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VEGETAL RADICALITY AS A LEGACY OF THE PARIS COMMUNE: THE WILD FOREST OF THE PALAIS D'ORSAY

1. Introduction 2. Historical Context 3. Haussmannization and Urban Biopolitics 4. Human-Vegetal Alliances in the Ruins 5. Theoretical Frameworks: Life in Ruins 6. Dystopia, Heterotopia, Atopia? 7. Conclusion

ABSTRACT: VEGETAL RADICALITY AS A LEGACY OF THE PARIS COMMUNE: THE WILD FOREST OF THE PALAIS D'ORSAY

This article explores the emergence of a spontaneous flora and forest within the ruins of the Palais d'Orsay following the suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871, arguing that this vegetal occupation constitutes a form of "vegetal radicality." Drawing on archival material, including Joseph Vallot's 1883 botanical survey of Les Ruines du Conseil d'État, and engaging with theoretical frameworks from urban political ecology and environmental humanities, we analyze how uncontrolled plant life within a ruined seat of state authority offered an ecological continuation of the Commune's political resistance. Set against the backdrop of Haussmannian biopolitical urbanism and its aesthetic and hygienic control of vegetation, the "wild forest" challenged the state's symbolic and spatial order. The forest became a heterotopia—an ungoverned, multi-species space shared by plants, artists, the unhoused, and other outsiders. Through interdisciplinary perspectives, the article reframes urban flora as a political actor, revealing how non-human life can resist, repurpose, and remember social upheaval. Ultimately, the article positions the forest as a dialectical image of post-Commune urban ecology, where ruins become sites not of decay but of radical ecological regeneration.



1. Introduction

In the shadow of the Paris Commune's suppression in May 1871, amid the physical and social reconstruction of Paris, a curious ecological phenomenon emerged in the heart of the city. The Palais d'Orsay, a vast edifice which hosted the *Conseil d'État* and the *Cour des Comptes*, the highest administrative institutions of France, which was located by the Seine River, was severely damaged during the final days of the Commune and subsequently abandoned by the Third Republic, became the site of an unexpected botanical

insurgency. Within the charred remains of this once-grand administrative center gradually arose a wild, unregulated forest hosting over 150 plant species. This verdant occupation of ruined state architecture presents a compelling case study in what we term "vegetal radicality" - the political dimensions of uncontrolled plant life in contested urban spaces. This paper examines how the wild forest of the Palais d'Orsay functioned as both ecological anomaly and political symbol in post-Commune Paris. While Baron Haussmann's urban renovations had sought to sanitize, regulate, and homogenize Parisian spaces - displacing working-class populations while imposing a controlled aesthetic on public greenery - the spontaneous forest of the Palais d'Orsay represented an alternative vision of urban nature. Neither planned nor cultivated, this forest existed in direct contradiction to the biopolitical regimes of the Second Empire and Third Republic. Its very presence challenged the narratives of progress, hygiene, and civic order that underpinned the modern reconstruction of Paris. Drawing on archival materials, including Joseph Vallot's meticulous 1884 botanical inventory *Florule du Conseil d'État*¹, we analyze how this forest became a living archive of political resistance. As a symbol, the forest carried forward certain aspects of the Commune's radical vision - its democratic aspirations, its rejection of centralized authority, its emphasis on communal space - while transforming these human political values into a non-human ecological framework. When human insurgents had been defeated, imprisoned, or exiled, plant life continued a different form of resistance to state power and

¹ As an appendix of this botanical opus, Joseph Vallot adjoined a repertory of all the vegetal species he could identify throughout the ruins of the Palais d'Orsay: J. Vallot, *Essai sur la flore du pavé de Paris limité aux boulevards extérieurs, ou: Catalogue des plantes qui croissent spontanément dans les rues et sur les quais*, Lechevalier, Paris 1884. Published in 1884, his inquiry actually took place in 1883. One year later he went back on the premises and observed the evolution of the vegetal invasion and the new species that have grown there: M. J. Vallot, *Sur Les Modifications De La Flore Des Ruines Du Conseil D'État De 1883 A 1884*, in «Bulletin de la Société Botanique de France», 31, 7, 1884, pp. 321-323.

capitalist urbanization. Our analysis situates this historical case within contemporary theoretical frameworks, particularly Anna Tsing's concept of "life in ruins" and emerging scholarship on the "Urbanocene".

