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Women in our history

Genderquake: socialist women and the Paris Commune

- Features - Feminism -

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On 11 April 1871, three weeks into the life of the Paris Commune, a poster appeared on the walls of France's capital:

Citizenesses, we know that the present social order bears within itself the seeds of poverty and of the death of all liberty and justice... At this hour, when danger is imminent and the enemy is at the gates of Paris, the entire population must unite to defend the Commune, which stands for the annihilation of all privilege and all inequality.

All women who were prepared to die for the Commune were urged to attend a meeting at 8pm at the Salle Larched, Grand Café des Nations, 74 Rue de Temple. Laundresses, seamstresses, bookbinders and milliners attended and there they established a new organisation, the Union of Women. This Union was a part of the socialist First International, which had been established by Karl Marx and other socialists and trade unionists in London in 1864 with the aim of uniting workers across national borders. Within a few days, the Union became one of the most important organisations of the Paris Commune. Socialist women played an indispensable role in organising the working women of Paris to become Communards. [\[1\]](#)

The Commune lasted only 72 days but in that short time it challenged hierarchies of gender which had been deeply entrenched for centuries. The role played by women in the Paris Commune attracted the attention of both contemporaries and historians. Images of unruly women populated contemporary accounts of the Commune. Historical studies of the Commune have tended to accept and even amplify a series of negative stereotypes that characterised working women as excitable, irrational and habitually violent. They are seen as outside any enduring feminist or socialist tradition. The histories that treat women more objectively tend to restrict discussions of their activities to specific chapters, reinforcing the idea that men had historical agency but women were marginal to events. Imagine reading a history of the Commune with a chapter titled, "Men in the Commune". The female Communards have been the exclusive focus of only three book-length studies, one published in 1964, one in 1996 and one in 2004. This article does not aim to retell the stories of the female Communards, fascinating though they are. It aims to explore the impact of socialist women on the Commune and on the wider socialist tradition.

The foremothers of the Commune

Most studies of the Commune begin on 18 March with the failed attempt of Adolphe Thiers, head of the French government, to disarm the Parisian National Guard.⁶ France had suffered a military defeat in a war with Prussia, following the long and bitter siege of Paris. The French government had agreed to surrender, but the population of Paris and the National Guard resisted. When government troops were sent to take the cannons of Paris, thousands of women, men and children rose up to defend them, built barricades and drove the French army out of the city. The emphasis on this revolutionary moment creates the impression that the Commune was a purely spontaneous event. The Commune was indeed born out of this spontaneous rebellion, but it was shaped and driven forward by individuals and organisations steeped in experience of the labour and socialist movements. The role of socialist women in preparing the way for the Commune has been almost completely overlooked by historians, yet the Commune depended on the women who were at the centre of Paris's working-class networks. Male and female members of the International established themselves by leading strikes in the 1860s. Eugène Varlin and Nathalie Lemel led a large strike of bookbinders in 1864. Lemel defied convention to become a member of the strike

committee and she fought tirelessly for equal pay for women. Both Varlin and Lemel became leading Communards.

Two opposing traditions relating to women co-existed uneasily inside the French socialist movement. One went back to the utopian socialism of the 1830s, when Flora Tristan became the first reformer to argue that women could only win equality through the emancipation of the working class. This tradition was developed in the 1848 Revolution by the great socialist leaders Jeanne Deroin and Pauline Roland, who organised women to fight for their rights to work and to vote.

A very different tradition was represented by the misogynistic anarchist-socialist writer Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Proudhon argued that women were physically weak, incapable of abstract thought and naturally immoral, fit only for marriage or prostitution. In his last work, *Pornocracy: Women in Modern Times*, Proudhon argued that husbands had the right to kill wives who were adulterous, immoral, drunk, thieving, wasteful or obstinately insubordinate. Jules Michelet further popularised these misogynistic views in his accessible novels *Love* (1858) and *Women* (1859). Michelet blamed women for the failure of the revolutions of 1789 and 1848 and considered them to be prisoners of their biology, which left them unreliable, capricious and unsuited to work outside the home. Proudhon and Michelet were very influential in the French section of the International. At the French section's inaugural meeting in 1866, delegates passed a motion that stated: "From a physical, moral and social viewpoint, women's work outside the home should be energetically condemned as a cause of the degeneration of the race and as one of the agents of demoralisation used by the capitalist class". There were opposing voices, including those of future Communards Varlin and Benoît Malon, but the French section of the International remained deeply Proudhonist.

Female campaigners fought back against the sexist ideas of Proudhon and Michelet. One combatant was André Léo. Léo had lived in Switzerland with her husband, a utopian socialist who had been inspired by the ideas of Henri de Saint-Simon and was forced into exile after 1848. Léo was widowed and to survive she published several novels exploring the oppression of women and affirming women's abilities. In 1866 she hosted the inaugural meeting of a new feminist group at her house. The group included Paule Mink, Louise Michel, Eliska Vincent, Noémi Reclus and her husband Élie Reclus, all future Communards. The group established improving girls' education as their campaigning priority.

