

Paris and the Commune, 1871–78: the Politics of Forgetting

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It has often been observed that the greatest legacy of the Paris Commune of 1871 was its myth. In its short duration the Commune failed to transform Paris in any lasting way – even its supreme gesture of repudiation of the military traditions of the French past, the toppling of the Vendôme column, was to be reversed. Despite the ravages of the fires that broke out during the *semaine sanglante* of 21–28 May 1871, Paris escaped remarkably unscathed. Much of the damage was rapidly repaired – the Hôtel de Ville and Palais de Justice were rebuilt – and soon the Parisian authorities went beyond rebuilding, looking to bring to fruition those of Baron Haussmann’s urban improvement projects that had not been realised under the Second Empire. Only the ruins of the Tuileries, symbol of monarchy and empire – and significantly the only building that Communards never denied having deliberately set alight – remained as a grim reminder of the Commune, not removed until 1883. Yet these ruins were anomalous. Otherwise, Colette Wilson argues in her intriguing *Paris and the Commune, 1871–78*, there was a concerted effort to efface memories of the Commune, beginning immediately after the close of the *semaine sanglante*. Wilson’s closely focused study reveals the tension between the ‘state obliteration of the memory of the Commune’ (p. 1) and its submerged presence in literary, artistic and photographic production. The memory of the Commune haunted the French imagination in the 1870s.

Echoes of the Commune have been traced well into the 20th century and indeed, as Wilson demonstrates in her conclusion, commemorations of the Commune endure today, particularly through the activities of the *Association des Amis de la Commune*. Lessons from the experience of the Commune were drawn by figures across the political spectrum. When Maxime Weygand and Philippe Pétain advocated an armistice in June 1940, fears of a socialist revolution following defeat, in a replay of 1870–71, figured in their thinking. Above all the Commune was appropriated by the socialist movement as a founding myth – witness for

instance the use of a Communard flag as a shroud for Lenin, or the pilgrimage of the leaders of the French Popular Front of 1936 to the legendary *Mur des Fédérés* in the Père Lachaise cemetery. Robert Gildea has even argued that

The 'making of the working class' in France did not take place as a result of industrialisation or urbanisation but as a result of the construction of a collective memory, the myth of the Paris Commune.⁽¹⁾

Wilson has chosen a much narrower focus. The general amnesty of 1880, advocated by Léon Gambetta in terms of the need to 'place the tombstone of oblivion over the crimes and vestiges of the Commune' falls outside the scope of her account. Wilson instead takes 1878 as her chronological finishing point, marked by 'the reinvention of Paris as a modern, healthy, hygienic and regenerated metropolis during the *Exposition Universelle*' (p. 2). In part this choice reflects Wilson's understandable desire to avoid rehearsing the familiar narrative of the various socialist interpretations of the Commune and subsequent struggles among the fragmented left to lay claim to the contested heritage of the Commune. Moreover the amnesty does not figure in Wilson's account because it is in cultural production broadly speaking that she is interested. There is little here on the Commune as a political stake during the 1870s – nothing for instance on how the counter-revolutionary right equated the Opportunist republicans with Communards during the crisis of the *Seize Mai*. For Wilson, it is cultural production that speaks most loudly and in cultural production that the elaboration and construction of collective memory can be analysed. It is therefore through close reading of a compact body of sources that Wilson seeks to unpack what she identifies as the collective memory of the anti-Communard bourgeoisie, the dominant memory of the 1870s.

