

Continuums of Revolution:

Parisian Collective Memory and the Paris Commune of 1871

Lena Rubin

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Professor Lisa Tiersten

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“I walk along, remembering this, remembering that... The gramophone record is going strong in my head: ‘Here this happened, here that happened...’”

Jean Rhys, *Good Morning Midnight*

“On the dawn of March 18, Paris arose to the thunder-burst of ‘Vive la Commune!’ What is the Commune, that sphinx so tantalizing to the bourgeois mind?”

Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France: The Paris Commune*

Introduction

On March 22, 2018, Parisian transit workers went on a general strike. Over 200,000 people took to the streets of Paris to support the workers of TGV and SNCF, Paris' main transit corporations, while demonstrating against the labor policies of current president Emmanuel Macron. Strikers and demonstrators, among them a large percent of the city's students, were faced with police violence, including the use tear gas -- the city was in a state of upheaval. A statue near the subway station Republique, near the center of Paris, which reads "A la Gloire de la République Française, la Ville de Paris 1883," was spray-painted with the words "Mai 68: Ils commencent, on recommence."¹ This graffiti is an example of what the philosopher Michel de Certeau would call a *tactic*, a political action that occurs at a local, everyday level. Tactics are ways that ordinary people -- students, workers, citizens -- subvert societal power from below. In this case, the anonymous graffiti subverts the mainstream glorification of the French state. The invocation of 1968 here is not simply a static memorialization of a revolution past, but rather a call to action. In the context of new waves of protests and strikes, this graffiti invokes May 1968 as living memory.

In this thesis I study revolution as a recurring theme in the political history of Paris. Rather than retell the narratives, key players, and outcomes, of the revolution themselves, I will focus instead on the ways in which these historical moments have been remembered, memorialized, and mobilized. Rather than take history as a chain of separate events, or to see revolutionary moments as an interruption or break from history "as normal," I have tried to characterize Parisian political culture as one that situates itself within a cultural and discursive

¹ Fabrice Bluszez, "Coup d'oeil sur la manif des étudiants," *Paris Depeches*, April 6, 2018. Accessed via https://www.parisdepeches.fr/16-Politique/128-75_Paris/12643-Coup_d_oeil_sur_manif_des_etudiants___html

“continuum of revolution,” to borrow from Martin Philip Johnson’s “The Paradise of Association.”² I have grounded my study of practices of collective memory in the city of Paris itself, the perennial site of urban insurrection in France. In March of 1871, after three previous attempts at revolution, the city of Paris was democratically governed by the working class for three months. Its streets, its hills, its *quartiers* and monuments, became itself a blueprint for a new organizing of space, of resources, of political activity and everyday life.

When I visited Paris for a month this summer, having received a grant to study the 1871 Paris Commune, I stayed in a neighborhood called Belleville in the 18th *arrondissement*. A working-class neighborhood at the outskirts of the city, Belleville was left out of Prefect-sur-Seine Baron Haussmann's grand vision of a bourgeois Paris. It played a central role in the Commune, for specifically socio-geographical reasons: its narrow streets made possible the building of barricades by the *Communards*, and its hills (located at the Parcs de Belleville and Buttes de Chaumont) were strategic locations to observe and defend the city from the Versailles government.

When I arrived in Belleville I was not yet aware of its connections to the Commune. But it was immediately clear that the mood of the neighborhood was politically involved and leftist. Every street corner was plastered with signs for Jean-Luc Melenchon, the far-left politician and former Trotskyist who had opposed both far-right candidate Marine Le Pen and centrist Emmanuel Macron in the previous presidential election. There was a graffiti-ed wall right across the street from the apartment I stayed in which read “Parler à tes voisins, pas à la police” (“Speak to your neighbors, not to the police”). The spirit of the Commune, in its resistance to

² Martin Philip Johnson, *The Paradise of Association, Political Culture and Popular Organizations in the Paris Commune of 1871* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 222.

authoritarian rule from above, and its politics of local association, were alive. As I wandered around on my first night, I passed into a public square where a concert was going on. I approached the makeshift stage, which was draped with red flags, and realized that it was a political fundraiser: I was greeted warmly by a group of seemingly college-aged members of CGT -- or Congregation General du Travail, the Communist-affiliated industrial union of Paris. I talked to them about their campaign for a 36-hour work week, about their critiques of the current labor policy under Emmanuel Macron, their plans for upcoming demonstrations. On the third page of the CGT's *Gazette Culturelle* was a notice for a celebration of the Paris Commune to be held at Pere Lachaise cemetery, the site of the burial of thousands of *Communards* after their execution by the Versailles government.³ Before this moment, I'd thought that the Paris Commune was somewhat of a niche field of study, given how few times I'd learned about it in school (it had been mentioned precisely once in my high school history class). But I soon realized that, among the Parisian Left, the Commune was not only familiar, but in fact enshrined and celebrated as an integral part of the collective political consciousness.

A great deal of the material I consider in this paper comes from my own firsthand witness of the "traces of the Commune" in contemporary Paris. I also draw from my findings in the archives, both the Archives Nationales de Paris, and the Archives Départementales de Saint-Denis, and I have been immensely inspired by primary texts including poems, paintings, fiction, memoir. Yet the true spirit of the Commune cannot be found solely in paper documents. To walk around a city is to bear witness to its living history, and the most important work I did in Paris, I believe, was my practice of walking. Michel de Certeau's book *The Practice of Everyday*

³ La CGT, *La gazette culturelle* (Paris: La Congrégation Générale de Travailleurs, 2017)

Life was immensely influential in validating the experience of the everyday in historical study, and it helped me in my formulation of the urban everyday as a lens through which to approach the understudied, misunderstood, and incredibly brief period of history that is the Paris Commune. As De Certeau writes, quoting the French architect Christopher Alexander:

“Pedestrian movements form one of these ‘real systems whose existence make up the city.’”⁴

Along with Certeau, the scholar Mathilde Zederman was immensely helpful to my analysis of the spatial politics of Paris, specifically Belleville itself. Her article “Memories of the Paris Commune in Belleville Since the 1980s: Folklorization and New Forms of Mobilization in a Transforming Quartier” was the only piece of writing I could find which attempts to conduct a study of urban collective memory of the Paris Commune -- the same general project that I attempt to take up here, though with different points of focus. I owe Kristin Ross a debt for being the first to spark my fascination with the Paris Commune itself, specifically her conception of a *Communard* culture. Her books *Rimbaud and the Emergence of Social Space* as well as *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* brought the spirit of the Commune to life, not only for me, but for a great deal of American academics, leftists, and artists. I follow Ross in situating the Paris Commune as a living history, not a set of issues rooted in the past but immediately relevant to the political issues of our day. As she says in an interview with Verso Books,

Like many people after 2011 I was struck by the return—from Oakland to Istanbul, Montreal to Madrid—of a political strategy based on seizing space, taking up space, rendering public places that the state considered private. Militants across the world had reopened and were experiencing the space-time of occupation, with all the fundamental changes in daily life this implies. They experienced their own neighborhoods transformed

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 4.

into theaters for strategic operations and lived a profound modification of their own affective relation to urban space.”⁵

In this essay, I will take up two separate, but linked, conceptions that Ross describes: “the space-time of occupation” and “the changes in daily life that this implies.” Rather than a one-to-one causal relationship, I argue that within the politics, history, and memory of Parisian revolution(s), the practices of daily life and the organization of urban space influence each other mutually.

In my first chapter I will give an outline of the events of the Paris Commune. I do not claim to be objective in my presentation of the events of March-May of 1871. Rather I will highlight the ways in which the political imagination of the Communards was shaped by the various practices of daily life that had their roots in the 1793 revolution and the Jacobin occupation of Paris. I will also describe the political accomplishments of the Commune and describe the severe repression it faced from the Versailles government. In the second chapter, I will delve more deeply into daily practices of *clubistes*. I will look at the role of women in clubs and examine the ways in which the working class used *clubs* to reappropriate the urban space taken from them by Baron Haussman’s redesigning of Paris. In the third chapter I will discuss the links between association and memory in the case study of the Association des Amis de la Commune. I will also discuss the symbolic and spatial “traces of the Commune” in contemporary Paris.

