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INTERSTICES 21

The politics of the pile: Material imagination and improvisation in the 1871 Paris Commune

The events of the 1871 Paris Commune, in which a working-class collective briefly took control of Paris before being brutally suppressed, have become an enduring part of leftist myth.¹ In the year of the Commune's 150th anniversary, this article considers the event's material imagination and improvised urban constructions. In particular, it discusses the crucial figure of *accumulated matter*, embedded in the idea of the "masses" or "mass action". I take the term "material imagination" from Gaston Bachelard, who points to the way our intuitive experiences of matter fuel powerful analogical imaginations of other things (1983: 1–5). As a shared "system of poetic fidelity" a material imagination conditions how situations, experiences, problems, and possibilities for collective action are understood (5). That is, it is also a political imagination. Attending to the Commune's material imagination, I suggest, casts a light on how public worlds are improvised through a shared imagination of matter. I present this collective improvisation as "articulation work", cobbling together a new public world and catalysing new collective subjects (Star and Strauss, 1999: 10).

My central theme is the *pile*: I refer to a mound of sticks and manure built to cushion the fall of a monumental column, an imaginary heap of meaningless consumer goods, impromptu barricades piled up in the streets, stellar matter pictured by an old imprisoned revolutionary, conjugations of terms in poems by Arthur Rimbaud, and ultimately the piled bodies of the Communards themselves. Sometimes these piles are understood as degenerate, something to be cleared away so order can be restored; and at others they are sites of construction and connection. Following this thinking, the public space of the Commune would consist not only of relatively permanent and stable constructions, but a pattern of public things being temporarily reconfigured, disputed, and suppressed in a broken world.

The Paris Commune

In the winter of 1871 Paris was besieged: freezing, starved and under Prussian artillery fire. France had instigated an ill-advised war with Prussia and been decisively out-manoeuvred. With rising unrest in the city, Adolphe Thiers, the chief executive of the French Government, signed an armistice that was effectively an

unconditional surrender. Working-class Parisians felt abandoned by political elites, and the motley militia of the National Guard (under the influence of radical groups) refused to be disarmed. They seized cannons and stormed the seat of government at the Hôtel de Ville. Thiers's government fled the city to Versailles.

Factional disputes between the rebels were resolved with the election of a Commune Council on March 28, which immediately began instituting socialist-democratic policies: the return of workers' tools that had been pawned for food, remission of rent paid during the siege, universal child-care and the abolition of child labour, strict separation of church and state, civil unions, secularisation of schools with education for all children, and pensions for the families of dead soldiers (Eichner, 2004: 29). While there was no single coordinating plan, the Communards aimed to reconstruct society, "improvising the free organization of its social life according to principles of association and cooperation" (Ross, 2015: 10). For seventy-two days, with the French government excluded from the city and lacking the military strength to retake it, the Commune worked energetically on their new world.

In May 1871, once the French army had been regathered after the Prussian defeat, the Commune was brutally suppressed by Versaillais forces. The Communards were driven from the Hôtel de Ville, and burned a number of public buildings as they retreated. They were met with little mercy. During the retaking of the city, and in the immediate aftermath, thousands of Communards were summarily executed.² In the Père-Lachaise Cemetery, one of the last places defended by the Communards, a bullet-riddled wall remains as a memorial.

It would be easy to consider the spatial legacy of the Commune as nothing more than a mess: pock-marked walls, burned buildings, demolished monuments, and rubbish in the streets. The Commune left no architectural heritage, nor even speculative proposals. But perhaps the political space of the Commune materialised in a different form?

Articulating public things

There has recently been renewed interest in the role of physical things in politics and the production of public spaces. Noortje Marres, for example writes of "the materiality of citizenship and participation" and the formation of "material publics" (2012: 7). For her, materials and material things are not a reliable or uncontroversial frame for public life, but catalyse publics precisely because they are unstable. Similarly, Bonnie Honig describes the "public things" that we "deliberate about, constellate around, or agonistically contest" as manifesting "stability, adhesion, attachment, resilience, concern and care" (2017: 5, 3; Ahmed, 2019: 41). Such things, however "may not just stabilize but also derail our world [...] they not only condition human experience but also have the power to undermine it" (Honig, 2017: 2). The public world, Honig suggests, is not a stable substrate, but must be constantly contested, cultivated, and maintained. Following this thinking, the public space of the Commune would consist not only of relatively permanent and stable constructions, but a pattern of public things being temporarily reconfigured, disputed, and suppressed in a broken world.

