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Immanent authority and the performance of community in late nineteenth century Montmartre

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This article develops an account of the aesthetic structure of ‘immanent’, non-foundational forms of authority. It argues for the need to develop a positive account of decentralized authority as an important constitutive form of social bond. Through a genealogical reading of the cultural experiments of the artistic community of late nineteenth century Montmartre, it builds an analysis of the affective and perceptual structures of immanent authority. Authority, it argues, operates across three axes of experience: amplitude, gravity and distance. Although the artistic experiments and cultural politics of fin-de-siècle Montmartre were politically naive, they offer an illuminating lens through which to view the emerging experiential structures of authority in the twentieth century.

Keywords: authority; aesthetics; power; performance; Montmartre

Introduction

Throughout history, authority has been staged through extraordinary spectacles, the illumination of sovereign power with flashes of fire and groans of thunder. Most often, these spectacles drew their power from singular, hidden, distant sources – from the depths of history, from divine powers, and from the kingly power that personified both. The dramatic events of 1789 and the decapitation of Louis XVI, however, came to symbolize an important change in the structures of authority – a devolution of the singular authority of sovereign power to the sovereignty of the ‘people’. It also accompanied a shift in political discourses towards a growing awareness and problematization of immanent forms of political power and authority.

In this article I draw on archival research on the creative community in fin-de-siècle Montmartre in order to contribute a genealogical perspective to the attempts in the rest of this issue to theorize the changing nature of authority, as a specific technique of power, in modernity. In particular, I look at how, during the nineteenth century, the arts came to acquire such an important place in the thinking of new non-traditional, ‘immanent’ forms of authority and social bond. In order to understand this, I will argue, it is necessary to develop a new account of the aesthetics of authority, and the innovative cultural forms that have attempted to use art, not only to question existing forms of authority, but also to stylize new forms of authority and political power. The paper develops theoretical debates concerning

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the role of culture in the constitution of political power, therefore, by contributing a new analysis of how authority works at affective and perceptual registers. I draw upon the example of this creative community, not because it offered a successful attempt to engineer a new form of authority, but because it offers a useful vantage point from which to view the emergence, during the nineteenth century, of structures of authority that have achieved a great deal in influence in both radical and neoliberal forms of contemporary urban governance.

Authority is a technique of power which presupposes the freedom of those who submit to it. Thus it is not reducible to persuasion, manipulation or coercion. Those who submit to authority do so voluntarily, in recognition of a superior expertise, ability or institutional position to make an appropriate judgement on behalf of the wider community. Authority, then, operates by demonstrating the strength, durability and power of an authority figure, inspiring a range of responses including trust, respect, attraction and fear (Sennett 1980). Authority works by establishing specific affective bonds between authorities and those who obey them. In order to understand how authority works as a technique of power, then, it is necessary to study the ways in which these affective relations are secured.

**Immanent authority**

Theorists of power have long been divided as to whether power is best seen as a form of domination (e.g. Dahl 1957, Lukes 2005) or, alternatively, as a normatively positive and enabling social relationship (e.g. Parsons 1963, Arendt 1977, Barnes 1988, Morriss 2002, Allen 2008). Similarly, authority is viewed by some theorists as an important foundation of social and democratic life (Durkheim 1915, Parsons 1960, Jouvenel 1963) and by others as a social relationship that is completely antithetical to freedom (e.g. Wolff 1970, Newman 2001). This latter position makes ‘anti-authoritarianism’ a catch-all rhetorical figure for ‘radical critiques of all oppressions’ (Del Gandio 2008, p. 5). Perhaps the most influential statement of an anti-authoritarian position in recent normative political theory is Jonathan Wolff’s *In Defence of Anarchism*, which argues that authority directly opposes autonomy and hence freedom, since to recognise the authority of another is to surrender one’s autonomous judgement (Wolff 1970). The problem with this anti-authoritarian position, however, is not just that it leads to an empty and sterile vision of autonomy as something incompatible with any form of binding commitment (Green 1988). It is also that authority relations are key means through which difference and diversity are incorporated into social life. Without freely submitting to authority, we would have to achieve an impossibly high level of knowledge and expertise in a multitude of different fields. Authority relations enable a separation of functions, duties and obligations. Thus authority is a tool for coordinating social action and, when practised and institutionalized fairly, treats individuals with respect without forcing them to take the responsibility for every aspect of their social life.

This is not to deny, of course, that authority – premised, at it is, on the legitimacy of certain forms of inequality – is always susceptible to abuse or to unfair distribution. But the problem with authority, in this respect, is not its existence, but the tendency for it to become sedimented and concentrated in institutional positions that are only accessible to those with high social, cultural or economic capital (Bourdieu 1984, 1993). In this case, an important task for democratic political theory becomes to understand how marginalized social groups can acquire the
authority to make effective social and politics claims: to see, for example, how it is possible ‘to speak with authority without being authorized to speak’ (Butler 1997, p. 157, Lovell 2003). Authority, as Millner (2013) argues, can open a theatrical space for politics enabling new forms of political claim to emerge.

Perhaps the best normative approach to authority, then, is to see it in a manner that is analogous to Michel Foucault’s perspective on power and authority: as a relationship that is simultaneously productive and dangerous (Rose 1993, Dean 1995, Osborne 1998a, Foucault 2000c, 2002, Allen 2003, Macmillan 2010). An adequate theoretical approach to modern authority, that is, must view it as an essentially ambiguous social relationship. As William Connolly puts it, ‘Any authoritative set of norms and standards is, at its best, an ambiguous achievement: it excludes and denigrates that which does not fit into its confines. Since social achievement is not possible without this shadow of ambiguity the question becomes: which achievements are worthy of our endorsement once the ambiguity within them is recognized?’ (Connolly 1987, p. 138).

