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# Custom Framing: An Analysis of Camille Pissarro's "Les Turpitudes Sociales" within a Base- Superstructure Model

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Custom Framing:  
An Analysis of Camille Pissarro's *Les Turpitudes Sociales* within a  
Base-Superstructure Model

By

Robin S. Klaus

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of  
The College of Wooster Independent Study Requirements

Department of Art and Art History  
March 27, 2016

Advisor: John Siewert



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## Introduction

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*Narrate for us in your vivid style or in your fervent pictures the titanic struggles of the masses against their aggressors; enflame young hearts with the beautiful breath of revolution.*

—Peter Kropotkin, “Paroles d’un Révolté” (1885)

Though Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) is best known for his quaint Impressionist paintings of the French rural countryside, his knowledge of social philosophy was more profound than any other notable writer or painter of the period.<sup>1</sup> He is considered to be the first artist with “a consistent and lifelong devotion” to anarchist politics, proselytizing for the cause decades before its eventual popularity and continuing his financial and artistic support of the movement until his death.<sup>2</sup> Even so, Pissarro’s political radicalism is all but absent from his artistic oeuvre, with the exception of a single album of drawings titled *Les Turpitudes Sociales* (1890).

Created for the personal use of Pissarro’s two English nieces, Alice and Esther Isaacson, *Les Turpitudes Sociales* is a bound work of twenty-eight pen-and-ink drawings intended to convert its owners to the artist’s own anarchist orientation. Though the women were in their early- to mid-thirties when they received the work, Pissarro felt that a visual approach to the topic—rather than lengthy political writings by leading anarchist thinkers—was most effective; he thus created the *Turpitudes* as an extensive artistic account of the social ills of nineteenth-century France. The album addresses the multifaceted misery of the working poor in twenty-eight separate visual accounts,

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenia W. Herbert, “The Visual Artists,” in *The Artist and Social Reform: France and Belgium, 1885-1898* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 186.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph E. Shikes and Paula Harper, *Pissarro: His Life and Work*, (New York: Horizon Press, 1980), 226.



though—in contrast with Pissarro’s larger oeuvre—it focuses solely on the urban industrial plight.

*Les Turpitudes Sociales* is a collective work of anarchist social commentary, yet its nearly thirty drawings lack a cohesive narrative thread beyond a general impression of urban misery. Thus, it initially reads more like a pictorial laundry list of social ills than a clearly anarchist analysis of contemporary society intended for political persuasion. However, closer inspection of the album’s seemingly arbitrary organization, combined with understandings of anarchist social theory, reveals a framework of analysis that is useful in eliciting a more comprehensive anarchist worldview from the album and its artist.

Specifically, I contend that a Marxist base-superstructure model is a valuable lens through which to analyze *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, as supported by the album’s own physical arrangement as well as anarchism’s shared conception of historical materialism. The ontological clarity of a base-superstructure analytical model provides a novel ideological clarity within the *Turpitudes* album; considered within an explicit framework of political thought, the *Turpitudes* images more comprehensively reflect the complexity of anarchist philosophy, as well as the problematic structure and function of nineteenth-century French economy and society.

Applying a base-superstructure framework of analysis specifically to *Les Turpitudes Sociales* also uncovers four thematic categories within which to further understand the album and characterize society as a whole. As evidenced by the album’s first group of drawings, these categories include: institutions, worth, relationships, and

class conflict. The majority of the album's drawings align with one or more of these themes, which contributes to a more exhaustive analysis of French society.



Though the political radicalism of Pissarro's *Les Turpitudes Sociales* is undeniable, the intelligibility of anarchist philosophy within the album is less immediately obvious. What follows is an analysis of the work within specific political and thematic models in order to render the album a more coherent work of anarchist art. The first chapter will provide biographical context to the development of Pissarro's anarchist philosophy, arguing that specific conditions of his youth and adult life lent themselves to the adoption of leftist politics. The second chapter more extensively introduces the *Turpitudes* album, and also details the conception and rationalization of a base-superstructure model in relation to it.

The third and fourth chapters are visual investigations of the *Turpitudes* images within the framework of a base-superstructure model and thematic categories. The third chapter focuses specifically on the nature of the base and superstructure, as visually characterized by capitalism and the misery of the human condition, respectively. The fourth chapter delves into a deeper analysis of the superstructure in relation to artistic depictions of institutions, worth, relationships, and class conflict. Though certainly not a definitive interpretation of *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, the analytical framework outlined and applied by this thesis provides novel means for an insightful investigation into the work, so as to better understand the anarchist worldview of Pissarro and his *Turpitudes* album.

## I

### **Biographical Context: Pissarro's Development of Anarchist Politics**

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Camille Pissarro's anarchist philosophy was largely informed by the writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–65) and Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), but biographical details from his formative years were equally significant in the development of his revolutionary politics. From daily life in his childhood home in the West Indies, to elite schooling in France and artistic travels in Venezuela, elemental experiences in Pissarro's life contributed to the crystallization of anarchist politics. Anarchism thus became characteristic of his adult life, and uniquely manifested itself in the 1890 creation of *Les Turpitudes Sociales*.

#### **Early Years: Youthful Rebellion**

The capitalist nature of Pissarro's hometown in the Danish West Indies, as well as the bourgeois status of his family within it, would become an important counterpoint for Pissarro in the development of his anarchist politics. Pissarro was raised in Charlotte Amalie, the capital city of the island of St. Thomas; it was a center of the sugar and slave industry where “[no one] really lived, but where one made one's money.”<sup>3</sup> Born Jacob Camille to Sephardic Jews of French and Portuguese origin, Pissarro was raised in a hardworking family that valued financial security and a close-knit familial dynamic.<sup>4</sup> The Pissarros maintained a comfortable existence as a result of their business ventures, living above the merchandise shop that they owned and operated on Charlotte Amalie's

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<sup>3</sup> Kathleen Adler, *Camille Pissarro: A Biography*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Shikes and Harper, 20.

primary commercial thoroughfare.<sup>5</sup> Pissarro and his brothers contributed to the running of the store after school hours and were ultimately expected to take over the business following their secondary education.<sup>6</sup> Camille, however, discovered a passion for art that he ultimately abandoned the family business to pursue—a significant and deliberate move that distanced himself from his notably bourgeois heritage.

Pissarro's prevailing interest in drawing and painting was firmly despised by his practical father, but nurtured in subsequent years by Parisian mentors in a notably countercultural fashion. Pissarro first exhibited artistic talent in primary school on St. Thomas, but found no encouragement from his entrepreneurial *père*; mastery of practical subjects like arithmetic and accounting were more essential to the future of the family business, and artistic endeavors were frivolous distractions.<sup>7</sup> This familial objection persisted when Pissarro left St. Thomas for elite secondary schooling in Passy, France. Pissarro's father warned the headmaster, M. Savary, of his son's proclivity for drawing and communicated his own fundamental disapproval of the trait.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, Savary was himself an art enthusiast and thus critically fostered Pissarro's talent as one of his favored students. Unlike the conventional methods of art instruction, Savary encouraged Pissarro to draw from nature—not from the old masters, as tradition posited. Paul Cézanne, a protégé of Pissarro, would later reflect: “Pissarro had the good luck to be born in the Antilles. There he learned to draw without masters.”<sup>9</sup> This renegade approach impacted not only Pissarro's subsequent artistic style, but also reinforced the value and acceptance of anti-establishment practices in art and otherwise.

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<sup>5</sup> Shikes and Harper, 20.

<sup>6</sup> Adler, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Shikes and Harper, 21.

<sup>8</sup> Adler, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Shikes and Harper, 30.

Although Pissarro found support for his artistic ambitions in Passy, the methodological freedom to develop his drawing existed in stark contrast to the strict regimen of overall life at “Pension Savary.” An exhaustive Pissarro biography describes:

The boys rose at 6 A.M. and retired at 9 P.M., their days rigidly divided into work, play and meals; they slept in dormitories lighted at night and occupied by a master; their mail was opened to ensure that correspondents were on the approved list; they could not leave school without permission; they were required to wear the school uniform at all times—conformity and lack of privacy, standard features of the educational system.<sup>10</sup>

The severity of this living and learning environment characterized six of Pissarro’s formative teenage years. After being enveloped by a restrictive environment of control and restraint, it is perhaps understandable that Pissarro subsequently adopted an attitude of political and social rebellion. This youthful spirit of dissent—combined with resistance to his family’s bourgeois capitalism and the countercultural nature of his art instruction—established a firm foundation for the development of a socially critical leftist ideology.

### **Politics and Society: France in Turmoil**

The nature of Pissarro’s upbringing and education laid the groundwork for a spirit of rebellion; an identifiable ideology, however, can be traced to Pissarro’s experience and observation of specific social conditions in France. At the time of his secondary schooling in the 1840s, France was ruled by a superficially stable “July Monarchy” and was also a hotbed for revolutionary intellectuals. Louis-Philippe was France’s ruling bourgeois monarch following the Second Restoration, a “Citizen-King” of royal blood whose reign was characterized by an increasingly “excessive interest in acquiring

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

wealth.”<sup>11</sup> In fact, Louis-Philippe’s materialist government notoriously advised French citizens to *enriches vous*; the French anarchist Proudhon, a critical influence on Pissarro in subsequent years, challenged Louis-Phillipe’s call with the assertion that “property is theft.”<sup>12</sup> The monarchy’s endorsement of *richesse* reflected itself in the social structure of the day, in which the *haute bourgeoisie*—an aristocracy of wealth rather than birth—were the ruling elite.<sup>13</sup>

Though social mobility within urban Paris was more possible than ever before—that is, “the doors of the bourgeoisie [were] open to all the world”<sup>14</sup>—France suffered crop failures, inflation, a mid-decade stock market collapse, and a resistance to expanded suffrage that fostered political and economic unrest.<sup>15</sup> Secret societies of the working classes began to agitate and criticism of the July Monarchy became unceasing; this was due in part to an active political press and the fact that “Paris in the 1840’s was a haven for every kind of political refugee and revolutionary thought.”<sup>16</sup> In short, yet another revolution was brewing and Pissarro was living in France at the height of excited political turbulence.

The revolutionary excitement surrounding Pissarro coincided with a classically French education that introduced him to a conception of individual rights that fundamentally informed his anarchist beliefs. As was the norm for the French *lycée*, Pissarro’s education included courses in rhetoric and philosophy in relation to values of

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<sup>11</sup> Jerome Blum, "France Comes Full Circle," in *In the Beginning: the Advent of the Modern Age, Europe in the 1840s*, (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1994), 202.

<sup>12</sup> Shikes and Harper, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Blum, 205.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Shikes and Harper, 22; Blum, 212.

<sup>16</sup> Blum, 214; Shikes and Harper, 22.

the French Revolution.<sup>17</sup> In fact, it was through the lens of this newfound knowledge of individual rights that Pissarro began to aggressively question the societal structure of his childhood home upon return from schooling in France—specifically in relation to the lack of political rights given to the island’s newly emancipated slave population.<sup>18</sup>

Pissarro returned to St. Thomas after completion of his secondary schooling in 1847, the same year that Denmark (the nation of the island’s colonized rule) decreed comprehensive emancipation. However, this freedom-granting policy proposed that current slave owners—including Pissarro’s middle-class parents—would maintain their powers until 1859. This caveat led to an impassioned slave revolt that won freedom for slaves across all the Virgin Islands.<sup>19</sup> Though Pissarro’s explicit opinion on slavery was unknown, he consistently chose blacks for his figure studies and depicted them with the same humble dignity that he would adopt for his hallmark paintings of French rural peasantry (Fig 1).<sup>20</sup>

A trip to Venezuela in the early 1850s again placed Pissarro at the center of a large-scale emancipation of dubious implications and profound impact; 40,000 slaves were freed during his stay in 1854, but continued political and economic oppression meant that the pronouncement had few practical ramifications. Indeed, “[the former slaves] were accorded no political rights or economic opportunities...and the turbulence of the situation created by their ‘freedom’ affected [Pissarro].”<sup>21</sup> Thus, Pissarro’s perception of the political grievances surrounding emancipation and individual rights,

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<sup>17</sup> Shikes and Harper, 21.

<sup>18</sup> Adler, 14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; Shikes and Harper 23.

<sup>20</sup> By his political maturity, Pissarro was consistently opposed to colonialism and the exploitation of natives; Shikes and Harper, 25.

<sup>21</sup> Adler, 17.

both at home and abroad, fostered a humanitarianism and “compassion for the exploited” that characterized not only his emerging politics but also his long-lasting artistic focus on simple, unpretentious people.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond the impact of witnessing Venezuelan abolition, Pissarro’s South American venture—an artistic undertaking with fellow artist Fritz Georg Melbye—also exposed him to the harsh realities of financial inequity, which easily advanced an egalitarian outlook. At the time of Pissarro’s visit, Venezuela was recovering from a civil war that had destabilized the economy and created a social structure of dramatic disparities of wealth.<sup>23</sup> Comparable to the sweeping two-class social structure in France during the 1840s, the gap between the have’s and the have not’s—specifically in relation to labor, living conditions, and economic resources—left a lingering impression on Pissarro.

### **Subsequent Decades: Anarchist Adulthood**

Exposure to the revolutionary tumult of 1840s France during Pissarro’s young adulthood was significant to his political awakening; however, the social and political climate in France upon the artist’s return from Venezuela in 1855 was more impactful on the cultivation of an anarchist ideology. During Pissarro’s brief absence from France, the revolution of 1848 had replaced Louis-Phillipe’s July Monarchy with a presidency headed by Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte; Bonaparte subsequently amended the constitution to extend his rule and name himself Emperor Napoleon III.

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<sup>22</sup> Shikes and Harper, 22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.