Mink and Michel were two of the leading women of the Commune. They both stood in the revolutionary socialist tradition of Deroin and Roland. Mink was the daughter of an exiled Polish nobleman. When her marriage broke down, she worked as a seamstress and language teacher. She also edited a radical newspaper and built a reputation as an orator in Paris's radical circles. At a public meeting in 1868, Mink challenged Proudhon: "By ceasing to make woman a worker, you deprive her of her liberty and, thereby, of her responsibility so that she no longer will be a free and intelligent creature but will merely be a reflection, a small part of her husband". Michel was the daughter of an unmarried servant. She trained as a teacher but refused to teach in state schools because it would have meant swearing an oath of loyalty to the French Empire. Michel came to Paris to further both her education and the revolution. She was one of the most courageous, determined and audacious women in the revolutionary tradition.

Some male members of the International supported the women against Proudhonism. In 1866, Malon wrote to Léo as a member of the International, assuring her that he was not, "forgetting about the emancipation of women and we receive new support each day. We have convinced almost the entire association of the idea; only the pontiffs of Proudhon remain unconvinced". The first edition of the paper issued by the Batignolles-Ternes section of the Parisian International included a programme, signed by Léo and 16 others, which declared: "It is time to have women participate in democracy instead of making them its enemy by senseless exclusion". The following year Varlin argued:

Those who wish to refuse women the right to work want to keep them permanently dependent on men. No-one has the right to refuse them the only means of being truly free. Whether done by man or women, there should be equal pay for equal work.

Léo, Mink and Varlin consistently agitated for the International to support both civil rights for women and women's right to work.

Throughout the 1860s women joined the political clubs that attracted large audiences in Paris's poorer districts, at least some of which discussed how to campaign against women's low wages. The political clubs also incubated the desire, "to establish a commune based on cooperation of all energies and intelligences instead of government composed of traitors and incompetents". Early in 1869 demands for a commune could be heard in many clubs, and proceedings often closed with the cry, "Viva la Commune". When the Commune became a reality two years later, the clubs continued to provide a space for debate and organisation and became a living link between the Central Committee and the people. The clubs debated what actions the Commune should take and made their views and priorities known to the Central Committee. Through the clubs, women could organise direct action against profiteers and urge support for reforms they wanted. Many Parisian women were in relationships with members of the National Guard, but few went through a marriage ceremony. Only married women could claim a wives' allowance from the Commune, a discriminatory policy that caused much anger. The demand for allowances for the unmarried partners of national guardsmen originated in the clubs and was later granted by the Commune

Some clubs were mixed, some were segregated and both provided a platform for female leaders to emerge. An English reporter from the Daily News described one club where "respectably dressed women with their grown up daughters, little shopkeepers' wives with their young families" mixed with "those repulsive females of almost all degrees of age who form the typical furies of excited Paris mobs". Reporters were horrified to hear women advocating not only an end to marriage but also for equality between the sexes. Michel presided over the Club of the Revolution, which voted to arrest any priests who were in league with the "monarchist dogs" and to set up corporations of women and men to undertake necessary public works. At the Club of the Free Thinkers, Nathalie Lemel and Lodoyska Kawecka, who dressed in trousers and wore two revolvers hanging from her sash, argued for divorce and the liberation of women. At the Club of the Proletarians a laundress, known only as Madame Andre, was the secretary. One regular speaker was a Citizeness Thiourt, who demanded that cannons be placed in the well-to-do squares of Paris and that women be given the right to bear arms.²⁵ Léo, Michel and Lemel toured the clubs arguing that capitalist exploitation must be abolished.

Before the storm: women under siege

The year 1870 began with a huge political revolt in Paris. Emperor Louis Bonaparte's cousin, Pierre, murdered a Republican journalist, Victor Noir. The murder sparked outrage and many women joined the 100,000 who marched through Paris in protest. A wave of repression was unleashed against members of the International. In the summer, the emperor declared war on Prussia but within weeks French forces had been defeated. On 4 September 1870 news of the defeat reached Paris. Thousands surged onto the streets, the Second Empire was overthrown and a Government of National Defence was established. The new government, however, refused to represent the interests of those who had installed them in office. The government's attempts to surrender to the Prussian army sparked weeks of unrest led by Parisian workers and the National Guard, whose members were drawn from the working class.

On 18 September 1870 many women were in the streets demanding the right to take up arms in defence of the French city of Strasbourg, which was besieged by Prussian troops. Louise Michel and André Léo led a delegation of women, students and school pupils to the Hotel de Ville, where they were locked up for a few hours. On 19 September Prussian troops laid siege to Paris. Around 100,000 rich citizens fled and 200,000 refugees from neighbouring towns entered the city. "Vigilance committees" were set up. Michel refused to recognise the segregated nature of the vigilance committees and joined the men's committee. She later described how "no one was very much bothered by the sex of those who were doing their duty. That silly problem was over and done with". Necessity led to

an erosion of gender discrimination.

Food supplies to the city were blocked and women protested against long queues and catastrophic food shortages. Women needed new ways to organise and socialist women were at the heart of creating them. Nathalie Lemel ran a cooperative restaurant called La Marmite. She was active in several of the many mutual aid groups which the police kept under surveillance because they had the potential to turn into resistance groups. La Marmite was based on solidarity between those working in supply, catering and production, bound together with a hefty dose of socialist propaganda. Victorine Brochon, another member of the International, ran a cooperative bakery in La Chapelle which donated a proportion of its funds to new cooperatives. Many more socialist women were at the centre of efforts to feed the people during the siege, efforts which placed them at the centre of mutual aid networks and political organisation.

