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Borrowing practices in modern revolution- making: from Marx's The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte to Rancière's The Names of History

Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* has served as a locus classicus for postmodern interpretations of Marxism's contemporary legacy and relevancy due to its thematisation of the performative, imaginary, psychological and linguistic aspects of revolutionary politics. This work has been used to redeem and rethink Marxian revolutionary politics along postmodern lines beyond its orthodox varieties, positioning Marx as an important forerunner of contemporary "post-Marxian" radical philosophy. I here argue that Jacques Rancière should feature prominently in this scholarship on the so-called postmodern Marx. Although having first offered a scathing reading of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983), I demonstrate how Rancière offers a more affirmative yet implicit interpretation in *The Names of History* (1992). By determining the nature, value and potential of Rancière's poststructuralist reworking of central themes from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, I aim to deepen understanding of radical politics's performative and affective aspects.

Keywords: Karl Marx, Jacques Rancière, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, performative politics

Introduction

In Karl Marx's oeuvre, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (henceforth referred to in brief as *The Eighteenth Brumaire*) published in 1852, remains a remarkable text. It appeared between the confident, programmatic proclamations of the 1848 *The Communist Manifesto* (1972) – co-written with Friedrich Engels – and Marx's later, so-called 'scientific' works like *Capital*, the first volume of which was published in 1867. The introduction's first 11 paragraphs contain brief, yet rich and evocative, historical-philosophical reflections on revolution-making that have fascinated Marxian and non-Marxian scholars alike. Its overall textual qualities also stand out, with Marx indulging in elaborate rhetorical and metaphorical language in his scathing analysis of the turbulent political events in France between its 1848 February Revolution and the coup of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte in December 1851. Add to this its genre as a work of historical-political commentary and it is understandable that *The Eighteenth Brumaire* has been a go-to work for postmodern interpreters of Marx. Think of Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist reading in *Spectres de Marx* (1994: Chapter 4) or interpretations by Terrell Carver and James Martin accompanying a new English translation in 2002. Carver's and Martin's reading generously present the work as anticipating key currents of post-Marxist and post-structuralist political theory. This especially concerns conceptions of the performative, symbolic and discursive nature of politics associated – in Martin's reading – with the work of Judith Butler, Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau respectively.¹

This article adds to this scholarship by involving another important contemporary post-Marxian theorist, Jacques Rancière, whose political thought is also centrally concerned with aesthetic and performative elements, especially in relation to radical, revolutionary politics.² What makes Rancière of particular interest and value is that, other than his aforementioned contemporaries, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* has featured both explicitly and implicitly in the development of his thought or, at least, the latter will be demonstrated here. In *The Philosopher and His Poor* (1983) Rancière offered a relentless reading as part of a broader critique of the Marxian, class-reductionist approach to society,

1 Considering the partial specification of the politics at issue in this article as being "performative," as well as the indirect reference (via Martin) to Butler's work, I want to indicate at the outset that the term is not used here in the strictly Butlerian sense (2002). Performative politics is primarily understood in line with *The Eighteenth Brumaire's* reference to historical actors evoking and re-enacting certain persona, scenes and discourses from other time periods in revolution-making. Although beyond the article's scope, there are important and interesting overlaps between Butler's and Rancière's work on politics' performative dimension, see in particular a study by Clare Woodford (2017).

2 See footnote 3.

history, and revolutionary events specifically. This reading starkly contrasts with Carver's and Martin's postmodern readings, almost 20 years later, which de-emphasise the work's class dimension, allowing for a more productive, redemptive reading of Marx's thematisation of the imaginary and performative aspects of revolutionary politics.

I shall argue, however, that Rancière's first, dismissive engagement with *The Eighteenth Brumaire* was not his final word on the matter. Rancière can be seen to take up key aspects of Marx's reflections on revolution-making in his 1992 *The Names of History*, only now offering a more positive, redemptive reading in line with later postmodern interpretations. This reprise is entirely implicit, however, and the article's aim is to disclose and argue the case for such a reading. It thereby, first, contributes to a deepened understanding of the development of Rancière's thought, especially his writings of the 1990s on politics and its aesthetic dimension, immediately subsequent to *The Names of History*, even if this is beyond the article's scope.³ Second, the article presents Rancière as an important precursor of later redemptive readings of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* as a key text in the Marxian corpus anticipating contemporary radical theorising on the aesthetics of politics. Third, beyond such hermeneutic and genealogical objectives, the article more generally aims to deepen understanding of the aesthetic, linguistic and performative dimension of revolutionary politics and the history of its conceptualisation. This is important because postmodern theoretical rearticulations of the Marxian legacy notwithstanding, aesthetic or performative

3 As regards Rancière's key writings on politics, *On the Shores of Politics* (2007) was published in 1990, and *Disagreement* (1999) in 1995. It would take a further, substantial study to determine and articulate how some of the ways in which Rancière's implicit, redemptive engagement with Marx's claims and themes in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* regarding the aesthetic and performative dimension of (revolutionary) politics in *The Names of History* (as will be argued here) might be seen to be taken up in his contemporaneous and subsequent political writings, especially in *Disagreement*. It should be noted here, however, that the latter contains no direct or indirect references to *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, nor is there any mention of practices of anachronistic borrowing during the English and French Revolutions. This explains the article's focus on *The Philosopher and His Poor* and *The Names of History*. To be sure, Rancière's conceptualisation and affirmation of politics as an inventive, poetic, "world-creating" and fictional practice characterised in theatrical terms such as "mise-en-scène" (1999: 55) and "dramaturgy" (88) in *Disagreement* could be understood in line with his implicit reading of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in *The Names of History*. Still, the framing in *Disagreement* is quite different, with an emphasis on the demonstration or "staging" – as Peter Hallward (2009) put it – of equality. Also of particular interest for further research is Rancière's theorisation and critique of Marxism as the paradigmatic model of "metapolitics" (1999: Chapter 4) which turns on the posited distinction and alleged discrepancy between politics' "form" (or "appearance") and its "content" (87), in line with Marx's similar distinction in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* foregrounded in this article. For a survey of the aesthetic dimension and aspects of Rancière's theorisation of politics in his political writings of the 1990s, see Pauwels (2015: Chapter 1).

forms of politics – especially those harking back to, and heroising the past, as centrally featured in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* – are still commonly met with suspicion from the Left, being associated rather with right-wing, reactionary, or populist – if not fascist – politics. Walter Benjamin’s well-known theorisation of fascism in terms of the aestheticisation of politics, and his criticism of the latter as an essentially manipulative, duplicitous and distractionary manoeuvre (2007: 204) is no doubt a continuing theoretical influence in this regard. While aesthetic or performative political modes may then be at most tolerated for pragmatic reasons, a clear preference exists for a no-frills, down-to-earth, unsentimental politics soberly facing and tackling present-day problems and future challenges unencumbered by yesteryear’s struggles.