⁵ “Survival of the Paris Commune: an Interview with Kristin Ross.” Verso Books blog, March 18, 2016. Accessed via <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2563-survival-of-the-paris-commune-an-interview-with-kristin-ross>

Chapter 1: The Spectre of Revolution in Parisian Political Culture 1793-1871

In 1868, a *Registre de caisse travailleurs* was published by an industrial union based in Paris. Later acquired by a parliamentary committee aimed at studying the causes of the workers' insurrection of March 1871, the pamphlet introduces its goals of ameliorating Parisian workers' living conditions by describing the recent history of workers' movements in Paris. It states that "the desire to improve the standing of the working class was born about twenty years ago, but has taken on slightly different forms since then."⁶ As the *Registre* demonstrates, the political culture of the Parisian working class in the years leading up to the 1871 Commune formed an identity based in the historical memory of Paris' previous revolutions.

Around twenty years before this *Registre* was written, the 1848 revolution had marked a historic moment of workers' revolt and insurrection. Over six thousand barricades were created in the streets of Paris as workers formed a "coalition of discontent with the government, embracing broad class collaboration" and "took to the streets."⁷ Porcelain workers went on strike and smashed machinery.⁸ On the whole, many facets of the 1848 revolution had their precedent in another insurrection, only eighteen years earlier. The occupation of public urban space, for example, was central to both revolutions. In both 1830 and 1848, workers demonstrated outside the Hotel De Ville, the seat of government power. While in 1830 workers occupied the space in order to protest the reign of King Charles X, chanting "A bas le roi! A la guillotine!" ("Down with the King! To the guillotine!"), workers in 1848 "led the crowd... to the Hotel de Ville to proclaim a republic led by themselves," in protest of the conservative policies of the Republic

⁶ Caisse de travailleurs 1868. Fonds de la Ministère de la Justice, BB-24-2329 Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris, France.

⁷ David P. Jordan, *Transforming Paris: the Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 78.

⁸ Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 79.

that were the eventual result of the revolution of 1830.^{9,10} The origin of l'Hotel de Ville as a “traditional center of insurrection” can be traced back to 1793 when the Jacobins installed a “reign of terror” in the Hotel.¹¹ Revolutionary memory can be seen on a collective as well as an individual level: many workers who demonstrated in 1848 would live to participate in the 1871 insurrection, emboldened by their memories of past revolution. Louise Michel writes about a man named Malezieux, “an old man now, a hero of 1848,” who, when confronted by counterrevolutionaries during the siege of Paris, “remembered bygone days and bravely took command of the situation as if he had been draped in his June Flag.”¹²

While all three of the Parisian insurrections that preceded the Paris Commune were marked by their occupation of public space, Parisian workers had also formed another spatial “tradition,” located outside of the public sphere per se. The working class of Paris, beginning with the Jacobins and persisting throughout the years after the Commune was destroyed, gathered to meet in spaces called *clubs de reunion*. Jonah Walters, a contemporary radical scholar of the French Revolution, writes that, “in the absence of political parties as we know them today,” the *sans-culottes*, or working-class insurrectionaries in the 1793 revolution, “received their political education from revolutionary societies like the Jacobins, who produced newspapers and called gatherings where revolutionary propaganda was read aloud.”¹³ Writings of *clubistes* from the 18th and 19th centuries demonstrate that the *club* as social form created an atmosphere and mood among the working-class where politics and culture were inseparable,

⁹ Andre Delattre and Marc Denkinge, eds., Juste Olivier, *Paris en 1830: Journal de Juste Olivier*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Department of Romance Studies, 2017), 247.

¹⁰ Robert Tombs, *France 1814-1914*. (London: Routledge, 2014), 24.

¹¹ Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 81.

¹² Louise Michel, “The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel” Lowry and Gunter, trans. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1981), 62.

¹³ Jonah Walters, “A Guide to the French Revolution,” *Jacobin Magazine*, July 14, 2015.

where political association was also a cultural form. The clubs were “at once spatial, discursive, and political spaces.”¹⁴ The tradition of popular *clubs* persisted throughout the revolutionary century, providing what the Ministry of Justice later called an “incubator” for the ideas of socialism and revolution that flourished during the Paris Commune.¹⁵ Jordan writes that in 1868-69, when the “many-throated voice of the Commune was already being heard” in workers’ clubs, the “rhetoric and example” of 1793 was increasingly “evoked and employed.”¹⁶ Martin Phillip Johnson adds, in his “The Paradise of Association,” that the *clubistes* “destroyed certain aspects of the old order and constructed their vision of the new.” They did so by “position[ing] themselves in the larger historical evolution of the revolutionary struggle.”¹⁷

Johnson’s description of a “many-throated” revolutionary “voice” can be read not only metaphorically but literally. The revolutionary song, or *chanson*, was a crucial tool used by clubistes in order to memorialize previous revolutions and keep alive a spirit of insurrection for the future. The *Marseillaise*, originally composed as a rallying call for 1793 workers from Marseilles joining the popular struggle in Paris, was sung at the beginning and end of most *club* meetings in the 1860s.¹⁸ Speeches and orations were also central to the collective memory which took place in clubs. Jordan writes that the “glorious memory” of 1830, lived on through the speeches of *orateurs* who spoke publicly in clubs de réunion.¹⁹ Women played an important role as speakers, or *orateuses*. An anonymous caricature of an “orateuse” demonstrates the important

¹⁴ Martin Phillip Johnson, *The Paradise of Association: Political Culture and Popular Organizations in the Paris Commune of 1871* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 95.

¹⁵ Letter to Versailles. Fonds de la Ministere de la Justice, BB-24-2329 Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris, France.

¹⁶ Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 298.

¹⁷ Johnson, *The Paradise of Association*, 204.

¹⁸ Johnson, *The Paradise of Association*, 206.

¹⁹ Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 76,

oratory role that women had in *clubs*. This caricature was likely meant to demean women *orateuses*, who were often accused of committing “debauchery” by attending the clubs, or of being “seduced” into *club* attendance by radical men.²⁰ However, this caricature can also be read as an accurate depiction of the central role of women in *clubs*. More broadly, it demonstrates the lively interchange of political discourse that the *clubs* provided for Paris’ working class. The “grrrand” *orateuse*, described as an “Amazon,” stands, in the middle of speaking, on a sort of pedestal. Her mouth is open and her facial expression is passionate. She holds a newspaper or pamphlet out to the audience, eager to share her ideas with them. The audience seems engaged and excited: their mouths are also open, perhaps speaking back to her, perhaps sharing ideas amongst themselves. The atmosphere of the audience, closely packed into a tight space, is undeniably one of solidarity and community.²¹

If the usage of *clubs* by revolutionaries was continuous from the late 18th century to the late 19th demonstrates, the political ideas expressed in these clubs evolved and became more radical over time. While “French socialism,” whose goal was to establish a republic, was prevalent in *club* meetings in 1830 and 1848, the political leanings of the *clubistes* in the late 1860s leaned more toward Marxist ideas that involved complete workers’ control of society.²² The continued education and radicalization of Paris’ working class towards ideas of Marxism provoked constant suspicion from the government of the Second Empire, and later, in 1870, the government of Adolphe Thiers and the National Assembly. Jordan writes that the memory of the three revolutions had “through their succession, produced a fear of public insurrection” in the

²⁰ Femmes pendant la commune. Fonds de la Ministere de la Justice, BB-24-2329 Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris, France.

²¹ DuBois, “The Grrrreat Female Orator of the Grrrand Amazon Club of the Commune,” in Gay Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 65.

²² Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 78.

heads of state, and particularly in Paris itself; it became clear to the state that a “potentially unruly populace,” having adopted a tradition of public insurrection, “had to be monitored.”²³ The *clubs* were deemed to be a place where another popular insurrection could be brewing at any moment.²⁴ The writings of the *Enquete sur les causes de l’insurrection de 18 mars*, a parliamentary inquiry into “the causes of the March 18th Insurrection,” and the same committee that acquisitioned the 1868 *Caisse de Travailleurs*, state that workers, and women workers in particular, were radicalized through the “debauchery of the clubs” and the “lack of police surveillance” in monitoring the clubs’ activities before 1868.²⁵ So, identifying the *clubistes* as potential actors in future insurrection, Napoleon issued a law on June 6, 1868, stating that the *commissaires de police* in each *quartier*, or neighborhood, in Paris, must attend meetings of their local clubs to “keep order.”²⁶

Government surveillance of Paris’ working class was made complicated by spatial layout of Paris at the time. Strict separations between working-class and bourgeois neighborhoods were increasingly present, thanks to the political and spatial redesigning of Paris during the Second Empire by Prefect-sur-Seine Baron Haussmann. The bourgeois of Paris walked the large *boulevards* through the commercial districts of the center of the city, living in their own “miniature world” and “deliberately shutting out the pregnant social developments” of the working-class. On the other hand, working-class *quartiers* on the outskirts of the city “that the authorities could not adequately control... were left to their own devices.”²⁷ Thus, working-class

²³ Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 191.

²⁴ Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 172.

²⁵ Femmes pendant la commune. Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris, France.

²⁶ Roger V. Gould, *Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 127.

²⁷ Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 173.

neighborhoods enjoyed some measure of freedom of association through which to hold club meetings, creating spaces of discourse that existed both politically and spatially outside of Haussmann's Paris.

By the end of the 1860s the memory of public insurrection not only fueled the political spirit of the *clubistes*, it also posed a persistent threat to the power of Napoleon's Second Empire. But despite efforts to surveil Parisian *clubs* as well as appeals to workers' morality, the government of the 1860s was unsuccessful in keeping popular insurrection at bay. In the spirit of 1793, 1830, and 1848, the Parisian working class gathered *en masse* for a fourth time on March 18, 1871. While the activity of the *clubs* continued, the organization and education of the working-class was no longer confined to traditionally working class neighborhoods or *quartiers*, rather a collective group of insurrectionaries now took spatial and political control of the city at large. Free from police surveillance, with the National Guard on its side and the Versailles government sent to exile, workers were now able to form a large city-wide association that would go on to elect its own government: this event and form of government was known as the Paris Commune. On March 18, as Louise Michel puts it, "the people wakened."²⁸ The historian David P. Jordan describes the historic day:

unopposed and swept along by a "human torrent," [workers] occupied all the administrative offices and government buildings without firing a shot. They found them empty. Around 9:30 pm, the mayor, Jules Ferry, fled the Hotel de Ville. It was occupied at 11 pm, and the red flag run up the pole. Paris was in the hands of the Commune.²⁹

²⁸ Louise Michel, "The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel" Lowry and Gunter, trans. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1981), 62.

²⁹ Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 342.

An anonymous paper-on-pencil engraving titled *Proclamation de la Commune a l'Hotel-de-Ville* bears graphic witness to the working-class victory of March 18. In the image the Parisian workers, which would come to be known collectively as *Communards* or *Communardes*, swarm the courtyard in front of the “traditional site of insurrection.”³⁰ While the occupation of l’Hotel De Ville conjures a sort spatial memory of past urban insurrections, the engraving also bears aesthetic resemblance to other images from Paris’ revolutionary century. Both this and another anonymous eyewitness drawing, of 1789’s Women’s March to Versailles, use visual repetition to demonstrate the simultaneous movement and collective energy of an insurrectionary whole.³¹ Though individual faces can be made out, the workers’ bodies blend into one another, gradually dissolving into a mass. While the market-women of 1793 wield pitchforks and sickles, the *Communards* hold the National Guard’s rifles. Despite historical differences, both groups of workers are shown to have power and autonomy through the collective possession of weapons that were once used in service of the coercive power of the state. In the depictions of both 1789 and 1871, workers are pictured occupying the outside government buildings, using public space to put collective pressure on the governmental bodies in control of the city, their wages, and their daily lives.

But there is a key difference between the March 18, 1871 insurrection, and the three insurrections which preceded and inspired it. In the anonymous *Proclamation de la Commune* engraving, workers are pictured not only demonstrating outside of the seat of governmental power, but indeed they have physically occupied the *inside* of the building. Workers peek out through the window of the Hotel, sitting on window sills, joyously waving hats to the crowd.

³⁰ Johnson, *The Paradise of Association*, 345.

³¹ Unknown, *The Womens’ March on Versailles*, in “The Myth of the Well-Behaved Womens’ March,” *New Republic*, January 24, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/140065/myth-well-behaved-womens-march>.

This symbolic image reflects a real transfer of state power that was unprecedented. Hours earlier, the Thiers government had fled to Versailles. Military power had also been transferred from the state to the hands of the Communards, rendering powerless both the state and the generals. A caricature by the artist De Frondas shows the ashamed military general Vinoy running from Montmartre, with the caption “Le Général Vinoy se repliant en bon ordre” -- “se replier” meaning “to fold,” or alternatively, “to withdraw.”³² No popular insurrection in Paris, before March 18, 1871, had ever succeeded in actually forcing government officials out of their seats of power and taking it for themselves. To modify Martin Philip Johnson’s description of the workers’ clubs -- while positioning themselves within a traditional site of insurrection, the Communards of 1871 also “created the new,” opened up previously unforeseen political possibilities. Drawing upon the familiar practices of urban insurrection allowed the working class to do something completely unprecedented and unfamiliar: wrest power from the hands of their bosses, generals, and government officials.

During the time of the Commune, many traditions of the *clubs de reunion* now occurred on a larger, more public scale. For example the tradition of workers’ songs found in *clubs*, for example, had been transformed into large-scale “les concerts populaires.”³³ Staged in les jardins des Tuileries, previously the home of Emperor Louis Napoleon, concerts were attended by “une immense foule,” (a “large crowd”) “dans une atmosphère de fête.”³⁴ Continuing in a long tradition of oppositional oration, “citoyennes,” performed songs with names like *Sois maudit*,

³² Bertrand Tiller. *Le Siège et La Commune de Paris* (Paris: Musée d’art et d’histoire de Saint-Denis, 2012), 23.

³³ Les Amis de La Commune de Paris, ed., *La Commune et La Culture: pour une education populaire*. (Paris: Les Amis de La Commune de Paris), 7

³⁴ Amis, ed., *La Commune et la Culture*, 7.

Bonaparte! (or, *Be damned, Bonaparte!*) Songs attacking the “malicious and deceptive” Versailles government received “frenetic applause and bravos.”³⁵

While popular gatherings like *concerts populaires* as well as public theatrical performances characterized Communal culture, the Communal government also created a formal body, *Les fédérations des artistes*, to soberly debate and discuss the role that art and culture were to play in the still-nascent Communal city.³⁶ On April 15th, 1871, the lecture hall of the School of Medicine was “absolutely full” of over four hundred painters, sculptors, and other professional artists, who had gathered to write a manifesto.³⁷ In it, they stated that the “free expansion of art” could only be created through “the independence and dignity of every artist taken under the protection of all through the creation of a committee elected by the universal suffrage of artists.” Appointed by a secret vote, members of the *fédération* had a term of one year and were able to be recalled by the popular power of other members. The *Journal officiel* described that the *fédération*, in “adhering to the principles of the Communal republic,” “strengthened the bonds of solidarity and achieved unity of action.”³⁸

While the working-class culture found unprecedented breadth and political significance during the three months of the Paris Commune, the activity of the working class of Paris during the time of the Commune was also, significantly, a remembering or restaging of revolutions past.

³⁵ Librairie des Bibliophiles, ed., *La littérature officiel sous la Commune: Documents sur les événements de 1870-71*. (Paris: Librairie des Bibliophiles), 10.

³⁶ Amis, ed., *La Commune et la Culture*, 7.

³⁷ La Federation des Artistes, trans. Jeff Skinner. “Manifesto of the Paris Commune’s Federation of Artists” Red Wedge Magazine, April 15, 2016.

