

Ethan Alcock

Disaster / Désastre: The Visual Legacy of the Paris Commune in America, 1871–1877

“The story of theft and fire and slaughter is but imperfectly told in the brief space at our command, but the illustrations by our artists present a pictorial view of the chief scenes in his terrific conflict, more vivid and striking than any thing [sic.] that could be conveyed in mere words.”

– *Harper’s Weekly*

Aug. 11, 1877

In 1877, one of the largest strikes in American history broke out: the Great Railroad Strike. It would become just one in a series of labor conflicts that characterized U.S. industrialization during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.² Much of the conflict of the Great Strike was not fought through action on the streets or on the railways, but instead through arguments in national U.S. media, primarily in newspapers and magazines. To make the strikes understandable, media of the time often referenced an unexpected recent event: the Paris Commune of 1871.³ Previous research has analyzed how the Commune became a useful reference to understand the strikes of 1877, but it often leaves out the use of visual media to connect American events to the Commune.⁴ Visual media, primarily

1 “The Great Strike,” *Harper’s Weekly* Aug. 11, 1877: 626, <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1877/0811/626> (accessed 5/6/2022).

2 There are a multitude of sources on labor conflict during this period. Carl Smith, *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877–1919* (New York: Norton, 1989), were inspirational. Particular thanks goes to Heather Cox Richardson whose public lectures, presented over Facebook during the pandemic, originally introduced me to this topic.

3 There are a multitude of primary sources explicitly making this connection. The following are taken from Harper’s Weekly, but newspapers and magazines across the country used the Commune to make sense of U.S. politics. “The City Amendments,” *Harper’s Weekly* Nov. 10, 1877: 879, <https://harp-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/view/article/text/133983/8148> (accessed 4/6/2023); “The Commune in New York,” *Harper’s Weekly* Jan. 31, 1874: 98, <https://harp-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/view/article/text/108997/8147> (accessed 4/6/2023).

4 Philip Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre: Americans and the Paris Commune* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction*, 85–107. Katz’ work is inspirational for this topic, as it is by far the most thorough exploration of the American experience of the Commune, but it is also lacking in visual evidence. Other resources which mention the link between the Commune and

through photographs and illustrated magazines, was fundamental in linking both the Chicago Fire of 1871 and the Great Strikes of 1877 with the Paris Commune in the minds of the American middle class. By making this connection, commentators associated class-based protest with violent revolt and urban disaster, threatening that if the working classes got what they wanted, all of civilization would go up in flames.

The Paris Commune

In the early morning of March 18, 1871, troops from the French national government⁵ in Versailles entered Paris in an attempt to remove military artillery from Montmartre, a working-class district of Paris.⁶ The artillery had been used during the recent Franco-Prussian War (1870 – 1871), during which Paris was besieged by the Prussians

for 4 months.⁷ The artillery was under the control of the National Guard, the primarily working-class city militia of Paris, which had been greatly expanded during the siege and had become proudly democratic and independent from the national army.⁸ Taking away these weapons was seen as the most efficient way to disempower working-class Parisians and to reassert the power of the national government.⁹ The attempt to take the cannons failed. The horses meant to haul them away were late, and the troops sent to guard them were ill-supplied. Taking advantage of the situation, Parisian civilians of all backgrounds overwhelmed the soldiers and attempted to convince them to disobey their orders. In a largely bloodless revolutionary moment, the Versailles troops (*Versillais*) refused to fire on civilian protesters, their discipline broke, and the cannons remained in Paris.¹⁰

U.S. politics, such as Richardson's work, don't devote enough space to the topic to merit using images as primary sources. J. Michelle Coghlan's study of the use of images of the *Pétroleuse* in post-Commune U.S. media has been influential. She draws on images, poetry and stories published in popular magazines to show how conservatives used the reference to the "unruly women" of the Commune to condemn domestic feminists who pushed social boundaries. J. Michelle Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

5 The French national government during this period was the National Assembly, led by Adolphe Thiers, and is also called the Third Republic. For more information on the details of French politics surrounding the Commune, see David A. Shafer, *The Paris Commune: French Politics, Culture and Society at the Crossroads of the Revolutionary Tradition and Revolutionary Socialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

6 Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 60–61.

7 Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 47–54.

8 The siege of Paris encouraged many wealthier Parisians to leave the city, leaving the National Guard as a more working-class organization than it had been before. Soon after the siege, "National Guard activists held a meeting at which they developed preliminary sketches for a Republican Federation of the Parisian National Guard battalions . . . to which each arrondissement would elect three delegates without regard to rank." For more information on the National Guard and their approach to democracy, see Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 57.

9 The national government under leadership of Adolphe Thiers pursued multiple policies leading up to the civil war which seemed designed to instigate a revolution in Paris. Reinstating rent payments was one of the most egregious of these policies. Even if the act of removing the cannons from Montmartre failed, Thiers could be safe in knowing that it would provoke a conflict that he felt the national army could win, further consolidating his power and permanently crippling French radicalism. Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 59.

10 Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 24–33.

This inaugurated the Paris Commune, a revolutionary republican government that fought against the French national government from March 18 to May 28, 1871.¹¹ During the last week of the Commune, the *Versillais* succeeded in entering the city and brutally suppressing the Commune in what is called The Bloody Week (*la semaine sanglante*).¹² Approximately 25,000 Communards were killed during the Bloody Week, many of them fighting on barricades and in the streets, others simply rounded up and killed en masse.¹³ Many important Parisian landmarks burned from a combination of shelling from the *Versillais* and the use of tactical arson by the Communards.¹⁴

The Commune became an international sensation, particularly in the United States. From the beginning of the Commune, bourgeois tourists were fascinated by the war and the destruction of Paris. Even before the Bloody Week ended, travel companies were scheduling tourist trips to see Paris

from outside the city.¹⁵ In the months following the Bloody Week, this only picked up steam with tourists and news reporters flocking to Paris.¹⁶ Americans who traveled to France often returned and shared their experience with an American audience.¹⁷ Photographers were among these early visitors and their photographs of Paris in ruin often recirculated in the United States. Hundreds of thousands of images produced in France were purchased by foreign businessmen to be sold abroad.¹⁸ These were often advertised as a means of helping foreign tourists who were visiting Paris to navigate these new ruins but were also used vicariously by U.S. viewers without the means to make the trip.¹⁹ In this sense, post-Commune photographs should be read from two viewpoints: the on-the-ground experience of a Frenchman, potentially with connections to the city, taking the photograph, and the American audience who would later view these photographs from afar.

11 The conflict between the French national government and the Paris Commune is also called the French Civil War, which in an American context can often be confused with The (U.S.) Civil War. Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 1.

12 Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 86–109.

13 Estimates of the number of dead vary, here I am drawing on Gullickson, who claims that 25,000 died during the Bloody Week and 15,000 national guardsmen died in the previous months' fighting. Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 97–98; Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 165.

14 Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 98–100.

15 Harvey A. Levenstein, *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 140.

16 Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 107–115.

17 A significant number of Americans already lived in Paris before the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune. They too often returned to America and publicly discussed the Commune, whether they had personally experienced it or not. Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 22–46.

