

Jacques Rancière's Epistemological Analysis of Louis Althusser's Structural Marxism and Its Implications for Character Education at St. Thomas 1 High School, Medan

Benediktus Sipandi Ginggar¹, Petra Putri Sarinah Pandiangan²
SMA St Thomas 1 Medan¹, Universitas Negeri Medan²

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Jacques Rancière's rejection of Althusser's concept of interpretation in epistemological rupture, and explores its implications for character education at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan. Rancière's critique stems from his rejection of hierarchical epistemological structures in the dichotomy between science and ideology. For Rancière, this approach constrains the division of social aesthetics of class outside of power as an ideological object, rather than as an autonomous political subject. By connecting this epistemological critique to the practice of character education, this paper argues that Rancière's principle of epistemic equality provides a theoretical foundation for building more inclusive and emancipatory learning environments. At SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan, character education that is grounded in critical reflection, autonomous thinking, and the equal recognition of all students as active moral agents aligns with Rancière's post-structural vision. The author uses a qualitative hermeneutic method to analyze primary works of Rancière and Althusser and relate them to current educational practice. Results affirm that the interpretation of Marxism must be grounded within social aesthetics, and that this framework offers a progressive, emancipatory model for character formation in secondary schools.

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Corresponding Author:

Benediktus Sipandi Ginggar

SMA St Thomas 1 Medan

email: sipandinedos@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx's discourse on thought has been subject to various interpretations, giving rise to various debates, particularly in epistemological discourse. This debate arises because the thinking of the young and mature Marx has significantly different epistemological foundations. This difference in epistemological foundations was viewed by philosopher Louis Althusser as a form of "epistemological rupture."¹ Althusser's claim implicates the interpretation of Marxism in the tradition of structuralist thought. Althusser attempts to interpret Marxism by first highlighting the "historical object." Althusser finds evidence that the epistemological break with Marx's thought occurred because of his youthful influence with Hegel.

For Althusser, Marx interpreted Hegel's thesis on historical dialectics as the initial foundation of materialist thought. This evidence of Marx's influence on Hegel's thought became the primary object of intervention to determine the epistemological foundation of the young Marx. This intervention confirms Althusser's interpretation that the young Marx

possessed a historical and philosophical foundation of thought rooted in Hegel's idealism/humanism.

Althusser's interpretation was rejected by his own student, Jacques Rancière. Rancière's rejection stemmed from the belief that Althusser's epistemological foundation no longer contained a structural driving principle. Instead, Althusser reduced class struggle to a mere effect of the reproductive mechanism.³ Rancière criticizes Althusser's thesis of ideology for failing to consider the existence of class struggle in the unity of its fundamental elements.

This epistemological debate between Rancière and Althusser is not only relevant in the discourse of philosophy and social theory but also has rich implications for contemporary educational practice. One interesting context to study is character education at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan—a private Catholic educational institution long committed to the holistic development of students' character. This school, with its strong humanistic and religious values, faces the challenge of creating a character education process that is not only top-down and structural, but also able to encourage autonomy, critical reflection, and the active participation of each student as an equal moral subject.

Rancière's critique of Althusser's epistemological elitism reveals an important insight: that the process of knowledge formation—including character formation—should not be dominated by a single authority that considers itself the only party capable of defining moral truth. In the context of SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan, this means that authentic character education must involve each student as an active moral agent, not simply an object receiving values predetermined from above.⁴

This study aims to critically analyze the epistemological dimensions of the debate between Rancière and Althusser, and relate it to the practice of character education at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan. This study aims to demonstrate that Rancière's principles of emancipation and epistemic equality can serve as a strong theoretical foundation for designing character education that is more inclusive, participatory, and oriented towards the development of students' moral autonomy.

2. METHOD

This work was written using a qualitative philosophical research method.⁵ The researcher used a literature study approach in the field of philosophy and education by hermeneutically exploring the philosophical thoughts of Rancière and Althusser, as well as their implications for the practice of character education. The hermeneutic method was implemented symptomatically by examining the original texts of the works of both figures, while connecting them with contemporary character education literature and the institutional context of SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan.

