

Radical Commemoration, the Politics of the Street, and the 150th Anniversary of the Paris Commune of 1871

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At two in the morning on 24 February 2011 – 140 years to the day since the first revolutionary meeting of what was to become the Paris Commune of 1871 – three young Parisians, hoods up, dressed in black, set about pasting a twenty-foot poster of National Guardsmen on the corner of Cour Damoye, just off the Place de la Bastille in the 11th *arrondissement* of Paris. This was the street-art collective RaspouTeam's first instalment of their *Journal Illustré de la Commune de Paris*, which would reinsert the Commune onto the streets of Paris and transmit 'news' of the occupation on the anniversary of each of its seventy-two days of existence.

RaspouTeam's *Journal Illustré* intended to make an explicit link between the Paris Commune of 1871 and the politics of public space in the twenty-first-century city. 2021 marks the 150th anniversary of the Commune, and in the decade since 2011 the call for democratic public spaces (as demanded by the Communards of Paris) has remained at the forefront of urban political struggles. As pseudo-public open spaces and corporate-owned urban areas present new battlegrounds for economic and social justice protests in cities across the globe, the anniversary of the Paris Commune offers an opportunity to reflect on how and why we remember radical urban resistance of the past, and to ask whether doing so has the potential to arm us for the struggles of today.

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The Paris Commune of 1871 was a radical experiment in government. Following the Franco-Prussian war of the previous year, and in defiance of Adolphe Thiers's newly elected provisional republican government (under control of a monarchist assembly), Paris democratically elected a Commune council in March 1871. The Commune governed Paris for seventy-two days and passed measures such as the abolition of night work, free secular education, the separation of Church and State, and the cancellation of rent arrears accrued by starving Parisians during the Siege of Paris the year before. In May 1871 the Commune was brutally defeated during a week of bloodshed. More than ten thousand Communards were killed.¹

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Immediately after the suppression of the Commune, the 'state obliteration' of its memory began.² The early governments of the Third Republic attempted to eradicate the memory of the Commune through rigorous censorship. They wanted to leave the horrors of 1870–1 in the past, and refashion Paris as the capital of healthy, hygienic modernity.³ In response to the fierce condemnation of the Commune from the right, Communards in exile and their international allies sought to protect and nurture the left-wing account.⁴ This battle over the memory of the Commune has continued ever since, as various leftist groups have mobilized its memory and claimed the heritage of the Communards. Since the 1880s, but most prominently between the 1920s and the 1960s, the *Mur des Fédérés* (the wall in Père Lachaise Cemetery against which thousands of Communards were shot in the final days of the Commune) has served as the principal site of commemorative ritual for the *Parti communiste français* (PCF), and to a lesser extent for socialists and anarchists.⁵ Outside of political mobilization, historians, political theorists, geographers and many others have articulated a multitude of motivations for the Commune, and tirelessly attempted to account for its downfall.⁶ Successive French governments have struggled with questions of the Commune: how does it fit within national memory? Could it be officially commemorated? Should it be included in the school curriculum?⁷

Every year at the end of May, on the anniversary of *la Semaine Sanglante* (the week of bloodshed), a procession to the *Mur des Fédérés* is followed by speeches, songs, and the flying of red flags. At its commemorative height, during the years of the Popular Front in the interwar period, the May march to the wall reportedly attracted hundreds of thousands of people,⁸ but today it is less a force for mobilization than a pilgrimage of the faithful.⁹ In the past decade competing claims for ownership of the legacy of the Commune have also re-emerged from both communist and socialist factions in the French government. Rather than keeping the Commune politically present, however, these claims paradoxically serve to depoliticize memory of the Commune and confine it to the realm of factional squabble.¹⁰ The *Aggiornamento hist-geo* collective (a team of history and geography teachers and researchers promoting curriculum reform in France) have argued for instance that parliamentary efforts to rehabilitate the Commune strip the Communards of their radical agency and render them merely 'banal republican victims'.¹¹

What is clear, then, is that invoking the Commune can quite easily become an exercise in political point-scoring. What's more, both factional and official attempts to commemorate the events of 1871 have often reduced the Commune to a fixed set of recognizably French or republican values. How, then, can commemorators access the radical urgency of the Commune? Is it possible to ground the Commune in the local landscape of Paris whilst emphasizing its international resonance and allowing its memory to speak to global questions? Or is this too much to ask of the long-dead Communard? To what extent can we look to the past for radical inspiration?

And how best can this radical inspiration be brought to bear on the concerns of the present moment? These questions are at the core of this article. The focus, or case study, is the street-art collective RaspouTeam's 2011 commemorative project, *Journal Illustré de la Commune de Paris*.

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Fig. 1. RaspouTeam's QR codes linking to online 'newspaper' content, spring 2011.

