

**AUTHOR:**

B. Olivier

**AFFILIATION:**

Extraordinary Professor of Philosophy,  
University of the Free State

**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**

Bert Olivier

**EMAIL:**

bertzaza@yahoo.co.uk

**POSTAL ADDRESS:**

UFS Dept. of Philosophy (IB 43),  
PO Box 339, Bloemfontein, 9301

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# Bourdieu, Rancière, Inequality and Education

## Abstract

*This paper is an exploration of the respective approaches of Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Rancière to education, specifically the question as to whether education has a significant 'effect' or influence on social inequality. Bourdieu's work is presented in terms of his well-known and related concepts of cultural capital and habitus, where the latter is understood as a largely unconscious cultural predisposition or attitude that is the result of cultivation as a function of cultural capital, that is, the symbolic-cultural manifestation of distinctive class taste. It is argued that, although Bourdieu is critical of inequality in French society, his research has shown that it is endemic to that society, and that education, which begins at home and continues through school to university – including 'ordinary' universities as well as the prestigious 'grands écoles' of France – is the main mediating institution in the establishment, reinforcement and legitimisation of social inequality in the highly stratified French society. In contrast to Bourdieu's work, which seems to be unable to move beyond the description and theorisation of a society that is (apparently irredeemably) characterised by inequality, for Rancière equality may be approached as an 'hypothesis' in need of confirmation, and there are several strategies to pursue this, one of which is to adopt the principle of "ignorance" on the part of the teacher, in order to demonstrate the ability of students to 'teach themselves' once they have the requisite material – a reference to Joseph Jacotot, who adopted this approach in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France, with unexpectedly affirmative results. Furthermore, Rancière criticises Bourdieu for supplying the means to 'distribute the sensible' in a hierarchical manner, effectively excluding workers from the 'polis' on the grounds that they do not share the capacity of 'logos' with other citizens (such as the elites). Rancière therefore claims that Bourdieu simply accepts the immutability of hierarchical class divisions in society. The usefulness of these two thinkers' work for education in South Africa is explored in this paper.*

**Keywords:** habitus, cultural capital, social equality/inequality, class, cultural/educational conflict, racism, transformation, emancipation

## 1. Introduction

The globalised (and still globalising) world is plagued by inequality – that much is abundantly apparent from many sources, and is graphically encapsulated in the phrase indelibly associated with the Occupy Movement: the '99% versus the 1%' (Conio, 2015:41, 53). How should one understand this state of affairs, if we accept that we live at a time when (liberal) democracy has become the most widely endorsed form of government? Does democracy not enshrine the 'equality' of citizens in the constitutions of countries that claim to be democratic, South Africa being no exception to the rule? Leaving aside for the moment the global inequalities of the early 21st century and focusing more specifically and systematically on the possible connection between education and inequality (as one of its possible sources), the work of two French thinkers, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and philosopher Jacques Rancière, offers itself as a potentially fruitful place to start an investigation into the root causes of inequality. In their work inequality and its possible sources has received sustained attention, as I shall demonstrate in what follows. An attempt will also be made to examine whether there is anything valuable that one could learn from these thinkers regarding education in South Africa.

## 2. Bourdieu on cultural capital, habitus, education and inequality

Does the fact that children go to different schools, and that some go to college, while others attend university, have anything to do with the ostensibly irremediable class structure of societies? One's intuitive response is likely to be in the affirmative, and it has been 'scientifically' confirmed by none other than the famous French sociologist and social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu. His empirical and theoretical work in texts such as *Distinction* (1984) and *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (with J.C. Passeron, 2000) seems to indicate that social 'reproduction' is a function of being educated in a certain way, which actually starts at home, long before children go to school, and is reinforced by school education. This is succinctly stated where Bourdieu and Passeron write (2000: 3-44):

Because learning is an irreversible process, the habitus acquired within the family form the basis of the reception and assimilation of the classroom message, and the habitus acquired at school conditions the level of reception and degree of assimilation of the messages produced and diffused by the culture industry, and, more generally, of any intellectual or semi-intellectual message.

In other words, what happens at home, in the ambit of the 'cultural capital' – "*the cultural goods transmitted by the different family PAs*" [pedagogic actions] (Bourdieu & Passeron, 2000:30) – of your parents and family (which can vary greatly from one family to the next), as well as their friends and the circles in which they move, according to Bourdieu, is that a particular, distinctive 'habitus' is cultivated and formed in children. By 'cultural capital' he appears to understand the cultural and symbolic manifestations of distinctive class 'taste' in literature, art, architecture, music and other cultural practices, which is the outcome (as indicated above) of the various pedagogical activities (reading, visiting museums, attending music concerts, or not doing any of these things) in relation to children in a family and the circles within which its members move. 'Habitus', again, denotes a cultural mind-set or attitude to the world, inculcated by cultural and social customs and norms, and functioning unconsciously as a kind of compass in people's lives, mediating between cultural practices and social structures. Clearly, there is a strong reciprocal connection between the two: cultural capital, as it is embedded in specific, socially diverse families and their circle of friends and associates (in art societies, for example), comprises the sphere within which the habitus of children is shaped and constituted. Inversely, the habitus of the people who interact in distinct social and cultural circles is the condition of the possibility of a distinct mode of cultural capital to be established and further cultivated, in the first place. The following excerpt from Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984:160-162) lays the basis for this reciprocity:

The habitus is both the generative principle of objectively classifiable judgements and the system of classification...of these practices. It is in the relationship between the two capacities which define the habitus, the capacity to produce classifiable practices and works, and the capacity to differentiate and appreciate these practices and products (taste), that the represented social world, i.e. the space of life-styles, is constituted...The habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure: the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes. Each class condition is defined, simultaneously, by its intrinsic properties and by the relational properties which it derives from its position in the system of class conditions, which is also a system of differences, differential positions, i.e., by everything which distinguishes it from what it is not and especially from everything it is opposed to; social identity is defined and asserted through difference.