One of the most important texts exploring this ambiguous nature of authority is Immanuel Kant’s essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’, where he characterizes enlightenment in terms of an emancipation from ‘alien guidance’ (Kant 1988). Immaturity, he writes, involves lazy and unthinking obedience to external authority – ‘a book to have understanding in place of me, a spiritual adviser to have a conscience for me, a doctor to judge my diet for me’. Thus Enlightenment is defined by Kant as ‘the moment when humanity is going to put its own reason to use, without subjecting itself to any authority’ (Foucault 2000a). Yet, despite this suspicion of subordinating oneself to external authority, Kant’s position is not simply an anti-authoritarian one. He certainly does not say that the exercise of reason should be exercised without limits. This is because Enlightenment is closely linked to the ethos of critique. The autonomy of reason, according to Kant, can only be assured by determining its legitimate and illegitimate uses. Since it cannot appeal to an external authority to do this, however, reason must determine its own limits, and this is the role that Kant sets himself in the three Critiques. And this is why ‘immanent critique – reason as the judge of reason – is the essential principle of [Kant’s] so-called transcendental method’ (Deleuze 1984, p. 3). Kant’s critical method cannot appeal to external criteria, but only criteria that are immanent to reason itself. In this sense Enlightenment does not mean the rejection of all authority and all limits, but the replacement of external limits with internal limits. In this sense, Kant’s position is not at all anti-authoritarian, because he is not positing that any limitation on the use of reason is illegitimate. Rather, he is claiming that reason must establish its limits by deferring to its own authority. Reason must limit itself. In other words, Kant’s critical project can more accurately be interpreted as an attempt to formulate a principle of immanent authority – a form of authority whose source is human experience and the faculties of reason, understanding and imagination that stem from it. Indeed, this helps to explain Kant’s seemingly paradoxical willingness to advocate unquestioned obedience to authority in the ‘private’ sphere of civil society (see Axinn 1971). For such forms of authority, whose criteria are immanent to the political community, are not incompatible with the rejection of external authority.

For a writer such as Hannah Arendt, the modern refusal of external authority is equally ambiguous, promising new forms of civic republicanism but also enabling the rise of coercive forms of rule such as totalitarianism. Arendt sees authority always to be related to transcendence. ‘The source of authority in authoritarian
government’, she writes, ‘is always a force external and superior to its own power; it is always this source, this external force which transcends the political realm, from which the authorities derive their “authority”, that is, their legitimacy, and against which their power can be checked’ (Arendt 1977, p. 97). With the modern decline of tradition and the sacred – the two sources of transcendent force – only one thing could follow: a disappearance of authority ‘as we once knew it’ that forces a fresh confrontation ‘with the elementary problems of human living-together’ (Arendt 1977, p. 141). For Arendt, the decline of transcendent authority effectively abandons humanity to an ontological position of radical immanence – a dislocation of the present from the past and future. Recreating authority in the modern age, then, requires grounding it in forces that are immanent in the present, rather than grounding it in transcendent, foundational guarantees.

It is hard to agree with the ‘epochal’ nature of Arendt’s analysis of the changing ontological conditions of authority (Savage 2009). Traditional and charismatic forms of authority have hardly disappeared, even if their meaning has altered (see Kantola 2009, Brigstocke et al. in preparation). But it remains possible to develop a key element of her argument, that processes of modernization have forced societies to develop new arts of living and new techniques of authority which, rather than being grounded in past foundations, can respond to the impossibility of transcendence, the vertigo of the fleeting moment. The key political challenge of modernity, for Arendt – a challenge more recently taken up by Jean-Luc Nancy, as Kirwan (2013) explores – is to create new grounds in a world that is wholly immanent to itself, without transcendent standards or guarantees.

Perhaps the greatest potential of immanent forms of authority is that the sources of authority can be multiplied, and authority can thus be distributed in fairer ways across multiple sites and agents. Traditional authority refers to a single, foundational event: although there can be many different media through which a connection to this event can be created, nevertheless its legitimacy always comes from a single, unitary power. Thus it is easy for traditional forms of authority to become concentrated, inflexible and hard to contest. Where such a singular transcendent power does not exist, however, there is much greater room for a multiplication and diversification of the sources of authority. When authority is not limited by its connection to a single source, and the sources of authority are multiplied, it becomes easier to generate new forms of ‘bottom-up’ authority in which marginalized groups become able to make authoritative social or political claims. Indeed, Haugaard (2010) has argued this to be one of the key challenges of democracy: democratic government is a means of ordering conflict and performatively enacting new forms of institutional authority.

As well as there existing a need for political theory to engage more fully with the techniques of bottom-up, immanent authority that are emerging in the present (a need which other papers in this volume are responding to), it is also important to bring a historical and genealogical perspective to bear on the invention of forms of immanent authority. Worries surrounding the decline of tradition, religion and authority, of course, are nothing new. Arendt’s work, whilst insightfully analysing the history of transcendent forms of authority, failed to develop a coherent account of the immanent forms of authority that started to replace forms of transcendent forms of authority since the Enlightenment. In the remainder of the paper, my aim is to contribute to a fuller understanding of the history of immanent forms of authority production by focusing on the way in which performance emerged, during
the nineteenth century, as a key technique for authority production, and offering an analysis of one particularly influential attempt to use artistic performance in order to create new kinds of aesthetic community bound by wholly immanent forms of authority – the artistic community that formed in Montmartre, Paris during the 1880s.