We argue that the wild forest of the Palais d'Orsay demonstrates how non-human actors participate in political history, creating alternative ecological communities that challenge anthropocentric urban planning. More than a curious footnote in Parisian history, this forest represents a profound intersection of ecological and political consciousness, offering insights into how vegetal life can embody forms of resistance when human movements have been suppressed.

2. Historical Context

Paris Commune of 1871 emerged from the catastrophic defeat of the Second French Empire in the Franco-Prussian War. On March 18, 1871, Parisian workers, National Guardsmen, and radical republicans seized control of the city, establishing a revolutionary municipal government that would last until its brutal suppression during the "Bloody Week" (*La Semaine Sanglante*) of May 21-28. During its brief 72-day existence, the Commune implemented a series of radical democratic reforms: separation of church and state, workers' self-management, democratic election of officials subject to immediate recall, equal pay for government workers, and the cancellation of rent debts accrued during the Prussian siege. The Commune's suppression by Adolphe Thiers' provisional government was merciless. Approximately 20,000 Communards were killed during the Bloody Week, with thousands more subsequently imprisoned or deported to New Caledonia. This violent elimination of political opposition was accompanied by a symbolic erasure - the reconstruction of Paris would proceed without physical monuments to the revolutionary government that had briefly controlled the city. Among the casualties of the Commune's

final days was the Palais d'Orsay, originally built between 1810 and 1838 under Napoleon I and later Napoleon III. Housing the Council of State (*Conseil d'État*) and the Court of Accounts (*Cour des Comptes*), the Palais represented the administrative heart of the French state. On May 23, 1871, as government troops advanced through Paris, retreating Communards set fire to the building. The blaze gutted the interior, leaving only the stone facade and structural walls intact.



Société photoglyptique, Palais d'Orsay. Cour des comptes et Conseil d'État incendiés (1871), [photography], Musée Carnavalet, Paris

Unlike other damaged monuments, the Palais d'Orsay remained unrestored throughout the Third Republic. This architectural abandonment reflected both financial constraints and political calculation. The new government prioritized rebuilding structures that could restore national prestige or actual political functions (like the Hôtel de Ville) while allowing reminders of "disorder"

to linger in controlled contexts. The functions fulfilled by the *Conseil d'État* and the *Cour des Comptes* were transposed in other settings in Paris, meaning the Palais d'Orsay remained as an empty shell of displaced administrative functions. Its ruins stood as a warning against revolutionary politics, yet simultaneously created a void in the urban fabric - a space beyond the reach of Haussmannian planning and control. As Émile Zola described it, in his 1892 novel *La Débâcle*, the fire that consumed the Palais became «the most terrible blaze of the *Semaine sanglante*»². Yet unlike other monuments damaged during the Commune's final days, this site was neither promptly restored nor demolished. Instead, it was allowed to persist as a structural scar in the cityscape, a visual reminder of revolutionary destruction that served the Third Republic's narrative of the Commune as chaotic and destructive. This abandonment created the conditions for ecological colonization. By 1875, observers noted the first significant growth of vegetation within and around the ruins. By the early 1880s, a genuine forest had established itself in what was once the central courtyard and interior chambers of the building. This vegetal occupation would continue, largely undisturbed, until the site was finally cleared for construction of the Gare d'Orsay railway station in 1898 - linking the timeline of the forest directly to the political trajectory of the Third Republic, from post-revolutionary consolidation to the *fin-de-siècle*.

