

The fight for equality: four women in the Paris Commune



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Abstract

This dissertation examines the involvement of four women in the 1871 Paris Commune. The case studies focus on Elisabeth Dmitrieff, Paule Mink, André Léo and Louise Michel whose links with socialism and the emerging feminist movement are investigated using a number of historical sources, including biographies. The Paris Commune of 1871 has been widely studied and much is known about the male leadership during the 72 days uprising. However, with the exception of Louise Michel who wrote about her own participation, little is known about the roles of thousands of women who fought during the Commune. Yet, the participation of women in the Commune is documented and the parliamentary inquiry into the insurrection of March 18, confirms this officially: 1,051 women were called before the Councils of War, and this is only the number of those who were not killed on the barricades and survived the slaughter of the "semaine sanglante". This dissertation aims at contributing to the existing body of research, redressing the balance and uncovering the originality of these four women's contribution and long lasting impact on the social fabric of the French capital. In addition to providing a general context to women's participation in the Commune, this investigation identifies four significant figures and analyses the nature of the contribution of these four women to the socio-political experiment that was the Paris Commune.

Paris surtout, Paris! C'est lui qui excitait leur terreur. Paris socialiste, Paris armé, délibérant dans ses clubs, dans son conseil et s'administrant lui-même! Ce génie si longtemps captif, et même alors dangereux! Enfin délivré! Quel exemple! Quelle propagande! Quel péril!

(André Léo, *La Guerre sociale*, 1871)

Preamble

Summary of the Paris Commune¹

In the summer of 1870 a war broke out between Bismarck's Germany and France under Emperor Napoleon III. For France it was a disaster. On 3 September the entire French army at Sedan was surrounded and the Emperor captured by the Prussians. In the political furore that followed, France was proclaimed a republic. On 28 January 1871 a truce was proclaimed and in February elections were held to a new National Assembly. The result was an extensive victory for the monarchist-right throughout the French provinces. At the head of the National Government was Adolphe Thiers, for decades an extreme conservative monarchist. The seat of the National Assembly and the government was Versailles, some ten miles from Paris.

Paris, however, was completely out of step with the central government. From 18 September 1870 until the truce four months later, Paris was under siege by the Prussians. This radicalised the population. It also left the capital in a state of economic collapse. The winter had been the severest in memory. Food and fuel were very scarce. In February there were bread riots. The Parisians also suffered from severe unemployment. For most working men the only source of income was the 1.50 francs daily pay of the National Guard. Practically every working man had taken to arms and the National Guard grew to 300,000.

¹ Given the word-count constraints attached to this dissertation, I am giving here a quick summary of what the Paris Commune was. For more information about the Commune itself, its causes and precise chronology, please go to the bibliography

Thiers, as head of a government which did not rule its own capital, was intent on taking control of Paris. The main obstacle to his plans was the National Guard. On 18 March 1871 his troops tried to seize the National Guard cannons. This assault was repulsed. The representatives of the right fled from the city and the workers elected their own government. The Commune was born. The Paris Commune of 1871 was a new type of state, a state without a standing army or bureaucracy: all officials, including judges, were elected, were subject to recall, and were paid workmen's wages. It is in the context of this unprecedented social and political experiment that one of the most heroic chapters in the history of working women's struggles was written, and this dissertation proposes to follow the personal involvement of four militant women in this struggle: André Léo, Elizabeth Dmitrieff, Paule Mink and Louise Michel.

Chapter 1

Women in 19th Century French society

The rise of the Commune

At three in the morning of 18 March 1871 troops were sent into Paris by Auguste Thiers to seize the cannon there, especially on the hill at Montmartre. But as soon as it became known that the troops were coming, the people of Paris began to organise. Barricades were set up and red flags began to fly. When the troops arrived in Montmartre they were surrounded by local people who offered them breakfast and mugs of wine. The women played a crucial role at this point. As General d'Aurelles de Paladine described it, "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 found themselves surrounded and did not have the power to resist these ovations that were given them"². When General Lecomte ordered his men to fire into the crowd they refused. Later Lecomte and another general were killed by the soldiers. The news spread rapidly through the capital and more barricades were erected. Effectively Paris had declared itself an independent state. Rapidly a new power was established. Elections were held just eight days later to set up the government of the Commune and throughout the 72-days it lasted, women organised, spoke publicly, theorised and fought alongside men to defend and develop the revolution. In order to understand why the Commune saw the involvement of such a high number of women, it is important to first look at the type of society in which they lived prior the rise of the Commune and to examine the role they played both in the private and public sphere.

The years that followed the 1789 revolution saw an increase in the rights of men but simultaneously a decline in women's political and civil rights. Social conditions of women in this period worsened significantly³. Joan Landes in *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Cornell University Press, 1988) insists that the question of woman's place hardly changed, even after their

² Edith Thomas, *The women incendiaries* (London, 1966), p.45-6

³ Paul Perron, Roland Le Huenen, Stéphanie Vachon, *Itinéraire du XIXe siècle* (Toronto : Centre D'études Romantiques Joseph Sablé, 1996), p.25

march on Versailles in 1789. Although women issues fuelled the public debate (in 1793 for example Olympe de Gouges responded to the “Declaration of the Rights of Man” with a “Declaration of the Rights of Woman”), important issues like civil rights and suffrage, and political practice in general, were still reserved for men. De Gouges demanded political and legal equality between sexes and the abolition of men’s privileges. Her request was declared sacrilegious and de Gouges was condemned to the guillotine⁴. In the same year the “Club de citoyennes” was abolished by the Convention and, in 1795, any gathering of more than five women was prohibited⁵.

In 1801, Sylvain Maréchal, enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution (and an early influence on utopian socialism⁶) nevertheless wrote a *Projet de loi portant défense d'apprendre à lire aux femmes* (“Law Project Preventing the Teaching of Reading Skills to Women”), which showed the limitations of his egalitarianism. Maréchal’s proposition did not become law, nonetheless, throughout the 19th century women’s literacy was considerably slower compared to men’s literacy. In fact, as Joyce Dixon-Fyle has shown women’s subordination and exclusion from political practice was a key factor in their continual involvement in numerous struggles for social recognition that erupted in the wake of the French Revolution⁷.

Finally, in the wake of the French Revolution, Napoleon’s “Code Civil” (1804) established a new legal system which clearly asserted the values and priorities of the bourgeoisie, the class which emerged triumphant from the Revolution⁸. Such values were: respect for property, the sanctity of the family, the authority of the father and of government⁹. Equally important for what is at stake in this dissertation, the Code Civil legitimated major differences in rights and powers between sexes and postponed the emancipation of women for a very long time. According to the Code Civil a French woman had no automatic right even to her own nationality as this was determined by

⁴ Diana Holmes, *French Women's Writing 1848-1994* (London: Athlone, 1996), p.6

⁵ *Ibid* p.6

⁶ As evidenced by the manifesto he wrote in support of Babeuf's goals - *Manifeste des Égaux* (first issued in 1796)

⁷ Joyce Dixon-Fyle, *Female writers' struggle for rights and education for women in France (1848-1871)* (Peter Lang, 2006)

⁸ For an interesting discussion regarding the impact of the Civil Code on Women's wealth, see Andrew Counter's *Inheritance in Nineteenth-Century French Culture: Wealth, Knowledge and the Family* (Oxford: Legenda, 2010)

⁹ Holmes, p.6

her husband, and marriage to a foreigner meant loss of French citizenship. Article 213 stated that the wife owed obedience to her husband. Article 1124 stated that women were to be considered before the law equal to children and the insane. Finally, in 1816 divorce was completely abolished¹⁰. Therefore, the period following the Revolution of 1789 was for women a period dominated by misogyny, a period of civil and political oppression, intellectual and political exclusion and deception following the hopes that the revolution had brought.

Women's work in the 19th century was not new, however, the inclusion of women in the workplace did not go unchallenged. Catholic conservatives, nostalgic of traditional and rural societies, saw the rise of the female working class as a threat to the social order itself because it challenged the traditional gender order constructed around the ideology of domesticity and "la femme au foyer". On the opposite side, were liberal thinkers who regarded industrial work as a huge opportunity for women and rejected the idea that industrial work was inimical to women's nature¹¹. Amongst these thinkers, Baron Charles Dupin, believed that industrial work offered women the possibility of circumventing some of the limitations which nature had placed upon them. In his view, industrial work was infinitely preferable to rural work which physically brutalised women. Moreover, he believed that this type of work could potentially strengthen the bonds of marriage between women and men of the labouring classes, since they would enjoy enhanced resources and therefore acquire a greater sense of stability. There were however, other intellectuals much more critical of the impact of industrialisation than Baron Dupin. One of them was Jules Simon¹²: in 1860, he published *L'ouvrière* where he expressed his concerns regarding the impact of work on women and their families. He believed that industrial work undermined women as wives and mothers. Even if women workers in factories earned higher wages than they would in other forms of employment, Simon believed that the price to be paid was too high. For him, it amounted to the renunciation of femininity and the ruin of the working class family. According to him, drunkenness and libertine behaviour were highly connected to industrial life and work in factories would damage women's physical and moral health. Moreover, in his opinion, a married

¹⁰ Ibid, p.6

¹¹ Ibid, p.110

¹² Ibid, p.112

woman who worked was no longer a wife but merely a worker, which as a result, challenged the patriarchal authority within the family¹³. Simon was nevertheless aware that waged labour was for many women a necessity rather than an option. He therefore suggested domestic industry as the form of work best suited to women, so that women could work from their households. This would allow them to carry on looking after their children, combining household chores and productive work. The crucial point in Simon's view, was to ensure that women stayed in the household in order to carry out their primary function, which was to moralise the family¹⁴.

Simon's *L'ouvrière* alongside other studies by Villermé or Audiganne fitted within the discourse of "political economy" which saw its rise in France during the mid 19th century. Such studies were considered reliable and somehow scientific thanks to their use of statistics. Joan Scott however, demonstrated that the economists' apparently "objective" data were intentionally deployed to justify women's lower wages¹⁵. The ideological assumption was that women's labour required to be remunerated at an inferior rate than those of men's because men's wages were intended to support not only himself but also his wife and children; whereas women's wages were only meant to supplement the family income. The basic premise was that married or not, a woman was meant to live within a family and never as an isolated individual¹⁶.

The socially accepted image of the truly feminine woman was the one of the chaste wife and mother, confined within the home under male protection. In opposition, the real man was heterosexual and sexually active¹⁷. This distinction between men and women's sexual roles led to an obvious problem of mismatch between men's sexual expectations and those of the women they knew¹⁸. The solution was for men to refer to those women who had turned to prostitution in order to affirm their sexual power without corrupting the woman's idealised role as angel within the family. Paris in the 19th century was known throughout Europe as the capital of sex,

¹³ James F. Mc Millan, *France and Women 1789-1791: Gender, Society and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.113

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Holmes, p.9

¹⁸ Ibid

or, to use the words of the Goncourt brothers, the “world’s brothel”¹⁹. Indeed, Paris had a higher number of prostitutes than other European capitals and acknowledged their presence through a system of regulation²⁰. The highest percentage of registered prostitutes came from the lowest paid sectors of female employment, those women for whom the gendered division of labour made economic survival impossible. Between 1878 and 1887, 30% of the unregistered prostitutes sent to the police for medical checks were garment workers (among the lowest paid women workers) and 39% were domestic servant²¹. Legally considered a minor under the Civil Code, it was extremely difficult for a woman to achieve economic independence²². Employment opportunities for women were severely limited. Beside prostitution, women could work either outside home in the industry (particularly textiles and the fashion industry) or inside the home in domestic service²³. Domestic employment was by far the most popular occupation for women in the city. It had the advantage, unlike other occupations, to offer adequate food, shelter and less intense conditions of labour. Nevertheless, the hours were long and conditions of living were strictly regulated (being legally considered as minors, domestics were subject to strict supervision). Educated women could aspire to be governesses or school teachers, the remuneration however remained very poor²⁴.

Despite the high rate of their real participation in production, women were considered as merely a provisional workforce, to be called on when the family budget or the economy needed it. This perception of their role materialised itself in lower pay. In 1848 a woman’s average wage was significantly less than half that of a man²⁵. This convinced the male workforce that female competition was a dangerous thing and contributed to the conservatism of the labour movement on issues of gender²⁶. Rather than allying with female workers to fight against wages and working conditions, working men and male unions viewed women as competitors²⁷. This helps to understand why the French section of the First Internationale put forward a rather

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Holmes, p.10

²¹ Ibid

²² David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York; London: Routledge, 2003), p.185

²³ Holmes, p.8

²⁴ Harvey, p.185

²⁵ Holmes, p.8

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p.60

reactionary motion condemning women's work and declaring their place to be in the home. In 1866, at the first congress of the International Working Men's association (or First Internationale), the French delegation declared that:

D'un point de vue physique, moral et social, le travail des femmes hors du foyer doit être énergiquement condamné comme une cause de la dégénération de la race et comme l'un des agents de démoralisation utilisé par la classe capitaliste²⁸.

Some delegates opposed this resolution, among them, Eugène Varlin²⁹ who claimed that exploitation and lack of education were the real causes of physical and moral decline. He claimed that work for women was a necessity and not an option and labour militants should strive to ameliorate their conditions, through effective organisation of work, rather than repress their livelihoods. However, Varlin was not able to convince the majority and the congress voted in favour of the adoption of the resolution³⁰.

Proudhon and Fourier and Saint-Simon

Some of the leftwing antagonism towards women's demand for equal rights is not surprising since a significant part of 19th century socialist thought was highly influenced by the doctrines of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, supporter of cooperative socialism but a convinced misogynist too. In 1858 Proudhon published his *De la justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Église* where he maintained that women were in every respect innately inferior to men. From his point of view, women's role in society could be reduced only to a choice between that of a housewife or a prostitute. In *De la justice* Proudhon attempted to demonstrate women's inferiority from every point of view: physical, intellectual and moral. Proudhon attributed women's physical inferiority to the more aggressive sexual drives of the male and affirmed that man alone was the complete human being³¹. The logical consequence was that man was

²⁸ Mc Millan, p.115

²⁹ Socialist and communard he was blinded and eventually shot in 1871 by the Parisian mob. See Bernard Noël (ed.), *Dictionnaire de la Commune* (Paris : Flammarion, 1978).

³⁰ Mc Millan, p.115

³¹ Susan G. Bell, Karen M. Offen, *Women, the Family, and Freedom: 1750-1880* (Stanford University Press, 1983), p.326

the master and that women should obey. In his opinion, women did not make up their physical inferiority by superior intellectual or moral qualities, on the contrary, they lacked the capacity for abstract thought, invention and conceptualisation. Genius was for Proudhon an attribute of masculinity impossible to find in women. Finally, according to him, women were also morally inferior to men not only because of their inclination to vanity and practice of prostitution, but also because of their supposed innate indifference towards the principles of justice and equality. Proudhon even tried to express these statements through a mathematical formula where physical, intellectual and moral superiority of men over women worked out in the proportion of three to two³².

However popular Proudhon's outlook on women was, French utopian socialism was not entirely dominated by misogyny and indeed, other trends of thought developed throughout the 19th Century. In 1808 Charles Fourier published his first major work *La Théorie des Quatre Mouvements* followed in 1822 by the *Traité de l'Association Domestique-Agricole ou Attraction Industrielle*. Count Henri de Saint-Simon died in 1825, and following his death, several disciples such as Enfantin, contributed to development of the "Saint-Simonian" doctrine³³. Both Saint-Simonians and Fourierists called for women's equality and freedom. They condemned women's servitude within the marriage institution and attacked the unfair economic system which forced women to prostitute themselves either through marriages of convenience or by selling themselves on the streets. Both Saint-Simonians and Fourierists believed that all important jobs should be open to women on the basis of their skills rather than closed on account of gender. Some differences existed however, between the two doctrines³⁴.

The Saint-Simonian doctrine considered all human history to be a progression from the primitive period of interpersonal hostility, antagonism and war evolving towards a golden future they referred to as "universal association". Saint-Simonians believed that the human social unit had expanded from family, to tribe, to city, to

³² Altogether, in Proudhon's calculation, men were superior to women in the proportion of 27 (3 x 3 x 3) to 8 (2 x 2 x 2). Ibid p.330

³³ Leslie F. Goldstein, 'Early feminist themes in French utopian socialism: the St.-Simonians and Fourier', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43 (1982), 91-108

³⁴ Ibid, p.95

nation, to the international Catholic Church and that next would come the “universal association” a form of society based on peace, harmony and cooperation. In “universal association” no one would inherit wealth, each would work according to his or her talents and each would be rewarded in accordance with their work³⁵. The Saint-Simonians believed in three major human faculties: intellect, morality (love), and physical force.

As for women, their argument was that by keeping women in a state of brutal subjugation, society had left the moral-Simonian doctrine³⁶. In their view, humanity would eventually begin to value human compassion (which women embodied) above material industry and science, thus women would at last be respected for their sensitive predisposition. To accomplish this, however, it was crucial that women remained as sweet and gentle as they ‘naturally’ were. Although this argument relied, once again, on an ‘essentialisation’ of women, it nevertheless differed from most of 19th Century thought in as much as women’s ‘nature’ was at least considered in positive terms rather than weak or corrupt. In Saint-Simonians’ view, women had to be excluded from the hostile and competitive social and political sphere, but this was in order not to corrupt their tender personalities. Saint-Simonians wanted women to leave domesticity but only after the world had been freed from war and violence. In short, they opposed emancipating the woman until the world had become feminised³⁷.

Fourier's thought on the other hand, was truly universal. Indeed his main concern was to liberate every human individual, man, woman and child in two ways. First, through education he wished to free their faculties for maximum development. Secondly, he sought the liberation of human passion from all forms of repression and frustration. He believed that if his utopia (‘Harmony’) was established, every human problem would be eliminated: not only the obvious economic necessities like hunger and need for shelter but also boredom, anxiety, and sexual frustration. Dulled for 2000 years in ‘Civilization’ (Fourier’s term for the current epoch), feelings would truly

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ This explains why it is among the ranks of the Saint-Simonians that can be found women who assertively questioned man’s right to claim all the benefits of education, work, family, and property. See Joyce Dixon-Fyle, *Female Writers’ Struggle for Rights and Education for Women in France (1848-1871)* (Peter Lang, 2006), p.4

³⁷ Goldstein, p.96

blossom in 'Harmony': people would live more than twice as long, they would need to sleep only a few hours per night and waking hours would be filled with pleasures³⁸.

Although utterly utopian, the feminist message in Fourier's vision was dominant. Fourier's feminist concerns figured in all of his major works. He believed that women in 'Civilization' had been severely oppressed, victimized and deprived of both economic and amorous fulfilment. Both deprivations were linked in his opinion, to the marriage institution. Women, who were excluded from most productive employment were sold into conjugal servitude as soon as they reached marriageable age. For women outside the aristocracy, prostitution, more or less prettied up, was their only resort. Finally, in Fourier's opinion, the knowledge that she would have to attract a 'buyer' in the form of a husband or customer had a terribly damaging effect on the personality of a growing girl and caused most women to develop vice-ridden characters³⁹.

Women's reaction: Lamber and D'Héricourt

Proudhon's derogatory claims on women caused deep offence among French feminists. In 1858 Juliette Lamber published her *Idées anti-proudhoniennes sur l'amour, la femme et le mariage* (in defence of Daniel Stern, Mme d'Agoult and George Sand) where she expressed all her outrage against Proudhon's views on women. She attacked his idea that women had been subordinated to men by nature and argued that women had their own kind of physical strength, such as the ability to endure childbirth. Lamber also criticized Proudhon for overestimating the role of force in society. She reminded Proudhon that social order was not based on physical force and the proof was that those men with the most power in society were not at all the strongest men⁴⁰. Lamber believed that society was founded on two principles: the feminine and the masculine and each principle was indispensable for social harmony. Each sex had duties proper to it and a sexual division of labour was appropriate. Men should do jobs which required muscle power whilst women those which required taste, tact and dexterity. She believed that women had the right to work and to be part

³⁸ Ibid, p.99

³⁹ Goldstein, p.100

⁴⁰ Mc Millan, p.125

of the productive forces in society and argued that they should receive training and at least vocational education.

Lamber was not against family and agreed that women had the role, among others, to be good wives and mothers. However, she did not accept misogynist attempts to reduce the whole of a woman's experience to family life. Lamber stressed the point that the role of mother did not suit every woman, that some women did not want to marry and that others even when married, wanted to work for the obvious reason that two wages were better than one. In Lamber's view, work was always a force for good provided it was not excessive nor brutalising. Work had emancipated men and work would emancipate women too⁴¹.

A second response to misogynist thinkers came from Jenny d'Héricourt who in 1860 published *La femme affranchie*. Here she defied both Proudhon and Michelet:

Le livre de M. Michelet et les deux études de M. Proudhon sur la femme ne sont que deux formes d'une même pensée. La seule différence qui existe entre ces messieurs, c'est que le premier est doux comme miel et le second amer comme absinthe. Et cependant j'aime mieux le brutal que le poète, parce que les injures et les coups révoltent et font crier : liberté ! liberté ! tandis que les compliments endorment et font supporter lâchement les chaînes⁴².

D'Héricourt was deeply offended by Michelet's demeaning pronouncements on women expressed in his books *L'Amour* (1858) and *La Femme* (1860) where he described women as permanently invalid beings incapable of enduring any type of work outside the household:

La femme peut-elle, à volonté aux métiers qui exigent de la force, prendre ceux des hommes? Nullement. (...) En réalité, la femme ne peut travailler longtemps ni debout, ni assise. Si elle est toujours assise, le sang lui remonte, la poitrine est irritée, l'estomac embarrassé, la tête injectée. Si on la tient longtemps debout, comme la repasseuse, comme celle qui compose en imprimerie, elle a d'autres accidents sanguins. Elle peut travailler beaucoup, mais en variant l'attitude, comme elle

⁴¹ Ibid, p.126

⁴² Jenny D'Héricourt, *La Femme affranchie, Réponse à MM Michelet, Proudhon, É. De Girardin, A. Comte et aux autres novateurs modernes*, (Paris, 1860), p.94

fait dans son ménage, allant et venant. Il faut qu'elle ait un ménage, il faut qu'elle soit mariée⁴³.

Medical studies in 19th Century France also contributed to differentiate women from men, not only from a physical point of view, but from a moral one too. With the authority of science, doctors were able to claim that physical and biological differences between men and women were responsible for moral and psychological differences between the two sexes. Femininity was perceived as to have its own pathologies, with hysteria being the quintessential female illness held to be the direct result of the menstrual cycle. From a psychological point of view, women were also believed to be more susceptible to madness than men because they supposedly lacked men's capacity to cope with emotional turmoil⁴⁴. Criminal law increasingly turned to medical science to make judgements about the motives of female criminals. Women's deviant behaviour was frequently diagnosed as "monomania", a temporary disorder linked to the functioning of their reproductive cycle. For the law, crime could be explained as irrational acts attributable to hormonal upsets. Theft, for instance, was deemed to be an instance of "monomanie du vol", which according to some, was most likely to manifest itself during the menstrual cycle⁴⁵.

In opposition D'héricourt claimed that it was through work that women would eventually emancipate themselves:

C'est par le travail de la guerre que le patriciat s'est constitué, c'est par le travail pacifique que le servage s'est émancipé, c'est aussi par le travail que la femme prétend conquérir ses droits civils⁴⁶.