**Creativity and authority in fin-de-siècle Montmartre**

The artistic community of fin-de-siècle Montmartre has become an almost mythical site of urban creativity (Chevalier 1995, Claval 1995), one whose memory continues to influence the present generation of urban planners and designers (see Brigstocke *et al.* in preparation). What I want to suggest is that this creative community provides an illuminating example of an influential historical attempt to stylize a new *aesthetics* of authority. Through cultural performance, including theatrical, everyday and textual performances, the community was trying to find ways of making authoritative claims towards social, political and economic change. They not only attempted to live out a utopian alternative lifestyle, but to make this lifestyle an authoritative example for social and political transformation. Indeed, the successes and failures of this project might enable useful conclusions to be drawn about the potential and limits of arts-based models of immanent authority.

The political and artistic milieu that emerged in Montmartre is usually described as a quintessentially anti-authoritarian one. John Munholland, for example, describes the area’s ‘long tradition of independence and defiance of all forms of authority’ (2001, p. 22). Similarly, Raymond Jonas describes it as a community ‘suspicious of authority of all kinds’ (2001, p. 110). Certainly, it is true that the new forms of urban culture that were developed there did pose a powerful challenge to traditional institutions of authority – including state, church, family and the main institutions and monuments of the city itself. My argument, however, is that it would be more accurate to describe the intentions of the Montmartre community as being not just to destroy established forms of authority but to experiment with using artistic creativity in order to engineer *new* forms of bottom-up, community-led authority. The aim of the Montmartre artistic community was to create a cultural explosion of such luminescence that the rest of the world would be forced to take notice. The aims of this group, then, were not merely destructive, but also constructive, in that they were committed to creating a wholly new form of aesthetic community that would provide the foundation for new values, new styles of living and new political formations.

According to the conservative historian Daniel Halévy, it was the neighbourhood of Montmartre, and the explosion of popular culture that it was home to, that encapsulated the withering of true French spirit and vitality. He named one key event as the focus of this decadent spirit: the opening of the Chat Noir ‘cabaret artistique’ on November 18, 1881 at the foot of the hill of Montmartre (Halévy 1929). This area had a long history of popular entertainment and disorder, because the boulevard traced the old ‘octroi’, a tax wall where a duty had to be paid on goods passing beyond the wall into the city of Paris. The area beyond the wall, for this reason, had long been a place of popular entertainment where drink could be enjoyed more cheaply than in the city. After the wall had been demolished, the area retained something of this popular spirit. The Chat Noir was not a conventional cabaret (a proletarian drinking venue), but a ‘cabaret artistique’, a novel kind of
café where artists would come to perform and display their works, as well as exchange ideas, in a relaxed and convivial environment (Oberthur 2007). Curious publics also came to watch, and the cabaret form quickly proved enormously popular, as well as commercially successful. Although the Chat Noir was not the first cabaret artistique – others such as the Grande Pinte, the Rat Mort, the Café Guerbois, the Bon Bock and the Nouvelle-Athènes were also popular gathering spots – the Chat Noir added a new ingredient to the mix with its ferocious sending up of established cultural, social and political values and debates, and its propagation of a spirit of anarchic humour, parody and satire (see Cate and Shaw 1996, Whitmore 2001). In this respect, it cultivated an anarchic spirit that was to be central to the cultural politics of later avant-garde movements such as Dada.

Indeed, the chaotic atmosphere that cabarets such as the Chat Noir cultivated proved deeply attractive to the anarchist community that briefly thrived during the late 1880s and early 1890s (Préposiet 2005, Bourrelier 2007). As Richard Sonrecounts, Montmartre became known as ‘an alternative society where creativity would be rewarded and eccentricity tolerated, a high-spirited realm where art rather than lucre determined status and social relations’ (Sonn 1989, p. 94). Montmartre, he goes on, ‘remained an ideal that in many ways embodied the anarchist version of utopia, not only in its championing of free creativity or local autonomy, but also in its balancing of the rural and the urban elements, the gardens and the cabarets … it preserved its own sacred space from which to gaze down upon the metropolis, countering its economic dependence with cultural autonomy and radicalism’ (Sonn 1989, p. 94). The artistic community in Montmartre was determined to realise utopia in the present: to cultivate a new, autonomous form of creative community in the here and now rather than wait for a proletarian revolution whose prospects seemed increasingly dim.

Rather than stopping at describing the anti-authoritarian aspects of this community, then, as previous research on the cultural politics of fin-de-siècle Montmartre has done, it is necessary to learn lessons from the successes and failures of the Montmartre artistic community’s attempt to use cultural performance as a means to stylize a new aesthetics of authority and, in doing so, to create the conditions for new forms of community that enabled alternative relations of political power. Before moving on to discuss this in more detail, however, it is necessary first to outline in theoretical terms some ways of analysing the aesthetics of authority.

The aesthetics of authority

Much recent social scientific research on authority has focused on the redistribution of formal structures of authority – and in particular, the ongoing privatization of authority (e.g. Cutler et al. 1999, Hall and Biersteker 2002, Cutler 2003, Sassen 2006). In addition to this important work on changing formal structures of authority, however, it is also necessary to understand how authority operates at affective registers, as a form of experience. Recent analyses of authority in political science seem to remain in thrall to a broadly Weberian (and Arendtian) account of authority that places it within an historical narrative of modern rationalization, bureaucratization and elimination of ‘experiential’ forms of authority based on tradition and charisma (see Brigstocke et al. in preparation). Yet, the modern world remains an ‘enchanted’ one (Bennett 2001), and ‘experiential authority’ remains central to the production of political power (Dawney 2013, Millner 2013, Noorani 2013). The strength of
authority is tied to the intensity of affective investments such as trust; it is a means through which power is tied to emotion (Heaney 2011). Authority, that is to say, is a technique of power that invariably operates at specific aesthetic registers. It functions by redistributing visibilities and invisibilities, by harnessing emotions and stimulating sensations.