The article’s first section offers a brief summary of Marx’s introductory reflections in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, focused especially on the political-aesthetic theme of borrowing from past classical and biblical sources in modern revolution-making. In Section Two, I indicate the ways in which at the start of the 21st century, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* has been positively endorsed as a proto-post-Marxian text, which I then contrast in Section Three with Rancière’s highly critical reading 20 years earlier, pointing out some reasons for this stark contrast. In the most important fourth section, I demonstrate how Rancière can be seen to offer a more affirmative take on the aforementioned themes of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in Chapters Two and Three of *The Names of History*, appropriating and translating these themes into his own idiosyncratic conceptual framework.

Marx on the uses and sources of revolutionary “poetry” in bourgeois and proletarian revolutions

The Eighteenth Brumaire extensively analyses the intricate political developments during a key period in France’s post-revolutionary period, the years 1848 to 1851. Considering the article’s focus on Marx’s historical-philosophical reflections on revolution-making in the introduction, I here only very briefly sketch the work’s context. After the overthrow of the monarchy during the French Revolution, France had a succession of different forms of rule: first a republic, then, under Napoleon Bonaparte, an empire, and after the latter’s ultimate defeat, a restoration of monarchical rule. In 1848, the so-called February Revolution took place in which liberals and nationalists overthrew King Louis Philippe’s rule and founded France’s Second Republic. *The Eighteenth Brumaire* deals with the increasing paralysis and conservative turn of the republican government, as exemplified by its retraction of the universal franchise. Also in 1848, there were protests by workers in Paris – known as the June Days Uprising – over the cancellation of the provision of nation-wide workshops assuring universal employment, which were violently suppressed and led to further conservatism among the ruling

bourgeoisie. Within this turmoil, an outsider, Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, cleverly manoeuvred himself to seize power. Having been elected as president of the republic in December 1848 (largely on peasant support) he staged a coup three years later when he could not be constitutionally re-elected, suspending the elected assembly and establishing himself as emperor of France's Second Empire.

The title of Marx's analysis of these turbulent events references the date of Napoleon Bonaparte's so-called "Coup of 18 Brumaire" in Year VIII according to the French Republican calendar (November 9, 1799) with his nephew's coup taking place (52 years later) during more or less the same time of the year, on December 2, 1851. For Marx, these developments signified the bourgeoisie's failure to govern itself, being paralysed by internal division and exaggerated fear of the proletariat's rising power, eventually resigning to the restoration of autocratic rule. Marx thus found this period to be deeply counter-revolutionary, with a reversion of the "liberal concessions wrung from [the monarchy] over centuries of struggle" (2002: 22) and "a whole people [...] forced back into a defunct era" (21).⁴

The bourgeoisie's invocation of "dead" revolutionary spirits

The Eighteenth Brumaire's opening paragraphs offer some general reflections on revolutionary epochs and, more specifically, a paradoxical temporal phenomenon whereby revolutionaries, in establishing something radically new, "nervously summon up the spirits of the past, borrowing from them their names, marching orders, uniforms" (Marx 2002: 19). Marx's terminology is quite suggestive, speaking of the "invocation" (2002: 20) and "resurrection of the dead" (21) and concluding that in making history, and revolution specifically, "Tradition from all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living." (19) Such an account seems at odds with the temporality commonly associated with radical politics (including of a Marxist variety) in terms of a radical break with the past, a pure living and acting in the here and now, or an anticipation of a utopian future.

The borrowing from past revolutionary traditions is mainly attributed, however, to what Marx considers to be the first bourgeois revolutions, with the English Civil War (1642-1651) and the French Revolution (1789-1814) as exemplary instances. As regards the latter, Marx says that it "draped itself alternately as Roman republic and Roman empire" (2002: 20), appropriating "Roman costumes and [...] phrases" (19). Or again, he observes how French revolutionaries acted like "resurrected Romans", modelling themselves on "the Brutuses, the Gracchuses,

4 For more nuanced assessments of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte's rule, see Price (2002) and Watkins (2002.)

the Publicolas, the tribunes, the senators and Caesar” of Ancient Rome (Marx 2002: 20).

Marx explains such identifications with past revolutionary figures and events based on his historical-dialectical understanding of the French Revolution as a revolution of the upcoming bourgeois class against the feudal order, aimed at establishing a capitalist society founded on peaceful economic competition and the unhindered pursuit of wealth. Marx regards such a societal project as deeply “unheroic” and as characterised by a “dreary realism”, which he deems to be problematic because in order to establish itself, it would “require [...] heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war and national conflict” (2002: 20). Since it cannot muster the necessary, revolutionary affective resources from its own dull, prosaic project, so Marx argues, the bourgeoisie had to borrow them from previous, more passional revolutionary episodes in world history. Marx thus attributes two vital functions to such borrowing. First, it served as a necessary form of “self-deception” (Marx 2002: 20) for the bourgeoisie, a way “to hide from [itself] [...] the constrained bourgeois character of their struggles” (20-21), or again, “to dull themselves” (22) to their revolution’s content. Second, borrowings from past revolutionary times would have functioned as a way for bourgeois revolutionaries “to keep themselves emotionally at the level of historical tragedy” (Marx 2002: 21). Marx then further argues that once the bourgeois revolutions were accomplished and capitalist society became established, invocations of the past quickly “vanished” (2002: 20), becoming incomprehensible in hindsight. The borrowing from the heroic past is thus regarded as a necessary device that was historically deployed by the bourgeois class to seize power, yet, once accomplished, quickly became a matter of “mere antiquarian interest” (Marx 2002: 21).

In Marx’s second case of bourgeois revolutionaries borrowing from ancient sources during the English Civil War (a series of military and political confrontations over the form of rule between so-called Parliamentarians and Royalists) it concerns the deployment of “Old Testament language, passions and delusions” (2002: 21).⁵ Specifically mentioned here are invocations of the prophet Habakkuk who challenged God’s apathy in the face of the blatant injustice suffered by his people.⁶ Identifying with such melodramatic prophetic protestations can be seen

5 See Christopher Hill’s study (1995) of the key role played by the first English translation and subsequent popular dissemination of the Bible in the 16th century in the revolutionary upheaval in the 17th century, especially in challenges to the monarchy. Interestingly, Hill shows how the Bible was equally deployed to justify monarchical rule, pointing to an irresolvable tension between revolutionary and counterrevolutionary appropriations.

