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“A Spectacle of Vice”:  
Sex Work and Moralism in the Paris Commune of 1871

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Spring 2018

## **Acknowledgements**

Professor Len Smith has been an incredibly supportive advisor both during the Honors process and for my history major, and his help has been invaluable during the last two semesters. I am also indebted to Professors Nunley and Sammartino for their continued help and support as my thesis readers. They have been continually available to answer questions and provide guidance when I needed it, and I cannot thank them enough. In addition, Professor Murphy in the French department was a profoundly influential figure, whose interest in my prospectus, even at its earliest stages, was incredibly inspiring.

I would also like to thank the librarians and archivists at the McCormick Library of Special Collections at Northwestern University and the staff of the Pierrefitte-sur-Seine site of the Archives Nationales. They were incredibly enthusiastic and knowledgeable about my research, and thoroughly committed to helping me find what I needed. I would not have had nearly as productive or enjoyable an experience without their presence and support, and I can't thank them enough. The Jerome Davis research grant allowed me to visit the archives in Paris, an experience for which I am incredibly grateful. I must also thank the staff of the Archives of the Prefecture of Police in Paris, who were both welcoming and enthusiastic when answering my (many) questions.

In addition, I would be remiss if I did not to mention the other History Honors students this year: Emilia DeLeo, Izzy Hannigan, Melissa Harris, Samir Husain, Ellie Lindberg, Hannah Kim, Xander Somogyi, and Shang Yasuda. They are an incredible group of people, and I would not have made it to this point without their encouragement.

Finally, this thesis would not have been possible without my friends and family: my parents, my brother Owain, my aunt and uncle, Heather Loschen, Ellie Wilson, Michael Kennedy, Tré Quarles, Jeeva Muhil, and Alice Antia. Thank you all so much.

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Note: Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

## **Introduction**

On May 10, 1871, at a political gathering at the Church of Saint-Séverin in the fifth arrondissement<sup>1</sup> of Paris, a woman identified as a sex worker called Amanda stood up to speak and was met with rapt attention. She proposed the formation of a battalion of *filles soumises* (sex workers registered with the police) to defend the revolutionary stronghold of the Paris Commune against the encroaching forces of the French national army. Her presence would not have been uncommon — *filles publiques*<sup>2</sup> were numerous at these meetings and it was rare that a gathering passed without one of them taking the stand.<sup>3</sup>

“We are at least 25,000!” she cried. “Well then, if they make us into regiments, if they arm us, we will shatter the power of the Versaillais!”<sup>4</sup> Her demand was followed by prolonged applause. This anecdote was documented by the author Paul Fontoulieu, who recorded accounts of such meetings in churches across the city during the Commune.

Historians sympathetic to the Commune have used such anecdotes to illustrate the insurrection’s importance to women, and its acceptance of those stigmatized across social mores, such as sex workers. Conversely, similar stories have also been used by those hostile to the Commune to brand it as illegitimate and immoral. However, both these

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<sup>1</sup> One of twenty administrative districts within the city of Paris

<sup>2</sup> Literally “public women”, sometimes translated as “streetwalkers”, this term generally refers to any sex workers who worked in public view.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Fontoulieu. *Les églises de Paris sous la Commune*. (Paris E. Dentu, 1873), 287.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Fontoulieu. *Les églises de Paris sous la Commune*. 288.

interpretations present needlessly simplistic images of both the Commune and its supporters. Some revolutionaries, like the famous anarchist Louise Michel, vocally advocated for the role of women in the Commune, and emphasized the roles that sex workers could play and their particular interest in the fight for economic liberation. At the same time, many other *Communards* were refusing the offered aid of sex workers who were serving as *ambulancières*<sup>5</sup>, working in the Commune's vigilance committees, and even actively participating in combat against the French national army. Although the Commune signified a major challenge to the bourgeois hierarchies of the previous regimes, many *Communards* retained concerns over morality and social virtue that had endured throughout the course of the nineteenth century. Despite the significant challenge the Commune posed to socioeconomic hierarchies of the time, traditional moralism surrounding sexuality and gender proved to be a sticking point that many *Communards* were unable to fully overcome. The conflicting messages of support and condemnation towards prostitution exemplify the struggle among the Commune's members concerning the role of women — and sex workers in particular — in its ranks, as well as the continuation of the gendered moralism that had pervaded revolutionary movements of the preceding eight decades.

The French army was intent on suppressing the rebellion, which it saw as even more threatening than the Prussian Army, despite having suffered a devastating loss to Prussia just months before with the end of the Franco-Prussian War.<sup>6</sup> The population of

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<sup>5</sup> Nurses, usually working on the barricades to aid wounded soldiers and National Guardsmen

<sup>6</sup> The years leading up to (and the months during) the war had seen a significant radicalization of the Parisian working class, and many government officials began to worry

Paris was still recovering from a months-long Prussian siege of the city, and the members of the newly formed Commune recognized the precariousness of their position. The Commune did not have the resources or the international support to mount a viable offensive against the French national government, which was headquartered in Versailles — the grandiose symbol of French conservatism and the monarchy. Rumors, fuelled by reports from oppositional caricaturists, journalists, and eyewitnesses, depicted the Commune's supporters (particularly the women) as lawless, violent, and bloodthirsty. Versailles, determined to discredit and delegitimize the Commune's authority, consistently portrayed the *Communardes* (women who supported the Commune) as prostitutes and murderers. The Commune, desperate to maintain an international reputation, denied any association with women considered disreputable or damaging to its legitimacy. However, the Commune's international image was not the only thing it was concerned about preserving. The *Communards* were attempting to create a new, economically just society — and they endeavored to make it a morally virtuous one as well. This self-image had no room for the morally suspect or publicly indecent.

It is difficult to speak definitively about individuals who worked as prostitutes during this period, because the *police des mœurs*,<sup>7</sup> tasked with their surveillance, were not always scrupulous about arresting only women they were certain were actually prostitutes. They were not even always scrupulous about arresting adults. The legal precedents or

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that the workers posed more of a threat to the French status quo than the army they were facing on the field.

<sup>7</sup> A branch of the French police force dealing exclusively with sex work (literally, “morals police”)

justifications they used were often antiquated or had little or nothing to do with the way the police used or interpreted them. In fact, as Jill Harsin argues, the police had little motivation to limit their own ability to arrest prostitutes by strictly defining punishable offenses, so it was to their own benefit to keep the legal justifications vague.<sup>8</sup> However, conclusions can be drawn about societal attitudes towards prostitution and moralism's effects on political and social mores. Enforcement was almost entirely at the discretion of the officers involved, to the point of arbitrariness, and many of the records from both before and during the Commune were destroyed in the fires at the Prefecture of Police during the Commune's last week. This can make it difficult to find sex workers; and the lasting marks they did leave are often colored by the attitudes of their arresting officers.

I will argue that the study of prostitution in the context of the late nineteenth century provides an illustration of the political upheaval of the Commune, as well as the widespread uncritical acceptance of the bourgeois moralism that linked sex work to both moral corruption and political dissidence. In illustrating the way moralism affected policies and discourse regarding sex work, I will also be using the cases of several real women who were directly affected by the rhetoric of both the Commune and the Versailles government. Although they were not all registered as prostitutes, the bourgeois attitudes that stigmatized sex work also influenced their treatment at the hands of *Communard* and Versailles authorities.

In order to form an intelligible image of the political and social attitudes that affected sex workers' lives and work before and after the Paris commune, I will be looking

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<sup>8</sup> Jill Harsin, *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Paris*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 79.



at research on nineteenth-century French prostitution and women in the Commune, and combine the two to form a more coherent picture of the social and political effects of prostitution and the enforcement of morality in the years leading up to and following the Commune. Sex work provides a unique insight into the ways the Commune grappled with its commitment to economic liberation and its ingrained expectations of women's respectability. It forms an intersection of gender and sexuality with labor that forced both the Commune and the era that followed to come to terms with the implications of sexual and political transgression.

For both the Commune and Versailles, sexual morality was a constant concern. Even when prostitution was not overtly referenced with respect to the women involved in the Commune, it was a touchstone that affected the way women were treated and sentenced in the Commune's aftermath including its use as evidence of the guilt of a defendant<sup>9</sup> and increased targeting of sex workers.

Much has been written about women in the Commune, but significantly less has been written that focuses on the particular role that sex work played in the Commune's rhetoric and policy. While several books address nineteenth-century French prostitution, the Commune is usually treated as an interruption and is rarely addressed exclusively. Even given the massive political and social upheavals that occurred in the late nineteenth century, the Commune still exhibits patterns of the bourgeois moralism of earlier decades, which continued with the Moral Order of the 1870s. I will be using the writings of doctors who wrote extensively about prostitution over the course of the nineteenth century, as well as trial records of *Communards* captured by the national government after the suppression

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<sup>9</sup> Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 209.

of the rebellion, letters of complaint submitted to the Prefecture of Police, and a report drawn up for the Versailles government describing captured women on trial to build a picture of the intersections between political dissidence and immorality in the rhetorics and actions of France's successive regimes.

While the Commune has been interpreted as either an outpouring of the violence of the Parisian working class or the first proletarian revolution, I argue that it in fact represented a demand for control of public space by the workers of Paris — the nature of which was contested even among the *Communards* themselves. It also represented the continuation (and culmination) of a century-long revolutionary tradition that was beginning to show hints of the revolutions of the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Marx and Lenin both drew heavily on the events of the Commune, and the outbreak of revolution in Russia in 1905 and then in 1917 redefined the role of the Commune in the 20<sup>th</sup> century — no longer the end of an antiquated revolutionary tradition, it became the first attempt at a true revolutionary society.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the Commune's fame as a large-scale attempt at economic and social justice, its attitudes towards prostitution stemmed from a long history of police oversight. Paris' institutionalization of surveillance and registration of prostitution began near the beginning of the nineteenth century, and lasted almost one hundred years. These practices of policing were notable for both their scope and the influence they exercised over other large European cities over the course of the century. They signified the efforts of successive regimes to enforce and control public morality and therefore maintain their holds on social

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<sup>10</sup> Casey Harison, "The Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolution of 1905, and the Shifting of the Revolutionary Tradition" *History and Memory*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (Indiana University Press, 2007) 6.

organization. While much scholarship focuses specifically on female prostitutes, it is also important to note that the nineteenth century saw the institutionalization of widespread policing of male prostitutes and more generally, any men who had sex with men.<sup>11</sup> This kind of state influence was therefore not entirely confined to the criminalization of women, and policing of public morality found many avenues for enforcement.

France's system of policing was based not on banning prostitution, but ostensibly on permitting it — in very specific, highly regulated areas of the city, by registered and closely monitored women. Officials were not interested in the complete abolition of the profession, since it was seen as an inevitable part of any society — instead, they tried to control it as best they could, in order to prevent its influence from reaching the wealthier classes. Police, in conversation with doctors and prosecutors, developed theories of the links between sexuality and criminality to support their massive surveillance apparatus. However, the police were not consistent with their enforcement, and often relied on antiquated or unrelated legislation to justify their practices. As Jill Harsin describes it, French practices meant that, “although prostitution would be regarded as illegal ... the authorities would not bring the force of law to bear upon it; they could, however, at any moment choose to exercise their power. The result was a situation of great tension, harboring much potential for abuse.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, the “French system,” as the apparatus of police officers, doctors, and

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<sup>11</sup> Since the eighteenth century, the police criminalized men who had sex with men, but with little actual enforcement. The Constituent Assembly repealed France's laws against sodomy in 1791, but that didn't change the attitudes of the police. As William Peniston points out, France was both the first country in Europe to abolish laws against sodomy *and* the first country to systemically criminalize it.

