

## From the Colony to the Metropolis and Back: The Travel of the Discursive Crowd

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In June 1882, Alexandria, besieged by the British fleet, was a scene of riots and confrontations between natives and foreigners. A month later the bombardment and invasion of the city by British troops took place. For many British and pro-British observers the riots were only understandable through the lens of Europe's own experience with revolutionary upheavals in France. This, however, is only half the story. The European crowds were always understood in racialized terms that invoke the savages of the colonies, the orient, and the Arab/Muslim/Turkish other. This paper aims at mapping this circular movement of the discursive crowd between the colony and the metropolis, and attempts to read the epistemological and ideological biases and underpinnings that project these two discursive spaces (the internal unruly element epitomized in the crowd, and the external threat lurking in the colonies and the racially other territories) onto one another.

### **The *Commune au Caire***

Describing the insurrectionary situation in Egypt, the Royalist Gazette de France referred to the situation dramatically as “*La Commune au Caire*.” (17/6/1882, 1). This comes after a series of articles in which Ahmad ‘Urabi (or *Arabi*, as English and French newspapers called him back then) was compared to Gambetta<sup>1</sup> and the events in Egypt were compared to the revolutionary moment preceding the Commune (or, as the *Gazette* calls these events: “*la dictature de 1870*,” see “*Arabi-Gambetta – Gambetta-Bey*,” Gazette de France, 8/4/1882, 1). The *Standard* would go further back into French history repeatedly describing the situation in Alexandria as “the Reign of Terror.” (For example on 20/6/1882, 5, 29/6/1882, and 5, 18/7/1882, 5). Less explicit but perhaps as relevant is the *Standard*'s use of the epithets of *anarchy* (7/1/1882, 5, 20/6/1882, 5, 27/7/1882, 4) and *incendiarism* (18/7/1882, 5 and 17/8/1882, 5), both coming directly from the counterrevolutionary lexicon on the Commune.

The same association can be observed in Arabic newspapers. Al-Watan (a staunch supporter of the ‘Urabi movement during its rise and a fierce opponents after its failure) accused the ‘Urabists of following the lead of “the Parisian revolutionaries” in imposing their opinion on

the rest of the population to the extent of threatening their opponents with death (19/9/1882, 1) and in attempting to demolish national monuments (2). The leading Arabic newspaper at the time, the Istanbul based al-Jawa'ib did not only see a similarity between the uprising and the Commune, it furthermore alleged that the burning of Alexandria was the work of former communards. It simultaneously blamed 'Urabi for "sullyng his ranks with the socialists who burnt Paris" and the former communards for using the 'Urabi regime as a tool for realizing their "diabolical intents" (7 *dhu al-Qi'dah* 1299, 1). Al-Jawa'ib thus literalized the travel of the discursive crowd through the alleged travel of actual communards.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Crowd as an Oriental and Savage Terror**

In 19<sup>th</sup> century European representations, the crowd in big cities was always reminiscent of racially other territories (Plotz 2000, 18). Gustave LeBon would open his paradigmatic text *The Crowd* (which codified crowd discourse into a pseudo-theory) by comparing the "great upheavals" caused by the crowds and their rule to the rise of the "Arabian [sic] Empire." (LeBon 1896, xiii).

Indeed the crowd in London – and perhaps other European metropolises, was racially diverse, and donned racially diverse artifacts (Makdisi, 1998, 30-36) yet in addition to the realities of the metropolitan crowds, the affinity between the crowd and the racial other lied in the *terror* they both induced (see *ibid*). Although the term *terror* came into currency after the Revolutionary government of 1793, *terror* before the Terror was used in reference to the Ottoman Sultanate (See Vitkus 1997, 150- 151).