To this must be added that, if the habitus generates and structures social practices and the perception of such practices, and reciprocally is the 'structured structure' that enables the classification of such social practices, the cultural dimension of such social practices comprises their 'cultural capital'. This means that the reciprocity in question is complex, insofar as the specific quality of cultural capital – richly variegated in terms of one's acquaintance with literature, music, architecture, science, and so on, along a spectrum of possibilities from cultural 'wealth' to cultural 'poverty', or, by contrast, comparatively less so – informs the quality of the habitus that is engendered on the part of children in a household, in the first place. Such habitus, which could be either culturally rich and diversified, or poor and mono-dimensional, becomes, in its turn, the generative source of social (and cultural) practices (Bourdieu, 1984:114-115). Moreover, cultural capital is just one among several kinds of 'capital', the others including literary, scientific (these two arguably being subsumed under 'cultural' capital), educational, social, political and economic or financial capital.

One might think of the reciprocity between the source of structuring social and cultural practices on the one hand, and the social or cultural structures, on the other, as a dialectical process, not entirely dissimilar to Hegel's (1966:142-145) notion of it – where a particular social or political condition, for instance, evokes its countervailing, antithetical condition, which eventually forms a synthesis with the initial condition, leading to the process repeating itself indefinitely. Importantly, for Hegel, none of the earlier conditions or stages in the dialectical process is annulled when its antithesis 'negates' it; every stage is 'sublated', insofar as previous stages are simultaneously cancelled, preserved (in a different form) and elevated to a 'higher' level of existence. As I understand the relationship between Bourdieu's notions of cultural (or social, educational and so on) capital and habitus, there is a dialectical reciprocity between them that also tends towards a kind of 'quasi-elevation' in the development of the cultural sphere inhabited by certain (classes of) people, but minus the metaphysical and teleological necessity that Hegel attached to the process of development. This is why I believe it is more appropriate to talk of 'quasi-elevation', because the process may in fact at times consist of a cultural retrogression rather than elevation, qualitatively speaking, for example when someone with a high degree of inherited cultural and acquired educational capital (from a wealthy, cultured family, and with an MBA from a prestigious university) becomes the CEO of a big company, and the pressures accompanying his or her new job are such that cultural activities have to take a back seat in favour of accumulating economic capital. Whether this is the case or not, however, every successive stage is bound to be more complex insofar as previous stages of development would continue to exist latently – or what Deleuze (2004:258-265) would call 'virtually' – in later stages, and could be actualised again, albeit in a novel configuration; the fictional CEO, above, could accept a lateral move in the company that would free her or him for more cultural activities, for instance.

According to Bourdieu, inherited 'cultural capital' proves to be crucial in being admitted into certain prestigious schools, and once admitted, in succeeding at school, whether this is an 'elite school' or a public school where students from different social strata go. And because school education favours those students with higher-class habitus, the education system functions in such a way that it reproduces and legitimates class differences and inequalities. In the introduction to *Distinction* he makes the following observation, which neatly summarises the theme of the book (Bourdieu 1984:1):

Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum-visits, concert-going, reading etc.), and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin. The relative weight of home background and of formal education (the effectiveness and duration of which are closely dependent on social origin) varies according to the extent to which the different cultural practices are

recognised and taught by the educational system, and the influence of social origin is strongest — other things being equal — in 'extra-curricular' and avant-garde culture ...

Even in the classroom, the dominant definition of the legitimate way of appropriating culture and works of art favours those who have had early access to legitimate culture, in a cultured household, outside of scholastic disciplines, since even within the educational system it devalues scholarly knowledge and interpretation as 'scholastic' or even 'pedantic' in favour of direct experience and simple delight.

Ironically, however, the education system covers up the role of habitus and cultural capital regarding success and failure on the part of students, and ascribes it to individual talents and effort, or the absence of these. Hence, when someone who lacks higher-class habitus and the cultural capital of which it is an expression does succeed in the educational system, it is seen as corroborating the meritocratic character claimed by it. At the same time it strengthens the system because such individuals are usually assimilated into the higher classes and henceforth contribute to the reproduction of a socially stratified society. On the basis of Bourdieu's research, in practice this means that educators show a preference for someone who shows the cultivated capacity to move effortlessly from the mere 'sensible qualities' of a painting to the level of 'what it means', in this way displaying the prior acquisition of the concepts necessary to 'decode' such a painting. Possessing this capacity, which is inseparable from high-class habitus, reflects a high degree of cultural capital, and the complex ways in which individuals can potentially arrive at the point where they possess this ability, is reflected in what Bourdieu writes about the relationship between cultural and educational capital (1984: 81):

The possessors of strong educational capital who have also inherited strong cultural capital, and so enjoy a dual title to cultural nobility, the self-assurance of legitimate membership and the ease given by familiarity...are opposed, first, to those who lack both educational capital and inherited cultural capital ... (and to all those who are situated lower down the axis representing perfect reconversion of cultural capital into educational capital). But they are also opposed, on the one hand, to those who, with equivalent inherited cultural capital, have obtained lower educational capital...(or who have an inherited cultural capital greater than their educational capital...) and who are closer to them, especially as regards 'general culture', than the holders of identical qualifications; and, on the other hand, to those who have similar educational capital but who started off with less cultural capital...and whose relation to culture, which they owe more to the school and less to the family, is less familiar and more scholastic.

