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Paris Communes 1871

Do you know Lefrançais?

- Features - Daniel Bensaïd archive -

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Less famous than Varlin, Vallès, Flourens or Rossel, he was nevertheless the first president of the Paris Commune and, Frenchman though he was [a wordplay on his name], Eugène Pottier dedicated the Internationale to him. [1]

Born in 1826 into an anti-Bonapartist family, he entered the Versailles teacher training college in 1842, but was unable to find a post when he left: he was already banned from teaching because of his sulphurous views. After the temporary replacement of a colleague in Dourdan, where he had a run-in with the local priest, he had to resign himself to becoming a writing clerk for a Parisian contractor, he was dismissed as soon as the February 1848 revolution began. His life as a communist then becomes the exemplary chronicle of a militant in the century. Arrested even before the June days (the uprising of 22-26 June 1848), he was sentenced to three months in prison and two years of surveillance for possession of weapons of war, sent to Dijon under house arrest. Exiled to London in 1851, he could meet Marx, Mazzini and Louis Blanc between Dean Street and Greek Street. He founded a cooperative restaurant, "La Sociale", before returning to Paris in 1853.

In the 1860s, he immersed himself in the grassroots activity of the clubs and meetings where the socialist movement was rebuilding its strength. Police reports consider him one of the most popular speakers of the time: "He develops his theories on collective property and the suppression of inheritance; he violently attacks the institution of marriage and advocates free union."

A member of the Vigilance Committee during the siege of Paris in 1870, Lefrançais actively participated in the riot of 31 October against the defeatist softness of the "National Defence" government. Imprisoned for four months in Mazas, then in Vincennes and in La Santé, he was elected deputy mayor of the 20th arrondissement and acquitted by a war council on 24 February 1871. On 26 March, he was elected to the Commune by the 4th arrondissement. Fighting on the last barricades of the Bastille and the Arsenal, he managed to escape to Switzerland. The council of war sentenced him to death in absentia on 30 August 1872.

In Geneva, he joined the local section of the International and then its Jura "anti-authoritarian" federation, incurring the wrath of the "Marxists" who denounced his role "at the head of these lunatics". He participated in the presidency of the international anti-authoritarian congress of Saint-Imier in September 1872 and contributed to *La Révolution sociale*, the organ of the Jura federation influenced by Bakunin. Earning his living as a clerk, he assisted Élisée Reclus in his geography work, fought a duel, and returned to Paris after the amnesty in 1880. Having often denounced "the deception of universal suffrage", he accepted to be a candidate in the legislative elections of 1889, as an "anti-Ferry and anti-Boulangist" protest.

He died on 16 May 1901. At his funeral in Père Lachaise on 19 May, a companion read his will: "I am dying more and more convinced that the social ideas I have professed all my life and for which I have fought as hard as I could are just and true. I die more and more convinced that the society in which I have lived is nothing but the most cynical and monstrous of robberies. I die professing the deepest contempt for all political parties, even socialist ones, having never considered them to be anything but groups of simpletons led by shameless and unscrupulous ambitious men. As a final recommendation, I ask my son Paul to see to it that my funeral - exclusively civil, of course - be as simple as my life itself has been, and that I be accompanied only by those who have known me as a friend and have been kind enough to bestow upon me either their affection or more simply their esteem."

The citizen Gustave Lefrançais had known everything: misery, prison, exile, conspiracy, insurrection, and the death sentence. Without ever giving up. Between the massacres of June 1848 and those of the *Semaine Sanglante*, his life

is an example of uprightness and fidelity to the cause of the exploited and oppressed. [3]

His story sums up the experience of a century in which history broke in two. Can one imagine the depth of this break? The young defrocked Ernest Renan, who witnessed the massacre from his window, wrote to his sister Henriette on 1 July 1848:

The storm has passed, my dear friend; but it will leave a long trail of destruction! Paris is no longer recognisable: the other victories had only songs and follies; this one has only mourning and fury. The atrocities committed by the victors make us shudder and take us back in one day to the time of the Wars of Religion. Something harsh, ferocious and inhuman is introduced into the customs and language. The people of order, those who are called honest people, ask only for machine-gun fire and shooting; the scaffold is shot down, massacre is substituted for it; the bourgeois class has proved that it is capable of all the excesses of our first Terror, with a degree of reflection and selfishness in addition.

