

1848, THE EUROPEAN PEOPLE'S SPRING

Louise Michel: She-Wolf of the Paris Commune (1870-1905)

Sidonie VERHAEGHE

ABSTRACT

A figure of the Paris Commune, an anarchist activist, and a symbol of women's emancipation, Louise Michel was remarkably famous, but also served as a sort of scarecrow in late-19th-century counter-revolutionary discourse. She is described therein as monstrous, mad, ugly, and hysterical. Through her, anti-Socialism joined forces with misogyny, sexism and anti-feminism.

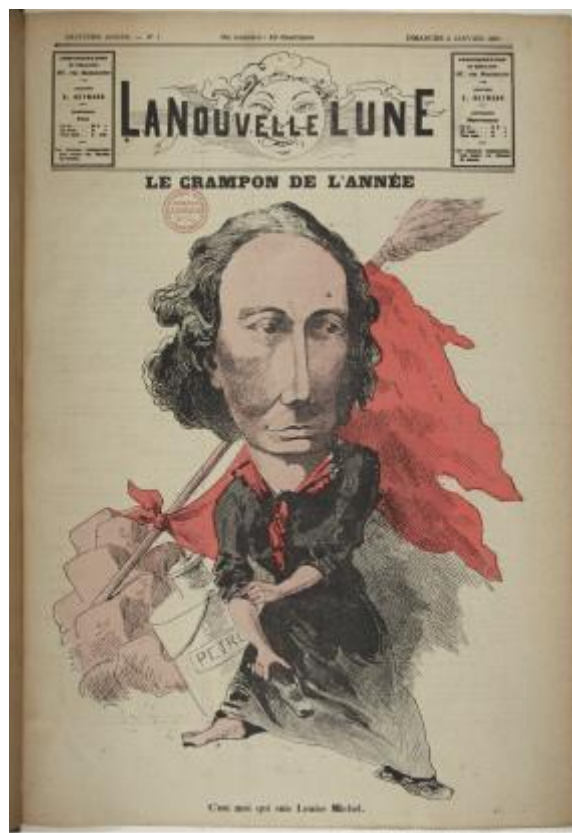


Illustration 1: "I am Louise Michel," in *La Nouvelle Lune*, January 2, 1887.

Source : [BnF/Gallica](https://gallica.bnf.fr).



Illustration 2: Plate 49 “Revolutionaries and Political Criminals. Mattoids and moral degenerates,” in Cesare Lombroso, *L'homme criminel, Étude anthropologique et psychiatrique (Criminal Man: Anthropological and Psychiatric Study)*, 4th French trans. of the Italian edition, Paris, 1887. (Louise Michel, 2nd row, 2nd from the left.) Source : [Wikipedia Commons](#).



Illustration 3: “Different ways of treating madwomen...” by Émile Kolh, in *La Nouvelle Lune*, April 8, 1883. Louise Michel is shown behind bars on the left.

Source : [BnF/Gallica](#).

Louise Michel was born in Vroncourt, in the Haute-Marne (in north-eastern France), in 1830. In 1856, she went to Paris to be a primary-school teacher. Then came the Commune (1871), which she participated in as a cook, a nurse, and, most notably, a combatant. According to the charges against her that were read at her trial, in December, she “excited the crowd’s passions, preached in favor of ruthless, never-ending war, and, like a bloodthirsty she-wolf, she caused the death of hostages through her infernal machinations.” Sentenced to deportation, she was sent to New Caledonia. She came back to Paris in late 1880, after the Chamber of Deputies passed a general amnesty for the Communards in July.

From the moment she returned, her fame grew: all the newspapers were talking about her, cabarets sung her praises, and town criers splashed news of her across the walls of Paris. For the revolutionaries, she became a heroine and an allegory of the Commune. But that process of heroization went hand in hand with a sort of negative consecration: her opponents strove to attack her systematically, to discredit and mock her in order, more broadly, to damage the ideas she both defended and incarnated. By using Louise Michel as a kind of scarecrow, they contributed to turning her into a leading political figure.

From the Commune to the “Villainous Laws”: Fear of Revolution

In the late 19th century, fear of a revolution and of the resurgence of an insurrectional commune ran through French politics: from the monarchists to moderate republicans (i.e. anti-royalists, but with moderate ideas regarding the social duties of the regime), they all painted a picture of the Paris Commune as a dangerous event led by perverted individuals. That image was used as an edifying illustration of the horrors of revolutionary zeal. New human sciences, inspired by natural-science methods, would seek the causes and roots of revolutionary behavior. Cesare Lombroso, an Italian, laid the foundation for the science of criminality. In 1876, he published his best-known work, *L'uomo delinquente*, later translated into English as *Criminal Man*, in which he asserted that criminality was the innate, hereditary product of an atavism (a genetic trait). Louise Michel’s life was one of his case studies. He placed her in the “mattoid and moral degenerate” category,” meaning she lacked any moral sense. The figure of the criminal-from-birth served to remove the revolutionaries’ action from a political framework and turn them into individuals who were violent, asocial and possibly insane, by nature and since birth.

