Rancière's Counter-Sociology

Politics, History, Education

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It is above all worrisome that so much intelligence is expended, year after year, in studying the reasons for which people are stupid. And we can only dream of the perhaps surprising results that might be produced were the same sum of energy to be applied to studying the forms of and the reasons for all the manifestations of those same people's intellectual capacity. As we know, this kind of dream is today stigmatised, under the name of 'populism', as representing the greatest crime against thought.

Jacques Rancière (2009b, p. 139 [114–115])

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All translations from the work of both Jacques Rancière and Pierre Bourdieu are my own. For works that have appeared in English translation, citations include page numbers from the original French, followed by the page numbers, in square brackets, of the corresponding passages from English translations, where these exist.

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1

Introduction

In 1983, Jacques Rancière published an article entitled 'La Représentation de l'ouvrier ou la classe introuvable' (The Representation of the Worker, or, the Elusive Class). The piece was a summary of his archival research into nineteenth-century French labour history, research that had earlier been published in full as *Proletarian Nights* (1981). In 'La Représentation de l'ouvrier…', Rancière argues that the working-class poets, philosophers, intellectuals, and activists he studied did not correspond to Karl Marx's account of the identity and consciousness of the revolutionary proletariat: their paths to emancipation deviated, in numerous ways, from any conventional Marxist account of economic, historical, and political development (Rancière, 1983b). In this sense, the proletariat was 'introuvable' as a class, 'elusive', or, more literally, unfindable, unlocatable.

A few years earlier, Rancière had used this same adjective, 'introuvable', in a critique of recent research into the emerging 'new class composition' of the European working class, research conducted in accordance with the premises of the Italian autonomist or *operaïste* school of Marxism. In its work in both France and Italy, this school has made extensive use of sociological surveys to track the changing social composition of the proletariat, the evolving nature of its place in relations of production altered

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by technological development, and its consequently always developing political role as the privileged agent of revolutionary change.[1] Rancière expressed his scepticism regarding this sociological and political project, parodying what he termed *operaïsme*'s 'never-ending pursuit of an elusive [*introuvable*] "new class composition"' (Rancière, 2003a, p. 349 [2012, p. 141]).

More recently, in an article first published in 2011, Rancière employs the term 'introuvable' again, this time to question the use of the notion of 'populism' in accounts of phenomena such as the French 'no' vote in their 2005 referendum on the EU Constitution and the increasing popularity, particularly amongst working-class voters, of the nationalist *Front National* (renamed the *Rassemblement National* in 2018). He argues that populism is an ill-defined concept that serves merely to resuscitate fears of working people as a 'dangerous class' that threatens to undermine the rational, consensual governance of the ruling elite. Rooted in fears of the irrational mob, populism is, Rancière concludes, 'introuvable', elusive, unlocatable (Rancière, 2022, pp. 63–66).

In each of these cases, we have a concept or notion that is claimed to correspond to certain observable sociological, historical, material, or objective phenomena. The identity and political consciousness of Marx's revolutionary proletariat is taken to be grounded in the laws of economic and historical development. The new forms of 'class composition' tracked by Italian *operaïstes* are believed to express the evolution of capitalism from nineteenth-century industrialism into first Fordism and then post-Fordism. Populism, finally, is taken to be rooted in the inability of a 'backward' or 'left-behind' fraction of the old industrial working class to keep up with the necessary 'modernisation' of France's economy, polity, and society. In each case, Rancière turns these sociological assumptions on their head to argue that these supposedly materially grounded notions of class identity and consciousness, of evolving class composition, and of inevitable populist reaction are in fact 'introuvable', chimerical, imaginary projections, fictions that may help underpin a particular worldview or philosophy of history but that have no grounding in reality.

The stakes of this inversion and subversion of sociological categories become clearer when we understand that every time Rancière uses the adjective 'introuvable' in this way he is alluding to the work of the liberal conservative sociologist, Raymond Aron. Aron's book *La Révolution*

introuvable (1968) is a disparaging account of the events of May 1968 in France, which argues that they amounted to nothing more than a 'psychodrama' (Aron, 1968, p. 31), in which students and workers merely acted out revolution, for lack of any coherent revolutionary ideology or project (115), and on account of their adherence to the theories of an immature, pre-Marxist brand of utopian socialism (32, 46). If the Gaullist regime had come close to collapse in May 1968, according to Aron, this did not reflect the genuinely revolutionary nature of those events but rather the pathological character of certain French institutions, as of French society as a whole. Here he invokes a recurrent theme of classical French sociology, namely the absence of 'intermediary bodies' to mediate between individual and state, integrating all French citizens into a cohesive social body.[2] The hierarchical structures of the labour movement, workplaces, and universities left workers and students atomised and lonely, feeling no sense of social solidarity, hence ready to indulge in the sort of compensatory outburst of 'semi-delinquent' incoherent rebelliousness that had characterised May 1968, threatening to provoke the 'decomposition' of French society. As Aron (1968, p. 45) puts it: 'The day when individuals refuse solidarity and the division of labour, refuse submission to order, imposed by everyone on everyone, social organisation decomposes'.