RaspouTeam were an anonymous Paris-based urban street-art collective, founded in 2005. Two graphic designers and a history graduate, they saw themselves as part of a politicized street-art tradition encouraging people to reclaim both their streets, and the forgotten or falsified historical narratives of their cities. In Portuguese *raspou* means to shave or scrape off. When I first came across RaspouTeam, having just encountered the work of Andreas Huyssen and the idea of the city as palimpsest, I supposed the name must signal their collective intention to peel back the layered histories of our cities and expose those hidden beneath. But when I asked RaspouTeam about their name in an interview in the spring of 2013, the group were reticent about its origins. To create what they described as 'urban interventions', RaspouTeam used new technologies – Quick Response (QR) codes, interactive online maps, and online broadcasts, along with traditional street-art forms – graffiti, stencils, and posters.¹² Between

2005 and 2011 they produced three commemorative projects. The 2010 *Désordres Publics* recalled incidents of police brutality on the streets of Paris and marked twenty such sites with QR code tiles linked to online content (Fig. 1); the 2011 web documentary *17.10.61* marked the fiftieth anniversary of the 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris, and used QR codes to link to a web documentary featuring actors playing characters based on real testimony of the event; and the 2011 *Journal Illustré de la Commune de Paris* commemorated significant moments of the Paris Commune on its 140th anniversary and placed large posters and QR codes at forty-five sites across the city.¹³

RaspouTeam's *Journal Illustré de la Commune de Paris* commemorated the Commune by linking online 'newspaper' articles to large street-art installations via QR codes. Large-scale posters with photographs, illustrations, and proclamations from 1871 were pasted onto walls in the places where the action they depicted had occurred during the Commune. Each poster contained a QR code, which would lead the 'audience' to an article, designed in the form of a nineteenth-century newspaper, detailing the event that took place on that very spot in 1871, and to an online map of all the installations.

For example, on 16 April 2011 at 15 rue St Maur, RaspouTeam installed a poster with an image of a gun foundry co-operative (Fig. 2). On 16 April 1871 the Commune had issued a decree to requisition all the workshops that had been abandoned by owners fleeing Paris after the siege. Workshops were occupied and reopened by workers' co-operative associations like that of the foundrymen. The Commune did not last long enough to implement its plans to revolutionize social and economic relations, but it made a start: these workshops were run without hierarchy – workers shared all profits, foremen were elected and subject to dismissal by workers, fines were prohibited, and the working day was limited to ten hours.¹⁴ In 2011, the QR code printed on the top right-hand corner of the image of the foundry took visitors to the *Journal Illustré* news webpage for this installation, which detailed the Commune's decree and its subsequent plans to requisition privately owned work spaces throughout the city. The article about the workshop decree contained further images as well as hyperlinks to pages about particular individuals. The page also included a link to the main page of the project, and to a Google map showing the locations of all the installations.

Other installations included images relating to the capture of the cannons at Montmartre (rue du Mont-Cenis, 18 March 1871/18 March 2011), the formation of *l'union des femmes* (rue Hittorf, 11 April 1871/11 April 2011), the separation of Church and State (Panthéon, 2 April 1871/2 April 2011), and the last barricade (rue des Rondeaux, 28 May 1871/28 May 2011). RaspouTeam also created twelve radio broadcasts to correspond with certain Commune events, which could be accessed via the webpage and were broadcast each Friday throughout the project at Frequency Paris Plurielle – 106.3 FM. The broadcasts featured historians and artists discussing moments, characters, and themes related to the Commune.¹⁵



Fig 2. RaspouTeam's installation, '16 AVRIL 1871: DÉCRET DES ATELIERS', on rue St Maur, 16 April 2011.

I came across RaspouTeam's project while living in Paris in 2012. An enlarged photograph pasted on the corner of Avenue Rapp and Avenue Franco-Russe in the 7th *arrondissement* (not far from the Eiffel Tower) was still partially visible in the autumn of 2012 (Fig. 3). It was a photograph taken just after the explosion at the Rapp cartridge factory on 17 May 1871, in which forty people were killed. The attack on the factory (effectively a large ammunition depot), was launched from the *Fort d'Issy*, one of the fortifications of the city of Paris built in the 1840s, which the Versailles army had regained control of the previous month.

By 2012, a large part of the image installed by RaspouTeam was covered by other posters, but the restaurant on the corner was building a new terraced area and in the process removing the detritus and repainting the wall, so part of the installation had been exposed. I could see less than half of the image, but, crucially, RaspouTeam's *la Commune* logo and the QR code were there to be found. I downloaded a QR reader, snapped the code, and arrived at RaspouTeam's website. I was captivated. I had begun studying French history only a few months previously and was introduced to the Commune in a class about the Third Republic. It had seemed daring and radical and exciting, but also somewhat abstract. I wasn't sure if the Commune was an organization, a form of government, or simply an idea. But now the Commune was reaching out to me! What got me excited about RaspouTeam's project was the restoration of place. I felt I had been offered a glimpse of the *rooted* Commune. And if I could only attune my senses and follow the clues, I could discover the Commune all over modern-day Paris.

