Representations of the Paris Commune

By

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Abstract:

This thesis analyzes and compares representations of the 1871 Paris Commune in literature, socialist theory, and historiography, prioritizing where possible the voices and opinions of participants of the event itself. Almost every observer of the Commune, including professional historians, has used the Paris Commune to confirm their pre-existing narratives of history.
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Introduction:
Representation of the Commune

Historical narratives written on the Commune place the event as foundational in the origin of ideologies as varied as Marxism, democracy, and feminism. While Marxists and other ideologues have used the Commune to help form their theories, many thinkers who wrote about the Commune – including professional historians – flattened the voices of the actual Communards in their perspectives of the event. Despite this weakness, Commune historiography in its totality offers a strong understanding of not just what occurred in Paris between March and May of 1871, but also how those events affected future ones in Russia, Europe, and elsewhere. However, traditional historiography misinterprets the relationship between the Paris Commune and the narrative closest in time and place to the Commune itself: the Third Republic in France.

A standard historiographical view of the Third Republic, which was founded in 1870 after the fall of the Second French Empire, is that it eliminated the radical French left in its response to the Commune; therefore, the remaining political factions were able to find common ground without French socialists, unions, syndicalists, anarchists, and other ideologues who had been dedicated to instability in France and would profit by disrupting government. In their work on the Third Republic, The Third Republic from its Origins to the Great War, Jean-Marie Mayeur and Madeleine Reberioux distinctly separate the Commune from ideological republicanism: “The most extreme republicans, even when they attempted to secure a reconciliation between Paris and Versailles, saw the Commune as an aberration or a utopia… [T]he Commune and its failure allowed the republicans to separate themselves from the revolutionaries.”¹ The Communards were not republicans, and their defeat allowed republicans to operate without a unified opponent on the left. Philip Nord’s institutional

history of the Second Empire, *The Republican Moment*, offers another version of this argument. He paints the Second Empire as more fertile for the growth of republicanism than previously imagined; the election of the Third Republic in 1870 wasn’t a lightning strike moment, but the culmination of a long process of growth for republican institutions across France during the Empire. The understanding of the Second Empire as a relatively linear antecedent of the Third Republic imagines the Commune as a blip in history, or a mistake marring the first year of republicanism in France since mid-century, the overcoming of which allowed the success of the Third Republic. However, the Commune was a republican institution, or at least it imagined itself that way. Even socialists and Blanquists within the Commune governed according to republican norms, refusing to attack private property or the French capitalist structure for fear of destabilizing the French economic system. The Commune intentionally defended republicanism in France, even while at war with the Republic; it is incorrect to assert the Commune was an opponent of republicanism. Furthermore, critical portrayals of the Commune would condition the post-Commune Third Republic’s understanding of the working class and its attempts at politicization.

Suzanna Barrows in *Distorting Mirrors* acknowledges that the intellectual climate of France in the late-19th century was a “complex refraction on late nineteenth-century French culture”; however, she fails to explicate the extent of the role of the Commune in establishing this culture.² If French philosophy and governance was afraid of the working class, that fear was a result of conditioned assumptions about workers, instead of those workers’ actual actions. Both the French political and cultural climates in the late-19th century were horrified of strikes. The sociologist Gustave le Bon criticized working-class crowds as primitive, bestial, and violent, whether gathered for passive events or engulfed in the rage of a strike.³ At the

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same time, the naturalist author Émile Zola described a strike in *La Germinal* in which a shopkeeper was castrated by a mob of hysterical women – a clear representation derived from the pétroleuses of the Paris Commune. If in all strikes between 1870 and 1890 in France, only one person died at the hands of strikers, then why were strikes so frequently represented as criminally violent? French culture understood the crowd – particularly female members – as violent because of literary representations of the Paris Commune.

How the Commune was understood following its defeat was more a result of representations of the event by authors, poets, diplomats, ideologues, historians, and others than a result of the actual events that happened between March 18th and May 28th, 1871. The representations of the Commune by participants and opponents have until now not been compiled and analyzed. Those representations were variously adopted, modified, and ignored by future socialist and anarchist theorists in the writing of their political theories. Some professional historiography of the Commune has latched onto the relationship between the Commune and following socialist revolutions, while both simplifying that relationship and missing its connection to original representations of the Commune in literature and non-fiction. That being said, some historians have understood the Commune both in its portrayal as well as objective reality. Writing in a relatively obscure compilation edited by James Leith, Sanford Elwitt acknowledges that the National Assembly and the Paris Commune – opponents during the civil war of 1871 – were ideologically different only in terms of nuance. Elwitt describes how representations of the Commune, instead of its reality, determined the reactions of other Frenchmen who were not inherently the Commune’s opponents: “I stated at the beginning that the Commune was isolated politically and

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ideologically within France. This happened because the republicans pre-empted the revolution, organized it, and set its limits."

The Third Republic was able to maintain support in France because the Communards were presented as radicals, over whose graves a rational political compromise could be forged. The destroyer of the Commune, General MacMahon, was even elected as the leader of the National Assembly in 1875, succeeding Adolphe Thiers. Robert Tombs, another historian, also explicitly understood the importance of the depiction of the Commune, writing in *The Paris Commune, 1871*, that it came to represent “various viewpoints…[as] a turning point, or more precisely a number of turning points.”

The Paris Commune acted as an historical mirror, reflecting images of whatever the viewer wished to see. To elite observers terrified of the lower classes and their ability to overthrow civilization and return to bestial savagery, such as Maxime du Camp, Émile Zola, or E.B. Washburne, the Commune was evidently a communist plot. It required destruction for the salvation of France. To socialist observers desiring to appropriate the symbol of the Commune for future proletarian revolutions, such as Karl Marx or Vladimir Lenin, the Commune was inspired by socialist principles, though lacking in several ideological or geopolitical resources required for success; Lenin vowed to solve those issues in his own revolution. To professional observers fitting the Commune into categories of late twentieth-century history, the Commune simply confirmed metanarratives of historians. Gender historians concluded that the Commune represented the social, political, and economic empowerment of women, and liberal historians that it was a trend towards increasing democratic participation so integral for a linear progression towards the liberal telos. These three images of the Commune created by contemporaries, leftist theorists, and historians are reflected in the three chapters of this thesis. Closing this introduction is a brief description of

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6 Ibid, 198.
the course of the Commune. The first chapter is a compilation of literary descriptions of Communards, both by participants in and opponents of the event. How did poets, authors, diplomats, journalists, and participants describe the Commune and the Communards? What observers saw in the Commune generally reflected their own political and social biases instead of the historical facts about the Commune itself. The second chapter is a case study of how socialist authors used their understandings of the Paris Commune to legitimize and form their revolutionary theories. The third chapter analyzes major historiography regarding the Paris Commune. The narratives authored by historians occasionally confirm Communard self-description, but just as often they ignore how Communards saw themselves. I intend to shift the historical view of the Commune towards an understanding of how Communards and their enemies viewed the revolution. While narratives that ignore can still be valuable, the field as a whole gains when the words of participants regain a central place in their own study.

This is not a history of the Paris Commune, as I have little of value to contribute to the actual historical rendering of the events that took place between March and May of 1871 in Paris. Neither is this a history of the construction and recreation of memory and commemoration of the Commune, as that Halbwachs-ian history has been ably written by Collette Wilson, among others. Instead I offer a more abstract history of how the Commune has been presented in diverse areas and how those representations align, diverge, and ultimately create a blurry yet recognizable image of the Communard and his or her government. Who was the Communard, why does he or she matter, and how have various writers used representations of the Communard to confirm their own stories about history? By the end of this work, we should have a clearer, though still muddled, answer to each of these questions.
Before we turn to portrayals of the Paris Commune, and the impacts on the course of history, we must first establish a basic understanding of what happened in Paris while the Commune was in power. On March 18th, 1871, a detachment of soldiers under the command of General Lecomte, snuck through Paris under cover of darkness to the heights of Montmartre, where several hundred artillery pieces were held. The president of the recently-elected National Assembly, Adolphe Thiers, was afraid of what a militarized Paris could accomplish with the cannon and rifles given to the National Guardsmen of the city during France’s war with Prussia. As a peace treaty was being negotiated, Thiers sent Lecomte to Paris to seize the cannon; however, Lecomte and his men forgot to bring horses. When the sun rose, the militarized working population of Montmartre awoke to find Lecomte and his men trying to remove the cannon, and they quickly confronted the soldiers. Lecomte ordered his men to fire on the crowd, and they refused. Lecomte was seized, and the Commune was born when thousands of soldiers joined the National Guardsmen throughout the city in rebellion against the National Assembly. The Assembly’s leaders in Adolphe Thiers, Jules Picard, Jules Favre, and others fled Paris to Versailles. However, the roots of the Commune were laid decades earlier.8

The most recent French attempt to establish a republican government had ended in disaster. In 1848, Paris participated in a series of European revolutions in which populations sought varied liberal reforms, such as shorter and safer working hours, freedom of the press, and democratic political reforms. Following a bloody crackdown against Paris during the June Days of 1848, Louis Napoleon was elected as the unexpected leader of the Second

French Republic. He dissolved the Second Republic in 1851 during a coup d’État and founded the Second Empire, taking the name of Napoleon III. Parisians, particularly the militarized working class who had fought for liberal reforms, bore a political grudge against Napoleon and his government. The Second Empire stifled reformers in Paris, cracked down on the press and political opponents, such as the socialist radical, Louis Auguste Blanqui. In addition, prices in Paris skyrocketed while wages fell or remained the same during a series of rapid changes to the city in the late 1860s. Paris was the site of the International Exposition of 1867, which brought foreign visitors, workers, and capital to the city. Furthermore, Napoleon appointed Baron Haussmann to reconstruct his capital city. Some goals were to eliminate disease due to overcrowding in the city, to allow ease of transportation, and to make revolution more difficult. These goals could all be accomplished in part by widening the streets of Paris. Haussmann bulldozed many working-class neighborhoods in central Paris to make way for great boulevards, forcing the already-impoverished workers into the outskirts and suburbs of the city. Rising prices and depressed wages combined with the changing city of Paris to further upset the lives of the working class.\(^9\)

In 1870, Napoleon III declared war on Prussia, and France performed poorly. France suffered disastrous defeats at Metz, where an entire army surrendered, and Sedan, where Napoleon III himself was captured. Paris was besieged from September to January, and the male working class of the city was divided into National Guard units, which were armed. Despite Parisians’ desire to engage Prussians, none of the commanders of the National Guard undertook a serious attempt at lifting the siege; this contributed to a widespread belief in Paris that the government betrayed the war cause, Paris, and France itself. Following the Battle of Sedan, a Government of National Defense was elected. Like the government preceding, the new republican government refused to use the National Guard against Prussia,

and Parisians soon realized the government intended to sign a humiliating peace treaty to end the war. Paris had twice attempted to establish a municipal government in October of 1870 and January of 1871. Each had failed, and Paris fumed while the government of National Defense abdicated in order to hold official elections for a Third French Republic in the form of a National Assembly. The election returned a monarchist and conservative majority, culminating in Adolphe Thiers – an Orléanist – being elected from Paris and appointed President. The deeply republican working class in Paris was furious about the monarchist returns, and the National Assembly declared its headquarters to be the royal palace at Versailles: another sign of monarchist leanings. It was in this climate that Thiers ordered Lecomte into Paris to seize the guns of Montmartre. However, after the National Assembly failed to seize the artillery from Montmartre and fled Paris, the city was under the de facto control of local Parisian powers. The mysterious Central Committee of the National Assembly, men elected to represent each unit of guardsmen, occupied the Hotel de Ville. They organized the election of the Commune, which occurred a week later, on the 26th of March.  

Initially, Communards did not want to attack Versailles, despite an overwhelming numerical superiority. Parisians believed that their political role was solely local, and any attempt to interfere with the Republic would be treasonous and counter to the inherent republicanism of the Communard form of government. Though the Commune allowed its enemies to walk freely out of Paris, including General MacMahon, who eventually organized its defeat during the Bloody Week, the French National Assembly in early April began a bombardment of Paris with its remaining loyal forces. Having just experienced the disastrous Prussian siege, in which rat meat became a delicacy, Paris lashed out against its new opponent. Paris organized a massive sortie – involving potentially several tens of thousands –

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against Versailles on the 2\textsuperscript{nd} of April, but it was bloodily repulsed. The Commune’s failure was largely due to disorganization and a mistaken belief that Versailles would not fight back, though the sortie was repelled in part by the fort at Mont-Valérien, which shelled Communard lines as they passed. Parisians believed Mont-Valérien to be in their own hands, and most soldiers fled at the sight of resistance. Had Paris succeeded, the goals of the attack were opaque. The Commune represented municipal power in Paris and republican government in France, and it had no coherent plan had it successfully toppled the Republic. The attack was more defensive than offensive, trying to achieve safety rather than any distinct political goal. This would be the closest the Commune would come to defeating Versailles. Paris was besieged for the next several weeks, and it cycled through War Delegates trying to find a successful military leader. The soldier of fortune, Gustave Cluseret, was replaced and imprisoned after the fort of Issy fell to Versailles, and Louis Rossel resigned after soldiers refused to listen to his orders. The elderly radical republican, Louis Charles Delescluze, was the final War Delegate, but his ignorance about war did not matter; by the time he was elected, Versailles had entered Paris on the 21\textsuperscript{st} of May. The following week, ending on the 28\textsuperscript{th}, was comprised of brutal executions of tens of thousands of Parisians by the occupying forces of the National Assembly.\textsuperscript{11} It was known as the Bloody Week.

During the days of the Commune, Parisian politics were often paralyzed. Politics were dominated by diverse but porous groups. Jacobins, generally dedicated to the ideals of the original French Revolution and republicanism, were the largest group, and their most prominent leader was Delescluze. He was a member of the Commune, member of the Committee of Public Safety during its brief and ineffectual existence, and final War Delegate

of the Commune. Some moderates sympathetic to the National Assembly were also elected, such as the mayors of Paris, but many resigned their posts when they saw that civil war was inevitable. There were also several nonaligned Communards. However, the other large group in the Commune was the Blanquists. They saw themselves as socialist shock troops, operating as militant revolutionaries. While Blanqui himself was in prison in Versailles, his disciples served as members of the Commune as well as leaders of its police agents; Raoul Rigault and Théophile Ferré were significant Blanquist members of domestic policing who were responsible for the execution of the Archbishop of Paris, Darboy, during the Bloody Week. Despite their theoretical commitment to revolution, Blanquists generally opposed legislation that could have destabilized federal French politics, and they fought to protect republicanism. Blanquists were hostile to the Church, and their presence was largely responsible for the laicization of education and public appropriation of Church land.¹²

The governing body spent most of its time debating instead of actually legislating, though several significant bills were passed. By far the most significant was the rent-abnegation bill the Commune passed within its first few days, releasing monetary pressure that had steadily suffocated Parisians since the beginning of the siege of Paris by Prussia in September of 1870. Many authors have used this bill as evidence of the Commune’s socialist nature and disregard of capitalist property and ownership; however, the Commune simply delayed and eliminated rent payments because this bill won support from the working class in Paris. Thiers’ National Assembly had insisted on Parisians immediately repaying their rents accumulated during the siege, and this in large part provoked Paris’ rebellion against the National Assembly. Thus the onset of the Commune could fit into the theoretical seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moral economy; the 1871 urban revolt was a moral reaction against rising prices amid a dwindling economy. Just as eighteenth-century peasants

revolted against increasing prices for foodstuffs, as described by E.P. Thompson, so too did the urban poor of Paris revolt against rising rents. Paris’ success in its revolt was the only innovative feature in 1871; while rent payments were delayed, the uprising provoked an unwanted civil war. Other bills gave to the possession of its workers abandoned factories and returned vital work tools that had been forfeited to pawnshops. Only a handful of factories ever changed possession, and the Commune demanded pawnshops release tools because so many had been hawked during the Prussian siege; the city needed to get back to work. These seemingly ideological pieces of legislation were most likely enacted out of practical necessity. Even Marx agreed that the Commune was not socialist: “[T]he Commune was merely the rising of a city under exceptional conditions, the majority of the Commune was in no wise socialist, nor could it be.”13 The Commune lacked ideological motivation, but it also lacked any drive or urgency, in many cases. The Commune spent much more time debating trivialities than leading a united city. Domestic policy was unrealistic, often assuming victory; for example, the Commune voted life-long pensions for widows (either married or not) of men killed in action. Small pensions given in single installments would have actually helped widows and orphans, while life-long pensions went unrealized.14

If politics in the Commune were for the most part not revolutionary and driven by necessity, the social life of Paris during the Commune was innovative and original, though at times violent. During the Commune, the streets of Paris were open to workers in ways that they had never before experienced. Workers could wander through rich arrondissements, which they had only previously visited as places of employment. The Louvre was opened to all visitors for no charge, and the Tuileries Palace – the former residence of Napoleon III and

his family – was opened for a fee of just 50 centimes, which was donated to the wounded fighting in the civil war. Massive open-air concerts, reminiscent of the great festivals of the early 1790s, were locations where tens of thousands of Parisians could gather to watch hundreds of performers. Ordinary Parisians avidly read about local and national politics due to “[t]he almost frenetic proliferation of newspapers, brochures, pamphlets, political posters, manifestos, wall posters, and caricatures that flooded Paris.” However, the flourishing of media was tempered towards the end of the Commune, as dozens of newspapers that questioned Communard governance were censored. The fine arts scene of Paris adapted to the Commune, as artists produced revolutionary opera, theater, and music. At the same time, the festivity of the Commune could manifest itself in popular acts of violence against symbols that were seen as opposing republicanism. The house of Thiers, who was despised by Parisians as a monarchist in charge of the Republic, was sacked and razed. Religion and clericalism were also believed to be agents of monarchy and reaction. Religious services were often interrupted by Communard supporters, churches vandalized, and priests arrested and occasionally executed. The most frequent anti-clerical enactments of the Commune were legislation against religion’s interference with government, enacting the laicization of education, as well as the appropriation of churches for the use of political clubs. The Vendôme Column, representing France’s imperial conquests under Napoleon, was dismantled by Communard crowds in mid-May. Similarly, a guillotine was symbolically burned on April 7\textsuperscript{th} as a symbol of the destruction of unjust reactionary justice systems. Some demographics found the Commune to be an opportunity. Women in the Commune found an increased ability to engage publically with social and economic life, if not politics. The Russian Elisabeth Dmietrieff founded the Women’s Union, which worked to

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{15} Merriman, \textit{Massacre}, 52.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Merriman, \textit{Massacre}, 51-56, 89-92; Horne, \textit{The Fall of Paris}, 349-351.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
provide employment opportunities and higher wages for women. The Montmartre Women’s
Vigilance Committee duplicated some activities of the Women’s Union, and it also recruited
women’s ambulance nurses and sent female speakers to political clubs. A few dozen clubs
were active in Paris under the Commune, and they acted both as institutions in which
ordinary citizens could discuss politics, as well as groups that could lobby and influence
government. Women frequented clubs, where they could openly discuss politics and their
preferences for social, economic, and even military legislation. Men and women of the lowest
orders of society could for the first time discuss high politics in public. Whether this was a
step forward for Paris or a grotesque perversion of the traditional order was a subject of
debate amongst Communards and their opponents alike.17

17 Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* (Indiana:
Bloomington, 2004), 70, 12-122.
Chapter 1: 
Voices of the Communards and their Opponents: Themes of the Commune in Literature and Non-fiction

Introduction

Who were the Communards? In his magnum opus, *The Paris Commune 1871*, Robert Tombs wrote that there are two ways to analyze the Communards: sociological description through empirical data and through analysis of their self-description. The former has been accomplished by able historians such as Jacques Rougerie, Alistair Horne, and Tombs himself. The latter method is woefully lacking in historiography, despite Tombs’ insistence on the importance of the approach. Tombs briefly summarized Communard self-description, offering “several connecting themes in the way Communards consistently described themselves, the struggle they were engaged in, and their enemies.” Communards consistently described themselves as republican, patriotic, socially revolutionary, and anti-clerical, but Tombs offered relatively little evidence from literature to support this analysis. This chapter will offer not only description of the Communards in their own words, but also in the words of their political enemies. The spectrum of representations of the Commune was broad, differing depending on the political orientation, nationality, class alignment, or other characteristics of the observer. However, these diverse definitions of the Communards fit relatively cleanly within five interconnected themes of alcohol consumption, adherence to gender roles, rationality and morality, nationalism and patriotism, and ideological commitment.

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Throughout a progression across portrayals of the Commune, connections and intersections between themes or categories of description are unavoidable and required. Thus foundational descriptors of Communards, such as individuals’ ideologies, can only be understood through the contextualization offered by commentators’ portrayals of the Commune’s relationships with other philosophies, such as nationalism or rationalism. Descriptive themes used to portray the Communards interact and combine to create singular images of the Communards. Taken together, these representations of the Commune reveal descriptions that were reproduced by later authors, such as Marxist theorists or professional historians (the subjects of the following chapters). Thus while inventing five catch-all themes to organize description of the Commune is somewhat inorganic, this process helps solidify specific and comprehensive images of the Communards. Furthermore, the process of describing Communards according to themes reveals a missing segment of Commune historiography. By collecting and combining the description of Communards by their adherents and opponents, it becomes clear that the voices of Communards themselves, as well as of their opponents, have been ignored in historiography. Writers in the 20th and 21st centuries have based entire political philosophies and historical monographs on representations of the Commune created in literature and non-fiction. Therefore, those fictional and non-fictional renderings of the Communards must be presented.

The portrayal of the Communards using the five aforementioned themes was consistent when the Commune was represented either in fiction or non-fiction. The first explicit literary representation of the event was published in 1886 by Jules Vallès, a Communard, who wrote the semi-autobiographical L’Insurgé, in which the life of the protagonist, Vingtres, mirrored Vallès’ own experiences. The next prominent literary picture of the Commune was Émile Zola’s The Debacle (1892), which described 1870-1 in France through the words and actions of two characters, Jean and Maurice, who fought in the
Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune. Many more novels about the Commune were published in the early 20th century, including *L’Apprentie* (1904) by Gustave Geffroy. Geffroy described the life of the fictional Cécile Pommier, who spent her early years living under the tyranny of the Paris Commune. Paul and Victor Margueritte wrote *La Commune* (1904), which presented the Commune through the eyes of a politically centrist chemist named Martial and a wise old historian named Thédenat. Each lived in Paris and sympathised with the working class, though neither actively supported the Commune due to their ages and moderate political dispositions. *Un Communard* (1913) by Léon Deffoux described the later life and death of an ornery old man, Burtau, who had once been a Communard. Several poems also dealt with the Commune, including *Paris War-Cry* by Arthur Rimbaud and select poems from Victor Hugo’s *L’Année Terrible*, published during 1871, closer to the date of the Commune itself. The Commune was also treated to fictive – and near-universally derogatory – representation by non-French authors in the late 19th century. American Robert W. Chambers wrote *The Red Republic*, and Englishman G.A. Henty wrote *A Girl of the Commune*. Each followed a foreigner and their adventures in the Commune.

