

The Cultural Avant-Garde & the Paris Commune

The 19th century was wilder than we thought

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On May 16, 1871, one of the most famous monuments in Europe, the Vendôme Column celebrating Napoleon's imperial regime, was toppled to the cheers of thousands. It was one of the largest public ceremonies of the short-lived Paris Commune, where revolutionaries controlled the city, establishing a free and egalitarian society that lasted a little over two months until suppressed by force.

This was only one of many effects of avant-garde anarchist artists and writers on the Commune, and their participation would change experimental culture in their era.

On the eve of the Commune in 1870, Napoleon III's totalitarian government was showing cracks, and beyond the sham legislature, the opposition was organized in a diverse network of numerous semi-secret radical organizations. French culture was experiencing the same pressures and tensions as other facets of society. Censorship was tight and official art was stifled and pathetic.

Popular culture seethed with new forms defining and re-defining themselves. Since the early 19th Century, hybrid coffeehouse-entertainment venues called singing-café (cafés-chantants) gradually developed their own styles of emotional or comedic chansons and performance poetry. Satirical cartooning had been a major subversive force since the 1830s. Shadow theatre, which was popular for about a century, was rapidly developing visual languages and mechanical technologies that presaged animation.

The French "cruel tale," developed in the 1830s, was on the verge of giving birth to the horror genre, and science-fiction genre began to peel off from the utopian novels that spawned them. All would converge after the Commune in cabarets, where an anarchic collage of music, comedy, poetry, puppetry, Gothic melodrama, and dance whirled together with contradictory genres and moods.

Though the older movement of avant-garde Romanticism still existed, countercultural poetry was becoming dominated by Parnassianism, a loose heterogeneous network of underground poets committed to formal sensuousness who preferred small, tightly knit affinity groups of readers rather than mass audiences, pursuing poetry as a mystical discipline. Stereotyped later as an apolitical, ivory tower movement, Parnassianism was actually quite diverse and involved a considerable number of radical poets.

The Parnassian poet, musician, and feminist Nina de Villard (a.k.a. de Callias & de Villars) hosted a weekly salon bringing together people working in the intersections of avant-garde poetry and radical politics, including Paul Verlaine, Louise Michel, and the comedic poet and inventor Charles Cros (her long-term partner).

Countercultural painting was dominated by Realism, which shared the Parnassian rejection of market capitalism, but manifested it in an almost opposite way, in gritty portrayals of the everyday lives of workers, prisoners, farmers, and those living on society's margins. Numerous artists and writers shared this general tendency, which was strongly associated with leftist politics, whether or not officially affiliated with the self-declared Realist movement.

Its most notorious painter, Gustave Courbet, had connections with anarchist groups influenced by Proudhon and Bakunin. Realists, such as Honore Daumier, Sapeck, and Andre Gill, had roots in political cartooning.

These tendencies met and merged with aspects of proletarian and bourgeois culture in the hybrid and ever-changing subculture known as Bohemia, which was at a low point in its vitality, having seen its heyday in the 1840s. Many radical journalists and future Commune leaders frequented the Bohemian scene, including Jules Valles, Raoul Rigault, and Prosper Lissagaray.

In July 1870, the French Emperor declared war on Prussia. By January, the French military effort collapsed and Paris was under siege. Napoleon abdicated and was replaced by a provisional liberal capitalist government which promptly entered into capitulation negotiations with Prussia. In the ensuing elections, conservatives won most of the country, but Paris went overwhelmingly radical, leading to a series of confrontations and finally the flight of the national government from Paris.

On March 18, 1871, supported by National Guard units, Paris voted to secede from France and become an autonomous Commune, encouraging other cities to do likewise. Paris' neighborhoods (*arrondissements*) were run by grassroots committees, while some industries and all government services were controlled by workers' committees or commissions from the Commune Council, that coordinated civic services and defense.

One of its representatives was the Realist painter Courbet, who also served on the anarchist-leaning Committee of Public Instruction, opposing the more authoritarian Committee of Public Safety in managing the Commune's policy on ideology and discourse. He was also elected president of the Federation of Artists to determine cultural issues, and initiated the plan to pull down the Vendôme Column as described above, one of the Commune's most lasting symbolic moments.

