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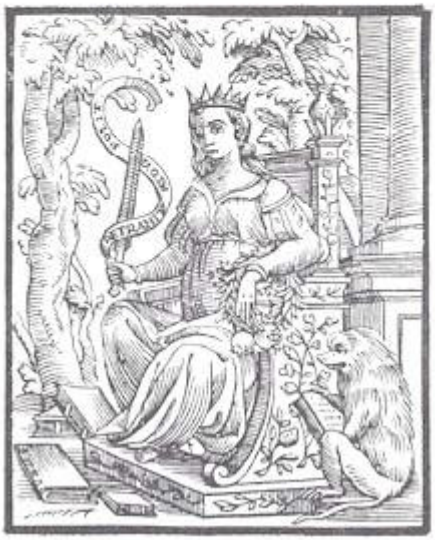

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French Revolutionary Thought and the early Third Republic

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In late May 1871, the French army marched into Paris and brought the two-month long Paris Commune, France's last nineteenth-century revolution, to a bloody end. Many revolutionaries were killed in the streets during the Commune's final days, 4500 were convicted and deported to the South Pacific, and those escaping death and arrest were forced into exile. As such, historians have overwhelmingly characterised revolution as a thing of the past by the 1870s. 'In this burning Paris', François Furet claimed, 'the French Revolution said its goodbyes to History'.[1] Furet is by no means the only historian to have advanced such a thesis, and work on the revolutionary movement often ends decisively in 1871.[2] The fall of the Commune, in other words, marked a significant historical break, after which French politics and attitudes towards revolutions, revolutionaries, and their place in society were irrevocably changed.

This perception has proceeded largely from the widespread association of revolution with recent French history and tradition. Scholars have devoted a great deal of space and effort to elaborating the political and cultural uses of the French Revolution by subsequent historical actors,[3] arguing that it is '*only* in the light' of the Revolution that subsequent French history can be understood.[4] Unsurprisingly, this has been particularly prevalent in work on later French revolutionaries.[5] While the

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[1] F. Furet, *La Révolution de Turgot à Jules Ferry* (Paris: Hachette, 1988), p.489.

[2] See for example J. Plamenatz, *The Revolutionary Movement in France 1815-71* (London: Longmans, 1965. First published, 1952); P. Darriulat, *Les patriotes: la gauche républicaine et la nation 1830-1871* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001).

[3] P. Nora, 'General Introduction: Between Memory and History' in *Realms of Memory, Vol. 1,* ed. P. Nora, 1-21, at p.5. The literature on this subject is vast. See for example A. Gérard, *La Révolution française: mythes et interprétations (1789-1970)* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970); F. Furet, *La Gauche et la Révolution française au milieu du XIXe siècle: Edgar Quinet et la question du Jacobinisme 1865-1870* (Paris: Hachette, 1986); G. Best (ed.), *The Permanent Revolution: The French Revolution and its Legacy 1789-1989* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988); S. Hazareesingh (ed.), *The Jacobin Legacy in Modern France: Essays in Honour of Vincent Wright* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

[4] R. Gildea, *The Past in French History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p.61. Emphasis mine. See also J.F. Stone, *Sons of the Revolution: Radical Democrats in France 1862-1914* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); R. Gildea, *Children of the Revolution: The French, 1799-1914* (London: Allen Lane, 1998).

[5] See for example R. Soltau, *French Political Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1931), p.xvii; C. Willard, *Socialisme et communisme français* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1978. First published 1967), p.8; P. Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition: The Blanquists in French*

elucidation of such connections is undoubtedly fruitful, the sheer abundance of work on tradition and the force with which historians have emphasised its importance has given the impression that revolution in France during the nineteenth century was understood exclusively in the light of 1789.[6]

According to this definition, those openly identifying as revolutionaries after 1871 could only ever be anachronistic. Bounded by the parameters of eighteenth-century France, 'revolution' embodied a specific set of symbolic and conceptual characteristics, and in the new Third Republic, none of these represented a viable form of political opposition. While the memory of revolution may have lived on, historians have suggested, the threat of a real, material revolution was dead – and with it, the concept's power to incite meaningful political opposition.

This paper suggests that this was not the case. More specifically, it shall make two points. Firstly, that understandings of revolution during this period were more multilayered than previously assumed. Revolutionary activists did not conceive of revolution only in terms of recent French history, or as a thing of the past. Rather, they continued to view it as a viable political action and, drawing upon a variety of different 'traditions' and temporalities, sought to recast the concept in broad, flexible, and expansive terms. These were designed to simultaneously appeal to convinced activists, seek out new audiences, and redefine large swathes of the population as revolutionaries, thus ensuring their own continued political relevance.