This is perhaps one of the reasons why, since the eighteenth century, theorists have so often looked to art, and in particular theatrical performance, to generate new forms of social bond. Indeed, it would be possible to trace an entire tradition of thought, emerging from the Romanticist aesthetic theory of Friedrich Schiller, and running through thinkers such as Schlegel, Marx, Wagner and Marcuse that sees the very possibility of legitimate authority to lie in humanity’s capacity for artistic creativity and performance (see Rancière 2002). Many of the avant-garde theatrical experiments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attempted to fulfil this promise. In the tradition that Schiller inaugurated, then, the invention of new forms of authority was a task that was to be allotted to the artist. And in order to understand these attempts to use artistic performance in the generation of a new aesthetics of authority, it is necessary to develop an analytical framework for analysing these practices. The proposal that I wish to explore here is that authority functions at three inter-related axes of experience: amplitude; gravity; and distance.

**Amplitude**

Firstly, the force of authority derives from a feeling of amplified experience and increased power. The diminution of individual power involved in submitting to authority is legitimized by the increase of collective power – the possibility of organized and co-ordinated activity – that it enables (Parsons 1960, 1963). This collective power, however, has to be made visible, and the legitimacy of the bond between those exercising authority and those obeying authority has to be demonstrated. One way of securing this link between authorities and those obeying them is by indexing it to the transcendent forces of tradition and religious foundations (Arendt 1977). Here, authority is legitimized by its connection to the past. The production of authority, however, does not necessarily involve augmenting experience by making it more extensive (i.e. stretching ever further into the past). It can also function by making it more intensive – that is to say, felt with a greater degree of intensity and inner force. Forms of authority such as the kind of authority referred to by Weber (1964) as ‘charismatic’ authority are legitimized by demonstrating the superior strength of the authority figure, and this strength is demonstrated by creating very intense, overpowering sensations and emotions (Sennett 1980). Authority, then, is related to an amplification of sensation – an intensification of affections and heightening of perceptions. Submitting to authority is motivated by a feeling of increase of (collective) power.

It is for this reason that performance has always been such an essential part of the aesthetic structure of authority. Authority is dramatized in rituals, rites, processions and ceremonies that demonstrate the superior strength and unquestionable reliability of the authority in question. Political authority is generated through the creation of dramatic spectacles to create new relations between the visible and the invisible, between the here and now and the mysteries of the outside. But with the decline of traditional authority, these performances were no longer confined to religious display or the spectacle of sovereign might. Instead, they migrated to the
spaces of everyday life, and in particular, to the street. During the nineteenth century, public culture came increasingly to be conducted outdoors, as in the case of promenades and civic processions, or in settings such as the concert hall or the giant exhibitions of art and industry where authority could be presented as spectacle. Linking these divergent activities was the impulse ‘to convert appearance in public into images of authority, to make social difference and the assertion of power over others visible by symbolic means’ (Gunn 2000, p. 30). This performative turn was not limited to hegemonic, bourgeois displays of authority: political opposition also used public performances to generate authority for their political claims through street demonstrations and other public display (Tilly 2008, on contemporary performances of oppositional authority, see Millner 2011, 2013). The authority of both dominant and oppositional groups, then, had to be asserted through public displays that could generate an amplified and intensified experience of collective power.

A crucial question to ask of immanent forms of authority, then, is what techniques are utilized to make authority visible and felt as a source of amplified power and intensified experience. Such intensification of experience alone, however, does not confer authority. It also has to be grounded in order to confer the required sense of strength and reliability.

**Gravity**

Secondly, then, authority is connected to an experience of gravity or weightiness. Traditional authority figures are endowed with ‘gravitas’ – an ability to bear the weight of the world upon their shoulders. They possess qualities of strength and permanence. In traditional forms of authority, this burden was the weight of the past. But with the onset of modernity and the loosening of ties to history and tradition, the decline of traditional structures of authority became experienced as a kind of weightlessness – the kind of experience that Baudelaire referred to as a ‘vaporization of the self’ and which Marx described as a sense that ‘all that is solid melts into air’ (see Berman 1982). Generating authority in a situation of immanence, then, requires finding ways of grounding it in something other than immemorial traditions. It demands developing an aura of strength and durability in a world in which everything appears to be in flux. As Blencowe (2013) puts it, an essential condition of authoritative relationships is access to objectivity, where objectivity is understood in broad terms ‘as a source of judgement beyond subjective perceptions, positions or understanding; as reality beyond individual knowledge; as the outside of both community and thought’.

Whereas some authority practices generate a feeling of gravity or connection with reality by attempting to re-install links to a foundational past, tradition, blood or soil, other forms of authority, by contrast, derive from experiences of gravity that are created out of (rather than in opposition to) the mobile, fleeting and exceptional. Indeed, Charles Baudelaire argued in his seminal essay on the painting of modern life that this task should be at the heart of modern aesthetics. Perhaps the key characteristic of modern life, he believed, was the increase of pace that it brings about, leaving the dweller of modernity giddy with vertigo. Thus the task of the modern artist is to capture the passing moment in such a way as to retain ‘all the suggestions of eternity that it contains’ (Baudelaire 1964, p. 5). The modern artist must acquire a capacity to arrest the world, to take the most ephemeral and
inconsequential of moments and heroize them, lending them the gravity of eternity. It is for this reason, then, that art emerged during nineteenth century discourse as one of the forms of practice best placed to bring about new forms of authority. For only the heroic artist was endowed with the ability to achieve the impossible feat of converting the fleeting and transitory moments of everyday life into images of the mystery of eternity. By transfiguring the everyday as something exceptional, artists might, perhaps, find a way of creating new forms of authority that did not have to be grounded upon lasting foundations, but could create their own foundations in the here and now.