18 Alisa Luxenberg, "Creating Désastres: Andrieu's Photographs of Urban Ruins in the Paris of 1871," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 1 (1998): 129; Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 198; Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 108.

19 Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 108.

These photographs include J. Andrieu's "*Désastres de la guerre*."²⁰ These are a series of silver prints on albumenized paper, which captured the ruins of Parisian architecture after the fall of the Commune.²¹ Images such as Andrieu's that came out of Paris faced multiple hurdles in becoming accessible to the international public. Action photography was technologically impossible; quickly moving figures would be blurred beyond recognition. Thus, photographs often depicted the aftermath of the fighting, and could only reference the action indirectly. Two primary genres of photography remained. First, still-life photography of war casualties was possible; it had been widely experimented with during the American Civil War for commercial and personal purposes.²² Secondly, photography of the destruction of the buildings of Paris was also viable. Another hurdle was the censorship of Commune photography which was quickly instated by the French government. This censorship was wide-reaching and was not limited to pro-Commune photography.²³ For instance, photography of the war dead was not necessarily pro-

Commune, but was still controversial. Because the Communards died in a civil war, their deaths could not be framed as a noble sacrifice that would facilitate national mourning.²⁴ Thus, Commune photography largely refrained from directly depicting the dead Communards. On the other hand, photographs of ruined buildings did not risk violating any taboos or running afoul of the censors.²⁵ In general, these were the types of photographs that exited Paris.²⁶ As a result, ruin imagery needed to stand in for the many experiences of post-Commune Paris.

Alisa Luxenberg is an art historian who specializes in 18th-19th century European photography and art, particularly in France and Spain. She reads these photographs as extremely complex works, making reference to a variety of themes, often in contention with each other, for different audiences.²⁷ Above all, she argues against a class-based reading of them. Instead, she works with a theory of participatory identity, in which the identity of the Communards was not shaped primarily by their class identity, but by their shared

20 Andrieu's full name is not known

21 Luxenberg, "Creating Désastres," 113.

22 Luxenberg, "Creating Désastres," 117.

23 Luxenberg, "Creating Désastres," 116.

24 Luxenberg, "Creating Désastres," 117.

25 Luxenberg, "Creating Désastres," 116.

26 Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 109.

27 Luxenberg, "Creating Désastres," 114 – 116.

spatial identity: their experiences surviving the Prussian siege and the attacks from Versailles.²⁸ In this light, these photographs represent a shared trauma at the destruction of monuments of national import, independent of the viewer's class background or politics. While acknowledging the specific classed aspects of viewing these photographs, they were undoubtedly emotionally resonant for anyone who had lived in Paris during the Prussian siege and the Commune.

While this reading is compelling, it is restricted to those with a connection to Paris. When photographs like Andrieu's migrated to America, viewers lost that sense of participatory identity, because they generally lacked any interpersonal inter-class connections to the people of Paris. Luxenberg reads these photographs as using "the technique of redescription, transferring and transforming the war 'wounds' from bodies to buildings, skin to stone."²⁹ J. Michelle Coghlan, a literary scholar who specializes in American radical print culture, makes use of this concept in her work on the role of the Commune in American literature. Her response foregrounds both the reality of the Communards' deaths and the specifically American viewership:

Such a slippage between building and body is doubly suggestive ... imbricating not only the ways in which the image of the Parisian ruins stood in for, and often marked the erasure of, the bodies of the Communards ... but also the ways in which the "wounds" of the Commune came to be transferred from the sight of bodies to the sites of lost or charred landmarks in mainstream American memory.³⁰

In a French context, the process of redescription may have provided genuine catharsis within the constraints of French censorship. In an American context, these same photographs took on a more insidious function, obscuring the human victims of the war and substituting in property as the primary casualty of the war.

This transference of war wounds is evident in Andrieu's photographs of the *Hôtel de Ville* (Fig. 1). The *Hôtel de Ville* was originally constructed in the 14th century and traditionally housed the Parisian municipal government. During the Commune, it housed the Communard government and was the center of the city's administration.³¹ The photograph frames the scene in five distinct parts: the vertical columns on the right and left side of the image (more distinct on the left), the rubble scattered

28 Luxenberg, "Creating Désastres," 114 – 115.

29 Luxenberg, "Creating Désastres," 117.

30 Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 109.

31 Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 63.



Figure 1. Andrieu. *Désastres de la guerre: L'Hôtel-de-Ville, Galerie des Fêtes*, 1871. École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. From the essay "Creating Désastres: Andrieu's Photographs of Urban Ruins in the Paris of 1871," *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 1 (1998).

on the floor in every direction, the end of the hall including a ladder, and the roof where light shines through the bars that previously held the ceiling. The grandeur of the building can clearly be seen from the decorative columns. They harken back to the building's historical legacy and even the broader legacy of Western Civilization by referencing Greek and Roman architecture. For American viewers, it would have been symbolic of Western culture, order, and civilization. The straight vertical lines of the columns are contrasted with the short, chaotic, and intersecting lines of the debris and bars which cover the top and bottom of the image.

Chicago Fire

One of the first truly American events which came to be viewed in the context of the Paris Commune was the Chicago Fire. The Chicago Fire roared to life on October 8, 1871, and quickly destroyed much of Chicago. It killed about 300 people, left 100,000 homeless, and destroyed \$200 million in property.³² It has remained one of the most famous urban disasters in U.S. history, in part because the fire became a useful reference for

discussing contemporary social issues.

Original commentators were quick to compare the Chicago Fire to the fires of Paris during the Bloody Week. This connection was made commonly enough that the Paris Commune is cited in nearly every modern work on the Chicago Fire.³³ In some sense, it is unsurprising that this was the first event that came to mind because the Bloody Week had ended less than 5 months prior. Yet the U.S. already had a recent history of urban ruin to draw on for comparison: the Civil War.³⁴ Commentators rarely drew on images of urban ruin in the U.S. South to compare to Chicago. It is suggested that the controversies of the Civil War made such a comparison difficult; the nation was already entering a period of reconciliation, in which the differences between the North and the South were better off forgotten.³⁵ Instead of looking to their own country for comparisons, Americans often looked to the international news section of their newspapers for a fitting reference.

American audiences had grown accustomed to detailed and fast, though often inaccurate,

³² Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 124.

³³ Ross Miller, *American Apocalypse: The Great Fire and the Myth of Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 95; Carl Smith, *Chicago's Great Fire* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020), 144–145; Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871–1874*. Historical Studies of Urban America. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 48; Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 49–50. Miller's *American Apocalypse* features an image nearly identical to Andrieu's photograph of the Hôtel de Ville (Fig. 1.), although the author doesn't comment on why he chose this figure and why it might be a relevant connection between the Commune and the Chicago Fire.

³⁴ Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 112.