Secondly, this broad conception of revolution was not simply a response to the failure of the Commune and the changed circumstances of the Third Republic. Rather, it had been a feature of revolutionary thought since at least the 1850s when, in

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Politics, 1864-1893 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p.3; M. Crapez, *La Gauche réactionnaire: mythes de la plèbe et de la race* (Paris: Berg International Editeurs, 1997), p.15.

[6] J. Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic: A History of Political Thought in France since the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.390.

the wake of 1848, radicals and revolutionaries across Europe had begun to search for alternative ways to define and present revolution. While the specific formulations of the 1870s and early 1880s may have been novel and specific, the ways in which activists conceived of revolution and its place in French society more generally were not. Consequently, if there were a point during the nineteenth century at which the means of thinking and talking about revolution changed, it was 1848 rather than 1871.

Although activists discussed revolution in several different contexts during this period, this paper shall focus on just two. The first section addresses the suggestion that revolution during this period was defined by the parameters of 1789. By exploring more fully the links between history, France, and revolution, it demonstrates that these connections were indicative neither of deep revolutionary attachment to the French Revolution nor the construction of an enduring 'revolutionary tradition'. The second section explores one of the ways in which activists sought to rejuvenate revolution – namely, by situating it within the context of evolution and the natural world, simultaneously neutralising their own recent failures and redefining revolution as the practice of everyday life.

For the purposes of this paper, 'revolutionary activist' is defined as anyone during this period who either took part in the Paris Commune or expressed strong solidarity with it after the event. This will enable us to examine a much wider range of sources than narrower (and, for this period, less useful) classifications such as 'socialist', 'nationalist', or 'anarchist'.

I

As much of the secondary literature has indicated, work on the future of revolution from this period repeatedly referred to the past. For many activists, revolution was a profoundly historical concept. Knowledge of the past was considered indispensable to the proper understanding of present discontents, and if the revolutionary movement aspired to either widespread support or a realistic chance of success, it had first to establish an historical basis for its ideas.[7]

The historical events to feature most frequently in such work were undoubtedly the French Revolution and its successors of 1830 and 1848 (henceforth collectively called 1789 or the Revolution). Writers frequently referred to workers as 'the Fourth Estate'[8] and revolutionary events, meetings, and congresses were similarly swathed in the symbolism of 1789, from busts of Marianne to red caps of liberty.[9] Indeed, it would not be an exaggeration to suggest that the French Revolution was everywhere. Wherever the contemporary revolutionary turned, whether they were at a political meeting, in a café, or at home reading the news, they were likely to stumble across it.

Historians have often interpreted the frequency of these references as evidence of a strong attachment to 1789. Clear memories of 1789 and strong convictions regarding its contemporary political utility, they suggest, formed the basis of activists' understandings of revolution and their own place in society during this period. As

[7] J. Andrieu, *Notes pour servir à l'histoire de la Commune de Paris en 1871* (Paris: Payot, 1971), pp.154-55. See also L'anniversaire du 18 mars 1871', *Le Prolétaire* (Paris), 18 March 1879; 'Il y a cinq ans'. *L'Égalité* (Paris), 19 November 1882;

[8] Intelligence report to the Préfecture de Police, 24 February 1881 (Lyons). APP Ba199/476; Arnould, *L'État et la Révolution*, p.69; J. Guesde, *Services publics et socialisme* (Bordeaux: Imprimerie E. Forastié, 1883), p.4; B. Malon, 'Les Partis ouvriers en France', in *La revue socialiste* 5 (5 May 1880), 257-269, at p.266.

[9] 'Quatrième congrès national-socialiste-ouvrier', *L'Émancipation*, 20 November 1880.

Jacques Moreau recently claimed in *Les socialistes français et le mythe révolutionnaire*, revolutionaries during this period

> 'lived through 1870-71, their parents remembered 1848 and even 1830, and the memory of the Great Revolution was less than a hundred years old. When they spoke of revolution, it was an event of this kind that they envisaged'.[10]

Upon closer inspection, however, revolutionaries' relationships with 1789 appear to have been more considerably complicated than this. Several changed their opinions about the Revolution across multiple texts,[11] while others sought to distance themselves from it altogether. In 1878, one writer observed dispassionately that

> 'after six Revolutions in less than a century, a beheaded king, four others dead in exile, and three Republics, the people in France are no more advanced than they were on day one.'[12]

During the nineteenth century, many writers presented detailed historicophilosophical interpretations of the Revolution that left little doubt as to their ideas on recent French history or its relationship to contemporary politics.[13] Revolutionaries from this period, however, were visibly not among them. Certainly activists frequently referred to the Revolution and appeared interested in establishing a general connection to it, but there's little evidence to suggest that activists in the immediate post-Commune period defined or interpreted revolution in the terms of 1789.