### **The Reign of [Muslim] Terror**

The Reign of Terror (which was, in essence, the rule of the organizations representative of the Revolutionary crowd, and which would be reduced in Dickens and LeBon to the rule of the crowd) was likened by its detractors to Muslim rule. Comte de Volney saw in the ideology of Robespierre "*une doctrine renouvelée d'Omar.*" For Volney the Terror prescribed "*[f]raternité ou la mort, c'est à dire: pense comme moi ou je te tue; ce qui est littéralement la profession de foi d'un mohamétan.*" (qtd. in Benot 1991, 228) This came amidst a trend in which both sides would accuse their adversaries of oriental despotism (226-228). Dickens captured this racialized polemic in *A Tale of Two Cities* and whilst orientalizing the decadence of the aristocrats through the image of the swirling Dervishes (2.7.81), he reserved the image of the racial savage for representing the brutality of the revolutionary crowd.<sup>3</sup>

### **Dickens and the Other Racial Others**

Though not unsympathetic to the plight of the Parisian crowd, Dickens depicted the

revolutionaries through the trope of the racial savage: “their *long hair* flapped back” revealing faces that “were more horrible and cruel than the visages of the *wildest savages* in their *most barbarous disguise*.” On their faces, smeared with blood and wine, they had “[f]alse eyebrows and false moustaches” – and they were “glaring with beastly excitement.” (3.2.203, emphases added). This is clearly the image of the Native American warrior, with long hair, war paint, and glaring beastly excitement. If this may seem like an over-reading on our part, Dickens’ description of the scene at Temple Bar leaves little room for speculation: the severed heads at Temple Bar gaze at Tellson’s Bank with “insensate brutality and ferocity worthy of Abyssinia or Ashantee.” (2.1.39) In a novel dealing with the motif of decapitation and the Guillotine, one that ends with the decapitation of one of its main characters, this reference, early on in the novel, (the seventh of the 45 chapters comprising the novel, and the first chapter of “Book the Second”) serves to refer the terror of the decapitations-to-come back to the colony where it belongs.

### **The Commune: The Orient in Paris**

This trend was preserved in the representations of the Commune. Both sides were trying to depict the other as falling outside western civilization. The manifesto of the Central Committee of the German Workmen’s party (celebrated and quoted by Karl Marx in *The Civil War in France* [1871]) objects to the Prussian occupation of France “in the interest of western civilization against eastern barbarism.” Little did these German communists know that their French comrades will fall victim to this same accusation of eastern barbarism. *The Standard* would place the communards and anyone who would sympathize with them or grant them amnesty outside of *civilization* and *Christendom*. They are “*hostis humani generis*” who are even less worthy of shelter than pirates.<sup>4</sup> Their murderous ways break “the moral code of Christendom” and place them in the same category with “heathen nations.” (29/5/1871, 4).

The racial representations of the Commune were most evident when the participation of women was in question. The female revolutionaries were, in counterrevolutionary representations, simultaneously Amazons<sup>5</sup> (Gullickson 1996, 85, 98, 101-104, 114-119, 142, 158, 159, 168, 177, 178, 189, 211, 221-226) and Mohicans (100). Warrior femininity, which contradicted with the Victorian vogue of gentle and domestic femininity, belonged not to European cities but to the same racially other topographies the crowd belonged to.

### **The Revolutionary Woman and the Muslim Pervert**

In addition to conferring a savage and bestial nature on warrior women, the association of the revolutionary women with the orient serves to construct a topos of licentiousness; this was notable in an account that attributed to one of the communardes a four-year residence

in a Turkish Harem (Gullickson 1996, 113): the site, *pare excellence*, of oriental and exotic licentiousness. The licentious bodies of the female revolutionaries belonged to the orient even in sympathetic accounts: lamenting the Versailles' disrespect to the bodies of the female revolutionaries one eyewitness exclaimed: "As for the women who were shot, they treated them almost like the poor Arabs of an insurgent tribe: after they had killed them, they stripped them, while they were still in their death throes, of part of their clothing. Sometimes they went further... [S]ome women were left naked and defiled on the sidewalks." (qtd. In Gullickson 1996, 180). The bodies of the female revolutionaries are produced as violable through a brutal and perverse, almost necrophilic, sexual chaos that could only belong to the Arab other.