Non-fiction written about the Commune echoed the description of fictional novels and poems. Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray was a noted Communard historian who published a well-researched account of the events in 1871 under the title *History of the Commune of 1871* (1876). The writing was assisted by Karl Marx, and the first publication was in English, translated by Eleanor Marx. Lissagaray’s account remains one of the most-cited historical documents about the Commune. One of the earliest and most scathing critiques of the Commune came from Maxime du Camp’s *Les Convulsions de Paris* (1878-1880). Du Camp was a reactionary author favoured by the post-Commune Third Republic government, and he earned an appointment to the *Académie Française* in 1880 due in part to his vitriolic description of the Communards. Conversely, Louise Michel, a famous female Communard,
justified and praised the Commune in her memoirs, *The Red Virgin* (1886). The American diplomat to France, E.B. Washburne, published his official diplomatic letters written during the Franco-Prussian War under the title *Franco-German War and Insurrection of the Commune: Correspondence of E.B. Washburne*. Another foreign author, Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, published his experiences during the Commune; however, unlike Washburne, Chambers, or Henty, he lived in Paris during the Commune and was far less critical. Finally, two compilations of many writings and interview responses from Communards about their revolution will also be used: Mitchell Abidor’s *Communards: The Story of the Paris Commune of 1871 as told by those who fought for it* and Eugene Schulkind’s *The Paris Commune of 1871: The View from the Left*. Descriptions of the Commune from non-fiction works are parallel to those presented in fiction, and each portrayal can be reduced to the five consistent themes of alcoholism, gender, morality, nationalism, and ideology.

A thematic organization of pro- and anti-Commune literature and non-fiction will culminate in a comparison of the portrayal of every theme as represented in two works: the realist literature of the anti-Commune Émile Zola and the history of the pro-Commune Lissagaray. It is important to note that these works did not develop the themes established by previous works, but instead re-iterated them. I offer these two works not as climaxes of representation, but instead as descriptions that offer insight into each theme, as well as how those themes interacted in creating singular descriptions of a Communard. Despite Lissagaray’s status as a historian and Zola’s status as a fiction writer, each recycled and re-used the same themes common to writings on the Commune. Whether the author was a historian or novelist, the five descriptive themes of alcoholism, gender, morality, nationalism, and ideology combine and interact to create opposing images of the Communard as a violent, effeminate communist or a rational, patriotic republican.
For anti-Communards, the incomprehensible political revolution could be explained as unproblematic if Communard thinkers were simply drunk. The drunkards’ logic is flawed by virtue of his intoxication, whether literal or metaphorical (ie. drunk on power, drunk with violence, etc.). Authors such as G.A. Henty were able to explain the apparent evil and cruelty of the Communards by their drunkenness. The character Jean Diantre, who became a
Communard and was almost killed during his attempt to assassinate a political figure, was frequently associated with alcohol: “He has been drinking a great deal lately, and I have warned him over and over again that he would get into trouble; but as a rule liquor does not affect him that way, he gets sulky and bad-tempered, but he can generally walk steadily enough.”21 The drunken Communard did not stumble or sleep, but instead succumbed to political treachery and violence. Female Communards – famous for their gendered violence – used wine to poison unsuspecting government troops.22 Even the Marguerrittes’ moderate work associated the Commune with alcoholism and false patriotism: “[The Commune was a] dream of unfortunate wretches, who, not finding sufficient in the present to suffice for the sacred rights of existence, rush angrily towards a better future. It is an adulterated wine, which only increases their thirst.”23 In this description, the Commune was not just fueled by alcoholism, but was itself a type of intoxicant.

While critics of the Commune blamed its excesses on alcoholism, others defended the Commune for its sobriety. Élie Reclus was a French journalist who joined the Commune. Though he was a committed Communard, he was also frequently critical of the Communard

22 Ibid, 267.
style of governance. Reclus stated that he spent much time during the Commune “keeping an eye out for drunks.” This was most likely as a result of the common conception that Communards were drunkards, which Reclus sought to disprove. Despite a whole day of searching, he was only able to find two men drunk on wine. While some, such as Reclus, refuted the notion that Communards were drunk, others embraced it. Jules Vallès, who was a Communard, praised political supporters of the Commune for their drunken wisdom. One Communard named Rouiller drafted an education program based seemingly on individual autonomy that Vingtrás admired: “He knows more than they do, more than I do! In the wrinkled dirty pages he gave me is an entire plan of education whose wisdom overturns all the catechisms of Academies and Grand Councils.” However, Rouiller claimed the centrality of alcohol to his thinking:

People say I’m wrong to get potted. But God-damn it, it’s just when I’m boozing it up that my thoughts start to go, it’s just when my eyes are aflame that I begin to see! Believe me, it’s not concern for virtue that makes people advise the poor not to lap it up; it’s because alcohol might clear up their brains a little, it might grease their muscles and warm their hearts. You like what I did? … Yeah? … I wrote it with the sweat of my drinking bouts!

Vallès established alcohol as a positive in Commune life, catalyzing educational programs filled with wisdom. Significantly, Rouiller described elite considerations of alcoholism as a vice only because they were afraid the poor might use alcohol to peer behind the curtain of their slavery. This anti-elite, anti-clerical opinion considered alcohol not as a detriment or sin, but instead a proletarian virtue, capable of providing the poor with wisdom enough to create

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26 Ibid, 119.
28 Ibid, 175.
entire educational programs. To critics of the Commune, this consideration of alcohol as a proletarian virtue revealed the depth of degeneracy motivating the Commune.

Gender in the Commune

Anti-Communard portrayals of gender reversals in the Commune were an illuminating warning, exposing the depths to which drunken and degenerate Communards could sink. Critics described women as reminiscent of mythic Greek harpies, unsexed and degenerate in their violence. Paul and Victor Margueritte correlated alcoholism and gender reversals in their description of Communard women during the executions of Generals Clément-Thomas and Lecomte on March 18th:

The garden [in which the executions took place] was black with people, among whom were numbers of women in a state resembling drunkenness… Nine bullets pierced [Clément-Thomas], and still they continued to fire into the warm body and trample it underfoot…a female fury mutilated Lecomte. Coats and boots were torn from the dead men, and around their half-naked bodies the mob executed a Caribee dance.29

Women were the drunken fury that rebelled against the National Assembly, executed Communard justice, and defined the Commune. Femininity and excessiveness of Commune justice inverted traditional gender roles, which construed violence as a male activity. The Marguerritites thus gestured towards the gendered irrationality of the Commune and the decadence of the French working class as a whole. By displaying Commune violence as female, the Marguerritites condemned the legitimacy of Commune justice and created a carnivalesque atmosphere in which Commune men were too decadent and weak to enforce their own rule of law. Contrastingly, women were unwilling or unable to conform to traditional roles of mother and wife, preferring instead to usurp the law by gathering in mobs and rending and robbing their already-dead victims.

Maxime du Camp echoed the descriptions of female Communards as the height of irrationality and violence in *The Convulsions of Paris*. When even the Communards realized that they were soon to lose the city, frenzied Parisians sought to execute political prisoners through mob justice:

The populace was *en fête*…After [the pétroleuse who led the mob] followed a rolling of drums, accompanied by a flourish of trumpets sounding the charge, mixing their madness of noise in heads already drunk with blood and alcohol… The mob closed in on the hostages; women reaching in front of the Federal Guards tore at them with their nails. Cries resounded of: ‘Here! Here! Kill them here!’

In the peak of frenzy, impassioned with drunkenness, female Parisians led the mob physically and psychologically. Their lust for violence exceeded any rationality or moderation of laws or even orders, as the member of the Commune, Gabriel Ranvier, had ordered the prisoners not yet be killed.

G.A Henty surpassed du Camp and the Marguerrittes in his justification of the executions of the Communards during the Bloody Week. The Communards deserved death because of their unnatural relationship between gender and violence. In *Girl of the Commune*, several instances of Communard violence were also gendered as female and irrational:

Another statement of a scarcely less appalling nature [than the execution of the Archbishop] was that the female fiends of the Commune not only continued their work of destruction by fire, but were poisoning the troops. Several instances of this occurred. In one case, ten men were poisoned by one of the furies, who came out as they passed, and expressing joy at the defeat of the Commune, offered them wine. They drank it unsuspectingly, and within an hour were all dead.

The Marguerrittes gendered the executions of the generals Lecomte and Clément-Thomas on the 18th of March, and Henty did the same to the battles of the Bloody Week, as the violence of the Communards was presented as illegitimate. Instead of fighting properly with honor, the Communards poisoned their foes for no strategic gains – having already lost the war with

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31 Henty, 331.
32 Henty referred to ‘Communards’ as ‘communists’ throughout his work.
Versailles – other than to serve chaos. The poisoning was done by women, who displaced the traditional role of masculinity in violence. The gender roles of the Commune were reversed, with males unfit to be men, and women performing the male activity of violence. Communards were abominations of nature and unfit to procreate and spread their corruption. The executions of the Communards were thus necessary, weeding out the corruption of France through the process of eugenics-by-firing squad.

Many defenders of the Commune asserted instead that female Communards were to be honoured and respected for their commitment to traditional gender norms. Louise Michel, for example, argued that when the most violent forty women of the Commune had been imprisoned and then tried, a number had been sentenced to death despite “only [having] been ambulance nurses.” The most violent women of the Commune were hardly harpies screaming for blood. On the 18th of March, instead of assaulting Lecomte in a decidedly un-feminine fashion, the women of Paris “covered the cannon with their bodies.” This defensive and protective method of defying the National Assembly conformed with traditional mothering roles. Michel ironically was one of the most militant supporters of the Commune, spending much of the course of the Commune on the front lines doing battle with National Assembly soldiers. She accounted for this with condemnation of her own femininity: “Barbarian that I am, I love cannon, the smell of powder, machine-gun bullets in the air.” Even if she were to be discounted, Michel suggests that other Parisian women deserved respect for the same qualities as had always been feminine: protectiveness and caring.

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34 Ibid, 64.
Women in the Commune did more than poison their foes, which most likely did not in fact happen, or nurse soldiers back to health. Women were important social organizers in the Commune, particularly through the Women’s Union for the Defence of Paris and for Aid to the Wounded. The Women’s Union, founded by Elizabeth Dmitrieff, was strongly socialist and affiliated with the International Workman’s Association. Dmitrieff wanted women to be paid more for work that was traditionally feminine, such as the garment-related trades. Members of the Women’s Union produced many National Guards’ uniforms and were able to negotiate contracts with the tailor’s union and the Commission of Labour in order to earn liveable wages. Other women too were active during the Paris Commune. André Léo was a feminist journalist and activist who founded a newspaper, *La Sociale*. Léo defended women’s places on the battlefield as nurses and fighters, contested the idea of women as the weaker sex, and advocated for the reconstruction of women’s education. Another female organizer was Paule Minck, who was a grass-roots feminist. She tried to open spaces for women in politics, and like Léo and Michel, to reform women’s education.

However, these channels of women’s activity and organization during the Paris Commune were generally unmentioned in fiction and non-fiction. Only Louise Michel mentioned the progressiveness of female members of the Commune:

> I salute all those brave women of the vanguard who were drawn from group to group: the Committee of Vigilance, the Society for the Victims of the War, and later the [Women’s Union]. The old world ought to fear the day when those women finally decide they have had enough. \[36\]

Solely Michel mentioned women’s organizations as a source of power, and she only briefly mentioned their activities as potential sources of power. Instead, women were treated shallowly by pro- and anti-Communard authors, as either decadent poisoners or traditional mothers. Authors subordinated the reality of women’s roles in the Commune to the

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36 Ibid, 60.
A representation of Communards intended in their works; authors’ depictions of female Communards were a central cog in arguments about the integrity of the Commune itself.

Culpability, Morality, and the Rationality of Commune Violence

Accompanying a debate over women’s roles in the Commune was an overt political argument over the morality of the conflict. Authors’ presentations of Versailles’ war with the Paris Commune were explicit arguments about the Commune’s value and broader class morality. Who was guilty of the burning of Paris? The American envoy E.B. Washburne – along with many elite French observers, such as Maxime du Camp – attributed the burning of Paris solely to the Communards: “All [of the fires] has been the work of organized incendiarism, and the insurrectionists have done everything in their power to destroy Paris.”

The Communards, particularly their female incendiaries, the pétroleuses, would destroy anything, even their own homes in Paris, to spite their enemies.

To author Gustave Geffroy, the Commune was immoral by virtue of its results. It had many victims, thought it may have intended to create an improvement in quality of life for its supporters. In his novel *L’Apprentie*, Geffroy described the life of the fictional Cécile Pommier in order to focus on the social implications of the Commune for working-class families, instead of the political and military aspects of the Commune. Geffroy’s protagonist Cécile spent formative time – she was age seven during the events of 1870-71 – in the Paris Commune. The scope of the novel extended well beyond March-May of 1871, though the Commune and its destruction formed a prominent section of the novel. Geffroy positioned  

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the working class, particularly women, as the victims of the Commune, dedicating

_L’Apprentie_ to “[les] filles de Paris en témoignage d’une époque barbare.”³⁹ Cécile’s two brothers, Justin and Jean, both died for their ideologies in the course of _L’Apprentie_, and her father descended into alcoholism, though not during the events of the Paris Commune.⁴⁰ This was the likely fate of working-class Parisians. Instead of describing barricades and crowds as emblematic of the city, Geffroy likened Paris to a graveyard: “[i]ci, la ville trempée de brume, couverte d’un ciel morne, une singulière ville qui semble prolonger le cimetière jusqu’à l’horizon.”⁴¹ The Commune may have had virtuous goals, but it destroyed the lives of those who supported it.

Communards, such as Jean, were depicted as unnaturally feverish and violent: “Jean, si placide, si doux, a sur le visage une violence concentrée: l’idée fixe lui bare le front, rend sa bouche mauvaise, sa parole brève.”⁴² Jean’s actions were often explained through ideology instead of reason. When he did return home on some nights, he had “l’air d’un homme qui ne veut rien entendre.”⁴³ The Commune was more of a despot and terror for the working class than the Empire before or Republic following. The Commune destroyed Cécile’s family, and Geffroy offered no redemption in its goals, politics, or long-term results.

The irrationality of Commune violence was vividly condemned by Léon Deffoux in _Un Communard_. Deffoux described an old man, Burtau, who had once been a Communard, as useless to society and irrationally spiteful and violent. Burtau desired another working-class revolution, but he spent his days uselessly reading an old article by Henri Rochefort.⁴⁴

³⁹ Ibid, 1.
⁴⁰ His madness is connected to the fates of Zola’s Gervaise and Coupeau, the protagonists of _L’Assommoir_, who descended into alcoholic madness. Both authors portrayed alcohol as the bane of working-class Paris.
⁴¹ Geffroy, _L’Apprentie_, 5.
⁴² Ibid, 37.
⁴³ Ibid, 47.
Instead of fomenting revolution against the government, he ironically lived on a government salary of 800 francs “à titre de pensionné du coup d’État [because of the reprisals of 1851].”

Burtau was filled with hatred for the bourgeoisie and could identify no possible outlets. The short novel ended with Burtau’s home burning while he slept, and a policeman carrying him to safety. Burtau died of asphyxiation a few days after, but his final conversation revealed his superflouty and rage: “L’agent! L’agent! Où est-il?... L’agent est mort, hier!... Tant mieux.”

He was glad that the policeman who saved him was dead; his irrational Communard morality overrode his natural human instinct to be grateful to the man who died trying to save him.

Jules Vallès presented a more moderate position on the morality of the Communards in *L’Insurgé*. He described the attempted arson and executions of the last days of the Commune as morally corrupt. In debating whether to destroy the Panthéon, which represented religion and royalism, “[a]ll [present] voted for flames, all!” Only an impassioned argument by Vingtras (a pseudonym for Vallès himself) could keep the building, which was already “rubbed with saltpeter and bathed in gas”, from being destroyed. Vallès also coldly described the executions committed by Communards, particularly regarding “a new batch to get rid of...[which included] fifty-two priests, cops, and police informers.”

Vallès criticized the Commune for arson and executions, and Vingtras attempted to stop these crimes from being committed. However, this criticism did not morally bankrupt the entirety of the Commune in the eyes of Vallès. Particularly in the early stages of the Commune, well before the Bloody Week, Vallès equated the social energy of the Commune with health and

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46 Ibid, 82.
49 Ibid, 204.
50 Ibid, 214.
morality. The impassioned support for the Commune from those living in Paris meant that the governmental system was a step forward for Paris, despite the event culminating in the Bloody Week. While Communards made moral mistakes, the revolution was not necessarily immoral.

Others denied any moral mistakes were committed by the Commune, implicating instead the National Assembly. Jean Grave, a journalist and the editor of Les Temps Nouveaux, took no part in the Commune, though he condemned its destroyers: “The Commune respected property! Versailles, its defender, was less scrupulous and didn’t hesitate to destroy houses when they had to turn a barricade.”\(^{51}\) Grave blamed the Versaillais for burning and destroying Paris, vindicating Communard violence. Another journalist, Jean Allemane, believed that Adolphe Thiers engineered the revolution on March 18\(^{th}\) so as to be able to rid Paris of left-wing political dissidents.\(^{52}\) This theory was supported by three other journalists, Léon Massenet, Henry Bellenger, and Maxime Vuillaume, who wrote Men and Things from the Time of the Commune. The National Assembly alone was guilty for the provocation of the Commune and ensuing civil war: “[I]t was decided that the best way to take the rifle from a National Guardsman was to provide him with a pretext to use it so as to be able to snatch it from him by a military surprise.”\(^{53}\) With a Machiavellian disregard for morality, Thiers planned and executed the conflict to maintain political power.

Similarly, the poet Rimbaud considered Paris to be virtuous, while the National Assembly and Thiers violated French morality. Paris War-Cry is a poem that described the destruction of Paris at the hands of Thiers and the Versailles National Assembly.\(^{54}\) An historian of the Commune, Kristin Ross, analyzed how Rimbaud mimicked and subverted

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\(^{51}\) Abidor, The Story of the Paris Commune of 1871 as told by those who fought for it, 63.

\(^{52}\) Ibid, 60.

\(^{53}\) Ibid, 126.

traditional love songs in order to highlight the horrific actions of the National Assembly.\textsuperscript{55} All the elements of a provincial love poem, including style, meter, flowers, and springtime, were included in \textit{Paris War-Cry}. However, they were inverted in order to highlight the violence committed against Paris: “The spring dawn is in fact the false sun of Versailles incendiary bombing over Paris and its suburbs, the flowering is the flowering of artillery bombardment, and the peaceful Corot landscape is the city aflame.”\textsuperscript{56} Rimbaud accused the National Assembly of culpability not just for excessive violence but also for destroying the romanticized Commune worthy of a love song.

To the supporters of the Commune furthest on the left of the political spectrum, any violence committed in the name of the Commune was justified. The International published a wall poster on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} of March, stating that the victory of the Commune would “bring to an end class conflict and secure social equality.”\textsuperscript{57} The Commune was the only rational actor in France, for it acted towards the goal of ending class conflict: the only way to obtain peace. For supporters or critics of the Commune, morality or rationality of the participants could often be pre-determined by their goals, whether they intended to sabotage France or bring about its glory.

Nationalism and the Commune

Even as Communards were described as drunken and degenerate, only the most critical authors could deny that they desired the glorification of France. The relationship between Parisian Communards and France was complex. Was Paris defending or betraying

\textsuperscript{55} Kristin Ross, \textit{The Emergence of Social Space Rimbaud and the Paris Commune} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 140.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, 141.
\textsuperscript{57} Eugene Schulkind, ed., \textit{The Paris Commune of 1871: The View from the Left} (London: Jonathan Cape, 1972), 111.
France? Some authors condemned the Communards for taking advantage of their nation in a time of crisis – constituted by crushing defeat at the hands of Prussia – in order to seize political power for themselves. Maxime du Camp criticized the Communards for “seeing in [France’s] misfortune a chance of realising their wild dreams.”\(^{58}\) The Communards refused to support their nation in its time of crisis; however, they appealed to nationalism in their lies to entreat the National Guards. Similarly, the American author, Robert Chambers, called all those who became Communards cowards who refused to fight against Prussia, and who instead were stooges for “the International Society of Workingmen, from which the Central Committee took orders.”\(^{59}\) The Third Republic represented French national interests, while Communards laboured – intentionally or unintentionally – for the mysterious and malicious anti-national International.

Paul and Victor Margueritte strove to balance their representation of the Commune, condemning the Commune while valorizing its participants. Following the disastrous loss to Prussia and the consequential collapse of the Second Empire, the Marguerritte described neither the Versailles government nor the Paris Commune as representing France: “[The National Assembly was] elected in a day of misfortune, crouching at Bordeaux, where it contemнопiously watched Paris, [failing to reflect] the image of France!”\(^{60}\) Similarly, the Commune was depicted as “a disgrace to civilization.”\(^{61}\) If neither of the opposing governments upheld the interests of France, it is not a surprise that France in 1871 was a disaster. *The Commune* ended in a nostalgic scene in which Martial and Thédenat – two protagonists whose views mirrored those of the authors – discussed the wastefulness of the Commune as well as how it hindered the goals it was trying to achieve. The National Guards

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58 Du Camp, 288.
60 Paul and Victor Margueritte, 8-9.
61 Ibid, 100.
should have fought the Germans instead of other Frenchmen.\textsuperscript{62} The two men were struck by the number and disparity of casualties, which reached into the tens of thousands on the side of the Commune and fewer than one thousand for the Versaillais. Instead of creating an ideological civil war, French nationalism should have bonded the nation together in an effort to drive the foreign invaders from the country. Following the Commune, the two men – and the authors – rejoiced in the election of a Republic, which represented the “inevitable victory of the future, and the astounding resurrection of France.”\textsuperscript{63} The continuation of the Republic after 1871 was a moral victory for France and constituted a revival of nationalism. The Commune may have been inspired by worthwhile goals of improving the quality of life of working-class Parisians, but it degenerated into destruction and death, only to be redeemed by the continuation of the French Republic.

Alternatively, pro-Commune authors argued that only the Commune upheld French nationalism. Victor Hugo wrote \textit{The Lesson of the Patriot Dead} in April 1871. While this was before the Bloody Week, the poem was written during the war between the Commune and Adolphe Thier’s National Assembly. The poem seemed to predict the extensive numbers of deaths that would occur in May. Hugo referred to the revolutionaries as “martyrs of Democracy the Truth sublime!”\textsuperscript{64} More than martyrs of abstract concepts of democracy and truth, Hugo’s dead Communards were represented as “teachers, leaders, heroes slain because they lived too pure.”\textsuperscript{65} However, their deaths were not in vain, for the souls of the revolutionaries remained alive: “Read yet the orders: ‘Forward, march!’ and ‘charge!’ Then from the lime, / Which burnt the bones but left the soul (Oh! tyrants’ useless crime!) / Will

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid, 359.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid, 364.
\textsuperscript{65} ibid.
rise reply: ‘Yes!’ ‘yes!’ and ‘yes!’ the thousand, thousandth time!”