Meanwhile, anarchist avant-garde artists and writers collaborated in other capacities. The cartoonist Gill oversaw the Luxembourg Museum under the aegis of Courbet's Federation of Artists. The Parnassian bohemian poet Paul Verlaine ran the Press Bureau of the Central Committee. The bohemian Cros was a major in the defense force, and his partner Villard was likely a Communard as well, considering who attended her salons.

The bohemian poet-singer, Jules Jouy, was radicalized during the Commune itself, as was the Romanticist poet, anarchist, feminist, and educator Louise Michel, who became one of the Commune's most aggressive activists. She had to be dissuaded from an assassination attempt on French President Thiers, organized an ambulance station, and fought in a combat unit. After the Commune's fall, she was deported to the French South Pacific penal colony in New Caledonia. There, she remained committed to anarchism, and supported the indigenous Kanak people's revolt against colonization while imprisoned on the distant island.

Avant-gardists were involved in attempts to establish other allied Communes in cities across France. The Bohemian poet Paul Laforgue was sent to Bordeaux as the Paris Commune's envoy to the effort there. Alphonse Esquiros, an avant-garde writer and occultist from the older Romanticist movement, returned from exile in England to lead the lesser-known Commune established in Marseilles. One of his propagandists was the teenage anarchist poet, Arthur Rimbaud, Verlaine's future partner.

In reaction to the revolutionary ferment, the French national army was mobilized against the rebels, with aid from the occupying Prussian military. Though Paris functioned democratically for over two months, maintaining civic services all while under constant military siege, it could not hold out against the combined armies of France and Prussia.

The infamous Bloody Week of May 21–28 after its fall saw 20,000 mass executions of Communards, plus deportations and exiles.

The Commune's major cultural impact is easy to miss since all direct mention of it in plays, operas, and novels were banned for a decade afterward. Though Courbet fled to exile to escape prosecution for the Vendôme Column's destruction, Realism's direct social engagement won over Parnassianism's rarefied abstraction to become dominant in the underground.

The young Realist writer, Emile Zola, began as an anti-Communard, but came out of it an anti-authoritarian who later faced down the army and anti-Semitism in the Dreyfus Affair. He added a more rigorous framework of socio-economic analysis, spawning Naturalism. Meanwhile, Parnassian anarchists moved toward Bohemia or the emerging Decadent movement, which denied the narrative of civilized progress and portrayed modern culture as on the verge of collapse. Their explorations of the irrational would inspire the first Surrealists.

A group of bohemian Parnassians including Cros, Verlaine, Gill, and Rimbaud, all individualist anarchists, came together in the wake of the Commune, calling themselves the Zutistes (the name coming from the French

exclamation of exasperation). Their poetry was a direct social practice, collaboratively composed and collected in an unpublished notebook.

They used humor, especially dirty humor, as a means to open discourse on gender and sexuality (including homosexuality), while reflecting the growing influence of pop culture, especially comedy, on the post-Commune avant-garde.

This embrace of low culture led to a new avant-cabaret movement and new flourishing of the bohemian scene in the 1880s. It was led by the Chat Noir (Black Cat) group, which included many anarchist and ex-Communard members, including Cros, Gill, Jules Jouy, and Sapeck. The nightly cabaret drew crowds from every social class and included experimental comedy, poetry, songs, dancing, shadow puppetry and more, all packed with subversive humor. Their weekly magazine featured more of the same, plus satirical stories and cartoons, with a readership of 20,000.

Overlapping with the Black Cat were a constantly-morphing series of avant-comedic groups smuggling anarchic ideas under the radar in writing, art and music as well as real-life pranks and media hoaxes employing the names the Hydropaths, the Hirsutes, the Incoherents, and others. They established an anarcho-comedic tradition continued in later generations by Dada, Surrealism, Lenny Bruce, the Yippies,

Up Against the Wall Motherfucker, Andy Kaufman, and various others.

The dizzying hopes of the Commune's rise and the horror of its fall caused two paradoxical responses which have both shaped dissenting culture for the next 150 years: Decadence made defeat itself a weapon to puncture civilization's lie, while Bohemia turned comedy into a subversive force.

Both found the means of dissolving power in places where power cannot settle: the dream of its own rot, and the chaos of a burst of laughter.

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