Aron's conceptual vocabulary, his references to 'intermediary bodies', 'solidarity', the 'division of labour', 'submission to order', reveal the extent to which his analyses of May 1968 draw on the classical French sociological tradition. For these are the key concepts employed by Auguste Comte, in the fourth volume of his *Course in Positive Philosophy* (1869), and Émile Durkheim, in his *Division of Labour in Society* (1893), as they attempt to imagine ways of restoring social morality and the social bond in the wake of democratic revolution and in the face of the threats posed by urbanisation and industrialisation. Aron (1968, p. 30) explains that his critique of the theatrical, comedic nature of May 1968 also owes a significant debt to another of the founding fathers of French sociology, to the man he terms his 'master', Alexis de Tocqueville.[3] In his *Souvenirs* (1893), Tocqueville had argued that the 1848 Revolution in France seemed to him nothing more than 'a bad tragedy played by ham actors from the provinces' (Tocqueville, 1893, p. 75), in which the

revolutionaries aped the slogans of their more illustrious predecessors of 1793 (95), while in reality being driven by the irrational 'desires', 'thoughts', 'needs', and 'instincts of the crowd' (96). As Aron (1968, p. 134) notes, Tocqueville's critique of the 1848 Revolution draws the same conclusions and employs many of the same interpretative tropes as does Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* (1852). Marx famously denounces the events of 1848–51 in France as a form of play-acting, a farcical simulacrum of genuine revolution, during which the revolutionaries anachronistically adopted the words and costumes of their more illustrious forebears, while each social class—peasantry, working class, and bourgeoisie—refused to play the revolutionary role ascribed to them by Marx's philosophy of history, a role that corresponded to the sociologically observable, supposedly objective truth of their historically, economically, and socially determined identities.

For Aron, then, the 'revolution' of 1968 was 'introuvable' insofar as the words and deeds of the protestors had no substance; they represented mere play-acting, a simulacrum of true revolution in comparison to the objective sociological factors that really underpinned the events. Rancière turns Aron's analysis on its head, appropriating and subverting the notion of the 'introuvable' to argue that it is these supposedly objective sociological factors that are in fact elusive and illusory. Politics is to be found precisely in those thoughts, words, and deeds that sociological analysis typically dismisses as lacking in substance, objectivity, or material foundation. In appropriating and subverting Aron's term 'introuvable', in claiming that certain supposedly objective sociological phenomena are themselves, in fact, imaginary, Rancière thus rejects those fundamental assumptions he takes to be common to both the classical French sociological tradition and orthodox Marxism. He rejects the notion that the political capacity or consciousness of a given social class or category can be gauged by a sociological analysis of that class's or category's identity. He repudiates any philosophy of history that claims political capacity or consciousness to be determined by a given social class's stage of historical development. He similarly refuses the essentially pedagogical conception of politics that any such philosophy of history typically generates, the notion that it falls to an enlightened, politically mature avant-garde to educate a still immature, backward working class as regards both the true

nature of the capitalist system and their historical role in securing its overthrow. Further, Rancière encourages us to ponder the deeper historical and philosophical roots of those recurrent denunciations of political protest as mere play-acting, of that anxiety at protestors whose words and actions allegedly betray or travesty their true, sociologically observable identities. His critique of sociology suggests that the roots of these recurrent tropes in the writings of Tocqueville, Marx, and Aron might be found in Plato's idealism, in the latter's strictures in both the *Republic* and the *Laws* against 'mimesis' and 'theatrocracy', that dangerous regime in which repeated public theatrical performances encourage workers to believe they might be something other than unthinking beasts of burden, a regime in which Plato's ordered hierarchy of places and roles is hence fatally undermined (Rancière, 2009b, p. 68 [50]).[4]