Facing breakdown and failure, the inhabitants of broken worlds engage in situated "articulation work": repairing, adapting, reusing and recuperating what is

to hand. This labour is “work that gets things back ‘on track’ in the face of the unexpected, and modifies action to accommodate unanticipated contingencies” (Star and Strauss, 1999: 10). Stephen Jackson suggests that “the fixer”, well-acquainted with breakdown, maintenance, adaptation, and re-use, might “know and see different things—indeed, different worlds—than the better-known figures of ‘designer’ or ‘user’” (2014: 229). Fixers don’t prioritise systemic overview, but rather the practical facility that comes from keeping things going, recognising their characteristic failures. They improvise with what is to hand rather than proceeding according to a master plan. Such a position, Jackson suggests, offers a “special epistemic advantage” in revealing how power and social relations are not statically congealed in the material world, but must be constantly maintained (230).

Public space is an unfolding tangle of the material and political. The invested and improvised articulation work of fixers does not centre on a single vision, but is diffused through an ambiguous mix of physical constructions, social assemblies, as well as metaphors that enabled them to make sense of these.

The failure of space

One metaphor that had been crucial over the past century of episodic revolutions in France was that of clearing space. The original French Revolution, according to historian François Furet “sought to restructure, by an act of imagination, wholeness to a society which lay in pieces” (Sennet, 1994: 285). A key spatial figure of this new wholeness was empty, open space. Revolutionaries cleared new public spaces in the city, with the idea that these would be innately freeing, places of transparency and access. They removed statues, trees, and informal constructions to make the city a place of “Sheer volume: free of the twisted streets and irrational accretions to buildings which had accumulated over the centuries, [...] free of tangible signs of human damage in the past” (Sennett, 1994: 295). The French revolutionaries *cleaned* the city, clearing away the mess of the past to provide a rational space for their new society. They imagined freedom would result from clearing away, tidying up, opening up the windows and ventilating the city, shaking off its dust, “a chance to start over with a fresh, blank slate” (296).

Dramatic festivals with huge stage sets, costumes and songs were intended to activate the potential of these spaces, but the actual experience of these spectacles was one of “unremitting boredom”: “‘I cannot say how dancing on the Champ de Mars made me a better citizen’, one declared; ‘we were bewildered,’ said another, ‘and so we soon made our way to a tavern’” (Ouzoff, 1988: 28; Sennett, 1994: 307). The revolutionary clearing and the production of open space in the French Revolution were not as liberating as expected. The newly cleared spaces of the city were anticipated to be part of the forming of new, modern subjects, actively engaged with producing a civic realm. In practice, according to Sennett, they neutralised crowds, producing apathy and passivity.³

If the revolutionaries imagined clearing a sheer open space, however, the political imagination of the Communards was distinctly different. While it shared the problem of trying to recuperate a new kind of social wholeness, it grappled with the impossibility of starting from scratch as well as the nonviability of simply taking over existing political and social structures. There is no sense of a blank slate. Rather, Communards imagined a new wholeness accomplished by

reconfiguring the physical materials of the city and its socio-political organisation. Like Jackson's fixers, they applied the "complicated work of fitting to the varied circumstances of organizations, systems, and lives" (2014: 222). It was not a matter of clearing away matter to produce a rarefied political space, but of seeing the material dimensions of the political. Piles and disorganised matter recurred in physical, metaphorical, and poetic registers during the Commune as symptoms of this stance.

Common matter: Felling the Vendôme Column

There were few attempts at symbolic festivities under the harsh circumstances of the Paris Commune. There was, however, at least one staged event: the Vendôme Column was torn down. The column (Fig. 1) was originally completed in 1810 to commemorate Napoleon's 1805 victory over the Russian army at Austerlitz. Modelled on the column of the Roman emperor Trajan, its sequence of four hundred bronze relief plates depicted the events of the battle, crowned with a pseudo-classically dressed figure of the emperor.⁴ Rome had shaken off tyrannical kings to become first a republic and then an empire; the Vendôme column asserted a parallel story of the revolution, culminating with the emperor. The column literally "narrat[ed] France", asserting linear historical time in a single frieze spiralling upwards (Smith, 1996: 153). To follow its story, one would have to circle the column repeatedly, eyes rising until the images became too small to discern from the ground.

Fig. 1 Ambroise Tardieu (1833).
The Vendôme Column. [Engraving,
Bibliothèque Nationale de France]

