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The Scarecrow on the Other Side of the Pond: The Paris Commune of 1871 in the Canadian Press

Alban Bargain-Villéger

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The Scarecrow on the Other Side of the Pond: The Paris Commune of 1871 in the Canadian Press

Alban Bargain-Villéger

IT WOULD BE HARD TO IMAGINE two more divergent projects in 19th-century state making than the Dominion of Canada and the Paris Commune. Yet they were products of the same historical moment, and, while the Communards no doubt paid little attention to transatlantic politics, Canadian newspapers viewed the developments in France through the spring of 1871 with some concern. The principles that animated the Parisian revolutionaries were antithetical to the cautious, less democratic precepts of the nation-building process then taking shape in Canada. Not surprisingly, Canadian commentators disliked what they saw, and their discourse about the Commune became part of their efforts to promote a different sense of liberal nationhood in the new dominion.

Between 18 March and 28 May 1871, in the wake of France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, a simultaneously socialist and republican insurrection occurred in Paris that gave rise to a veritable state within the state. Communards had their own elected government and resisted the assaults of the official French government before falling in late May. The last major insurrection of 19th-century France is not just a significant event in left history. It also had an impact across the Atlantic, as the overwhelming majority of Canadian newspapers made use of the Paris events to make sense of the new nation. For despite the lofty pronouncements and ringing bells of 1 July 1867, Canada found itself in a quest for a concrete legitimation of its existence and purpose. Socialism was an ideal scapegoat, as it allowed both Francophones

and Anglophones, liberals and conservatives to share a common antipathy for what appeared to be a foreign and pernicious political system.

The press acted as the main vehicle for the demonization of the Commune. As Paul Rutherford has pointed out in *A Victorian Authority*, the creation of national mythologies was central to the Confederation-era nation-building process. In that process, “the daily press was the prime mythmaker.”¹ Indeed, in its coverage of the Commune, the press was concerned with order, a factor that had added significance due to the young age and the seemingly fragile political edifice of Confederation.

This research note argues that the Canadian press coverage of the Commune played a role in constructing a consensual idea of what the moral basis of Confederation should be. Although some Canadians certainly felt sympathy for the Communards, most newspapers agreed on one thing: the insurrection and the regime it established were an aberration. This unanimous condemnation of the Commune and its use as a cautionary tale contributed to strengthening the nation-building process.

Nation building, in Canada as elsewhere, rarely is a finite moment in a country's history. Even relatively old countries still strive to define their respective identities.² This phenomenon seems to have been inherent to any national entity that has not lived in isolation from the rest of the world. Openness to foreign material and cultural goods as well as immigration flows and international contacts of all kinds unsurprisingly engender the periodical reconsideration of those identities and encourage continuous changes to national narratives.

Like most other national projects, Canada is a non-finite entity that has been shaped by dialogues and conflicts among various individuals, institutions, and organizations that contributed to its creation. This *perpetuum mobile* can be seen as a laboratory, one in which various individuals and groups that partake of that community add their contributions to the crucible of national consciousness. Though at times the result of compromise among various forces, a nation's official identity is nevertheless often proposed from above to (and sometimes imposed on) individuals, who then interpret it, albeit within a frame acceptable to the rules of that newly created national consciousness.

As the main information medium at the time (the newspaper circulation figures for 1872 amounted to 670,000 copies – more than one issue per family), the press played an important role in demonizing the Commune.³ In Rutherford's words, the press, as “a leading agency of ‘legitimation,’” held

1. Paul Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority: The Daily Press in Late Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982), 156.

2. Mircea Vasilescu, “Mais où est passée la France de nos rêves?” *Dilema Veche/Courrier International*, 10–16 February 2011, 20; Julia Stapleton, “Citizenship versus Patriotism in Twentieth-Century England,” *The Historical Journal*, 48 (March 2005): 151–178.

3. Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority*, 3.

much power in creating “heroes and villains.”⁴ Unanimously presented as an immoral project, the Paris Commune linked seemingly disparate Canadian publications, transcending language, religion, and political allegiances. The media coverage of the Paris Commune can thus be seen as part of a nation-building exercise, one that helped to stitch together the country through a common *othering*.

In order to better understand what was out of bounds when Canadians wrote about the Commune, this article focuses on 21 newspapers. In making this selection, geographical, linguistic, and political diversity was privileged. In an east to west order, the newspapers are the following: the *Halifax Citizen*, the *Halifax Reporter*, *St. John's Daily Telegraph and Morning Journal*, *La Gazette de Sorel*, Montreal's *Daily Witness*, *Le Franc-parleur*, *La Minerve*, *Montreal Herald*, *Le Nouveau Monde*, and *Le Pays*, the *Ottawa Free Press*, Toronto's *Globe* and *Irish Canadian*, the *St. Catharines Constitutional*, the *Simcoe Reformer*, the *Norfolk Reformer*, the *Perth Courier*, the *Woodstock Sentinel*, Winnipeg's *Weekly Manitoban*, the *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, and the *Victoria Daily Standard*.

As far as methodology is concerned, this study focuses on two distinct types of media coverage: telegraphic dispatches and opinion pieces. About 90 per cent of the articles surveyed consist of literal renditions of overseas telegraphic dispatches. With dispatches, the reader was directly confronted by the news as it came into the newspaper. Opinion pieces were relatively scarce. For the most part, articles with either news or commentary were often hastily printed, replete with incorrect spelling and inconsistent grammar (these have been reproduced verbatim).

It could be argued that the inclusion in this article of mostly European dispatches will not provide any information on the shaping of the Canadian nation-building process. Nevertheless, the fact that editors and/or journalists chose to privilege anti-Commune dispatches is itself indicative of the newspapers' perspective on the events. That said, while some dispatches will be cited, the majority of the sources quoted in this study are opinion pieces precisely because they drew on the more factual dispatches to orchestrate a specific set of understandings about what the Commune represented.