Paris had been burned, but the spirit of revolution remained whole. The poem could have been referencing France losing the war to Prussia; however, the French soldiers were not martyrs of democracy, particularly because France was governed by the Third Empire and Napoleon III during the war. The Third Republic, led by Adolphe Thiers, surrendered and ended the war, but not until after the poem was written. The only French who died for democracy were the Parisian dead of the Commune. Hugo continued this theme in *The Boy on the Barricade*, written in June 1871, after the Bloody Week. The boy who was captured beside the barricades – an explicit reference to the Paris Commune – stood “splashed with gouts of guilty gore.” However, the bloodied and guilty Communards were heroic, for the boy was “gemmed with purest blood of patriot more.”

The Communards fought for the highest ideals of France and democracy, and despite their loss, the goals of democracy and nationalism had not died with the Commune.

Expanding on the themes of Hugo, Louise Michel not only believed that the Communards were the only party true to the French national ideal, but also that the National Assembly betrayed the nation. It was the monarchism of the elected members of the National Assembly that drove Parisian republicans to rebel. Thus the onset of the Commune on the 18th of March was the re-appropriation of nationalism by the people of Paris instead of the elite bourgeoisie, who would betray the nation and re-instate monarchy: “On this day, the eighteenth of March, the people wakened. If they had not, it would have been the triumph of some king; instead it was a triumph of the people.”

If Parisians during the Commune had attempted to vindicate France after its humiliating loss, then for what ideology were they fighting? Was the Commune a republican institution or an attempt at socialist revolution?

66 ibid.
67 ibid, “The Boy on the Barricade.”
68 Ibid.
Devilish Communist or Patriotic Republican: The Ideology of the Communard

The ideology of the Commune was the most divisive topic for any author describing the event. While critics – particularly foreigners – claimed the Commune was a clear communist plot engineered by the mysterious International, Communards believed themselves to be protecting French republican values. That the Communard was dedicated either to the republic or to social revolution became the basis of countless arguments written about the event in the years following.

When the Commune was described by non-French authors, the layer of misplaced patriotism was stripped away from observation, and Communards were exhibited only as communist agitators. To the American envoy to France, E.B. Washburne, the insurrectionary Commune was an affront to law and order, committing “terrible atrocities…during this new reign of terror.”\(^70\) These atrocities included murder, incitation of violence, and halting the mail (for which reason Washburne had to flee Paris for Versailles). Despite offering little evidence of potentially ideologically-motivated Communard policies – save the exemption of rents for tenants during the siege, the turning over of abandoned factories to their workers, and the appropriation of the bedsheets in Thiers’ house for hospitals – in his April 9\(^{th}\) letter to Secretary of State Hamilton Fish, Washburne condemned the Parisian revolt as communist.\(^71\) He feared for the state of capitalism during the days of the Commune: “Fortune, business, public and private credit, industry, labor, financial enterprise, are all buried in one common grave.”\(^72\) Washburne assumed this despite the Commune protecting the instruments of capitalism in Paris, such as the Bank of France. While Washburne received most of his news

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\(^71\) Ibid, No. 403, 172; No. 420, 184; No. 441, 198; No. 416, 180.  
\(^72\) Ibid, No. 422, 187.
about the Commune from reading Parisian journals like anyone else, his attribution of communism to the Commune was mimicked by other foreign observers.

G.A. Henty’s *Girl of the Commune* flattened Communards into characters with one-dimensional historical significance, vilifying them as communists. The word ‘Communard’ was replaced by ‘communist’ in *Girl of the Commune*, and the author referred to all supporters of the working-class government as “the scum of Paris.” Their predilection towards violence was determined by their status as working-class; before the Commune even began, Henty referred to the working class as “fools…who are in no small proportion knaves besides. They read those foul pamphlets and gloat over the abuse of every decently dressed person. They rave against the Prussians, but it is the Bourgeois they hate. They talk of fighting, while what they want is to sack and plunder.” Working-class Parisians, who were the supporters of the Commune, refused to fight for their nation and raved violently against their class superiors. Conversely, the enemy of the working class, the Versaillais, were described as measured and careful:

> Everything shows that Thiers is anxious to spare Paris itself as much as possible. Not a shot has been fired at random, and scarcely a house has been injured. They fire only at the forts and at the batteries on this side, and when they begin in earnest I have no doubt it will be the same. It would be a mere waste of shot to fire up there, and if the Versailles people were to do unnecessary damage it would bring them into odium throughout all France, for it would be said that they were worse than the Prussians.

The French soldiers were logical, reasoning through the consequences of their military actions. Their reason was a foil to the feverish madness of the working class. The destruction of Paris during the Bloody Week was again described as being the work of the communists alone, who “carry out their threats to lay Paris in ashes before they yield.”

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74 Ibid, 88
75 Ibid, 303.
76 Ibid, 327.
Louis Zatzman

portrayal of the Commune, the Versaillais even provided fire engines to fight the destructive work of the communists.77

Ernest Alfred Vizetelly was one foreigner who did not condemn the Commune as communist. He was an English journalist, known as a war correspondent. He limited the role of the International in establishing the Commune and associated the Commune more with eighteenth-century revolution:

I do not agree with those writers who have ascribed the rising of the Commune chiefly to the machinations of the International. The latter’s influence was simply one among several factors… [T]he rising was actually brought about by the Central Committee of the Federation of the National Guard, and only a very few members of that Central Committee were connected with the International… I consider that the real spirit behind the rebellion was rather the old revolutionary spirit of 1793.78

Vizetelly presented the Commune as a continuation of traditional French revolution. He implied that though some Communards adhered to a socialist ideology, the importance of socialism was greatly exaggerated by many other authors. Even to the socialists among the Communards, their desire for social revolution was subordinated to their love of republicanism, and this hierarchy of aims was revealed through Communard policies.

Others were similarly committed to the concept of the Communards representing republicanism instead of socialism or communism. Some socialists in Paris, belonging to the International, chastised the Commune in a letter sent on May 12th for its lack of dedication to the cause of social revolution.79 Even the avowedly socialist Louise Michel believed the Third Republic itself owed its foundation to the Communards: “When we are told we are the enemies of the Republic, we have only one answer: We founded it upon thirty-five thousand

77 Ibid, 328.
of our corpses. That is how we defended the Republic.”\textsuperscript{80} Most significantly, Michel equated the Communard revolution with the traditional French revolutionary value of liberty:

> We revolutionaries aren’t just chasing a scarlet flag. What we pursue is an awakening of liberty, old or new. It is the ancient communes of France; it is 1793; it is June 1848; it is 1871. Most especially it is the next revolution, which is advancing under this dawn. That is all that we are defending.\textsuperscript{81}

Like Vizetelly, Michel presented Communard ideology as a continuation of a Republican revolutionary tradition begun far before 1871. This interpretation of the Commune was consistent with many of the writings and interviews of Communards who survived the event. Jean Grave, a French socialist revolutionary looking back at the Commune, denied his predecessors represented his ideals: “Triumphant, the Commune would have become a government like the others. A new revolution would have been needed to bring it down.”\textsuperscript{82} Many observers, including Maxime du Camp, E.B. Washburne, and Élie Reclus cited Communards – even in front of the firing squad – crying ‘Vive la République’. To Reclus, Communards fought for true republicanism – as opposed to the monarchist republicanism of Thiers, Favre, and Picard.\textsuperscript{83} He did not elaborate on the distinction. Even the Central Committee, followed its declaration on April 5\textsuperscript{th} that the National Assembly fought for “parasitism and…exploitation” with the phrase ‘long live the Republic!’ preceding ‘long live the Commune!’\textsuperscript{84} The three journalists Léon Massenet de Marancourt, Henry Bellenger, and Maxime Vuillaume denied the role of the International in the Commune. There were a handful of members pledging allegiance to the international socialist revolution, but they lacked a leader or plan to implement their theories.\textsuperscript{85} Gaston da Costa, a Blanquist and official of the Communard police prefectures, denied any significant influence of socialism in

\textsuperscript{80} Michel, \textit{The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel}, 168.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid, 193.
\textsuperscript{82} Abidor, \textit{The Story of the Paris Commune of 1871 as told by those who fought for it}, 63.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid, 94.
\textsuperscript{84} Schulkind, \textit{The Paris Commune of 1871: The View from the Left}, 120.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 129.
the Commune: “The idealist socialists assembled in the minority were nothing but dreamers, without a defined socialist program… [T]he insurrection was above all republican and patriotic… despite the socialist philosophy of [some of its leaders].”⁸⁶ Even the minority of socialist leaders in the Commune itself protested the establishment of the Committee of Public Safety using republican and democratic language:

The majority of the Paris Commune declared itself irresponsible by its vote [to establish the Committee of Public Safety] and abandoned all responsibility in our current situation… [We] desire the carrying out of social and political renewal, but contrary to their ideas we demand, in the name of the suffrage we represent, the right to respond for ourselves for our acts before our voters, without hiding behind a supreme dictatorship.

The socialists of the Commune presented themselves as adhering to a 1789-style understanding of revolution, espousing democratic responsibility and eschewing the Blanquist-style dictatorship that would become synonymous with socialist revolution in the years following the Commune.

Zola’s Commune: Realist Fiction and the Commune as a Cancer

All of the themes describing Communards and their government in Paris were manifested vividly in two strikingly different works: Émile Zola’s The Debacle and Prosper Lissagaray’s History of the Commune of 1871. Zola’s realist description of the Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune portrayed Communards as drunken, effeminate, immoral socialists, though they still loved their country. Lissagaray’s historical monograph about the Paris Commune instead vindicated the Commune as sober, adhering to traditional gender norms, moral, nationalist, and ultimately republican. While Zola criticized the Commune,

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⁸⁶ Ibid, 181.
Lissagaray defended it; however, they used the same themes to co-create opposing representations of the Commune and its inhabitants.

Zola described the Commune as a cancerous sore, requiring removal in order for France to rebuild. Despite earning fame as a naturalist and realist author, Zola metaphorically embodied France in two fictional characters, Jean and Maurice. Jean was a kind and practical peasant, strong in body and mind. He symbolized healthy, peasant France, which worked hard and was the source of France’s wealth and glory. Maurice, on the other hand, represented degenerate France. He was an intellectual and was subject to bouts of “moral agony…[and] fits of depression”. He had frequent moments of cowardice. Maurice was the Commune.

The social status and attached ideological tendencies of Maurice pre-determined his alcoholism. The urban decay of the Commune drew Maurice to alcoholism, as if against his will:

Then Maurice, who had never been a drinker, found himself drawn into the general outbreak of drunkenness and lost in it. Now, when he was on duty at some advanced position or spending the night in the guard-room, he would accept a tot of brandy. If he had a second one he would get worked up in the alcoholic mists whirling round him. It was a growing epidemic, chronic befuddlement…a population without bread but with spirits and wine in barrelfuls had steeped itself in drink and now went crazy on the smallest drop.

Alcoholism was prevalent amongst the working class in many novels written by Zola, including *Nana, L’Assommoir, Germinal*, and *The Debacle*. While Zola was a realist author, his works at times implied a tension between social and hereditary determinism. While some members of the Rougon-Macquart family found alcoholism to simply be a biological fact of their existence, such as Étienne of *Germinal*, other characters’ socioeconomic statuses would

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88 Ibid, 32.
89 Ibid, 327.
condition their emotions and behaviors; Maurice was drawn to alcohol as a result of his social existence. Thus Maurice was an alcoholic because he was a Communard. Instead of being a catalyst of thought or a source of carnivalesque entertainment, alcohol destroyed and corrupted. Maurice was unable to remember days at a time, as if in a drunken stupor during the entirety of the Commune.

While Maurice’s alcoholism was a result of his experience in the Commune, his unorthodox relationships with gender and violence were more biologically determined. Zola described Maurice’s degeneracy by calling him “as highly-strung as a woman, shattered by the disease of the age they were living in, going through the historical and social crisis of his race, capable of passing from one minute to the next from the most noble enthusiasm to the most craven discouragements”. Maurice’s constant fluctuation between utter despair and wild hopes of victory was symptomatic of his degenerate mind. His physical degeneracy was evidenced by comparison with an ancestor who had been a hero of Napoleon’s Grande Armée; Maurice’s stock was physically much lower than that of his forefathers. In war, Maurice thought himself to be “as weak and nervous as a woman”. His martial ideas tended towards cowardly and feminine assassination instead of manly open combat. Instead of eschewing violence, Maurice saw war as “a necessity...[and] the law of the universe”. Echoing the stories of the Marguerrittes and Henty, violence was presented as feminine in the Commune. This was Zola’s conception of the Communard; his cowardice, physical weakness, and feminine distortion of violence discounted him as a man.

As a result of his character flaws, the Communard lost any conception of morality or rationality. Crowd violence dominated the domestic face of the Commune. Citizens attacked

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90 Ibid, 118.
91 Ibid, 223.
92 Ibid, 119.
a house for keeping its lights on all night: a clear (to them) signal flashed to the Prussians.  

Another man was almost drowned for revealing himself as a spy when he unfolded a map of Paris. A soldier was almost lynched by Parisian citizens for expressing a desire for peace. When the Prussians demanded Paris disarm, the Central Committee protested; in the orgy of celebratory defiance, a policeman was tied to a plank, thrown into the river, and then stoned to death. This commitment to ideological violence as divorced from morality manifested in the Commune attempting to destroy Paris during the Bloody Week. Zola described the Commune as filling the sewers of Paris with explosives, ready to destroy the city. The Communards had standing orders to burn each arrondissement as the barricades were taken, “stop[ping] the troops with an all-destroying line of furnaces, burn[ing] Paris as they surrendered it.” Maurice agreed with the burning of Paris: “Let Paris collapse and burn like a huge sacrificial fire rather than be given back its vices, miseries and the old social system.” The infected Communard mind saw no difference between saving and destroying France.

Significantly, the Communard was a patriot, though his dedication to his nation was misplaced and ultimately tragic. His feverish madness was catalyzed by a zeal for French glory: “Anything, destruction, even extermination, rather than yield up one sou of the wealth or one inch of the territory of France!” The pain that caused Parisians to turn to madness was the pain of scorned patriotism: “What however depressed Maurice so much was the great city of Paris, leaping from the heights of self-deception to the depths of discouragement.”

93 Ibid, 316.
94 Ibid, 316.
95 Ibid, 318.
96 Ibid, 322.
97 Ibid, 327.
98 Ibid, 330.
99 Ibid, 326.
100 Ibid, 316.
101 Ibid, 316.
The failure of the Empire or the National Assembly to achieve national glory meant that the cause had fallen to Paris. France’s defeats at Metz and Sedan had been because of stupidity on the part of its leaders, and Maurice was furious: “Sedan was making him bleed like a still tender wound…and the shock of each of these defeats had unhinged him.”  

Parisians clamored for victory over the Prussians, but their patriotic fury was misplaced. Communards failed to deliver France to glory because of their adherence to the deceptive and destructive ideology of socialism. The political nature of the Commune in Zola’s memory was corrupt and unhealthy, characterized by “[a] Communist terror [that] was growing.” Communism was a political force bent on destroying the literal and figurative foundations of society before building upon the ashes. Violence that was not militarily strategic was attributed to communist political ideology. Jean killed Maurice, and Zola was clear that degenerate Paris was destroyed for the greater good of France; the “blood-bath was necessary…the unspeakable holocaust, the living sacrifice in the purifying fire” in order to destroy the decadent energy of Paris and the Communards.

Zola’s portrayal of the Communard was unkind. While the Commune intended to bring glory to France, its adherents inherited physical and social perversions. The Commune had to be destroyed in order for France to redeem itself. This description of the Commune, common to authors like Zola, du Camp, Geffroy, Deffoux, and others, became the French state’s portrayal of the Commune; the Communard’s debauchery justified his and her punishment both during the Bloody Week and afterwards.

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102 Ibid, 317.
103 Ibid, 327.
104 Ibid, 346.
Lissagaray’s Commune: Historical Non-Fiction and the Commune as a Savoir

While Zola observed the Commune from outside of Paris, Prosper Lissagaray was a Communard; he survived and wrote his history about the event, *History of the Commune of 1871*, which is still cited today as one of the best historical documents about the Commune. Lissagaray considered the purpose of his history to be to oppose the works of authors like Maxime du Camp and Zola, as Lissagaray alone wrote proletarian history: “The French proletarian has never been allowed to speak in books of history; at least he should do so in his own revolution.” Lissagaray described the Commune from the opposite perspective of the elite interpretation, and thus his presentation of the Communards inverted the themes of Zola’s *The Debacle*.

Alcohol was notably absent as a widespread systemic vice or virtue in the Commune. Instead, Lissagaray used the theme of alcohol to condemn certain figures within the Commune without tarnishing the morality of the Commune itself. The commanding colonel of the Communard artillery, Lullier, “allowed a whole regiment of the army encamped at the Luxembourg to leave Paris with arms and baggage” as a result of his alcoholism. Lissagaray even offered examples to refute the supposed mass drunkenness of the Communards: “A young fellow of eighteen, whose right hand had just been amputated, holds out the other, exclaiming ‘I have still this one for the service of the Commune.’… These, my friend, these are the brutish drunkards who, according to Versailles, form the army of the Commune.” The Communards were dishonestly labeled drunkards even in death: “The victors, in order to dishonour these [Communard] corpses, had placed inscriptions on their

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106 Ibid, 74, 119.
107 Ibid, 300.
breasts…“drunkard,” and stuck the necks of bottles into the mouths of some of them.” In fact, Lissagaray accused the opponents of the Commune of being the true drunkards. The men who attacked and executed the Communards, sentenced them at their trials, and guarded them after their exiles, were variously accused of being drunkards, half-mad from absinthe, or motivated by alcohol. Lissagaray inverted the standard attribution of drunkenness away from the Commune towards its enemies, while still retaining the traditional assessment of alcoholism as a moral negative.

Lissagaray generally described women as traditional mother figures, though at times women’s actions could have been construed as heroic or unorthodoxly aggressive, depending on one’s perspective. At the onset of the revolution, on March 18th, women played a central role: “As in our great days, the women were the first to act… They surrounded the mitrailleuses.” However, in the executions of the Generals Lecomte and Clément-Thomas, women played no role. This directly contradicted the Marguerritte’s *The Commune*, in which women were the driving force behind their executions. At other times during the Commune, women acted profanely, as when a battalion of women demanded to sally forth against Versailles in battle. Despite this concession, Lissagaray vehemently denied the existence of the famed pétroleuses: “[T]hat legend of the pétroleuses, which, born of fear and propagated by the press, cost hundreds of unfortunate women their lives.” While active in the defense of the Commune, women were not murderous harpies, poisoning their enemies and clamouring for blood. Even the most militant of women, Louise Michel, performed traditional feminine gender roles: “Gentle and patient with the little children, who adored her, in the cause of the people the mother became a lioness. She had organised a corps of

109 Ibid, 336, 422, 441, 450.
110 Ibid, 79.
111 Ibid, 167.
112 Ibid, 348.
The most militant of Communard women still acted as a traditionally feminine nurse. However, while Commune women remained conventionally feminine despite their occasional expansion of gender activity, the women of Versailles were monstrous in Lissagaray’s depiction. Gallifet, a Versailles general, achieved his rank “by the charms of his wife, prominent in the orgies of the Imperial court.” Upon the parade of Communard prisoners through Versailles following the fall of the Commune, elite women swelled the streets to strike and curse the prisoners. Lissagaray inverted the common depiction of Communard women as unfeminine, instead applying that label to the Communards’ enemies, just as he had with the trait of drunkenness.

The National Assembly was only able to defeat Paris as a result of the ease with which its leaders were able to abandon morality in their violence. Versailles happily tortured its prisoners: “What obscure corner of the Parisian prisons has hidden a single one of the thousand tortures which displayed themselves in broad daylight at Versailles?” The Versaillais were inhuman monsters – believing themselves to be defending civilization against the tides of communism – while the Communards were rational and moral, even to their own detriment. The people of Paris desired a Commune not for ideological reasons, but instead because they believed it could be “a lever for uprooting despotism and misery.”

Their experience with past governments failing them was the source of their commitment to an empowered municipal government:

They had seen all the constitutions and all the representative governments run counter to the will of the so-called represented elector, and the state power, grown more and more despotic, despoil the workmen even of the right to defend his labour, and this power, which has ordained even the very air to be breathed, always refusing to interfere in capitalist brigandage. After so many failures, they were fully convinced that the

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113 Ibid, 209.
114 Ibid, 169.
115 Ibid, 397.
116 Ibid, 401.
117 Ibid, 89.
actual governmental and legislative regime was from its very nature unable to emancipate the working man.\textsuperscript{118}

The Parisian proletariat supported the Commune because they believed it would be the only governmental form that would support them. Furthermore, the Commune upheld morality. Crime quickly lessened as a result of the Commune’s rule.\textsuperscript{119} Instead of jailing political conservatives after the Commune’s victory, the Communards allowed them to leave Paris.\textsuperscript{120} The Commune obeyed its charter of municipal power to the letter of the law, refusing to intervene in federal politics or even the municipal politics of other cities.\textsuperscript{121} This dedication to morality proved disastrous; Paris was “strangled by [its] saving principles.”\textsuperscript{122} It refused to begin a war with Versailles upon the establishment of its power, instead preferring to legitimate its revolution through an election. The Versaillais won the war through their disregard of morality, while the Communards legislated away their advantage, preferring to be considered legitimate rather than victorious.

Lissagaray condemned the Commune’s enemies for abandoning the French nation’s interests while upholding the nationalistic aims of the Commune. Parisians were appalled that the National Assembly refused to defend Paris: “[W]hen the fatal word [of surrender] was uttered, the city seemed at first wonder-struck, as at the sight of some crime, monstrous, unnatural.”\textsuperscript{123} Lissagaray echoed Zola in his estimation of the French elite having abandoned and betrayed nationalism. Both believed that Thiers considered the enemy not to be Prussia, but instead Paris; however, Lissagaray surpassed Zola in believing Paris to be the actual defender of the nation.\textsuperscript{124} The capital represented republicanism against the forces of

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 89.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid, 117.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid, 87.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid, 202-3.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid, 202.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid, 36.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid, 55.
monarchism, clericalism, and reaction: “If [Paris] dies, what life remains to [France]? Who, save Paris, will have strength enough to continue the Revolution? Who save Paris will stifle the clerical monster?” Paris defended France, while the National Assembly betrayed it. The National Assembly sought to use the pretense of war with Prussia as a cover to destroy its internal enemies in Paris. It ignored the interests of the nation in order to attack the capital.