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[10] Moreau, *Les socialistes français et le mythe révolutionnaire*, p.26. See also Jennings, *Revolution and the Republic*, p.390; F. Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* (trans.) E. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981. First published in French, 1978), p.5; Hutton, *The Cult of the Revolutionary Tradition*, pp.14-15; p.166.

[11] Compare G. Lefrançais, *L'idée libertaire dans la Commune de 1871* (Cahiers de contre-courant 66, April 1958. First published, 1874), p.18; G. Lefrançais, 'Juin 1848: les Républicains bourgeois devant la République sociale', *Le Travailleur* 2:1 (January-February 1878), p.32. Compare also 'Notre abstention', *Le Prolétaire*, 24 July 1880; 'Juillet 1789', *Le Prolétariat*, 11 July 1885.

[12] A. Arnould, *Histoire populaire et parlementaire de la Commune de Paris*, 3 vols. (Brussels: Imprimerie A. Lefevre, 1878), vol.3, p.124.

[13] Furet, *La Gauche et la Révolution française au milieu du XIXe siècle*; L. Blanc, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 12 vols. (Paris: Langlois et Leclerc, 1847-1862); J. Michelet, *Histoire de la Révolution française*, 9 vols. (Paris: Chamerot, 1847-1853).

Rather, it was elsewhere that activists found their revolutionary history. A variety of different writers traced the Commune's heritage to medieval 'revolutionaries' such as Étienne Marcel,[14] Cathar martyrs,[15] and even '[t]he slave revolts of antiquity'.[16] While revolutionaries certainly mentioned 1789 in their work on the Commune, their historical reflections didn't end at the eighteenth century. They also reached considerably further back into the past for their examples, in fact often suggesting that they identified far more closely with these than with 1789 and its successors. While the Revolution featured in revolutionary accounts of the Commune's history, simultaneously these longer genealogies self-consciously provincialised it.

By providing these additional historical precedents for the Commune, revolutionaries sought to establish an alternative rationale for revolution. Whereas during this period the French Revolution was chiefly characterised as a struggle for legal and political rights,[17] earlier figures like Spartacus and Marcel were overwhelmingly associated with social or populist revolts. In establishing links to such characters as well as to 1789, revolutionaries thus pointedly attempted to construct an image of the Commune, revolution, and themselves that was not bounded by modern French revolutionary traditions. Rather than simply seeking to build upon or enhance the historical legitimacy provided by 1789, they aimed to establish a much older source of legitimacy, and in doing so redefine revolution as an action that transcended the political.

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[14] *Qui vive!* (London), 12 October 1871. For more feudal references, see Lefrançais, *Étude sur le mouvement communaliste*, p.393; Arnould, *Histoire populaire et parlementaire de la Commune*, vol.2, pp.48-49.

[15] Arnould, *Histoire populaire et parlementaire de la Commune*, vol.3, pp.24-25, p.104; P. Lafargue, 'Blagues bourgeoises: la patrie', *L'Égalité*, 17 November 1884.

[16] C. Beslay, *1830-1848-1870: Mes souvenirs* (Neuchâtel: Imprimerie James Attinger, 1873), p.472. See also B. Malon, *Spartacus, ou la guerre des esclaves* (Verviers: Imprimerie d'Emile Piette, 1876).

[17] Intelligence report to the Préfecture de Police, 11 September 1877 (London). APP Ba429/2406; Lefrançais, *République et Révolution*, p.21; 'Prudence!', *Le Prolétaire*, 8 December 1883.

This expansive approach towards revolutionary history was unsurprising given the changing status of revolution and the Revolution in France during this period. By the end of the 1870s, the security of the Republican State was to all intents and purposes assured. The 1875 Constitutional Laws, the fall of the Moral Order government in 1877, and the installation of the actively republican Opportunists had finally brought to an end the attempts at monarchical restoration that had characterised the early 1870s. Yet several powerful and influential sections of society including the army and the Church remained unconvinced of the ability of either the Opportunists or republican government more generally to adequately represent their interests.[18] Indeed, the Catholic Church did not endorse the Republic until 1892. While the Republican State may have become legally and constitutionally secure in the second half of the 1870s, for many years republicans' place within it was not, and the precise form that the government would take remained to be decided.