6 Marx perceives one other instance of borrowing in the modern era in the religious sphere, taking Martin Luther to have “masquerad[ed]” as the apostle St Paul (2002: 20).

to have emboldened bourgeois revolutionaries in their attack on the English monarchy for its similar indifference toward its subjects' fortunes. Here as well, Marx regards such enactments as temporary props that disappeared after the revolution, stating that soon afterwards "[the prosaic empiricist] Locke" took the place of "[the sorrowful prophet] Habakkuk" (2002: 21).

The uses and abuses of re-enacting the revolutionary past

Even though such borrowing practices are attributed to bourgeois revolutions, they are not therefore entirely dismissed by Marx. In the historical-materialist theory of the establishment of communism – as set out programmatically in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) – bourgeois revolutions necessarily precede proletarian ones, being instrumental in raising the productive forces to a more advanced level, mainly through the rationalisation and industrialisation of production processes. Once accomplished, the conditions would be ripe for a communist revolution. In Marx's grand historical scheme, the adoption of ancient heroics in bourgeois revolutions thus ultimately serves a progressive purpose, mustering the affective resources for the performance of bourgeois revolutions as a necessary step for the subsequent push toward communism.

This positive treatment of borrowing from past revolutions in the 17th and 18th centuries is starkly contrasted with Marx's scathing critique of its later manifestation during the 1848 February Revolution and its aftermath. Not only is such borrowing considered to have become obsolete at this later developmental stage of bourgeois-capitalist society, its function is also seen to have been perverted, with re-enactments of past revolutionary heroics being cunningly used to disguise counter-revolutionary developments. Marx contrasts the uses of borrowing practices in the periods of the French Revolution and the February Revolution respectively in terms of "glorifying new struggles" versus "parodying the old", "magnifying fantastically the given task" versus "evading a real resolution", "recovering the spirit of revolution" versus "relaunching its spectre" (2002: 21). Apart from criticising such misuses, Marx also takes issue with the derivative, unoriginal nature of the borrowing in this period, as it is seen to merely re-enact elements from France's earlier revolutionary period. Marx thus deplores that "the revolution of 1848 could come up with nothing better than to parody 1789 at one point, the revolutionary inheritance of 1793-5 at another" (2002: 20). Over and beyond a lack of inspiration, the protagonists of the February Revolution are further reproached for offering a bad, exaggerated, comical, cartoonish imitation of the earlier borrowings from the heroic past during the French Revolution. The most well-known passage of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* characterises the contrast between the borrowing from past revolutionary events in both periods: "Hegel

observes somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur twice, so to speak. He forgot to add: the first time as high tragedy, the second time as low farce” (Marx 2002: 19). The foremost instance of such farcical reoccurrence is the figure of Louis Bonaparte himself of course or, as Marx puts it, “the London constable [Louis Bonaparte], with a dozen of the best debt-ridden lieutenants, [occurring] after the little corporal [Napoleon Bonaparte], with his roundtable of military marshals! The eighteenth Brumaire of the fool after the eighteenth Brumaire of the genius!” (2002: 19).⁷

Different temporalities of borrowing practices in bourgeois and proletarian revolutions

Underlying Marx’s damning assessment of this later instance of borrowing are certain historical-dialectical assumptions regarding the different material conditions in the mid-19th century and the related, changed nature of revolution-making, including its temporal logic. The latter is in fact completely reversed, as Marx states that,

[t]he social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot create its poetry from the past but only from the future. It cannot begin till it has stripped off all superstition from the past. Previous revolutions required recollections of world history in order to dull themselves to their own content. The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury the dead in order to realise its own content. There phrase transcended content, here content transcends phrase (2002: 22).

The crucial difference between the bourgeois revolutions in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the “social” or proletarian ones of the 19th century, is thus specified in terms of the relationship between their content – i.e. their societal project – and their phraseology or “poetry”, – or, one could also say, between their content and form – and, following from this, the temporal orientation or inspiration in creating their revolutionary poetry. As already mentioned, Marx considers the bourgeois revolutions’ content – i.e. a capitalist society geared toward individual, material advancement – to be banal and uninspiring and, although a necessary stage on the road toward a supposedly truly revolutionary society based on communist principles, not itself revolutionary. It can therefore not generate its revolutionary phrases or poetry, necessary for the realisation of its content, from this content, instead having to draw from past revolutionary events. As such, bourgeois

7 Marx’s other examples are “Caussidière after Danton, Louis Blanc after Robespierre, the montagne [democratic socialists] of 1848-51 after the montagne [Jacobin democrats] of 1793-5” (2002: 19).

revolutions' form would surpass its content in radicalness or revolutionariness, or one could even say that bourgeois revolutions are mainly revolutionary in form or appearance.⁸ In contrast, since the content of proletarian revolutions is taken to be revolutionary in itself – as an unprecedented project of a thoroughly collectivised society – there is no need here for borrowing inspiration for its phrases or poetry from external, past sources. Instead, proletarian revolutions' form would closely follow their content, the future communist society, and play a less prominent role in the realisation of this content, as there is no reason to dress up the latter to make it appear more revolutionary than it already (supposedly) is.

The introductory paragraphs of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* thus contain some remarkable claims by Marx concerning the performative, affective and aesthetic dimension of revolution-making in the modern era. These include the prominent role of practices of borrowing with regard to revolutions' formal aspects – i.e. their poetry, phraseology, costumes, etc. – the different temporal orientations of such practices – toward the past or the future – as well as the difference in weight carried by a revolution's form and content. In his conceptualisation and assessment of these aspects, Marx's broader historical-dialectical theorisation of the different stages en route to the establishment of communist societies was shown to play a key role.

***The Eighteenth Brumaire* as a proto-post-Marxist manifesto**

As said, postmodern theorists have endorsed *The Eighteenth Brumaire* as an important precursor of central themes within contemporary post-Marxian radical political theory. In a chapter contribution to the 2002 English translation, Terrell Carver lauds the work for its “emotionally, psychologically and performatively perceptive account of how progressive politics takes place” (2002: 123). He finds many of Marx's claims astonishing, such as the specification of the conditions of history and revolution-making – the “present circumstances, given and inherited” (Marx 2002: 19) – in terms of past traditions, rather than in material, economic terms, as might have been expected from a materialist thinker. A further surprising element for Carver here is that the role of tradition – or, in Marx's words, the “dead generations” (2002: 19) – is not simply regarded negatively – as “a nightmare [weighing] on the brain of the living” (Marx 2002: 19) – but is also conceived as “politically productive” and “enabling” (Carver 2002: 121). Carver thus takes *The Eighteenth Brumaire* to develop a remarkable conception of revolution-making through “productive masquerade” or, as he also phrases

8 The German phrasal verb used in the content-phrasal passage is “über [etwas] hinausgehen”, which can be translated as to “exceed”, “go beyond”, “surpass” or “transcend” something.

it, through “collective recollection enacted in ritual” (2002: 121), highlighting the “*emotional terms*” (122) of Marx’s theorisation.

