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Paris Commune (1871): Remembering Gustave Lefrançais

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Gustave Lefrançais has been unfairly overlooked in accounts of significant actors in the Paris Commune, argues Daniel Bensaïd.



Though less famous than Varlin, Vallès, Flourens or Rossel, Gustave Lefrançais was the first president of the Paris Commune and the dedicatee of Eugène Pottier's *L'Internationale*.

Born into an anti-Bonapartist family in Anjou in 1826, Lefrançais attended the teacher training college at Versailles from 1842, but was unable to find a job when he left: he was already banned from working on account of his scurrilous opinions. After temporarily replacing a colleague in Dourdan, where he tussled with the local priest, he had to resign himself to becoming a clerk for a Parisian businessman, who dismissed him when the revolution broke out in February 1848. His future life was exemplary for a nineteenth-century communist militant. Arrested even before the June days, he was sentenced to three months in prison and two years' surveillance for possession of weapons, and sent to Dijon under house arrest. Exiled in London from 1851, he might have crossed paths in Soho with Marx, Mazzini or Louis Blanc. He founded a cooperative restaurant, 'La Sociale', before returning to Paris in 1853.

In the 1860s, Lefrançais immersed himself in the day-to-day activity of the clubs and meetings through which the socialist movement was rebuilding its strength. Police reports considered him one of the most popular speakers of the time: 'He developed his theories on collective property and the suppression of inheritance; he violently attacked the institution of marriage and advocated free union.'

A member of the vigilance committee during the siege of Paris in 1870, Lefrançais took an active part in the uprising of 31 October against the defeatist flabbiness of the 'government of national defence'. Imprisoned for four months in Mazas, then in Vincennes and the Santé, he was elected deputy mayor of the 20th arrondissement and acquitted by a council of war on 24 February 1871. On 26 March, he was elected to the Commune by the 4th arrondissement. After fighting on the last barricades at the Bastille and the Arsenal, he managed to escape to Switzerland. On 30 August 1872 a council of war sentenced him to death in absentia.

In Geneva, Lefrançais joined the local section of the International and then its 'anti-authoritarian' Jura federation, incurring the wrath of the 'Marxists' who denounced his role 'at the head of these

lunatics'. He was on the presiding bureau of the international anti-authoritarian congress at Saint-Imier in September 1872, and contributed to *La Révolution sociale*, an organ of the Jura federation influenced by Bakunin. Earning his living as a clerk, he assisted Élisée Reclus in his geographical work, fought in a duel and returned to Paris after the amnesty in 1880. Though he had often denounced the 'deception of universal suffrage', he agreed to be a candidate in the legislative elections of 1889, as an 'anti-Ferry' and 'anti-Boulangier' protest.

Lefrançais died on 16 May 1901. At his funeral in Père Lachaise on the 19th, a companion read out his will:

"I die ever more convinced that the social ideas I have professed all my life and for which I have fought as hard as I could are just and true. I die ever more convinced that the society in which I have lived is simply the most cynical and monstrous of robberies. I die professing the deepest contempt for all political parties, however socialist they may be, having never seen them as anything more than groups of simpletons led by shamelessly unscrupulous and ambitious men. As a last wish, I ask my son Paul to ensure that my funeral - exclusively civil, of course - is as simple as my life itself was, and that I am accompanied only by those who knew me as a friend and were willing to give me either their affection or, more simply, their esteem."

Citizen Gustave Lefrançais knew everything: misery, prison, exile, conspiracy, insurrection, and capital punishment. Without ever giving up. Between the massacres of June 1848 and those of the Commune's Bloody Week, his life is an example of unyielding fidelity to the cause of the exploited and oppressed.

The story of his formation sums up the experience of a century in which history broke in two. Can we imagine the depth of this rupture? Witnessing the butchery from his window, the young Ernest Renan wrote to his sister Henriette on 1 July 1848:

"The storm has passed, my dear friend; but it will leave disastrous traces for a long time to come! Paris is no longer recognisable: other victories had songs and follies; this one has only mourning and fury. The atrocities committed by the victors make us shudder and take us back in a day to the time of the wars of religion. Something hard, ferocious and inhumane has entered morals and language. The people of order, the so-called honest people, ask for nothing but machine-guns and firing squads; in place of the scaffold we have massacre. The bourgeois class has proved it is capable of all the excesses of our first Terror, with a degree of reflection and selfishness to boot."