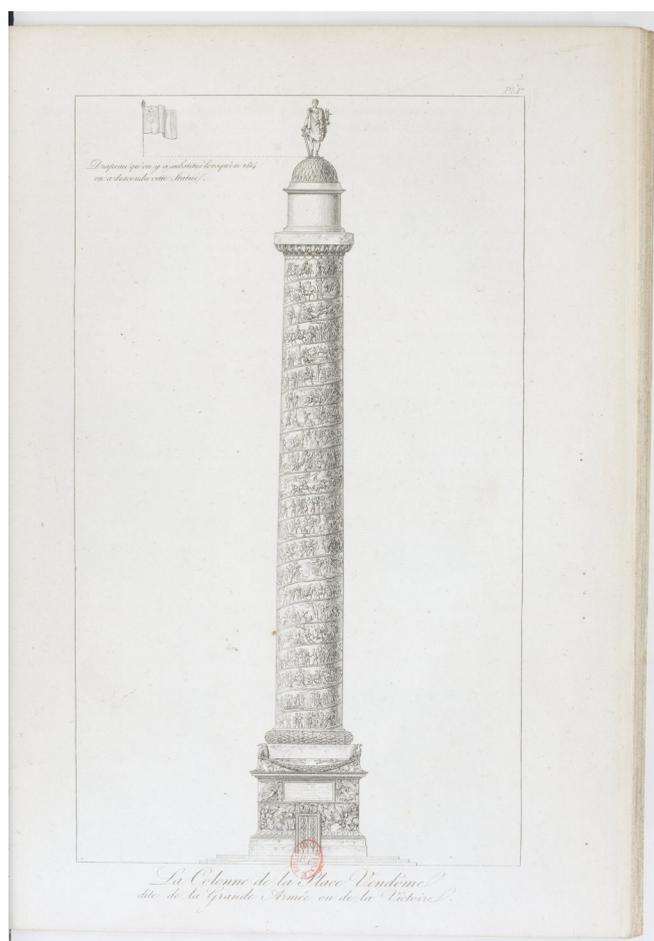




Fig. 2 Bruno Braquehaïs (1871). The Vendôme Column rigged for demolition. Plate from album "Siege de Paris, 1870-1871". [Photograph, Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal]

The painter and Commune Gustav Courbet was an early advocate for removing the column, considering it "a monument devoid of any artistic value, tending by its character to perpetuate the ideas of wars and conquests" (King, 2006: 305).⁵ After the Commune was declared, support for the idea grew, and on April 10 the Communards announced that as "a symbol of brute force and false glory" it would be demolished (305).

Ropes, winches, and a large capstan were installed in the square. A photograph by Bruno Braquehaïs shows the arrangement (Fig. 2). The capstan sits on a base of paving stones, and coils of rope lead to the top of the column where they are attached just below the figure of the emperor. Long diagonal braces have been positioned to control the direction of the column's fall. Barricades of paving stones are black in the foreground, there is muddy snow on the ground, and muskets can be seen stacked to the left of frame.

The shaft had been given a bevel cut into which wedges of wood were driven, and then, on the afternoon of May 16, after the singing of the *Marseillaise*, the capstan was tightened and, following an initial miscue, the

Fig. 3 Jules Andrieu (1871). View of the Vendôme Column after demolition. [Photograph, Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture / Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal]

Fig 4 Alphonse Liébert (1871). View of the Vendôme Column after demolition. [Photograph, Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture / Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal]

column crashed to the ground amid cheers from a crowd of 10,000 onlookers. (King, 2006: 305)

The mood of the event was resolute determination rather than celebration, and the scene more like an engineering demonstration than the stage set for a revolutionary festival. As one Communard remembered it:

The music played fanfares, some old greybeard declaimed a speech on the vanity of conquests, the villainy of conquerors, and the fraternity of the people, we danced in a circle around the debris, and then we went off, very content with the little party (Ross, 2015: 41).

Braquehaïs's photograph telescopes the distance between column and capstan; there was room for the column to fall its full length well before the barricades. In this space there was another significant spatial element: a huge pile of material, "a bed of sand, branches, and manure" to cushion the impact of the column's fall (King, 2006, 307). The engineers Jules Iribe, Ismaël Abide and Georges Cavalier, responsible for orchestrating the column's fall, had been concerned that the falling column would shatter the stones of the square, collapse the main sewer line under it, and blow out the surrounding windows. The pile they arranged is just visible over the barricades in Braquehaïs's photograph. In other images, taken after the fact by Jules Andrieu (Fig. 3) and Alphonse Liébert (Fig. 4) its remnants can be seen as a dark halo surrounding the fallen column.



Other destructive acts by the Commune (such as the burning of the Hôtel de Ville) were impromptu and indiscriminate, but the Vendôme column's removal was careful and deliberate. The column was offensive, but the cushioning mound exhibits a concern to protect and maintain the urban fabric.⁶ The mound also gave narrative meaning to the column's fall. Napoleon's tightly-coiled imperial history collapsed onto a pile of prosaic (even abject) matter, and he was left on his back amid sticks and manure. The demolition explicitly rejected imperial political form and nationalist historical time; a significance well-understood by witnesses:

I saw the Vendôme Column fall, it collapsed all in one piece like a stage décor on a nice bed of trash when the machinist's whistle blew. Immediately a huge cloud of dust rose up, while a quantity of tiny fragments rolled and scattered about, white on one side, gray on the other, similar to little morsels of bronzed plaster. This colossal symbol of the Grand Army—how it was fragile, empty, miserable! It seemed to have been eaten out from the middle by a multitude of rats, like France itself, like its old tarnished glory, and we were surprised not to see any [rats] run out along the drainpipes (Ross, 2015: 41).

