ADRIAN RIFKIN

NO PARTICULAR THING TO MEAN

Introduction

There seems to be an emerging awareness that one of the outstanding problems in the de-constitution of art-history as an academic subject remains the status of the art-object itself, as a historical form of production, as a site of the intersection of various ideologies, and in terms of how it is understood as an object of knowledge. Awareness that is, that this is a problem and that it is grossly under theorised. The way in which this problem is confronted will shape the elements of a new art-history, in what way or if at all it requires the epithets of art or design. In some respects the new and progressive art-histories of the last decade, that have embarked on particular methods of historicising the art-work, have as much intensified the problems as they have resolved them. In Tim Clark's work, for example, the fundamental issues of the reception of works of art and its diverse meanings have been broached. But in one way or another, we are always left somewhere in the Louvre or, of late, in the Jeu de Paume. That is to say, in a highly privileged space, one of whose functions remains the equipment of our own cultural outlooks with the heirarchies of its privileges. Clark's Louvre is very differently peopled from that of college visits or the artistic biographies produced in the Institues of art. The conditions through which the works hanging there began to acquire their importance through various kinds of historical process are interpolated between us and the painting. But quite often it's like going out where you came in, and the historicisation acts like a sort of immanent meaning of the art-work, as if the source, – the real source, of its timeless values. Even, pleasure in it is intensified through the knowledge of its historical profundity, and it gets re-presented as the file of new struggles.

For instance it can be seen as the proper place of a struggle for an appropriation of values by art-historicans of left and right alike. Or, one step on, if appropriation itself is not an objective, then a painting can still be the field of a conflict of tendencies at a level at which academic method and cultural politics overlap. To the right of this relatively safe terrain lies the sociology of a Baxendall in which a comlex but soothing group of methods explains everything at the expense of theory, or possibly nothing at all. If I remark on these things here, it is not to suggest that this essay is going to provide any answers. Rather I want to place it by detaching it from a notion that is residually important in the debates that they pose. This is the notion that there needs to be a contradiction between 'high' and 'low' art forms, and that the elaboration of this contradiction is a means of combatting some unjust ideas of quality . . .

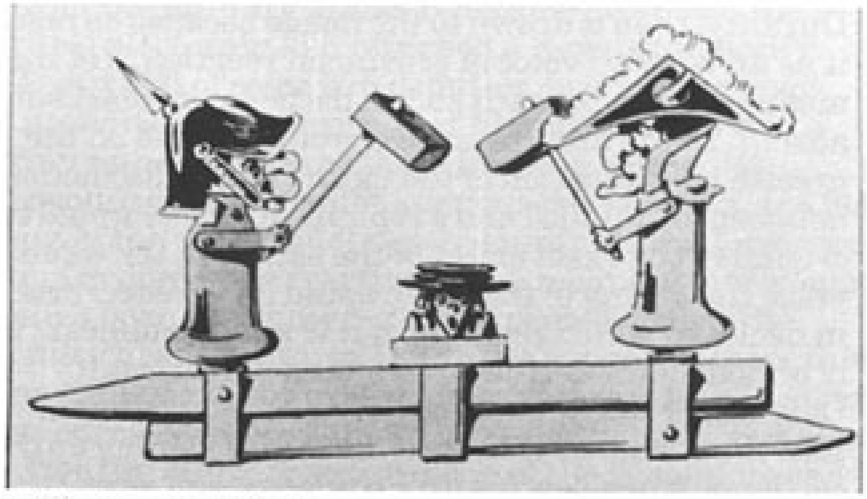
In Schapiro or Clark, for instance, popular prints or songs, and their contemporary commentaries and types of appropriation, are made to serve the analysis of the always more comprehensive meaning of a painting from the Louvre - Courbet's *Funeral at Ornans* or *Atelier* are the principal subjects. This process also tends to confer quasi immanent meanings on the museum art, even if these meanings at times become unfixed in the confusions of social life. If we were to respond to it by asserting the independance of the popular prints as such, we would have to engage ourselves in a welter of categorical muddles held together by a well established language of dominant values and qualities. The prints 'are as good as' or 'are unjustly neglected' etc etc. This might get the print out of whichever museum it's in, municipal history or social anthropology, into a temporary showing in the Louvre, and so reinstate its hierarchisation with shuffled terms. So in making some political prints the occasion of this piece, I want to emphasise that they are not being endowed either with any imaginary privilege or with its lack. They are a starting point for the consideration of some problems of analysis – a starting point that is not, in this instance, excessively overdetermined by systems of values that one would wish to dismantle, or, as a pro-tem measure, marginalise. They are no more high than they are low, nor folk, nor popular, for that matter.

