

Christian Sternad

## The Silent Witnesses

Interview with Jacques Rancière

Information on the context of the interview:

On the 28./29. November 2014, Siegfried Mattl and Christian Sternad organized a small conference at the IFK (*Institut für Kulturwissenschaften*) in Vienna, in which participants from different disciplines explored how Jacques Rancière's work relates to history and to the Historical Sciences in general. The idea behind the workshop was simple: While Jacques Rancière is widely discussed in contemporary Philosophy, Political Theory, and the Liberal Arts, his works do not seem to have received significant reception in the Historical Sciences. This is all the more startling given the fact that Rancière explicitly understood many of his early works as studies in the field of History, especially the history of the labour movement of the 19th century. The organizers invited four experts from different fields of research (Philosophy, Political Theory, Aesthetics, Literature) to give lectures on the work of Rancière, to which professional historians replied challenging their thoughts in front of a specialized audience. The title of the conference *Silent witnesses. Jacques Rancière and History* paraphrases a passage from Rancière's work *The Names of History* where he claims: „It is, then, this world of silent witnesses that the historian brings into a significance without lies, that history in our century will reclaim as its realm“<sup>1</sup>.

*Christian Sternad:* In taking a closer look at your early work, one recognizes a strong relationship with questions that are situated in the field of the Historical Sciences. For someone who is a philosopher by profession, this is not all that common. As primarily a philosopher and student of Louis Althusser, what was it that drew you to archival research and studies in the Historical Sciences, as for example in *Les Révoltes logiques* (1975–1981) and *La nuit des prolétaires* (1981)?

*Jacques Rancière:* The disciplinary border between philosophical discourse and historical research had already been blurred by Foucault, who, obviously, offered at that

moment the model for a philosophical investigation following the ways of archival research. In a sense, Foucault's archaeology appeared to be the exact opposite of Althusser's scientific dogmatism. Althusser spoke about the "fusion" of Marxist theory and the worker's movement without any precise knowledge of the history of real workers' movements. In May 1968 his "science" had been strongly contradicted by the reality of the social movement. On the contrary the archival method of Foucault and his distance from general statements about History and Revolution seemed perfectly in tune with a movement that shattered down the dogmatist views about the ways of class-consciousness, class-struggle and revolutionary strategy. May 68 had evinced the gap between the reality of collective movements and the Marxist dogmas about science, the avant-garde, ideology and so on. I had the idea that the so-called "fusion" of Marxism and the workers' movement might have been a missed encounter whose history should be traced from the very beginning. That's why I focused on the 1840s, which was the specific moment when Marx wrote his first texts about the proletariat and revolution. I wanted to look for the real forms of French workers' thought and struggle at the very moment when Marx was in Paris. My initial idea was to trace the history of this missed encounter from that moment up to the creation of the French Communist Party in 1921.

*Christian Sternad: Les Révoltes logiques* grew out of a collective research group at Paris Vincennes (Paris VIII). What was the general idea or the general aim of this collective research? And was there a specific reason for conducting this research as a collective?

*Jacques Rancière:* At the beginning, the collective structure of the research simply was my class at Paris VIII. This means that I set out to turn a philosophy class into a group of researchers doing historical research. The idea of the collective in this case cannot be separated from the anti-hierarchical context of Vincennes. It was based on the will to break with both the professor/student hierarchical relation and the idea that research is a disciplinary matter that must be done by well-trained specialists of a domain. Then the structure of the group became independent from Vincennes. But it remained a collective of "amateur"-historians – mostly philosophers – who wanted to use historical research as a way of rethinking some issues of the present such as social movements, education or feminist struggle.

*Christian Sternad:* In this collective, a historian would immediately recognize the names of Arlette Farge or Geneviève Fraisse, who became important for the early development of Gender History. How does your work relate to Gender History or

conversely, how did this work have an impact on your thoughts on history/historiography?

*Jacques Rancière:* Arlette Farge joined us a bit later after having read the first issues of the journal. Geneviève Fraisse was a member of the collective from the very beginning. But you must be aware that there was no “gender history” at that moment. Geneviève Fraisse was interested in the history of women, of women’s struggles and of feminist theory. Arlette Farge was interested in the archives of the life of popular classes. The big issue at that moment was, in Maoist terms, “the contradictions among the people”, the conjunction or disjunction between the various forms of oppression and the various forms of struggle. Our purpose was not to include “gender” as a new object into history but to come back, by the ways of historical research, to the tensions and contradictions between workers’ emancipation and women’s emancipation. “Gender” theory came later, as a division inside feminism. Still today, Geneviève Fraisse speaks in terms of sexual division rather than in terms of gender – a term which risks to hide the political background of women’s struggles.