The column was shown to be a piece of stage décor furnishing a fictional narrative. On impact it shattered and its constituent materials were revealed to be mundane. It was as hollow as a drainpipe, and the witness imagines it similarly populated with voracious rats. Imperial art and hierarchical meaning were abruptly levelled, spilled out across the ground.⁷

Excess matter: Capitalist overproduction and barricade-building

Bulk matter, without hierarchy, was also a contemporaneous metaphor for capitalist excess and consumerist overproduction. Bourgeois society generated abundance, but it was generic and irrelevant, a "senseless luxury" (Ross, 2015). Paul Lafargue, in his *The Right to be Lazy* (1883) railed against the way capitalism demanded excessive consumption, first for the bourgeois (who "crams himself with capons stuffed with truffles [...] in order to encourage the breeders of blooded poultry") and then workers, who have "developed abnormally the stomach of the capitalist class" (Lafargue, 1907: 35, 40). Excess and indulgence were not merely personal vices, but a social disorder characterised by senseless accumulation. Karl Marx famously described capitalism as fundamentally accumulative. Capitalism, he argued, generates abstracted commodities that can accrue endlessly. Capital not only circulates, it builds up, and one of the basic challenges of capitalism is discharging this accumulation by finding new markets and fueling new demands.⁸

As a result, Lafargue lamented, "nothing, nothing can melt away the mountains of products heaped up higher and more enormous than the pyramids of Egypt" (Lafargue, 1907: 42). These unnecessary products have no meaning as individual items, but have become "a mass of things which no sane man could desire" (Ross, 2015: 98). Sense dissolves in the face of sheer quantity. These mass goods cannot be melted down into a liquid that can trickle away, but pile up into an ironic monument. Lafargue compares the intentional piling of the pyramids with the seemingly involuntary discharges of capitalist production. Capitalism deprived matter of meaning and context, threatening to overshadow and overwhelm the shared public world.



Fig. 5 Barricade in the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine (1848). [Engraving, Illustrated London News]

Lafargue’s image suggests a new reading of the barricades, improvised street blockages that had long featured in Parisian urban unrest.⁹ The excess of bourgeois things spilled chaotically into the street during times of insurrection. Interiors were tipped outwards:

Home furnishings were offered by sympathetic residents (or simply confiscated if cooperation was withheld). Books, tables, chairs, beds, armoires, and chests of drawers were frequently mentioned, but the list of materials occasionally included more unusual items, such as pianos, bathtubs, a perambulator, commodes, dead horses, and, on one occasion, a blacksmith’s anvil (Traugott, 2010: 52–3).

The list goes on: cobblestones, materials from construction sites, vehicles (purportedly even a train in 1848), “vegetable baskets, egg crates, brooms, and counters from merchants’ stalls ... public urinals, bales of wool ... lamp posts ... shutters ... street benches ... trees ... mattresses”, and of course the barrels (*barriques*) from which the term barricade derives its name (52). The barricade had reached its apotheosis in the monumental heap built in the Rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine in 1848 (Fig. 5). Victor Hugo, who witnessed this construction, described it as

jagged, makeshift, and irregular, castellated like an immense medieval survival ... Everything had gone onto it, doors, grilles, screens, bedroom furniture, wrecked cooking stoves and pots and pans, piled up haphazard, the whole a composite of paving-stones and rubble, timbers, iron bars, broken window-panes, seatless chairs, rags, odds and ends of every kind and curses ... The Saint-Antoine barricade used everything as a weapon, everything that civil war can hurl at the head of society ... a mad thing, flinging an

inexpressible clamour into the sky ... It was a pile of garbage and it was Sinai (1982: 989–90).

From upstairs windows revolutionaries rained furniture and stones onto their attackers, filling the air and the street with detritus. Lafargue’s image of the mountain of products resonates with these chaotic piles. The same dissolution of sense occurs as the specificity of items is overridden by their status as bulk matter. A barricade’s materials are non-specific. It can be made from almost anything, and its identity and function doesn’t rest on any particular element. This dissolution of particularity recalls Marx’s account of the irrelevance of use-value to the capitalist:

clearly, the exchange relation of commodities is characterized precisely by its abstraction from their use-values [...] The capitalist knows that all commodities, however scurvy they may look, or however badly they may smell, are in faith and in truth money (1887: 127–8, 256).