The essay itself is based on a number of talks that I gave to accompany an exhibition of some 200 of these prints that I made about 2 years ago. It has thus had innumerable inputs, and follows the final presentation more or less exactly. I had thought to say that it is a preliminary sketch for a much longer, more definitive etc etc, but since the preliminary sketch has become more or less a vocation, it would be silly. The reproductions are all black and white, and so their colour coding is lost.

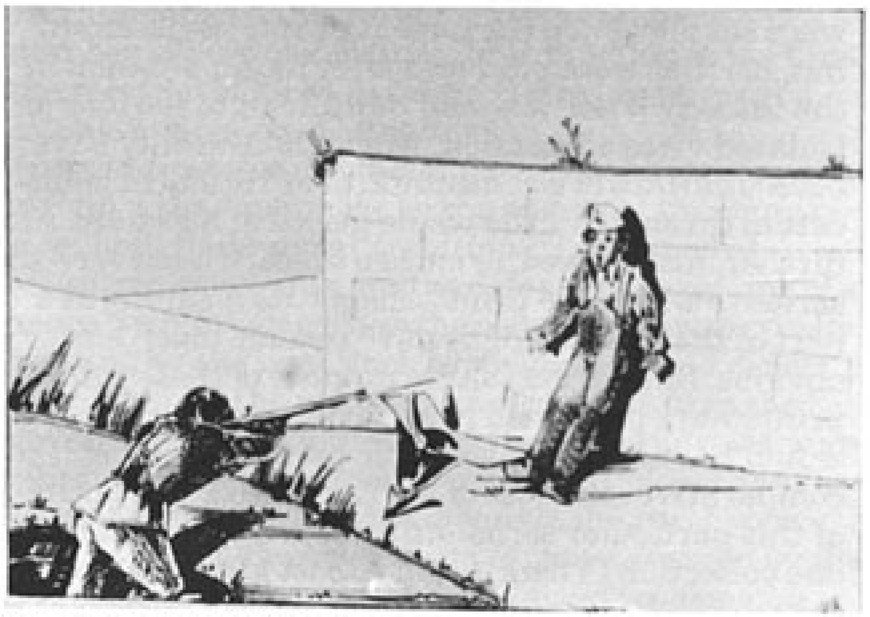
No Particular Thing to Mean

The print shown in illustration 1. was produced in Paris during the first few months of 1871. It is not possible to date it precisely either by means of the 'legal deposit' system, which was not working at this point of revolutionary confusion of the state, nor by its subject matter, which is of a kind that remained topical over a period of time. In histories of the siege and the Commune, or in illustrated books devoted to the visual imagery of the time, it receives, as far as I can see, no attention. It is a print of very little importance. Nonetheless it is one of the very few images out of thousands printed that attracted any kind of a detailed comment from a professional writer or critic – in this case, the art critic Duranty. He made a brief remark about it in one of a series of three articles that he published in the Gazette des Beaux Arts in 1871 in the months after the suppression of the Commune. The series deals with imagery in Europe during the Franco-Prussian war and the siege of Paris, and only one of them concetrates on Parisian material – material which, at this point, was politically hot, and remained so for the rest of the decade. All the printed texts and imagery that had escaped censorship during the revolutionary uprisings were placed under a blanket interdiction by the Thiers government, and those addict-collectors who wanted to amass it – there were quite a number of them, had to be quick off the mark to get examples before they were wiped out by the tribunals, the postering service of the Paris police etc. Any published commentaries on the images, posters and proclamations that were circulated necessarily reproduced the dominant anti-Communard propaganda, cynically branding their subject as the manifestation of political disease, filth, hypocrisy and improper and unreasonable desires to disturb established order. Thus a trio of little volumes like those of Firmin-Maillard, for example, both confirmed the need for the military and judicial massacre of the Commune, and, at the same time, provided collectors with a detailed run down of items of interest – a connoisseurs guide to the scum.