The source of the Communards’ commitments to nationalism and legitimacy was their distinct ideological prioritization of republicanism over socialism. The Commune was a sentinel against the re-imposition of monarchy; it “had no Utopia to initiate.” Instead of being motivated by a productive desire to initiate a social revolution, the Commune was instead driven by a reductive fear of monarchy. After the fall of Napoleon III and the Second Empire, Parisian republicans feared a re-imposition of monarchy, as happened in the Bourbon Restoration of 1814. This was a realistic fear, as Thiers and other leaders of the National Assembly were self-professed monarchists. The Commune was founded out of a desire to ensure the continuation of republican government in France. Even socialist members of the Commune, such as Eugène Varlin, admitted that the central goal of the Commune lay in “real municipal liberties” rather than social revolution. The Commune failed to institute socialist legal systems, instead adopting the framework of traditionally bourgeois jurisprudence. In that sense, the Commune was a reassertion of the French eighteenth-century revolutionary tradition. The Commune was not a new revolution, but instead the resurrection of each that preceded it: “Do you at last recognise this Paris, seven times shot down since 1789, and always ready to rise for the salvation of France?”

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125 Ibid, 303.
126 Ibid, 75.
127 Ibid, 97.
128 Ibid, 229-230.
129 Ibid, 302.
Week, when the Versaillais recaptured Paris, Lissagaray evoked each past revolution that had
occurred in the same place:

Each stone has its legend in this estuary of the Revolution. Here encased in the wall is a
bullet launched in 1789 against the fortress. Leaning against the same wall the sons of
the combatants of June fought for the same pavement as their fathers. Here the
conservatives of 1848 gave vent to their rage; but what was their fury compared with
that of 1871? 130

1871 was the reincarnation of 1789, 1830, and 1848. This revolution was not new. Lissagaray
reaffirmed the assertions of Louise Michel, Gaston da Costa, Massenet de Marancourt, Henry
Bellenger, Maxime Vuillaume, and others; the Commune was a revolutionary expression of
republicanism.

Conclusion: The Definition of a Communard

If Communards were diverse, the representations of Communards in fiction and non-
fiction are almost incommensurable. Trends emerge when descriptions of the Commune are
analyzed from the perspective of a few interlocking themes. Significantly, there is no
difference in presentation between fiction and non-fiction. The different literary descriptions
of Zola, Geffroy, and the Marguerrittes described a Commune steeped in decadent fever.
They dependably agreed upon the drunkenness, femininity, irrationality and amorality, and
socialistic tendencies of Communards. Similarly, each admitted that Communards may have
believed themselves to be nationalistic, though they unintentionally brought ruin upon the
nation. This description was consistent with non-fiction authors who criticized the Commune,
such as Maxime du Camp. It was generally foreign observers, such as Washburne, Henty,
and Chambers, who deprived the Communards of even the goal of national glory. From the
non-French literary and non-fiction vantage point, Communards were flattened into single-

130 Ibid, 366.
dimensional communists whose lust for power overwhelmed their love of country. A similar uniformity of themes appears from the pro-Commune side. The poems of Rimbaud, autobiographical fiction of Vallès, diaries of Reclus, and historical non-fiction of Lissagaray painted a remarkably consistent image of the Commune. The Commune did not have a systemic drinking problem. Women behaved unusually, though following traditional gender roles. Communards usurped morality and nationalism from the bourgeois rulers who had fled to Versailles. Finally, the Communards were republicans ironically rebelling against a Republic. Political orientation was a far more accurate predictor of an author’s description of the Commune than literary genre.

This chapter has sought to fulfill Tombs’ challenge that the Communards be described in their own words and those of their political opponents. While Communards were not simple and homogenous, there were some consistencies among most. All, even the socialists and Blanquists, loved France. The Communards believed themselves to be defending France after the previous orders, both Emperor Napoleon III and the Government of National Defense, failed to protect the nation from the Prussians. Republicanism and socialism were not mutually exclusive, but Communards were devoted to republicanism, often at the expense of the social revolution. Parisians naïvely refused to invade Versailles following the 18th of March because they believed that would be a subversion of the strictly municipal mandate of the Commune. Communards’ nationalist dedication to France often subverted any socialist goals, such as when the Commune refused to attack the Bank of France for fear of hurting the French economy. Significantly, Robert Tombs described Communards as “first and foremost republicans. And as republicans they were patriots, because France was the fatherland of the Revolution.”131 This fundamental fact about the Commune seems to be lost in its study, which will be addressed in the third chapter.

However, the voices of the Communards and their condemners were silenced in the decades following the Commune. A new political voice shouted far louder about the Commune than Communards themselves or their political opponents. Marxists, socialists, and anarchists described the Commune in subsequent theories about revolution, and the Commune they presented in their works varied greatly from the heterogeneous picture created during and immediately after the Commune.
Chapter 2:
“We are Standing on the Shoulders of the Commune”: Socialist Theory and the Paris Commune

Introduction

The most intense debate over the legacy of the Paris Commune is found in leftist polemics about the Commune, which helped to construct and shape different conceptions of Marxist and socialist governments. The Commune became a series of lessons that informed revolutionary thought and actions, revealing to revolutionaries like Trotsky and Lenin how socialist utopia could be achieved. In some cases, previously existing revolutionary theory easily absorbed the Paris Commune; however, theorists also dramatically modified their philosophies as a result of their understanding of the Paris Commune. The origins of socialism are incomprehensible without understanding the role of the Paris Commune and how the act of interpreting it shaped varying socialist theories. Without the Commune, any attempt to understand socialism as it developed in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries is doomed to interpret it as a radical intellectual leap, with insufficient causes or predecessors to properly explain its development. Despite a need to connect the Commune to the Russian Revolution in order to properly understand socialism, even the most able Commune historians such as Alistair Horne or Robert Tombs have only vaguely gestured at their association, without analyzing in any detail how later revolutionaries used the Commune to inform and justify their actions. Russian Revolution historians, such as Sheila Fitzpatrick, Igal Halfin, or John L. H. Keep, have done even less to explicate the impact of the Commune.

Inconsistent with the usage of the Commune by future socialist authors, Communards themselves subordinated any socialist ideology to nationalist republicanism that prioritized the interests of France over those of the social revolution. The socialist members of the
Commune never numbered larger than a small minority. The Commune did not enact more than a few distinctly socialist policies, and even those are easily explicable through practicality instead of ideology. However, within only a few years of its defeat, the Commune was considered the foundation upon which a socialist revolution could be built by radical left-wing advocates, such as Karl Marx. The Commune experienced a bizarre afterlife in literature and works of non-fiction, distorting it into a symbol of proletarian conflict against the bourgeois capitalist system; to its opponents, it was a symbol of communist terror, even as Communards described themselves as republican. Socialist theorists also used the Commune as a symbol, and they went further than the most extreme of the Commune’s detractors in describing the event as ideologically motivated. Only by comprehending the image of an ideologically-socialist Commune can following socialist theory be explained and understood.

Socialist writings on the Paris Commune are varied, and the tone and content of texts changed – becoming less focussed on justifying or critiquing the Communards and more on justifying or critiquing the Leninists – after the Russian Revolution in 1917. Most significantly after 1917, the Russian Revolution was interpreted more distinctly by those involved in the Revolution as the descendant of the Paris Commune than it was the successor of the 1789 French Revolution. I will focus predominantly on Russian commentary, including works by Trotsky, Lenin, Bakunin, and Kropotkin written both before and after 1917. However, Marx’s *The Civil War in France* and Karl Kautsky’s *The Proletarian Dictatorship* must function as starting points for the discussion, as many of the later Russians addressed these two works. Tracing the relationships among the texts of socialist authors will offer an initial and incremental map between the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution,

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and broad socialist philosophy. The Russian Revolution has historiographically been connected with the 1789 French Revolution. However, Trotsky and Lenin more frequently located 1917 as the distinct descendant of 1871. Lenin wrote in 1917 that “we are standing on the shoulders of the Paris Commune.”¹³⁴ This connection is frequently overlooked historiographically, and I aim to place the Paris Commune back into its central location in socialist thought.

Socialist philosophers, following Karl Marx, viewed history as a teleological structure.¹³⁵ Socialist authors who analyzed the Paris Commune viewed it as an important step towards the development of a society that reached its final stage of development and thus the end of history; the lessons of the Paris Commune and its defeat helped form how a utopian society could appear for each author. In the immediate aftermath of the Commune, socialist authors used the Commune as the first ever example of a proletarian revolution. In the following years, particularly after 1917, criticism instead of praise dominated socialist treatment of the Commune; authors pointed towards the failures of the Communards – not invading Versailles immediately after taking power, not seizing the Bank of France, etc. – as failures that must not be replicated in the Soviet Union. This chapter will detail the subtle shifts in discussions about the Commune held between socialist authors. They used their understandings of the Commune to shape and inform their understanding and advocacy of leftist government and utopia. After observing the Paris Commune, Marx amended his theories from The Communist Manifesto (1848) in The Civil War in France (1871), adding the crucial step of destroying existing state machinery in the transition from capitalism to socialism. Trotsky attempted to rectify the Communards’ failures through greater emphasis on planning and centralism. Lenin helped explain how socialists could destroy bourgeois

state machinery, inventing the concept of a centralist totalitarian dictatorship that would
defend the revolution by breaking down the resistance of the bourgeoisie. Anarchists drew
opposing lessons from the Commune and its failures. Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin,
for instance, argued that centralism of any sort would destroy the socialist revolution and
proposed an egalitarian social model that would function based on the heart and will of the
people. Planning or centralized power were anathema to success. For each thinker, socialism
was to be reached at the end of history, and the example of the Paris Commune clarified how
that end could be achieved.

Historians writing on either the Paris Commune or the Russian Revolution, including
Frank Jellinek and Andrzej Walicki, often either simplify or ignore the effect of the former
revolution on the latter. Certainly, Paris Commune historians such as John Merriman draw
connections between the two revolutions, generally in their conclusions or final sections
detailing the impact of the Commune’s representation. They are not Russian specialists, and
their analyses do not include detailed and specific reference to the formation of socialist
theory. French scholars often conclude monographs about the Commune with simplistic
indications that the Russian Revolution was the ideological descendant of the Paris
Commune. For example, Alistair Horne wrote a social history of the Commune in the 1960s
and described in his aftermath that “[a]ll through his life Lenin studied the Commune;
worshipped its heroism, analysed its successes, criticized its faults, and compared its failures
[with his own] … To Lenin and his followers, the supreme lesson of the Commune was that
the only way to succeed was by total ruthlessness.” Horne offers no further explanation of
the Commune’s effects on Lenin or the process by which Lenin concluded ruthlessness was
required. This general indication that Lenin learned a lesson from the Commune does not
explain specifically how the Commune influenced Lenin’s philosophy and actions. How the

Commune was defeated greatly influenced how Lenin took and held power in Russia. Therefore, the Commune is historically more significant than a simple predecessor of 1917.

Terrific historical works have been written about the Russian Revolution and its ideological influences.\(^{137}\) However, Russian Revolution historians such as Walicki, Avrich, and Halfin often overlook 1871 entirely, rarely citing or mentioning the French event in their studies of the Russian Revolution. The rare historiographical entry in the Russian field that discusses both the Paris Commune and its importance for the Russian Revolution includes *Telling October* by Frederick Corney and *Revolutionary Dreams* by Richard Stites. They have argued implicitly that our memory of the Paris Commune has been filtered through the Russian Revolution, but this argument fails to capture the significance of the Commune on the Russian Revolution itself. In his work on Russian representation of the 1917 revolution, Corney characterizes Russian revolutionaries themselves as understanding the Paris Commune to be integral:

\[ M \& y of Russia’s revolutionaries…shifted their sights from the French Revolution as a bourgeois phenomenon to the Paris Commune of 1871 as the first (failed) dictatorship of the proletariat. They retold the tale of the Paris Commune as a truncated revolution in need of completion… [T]he Parisian proletariat attempted to exert moral influence on its enemies instead of annihilating them.\(^{138}\)

Corney acknowledges the importance of the Commune for revolutionaries; however, he focusses more frequently throughout *Telling October* on the role of the 1789 French Revolution, particularly the storming of the Bastille, in informing the actions of Russian Revolutionaries.\(^{139}\) The Paris Commune appears briefly throughout *Telling October*, more as an example of a failed revolution that predated the successful Russian one than a significant

\(^{137}\) This includes Andrzej Walicki’s *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom*, Paul Avrich’s *The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution*, Igal Halfin’s *From Darkness to Light*, Richard Stites’ *Revolutionary Dreams*, and Frederick Corney’s *Telling October*.


\(^{139}\) Ibid, 10.
influence on Russian Marxist-Leninist theory.

A similar flattening of the role of the Paris Commune in Russian revolutionary historiography is found in Corney’s description of how the Russian revolutionaries decided they needed a strong centralist party to safeguard the revolution. Instead of tracing that philosophical development from the Commune to Marx and Engels to Trotsky and Lenin and their disagreements with Karl Kautsky, Corney states that “Zinoviev…argued that the Paris Commune had failed precisely because it had lacked the firm base of a party.”\(^{140}\) This understanding of ‘party’ is simplistic, without the nuances of Marx’s conception of a dictatorship or Lenin’s conception of totalitarian socialism. Corney does not trace the development of socialist thought as related to observations of the Commune; he offers the final result instead of the process. Without the process of how the origins of radical socialism influenced the theories, scholarship of radical socialism loses the ability to comprehend the logic of socialism as embodied in its time and place.

Richard Stites describes the cultural, social, and intellectual aspects of the Russian Revolution in *Revolutionary Dreams*. He explains how the intellectual influences of revolutionary Russian philosophy informed dreams of a utopia. Similar to Corney, Stites treats the Paris Commune simply as an antecedent to the Russian revolution without establishing the process through which socialist theorists appropriated the Commune into their philosophies. Stites explains that the Bolshevik vision was “embellished with concrete details from the experience of the Paris Commune in 1871,” but he ignores evidence that the Commune helped form revolutionaries’ foundational conceptions of revolution.\(^{141}\) This evidence can be drawn from within Stites’ own account. A play named *Toward the Worldwide Commune* delivered to Petrograders and the Second Congress of the Communist

\(^{140}\) Ibid, 98.

International included as its most vivid scene of “the 1871 execution of the Paris Communards – a classic, almost mythic, act of counter-revolutionary brutality… [The play also included] a timely barb aimed at Karl Kautsky.”142 This Soviet spectacle prioritized the Commune as the major precedent of 1917, and it related the Commune to the late 19th and early 20th century polemics exchanged between Kautsky, Trotsky, and Lenin that helped Lenin develop his conception of totalitarian socialism. More striking evidence is found in the popularity of the revolutionary name Parizhkommuna (Paris Commune) for babies born after 1917.143 This significant commemoration of the Commune placed 1871, instead of 1789, at the forefront of ideological influences on 1917. Revolutionaries who portrayed the Commune in major theatrical spectacles – and named their children after the Commune – remembered the importance of 1871, even if historiography flattens it in monographs.

Marian Sawer, more directly than any other French or Russian scholar, describes the importance of the Commune on the development of Lenin’s theory of totalitarian socialism. Sawer writes that “[i]t was extremely important to the early Bolshevik leaders that their own revolution should be viewed as the direct descendant of the Paris Commune.”144 This acknowledgement places Sawer at the forefront of historiography relating the Russian Revolution to the Paris Commune; furthermore, Sawer briefly includes discussion of the role of the Commune in catalysing the construction of socialist philosophies. Namely, Lenin developed his concept of a strong centralist party, or a Marxist-Leninist party, out of the ashes of the Paris Commune, which lacked “a Communist party worthy of the name.”145 However, Sawer does not acknowledge the importance of the Commune for other leftist thinkers. Even though Lenin became the major example of socialist theory achieved in action,

142 Ibid, 96.
143 Ibid, 111.
he was not predetermined to do so. His ideas did not form out of an ideological vacuum – even if that vacuum included the Paris Commune – but rather out of theoretical debate with other socialists, such as Trotsky and Kautsky. Furthermore, Sawer fails to acknowledge that the success of 1917 led Lenin to condemn aspects of the Paris Commune, and even of Marx and Engel’s analysis, in order to defend his own revolution from Kautsky’s critiques. Representation of the Paris Commune did more than shape the philosophies of Russian Marxist-Leninists such as Trotsky and Lenin. Anarchists too used the Commune in order to form and validate their ideas. That such a diverse grouping of socialist thinkers represented the Commune as evidence to support their own theories points to a broader importance for the Commune in history than even Sawer presents with his study on Lenin.

Karl Marx and the Destruction of the Bourgeois State Machinery

Karl Marx fulfilled two goals in *The Civil War in France*: to vindicate the Paris Commune as a harbinger of socialist revolution and to explain why it failed. If Marx could justify the Commune while disentangling its successes from its failures, he could predict a successful revolution in the future. Chimen Abramsky proved convincingly in his 1971 essay, *Marx’s Theory of the State: from the Communist Manifesto to the Civil War in France* that Marx’s understanding of the term, ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, evolved significantly during the decades preceding the Paris Commune.146 Historiography investigating Marx’s thoughts about the Commune has generally been pre-occupied with whether Marx considered the Commune a dictatorship of the proletariat. Whether the Commune was or was not a

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dictatorship, Marx’s conception of socialist revolution changed greatly in specific response to his understanding of the Paris Commune.

Marx understood the roots of the Commune to have begun in September, 1870, when the Franco-Prussian War still raged. Louis Napoleon III was captured by the Prussians at Sedan; his empire fell, and the French Third Republic was proclaimed. Paris was under siege, and its working class did not support the Republic. Marx separated his villain, Thiers’ government, from the Republic which it led:

A victory of Paris over the Prussian aggressor would have been a victory of the French workmen over the French capitalist and his state parasites. In this conflict between national duty and class interest, the Government of National Defence did not hesitate one moment to turn into a Government of National Defection.147

The tension between the capitulatory Republic that signed a humiliating peace deal and the storied military history of French republicanism led to the establishment of the Commune, which upheld the spirit of nationalist republicanism. Marx related the Government of National Defence to the Prussian aggressors; Paris was thus the inheritor of patriotic struggle, which had been forsaken by consecutive French leaders Louis Napoleon III and Adolphe Thiers. This was a significant modification of the Communist Manifesto, which simplistically dispensed with nationalism as a bourgeois deception. In The Civil War in France, Marx repurposed nationalism as potentially proletarian in nature; nationalism could be a manifestation of class consciousness instead of just serving the bourgeoisie. Thiers’ foreign minister, Jules Favre, wrote in a letter to French statesman Léon Gambetta that his government was defending against “not the Prussian soldiers, but the working men of Paris.”148 The enemies of the Commune chose class interests over national ones, while the Communards defended France patriotically by refusing to accept France’s surrender. Like the

148 Ibid, 38.
Communards themselves, Marx understood the Commune to be motivated by nationalism as well as republicanism.

Marx criticized the monarchist-leaning Thiers for having “denounced the republicans as the only obstacle to the consolidation of the republic.” To Marx, Paris represented proletarian nationalism and the true spirit of republicanism, while the leaders of the proclaimed Republic represented classism and the bourgeoisie. The separation of the Republic from the spirit of republicanism allowed Marx to later define the Civil War as a war by Thiers and the Government of National Defence against the Republic, which Thiers in fact led. Ironically, Paris defended the spirit of republicanism by combatting the Republic. It was for this reason that Thiers demanded Paris be disarmed, even though Paris only wanted to use its arms to defend France from Prussia.

While thus far, Marx generally reiterated Communard self-description, he next set his attention to analyzing the significance of the Commune. The Commune provided for Marx an historical opportunity to describe how a capitalist system could transition to socialism. Whereas the Communist Manifesto offered little substance on the transition, The Civil War in France provided more specific instructions. The basic cause of the Commune’s failure – and a pitfall for any transition to socialism – was implied in Marx’s opening statement that “the working class simply cannot lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.” The ready-made state machinery of Paris was primitive in nature, and it restricted freedom and class equality. These organs, including a standing army, government bureaucracy, the clergy, and the court system, originated “from the days of absolute monarchy, serving nascent middle class society as a mighty weapon in its struggles.

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149 Ibid, 42.
150 Ibid, 43.
151 Ibid, 54.
against feudalism.” The state-machinery was thus created by the bourgeoisie as a weapon against feudal lords; these systemic state features were created to serve the bourgeoisie, and the working class could never use them for its own interests. The existing structure of the state preserved an ossified and codified relationship of capital dominating labour, which engendered social slavery. Destroying this state structure would be a necessity for transitioning from capitalism to socialism. That the Commune attempted to use Paris’ existing state structure was a source of its failure.

Marx offered the Commune as the antithesis to the most bourgeois system of government: imperialism. The Commune was the true form of republicanism because it aspired to “a social republic” instead of monarchical class rule. Marx’s favourite example of the Commune’s republicanism was its decree to abolish the standing army, the foundational institution of absolutism, replacing it with a populist National Guard. The Commune similarly offered universal suffrage as a means of choosing municipal councillors. The police were stripped of political attributes, and instead it was “at all times [a] revocable agent of the Commune.” The clergy was abolished from public life, and the judiciary became “elective, responsible, and revocable.” The consequence was that the pillars of a bourgeois state were divested of their responsibility to the regime; the “legitimate functions [of the pre-existing governmental organization] were to be wrested from an authority usurping pre-eminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society.” The Commune tried to change the state machinery, but according to Marx it did not go far enough.

152 Ibid, 54.
153 Ibid, 55.
155 Ibid, 57.
156 Ibid, 57.
157 Ibid, 58.
Marx believed the Commune’s decrees were attempts to refuse the ready-made machinery of the state instead of destroying it. However, he did acknowledge Communal successes, praising the Commune for its dedication to proletarian liberation:

It was essentially a working class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour… The political rule of the producer cannot co-exist with the perpetuation of his social slavery. The Commune was therefore to serve as a lever for uprooting the economical foundations upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule.\textsuperscript{159}

The Commune thus represented communism, or the transformation of the means of production into instruments of free labour, even if the Commune failed to institute communism. It predicted future revolution by its existence as the first attempt at economic upheaval. Crime and corruption were greatly limited as Paris united behind a transparent municipal government.\textsuperscript{160} The Commune was a “symbol of the Republic of Labour” that taunted the entire bourgeois world, which had abandoned national interests in favour of retention of class power.\textsuperscript{161} Despite its successes, the Commune was doomed to fail.