³⁵ Coghlan theorizes that comparing the Chicago Fire to the Parisian fires helped Americans forget the violence and division of the civil war. Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 112.

reporting during the American Civil War.³⁶ During the previous decades, printing and news reporting practices improved, and newspapers proliferated across the United States, expanding from 426 million copies distributed in 1850 to 1.5 billion in 1870.³⁷ When war broke out between France and Prussia, American readers demanded a similar style of war coverage as during the U.S. Civil War. War correspondents in Europe used similar techniques as during the Civil War, and the hottest news, independent of accuracy, was sent to New York via the transatlantic cable.³⁸ New York-based newspapers were often the first to receive the news from abroad, and news coverage from New York newspapers was often recirculated and reprinted throughout the rest of the U.S. by newspapers that couldn't afford the expensive telegraph costs.³⁹ In this way, international news of the Paris Commune spread to Chicago and became relevant when the Great Fire started in 1871.

One way the comparison between the burning of Paris and the Great Chicago Fire was made was through accusations that Communards or Communists⁴⁰ had started the fires. A few weeks after the fire, the *Chicago Times* printed what was supposedly a Communard's confession of starting the Great Fire.⁴¹ The anonymous source claims that they came straight to Chicago from Paris after the Commune fell and had the intention of burning the business district of the city with a small group of revolutionaries. The story had no evidence, and its validity was widely questioned at the time, yet it was immensely compelling to middle-class Chicagoans.⁴² The story in the *Chicago Times* was not the only instance where a Communard was accused of starting the fire. Multiple other highly visible Americans associated with the Commune were rumored to have a connection to the fire.⁴³ Evidently, the memory of the Paris Commune and the experience of the Chicago Fire were circulating in close proximity, but it is not obvious why the

36 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 63.

37 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 62.

38 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 63–66.

39 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 65–66.

40 These terms are often used synonymously and incorrectly in contemporary American news. The Commune included a significant Socialist element, but the ideologies of the Communards were far from homogeneous. Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 189; Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 215; Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 119–9 125

41 Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 46–48; Smith, *Chicago's Great Fire*, 145; Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 49–50; Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 124–127.

42 Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 48.

43 The list includes George Francis Train, a well-known if eccentric leftist organizer who had experience organizing in France; Gustave Cluseret, the Delegate of War of the Commune for much of its existence as well as a union general years before; and Wendell Phillips. Train was especially singled out for setting the fire as he was making an improbable run to become president in late 1871 and actively celebrated the destruction of the city. Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 126.

connection between these two events would have been compelling.

As cities, Paris and Chicago were vastly different. Part of what made the burning of Paris so sensational across the Atlantic was the mystique of the city. It had a long, rich history at the center of “Western Civilization.” Chicago was a boomtown on the edge of American Westward colonial expansion. It had existed for only forty years before the fire, but in that time had already become a metropolis and an industrial and railroad center in the West.⁴⁴ It had virtually no history to draw on in comparison to Paris and was on the very periphery of European expansion at the time. How could these two cities, these two events, be worth comparing?

Carl Smith, a prominent historian of social division, social threat, and promise in the American city, gives one answer in his book *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief*:

The burning of the city [Chicago] commanded more attention than any other of the dozens of nineteenth century American urban fires ... not only because of its scale but also because, as John J. Pauly suggests, it thrust calamity into the heart of

the most promising — and, in some respects, most threatening — city in the nation.⁴⁵

The same could be said of Paris. It was at once the city of light and the origin of the French Revolution. Commentators across the Atlantic were aware of this duality and continually drew on the history of urban disorder in Paris to describe the Commune.⁴⁶ Yet the city remained a cultural Mecca, full of promise for American tourists who visited. Despite the differences, when urban disaster struck in these cities, it was remembered for two reasons: because they were great cities, promising in their own respects, and because they were already cities full of conflict with hotly contested identities.

Forty years after its founding, Chicagoans were already building up a belief in the greatness of their city. Before the fire, Chicagoans placed great faith in the indestructibility of their “great buildings,” in particular buildings touted as “fireproof”. The Chicago Courthouse is a standard example. John M. van Osdel designed the building in Greek Revival style with limestone from out of state known as “Athens Marble.”⁴⁷ Almost everything about the building was designed for architectural greatness

44 Miller, *American Apocalypse*, 39.

45 Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 5.

46 There are a multitude of examples of commentators drawing on the memory of the French Revolution and the Terror to discuss the Commune. The tricoteuses were a female figure of the French Revolution who knitted next to the guillotines as prisoners were executed, and were likened to the women of the Commune. Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 12.

47 Miller, *American Apocalypse*, 69.

rather than practical usage.⁴⁸ Unlike the primarily wooden residences of Chicago, these buildings were made of brick, stone, and steel, which were considered fireproof. This kind of architecture was not abnormal for downtown Chicago and served as the pride of wealthy Chicagoans looking to distance themselves from the working classes of the city.⁴⁹ However, pride and faith were not enough to stop the flames. Even so-called “fireproof” buildings like the Chicago Courthouse were destroyed by the fire.⁵⁰

The failure of this great architecture was shocking for commentators. One commentator confronting the vast carnage of the fire remarked: “All those magnificent streets, all those grand palaces, which but yesterday were the pride and glory of the chief Western metropolis, are today indeed, a mass of scattered shapeless ruins.”⁵¹ The fact that the primarily wooden slums of the city would burn at the first sight of fire was taken for granted; the idea that large, fire resistant buildings could come to ruin was shocking. Journalists and photographers documented the failure of these buildings by taking and reprinting ruin photographs. These

included Jex Bardwell’s photograph of the ruins of the great Chicago Courthouse (Fig. 2) as well as the ruins of the Honoré block (Fig. 3). In these photographs, European-style architecture, a pride of Chicago, is contrasted with the rubble left by the fire. Particularly in the photograph of the Honoré block, the European-style white columns contrast with the dark rubble with a striking similarity to Andrieu’s photograph of the *Hôtel de Ville* (Fig. 1). As with Andrieu’s photograph, the order of grand architecture opposes the chaos of urban ruin. In both photographs the columns of a “great building” point eerily upwards to a roof that no longer exists.⁵²

Apart from their promise, Paris and Chicago were also similar in the threat they posed. For many bourgeois commentators, the primary threat presented by the Chicago Fire was not the conflagration itself, but class conflict. Shortly after the presses began printing after the fire, commentators told stories of class revolt and the threat posed to the more “proper” citizens of Chicago.

48 The only exception was a second-story stairway meant to accommodate the muddy shoes of people entering without overly dirtying the building. Miller, *American Apocalypse*, 68.

49 Miller, *American Apocalypse*, 68–70; Miller, *American Apocalypse*, 75–76.

50 Miller, *American Apocalypse*, 69–70.

51 Miller, *American Apocalypse*, 68.

52 An additional relevant visual trope is that of the “woman-as-city.” Smith includes an image of Chicago represented as a woman being helped to her feet by other city-women all surrounded by jackals. Similar images are common of Paris-as-woman or France-as-woman being abused in a variety of ways during the Franco-Prussian war and during the Commune. This trope claims the city as a ‘great city’ in a Western artistic tradition. Smith, *Chicago’s Great Fire*, 146; James A. Leith, “The War of Images surrounding the Commune,” *In Images of the Commune, Images De La Commune*, ed. James Leith (Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queens University Press, 1978), 115–117.



