

# Jacques Rancière

## The Method of Equality

Translated by Julie Rose



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Jacques Rancière

Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan

Translated by Julie Rose

polity

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# Foreword

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Jacques Rancière is one of a generation of French philosophers who, in recent years, have been unstinting in giving interviews to people from all kinds of different fields. While this is noteworthy, it is no accident. As Rancière explains here, an interview is not to be confused with the research work it's always in danger of short-circuiting or over-simplifying, but it does nonetheless represent a non-negligible part of the 'method of equality' that provides the present work's title. It's a title chosen by the philosopher for a process he has tirelessly defended since the 1970s. The activity of thinking is no less effective in an interview than in a written work, and one of the characteristics of the method in question is to posit that 'there is no proper place for thought. Thought is everywhere at work.'<sup>1</sup> But why add another book-length interview to past interviews, some of which have already been brought together in book form?<sup>2</sup>

Two objectives guided our approach here. This long conversation, divided into four phases, is meant to provide an introduction to the thought of a present-day theorist who is abundantly read and commented on. The point was to spell out the origin, function and

<sup>1</sup> This is a claim Rancière made in the closing lecture of the conference devoted to him at Cerisy in 2005 and which was entitled 'The Method of Equality' in the annals published subsequently. See *La Philosophie déplacée – Autour de Jacques Rancière* (Lyon: Horlieu, 2006), edited by Laurence Cornu and Patrice Vermeren, p. 519.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués. Entretiens* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2009).

definition of certain concepts and catch phrases (the distribution of the sensible,<sup>3</sup> dissensus, the ignorant schoolmaster, disagreement, the part of those who have no part ...) that are sometimes taken up by readers automatically and used without thinking. Beyond these now routine expressions, we asked Jacques Rancière to go into details on several issues in a bid to deepen or clarify certain elements of his thinking. That aim squared with our second goal, which was to restore the unity of Rancière's philosophical project, given that that project continues to be misread almost universally as being split into a so-called 'political' moment followed by a moment described as 'aesthetic'. Ever since his masterwork, *The Nights of Labour*, came out in 1981, the whole of the French philosopher's *œuvre* has consisted, on the contrary, in contesting that opposition along with all a priori demarcations of fixed fields of competence, by working on regimes of interaction and circulation between different ways of seeing and thinking, different ways of coming together and doing battle. This also allows us to define a method of equality that is fleshed out in a reconfiguration of territory and capacity and in the shift in the meaning of words and things that follows from this. If Rancière's work is all of a piece in its perspective and its method, it has shown, and continues to show, different inflections, moments and reworkings, which are also dealt with in the pages that follow.

The first part of the book, 'Geneses', revisits the elaboration of Rancière's intellectual programme via the education he received, born as he was in 1940, as well as his early writing. The first known text that Rancière published under his name was a contribution to *Reading Capital*, edited by Louis Althusser and published in 1965. In 1974, the publication of *Althusser's Lesson* ratified a methodological and political break, obvious as early as 1969, with the Marxist philosopher of 'the rue d'Ulm' (the École normale supérieure). In 1980, under the supervision of Jean-Toussaint Desanti, Rancière defended his thesis, which was called *La formation de la pensée ouvrière en France: le prolétaire et son double* (*The Formation of Working-Class Thought in France: The Proletarian and His Double*). This was published the following year as *The Nights of Labour*. The problems orchestrating Rancière's thinking as a whole seem to have crystallized around that time. They also arose out of all he learned from the events of May 68 and the new diagnosis that ensued concerning the task of intellectuals and how far their knowledge and their discourse might extend.

<sup>3</sup> '*Le partage du sensible*' has been translated in a number of ways but is now usually translated as 'the distribution of the sensible', as 'distribution' manages to capture both senses of *partage* as a parcelling out or sharing and as a division. *Translator's note*.

