

**“The Possibility of Living Another Life”: Reimagining Possibility in
Radical Pedagogy Through Rancière**

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Introduction

“Successful as a tromp-l’oeil for the great social equalizer, schools still serve as vigorous mechanisms for the reproduction of dominant race, class, and gender relations and the imperial values of the dominant sociopolitical order” (McLaren 1995, p.229).

The traditional approach within radical pedagogy has been to pursue liberatory social justice agendas in order to promote political transformation for the achievement of an egalitarian society (Biesta 1998). Yet inequality endures. Might radical pedagogy need to reconceptualize the link between liberation and transformation? Perhaps, I argue here, it is time to think differently about the relationship between social justice, equality and the possibility of political transformation. Turning to Jacques Rancière’s theory of the political, I first problematize the relationship between social justice and equality, arguing that this relationship at best distorts and at worst sacrifices transformative possibilities. I extend this argument to education as a social institution and explore the ways in which institutionalizing emancipatory goals in education, even radical education, inhibits political transformation itself. Instead of seeing this as a doomsday message for radical pedagogy, I seek to re-open a discussion of *what is possible* via education by identifying four philosophical shifts that enable a reimagining of the radical pedagogical agenda. Employing these shifts, I argue that locating and imagining possibility, which I call iteration, may be a more fruitful path for radical pedagogy than adhering to traditional conceptions of social justice or liberatory goals. Following what I take to be part of Rancière’s own philosophical practice, I offer one example of this iterative process as the search for and study of what I refer to as “anachronistic possibility”—that is, the exploration of transformative events in the past which our present leads us to believe are no longer possible.

Critiquing Ideology Critique: Beginning in equality

“Schools as centers of possibility means to understand them as spaces of transmission and creation of meaningful knowledge and as political laboratories that can deepen participation and dialogue about the larger social, political, and economic relations and practices that are transforming this planet into a toxic sewage dump and mass graveyard for the victims of Fascism, terrorism, and imperialism.” (Fischman and McLaren 2005, p. 355)

bell hooks (1994) describes radical pedagogy as an umbrella term for a range of feminist and critical pedagogies committed to social justice, social transformation and democracy. These pedagogies are certainly not the only perspectives to embrace goals of justice and social transformation for education, but what unifies the range of radical pedagogies is the priority they give to, and their self-identification with, the struggle for social justice as the means for achieving social transformation. Because of the priority radical pedagogies give to the promotion of various forms of egalitarian social transformation through education, and because as an educator I find radical pedagogy to offer some of the most compelling arguments for pursuing those ends (see, for example, Apple 2004, Freire 2000, Giroux 1983, hooks 1994), this essay focuses on radical pedagogy as a challenging case for why education should be wary of institutionalizing the goals of social transformation, and what it is possible to do instead.

The efforts of radical pedagogy to promote social justice, as the quotation at the beginning of this section suggests (see also Apple 2004, Aronowitz 1998, Giroux 1983), begin with the exposure of the dominant ideological and cultural relationships in society and the ways in which they mediate inequality. This is actually no start at all for possibility, according to Jacques Rancière (1991). Ideology critique is no place to start because it requires the setting up of a hierarchy between those who “see” the world as it really is, and those who must be made to see. Those who see the hidden curriculum, who charge themselves with giving that sight to others, are placed in a position of expertise that the

“others” never can reach, because in the process of explaining the way things really are what the teacher succeeds in explaining is that the others will not understand unless they are explained to. Instead of enabling equal agency, the act of “giving” sight to others teaches those others their place in, and thus reinforces, the social hierarchy.¹

Elsewhere, Rancière writes,

anyone who starts out from distrust, who assumes inequality and proposes to reduce it, can only succeed in setting up a hierarchy of inequalities, a hierarchy of priorities, a hierarchy of intelligences—and will reproduce inequality ad infinitum (1995, p. 52).