See William A. Peniston, *Pederasts and Others: Urban Culture and Sexual Identity in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Harsin, *Policing Prostitution*, 95.

other public health workers came to be called, was largely enforced at the discretion of the police. A woman's registration with the Prefecture of Police would rarely protect her from arrest, and women labeled as prostitutes were rarely, if ever, granted their right to a trial.<sup>13</sup>

Although much of the Commune's concerns about morality originated in the social hierarchies of preceding decades, the police institutions that were used to control prostitutes had actually originated much earlier — from the same revolutionary legacy that the Commune claimed for itself. The system was developed during and after the Consulat, expanded upon under Napoleon Bonaparte, and would ultimately serve as a model for other countries in Europe over the course of the century.<sup>14</sup> Police and municipal authorities presented a variety of justifications for their regulationist system, the most frequent of which was for the protection of public morality — both to protect young girls from the “spectacle of vice,” and to maintain the sexual morality of the family.<sup>15</sup> In fact, the systems of surveillance that survived for the rest of the century grew out of the 1789 Revolution, the Consulate, and the First Empire, although their own attitudes were somewhat contradictory.

While the radical republican misogyny of the 1789 Revolution is not exactly the same as the bourgeois moralism of the next century, it did represent the beginning of a new system and attitude toward sex work in political life that would have long-standing implications for revolutionary women. While the attitudes of the republicans were specific

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<sup>13</sup> Harsin, *Policing Prostitution*, 7.

<sup>14</sup> Alain Corbin. "Commercial Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century France: A System of Images and Regulations." *Representations*, no. 14 (University of California Press, 1986), 209.

<sup>15</sup> Corbin, "Commercial Sexuality," 209

to both the time and the movement, the institutions that they created would impact the next hundred years. The revolutionaries of 1789 saw prostitution as a manifestation of the vices of the *ancien régime*,<sup>16</sup> and attacked politically active women as morally degenerate prostitutes, but they did not extend the same condemnation to actual sex workers. They did not completely outlaw prostitution, but used the same rhetoric that would continue through the century, emphasizing control, policing, and hygiene.<sup>17</sup> In addition, as Susan P. Conner argues, the French Revolution represented the “proletarianization” of prostitution, as the profession transitioned from temporary or seasonal to a full-time trade conducted by *femmes publiques* who were increasingly shunted to the margins of society.<sup>18</sup> Previously, women had the option of temporarily turning to prostitution for supplementary wages in a time of crisis, with little long-term consequence. This transition began to cement prostitutes as a separate, marginalized group who municipal authorities increasingly tried to isolate from the rest of society.

However, these changes to policy and enforcement were mostly surface-level, and merely cemented practices that long predated the revolution — the basic framework of the system had been constructed long before 1789. The dispensaries, exams, and registration were products of the post-Revolutionary period, but ordinances relegating prostitutes to designated districts had been in place since at least as early as the thirteenth century, and

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<sup>16</sup> Susan P. Conner, “Public Virtue and Public Women: Prostitution in Revolutionary Paris, 1793–1794” *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28 vol. 2 (1994–5), 222.

<sup>17</sup> Conner, “Public Virtue and Public Women”, 222.

<sup>18</sup> Conner, “Public Virtue and Public Women”, 224.

other ordinances banishing prostitutes from towns and hamlets appeared even earlier.<sup>19</sup> In 1684, another ordinance ordered prostitutes in Paris to be confined to Salpêtrière Hospital (for a length of time completely at the discretion of the police), due to fears of the spread of disease.<sup>20</sup> During the *ancien régime*, several aspects of the 19<sup>th</sup> century system had already begun to emerge: mandatory medical care, which began at least as early as the 1684 ordinance; confinement to hospitals or other designated spaces; and the *maisons de tolérances*, which began in the mid-eighteenth century as police began to form connections with madams who were expected to furnish the police with information and maintain order over the women in their establishments.<sup>21</sup>

The *maisons de tolérances* provided ideal locations for control and surveillance, since prostitutes could be kept in groups and confined to specific locations in working-class districts while largely isolated from society around them. They were overseen by the *dame de maison* —independent of any landlord and without a husband or male partner who might interfere with the authority of the police.<sup>22</sup> The madam was to inspire respect and deference in the *filles*, and therefore presented an ally to the police tasked with supervising the *maisons de tolérances*. But as Dr. Alexandre-Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Harsin, *Policing Prostitution*, 58.

<sup>20</sup> Harsin, *Policing Prostitution*, 65.

<sup>21</sup> Harsin, *Policing Prostitution*, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 11.

<sup>23</sup> A doctor who worked and wrote extensively on hygiene and public sanitation in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century — a member of the Paris *Conseil général de salubrité* (General Council on hygienic conditions) and founding editor of the *Annales d'hygiène publique et de médecine légale* (Annals of public hygiene and legal medicine).

discovered, such a venture was largely unsuccessful and many prostitutes preferred to avoid the *maisons de tolerances* and instead work independently. In this case, the police preferred to register them and issue registration cards.

Parent-Duchâtelet's 1836 work, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris* was the first time that prostitution was treated as a serious social issue<sup>24</sup> and, according to Alain Corbin, so wildly influential that it obscured any other research for most of the century. It was such a valuable source that most other studies of prostitution in France at the time drew heavily on his research. By all accounts, it has also done much to preserve information that would otherwise have completely disappeared — Parent-Duchâtelet himself describes the order to destroy files on prostitution in the police archives just as he was finishing his own research.<sup>25</sup> He was the chief defender of the regulatory system, and his work increased the prestige of the *police des mœurs* dramatically,<sup>26</sup> as their numbers (and budget) grew exponentially to combat the vice run rampant through the city. Charles-Jérôme Lecour, Prefect of Police before the Commune, described his horror at the number of unregistered prostitutes in the city: "You encounter them in public establishments, railway stations, even railway carriages. There are some of them on all the promenades in front of most of the cafés, they circulate in great numbers on the most beautiful boulevards, to the great disgust

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<sup>24</sup> Harsin, 97.

<sup>25</sup> Harsin, 99.

<sup>26</sup> Harsin, 98.

of the public, which takes them for registered prostitutes violating the regulations and is hence astonished at the inaction of the police.”<sup>27</sup>

While the modernization efforts of the 1850s and 60s (lead by Prefect of the Seine, Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann) were designed for the free flow of goods and capital, they also reinforced the social hierarchies of the city by displacing workers. Yet at the same time, the new public spaces allowed these social classes to intermingle,<sup>28</sup> which some (like Lecour) found alarming. The enforcement of inequalities were reproduced on Paris’ very landscape, as workers were displaced and pushed to the city’s margins and their houses were demolished. Sex workers presented a significant challenge to these socio-economic distinctions, as their social mobility throughout the city allowed them to interact with more affluent classes, which demonstrated a threat to the foundations of bourgeois social order. For that reason, police instituted complicated systems of categorization and identification to prevent too much social overlap from occurring.

Over the course of the development of policies of policing and surveillance of prostitutes, police used several categorizations to monitor and identify sex workers within the city. The term “prostitute” had significant class connotations, distinguishing working-class sex workers from courtesans and more affluent women, and those whose trade was conducted in secret, or in the privacy of their own homes.<sup>29</sup> But prostitutes were also

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<sup>27</sup> Lecour, quoted in Rupert Christiansen, *Paris Babylon: The Story of the Paris Commune*. (New York: Viking, 1995). 88.

<sup>28</sup> Peniston, *Pederasts and Others*, 128.

<sup>29</sup> George Drysdale, *The Elements of Social Science; or Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion: An Exposition of the True Cause and Only Cure of the Three Primary Social Evils: Poverty, Prostitution, and Celibacy*. (London: E. Truelove, 1886), 241.



divided into several distinct categories: Generally, they were called “public women,” (*filles publiques*), but other labels were also used to delineated their relationships to police institutions and to categorize their own working conditions. *Filles soumises* (“submissive women”) were those registered with the police — either working in a brothel (*maison de tolérance*) or those who worked independently. Prostitutes not confined to a brothel were known as *filles isolées* (“isolated women”) or *filles en carte* (women with a registration card). Any woman who sold sex (or was suspected of selling sex) without police registration was called a *fille insoumise* (“disobedient” or “rebellious” women) or *clandestine*. Prostitutes who were inscribed were expected to present themselves for medical examinations periodically (as often as every 15 days), and could not work in daylight or dress extravagantly. In return, they would (hypothetically) be able to work with minimal interference from the police, so long as they abided by legal and moral expectations for their public behavior.<sup>30</sup>

This paper is structured roughly chronologically. In the first chapter, I discuss the events leading up to the Commune, and the role that women played in its establishment and rhetoric. The second chapter will address prostitution more specifically, and the role of morality and public space in the insurrection. The third chapter will then address the significant implications that prostitution had on the fall of the Commune and the lives of women after its suppression.

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<sup>30</sup> William Acton, *Prostitution*, 2d ed., ed. Peter Frye (London: MacGibbon and Kie, 1968), 97-107, abridged.  
<http://chnm.gmu.edu/history/faculty/kelly/wciv/women/prostitution.htm>

## **Chapter 1: The Second Empire and Women under the Commune**

The Commune sits between two distinct regimes in French history, the Second Empire and the Third Republic, which both had significant impacts in the moralist arguments both of and by the *Communards* and police suppression of transgression and dissent. The Commune formed a rupture in the status quo of a country that had already experienced a series of dramatic regime changes, and signified the last in a century-long line of revolutions. While marking the end of nineteenth-century French political upheaval, it simultaneously became a touchstone for leftist movements in the twentieth century. It was, as Gay Gullickson argues, a defining moment for Western constructions of gender, with its embodiment of the frightening, violent, enduring, and sexually transgressive figure of a politically active woman.<sup>31</sup>

The Second Empire, which lasted from 1852 to 1870 under the rule of Napoleon III, can perhaps most easily be described as non-ideological authoritarianism, exemplified by Napoleon III's insistence that the people should be "disciplined so that they may be directed."<sup>32</sup> The early years of his regime were characterized by dramatic acts of political repression. Even before he had declared himself emperor, he was taking steps to suppress leftist opposition. He outlawed the singing of the "Marseillaise," jailed radical republican leaders, and even declared martial law in several departments in 1851.<sup>33</sup> When the southern and central departments of France responded with the largest peasant rebellion

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<sup>31</sup> Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> Donny Gluckstein. *The Paris Commune: A Revolution in Democracy*. (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2011), 53.

<sup>33</sup> W. Scott Haine. *History of France*. (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Incorporated, 2000. Accessed February 23, 2018), ProQuest Ebook Central. 108.

in nineteenth century Europe, Louis Napoleon's regime responded with brutal repression and deported about 10,000 insurgents.

Louis Napoleon's regime combined universal male suffrage with authoritarianism — he declared unions illegal, doubled the size of the police force,<sup>34</sup> and promoted the major urban renewal program in Paris led by Baron Georges Haussmann. The *Haussmannisation* of Paris added new sanitation, transportation, and water systems to the city, including miles of new streets, aqueducts, and sewers. It also widened its boulevards, so as to prevent future revolutionaries from building barricades in them (an attempt which was quickly proven futile.) It was, according to David Harvey, an attempt to reconcile capitalist and imperialist forces within the capital city — an effort whose failure was quickly and dramatically proved with France's defeat at the hands of the Prussians in 1870.<sup>35</sup> This massive project demolished 20,000 houses, made civic buildings more defensible against attack and constructed massive nationalist monuments, which as Andrew Israel Ross argues, created "direct representations of imperial power through the urban environment," and became sites of struggle over access to this new modernization.<sup>36</sup> The poor and working classes were increasingly displaced to the outskirts of the city, and transportation to their places of work became more and more difficult. One of the major aims of the modernization effort, in fact, was to unify the city, and ensure public hygiene, and in doing so stabilize bourgeois society against urban population growth and socioeconomic

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<sup>34</sup> Gluckstein, *A Revolution in Democracy*, 53.

<sup>35</sup> Quoted in Andrew Israel Ross, "Urban Desires: Practicing Pleasure in the 'City of Light,' 1848–1900" (Ph.D. Thesis: University of Michigan, 2011), 10.

