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Disruption and Disagreement Emancipation and Education in Clayton Christensen and Jacques Rancière

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Abstract

In this paper, I will examine the varying uses of the concept of disruption in education, with particular focus on its use by Clayton Christensen and other 'education reform' advocates on the one hand, and Jacques Rancière's ideas of dissensus and intellectual emancipation on the other. Despite the odd juxtaposition, the two ideas share deep similarities: both strive to democratize education through a structural shock to the status quo. However, I argue that it is more accurate to understand disruption rhetoric as technocratic in nature and deeply rooted in capitalism. Rancière's understanding of disruption as liberation reflects a deeper and more fundamental disturbance to the status quo. I conclude by discussing the insights these concepts provide into neoliberalism and possibilities for resisting it.



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In the past half-decade, the idea of “disruption” has attained a prolific place in our political and economic discourse. In the past the word connoted something unpleasant and best avoided, often in contexts such as disruptive students, traffic disruptions brought on by road work, or business disruptions caused by labor strikes. Those who effortlessly use the term today, however, mean it in a much more heroic sense: disruption is a process with emancipatory, even revolutionary, potential. It loosens the shackles of old forms and structures and overturns entrenched orders, forging something radically new in the process.

Considering this rhetoric of liberation, it may be surprising much of the new obsession with disruption comes not from some newly galvanized Left, but from the technocratic Center and Right, and it refers not to popular uprisings against a powerful elite but to new technology’s tendency to shred existing industries (and the collective bargaining agreements, communities, and ways of life that accompany them). At the vanguard of the disruption boom is Clayton Christensen, Kim B. Clark Professor of Business Administration at Harvard, who originally coined the term (with co-author Joseph Bower) in a 1995 article to describe the process by which certain new technologies displace existing ones – a process that usually involves initially smalltime upstarts (think Apple) knocking out established titans of the industry (Microsoft or IBM). Since the original publication of Christensen’s *The Innovator’s Dilemma* in 1997, however, the idea of disruption has taken on a life of its own – and one that stretches far beyond MBA programs or business bestseller lists.

For an idea that originally emerged in the academic management literature, disruption has acquired a startling level of mainstream cachet. Much of this prominence seems to be attached to its simultaneous simplicity, theory-of-everything explanatory power, and quasi-mystical quality. Sometimes it’s played for laughs: In one of the funniest scenes of the HBO series *Silicon Valley* a character goes into the desert and takes hallucinogenic drugs in an attempt to find inspiration for his startup company’s name, but ends up mumbling incoherent technology buzzwords – “We got a name! Infotrode Cloud-based, disruptive platforms. Disrupting the cloud through – I said cloud twice, shit” (Borghese & Turbovsky, 2014). Usually it’s not: when former *Yahoo! News* executive Guy Vidra took the helm of *The New Republic* in 2014, he took the mantle of disruptor by telling the magazine’s staff that he was there to “break shit and embrace being uncomfortable” as he transformed the journal into a “vertically-integrated digital media company” (within weeks, the century-old publication had imploded, with most of the staff resigning in protest after the editor was fired and the publication schedule changed) (Lizza, 2014). If you listen for it, disruption is thrown around in myriad other contexts as well, from news articles (for some time there was even a regular weekly column in the *New York Times* called “Disruptions”) to meetings with university administrators (Bilton, 2015).¹

Despite their dominance of the popular conversation, the new technocrats I’ve described above are not alone in their embrace of disruption. At least since Lefort (1988) famously defined democracy as the “dissolution of the markers of certainty,” another group of authors has

¹ The university administrator reference comes from personal experience: late in my graduate school education, the university I attended pushed through a massive program-wide restructuring with limited input from students or faculty. In exchange for a very modest increase in graduate stipends, they implemented a major increase in tuition while simultaneously cutting off funding for all Ph.D. students past their fifth year, irrespective of the field-specific availability of outside funding. In defending the decision, the dean of the graduate school acknowledged that the decision was – what else? – ‘disruptive.’

focused on disruption and a range of synonyms in a very different context (p. 19). Like the new technocrats' elevation of disruption in their model of technological progress and economics, these radical democrats place disruption at the center of their conceptions of democracy and the political. Against deliberative democrats who understand democracy as a rational, discursive process of opinion- and will-formation, authors like Wolin (1996) conceive of democracy as "a rebellious moment that may assume revolutionary, destructive proportions," while Rancière (2010) calls it "the complete absence of any entitlement to govern" (p. 43; p. 31). What radical democrats all share in common is an understanding of democracy as an *incursion* on the stable order of power – in other words, a *disruption* of politics as usual.

Are there any similarities between these two poles of "disruption"? This is the question I will explore in this paper, with a particular focus on one area that both the neoliberal center and the radical Left have viewed as a crucial arena of disruption: the classroom.

Despite their rhetoric of equity (and it is always "equity," never "equality") I argue that the disruptors are ultimately parties to the very sort of stultification (*abrutir*, literally "to make into a brute") that Rancière (1991) decries in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. If anything, the brutalizing power of disruptive education is even deeper and more entrenched than the pedagogies that Rancière targets—instead of a well-meaning project of social engineering, Christensen understands disruption to be an interlocking system with capitalism, one where schools serve fundamentally as adjuncts to the market. In this way, disruption falls within the broader regnant late capitalist ideology of neoliberalism, which envisions non-economized spheres (the political, the cultural) as frontiers to be colonized.