**1,500 killed in action. 3,000 executions.
12,000 deported**

Twenty years later, Flaubert was still shuddering:

When the prisoners approached a window, the national guards who were on duty would stick bayonets into the crowd at random. They were generally ruthless. Those who had not fought wanted to signal their presence. It was an overflow of fear. They were taking revenge on the newspapers, the clubs, the assemblies, the doctrines, everything that had been exasperating for three months. The aristocracy had the fury of the scoundrel and the cotton hat showed itself no less hideous than the red hat. Public reason was disturbed as after the great upheavals of nature. People of spirit remained idiots for the rest of their lives.

“And here,” confirmed Lefrançais, “are the sons of Voltaire, the old laughers of mystical relations, the eaters of priests, grouped around a pedestal table waiting for hours on end for this piece of furniture to lift its leg... Finally, religion in all its forms is on the agenda. It’s very distinguished. France has gone mad. Madame Roland was right when she wrote that to me after 2 December.”

Lefrançais and his brothers-in-arms were, on the contrary, denuded of this once and for all.

After June 1848, there was no longer one Republic, but two. Irreconcilable.

The blue and the red. The bourgeois and the social.

“And the real birthplace of the bourgeois republic is not the February victory; it is the June defeat.” wrote Marx. [4]

Do you know Lefrançais?

“What relationship exists,” Lefrançais asks again, “between the modern conception of an egalitarian republic, based on labour, and the ancient republics of patricians, plebs and slaves?” Decidedly, “our republic has nothing in common with yours”: “June has sufficiently demonstrated this!”

About fifteen thousand men dead or wounded on both sides; the organised manhunt; one part of Paris denouncing the other; the fiercest hatreds unleashed between the army, the mobile and the workers, whose wounded inveigh against each other even on their hospital beds; the indefinite state of siege; the permanent councils of war to send the most energetic barricade fighters to gaol or even to the scaffold: such is the balance sheet of four months of government by the Republicans. What could the most execrable of monarchies have done?

Republican bullets from June 1848 or monarchist bullets from June 1832, it is all the same to those who receive them, “except that in 1848 there were more of them”.

The lesson had been learnt. It would leave deep traces of popular hostility towards the democrats and bourgeois politicians, towards the hugolant Hugos and the gambetta-like Gambettas, always ready to turn against the “scoundrel” who serves as their footstool:

Since his entry into the prefecture of police, on the evening of 24 February, hasn't Caussidière helped, along with Ledru-Rollin and Louis Blanc, to play into the hands of the reactionaries by stirring up the spectre of Blanqui. Why weren't he and his friends present at the barricades, giving the movement the guiding impulse it lacked to concentrate its efforts on the Assembly which should have been stormed from the first day? It is this absence of direction which confines the insurrection to its quarters where the energy of the combatants is spent in pure waste. Cavaignac and his friends understood this well. So, soon reduced to the defensive, the insurgents would remain insurgents - that is to say, defeated

noted Lefrançais in February 1848. [5] The political experience is also military: the art of insurrection is a war of movement and rapid decision. Immobility and hesitation are synonymous with defeat. A certain Lenin remembered this, half a century later, in those October days when he urged the leaders of his party to take action without delay: it was a matter of life and death.

The Commune of 1871 confirmed June 1848. The revolution of 18 March brought to power a government of uneducated people, “unknowns, ignorant people”, who would one day be the glory of “the first truly popular of our revolutions”.

After the defeat, Lefrançais summarized the roots of the class divide which was the key to the civil war:

The real 'crimes' of the Commune, oh bourgeois of all stripes and colours: monarchists, Bonapartists, and you too, pink or even scarlet republicans; the real crimes of the Commune which, to its credit, you will never forgive it for, I will enumerate them [...]. The Commune is the party of those who had initially protested against the war in July 1870, but who, seeing the honour and integrity of France compromised by your cowardice, tried the impossible to ensure that the invader was pushed back from the borders [...]. The Commune, for six months, defeated your work of treason [...]. The Commune demonstrated that the proletariat was prepared to manage itself and could do without you [...]. The reorganization of the public services which you had abandoned is clear proof of this [...]. The Commune has tried to substitute direct action and unceasing control by the citizens for your governments, all of which are based on 'national interest', behind which your plunder and governmental infamies of all kinds take cover... Never, no never, will you forgive it.

Do you know Lefrançais?

The Commune, however, sinned by naivety in not understanding that “one cannot be both legal and revolutionary (on pain of falling between the two)”. Lefrançais thus agrees with Marx that not having taken possession of the Banque de France constitutes “an irreparable fault”.

Such Memoirs contribute to a better understanding of certain constitutive features of the French workers' movement. They shed light on the origins of revolutionary syndicalism, its tenacious mistrust of parliamentarianism, its workers' or populist accents, which the Communist Party was able to exploit to its own ends, in the inter-war period, in the service of Stalinist Bolshevization.