Duranty, addressing himself to an audience more distanced from the arenas of political turbulence, wrote in a very different tone. His account is marked by a detached, intelligent and measured assessment of his subject. If the emphasis of his analysis lies with Daumier, Doré and Puvis de Chavannes, whose imagery constitutes a mildly humanistic to reactionary despair at the unfolding of events, he does not feel himself bound to place everything else beyond the realm of explanation. He does not characterise it simply as filth or garbage: rather he insists that the imagery itself is as exceptional as the epoch, no more and no less unfortunate than the conjuncture that produced it. Thus it can be excepted from the mainstream of the French national tradition of political satire, and understood as an object of interest without embarassment. The balance of attention in Duranty, and the kinds of discrimination that he tries to make are quite deeply symptomatic of a wider process in art history. A process, that is, through which certain elements of overtly political art-forms, such as the work of Daumier, are attached to aesthetic criteria that allow these criteria to become their main signification in place of their historically specific meanings. These latter, for instance Daumier's critical and radical position on some political and social issues, become supernumery, explicable primarily through historical context as an adjunct to more 'profound' aesthetic exegetics. One important spin-off from this is the emergence of the well known distinction between quality and meaning in works of art, which is a nodal point of innumerable different processes of social ordering and hierarchies. In this light Duranty's emphasis could be said to be over-determined by the same needs, ways of thinking etc. that produce the texts that are engaged in overt political abuse, and his concentration on the 'unimportant' image in illustration 1, as one of the few 'popular' fly-sheets to attract him, takes on more sense. Lacking quality, it is more readily susceptible to analysis



1. *The War in the Provinces.*



2. *Amusement of the Garrison.*

He wrote of it:

> *But in the general concert (of posters) I find only one that really sounds out of tune. It imitates the penny-game called shoe-smiths. In the place of a block is a peasant's head. From one side a Prussian bashes on it, from the other the figure of a French admiral or a republican officer – it is not easy to work out which. It is a real cry of provinical reaction, astray in the democratic tumult of Paris. It is a demand of the countryside against the delegation of war. At the same time, given the exception of dated newspapers, it is impossible to be precise about the date of these fly-sheets, which are sometimes isolated, published after the event, some of which disappear and reappear according to the fluctuations of political regimes.*

Duranty, then is drawn to the image because he reads it as an isolated voice of provincial reaction. Yet the means for him to reach such a decision are markedly absent. In the first instance it would depend on the precise identification of the figure, as the distinction between an admiral and a republican officer would be crucial to the exact object of the satire. In the second place the dating of the print would be no less crucial in deciding which republic, if it is anti-republican, it is aimed against – the government of National Defence, or the Communard government of Paris, that the official government accused of holding up the settlement of a peace with Prussia as well as of planning to seize the peasants' land. Differently, if it were set alongside the torrent of anti-communard images that were produced after its suppression in the *'Bloody Week'* it would be difficult to see it as an isolated voice of reaction. Nor could Duranty have been unaware of a continuum of anti-radical publication throughout the whole period of his study. And further, had he seen, or chosen to see, whichever – the series to which the print belongs, its meaning as a part of that series might have become much more obvious. Since a very large number of these political prints were published in series or thematic groups it would have been a reasonable tactic to look for comparative material of the same kind. The entirety of this particular series still exists intact in at least one collection (Victoria and Albert Museum). It is called *'Wooden Sabre'* and from our own viewpoint it falls quite definitely within a broad spectrum of radical critiques of the entire conduct of the war with Prussia, both under the Second Empire, which embarked on it, and the Republican governments of Thiers, that concluded (ie lost) it. One element in its mode of satire is the representation of different aspects of the war and its politics as toys or games of one kind or another, and it touches on a number of the most widespread objects of discontent. For instance, it also attacks the claim of the general in command of defence, Trochu, to have a 'plan' – a 'plan' that became notorious for its absence, for its obsucrity, or for being nothing other than a covert capitulation. Satirising Trochu's claims had no necessary link with anti-republicanism, even if the satire could address itself to a very wide range of disaffected opinions from royalist to revolutionary.