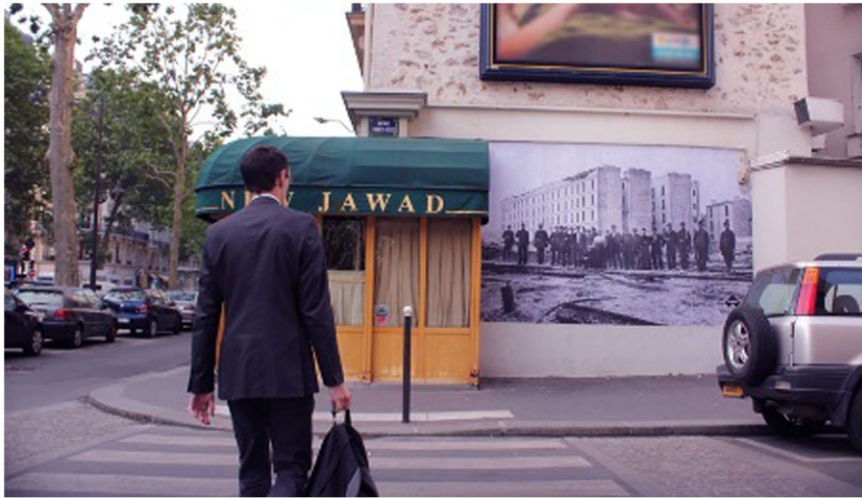


Fig. 3. RaspouTeam's installation, '17 MAI 1871: L'EXPLOSION DE LA CARTOUCHERIE DE RAPP', on the corner of Avenue Rapp and Avenue Franco-Russe, 17 May 2011.

So off I went, in search of more. I loaded the map and walked, now more alert to the layout of intersections, the arrangement of streets, the surfaces of buildings, and the textures underfoot. As I scanned for traces of the Communards of 1871 I felt a sense of what was at stake in the Commune, and what had since been lost. The Commune itself was rooted in the local – it relied on neighbourhood-centred associational cultures and networks.¹⁶ It was a revolution in municipal autonomy and social relations that was intimately tied to the places of Paris but connected trans-locally to battles against imperialism and centralization elsewhere. In many ways the Commune was a battle for place as much as for people. Indeed, the Commune was a powerful exemplar of what Doreen Massey characterized as the local/global nexus.¹⁷ In other words, though the Commune originated with specific cultural, socio-economic and historic ideas about place, the Communards' revolution was not parochial or bounded. The Commune was rooted in the local circumstances of Paris in 1870 and 1871, but in wider critiques of the effects of capitalism, privatization and displacement it was connected to struggles far beyond itself, both geographically and temporally.

But after embarking on my historical treasure hunt in the autumn of 2012, I soon discovered that none of RaspouTeam's other installations remained. I came across the corner of what was probably part of a poster depicting one of the last barricades in Montmartre, on the Passage de Abbesses, but the QR code was long gone and I was able to guess at what the torn and partially covered image might have once been only because I was looking for it. I could still explore the project's extensive online material, but the excitement of discovering radical history *in situ* was gone.

I was disappointed. More, I was angry. Angry at the city that had both violently crushed the Commune, and then repeatedly dispelled its memory from the cityscape. This was a nebulous anger, directed at a faceless mass of city planners, private developers, indifferent bureaucratic bodies, the police, and private capital. The memory of the Commune is a powerful exemplar for modern-day social movements precisely because it tried to resist these forces. But it couldn't, and in the end it failed. Therefore, I felt that RaspouTeam, in reinserting the Commune into central Paris (all but two of the forty-five installations were inside the *périphérique*), had set the Communards up for failure a second time. In their effort to encourage urban resistance, to transpose the past onto the present, RaspouTeam underestimated the forces they sought to undermine – the privatization, gentrification, and sanitization that had threatened the Communards' Paris, and continue (even more aggressively) to threaten cities today. RaspouTeam's message could not reach those who had suffered the displacement caused by these forces: the *Journal Illustré* reinserted the Commune into precisely those parts of central Paris that RaspouTeam argued have been so stringently controlled and restricted. And their installations were easily policed out of existence. How then could ordinary Parisians, dispersed from these once free 'public' spaces in the city, access this radical history?

Heritage projects and commemorations can serve both to introduce new audiences to a radical past, and to reconnect people with a sense of place and the radical legacies associated with those places. It is no accident, then, that radical commemorative activities are very often centred around the sites at which radical action took place. And, as my experience of encountering RaspouTeam's project attests, it is powerful to stumble upon traces of the past in the present. However, paying tribute to the Commune where it happened, rather than creating a commemoration based around who it might be for, meant losing precisely the audience RaspouTeam hoped to address, and therefore the radical social function of the commemoration was diminished. In other words, in this case, geospatial fidelity meant sacrificing social faithfulness.

This article speaks to some of the intractable problems of radical commemoration – namely how to make histories accessible without sacrificing nuance, and how to propel radical stories to the communities where they might be most powerful without abandoning the historical and place-centred specificity of radical pasts. What follows does not pretend to answer these questions, instead it argues that only in acknowledging and persistently attending to these intrinsic problems and constraints can commemoration ever hope to be radical. The article explores the two key ways through which RaspouTeam sought to radically commemorate the Commune: reinscribing the Commune onto the streets of Paris, and creating a commemorative piece that encouraged active individual participation.