3. Haussmannization and Urban Biopolitics

To understand the political significance of the Palais d'Orsay forest, we must consider the urban context from which it emerged. Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann's transformation of Paris (1853-1870) represented the most ambitious urban renovation project of the nineteenth century. Commissioned by Napoleon III, Haussmann's

² E. Zola, *La Débâcle*, G. Charpentier et E. Fasquelle Editeur, Paris 1892, p. 260.

redesign carved wide boulevards through the medieval street pattern, demolished overcrowded working-class neighborhoods, created uniform building facades, and established an elaborate network of sewers, water supplies, and gas lines beneath the city. This reconstruction was explicitly biopolitical in nature. As Michel Foucault has argued, the emerging disciplines of public health and urban planning became mechanisms through which state power was extended into the everyday lives of citizens³. Haussmann's Paris embodied this biopolitical logic: the city was reimagined as a body that needed to be sanitized, regulated, and optimized for circulation – of people, goods, capital, and air. The straight boulevards that replaced winding medieval streets facilitated both commercial traffic and military control, while the standardization of *façades* imposed a visual order that paralleled the administrative order of the Second Empire. Critically important to this sanitized vision was the control of urban vegetation. Under Haussmann and his collaborator Adolphe Alphand, the engineer of promenades and public parks, urban greenery was transformed from wild growth into instrumental nature – species were selected and arranged according to aesthetics, hygiene, and social control principles. Flora deemed inconvenient or inappropriate – such as the fragrant linden tree (attractive to flower-gathering poor) or the "invasive" ailanthus (considered malodorous) – were systematically removed from the urban landscape. Alphand's vision transformed Parisian green spaces into tools of scientific and moral order, where nature was domesticated, disciplined, and pressed into service for the bourgeois ideal of urban life. The planting of trees along boulevards followed strict geometric patterns, with species chosen for their visual uniformity and resistance to urban conditions. Public parks like the Bois de Boulogne and Buttes-Chaumont –

³ M. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population. Lectures at the Collège de France (1977-1978)*, transl. by G. Burchell, ed. by M. Senellart, Palgrave Macmillan, London 2007.

though seemingly more "natural" - were in fact highly engineered landscapes designed to provide controlled encounters with a simulacrum of nature.

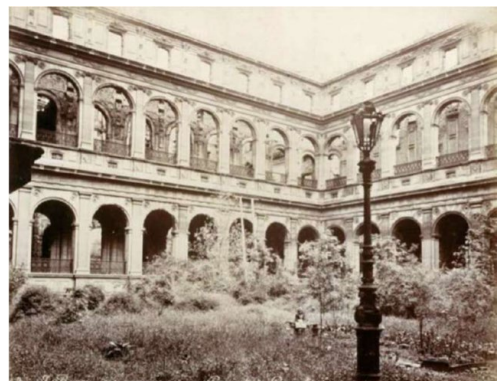
These spaces served a specific social function: they offered the urban bourgeoisie opportunities for regulated leisure, creating what Henri Lefebvre would later term "representations of space" - conceived and abstract spaces that express and facilitate dominant relations of production. Against this backdrop of regulated urban nature, the wild forest of the Palais d'Orsay emerged as a radical counterpoint. According to Joseph Vallot's meticulous 1884 botanical survey, *Florule du Conseil d'État*, over 150 plant species established themselves within the ruins, creating an ecological community that defied the logic of Haussmannian control. The diversity of this spontaneous forest stands in stark contrast to the carefully curated plantings of official Paris. Where municipal gardens featured selected species arranged in geometric patterns, the Orsay forest followed only the logics of ecological succession, seed dispersal, and opportunistic growth. The botanical inventory reveals a community of remarkable diversity and ecological resilience. Plants migrated from adjacent gardens, floated in on winds, or arrived as seeds carried by birds or deposited in horse manure. The siliceous and calcareous soils of the courtyard supported an unexpected range of species, including many that appeared far from their typical ecological contexts. The *Pteris aquilina* (bracken fern), for instance, thrived in limestone terrain where it would not normally grow. Rare and common species alike found niches within the ruins, creating what we might call, drawing on Anna Tsing's work, a «polyphonic assemblage» - a multi-species community emerging without central design or authority⁴.

