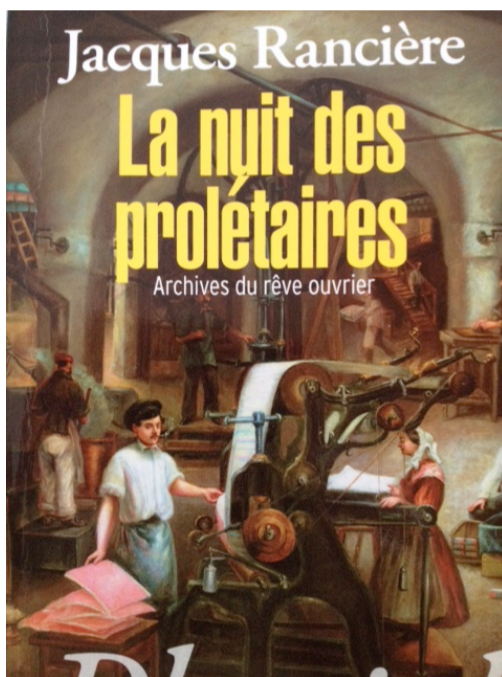


Conversation with Jacques Rancière

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(Translated by Graeme Thomson)



Aurora Fernández Polanco.- Let's begin with the night, with people who don't sleep...

Jacques Rancière.- So you'd like me to say something about the rapport between the archive of the workers' dream and this model, this slogan *rêve generale* that we've been seeing in the "Nuit debout" protests around Paris. Well, I can see several aspects that are somewhat independent of the image. First of all there's the question of night. *Proletarian Nights* is a phrase that strongly implies an interruption of the normal order of time in which workers work all day and sleep at night and the cycle begins again the following day. *Proletarian nights* means the workers taking hold of the night to give it a new meaning, no longer simply to regain their physical strength for the next day's work, but to use this time to get out of their normal conditions and the natural order of the times. So there's a strongly metaphorical sense to the theme of night in *Proletarian Nights*, that is at once similar and at the same time quite different to the Paris "Nuit debout" movement, because there you no longer have the sense of a rapport between the working day and the night whose meaning is subverted, and yet there is the phrase "nuit debout", which implies a certain opposition to the normal order of things, since night is when you generally go to bed, even if you're not a proletarian and you don't have to get up to go the factory the next day. So in the night there is this term which is common to an activity that subverts the normal order of activities: that's the first thing. The second is the question of dream. Of course in my book I'm not talking about the dreams of

workers, but of the workers' dream in the sense of a historical configuration: there was a "workers' dream", an idea of worker emancipation, and there are also "archives of the workers' dream" which implies that I return to the moment when this dream began to take form. It's different from the kind of dream that we've seen reappearing in the movements of 1968 and after. At the same time it's interesting because there's a subversion of language (in the play on words with *grève generale* – general strike) and yet saying this implies a grammatical impossibility, since in French *rêve* (dream) is masculine whereas *grève* (strike) is feminine, so there's something impossible even in the formulation of the slogan.

But there's always been this strong tendency to try to reinject the dream into the strike and open the strike to something in excess of itself. The very idea of the General Strike always implies a major act of subversion and not simply the fact that everyone downs tools at the same moment.

And yet at the same time I feel a distance from all these notions of dream, because quite often I feel it's become too facile and somewhat banalised. They say we have to dream, we have to keep dreaming, with every movement there's this compulsion to dream. Our rulers too think they can bring an element of dream to society, even socialist rulers (and of course we know who they are) tell us that there has to be a dream, a sliver of utopia, so I get a bit irritated when I see this word "dream" being pulled out at all occasions. But nonetheless we see there's a desire to combine the idea of strike with that of night. In France, the strike also represented a transformation of a certain topographical situation. The word comes from the expression "place de grève", a square where workers would gather and wait for the bosses to hire them. After which, the meaning was reversed, no longer referring to the workers' waiting but to the moment of their own appropriation of the bosses' work spaces. In this image there's a reminder of a historical sedimentation, that is to say the very rapport between the idea of strike and that of a place where we are gathered in large numbers and where we attempt to transform the actual meaning of the space, and of our being there.

So you see, one can't really assert that the images say much by themselves. Here the image enables us to discuss the symbolic value of a certain number of words – dream, strike, night etc. But at the same time you can't really say the image is meaningful because we can think of many examples of large numbers of people gathering together in a square, and Place de la République in particular...