His point is simple but profound: if we start with inequality, we will end up with inequality. Extending that point, if we set out on our educational struggle against inequality by exposing its mediation in society, we will end up with inequality. Thus, inequality is no place to start, it is a false start the only possible ending for which is the inequality it begins with. In re-opening the discussion of *what is possible* via education, the first philosophical shift Rancière would have us make is to begin our radical pedagogical project somewhere other than in inequality.

Rejecting the false start of inequality, Rancière (1991, 1995, 1999, 2006) founds his philosophy in equality—in the assumption that equality of intelligence is the “common bond of humankind” (1991, p. 73). At first glance Rancière’s assumption of the equality of intelligence may seem intentionally provocative, but his point is altogether more subtle. He writes,

intelligence is not a power of understanding based on comparing knowledge with its object. It is the power to make oneself understood through another’s verification.

And only an equal understands an equal (ibid, pp. 72-3).

It is the equality of intelligence among speaking beings that enables us to understand the hierarchical messages of society: it is only because we share the performance of language

that we understand when we are told where we do and do not belong (Rancière 1999). In his philosophy, equality is the fundamental assumption upon which society functions, rather than a given feature or goal of politics. This distinction highlights the conflict between the fundamental equality of speaking beings, and the societal inequality it makes possible (Rancière 1995). That conflict is central to Rancière's understanding of political possibility and, if we take the implications of this conflict seriously, it also reveals the incompatibility between justice and human equality.

Complicating Social Justice: The conflict between justice and equality

“For a society to be just it must, as a matter of both principle and action, contribute most to the advantage of the least advantaged. That is, its structural relations must be such as to equalize not merely access to but actual control of cultural, social, and especially economic institutions” (Apple 2004, p. 10).

By distinguishing between the equality of speaking beings and social inequality, Rancière complicates justice as a foundation for social transformation. The social justice agenda of radical pedagogy, as indicated by the above quotation, is built upon the goal of transforming the proper distribution of societal resources and rights into an egalitarian distribution. But, Rancière asks us, what happens to equality when equals are ruled over by their equals? He writes,

Once equality exists . . . what is *just* can never be synonymous with what is *good* and deployment of the goodness tautology. The virtue of the good man, which is to rule, is not the virtue proper to politics. Politics exists only because there are equals and it is over them that rule is exercised (Rancière 1999, p. 71, emphasis in original).

The argument against justice, then, is that it can never actually be egalitarian. Justice may be benevolent, it may have all the right intentions, but because there are equals and it is over them that justice exercises its rule, justice constitutes inequality. Thus justice is another false

start for the radical pedagogical project because such an agenda cannot possibly succeed in securing equality. Rather, we must choose between justice and equality at a fundamental level. In re-opening the discussion of *what is possible* via education, the second philosophical shift Rancière would have us make is to problematize social justice and come to terms with its conflict with equality.

A tempting path to take in coming to terms with this conflict might be to reformulate the notion of justice in an attempt to reconcile its inherent inequality with the equality of speaking beings. For Rancière (1999), however, reconciling this conflict represents a philosophical mistake that destroys the possibility of political transformation. The conflict between the fundamental equality of speaking beings and societal inequality is not a problem requiring a political solution, but precisely that which makes the political possible. Put another way, this conflict is necessary for political transformation to take place.

Redefining the Political: Focusing on social transformation

For Rancière (1995), the political arises from the conflict between our equality as speaking beings and societal inequality. This conflict “becomes a sort of testing of equality,” an opportunity to prove the equality of speaking beings (p. 45). The conflict between our equality as speaking beings and societal inequality opens a momentary space for a “logical confrontation” (p. 47) in which it is precisely equality that must be demonstrated. The successful demonstration of equality, the affirmation of the common bond of humankind, is the political. Let us consider the political carefully in order to gain a better understanding of the components of a successful demonstration of equality and why an attempt to redefine justice in order to reconcile its inherent inequality with our equality as speaking beings would be misguided.

