

*Proletarian Nights: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*

Jacques Rancière

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*"The new world... is taking shape every day before our eyes and in our heads..."<sup>1</sup>*

The unique and provocative volume, *Proletarian Nights*, is the culmination of a long period of transition for Jacques Rancière, following his break with Louis Althusser's brand of Marxist ideology. This formative period in Rancière's life took him into the archives, immersing him in the often forgotten writings of 19th century French workers who refused to simply take themselves as "workers." They became writers who would envision different futures for themselves, taking up their nights by engaging in intellectual pursuits. The resulting book is large, but it does not comprise a unitary statement by its author. Rather, the author here is still in search of his philosophy. Along with the publications to follow—*The Philosopher and His Poor*, *The Names of History*, and *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*—*Proletarian Nights* begins to establish Rancière's mature perspective that goes on to inform and shape his ongoing critical analyses in political thought and aesthetics.

There is a motley collection of voices brought together here, curated by Rancière, though without an imposed theme or directing narrative. In the foreword to Rancière's *The Names of History*, Hayden White asks "What are the historian's obligations to the words of the dead?"<sup>2</sup> In a later work, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière writes so as to blend Joseph Jacotot's words and ideas with his own voice. He rejects any critical distance in order to honor the presentation of Jacotot's ideas. Here, he writes in a fashion that lets the voices of his proletarian subjects stand out on their own, without imposing his own critical framework or authority on their thought. Because of this, the text meanders and proceeds to raise conflicting ideas from one chapter to another. The paradoxes and contradictions that arise are left unresolved. The conclusion will not declare winners and losers. Instead, it invites readers to step in and think with and alongside these worker-intellectuals. Rancière does not make it his place to impose a "definitive" judgment on their writing. He

<sup>1</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Proletarian Nights*. translated by John Drury, London: Verso, 2012, 428.

<sup>2</sup> White, Hayden. "Foreword: Rancière's Revisionism," in Jacques Rancière. *The Names of History*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, viii.

does not wish to dictate his version of what true aspirations such subjects ought to have. As Jean-Philippe Deranty comments: "It seems that the very impossibility to draw definitive, neat and consistent, black and white conclusions from the trials and tribulations of these isolated voices of the early labour movement is by itself the deep political, indeed the deep philosophical lesson Rancière wants to learn, and wants us to learn from his research into 'the worker's dream.'"<sup>3</sup>

Rather than imposing a narrative upon the words of his subjects, as much as possible Rancière strives to let the *facts* of their own thoughts speak for themselves, as they have left them to us. He is not even concerned to distinguish the "true" from the "false" in their claims or assessments. What is more important is to witness how these people thought for themselves, and thought of themselves and about their lives. Amongst these facts are the dreams and utopian aspirations that motivated the workers and migrants who had dared in their own ways to say, "Me, too. I'm an artist!" We find ideas that only sometimes fit with the "authentic" notions assumed by sociologists and ideologists about "worker interests." The text as a whole thus deconstructs notions of "working class" interest and identity. It does so without relying upon textual analysis or the employment of ideological concepts. It does so without the author having to tell us that it is being done.

Rancière worked in the period leading up to the publication of *Proletarian Nights* with the group "Révoltes Logiques," also publishing a journal under the name of the collective. Kristin Ross refers to the group's work in her book *May '68 and Its Afterlives*. The group declared themselves as working to address "the gap between the official genealogies of subversion—for example, 'the history of the workers' movement'—and its real forms of elaboration, circulation, reappropriation, resurgence." Rather than ignore or explain away, the group and its journal would highlight:

"The disparity in forms of revolt.  
Its contradictory characteristics.  
Its internal phenomena of micro-powers.  
What is unexpected about it."

The group would "try to follow the transversal paths of revolt, its contradictions, its lived experience and its dreams."<sup>4</sup> These claims, a manifesto of sorts, appeared originally in an editorial for the first edition of *Révoltes Logiques* in the winter of 1975. The same characteristics carry over into the presentation of *Proletarian Nights*, which would be completed in the wake of the journal's dissolution.

<sup>3</sup> Deranty, Jean-Philippe. *Jacques Rancière: Key Concepts*, Durham: Acumen, 2010, 21.

<sup>4</sup> Ross, Kristin. *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, 128.

According to Maria Beatriz Greco, "Rancière discovers...a new arrangement of proletarian space and time by which other subjects are created from those doomed to work, subjects emancipated by breaking the cycle of day and night of the worker, the circle of activities destined only to work and to compensate for the fatigue of work."<sup>5</sup> The "proletarian nights" are the time these worker-intellectuals take as their own, defying the fatigue of the workday to create another self, another existence unbound from the cycle of labor and recuperation for the next day's labor.