In the same vein, James Martin (also in a chapter in the 2002 English translation) emphasises *The Eighteenth Brumaire’s* pioneering role in thematising “the imaginary themes through which revolutions are made” (2002: 130), thereby anticipating “contemporary theories of politics as a ‘performative’ activity” (129). Such a political conception is found to be “evident in an untheorised but nevertheless tantalising way” (Martin 2022: 30). Especially Marx’s deployment of “a rich, figurative language” (Martin 2002: 131) is regarded as an “implicit recognition” of the key importance of the “symbolic” and “theatrical” (131) dimension of politics, “not [...] [as] some secondary ‘level’ perched upon the hard rock of property relations but [as] [...] itself integral to the materialisation of class power” (132-133), “requir[ing] interpretation as such” (132).

Carver and Martin also offer some valuable psychopolitical interpretations of the functions of borrowing from the past in revolutionary events in addition to Marx’s account in terms of disguising and compensating for bourgeois society’s dispassionate, materialistic character. Carver views it as a way for revolutionaries to assuage their fear for “the new”, with the “process of imaginative anachronism [...] giv[ing] [...] a comforting illusion of familiarity” (2002: 123). Similarly, Martin takes bourgeois revolutions’ “invo[cation] [of] historical references and symbols” to function as a means of “legitimis[ing] and so eas[ing] the momentous breach they make with earlier orders” (2002: 130).

Although Martin’s reading is equally affirmative as Carver’s, it questions Marx’s assessment of the performative dimension of different bourgeois revolutions, as well as the difference of proletarian revolutions in this regard. While Carver mainly rehearses Marx’s negative evaluation of the performative politics in the period 1848-1851, Martin’s verdict is more nuanced. Taking the developments at the time to have been “profoundly ambiguous in itself and in its implications” – following Timothy Clark’s assessment in *The Absolute Bourgeois* (1973) – Martin considers the restaging of past revolutionary figures and events to have functioned as a way for the key protagonists to cope with uncertainties, “stabilising a volatile situation by ‘calling on old resentments and memories’ [cited from Clark 1973]”, and thus not simply, as Marx is seen to contend, a “sly effort at propaganda” (2002: 132). More importantly perhaps is how Martin counters Marx’s characterisation of proletarian revolutions as somehow beyond the performative logic – their contents assumedly exceeding their form – and, as such, fundamentally different from previous, bourgeois revolutions. Martin takes Marx to claim here that politics’ “symbolic dimension, or its need, will be surpassed by a more honest

‘facing’ the facts by a genuinely radical political subject” (2002: 140). In contrast, he maintains – in line with contemporary radical political theorists like Butler, Žižek and Laclau – that, “the realm of fantasy, imagination and discourse are not exclusively bourgeois instruments but must be integral to any collective mobilisation; indeed, they are a constitutive dimension of collectivity itself” (Martin 2002: 140).

Despite such disagreements, Martin still holds the premise that “political struggle must, at some level, be read in terms of its symbols and imaginary constructions because these are effective elements in making history” to be a key “implicit assumption” of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (2002: 140). Even if only partially and, on some points, inadequately applied, this work is regarded by Martin as the pioneering text of an aesthetic, performative conceptualisation of (radical, revolutionary) politics in the Marxian corpus. Or, as Carver sums it up, it constitutes “Marx’s short treatise on the performative power of anachronistic allusions and invocations” (2002: 127).

Rancière’s scathing reading of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*

Before arguing that Rancière, some 10 years earlier, had already offered a similar, important, if entirely implicit, redemptive reading, one obstacle should be addressed first, namely, Rancière’s damning critique of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in the fifth chapter of his 1983 study *The Philosopher and His Poor*, which suggests a complete dismissal of the work’s value. However, Rancière here does not so much engage Marx’s claims regarding revolution-making and the role of anachronistic borrowing per se. The focus is rather on how Marx is seen to deal with his disappointment over the political developments in the period 1848–1851 in France, especially considering the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* a few months prior. In light of the manifesto’s affirmation of an “optimistic rationality” of human history as “simply the history of class struggle” (Rancière 2003: 90) and its emphatic “confidence in the political readability of history” (93), Rancière contends that the political events following the February Revolution appeared as incomprehensible and outrageous to Marx, as betrayed, for one, by *The Eighteenth Brumaire*’s sarcastic, derisive commenting style. Despite the seemingly favourable conditions for the establishment of a so-called dictatorship of the bourgeoisie – and with this, a further crystallisation and polarisation of the key class protagonists – the inverse happened and, as Rancière puts it, “everything [became] confused” with materialist history’s “rightful actors” (2003: 93) being outshined and outplayed by a singular individual owing his power to his familial lineage. Rancière’s analysis then problematises the ways in which Marx is seen to attempt to uphold the validity of his historical-materialist theory in the face of

these recalcitrant historical events both through supplemental, speculative and pseudoscientific explanations, as well as rhetorical-poetic devices.⁹ I mainly deal with the latter as they pertain to Marx's contrasting assessment of the borrowing from past revolutionary times during the French Revolution and during the February Revolution and its aftermath.