Figure 2. Jex Bardwell. *Ruins of the Court House after the Fire of 1871*. Photograph. From *The Great Chicago Fire & The Web of Memory*, ichi-38923. <https://gretchicagofire.org/item/ichi-38923/> (accessed 4/19/22).



Figure 3. Jex Bardwell. *Ruins of the Honoré Block after the Chicago Fire of 1871*. Photograph, glass negative. From *Chicago History Museum: Images*, ichi-059806. <https://images.chicagohistory.org/asset/24045/> (accessed 4/19/22).⁵³

⁵³ This image is reprinted in Lowe's eyewitness accounts of the Great Fire. The subtitle is particularly notable: "The Honoré Block, at the northwest corner of Dearborn and Adams Streets, another so-called fireproof structure, as it appeared after the Great Fire." Even a century after the fire commentators lamented the falling of the fireproof buildings. David Lowe, *The Great Chicago Fire: In Eyewitness Accounts and 70 Contemporary Photographs and Illustrations* (New York: Dover Publications, 1979), 35.

Reportedly, looting and drunkenness swept the city, even as the fire raged. A commonly retold story was that bartenders, understanding that their supplies were soon to be burnt, rolled out barrels of alcohol into the street for people to consume.⁵⁴ Looting in this era was consistently seen as a heinous crime by bourgeois Americans, one uniformly used as an accusation by the wealthy against the working class. In the context of the era of the temperance movement, the charge of drunkenness takes on the quality of being immoral and improper as well, connoting a class or racial “other.”⁵⁵ Together, these accusations form a rhetorical strategy that condemned the working class as they fled the fire. Not only were there accusations of people using the fire to steal from the wealthy, but there were also accusations of working-class criminals actively helping spread the fire.⁵⁶ These imagined fire spreaders included literal criminals released from a Chicago prison so as not to be burned alive, as well as the aforementioned Communards, who represented the foreign “other,”

blamed for instigating class conflict in America.⁵⁷ The theme of fire spreading is also found in the story of Mrs. O’Leary, whose ignorance reportedly started the conflagration. In the aftermath of the fire, the myth developed that Catherine O’Leary, an Irish immigrant, was responsible for the fire because she brought a lantern into her barn to milk her cow, which promptly kicked over the lantern and started the conflagration.⁵⁸ The Mrs. O’Leary story became so popular that many Americans still recognize the story, despite the lack of evidence to support it. As a truly intersectional working-class, Catholic, Irish immigrant woman, she embodied all of the “others” whom bourgeois white male commentators feared and sought to blame.⁵⁹ In this way, the social elite of Chicago constructed unruly, criminal “others” as intentionally causing harm to respectable Chicagoans for their own benefit.

In response to these accusations, commentators imagined and illustrated what they deemed to be appropriate punishments. A series of

54 There were a number of similar stories produced following the fire. Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 50–54; Smith, *Chicago’s Great Fire*, 140–142; Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 48–52.

55 Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 54.

56 Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 56.

57 American commentators often vigorously denied that European style class conflict could happen in the U.S. Casting the real perpetrators of class conflict as foreigners was a rhetorical strategy which emphasized national loyalty over class consciousness, and which attempted to reassure bourgeois Americans that the U.S. was fundamentally insulated from Commune-like revolt. Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 142–160.

58 Chicago History Museum, “The O’Leary Legend,” *The Great Chicago Fire & the Web of Memory*, Chicago History Museum, 2011, accessed April 2, 2023. <https://greatchicagofire.org/oleary-legend/>.

59 Miller makes the argument that pointing blame at the urban poor of Chicago distracted from the institutional problems which made the Great Fire possible. Moves such as blaming Mrs. O’Leary or a Communard for purposefully spreading the fire obscured the fact that Chicago utilities were notoriously underfunded and that Chicago architecture had fundamentally failed to account for such a large fire. Miller, *American Apocalypse*, 63–67.



SWIFT JUSTICE. FATE OF THIEVES AND INCENDIARIES.

Figure 4. “Swift Justice. Fate of Thieves and Incendiaries.” Engraving. From Luzerne, Frank. *The Lost City! Drama of the Fire-Fiend! – or – Chicago, As It Was, and As It Is! And Its Glorious Future!* New York: Wells, 1872 p. 187.

images were produced following the fire showing the public lynching or murder of alleged “thieves and incendiaries.”⁶⁰ For example, an image in the instant history “The Lost City” shows a well-dressed but working-class crowd hanging a man from a lamppost.⁶¹ The caption reads “Swift Justice. Fate of

Thieves and Incendiaries,” identifying the man as an unruly element of the city who must be eliminated (Fig. 4). The crowd is actively engaged in the activity; two men to the left are seen pulling the rope to hoist the body upwards. In the background, the fire looms, giving context to the scene and situating it in hellish imagery. There were no such recorded events, and it seems immensely improbable that the citizens of Chicago, fleeing the fire, would have found the time to identify and hang people for either incendiarism or theft.⁶² The image functions to claim that even the working class respects the bourgeois outrage toward these unruly individuals who benefit from the misfortune of all Chicago residents. Like much commentary on the class conflict element of the fire, it attempts to pin the blame on a handful of instigators and to claim that the vast majority of Chicagoans, independent of class, agree with the social norms the commentators believed in.

The image shares similarities with commonly reproduced representations of incendiaries, often women, who were held responsible for the burning of Paris.⁶³ In particular, the *Pétroleuses* were the focus of newspaper coverage towards the end of the

60 Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 56.

61 “Instant histories” was the name given to historical accounts of recent events, often written months or a year after the events took place. They were a fairly popular genre in the 19th century, bridging the gap between an informative and entertainment source. Luzerne’s history of the Chicago Fire, published in 1872, for example, was an instant history. Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 72.

62 Smith, *Urban Disorder*, 56.

63 The phrase “unruly woman” is borrowed from Gullickson. Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 3–6.

Commune.⁶⁴ These women were accused of running around Paris with buckets of gasoline or petroleum (hence the name) setting fire to the city during the Bloody Week. The *Pétroleuse* became one of the most enduring images of the Paris Commune, in large part because of her failure to conform to feminine norms and her inability to be controlled by traditional social structures. Although the character in “The Lost City” image is not a woman, a host of unruly female figures did emerge from the Chicago fire. The most obvious one is Mrs. O’Leary herself, but the list also includes looters, drunks, and criminals. The hanged incendiary does still share an “otherness” with the *Pétroleuse*, which made them both compelling figures for bourgeois news reporters.



Figure 5. “The End of the Commune – Execution of a *Pétroleuse*,” July 8, 1871, 628, *Harper’s Weekly*, harpweek, <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1871/0708/628> (accessed 4/19/22).⁶⁶

Images such as “The End of the Commune – Execution of a *Pétroleuse*,” published in Harper’s *Weekly*, show the fate of accused *Pétroleuses* captured during the Bloody Week (Fig. 5). A lone woman identified as a *Pétroleuse* stands cornered against a wall facing a soldier with a rifle on the right and presumably two soldiers with pistols out of the frame of the image. They are soon to execute the woman, just as many other Communards were summarily executed during the week.⁶⁵ The surrounding text t

paints her as a sympathetic figure who has been unfortunately driven out of her “proper” feminine sphere to become the feared *Pétroleuse*.⁶⁷ Gay Gullickson, a historian specializing in women’s history in France, analyzes this image in her work on representations of women of the Commune. She argues that the image portrays the woman positively, focusing more on the brutality

64 Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 3–6; Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 23–51.