The Paris Commune

THE PARIS COMMUNE LASTED from its official creation on 28 March until its repression on 28 May. It grew out of the period of political transition following Prussia's defeat of France, the end of Napoleon III's reign, and the proclamation of the Third Republic on 4 September 1870. The armistice with Germany signed on 27 January followed a four-month siege of Paris and a particularly

4. Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority*, 7.

harsh winter.⁵ During the siege, the city's most adamantly republican elements staged several demonstrations and failed insurrections, set up *arrondissement* committees, and reorganized the National Guard on a democratic basis.⁶

The goals of the insurrectionists were multiple and sometimes conflicted with each other. Broadly speaking, the rebels' main demands consisted of the establishment of a social republic and the granting of the municipal franchise for Parisians.⁷ Nationalism also played a role in the insurrection. According to Robert Tombs, the Communards understood the revolution as a consequence of "the revolutionary nationalism produced by the war and the fall of Napoleon III."⁸ The regime also eponymously referred to the precedent of the first Paris Commune, which administered the city from 1789 until 1795 and took a radical turn after 1792. Thus, the idea of the Commune was not just socialistic but also republican and patriotic.

The February national elections gave an overwhelming majority to the monarchists, which worried the generally pro-republican Parisian population. Among the decisions taken by the National Assembly, at least four can count as causes of the insurrection. In the weeks that followed the elections, the deputies voted to move the seat of the Assembly from Bordeaux to Versailles. This decision was not only symbolically loaded but could also be read as a symptom of distrust from the authorities for the capital city. Added to that, the signing of the armistice exacerbated anti-governmental sentiment in the city. Furthermore, the government's economic policies proved particularly clumsy. The Assembly's cancellation of the moratorium on rents and arrears due during the siege made the government even more unpopular in Paris, whose economy had greatly suffered from the war. Finally, the government's decision to disarm the citizens' militia brought matters to a boil. Some local republicans viewed the attempt, in the morning of 18 March, to seize the guns stored in Montmartre, La Villette, and Belleville, as the prelude of a monarchist coup.⁹ The operation failed, as a result of the strong resistance of the Montmartre residents, who managed to get the troops on their side. This event marked the beginning of the insurrection.

Communal Council elections took place on 26 March. Although the majority of the 85 councillors who actually attended the sessions agreed on some

5. The peace treaty was signed at Frankfurt on 10 May 1871.

6. Jacques Rougerie, *La Commune. 1871* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), 48–50. An *arrondissement* is a type of administrative subdivision. Since 1859, Paris has been divided up into twenty *arrondissements*.

7. Although elections for *arrondissement* mayors took place in November 1870, the voters were not given the opportunity to elect a mayor for Paris. The Parisians had to wait until the 1977 municipal elections to choose their own mayor. Finally, a law passed in 1982 established the position of elected mayor for each *arrondissement*.

8. Robert Tombs, *The Paris Commune 1871* (London: Longman, 1999), 73.

9. Tombs, *The Paris Commune*, 67–68.

points, they did not share the same worldview. International Workingmen's Association (IWA) members certainly played an important role in the Communal Council but did not form a majority. Besides, the IWA was not itself a cohesive whole. At that time, Marx was not the most influential figure in the organization, and the supporters of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, one of the fathers of the modern anarchist movement, were dominant. As a result, the Internationalists had to work with the neo-Jacobins, the Blanquists, and republicans of various hues.¹⁰ However, to evaluate the political dynamics during the Commune poses a challenge, for those groups were far from rigid.

Despite its brief existence, the Communal Council managed to take several measures. Acting both as executive and legislative body, it decreed the separation of Church and the State, the secularization of education, and the abolition of the death penalty. The Versailles government's decision to cancel the moratorium on rents and arrears owed during the siege was overturned. A more flexible schedule for the repayment of debts was established as a result. The Council abolished night work in the city's bakeries and ordered the return by the pawnshops of the goods pledged during the siege. Some of the companies whose owners had left Paris were appropriated and run by workers. The justice system underwent a radical reform, with the introduction of elected juries and the right of free defence. The draft was abolished and every able citizen was made eligible for the National Guard. The Commune also saw the creation of many political clubs, a number of which took residence in deserted churches. As progressive as the Commune was, however, women were not granted the franchise. Many women nevertheless created clubs, involved themselves in committees, and participated in insurrectionary and military operations, both as nurses and fighters.¹¹

The Communal Council did not prove as competent in the realm of military affairs. The regime counted few experienced strategists, and the leaders committed a series of fatal errors in the organization of the city's defence.¹² The Communards resisted the assaults of the Versailles government until the latter's troops eventually burst into Paris on 21 May. An entire week of killings and arrests, which became known as the "Bloody Week," ensued. Many of

10. The neo-Jacobins were the self-proclaimed heirs of the radical republicans of the French Revolution. Nowadays, a Jacobin is seen as a partisan of political and administrative centralization. In the context of the Commune, however, the term referred more generally to those who wanted to enforce the republican ideals of the Revolution.

The Blanquists, named after Louis Auguste Blanqui, were socialists who advocated the seizure of power by a small, secretive, and uncompromising group of revolutionaries. Blanquism consisted more of a set of tactics than an actual socialist theory.

11. Rougerie, *La Commune*, 57–72, 67; Martin Philip Johnson, *The Paradise of Association: Political Culture and Popular Organizations in the Paris Commune of 1871* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), 159–169; Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 120–176.

12. Rougerie, *La Commune*, 71–72.

the survivors went into exile, were imprisoned in France, or deported to New Caledonia.

A century and a half later, the death toll remains uncertain. From 18 March until 28 May, the Communards killed between one and two thousand of their enemies.¹³ The number of Communards killed in that period varies between 10,000 and 50,000. Unsurprisingly, the human loss during the infamous Bloody Week remains controversial. Robert Tombs, an eminent specialist on the question, recently altered his original conclusion that the total number of victims was located “between 10,000 and 30,000” to 6,000–7,500. An alternate view is held by Pierre Milza, whose recent analysis estimates that the death count was closer to 20,000.¹⁴

Much has been written on the Commune, its meaning and achievements. Almost all aspects of the Commune have been explored since the rediscovery of the topic in the early 1970s. That said, the Commune remains a somewhat controversial event, one that has not been fully integrated into the French historical narrative.