Though the reign of Napoleon III (known as the Second Empire) was marked by economic prosperity, the root causes of social unrest that prompted the overthrow of the July Monarchy persisted. The Second Empire saw an increase in national railroads, steel production, and foreign trade, and Napoleon III initiated an urban reconstruction project that made Paris a model for modern metropolises.<sup>24</sup> Partially due to these advances, however, gentrification of the city center ensued, inter-class resentment from poor wages escalated, and the dire conditions of the working poor remained. To make matters worse, universal male suffrage was suppressed,<sup>25</sup> press was censored, and unorthodoxy—political or otherwise—was generally suspect. Such was the France to which Pissarro returned in 1855, and within which he began to concretely navigate a leftist political ideology. Indeed, “Pissarro’s identification with the philosophy of anarchism had its roots during the Second Empire,”<sup>26</sup> and continuing socio-economic injustice would only strengthen the resolve and scope of his political convictions.

Pissarro’s introduction to the political theories of Joseph Proudhon served as catalyst for the artist’s crucial crossover from social consciousness to anarchist politicization. The French social philosopher, whose writings “exercised considerable influence on the development of anarchism and socialism in Europe,”<sup>27</sup> was the increasing subject of debate and dialogue during the 1860s as the result of his recently published *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l’église* (1858). The edition sold

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<sup>24</sup> Paris’ reconstruction replaced narrow, labyrinthine streets with sweeping boulevards. This aesthetic improvement also made future uprisings in the workers’ quarters more controllable by allowing government troops to more easily maneuver; *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Universal male suffrage had been extended as a result of the 1848 revolution that replaced Louis-Phillipe’s July Monarchy.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> "Proudhon," *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, ed. Katherine Barber (Oxford University Press, 2004).

quickly and was hotly discussed within circles of intellectuals—of which Pissarro was a part—that met to socialize and debate in Parisian cafés.<sup>28</sup> Pissarro’s demonstrated concern for the socially and economically exploited led naturally to acceptance of Proudhon’s stances on poverty, vice, and crime, as well as an overall “reasoned advocacy of equal justice for all.”<sup>29</sup>

More significant given Pissarro’s identity as an artist was Proudhon’s last work, *Du principe de l’art et de sa destination sociale* (1865). The work, which was discussed by Pissarro and his friends, argues Proudhon’s belief in the power and responsibility of art for social change; as Shikes notes: “Proudhon believed that the mission of art was to educate the public to an understanding of social reality and its injustices.”<sup>30</sup> As a result, it is likely that the anarchist inspired Pissarro to create *La promenade à âne, à La Roche-Guyon* (1864–5) (Fig. 2), considered to be Pissarro’s only painting with an overt political message.<sup>31</sup> In it, two affluent children appear in the foreground sitting contentedly on the backs of donkeys. Just behind them, in a “retreating plan to emphasize their position in the social hierarchy,” two children of relatively similar age, but considerably less wealth and opportunity, watch wistfully.<sup>32</sup> The presence of social commentary in Pissarro’s *La promenade à âne* is novel, yet the quaint rural scene is perfectly characteristic of Pissarro’s hallmark style—a fact that will not be the case for the *Turpitudes Sociales*.

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<sup>28</sup> Proudhon’s *De la justice dans la révolution et dans l’église* was ultimately seized by the French police, who charged Proudhon with “attacking the rights of the family, outraging the public and religious morality and disrespecting the law;” Shikes and Harper, 48.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Ralph E. Shikes, “Pissarro’s Political Philosophy and His Art,” in *Studies on Camille Pissarro*, ed. Christopher Lloyd, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 36.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

Pissarro's philosophy continued to progress leftward in the decades following his introduction to anarchist theory, as evidenced by his social and artistic involvements. As a member of the Impressionist camp, Pissarro relished participation in the cooperative as a political act, and even modeled the 1873 Impressionists' Society charter after a Pontoise bakers' union contract.<sup>33</sup> He was a loyal subscriber to anarchist periodicals like Jean Grave's *La Révolte*,<sup>34</sup> propounded the ideas of anarchist thinkers like Grave and Kropotkin, and was the sole anarchist advocate in café discussions in the 1880s.<sup>35</sup> Renoir later complained about Pissarro's "egalitarian theories" of the time, which only escalated to characterizations as a *sociale* and *revolutionnaire* in the years to come.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to exposure to anarchist writings, Pissarro's marked leftward shift can be partially attributed to the dismal state of his family's finances from the 1870s onward. Richard Thomson asserts: "No doubt the practical pressure of poverty contributed to the artist's sense of social injustice."<sup>37</sup> However, Pissarro's increased anarchist interest also precipitated a more general rise in anarchist thought amongst France's leading intellectuals and artists in the late 1880s due to the influence of *La Révolte*. In fact, a police dossier that tracked readership of Grave's anarchist periodical included many of France's leading creatives, for "they were attracted to anarchism's stress on the rejection of authority—after all, authority had rejected them—and its exaltation of the

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>34</sup> While in Geneva in his twenties, Jean Grave collaborated with Kropotkin on his anarchist weekly, *Le Révolté*. Grave transferred Kropotkin's periodical to Paris in 1885, where it subsequently became *La Révolte* (1887–94) and *Les Temps Nouveau* (1895–1914); Robert L. and Eugenia W. Herbert, "Artists and Anarchism: Unpublished Letters of Pissarro, Signac and Others - I," *The Burlington Magazine* (The Burlington Magazine, Ltd.) 102, no. 692 (1960), 474.

<sup>35</sup> Shikes, 45.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Richard Thomson, "Camille Pissarro, *Turpitudes Sociales*, and the Universal Exhibition of 1889," *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 8 (1982), 84.

individual.”<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, propaganda of the deed and antimilitarism were on the rise, and by the 1890s the anarchist movement was at its height in France and beyond.<sup>39</sup>



The anarchism of Camille Pissarro cannot be attributed to a single historical event or biographical detail. Instead, his political orientation was the ultimate culmination of a life characterized by personal resistance, countercultural instruction, social consciousness, and a humanist egalitarianism that infiltrated his art as well as his politics. Pissarro advocated for the anarchist cause decades before it was accepted by his peers, but created *Les Turpitudes Sociales* during an especially salient moment within the political movement as a whole. Even so, the album is not a work of public propaganda that abides by any one sect of anarchist thought; it is an intimately personal project that fits cleanly within the biographical context that gave rise to it, thus reflecting the singular anarchist worldview of its author.

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<sup>38</sup> Shikes, 46.

<sup>39</sup> Hutton, 36.

## II

### **Analytical Framework: Considering *Les Turpitudes Sociales* within a Base-Superstructure Model**

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Though Pissarro was an avowed anarchist for the majority of his artistic adulthood, the *Turpitudes* project is the only time his political convictions translate to visual form in such an “overt and dramatic” way.<sup>40</sup> Even so, the album is not a systematic investigation of existing anarchist theory; each of the twenty-eight images explores a separate facet of urban plight, without an overarching narrative thread. An analytic framework is thus helpful in guiding interpretation of the album, and I contend that the *Turpitudes* support the use of a Marxist base-superstructure model. With a base-superstructure model as a guiding framework, the *Turpitudes Sociales* is able to critically address the structure and function of capitalist society, thus becoming a more meaningful work of anarchist art.

#### **Creating *Les Turpitudes Sociales*: Art as Social Critique**

Art has long been a medium of social critique, with the Spanish artist Francisco Goya’s *Los Caprichos* series (1799) as one of the most immediately memorable examples. The eighty-plate aquatint series uses cynical satire and fantastical imagery to depict the caprices of late eighteenth-century Spain. As such, the series communicates the artist’s criticism and condemnation for the society in which he lived. Created nearly one hundred years after the publication of the *Caprichos*, Pissarro’s *Les Turpitudes Sociales* exists to much the same effect. Although distinct from the *Caprichos* in

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<sup>40</sup> Thomson, 82.

medium and intended audience,<sup>41</sup> the *Turpitudes* reflect a similar pessimism for late nineteenth-century France. Like Goya, Pissarro's album of twenty-eight drawings illustrates the perceived wickedness of his time, exposing the misery of the human condition within it. Pissarro, however, takes his artistic accusation a step further by presenting a lasting solution: anarchist revolution.

While the subjects of *Los Caprichos* and *Les Turpitudes Sociales* are certainly comparable, the disparities between artistic projects are of critical consideration. Goya's social condemnation was created within a print medium, with multiplicity therefore inherent; the series was mass-produced and distributed in order to reach and subsequently inform as large an audience as possible. *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, on the other hand, was not created for long-reaching social impact. Quite contrary, the album of drawings—a singular medium—was created for the eyes of two people alone, and family members at that.

Pissarro created the *Turpitudes* album for his English nieces, Alice and Esther Isaacson, as he “felt responsible for [their] political education.”<sup>42</sup> Pissarro had initially sent Alice a copy of Proudhon's *De la justice dans la révolution* in 1884—a work of political philosophy that informed his own anarchist worldview—but ultimately felt that an illustrative approach might have a more profound effect.<sup>43</sup> Kathleen Adler, a Pissarro biographer, remarks:

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<sup>41</sup> While Pissarro created his drawings for a private family audience, Goya's *Los Caprichos* aquatint prints were intended for mass distribution and consumption.

<sup>42</sup> Richard R. Brettell, "Les Turpitudes Sociales," in *Pissarro's People* (New York: Delmonico Books/Presitel, 2011), 243.

<sup>43</sup> Adler, 127.

...he decided that Alice and Esther would be more responsive to the graphic representation of a series of cautionary episodes than they would be to discussion or to the arguments developed in the writings of Proudhon or Kropotkin.<sup>44</sup>

That is not to say that Pissarro felt his nieces lacked intellectual capacity. In fact, Pissarro respected his “bright and open-minded” nieces so much that he believed their political education—ultimately, liberation from their bourgeois attitudes—was worth an extensive amount of his own intellectual and artistic time.<sup>45</sup>

Though Pissarro felt his illustrations of social ills were more effective than political texts, the *Turpitudes* are not absent of anarchist writing. Each drawing is accompanied by a caption or quotation, many from *La Révolte*, a political periodical published by Jean Grave.<sup>46</sup> Pissarro thus adapted, created, and combined both written and visual anarchist content to best enlighten his nieces to the evils of a capitalist society, as well as convince them that anarchism offers the solution. As such, the *Turpitudes* can be understood as Alice and Esther’s personalized anarchist primer of sorts, an easily digestible introduction to the political theories of Proudhon, Kropotkin, and Grave.

Because the *Turpitudes* were created explicitly to incite the Isaacson sisters to frustrated realizations of social injustice, the illustrations themselves are characterized by brutal misery and misfortune for greatest emotional and visceral effect. Ralph E. Shikes describes how Pissarro “parades life’s victims and ironies” throughout the album.<sup>47</sup> This characterization underscores the dramatic display of tragedy, violence, hardship, and despair in contemporary urban life, a twisted celebration of society’s nefariousness.

Given this tendentious slant, the *Turpitudes* take on the role of small-scale propaganda.

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Shikes and Harper, 231.

<sup>46</sup> Grave was a leading anarchist intellectual in France, as well as a personal friend of Pissarro’s; Shikes, 47.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

Rather than the work of an institution or authoritative state, however, they are the product of an individual who rails against both.

Despite the inflammatory intentions of the *Turpitudes Sociales*, the album is not a sweeping indictment of the whole of French society. Instead, the drawings and their supporting text only take aim at urbanity. They include depictions of gritty factories, dark alleyways, decrepit apartments, and all means of impoverished pariahs. This fact, particularly the absence of a rural plight, is interesting in relation to the rest of Pissarro's oeuvre; with the politically radical *Turpitudes* as sole exception, the artist primarily painted quaint scenes of rural simplicity, often depicting the humble work of modest people framed by the French countryside. Yet, the rural life of Pissarro's painting was not without its own troubles. Shikes elaborates:

True, there was less hunger in the countryside, and the contrasts between relatively rich and poor were not so extreme. But like city workers, peasants got drunk and beat their wives. Unemployment increased in the rural areas during this period and with it homeless wanderers. But basically Pissarro was justifying not only his condemnation of a brutal society, but also his philosophical and artistic belief in the superiority of rural society, where men and women had what was so important to Pissarro—dignity.<sup>48</sup>

For Pissarro, then, society's turpitudes were confined to the cutthroat city, with the countryside as an idealized, communalized counterpart.

This romantic sentiment was not unique to Pissarro; in fact, many nineteenth-century French artists and intellectuals took a similarly romanticized stance, and agrarian subjects became a staple of anarchist art.<sup>49</sup> Robert L. and Eugenia W. Herbert explain that, "[Kropotkin] and his French followers could not shake a romantic love of the countryside. Their hatred of the manner in which the urban proletariat were oppressed

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-50.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.



led them to a hatred of industrial life and a glorification of the healthy life of the peasant.”<sup>50</sup> This explanation perfectly rationalizes Pissarro’s urban choice for the *Turpitudes*, as well as the escapist optimism found in his rural paintings; each setting was symbolic of society’s respective good and evil.

Because of the perceived ideological contrast between city and country, the aesthetic disparity between the urban-centric *Turpitudes* and Pissarro’s rural painting is appropriate. Contrary to the colorfully harmonious paint strokes of a Post/Impressionist, the *Turpitudes* are executed in pen-and ink that creates harsh contrasts between light and dark.<sup>51</sup> This dramatic value disparity combines with a frenzied cross-hatching technique, dominating every image in the album. Richard R. Brettell, curator of the 2011 “Pissarro’s People” exhibition at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, notes that “Pissarro harnessed the energy of the scribble, the repeated hatch marks, and the squiggle to give these emotionally charged images an even greater intensity.”<sup>52</sup> Thus, while the dramatic contrast found in the *Turpitudes* can be attributed to Pissarro’s lifelong (and characteristically Impressionist) interest in the problems of light,<sup>53</sup> the technique used to accomplish it is an intentionally programmatic choice that best fits the anarchist content and sensational intent of the project.

