

## RANCIÈRE 'S ARCHIVES: THE AESTHETES-WORKERS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AND THE ISSUE OF EMANCIPATION IN HUMAN FORMATION

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### ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the relation between the path Jacques Rancière builds up through the workers' archives from the nineteenth century in France and the following conceptualization of emancipation. From aesthetic "narratives", from a storytelling of lonely words and impossible identifications with conscious principles of the great proletarian collective discourse this paper intends to show how the sense of emancipation changes: from social collectivity to intellectual individuality. Question of method it will say Rancière. It's on the attempt to think about the importance of the archive to the construction of such "rancierean methodology" that this paper will focus. By analyzing that the *Proletarian nights* were not simply made of miseries of an exhaustive subjection of working bodies, but also of poems, chants and prose, it made it possible thinking in an aesthetic that includes the workers, in aesthetes-workers. Not from the perspective of a "popular aesthetic", always hostage of its parallel of an "erudite aesthetic", but only from one and same aesthetic. The ancestral separation between the hands of working and the vision/contemplation of the beauty and the following hierarchical subordination of the former by the latter is, then, unsettled. The question of emancipation, therefore, reassumes by aesthetic a new centrality. And the notion of archive is fundamental to think of how this conceptual re-elaborations proposed by Rancière in aesthetic and politics arise from the use of thinking based on witnesses, letters and narratives registered in "class" journals, in a memorial word which before preserving a sacred truth, unique, from a time, gives us proofs of a polyphony and a poligraphy capable of disturbing the right conviction in which is based all attempts to erase the contradictions on behalf of a conscious historical project, either in political philosophy or in philosophy of education.

**Keywords:** Emancipation; Workers' narratives; Historical project; Archives.

### Introduction

To the concern of Rancière's archives, which are our theme here, it's good to make clear, at the beginning, that the French philosopher doesn't make any thematization or conceptualization of the notion of "archive" in his book

about worker's movement at the nineteenth century. It only echoes, perhaps, a very well widespread terminology of contemporary French philosophy, especially from the archaeological works of Foucault and Derrida's discussions, referenced by contemporaries like Agamben. It's not also a simply *stricto sensu* reading of French proletarian movement archives, especially its magazines, because no reading is simple. But it's not anything more than a reading. There isn't, it seems, any great metaphor respecting the archives. Though, as Rancière warns about the book's title from which this research drifts, *Proletarian nights*, its subtitle, *archives of worker's dream*<sup>2</sup>, does not also suggest any metaphor, any monumentalization of the past or of memories.

Readers should not look for any metaphors in my title. I am not going to call up the pains of manufacture's slaves, the unhealthiness of working-class slums, or the wretchedness of bodies worn out by untrammelled exploitation. There will be no exposition of all that here, except through the glances and the words, the dreams and the nightmares, of the characters who will occupy our attention. (RANCIÈRE, 1981, Preface, vii)

*Proletarian nights: archives of worker's dream*, whose first French edition is from 1981, intends to be, therefore, only an inscription of what I call "aesthetic narratives" of nineteenth century workers, collected by Rancière, from his purposes, to show how emancipation's question is not related in his view with simple mass awareness clarified by the teaching of intellectuals, but by appropriation of another time course by the proletarians, by the "history of those nights snatched from the normal round of work and repose" (RANCIÈRE, 1981, Preface, viii), by the subversion of a time regime which reserves night time only to those for whom the early awakening of the following day can be relegated to a background, that is, to an intellectual elite, "turning the world upside down begins around the evening hour when normal workers should be tasting the peaceful sleep of people whose work scarcely calls for thinking" (RANCIÈRE, 1981, Preface, vii)

It's based on this initial opposition between day and night, between the normal round of these two periods of times appropriated by different subjects, that rancierean analysis about workers' archives gains importance. What does it consist this "plucked nights"? They are nights of study, nights of inebriation, long days to listen to saint-simonian apostles' words or the lesson of peoples' educators, time to learn, to dream of, to

debate, to write. But what represent those nights to the “workers’ cause” it would ask an uneasy historian that Rancière gives rise to the scene.