However, there are two unusual elements in 'Wooden Sabre'. One of these is the highly elliptical metaphors of some of its numbers, which make any reading of them difficult – much more difficult than in illustration 1. This removes them from the type of political simplification that is characteristic of most political prints. The second is indeed their very obvious sympathy to the plight of the countryside as the site of war. Illustration 2, which is the next in line from 1 is clear enough. It is here, in the nature of the political language of the moment, that the particular tendency of Duranty's reading is to be located. Basically it is not made from within the image in its use of the types of figure that appear in it, an accurate evaluation of these and their relation to other prints, but from the dominant use of the word 'rural' in the opening months of 1871. After the election of a new National Assembly at the end of January – the assembly that took its sessions in Bordeaux, away

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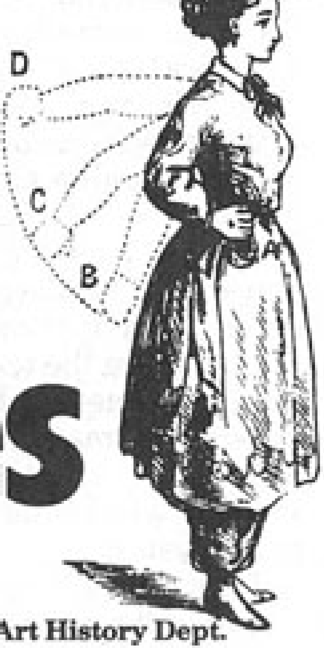