The second part, 'Lines', tests the hypothesis that Rancière's *œuvre* is all of a piece by suggesting various ways of reading it that are internal to Rancière's research. It is not so much a matter of summing up or reiterating his thinking and its main categories, or of tracing its contours and compartments, as of seeking – as Rancière invites you to do in other forums – the transitions and various subterranean circuits. This sometimes happens by exposing the work to classical problems of philosophy. Particular attention has been paid to the philosophical utterance as such and this represents a way of raising a whole set of questions about Rancière's *œuvre* that Rancière has himself put to other producers of official discourses. More than a general philosophy, what we have tried to capture is a theoretical style.

The following phase of our interview, 'Thresholds', consists in comparing Rancière's work with that of other thinkers of the same period and subjecting it to some of the recurring objections it attracts, or, indeed, to new critical investigations. The possible connections or distinctions we could make between Rancière's *œuvre* and other significant bodies of work produced in his time are numerous and no doubt other researchers will work through these more systematically and precisely in future. For our part, we deliberately limited references to other authors, preferring to underscore, without attributing them, some of the controversies, misunderstandings or differences that have arisen. We locate ourselves here at the outer foothills of Rancière's conceptual mountain.

The last part of our interview, 'Present Tenses', aims to project Rancière's thought on to the current scene and the available possibilities. Various themes are dealt with, but the relationship the philosopher maintains with them is emphatically not one based on expertise or science, thanks to the method of equality. So the challenge is to isolate a way of viewing the times by posing a few unavoidable questions for contemporary liberation practices. This overview notes one thing in particular, which is the multiplicity of present tenses running through the current moment. As coherent and unified as it is, Rancière's intellectual programme continues to be endlessly renewed through the discordance between these various versions of the present.

The four moments of our interview describe one possible reading of this book. But nothing would be more in keeping with a theoretical approach that has stood from the outset for 'rejecting hierarchical thinking' than to work through them any way you like.

Laurent Jeanpierre  
Dork Zabunyan

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# Part One

## Geneses

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### Childhood and Youth

*Let's start with your formative years and the building blocks of your thinking, up to when The Nights of Labour was published in 1981. Tell us firstly what you remember of the period before you went to the École normale supérieure.<sup>1</sup> Whether we like it or not, for most of us in France the years of preparatory classes for the grandes écoles and exams often remain important elements in our intellectual trajectories. Maybe that means something to you too?*

I got into the École normale sort of 'automatically', even if you had to sit for the exam and pass. When I was twelve, I wanted to be an archaeologist. I was told that, for that, you had to prepare for the École normale, you had to do Latin and Greek, so I started off in the Latin-Greek stream. I went off archaeology, but I forged ahead anyway. I was good at arts and I took the supposedly royal road. In the end, those years of preparation weren't especially traumatic for me apart from a few serious health problems, it was just a little strange as an experience. We had a fairly amazing number of bad teachers. I discovered for the first time that the pinnacle of the teaching hierarchy had nothing to do with any level of

<sup>1</sup> The École normale supérieure (ENS) is the prestigious *grande école* for top-tier teachers and researchers. The *grandes écoles* are tertiary institutions specializing in professional training; entrance exams are rigorous. *Translator's note.*

competence or ability to teach. I also discovered the strange law of exams and competitions, which is their ritualistic quality, both in terms of setting you up and then humiliating you. I remember this bigwig at the Sorbonne who cut me off at the first sentence to say, 'Monsieur, this is a classic example of poor analysis,' after which I got my certificate with second-class honours. But that's a part of my experience that only played a role much later on. Because, once I got into the *École normale supérieure*, I was able after all to quite easily slip into the character of a person who'd passed a very hard exam and so could speak in the name of knowledge, of science. You could say there was a certain contradiction between my experience as a student doing exams and competitions, confronted by all the mechanics of getting in and being humiliated, and then, later, my fairly unproblematic support for the Althusserian struggle of science against ideology.

