

Oppositional Collaboration

A Response to Backer

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In his “The Educational History of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses: Ranciere’s Frustration,” David Backer offers an important contribution to Althusserian studies, bringing to light Ranciere’s impact on Althusserian theory. Backer works to enrich our understanding of Althusserian philosophy of education by suggesting that the teacher-student dynamic between Althusser and Ranciere was crucial to the articulation of specific Althusserian ideas and that this dynamic is therefore representative of a specific pedagogical phenomenon. Backer suggests that this particular teacher-student dynamic was centered on pedagogy, or “a disagreement over the politics of teaching and learning,” and is an example of what can be positively referred to as “oppositional collaboration.”¹ I draw from Ranciere’s critique of Althusser to reflect on Backer’s distinction between words and concepts and connect this distinction to the teacher-student dynamic, showing the apparent necessity of these dichotomies within Althusserian theory. Subsequently, I inquire into the notion of oppositional collaboration and its potential implications for philosophers of education.

WORDS AND CONCEPTS, TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Tracing the history of Althusserian theory using methodology consistent with the theory itself, Backer distinguishes between words and concepts: Ranciere may have provided the concepts, but Althusser articulated them into words.² Ranciere would have foreseen this response given that he describes Althusser’s theorization as an attempt to preserve philosophy as a kind of protector against the vulnerable sciences and producers – a protection which incidentally occurs through the policing of words.³ Ranciere describes this move in Althusser as an insistence that “it is up to philosophy ‘to draw a dividing line’ between good and bad words, between those that convey a proletarian world view and those that convey a bourgeois one.”⁴

As Ranciere writes, “Althusserian theory ... replaces a real discursive division [producers and capitalists] with a double, speculative division between science and ideology, between concepts and words.”⁵ As a consequence of this, words “are not the elements of discursive practices that are, in turn, articulated in different social practices ... they only allow the following division: on the one side are the words that represent bourgeois domination (man, rights, freedom), and on the other are the words forged elsewhere, that is, in scientific knowledge (masses, classes, process, and so on). This division gives to philosophers the power to be the word-keepers.”⁶ Proper use of words, and the need for philosophers to dictate this usage, is the only way for philosophy to establish its political necessity.⁷ Philosophy serves as an “instance of control” meant to “bring science under its protective wing and lead the class struggle without ever stepping out of the lecture hall.”⁸ This safeguarding of words is found in philosophers’ access to ‘true knowledge’ as well, ever securing the status of philosophers as a dominant class.⁹

On a similar note, the pedagogic structure of the teacher-student dynamic is shown to be necessary for Althusser because of the content that educators alone can deliver. Philosophers know words, educators know (the proper) science or content. Philosophers serve the role of disassociating rational politics (the politics which knows correct use of words) with empirical politics (the ignorant workers). Ranciere’s critique of this is that the teacher-student dynamic is shown to be necessary by assuming a metaphysical distinction between true and false knowledge.¹⁰ The logic of Althusserian discourse is such that “the antagonisms of empirical politics never give philosophy the moment to conclude ... for this to happen, the position of the educator, which sustains this disassociation, would have to be destroyed.”¹¹ Educators and philosophers must remain so that they may lift the ideological veils of the ignorant, parsing concepts from words, introducing new words as needed.

OPPOSITIONAL COLLABORATION

Backer concludes that “ISAs themselves have a thoroughly educational history,” insofar as they emerged from this historical, oppositional

collaboration between Althusser and Ranciere, yet Backer leaves this term undefined.¹² One place that the term oppositional collaboration comes up is in business studies. As Robert J. Thomas asserts in “The Three Essential Ingredients of Great Collaborations,” oppositional collaboration is a response to shortcomings, perceived injustices, and/or failings of an organization, but it “does not seek to ameliorate or compensate for those shortcomings; it seeks instead to leverage them in order to strike a more attractive effort bargain, and/or to grow a counterculture and a distinctive identity based in opposition.”¹³ Using this definition, perhaps Backer would concede that indeed Althusser intended to maintain an identity in opposition to Ranciere’s. A second place in which this term is invoked is bioethics. Margaret Pabst Battin writes that “oppositional collaboration involves pairing investigators on opposite sides of an issue” and having them assemble data together, compiling shared reading lists if needed and working together “like a pair of Siamese twins, joined at the eyes and ears, so that they see and hear the same things wherever they go.”¹⁴ Importantly, Battin goes on, “these oppositional collaborators are not joined at the brain ... they make ideal partners *because* they disagree ... nevertheless, if they enter the collaboration in good faith – that is, with a sincere interest in finding out what is actually the case in the matter they are exploring ... they will seek agreement between themselves as providing the most nearly true account.”¹⁵ Even if Althusser cited Ranciere, would we say they were working to provide a nearly true account of the same thing? Might we consider Backer’s use of the term as distinct from its use in both business and bioethics? The term may evolve in its definition, but it is clear so far that it plays an educative role.

