

Fire and Blood: Walter Benjamin's Paris Commune

Walter Benjamin's 'Arcades Project' provides a counter-history of Paris in the 19th century – and offers a vivid portrait of the revolutionary chaos and bloody demise of the Paris Commune.



Walter Benjamin's [Arcades Project](#) outlines a panoramic history of nineteenth-century Paris. The Paris Commune features in it as tragedy – a failed effort at revolutionary overthrow, in which, finally, dripping in their own blood, the Communards mete out political terror against a state that has far greater reserves. Resting on the shakiest foundations, the ragtag revolt could only fail.

Left historians, by Benjamin's time of writing in the 1930s, will already have come to know that, inspiring as it was as an emblem of spontaneous refusal and uncompromising insurgency, the Commune lacked a carefully prepared social basis. The insurrection rises quickly, like an untethered balloon – that can soon enough be pierced and deflate. But in contrast to those who dispense political reproaches about failures of political and social form, Benjamin lingers on the devilish detail of hellish events in and after the Commune.

Included among these are the Commune's demonic power of critique. While visiting the first exhibition about the Commune, in St Denis in 1935, Benjamin notices a placard from 15 April 1871. It proposes a Communard Monument to the Accursed. Hammered into it would be all the names of official personalities of the Second Empire who made an 'infernal history'.

Napoleon I is included – 'the villain of [Brumaire](#) – the chief of this accursed race of crowned bohemians vomited forth to us by Corsica, this fatal line of bastards so degenerated they would be lost in their own native land'. Baron Haussmann—architect of the wide boulevard, arch-demolitioneer of Paris—is dishonoured too. He made Paris ready for the sweeping through of military vehicles.

On Haussmann, Benjamin quotes anti-fascist Jean Cassou, who reflected, in 1936, on the bare-armed fighters who fought against gold-braided officers and built barricades on local street corners. This act is 'the supreme leap of the nineteenth century', a leap of faith in which urban and political arrangements of the past persist:

One still wants to believe. To believe in the mystery, the miracle, the feuilleton, the magic power of the epic. One has not yet understood that the other class has organized itself scientifically, has

entrusted itself to implacable armies. Its leaders have long since acquired a clear vision of the situation. Not for nothing had Haussmann built broad, perfectly straight avenues to break up the swarming, tortuous neighborhoods, the breeding grounds for mystery and for the feuilleton, the secret gardens of popular conspiracy.

The wide street is a weapon of the state and it will smash up old Paris, which is a breeding ground of intrigue, rebellion, gossip, poetry. Hausmann's boulevards pave over hope and banish disorder. The Commune is a final excited yelp of chaos. History – even immediate history – will see it as such. It is an 'orgy of power, wine, women, and blood', writes Charles Louandre, in his 1872 study *Subversive Ideas of Our Time*.

Wine hints at exuberance, the joy of taking back the streets, the intoxicatory effects of revolt associated with the Commune. Blood is the blood of repression, the brutal shootings of Communards in *la semaine sanglante* of 21-28 May. It is also the blood spilt by the Communards, who in desperation, as their numbers fell and they withdrew into the centre of Paris, executed hostages.

And women – what women? The *Mesdames Sans-Culottes*, the laundresses, seamstresses, bookbinders, and milliners who formed the Union of Women and organised the food and fuel supplies. Powerful women, women who demand power so it might be distributed to all. These included in their ranks Commune Louise Michel, who declared, in her memoir *The Red Virgin*, 'Barbarian that I am, I love cannon, the smell of powder, machine-gun bullets in the air'. The Commune wants, says she, 'Art for all! Science for all! Bread for all!'

The nation is often allegorised as a woman. *La République*, France's personification, is a woman. Benjamin mentions a lithograph titled *She*. A snake squeezes a beautiful woman to death – its features resemble Thiers, suppressor of the uprising. Underneath is a verse: 'Many the ways you can take her/ She is for rent but not for sale'. The republic can be taken by one or other political force, but she will not be given over to them for ever. Imagined as a prostitute, the Republic is not loyal to one lover, ideology or regime. Therein lies her dangerous power. The women that crowd the imagination of commentators are hazardous, uncompromising revolutionaries, ghoulish agents of death, home wreckers, home burners.