⁴ A. L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2015.

This ecological diversity was matched by its political significance. Just as the Paris Commune had represented, in Jacques Rougerie's analysis, a reclaiming of urban space by the working class⁵, the vegetal colonization of the Palais d'Orsay constituted a reclaiming of the soil by non-human agents. The unregulated growth of these plants mocked the elaborate classifications and spatial management of Parisian urban ecology. They made visible the limits of the state's project of total environmental control. The forest also challenged the temporal logic of modernity. Where Haussmann's boulevards facilitated speed and circulation, the overgrown ruins demanded slowness, wandering, even getting lost.



Alphonse Liébert (1871), Le Conseil d'État incendié (Vue Intérieure de la Cour) (N°17), Les ruines de Paris [photography], Musée Carnavalet (CC0 Paris Musées / Histoire de Paris)



Jean Barry (s.d.), La Cour des comptes, 67 quai d'Orsay. Ruines après l'incendie de la Commune de Paris dans la nuit du 23 au 24 mai 1871 [photography], Musée Carnavalet (CC0 Paris Musées / Histoire de Paris)

The rhythms of seasonal change, the slow maturation of trees, and the cycles of decay and renewal contrasted sharply with the linear, progressive temporality of industrial capitalism. The forest enacted what might be called a vegetal *détournement* of urban space – a subversion of intended use that revealed alternative possibilities for urban life.

⁵ J. Rougerie, *Paris Libre 1871*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1971.

4. *Human-Vegetal Alliances in the Ruins*

Importantly, this vegetal insurgency did not exist in isolation from human activity. The ruined Palais became what Alphonse Daudet described as a «jungle in the middle of Paris»⁶, inhabited not only by plants but by a diverse community of human outsiders. Artists established studios within the rubble; in Daudet's novel *L'Immortel*, the fictional sculptor Védrine creates his workshop in the former vestibule. The homeless found shelter among the overgrown chambers. Urban explorers, rogue botanists, and curiosity-seekers made regular pilgrimages to this unregulated space. The site became, in contemporary accounts, a modern *Cour des miracles* - a reference to the semi-autonomous zones of medieval Paris where marginal populations established their own forms of community and governance. This human presence was not incidental to the forest's political significance. Rather, the alliance between unhoused humans and uncultivated plants represented a profound challenge to the biopolitical ordering of urban space. Just as Haussmannization had sought to eliminate both "unhygienic" neighborhoods and "undesirable" vegetation, the forest of the Palais d'Orsay created refuge for both biological and social diversity. It demonstrated what Matthew Gandy has termed the «ecological uncanny»⁷ - the disruptive potential of spontaneous urban nature to foster alternative forms of social and ecological relations. The interactions between humans and non-humans within the ruins created a "collective" - a gathering of diverse agents held together by shared conditions and mutual entanglement. Cats prowled among ivy vines, bees circled flowering clematis, and pigeons nested in scorched walls alongside human inhabitants. This multi-species community enacted care and co-existence across species boundaries that challenge anthropocentric

⁶ A. Daudet, *L'Immortel. Moeurs parisiennes*, Alphonse Lemerre, Paris 1888, p. 722.