*Christian Sternad:* Let us now speak a little bit about your large and impressive study *La nuit des prolétaires*. In the preface, which you wrote almost 30 years later, you mention that in hindsight this work was somehow anachronistic. In the aftermath of May 68, the student revolts, etc. this work seemed somewhat alien, dedicating itself to modest archival research and not going along with the narrative about classes. How would you describe your situation at that time in relation to research, May 68 and the predominant trends of research and why did your work appear to be a “strange endeavour”?

*Jacques Rancière:* This statement must be related to the context of the publication in 1981. When I started my research, at the beginning of the 1970s, this dedication to archival research and its relation to a perspective of emancipation were not anachronistic. They were in tune with the spirit of 1968. This implied both a revival of the great emancipatory ideals and a distance from the orthodox Marxist narrative of class struggle, an attention to the real forms of rebellion, which were often at odds with the mainstream narrative of class-struggle. They were also attuned to contemporary social struggles, such as the movement of the watchmakers of Lip, who in 1973 decided to take the control of their factory and run it on their own. Then came the ebb of the flow: the exhaustion of the post-68 movements, the marginalization and militarization of the movement in Germany and Italy, the defeat of the revolutionary left in Portugal; the “nouveaux philosophes” in France, who initiated a whole intellectual counter-revolution. In the historical field François Furet made the

French Revolution appear an illusion, whose sole reality was the Terror. On the one hand there was a strong movement to liquidate the spirit of 1968 and the whole revolutionary tradition in France. On the other hand, there was the rise of the socialist party that pretended to give reality to the ideals of 1968; it developed a hyper-Marxist discourse and a hyper-Marxist program of nationalizing industries and banks. It is in this context that my work looked totally anachronistic: still too attached to the outdated revolutionary tradition for the right, still too attached to pre-Marxist stories of artisans for the left.

*Christian Sternad:* I have the impression that the original aim of your research was somehow different from the result of your study. On first sight, one can find a very subtle and careful description of the “worker’s voice”, shown to the reader through the workers’ own voices, documents, etc. But as the study goes on, one can also observe a slow „deconstruction“ of the notion of „the worker“ or the „class“ of workers.

*Jacques Rancière:* It is true that there is a distance between the original aim of my research and its final result. But the contradiction does not oppose careful description to deconstruction: on the contrary, it is the “careful description” of the archival material that explodes the traditional figures of the worker, of class consciousness, proletarian ideology, and so on. The contradiction does not lie in my method; it lies in its very “object” and it is this object that forced me to give up my original project, which was still based on the presupposition of an “authentic” self-expression of the working-class. The workers’ texts I dealt with showed me the twist lying at the core of that “authenticity”. This is what I spelled out in the text *The Proletarian and his double* that I wrote to defend my thesis: the big signifiers of workers’ thought and workers’ movement were elaborated by workers who wanted to break away from their condition and from the ways of thinking and speaking attached to that condition. I tried to follow the twisted path through which their attempt to escape their identity resulted in the construction of the collective figure of the proletarian fighter. This is what I conceptualized later as the opposition between identification and subjectivation. As a matter of fact, I did not “deconstruct” the figure of the worker. Instead I followed the paths of its paradoxical construction as the workers had done themselves.

*Christian Sternad:* *La nuit des prolétaires* develops such a huge momentum that it is difficult for the reader to actually draw the line between a historiographic (scientific) text and a work of literature. It becomes difficult to draw the line between you as a narrator and the people about whom you tell the story. This is especially interesting because almost half of the text is told by those people themselves, their very

own documents (letters, diaries, etc.). Was it a conscious strategy to blur the lines between what most historians try very eagerly to maintain, the scientific distance to the object of scientific investigation?

