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**Mary Gluck**, *Popular Bohemia: Modernism and Urban Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005. xi + 224 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$35.00 (cl.) ISBN 0-674-01530-4.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast.

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In *Popular Bohemia*, Mary Gluck explores the relationship between nineteenth-century bohemian culture in Paris and the rise of avant-garde modernism in the early twentieth century. The critical intersection is found, she contends, in “popular bohemia,” that is, among those bohemians with provocative, parodic, and ironic sensibilities more than those with commercial, fashionable, or sentimental ones. Her thesis is that the discourses and performances of this popular bohemia “rescued the culture of everyday modernity and transformed it into enduring aesthetic forms that have come to define modernist culture” (p. 21). Gluck demonstrates her prowess as an intellectual historian by selecting, distilling, and synthesizing theoretical and historical work from the past two decades, largely inspired by the writings of Walter Benjamin, into a concise volume that is both scholarly and accessible. It is a book that deserves to be widely read.

Both critical and historical issues motivate Gluck’s study. On the critical side, she seeks to explain “the persistence of the ideology of aesthetic autonomy” in modernism (p. 4), in the face of the multiple interconnections between modern art and popular culture that have been made in recent decades. This seeming contradiction can be addressed, she believes, by looking for the demand for artistic autonomy in historical, more than philosophical, sources. In this case, the origins of modernism emerge from the practices of “ironic bohemia,” as distinct from “sentimental bohemia,” which Gluck believes surpasses the earlier treatments of bohemianism provided by Jerrold Seigel and Elizabeth Wilson. [1] For Gluck, “art for art’s sake” was not simply the by-product the bohemian’s social marginalization from and political rebellion against bourgeois society, but emerged from a complex of “parodic gestures and ironic public performances of experimental artists and aimed to differentiate the artist of modernity from his middle-class counterparts” (p. 15). Chapters on the Romantic bohemian, the *flâneur*, the Decadent, and the Primitive artist tease these critical practices out of Parisian bohemia.

Gluck begins with the young, rebellious, and flamboyant Romantic bohemians of the 1820s and 1830s, eccentric in costume and manners, who were not yet modernists. Although champions of freedom of artistic expression, particularly the new Romanticism and its heroic celebrity, Victor Hugo, these bohemians were more outlandish than innovative, fashionable rather than critical, oriented more toward the past than the future in sensibilities. By contrast, the ironic Théophile Gautier articulated that it was precisely the superfluity of contemporary culture, not its greatness, which made it truly modern. *L’art pour l’art*, or the “uselessness of literature” (p. 43), was Gautier’s declaration in favor of artistic autonomy and in support of popular politics over middle-class values. Gluck elaborates upon this latter issue for the remainder of the chapter, which contrasts popular theatrical melodrama with the bourgeois comédie-Vaudeville.

The *flâneur*, the strolling observer of modern urban life, has been a popular figure for scholarly attention over the past few decades, and Gluck devotes a chapter to him as well. Following the interpretive lead established by this scholarship, Gluck affirms that the *flâneur* was not only the literal stroller of the Parisian arcades and boulevards, but by extension the artistic, journalistic, literary, and poetic observer of modern urban life. For Gluck, the key is to distinguish the normative *flâneur* from his ironic superior.

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*Flâneurs* of the 1830s and 1840s sought to codify the diversity of modern, urban experiences into literary realism, character types, and the history of manners, for example, in the vignettes of the multi-volumed *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes* and the caricatures of *Le Charivari*. But satirical *flâneurs* with more ironic sensibilities, such as Balzac, Daumier, and Baudelaire, saw the realist project as futile. This more perceptive “avant-garde flâneur” (p. 102) was paradoxically both a part of and in opposition to the modern world, and saw the modern urban landscape as fragmentary, abstract, and imaginary. “Modernity had ceased to be a social text, that waited to be deciphered by the urban writer,” Gluck writes, “and became an aesthetic construct, that needed to be freshly created through the artist’s imaginative act” (p. 103).

The sentimental versus ironic bohemia dynamic is developed somewhat differently in the discussion of the Decadents. Gluck searches for the origins of the late-nineteenth century movement in Émile Goudeau’s Hydropathe society and Rodolphe Salis’s *Le Chat Noir* cabaret, each with their corresponding journals, as well as the through less-well-known Incoherent art movement. These fin-de-siècle bohemians were decadents in their provocative activities and flamboyant lives. For Gluck, in addition they were artistic visionaries who saw in their performances, writings, and art, “the potential for a public culture that could transcend the fragmentation of modern life” (p. 124). Gluck also explores the medical discourses on hysteria and neurasthenia, as well as the theatrical performances of hysteria in Charcot’s Salpêtrière hospital, as sources of more widespread notions about decadence and degeneration at the end of the century. When concepts like hysteria and neurasthenia were put in the hands of an intellect as powerful as the Decadent J. K. Huysmans, decadence became a spiritual quest for a purified art that lay beyond the puerile and decayed realities of modern life.

A discussion of the Primitive artist constitutes the final chapter of the book. Gluck quickly moves through Gauguin’s art and writings, primitive artifacts displayed in the Trocadero museum built for the International Expositions of Paris, and Pierre Loti’s exotic literature, all familiar cultural terrains. The most important figure highlighted in the chapter is Victor Segalen, who, Gluck emphasizes, distinguished “past” from “future” exoticism [del. & move quotation marks] (p. 182). For Segalen, the *exot*, the European sense of identity fashioned in relation to the “exotic Other,” was an abstraction that cut two ways. The “false” *exot*, represented by colonial administrators and tourists, imposed primitive character types upon colonial populations, while the “true” *exot* embraced native perspectives. The resulting fusion of identities by the true *exot* heightened, rather than lessened, the sense that Europeans felt as aliens in colonial settings. As the twentieth century developed, Gluck claims, exotic Primitivism was increasingly supplanted by avant-garde movements, such as Surrealism, that sought immediate correspondences between the aesthetics of primitive and modern art.