<http://www.redwedge.com/online-issue/manifesto-federation-artist-commune>

³⁸ Federation des Artistes, Skinner, trans. “Manifesto of the Federation des Artistes.”

<http://www.redwedge.com/online-issue/manifesto-federation-artist-commune>

Delphine Modrey, in her study of the public concerts of the Commune, claims that the Commune had an “obsession with the past,” stating that

Everything from the formation of the Committee for Public Safety to the planned women's march on the government of Versailles to the reinstatement of the Republican calendar on 15 Floreal, year 79 (5 May 1871) had its model in the first revolution. The spectres of the past were never more present than in 1871.³⁹

The Paris Commune, on the one hand an expression of collective memory and on the other, an unprecedented “radical experiment in socialist self-government,” lasted only three months before being crushed by the return of troops sent by the Versailles government into Paris during May of 1871.⁴⁰ The *Semaine Sanglante*, or “bloody week” marked the Commune’s tragic end. “The capitalist state took revenge on radical Paris,” in the words of William A. Pelz. Returning to Paris, the Versailles government executed over 40,000 Communards and transferring 4,000 to a penal colony in the French colony of New Caledonia.⁴¹

The retaking of political power by Versailles made the Paris Commune yet another “spectre” in Paris’ revolutionary past: as cultural scholar of Paris Siegfried Kracauer writes in *Offenbach and the Paris of his Time*, the “power of the bourgeoisie was reestablished: the old life rose again from the ashes.”⁴² Paintings by Impressionist painters such as Claude Monet and Paul Cezanne represent the idealized spatial dynamics of post-Commune Paris, as art historian Albert Boime has noted. The popularity of Impressionism in the 1880s re-emphasizes Haussmann’s Paris and erases the memory of the Commune, depicting “exuberant street scenes, spaces of leisure and entertainment, sunlit parks and gardens, the entire concourse of movement

³⁹ Delphine Modrey, “Moments Musicaux: High Culture in the Paris Commune.” *Cambridge Opera Journal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1-31.

⁴⁰ Manu Goswami, “The Meaning of the Paris Commune: An Interview with Kristin Ross.” <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/05/kristin-ross-communal-luxury-paris-commune/>

⁴¹ William A. Pelz, *A People’s History of Modern Europe* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 84.

⁴² Siegfried Kracauer, *Offenbach and the Paris of his Time*. (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2016), 343.

as filtered through an atmosphere of scintillating light and color all constitute an effort to reclaim Paris visually and symbolically for the bourgeoisie.”⁴³

Nonetheless, the spectre of the Commune has not been forgotten. The Paris Commune is remembered today for the principles of popular democracy for for which it stood. It can also be found in revolutionary songs, poems, and plays composed during or about the Commune. The use of these pieces of art, specifically the staging and restaging of Communard-themed plays, is a way of recreating the spirit of popular association and occupation of space that made the Commune revolutionary. Memory of the Commune also continues to be recovered through collective memory in urban space, specifically in Paris. Both the usage of spatial memory in Paris as well as discursive and symbolic memory through art are two practices that work to commemorate the Paris Commune: an event that, in turn, was symbolic of the collective revolutionary memory of the Parisian working class.

⁴³ Albert Boime, *Art and the French Commune: Imagining Paris After War and Revolution*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), xi.

Chapter 2: *Clubistes* and Practices of Memory in Pre-Commune Paris

In 1869 Karl Marx noted that “a very interesting moment is going on in France. The Parisians are making a regular study of their recent revolutionary past to prepare themselves for the business of impending new revolution.”⁴⁴ This notion of *regular* memory of the past was visible in Paris’ working class through their everyday lives, most notably in the practice of attending political *clubs de réunion*. Spaces of both theory and practice, *clubs* were the places where the working class *clubistes* both outlined and acted on their visions.⁴⁵ Baron Haussmann’s *grand travaux* had displaced the working-class from Paris’ center to its margins: his plans for Paris sectioned working-class life off into enclosed *quartiers*, where workers were more or less left “to their own devices.”⁴⁶ But a common neighborhood feature among these disparate *quartiers* were the *clubs*. At night, workers gathered in large groups, sang songs, drank, debated, discussed, and delivered and listened to political oration. No building was designated permanently to be a *club*, rather workers appropriated buildings schools, civic buildings, and most popularly, churches, after the regular hours of the day. Because they were located in spaces technically designated for another function of capitalist urban life, the existence of the *club* was temporary and unofficial.

Yet at the same time the *club* form was neither an erratic nor an ephemeral social phenomenon: rather, it was a decades-long tradition that was self-conscious in its ability to persist through history. Historian Martin Philip Johnson writes in his book-long study on the role

⁴⁴ Letter from Karl Marx to Dr. Louis Kugelmann, 1869, quoted in Martin Phillip Johnson, *The Paradise of Association: Political Culture and Popular Organizations in the Paris Commune of 1871* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 95.

⁴⁵ *The Paradise of Association*, 221

⁴⁶ David P. Jordan, *Transforming Paris: the Life and Labors of Baron Haussmann* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 192-194.

of the political club in French revolutionary culture that the “origins and key features” of the Paris Commune “were shaped by the memory of the French revolutionary tradition.”⁴⁷ A study of the social functioning of the club gives clear evidence the persistence of revolutionary memory during the nineteenth century. Clubs began during the Jacobin “terror” period of 1789, and continued throughout 1793, 1830, 1848 and into the 1860s, when *clubistes* placed themselves into an urban and associative “continuum of revolution.”⁴⁸

The philosopher Michel de Certeau, speaking generally on practices of subversion, refers to the possibility of “an endless production of an identity,” specifically of a non-dominant or non-hegemonic identity, that is created through repeated activity.⁴⁹ The practice of attending nightly *club* meetings created its own sort of political subject. *Clubiste* identity had both local and global aspects: it was expressed both through alignment with a grand revolutionary tradition, but also with smaller, more quotidian practices, such as ways of dressing. Johnson describes a “nexus of practices” that constructed *clubiste* identity, among them such small details such the use of red fabric, which hung from the walls of *clubs* and marked a *clubiste* from other Parisians as she walked down the street. The Communard, poet, and schoolteacher Louise Michel describes in “The Red Virgin” her commemoration of workers killed by the Versailles government, “As a token of defiance, I took off my red scarf and threw it on a grave. A comrade picked it up and knotted it in the branches of a willow.”⁵⁰ The small, everyday detail of a red piece of fabric has commemorative significance -- not in the object of itself, and not in the symbolism of the object *per se*, but rather in the *memory* of the symbolism of the object, and in

⁴⁷ *The Paradise of Association*, 255.

⁴⁸ *The Paradise of Association*, 261.

⁴⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 137.

⁵⁰ Louise Michel, “The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel” Lowry and Gunter, trans. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1981), 62.

turn the role that this symbolism takes in the creation of a shared history. Another concrete example of this formula is described by in *The Paradise of Association*:

Red dress and accessories expressed the crossing of the threshold into the new world, part of the constellation of transformations that signaled that a revolution was under construction. The revolutionary cycle that culminated in the insurrection of March 18 begun... on February 24, when the Red Flag was hoisted to the top of the Bastille column by guardsmen who were both celebrating the anniversary of 1848 and defying the monarchist national assembly.

The culture of revolutionary memory was situated, one could say, in the acts of both “celebrating” and “defying.” Commemorations of past revolutions were a mode of cultural expression, in which the working class could unite around their shared connection to a recent revolution, in the very specific place where it had happened. The affective memory located in urban space was not only symbolically but politically powerful. The National Assembly’s alarm at the red flag proves that very practice of remembering a revolution had revolutionary power of its own.

During the 1860s, the threat of insurrection brought forth the memories of revolutions past, not only in the minds of Paris’ workers, but also in the publications of the Versailles government and their allies. In an 1868 article in the pro-Versailles newspaper “*Le Patriote*,” the author calls readers to

moralize and enlighten workers, so that they do not become drawn into the suggestions of demagogic leaders, and so that they do not become the unconscious instrument of revolutions from below, after having for too long been [the unconscious instruments] of *coups d’etat* from above.⁵¹

⁵¹ “L’ouvrier.” *Le Patriote*, March 1870. Fonds de l’Enquête Parlementaire sur les causes de l’insurrection 18 Mars BB-24-2329. Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris.