D'Héricourt also countered Michelet's defective views on female biology which claimed women's menstrual cycle to be something morbid rather than something natural and normal. To his claim that during the menstrual cycle women were twice as ill: "Il y a surtout une semaine par mois où la malade, deux fois malade, est vulnérable à tout, faible, émue, et pourtant n'ose parler⁴⁷". [There are times

⁴³ Jules Michelet, *La Femme* (Paris: Hachette, 1860), p.33

⁴⁴ Mc Millan, p.102

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ D'Héricourt, p.123

⁴⁷ Michelet, p.350

especially when the patient, doubly ill, is vulnerable to everything, weak, easily affected, and yet not daring to speak.⁴⁸] d'Héricourt answered back underlying the normality of such biological occurrence:

Il est de principe en biologie qu'aucun état physiologique n'est un état morbide; conséquemment, la crise mensuelle particulière à la femme n'est point une maladie, mais un phénomène normal⁴⁹.

D'Héricourt also disagreed with Michelet's assertion that women were counter-revolutionary by nature: "La Française, (...) peut devenir au foyer un puissant instrument de réaction, un sérieux obstacle au progrès"⁵⁰ [The French woman (...) may become at home a powerful instrument of reaction, and a serious obstacle to progress]⁵¹ and claimed that if women had not had prominent roles in previous revolutions, it was not because they did not want to, but because the Revolution had rejected them⁵². According to d'Héricourt, women were essential for the success of a revolution and the real enemies of progress and of the Revolution were those who opposed women's emancipation⁵³. In the opening of her book d'Héricourt clearly states her aim:

Prouver que la femme a les mêmes droits que l'homme. De réclamer, en conséquence son émancipation (...). Émanciper la femme, c'est la reconnaître et la déclarer libre, l'égale de l'homme, devant la loi sociale et morale et devant le travail⁵⁴.

In the 1860s other women joined her battle and started to get organised in order to fight women's demeaning social and political status in French society at the time. Among the first women of this era to speak publicly in favour of women's rights was Olympe Audouard. In 1862 she founded a literary review "Le papillon" with the

⁴⁸ Translation by J. W. Palmer, p.261

⁴⁹ D'Héricourt, p.95

⁵⁰ Michelet, p.157

⁵¹ Translation by J. W. Palmer. p.144

⁵² By enlarge, while revolutionary politicians challenged the Monarchy, they did not challenge the repressive authoritarian structures which confined women within the domestic sphere. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that after the 1848 Revolution in particular (and spurred by the work that had been done in the wake of the 1830 revolution by a number of women writers and activists, including Flora Tristan and women involved in Saint-Simonism) the most important themes of the ensuing intellectual debates centred around family, freedom and the marginalization of women, many of whom felt the need to recast social ideology that had relegated them to the confines of the family.

⁵³ Mc Millan, p.127

⁵⁴ D'Héricourt, p.5

support of several male writers such as Alexandre Dumas (père). Audouard also attempted to publish a political review “La Revue cosmopolite” but the imperial government did not permit her to do so. The official explanation for this ban was that a woman, not being a full citizen, was not allowed to publish a political review. This led her to issue a scathing pamphlet *Guerre aux hommes* (1866) and to plead the “Corps Législatif” to grant full and civil rights to women⁵⁵.

Other women also spoke out during the final years of the Second Empire. Paule Mink, André Léo⁵⁶ and Maria Deraismes all defended the rights of women workers. Before the rise of the Commune in 1870 Mink had founded the “Société Fraternelle de l’Ouvrière”⁵⁷ an organisation based on mutualist principles inspired by Proudhon. Léo had already published two novels, *Un Divorce* (1862) and *Un Mariage Scandaleux* (1862) in which she called out for equal rights within marriage and the reestablishment of divorce. In *Les Femmes et les mœurs* (1869) she went further and demanded equal political rights for both sexes⁵⁸.

In the closing years of the Second Empire, there is evidence that feminists began to organise clubs that met regularly. Hubertine Auclert in *Le Vote des femmes* (1908) tells that a committee formed in 1866 held regular meetings and their main goal was to reform all marriage laws. Furthermore, a group of men and women met regularly at the home of André Léo and created on July 1869 the “Société de Revendication des Droits de la Femme” whose main goal was to establish schools for girls and consequently accelerate the recognition of women’s rights⁵⁹. Regular participants of these meetings were Maria Deraismes, Paule Minck, Mme Jules Simon and Louise Michel, thus showing that by the time the Commune established itself, significant ground work had been undertaken in the preceding years by some of the women we have chosen to focus on in this work.

If women were obviously the most involved in the fight for women’s emancipation, some men did also joined this cause. Léon Richer was one of them and is credited by

⁵⁵ Ibid, p.179

⁵⁶ Victoire Léodile Béra (1824–1900) was a French novelist, journalist and feminist. Like some of her famous predecessor, George sand, and for similar reasons (easier access to literary career), she took the pen name of André Léo, her two twin sons' names.

⁵⁷ Christine Fauré, *Political and Historical Encyclopedia of Women* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), p.363

⁵⁸ Ibid

⁵⁹ Fauré, p.359

historians for launching feminism as a continuous movement⁶⁰. In April 1869 he launched "Le Droit des femmes", a weekly newspaper devoted to feminist issues where he called out for the improvement of girls' education, the rise of women's wages in order to fight prostitution and the revision of the Civil Code⁶¹. Furthermore, in 1871 he founded the "Association pour les Droits des Femmes".⁶²

In the late 1860s feminists seemed to be everywhere, doing everything and the future of feminism appeared bright⁶³. However, the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war in 1870 led the feminist movement to a temporary halt⁶⁴. In July 1870 war broke out between France and Prussia, and on September 2, Napoleon III and his army surrendered to the enemy. On September 4, a new Third Republic was proclaimed, but soon after, the Prussians besieged Paris and the new government eventually capitulated to Prussia. On 18th March 18 the Parisians rose against Thiers' government which then withdrew with the army to Versailles. The Parisian people elected their own government and thus founded the first work-based state in history known from thereafter as the Paris Commune.

From the very beginning, the Commune was plagued by indecisiveness and by a confusing variety of aims and creeds. The ideological composition of the Commune included every tint in the spectrum of French left. The largest section represented within the Commune's leadership was Jacobin, followed by socialists disciples of Blanqui, and then by the anarchists⁶⁵. Such variety of ideals and the lack of a dominating leader within the Commune made it very difficult to formulate an ideology which could unite everyone and perhaps contributed in making the commune such a precarious experience⁶⁶.

The Paris Commune lasted seventy two days and drowned in a bloodbath the last week of May with the so called "Semaine Sanglante". Because of its shortness the Commune lacked the opportunity to carry out far-reaching social reforms and spent

⁶¹ Claire G. Moses, *French Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), p. 186

⁶² Theodore Zeldin, *France 1848-1945* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p.347

⁶³ Moses, p.189

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, p.174

⁶⁵ Frederick Busi, 'The Failure of Revolution', *The Massachusetts Review*, 12 (1971), 397-408 (p.402)

⁶⁶ Price, 'Ideology and Motivation in the Paris Commune of 1871', *The Historical Journal*, 15 (1972), 75-86 (p.75)

most of its time struggling to survive. Yet, despite all its weaknesses and its tragic ending, the Commune marked history for ever. For the first time in modern history, there was a state, although minuscule and weak, which defied imperialism and the bourgeoisie. A state with a proletarian base destined to become the model for future revolutions⁶⁷.

It cannot be claimed that women's rights were at the top of the Commune's priorities however. In fact, as claimed by André Léo in the newspaper "La sociale", women who wanted to serve the Commune often found themselves rejected by male militants still highly influenced by antifeminist prejudices⁶⁸. Nevertheless, many women identified with the revolutionary cause and sought to serve the Commune as best they could: working-class women but also bourgeois women, with a political past preoccupied with women's rights who took on leadership roles. The parliamentary inquiry into the insurrection of March 18, confirms this officially: 1,051 women were called before the Councils of War, and this is only the number of those who were not killed on the barricades and survived the slaughter of the "semaine sanglante"⁶⁹.

For some politically committed women, the insurrection of the Commune provided a unique political and social occasion in which they could attempt to surmount the existing gender structures and bring about economic, social, and political change⁷⁰. Following on from earlier attempts in 1789 and 1848⁷¹, the 1871

⁶⁷ Busi, p.402

Given the word limit constraints, and given that the focus is less on the causes of the Commune than the participation of women, I am not going to expand on the chronology of events. My interest here is largely based on the fact that the Commune provided an outlet and an opportunity for some women to transform the structure of French society, not only by rethinking social mores and reconfiguring family structures, but also by participating actively in transforming these structures. Therefore, my central focus is on their actions and the results of their involvement rather than the chronology and minutiae of the events of the three-months uprising. For further reading on the Commune itself, see for example Jacques Rougerie, *Paris Libre* (Paris: Seuil, "Points Histoire", 2004); Prosper Lissigay, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871* (Saint Petersburg, Florida: Red and Black Publishers, 2004).

⁶⁸ Mc Millan, p.133

⁶⁹ Edith Thomas, 'The women of the Commune', *The Massachusetts Review*, 12 (1971), 409-417 (p.409)

⁷⁰ Carolyn J. Eichner, 'Vive La Commune!: Feminism, Socialism, and Revolutionary Revival in the Aftermath of the 1871', *Paris Commune Journal of Women's History*, 15 (2003), 68-98 (p.69)

⁷¹ The "trois glorieuses" of the 1830 Revolution is less significant for women's action, but there is no doubt that it acted as a trigger and that the 1830s in France see a decade of rising awareness and involvement of women in public debates about civil rights and suffrage, and political practice in general – see for example: McPhee, Peter *A Social History of France, 1789-1914* (New York: Palgrave

uprising gave such women a new space to fight for a better future. The women we are going to concentrate on in the following chapters formed political clubs, organized a citywide women's union, wrote articles, edited newspapers, marched in the streets, served as nurses and cooks and fought on the battlefields and on the barricades⁷². These women were Elisabeth Dmitrieff (1851-1918), Paule Minck (1839-1901), André Léo (1824-1900) and Louise Michel (1830-1905): not all of them were French, but found themselves in the French capital during the unique political experiment that La Commune was. Each contributed to this experience in a unique way and each chapter will look in detail at each of these militant women's political beliefs and the nature of their involvement during the Commune.

Dimtrieff, Mick, Léo and Michel were all original in their approach (which was often ideological as well as practical), single-minded in the promotion of women's rights through education in the wider sense, and courageous in their beliefs as well as their actions. The aim of this dissertation is to assess whether they succeeded in initiating a form of gender politics that benefitted their successors, or whether like the social achievements of Commune itself, this experiment in gender equality was lost for generations.

Macmillan, 2004), Rosemary Lloyd and Brian Nelson eds., *Women Seeking Expression* (Clayton, Melbourne: 2000)

⁷² Ibid

Chapter 2

André Léo, journalist and novelist: “un écrivain engagé”

Introduction: writing for the Commune

During the decade following the publication of Jenny d’Héricourt’s *La femme affranchie* (1860), the state of inequality between the sexes remained a “topical and frequently debated matter of public opinion in France” (see Joyce Dixon-Fyle, op. cit., p.95). It triggered a wave of polemical works published by women in the years leading up to the Commune. In the absence of women’s organizations and especially the newspapers, former journalists resorted to expressing their critical opinions in various literary genres. Among the journalists who wrote prolifically on women’s issues was Léodile Bréra (1824-1900), also known as Léodille Champseix (from her first marriage), a militant socialist novelist and journalist who wrote under the pseudonym of André Léo.

As of 18 March, 1871 she devoted herself entirely to the cause of the Commune. She engaged herself in several ways, by orating in clubs and by taking part in several organisations. Léo was a member of the “Comité de vigilance de Montmartre”, of the “Comité des citoyennes du 17^e arrondissement” and participated (although in a very limited way) to Dmitrieff’s “Union des femmes pour la défense de Paris et les soins aux blessés” as will be seen in Chapter 3. But it was mostly through her writing that she served the cause of the Commune. Although in the second decade of his regime, Napoleon III’s relaxed press censorship, freedom of expression under the Second Republic was nevertheless very much restricted⁷³. However, with the insurgency of the Commune, a vast number of journals came to life, as recounted by a contemporary, John Leighton, who writes that virtually all members of the Commune had their own paper⁷⁴. Léo too, took advantage of this unprecedented wave of press freedom, in January 1871 she founded the newspaper *La République des Travailleurs*

⁷³ Jackson J. Spielvogel, *Western Civilization: A Brief History*, (Boston: Wadsworth 2009) p.464
For a brief history of the French press, see Pierre Albert’s *Histoire de la Presse* (Paris: PUF, “Que sais-je?”, 1996)

⁷⁴ John Leighton, *Paris under the Commune* (Bradbury: Evans, 1871), p.119

and on March 1871 she founded the daily paper *La Sociale*⁷⁵. As a journalist she recounted and commented tirelessly the political current events making the pen her primary tool of activism. However, and in order to locate Léo within the context of female writers' struggle for rights and education in France, I am going to start by examining her novel, *Un mariage scandaleux* which she published in 1862, at her own expense, in order to expose the subordination of women and their material dependence on their husbands. Central to the general political and social debate of the Commune, and of the involvement of women, is her focus on the power of education.

Fiction, writing at the service of the revolutionary cause

Léo was simultaneously a novelist and a journalist. From 1851 to 1899, she wrote nineteen novels. As claimed by Granier, author of *Les briseurs de formules. Les écrivains anarchistes en France à la fin du XIXe siècle* (2008), through the use of fiction Léo gave life to “creatures” that had nothing fictional about them but that could have easily belonged to the world of the livings. In addition to men's excesses, Léo despised the rigorous conformities demanded of women, who not only had to hide their true feelings behind a mask of ignorance, but lost their identity and sense of self worth in the process⁷⁶. She created characters strong enough to oppose those fake conventional female characters that had been created by misogynist philosophers such as Michelet and Proudhon:

Comme dans de nombreuses œuvres de fiction écrites par les anarchistes, la création, la fable imaginée par l'écrivain vient ici s'opposer aux fictions sociales et politiques qui modèlent les représentations que nous avons du réel⁷⁷.

Less ephemeral than newspapers articles, narratives hold a power that is unique to fiction and Léo used it repeatedly in order to spread her thoughts and give them a lasting impact. Léo's novels are an accurate depiction of French society in the second half of the 19th century. In her novels she focused mostly on women's lives, she described the lives of both “bourgeoises” and peasant women, she decried their

⁷⁵ Fernanda Gastaldello, *André Léo (1824-1900) Femme écrivain au XIX siècle* (Cahier du Pays Chauvinois, 2001), p.20

⁷⁶ See Joyce Dixon-Fyle, op. cit, p.99

⁷⁷ Caroline Granier, *Les Briseurs de formules : Les Écrivains anarchistes en France à la fin du XIXe siècle* (Œuvres-et-Valsery: Ressouvenances, 2008), p.927

submission to man, first to the father and then to the husband. She strongly opposed the custom of “mariages de convenance” and condemned the ineffective education women received.

Most of Léo’s novels were first published as serials in periodicals with a widespread readership. Eleven of her novels were published in *Le Siècle* alongside novels by Emile Zola and Hector Malot⁷⁸. In 1862 she published *Un mariage scandaleux*, one of her most renowned novels. The novel’s heroine, Lucie, is a young middle class girl who falls in love with a young countryman named Michel. Coming from different social classes the two youngsters are not allowed to marry, their love though is strong enough to motivate them into fighting social conventions and prejudices until they eventually succeed and unite in marriage. In *Un mariage scandaleux* the reader finds numerous romantic themes such as the simplicity of life in the country as opposed to life in the city and a condemnation of this “maladie de l’espèce humaine.”⁷⁹ that is money and its corruptive power⁸⁰. Léo analyses the relationship between social classes giving the reader an idea of the type of society to which she aspired. She perceives the bourgeoisie to be by and large, superficial and exalts the *paysans*’s honesty and simplicity:

Je vous assure, Michel, qu’entre les bourgeois et les paysans la différence n’est pas tant dans les idées que dans le langage. Et pour les idées, j’aimerais presque mieux celles des paysans, parce qu’ils connaissent leur ignorance et qu’ils ont à cause de cela plus de bonne foi et de simplicité. (...) Avec ceux que vous croyez si intelligents, on a rarement des conversations bien intéressantes. Chez mon oncle Bourdon, presque jamais on ne parle de choses sérieuses, ou bien c’est d’un ton léger comme en se moquant⁸¹.

Léo strongly criticises the bourgeoisie for its obsession with appearances and for what she calls, their “cult of pride”. Indeed she believes it is pride that rules bourgeois existences as it has taken divine dimensions:

⁷⁸ Cecilia Beach, ‘Savoir c’est pouvoir: Integral Education in the Novels of André Léo’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 36 (2008), 270-285 (p.283)

⁷⁹ André Léo, *Un mariage scandaleux* (Paris, 1863), p.99

It is not difficult to see what Léo’s conception of the countryside owes to George Sand, and also to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As with these two writers, for Léo, the countryside is the locus where the general process of transformation of values can take place.

⁸⁰ Gastaldello, p.11

⁸¹ Léo, *Un mariage scandaleux*, p .108

Malgré leur bagage de religion et de philosophie, les hommes n'ont encore eu qu'un seul vrai Dieu, l'orgueil, père tout-puissant, qui tient le globe dans sa droite. (...) De même qu'autrefois, ils font encore à ce Dieu des sacrifices humains, et les victimes fanatiques s'offrent d'elles-mêmes au supplice⁸².

Lucie's parents are no exception to this, as they sacrifice their happiness and their daughter's happiness in order to keep up to bourgeois' expectations. Indeed, Lucie's family belongs to the bourgeoisie but faces enormous economic difficulties. In order to keep the appearance of a wealthy family Lucie's parents refuse to carry a similar lifestyle to peasants and refuse to raise animals or work in the fields:

Nous ne sommes pas des paysans, nous, ma pauvre petite. Nous n'en sommes, il est vrai, que plus malheureux ; mais enfin, puisque nous avons un rang, il faut bien le tenir⁸³.

Working would, in Lucie's mother point of view, be unworthy of her daughter's status:

Un porc, une chèvre, c'est bien! Mais qui nettoierait les étables, puisque nous ne pouvons point avoir de serviteurs? Tu sais bien que ton père ne toucherait pas à cela. Quant à toi, ma pauvre enfant, tu ne fais déjà que trop de choses indignes de ton rang. Croirait-on, à voir tes main, que tu es d'illustre naissance?⁸⁴

Through Lucie, Léo expresses her own views on the benefits of work (for both sexes) which stands at the antipodes of Lucie's mother :

Enfin j'accepte, en épousant Michel, en même temps qu'une vie d'amour, une vie de travail. (...) Et si l'on disait au prisonnier cellulaire : Viens à l'atelier ! Ne se lèverait-il pas avec joie ? Le travail fécond, au sein de la nature, couronné de fleurs et de fruit, je l'aime !⁸⁵

Education is at the centre of the plot in the novel: this is clearly something that Léo held close to her heart as she understood and denounced the purposeful mis-education of the masses aimed at maintaining the status-quo. She expresses her thoughts mainly

⁸² Léo, *Un mariage scandaleux*, p.335

⁸³ Ibid, p.76

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.76

⁸⁵ Ibid, p.357

through Lucie and her uncle, the bourgeois Monsieur Bourdon⁸⁶ clearly expresses the opposition. Lucie envisages the existence of a “people intelligent” and her uncle sums up the apocalyptic consequences of this for the ruling classes:

Imagine-toi le peuple intelligent, ou seulement conduit par des hommes du peuple intelligents et fermes, nous avons l’anarchie, et tout est perdu. (...) ⁸⁷.

According to Monsieur Bourdon, to safeguard the status quo, smart people such as the hero Michel, should not be left within the masses:

Des hommes comme celui-là ne devraient pas rester dans la foule. (...) C’est de la bonne politique, et assez ancienne, comme en faisaient Louis XI, Henri IV et même Louis XIV. Non, l’intelligence ne doit pas rester dans la foule; nous devons lui tendre la main et l’en tirer bien vite. C’est ce que les gouvernements habiles ont toujours fait⁸⁸.

Moreover, the inclusion of such individual within the upper class is not to be feared. According to Bourdon if the peasant is given the chance to join the bourgeois he will instantaneously turn his back to the people:

Ne vois-tu pas (...) comment une fois sortis du peuple, tous ces grands hommes lui tournent le dos? (...) Devenus bourgeois, ils resteront tels en dépit d’eux-mêmes, car ils ont oublié le langage, les besoins, les sentiments du peuple, et désormais, associés à nous, ils sont devenus solidaires de tous nos risques⁸⁹.

Léo expresses here ideas that had already been expressed by Stendhal for example, in *The Red and the Black* who had shown, through his character’s ambition, how Julien Sorel’s focus on his advancement had not only made him forget his roots, but positively craved to move away from his social origins. So Léo expresses here an idea that Zola will articulate in the Rougon-Macquart series, and perhaps especially clearly in *Germinal*: working classes are nothing if they are not organised as a group; the individual of humble origins is either powerless (largely through his/her lack of instruction) or, as both Stendhal and Léo suggest, turning his back on his social class

⁸⁶ Here Léo plays with onomastics since the name of the character probably alludes to Proudhon and his own misogyny as well as to the Church and its reactionary position towards women – and the education of women – since a “bourdon” is a pilgrim’s staff.

⁸⁷ Léo, *Un mariage scandaleux*, p.170

⁸⁸ Ibid, p.169

⁸⁹ Ibid

peers when he is (like Julien Sorel, thanks to his education – which shows again the centrality of this question throughout the 19th C) “received” by the bourgeoisie (or even, in Julien’s case, the aristocracy). The isolated, exceptional young man is just that: an exception. Léo’s emphasis on education (just like Louise Michel as will be seen in Chapter 5) is an acknowledgement that it is the only way to transform the exception into the norm. Poor, uneducated, yet bright young men –such as Michel in *Un mariage scandaleux*– are entitled to this education –just as Lucie’s education helps her to choose her own life–, and this is for the general good according to Léo: this will better society.

The power of education

Within her wide range of interests, the most prevailing theme in Léo’s production was the power of education. Many of her novels focus on this topic and condemn the educational practices in place in the second half of the nineteenth century. Léo promoted remarkable revolutionary concepts for the time, such as co-education, professional training, the abolition of corporal punishment and free education available to all⁹⁰. She saw education as a key factor to emancipate women (and men, as has been seen in *Un mariage scandaleux*) and to free them from the objectification they were victim of. Only through education could people emancipate themselves, as she claimed in her novel *Aline-Ali* (1869): “L’instruction du peuple, tout est là désormais, et tout est vain sans cela”⁹¹.