According to Marx, the defeat of such a glorious rebirth of class-aware Paris could only be engineered through an international conspiracy of bourgeois imperialists. Thiers only found enough soldiers to begin an attack on Paris with a donation of soldiers, returned by Bismarck, who had been captured during the Franco-Prussian War; this kept France “in abject dependence on Prussia.”\textsuperscript{162} Thiers betrayed national interests in order to serve classist goals. Marx used his analysis to revise his internationalist Marxism of \textit{The Communist Manifesto} and create space for proletarian nationalism. Both the Commune’s and Thiers’ actions provided Marx with evidence to adapt his conception of nationalism in \textit{The Communist Manifesto}. When the provinces refused to support Thiers – despite a deluge of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{159} Ibid, 60-1.
  \item \textsuperscript{160} Ibid, 64-7.
  \item \textsuperscript{161} Ibid, 62.
  \item \textsuperscript{162} Ibid, 70.
\end{itemize}
lies spread by Thiers about the criminal Commune subverting the Republic – Bismarck offered the return of the entire Bonapartist army and even the aid of Prussian troops in putting down Paris.\(^{163}\) In exchange, Bismarck was made the supreme arbiter of French politics via Prussian occupation of many of the forts surrounding Paris. This peace deal was signed on May 10\(^{th}\). As soon as Thiers had enough soldiers to capture Paris, his tone changed from conciliatory to merciless, and he promised to “be pitiless [as he] enter[ed] Paris with the laws in his hands.”\(^{164}\) The state machinery that the Commune had not destroyed, such as France’s standing army, was integral in the recapture of Paris. The bourgeois political system reasserted dominance over a beacon of labour revolution; the atrocities committed during the Bloody Week, in which tens of thousands were butchered, were justified by Paris’s crimes against civilization. For Marx, these crimes were paradigm-shifting in nature, as Paris represented the embodiment of proletarian militarism against the bourgeoisie. Paris was defeated, but “[i]ts martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class.”\(^{165}\) As a result of its defeat yet continued significance, the Commune drove home a crucial lesson: existing state machinery had to be destroyed, rather than used or even ignored, prior to the implementation of socialist government.

**Karl Kautsky and Social Democracy**

Karl Kautsky used Marx’s analysis of the Commune to support parliamentary socialism, which incited frequent condemnatory polemics from his political opponents, Trotsky and Lenin. Kautsky prodded the more radical authors to develop their theories more fully in contrast to his own. The Commune proved to be the center of the theoretical disputes

\(^{163}\) Ibid, 73.
\(^{164}\) Ibid, 74.
\(^{165}\) Ibid, 81.
between Kautsky, Trotsky, and Lenin. Kautsky re-interpreted Marx’s writings on the Paris Commune so as to favour social democracy; he considered the Commune’s example of a dictatorship to be more fitting with Marx’s proposed path to socialism than with the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in the USSR. Kautsky wrote *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* in 1920 to attack the dictatorial Bolshevik form of socialism:

The present Russian Revolution has, for the first time in history of the world, made a Socialist Party the rulers of a great Empire. A far more powerful event than the seizing of control of the town of Paris by the proletariat in 1871. Yet, in one important aspect, the Paris Commune was superior to the Soviet Republic. The former was the work of the entire proletariat. All shades of the Socialist movement took part in it, none drew back from it, none was excluded.\(^{166}\)

*The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* was written to vindicate Kautsky’s social democracy over Lenin’s more totalitarian Bolshevism. Kautsky was an orthodox Marxist who valued political participation of every social class, even the bourgeoisie, in a socialist government. To Kautsky, the defeat of the Commune – which was a healthy and productive government due to its democratic political participation – was as a result of “the French proletariat…only [having] attained to the slightest degree of class-consciousness.”\(^{167}\) The Commune failed because its members were not yet aware of the power available to their class; the democratic tendencies of the Commune were a strength of the government instead of the source of its demise. Kautsky used his analysis of the Paris Commune to prove his evaluation of democracy as superior to dictatorship.

Democracy could be defended by violence, as Kautsky believed occurred in the Commune, but never replaced by it. He accused Bolshevism of replacing class interests with violence, and he pointed to the Commune as having used violence more appropriately in its defense. However, socialist dictatorship would be catastrophic in other ways as well. Kautsky

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\(^{167}\) Ibid, 23.
defined “village communism” as socialist production methods in primitive conditions, which results in despotism.\(^{168}\) This resulted in exploitation of the people in Dutch colonial Java, India, and the Jesuit State of Paraguay.\(^{169}\) These examples convinced Kautsky that socialism without democracy would be disastrous; exploitation, civil war, political apathy, and arbitrary government could all result.\(^{170}\) Socialism could not be achieved without democracy. Conversely, democracy was entirely achievable without socialism; Kautsky pointed towards any peasant community in which “equality of economic conditions…exists on the basis of participating in privately owned means of production.”\(^{171}\) Furthermore, democracy was a required condition of a functional and beneficial socialism, and Kautsky believed the transition would soon occur peacefully in advanced nations such as England and America.\(^{172}\) To Kautsky, the Commune’s democratic socialism pointed towards its clear superiority over the Bolshevik Revolution in its potential to achieve socialism.

Kautsky analyzed the state differently from Marx, which culminated in his belief that the Paris Commune was correct not to destroy existing state machinery upon its ascension. Instead of describing the state and its systemic functions as a bourgeois class weapon, Kautsky claimed it was possible that the state could be separated from class: “The power of the state…including the bureaucracy and the army, looms over the people, even gaining such strength that at times it acquires an ascendancy over the classes which are socially and economically dominant.”\(^{173}\) Therefore a democratic government could peacefully transition to a socialist form, as the state itself was class-neutral. However, an ascension of the state over the classes could fetter the productive forces and cause an ossification of society and the

\(^{168}\) Ibid, 6.
\(^{169}\) Ibid, 6-7.
\(^{170}\) Ibid, 7, 47, 69.
\(^{171}\) Ibid, 7.
\(^{172}\) Ibid, 10.
\(^{173}\) Ibid, 23.
Louis Zatzman

economy: “[t]he absolute rule of bureaucracy…leads to arbitrariness and stultification.” To prevent this, the state would have to remain open to influence by the classes, which was provided naturally in a universal democracy. Universal suffrage would prevent the growth of an absolute state, particularly if powers were separated between the legislature, executive, and judiciary. Thus the Commune did not falter by failing to destroy pre-existing state machinery, as the state did not by definition favour any class. Each class fought against the state’s will to absolute power, and democracy was the only political form that could benefit the proletariat against the state’s power. Kautsky advocated a democracy to oversee the efforts of the state, with the power to remove legislative ability from the bureaucracy. Universal suffrage was the only safeguard of the working class, and the Paris Commune exemplified universal suffrage.

Kautsky differed from Marx about the role of the state in class struggle, but the former attempted to find common ground with the latter throughout *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. Kautsky’s main philosophical method to do this was to reinterpret the term ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ especially as related to the Paris Commune:

Thus the Paris Commune was [in the perception of Marx] The Dictatorship of the Proletariat. It was, however, at the same time not the suspension of democracy, but was founded on its most thoroughgoing use, on the basis of universal suffrage… The dictatorship of the proletariat was for [Marx] a condition which necessarily arose in a real democracy, because of the overwhelming numbers of the proletariat. Marx must not, therefore, be cited by those who support dictatorship.

Kautsky equated Marx’s definition of dictatorship with the majority opinion of the universal population; he manipulated the term by declaring Marx not to have meant it “in the literal sense.” Marx’s conception of dictatorship did not exclude democracy. The Paris Commune

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174 Ibid, 23.
175 Ibid, 24.
176 Ibid, 39.
177 Ibid, 39.
178 Ibid, 38.
fit more readily as a democracy, as it elected its officials; furthermore, no revolutionaries “exercised a [literal] dictatorship over the others.”

This argument was intended to lay the foundations for an attack on Lenin’s governmental system of the USSR. Kautsky argued that the Bolsheviks exercised a literal dictatorship in which democracy was eschewed and bayonets used in order to force a political revolution. As Kautsky predicted would occur in a socialist dictatorship, the Bolsheviks eliminated dissent in thought or action by “exclud[ing] all organizations which it consider[ed] obnoxious.”

Kautsky rejected Bolshevism’s claim to scientific Marxism as, in reality, comprising “arbitrary action” against poorly defined political opposition or criticism. The result was the exclusion of much of the proletariat, including Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries, from their own political parties. This path towards socialism would result in increasing numbers of enemies and civil war. Though the Commune failed due to a lack of class-consciousness, its model of democratic inclusion would have to be partially replicated in order to achieve socialist success. Kautsky displayed remarkable foresight by using Thiers’ repression of the Commune to predict what a socialist dictatorship might accomplish:

A minority which only retains control by military power is inclined to crush its opponents by the bloodiest means… [T]he bloody May week of 1871 has shown this with terrible distinctness… And yet the dictatorship of the minority, which…produces civil war…is [considered by Bolsheviks] to be the sovereign means for effecting the transition from Capitalism to Socialism!

Kautsky ironically compared the executioners of the Communards to the revolutionaries who claimed to inherit the tradition of the Commune. His representation of the Commune fit less smoothly with Communard self-description than did Marx’s, but his prediction of the result of a socialist dictatorship proved tragically accurate.

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179 Ibid, 41.
180 Ibid, 69.
181 Ibid, 71.
182 Ibid, 72-4.
183 Ibid, 47.
Trotsky and the International Revolution

Trotsky’s distinct theory of socialism – international, non-democratic, and centralized – was developed as a result of his arguments, in part with Kautsky, about the Paris Commune. Similar to his opponent, Trotsky tried to reposition Marx’s interpretation of the Commune in order to support his own brand of socialism. Trotsky wrote several pamphlets and articles discussing the Paris Commune, and the goals of each differed according to the dates on which they were published. Those published before 1920 intended to repossess the heritage of the Paris Commune for the purposes of the Russian socialist movement. After 1920, Trotsky’s publications on the Commune were vitriolic attacks on Kautsky’s conception of socialism, intended more to defend the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution than to enlighten readers to the socialist modernity of the Communards. However, in Trotsky’s articles from the early 1900s, before 1920, the differentiation between his theorizing and that of Kautsky was already evident. In *Thirty-Five Years and After: 1871-1906* Trotsky echoed Marx in his conception of the state as a class-conscious weapon:

> The state is not an end in itself. It is only a machine in the hands of the ruling social force. Like any machine, the state has its motor mechanism, its transmitting mechanism, and its working machine. The motor force is class interest; its mechanism – agitation, the press, the propaganda of churches and schools, the party, the street meeting, the petition, the insurrection. The transmitting mechanism is the lawmaking organization of the caste, dynamic, estate, or class interest… And finally, the working machine is the administration and the police, courts and prisons, the army.

Whereas Kautsky described the state as an autonomous and class-neutral power, willing itself to absolutism, Trotsky preferred to echo Marx’s conception of state machinery as a vehicle of bourgeois class dominance, while adding a few details. Marx wrote that state organs were simply those of external function, such as a military or the police; Trotsky added to Marx’s metaphor internal organs of class-interest, such as the press or the church.

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Trotsky interacted with Marx’s understanding of the Paris Commune in more ways than by adding nuances about what constituted bourgeois state machinery. Trotsky also added to Marxist theory by arguing that though nationalism could help socialist revolution begin, it would ultimately contribute to that uprising’s suppression. His argument hinged on how the Communards came to power. While Kautsky argued that class-consciousness was a requirement for the onset of socialist revolution and its success, Trotsky contended that tangible geopolitical realities could equally catalyze socialist revolution. The existence of the Paris Commune proved that the economic development of a state did not correlate precisely to the onset of revolution: “The Parisian workers took power…not because the productive relations had matured for the dictatorship of the proletariat…but because they were forced to take power by the betrayal of the bourgeoisie in the matter of national defense.”185 Instead of socialism arising in Paris in 1871 from a natural evolution of economic forces, the socialist Paris Commune arose because working-class Parisians were forced to defend their city and nation after the bourgeoisie had failed to do so in the Franco-Prussian War. Thus Trotsky reaffirmed the conception of the Parisian working class repossessing nationalism as a proletarian concept – that could even incite revolution – rather than a bourgeois deception that would vanish with the advent of socialism. The proletarian Paris defended France against the Prussian invaders while the bourgeois leaders abandoned France out of fear of arming the working-class of Paris. However, this was a trap and source of failure for the Commune; the Commune’s nationalist socialism ultimately failed in the face of an international bourgeois alliance in 1871.186 While Communards intended to defend France, the National Assembly conspired with Prussia to use released prisoners to defeat the Commune. International socialism would be required in order for any revolution to have staying power.

185 Ibid, 12.
186 My use of ‘national socialism’ is not to be confused with German national socialism of the 20th century.
The Commune was predestined to fail, as the catalyst of its revolution, nationalism, was an inherent trap that the bourgeoisie would abandon to defeat the proletariat. However, the successes of the Commune would have to be mimicked by future revolutions, and they were reached through the proletariat’s consciousness of its ability to seize power and thus remake the bourgeois state:

In the fulfillment of [the reconstruction of the state], the experience of the Paris Commune will not be forgotten by the Russian proletariat. The abolition of the standing army and the police, the arming of the people, the dispersion of the mandarin bureaucracy, the establishment of the principle of election of all functionaries, the equalization of their salaries, the separation of church and state – these are the measures which, from the example of the Commune, it is necessary to carry through at the very beginning.\(^{187}\)

As Marx remarked in *The Civil War in France*, the Commune’s success lay in its attempts to refashion the bourgeois and class-conscious apparatuses of state, such as the army, bureaucracy, and church. Trotsky implied that destroying the bourgeois state system fulfilled the requirements of a proletarian dictatorship. The new political system in the Commune was “based on the political independence of the workers… [The Commune was] a dictatorship over the whole of society through the proletariat.”\(^{188}\) While this constituted the success of the Commune, the government’s failure was fashioned through an international bourgeois class alliance primarily between former enemies, France and Prussia. Failure could be avoided by the revolution originating from an international working-class alliance. Trotsky proposed that the Russian proletariat could succeed by adopting Paris’ dictatorship – in the destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus – but eliminating its proletarian nationalism: “The Russian proletariat…will be able to [succeed] only under one condition – that it knows how to break out of the national framework…and make it the prologue to the world victory of labor.”\(^{189}\)


\(^{188}\) Ibid, 24.

\(^{189}\) Ibid, 26.
This also conveniently vindicated the Bolsheviks for refusing to continue to fight against Germany in the First World War.

In October 1917, Trotsky’s political party, the Bolsheviks, seized power in Russia and converted the political system into a socialist dictatorship. This context, combined with the publication of Kautsky’s *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat* in 1920, resulted in a shift in Trotsky’s analysis of the Paris Commune. Trotsky sought to fulfill the dual goals of defending his revolution and condemning Kautsky’s philosophy, and these replaced his former aim of repositioning the Commune as the historical and philosophical antecedent of the Russian socialist movement. The introduction to *The Paris Commune and Soviet Russia* (1920) illustrated the new status of the Paris Commune for Trotsky. A decade ago, Trotsky praised it as destroying the bourgeois state, while in 1920 he was loath to offer the same approval:

The Paris Commune of 1871 was the first, as yet weak, historic attempt of the working class to impose its supremacy. We cherished the memory of the Commune in spite of the extremely limited character of its experience, the immaturity of its participants, the confusion of its program, the lack of unity of its leaders, the indecision of their plans, the hopeless panic of its executive organs, and the terrifying defeat fatally precipitated by all these.\(^{190}\)

The Commune was no longer defeated by an international bourgeois alliance, but instead by its structural flaws. Trotsky attributed these internal faults to a lack of preparation by the French socialists. While Kautsky praised the Parisians for their spontaneity, Trotsky detailed how organizational preparation could have overcome the weaknesses of the Commune and contributed to its permanence.\(^{191}\) Whereas the Communards were surprised by their ascension to power, “[the Bolshevik party during the nine months preceding their revolution] devoted itself not only to agitation, but also to organization. The October Revolution took place after [it] had achieved a crushing majority…[in] all the industrial centers…and transformed the

\(^{190}\) Ibid, 29.
\(^{191}\) Ibid, 30-2.
soviet into powerful organizations.” Conversely, the Parisians failed to achieve a lasting dictatorship of the proletariat because of their humaneness and inaction. Communards did not pursue an aggressive policy of international socialist revolution, either prior to or following their successful ascension to power. Trotsky offered evidence that Paris spent a week holding elections and transferring power from the Central Committee of the National Guard to the Commune instead of besieging Thiers at Versailles. Trotsky was more willing to confirm Communards’ own understanding of their government as republican and legitimate in 1920, when he had his own revolution to defend. Kautsky praised the Communard inaction as democracy, but Trotsky identified it as a source of their destruction. He refused to replicate these democratic, nationalist, or spontaneous tendencies in his revolution.

Now revised by the circumstances of the Bolshevik seizure of power, Trotsky’s practical lesson from the Commune was fundamentally that in order for a socialist revolution to succeed, it would require prepared and decisive leaders with centralized power: “We will find in [the history of the Commune] one single lesson: a strong party leadership is needed.” The Paris Commune was defeated in 1871 because it lacked an international “workers’ party…[with] accumulated and organized experience of the proletariat… [Instead, Paris swarmed] with bourgeois socialists, rais[ing] their eyes to heaven, wait[ing] for a miracle.” When geopolitical realities shifted in 1917, Trotsky shifted his portrayal of the Commune from an attempted socialist dictatorship to a weak republic government concerned with appearances of legitimacy, which incidentally confirmed how many Communards saw themselves.

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192 Ibid, 32.
193 Ibid, 37.
194 Ibid, 61.
195 Ibid, 53.
While Trotsky’s portrayal of the Commune shifted over time, his theories derived from the Commune’s interpretation stayed relatively compatible. Before 1917, only an international alliance between dedicated and decisive proletarian parties could overcome the bourgeois conspiracy, which would abandon nationalism in favour of class interests. When Trotsky’s views of the Commune became more critical following 1917, he concluded that revolutionaries had to be experienced and organized, able to abandon democratic inaction. In 1871, the proletariat should have imprisoned Thiers and his government before they fled the city, and agitators should have been placed within the military to turn the soldiers against the officers.¹⁹⁶ No party existed to order these actions. Trotsky would not repeat those mistakes, and the Paris Commune provided that lesson.

Lenin and Totalitarian Socialism

Lenin reached more extreme conclusions than Trotsky in his estimation of a revolution’s path to success; from studying the Paris Commune, Lenin concluded that dictatorship and mercilessness constituted the only achievable path to socialism. The sources of Lenin’s authorship on the Commune are varied, including speech transcripts, excerpts of treatises such as *Theses on Bourgeois Democracy and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat* or *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky*, philosophical letters to other socialists such as August Bebel, and publications in newspapers. Like Trotsky, Lenin discussed the Paris Commune both before and after 1917, but his views after 1917 solidified in response to criticism of his own revolution from sources such as Kautsky.

Like Marx and Trotsky before him, Lenin used the example of the Commune to prove that nationalism could be appropriated by the proletariat and abandoned by the bourgeoisie.

However, even when the flag of nationalism was carried by the proletariat, it remained a deception: “[T]he proletariat did not realise [that the Government of National Defense was their enemy], for it was blinded by patriotic illusions… [T]he minds of the Socialist of the Commune were under its spell.” Lenin reached the same conclusion as had Trotsky: patriotism was a fatal flaw that the proletariat had to reject in order to avoid defeat at the hands of the international bourgeois conspiracy.

Lenin’s interpretation of the Commune went beyond praise of the Communards or even a defense of Bolshevik actions; he used the Commune to illustrate and prove his political philosophy of centralized socialist dictatorship, offering a precise approach to Marx’s proposal to dismantle state machinery. Many social democrats, such as Kautsky, believed Marx’s comments were metaphorical, meant to emphasize “the idea of gradual development.” Conversely, Lenin devoted himself to the ideal that Marx proposed a literal shattering of the bourgeois state, both destructive and total. Whereas Kautsky had interpreted Marx’s conception of dictatorship as compatible with democracy, Lenin understood dictatorship as a moral and literal necessity.

Lenin’s totalitarianism was a result of his dedication to Marx’s teleology, as Lenin believed “there could only be one view of the historical process… Those who advocated the heterodox path were regarded as evil and diabolical, counterrevolutionary forces to be ruthlessly eliminated.” Dictatorship would be the only governmental form appropriate for upholding the socialist telos. Kautsky appropriated Marx’s term ‘dictatorship’ and changed it to signify a democratic rule of the majority; however, Lenin determined this interpretation to be slavery for the proletariat in the guise of freedom. He offered instead true freedom for the proletariat, which could only be achieved through violent destruction of the bourgeois state.

199 Halfin, From Darkness to Light, 84.
Writing in 1918, Lenin critiqued the 1871 Commune for failing to accomplish this. The Commune used its democratic form to reinforce bourgeois state power instead of dismantling it. Instead of waging war against the class of expropriators, the Commune offered mercy, which resulted in its defeat. Lenin concluded: “it reminds us that in deriving lessons for ourselves from the Paris Commune, we must imitate, not its errors (they did not seize the Bank of France, they did not undertake an offensive against Versailles, they had no clear programme, etc.), but its practically successful measures, which indicate the correct path.”

The Commune tacitly accepted the foundational aspects of the class-conscious bourgeois state, and it thus assured its defeat.

Lenin sought to find what would replace the broken bourgeois state in the path to socialism. He dismissed bourgeois parliamentarism as consisting of “decid[ing] once every few years which member of the ruling class is to repress and oppress the people through parliament.” A parliamentary body had to be converted into a working body; this transformation characterized the Commune and allowed it to pass what socialist decrees it did, such as abolishing the standing army and limiting the wages of Communards. Lenin determined, like Marx and Trotsky, that a state was by definition class-conscious: “Every state, including the most democratic republic, is nothing but a machine for the suppression of one class by another. The proletarian state is the machine for the suppression of the bourgeoisie by the proletariat.” The Commune was a proletarian state that was not sufficiently aware of itself and its interests to oppress the bourgeoisie.

The new type of state that Lenin proposed – and the Commune began – would unite workers, soldiers, and peasants into soviets. These soviets would be organized

200 Ibid, 62.
201 Lenin, *The Paris Commune*, 34.
202 Ibid, 54.
203 Ibid, 55.
democratically simply by virtue of representing the initiative of the millions within them; they would not require social democratic drafts of laws or republics, which represented the bourgeoisie as a condition of their existence.\textsuperscript{204} Such a process of codification would lead to a prioritization of bourgeois values. To defend proletarian freedom, the soviets representing the people would all be subordinate to a single and centralized soviet. Only such an all-powerful, action-oriented, and dictatorial central government could assure humanity’s arrival at the final evolution of history.

The Commune failed to establish a dictatorship of the proletariat, which was needed in order to break down the resistance of the bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{205} Lenin’s Russian Revolution succeeded in establishing this, and it thus assured its success. By defending the Bolshevik Revolution from Kautsky, Lenin explicitly contradicted Engels, who described the Commune as a dictatorship of the proletariat, and implicitly denied Marx’s analysis of the Commune. Lenin denied that the Commune acted as a proletarian dictatorship, but instead attributed to it the qualities of a proletarian state, functioning with the participation of classes in addition to the working class.\textsuperscript{206} The Commune’s lack of a dictatorship was its source of defeat. This understanding was what prompted Lenin to develop Marxism-Leninism, which much of historiography fails to attribute to Lenin’s understanding of the Paris Commune and his resultant tirades against Kautsky.