<sup>36</sup> Ross, "Urban Desires", 11.

inequity.<sup>37</sup> Rupert Christiansen argues that the outbreak of the Commune was a revolt by Paris workers against the forces that they saw taking their city from them.<sup>38</sup> The history of the Commune is therefore both a history of class conflict as well as a struggle over access to public space.

In July of 1870, in an effort to bolster his waning popularity, Louis Napoleon declared war with Prussia over an apparent snub over succession to the Spanish throne. However, the declaration was more likely a response to growing fears of Prussia's rapidly modernizing army, something other European powers had been watching with increasing alarm. The French army was no match for the military efficiency of the Prussians, whose rail lines quickly proved to be a great advantage. Less than two months after war began, Napoleon himself, along with 80–100,000 of his troops were captured at Sedan. The Parisian public heard the news on September 3, and by the next day, a new provisional republican government had been declared at the Hôtel de Ville, called the government of National Defense. On September 18, the Prussian army had laid siege to the city. The siege lasted until late January, as Paris endured starvation, cold, and disease, as well as Prussian bombardment. The government signed an armistice with Prussia and set up elections for a National Assembly with the power to sign a peace treaty. Without votes from republican leaders in Paris, conservative republican Adolphe Thiers was elected by the assembly (largely conservatives and royalists) to serve as chief executive.

Suspicion ran rampant among the Parisian workers, who had begun to suspect that the government was willingly giving the city over. Paris had, for almost the whole of the

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<sup>37</sup> Ross, "Urban Desires," 5.

<sup>38</sup> Christiansen, *Paris Babylon*, 297.

last century, seen itself as the center of political change in France (largely disregarding a history of significant and widespread peasant revolts,) and they began to suspect the government was more willing to negotiate with the Prussians than its own workers. The Assembly didn't do anything to alleviate the suspicion, as it promptly lifted the wartime moratorium on the sale of goods in state-run pawnshops, and announced that with the siege over, landlords could collect all accrued rent owed them. Paris workers were left facing either eviction or the sale of their furniture and clothing. Resentment only deepened when Thiers ceded Alsace and parts of Lorraine and Metz, (along with 5 billion francs) to Prussia.<sup>39</sup> In response to Thiers' surrender of Paris itself to the Prussians, armed crowds poured onto the streets in the working-class districts of Montmartre, Belleville, and La Chapelle, and dragged the National Guard's cannons to Montmartre for safekeeping.

However, rebellion in Paris did not erupt until the early morning of March 18<sup>th</sup>, when Thiers tried to send soldiers to seize 200 cannons belonging to the National Guard, which were being held in Montmartre. Over the course of the siege, the National Guard in Paris had drifted decidedly to the left, as liberals fled the war-ravaged city and more and more workers joined its ranks as work became scarce. The National Guard held the city's largest collection of heavy guns in Montmartre — a working-class area only recently incorporated into the city proper, and a center of political radicalism. Early that morning, women in Montmartre discovered the soldiers waiting with the cannon and raised the alarm that the government was attempting to steal their arms. Paris surged into open revolt, and Thiers and the National Assembly withdrew to Versailles — a symbolic decision that, to the workers of Paris, recalled the absolutism of Louis XIV. Into the space left by this

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<sup>39</sup> Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 15.

departure stepped the Central Committee of the National Guard, which called for municipal elections for the Commune, established a municipal government, and called on the support of other cities in France, which were experiencing similar stirrings of rebellion, though none so powerful as in Paris.<sup>40</sup>

A widely varied set of revolutionaries came to power during the Commune: “Jacobins,” who wished to emulate the actions of the 1789 Revolution; Blanquists, who ascribed to the writings of professional revolutionary Auguste Blanqui, who advocated the need to seize state power through revolution and who had been arrested the day before the insurrection began; Proudhonists<sup>41</sup>, who advocated a form of grassroots laissez-faire revolutionary economics; and members of the First Workers’ International.<sup>42</sup> Robert Wolfe argues that although there were several committees operating at a city-wide level, including both the Central Committee of the National Guard and the Central Committee of the Twenty Arrondissements<sup>43</sup>, the most revolutionary movement originated in small, localized bodies in neighborhoods across the city, with little centralized coordination.<sup>44</sup> Paris also had some communication with other cities in metropolitan France who had begun similar uprisings, as well as with some revolutionaries in Algeria. Several other

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<sup>40</sup> Haine, *History of France*, 119.

<sup>41</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had a book published posthumously in 1875, entitled *La pornocratie, ou les femmes dans les temps modernes*, which warned of imminent universal prostitution and illustrated his almost hysterical fear at the prospect of the subversion of sexual difference.

<sup>42</sup> Haine, *History of France*, 119.

<sup>43</sup> The central body of the many vigilance committees that were formed around the city

<sup>44</sup> Robert Wolfe, “The Parisian Club de la Revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> Arrondissement 1870–1871”. *Past & Present*, No. 39 (Oxford University Press, 1968), 82.

Communes were attempted in various other cities around the country, including Lyon, Saint-Étienne, and Marseille, but they were even shorter-lived than the Commune in Paris, and were quickly suppressed. Ultimately, the Commune was isolated in its fight against Versailles, and while its rhetoric of moralism was to some extent for the benefit of its international image, its rhetoric was largely for its own “self-consecration and validation”.<sup>45</sup>

The Commune’s legislation relating to the welfare of the public was simple: it eliminated fines for factory rule violations, set pay for legislators equal to the daily worker’s wage, returned pawned belongings (up to a value of seven francs) free of charge, abolished ‘night baking’<sup>46</sup> at the request of Paris’ bakers, separated church and state and secularized education, adopted the partners<sup>47</sup> and children of National Guardsmen killed defending Paris.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the Commune took the responsibility of marriages out of the hands of the Catholic church, and instead instituted civil marriage, reestablished divorce for the first time since 1816, gave equal rights to children regardless of legitimacy, and even granted alimony to women demanding separation.<sup>49</sup> Many women’s organizations in the Commune accepted gender differences — including expectations of motherhood — and combined them with a focus on the particular needs of working-class women. However,

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<sup>45</sup> Christiansen, *Paris Babylon*. 296.

<sup>46</sup> The continuing Parisian demand for warm croissants early in the morning, despite the lift of late-night burdens on bakers, made this decree difficult to enforce.

<sup>47</sup> This referred to both widows and unmarried women who had been living with them — one of the Commune’s notable steps was to recognize marriages that hadn’t previously been recognized by the state, since it removed the religious foundation.

<sup>48</sup> Gullickson. *Unruly Women of Paris*, 19.

<sup>49</sup> Gluckstein, *The Paris Commune*. 22.

many expressed frustration that their demands for dignity and control of their own labor were not addressed quickly enough by the Commune's central leadership, which women were not permitted to participate in.<sup>50</sup>

The Commune's vision for women was not entirely unambiguous — while women were unable to vote or hold political office under the Commune, the *Journal Officiel* of the Commune and its Executive Commission issued a call for the organization of women's committees to directly address their needs, and urging them to fight for "the advent of the reign of labour and of Equality".<sup>51</sup> The Commune widely espoused a vision of republican motherhood that emphasized women's roles as workers without fully challenging their place as wives and mothers, although their interpretations of these roles were tied closely to their duty to the revolution. One anonymous *Communarde* at a club meeting declared, "Women weakened by these conditions, you will feed yourselves, you will clothe yourselves, you will become powerful engenderers of a strong race. The real family of humankind will be born out of your more fruitful wombs."<sup>52</sup> The focus, still, was on their ability to give birth to new citizens, more so than their roles as citizens themselves.

The Commune abolished the death penalty (although it would ultimately execute several prisoners in its last days) and began plans to offer free compulsory education up to the age of twelve, with an emphasis on girls' education.<sup>53</sup> It also saw the creation of

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<sup>50</sup> Kathleen Jones and Françoise Vergès, " 'Aux Citoyennes!': Women, Politics, and the Paris Commune of 1871." *History of European Ideas* 13, no. 6 (1991), 723.

<sup>51</sup> Jones and Vergès, " 'Aux Citoyennes!'", 721.

<sup>52</sup> Jones and Vergès, " 'Aux Citoyennes!'", 724.

<sup>53</sup> Gluckstein, *The Paris Commune*. 23.



numerous political clubs that were held across the city, which, according to Gluckstein, “form[ed] the living link between the mass movement and the council.” There were anywhere from 36 to 50 of these clubs on a given day, often in churches occupied by the *Communards*. While women were not represented widely in the central committees of the Commune, they were present and vocal in political gatherings and the *Union des femmes*.<sup>54</sup> For many women, the Commune represented the possibility of new independence and dignity as workers. Women treated the wounded, provided food, manufactured weapons and uniforms, and even accompanied the National Guard into battle on the barricades.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the most dramatic and symbolic act of the Commune to reclaim Paris’ public space was the dismantling of the Vendôme column, a monument erected during the first empire and seen by the Communards as a symbol of the war and conquest of France’s imperial past.

However, Thiers and the national government were not interested in negotiating with the Commune at all, and soon the French army was marching back to Paris, though it had hardly recovered from its disastrous defeat at the hands of the Prussians only months earlier. After more bombardment and weeks of fighting, the French army broke back through Paris’ defenses and began the violent suppression of any and all of the Commune’s supporters that lasted until May 28 — these seven days became known as *la semaine sanglante* (‘Bloody Week,’) as tens of thousands of communards were killed, and even more

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<sup>54</sup> The *Association des Femmes pour la Défense de paris et les Soins aux Blessés* (‘The Association of Women for the Defense of Paris and the Treatment of the Wounded’) was intended to form women’s cooperatives in defense of the city, but which ultimately focused on the reorganization of labor for the benefit of working women.)

See Jones and Vergès, “ ‘Aux Citoyennes!’ ” 721.

<sup>55</sup> Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 20.

executed in the forced march to Versailles and the military tribunals that followed — estimates of the numbers killed by Versailles vary wildly, but most estimates have the number at over ten thousand, and more than forty thousand were taken prisoner. Some captured *Communards* were shot immediately (usually if they were armed when captured), while others were brought back to the military barracks and executed there, or marched to Versailles to be tried. The Commune's violent suppression brought an end to the century of revolutionary movements in France, and paved the way for the conservatism of the Third Republic.

In their own ways, the Empire, the Commune, and the Republic each claimed to be carrying on the legacy of the 1789 revolution — Napoleon III was the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, The Commune was yet another insurrection against an oppressive national order, and the Republic continuously drew on revolutionary imagery to legitimize its existence, while simultaneously ignoring (or erasing) the violent or radical elements of France's revolutionary tradition. It was the Third Republic, in fact, that declared July 14<sup>th</sup> a national holiday in memory of the storming of the Bastille, and reestablished the "Marseillaise" as France's new national anthem.<sup>56</sup> With this in mind, it is important to interrogate the misogynist legacy of the Revolution itself, and how that legacy reasserted itself in ensuing political eras.

## **Chapter 2: Madness and Public Space: Prostitution Under the Commune**

For the Commune and the Versailles government, prostitution and sexual transgression was a topic that was consistently present in their rhetoric, even when it

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<sup>56</sup> John Kim Munholland, "Republican Order and Republican Tolerance in Fin-de-Siècle France: Montmartre as a Delinquent Community," in *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 20.

wasn't being addressed directly. Nineteenth-century social and political stability were tied closely to social morality, which could be used as an indicator for the health and power of a given regime. Sex work, as something that was seen as both morally corrupt and socially inescapable, provides insight into the role that respectability played and how it was enforced in political life, as it could be used to either affirm or deny the legitimacy of a state, society or institution. For both the Commune and the regimes that followed, this respectability was reinforced through control of public space, and who was or wasn't allowed to work, participate, or even exist in it. Even the Commune made efforts to regulate the presence of prostitution within the public view, and some district councils even went to far as to attempt to ban it entirely.