Rancière argues that the emancipatory, even revolutionary character of May 1968 reflects precisely the extent to which it saw workers and students escape the categories of thought and action ascribed to them by sociology, hence acting in ways that undermined Marx's philosophy of history, challenging 'all the schemas of historical evolution that assign to it a necessary end' (2009b, p. 195 [168]). Thus, he insists, May 1968 can only be understood by 'wresting the event of 68 from its dominant mode of interpretation, from the sociological mode of interpretation' (2022, p. 126). Moreover, this is true not merely of May 1968 but of any and every political event: for Rancière politics is what happens when sociological categories are abandoned and sociologically determined identities rejected, overturned, undermined. As he puts it: 'Politics is what interrupts the play of sociological identities' (2009b, p. 205 [177]). Whether in the form of Marxism or of classical sociology, the social sciences typically attribute fixed places and capacities to different social classes or categories based on a supposedly objective analysis of their material condition. Politics, according to Rancière (1995, p. 95 [61]), 'only exists by the realisation of the equality of just anyone with just anyone' that hence upsets any order or hierarchy of social roles and places. The classical political philosophies of Plato and Aristotle represent attempts to 'suppress' this 'scandal' of democratic politics by theorising different means of either re-establishing social hierarchy or redistributing political power in an orderly manner. The social sciences, Rancière argues,

represent the form taken, in the wake of the democratic and social revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, by this 'political project of realising politics by suppressing it' (1995, pp. 130–131 [92]).

In this sense, both classical political philosophy and 'the avatars of Marxist science or of Durkheimian or Weberian sociology' belong to that category of phenomena Rancière labels 'police', where 'police' is understood to correspond to everything that any political, democratic, or emancipatory event challenges or undermines. The term 'police' refers here not to those institutions charged with law-enforcement; it relates, rather, to an earlier usage of the word 'la police' in French as a translation of the ancient Greek term *politeia*. *Politeia* names that particular form of 'polity' or 'political organisation' that distributes rights, places, and roles to different categories of citizen and non-citizen, so as to distinguish between who counts and who goes uncounted, who belongs and who is excluded from the political community.[5] According to Rancière, where classical texts of political philosophy such as Plato's *Republic* or Aristotle's *Politics* represent early theorisations of these policing operations, sociological analyses typically rehearse their founding assumptions.

Rancière's repeated use of the term 'introuvable' is thus not merely a riposte to Aron's attempts to sociologise away the emancipatory force of May 1968. Rather, this is just one example of his more general tendency to take a notion from sociological or Marxist theory and turn it on its head. Through these kinds of conceptual *détournement*, Rancière signals his wholesale rejection of sociological modes of analysis, on the basis that they amount to policing operations, which, by definition, deny the emancipatory logic of democracy. This is a rejection that characterises Rancière's mature output in its entirety. By 'mature' we refer to everything Rancière has produced not only since his break with his former mentor, Louis Althusser, in the wake of the 1968 events, but also since his rejection of conventional Marxist modes of analysis in all his work from the publication of *Proletarian Nights* in 1981 onwards. The rejection of conventional forms of both sociological and Marxist modes of analysis is, thus, a defining feature of Rancière's mature thinking about politics, language, emancipation, democracy, the aesthetic, education, history, and social class, as well as his interventions into more recent debates about the alleged recrudescence of authoritarian forms of

populism. As Rancière has explained, the term 'sociological' refers, for him, less 'to an academic discipline than to a mode of interpretation'. This mode of interpretation can 'be found at work' as much 'in a historian's narrative, a journalist's reportage, or a philosopher's line of argument' as in sociology itself (2022, p. 126). Rancière's interventions into all of these domains always involve a rejection of the assumptions underlying any sociological mode of interpretation.

Thus, his hostility to sociology is not limited to his critique of sociological interpretations of May 1968, nor is it restricted to the passing criticisms of figures such as Comte, Durkheim, and Max Weber that pepper his mature output; neither, finally, does it take the form merely of his more sustained criticisms of the most influential French sociologist of the post-war era, Pierre Bourdieu. All of these are individual manifestations of an all-encompassing feature of Rancière's mature output, a feature evident across the entirety of that output. It is central to the innovative approach he takes to labour history in *Proletarian Nights*, as well as to his critique of both the *Annales* school and François Furet's historical revisionism in *The Names of History* (1992). The rejection of sociology plays an equally pivotal role in his critique of political philosophy and his elaboration of an original theory of political subjectivation, of democracy and emancipation in texts such as *Disagreement* (1995) and *On the Shores of Politics* (1998a). Rancière's close engagement with the thought of Joseph Jacotot in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1987), and his embrace of the latter's model of intellectual emancipation, is decisively influenced by his rejection of the premises behind Durkheim's and Bourdieu's sociologies of education. His examination of the 'hatred of democracy' manifested by certain high-profile French republican intellectuals, in a book of the same name (*The Hatred of Democracy* (2005a)), attributes a key role to sociology in the genesis of this reactionary phenomenon. Finally, the rejection of sociological modes of interpretation is a recurring feature of Rancière's more occasional pieces on contemporary politics, on populism, racism, technocracy, and the neo-liberal consensus, pieces anthologised in collections such as *Chronicles of Consensual Times* (2005a), *Moments Politiques* (2009b), and *Les Trente inglorieuses* (2022).[6]