65 Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 90.

66 This image is a reprinting of an engraving earlier produced in *The Graphic*, a British illustrated weekly, on June 10, 1871. Reprinting European drawings without citation was a common professional practice for American newspapers. Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 188; Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 65.

67 “*La Pétroleuse*,” *Harper’s Weekly* July 8, 1871: 628.

of the soldiers than her sins.⁶⁸ However, it can still be read as indicating the *Pétroleuse*'s guilt. She is a figure who can only be mourned when she is dead, when her continuing presence in the world is not threatening. As long as she remains alive, questions of how a respectable woman could commit such crimes remain, and it is difficult to give her a satisfying conclusion.⁶⁹ The image is certainly not identical to "The Lost City" image. However, the images both show the perpetrators of class conflict being punished in the streets they roam, explicitly for the charge of spreading fire and implicitly for the charge of upsetting the social order.⁷⁰

Great Railroad Strikes

In 1871, visual imagery was used both to attack unruly elements of American society and to claim that class conflict could not truly spread to America, because it was fundamentally foreign to the vast majority of the American working class, who were decent, law-abiding citizens. The years between 1871 and 1877 marked some significant changes to

this narrative, culminating in the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. Philip Katz is the preeminent scholar on the repercussions of the Commune on American society until 1877. He argues that between 1871 and 1877, the Commune remained in the news and on people's minds, resulting in an Americanization of the Commune: an adaptation of the story of the Paris Commune to an American context for the purpose of commenting on American political events.⁷¹ Only after this Americanization could the Commune properly be used to characterize labor unrest at home during the Great Strike.

The Commune remained in U.S. public discourse in a variety of forms. The French government continued the trials of captured Communards for over four years, and they were often reported on by the American press.⁷² Many Communard refugees fled to New York in the aftermath of the repression of the Commune and the sentencing of the Communards by the French government. These refugees lacked sufficient numbers to significantly alter the U.S. political

68 Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 187–189; Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 34–36.

69 The question of how seemingly respectable women could have participated in the Commune was a focus of the trials of the Communards by the Third Republic. Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 198–201.

70 A notable difference between Paris and Chicago is how quickly each city was rebuilt after their respective fires. Very quickly after Chicago's fire the scaffolding went up for new buildings; architects and city planners saw the rebuilding process as integral to overcoming the trauma of the fire and to cementing Chicago's reputation as an American metropolis. However, when the economic recession happened in 1873 construction came to a halt, requiring a longer-term investigation into architectural strategies. Miller, *American Apocalypse*, 63–105. Paris had a more fragmented rebuilding; notably the palace of the Tuileries and the palace of St-Cloud were left in ruin for over a decade. The difference in these rebuilding mentalities shows distinctions in the ideological context of the two situations. Luxenberg, "Creating Désastres," 117; Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 110–112.

71 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 161.

72 Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 194–195; Shafer, *The Paris Commune*, 100.

scene, but they did help foster radicalism in New York City and helped celebrate the anniversary of the Commune annually in the years following 1873, along with other radical groups across the country.⁷³ On the other side of the political spectrum, conservatives continued to discuss and make sense of the Commune in the following years, especially attempting to put it in an American context. American clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, routinely denounced the Commune, focusing particularly on its hostility towards religious institutions.⁷⁴ That is not to say that the American clergy were a monolith; there were a handful of clergymen who were sympathetic to the Commune and were sometimes even explicitly supportive of the Communards.⁷⁵ It was their interpretations and disagreements that kept the topic in circulation in American discourse and applied the lessons of the Commune to an American context.

Economic activity did not stand still, either. In 1873, one of the worst financial recessions in U.S. history started: the Panic of 1873. It would last until 1878, by which time American economic activity had decreased by a third.⁷⁶ The recession

had disastrous consequences for American workers. Wages fell by staggering proportions, up to 50% in some states. Unemployment was rampant, and those without jobs often roamed the streets as “tramps” looking for work.⁷⁷ The recession was foundational in creating the class tension which would spark the strikes of 1877.

In 1876, one particularly extravagant representation of the Commune emerged at the U.S. Centennial celebration in Philadelphia. Coghlan notes two visual sites of memory of the Commune: “The Siege of Paris” cyclorama, which included an exhibition on the assassination of the Archbishop of Paris by the Communards, and the “Paris by Night” cyclorama.⁷⁸ These cycloramas presented panoramic views of Paris; “Paris by Night” represented Paris before the Commune (1848), and “The Siege of Paris” claimed to represent Paris during the Prussian siege in 1871.

Coghlan argues that these cycloramas produced what Alison Landsberg famously termed “prosthetic memory” of the Commune for American viewers.⁷⁹ Landsberg defines prosthetic memory as a memory of an event that an individual did

73 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 162–164.

74 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 143–148.

75 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 149–151.

76 “Economic activity” is meant very narrowly here, referring to the formal economy. Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 167.

77 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 167.

78 Cycloramas refer to panoramic displays which could surround and engage the viewer in a landscape. Antiquated cycloramas still exist; there is still one at the University of Iowa Museum of Natural History. Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 11–19, 163.

79 Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 12.

not live through themselves, but feel like they experienced through film or modern mass media in general.⁸⁰ Coghlan expands the idea from film into these panoramas, claiming that this particular reproduction attempted to give viewers an “authentic” experience of Paris during the Commune and thus gave American viewers their own memory of the event.⁸¹ This thread can be expanded further, if in a weaker form, to any visual reproduction of the Commune which divorced visual representation from real events, and situated the events of the Commune in a specifically American memory. In 1877, as in 1871, many commentators complained about the lack of accuracy in sensationalized visual reporting. *The Pittsburgh Leader’s* complaint in particular is worth reproducing:

they represent it [the 1877 strikers] as a wild and heterogeneous collection of rough men and virago women ... all with coarse, brutish faces, exhibiting every phase of ignorance and malignity. Now this is a French mob, the traditional mob of the first French Revolution, as sketched by English artists,

which again budded and bloomed and was plucked in the commune of June, 1870 [*sic*].⁸²

The memory of the French Revolution, which resurfaced during the Paris Commune and became Americanized throughout the 1870s, became a prosthetic memory for American citizens who had not lived through the French Revolution, who had not been to Paris, and who had never even seen a strike. Representations of the 1877 Railroad Strike had little to do with the conditions on the ground.⁸³ They instead drew on imagery of what class conflict could look like, and thereby depicted a uniquely American class revolt as the reoccurrence of a uniquely Parisian class and anti-government revolt six years prior.