An attempted insurrection in Paris on 22 January 1871 demanded that the government be replaced by a Commune. Large numbers of women and national guardsmen massed on the streets of Paris. However, the failure of the insurrection led to a backlash and then on 28 January the French government officially surrendered to Germany. [2] A general election held on 8 February was a massive defeat for the left with landowners, aristocrats and army officers forming the majority of those elected. The French section of the First International had 50,000 members in the spring of 1870 but after the February elections, leading members felt they were on the brink of collapse as support drained away. However, some glimpses of the insurgency to come were nevertheless visible. On 26 February, a rumour that German troops were planning to enter Paris in order to take the city's cannon brought a huge crowd of national guardsmen, women and children out to defend the cannon they had paid for with their subscriptions. Through all the turbulent events of 1870 and the first months of 1871, women were leading the crowds, urging defiance and creating the basis of the organisations which would create a worker's government.

The Universal Republic

The French government decamped to the safety of Versailles, on Paris's western fringes. On 18 March, Thiers, who had surrendered to Germany as the government's "chief executive", sent troops to disarm the Parisian National Guard. It was milkmaids who raised the alarm. The women of Paris swarmed among the government troops as they attempted to remove the cannon. Prosper Olivier Lissagaray, a socialist and a historian of the Commune, noted that "it was the women who were first to act".³⁶ Women formed a human barricade between the government's soldiers and the National Guard. A government supporter, General Louis d'Aurelle de Paladines, described the significance of the women's actions:

The women and children came and mixed with the troops. We were greatly mistaken in permitting these people to approach our soldiers, for they mingled among them and the women and children told them: "You will not fire upon the people." This is how the soldiers of the 88th, as far as I can see, and of another line regiment found themselves surrounded and did not have the power to resist those ovations that were given to them.

When the officer in charge, General Claude Lecomte, ordered the troops to fire on the crowd, they refused. Lecomte was taken prisoner and later shot.

Before March 1871, the Commune existed only as a political aspiration, a rallying cry and possible different future—but with the government gone and the army and police driven out, a real, living Commune based on the "anonymous power of Monsieur Tout-le-monde ('Mr Everyone')" was established. A great sense of freedom brought a

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mass movement of men, women and children exploding onto the streets. One witness described the atmosphere:

There was, first of all, a grandiose festival, a festival that the people of Paris, the essence and symbol of the French people, and of humanity in general, created for itself and for the spring. Spring festival in the city, festival of the disinherited and the proletarians, revolutionary festival and festival of the revolution.

The revolution transformed all interactions: “The social life of the city was recalibrated according to principles of cooperation and association”.⁴⁰ All this energy and commitment was rapidly channelled towards running the vital services of the city.

Paris’s state institutions had disintegrated or been destroyed by the government at Versailles. “All the respiratory and digestive apparatus of this city of 1,600,000 collapsed”. The crisis was so deep that the cemeteries had ceased to bury the dead and some 300,000 were out of work.⁴² The General Council of the National Guard stepped up to take over running the state until elections were held. All foreigners were admitted to citizenship, all state functionaries either eliminated or paid a workers’ wage and subject to immediate recall. Priests and nuns were despatched to private life. Manual workers and those from subordinate positions took over the jobs of the highly-paid bureaucrats and began to organise public services such as the post office.

The people of Paris transformed their physical environment, destroying the symbols of the old regime. On 10 April the guillotine was dragged to the Place Voltaire and publicly burned by a crowd led by women. On 16 May the Vendôme Column, which glorified Napoleon’s imperialist conquests, was torn down and the square was renamed the Place Internationale. Communards tore down the symbols of the old order, but they also demanded positive change. The Commune had a policy of creating “communal luxury”, a phrase coined by Eugène Pottier, who wrote the “Internationale” in order to commemorate the Commune “Communal luxury” was a programme for public beauty in which art would be integrated into public life rather than treated as a private commodity enjoyed by the wealthy. The radical painter Gustave Courbet worked for the Commune’s Arts Commission. He described the enormous efforts people went to in order to reorder their society:

I have breakfast and preside over meetings for 12 hours each day. My head has begun to spin, but despite this mental torment, which I am not used to, I am enchanted. Paris is a true paradise! No police, no nonsense, no exaction of any kind, no arguments! Everything in Paris rolls along like clockwork. All the government bodies are organised federally and run themselves”.

As art and politics became intertwined, female artists found their voice. Singer Rosalie Bordas, known as La Bordas, was born in Montoux in 1840 and learnt to sing in the Red Café, which was run by her parents. She moved to Paris and sang for the Paris Concert and in 1870, during the siege, she sang “La Marseillaise” and waved a tricolour on stage. She was committed to the Commune, performing revolutionary songs while wrapped in a red flag in order to raise funds for the wounded.

The Commune demonstrated that working class people were capable of organising society more efficiently and fairly than the privileged politicians and bureaucrats that they had replaced. However, many of the Commune’s supporters had a wider ambition: to lay the basis of a socialist society. Elise Reclus, who had been a member of André Léo’s feminist circle, wrote:

The Commune set up for the future a new society in which there are no masters by birth title or wealth, and no slaves by origin, caste or salary. Everywhere the word "Commune" was understood in its largest sense as referring to a new humanity, made up of free and equal companions, oblivious to the existence of old boundaries, helping each other in peace from one end of the world to the other.

They believed that the Commune could inspire an international movement towards egalitarianism and freedom.

Building a new society

Arthur Arnould published a book called *State and Revolution* in 1878, 40 years before Lenin's work of the same name. In it, Arnould explained the Commune's unique ambitions:

The Paris Commune was something more and something other than an uprising. It was the advent of a principle, the affirmation of a politics. In a word, it was not only one more revolution. It was a new revolution, carrying in the folds of its flag a wholly original and characteristic programme.