Since the Commune represented such a dramatic response to the hierarchical modernization of the city, its interest in workers' rights to the city as a whole is unquestionable. However, their reluctance to include sex workers in that right speaks to the ingrained bourgeois ideals of sexual propriety and behavior that they carried with them from the preceding decades. As for Versailles, their anxieties over the moral degeneracies of the Commune are evident in the military tribunals held for the captured *Communards* in the months and years following the *semaine sanglante*. Several appeals, submitted by convicted women, effectively illustrate how these rhetorics affected their sentences.

The Commune's attitudes towards prostitution were multifaceted and even contradictory. In fact, elected officials within the Commune tried to outlaw sex work entirely during the course of the Commune, but with little success. At the same time, a number of prominent women within the Commune argued for greater respect and recognition for sex workers in various roles in the Commune. They were laborers after all,

and their economic exploitation was compounded by their roles as women who were deemed morally suspect. As Louise Michel argued, “Who has more right than these women, the most pitiful of the old order’s victims, to give their lives for the new?”<sup>57</sup>

Although Michel was emphasizing the importance of sex workers in the Commune’s future, she was also falling into many of the same rhetorical traps that her comrades had, by characterizing sex workers as the most “pitiful” or exploited of all workers. She was still characterizing the “immoral” characteristics of their profession as exceptionally degrading, more so than any other working-class women of the time.

Prostitution had, historically, provided a conspicuous challenge to political authority through its visibility and occupation of public space. Throughout the nineteenth century, people would voice complaints about the presence of sex workers on the streets and outside their homes or places of work. George Drysdale, in his exposition on the primary social evils, described the nature of prostitution as follows:

The question first arises, ‘what is a prostitute?’ To this the law answers, that it is one, who openly and with little or no distinction of persons, sells her favors for money: and who with this object endeavours to make herself publicly known as a prostitute. On the contrary, the woman, who does not court notoriety, but admits few lovers and in secret, although she receive money, cannot, and dare not, under penalty of damages for libel, be called a prostitute.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Stewart, “Invisible Revolutions,” 305.

<sup>58</sup> George Drysdale, *The Elements of Social Science; or Physical, Sexual, and Natural Religion: An Exposition of the True Cause and Only Cure of the Three Primary Social Evils: Poverty, Prostitution, and Celibacy*. (London: E. Truelove, 1886) 241.

Drysdale presented a controversial challenge to Victorian morality, and critics called his work “the Bible of the brothel.”

In the years before the Commune, as Andrew Israel Ross argues, political and social control was enacted through control of public space. Prostitutes were women who defied that control by advertising their immorality and their economic need in public —those whose actions were discrete or secret were therefore not criminalized in the same way. *Maisons tolérées* weren't allowed near places of worship, palaces, hotels, schools, or "large public establishments". According to Parent-Duchâtelet, "Napoleon, who had a dread of prostitution, drove these houses from the Tuilleries and the streets around it: under the restoration, the government was more severe, for the girls were expelled from their private rooms, even those who did not walk the streets, and who were known only to the police."<sup>59</sup>

In some ways, this was especially fraught for the Commune, which advocated an end to economic exploitation. If prostitutes in a public space were demonstrating their economic need, then they were an immediate manifestation of the Commune's failure. With the Commune's commitment to both economic justice and public morality, the visibility of prostitution presented an immediate challenge to the success of their programs. The Commune's relationship with and attitudes towards Paris' public space demonstrate both its reclamation of the city and its tenuous relationship with its own morality. It is therefore not entirely unsurprising that despite the Commune's hostility towards the Paris police, it embarked on an effort to eradicate prostitution entirely, through the very institution it distrusted.

During the Commune itself, it is hard to know for sure the extent to which the *police des mœurs* were able to continue their operations, given the chaos of the siege, failures of

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<sup>59</sup> Alexandre-Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet, *Prostitution in Paris: Considered Morally, Politically, and Ethically: Prepared for Philanthropists and Legislators, from Statistical Documents*. Trans. An American Physician. (Boston: Charles H. Brainard, 1846), 99.

communication between arrondissements and committees, and difficulty of enforcement while under bombardment. According to Charles-Jérôme Lecour, Prefect of Police in the years before the Commune (and therefore a staunch regulationist), even after one committee removed the *bureau des mœurs* from the Prefecture of Police, the resolution was not immediately executed. Instead of being abolished, the bureau was then taken over by someone with very little knowledge of its procedures and who was described by Lecour as “incompetent.”<sup>60</sup> Lecour, being involved with the force, was a committed regulationist and found this lack of oversight (as well as the Commune’s attempt at abolition) appalling. As many of his contemporaries, Lecour saw prostitution as a distasteful, but necessary aspect of society. Abolition, he thought, would prevent the release of society’s toxins, which would slowly poison the well-to-do, moral bourgeoisie that had so far escaped moral corruption. Throughout the century, prostitutes were actually referred to as “sewers,” or receptacles for society’s moral refuse, and were therefore unavoidable.

It is difficult to determine to what extent the Commune was able to successfully enforce the regulations it passed. Alain Corbin describes the Commune’s actions as “ambiguous,” since its attempted municipal prohibition was accompanied by a rhetoric of antiregulationism and an actual practice of libertarian disregard.<sup>61</sup> Harsin, in turn, points out that the Commune’s laws actually did less to affect the lives of Paris’ prostitutes than the mass resignation of all the doctors of the dispensary.<sup>62</sup> The Commune responded by

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<sup>60</sup> Charles-Jérôme Lecour, *La prostitution à Paris et à Londres 1789–1871*, 2e éd. (Paris: P. Asselin, 1872), 328.

<sup>61</sup> Corbin, *Women for Hire*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> Harsin, *Policing Prostitution*. 94.

denouncing the doctors' right to cause "the disorganization of a public service," and issued a warrant for the arrest of the *médecin en chef*.<sup>63</sup> Rupert Christiansen, however, describes the actions in the eleventh arrondissement (an area including Belleville) as "something like a purge of the streets — [they] sent posses of fed-up *filles* down to the Hôtel de Ville offering their services as nurses on the ramparts."<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, whatever the Commune's actions, its rhetoric was characterized by an overt hostility towards any prostitutes found in public.

Many *Communards* associated prostitution with the moral corruption of the Second Empire, and several arrondissements passed resolutions outlawing it entirely. This was especially shocking for the regulationists at the time, who had come to see prostitution as an evil, but a necessary one. The Commune's commitment to ending prostitution entirely seemed to them to undermine the social fabric that they had based their careers on maintaining. A committee in the eleventh arrondissement attempted to ban prostitution entirely by passing an ordinance, which stated,

That the principles of the Commune are established regarding the morality and respect of each; The *femmes de mauvaise vie* and the drunkards are, each day, a scandalous spectacle for the public morals; that there is an necessity that these same disorders be promptly repressed;

Declaring:

The chiefs of police and the national guardsmen of the 11<sup>th</sup> arrondissement must arrest and jail all women of suspect morals exercising their shameful trade on the street, in the same way that [they will arrest] the drunkards who, in their gruesome passion, forget their self-respect and their duty as a citizen.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *Journal Officiel de la Commune*, May 9, 1871, quoted in Lecour, *La prostitution à Paris et à Londres*, 336.

<sup>64</sup> Christiansen, *Paris Babylon*. 346.

<sup>65</sup> *Journal Officiel de la Commune*, May 11, 1871, quoted in Lecour. *La prostitution à Paris et à Londres*, 323.

The ordinance went on to compare prostitution to slavery, a statement which is all the more notable considering the committee's determination to arrest all those caught working on the street. In declaring prostitution illegal in the "public road", the committee was making a firm declaration of who was or wasn't acceptable in a public space. They extended the same treatment to *ivrognes*, who were also similarly banned from public spaces. Prostitutes were therefore deemed not respectable enough to be seen and identified for their profession. Even in the context of this massive reclamation of public space, some people were still deemed unfit for that right. However, this particular ordinance is not wholly representative of the real-life actions of the Commune with regards to sex workers as individuals — something even more complex and contradictory than the Commune's official positions revealed in their ordinances. The nineteenth arrondissement passed similar legislation, stating,

Considering that numerous and justified complaints were made concerning the way in which prostitution is practiced publicly in certain quarters of the 19<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, and since it is vital to put an end to these scandals;

Declaring:

Art. 1: Every *fille publique* walking at night on the public road will be immediately arrested.<sup>66</sup>

But perhaps the most telling example of local ordinances passed during the Commune comes from the eleventh arrondissement, which declared,

The communal delegation of the eleventh arrondissement

Regarding:

That society is responsible for and united by the disorder caused by prostitution;

That in effect the lack of instruction and of work, the general cause of the loss of so many women, is without a doubt to blame for an essentially perverted

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<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Lecour, 321.



social mechanism; that consequently, the new society, descendant of the communal Revolution, must pursue the recovery of all monarchical wounds; That intelligent organization of women's work is the only remedy to prostitution; That the organization is already in the process of formation; That however, regardless of the justifiable feelings of pity that the situation of thoughtless victims of prostitution can inspire, it is important to preserve for the present the purity of the younger generation and save them from the spectacle of vice displayed on the public street.<sup>67</sup>

It is likely that these ordinances weren't entirely for the sake of public morality, and concern about hygiene and sanitation continued to persist. John Murray, a doctor who wrote about his time working in Paris hospitals during the Commune in *The British Medical Journal*, noted with some surprise that, save for small-pox, health among the *Communards* was generally good — a significant improvement since the end of the Prussian siege.<sup>68</sup> One of the Commune's actions he credits for this improvement is the "blow" dealt to prostitution. Given the disease and famine of the Prussian siege, it is unsurprising that public health would be on the *Communards* minds — whether or not they explicitly cited it as a reason for their bans on prostitution — in addition to their desire for moral legitimacy.

Others found the Commune's efforts to eradicate prostitution horrifying and appalling. Charles-Jérôme Lecour had a very different take on the potential consequences of the Commune's actions. He reported that the Commune's closure of the *maisons de tolérances* and its lax attitude towards arresting prostitutes on the street would cause the destruction of modern society, as prostitutes would not be confined to any one space, and would instead run wild through the streets. Sex workers were, according to him, employed

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<sup>67</sup> Quoted in Lecour, *La prostitution à Paris et à Londres*, 324.

<sup>68</sup> John Murray, "Four Days in the Ambulances and Hospitals of Paris under the Commune", *The British Medical Journal* 1, no. 544 (1871), 596.

by the Commune in filling sandbags for the barricades and he even accused a number of them of instructing National Guardsmen to set fire to the Prefecture of Police (or possibly doing it themselves) in order to destroy all record of their profession.<sup>69</sup> Unlike Murray, he described a “considerable development of venereal diseases” among the Communards, which he cites as a result of the collapse of the regulatory system.<sup>70</sup> Prostitutes, in his mind, were permitted to run wild throughout the city, spreading their immorality and vice among the susceptible populace.

Although most records on prostitution were destroyed in the fires at the Prefecture of Police, Lecour reports that over the course of the Commune, 279 women were arrested for prostitution, 71 of whom were immediately imprisoned. He draws these figures from the records of a prison near the prefecture, and Saint-Lazare, a prison and hospital for women in the tenth arrondissement. At Saint-Lazare, Lecour reports with some disdain, “delegates” of the Commune maintained “scandalous relations” with the women detained there. Lecour concludes, “one trembles at the thought of a population whose interests and protection are abandoned to such individuals.”<sup>71</sup>

For Versailles and such regulationists, the fact that delegates of the Commune were consorting with imprisoned prostitutes added to the host of reasons why the Commune did not present a legitimate form of social organization. Lecour says sarcastically, “the refined ‘superior officers’ of the *fédérés* were in search of the dossiers of women having a worldly

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<sup>69</sup> Lecour, *La prostitution à Paris et à Londres*, 333.

<sup>70</sup> Lecour, *La prostitution à Paris et à Londres*, 335.

<sup>71</sup> Lecour, *La prostitution à Paris et à Londres*, 332.

notoriety of venal debauchery. They wanted to satisfy their morbid curiosity and make a weapon of certain secrets of existence."<sup>72</sup>

Lecour was appalled that members of the Commune were using their newfound access to police records to find sex workers in Paris. Sex workers, he thought, were a corrupting influence and the National Guard's associations with them only added to the Commune's multitude of moral infractions, especially since Versailles blamed sex workers for the violence (and fires) of the *semaine sanglante*.