The forceful ending of the Paris Commune set a precedent for using state violence to put down class revolt, which was echoed by language used in 1877. The U.S. army had not been used to put down strikes since 1834, 43 years earlier, during

80 Alison Landsberg, “Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture,” In *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. Paul Grainge (Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 148–149; Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 12.

81 Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism*, 12.

82 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 177.

83 Many images produced in illustrated magazines are fundamentally unable to accurately portray events simply due to the medium. As mentioned, photography in this period could only capture still shots, so any action images are produced from an artist’s imagination, sometimes directly inspired from the lived experience of a journalist, but more often produced to satisfy the needs of a public hungry for sensationalized action. In this sense illustrated journals acted very much like films where filmmakers draw on visual imagery which doesn’t directly correlate to reality but is satisfying for an audience expecting an “extra-real” experience. *Harper’s Weekly* claimed that some of their images (Fig. 6) were drawn by reporters who were in the fray based on their own experiences, but Katz writes at length about the inaccuracy of Commune reporting. “The Capture of Paris,” *Harper’s Weekly* July 1, 1871: 599; Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 66–67.

Andrew Jackson's presidency.⁸⁴ Katz argues that the primary analogy made in 1877 was to the more recent Paris Commune and the use of force by the French government to put down the Commune.⁸⁵ Many newspaper commenters clearly made this connection and used the memory of the successful state intervention in Paris to justify putting down strikes at home. They were particularly drawn to the phrase "grape and canister" as a method of putting down revolt, referencing the military tactics used by the Versailles government against the Communards.⁸⁶ Rather than focusing on the troops as violent oppressors, they preferred to cast them as an extension of normal Americans who would not tolerate violent class upheaval. Again, bourgeois authors claimed to speak for the masses in condemning class conflict, and, in doing so, argued that state violence was democratic and merited.

Similarities in visual imagery between 1871 and 1877 mirror this argument. The cover image of the July 1, 1871 Harper's Weekly magazine issue (Fig. 6) portrays a group of *Versaillais* shooting from the roof of a house in Paris. They are shooting

at and killing Communards in the streets below, but the framing of the image instead focuses on the individual soldiers' bravery and triumph. Additionally, the written article which accompanied this image only mentions Communards in the context of setting fire to the city. It is not mentioned who the soldiers are firing at nor why they're moving along the tops of houses.⁸⁷ In the window, two women curiously look out from behind the firing soldier. The article claims that they are residents of the house who were originally scared of the troops entering the house, but quickly adapted to it. The image visually claims these residents as allies of the Versailles soldiers.⁸⁸ Like many other images middle-class Americans would have grown familiar with, the image removes and isolates the class "other" and claims that any respectable citizens are allies of "order" as represented by the state soldiers.

84 The U.S. army had been used more recently to put down the New York Draft Riots. Primary sources show a connection between the Draft Riots and the Great Strike. "Something that will not 'blow over,'" *Harper's Weekly* July 29, 1871: 696; J. T. Headley, *Pen and Pencil Sketches of the Great Riots. An Illustrated History of the Railroad and Other Great American Riots, including all the Riots in the Early History of the Country* (New York: E. B. Treat, 1882), 136–288; Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 174.

85 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 174–178.

86 Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 174.

87 "The Capture of Paris," *Harper's Weekly* July 1, 1871: 599.

88 The political beliefs of women of the Commune certainly varied widely; some supported the revolution to their deaths and others opposed the Commune and supported the national government. Gullickson provides examples of both. For many women the Bloody Week was far less rosy than for those represented in the *Harper's Weekly* magazine (Fig. 6). Many women actively participated in the fighting and dying and many more were taken prisoner by the troops. Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 120–158; Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 160–166.

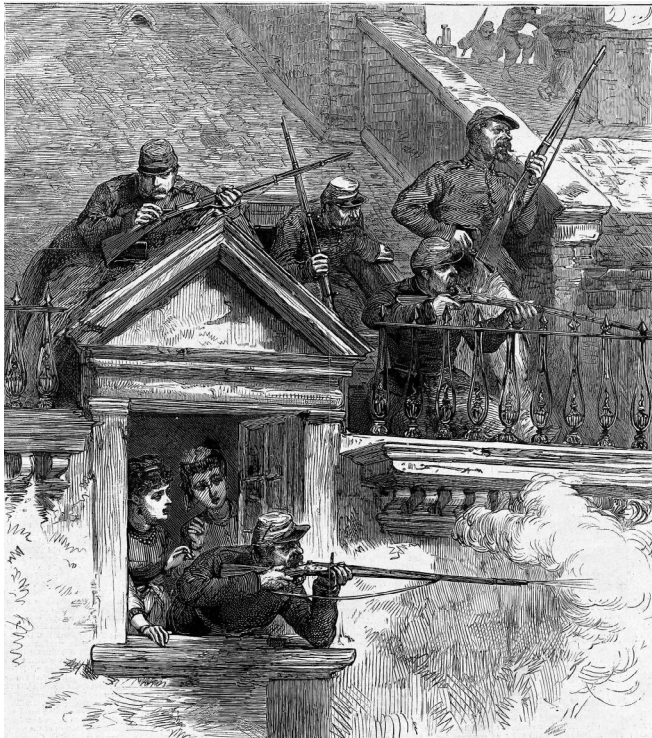


Figure 6: “Versailles Soldiers Firing Upon the Communists from Roofs and Windows in Paris,” July 1, 1871, 593, *Harper’s Weekly*. Harpweek, <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1871/0701> (accessed 4/19/22).

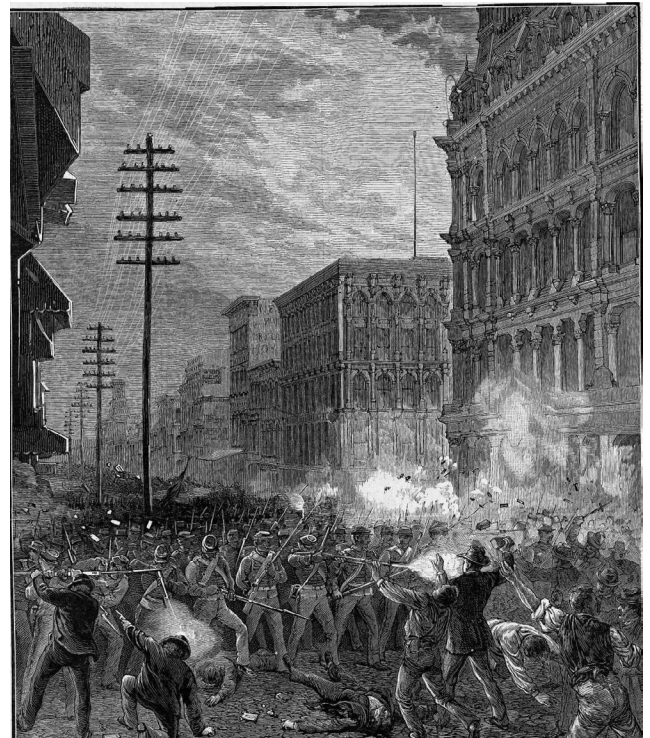


Figure 7: “The Great Strike — The Sixth Maryland Regiment Fighting its Way Through Baltimore,” August 11, 1877, 617, *Harper’s Weekly*. Harpweek, <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1877/0811/617> (accessed 5/2/2022).