Elsewhere in the article the author states plainly that “the true worker is a force on which democracy rests.”⁵² *Clubistes* had the same belief about the power of workers society, though here we can see that conception put to very different political ends. The author of this article sees political participation of the workers, as a class, as having been essential to revolutions past: through invoking workers’ participation in previous *coups d’etat*, he, too, reiterates the “continuum of revolution.”

According to this author, workers have a tendency to become susceptible to revolution, unless they are explicitly steered elsewhere. This tendency is presented both as a function of *character* and of *history* - workers are naturally drawn to the dogma of revolution, and because of this natural tendency they continue to be drawn toward it. In this conception, the way to both quell revolution and to create a just society is by simply changing, or “enlightening,” the moral character of the working class. This ideal vision of society creates an ideal of a working working-class subject, which the author deems calls the “real worker,” or the “*véritable ouvrier*.” An idealized working-class subject is someone who:

works at least three hundred days per year, never has debt, who loves and respects his wife and his children, who gives to [his family] all the free time that his work leaves him... who never gets drunk. He does not neglect any of his roles as citizen. He is republican *par excellence*: the spirit of the party does not blind him... there is not such-and-such a newspaper who will change his opinion through grand phrases and gestures.⁵³

The social and political characteristics of *clubs* facilitated a completely different type of worker. Workers gave their free, non-working time to *clubs*, rather than using this time to tend to the duties of the home or engaging in commercialized leisure activities. A clear politics was put forth

⁵² “L’ouvrier.” *Le Patriote*, March 1870. Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris.

⁵³ “L’ouvrier.” *Le Patriote*, March 1870. Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris.

and spread through *club* newspapers, and, quite literally “grand gestures” of oration and performance. Workers constantly “changed their opinions,” or at least worked to evolve their political beliefs, through lively discussion and debate on issues ranging from rent and landlords, to the freedom of the press, to the role of women in the revolution.^{54 55}

Perhaps the most important point to be made about the distinction between the *clubistes* and the *véritable ouvrier* is that the first is a plural political subject, while the second is markedly singular, atomized, isolated. *Clubs de réunion* cut against the notion of the individualized worker, perpetuating practices of association in a city of anonymity and alienation. Nowhere in the daily life of the *véritable ouvrier* is there any fraternizing, communicating, or sharing ideas with, other workers. He is the “private individual,” the normative political subject that Walter Benjamin describes in his unfinished “Arcades Project,” who in the beginning of the nineteenth century “[made] the entrance on the stage of history. For the private individual, the place of dwelling is for the first time opposed to the place of work. The former constitutes itself as the interior.”⁵⁶ The private individual, the individual worker, must be understood against the backdrop of Haussmannien Paris, in which the flaneur walked the streets by himself, observing everyone but interacting with no one. The gaze of the flaneur was, Benjamin writes, “the gaze of the alienated man.”⁵⁷

Bourgeois alienation is memorialized in images of the *boulevards* in the center of Paris, such as Gustave Caillebotte’s “Paris Street, Rainy Day.” Caillebotte depicts a metropolitan

⁵⁴ As an aside: this article, through identifying a worker only through male pronouns, and women only as mothers, actually erases the high population of working-class women in Paris at the time. I will return to this subject later

⁵⁵ *The Paradise of Association*, 222.

⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 9.

⁵⁷ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 10.

population isolated from one another, avoiding each other's gazes: even the bodies of the couple shown in the front of the frame, sharing an umbrella, are barely touching.⁵⁸ (see figure 1). The bourgeois *boulevardiers*, became, as Benjamin describes, "estranged from their city," despite the fact that it was built specifically with their interests in mind.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, despite the fact that Haussmann's Paris was designed as a political project to keep the working-class *out* of the city, drawings and paintings of club meetings show the working class making the city their own.⁶⁰ (see figure 2). In these images we see a completely different social world in which bodies are in motion towards each other, mouths are open in the exchange of ideas, people make eye contact, and bodies are crowded close together in a space in the shared acts of speaking, listening, and creating a new world. The geographically separated but politically united working class demonstrates that "what the map cuts up, the story cuts across:" the social and political culture of the *clubs* inverted Haussmann's process of spatial isolation.⁶¹ As one social space, the *club de reunion* was also part of "an ever shifting and intricate mosaic of small-scale social relations and subcultures" that characterized Paris' working class in the nineteenth century. We can see this elsewhere, scattered throughout the alienated city: W. Scott Haine writes, for example, that cafés provided "friendship and social interaction" based around discussions of politics and "revolutionary sentiment."⁶²

But from the point of view of its political opponents, the *clubs*, along with other working-class social spaces were seen as loud, drunken sites of debauchery and anarchy.

⁵⁸ Gustave Caillebotte, *Paris Street, Rainy Day*, The Art Institute of Chicago.
<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/20684>

⁵⁹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 12.

⁶⁰ L'association des amis de la Commune, "Les clubs sous la Commune." accessed via
<http://www.commune1871.org/?Les-clubs-sous-la-Commune>

⁶¹ De Certeau 134.

⁶² W. Scott Haine, "Cafe-Friend." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 27, no. 4 (Oct., 1992,) pp. 607-626.

Documents from the National Assembly's *Enquete Parlementaire sur les causes d'insurrection de 18 mars* make clear the connection between the revolutionary atmosphere of Paris' working class and their supposed lack of morality. This relationship between political activity and debauched attitudes was often shaded with sexist language. One piece of writing from the *Inquete* tries to make sense of the 1871 insurrection by taking stock of the "moral state of the country" in the years preceding the Commune. This article counts "womens' dress" as one of the "most prominent aspects of the moral state of the working class" along with "the loosening of the bonds of the family" and the "working masses [being] absolutely misled by false doctrines of solidarity, resistance to oppression, Communism, and collective property."⁶³ In an associated document entitled *Les femmes pendant la commune*, a member of the National Assembly writes that

Many of them [Communarde women] were seduced by the theories of socialism developed in clubs and public reunions, thinking that a new era was going to open itself. Laziness, desire, the thirst for unknown pleasures, made them blind, and they are throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the revolutionary movement that would engulf them."⁶⁴

Here we see a similar conception of the workers' "susceptible" nature found in the argument of *Le Patriote*. However, there is also an undertone here of malicious intent: the subtext is that working-class men want to "blind" working-class women with revolutionary politics and "engulf them." On the other hand we see a characterization of Parisian working-class women as being overly desirous and promiscuous; they are accused of, misguidedly, sublimating an excess of erotic energy into the desire to be subsumed into revolution. Working-class sensibility is seen as

⁶³ "Etat moral du pays." Fonds de l'Enquête Parlementaire sur les causes de l'insurrection 18 Mars BB-24-2329. Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris.

⁶⁴ Femmes pendant la commune, Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris, France.

rife with deception and coercion, driven by base desires. The idea that women might actually be drawn to revolutionary politics by their own thoughts about society seems out of the question. Women, in this conception of political life, lack political agency while exhibiting desire in excess.

To the contrary, women, who made up a large part of the working class in Paris, in turn contributed significantly to the culture and politics of the *clubs*. Louise Michel, the celebrated Commune and poet, describes this aptly, as well as giving a nuanced articulation of the use of historical memory in the *clubs*. She writes in *La Commune*: “One felt free, beholding the past without overly copying ‘93, and at the same time viewing the future without fear of the unknown.”⁶⁵ She adds that “the last two years before 1871, the rue Hautefeuille was a hotbed of intellectual women,” that during the Commune “Heroic women were found in all social positions,” and that at the meetings of the organization of the Rights of Women on rue Thevenot, “the most advanced men applauded the idea of equality.”⁶⁶ A witness describes a *clubiste* named Catherine Rogissart, vice president of the Club Eloi, who “walked the streets of the quartier with a red belt.” A Versailles police report demonstrates the veritable political force of women *clubistes* the day after the March 16 insurrection:

bands of armed *citoyennes* [women citizens] consisting of more than five hundred women with armbands took themselves to the Hotel de ville, after having made the rounds of several *quartiers*. Throughout their route they alarmed the inhabitants by their songs, shouts, and gestures; several were drunk.⁶⁷

The immoral character of the worker who drinks alcohol is a repeated trope in the pro-Versailles conceptions of the demoralized working class. It is a trope used both literally and

⁶⁵ Johnson, *The Paradise of Association*, 265.