A Convenient Scarecrow: The Canadian Press and the Commune

IN MANY WAYS, THE COMMUNE stood for ideals opposed to those of liberalism. The presence among Communards of many socialists who, like Proudhon, believed that “property was theft” was a good enough reason to provoke the ire of liberals, for whom the principle of private land and capital ownership was essential.¹⁵ Such measures as the cancellation of the rents and arrears due during the siege and the outlawing of night work must indeed have seemed anathema to most advocates of free market capitalism.

Furthermore, the appropriation of Church property and the imprisonment and execution of several clergymen proved antithetical to the establishment of a “moral dominion” Canada. Although the Canadian national project strove toward more secularism, the liberal élites were careful to accommodate religious institutions. Whereas the Canadian liberals and the Communards agreed on the principle of secularism, they differed when it came to agreement on the

13. Jacques Rougerie, *Paris insurgé: La Commune de Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 107–108; Rougerie, *La Commune*, 73.

14. Robert Tombs, *The War Against Paris 1871* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 191; Robert Tombs, “How Bloody was la Semaine Sanglante? A Revision,” 57th Annual Meeting of the Society for French Historical Studies, H-France Salon, 3 (February 2011), 2, 7, <http://www.h-france.net/Salon/Salonvol3no1.pdf>; Pierre Milza, “L’Année terrible,” 2, *La Commune: mars-juin 1871* (Paris: Perrin, 2009), 469.

15. Jean Maitron, *Le Mouvement anarchiste en France, I: Des origines à 1914* (Paris: Maspéro, 1975), 33.

methods employed in order to achieve that end and even whether a full separation of Church and State was desirable.¹⁶

However, the majority of the Communards were not aiming for a total appropriation of the means of production. In addition to advocating moderate social and political reform, the movement also had deeply patriotic roots.¹⁷ Although most Communards held internationalist beliefs, many of them viewed patriotism as compatible with and even integral to the republican and socialist agendas. The Communards, who saw themselves as heirs to France's revolutionary traditions, understood their brand of patriotism as a way to promote their country's alleged high degree of tolerance and belief in universalist, egalitarian principles.

Whether one picked up Toronto's *Globe*, a liberal paper run by George Brown, or Montreal's *Le Franc-parleur*, a conservative Catholic newspaper, a small town paper like the *Simcoe Reformer*, or Winnipeg's *Weekly Manitoban*, a reader would have found fairly similar coverage of the Commune. There were three main characteristics to the Canadian journalistic consensus: religion and the Church, the place of women in society, and the capitalist work ethic. While there were no western nation-states at the time that were irreligious, un-patriarchal, or institutionally socialist, the unanimous critique of this event – as remote as it was – undoubtedly shored up a young divided nation's quest for legitimacy.

While clock towers had rung on 1 July 1867, heralding the birth of a new dominion, Canada had been a top-down creation rather than a product of popular groundswell. The muted popular reaction was notable. Several internal and external pressures, from trade issues and the growing power of the United States to some British business interests and the threat posed by the Fenian Raids, led to Confederation. Despite being joined under a common federal political structure, the country was divided along geographic, economic, and religious lines.¹⁸ Given so difficult a context, it was not surprising that the

16. Tina Loo and Carolyn Strange, *Making Good: Law and Moral Regulation in Canada, 1867–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 16; Ian McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *The Canadian Historical Review*, 81 (December 2000): 635–636.

17. Jacques Rougerie, "L'A.I.T. et le mouvement ouvrier à Paris pendant les événements de 1870–1871," in Rougerie, ed., *1871: Jalons pour une histoire de la Commune de Paris* (Assen: Presses Universitaires de France: 1972), 16–19, 32, 78–79.

18. See Ged Martin, ed., *The Causes of Canadian Confederation* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1990); Jean-Paul Bernard, *Les Rouges: Libéralisme, nationalisme et anticléricalisme au milieu du XIX^e siècle* (Montréal: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 1971); Ian McKay, "Canada as a Long Liberal Revolution: On Writing the History of Actually Existing Canadian Liberalisms, 1840s–1940s," in Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, eds., *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 347–452; Stanley B. Ryerson, *Unequal Union: Roots of Crisis in the Canadas, 1815–1873* (Toronto: Progress Books, 1983), 42–61, 132–165, 188, 422; Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University

press was ready to seize any opportunity to involve the constituent parts of Confederation in a common project, one that could unite all Canadians.

A variety of dispatches came into the newspapers surveyed, including those from the Paris-based *Le Cri du peuple*, a pro-Commune newspaper. But this slant did not influence the Canadian editorial line. In the eyes of Canadian editors and journalists, the Commune was anything but respectable. As the *New Westminster Mainland Guardian* repeated from the overseas dispatches it had received, "the respectable Parisians are stupefied ... the mob is triumphant and virtually masters of the city. Drunkenness is rampant; women are armed, and all the notabilities are flying from Paris."¹⁹ Here, *respectability* can be understood as a fluid, vague notion that could refer to both acquired status (as a result of merit) and social/cultural capital given by birthright. The notion of respectability pervaded most of the articles dealing with the Commune.

This emphasis on respectability was common at the time. As Tina Loo and Carolyn Strange have shown, the type of morality, which the Canadian nation-building project developed, constructed notions of temperance, class, gender, and ethnicity that acted as markers of respectability.²⁰ Last but not least, religiosity, understood as a minimum guarantee of respectability, loomed large among the Canadian journalists' views on the Communards.