The political involves three moves, temporally defined as an event. These moves are

denial, identification and opening (Rancière 1994). The political begins when denial sets up a dispute. Someone or some group steps out of anonymity to articulate the message that, “I understand I am being told I do not belong here, and I deny the claim to exclude me.” This is the articulation of the conflict between our equality of speaking beings and societal inequality. The successful articulation of denial interrupts an exclusionary border and becomes discursively tangible: the public can respond through identification.

Identification is the movement in which the public hears the echoes of the articulated exclusionary gap and its wrongfulness. Rancière refers to this as mobilizing “an *obligation to hear*” (1995, p. 86, emphasis in original) or as a “contingent forced entry” of “reasonable arguments” (ibid, p. 49). Identification involves a linkage between the contemporary denial and the public recollection of past signifiers of equality. To quote an example given by Rancière at length,

in the autumn of 1986, for instance, we saw how the single word ‘selection’ had the power to establish a new communication between the egalitarian signifier and the factual situation, existing in France, of a university open to all regardless of economic considerations. Those who at the time contrasted the success of this movement . . . with the vain revolutionary dream of 1968, evidently forgot that the victorious calm of the moment was only possible thanks to the violence of those earlier events which had put the university in question and used the streets to effect communication between the university as a place and society as a whole (ibid, p. 91).

It is important to note that there is a component of force or violence, at least on a symbolic level, to the identification of the echo of the wrongfulness of the exclusionary gap. At the same time, the linkage of identification is what allows for the discovery of community or the common bond of humankind in the articulation of denial. Rancière writes, “the *there is* of the event brings out the facticity of *being-there-together*” (ibid, p. 87). The public hears the

message of denial and responds, “We also refuse to accept that definition of who belongs.” The assertion “we are all German Jews,” (Rancière 1994, p. 97)—which was of course freshly reinscribed by the *Le Monde* editorial headline on September 12, 2001—embodies both the identification of the echo and the identification by the public of the wrongfulness of the exclusionary gap. Through its successful identification, articulated exclusion serves an important purpose. Rather than merely representing an inside-outside relationship, exclusion represents “the mode of division according to which an inside and an outside can be joined,” thus opening space for social transformation (Rancière 1999, p. 116).

The space that opens is not a space of consensus, but a dialogic moment in which the irreconcilable grievance between the equality of speaking beings and social inequality can be addressed (Rancière 1995). Opening allows for the renegotiation of space and time to enable the inclusion of the excluded and the placement of those who have no place. It is a movement that redefines not simply who belongs, but belonging itself. Belonging thus engages in an irrevocable conflict with its borders. Opening is thus the movement in which, to paraphrase Rancière, the call for equality which has made itself heard defines its own space; it is the movement in which equality actualizes itself and verifies that it has an effect (1995, p. 50). Rancière describes opening as a rare moment in which equals “experience the *artificial* aspect of their power—in the sense that ‘artifice’ may mean both something that is not necessary and something that is to be created” (ibid, p. 91, emphasis in the original).

In linking the political to a public conflict, Rancière makes the term political transformation redundant—the “political” by definition involves social transformation. Nothing counts as political except that which both enacts social change and transforms the relational fabric of society (Rancière 1999). This renegotiation is neither grand nor once-and-for-all, but it does represent an irrevocable, unplanned and new possibility for the experience of human equality in society. The potential new possibility of the political *only* can be

experienced if there is a conflict between the fundamental equality of speaking beings and societal inequality. Where this conflict can be publicly disputed the possibility of the political, of change, experienced on the individual level as “the possibility of living another life,” emerges (Reid 1989, p. xxxv). Attempting to permanently reconcile this conflict through justice would destroy the possibility of the political. Therefore, in re-opening the discussion of *what is possible* via education, the third philosophical shift Rancière would have us make is to redefine our sense of the political to reject attempts to reconcile justice and equality, and instead focus on cultivating the possibility of the political. An agenda of social justice can neither help in the redefinition of the political nor enable political possibility, and as such becomes a counterproductive goal for a radical pedagogy committed to equality and emancipation.