⁶⁶ Louise Michel, “The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel” Lowry and Gunter, trans. (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1981), 58-59.

⁶⁷ *The Paradise of Association*, 257.

metaphorically: government documents describe *clubistes* as “ivrée de dérèglement,” or “drunk with deregulation.”⁶⁸ While the documents from the *Inquete* warn that women may be put in danger by socialist ideas, it is important to see how it was actually the government itself who was threatened by militant women. An account from the *Inquete* describing the political climate of the Arrondissement de Falaise describes that “the women, more numerous than the men in this part of the city, act in the most lively ways against the social order.”⁶⁹ It is clear that *clubiste* women posed a threat to the political status quo, and that women were not simply “given a place” in *clubs*, nor were they seduced or blinded by revolutionary men, but that, through association, they took leading roles in the unfolding of the revolution of March 18, 1871.

⁶⁸ Femmes pendant la commune. Fonds de la Ministère de la Justice, BB-24-2329 Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris, France.

⁶⁹ “Etat moral du pays.” Fonds de l’Enquête Parlementaire sur les causes de l’insurrection 18 Mars BB-24-2329. Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte-sur-Seine, Paris.

Chapter 3: Walking the Commune in Contemporary Paris

Despite efforts to erase the Commune by the government of Paris, urban collective memory remains possible. One approach to contemporary collective memory of the Paris Commune consists in what the philosopher Michel de Certeau calls “tactics of everyday life.” Tactics, de Certeau writes, are defined as practices which exist outside a dominant set of “force-relationships” that belong to a state or government; a tactic “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily.” Certeau adds that, through using tactics, “the weak must continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them.” The association of workers in the *clubs* of the 1860s can be considered a tactic, a way that workers made space for their own ideas in a city that, spatially and politically, wanted to keep them out and to make them alien. Club gatherings created a “contradiction” between Haussmann’s “administration” of bourgeois Paris through their own “mode of reappropriation” of the same urban space.⁷⁰

Today’s political landscape in France is generally hostile to the memory of the Paris Commune: contemporary politicians “reappropriate” the memory of the Commune dismissively or disparagingly. A speech by former French Republican president Nicolas Sarkozy demonstrates that the Commune does have a presence in mainstream political memory in France: while not completely written out of the national narrative, it is described mainly with negative connotations. Sarkozy said during the 2007 presidential elections that “French unity has been achieved after the break created by the Revolution, the Empire, 1830, 1848, the Commune, and the painful separation between church and state.” With Sarkozy’s statements as an example, it would seem that the place of the Commune in French national identity is something of a

⁷⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 4.

mistake, a rupture, an event that the people of France must overcome and forget rather, than commemorate.⁷¹ Mainstream political narratives may treat the Commune as unworthy of positive commemoration, but an alternative approach can be found in the spatial dynamics of working-class Paris today. The uses of what Michel de Certeau calls “indirect” or “errant” trajectories, ways of moving through the city, can provide an alternative narrative which commemorates and preserves the history of the Commune.⁷² Today, associations like Paris Par Rues Meconues, based in the working-class quartier of Belleville, encourage visitors and natives of Paris alike to “changer le regard sur la ville pour montrer Paris sous une autre angle:” to change the way they look at Paris in order to better understand it. The simple act of walking through the city is one way to change the way one looks at contemporary Paris and understand the working-class history that still persists in the city.⁷³

A mosaic in the main park of Belleville -- a working class neighborhood and former home to many *clubs de reunion*, untouched by Haussmann “grands travaux” -- can serve as a model for spatial commemoration on a larger scale. The mosaic is labelled “une carte subjective” or “a subjective map” (see appendix, fig. 3). It encourages and allows visitors to experience what De Certeau would call “a story that begins on ground level,” by walking from one place to another within the *quartier*.⁷⁴ Zederman and others have noted an intensive process of gentrification that has occurred in Belleville in recent years: but this map provides symbolic preservation of an ungentrified *quartier*, allowing for an “errant trajectory” that bypasses the

⁷¹ Quoted in Mathilde Zederman, “Memories of the Paris Commune in Belleville since the 1980s: Folkloric Representations in a Transforming *Quartier*.” *History and Memory*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2014), 109-135. 10.2979/histmemo.26.1.109

⁷² Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 5.

⁷³ <https://www.babel-voyages.com/france/association/paris-par-rues-meconnues.html>

⁷⁴ De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 97.

upscale restaurants and boutiques that bring upper-class tourists to Belleville.⁷⁵ Instead one is pointed to the radical bookstore Jargon Libre; Folie's, an "ancien cabaret ou les ouvriers parisiens y venaient s'encanailler;" or La Veilleuse de Belleville, a now-closed workers' cooperative. The map directs visitors to places that may or may not exist in their original forms: many constitute "mythic" rather than real landmarks.⁷⁶

Another "subjective map" of Paris is created by the locations of twenty-six street signs within Paris that have been dedicated to Communards and to the Commune itself -- a process that began in 1882 with a rue dedicated to Gustave Courbet in the 16^{eme} arrondissement. Courbet was a Communard, artist and sculptor, and notably, the president of the Fédération des Artistes. Since then twenty-six streets in Paris have been named in memory of the Paris Commune: most recently in 2016, street in the 18^{eme} arrondissement was dedicated to a lesser-known Communard, Maxime Lisbonne. Though these dedications may be read as symbolic, they nonetheless have significant political weight for Parisians dedicated to remembering the Commune. The importance of giving a spatial "name" to the Commune was made clear in the case of "La Place de La Commune de Paris," in the Butte-aux-Cailles neighborhood of the 13^{eme}. The municipal council of the arrondissement "finally made the decision to attribute the name to the *Commune de Paris*" after a petition was created by a community organization called Les Amis de La Commune 1871. The organization received support from over 10,000 signatories, among them "des universitaires, des artistes, des écrivains, et des avocats."⁷⁷ The establishment of the plaque marking the Place de la Commune De Paris was celebrated in a public, collective fashion. The

⁷⁵ Zederman, "Memories of the Paris Commune," 26.

⁷⁶ De Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 50.

⁷⁷ Les Amis de La Commune de Paris 1871, eds, *L'histoire de l'Association*, (Paris: Les Amis de la Commune de Paris, 2008), 40.

Amis de la Commune describe the day's gathering in Butte-aux-Cailles: "par une belle journée ensoleillée, nos amis se précipitent joyeux sur cette petite place... comble du symbole... pour assister à la pose des plaques." The unveiling of the plaque was accompanied by political banter: the mayor of Paris at the time, Jean Tiberi, who had authorized the plaque, nonetheless was bold enough to "praise [Adolphe] Thiers," and was met with "whistles and jeers;" "Paris and her banter were there, defending the honor of the Commune."⁷⁸

Today, a walk around the Butte-aux-Cailles neighborhood is "filled with commentary on the Commune."⁷⁹ One example of this commentary is street signs, which take the form of graffiti or *affiches*. In the non-Haussmannified *quartiers* of Paris, *affiches*, or political posters provide political "commentary" to the everyday pedestrian. Arthur Rimbaud, 1871 Paris, noted the cultural and discursive power of *affiches*, describing how the city streets wrote their own "literature."⁸⁰ In today's Paris, *affiches* call on the nation at large to take political stands: "France doit reconnaître l'état Palestinien," reads a sign in Belleville. Just down the street from this, an *affiche* publicizes a "Bal Populaire," a concert-fundraiser for the "Front de Gauche," or "Left Front," an initiative of the Parti Communiste Français (PCF). (see appendix, figs. 4,5). On the Rue de Cinq Diamants, which intersects with the Place de la Commune de Paris, two pieces of graffiti evoke the spirit of self-governance that was central to the Commune. One cannot miss the word "INGOUVERNABLES," meaning "unable to be governed" spray-painted in large black letters; just down the block is a poster satirizing the image of Emmanuel Macron, the most recently elected president of France, with the caption "le bouffon du roi" or "court jester." (see

⁷⁸ Amis, *L'histoire*, 42.