Not surprisingly, the state of religion during the Commune garnered the most concern from both the Francophone and Anglophone press. While recognizing religious freedom, the Commune insisted on the separation of Church and State. Although the Communal Council, the local committees, and the revolutionary clubs were not as violently anticlerical as their counterparts during the French Revolution, the Canadian press chose to emphasize and exaggerate the Commune's most irreligious facets.²¹

The importance of religion in the Canadian press is easily explained by the prominent role played by the Catholic and Protestant Churches in late 19th-century Canada. According to Loo and Strange, Christian Churches were, along with the federal and provincial governments and local communities, the principal agents of moral regulation in the three decades that followed Confederation.²² It should not come as a surprise then, that the Communards' alleged irreligiousness occupied so important a place in the Canadian press.

More generally, telegraphic dispatches from the Versailles government and non-socialist/left-republican newspapers were quick to condemn the Communards for their supposedly godless behaviour. In the Canadian case, the dispatches' overemphasis on the perceived immorality of Paris' new political

of Toronto Press, 1992).

19. "Latest Telegrams," *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 23 March 1871, 3.

20. Loo and Strange, *Making Good*, 32, 53–54.

21. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 110.

22. Loo and Strange, *Making Good*, 16, 36.

regime was exacerbated by three factors, the first two of which were interrelated: the centrality of Christian Churches in the strengthening of a Canadian national consciousness, the ongoing nation-building process, and the amplifying effect of geographical distance. Unlike the American press, which also tended to add colourful details to the (often delayed) news they received from Europe, Canadian journalists seem to have seen it as their duty to use the events as a nation builder.²³ Christian values, which trumped the many political and theological differences that opposed Protestants and Catholics, could be presented as a common cause for all Canadians, understood as members of a Christian community.

The *New Westminster Mainland Guardian* denounced the Communards as the "vile products of irreligion," adding that "their liberty is robbery and murder, their equality is in vice, and their fraternity that of demons."²⁴ The *Irish Canadian*, unsympathetic to the Commune despite its pro-Home Rule position, described the Communards as a "turbulent and sacrilegious rabble" and hoped for their "complete subjection."²⁵ *Le Nouveau Monde* virulently predicted that "[d]es gredins, des faquins et des crétins conjurés contre Dieu, son Christ, son Eglise, une seule chose demeurera: leur infamie."²⁶ Even the radical *Le Pays* referred to the Communards as "*Tyrans rouges*" who "persécutent les prêtres et prétendent interdire tout exercice du culte religieux."²⁷

In all cases, the condemnation of irreligiousness took two forms: abstract and concrete. While the former criticized the secularization of politics under the Commune, the concrete aspect comprised sensationalized, often false, accounts of the violent treatment inflicted on clergymen.²⁸ The *Weekly Manitoban* singled this out when it noted that "Paris [was] still under the control of an enraged mob, which has been committing terrible excesses, venting its fury especially upon churches and priests, and shooting, it is rumoured, some twenty Jesuits."²⁹ As the latter quote shows, the *Weekly Manitoban*, like other Canadian newspapers, showed itself prone to exaggeration in its coverage of the events. The rumour of the execution of twenty Jesuits was indeed untrue.³⁰

A dispatch in the *Halifax Citizen* described the pillaging of churches and the cancellation of all Good Friday religious services noting in passing that

23. Edward T. Gargan, "The American Conservative Response," in Rougerie, ed., 1871, 243–245; Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 79–80.

24. "Revolutionary France," *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 8 April 1871, 2.

25. "The Reign of Terror," *Irish Canadian*, 19 April 1871, 4.

26. "Ils cherchent un homme, et c'est Dieu qui leur manque," *Le Nouveau Monde*, 4 May 1871, 1.

27. "Persécutations religieuses," *Le Pays*, 13 May 1871, 4.

28. "Paris," *Ottawa Free Press*, 1 April 1871, 2; "The Climax Reached," *Ottawa Free Press*, 12 April 1871, 1.

29. "The Paris Insurrection," *Weekly Manitoban*, 6 May 1871, 4.

30. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 68.

"German intervention was the only hope."³¹ In its 19 May issue, the *Perth Courier* described the "now desperate Communists" as "rapidly destroying or removing all traces of Christianity" throughout Paris, with dire implications for the "beautiful city."³² Each in their own way, the two articles presented the insurgents' behaviour as unforgivable. Such anti-Christian, and thus subhuman, individuals could not be negotiated with. The *Halifax Citizen* implicitly agreed with the dispatch that such actions could only be ended with a swift, possibly violent response. To the *Perth Courier*, the revolutionaries' lack of sensibility to pure beauty, explicitly equated with Christian aesthetics, automatically relegated them to the status of uncivilized creatures.

Religious sectarianism dissolved in the Canadian commentaries as *La Minerve* (a Francophone, conservative newspaper), the *Toronto Globe* (an Anglophone, liberal daily), and other publications treated the subject in exactly the same manner, using the same argumentative structures and languages. While rhetorical language such as "rabble," "enraged mob," "mob-soldiers," can be explained by the vocabulary found in many dispatches, there was a unanimous rejection of any threat to the Church, private property, and state order more generally.³³ Although the reaction might be unsurprising, the authors' strategies demonstrate remarkable similarities. Religion was certainly the most obvious common denominator, transcending divides between Protestants and Catholics.

Canadian journalists were also revolted by the behaviour of women during the Commune. Most newspapers described the female insurgents as creatures devoid of morality and regularly trumpeted the view that "women fell into two categories: the innocent victim and the designing vixen."³⁴ Although not confined to Canada, this Manichean categorization of women was part and parcel of the nation-building process. The articles dealing with the *Communes* clearly synthesized bourgeois-liberal values and more conservative ones. On the one hand, the condemnation of the female insurgents hinted that women should have a modicum of composure and try to emulate middle class women. On the other hand, the biblical assumption that women had been corrupt ever since Adam and Eve's fall and should therefore stay away from any kind of power was also present in many articles.³⁵

While the Communal government did not give women the right to vote, they did take part in the battle, alongside children, and were allowed to participate

31. "From Europe – London, April 7th," *Halifax Citizen*, 15 April 1871, 8.