With urbanity as the established setting and abrasive pen-and-ink techniques across the board, the *Turpitudes*’ twenty-eight drawings appear to be individual indictments of contemporary life. With few exceptions, each drawing has a distinct

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<sup>50</sup> Herbert and Herbert, 478.

<sup>51</sup> John Hutton, “Camille Pissarro’s *Turpitudes Sociales* and Late Nineteenth-Century French Anarchist Anti-Feminism,” *History Workshop Journal* (Oxford University Press), no. 24 (1987), 36.

<sup>52</sup> Brettell, 244.

<sup>53</sup> Shikes and Harper, 231.

subject with independent characters. The album does not have an overarching narrative involving consistent figures; it is not an illustrated storybook. Instead, the project seems to jump from tragic scene to tragic scene, touching on myriad aspects of urban misery. From loveless marriage, to the stock market, to beggars, drunks, and abusers, the *Turpitudes* are a catalogue of injustices whose lack of immediate categorization or comprehensible sequence reinforces the multitudinous nature of the urban plight.

### **Formulation of the Marxist Base-Superstructure Model**

Though absent of explicit organization, the presence of a financially oriented grouping of plates at the beginning of the *Turpitudes Sociales* points to a conceptual framework within which to understand the rest of the album and Pissarro's conception of society at large. Specifically, the first five drawings establish a cause-and-effect relationship reminiscent of a Marxist base-superstructure model; the initial plates, beginning with *Capital*, establish the reigning capitalist monetary system as the defining factor of modern society. In the first five drawings alone, Pissarro demonstrates how capitalism determines the nature of nineteenth-century motivations and desires, institutions, worth, relationships, and class conflict. With governance over these critical realms, capitalism thus influences every other facet of contemporary life.

The interdependency between economy and society, as established by the *Turpitudes'* first five drawings, is a particularly Marxist understanding that informs anarchist philosophy as well as navigation of the remaining plates. Though nineteenth-century anarchism and Marxism are distinct political ideologies, they share Marx's

historical materialist analysis of society.<sup>54</sup> In particular, Marx attests that history is defined by class struggle, an eternal dialectic of oppressor and oppressed in constant conflict with one another.<sup>55</sup> Capitalism and capitalist modes of production are the root of this repressive scheme, in which the bourgeoisie exert power over the proletariat; that is, the exploitative owners and controllers of the means of production take advantage of wage-labor workers for personal gain.<sup>56</sup> From this, the life of the common man within capitalist society—especially an urban one—is dire; he inevitably becomes an “appendage of the machine” and a slave of the bourgeois class.<sup>57</sup> Under such conditions, all of life’s charm is lost and man can never be truly free.<sup>58</sup>

The basic ontological understandings of historical materialism also beget a base-superstructure model that is helpful in understanding the influence of the capitalist foundation upon which society—and Pissarro’s album, I contend—is built. According to Marxist theory, society is comprised of an economic base and a social superstructure (Fig. 3). The economic base includes the material forces and social relations of production,<sup>59</sup> and society’s political and ideological institutions arise from it.<sup>60</sup> Applied specifically to capitalist nineteenth-century France, a base-superstructure model demonstrates that the means of production are in the hands of the bourgeoisie, who

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<sup>54</sup> Though an avowed anarchist, Pissarro also studied Marx and other socialist theorists; Eugenia W. Herbert, “The Visual Artists,” in *The Artist and Social Reform: France and Belgium, 1885-1898* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 186.

<sup>55</sup> Karl Marx, “The Communist Manifesto,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 159.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>59</sup> Material forces of production are considered to be the means for production, including: raw materials, resources, labor, and machines. Social relations of production, on the other hand, include socio-economic relationships, the social division of labor, class relationships, property, capital, etc.

<sup>60</sup> Examples of society’s political and ideological institutions include: laws, morality, politics, family, religion, culture, and education.

establish and control social and political institutions to best serve their interests. According to this model, the superstructure thus reflects and maintains the character of the base.

Because society's base and superstructure are derivative of each other, they are inseparable; one cannot be understood—or criticized—independent of the other. With this base-superstructure model in mind, the content and placement of Pissarro's first five drawings within the *Turpitudes* becomes meaningful. Together, the initial plates characterize the capitalist base of France's nineteenth-century society. As such, they serve as the guiding lens through which the viewer can comprehend the following twenty-three drawings, all of which manifest the ideological and institutional superstructure.

Despite conceptualization as the economic base within this model, the first five images of the *Turpitudes* do not explicitly depict a Marxist conception of material forces or social relations of production. This is partially because the base-superstructure model is my own analytical interpretation of Pissarro's organizational structure, and also because it was only important for the album to communicate political philosophy in broad, qualifying terms. Pissarro was not attempting to teach Alice and Esther the anarcho-communist canon to the same standards as a political philosopher. Even more, though Pissarro was “the best read in social theory of all the writers and painters in this period,” he was first and foremost a politically attuned artist—not a profound anarchist thinker in his own right.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, I maintain that the first five drawings of the *Turpitudes Sociales* are a roadmap with which to categorize and analyze not only the nature of capitalist society,

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<sup>61</sup> Herbert, “The Visual Artists,” 186; Shikes and Harper, 226.

but also the album as a whole. Within the framework of a base-superstructure model, the first five drawings characterize the economic base as a capitalist one, governed by the accumulation of capital and the rule of the bourgeois class. Because of the interdependently reflective relationship between base and superstructure, I also suggest a secondary model of meaning in which the five initial drawings—still understood as indicative of the base—create categories within which to understand the social superstructure evident in the rest of the album.

In this secondary model, I conceive the first drawing, *Capital*, as the all-telling allegory around which the subsequent four drawings relate and revolve; each of the four drawings following *Capital* represents a category of capitalist superstructure and society. *Le Mariage de raison* (no. 2) depicts relationships; *Le Temple du veau d'or* (no. 3) symbolizes institutions, whether financial or otherwise; *Les Boursicotières* (no. 4) illustrates class conflict; *Le suicide du boursier* (no. 5) exemplifies worth, as defined by alienated labor. The remaining plates can subsequently be delegated into one of these four themes. A scene of domestic abuse titled *Petite scène de la vie conjugale* can be categorized under relationships, while *Enterrement d'un Cardinal* begets an institutional heading. The robbing of a bourgeois man at the hands of the proletariat in *Les Strugleforlifeurs* easily depicts class resentment, and *L'art est dans le marasme* summons issues of alienation and worth.

Some plates remain elusive to this categorization because they depict the general troubles experienced by the working poor. As such, I conceptualize a transcendent theme created by the coalescence of the previous four: misery of the human condition. This final characterization is the most critical to Pissarro's anarchist agenda because it

epitomizes the ultimate takeaway of the *Turpitudes Sociales*. Pissarro despised the injustices of the world in which he lived, and thus created the *Turpitudes* as an “overt attack on ‘the shameful ignominies of the bourgeoisie,’ i.e. capitalism and the urban misery caused by it.”<sup>62</sup> He hoped to demonstrate to his nieces the sheer extent of mankind’s existing misery, so as to arouse in them the desire to make a better, anarchist world.

### **Capitalist Nature of the Model**

As representative of the economic base, the first five images of the *Turpitudes Sociales* share an overarching theme that establishes capitalism as the nature of the model, as well as the series overall. The first image in particular confronts issues of the concentration of capital, the accumulation of wealth, and the devastatingly negative effects of it all. Simply titled *Le Capital* (Fig. 4), the plate features “the archetypal bourgeois gentleman, with his frock coat, high collar, and mutton chops, standing on a plinth like some statue symbolic of his epoch.”<sup>63</sup> He clutches a bag labeled “capital” to his chest, and throngs of distraught people surround him, yelling and pleading and pointing. One figure, of whom only arms and torso are visible, offers a crying and emaciated child to the elevated man in a motion of either defiance or despair; presenting the miserable child could be an effort to guilt the capitalist, or perhaps the last resort of an anguished parent who can only provide for his child by giving him up. The crowd around the central figure devolves into an endless sea of indiscriminate faces, emphasizing the sheer scope of the urban plight in the face of capitalism.

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<sup>62</sup> John Spurling, "The Importance of Being Anarchist," (New Statesman, Ltd.) 100 (November 1980), 26-27.

<sup>63</sup> Thomson, 86.

Because the *Turpitudes* are Pissarro's specifically anarchist analysis of society, the implication of placing *Le Capital* first is significant beyond its role within a base-superstructure framework of analysis. More generally, the drawing illustrates a symbolic snapshot of capitalist society in which the accumulation of wealth is desired and even essential to survival; possession of capital ensures prosperity, lack of it spells doom. Pissarro pairs the image with a quote from *La Révolte*, which clarifies the image as well as the nature of the model overall:

*C'est la guerre des dépossédés contre les dépossesseurs, la guerre des maigres contre les gras, la guerre des pauvres contre les riches, la guerre de la vie contre la mort.*<sup>64</sup>

For an anarchist like Pissarro, the capitalist base of society as illustrated by *Le Capital*—i.e., the war of the poor against the rich—is the root of mankind's misery and hopelessness. As such, capitalism and capital itself are primary targets within the rest of the album; capitalism is the root of the anarchist problem, and therefore its downfall is at the heart of an anarchist solution.

As opening image, *Le Capital* appropriately situates the entire *Turpitudes* project in relation to a capitalist base, and the four subsequent images focus on similar monetary themes. The third plate in *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, for example, bears the title *Le temple du veau d'or* (Fig. 5) and translates a similar theme to *Le Capital*—the worship of money—into less symbolic terms. While *Le Capital* can be taken as a grand allegory for capitalist society and the meaning of capital within it, *Le temple du veau d'or* is the

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<sup>64</sup> Camille Pissarro, *Les Turpitudes Sociales: Reproduction*, Vol. 806, 999 vols. (Geneva: Reda, 1972), 1.

contemporary manifestation of such misapplied adoration: the stock exchange, “the hated Bourse.”<sup>65</sup>

The image is teeming with a dense crowd of *boursicatières* that weighs heavily on the bottom of the drawing, yet was not always a part of the *Temple du veau d’or* scene. This addition to the composition, as well as two other alterations, illuminates Pissarro’s artistic process while reinforcing the validity of a base-superstructure model as a framework with which to understand the *Turpitudes Sociales*. Comparing the final plate with its preparatory drawing (Fig. 6), the Ashmolean Museum’s catalogue notes that Pissarro “gives far greater emphasis to the flight of steps, which rises dramatically towards the top of the composition, distributes his figures more freely, and fills the foreground with extra figures seen slightly from above...” in the final version of *Temple du veau d’or*.<sup>66</sup> The aforementioned foreground figures, which are absent from the preparatory study, are cropped so that the viewer is inserted within the jumble. Thus, if the bankers are being antagonized as enthralled participants in the capitalist scheme—i.e. worshippers of the Golden Calf—the viewer seems complicit as well.

Other non-compositional changes to the final drawing, however, reveal more significantly the development of the image’s role within the album and the usefulness of a base-superstructure analytical model. Firstly, Pissarro changed the plate’s title. While the use of working titles is commonplace within creative fields, the quality difference between the two versions is noteworthy. The initial title, *La Bourse*, is located in the

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<sup>65</sup> Shikes, 47.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Brettel and Christopher Lloyd, *A Catalogue of the Drawings by Camille Pissarro in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 170; The Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology at the University of Oxford possesses the largest institutional collection of works by Camille Pissarro. Included in their holdings are two preparatory drawings for *Les Turpitudes Sociales*; one is a study for *Le Temple du veau d’or*, and the second is a study for *L’asphixie*, which will be discussed in the next chapter.



lower left corner of the Ashmolean study following the plate number. *La Bourse*—or stock exchange—is a straightforward descriptor, as it directly names the subject and setting of the drawing. The title and its image refer more specifically to the *Bourse de Paris*, a neoclassical building designed by Alexandre-Théodore Brongniart (1739-1813) that has housed the Paris stock exchange since the early nineteenth century.<sup>67</sup> The building is identified in Pissarro's drawing by its Corinthian colonnade and grand supporting stairway. Indeed, Pissarro's rendering of the city's financial center appears like a sketched detail of period photographs (Fig. 7).

Pissarro's decision in favor of a less obvious title—a transition from *La Bourse* to *Le Temple de veau d'or*—imparts the image with greater, if not slightly altered, meaning.<sup>68</sup> The official title of the plate translates as “Temple of the Golden Calf” and references a biblical episode from the book of Exodus. The tale is one of worshipping false idols, a moral sin committed by the Israelites during a period of Moses' absence. Pissarro compares the activity of the Paris stock exchange to the worship of false idols, claiming that the Golden Calf is synonymous with “the God Capital... thus representing today's divinity.”<sup>69</sup> *Le Temple du veau d'or* is therefore not only a more hyperbolic choice than the working title, but also an explicitly moralizing statement; the worship of false idols—in this case, the exchange and aggrandizement of capital—is a sin worthy of God's wrath and Moses' destructive anger. By extension, then, Pissarro's final title

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<sup>67</sup> Gustave Pessard, *Nouveau Dictionnaire Historique de Paris* (Paris: Eugene Rey Libraire, 1904), 224.

<sup>68</sup> Thomson notes that Pissarro made a drawing ultimately not included in the *Turpitudes* album that depicts a procession of bourgeois men carrying a Golden Calf. Though Pissarro opted for a less allegorical image in the final album, the biblical story and its moral message nevertheless remained in mind for the titling of the third plate.

<sup>69</sup> Thomson, 88.

choice renders the entire capitalist system not only unjust by human standards, but also blasphemous by divine ones.