⁷ M. Gandy, *The Geometry of Disease: Landscape, Race, and the Emergence of Vector-Borne Disease in 19th-Century America*, in «Environment and Planning A», 38, 5, 2006, pp. 833-846.

hierarchies. Such environments – *terrain vague* in the terminology of Ignasi de Solà-Morales – embody ambiguity, vacancy, and resistance to commodification⁸. The relationship of these spaces with the city is at once exterior and interior: «Their exteriority enables the perception of their vacancy: buildings in ruins, empty lots, wastelands. But this exteriority is also what confers upon them a mysterious capacity for indeterminacy and appropriation. These are voids, cracks, and fissures that resist the imposition of predetermined form and use»⁹. Surely, but *terrains vagues* reveal also another type of phenomenology: what accumulates and grows there generates an alternative ecology: plants adhere to different types of artefacts, they colonize stones according to their specific prehensile capacities, the soil is scattered with shreds that is progressively incorporated into humus, insects become the most active agents in this mineral/vegetal mixture. There are actually – unlike forests or prairies no two *terrain vagues* can present the same characteristics¹⁰. It would take us some time to revive what was the unicity of the vegetal engulfing of the ruins of the Palais d'Orsay, and we can be content here to approach it with critical categories that have emerged in recent critical and environmental humanities. In that vein one could say that the forest of the Palais d'Orsay functioned as a heterotopia in Foucault's sense: a counter-site that simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted the spaces of the surrounding city. It was not simply forgotten space but a functional alternative to the disciplined spaces of Haussmannian Paris, a living critique of urban rationality and its biopolitical foundations.

The wild forest of the Palais d'Orsay also generated significant artistic engagement, becoming a site of aesthetic as well as

⁸ I. de Solà-Morales, *Terrain Vague*, in *Anyplace*, edited by C. C. Davidson, MIT Press, Cambridge-Massachusetts 1995, pp. 118-123.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁰ S. Bourgeois-Gironde, *Monographie d'un terrain vague*, unpublished.

ecological rebellion. The ruins attracted painters like James Tissot, Emmanuel Lansyer, Jean Desbrosses, or Jean Barry, who depicted the overgrown site not as desolation but as mysterious abundance.



Georges Rouard (circa 1888), *Vue intérieure des ruines de l'ancienne Cour des comptes, quai d'Orsay* [oil painting], Musée Carnavalet (CC0 Paris Musées / Histoire de Paris).

These artistic representations not always challenged conventional ruin aesthetics, which typically emphasized melancholy contemplation of human transience or nostalgic reverence for past civilizations. Not always either, like Desbrosses's here reproduced, did they testify high talent and profound inspiration. But the paintings of the Orsay forest also celebrated present vitality emerging from political destruction - vegetal life asserting itself against architectural order. Even popular culture engaged with the forest as a space of eccentric possibility. In Christophe's comics featuring the character Cosinus, the ruins appear as a site of scientific experimentation and freedom from social constraint. These cultural representations reinforced the forest's status as what the Situationists would later call a "zone" - a space outside normal social ordering where alternative ways of being become possible. Literary responses to the site were equally significant. Daudet's novel *L'Immortel* uses the forest as both setting and symbol, contrasting the vitality of the ruins with the sterility of academic institutions. His villain, Léonard Astier-Réhu, is described as one who "turns gold into dead leaves" - extirpating originality like weeds from the minds of youth. The novel points to a connection between ecological and creative freedom, suggesting that the same institutional forces that sought to

discipline urban nature also worked to constrain artistic expression.

This artistic association was historically justified. Gustave Courbet, a prominent Communard who had initiated the Federation of Artists during the revolutionary period, had advocated for artistic autonomy from academic tradition. The Federation's manifesto declared that «the artist will henceforth have a significant role in determining the form and development of social life»¹¹. Though Courbet himself was in exile during the forest's flourishing, the wild growth at the Palais d'Orsay symbolically continued his vision of autonomous creation against institutional control. Despite these positive cultural engagements, mainstream discourse generally portrayed the forest as a disorderly blemish – a failure of urban management rather than an ecological achievement. Official narratives emphasized the "scandalous" nature of allowing such unregulated growth in a central Parisian location. This tension between alternative and official valuations of the site reveals the deeply political nature of urban ecology – what counts as appropriate or inappropriate growth always reflects underlying power relations and ideological commitments.