The Anarchist Alternative

The historian of anarchy Paul Avrich noted that the Paris Commune “became the anarchist answer to Lenin’s dictatorship.”\textsuperscript{207} Anarchists used the Commune to validate and

\textsuperscript{204} Ibid, 55.
\textsuperscript{205} Ibid, 51.
\textsuperscript{206} Ibid, 52, 62.
form their ideas, which stood directly in opposition to those of Trotsky and Lenin. Bakunin and Kropotkin used their understandings of the Commune to develop their theories of free federation and leaderless revolutions as contrasted with the failures of a centralist state. Bakunin supported it because “it was a bold, clearly formulated negation of the state.”208 Kropotkin gleaned lessons from the Commune and its failures, but in contrast to Bakunin, he did critique the Commune for its failures to fully “break with the tradition of the state.”209 Bakunin and Kropotkin were anarchists, and they neither identified their anarchist-socialism in the Commune, nor did they approve of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution.210 However, like Marx, Kautsky, Trotsky, and Lenin, these anarchists identified lessons to be learned from the 1871 revolt, and they used the Commune to distinguish their arguments from those of other leftist thinkers.

Bakunin learned from studying the Commune’s failures that a successful revolution had to be leaderless and ideologically unified. He consented to Marx’s analysis that bourgeois state machinery had to be destroyed but believed that nothing could replace it; “the cause of [mankind’s] troubles…lie in…the very existence of government, whatever form it may take.”211 Bakunin consecrated the Commune as an egalitarian anti-centalist model.212 Anarchists focused on aspects of the Commune that Trotsky and Lenin had condemned in order to identify it as a model upon which they could build. For Bakunin, the spontaneity of a revolution was most significant.213 He declared the Commune to be a significant anarchist

210 Bakunin was already dead by 1917, so he couldn’t approve of anything. Kropotkin was philosophically opposed to the Bolsheviks.
model as “it was a bold, clearly formulated negation of the State.” 214 What made the Commune a negation of the concept of government was the self-distrust of socialist leaders, who were convinced that “individual action was to be almost nil, while the spontaneous action of the masses had to be everything.” 215 Bakunin offered no example of the leaderlessness of the Commune in his short text. Had the leaders believed in a Marxist-Leninist style of leadership, the Commune would have devolved into a political dictatorship, complete with the “privileges, inequality, and oppressions…the political, social, and economic slavery of the masses.” 216 However, the leaders, often unintentionally, allowed the masses to lead, so the Commune represented an anti-centralist and egalitarian negation of the state. Bakunin praised Paris as a rejection of the state because it destroyed nationalism. 217 However, this analysis explicitly contradicted the portrayals of the Commune as an essentially nationalist government by Communards, several opponents of the Commune, and Marx alike.

Bakunin used his analysis of the Commune to contradict the communist arguments of Marx, Trotsky, and Lenin. The latter group argued that the Commune failed through a lack of preparation and leadership; the Parisian proletariat was neither politically nor economically ready for a successful revolution, and national capitalist governments united as one – abandoning nationalism – against the proletariat to defeat it. Bakunin argued instead that the Commune failed because of ideological divisions. The Commune was stricken with paralysis due to the number of Jacobins among the Communards. Intellectual diversity was the weakness of the Commune, while the lack of leadership was a strength rather than the source of its defeat. 218 The lack of preparation by leaders contributed to the successes of the

214 Ibid, 3.
216 Ibid, 6.
217 Ibid, 4.
218 Ibid, 6.
Commune rather than its defeat; Bakunin saw the Commune’s initial success on March 18th as a result of it being a spontaneous event representing the will of the people. While Marx, Trotsky, and Lenin learned from the Commune that the bourgeois state represented exploitation and had to be destroyed in order for the revolution to succeed, Bakunin asserted instead that any state “represents the…interests of the exploiting class which tends to absorb all the others – the bourgeoisie.”219 The state would have to be dismantled for the success of the revolution, but nothing could replace it; social organization should be “carried out from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers.”220 While Lenin used the failure of the Paris Commune as evidence of the requirement of a strong central dictatorship, Bakunin used its defeat as an indication that a grassroots, leaderless revolution would be the only socialist revolution that could maintain its success and represent the final utopian stage of human development.

Kropotkin also used the lessons of the Paris Commune to formulate and validate his conception of anarchism, specifically the necessity of a social revolution that eschewed politics and government. While Bakunin wrote The Paris Commune within a few months of the end of the Paris Commune, Kropotkin published The Commune of Paris in 1880, almost a decade after its finish. He praised the lack of leaders during the establishment of the Commune on March 18th, as this process “sprang from the heart of a whole community.”221 Kropotkin admitted the ideological timidity of the Commune, which “neither boldly declared itself socialist nor proceeded to the expropriation of capital nor the organization of labor… Nor did it break with the tradition of the state, of representative government.”222 However, he asserted that had the Commune survived for longer, it would undoubtedly have been forced

219 Ibid, 7.
220 Ibid, 7.
222 Ibid, 5.
by necessity to adopt all of these anarcho-socialist revolutionary actions. This would have happened because, despite a lack of anarchical intentions on the part of its leaders, the Commune represented “the revolution of the lowest of the people marching forward to conquer their rights.” Paris did not seek its independence in order to become a state within France, but instead it sought a social revolution; political independence was just a means to an end. This interpretation rejected the writings and actions of Communards themselves, who saw the Commune as a municipal authority that could co-exist with and within a legitimate republic.

Kropotkin argued that the failure of the Commune was in its inability to fully challenge the concept of government, which was understandable due to this being a first attempt at overthrowing the system of government:

But in 1871, the people of Paris, who have overthrown so many governments, were only making their first attempt to revolt against the governmental system itself; consequently they let themselves be carried away by the fetish worship of governments and set up one of their own… [They] los[t] the inspiration which only comes from continual contact with the masses, they saw themselves reduced to impotence. Being paralyzed by their separation from the people — the revolutionary center of light and heat — they themselves paralyzed the popular initiative. The Commune of Paris, the child of a period of transition, born beneath the Prussian guns, was doomed to perish.

After proclaiming freedom – a clear but unintentional anarchist principle asserting the breakdown of the state – Parisians set up a government of their own. This government was paralyzed as a result of its separation from the people, which led to the defeat of the Paris Commune. Like Bakunin, Kropotkin deemed anarchism to be the only principle that could assure a revolution a successful and natural transition from capitalism to socialism. While the Paris Commune was doomed to failure, it “began a new series of revolutions,” which were the spectacular effect of the Paris Commune. The new revolutions would “proclaim and

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223 Ibid, 6.
224 Ibid, 7.
225 Ibid, 7.
establish their independence by direct socialist revolutionary action, abolishing private property.” Kropotkin believed in 1880 that Commune commemorations across Europe were dedicating themselves to an anarchist conception of socialist revolution. Political freedom would beneficially enable true economic freedom, including the production and use of what is needed rather than what is most profitable.

Conclusion: Historiography Connecting the Commune and the Russian Revolution

Despite only existing for a brief and bloody seventy-two days, the Paris Commune was used to form and legitimize an unexpected number of different socialist arguments, each of which interpreted the event differently. These authors portrayed the Commune in incongruent fashions, and their arguments were often incompatible with other left-wing portrayals, let alone representations of the Commune in the literary and non-fiction works presented in the first chapter. Overlooked were Communard connections to previous Jacobin, rather than socialist, French revolutions, such as those in 1789 or 1848. Instead, socialist authors emphasized the Commune’s dictatorial aspects and often incorrectly diminished its adherence to republican values and government. Marx and Trotsky saw the Commune as the first example of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Kautsky praised the Commune for its proletarian democracy, which was his definition of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Lenin argued the Commune was a proletarian state but lacked dictatorship. Bakunin and Kropotkin argued that the Paris Commune represented the negation of the state (by definition dictatorial) because of its dedication to leaderlessness and spontaneity. Few of these arguments cited either empirical data about the Commune or writings by Communards and their opponents. However, several left-wing authors understood the Commune was a

226 Ibid, 8.
nationalist government. Marx initially wrote that the Commune appropriated nationalism from the bourgeoisie, which echoed some participants, such as Jules Vallès, Prosper Lissagaray, and Louise Michel. Trotsky and later Lenin concluded that nationalism would betray the socialist revolution. Trotsky’s dedication to internationalism eventually became a rift between him and Stalin, a conflict which has been historiographically covered in depth. Conversely, anarchists denied the Commune was a nationalist institution, for which they praised the government. Regardless of these differences, the importance of each author’s interpretation of the Commune in underpinning their philosophy is undoubtable.

Historiography has not yet caught up to history, in that the significance of the Commune in forming these authors’ ideas has not yet fully entered the understanding of historiography. Russian Revolution historians occasionally accept that the Paris Commune was a lesson that Lenin and others learned; however, monographs lack the nuances of how understanding the Commune led socialists to prove and even adapt their theories. Without understanding the origins of Russian socialism, it is ideologically and geopolitically bereft of rationality. From each of their understandings of the Commune, socialist authors formed major aspects of their theories. Marx amended his proposed theoretical transition from capitalism to socialism espoused in *The Communist Manifesto* to include the destruction of bourgeois state machinery. Kautsky used what he perceived to be the democracy of the Commune to criticize the Bolshevik dictatorship in the Soviet Union. Trotsky believed the proletariat had to abandon nationalism in favor of an international revolution. He also asserted the Parisians had failed in their revolution due to a lack of central command and preparedness, which he assured existed in Russia in 1917. Lenin also tried to align the failure

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227 While Trotsky developed his theory of internationalist socialism in part as a result of his understanding of the Paris Commune, Stalin on the other hand failed to reference the Paris Commune once in his most significant writing on national and international Marxism, *Marxism and the National Question* (1913).
of the Commune with Marx’s notion of bourgeois state destruction, and he created the
concept of a totalitarian socialist government that would unify the proletariat within a series
of soviets. Bakunin used the Paris Commune to advocate for his model of a leaderless and
ideologically unified revolution. Kropotkin similarly cemented his notion of a social
revolution that shunned any political system with evidence drawn from the Paris Commune.

Russian historiography too often connects the French Revolution of 1789 with the
Russian Revolution of 1917 without understanding the impact of the Paris Commune as a
factor more autonomous than intermediate and connecting. The historian of Marxism,
Andrzej Walicki, emphasizes the French Revolution as the ancestor of the Bolshevik
Revolution: “Lenin saw the…French Revolution as but the forerunner of a communist
revolution, which would be far more grand, far more solemn, and which will be the last.”

This traditional historiographical understanding of the Paris Commune does not fit with
Russian revolutionaries’ own representations of the Commune, which were reproduced in
socialist thought, action, spectacle, and even names of children. Lenin did not fully
understand his revolution to be a continuation of the French Revolution, which represented
the bourgeois freedom against which he fought; the temptation of bourgeois freedom
subverted the Parisian Revolution of 1871, as the revolutionaries elected a democratic
government that included its class enemies instead of oppressing them.

Lenin ideologically connected his revolution more with the Commune, which was defeated by an inability to
overthrow the bourgeois state; however, the Commune did not represent the bourgeois state,
as did the French Revolution of 1789. Lenin declared both the Commune and his own
revolutionary Russia to be proletarian states that assaulted bourgeois democracy; this

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228 Walicki, *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom*, 292.
connection is lacking in Walicki’s *Marxism and the Leap to the Kingdom of Freedom* as well as in Russian historiography in general.\(^{230}\)

When French or Russian historians gesture towards the Commune as a predecessor of the Russian Revolution, they miss the true significance of the Commune in forming socialist theory regarding revolution. Lenin’s perception of the course and crushing of the Commune, while incongruent with many Communards’ perceptions, directly formed his theories about how to seize and maintain control of a state. When the Commune’s significance in shaping Lenin’s philosophy is taken into account, there is a dark importance to leftist interpretations of France’s civil war, predicted by Karl Kautsky. The Paris Commune was not a singularly socialist revolution, but its representation has been twisted into something that the event itself was not. The interpretation of the event thus had more causative power – in that it influenced socialist philosophy to a great extent – than the event itself. After the fall of the Commune in the end of May 1871, the executions were ghastly and numerous: “There were so many victims, that the soldiers, tired out, were obliged to rest their guns actually against the sufferers. The wall of the terrace was covered with brains; the executioners waded through pools of blood.”\(^{231}\) While estimates vary, tens of thousands were put to death, often for having a bruised shoulder or powdered hands: potential evidence of having recently fired a rifle. The ferocity of the French government’s reaction to the Commune in 1871 is less surprising than the further twisting of the massacred victims into indirect justifications for the killings of millions more at the hands of Lenin’s future totalitarian dictatorship.

\(^{230}\) Lenin, 47-49.

Chapter 3: Historiography of the Commune: Dawn, Dusk, and the Narratives Invested in the Commune

Introduction:

Historians represent the Commune as a threshold, as either the end of an old era or the beginning of a new one. Borrowing from Jacques Rougerie, Robert Tombs refers to this interpretive divide over the Commune as a debate about whether it represented dawn or dusk. Did the Commune indicate the death throes of French urban revolt, begun in 1789, or was it the first modern revolution, to be imitated and modified in 1917 in Russia? This chapter will thematically explain historiographical perspectives on the Paris Commune, focusing throughout on dusk or dawn analyses and how historians’ narratives of the Commune and Communards invest the Commune with singular representations that at times misrepresent the event and ignore the voices of its participants. Professional historians used the Commune to invest their historical narratives, whether Marxist, liberal, feminist, or other. Frank Jellinek’s 1937 work on the Commune provides a standard Marxist interpretation. Alistair Horne’s 1965 work matches professional historians’ broader turn during the decade towards close empirical social history. A subset of new social history was a focus on gendered history, re-evaluating the neglected women of the past; Eugene Schulkind’s 1972 study of female Communards falls within this section of historiography. In the same time period, Stewart Edwards’ 1971 study of the Commune puts forward a liberal thesis, that the Commune provided the foundations for a massive, liberal leap forward towards progress, such as the laicization of education or increased rights for women. In the 1980s and 1990s, a turn towards new cultural history – popularized by Lynn Hunt – focused on cultural representation instead of social realities. Gay Gullickson’s 1996 study of the representation of

female Communards as pétroleuses fits within a late 20th century turn away from social history. Robert Tombs attempts to reassert the importance of historical documentation instead of cultural representation in his 1999 work. Broad historiographical trends thus correspond neatly with the changing representations of the Commune in historiography. Monographs on the Commune since Tombs have struggled to add anything to the field that is not already covered or refuted by Tombs’ *The Paris Commune 1871*.

Most historians present historiography as lacking in some respect, and they therefore offer their own work to fill an empty historiographical space or correct previous mistakes made by historians. The Commune has meant different things to different observers, and these implications have changed over time. Understanding how and why these changes have taken place will shed light not just on the Paris Commune, but also on the interpretive power of history as a source of knowledge. However, in a broader sense, historians’ studies of the Commune have corresponded neatly to professional trends throughout the late 20th century.

The interplay between individual historians’ efforts to fill previously unstudied historiographical space and the changing fashionability of historical methods have created an effect whereby historians use the Commune in the same manner as the socialist authors of the previous chapter; each fits the Commune into singular historical narratives that by definition homogenize a complex event and ignore conflicting stories and patterns. This can be both valuable and dangerous. Historical narratives are important, but a radical narrative can contribute to violent and extreme results, as happened in Russia under Lenin. While historians have never, to my knowledge, perpetrated crimes on the scale of Lenin’s, it is important to recognize the explicit and implicit goals of each narrative fashioned around the Paris Commune.
Marxism and the Commune as Dawn

Frank Jellinek’s *The Paris Commune of 1871* represents a standard Marxist history. Jellinek treats the Commune as the dawn of a socialist future, which identifies the Paris Commune as the first modern revolution. Jellinek states his predilection for Marxism as well as his adherence to Marx’s ‘objectively true’ understanding of the Paris Commune:

There was much of modern Communism *implicit* in the Paris Commune… It says much for [Marx’s] historical intuition, based upon a lifetime’s study, that his facts remain substantially correct, and his conclusions substantially unchallengeable… It is the aim of the present study to revive these facts [of Marx], to restore, as it were, the background to the *Civil War in France* and to Lenin’s elaboration of it, *The State and Revolution*. \(^{233}\)

Jellinek offers no conclusions of his own, for Marx and Lenin’s prove absolute. He considers all studies up to the date of his own (1937) to be concerned with disproving the conclusions of Marx and Lenin; therefore, he intends to deal solely with the facts that prove those conclusions, for according to Jellinek no study had done this by 1937. The importance of Jellinek’s Marxist methods is not in whether he is correct, but in the types of ‘facts’ he considers worthwhile to prove Marx’s conclusions.

Jellinek concentrates the majority of his analysis on the experiences of its leaders, beginning the story of the Commune in 1868 with the whereabouts of Henri Rochefort, Delescluze, Félix Pyat, Jules Vallès, Gustave Flourens, Louis Blanqui, Theophile Ferré, and others. \(^{234}\) Their foil was the villainous Adolphe Thiers, whose plan was equally either to “gain the guns [of Montmartre on March 18th] or decimate Paris.” \(^{235}\) Jellinek thus presents the instigation of the Paris Commune as an insidious plot by Thiers, who sought either to

\(^{234}\) Ibid, 22-4.
\(^{235}\) Ibid, 105.
humiliate or destroy Paris; either result would strengthen his tenuous political hold over the newly formed Third Republic.

_The Paris Commune of 1871_ heavily focusses on the internal politics of the Commune. As well as organizing his chapters by different iterations of Communist government, Jellinek cites the important stages of March-May 1871 as defined by “decisive move[s] in the internal politics of the Commune.”²³⁶ Political reorganizations of the Commune are the spatial and temporal divisions of the monograph; this signifies a further emphasis on the ‘great men’ of the Commune. Jellinek mythologizes Communards as the heroes of 1871, indicating that even the historian Lissagaray was capable of military heroics: “[t]he last barricade…held out for a quarter of an hour, defended by a single man. Again and again this dead shot broke the staff of the Versaillese flag on the barricade in the rue de Paris. Then, his ammunition having failed, the last soldier of the Commune walked away. It was quite possibly Lissagary, its best historian.”²³⁷ Jellinek offers this possibility from Lissagaray’s description of the last barricade:

The last barricade of the days of May was in the Rue Ramponeau. For a quarter of an hour a single Federal defended it. Thrice he broke the staff of the Versaillese flag hoisted on the barricade of the Rue de Paris. As a reward for his courage, this last soldier of the Commune succeeded in escaping.²³⁸

Lissagaray’s heroicization of the last defender of the Commune is taken as fact, perhaps even proving that Lissagaray himself had been the defender; how else would he have known? The Communards were heroes, even the historians-turned-soldiers. Conversely, the Versaillais were butchers: “The corpses [of the Communards] were left lying barefoot. The ‘restoration of order’ had begun.”²³⁹

²³⁶ Ibid, 240.
²³⁷ Ibid, 363.
²³⁹ Jellinek, _The Paris Commune of 1871_, 363.
This attribution of the moral high ground to the Communards is extended to Jellinek’s analysis of the socialist nature of social legislation passed in Paris. He is ambiguous about their communism, stating that the Commune was objectively but not subjectively communist.\textsuperscript{240} Objective communism was analyzed in Marx’s \textit{The Civil War in France}, and Jellinek confirms that the Commune was forced into some objective communist measures – breaking up the bourgeois state – by the “logic of objective conditions”, or by being at war with the French army of Versailles.\textsuperscript{241} The Commune did not intentionally break up the bourgeois state because of ideology, but rather because of the necessity of functioning while at war. Subjective communism is described as “measures taken in favour of the producing class against the possessing.”\textsuperscript{242} This would have included intentional and ideological measures of tyranny against the bourgeoisie, which the Commune failed to instituted. The closest examples were the limiting of government officials’ wages to 6000 francs a year, the returning of pawned tools to workers, and the dispossession of ownership of abandoned factories from the bourgeois former owners to their workers. However, Jellinek explains why the Commune could not undertake more extreme subjective communist legislation: “[the Commune had] small moneys and less time at their disposal, [so] the Commissions could do very little in the way of social legislation.”\textsuperscript{243} Complete subjective communist legislation would have been impossible without the enactment of objective communist legislation, or “breaking up the state-machinery [in its entirety and refashioning a socialist polity].”\textsuperscript{244} The Commune did not attempt to do this. Jellinek echoes Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky in his conclusion that the failure of the Commune lay in its inability to revolutionize the state-machinery or institutions; this failure would be remedied in 1917. Jellinek creates a linear

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{240} Ibid, 389.
  \item \textsuperscript{241} Ibid, 391.
  \item \textsuperscript{242} Ibid, 391.
  \item \textsuperscript{243} Ibid 395.
  \item \textsuperscript{244} Ibid, 409.
\end{itemize}
connection from 1871 to 1917: “[t]he Commune was only the first stage; the Russian October was the second. They are intimately linked, historically and traditionally.”245 This emphasis on the Commune as an ancestor of 1917 prioritizes the Commune as a dawn of the future socialist utopia, to be created in future revolutions that learned from past failures.

Social History and the Empirical Study of the Commune

In 1965, Alistair Horne pivoted away from narratives and towards empirical study of the Commune, publishing *The Fall of Paris* in 1965, which at the time constituted the most significant study of the Commune published by a professional historian. Horne offers political history combined with a new focus on social history of ordinary Communards. He highlights the significance of the Franco-Prussian War as the first link in a connection of Franco-German military engagements, including both World Wars.246 Despite initially desiring to focus on the Franco-Prussian War, Horne found himself drawn to the Commune as the most dramatic event during 1870-1; finding that existing historiography was either “Marxist or bourgeois in sympathy”, Horne set out to write a centrist, fact-based account of the Commune.247 He offers a political and social account of the Commune, concentrating in part on left-wing leaders, such as Blanqui, Delescluze, and Varlin. To Horne, the ideologies and the actions of the Commune were embodied in the leaders; the Commune was not conceived as a result of ideas separate from history and destined to be discovered, but by ideas that developed as a result of historical contexts. Thus Horne dedicates the first part of his two-part text to preceding events, extending back to the Great Exhibition of Paris in 1867. Beginning in September 1870 and lasting until January, the Prussians besieged Paris, where

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245 Ibid, 419.
247 Ibid, xiii.
“rats were essentially a rich man’s dish.” Horne establishes at great length daily life during the siege, including prices for all types of meat in Paris, the living quarters for Prussians outside of the city, and the weight of shells falling on Paris in January. The desperation created by the siege led indirectly to working-class self-reliance and government, embodied in the Paris Commune.

While describing the structural contexts of Paris – siege, hunger, bombardment – Horne is careful to also detail the lived experiences of Communard leaders. Blanqui’s ideology is as much informed by past failures in 1848 as by his decades spent in French prisons for his radicalism. Despite focussing on the importance of leaders to developments leading up to and including the Commune, Horne is ambivalent about the role of left-wing ideology in the Paris Commune; he recognizes that many Communards’ stated dedication to the social revolution was outweighed by their nationalist dedication to the Republic and the values inherently attached, such as private property. This shows an impressive adherence to Communard self-description.