*Did you go to school in Paris?*

Yes, I left Algiers at the age of two. I lived in Marseilles between 1942 and 1945. After that, I spent my whole childhood in Paris, more precisely at the Porte de Champerret, which played a certain role because it was the border between several worlds. Right at the Porte, there was a bit of the *zone*, the rough area, that hadn't been completely destroyed; and after that, on the left, there was Neuilly, the bourgeois town, and, on the right, Levallois, which was still a working-class town at the time. I went to school in Neuilly, but there weren't many children from Neuilly in the local *lycée* since the whole of the north-western suburbs went there, including suburbs that were still very working class. I lived my childhood in an atmosphere that was very IVth Republic. By that I mean in an immediate postwar atmosphere, with rationing and power cuts, blackouts and strikes (those days we went to school in a military truck) and in a social world that was still extremely mixed. There were communist councilors in Neuilly. At Pasteur, the local *lycée* of that posh suburb par excellence, people came from everywhere. And at soccer matches, on the *île de Puteaux*, which was another kind of *zone*, you would go, from one week to the next, from the posh kids from Janson de Sailly to teams from the technical colleges. I lived in that world, which was both conflictual and mixed at the same time, though its memory has been crushed under the weight of the clichés about the *Trente Glorieuses*<sup>2</sup> and the baby boom.

<sup>2</sup> *Les Trente Glorieuses* (*Thirty Glorious [Years]*), originally the title of a 1979 essay by French economist Jean Fourastié, has been used ever since

My experience was filtered through a vaguely progressive Catholic conscience. I was in the Jeunesse étudiante chrétienne (JEC), the Christian Youth Organization, and I first came to Marx because the school chaplain showed me a book he was enjoying reading, Calvez's book on Marx (*La Pensée de Karl Marx*, 1956). That means I first got interested in Marx through all the themes that Althusserism later brushed aside, notably the critique of alienation. I also discovered Marx through Sartre, since my first way into philosophy was Sartre via Sartre's novels and protest plays. I'd read him as a philosophical writer before my final year of high school. Those were the days when people still engaged in the great philosophical debates about existence, its absurdity, commitment, and so on – the heyday of Sartre and Camus, if you like. The first book of philosophy I ever read was Sartre's *Existentialism is a Humanism*. When I got to the philosophy class and I was subjected to courses on attention, perception, memory, etc., I was in complete despair. Luckily, the following year, in *hypokhâgne*<sup>3</sup> at Henri IV, I had Etienne Borne's philosophy courses. That was a revelation for me, the discovery of the 'great philosophers' in a form that was at the same time very impassioned. Because of an essay I happened to have to do on the distinction between the body and the soul in Descartes, I threw myself into his *Metaphysical Meditations* and *Objections and Replies*. My philosophical culture, like my culture generally, has always been cobbled together in fits and starts; it's been local, localizable, sporadic, never encyclopedic, and very often developed either alongside official school courses, or based on specific projects I had to do for school but which I immediately took a lot further than was required.

*You managed to reconcile those two things? After all, there is the entrance exam ...*

At first, I didn't understand how it worked. When we were in Henri IV, they made us think we were the best, that the rest were plodders, losers. Result: the exams were a bloodbath. When I got to Louis-le-Grand, where the teachers were very grey, where even the students mostly looked grey, I realized the problem was first and foremost to somehow manage to translate any random extract from Homer off-the-cuff. In the oral exam in Greek, there was a text you prepared

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to refer to France's boom years between the beginning of postwar reconstruction in 1945 to the oil crisis of 1973, years marked by full employment and record growth. *Translator's note.*

<sup>3</sup> *Hypokhâgne* is the first year of the two-year preparatory course for the École normale supérieure. *Translator's note.*

and afterwards there was the killer question where you were given ten lines of Homer to translate – just like that. I understood that the great philosophical and literary production numbers were one thing, but that studying for the exam was a precise gymnastic exercise and you just had to do it. I did it, despite everything, and apparently I remember it, whereas all the people who now give fiery speeches about the republican education system and the great themes – being steeped in a humanist culture, learning to think, learning to be critical – have forgotten that, like me, they sat for their exams on the basis of a culture of lecture handouts (at the time the history syllabus meant lecture handouts) or index cards listing the meanings of all the Greek particles, and what was called at the time minor Latin and minor Greek, meaning daily drilling so as to be able to translate any text whatever off-the-cuff.

