius is within us all—we simply must use our attention and turn our will to the task at hand. We will be able to learn whatever we wish and create marvelous things.

Let us return to the question that ended the previous section: to what did Jacotot attribute the power of universal teaching? We now see: equality of intelligence is the gateway to knowledge, and the power of one's will is the key that opens the gate. Since we all have equal intelligence, mastering what has been mastered previously is simply a matter of determining that one will do it, and once one has done this, everything becomes possible, since *tout est dans tout*. Not surprisingly, this implies that it is important to have high expectations for all students, and Jacotot expounds on this point with great enthusiasm:

I have told you that I believe that all men have an equal intelligence; I'll tell you right now about the utility of this maxim and the danger of the opposite in education. For the sake of a few children for whom you flatter their pride, you sacrifice a thousand who are just as good. I've always seen that success is linked to attention in our schools. Never has an attentive young man been shown to be incapable. No experience has ever disproven this constant fact. Success is a fact always accompanied by the fact of attention. Check, and if your experience demonstrates the contrary, hold onto your experience, and I'll believe in my own. It's on this fact that the method and all of its exercises are founded—I demand everything and everything is possible as long as attention isn't lacking.¹⁶

This was a revolutionary view. The old order had been overthrown, and people like Jacotot believed that the oppression and waste of human potential associated

with that order could finally be ended. And universal teaching, by throwing out the stultifying educational schemes that had propped up the old regime, could unlock a vast reserve of power that had lain dormant until now by having faith in the untapped will and intelligence of all human beings.

A FAILURE OF WILL

We have seen that a belief in the equality of intelligence and the power of the will are cornerstones of Jacotot's educational thinking. So what is the task of the teacher under universal teaching? Since intelligence is a constant, the only variable available is the student's will. If the student fails at a particular task, there is no explanation other than his pathetic lack of effort. Conversely, success is simply a matter of the student rallying their will to the task, whatever the task may be. The teacher's job is to inspire the student to greater effort and gently shame him for his failures—the students need to know that it's a “*Qui veut, peut*” [Whoever wants to, can] world out there where they have to fight for what they want to learn.

There is something very American about this point of view. As Barbara Ehrenreich has documented in *Bright-sided*, America has had a long love affair with the power of hard work and a positive attitude to overcome obstacles.¹⁷ In the crudest version of the American dream, success is simply a matter of working hard, wanting it enough, and having a world-beating attitude. When one combines this with America's pervasive anti-intellectualism, one can see that a view with some similarities to Jacotot's would find fertile ground amongst the American right. If one softens the belief in the equality of intelligence and substitutes a belief that intelligence is secondary to the power of the will, we have a view that would be right at home in the Bush White House, which, after all, coined the phrase, “the soft bigotry of low expectations.”¹⁸

A will-centric view is also popular amongst a certain group of American psychologists and charter school enthusiasts who emphasize the value of grit in education. What separates the sheep from the goats, they claim, is how “gritty” you are—how resilient you are in the face of adversity and how passionate you

are in your interests. The gritty, willful ones tend to succeed, while the weak of will fall short. From an educational standpoint, then, the key is to develop the non-cognitive skill set involved in being gritty. On this point, Farrington et al. note that there are several key ingredients in academic performance:

1. Academic mindsets—“I belong in this academic community,” “My ability and competence grow with my effort,” “I can succeed at this,” “This work has value for me.”

Which leads to ...

2. Academic perseverance—grit, delayed gratification, self-discipline, self-control.

Which leads to ...

3. Academic behaviors—going to class, doing homework, studying.¹⁹

According to this school of thought, academic behaviors are the critical predictors of success, and academic perseverance and academic mindsets are the critical determinants of academic behaviors. Jacotot would have agreed entirely, although he would have added the radical addition that intelligence made no difference at all to the success equation.

Now, this entire line of argument, which compares Jacotot to a line of contemporary American educational thinking, may strike some readers as strange. This is not, after all the version of Jacotot that one gets from Rancière—there is considerable ideological distance between, say, Rancière in *Hatred of Democracy* and Angela Duckworth’s TED talk about grit. Clearly, Rancière does not exactly embrace what we might call the “Qui veut, peut” [“Whoever wants to, can”] interpretation that some might place on Jacotot’s ideas, and he is careful to emphasize this in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, where he writes:

Universal teaching is not the key to success granted to the enterprising who explore the prodigious powers of the will. Nothing could be more opposed to the thought of emanci-

pation than that advertising slogan. And the Founder became irritated when disciplines opened their school under the slogan, “Whoever wanted is able to.” [Qui veut, peut] The only slogan that had value was “The equality of intelligence.”²⁰

The problem with Rancière’s gloss here, however, is that it does not seem to be true. Consider Jacotot’s remarks in *Mélanges Posthumes*: “We say in universal teaching: ‘Qui veut, peut.’ [‘Whoever wants to, can.’]”²¹ This remark is followed up with a defence of “qui veut, peut,” (“Some say it is a criminal’s motto, but we say ...”), so Jacotot clearly means it seriously.²² Furthermore, this fits with what Jacotot says elsewhere; in *Langue Maternelle*, which is the ur-text of the universal teaching movement, he quotes with approval the maxim “Labor improbus omnia vincit,” [Labor conquers all] and at countless other junctures, he vaunts the amazing possibilities that are unleashed if only students can conquer their laziness and exert their will and attention more fully.²³

Despite this emphasis on the power of the will, one cannot deny that Jacotot’s philosophy is strongly egalitarian, and once in the hands of Rancière, it becomes even more so, and it is to some degree scrubbed of the elements (the emphasis on the will, weak arguments for the equality of intelligence, an obscure method of teaching) that don’t fit Rancière’s narrative especially well. But while Jacotot’s philosophy may be egalitarian, it also has a streak of hucksterism about it. His grandiose and largely unverified claims of success, his ranting against the establishment, his comparisons of his own ideas to Galileo’s, and, above all, his claim that if you just try hard enough and believe hard enough, you will achieve success—these are all of the hallmarks of the huckster. And as we have seen from recent events, in which a seller of iffy mail-order steaks was elected President, there’s no place that loves hucksters like America.