In less than two hundred pages, Gluck skillfully handles an array of nineteenth-century French figures to reveal the ways in which their activities and writings prefigured a demand for artistic autonomy, in practice and aesthetics, characteristic of twentieth-century modernism. But what is really new here? Readers of H-France are already familiar with some of the scholarship from recent years that links bohemia and the urban landscape of Paris with the development of modernity, as well as studies that link symbolism, decadence, and colonial literature with modernism.[2] In my view, two things distinguish Gluck’s treatment from these others. First, *Popular Bohemia* draws together many of the topics, issues, and insights raised by this body of scholarship into a single, powerful, synthetic volume, accessible by advanced undergraduates as well as scholars. It deserves a wide readership, but unfortunately it is currently only available in a cloth edition, which may limit its distribution.

Second, Gluck’s conception of modernism places this book somewhat at odds with works previously reviewed on H-France. She seems to be working with two different, and perhaps not altogether compatible, notions of modernism. Sometimes she uses the terms modernity and modernism

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interchangeably, which suggests that modernism is the culture of modernity. But in her critical sensibility, she affirms modernism as an avant-garde artistic and intellectual movement. Despite broadening the cultural base of the historical discussion, the key figures remain those who pointed toward the development of an early twentieth-century avant-garde—Gautier, Daumier, Balzac, Baudelaire, Huysmanns, and Segalen (who has quickly risen in stature in recent years). Many other recent works, by contrast, regard modernism as a more widespread cultural development, emerging from spectacular consumer culture for example, or tease modernism out of unexpected sources, such as late nineteenth-century religious pilgrimages. In Gluck's book, by contrast, popular bohemia is not defined by what was popular, as commonly shared culture, but is restricted to the insights of those who can distinguish the ironic from the sentimental. The only popular bohemian voices that count are those who speak with an avant-garde modernist sensibility.

To be fair, this is precisely what Gluck sets out to accomplish, and she does an excellent job at it. In the book's preface, Gluck recounts her own journey as an intellectual historian who has moved into the cultural idiom. She has come to believe that intellectual history is enriched by such a move, deepening our understanding of critical intellectual issues by broadening the cultural base. In turn, it is worth asking, how do historical investigations of nineteenth-century modern culture critique our understanding of intellectuals and modernism? It is a particularly pertinent question if the concept is expanded to encompass a wide spectrum of cultural modernities beyond formal modernism or, its subset, the avant-garde. This is precisely why the field of scholarship is more a dialog than a didactic, or even dialectical, activity. Coming from the direction of intellectual history, *Popular Bohemia* adds an important voice to discussions about the origins and meaning of modernism.

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## NOTES

[1] Jerrold Seigel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986) and Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2000).

[2] Works reviewed in recent years on H-France that cover topics closely related to Gluck's concerns, some of which are referenced by her, include:

Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), <http://h-france.net/vol3reviews/clancysmith.html>

Sally Debra Charnow, *Theatre, Politics, and Markets in Fin-de-Siècle Paris: Staging Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), <http://h-france.net/vol6reviews/jackson3.html>

Georges Didi-Huberman, *Invention of Hysteria: Charcot and the Photographic Iconography of the Salpêtrière*, trans. Alisa Hartz (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003), <http://h-france.net/vol4reviews/surkis.html>

Elizabeth Emery and Larua Morowitz, *Consuming the Past: The Medieval Revival in fin-de-siècle France* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), <http://h-france.net/vol5reviews/matsuda.html>

Annegret Fauser, *Musical Encounters at the 1889 Paris World's Fair* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005), <http://h-france.net/vol6reviews/levitz.html>

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Pamela A. Genova, *Symbolist Journals: A Culture of Correspondence* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2002), <http://h-france.net/vol3reviews/walz4.html>

Rae Beth Gordon, *Why the French Love Jerry Lewis: From Cabaret to Early Cinema* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 200), <http://h-france.net/vol1reviews/rearick2.html>

David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York & London: Routledge, 2003), <http://h-france.net/vol4reviews/taithe3.html>

Kimberley J. Healey, *The Modernist Traveler: French Detours, 1900-1930* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), <http://h-france.net/vol4reviews/walz5.html>

Asti Hustvedt, ed., *The Decadent Reader: Fiction, Fantasy, and Perversion from Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), <http://h-france.net/vol1reviews/walz2.html>

Suzanne K. Kaufman, *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005), <http://h-france.net/vol5reviews/curtis3.html>

Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in fin-de-siècle* (Paris, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), <http://www.h-france.net/reviews/walz.html>

Richard Thomson, *Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre* (Washington: National Gallery of Art and Princeton University Press, 2005), <http://h-france.net/vol5reviews/mix.html>

Lisa Tiersten, *Marianne in the Market: Envisioning Consumer Society in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2001), <http://h-france.net/vol2reviews/thompson2.html>

Gabriel P. Weisberg, ed., *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2001), <http://h-france.net/vol2reviews/seigel.html>

Robin Walz  
University of Alaska Southeast  
[rwalz@uas.alaska.edu](mailto:rwalz@uas.alaska.edu)

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