In addition to her writing novels however, and inspired by several years of political and social disillusionment and a deep interest in women’s near stagnant condition, she was, alongside a few male advocates of women’s emancipation, one of the founder of the long-lasting women’s right organisation: “L’association pour le Droit des femmes” in 1869⁹². Because of the range of political opinions represented in the association, the group decided to settle on a minimum programme on which all could agree⁹³. As well as advocating secular education for girls, it also campaigned

⁹⁰ Beach, p.270

⁹¹ André Léo, *Aline-Ali* (Paris, 1869) p.368 in Gastaldello, p.9

⁹² James F. McMillian, ‘Clericals, Anticlericals and the Women’s Movement in France Under the Third Republic’, *The Historical Journal*, 24 (1981), 947-949 (p.130)

⁹³ McMillian, p.130

for equal access to work and civil equality for married women so as to end women's legal subjugation within the family in particular, and within society in general⁹⁴. In an article entitled *La ligue des femmes en France*, Léo described the main objective of the organisation: "Informer et éduquer l'opinion publique pour préparer les générations futures à une société toujours plus juste"⁹⁵. Education was for Léo a crucial factor not only in the fight for women's emancipation but also in the fight for socialism: "de la connaissance dérive la volonté, comme de l'ignorance l'incertitude. Qui pense et qui sait veut, tous les despotes sentent cela."⁹⁶

The promotion of socialism

By the late 1860s Léo revealed a more and more radical spirit⁹⁷ calling for fairness in wage allocation for women, denouncing misery and prostitution, and calling one more time for adequate education for girls (essentially vocational). She became a vivid promoter of socialism, strongly believing in the rightness of its tenets but nevertheless refused to impose it on the people. In 1868 she was invited to write for the International Workers Association's Swiss newspaper *L'Égalité*. The paper, edited by the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakounine, favourably welcomed the socialist writer:

Nous enregistrons une nouvelle qui fera, nous n'en pouvons douter, le plus grand plaisir à nos lecteurs. Un des premiers écrivains socialistes de France, Madame André Léo, a bien voulu nous donner l'assurance qu'elle consentait à prendre place parmi les collaborateurs de l'Égalité.⁹⁸

Although she was received with such a warm welcome, the collaboration between Léo and *L'Égalité* lasted less than six weeks⁹⁹. The reason for this was a divergence of opinions on how to reach the fundamental principles of socialism. In an article published in *L'Égalité* on 13 March 1869, Léo declared to share the same goals as

⁹⁴ Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p.61

⁹⁵ André Léo, 'Le Journal des Femmes' (20 March 1869), in Gastaldello, p.15

⁹⁶ André Léo, *Les Femmes et les mœurs. Liberté ou monarchie* (Paris, 1869), in Alessandra Anteghini 'Parità, pace, libertà, Marie Goegg e André Léo' (Costellazioni, 1998), p. 69

⁹⁷ Expressed in particular in her political essay "La femme et les mœurs" published in Léon Richer's feminist newspaper *Le Droit des femmes* to which I shall return later]

⁹⁸ André Léo, 'L'Égalité' (27 February 1869), in Gastaldello, p.13

⁹⁹ Alessandra Anteghini, *Parità, pace, libertà, Marie Goegg e André Léo* (Costellazioni, 1998), p.66

L'Égalité's team, but she disagreed on the means to reach such goals: "Je suis d'accord avec vous sur le but; nous différons quelquefois sur les moyens"¹⁰⁰. Léo defended those "petits bourgeois" and peasants who did not join the fight for socialism and she believed that their lack of involvement was the result of centuries of ignorance that prevented them from having a clear and correct view of reality¹⁰¹; Léo did not want to hurry the masses and believed it was better to educate the people into socialism rather than to impose dogmas on them.

In her final public speech¹⁰² in 1871 held in front of the "Ligue de la paix et de la liberté" she reasserted this concept:

D'autre part, il faut reconnaître que les démocrates avancés, que les socialistes, en général, (...) sont dans cette erreur, qui me paraît très fatale, de croire qu'on peut violenter l'opinion pour aller plus vite.—Je crois au contraire que c'est une des raisons pour lesquelles nous allons si lentement.—Ils oublient que la vie d'un penseur a deux faces: le droit pour lui-même d'aller aussi loin qu'il peut, et d'explorer l'absolu—le devoir, vis-à-vis des autres, de se faire comprendre. Or, on n'est compris des gens qu'en leur parlant dans leur langue, et en les prenant au point où ils sont, pour les amener, s'il se peut, à soi. Le parti avancé en un mot, est intolérant—et il n'est pas le seul—mais seulement il le montre davantage¹⁰³.

Furthermore, Léo refused all sectarianism and opposed the idea of dividing the worker's movement in different factions. It was only by staying united that people could hope to win the battle for socialism¹⁰⁴. At the same speech, although two years had gone by, Léo had not chanced her mind the slightest:

Je persiste à le croire, un traité d'alliance serait possible, qui, réservant en dehors les convictions et la liberté de chacun, réunirait contre l'ennemi de la paix sociale, et dans la réalisation d'un programme commun, toutes les fractions de la démocratie. Car ils sont nombreux, les points sur lesquels on peut s'entendre, avant ceux où l'on peut se diviser: toutes les libertés à reprendre, de presse, de colportage, de réunion; la liberté communale à fonder; l'impôt unique et progressif;

¹⁰⁰ André Léo, 'l'Égalité' (13 March 1869), in Roger Bellet 'André Léo, écrivain-idéologue' *Romantisme* 77 (1992), p. 62

¹⁰¹ Gastaldello, p.13

¹⁰² Apart from writing novels and articles, one of the other avenues through which Léo sought social reform, and one that she used fully – in particular during the Commune – was public speaking. See Joyce Dixon-Fyle, op. cit., p.101

¹⁰³ André Léo, *La Guerre sociale: Discours prononcé au congrès de la paix 1871* (Neuchatel, 1871), p.13

¹⁰⁴ Gastaldello, p.13

l'organisation de l'armée nationale et citoyenne; et enfin et surtout peut-être, l'instruction démocratique, gratuite et intégrale¹⁰⁵.

Following her claim, Bakounine himself accused Léo of “socialisme bourgeois” and on 10 April *L'Égalité* announced that she would no longer collaborate with the paper¹⁰⁶.

Journalism, writing at the service of the Commune

Besides her novels, which reached a readership largely outside the classes she eloquently defended, Léo used her involvement with newspapers to write political editorials and articles, aiming at a more direct impact, and bringing the question of equality between men and women to the fore. She started her career as a journalist prior to the rise of the Commune in 1867 when she started writing for the newspaper *La Coopération*¹⁰⁷. In her articles she focused on many of the same feminist themes she had previously developed in her novels. In her “Lettre au rédacteur”, published in February 1867, she reported on the strong disparity between men and women's wages, claiming that women earned half of what a man earned:

Le prix de la journée de travail dans les campagnes est partout à peu près le même: pour les hommes un franc, avec la nourriture; ou deux francs sans être nourris... Pour les femmes le prix varie de 40 à 50 centimes, avec la nourriture, et s'élève à 75 centimes quand elles ne la reçoivent pas¹⁰⁸.

In the same article she reported on the difference between the working conditions in the province and in the city:

Dans les villes, le prix de la main d'œuvre varie suivant l'industrie. Mais pour les ouvrières la journée est la même que celle des pauvres femmes des campagnes, 40 et 50 centimes¹⁰⁹.

She also analysed the consequences of the work done by nuns, which lowered the costs of labour: Like many other “communards”, Léo held strong anticlerical views.

¹⁰⁵ Léo, *La Guerre sociale*, P.13

¹⁰⁶ *L'Égalité* (10 April, 1869) in Gastaldello, p.13

¹⁰⁷ Gastaldello, p.11

¹⁰⁸ Léo, ‘Lettre au Rédacteur’ (*La Coopération*, 10 February 1867), in Gastaldello, p.11

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*

She denounced convent-run workshops for exploiting women's labour and underselling their products, a practice that drove down wages in the competing workshops: "Cela est dû au travail des couvents, qui jettent à prix réduit sur le marché d'énormes quantités de linge confectionné"¹¹⁰. She therefore condemned the establishment of convent of women in any locality¹¹¹.

In 1866 Léo started to write for a modest review called *Le Droit des femmes*, founded by French feminist Léon Richer (1824-1911), well known journalist and arguably feminism's most tireless organizer. In Richer's paper Léo published her seminal essay "La femme et les mœurs. Liberté ou monarchie" (1869), where she famously replied to misogynist thinkers such as Proudhon and Michelet and accused them of insulting women by trying to prove their inferiority. Léo focused particularly on Proudhon and his controversial book *Justice dans la Révolution et dans l'Eglise* (1858), where he tried to demonstrate in a "scientific way" woman's physical, intellectual and moral inferiority. Léo analysed and scrupulously challenged his theory. In particular, she emphasized that women were not physically inferior to men, that they were just as strong but endowed with a different type of strength, as their strength was intended for different purposes, such as pregnancy and child birth¹¹².

To those who considered women of being incapable of high intellectual conceptions, (claiming that their brains were smaller than those of men), Léo asked to search the causes of women's apathy vis-à-vis culture and social problems. The lack of education, of freedom and responsibility were according to her, the determinants of women's often passive attitude. When women's brains would no longer be purposefully atrophied, when they would at last be given freedom and an education similar to that of men, only then would physiologists have the right to resume their calculations, weighing and measuring brains. As for motherhood, Léo wished to highlight a mystification dear to men, when they argued that women were born mainly to be mothers: if this were true, it would be one more reason to give women a suitable instruction so as to enable them to meet the needs and endless curiosity of

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Eichner, p.61

¹¹² André Léo, "La femme et les mœurs. Liberté ou monarchie" (1869), in Gastaldello, p.16

their children. Léo defended and valued motherhood, but she warned women of being entirely absorbed in this role¹¹³.

The collaboration between Léo and Richer, like the one with *L'Égalité*, did not last long. The reason for the ending of this collaboration is unknown and rather surprising, as Léo and Richer shared by and large the same ideas and goals¹¹⁴. Indeed, the programme advocated by "Le Droit des femmes" recalled many of Léo's demands such as to improve the educational program in girls' schools, to increase women workers' wages to fight prostitution, to work toward revising the Civil Code, to spread the idea of a single moral standard, to give women free access to the liberal professions, to gain application of the formula "à produit égal, salaire égal" and to obtain freedom for women to dispose of their own wealth¹¹⁵.

Just two months before the uprising of the Commune, in January 1871, during the Prussian siege, together with her friends Benoît Malon and Élie Reclus, Léo founded the newspaper *La République des Travailleurs*¹¹⁶. The targeted lectureship for this paper was the rural population of the provinces and the aim was to promote its education. The paper presented itself as the voice of the International Workers Association and was based on the mottos: "Pas de droits sans devoirs, pas de devoirs sans droits" and "affranchissement des travailleurs par les travailleurs eux-mêmes"¹¹⁷.

Her involvement in the Commune was one of an activist, requiring immediate call for action from others to support the movement. This is the reason why, alongside Anna Jaclard, Russian socialist and feminist revolutionary, wife of the "communard" Victor Jaclard, she founded the newspaper *La Sociale* in which she fiercely criticized the Versailles government, Thiers and Favre in particular. However, she also criticised the Commune's government in her newspaper. As has already been seen when examining her novel, Léo had a long standing interest in the countryside and its potential for renewal. It is from the besieged capital that she calls on workers from the countryside to rise. Her famous appeal "Aux travailleurs des campagnes" was indeed published on 28 April 1871 in *La Sociale*, and around 100.000 copies were released.

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Anteghini, p.70

¹¹⁵ Moses, p.186

¹¹⁶ Gastaldello, p.18

¹¹⁷ Ibid

Its impact on the peasants however remains unknown¹¹⁸. Here Léo compared the conditions of workers in the city and workers in the countryside and showed how similar they were with one another. Both types of workers were being exploited and both had to fight for the same cause:

Frère on te trompe. Nos intérêts sont les mêmes. Ce que je demande, tu le veux aussi, l'affranchissement que je réclame, c'est le tien. Qu'importe si c'est à la ville ou à la campagne que le pain, le vêtement, l'abri, le secours manquent à celui qui produit toute la richesse du monde ? Qu'importe que l'opresseur ait nom : gros propriétaire ou industriel ? Chez toi, comme chez nous, la journée est longue et rude, et ne rapporte pas même ce qu'il faut aux besoins du corps (...). Nous sommes encore et toujours, toi et moi, les vassaux de la misère. (...) Et voilà pourquoi Paris s'agite, réclame, se soulève et veut changer les lois qui donnent tout pouvoir aux riches sur les travailleurs¹¹⁹.

In the same appeal Léo warned the peasants : "Si Paris tombe, le joug de la misère restera sur votre cou et passera sur celui de vos enfants"¹²⁰ and asked for their help: "Aidez-le donc à triompher"¹²¹. She concluded her appeal by stating in capital letters what the common goal of the revolution was: "LA TERRE AU PAYSAN, L'OUTIL À L'OUVRIER, LE TRAVAIL POUR TOUS"¹²².

Extremely faithful to her convictions she did not fear to go against her allies in order not to compromise them. She firmly believed that the end never justifies the means and believed in always putting forward an honest and democratic policy, even when this meant going against her allies. Indeed, wishing not to act like the Commune's foes, she opposed its decision to suppress reactionary papers: "Si nous agissons comme nos adversaires, comment le monde choisira-t-il entre eux et nous?"¹²³. Léo publicly disagreed with the revolutionary government on many points. In particular she reproached its misogynist attitude. She strongly criticised the fact that among the ninety Commune central committee members, not even one was a woman, a rather unfair situation considering that without women, she claimed, and

¹¹⁸Jacques Rougerie, Michelle Perrot, *La Commune de 1871 : L'événement, les hommes et la mémoire* (Paris, 2004), p.115

¹¹⁹ André Léo, "L'appel aux travailleurs des campagnes" on Association André Léo <http://www.andreleo.com/spip.php?article7> [accessed on 10/03/11]

¹²⁰ Ibid

¹²¹ Ibid

¹²² Ibid

¹²³ André Léo, *La Sociale* (22 April, 1871), in Thomas p.146

their fundamental role in the 18 March demonstration, the Commune would never had come to life¹²⁴.

On many occasions during the Commune, Léo repeatedly invited women to join the fight. In her 12 April *La Sociale*'s article "Toutes avec tous" Léo affirmed the importance for all Parisians to take up arms, and for men and women to form a united fighting force against Versailles¹²⁵. Her appeal, although welcomed favourably by many women who were willing to join the fight, clashed with the Commune's government which did not approve of women's warriors. Indeed on 1 May, the Commune's Committee of Public Safety, passed a measure barring women from taking part on the battlefield. The Committee issued this ruling on its first day of existence, exemplifying the depth of sexism amongst male socialist leaders¹²⁶. Seven days later, on 8 May 1871, twenty days before the fall of the Commune, Léo published the seminal article, "La Révolution sans la femme" where she strongly criticised the Commune's government for excluding women from the battlefield:

Croit-on pouvoir faire la Révolution sans les femmes? Voilà 80 ans qu'on l'essaie et qu'on n'en vient pas à bout. La première Révolution leur décerna bien le titre de citoyennes, mais non pas les droits. Elle les laissa exclues de la liberté, de l'égalité. Repoussées par la Révolution, les femmes retournèrent au catholicisme (...). (Les Républicains) n'ont détrôné l'Empereur et le bon Dieu que pour se mettre à leur place. Et naturellement, dans cette intention, il leur faut des sujets, ou tout au moins des sujettes. (Ainsi la femme) n'aurait fait que changer de confesseur¹²⁷.

Here again she emphasised and condemned the process whereby the oppressed becomes the oppressor. As with many other republicans (as will be seen in Chapter 3 dedicated to Paule Mink), Léo targeted the strong influence of the Church on women's education in particular. To her, the Church's unshakable belief in the notion of obedience and its way of preserving its iron-grip on society. Léo did not fear to express her discontent towards the revolutionary government and even in the wake of the fall of the Commune, she confirmed her opposition to those responsible for the fall of the Commune, the elected members of the Commune themselves: "Plus que

¹²⁴ Eichner, p.100

¹²⁵ André Léo, "Toutes avec tous" *La Sociale* (Paris, 12 April 1871), in Eichner, p.101

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, p.103

¹²⁷ André Léo "La Révolution sans la femme" (8 May 1871) in Bellet, p.63

personne, j'ai déploré, j'ai maudit l'aveuglement de ces hommes – je parle de la majorité – dont la stupide incapacité a perdu la plus belle cause”¹²⁸.

An “écrivain engagé”

During the Commune Léo spoke at clubs and participated in both Michel's “Montmartre Vigilance Committee” and Dmitrieff's “Union des femmes” as will be seen in later chapters. There is no concrete evidence of what she did within these organizations, it is nonetheless obvious that her action as a journalist during the Commune was far more important than her participation within either the “Union” or the “Montmartre Vigilance Committee”. Léo did not fight on the barricades as Michel did, she did not organise women to action as Dmitrieff did, and although she claimed interest in the provinces she did not physically go to the provinces to spread her message as Mink did. Léo served the Commune and the socialist cause using her talent as a writer and journalist, pursuing her own battles she tirelessly focused on those social themes closest to her denouncing society's inequities and injustices.

During the three-months uprising, she focused essentially on writing in newspapers, and taking part in public speaking, as this form of expression allowed her to comment immediately on the events taking place around her. With the enemy standing at the gates of the city, people felt a constant sense of urgency and there was certainly no time to write or read any novels, she felt; the speed with which she could express herself through the press proved particularly useful. In all her articles during the Commune, she demonstrated a lucid and practical attitude. It seems indeed that one of her main characteristics was her lucidity (something which, according to her the Commune's government was devoid of by and large). She knew that in order to win, Paris needed the support of the provinces, hence her appeal to the peasants. Moreover, she knew that in order to win, everyone had to join the fight; men and women alike. Hence her call to women to join the fight.

In the wake of the Commune's fall, Léo continued to serve the socialist cause and did so in the way she best knew how: writing. After the fall of the insurrection,

¹²⁸ André Léo, *La Guerre Sociale*, p.2

and given that there was no newspaper outlet available for her to express her ideas anymore, she went back to writing fiction. Although over the years she got more and more disillusioned with the International and progressively retrieved from the public sphere, she never ceased writing and from 1876 to 1899 she wrote nine novels.

As claimed by Malon: "André Léo (...) s'était également vouée à la cause populaire et la servait de sa plume, de sa parole et de son concours"¹²⁹. As she herself claimed in the wake of the Commune's fall she would never stop testifying against social injustices:

Jamais le sentiment d'indignation qui s'est élevé en moi ne s'apaisera!
Et tant que je vivrai, partout où je pourrai être entendue, je témoignerai
contre cette incarnation monstrueuse de l'égoïsme, de l'hypocrisie et de
la férocité, que l'imbécile vulgaire accepte sous le nom de parti de
l'ordre.¹³⁰

Similarly to her friend Jules Vallès (member of the Commune government as well as a literary critic, journalist and novelist) who had famously claimed: "*Ou insurgé ou courtisan: il n'y a pas à sortir de là*"¹³¹, Léo too believed one could only choose between two options:

Il n'y a en réalité que deux partis en ce monde: celui de la lumière et de
la paix par la liberté et l'égalité; celui du privilège par la guerre et par
l'ignorance. Il n'y a pas, il ne peut pas y avoir de parti intermédiaire;
j'entends de parti sérieux.¹³²

In a speech Léo held in the aftermath of the fall of the Commune to the "Ligue de la paix et de la liberté" she claimed that it was them, the enlightened, educated class (who supposedly belonged to the world referred above as the world of light, peace, liberty and equality) who could not possibly pretend not to see injustices: "Vous ne pouvez pas vous appeler la Ligue de la paix et de la liberté, et demeurer indifférents à

¹²⁹ Benoit Malon, *Troisième défaite du prolétariat Français* (Paris, 1876) in Thomas *Les Petroleuses* (Paris: Gallimard 1963), p. 141

¹³⁰ André Léo, *La guerre Sociale*, p.5

¹³¹ Walter Redfern 'Plus marrant que Sartre : Vallès et la littérature engagée' *Les Amis de Jules Vallès* Vol 16 (1993) 62-68, p.65

¹³² André Léo, *La guerre sociale*, p.7

ces massacres, à ces violences.”¹³³ They had, in her opinion, the duty to oppose terror and defend people’s right to freedom :

Vous, messieurs, qui représentez ici la pensée intelligente des classes éclairées, qui croyez à la paix, qui croyez à la liberté, et par conséquent à la conscience humaine, votre devoir est de protester contre de tels crimes. Feindre de ne pas les voir, quand ils remplissent le monde, quand ce pays où vous êtes est semé des débris de ce naufrage, serait trop puéril et trop faux, et je le répète, votre devoir s’y oppose. (...) Vous êtes la Ligue de la liberté, et 40,000 hommes sont entassés dans des cales; et toutes les libertés, de nouveau, sont violées; et la terreur, depuis quatre mois, règne à Paris! C’est la vieille barbarie, victorieuse de tous les instincts du monde nouveau. Vous devez protester contre elle, et mettre au ban de l’humanité ces égorgés et ces proscriptionnaires¹³⁴.

This idea anticipates the notion of “engagement” (“Commitment”), a concept that Jean-Paul Sartre will elaborate on in 1947, but which already inhabits the ethos of the 19th C as will be forcedly demonstrated by Zola in his famous letter “J’accuse” (published on 13th January 1898) to defend the name of Captain Dreyfus wrongly accused of treason. Léo, just as Vallès, provided the notion of “littérature engagée” with some of its most important tenets. The notion of responsibility of the writer is at the heart of their practice, long before Sartre will claim that the artist has the responsibility and the duty to engage with the political and social problems afflicting the society s/he lives in¹³⁵. Léo believed that herself, and fellow members of the lettered class bore a duty to raise the consciousness of those less fortunate¹³⁶. As she claimed:

La bourgeoisie a la plume, la parole, l’influence. Elle pouvait se faire l’organe des revendications du peuple égorgé, opprimé, vaincu. Elle n’eût été en cela que l’organe de la justice¹³⁷.

Again, strikingly, this is the line or argumentation used by Zola in “J’accuse”; it is therefore puzzling, as indeed Edith Thomas has pointed out (in *Les Pétroleuses* (1963)) that Léo should have been so utterly ignored and forgotten by historians.

¹³³ Ibid, p.2

¹³⁴ Ibid, p.6

¹³⁵ Alain Viala, Paul Aron, Denis Saint-Jacques, *Le Dictionnaire du littéraire* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), p. 177

¹³⁶ Eichner, p.98

¹³⁷ André Léo, *La guerre sociale*, p.14

Thomas identifies several reasons for this. First, being a woman certainly did not help Léo in asserting herself as a successful writer. Second, her strong personality and her lucid critical attitude towards both her opponents and her allies made it very difficult to place her within a particular political faction. Indeed, although her origins were in the bourgeoisie, she did not have its support, similarly although she was a well convinced socialist, she was contested by Marxists and anarchists alike for being too moderate. This position of hers is very likely to have hindered her career and path to success. Strikingly, Léo's personal story and her posterity (or lack of) does point out towards a strong gender bias in favour of men in French society: although it is easy enough to understand it in the context of 19th C French politics, it is more difficult to analyse it in terms of 20th C history.

Chapter 3

Organising women: Elisabeth Dmitrieff, the "Union des femmes" and Nathalie Le Mel

Dmitrieff and the Appeal to the Women Citizens of Paris

With André Léo, we have seen one veteran writer (her first novel was published in 1851) and journalist (she started her career as a journalist in 1867) whose fight for women's rights started long before the Commune, in an attempt to shape public awareness if not public policy. This was not easy and it is difficult to assess the gains of this form of campaigning before and during the Commune¹³⁸. This chapter examines another form of struggle in the pursuit of political freedom and women's rights: direct participation in the form of the creation of radical political organisations. Because of widespread misogynist attitudes within socialist milieu, throughout the nineteenth century, women had been excluded from most working class organisations. Nevertheless, during the Prussian siege they had started discussing with one another in clubs, organising themselves through communities, cooperative and workshops¹³⁹. Life during the siege contributed in developing a sense of solidarity and of "sisterhood" amongst Parisian women. Moreover, it can be claimed that the siege had been a training ground from which women emerged who would later become activists in one of the Commune's largest and most effective organisation: the "Union des femmes pour la Défense de Paris et les Soins aux Blessés" (the Union of Women for the Defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded)¹⁴⁰.

The leading force behind this organisation was Elisabeth Dmitrieff. Born Elisavieta Koucheleva on November 1, 1850, in the town of Volog in North West Russia, Dmitrieff was the illegitimate daughter of an aristocratic landowner and

¹³⁸ Fortified by the gains of earlier activism of Saint-Simonian and Fourierist journalism, former adherents organised themselves by founding their own presses, newspapers and journals for the creation of a typically pro-feminine discourse. In his *Histoire de la Presse française*, Henri Avenel points out that while feminist newspapers provided a viable outlet for women to air their dissenting views, the press itself was not free and suffered numerous repressive measures.