Back in Paris, Louise Michel tirelessly attended political meetings and participated in strikes and demonstrations (she was jailed from 1883 to 1886 for “inciting looting”) and wrote political, literary, poetical and theatrical texts. For her opponents, she was a “crazy old woman,” a “pitiful madwoman,” or a “dangerous old woman;” she had “a madwoman’s frightening gaze” and was “mad, or at the very least disturbed in her soul.” On March 26, 1881, a police report specified that “We don’t pay much attention to Louise Michel’s speeches, because they are tainted by madness.”

The discourse about Louise Michel's supposed insanity had a real impact on her life. In May, 1890, she was arrested in Vienne (near Lyon) and jailed for her calls for violence. Refusing a pardon, she was forcibly turned out of jail. A doctor said she should be committed by reason of insanity, so Louise Michel fled France for exile in England. A few years later, during the period of the anti-anarchism or "villainous" laws (1893-1894), a journalist from the newspaper *Le Matin* wrote about different types of people who became anarchists. Anarchism, he said, had "its poets, its rhetoricians and popular orators, its coldly mathematical scholars, and lastly, its fervent idealists." He saw Louise Michel as belonging to that last category. The article concluded with the journalist's condemning her. In his eyes, the only reason to publish Louise Michel's opinions was to "show the degree of mental aberration to which subversive doctrines could lead."

Ugly and Hysterical: Fear of Women's Emancipation

Although at her trial after the Paris Commune Louise Michel was not convicted of starting any fires, in the public imagination, she is very much associated with the "pétroleuses" or women fire-starters. In 1880, one could read in *Le Gaulois*, a conservative, Legitimist (royalist), newspaper, that Louise Michel's "chilly speaking, an expression of sanguinary mysticism, has the effect of water on burning petrol on the proletariat, with their over-excited appetites." Two years later, in the same newspaper, a contributor wrote that, "as ever, Louise Michel stands out for her petrol-soaked eloquence and her dynamite brio." Counter-revolutionary history has always highlighted violence committed by women. The Commune's "pétroleuses" echo the French Revolution's knitters (women who knitted calmly during executions) and the Vésuviennes (a community of anti-royalist working-class young women) in 1848. Harping on those "monstrous women" (because they transgressed the norms of femininity) enabled the authors to turn the idea of revolution itself into a monstrosity.

Louise Michel stood up for women's right to be both combatants and activists, and refused to bow down to many key social norms for her sex (she never married, nor did she have children). She founded and participated in women's collectives, spoke at conferences and rallies for women's rights, and lent her support to working women on strike. That work made her a target of virulent antifeminism. *La Presse* of January 13, 1893 deplored activist women's transgressions: "We would have preferred that [America] had retained its monopoly on the eccentricities of this 'third' sex that gave us Louise Michel."

Late 19th-century anti-feminists based their ideas on naturalist scientific literature that hypothesized that women were naturally unfit to become involved in the public sphere. In 1880, a staff writer for *La Presse* called for "the creation of a hospital for politicking women." Feminists who achieved fame in politics were necessarily psychologically unstable, and most likely afflicted with hysteria, that "female complaint" that the neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot was studying. Turning Louise Michel into a hysteric was a way of delegitimizing her ideas, and, therefore refusing to grant her - or any woman - access to politics.

Her nickname, the "Red Virgin," played an important role in the dynamics of disqualification of women's speech and ideas. Louise Michel's opponents referenced her alleged virginity as soon as she got back to Paris: she was variously called "the virgin of the Commune," "the Maid of Belleville" and "the petroleum virgin." That virginity became the proof of her deviance. In the novel *Gil Blas*, one finds the following lines about Louise Michel: "She's not pretty, and they say she's a virgin. That's bad for sanity! Virginity is the mother of dementia." As their

reasoning went, being ugly, Louise Michel couldn't entice a man; without marriage or motherhood, she trained her affection on the struggle for civil rights. In 1886, a contributor to *La Petite Gazette* defended that hypothesis of frustration in these terms: "You see, that ardent and perverted soul doesn't know what to do with its immense need for affection, it would have required a husband to occupy her heart, and children, who are women's great consolation. A married Louise Michel would have meant one less 'great female citizen' and one more happy homemaker; and we would not have been worse off." Originally used by her critics, the Red Virgin nickname offered a two-fold justification for Louise Michel's deviance: her ugliness and her virginity. Between the lines, the goal was always to discredit feminist demands and revolutionary struggle in general by discrediting her, an icon of those struggles.

Louise Michel died in Marseille on January 9, 1905, during a speaking tour. Over 10,000 people (according to the police) or 100,000 (according to the then-Socialist newspaper *L'Humanité*) attended her funeral. Her memory was controversial for many years: the Paris municipal council refused to allow a statue of her to be erected; when streets were named for her, local prefects would cancel the naming. It wasn't until after World War II that the combined efforts of the Communist Party and the Socialist Party paid off: her image gradually became more pacific, and she joined the pantheon of national icons - while still bearing a message of emancipation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

LIDSKY, Paul, *Les écrivains contre la Commune* (Paris: La Découverte, 2021 [1970]).

THOMAS, Édith, *Les « Pétroleuses »* (Paris: Gallimard, 2021 [1963]).

VERHAEGHE, Sidonie, *Vive Louise Michel ! Célébrité et postérité d'une figure anarchiste* (Vulaines-sur-Seine: Éditions du Croquant, 2021).

Source URL:

<https://ehne.fr/encyclopedia/themes/political-europe/1848-european-people's-spring/louise-michel-she-wolf-paris-commune-1870-1905>