

Artists, Anarchists & Concierges Battle in 19th Century Bohemian Paris

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In the musical *Rent*, the archetypal hip, Lower East Side New York Bohemian protagonists call their landlord “the enemy of Avenue A” when he enters their chosen coffee shop, in the song “La Vie Bohême.” The title recalls that of the Puccini opera, *La Bohème*, on which *Rent* is based.

This in turn was based on stories published by the French writer Henry Murger in 1851, that established the archetype of the urban, artistic, liberal Bohemian that still prevails in gentrifying areas throughout today’s world.

The conflict between landlords and tenants was encoded in Bohemian countercultures from the start, but in the 19th century they rarely interacted directly. In fact Murger’s own father occupied the role of middle-man between the propertied and renting class, as one of Paris’s thousands of concierges.

Already a decade earlier, in Eugène Sue’s socialist novel, *The Mysteries of Paris*, a concierge would rent out a room only if, “Nature did not make you one of those monsters called artists.” In the novel, the last artist played both music and pranks at all hours, provoking a tenant petition to remove him and costing the owner eviction money. The character dramatizes a central conflict in Bohemian urbanism, and his name, Pipelet, became derogatory slang for concierge in underground subculture for generations.

Far beyond that of today’s hotel concierge, the job of the pipelet in a Paris apartment building combined a great many duties, some janitorial or subservient, others managerial and authoritative.

As both security and the avatars of the landlords, these domestic servants were often the actual recipients of direct action aimed at their masters, including injuries and deaths in bombings.

In 1892, the concierge of a mining company under strike discovered a bomb placed near its headquarters by the anarchist, Émile Henry. The concierge gave it to the police, who took it to the station where it exploded, killing five cops and a company employee.

Two years later, around the time of Henry’s execution, his friend, Félix Fénéon, the anarchist activist and bohemian poet, was turned into police for conspiracy—informed on by his own building’s snooping concierge, on the basis of his many foreign visitors and international mail.

As France rapidly urbanized after the July Revolution of 1830 and Paris swelled with landless workers, capitalists raced to develop new methods for monetizing property, converting old mansions for rent and building new apartment blocks to accommodate more workers. They saw themselves not as managers, but as property speculators, and essentially outsourced all of their actual duties to the concierges, who were also employed at other large institutions such as theaters, restaurants, and office buildings.

Concierges were looked down on even by many of their underprivileged tenants (who called them *bignoles* or *snoopers*) for being unskilled workers requiring no apprenticeship, and because, as domestic servants always on call, they had no autonomous lives. An attempt to unionize in 1875 failed to get off the ground, the difficulty possibly due to their unskilled status.

Being paid by a combination of wages, free lodging, and tenant tips led to inevitable cross-obligations and temptations for corruption. Concierges found themselves in a paradox: Their duties gave them power over tenants in some ways, while making them subservient in others. Even while they continued to be scorned as their tenants' janitors, a series of 1896 court cases made owners legally responsible for their concierges' actions, confirming their role as the landowner's proxy.

This liminal status made it a space for possible class mobility. Murger's semi-literate father expected him to go into law and pull the family into the bourgeoisie; but his son had other ideas. Instead he joined the emerging so-called Bohemian counterculture, a loose and motley community of middle-class students, political radicals, indigent criminals, subversive intellectuals, the neuro-atypical, wealthy, but dissolute dandies, and others linked only by their self-conscious and defiantly marginal lifestyles.

Cheap working-class housing in the Latin Quarter and Montmartre led to gentrified bohemian neighborhoods where bourgeois, proletarian, and indigent classes mixed in unique ways that were sometimes radical, sometimes problematic.

Then as now, Bohemia's heterogeneous politics were generally liberal or libertarian, containing a large element of socialist, anarchist, and neo-Jacobin activists (as well as a small presence of reactionary proto-fascism). But even when leftist politics and shared poverty united bohemians and the workers among whom they lived, differences in lifestyle and values caused friction and highlighted the privilege many bohemians retained from the bourgeois upbringing they tried to reject as they colonized working-class housing. As the character Pipelet's complaint about artists reminds us, an intended joke can be felt as a persecution by those who have to clean up the mess.

The characters of the Pipelet couple incorporated concierges into the social mythology of Bohemia as a kind of clan enemy and designated butt of practical jokes, dehumanized and distinct from the sympathetic lower class. Grievances ranged from rent collection and eviction, pressing for tips, and lack of humor to more substantial charges of corruption, spying and malicious gossip.

By the 1880s, Montmatre was a long-established bohemian neighborhood with its own micro-culture and alternative institutions, soon to culminate in the thriving scene centered on cabarets like the Moulin Rouge.

In 1881, two bohemian pranksters associated with the Chat Noir cabaret and magazine launched a satirical campaign against the pipelets. They were Jules Jouy, a radical poet and journalist who had supported the Paris Commune, and the cartoonist Sapeck, a lawyer by training, but famous as a flamboyant bohemian who sometimes dressed in Turkish clothing and painted his head blue to go to the cafe. Sapeck was also anti-imperialist and likely had anarchist leanings.

In December 1881, they launched *The Anti-Concierge: Quarterly Organ for Tenants' Defense*, a Montmartre-centered magazine that prefigured later bohemian neighborhood zines like the *Village Voice*, *Fuck You: a Magazine of the Arts* and *The Waverly Flea*.

It played with the line between absurd satire and a kind of tenants' union, proclaiming that "from this moment on we declare pitiless war on [concierges], in the name of victimized tenants." No copy of any of its seven issues seem to have survived intact, making its overall tone uncertain, but it made a splash in the underground community, where several articles and reviews of it were published. It was still referred to decades later in news reports on court cases and organizing efforts, as well as by the concierge community itself, among whom it clearly caused a good deal of social trauma.

By this time, there were around 16,300 concierges in the metropolitan Paris area, and in 1887 attempts were renewed to collectivize as the Knights of the Cordon (named after the cordon they pulled to admit entry) due to the recent legal recognition of trade unions. Even with the support of the organized Left, this attempt too ended in failure.

In 1900, the Syndicalist Congress of People of Condition reached out in their journal to form a concierge's section in their union. They singled out bohemian writers as the concierges' main enemy, using the press to smear the trade's image, and specifically cited *The Anti-Concierge*. Enabled by labor-friendly reforms in France, by 1904, numerous concierge unions existed, and were being consulted by the Ministry of Labor.

The concierges lived within the space of contradiction between the capitalist and proletarian classes, belonging to both and neither, in some ways the foremen of the emerging housing industry. As one of the only upwardly-

mobile careers open to unskilled workers (especially for women and the elderly) they were both collaborating agents and double-victims of the machinery of urban capital.

Their untenable position between the renting and owning classes was mirrored in their untenable status as both authorities over and domestic servants under their employers' tenants.

Beyond their official duties, they served the systemic function of redirecting and absorbing the legitimate anger of the exploited, as expressed in *The Anti-Concierge*, attracting it away from the capitalists and onto another segment of the proletariat.

If Bohemia merges and dissolves class distinctions in its rejection of social norms, so too its original archetypal enemy, the concierge, is the creature of a hybrid class, rejected by all, but in service to capital, locked in eternal combat with the counterculture whose doors, both literally and figuratively, it is sworn to watch over.

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