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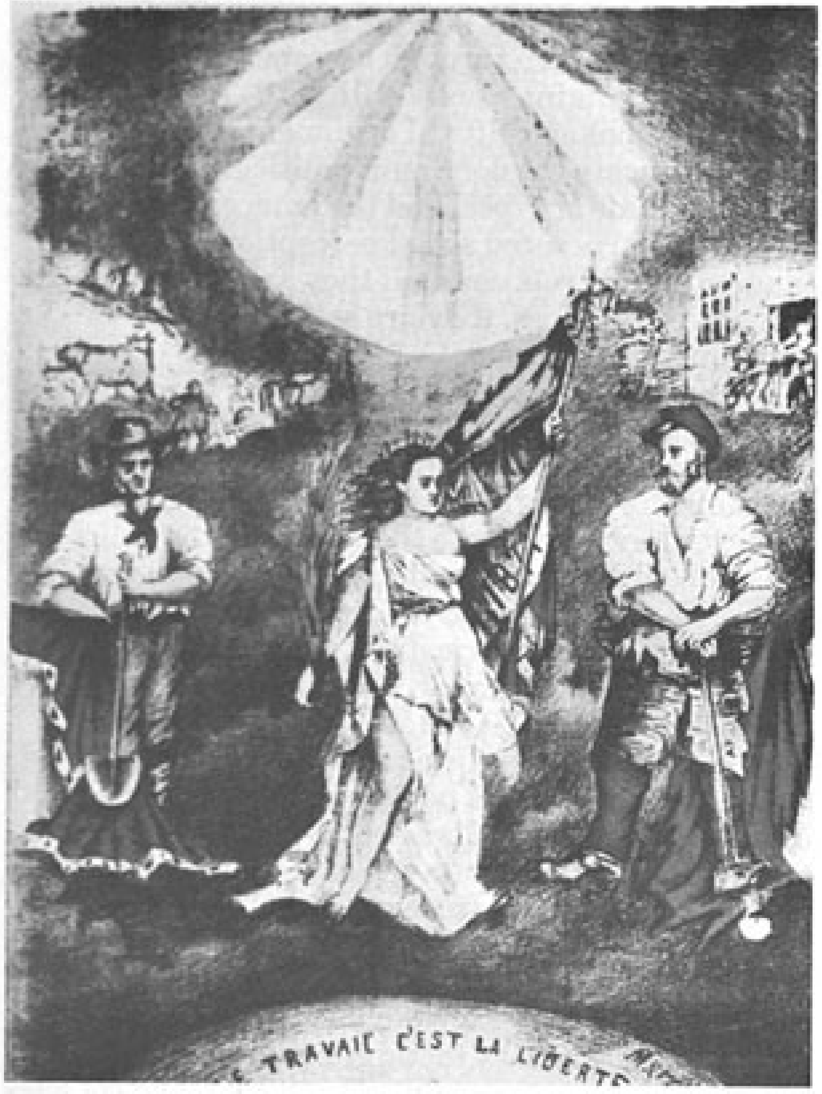
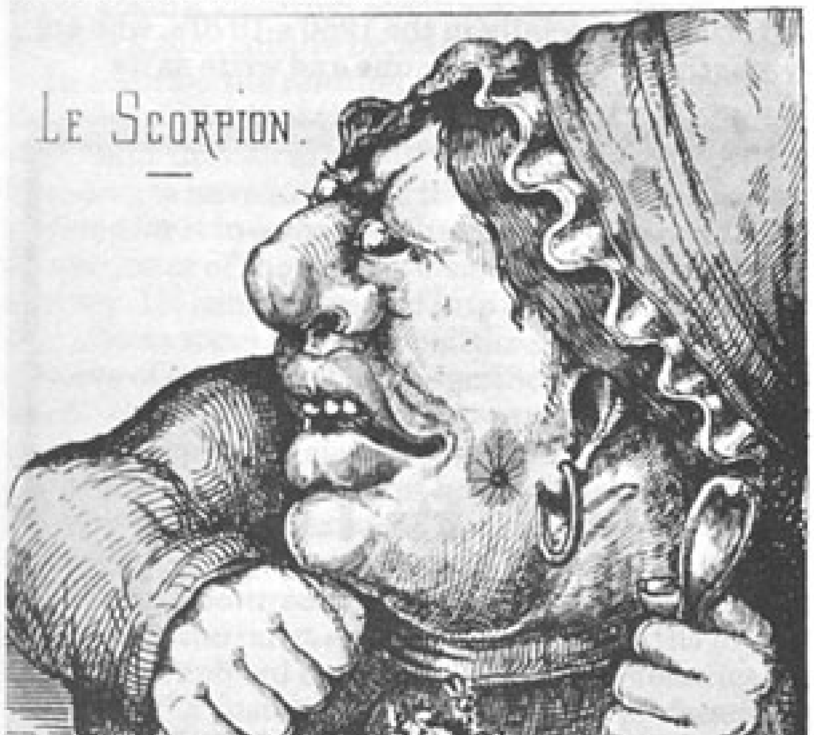
3. *Labour is Liberty.*


LE TRAVAIL C'EST LA LIBERTÉ

4. The Signs of the Zodiac no 10 – Club for the emancipation of women *A Scorpion in her ugly mug*



from the military arena, it became clear that the rural electorate had returned a Royalist majority. About 400 of some 675 deputies, leaving the revolutionaries and bourgeois or liberal democrats in a tiny minority. It was these that the Marseilles revolutionary Crémieux denounced as *rurals*, and his use of the word rapidly passed into political language as a synonym for reactionary – a meaning that would have been recognised, if not accepted, across the political spectrum. In Duranty's comment, then, this recognition is sufficiently powerful to attach itself to a representation of the countryside as such. But also, after the military suppression of the Commune and the unfolding of the great show trials of its leaders and supporters, this recognition would have had a number of political virtues, that function to mediate the relation of Paris to the provinces in terms of a complex of political allegories.