Despite their superficial similarities, the rupture at the heart of Rancière's project is put to very different ends. Strictly speaking, pedagogy is not the subject of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Rather, the classroom is staged as a site of what he calls "intellectual emancipation," the genuine enactment of equality (always "equality," never "equity") in a controlled setting. However, while Rancière uses education more as a motif than an object of study, both intellectual emancipation and his later formulation of "disagreement" (*la mésentente*) can be productively marshalled in a very different conceptualization of education as liberation.

The core of my argument, then, is that these two ideas of "disruption," juxtaposed against each other, offer a crucial framework for understanding our present condition. Each responds in a distinctive and parallel way to a world coming apart at the seams. Neither, however, attempts to stitch back together its fraying threads, but rather celebrates the ruptures emerging in the political and economic fabric. In this sense, they each offer both a critical lens and praxis for navigating neoliberalism.

However, while the disruptions of Christensen and Rancière are in this sense parallel, they are far from equivalent. Rather, they are mirror image responses to the deadening and atomizing effects of neoliberal capitalism—while Christensen celebrates its emancipatory potential for individual entrepreneurs or students (it is doubtful he would erect a strict division between these two categories), Rancière offers a model for resistance to the *abrutissement* of a purely functionalist education. To put it more plainly, Christensen offers a blueprint for embracing neoliberalism, while Rancière lays the groundwork for resisting it.

This paper progresses in five sections. In the first section, I will outline Christensen's theory of disruptive innovation and his specific application of the model to public education in the book *Disrupting Class*. In the second section, I will explore Rancière's conception of politics and

how it relates to the pedagogical method he introduces in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. In the third section, I will argue that despite their very different geneses, disruption and dissensus share deep structural similarities. Nevertheless, in the fourth section, I will set Christensen's and Rancière's understandings of disruption against each other, with a particular focus on *who* the disruptors are and the *direction* of the disruption: while both frame their visions of educational disruption as student-driven and revolutionary, Christensen ultimately urges hierarchical management in contrast to Rancière's anarchic self-direction. I will conclude by exploring the broader implications for leftist political thought, and specifically by discussing how "disruption" offers a fruitful way of understanding and resisting the hegemony of neoliberalism.

Disruptive Innovation and Emancipation

The original source of the current "disruption" craze is not difficult to trace. In 1995, Clayton Christensen and Joseph Bower co-authored an article in the *Harvard Business Review* entitled "Disruptive Technologies: Catching the Wave," a project Christensen expanded into a book called *The Innovator's Dilemma* in 1997. In those works (as well as a string of spin-offs that continue to roll off the presses on an approximately biannual schedule), Christensen and his co-authors divide technology into two categories, "sustaining technologies" and "disruptive technologies." While sustaining technologies "improve the performance of established products, along the dimensions of performance that mainstream customers in major markets have historically valued," disruptive technologies, though initially inferior in their performance, "are typically cheaper, simpler, smaller, and, frequently, more convenient to use" (Christensen, 2011b, p. xviii). Despite their initial limitations, these cheaper and simpler products will later become the only products that matter; as they improve, they will eventually be good enough to satisfy the market for the original product yet simple and accessible enough that a *new* market will have arisen for them as well. Unsurprisingly, this process is illustrated with the example of computers: in Christensen's telling, super computers were replaced by minicomputers, and minicomputers were eventually replaced by now-ubiquitous personal computers (Bower and Christensen, 1995, pp. 43-44). When established businesses fail, according to this analysis, it is usually because they have failed to anticipate the emergence of a disruptive technology that (ultimately) will make their own products obsolete.

Until recently, Christensen's theory of "disruption" was mostly limited in its application to the private sphere, and was specifically aimed at managers in technology-driven businesses (in addition the theory's putative explanatory power, books on disruptive innovation were also framed as how-to manuals for surviving technological change). This changed with the publication in 2008 of *Disrupting Class: How Disruptive Innovation Will Change the Way the World Learns*. In that book, Christensen and co-authors Michael B. Horn and Curtis W. Johnson argue that the thesis of *The Innovator's Dilemma* extends beyond the confines of for-profit corporations to the field of education – and, specifically, public education. In the same way that retailers like Sears failed to adapt to the rise of Amazon, public education is at risk of failing to adapt to the rise of online educational technologies. As in those industries, Christensen argues, online education represents a new and "disruptive" form of competition that (while inferior in the status quo) will inevitably upend the way that teachers teach and students learn.

With this new application of disruptive innovation, Christensen departed from the corporate boardroom and explicitly entered the public sphere. And while the idea of *emancipation* could only be applied figuratively to the theory in its original form, in the context of public education its liberating potential became explicit. There are three important ways in which this

disruption is framed as a project of emancipation. First, Christensen and his coauthors present disruptive innovation in the educational sphere specifically as a process that will be beneficial to disadvantaged students. While budgetary restrictions have traditionally ensured that the wealthiest schools are the best, the comparative cheapness and geographic flexibility of computer-based learning opens up high-quality and broad education to students who did not have access to it before. Second, the authors present the idea of disruption in public education as a process that effects a break in the “monolithic” nature of public education; instead of shoehorning every student into exactly the same pedagogical model, online education respects the diversity of learning styles and needs. Third, and perhaps most importantly, disruption – whether it is affecting a private company like Microsoft or a public institution like the educational system – entails interrupting our basic conceptions of quality. In other words, it “liberates” us from the rigid frameworks and assumptions that we use to evaluate the world around us – a powerful idea, particularly in the context of education. I will expand on each of these emancipatory features in turn.