Rancière identifies a central rhetorical manoeuvre in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* whereby Marx posits the existence of a corrupted double accompanying the key class protagonists in order to account for their failure to live up to their appointed role within his dialectical-materialist theory of history. At crucial points, classes are thus found "to be doubled, decomposed by [their] own caricature or, more precisely, [their] *lumpen*" (Rancière 2003: 95). Referring here to Marx's notion of the lumpenproletariat – as the proletariat's supposedly backward, disorganised, opportunist or delinquent sections – Rancière argues that a similar "lumpen" variety is advanced for other classes as well. Defining the general process of a class's lumpenisation in terms of "its return to the strict conservation of itself and, at the same time, its decomposition into a mere aggregation of individuals" (2003: 96), Rancière identifies the so-called finance aristocracy, represented politically by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, as Marx's lumpen double for the bourgeoisie, being disparaged as a "parasite", "a class of conjurers that lives off productive wealth," and as a "vampirization of the true bourgeoisie" (2003: 97).¹⁰ Rancière rejects such constructed doubles as "myths" lacking proper sociological grounding, and created mainly for the purpose of propping up Marx's historical-materialist projections.¹¹ Deconstructing this perceived doubling trick, Rancière argues in the case of the bourgeoisie that the opposition between the bourgeoisie qua "true, productive class" and its "false, unproductive" double is "belied immediately", as the second "shows itself for what it is, [...] nothing else than the bourgeoisie itself" (2003: 97) or, put the other way around, "The ruling bourgeoisie proves itself to be what it is: not the force incarnate of modern industry but simply a mob of individuals eager to fill their purse by any means." (2003: 98)

With regard to Marx's reflections on revolutionary-making and the role of borrowing from past revolutionary times, the same rhetorical doubling tactics can

9 As regards the first, Rancière dismisses as pseudoscientific Marx's explanations in terms of a "historical delay" caused by a supposed "French backwardness," as well as in terms of a "fear" among the bourgeoisie for "unleashing [the] class struggle in all its nakedness" (2002: 94) by assuming political power.

10 Rancière here refers to Marx speaking of "the rebirth of the lumpenproletariat at the heights of bourgeois society" (1878: 50-51).

11 In case of the lumpenproletariat, Rancière points to "sociological" inaccuracies in Marx's account, as well as an uncritical reliance on the reactionary "political mythology" (2003: 95) of the active participation of certain sections of the working class in suppressing worker uprisings. On the problematic status of this notion, see also Cowling (2002.)

be identified in the stark contrast drawn between a legitimate, tragic, productive application – during the French Revolution and English Civil War – and a perverted, farcical, counterrevolutionary one – during the 1848 February Revolution and its aftermath. Although not spelled out by Rancière, one implication of his deconstruction of such doubling tactics is that the aforementioned opposition can no longer be upheld, at least not based on Marx's class-based historical-materialist theory. In fact, one of Rancière's central conclusions concerning *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is that – simply put – both the events it critiques, as well as the ways in which it does so, reveal nothing less than the demise of such a theory.

Compared to Carver's and Martin's later "postmodern" interpretations Rancière's reading clearly lacks a redemptive dimension, issuing a relentless critique. This can be explained, first, by the overall theme of *The Philosopher and His Poor*, namely, philosophers' problematic, disparaging attitudes toward the underclasses or "the poor", even when rallying for their cause. Marx's scornful reckoning with the historical protagonists of the February Revolution and the ensuing years – but also his general condescension toward the revolutionary circles of his age, as evidenced by Rancière – are served up as an exemplary case, with Marx being seen to take out his frustration over political events' non-conformance to his historical-materialist prognoses on the "poor" actors involved. By mimicking *The Eighteenth Brumaire's* sarcastic style in critiquing Marx, Rancière seems to return the insult, posthumously avenging Marx's "poor". Second, Rancière's focus on debunking the scientific pretensions of Marx's analyses should undoubtedly be understood in line with his prior rejection of Louis Althusser's structuralist Marxism which involved a similar problematisation of the adoption of a scientific approach as a turn away from political engagement and as premised on a disdain for the revolutionary agents of one's age (Rancière 2011). Finally, as a categorical dismissal of the Marxian notion of class and a class-reductionist approach to political struggle, Rancière's critique is also very much part of its historical context, with similar, perhaps better known critiques being levelled by other ex-, or post-Marxists, like Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) two years later.

Issued 20 years later, Carver's and Martin's interpretations take a lot of these critiques for granted, which might explain their more generous character. Martin thus explicitly positions his reading beyond orthodox Marxian theories of class and ideology. Carver, for his part, assessing the prevailing interpretive politics regarding *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, dismisses the Engelsian approach which is seen to assume that "Marx's texts have to be about science, and [...] historical materialism" (2002: 119).¹² Instead, he proposes a more "radical" strategy

12 Carver here refers to Engels's framing of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in the 1885 "Preface" to the third German edition as a straightforward application of dialectical-materialist laws of history.

whereby Marx is read “through his ‘historical’ works, in which he really gets to grips with political analysis” (Carver 2002: 117) with particular attention – in line with postmodern sensibilities – to textual properties, identifying “ideas in the images and tropes, rather than the other way round” (119). One advantage of such a strategy would be to “open [...] out the issue of class struggle politically, rather than closing it down to an academic problem scientifically” (Carver 2002: 118), which should be music to Rancière’s ears as a key contemporary thinker of “the political”, and considering his spat with Althusser.

To be sure, Rancière’s reading does not take *The Eighteenth Brumaire’s* poetics or metaphors any less seriously. Carver and Martin, however, interpret them generously as indicating Marx’s implicit recognition of the importance of politics’ aesthetic, performative dimension. As Martin puts it, “The theatrical dimension – though employed to disparage the events as ludicrous – is incorporated into [...] [Marx’s] own analysis as part of his critical interpretation” (2002: 131). Similarly, Carver links *The Eighteenth Brumaire’s* “extra-ordinary imagery” to its perceived aim of “represent[ing] [...] a politics of imagination” (2002: 127). In contrast, Rancière takes the resort to elaborate rhetorics and metaphors to express Marx’s frustration over the falsification of his historical-dialectical predictions by actual political events, as well as a means to try and vindicate these predictions – and their underlying scientific ideas and pretensions – through pseudoscientific, poetic artifices.

The Names of History, or, Rancière’s affirmative reading of borrowing practices in modern revolution-making

I shall now argue that this dismissive reading is not Rancière’s final reckoning with *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, and that a more affirmative, yet implicit reading underlies *The Names of History* (1994), a study Rancière began five years later.¹³

13 Originally published in 1992, *The Names of History* is based on research done during the years 1987 to 1990. To be sure, there are more writings of Rancière with a strong historical focus or component, some of which are of possible relevance to this article’s thematics. A prominent, earlier instance is *The Nights of Labour* (1989), published in 1981, which is a presentation of Rancière’s extensive archival research on early workers’ movements in 1830s France. Especially in Rancière’s later reflections on this study, one can see how the aesthetic and performative aspects of revolutionary action theorised in *The Names of History* – as highlighted in this article – can already be seen to be present in this earlier work. For instance, in *The Philosopher and his Poor* Rancière stated that the “first militant workers” started their resistance “by taking themselves for poets or knights, priests or dandies” (2003: 200). Or again, in a later interview, Rancière emphasised how at the core of early workers’ emancipation struggles there was a “process of appropriation by the workers of a language which was not their language but the ‘others’ language’ the language of ‘high literature’” (2005: 16). However, it is in *The Names of History* that Rancière engages these appropriative practices on a