32. "The Paris Rebellion," *Perth Courier*, 19 May 1871, 2.

33. "Reign of the Rabble" and "Mob Law in Paris," *Globe*, 20 March 1871, 1; "The Paris Insurrection," *Globe*, 8 April 1871, 1; "The Troubles in Paris," *Perth Courier*, 14 April 1871, 2.

34. Loo and Strange, *Making Good*, 52; Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 46.

35. "Latest Telegrams," *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 20 March 1871, 3; "Affairs in Paris," *Ottawa Free Press*, 21 March 1871, 2; Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 5–6, 189–190.



A Communard, from *The Communists of Paris, 1871: Types – Physiognomies – Characters* by Bertrall
Paris: Buckingham and Company, 1873

in political discussions.³⁶ In the Canadian press, Parisian women were portrayed as furies in a permanent trance, burning and pillaging “honest people’s” possessions. The opposition between the anti-Communard “respectability” and the wild irrationality of the rebels was emphasized in these accounts, with the press arguing that women fighting on the barricades were too “out of control” to be part of the “middle class” instead of simply labelling them as part of the “rabble.” To the press, women were doubly guilty. On the one hand, they accompanied the male insurgents in their unreasonable endeavour. On the other, by refusing to accept the role that society had assigned them, they committed the crime of hubris.

Women fighting on behalf of the Commune were regularly mocked, as in a *Perth Courier* article, whose author observed that what the newly created

36. See any issue of *Le Cri du peuple* from 20 March 1871 to 23 May 1871: women’s clubs are always mentioned on page 2.

"corps of Amazons [would] accomplish remain[ed] to be seen," adding that "the possibility [was that we would] hear no more about them."³⁷ Again, the alleged hysterical behaviour of female insurgents set them apart from their male counterparts. This emphasis on what was expected of women in society is not surprising. While other countries' newspapers also contributed to animalizing the *Communardes*, the promotion of the bourgeois family unit was particularly important in the nation-building context and, more specifically, that of the Canadian "moral dominion."³⁸

Women were easy prey for critical reporters, who could use commentary on their actions to sensationalist effect. Such presentations of females were also emblematic of the absence of virtue and the dominance of iconoclastic conduct ostensibly characteristic of communism. As the *Weekly Manitoban* noted, "there were awful scenes at the gates at Besjon (*sic*) hospital. Crowds of women with streaming hair, uttering loud shrieks, were demanding their husbands, brothers and children."³⁹ This was the most sympathetic description of the *Communardes*; even then, they were still portrayed as wailing beasts.

The *Communardes* were not just condemned for being allegedly hysterical, but also for involving themselves in politics. *Le Franc-parleur* thus observed that "il y avait en France sous le règne de la terreur des femmes *sans culottes* auxquelles on donna le sobriquet de: Les tricoteuses. Quand la femme veut s'élever elle monte à des hauteurs sublimes où elle s'environne de beauté, de gloire et de majesté, mais aussi lorsqu'elle veut s'abaisser elle descend bien bas, oh! Bien bas dans les profondeurs de la crapule et de l'infamie."⁴⁰ As the chronological link between the 1793–94 Reign of Terror and the 1871 alleged, revolutions exacerbated women's supposed natural inclination toward cruelty. Articles of this kind were not just directed against women's involvement outside of the domestic sphere but against revolutionary upheavals, which could only result in gendered chaos.

The *Franc-parleur* article also touches on two central differences between the Anglophone and Francophone press coverage: stylistic differences and the historic context in which the stories were situated. Francophone newspapers resorted to a more dramatic literary style, as opposed to the more straightforwardly journalistic approach of the Anglophone press. More critical, however, was their historical approach. Whereas Anglophones focused on factual accounts of the events, the Francophone press made frequent references to the 1789 French Revolution. That said, all newspapers fixated on the nightmarish spectre of the guillotine, for which, supposedly, "inmates of many houses [had]

37. "The Paris Rebellion," *Perth Courier*, 19 May 1871, 2.

38. Loo and Strange, *Making Good*, 17.

39. "Awful Scenes," *Weekly Manitoban*, 13 May 1871, 1.

40. "Petite revue – France," *Le Franc-parleur*, 6 April 1871, 6.

been marked as good.⁴¹ Ironically, while the Commune's rhetoric revolved around the legacy of the 1789–94 Revolution, the insurgents also condemned the Reign of Terror by publicly burning two guillotines.⁴²

The Canadian press focused more on the topic of violence than on the socioeconomic backgrounds and demands of the Communards. In fact, the very notion of "worker" was almost non-existent in the Anglophone newspapers and *La Minerve*. Whereas French socialist newspapers made frequent reference to the "proletariat," Canadian newspapers would describe the revolutionaries as a crowd of good-for-nothings whose sole purpose was to destroy property and slaughter priests.⁴³ The *Ottawa Free Press*, for example, labelled the insurgents "maddened desperadoes," sacrificing hundreds of lives, who "have now reached the limit of human wrong-doing ... lost all sense of right and wrong."⁴⁴ Communards were thus portrayed as having one goal: destroying the entirety of the civilized world. Through this discursive theme, the reasons behind the Commune were obscured in favour of appeals to emotion and spectres of lawlessness.

Journalists hostile to the Commune could not plead ignorance. Their condemnation of the Commune was motivated by a certain idea of Canada, a vision of what their country should be and the values that it should stand for. It is highly probable that the journalists were not just hearing only one side of the story. Thanks to dispatches, they would have had a fairly clear idea of what was going on, that the "rabble" had, in fact, passed laws for the preservation of order and abolished capital punishment.⁴⁵ They would have noticed that several leading Communards, like Charles Beslay and Louis Rossel, came from the ranks of the upper bourgeoisie. Therefore, the decision to characterize the Communards as a "mob" was a conscious choice by the Canadian press. The actual legislative intent of the Commune mattered little to the majority of Canadian journalists. Instead, the principle of insurrection and the idea of a godless society had to be condemned at all times.