**Distance**

Thirdly, authority is produced from the sense of mystery that is conferred by the presence of an outside, a feeling that the authority figure always retains a distance, remaining partially withdrawn and hidden from the subject of authority. Traditional authority is linked to a notion of sovereignty bound up with the idea of a wholly distant (i.e. transcendent) foundation, such as a sovereign God or a founding act in the depths of time. Authority, however, does not only emanate from individuals. There is also the authority of what Walter Benjamin referred to as ‘auratic’ objects – the authority that emanates from an object that cannot be grasped, no matter how close to it one comes. The auratic object exerts its authority by continually distancing itself from the viewer. ‘To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return ... The deeper the remoteness which a glance has to overcome, the stronger will be the spell that is apt to emanate from the gaze. In eyes that look at us with a mirrorlike blankness the remoteness remains complete’ (Benjamin 1999, pp. 184–186). It has authority because, in its ability to elude one’s grasp, it retains a power that seems inexhaustible. It provokes a desire that cannot be sated or a fear that cannot be assuaged. By remaining distant, it has a strength and mystery that inspires confidence.

For this reason, the project of generating immanent forms of authority can seem to be all but self-contradictory, since whereas immanence implies interiority, immediacy and presence, authority implies exteriority, withdrawal and distance. It is self-contradictory, however, only if immanence and transcendence are viewed as binary opposites. If, however, it were possible immanently to create forms of transcendence, then forms of immanent authority would indeed be achievable. It is precisely such a characterization of the nature of transcendence in modernity that Georg Simmel develops in his theorization of the nature of life in his essay ‘On the Transcendent Character of Life’. For Simmel, the defining characteristic of life in modernity is its ability immanently to transcend its own limits: ‘the innermost essence of life is its capacity to go out beyond itself, to set its limits by reaching out beyond them, that is, beyond itself’ (1971, p. 364). Life, as a form of immanent self-realization, continually transcends its own boundaries. ‘Transcendence’, he writes, ‘is immanent in life’ (1971, p. 363). This raises the possibility of forms of authority whose source is not an exterior force that is withdrawn from the here and now, but whose source is a form of life that exists fully in the present moment, but yet can exceed its own limits and become distanced from itself. Immanent forms of authority, then, are forged through vital forms of self-transcendence.

It is for this reason that, once again, art acquired a privileged place in the attempt to develop new forms of authority in the nineteenth century. For artistic
imagination and creativity, like biological life, is a means by which humanity becomes able to distance itself from itself, to transcend its own boundaries and reach out into its past and future. Art and life, then, become the key concepts through which the possibility of new social bonds and new kinds of community can be thought. The dream of merging art and life that has been so central to modernist and avant-garde aesthetics and politics, then, has its roots in this shared ability – a common creative energy and self-transcending power. And from the nineteenth century, where transcendent forms of authority seemed to be at risk of disappearing forever, it was art to which many turned in order to provide the experiential amplitude, gravity and distance that would enable the emergence of new forms of immanent authority, and novel forms of autonomous community.

Performing authority in fin-de-siècle Montmartre

The artistic community of fin-de-siècle Montmartre and its early attempts to transform everyday life through art, I want to suggest, exemplify important elements of these techniques of immanent authority production. Its failure to achieve lasting social and political effects beyond short-term economic regeneration, however, enable conclusions to be drawn concerning the limits of attempts to engineer lasting forms of authority through artistic means.

The values that the Montmartre artistic community lived by were diverse and contested. Above all, it placed value upon local autonomy, and took advantage of the neighbourhood’s association with the 1871 Commune when humourously declaring its autonomy from the city of Paris. The ground of that autonomy was to be artistic experimentation – although, in an acquisitive age which they perceived to be hostile to aesthetic beauty or finer values, in order to survive art had to sell itself to the highest bidder, cultivating commercial success but disguising its artistic ambitions in base, lower forms of art such as pantomime, puppet theatre and popular song. The Chat Noir cabaret captured a popular anti-bourgeois spirit that was deeply hostile to the new Republic’s obsession with technological progress, accumulation and restless colonial adventurism. In contrast to the, by now well established, bourgeois republican values of progress, profit and moral sobriety, Montmartre bohemians celebrated other values better associated with aristocratic or proletarian culture such as heroism, beauty, sensuality, laughter and revolt (Seigel 1986, Cate and Shaw 1996, Wilson 2000, Weisberg 2001). The Chat Noir valued, above all, pleasure, humour and esprit – intended as a contrast to dreary republican asceticism. It identified itself with proletarian culture and adopted some of its cultural forms.

Montmartre quickly became an area known for its experimentation with alternative lifestyles. It drew upon the spirit of the failed Commune, and, like much modernist culture, attempted to find an alternative, creative outlet for revolutionary energies (see Weir 1997). Through the invention of a new kind of creative community, they hoped, it would be possible to live out anarchist ideals of spontaneity, autonomy and creativity in the present. By collectively living life as a work of art, they hoped to provide an example of an alternative form of life that would be able to make serious, compelling, authoritative social and political claims. At the heart of their activities was an ambition to generate a form of artistic authority that was far removed from the established authorities of science, finance and the law.
Amplitude

One way in which the Montmartre artistic community attempted to confer authority upon its vision of a new society was by dramatizing itself in such a way as to generate the greatest possible visibility. In an unsuccessful campaign to become mayor of Montmartre in 1884, the owner of the Chat Noir, Rodolphe Salis, proclaimed in an election poster: ‘What is Montmartre? – Nothing. What should it be? – Everything’ (Salis 1884). He did everything within his power to make the artistic community in Montmartre explode onto the consciousness of the city that it surveyed from above. Thus in certain respects, the Montmartre cabaret culture was a key part of what Vanessa Schwartz, amongst others, has characterized as an ongoing spectacularization of modern urban culture (Schwartz 1998).