Realizing the Rarity of Transformation: Motivating the cultivation of political possibility

If this counterproductive social justice agenda is shed, how might we reimagine a radical pedagogy committed to cultivating the possibility of the political?

A reimagined radical pedagogy must not seek to reconcile the conflict between the fundamental equality of speaking beings and societal inequality. By this I am not suggesting that radical pedagogy remain passive in the face of societal inequality. Rather, radical pedagogy must recognize the limits of what can be accomplished through the social institution of education. Without recognizing the consequences of these limits, radical pedagogy risks eliminating, rather than cultivating, the possibility of the political. Rancière’s theory of the political implies that the consequence of institutionalizing a defined vision of transformative goals in education is to inhibit political possibility.

This argument begins by locating education in the social sphere, which Rancière (1999) terms the police. The customs and mechanisms of the police serve to implicitly shape

collective ideas of community, education, and collective morality based on a particular distribution of the sensible, or that which is apprehensible to the senses (Rancière 2004). In shaping these collective ideas the police functions in a legitimizing, consensus-oriented role which conceals or is unaware of the conflict between the fundamental equality of speaking beings and societal inequality. One effect of this role is that the police treats individuals as interchangeable, which contributes to the rarity of political possibility in at least three ways.

First, consensus conceals the politically necessary conflict between equality and inequality. Second, in addition to covering over the fundamental conflict upon which social organization may be disputed, consensus prioritizes dialogue over dispute and calls into question the procedural legitimacy of the dispute itself. Thus the consensus role of the police creates a stumbling block for denial, the necessary initial movement of the political discussed in the previous section; the police interferes with the setting up of the dispute. Third, by treating individuals as interchangeable, the police also interferes with the second movement of the political, the necessary public identification of the dispute. The public has difficulty identifying and participating in the dispute over the exclusionary gap in society because, for example, to the extent that I identify individuals as interchangeable, I equate my experience to the experience of others and become deaf to the ways in which others experience social exclusion that I do not myself experience. The cumulative (and unavoidable) effect of the police, through these three stumbling blocks for the political, is to rarefy the political. Reimagining radical pedagogy with sensitivity to the *rarity* of the political becomes especially important in light of these stumbling blocks. Basing a reimagined pedagogical project on the cultivation and imagination of political possibility is not without its own obstacles, however. These challenges must be considered if the already rare prospect of the political is not to be completely eliminated. The most significant challenge to imagining political possibility is posed by the modern state.

Locating Space for Possibility: Highlighting the problem of consensus

Like the police, the modern state seeks to legitimize itself through consensus. Specifically, the consensus the state employs is a consensus regarding possibility. The state suppresses political initiative by asserting that the present order “is only doing the only thing possible to do” (Rancière 1999, p. 132). Through this assertion possible alternatives to the present order achieve the status of realistic impossibility. Possibility can be only that which already is—and thus is no alternative at all. The lack of alternatives extends to historical memory through the constitution of that memory as a discourse of truth, making the contemporary impossibility of the apparently impossible a part of historical fact. Possibility becomes a “never was” (Rancière 1994, p. 63). The effect of this form of state legitimization is clear: possibility can be neither imagined in the present nor remembered in the past. It is important to remember here that while consensus has similar consequences in both its use by the state—to eliminate possibility—and in its use by the police—to rarefy the political—the state and the police are not identical. While the modern state may have eliminated possibility, the police only has made it *rare*. There is still an opportunity to cultivate possibility and to find tentative spaces within the institutions of the police where possibility might be remembered and imagined.