So central is the rejection of sociological premises to Rancière's work on politics, emancipation, history, democracy, and education that it seems reasonable to characterise his thought as a *counter-sociology*. That counter-sociology does not take as its target a specific sociologist or sociological school. Rather, as we have seen, it understands sociology to represent a particular mode of interpretation. This is a mode of interpretation based on the assumption that the social or the socio-economic comprise a set of institutions and practices that transcend ordinary agents' ability fully to understand, know, control, or influence. As such the social or socio-economic is accorded the ability to generate the categories of thought and action of particular agents at any given historical moment in accordance with their specific social condition. Although they are socio-historically generated, these categories of thought and action are hence endowed with a quasi-transcendental status, representing the *a priori* conditions of possibility of supposedly objectively determined forms of thought, feeling, and action.

Moreover, according to Rancière, the assumptions underpinning the sociological mode of interpretation determine what can and cannot be seen, grasped, thought, and made sense of from sociological premises. Indeed, it might be argued that sociology represents, for Rancière, a *problematic*, in the specific sense of that term that Althusserian Marxism inherited from the philosopher of science, Gaston Bachelard. For Bachelard, a problematic is a set of hypotheses, assumptions, interpretative, and experimental procedures that determine which phenomena can be 'constructed' as 'objects of knowledge', dictating what can and what cannot be seen or understood within that established set of assumptions (Bachelard, 1949, pp. 50–56). Perhaps in an effort to distance himself from his Althusserian past, Rancière only employs the term sparingly. Nonetheless, he does use the word in a number of places to define sociology as a mode of interpretation (1998a, p. 82 [43]; 2003a, p. 356 [2012, p. 148]). Moreover, the concept is implicit in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, in which he suggests that if Plato, Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Bourdieu are all equally disparaging of the capacities of 'the poor', this betrays their adherence to a shared, ultimately Platonic problematic (Rancière, 1983a). Similarly, in explaining why Bourdieu is unable to see the aesthetic as anything other than a misrecognised form of class

distinction, Rancière employs a conceptual vocabulary that echoes Althusser's account of the limited, ideological manner in which the 'problematic' of classical political economy was able to 'produce the object' of its enquiries. 'Bourdieu's polemic against aesthetics is not the work of one particular sociologist on a particular aspect of social reality', Rancière argues, 'it is structural', reflecting the nature of sociology as a discipline. He goes on: 'A discipline is not first of all the definition of a set of methods appropriate to a certain domain or a certain type of object'; rather, it 'is first the very construction of this object as an object of thought' (Rancière, 2006, p. 6).[7]

In other words, it is the way in which sociology constructs the aesthetic as an object of thought that prevents Bourdieu from seeing its emancipatory potential. Similarly, it is the way in which sociology constructs politics and society as objects of thought that prevents Tocqueville and Aron from seeing upheavals such as 1848 and May 1968 as anything other than theatrical performances. By the same token, it is the way in which Marx's philosophy of history constructs 1848 as an object of thought that prevents him from seeing it as anything other than a farcical simulacrum of a genuine revolution. What we have termed Rancière's 'counter-sociology' hence involves him delineating the historical roots and enduring impact of the sociological problematic, demonstrating and overcoming the obstacles that problematic poses to understanding the logic of democracy, intellectual and political emancipation, historical temporality, and political change. It then sees him develop new modes of interpretation that generate alternative theories of these phenomena based on counter-sociological assumptions and procedures, on what might be called a counter-sociological problematic.

As we have indicated, for Rancière, the sociological problematic rests on a particular articulation of politics, history, and education; it assumes that political thought and action are an expression of social identity; that social identity is determined by a logic of historical development; and that knowledge of this historical necessity is restricted to an intellectual or political elite, who hence must adopt a pedagogical role in relation to the uneducated, left-behind, or immature popular masses. Insofar as Rancière challenges each of these assumptions, he is obliged to elaborate new, alternative theories of politics, history, and education as a result.

Rancière's rejection of sociology, his counter-sociology, hence needs to be understood as the positive condition enabling his innovative work in these three domains and not as an unfortunate flaw or lacuna, as is too often the case.