These concerns derived in large part from the persistent association of republican government with revolution. Satisfactorily resolving this situation was, as Sudhir Hazareesingh has observed, one of the most important tasks that advocates of republican government faced, both in opposition during the 1870s and after the Opportunists came to power.[19] On the one hand, republicans were eager to pay the Revolution the respect that they believed it deserved.[20] Yet on the other, it was essential to reassure sceptical citizens and social institutions that a truly Republican State would ensure political, social, and economic stability rather than destroy it.

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[18] Plamenatz, *The Revolutionary Movement in France*, p.162; P. Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp.247-49.

[19] S. Hazareesingh, *Intellectual Founders of the Republic: Five Studies in Nineteenth-Century French Republican Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005. First published, 2001), p.297.

[20] For liberal praise of the Revolution see É. Laboulaye, *Le parti libéral: son programme et son avenir*, 4th edn (Paris: Charpentier, 1864), p.316. For more on the Revolution's broad appeal, see Hazareesingh, *Intellectual Founders of the Republic*, pp.294-5.

The Revolution played a central role in the government's efforts to prove its political worth. Rather than seeking to distance themselves from France's revolutionary history, republicans embraced it. After being welcomed back to France with in 1870, *quarante-huitard* exiles such as Victor Hugo and Louis Blanc quickly took up seats in the Assemblée nationale. In 1880 the government declared the Fête de la Bastille a national holiday, and the Revolution's centenary in 1889 was also lavishly celebrated. The *Exposition universelle* even included a scale replica of the Bastille and its surroundings, enabling visitors to place themselves in the shoes of famous revolutionaries past. The horrors of the Paris Commune clearly had not put the Opportunists and their allies off the French revolutionary past. Indeed, during this period it was promoted and celebrated on a scale not seen since the 1790s.

At the same time as these celebrations lauded revolution, they also historicised it. Republicans demonstrably did not seek to draw any lessons for the future from 1789, but rather emphasised its historical character. By promoting, indeed apotheosising the events of 1789, they hoped to definitively tie revolution the action to Revolution the historical event. Revolutions, in other words, did not take place in history: they were history. In doing so, they sought to concurrently neutralise two diametrically opposed threats to republican government, denying political legitimacy to potential future revolutionaries on the one hand and reassuring more conservative members of the population that they too sought stability on the other.

In fact, they suggested, republican government was more than simply in favour of social and political stability: it was essential to its maintenance. It was the Republic, they suggested, that had instituted full and democratic elections, and it was the Opportunists who had put an end to attempts at restoration. It was republicans, their ideas, and their tenure of power that kept revolution at bay. This rhetoric was thus a

warning as well as a reassurance. Through the promotion of their specific interpretation of the Revolution, Opportunists and radicals sought to stabilise the position of truly republican government by cautioning its detractors that a return to anything else could bring about a reversal of the previous decade's progress and the relative political stability France enjoyed in the early 1880s.

It is in this context that revolutionary uses of 1789 must be understood. Revolutionaries were well aware of the attempts to use 1789 to excise revolution from contemporary political life, and they were also aware of the growing popularity of this interpretation. In 1881, Gabrielle Deville complained that

> '[t]he public love and respect [the Revolution]. They bow religiously before "the immortal principles" inscribed in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* without examining whether, for the immense majority, they are anything other than a trick of the eye.'[21]

Revolutionaries' own complicated engagement with 1789 was central to their attempts to respond to the challenge of a republicanism that venerated the Revolution, but neither wanted nor needed to endorse revolution.

By publicly associating themselves with its imagery, activists attempted to reestablish their own connections to the recent French past and, if not wrest control of 1789 from the government, then at least remind the population that the Revolution's aims had been wider than those suggested. At the same time, situating 1789 within a much broader historical genealogy enabled revolutionaries to deal with the unquestionable popularity of the Opportunists' interpretation, diminishing 1789's significance, whilst simultaneously positioning themselves and revolution as indispensible facets of contemporary French political life.

[21] G. Deville, 'Quatre-Vingt-Treize', *Le Citoyen*, 26 December 1881.