LETHAL MUTATIONS?

Jacotot’s works, and Rancière’s *Ignorant Schoolmaster*, were written at least partly to address a particular problem: the stultifying and oppressive effects of the French educational system. Even today, France is a fairly stultified

place, at least educationally speaking. French K-12 schools are traditional in their orientation, the higher education system is stratified, and intellectuals are sought after on television to hand down their opinions from on high. Rancière wrote *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* in a context in which certain actors were trying to preserve the stultifying characteristics of schools,²⁴ and one has considerable sympathy for Rancière's efforts in this regard as well as for Jacotot's efforts to give people the power and the confidence to teach themselves. Proceeding on the assumption of equality of intelligence, as both Jacotot and Rancière want us to do, might well have had salutary effects in their respective contexts.

But what happens when we try to export these ideas? In the United States in particular, Jacotot's core principles intersect with a society that, unlike contemporary France, (a) has made anti-intellectualism a key component of a widely held political position (i.e., Trumpism), (b) treats teachers with contempt and pays and educates them relatively poorly, (c) has a widespread folk belief that a strong and energetic will counts for far more than intelligence, and (d) is currently developing a strand of educational theory (grit, academic mindsets) that intersects worrisomely with (a), (b), and (c).

Edward Haertel uses the term "lethal mutation" to describe the phenomenon in which a beneficial classroom practice becomes harmful through a small change in how it is practiced.²⁵ Were a Rancièreian/Jacototian approach to become more popular in North America, the context is, in my view, highly favorable for numerous lethal mutations. The pervasive anti-intellectualism of North America, its recent interest in what one might call a "will-based" educational theory, and its already poor opinion of teachers, all make the North American classroom a poor test bed for Jacotot's revolutionary thinking. Living in the shadow cast by the ascendant grit paradigm of educational success, one does not have to work too hard to envision what some of the most worrisome mutations would look like.

Of course, perhaps this is just more low-energy negative thinking from a card-carrying stultifier. Rejoinders spring up easily: one could point out that North America is a long way from implementing any Jacototian educational principles and that this "lethal mutation" suggestion is entirely speculative. One

could suggest that I pay too much attention to the letter of Jacotot's ideas and not the spirit of them. One could say that rather than tackling Rancière directly, I am trying to undermine him indirectly through Jacotot's weakest arguments. But perhaps I will leave the final rejoinder to Jacotot himself:

And so, my dear students, that's what I've got to say on this subject. Don't waste your time with these useless discussions. If someone asks you mockingly, "Do you believe in the equality of intelligence?" you can respond (without laughing, if possible); "Well, sir, I believed it until now, but that was before I met *you*."²⁶

1 Cf. Gert Biesta, "Learner, Student, Speaker: Why it matters how we call those we teach," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 42, nos. 5-6 (2010): 540-552; Claudia Ruitenberg, "What if Democracy Really Matters," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 3, no. 1, Article 11 (2008); Lorraine Otoide & Steve Alsop, "Moments with Jacques Rancière: Sketches from a Lived Pedagogical Experiment in an Elementary Science Classroom," *Canadian Journal of Science, Mathematics, and Technology Education* 15, no. 3 (2015): 234-247.

2 Joseph Jacotot, *Droit et Philosophie Panécastique* (Paris: H.V. Jacotot, 1852), 4. All direct quotes from Jacotot are translated by the author.

3 Joseph Jacotot, *Enseignement Universel: Langue Étrangère* (Paris: H.V. Jacotot, 1852), 197-198.

4 Joseph Jacotot, *Enseignement Universel: Langue Maternelle* (Louvain: H. Depauw, 1827), 1.

5 *Ibid.*, 4.

6 *Ibid.*, 10.

7 *Ibid.*, 10.

8 "Enseignement Universel: Langue Maternelle," *Courrier de la Meuse*, August 9, 1823.

9 Jacotot, *Langue Maternelle*, 11.

10 *Ibid.*, xii.

11 Jacotot, *Langue Étrangère*, 83.

12 *Ibid.*, 170.

13 *Ibid.*, 170-171.

14 *Ibid.*, 232-233.

15 *Ibid.*, 233-234.

16 *Ibid.*, 240.

17 Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-sided* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009), 8.

18 George W. Bush, "Speech at the NAACP's 91st Annual Convention" (2000),

Washington Post, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/elections/bushtext071000.htm>

19 Camille A. Farrington et al., *Teaching Adolescents to become Learners: The Role of Non-cognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2012), 8-10.

20 Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 56.

21 Jacotot, *Mélanges Posthumes* (Paris: H.V. Jacotot, 1852), 254.

22 *Ibid.*, 254.

23 Jacotot, *Langue Maternelle*, 3.

24 Cf. Kristin Ross, "Translators Introduction," in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), xii-xv.

25 Edward Haertel, cited in Ann L. Brown and Joseph C. Campione, "Psychological Theory and the Design of Innovative Learning Environments: On Procedures, Principles, and Systems," in *Innovations in Learning: New Environments for Education*, ed. Leona Schauble and Robert Glaser (New York: Routledge, 1996), 259.

26 Jacotot, *Langue Étrangère*, 241.