AFP.- But there's a difference, beginning from the Indignados movement the images come from within the situation and there's a strong relation between images, bodies and words...

JR.- Yes, yes. It's true we're now in an age when it's much simpler to produce images and the tools are more accessible. People are now able to rapidly invent an image to convey their situation. Which is somewhat different from the idea of the selfie, even if the techniques are the same. You can make images of anything at every moment, I can make an image of myself posing in front of a statue, or alternatively we can make an image of a crowd trying to constitute itself partly by means of the image itself.

As for the image on the cover of my book, I didn't choose it, precisely because there are no images to represent what I'm talking about. So if we were going to put an image on the cover of *Proletarian Nights*, the problem would be to know how we should picture the idea.

What concerned me more was how to picture the night. But I wasn't able to convince the publishers that this idea of night was the key thing. I wanted Romantic images of night, of ruined temples bathed in moonlight etc. Clearly the publishers

didn't understand this. For them what counted was the proletarian aspect, meaning people who work and suffer and they couldn't see what that had to do with moonlit ruins...

AFP.- Even if there are no visual representations, the book is still full of images...

JR.- Yes, there are a lot of images, but images which are in some sense summoned by the words, not illustrations. The cover illustration I accepted because it's not too bad aesthetically, but at the same time it's not really pertinent. It shows a printing press but one where they printed wallpaper, not where the workers were printing their pamphlets.



AFP.- Let's move on to these two images, because I read somewhere that you didn't really agree with the definition of "cognitariat", since there are still many workers who are working on the assembly line, who do manual work and who, as you've said, are not part of movements like Nuit debout.

JR.- Yes, in fact it's amazing that there's this kind of official image of immaterial capitalism – a word that has been easily absorbed by many thinkers on the left, such as Toni Negri and the *operaisti* – which shows how widely accepted is the notion that capitalism has by now become something completely immaterial, there are no more workers, no more factories, but only a kind of generalised social labour that no longer recognizes boundaries between work and life time. We've ended up thinking the becoming of work in terms of this image of the temporality and mode of work of a typical white-collar worker in a corporate neighbourhood, which is not at all the case. It's important to recall the dislocation of the work market, which meant that among the people who have gathered in squares in Europe, Turkey, and the USA there have been relatively few factory workers. In fact, a large number of factories have been moved elsewhere, to Eastern Europe or South East Asia, but I think what's important for us to remember is that, at a global level, industry still exists, and contrary to what we are often told, the reality of contemporary capitalism cannot be reduced to the immaterial realm of computer screens. What is actually happening is quite the reverse: we are witnessing a return to 19th century forms of manufacture and to forms of domestic work and exploitation. During a visit to China some years ago I was struck by the way some sectors of the textile industry functioned. On one hand you have computers stationed in a small boutique which permits the control of a large distribution chain and ensures a rapid response to orders, while elsewhere the work is done by people in small old-style factories, even in villages. You see the goods arriving from the villages to be shipped off to Walmart. And you're in a world where the workers in these displaced factories are subjected to the most frenetic conditions of overexploitation. At the same time you have this dialectic whereby the fact that in the West people can still survive even if they don't have a job is linked to their being able to clothe themselves in garments made at very low cost in China or Cambodia. I think we really have to get out of this image of capitalism having become immaterial, liquid, in which all social relations are equally liquid or gaseous, fluid, flexible...

What I find interesting about the movements who occupy public squares, is their attempt to re-materialise the world, to

shatter the idea that nothing can be done since everything now happens in the immaterial realm of data flows. Even if there's no direct relation between what has taken place in the squares and what goes on in the sealed-off factories in the Far East, and we're living in a period where the dominant discourse is of a world where all social relations have become fluid, flexible or gaseous, all of this is now being put in question by people who refuse the idea that politics is not simply about big speeches and voting booths but that it consists in occupying a space in a certain way and trying to achieve something together.

AFP.- So now we come to this image, which you said interests you especially.



JP.- Yes, what interests me about this image is its theatrical aspect, because it was originally published as a caricature in June 1848 by a conservative English newspaper at the moment of the Parisian workers' insurrection, with the intention of showing that all of that was no more than theatre, a parade on the barricades with the characters appearing in a kind of semichorus, and above all with the placard saying COMPLET (SOLD OUT), which tells us we are at the theatre.