Another issue of *Harper’s Weekly* from August 11, 1877 covered the Great Railroad Strike at length. The cover image is captioned “The Great Strike — The sixth Maryland regiment fighting its way through Baltimore” (Fig. 7).⁸⁹ As in the 1871 magazine cover, the focus is on the soldiers; the viewer faces them as they “fight” the people of Baltimore. The framing of the image, notably the long electrical or telegraph lines, implies a linear

view not only of the street but also of the soldier’s progress. They came from the image’s vanishing point, their path stretching out in the distance, and they will continue to press on despite the risk posed to them. There are clearly notable differences in comparison to the 1871 cover. Those opposed to the soldiers are clearly visible in this image; they fight back with bricks and pistols, and when the soldiers press forward the dead or wounded strikers

⁸⁹ “The Great Strike — The Sixth Maryland Regiment Fighting its Way Through Baltimore,” Aug. 11, 1877: 617.

are left in the street. The fact that the victims of the soldiers are clearly visible does not seem to disturb the magazine's authors. They labeled the image as a "fight" and clearly seemed to think it such. Coverage of the strikes often used wartime language.⁹⁰ This was in part because the reporters covering the event had trained in covering wars, a practice that was originally developed during the U.S. Civil War, but continued during the Franco-Prussian war, Paris Commune, and even during the Russo-Turkish war, which was covered in this same 1877 magazine issue.⁹¹ The language of war allowed commentators to frame the two sides, strikers and soldiers, as military equals on a battlefield. Only in this light can the August 11 cover look like a fair fight and not a massacre. The framing of strikers as military opponents allow such images to overlook the human suffering inherent in violent strike-breaking, just as bourgeois commentators ignored the suffering involved in ending the Commune.

As the *Harper's Weekly* writers cheered on the troops, they also condemned rioters as looters and arsonists. In some cases, these were gendered attacks against women and children:⁹²

In one place where barrels of flour had been rolled from the cars and over the walls to the street below, breaking with the fall, heaps of flour were piled up several feet in depth. In these the women were rolling and fighting in their eagerness to get all they could. In their greed they were not satisfied with aprons full, but, holding out the skirts of their dresses, they ploughed into the heaps till they had all they could carry; then staggered off, covered from head to feet with flour.⁹³

This section from a *Harper's Weekly* article contains a great deal of poorly concealed classism and sexism. The fact that the women were desperate and hungry was considered fundamentally at odds with proper femininity. In these representations, poor women were, by definition, failures of femininity, and middle-class male commentators could not help but be gripped by anger and disgust at the sight of them.

These kinds of indictments are reminiscent of gendered attacks made on the women of Paris during the Paris Commune. The women of the Commune who refused, or were unable, to conform to ideals of femininity were often used by

90 Troy Matthew Rondinone, "The Other 'Irrepressible Conflict': Industrial War in the Public Imagination, 1865–1950." (PhD diss., University of California, 2003), 75–82.

91 "Foreign News," *Harper's Weekly* Aug. 11, 1877: 619.

92 The quoted passage doesn't mention children, but other parts of the same article do. Children are often read as the extensions of women. The immorality of children is always considered an expression of the failure of the mother. One sensational example is that some *Pétroleuses* were accused of taking their children with them to help spread gasoline over the buildings of Paris. Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 172.

93 The section also makes other attacks on women and children, accusing them of looting other daily necessities which would have been absolutely necessary in an economic depression. "The Great Strike," *Harper's Weekly* Aug. 11, 1877: 626.



Figure 8: “The Great Strike – Destruction of the Union Depot and Hotel at Pittsburgh,” August 11, 1877, 621 Harper’s Weekly. Harpweek, <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1877/0811/621/m> (accessed 5/2/2022).

conservative commentators to cast the Commune as uncivilized. A particularly poignant example came from a case on the first day of the Commune, when a group of Communards butchered and distributed the meat of a horse which was killed in the streets of Paris during the fighting. Commentators, particularly conservative historians, singled out women and children as the perpetrators, and used the ideological charge of the incident to condemn the Commune as uncivilized and barbaric.⁹⁴ Gullickson reads the incident as being ideologically important specifically because of the conflict between the

physical needs of working-class Parisians and the social expectation to act within gender confines. Women of the Commune found themselves in a lose-lose situation; they needed to loot to provide food for themselves and their children, yet doing so would mark them as unnatural and unfeminine. Understandably, they chose to survive.

By far the most common visual denunciation of the railroad strikers was focused on arson.⁹⁵ Woodcut after woodcut shows scenes of rioters burning buildings, railroads, and train cars. The image of the “Destruction of the Union Depot and Hotel at Pittsburgh” is a typical example (Fig. 8). It is one of the most reproduced images of the Great Strike, reprinted in a host of contemporary and modern works on the strike.⁹⁶ It shows rioters burning the union depot in Pittsburgh where labor conflict was particularly spectacular. Commentators for Harper’s Weekly, in particular, focused on the union depot as a great building, describing its architecture and dimensions at length.⁹⁷ Multiple other images in the same issue show the destruction of railroad cars and rail infrastructure, which, alongside great European-style buildings, stood as a sign of modernity and the progress of American industry.

94 Gullickson points out that the historical evidence for this event is unclear and marred with ideological bias. The version presented here follows the initial eyewitness account of the event, written by Edmond Lepelletier. Gullickson, *Unruly Women*, 45–47.

95 Of eight images about the strikes published in Harper’s Weekly between the Aug. 11 and Aug. 18 editions, five focus on arson and burning.

96 Notably “Pen and Pencil Sketches of the Great Strike” features this image on one of the first pages. It is still commonly reproduced in popular works on the strikes, for example it’s featured on the Wikipedia page on the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. “Great Railroad Strike of 1877,” Wikipedia, accessed 5/6/2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Railroad_Strike_of_1877.

97 “The Great Strike,” *Harper’s Weekly* Aug. 11, 1877: 626.



Figure 9: “The Burning of Paris – Fall of Houses in the Rue de Rivoli,” July 1, 1871, 596 *Harper’s Weekly*. Harpweek, <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1871/0701/596> (accessed 5/2/2022).

The imagery of arson in 1877 is strikingly similar to that of 1871 in Paris, which Harper’s *Weekly* also featured at length. Images of *Pétroleuses* – the accused perpetrators of arson – were common, but images of the burning itself were also well covered. One example is the woodcut “Fall of Houses in the *Rue de Rivoli*” (Fig. 9). It shows the attempts to put out the fires of Paris in the *Rue de Rivoli*, which the Communards were accused of setting aflame. The large front part of the center building is illustrated in the process of falling spectacularly to the street below. The figures fleeing from the falling debris are

firefighters, presumably part of the Versailles army following the actual fighting.