*Jacques Rancière:* It was my object that dictated my method and not the other way round. At the beginning I still shared the basic assumption of normal historians or Marxist militants: the assumption that workers' texts – manifestoes, newspapers, chronicles, poems, letters and so on – expressed, in a more or less adequate way, the reality of a pre-existing collective identity. I was forced to realize that they were breaking with a given form of identity and trying to construct another one. I was forced to treat them not as expressions and reflections of an underlying reality but as speech acts and forms of construction of a new common world. Above all I was struck by the intrinsic quality of those texts, by the fact that they existed per se and not as “expressions” of a deeper reality. I was struck by the fact that they were not dealing with matters of labor and salary; they were dealing with the kind of life that those workers lived, the world to which they belonged and the new fabric of life they were trying to weave. These texts evinced that those workers looked with the same eyes and thought with the same brain as we do although their place in the distribution of the sensible witnessed to the contrary. If I wanted to understand the conflict of worlds that was at stake in their texts, I had to abolish, for my part, the normal distribution of the play, which gives to the researcher his status and his modes of interpretation: the opposition between reality and appearance, or science and ideology, the opposition between the language of science and the language of its objects, between human beings whose thought is the expression of a condition and those whose thought is an autonomous process, and so on and so forth.

*Christian Sternad:* You became especially interested in one of those workers, Louis-Gabriel Gauny. You even edited and published some of his writings in *Louis Gabriel Gauny. Le philosophe plébéien*<sup>2</sup> (1983). Why is he so important for you, particularly in connection to your own perspective on the labour movement?

*Jacques Rancière:* The Gauny Archive is something quite exceptional. I have not found anything that can be compared to it. Normally we know about people of his class only from police archives. A private archive is the archive of a person of the high class: a politician, a diplomat, a writer, etc. Here we have eight boxes full of writings of a man who spent his whole life as a carpenter: poems, articles, philosophical meditations, memories, letters covering fifty years from the 1830s to the 1880s. They are texts of a young rebel who was among the few workers converted by the Saint-Simonians in the 1830s and still remained faithful to the ideal of work-

ing-class emancipation. My encounter with that archive made me change my point of view and understand that the writers who had been the pioneers of working-class emancipation were not representatives of the ethos of a class but individuals in-between; individuals who had been seized by the power of texts that were not meant for people from their class and who wanted to live in the same world as the poets they had read. They wanted to live in a world where there would be no separation between people destined to work and people destined to think and write. The first text that came into my hands was a letter to a Saint-Simonian fellow, in which Gauny described the Sunday he had just spent with two friends in the countryside: He described the leisurely day of aesthetes enjoying pastoral forms, lights and shades, of philosophers in inns developing metaphysical hypotheses and apostles trying to communicate their faith to chance companions encountered in inns. I found the letter simply beautiful and I felt the kinship between the emotions and thoughts of this 1830s' worker and those of the rebellious students of 1968. Like him they wanted to change life so that nothing in the future would be as it had been before. Then I read the extraordinary texts that he devoted either to the description of his day at work or to visions of the future. It was this encounter that made me abandon the attitude historians take towards their "object". Instead I based my mode of writing on a principle of intellectual equality.

*Christian Sternad:* Let us now speak about your most recent historiographical work *Les noms de l'histoire* (1992). The title itself has many connotations, especially when one takes into account that it has been reprinted under its original title *Les mots de l'histoire*, which reminds one of Michel Foucault's famous *Les mots et les choses* (1966). What is the secret behind the title and why did it change?

*Jacques Rancière:* There was no reference to Foucault in my choice. At the beginning I wanted to analyse the gap that had opened between historians and me. It mostly concerned the importance given to words as acts. For historians words express conditions and situations and for social historians workers are interesting because of what they do – working and possibly struggling – not because of what they say. In contrast I perceived that words are material forces that change the destiny of individuals and groups. I observed that this is the case above all when it comes to individuals and groups who are not supposed to care about writing, who at best are supposed to voice their pains and possibly their rebellion. I decided to dedicate a seminar to this issue and this is how I started to look at the way in which historians had dealt with words that change the destiny of human individuals and groups, notably the words of revolutionary protest and religious heresy. What do historians do with words and especially with the words of the poor, the words of those who are not sup-

posed to dedicate their time to words? Such was the topic of my seminar. That's why the book originally received the title *Les Mots de l'histoire*. It was also a kind of joke since there is a French expression that reads: "C'est le fin mot de l'histoire". It means: "this is the reason for what happened". Then I had to change the title for a very practical reason: there was a kind of lexicon that bore the same title and legally I had to find a different one for my book. As this lexicon is no longer available on the market, I decided to return to the original title.