5. Theoretical Frameworks: Life in Ruins

To theorize the significance of the Palais d'Orsay forest, we can partially rely on how Anna Tsing's work examines the way in which disturbed landscapes – sites damaged by extractive capitalism – become grounds for unexpected ecological relationships and alternative forms of value. While the ruins of the Palais resulted from political rather than directly capitalist destruction, they similarly created conditions for what Tsing calls "contaminated diversity" – ecological assemblages that emerge in the aftermath

¹¹ *Manifeste de La Fédération des artistes*, dated April 15, 1871, in «Le Cri du Peuple», April 16, 1871.

of disruption¹². The forest represents what we might term "insurgent ecology" - non-human life that colonizes spaces abandoned by human power structures, creating alternatives to planned environments. Such ecology is insurgent not because it consciously opposes human systems (plants have no revolutionary intentions), but because its very existence challenges the foundational assumptions of modern urban order: that nature must be controlled, confined, and instrumentalized; that space must be productive according to capitalist metrics; that the unplanned is inherently threatening.

Michael Marder's philosophical work on plant thinking offers additional insights. Marder proposes that plants represent a fundamentally different mode of being - one characterized by radical openness, receptivity, and non-hierarchical growth patterns¹³. While avoiding the anthropomorphization of plants, Marder suggests that vegetal existence can be understood as politically significant, embodying forms of community and relating that challenge dominant human social organizations. The wild forest of the Palais d'Orsay exemplifies this vegetal politics - a non-centralized, non-hierarchical community of diverse species coexisting without imposed order. It presents, though, an internal order and incorporates intrinsic values. The main issue, for contemporary environmental ethics, would be to spell out in which way city dwellers would have to relate to such vegetal spaces, especially in the case when they have developed on the visible remnants of a political crisis. Should they symbolize the repetitively failed accomplishment of human politics, its inability to grow towards a harmonious state of society as it was dear, precisely, to both the most revolutionary (in diverse utopian or communist projections and the most conservative (under

¹² A. L. Tsing, *The mushroom at the end of the world: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2021, p. 6.

¹³ M. Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life*, Columbia University Press, Columbia 2013.

the guise of a return to an idealized monarchist feudal order) actors of the Commune? But aren't we then projecting - in a sort of regressive infantile imaginative move - over spontaneous vegetal growth ideas of order, coexistence and harmony that actually do not prevail in that "realm"? Our connection, we could say, to those vegetalized ruins could acquire ethical depth, and somewhat detachment from our psychological tendencies, recognizing above all the dignity of the living beings that grow in our foregone premises, avoiding to characterize them as invasive¹⁴ when the space open to their growth was the result of our own failures.

The concept of the "Urbanocene" - an alternative framing to the Anthropocene that emphasizes the city as the primary site of human-nature relations - provides another useful theoretical lens. The Urbanocene perspective recognizes cities not as spaces apart from nature but as novel ecosystems where human and non-human agencies continually interact. In this context, the forest of the Palais d'Orsay represents not an anomalous intrusion of "nature" into the city, but rather the emergence of alternative urban ecologies when dominant patterns of control are disrupted. These theoretical frameworks help us understand the forest not merely as a curious historical footnote but as a significant case study in the politics of urban ecology. The ruins created what philosopher Jane Bennett might call an "enchanted" space¹⁵ - a site where material agencies beyond human control become perceptible, challenging the modern disenchantment of nature as passive matter subject to human technical mastery.

6. *Dystopia, Heterotopia, Atopia?*

The wild forest of the Palais d'Orsay inspired deeply ambivalent responses that reveal tensions in modern urban imaginaries. To

¹⁴ S. Bourgeois-Gironde, Q. Hiernaux, R. Casati, *Aspects éthiques et juridiques des plantes invasives*, in «La pensée écologique», 9, 2, 2022, pp. 25-42.

