

ANARCHO-FEMINISM AND LOUISE MICHEL

by Marian Leighton

Louise Michel was probably the best-known popular speaker on socialism and anarchist socialism during the 1880s and 1890s until her death in 1905. Through her speaking missions she reached literally hundreds of thousands of French and English people, introducing them to socialism. Attended by hundreds of thousands of the Parisian poor, her funeral in 1905 was the second largest in French history up to that time, second only to that of Victor Hugo. Yet today, since her approach to the world often seems so melodramatic to the modern mind and since male socialist historians are usually more impressed by vast bodies of theoretical quibbling than with actual relationships with the oppressed, she is virtually unheard of.

Like many of her female counterparts and contemporaries, Louise Michel often seems more like a pious nun than an "emancipated woman" as currently defined. Pauline Roland (a Commune of 1848), Nathalie Lemel (a fighter with Michel in the 1871 Commune), and Louise Michel all identified themselves rigorously with their cause and refused to distinguish their public lives from their private lives. Devotion to the people, extreme physical deprivation, sexual asceticism and moralism, and humble and quiet lives—often as "spinsters"—were not atypical of such nun-like revolutionaries. These women's lives were marked not only by selflessness, but also by a belief in transcending "realistic" existence to the level of becoming a symbol. Yet they also displayed a marked disdain for wielding power in the ordinary political sense and displayed a decided

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propensity for visions which transport one to an ethereal/inspirational plane in which one obtains an understanding of the pure meaning of revolution. In many instances their conscious ideal for emulation was based upon Joan of Arc, Jesus Christ, or—as in Louise Michel's case—upon ancient warrior maidens and gallic druidesses who helped overthrow the Roman invaders of Gaul by primitive physical prowess and supernatural wisdom.

Whereas the male radical tradition in 19th-century France was often dominated in word, spirit, and deed by an extreme rationalism that cut to the very roots of the Church's influence on the lives of churchgoers, women revolutionary leaders embodied a new kind of spiritual sensibility which tended to be spiritually transcendent, verging on the mystical in character. While the women, too, may have verbally subscribed to the materialist, rationalist, and positivist tradition that was considered radical at that time, the evidence from their lives, manifestoes, and writings brings new elements into play, elements which differ substantively from the dominant threads in the male radical tradition. These help explain the formation of divergent female/male revolutionary types and what the ideological and strategic implications of these differing self-images might be.

From Church to Commune

Louise Michel's radical activities did not begin until she was 41 years old during the Paris Commune of 1871, which she always considered the turning point in her life. Prior to that landmark she was merely another *institutrice*, i.e. spinster primary school teacher in Paris. True, she had been involved in the 1860s, but then again she had also sung fairly regularly in the choir in her local Catholic Church, up until the Commune when she became verbally violently anticlerical like most other Communards. However, she was never literally or ideologically dogmatic and her change of heart seems entirely believable and sincere.

Paris was a great change from the environment of her childhood in the provinces north of Paris. She was born the illegitimate child of a servant in a family of rural nobility. She was educated and raised as part of the family, a not uncommon occurrence if the patriarch or his son was implicated in the servant child's paternity. For many years, the future Louise Michel was called Louise deMahis, the family name of the house-

hold where Louise's mother Marianne served. Louise and her mother remained with the deMahis' until the death of the head of the family and the selling of the estate, at which time the old family servant and her illegitimate child went away to Paris. There Louise's exceptional education in music, arts and literature stood her in good stead in supporting the two of them by teaching.

As a schoolteacher, Louise often lived with other women teachers after she left her childhood home. In spite of differences in ideology when she became a radical, Louise remained with her mother, caring for her and worrying about her until her mother's death during Louise's imprisonment in the 1880s. After her mother's death, Louise's only companions were devoted women friends. In later years she lived with various other, younger women like Marie Ferre, the younger sister of Louise's martyred fellow Communard Theophile Ferre. Never did she experience similar intimate and caring relationships with men.

All her experiences with men seem to have been totally idealized. Her inspirational poetic muse from adolescence was Victor Hugo, who in return idealized her and immortalized her in a poem of tribute. She enjoyed similar relationships with prominent radicals and men of letters like Kropotkin and Henri de Rochefort. It seems entirely unlikely that these contacts, which were the source of much of her creative energy, were ever complicated by actual physical contact.