The most famous and widely recognizable female image from the Commune, as well as one of the most powerful political symbols of late nineteenth-century France, is the *pétroleuse* — the entirely fictional female arsonist who was blamed for the fires across Paris in the last week of the Commune. However, the *pétroleuse* was not the only such image, and a theme that persisted throughout these various iterations was a voyeuristic horror towards the sexual promiscuity or sexual deviance of working class women, and in particular those who were politically active. While this rhetoric didn't always directly reference prostitution as among their crimes, there continued an association between the crimes of working-class women and the sexual transgressions of prostitutes in Paris. The *New York Herald* described the *Communardes* during the *semaine sanglante* as "loose women of Paris, those debased and debauched creatures, the very outcasts of society ... knowing no shame, dead to all feeling, without homes, without friends, no little ones to claim their attention."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Lecour, *La prostitution à Paris et à Londres*, 334.

<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, p. 177.

For Versailles, the women who supported the Commune were prostitutes almost by definition,<sup>74</sup> as police and officials often conflated social transgression with the “dangerous” working classes. Even when prostitution isn’t overtly mentioned in discussions of the misdeeds of the *Communardes*, the assumption of immorality, and its ties to political action, lurks just beneath the surface. Lecour recounts rumors that had circulated at the time, presenting them as hard facts, which describe armed prostitutes fighting at the barricades, and taking part in the “saturnalia” of the barricade of the Rue Royale. He adds, “the world of public debauchery supplied its contingent of *pétroleuses*, and it could believe, with the culprits and the recovery of justice, that the arson of the Prefecture of Police, in destroying its archives, gave their definitive emancipation...”<sup>75</sup>

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, the first day of open rebellion in Paris, the first deaths of French troops and the butchering of a horse that had been shot in the Place Pigalle were widely attributed to women. The defense of the cannons was attributed to virtuous housewives who offered the troops food and reminded them of their kinship. In the case of the Place Pigalle, however, the outbreak of violence was blamed on women’s “sinister passions,” and those involved were even directly referred to as prostitutes.<sup>76</sup> (It is important to note that the Place Pigalle was well known for its association with sex work.<sup>77</sup>) For the Commune, the true heroes of the day were the housewives who were first alerted to the seizure of the

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<sup>74</sup> Marisa Linton and Christine Hivet. “Les Femmes Et La Commune De Paris De 1871.” *Revue Historique* 298, no. 1 (603) (1997), p. 37.

<sup>75</sup> Lecour, 337.

<sup>76</sup> Gullickson. *Unruly Women of Paris*, 37.

<sup>77</sup> Stewart, Pamela Joan. “Invisible Revolutions: Women’s Participation in the 1871 Paris Commune.” The University of Arizona, 2006. p. 203

cannons — who appealed to the soldiers' humanity, offered food, and deplored the cowardice of those who didn't join them.<sup>78</sup> Their compassion and nonthreatening actions made them, in the eyes of much of the Commune's leadership, much more acceptable figures for the ideal of the *Communarde* in the mind of the public.

Throughout the course of the Commune, women's association with references to prostitution and their relative respectability in the eyes of the bourgeois press were determined by the extent to which they posed a threat to gender norms or expectations. Women who were seen as complicit in violence, women who lived with men they were not married to, and women who voiced controversial and radical positions were all widely associated with prostitution. Prostitution, in a way, became an easy way for the media to discredit women's contributions to the Commune. September of 1870 saw officials of the Third Republic encouraging a conflation of prostitution with female participation in the new political clubs that grew after September 4th<sup>79</sup>, and consequent policing.<sup>80</sup>

Lecour offered the opinion of many police officers of the time when he expressed his horror and confusion at the conversations of prostitutes overheard at a political meeting. According to the account of a police spy, the meeting's objective was to discuss the abolition of prostitution.<sup>81</sup> For the police, prostitution itself was an inevitable part of

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<sup>78</sup> Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 37.

<sup>79</sup> September 4<sup>th</sup> marked the end of the Second Empire, two days after Napoleon III was captured at Sedan, when he was officially deposed and the government of National Defense was established.

<sup>80</sup> Stewart, "Invisible Revolutions," p. 115.

<sup>81</sup> Lecour, Charles Jérôme. *La prostitution à Paris et à Londres 1789–1871*, 2e éd. Paris: P. Asselin, 1872, p. 321

society, and therefore the women who engaged in it were inherently immoral and not, as this discussion suggested, potentially “respectable” workers.<sup>82</sup> The police had spent the last several decades attempting to restrict prostitutes to certain areas of the city and keep them out of sight of respectable Parisians. Their entire system of policing was based on the assumption that prostitution was necessary to society and therefore inescapable, but that the prostitutes themselves were inherently corrupt. The prospect of a society where the regulation of sex work was unnecessary was horrifying to them. If society had nowhere to channel its refuse, they thought, then it would gradually poison even the most respectable of citizens, and society would crumble. This impression of their necessity explains the ongoing conflicts between policing and tolerance of the period.

Sex workers are difficult to find in archives relating to the Commune. In fact, many files relating to prostitutes were destroyed soon after the March 18 uprising, as were many more documents at the Prefecture of Police in the Bloody Week fires of May 21–28.<sup>83</sup> This makes the surviving documentation all the more notable and all the more valuable. The accounts of prostitutes participating in the Commune illustrate the opposition or support they encountered in their efforts to be included as part of a broader economic liberation while simultaneously facing decades of institutionalized surveillance, stigma, and suspicion from both the police and the bourgeois public. In the military trials that occurred after the Commune’s suppression, women appear infrequently, but notably, as their presence was used to discredit the Commune in its entirety while setting the precedent for the conservative moralism of the Third Republic.

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<sup>82</sup> Stewart, “Invisible Revolutions,” 116.

<sup>83</sup> Stewart, “Invisible Revolutions,” 116.

Amanda's call at the church Saint-Severin for the creation of a battalion of *filles soumises* illustrates a number of nuances within the conflicting systems of power and morality within the Commune. She was advocating for sex workers to take up arms to defend themselves and their own economic liberation — something that many women attempted as the siege went on, but many were turned away or ridiculed by the National Guardsmen they fought beside.

Despite Amanda's advocacy for other sex workers, even she abides by the categories imposed by the Prefecture of Police. She refers specifically to *filles soumises* — women who had been registered as prostitutes with the Prefecture of Police. Whether this is only because the registration processes provided the only estimates to the number of prostitutes working in the city, or whether it speaks to a continuing desire to align herself with those women seen to be obeying legal strictures is unclear. However, it is certain that the distinction between registered and unregistered prostitutes was an important one, especially to the prostitutes themselves. In her call to arms, Amanda specifically identifies registered prostitutes as those willing (or able) to fight for the Commune, failing to mention all unregistered *clandestines*, who were, according to arrest records and police accounts, likely numerous. Although this is a small detail, it does indicate a definite distinction between registered and unregistered prostitutes, and therefore those whose profession was sanctioned by the police, and whose wasn't. The Prefecture of Police had been taken over by the Communards, who had little trust in the officers of the Empire, and the leadership had been replaced.<sup>84</sup> The Commune certainly seemed to represent a rejection of criminalization of the working classes and a greater distrust of the police force. However,

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<sup>84</sup> Lecour, *La prostitution à Paris et à Londres*, 328.

Amanda's use of the police's rhetoric still displays some degree of acceptance of police categorization.

With the victories of Versailles as the Commune's forces gradually retreated, a new figure came to represent the gendered immorality of the Commune's crimes. The last week of the Commune, the *semaine sanglante*, was when the image of the *pétroleuse* truly eclipsed all other bourgeois descriptions of the *Communardes*. Although the fires in Paris were not nearly as extensive as first thought, and evidence suggested they were largely set by men, women were largely — if not exclusively — portrayed as the culprits.<sup>85</sup> The *pétroleuses* presented an interesting case, because they were simultaneously highly sexualized and actively desexualized. While many onlookers at the trials of accused *pétroleuses* actually expressed disappointment at their reported ugliness, and they were called furies, witches, and wild animals; the bourgeois press also expressed a fascination with the women's sexuality and sexual lives. Captured women were often stripped, and numerous accounts describe the nudity of lines of female prisoners.<sup>86</sup> While the *pétroleuses* weren't overtly tied to imagery of sex workers, they were often portrayed as sexually immoral or deviant, and their presence in Versailles' propaganda set the tone for life in Paris after the Commune.

### **Chapter 3: Class, Geography, Sex, and Power: Life after the Commune**

In the wake of the Commune, the Versailles government struggled to maintain social and political control in Paris, terrified by the challenge to its bourgeois order posed by the

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<sup>85</sup> Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, p. 170.

<sup>86</sup> Gullickson, Gay L. "La Pétroleuse: Representing Revolution." *Feminist Studies* 17, no. 2 (1991), p. 252



Commune. The 1870s were a time of severe repression and policing of anyone who posed a possible threat to the regime. Although the level of surveillance declined in the following decade as criticisms of police abuses under the regulationist system became widespread, the connections between political action and sexual transgression remained. Montmartre, the site of the fight for the cannons on March 18, used the notoriety it gained for its role during the Commune to become a new center for dissidence and subversiveness in *fin-de-siècle* Paris. Attitudes towards prostitution shifted, both due to an outbreak of syphilis and fears of their ability to interact with multiple socioeconomic classes.

Lecour wrote that May 28 saw the reinstallation of the Prefecture of Police on the ruins of the Commune, and its reorganization was completed just over two weeks later, on June 15, with the establishment of a new Dispensary. All the old practices of surveillance were reintroduced, with the added responsibility of addressing all the social ills that the Commune had exacerbated with its anti-regulationist policies.<sup>87</sup> Lecour reports with some measure of horror that in the seven months after the end of the Commune, the number of arrests for prostitution rose to 6,007. Of those arrests, 2,935 were *insoumises*, a number which he said was more than double that of the corresponding months of 1860. By January 1 of 1872, he reports, there were 3,675 prostitutes working in Paris.<sup>88</sup> In his view, this drastic growth in numbers of prostitutes was a direct result of the Commune. Although he never addresses it fully, he implies that the moral decay and poorly-executed policing strategy was to blame.

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<sup>87</sup> Lecour, 338.

<sup>88</sup> Lecour, 339.

At the same time that Lecour was condemning the Commune's actions, the government was condemning its members; and it was during the Versailles trials of captured *communards* that the government's true aims became increasingly apparent. The government was trying civilians in the *Conseils de guerre* (courts martial), and their guilt was often either expected or predetermined. Ostensibly, Paris was under martial law and therefore the prisoners were tried military courts, which were much more likely to enact harsher penalties. It also meant that the prisoners would all be charged for criminal offenses, rather than political ones, which often bore little resemblance to their actual actions.<sup>89</sup> The trials were merely a performance to appease bourgeois demands for vengeance and present a warning for any future revolutionaries. Evidence and testimony was of little importance, the prisoners' assigned lawyers often failed to appear in court entirely, and guilt was often assumed before the trial had even begun.<sup>90</sup>

As Gay Gullickson argues, the trials were merely intended to enact revenge against the *Communards* while simultaneously serving as a warning to all future potential revolutionaries.<sup>91</sup> Prisons in Versailles were not large enough to accommodate the vast numbers of arrested revolutionaries, so around 20,000 were incarcerated in the holds of ships and about 8,000 in coastal fortresses. The Camp de Satory, where many *Communards* were held, was called a "cell in open air," where prisoners were sometimes forced to dig their own graves and many were shot during the night. Later, Louise Michel wrote about her experiences there, as prisoners desperately drank water from a small pond only to

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<sup>89</sup> Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 202.

<sup>90</sup> Gullickson, "La Pétroleuse", 203.