As indicated, the official government was at pains to depict the Commune as the enemy of the countryside, both in its social ambitions that aimed at collective ownership, and as delaying the signing of a peace with Prussia when the countryside was cruelly affected by the war. Such propaganda could deflect the blame for the misconduct of the war from the government and suggest that there was no resistance either to the government's politic or independant resistance to the Prussians amongst the rural population. The dangerous effects of this were seen by the Commune which launched an appeal for common cause with the country, without, however, being able to make it heard. And they were brutally felt by the Communards when finally defeated by a government army largely recruited from the rural populations. However the situation is even more convoluted. Insofaras Paris could be represented as the prize for which the French were to fight for their national salvation both against the foreign enemy and the enemy within – the revolutionaries of Paris, then to that extent deliverance would depend upon the further subjugation of the interests of the provinces to Paris. The long term process of the economic, politial and ideological predominance of the metropolis could unfold in part through a particular image of Communard Paris as the enemy of the provinces. In this context it would be almost inconceivable that an image like illustration 1 could be read as anything other than a cry of reaction. But again, in choosing to comment on an image that he can construe as reactionary, Duranty both delivers himself from the need to re-iterate the same kind of abuse against the radical imagery as his more scatological colleagues: and, in neglecting the actually reactionary imagery, allows it to do its work undisturbed. By the more humanistic artistic standards of a Daumier or a Doré, the cartoons that rendered the Communards as subhuman had even less to recommend them than some of the most amateur of radical fly-sheets. Free from censorship, their work was best done in silence. To have drawn attention to their 'quality' could only have subverted them. From one perspective Duranty, an astute, professional critic, misreads the print: from another, he does no more than traverse it as an element in a dominant mode of political thought that enables him to articulate it himself. In this sense the social signification of the image can not be precisely fixed within any one set of determinations.

Yet this fixing is typically the objective of much analytical or historical work that is done on political imagery. In one way it does lend itself to a highly restricted interpretation – that is, insofor as it is political. Or rather, insofar as the notion of political that it represents and the political determinations of the process of interpretation coincide within a static and one dimensional conception of politics. The objectification of complex social and ideological movements into a relation between individuals or groups of individuals drawn from the dominant ranks of professional politicans is still reproduced in school-book histories, television news, 'investigative' journalism, anti-hagiographies such as 'de-Stalinisation' etc, and is itself a caricatural procedure. Political prints are, more often than not, an aspect of this way of thinking, and serve to confirm its apparent operational validity, even if, at the same time they have the advantage of genuinely concentrating complicated relations into a form through which they can be realised and fought over. Given the accuracy of the assertion that the Paris Commune was essentially a social revolutionary movement, of which the narrowly political forms were conjuncturally produced, then the political prints produced around it take on a particular interest. Among the thousands of subjects both for and against, only a handful are concerned with the 'social', with the issues that were generated within popular and working class organisations as means of social transformation. One or two, for instance, touch on the question of rents. But none at all on the organisation of social production through association or cooperation: this remains wholly within the domain of written or spoken political argument. Primarily the prints replicate the dominant political concentration on individuals or types, and the emergence of a complexly structured social perception out of them is tangential and relational. If they are often complete political utterances, they are seldom more than phonemes of the social.

This difficult entry into a method of reading them is well concealed in their historiography, which has been constructed through needs which limit them to a totemic function. If, in the earliest stages of their history, they passed into the control of the police and the cupboards of a few collectors, their next use was as a dark point, a negative example in the official histories of French caricature. The inception of their separation from Daumier, Doré et al in Duranty is completed by Grand-Cartaret in the 1880's and 1890's.[1] In his books they are definitively consigned to the dustbin, the link between undesirable political intentions and bad art is sewn up more tightly: in one case an image by Pilotell, one of the rare professional printmakers who was also a Communard, is especially blamed because it quotes an iconography of Daumier, thus dragging it into the mire, and stripping it of the humanistic connotation that lets it act as art. Grand-Cartaret's tactic effectively contains 'analysis' within the realm of intention, and confines meaning to the narrowly specific, non-social reading. It is a tactic that is implicitly accepted by later social historians, especially in the 1950's-1970's, who are sympathetic to the Commune and write as its