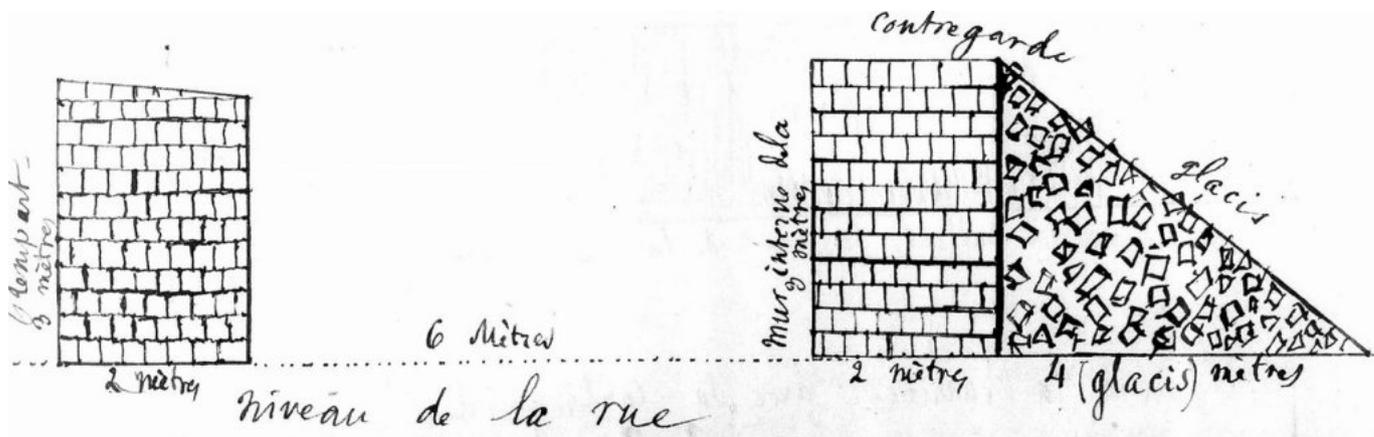
In the imagination of Communards like Lafargue, capitalist overproduction reduces useful activities and meaningful things into a pointless heap. Amongst their other physical and social ends, barricades could be seen as a manifestation of this redundancy and a rejection of the world of excess things. The crucial spatial image of the Revolution was the cleared surface that would act as a pure ground on which the elements of a new society could be arranged. By contrast, that of the Commune was the pile, a heterogeneous excess that cannot be escaped, only reconfigured.

Specified matter: Auguste Blanqui’s barricades

Such a rhetorical idea of barricades would have been deeply foreign to the anarchist Auguste Blanqui, one of the driving figures behind the Paris Commune. From his prison cell on an island off the coast of Brittany, Blanqui prepared a manual for revolutionaries, *Instructions for an armed uprising* (1868), in which he offered systematic designs for barricades and directions for their use. Although their leader remained incarcerated, Blanquists were among the most assertive and active Communards.

Blanqui lamented the chaotic nature of previous insurrections, contending that revolution could only succeed through “organisation, unity, order and discipline”

Fig. 6 Auguste Blanqui (1868). Section drawing of a barricade. [Ink drawing, Blanqui, 1868]



(1886). Uprisings in 1830 and 1848 had ultimately been ineffective, he believed, because they lacked coordination: “Enough of these tumultuous uprisings, with ten thousand isolated individuals, acting haphazardly, in disarray, without any thought for the collective, with everyone in their own corner and following their own whim!” (1886, n.p.).

Barricades were central to the problem, being poorly located, constructed, and defended; “ill-conceived and ill-placed barricades that waste time, block the streets, and prevent movement” (n.p.). They could no longer be a “shapeless heap of paving stones, interspersed with carriages on the flanks, beams and planks of wood” as in the past, but needed to be systematically laid out at strategic locations using the module of the paving stone. In his treatise, Blanqui gave detailed specifications, basing his designs on the module of the paving stone, a 25cm cube. He provided a dimensioned section drawing of a barricade with two thick walls, 3m high and 6m apart (Fig. 6). Their construction was to be staged: the inner rampart first built up to 1.5m so fighters could shoot over it; and then extended to full height with protruding joists to support an elevated firing platform. Beyond the regular stonework of the outer wall, there was to be a *glacis*, a sloped apron of rubble extending four metres to absorb cannon fire and prevent attackers from using the wall as cover.