*Christian Sternad:* Please allow me another preliminary question: The English version of the book has a preface by Hayden White, who was not so much a historian but a literary scholar. Nevertheless his book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) was very important for the development of the Historical Sciences in the 20th century. Given your own thoughts on how history and literature intertwine this does not seem surprising. What is the relation between Hayden White and your work?

*Jacques Rancière:* As a matter of fact I had no connection with Hayden White and I had not read *Metahistory* when I wrote my book. I met him and studied his texts later when there was a debate in Paris after Carlo Ginzburg had denounced his historical "relativism". It was the American publisher that asked him to write a preface for the book. I saw the text only after it had been published. I certainly agree with Hayden White's position that the writing of History follows literary models and I disagree with Carlo Ginzburg who linked his "relativism" to the rise of negationism. But unlike White I have no specific interest in narratology as a discipline and I do not find the categories set up by Northrop Frye very helpful.

*Christian Sternad:* In comparison to *La nuit des prolétaires*, one can observe a thematic shift. Whereas in your earlier work you were concerned with the labour movement, you then seem to turn your attention to different historical depictions or narratives of the French Revolution. How did this thematic shift come about and what were its reasons?

*Jacques Rancière:* There is a clear continuity between the writing of *La Nuit des prolétaires* and the issue of the writing of history that I examine in *Les Mots de l'Histoire*. In the latter I analysed the ways in which the historians had dealt with the words or the writing of the poor. What was important for me, was to select significant examples showing how they treated those words in excess that had "made" History because they had been appropriated by ordinary men – workers, peasants and so on – to whom they were not destined. That's why I focused on Michelet,

who turned the words of village orators into silent voices of the land and the generations, or on Le Roy Ladurie, who transformed the words of heretics into immemorial voices of the peasants' soil, life and aspirations. My interests did not change. I studied the same issue in different authors and I had to study it in reference to the historical terrain covered by their own research, be it the French Revolution or medieval heresies.

*Christian Sternad:* Apart from the Historical Sciences as such a main target of *Les noms de l'histoire* is a school that is considered to have brought about a theoretical revolution within the Historical Sciences: the school of the *Annales*. Founded in 1929 by Marc Block and Lucien Febvre, this school aimed to turn the gaze of the historian away from kings, military generals and individuals of grand historical significance. Instead they focussed on deep social, economic, sometimes even geographical developments over time – *longue durée* is an important keyword. At first, the *Annales*-school therefore seems to serve your purpose as it turns away from singular important individuals. Nevertheless, you seem to have serious problems with their method. Why?

*Jacques Rancière:* The method of the *Annales*-school set up an alternative: either you deal with a few important individuals – kings, generals and others –, with their words and with the time and space of their actions, or you deal with the “*longue durée*” of the life of the anonymous and silent masses, who live, work and die without being noticed; you analyze the short and long cycles of the economic process within which their life has taken place; you reconstitute their life out of the “silent witnesses”: the configuration of the land, the form and texture of the objects, and so on. This attention to the life of the masses at the same time confirms a global configuration that divides human beings into two categories: those who are individuals, who have a name, a life of their own, a time governed by the pursuit of great ends, etc., and those who exist only as members of an undifferentiated mass that speaks only through the voice of the “silent witnesses”. This is the kind of democracy that loves the poor on condition that they never try to be individuals. In that framework, even those who have made the radical choice of heresy must be treated as representatives of immemorial peasant life. As for me, I precisely focused on those members of the mass who wanted to be individuals like any other human being, to have a look, a thought and a speech of their own and who created a new form and a new sense of the collective in their very endeavour to live as individuals.

*Christian Sternad:* The theoretical core of your work, at least as I see it, is what you call the threefold contract between science, politics and literature. In this contract,

all the problems of historiography inevitably converge and give the actual writing of history today a very political connotation. Could you please explain the idea of this threefold contract and why this idea is important for the Historical Sciences?