Pissarro's final modification to *Temple du veau d'or* is the numbering of the plate within the *Turpitudes* series, a developmental adjustment that lends support to the base-superstructure model. Though the drawing is third in the final album, the preparatory sketch for the drawing bears twelfth numeration (Fig. 8). As a result, Pissarro plausibly rearranged the plates according to some sense of sequential, if not intuitive, order. While an overarching narrative scheme remains elusive, as previously noted, the relocation of the *Temple du veau d'or* drawing bolsters the notion of an independent sub-grouping that represents the economic base and informs the rest of the album. Specifically, in moving *Temple du veau d'or* to third place from twelfth, Pissarro was able to create an introductory cluster of five drawings that comprehensively deal with capitalist themes. Thus, evidence of Pissarro's adjustment of plate sequence supports the fact that he considered the drawings, at least in part, to be interdependent players of an overarching scheme, and not simply twenty-eight separate accounts of contemporary ills.



Though Pissarro was not a Marxist, the shared conception of historical materialism renders a base-superstructure model an apt framing device with which to understand and interpret broader anarchist themes within the *Turpitudes Sociales*. Beyond the model's ideological viability, a capitalist-themed grouping at the beginning of the album also supports a base-superstructure analysis in more material terms. Additionally, the initial grouping provides further categorization in that it establishes four

themes of capitalist influence apparent in the rest of the album: institutions, worth, relationships, and class conflict. The following chapters will dissect images from the *Turpitudes Sociales* within this framework in an effort to elucidate Pissarro's specifically anarchist analysis of the society in which he lived.

### III

#### Visual Investigation of Base and Superstructure: General Characterization and Analysis

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As formulated in the previous chapter, I contend that a base-superstructure model is a useful organizational framework through which to analyze Pissarro's *Les Turpitudes Sociales*. In addition to the utility of the model, I have also posited that the album itself suggests a base-superstructure analysis; the initial grouping of capitalist-related images establishes the economic base, as well as thematic categories that define the social superstructure and *Turpitudes* album overall. The first half of this chapter will continue analyzing the group of drawings that comprise the capitalist base of Pissarro's troublesome society. The second half of the chapter will similarly investigate the superstructure, providing a general portrayal of capitalist society as characterized by misery of the (urban) human condition. A more in-depth analysis of the superstructure in relation to the aforementioned thematic categories will appear in the next chapter.

#### **Base: Capitalism**

**No. 1 || Le Capital**

**No. 4 || Les Boursicotières**

**No. 5 || Le suicide du boursier**

Although the *Turpitudes* images are somewhat of a political and stylistic anomaly within Pissarro's broader oeuvre, many of the images are not completely unique. That is, Pissarro's visual memory is apparent in plates like *Le Capital* that feature existing motifs

and compositions that “suited, or could be transformed to suit, the planned subjects.”<sup>70</sup>

Thomson suggests, for example, that the overall composition of *Capital* emulates an illustration by Henri Pille (1844–97) published in a popular satirical weekly, *Le Courrier Français*, and that the plate’s central figure is an adaptation of a well-known cultural character.<sup>71</sup> As a result, Pissarro’s use of artistic quotations imbues *Le Capital* with a more nuanced social commentary.

While Pissarro borrows fundamental compositional elements from Pille’s *Saint Ménehould* illustration (1886) (Fig. 9), he transforms the overall quality to render *Capital* a more deplorable and anguished scene. *Saint Ménehould* centers on a haloed, elevated woman surrounded by an enthusiastic crowd gesturing upwards toward her. Where the female figure outstretches her arms to rain money into the crowd, Pissarro’s *Capital* figure makes an opposite motion; instead of a triumphant welcoming gesture, the man clutches his arms to his chest in an act of protection, keeping his bag of capital safe and away from the throngs below him. The crowds in the two illustrations are similarly divergent. Those surrounding Pille’s figure act in awe and frenzied admiration as they reach to claim one of the francs being littered above their heads. They appear like frantic fans clamoring to touch the hands of their famed idol, or at least acquire a souvenir of the momentous occasion. Pissarro’s crowd, on the other hand, is an agonized mob. They surround the capital figure to plead and beg, hands crossed to gain the figure’s goodwill and mercy, faces distraught and desperate.

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<sup>70</sup> Thomson, 86.

<sup>71</sup> Thomson notes that Pissarro would have known the illustrative content of *Le Courrier Français* well, and that his son Lucien contributed drawings to the publication the following year; *Ibid.*

Pissarro's quote of Pille's illustration is apparent, but the artist's borrowing of a popular French caricature figure has more telling implications for the *Capital* plate. Specifically, Pissarro employs the well-known character of Monsieur Joseph Prudhomme, as seen in *Projet à la mémoire de Monsieur Prudhomme* (1888) (Fig. 10).<sup>72</sup> Prudhomme was the brainchild and hallmark of French caricaturist and playwright Henri Monnier (1799–1877), and, along with two other caricature figures, “*subsisteront comme la représentation la plus fidèle de la bourgeoisie pendant vingt ans, de 1830 à 1850.*”<sup>73</sup> Prudhomme was indeed a salient subject in French culture. Not only was he the leading character in several of Monnier's plays, he was also the inspiration for the 1866 poem *Monsieur Prudhomme* by Paul Verlaine (1844–96).<sup>74</sup>

From muttonchops to long overcoat and bulging belly set to burst at the buttons, the similarities between Prudhomme and Pissarro's *Capital* figure are undeniable. Especially convincing, however, is the fact that the Prudhomme figure in *Projet à la mémoire* is situated on a pedestal, albeit a quadrangular one. Thus, while Pissarro's *Capital* figure has already been described as an allegory of capitalism and the classic bourgeois man in purely formal terms, the image also incorporates standards of French

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<sup>72</sup> An illustration and detailed discussion of Monsieur Prudhomme appears in Champfleury's *Histoire de la Caricature Moderne*, which Pissarro owned and recommended to his son Lucien; *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>73</sup> Those characters being: Mayeux (by C. J. Traviès) and Robert Macaire (by Honoré Daumier); Champfleury, *Histoire de la Caricature Moderne*, ed. E. Dentu, (Paris: Libraire de la Société des gens de lettres, 1865), xiii.

<sup>74</sup> Those plays by Monnier include: *La Famille improvisée* (Théâtre de Variétés, 1831) and *Grandeur de décadence de Joseph Prudhomme* (Odéon, 1852).

culture to communicate the subject's bourgeois capitalist identity and associated connotations.<sup>75</sup>

Despite the recognizability of the Prudhomme type, Pissarro again makes critical changes in order to adulterate the jovial air of his visual influences. Brettell elaborates:

... rather than make Capital into a delightfully bumbling fool like Prudhomme, Pissarro turned up the graphic volume so that his character-type becomes at once grotesque and pathetic and vile.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, Pissarro created the *Capital* figure to be instantly recognized as a bourgeois archetype in both identity and composition, a “*grandiose et pompeux, sentencieux et déclamatoire*” character that visually represents the anarchist antagonization of the oppressive bourgeois class.

The previous chapter described *Le Capital*, the first plate in *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, as Pissarro's allegory of capitalism through which he critically characterizes the nature of nineteenth-century France's economic base. A closer look at the image, specifically its situation on the site of the Universal Exhibition of 1889, reveals implications more complex than mere condemnation of an economic system. In fact, an article by Richard Thomson in *Arts Magazine* paints the entire *Turpitudes* album as Pissarro's reaction to and comment on the Universal Exhibition. Simply put, Pissarro disdained the whole operation.

The Universal Exhibition, a world's fair hosted in Paris, opened on May 6, 1889 to commemorate the centennial of the French Revolution of 1789. Pissarro, however, found great irony in the historical implications of the celebration. As noted in *La*

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<sup>75</sup> Thomson also suggests that, beyond artistic quotation, Pissarro borrowed from other artists' motifs because he “was not practiced at coordinating multi-figure scenes to convey a central meaning;” Thomson, 86.

<sup>76</sup> Brettell, 244.

*Révolution*, the French Revolution did not solve the plight of the working class; quite contrary, “the ill-informed people believed in shrewd bourgeois promises, and fought to establish them in power, thereby just changing masters.”<sup>77</sup> Consequently, social, economic, and political power were still in the hands of the bourgeoisie—and the lower and working classes were still repressed—one hundred years later. Thomson notes, “The Universal Exhibition thus embodied a treacherous irony, for it was a celebration of the centenary of the Revolution and yet the triumph of the modern bourgeois state.”<sup>78</sup>

In light of Pissarro’s anarchist attitude toward the French Revolution, his disgust for the Universal Exhibition commemorating it is not surprising; in a letter to Esther Isaacson during the early summer of 1889, Pissarro even refers to it as “this stupid Universal Exhibition.”<sup>79</sup> Beyond negative associations with the Revolution, the Exhibition simultaneously epitomized and celebrated the social conditions that anarchism sought to overturn. The fact that *Capital* takes the Universal Exhibition as its backdrop, as indicated by the looming presence of the Eiffel Tower, provides equal denunciation for both. Indeed, much like the elevated capitalist set emblematically against it, “the tower was to Pissarro an image of the bourgeois world, symbol of obstruction to social justice and progress.”<sup>80</sup>

Characterization of France’s capitalist base continues in the *Turpitudes*’ fourth plate, *Les Boursicotières* (Fig. 11). The title is a feminine version of the term for market speculators, and features three working class women huddled together outside of the

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<sup>77</sup> Thomson, 85.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.



Paris Stock Exchange.<sup>81</sup> Clothing and accessories identify their social class to be in contrast with those around them; long shawls, loose dresses, and woven hand baskets diverge from the tailored, two-piece outfit of the umbrella-holding bourgeois woman behind them. The three central women appear in the midst of a worried conversation as one of them points toward the mass of stockbrokers occupying the surrounding space, if not the upper class woman herself. As a result, the bourgeoisie and the financial activity occurring at the Bourse appear to be the source of the women's consternation.

Despite the feelings of apprehension discernable on the faces of the three primary figures, the composition of *Les Boursicotières* provides an overwhelming stability to the scene. Indeed, the central pyramidal construction of the three working class women, as well as the strong horizontal created by the bourgeois stockbrokers behind them, is a technique that harkens back to the art of the Renaissance. In spite of the unifying effect most often associated with such a composition, the two classes apparent in *Boursicotières*—the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, for all intents and purposes—remain as separate as ever. They stand several feet apart and only converse within their own class, not even turning their eyes to the other; the only exception is the woman with the umbrella, who looks on at the central group of women with vague, apprehensive interest. In fact, it is as if the pyramidal composition of *Boursicotières* underlines the notion that class disparity and working class uneasiness is the only solidly unmoving aspect of both the illustration and society overall.

The final drawing within the base subgroup is *Le suicide du boursier* (Fig. 12). Probably inspired by contemporary events of late nineteenth-century France, the plate confronts the ominous underpinnings of a society rooted in capitalism. The composition

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<sup>81</sup> Hutton, 36.

centers on the death of a middle-aged stockbroker whose occupation is only known by the title. The man slumps on the edge of a bed with one arm outstretched, beneath which lies a flintlock pistol, presumably dropped following the act. Pissarro's pictorial account of a *boursier's* death was most likely created following an infamous Parisian suicide at the time. Richard Thomson notes that two months before the opening of the Universal Exhibition in Paris, Eugène Denfert-Rochereau,<sup>82</sup> a leading financier (or *boursier*) committed suicide. This led to an “acute financial disruption” in which “panic-stricken crowds fearful of a crash besieged the Bourse.”<sup>83</sup>

The personal ramifications of a failed investment venture prompted Denfert-Rochereau's suicide. Denfert-Rochereau committed fraud to shroud risky investments in the precious metals business—copper, specifically—but was catastrophically unsuccessful and therefore unable to save the *Comptoir d'escompte* from bankruptcy.<sup>84</sup> This tale, complete with deceit, greed, disaster, and tragedy, thus epitomized Pissarro's impression of and distaste for the capitalist financial institutions of his day. Even more, the scene questions the capitalist value system that drove a man to commit suicide following a professional failure. *Suicide du boursier* thus highlights the profound conditions of alienation in which a man—and a bourgeois one, at that—is only as valuable as the products of his labor.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Not to be confused with Pierre Philippe Denfert-Rochereau—the financier's brother—who successfully defended a besieged Belfort during the Franco-Prussian war and for whom Place Denfert-Rochereau and Gare de Denfert-Rochereau were named.

<sup>83</sup> The Banque de France ultimately intervened in order to avoid a run on the Stock Market; Thomson, 84.

<sup>84</sup> Alain Faujas and Jacques Trauman, "Cuivre: le gotha financier de Paris joue et perd," *Le Monde* (Paris), August 7, 2013.

<sup>85</sup> Further discussion on alienated labor found in the following chapter.

The plate's intense subject is appropriately paired with the dramatic light-and-dark contrasts that characterize the *Turpitudes* album overall. This contrast takes physical form in *Suicide du boursier* with the pictured presence of a light source. A lamp sits on a table to the *boursier*'s left and its bright orb of light is portrayed by the mere absence of pen strokes. The light illuminates the man's downturned face, as well as the furniture on which he sprawls. The man's dangling arm and jutting legs form a triangle with the floor of the room, and darkness is primarily concentrated within it. A handgun lies at the triangle's lower left point, a position also directly diagonal from the lamp. This spatial and contextual opposition between light and dark can be reasonably extrapolated to that of good (anarchism) and evil (capitalism); or perhaps, the light plays an objective role, simply spotlighting the tangible, corruptive forces of capitalism on even the bourgeois class.