Reformulating the Educational Agenda: Possibility not politics

Before discussing the role radical pedagogy might play in cultivating this rare possibility, one more consequence of education’s institutionalization within the police must be drawn out. The consequence of education’s location within the police—a consequence radical pedagogy would be foolhardy to overlook—is the consequence that arises when education adopts a political agenda. Paradoxically speaking, when radical pedagogy ascribes

a political goal to education the effect is to eliminate the political.

The paradox functions as follows. Radical pedagogy, as an educational project, is located in the police. The goal of social transformation, the political, must begin in the equality of speaking beings. It is in the juxtaposition of these two conditions that the political is eliminated. Rancière (1999) writes, “equality cannot consist in any form of social bond whatsoever. Equality turns into the opposite the moment it aspires to a place in a social or state organization” (p. 34). In other words, because the political is founded in equality, because the police is blind to this fundamental equality of speaking beings, and because radical pedagogy is a part of the police, a political agenda for radical pedagogy cannot be successful; its effects will become the opposite of its intentions. Radical pedagogy, for all its commitment to equality and emancipation, cannot hope to succeed in transforming society for the better if it charges itself with these political goals. If radical pedagogy is truly committed to social transformation, it must avoid trying to achieve that social transformation through itself. In re-opening a discussion of *what is possible* via education, the fourth philosophical shift Rancière would have us make within radical pedagogy is to resist institutionalizing a political agenda. To do otherwise has the consequence of eliminating political possibility. In re-opening a discussion of *what is possible* via education, I will now argue that cultivating and imagining possibility is precisely that which it is possible for radical pedagogy to do.

Reimagining Radical Pedagogy: Iteration

What radical pedagogy cannot do is create political change *for* anyone; it cannot lead the charge. What it might do is cultivate possibility, imagine it, remember it, and seek it out. This is by no means a hopeless or frustrated goal for radical pedagogy. It is a reimagining of *what is possible* via education, both for and through radical pedagogy. To distinguish the

cultivation of possibility from a goal of social transformation, I refer to this project as an iteration of the political. In the rest of this section I will develop the concept of iteration and outline one potential path iteration might pursue in cultivating the imagination of possibility, the path of anachronistic possibility.

Through this paper I have identified four philosophical shifts for radical pedagogy that provide a framework for discussing what iteration can and cannot hope to be. First, in order to avoid rigidifying the current features of societal inequality, a radical pedagogical project of iteration needs to find a starting point other than a critique of societal inequality. Second, to avoid exacerbating societal inequality, iteration needs to come to terms with the contradiction between social justice and equality, and reject attempts to achieve equality through justice. Third, recognizing the rarity of the political, iteration has an important responsibility to cultivate the possibility of social transformation. Fourth, to avoid eliminating the political, a radical pedagogical project of iteration must recognize that it cannot pursue a political agenda for itself. Instead of a direct emancipatory project, iteration might become the name for a repeated process of studying the meeting points, interruption, reimagination and reordering of the possible distribution of places and roles. Iteration engages in this process not *because* the current distribution is unequal, but to explore possibility itself. A radical pedagogical project of iteration might engage in the active imagination of the denial, identification and opening of unplanned–unexpected–alternative possibilities for the embodied experience of human equality in society. The unexpectedness of possibility is a crucial feature of iteration. In order to avoid accidentally eliminating the political, a radical pedagogical project of iteration needs to allow for the unexpected and resist adopting end goals for what the imagination of possibility might achieve. In other words, educators engaged in radical pedagogy must actively abrogate responsibility for defining the purposes and results of iteration (Rancière 1991). What participants learn from

the project of iteration is not the concern of the educator, instead the responsibility of radical pedagogy lies solely in cultivating the active imagining of possibility within the iterative process itself. This is a project without an end (Rancière 1994). Thus what I am proposing is that radical pedagogy, through iteration, reimagine itself as oriented toward a never-ending cultivation of possibility in the present rather than as oriented toward creating social change for the future. Indeed, in order to truly imagine alternative possibilities, we must give up a normative, future-oriented ideal and actively engage with the idea that there is *presently* more possibility than we generally lead ourselves to imagine. This active engagement with possibility is the project of iteration. Iteration can follow many paths. I will only outline one path here, iteration as anachronistic possibility.