Of course, the author is present. Presenting us with the complexity of his subjects, letting their words stand out, these are choices made by Rancière and that he offers them to us as such conveys the core of his approach. The conclusions will be drawn more as Rancière develops his own burgeoning political philosophy of dissensus. The philosophical battles which are hinted at in this book become articulated in his following work, *The Philosopher and His Poor*. There, we will find the lessons gleaned from the worker archives employed to confront the divisions marked out in Plato's *Republic* and the classifications and judgments of Karl Marx, (confrontations raised here in Chapter 1: The Gates of Hell, particularly regarding the notion that the workers do not have time to be something other than workers), and the impositions of modern progressive sociology. But these philosophical arguments, while present, largely stay in the background in *Proletarian Nights*. The work contained here gives color and shape, real-life depictions to illustrate those philosophical debates.

This 2012 Verso edition of *Proletarian Nights* also includes a new five page preface from Rancière. Though brief, this is in fact a very valuable piece of writing. It provides a thematic assessment and entryway into the *Proletarian Nights* project, which connects with his work more broadly. As a reader of Rancière, I find this preface to be one of the most succinct statements he has produced. This new addition alone makes the book a valuable reference. In the preface, Rancière writes that "For the workers of the 1830s, the question was not to demand the impossible, but to realize it themselves." From his research, he finds that "it becomes apparent that workers had never needed the secrets of domination explained to them, as their problem was quite a different one. It was to withdraw themselves, intellectually and materially, from the forms by which this domination imprinted on their bodies, and imposed on their actions, modes of perceptions, attitudes, and a language."<sup>6</sup> This is

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<sup>5</sup> Greco, Maria Beatriz. *Rancière et Jacotot: une critique du concept d'autorité*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007, 62. Translated from the Spanish into French by Antonia Garcia Castro. English translation is my own.

<sup>6</sup> Rancière, Jacques. *Proletarian Nights*. (London: Verso, 2012), ix. Preface to the New English Edition, translated by David Fernbach.

a struggle to get free and to engage oneself on one's own terms, to liberate one's own life from the bonds of facticity and situation.

When I began reading the early portions of the book, I sketched some remarks to myself about my experience with Rancière's work and the ideas he gleans from these proletarian writings. I am drawn to consider my own situation and how it impacts my imagination and aspirations, and vice versa. Finding myself thinking about my own aspirations and position in society feels like an act in accord with the sentiment of the work itself. Who am I? Am I a worker or something "other"? A precarious laborer? As an adjunct, I would have to say yes. My own biography would seem to place me somewhere between lumpen-proletarian and intellectual (I grew up relatively poor for an American, in a broadly non-intellectual environment...and yet...). Then today, my work of becoming something of a professional intellectual positions me only as a precarious laborer, albeit of an intellectual sort. So, I regularly confront the challenges of keeping in touch with my aspirations, fighting to keep up my motivation to dream, to think, to be something other than a precarious laborer. I feel an immediate kinship with these proletarians. (I am also glad that my labor is much less dangerous and burdensome.) I also hold particular frustrations with labels that get placed on people and with the judgments regarding "authentic" desires that people should have. I detest ideologists who would impose their definitions on their (would-be) subjects. So there is also an ironic sense of "community" I've enjoyed finding here, among these worker-intellectuals, a community for those of us who bristle at the absolute notions of true desires and identities often associated with ideals of "community."

Beyond my own particular interests, the experiences portrayed here resonate in interesting ways with the contemporary situation, perhaps in an unexpected and untimely fashion. Rancière notes in the preface that "The present forms of capitalism, the collapse of the labor market, the destruction of systems of social solidarity, and the precarious nature of employment are creating experiences of work and forms of life that may well be closer to those of the artisans of the past than that world of non-material work and frenetic consumption whose complacent picture we are offered."<sup>7</sup> And a vital aspect of this work is its sense of contemporaneity. The figures depicted here are shown engaging their *own* present, questioning how they relate to their time and how they envision their selves and their futures. They are engaging life as contemporaries, imagining their present otherwise, considering themselves as creative agents taking inspiration from figures

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., xi.

in the world around them. They are "Perverted proletarians whose discourse is made up of borrowed words."<sup>8</sup> But then, aren't we all?

At 430 pages, there is much material to sit with. The preface by Rancière and the fine introduction by Donald Reid give a lot of direction to those wishing to gain a clearer understanding of Rancière's work. However, there is no substitute for simply getting lost in the archives and dreams of the workers. This volume makes that possible. Where it wanders will be largely up to you. I'd highly recommend accepting the invitation and charting your own path.

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<sup>8</sup> Rancière. *Proletarian Nights*, 15.