Fig. 7 Ambrose Richbourg (1871). Barricade of the Paris Commune, Ambrose Richebourg. [Photograph: NY Metropolitan Museum of Art]



The Commune's barricades seem to display something of Blanqui's influence, but would not have met his exacting standards (Fig. 7). They were relatively sober constructions of pavers compared to Hugo's riotous piles. The double-wall construction seems to have been frequently effected, but there is rarely any attempt at a *glacis*. Communards posed proudly for photographs in military-style dress on their constructions (Fig. 8). Traugott dismisses these "prefabricated" or "industrial" barricades as "monumental showpieces" more concerned with style than defensive advantage (2010: 54). Certainly, they provided little obstacle to the French troops seeking to retake the city, being easily outflanked and rendered irrelevant (54).

Fig. 8 Barricade in the Chaussée Ménilmontant (1871). [Photograph, Musée Carnavalet Histoire de Paris]



Traugott's critique is that Communard barricades lacked spontaneity, but Blanqui would have seen their failure as a matter of insufficient organisation. For him, rigorous order was the only way emergent acts of rebellion could be brought together into a coherent revolution that would culminate in a new social reality. In *Instructions for an armed uprising* he set out a military command structure, and described how this would enrol bystanders, disciplining and synchronising their action. Somewhat optimistically, he specified: "As soon as the citizens rush into the streets in response to the uprising, arrange them into battle formation with two rows" (1886). In place of "ten thousand isolated individuals" improvising at once, the central problem of the revolution as Blanqui saw it was how to turn them into modular units of a single construction, like the stones of one of his

barricades. The heterogeneity of the masses (whether human or the inanimate material of the barricades) was threatening, and to be successful the revolution needed to bring it under control. Scenes and metaphors of accumulation enabled people to imagine stripping away hierarchies, but they also threatened to undermine the possibility of order.

Deterministic matter: Cosmic materials at infinity

Blanqui was a fixer, exquisitely aware of the materials he had to work with. He knew the dimensions of paving stones; where to find lead, scales, nitric acid, and scythe blades; how to improvise with butchers, sewers, staircases, and drums. But his faith in improvisation had limits, and in other respects he was a designer with a plan. The muddle of the city had to be subjected to a new order, and loose arrangements of participants had to be configured according to a predetermined hierarchy. Masses figure in his imagination as simultaneously a source of vital improvisation and a source of dispersal and dislocation.

This ambivalence about matter showed up again when Blanqui wrote from prison after the failure of the insurrection. *Eternity through the stars* (1872) is a strange work of philosophy and amateur cosmology, entirely unlike *Instructions for an armed uprising*. In it, Blanqui imagined an infinite universe. If there is no end to the cosmos, but the elements that make it up are limited, he speculated, then every possible configuration of those elements must occur and recur. He imagines “billions of earths, absolutely identical, personally and materially, where neither a blade of hay, nor a spider’s thread, vary in either time or space” (137). Ultimately, in spite of tumult and chaos this universe would repeat itself inescapably: “That which I am writing at this moment, in a dungeon of the Fort du Taureau, I have written and shall write again forever, on a table, with a quill, under clothes and in entirely similar circumstances” (146). Walter Benjamin famously considered *Eternity through the stars* “an unconditional surrender ... a vision of hell” seen in despair after the fall of the Commune (Benjamin: 112).¹⁰

It is a vision preoccupied with the nature of matter. Blanqui imagined stars and solar systems emerging from an “original agglomeration of chaotic matter”, expiring and recondensing forever. The deterministic chaos of the universe is driven by gravity, “the great fertilizing and inexhaustible force that no prodigality so much as dents” (102, 105). Gravity churns the universe, “divides, blends and kneads” until every solar system “is a compound of the dust of all the others” (105). We might be reminded of the perpetual circulation and prodigality of Marx’s capital. Even if it is made up of simple elements, matter, like capital is excessive: it overflows, circulates, disperses and recondenses.

Instructions for an armed uprising and *Eternity through the stars* differ dramatically in subject matter and style, but they share an underlying concern with making sense of matter, and frustration about its resistance to sense. Whether he is wondering about what comets are made of, or how best to make a serviceable pile from scrounged materials; on the forces and energies that cause matter to accumulate, or the value of a rubble *glacis*, Blanqui endlessly imagines matter stripped of its hierarchical organisation, and reassembled.

Conjugated matter: One thing after another

Blanqui's universe seems stifling despite its vastness, like a printer with a fixed plate or a factory mechanism: "In spite of its constant becoming, it is engraved in bronze and relentlessly prints the same one page" (144). A counterpoint can be found in the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud, at the time an adolescent Communist sympathiser. Rimbaud wrote startling proto-surrealist poetry for only a few years, before abandoning it altogether at twenty. He seems to have been in Paris in 1871, although the degree to which he was an active participant in the Commune is debated (Ross, 2010: 87). Rimbaud's universe, unlike Blanqui's repetitive one, is bewilderingly fecund, and manifests through disjunctive lists:

In the woods there's a bird whose singing stops you and makes you blush.

There's a clock which doesn't strike.