Proclaiming his communist convictions, a fighter like Lefrançais was nevertheless wary of populism from above and of the “exaltation of the workman's blouse” which had become “the catchphrase of the republicans of tomorrow”. He mocks the “self-proclaimed friends of the people”: “Do we need to proclaim that we love ourselves?”

Producers, let's save ourselves! For him, this formula is quite literal. It is the basis of his hostility to all forms of representative delegation and his undiminished taste for direct democracy. Twice in a quarter of a century, Lefrançais's generation had suffered the bitter ordeal of bourgeois cowardice and cruelty. Thus he (along with Vallès, Varlin, Courbet, Franckel, Beslay, Longuet, Vermorel) belonged to the minority of the Commune which voted against the creation of a Committee of Public Safety. [6] Not only did he disapprove of re-enacting the great hours of the Jacobin Terror as a farce, but he feared that such a committee would become a weapon in the hands of a party, whereas the Paris Commune was “the expression and impersonal force of the revolution”. It must remain so.

As soon as it entered the Hôtel de Ville, the Central Committee declared that “the revolution of 18 March has first of all the aim of restoring to Paris, and consequently to the whole of France, the effective sovereignty once more usurped by the people of 4 September”. [7] It did not see itself as a Power, but as “a provisional instrument of popular sovereignty which immediately invites the population to elect its representatives”. From then on, “the state would be the simple expression of communal interests in solidarity”.

This vigilance against any form of delegation, confiscation or usurpation of power, and against the formation of a “new caste of state employees by means of a School of Administration” (an ENA before the time envisaged by the Thermidorian Carnot [8]) was matched by a lifelong concern for education and popular organisation. Lefrançais was constantly listening to what was brewing in clubs and associations. He marvelled at this proliferation of popular life and culture, where the working classes were learning on a large scale, in contrast to the closed circles of the secret societies. In the 1860s, he enthusiastically witnessed the rise of a modern workers' movement whose forms of solidarity clashed with the competition on which “the exploitation of wage earners by wage earners” was based. But he also fought against the Proudhonian illusions whose societies, “however fraternal they may be”, would only “substitute the war from group to group for that from individual to individual”. The only way to avoid this trap is “the federation of workers' associations in solidarity; but the idea is not yet ripe...”.

Having begun his career as a teacher, Lefrançais remained particularly sensitive to educational programmes and methods. A few years later, he could have been a pioneer of the *Ecole émancipée* and of teacher unionism. [9] A member of the Association of Socialist Teachers, he contributed in the 1840s with a few friends, including Pauline Roland and Jeanne Deroin, to the development of an innovative programme under the Second Republic. During the Second Empire, while the workers' movement was getting its breath back, he joined a Scottish-rite Freemason lodge, but left immediately, scalded by “the most insipid and religious of the charitable societies”.

On the other hand, it is striking to note how far removed from the narrow trade unionism confined to the closed horizon of the factory were these semi-legal meetings where the popular movement took on a new lease of life. The broad audience was curious about everything. It was passionate about the cause of women and about family and inheritance issues. In 1849, invited to a meeting on education which did not look good, Lefrançais decided to stay

when he saw “these ladies enter, convinced that the interest of the meeting would be affected by their presence”. In 1868, one of the very first public meetings at the Vaux-Hall, attended by more than 2,000 people, mostly male and female workers, dealt with “women’s work”. The discussion concluded with a vote of principles “recognising the right of women to maintain their personality and hence their social equality through work.”

The meetings debating the family were crowded. Between supporters of legal divorce and those of free union, the audience was often divided, but it did not matter: “The idea of free union was established”. At the meetings at the Pré-au-Clercs, where the audience was mainly students, there was much discussion of marriage, heredity and the reciprocal rights of father and child. At the Folies-Belleville, where the “working class element” dominated, discussions were held mainly between socialist schools: “The audience is very impressionable, easy to move and yet very attentive, there is nothing more interesting for the speaker than to see this ocean of heads reflecting the various emotions he himself has gone through and which he has been able to transmit to them.”