To implement this programme required the mass involvement of the previously marginalised people of Paris. On 26 March, around 200,000 male Parisians elected a General Council to organise the Commune. When the results were declared, a third of those elected were members of the First International. The results were greeted with a "dazzling spectacle of hope for change, tens of thousands on the streets, the 'Marseillaise' playing, red flags waving, seas of banners and bayonets glinting in the sun".

Women were not allowed to vote in these elections and their exclusion has prompted some historians to question whether women were really included in this "Universal Republic". Historian James McMillan argues that "it cannot be claimed that women's rights were at the top of the Commune's priorities". There are a number of reasons for this perception of the Commune. When the government troops were driven out of Paris, the Federation of the National Guard filled the vacuum of power. Based on military service, it was an entirely male organisation. The National Guard ceded power to the formal institution of the Commune that was the town council of Paris, albeit one which was rapidly adapting to the revolution taking place in the streets. The inheritances of the past shaped the formal structures of the Commune, even while the mass movement was establishing new priorities and aspirations. One such inheritance was the voting system used under the Second Empire that excluded women and reflected the entrenched nature of sexism in French society.

A further reason for the negative interpretation of the role of women in the Commune lies within feminist histories that equate feminism with a "vocabulary of rights" that limits definitions of feminism to the pursuit of equal civil rights for women. The female Communards rejected the idea of civil rights and instead demanded the right to work and to organise collectively. They did not present themselves in terms of civil rights and so have been overlooked in feminist histories of France.

The exclusion of women from the formal institution of the Commune might have been challenged if the Parisian Revolution had survived for more than a few weeks. There was constant debate about the role women should play in the Commune. André Léo complained that women who wanted to support the Commune were at times rebuffed by male militants who did not want women to act as nurses and supply the front lines. The Marxist wing of the First International was the only political organisation in France which supported the female franchise. At least four socialist members of the Commune—Eugène Varlin, Benoît Malon, Édouard Vaillant and the Hungarian Leó Frankel—took initiatives that promoted women's equality in their areas of responsibility. One historian of the Commune, Gay Gullickson, argues that since no women were members of the Commune's leading bodies—the Central Committee, the Communal Council and the National Guard—the Commune could not represent their interests.

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However, Gullickson's argument overlooks the ways in which the Commune did respond to female activism. Indeed, it was the first French regime to appoint women to positions of responsibility, where they lead welfare programmes, made vital appeals for support to provincial cities and transformed education.⁵³ Evictions were banned, and allowances for unmarried partners of national guardsmen and their children were introduced. Many contemporaries saw this as the Commune's most revolutionary measure. Communard Arthur Arnould wrote:

This decree, which raises woman to the level of man, which puts her, in the eyes of morals and the law, on a footing of civic equality with man, placed itself upon the plane of living morality, and delivered a mortal blow to the religio-monarchical institution of marriage as we see it functioning in modern society.

Arnould was being a little optimistic in his assessment, but it was a move of great significance for working-class women. Other important reforms included banning the sale of the many thousands of items left in pawn shops. The Commune also organised public assistance schemes, distributing tokens to the poor and setting up public canteens. In April, the Commune announced it was requisitioning the houses left empty by the rich for the use of poor families.

A second problem with Gullickson's argument is that she approaches the Commune from the top down rather than the bottom up. The militant women's organisations in the Commune and leading women activists such as Louise Michel did not see the vote as central to their vision of collective liberation. They tended to be dismissive of the right to vote and focused instead on the right to work and to bear arms, which they saw as more fundamental and immediate. They found ways to shape the Commune through organising in their communities and workplaces, their unions, committees and clubs.

In its 72 days, the Commune did not completely uproot centuries of women's oppression. It did, however, both promote women to positions of authority and enable women to have real power over their lives. When assessing the Commune's record, it should be remembered that nowhere internationally, with the exception of one area of Australia, did even property-owning women have the right to vote in major elections in 1871. No women served in the French government until three women were appointed by the Popular Front coalition of 1936. These women were appointed rather than elected because they could not stand for office or vote in an election until 1945. Viewed from an international and historical perspective, the Commune stands out as a form of government that encouraged the active support of women.

In return, women made huge sacrifices to support the Commune. They had none of the time, freedom and energy bestowed by running water and toilets in their homes, by gas, electricity and public transport. They had to manage their periods, pregnancies and childbirth without basic hygiene, pain relief and medical support. They had little or no education, no health service and no pensions. In normal times they were seen as inert and resigned and in thrall to the Catholic Church. Yet during the Commune those women began to act as if they felt they would be listened to, as if they could make a difference. And make a difference they did.

On 1 April the government declared war on Paris. On 11 April the Union of Women for the Defence of Paris was established. It aimed to mobilise women to defend the Commune, treat the wounded and carry out important work. Its committees met daily in most districts of Paris and it became "the Commune's largest and most effective organisation". The Union aimed to organise the defence of Paris's revolution and to instigate long-term changes in women's labour to eradicate the masters and exploiters. It issued an address calling on the Commune to abolish all forms of gender inequality and describing sex discrimination as a means employed by the ruling class to maintain their power. This was the first time a significant French women's organisation explained their inferior status in terms of class.