1,500 killed in combat. 3,000 executions. 12,000 deportees.

Twenty years later, Flaubert still shuddered at the memory:

"When the prisoners came near the gratings, the National Guards who had been posted there to prevent them from loosening the bars thrust their bayonets at random into the crowd. By and large the National Guards were merciless. Those who had not taken part in the fighting wanted to distinguish themselves; and in an explosion of panic they took their revenge at one and the same time for the newspapers, the clubs, the demonstrations, the doctrines, for everything which had been infuriating them for the past six months... the aristocracy shared the fury of the rabble, and the cotton nightcap was just as savage as the red bonnet. The public's reason was deranged as if by some great natural upheaval. Intelligent men lost their sanity for the rest of their lives." [1]

'And there you have it,' Lefrançais confirmed. 'Voltaire's heirs, those who used to laugh at mystical relationships, priest-eaters - all grouped around a table waiting for hours for this piece of furniture to lift its leg... At last, religion in all its forms is back on the agenda. It is very distinguished. France

has gone mad.'

Lefrançais and his brothers in arms, on the contrary, learned the facts of life once and for all. After June 1848, there was no longer one Republic, but two. Irreconcilable.

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

'The true birthplace of the bourgeois Republic,' Marx wrote at the time, 'was not the February victory but the June defeat.' 'What relationship is there,' Lefrançais asked, 'between the modern conception of an egalitarian republic, based on labour, and the ancient republics with patricians, plebs and slaves?' Decidedly, 'our republic has nothing in common with yours': 'June demonstrated this well enough!'

Some fifteen thousand men dead or wounded in the two camps; organised manhunts; one part of Paris denouncing the other; the fiercest hatreds unleashed between the army, the Mobile Guard and the workers, whose wounded still hurl abuse from their hospital beds; the indefinite state of siege; the permanent war councils sending the most energetic fighters from the barricades to prison or even the scaffold: such is the balance sheet of four months of republican government. What could the most execrable of monarchies have done?

Republican bullets of June 1848 or monarchist bullets of June 1832, it was all the same for those on the receiving end, 'unless there were more of them in 1848'.

The lesson was learned. It would leave deep traces of popular hostility towards democrats and bourgeois politicians, towards the Victor Hugos and Gambettas always ready to turn against the 'mob' that served them as footstool. As Lefrançais noted in February 1848:

"Since his entry into the prefecture of police on the evening of 24 February, Caussidière helped Ledru-Rollin and Louis Blanc play into the hands of the reactionaries by waving the spectre of Blanqui. Why weren't he and his friends present at the barricades, giving the movement the guiding impulse it lacked to concentrate its effort on the Assembly, which should have been stormed on the first day? This lack of direction confined the insurrection to individual neighbourhoods, where the energy of the fighters was simply wasted. Cavaignac and his friends understood this. Soon reduced only to the defensive, the insurgents would remain insurgents - that is to say, defeated."

Political experience is also military: the art of insurrection is a war of movement and quick decision. Immobility and hesitation are synonymous with defeat. Half a century later, a certain Lenin would remember this, in those October days when he urged his leading comrades to act without delay: a matter of life and death.

The Commune of 1871 confirmed June 1848. The revolution of 18 March brought to power a government of rank outsiders, 'unknown, ignorant people', who would one day be the glory of the 'first truly popular one of our revolutions'.