As already indicated, cultural capital could be 'inherited' in a home suffused with a rich cultural life, or acquired through intelligence and hard work at school ('educational capital'), even if it is not one of the most prestigious schools. This is significant because there is another, equally important connection, between cultural capital and economic capital, which gives children or students from economically wealthy homes an advantage over those whose social origins do not allow them the leisure and economic confidence to assimilate culture. Again it is a complex matter, as one can gather from Bourdieu's observation, under the heading, "Distance from Necessity", that (1984: 53-54):

To explain the correlation between educational capital and the propensity or at least the aspiration to appreciate a work [of art] 'independently of its content', as the culturally most ambitious respondents put it, and more generally the propensity to make the 'gratuitous' and disinterested investments demanded by legitimate works, it is not sufficient to point to the fact that schooling provides the linguistic tools and the references which enable aesthetic experience to be expressed and to be constituted by being expressed. What is in fact affirmed in this

relationship is the dependence of the aesthetic disposition on the past and present material conditions of existence which are the precondition of both its constitution and its application and also of the accumulation of a cultural capital (whether or not educationally sanctioned) which can only be acquired by means of a sort of withdrawal from economic necessity.

The wealthy, in other words, can spend the time that keeps the noses of less economically privileged people to the grindstone, visiting art galleries, attending music concerts, learning to play the piano or the violin, reading their favourite novelists, or pursuing a 'hobby' such as astronomy, or getting private science tuition, which puts them at a distinct advantage over their economic inferiors. Even (or is it especially) in a democracy, power seems to dwell less in the political realm than in the economic, which (as one can gather from Bourdieu's research in this regard) has far-reaching implications for education via the accumulation of cultural capital on the part of the economically empowered, and hence for the relationship between economic privilege, education and social standing. One has to add that Bourdieu's research pertains to France, a country renowned for the importance that its people attach to culture and participation in cultural activities, to the point of being exceptional in resisting American globalising cultural colonisation (Jameson, 2000:54), and it is probably the case that one *cannot* apply his findings to other countries without allowing for different societal attitudes to culture, particularly if the country concerned is not a western state, such as Britain or Germany. In the case of South Africa, where 'culture' bears the imprint of strong western as well as (understandably) African influences, this is even more relevant. Nevertheless, I believe that one can gain important insights from Bourdieu regarding the relationship between culture, education and social inequality or class differences, provided that his findings are adjusted to accommodate the different cultural and social stratifications in other countries (Sullivan, 2002). To illustrate what is meant by this observation, the next section scrutinises a musical drama written in, and representing, social (and correlative, educational) disparities in Britain.

### 3. Interlude: The tragic dimension of social inequality

There are many examples in the arts which reflect, and refract, the social inequality in different societies – an inequality that cannot be divorced from education, as Bourdieu's work testifies. One such work of art is Willy Russell's gripping musical, *Blood Brothers* (1983), which is set against the backdrop of class-stratified British society. At the dramatic culmination of this musical drama, one of the twins who were parted soon after birth, Mickey, expresses his resentment at his mother, Mrs Johnstone, for not having been the one (Eddie) who was given away to a rich, childless woman, exclaiming something like: "I could have been him!" And then he shoots his own twin brother, Eddie, before being shot by police himself. *Blood Brothers* is a riveting drama about economic desperation on the part of a poverty-stricken mother, the possessiveness of a rich, barren woman who exploits the former's economic destitution to take one of her twins away from her, and the friendship, as well as ultimate division, between the poor, factory-worker brother (Mickey) and the wealthy, university-educated, councillor brother (Eddie), who only learn right at the end that they are real brothers, and not only the 'blood brothers' they pledged to be when they were boys, playing together in the neighbourhood. And the final ingredient that catalyses the action into a tragedy: both Mickey and Eddie love the same girl/woman, Linda.

When Mrs Johnstone, who is at the time working for Mrs Lyons, the wife of a wealthy industrialist, reveals to her employer that she is expecting twins – a blow to a single parent who is already struggling to feed her other children – the childless Mrs Lyons jumps at the opportunity to 'give her husband a son' when he gets back from abroad (without his knowledge that the baby came from Mrs Johnstone). Despite being torn between economic need and her strong inclination to cling to her offspring, Mrs Johnstone agrees in the end, urging Mrs Lyons to select one of the baby boys, instead of choosing herself which one to

part with. This is how Mickey Johnstone and Edward Lyons are separated, and grow up in homes marked by vast economic and social inequality. This was not to last, however, because Mrs Lyons soon complains to her husband that her cleaning lady's fussing over 'her' boy, Edward, is getting on her nerves, and that she would have to go. Mrs Johnstone ends up losing, not merely one of her twins, but her job as well. However, if Mrs Lyons thought that it was the end of any connection with the Johnstones, she was wrong. As they grow up, the twins of necessity had to bump into each other in the streets of the town, and when they do, they take to each other to such a degree that, at Mickey's suggestion, they solemnly pledge to be 'blood brothers', despite Eddie being discouraged by Mrs Lyons from fraternising with the locals. Through Mickey, Eddie also gets to know Linda, a real Tomboy, who is inseparable from Mickey.