Almost everything about it was excessively theatrical. As soon as customers entered the cafe, they would be greeted by Salis, the patron and master of ceremonies, who became infamous for the sarcastic deference with which he would greet his customers. Even a royal visitor to the cabaret, Prince Edward, was allegedly subjected to Salis’ biting tongue. Traditional authority, it was clear, would not be recognized in this space. The cabaret was devoted to the performance of minor art forms, including poetry, music, political satire, puppet shows and shadow theatre. Everything was performed with the distinctive hallmark of Montmartre popular culture, a biting yet joyful combination of irony, buffoonery and other forms of humour and satire (see Brigstocke 2012). But this theatricality was not reserved for the cabaret performances themselves. It was also extended to the streets through a number of masked balls, processions and festivals, and, through the newspaper that the cabaret published, both to the wider Montmartre community and to the city of Paris itself.

A typical parade included one in which the Chat Noir moved to its new premises, where, accompanied by a vast crowd, a procession made a long tour of the outer boulevards and finally rushed into their new home on the Rue Victor-Massé. The parade was populated by stage characters in extraordinary fancy dress and musicians creating a cacophony with bizarre instruments (Salis 1896). This parade became, in the self-promoting mythology of Montmartre, one of the founding events of the artistic community. With this chaotic parade, ‘Salis had founded Montmartre!’ as one observer put it (Valbel 1895, p. 68). Other processions had more explicitly political resonances, such as the ‘Fête de la Vache Enragée’, which rivalled an official Parisian festival on the same day, and was dedicated to those inhabitants of Montmartre who were reduced to hunger and starvation, or, in the popular idiom, forced to ‘manger une vache enragée’ (Datta 1993, Bihl 2001). It asserted an affinity between workers and bohemians, both reduced by the bourgeoisie to penury, but both fiercely proud of the independence and rebellious ethos of their neighbourhood. As the poster for the festival claimed: ‘Citizens of the Butte [Montmartre]. Noble children of the sacred hill. Artists and merchants, artisans and poets. Everyone, especially in Montmartre, knows what the vache enragée is ... By dedicating a parade to the Vache Enragée, we are scoffing at misery. Our laughter is not a grimace of submission or of complicity but rather one of defiance’ (cited in Datta 1993). Through these kinds of parades and festivals, the Montmartre community attempted to balance outrageous excess with political sincerity, cultivating a mix of creative exuberance, authenticity and political polemic that would serve to establish the community as an authoritative voice of anti-bourgeois revolt.
Perhaps the most important technique through which the Montmartre creative community made itself visible, however, was through publishing. Following the liberalization of the censorship laws by Jules Ferry in 1881, newspapers no longer had to obtain prior approval before publication, and a wide array of new publications, especially literary and anarchist newspapers, sprung up (Bourrelier 2007, De la Motte and Przyblyski 1999). Montmartre was home to many of these new publications. The house journal of the Chat Noir cabaret, for example, proved extremely popular across Paris. It exemplified the style of the performances at the cabaret, combining political satire with poetry, short stories, graphic art, advertisements and jokes. It was, above all, an organ of wildly exaggerated self-promotion. The first issue proclaimed: ‘The Chat Noir is the most extraordinary cabaret in the world. You will mingle with the most famous men in Paris, who are hobnobbing with foreigners from every corner of the globe ... It’s the greatest success of the age! Come on in! Come on in!’ (Anon. 1881).

Gravity

In addition to asserting their authority by making visible their utopian aspirations in spectacular parades, performances and publications, the Montmartre artistic community also set out to ground their authority by establishing a durable sense of place and community that would make possible the conditions of genuine creativity and imagination. It is possible to interpret elements of Montmartre culture as an attempt to create a bounded space, clearly demarcated from the city below that would display the autonomy, strength and durability necessary to generate the authority to make powerful claims upon the wider population.

The Montmartre cabarets quickly succeeded in creating a very powerful imaginary of the area, one that survives and remains influential in the present day (Hewitt 2000). An essential part of the appeal of this imaginary was the force with which it mobilized a new sense of place at a time where citizens of Paris worried that the city had changed so quickly that the city felt illegible, alien and threatening. By successfully cultivating a sense of place and solidity from dynamic and creative forces, rather than in opposition to them, Montmartre could be imagined as an ‘other’ to conventional Parisian society, a place in which established codes of conduct could be set aside, and in which a fleeting glimpse of utopia could be stolen.