The clearest sense in which “disruption” could be considered emancipatory is in its emphasis on improving education for economically disadvantaged students. Too many children, Christensen argues, are being left behind in the status quo, and this results in an educational system that reinforces social and economic inequalities. The primary way in which “disruption” will supposedly radically transform public education is through new online and digital pedagogical tools. These ostensibly will make broad and specialized curricula available to schools and students that do not have access to them at present – a dearth that has only been exacerbated by the simultaneous passage of the No Child Left Behind Act and diminished state funding for public education. According to Christensen, the contexts in which the disruption will initially pick up steam will be those areas – chiefly rural and urban school districts – where resources and demand (as well as political will) are too low to sustain offerings like art, advanced placement, or music courses (Christensen, 2011a, pp. 92-95). The drive to disrupt the status quo is not based on making money or simply improving overall educational quality, but on a desire to “ensure that all students have the skills and capabilities to escape the chains of poverty and have an all-American shot at realizing their dreams” (Christensen, 2011a, p. 38).²

Similarly, in a discussion of the book’s title, Christensen claims that “class” is an intentional double entendre, with “class” referring not only to the classroom but also to socioeconomic class:

...we say disrupting *class* with some intent. For some, class will mean social class. To you we would say that for too long and in far too many ways our system of schooling has best served those who hail from homes where parents were themselves well schooled and who support their children with adequate resources and experiences. Class also is the venue in which most of our attempts at education take place. In many ways, what goes on in these classes profoundly affects social class, for good and for ill. Our nation has embarked on a commitment to educate *every* child. No nation has ever sought to do that. The societal stakes in improving our schools are high (Christensen, 2011a, pp. v-vi).

² *Disrupting Class* is replete with the language of American Exceptionalism, including the curiously ahistorical claim cited below that U.S. is the only country ever to strive for universal education.

Disruption, then, should not only effect a change in the way that subjects are taught, but also in the basic power structure of society; new technology, according to Christensen, is capable of upending some of the structural advantages built into the educational system. The overall message is that the crisis in American education is one that disproportionately affects the poor. The system that is producing the crisis, the authors tell us, is begging for disruption.

Christensen emphasizes repeatedly that the mode of education being “disrupted” by online and computer-based curricula is an old and *monolithic* pedagogy: “the current educational system – the way it trains teachers, the way it groups students, the way the curriculum is designed, and the way the school buildings are laid out – is designed for standardization” (Christensen, 2011a, p. 37). In contrast to the traditional American educational model, online learning is designed to be maximally personalized, tailored to the particular ways in which individual students learn. The authors refer to the type of pedagogy enabled by technology “student-centric,” with computer programs monitoring progress and constantly adapting to types of lessons that work and those that don’t with the students using them. At the same time, teachers will shift from being lecturers at the front of the room to “learning coaches and tutors to help students find the learning approach that makes the most sense for them” (Christensen, 2011a, p. 107). This system eventually will be infinitely customizable and expandable, “modular” in a similar way to Linux operating systems or IKEA furniture.

But disruptive innovation also claims the emancipatory mantle in a more fundamental way. Disruption, whether it occurs in an educational setting or in the market for mechanical shovels, is premised on a basic restructuring of our conceptions (at least as they relate to the product or service in question). “Disruptive innovations take root in simple, undemanding applications in what...is a new plane of competition – where the very definition of what constitutes quality, and therefore what improvement means, is *different* from what quality and improvement meant” before (Christensen, 2011a, p. 47). Education disruption entails the creation of something that is new, and insofar as it aims at the very foundations of the educational system (from pedagogy to the architectural design of schools, with their boxed-in and separated classrooms), its goals are radical.

Disruptive innovation in public education not only can improve the educational performance of disadvantaged students, in Christensen’s view, but also free us from stifling conceptions of what education is “about.” Our old ideas about what it meant to be a good teacher or to receive a good education, according to this analysis, has been shaped as much by stifling and closed-minded habits – as well as a powerful educational establishment – as any accurate judgment about quality. This picture of educational change as gestalt shift calls to mind another, more explicitly radical notion of disruption and upheaval: the political and educational theory of Jacques Rancière.

A Different Model of Disruption

An idea analogous to disruption has recently gained currency on the academic Left: dissensus or disagreement (from the French *mésentente*, occasionally transliterated as disagreement), an idea most closely associated with Jacques Rancière. Unlike disruption, disagreement refers more directly to a state of affairs than to a dynamic process, and (rather than being episodic) disagreement is the norm. Rancière (2004) describes disagreement as a “speech situation...in which one of the interlocutors at once understands and does not understand what the other is saying” (p. x). This does not refer to simple misunderstanding—“the conflict between one who says white and another who says black”—but “the conflict between one who says white and

another who also says white but does not understand the same thing by it or does not understand that the other is saying the same thing in the name of whiteness” (p. x). Political disagreement (the species that most concerns Rancière) constitutes “an extreme form... where X cannot see the common object Y is presenting because X cannot comprehend that the sounds uttered by Y form words and chains of words similar to X’s own” (p. xii).