When Mrs Lyons discovers that her 'son' spends his time playing with Mickey, she insists to her husband that they move to the countryside, but as karma would have it, the Johnstones get to move to the same area through a stroke of what seems at the time like good luck, and before long, the two boys bump into each other again, to their pleasant surprise. The two of them, together with Linda, spend a lot of time together, and it becomes clear that Eddie has fallen for Linda. Then Eddie goes to university, Mickey starts working in Mr Lyons's factory, and Linda gets pregnant with Mickey's baby. They fall on hard times when factory workers, including Mickey, lose their jobs as 'a sign of the times', and in desperation he participates in an attempted robbery, only to be arrested and sentenced to prison for a number of years, where he is diagnosed with depression and becomes addicted to anti-depressants. On Mickey's release from prison, Linda tries to prevent him from taking the anti-depressants, but in vain. In the meantime Eddie has become a councillor and they start seeing each other, something Mrs Lyons discovers, and tries to stop by telling Mickey, who is working in the factory again, about it. This is what impels Mickey to go searching for Eddie with a gun, and finding him in the council chambers where he confronts Eddie about his relationship with Linda. Having been alerted by Linda, Mrs Johnstone arrives on the scene where Mickey is pointing the gun at Eddie, and tries to stop him by revealing that they are brothers, separated soon after birth.

The contribution of socio-economic inequality to tragic social events manifests itself clearly when Mickey, instead of – as one might expect – reproaching her for separating them, complains that she might have given him (Mickey) away instead, so that he could have been in Eddie's (wealthy) place. With this insight Russell confirms the insight of psychoanalyst Paul Verhaeghe (2014:location 2202-2345), that the greatest incidence of crime, violence, poor housing and debt, as well as, correlatively, suffering in the form of depression, anxiety and other psychic maladies, is to be found in societies where socio-economic inequality is most pronounced.

One does not have to be a Marxist to appreciate the important, if not decisive, role played by economic relations in societies throughout history, and the fact that this is reflected in literature should surprise no-one. After all, it is no accident that economic relations ineluctably have a political flip-side, as indicated by the phrase 'political economy' – it is simply because economic, bread-and-butter issues move people to take an interest in different ways of governing, which are inseparable from either having power, or lacking power. And power, in turn, is inseparable from economic relations. What makes *Blood Brothers* significant in this regard, is Russell's insight that economic power (linked to level of education), on the one hand, and the lack of it, on the other, can even disrupt, and eventually destroy, a friendship between 'blood brothers' (who happen to be, unbeknown to themselves, real brothers). This is the tragedy potentially, and sometimes actually, inherent in economic inequality, and explored in exemplary fashion in Russell's 'musical tragedy'.

#### 4. South Africa, education and inequality

In the light of the preceding discussion, where does South Africa stand with regard to cultural capital, education and social inequality? To begin with, as far as *economic* inequality goes, although French society (and some other European societies, like the British) is highly stratified, the inequality that obtains there is nowhere near that which exists in South Africa, for historical reasons that are known to most, if not all, South African academics, and to many other citizens as well. There is simply no comparison between poverty levels in France or Britain (except among migrants and refugees that have flocked to these countries for the last few years) and economic hardship in South Africa with its conspicuous squatter shanty-towns on the outskirts of cities, and where not a day passes when one does not see people begging at traffic lights, or when the army of car attendants at shopping centres and elsewhere reminds one concretely of the pervasiveness of poverty in this country. With regard to this situation, Naomi Klein states the following about inequality in South Africa (Klein 2007: 198):

In the years that passed between Mandela's writing his note from prison [in 1990, on the supposedly 'unnegotiable' ANC economic principle of nationalisation of key industries; see p. 194-195] and the ANC's 1994 election sweep in which he was elected president, something happened to convince the party hierarchy that it could not use its grass-root prestige to reclaim and redistribute the country's stolen wealth. So, rather than meeting in the middle between California and the Congo, the ANC exploded both inequality and crime to such a degree that South Africa's divide is now closer to Beverly Hills and Baghdad. Today [Klein's book appeared in 2007], the country stands as a living testament to what happens when economic reform is severed from political transformation. Politically, its people have the right to vote, civil liberties and majority rule. Yet economically, South Africa has surpassed Brazil as the most unequal society in the world.

Furthermore, the poverty in South Africa referred to above is highly relevant to the access that students from poor families, as opposed to those from middle class and wealthy families, have to schools with a good academic track record and the financial resources that usually (if not always) go hand in hand with academic success. For these reasons the state of education in South Africa is not comparable to that which is the case in France or Britain either, despite which I believe one can learn from, and adapt Bourdieu's theory (and learn from Rancière's critique of Bourdieu, below). Some of the main reasons why allowances have to be made for the differences between these European countries and South Africa, concern the fundamental social, economic and cultural differences between the former and the latter.

Some of these differences are highlighted by the experience that Gary Koekemoer, a mediator (who is a PhD-student doing research on race and race relations in South Africa) at a South African high school for girls has had for the past six months, mediating between opposing parties at the school in relation to what might be termed 'cultural-educational conflict'. The school concerned is an old, well-established, traditional high school in the western sense, which has for a long time been open to students of all races or, more to the point, cultures. Only relatively recently did cracks start appearing in its cultural-educational edifice, when a white student was overheard complaining about African students ululating at a school assembly in the course of singing, followed by the dissemination of this information on social media, which, in turn, has led to a widespread confrontation between 'traditionalists' and 'progressives' at the school (with parents weighing in on the matter too), with the former defending the age-old (western) cultural practices of the school – including retaining the names of the various 'houses', which still bear the names of British queens – and the latter arguing that these practices smack of colonial values, and should be changed to reflect contemporary South African culture. A discourse-analysis (below) of Koekemoer's summary of the state of affairs at the high school in question indicates what is at stake here, and foregrounds similarities as well as differences between the situation in France and South Africa as far as the relationship between 'culture' (or cultural capital) and education is

concerned. What becomes evident immediately, from the summary in question, is that the issues that are contested in South Africa are fundamentally different from those that are disputed in France.