This work uses four methodological stages. First, the exploratory study stage was used by the researcher to explore the thoughts of Rancière and Althusser, especially in the debate on the interpretation of Marxism. Second, the data inventory and classification stage carried out by the researcher to divide the literature that will be understood hermeneutically from the thoughts of Rancière and Althusser, including literature on character education. Third, the data processing and analysis stage used by the researcher to explore the epistemological basis in the interpretation of Marxism and its relevance for character education at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan. Fourth, the systematic compilation stage provides a description of the author's findings in providing critical arguments that compare the thoughts of Rancière and Althusser and relate them to the context of character education in high schools.

3. DISCUSSION

Critique of Epistemological Elitism

Althusser's interpretation of Marxism follows an argumentative pattern that sharply distinguishes epistemological objects between scientific knowledge (science) and ideology. This epistemological foundation is built through consideration of the moral foundations of the reality of production structures and relations. Furthermore, for Althusser, it is important to interpret this epistemological foundation symptomatically to avoid falling into the logic of humanist understanding. Althusser's interpretation of Marxism is limited by emphasizing that humans, in Marxist discourse, are the primary subjects in economic dynamics.⁶

Althusser's argument creates a philosophical problem rooted in epistemological elitism. This condition emerges hierarchically through direct criticism from his student Jacques Rancière. Rancière offers an antithesis by proving that Althusser's Marxist interpretive discourse actually traps the epistemological foundation in a sharp dichotomy between "nature" and "history." This epistemological trap emphasizes the difference between the roles of the masses and the role of figures (philosophers or parties) in understanding history—a separation Rancière deems a betrayal of the principle of fundamental equality.⁷

The implications of this epistemological elitism are directly relevant to the practice of character education at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan. If character education at this school is built on a logic similar to Althusser's structuralism—namely, that character values can only be defined and conveyed by a single authority (the teacher, the principal, or the national curriculum) without the active participation of students—then what occurs is the reproduction of an elitist epistemological hierarchy. Students, in this model, become mere objects who receive values from above, not subjects who actively formulate and internalize those values through their own experiences and reflections.

Rancière offers a more emancipatory alternative: that every individual, regardless of class background or level of formal knowledge, has an equal capacity to understand and produce knowledge.⁸ In the context of character education at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan, this principle means that every student—whether high academic achievers or not—has the same capacity to develop good character and contribute to the formation of the school's moral community. Educators at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan need to design a character education program that is not top-down, but rather dialogic and participatory, where every student's voice is recognized as a legitimate contribution to the formation of shared values.

Concrete evidence of the failure of an elitist approach to education can be seen in the dynamics that occur when students feel they have no space to express their own moral views. In an overly hierarchical environment, students tend to mechanically internalize values without truly understanding or living them—much like Rancière's critique of Althusser's ideology thesis that fails to address the subject as acting in a revolutionary way.⁹ At St. Thomas 1 High School, Medan can be addressed by creating an open ethical discussion space, where students are invited to reflect on character values in the context of their real social lives.

Critique of Break's Epistemology

The interpretation of Marx's thought as a youth and an adult has different epistemological foundations, sparking debate among his readers. Althusser interpreted this epistemological difference as an epistemological break. Evidence from Marx's work, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," demonstrates Marx's youthful tendencies toward Hegelianism. Althusser believes this Hegelian streak in Marx's thought actually traps his readers into forcing a comparison between Hegel's and Marx's theses.¹⁰

Althusser's concept of epistemological break essentially leads contemporary Marxist discourse to focus solely on class domination. This interest in class domination actually traps Althusser in a dead-end reality. Although Althusser initially intended to provide a domain of social structure as a way to interpret reality, this domain results in undeniable class domination. Rancière deconstructs the concept of epistemological break as a philosophical framework that tends to be subjective, trapping epistemology within the dominant subject, preventing questions related to philosophical elements from being raised.¹¹

The concept of epistemological break has an interesting analogy in the context of character education at St. Thomas 1 High School in Medan. In educational practice, a "break" often occurs between the moral knowledge taught in the classroom and students' actual experiences outside the classroom. Teachers who teach character values through a doctrinal approach—similar to Althusser's separation of science from ideology—risk creating students who know values verbally but are unable to internalize them in their daily lives. This is what can be called an "epistemological break" in character education: a disconnect between formal moral knowledge and authentic moral practice.