Benjamin describes another lithograph by the caricaturist Marcia. Titled *The Perishing of the Commune*, a skeleton marked as female, shrouded in white billowing cloth and bearing a tatty red flag, rides a monstrous hyena-horse away from an alleyway, whose houses are tickled by smoke and flames. This is the enduring image of women in the Commune, or rather in the desperate end days of the Commune: *Pétroleuses*.

The US Minister to France, Elihu Benjamin Washburne, summarised in his hearsay-based report the phantasm of the female incendiary:

She walks with rapid step near the shadow of the wall. She is poorly dressed; her age is between forty and fifty; her forehead is bound up with a red checkered handkerchief, from which hang meshes of uncombed hair. Her face is red, her eyes blurred, and she moves with her eyes bent down.

Her right hand is in her pocket, or in the bosom of her half-buttoned dress; in the other hand she holds one of the high, narrow tin cans in which milk is carried in Paris, but which now, in the hands of this woman, contains the dreadful petroleum liquid. As she passes a poste of regulars, she smiles and nods; when they speak to her she answers, 'My good Monsieur!' If the street is deserted she stops, consults a bit of dirty paper that she holds in her hand, pauses a moment before the grated opening to a cellar, then continues her way, steadily, without haste.

An hour afterward, a house is on fire in the street she has passed. Such is the pétroleuse.

It is one of many concoctions by agitated imaginations. Arsonist women of Paris likely did not exist, or not in the way imagined, even if in the statutes of the Communards' *Union des femmes pour la défense de Paris*, the 'purchasing of petrol and weapons for the fighting female citizen' was announced. Washburne's source accumulates details – colour, demeanour, hair, gestures.

The scene is vivid, like the Naturalism ascendant at that time in the world of literary and artistic culture. The arsonist's palette is red – the handkerchief, the face and what she touches will turn red, before it sinks as ash. She is filthy, her dress frayed, her hair uncontrollable; the paper she holds is dirty too. Her hand grasps inside her semi-buttoned dress, half-holding in the spillage of her breast, which is not the noble, giving breast of Liberty on the Barricades, but rather the breast of an unnatural woman who would swap milk for petrol. As she strides, the streets burst into flames.

Was one of these cold-blooded hotheads, with inflamed passions and a coolly calculating air, ever caught red-handed? Perhaps never, despite the apparent eye-witness statements, such John Leighton's, who was convinced that: 'Small tickets, of the size of postage stamps, were found pasted upon walls of houses in different parts of Paris, with the letters B.P.B. (bon pour brûler), literally, good for burning. Some of the tickets were square, others oval, with a bacchante's head in the centre. They were fixed on spots designated by the chiefs. Every pétroleuse was to receive ten francs for each house she fired.'

A bacchante's head – treacherous woman again, devotee of frenzy and chaos. Paris has to be patched up, 'every hole and crevice being plastered up to prevent insertion of the diabolical liquid – walled up against pétroleurs and pétroleuses', notes Leighton. The city turns morgue. At one location, notes Leighton: 'This morning three pétroleuses were shot there, the bodies are still lying on the boulevards.' There is nothing but the ache of defeat for Eulalie, Louise, Hortense, Fille, Léontine, Clara and the other pétroleuses, captured by [Eugène Appert](#)'s camera, while awaiting trial for arson, a charge they all denied.

The Paris Commune became a hellfire, scorched by the forces of reaction. Benjamin tells of fugitives executed after a chase through the underworld of skeleton-filled catacombs. The infernal history was not commemorated by the Commune in stone in a monument, but instead took the Commune as its consummation.

Benjamin points out how Blanqui, champion of insurrection, sees in its defeat only an eternity of repetition, the end of history. But Benjamin perceives, instead, its marking the end of a phantasmagoria, which was a promise of universal liberation, that was only broken time after time by the bourgeoisie. It becomes ever clearer, he notes, that 'every manufacturer lives in his factory like a plantation owner among his slaves'. No equality here. Not then. Not now.