There's a clay-pit with a nest of white animals.

There's a cathedral coming down and a lake going up. There's a little carriage abandoned in the woods or rolling down the path with ribbons all over it.

There's a troupe of child actors, in costume ... (Rimbaud, 2005: 311–13).

Blanqui tends to see mass as made up of repeated molecules: the hundred or so basic elements of the cosmos, or the paving stones of the barricade. Rimbaud cannot perform this abstraction. Generic forces or substances are foreign to him, and his poems pile up heterogeneous elements in a way that reminds Ross of the "and...and...and" logic of the barricade (2010: 248). He suppresses conjunctions, eliding any clear sense of relationship.¹¹ So we encounter "helmets, wheels, barges, rumps", "saints, veils, weavings of harmony, and chromatic legends in the sunset", and:

Temples lighted up by the return of theories, tremendous views of modern coastal defenses; dunes illuminated by warm flowers and bacchanalia; great canals of Carthage and Embankments of a degenerate Venice, mild erupting Etnas and crevasses of flowers and glacier waters, outside laundries surrounded by German poplars ... (Rimbaud, 2005: 341, 345, 343)

How do these various scenes relate to one another? They are not quite metaphors, in which one term figures the other, nor literal descriptions. Rimbaud's poems, Ross argues, are not organic wholes or integrated structures, but a kind of rubbish heap or overloaded phantasmagoria. They imagine a new kind of collective existence that is no longer the idealised rational order of the eighteenth-century revolutionaries with their clearing away of sheer space. Rimbaud rejects both hierarchy and flat uniformity.

Blanqui and Rimbaud share a sharp awareness of being in a confusing, excessive world in which clear hierarchies have dissolved. Imperial history had collapsed into a pile of rubble in the Place Vendôme, the neat furnishings of bourgeois interiors had been tipped into the boulevards, and political order had been upended. Both tried to imagine the articulation work needed to produce new spaces from the materials surrounding them. They vividly observed the way things around them could take on new meanings and be fixed into new constellations. But Blanqui's imagination rested on finding uniformity underlying heterogeneity. The old materials were to be reconfigured using new diagrams (or rather co-opted

diagrams like that of military command structures). The resistance of those materials to his diagrams results in the impatient and frustrated tone of *Instructions for an armed uprising* and the vertigo of *Eternity through the stars*. Rimbaud, by contrast, seemed happy with simple concatenation, delighting in the way that adding one thing to another triggered new meanings and affects in both and seeing aesthetic potential in resistance and excess. Blanqui's improvisation took the form of slotting things into a predetermined structure of relationships, where Rimbaud's sought to discover unexpected relationships by simply putting one thing next to another.

Conclusion: Cleaning up after the Commune

How could new collectives be formed while rejecting existing political hierarchies? No blank slate was possible, and the idea of cleared, empty space, "freedom conceived like a pure, transparent volume" was far less prominent amongst the Communards than it was amongst the revolutionaries of eighty years earlier (Sennett, 1994: 309). Jackson characterised design as involving systemic overview and fidelity to a plan.¹² Rather than *plans*, the collective improvisation of fixing coalesces around *problems*. Philosopher Jane Bennett (glossing John Dewey, and exploring a concept of material publics similar to Marres's and Honig's) writes: "When diverse bodies suddenly draw near and form a public, they have been provoked to do so by a problem, that is, by the 'indirect, serious and enduring' consequences of conjoint action" (2010: 100).

In this article, I have tried to show how materials and the way they trigger imagination can be problematic in this way. The Commune, I argue, was preoccupied with imagining accumulated mass. Collectives, collective action, and shared spaces were imagined through metaphors of mounding and scattering. In this light, physical piles like barricades and the Vendôme mound take on rhetorical significance. Piled matter provides a way to imagine non-hierarchical organisation, but also to encounter the threats of such organisations, piles become an ambiguous figure that blurs the distinction between metaphoric and literal realities.

To build a barricade was not only to block a street, but also to express continuity with revolutions of the past and to catalyse public action. Consumer goods were stripped of context and use, revealed as senseless overproduction by a wasteful and interminable process. Motley mounds built across the streets indicated that conventional partitions between domestic, commercial, recreational, and public spaces had ruptured, and expressed a collective purpose that overrode individual ownership and use. Blanqui's attempt to regulate the construction of barricades underestimated this aspect. In spite of being an anarchist, he saw disorganisation as a threat to communal action, and sought to enforce discipline.

Others in the Commune world saw emancipatory potential in heterogeneous accumulation.¹³ For Rimbaud, juxtaposition and the *non-sequitur* became a force for creation. In his piled-up poems, unlike things are placed together, prompting their reinterpretation. They are restless journeys, an open-ended concatenation of steps away from a starting point without any clear vision of the journey's end.