But beyond this satirical intention, what interests me is the fact that in a certain way it does represent what a barricade is. Auguste Blanqui, the great street battle strategist, was against constructing barricades because they blocked circulation on either side. In his view, what was needed was not to build barricades in worker districts but to invade the centre and take the government and parliamentary buildings by storm. But barricades are not simply a military device, they are also political in that they manifest a certain political aesthetic, a way of altering the purpose of a space: roads are made to encourage circulation, so one digs up the paving stones that foster this motion and instead produce barriers, and in the same way the wheels and upturned carts that we see reverse their normal function, which is to transport goods. Then there are mattresses thrown on top, mattresses which are made so that families can rest in the evening so as to be fit for work the following day. A barricade is like a world overturned where the normal use of things, streets, buildings, furniture, household utensils is completely subverted. And for what reason? To manifest the people's own space in front of and in contrast to the space of official politics and governmentality. I am fond of this image because of the way it relates politics to the material subversion of time and space: the workers don't go to work, they man the barricade and in the end all the elements that go together to compose the so-called normal world are instead in complete disorder. So that's what I've tried to analyse, that even if a politics does not necessarily equate with insurrection, it nonetheless presents a subversion of the normal order and distribution of spaces and times and of the places that individuals and groups occupy. This is what the occupy movements of recent years have been doing through peaceful means, transforming the purpose of spaces and times (streets made for passage, nights for sleeping), though in Paris it was less spectacular than in Madrid since they weren't able to set up tents.

AFP.- Yes all that was truly remarkable, but it here in Spain we've now passed from this moment of manifestation, of the event, to the question of constitution, and I quote: "What we have to consider is that democracy cannot be reduced to the form of an assembly, because democracy is always a question of imagination". So how can we continue to imagine if we are in power (as is the case with the mayors of Madrid and Barcelona)?

JR.- I don't think we can, because at that point it becomes the imagination of power. There are several things to consider here. There's the fact that democracy cannot simply be a question of managing its own image. It's true that in the image of the assembly you have a situation where everyone can have a say and everyone is equal and that's all very well, but at the same time when everyone gathered in a square can say whatever they like and in no particular order, then in the end not much gets done. We can formally affirm that democracy exists but in reality this democracy does not act. We discuss the matter of everyone being equal, but if we decide to engage in discussion it's to actually achieve something and not simply so that everyone can say that we have to defend migrants, animals, women, bisexuals, transexuals and what have you.

There's this first level on which democracy is spatio-temporal but that's not the whole story. It's a form that must be verified, the way Jacotot speaks of the logic of verification of the equality of intelligence, and not simply a matter of everyone having the right to speak for the same length of time in a given space. Democracy must invent actions, which could well be street actions, as well as forms of organization or campaign objectives that will provide a movement with its own dynamics and not simply limit it to some kind of self-reflection. So that's the first thing to be said concerning democracy.

As a second point I would say that in my view the problem is to invent an autonomous movement, one that isn't configured in relation to elections or party alliances... In Paris, the movement is relatively small compared to others that have appeared in Turkey, Greece or Spain, but the question is this: should we think of the movement as the seed of a form of organization or autonomous political action or are we going to try to transform it into a new far-left party to recuperate voters who have become disillusioned with the existing left-wing parties.

AFP.- Everywhere we see the phrase *OMNIA SUNT COMMUNIA*... to found another idea of the commons.



Perhaps now's the time to talk about Agamben's messianic position. What new community is it calling forth? Are we going back to the world of St. Francis?

JR.- There are several points to consider here, first there's a return to the political agenda of a concrete sense of the commons, which is also connected to the question of the environment, a way of linking socialist or communist political thought to the management of natural resources. This first aspect puts the question of what is the commons right at the centre of the political agenda. The second point is the reversal of a certain Marxist logic that has prevailed since the 19th century. The logic of Marxism has held that communism is not about people living in a kind of poverty who wish to share things in a community based on principles of sobriety. The Marxist idea was that communism would be created on the basis of the development of productive forces, "the communism of wealth". Now, if we consider first of all the historical catastrophe of Marxism and secondly the evolution of the world – which has shown that progress in the growth of wealth does not correspond to progress in its distribution – we see the inversion of perspective, an inversion which may be highly ambiguous. To take an example, look at how the thought of Negri has shifted from a communism of wealth to a communism of poverty. At the end of *Empire*, we even come back to the figure of St. Francis, so it's not really Agamben who started this trend but his old enemy, Negri.