Even though mainly concerned with critiquing the influential 20th-century Annales School of historiography, important passages can be interpreted as Rancière's singular take on the characteristic procedures of revolution-making in the modern era, with subtle overlaps and resonances with Marx's key notions, metaphors and formulations regarding the performative aspects of revolutionary politics.¹⁴

From the “revolution of the children of the book” to the anachronistic novelty of the Event

In Chapters Two and Three, *The Eighteenth Brumaire's* exemplary instances of revolutionary borrowing practices – i.e. from classical and biblical sources – also form the focus of the argument, yet they are contextualised entirely differently. Instead of being associated with bourgeois revolutions, they are regarded as manifestations of a more profoundly modern, democratic revolution driven by the common people or, in line with Rancière's previous work, the poor. In this context, Rancière picks up on this term in a passage from a founding text of the Annales School by Fernand Braudel (1972) announcing the masses as an emerging historical agent in the 16th century, displacing the kings and noblemen of premodern times. Rancière notes, however, that as soon as the masses are evoked, their historical importance is diminished, as Braudel characterises their increasing “eager[ness] to write [and] [...] talk” in terms of a “Renaissance of the poor [...] [and] the humble”, juxtaposing it to the earlier “true” Renaissance of the 15th century (1972: 21). Braudel enjoins one to “distrust” this poor persons’ Renaissance and its “mass of paper,” disparaging the latter for being driven by “burning passions” and “being blind [...] and unconscious of the deeper realities of history” (1972: 21). This notion of a “false”, “caricature” Renaissance or, as Rancière also characterises Braudel's claim, the Renaissance “as [...] apprehended, expressed, and misunderstood [by the poor and humble] [...] from their inferior and backward position” (1994: 17), is further found to be posited without any factual evidence.

Rancière then finds an important philosophical antecedent to this supposition of an inferior, commoners’ Renaissance in Thomas Hobbes's theorising on the causes of sedition at the time of the English Civil War in the 17th century (1642: Chapter 12; 1651: Chapter 29). Hobbes is seen to identify “poorly used words [...] [and] unwarranted phrases [...] drag[ging] here and there, anywhere” as key

more explicit, theoretical level and in relation to the same historical instances foregrounded in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

14 I here only touch on aspects of *The Names of History* relevant to the article. For excellent overviews, see Nikulin (2012), Thomson (2011), Davis (2010: Chapter 2) and Watts (2010).

sources of rebellion against the monarchy, referring to the people's borrowing and weaponising of terms and mottos from classical texts and the Bible – e.g. sayings like “It is just to suppress tyrants” or calls to “listen to the voice of your conscience before that of authority” (Rancière 1994: 19). At issue for Hobbes would be not only the excessive amount of such phrases circulating in the body politic, but also their vacuity, the fact that they do not designate “any reality,” “real property,” or “determinate idea” (Rancière 1994: 21) except for “the targets against which they place weapons in the killer's hands” (19). Common people's borrowing from ancient and biblical texts is further seen to be criticised by Hobbes for disregarding contextual considerations, with words and phrases being “torn” from their original context and applied to incomparably different ones (Rancière 1994: 21). For Rancière, the aim of Hobbes's complaints against the mishandling of words and phrases is to disqualify the common people as “people who should not handle” such words and phrases (1994: 21).

Insofar as the Renaissance fundamentally involved a rediscovery and reappraisal of the literature, culture and general civilisational values of classical Rome and Greece, Hobbes's dismissal of rebellious commoners' similar, yet assumedly simplistic, illegitimate and opportunistic borrowing from antiquity, would thus conform to Braudel's thesis (three centuries later) of a poor persons' Renaissance as a bad or false double or repetition of a return to the ancients.¹⁵ For Rancière, Braudel's and Hobbes's claims serve as exemplary attempts by a scientific historian and political philosopher respectively, to dismiss the historical, political and epistemic legitimacy of the writing and speech of the common people at a critical juncture in Western European history when they started to emancipate themselves from feudal bondage. He opposes such dismissive readings as conservative, defensive responses to what he considers to be the core of the modern democratic revolution as

[a] revolution of the children of the Book, of the poor who are “eager to write, to talk of themselves and others,” [driven by] the proliferation of speakers who are outside their place and outside the truth, gathering the properties of the two great bodies of writing lingering within their reach, prophetic epilepsy and mimetic hydrophobia. It is a revolution of paperwork in which royal legitimacy and the principle of political legitimacy find themselves defeated, fragmented in the multiplication of speech and speakers who come to enact another legitimacy – the

15 Rancière can thus be seen to reproach Braudel for deploying the same doubling manoeuvre he found to be central to *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in *The Philosopher and His Poor*. Also in line with his critique of Marx in the latter work, are the reproaches of a lack of empirical, sociological grounding and the construction of a myth or “fable” (1994: 18).

fantastical legitimacy of a people that has arisen between the lines of ancient history and of biblical writing (Rancière 1994: 20).¹⁶

Rancière's key interpretive move regarding the common people's borrowing practices, then, is to invert conservative objections and concerns, and positively endorse such practices as the predominant way "in which the revolutions and great movements of the democratic age are made and stated" (1994: 22). Remarkably, Hobbes's pejorative valuations of such practices – as excessive, improper or anachronistic – are elevated into the general properties, conditions of possibility even, of the making of history and revolution. In a dense passage, Rancière thus argues that,

[e]very event, among speakers, is tied to an excess of speech in the specific form of a displacement of the statement: an appropriation "outside the truth" of the speech of the other (of the [...] ancient text, [...] the sacred word) that makes it signify differently – that makes the voice of Antiquity resonate in the present, the language of prophecy [...] in the common life. The event draws its paradoxical novelty from that which is tied to something restated, to something stated out of context, inappropriately. The impropriety of expression is also an undue superimposition of time periods. The event has the novelty of the anachronistic (1994: 30).

Simplified, Rancière here argues that revolutionary events – i.e. historical events in which something radically new emerges – come about through the "excess" that arises when words or phrases are "inappropriately" appropriated or restated outside of their original context or beyond their authors' intended meaning. Because of being thus "displaced", words and phrases take on different meanings, allowing them to "resonate" in different times and spheres of life. The paradoxical nature of this process, then, is that something new is created in one context or time period through something restated from another.