What are they by comparison with the anonymous masses of the mills or the innumerable militants of the workers’ movement? What weight can be attributed to the verses of their poems or even the prose of their ‘workers’ journals’ by comparison with multiple array of daily practices, oppressions, resistances, murmurings, and clashes of workshop and city? (RANCIÈRE, 1981, Preface, viii)

What troubles, though, Rancière in his anti-althusserians readings over the archives is to find a series of key events of workers’ movement in which the identification of the individual worker subject and his proletarian collectivity does not fit. Is it a problem of the theory? Is it a problem of the practice? Where should we repair the “error” in the social science? It’s precisely in the fact of this mastery relation between people’s friendly intellectuals, who know, and the people to be taught about their exploited condition which *Proletarian nights*, *The ignorant schoolmaster*, among others, arise. As Rancière says on the back cover of the Portuguese version: “It was never necessary to explain the exploitation to a worker”. Then, through a quick vision over some events of the thirties and forties of nineteenth century the philosopher asks himself:

Why, in 1833 and 1840, did the striking tailors of Paris want their leader to be André Troncin, a man who divided his free time between the student cafes and his reading of the great thinkers? Why, in 1848, did the working-class painters seek an organizational plan from their bizarre colleague Confais the cafe-keeper, who ordinarily bored to death with his Fourierist harmonies and his phrenological experiments? Why did the battling hat makers seek out the former seminarian Philippe Monnier, whose sister went off to play the “free woman” in Egypt and whose brother-in-law would die in pursuit of his American utopia? Clearly such figures, whose sermons on worker dignity and whose evangelical devotion were studiously shunned, did not represent the ordinary round of their daily labors and angry grievances. (RANCIÈRE, 1981, Preface, ix)

“Mass” answer, therefore, if we follow Rancière’s own terminology, would be there to legitimate this fact which certain critical theory tradition seems strictly to forget: if the masses speak, they speak as bourgeois

people. And before condemning that by being a petty bourgeois' trait or a vestige of a history to be erased Rancière takes it as the political sign which distinguishes, since ever, mankind from its animal origins. It's because a voice can be heard, that it can be counted as a voice by those which share the same sensible world that words like "commoners", "proletarians", "women" now count as political beings. They had left, then, their animal condition and came into existence as humans.

If the protests of the workshop crew were to find a voice, if the emancipation of the worker was to offer a face to contemplate, if the manual laborers were to exist as subjects of a collective discourse that would give meaning to their manifold meetings and clashes, then their strange spokesmen already had to have made themselves "different", doubly and irremediably excluded for living as workers did and speaking as bourgeois people did. (RANCIÈRE, 1981, Preface, ix)

Speak as bourgeois people, even if they are not, represents then the possibility of taking place. And in this sense, perhaps, it would make sense an approximation to Agamben's concept of archive<sup>3</sup>, even if that was not thematized by Rancière and it should be thought confronting Foucault's archeological project and rancierean concept of partition of sensible. Workers' spokesmen are already constituted themselves as "different". They are already emancipated people, in the sense Rancière gives to it, that is, as subjects which intelligence is not submitted to any other intelligence, even if their bodies, as workers, still remain. It's in the conflictual coexistence of a tension in themselves, of a dissent, that these emancipated workers make us remember what can signify concepts like "emancipation", "politics" and "politics' aesthetics". One of the most significant and intriguing characters of *Proletarian nights*, the joiner Gauny, a reference in many of Rancière's texts and reason even for a book, reveal us clues of how emancipation happens in terms of a politics' aesthetics. The philosopher tells us that one day the joiner:

Believing himself at home, he loves the arrangement of a room so long as he has not finished laying the floor. If the windows open out on a garden or commands a view of a picturesque horizon, he stops his arms a moment and glides in imagination toward the spacious view to enjoy it better than the possessors of the neighboring residences. (RANCIÈRE apud GAUNY, "Le travail a la tache" In: RANCIÈRE (ed.), 1983, 45-46.)

Famous passage of Rancière's work which, reiterated several times in his books after its discovery in workers' archives, seems to indicate what the philosopher meant as emancipation via dissent. The hand that works concomitantly with the vision that contemplates seems to counter circuit the common notion in which is based all forms of domination between those destined to manual labor and those destined to intellectual "labor". "Either work or contemplate" seems to be a constant mantra of our societies since longtime. What the nineteenth century workers' archives reveal therefore (comprehending that there is no hidden truth for Rancière) is that more than dissociation or opposition, which interests the domination, what is there is dissent, what this anonymous, fleeting, characters show, which is certainly not the "organic" totality of the movement, is this capacity for living the dissent. And every time this occurs there is, following Rancière, politics. Politics only exists "when there is a place and forms for the encounter of two heterogeneous processes" (RANCIÈRE, 2004, 43), between the hand that works and the vision that contemplates, for example. There's no distinction of any kind of "nature" between those destined to work, to manual labor, to practice, and those destined to contemplation, aesthetics, philosophy, to the theory and to politics. It's by presupposing equality of all spoken being with every other spoken being that those that used to speak as bourgeois people can be countersigned by their peers as their spokesmen. And it's only by presupposing this equality that we can comprehend what means the political "nature" of us, what it does mean to affirm that "we are political animals".