The achievements of the Union were huge. It provided staff for orphanages and care for old people, recruited nurses and canteen workers, provided speakers for public meetings. The Union asked for space in local halls so it could meet and staff a desk providing information, aid and expenses for printing leaflets and posters—all of which the Commune provided. Nightly meetings of the Union were attended by between 3,000 and 4,000 women.

The driving force behind the Union was an outstanding revolutionary socialist leader, Elisabeth Dimitrieff. Dimitrieff had escaped from her native Russia for less repressive Geneva, where she was one of the signatories of the founding document of the Russian section of the International. The document sought to synthesise Marx's economic theories with the beliefs of the influential writer Nikolai Chernyshevsky in the emancipatory potential of the traditional peasant commune. In Geneva, Dimitrieff met future Communards and supporters of women's rights, Eugène Varlin and Benoît Malon. Dimitrieff also edited a journal, *The People's Cause*. Its founding statement declared:

As the foundation of economic justice, we advance two fundamental theses:

The land belongs to those who work it with their own hands: to the agricultural communes.

Capital and all the tools of labour belong to the workers: to the workers' associations.

These ideas resurfaced in the Commune. Dimitrieff spent three months in London, discussing her journal with the Marx family. She requested to be sent to Paris and there she established the Union of Women. Dimitrieff's politics shaped everything she did. She sought out working-class women, recruiting laundresses and seamstresses to the Union.

The Union of Women was not the only organisation created by socialist women to support and influence the Commune. Beatrix Excoffon and Anna Jaclard were members of the Women's Vigilance Committee. Then there was Anna Korvin-Krukovsky, born in Russia to an aristocratic family. In the 1860s, the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoyevsky had proposed to her but she rejected him. Anna and her sister, the mathematician Sophie Korvin-Krukovsky, escaped from Russia and managed get to France and Germany respectively. Anna met Victor Jaclard at a revolutionary meeting, and in 1869 the two were forced into exile in Switzerland. They returned to Paris when the Second Empire fell in 1870, and he was elected to the Central Committee of the National Guard. Anna helped to establish the Montmartre Vigilance Committee, which ran workshops, recruited ambulance nurses, sent women speakers to clubs and hunted down draft dodgers. It was another organisation which enabled women to express their own aspirations and organise to achieve them.

How women shaped the Commune

To explore how women shaped the Commune, I will look at four key areas: women's work, women's education, women's attempts to spread the revolution and women's attitude to their new state.

Women's work

The Commune gave women work. Lissagaray saw 1,500 women sewing sandbags for the barricades, while another 3,000 worked on making cartridges. Benoît Malon and Leó Frankel were both members of the International and were also in charge of the Commission for Labour. They believed this commission was the most important mechanism for implementing lasting social change. Frankel explained:

The people created its political organism as a mean of realising the very aim of the revolution, that is the emancipation of labour, the abolition of monopolies, privileges, bureaucracy, speculative, capitalist and industrial feudalism.

The Commission for Labour was shaped by and absolutely depended upon the Union of Women. On 16 April the Communal Council decreed that workshops whose owners fled to Versailles would be passed to the "cooperative association of workers who were employed there". Dimitrieff believed that taking over the workshops was a way to transform labour by introducing equal pay, shorter working hours and ending the competition between women and men. Frankel and Malon drew up a plan for women's labour and put Dimitrieff in charge. She envisaged the workshops as free associations of labourers working for their collective profit:

In taking work away from the bondage of capitalistic exploitation, the formation of these organisations would eventually allow the workers to run their own business.

The working class was not yet powerful enough to organise production collectively through workers' councils. Nevertheless, Dimitrieff, Frankel and Malon tried to separate labour from exploitation by workshop owners and instead direct it according to the needs of both consumers and producers.

Education for emancipation

André Léo, Paule Mink, Louise Michel and Noémi and Élie Reclus had developed their ideas about female education in the 1860s. The Commune afforded them the opportunity to put their ideas into practice. The Commune's Education Committee included these veterans of the 1860s women's organisation as well as Jaclard and Dimitrieff. The Education Committee was no moderate means by which women could extend their traditional domestic role into the public sphere. It was a tool for empowering women and enabling them to participate in the Commune while simultaneously subverting gender stereotypes. Despite the desperately limited means at its disposal, the Commune prioritised introducing education for girls. The radical newspaper *Le Père Duchêne* explained why:

If only you realised, citizens, how much the revolution depends on women, you would have your eyes opened on girls' education. You would not leave them, as has been done until now, in ignorance.

For many female Communards, education for girls was both a question of equality and of reforming human nature for

a future socialist society.

Education became both free and secular. This meant turfing out nuns and priests and recruiting more teachers, with female teachers being awarded equal pay. The commission drew up plans to establish day nurseries. Parental and community engagement was another priority. Twice a week the Society for a New Education, which was composed of three women and three men, brought teachers and parents together to discuss the curriculum and the methods used in schools. The committee took a radical approach to education: "Any official direction which is imposed on the judgement of pupils is fatal and must be condemned... It tends to destroy individuality". Women did not just sit on committees. Mink opened a girls' school in the chapel of Saint-Pierre de Montmartre. Marcelle Tinayre, who was the first female school inspector in France, took charge of the secularisation process in the 12th Arrondissement area of Paris.