After the defeat, Lefrançais summed up the roots of the class divide that was the key to the civil war:

"The real 'crimes' of the Commune, oh bourgeois of all stripes and colours: monarchists, Bonapartists, and you too, pink or even scarlet republicans; the real crimes of the Commune, for which to its honour you will never forgive it, I will list for you... The Commune is the party of those who first protested against the war in July 1870, but who, seeing the honour and integrity of France compromised by your cowardice, tried the impossible so that the invader would be driven out of the country... The Commune, for six months, put a stop to your work of treason... The Commune demonstrated that the proletariat was prepared to administer itself and could do without you... The

reorganisation of the public services that you had abandoned is clear proof of this... The Commune tried to substitute direct action and the permanent control of citizens for your governments, all based on raison d'état, behind which you hide your plunder and infamies of all kinds... Never, no, never, will you forgive it."

However, the Commune sinned out of naivety by not understanding that one 'cannot be both legal and revolutionary (at the cost of falling between the two)'. He thus considered, with Marx, that not having taken possession of the Bank of France constituted 'an irreparable fault'.

Lefrançais' Souvenirs contribute to a better understanding of certain constitutive traits of the French workers' movement. They shed light on the origins of revolutionary syndicalism, the tenacious mistrust of parliamentarianism, its workerist or populist accents, which the Communist Party knew how to exploit for its own ends in the inter-war period, in the service of Stalinist Bolshevisation.

While proclaiming his communist convictions, a fighter like Lefrançais was wary of populism from above and the 'exaltation of the smock' which had become 'the refrain of tomorrow's republicans'. He mocked the 'self-proclaimed friends of the people': 'Do we need to proclaim that we love ourselves?' Producers, let's save ourselves! - a formula that fits him to the letter. It lies at the root of his hostility towards any form of representative delegation, and his unfailing commitment to direct democracy. Twice in a quarter of a century, Lefrançais' generation underwent the bitter test of bourgeois cowardice and cruelty. Thus, he belonged (along with Vallès, Varlin, Courbet, Franckel, Beslay, Longuet, Vermorel) to the minority of the Commune who voted against the creation of a Committee of Public Safety. Not only did he disapprove of replaying the great moment of Jacobin Terror in the mode of farce, he feared such a committee would become a weapon in the hands of a party, whereas the Paris Commune was 'the expression and impersonal force of the revolution'. It must remain so.

As soon as it entered the Hôtel de Ville, the Central Committee declared that 'the revolution of 18 March is intended above all to restore to Paris and consequently to all of France the effective sovereignty usurped once again by the people of 4 September'. It did not see itself as a state power, but as 'a provisional instrument of popular sovereignty which immediately invites the population to elect its representatives'.

From now on, 'the state would be nothing more than the simple expression of communal interests in solidarity'.

This vigilance against any form of delegation, confiscation or usurpation of power, against the formation of a 'new caste of state employees by means of a school of administration' (an Ecole Normale de l'Administration before its time, as envisaged by the Thermidorian Carnot), had as its counterpart a lifelong concern for education and popular organisation. Lefrançais was constantly attentive to what was fermenting in clubs and associations. He marvelled at this proliferation of popular life and culture, through which the working classes were learning on a large scale, contrary to what used to happen in the closed circles of secret societies. In the 1860s, he enthusiastically witnessed the rise of a modern workers' movement whose forms of solidarity opposed the competition on which the 'exploitation of employees by employers' was based. But he also fought against the Proudhonist illusions about associations, 'however fraternal they may be', which would only 'substitute warfare between groups for warfare between individuals'. The only way to thwart such a trap was 'the federation in solidarity of workers' associations; but the idea is not yet ripe'.

Having started his career as a teacher, Lefrançais remained particularly sensitive to educational programmes and methods. A few years later, he could have been a pioneer of the emancipated

school and of teacher trade-unionism. As a member of the Association of Socialist Teachers, he had contributed in the 1840s, with a few friends including Pauline Roland and Jeanne Deroin, to the development of an innovative programme under the Second Republic. During the Second Empire, when the workers' movement was regaining its strength, he joined a Masonic lodge of Scottish rite, but left it immediately, horrified by 'the most insipid and religious of charitable societies'.