Critics and commentators on Rancière's work have tended to interpret his refusal to employ conventional sociological, Marxist or *marxisant* modes of analysis as representing unthinking omissions attributable to a kind of interpretative negligence on his part or even to his intellectual, political, or moral flaws. Thus, for example, Jodie Dean lambasts Rancière for elaborating a theory of emancipation based on 'a fantasy […], a fantasy of my non-existence in the situation I confront, as if, somehow, I was outside of and apart from the system's determinations' (in Bowman & Stamp, 2011, p. 88). Didier Eribon (2011, p. 30) confesses to feelings of 'anger and disgust' in the face of Rancière's work. Even a more favourable commentator such as Oliver Davis repeatedly upbraids Rancière for obscuring 'the specific social conditions in which' emancipation might be possible, or, for overlooking 'the institutional dimension' determining the political and intellectual capacities of different social classes (Davis, 2010, pp. 110–113, 71). Rancière's critics and commentators hence typically call on him to return to the sociological modes of interpretation he eschews. In doing so, they risk falling back into the very conceptual and political pitfalls that, according to Rancière, those modes necessarily entail. This strongly suggests there is a need to understand more clearly, first, quite *why* Rancière eschews conventional modes of sociological, Marxist, or *marxisant* analysis and, second, what this allows him to see, to bring to light, and understand.

The current book thus aims to show that, as a form of counter-sociology, Rancière's work involves, first, challenging the assumptions behind what we have termed the sociological problematic. This leads Rancière to uncover the historical and conceptual roots of that sociological problematic, most distantly in Plato's idealism and in his advocacy of an ordered polity based on a functional hierarchy of fixed places and roles that supposedly align with differences of natural talent and capacity. More proximally, Rancière argues that it was this Platonic vision of stability through functional hierarchy that inspired the various attempts of Tocqueville, Comte, and Durkheim to theorise the basis of a rational new

social morality and social bond that would see off the threats of social decomposition and atomisation brought by democratic revolution, industrialisation, and urbanisation. It is in this sense that he maintains that the social sciences have been 'curiously contaminated by a problematic born of theocratic, counter-revolutionary thought, which conceived the emergence of democracy as a loss of unity, a tearing of the social bond'. More controversially, Rancière argues that traces of this counter-revolutionary fear of lost unity and social decomposition can be found in Marx's writings also, in his critique of the *Lumpenproletariat* and his laments at the split between the 'real' laws of historical development and the distortions of ideology. Rancière's counter-sociology is thus an attempt to think through the implications of this problematic in order to escape both its counter-revolutionary assumptions and its 'fantasy of a totality lost and in need of restoration' (Rancière, 1998a, p. 82 [43–44]). As we will show, this in turn sees him appropriating and subverting key terms and concepts from the Platonic, sociological, and Marxist traditions, so that what those traditions stigmatise as, variously, symptoms of social dislocation or simulacra of true revolution become, for Rancière, the *positive conditions* for political change and emancipation.

Needless to say, Rancière's claim that both Marxism and sociology remain 'contaminated' by the conceptual heritage of both counter-revolutionary thought and Platonic idealism involves a direct challenge to the way in which Marxists and sociologists understand their own disciplines. Marxists, of course, are ostensibly committed to achieving radical democracy through revolutionary change. Sociologists, meanwhile, perhaps particularly French sociologists, often claim their discipline to be fundamentally emancipatory in nature. Historical accounts of French sociology typically see its emergence as representing the victory of an empirical, rational, historical, and hence scientific mode of thought over the previously dominant discipline of philosophy, itself characterised by metaphysical speculation and ahistorical appeals to *a priori* transcendental categories. The alleged victory of a rational, scientific sociology over speculative philosophy has a distinctly political tenor in the French context, insofar as this is seen as congruent with the overthrow of an *ancien régime* based on a divine right of kings justified by reference to Catholic doctrine, hence to revealed religion rather than empirical evidence. This

notion of sociology as a key weapon in the victory of Enlightenment reason over revealed religion and inherited privilege is also typically articulated to a pedagogic conception of political change. Sociology, it is argued, employs scientific tools of empirical enquiry to uncover objective truths that remain hidden from the mass of ordinary agents, whether on account of their lack of education or their susceptibility to the workings of ideology, however understood. The role of sociology and sociologists is then taken to be to educate this untutored mass as to the reality of the social determinants that oppress them, hence contributing to their emancipation. As a result, the discipline is frequently seen by its practitioners as fundamentally progressive, in political terms, wedded to the promotion of key French republican values of liberty and equality. Certainly, this is a recurring theme in accounts of the origins and historical emergence of sociology in France.

