Jacques Rancière

PREFACE TO *PROLETARIAN NIGHTS* [1981]

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Editor's introduction

In the middle of the 1960s Jacques Rancière was primarily associated with the structural Marxism of Louis Althusser and was an active participant in his rereading of *Capital*. Yet in those fiercely political times it was not long before Rancière and many other activist students sought to distance themselves from Althusser. In retrospect Rancière's frustration with Althusser's brand of Marxism is probably most succinctly registered in the language of the militant students (which included Rancière) of May 1968, particularly the anti-structuralist slogan 'structures don't take to the street'.

In 1975 Rancière and a small group of similarly minded philosophers and historians published the first issue of their journal *Les Révoltes Logiques*. The journal was dedicated to resuscitating archives of working-class writing as an attempt to chart proletarian dreams and proletarian desires. If political philosophy abstracted a working class identity from a generalised idea of proletarian daily life (from the 'dignity of labour' to the relentless of alienation) Rancière and others worked to ground the study of class in the details of specific daily lives. What would it mean to reclaim those nightly hours when, after a day of work, worker poets and bohemians set to write and drink the night away and to fill it with their dreams? What would it offer the history of revolutionary struggle to find people not simply demanding better working conditions or ownership of the factories but something more fundamental: a different everyday life?

To take seriously such demands (and May 1968 reverberated with such fundamental desires) would mean rethinking a politics of class based on some essential structural division between proletarian and bourgeois. It would also mean attending to the 'voice of the proletariat' as multifarious and as an active agent of desire (rather than as passively reflecting 'its' historical condition). In some ways Rancière's position has some curious

similarities with Michel de Certeau's (Chapter 6) in that both authors take 'belief' as a concrete element of history and as a complex activity within class struggles.

Further reading: Althusser and Balibar [1968] 1979; Rancière 1989, 1994; Rattansi 1989; Rifkin and Thomas 1988.

THERE IS NOTHING METAPHORICAL in this title *Proletarian Nights*. The point is not to revive memories of the sufferings of factory slaves, of the squalor of workers' hovels or the misery of bodies sapped by unbridled exploitation. All that will only be present via the views and the words, the dreams and the nightmares of the characters of this book.

Who are they? A few dozen, a few hundred workers who were twenty years old around 1830 and who then resolved, each for himself, to tolerate the intolerable no longer. It was not so much the poverty, the low wages, the comfortless dwellings, or the ever-present threat of hunger. More fundamentally, it was anguish at the daily theft of their time as they worked wood or stone, sewed clothing or stitched shoes; and all for nothing but the indefinite maintenance of the forces both of servitude and of domination. It was the humiliating absurdity of having to beg day after day for work which frittered their lives away. And it was the weight of others too; the ones in work, with the petty vanity of fairground muscle-men or the obsequiousness of conscientious workers; those outside waiting for a place you would be glad to hand over; and finally those who drove by, casting a disdainful glance from their open carriages over all that blighted humanity.

To have done with all that, to know why it had still not been brought to an end, to change their lives. . . . Overturning the world begins at an hour when ordinary workers ought to be enjoying the peaceful slumber of those whose trade calls for no thought whatever. For example, at precisely eight o'clock on that night of October 1839, a meeting is called at the house of Martin Rose, the tailor, to found a working man's newspaper. Vincard, the maker of measures, who writes songs for the singing club at the local bar, has invited Gauny, the carpenter, who gives expression to his more taciturn temperament in vengeful couplets. Ponty, another poet, who clears cesspools, will certainly not be there: Bohemian that he is, he has chosen to work at night. But the carpenter will be able to tell him the outcome in one of those letters he copies out around midnight, after several drafts, letters describing their blundered childhoods and their wasted lives, plebeian passions and those other existences beyond death – which may be beginning at that very moment. He writes those letters out, in an effort to delay to the very last minute that sleep which will restore the powers of the servile machine.