The duplicity shown by the bourgeois Republic, on the other hand, had sown a stubborn suspicion about the claims that seem to be associated with it. Thus, Lefrançais was indifferent, even vaguely hostile to the idea of women’s suffrage: what does it matter, he says, to the woman who gets her fingers bloody making artificial flower stems, or who ruins her health at work, to be able to be an elector and eligible. He also refuses to be part of any society for the abolition of the death penalty, which already appears to be the hobbyhorse *par excellence* of reformers who had given up on any other radical social reform and who did not hesitate to use the troops against the barricades: “As long as thousands of workers have their heads, arms and legs cut off, their stomachs gutted by industrial machinery, for the greater satisfaction of the god Capital, I reserve my tears for them. The suppression of the death penalty incurred every day in the factory by the exploited of big industry seems to me much more urgent than that of the penalty inflicted by the judges. Let’s abolish the former first; the latter will logically follow.” Paul Lafargue has the same view. Here we can see at its source a workerism or a “pure socialism”, whose legitimate distrust of bourgeois parliamentarism is transformed into a withdrawal from politics in general. The initial indifference of Guesdist socialism towards the Dreyfus affair, conceived as a settlement of accounts within the military caste and the ruling class, is part of this nascent tradition. Parliamentary decay, the ‘elites’ mixing with riff-raff, corruption and scandals are likely to revive this sensitivity today, which is sometimes dormant but deeply rooted in French popular culture.

It is easy to understand, when reading these memories, that Lefrançais had a stormy temper. He was not easy to get along with and often ill-tempered. A tumultuous life tempered his character. Controversies and rivalries raged in the nascent socialist movement. The vigour of the confrontations does not, however, give the impression of the rancid and hardened sectarianism that ravaged the ranks of the workers’ movement after the social-democratic assassination of Rosa Luxemburg and the introduction of Stalinist police methods. Thus, everything opposes Proudhon and Leroux. The former is an individualist, the latter a communist. The former is an atheist, the latter a Christian. But both deserve respect, because they want to substitute solidarity and justice for the “every man for himself” of the bourgeois economists. Both have been composers, proofreaders. They are “workers, proletarians, of great knowledge, able to discuss competently with the most learned specialists of the time”.

Lefrançais, who had often fought against Proudhon, remembered his funeral with emotion. A crowd of five to six thousand people gathered in January 1865 for the funeral. A regiment approaches and returns to the barracks after a manoeuvre. It is thought to be a trap. They explain themselves. They negotiate. The ranks open up to let the troops through. An anonymous voice shouts: “Beat the drum!” The colonel raises his sword, heads are uncovered, and the regiment marches in front of the house of the deceased, presenting arms: “A deep emotion seizes everyone. We shook hands in silence. Not a shout, not a word in this crowd dominated by a feeling of dignified pride. We feel alive again. So not everything is dead.”

Blanqui enjoyed a special respect in his eyes, as in Marx’s, by the way. Under Louis-Philippe, his Société des saisons was already distinguished. One “hardly laughs there”, certainly, but one does not declaim there either. And every line carries. Marx said that the bourgeoisie invented the name of Blanqui to criminalize communism. Lefrançais

sees in it the symbol of “the true Republic” whose time has not yet come. Before the Bourges court, unlike Raspail who sought to justify himself, Blanqui, threatened with capital punishment, “widened the debate, tore off the veil of the supposed respect due to the majesty of universal suffrage and clearly demonstrated that it is the Revolution alone that is in the hot seat. As for his person, Blanqui has no concern about it. Not believing that a dictatorship, however enlightened, could bring about the triumph of the social revolution, Lefrançais could not be a Blanquist. He nonetheless proclaims to the end, towards Blanqui “whose whole life has been generously sacrificed without reserve to the Revolution”, the “respect to which he is entitled”. He is more reserved towards the Blanquists.

More significantly, Lefrançais considers the arrest of Rossel for military incompetence by decision of the Commune to be legitimate. However, he specifies: “As for believing him to be a traitor, nothing justifies such an opinion. He is a man who made a mistake.” Unlike what happened under the Robespierriest Terror, for him a mistake was neither a crime nor treason. Unlike the murderous rhetoric of the Moscow trials, Lefrançais ignored the infamous formula of “objective guilt”.

Invited under the Republic of September 1870 to raise a toast to that of 1792, Lefrançais raises his glass to “those who fell in June 1848 for the conquest of social equality”. Arago was in a tizzy. The young people, led by Flourens, applauded. There was no need, then, to invoke the duty of remembrance in order to be faithful. Lefrançais was not the type to commune with the “republicans of the two shores”, from Pasqua to Chevènement. He will never be a black hussar of the Republic. A red hussar, rather. Or even a black and red hussar. For he has a frankly libertarian communism.

He is made of the same stuff that stiff-necked rebels are made of. We can't imagine him being bogged down in the decorum and propriety of a governing, pluralist left. He already speaks with disdain of “the open left” as well as the “pink Republic”. Different times, different customs? Maybe.