Wilson's approach is informed by literary studies, and consists of four case studies, ranging from the reports of *Le Monde Illustré* to the images of Paris captured by photographers Soulier, Baldus and Marville, by way of the writings of Maxime du Camp and Émile Zola. One of the strengths of Wilson's selection of case studies lies in her decision not to restrict herself to representations of the Commune, but to look rather at how the Commune was present in works that did not directly address *l'année terrible*. Thus she turns not to Zola's *La Débâcle* (which in any case lies outside the chronological span she has chosen) but to *Le Ventre de Paris*, *L'Assommoir* and *Une page d'amour* to see how the experience of the Commune informed these novels of the 1870s. Likewise Wilson does not focus solely on Du Camp's notorious *Les Convulsions de Paris* (a canonical work in propagating the reactionary version of the Commune) but is particularly interested in his detailed analysis of Paris begun during the Second Empire, *Paris: ses organes, ses fonctions et sa vie dans la seconde moitié du XIXe siècle*. Wilson is also attentive to linkages between the texts she studies, pointing, for instance, to Zola's indebtedness to Du Camp's study of Les Halles in the second volume of *Paris: ses organes* when he came to write *Le Ventre de Paris*.

Wilson's discussion of *Le Monde Illustré* demonstrates her care to marry close reading to an appreciation of the wider context. Attention is drawn to *Le Monde Illustré's* interesting stance, part of the Dalloz press empire and therefore sister paper of the quasi-official *Le Moniteur Universel*, conservative and supportive of Church and state, but distancing itself from president MacMahon as his 'Moral Order' regime faltered in 1877–8. Wilson notes that the illustrations from the 1871 editions of *Le Monde Illustré* are by no means unknown, but have been analysed in isolation, the accompanying texts ignored. Jean Noël's illustration 'Aux Tuileries – Rapprochements et Contrastes', evidently reflects the experience of the Commune in terms of a working class invasion of bourgeois space and the received image of Communard women as masculine and grotesque. However our appreciation of the illustration is sharpened by Edouard Hubert's ironic description of the scene: innocent children play at being Communards (the chief blasphemer, the drunken soldier, the 15-sous women who supply their food) in close proximity to the reality of drunken women and cursing soldiers who represent the tyranny of the rabble. On the other hand, the fit between image and text is not always perfect, Wilson suggests, pointing to possible tensions between illustrations of the toppling of the Vendôme column or the supposed 'last stand' of the *fédérés* in the Père Lachaise cemetery and the firmly anti-Communard text that accompanies them. Wilson's most interesting use of *Le Monde Illustré*, however, is not

to look at representations of the Commune, but to look at the two spectacles of 1878, the *Exposition* and the *fête* of 30 June. For Wilson, ‘at a subliminal level ... the Commune [was] everywhere present’, above all as both spectacles were describing in terms of *fêtes*, which could not but recall the ‘*fête*’ of the Commune. Were the crowds of workers once more a threatening presence, invading the city? Parisians might see parallels between the celebratory fireworks of 30 June and the bombardment of Paris and fires of May 1871. There were also ambiguities inherent in any discussion of the *Exposition*, given the Second Empire’s enthusiasm for exhibitions as displayed in 1855 and 1867. In addition, the associated projects carried Napoleonic echoes in the cases of the enlargement of the Napoleonic Pont d’Iéna and the colossal statue of Charlemagne. The close reading of the reports of *Le Monde Illustré* Wilson provides illuminates these issues.