The relation between disagreement and disruption stems from its place and significance in Rancière’s understanding of politics and democracy. At various points he describes politics as a break, a rupture, or *dissensus* emerging in the logic of the *arkhê* (a word he adopts from Greek to denote the social order that determines rule), the partition of the sensible, or the police order.³ At the most basic level, Rancière’s version of disruption is a reordering of status quo disagreement, with those who were unrecognized as possessors of *logos* “making themselves of some account,” a process he considers the essence of politics:

Politics does not exist because men, through the privilege of speech, place their interests in common. Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account, setting up a community by the fact of placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation, the contradiction of two worlds in a single world: the world where they are and the world where they are not, the world where there is something “between” them and those who do not acknowledge them as speaking beings who count and the world where there is nothing (Rancière, 2004, p. xii).

While *mésentente* is present in any *police* order – with an established and enforced *arkhê* determining who is fit and unfit to participate, who is a speaking being and who is only an animal in possession of *phonê* – *politics* only occurs episodically in the moment of dissensus. In *Disagreement*, Rancière memorably uses the example of the quasi-mythical 494 B.C.E. “secessions of the plebs” chronicled in Livy’s *History of Rome*: “Livy is incapable of supplying the meaning of the conflict because he is incapable of locating [Roman consul] Menenius Agrippa’s fable in its real context: that of a quarrel over the issue of speech itself” (p. 23). When plebeians made political claims and Roman officials responded to them, they were creating a rupture in the “partition of the sensible”: while the plebs were previously understood to be making sounds, now they were implicitly recognized as speaking beings.

Among Rancière’s most important writings on disruption is *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), a text that contains in chrysalis many of the ideas that would later appear in his more explicitly political works. As the title suggests, however, here Rancière uses schooling as a way of understanding equality and what he calls “intellectual emancipation.” If the lesson of *Disagreement* is that political emancipation entails breaking the idea of fitness to rule, the lesson of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is that intellectual emancipation entails breaking the idea of fitness to *teach*. In the book, Rancière offers a free-wheeling interpretation of the philosophy of the nineteenth century Walloon educator Joseph Jacotôt. Jacotôt had been tasked with the unenviable task of teaching a group of Flemish-speaking students despite not speaking the language himself. His solution was to simply give his students a copy of the novel *Télémaque* with side-by-side French and Flemish text and have them learn French on their own, a move that was apparently

³ All of these terms are used in ‘Ten Theses on Politics,’ one of the best introductions to Rancière’s political thought. To avoid confusion, I will use ‘dissensus’ for the remainder of this paper (Rancière, 2010).

successful (Citton, 2010, pp. 26-29). Rancière concludes from this that the very idea of an instructor standing in front of pupils and lecturing is not only unnecessary, but also undermines the struggle for equality – and that *disrupting* that relationship is a liberatory act:

The duty of Joseph Jacotôt's disciples is thus simple. They must announce to everyone, in all places and all circumstances, the news, the practice: one can teach what one doesn't know. A poor and ignorant father can thus begin educating his children: *something must be learned and all the rest related to it, on this principle: everyone is of equal intelligence* (Rancière, 1991, p. 101).

In the same way that moments of dissensus like the plebeians' secession on Aventine Hill overturn the concept of *arkhê* – suggesting that democracy is precisely that mode of government for which the *arkhê* is premised on a *lack* of qualification – equal intelligence overturns the concept of expertise, democratizing education itself.

Since the turn of the new century, Rancière has become one of the most widely cited and influential authors in political theory, and summarizing the entirety (or even a significant portion) of this literature would be impossible in this space. I do, however, want to emphasize two themes that are prevalent across the secondary literature. First, both Rancière himself and the secondary literature have emphasized his theory as a *rejection* of the idea of political philosophy (See e.g. Deranty, 2003). In this understanding, all hitherto political theory is ultimately an exercise in “passive equality,” instead of the *active* equality that Rancière offers to us (May, 2008). In many respects, Rancière's own theory is just the sort of disruption that he places at the core of politics: words like “democracy,” “emancipation,” and (crucially) “politics” break radically from their conventional meanings – to the extent that his specialized uses of the terms has been derided by some critics as “pure politics” (shorn of any insight into the material basis of the political) or too narrow to be useful (See Žižek, 2006, and Hewlett, 2008).

Second, much of the secondary literature has stressed the continuity between Rancière's explicitly political thought and his work on education in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Chambers (2013) explicitly echoes this centrality in the title of *The Lessons of Rancière*, because “his claims about ‘lessons,’ his arguments about teaching and pedagogy, prove fundamental to his project” (p. 4). Similarly, Biesta (2011) extends the notion of an “ignorant schoolmaster” to a general democratic subject identifying as an “ignorant citizen”: in the same way that intellectual emancipation requires a teacher who does not claim authority, political emancipation requires citizens who do not claim to know in advance what makes a good citizen. Elsewhere, Biesta and Bingham (2010) also explicitly links Rancière's education project with the radical *newness* of his political one: while there had previously been a binary opposition between emancipator and emancipated, Rancière collapses them together; intellectual and political emancipation subvert static conceptions of subjectivity, something the authors argue is a break from the history of political and social thought (pp. 27-35).