The Paris Commune's legacy is politically generative because of its ability to connect with both the local and the global. The lasting legacy of the

Commune is not so much a national one, unlike 1789, 1830 or 1848. This is due in part to the localism and internationalism of the Commune itself, both in its ideology and its social make-up. RaspouTeam sought explicitly to connect the local events of the Commune to global critiques of unfettered capitalism and urban dispossession. But in tying their *Journal Illustré* so faithfully to the geography of the Paris of 1871, they inadvertently excluded much of the Paris of the twenty-first century. With the *Journal Illustré* RaspouTeam forewent the traditional commemorative group gathering or procession and instead designed a project that privileged feelings of individual discovery and political awakening over expressions of collective solidarity. Their project was not one that physically brought people together; RaspouTeam didn't stop traffic or stage a public event. Their commemoration didn't exceptionalize the Commune. Instead, RaspouTeam inserted the Commune into the everyday and sought to create mini moments of revelation in the otherwise unremarkable daily routines of ordinary citizens. This made the project feel personal; it made anyone who discovered the Commune on the streets of Paris in 2011 an agent in the history of the city. That individual agency, though, relied on access, access made difficult by migratory lives, escalating rents, insecure housing, and precarious work, in a city that, ever since the Commune, has been made increasingly unlivable for working-class residents.¹⁸

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Commemorations of the Paris Commune – as an urban revolution in itself – are well placed both to re-stage the urban occupation of Paris, and to revisit the political arguments made against aggressive city planning, population control, and sanitizing efforts, both in 1871 and today. In this way, commemorations have the potential to become politically charged interventions that link past and present. In the case of the Commune, it was the connection between contemporary labour politics and workers' rights, and the politics enacted by the Parisian Communards of 1871, that sustained the memory of the Commune through the struggles of defeat after 1871; the formation of French *Bourses du Travail* (Labour Exchanges)¹⁹ and the remarkable growth of syndicalism at the end of the nineteenth century; the rise and dominance of the Communist Party (PCF) in the 1940s; and the communist symbolism and propaganda beyond the Iron Curtain in the second half of the twentieth century. Workers' movements in France and around the world have celebrated, and continue to celebrate, the anniversary of the Commune as a day for labour, for the workers, the people. However, more recently the memory of the Commune has been redirected and deployed within political conversations and activism about public and civic space, and the politics of access versus privatization in the modern city.

RaspouTeam's *Journal Illustré* was a commemoration that aimed to use spatial transgression to 'promote reflection on the topicality of the themes

developed under the Commune, and on the future of our society, where the spaces of freedom are significantly reduced'.²⁰ RaspouTeam sought to conjure the Commune not as a political object to be parlayed for political power, but rather as a sort of guiding spirit with which to encourage contemporary urban exploration and resistance.

The Communards themselves were rallying against the redevelopment and sanitization of revolutionary Paris. In the two decades before the Commune Paris was restructured – narrow cobbled streets were destroyed to make way for wide boulevards that could be better policed and controlled if threatened by popular uprisings – in a massive urban renewal programme undertaken by Georges-Eugène Haussmann at the behest of Emperor Napoleon III.²¹ The radical social and political geographies and ecosystems of revolutionary Paris were diminished by these architectural transformations. Haussmann's project was a deliberate attempt to remove from Paris those elements deemed unsavoury by the ruling elite. The Commune, therefore, was in part a violent reaction against the physical and political violence of Haussmannization.

The twenty-first century city continues to be a contested and divided landscape. Battles for public access, shrinking free civic spaces, and the insidious growth of pseudo-public private spaces policed by private security forces, have placed urban politics at the forefront of many prominent social and political movements.²² Transgressing the enforced 'rules' of contemporary city spaces, therefore, has formed a key part of protests against the privatization of cities and the continued encroachment of capital upon community. This is unsurprising given that, as Katrina Navickas has argued, protest is always in part predicated on the transgression of spatial codes.²³ The anti-enclosure Newton Rebellion (1607), the Kinder Scout Trespasses (1932), the Occupy Movement (2011), the Extinction Rebellion protests (2019), and the *gilets jaunes* movement (2018–20) are but a few examples of how the act of taking up space where one has been told not to can be central to the political aims of those protesting.

In the context of modern-day social movements which question how power operates in the modern city, the Commune has been brought back into focus, not necessarily as an example of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but rather as a spontaneous urban occupation. In reinserting the Commune back on the streets of Paris in 2011 RaspouTeam attempted to situate the memory of the Commune within international urban political movements and in solidarity with ordinary citizens, rather than entering into the debates over who in France are the most legitimate heirs of the memory. The group's use of large-scale posters was a direct reference to the revolutionary material and visual culture of the Commune itself.²⁴ In 1871 the revolution was literally on the streets. RaspouTeam's commemoration returned to those same streets in an attempt to insist that the memory of the Commune can resituate us in those forbidden spaces and remind us that we might still have agency to reopen our cities, and to invest them with

different priorities. In RaspouTeam's own words, their *Journal Illustré* hoped to 'transmit the memory of the revolution where it is lacking in the public space, which is owned by all'.²⁵

Kristin Ross locates the legacies of the Communards in the resurgence of encampment as a political strategy and the ways in which contemporary political movements like Occupy and Reclaim the Streets have staked out our cities.²⁶ In 2011 occupation came to the fore in various contexts and across various national settings – from the Arab Spring, and the *Indignados* of Spain, to the Direct Democracy Now movement in Greece.²⁷ The occupation of city spaces intersects with the increasingly fierce debates around the question of free access within cities – the recently scrapped Garden Bridge project in London (2017) epitomized the ongoing battle for publicly accessible leisure spaces as against the increasing prominence of faux-public projects that promise public access but do not serve the needs of ordinary city-dwellers.²⁸ In light of these contemporary politicized urban battles, it is little surprise that the Commune has re-emerged as a source of inspiration.