For example, Marc Joly argues that sociology is 'a specialism that invites us to take leave of metaphysical speculation', going on to assert that what he terms 'the sociological revolution' witnessed the triumph of 'a multidimensional immanent vision of human nature and human societies at the expense of a theocentric vision, albeit one in the watered-down form of a rational and etherealised transcendentalism' characteristic of philosophy (Joly, 2017, pp. 8, 10). Wolf Lepenies (1990, pp. 1–13) sees the emergence of French sociology as heralding the victory of a rational mode of thought associated with revolutionary Jacobinism over more literary discourses characteristic of spiritualist and Romantic movements aligned with the anti-rational, counter-revolutionary Right. Laurent Mucchielli, meanwhile, places greater emphasis on what he sees as the Durkheimian School's decisive break with earlier forms of biologism. It was between 1885 and 1900, he maintains, that the Durkheimians were able to establish sociology as a legitimate discipline, precisely by breaking with the earlier 'bases' of social science in 'raciology, hereditarism, craniometry, in short physiology' (Muccheilli, 1998, p. 80). Moreover, this 'scientifically precocious rejection' of pseudo-scientific biologism not only led the Durkheimians to support the cause of Alfred Dreyfus against nationalistic, antisemitic, counter-revolutionary intellectuals such as Maurice Barrès and Charles Maurras; it also laid the ground for the wholesale disqualification of racial pseudo-science in social anthropology

in the wake of the Second World War and the Holocaust (Muccheilli, 2004, pp. 163–198). This vision of sociology as being inherently rational, resistant to 'false transcendences', hence 'scientific' and allied to Enlightenment values that translate, politically, into support for the key French republican ideals of liberty and equality is exemplified by Bourdieu's inaugural speech at the *Collège de France* in 1982. Here Bourdieu situates his own sociological demystifications of culture and education in a lineage he traces back to Durkheim's work in the sociology of religion. He argues that this kind of demystification has an emancipatory force, insofar as it uncovers the naturalised or mystified sources of symbolic forms of domination (Bourdieu, 1982b).

As Rancière acerbically remarks in response to Bourdieu's account of the origins of sociology and its inherently emancipatory effects: 'The discourse on origins is a genre in which myth-making is *de rigueur*. Rarely, however, will the gulf between the real history of a discipline and its retrospective apologia have seemed wider' (2003a, p. 355 [2012, p. 147]). For, as he points out, Durkheim's interest in religion did not reflect his desire to demystify superstition to emancipatory effect. Rather, Durkheim was interested in religion as a form of collective belief and as a force for social integration: religion thus contained important lessons for a thinker concerned 'to contain the effects of social disintegration' unleashed by the Revolution, by liberal political philosophy and economy (355 [148]). This is the 'problematic' that Durkheim 'inherited from the first idea of sociology, the idea of Auguste Comte' (355 [148]), the problematic that, as we have noted, Rancière considers to have been 'contaminated' by the counter-revolutionary tradition's dream of remaking a cohesive body for society, in the wake of revolution, urbanisation, and industrialisation.

Rancière's scepticism at the myth-making behind Bourdieu's account of the origins of sociology might equally be directed at those passages from Joly, Lepenies, and Mucchielli that we cited above. The claim that sociology banishes metaphysical and transcendentalising modes of thought, in favour of the historical and the immanent, has been challenged by Gillian Rose (2009), who has convincingly shown the extent to which classical sociology relies on neo-Kantian assumptions, in ways which raise problems of both historical causality and human agency. As Rose shows, classical sociology typically places society, history, culture, or

social class in the place of the transcendental, positing these sociological categories as conditions of possibility that determine, *a priori*, what agents can think or do at a particular moment in history. Further, far from systematically abjuring biological explanations in favour of the historical, social, or cultural, both Comte and Durkheim appeal to the pseudo-science of phrenology to claim that social inequalities between men and women reflect natural differences in brain size and function (Comte, 1869, pp. 405–406; Durkheim, 1893, pp. 19–27). Max Weber, meanwhile, states in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5) that he suspects 'the importance of biological heredity' to be 'very great' in explaining the emergence of 'rationalization' in 'the Occident' rather than elsewhere (Weber, 1904–5, pp. 30–31). Finally, the notion that classical sociology is inherently aligned with French republican values of liberty and equality seems equally questionable given, first, Comte's public support for the imperial regime of Napoleon III and, second, the extent to which his theories proved congenial to the antisemitic nationalist Charles Maurras (*see* Maurras, 1954, pp. 459–498). Obviously, it would be wrong to hold Comte responsible for Maurras's political choices. Nonetheless, it is easy to see why the latter might have been attracted by the conservatism of Comte's sociology, its advocacy of submission to a rationalised form of religious morality, to fixed gender roles, and a hierarchical division of labour, as the basis of a new organic social bond.