While *La Minerve* took a line similar to most of the Anglophone press, *Le Franc-parleur*, *Le Nouveau Monde*, and *Le Pays* expressed considerable

41. "Paris," *Ottawa Free Press*, 1 April 1871, 2.

42. Jean Baptiste Clément, "La Poignée de Factieux," *Le Cri du peuple*, 29 April 1871, 1.

43. It would be misleading, in the context of the Commune, to assume that the term "proletariat" was invariably meant in the Marxist sense of the term, i.e., to refer to workers who did not own the means of production. It seems that "proletariat" was used more broadly, to mean "manual worker." See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton and Company, 1978), 473n5.

44. "The Climax Reached," *Ottawa Free Press*, 12 April 1871, 1.

45. The Canadian press had access to dispatches from the Communal government, more specifically to articles by *Le Cri du peuple* and the *Journal officiel*, which were usually transmitted via the British press.

awareness of the Communards' demands in the socioeconomic realm. They noted that the rebels demanded more social equality, secular education, and reiterated other planks. However, these newspapers used their knowledge of the Commune as a means to contrast the Parisian rebels' behaviour with that of the allegedly God-loving, hardworking Canadian workers. On the occasion of the St. Joseph holiday, *Le Franc-parleur* observed that

il fait bon de voir nos artisans s'unir, dans un but commun, pour faire le bien et marcher comme un seul homme à l'ombre du drapeau de la religion. Tandis que la populace française, sans frein, s'égorge dans les rues de Paris, nous devons être heureux de voir nos intelligents ouvriers arborer le drapeau de la Foi qui sait offrir des joies à la famille et des consolations aux malheureux ... Honneur à vous qui comprenez que pour être dans des classes modestes, vous n'en êtes pas moins l'ornement d'une société qui vous admire. Tant que vous serez ce que vous êtes, vous n'avez rien à envier aux professions libérales qui ne seront elles-mêmes dignes de respect qu'autant qu'elles vous respecteront.⁴⁶

The Commune was clearly a counterexample, a warning to local workers. Although *Le Franc-parleur* captured the social and economic dimensions of the Commune, the newspaper painted the insurrection as the expression of the workers' jealousy toward the upper classes rather than the result of social injustice, and encouraged the readers to remain loyal to the Church and to their place in society.

Despite the deeper socioeconomic analysis that characterized some Francophone newspapers in that particular instance, the Canadian press generally viewed the rebels more as an unruly mob or crowd than as an actual class. Whereas *Le Franc-parleur* and other newspapers might have grasped the economic context, they did not endorse the Communards' beliefs. The debate was not between pro- and anti-Communards. Indeed, there was no debate at all. There was fundamental agreement among all newspapers concerning the nature of the rebels.

A notable difference between Francophone and Anglophone newspapers concerns their respective historical perspectives. Francophones more often raised revolutionary imagery. This had a twofold effect. Firstly, it enabled Québécois journalists to stress the distinctiveness of Quebec; they had not been through the revolution and, as a result, had little to do with the phenomenon of revolutionary unrest.⁴⁷ Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it stressed the ongoing victimization of the Catholic Church and thus strengthened its domestic identity in Quebec.

Anglophone papers situated the Commune differently, accenting a narrative of British superiority. Throughout the Anglophone press, one can observe the belief that the United Kingdom was the most developed country and that

46. "Les Ouvriers," *Le Franc-parleur*, 23 March 1871, 5.

47. See Yvan Lamonde, *Histoire sociale des idées au Québec (1760–1896): Volume I* (Québec: Fides, 2000), 395.

the Anglo-Saxons are not so impressionable as the French ... [whose] close intercourse with the English people has imbued ... with the British love of gain by trade, hence the French character is not near so inflammable as it was in 1830 ... Freed from the canker-worm of Red Republicanism, [France] will grow up a healthy tree that shall, as heretofore, spread its influence far and wide.⁴⁸

Whereas the Francophone press strove to distinguish the French Canadian historical experience from that of France, the Anglophone press underlined the negative dimensions of *Frenchness*, implicitly understood as a set of innate, identifiable characteristics.

Beside the theme of the linguistic/cultural cleavage, the newspapers also looked at the Paris events through the lens of the ongoing Confederation project. Nonetheless, only rarely did journalists draw readers' attention to any connections between the demands of decentralization that were central to the Commune and similar issues inherent to the expansion of the Confederation. That aspect of the Commune was completely and probably voluntarily ignored. Based on the evidence brought forward in this article, the strengthening of the Canadian nation-building project invariably took precedence over other considerations. Here, the privileging of a synthesis of liberal and religious values trumped the federalist, decentralizing drive of the Commune. The majority of Canadian newspapers could have easily seen that particular aspect as a progressive, reasonable demand. Of all the articles investigated, only three opined that the insurgents were at least right in demanding the municipal franchise. *Le Pays*, for instance (quoting and agreeing with the *New York Sun*), conceded that the Communards "se bornent à désirer des privilèges que nous possédons en grande partie dans les villes des Etats-Unis et du Canada."⁴⁹

Although the media would soon express exuberance at the entrance of British Columbia into Confederation, many articles continued to show allegiance to their region rather than to the federal country.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, regional allegiance had its limits. It could be expressed in a broad variety of ways as long as it did not contradict the moral bases of the new Canadian nation, i.e., the sacrosanctity of property ownership, the integrity and centrality of family and gender division, and the importance of religious (read Christian) values.

The Commune was processed through particular regional lenses, shedding light on both perceptions of the overseas events but also, crucially, how the provinces saw themselves within Canada. While all newspapers expressed

48. "Revolutionary France," *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 8 April 1871, 2.