¹³⁹ Kathleen Jones, Françoise Vergès, 'Aux citoyennes, women politics and the Paris commune', *History of European Ideas*, 13 (1991), 711-732 (p.713)

¹⁴⁰ Eugene Shulkind, 'Socialist Women during the 1871 commune', *Past & Present*, 106 (1985), 124-163 (p.135)

former army officer, and a German nurse. Despite her illegitimate status she received an excellent education (she was fluent in French) and a substantial inheritance following her father's death¹⁴¹. By the time she reached her teens, Dmitrieff had become interested in Marx and other socialist thinkers' revolutionary ideas. She aspired to more formal education but could not do so as Russia barred women from universities. Determined to continue her studies, she entered into a "mariage blanc" in order to travel freely under the legitimacy of her husband's name. At seventeen she thus married Colonel Mikhail Tomanovsky and subsequently left Russia for Geneva. Here she studied, befriended Karl Marx and became a founding member of the Russian émigrés section of the First International. These three years in Geneva prepared her for the central role she was to assume in the 1871 Parisian insurrection¹⁴².

Indeed, just turned twenty-two years old, Dmitrieff was sent to Paris by Marx to keep the International General Council informed on the events of the city which had risen only ten days earlier¹⁴³. She arrived in Paris at the end of March 1871, on either March 28 or 29, with a false passport provided by the International. There, she dropped her father's name Koucheleva and her legal married name Tomonovskaya and took the nom de guerre of Dmitrieff (a common Russian surname). Upon her arrival in Paris, she immediately began to investigate the revolutionary situation and its potential opportunities. She met with Benoît Malon, founder of the French branch of the International and a member of the Commune, whom she had encountered earlier in Geneva¹⁴⁴. Having thus established a connection with the insurrectionary government, she then consulted with female activists such as Marie Leloup and Blanche Lefèvre. Within a month, on 11 April 1871, she issued an "Appel aux citoyennes de Paris":

Nous invitons les citoyennes patriotiques à se rencontrer aujourd'hui, mardi 11 avril (...) afin de prendre des mesures concrètes pour la formation de comités, dans chaque arrondissement, visant à organiser un mouvement de femmes pour la défense de Paris (...) Nous avons

¹⁴¹ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.27

¹⁴² Ibid, p.28

¹⁴³ Ibid, p.71

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

besoin de la collaboration active de toutes les femmes de Paris comprenant que le salut de notre capitale dépend de l'aboutissement de ce conflit; sachant que l'ordre actuel porte en lui même les germes de la pauvreté et la mort de la Liberté et de la Justice; qui donc accueille l'avènement du règne du travail et de la qualité et est prêt à l'heure du péril à se battre et à mourir pour le triomphe de cette révolution, pour laquelle nos frères sacrifient leurs vies !¹⁴⁵

The appeal, whose title is a direct reference to the terminology used during the French Revolution of 1789, was followed immediately by the announcement of a meeting, during which the "Union des femmes" was founded, within a month of her arrival in Paris¹⁴⁶. The "Union des femmes" stands as one of the Commune's largest and most clearly delineated and effective organisation and was to be the women's section of the French branch of the First International. This explains in part why this organisation developed very rapidly and maintained a cohesive structure throughout its duration. It was also remarkable in that it was composed mainly of women belonging to the working class and was preoccupied with their immediate needs¹⁴⁷. Finally, it was officially linked with the Commune's government and developed as the principal interlocutor with the Commune on behalf of women¹⁴⁸.

The "Union des femmes" and the Commune's government did collaborate throughout the seven weeks long uprising. Dmitrieff asked the Commune to be in charge of the costs of printing posters and notices essential for its propaganda and to provide the "Union des femmes" with quarters where the committees could reside permanently¹⁴⁹. In exchange, the "Union des femmes" put its members at the Commune's service and sent women to serve in ambulances and on the barricades¹⁵⁰.

¹⁴⁵ *Journal Officiel* (11 April 1871) in Jones and Verges, p.721

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*

¹⁴⁷ Shulkind, p.25

Out of 128 members, we know the professions of 60. All women's trades are represented there: fifteen seamstresses, nine waistcoat-makers, six sewing-machine operators, five dress-makers, five linen-drapers, three makers-up of men's clothing, two boot-stitchers, two hat-makers, two laundresses, two cardboard-makers, one embroiderer of military decorations, one braid-maker, one tie-maker, one schoolteacher, one perfume-maker, one maker of jewellery, one gold-polisher, one bookstitcher, and one bookbinder. The Central Committee, which in principle was made up of twenty members representing the twenty *arrondissements* of Paris, accurately reflected this social composition, see Edith Thomas, *Les Pétroleuses*, (Paris: Gallimard 1963) p.62-4

¹⁴⁸ Robert Tombs, *The Paris Commune 1871* (London: Longman, 1999), p.135

¹⁴⁹ Thomas, p.80

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*

It was also involved in recruiting teachers for the Commune's planned secular girls' schools, recruited "cantinières" and cared for the wounded by replacing nuns in the city's hospitals¹⁵¹.

The "Union des femmes" and the International

Dmitrieff had strong links with the International and as claimed by Gullickson, the "Union des femmes" functioned as the women's section of the French branch of the International¹⁵². During the Prussian siege, the International had become the most prestigious organisation among working-class Parisians. It gained widespread consent for its aim of freeing the working class from wage exploitation and for its will to replace authoritative government with a democratic state led by representatives of the working class¹⁵³. As for women's rights, the International was supposedly in favour of the elimination of all forms of discrimination, including those of gender. The predominant position adopted among the Parisian section had noticeably shifted away from that of the French delegation of the Geneva congress which in 1866 claimed that women were not intended to work and their place was within the family and home¹⁵⁴. Women were now included as equal members to men, however attitudes among men still varied considerably and the formulation regarding women's involvement within the International was general enough to allow men with quite different opinions on the subject to be members. As claimed by Benoît Malon in a letter he wrote to André Léo in 1868:

Nous (l'Internationale) n'oublions pas la question de l'émancipation des femmes et nous recevons de nouveaux soutiens tous les jours. Nous avons convaincu presque toute l'association à ce propos; seuls les pontifes de Proudhon restent sceptiques¹⁵⁵.

Dmitrieff's strong links with the International (let's not forget she was sent to Paris by Marx himself) were evident starting from the first article of the "Union des

¹⁵¹ Tombs, p.136

¹⁵² Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Cornell University Press, 1996), p.125

¹⁵³ Shulkind, p.141

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p.106

¹⁵⁵ Letter dated 6 September 1868, in Shulkind, p.141

femmes” General statute which claimed that all members of the “Union des femmes” were correspondingly members of the International Workingmen’s Association, and were to be responsible for paying its monthly dues¹⁵⁶. Although this statute was not always fully applied, such obligation indicates Dmitrieff’s desire to bring working women into the International and consequently influence the organisation’s heavily male-dominated agenda¹⁵⁷.

Membership to the “Union des femmes”

The overall organization of the “Union des femmes” featured a seven-member Executive Commission and eleven-member commissions representing each arrondissement¹⁵⁸. The executive commission consisted of Nathalie Le Mel, Blanche Lefèvre, Marceline Leloup, Adèle Gauvin, Aline Jacquier, Aglaé Jarry¹⁵⁹, and Elisabeth Dmitrieff¹⁶⁰. Although the “Union des femmes” was not the only female organisation operating during the Commune, Dmitrieff nonetheless clearly requested total loyalty to the “Union des femmes’s” members, to the point of publicly chastising the widely known André Léo when she joined the “Comité de Vigilance de Montmartre”. Indeed, Dmitrieff, in the name of the “Union des femmes” claimed that:

Le Comité central de l’ Union des femmes pour la défense de Paris et les soins aux blessés juge nécessaire d’informer tous les membres de l’Union que la citoyenne André Léo, en donnant des explications sur les motifs qui l’avaient engagée à donner sa signature à un comité étranger à notre Union, a déclaré n’avoir aucun rapport officiel avec ledit Comité de Vigilance et a témoigné son désir de rester membre du Comité du 10eme arrondissement de l’Union des femmes pour la défense de Paris et les soins aux blessés¹⁶¹.

As a Marxist, Dmitrieff exercised a level of control which gave the “Union des femmes” all the characteristics of a monolithic party. This is likely to have repelled

¹⁵⁶ Eichener, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.86

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

¹⁵⁸ David A. Shafer ‘Plus que des ambulancières: women in articulation and defence of their ideals during the Paris Commune 1871’, *French History*, 7:1 (1993), 85-101 (p.97)

¹⁵⁹ Shulkind, p.153

¹⁶⁰ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.81

¹⁶¹ *Le Cri du Peuple*, 2 May 1871 in Thomas, p.106

some potential adherents¹⁶². According to Carolyn Eichner, the “Union des femmes’s” top-down highly centralised structure may have alienated other high profile female writers and activists such as Paule Mink, Louise Michel and Anna Jolard. Moreover, Eichner insists, Dmitrieff’s youth, her inexperience and recent arrival on the Parisian scene may also have made Léo, Mink and Michel wary of her or disinterested in her programme. Of these women, only Léo participated in the organisation but did so in a limited capacity and her name does not appear on the list of the “Union des femmes’s” adherents¹⁶³. Nathalie Le Mel, member of the Executive Commission and the “Union des femmes’s” second most influential member after Dmitrieff, appears to be the only to have been excepted from Dmitrieff’s monolithic demands¹⁶⁴.

Nathalie Le Mel

Nathalie Le Mel was of humble Breton origins. A mother of three, she separated from her alcoholic husband shortly after moving to Paris in 1861. Since then she earned her living as a stitcher in the bookbinding trade. Having learned a skilled trade at the age of 35 to support herself and her children, Le Mel strongly empathized and identified with the working class. As a single mother, she was more personally affected by gender and class oppression and inequity than other high profile “communardes”. As a result, her activism included a “grass roots” component absent from many of her fellow compatriots, including Léo and Dmitrieff¹⁶⁵. Unlike Dmitrieff, Le Mel had work, union and strike experience. Indeed, her militant credentials before the rise of the Commune, were rather impressive: she was an active member of the French section of the International, she founded a co-operative restaurant and frequently participated in radical clubs¹⁶⁶. Le Mel was notorious for the strong language she would use in her orations:

¹⁶² Ibid

¹⁶³ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.81

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, p.83

¹⁶⁶ Shulkind, p.153

Nous arrivons à l'instant suprême où il faut savoir mourir pour le pays.
Plus de léthargie, plus d'incertitude! Tout le monde dans le combat!
Chacun à son devoir! Nous devons écraser Versailles!¹⁶⁷

During the siege, Le Mel and Eugène Varlin (future member of the Commune's government) formed a food co-operative called "la Marmite". Established in the 6th arrondissement, "la Marmite" served cheap food and played an essential role in feeding poor and hungry Parisians¹⁶⁸. This was an essential task since during the siege starvation among the masses was rampant. As of 19 September 1870, Paris was under Prussian siege. The Prussians had declared they would end the siege and the war against France if, among other conditions, France would surrender Alsace and half of Lorraine. Until the French government reached an agreement with the Prussian government on the armistice terms on January 28, 1871 Parisians were intentionally weakened through poor food rationing aimed at literally starving them into surrender. Many in the capital turned to all sources of food available, including stray animals such as rats, cats and dogs¹⁶⁹. In her account of the Commune, Louis Michel, a close friend of Le Mel, later recounted:

La marmite révolutionnaire où pendant tout le siège madame Le Mel, de la chambre syndicale des relieurs, empêcha je ne sais comment tant de gens de mourir de faim, fut un véritable tour de force de dévouement et d'intelligence¹⁷⁰.

Le Mel continued her work at "la Marmite" during the Commune, in addition to speaking at political clubs and participating in the coordination and administration of the "Union des femmes". She wholly devoted herself to the Commune and to the "Union des femmes". The intensity of her commitment is exemplified in the interaction between her and the presiding judge at her trial. When she was asked: "Did you often assist in the Central Committee meetings?" Le Mel responded: "Every

¹⁶⁷ Fontolieu, *Les Eglises de Paris sous la Commune* (Paris, 1873), p.274 [quoted in Martin Philip Johnson, *The paradise of association: political culture and popular organisation in the Paris Commune of 1871* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), p.248]

¹⁶⁸ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p. 84

¹⁶⁹ Stephen Badsey, *The Franco-Prussian War 1870-1871* (Osprey publishing: 2003), p.75

¹⁷⁰ Louise Michel, *La Commune: histoire et souvenirs* (Paris: 1898), p.173

day”, and when she was asked: “You also made the rounds in the arrondissement committees each day?” Le Mel replied again: “yes”¹⁷¹.

Dmitrieff clearly valued Le Mel and tolerated her activism in outside organisations, sparing her the public chastisement she gave Léo. As claimed by Eichner, Le Mel created a bridge between the elite intellectual milieu of Dmitrieff and the working-class world of Parisian women and brought a unique perspective and invaluable set of experiences to the Executive Commission of the “Union des femmes”¹⁷². A generation after the Commune, Henri Rochefort (a major newspaper publisher and Communards’ sympathiser) recalled discussions with Le Mel on the prison ship deporting them to New Caledonia and describes her as:

One of the most intelligent women I have ever known. Eloquence and common sense equalled her courage; her thinking was marked by astonishing clarity and rigour¹⁷³.

Dmitrieff’s key role in creating the “Union des femmes” is undeniable. The “Union des femmes” was based upon her own particular socialist feminism, the Commune had given her the opportunity to turn theory into practice and apply her studies to reality¹⁷⁴. Nevertheless, as claimed by Shulkind, Nathalie Le Mel’s involvement with the “Union des femmes” is in no way less important than Dmitrieff’s. Indeed, whatever may have been the effectiveness of Dmitrieff’s organizational skills and political lucidity in the “Union des femmes”, Nathalie Le Mel appears to have had a crucial role in shaping the daily activities of the “Union des femmes” and in implementing the “Union des femmes’s” efforts to set up workshops and co-operatives¹⁷⁵.

¹⁷¹ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.83

¹⁷² *Ibid*, p.84

¹⁷³ Shulkind, p.154

¹⁷⁴ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.71

¹⁷⁵ Shulkind, p.155

The “Union des femmes” and the fight for the Commune

Because of limited documentation and fragmentary evidences, it is very difficult to describe the full range of activities the “union des femmes” engaged in¹⁷⁶. It is also hard to understand how women elected in the arrondissement committees could possibly attend the required two daily meetings, fulfil “Union des femmes” tasks, set up co-operatives workshops, organise discussion meetings, staff enrolment centres for nursing and canteens, run welfare institutions and still take care of their home responsibilities. Yet, surprisingly, evidence from registers, accounts, requisitions, communications and meeting notices demonstrate a remarkable degree of activity in many “arrondissements”, up until the violent fighting at the end of May¹⁷⁷.

It is only rarely that the full range of activities for a particular arrondissement committee can be reconstructed in full, but thanks to those scattered evidences we are aware of the principal functions performed by arrondissement committees. These functions included recruiting nurses and canteen aids for National Guard battalions and medical stations, providing non-religious personnel for welfare institutions such as orphanages and hostels for the elderly, setting up co-operative workshops for women, organizing public meetings and committee meetings, establishing town hall centres to provide information and aid seven days a week and last but not least, maintaining accounts and records¹⁷⁸. As the “Union des femmes’s” agenda was multifaceted, studies on the “Union des femmes” have generally concentrated mainly on its role in organising women’s cooperative and caring for the wounded and have often neglected its military functions. Carolyn Eichner’s study on the “Union des femmes” focuses mainly on its mission to restructure and re-evaluate women’s

¹⁷⁶ As Jacques Rougerie has noted himself (in *La Révolution avec ou sans la femme?*; *La Commune de 1871, Encyclopédie politique et historique des Femmes*, Christine Fauré dir., (Paris: PUF, 1997), women and the women’s rights movement have left very little traces in 19th C archives. Rougerie speaks of “silence significatif”. The files of the 1871 insurgents who were tried by the War councils are kept in the historical archives of the army (SHAT) in Vincennes; there about one hundred files concerning women who have played a real role during the insurrection. The Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, in Amsterdam, has papers patiently assembled by Lucien Descaves at the end of the 19th C, in particular, those dealing with the relationship between Benoît Malon and André Léo, as well as numerous texts by Louise Michel. For the purpose of this MA dissertation, I mostly relied on secondary sources, making reference to these archives as I was not in a position to go and examine these archives myself.

¹⁷⁷ Shulkind, p.148

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, p.149

labour¹⁷⁹, on the other hand, Martin Johnson, although he acknowledges these were important activities within the “Union des femmes”, argues that it was created primarily as a revolutionary rather than conciliatory endeavour. Johnson claims that the initial dominant motive for creating the “Union des femmes” was to organise women to militarily defend the Commune. Indeed, the “Appel aux citoyennes de Paris” asked for the aid of women who were willing to fight and die for the revolution and made no mention of nursing or workshops¹⁸⁰. The appeal, published in the Commune’s official newspaper, the *Journal officiel*, on 11 April, called on the women of Paris descendants of the women of the great Revolution:

Citoyennes de Paris, descendantes des femmes de la grande Révolution, qui au nom du peuple et de la justice, marchaient sur Versailles, ramenant captif Louis XVI, nous, mères, femmes, sœurs de ce peuple français, supporterons-nous plus longtemps que la misère et l’ignorance fassent des ennemis de nos enfants? Que père contre fils, ils viennent s’entretuer sous nos yeux pour le caprice de nos oppresseurs qui veulent l’anéantissement de Paris après l’avoir livré aux étrangers? Citoyennes, il faut que c’en soit fait du vieux monde¹⁸¹.

The language used in the appeal echoes with references to past revolutions, and in particular, as the reference to Louis XVI indicates and through undertones of the “Marseillaise”, to that of 1789. Importantly, for our point in this dissertation, the appeal is couched in strongly gendered language, calling for women, mothers and sisters to join the fight¹⁸². Indeed, in terms of gender, the call to fight “with our brothers” is in itself a claim to equality:

Si les infâmes qui fusillent les prisonniers, qui assassinent nos chefs, mitraillent une foule de femmes désarmées, tant mieux! Le cri d’horreur et d’indignation achèvera ce que nous aurons tenté!... Et si les cordes et les baïonnettes sont toutes utilisées par nos frères, il nous restera encore des pavés pour écraser les traîtres!¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.70

¹⁸⁰ Johnson, p. 246

¹⁸¹ *Journal officiel de la Commune* (11 April 1871) quoted in Thomas, p.78

¹⁸² Tombs, p.135

¹⁸³ *Journal officiel de la Commune* (11 April 1871) quoted in Thomas, p.78

The appeal can be read as a literal call for women to fight, inviting them to use paving stones to crush traitors and envisaging the moral effect if the enemy dared to fire on a crowd of unarmed women. Moreover, on April 14, the “Union des femmes” urged again women to prepare to fight:

Le danger est imminent et l'ennemi est aux portes de Paris. (...). C'est le devoir et le droit de chacun de se battre pour la cause sacrée du peuple (...) mettre un terme à la corruption et, finalement, régénérer la société¹⁸⁴.

Moreover, according to the “Union des femmes”, women were ready, if the enemy was to enter Paris “à combattre et, vaincre ou mourir, pour la défense de nos droits communs”¹⁸⁵. The “Union des femmes” demanded that women be included in the fight on the basis of men’s and women’s common interest in the outcome of the struggle. The leaders of the “Union des femmes” claimed that “le succès du conflit actuel (...) est aussi important pour les femmes que pour les hommes de Paris”¹⁸⁶ and that women had a right to join in the fighting and had as much their “cause sacrée” as men did. It was the duty and the right of everyone to defend the revolution¹⁸⁷. Evidence that the “Union des femmes” organised barricade duties is given by witnesses during the trials following the “semaine sanglante” and by the register of barricade fighters found at the town hall of the 10th arrondissement, where the “Union des femmes” made its headquarters during the week of 21-28 May. According to a woman who testified at Le Mel’s trial:

Toute femme qui voulait aller aux barricades, pour les construire ou les défendre, devait donner leur nom et s’inscrire, et celles qui voulaient soigner les blessés devaient faire de même.¹⁸⁸

Although the “Union des femmes” rapidly reached widespread consent among working class women, there was nevertheless some opposition to the movement. This

¹⁸⁴ *Journal officiel de la Commune* (11 April 1871) quoted in Thomas, p.125

¹⁸⁵ Thomas, p.80

¹⁸⁶ Gullickson, p.126

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid*

¹⁸⁸ Dossier Le Mel, 4e Conseil 388, quoted in Johnson, p.248

became evident in May when a second anonymous group of “citoyennes” placarded the walls of Paris calling for an armistice:

Toutes les femmes (...) celles qui ont des petits enfants dont les bombes peuvent se trouver dans leurs berceaux, celles dont le mari se bat par conviction, celles dont les maris ou les fils gagnent leur pain quotidien sur les remparts, celles qui aujourd'hui gardent leurs maisons seules (...) souhaitent la paix! La paix!¹⁸⁹

These women wanted to protect their children and their husbands thereby reverting back to traditional gender roles. They sought an immediate end to the bloodshed and a reconciliation between Paris and Versailles: “Les femmes de Paris, au nom de la Patrie, au nom de l'honneur, au nom même de l'humanité, demandent un armistice”¹⁹⁰. The “Union des femmes” was outraged by such a proclamation and two days later, it responded to the anonymous group of – according to them – reactionary women by also covering the walls of Paris:

Au nom de la Révolution sociale que nous acclamons, au nom de la revendication des droits du travail, de l'égalité et de la justice, l'Union des femmes pour la défense de Paris et les soins aux blessés proteste de toutes ses forces contre l'indigne proclamation aux citoyennes parue et affichée avant-hier et émanant d'un groupe anonyme de réactionnaires¹⁹¹.

In contrast to the “citoyennes” who had spoken in the name of country, honour and humanity the “Union des femmes” spoke in the name of the social revolution, the right to work and equality and justice¹⁹². The “Union des femmes” did not demand peace but all out war:

Toutes unies et résolues, grandies et éclairées par les souffrances que les crises sociales entraînent toujours à leur suite, profondément convaincues que la Commune, représentante des principes internationaux et révolutionnaires des peuples, porte en elle les germes de la révolution sociale, les Femmes de Paris prouveront, à la France et au Monde, qu'elles aussi sauront, au moment du danger suprême – aux

¹⁸⁹ Gullickson, p.127

¹⁹⁰ Thomas, p.80

¹⁹¹ VIe Conseil de Guerre in Louise Michel, *Mémoires de Louise Michel, écrites par elle-même* (Paris, 1886), p.210

¹⁹² Gullickson, p.127

barricades, sur les remparts de Paris, si la réaction forçait les portes – donner comme leurs frères, leur sang et leur vie pour la défense et le triomphe de la Commune, c'est-à-dire du peuple.¹⁹³

According to the “Union des femmes”, women were as capable as their male counterparts of giving up their lives for the cause of the Commune, for the cause of the People and there could be no compromise. A negotiated peace would have been the equivalent of a defeat. It would have destroyed the workers’ hopes for social transformation and the end of exploitation. In short, it would have been “treason”¹⁹⁴. Clearly, in its political positioning the “Union des femmes” was both radical and unambiguous about women’s participation in the defence of the Commune: women were fighting on an equal footing with men, wanted freedom for all, regardless of class and gender. However, it is also clear that the “Union des femmes” focused on the specific interests of women workers. Dmitrieff’s Marxism was deeply influenced by her feminist stands. She understood class and gender inequity as integrally intertwined and considered intergender and interclass conflict as detrimental to all progress¹⁹⁵. According to her, the ruling class needed intergender conflict to maintain its power and preserve the status quo. If a new socialist world was to be put in place, it was necessary for men and women to unite. Dmitrieff saw the reorganization of women’s labour as the tool to achieve such unity.