Yet while activists' ambivalent attitudes towards the Revolution were politically advantageous in these circumstances, they were not solely a product of them. Rather, this ambivalence had been a regular feature of their thought since before the Commune. In order to demonstrate this, let us take a more specific example: the thought of Louis-Auguste Blanqui. Unlike many of the younger, more prolific activists of this period, by 1871 Blanqui was a long-standing member of the revolutionary movement. By his death in January 1881, he had been involved in revolutionary and radical politics for almost sixty years. During this time, he had taken part in two major revolutions, masterminded numerous smaller *attentats*, and spent long years in prison as a result. As well as an activist, Blanqui was also a theorist, and over the years aired his ideas in a variety of media – in books, pamphlets, and newspapers where possible, and also in speeches from the dock during his numerous court appearances. Upon his death, then, Blanqui had experienced almost everything that the revolutionary movement had to offer, and his work thus provides an excellent window through which to examine the place of history and the Revolution in revolutionary thought, both during this period and prior to it.

Like many other revolutionaries, Blanqui had little to say about the Revolution between the Commune and his death.[22] Even prior to the failure of the Commune, however, he had not been slavishly devoted to it. This was perhaps most clearly demonstrated in his newspaper *La patrie en danger*, which was published for several months between late 1870 and early 1871, and which Blanqui both edited and wrote for. *La patrie en danger* mentioned recent French history more than Blanqui's later work, running several articles on the Revolution within two weeks in October 1870.

[22] The two full-length works Blanqui published after the Commune barely mention the Revolution at all. See L.-A. Blanqui, *L'éternité par les astres* (ed.) L. Block de Behar (Geneva: Éditions Slatkine, 2009. First published, 1872); L.-A. Blanqui, *L'armée esclave et opprimée: suppression de la conscription enseignement militaire de la jeunesse armée nationale sédentaire* (Paris: Au bureau du journal *Ni dieu ni maître*, 1880).

Again, however, Blanqui did not use these articles to suggest that contemporary revolutionaries should seek to replicate the actions of their eighteenth-century predecessors.[23] While he may have mentioned the Revolution more frequently in *La patrie en danger* than he did after the public defeat of his tactics during the Commune, these mentions nonetheless indicated no deep intellectual commitment.

In fact, *La patrie en danger*'s references to the Revolution derived primarily from the context of the Franco-Prussian War. Following France's loss in the Battle of Sedan and the swift advance of the Prussian Army, various writers and politicians including Victor Hugo and Jules Favre had turned to emotive and patriotic rhetoric in an attempt to galvanise the French population.[24] In referring to the nation's revolutionary past, it was this rhetoric that *La patrie en danger* aimed to engage in. Indeed, in its first issue Blanqui explicitly stated that '[i]n the presence of an enemy, parties and differences disappear.'[25] The purpose of Blanqui's references to the Revolution during this period was thus demonstrably not to foment internal discord or a new French revolution. Rather, they formed part of a patriotic myth that a diverse array of writers combined to create in order to promote unity during a moment of national crisis.

It is tempting to view contemporary activists' ambivalence towards the Revolution after the Commune as a definitive shift in revolutionary thought and rhetoric. Prompted by the very visible failure of 1871 and the changed political context of the Third Republic, revolutionaries abandoned their previous commitment to 1789 in search of a more appropriate historical genealogy for revolution. But while these

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[23] 'Le Girondisme', *La patrie en danger*, 15-16 October 1870; '1792-1870', *La patrie en danger*, 26 October 1870 and 30 October 1870.
[24] See for example Victor Hugo au peuple français', *L'Electeur libre*, 18 September 1870; 'La circulaire de M. Jules Favre', *L'Electeur libre* (Paris), 20 September 1870.
[25] 'En présence de l'ennemi, plus de partis ni de nuances.' 'La patrie en danger', *La patrie en danger*, 7 September 1870.

circumstances undoubtedly contributed towards the intellectual decisions activists made in this period, their attitudes towards the Revolution can't be attributed entirely to them. As Blanqui's work suggests, intellectual neutrality on the subject of 1789 was a continuity of revolutionary thought rather than a significant change. By summer 1871, activists hadn't sought to systematically define revolution in terms of France's recent history for some time. Rather than a shift in thought, their ambivalence after 1871 represented the continuation of a pattern. The pattern was simply different from what most historians have assumed.

II

History thus played a central role in activists' attempts to reshape revolution for post-Commune France. Yet despite its importance, this definition of revolution was of no aid to activists in respect to quotidian politics and the practice of everyday life. While constructing an appropriate historical genealogy could establish the theoretical importance of revolution, it spoke of revolution only in hypotheticals: the promise of future action, as opposed to tangible steps that its supporters could take in the present. In order to redress this, activists turned to another definition: that of revolution as a natural law.