*Before you penetrated the ‘fortress’ of the École normale, we should perhaps go back over your family background, which you glossed over so quickly. Was it a milieu in which people had already had careers in teaching at school or university?*

No, my family had nothing to do with any university or academic milieu. My father had started studying German but gave it up for a career as a government official, but he was killed in France in 1940. I never knew him. And my mother was in the public service. My father had been in the public service, my uncle was in the public service, and my mother joined the public service when she had to go out and work. I didn’t have an academic or university background at all.

*Did you father die in combat?*

Yes, in June 1940, just before the armistice. My mother never remarried. She had all the strength it took to raise three children on her own. I grew up in a very protective, close and loving environment. I didn’t have a father, but I was never an unhappy child. The only time I felt miserable was when I started high school because, at home and at primary school, I’d lived in an essentially feminine world. The discovery of the masculine world was the main traumatism of my youth.

*You mentioned Algiers. Well, before you went to the École normale, there was the Algerian War. Did that mean anything to you?*

Let’s say I had a split conscience when it came to Algeria. I lived surrounded by objects and documents from Algeria, books, postcards with coloured Algerian landscapes: Bougie Bay all in pink,

Chr  a all in blue, Timgad dun-coloured ... I had a vision of Algeria as a kind of dreamland, as far as that went. Otherwise I lived through the Algerian War, after the war in Indochina, just as I was waking up to political life. But I didn't live through it as a native of Algeria. I lived through it as a young man of the times who read *L'Express*, with a mix of admiration for Mend  s France and disgust for Guy Mollet. The Lyc  e Pasteur was pretty right-wing; I remember seeing extremely violent tracts for the defence of the Christian civilization of the West passed around in class. I wavered a bit, I have to say, but the kind of Catholic circles I hung out with were pretty progressive.

Later, when I was at the   cole normale, it was the days of the OAS<sup>4</sup> and the big demonstrations against them. The year 1961–2 was vital from that point of view. One of the first demos following the violent attacks on North African immigrants started off from the   cole normale; there were a few dozen of us, a few hundred demonstrating in the boulevard Montparnasse the next day or the day after that. Before, I didn't belong to any political group. I was in various Catholic youth movements, but they weren't political even if there was a fairly left-wing sensibility. Once we were at the   cole, there was constant agitation, rallies. The people who organized the rallies were communists who would say the word and, after that, we'd either follow or not. So that was my experience and it wasn't linked to the fact that I was born in Algiers, except that when Algeria became independent I said to myself, why not go down there? I even put in a request to go to Algiers as a teacher, but that wasn't till 1965.

### Education

*By the time you got into the   cole normale sup  rieure, your dream of becoming an archaeologist was a thing of the past, but had you already decided on philosophy?*

I hadn't decided. I started first year at the   cole normale sup  rieure without knowing whether I'd do literature or philosophy. I was enrolled in arts; I went to see Althusser, who didn't exactly wildly encourage me to do philosophy. So I hesitated for a long while and then, in my second year, I took the plunge, I had to make up my mind and I opted for philosophy. We went to the Sorbonne to enrol and to sit the exams. Otherwise we never set foot in there, with one

<sup>4</sup> The Organisation arm  e secr  te was the French terrorist organization that opposed Algerian independence in the 1960s. *Translator's note.*

exception: if you were doing arts, you went to the philology classes there, as that's something you can't make up and it takes up a lot of time if you want to do it without teachers. The first year, when I was still enrolled in arts, I took the courses for the grammar and philology degree, but otherwise we hardly ever went to the philosophy courses at the Sorbonne. There were no courses at the ENS either. Those were the days when there was no teaching profession. There were just the 'croc's',<sup>5</sup> like Althusser, who was either there or not there and hardly ever gave classes, though he'd invite other people to give classes, seminars, but we weren't forced to go to them. I hardly followed any philosophy classes at the Sorbonne and very few at the ENS. I didn't do that much philosophy at school, except in my *agrégation*<sup>6</sup> year, the year I did the teachers' exams.

