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Colette E. Wilson, *Paris and the Commune, 1871-78: The Politics of Forgetting*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016. xiii + 236 pp. Figures, notes, illustrations, bibliography, and index. £19.99 U.K. (pb). ISBN 9781526106582.

Review by Casey Harison, University of Southern Indiana.

The Commune of 1871 was the predominantly working-class rebellion that seized control of Paris two months after France had lost a war against Prussia. The Communards controlled Paris from mid-March to late May before the French national army operating from nearby Versailles entered and retook the city in a week of terrible street fighting. According to John Merriman, *La Semaine Sanglante* (Bloody Week, 21-28 May 1871), was a “massacre” perpetrated by the national government that left as many as 12,000-15,000 Communards killed.[1] Historians like Merriman have written a great deal about the Commune. As with other national traumas, there have also been contests over the memory and legacies of 1871. Colette E. Wilson’s persuasive *Paris and the Commune 1871-78* (first published as a hardback edition in 2007) is about the effort by conservative elements in Paris and France to either forget aspects of the Commune’s history or to remember only what they regarded as its crimes.

Paris and the Commune 1871-78 is a concise work of six chapters, including introduction and brief conclusion. The book is part of a series produced by Manchester University’s Centre for the Cultural History of War and belongs to the scholarly genre of cultural memory studies. Wilson’s analysis covers the immediate post-Bloody Week months of 1871 through 1878, when Paris hosted a World Exposition, whose purpose in part was to whitewash the memory of the Commune. The introductory chapter reviews the history of the Commune and some of the scholarly interpretations about 1871. The four central chapters consist of selected case studies whose purpose is to illustrate the author’s main argument, drawn especially from the theories of Maurice Halbwachs, that collective memories are created by and perpetuated in the interests of a dominant social group. There are, of course, multiple collective memories for notable events, but here the author focuses on one group: the French bourgeoisie and its desire to establish a “moral order” (*l’ordre moral*). The first of the case studies (the longest chapter in the book) is about the illustrated magazine *Le Monde illustré*. Wilson describes *Le Monde illustré* as “profoundly anti-Communard,” even as it was also contributing to an evolving Third Republic (p. 34). The emphasis in the magazine was on high-quality illustrations directed at a bourgeois (rather than popular) audience. Like the work of photographers described in a later chapter, the magazine was subject to government censorship that sought to discredit the Commune. When *Le Monde illustré* printed stories and images about 1871, the physical destruction of buildings and streets that occurred during Bloody Week was blamed not on the *Versaillais* (the French national army that invaded the city and put down the Commune) but on the Communards. When *Le Monde illustré* depicted the rubble of the Tuileries (the old royal residence in the center of the city) it was meant to suggest the sins of the Communards. (The rubble of the building was not cleared until 1883.) Female Communards were represented as wild arsonists (*petroleuses*), male Communards as savages, and the reign of the Commune as a modern Saturnalia. The magazine defended the violent suppression of the Commune directed by the politician Adolphe Thiers. Wilson concludes the chapter with observations on the World Exposition and the political festival of June

1878 (*Fête de la juin 1878*) that were designed to symbolize the triumph of the Republic, push aside memories of the Commune, “regenerate” the nation, and reintegrate the Parisian working class into the body politic.

Another chapter is devoted to the writer and commentator Maxime Du Camp. Early in his life, Du Camp had been aligned with the progressive Saint-Simonians. But the political disruption of the Commune and especially its violent end turned him, writes the author, into a reactionary. The analysis in this chapter is mostly drawn from Du Camp’s multi-volume *Paris: ses organs*, which Wilson describes as straddling the line “between history, memory and reportage” (p. 92). Du Camp angrily decried the destruction of books and records by the Communards. He was a bourgeois anti-clericalist and then a member of a fin-de-siècle generation lamenting the decline of France. Du Camp was firmly opposed to amnesty for the Communards (this became a political issue by the late 1870s) because he regarded them as criminals. Employing what became a common trope of the political right, Du Camp, in his even more reactionary multi-volume *Les Convulsions de Paris*, cast the Commune as a “prostitute.” Wilson does not regard Du Camp as a reliable reporter about the Commune, his observations too much the product of dubious written “reminiscences.” “Du Camp,” Wilson writes, “has no qualms about exercising his imagination when concrete evidence is in short supply, missing altogether, or when it runs counter to his argument” (p. 116). And yet Du Camp had tremendous influence on future writers, and new editions of *Paris: ses organs* sold well through the end of the century.