<sup>91</sup> Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 203.

discover it was filled with their executed comrades' blood.<sup>92</sup> Versailles made no effort to portray its treatment of the *Communards* as just —instead, the arrests, executions, and trials were entirely to quell any possibility of further rebellion and cement its own power.

For the women accused of incendiarism, the court showed a strange fascination with their sexual history. Political activity was seen as a cause of immorality in women, and by twisted logic, this meant that immoral activities (such as pre- or extramarital sex) could be used as proof of political activity.<sup>93</sup> The Third Republic's investigation into the Commune includes a report by Captain Briot, the deputy prosecutor of the *4e Conseil de Guerre*, which lists women based on their marital status, dividing them into married, widowed, and single; and within each of those categories, whether they were living with a man they were not married to ("*vivant en concubinage*").<sup>94</sup> And of the 630 single women listed in the report, 246 are classified as *soumises à la police*. Of a total of 1,051 women arrested, that is not a small percentage. Since the exact same number of women was listed as "without profession", it is likely that sex work was their sole means of employment. However, single women were not the only ones facing accusations of sexual misconduct.

The report goes on to describe the arrested women: "All, or very nearly, are bereft of morals, even the married women. One of these last was inscribed with the police as a *fille*

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<sup>92</sup> Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 194.

<sup>93</sup> Gullickson, "La Pétroleuse", 209.

<sup>94</sup> Assemblée Nationale. *Enquête parlementaire sur l'insurrection du 18 Mars 1871*. Paris: Librairie Législative A. Wittersheim, 1872, p. 549

*publique* on the advice of her husband with whom she continued to live, and brought back to this marital home the product of her shameful business.”<sup>95</sup>

Gay Gullickson argues that government agents believed that the *communardes* were, if not prostitutes, then certainly sexually promiscuous. They were determined to find any sign of immorality that they could, and would question the women and witnesses again and again in efforts to prove their depravity.<sup>96</sup> However, as Briot’s report indicates, even married women did not escape this kind of interrogation. They could easily be characterized as prostitutes and then condemned for their transgressions, and their marriage provided little protection.

Louise Michel, an anarchist, revolutionary, and schoolteacher, was the most prominent woman involved in the Commune. She presents a notable case because her most well-known moniker was “*la vierge rouge*” (the Red Virgin), which explicitly describes her lack of sexual activity. Unlike many of the other women of the Commune, she was explicitly desexualized — both by the Commune itself and by Versailles, although for very different reasons. During her trial, she was described as defiant and unrepentant, and was sentenced to deportation to New Caledonia. Since Louise Michel already presented such a profound political challenge to Versailles’ authority, it is not wholly surprising that she was consistently desexualized. Gullickson argues that while portraying women as sexually promiscuous could be a way to delegitimize their political actions, it could also lend them a significant amount of power that the Versailles government found genuinely alarming.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> *Enquête*, 549.

<sup>96</sup> Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, 200.

<sup>97</sup> Gullickson, “La Pétroleuse”, 253.

Versailles' portrayals also deemphasized Michel's femininity, insisting that she was an aberration, and other women could never present the same challenge to its authority. Given that Louise Michel had already proven herself to be a real threat, Versailles would have been unwilling to grant her (or any other woman) any more influence. The Commune's rhetoric was similar, although for completely different reasons. As such a symbolically important figure for the Commune could not be portrayed as sexually immoral. Instead, the title gave her an almost heroic standing in her devotion to her cause. It granted her an authority that Versailles was unable to challenge.

In her trial before the *6e Conseil de Guerre*, Michel was defiant and unapologetic. She emphasized her role as a woman in the Commune, and demanded that her gender not affect the outcome of her sentence, saying, "You are the men who are going to judge me. You are in front of me publicly. You are men, and I, I am just a woman. Nevertheless, I am looking you straight in the face. ... Since it seems that any heart which beats for liberty has the right only to a small lump of lead, I demand my share. If you let me live, I will not stop crying for vengeance, and I will denounce the assassins on the Board of Pardons to the vengeance of my brothers. ... If you are not cowards, kill me ..."98 The court ignored her demand and instead deported her, along with about 4,500 other prisoners, to the French colony of New Caledonia.99

Many Communards convicted by the *Conseils de la guerre* of the Versailles government appealed their sentences months or years later. These records provide insight

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<sup>98</sup> Louise Michel. *The Red Virgin: Memoirs of Louise Michel*. Ed. Bullitt Lowry and Elizabeth Gunter (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1981), 86-7.

<sup>99</sup> Christiansen, *Paris Babylon*, 376.

in to the sentences, trials, lives, and caricatures that the *communardes* experienced at the hands of the Versaillais. Women's records are not numerous — but the ones that do exist provide vivid images, not necessarily of the women themselves, but the treatment they received at the hands of the military tribunals. Although prostitution was seldom referenced directly, sexual and gendered deviance are often present in the discussions of the prisoners' crimes.

Claudine Garde was condemned to ten years hard labor in May of 1872 by the 26<sup>e</sup> *Conseil de guerre* on charges of complicity in unlawful arrests and looting with members of the National Guard.<sup>100</sup> She was reported to be in possession of stolen items — probably from the houses of bourgeois who had fled the city — but ultimately, her greatest crime (and the one reported in most detail) was that she stole from and then threatened *la dame Meyer*, the wife of a former police chief. This exemplifies one of Versailles' greatest fears of the Commune — the loss of private property. In claiming the city as their own, members of the Commune were also seizing control of the property left behind by wealthy residents who had fled during the first siege — many expressed fears that their houses would be looted and belongings stolen. This was an affront to carefully constructed and maintained social distinctions that would be upended by this redistribution of wealth. Claudine Garde had not only taken the belongings of a respected woman and wife of a police chief, but she had threatened her — certainly an outrage to a regime desperately trying to reconstruct its social hierarchy.

In prison, she at first was punished for various infractions, but was described as becoming submissive and obedient. She was also often ill — according to the report,

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<sup>100</sup> Archives Nationales, Paris BB/24/748,

“almost constantly”<sup>101</sup>. In the letter that she herself submitted for her release, she emphasized her desire to return to her family and her children, saying that her behavior would merit the mercy shown her. Her freedom, she understood, was contingent on her ability to convince the Ministry of Justice of her remorse and devotion to her family. Her daughter even sent a letter asking for her mother’s release and describing her mother’s participation in the Commune as “caught up in the misfortune of 1871,” as though the Commune was in reality mass hysteria, from which her mother had fully recovered. This appeal, and the fact that it was submitted by Claudine Garde’s daughter, emphasizes the importance of family in reestablishing social control after the Commune. If Claudine Garde had only been caught up in the hysteria of the Commune, and not a willing participant, then her role in it was merely a brief illness that had passed and she could now return to caring for her family. In this way, her daughter paints her as a woman fallen prey to a mass hysteria — the victim, as many doctors who studied hysteria argued — of the societal ills that surrounded her. Hysteria was both an illness and a signifier of women’s sensitivity, which made them well-suited to motherhood.<sup>102</sup> For Claudine Garde, hysteria could therefore be used as a plea for her own innocence and as a tool for displaying her devotion to her own family and in particular her children.

Although prostitutes actually made up a fairly small proportion of women admitted to public asylums during this period, psychologists like Jean-Étienne Dominique Esquirol argued that their social marginalization, lack of support systems, and predilection for

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<sup>101</sup> AN BB/24/748

<sup>102</sup> Jann Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 126.

excess caused “paralytic dementia.”<sup>103</sup> As Jann Matlock argues, the portrayal of the prostitute as hysterical combined a series of debates in the early part of the century: while prostitutes were seen as the amalgamation of all the excesses and ills of society, hysterics were the victims of their own excesses. This inconsistency articulated questions of class and gender that could not be easily answered — was hysteria a product of the vices of women of the “criminal classes”, or instead wealthy women’s feminine fragility? Increasingly, it became the former. As such, the hysteria diagnosis appeared in clinical notes referring to working-class women seen as especially likely to become prostitutes.<sup>104</sup> Just as the police were desperate to create difference between prostitutes and “respectable” women, so too were doctors desperate to distinguish hysterics from other women — and the source of this difference was repeatedly sexual.<sup>105</sup> While the eighteenth century had depicted hysteria as a sign of aristocratic femininity, the nineteenth century increasingly emphasized the predisposition of all women to nervous disorders, and therefore both prostitution and hysteria represented women’s deviance from “fulfillment”. Therefore, as Matlock argues, hysteria represented both a feminine flaw as well as the epitome of the sensitivity of the romanticized woman.<sup>106</sup> To avoid risk of hysteria among respectable women, many reformers argued, they must avoid any contact with immorality or vice —yet another argument for the relegation of sex workers and hysterics to isolated regions of the city. For Claudine Garde, invoking a temporary madness as a reason for her

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<sup>103</sup> Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 124.

<sup>104</sup> Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 125.

<sup>105</sup> Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 127.

<sup>106</sup> Matlock, *Scenes of Seduction*, 131.



crimes was risky. Louise Michel had also been accused of hysteria, and that was not someone Claudine Garde was likely to want to emulate. However, it also had the power to portray her as an innocent by invoking her femininity.

Louise Bonnefoy was sentenced in October 1871 to deportation in an *enceinte fortifiée*<sup>107</sup> for provocation to massacre, looting, destruction of property, and participating in the construction of barricades.<sup>108</sup> She was imprisoned around the age of 55, and was still in prison at the age of 63. She was described of helping to set fires in Paris and is even called a ‘fury’ and is described as shouting “We are going to roast more than three thousand Versaillais!” And on a separate occasion, while encouraging the insurgents to set fire to shops, she is quoted saying, “We must burn this nest of reactionaries!”<sup>109</sup> This account of her actions presents a classic example of the construction of the *pétroleuse* caricature that plagued the *Communardes* throughout their trials. She was portrayed as violent, bloodthirsty, and ragged — each characteristic defying the gendered ideals that could have garnered her sympathy for her appeal. These fictional portrayals of *pétroleuses* as old, dressed tattered clothes, and bloodthirsty, echoed the *tricoteuses* of the French Revolution who sat and knitted beside the guillotine. This figure is not uncommon: Leconte de Lisle described the *Communardes* similarly, saying, “their women, these nameless harpies,

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<sup>107</sup> A “fortified enclosure”

<sup>108</sup> AN BB/24/748

<sup>109</sup> AN BB/24/748

roamed the streets of Paris for a whole week, pouring petrol into cellars and lighting fires everywhere. They are hunted down with muskets like the wild beasts that they are.”<sup>110</sup>

Her husband, in his letter appealing her sentence, describes her as the “victim of shameful revenge,” since he had only been sentenced to street work, whereas she had been condemned to deportation — a dramatic illustration of the lengths to which Versailles would go to eliminate the gendered threats of accused *pétroleuses*. He emphasizes her faithfulness to him and to their marriage, which illustrates the extent to which Versailles associated *Communardes*, and those accused as *pétroleuses* in particular, with prostitutes. As Gay Gullickson points out, the eruptions of violence during the Commune that involved women were often identified as the work of prostitutes, and therefore distinct from the nonviolent women who had used only their words and (apparently) appeals to kinship.<sup>111</sup> By reaffirming her faithfulness, her husband likely hoped to distance her as much as possible from widely-held ideas about the *pétroleuses*. In a letter to the *Garde des Sceaux* (Lord Chancellor) dated June 1879, the director of criminal affairs and clemency described her as making an effort to “return to good”, and that he was very satisfied with her conduct — despite her actions, her remorse reassured those around her that she was no longer a threat.

Marie Gaspard worked as a *cantinière*<sup>112</sup> for the 101<sup>st</sup> battalion of the Commune, and was arrested in late June by the Versaillais.<sup>113</sup> She was married, with no children and lived

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<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Eric Hazan, *The Invention of Paris: A History in Footsteps*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2010), 232.