49. "Appréciations des faits de la commune," *Le Pays*, 20 April 1871, 2; see also "The Demand of the Reds for Municipal Institutions," *St. John Daily Telegraph*, 15 April 1871, 1; "Correspondence – France (*From Our French Correspondent*)," *Montreal Daily Witness*, 5 May 1871, 1.

50. "Lillcoet Corresdence (*sic*)," *Victoria Daily Standard*, 12 April 1871, 3; "Indecent Journalism," *Halifax Citizen*, 29 April 1871, 2.

regional predilections to various extents, the *Weekly Manitoban* provided an interesting perspective. Although the news from France was often treated and presented the same way, identical terms were often used in different contexts. The *Weekly Manitoban*, defending against accusations of disloyalty, declared that “there are no rebels properly so-called in this province, and there never were above half a dozen, even in the [illegible] days of Riel’s rule.” Louis Riel, after all, had “never pronounced against British supremacy: he always hoisted the British flag, but objected to Canada taking possession of this country without giving its people the right to pronounce on the intended absorption.” If the readers were to shift their eyes a few inches to the right, however, they would have seen an article on the Parisian “rebels.”⁵¹ The subtext here was that even the 1869 Red River rebellion did not constitute as seditious a challenge to Canada as the Commune did to France. The regionalist cause, construed by the *Weekly Manitoban* as having been almost non-threatening, was thus used against the *truly* rebellious Paris insurrection.

But more than anything the newspapers’ concern was the potential threat posed by the “dangerous classes” and the popularization of socialism. Despite the notable scarcity of references to the Revolutions of 1848 and, closer to home, to the Rebellions of 1837–38, the fear of social unrest spreading to Canada seems to have been the elephant in the room. In the context of the rise of a trans-Canadian working class, the main concern for the heralds of a liberal Canada was the preservation of order. The presses themselves may have had this in the back of their heads. Although lasting labour organizations were still in their infancy in the early 1870s, the country’s business and political élites had, ever since the 1800s, increasingly viewed craftspeople and unskilled workers as a potential threat that ought to be controlled. Along with other trades, the printers contributed to pioneering trade unionism in Canada. The establishment of typographers’ unions, present in the 1830s and growing in strength by the 1860s, certainly did not encourage press magnates to look kindly on labour organizations and what they regarded as inevitable, resulting grievances. In 1869, the Toronto Printer’s Union had approached the employers asking for a reduction in weekly hours worked. The result was a flat-out refusal on the part of the employers to consider such demands. This conflict would reach a head in the 1872 Nine-Hours Movement.⁵² Newspapers

51. “Ontario vs. Manitoba” and “The Montmartre Insurrection,” *Weekly Manitoban*, 15 April 1871, 2.

52. Bryan D. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800–1991*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1992), 25–56, 63–80, 91–116, 93; Craig Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: Lorimer, 1996), 4, 8–9, 12–13, 43; Bettina Bradbury, *Working Families: Age, Gender, and Daily Survival in Industrializing Montreal*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 46; John Battye, “The Nine Hour Pioneers: The Genesis of the Canadian Labour Movement,” *Labour / Le Travail*, 4 (1979): 25–26.

as employers were unsympathetic to labour, which may have influenced their coverage of the Commune.

The condemnation of any form of socialism implicitly strengthened what was opposed to it: the respect of private property, religion, and traditional family. As capitalism itself was being challenged, it was not surprising that the rejection of the Commune bridged religious, linguistic, and political lines. Of course some newspapers, like *La Minerve*, attempted to delegitimize political rivals and implicitly construe them as enemies of traditional values by targeting the Commune: "On ne peut croire que la population parisienne n'ait pas perdu le sens en s'adonnant a de si coupables excès ... une édition sanglante des jours si lugubres de 89 et 92, origines des 'immortels principes' de nos libéraux."⁵³ At stake in this case were political antagonisms, which did not in any way question the status of the nation. Besides, the conservative newspapers rarely mentioned the many common and highly regarded distant ancestors shared by Canadian liberals and their French revolutionary predecessors.

Few journalists expressed the fear that the Commune might inspire the Canadian proletariat or connected the events to the otherwise well-known strikes that had been taking place from the 1830s onward, especially evident in an 1850s "insurrection of labour."⁵⁴ What did the quasi-absence of the Canadian worker mean? Parisian workers were seen as dangerous, not only due to their class status, but also because of the socialist ideology that framed their demands. Although French and Canadian workers were rarely compared, a pattern of implicit demonization can be seen in the coverage. The articles rarely flagged the risk of communist contagion in Canada, but they regularly warned workers against the pernicious charms of the revolutionary option.

The Canadian press clearly reflected the ideas of the day that "workers" could not possibly be conceived of as mature, full-fledged political actors. In this elitist system, property qualifications greatly limited the workers' political clout.⁵⁵ As noted earlier, Canadian newspapers had access to the Commune's press and could not claim to ignore the Communards' demands. Among the latter, the democratization of society could have found an echo on the other side of the Atlantic. It was possible that the newspapers' staunch hostility to the Commune exceeded concerns about labour unrest, but resulted from fears of challenges to the property qualification system. As a reflection of 19th-century liberal concepts of meritocratic democracy, property qualifications were part and parcel of Canada's nation-building process. A threat to a society in which property ownership defined citizenship would have automatically questioned the principles that underlay Canada's national development.

By waving the scarecrow of the Commune, the press aimed to keep Canadian workers from the temptations of their French counterparts.

53. "Guerre Civile," *La Minerve*, 30 March 1871, 2.

54. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 87–91.