*Jacques Rancière:* I did not propose a general notion of the relation between the three terms. For me the connection between those terms is historically determined and it is grounded in a deeper form of relationship between modes of discourse and forms of life. History had belonged for a very long time to the domain of rhetoric, which means that the truth of facts was less important than the moral examples that could be discovered in the characters, situations and events, and the rhetorical models provided by the narration and the speeches. It became a science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the literary revolution shattered the old rhetorical paradigm in several ways: by privileging the truth about the life of individuals and societies over the exemplarity of moral lessons, by locating this truth in the domain that had been heretofore the domain of the obscure life of the low people and by inventing new modes of significance, such as the language of the “silent witnesses”. This conjunction of literature and science itself responded to the revolutionary turmoil that had made “the people” appear as the new subject of History through the wild appropriation and perversion of the rhetorical models. The development of History as a science was part of the great intellectual endeavour of the post-revolutionary time: the attempt to include and stabilize the disturbing “people” inside a stable order of government and a stable framework of scientific intelligibility. The historiography of the *Annales*-school was a compromise with the revolutionary and democratic legacy, a compromise that the literary revolution made possible. On the one hand I questioned this compromise, which silenced the voices of rebellious artisans by having the “silent witnesses” of the “longue durée” speak in their place; on the other hand I showed how the scientific pretension of that school let them forget about the political underpinnings of their science. From this point of view, Furet’s *Penser la révolution française* can be considered a landmark: the historian bids farewell to the Revolution at the same time as he proclaims a return to “intellectual history”, a kind of history more interested in interpreting acts of governments than in the life of the masses.

*Christian Sternad:* Towards the end of your book, one can find this beautiful and simple statement: “The problem is therefore not to know if the historian does or doesn’t have to produce literature, but what literature he produces.”<sup>3</sup> Is this the reason for engaging with Jules Michelet’s *Histoire de la Révolution française* (1847/48) and François Furet’s *Penser la Révolution française* (1978), to show how different forms of literature are entangled with different forms of politics?

*Jacques Rancière:* I wanted to recall that the writing of history had always been linked with a certain regime of identification in the art of writing, be it the old regime of rhetoric or the modern regime of literature. This regime itself is connected to a certain distribution of bodies and of their capacities within a common world. The rhetorical model was connected to a hierarchical society in which only few people were supposed to act and speak, while the mass was only supposed to live and to make noise. However, ordinary people could appropriate and subvert this model as Tacitus already showed with the story of Percennius. The modern historical model depends upon the literary revolution that abolished the old hierarchies and found an unheard-of capacity of emotion and thought in any vulgar individual and a deep power of significance in any trivial thing. This revolution also allowed the operation that uses the “significance” of things against the capacity of individuals from the lower classes to disturb. I showed how Michelet exploited that possibility when he turned the speeches of revolutionary orators into voices of the land. He did it to construct the republican historiography. After him historians still exploited that possibility but they increasingly forgot its literary foundations along with its political significance in order to think that they were doing only objective science and no more “literature”. Furet’s *Penser la Révolution française* shows us a kind of final point in this trajectory: Historical science pretends to bid farewell to the delusory narratives linked with the revolutionary tradition. By the same token it bids farewell to History itself in favor of a kind of political sociology.

*Christian Sternad:* At our conference, we spoke about the question of whether your early works could be considered those of a historian. We mostly agreed that even though these works are deeply intertwined with the Historical Sciences, they rather are one of your many systematic interventions that right now seem to reach from philosophy to aesthetics, from aesthetics to film studies, etc. Would you say, in hindsight, that you were a historian or considered yourself a historian in that particular period of your work? Why or why not?

*Jacques Rancière:* In the 1970s I certainly considered myself a historian since I had left the domain of philosophical speculation and set out to investigate the archives of real life – including the real life of words and discourses. Professional historians however made it clear that I was *not* a historian since I had not been trained in their discipline, I was not using the *right* historical methods and so on. I had to realize that I was neither a philosopher nor a historian but a researcher who questioned precisely the frontiers between disciplines and who doubted that there were such things as a philosophical method, a historical method, a sociological method, and so on. I understood that the borders separating disciplines depended upon the frontier sep-

arating those who are allowed to speak and those who are not and ultimately those who are supposed to be human speaking beings and those who are supposed to be noisy animals. It is this frontier and the multiple forms that it engenders that is at the core of my research. Such a research implies that you try to situate yourself outside of any particular discipline, somewhere between several disciplines. This is what I did when I studied workers' attempts to live another life. This is also what I do when I investigate the fields of art or literature. I focus on how situations, characters, or performances that were outside art become art and change the very mode of perceptibility of what we call art.

## Anmerkungen

- 1 Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History. On the Poetics of Knowledge*, Minneapolis/London 1994, 58.
- 2 Louis Gabriel Gauny, *Le philosophe plébéien. Actes et mémoires du peuple. Textes réunis par Jacques Rancière*, Paris 1983.
- 3 Jacques Rancière, *The Names of History. On the Poetics of Knowledge*, Minneapolis/London 1994, 101.