As part of these place-making efforts, the pages of the Chat Noir journal were full of stories and poems describing Montmartre, often – in deeply nostalgic terms – referring back to the glory of the Paris Commune and the disaster of its suppression. As one poem put it: ‘Ah the eight great days of battle .../What they achieved was truly malignant./Two months after the good fight/What was left?’ (Anon. 1882). Montmartre was portrayed as a place teeming with revolutionary powers which, due to state oppression, had to be channelled through new forms of artistic, rather than political, insurrection. Thus in an 1884 municipal election campaign, Salis wrote a campaign poster proclaiming his intention to declare independence from the city below: ‘The day has finally come where Montmartre can and must claim its rights of autonomy from the rest of Paris ... Montmartre is rich enough in finance, art and spirit to lead its own life. Electors! This is no mistake! Let the noble flag of Montmartre flutter in the winds of independence ... Montmartre deserves to be more than an administrative ward. It must be a free and proud city’ (Goudeau 1888, pp. 274–275).
In order to reinforce this sense of place and autonomy – this assertion of a collective strength and superiority over the city below – much Montmartre urban culture played off a supposed inability of citizens of Montmartre and citizens of Paris to understand each other. The journal *Le Chat Noir* featured a long series of satirical travel articles that parodied the stereotypes of popular colonial travel narratives, as the Montmartre explorers cast their arrogant gaze, not at overseas conquests, but at the natives of the city of Paris below. Paris was portrayed in these texts as virgin territory, encountered for the first time with a gaze impervious to the auratic power of the city’s monumental buildings and boulevards. The Montmartre explorers continually misinterpreted the nature, function or meaning of the esteemed monuments of Paris to humorous effect. One traveller, for example, accidentally wanders into the Ministry of Finances (which was housed in the Louvre) instead of the art museum, and is appalled at the poverty of native culture: ‘I found a kind of gallery where people were locked in cages adorned with tiny doors ... These must be the modern painters of the country’s government ... You can reassure our friends in Montmartre, there is not a painting here that can compete with theirs. These number tables lack any taste, and reveal in their creators an absolute lack of idealism and selflessness’ (A’Kempis 1882b). The effect of texts such as these was to assert the superiority of the values and modes of living that Montmartre was intended to supposed to exemplify.

By emphasizing the difference between Montmartre and the city below it, then, Montmartre artists attempted to create a stable ground from which to make their claims over the rest over the city. Montmartre was to be a place of authentic creativity and spontaneity, the motionless eye of a violent hurricane. Authority, here, was not grounded on tradition or foundational pasts, but on an aesthetics of giving a durable place to novelty and creativity.

**Distance**

A third technique that the Montmartre artistic community used in order to stylize a new aesthetics of authority was to create a sense of scattered temporality that reinforced a sense of confusion, mystery and withdrawal from the present. It is perhaps this need to stylize aesthetics of authority based on temporal distance and self-transcendence that explains their continual series of experiments with disrupting everyday experience of time and engineering new experiences of a sensory realm of ghosts and spirits.

A sign outside the Chat Noir proclaimed that the cabaret was the height of modernity, exhorting: ‘Passer-by – Be modern!’ Yet the urban culture associated with the Chat Noir involved a series of experiments with confusing temporal structures and narratives. On entering, the passer-by would discover that the self-professed emblem of modernity was a bizarre jumble of pasts, presents and futures. The cabaret was explicitly styled as a kind of anti-museum, piled high with curiosities and bric-a-brac, valuable antiques arranged next to worthless trinkets. The furnishing comprised an odd assortment of dark oak antique chairs and tables, old copper pots, swords, coats of arms and paintings. A faux museum guide was published (Auriol 1887), delving into the provenance of the objects on display and making outlandish claims about their origins. Modernity, it seemed, was not to be equated with the living present, but neither could it refer to the kind of authentic past guarded by art museums. Within the walls of the cabaret, audiences were
immersed within a self-consciously artificial historical temporality. The Chat Noir displayed a present *in disguise* as something else. It was almost as if the aim was to make the present disappear, dissolving into a chaos of disjointed temporalities. An article in the *Chat Noir* journal, dated October 24, 1882, exemplified this kind of dispersal of time, reporting the sensational news of a monarchist *coup d’état.* ‘Last night’, it raged, ‘the President of the Republic, yielding to the solicitations of his entourage, committed the ultimate crime: the violation of freedom ... Imitating the conduct of Bonaparte, he has let himself be taken on a reactionary path ending in a *coup d’état* which will cover his name with shame and disgrace forever’ (A’Kempis 1882a).\(^8\) The catch, however, was that the article was reporting an event five days in the future – October 28.

In the shadow theatre performances that would eventually make the cabaret famous, in addition, the artists of the Chat Noir attempted to stylize a different form of temporal distancing. In these phantasmagorical light shows, filled with shadowy urban landscapes, flashing colours and spooky sound effects, they engineered a ghostly atmosphere that seemed to gesture towards an other world (Jeanne 1937). The critic Jules Lemaître observed that the effect ‘was mystical … the luminous wall of its puppet-theatre formed a window into the invisible’ (Lemaître n.d.). Summoning shadows, ghosts and transcendent forces, these performances juxtaposed mystery and humour, leading to a sense of self-transcendence, an ability to move beyond the limits of the present, whether through disrupting time or reaching beyond the phenomenal world together. Through techniques such as these, Montmartre bohemians always cultivated a sense of mystery and danger, a withdrawal that would emphasize the ability of this artistic community to hold itself back and reinvent itself anew.

**Conclusion**

The rise of the Montmartre cabarets during the 1880s was a pivotal moment in the history of urban cultural politics, anticipating both new forms of popular culture and also the experiments of avant-garde groups such Dada, Surrealism and Situationism. Montmartre bohemians attempted to use art, I have been arguing, to engineer a new form of ‘immanent authority’ through which powerful social and political claims for a more egalitarian, more creative and less acquisitive society could be heard. Their cultural experiments centred upon mobilizing a new ‘embodied imagination’ (Dawney 2011), transforming the experience of the city and opposing its rationalization, fabricating a re-enchanted, magical, affectively dynamic counter-modernity. By engineering novel ways of experiencing the forms of amplitude, gravity and distance through which authority asserts itself, they presented images of strength and authenticity that enabled their critique of society, and their utopian vision for a new society, to acquire considerable power and influence.