So today we have this inversion in thinking which has it that the possibility of equality can no longer be based on the maximum development of wealth but must distance itself from the model by which wealth is organized, produced and redistributed.

And there's a third aspect which is in some way linked to this, that we are at a moment when we have to build a sense of the common, not in the historical sense but in reaction to the sense history has taken, and that is connected to something else, namely the idea that dissensus should no longer be about attacking the enemy, but withdrawing, distancing ourselves from the centres of power and wealth. I think all these elements combine to revive a religious idea of history and community of the order of a certain kind of messianism. But messianism is a kind of endlessly deferred promise. It always implies a sense of waiting in contrast to the materialist Marxist schema of history which would produce the conditions of the community. And then, I don't know... of course the religious dimension is quite strong (at its base we can think of communism as the ultimate realisation of Christianity) but then there is another kind of religiosity at work here, based on the idea of secession and poverty, in contrast to the great communist themes of seizing power, the Winter Palace, and other such revolutionary schemas.

AFP.- A question of potency leading nowhere?

JR.- That's certainly part of the problem. But we shouldn't think of it as the result of one thinker's personal obsession. It's true that Agamben has developed this concept of potency separated from act but this is also the problem at the heart of emancipatory and revolutionary thought: in a certain sense emancipation is the development of potency rather than a strategy of action. Now that we've seen the collapse of a certain Marxist historical schema, it's quite logical that we think in terms of a potency to be constituted rather than a goal to attain, because nobody these days would be able to say what the goal should be. The question is certainly that of constituting a potency, a potential, after which it remains to be seen how that potency should be thought and activated.

AFP.- But how would you translate that in terms of your own way of thinking?

JR.- I would say that there is a dynamics proper to emancipation and that this dynamics is not strategic, I don't think that a historical movement is determined by its future goals. Rather, it's always the dynamics of historical and present moments that creates possible futures. But we mustn't block this dynamics through a radical separation between potency and act, as Agamben does. That said, it's true that in the dynamics of emancipation there is something of a displacement, even with regard to the night, *proletarian nights*, *nuit debout*, there's a dynamics of secession that distances itself from that of a historical promise to be accomplished by determined means and ends. So I don't really believe in the glorification of pure potency as thinkers like Agamben do. I think we're in the kind of situations where we have to ask ourselves if a movement can develop its own potency or whether it should be inscribed within an order of defined goals. Basically it's a question of knowing if a new far-left party will be constituted and, should it manage to create a victorious electoral bloc, whether or not it will be willing to negotiate its position with other parties, or on the other hand whether the movement will develop as an autonomous force with its own agenda. So that's basically the context in which the various philosophies of exodus and secession, of pure potency, must take their *place*.

AFP.- A place in the "square" (*place*)... I don't know whether that's pure potency or already an act...

JR.- Yes, there is some kind of act involved, an act of self-affirmation more than a strategic act to effectively determine what would be the means there, for seizing power. But what would it even mean to seize power now? It's only in the electoral sense that such an idea has any real meaning, and that seems to be the essence of the problem.

AFP.- For we who are concerned with images and bodies, there is at least what we could call a symbolic moment that seems quite pertinent!

JR.- Yes, of course, these are gestures, but gestures of a distancing movement, not the kind that will lead to the constitution of an army that can seize power. I think the idea of potency isn't a question of just doing nothing, but rather that it involves a deployment of gestures and acts whose ends are in some way suspended.

AFP.- The question of suspension, that seems to me very typical of you...

JR.- You're right, though Agamben also wrote a book called *Means Without Ends* ... I think emancipation involves developing a whole series of potencies for action, in the sense of the growth of a collective potency. But between the growth of collective potency and a strategy for action there is a big distance, I would even say an abyss.

AFP.- Finally, I wonder if you could speak a little about the question of visibility... Our group is called *Critical Visualities* and we are very interested in this question of what is at stake between visibility and invisibility... I refer of course also to the Invisible Committee... How do you situate yourself with respect to that remarkable community and form of life who are saying that to destroy the global order one must become invisible?

JR.- The very idea of invisibility is highly ambiguous. We might think of the invisibility of this Committee as something akin to the army of shadows, the invisibility of conspirators, the people who stay underground to make the world explode. But I think that when we speak about invisibility today, it's more in terms of a mode of withdrawal. It seems to me that the proclamations of the Invisible Committee are more and more in line with the positions of Agamben. And here I think there are two forms of naiveté at work, the notion of constituting a kind of shadow army on the one hand and the idea that it's possible to make the world explode by withdrawing from it on the other.