Like some of the ideas already discussed, neither the problem of everyday life nor the solution proposed in the early Third Republic was new. As the failure of the Commune prompted many revolutionaries to reassess their actions, the defeat of 1848 had likewise forced its participants to confront the failure of their own tactics and prompted a wholesale reassessment of the ways in which radicals and revolutionaries

conceived of their own ideas, their place within society, and the way they presented it to others.

In search of alternatives to the quasi-religious rhetoric of 1848, defeated radicals across Europe alighted upon science and nature. Natural interpretations of human history and action were eagerly taken up by various prominent revolutionary theorists in France, including the academic Gustave Flourens (later to die during the Commune). In 1863, Flourens delivered a series of lectures at the Collège de France on the subject of the natural history of man, in which he argued that man was an animal, a product of nature, and his actions were therefore bound by the same laws.[26] By placing man and his actions within the context of natural history, Flourens and other activists aimed to redefine revolution entirely. Revolutions, they argued, were not brought about solely by human will, but also by natural processes and as such, it was inevitable that they would rise and fall. Redefining revolution in this way enabled activists to diminish the significance not only of 1848's failure, but also the failure of individual revolutions in general. If it were an inevitable part of a natural process, then failure said nothing about the worth or value of their ideas.

This newfound interest derived from several sources. In 1859, Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of the Species*,[27] which proved an international sensation, censured and discussed in equal measure.[28] Perhaps more importantly, though, revolutionaries' interest in science also arose directly from 1848. Namely, from the relative success of the Positivists. Unlike other activists, the Positivists had not engaged

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[26] G. Flourens, *L'histoire de l'homme: cours d'histoire naturelle des corps organisées au Collège de France* (Paris: Imprimerie de E. Martinet, 1863-1864).

[27] C. Darwin, *On the Origin of Species by means of Natural Selection, or the preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life* (London: John Murray, 1859).

[28] The book was translated into French in 1862, and two translations and four editions appeared between then and 1873. C.R. Darwin, *De l'origine des espèces, ou des lois du progrès chez les êtres organisés* (trans.) C.-A. Royer (Paris: Guillaumin & Masson, 1862, 1866, 1870); C.R. Darwin, *De l'origine des espèces au moyen de la sélection naturelle, ou, la lutte pour l'existence dans la nature* (trans.) J.-J. Moulinié (Paris: Reinwald, 1873. First published in English, 1859).

in the mythological and messianic revolutionary promises that characterised much of the revolution's rhetoric. Their new social doctrine based upon the sciences had enabled them to more easily endure the failures of 1848-51, and they were arguably the most active radicals of the 1850s. In gravitating towards a more scientific description of revolution, activists thus aimed to publicly demonstrate that they had learned the lessons of 1848; that they were no longer naïve about revolutions or politics, and that in the future they would be able to make any changes they wrought last.

In France, much of the support for this new definition of revolution came from the student population. Unlike schooling, higher education was left largely untouched by the Second Empire's educational reforms, and radical students quickly established themselves as some of the imperial government's most vocal opponents. This opposition often manifested itself as support for radical science, and coalesced particularly around two overlapping groups: medical students and the student journalists of the *rive gauche*.[29] Many of these, such as Georges Clemenceau, Paul Lafargue, and Charles Longuet became leading figures in radical and revolutionary politics during the Third Republic. The revolutionary turn to science in the 1870s and early 1880s was thus not the result of completely novel theorisation, and neither could it be classified as a return to an older idea. Rather, it represented the continuation of a firmly established way of understanding revolution and social change; one that the revolutionaries of the early Third Republic, moreover, had been deeply personally involved in.

The association of revolution with science was widely discussed and took a variety of forms during this period.[30] The most widely discussed scientific concept was

[29] For contemporary discussion of student involvement in radical politics, see B. Malon, 'Étudiants et prolétaires', *L'Intransigeant*, 22 February 1885. For further details, see Nord, *The Republican Moment*, pp.34-35; p.44.

[30] 'La semaine scientifique', *Le Citoyen*, December 1881-May 1882; L. Michel, 'Notes encylopédiques', vol.1 (2 vols.), Louise Michel: Fonds Moscou, International Institute of Social History (IISH) 233:5/1, p.95; 'Les primitifs', *L'Intransigeant*, 28 October 1885.

undoubtedly evolution, and activists from across the revolutionary spectrum rushed to proclaim themselves 'evolutionist on the one hand, and revolutionary on the other'.[31] In order to fully understand the ways in which activists during this period conceived of revolution, it is thus necessary to first understand their ideas of and interactions with evolution.

