

HYDRARCHY

*...SEEKING THE RED THREAD... SO
THAT WE CAN WEAVE A RED
THREAT*



MONDAY 05 JANUARY 2009

Ranciere 2 - Preface to the new Hindi translation of 'Nights of Labour'

Sarai

PREFACE

The Indian reader who opens this book in 2009 will no doubt think it is a strange thing. How can these stories of nineteenth-century French lockmakers, tailors, cobblers and typesetters be relevant to the information revolution, the reign of immaterial production or the global market?

This question, it should be said, was already present for the French reader who opened this book twenty-seven years ago. We did not speak yet of globalisation, nor of the end of the proletariat, of history or of utopia. Quite the contrary: France had recently elected a combined socialist and communist government, which proudly laid claim to the traditions of Marxism and of working class politics. And it is in this context that the book seemed to run counter to its own time, and became difficult to classify.

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The author was a professional philosopher who had struck his first blows, in the 1960s, by participating in the theoretical enterprise of Louis Althusser, who wished to rebuild Marxist theory. Now, instead of offering philosophical theses, he was telling stories about the French working class of the nineteenth century. And he offered nothing by way of Marxism - no analysis of the forms of industrial production, of capitalist exploitation, of social theories or of class struggles or worker movements. His workers, moreover, were not "real" workers; they were artisans from olden times, dreamers who dabbled in poetry and philosophy, who got together in the evening to found ephemeral newspapers, who became intoxicated by socialist and communist utopias but for the most part avoided doing anything about them. And the book seemed to lose itself in the aimless wanderings of these people, following the dreams of one, or the little stories others recounted in their diaries; the letters they wrote about their Sunday walks in the Paris suburbs, or the everyday concerns of those who had left for the United States to try out their dream of fraternal communalism. What on earth were readers to do with these stories in 1980?

The question is not, therefore, one of geographical or temporal distance. This book may seem untimely in an era that proclaims the disappearance of the proletariat, but it also seemed so in the previous era, which claimed to represent the class that had been united by the condition of the factory and the science of capitalist production. Let me put it simply: this book is out of place in a postmodern vision for the same reasons that it was already out of place in a classical modernist vision. It runs counter to the belief, shared by modernism and postmodernism alike, in a straight line of history where cracks in the path of time are thought to be the work of time itself - the outcome of a global temporal process that both creates and destroys forms of life, consciousness and action. This book rejects this because, despite its apparent objectivity, such an idea of time always places a hierarchy upon beings and objects. The belief in historical evolution, said Walter Benjamin, legitimises the victors. For me, this belief legitimises the knowledge that decrees what is important and what is not, what makes or does not make history. It is thus that the social sciences have declared that these little stories of workers taking an afternoon walk, or straying far from the solid realities of the factory and the organised struggle, have no historical importance. In doing so they confirm the social order, which has always been built on the simple idea that the vocation of workers is to work - "and to struggle," good progressive souls add - and that they have no time to lose in wandering, writing or thinking.

This book turns this idea of time on its head. In the grand modernist narratives of the development of productive forces and of forms of class consciousness, this book sees a way of diverting the intimate energy of the very struggles they claim to represent, and re-attributing it to the order of time that was struggled against. It sees such narratives as a way of reinforcing the power of those who believe they have a masterful, external perspective on the history in which they declare everyone else to be collectively imprisoned. This idea of imprisonment, and this position of mastery, had found their radical form in the project of Louis Althusser that I had participated in. For this project, the agents of capitalist production were necessarily caught in the ideological traps produced by the system that held them in their place. That is to say that our project itself trapped them in a perfect circle: it explained that the dominated were kept in their place by ignorance of the laws of domination. But it also explained that the place they were in prevented them from knowing the laws of domination. So they were dominated because they did not understand, and they did not understand because they were dominated. This meant that all the efforts they made to struggle against their domination were blind, trapped in the dominant ideology, and only intellectuals, who were capable of perceiving the logic of the circle, could pull them out of their subjection.

In the France of 1968 it became abundantly clear that the circle of domination was held in place in fact by this so-called science. It became clear that subjection and revolution had no other cause than themselves and that the science that pretended to explain subjection and inspire revolution was in fact a part of the dominant order. It is with this lesson in mind that I undertook in the 1970s the long period of research in the labour archives that culminated in this book. On the way, many surprises awaited me. I set out to find primitive revolutionary manifestos, but what I found was texts which demanded in refined language that workers be considered as equals and their arguments responded to with proper arguments. I went to consult the archives of a carpenter in order to find out about more about the conditions of labour; I first came upon a correspondence from the 1830s where this worker told a friend about a Sunday in May when he had gone out with two friends to enjoy the sunrise over the village, spend the day discussing metaphysics in an inn, and end it trying to convert the diners at the next table to their humanitarian social vision. Then I read documents in which this same worker described an entire vision of life, an unusual counter-economy which sought ways to reduce the worker's consumption of everyday goods so that he would be more independent of the