The “Union des femmes” and the reorganisation of women’s work

The most important aspect of the collaboration between the “Union des femmes” and the Commune concerned this reorganization of work. The “Union des femmes’s” Executive Commission closely collaborated with the Commune’s Commission of Labour and Exchange in order to tackle the problem of unemployment among women. The solution was found in the use of co-operatives. The Commune’s decree of 16th April authorized the conversion of abandoned workshops into worker-owned co-operatives and a committee of nine representatives from Labour organizations, including Nathalie Le Mel from the Executive Commission of the

¹⁹³ VIe Conseil de Guerre in Louise Michel, *Mémoires*, p.211

¹⁹⁴ Gullickson, p.128

¹⁹⁵ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.74

“Union des femmes”, met in mid-May to co-ordinate their efforts in planning the implementation of such co-operatives¹⁹⁶.

In an undated letter to the Commune’s Commission of Labour and Exchange, Dmitrieff claimed that the work of women had been the most exploited of all and that its immediate reorganization was vital. The “Union des femmes” submitted two plans to the Commission. In the first, it declared that in order to establish the foundations for the new social order, it was essential for the Commune not to limit itself to the urgent needs of military defence, but to simultaneously initiate social reforms. According to the “Union des femmes”, it was crucial that the Commune did not rely on temporary arrangements which may be able to answer the pressing needs imposed by the abnormal situation, but could easily lead to other difficulties. In other words, the Commune’s duty was to put into practice reforms which would continue to be valid even after the circumstances which led to their initiation would have disappeared. It is therefore important to note that the “Union des femmes” had a strong political and social agenda which went far beyond the “defence of Paris and Aid to the Wounded” of the title. It clearly was intended as an alternative political party, organised in a fiercely militant way to promote the advancement of women and the poor, seen as the two excluded sections from the political and social spheres of French society at the time.

This goal could be achieved through the creation of women controlled workshops and of centres for the sale and distribution of the products they would have manufactured¹⁹⁷. The second plan of the “Union des femmes” elaborated additional details for implementing the co-operatives and called for the abolition of all competition between men and women workers since their interests were absolutely identical and their solidarity was essential for the success of Labour against Capital¹⁹⁸. Moreover it demanded equal pay for equal hours of work¹⁹⁹. Co-operative production was seen as a solution to part of the problem of inequality of women’s pay: as all earnings would go to the workers, women would logically receive equal pay for work

¹⁹⁶ Shulkind, p.149

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, p.150

¹⁹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹⁹ Gullickson, p.126

of equal value. The rise of female wages to parity with men's would, in Dmitrieff's opinion, remove the accusation that women were stealing men's jobs and would allow women to gain economic independence. Such a shift directly contradicted the ideology of separate spheres and the era's predominant assumption of the male as breadwinner²⁰⁰. Members of the Commune government supported women's desire to work but still believed it was best for them to work from home and that home piece-work (the kind of labour that most women performed at the time) should be distributed so that women could stay at home.

The "Union des femmes" took a different approach and argued that the only way to reorganize labour so that the producers were guaranteed the product of their work was by setting up free producer associations. Given Dmitrieff's involvement in the creation of the Russian section of the International in 1870 in Geneva, and her subsequent contacts with Marx (as we have seen), it is not surprising to find at the heart of the "Union des femmes" a strong aspiration to find a model deliberately attempting to produce against the appropriating class, searching for a new form of economic emancipation of labour. That said, the idea to put into place a co-operative model of production was more directly inspired by Proudhon's mutualist theory, than Marx:

La réorganisation du travail tendant à assurer le produit au producteur ne peut s'effectuer qu'au moyen d'associations productives libres, exploitant les diverses industries à leur profit collectif. La formation de ces associations, en soustrayant le travail au joug du capital exploiteur, assurerait enfin aux travailleurs la direction de leurs propres affaires²⁰¹.

The "Union des femmes" believed in the need for women to be independent and to control the products of their own activity as well as to be better supporters of their families.²⁰² It wanted to avoid the boredom and alienation of the workplace but simultaneously opposed relocating women's work in the home.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.74

²⁰¹ Thomas, p.96

²⁰² Jones and Verges, p.721

²⁰³ Ibid

identity being established, or whether she had been taken to Versailles.²¹⁴ The truth was very different: along with an astonishing number of fellow “communard” leaders, Dmitrieff had successfully made her way out of France and safely returned to Russia²¹⁵. Despite her innate predisposition to social unrest and her undisputable leading skills however, Dmitrieff never again attempted to create an organisation such as the “Union des femmes”.

²¹⁴ McClellan, p.157

²¹⁵ Ibid

Chapter 4

Paule Mink: Political clubs and the anti-clerical discourse

The influence of the Church on women

As already seen with Léo and Dmitrieff, a diverse set of approaches was used by women in their determination to accelerate social and political change, taking advantage of the unprecedented set of circumstances provided by the Commune uprising. Whilst Dmitrieff centred her efforts towards organising working-class women, other politically-minded women also strove to encourage women into joining the fight. If on the one hand Dmitrieff relied on a top-down organisational approach, other women opted for a more grass-root approach to revolution. Among these, stands out Paule Mink; passionate about revolution, gifted with exceptional oratorical skills, she inflamed Parisian club's audiences inspiring them to rise up and join the fight.

This study brings together four channels of protest and action²¹⁶, and in this chapter, through the example of Paule Mink I want to examine women's clubs during the Commune. Ostensibly intended to foster a feeling of female solidarity in a society that had been severely fragmented along gender and social class lines, clubs form part of the strategies employed by women to reconstruct a new self-image of women as trained workers and full citizens. In order to achieve this, animators of the clubs that sprung out of the Commune needed to explicitly address the ills of the French society of the time. One constant target of these clubs was the Catholic Church, and one of the most retrogressive policy against women routinely identified by the speakers was without a doubt the monopoly of instruction by the Church. So, in order to fully comprehend the context of the deep anti-clerical sentiments conveyed by these clubs, it is necessary to get back to the negative effects of the religious instructional system, which not only stifled initiative but produced other negative outcomes which far outweighed the positive.

²¹⁶ Writing, political organisation, clubs and *practical* action (which can take different forms from the creation of schools for girls to the fight on the barricades).

In 1845 French historian Jules Michelet published his polemical essay entitled *Le Prêtre, la femme et la famille*, in which he attacked the institution of the Church and denounced it as the main power responsible for women's oppression:

On avait cru généralement que pour le mariage il suffisait de deux personnes. Cela est changé. Voici le nouveau système, comme eux-mêmes l'ont exposé; trois éléments le constituent: 1° L'homme, le fort, le violent; 2° la femme, l'être faible de nature; 3° le prêtre, né homme et fort, mais qui veut bien se faire faible, ressembler à la femme, et participant ainsi de l'un et l'autre, peut s'interposer entre eux.²¹⁷

According to Michelet, women were the prime victim of clerical manipulation and the psychological control priests had over them was detrimental to marital life and family unity. More importantly, given the period we are examining, Jules Ferry, in his 1870 *Discours sur l'égalité d'éducation* targeted the Church by denouncing the monopoly it had established in the sphere of secondary education for girls:

Les évêques le savent bien: celui qui tient la femme, celui-là tient tout, d'abord parce qu'il tient l'enfant, ensuite parce qu'il tient le mari (...). C'est pour cela que l'Église veut retenir la femme, et c'est aussi pour cela qu'il faut que la démocratie la lui enlève; il faut que la démocratie choisisse, sous peine de mort; il faut choisir, citoyens: il faut qu'elle appartienne à la science ou qu'elle appartienne à l'Église.²¹⁸

The Church had merely three images of women, that is: woman as a wife (the devoted spouse submissive to her husband), woman as a prostitute (stressing her carnality and predisposition for evil) or woman as a virgin (the spiritual equal of men but compelled to deny her sexuality in order to attain equality with man)²¹⁹.

One of the strategic fields targeted by the Church to exert its influence, as seen in Jules Ferry's speech, was education. In this respect, the enactment of the Falloux Law in 1850, which allowed nuns to teach without holding a certificate of capacity (when it was obligatory for lay teachers) provided the Church an overwhelming advantage in education. Compared to lay teachers, nuns demanded less financially, had no family responsibilities and had more time to perform extracurricular tasks. Consequently,

²¹⁷ Jules Michelet, *Le Prêtre, la femme et la famille* (Paris: Hachette-Paulin, 1845), p. VI

²¹⁸ Jules Ferry, Speech pronounced on 10th April 1870, Salle Molière, Paris. <http://www.laligue.org/assets/Uploads/PDF/JulesFerry.pdf> [Accessed on 12/11/2011]

²¹⁹ Mc Millan, *France and Women 1789-1791*, p.362

religious schools had an enormous advantage over lay schools and rapidly outnumbered them²²⁰. The Catholic moral and the religious image of the ideal woman (a passive, resigned and submissive being) were promoted not only in religious schools, but in secular schools too. Catholicism was also promoted in the workplace. In many cases nuns worked in factories where young girls were employed, in order to guard their morals and ensure their work was up to standards²²¹.

Socialist misogyny

The image of woman as an inferior being was not confined to the clerical sphere but was widespread in the socialist movement too, as we have already indicated. Numerous anti-clerical socialists believed that the fundamental role of women in society was to be good wives and mothers and no space was left for them to act in the public sphere. Indeed, as James F. McMillan has shown, Proudhon's dictum that there are only two roles for women "housewife" or "harlot"²²² ("ménagère" or "courtisane"²²³) sums up the widely spread doctrine dominating French society at the time (and for a long time to come), that the place of woman is "au foyer"²²⁴. Likewise, in his book *La Femme du vingtième siècle*, Jules Simon, French statesman and philosopher claimed:

Quelle est la vocation de l'homme? C'est d'être un bon citoyen. Et de la femme? D'être une bonne épouse et une bonne mère. L'un est en quelque sorte appelé au dehors; l'autre est retenue au dedans²²⁵.

In mid-nineteenth century France, working-class women lived under a double burden: on the one hand, the Church conveyed reactionary ideas about the role women should play in society, but at the same time, on the side of "progressive" politics, they had to face the anti-feminist tenets of the socialists putting them under severe material and psychological oppression. There is no doubt however, that at the

²²⁰ Persis Hunt, 'Feminism and anti-clericalism under the Commune', *The Massachusetts Review*, 12 (1971), 418-431 (p.419)

²²¹ Hunt, p.420

²²² See James Mc Millan, *Housewife or Harlot: The Place of Women in French Society 1870-1940* (New York: St. Martin's, 1981)

²²³ Mc Millan, *France and Women, 1789-1914*, p.363

²²⁴ Ibid

²²⁵ Jules Simon and Gustave Simon, *La Femme du vingtième siècle* (Paris: Calmar Levy, 1892), p.77

The co-operatives focused on traditionally female trades such as needlework, feather processing, artificial flower making, typography, glassblowing and laundry. Furthermore, the Commune also agreed to purchase National Guard outfits from women's co-operatives²⁰⁴. David Shafer argues that although the "Union des femme's" co-operatives represented the most progressive expression of women's labour equality and independence, it was nevertheless committed, or resigned (to use Shafer's words) to a gender-based division of work²⁰⁵. The "Union des femmes" demanded for women to have the same opportunities for independence that men had, nevertheless, they accepted certain gender differences and they recognized the peculiar needs of working class mothers. Indeed, the "Union des femmes" was concerned with the special needs of employed mothers and recognised the mother-child bond as socially beneficial²⁰⁶. Through women controlled co-operatives, it envisioned a socialist future where women workers would be independent and in control of their own labour. The "Union des femme's" proposal for producer co-operatives for women was unmistakably feminist however, and had a factual plan which envisioned women in complete control of production, storage, sale and distribution²⁰⁷. With the support of the Commune, the "Union des femmes" succeeded in establishing several women's co-operatives and for the first time, women were given complete control over production and finance.

Given the duration of the Commune (72 days) these co-operatives hardly had time to get off the ground, but the "Union des femme's" leaders saw them as the basis for creating a wide "socialist women's industrial network"²⁰⁸. The "Union des femmes" had a factual plan which envisioned women in complete control of production, storage, sale and distribution. If the "Union des femme's" plan had had the chance to be fully implemented, women would have eventually supervised all their own finances and one of their members would have sat permanently at the Ministry of Labour²⁰⁹. As claimed by Edith Thomas, "communards" and "communardes" were admirable for their faith in the future. In an isolated city, in the

²⁰⁴ Shafer, p.98

²⁰⁵ Ibid

²⁰⁶ Jones & Verges, p.721

²⁰⁷ Ibid, p.722

²⁰⁸ Tombs, p.135

²⁰⁹ Jones and Verges, p.722

middle of a hostile country, engaged in a fight against a government better equipped in terms of weapons, Parisians “communards” nevertheless focused on the future and prepared the basis for the fundamental transformation of work and production in order to create a fairer socialist society²¹⁰.

The entry of women into political life

Easily the most prominent and important of the many women’s organisations in the uprising, Dmitrieff’s “Union des femmes” had been extraordinarily successful in uniting women towards the same goal and allowing them to contribute to the revolutionary cause. Indeed, as claimed by the Thiers government (and of course, it was not a compliment in their view), Dmitrieff and her organisation bore responsibility for most of the insurrectionary acts committed by women during the Commune²¹¹. The “Union des femmes” served the Commune as best as it could in a wide variety of ways, but it also went beyond this official aim, by laying down the foundations for what could have become the women’s section of the International²¹². Describing the role of the “Union des femmes” and of women “communardes”, Malon recognized that one important consequence of the Paris revolution was the entry of women into political life. According to him, like Dmitrieff, women and the proletariat could only hope to achieve their respective emancipation by uniting²¹³. Thanks to the “Union des femme’s” activities during the Commune, it became apparent to many socialist men that women were very capable of effective organizational activities and that their involvement was not only possible but also necessary.

Shortly after the fall of the Commune, a Russian diplomat filed a report on Dmitrieff’s activities, describing her as a dangerous woman, much more interested in the acts of the Commune than in the wounded. The diplomat asked what had become of this woman, and wondered whether she had been executed on the spot without her

²¹⁰ Thomas, p.99

²¹¹ Woodford McClellan, *Revolutionary Exiles* (London: Frank Cass 1979), p.154

²¹² McClellan, p.156

²¹³ Shulkind, p.160

fringe of the left wing parties, some saw in the rise of the Commune and the subsequent subversion of the social order, an opportunity to at last eradicate clerical influence from women's lives. Symbolically, as had been done at the beginning of the French Revolution, churches in the capital were taken over and turned into political clubs and anti-clerical sentiments rapidly spread amongst Parisians.

Anti-clericalism and political clubs

Anti-clericalism was a deeply-rooted sentiment which had regained popularity during the Second Empire as a consequence of the renewed alliance between the Church and the State. It was closely related to the injustice of women's limited access to the educational opportunities available to men and working women and men's aversion to the Catholic Church was also strongly linked to their social and economic discontent. Working women in particular, resented the wealth of the Church, the competition of its workshops, its control on girls' education and its interference within the family²²⁶. The fact that some of these clubs' members met in converted churches, was a clear expression of their anti-clericalism. When attending a political club it was not uncommon to hear women and men defy the existence of God or call for the execution of priests and nuns. Testimonies recall a woman at Saint-Nicolas des Champs suggesting that the bodies of priests should be used instead of sandbags for constructing barricades²²⁷. At Saint-Eloi, another woman claimed that all the nuns should be thrown into the Seine and they should not be allowed to work in hospitals as they would poison the wounded "communards"²²⁸. During the Commune, the corridors of the hospital of the Hôtel-Dieu were "debaptized" and the names of the wards were changed from those of saints to those of famous revolutionaries such as Blanqui and Barbès²²⁹.

What distinguishes the Commune's anti-clericalism from previous revolutionary anti-clericalism however, is that radical anti-clericals opposed not only the Catholic Church and the clergy but also the very concepts of religion and God.

²²⁶ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.130

²²⁷ Stewart Edwards, *The Paris Commune 1871* (Newton Abbot: 1972), p.286

²²⁸ Ibid

²²⁹ Ibid

They went beyond striving to just remove the religious institution and its hierarchy, they also wished to eradicate the authority of God²³⁰. As claimed by well-known female “*communarde*” Paule Mink (whose contribution to the Commune we will look into more details further ahead in this chapter) in a 1868 speech at Pré-aux-Clercs (Paris):

L'Église n'a rien fait pour la femme (...), l'Empire et le Concordat ont rétabli la servitude. (...) Nous n'admettons pas la puissance de Dieu, parce que nous ne voulons ni Dieu, ni puissance d'aucune sorte²³¹.

Most of the information we have about clubs comes from bourgeois men such as Auguste Vitu, Paul Fontoulieu, Maxime Du Camp, Philibert Audebrand and Edmond de Goncourt who frequented the clubs out of curiosity and for the pure “pleasure” of being scandalised²³². The information they provide us with is far from unbiased but it is most of the information we have as the Commune’s *Journal Officiel* published very little about them. Indeed *communard* newspapers favoured the highly structured “Union des femmes” over the Clubs which were mistrusted for their radical direct approach to democracy and rarely printed notices or commented on political clubs meetings²³³. In contrast to the “Union des femmes”, political clubs were loosely organised and strictly non-hierarchical, they left no written plans, minutes or membership lists and their members, mostly belonging to the working classes, did not write any memoirs for obvious reasons, as most of them were illiterate. In the absence of documentary records from the protagonists themselves, we must rely on the accounts of observers (such as the ones previously mentioned) who wrote from extremely different economic, political and gender perspectives than the “clubbists”²³⁴.

Political clubs had started spreading in Paris prior to the rise of the Commune during the Prussian siege as a result of a loosening of laws concerning freedom of speech by the Empire. Auguste Vitu, bourgeois observer, provides us with an instructive, if biased, description of the rising of clubs:

²³⁰ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.130

²³¹ Paule Mink in Auguste Vitu, *Les Réunions publiques à Paris 1868-1869* (Paris, 1869), p.16

²³² Gullickson, p.112

²³³ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.131

²³⁴ Ibid

La démagogie socialiste, vaincue en Juin 1848 et en Décembre 1851, sortant des bas-fonds où elle sommeillait depuis dix-sept ans, courbée mais non résignée, est venue affronter de nouveau le grand jour (...). Ce ne sont pas seulement les épaves de la révolution de 1848 (...) c'est toute une évocation des pages sanglantes de notre vieille histoire révolutionnaire. Jacobins, hébertistes, tricoteuses de guillotine, tout le personnel de la Terreur joue en ce moment devant le peuple de Paris une odieuse et bouffonne parodie datée de 1793²³⁵.

The constant reference to the French Revolution (“Jacobins”, “tricoteuses de guillotine”²³⁶ “personnel de la Terreur”) shows very well the presence of the traumatic Revolutionary past in the collective psyche of the French bourgeoisie at the time. Any radical political experiment is equated to “Terreur” and “revolution”: there is no sense in this observer that there could be any social or political ground for the claims to social justice brought to the fore by the “Communards”. As for women, the reference to the “tricoteuses de guillotine” expresses how women who participated in these clubs could only be blood-thirsty “monsters” in the eyes of the society of the time. As for the topics touched upon by “clubbists” during their meetings, with similar emphasis Vitu claims:

Dans ces assemblées, il se débite tous les soirs, à la face d'un public immense (...) les discours les plus extravagants et les plus criminels, mélange à doses égales de bêtise et de perversité. L'autorité, qu'elle vienne du ciel ou de la terre, y est niée et conspuée; la morale publique, comme la morale religieuse, est outragée sous toutes les formes. La famille, la paternité, le mariage sont couverts de crachats et d'affronts. On y proclame l'abolition de la propriété, le communisme des biens, la suppression des propriétaires, des gouvernements et des religions²³⁷.

Despite the personal comments on the alleged perversity and stupidity of the topics discussed by “clubbists”, Vitu provides us with an accurate list of the topics of

²³⁵ Vitu, p.7

²³⁶The term “Tricoteuse de guillotine” where tricoteuse literally means knitting woman, refers to those women who would regularly attend the public execution in Paris during the 1789 French Revolution. The term gained popularity “thanks” to English author Charles Dickens who in his novel *A tale of Two Cities* [*Un conte de deux villes* (1836)] created the image of a blood-thirsty woman knitting in front of a guillotine, counting the number of heads falling from it. See Michelle Z. Fournel., *Les Mots de l'histoire des femmes* (Université de Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 2004) p.103.

²³⁷ Ibid, p.8

interest “clubbists” shared with one another. What he omits in his description of clubs however, is their function. Within the walls of deconsecrated churches, “clubbists” did not only foster among themselves a sense of power and solidarity, but more importantly, by sharing their experiences and interests with one another they could identify general goals and targets for political action²³⁸. It was widely believed indeed, that people had to be more involved within the Commune’s decision making process and the gap between the Commune’s government and the people of Paris was thus reduced²³⁹. The club was the perfect place to do so:

Les clubs, écrivait un membre de la Commune, sont les auxiliaires de la Commune; c’est d’eux que doivent jaillir les idées que la Commune a mission de réaliser.²⁴⁰

Many proposals were made to reach this aim. The “Club des Prolétaires” and the “Club Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs” for instance, requested that at least one member of the Commune came every night to listen to the demands of the people²⁴¹. Similarly, the secretary of the Commune’s Executive Commission suggested that the Commune should appoint a special Commission to examine the suggestions that clubs and individuals were sending in²⁴². These proposals were not accepted by the Commune, but the Clubs did not give up in trying to exert their influence on the governing council. Eleven clubs joined each other and formed a federation, their main aim being to maintain daily communication with the Commune. The Clubs in the federation discussed proposals made among themselves and forwarded these on to the governing council. The committee for this federation met for the first time on 5 May and on 6 May the Club Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs published the first issue of the *Bulletin Communal*, a bulletin which was supposed to report daily on the propositions voted in the different clubs. The bulletin had only one issue but the committee of the Federation of clubs met everyday and kept active throughout the life of the Commune²⁴³.

²³⁸ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.132

²³⁹ Edwards, p.280

²⁴⁰ Francois Bournand, *Le Clergé pendant la Commune* (Tolra, 1871), p.148

²⁴¹ Edwards, p.280

²⁴² Ibid

²⁴³ Edwards, p.281

In the clubs that had emerged under the Prussian siege, women had played very limited roles. With the rise of the Commune this changed dramatically²⁴⁴. Needless to say, the participation of women in clubs deeply scandalised bourgeois observers. In his *Les Convulsions de Paris* Maxime Du Camp makes his outrage very clear :

Dans les écoles où elles s'installèrent, elles apprirent aux petits enfants à tout maudire, excepté la Commune. Du haut de la chaire des églises converties en clubs, elles se dévoilèrent ; de leur voix glapissante, au milieu de la fumée des pipes, dans le bourdonnement des hoquets, elles demandèrent "leur place au soleil, leur droits de cité, l'égalité qu'on leur refuse" et autres revendications indécises qui cachent peut-être le rêve secret qu'elles mettaient volontiers en pratique : la pluralité des hommes²⁴⁵.

Clubs were particularly important to women; since they had been excluded from the electorate and from the governing body of the Commune, these were the only places where they could freely express their opinions and ideas²⁴⁶. Some clubs were attended exclusively by women whilst others attracted a mixed audience. Many who spoke at the clubs were simply women of the people who had something they wanted to say whilst others were already well known radicals. Louise Michel for instance, participated frequently at the "Club de la Révolution" in the church of Saint-Bernard de la Chapelle. Beatrix Excoffons (a young working-class woman) was the vice-president of the "Club de la Boule Noire". André Léo spoke numerous times at the "Club de la Délivrance" at the Trinité Church²⁴⁷. Among them all, the most famous "clubiste" is without any doubt Paulina Mekarska, more famously known under her pseudonym Paule Mink (1839-1901).