The fullest and clearest discussion of the relationship between evolution and revolution from this period is to be found in the work of Élisée Reclus. Reclus was an established geographer, well known and highly respected in international academic circles. His nineteen-volume magnum opus, *La nouvelle géographie universelle* was published simultaneously in French and English between 1876 and 1894, and in 1892 was awarded the gold medal of the Paris Geographical Society.[32] Also an anarchist and member of the Commune, Reclus was banished from France in 1872. Along with many Communards as well as other revolutionary exiles such as Georgi Plekhanov and Vera Zasulich, Reclus settled in Switzerland, where he remained until returning to France in 1880.

In the international exile community based in Geneva, Reclus found both a host of new collaborators and a large audience for his ideas. He took full advantage of these opportunities, editing periodicals and delivering frequent public lectures. While Reclus had certainly been active and well known in revolutionary circles prior to the Commune, the experience of exile significantly enhanced his visibility and the level of his engagement. Indeed both contemporaries and later historians have suggested that he was the exile community's 'moral leader'.[33]

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[31] P. Dervillers, 'La foi s'en va', *Le Prolétaire*, 7 January 1883.
[32] É. Reclus, *La nouvelle géographie universelle*, 19 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1876-1894).
[33] J.T. Joughin, *The Paris Commune in French Politics, 1871-1880*, 2 vols. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955), vol.1, p.85. For a similar assertion by a contemporary, see Copy of a report to the Préfecture de Police, 15 February 1876. APP Ba432/1768.

On 5 March 1880, Reclus delivered a public lecture in Geneva entitled 'Évolution et Révolution'. In it, he drew directly upon his academic work to highlight what he considered to be a contemporary political issue of pressing importance: the widespread misunderstanding and misuse of the concept of evolution. Over the course of the 1870s, Reclus suggested, the politicians, professionals, and industrialists of the *couches nouvelles* had become increasingly aware that neither the Commune's failure nor the establishment of the Third Republic had brought an end to social discontent. Fearful of the potential effects of future revolutionary challenges upon both their own livelihoods and the security of the Republic, politicians had alighted, with varying degrees of sincerity, upon evolution – or political reform – as an alternative to revolution. In present political discourse, Reclus noted, the two terms were 'constantly used...as though their meaning were absolutely antagonistic'.[34]

By advocating political evolution, politicians drew self-consciously upon the memory of science's radical associations under the Second Empire, and often their own involvement in it.[35] In utilising the language of science, Reclus argued, politicians aimed to present their ideas as a productive 'third way': an alternative to both revolution and reaction. This, it was hoped, would dissipate workers' anger at the persistent inequality of French social relations and with it, the potential for revolution. Whether their promises of gradual change were genuine or not, the political use of evolution during this period was thus little more than another weapon in the war upon revolution and the well being of the French working class. '[T]he word evolution', Reclus claimed, 'serves but to conceal a lie in the mouths of those who most willingly pronounce it'.[36]

[34] Reclus, *Évolution et Révolution*, p.3.
[35] Nord, *The Republican Moment*, pp.31-32.
[36] Reclus, *Évolution et Révolution*, pp.5-6.

Yet contemporary revolutionaries, Reclus argued, were equally complicit in this state of affairs. While their social and political intentions were undoubtedly better, activists in the period after the Commune had also frequently opposed the terms evolution and revolution. Following their break with radical republicans over the Commune, revolutionaries had too often turned their backs on political engagement and spurned the value of gradual change. While activists imagined that in doing so they were preserving the integrity of revolution, in fact they were alienating potential support in the form of workers that did not openly declare in favour of violent revolution. '[I]f all the oppressed have not the temperament of heroes', Reclus reminded his audience, 'they feel their sufferings none the less'.[37] Activists had effectively allowed politicians' definition of evolution to pass unchallenged, and had ceded control of science to their former radical and republican allies.