In what follows, I will dispute this characterization of Rancière's thought as a fundamental break from our understandings of politics or education. Instead of something radically new, I will present Rancière's dissensus (as well as Christensen's disruption) as a species of a larger theme in political and social thought that Eisenstein and McGowan (2012) call “rupture”: a traumatic breaking or tearing apart of the status quo. But first, the next two sections will make explicit the parallels I have so far alluded to between Christensen and Rancière.

Disruption and Disagreement I: Rupture, Incommensurability, and Surprise

Considering their dramatically different theoretical contexts, it might be natural to assume that these two “models” of disruption and education have little to nothing to do with each other – and in certain ways they are indeed worlds apart. At a superficial level, their lack of interaction is observable: neither Rancière nor Christensen has ever cited the other, and indeed there is no evidence that either is aware of the other’s existence. Comparisons in the secondary literature have been similarly scant. Only a handful of publications cite both authors, and in most cases the citations come in unrelated sections with no direct comparison between the two (see e.g. van Mourik et al., 2014, McNamara, 2013, and Pang, 2012).

More deeply, there is a striking lack of intellectual pedigree between the two authors. After traveling to South Korea on a Mormon mission, Christensen received his bachelor’s degree in economics from Brigham Young University, followed by an M.Phil. in applied econometrics from Oxford (on a Rhodes Scholarship) and an MBA from Harvard Business School. Before returning to HBS to earn a DBA and (the same year) join the school’s faculty, he was a White House Fellow in the Reagan Administration and a management consultant with the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) (Biography n.d., ClaytonChristensen.com). From the start, Christensen’s career has been marked by his association with institutions and sectors that are deeply entangled with the political Right and center-Right: the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the Republican Party, the financial services industry, and business academia.

Just as deeply as Christensen’s thought is connected to the American Right, Rancière’s is rooted in the French Left. As a student of the Marxist theorist Louis Althusser, Rancière contributed an introductory essay to *Reading Capital*, the central text of arguably the most influential school of Western Marxism of the late twentieth century (Chambers, 2013, pp. 35-36). While he would eventually break with his mentor, that break was precipitated by Rancière’s sense that Althusser was not radical *enough*. Rancière came to believe that Althusser was too elitist to appreciate the radical potential of movements like the 1968 Paris uprising, and that Althusserian Marxism was based on a rigid “politics of order” (an idea that would later be echoed in his influential distinction between “politics” and “police”) (Sayers, 2004). So why, then, have I put these two ideas together at all?

While disruption and dissensus are in many ways sharply contrasting theoretical models, I want to call attention to the ways in which both models respond to structurally similar conditions of contemporary capitalism, and specifically to the material and ideological system of neoliberalism (which I will discuss in more detail below). For Christensen, contemporary capitalism is distinguished from previous epochs by a heightening of competition, with no industry, career, or even way of life safe from the rapid and unexpected transformations wrought by capital—akin to what Milton Friedman called “the competitive order”: an economic and social system in which competition has extended itself beyond the traditional market to shape individual lives on a wider and more fundamental basis (Friedman, 1951, p. 7).⁴ According to Christensen, disruptive innovation is not only a prescriptive framework for succeeding in that order, but also a clear-eyed description of the field on which we all are forced to play. As Christensen wrote in the original article on disruptive technologies, disruption is an inexorable process of capitalism: only

⁴ Christensen believes that disruptive innovation is applicable to earlier stages of capitalism, as well. However, his model is technologically driven and most of his examples are from the 1980s to the present.

those “that understand this process can create new businesses to replace the ones that must inevitably die” (Bower and Christensen, 1995, p. 53). “Riding the wave,” as the subtitle of his 1995 article puts it, is the only option in the face of a market that will never stop tightening and churning.

Rancière similarly writes in reaction to the forces of late capitalism. Instead of focusing on the inevitable shocks of capitalist production, however, he emphasizes the ways in which these processes erase politics. Rancière (2010) associates these ideas with the putative “consensus” rung in by neoliberal triumphalists like Francis Fukuyama after the fall of the Soviet Union, a consensus whose “essence lies in the annulment of dissensus as separation of the sensible from itself, in the nullification of surplus subjects, in the reduction of the people to the sum of the parts of the social body and of the political community to the relations between the interests and aspirations of these different parts” (p. 42). The possibility of dissensus—and so of politics itself—is increasingly submerged by a homogenized public where there is no alternative to markets and militarism.

Both Christensen and Rancière, then, offer means of responding to the unyielding strictures of neoliberalism. Moreover, both of their models are prescriptive, and specifically understandings of what it would mean to be *free* under late capitalism. This prescriptive element is particularly apparent in both authors’ analysis of schooling. This emphasis on liberation emerges in both the educational methods themselves—both of which are intended to promote a sort of autonomy for the student—as well as in the explicit attention each pays to *democracy* as in some way the purpose of education. In other words, each of these models offers a vision of emancipation, albeit in very different ways.