⁷⁹ Amis, *L'histoire*, 43.

⁸⁰ Arthur Rimbaud, *Les Lettres Voyants*, quoted in Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. London: Verso, 1988.

appendix, figs. 6, 7). The 1999 Place de La Commune plaque now bears a sticker stating: “Paris Anti-Fascist.” This piece of graffiti more specifically connects the current government of France to the Second Empire. Visitors to the neighborhood, in encountering this plaque, are encouraged to make a political connections between the insurrection of 1871 and contemporary anti-fascist politics in France which have emerged in the wake of far-right candidates such as Marine le Pen. In the Menilmontant neighborhood, an *affiche* bears an image of the crowds of March 18, with the text “Vive la commune! A bas l'union européenne!” This *affiche* shows the spirit, ideas, and symbolism of the Commune applied to current-day anti-authoritarian politics. Even the popularity of the phrase “Vive la commune” demonstrates how 1871 is construed as a living memory with the possibility to be revived, to be given new life, or that indeed it *is* still living.

The Place de la Commune de Paris is in walking distance of the “local” meeting place of Les Amis de La Commune, an organization that has worked to preserve the memory of the Paris Commune since 1882, making it “la plus ancienne association ouvrière encore existante.”⁸¹ Visitors to the “local” experience collective memory as a specific municipal and local establishment. Mathilde Zederman writes that “social and cultural associations, which often work alongside or in cooperation with the local municipality to reconstruct the past. It is through their involvement in the construction of the memory of the Commune that associations such as Les Amis de la Commune... provide new frameworks, enabling the localization of that memory. These associations in turn participate in creating and performing a collective memory of the area.”⁸² The doors of the local of the Association are open to any and all visitors, who are greeted by red flags and a reproduction of an *affiche* from the Commune, stating its decree of the

⁸¹ Amis, *L'histoire*, 2.

⁸² Mathilde Zederman, “Memories of the Paris Commune in Belleville since the 1980s: Folkloric Representations in a Transforming *Quartier*.” *History and Memory*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2014), 109-135. 10.2979/histmemo.26.1.109

separation of church and state. Featured prominently is a plaque dedicated “aux morts de la commune.” There is also a watercolor painting on display of women holding red flags in front of a barricade with the caption: “La barricade de la place Blanche défendue par les Femmes.” The *bricolage* of these aesthetic elements creates an atmosphere within the local that both recreates and remembers the Commune (see fig 8). Not only decorative and static, the commemoration of the Commune in the local is also interactive. As the association describe, “les touristes s’arretent devant la vitrine de notre local... et nous demandent très souvent des explications que nous apportons avec plaisir.”⁸³ This interactive discourse can be termed “semantic memory,” a name which Aleida Assmann uses to define “collective instruction... that connects us with others and the surrounding world.”⁸⁴ Semantic memory takes place at the site of the association local through a shared discursive process in which visitors or “outsiders” *demandent*, while the Amis de la Commune *apportent les explications*.

Another establishment central to the “localization of memory” in Butte-aux-Cailles is the restaurant “Les temps des cerises,” which shares its title with a song written by Communard Jean-Baptiste Clement. The restaurant offers “un petit parfum communard,” not only through its name, but through the role it plays in Paris’ economic structures of production and distribution.⁸⁵ It is an “societe cooperatif ouvrier de production,” or “S.C.O.P.,” meaning that the workers who make and serve food are also the owners of the restaurant. The restaurant is part of a long history of “S.C.O.P’s” in France; most notably, over forty worker-owned cooperatives were formed during the Paris Commune.⁸⁶ Recently, though, gentrification has eliminated many worker

⁸³ Amis, *L’histoire*, 43.

⁸⁴ Aleida Assmann, “Transformations between History and Memory” *Social Research*, vol. 75, no. 1 (2008), 49-72. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40972052>

⁸⁵ Amis, *L’histoire*, 43.

⁸⁶ Johnson, *The Paradise of Association*, 140.

cooperatives in Paris. In 1877, in the former working-class quartier of Belleville, the cooperative La Bellevilloise was established, serving as “a popular meeting place for the working class” after the brutal destruction of the Commune. But in 2005, the building was bought by “cultural entrepreneurs” who transformed the space into a for-profit concert venue.⁸⁷ The gentrification of contemporary Paris makes the existence of Les Temps des Cerises as a non-capitalist enterprise all the more significant. A visitor to Le Temps des Cerises is able to experience there, both symbolically and materially, everyday life under the Commune.

While Butte-aux-Cailles can be considered a self-contained site of memory, its connection to the Commune also lies in its location within the larger political geography of Paris. In the years leading up to the Commune, the population of the outer arrondissements, including Butte-aux-Cailles, was made up of Paris’ working class who had been “forcibly expelled from the center” of the new vision of Paris created by prefect-sur-Seine Baron Haussmann. While Haussmann's goal was to “assure the stability of the authoritarian state” through creating “new neighborhoods for wealthy inhabitants,” working class quartiers were “contained” rather than “transformed.” Jordan writes that “those neighborhoods that the authorities could not adequately control... were left to their own devices.”⁸⁸ As a result, the outer arrondissements, shunned from Haussmann's vision of a new, bourgeois Paris, were the main locations of *clubs de réunions*. The ideas of *clubistes* were informed by their location in Paris’ political geography: Jordan writes that “the *reunions* in the outer arrondissements provided a platform for the profound resentments of those dispossessed by Haussmann's *grand travaux*.”⁸⁹ The Amis’ account of contemporary Parisians who “se précipitent joyeux sur cette petite place,” is one of not only symbolic but

⁸⁷ Zederman, “Memories of the Commune,” 124.

⁸⁸ Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 192-194.

⁸⁹ Jordan, *Transforming Paris*, 298.

spatial memory: the Association and its visitors keep the Commune alive through occupying the arrondissements in which its ideas were originally incubated.

Collective memory of the Commune in Paris takes place not only in the places where the ideological foundation of the Commune began, but also where the life of the Commune was brought to a tragic end. The Pere-Lachaise cemetery, located in the heart of “popular Paris,” is home to the tombs of many Communards.⁹⁰ It has become a site of perpetual memory for those sympathetic to the cause of the Commune: it is “toujours fleurie” either “par des mains anonymes, ou de manière plus organisée.”⁹¹ The act of visiting the Pere Lachaise to honor the dead of the Commune has served as a sort of communal rite or ritual. It is a performance of memory, which is often organized by an association, but at the same time openly welcomes any individual to participate -- whether or not they are officially affiliated with any association. A “gazette culturelle” published by the industrial union CGT, or *congregation general de travailleurs*, in May 2017, demonstrates in its *appel* to Pere Lachaise that this ritual is one of inclusivity and a collective memory that transcends specific political affiliation: advertises a gathering at Pere Lachaise asks readers to join the “large umbrella of friends of the Commune,” including “all progressive actors: *syndicats*, political parties, associations.”⁹²

Aleida Assmann, the scholar of cultural memory, writes that “the collective memory is a crossover between semantic and episodic memory: it has to be acquired via learning, but only through internalization and rites of participation does it create the identity of ‘we.’”⁹³ Invitations to participate in the public rites at Pere Lachaise are presented to the public as *appels* - “calls,” a

⁹⁰ Amis, *L'histoire*, 47.

⁹¹ Amis, *L'histoire*, 48.