One response to these political entanglements consists in simply passing over them in silence. For example, Norbert Elias, in his *What Is Sociology?* (1970), praises Comte for having first established sociology as a 'relatively autonomous science' and hence having anticipated the emergence of the figure of 'the sociologist as destroyer of myths'. Unsurprisingly, Elias makes no mention of Comte's support for the Bonapartist myth or its quasi-dictatorial mode of governance (Elias, 1970, pp. 33–49). More recently, in his *French Sociology* (2015), Johan Heilbron makes similar claims regarding Comte's role as a pioneer of 'scientific' sociology, while saying nothing of the latter's questionable politics. Lepenies, by contrast, attempts to explain away the influence of Comte on Maurras by invoking what can only be described as 'the Yoko Ono defence'. He distinguishes between an earlier positivist, rationalist Comte and a later Comte, who, inspired by his great love for Clotilde de Vaux, turned to irrationalism

and spiritualism. According to Lepenies, it was the earlier Comte who inspired French republicans, while the later spiritualist Comte, led astray by the noxious effects of a woman's love, proved attractive to the likes of Maurras and Barrès (Lepenies, 1990, p. 39). Not only does this account rely on the decidedly misogynistic trope of the feminine corruption of masculine reason, most familiar to us through accounts of Yoko Ono's allegedly corrosive impact on the brotherly bond that kept the Beatles together, it is not supported by the facts: many of the ideas that so inspired Maurras can be found in volumes of the *Course in Positive Philosophy* that were published before Comte supposedly fell under the Medusa-like spell of Clotilde de Vaux. The unconvincing nature of Lepenies's attempt to explain away Comte's influence on Maurras is surely a measure of the extent of his desire to protect a particular myth of sociology's origins and implications.

Christian Laval's 2012 study, *L'Ambition sociologique*, represents a welcome exception in this respect. Laval eschews the conventional narrative according to which sociology's emergence heralded the victory of emancipatory reason over religious superstition, philosophical speculation, or literary impressionism. He argues that classical sociology emerged as a series of responses to the challenges posed by the division of labour, both as an increasingly common empirical phenomenon in an industrialising Europe and as a theoretical prescription for a stable economy and polity, as advocated by Adam Smith in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776). However, Laval fails to relate this interest in the division of labour and its functional hierarchy to its origins in Plato's conception of a stable polity and society in the *Republic*. So, he tends to bypass Rancière's fundamental insight, namely, that the division of labour is essentially a means of assigning individuals and classes to a fixed place and limited role in a rigid social hierarchy governed by a technocratic elite. It is this insight which explains Rancière's conviction that democracy, like political and intellectual emancipation, cannot but involve a suspension or interruption of any division of labour or functional hierarchy, or, in other words, a break with the sociological problematic *per se*.

Kieran Allen (2004, Allen and O'Boyle 2017) has authored highly critical studies of two of sociology's founding fathers, Durkheim and Weber, highlighting the conservative implications of both thinkers' work.

Yet, in a third study, he presents Marx as the answer, as it were, to the problems inherent to both Weberian and Durkheimian sociology (Allen, 2011). In this sense, he stops short of Rancière, whose 'counter-sociology' extends beyond a critique of what is sometimes known as classical bourgeois sociology to target significant elements of the Marxist tradition also. What we have termed Rancière's counter-sociology is thus significant to the extent that it enables us to challenge not only the conventional, often mythologised account of classical sociology's origins and implications but also some of the central premises underpinning Marxism. Rancière's counter-sociology allows us to think more critically about a sociological problematic now understood to embrace conventional Marxism also, encouraging us to consider some of its more questionable conceptual and political effects. However, as we have already indicated, Rancière's counter-sociology is much more than simply a critique of sociology's flaws; it also forms the positive condition for his elaboration of innovative theories of democracy, history, political subjectivation, and intellectual emancipation. In examining this counter-sociology, this study thus seeks to clarify not merely the bases of Rancière's rejection of sociological modes of interpretation and the nature of his critique of the sociological problematic. This study is also centrally concerned to examine what it is that Rancière's counter-sociology allows him to grasp and conceptualise in the domains of politics, history, and education.