Both Christensen’s and Rancière’s educational disruptions are centered on a restructuring of the relation between teacher and student. For Christensen, disruption will occur in such a way that teachers and administrators are disempowered relative to students, who will be afforded new and individualized methods of learning. As I discussed above, Christensen (2011a) envisions educators becoming “professional learning coaches and content architects to help individual students progress,” where teachers will serve as “a guide on the side, not a sage on the stage” (p. 39). In these classrooms of the future, students direct their own education, albeit with technological mediation (which he refers to specifically as “student-centric technology”) (p. 11-12).

This reimagined role for the instructor, from omniscient master to ignorant schoolmaster, is even more prevalent in the methods pioneered by Jacotôt, the main inspiration behind *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. The “intellectual emancipation” referred to in that book’s subtitle is a liberation from an authoritarian teacher and the system of thought that assumes his necessity. Rancière’s critique of traditional education has strong echoes of Christensen’s (2011a) critiques of the “factory model” of education, which fails according to the latter because “the way it trains teachers, the way it groups students, the way the curriculum is designed, and the way the school buildings are laid out – is designed for standardization” (p. 37). Here is Rancière (1991) using similar language:

The child *advances*. He has been taught, therefore he has learned, therefore he can forget. Behind him the abyss of ignorance is being dug again. But here’s the amazing part: from now on the ignorance is someone else’s. What he has forgotten, he has surpassed... This is the genius of the explicators: they attach the creature they have rendered inferior with the strongest chains in the land of stultification – the child’s consciousness of his own superiority (pp. 21-22).

The role of the teacher under intellectual emancipation, on the other hand, is simply to “interrogate” and “verify,” and that more passive task demands *ignorance* rather than expertise: “Is a highly skilled, very learned master necessary to perform this? On the contrary, the learned master’s science makes it very difficult for him not to *spoil* the method” (p. 29).

Beyond the classroom itself, both Rancière and (at least ostensibly) Christensen also frame their educational projects as ones with democratic ends. On the first page of the introduction to *Disrupting Class*, Christensen lists “facilitating a vibrant, participative democracy in which we have an informed electorate that is capable of not being ‘spun’ by self-interested leaders” as one of four basic aspirations of public education in the United States (p. 1). He traces this idea to Thomas Jefferson and Noah Webster, who believed that “basic education needed to be universal...so that all citizens could participate in the democracy” (p. 52). Even beyond the role of knowledge, Christensen writes (in the course of an argument disputing the purpose of geographically organized secondary schools) that “one of the basic jobs for which society hires primary schools is to foster democracy by assimilating people into their communities and allowing people from all sorts of backgrounds to mix,” suggesting that a degree of democracy is also necessary *within* the classroom itself (p. 222).

While Rancière uses the term “democracy” in a much more nuanced and specific way than does Christensen, it is intrinsic to his project. The idea of intellectual emancipation elaborated in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is premised on the radically democratic principle of “equal intelligence.” From this assumption, the task of education becomes “not to create scholars,” but “to raise up those who believe themselves inferior in intelligence,” to “make emancipated and emancipating men” (pp. 101-102). Moreover, as Chambers (2013) has written, intellectual emancipation is central to Rancière’s overall political project: the subjectivation that is central to dissensus only occurs when the uncounted enact themselves as speaking subjects – a sense of equality that is predicated on a *lack* of qualifications and ranks is instantiated when we stage democracy as much as it is when we teach from ignorance (pp. 4, 42-43).

While these similarities are important, a critic might well dismiss them as incidental. Whether Christensen’s bland Jeffersonianism and Rancière’s revolutionary praxis are both species of the same thing called “democracy” on more than a rhetorical level is debatable to say the least (and indeed, I will take the negative side of that debate in the next section). However, there is also an even deeper resonance between disruption and dissensus, namely in their respective embrace of disorder.

Chambers (2013) refers to this chaotic element in Rancière as a “capacity for surprise,” a sense which he considers to be a unique feature of his work (p. 5). Chambers argues that both liberalism and empirical political science are premised on the tidy ordering of the future. Liberalism, he writes, is committed to “a framework in which all problems, issues, conflicts can be resolved, sorted out, and contained,” while political science (and social sciences more generally) regularly adjudicate their quality according to their “predictive power” (pp. 7-8). Rancière, on the other hand, is premised on the radical contingency that marks moments of revolution, which is fundamentally marked by the emergence of new subjectivities – an event that “is intelligible as such only *after* the moment of politics” (p. 9). While the study of politics has traditionally sought to eradicate the unknowable, Rancière embraces it as the very definition of the political.