*That was also a time when figures who are sometimes at the outer limit of philosophy, like Bataille or Blanchot, shot to the fore. Did you follow the literary debates?*

Absolutely not. I don't know when I first heard of the existence of Blanchot or Bataille, but I think I was already a qualified teacher by then. I'm exaggerating a bit, but that was completely outside my world. Once again, my horizon, at seventeen, was Sartre and maybe the people he talked about, the great novelists of the 1930s, like Faulkner and Dos Passos. He also talked about Blanchot and Bataille, to tell you the truth, but I must have skipped those chapters. Otherwise, my world was Rilke, since the first philosophy course I ever heard was Jean Wahl's course on Rilke. That was the Sorbonne open course, which I'd listen to on the radio when I got home from school. Otherwise, I knew there were things like the new novel; I read a few of them. I knew the Barthes of *Mythologies*. My culture, when I was twenty, was a modernist culture, which could possibly be called structuralist already, but let's just say that I saw myself more generally as being part of a culture we could describe as 'avant-gardiste' – even if it was only avant-gardiste for me, without necessarily being so historically. My references were the new novel, new-wave cinema, the concerts put on by the *Domaine musical* society, and abstract

<sup>5</sup> A crocodile, or *caïman*, is a senior master at the École normale supérieure.

<sup>6</sup> The *agrégation* is the prestigious teaching degree that allows *agrégés*, those who pass its difficult exams, to get well-paid and highly respected jobs as secondary- and tertiary-level teachers in France. It was, and is, extremely important in France's intellectual hierarchy. The *Capes* (*Certificat d'Aptitudes à l'enseignement secondaire*) is the much less prestigious secondary-school teaching certificate. *Translator's note.*

painting – to cut a long story short, the modernity of the 1950s and 1960s, excluding all the offshoots of surrealism which weren't part of my world at all.

*In philosophy, did you see yourself as having any masters, such as Hippolyte, Canguilhem or Alquié? They were still alive then.*

We knew Hippolyte as the school director at the ENS, but he'd stopped playing a role as a philosopher or master. There was Althusser, but he wasn't a teacher. He inspired us more with conversation or certain texts more than any actual lessons. There were the people Althusser invited in. I remember some of Serres's lectures that were pretty brilliant. I also remember Foucault, who came and announced a seminar but never came back to do it. So in those days I hardly followed any philosophy at all. In second year, I started on an essay on the young Marx. It seems to me that as soon as I chose to do philosophy, I decided to do the *diplôme d'études supérieures*<sup>7</sup> on 'critical thought' in the young Marx. I'd gone to see Ricœur, who asked me if I wouldn't prefer to work on alienation or fetishism. I said no, I wanted to work on critical thought.

I didn't want to work on a philosophical theme; I wanted to work on a practice of thinking. I read a lot of the young Marx. I began my philosophical career by doing a talk on Marx's essay on the law on the theft of dead wood. That was in the winter of 1961–2. It was pretty funny because, just a bit before this, I'd gone to see Althusser and he'd said to me, 'Listen, I can't guarantee you success in philosophy, but if you want to do it, do it.' Then he launched his seminar on Marx, at the end of 1961 I think, and I gave the paper on the theft of dead wood and, at the end of the paper, Althusser came to see me to tell me I'd get the *agrégation*, no problem, I wouldn't have any trouble with philosophy. For two years I basically concentrated on that piece. At the same time, I did a degree in psychology, with social psychology, the psychology of the child, etc., which involved a certain amount of practical work. Since I wanted to work on issues to do with ideology and representation, I hit on the idea that it might be interesting to go in that direction. But it didn't help me at all.