### **Suspicious of workers' voices – A glimpse at their own narratives**

But why then do we always suspect of a bourgeois' speech? Why do we suspect that these representatives do not truly represent the workers' movement even to the point that we had never reserve for them a special seat in history, even had remembered their names? Why should we imagine that emancipation does not start there when Gauny works and contemplates, but when he should be taught of his misfortunes' paths and misleading? Rancière also asks himself about this constant "jealous concern to preserve popular, plebeian, or proletarian purity" (RANCIÈRE, 1981, Preface, x)

Why does scholarly or militant thought always to find a wicked third party – petty bourgeoisie, ideologist, or master thinker – and blame on it the shadows and opacities that obscure the harmonious relation between self-awareness and self-identity

of its object, the "people"? Isn't it possible that the wicked witch is conventionally fabricated to adjure a greater threat: that is, the sight of our nighttime philosophers invades the terrain of serious thinking? (RANCIÈRE, 1981, Preface, x)

This third element, always wicked, malefic, which inter-meddles self-awareness and self-identity is what seems to me interesting to think contemporaneously. Like a deceiver god which would forge in us always the error, even if the mathematical procedures remained "correct", the "wicked third party" of scholarly and militant thought guarantees, on the contrary, always the truth, at least the truth of scholarly and militant discourse. The shadows and opacities would not be found in the cast and pure "research object", named by "people" or "mass", but in this contemporary deceiver god. Perhaps, as it states Rancière in his acuteness mode, the forge of this "wicked witch" only serves to adjure this extremely appalling threaten for the "wisers", for the intellectuality: the sight of nighttime philosophers invading thinking terrain. However friendly "left" intellectuals are to the proletarian "cause" they eventually reinforce what they criticize, inequality, by the simple fact that they do not start their thinking from the equality of all spoken being with every other. The mastery distinction is the first element of this dispute for the statement of intelligences' equality capable of putting in check social distinctions, domination, and capable of redefine "emancipation" and "politics".

If the allegation of "anti-philosophy" to ranciorean thinking<sup>4</sup> is right it's certainly because of his inclination to hear this "nocturne philosophy". Not as Hegel's owl of Minerva which, solitary, flies when the others take rest, but as an amateur ornithologist who observe birds in their diversity. And what does this ornithologist observe "when the proletarian discourse which loves intellectual nights faces intellectual discourse which loves the glorious and laborious days of people"? Contradictory relations, failure encounters, impasses of Utopic education. The amateur ornithologist before finding what his science intends to find, ordered and well limited classifications consensus, harmonic though its "apparently" disharmony, finds sensible dissent. Not to glorify an encomium of chaos, of disorder, of a post-modern "liquid" and fluid world. Simple inversion of categories is a mere reflex of the same process. Dissent is not, therefore, the opposite of consensus, as well as politics is not the opposite of police. Politics only exists in the presence of police, as well as dissent only exists in the presence of consensus. It's on the conflictual living of these conceptual pair that ranciorean thought gains strength. Would it be, though, an innocuous force, vacuous, as well as vacuous the sense of emancipation that has arisen with

Rancière work over the archives? That is, is it innocuous once does it not prescribe a wide project of social transformation? The ornithologist answers by listening to nighttime philosophers at least once:

Leaving the field open, for once, to the thinking of those not 'destined' to think, we may come to see that the relationship between the order of things and the desires of those subjugated to it is a bit more complicated than scholarly treatises realize. (RANCIÈRE, 1981, Preface, XII)