Backer grants that it was a philosophical point for Althusser that what is important in education is the content rather than the form.¹⁶ Yet it is still this form of the teacher-student dynamic that seems to be presented as a given. Per Althusser, students or the proletarians should not worry about the power their teachers have over knowledge, over theory, over them, because as Ranciere puts it, “there are no effects of power, only the effects of the education of the powerful.”¹⁷ The teacher-student relation can be analyzed thus

not as a power relation but merely as our only hope of escaping ideology and discovering truth; we must be educated. As Ranciere puts it, “Althusserianism is a theory of education, and every theory of education is committed to preserving the power it seeks to bring to light.”¹⁸ As such, the teacher-student dynamic must be preserved, and we must make sense of Althusser’s use of Ranciere’s concepts in light of this dynamic. Oppositional collaboration this way may be seen as an Althusserian word to explain the necessary and productive teacher-student dynamic – one in which the importance of content necessitates that teachers teach, yet where the form, despite its appearance as power imbalance, is actually one of collaboration.

CONCLUSION

Backer acknowledges that Ranciere has reason to feel snubbed by his teacher’s failure to cite his conceptual contribution to the ISA essay and its subsequent theorization and insists that we should rectify this by recognizing the Rancierian thread within Althusser’s work – so long as we distinguish between Ranciere’s concepts and Althusser’s words.¹⁹ But to summarize *Althusser’s Lesson* as Ranciere’s attempt to receive acknowledgement and to suggest that abrogation of student activism is a “sticking point” for Ranciere seems to overlook the critique of the science/ideology split and its resulting preservation of the role of the teacher. Putting Ranciere’s frustration with his teacher at the heart of a reading of *Althusser’s Lesson* is thus a fitting Althusserian response, for the teacher-student relation is (apparently) a determinant dichotomy, and student frustration is inevitable. Offering a new word as a solution serves only to further demonstrate Ranciere’s concerns.

Backer expresses his appreciation of Ranciere’s contribution to the notion of ISA’s and affirms the value this notion has for philosophers of education today. However, if Ranciere’s critiques of Althusserian theory are seen mainly as the complaints of a student rectified by remembering that words and concepts are distinct (distinguished by intellectuals), and if this discourse between Ranciere and Althusser should be viewed as one of oppositional collaboration, what have we taken in from Ranciere’s critique? What have we learned about actual students, actual teachers? Is the teacher-student

dynamic necessary? Are teacher-student relationships inevitably oppositional? Can these relationships truly be seen as collaborative? Can the dynamic be critiqued?

1 David I. Backer, “The Educational Theory of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses: Ranciere’s Frustration,” *Philosophy of Education* (2020).

2 Backer, “The Educational Theory of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses,” 12.

3 Jacques Ranciere, *Althusser’s Lesson*, trans. Emiliano Battista (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 58; 66-67.

4 Ranciere, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 68.

5 Ranciere, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 94.

6 Ranciere, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 95-96.

7 Ranciere, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 65.

8 Ranciere, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 67.

9 Ranciere, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 146-147.

10 One of the passages from Ranciere that Backer cites includes the suggestion that Althusser is guilty of “a lonely repetition of metaphysics.” Backer, “The Educational Theory of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses,” 11. Backer notes that he will return to this topic yet does not appear to. I hope that my use of ‘metaphysics’ here will prompt this return.

11 Ranciere, *Althusser’s Lesson*, 55.

12 Backer, “The Educational Theory of Althusser’s Ideological State Apparatuses,” 13;3.

13 Robert J. Thomas, Harvard Business Review, June 11, 2001, <https://hbr.org/2011/06/the-three-essential-ingredient>.

14 Margaret Pabst Battin, *Ending Life: Ethics and the Way We Die* (New York: Oxford

University Press, 2005), 317-318.

15 Battin, *Ending Life*, 318.

16 Backer, "The Educational Theory of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses," 7-8.

17 Ranciere, *Althusser's Lesson*, 53.

18 Ranciere, *Althusser's Lesson*, 52.

19 Backer, "The Educational Theory of Althusser's Ideological State Apparatuses," 12-13.