Communard ideology is not flattened into communism and made one-dimensional in *The Fall of Paris*. Horne writes that the “new municipal government was controlled by Reds in a proportion of four to one, and they promptly assumed the title of ‘Commune de Paris’, with all the awe-inspiring associations that conveyed.” However, despite the socialism of the delegates elected to the Commune, Horne insists that “not one of the demands put forward at its inception in any way smacked of Socialism, let alone Marxism.” This inconsistency between the ideology informing the Commune and its actions is best explained

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248 Ibid, 178.
249 Ibid, 182, 195, 212.
250 Ibid, 91.
251 Ibid, 288.
252 Ibid, 293.
by Horne as descriptive of the overall divide between Jacobin and Blanquist Communards.\textsuperscript{253} The diversity of ideological groups and leaders within the Commune meant that the government was plagued by inefficiency, a lack of unified aims, and absence of a single leader. While establishing that in March 1871 the Commune “had nothing to do with Communism”, Horne ends his characterization of the working-class government in the U.S.S.R, in which Lenin’s corpse was shrouded in a Communard flag, and the first Soviet cosmonauts took a ribbon of the Communard flag to space.\textsuperscript{254} Like many other Communard historians, Horne acknowledges appropriation of the Paris Commune by Russian communism, while not recognizing the extent to which the course of events in 1871 determined the course of events in 1917 and afterwards.

Horne’s examination of the Paris Commune was ground-breaking and original in many ways, but it also borrowed from previous analyses, such as Marx’s \textit{The Civil War in France}. Significantly, Horne echoes Marx and Lenin in their attribution of failure to the Commune as a result of its passivity:

By not taking advantage of their initial superiority to launch an offensive against Versailles, here, in the eyes of Lenin, lay the second of the Commune’s fatal errors. As Marx had written about the revolution of 1848, ‘the defensive is the death of every armed uprising; it is lost before it measures itself with its enemies’. The Commune was about to suffer the consequences of its error, one which Marx’s pupil, Lenin – about to celebrate his first birthday far away at the Simbirsk on the Volga – would not repeat when his turn came.\textsuperscript{255}

Horne compliments Marx’s power of observations while distancing himself from Marx’s conclusions: “[Marx] got most of the events of the Commune right – plus the reasons for its failure – then distorted the facts for his dialectical purposes.”\textsuperscript{256} Horne realizes the danger of a misplaced historical narrative. He determines the Commune affected not just Russian

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{253} Ibid, 295-6.
\item \textsuperscript{254} Ibid, 291, 432-3.
\item \textsuperscript{255} Ibid, 303.
\item \textsuperscript{256} Ibid, 429.
\end{itemize}
history, but also world history; emphasizing that the importance of the Commune was located outside of France, Horne establishes another effect of the Commune was the two world wars: “[Americans and Englishmen] little reckoned that one day they would both be called in – twice – to redress the balance which Louis-Napoleon and Bismarck had upturned.”\textsuperscript{257} As a result of Prussia defeating France and the consequent civil war further diminishing French power, the delicate balance of European power was overturned. Horne thus describes the First and Second World Wars as attempts to determine European power hegemony; the United States had to join both wars in order to end the bloodshed.

Horne cites the importance of the Commune in the course of Russian, English, and American history, though in his estimation it may have failed to drastically change French politics in the long-term. The Third Republic survived 1871, and it only fell in 1940, making it the longest-lasting Republic in French history. To Horne, the Commune is just a footnote to French history and the course of the Third Republic. The Commune was significant because of its varied foreign effects, thus indicating the Commune contributed to the dawn of a new international world order, created by both world wars as well as by the Russian Revolution.

Liberal History and the Commune as Dawn

Stewart Edwards published \textit{The Paris Commune: 1871} on the centennial anniversary as an attempt to liberate the Paris Commune from its embodiment in socialist theory. While Horne tries to mute narratives about the Commune in favour of empirical data, Edwards tries to replace socialist narratives with a liberal narrative of progress. His economic and intellectual history shifted the narrative of the Commune away from ideology and towards structural agents including urban architectural change, war with Prussia, and the economic

\footnote{\textsuperscript{257} Ibid, 428.}
decay of the working class. Edwards claimed his historiographical shift to be towards a space-oriented narrative within France. Instead of representing a class war between proletariat and bourgeoisie or forecasting a future of European conflict, the Paris Commune was significant as a workers’ repossession of space in Paris after the spatial realignment of Haussmannization. Workers reclaimed power through urban space, not through a Marxist sense of seizing the means of production, but by demanding rights for the underprivileged.

Edwards prioritizes structural historical agents; instead of individuals, he emphasizes broad trends. This is illustrated by his attribution of the cause of the Paris Commune not to the ideologies or actions of the leaders, but rather to broad military and social causes: “the complete defeat of the French army by Prussia in the autumn of 1870 and the ensuing four-month siege of the capital.” This was the short-term cause, but Edwards also identifies diverse and deep long-term causes of the Paris Commune. He describes previous historiography as incorrectly emphasizing individuals and their beliefs, instead of the more important causative agents of “the economic and social structure of France at the time and how this had developed.” Edwards highlights demographic and economic changes in France throughout the 19th century. Paris had been growing rapidly since mid-century, with an influx of provincial immigrants and foreign workers. The Exposition of 1867 was just the surface-level exclamation mark to a much longer and deeper trend of engagement with the rest of the world. Economically, the city was increasingly industrialized, though Edwards cautions that “the Parisian working population at the end of the Empire [in 1871] was still far from being an industrial proletariat.” Accompanying this demographic change leading up to 1871 was an economic shift towards capitalism. This saw a rise in prices with an artificial

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259 Ibid, 1.
260 Ibid, 1.
261 Ibid, 6.
depression of wages, resulting in appalling living conditions for workers. Similarly, the working class was deprived of any political voice. Political censorship imposed by the Second Empire combined with no municipal government in Paris, resulting in an economically poor, politically frustrated, and growing working class in Paris. Urban disenfranchisement continued in the nascent Third Republic after the Second Empire fell. Even before 1871, the working class often called for a ‘Commune’, harkening back to the French Revolution, in which the Commune was synonymous with urban revolution and fluid power structures. These structural trends created an explosive atmosphere in Paris, especially as they were exacerbated by the crushing poverty resulting from the siege of the Prussians. The first manifestation of short- and long-term unrest resulted in failed uprisings in September and October 1870, and continued political instability successfully overturned the government in March 1871. While individuals could act as catalysts or inhibitors for Edwards, their causative power as historical agents were displaced by structural trends.

While explicating the political life of the Commune, Edwards describes Communards who often lacked skills necessary to their tasks, though they were devoted to their work and well-intentioned: “[in the Hôtel de Ville] and in the Ministries the atmosphere, though always chaotic, was more one of puritan application to duty, people taking their meals while still working and grabbing a few hours’ sleep on sofas.” Edwards attempts to delineate the sociology of the members of the Commune, including their ideologies and class status, but he admits that Communards “cannot be sharply divided up into political groupings, let alone parties.” Few leaders shared ideologies, and even those who shared philosophies would frequently vote differently on ensuing pieces of legislation. By separating Communards from

262 Ibid, 12-14.
263 Ibid, 29.
264 Ibid, 208.
their ideologies, Edwards can offer a non-Marxist moral reclamation of the Commune. Leaders worked hard and tried to do the right thing, which Edwards seems to admire. He tellingly describes Commune action during the Bloody Week, which included arson and the execution of clerical prisoners, as heroic.\footnote{Ibid, 248.}

The morality and success of the Commune lies for Edwards in its festive revolution. The Commune created a social world turned upside-down, that is, a carnival. Politically, the Commune was not revolutionary; it did not attempt to dismember the institutional pillars of the capitalist system of France, particularly the Bank of France.\footnote{Ibid, 252.} The concept of private property remained unchanged, and broad economic trends such as interest and loans were accepted as status quo. Capitalism was unchallenged by the Communard government, even by its socialist members. Any political revolution resulting from the Commune was simply a result of its “own working existence.”\footnote{Ibid, 275.} Edwards elaborates on the success and novelty of the Commune as more social than political or economic.

Clubs, newspapers, and festivals flourished in Paris, offering an understanding of the city as a “permanent concert, a sort of perpetual fair.”\footnote{Ibid, 279.} Clubs offered ordinary citizens a channel through which they could understand and even inform politics. While public meetings and press publications were severely limited and censored under the Second Empire, Paris under the Commune experienced a democratization of public space and discussion. Clubs were atheistic, and they even subverted traditionally religious space by often meeting in churches.\footnote{Ibid, 283.} Women’s and men’s clubs existed, and all were connected by a sort of “popular egalitarianism”, in which members felt connected by their poverty and
working-class status. The working class was more socially engaged under the Commune than its members could ever remember. By discussing the social life in the Commune as embodied by its ordinary citizens rather than its leaders, Edwards emphasizes the democratic nature of the Commune, as well as his own rejection of great man history. With his emphasis on democratic social revolution, Edwards is able to separate the Commune from its socialist progeny, including the Russian Revolution of 1917, and place its significance elsewhere. The Commune represented the social prioritization of the poor over the rich, creating increased access to education for men and women, stronger tenant rights, and co-operative workshops. However, the Commune was not politically adept, and it did not have the time required to finish what it began. It lacked the unanimous support of Paris, and many pieces of social legislation lacked tangible enforcement. However, that the Commune’s attempts at revolution were cancelled by defeat does not signify failure:

Paris in revolution was a festive Paris… The festive nature of the Commune [was] the active conquest of urban time and space; a restructuring of the city. The progress of the Commune was marked by the advance of the crowds from the outlying districts, whither they had been driven by Haussmann’s rebuilding projects, back into the streets of the centre… The Commune as a revolution was not just one stage in a gradual social progress, but a ‘tiger-leap’, one of those moments that cancel historical time… Without such ‘failure’ all vision would be lost… In this the Commune was a revolution of more than just its own time.

The Commune revolutionized time and space in Paris, and it reclaimed the city for democratic social experiment. The death of the Commune and its leaders could not expunge the experiences of the common Parisian, who participated in festive clubs and democratic progress. By separating the importance of the Commune from leaders and ideology, Edwards

273 Ibid, 361.
emphasizes its importance for each individual who survived. The men and women who occupied the streets of Paris during 1871 would not forget those experiences, and those individuals would recreate France following the destruction of 1870-1.\textsuperscript{275}

Edwards’ cultural emphasis on the Commune as festival, as well as the lived experience of democratic engagement, equates the Commune with the modern democracies that developed in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Edwards likens the importance of the Commune to a liberal modernity, including the expansion of the general vote in France in the 1940s, instead of a Marxist future. Edwards’ perception of the Commune invested the event into the narrative of the dawn of a modern, liberal, and democratic future instead of a socialist one.

Opposing Feminist Views on the Commune

Eugene Schulkind expands on Horne’s social history, adding well-researched and documented evidence of women’s explicit participation in the political life of the Commune; however, Schulkind also combines Horne’s focus on social history with Edwards’ narrative of the Commune as a foundation for liberal progression. Schulkind’s two major publications on the Commune are an essay published in 1985 named \textit{Socialist Women during the 1871 Paris Commune} and a publication of primary documents titled \textit{The Paris Commune of 1871: A View from the Left}. Schulkind’s aims of \textit{Socialist Women} are similar to those of Edith Thomas in \textit{The Women Incendiaries} (1967); Schulkind and Thomas each delve into the facts surrounding women in the Commune, arguing that historiography either dismissed women or failed to find and relate facts. Schulkind argues over the span of several decades that the historiography of the Paris Commune was based on incomplete or inaccurate utilization of

\textsuperscript{275} Edwards ignores here that the men and women who flooded the streets of Paris during the Commune were broadly silenced in the years following 1871, by execution, exile, and political punishment.
source work, resulting in historians using the Commune to support preconceived notions of history that did not align with historical fact. He argues that the Marxists did this, beginning with Marx’s *The Civil War in France*, and historians continue to appropriate the Commune for inaccurate and polemical purposes. The publication of translated source material in *A View from the Left* was an attempt to remedy this.276

Schulkind focusses on the role of gendered action and ideology in *Socialist Women during the Paris Commune*, referring specifically to a club of women, called the Union of Women for the Defense of Paris and Aid to the Wounded, founded by Elisabeth Dmietrieff. Schulkind establishes the Union as a significant source of leadership for ordinary citizens: “neither the Central Committee…nor the elected Commune…imparted programmatic leadership to the mass of supporters who, like these women, made up the Commune’s driving force.”277 The Union was important not just for providing leadership, but also because it included and served working-class women. Its efforts involved political lobbying and socialist ideological aims.278 Specifically, the Union fought for economic equality of the sexes. Labourers who manufactured many of the garments worn as the uniform of the National Guard, many of whom were women, fought for contracts with higher wages. Much of Schulkind’s source work is focussed on court martial dossiers compiled for the purpose of prosecution of women, which indicated that women were seen by prosecutors as agents of decadence, feminizing, and illegal violence. Women appropriated the traditionally male realm of violence, thus destroying their claim to femininity while emasculating Communard men, who were unable to fight for themselves. Schulkind’s description of women during the Commune prioritizes anti-Communard descriptions, such as those of du Camp, the

278 Ibid, 125.
Marguerrites, and Émile Zola. Despite elite prosecution of women, male prosecutors still “were unable to conceive of any Communard women as serious, intelligent and organizationally sophisticated.”279 Most women accused of treason during the Commune were not tried due to lack of evidence, and those who were tried were often acquitted.

However, women were active in the months before the Paris Commune during the Prussian siege. The Union was a form of female engagement, and following March 18th, the Commune “was the first French regime to make use of women in positions of responsibility, appointing them to administer welfare institutions, sending them on liaison missions to provincial cities, and including them on commissions to reform education and open new schools for girls.”280 To women of the Union, the Commune (at first) unambiguously represented economic – if not political – gender equality, and the main goal of the Union was to organize labour workshops solely for women, offering equal pay, so as to achieve social and economic parity. When the Commune did not act decisively in establishing labour opportunities for women, Union members grew impatient.281 Female support of the Commune was thus partially contingent on what the Commune offered women; instead of emphasizing unshakeable female ideological endorsement of the Commune, Schulkind describes female support for the Commune as reminiscent of a modern democracy, particularly as women offered their political patronage based on what politics offered them. Women used tactics that would develop into modern political lobbying to garner support for gendered politics in the Commune, and Schulkind describes these tactics as successful: “the central fact remains that the Commune gave both official status and material aid to the Union

279 Ibid, 130.
280 Ibid, 136.
281 Ibid, 151.
as a women’s organization [and the most influential popular organization of the Commune].”

Schulkind studies the ordinary Communard, often preferring to offer the standard opinion of the individual than to outline those of Communard leaders: “What can be said about the mainly nameless women who rallied to the Union? How significant it would be, obviously, to know.” He uses a sociological perspective, trying to investigate the social backgrounds of each of the women known to have been involved with the Union. This emphasis on ordinary citizens, especially women, represents his preoccupation with the Commune as a dawn instead of a dusk. The Commune instituted modern female education and political engagement, representing the dawn of modern gender equality. Schulkind points to several aspects of Union public statements that signified modern gender equality, including the call for equal education for boys and girls, equal pay for male and female teachers, and the introduction of speeches with “Citoyens et citoyennes.” Not just women were committed to equality, but also an increasing number of men of the Paris Commune. Schulkind also associates this modernity of gender equality with the minority of Communards who were members of the International: “we are not forgetting about…emancipation of women… We have convinced almost the entire association [of the International] of the idea; only the pontiffs of Proudhon [a misogynist French socialist philosopher] remain unconvinced.” For Schulkind, the Paris Commune’s significance as a dawn of socialist revolution is subordinate to its importance as a dawn of modern gender equality; the former is incomplete without an understanding of the latter. The singular conclusion of the seminal *Socialist Women* is that despite the miscarriage of French feminism

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283 Ibid, 155.  
284 Ibid, 137.  
285 Ibid, 142.
in the Commune due to its rapid military defeat, “the Union prefigures twentieth-century radical movements among French women seeking full equality.”

Gay Gullickson continues Schulkind’s gendered analysis of the Paris Commune in *Unruly Women of Paris*, but she eschews the social history of women in exchange for the cultural representation of female Communards after 1871. She intentionally cleaves representation of the Commune from Marxist history, even identifying anti-Marxist protest as a descendant of the Commune: “Russian citizens confronted Soviet tanks and triumphed, as the Communards had believed they could. East German citizens streamed through the wall that had kept them isolated…in a literal and symbolic protest that the Communards who burned the guillotine would surely have understood.” While Schulkind describes the sociology of women in the Commune, Gullickson examines representations of those women after the Commune ended. The goal of *Unruly Women of Paris* is thus to redeem those women from their depiction as pétroleuses, or “megaeras, amazons, furies, vigaroes, jackals, hecates, madwomen [who in fictional representation of the Commune were responsible for the immolation of Paris during the Bloody Week].” To Gullickson, female Communards had been rebuked by Communards and anti-Communards alike, and she offers individual accounts of male Communards criticizing women who abandoned their domestic sphere. She proposes to analyze the origins of the myth of irrational gendered violence of the Commune, reproduced by authors including Zola, Henty, and others. From this perspective, women were central to the Commune, as “the struggle between Paris and the French national government operating at Versailles was perceived and understood in gendered terms.”

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286 Ibid, 163.
288 Ibid, 4.
289 Ibid, 4.
290 Ibid, 11.
representation of revolution as female – and women as irrational – leads Gullickson to consider the creation of the pétroleuse as inevitable. Gullickson’s analysis overlaps with much of the anti-Communard literature and non-fiction description of women; however, it ignores much of the pro-Communard writing, such as that by Louise Michel, Jules Vallès, or Prosper Lissagaray, which presented women as courageous leaders of the revolution while also obeying traditional gender norms.

Gullickson identifies shifting representations of Communard women depending on the time period of the Commune being studied. During the origin of the Commune on March 18th, women were remembered as being the most vocal revolutionaries, shaming soldiers for stealing their cannons, and then leading the executions of Generals Lecomte and Thomas later in the day. During the functioning life the Commune, they were remembered both as instigators and perpetrators of Commune excess, as well as nurses and doctors for wounded soldiers. This disparity represents the divide in perceptions of women, who were portrayed as irrational and violent, as well as compassionate at the same time. In the final stage of the Commune, the Bloody Week, women were portrayed as the pétroleuses, who burned the city and abused and executed Versaillais taken as prisoners.291

Like Schulkind, Gullickson describes women of the Commune. However, while Schulkind describes the experience of women as political agitators and agents, Gullickson describes their post-1871 representation as pétroleuses, bent on destruction and sexual chaos. This difference in focus hints at a deeper difference in perspective on the Commune itself. For Schulkind, the Commune was a dawn of modern gender equality and democracy; however, for Gullickson, representation of the Commune was a continuation of past bourgeois fears of “destruction of…civilization [through] women’s [freed] sexuality.”292

292 Ibid, 225.
this sense, the Commune was an isolated event in history, connected neither to preceding nor subsequent events. Women’s prominent political and democratic roles in the Commune proved insignificant for Gullickson, for their representation afterwards lost them any social gains they may have made. Representation of women after the Commune was the symbiotic partner of the Bloody Week; while men were killed for their roles as Communards, women were mythologized and subverted as evil, destructive, and unnatural. Gullickson describes the relationships between the Bloody Week and image of women: “In order for the conservative bourgeoisie to establish its hegemony over Paris, it had to establish it over women. In essence, the bourgeoisie undertook to demonstrate its mastery of the revolution by mastering its representation…by punishing and repressing women.”

Gullickson redeems women from their subordination beneath pre-modernity, rescuing them from gendered repression both by 19th century bourgeois representation and historiography alike. *Unruly Women* describes post-1871 portrayals of female Communards as a continuation of pre-modern gendered dominance. If the Commune was an outlier of gender equality between bourgeois repression that existed before and after, *Unruly Women of Paris* serves as the metaphorical bridge connecting women’s equality in the Commune with the redemption of those women more than a century later. An inherent value in this approach is that it offers an alternative to traditional ‘cause or effect’ history so prevalent in the study of the Commune. Gullickson adds complexity to the dawn or dusk narrative by refusing to assign either label to the Commune, choosing instead to focus on representation of the Commune.

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Robert Tombs and the Criticism of Narratives

Robert Tombs overturns the works by Jellinek, Edwards, and Gullickson, and he leaves us with a far less revolutionary image of the Commune. *The Paris Commune 1871* is a foundational text in the field, and Tombs qualifies previous historiographical narratives while re-asserting a dedication to primary source reading for Commune history. Tombs attempts to refute the type of importance attributed to the Commune by previous historiography. He seeks to historicize the Commune, much as Horne did in the 1960s, by offering “different aspects of this unique episode.” His method is often to use social history, frequently citing other historians, such as Jacques Rougerie, and offering categorizations of Communards and their supporters belonging to different professions. This grassroots approach harmonizes Tombs’ method of dismembering the dusk or dawn approach to the Commune. He argues that running through all historiography has been a discussion of the Commune “in the history of revolution,” or more specifically in change from the past or towards the future. Tombs contradicts the commonplace belief that any discussion about the Commune must be about its place as a turning point in history; the event has stand-alone importance, as an end in itself rather than a means towards a different historical agenda.

Like Horne and Schulkind, Tombs considers historical study of the Commune to lack objectivity or accurate analysis of primary sources. He aims to extract the Commune from arguments that do not properly apply to it, such as Edwards’ class-based urban argument about the Communard working class reclaiming space lost to it during Haussmannization: “[The] sense of dispossession and exile caused by Haussmannization [could only be of contributory importance to the Commune because of] a long series of Parisian revolts...[and

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295 Ibid, 12.
296 Ibid, 184.
other] momentous events [including] the war against Germany, the siege of Paris, and the chronic political tension.”

Tombs dismisses as ahistorical the theory that the Commune revolution was the act of Parisians reclaiming space previously taken by Haussmann. Tombs focuses instead on the immediate historical causes of the Commune instead of disembodied intellectual currents, attributing “Paris’s last revolutionary period…not to Blanqui but to Bismarck [and his defeat of French forces].” The origins of the Commune were concrete geopolitical occurrences, combined with a history of revolutionary action in Paris.

In his process of dismantling the framework governing previous arguments about the Commune, Tombs also discredits the revolutionary social dimensions of the Commune. He disparages the role of clubs and direct democracy in the Commune: “There was apparently no will – and perhaps no time – to organize elections for all [political] functionaries… The clubs, which continued to organize meetings, were largely excluded from running the revolution.”

The social revolution of the Commune contributed less to any meaningful governance than presented by Edwards, Schulkind, and others. Similarly, several institutions that the Commune promised to infuse with democracy were left relatively unchanged; neighborhoods were promised the ability to elect their own police officers, though this never became practice. The Commune neither created nor catalyzed a social democratic revolution.