The main subject of this book is those nights wrested from the normal sequence of work and sleep. They were imperceptible, one might almost say inoffensive breaks in the ordinary course of things, where already the impossible was being prepared, dreamt and seen: the suspension of that ancient hierarchy which subordinates those dedicated to labour to those endowed with the privilege of thought. They were nights of study and intoxication, and days of labour prolonged to hear the word of the apostles or the lectures given by teachers of the people, to learn, to dream, to talk or

to write. They are Sunday mornings begun early so as to leave for the country together and take the dawn by surprise. Some will do well out of these follies. They will finish up as entrepreneurs or senators for life – and not necessarily traitors for all that. Others will die of them: by suicide because their aspirations are impossible; by the lethargy which follows crushed revolutions; by that phthisis which strikes exiles in the northern fogs; by the plagues of Egypt, where they went seeking the Woman-Messiah; or by the malaria of Texas where they went to build Icaria. Most will spend the rest of their lives in that anonymity which occasionally throws up in the name of a worker poet, a strike-leader, the organiser of an ephemeral association, or the editor of a paper that is here today and gone tomorrow.

The historian will ask what they represent. What are they by comparison with the anonymous mass of factory workers or even the activists in the labour movement? What do their lines of poetry or even the prose in their 'workers' papers' amount to compared with the multitude of day-to-day practices, of acts of oppression and resistance, or of complaints and struggles at the workplace and on the streets? This is a question of method, which tries to link cunning with 'straightforwardness' by identifying the statistical requirements of science with political principles which proclaim that only the masses make history and enjoin those that speak in their name to represent them faithfully.

But perhaps the masses who are invoked have already given their answer. Why do the striking Parisian tailors of 1833 and 1840 want their leader to be André Troncin, who divides his time between student cafés and the study of the great thinkers? Why will painters in 1848 ask the bizarre café owner Confais to draft them a constitution, when he normally bores them stiff with his talk of Fourieresque harmonies and phrenological experiments? Why did hatters engaged in struggle seek out a one-time seminarist called Philippe Monnier, whose sister has gone to play the Free Woman in Egypt and whose brother-in-law died in pursuit of his American utopia? Certainly those men, whose sermons on the dignity of working people and on evangelical devotion the masses normally avoid, do not represent their daily labours or their daily anger.

But it is precisely because those men are *other*. That is why they go to see them the day they have something they want to *represent*, something they want to show to the bourgeoisie (bosses, politicians, judges). It is not simply that those men can talk better. It is that what had to be represented before the bourgeoisie was something deeper than salaries, working hours or the thousand irritations of wage-labour. What has to be represented is what those mad nights and their spokesmen already make clear: that proletarians have to be treated *as if* they have a right to more than one life. If the protests of the workplace are to have a voice, if worker emancipation is to possess a human face, if workers are to exist as subjects of a collective discourse which gives meaning to their multifarious assemblies and combats, those representatives must already have made themselves *other* in a double, hopeless rejection, refusing both to *live* like workers and to *talk* like the bourgeoisie.

This is the history of isolated utterances, and of an impossible act of self-identification at the very root of those great discourses in which the voice of the proletariat as a whole can be heard. It is a story of semblances and simulacra which lovers of the masses have tirelessly tried to cover up – either by fixing a snap-shot in sepia of the young working class Movement on the eve of its nuptials with proletarian

Theory, or by splashing onto those shadows the colours of everyday life and of the popular mind. Solemn admiration for the unknown soldiers of the proletarian army has come to be mixed with tender-hearted curiosity about their anonymous lives and a nostalgic passion for the practised movements of the craftsman or the vigour of popular songs and festivals. These different forms of homage unite to show that people like that are the more to be admired the more they adhere strictly to their collective identity, and that they become suspect, indeed, the moment they want to live as anything other than legions and legionaries, when they demand that individual wanderlust which is the monopoly of 'petty-bourgeois' egoism or the illusion of the 'ideologist'.