Henri Lefebvre, the twentieth-century philosopher, characterized the events of spring 1871 as 'an immense epic festival'.²⁹ He identified playful, performative elements within the Commune – the ways in which Communards attempted to reclaim Paris with music, performance and municipal joviality. These were part of the Commune's political arsenal: such acts were political because the performers and the spectators were collectively reclaiming previously forbidden or exclusive spaces of the city. The Communards themselves did not need the spatial turn, or high-tech mapping of contested city spaces, to know the importance of spatial transgression in their urban revolutionary movement. After proclaiming their new government, the Communards and ordinary Parisians took up space across the city (in royal palaces and gardens, state buildings, and cultural sites), and set about operating cultural, musical, and political activities out of these places; the Commune government issued decrees encouraging artisans to occupy empty buildings and warehouses for use as meeting rooms, artists' studios, workshops, and social spaces, and the famous Commune Louise Michel organized concerts in the Tuileries Garden.³⁰

During the Commune, Frederic Harrison, English Positivist and one of the first in Britain to publicly praise its actions, recognized the Commune as a radical reclamation of parts of Paris that had been claimed by and for the wealthy. In an article for the London magazine, *Fortnightly Review* in August 1871, Harrison suggested that the ferocity with which the Communards were suppressed stemmed from a violent indignation that the poor of Paris would dare lay any claim, or enact any violence toward the glorious city:

That wretched workmen should set foot on the Elysian Fields of luxury; that they should disturb the very gaieties of the season; that, in the

pursuit of a more moral and just world they should disarrange the charm of the pleasantest city in Europe – all this, in the eyes of the silken puppets who call themselves Society, was an outrage worthy of death.³¹

Harrison also later commented on the violence of Haussmann's restructurings, referring to him as 'the insatiable *démolisseur*' enacting 'the most gigantic and ruthless schemes of transformation ever attempted in any great city'. In Paris 'Haussmann ruled supreme, like Satan in Pandemonium, thirsting for new worlds to conquer'.³² The new worlds were the streets of revolutionary Paris and the conquered were those Parisians expelled from the city's centrality by the forces of 'autocratic imperialism and gigantic jobbery'.³³ By 2021 Haussmann himself may no longer be the chief enemy, but the occupation of cities by the forces of capital and the power of corporate interests in dictating the use and access of civic spaces continue apace, threatening the democratic development of cities and begging the question, are cities built for citizens at all?

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With their Commune project, RaspouTeam formed a part of this long engagement with the politics of the city. They described themselves as creative descendants of Ernest Pignon-Ernest³⁴ – a Situationist, and former PCF member, born in Nice in 1942.³⁵ His work is considered a precursor of modern street art, and is intimately linked to the urban landscapes where it appears:

At first there is a place, a place in real life where I wish to work. I try to understand, to grasp all that I see there: space, light, colours ... and, at the same time that which is not seen: history, buried memories, the symbolic charge ... and then in this real place, in all its complexity, I inscribe an element of fiction, an image.³⁶

Ernest Pignon-Ernest's 1971 project, *Les Gisants* (the recumbents), produced for the centenary of the Commune, was very much concerned with place, and with reinserting the Commune back into the landscape, and mindscape, of modern Paris. In the last decades of the twentieth century the traditional communist procession to the *Mur des Fédérés* lost its monopoly on Commune commemoration. The 1970s witnessed the beginning of the decline of the PCF – leadership problems, the fallout after May '68 and the increasing popularity of the French Socialists saw the communist party lose its dominance on the left.³⁷ Pignon-Ernest's *Les Gisants* expressed the tension between the traditional partisan interpretation of the Commune and alternative interpretations of its legacy (which further flourished following the fall of the Soviet Union),³⁸ that were much more about the relationship between politics, urban space, and community.



Fig. 4. Ernest Pignon-Ernest, *Les Gisants* at the Sacré-Cœur. See 'Le Site Officiel': <http://www.pignon-ernest.com/>.

Les Gisants was made up of hundreds of large-scale posters of a recumbent lifeless figure, devoid of explicit historical reference, laid up the steps to the Sacré Coeur Church (Fig. 4). The Sacré Coeur was built as a monument to celebrate the defeat of the Commune and the victory of the conservative moral order, an enduring reminder of the official silence and invisibility of the Commune, which persisted through much of the twentieth century. Pignon-Ernest disturbed this silence. Moreover, he emphasized the anonymity of the dead figure – no barricades or flags or other Communist paraphernalia. In doing so Pignon-Ernest cast off some of the trappings of communist representation and reopened the legacy of the Commune for

new interpretations. Pignon-Ernest sought to find a way to bring the Commune back to the street:

Originally, I was invited to participate in an exhibition on the theme of the Bloody Week of the Commune. In preparing this project and reading widely I discovered. . . I could not account for such an event by means of a painting that would take place in an exhibition. That seemed to me to be nonsense: the negation of the very spirit of the Commune. It was necessary to work on the level of the street, to reinvest those places charged with history.³⁹

Channelling some of Pignon's philosophy, RaspouTeam's Commune commemoration was an attempt to let the Communard speak to new audiences, and to galvanize political resistance that looked not only to the past, but to the future. They described their project as a kind of 'open air museum' that aimed to present 'history as micro-stories – people might get into just one very small event that is more linked to them or relevant to them because it is in their local environment. For us this could be a way in'.⁴⁰ They hoped that those encountering the *Journal Illustré*, either on the street or online, would then 'take that to the street and share it'.⁴¹ The very act of participating in the commemoration – discovering the sites, reading online, telling their friends about it – had the potential to grant participants agency to connect the Commune to any number of contemporary urban struggles.