Mass materials in the Commune imagination were variously something unruly to discipline, something base to expose, or something wild and emancipatory.

Mass affects were posed against the hierarchies of the empire.

Reasserting hierarchical order was a crucial priority for the French government on repossessing Paris. During the Bloody Week of May 21–28, 1871, thousands of Communard bodies were left lying the street, mingled with the remnants of their barricades. The French army had been recently equipped with cranked machine guns, which proved highly efficient tools for mass execution (Ellis, 1993: 63–4; King, 2006: 309). Photographs the Communards had posed for were used to track them down and they were re-photographed, stacked in their coffins (Doy, 1979). Under the restored regime, responsibility had to return to individual actors. A disturbing form of collectivity manifested in the cleaning away of piles of bodies:

The executions abated, and the sweeping off began. Carriages of all kinds, vans, omnibuses, came to pick up the corpses and traversed the town. Since the great plagues of London and Marseilles, such cart-loads of human flesh had not been seen (Lissagaray, 1876: 392).

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ENDNOTES

- 1 For a detailed and sympathetic contemporary account of the Paris Commune, see Lissagaray's *History of the Commune of 1871* (1876). Karl Marx responded early to the event; see *The Civil War in France 1818–1883* (1871). For subsequent accounts see Horne's *The fall of Paris* (1965) and Chapter 3 of Alain Badiou's *The communist hypothesis* (2010).
- 2 Figures up to 25,000 Communards killed are still commonly cited, following Lissagaray's partisan account. Robert Tombs has argued for a dramatically lower figure of around 1,400 (2012).
- 3 In fact, he argues, "Modern forms of individual passivity and insensitivity in urban space made their first, more collective appearance on the streets of revolutionary Paris" (284).
- 4 It was designed by Pierre Nolasque-Bergeret and cast from cannons captured at Austerlitz. The original figure had been replaced with a flag after Napoleon's defeat at the battle of Waterloo, then reinstated in military uniform in 1833, and finally replaced in 1863 with a new version of the original neo-classical figure with toga and laurel leaves (King, 2006: 303–4).
- 5 Courbet was an active member of the Commune, organising a Federation of Artists. He seems to have intended for the column to be disassembled and removed, not demolished. This made no difference to the re-established French government after the Commune's fall, who held Courbet personally responsible for the cost of replacing it (King: 2006: 305).
- 6 In 2014, architectural historian David Gissen proposed the reconstruction of the mound, as "a way to recuperate the complex and often absent history of these events within the contemporary city" (2014). He claims the mound "wasn't solely quotidian, nor solely an object for maintaining the surrounding plaza", but echoes monumental mounds made in 1789 as stages or improvised platforms.
- 7 This reduction was clearly understood by those who

opposed the Commune. One wrote in outrage: “it’s unearthing your fathers in order to slap the fleshless cheeks of their skeletons” (Ross, 2008: 38). Fathers, who should be respected in the full significance of their role, were instead being treated as mere materials.

8 In a famous section of *Capital*, Marx describes the way that capitalism can only have come to take the form of an endless circulation because of an earlier phase of “so-called primitive accumulation”. This resulted from the expropriation of public goods as private wealth (Marx, 873). This is “an accumulation which is not the result of the capitalist mode of production but is its point of departure” (873).

9 For historical studies of the barricades, see Douglas, 2007; Traugott, 2010; Corbin and Mayeur, 1997.

10 Against Benjamin’s view Hallward argues that Blanqui’s aim is to dismantle the positivist argument that just because something existed meant it was inherently necessary or just. In Blanqui’s universe everything is necessary; just, unjust, or otherwise. There could be no recourse to nature in justifying any status quo (Hallward, 2014). There is always another way the world could be configured.

11 Ross gives this effect the rhetorical term “parataxis”: “The following linguistic and grammatical elements are eliminated: conjunctions expressing logical relations, causal links, a great deal of verbs, syntactic transitions, subordinating clauses. The poems, in other words, are organized paratactically” (249–50)

12 Whether this is an accurate view of design is outside the scope of this article. Shannon Mattern frames the distinction slightly differently, comparing *maintenance* with *innovation* as paradigms (2021: 108).

13 However, after the Commune’s defeat, Rimbaud, like Blanqui, was in despair. A friend recalled touring the city with him: “We took quite a long walk on the boulevard and around the Panthéon. He showed me the white holes in the columns: ‘From the bullets,’

he said. Everywhere, in fact, we saw the traces left on the houses by machine gun fire. I asked him where Paris was from the point of view of “ideas.” In a weary voice he spoke a few brief words that revealed he had lost hope: “Annihilation, chaos ... all the possible, and even probable reactions.” (Ross, 2010: 229).