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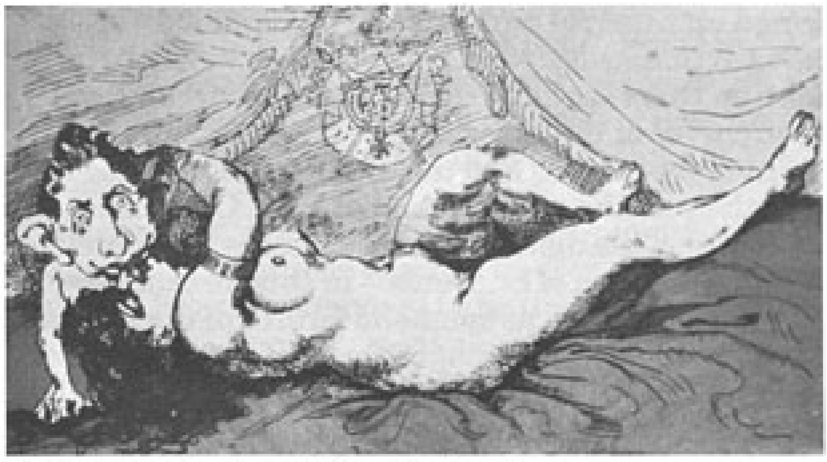
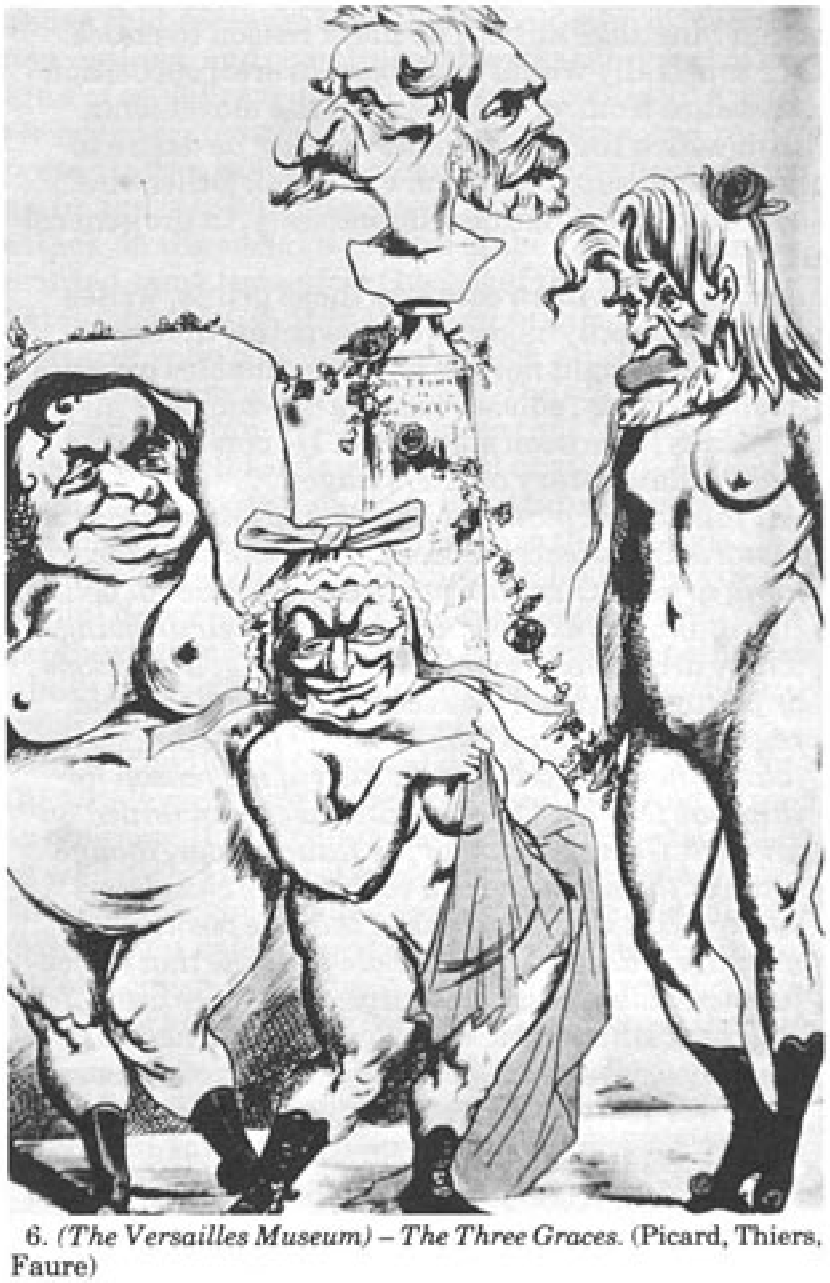
partisans. For them their acceptance of the prints as an object of commentary or a source of illustration, – the latter principally, signifies their own political opposition to the reactionary or liberal denigration of the Commune, and their sympathy with its revolutionary politics. This is clearly a necessary stage in the development of a historical position, and in the establishment of a marxist view of labour history. But, at the same time it is liable to lead to alternative idealist readings of the prints through describing their meaning as fixed and attributing them to an intention that is now designated as virtuous rather than as wicked. Equally the pecking order in relation to Daumier is also accepted. Some of the radical printmakers – Pilotell, for example, can easily be rescued from the calumny of poor draughtsmanship through reference to dominant notions of quality. They can thus appear not only as virtuous but also as relatively good. This judgement reinforces the notion that the actual object of good caricature, like good art, should be universality. The need even to enter a dispute on the grounds of quality constantly refers matters back to the bourgeois norms that politically and socially are the focus of opposition. The ideological complex that endows quality with its awsome power then yet again subverts the analysis of the prints, which are abstracted from the generality of visual and verbal languages and totemistically attached to the desire to read socialism into them. The anti-commune prints too loose any meaning other than that allowed them in their role as one side of a purely manichean conflict. (One corollary of this is the absurd view that the Commune failed to develop a good culture because it only lasted 72 days!)