Imagining Anachronistic Possibility: Finding possibility in time

One potential problem for iteration is the difficulty of identifying contemporary examples of the political which might provide a practical context in which to imagine possibility. By identifying and studying actual examples of social transformation we might discern the movements of the political event (denial, identification and opening) and study the ways in which each of these moves makes use of and contributes to unexpected and new possibilities for the experience of human equality in society. One reason the political is difficult to identify contemporaneously is because of the previously discussed consensus mechanism of state legitimization. Another reason for the difficulty is that philosophy, which never can give rise to but nevertheless has a role in recording the political, always “comes too late” for the political (Rancière 1999, p. 62). The implication of philosophy always coming late, of always coming after the political, is that it is only possible to recognize the political as a past event, rather than as an ongoing or contemporary process. Therefore when seeking to study and imagine possibility “in action,” iteration will need to take a historical approach.

Because of the mechanisms of legitimization employed by the modern state, possibility-in-action appears, even in history, to be incongruous, out of place, an anachronism (Rancière 1995). This means that iteration which takes up possibility-in-action, studying and imagining possibility through examples of the political, explores a path of anachronistic possibility.

Iteration in the form of anachronistic possibility thus takes on the role of remembering the political. In locating memories of the possibility of another life, in giving names to those who have articulated an exclusionary gap through their denial, in searching for public mobilizations of identification, in tracing the imagination of alternatives that allowed for an opening and renegotiation of embodied experience in society, anachronistic possibility not only imagines possibility for the present, it remembers possibility in the past. The project of creating an alternative historical memory, a memory in which possibility can be located, is part of Rancière's own philosophical practice (Déotte 2004; Rancière 1991, 1994). In taking up this practice, radical pedagogy as iteration has a role to play, indirectly and without normative responsibility, in problematizing the consensus of legitimacy which declares that the way things are is the only possible way for things to be. Radical pedagogy plays this role through a strategy of anachronistic possibility. By attaching space and time to quiet historical processes of social transformation, anachronistic possibility challenges historical consensus and makes it possible to hear and imagine possibility in alternative historical memories. Anachronistic possibility is thus one, but by no means the only, example of a reimagined radical pedagogy as iteration, as the cultivation of the idea that there has been and presently is more possibility than we generally lead ourselves to imagine.

Conclusion

Bringing Rancière's theory of the political into the discussion of *what is possible* via education opens for a new way of imagining the radical pedagogical project. In order to

avoid eliminating the possibility of the political or exacerbating societal inequality, Rancière helps us think through the consequences of attempting to achieve transformative and social justice goals through education. Responding to these consequences involves recognizing the limitations of what radical pedagogy can hope to achieve, but also suggests a new focus: cultivating possibility. In reimagining radical pedagogy as iteration I have attempted to re-locate the project of radical pedagogy in both space and time. Instead of a project with an eye toward change in the future, radical pedagogy as iteration imagines possibility in the present and, through anachronistic possibility, remembers possibility in the past. Instead of a project with a normative foundation, a reimagined radical pedagogy actively resists responsibility for what is learned through iteration, thus opening a space for something truly revolutionary—unexpected possibility. In resisting a political agenda, radical pedagogy as iteration has the potential to do more to cultivate possibilities for social transformation than it otherwise might. In recognizing its own limits, radical pedagogy re-opens space and time for the imagination of alternatives. This project is important, not because we know where it might lead, but because it makes us aware that *possibilities* of social transformation are as real as the rest of our world—we simply do not remember them yet.

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Notes

¹ Jennifer Gore (1993) has made a similar point about empowerment.