¹⁵ J. Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001.

some observers, the site represented an urban dystopia – a failure of civic management, a visual insult to republican order, and a potential health hazard. These negative readings reflected anxieties about urban hygiene that had been cultivated through decades of medical discourse linking uncontrolled vegetation to disease and moral decay. The forest violated fundamental principles of visibility and legibility that were central to the new urban planning – its dense growth created spaces hidden from surveillance, while its unpredictable ecological development defied taxonomic control.

To others, however, the forest represented a utopian alternative – an interstice of ecological possibility amid the regulated city, a demonstration that other urban futures were possible. This positive valuation drew on romantic traditions that valued the sublime aspects of ruins and wilderness, but also on emerging ecological awareness that recognized the value of spontaneous nature. The forest exposed the myth of the city as a fully anthropized space and undermined the fantasy of permanent human control over the urban environment. What makes the forest particularly significant is that it was neither heritage in the traditional sense nor planned nature. It lacked monumental intention – its plants carried no commemorative function and its ecological assemblage emerged without design. Unlike Roman ruins, which commemorate past civilization, these ruins threatened to erase human primacy altogether. They demonstrated, as one observer noted, that «a single winter, a few seeds, and some bird droppings were enough to engulf stone in green»¹⁶. This capacity for non-human reclamation of human architecture constituted both threat and promise – a reminder of ecological fragility and resilience. The site can be understood as what Ernst Bloch called "concrete utopia" – not an abstract ideal but an actually existing space

¹⁶ M. Vachon, *Le Palais du Conseil d'État et de La Cour des comptes*, A. Quantin Imprimeur, Paris 1879, p. 26.

that prefigures alternative possibilities. The forest did not merely symbolize ecological resistance; it enacted it through material processes of growth, decay, succession, and adaptation. A crucial aspect of the Orsay forest was its hybrid nature - it was neither purely "natural" nor exclusively human, but rather a complex interweaving of multiple agencies. The urban ecosystem that developed within the ruins was co-produced through multi-species interactions: horse manure from cavalry exercises altered soil composition, aiding seed germination; migrating birds dispersed seeds from the Seine's banks; garden escapees - like the *Robinia pseudo-acacia* - joined native species in novel ecological assemblages. What emerged was not chaos but hybridization, a complex web of agencies without central planning but with intricate patterns of mutual influence. This hybridity challenges fundamental categories, particularly the nature/culture divide that has structured modern environmental management. The forest was not "nature" returning to reclaim "culture", but rather a novel socio-ecological formation emerging from their entanglement. It existed neither outside the city nor fully within its ordering systems. Instead, it disclosed the porosity of boundaries between urban and natural, center and margin, order and insurgency. Foucault's concept of heterotopia - spaces that are simultaneously inside and outside social order - provides a useful frame for understanding this hybrid character. The forest was not just a heterotopia of deviation (housing social outsiders) but of disturbance - a space that disrupted the taxonomic order of the modern city by creating ecological combinations that defied classification. Unlike the carefully delineated boundaries between cultivated and wild spaces in Haussmann's vision, the Orsay forest created what political ecologist Erik Swyngedouw terms "socio-

nature" – inseparable combinations of social and natural processes¹⁷.

The ruin was thus not outside the city but deeply entangled within it. Revolutionary destruction had created conditions for ecological emergence, which in turn fostered social practices excluded from official urban space. Human and non-human actors co-produced this alternative territory through their interactions, creating a gathering where agency is distributed across species lines rather than concentrated in human governance alone. This ecological heterotopia challenges conventional narratives of urban development by revealing alternatives to the binary of pristine nature versus human civilization. The forest suggests the possibility of urban futures based not on domination of nature but



Jean Barry (1871), La Cour des Comptes et Conseil d'État. Ruines après l'incendie de la Commune de Paris dans la nuit du 23 au 24 mai 1871, quai d'Orsay, 7ème arrondissement, Paris. [photography], Musée Carnavalet (CC0 Paris Musées / Histoire de Paris)

on cohabitation with diverse life forms – what Donna Haraway calls «multispecies flourishing»¹⁸. Its radical potential lies not in returning to some mythical pre-urban wilderness, but in fostering new forms of connection between human and non-human communities within the urban context.