By sending participants on a radical treasure hunt around Paris, RaspouTeam intended to disrupt the accepted function of spaces and in doing so to create a participatory commemorative intervention. They hoped that the scattered and ephemeral nature of their commemoration might mean that a person could find one poster, muse on the Commune for a moment and then forget, or perhaps follow the QR code to the online map and then walk the city in search of more. Depending on when they happened upon the project in the first place, a participant might not find any installations, but they might find other things – other hidden spaces, artworks, secret city sights and sounds that you might not notice on your usual path to work or home. In this way RaspouTeam's *Journal Illustré* was intended to be about much more than the Commune. The Commune was the starting point for a deeper exploration of Paris, and cities more generally, both past and present.

RaspouTeam's urban intervention attempted to map Paris, not in terms of capitalist spectacle, tourism, or consumption, but rather as sites of contestation, conflict and insurrection. The *Journal Illustré* brought together the characters from the Commune of 1871 and the characters of modern-day Paris on the same streets. The placing of their poster installations corresponded to places of action during the Commune, but the timeframe was different, allowing past and present to collide on the dramatic street stage of Paris. In their own words, RaspouTeam intended the *Journal Illustré*



Fig. 5. RaspouTeam installation, '16 MAI 1871: LA DESTRUCTION DE LA COLONNE VENDÔME' at Place Vendôme, 16 May 2011.

to blur the boundaries between time and space. It is the blur that interests us, and so we presented in the same moment, in the same place, what is, what could be, and what has passed. Our current present is an established order, but it is not the only one possible.⁴²

Perhaps the most striking example of their attempt to 'blur' past and present was RaspouTeam's installation at Place Vendôme (Fig. 5). The Communards tore down the Vendôme column on 16 May 1871. The original column, erected by Napoleon I to commemorate the Battle of Austerlitz, was denounced by the Commune as a symbol of Napoleonic decadence and tyranny. 'A monument devoid of all artistic value, tending to perpetuate the ideas of war and conquest of the past imperial dynasty', according to the artist and Commune member Gustave Courbet.⁴³ In twenty-first century Paris Place Vendôme is home to luxury shops, hotels and services for the wealthy. Louis Vuitton and Rolex have shop fronts looking out on the resurrected Vendôme column, the Ritz Paris is next door and JP Morgan Bank sits on the opposite side of the square. In other words, it is a site of high-end consumption, and one that was built on the wealth of imperial exploits.

In 1871, Place Vendôme was similarly a monied and elite part of Paris. This made the Communards' toppling of the column all the more powerful – it symbolized the incursion of the poor into neighbourhoods of Paris from which they had been excluded. The Commune was claiming the city of Paris for working people. On 16 May 2011 RaspouTeam revived the Communards' act of destruction and pasted a large image of the fallen

column directly in front of the modern-day column, to show, as they said, ‘what is, what could be, and what has happened’.⁴⁴ RaspouTeam made an explicit link between the politics of the Commune and the political struggles of today, in order to suggest an alternative future. At a time when all of central Paris, like many cities, was increasingly populated by the wealthy, as the working classes were pushed further and further beyond the *périphérique* due to escalating rents, RaspouTeam wanted to remind us that our cities, and our histories, remain sites of political struggle. By performing an act of transgression, and through encouraging their audience to celebrate the Commune by enacting an incursion that symbolically reproduced that of the Communards, RaspouTeam staged a kind of radical historical re-enactment.

However, while the intended message of the resituated fallen Column is clear when looking at the image posted and contextualized on RaspouTeam’s website, the physical poster was removed by authorities hours after installation.⁴⁵ It would have been seen by very few people while in place. So despite RaspouTeam’s resurrection of the Communards’ message to reclaim Place Vendôme and redistribute power to ordinary citizens, the few people to see the installation will not have been those who had suffered the dislocation of gentrification. The destruction of the column in 1871 was powerful because it was enacted by Communards who were collectively and publicly seizing a symbol of dispossession. But in 2011 the dispossessed of Paris were not there to revel in the rubble, nor did the re-enactment make international headlines, as had been the case in 1871. RaspouTeam’s installation was removed without ceremony and without an audience. Between 2012 and 2017, around 11,000 residents a year departed from Paris, and state officials projected that the population decline would continue until at least 2024.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, house prices have gone up sixty-six percent in the last decade, and the proportion of Parisian residents who fit the traditional census definition of working class has declined from thirty-five percent in 1999 to just twenty-six percent today.⁴⁷ In short, potential inheritors of the Commune’s message of urban reclamation simply could not access RaspouTeam’s transmission.