As I discussed above, Christensen frames disruptive innovation as a theory with (sometimes comically precise) predictions of its own. At a deeper level, however, disruption is a process that is inherently built on unpredictability. While Christensen believes that he can forecast the patterns that disruption will follow, the disruptions themselves are often invisible until the moment of their arrival. Watch any episode of *Star Trek* (whose 23rd century features data stored on tapes and computers speaking in a robotic monotone) and you will be struck by the sometimes humorous inaccuracy of our own predictions of technological change. But deeper still, the types of innovations to which the new technocrats ascribe disruptive power are hidden from the view of status quo actors by structural blind spots. The manufacturers of mini-computers couldn't predict the emergence of personal computers because they did not resemble what they were predisposed to expect. Disruptions are most devastating precisely when there are motivations for companies to operate in a way that depends on predictability:

The question people always ask is, "How in the world could these companies not see the train wreck coming?" They certainly do not lack resources like money or technological expertise. What they do lack, however, is the motivation to focus sufficient resources on the disruption. Why is this? In the years when the companies must commit to the innovation, disruptions are unattractive to the leaders because their best customers can't use them, and they promise lower profit margins. Therefore, investment dollars are always more likely to go toward next-generation sustaining innovations instead of toward disruptive ones. (Christensen 2008, p. 50)

Disruptions are disruptive precisely *because* they surprise. Christensen's theory trains its audience not so much to accurately foresee them, as it does to be prepared to *adapt* to their inevitable (and fundamentally unpredictable) effects.

Disruption and disagreement II: Democracy and Authoritarianism

Christensen and Rancière are operating on similar conceptual terrain. Why, then, is Christensen's disruption terrifying while Rancière's is emancipatory? First, while Rancière gives a distinctive place to democracy, Christensen explicitly relegates democracy to an almost useless "cultural" management technique. Second, and more subtly, the process of disruption in Christensen relies on pseudo-natural laws of supply and demand rather than the agency of the disruptors themselves; while Rancière credits disruption to the active revolt of oppressed people through the medium of language, for Christensen it is a neutral process that is caused by capital's perpetual drive toward efficiency. Ultimately, despite its emancipatory sheen, Christensen's disruption more resembles the conventional, celebratory version of Schumpeter's (2008) "creative destruction" than it does any politics of liberation (pp. 81-85).

The place of democracy is clear from the beginning in Rancière's work, although his specific definition of democracy – and his equation of it with politics per se – is initially counterintuitive. For Rancière (2010), democracy is "the very regime of politics itself," entailing not simply a system of government where people vote for their leaders but "a rupture in the logic of the *arkhê*," where "there is no principle for dividing up of roles" (p. 31). Unlike any other regime (or "police order" as Rancière calls them to distinguish them from politics), democracy is founded on the idea that there is *no* qualification to rule, "the absence of entitlement that entitles one to exercise the *arkhê*" (p. 31). Democracy and politics are episodic interruptions to orders of domination:

Political demonstration makes visible that which had no reason to be seen; it places one world in another – for instance, the world where the factory is a public space in that where it is considered private, the world where workers speak, and speak about the community, in that where their voices are mere cries expressing pain (p. 38).

It is in this insistence on total interruptions in power structures – incursions upon the powerful from positions of subalterity – as the essence of politics that Rancière can accurately be characterized as a radical democrat. True to the etymology of “radical,” Rancière’s democracy acts upon the very roots of the polity.

The radical democracy of disagreement comes in sharp distinction to the technocratic triumphalism of Christensen’s disruption. While the original idea of disruption is premised on individual consumers’ behavior undermining the old guard of blue chip corporations, in general his work is aimed at bosses who wish to *anticipate* disruption rather than the disruptors themselves: “unless top managers actively manage this process, their organization will shape every disruptive innovation into a *sustaining* innovation – one that fits the processes, values, and economic model of the existing business – because organizations *cannot* naturally disrupt themselves” (Christensen, 2011a, p. 75). This is no different in the context of public education, where Christensen explicitly targets his arguments at superintendents and political leaders – and urges them to embrace undemocratic means as a way of “reforming” public education. In his theory of political and organizational action, Christensen divides the field of possible tactics into four types of “tools of cooperation”: leadership tools, culture tools, management tools, and power tools. According to his model, the effectiveness of each of these tools varies according to the degree to which there is antecedent agreement about goals and causality. What emerges is a four-by-four matrix, with the various tools sorted according to the “extent to which people agree on cause and effect” (X-axis) and the “extent to which people agree on what they want” (Y-axis) (Christensen, 2008, p. 187).

Along with such incongruous matches as folklore, religion, and apprenticeship, democracy is sorted into the top right corner of the matrix with culture tools, and because it relies on broad antecedent consensuses on causality and goals, Christensen dismisses it as a pointless exercise that can only serve to reinforce the status quo. “What is worse,” Christensen tells us, “like all the tools in the matrix’s culture quadrant, democracy is not an effective tool for radical change” (p. 192). And public schools, he argues, are unlikely to be amenable to democratic change, as the “democracy tool wasn’t designed to deliver consensus in the face of the fractious debates that characterize school board meetings” (p. 193). Instead of seeking the approval of constituents for sweeping changes to public institutions, Christensen argues that politicians and school leaders should use coercive power directly, using tools such as firing teachers and principals, full-scale putsches against school boards, and school takeovers and closures (p. 193).⁵ Unlike in Rancière, democracy (at least in a deeper sense) has no central place in Christensen’s version of disruption – and in fact may be antithetical to it.