Chapter 2 focuses on Rancière's critique of the sociological problematic, analysing his claims that this problematic is contaminated by the dual inheritance of Platonic idealism and counter-revolutionary thought. Taking Bourdieu's critique of aesthetics as paradigmatic of the sociological demystification of allegedly ahistorical philosophical categories, it examines Rancière's contention that this demystification in fact betrays a continuing debt to the classical sociology of Comte and Durkheim and to that tradition's counter-revolutionary heritage. The chapter highlights the transcendentalising tendencies inherent in the sociology of all four of Comte, Durkheim, Weber, and Bourdieu, before showing how Rancière seeks to escape such tendencies by developing a counter-sociological theory of political subjectivation and emancipation, notably in *Disagreement* and *On the Shores of Politics*. As the chapter progresses, some of Rancière's

key concepts will be clarified, including 'the partition of the perceptible', 'political subjectivation', 'archi-politics', 'meta-politics', and 'literarity'.

Many of the criticisms Rancière addresses to classical sociology appear equally applicable to conventional forms of Marxism. However, while Rancière has never been a sociologist, he spent several decades as a committed Marxist. Chapter 3 hence turns to consider his more complex relationship with Marxism, arguing that where Rancière rejects sociology outright, his approach to Marxism is more nuanced, consisting in an attempt to extract from it an emancipatory political core that requires the shedding of Marxism's more sociological aspects. The chapter focuses, in the first instance, on Rancière's critique of Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire*, showing how this sees him up-end and subvert conventional Marxist notions of language, class, and historical development. As we will show, Rancière accuses Marx's critique of the anachronisms and travesties of the 1848 revolutionaries not only of complicity with Platonic idealism but also of an affinity with Thomas Hobbes's denunciation of the English revolutionaries of the 1640s. Escaping the conservatism of this Marxist, Platonic, and Hobbesian problematic sees Rancière appropriate and subvert certain of Marx's key terms of analysis, so that anachronism, play-acting, and the de-coupling of signifiers from any fixed signified (all pathologised by Marx) become the positive conditions of possibility for political emancipation. Responding to accusations that this embrace of anachronism amounts to a straightforward ahistoricism, the chapter then examines Rancière's accounts of four moments of political struggle, the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, the events of May 1968, and the so-called occupation movements in France and elsewhere in the 2010s. This allows us, first, to show that Rancière's counter-sociology in no way amounts to an ahistoricism and, second, to elucidate his concepts of 'untimeliness', 'anachronism', a 'revolutionary scene', and a 'conflict of worlds', concepts he elaborates in opposition to conventional Marxist or sociological modes of historical interpretation.

Rancière's critical engagement with both sociology and Marxism clearly has implications for his thinking about historical development, temporality, and causality. Chapter 4 turns to look at how this manifests itself, theoretically, in his critique of certain forms of historiography, in *The Names of History*, and, empirically, in his own practice of labour

history, in *Proletarian Nights*. Once again, Rancière's counter-sociology is central to these questions. In *The Names of History*, he focuses on historical writing that has been decisively influenced by Tocquevillian and Durkheimian sociology, from the work of the *Annales* school and Jules Michelet's influence on the history of mentalities to counter-revolutionary histories of the French Revolution, penned by both François Furet and his predecessor Augustin Cochin. One important focus of Rancière's critique here is what he terms the 'poetics of knowledge': the particular ways in which these sociologically informed historical schools construct their narratives, select tropes and verb tenses to, as he sees it, consistently write ordinary agents and their struggles for emancipation out of their accounts. By turning to Rancière's own work in labour history, the chapter then examines the alternative 'poetics of knowledge' he employs in his own account of nineteenth-century labour movements, *Proletarian Nights*. Taking William Sewell's *Workers and Revolution in France* (1980) as typifying an approach to this topic informed by both sociology and Marxism, the chapter shows how Rancière's mode of historical interpretation challenges the conventional assumptions of labour history. A close reading of the first chapter of *Proletarian Nights* then examines the more expansive mode of interpretation and historical writing practised by Rancière. This is a mode that refuses to reduce the words and deeds of nineteenth-century workers to their supposedly objective conditions of possibility, hence rejecting the conventional sociological or historicist emphasis on the alleged immaturity of their political consciousness and development. This expansive mode of historical writing seeks, rather, to make connections between workers' words and deeds, to amplify their emancipatory potential, inspired as it is by what Rancière terms 'a culture of confidence' in workers' capabilities as opposed to the 'culture of mistrust' typical of a Marxism 'based on the presumption of the inability of the greatest number to see and understand' their situation (2009b, p. 224 [195]). As this quotation indicates and as this chapter will show, Rancière's innovative approach to labour history involves a break not only with Marxism's philosophy of history but also with the pedagogical project at the heart of Marxist politics.

Rancière argues that his findings from the nineteenth-century workers' archive verified 'the lesson' delivered by the unconventional educational