Above the *boursier*'s lifeless body hangs a domineering portrait that provides further comment on the fate of the failed broker. The painting is signed in the corner by Léon Bonnat (1833–1922), a French painter known both for his religious paintings and nearly photographic realist portraits of notable contemporaries.<sup>86</sup> Pissarro does not render the top of Bonnat's painting, but the portrait bears resemblance—though mirrored—to Bonnat's *Portrait of Jules Grévy* (1880) (Fig. 13).<sup>87</sup> Both depict a man standing with one hand stiffly at his side and the other on a pile of books, which rest on a table beside him. This pose is typical within the portraiture tradition, in which learned men are pictured with symbols of their scholarship.

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<sup>86</sup> "Léon Bonnat," in *Oxford Dictionary of Art* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>87</sup> Jules Grévy was President of the French Third Republic from 1871–73.

Although the Bonnat portrait bears some resemblance to an existing work, it is equally plausible that Pissarro intended the portrait to be ambiguous, yet grounded in contemporary reality. In that case, and based solely on the physique and costume of the subject, I suggest that the painting above the suicide scene is a transmutation of Pissarro's own Capital figure. It hangs dramatically framed with pride of place, an emblem of wealth and power to which the *boursier* aspired, as well as a stern figure of final judgment beneath which the *boursier* ended his life rather than face fiscal doom. The base-related subgroup thus closes on a classic tale of capitalism-gone-wrong, an apt point of departure for an album that contains cautionary tale after cautionary tale of the systematic realities that led to the *boursier*'s downfall.

### **Superstructure: Misery of the Human Condition**

**No. 12 || L'asphixie**

**No. 19 || Le mondiant**

Pissarro titled the twelfth plate in his *Turpitudes* series *L'asphixie*, using an archaic spelling of the French word for asphyxia, or suffocation. Based on the title and the generally tragic scenes comprising the series overall, one could imagine Pissarro depicting a dynamic and gruesome death by asphyxiation. However, *L'asphixie* (Fig. 14) is an overwhelmingly static scene that centers on a bed bearing three people. The image is divided into two horizontal halves, of the top of which possesses a single rectangular window and a dramatic beam of light filtering downward through it. The light falls on a bed and its three occupants, which comprise the lower half of the image. Identified by John Hutton as a mother and her two children,<sup>88</sup> the subjects lay tightly against one

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<sup>88</sup> Hutton, 34.

another in strict lines so as to make most efficient use of the available space. In fact, the middle figure conserves space by crossing her arms in an ominous mummy-like pose.

While the fundamental subject of the twelfth plate—three poor family members sharing a single bed—is innocuous enough, the title indicates that the scene is much more sinister than immediately apparent. Indeed, *L'asphixie* denotes a fatal suffering despite the simplicity of the image itself. Upon closer examination, this anguish becomes evident; the faces of the children bear obvious signs of torment. The middle child's brow is anxiously furrowed above closed eyes, and her mouth turns dramatically downward in a troubled frown. The youngest, on the farthest side of the bed, appears to grimace as if she has just concluded an exhausting bout of crying.

Though the mother's face does not communicate anguish, her right arm hangs off the side of the bed in a posture reminiscent of the post-suicide *boursier* of plate five. While the *boursier*'s cause of death (a flintlock pistol) appears directly beneath his hand, no such evidence appears in *L'asphixie*. The cause of death in this case is more treacherous: capitalism and the miserable hardships created by it. In fact, the nature of suffocation perfectly exemplifies the plight of the working class and its dire effects; suffocation is necessarily a struggle for air, that which is often abundant yet unavailable to the sufferer due to an artificial impedance. Such is the life of the proletariat under capitalism; it is an embittered battle for wealth, resources, and opportunity that exist in plentiful supply, but for the concentration of it in bourgeois hands. Thus, the proletariat is doomed to die, unable to secure the means to sustain themselves due to the capitalist hand around their necks.

The scene's fatality, as well as its capitalist cause, is bolstered by an attached quote from *La Révolte*:

*Non! Nul ne peut-invoquer l'humanité pour la classe bestiale qui s'est mis elle-même hors l'humanité lorsqu'elle a résumé toutes ses tendances et sa morale dans cette sinistre pensée de Malthus : [un homme qui naît dans un monde déjà occupé, si sa famille n'a pas le moyen de la nourrir, ou si la société n'a pas besoin de son travail, cet homme dis-je, n'a pas le moindre droit à réclamer une portion quelconque de nourriture : il est réellement de trop sur la terre. Au grand banquet de la nature il n'y a pas de couvert mis pour lui. La nature lui commande de s'en aller, et ne tardera pas à mettre elle-même cet ordre à exécution.]*<sup>89</sup>

[A man who is born into a world already occupied, his family unable to support him, and society not requiring his labor, such a man, I say, has not the least legal right to claim any nourishment whatever; he is really one too many on the earth. At the great banquet of Nature there is no plate laid for him. Nature commands him to take himself away, and she will not be slow to put her order into execution.]

The anarchist periodical's excerpt cites an inflammatory quote by the English economist Thomas Robert Malthus, a "pioneer of the science of political economy" who contentiously expressed concerns about the disproportional rise of population in relation to its means of subsistence.<sup>90</sup> In choosing to append the words of Malthus to *L'asphixie*, however, Pissarro is not necessarily infusing the politics of population into his visual political commentary. Instead, he focuses on the lack of room for mankind at nature's mighty feast—a banquet in which arguably only the bourgeois take part. Thus, nature (or capitalist society, in this case) casts off those who do not have a seat at the table of plenty, an effective *ordre à execution* for the working class and the three subjects of *L'asphixie* in particular.

*L'asphixie* is the poster child for the "misery of the human condition" in large part due to the evidence of Pissarro's intent in making it so. That is, alterations between a

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<sup>89</sup> Camille Pissarro, *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, 20.

<sup>90</sup> "Thomas Robert Malthus," in *A Dictionary of World History* (Oxford University Press, 2015).

preparatory drawing for *L'asphixie* (Fig. 15) and the final version center almost solely on Pissarro's development of the subjects' faces to show *more* misery and general despair. Indeed, the faces of all three sleeping figures transform from indifferent expressions of lethargy in the preparatory drawing, to those of individual experiences of agony in the final plate.

The first face, that of the woman closest to the viewer, changes the least dramatically of the three; instead, hers seems to shift its overall impression. In the preparatory sketch, the woman's head tilts slightly upwards and bears a quiet, sleepy serenity. Her brows arch slightly upwards and communicate a dreary contentedness; the viewer can almost sense that the sleeping woman is in the midst of a pleasant, if not harmless, dream. The final image, however, is heavier handed. The woman's chin rests heavily on her chest, unable to hold itself up as effortlessly as in the preparatory drawing. Her brow is now furrowed and all semblance of serenity has disappeared. This woman, for being asleep, appears no less exhausted; her anxious fears—most likely in caring for the two younger children beside her—persist even in slumber.

The middle figure's facial variance is the most apparent of the three. The figure's tucked chin and crossed arms remain unchanged, but the preparatory drawing depicts a sleeping girl in the same, contentedly neutral manner as the woman described above. Pissarro ultimately exchanges a blank face for a brooding brow and eyes that are downcast in despondency. The final version also shows the figure in noticeable pain, despite her cross-armed attempt at protection and self-consolation.

The final and furthestmost figure in *L'asphixie* also demonstrates significant changes that reinforce the misery of the scene and alter the overall impact of Pissarro's

plate. Specifically, the figure is rendered much younger in the final plate than in the preparatory drawing. The preparatory sketch shows the second and third figures smaller than the foreground figure, but of the same comparable size and age. In fact, the figures appear most definitively like a mother and two children in the sketch for this reason. The final plate, however, appears to show a more mature middle figure—mostly on account of her anxiousness, as well as the changed styling of her hair—and a dramatically more infantile third figure. Indeed, the despondent head of the third child appears better suited to the swaddled body of an infant than that of the long-torsoed toddler drawn by Pissarro.

The conspicuous juvenility of the plate's third figure combines again with an embellished agony to render the image with a new dynamic of responsibility. The preparatory sketch shows a mother and two young-adult children, who appear of comparable age; an insinuation of personal agency and personal responsibility lies therein. Both most likely have menial jobs of their own, and share a bed with their mother merely from lack of resource—not from maternal dependency. The final plate, on the other hand, shows the third child much younger, and therefore much more dependent on the older figures—socially, financially, and in every other way.

When combined with the escalation of visible torment between drawings, accountability for the youngest figure's misery is not intrinsic. The burden of culpability for the child's anguish is not with the child itself due to a fundamental lack of agency. Instead, responsibility for her misfortune can fall to the exhausted mother, or—as Pissarro most likely intended—to the underlying capitalist economic and social system that ultimately precludes a mother from preventing her own child's misery.



The concerns raised by *L'asphixie*—namely, the general misery of the human condition in late nineteenth century French society, as well as the complexity of its causality—are also apparent in *Le mondiant* (Fig. 16). The plate, nineteenth in the series, features two beggars on a street corner. One of them is a slightly hunched man of middle age with disheveled hair and a full beard. His eyes are downcast as he holds a cane and upturned hat in one hand, beckoning for donations with the other. The humble beggar stands directly in front of a *boucherie* whose store window overflows with meats and cheeses, an abundance of rich foods that will presumably never make it to the beggar's table. Thus, between foreground and background, Pissarro displays the disparity of wealth and circumstance that contribute to the misery experienced by not only the beggar, but by the working class in general. The blatant coexistence of the have's and have not's, even on the same street corner, make the former's hardship all the worse.

The second figure, a small, barefooted child, relates to the same issues of victimhood as *L'asphixie*. The child is understood to be the bearded beggar's son and stands beside him on the street. Though the child's presence can be read as an object of pity that would elicit more donations from passersby than the bearded man alone, it plays the same role as the youngest suffering child in *L'asphixie*. The fates of both children are in the hands of their caretakers, and the fates of their caretakers are at the utter disposal of the oppressive capitalist scheme. Thus, the shoeless child in *Le mondiant* is doomed to live a destitute life by no fault or shortcoming of his own, but rather by chance of his proletarian birth.

The arbitrariness of the beggar's fortune is ironically underscored by the assigned quote from Baudelaire: *Celui-là seul est l'égal d'un autre, qui le prouve, et celui-là seul*

*est digne de la liberté, qui sait la conquérir.*<sup>91</sup> Baudelaire wryly conjures notions of universal opportunity and egalitarian work-hard-and-prosper attitudes, but Pissarro's plate speaks otherwise. A poor beggar and his barefooted child could never prove equal to, or achieve the freedom of, a bourgeois gentleman and his careless, wantless son by mere effort and invention. That is, the working classes cannot relieve their misery and achieve freedom and equality within a capitalist system purely by the means allowed by it.



*L'asphixie* and *Le mondiant* both illustrate the miserable despair experienced by the urban working poor in Pissarro's nineteenth-century France. As such, they generally define the superstructure in terms of this misery. The external causality apparent in both images also references the base-superstructure analysis; because the superstructure is an essential extension of the base, the misery of the human condition is necessarily the consequence of a capitalist economy. Capitalism's reach within the superstructure can also be identified via its impact on institutions, worth, relationships, and class conflict according to the previously established categories. The next chapter will explore the superstructure within this framework.

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<sup>91</sup> Pissarro, *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, 19.

## IV

### **Thematizing Superstructure: Institutions, Worth, Relationships, and Class Conflict**

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The previous chapter visually examined the nature of the base-superstructure model as evidenced in the *Turpitudes Sociales*; it defined nineteenth-century France's economic base and social superstructure in terms of capitalism and the misery of the human condition, respectively. However, the *Turpitudes*' initial grouping of plates establishes further thematic categories within which to consider society's superstructure. In analyzing the *Turpitudes* according to depictions of institutions, worth, relationships, and class conflict, a more comprehensive understanding of the social superstructure follows.

#### **Institutions (Hypocrisy)**

**No. 6 || Enterrement d'un cardinal**

**No. 25 || Après l'accident**

*Enterrement d'un cardinal* (Fig. 17) is the sixth plate in *Les Turpitudes Sociales* and thus directly follows the initial capitalism-themed grouping that, I contend, is emblematic of a Marxist economic base. As a result, *Enterrement* is the first shift into pictorial depictions of superstructure; it is the first plate that demonstrates how the capitalist economy of nineteenth-century France manifests itself secondarily in institutions, worth, relationships, class conflict, or combinations thereof. *Enterrement* specifically represents the category of institutions, tackling religious institutions in particular.

Like *Le suicide du boursier*, which Pissarro created in reaction to the recent suicide of Parisian stockbroker Denfert-Rochereau, *Enterrement d'un cardinal* takes as inspiration the notable contemporary death of Cardinal Henri-Marie-Gaston Boisnormand de Bonnechose. Cardinal Bonnechose was the Archbishop of Rouen (1858–83) as well as the oldest living cardinal at the time of his death,<sup>92</sup> and Pissarro witnessed the pomp and circumstance accorded to the deceased cardinal while in Rouen; he subsequently made *Enterrement du cardinal de Bonnechose à Rouen* (1883) (Fig. 18), a documentary watercolor of the funeral procession. The *Enterrement* plate is nearly identical to this earlier watercolor, which, as Thomson notes, makes it compositionally unique within the *Turpitudes* because it seems to be the only plate “entirely based on a motif of [Pissarro’s] own past creation.”<sup>93</sup>

The similarity between the *Enterrement* plate and Pissarro’s earlier watercolor is striking, so much so that only minor compositional proportions and mediums appear divergent. Both images depict a dense, riverside crowd congregated in concentric curves around the funeral procession of a cardinal, who is only identified in the *Turpitudes* as “un Cardinal qui avait fait voeu de pauvreté.”<sup>94</sup> Both images use an aerial perspective to best capture the expansiveness of the gathered crowd, which spills beyond the confines of the composition and is contained solely by the strong horizontal of the River Seine. The bank opposite the funeral procession is lined with houses, and a solitary boat floats in the water; its masts are crossed, thus subtly injecting a recognizable Christian symbol to overlook the hallowed scene.