<sup>111</sup> Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, p. 30

<sup>112</sup> Someone who brought food for the National Guard and others who were fighting for the Commune

*en concubinage* with an officer of the 101<sup>st</sup> battalion. She was 34 in 1871 and was accused of carrying arms in an insurrection and incendiarism (although this was only mentioned once in her appeal file.) In addition, she was listed as an ex-prostitute with a “detestable reputation” who had previously been condemned to six months in prison, in 1863, for theft while working in a *maison de tolérance*. During the first siege, she had worked for the National Guard producing equipment, which probably influenced her later involvement as a *cantinière*. According to a report to the *Commission des Graces* by the Ministry of Justice, she actually left Paris briefly to procure supplies and objects that she had (supposedly) looted. Her house was reportedly set on fire by the Versaillais. She was described as “bad-spirited” and undisciplined, with poor conduct and morals — faults for which the *Conseils de guerre* often had little mercy. In fact, submissive behavior and remorsefulness were cited often and sympathetically in trial descriptions, and women who refused to display them were criticized and caricatured in their files. For her participation in the Commune (and possibly for looting as well), Marie was condemned by the *6e Conseil de guerre* to deportation in an *enceinte fortifiée* to New Caledonia in May 1872 — eleven months after her initial arrest. Her plea, submitted in 1872, was denied about six years later.

Marie Gaspard presents a quintessential example of the ways in which prostitutes (and working women in general) interacted with and were treated by the military tribunals. Her history of prostitution was mentioned repeatedly in her file, as was her unmarried relationship with an officer of the 101<sup>st</sup> battalion. For Versailles, an “illicit”

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<sup>113</sup> AN BB/24/747

marriage was little better than prostitution<sup>114</sup>, and the Commune's acceptance of marriages not sanctioned by the church or the state only added to their suspicions. Marie's lack of remorse for her actions was, in the eyes of the *Conseil de guerre*, unforgivable. As both a *Communard* and a former prostitute, she presented an unacceptable threat to Versailles' political and moral authority, so it is unsurprising that her appeal was denied. She embodied all the crimes of the Commune that Versailles found most threatening — social and sexual immorality, looting and theft of bourgeois homes, and a complete lack of repentance in the face of her punishment.

Although the appeals don't directly address the role of prostitution in the trials of the *Communardes*, they do illustrate how sexual morality was continually present in discussions of their crimes and whether they were "deserving" of clemency. If immoral sexual behavior was tied to political rebellion then those whose crimes were also sexual in nature could still pose a threat to Versailles' authority. And women worked very hard to appear as moral as possible so as to minimize that threat.

The Third Republic grew from the Versailles government out of the military chaos, political rebellion, and economic deterioration of the siege and the Commune. (The period from May of 1870 to May 1871 has in fact been referred to as "the terrible year."<sup>115</sup>) In the decade of the 1870s, the Republic struggled to establish a new form of government against the last strains of Bonapartism and royalism vying for power.<sup>116</sup> The fall of the Empire had left room for various political factions each jockeying for influence: the Legitimists,

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<sup>114</sup> Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades*, p. 113

<sup>115</sup> Haine, *History of France*. 118.

<sup>116</sup> Haine, *History of France*. 118.

Orleanists, Bonapartists, and conservative, moderate, and radical republicans; and the rest of the decade saw incredibly harsh measures of authority and social control combined with a political atmosphere of uncertainty.<sup>117</sup> By the end of the 1870s, a new constitution had emerged that solidified the Third Republic, which would endure for the next seventy years. It established a strong parliament and a weak executive (forestalling another Napoleon,) and elections through universal male suffrage. The Assembly would have an upper house, a reassurance for conservatives, and 75 of its 300 members would be appointed for life, while departmental electoral colleges chose the rest.<sup>118</sup> This new system embodied both popular and conservative elements, and would end the cycle of revolutions that had characterized France's nineteenth century. The Third Republic, like the Second Empire, relied on social distinction, although also including a new powerful middle class.<sup>119</sup> It saw little revolutionary dissent, as its brutal suppression of the *Communards* proved to be extremely effective.

Along with the increase in surveillance and control came the reinstitution of many of the pre-1871 practices and institutions for the regulation and control of prostitution, which were increasingly portrayed in the art of *fin-de-siècle* Paris. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, for example, often displayed the daily lives of prostitutes — particularly those living or working in Montmartre. His painting from 1894, *Rue des Moulins, 1894* (fig. 3) shows two women standing in line waiting for their medical inspection. The growth in artwork depicting the day-to-day lives of prostitutes after the Commune illustrates the

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<sup>117</sup> Peniston, *Pederasts and Others*, 1.

<sup>118</sup> Haine, *History of France*, 121.

<sup>119</sup> Ross, "Urban Desires," 11.

changing attitudes towards prostitution as a feature of society. The beginning of the Third Republic saw the introduction of individual prostitutes in literature as “full-fledged overturners[s] of social and sexual hierarchies.”<sup>120</sup> In part, this was due to the anxieties about the nature of women and their role in political insurrection that arose during the months of the Commune. Sexual activity by unmarried women, instead of a “subterranean” but inescapable threat, became seen as an immediate danger threatening to engulf society.<sup>121</sup> The 1870s and 80s also saw a change in the ideas of what *caused* prostitution: instead of the social or economic factors described by Parent-Duchâtelet, many (arch-conservatives and social democrats alike) saw prostitution as the result of an innate laziness and propensity towards immoral behavior. For this reason, prostitutes were seen as definitionally immature, because maturity meant an acceptance of societal expectations and values.<sup>122</sup>

Although the Commune itself was not the sole influential moment of sex work-related rhetoric and policy of the late nineteenth century, the role (perceived or real) of prostitutes in the 1871 insurrection provided a reason for greater regulationism and emphasized the political threat sex workers posed to the gendered bourgeois order.<sup>123</sup> After the Commune, prostitution was seen as much more extensive within the city, and was a rising threat against the entire social body that could only be stopped by the reinstitution

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<sup>120</sup> Choquette, Leslie. “Degenerate or Degendered? Images of Prostitution and Homosexuality in the French Third Republic.” *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 23, no. 2 (1997), p. 207

<sup>121</sup> Corbin, *Women for Hire*, p. 18.

<sup>122</sup> Corbin, *Women for Hire*, 7.

<sup>123</sup> Corbin, *Women for Hire*, p. 21.

of regulations and a new moral order.<sup>124</sup> In fact, the nine years after the end of the Commune, as the Third Republic attempted to stabilize and entrench its grip on power, saw an increased degree of social control and enforcement over those deemed potentially subversive. The decades following the Commune saw a crackdown on sexual transgression, as it was closely associated with political insurrection, particularly (but not exclusively) for women. By the late 1800s, policing of prostitution had turned into a virtual “mania,” according to Jill Harsin, as thousands were arrested each year. The *police des mœurs* had a tendency to see prostitution anywhere they saw women acting “irregularly,” and those they arrested had no economic or legal recourse for their treatment.<sup>125</sup> Even if they had had the legal right, it is unlikely they would have had the financial means. Even the legal restrictions placed on women were only applicable to the middle and upper classes, as working class women had no property to inherit and both men and women often had to work for subsistence. The legal methods of gendered control were tied closely to class.

For example, arguments for regulation after the Commune often included fears over preservation of money. Unregistered prostitutes in particular became the target for fears about the “extraordinary mobility of money”<sup>126</sup> that threatened societal and economic stability. Many bourgeois families who fled Paris during the Commune were terrified of their properties being looted, and these fears continued for the rest of the decade, overlapping with other rhetorics around social and moral preservation. An 1877 pamphlet detailing the “night amusements” of the city cautions any visitors to the *maisons de*

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<sup>124</sup> Corbin, *Women for Hire*, p. 21

<sup>125</sup> Harsin, *Policing Prostitution*, p xvii.

<sup>126</sup> Corbin, *Women for Hire*, p. 24

*tolerances* to never take more money than they would mind losing, and also cautions against drinking, lest visitors “lose their senses.”<sup>127</sup> The pamphlet displays a kind of horrified fascination with the Paris system, detailing its practices and consequences at great length, judging a life of alcoholism and disease “the punishment of Heaven.” As Ross argues, the commodification of sex became a threat to social constructions of family and morality, and the bourgeoisie faced the prospect of prostitutes using sex work as a means for social advancement. With the growth of capitalism in post-Revolutionary France, regulation of sexual commodification became a stand-in for urban social hierarchies,<sup>128</sup> and the growth of prostitution became a representation of the moral degradations of capitalism itself.<sup>129</sup>

For each successive regime, prostitution became a tool with which to delegitimize the one that came before. Both the Commune and the Third Republic came to see prostitution as an attack on its own moralism carried over from the previous regime. Where Communards saw prostitutes as representatives of the moral failings of the Empire, the Republic saw them as inherently tied to the *pétroleuses* of the Commune, and the regulation that followed emphasized their fears of working class women’s sexual transgressions.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>127</sup> *Paris After Dark: containing a description of the fast women, their haunts, habits, ec.: to which is added a faithful description of the night amusements and other resorts: also all particulars relative to the working of the social evil in the French metropolis: the only genuine and correct night guide: sold by all the principal booksellers on the continent.* 12<sup>th</sup> annual ed. (Boulogne Seine: Printed by Jules Boyer, 1877)

<sup>128</sup> Ross, “Urban Desires,” 33.

<sup>129</sup> Ross, “Urban Desires,” 37.



The Commune and the repression that followed present a quintessential example of the ways in which the moralism of the late nineteenth century was perpetuated in both radical and conservative movements. The years following the Commune also reflected the ways in which urban public space was so vital to the Commune's existence, as well as its suppression. In reasserting its authority in Paris, the Versailles government was policing the very memory of the Commune — a movement which, through its democratization of public space, had begun to blur the social hierarchies that Versailles fought so hard to maintain. As Peter Starr points out, the Commune was noteworthy simply for the amount of vitriol leveled against it by its critics.<sup>130</sup> However, it is not just in contemporary rhetoric that we can find the ways Versailles attempted to bury the Commune for good, and many of these efforts were in the very geography of the city itself. The Commune saw huge numbers of people participating directly in Paris' governance and in public affairs.<sup>131</sup> The reassertion of Versailles' power illustrated the inextricable link between politics and place within the city.

The violent repression of the Commune saw a new growth of the long-lasting association of political radicalism with social and sexual 'deviance,' which manifested particularly in the working-class areas that had first engendered the insurrection, especially Montmartre — the location of the first outbreak of rebellion to protect the cannons on March 18. During the Prussian siege, Louise Michel said, "Montmartre, the mairie, the vigilance committees, the clubs and inhabitants, were along with Belleville the

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<sup>130</sup> Peter Starr, *Commemorating Trauma: The Paris Commune and Its Cultural Aftermath*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>131</sup> *The Communards of Paris, 1871*. Ed. Stewart Edwards. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 40.

nightmare of the party of Order.”<sup>132</sup> And in fact, in the decades after the Commune, Montmartre became shorthand for both the uprising itself, but also its suppression, and the Third Republic began to see it as a “delinquent community” — a symbol of deviance from republican norms.<sup>133</sup> The 1880s and 90s actually saw the establishment of Montmartre as a subversive liminal space where artists, anarchists, and prostitutes all lived. While Montmartre’s marginality meant it escaped the brunt of police surveillance and repression, prostitutes were regularly rounded up in the quartier, anarchist editorial offices were suppressed, and ‘deviant political behavior’ was still closely monitored, especially given Montmartre’s close association with the Commune.<sup>134</sup> The *butte*<sup>135</sup> was widely and loudly critical of the Third Republic’s hypocrisy, and openly dismissive of Prime Minister Jules Ferry’s advocacy of art only for “useful purpose.”<sup>136</sup>

*Fin-de-siècle* Montmartre became famous for its cabarets, its artists, and its social transgressiveness. It became a liminal space —where class, gender, and sexuality were constantly blurred. In fact, a part of its new notoriety stemmed from its role as the seat of government during the Commune.<sup>137</sup> Many prominent *Communards* had been from Montmartre, and in the years following the Commune, it attracted political dissidents,

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<sup>132</sup> Quoted in Hazan, *The Invention of Paris*, 236.