Maxime Du Camp’s extensive investigation into Paris, originally published as a series of articles in the conservative *Revue des deux mondes* in the period 1867–74 attracts Wilson’s interest precisely as a work interrupted and altered by the experience of the Commune. The experience of *l’année terrible* left Du Camp in the situation of cataloguing an administration that had suddenly ceased to exist, but he nonetheless determined to leave volumes three and four unchanged, as marking a significant moment in the history of Paris, the shift from authoritarianism to the liberal empire. This has led other commentators to consider *Paris : ses organes* a ‘memorialist’ work, recalling a vanished Paris. However, Wilson draws our attention to the explanatory notes Du Camp chose to add to the completed volumes that call attention to the devastation wrought by the Commune, from material ruin to the destruction of the judicial documents and archives. For Du Camp the destruction of the records of births, marriages and deaths held at the Hôtel de Ville destabilised the very identity of the city. The final volumes allowed Du Camp to expand on the impact of the siege and the Commune on the Parisian working class who fell prey to alcoholism and mental illness – their ‘*pétrolomanie alcoolique*’ resulted in the destruction of city. Yet, Wilson suggests, Du Camp does rather more than this – his anti-clerical observations on the Catholic church served as an ironic commentary on the clerical ‘Order morale’ regime of MacMahon. *Les Convulsions de Paris* (1878–79), allowed Du Camp the space to refute pro-Communard memoirs at length and fully develop the observations made in the *Paris : ses organes*. *Les Convulsions*, which positioned itself as an ‘impartial’ first hand account of the Commune (supplemented by archival documents), was prompted by the issue of the amnesty and signalled Du Camp’s desire to prevent both an amnesty and any forgetting of the crimes of the Commune. As Wilson demonstrates, Du Camp’s method was indebted to that of Taine; a debt that extended to his use of medical and scientific metaphors (the Commune as a diseased prostitute) and his readiness to fall back on his own imagination. Tendentious and unreliable though it was, Du Camp’s *Convulsions* ‘fulfilled a need in the hearts and minds of the reactionary and monarchist elite’ (p. 123) and ‘served to consolidate the constructed anti-Communard memory of Paris and the Commune’ (p. 125). Du Camp’s reward came in the shape of his election to the *Académie Française* in 1880.

If in the case of Du Camp, the originality of Wilson’s account lies in her attention to *Paris: ses organes*, when it comes to Zola Wilson has to contend with existing scholarship on Zola’s attitudes towards the Commune. Wilson is not the first to examine covert political references in *Le Ventre de Paris* (1873) and *L’Assommoir* (1877). However, it is Wilson’s skill to provide an original and insightful analysis by means of examining the ‘relationship between the text, the city’s topography and the Commune as a function of collective memory’ (p. 133). Most strikingly this is the case with *L’Assommoir*. In a particularly interesting analysis Wilson traces the route of Gervaise’s wedding party from Montmartre to the city centre, showing that each landmark mentioned was saturated with memories of the Commune (though I did find myself wishing that the book included a detailed map of Paris). Wilson also goes beyond other critics in choosing to read *Une page d’amour* (1878) through the lens of the Commune. Subtle allusions to the Commune are teased out – for instance, ‘Zola specifically singles out Montmartre on the horizon as if shrouded by glowing crimson and golden embers, reminding us once again of conflagration and bloodshed’ (p. 163). However, there are moments when I am unclear as to what sort of parallel is being drawn. Take for instance another of Wilson’s observations on *Une page d’amour*:

The description of Paris as if it were a cesspool of filth, crime and wretchedness ... recalls

Zola's own sense impressions in the wake of *la semaine sanglante* when he walked the city streets, his hand over his nostrils so as to keep out the stench of putrefying bodies lying under the hot sun (p. 163).

I am unsure whether this is to argue that Zola had this image specifically in mind when he wrote this passage, or whether it might be expected that any of his readers would recall the Commune when reading this passage. Wilson, familiar with the details of Zola's biography can make this link – but can we really take this as a reference to the Commune, or proof of Wilson's overall judgement that 'Zola's response to the Commune ... lies at the heart of his literary project as a whole' (p. 168)?