market economy, and better able to fight against it. Through these texts, and many others, I realised that workers had never needed others to explain the secrets of domination to them, and that the problem they faced was having to submit themselves, intellectually and materially, to the forms by which it inscribed itself on their bodies, and imposed upon them gestures, modes of perception, attitudes and language. “Be realistic: demand the impossible!” the protesters cried in 1968. But for these workers in 1830, it was not about demanding the impossible but making it happen themselves: of appropriating the time they did not have, either by spying opportunities in the working day or by giving up their own night of rest to discuss or to write, to compose verses or to work out philosophies. These hard-won bonuses of time and liberty were not marginal phenomena, they were not diversions from the building of the worker movement and its great ideals. They were a revolution, discreet but radical nonetheless, and they made those other things possible. They comprised the work by which men and women tore themselves away from an identity forged for them by a system of domination and affirmed themselves as independent inhabitants of a common world, capable of all the refinements and self-denials that previously had been associated only with those classes that were released from the daily concern of work and food.

It is the necessity of acknowledging this revolution which gives to this book its unusual form. The book plunges us directly into workers’ words, in all their forms - from personal confidences and everyday anecdotes to fiction composed in diaries to philosophical speculations and programmes for the future. It does not seek to impose any differences in status, any hierarchy between description, fiction or argument. This does not arise from some fetishistic passion for the lived. This is generally the excuse for a division of roles in which the people are made to speak in order to prove that they do indeed speak the language of the people, which allows the poor to have the experience of the real and the flavour of the everyday in order to better reserve for itself the privilege of creative imagination and analytical language. It is precisely this division between the language of the people and literary language, between the real and fiction, between the document and the argument that these “popular” texts call into question. We will never know if their memories of childhood, their descriptions of the working day or their accounts of their encounters with language are authentic. A narrative is never a simple account of facts. It is a way of constructing - or deconstructing - a lived world. The learned philosopher and the child of the people go about it in the same way. In the third book of Plato’s Republic, Socrates asks his interlocutors to accept an unlikely story: if some people are philosophers and

legislators while others are workers, it is because the gods mixed gold into the souls of the first group and iron into the souls of the second. This outlandish tale is necessary in order to give consistency to a world in which differences in condition must be accepted as differences in nature. The worker narratives presented here are like counter-myths, narratives that blur these differences in nature. This is why it was so important to me to unravel the mesh of words, in which narrative, dreams, fiction and argument are all part of the same enterprise, in order to upset the order of things that puts individuals, classes and forms of speech in their place. There is no popular intelligence occupied by practical things, nor a learned intelligence devoted to abstract thought. There is not one intelligence devoted to the real and another devoted to fiction. It is always the same intelligence.

This is the message proclaimed in the same historical period by Joseph Jacotot, a teacher who broke with all tradition. While his contemporaries wanted to give the people just the instruction that was necessary and sufficient for them to adequately occupy their place in society, he called them to free themselves intellectually in order to demonstrate the equality of all intelligences (1).

In the very diversity of their expression, the workers whose stories are told in this book demonstrate precisely this equality. In order to show the subversive power of their work I needed to break with the conventions of the social sciences for which these personal narratives, fictional writings and essays are no more than the confused expression of a social process which only they can know. I needed to remove the conventional labels from these texts - of testimony, or symptoms of a social reality - and to exhibit them as writing and thought that worked towards the construction of an alternative social world. That is why this book renounces the distance of explanation. It attempts instead to weave a sensory fabric of these texts so that their radical energy may resonate again in our own time, and threaten the order which gives categories to times and forms of speech. And this is the reason why our severe theorists and historians decided that this book was literature. The issue for me was to recall that the arguments of philosophers and intellectuals are made of the same common fabric of language and thought as the creations of writers and these proletarian narratives.

This is also why I am not afraid that this book will suffer too much from distances of time, place and language. For it does not simply tell the story of the working class of a far-off time and place. It tells a form of experience which is not so far away from our own.

Contemporary forms of capitalism, the explosion of the labour market, the new precariousness of labour and the destruction of systems of social solidarity, all create forms of life and experiences of work that are possibly closer to those of these artisans than to the universe of hi-tech workers and the global bourgeoisie given over to the frenetic consumption described by so many contemporary sociologists and philosophers. In our world, just as in theirs, the challenge is to obstruct and subvert the order of time imposed by a system of domination. To oppose the government of capitalist and state elites and their experts with an intelligence that comes from everyone and anyone.

It remains for me to offer my warmest thanks to the editors and translators who have made it possible for the voices of these anonymous people, forgotten for so long, to speak in an Indian language, and so to encounter new voices with which they may mix and extend their appeal.

Jacques Rancière

(1) See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Stanford University Press, 1991

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