On the other hand, it is striking to see how far these semi-legal meetings from which the popular movement took off again were from a narrow trade-unionism with demands confined to the closed horizon of the factory. A broad public were curious about everything. They were passionate about the cause of women, about family and inheritance issues. In 1849, invited to a meeting on education which looked unlikely to go well, Lefrançais decided to stay when he saw 'ladies come in, convinced that their presence would attract the interest of the meeting'. In 1868, one of the very first public meetings at the Vaux-Hall, attended by more than 2,000 people, mostly workers, dealt with 'women's work'. The discussion concluded with a vote of principle 'recognising the right of women to maintain their personality and hence their social equality through work'.

The family was discussed in crowded meetings. Participants were often divided between those in favour of legal divorce and those in favour of common-law unions, but that did not matter: 'The idea of common-law union has been raised.' At meetings in the Pré-au-Clercs, mainly attended by students, there was excitement over the issues of marriage, inheritance, and the reciprocal rights of fathers and children. At the Folies-Belleville, where the 'working-class element' predominated, discussions were above all between socialist schools: 'The audience is very impressionable, easy to move and yet very attentive. Nothing is so interesting for the speaker as seeing this ocean of heads reflecting the various emotions he himself passes through and which he has been able to transmit to them.'

The duplicity shown by the bourgeois republic, on the other hand, cast lasting suspicion on the claims seemingly associated with it. Thus, Lefrançais was indifferent, even vaguely hostile, to the idea of women's suffrage: what does it matter, he said, to a woman whose fingers are blooded from making artificial flower stalks, or whose work ruins her health, whether she can be a voter or a candidate. He also refused to join any society for the abolition of the death penalty, which already seemed to be the battle-cry par excellence of reformers who had renounced any other radical social reform and did not hesitate to send the troops against the barricades:

"As long as thousands of workers have their heads, arms and legs cut off, their bellies gutted, by industrial machinery, for the greatest satisfaction of the god Capital, I reserve my tears for them. The abolition of that death penalty incurred every day in the factory by those exploited by large-scale industry seems to me much more urgent than abolition of the sentence imposed by judges. Let us abolish the former first of all; the latter will logically follow."

Paul Lafargue would sound the same note. Here we see at its source a workerism or 'pure socialism' whose legitimate distrust of bourgeois parliamentarism is transformed into a withdrawal from politics in general. The initial indifference of Guesdean socialism to the Dreyfus affair, conceived as a settling of scores within the military caste and the ruling class, belongs to this nascent tradition. Parliamentary decomposition, the degeneration of the 'elites', corruption and scandals are likely to revive this sensitivity today - sometimes dormant, but deeply rooted in French popular culture.

It is easy to see from these memoirs that Lefrançais has a gloomy side. He is uncomfortable, often grouchy. His character was shaped by a tumultuous life. Polemics and rivalries raged in the nascent socialist movement. The vigour of these confrontations, however, does not give the same impression as the bitter and hardened sectarianism that ravaged the ranks of the labour movement after the Social-Democratic assassination of Rosa Luxemburg and the introduction of Stalinist police methods.

Proudhon and Leroux, for example, were opposed on everything. The former was individualist, the latter communist. The former was atheist, the latter Christian. But each respected the other, because they sought to substitute solidarity and justice for the 'every man for himself' of the bourgeois economists. Both were, in turn, compositors, proof-correctors, foremen. They were 'workers, proletarians, of great knowledge, able to discuss in all competence with the most educated specialists of the day'.

Lefrançais, who often fought against Proudhon, remembered his funeral with emotion. A crowd of five to six thousand people gathered for this in January 1865. A regiment of soldiers approached, on its way back to barracks after a manoeuvre. A trap was suspected. Explanations and negotiations took place. The ranks opened up to let the troops pass. An anonymous voice shouted out: 'Fight in the fields!' The colonel raised his sword, hats were lifted, and the regiment marched past the house of the deceased, presenting arms: 'A deep emotion seized everyone. We clasped one another's hands in silence. Not a shout, not a word in this crowd dominated by a feeling of dignified pride. We feel revived. So not everything is dead.'

