

## **Essay 5: Women**

In this last essay, I turn to one of the most celebrated and derided aspects of the Paris Commune, the central role of women in the uprising.

After every demonstration that I've been to in my life, from marching against apartheid, nuclear weapons, or in support of the miners in the 1980s to the march against the Iraq War or in support of Black Lives Matter more recently, it's striking that the way it is represented is always the same. The numbers on the march are minimised. Moments of apparent disorder dominate the press coverage. Politicians and police officers ritually reiterate the right to peaceful assembly but lament that a small minority of protestors spoiled it for the rest.

At the Poll Tax demonstration in March 1990, I and a couple of hundred other marchers had paused halfway up Whitehall to do that most revolutionary of things, sit and eat a packed lunch on a strip of green opposite Downing Street. As we chatted and ate our sandwiches, enjoying the sunshine and the conviviality, we idly observed a group of police on horseback lining up at the end of the strip. And then, without warning, they charged at us. We panicked, scattered, ran back into the road where police arrested several of us (not me) for some kind of affray. I was reminded of this at the recent vigil for

Sarah Everard, the actions of the police – so it seemed to me anyway – turning a largely peaceful protest into a mêlée. Just as news reports in 1990 reported us running to avoid being trampled as an outbreak of violence, so the press found that at the vigil on Clapham Common, a small minority of protestors had spoiled it for the rest.

It has seemed to me always that we should be aware of the ways that we represent dissenters and protestors, the figures and metaphors and images that circulate to demean and dehumanise, to reframe intentions and actions, to undermine the principles of the dissent and the validity of the protest and this was never clearer than in the demonisation of the women of the Paris Commune.

### The Petroleuse

She walks with rapid step near the shadow of the wall. She is poorly dressed; her age is between 40 and 50; her forehead is bound up with a red chequered handkerchief, from which hang masses of uncombed hair. Her face is red, her eyes blurred, as she moves with her eyes bent down. Her right hand is in her pocket, or in the bosom of her half-buttoned dress; in her other hand she holds one of the high, narrow tin cans in which milk is carried in Paris, but which now contains the petroleum. If the

street is deserted she stops, consults a bit of dirty paper that she holds in her hand, pauses a moment, and continues on her way, steadily, without haste. An hour afterwards, a house is on fire in the street she has passed. Such is the pétroleuse.

This contemporary account describes a new and terrifying creature, the pétroleuse: a woman, so alienated from her pliant and pious femininity, that she sets fire to buildings in acts of wanton destruction and malevolent hatred. You see in this description a number of the contradictory images that constitute the pétroleuse: she is unfeminine (her hair uncombed, her face red), but she is curiously sexualised with her half-buttoned dress; she is purposeful as she slinks through the streets; but she is following instructions presumably from a man on the scrap of dirty paper she consults.

Many fires were set in the climax of the fighting that brought the Paris Commune to its brutal end. Early reports made no particular mention of women taking part in these incendiary acts. But as the reporting developed, the figure of the pétroleuse was invented as one of the supreme propaganda victories of the Versaille forces, shocking public sensibilities, demonising the whole project of the Commune, in a denatured figure of apparent evil and inhumanity. In fact

there is little evidence that women were responsible for these acts of arson; some certainly assisted in the blaze that consumed the Tuileries, but otherwise it appears largely to have been men who started the majority of the fires.

### Women in the Commune

The effectiveness of this propaganda image drew on deep roots. First, it responded to decades of nineteenth-century fears about the political activism of working-class women. But second, it did pick up on the very unusual and central role that women had played in the Commune. On the morning of 18 March, it was, after all, women, out early in Montmartre who spotted the soldiers gathering around the cannons, waiting the harnesses that would allow the horses to take them into French possession. As historian Gay Gullickson has observed, historical accounts of Commune women are always shaped by attitudes to femininity; are these women caustic and aggressive activists on the look out for soldiers to rough up? Or are they innocent housewives up early and dutifully shopping for milk and bread when they happen upon the soldiers? It's an important reminder again to be wary of the images of the Commune and how they circulate.

But it is clear that women were important to the Commune at every step of the way. The Commune emerged in part from women's organising; the political clubs that were legalised in

the late 60s often featured women centrally, articulating their frustrations and visions of the future. And under the Commune, there were numerous women's societies, like the Union des Femmes, which supported Communal aims but also held the Commune in check, negotiating better wages for the mainly female workforce that sewed the National Guardsmen's uniforms.

The Union des Femmes was founded in early April by a group of women, apparently led by Elizabeth Dmietrieff, a Russian radical – and friend of Karl Marx – now living in Paris. Dmietrieff was just one of a number of extraordinary women who came to prominence and indeed flourished under the Commune. I've previously mentioned André Léo, a pseudonym for Léodile Champseix. Under the name Léo she was a tireless campaigner and journalist, whose regular admonitions were that the Commune needed to be true to its principles, particularly regarding women. In early May, a directive had gone out preventing women from supporting troops at the front. Léo denounced the Commune furiously, reminding the General of the Commune's forces that without the women of Montmartre, you would not even be a general. A revolution without women, wrote Léo, is no revolution at all.

Similar views were expressed by the extraordinary radical Louise Michel. She had been a teacher but had become enthused by revolutionary ideas in the late 1860s and her commitment to

the Commune was second to none. After the Commune, she continued to be a figure of fear for many on the right, no doubt for sentiments such as she expressed in her memoir:

I am a savage alright, I love the smell of gunpowder, grapeshot flying through the air, but above all, I'm devoted to the revolution.