The starting point for the *Journal Illustré* was to make visible an invisible past so that it might connect with contemporary struggles and perhaps offer some radical inspiration for those unfamiliar with the Commune. And yet, once begun, RaspouTeam seemed to forget the insidious power of precisely those forces that kept the history of the Commune concealed, or that might prevent most people from being able to simply stumble upon a heritage installation and walk the city in search of more. Most obviously class, gender, and race all affect how easily someone might or might not be able to access a project like RaspouTeam’s. Few people would have been able to explore the history that RaspouTeam so creatively scattered around the city. In 2020 the Covid-19 pandemic and the NHS track-and-trace system have made QR codes very familiar to anyone with a smart phone. But in 2011 QR

codes were still very much the preserve of the tech-savvy. All of RaspouTeam's online content relied on people being able to find and use the QR codes. Without the codes, the installations were just posters without context. And without the linked poster to lead you online, the website was just one of millions, lost in the vastness of the world wide web. In short, the official silence on the memory of the Commune instigated by the French state after 1871, combined with the forces of capital and privatization that have increasingly policed our cities in the past 150 years and the processes of gentrification that have fundamentally altered urban demographics, meant the *Journal Illustré* simply could not reach its intended audience.

Of course, arguably most public heritage projects are missed by most people. This, though, makes discussions of access and visibility even more important. How best can radical histories be made available to new audiences? RaspouTeam sought to connect via new mediums in the hope of engaging those less likely to discover the Commune in a museum or via an explicitly political celebration. The group's commemoration of the Commune went well reported on various blogs, both in France and internationally, particularly street-art blogs and blogs about urban politics, anti-capitalist resistance, and radical history.⁴⁸ Many celebrated RaspouTeam's approach – one blog referred to the group's work as exemplifying 'the history workshop of the street'.⁴⁹ Others, though, expressed fear that for all its innovativeness, RaspouTeam's project simply could not reach ordinary Parisians. In the comments section of *L'Obs* (a weekly French news magazine based in Paris) a comment on an article about RaspouTeam's project read: 'I fear that this work will remain in the columns of newspapers and interest only a few intellectuals, those who are well-meaning but somewhat cut off from reality'.⁵⁰ Several other online commentators also articulated concern for an approach which they feared might turn the memory of the Commune into a cultural object. One remarked that in terms of 'the form, the initiative is innovative, and useful for young people'. But in terms of the substance, they were concerned that 'the cultural appropriation [of the Commune] empties it of its political substance, diminishes it somehow...'.⁵¹ For some, then, RaspouTeam's brand of playful treasure-hunt-style commemoration emptied the event of its political potency, and instead rendered it an urban weekend activity for young culture-vultures.

Worse still, the *Journal Illustré* could be taken as an attempt to appropriate the history of the Commune for a new generation of community-minded young Parisians, keen to engage with radical heritage but reluctant to acknowledge their role in processes of gentrification and dispossession. Mathilde Zederman, writing on memories of the Commune in Belleville, describes how the transformation of traditionally working-class neighbourhoods of Paris since the 1980s has dramatically reshaped the social and cultural make-up of the area. The process of gentrification in Belleville, beginning after widespread demolition and reconstruction of its dilapidated streets in the 1980s, saw traditional working-class residents progressively

replaced by newcomers from the middle and upper middle classes. Zederman argues that these *multiculturels* – defined by their attraction to a ‘socially and ethnically mixed environment’⁵² – gained social prestige from the working-class and cosmopolitan heritage of Belleville, and that to integrate into their new place of residence they often became involved in local associations.⁵³ Zederman applies this idea to the uses of the Commune in the neighbourhood. She argues that the memory of the Commune has been appropriated by artists and recent residents of Belleville, who claim that the memory of the Commune belongs to the revolutionary tradition of the area, and thus that celebration and commemoration of the Commune is an authentic reassertion of local identity. However, as Zederman shows, ‘the continual reference to a resistant past is counter-intuitive when the social changes of the area are considered’. In other words, the memory of the Commune in Belleville has been ‘[re]constructed as a shared memory of Belleville’ so as to include the gentrifiers who reconstructed it, thus further erasing the radical legacies of such places.⁵⁴ RaspouTeam’s project was not centred solely on Belleville, but, perhaps tellingly, when I arranged to interview RaspouTeam in 2013, they suggested Belleville as the meeting place.

It is difficult to make any kind of accurate judgement as to the precise engagement figures for the *Journal Illustré*.⁵⁵ RaspouTeam reported in March 2011 that their earlier project, *Désordres Publics*, had in the previous five months between five and fifteen people a day tagging their QR codes – a total of over a thousand smartphone users accessing the web content⁵⁶ and enough to convince the film production company AGAT films to help finance their Commune project.⁵⁷ If RaspouTeam got as many people engaging with their *Journal Illustré* project, that would be more than those who marched to the *Mur des Fédérés* for the Commune commemoration the same year. However, while funding constraints and impact agendas mean that heritage organizations are increasingly concerned with engagement figures and visitation numbers, this is not necessarily a sound yardstick against which to measure the ‘success’ of commemorative projects. RaspouTeam proved that there was still mileage in the Commune; there remains radical inspiration to be gleaned from the events of 1871. But it is not enough to create public history projects out of radical pasts and assume that that their progressive value is self-evident just because they remember a ‘radical’ moment. RaspouTeam’s project made meaningful links between urban struggle in 1871 and the fight for egalitarian cities in the twenty-first century, but the group assumed that such connection with a radical past was enough to propel these stories to the people and places where they might be most meaningful today.