One of the case studies in *Paris and the Commune 1871-78* closely examines three works by the novelist Emile Zola: *L’Assommoir*, *Le Ventre de Paris*, and *Une Page d’amour*, all of which were written in the 1870s when the shock of the Commune and its terrible suppression still hung in the air. Yet these novels deal with the Commune only indirectly, unlike Zola’s more famous description of 1870-71 in *La Débâcle* (1892). Wilson selects these earlier novels because they were written closer in time to the Commune. Zola’s writing and moral views were partly shaped by positivism, and the elements in Parisian society that gave birth to the Commune are planted early in these novels. Like Du Camp, Zola had been in Paris during the Commune. He was appalled by the violence and by the flawed leaders of both the Commune and Versailles. A central actor in *Le Ventre de Paris* is based on the real Communard firebrand Gustave Flourens. Most of the analysis in this chapter covers the novel *L’Assommoir*, which is set in Paris during the Second Empire (1852-70) that preceded the Commune and in whose main character, “Gervaise,” the author sees future female Communards. In the novel, Zola established a link between alcoholism, a frail social fabric, and working-class degradation. Wilson includes a long analysis of a section of the novel in which “Gervaise’s” wedding party makes a foray from the urban margins where they live and work to some of the famous historical landmarks of the central city, including the Louvre and Vendôme Column. Wilson’s reading of this section of *L’Assommoir* evokes themes from Pierre Nora’s *Lieux de mémoire*. In *L’Assommoir* and the other Zola novels taken up in this chapter, Wilson identifies “a number of coded political references that modern readers may overlook but which, for contemporary Parisian readers, would have evoked memories of the recent past” (p. 157). Zola, who later in the century became a famous defender of Dreyfus, both influenced collective memories and helped to propagate them: Zola, writes Wilson, “was never able where the Commune was concerned to shake off the prejudices and myths of his own social class” (p. 157).

The last case study in *Paris and the Commune 1871-78* looks at the work of three photographers of the era: Charles Soulier, Edouard-Denis Baldus, and Charles Marville. Wilson defines photography as a patently subjective activity, and for her these photographers were no less conscious or unconscious supporters of the bourgeois moral order than Du Camp and Zola. Contemporary viewers of their photographs, reproduced in a variety of publications and subject for years to government censors, would have drawn “moral lessons” from them (p. 176). Citing Pierre Bourdieu, the author approaches the photographers’ images as a process of decoding “hidden meanings” (p. 176).

The brief conclusion to *Paris and the Commune 1871-78* reflects on recent contests over the memory of the

Commune, including the erection of a commemorative plaque in 2000 and Peter Watkin's controversial film *La Commune Paris 1871* of the same year. Meanwhile, political commemorations of the Commune sometimes still take place at the *Mur des Fédérés* in Père Lachaise cemetery where the last Communards were executed in May 1871, and Sacré Coeur Basilica (built as an act of penance by French Catholics after the Commune) at the top of Montmartre serves as a constant visual reminder on the Parisian landscape of the "sins" of 1871. At the end of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Nietzsche had argued for "deliberate forgetting" of traumas, but that did not happen with the Commune (p. 11). The contest over the memory of 1871 lives on.

Over the decades, historians, literary scholars, and sociologists have probably written most about how supporters of the Commune on the political left kept its memory alive, either to learn lessons from its successes and mistakes or to have its commemoration serve as inspiration for working-class organizations like trade unions or political parties. Wilson's book provides a healthy corrective to this tendency by focusing on the years immediately following the Commune and "the ways in which broadly conservative, counter-revolutionary and reactionary collective memories and myths...manifested themselves in a wide range of cultural production" (p. 2). Her central argument—that memories are mostly constructed by the dominant forces in society, and that the subjects in her case studies distorted or misunderstood the events of 1871—is compelling. The author demonstrates a solid grasp of her primary sources and the secondary literature in both cultural studies and history, and provides a credible argument for the case studies she has selected. The analysis builds persuasively from chapter to chapter. There is not much to disagree with here. Some of her readings of the sources (Zola and the photographers, in particular) may go a bit far for some readers. The text is well-written and concise, though the images from *Le Monde illustré* are not clearly reproduced. Except in the broadest sense, the analysis is not really about "politics," as described in the subtitle. One could note, too, that what is being "forgotten" about 1871 is not the whole of the Paris Commune, but really just Bloody Week. Indeed, there was much that the Communard leadership tried to accomplish in March, April, and early May before the terrible end. I was left wondering what the author's sources—*Le Monde illustré*, Du Camp, Zola, and the photographers—thought about the federalist and progressive policies of the Commune.

These are minor criticisms. Colette Wilson's tightly focused *Paris and the Commune, 1871-78* is an excellent contribution to the scholarship on the Commune and its memory.

NOTE

[1] John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), p. 255.

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