In addition the relation of intention and meaning is further fetishised through the use of biography. To the extent that an artist (or poet, or songwriter) can be shown to have sacrificed their talent for politics, or suffered for it in some way, he can also be recruited as a forerunner of the progressive artist of the present century. He can be inserted into the discourse that still affects some left wing politicans and theoreticians of art, in which the sacrifice of an artist is worth literally hecatombs of workers, Jews or other violently oppressed classes or groups – a sacrifice that is invested by the dominant bourgeois conception of art with its whole nexus of market values, social hierarchy etc. The predominant role of intention and will in this discourse both prevents the elaboration of a refined materialist analysis and distorts the proper use of biographical material as a form of historical evidence. For instance, the formation of professional political cartoonists can be seen as an explanatory element of the lack of images directly concerned with social themes. Consistantly pro-Communard draughtsmen like Pilotell or Moloch appear to have lived through a social grouping of declassé, bohemian intellectuals – art-school drop-outs, journalists etc who characteristically sympathised with an extreme Jacobin tradition in French politics – though Courbet who is partially implicated in such circles, pronounced himself anti-Jacobin and socialist. However, we would expect this type of political tendency to be more interested in the fight around long standing radical issues like anti-clericalism rather than the establishment of specifically working class positions. The conjuncture of this kind of interest with other aspects of Communard politics – the disestablishment of the Church, for example, can be seen as a fruitful basis in explaining the quantity of anti-clerical imagery in Pilotell, Moloch and other cartoonists, as well as its widely differentiated inflections and objectives. But this can never be more than a very partial explanation, and does not necessarily enter into the problem of meaning. Even so, it is


5. *Under the Empire – A Prince's education*


6. *(The Versailles Museum) – The Three Graces.* (Picard, Thiers, Faure)

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[1] The best available bibliography on the Commune is the University of Sussex Library Commune Collection, Printed Catalogue. This lists three publications of Maillard, on Posters, Newspapers and fly-sheets respectively. Their general interest is in both listing the material and in needling it, in winkling out signs of weakness and ill faith etc.