Spreading the revolution

The Communards understood that the Paris Commune could not survive if it remained isolated from the rest of the country. After initial uprisings in other major towns were crushed, practical and political support from the small farmers around Paris was vital to feeding the city. Women were at the forefront of reaching out to the peasantry. Léo was largely responsible for writing a manifesto for rural workers, "To the Workers of the Countryside", although Malon also contributed to it. Some 100,000 copies were printed. "What Paris wants is the land for the peasants, the tools for the workers and work by and for everyone", Léo argued. What does it matter, she continued, if the oppressor is called a landowner or a manufacturer? The pamphlet pointed out that "if Paris falls, the yoke of poverty will remain on your neck and pass onto your children". Léo proposed ways that the capital could reach out to the rest of the country and Mink toured the provinces raising support. Léo and Mink were entirely right to direct their efforts towards winning support outside Paris. Marx argued that it was the Commune's isolation from the countryside that proved to be fatal. No press reports reached the small villages. Their inhabitants had no chance to see that the Commune represented their "living interests" and "real wants" without communication from the Communards.

Dimitrieff also urged the General Council to increase its efforts to break out of isolation, but she set her sights on other European nations rather than the countryside. She understood that the military forces were regrouping at Versailles, but believed that if the Commune could deepen its efforts at reform, it would also deepen its international support: "If the Commune is victorious, our political organisation will be transformed into a social one, and we will create new sections of the International". Dimitrieff wrote optimistically to Marx, outlining how revolt might spread across Europe:

In general, the internationalist propagandising I am doing here, in order to show that all countries, including Germany, find themselves on the eve of the social revolution, is a very pleasing proposition to women.

According to Dimitrieff, women were particularly tuned in to the idea that the revolution must spread to countries such as Germany. Her strategy did not have the opportunity to become a reality.

Finishing the revolution

The Commune replaced the army and the police with the National Guard. Many radicals, including many women,

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wanted to use this revolutionary wing of the workers' state to overthrow the government at Versailles. However, Dimitrieff was one of the very few Marxists in the leadership of the Commune. Thus, discussions on whether to march on Versailles took place between Proudhonists who, as anarchists, did not believe in political action and Jacobins who were from a middle-class political tradition. The Blanquists were the main group to argue for the march on Versailles but they were too small to win wide support. On 2 April, Versailles launched an attack on a Parisian suburb. Women helped build new barricades and decided to lead an action of their own and launched an appeal in several newspapers:

Let's go to Versailles. Let's tell Versailles what the revolution of Paris is. Let's tell Versailles that Paris has made the Commune because we want to stay free. Let's tell Versailles that Paris has made ready to defend herself because people tried to take her by surprise and disarm her. Let's tell Versailles that the Assembly is not the law, Paris is.

Beatrix Excoffon, known in her district as "The Republican", described the gathering on the following day:

I told my mother I was leaving, I kissed my children and off I went. At the Place de la Concorde, at half past one, I joined the procession. There were between 700 and 800 women. Some talked about explaining to Versailles what Paris wanted; others talked about how things were a hundred years ago, when the women of Paris had already gone to Versailles to carry off the baker and the baker's wife and the baker's little boy.

"The baker and the baker's wife and the baker's little boy" is a reference to the women's march on Versailles that took place in 1789. At that time, a hungry mob of women and men had laid siege to the Palace of Versailles and captured King Louis XVI and his family. Many female Communards invoked this militant revolutionary tradition of women's activism rooted in the Great French Revolution. However, unlike in 1789, the women's marches of 1871 were turned back by the National Guard, who feared the women would be shot by government troops.

Louise Michel was one of the most ardent supporters of a military attack on the government. She even volunteered to go to Versailles to assassinate Adolphe Thiers herself. She fought so bravely that the 61st Battalion gave her a Remington rifle and on receiving it she declared: "Now we are fighting. This is a battle. There is a rise, where I run ahead crying 'To Versailles! To Versailles!'" Michel instinctively knew that if the government at Versailles was not crushed, it would be unceasing in its efforts to overthrow the Commune.

After the defeat of the Commune, Paule Mink argued that the moderate minority in the Central Council lacked the courage to deliver a fatal blow against the government. In the face of the brutal suppression of the Commune, Mink drew the conclusion that centralised, organised revolution was the right strategy to achieve socialism. Lenin explored the experience of the Commune in his *State and Revolution* (1917) and raised the same criticism as Mink. He wrote that revolutions must:

Suppress the bourgeoisie and crush their resistance. This was particularly necessary for the Commune; and one of the reasons for its defeat was that it did not do this with sufficient determination. The organ of suppression, however, is here the majority of the population, and not a minority, as was always the case under slavery, serfdom and wage slavery.

Michel, Mink and Lenin all made similar observations. The Commune had created a new kind of state, based on the engagement of the majority, but failed to direct its power against the old order, which would never stop seeking the means to destroy any hope of a different society.

Women on the barricades

On 21 May, troops sent from Versailles entered Paris and the entire population was summoned to the barricades. All contemporary accounts of the last days of the Commune pay tribute to the courage of women as they built barricades, nursed the wounded, supplied the National Guard with food and drink and fought alongside men. There was no great separation between nursing and fighting. Louise Michel described how women answered a call to volunteer to treat the wounded and often took up their rifles. André Léo noticed that officers were hostile to the nurses but the rank and file troops welcomed them. The Union of Women met on the same day that the government troops entered Paris. Nathalie Lemel, red flag in hand, led the women out to the barricade at Batignolles. Elisabeth Dimitrieff urged all devoted and patriotic women to organise the defence of the wounded. Anna Jaclard and André Léo issued an appeal from their vigilance committee to the women of Montmartre, asking them to support a summons from the Commune: “The women of Montmartre, inspired by the revolutionary spirit, wish to attest by their actions to their devotion to the revolution”. The women acted as ambulance nurses under fire and many were captured, raped and shot dead by the government troops.