Indeed, she was as much idealized by men of letters as she idealized them. Poems of tribute were written about her bravery, not only by Hugo but also by the poets Verlaine and Rimbaud. Interestingly enough, even a rightist and nationalist like Maurice Barres, too, was devoted to Louise, or at least to what she represented in French history: "She is a saint; she has the divine fire (*la flamme*)."

Her sexual asceticism (for which there are also obvious social reasons such as the total unavailability of contraceptives and societal taboos on female sexuality) made her even more the ministering angel, the *sœur de charité*, which was still a powerful symbol in the very much Catholic-influenced France of the 19th Century. Even among anticlerical radical men, the image of the selfless and sexless woman who braved everything and was willing to help everyone was a thoroughly praiseworthy and true ideal.

Militancy, Mystique, and Martyrdom

Once the Commune had been declared, Louise Michel found herself in her element. During the Commune she was literally tireless, usually not going home or sleeping for days on end. She attended meetings of many organizations, working with all people, committing herself to helping others, all the while carefully transcending identification with any particular group. To have been a partisan of one particular organization would have been inimical to her style, as her own ideology at that time was very amorphous and vague if judged in terms of traditional intellectual development.

Constantly from March to May 1871, until the Commune was finally defeated by the Versailles forces, Louise lived with the threat of death looking over her shoulder. She often consciously sought to expose herself to the most dangerous and extreme situations. She gathered up the wounded and bandaged them on the battlefield; she went under fire to rescue a cat; she read Baudelaire with a student also under gunfire; she played the harmonium near a barricade at a Protestant church at Neuilly.

During one night of heavy fighting, she paid a midnight visit to the grave of a formerly close woman friend at a cemetery on the heights outside of Paris. Vividly she later described the extraordinary event in a letter to her fellow Communard, Theophile Ferre. She had felt there in the cemetery the presence of her old friend, as if distinctions between life and death no longer had any meaning, as if she had perceived a timelessness of the moment wherein past, present, and future merged. She had experienced life on another plane. At only one other time does she record a similar transcendent experience and that was in extreme old age, after she was found by an assassin's bullet and believed herself to be resting on her deathbed.

Louise Michel's revolutionary mystique should not be dismissed as atypical of other women leaders of the Commune. Louise Michel, thoroughly steeped in the phantasmagoria of the French romantic tradition and a tremendously imaginative poet and novelist in her own right, obviously was more conscious of living through a certain image or mystique than many other women were. But even here one cannot be led to depict her as a "phony" or a "crackpot"; her mystique was her life and her inspiration. Other Communardes cut similar sorts of figures. One reads of fiery women, attired in traditional French revolutionary costume replete

with red sashes, rising to orate furiously in the political clubs; of Beatrix Excoffon determinedly confronting the enemy with a red flag as she marched to aid the wounded on the field of battle.

During the confusion of Bloody Week, May 1871, which saw the final slaughter of the Communards by the Versailles troops of the Third Republic, Marianne Michel was arrested and was about to be shot in her daughter's stead. Louise rushed to the detention centre and barely saved her mother's life. Two trials followed before Louise was finally sentenced to exile in New Caledonia for her role in the Paris Commune.

The Flame of Anarchy

All of Louise Michel's later life, from her exile at age 41 until her death at the old age of 75, was deeply coloured by her involvement in the Commune. From the Commune onward she believed herself to embody the social revolution and behaved accordingly, living always in utter material deprivation on what little she could borrow from old friends or earn by her writing and speaking engagements, most of which she gave away.

Her ideology, loosely described as anarchism, was largely worked out during her years in exile. Here again she always stated that her belief in anarchism was the result of her personal political experiences. Louise Michel's relationship to her ideology was a total one; it could brook no hypocrisy in her personal life nor any compromise with political practices that were not her own.

In some respects, Louise Michel's representational relationship with her ideology coloured the very nature of that ideology itself. While absolutely intolerant of reformist groups and reformist political measures—she refused nomination by a women's group to run for political office because she believed that electoral reform could not promote or aid in making a thoroughgoing revolution—she was nonetheless dogmatic only in the sense that the “dream”, the new world, the social revolution must never be compromised. Destruction of the old order must be complete in order to allow for total construction of the new. On the other hand obscure theoretical discussions and the implications of her ideology did not interest her.

Louise Michel's anarchism was a non-dogmatic radical ideology in that, for all its emphasis on the principles of decentralization, anti-

statism, and anti-authoritarianism, it was never intellectually dogmatic to the extent that it statically imposed itself upon a popular uprising with emergent radical implications. Just as during the Commune, Louise Michel made no distinction between her life, needs, and emotions, and the lives, needs, and emotions of those oppressed around her, whom her ideology served.