Koekemoer's summary of insights (April 2017) gained in the course of mediation (which I here use with his permission) at the school reads as follows:

## 5. "Key 'truths' informing engagement:

1. **What problem?** Isolated incidents...being blown out of proportion by politically motivated elements and pandering to such select groups in the interest of being PC exacerbates the situation;
2. **Death by transformation:** by transforming (namely more black/township/poor pupils) debt will increase and academic standards will drop;
3. **Us vs. them:** all whites are the same, all blacks are the same; whites are inherently racist and protect their privileges at all costs, blacks are all demands but no effort -happy to take the benefit but not to shoulder the burden;
4. **Our time to eat:** blacks want to punish whites for apartheid,...[the school] is a proxy for black revenge;
5. **...[A local upper middle class suburb] rules the waves:** The school should reflect the values and aspirations of the upper/middle class (white) suburbs (...[a local high school for boys] being the standard that ...[the girls' high school] must follow);
6. **Spare the rod, spoil the child:** compliance is best ensured through strict enforcement (discipline) and targeting/punishing pupils is the best way to manage non-compliant parents. Any slippage on rules will lead to institutional collapse;
7. **Go big or go home:** change is only possible (best) through disruptive confrontation ('in your face') and measured by quick outcomes in response;
8. **Everything must go:** transformation means doing away with all tradition;
9. **It's one or nothing:** ...[the girls' high school] culture cannot accommodate many cultures;
10. **FIFA: Fit in or fly away:** if you don't like it (both: current status quo or transformed institute) you can leave, you signed up for it vs. get with the reality of SA;
11. **Academics "über alles":** academic achievement is the priority – it's THE output that ensures success later in life;
12. **Racism starts at home:** the home environment is where racism is learnt, parents are wholly responsible;
13. **Black is in, white is out:** any new house names will automatically be black names, white persons will have no say;
14. **Don't let a foot in the door:** any change must be resisted – starts as small initiatives but quickly overwhelms, so no change can be tolerated."

A discourse analysis of this summary cannot ignore what it reflects, namely that, contrary to France, where 'inherited cultural-capital' issues (such as whether students pay regular visits to museums or musical performances, can analyse paintings with ease, and so on) are significant in gauging students' educational capital, such issues do not even feature in South Africa. Judging by the above summary of relevant matters in a dispute about (what one may call) 'school culture', the issues in South Africa are far more basic, as scrutiny of each numbered item will show.

In the case of numbers 1 and 2 it is apparent that the reference to "isolated incidents...being blown out of proportion", etc., as well as to the economic consequences of 'transformation', represents white parents' point of view, with emphasis on economic empowerment – if black students, or their parents, cannot meet financial-economic demands, they don't belong there because it would affect the school's 'standards' adversely. This is an example of economic exclusivist thinking. The allusion to 'being PC' (politically correct) also suggests that this represents white parents' views, insofar as 'PC' would hardly refer to the position of a minority of white people, who show all the signs of feeling 'culturally' beleaguered into the bargain. The worry expressed about rising debt, poor pupils and dropping academic standards, likewise, clearly reflect white parents' concerns, and betray what is by and large their economic privilege, although the black middle-class is evidently growing sufficiently for black parents to be able to send their children to this exclusive school. 'Dropping academic standards', moreover, is arguably a metonymy for 'changing cultural criteria', which is really what concerns the white parents. Unrealistically, one might add, because in a country that only recently (in 1994) became a constitutional democracy, and where universities and schools have become multiracial (and hence, multicultural, given the differences between African and quasi-western culture), it is inconceivable that African culture will not influence the quasi-western, Euro-African culture of whites, and *vice versa*.

Turning to number 3 – "us vs. them: all whites are the same, all blacks are the same..." – it is clearly an allusion to a form of racism held by parents from both racial groups, which is tantamount to a belief that neither group can change their fundamentally held convictions about the other group. Belief expressed by black people, that "whites are inherently racist" seems to evince a form of racism that Hardt and Negri (2001:190-195) call 'modern racism', which is essentialist in the sense of attributing immutable qualities to people by virtue of having certain racial attributes, such as a specific skin colour. The view on the part of whites, that 'blacks are all demands but no effort' could be either an instance of such 'modern racism', or of what Hardt and Negri (2001:191-195) term 'postmodern racism' instead, where it is not skin colour that is regarded as essentially determining one's attributes, but the 'culture' you belong to: 'Once a Jew, always a Jew, once an Arab, always an Arab', and so on. (Needless to stress, although it cannot be pursued at present, a poststructuralist anthropology cannot accept such racial or cultural determinism, given its point of departure, that human subjects as linguistic beings are always capable of re-inscribing their complex, flexible 'identity' into other linguistic-cultural domains; see Olivier, 2009.) Whatever the case may be, such attitudes reflect differing cultural attitudes that, unless they can be modified (which will probably happen in the course of time), do not augur well for the prospects of a shared South African culture, where the accumulation of educational capital could draw on cultural values which prefigure a shared habitus on the part of students. This should be seen in conjunction with numbers 9 and 10, 'It's one or nothing', and 'Fit in or fly away', both of which emphasise beliefs regarding culture – either that culture is immutable and has to be accepted as such, or that the time has come for 'white culture' to change, combined with an uncompromising attitude on the part of both groups. Number 7 – 'Go big or go home' – also resonates with these beliefs.

