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Is there A World You Long to See?

Ben Marsh

Nothing evokes the passion, defiance, and desperation of the people who took to the streets in the Age of Revolution as much as the image of the barricade. And yet we have nothing left of them as artefacts of protest: they are vanished, almost as quickly as they are assembled. Their disappearance owes partly to the fate of the people who constructed them, partly to the status of those people in relation to the historical record, and partly to the materials out of which barricades were built: ephemeral, pre-discarded, literally makeshift. One wonders: did people care what carts they upturned, what furniture, what wood, metal, stone, and earth they assembled? What materials they chose to create a blockage in the status quo, and to narrow the path of expected enemies as they made their stands to defend their neighbourhoods, or for political and social justice? Was the barricade, ever, an aesthetic phenomenon?

The barricade has almost become so clichéd that it is hard to break through it. The word itself yields up its French connection – *barrique* meaning barrel – and harks back to the late sixteenth century, when France erupted with conflicts dividing Catholics and Protestants. It was first mentioned by royalist marshal Blaise de Montluc, in his *Commentaries*, penned while recuperating from the shattering of his jaw in 1570 by an arquebus (a hand cannon). He supposed the shot must have come from the edge of an improvised fortification blocking the path of his troops, “as all the rest of the barricade had been destroyed by two cannon firing from the flank.” Later in the same Wars of Religion, Parisians combined weighted barrels and great iron chains to provide urban defence for citizen militia in the face of external threats and foreign troops. Their method was duly copied in any number of locations where city chokepoints, popular causes, and violence intersected. The barricade was born, but its heyday was yet to come. Only with the great developments of the Age of Revolution at the end of the eighteenth century – political fractures, wars, popular mobilisation, economic collapses, new ideas – that shook cities and nations, did barricades emerge as prominent tools and international symbols of revolutionary intent.

Most of the time, barricades were desperate failures. They were failures because in the face of modern artillery, and increasingly professional soldiers and police forces, they were child’s play, as they had been back in 1570. Ernest Meissonier, in his cold representation of the bloody aftermath of a Paris barricade in 1848, was closer to the bone than Eugène Delacroix’s romantic tableau of *Liberty Leading the People* in 1830. Barricades were desperate because they reflected ordinary city folk’s very distant hopes for a better future, and even more desperate because they exposed the forsaken conditions of these people in their everyday lives. Labourers and artisans, hungry young men and angry women, people having to make their voices heard with a stone’s throw, building ramshackle structures that were dwarfed by the odds stacked against them by their own governments and societies.

But under occasional conditions, the historical barricade could and did become a menace to authorities. An urban hydra, whose forms reappeared in neighbouring streets and blocks each time it was dismantled, which moved to menace the forces of the state, hemming them in and entrapping them spatially, and morally. Framed by the flanking buildings of cityscapes, and the scorn and projectiles that poured down from them, the barricade could become a sinister and a disarming presence for commanders, garrisons, and guardsmen. Barricades could arise in the midst of night, could communicate with one another, could provide a literal as well as figurative platform for

radicalism. A stain on the municipal body politic that could not be wiped out without sweat and blood, the barricade was a thoroughly “modern subject,” as Delacroix remarked in a letter to his brother in October 1830, while completing his work.

Few sites could match the Faubourg Saint-Antoine in Paris for its involvement in barricading history. For a matter of a handful of hours in May 1793, the district’s inhabitants – often led by women – threw up structures to threaten the retreat of a column of 1,200 troops sent to suppress angry crowds who felt their revolution was being betrayed. Stronger barricades emerged there again in the July Revolution of 1830, in the words of Alexandre Dumas, “silently raised, as if it had been built by the spirits of the night,” and playing their part in forcing the exile of a hated king who had banned printing in an effort to stifle discontent. The faubourg’s barricades were among the last holdouts of the 1832 republican insurgency immortalised by Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables*. And they would again erupt in February 1848, when the Russian activist Mikhail Bakunin remembered Parisian barricades “erected like mountains and rising to the rooftops,” in a pattern of protest that would soon spread internationally to scar the streets of Berlin, Vienna, Naples, Budapest, Venice, Milan, Ghent, Dresden, and beyond. As Alexis de Tocqueville recalled of the Paris barricades defended by thousands of workers later that summer, the insurgents “showed wonderful powers of coordination.” It was not enough. Under careful and concerted pressure, the Faubourg Saint-Antoine was the last district to collapse that June, the red flags falling in the face of the bloody advance of the National Guard. These were not scenes or outcomes that it would be appealing to remember, though they would energise Marx’s developing vision of history.

The public profile of Delacroix’s painting danced in response to these events, reflecting the reciprocal power of art and revolution to influence one another. Delacroix certainly viewed his work as a patriotic enterprise, writing “if I haven’t fought for my country at least I’ll paint for her.” Purchased as a popular gesture by the French government in 1831, it was only displayed for a few months before being consigned to storage due to fear of its rabble- and rubble-rousing potential. The painting was temporarily re-exhibited after February 1848, amidst the excitement of the French Second Republic, but then again disappeared from view until installed at the Louvre in 1874 – now as a comfortably historical phenomenon. Its comings and goings, like the barricades themselves, reflected nervous judgements about the existing order, and the individual’s stake in it. Both lead us to ask: when does construction become provocative? When does provocation become constructive? The barricades may have been historically fleeting, always one day away from destruction, but their image endures as a platform for something grander. They were themselves exhibitions of injustice and theatres of inequality, spaces to co-curate fears and, occasionally, co-create hopes.