

PARIS



Wandering around Paris looking for the city of Revolution, other things kept blocking the view. Take for instance Place de la Concorde. The last sunlight of a surprisingly cloudless day was casting long shadows across the square as I stopped to read a shiny metal plaque embedded in the ground. I don't know French but it was easy enough to make out that this was the spot where the people of Paris once killed their king. Looming above me though was a heavy Egyptian obelisk. Below the crispy carved hieroglyphs and above the corner, mounted rotating cameras, a panel of gold letters glinted in the evening sunlight and stated this towering stone, which pushes down the memory of Revolution, was erected by a later, restored, king.

On a later, cloudy day I climbed the hill of Montmatre. In front the whole city was spread out as far as I could see. Behind stood the greying edifice of the Sacre Coeur. After turning away from this unimpressive monument to the destruction of the Commune, I headed down a set of stairs interspersed with patches of grass and benches. At the top of the stairs a little sign, as well as saying what is forbidden here-cycling, skating, drinking, dogs- claims this area is officially known as Square Louise Michel. Again, a memory of Revolution down on the ground while a monument of Reaction soared above.

Paris can't seem to make its mind up about its history. Memories of Revolution and

Reaction coexist everywhere as if two cities inhabitant the same spot. It is a place that is Royalist and Revolutionary, Commund and Republican, Communist and Democrat all at the same time. Perhaps we should not be so surprised, this is a place where above ground trees can be cut and controlled into exact and precisely shaped rectangles to mirror the straight lines of the human world around them whilst at the same time below ground people casually, and with some agility, jump the metro barriers.

To escape this confused and confronting history Paris has taken refuge in its late nineteenth/early twentieth century Golden Age. Walking along the river bank passing row upon row of elegant

apartments, through the gardens of the various palaces and the echoing corridors of art galleries feels like being sent back in time. There's even the odd factory chimney bellowing out smoke to complete the picture of a bygone age. Standing sentinal above it all is that ubiquitous symbol of Paris, the Eiffel Tower. What is this giant mass of metal if not a huge pin to forever hold Paris fast to its Golden Age?

It's understandable why this is the dominant image of Paris. It was the time when every major writer, artist, poet or exile came here seeking safety or inspiration. It's a nice, safe moment to remember, between the barricades and bullets of the nineteenth century and the defeats, decolonisation and massacre by the Seine of the twentieth. Today though, those nice little cafes, with their wicker chairs, round metallic tables and grumpy waiters, seem a little empty of struggling, starving artists. With €600 rents, €10 museum tickets, €5 sandwiches and €2.65 metro tickets modern Paris is more likely to smother inspiration than spark it.

If we accept that this creative Paris is vanishing to leave the tourists chasing a shadow, what comes next? With France being labelled the new sick man of Europe, a Socialist PM pleading that the country is pro-business and the Far-Right building

in the wings, the city of Revolution seems to have become another playground for the rich. There was a time when the flame of insurrection in Paris would ignite the whole continent. Now we look elsewhere for our sparks of inspiration. We look to the banlieue, to Sivens or Nantes, or further afield we look to Cairo, Athens, Istanbul or Rio to light these dark days. The City of Lights itself, having done all it can, we leave to grow dimmer in peace.

“I shall thus limit myself to a few words to announce that, whatever others may say about it, Paris no longer exists. The destruction of Paris is only one striking example of the fatal illness that is currently wiping out all the major cities, and that illness is in turn only one of the numerous symptoms of the material decay of this society. But Paris had more to lose than any other.”

-Debord, 'In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni'.