Numbers 4 and 13 go together – 'Our time to eat' and 'Black is in, white is out' – are different sides of the same discursive thread. The first one represents whites' projection of their collective guilt for apartheid (even if individuals may not experience such guilt, they nevertheless know, unconsciously, that whites were responsible for it), while the second applies to both white and black parents' knowledge that the *status quo* in South Africa demands redress and recognition of indigenous culture. What this entails for the future is not necessarily a wholesale 'Africanisation' of culture in this country; with globalisation came an internationalisation of culture that has led (and is still giving rise to) hybridised cultures, often referred to as 'glocalisation' (Steger, 2003:70-76). The same applies here.

Numbers 8 and 14 are related in the same oppositional manner – whereas 'Everything must go' instantiates an intransigent stance on the part of black parents regarding so-called

'transformation', 'Don't let a foot in the door' indexes an equal measure of intransigence on the part of whites. Again, such mutual antagonism is not conducive to forging a common cultural milieu, with predictable consequences for divergent instances of habitus on the part of students, and the complication of cultural capital and the educational capital that draws on it at schools and universities.

Numbers 5, 6 and 11 – '...[A local upper middle-class suburb] rules the waves', "Spare the rod, spoil the child" and "Academics 'über alles'" – appear to represent resistance measures on the part of white parents, in an effort to confront black parents with non-negotiable aspects of the school's traditional cultural values, while the opposite is true of numbers 7 and 12 ('Go big or go home' and 'Racism starts at home'), which can be related to black parents' strategy to appropriate power at the school. This strategy validates Foucault's insight, that 'Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it' (Foucault 1972: 227).

What is evident from the above, is that 'South African culture' – if there is such a thing – is complex in a different way to that of France or Britain. In fact, one could even say that in South Africa, a country situated on the African continent, different – and at present, competing – cultures exist side by side, and while mutual cultural borrowing does unavoidably take place, these cultures (broadly western, or Euro-African, and African) are still distinct. To be sure, in a country like France this is also the case to a certain degree, but French citizens of African origin who have lived there for a generation or more have accepted French culture and speak French, although the more recent arrival of refugees from various African and middle-eastern countries has no doubt complicated the situation. The point is that it makes little sense to speak of 'cultural capital' in culturally heterogeneous South Africa (Olivier, 2004) in the same sense as in France, where there is a large degree of cultural homogeneity compared to South Africa, and where, to speak of 'more' or 'less' cultural capital has some meaning. But what about the idea of equality, which supposedly (albeit ambiguously) underpins that of democracy? To answer this question, one has to turn to the work of Jacques Rancière.

## 6. Rancière on Bourdieu, education and equality

Returning to Bourdieu's work on social inequality and education, his work has not escaped criticism of various kinds, such as Goldthorpe's (2007), which centres on his use of 'cultural capital' as not allowing for sufficient conceptual differentiation in his theory of social reproduction. One could further criticise his tendency to focus on university instead of school education, which means that the results of his investigation were predictable, because it was concentrated on a population from which (according to his own analysis) the academically less qualified students, or from a different perspective, the 'lower classes', have already been eliminated to a large extent, and not only because of lack of the requisite 'cultural capital', but of capital in the economic sense. The most trenchant criticism of his work has come from a fellow Frenchman, however, namely philosopher Jacques Rancière.

In his book, *The Philosopher and his Poor* (2004), Rancière draws a line from Plato through Marx and Sartre to Bourdieu, arguing that what Plato accomplished (and is reaffirmed by later thinkers) was to devise a discourse in which the origin, purity and legitimacy of philosophy as 'legislator' regarding truth and social divisions are established. The significance for Bourdieu's sociological science lies in Plato's notorious expulsion of the poet, artisan or worker from what philosophy claims for itself alone: what Rancière thinks of as the domain of fiction (Rancière, 2004:50-53). In practice this meant that (according to Plato) the philosopher, in the role of 'philosopher king', was/is the only one who has the right to articulate fictions, specifically the 'noble lie' about the 'natural' predispositions of citizens in terms of the 'metal' of their souls – gold, silver, bronze and iron (which correspond with

different classes of citizens) – an aristocratic lie that predetermined the class of the person concerned, about which Plato was surprisingly open, compared to later thinkers, including Marx, Sartre and Bourdieu, and that supposedly served the purpose of maintaining social order in the republic as he conceived of it (Rancière, 2004:17-21). But whether candid about ordering society by means of keeping the workers in their place or not, what Plato and these later thinkers shared, according to Rancière, is neatly summarised by Joseph Tanke (2011:31): '...science flourishes to the extent that workers remain subordinate to the master thinker'.

Rancière extends his critique of Plato to Bourdieu as well (2004:165-202), arguing that, by commencing with the assumption of existing inequalities, the latter manages, predictably, to uncover abundant signs of it in the social field. By scrupulously describing all the symbolic processes, ranging from cultural competitions to educational ceremonies, by means of which the upper classes maintain their hegemonic position in society, Bourdieu is merely confirming (and, despite his stated intention of providing a merciless critique of the class system) what everyone already knows: that those who are economically subjugated are simultaneously under the symbolic, cultural domination of the wealthy. Furthermore, according to Rancière, Bourdieu's sociological discourse transmutes what are in the final analysis arbitrary cultural distinctions into seemingly immutable social laws, proceeding in a way that reverses Plato's discursive procedure (Rancière, 2004:179):

The philosopher started from the arbitrary in order to reach necessity. The sociologist reaches necessity starting from the illusion of freedom. He proclaims that it is the illusion of their freedom that binds artisans to their places. The declared arbitrariness thus becomes a scientific necessity, and the redistribution of cards an absolute illusion....