55. Heron, *The Canadian Labour Movement*, xvi.

The latter, portrayed as *bad* workers, contrasted with the ideal of the *good* Canadian worker who had, so far, resisted the urge to engage in subversive adventures. The *bad* worker, as opposed to the *good* Canadian worker, was *othered*, perceived as someone with whom no discussion was possible. In one of its first reports, the *New Westminster Mainland Guardian* wrote that “the rebels killed, cut up and ate the horses of staff officers made prisoners.”⁵⁶ Rebels were thus portrayed as raging beasts, and, by extension, the Commune was viewed as the embodiment of everything inhuman, un-Canadian, un-British. It was also delegitimized, as the regime’s court proceedings were described as “solemn farce[s],” a statement reminiscent of French Revolution-era caricatures of ape-like judges chairing revolutionary tribunals.⁵⁷

Finally, the very idea of communism was presented as an anomaly, a disease of sorts. An article from the *New Westminster Mainland Guardian* remarked that

like a disease, with which some nations are periodically affected, France has nearly gone through her season of affliction, although it will require many years before she will recover from its effects ... Communism is not merely a misfortune for France, it is a danger that menaces society throughout the world. It is the reign of immorality which taints every nation, more or less, with its impurities ... The late terrible consequences to France should act as a timely lesson to England, the United States, and every other nation where any traces of the disease are likely to appear. We have very strong doubts of republicanism in any form, but Red republicanism is simply anarchy, murder, and pillage.⁵⁸

The last part of the quote is the most revealing, as it hints at the possibility that revolutionary ideas may *infect* North America. While socialism certainly did not represent a serious threat throughout the world at the time, the author’s alarmist tone might have reflected a more general anxiety that a revolution could materialize in Canada. Although the threat referred to is vague, it may have stemmed from recent political developments, like the creation of the IWA in 1864, the growth of Social Democracy in the German states, the role played by Garibaldi and his followers in Italian unification, and, closer to home, the founding of several labour societies such as the Knights of Labor in 1869.⁵⁹

Conclusion

WHETHER IT WAS A CONSERVATIVE Francophone Québécois weekly, an Irish pro-Home Rule Toronto newspaper, or an anti-Confederationist daily from

56. “Latest Telegrams,” *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 23 March 1871, 3.

57. “The Crisis in Paris,” *Globe*, 4 April 1871, 1; see for instance the caricature by H. Humphrey, “The heroic Charlotte la Cordé, upon her trial, at the bar of the revolutionary tribunal of Paris, July 17, 1793,” 29 July 1793, no. 18, Old Bond Street, 1793, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.05419/>.

58. “Communism in France,” *New Westminster Mainland Guardian*, 20 May 1871, 2.

59. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience*, 121.

the Pacific Coast, a certain consensus regarding the pro-order nature of Canada knitted these newspapers together. In a time of nation building, this was remarkable unity. The Canadian newspapers' reaction to the Commune was not exceptional in itself. The insurrection was condemned by the majority of newspapers the world over. Nevertheless, the Paris events happened at a key moment in Canada's national construction. The Constitution Act was still fresh in memories, Confederation had expanded into parts of the prairies in 1870, and British Columbia was in the process of becoming Canada's sixth province. While Germany and Italy had also undergone their unification processes in the course of the 19th century, those developments found their roots in long-standing common histories, languages, and cultures, which facilitated the creation of national myths. Unlike these two countries, Canada faced the challenge of consolidating, almost *ab nihilo*, its newly acquired statehood while legitimizing its imperial development to the west and the north of the continent.

The late 1860s did not just see Canada's accession to statehood but also the development and popularization of the press. More than a peripheral instrument of legitimation, the press was a major cog in the nation-building process. In Rutherford's words, the press acted "as a fourth estate, standing midway between the people and their leaders, offering service and criticism to a collection of different constituencies."⁶⁰ Each in their own way, Canadian newspapers mirrored the view that nothing productive would come out of socio-political unrest. Although the Commune was not always front-page news, it appeared in almost every issue of the newspapers studied in this article. At a time of national expansion, commercial conflict with the United States (which resulted in the signing of the Washington Treaty on 8 May), and elections in Ontario and Nova Scotia, the relatively large place granted to the Paris insurrection is noteworthy.

Nevertheless, the newspapers ceased to publish articles on the Commune approximately two weeks after the Bloody Week. That said, it should be noted that, a year after the Paris events, Father Racine, a Quebec City priest, compared the Nine-Hours movement with "la commune, la hideuse commune."⁶¹ In English Canada, too, the demand for the nine-hour workday reminded some of "the principles of the French communists."⁶² But references to the Paris insurgency remained rare. Even the *Ontario Workman* did not take a clear

60. Rutherford, *A Victorian Authority*, 190.

61. "Des Grèves," *Le Courrier du Canada*, 28 May 1872, 2, quoted in Battye, "Nine Hour Pioneers," 55.

62. "Oculus," *Hamilton Spectator*, quoted in Palmer, *A Culture in Conflict: Skilled Workers and Industrial Capitalism in Hamilton, Ontario, 1860–1914* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979), 136.

stance on the trials of surviving Communards and frequently emphasized the need for “a proper and Christian-like spirit” among Canadian workers.⁶³

The Paris Commune was an occasion to point at a supposedly monstrous, unnatural, un-Canadian phenomenon. Socialism was an ideal scapegoat, allowing Francophones, Anglophones, liberals, and conservatives to come together in a common hate for a foreign phenomenon. Occurring as Canadians sought to consolidate legitimacy, after Confederation that had given few a real sense of unity or sense of belonging, the Commune presented a counterexample, an illustration of what awaited decadent, disorderly, impious nations.

No mainstream newspaper consistently stood up for the Communards in any way, despite the seeming diversity of views sampled here. While it is hard to decipher the impact that newspapers had on their readers, the Canadian media can be seen as having played a major role in nation building, a process that transcended language, religion, and political allegiances. The press linked the world as it was across the Atlantic with the lofty, idealized realm of national values – religion, family, social hierarchies, order, liberalism – that gave the nation its legitimacy.

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63. “The Nine-Hours Movement,” *Ontario Workman*, 18 April 1872, 1; “Scene at the Trial of a Communist,” *Ontario Workman*, 20 June 1872, 1.