Even when authoritarian managers (slashing labor contracts and unilaterally doing what must be done) don’t take center stage, disruption is a process that results from utterly faceless market processes rather than any kind of social movement. This second angle on disruption is no

⁵ Curiously, much of this explicitly anti-democratic language was excised from the ‘updated and expanded’ edition of *Disrupting Class* released in 2011.

more democratic than the first, and is similarly distinct from Rancière’s concept of disagreement. Although Christensen assigns top managers the task of adjusting to disruption, disruption itself is a process that he views as inevitable, simply built into the process of technological change and market demand. At the point that a disruptive technology emerges, there is no way to put the genie back in the bottle; everyone will eventually want to use the product, and the original industry (in this case the public school) will crumble into obsolescence. Moreover, the precise moment at which this will occur – when the disruptive technology will replace the old industry – is something that is almost inscribed in the laws of nature, following an S-curve (in which adoption starts slow, but abruptly booms to be the dominant force in the market).⁶ All of this occurs simply because the new technology is fulfilling a market role, supplying a product for which there was latent demand.

Again, this comes in sharp distinction to Rancière’s democratic vision. Dissensus emerges in the face of disagreement when humans who were unrecognized make demands upon the powerful that require a response; it is fundamentally shaped by agents whose non-agency was taken for granted by others. Disruptive innovation, on the other hand, emerges simply as a productive process, with the efficient and invisible hands of supply and demand effecting a conclusion that was (at least on aggregate) outside the control of anyone. Where disruptive innovation is not a story of authoritarian control, it is simply a story of late capitalist contingency.

Conclusion: Education, Disruption, and Neoliberalism

Over the last several years, “neoliberalism” has been increasingly used as a broad descriptor of late capitalist ideology. While it had previously been confined to the academic left, it has increasingly migrated to popular discourse, where it has been used to describe the ideological base behind everything from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and Clintonism to Uber and *Hamilton* (see e.g. Chodor, 2016; Henwood, 2015; Nichols, 2016). Revulsion with neoliberalism has been credited with a range of political shocks on both the Left and Right, including the strong performance of Bernie Sanders in the 2016 Democratic Party presidential primaries, Britain’s “Brexit” vote to leave the European Union, and, of course, the stunning victory of Donald Trump in the 2016 U.S. election (see e.g. Rehmann, 2016; Aschoff, 2016; Jessop, 2017).

Scholarly attention has increased, as well, with Brown’s (2015) *Undoing the Demos* a particularly insightful addition to the literature. Examining the topic through Foucault’s *Lectures on Biopolitics*, Brown describes neoliberalism “not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life and construes the human itself exclusively as *homo oeconomicus*” (p. 176). This version of neoliberalism extends beyond trade agreements or election campaigns. It serves not only as a set of capital-friendly policy proposals, but as the master ideology of late modernity.

That very conceptual flexibility and power has, however, led some critics to dismiss the term as meaningless. These critiques have ranged from popular liberal bloggers like Jonathan Chait, who suggested that “if every use of ‘neoliberal’ was replaced with, simply, ‘liberal’” no “non-propagandistic meaning [would] be lost” (Robin, 2016); to libertarian economists like Bernstein (2014), who asserts that neoliberalism “is one of those words that when [he] see[s] it

⁶ Christensen’s precise theory is that the point at which a technology will take over an industry can be predicted by scaling the S-curve logarithmically, ‘so that .0001 [percent of market share], .001, .01, .1, 1.0, and 10.0 are all equidistant.’ If the points on curve form a straight line over time, then a disruptive innovation is occurring and it is possible to visualize the moment of the takeover (Christensen 2011, pp. 98-99).

used, [he] know[s] that the author is hostile to the concept he purports to be describing”. For the critics, “neoliberalism” as a theoretical construct has been stretched beyond its breaking point, and in the process has become indeterminate.

Even Brown acknowledges that neoliberalism “is a loose and shifting signifier,” one that “has no fixed or settled coordinates, that there is temporal and geographical variety in its discursive formulations, policy entailments, and material practices” (p. 20). Moreover, she writes, “neoliberalism is a term mainly deployed by its critics, and hence its very existence is questionable” (ibid.). Despite its ubiquity on the Left (and even, increasingly, on the far Right) and the wide explanatory value it has as the dominant ideology of late capitalism, neoliberalism is a concept so contested that some critics doubt that it even exists. Should we simply abandon it completely, then?

I believe that the idea of disruption sheds important light on the concept of neoliberalism, and that its contrast with Rancière’s disagreement offers a fruitful path for enacting democracy under contemporary capitalism. With Christensen’s discussions of disruption, we have an account from a neoliberal partisan outlining the ideal operation of the capitalist market, and one that explicitly celebrates its tendency to shred the stability and certainty of the lives of workers. It is an account that models teachers as employees and students and consumers, and one that very clearly chooses the hierarchical control of capital over the uncertainty of democracy to achieve its aims.

Moreover, the contrast with Rancière offers a theoretical model for resisting neoliberalism in the classroom. Against a new order that increasingly understands education to serve no social function beyond preparing future private sector employees and entrepreneurs, he offers a version of pedagogy that is built on a radical understanding of equality and emancipation: schools are not the grounds for lubricating the engine of capitalism, but for enacting an egalitarianism that is antithetical to it.

This paper, then, offers both an analysis of and the beginnings of a means of resistance to neoliberalism, and in doing so renders a particularly advanced form of neoliberalism concrete and intelligible. While the scope of this paper is much narrower than Brown’s or other recent analyses of neoliberalism, I hope that I have at least offered a salvo against those who are exhilarated by neoliberalism in the name of those who are terrorized by it.

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