Rancière offers a relevant epistemological solution: rejecting the rigid separation between "knowers" and "don'ts," between knowledge and praxis. In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière demonstrates that true learning occurs when teachers trust in students' innate ability to understand the world through their own experiences, without having to progress through predetermined hierarchical stages of knowledge.¹² For character education at St. Thomas 1 High School in Medan, this implication is very concrete: character education teachers need to be facilitators of moral reflection, not simply transmitters of value doctrine. Students need to be encouraged to analyze the real-life ethical dilemmas they face, discovering relevant values through a process of critical inquiry, rather than accepting values "preferred" by authorities.

The failure of Althusser's epistemological break thesis in interpreting the 1968 French political upheaval—in which the masses in motion actually produced their own knowledge—teaches educators at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan an important lesson. The dynamics of students' social lives, including their experiences with injustice, friendship, conflict, and solidarity, are a source of authentic moral knowledge and cannot be ignored. Character education programs that ignore students' lived experiences and focus solely on transmitting abstract values will suffer a similar failure: failing to deeply engage students' moral awareness.¹³

Critique of the Separation of Science and Politics

The basic philosophical formulation of Althusser's thought essentially separates the epistemological needs of theory from those of practice. This separation is rooted in the scientific need for theory and the practical need for analysis of ideological frameworks within social structures. Althusser's scientific theory, like the state apparatus, is a manifesto of class struggle to maintain domination over contradictions. This theory tends to have an epistemological relationship that is driven by the practical needs of interpreting reality.¹⁴

Rancière criticized the separation of scientific epistemology as science and practical epistemology as politics, as this has serious negative consequences. First, Althusser attempts to eliminate the space for scientific epistemological interaction as science—a condition that, for Rancière, makes class domination only stifle social reality. Second, an epistemological obstacle arises that hinders the interactive, material, and historical implications of social class.¹⁵

In the context of character education, the separation between "character science" (as taught theory) and "character practice" (as real life) reflects the same problem. A character education curriculum that is too theoretical and separated from the socio-political context of students' lives will create a gap between the values they know and the values they live. At SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan, integrating the theoretical dimensions of character education—such as understanding honesty, responsibility, and justice—with students' practical social experiences is crucial.

Rancière asserts that the epistemology of all classes must be seen as equal, and this is the main essence of social contradiction.¹⁶ For Rancière, politics is not a space representing class control in scientific epistemology as knowledge. This view reinforces the class's commitment to always maintaining the narrative of emancipation in politics. Translated into an educational context, this principle means that the classroom at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan must be a space of epistemic democracy: a place where moral knowledge is not the monopoly of teachers, but grows from dialogue between teachers and students, between theory and experience, between traditional values and the challenges of the contemporary world.

Rancière's notion of the distribution of the sensible offers a rich framework for understanding how good character education works. This concept affirms the universal class equality of being "seen," "heard," "thought," and "said" in a society.¹⁷ In the context of SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan, this means that every student, without exception, must have the right and opportunity to express their moral perspectives, to be heard in ethical discussions, and to contribute to the formation of the school's character culture. Marginalized students—whether academically, economically, or socially—should not be ignored or deemed incapable of contributing to the moral formation of the school community.

Implications for Character Education at St. Thomas 1 High School, Medan

St. Thomas 1 High School, Medan, as a Catholic educational institution with a strong humanistic tradition, naturally embodies values oriented toward respecting human dignity and developing the potential of each individual. However, the challenge of implementing authentic character education remains: how to ensure that the program does not fall into the epistemological elitism criticized by Rancière.