Times change, of course. But there remains a popular righteousness, whose first imperative was always to betray the bourgeoisie for the man.

Contrary to what my surname might indicate, my maternal grandfather, answering to the valiant first name of Hyppolyte, was born in 1861, at 1 passage de la Main-d'Or, into a family of cabinet-makers from the faubourg Saint-Antoine [in Paris]. After the crushing of the Commune, he had to follow his proscribed parents. Grandfather Hyppolyte had tears in his eyes when he mentioned a German called “Karle Marx” (sic!), of whom he had probably never read a line. In the family dining room, a portrait of Jean-Baptiste Clément was displayed. [10] Every year, on the anniversary of the Bloody Week, the table had to rise solemnly to sing *Le Temps des cerises*. In times of sinuosity and flexibility, of repentance and reversals, when by dint of bending and bowing, we would end up crawling, may the rough stiffness of the forty-eighters and Che communards encourage us not to bend and not to give in. As the song says: “All this does not prevent, Nicolas, that the Commune is not dead!” [11]

The final word, of course, goes to Lefrançais, irreconcilable communist and irreducible rebel: “Today, the Republic is only worth as much as it is the negation of all supremacy, of all privilege, not only of an administrative nature, but also and above all of an economic nature. In a word, the modern Republic is social. The great honour of the Paris Commune is to have understood this. And let the proletarians not forget that the latter [the more or less radical and even intransigent republicans] are no less dangerous among their implacable enemies. We are a thousand leagues away from the priestly Republic, the pawn Republic, the Republic of order, discipline and inequality; a thousand leagues away from a Left servile to the owners, from its denials and its disavowals; from its reverences and its genuflections.”

With Lefrançais, one is in good company. One simply feels at home.

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[1] **Eugène Varlin** (5 October 1839 – 28 May 1871) was a French socialist, comunard and member of the First International. He was one of the pioneers of French syndicalism. **Jules Vallès** (11 June 1832 – 14 February 1885) was a French journalist and author and left-wing political activist. **Gustave Flourens** (4 August 1838 in Paris – 3 April 1871) one of the most active leaders of the insurrection, was captured, disarmed and killed on 3 April. **Eugène Edine Pottier** (4 October 1816 Paris – 6 November 1887 Paris), member of the Commune, poet and songwriter.

[2] Gustave Adolphe Lefrançais (30 January 1826 in Angers, Maine-et-Loire – 16 May 1901) was a revolutionary anarchist militant, member of International Workingmen's Association (IWMA), the Paris Commune, and the Jura Federation. ([Wikipedia](#).)

[3] *Semaine Sanglante* Bloody Week, the final week and defeat of the Paris Commune.

[4] In [The Civil War in France](#).

[5] **Victor Hugo** (7 Ventôse year X [26 February 1802] – 22 May 1885) was a French writer who evolved from conservative positions in 1848 to more radical if ambiguous ones by the time of, the Commune. **Léon Gambetta** (2 April 1838 – 31 December 1882) was a lawyer and politician. A republican he was opposed to the Commune.

[6] Leaders of the Paris Commune: **Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet** (10 June 1819 – 31 December 1877) also a painter who led the Realism movement in 19th-century French painting. **Leo Franckel** (25 February 1844, Újlak– 29 March 1896, Paris) of Hungarian and Jewish origin. **Charles Victor Beslay** (1795, Dinan, Côtes-d'Armor – 1878, Neuchâtel) was the oldest member of the Paris Commune. **Charles Félix César Longuet** (14 February 1839, Caen – 5 August 1903, Paris). In exile in London after the Commune married Jenny Marx. **Auguste-Jean-Marie Vermorel** (21 June 1841 – 20 June 1871). Wounded on the barricades, died as a prisoner at Versailles.

[7] The Third Republic was declared on 4 September 1870 after the defeat of Napoleon III.

[8] *Ecole Nationale d'Administration* is a French *grande école* for top civil servants and politicians. Lazare Nicolas Marguerite, Count Carnot (13 May 1753 – 2 August 1823) was a leading figure of the French revolutionary government.

[9] The *Ecole émancipée* is a longstanding radical tendency in French teacher unionism, founded in 1910.

[10] **Jean Baptiste Clément** (31 May 1836 - 23 February 1903), member of the Commune and author of the songs *Le Temps des Cerises* et *La Semaine sanglante* closely associated with it.

[11] Reference to a song *Aux survivants de la semaine sanglante*, written about the Commune by Eugène Pottier.