Blanqui enjoyed a special respect in his eyes, as indeed in Marx's own. Under Louis-Philippe, his Société des Saisons had already distinguished itself. They 'hardly laughed', to be sure, but they didn't declaim there either. Marx said that the bourgeoisie invented the name Blanqui to criminalise communism. Lefrançais saw Blanqui as the symbol of the 'true Republic' whose time had not yet come. Before the Bourges court, unlike Raspail who sought to justify himself, Blanqui, though threatened with the death penalty, 'widened the debate, tore the veil of respect supposedly due to the majesty of universal suffrage, and clearly demonstrated that it was the Revolution alone that was in the dock. As for his own person, Blanqui did not care at all.' Not believing that a dictatorship, however enlightened, could bring the triumph of the social revolution, Lefrançais could not be a Blanquist. He nevertheless always paid Blanqui, 'whose whole life was generously sacrificed without reserve to the Revolution', the 'respect to which he is entitled'. He was more reserved towards Blanqui's followers.

Even more significant: Lefrançais considered legitimate the arrest of Rossel for military incompetence by decision of the Commune. However, he added: 'As for believing him a traitor, nothing justifies such an opinion. He is a man who made a mistake.' Unlike what happened under the Robespierist Terror, mistakes were for him neither crimes nor treason. Contrary to the murderous rhetoric of the Moscow Trials, Lefrançais rejected the infamous formula of 'objective guilt'.

Invited under the Republic of September 1870 to toast that of 1792, Lefrançais raised his glass to 'those who fell in June 1848 for the conquest of social equality'. Arago made a sour face. The young people, led by Flourens, applauded. No need, then, to invoke the duty of memory to have a deep inward loyalty. Lefrançais was not the type to commune with 'republicans of both sides', from Pasqua to Chevènement. He would never be a 'black hussar', a schoolteacher of the Republic. A red hussar, rather. Or even black and red, as his communism was frankly libertarian.

He was made of the wood that produces rebels with stiff necks. It is hard to imagine him mired in the decorum and conventions of a plural and governing left. He already spoke disdainfully of the 'open left', as well as the 'pink republic'. Other times, other customs? Indeed.

Times change, of course. But a popular righteousness remains, whose first imperative was always to stand up for humanity against the bourgeoisie.

Contrary to what my own surname might indicate, my maternal grandfather, with the valiant first name Hyppolyte, was born in 1861, 1 passage de la Main-d'Or, into a family of cabinet-makers in the

Faubourg Saint-Antoine. After the crushing of the Commune, he had to follow his exiled parents. Grandfather Hyppolyte had tears in his eyes when he mentioned a German by the name of 'Karle Marx' (sic!), of whom he had probably never read a line. In the family dining room, a portrait of Jean-Baptiste Clément was enthroned. Every year, on the anniversary of Bloody Week, the table would solemnly rise to sing *Le Temps des cerises* (The Time of Cherries). In times of sinuosity and flexibility, of repentance and reversals, where by dint of curves and bends one can end up crawling, may the rough stiffness of the 48ers and the Communards encourage us not to bend and not to give in. As the song says: 'For all that, Nicolas, the Commune is not dead!'

The final word, of course, to Lefrançais, irreconcilable communist and indomitable rebel:

"Today, the Republic has worth only insofar as it is the negation of all supremacy, of all privilege, not only of an administrative nature, but also and above all of an economic nature. In a word, the modern Republic is social. The great honour of the Paris Commune is to have understood this. And let proletarians not forget, the latter [the more or less radical and even intransigent republicans] are no less dangerous than their implacable enemies."

Here, we are a thousand miles away from a Republic of priests or pawns, a Republic of order, discipline and inequality; a thousand miles from a left servile to the possessing class, from its denials and renegotiations, its obeisance and genuflections. With Lefrançais, you are in good company. You simply feel at home.

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Daniel Bensaïd

P.S.

• Verso Books. 17 March 2021:
<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5025-remembering-gustave-lefrancais>

This text was published as a preface to *Souvenirs d'un révolutionnaire. De juin 1848 à la Commune, Gustave Lefrançais*, La Fabrique, 2013, 506 pages.

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Footnotes

[1] Gustave Flaubert, *Sentimental Education* (trans. Robert Baldick), Penguin: 1988, p. 334.