Rancière here subversively affirms what is commonly regarded as problematic or mistaken about borrowing practices, as what is essential to them and as what makes them productive, distinguishing between two such perceived flaws, the "conflagration of discourses and the confusion of time periods" (1994: 30). The first refers to disregarding the particular register of a discourse (e.g. as literary

16 Rancière's notion of a "revolution of the children of the Book" seems closely tied to the so-called Gutenberg Revolution (Man 2009). The latter is seen to follow from the publication of the Gutenberg Bible in the mid-15th century whereby the Bible – but other, classical literature as well – first became available to the common people in its complete, textual form, after having been an exclusive privilege of the priestly, scholarly elites.

or religious), applying it to an assumedly different realm. Rancière here refers to applications of the “language of prophecy or [...] belles lettres in the common life” (1994: 30). The second involves the disregard for a text’s historical context, indiscriminately applying statements from it to other time periods, which is seen to result in anachronisms whereby antiquated notions are asserted in fundamentally different historical times. While both procedures are regarded as scandalous by some of the 20th-century scholarly historians featured in *The Names of History*, Rancière argues that it is through such errors that something new is effected in history or, as he puts it, events “happen to subjects” through “impropriety and [...] anachronism” (1994: 35).

Affirming bourgeois revolutions’s excess of phrase over content

Rancière hereby offers a quite affirmative reading of the role of the same borrowing practices in modern revolutionary activity featuring centrally in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*’s introduction. Unsurprisingly considering his earlier rejection of the Marxian notion of class and related theory of history, this reading is no longer framed in terms of a historical-dialectical struggle between the bourgeoisie or proletariat. Instead, the principal historical agent is the one Marx was accused of denigrating in *The Philosopher and His Poor*, while the thrust of revolutionary activity is not the overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of communism, but rather the general democratisation of society driven by common people’s emancipation from feudal bonds.

Over and above the shared thematic focus on borrowing practices, however, there are more substantial overlaps. First, in *The Names of History* Rancière can be seen to do something similar as later postmodern interpreters and their nuancing, relativising or even suspending of Marx’s key distinctions between the aesthetic-performative aspects of different bourgeois revolutions and proletarian revolutions. Marx’s qualified endorsement of borrowing practices during the first wave of bourgeois revolutions is hereby generalised and regarded as valid for modern revolutionary politics as such. In *The Philosopher and His Poor*, Rancière already deconstructed Marx’s contrast between the ideological status and political uses of borrowing in the French Revolution and in the period in France between 1848-1851. In *The Names of History*, he can be seen to subversively appropriate a key characterisation of bourgeois revolutions in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*. If Marx regarded proletarian revolutions’ supposed excess of their content over their phrases as preferable or superior, Rancière, inversely, affirms bourgeois revolutions’ excess of their phraseology over their content, whilst no longer attributing this feature to bourgeois revolutions only but to modern popular revolutionary activity in general.

This is not done in direct reference to Marx, but through an equally subversive reading of what appears to be a surprising precursor in terms of theorising the role of borrowing practices in modern revolutionary activity, the conservative philosopher Hobbes. This could be regarded as a provocation by Rancière, especially since Hobbes's findings seem to accord with Marx's in critiquing the excess of borrowed phrases in relation to their content. Again, Rancière affirms as positive and essential what is regarded as problematic by the conservative Hobbes – and, by implication, the revolutionary Marx – namely, the anarchic circulation of borrowed phrases among the common people, devoid of a real or precise content or referent, and improperly and anachronistically applied beyond their original context. If Rancière thus affirms the radical, revolutionary force of this “excess of words and phrases,” or, as he also phrases it, “excess of speech” (1994: 22), it is difficult not to understand this as a veiled, critical reworking and redemptive appropriation of Marx's attribution of an excess of phrase over content to bourgeois revolutions.

Second, similar to Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Rancière's account of borrowing practices from classical and biblical sources in the modern era foregrounds and conceptualises their performative dimension. Remarkably, Hobbes's conservative complaints serve as a springboard for Rancière's theorisations here as well. In his narration of Hobbes's criticisms of borrowed phrases' lack of referencing something actual or real and, inversely, their mainly incendiary role, there is a strong suggestion of the fundamentally performative mode of such phrases as not only an encouragement to action (i.e. rebellion) but also as first creating its object or target (i.e. the monarch qua tyrant). Rancière here coins the term “fiction-politics” – “*politique-fiction*” in the original French – to indicate how Hobbes takes the common people's “parasitic voices and writings” to “overload [...] [the sovereign's] body [...] with a ghost [*fantôme*] made of words without body (the ghost of someone to kill)” (1994: 20). The expression “words without body” can be seen as another implicit allusion to, and variation on, Marx's characterisation of bourgeois revolutions in terms of phrases exceeding their content.

Redeeming the notion of class as an improper performative naming act

Third, even though *The Names of History* focuses only marginally and indirectly on Marx or Marxism, I contend that Rancière here develops a more nuanced, redemptive approach, especially to the notion of class, and that *The Eighteenth Brumaire's* reflections on politics' performative aspects are pivotal in this regard. It is significant that in the parts dealing with Marxism, Rancière harks back to his earlier, critical reading of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in *The Philosopher and His*

Poor. On the one hand, this reading is reasserted and Marxism is presented as one of two defensive responses to the central role of borrowing from religious or classical sources in modern revolutions, with the French Revolution as the most prominent instance. Rancière argues that the latter has historically functioned as a kind of negative “founding event” of a certain “tradition of modern social science”, or again, phrased in metaphors very similar to *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, as its “original ghost [fantôme] [...] the revolution as anachronism, the revolution in the clothing [*en habits*] and discourse of antiquity” (1994: 31). This tradition is seen to be based on a “denunciation of the impropriety of the words and [...] the anachronism of [historical, revolutionary] events” (Rancière 1994: 30), inversely advancing a “way of thinking about time [...] liberated from the anachronism of speech and of the event” (31). Of the Marxist way of doing so, Rancière points to how,

[t]he slowing of the forces of the future, their lack of maturation, was [...] made responsible on each occasion for the regression, for the anachronistic and verbose repetition of the past in place of the execution of the tasks of the present. The ignorance of the historical actor and the symmetrical knowledge of the theoretician of history were linked to this predominance of a future, alone fit to explain the past, but always missing in the present of the action, always newly split in the inaccessibility of a *not yet* determining the repetition of a *once more*. The analysis of class struggle that was Marx’s paradoxical glory is rather the theatrical distribution of the shapes that may be taken by the conjunction of the not yet and the one more time (1994: 31).