In the middle of the war, she nurtured a plan to go and assassinate Adolphe Thiers, even slipping out of the city to Versailles to show how easily it could be done. She fought with the 61st National Guard and was usually seen with her rifle on her back. She was put on trial in December 1871, at which she displayed no regrets for anything she had done for the Commune and expressed fury that her sentence was not death: 'if you let me live, I will not stop crying for a vengeance. If you are not cowards, kill me!' She was a formidable figure though her ferocity should be balanced with recognition of her as a teacher, a nurse in wartime, and a poet, who, as a youth, sent her verses to Victor Hugo for approval. On one occasion, she became a victim of the same directive against which André Léo railed, when she joined a group of women ambulancières ready to patch up wounds and tend to the feverish. She was mocked by her own side, patronised and sent home, later observing that men, even of the Commune, 'applauded the idea of equality

[...and] gave the appearance of helping us, but were always content with just the appearance'.

### Policies

The Commune was a complicated organisation with some figures much more genuine in support of women's rights than others. It introduced progressive initiatives, recognising unmarried in law and passing a resolution in favour of divorce. It appealed continually for women to participate in the battle against the Versailles, and not just as nurses. The Appel aux Citoyennes de Paris of 11-12 April and the call for the formation of the Amazons of the Seine invited women to arm up and join the fighting. Although rumours about the pétroleuses were mostly unfounded it is certainly true that women fought and killed in defence of the city. One day early in the Bloody Week that ended the Commune, a group of French soldiers were passing down a street in the 8th arrondissement when a shot was fired from within a building, killing a gendarme who was with them. The soldiers dragged out the shooter who was a grey-haired and dishevelled older woman. 'You killed my son this morning, you cowards,' she spat at them, 'and now I have killed one of you'. She was shouting 'Vive la Commune' as they shot her.

The idea of fundamental equality between the sexes ran deep in the Commune. Education reforms, which I spoke about in the second essay, were informed by the principles of

revolutionary-era educationalist Joseph Jacotot. One of his core principles was simply, boys and girls were equally intelligent. It is hard to overstate how progressive this view was in 1871, when decades of educational practice had been founded on the opposite. Louise Michel argued in bewilderment: 'I have never understood why there is a sex whose intelligence people have tried to stifle as if there were already too much intelligence in the world'. André Léo conversely, argued that men were as emotional as women: 'Great causes excite the same sentiments in all human hearts' adding that men and women 'experience the same passions'.

#### The Empire strikes back

To crush the Commune was also to crush these nascent ideas of full equality between the sexes and, in the explanations of the Commune and its supposed flaws, there is a trenchant reassertion of male privilege over female self-assertion. Women's participation, it was widely claimed, was an unnatural departure from women's natural role: the poet Catulle Mendès asked, 'what are these extraordinary beings who give up the housewife's broom and the seamstress's needle for a rifle?' Frequently the women of the Commune were accused of having 'forgotten their sex'. The nickname for Louise Michel was 'the Red Virgin' and, while it is often intended to be complimentary in evoking her single-minded devotion to the



cause, it also stigmatises her as unfeminine and unfeeling in her ideological commitments.

Women who participated fully in the Commune were pathologized. Critic Francisque Sarcey explained these women's passion for the revolution by noting that their 'brains are weaker and their emotions livelier'. Le Figaro talked of 'revolutionary hysteria' and the Communard Sergeant Bergeret defended their passion by saying that the shelling had disrupted these women's domestic sphere: 'you may call them furies,' he said, 'but it is society that has driven these passive creatures into madness'. (Sit down, Sergeant, you're not helping.)

The women of the Commune were mocked, then stigmatised, then demonised. This paved the way for the particularly cruel treatment of women, both in the press, and on the streets. In the invasion of Paris there are numerous reports of sexual assault being used as a weapon of war. Women prisoners and even women's dead bodies were often stripped of their fighting clothes in a particularly grim determination to return them forcibly to their femininity.

### Epilogue

The history of the women of the Commune represents a further challenge, to ask ourselves how far we can really commit to the principles by which we claim to live. Who do we take with

us in our journeys towards a better world and who do we leave behind? Who do we not see and who does not see us? What kind of world can we build that includes us all?

In May 1871, in one of the many political clubs that fuelled the imaginations and convictions of the Commune, Citoyenne Destrée stood before the assembled crowd of men and women and declared: 'The Social Revolution will not be operative until women are equal to men. Until then,' she said, 'one has only the appearance of Revolution.'

Finally, as with many of the attempts by the French government to crush the memory of the Commune, the snuffing of this feminist flame was unsuccessful. The 1870s and particularly the 1880s saw a flowering of women's rights movements, newspapers and campaigns right across Europe and beyond. Many who had been important in the Commune either escaped censure or returned to France after the Amnesty declared in July 1880 that allowed many of the ex-Communards living in exile to return to Paris. Some of the Commune's education policies were revived under the Third Republic. The ideas that had animated the Commune and so enraged the rest of France now found themselves creeping into public policy. Soon, the Commune found itself reincorporated as part of France's distinctive heritage of democracy and dissent.

But the story of the Commune cannot be entirely de-fanged, both in its founding and in its collapse. It remains a story of struggle and passion, imagination and commitment. In its heroism and its failures, in its anger and its joys, the Commune still stands – red flag flying above the City of Light – to challenge us again.