Similarly, Tombs disparages the cultural revolution posited by some historians, identifying Commune educational policies, theatre, music, and art as traditionally-rooted and conservative rather than revolutionarily progressive. Tombs limits the importance of broad trends, including gender equality, focussing instead on specific forms of culture of the

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297 Ibid, 30.
298 Ibid, 40.
299 Ibid, 88.
300 Ibid, 89.
301 Ibid, 100-3.
Commune: “Did the Commune, then, mark a revolution in gender attitudes? … [M]y provisional answer (which differs from that of some recent scholars) is no.”

Tombs limits the importance of Schulkind’s integral Union, emphasizing instead the lack of awareness of many Commune newspapers and political leaders of women’s activities. He suggests that women’s rights did not affect Communard consciousness, but was instead a fringe concern. Not only were other Communards not conscious of female political activity, but Tombs even asserts that “there were no steps to include [women] in the formal political structures of the Commune.”

Women certainly did not achieve equality under the Commune, political or otherwise. Moreover, Tombs discredits the role of festival revolution over space and time, as discussed by Edwards. While allowing that festive events took place, such as large marches, parades, and concerts, Tombs quibbles with the conception that the festival-goers were reclaiming urban space lost to them during Haussmannization:

The ‘descents’ on Paris during the Commune appear to have been occasional excursions, and of course there is no way of knowing whether those involved in 1871 either felt themselves to be or really were returning exiles, as opposed to visiting sightseers. Most Fédérés would have been immigrants with little or no memory of pre-Haussmann Paris… This indicates that their presence was neither permanent [during the Commune], secure nor accepted: more a carnivalesque incursion than a ‘repossession’ of the city.

Instead of repossessing space, Edwards’ protagonists were simply visiting urban Paris as tourists. The Commune did not, in this view, constitute a social or cultural revolution to complement political changes.

Tombs also denigrates Marxist history as incorrectly presenting legislation as motivated by ideology instead of practicality. Jellinek offers certain pieces of legislation, such as cancelling rent arrears or handing over abandoned factories to co-operative associations of workers who had been employed in them, as evidence of the Commune’s
dedication to socialism; however, Tombs presents those pieces of legislation as instituted by necessity instead of ideology. Only one abandoned factory was given to a workers’ co-operative, and it functioned as a traditional bourgeois business, paying rent and attempting to function after the Commune fell. Each decree was meant to ensure support from the Commune’s most significant constituency, the working class. The former decree solved a crisis in housing while the latter addressed a crisis in employment; however, Tombs decries them as having little practical effect. Marxist history fits the Commune as an example into a teleological historical narrative that ignores or misrepresents many facts about the Commune.

If Communards did not represent a social, cultural, or political revolution, then for what did they stand? Tombs presents the voices of Communards themselves, as in part one of this thesis, in declaring that the Commune stood for republicanism: “Communards were first and foremost republicans. And as republicans they were patriots, because France was the fatherland of the Revolution.” The Republic needed defending from monarchists and reactionaries in Versailles, the provinces (who elected Napoleon III in 1848), and Prussia. Even the anticlericalism of the Commune – evident in that priests were some of the only hostages executed by the Commune – was explicable as republican through the development of enlightenment rationality as opposed to religious anti-intellectualism. Communard hostility to priests could be understood through republican values. If citizens’ commitment to the Commune was not explicable through radical socialist ideology, Tombs explains it through the practical duality of economic need and community pressure. Men fought and died for the Commune because they relied on the daily pay of thirty sous to stay above the

305 Ibid, 92-3.
306 Ibid, 94.
308 Ibid, 129.
poverty line and because they were embarrassed not to fight. The Parisian working class supported a governmental system that they believed offered them more of a voice than any previous system. By remembering Communards and their supporters as actual historical figures instead of symbols, Tombs explicitly counteracts most historiographical narratives about the Communards.

In deconstructing historiography of the Commune, Tombs limits the significance of the Marxist, liberal, and feminist perspectives, as well as some social and cultural history from the 1960s to 1990s. He criticizes Marx’s interpretations of the Commune as ahistorical, and he questions the role of class-consciousness, or even whether a proletariat existed in Paris in 1871.309 Tombs accepts the idea that the Commune represented the dusk of the French Revolution, as the Commune was the last of a long series of Parisian revolutions. However, he refuses to acknowledge the Commune as a dawn. For Tombs, studying the Commune is valuable whether or not it constituted a dawn or dusk. Tombs seems to criticize the entire approach of dusk or dawn, cause or effect, in his concluding arguments on the importance of the Commune: “Historians often stress origins and consequences, and this book is no exception. But no event is reducible to what goes before and what comes after it. The Commune, so often presented as a reincarnation of the past or as a harbinger of the future, remains extraordinarily and unexpectedly itself.”310 Historical causality is complicated, and contingent and seemingly random events often muddy the waters of explanation. Tombs emphasizes short-term and tangible causes of events over ideological ones, but he acknowledges the diversity and inexplicability of historical causality. Rather than emphasizing agency or lack thereof for the Commune and its Communards, Tombs instead

310 Ibid, 209.
Louis Zatzman

prefers to emphasize stand-alone importance as worthy of study simply because of the breathtaking sequence of events that comprised the story of the Paris Commune.

Commune Historiography after Tombs

Tombs’ dismantling of most of the assumptions inherent to historical narratives based on the Commune has not limited further publications. Many have continued to argue the significance of the Commune as dawn or dusk, though often failing to properly address Tombs’ criticisms of the binary. Carolyn J. Eichner wrote *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* as a 21st century update to Eugene Schulkind’s work on women in the Commune, using much of the same material as her predecessor. Eichner’s historical perspective on the Commune is gendered and ideological, intending to “illuminate the breadth, depth, and impact of feminist socialism.”\footnote{Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune*, 2.} She embodies her gendered ideology of the Commune in the writings and memories of three exceptional women, André Léo, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, and Paule Mink. Léo and Dmitrieff were also major subjects of Schulkind in *Socialist Women* (1985). In studying these female leaders of the Commune, Eichner seeks to “reconstruct and analyze [the Commune] from feminist perspectives.”\footnote{Ibid, 2.} Léo, Dmitrieff, and Mink were visible revolutionary leaders, and Eichner offers them as evidence to disprove a general historiographical trend of discounting the importance of female Communards within both feminism and socialism.

Eichner tells the story of the Commune – preceding, during, and following – through the biographies of her three protagonists. She recounts the ideas they brought to the Commune; this emphasis on individuals clarifies some of the complexities of underlying complexities.

\footnote{Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune*, 2.}

\footnote{Ibid, 2.}
ideology of the event. Instead of recounting the ideological heterogeneity of the Commune, Eichner refers to it consistently as a socialist revolution.\textsuperscript{313} Her protagonists, and thus the Commune by extension, were ideologically single-minded as a result of their life experiences: “Mink, born…in 1839 in Claremont-Ferrand, France, lived a life steeped in the lore of revolution and freedom fighting… [She was] [r]aised with a sense of deep connection to a subjugated Poland, and to the ideas and values of revolution.”\textsuperscript{314} Similarly, the Russian Dmitrieff “had become interested in the revolutionary ideas of Karl Marx…[b]y her teenage years.”\textsuperscript{315} Each of the three female Communards was socialist, and each belonged to the International. Their ideologies and experiences brought them to Paris before or during the Commune. Dmitrieff was a leader of the Union des Femmes during the Commune. André Léo was an intellectual journalist, and Paule Mink was a club leader who advocated grassroots socialist feminism.

The complex picture of the Commune is simplified when focussing on individuals, and Eichner is able to declare decidedly that the Commune represents dawn: “The Commune constituted a political, ideological, and social turning point in nineteenth-century France, creating an inescapable historical fissure.”\textsuperscript{316} The gains of the Commune were not to be reversed by the Bloody Week, and significantly, none of Léo, Mink, nor Dmitrieff died during the Commune or following repression. The Commune created a “unique historical opening” for France, and increasing gender equality – and broad gender and class politics – must be traced to individual female leaders and activists within the Commune.\textsuperscript{317}

Donny Gluckstein claims the Commune as an ancestor of the modern, liberal world in \textit{The Paris Commune: A Revolution in Democracy}. In this sense, Gluckstein’s work is an

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{313} Ibid, 18.
\textsuperscript{314} Ibid, 23.
\textsuperscript{315} Ibid, 28.
\textsuperscript{316} Ibid, 209.
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid, 210.
\end{footnotesize}
update of Edwards’ *The Paris Commune 1871*; both position the Commune as a dawn of modern liberalism instead of socialism. The Commune is also a potential form of resistance and protest from which our 21st century world could learn:

The system we live under concentrates obscene wealth at the summit of society while condemning millions… A movement of resistance to this has arisen and mobilized millions of people around the world… These demands raise many questions: what sort of new world is possible, what social forces can bring it about, and what sort of local action is needed to achieve global transformation? The Paris Commune of 1871 provides answers.318

Many historians claimed the Commune as a predecessor to Marxist revolutions, but Gluckstein re-appropriates revolution. His proposed revolution is not economic but social; Occupy 2011 is more the descendant of the Paris Commune than was October 1917.

Gluckstein’s admiration for the Communards is evident in his adoration of their achievements: “Whether it concerned workers’ control of production, women’s emancipation, education…the Paris Commune had planted the seeds of a new social world and opened the way towards the liberation of all humanity.”319

When discussing causes of historical change, Gluckstein emphasizes revolutionary ideologies as well as long-term structural changes in Paris and France. He identifies the French Revolution, Haussmannization, economic transformation of the working class, and demographic change as equivalent to the philosophical influences of Proudhon and Blanqui. These long-term specific and abstract sources fed into the immediate causes of the Commune, such as the Franco-Prussian War, the Siege of Paris, and preceding attempts at revolution in September and October 1870.

Gluckstein’s admiration for the Commune is further displayed in his discussion of its historical significance. In criticizing the arguments of Gullickson and others that condemned

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319 Ibid, 41.
male Communards for their treatment of women and feminism, he emphasizes the Commune’s attempt at equality: “The Commune emphasized women’s emancipation as part of a single, unified movement for human liberation. In this sphere the achievements of 1871 were unparalleled.”320 These achievements of the Commune contribute to Gluckstein’s perspective on the Commune as more dawn than dusk. While acknowledging “the important place of the Great Revolution in Communard thinking,” Gluckstein emphasizes the greater significance of the Commune as an ancestor of the future rather than a tombstone over the past.321 He argues that class consciousness did exist in 1871 and that the Commune was a working-class insurrection. While lacking modern language with which to describe its capital-related woes – and thus relying on 1789 diction – Communards fought a distinctly modern fight against the bourgeoisie that Gluckstein argues continues to be the source of contention between the 99% and defenders of capitalism across the globe. This narrative echoes the representation of the Commune as socialist created by its opponents, such as du Camp and Zola; however, it also repeats the arguments of socialist authors, such as Marx and Lenin, who used their understanding of the Commune as socialist to manufacture their theories of revolution.

If Gluckstein offers a 21st century polemical narrative, arguing for the modern significance and moral value of the Paris Commune, John Merriman joins and even surpasses him. In his popular history, Massacre, Merriman offers a chronology harking back to 19th or early 20th century Commune history; his impassioned dedication to the cause of the Communards belies the historical objectivity desired by historians, such as Horne and Tombs, seeking the re-dedication of study of the Commune to sources instead of ideologically-motivated narratives. Merriman offers pro-Communard subjectivity in his

320 Ibid, 177.
321 Ibid, 179.
representation of the Commune: “*Le temps de cérises* [which was a song, espousing nostalgia for the Commune] were now the good old days, when Parisians were free. When I go up to the Wall of the Fédérés...I can almost hear the words of Thomas Wolfe: ‘Oh lost, and by the wind grieved, ghost, come back again’.” Merriman remembers the Commune as a time in which Parisians were free. He wants a return to the Commune. The Bloody Week was the re-assertion of bourgeois dominance over the working class, and it constituted the loss of freedom. The Commune is for Merriman the dusk of pre-modern freedom. Merriman fails to engage deeply with historiography, and his goal is more to tell the tragedy of the Communards to a popular audience. *Massacre* is a return to 19th century historical analysis of the Commune, in which the historian argued not about historical causality, but rather about the moral value of the Commune and the Communards. All three of Eichner, Gluckstein, and Merriman ignore the complexity of the Commune – presented in the chorus of voices of its participants and opponents – in order to support their historical narratives; this is the historical method against which Tombs argued in 1999.

**Conclusion: The Commune, Morality, and the Future of Historiography**

With a recent 21st century return to the focus on the morality of the Communards and Versaillais, historical study of the Commune has come full circle. Donny Gluckstein and John Merriman echo Frank Jellinek – though perhaps not his Marxism – in their praise for the Communards, their actions, and their political ideologies. This circle of study portrays how modern situations can influence historiography. Authors writing about the Commune use it to fit their narratives, often at the expense of the heterogeneity and richness of the event; Communard self-description is silenced in order to boost the voices of historians themselves.

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writing about the event. It is partially for this reason that immediately following the centenary anniversary, Eugene Schulkind called for objective historical study based on primary source work; he published a large collection of translated documents in *A View From the Left* (1972) so that historians would have easy and accessible source work on which to base their arguments. Much of Schulkind’s advice has been heeded, and his extensive collection at Sussex University is now mandatory reading for any historian studying women of the Commune. The study of women in the Commune has boomed, though perhaps emphasizing women’s influential participation in the Commune to a greater degree than occurred, if Tombs is to be believed. Furthermore, historians continue the approach of subjective moralizing about the Communards in their monographs. Eichner describes Communard women as integral to the politics of the Commune. Gluckstein describes the Commune as central to the battles of social inequality waged today. Merriman depicts the seventy-two days of the Commune as days of freedom for the working class, ending only with the re-imposition of tyranny by the bourgeoisie. The most recent studies of the Commune have emphasized the redemption of either the politics, society, or culture of the Commune, or the individuals functioning within those systems. Ironically, this focus shows a limited understanding of the complex realities of those participants.

A deeper argument lies within historical discussions of Communards and their significance. By arguing about the importance of the Commune as dusk of the past or dawn of the future, historians reveal their preferred narratives of history. Socialists such as Jellinek describe the Commune as the dawn of a socialist modernity, in which revolution can initiate the utopia signifying the end of history. Alistair Horne presents the Commune as a dawn of extended 20th century European conflict; the Commune and the preceding Franco-Prussian War were the precursor to continued Franco-German conflict that re-shaped the world from 1914-18 and 1939-45. Stuart Edwards illuminates the Commune as a ‘tiger-leap’ through
space and time towards modernity, consisting of repossessing space and time through democratic social, gendered, and festive acts and decrees. Eugene Schulkind describes the Union of Women as an integral democratic agent of the politics of the Commune, and he repositions women as essential to the Commune. Thus the Commune was an ancestor of modern gendered feminist battles for equality. Gay Gullickson continues Schulkind’s focus on Commune women, studying the representations of Commune women following the Bloody Week by former Versaillais and Communards alike. By positioning representation of women as a continuation of pre-modern misogyny, Gullickson attempts to rescue women from their status as condemned pétroleuses. Representation of female Communards as pétroleuses is revealed by Gullickson as a dusk of traditional gender relations.

Robert Tombs eschews the binary of dawn or dusk and historians’ predilections to fashion shaky narratives. He declares the Commune not revolutionary in social, cultural, or political respects. He also requests a greater emphasis on the voices of Communards themselves in fashioning narratives situated on the event. History for Tombs is more contingent than for other historians, and long-term abstract causes are often too removed for him to include as significant. Tombs therefore focuses on the stand-alone importance of the Commune, needing to signify neither a dusk nor a dawn in order to be significant. Tombs’ unique microhistorical approach – in that it eschews a narrative of connection – did not end historiography of the Commune. Carolyn Eichner argues that female Communards have been limited in importance by historiography. Donny Gluckstein and John Merriman both represent the Commune as a moral, modern institution that was crushed by traditional forces of inequality and tyranny. They resent the defeat of the Commune as a dawn of modern inequality. Significantly, none of the three grapples with Tombs in their texts, and Eichner even fails to cite Tombs’ *The Paris Commune, 1871*, despite its status as a foundational text in historiography.
Study of the Paris Commune often falls into pre-packaged narratives, ignoring aspects of the event, such as Communards’ dedication to republicanism that participants themselves emphasized. Historians have examined the Commune from many perspectives, including Marxist, social, gendered, cultural, and liberal; each perspective reveals a historian’s judgment of the importance of cause and effect. However, often these arguments are confused with the tired debate over the moral right or wrong of the Communards and the Versaillais. Robert Tombs’ solution to this issue is to limit the value of history as a progress narrative, assigning importance to events alone, without considering their causes or effects as knowable or worthwhile. Commune historiography will be aided by texts that do not seek to redeem the morality of the Commune or of specific Communards. Perhaps when historians no longer consider the Commune a solution to the problems of the world in which they are writing – or the cause of those problems in the first place – monographs on the subject will contain the necessary objectivity requested by Horne and Schulkind. Whether historians ought to see their present in the past is a separate argument.
Conclusion: The Limit and Value of Diverse Historical Narratives about the Paris Commune

A great irony of the Paris Commune is that its portrayal as ideologically socialist by opponents, such as du Camp, Zola, and Henty, was adopted by the Commune’s greatest adherents, including Marx, Trotsky, and Lenin. In part a result of Lenin’s faulty understanding of the course and defeat of the Commune, horrific massacres took place in Russia and elsewhere, with millions killed. One would think that it would be the job of historians to correct the mistake in Lenin’s historical method, placing a greater emphasis on an objective understanding of the Commune. However, historians have to a large degree repeated the flaw of subordinating an accurate understanding of the Commune and its participants to their own preferred historical narratives. While historians’ continued misrepresentations of the Commune may not have had such a disastrous effect as Lenin’s mistakes, the process has resulted in a somewhat imbalanced branch of historiography.

Almost all professional historians studying the Commune have represented the event in specific narratives that ignore or distort how observers at the time saw the revolution. In presenting the Communards as urbanites repossessing their city after having been displaced by Haussmann, Edwards ignores that most Communards were immigrants to the space, with no memory of pre-Haussmann central Paris. In presenting Communard women as active political participants, authors like Schulkind and Eichner ignore that the Commune roundly rejected female participation. That members of the Women’s Union negotiated contracts for higher wages in the manufacture of National Guard uniforms was an important step for gender equality; however, economic advancement was not equivalent to political participation, and Communards themselves did not see the Commune as a political step forward for women. In presenting the Commune as a forbearer of modern liberalism via its
laicization of education, Gluckstein overlooks that the Commune’s legislation was rarely implemented and then immediately revoked following its defeat.

Tombs is correct in stating that many historians overemphasize aspects of the Commune, and flatten others, in order to fit their narratives. Is this a flaw? If historians reject the act of moulding an event to fit a narrative, then that leaves historians with the option only of using raw empirical description to describe an event and its participants. This is not a desirable change for the historical profession. It may be more productive to see narrative history as a necessary evil; historians must choose to invest one representation of an event with one narrative about historical cause and effect. In the spirit of understanding the inherent worth and error of historical narratives, Tombs’ final words in *The Paris Commune 1871* are significant:

Thus, during their lives and after their deaths, the Communards were conscripted into many causes. Let us end by giving some of them…the last word. The Commune was ‘provoked by a feeling of patriotism first of all, and by the wish to prevent the monarchical form from taking over the country.’ It aimed to ‘set up a dictatorship, defeat Versailles, call a national convention and continue the war against Germany’. It was to be ‘a precision instrument of economic transformation’. It was ‘to show that working people could govern economically’. It was ‘a sort of *jacquerie*, above all patriotic’. How diverse their expectations and intentions were; how unpredictable the consequences; and how divergent their retrospective understandings. 323

Perhaps the value of a historical narrative is in its plurality. We can understand the Commune by tying it to the years before and after with cultural, social, economic, political, liberal, feminist, and other threads. Each narrative involving the Commune and its participants is valuable, even if each forces information into sometimes ill-fitting stories. However, it is equally important for a field to contain authors like Tombs, who call into question certain aspects of certain narratives, while also appreciating them as valuable for contributing to a field. It is the dominance of one exclusive understanding of an event, such as Lenin’s, that can be dangerous. It is deeply flawed to see only one lesson radiate from the pages of history.

It is odd that in a field with so many competing narratives, few have bothered to make the simple argument. Historians like Jellinek, Horne, Eichner, and Gluckstein point towards the significance of the Commune in varying countries, decades in the future. However, few have gestured to the time and place immediately following the Commune’s defeat. The Commune mattered desperately to the French Third Republic. Following 1871, Parisian ideologues, both republican and socialist, lay by the thousand in the mass graves and incinerators of Paris. Further thousands of Parisians were exiled to New Caledonia, or fled to Geneva, London, and elsewhere. The National Assembly presented itself as the only legitimate republican government to the country, and it was forced to retain republicanism, despite dedication to monarchy on the part of a majority of its members. Even when the monarchist president, MacMahon, dissolved parliament in 1877 in an attempt to restore the monarchy, the country returned a republican majority in the following election. The Commune and its portrayals were significant contributors to the nation’s dedication to republicanism. The Commune was not a footnote to the establishment of the Third Republic, as it has been presented by historians such as Philip Nord. The Commune was a foundational and traumatizing event for the Third Republic, which not only allowed for the Republic’s continuation, but also shaped the future of the Republic in France.

As Communards trickled back into France in the late-1870s and 1880s following general amnesties, the participants for and against the revolution began popping into historical events in expected ways. General MacMahon, the commander who planned the military defeat of the Commune during the Bloody Week, succeeded Adolphe Thiers as the president of the Third Republic. Both were monarchist, but both failed to replace republicanism in France with a return to monarchy. Maxime du Camp was appointed to the Académie Française. While those who fought against the Commune achieved fame and success following its defeat, some Communards retained their radicalism from 1871, such as
Édouard Vaillant, who became the leader of the Blanquists after Blanqui died. Others, such as J.B. Clément and J.B Dumay, renounced revolution and supported syndicalist movements focussed on improving the lot of workers through traditional political action, such as the establishment of trade unions and socialist political parties. Still others, such as Henri de Rochefort, further disparaged the values of the Commune by following its opponents. Rochefort supported General Ernest Boulanger, the popular French General – one of the leaders of the French military that crushed the Commune – who almost overthrew the French Third Republic and established a dictatorship in 1889. Boulanger’s anti-republican values clashed with the devoutly republican nature of the Commune and its participants. The Dreyfus Affair proved to be a surprising crucible, further shifting political allegiances of Communards and anti-Communards alike. Rochefort became a prominent anti-Dreyfusard, leading nationalist riots that supported the French state. Émile Zola, on the other hand, saw his fame reach a new height upon the publication of J’Accuse, a popular attack on the elite powers of France and the reactionary impetus of government that had, ironically, opposed the Commune. Thus the Commune, its participants, and its opponents echoed into French history in the late-19th century full of swirling disparities, in which Communards and their opponents could not accurately be bent to fit inside of any singular narrative, much how they had lived for a few brief weeks during the spring of 1871.
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