Importantly, while RaspouTeam’s *Journal Illustré* offered numerous ways in – via the street, the internet, or a mobile phone – the group’s commitment to spatial fidelity meant that their project was tied to the social landscape of the Paris of 1871 and so was less able to connect to the Paris of the 2000s and to the global beyond, to the places that, in the 150 years since the Commune,

have been dispossessed of public space and liveable cities. In other words, precisely those places where the memory of the Commune might be most valuable.

* * *

RaspouTeam's *Journal Illustré* demonstrated the huge amount of creative potential in commemorative activity. Commemorations can take multiple forms. They can reinvigorate the politics in what they commemorate and contribute to current political conversations. RaspouTeam explained that they chose to celebrate the Commune because they could see that there were contemporary social and political issues to which the memory of the Commune might speak: 'History is always in the present. We do not ask the same questions today as thirty years ago, and so much the better! We inherit a memory [of the Commune] that we want to develop and appropriate.'⁵⁸ Indeed, commemorating the past is always predicated on the present. Commemoration offers boundless possibilities for adaptation, appropriation, re-use, misuse, discussion and disagreement about the past, in conversation with the concerns of the present. RaspouTeam's project spoke to some of the concerns of the twenty-first century city – it made new connections and it placed the legacies of the Commune firmly on the street. But in doing so RaspouTeam inadvertently confirmed their fear that 'in many cities the streets are no longer the realm of the people'.⁵⁹

The *Journal Illustré* highlighted the strength of the forces acting against radical urban transformation and democratization, and consequently, the difficulty of producing or enacting authentic radical commemoration in the city. The gentrification of our cities has been matched by a gentrification of heritage, so that even when an explicitly disruptive challenge to the imposed spatial power dynamics of the city attempts to recapture past radicalisms, it is unable to undermine the capitalist forces that police the streets on which it is set. Even projects that seek explicitly to connect with an anti-capitalist, anti-privatization political message can end up commodifying the past, for the consumption of only a privileged few. In 1871 the Communards of Paris sought to empower ordinary Parisians. RaspouTeam hoped that their project might in some small way do the same – they hoped to 'take the powerful history of the Commune to the people'⁶⁰ – but they struggled to empower those excluded both from heritage projects, and from parts of the city.

RaspouTeam's desire to take the history of the Commune to the people also forces us to question how and why we choose to remember certain pasts. The intractable problem of trying not to privilege certain stories, while privileging a particular 'radical' or 'hidden' story in order to do so, reminds us that it is dangerous to simply decide on a radical moment or event and confer on it an intrinsically progressive character. The Communards themselves were fallible – many were elitist and chauvinistic – and their political visions were varied and complex. They are by no means unblemished radical

heroes. In 2016 Owen Hatherley declared that ‘if there is a rock on which the fissile contemporary left might all agree to build itself, it is the two-month-long Paris Commune of 1871’.⁶¹ Indeed, the Commune is a hugely important historical episode for the left, and understandably so. But in using the Commune as a point of radical consensus within a fractured political landscape, we risk losing our ability to think critically about it. RaspouTeam showed that the Commune does not mean one thing only, and that its memory can and should be utilized and appropriated by all who might find value in its message. For all of the *Journal Illustré* installations that were policed out of existence by the authorities, others were almost certainly lost to the work of other street artists, and other projects – covered up by new installations and new interventions, all vying for space on the crowded canvas of the Paris street.

In a recent reflection on the question ‘What is radical history now?’, Onni Gust suggested that practising radical history requires one ‘to undermine, critique and find alternatives to established frameworks’.⁶² Perhaps, then, it is precisely this persistent vying for space – the continued struggle to democratize our streets and our histories, and the continued engagement with the difficulty of truly opening up heritage – that makes commemoration of the Commune radical. Radical in so far as this continued engagement both with the inconsistent politics of the Commune and with the problem of commemoration, defends against complacency.

With the 150th anniversary of the Commune, commemorators and heritage-makers in all their guises must keep asking how they might find new audiences and how they might empower those traditionally excluded from public heritage with histories to inspire new futures. The Paris Commune of 1871 has a lot to offer us – plans for political revolution, ideas of internationalism, and dreams of municipal utopias – if we can only set its message to a twenty-first century frequency. This article began by asking whether the responsibility of bestowing a radical future is too much to ask of the long-dead Communard of 1871. Indeed, it is, and it is certainly too much to ask of RaspouTeam. But that is precisely the point. We cannot create radical blueprints from single historical events, nor can one anniversary or heritage project dictate how the legacies of the past might best be deployed today. What we take from the Commune, and from radical pasts more generally, must be a ceaselessly challenging, contested, and collaborative process. RaspouTeam were a part of this process. With the *Journal Illustré* RaspouTeam tried to transcend the heavily policed histories and highways of Paris. Their project was imperfect, and in many ways, it failed. But it failed while trying to find an alternative to established forms of commemoration and while seeking to empower new audiences, and in doing so offered important lessons for future commemorative projects. And therein lies the beauty of the anniversary celebration – there will always be another opportunity next year.

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