Rancière can be seen to argue here that from the perspective of Marx’s projected road map toward the future communist society, revolutionary actors’ “anachronistic and verbose” borrowing from the heroic past must always appear as retrogressive, as an indication of their lacking determination, maturity, and historical awareness and foresight, if not as a way to evade their necessary, historical class mission as determined by the materialist “theoretician of history”. To be sure, Marx’s valuation of anachronistic borrowings in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* is at least partly positive as an important psychological prop for the bourgeoisie in its struggle against feudalism. At the same time, however, borrowing practices are conceived negatively as evasive, self-deceptive manoeuvres and are considered to have become anachronistic in 19th-century conditions, with the bourgeoisie being reproached for relapsing in this regard in the period 1848–51, signifying their failure to execute their historic class mission head-on, succinctly and matter-of-factly, a *modus operandi* Marx attributed to a prospective, fully matured proletariat. Apart from referring to Marx’s attempted

explanations of class failures in terms of revolutionary conditions or classes not yet being fully developed, Rancière, in the cited passage, also repeats his central criticism from *The Philosopher and His Poor* that Marx had to resort to theatrical evaluations – in terms of tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, low farce, etc. – to prop up such historical-materialist, class-based explanations.

Rancière's earlier, dismissive critique of the Marxian notion of class is not simply reasserted in *The Names of History*, however, as this notion can be seen to be redemptively reconceptualised in performative, linguistic terms. Surprisingly, this is done through a partial defence of Marxian interpretations of the French Revolution against later critiques of the anachronistic nature of the class categories used by historical scholars. Alfred Cobban's work is presented as exemplary here, demonstrating how key Marxian notions were either no longer relevant at the time – in case of feudalism – or did not yet exist in the later sense given to them by Marxist theorists – in case of the proletariat and bourgeoisie.¹⁷ In the latter instances, Marxism is criticised for committing anachronisms from the future, retrojecting later class categories into the past, irrespective of the historical actors' factual properties, being based instead on historical-materialist, "futurist" speculations or on the actors' own adoption of class names. Marxist interpretations are thus criticised for "ha[ving] let itself [...] be trapped by words," not only by "stick[ing] words and notions from later times on to the past event," but also by "tak[ing] for granted the words of the actors, contemporaries, and chroniclers of the Revolution" (Rancière 1994: 33). Cobban's interpretation of the French Revolution exemplifies a second endeavour – i.e. apart from the first, failed Marxian attempt – to conceive and study history devoid of any anachronisms or confusions caused by speech, focused instead on disclosing the absolute "presentness" of history uncontaminated by "categories of the past and future" and only using "categories [...] adequate to their [historical] object because [...] exactly contemporaneous with it" (1994: 31).

Here as well, Rancière's key move is to affirm the perceived obstacle to an accurate, non-anachronistic, scientific knowledge of the past as a key component of how history, and revolution especially, come about. The root cause of scholarly historians' issues with Marxian class-based interpretations of the French Revolution is specified by Rancière in the more general linguistic terms of the "gap between words and things," or again, between "*nominations* and *classifications*" (1994: 34) – which again resonates with Marx's claim regarding the excess of bourgeois revolutions' phrases in relation to their content. This gap is considered to be "irremediable" (1994: 34) due to a structural property of language, which Rancière calls the "excess" at its heart, namely, its homonymic character (1994:

17 In his 1964 study *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cobban 1999).

33). This not only refers to words' ability to "designate several entities and several properties" but also to "designate properties that did not exist, [...] no longer existed or were still to come" (Rancière 1994: 33). This would then cause the structural disconnect between historical categories and their objects, or again, the inevitable fact that "the classes that name themselves, and that are named, are never what classes must be, in the scientific sense: sets of individuals to which it is possible to attribute rigorously a finite number of common properties," with Rancière further asserting that "[a] name identifies, it doesn't class" (1994: 34).

If postmodern interpretations of Marx are often seen to apply key insights of the so-called linguistic turn (Carver 1998), Rancière here offers his own application to the Marxian notion of class, reconceptualising the latter in nominalistic terms as a performative naming process through which historical actors create, and identify themselves as a collective, irrespective of their irreducibly heterogeneous individual characteristics. The Marxian notion of class is thus redeemed by Rancière as a performative speech act characterised by the general, anachronistic and improper nature of historical naming processes, while rejecting its "scientific" understanding or pretension of denoting a pre-existing set of individuals with objectively determinable shared characteristics. In his characteristic manner, Rancière hereby affirms the impropriety and anachronicity of historical names in relation to their class referents which, as he points out, scientific historians regard as the gravest "sin" (1994: 35), as "the sin of the very actors in the event, the sin by which events are produced – by which, simply, there is history," which is claimed to exist,

[...] because the speakers are united and divided by names, because they name themselves and name the others with names that don't have "any close relation" with sets of properties. What makes sense for them and what they make an event out is [...] the intricacy of [...] the juridical and the nonjuridical, the personal and the real, the past and the present, feudal privilege and bourgeois property. And this makes sense for those who act not as representatives of definite social identities through sets of properties but as nobles or knaves, bourgeois or proletarians – that is to say as speakers (1994: 35).

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that some of Marx's historical-philosophical reflections on the nature of modern revolutionary politics in the introductory paragraphs of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* can be seen to underly key tenets of Rancière's own theorisations in this regard in a key work on history and

historiography, starkly contrasting with his prior dismissive reading. Rancière was herein found to anticipate by some 10 years key features of redemptive postmodern readings of *The Eighteenth Brumaire* characterised by a relaxing of the historical-materialist underpinnings of Marx's account of the performative aspects of bourgeois and proletarian revolutions. What makes Rancière's implicit engagement with *The Eighteenth Brumaire* of special interest, however, is not so much its earlier occurrence as the way in which it does not merely extrapolate from Marx's reflections regarding borrowing practices in modern revolutionary activity but also offers an alternative historical-theoretical framing and interpretation. A key focus of Rancière's redemptive reading was shown to be Marx's claim concerning the excess of bourgeois revolutions' phrases in relation to their content. Dissociating this feature from bourgeois revolutions, Rancière identifies the excessive, insurrectionary deployment of phrases or terms taken from classical and biblical sources following the Renaissance as a key procedure of democratic, emancipatory struggles by the common people against the prior hierarchical feudal order. The revolutionary potential of such borrowing practices is then further elaborated conceptually in terms of the production of an excess of new meanings, and is even tied to the occurrence of revolutionary events or historical change as such, with Rancière affirming the often maligned, improper and anachronistic nature of borrowing practices as a crucial, productive factor. Finally, the insight that words always exist in excess of their referents is deployed by Rancière both to critique Marxism's attempts at neatly dividing society into classes based on shared, presumed objective material properties, as well as to redeem and reconceptualise the notion of class as an essentially performative and imaginative process, thereby anticipating later postmodern interpretations of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*.

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