Fighting was a revolutionary act, which is why, as Edith Thomas pointed out, the same women who attended the political clubs were also those who climbed the barricades. The French government used brutal force to crush the Commune, with some 20,000 men, women and children executed during what became known as “Bloody Week”. Women were involved in all the military engagements during Bloody Week and many were listed among the wounded and the dead. One name on the list was that of Blanche Lefebvre, a laundress at the Sainte-Marie des Batignolles washhouse. She was a member of the Club of the Social Revolution, which had been set up on 3 May in the local church. Lefebvre was also a member of the Central Committee of the Union of Women. She was one of 120 women who held the barricade at the Place Blanche for several hours until they ran out of ammunition and were overrun. Those taken at the barricade were shot on the spot. Lefebvre was one of them. She was aged just 24.

The myth of the pétroleuse

It took the government troops seven long days of shelling, hand to hand combat and mass executions to retake Paris. Their revenge on women was particularly harsh. Women were systematically humiliated, stripped, raped and murdered by government troops. Malon attributed the troops’ ferocity to lessons learned by the French army in its colonial subjugation of North Africa. Communards were shot where they were captured, but all working-class women were under suspicion. The women of the Commune were considered to have “unsexed themselves”. The Times reported that the women forgot, “their sex and their gentleness to commit assassination, to poison soldiers, to burn and to slay”. Opponents called female Communards evil, amazons, furies, jackals. The Pall Mall Gazette described the female Communards as, “hideous viragoes—furies intoxicated with the fumes of wine and blood”. Wealthy society women lined up to abuse women prisoners and beat them with their parasols as they were dragged past on their way to prison. The myth of the “pétroleuse”, women who burnt down buildings, began to circulate, justifying repression by dehumanising its victims. Despite the myth, out of the 1,051 women who were arrested during the Bloody Week, only five were convicted of arson. Historians researching archives at the French Ministry of War have found, amidst the records of arrests, trials and pleas for clemency, evidence of the “dramatically varied way that women participated in the revolutionary struggle of 1871”. These women were not protected by their sex: the state punished them precisely because they were women who refused to submit to oppression.

Dimitrieff escaped from Paris and sent a telegram from Geneva informing the International of her safe arrival. According to Lissagaray, Dimtrieff ran a hotel on the shores of Lake Geneva where she nursed refugees from the Commune. She then continued her agitation in Russia, turning towards political terrorism, perhaps as a result of her frustration at the defeat of the Commune. Malon, Léo and Mink also escaped to Geneva. Victor Jaclard was arrested and transferred to prison camp at Versailles but managed to escape and he and Anna also fled to Geneva. Thousands of others were not so lucky. Beatrix Excoffon was sentenced to transportation, although this was commuted to ten years in prison. Many thousands of other working women were summarily executed without a trial or imprisoned simply for expressing support for the Commune, for example, by allowing their shops to become meeting places.

Their stories illustrate the hopes that the Commune aroused among its supporters and how they experienced change in every aspect of their lives. A laundress named Marie Wolff was one of those prosecuted. On 27 May, four escaped prisoners who were supporters of the Versailles government were arrested. Wolff, who was an ambulance nurse, took part in their execution. Before the Commune, Wolff had served time in prison for theft and burglary. During the Commune she carried a red banner and a belt with weapons stuck in it. On 25 April 1872, Wolff was sentenced to death for her role in the execution of the prisoners. Her sentence was commuted to hard labour for life.

Marguerite Tinayre was a teacher and supporter of the International. Her husband, who was unpolitical, was shot as he searched for her. She was sentenced to transportation but escaped to Geneva and then Budapest with her five children. Tinayre was excluded from an amnesty of 1879 because she continued with her “socialistic and internationalist intrigues”. She was eventually allowed back to Paris.

The revenge of the ruling class was brutal, but it did not crush the revolutionary spirit of the female Communards. Eliska Vincent, veteran of Léo's 1866 feminist group, was almost executed for her role in the Commune, but went on to lead a women's suffrage organisation and edited a paper, Equality. Michel dared the court to sentence her to death. They declined and sentenced her to penal transportation. She met Lemel in the penal colony of New Caledonia in the South Pacific Ocean. Michel returned to Paris after a total amnesty was declared in 1880. She was arrested on a demonstration of unemployed workers in 1883 and sentenced to six years of solitary confinement. She was arrested again in 1890 but escaped to England, where she taught refugee children. Michel returned to France and died of pneumonia in January 1905. More than 100,000 attended her funeral. When the Commune fell, Mink was touring the provinces to win support for the Commune. She managed to escape to Geneva with her daughter. She never stopped organising for socialist revolution. When she was buried on May Day 1901, thousands of mourners joined the funeral procession through the streets of Paris, calling “Vive la Commune” and “Vive la Internationale”. Over 600 police, 500 soldiers and 100 cavalry were required to patrol the streets. Her funeral underlined the continuing importance of the Commune in the socialist tradition.

Conclusion: agitating and squawking

One historian of the Commune describes it as an “incubator for embryonic feminist socialisms”. It would be more accurate to say that women's role in the Commune encouraged experienced socialist women to reach out to other working women. Mink wrote in the Geneva-based newspaper of the International, Equality, addressing women:

It is in the name of women that I speak, in the name of women to whom the International has given the rights and duties equal to those of men... Only socialism will be able to emancipate women materially and morally, as it will be able to emancipate all those who suffer!