So this paper, before searching for a definitive word of proletarian movement of nineteenth century, before seeking for interpretations to their history, which is also ours, worth raising space to these aesthetic "narratives", dissentious narratives of workers. As an example, it can be shown the "consensual" preoccupation of different workers' journals (catholic, saint-simonian and communist), in the half of nineteenth century, with the excess of workers' night life in the so called "goguettes", meetings organized to sing and drink<sup>5</sup>. The journals' attempt to a "return to morality"<sup>6</sup> in opposition with singular workers' answers, like Gauny's, only reflects the controversies and complexities of a plural movement, more contradictory than social science tradition normally reveals. A process of political subjectivation like "proletarians" can only designate in social science as well as for their clarified peers of the journals, a "non-waste" movement of their hours in favor of their struggle, of identification between their identity and their consciousness. What the archives show us, as it would show, perhaps, a simple look around nowadays, is that the exercise of a subject "hygiene" in his collective essence, class essence, is a task which wastes the more "essential" of politics, the nonexistence of a name before the wrong it expounds, that is, the nonexistence of this "proletarian" subject before his harmful exhibition. As Rancière says in *Disagreement*: "Before the wrong that its name exposes, the proletariat has no existence as a real part of society" (RANCIÈRE, 2004, 39). It does not exist then, for Rancière, a "proletarian essence" to be preserved or saved from tavern excess. Proletariat only exists in the dimension of their harm exposition, that is, as being proletarian exhibits a polemical universal concept which

defines neither a set of properties (manual labor, industrial labor, destitution, etc.) that would be shared equally by a multitude of individuals nor a collective body, embodying a principle, of which those individuals would be members. It is part of a process of subjectivation identical to the process of expounding a wrong. 'Proletarian' subjectivation defines a subject of wrong – by superimposition in relation to the

multitude of workers. What is subjectified is neither work nor destitution, but the simple counting of the uncounted, the difference between an inegalitarian distribution of social bodies and the equality of speaking beings. (RANCIÈRE, 2004, 38)

This is therefore the wrong that the name "proletarian" expounds. Not workers' miserably essence, in which a "return to morality" would guarantee its original shape, but strictly the harm of a non-equalitarian distribution of social bodies and of the equality of spoken beings their name reveals. It's this kind of litigious which is at stake in workers' struggle, in their "cause", the dissent operated by two heterogeneous logics working together. In so doing,

'Proletarian' political subjectivation [...] is in no way a form of culture, of some collective ethos capable of finding a voice. It presupposes, on the contrary, a multiplicity of fractures separating worker bodies from their ethos and from the voice that is supposed to express the soul of this ethos: a multiplicity of speech events – that is, of one-off experiences of conflict over speech and voice, over the partition of the sensible. (RANCIÈRE, 2004, 36-37)

That's why the spokesmen of the first manifestations, of the first strikes, are not typical workers who reveal their "self", but those who speak as bourgeois people. Let us retain then the poetry of whom was not destined to, the floor-layer Gauny:

Le jour s'abat, bientôt une nuit vaporeuse  
 Couvrira de chagrins le rêve que je creuse  
 Dans la forêt encore, d'un regard enchanté  
 Je vois, en m'en allant, marcher la liberté.  
 Elle s'est retournée et son adieu me donne  
 L'indice des erreurs qu'il faut que j'abandonne.  
 Je la retrouverai plus large de poitrine  
 Dans un beau jour doré par effort du travail  
 Day sinks, soon a misty night /  
 will cover with regrets the dream I dig /  
 in the forest again, with an enchanted gaze /  
 I see liberty advancing as I leave. /  
 She has turned back and her adieu is an indication /  
 of the mistakes I must abandon. /  
 I will find her again, her breastplate larger /  
 on a fine day gilded with the exertion of work. (RANCIÈRE apud  
 GAUNY, *La Forêt de Bondy* (Paris, 1879), In: RANCIÈRE, 1981, 59)



## Conclusion

It's therefore in a beautiful working day, and not in its borders, that liberty will be found once more. It's in the process of "making", in the relation with its instruments, that aesthetics and politics touch each other. Liberty is not a promised land, in the distant Icaria or in post-revolution. It is not a paradise, mundane or upper-mundane, affable and harmonious. Liberty is in this interval always present, in this space which marks politics by the simple fact of making possible a dissent, of exposing a wrong which was unnamed since then, but that equally marks the equality of everyone with everyone else. Retaining again the image of emancipation, presented by the same Gauny when he feels home by laying a floor in a house which he does not own, Rancière presents the mark of this dissent which is also the mark of what he means by "politics": a place where for a brief interval the constant is broken that wedges the laborer between the entrepreneur, master of work, and the bourgeois man, master of the proprietary order.

Simulacrum and reality, opposed since Plato. "Naturally" excluding figures. Rancière's archives show us exactly their necessary coexistence. Not more oppositions, dualism, but dissents: the simultaneity of contraries in tension. Perhaps politics and philosophy have much to gain with this concept.