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<sup>92</sup> Antonin Debidour, *L'Église catholique et l'État sous la troisième république (1870-1906)*, ed. Félix Alcan (Paris: Librairies Félix Alcan et Guillaumin Réunies, 1906), 15.

<sup>93</sup> Thomson, 86.

<sup>94</sup> Pissarro, *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, 6.

The horizontal cross-river portrait, which comprises the uppermost portion of both compositions and is bound by the looming height of a balcony on the right, is expanded in the *Turpitudes* version. While the watercolor ends at the top of the aforementioned balcony, the *Turpitudes* drawing extends beyond it and consequently doubles the composition's uppermost space. This expansion allows for the inclusion of dark, furling smoke pouring from several factory smokestacks. Shikes and Harper describe it as “symbolically pouring from factories on the far bank,”<sup>95</sup> perhaps commenting on the constant presence of urban capitalist industrialization. However, in proximity to the aforementioned cross-shaped masts, I contend that the smoke can be read as another possible allusion to Catholic religious practices associated with funeral ritual; the boat's masts serve as ceremonial crucifix and the rising smoke exemplifies smoky incense, both of which lead a traditional Catholic funeral procession.

Pissarro uses *Enterrement* within the *Turpitudes* album to characterize religious institutions—Catholicism, specifically—as social ills on account of their fraudulent sanctimoniousness. As an institutional reflection of society's capitalist economic system, the Church and its clergy enjoy not only the comforts of wealth, but also the power and cultural authority that come with it—despite a supposedly charitable mission and explicit vows of poverty, as Pissarro notes in the plate's caption. The artist expounds on this notion, as well as the nature of his religious disdain, in a letter accompanying the *Turpitudes* album: “*L'enterrement d'un cardinal qui avait la prétension de représenter Jesus-Christ sur la terre, hypocrisie, mensonge et luxe!*”<sup>96</sup> Pissarro's commentary

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<sup>95</sup> Shikes and Harper, 234.

<sup>96</sup> Camille Pissarro, Letter to Esther Isaacson, 29 December 1889. As reproduced for: Pissarro, Camille, *Les Turpitudes Sociales: Reproduction*, Vol. 806, 999 vols. (Geneva: Reda, 1972).

suggests that, in operating lavishly for its own end, the Church neither fulfills its public mission of service to the poor nor its personal commitment to pious humility.

While the identity of *Enterrement*'s deceased cardinal is known from Pissarro's 1883 watercolor, a specific identity is not an imperative component of the plate itself—indeed, Bonnechose is never mentioned within the *Turpitudes*' accompanying letters or captions. Thus, though Pissarro copied his watercolor of Bonnechose's funeral, he likely intended *Enterrement* to be a more general indictment of religious institutions, not of particular individuals within them. Thomson aptly notes:

This drawing is an excellent example of the sharpening of Pissarro's political responses by the end of the decade, for while the earlier watercolor is an impressionistic record of a colorful procession, in the drawing the trappings of the establishment—the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the police-lined street—are brought into prominence.<sup>97</sup>

In taking the Roman Catholic Church and its hierarchical system of authority as subject for *Enterrement*, Pissarro is able to condemn the insincerity of its practice while demonstrating the impact of a corrupt capitalist base on society's institutional superstructure.

Pissarro's contempt for the Church's hypocritical duplicity is especially poignant when comparing the cardinal's funeral procession in *Enterrement* to that of a workingman in *Après l'accident* (Fig. 19), plate twenty-five in *Les Turpitudes Sociales*. *Après l'accident* shows a humble gathering around the body of a window washer who presumably fell to his death, given the previous plate's subject and title, *Avant l'accident* (Fig. 20). Contrary to the indistinguishable mass of mourners surrounding the cardinal, those in *Après l'accident* are depicted in a more personal and emotional fashion. Heads are bowed, hands are crossed, and an identifiable sadness appears on those faces visible

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<sup>97</sup> Thomson, 86.

to the viewer. With this contrast, Pissarro relates how the death of a lofty cardinal has a much less tangible impact on the common man than the death of one of his own. The death of the former spells opulent ceremony yet changes very little in the lives of others, while the death of the latter brings tragedy and increased hardship on those dependents left behind.

Pissarro was not alone in the anti-clericalism expressed in *Enterrement*, for France itself had a significant history of often-violent opposition to the Catholic Church, particularly during the French Revolution at the close of the eighteenth century.<sup>98</sup> Sentiments of religious dissent reappeared during the Third Republic and deepened in the decades surrounding the *Turpitudes*. French anticlericalism ultimately culminated in the passage of the 1905 Law on the Separation of Church and State, which effectively eliminated religion's influence on law and politics.<sup>99</sup> Though Pissarro died in 1903 and thus did not witness the law's implementation or consequent impact, he would have likely valued the introduction of French *laïcité* as a partial remedy to the institutional ails of the Church as exemplified in *Enterrement d'un cardinal*.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Joseph N. Moody, *The Church as Enemy: Anticlericalism in Nineteenth Century French Literature* (Washington: Corpus Books, 1968), 2.

<sup>99</sup> "The law of 1905 settled long-standing political and ideological conflicts between a state demanding its independence, and a Church convinced that it was her right and duty as public Magisterium to ordain the domains of both personal and collective moral action in France...by eliminating the political status of churches, the law of 1905 marked the complete detachment of political power from religion in France;" Theo A. W. de Wit, "Laïcité: French Secularism and the Turn to a Postsecular Society," *TELOS* (TELOS Press Ltd.) 2014, no. 167 (2014), 145–46.

<sup>100</sup> The term *laïcité* refers to secularism, particularly in reference to the separation of church and state.

## Worth (Alienated Labor)

No. 7 || *Le baigneur*

No. 17 || *L'art est dans le marasme*

The nature of labor and the value of work is a key component of societal superstructure that is dictated exclusively by the nature of the base. Thus, the capitalist economy of Pissarro's nineteenth-century France imposes an alienated system of labor. As identified by Marx, alienation is an essential estrangement from one's intrinsic humanity as a direct result of the capitalist social relations and material forces of production.<sup>101</sup>

Applied specifically to work, alienation manifests itself in systems of wage labor in which the worker is only as valuable as the object of his productivity. He does not work creatively or self-consciously, but solely for the wage that will sustain his livelihood and that of his family. Alienation ensues because "what is embodied in the product of his labor is no longer his own."<sup>102</sup> As a result, the wage laborer "does not fulfill himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than wellbeing, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased."<sup>103</sup> The working man is thus alienated not only from the productive process, but also from his true potential as a human being.

Alienated labor appears in several *Turpitudes* plates, most explicitly in *Le baigneur* (Fig. 21).<sup>104</sup> As described by Hutton, *Le baigneur* depicts "gaunt workers toiling away in a

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<sup>101</sup> Karl Marx, "Alienated Labor," in *Seeing Ourselves: Classic, Contemporary, and Cross-Cultural Readings in Sociology*, ed. John J. Macionis and Nijole V. Benokraitis, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001).

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 267.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>104</sup> The term *baigneur* translates to 'penal servitude,' by which Pissarro consequently compares (alienated) labor to prison; Hutton, 46.



hellish scene behind the bloated capitalist.”<sup>105</sup> They appear to be casting metal in squalid conditions, and two of the workers have collapsed at the feet of their haughty bourgeois overseer. Pissarro includes a quote from *La Révolte* that reads alienation in every line:

*Les pauvres sont assujettis à l'esclavage du salariat, enchainés au paupérisme perpétuel, maintenus dans l'ignorance, l'abjection, la misère et privés du nécessaire, sont condamnés à fournir par un travail excédant et abrutissant le superflu et le luxe du bourgeois.*<sup>106</sup>

[The poor are subject to slavery as wage earners, chained to perpetual pauperism, maintained in ignorance, humiliation, misery, deprived of necessities, condemned to excessive work to support the excesses and luxury of the bourgeoisie.]<sup>107</sup>

It becomes apparent that the metalworkers in *Le bagne*, having no creative input or labor power, are alienated from the fruits of their production as well as dependent on the working orders of the capitalist who reaps the benefits of their alienation.

Traditionally, artists are seen to exist outside of the confines of alienation because their artistic productivity—unlike that of a wage laborer—is intrinsically tied to their own sense of creativity and self-expression. The artist in *L'art est dans le marasme* (Fig. 22), however, does not enjoy this exception. He is seen crouched on the floor of his studio with brush and palette in hand, working from an easel with twelve postcard-sized paintings arranged in a grid. Long gone is the dignity associated with successful creative industries of centuries prior. Instead, the modern artist works in discomfort beside stacked packages that are destined for locations like New York—an ever-present reminder that the artist is only as valuable as the demand for his product. Thus, rather than creating grand works that embody a personal artistic vision, the plate shows “a poor

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Pissarro, *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, 7.

<sup>107</sup> As translated in: Hutton, 46.

painter mass-producing pictures in order to scrape a living,"<sup>108</sup> and who uses a self-imposed assembly line not unlike the methods of production that define alien labor.

The overturn of art's classic immunity from alienation, as illustrated in *L'art est dans le marasme*, was likely the result of the Academy's relative demise and the subsequent development of a modern art market governed by free competition. Michel Melot remarks that, in the period preceding the *Turpitudes*' creation, a new artistic era was emerging that promised false freedom for the artist:

Freedom has been guaranteed to him as the precondition for his production. The artist must produce unique objects and endlessly renew them. He must do so within the framework of a mode of production that remains intangible: His is the exuberant freedom of a moth circling a flame. The avant-garde endlessly runs up against the limits of the economic and social system.<sup>109</sup>

The 1880s provided artists with new freedoms and opportunities for success outside of the state-controlled Academy and its Salon, but necessarily within the capitalist scheme. The artist in *L'art est dans le marasme* is therefore a failed one, unable to prosper within the constraints of a new order. Pissarro notes that the pictured artist is just another wretch who dreamt of futile glory, and subsequently concedes: "*il ne faut pas de chimère eu ce monde, il faut être pratique.*"<sup>110</sup> The anarchist position then remains: for the artist to liberate himself from alienation and live up to his potential, social and economic revolution must occur.

I suggest that *L'art est dans le marasme* reflects the mind of Pissarro more than any other image in *Les Turpitudes Sociales* because the plight of the artist in capitalist France was his own. In fact, the creation of the *Turpitudes* album coincided with a period

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<sup>108</sup> Thomson, 84.

<sup>109</sup> Michel Melot, "Camille Pissarro in 1880: An Anarchist Artist in Bourgeois Society," in *Critical Readings in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism: An Anthology*, ed. Mary Tompkins Lewis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 210.

<sup>110</sup> Pissarro to Esther Isaacson, 29 December 1889.

of especially turbulent personal finance for Pissarro in which he bemoaned the low selling price of prints and at times resorted to the pawnshop to support his family.<sup>111</sup> Consequently, Thomson asserts that *L'art est dans le marasme* is “a timely reminder of the fact that at the age of sixty, despite the admiration of progressive critics and artists, Pissarro himself found sales difficult.”<sup>112</sup> In September 1889, three months before he would send *Les Turpitudes Sociales* to his nieces, Pissarro admits again to his son Lucien, “*les affaires sont pénibles.*”<sup>113</sup> From this, *L'art est dans le marasme* can be considered a relatively personal account within the *Turpitudes* in which Pissarro laments capitalism’s impact on the value of work, artistic and otherwise.

### **Relationships (Family Disintegration)**

**No. 14 || Plus de pain**

**No. 22 || Petite scène de la vie conjugale**

A fundamental premise of the base-superstructure model is that capitalism affects not only economic operations, but the nature of interpersonal relationships as well.

Pissarro uses the *Turpitudes* to investigate one relationship structure in particular: the family. Factions of families appear in several *Turpitudes* plates; *Le mariage de raison* features a newly wedded husband and wife, and *Le mendiant* depicts a father and son (as described in the previous chapter). A traditional family in its entirety, however, is only present in *Plus de pain* (Fig. 23).

*Plus de pain* centers on a family of five, and, unsurprisingly, is no cheerful portrait of urban family life. A mother sits dejectedly at the foot of a fireplace, covering

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<sup>111</sup> Thomson, 84; Camille Pissarro, *Correspondence de Camille Pissarro, 1866-1890* (Paris: Editions du Valhermeil, 1986), 265.

<sup>112</sup> Thomson, 84.

<sup>113</sup> Pissarro, *Correspondence*, 294.

her ears to escape the cries of her three children. Two of them stand beside her and reach desperately toward their father, whose arms are crossed, and a third child (an infant) lies helplessly at her feet. The scene is one of poverty and hunger—as are many others within the *Turpitudes*—and the viewer can easily imagine “*plus de pain*” coming from the hungry children’s lips as they beg their empty-handed father for sustenance. Because of coalescing factors within capitalist society, the working class father in *Plus de pain* is unable to fulfill his conventional responsibility as the head of the household—that is, to provide for the health and safety of his family—and thus his darkly shadowed face can be interpreted as both shame and guilt.

Though the despair in *Plus de pain* begets inevitable pity, the scene in *Petit scène de la vie conjugale* (Fig. 24) serves to shock. In it, Pissarro illustrates the brutal beating of a woman at the hands of her enraged, stick-wielding husband. The man’s body twists in dynamic action with baton suspended momentarily above his head; the viewer understands that the weapon will meet its target in the moments to come. The man’s other fist grasps his wife’s hair, allowing him to drag her across the ground while she screams and struggles. In a now-familiar trope, Pissarro uses an artificial source of light within the image itself—in this case, a single candle—to create dramatic lighting contrasts that render his subjects even more dramatic and violent.