There was a hoax recently regarding a *Philosophers' Strike*, philosophers who were refusing to think. Well, of course the effects of that wouldn't exactly be catastrophic, Capitalism can get along very well without philosophers thinking. It was a way of critiquing that somewhat naive notion that the system will crumble if we simply withdraw from it. But of course no system will ever crumble because of people withdrawing from it or creating a shadow army. The problem isn't about our visibility or invisibility with regard to the enemy or the global order. It's about our visibility or invisibility in relation to ourselves. Which means to say, giving visibility to or manifesting something that will bring people together to think collectively and try to find in the images of the world possible ways to create a world.

I don't believe that there is an official world on the one hand and an invisible realm on the other. I think there are many ways to create a world. The images we've been speaking about all refer to ways of creating a world, and constructing modes of visibility. The movements of the occupiers of squares or the barricades that we saw at the beginning are also ways of constructing the visibility of a world. With all the problems that images involve, naturally. For example, what does it mean the fact that these combatants show themselves in the foreground? We know that at the time of the Paris Commune there were all these photos that showed the communards proudly manning their barricades and that afterwards the same photos were used to identify and condemn them. I was struck by something similar during the demonstrations in Tehran against the fixed elections a few years ago, when they had posted a huge number of close-ups of demonstrators in the streets. Sceptics said it was crazy to do that, that those people would have been identified immediately... but I think they did it exactly to show that they were not afraid. There are many meanings you can give an image and the same goes for forms of visibility. And all these movements we've been talking about, the various Arab Springs, the Indignados, Occupy have been trying to construct the visible world in a different way. One might argue that this is also what's at stake for art today.

AFP.- The world of the visible, or we could also say the sharing of the commons, because for you an image is always one element of a device.

JR.- Yes, there's always something of a world in miniature in an image. One produces an image, a performance, a

movement that could be a movement of a film, so in a sense one produces a draft or sketch of the world: to put words, gestures or visual forms together, to form movements, to create spaces is all a way of creating possibilities of worlds. When we think about the idea of community, it doesn't mean taking individuals and gathering them together... that wouldn't be a community. In any case, we are always already in a community because of the way the common world is structured, which is to say its dominant structuring. Every day, people make certain kinds of gestures, and are exposed to dominant images, dominant modes of interpretation, dominant discourses. Take the example of the word "crisis", it's a word that fits into the dominant narrative, we are told we are living "in the crisis" even if "crisis" is primarily a word. All actions of dissensus try to create other forms of community, and they begin by finding other ways to put words, gestures and images together: words with images, words with movements, movements with temporalities, spaces with time.

AFP.- Is it for that reason that you said at one time that you had a problem with the word "imaginary"?

JR.- Yes, absolutely. I don't like the idea that the imaginary is some kind of floating world of images. Images are always material operations and realities, they're not something that floats from our minds to project itself outside. An image is always a restructuring of things that are already visible.

AFP.- Rereading your book *Proletarian Nights*, I really liked the way that as a researcher you didn't try to speak from some kind of outside position. If I've understood your sensibility you were, like a fervent admirer of Flaubert, looking for this intensive relation between words, perceptions, things... the words "of life" that you find in the archive...

JR.- That's right. Again, writing a book is like building a certain kind of common world. Now, the normal type of common world is one where there are some people who don't know how to speak well and others who do and who take it upon themselves to explain the words of the former. The normal view is that workers' texts express in their own manner the worker's situation or condition: the fact that they weren't rich or happy, that they suffered considerably and that was why they wrote. But I don't adhere to this view. What they write are words. I work with words and what is important is this common fabric that I try to weave and that allows me to show how these words are not just the expression of their suffering or their imagination or even dreams but also that they build a certain type of common world. While they attempt to build a kind of common world, I in turn try to build a common world between my situation as a writer-researcher and the world they are trying to build, and that's it basically. It's the Flaubertian practice of writing as the weaving of a common fabric: even if he thinks Madame Bovary is a fool, Flaubert is at the same time in complete solidarity with her in the fabric of his writing. He cannot realise his potency as a writer without being constantly immersed in Emma Bovary's perceptions, knowing no more than her, never straying beyond the limits of her own visual field. This is what I call the democracy of writing.