<sup>133</sup> Munholland, “Republican Order and Republican Tolerance”, p. 16

<sup>134</sup> Munholland, “Republican Order and Republican Tolerance”, p. 30.

<sup>135</sup> A hill directly north of the city center (see fig. 1)

<sup>136</sup> Munholland, “Republican Order and Republican Tolerance”, p. 18

<sup>137</sup> Gabriel P. Weisberg, “Montmartre’s Lure: An Impact on Mass Culture”, in *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 1.

artists, and prostitutes. Many of the Communards who had lived in Montmartre had been deported after *la semaine sanglante* to New Caledonia. When the Republic granted them amnesty in 1880, many returned to the *butte*. The *fin-de-siècle* was also a high point of the French anarchist movement, and all but one of the major anarchist editorial offices were headquartered in Montmartre.<sup>138</sup> After a series of bombings, the Republic suppressed anarchist media, and by 1895, when the movement began to recover, Montmartre itself had become tarnished by widespread commercialism. However, even this growing commercialism of the time relied on Montmartre's reputation as a subversive center — something that the anarchist movement only added to.

Montmartre also became the site of the Catholic Church's most dramatic reassertion of its power in the city — the basilica of Sacré-Coeur, which looms over the entire city of Paris, and is still an imposing presence to this day. It was both a massive reassertion of the power of the church after the anticlericalism of the Commune and a statement of the power of the new moral order in the heart of Paris' most immoral district. Although largely symbolic, Sacré-Coeur demonstrated the wealth of the church and a return to conservatism in the early Third Republic.

The *Communard* Jules Vallès described the contradictions of class and respectability of the 1880s in his book *Tableau de Paris*, in which he describes the Jardin des Tuileries:

A bit of grass and a little shadow in the former reserved garden, where the emperor had the sole right to walk and where the girls now came to prowl the evenings in search of poor libertines. It's the promenade of

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<sup>138</sup> Richard D. Sonn, "Marginality and Transgression: Anarchy's Subversive Allure", in *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), p. 123

courtesans of twenty *sous* the caress, just past the one for the courtesans of twenty thousand *écus*.<sup>139</sup>

Paris had changed since the end of the Second Empire, and the public spaces that had once been reserved for the wealthy had become a space claimed and used by *filles publiques*. As Ross argues, Vallès' description of the presence of sex workers is deliberate — it illustrates the ways that the presence of prostitutes in public space can undermine the power of the regime. The Tuileries garden, once solely accessed by the highest authority, had become a place signifying the instability of social and political power.<sup>140</sup>

Even in the wake of the Third Empire's desperate attempt to restore public morality and political authority, the social landscape of Paris had changed dramatically. For revolutionaries and reactionaries in France alike, prostitution held a particular level of anxiety and uncertainty. For those opposed to the Commune's aims, prostitutes represented all of the Commune's failures, as well as the potential fate of respectable women caught up in its madness. For many *Communards*, prostitution was an unpleasant reminder of the moral corruption of the Second Empire and a blemish on their attempt at a society free from economic coercion (but still bound by the constraints of bourgeois moralism. In both cases, officials used images of prostitution to cement their own legitimacy, while attempting (with varying success) to undermine the moral authority of their opponents. For many *Communards*, prostitution's ties to previous regimes made it unwelcome in the new city they were creating. But even in a city in the midst of a siege and political uprising, sexual morality proved to be an inescapable criterion to gauge the

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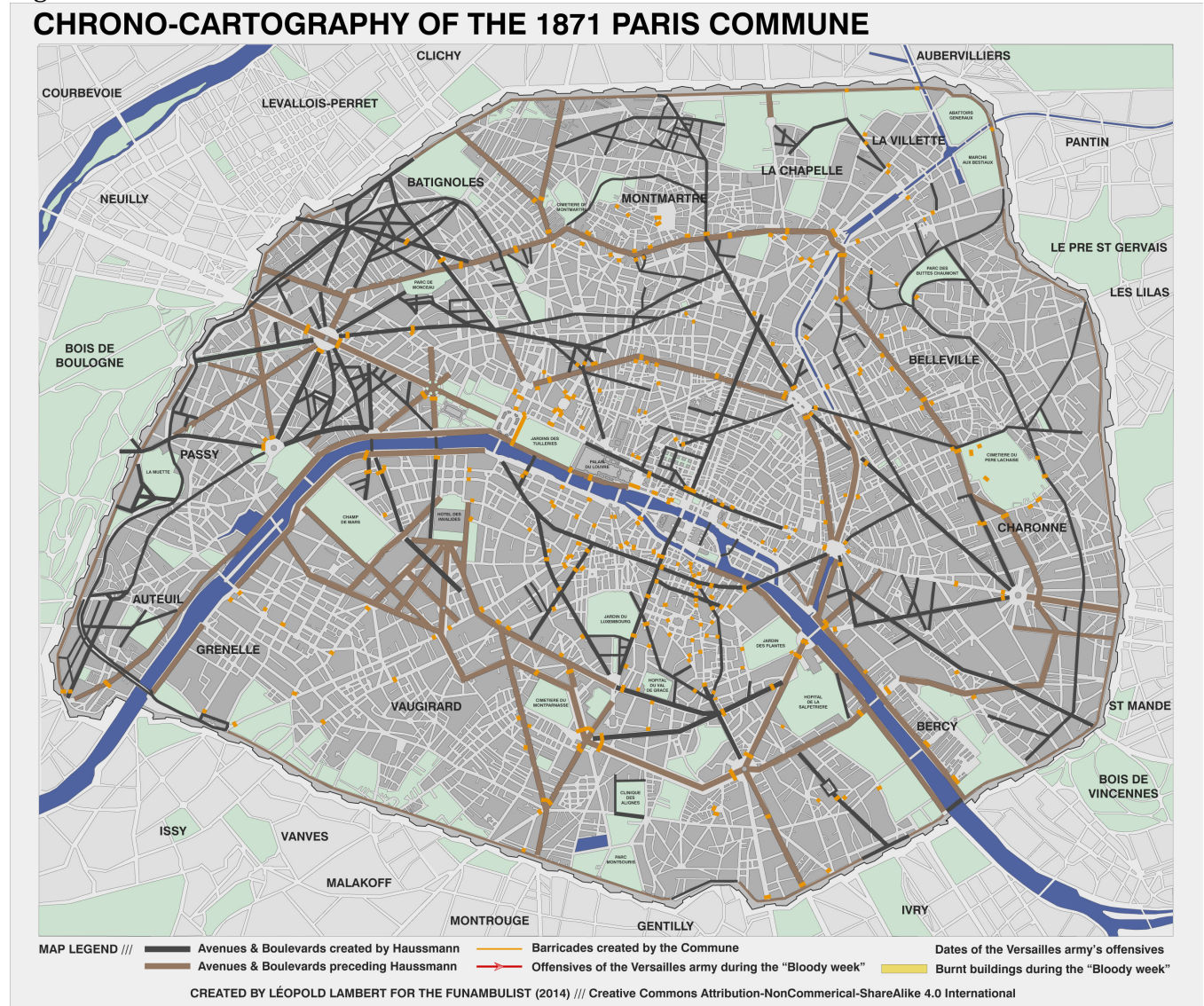
<sup>139</sup> Jules Vallès quoted in Ross, "Urban Desires", 29

<sup>140</sup> Ross, "Urban Desires," 30.

success or failure of the new social order. Sex work, even after the end of the Commune, provided a touchstone for many of the Third Republic's worst fears, and even when not overtly referenced, remained an integral part of the political rhetoric of social control for a long time after.

## Appendix

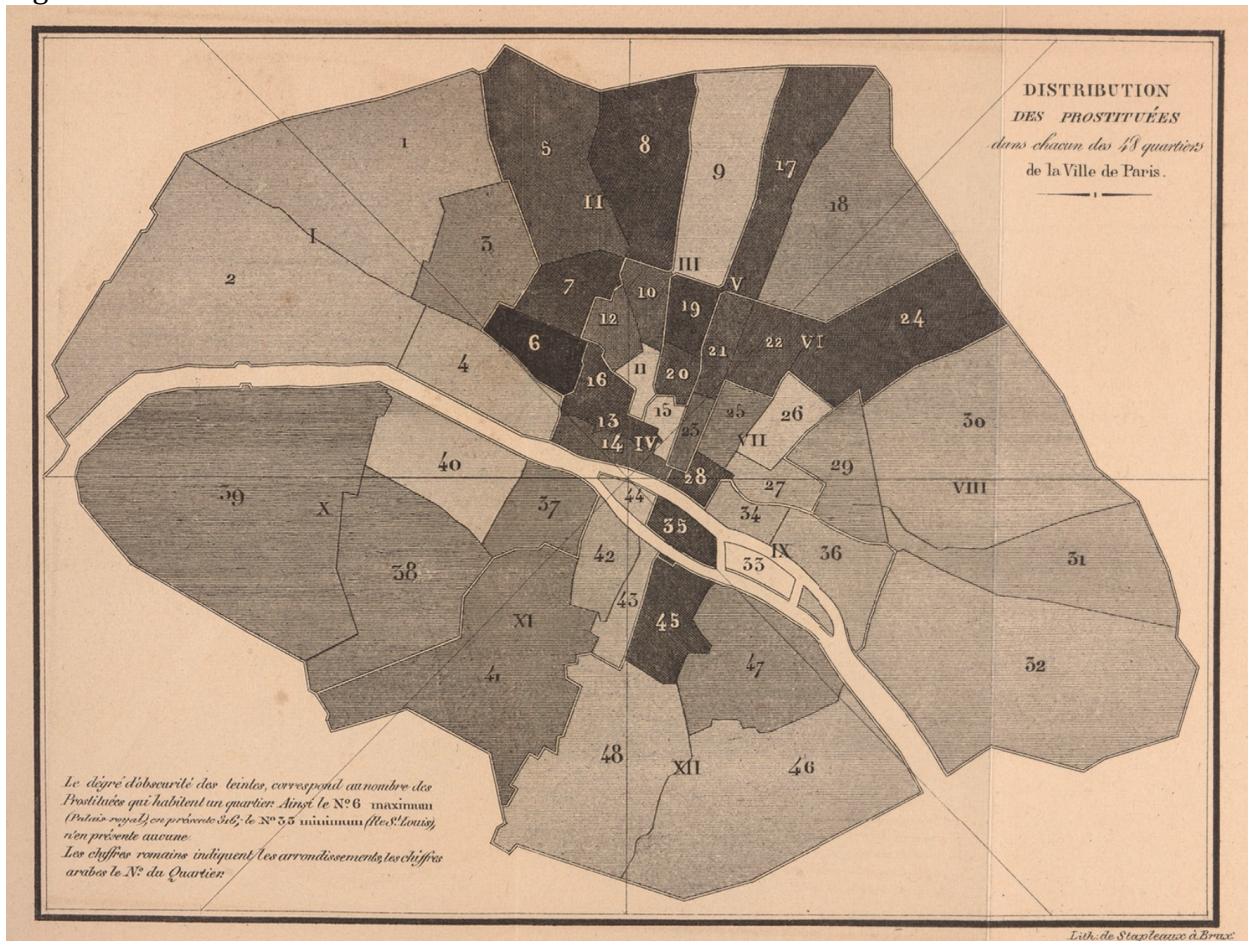
Fig. 1



**The Funambulist: Chrono-cartography of the 1871 Paris Commune**  
<https://thefunambulist.net/history/history-chronological-cartography-of-the-1871-paris-commune>



Fig. 2



# **Distribution of Prostitutes in Each of the 48 Quarters of the City of Paris, 1836**

Cornell University — PJ Mode Collection of Persuasive Cartography

<https://persuasivemaps.library.cornell.edu/copyright>

Fig. 3



**Rue des Moulins, 1894**

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 1894

National Gallery of Art

<https://images.nga.gov/en/page/openaccess.html>



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