Based on a critical analysis of the Rancière-Althusser debate, there are several concrete implications for the development of character education at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan. First, recognition of students' moral autonomy. Each student should be treated not as an object receiving grades, but as a subject actively constructing their own moral understanding. Teachers act as reflective companions, not as authorities who unilaterally distribute moral truth. This aligns with Rancière's principle of intellectual egalitarianism, which rejects epistemological hierarchy.¹⁸

Second, contextual and critically reflective character education. The character education program at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan needs to be designed so that students can connect character values to their social realities. Discussions of contemporary social issues— injustice, corruption, discrimination, solidarity—should be an integral part of the character learning process, not just an add-on. This way, students will not simply learn values abstractly but will be able to apply them in critical analyses of their social world.¹⁹

Third, inclusivity as a fundamental principle. Following Rancière's critique of Althusser's epistemological elitism, character education at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan must ensure that every student—regardless of economic background, academic ability, or social

status—has equal access to character development. Character programs that are accessible only to a select few (for example, high-achieving students or students from wealthy families) will actually reproduce inequalities that contradict the fundamental values of humanistic education.

Fourth, maintaining contradiction as a motor of moral development. Rancière emphasizes the importance of maintaining contradiction as a tool of mutual emancipation, not eliminating it through structural control.²⁰ In character education, this means that moral tensions—ethical dilemmas, value differences, conflicts between individual and community interests—should not be avoided or prematurely resolved by teachers. Instead, these tensions are valuable learning opportunities, where students learn to think critically, negotiate values, and develop their moral maturity. At SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan, a safe and open space for moral discussion—where differing views are respected and analyzed together—needs to be systematically created.

Fifth, the integration of the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of character education. Rancière's critique of the separation of science and politics teaches that character formation cannot be solely cognitive. At SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan, effective character education must integrate intellectual understanding of values (cognitive dimension), emotional appreciation and empathy (affective dimension), and real-life social action experiences (practical dimension). Programs such as community social activities, cross-class collaboration, and reflection based on real-life experiences need to be core components—not just additional activities—of the character education curriculum.

Sixth, repositioning the teacher's role as a facilitator of emancipation. Based on Rancière's thinking in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, the ideal character education teacher at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan is someone who believes in each student's ability to independently achieve deep moral understanding. Teachers are not the sole source of moral authority, but rather thought partners who stimulate students' critical reflection. This shift in role requires a reconceptualization of the professionalism of character education teachers: from "values teachers" to "facilitators of moral reflection."²¹

In the context of SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan, which is characterized by Catholic and humanistic values, Rancière's principles actually resonate deeply with the Christian pedagogical tradition that emphasizes the dignity of every human being as the image of God (*imago Dei*). The theological view that every human being has equal dignity and the ability to know moral truth is in line with Rancière's principle of epistemic egalitarianism. Thus, the integration of Christian faith values and Rancière's philosophy of emancipation can produce a very strong and coherent character education model for SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan.

4. CONCLUSION

Rancière criticized Althusser for lacking a revolutionary edge in his Marxist perspective. This is because Althusser's interpretation tends to emphasize elitist interests in politics, making epistemology a focal point of class conflict. Furthermore, centralized epistemological control systematically constrains social struggle. Rancière's goal in criticizing Althusser's interpretation of Marxism is to create equality as a result of emancipation and class struggle.

The implications of Rancière's epistemological critique for character education at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan are significant. Authentic character education requires an egalitarian epistemological foundation—namely, the recognition that every student has equal moral capacity and the right to be an active subject in the process of character

formation. This approach rejects a hierarchical model in which values flow solely from the top down, and instead promotes a dialogical model in which character formation occurs through a process of critical reflection, active participation, and mutual recognition.

Furthermore, Rancière's critique of the separation of science and politics teaches that character education cannot be separated from the real socio-political context in which students live. The character education program at SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan needs to comprehensively integrate the cognitive, affective, and practical dimensions, and ensure that every student—regardless of their background—has equal access to this moral formation process.

Thus, Rancière's critique contains epistemological logic that can be further analyzed in subsequent research, especially in interpreting the implications of the philosophy of emancipation for the design of character education curriculum in high schools in Indonesia, including SMA St. Thomas 1 Medan as a promising pedagogical laboratory.

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