To ensure his kingship, the sociologist for good measure rationalized, absolutized, the arbitrary.

In brief, Bourdieu's sociology, or what Rancière (2004: 215) does not hesitate calling "sociocracy", promotes the idea that the ideal of equality is a mere mirage. Even worse, for Rancière, is the fact that Bourdieu, the sociologist, usurps the throne of Plato's philosopher-king in the process, with the same claim of representing the legislative discourse concerning what Rancière calls the 'partitioning of the sensible' in the social domain. And again, as with Plato, it is the workers who are resolutely excluded from the sphere of culture and the creation of symbolic forms in art and literature.

For Rancière, despite appearances to the contrary, Bourdieu elevated the arbitrary nature of class domination to the level of necessity, and regarded the ideal of equality as an illusion. In his critique of Bourdieu, Rancière exposes the paradoxical logic at work in the processes of social reproduction described by him (Bourdieu), which can be summed up as claiming that schools exclude students by way of convincing people that they do *not* exclude them – that is, those who are jettisoned by the culturally 'loaded' system, do not have the means of comprehending the grounds for their exclusion. (Needless to stress, Rancière does not agree with this argument.) Furthermore, by arming themselves with the weapons of statistics and opinion polls, sociologists are playing with loaded dice, according to Rancière (2004: 168) – by the time sociologists arrive on the scene to interpret the results, statistics and economics have already produced evidence that schools 'eliminate' workers' children and 'promote' most of those from the bourgeoisie, and that every class of consumers "consumes whatever its revenue allows it to". Rancière comments on the work of Bourdieu and Passeron as follows (2004:172-173):

School...eliminates by dissimulating that it eliminates. Which of course implies another trick. In order to perfect the system, it must eliminate in order to dissimulate

the fact that it eliminates while pretending not to eliminate. Such is the function of the examination in this logic. It eliminates fundamentally those who do not take it, those who stop a few years before they reach it. It is the myth that allows those who do not go as far as applying its norm to themselves to recognize the destiny they deserve in the destiny of those it eliminates...

This, then, is how the case could be summarized: school makes the children of the common people believe that it welcomes them and their others with equal opportunities, that success and failure depend on personal *gifts* independent of social conditions. This dissimulation is simulated in the games of cultural charisma in which the teacher pretends to exercise his students in an aesthetic vision transcending the routine of school exercise...he attributes the charisma of gifts to those for whom culture has an existence beyond the walls of the school: those who own it by birthright and who are able to bring to the perception of the *je ne sais quoi* [elusive quality] the ease that characterizes their manners or their clothing.

What are we to make of this ironic 'summary' of Bourdieu's work by Rancière? In sum, although Bourdieu's sociology was apparently an attempt — undertaken at the time when France had a socialist government that was concerned about discrepancies in educational outcomes (Tanke, 2011:31) — to uncover and criticise the source of inequalities, it ended up declaring these inequalities as unchangeable, as far as Rancière is concerned. This cast Bourdieu in a worse light than Plato, who candidly admitted the fictional nature of his philosophical blueprint for class divisions in society: Bourdieu does nothing of the sort, but presents the unequal society fatalistically as immutable. Rancière himself has produced several works in which he challenges this supposed unassailability of inequality, promoting instead a powerful, if subtle, argument in favour of equality.

## 7. Education, inequality, ignorance and intellectual emancipation

How does one achieve the intellectual emancipation of students, or, for that matter, of anyone, including yourself? The answer most people would probably give to this question, is that it is done through education and learning. To be sure, but what one learns from the French philosopher, Jacques Rancière, is that a great deal depends upon one's conception of education and learning. What is education, and how does one learn? In short, does a student, who supposedly does 'not know', learn 'from' her or his teachers, who 'know' (as the dominant view on education asserts), and become intellectually emancipated along this avenue, or does such a movement towards intellectual liberation entail something entirely different, and counter-intuitive into the bargain? Here one has to focus on Rancière's argument concerning equality in learning, and show why it is so relevant for the time in which we live, which is marked by mind-boggling inequalities everywhere, particularly in South Africa (since South Africa replaced Brazil as the most unequal society in the world).

In a nutshell – which is difficult to do – Rancière argues that neither equality nor inequality is a condition that one can 'prove' to be the case once and for all; you cannot work towards it as a condition to be actualised, as one would 'normally' think. (Philosophical caveat: distrust everything that presents itself as 'normal' or self-justifying; chances are that it is ideology masquerading as common sense.) Instead, both of these concepts function as axioms or hypotheses to be validated or demonstrated, and therefore one of them invariably underpins one's approach to educating or teaching the young. So, for instance, conventional wisdom has it that the teacher 'knows' and the student does not; perfectly self-evident, we would all tend to think. If you happen to have studied the history of philosophy, you may already be inclined to be on your guard here, even before you have read Rancière, because Socrates believed that one cannot really claim to know much. The Socratic '*docta ignorantia*' (or 'learned ignorance'), which states that 'all one can know is how little one knows', and

therefore motivates an endless pursuit of knowledge, or better, wisdom, already warns one against too smug an acceptance that the teacher imparts what she or he knows to those who do not know – the ignorant.