Though *Petit scène de la vie conjugale* is a shocking image, Pissarro’s casual title seems disproportionately flippant. In choosing a trivializing title, however, he effectively underlines the unremarkable ordinariness of the episode. His explanatory note suggests the same: “*c’est encore une des phases de la vie conjugale tres connue.*”<sup>114</sup> Domestic abuse is as inherent to family life under capitalism as general hardship and poverty, and

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<sup>114</sup> Pissarro to Esther Isaacson, 29 December 1889.

*Petit scène* reinforces the existence of all of three. Indeed, the sparse room lit by a solitary candle denotes a depravity that is inevitably caused by the capitalist system and possibly contributes to the husband's violent outburst.

With *Plus de pain* and *Petit scène de la vie conjugale*, Pissarro paints a pessimistic picture of family life that can be rationalized, much like the nature of labor, in terms of alienation. Not only do capitalist economic structures alienate the worker from the products of his labor, they also alienate people from each other. Capitalism's alienation disallows freedom, security, and personal fulfillment, which makes healthy interpersonal relationships—especially those with elements of dependence, as in families—nearly impossible. As a result, the relationships apparent in *Les Turpitudes Sociales* are characterized by “disintegration and collapse” on account of their existence within a capitalist-dictated superstructure.<sup>115</sup>

Interestingly, the creation of the *Turpitudes* coincides with an era in French history of evolving conceptions of family and marriage. Nicholas White observes that *fin-de-siècle* France saw a “crisis of family values” that ultimately precipitated the 1884 legalization of divorce via *Loi Naquet*.<sup>116</sup> The law allowed the separation of unhappy couples in ways not previously permitted, but White additionally notes:

...it signalled [sic] the fragility of state-sponsored idealism about the indestructibility of the married couple. However unrecognizable as an adequate divorce law it might appear to a late twentieth-century audience, the *Loi Naquet* did articulate an admission on the part of the French state that the family unit was not indissoluble.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Hutton, 49.

<sup>116</sup> Nicholas White, "Introduction: fin de siècle, fin de famille?," in *The Family in Crisis in Late Nineteenth-Century French Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 4.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Pissarro's dismal portrayals of home and family were thus created in France during a "paradigmatic shift in the conceptualization of family."<sup>118</sup> It remains unclear whether Pissarro saw this cultural evolution as the cause of, or partial remedy to, the overwhelming anguish of *Plus de pain* and *Petit scène de la vie conjugale*.<sup>119</sup>

### **Class Conflict (Revolution)**

**No. 20 || Les Strugleforlifeurs**

**No. 28 || Insurrection**

According to the Marxist formulation of historical materialism within which anarchism operates, the nature of life in capitalist society is primarily characterized by oppression and class struggle. This is epitomized in *Les Strugleforlifeurs*, the twentieth plate in *Les Turpitudes Sociales* whose inventive title (a combination of English and French) explicitly mentions this conflict. The plate depicts a back-alley robbery in which three shadowy-faced men are shown accosting a fourth. The man being robbed has dropped his hat and umbrella on the sidewalk beneath a streetlamp that illuminates his shocked face. Like the lamp in *Suicide du boursier*, the skylight in *L'asphixie*, and the candle in *Petit scène de la vie conjugale*, Pissarro again uses a light source within the image itself to allow for dramatic value contrasts, which "sharpen the violence of his subjects" in turn—a tactic especially appropriate for a depiction of overt assault as found in *Les Strugleforlifeurs*.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>119</sup> Regardless of Pissarro's positive or negative evaluation of evolving social standards, he likely would have only seen anarchist revolution as a lasting solution to the fundamental causes of poverty and hardship apparent in *Les Turpitudes Sociales*.

<sup>120</sup> Shikes and Harper, 231.

At surface value, it appears as if Pissarro is simply decrying the existence of violent crime in urban life. However, the social dynamic of the robbery—that is, the class identities of the victim and perpetrators—creates a more complex narrative. As explained in the letter accompanying the *Turpitudes* album, *Les Strugleforlifeurs* depicts the robbery of a bourgeois man at the hands of three poor, working class men. *Strugleforlifeurs* thus centers on a violent episode of class conflict, an essential facet of a society built on capitalism. Pissarro notes that the scene features (proletarian) thieves “*qui font restituer par la force l’argent q’il a volé par la force.*”<sup>121</sup> Given this context, the plate’s immediate antagonist-antagonized relationship becomes subsequently reversed; the bourgeois man who momentarily struggles against the hands at his throat is complicit in the social and economic oppression of his robbers, and thus culpable for the lifelong struggles of the proletariat. The aggressors in *Strugleforlifeurs* are therefore actually the victims in Pissarro’s grand, miserable tale; they are simply righting wrongs by the only means available.

With *Strugleforlifeurs*, Pissarro uses physical confrontation to straightforwardly illustrate the larger notion of class conflict. In doing so, he also seems to defend and even advise the use of violence to achieve anarchist ends. The plate thus reflects the philosophy of Émile Pouget (1860–1931);<sup>122</sup> unlike other anarchists who believed that theft was antithetical to anarchist ethics, Pouget “called for direct action, including theft if one was hungry and assassination of unjust judges.”<sup>123</sup> *Strugleforlifeurs* is therefore an

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<sup>121</sup> Pissarro to Esther Isaacson, 29 Decemeber 1889.

<sup>122</sup> Pouget was a French anarcho-communist and personal friend of Pissarro whose anarchist publication *Le Père Pienard* was notably written in working class vernacular; Adler, 125.

<sup>123</sup> Shikes and Harper, 228; Shikes, 50.

endorsement of sorts, one that situates Pissarro on Pouget's side of a critical debate within the French anarchist camp.

Though *Strugleforlifeurs* appears to justify the use of force by the working classes, most art historians contend that Pissarro would have opposed such tactics. Kathleen Adler insists that "his gentle nature could not condone the use of violence in order to bring about the change in society."<sup>124</sup> Yet *Strugleforlifeurs* is not a one-off ideological fluke. In fact, Pissarro advocates even more clearly for violence as an acceptable and even necessary means of social change in the final image of *Les Turpitudes Sociales*. The plate is titled *Insurrection* (Fig. 25) and depicts just that: the ultimate escalation of class conflict, "the immense insurrection that results from the combined greed of the bourgeoisie and the misery of the urban working class."<sup>125</sup>

In addition to taking a resolute political stance, *Insurrection* is also the only plate to break with the standardized subject apparent in the twenty-seven images preceding it. Unlike the rest of the album, *Insurrection* neither depicts an urban scene of "social turpitude" nor contributes to the illustration and annotation of a deprived contemporary existence. With the final image of *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, Pissarro breaks from his descriptive approach and offers a prescriptive one instead. *Insurrection* manifests the fact that:

[Pissarro] fervently believed in the inevitability of a social and economic revolution—so much that his activities were carefully followed by the French police—that would completely transform the world in which he lived.<sup>126</sup>

*Insurrection* is the solution not only to the issue of class conflict, but to the underlying oppressive capitalist scheme (base) and the misery of the human condition caused by it

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<sup>124</sup> Adler, 127.

<sup>125</sup> Brettell, 243.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



(superstructure). Pissarro thus ends the *Turpitudes* on a hopeful note; as Shikes attests, “All this tragedy ends on a note of defiance, if not triumph.”<sup>127</sup> Anarchist revolution will rid the oppressed working classes of their bourgeois oppressors and fundamentally rework the economic base and social superstructure that allowed it in the first place.

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<sup>127</sup> Shikes, 48.

## Conclusion

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*No doubt in the year 2000...they will look back at these drawings and wonder how people in the nineteenth century could be so stupid as to let themselves be troubled by such problems.*

—thank you letter for “*Les Turpitudes Sociales*” from Esther Isaacson to Pissarro, 1890



*Il est facile de se rendre compte que l'on est en pleine revolution.*

—letter from Pissarro to his son Lucien, 26 April 1892

The social and political dilemmas raised by *Les Turpitudes Sociales* have by no means disappeared in the centuries since its creation, and thus the album’s specifically anarchist analysis of late nineteenth-century urbanity remains salient. The possession of wealth as depicted in *Le Capital* is as desirable as ever; extreme poverty and hunger as apparent in *Plus de pain* and *Le Mondiant* still plague the urban and developing worlds; and, though the overt class conflict depicted in *Les Strugleforlifeurs* has become more insidious, the root cause of economic disparity and resentment endures. Indeed, the anarchist revolution prescribed by Pissarro in *Insurrection*—the solution by which his twenty-eight accounts of urban misery could be remedied—never materialized.

Though the anarchist vision with which Pissarro concludes *Les Turpitudes Sociales* never came to fruition, his album serves as a politically charged art historical snapshot of the society in which he lived. The album’s twenty-eight distinct scenes of urban plight readily communicate the sheer scope of the misery of the human condition under capitalism by attacking the existing social structure from every conceivable angle—marriage, finance, suicide, art, industry, and assault, to name a few. However, despite the scope of subject between plates, the *Turpitudes* lack an overarching narrative scheme and immediately coherent political program.

To remedy the seeming absence of politically significant organization, I maintain that a Marxist base-superstructure model is an apt analytical framework with which to interpret the *Turpitudes*, as well as a valuable means of eliciting a nuanced anarchist analysis from the album overall. Anarchism's shared conception of historical materialism allows for the model on a theoretical level, while the album's initial grouping of five financially oriented plates—which serves as the base that precedes and qualifies the superstructure—reinforces the use of the model materially.

A base-superstructure framework of analysis as applied to *Les Turpitudes Sociales* characterizes the economic base of nineteenth-century French society as a capitalist one, and defines the social superstructure in terms of the misery of the human condition. Beyond general descriptors, the analytical framework also provides supplemental thematic categories with which to understand the superstructure; these include: institutions, worth, relationships, and class conflict. Thus, interpretation of the *Turpitudes* using both analytical systems renders the album's elementary social commentary more politically and economically complex. That is, a base-superstructure model and internal thematic categorization transforms the *Turpitudes* from twenty-eight representations of social ills to an intelligible visual demonstration of complicated social and economic relationships from a singularly anarchist perspective.

Though the analytical models employed by this thesis allow for the extraction of consequential anarchist content from *Les Turpitudes Sociales*, the fact remains that Pissarro never intended the work to serve the greater anarchist cause. Regardless of the *Turpitudes*'s possible effectiveness in inciting anarchist awareness within a large population, the entire album was created in the hopes of persuading two family members

who lived outside of France. The intentionality of the *Turpitudes*'s private audience, in combination with the understanding that political radicalism did not appear in the rest of Pissarro's oeuvre, thus questions whether Pissarro's avowed anarchist identity was anything more than an ideological label; perhaps the anarchism of Camille Pissarro was simply a socially conscious worldview that rationalized the hardship of a struggling artist, while avoiding the action and activism necessary to change it.

## Illustrations



Figure 1. Camille Pissarro, *Native Woman*, 1854. Pencil. Ashmolean Museum.



Figure 2. Camille Pissarro, *La promenade à âne, à La Roche-Guyon*, 1864–5. Oil on canvas. Private Collection.

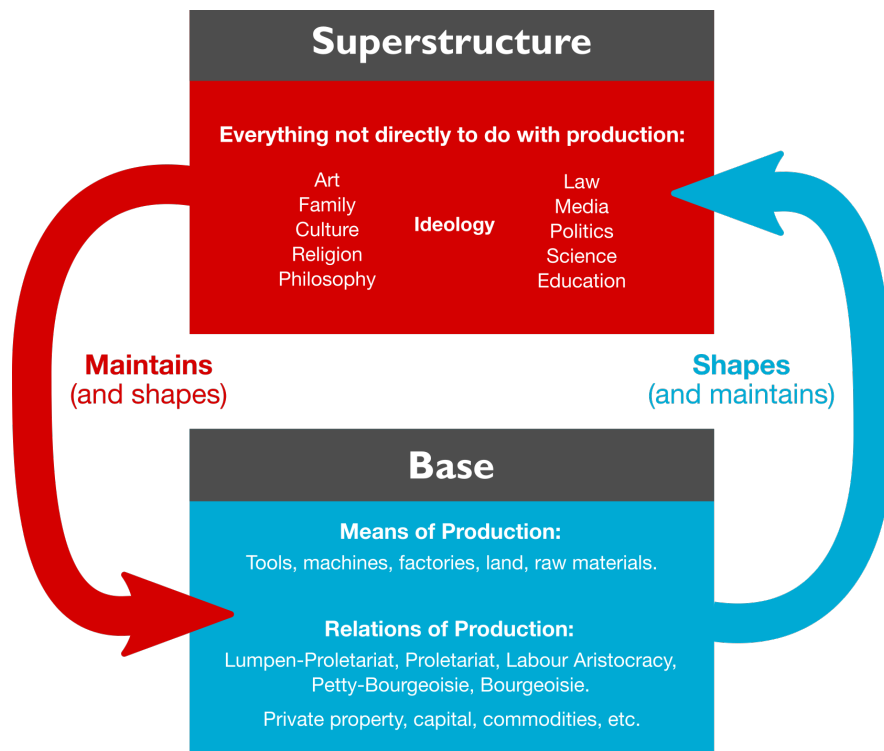


Figure 3. Marxist base-superstructure model. Wikimedia Commons.