First revolutionary steps

As claimed by historian Sowerwine, Mink "had revolution in her earliest background"²⁴⁸. Her parents were Polish nobles who had supported the revolution of

²⁴⁴ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.132

²⁴⁵ Maxime Du Camp, *Les Convulsions de Paris* (Paris, 1881), p.61

²⁴⁶ Gullickson, p.109

²⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p.110

²⁴⁸ Charles Sowerwine, *Sisters or Citizens?: Women and socialism in France since 1876* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), p.27

1830 and fled to France after the revolution was defeated. Mink arrived in France at the age of sixteen and started working, giving language lessons and sewing²⁴⁹. Here she engaged in her first independent political act against the Catholic Clergy, by disrupting a clerical procession in the streets of Clermont-Ferrand, in the centre of France. This act cost her a first jail term of the duration of one week²⁵⁰. The following year she joined an outlawed workers' association "La Couture", a membership which cost her yet another prison sentence, this time of the duration of eight months. She then moved to Paris and immersed herself in the radical life of the capital²⁵¹.

In 1866, together with Louise Michel and Maria Deraismes, she founded the first feminist group in France, the "Société pour la Revendication des Droits des Femmes"²⁵² which aimed at improving women's education and prevent prostitution through higher pay for working women²⁵³. Under its initial form, the society did not last long, as Mink and several of her associates who took part in the Paris Commune were either arrested, imprisoned or forced into exile in the wake of the uprising²⁵⁴. However, after several changes in name, in 1881 the society became, under its new incarnation, the "Société pour l'amélioration du Sort de la Femme et la Revendication de ses Droits". In this form, led by Deraismes, the society lasted well into the twentieth century and became, along with Richier's "Ligue Française pour le Droit des Femmes" one of the two main pillars of French feminism²⁵⁵. As well as founding the first French women's mutual-aid society, in the late 1860s Mink and Deraismes collaborated in setting up a series of public lectures on "women's work", which became famous as they were the first public meetings allowed under the Empire²⁵⁶.

²⁴⁹ Ibid

²⁵⁰ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p. 24

²⁵¹ Ibid

²⁵² Joni Lovenduski, *Women and European Politics* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), p.38

²⁵³ Richard J. Evans, *The Feminists* (Harper and Row publisher, 1977), p.127

²⁵⁴ Ibid

²⁵⁵ Sowerwine, p.7

²⁵⁶ Ibid, p.27

Paule Mink, a propagandist: the rhetoric of public speaking

During the Commune Mink proved herself an energetic propagandist both in the revolutionary clubs in Paris, and in the provinces. From March to May 1871, she organised and spoke at several clubs, namely she helped organise the “Club de la Victoire”, she spoke at the “Club de Notre-Dame de la Croix”, at the “Club de Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs” and at the “Club de la délivrance”. She also established a free school for girls in Montmartre in the church of “Saint-Pierre de Montmartre”²⁵⁷ and travelled to the provinces to propagandise for the Revolution²⁵⁸. Historical sources on Mink’s undertakings prior and during the uprising are limited. The fires of the Commune destroyed the police prefecture and all of its records so nothing is known from this source, whilst her dossier from the “conseils de guerre”, the post-Commune military tribunals, has also gone missing²⁵⁹. On the other hand, her post-Commune activism, is well documented in her extensive police file and in newspaper articles and accounts²⁶⁰.

Although little is known about her activities during the revolt, we are well informed about her political thought to which she remained faithful in her public life spanning over more than thirty years. Mink was a strong advocate of what she called “Égalité dans la différence”²⁶¹, she supported a strand of feminism nowadays labelled as “difference feminism”, which highlights the fundamental cultural and biological differences between women and men²⁶². According to Mink, sexual differences were natural and women and men were equals, having each their own virtues and their own qualities:

L’homme est la force, la femme la résistance, l’homme est l’initiative, la femme la persévérance (...) Partout et toujours, c’est ainsi (...) égalité dans la différence. (...) En réclamant l’indépendance de la femme, il n’est pas nécessaire pour elle de vouloir devenir un homme (...) il est nécessaire, avant tout, d’être et de rester elle-même.²⁶³

²⁵⁷ Jacques Rougerie, *Paris Libre 1871* (Paris: Seuil, “Points Histoire”, 2004), p.224

²⁵⁸ Carolyn J. Eichner, ‘Vive La Commune!: Feminism, Socialism, and Revolutionary Revival in the Aftermath of the 1871’, *Paris Commune Journal of Women’s History*, 15 (2003), 68-98 p.73

²⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p.68

²⁶⁰ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.131

²⁶¹ Bell & Offen, p.467

²⁶² Tracy A. Thomas, *Feminist Legal History: Essays on Women and Law* (New York University, 2011), p. 19

²⁶³ Paule Mink, *Le Travail des femmes* (13 July 1868) in Eichner, ‘Vive La Commune!’, p.73

Mink believed in equality (but not identity) between sexes and believed that in order to reach emancipation women did not have to sacrifice their “womanliness”. By doing so she effectively attempted to eliminate the moral excuse that relegated women outside the productive sphere and defended women’s right to work. She strongly opposed the position of the First International which contested women’s right to enter the work force on “moral” grounds (or more likely because of fear of competition). At an assembly in July 1868 she spoke about women’s right to work and argued that women’s work not only did not overlie that of men, but most importantly, that it was a crucial tool to free woman²⁶⁴.

Mink’s political position can be labelled as an anarchist, non-collectivist socialist. Indeed, she opposed collectivism and firmly believed in freedom and the removal of governmental authority. In a public assembly focusing on women’s conditions and socialism she claimed that:

Personne n'aime et ne désire l'égalité plus que moi, mais elle, l'égalité, doit avoir la liberté pour son corollaire, la possibilité complète pour l'initiative individuelle (...) sinon, je trouve l'égalité, pratiquée seule, une manille au progrès (...) Je veux être moi-même, un être humain, pensant et actif, et non pas un simple rouage dans la grande machine sociale.²⁶⁵

A fervent supporter of freedom, Mink opposed Communism which in her opinion suppressed freedom in favour of equality and during the Commune, she allied with the “moderate” minority side of the revolutionary government supporting a gradualist and decentralised socialism²⁶⁶. However, considering her incendiary rhetoric Mink can by no means be considered a moderate. She was in fact very hostile towards the upper classes and a strong supporter of anti-clericalism. In a lecture entitled *Le Mariage et le divorce* (1868) she attacked the Church and identified it as the main institution responsible for women’s oppression and perpetuation of capitalism:

Jamais n'a l'Église soutenu les femmes. Depuis que l'Église a dominé, la femme a toujours été subordonnée (...) la femme n'a jamais été

²⁶⁴ Eichner, ‘Vive La Commune!’, p.73

²⁶⁵ Paule Mink, ‘La liberté: condition du socialisme’ in Eichner, ‘Vive La Commune!’, p.72

²⁶⁶ Eichner, ‘Vive La Commune!’, p.72

protégée par l'Église, qui a toujours prêché la concentration du pouvoir et des richesses.²⁶⁷

Arguing primarily for legalized divorce in this lecture, she accused the Church not only of oppressing women but also of failing in its self-proclaimed paternalistic role as economic and social guardian²⁶⁸. Mink was not alone in her opposition to marriage, and was not as radical as other female "clubistes" who asked for the complete abolition of marriage. As well as strong anti-clerical feelings, Mink shared with fellow "clubists" a feeling of hatred towards the idle rich, who were seen as living at the expense of the sufferings of the poor. In a speech held at the club of "La Délivrance" Mink claimed that the rich, along with priests and nuns, should be eliminated and that people would be happy only when there would be no more bosses, no more rich people and no more landlords:

Un autre mal de la société actuelle est le riche, qui ne pense qu'à boire et s'amuser, sans jamais se soucier. Nous devons nous débarrasser d'eux, avec les prêtres et les sœurs. Nous ne serons heureux que quand nous n'aurons plus de patrons, plus de riches, plus de prêtres!²⁶⁹

A threat to conventional female roles

In contrast to Dimitrieff's top down activism, Mink had no particular plan on how to take action and "get rid" of the bosses, rich men, priests and nuns. Perfectly aware of the interrelated powers of sex, class, and religion, she sought to ameliorate women's condition through a diminution or (preferably) an eradication of Church authority and a recognition of equality between the two sexes, but did not present any specific way to actively do so. Although throughout her life she did considerably less than fellow "communardes" Dimitrieff and Léo, she in fact enjoyed a great deal more fame²⁷⁰ and her funeral was attended by thousands of mourners and nearly as many

²⁶⁷ Paule Mink, 'Le Mariage et le divorce' (3 November 1868) in Eichner, 'Vive La Commune!', p. 73

²⁶⁸ Ibid

²⁶⁹ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.146

²⁷⁰ Soon after the fall of the Commune Dimitrieff went back to her home town in Russia and eventually abandoned her socialist and feminist beliefs altogether. As for Léo, she remained actively engaged in the intellectual and literary life of European socialism, but gradually retired from the public scene and died in solitude (although she has now been rediscovered thanks to her novels and to the interest she has attracted in gender studies).

policemen²⁷¹. For conservatives who opposed the Commune, the most worrying aspect of it were its women orators and warriors who did not have even the façade of traditional female roles to cover their activities, as the “cantinières” or “ambulancières” did. Women such as Mink posed a threat to the traditional conceptualisation of gender as they presented themselves as aggressive, self-sufficient and independent individuals rather than passive, helpless and dependent beings²⁷². Political clubs provided working class women with a space where they could express their resentments, frustrations and needs.

Although nowadays anti-clericalism may not seem as a strong enough force for social change, at the time it was daring and revolutionary for women to embrace it as they were considered to be by nature religious and submissive to ecclesiastic authority²⁷³. This is the reason why the Commune’s anti-clerical women seemed so threatening to contemporaries as they defied what was considered to be normal and right. These women opposed the existing religious, class and gender hierarchies; most attacks were directed to the Church identified as the main oppressor but similarly the rich and misogynists were also widely criticised. Seeking to inspire, motivate and encourage their audience, speakers like Mink voiced their anger and ideas asking for radical change and the eradication of inequities. Because of the utter equality between club members and the total freedom of speech within clubs, female “clubistes” established and experienced popular sovereignty and constituted, arguably, Paris’s first profoundly democratic women’s organisations.

²⁷¹ Eichner, ‘Vive la Commune’, p.91

²⁷² Gullickson, p.119

²⁷³ Hunt, p.418

Chapter 5

Louise Michel : Educator and combatant

The legend of Louise Michel

Louise Michel is undoubtedly the most celebrated and most mythologized *communarde* of all. She devoted her lifetime to the pursuit of radical causes and stoically endured prison and exile for the sake of her convictions²⁷⁴. Born in 1830, the illegitimate daughter of a chambermaid, she nevertheless benefitted from a particularly exceptional upbringing as she was introduced by her grandfather to classical and philosophical readings, arts and history. Thanks to this education, Michel could accede to an independent career. In 1852, after obtaining a teaching certificate, she opened a free elementary school for girls in the village of Audeloncourt. She then moved to Paris where she established herself as a school teacher at a state school for nine years. Finally, in 1865 at the age of 35, she established her own school in the Montmartre district of Paris²⁷⁵. Alongside Léo and Maria Deraismes, she was called upon by Léon Richer²⁷⁶ to contribute to his feminist paper *Le Droit des femmes*. Inspired by several years of political and social disillusionment and deep interest in women's near-stagnant condition, she understood that activism remained an effective remedy for the inequality between the sexes. At the time of the rise of the Paris Commune dramatically, she was already a seasoned activist, but the uprising utterly changed her life, from a simple teacher of Paris's poorest neighbourhood to one of the most renowned revolutionary history has ever known: from indefatigable militant for the education of girls, she became a combatant on the barricades which earned her the nickname the "red virgin".

In the first few weeks of the Prussian siege, Michel brought into her school many children whose parents were refugees from the surrounding countryside. As the months wore on and life became more difficult in Paris, she ran committees, fed the

²⁷⁴ Marie Marmo Mullaney, 'Sexual Politics in the Career and Legend of Louise Michel', *Chicago Journals*, 15, 2 (1990) 300-322, p.301

²⁷⁵ Charles J. Stivale, '*Louise Michel's Poetry of Existence and Revolt*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 5, 1 (1986) 41-61, p.42

²⁷⁶ See chapter 2, p.32

poor, bullied the churches for food and offered shelter for the homeless in her school. However, Michel did not confine herself to nurturing roles as she also dressed in the uniform of the National Guard and fought within the 61st battalion²⁷⁷. Shouldering her rifle, she took part in the attack on the *Hôtel de Ville* on 22nd January 1871, one of the first insurrection attempts that ended in a bloodbath²⁷⁸. She also played a key role on 18th March, the official date of the rise of the Commune, when Parisians responded to French troops attempting to take the cannons for which they had paid and with which they had defended themselves during the eighteen weeks of the Prussian siege, as we have seen²⁷⁹. On watch with the 61st battalion, Michel was among the first to see Thiers's soldiers climbing the hill of Montmartre. Her reaction was to rush from her post to sound the alarm shouting "treason" on top of her voice²⁸⁰. Soon, more Parisians arrived, fraternized with the Versailles troops and forced their retreat: "La Révolution était faite"²⁸¹. In *La Commune* Michel recounts the events of that day:

Tout le monde savait que les canons, soi-disant dérobés à l'État, appartenaient à la garde nationale et que les rendre eût été aider à une restauration. (...) Je descends la butte, ma carabine sous mon manteau, en criant: Trahison ! Une colonne se formait, tout le comité de vigilance était là (...) ²⁸².

In her account of the day Michel also underlines the important role played by women:

Toutes les femmes étaient là, (...). Ce n'était pas la mort qui nous attendait sur les buttes (...) mais la surprise d'une victoire populaire. Entre nous et l'armée, les femmes se jettent sur les canons, (...) les soldats restent immobiles ²⁸³.

²⁷⁷ Pamela Robson, *Wild Women History's Female Rebels, Radicals and Revolutionaries* (Murdoch books, 2011), p.39

²⁷⁸ Bertrand Taithe, *Citizenship and Wars, France in turmoil 1870-1871* (Routledge, 2001), p.13

²⁷⁹ See Chapter 1 p.6

²⁸⁰ Robson, p.40

²⁸¹ Michel, *La Commune*, p.184

²⁸² Ibid, p.183

²⁸³ Ibid, p.184

Looking back at the events fifty years later, Michel imagines how things could have gone differently, and in particular, for the better. She identifies 18th March as the crucial moment and expresses regret for people not going immediately to Versailles:

La victoire était complète; elle eût été durable, si dès le lendemain, en masse, on fût parti pour Versailles où le gouvernement s'était enfui. Beaucoup d'entre nous fussent tombés sur le chemin, mais la réaction eût été étouffée dans son repaire²⁸⁴.

There is no doubt that, by the time Michel's account of the Commune is published (1898), she has become part of her own legend. However, her role in the uprising cannot be contested as numerous accounts²⁸⁵ show indeed how her actions became inextricably linked with the activity of the mass of women, especially working-class women, who took part in the uprising. As to whether the Commune could have triumphed so easily, she is probably deluded, suffice to say, given that the events of the Commune are not under study here, that the reaction of male public and female from the upper classes (this includes George Sand who condemned the violence of the uprising²⁸⁶ reveal a similar pattern if class bias observed in earlier revolutions.

Fighting on the barricades

Once the Commune was proclaimed, Michel assumed a number of roles combining the activities of teaching, ambulance-worker and left-wing propagandist²⁸⁷. As head of the "Women's vigilance committee of Montmartre", she was responsible for the day-to-day welfare of two hundred children. She spoke in defence of women's rights, started a soup kitchen for students and workers, organised and staffed ambulance stations, tended the sick and bandaged them on the battlefield²⁸⁸. Her most sensational exploits however, came with her role as a soldier as she actively

²⁸⁴ Ibid, p.185

²⁸⁵ See for example Maria Deraismes's account in *Eve dans l'humanité* (Paris: Côté Femmes, 1990); see also Edith Thomas "Le rôle des femmes dans la Commune de 1871" in 1848: *Revue des Révolutions contemporaines*. n°42, February 1950, pp.15-29

²⁸⁶ See Joyce Dixon-Fyle, op. cit., p. 127

²⁸⁷ William Fortescue, *The Third Republic in France, 1870-1940 Conflict and Continuities* (Routledge, 2000), p.14

²⁸⁸ Mullaney, p.302

participated in the defence of the Parisian insurrection. Women's participation to the fighting in defence of the Commune is widely recognised as women formed battalions and fought and died on the barricades²⁸⁹. Little is known however about the number and size of these battalions; similarly, little is known about their members²⁹⁰. The only exception to this is Michel. Indeed, we know that by the beginning of April she devoted most of her time to the armed struggle against Versailles, fighting within the 61st Battalion she hardly left the countryside, and when her battalion rested, she would join another division:

Lorsque le 61^o rentrait pour quelques jours j'allais avec d'autres, je n'aurais voulu pour rien au monde quitter les compagnies de marche et depuis le 3 avril jusqu'à la semaine de mai je ne passai à Paris que deux fois une demi journée.²⁹¹

Armed with weapons and attire of the National Guard, she received considerable attention from the Parisian newspapers²⁹². She searched for men hiding from National Guard duty, tended the wounded, kept watch, lived in the trenches and killed enemies²⁹³. In *La Commune*, Michel's narration of the Commune, she recounts her experience as a soldier:

J'étais souvent avec les ambulancières venues nous retrouver au fort d'Issy, mais plus souvent encore avec mes camarades des compagnies de marche; ayant commencé avec eux, j'y restais et je crois que je n'étais pas un mauvais soldat. La note du journal officiel de la Commune (...) était exacte. — Dans les rangs du 61^o bataillon combattait une femme énergique, elle a tué plusieurs gendarmes et gardiens de la paix²⁹⁴.

As claimed by historian Gullickson, had Michel been a man, her activities during the Prussian siege, her commitment to revolution and her prominence in radical circles might have resulted in her election to the Commune. She might even,

²⁸⁹ Fortescue, p.82

²⁹⁰ Gullickson, p. 104

²⁹¹ Michel, *La Commune*, p.246

²⁹² Gullickson, p.104

²⁹³ Cook, p.411

²⁹⁴ Michel, *La Commune*, p.246

given her commitment to the National Guard, have been one of its commanders. However, since she was a woman, these formal political and military roles were closed to her²⁹⁵. Nevertheless, she continued her armed support of the Commune, recruiting women for ambulance service and publicly commented on the bias female fighters often experienced such as the fact that, according to her, they were excluded from food rations²⁹⁶.

Throughout the seventy-three days of the Commune and in the aftermath of the revolution, Michel proved fearless towards death. Indeed during her post-Commune trial she famously challenged her judges to kill her: “Si vous me laissez vivre, je ne cesserai de crier vengeance (...) Si vous n’êtes pas des lâches, tuez-moi”²⁹⁷. During the Commune she believed the “communards” should send her to Versailles to assassinate Adolphe Thiers). Théophile Ferré and Raoul Rigault, two of the most violent Commune members, persuaded her not to carry out this plan²⁹⁸. In *La Commune* Michel expresses regret for following their advice:

Et moi, qu’on accuse de cette bonté sans limites, j’aurais sans pâlir, (...) pris la vie de ce nain qui devait faire tant de victimes! (...) Combien je me suis reproché aux jours de la défaite d’avoir demandé conseil, nos deux vies eussent évité l’égorgement de Paris²⁹⁹.

Likewise, during the final days of the fighting, when one of her companions threatened to surrender, she proved ready once more, to sacrifice herself for the revolution:

Une nuit que nous étions une poignée à la gare de Clamart, (...) l’idée de se rendre le prit comme une obsession. (...) Faites-le si vous voulez, lui dis-je, moi je reste là, et je fais sauter la gare si vous la rendez. Je m’assis avec une bougie, sur le seuil d’une petite chambre, où étaient entassés les projectiles, et ma bougie allumée j’y passai la nuit³⁰⁰.

²⁹⁵ Gullickson, p.149

²⁹⁶ Cook, p. 411

²⁹⁷ Michel, *La Commune*, p. 438

²⁹⁸ Gullickson, p.149

²⁹⁹ Michel, *La Commune*, p. 210

³⁰⁰ Ibid, p.252

The trial and the beginning of a legend

In the wake of the fall of the Commune, the Versailles's military tribunal accused Michel of pretty much everything: from heading the central committee of the famous "Union des femmes" to burning down Paris:

Louise Michel organise le fameux Comité central de l'Union des femmes, ainsi que les comités de vigilance chargés de recruter les ambulanciers, et, au moment suprême, des travailleuses pour les barricades, peut-être même des incendiaires³⁰¹.

To having intimate connections with the members of the Commune to trying to assassinate the president of the Republic:

Intimement liée avec les membres de la Commune, elle connaissait d'avance tous leurs plans. Elle les a aidés de toutes ses forces, de toute sa volonté; bien plus, elle les a assistés et souvent elle les a dépassés. Elle leur a offert de se rendre à Versailles et d'assassiner le président de la République, afin de terrifier l'Assemblée et, selon elle, de faire cesser la lutte³⁰².

On the accusation of incendiarism, Michel claimed to have stated the fire and to have acted on her own with no accomplices:

Quant à l'incendie de Paris, oui, j'y ai participé. Je voulais opposer une barrière de flammes aux envahisseurs de Versailles. Je n'ai pas de complices pour ce fait, j'ai agi d'après mon propre mouvement³⁰³.

Although most of these accusations were not true, Michel never tried to defend herself and accepted responsibility for everything she was accused of:

Je ne veux pas me défendre, je ne veux pas être défendue; j'appartiens tout entière à la révolution sociale et je déclare accepter la responsabilité de tous mes actes. Je l'accepte tout entière et sans restriction³⁰⁴.

When accused of being an accomplice of the Commune, she could not feel anything but pride:

³⁰¹ 'VI conseil de guerre', in Michel, *Mémoires*, p.210

³⁰² Ibid, p.212

³⁰³ Ibid, p.213

³⁰⁴ Ibid

On me dit aussi que je suis complice de la Commune! Assurément oui, puisque la Commune voulait avant tout la révolution sociale, et que la révolution sociale est le plus cher de mes vœux; bien plus, je me fais honneur d'être l'un des promoteurs de la Commune³⁰⁵.

At her trial Michel clearly exaggerated her role during the uprising. She did so not in the attempt of gaining further fame but rather in the hope of reducing accusations towards her fellow "communards"³⁰⁶. By refusing to defend herself and by taking on responsibility for much more than what she was actually responsible for, Michel contributed to her own notoriety and legendary status³⁰⁷.

With the knowledge we have today about the different factions operating during the Commune, it seems impossible to believe that the Versailles Military committee could actually accuse Michel of heading the "Union des femmes". Indeed we know that not only Michel had nothing to do with this organisation, but that she intentionally kept away from it. Although the "Comité de Vigilance de Montmartre" (which she headed) and Dmitrieff's "Union des femmes" assumed many of the same tasks, they never collaborated with one another³⁰⁸. In spite of the overlap of many of their goals and aims, Dmitrieff's top-down and highly hierarchical organisation clashed with the less structured grass-root vigilance committees³⁰⁹. It is also very likely that a certain degree of rivalry existed between the two organisations, especially as far as the "Union des femmes" is concerned as it demanded the exclusive allegiance of its members³¹⁰.

What surprises when reading the list of accusations held against Michel however, is that although accused of every possible crime, her role within the Montmartre Vigilance Committee was completely ignored when in fact her role in the Committee was very important as was the committee's existence and its activities during the Commune. During the Siege and throughout the Commune, Vigilance

³⁰⁵ Ibid, p.213

³⁰⁶ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.147

³⁰⁷ Ibid

³⁰⁸ Ibid, p.148

³⁰⁹ Ibid, p.149

³¹⁰ Ibid, p. 148

Committees were organised in various quarters; there were two in Montmartre, one for men and one for women. Michel served in both committees at once. In her memoirs she recounts the moments spent within the Montmartre Vigilance Committees:

Jamais je ne vis intelligences si droites, si simples et si hautes ; jamais individualités plus nettes. (...) Chez les citoyennes même courage ; là aussi des intelligences remarquables³¹¹.