But Rancière is even more radical than Socrates. Appealing to the ‘teaching practice’ of a 19th-century figure, Joseph Jacotot, in his book, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster – Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford, 1991:29-30), Rancière argues that Jacotot’s radical (if not desperate) experiment, to let students discover for themselves something they did not know, and he could not teach them, is an instantiation of a radical, emancipatory process of self-discovery which affirms the intellectual ‘equality’ of all individuals (regardless of gender, culture or race). Furthermore, this has far-reaching implications for social equality. There is a reason why I put intellectual ‘equality’ in scare quotes. Rancière is not claiming that everyone is equally ‘intelligent’ in the ‘measurable IQ’ sense of the term. What he is claiming, however, is that, just as every child sufficiently endowed with intelligence is capable of learning their mother tongue – the measure of intellectual capacity – so, too, every student or person is capable of discovering the meaning of diverse things for themselves by replicating the situation of acquiring their first language, that is, by listening, comparing, repeating, attempting and imitating. In short, every human being is capable of ‘making sense’ of something by themselves. Referring to his book (mentioned above), Rancière observes (2010:1):

It is...up to me to defend a most unreasonable position: That the most important quality of a schoolmaster is the virtue of ignorance. My book recounts the history of a teacher, Joseph Jacotot, who caused quite a scandal in Holland and France of the 1830s. He did so by proclaiming that uneducated people could learn on their own, without a teacher explaining things to them, and that teachers, for their part, could teach what they themselves were ignorant of...I would like to show...that it is not a matter of taking pleasure in paradox, but of fundamental inquiry into the meanings of knowledge, teaching and learning; not an amusing journey into the history of pedagogy, but a matter of timely philosophical reflection on the way in which pedagogical logic and social logic bear on each other.

That teaching can happen on the basis of ignorance is borne out by Jacotot’s experience in the early 19th century when he found himself in the position where he had to ‘teach’ a group of Flemish students French, of which they were ignorant. He, in turn, was ignorant of Flemish, but by a stroke of serendipity he discovered a bilingual novel, where Flemish and French correlated with each other. He instructed the students, through an interpreter, to read half of the book in French by using the Flemish translation, continually repeating for themselves what they had learnt, then to read the rest quickly, followed by commenting on it in French. To his amazement, by following his instruction they learnt sufficient French, all by themselves, to articulate their opinions very well.

What can one learn from this exercise in the pedagogy of not knowing, of ignorance? For Rancière it is an indication of the gulf that separates the pedagogy of ‘explication’ (or explanation) – which presupposes that the student is unequal to the teacher as far as knowledge goes – from the pedagogy of equality, or ignorance, where instead of explication, there is self-driven discovery and learning. Moreover, in the case of explication, which supposedly brings the student closer to the teacher, in equality, this chasm is never really negotiated, because every approximation of the teacher’s knowledge moves the goalposts to another level, involving yet another set of explanations. It becomes an infinite regress, and inequality is entrenched, not only in education, but in society as such. By contrast, the pedagogy of ignorance, where the teacher is at best a ‘guide’ of sorts, and where there is not a disjunction of intelligences, as with the pedagogy of explication, instantiates a relation of wills (that of the teacher and of the student) insofar as the teacher is an ‘authority’ only in the sense of inviting the student to harness her or his will to travel along a specific track. In so doing, Rancière (2010:2-3) reminds one that students are merely activating a ‘capacity’

that they already possess, as shown by the fact that, as infants, they acquired a ‘foreign language’ without any previous knowledge, and without a teacher to explain it to them.

You may wonder in what way this is more radical than Socratic ‘learned ignorance’. The Socratic ‘maieutic’ – a dialogic method of interrogating an interlocutor in order to aid them in finding knowledge within themselves (what Socrates did with the slave boy in Plato’s *Meno*) – is for Rancière a form of ‘stultification’, or blocking of a person’s intellectual emancipation by making him or her dependent on the teacher as master. In his words (1991:29): ‘The Socratic method is thus a perfected form of stultification. Like all learned masters, Socrates interrogates in order to instruct’. And elsewhere (2010:2): ‘Under the guise of creating a capacity, the [Socratic] maieutic aims, in fact, to demonstrate an incapacity’. Small wonder that societies, globally, are structured in such egregiously unequal, hierarchical terms – these hierarchies have their foundation in the widespread pedagogy of explanation, which presupposes an unbridgeable gulf between teacher and student, something that subsequently replicates itself in every other social relation. Rancière’s work, by contrast, is predicated on the axiom of equality, which he sets out to demonstrate as actualisable in his various works.

## 8. Conclusion

In light of the preceding discussion of the work of Bourdieu and Rancière on education, equality and inequality, this paper has demonstrated that, while the concepts of cultural capital, habitus and educational capital are highly relevant in the socio-economically stratified, but largely culturally homogenous French society, they are less applicable here, given the culturally heterogeneous structure of South African society. Furthermore, Rancière’s reflections on Bourdieu’s sociology as entrenching inequality, rather than offering an effective critique of it, pave the way for his radical endorsement of equality, particularly with regard to education. His affirmation of equality in relation to education is particularly significant for education in South Africa, given its emphasis, based on the work of Jacotot in 19th-century France, on the capacity of any human being (including students) to ‘teach themselves’, and on the principle of the teacher’s ‘ignorance’ – that is really a rejection of the hierarchical didactic model of ‘explication’, which rests on the assumption that the teacher ‘knows’ and the student does not. In contrast to this, Rancière emphasises the capacity of students to learn by themselves, while the teacher functions as a guide of sorts, who merely points them in the right direction. Needless to say, this approach is highly relevant in South Africa, where students come from widely divergent cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, and would benefit prodigiously from empowering themselves by using the means at their disposal, including libraries and the internet, as long as they have been ‘pointed in the right direction’. \*

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\*Some material in this paper was previously used in my blog-posts at the *Mail and Guardian's Thoughtleader* website, but has here been reconfigured and integrated into the present argument.