Montmartre’s artistic and anarchist community seem to have had faith in the ability of art to stylize, on its own, a new form of political community. Certainly they did little to back the strength of their aesthetic innovations with the institutional, organizational and practical means by which to implement lasting social change. This perhaps reflects the unresolved tensions between the anti-authoritarian impulse towards ridiculing established political structures and values, and the attempt to create new forms of authority from which to make more effective social demands.\(^9\) Indeed, before long, disillusioned anarchists fell back on new forms of
anti-authoritarian gesture such as the dynamite explosions that were expected somehow to spark a full revolution (Sonn 1989, Préposiet 2005). The anti-authoritarian impulses that were an essential part of the Montmartre counter-culture were turned against the Montmartre community’s own attempts to create new forms of authority from which to make powerful social and political claims.

Whilst the cultural experiments of 1880s Montmartre were soon abandoned in favour of a more radical anarchist politics, on the one hand, and a more commercial cultural industry, on the other, the experiments with developing new forms of authority proved highly fertile throughout the twentieth century. Indeed, contemporary neoliberal urban discourses in city planning and government now look back fondly on the creative community of fin-de-siècle Montmartre, hoping to replicate the economic boom that it created. By engineering forms of ‘neo-bohemian’ space into contemporary urban environments, they believe, it will be possible to generate creative, autonomous, economically dynamically urban communities (Florida 2005, Lloyd 2005, see Peck 2005).

Whilst its political ideals remained unfulfilled, and it found its own experiments with urban living subjected to the same anti-authoritarian impulses that it had initiated, the Montmartre counter-culture clearly succeeded in pointing the way to some important emerging structures of authority. It made a case for the virtues of urban creativity, improvisation and risk-taking that resonated throughout the twentieth century, providing inspiration for the radical political movements of the Situationists, and hence indirectly influencing the events of May 1968 (Merrifield 2004). It successfully created a myth of egalitarian urban creativity and dynamism that remains powerful in the present day, even where this power is co-opted by narrow economic interests. For these reasons, it is important to understand the new aesthetics of authority that they stylized — where humorous physical and textual performances were used to create a new amplitude of authority; where novel techniques of place-making were used to create a stable ground for authority; and where the engineering of experiences of fragmented and scattered temporalities aimed to create the mystery and disorientation that might constitute the distance of authority.

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Notes on contributor

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Notes
1. My interpretation of Foucault here evidently diverges from, firstly, those who see a Foucauldian normative programme to be impossible or incoherent (e.g. Dews 1987; Habermas 1987; Norris 1993; McNay 2009), and secondly, those who see his normative stance to be oriented towards resisting power (e.g. Sharp et al. 2000; Haugaard 2010, p. 429; Haugaard 2012). Rather, I see Foucault’s analytics of power to be circumscribed within an ethical project of critique whose aim is ‘to supply the strength for breaking the rules with the act that brings them into play’ (Osborne 1998b; Foucault 2000b, p. 244; see Blencowe 2012).

2. ‘The origin of the supreme authority is, from the practical point of view, not open to scrutiny by the people who are subject to it: that is, the subject should not be overly curious about its origin as though the right of obedience due it were open to doubt’ (Kant 1965, p. 84).

3. LE CHAT NOIR Est le cabaret le plus extraordinaire du monde. On y coudoie les hommes les plus illustres de Paris, qui s’y rencontrent avec des étrangers venue de tous les points du globe ..sC’EST LE PLUS GRAND SuccèS de l’époque. ENTREZ! ENTREZ!

4. Ah! les huit grands jours de bataille!../C’est bien malin ce qu’ils on fait’.

5. Le jour est enfin venu où Montmartre peut et doit revendiquer ses droits d’autonomie contre le restant de Paris … Montmartre est assez riche de finances, d’art et d’esprit pour vivre de sa vie propre. Électeurs! Il n’y a pas d’erreur! Faisons claquem au vent de l’indépendance le noble drapeau de Montmartre .sMontmartre mérite d’être mieux qu’un arrondissement. Il droit être une cité libre et fière.’

6. Je me suis rapproché d’un gros monument sans style, avec de grandes portes et de grandes fenêtres. On m’a assuré que cette bâtisse s’appelait le et avait servi a de vieux peintres qui y faisaient des tableaux pour le gouvernement. J’ai eu la curiosité de visiter cet établissement sur la porte duquel par une bizarrerie de mauvais gout on a écrit: Finances. J’ai trouvé une manière de galerie où des gens étaient enfermés dans des cages ornées de toutes petites portes sur lesquelles on lisait guichet comme chez le changeur de la rue d’Orsel, chez nous. D’autres individus munis de papiers bleus, jaunes, verts ou blancs se présentaient à ces guichets et touchaient de l’argent. Ce doivent être les peintres modernes du gouvernement du pays; mais quand j’ai vu placardés sur les murs des espèces d’affiches, couvertes de nombres, j’ai eu un très faibles désir de voir les productions informes que doit receler cet énorme édifice ..sVous pouvez rassurer nos amis de Montmartre, ce n’est pas encore cette peinture-là qui peut leur faire concurrence. Ces tableaux chiffrés sont d’un goût atroce et indiquent chez leurs auteurs un manque absolu d’idéal et de désintéressement.’

7. ‘Passant – Sois Moderne!

8. Coup d’état du 2 Novembre 1882. La nuit dernière le Président de la République, cédant aux sollicitations de son entourage, a commis de dernier des crimes: violer la liberté !!! ..sImitant la conduite des Bonaparte, il s’est laissé emporter dans la voie réactionnaire jusqu’à commettre un coup d’État qui couvrira son nom d’opprobre et de honte à tout jamais’.

9. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for helping me to clarify this point.

References


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