In politics the identification of self with one's beliefs is intellectually compatible only with an ideology that affirms the unity of means with ends. Thus, after the Commune, Michel came to believe that no hierarchical or dominating political structure as a means could be compatible, even during a transitional or crisis stage, with a totally liberatory and revolutionary end. Her own concept of a legitimate political theory for revolution could only be that of a non-dogmatic type. Theory was rooted in historical situations and could only legitimately aid in the birth of revolution if it emerged and evolved in a popularly created and perpetuated rebellion.

Much of the historical incompatibility with and incomprehension of woman's radical consciousness by male radical ideologies has its source in the very base of women's politics: the “personal as political” and the “political as personal”. Somehow, whenever men attempt to comprehend this reality, it is articulated in a dichotomized state as sheer egotism or self-effacing martyrdom. Although many socialist women like Louise Michel did not concentrate on the innovation and development of theory as a principal priority in its own right, their contributions were of a less recognized, but equally valuable sort: chiefly that of devotion and service to the needs of the real people around them. Their attitude toward their own ideology was such that its activist expression was oriented toward moving with—flowing with—the most positive and far-reaching elements of the revolutionary tide, rather than maintaining an ideological separateness in order to stem, direct, or in any way manipulate this tide. Thus, their organizations were created by the Revolution rather than the domineering inverse of having organizations attempt to create the Revolution.

Louise Michel's Statement

“I became an anarchist when we were exiled to New Caledonia for our activities in the Paris Commune. On the State's ships, we were sent

with afflictive and defamatory condemnations, to which we were absolutely indifferent, having seen that, obeying our consciences, we would have been criminals to behave otherwise than as we did: rather we reproach ourselves for not being more vengeful; sorrow in certain circumstances is treason.

"Always, in order to bring us to repentance for having fought for liberty, and for protection against such 'great malefactors' as us, we were put into cages like lions or tigers.

"For four months on the ship, we could see nothing but sky and water and occasionally the whole sail of a boat, like a bird's wing, on the horizon—and that impression of flatness was startling. There, we had all the time in the world to think, rocked by the gentle rhythm of the waves, being lifted infinitely into the distance or expelled all at once to the immense depths, the shrill whistling of the wind in the sails, the vessel groaning under the swells; there we were like servants to the elements and the Idea magnified.

"Eh bien!—the force of comparing things, events, men ... Having seen our friends in the Commune energetically throwing their lives away, so honest and so fearful of not being adequate to their tasks, I rapidly came to be convinced that honest people in power will be as incapable there as the dishonoured are harmful and that it is impossible for liberty ever to be allied with any power whatever.

"I felt that a revolution forming any government whatever was inconsistent, that it does not at all open the doors to progress, and that the institutions of the past, which seemed to disappear, actually remained under changed names. Forged in the chains of the old world, these institutions form a single bloc which must disappear entirely to make way for a new world, happy and free, under the heavens.

"I saw that the laws of attraction, which endlessly carry countless spheres toward new suns between the two eternities of the past and the future, also preside over the destinies of human beings in an eternal progress which attracts them toward a true ideal, ever changing and growing. I am then an anarchist because only anarchy means the happiness of humanity. In working for the ultimate goal, the highest idea which can be comprehended by human rationality is anarchy.

"As to the measure in which ages will pass, progress as yet unknown will follow. Is it not common knowledge that what appears as utopia to one or two generations will become reality for the third generation?

"Only anarchy can render man ethically aware, since only anarchy can make him totally free. Anarchy means the complete liberation of the hordes of the enslaved and thus their true humanity.

"For every man participating in power, the state is like the bone upon which the dog gnaws, and it is for this reason that he defends the state's power.

"If power makes one ferocious, egotistical, and cruel, servitude is equally degrading; anarchy will mean the end of the horrible misery in which the human race has always languished; only anarchy will not become a recommencement of the old suffering. More and more, it attracts hearts tempered in the battle for truth and justice.

"Humanity wishes to live and adhere to anarchy in the struggle against despair which it must engage in order to leave the abyss; this struggle is the harshness risen from the rocks below; any other idea seems like tumbledown stones and uprooted weeds. We must fight not only with courage but also with logic. It is time that the true ideal, which is greater and more beautiful than all the fictions which have preceded it, should be shown prominently enough for the disinherited masses no longer to shed their blood for deceptive chimeras.

"That is why I am an anarchist."