The organisation aimed at contributing to the defence of the city. Its committee took on several different roles, in particular it organised aid for the wounded and sent out nurses to the battlefields. In addition the Committee also received and distributed work, sent representatives to political clubs and hunted down military deserters. Beatrix Excoffon, close friend of Michel and active member of the women's committee, recounts the purpose and activities of the Montmartre Vigilance committee:

Nous nous occupions des ambulances, où il fallait organiser tous les secours pour les blessés, envois d'ambulancières, etc. J'allai dans tous les clubs faire signer la pétition par laquelle la Commune réclamait Blanqui en échange de l'archevêque. (...) Le comité de vigilance des femmes envoyait des députations aux enterrements, s'occupait des veuves, des mères, des enfants de ceux qui mouraient pour la liberté; il resta sur la brèche jusqu'à la fin³¹².

From Eichner and Thomas, we also learn that the committees were very active as far as education was concerned as they also asked for the instauration of professional schools and lay orphanages³¹³. This was all the more important that women were "handicapped by mental poverty"³¹⁴. As we have seen in Chapter 4, the Church was partly responsible for this, which intentionally prevented the development of women's literacy by opposing state schools and by continuously promoting the submissive and compliant role women were expected to have both within the family

³¹¹ Michel, *Mémoires*, p.75

³¹² Beatrix Excoffon in Louise Michel, *La Commune*, p.515

³¹³ Thomas, *Les Pétroleuses*, p.133

³¹⁴ Shulkind, p.134

and society. Michel shared with fellow “communardes”, namely Léo and Mink, a strong interest in education. Together with Mink, Léo and several other well-known feminists she joined the group “La Société du Droit des Femmes”. This organisation, founded by fellow feminist, Maria Deraismes, in 1866, aimed at promoting equal secular education, equal work retribution, and equal civil rights between men and women³¹⁵. As claimed by Michel in her memoirs, by doing so the society wished to give women more opportunities in life beyond prostitution:

L'instruction à égal degré, le travail rétribué pour les états de femme, de manière à ne pas rendre la prostitution leur seul état lucratif, c'est ce qu'il y avait de réel dans notre programme³¹⁶.

Education supporting the status quo

Michel had a strong belief in the power of education and faced enormous difficulties when pursuing her career as an *institutrice*. To understand the difficulties she faced one must be acquainted with the French educational system prior the Commune. In the first half of the 19th century it was widely accepted that the education of girls should be moral and religious. Education at that time was meant not only to reflect, but also to reinforce sexual differences. Most of the literature used in schools depicted girls as devoted daughters and dedicated mothers able to run a clean and ordered household, as opposed to boys who were depicted as dutiful sons and good workers. Girls were expected to acquire typically feminine virtues such as “modesty, a pleasing disposition and, above all, a sense of order”³¹⁷. Marie Curo’s “Études morales et religieuses ou éducation pratique des jeunes filles” (1860), conveyed the message to young girls that order led to God and that disorder and confusion were the enemies of domestic virtues³¹⁸.

Education for women emphasized practical skills (in particular, sewing) and religion. These ideas were inculcated not only in schools run by religious orders, but

³¹⁵ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.61

³¹⁶ Michel, *Mémoires* p.67 M

³¹⁷ Mc Millan, ‘Clericals, Anticlericals and the Women’s Movement in France Under the Third Republic’, p.98

³¹⁸ Ibid

in state schools too³¹⁹. Michel was perfectly aware of the state of French education and harshly criticised it:

Jamais je n'ai compris qu'il y eût un sexe pour lequel on cherchât à atrophier l'intelligence comme s'il y en avait trop dans la race. Les filles, élevées dans la niaiserie, sont désarmées tout exprès pour être mieux trompées: c'est cela qu'on veut. C'est absolument comme si on vous jetait à l'eau après vous avoir défendu d'apprendre à nager, ou même lié les membres³²⁰.

As already mentioned in Chapter 3, in 1850 the French government introduced the so called "loi Falloux"³²¹ whose most important act was to abolish the "brevet de capacité" (the French teaching qualification) in the case of religious orders³²². As a consequence, untrained nuns endowed with a letter from their superior were allowed to undertake the instruction of young girls, whilst lay women who had earned their "brevet" remained unemployed³²³. Article 51 of the Falloux law recommended the establishment of separate schools for girls and boys in all 'communes' with a population of more than 800 people. On the one hand, the Falloux law gave a massive boost to the expansion of girls' primary education but on the other hand, such education was principally under religious congregations. By 1866, 55% of all girls were taught by nuns and out of seventy-four training schools for female teachers, two thirds were directed by female religious orders³²⁴.

Michel entered the teaching career closely after the December 2, 1851 coup d'état. The repercussions of the coup d'état were important in the school sector as all staff were required to swear obedience to the emperor. State schools were therefore

³¹⁹ Ibid

³²⁰ Michel, *Mémoires*, p.49

³²¹ From 1849, Alfred Falloux (1811-1886) was the minister of education and passed a law favouring private Catholic teaching, thence known as "Loi Falloux".

³²² Antoine Prost, *L'Enseignement en France 1800-1967* (Paris: Armand Collin, 1968), p.10

³²³ Elisabeth Fyle, *Female Writers' Struggle for Rights and Education for Women in France* (Peter Lang 2006), p.100

³²⁴ Mc Millan, 'Clericals, Anticlericals and the Women's Movement in France Under the Third Republic', p.98

closed to Michel, who held strong republican views and could not consent to such obligation³²⁵:

Dans ma carrière d'institutrice (...) j'ai vu bien des jours de misère; toutes celles qui ne voulaient pas prêter serment à l'Empire en étaient là³²⁶.

Given that the majority of state schools were closed to her, her only alternative was to open her own school. In January 1852 she obtained the permission to open an all girls' school in Audeloncourt³²⁷. Although in her memoirs she refers to her school as a "école libre" she nevertheless had to follow a general regulation all primary schools were submitted to³²⁸. The first regulation article stated that the teacher's main duty was to give the children a religious education and establish on their souls a feeling of duty towards God and their parents³²⁹. Article 20 ordered for a crucifix to be placed in the class in the pupils' view, and article 21 ordered that the classes be always preceded and followed by a prayer. Article 36 did not apply to Michel's school as she opened a girls' school, but it is nevertheless important as it fully reveals the mentality of the time concerning gender differences. This article stated that those schools that welcomed both female and male students had to keep the two genders separated at all times:

Dans les écoles qui reçoivent des enfants des deux sexes, les garçons et les filles ne pourront jamais être réunis pour les mêmes exercices. Ils seront séparés par une cloison de un mètre cinquante au moins de hauteur, disposée de manière à ce que l'instituteur ait vue des deux côtés de la salle. L'entrée et la sortie auront lieu à des heures distinctes³³⁰.

It is in such an atmosphere of constant repression that Michel found herself to teach. Needless to say, she never followed these impositions, on the contrary she took on revolutionary stances within her classroom. In her memoirs she recounts that instead of morning and evening prayers her pupils would sing the *Marseillaise*: "à ma

³²⁵ Paule Lejeune, *Louise Michel l'indomptable* (L'Harmattan, 2001), p.53

³²⁶ Michel, *Mémoires*, p.17

³²⁷ Le jeune, p.53

³²⁸ Ibid, p.53

³²⁹ Ibid, p.54

³³⁰ Ibid, p.55

classe d'Audeloncourt on chantait *La Marseillaise* avant l'étude du matin et après l'étude du soir"³³¹. Facing with humour and courage the admonitions of some "amis de l'ordre", she engaged with her work as a teacher with enthusiasm and passion:

Malgré les dénonciations de quelques imbéciles (...) sur mes opinions politiques, ma classe marchait d'autant mieux que j'avais le zèle de la première jeunesse; je la faisais avec passion³³².

During the Commune numerous organisations similar in their aim came to life. On March 26 1871, the society "L'Éducation Nouvelle" an educational reform association initially formed during the Prussian siege of Paris, established a committee of six delegates to present a plan to the Commune³³³. The commission was made of three men: J. Manier, J. Rama and Rheims³³⁴ and three women: Henriette Garoste, Louise Laffitte and Maria Verdure³³⁵. On 1st April, the commission brought to the Commune their project claiming that instruction needed to be available to all children regardless of their faith; what is more, religious education was to be abolished³³⁶. This claim was perfectly in line with Michel's own beliefs as she ardently opposed religion, not only in school, but in the whole of society:

Expulser Dieu du domaine de la connaissance, l'expulser de la société, est la loi pour l'homme s'il veut arriver à la science, s'il veut réaliser le but de la Révolution. (...) Que la Commune débarrasse à jamais l'humanité de ce spectre (...). Dans la Commune, il n'y a pas de place pour le prêtre: toute manifestation, toute organisation religieuse doit être proscrite³³⁷.

Moreover, the commission claimed that education had to be considered as a public service. It had to be free of charge and compulsory, regardless of the child's parents social status. Some of these projects were actually implemented. An

³³¹ Michel, *Mémoires*, p.29

³³² Ibid, p.28

³³³ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.123

³³⁴ Names are reported as they appeared in the *Journal officiel de la Commune de Paris*, (2 April 1871)

³³⁵ Ibid; see also Thomas, *Les Pétroleuses*, p.131

³³⁶ Ibid, p.132

³³⁷ Michel, *La Commune*, p.525

orphanage was created for the children of the *communards* who died in the battle and for children whose mothers worked in ambulances and did not have the time to look after them³³⁸. In addition to this, in the 4th arrondissement religious schools were shut down³³⁹. On the eve of the Versailles' entry in Paris, the Commune increased teachers and school directors' wages. Furthermore, for the first time salary equality between male and female teachers was proclaimed³⁴⁰. The following day however, Versailles' troupes entered Paris, and women's fight for better girls' education was put on hold for several generations.

The passion for revolution

At her post-Commune trial, Michel's judges did not face up to her challenge and instead of being executed as she had asked for, she was sent into exile to New Caledonia where she remained for a total of eight years. During those years Michel's revolutionary faith grew stronger. She gradually developed anarchist ideals and eventually shifted from Republicanism to Anarchy³⁴¹. Active as an anarchist lecturer, writer, and strike leader, upon her return from exile, she took her place among the fiercest critics of the Third Republic. Though she was imprisoned several times on a variety of charges, her revolutionary ardour never faded³⁴².

Just as Dmitrieff, Mink and Léo, Michel too seized the political moment offered by the Commune and attempted to improve the living and social conditions of her gender. As seen in the previous chapters, although they shared the same goal –the emancipation of working-class women in particular and women in general- Dmitrieff, Mink and Léo each chose different paths to reach it: Dmitrieff believed in a structured top down organisation of labour, whilst Léo and other engaged female journalists such as Caroline Rémy, most famously known under her nom de plume Séverine, used their pen as the primary tool of their activism. Being a teacher, Michel focused a great deal of her attention on education.

³³⁸ Ibid, p.134

³³⁹ Ibid

³⁴⁰ Ibid, p.136

³⁴¹ Stivale, p.54

³⁴² Mullaney, p.303

Differently from Dmitrieff and Léo, Michel abstained from theory and organisation in favour of a more passionate and emotional engagement. Similarly to Mink, with whom she embarked on several propagandistic tours, she believed in a grass-root approach to revolution. Gifted with exceptional oratorical skills, she spoke frequently at clubs for the duration of the siege and of the Commune. Through her speeches she sought to inspire her audience and encourage their devotion to the revolutionary cause. In her memoirs, Michel underlines countless times her devotion to the revolution and lyrically expresses it:

Il devait en être ainsi; le vent qui soufflait dans ma vieille ruine, les vieillards qui m'ont élevée, la solitude, la grande liberté de mon enfance, les légendes, les bribes de sciences braconnées un peu partout, tout cela devait m'ouvrir l'oreille à toutes les harmonies, l'esprit à toutes les lueurs, le cœur à l'amour et à la haine; tout s'est confondu dans un seul chant, dans un seul rêve, dans un seul amour : la Révolution³⁴³.

Michel was indeed a woman of the revolution. She gave herself totally to the cause of the Commune and worked tirelessly for it in all ways she possibly could.

³⁴³ Michel, *Mémoires*, p.106

Chapter 6

Dmitrieff, Mink, Léo and Michel : the aftermath

The “semaine sanglante”

On Sunday 28th May, 1871, the last barricade of the Commune fell under the national government’s repression³⁴⁴. This date represents the end of the Commune but also the end of one of the most violent repressions French history has ever encountered, the bloody week, the “semaine sanglante”. Versailles’s propaganda in the province prior to this date had been very effective and is considered by many historians as the main reason for the success of repression. Indeed, before May 1871, the national government had faced difficulties when raising troops to fight the Parisians and the first soldiers deployed on 18th March 1871 had fraternized with the insurgents. On 28th May 1871 however, a new army assaulted the city. This time the troops had been carefully selected among soldiers returning from imprisonment in Germany; they were prevented from fraternizing through harsh discipline, bribes and isolation from Parisian news reports³⁴⁵. This made the work of exterminating Parisians a much easier job. As claimed by Michel:

On persuada les soldats qu’ils avaient à venger leurs camarades; à ceux qui arrivaient délivrés de la captivité de Prusse, on disait que la Commune s’entendait avec les Prussiens et les crédules s’abreuvent de sang dans leur rage. Afin que comme au 18 mars l’armée ne levât pas la crosse en l’air, on gorgea les soldats d’alcool mêlé, suivant l’ancienne recette, avec de la poudre et surtout entonné de mensonges³⁴⁶.

The lack of any official protocol to follow when capturing rebels accounted for most of the estimated 20,000 people killed during the bloody week³⁴⁷. Many insurgents were able to escape, but the majority (approximately 40,000) were

³⁴⁴ Badsey, p.86

³⁴⁵ Alice Bullard, ‘Self-Representation in the Arms of Defeat: Fatal Nostalgia and Surviving Comrades in French New Caledonia, 1871-1880’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 12 (1997), 179-212 (p.183)

³⁴⁶ Michel, *La Commune*, p. 338

³⁴⁷ Howard G. Brown ‘Domestic State Violence: Repression from the Croquants to the Commune’, *The Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 597-622 (p. 620)

captured. The existing four "conseils de guerre" could not cope with the number of captives, so twenty two supplementary tribunals were created and functioned actively in the years 1872 and 1873³⁴⁸. More than 13,000 communards were condemned; over 4,000 were deported to New Caledonia and another 1,600 were sentenced to prison or hard labour³⁴⁹.

Propaganda for and against the Commune

The images and texts produced during and after the Commune vary widely. Maxime Du Camp, well known opponent to the Commune, in his book *Convulsion de Paris* (1878) describes the revolutionary experience in these terms:

Ce n'étaient que des malfaiteurs, qui ont invoqué des prétextes parce qu'ils n'avaient point de bonnes raisons à donner; les assassins ont dit qu'ils frappaient les ennemis du peuple, et ils ont tué les plus honnêtes gens du pays; les voleurs ont dit qu'ils reprenaient le bien de la nation, et ils ont pillé les caisses publiques; les incendiaires ont dit qu'ils élevaient des obstacles contre l'armée monarchique, et ils ont mis le feu partout; seuls les ivrognes ont été de bonne foi : ils ont dit qu'ils avaient soif, et ils ont défoncé les tonneaux. Les uns et les autres ont obéi aux impulsions de leur perversité, mais la question politique était le dernier de leurs soucis³⁵⁰.

In French school books, until the beginning of the Second World War, the Commune was described as follows :

Une grande honte et de grands désastres viennent s'ajouter aux désastres de la guerre. La population parisienne s'insurgea. Il fallut que, sous les yeux des Allemands, une armée française, commandée par le maréchal de Mac-Mahon, assiégeât des Français révoltés et qu'elle prît d'assaut la capitale de la France. Avant sa défaite, la Commune incendia plusieurs des monuments de Paris, elle fusilla l'archevêque de Paris. Pendant la lutte, un grand nombre de soldats furent tués. Un plus grand nombre d'insurgés périrent les armes à la main ou furent fusillés après jugement de cours martiales. De toutes les insurrections dont l'histoire ait gardé le souvenir, la plus criminelle fut

³⁴⁸ Jacques Rougerie, *Procès des communards*, (Gallimard, 1973), p.21

³⁴⁹ Brown, p. 620

³⁵⁰ Maxime Du Camp in Rougerie, *Procès des communards*, p.10

certainement celle du mois de mars 1871 faite sous les yeux de l'ennemi vainqueur³⁵¹.

If on the one hand conservatives condemned and demonised the Commune as much as they could, left wing militants and theorists, tirelessly exalted the revolutionary event. In his book *La Guerre civile* (1871), Marx honours the Commune as the precursor of the new society:

Le Paris ouvrier, avec sa Commune, sera célébré à jamais comme le glorieux fourrier d'une société nouvelle. Le souvenir de ses martyrs est conservé pieusement dans le grand cœur de la classe ouvrière. Ses exterminateurs, l'histoire les a déjà cloués à un pilori éternel, et toutes les prières de leurs prêtres n'arriveront pas à les racheter³⁵².

Following the fall of the Commune, left wing factions, namely Marxists and anarchists, opposed each other as the true "owners" of the Commune. Anarchists in particular vigorously opposed Marxists' attempts to take ownership of the Commune's heritage. They believed this heritage belonged to them since the Commune had been, in their view, the first revolution to attempt to abolish the state, a goal that is every anarchist's dream. The Swiss anarchist James Guillaume thus claimed in April 1871:

La révolution de Paris est fédéraliste. Le fédéralisme, dans le sens que lui donne la Commune de Paris, et que lui a donné il y a bien des années le grand socialiste Proudhon, est avant tout la négation de la Nation et de l'État. Il n'y a plus d'État, plus de pouvoir central supérieur aux groupes et leur imposant son autorité; il n'y a que la force collective résultant de la fédération des groupes. L'État centralisé et national n'existant plus, et les Communes jouissant de la plénitude de leur indépendance, il y a véritablement an-archie³⁵³.

Along with the most diverse interpretations, condemnations and exaltation of the Commune, the end of the uprising saw the creation of yet another myth, the *pétroleuses*: working-class women accused of burning down Paris during the final week of the Commune. The image of the *pétroleuse* quickly came to symbolise all the crimes of the Commune in the eyes of its opponents, even after it became evident that

³⁵¹ Rougerie, *Procès des communards*, p.11

³⁵² Rougerie, *Paris libre 1871*, p.266

³⁵³ Rougerie, *Procès des communards*, p.14

the fires had mostly been set by men and that they had not been as devastating as it first had been claimed³⁵⁴. As Gullickson explains, the image of the *pétroleuse* was almost entirely a product of the government's and conservative's press imagination³⁵⁵. The truth was indeed very different from what was being claimed at the time. Versailles troops entered Paris on Sunday night, 21st May and on Tuesday 23rd May, *communards* started setting the first fires in order to protect their battle position. By that evening numerous fires were set, some for strategic reasons, some for revenge whilst others were actually ignited by the incendiary shells used by the Versailles troops. By the third day of the battle, rows of houses, the Tuileries Palace, the Ministry of Finance, and the Hotel de Ville were on fire³⁵⁶.

Why women were held responsible for lighting the fires is in fact an interesting question when looking at the role played by women in the Commune as it underlines how negatively their action was perceived almost immediately. The violence of the reaction towards women in particular can be seen as a "symptom" of social anxieties towards their attempt to re-define gender roles as an integral part of radical politics. To use Gullickson's title, French society seems to have been particularly traumatised by these "unruly women" who embodied the strongest threat to social structures. Indeed, and although there is clear evidence that the vast majority of the fires were set by men, attention focussed almost immediately on women as perpetrators³⁵⁷. Initially however, women were not held responsible for the fires: Thiers, in his speech to the National Assembly at Versailles, identified the lighting of fires as a desperate military move and made no references to women as responsible for this³⁵⁸.

Soon after this however, opponents of the Commune started considering vengeance rather than strategy as the motivation for the fires. Pro-commune papers started identifying the non-combatants, and in particular women and children, as

³⁵⁴ Gullickson, p.242

³⁵⁵ Ibid

³⁵⁶ Ibid, p.246

³⁵⁷ Ibid

³⁵⁸ Ibid, p.247

responsible for the fires³⁵⁹. From then on, rumours about women working as incendiaries grew rapidly. It quickly became commonplace for newspaper to refer to all the arrested *communardes* as *pétroleuses*, regardless of whether they had been charged with the crime of incendiarism or not³⁶⁰. Although men as well as women were thought to be setting fires, women were widely regarded as being more active than men and as the greater villains. Children were also accounted as responsible and were in many cases arrested and executed³⁶¹. Whether the behaviour of women during the Commune and the “bloody week” had been substantially different from that of men is unclear. What is clear however, is that women's behaviour was perceived and remembered differently by male observers, and in particular by “highly threatened” bourgeois male observers.

Just as opinions on the Commune differed widely according to which side of the political spectrum they came from, so did opinions on women involved in the Commune. Some pro-commune journalists and historians reported in Gullickson's *Unruly Women of Paris*, considered female *communardes* to be “gallant young women, wounded lionesses, and the bravest of the martyrs who died on the barricades”³⁶². Conservative journalists on the other hand, deeply criticised women who participated in the Commune and in particular in the fighting. Journalist such as Francisque Sarcey suggested that women had been more ferocious than men because “their brains were weaker and their emotions livelier”³⁶³. Maxime Du Camp, thought that women who fought for the Commune were simply evil and insane, Alexandre Dumas fils refused to call them women at all and used instead the term “femelles” (a term usually used for animals). The list of adjectives used to describe *communardes* is very long: amazons, furies, prostitutes, madwomen, or simply *pétroleuses*³⁶⁴. Even within supporters of the Commune there was some disagreement over what to think about women's participation. On the one hand, we find comments such as the ones by Benoît Malon, who positively described women as “self-sacrificing mothers” who

³⁵⁹ Ibid

³⁶⁰ Ibid, p.248

³⁶¹ Ibid

³⁶² Ibid, p.4

³⁶³ Ibid

³⁶⁴ Ibid

fought “to make their children free”³⁶⁵. On the other hand, some revolutionaries such as Gaston Da Costa, sentenced to death for his role in the Commune, distinguished between “good” and “bad” women and distanced himself from the latter whom he also identified as prostitutes³⁶⁶. Thus it is clear that women who had participated in the Commune were especially held responsible for daring to step out of the traditional roles ascribed to them by society: as mothers and wives, their lives were seen as pillars of a male-dominated order. From the moment when they started claiming autonomy (freedom to work, to think, to act), they embodied one of the strongest threats to social rule.

The *Communardes*' post-Commune existence

As the “semaine sanglante” neared its end, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, André Léo and Paule Mink all successfully avoided arrest and slaughter, Louise Michel on the other hand, was arrested and deported to New Caledonia. The revolutionary experience affected and shaped the four women’s lives in momentous and yet, different ways. All four *communardes* remained committed to social and political activism, but just as they had chosen different approaches to promote their feminist and socialist ideas during the Commune, so did they take a unique path in the aftermath of the insurrection³⁶⁷. Some analogies can be drawn between Dmitrieff and Léo’s post-Commune existence and between Mink and Michel’s. Dmitrieff and Léo both lived the Commune as the climax of their activist careers and gradually withdrew from organised feminism and socialist politics in the years following the insurrection. By the end of their lives, both women’s fame had completely evaporated³⁶⁸. Mink and Michel on the other hand, led public lives and kept leading roles within the feminist and socialist spheres. Speaking publicly and travelling tirelessly to promote their thoughts, they gained enormous popularity and became living symbols of the Revolution.