Genderquake: socialist women and the Paris Commune

Socialist men who supported women's emancipation were also keen to draw the lessons of the Commune. In 1871, just weeks after the defeat, Malon argued that "one important fact demonstrated by the revolution in Paris is the entry of women into political life... Women and the proletariat can only hope to achieve their respective liberation by uniting". At the same time, Leó Frankel wrote:

All the objections produced against equality of men and women are the same sort as those which are produced against the emancipation of the Negro race. Firstly, people are blindfolded and they are told that they have been blind since birth. By claiming that half of the human race is incompetent, man prides himself on appearing to be the protector of women. Revolting hypocrisy! Just let the barriers of privilege be lowered and we shall see.

In 1879, the national workers' congress in Marseille marked a decisive shift in attitude of organised French workers and a "majority rallied behind the notion of complete civil and political equality". The motion was ardently defended at the congress by Hubertine Auclert, a working-class socialist. She was acclaimed by the Congress, elected as chair of both the session and the commission, and the Congress adopted a resolution proclaiming the "absolute equality of the sexes".

The Paris Commune impacted powerfully on the Marx family. Marx initially opposed the Parisian uprising as premature. Yet once it was underway, he and the whole family threw themselves into supporting it. Marx was vilified as the "red doctor" and sinister insurrectionist who had instigated the Commune. Two of the Marx daughters, Eleanor and Jenny, were lucky to escape after visiting France in April 1871. Defeat brought refugees flooding into London and many found their way to the Marx family home. Jenny and the third sister Laura married Communards and Eleanor was engaged for a while to Lissagaray, whose invaluable history of the Commune she translated. The Commune also shaped the international socialist movement and was commemorated by the British working-class movement for decades with anniversary celebrations, speeches and events.

Marx described the Communards' greatest achievement as the new ways of organising they created, the Commune's "actual working existence".¹⁰⁷ The experience of 1871 prompted Marx to distance himself from the idea that revolutionary perspectives must be based on capitalist "progress". Rather, he saw non-capitalist forms of communal property ownership as creating potential allies for the working class. History progresses not through self-contained stages but rather through the interactions of town and country, worker and peasant. Despite its disastrous ending, the Commune was a new point of departure of world-historic importance. As Lissagaray wrote, the Commune was "the first attempt by the proletariat to govern itself". The only alteration Marx ever made to *The Communist Manifesto* was in 1872 when he added the line: "The working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for their own purpose." For Marx, the Commune showed how the oppressive state could be broken and replaced with a democratic state run by the majority.

On the brink of the October Revolution of 1917, Vladimir Lenin drew on the experience of the Commune. He described how the abolition of the standing army and all officials being elected and subject to recall "signifies a gigantic replacement of certain institutions by other institutions of a fundamentally different type: democracy, introduced as fully and consistently as is at all conceivable, is transformed from bourgeois into proletarian democracy". When he defended the Bolsheviks from accusations that the party was too small to govern Russia, he argued that:

We have a “magic way” to enlarge our state apparatus tenfold at once, at one stroke—a way which no capitalist state ever possessed or could possess. This magic way is to draw the working people, to draw the poor, into the daily work of state administration.

The Communards were the first to demonstrate this latent magic within the working class.

The Marxist analysis of the state is constantly under pressure from those who argue that the idea of “smashing the state” is outmoded and that many state-run services, such as health, education and welfare, must be preserved and extended rather than smashed up. The Communards did not “smash” the post office, the cemeteries or the schools; they took them over and ran them for the benefit of the majority. As Lenin put it, the revolution must “cut the wires” that tie the useful aspects of the state from the capitalist interests that distort and limit them and from repressive institutions such as the police and army.

Rosa Luxemburg turned to the Commune in the last article she wrote, published in January 1919. She described how the Commune had ended in terrible defeat, like so many heroic working-class struggles. Then she asked:

Where would we be today without those terrible defeats, from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism? We stand on the foundation of those defeats; and we cannot do without any of them, because each one contributes to our strength and understanding.

The Commune was a working-class revolution that was necessarily also a “great gender event” because it depended on women’s active involvement, creativity and courage. It was the visible involvement of women that made the Commune so appalling to its opponents. One wrote:

Those females who dedicated themselves to the Commune—and there were many—had but a single ambition: to raise themselves above the level of man. They were all there, agitating and squawking, the gentleman’s seamstresses, the gentleman’s shirt makers, the teachers of boys, the maids of all work. During the final days all these bellicose viragos held out longer than the men did behind the barricades.

Across the English Channel, a Times reporter joined in the abuse, sneering: “If the French nation were composed only of the French women, what a terrible nation it would be.” If the unruly women of Paris had been in charge of the whole country, it is conceivable that the revolution could have spread across Europe. Perhaps then, this brief but inspiring example of workers’ power could have won more time and so provided us with many more examples of how working-class people can organise together to create a socialist society.

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[1] Thank you to Joseph Choonara, Richard Donnelly, Donny Gluckstein and Rob Hoveman for comments and suggestions.

[2] Germany had been formed just ten days earlier when, off the back of his military victories against the French, Prussia's King Wilhelm I was proclaimed headed of a unified German Empire at a ceremony in the Palace of Versailles.