The history of these proletarian nights is explicitly intended to prompt an examination of that jealous concern for the purity of the masses, the plebeians or the proletariat. Why has the philosophy of intelligentsia or activists always needed to blame some evil third party (petty bourgeoisie, ideologist or master thinker) for the shadows and obscurities that get in the way of the harmonious relationship between their own self-consciousness and the self-identity of their 'popular' objects of study? Was not this evil third party contrived to spirit away another more fearsome threat: that of seeing the thinkers of the night invade the territory of Philosophy. It is as if we were pretending to take seriously the old fantasy which underlies Plato's denunciation of the sophists, the fear of philosophy being devastated by the 'many whose natures are imperfect and whose souls are cramped and maimed by their meannesses, as their bodies are by their trades and crafts'.[1] Unless the issue of dignity lies in another quarter. Unless, that is, we need to exaggerate the positivity of the masses as active subject so as to throw into relief a confrontation with the ideologist which enables intellectuals to accord to their philosophy a dignity independent of their occupational status alone.

These questions are not meant to put anyone in the dock. But they explain why I make no apologies for sacrificing the majesty of the masses and the positivity of their practices to the discourses and the illusions of a few dozen 'non-representative' individuals. In the labyrinth of their real and imaginary travels, I simply wanted to follow the thread of two guiding questions: What paradoxical route led these deserters, who wanted to tear themselves free from the constraints of proletarian existence, to come to forge the image and the discourse of working class identity? And what new forms of false construction affect that paradox when the discourse of workers infatuated with the night of the intellectuals meets the discourse of intellectuals infatuated with the glorious working days of the masses? That is a question we should ask ourselves. But it is a question immediately experienced within the contradictory relations between the proletariat of the night and the prophets of the new world – Saint-Simonians, Icarians or whatever. For, if it is indeed the word of 'bourgeois' apostles which creates or deepens a crack in their daily round of work through which some workers are drawn into the twists and turns of another life, the problems begin when the preachers want to change those twists and turns into the true, straight road that leads to the dawn of New Labour. They want to cast their disciples in their identity as good soldiers of the great militant army and as prototypes of the worker of the future. Surely, the Saint-Simonian workers, blissfully listening to these words of love, lose even more of that tough workers' identity that the calling of New Industry requires. And, looking at the matter from the other direction, surely the Icarian

proletariat will be able to rediscover that identity only by discrediting the fatherly teachings of their leader.

Perhaps these are so many missed opportunities, dead-ends of a utopian education, where edifying Theory will not long delude itself that it can see the path to self-emancipation beaten out for any proletariat that is instructed in Science. The tortuous arguments of *L'Atelier*, the first great newspaper 'made by the workers themselves', suggest in advance what the agents detailed to spy on the workers' associations which emerged from this twisting path were to discover with surprise: that once he is master of the instruments and the products of his labour, the worker cannot manage to convince himself that he is working 'in his own interest'.

Nonetheless, we should not be too quick to rejoice at recognising the vanity of the path to emancipation in this paradox. We may discover that obstinate initial question with even greater force: What precisely is it that the worker can pursue *in his own interest?* What exactly is at work in the strange attempt to rebuild the world around a centre that the inhabitants only want to escape? And is not *something else* to be gained on these roads that lead nowhere, in these efforts to sustain a fundamental rejection of the order of things, beyond all the constraints of working-class existence? No one will find much to strengthen the grounds of his disillusionment or his bitterness in the paths of these workers who, back in July 1830, swore that nothing would be the same again, or in the contradictions of their relations with the intellectuals who aligned themselves with the masses. The moral of this tale is quite the reverse of the one people like to draw from the wisdom of the masses. It is to some extent the lesson of the impossible, that of the rejection of the established order even in the face of the extinction of Utopia. If, for once, we let the thoughts of those who are not 'destined' to think unfold before us, we may come to recognise that the relationship between the order of the world and the desires of those subjected to it presents more complexity than is grasped by the discourses of the intelligentsia. Perhaps we shall gain a certain modesty in deploying grand words and expressing grand sentiments. Who knows?

In any case, those who venture into this labyrinth must be honestly forewarned that no answers will be supplied.

Translated by Noel Parker[2]

Notes

1 Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Jowett, VI. 495.

2 With acknowledgement for help and suggestions from Pete Dews, Jonathan Ree, Mike Shortland, Carolyn Sumberg.