³⁶⁵ Ibid

³⁶⁶ Ibid, p.4

³⁶⁷ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.154

³⁶⁸ Ibid, p.155

Elisabeth Dmitrieff

After the Commune's defeat, Dmitrieff returned to Russia disheartened and under evident shock. She immediately abandoned her pseudonym and resumed using her legal name, Tomonovskaya. Doing so, she effectively erased her existence as Elisabeth Dmitrieff making it impossible for French military commission to locate her. She successfully eluded French and Swiss authorities and safely arrived in Geneva in June 1871. Here she reunited with her International Workingmen Association comrades, but gradually began removing herself from the organisation. Differently from her fellow *communardes*, who immediately started writing about their experience of the Commune, she did not participate politically or contribute to the cause in any way. As argued by Eichner in *Surmounting the Barricades*, it is very likely that she felt resentment towards Marx and the other Internationalists who chose not to come to Paris and defend the Commune³⁶⁹.

In late October she left Geneva and made her way back home to Russia. Upon her return to Russia she found a rather repressive environment but nevertheless began reconnecting with the radical world. In 1872 she met Ivan Davidovsky, a meeting that changed the course of her life. She fell in love with him, had two children and eventually married him. Davidovsky held a particular approach to revolutionary change; he was involved in numerous conspiratorial plots and in 1876 was accused of murdering a magistrate. Realising the need for a highly skilled lawyer and their inability to pay for one, Dmitrieff turned to her old Internationalist comrades. Upon her request for help, Marx sent her a lawyer who accepted the case without pay. According to Eichner, Marx and the International's efforts towards helping Dmitrieff, nearly six years after her return to Russia and in spite of her husband's infamous reputation, indicate an exceptional regard for Dmitrieff and her revolutionary history³⁷⁰.

Knowing that only a wife could accompany a man into exile, in 1877 she legally married Davidovsky. When he was found guilty and sent to exile in Siberia,

³⁶⁹ Ibid, p.160

³⁷⁰ Ibid

Dmitrieff, her two children and her mother-in-law accompanied him. Once in Siberia, the couple opened a pastry shop and tried to meet the many political prisoners in the area. But Davidovsky had been convicted as a common criminal and not as a political criminal, moreover the organisation he belonged to, the "Jacks of Hearts" had gained infamy for its "end-justify-means method" and many of the exiled in Siberia rejected it. Dmitrieff on the other hand, had no way of proving her past involvement in the Commune. Unaware of Dmitrieff's past and opposing Davidovsky's past, the political exiles boycotted the pastry shop and the enterprise failed³⁷¹.

In a desperate attempt to react to her political and social isolation Dmitrieff started turning to religion³⁷². Filling Léo's prophecy who had claimed many years before that, if rejected by revolutionary movements women would return to Catholicism: "Repoussées par la Révolution, les femmes retournèrent au catholicisme"³⁷³, so Dmitrieff embraced the Orthodox faith³⁷⁴. Her relationship with her husband gradually worsened, she eventually left him and between 1900 and 1902 she went back to Moscow together with her two daughters. Dmitrieff's final years and her death remain a mystery. The precise date of her death is unknown and there is no evidence as to whether she played a role in the 1905 revolution or whether she was still alive in 1917.

André Léo

In the wake of the fall of the Commune, Léo escaped France and reached Switzerland. There she immediately started planning and undertaking a series of public lectures, wishing to tell the world of France's brutal repression of the Commune. In 1871, at the "Ligue de la paix et de la liberté" she gave one of her most famous speeches. On this occasion, she denounced the Versaillais' atrocities towards the Parisians but most importantly, she fiercely criticised her host: the bourgeois members of the League and the Commune government's Blanquist-Jacobin majority. She considered them to also be responsible for the defeat of the Commune and

³⁷¹ Ibid, p.161

³⁷² Ibid,

³⁷³ André Léo, 'La Révolution sans la femme' (8 May 1871) in Roger Bellet, 'André Léo, écrivain-idéologue', *Romantisme*, 77 (1992), p.64

³⁷⁴ Shulkind, p.124

accused them of refusing to self-reflect and accept their share of the responsibility in its failure³⁷⁵. On this occasion, she chose to ignore gender questions and did not mention women's revolutionary activities, nor did she talk about their emancipation. She spoke as a socialist and made no reference to her own gender. She might have thought that the League's potential non-receptivity to her class analysis would only be intensified if she had introduced feminist issues³⁷⁶. Considering she was forced off stage before she could conclude her speech, she was probably right. Soon after this episode, Léo published the transcript of her speech under the title *La Guerre sociale*. In it, Léo identified ignorance and Versailles's propaganda as the main reasons for the failure of the Commune:

C'est ainsi qu'on excitait la France contre Paris, qui avait fait la République et la voulait maintenir. C'est ainsi qu'on flétrissait la victime avant de l'exécuter, et qu'on ruinait autour d'elle toutes les sympathies, avant de tendre le piège où elle devait périr (...) ³⁷⁷.

During her speech to the League, Léo retold the horrendous repression of the Commune, but went beyond this as she addressed her audience's role in the events. First, she praised the organisation for opposing the monarchical war between France and Prussia, but immediately after, accused them for their blindness to the ongoing class war, the "guerre sociale" of her speech's title:

Mais il est une autre guerre, à laquelle vous n'aviez pas songé, et qui dépasse l'autre de beaucoup en ravages et en frénésie. Je parle de la guerre civile. Elle existe en France depuis 1848; mais beaucoup s'obstinaient à ne pas la voir. (...) Vous ne pouvez pas vous appeler la Ligue de la paix et de la liberté, et demeurer indifférents à ces massacres, à ces violences ³⁷⁸.

Léo condemned the league's members for choosing not to acknowledge the ongoing class war and to not recognise the damages caused by capitalism in its promotion of inequities. She condemned them for promoting peace and freedom but not equality. Inequality was in fact central to Léo's understanding of social war as it was not

³⁷⁵ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.164

³⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p.168

³⁷⁷ André Léo, *La Guerre sociale*, p.4

³⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 2

possible, in her opinion, to have equality without freedom and conversely, freedom without equality:

Il ne peut y avoir d'égalité sans liberté, ni de liberté sans égalité. L'une implique l'autre absolument. Creusez l'un des deux termes et vous trouvez l'autre au fond.

— Si vous jouissez d'avantages, que je ne puis obtenir moi-même et qui me sont nécessaires, si je ne suis pas votre égal, vous êtes mon bienfaiteur ou mon maître. Je ne suis pas libre.

— Si l'égalité décrétée par vous, offense ma conscience, ordonne mes goûts, tue mes initiatives, je ne suis pas libre; vous êtes mon pape et mon roi³⁷⁹.

As for the administration of the Commune, Léo kept faithful to her opposition to anti-democratic, authoritarian socialism and denounced the Commune government's Blanquist-Jacobin majority:

Car, ce qu'on ne sait pas assez, ce qu'il faut dire et redire, c'est que la révolution du 18 Mars n'a point été aux mains du socialisme, comme on l'affirme avec intention; mais encore et toujours, aux mains du Jacobinisme, du Jacobinisme bourgeois, par sa majorité, composée surtout de journalistes, d'hommes de 1848, d'étudiants, de clubistes. La minorité, ouvrière et socialiste, empêcha quelquefois, protesta presque toujours, mais ne put jamais imprimer aux affaires sa direction³⁸⁰.

Needless to say that Léo's criticisms were far from well received. The audience loudly interrupted her talk several times; with the excuse of not addressing the conference's topic, she was barred from continuing her speech. Clearly disappointed in the league's members and conference's outcome, Léo responded to her silencing by publishing the full text of her lecture where she expressed her outrage towards the organisation's imposed silence and their rationale for terminating her speech³⁸¹. She also continued her critique of the liberal bourgeoisie and their role in perpetuating this social war:

³⁷⁹ Ibid, p.10

³⁸⁰ Ibid, p.12

³⁸¹ Ibid, p.13

La guerre sociale ne serait-elle pas une guerre! Mais c'est la plus âpre et la plus cruelle! Comment donc ce Congrès peut-il se récuser, quand on vient invoquer son verdict sur de tels faits au nom de la paix, de la morale et de la justice?³⁸²

Following this experience, Léo withdrew from public speaking and abandoned her initial intent to travel and lecture around Europe. When in 1880 the French government declared a general amnesty for all exiled and imprisoned *communards*, Léo returned to Paris and settled into private life. She continued to publish and write political articles and novels, but disappeared from the public eye³⁸³. The Parisian police force stopped monitoring her once she returned to Paris believing she had ceased to pose a threat to social order. And indeed, although she remained committed to her social and political ideals she never again allied herself with a socialist or feminist faction, she increasingly isolated herself and kept an extremely low profile until her death in 1900³⁸⁴.

Paule Mink

After the fall of the Commune, Mink radically altered her ideological beliefs. Shifting from the grass-root anarchist approach which had characterised her and differentiated her from the other *communardes*, she eventually came to embrace centrally planned, violent revolution as the most effective way to achieve social change.

Like Léo, she too analysed the reasons for the defeat of the Commune, but in sharp opposition to her fellow *communarde*, she identified the minority moderate faction as responsible for its failure. She accused the minority of moderating the majority's revolutionary methods and preventing it from enacting particular reforms which would have, in her opinion, enabled the Commune to triumph³⁸⁵. In open contrast with Russian anarchist theorist Bakunin, who had claimed that it was better to lose the

³⁸² Ibid, p.14

³⁸³ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.175

³⁸⁴ Ibid, p.177

³⁸⁵ Eichner, p. 181

revolution than win it by adopting the enemy's methods³⁸⁶, Mink claimed the opposite. She believed in the use of authoritarian methods such as the limiting of rights and freedoms during the insurrection if this could enhance the possibilities of victory. Mink's new socialist authoritarian stance led her to celebrate the Blanquist majority and she became an avid supporter of centralised, conspiratorial Blanquist socialism³⁸⁷.

Her conversion to Blanquism did not however, affect her feminism in any way, nor did it require her to step away from the International. On the contrary, she strove to make her feminism and socialism central to the workers' organisation³⁸⁸. Like Léo, she also spoke at the League of peace and liberty congress and used this opportunity to admonish the International for having "forgotten" about women. She still deeply believed that the success of Socialism depended entirely on the inclusion of women. By denying justice to women, the International had, in her opinion, held back the organisation's own progress and simultaneously hampered the advancement towards socio, economic and political change. Whilst heavily criticising the International, Mink made every effort to revive the organisation and incorporate women into its membership, in the hope of creating a base for an egalitarian agenda³⁸⁹.

During her decade in exile, Mink travelled to cities and towns around Europe, agitating and promoting social revolution. She spoke to men and women in the attempt to ignite social unrest. In addition to giving public lectures, she participated in the formation of "La société des proscrits de Genève", an organisation of the exiles from the Commune detached from, but not in conflict with, the International. This group focused on, among other things, smuggling politically incendiary literature and arms into France³⁹⁰. In 1880, following the government's general amnesty, Mink returned to France. She had previously made several clandestine trips in and out of France smuggling revolutionary "goods" and appearing at socialist meetings. With the

³⁸⁶ Mc Clellan, p.165

³⁸⁷ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p. 181

³⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p.181

³⁸⁹ *Ibid*

³⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p.182

issuing of the general amnesty however, she made a flamboyant return to Paris travelling via London, crossing the provinces and lecturing on feminism, socialism and anti-clericalism³⁹¹. Like Léo, Mink remained a strong advocate of rural radicalisation, but contrary to Léo, she physically brought her insurrectionary message to people in towns across the country.

Although of noble origins, Mink successfully blended with the lower-class. Speaking publicly and frequently at clubs in Paris and in the province during and after the Commune, she effectively inspired and encouraged people to take on the revolutionary cause. Similarly to Michel, Mink relied on her charisma and flamboyant personality, leaving scandal and adulation in her wake. Differently from Michel though, her life involved men, marriages (of convenience), separations and children. As a single mother she could not give all to the revolutionary cause, she could not, as Michel did, become the cause³⁹². In sharp contrast to Léo's return to private life and to Dmitrieff's disappearance from the political realm, Mink travelled tirelessly, agitating for social revolution. In opposition to Léo, whose ideas and means of communicating them convinced French police forces to abandon their surveillance of her, Mink was kept under surveillance until the end of her life³⁹³. Just after Michel, Mink holds the largest police dossier amid any other *communardes*³⁹⁴. She died in 1901; her funeral on May day was attended by thousands of mourners whilst over six hundred police, five hundred foot soldiers, and one hundred cavalry patrolled the procession³⁹⁵. Thirty years after the fall of the Commune Mink's ideas and renown had not faded in the slightest.

Louise Michel

Out of the four *communardes* protagonists of this study, Michel is the only one to have been convicted and punished for her role in the insurrection. She was deported to New Caledonia in 1873 and endured the full sentence along with other 4,500

³⁹¹ Ibid, p.185

³⁹² Ibid, p.188

³⁹³ Ibid, p.185

³⁹⁴ Ibid, p.183

³⁹⁵ Ibid, p.179

“déportés”. Refusing to return to France when in 1879 a partial amnesty had been granted to a number of convicts, she once more gave evidence of her stubborn personality and faithfulness to her principles. Indeed, she refused to abandon New Caledonia unless all convicted *communards* were allowed to do the same³⁹⁶. When a petition asking to grant her pardon, was published by several French radical newspapers, Michel found a way to reply and expressed her outrage at such proposals:

Veillez considérer comme nulles toutes les démarches outrageantes pour mon honneur qu'on se permet de faire en mon nom, (...). Je ne comprends d'autre retour en France que celui qui ramènerait toute la déportation et toute la transportation de la Commune, et n'en accepterai jamais d'autre³⁹⁷.

Life in New Caledonia for Michel and her fellow convicted *communards* was extremely difficult. The main living areas assigned to the “déportés”, such as the Isle of Pines and the Ducos Peninsula, were provided with only a few buildings, roads were very rudimentary and there was no water system as such. Little European industry existed anywhere on the island, the land was in most places arid and infertile, and fertile areas were occupied by the local population. New Caledonia had been claimed as a French colony in 1853, but very few Europeans had settled there prior to the arrival of the *communards*³⁹⁸. Through deportation, the French government wished to create a settler colony. According to this plan, agricultural and hard work on the land would have served the double purpose of moralizing the *communards* and help them create emotional attachments with their new home.

Things did not go as planned however, as the government did not take into account the resentment of the *communards* towards the French government. Angry at the defeat and defiant towards the government that had convicted them, the *communards* rejected both their transplantation away from Paris and the demand that they create a colony for France. In their obstinate opposition to the national government, they refused to cooperate, even though they knew that work would have

³⁹⁶ Joël Dauphiné, *La Déportation de Louise Michel : Vérité et légendes* (Paris : Les Indes savantes, 2006), p.91

³⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p.91

³⁹⁸ Bullard, p.184

provided them with a useful distraction from the monotony of exile³⁹⁹. Moreover, the administration proved negligent in supplying the prisoners with the prescribed food, clothing, shoes, and hammocks. It was not rare for the *communards* to be assimilated into groups of common criminals and engaged in forced labour, whilst physical and psychological torture were reported by many *communards* such as Jean Allemane in his *Mémoires d'un communard. Des barricades au bagne* (1910) and by Pascal Grousset (elected member of the Commune who spent two years in New Caledonia and successfully escaped in 1874) who recounted the experience together with fellow Commune and exile friend François Jourdes in *Les Condamnés politiques en Nouvelle-Calédonie, récit de deux évadés* (1876). In addition to this, the “déportés” deeply suffered from the emotional isolation and the lack of communication with France. The emotional privations of the deportation led many of the “déportés” to an apathetic state of mind, expressed as a deep boredom with life in the colony⁴⁰⁰.

Michel arrived in Noumea in 1873, from the reading of her *Mémoires*, we discover she lived her time in exile more positively than many of her comrades. She found comfort in the beauty of nature which she widely describes in her *Mémoires*. Although deeply suffering from the great distance separating her from her mother, she managed to find distraction and consolation by tying links with the local population, the Kanaks. During her stay in New-Caledonia she demonstrated great interest and consideration towards the Kanak population. Contrary to her fellow “déportés”, she committed herself to studying and understanding the Kanak culture. When finally granted permission to open her own school, she dedicated her Sundays to teach the natives how to read, write but also sing and draw⁴⁰¹. Her interest towards this population earned her the reputation of being “plus canaque que les canaques”⁴⁰². When in June 1878, the Kanak rose up against the colonial French power, she did not hesitate in taking their side: “Ma foi ceux qui m'accusaient, au temps de la révolte, de leur souhaiter la conquête de leur liberté avaient raison”⁴⁰³.

³⁹⁹ Ibid

⁴⁰⁰ Bullard, p.185

⁴⁰¹ Dauphiné, p.88

⁴⁰² Louise Michel, *Mémoires*, p.133

⁴⁰³ Ibid, p.158

Returning from exile on 9th November 1880 after seven years of exile, Michel received the most stunning reception as she came off the train at Saint-Lazare station in Paris. Brochures had been printed in advance and between six and eight thousand people welcomed her as she stepped off her train⁴⁰⁴. Michel's multiple roles during the insurrection, her participation in the battlefield and in the clubs, in addition to her remarkable performance before the Versailles military tribunal where she claimed responsibility for much of the revolution, had elevated her to legendary status⁴⁰⁵. During exile, Michel's revolutionary faith grew even stronger and upon her return to France she dedicated the remaining twenty five years of her life to preparing for the revolution she had longed for. Michel came back from exile as an anarchist and an anti-colonialist. She started touring France lecturing on the causes closest to her: pacifism, feminism, anti-colonialism and above all else, human freedom. She took her place among the fiercest critics of the Third Republic⁴⁰⁶ which cost her her freedom several times in 1882, 1883 and 1886⁴⁰⁷. Despite her successive imprisonments, her revolutionary ardour never waned. She became well-known throughout Europe, and an integral part of the radical world of the Belle Époque. She tied a close relationship with many influential personalities of the time, in particular French socialist Jules Guesde, anarchists Peter Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, and Karl Marx's son-in-law Paul Lafargue.

As years went by Michel grew to be a figure of legendary dimension and was celebrated by several poets, such as Victor Hugo (notably in *Viro Major*) and Paul Verlaine⁴⁰⁸. Abundant similarities can be drawn between Michel and Mink in their attitudes and actions both during and following the Commune. As claimed by historian Eichner, they both strode flamboyantly through the post-Commune decades, leaving scandal and adulation in their wakes. Michel however, eclipsed Mink a great deal more in the collective memory⁴⁰⁹. After her death in 1905, she immediately turned into a myth and became known as the "bonne Louise", the "Vierge Rouge" or the "Grande Citoyenne" as the Legend of the Commune itself took hold. More

⁴⁰⁴ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.186

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid

⁴⁰⁶ Mullaney, p.303

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid, p.318

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid, p.303

⁴⁰⁹ Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p.188

importantly, because of the attention she paid in her writing towards women in terms of education and work, and through symbolic actions such as wearing male outfits, Michel revealed key feminist claims and was appropriated in the 1880s by the first wave of feminism⁴¹⁰.

The legacy of the Commune

Most accounts on the Commune tend to mask the crucial role that women played in catalysing the revolutionary seizure of power⁴¹¹. The intensive political and active participation of women in the life of the Commune is however undeniable. Thousands of women were involved, some joining organisations such as Dmitrieff's "Union des femmes" or Michel's "Comité de Vigilance de Montmartre". Others took action spontaneously in the streets, swept along by revolutionary enthusiasm. Women were actively involved in an extraordinarily broad range of activities, as educators, journalists, cooks, nurses and political agitators; they also fought on the barricades during the bloody week⁴¹².

Despite intense commitment to the struggle by unprecedented number of working class and non-working class women, women still were absent from the central decision-making commission of the Commune. Nevertheless, the Commune took a number of crucial measures affecting their status and needs. The Commune proved to be remarkably responsive to women's demands, operating most notably in the areas of education, promoting the organisation of women's cooperatives, providing income support and child care centres⁴¹³. On 13th May, a professional school of industrial arts was opened to young women. On 16th May, men and women citizens were called to participate in the reorganisation of education and to apply for teaching positions in the newly secularised Commune schools. On 13th May, a special unemployment agency was created for women who were bookbinders. Moreover, widows and 'legitimate' or 'illegitimate' children of all citizens killed in battle were to receive pensions at the Commune's expense⁴¹⁴. Two more decrees, pronounced in

⁴¹⁰ Moses, p.10

⁴¹¹ Jones & Verges, p.713

⁴¹² Ibid, p. 714

⁴¹³ Ibid, p.716

⁴¹⁴ Ibid

favour of women are worth citing: the first approved on 12th May, conferred financial support to separated women, the second, on 18th May, equalised female teachers' salaries to those of men. For the first time equal retribution for equal work was proclaimed between men and women. These two decrees would have been of capital importance if only they had been approved earlier. Indeed, only ten days later, on 28th May the Commune fell under Versailles's ferocious military repression and women could not see these decrees put into practice⁴¹⁵.

The experience of the Commune indelibly affected its participants, the French nation, and the European (and American) political climates into the twentieth century⁴¹⁶. For the left, the Commune stood as a shining moment, with its victims as martyrs and its survivors hailed as heroes. For the French forces of order, it represented the everlasting possibility of revolutionary insurgence and a perennial threat to both the gender and class orders of French society.

For women, the insurrection provided a unique political and social moment during which they fought to attempt surmounting the existing gender structures⁴¹⁷. Having been excluded from most working class organisations prior to the Commune, and confronted with Proudhonian misogynist thinking even in socialist quarters, women were wholly without a model for structuring a movement. With the experience of the siege first, and the Commune after, one can only imagine what women could have obtained, had most of the Commune's feminist leadership not been imprisoned, exiled or killed.

Dmitrieff, Léo, Mink and Michel's biographical trajectories and type of feminist socialism converged in the Commune and diverged in its aftermath. Just as each one of them had taken differing approaches to revolution, so did each one of them shape a unique path in their subsequent journeys. No matter their personal choices and actions, all four women were united by the same goal. Like the 1,051 women who were called before the Councils of War⁴¹⁸ and those how many will never be known who were killed on the barricades and in the great slaughter during

⁴¹⁵ Anteghini, p.75

⁴¹⁶ Eichner, 'Vive La Commune!', p.69

⁴¹⁷ Ibid

⁴¹⁸ Thomas, 'The Women of the Commune', p.409

the “*semaine sanglante*”, Dmitrieff, Mink, Léo and Michel all shared the same lifelong desire to modify hierarchies and overthrow unjust oppressions. The failure of the Commune and of its radical political aspirations set back the advancement of women’s rights, their access to education and slowed down their journey on the path to equality. For the Versaillais reactionary forces, it was all too easy to depict these militant fighters as “monsters”, “incendiaries” or *un-natural* women.

The political and social experiment of the “Commune” was, for women, at the vanguard of political and social awareness. It was certainly too radical. If we compare it with the creation in Britain, in 1897, of the “National Union of Women’s Suffrage”, we can see that the limited expectations of the “Suffragettes” (despite their sometimes violent actions), whose campaigning was centred on the right to vote paid off: in 1918, the “Representation of the People Act” granted women’s suffrage. In France, it took another World War, and another 28 years to reach that point.

Perhaps the “trauma” of the Commune in the French psyche took that long to heal, and male-dominated politics could not understand these four fighters who came from “la nuit où l’on souffre” (...) “incapable(s) de tout ce qui n’est pas héroïsme et vertu”⁴¹⁹. Perhaps, more generally, France was not ready for women with political minds, capable of heroic actions and inhabited by a strong belief in the intellectual abilities of their own gender.

⁴¹⁹ See Victor Hugo’s poem, *Viro Major*, dedicated to Louise Michel (in 1871)

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