The wild forest of the Palais d'Orsay was erased from the Parisian landscape. In 1898, the ruins were sold to the Compagnie d'Orléans

¹⁷ E. Swyngedouw, *Modernity and Hybridity: Nature, Regeneracionismo, and the Production of the Spanish Waterscape*, in «Annals of the Association of American Geographers», 89, 3, 1999, pp. 443–465.

¹⁸ D. J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, New York 2016.

for the construction of the Gare d'Orsay railway station (later converted to the Musée d'Orsay).

The forest was cleared, its botanical diversity replaced by the architectural uniformity of the station. This erasure paralleled the broader political trajectory of the Third Republic, which had by the fin-de-siècle consolidated its power and largely suppressed the revolutionary memory of the Commune. Yet the legacy of the forest persisted in unexpected ways. The specific site seems to have retained a memory of alternative use - in 1954, the then-disused railway station became a shelter for the homeless under the leadership of Abbé Pierre, continuing its vocation as refuge for urban outsiders. More broadly, the forest lives on as a symbol of ecological resistance to biopolitical ordering, a historical example of what is now termed "urban wilderness" or "novel ecosystems". Contemporary scholarship on urban ecology increasingly recognizes the value of such spontaneous vegetation in fostering biodiversity, climate resilience, and human wellbeing. Sites once dismissed as "wastelands" are now studied as important habitats and potential models for more sustainable urban design. The wild forest of the Palais d'Orsay anticipates these contemporary concerns, demonstrating how abandoned spaces can foster ecological experimentation when freed from conventional management regimes.

There is also an affective dimension to this legacy. Historical accounts suggest that despite official disapproval, many Parisians developed emotional attachments to the forest - it became a site of wonder, discovery, and escape from urban routines. This affective connection to unplanned urban nature continues today, as urban residents often defend spontaneous vegetation against development pressures. The capacity of such sites to evoke a sense of belonging to multi-species communities - represents an important counter-current to utilitarian approaches to urban

nature - but also, as we alluded before, the availability of regression, of a return to the interior primeval mental forest.

The forest offers a "dialectical image" - a moment from the past that illuminates present possibilities. It reveals that even in the most controlled urban environments, alternative ecological communities can emerge



when dominant systems are disrupted. It demonstrates that vegetal life carries

Jean Barry (1871), *La Cour des Comptes et Conseil d'État. Ruines après L'incendie de La Commune de Paris dans La nuit du 23 au 24 mai 1871, quai d'Orsay, 7ème arrondissement, Paris.* [photography], Musée Carnavalet (CC0 Paris Musées / Histoire de Paris)

its own forms of resistance, independent of human intentionality but capable of creating alliances with human outsiders. And it suggests that revolutionary afterlives may take unexpected forms, persisting not only in political memory but in material transformations of the urban landscape.

7. Conclusion

The story of the wild forest of the Palais d'Orsay is not merely a curiosity of botanical history but a profound allegory of urban life under duress. It represents what we have termed "vegetal radicality" - the capacity of plant life to embody and enact forms of resistance to biopolitical control when permitted to grow beyond human management. The forest's emergence from the ruins of the Paris Commune connected botanical insurgency to political insurrection, not through metaphor but through material processes of reclamation and regeneration. This case study illuminates several critical dimensions of urban political ecology. First, it

reveals how the control of urban vegetation has historically functioned as a mechanism of biopolitical governance - the regulation of plant life parallels the regulation of human populations, with both serving the interests of capital accumulation and state power. Second, it demonstrates how spontaneous urban ecology can create alternative socio-natural formations that challenge dominant urban imaginaries, fostering multi-species communities outside planned systems. Third, it suggests how ruins - spaces of apparent desolation - can become sites of unexpected flourishing, both political and psychological.

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