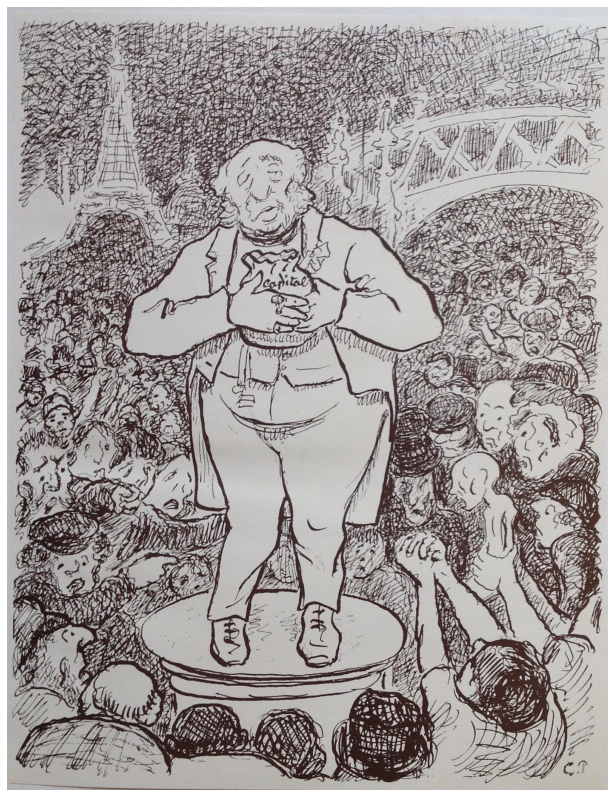


Figure 4. Camille Pissarro, *Le Capital*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.

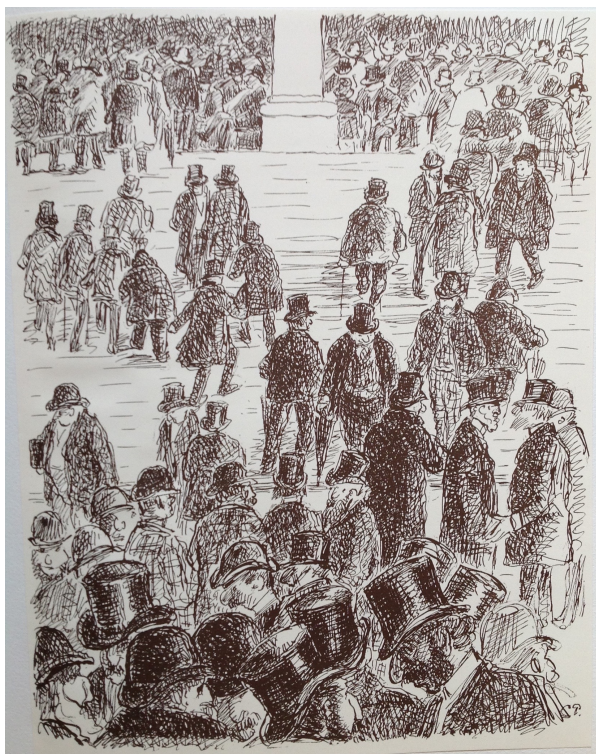


Figure 5. Camille Pissarro, *Le temple du veau d'or*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.



Figure 6. Camille Pissarro, *Study for Le temple du veau d'or*, c. 1889. Pen and ink over pencil on paper. Ashmolean Museum.



Figure 7. *La Bourse*, 1900. Photograph. Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 8. Camille Pissarro, detail, *Study for Le temple du veau d'or*, c. 1889. Pen and ink over pencil on paper. Ashmolean Museum.





Figure 9. Henri Pille, *Saint Méneould*, 1886. Print. *Le Courrier Français*, 7 March 1886. As reproduced in: Richard Thomson, "Camille Pissarro, *Turpitudes Sociales*, and the Universal Exhibition of 1889," *Arts Magazine* (1982), 84.



PROJET DE MONUMENT A ÉLÈVER A LA MÉMOIRE DE MONSIEUR PRUDHOMME.

Figure 10. Henri Monnier, *Projet à la mémoire de Monsieur Prudhomme*, 1888. Print. As reproduced in: Champfleury, *Histoire de la Caricature Moderne* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1888), 24.



Figure 11. Camille Pissarro, *Les Boursicotières*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.



Figure 12. Camille Pissarro, *Le suicide du boursier*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.



Figure 13. Léon Bonnat, *Portrait of Jules Grévy*, 1880. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay.



Figure 14. Camille Pissarro, *L'asphixie*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.



Figure 15. Camille Pissarro, *Study for L'asphixie*, c. 1889. Pen and ink over pencil on paper. Ashmolean Museum.



Figure 16. Camille Pissarro, *Le Mondiant*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.

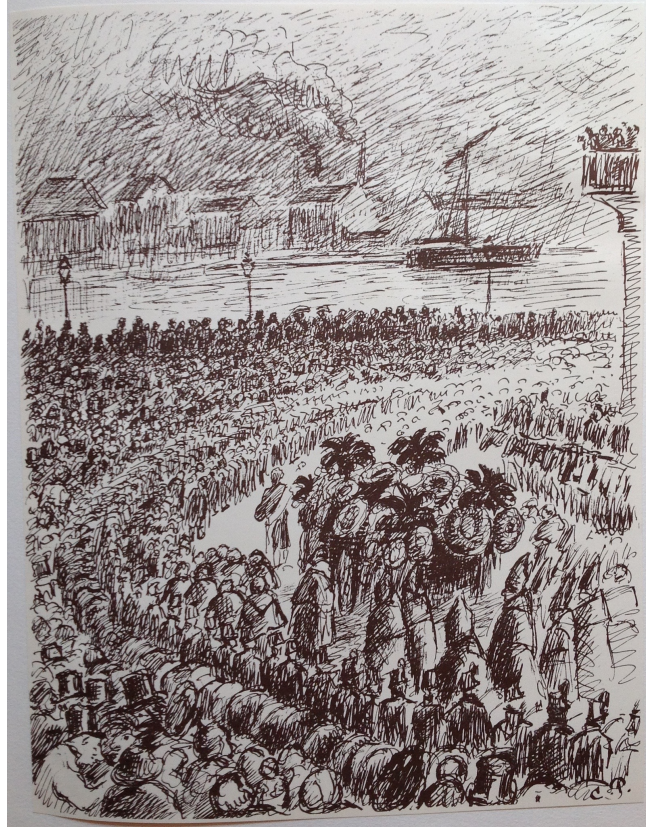


Figure 17. Camille Pissarro, *Enterrement d'un cardinal*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.



Figure 18. Camille Pissarro, *Enterrement du cardinal de Bonnechose à Rouen*, 1883. Watercolor. Musée d'Orsay.

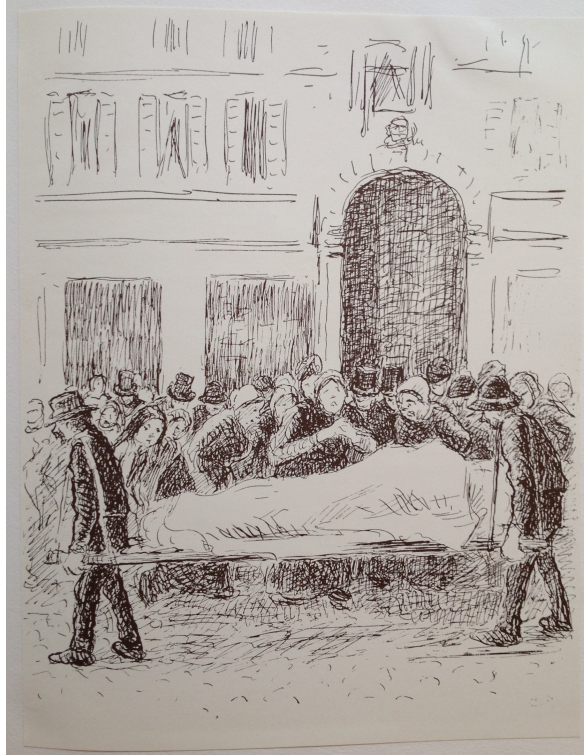


Figure 19. Camille Pissarro, *Après l'accident*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.



Figure 20. Camille Pissarro, *Avant l'accident*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.



Figure 21. Camille Pissarro, *Le bain*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.



Figure 22. Camille Pissarro, *L'art est dans le marasme*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.

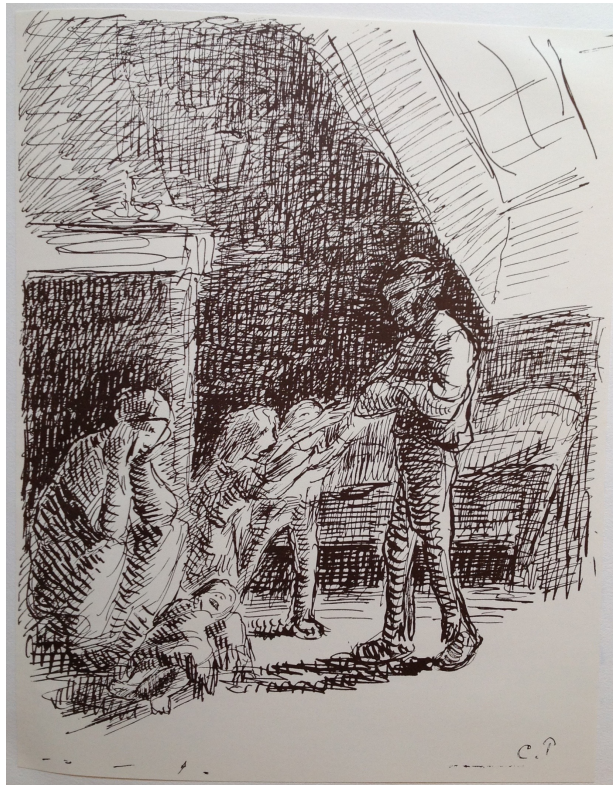


Figure 23. Camille Pissarro, *Plus de pain*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.

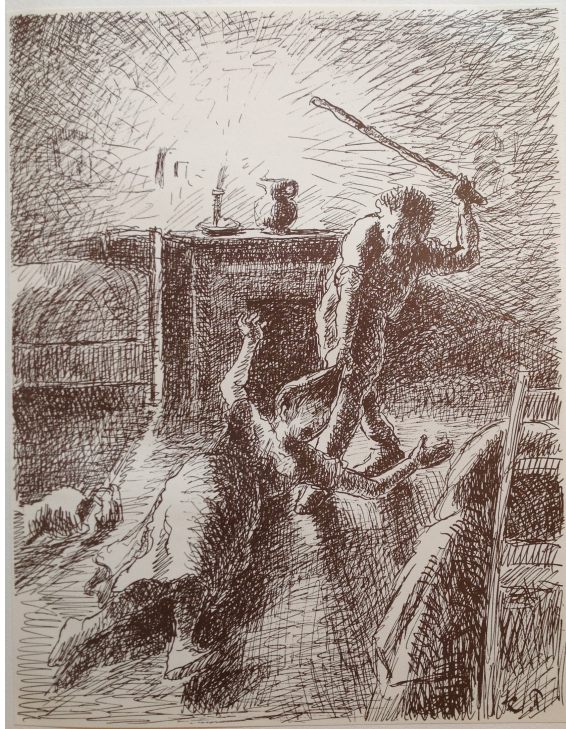


Figure 24. Camille Pissarro, *Petit scène de la vie conjugale*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.



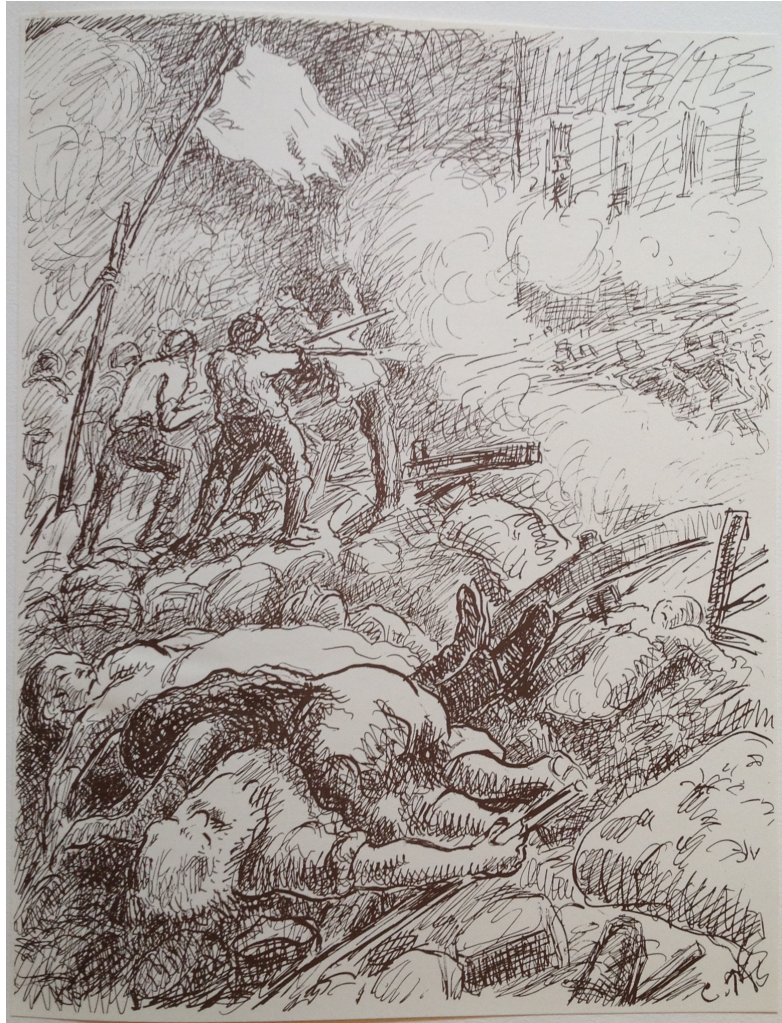


Figure 25. Camille Pissarro, *Insurrection*, 1889. Pen and ink. Private Collection.

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