I didn't do much history of philosophy; there was no reason to once you got your history of philosophy certificate at the Sorbonne,

<sup>7</sup> The *Diplôme d'études supérieures spécialisées* (DESS) is a one-year post-graduate degree roughly equivalent to a master's, although it then required students to write a longer and much more thorough thesis than today's masters require. *Translator's note.*

unless maybe you wanted to learn more about a particular philosopher if a course or seminar had excited you. I only began working – or working again – on the history of philosophy after the *khâgne*<sup>8</sup> for the *agrégation* year. I remember the beginning of that year, when Canguilhem was president of the board of examiners. As a result, the class on the history of the sciences where there were usually only five or six people – Balibar, Macherey and two or three others – was full from then on. Everyone was there. Canguilhem said not to have any illusions, the die was cast, you either knew the history of philosophy or you didn't. I said to myself, 'No, listen, you don't know the history of philosophy, but at the end of the year, you'll know all you need to know.' I spent the year reading all of Kant and, at the end of the year, I was able to answer any even remotely thorny question on Kant.

### Reading Capital

*You were talking about the young Marx, your DESS project, but did people really already say 'the young Marx' at the time? Wasn't it an effect of Althusserian reconstruction – distinguishing between the 'young' and the 'old' Marx?*

Althusser's essay on the young Marx dates from 1961 and it was in response to an issue of an orthodox Marxist review on Marx that tried precisely to reappropriate the 'young Marx', who was then inspiring the theologians after having inspired the social democrats. So I don't know if people actually said 'the young Marx', but there was already a surge in interest in all the young Marx's essays, especially the *Manuscripts of 1844*. That was notably the case with the books that introduced me to Marx, books written by the Jesuits, Father Calvez and Father Bigo, who made the essays on alienation the very basis of Marxism. So the young Marx existed but it was Althusser who said, 'No, that's not the real Marx.' At the ENS we thought alienation was a joke; we laughed at Lefebvre, Morin or whoever, but without having read them. The world of the left-wing traditions of Marxism was totally unfamiliar to me, since they held sway in circles that were completely separate from ours.

So I began my DESS on the boundary between two worlds of thought, since, on the one hand, I was already more or less part of the

<sup>8</sup> In school argot, *khâgne* is the second year of the two-year arts course students need to do as preparation for the *École normale supérieure*. *Translator's note.*



enthusiastic uptake of the essays of the young Marx with all that was lyrical about essays like the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, which sort of corresponded to my idea of the time, to a philosophy that emerges from itself and becomes a way of life, a world. So I had even less reason to spend a lot of time studying the history of philosophy as it felt like the thinking I was involved in spelled the end of philosophy. I started working on the young Marx with that particular impetus. Meanwhile, that impetus was mitigated by Althusser and his critique of the 'young Marx'. My masters thesis turned into an essay in which I tried to prove the existence of an 'epistemological break'. The third part was on *German Ideology* and Ricœur told me it was truly sad: the first two parts sparkled and then this third part just reiterated Marx's 'let's start with the facts; it is a fact that ...'. He felt this descent into the world of facts was truly dismal.

*In 1964–5, while Althusser's seminar dealt with reading Capital, you did an essay on the concept of a 'critique' in Marx. What made Althusser decide to publish that exchange? The other seminars weren't published, were they?*

Yes, in 1964 there was the seminar project based on *Capital*. Althusser had said that Marx's philosophy was there in practical form in *Capital*, but still needed to be identified and put into theory. It was all a bit *Hic Rhodus, hic salta* – 'Prove what you can do, here and now'. What we had to do was try and dig the philosophy from out of the guts of *Capital*. I didn't really have much to do with the core group that discussed the seminar and its role, etc. My job was to demonstrate this 'epistemological break'. As a specialist in the young Marx, I was given the job of showing the difference between the young and the old. It was a strategic job, since if I hadn't got started on it, nothing would ever have happened. No one knew what philosophy we were going to be able to find in *Capital* that we could identify and extract. What I extracted wasn't necessarily what should have been extracted, but someone had to take the plunge, even if it was completely mad.

Summing up the *Manuscripts of 1844* and showing why they weren't scientific was relatively easy, but showing how *Capital* changed everything was much more complicated. First of all you had to read *Capital*, which I'd never read. Like everyone else, I knew the first chapter of the first book, and that was all. I threw myself into it, did my first paper and then normally I should have done the next one a week later. I went to see Althusser to tell him I had another two books of *Capital* to read, that it wasn't possible to work out its philosophical rationality in such a short time. So I got a bit of an