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## Notes

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2 English translations of *La nuit des prolétaires: archives du rêve ouvrier* have eliminated the word "archive" of the title. Both in the version of 1981, entitled *The Nights of Labor: the Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, and in the revised edition of 2012, entitled *Proletarian Nights: the Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, "archive" does not appear. It may be significant this disappearance and for the effectiveness of this paper I have chosen to maintain a literal translation.

3 In *Remnants of Auschwitz: the witness and the archive* (2002) Agamben delimits the idea of archive from the Foucauldian notion of enunciation, considering the utterances not as the text of the discourse, but from its having-place, taking the subject as an empty place that can be filled by different individuals, that is, taking the enunciation as a pure event of language.

<sup>4</sup> Rancière accepts this allegation in an earlier article of 1978 at *Critique* (Le pensée d'ailleurs) when he's trying to keep away of althusserianism: "On peut appeler ce travail interminable de philosophie et dire que sans philosophie nul savoir ne saurait plus échapper à la pornographie politique, mais aussi que toute volonté d'énoncer la philosophie dans un discours autonome ne saurait être que pornographie transcendante. Maintenant, si l'on considère l'acception du terme dans l'opinion régnante, il vaut peut-être mieux appeler ce travail: anti-philosophie".

<sup>5</sup> "Right after the uprising of 1830, the orators of the people of July needed only a stroke of the pen to brush away the allegations, more frightened than bold, of men of property on the defensive: allegations comparing the common people of the city's outskirts to the barbarians of an earlier day who were camped at the gates of the Roman Empire [...] The interplay of being and appearance, reversing ideally the submission of working-class misery to the paneled rooms of idleness, has been succeeded by this mixed spectacle intermingling the stigmata of poverty and the stigmata of pleasure to shape the figure of an animalized people. And indignant replies to bourgeois descriptions have given way to a certain shared view of the spectacle of degradation. The monotonous bourgeois enumeration of worker vices is matched by the obsessive visions that haunt the journals of every stripe put out by informed workers dedicated to defending the interests of their own class. There is no point here in trying to separate out the Catholic invectives of *L'Atelier*, the Saint-Simonian dislikes of *L'Union*, or the communist indignations of *La Fraternité* when confronted with the coarseness of popular amusements." (RANCIÈRE, 1981, 258)

<sup>6</sup> As examples of this consensus about the goguettes we should read the journals in a sequence:

**L'Atelier**, 1844, says: "Among our adversaries today there are men who have an interest in believing that these monstrous personifications are our true portraits. There are people for whom these infamies are a stroke of good luck. They retail and spread them around, saying: "*What do you expect from the common people. There you have their own self portrait!*" It is against all that that our protest is directed. It is with a view to the evil that may come of it that we contemptuously denounce the blockheads of our class who, out of blindness or vanity, unwittingly turn themselves into accomplices of our enemies." (RANCIÈRE, 1981, 261)

**La Fraternité**, 1841, says similarly: "For ten years now the materialist system has triumphed, with the Guizots, the Humanns, and all the enthusiasts of material interest and the *fait accompli*. And what have been the results? Egotism, isolation, war, competition, poverty, and hunger... And what has become of friendship, patriotism, disinterestedness, abnegation? All such virtues have been relegated to the rank of prejudices! Ah, let us get back to healthy morality! It's about time! No, the human being does not exist for itself! No, the human being is not the brutish and unintelligent result of games of chance, the combination of a few molecules. The human body is merely a garment concealing an intelligence, the latter being the child of a higher, eternal, working intelligence that creates and preserves the world". (RANCIÈRE, 1981, 266-267)

**La Ruche Prolétaire**, 1844, also says: "If you consider the smallness of wages today, if you realize that only with stubborn perseverance and dogged employment of his time, his sole and precious capital, can the laborer satisfy his most basic

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needs, then you can readily appreciate the serious upsets produced in the lives of those people whose minds are continually preoccupied with anything and everything but their work... Application without respite is a matter of life and death for the worker. (RANCIÈRE, 1981, 288)

**L'Union**, 1845, says finally: "Walk around during these festivals. Listen to the deafening screams and the dissonant sounds of the instruments. And if, amid these infamies, you see the savage woman devouring raw flesh, you may wonder whether you are in a civilized country or among barbarians..." (RANCIÈRE, 1981, 258)

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