Conclusion

From 1871 to 1877, images of the burning of property were some of the most compelling visual arguments against working-class revolt that bourgeois commentators produced. They harken back to the experience of early tourists as they entered Paris after the Bloody Week. A sense of curious ruination of the emblems of Western Civilization

itself emerges, adding a peculiar ideological aspect to ruin voyeurism. In American newspapers, the thoughts and emotions that emerged from Paris were adapted to a specifically American context and expanded over the following six years. During the Great Chicago Fire, the experience of urban ruin was likened to Paris, and commentators drew on denunciations of the Parisian Communards to denounce the working classes of Chicago, often based on the charge of arson. During the Great Strikes of 1877, commentators and artists similarly drew on inspiration from the Commune. This time they sought to understand how class conflict could emerge in the United States, and again drew on imagery of the Commune to argue against the strikers and justify the violent suppression of political protest.

These tactics used to delegitimize protest were not constrained to the 19th century. When the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020 emerged in response to the killing of George Floyd, Americans widely supported the protests.⁹⁸ The imagery that dominated the media was of George Floyd: images of his face, held in the hands of the many millions of protestors, and images of his dead body, seen by the world through video recording. As the summer progressed, a new yet familiar type of imagery began to dominate American media.

Outlets began to focus on police confrontation with protestors and the looting and burning of stores during the protests.⁹⁹ The change in focus directly led to a decrease in public support for Black Lives Matter, as white Americans started to associate the protests with violence and lawlessness (by protestors, not police). Once again, significant parts of U.S. media used images of arson and destruction to argue against social change.

The image of the racial and class “other” setting the markers of society on fire was vivid enough to remain a powerful argument to this day. In the 1870s such images were used to suppress class revolt, and in 2020 similar images were used to delegitimize popular protest against racial violence. Forces which support the status quo are quick to popularize images of revolutionary violence while concealing images of quotidian violence in an unjust world. The question of how to argue against this logic, how to create far-reaching boundary-crossing alliances in the face of a national media hostile to change, is informed by historical study but remains open.

98 Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us* (New York, New World, 2021), 237.

99 McGhee, *The Sum of Us*, 238; Stephanie Pagonis, “Protests, riots that gripped America in 2020,” Fox News 2020 Year in Review, Fox News, Dec. 29, 2020, <https://www.foxnews.com/us/protests-riots-nationwide-america-2020>.

Bibliography

- Chicago History Museum. “The O’Leary Legend.” *The Great Chicago Fire & the Web of Memory*. Chicago History Museum, 2011. Accessed April 2, 2023. <https://gretchicagogfire.org/oleary-legend/>.
- Coghlan, J. Michelle. *Sensational Internationalism*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.
- “Foreign News.” *Harper’s Weekly*. Aug. 11, 1877. <https://harp-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/view/article/text/132432> (accessed 4/6/2023).
- Gullickson, Gay L. *Unruly Women of Paris*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996.
- Headley, J. T. *Pen and Pencil Sketches of the Great Riots. An Illustrated History of the Railroad and Other Great American Riots, including all the Riots in the Early History of the Country*. New York: E. B. Treat, 1882.
- Katz, Philip. *From Appomattox to Montmartre: Americans and the Paris Commune*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998.
- “La Pétoleuse.” *Harper’s Weekly*. July 8, 1871. <https://harp-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/view/article/text/89232> (accessed 4/6/2023).
- Landsberg, Alison. “Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture.” in *Memory and Popular Film*, edited by Paul Grainge, 144-161. Manchester, New York: Manchester University Press, 2003.
- Leith, James A. “The War of Images surrounding the Commune.” In *Images of the Commune, Images De La Commune*, edited by James Leith, 101 - 150. Montreal, Canada: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978.
- Levenstein, Harvey A. *Seductive Journey: American Tourists in France from Jefferson to the Jazz Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Lowe, David. *The Great Chicago Fire: In Eyewitness Accounts and 70 Contemporary Photographs and Illustrations*. New York: Dover Publications, 1979.
- Luxenberg, Alisa. “Creating Désastres: Andrieu’s Photographs of Urban Ruins in the Paris of 1871.” *The Art Bulletin* 80, no. 1 (1998): 113–38.
- Luzerne, Frank. *The Lost City! Drama of the Fire-Fiend! – or – Chicago, As It Was, and As It Is! And Its Glorious Future!*. New York: Wells, 1872.
- McGhee, Heather. *The Sum of Us*. New York: One World, 2021.
- Miller, Ross. *American Apocalypse: The Great Fire and the Myth of Chicago*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Pagones, Stephanie. “Protests, riots that gripped America in 2020,” *Fox News 2020 Year in Review*. Fox News, Dec. 29, 2020. <https://www.foxnews.com/us/protests-riots-nationwide-america-2020>.
- Painter, Nell Irvin. *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919*. New York: Norton, 1989.
- Richardson, Heather Cox. *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865-1901*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.
- Rondinone, Troy Matthew. “The Other ‘Irrepressible Conflict’: Industrial War in the Public Imagination, 1865-1950.” PhD diss., (University of California, 2003).
- Sawislak, Karen. *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874*. Historical Studies of Urban America. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Shafer, David A. *The Paris Commune: French Politics, Culture, and Society at the Crossroads of the Revolutionary Tradition and Revolutionary*

- Socialism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Smith, Carl. *Chicago's Great Fire*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2020.
- Smith, Carl. *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- "Something that will not 'blow over.'" *Harper's Weekly*. July 29, 1871. <https://harp-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/view/article/text/89612> (accessed 4/6/2023).
- "The Burning of Paris – Fall of Houses in the Rue de Rivoli." *Harper's Weekly*. July 1, 1871. <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1871/0701/596> (accessed 5/2/2022).
- "The Capture of Paris." *Harper's Weekly*. July 1, 1871. <https://harp-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/view/article/text/89098> (accessed 4/6/2023).
- "The City Amendments." *Harper's Weekly*. Nov. 10, 1877. <https://harp-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/view/article/text/133983/8148> (accessed 4/6/2023)
- "The Commune in New York." *Harper's Weekly*. Jan. 31, 1874. <https://harp-alexanderstreet-com.ezproxy2.library.arizona.edu/view/article/text/108997/8147> (accessed 4/6/2023).
- "The End of the Commune – Execution of a *Pétroleuse*." *Harper's Weekly*. July 8, 1871. <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1871/0708/628> (accessed 4/19/22).
- "The Great Strike." *Harper's Weekly*. Aug. 11, 1877. <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1877/0811/626> (accessed 5/6/2022).
- "The Great Strike – Destruction of the Union Depôt and Hotel at Pittsburgh." *Harper's Weekly*. Aug. 11, 1877. <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1877/0811/621/m> (accessed 5/2/2022).
- "The Great Strike – The Sixth Maryland Regiment Fighting its Way Through Baltimore." *Harper's Weekly*. Aug. 11, 1877. <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1877/0811/617> (accessed 5/2/2022).
- "Versailles Soldiers Firing Upon the Communists from Roofs and Windows in Paris." *Harper's Weekly*. July 1, 1871. <https://content-harpweek-com.ezproxy4.library.arizona.edu/view/issue/image/1871/0701> (accessed 4/19/22).