⁹² La CGT, *La gazette culturelle* (Paris: La Congrégation Générale de Travailleurs, 2017)

⁹³ Assmann, “Transformations,” 53.

term signifying both openness of invitation and a certain political urgency. An *appel* to Père Lachaise can also be found on the first page of the Spring 2017 newsletter of Les Amis de la Commune, given out for free to visitors of the local in Butte-aux-Cailles. “La commune comme une espérance,” is the subtitle of the *appel*, which states that while “certaines commémorations, avec le temps, ont perdu de leur originalité et s'essouffent...Rien de tel avec celle de la Commune.” While the *appel* notes that the visit to Pere Lachaise has inherent value as a ritual which commemorates past struggles, it also makes the point that this ritual has the potential to take on contemporary political resonance: “toutes celles et tous ceux qui veulent résister aux atteintes contre les droits sociaux et démocratiques, et lutter pour en conquérir de nouveaux” are invited to participate.⁹⁴ The collective ritual of visiting Pere-Lachaise poses an alternative to Sarkozy’s vision of unity: a unity through commemorating, rather than overcoming, the history of the Commune.

⁹⁴ Les Amis de la Commune, *La Commune* (Paris: Les Amis de La Commune, 2017), 2.

Conclusion

In March through May of 2012, a cast of actors and musicians gathered in New York's Zuccotti Park. It was a year after the Occupy Wall Street movement and one hundred and forty years after the Communal occupation of Paris. The group staged a public performance of Bertolt Brecht's celebrated play "The Days of the Commune," each weekend for three months, transplanting the story of one city's occupation and social upheaval into another. Beloff's performance of the Paris Commune in New York was a multi-layered site of living, collective memory. It was a creative and subversive imagining of a three-month period of time that continues to evade understanding. Beloff said in an interview:

Spending time at the Occupy Movement in Zuccotti Park in September and October 2011...I connected the two events. The Paris Commune was the first great "occupation" in modern history when the working people took over their city and formed a progressive democratic government. I wanted to contribute artistically to Occupy... I wanted to make something that I could share with everyone. When I discovered Brecht's play *The Days of the Commune* I knew that I had to stage it, right away in the streets of New York. I wanted to use it to create a sketch of a yet-to-be Commune.⁹⁵

During their performance of Brecht's play, the troupe of actors walked all around New York City, performing on street corners, in front of the New York Public Library, at a community garden in the East Village. In its walking trajectory through the city, the performance enacted the same ownership and affective mapping of their city that the Communards did in Paris in 1871. Actors carried symbolic props like loaves of bread and barricades; they wore red sashes and carried street signs to denote the streets in Paris where significant moments of the Commune took place. They performed the *Internationale*, a revolutionary *chanson* born in the clubs de réunion of the long nineteenth century. (see fig. 9).

⁹⁵ Jennie Hirsh, "Days of the Commune: An Interview with Zoe Beloff." *Art in America*, May 3, 2013.

I invoke Beloff's production as a current-day example of the Parisian "continuum of revolution" I have explored throughout this essay.

The mainstream media of Paris, under the influence the Versailles government, consistently villainized the Communards as arsonists, harlots, and criminals. And today, the French and American liberal mind considers the Paris Commune as "one of the four great traumas that shaped modern France" (with the three others being the revolutions of 1793, 1830, and 1848)⁹⁶. It is true that the French political imaginary has been irrevocably shaped by its history of collective insurrection. And, indeed, the violence inflicted on the Commune by the Versailles government, the mass deportation and execution of the Communards, was traumatic on a grand scale. Yet the working existence of the Commune itself was a triumph. This is demonstrated in the collective memory of the Commune, from Paris to New York, which, by "halting in its tracks the politics of commemoration" maintains a spirit of *joie* and celebration.⁹⁷

The Paris Commune, which Karl Marx so famously called "the sphinx so tantalizing to the bourgeois mind," cannot be summed up neatly.⁹⁸ The "what-exactly happened" is only part of the story. In this essay I have tried to open up an understanding of the Paris Commune that moves through space and time, and engages with a study of the everyday tactics used to imagine, create, and remember the Commune. I have tried to theorize the indelibility of the memory of the Commune on Parisian political culture and the politics of urban space. The same *New Yorker* who calls the Commune a "great trauma," misguidedly invoking a "violence on both sides"

⁹⁶ Adam Gopnik, "Fighting Over the Paris Commune." *The New Yorker*, December 22, 2014.

⁹⁷ Gabriel Rockhil, "Is May 1968 About to Happen Again, or be Surpassed?" *Counterpunch*, April 13, 2018.

⁹⁸ Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France: The Paris Commune*. (New York: International Publishers, 1989).

rhetoric, nonetheless recognizes the longevity and modern relevance of Commune by calling it “an Occupy Paris movement.”⁹⁹

The Paris Commune was born from a political imaginary rich with nostalgia for revolutions past, revolutions not-quite-realized. In 1793, 1830, and 1848, Parisians learned the power of occupying public spaces, like the Hotel de Ville. They developed a set of symbolic and practical tactics that kept alive their desire for revolution, from radical *chansons* to red flags. The *clubs* were sites of enacting memory and imagining new futures, both, paradoxically at once. In an increasingly atomized and alienated Paris, redesigned under Haussmann, clubs were most importantly *communal* spaces, where people connected with each other to generate, rather than consume. These clubs were in some sense laboratories for the collective, democratic politics of March-May 1871. Women were empowered, free speech was encouraged, ideas of equality were vigorously discussed and debated, the voice of the working class was front and center.

Today, the collective spirit of the Commune is still present in the city of Paris, for those who know where to look. I have tried to present an interactive narrative of the “traces of the Commune” in Paris so that interested readers may pursue their own “errant trajectories” through the city. I intend my project, especially this last piece, to be a living meditation on the ways in which we create the future by accessing the past. I have tried to point out that this process occurs not on national or governmental levels but on everyday, quotidian, and symbolic levels. A knowledge of the history of the Commune is necessary in order to fully appreciate its echoes in the Paris of today. At the same time, I believe that making one’s own errant trajectory through

⁹⁹ Gopnik, “Paris Commune,” *The New Yorker*.

the city of Paris is necessary in order to give any sort of life and spirit to the “what-exactly-happened” of the Paris Commune.

In today’s Paris, exactly fifty years after the general strikes and occupations of 1968, railroad workers have joined university and high school students in mass protests against the repressive politics of the Macron government. Through strikes, school occupations, and radical teach-ins that mirror the politics of association of the *clubistes* of the nineteenth century, the collective commemoration of the Paris Commune continues to this very moment.¹⁰⁰ As Gabriel Rockhil writes in his April 13, 2018, article entitled “Is May 1968 About to Happen Again, or Be Surpassed?”:

The best way to commemorate May 1968 would not only be to rejuvenate it, bringing it back from the dead as it were, but to surpass it: tearing it out of the mausoleum of consecration by making it into a living transformation.

¹⁰⁰ An interactive map (a *carte subjective*) of current strikes, occupations and demonstrations can be found at: <http://www.liberation.fr/apps/2018/03/universite-facs-mobilisees>.

Appendix



Fig. 1: Caillebotte, *Paris Street, Rainy Day*. Art Institute of Chicago.



Fig. 2: *Une Séance du Club des Femmes dans l'église Saint-Germain-l'auxerrois*. Le Monde Illustré, May 20, 1871.



Fig. 3: Mosaic, “Une Carte Subjective de Belleville,” Parc de Belleville, Paris, July 2017.
Photo author’s own.



Fig. 4: *Affiche*, “Palestine,” Belleville, Paris, July 2017. Photo author’s own.



Fig. 5: *Affiche*, “Bal populaire,” Belleville, Paris, July 2017. Photo author’s own.



Fig. 6: *Affiche*, “Ingouvernables,” Butte-aux-Cailles, Paris, July 2017. Photo author’s own.



Fig. 7: *Affiche*, “La bouffon du roi,” Butte-aux-Cailles, Paris, July 2017. Photo author’s own.



Fig. 8: A visitor stops into the Association des Amis de La Commune 1871. Butte-aux-Cailles, Paris, July 2017. Photo author’s own.



Fig. 9, *The Days of the Commune*, dir. Zoe Beloff. “Zoe Beloff in Conversation with Jonathan Kahana,” *E-Media Studies*.

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