A curious example of this association between the licentious female body and oriental perversity and how both stand together for the revolutionary crowd or the revolution *herself* can be found in Maxime du Camp's polemic against the Commune (which was given the title *Les Convulsions de Paris*, a title laden with gendered and racial overtones that space doesn't allow us to get into). To attack the Commune, Du Camp goes on a tirade against the French Painter Gustave Courbet (who was for a short period affiliated with the Commune and who will be later associated with the demolishing of the Vendôme Column). Courbet's "*Origine du Monde*" falls under du Camp's fire not only because it depicts female genitalia but furthermore because it was commissioned by an Ottoman diplomat: "To please a Moslem who paid for his whims in gold, and who, for a time, enjoyed a certain notoriety in Paris because of his prodigalities, Courbet, this same man whose avowed intention was to renew French painting, painted a portrait of a woman which is difficult to describe." (qtd. in Hertz 1983, 34) The licentious female genitals and the licentious "Moslem who paid for his whims" sum up the excesses and transgressions of the revolutionary crowds and refer them back to the discursive territories (racialized and gendered) to which they belonged.

### **Concluding Remarks**

We observe, therefore, a discursive revolving door between the metropol and the colony (or more broadly the racial other) through which tropes, topoi, themes, and discourses on the crowd moved back and forth. First the French Revolution was understood through and compared to racial savagery and oriental despotism. A few decades later the memory of the French Revolution and the imagery of the bloody confrontations in the colonies will continue to haunt one another. *A Tale of Two Cities* is emblematic of this discourse, wedding (alleged) revolutionary savagery to the (alleged) savagery of the racial others in Africa and North America. Representations of the Paris Commune would follow the same topos, adding gendered and sexual savagery to racial savagery. When confrontations broke between the British and the indigenous crowd in 1882 Egypt, the strategies and formations of discursive

crowd control devised against the European revolutionary crowd were deployed, *mutatis mutandis*, against the Egyptian crowd. It was as if the racial other inhabiting the discourse on the crowd was finally driven back to the racially other topography where (s)he always belonged.

This movement betrays the tendency of the dominant (rational, enlightened, white-masculine) Western discourse to project its own unruly element to other topographies; namely the racially other and the feminine, produced by the evolutionary episteme of the time (in both its biological and social manifestations) as lagging phases of evolutionary development, and therefore convenient dumping grounds for the unruly element (see Brickman 2003, 120-127). This was clearest in the anti-Commune discourse. When LeBon would write *The Crowd* (a decade after the Alexandria events, and two decades after the Commune to which LeBon was writing in response) he would clearly and unequivocally relegate the crowd to feminine and racially other topographies and would code this projection in the evolutionary language of the time.

The crowd can therefore be seen as one of the vectors through which the horror of the colony (and of the Orient) haunted the metropolis, and through which the metropolis projected own unruliness onto racially other topographies. The back and forth movement described in this paper is essential to better understand the kind of *licentious spaces* that emerged in early modernity; including the crowd and the colony, and how both are mutually-constitutive. This imbrication of the domestic *licentious space* of the metropolis and the colony exposes the colonial nature of the discourse that produces licentious spaces and subjects, whether this discourse operates in the colony or the metropolis.

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## Notes

1. Of course Léon Gambetta was not a communard, not even remotely a sympathizer with revolutionary causes. If anything, he fled Paris at the eve of the uprising. It is clear, however, that the *Gazette* is projecting all its enemies into one space that is simultaneously a revolutionary space and an oriental one.
2. It falls beyond the purpose of this paper whether this allegation is true or not. Either way, in the discourse of al-Jawa'ib, this travel of former communards becomes indexical of the travel of revolutionary insanity, diabolical purposes, and pyromania.
3. I admit I am here collapsing two overlapping yet distinct categories onto one another. The first is the orient, not all of which belonged to the colony – at least in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The other is the colony, not all of which is oriental; while Native America was in many ways an Orient, imagined to be the eastward part of India and understood through various orientalist tropes, Africa, with the exception of Muslim North Africa was not an orient and was understood through a different set of biases. I believe collapsing the two categories onto one another is justifiable for the purpose of this study not only because both categories are the product of the same colonial Weltanschauung, but furthermore because the event with which this paper commenced ushered the fall of Egypt – already an orient-within the category of the colony, thus collapsing the two categories in practice.
4. The figure of the pirate in the English imaginary – and by extension, one may add, that of the *hostis humani generis*, was already racialized as Berber and Muslim due to England's experience with the "Barbary Pirates." See Vitkus 1997.
5. The Amazons are a relic of classical Greek orientalism, serving to project warrior femininity to Libya and Persia.