Despite the interesting nature of Wilson's work, I do have certain reservations. Here the question of approach is key. Close reading undeniably sheds light on ways in which the Commune continued to resonate in the French imagination. Wilson's readings of all her sources are of considerable interest. However, there are problems with this way of proceeding. As I see it, the problems are of two orders. First, at times more might be uncovered by going *beyond* the case studies. The use of additional sources would strengthen arguments and perhaps provide alternative perspectives, while still preserving the focus on the bourgeois anti-Communard memory. Most strikingly, I feel this in relation to the discussion of 1878, which I found one of the most interesting sections of the book. Here the close focus on *Le Monde Illustré* is not always helpful. Wilson's contention that the *Exposition* was designed to efface the negative images associated with the Commune is interesting, but could be explored in more depth. I would have liked more detail on the *Exposition* (including more on Marville's officially commissioned photographs, briefly discussed in the final chapter) and a closer look at the associated official discourse. Secondly, there is the issue of reading so closely as to find things that might have escaped both audience and author. For the most part, Wilson's readings are persuasive, but at times I find myself reluctant to follow her. I offer two examples. Wilson convincingly shows the possible readings of the marionette-show in *Une page d'amour* (references to MacMahon as Polichinelle were not uncommon, but equally it could be read as a reference to Napoleon III or the Communards), but additionally notes 'the red stage curtain reminiscent both of the red flag of the Commune and the red blood of *la semaine sanglante* ...' (p. 158). In her examination of Soulier's album of photographs, *Paris Incendié: mai 1871*, Wilson declares, 'for those who sought salvation in a return to the Catholic church after May 1871, Soulier's light-filled archway ... would no doubt have had a strong appeal ... like the gates of heaven the archway rise high above the rubble of the palace...' (p. 187).

Given that bourgeois anti-Communard collective memory is what is being explored, it seems a shame to marginalise official discourse which cannot but have informed this memory. Silence and repression of sympathetic accounts of the Commune was not the sole response of the government – there was an official discourse on the Commune (for instance the important three volumes of findings of the Parliamentary Enquiry on the Insurrection of 18 March) which might have been touched upon. In addition, there are questions to be raised about which collective memory is under analysis. It is an ambitious goal to use the case studies in question to reveal the operation of 'broadly conservative, reactionary and counter-revolutionary memories and myths' (p. 2). Although counter-revolutionaries would have endorsed some of Du Camp's observations in *Les Convulsions de Paris*, little light is shed on counter-revolutionary memory. The most stridently counter-revolutionary memories were those held by legitimists and ultramontane Catholics. These collective memories were marked by an obsessive focus on the revolution, understood as an ongoing phenomenon, a Manichean struggle between what Joseph de Maistre had identified as the 'satanic' revolution and Christian France ('true France'). The Commune was thus read through the lens of the revolution – as was indeed the Opportunist Republic. Moreover there was a strong theme of expiation, again an idea to be found in Joseph de Maistre's *Considérations sur la France* (2), powerfully expressed in the *Voeu National* movement, which aimed to dedicate France to the Sacred Heart. Though Wilson does refer to the Sacré-Coeur basilica to be built in Montmartre, the physical symbol of the *Voeu National* movement, the elaboration and operation of counter-revolutionary memory is not to be found in her account.

It will be apparent that the reservations I have about Wilson's work are chiefly to do with what she does *not* do. I am full aware that it is perhaps unhelpful, if not unfair, to take a book to task for missing out certain

points. I would like to conclude by reiterating my appreciation of what Wilson *does* do. The strengths of Wilson's book deserve to be recognised. The close reading approach is used to good effect and illuminates the way in which bourgeois memories of the Commune were constructed and how these memories came into play, as the Commune continued to resonate in the bourgeois imagination. At the same time, Wilson avoids the temptation to treat texts in isolation, but effectively contextualises them. In addition Wilson's exploration of bourgeois collective memory is informed by theory. Wilson is well-versed in theories of memory and addresses 19th-century understandings of memory, Halbwachs's ideas of collective memory, how images operate in the fashioning of memory and contemporary theories on reminiscence. If this reviewer is not entirely persuaded by all the readings provided by Wilson, the arguments put forward are undeniably interesting, provocative and stimulating. To be introduced to some unfamiliar texts and to be made to see familiar texts through fresh eyes cannot but be a rewarding experience.

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Notes

1. Robert Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven and London, 1994), p. 44. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Joseph de Maistre, *Considérations sur la France*, 1796 (Paris, 1988). [Back to \(2\)](#)

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