Evolution, in fact, was not an antidote to revolution, but its precursor. As Reclus had argued in his recent academic work, the evolution of the natural environment was not a process of peaceful, imperceptible change, but a cycle of 'destruction and renewal' in which gradual change prepared the way for sudden change, and vice versa.[38] The same, he suggested, was true of human society. While there had been no violent revolutionary upheavals since 1871, society was radically changing nonetheless:

> 'does not the great school of the outer world exhibit the prodigies of human industry equally to rich and poor, to those who have called these marvels into existence and those who profit by them? The poverty-stricken outcast can see railways, telegraphs, hydraulic rams, perforators, self-lighting matches, as well as the man of power, and he is no less impressed by them. Privilege has disappeared in the enjoyment of some of these grand conquests of science.'[39]

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[37] *Ibid.*, p.7.
[38] É. Reclus, *La terre: déscription des phénomènes de la vie du globe*, 2 vols. (Paris: Hachette, 1877. First published, 1868-1869), vol.1, p.ii.
[39] Reclus, *Évolution et Révolution*, pp.13-14; see also p.18.

While evolution and revolution often took different forms and moved at different speeds, their purpose – to effect change – was a shared one. It was not only the words, but also the concepts that 'closely resemble[d] one another'.[40] Indeed, they shared more than a common purpose. Rather, evolution and revolution were inextricably linked in a single cycle of progress: they were 'fundamentally one and the same thing'.[41] Evolution, Reclus argued, was thus a profoundly revolutionary concept, and an idea that contemporary activists eager to remain politically relevant must embrace.

The reaction to Reclus's lecture was immense. In the months after it was given, both the lecture and its content were much discussed at meetings and in the revolutionary press.[42] It was swiftly distributed in cheap pamphlet form in 1880 and proved extraordinarily successful, with a second edition appearing less than a year later.[43] An English translation soon followed and enjoyed similar attention, running to seven editions by 1891.[44] Indeed, the international popularity of *Évolution et Révolution* was such that in 1898 Reclus published a vastly extended and more theoretically detailed version that itself ran to at least six editions by 1910.[45]

In particular, it had a significant intellectual impact upon the French revolutionary movement in the early 1880s.[46] Reclus's lecture was thus more than simply the clearest elaboration of revolutionary interest in evolution; it was arguably the source of wider revolutionary interest in it during this period. Although activists occasionally mentioned other theorists such as Darwin, it was Reclus's definition with

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[40] *Ibid.*, p.1.
[41] *Ibid.*, p.3.
[42] A. Lecler, 'Évolution – Révolution', *Le Prolétaire*, 28 August 1880.
[43] For the second edition, see É. Reclus, *Évolution et révolution: conférence faite à Genève, le 5 mars 1880*, 2nd edn (Geneva: Imprimerie jurassienne, 1881).
[44] É. Reclus, *Evolution and Revolution*, 7th edn (London: W. Reeves, 1891. First published by International Publishing Company, 1885).
[45] É. Reclus, *L'évolution, la révolution, et l'idéal anarchique* (Paris: P.V. Stock, 1898). This version had itself run to at least six editions by 1910.
[46] For discussions of Reclus's evolution, see A. Lecler, 'Évolution – Révolution', *Le Prolétaire*, 28 August 1880; C. Bouis, 'Les deux républiques', *L'Intransigeant*, 30 August 1880. See also B. Malon. 'La reserve révolutionnaire', *L'Intransigeant*, 1 December 1883; 'Le possibilisme', *L'Égalité*, 5 February 1882.

which they were most familiar, and which they referred to the most. Where shortly after the lecture *Le Prolétaire* had felt it necessary to provide a definition of evolution for unfamiliar readers, by the mid-1880s it occupied a central position in numerous revolutionary programmes, sitting alongside revolution itself as one of their key beliefs.[47]

Given the extensive criticism meted out to the revolutionary movement in the lecture, it may seem surprising that they adopted its ideas so willingly. In the circumstances that revolutionaries found themselves in, though, its ideas were particularly useful. Reclus's lecture not only redefined evolution, but also revolution, by embedding it in the natural processes he had observed in his capacity as a geographer. In this interpretation, human revolutions were not violent political events or even acts of will, but iterations of a much wider natural process and their occurrence (or lack of), as well as their success or failure was beyond human control. Activists during this period hoped, like the defeated *quarante-huitards* in the 1850s and 1860s, to find definitive closure regarding the events of the Commune. By redefining revolution as a force of nature, they sought not to disown or hide their actions, but rather to place them in a wider context and, in doing so, demonstrate that their failure had been neither final nor unnatural. Revolution, in other words, was not dead; it had just been misunderstood.

The value of Reclus's revolution, however, was more than simply retrospective. It also made the practice of being a revolutionary in the post-Commune period considerably easier. For large parts of the nineteenth century, the life of a revolutionary had been characterised as one of sacrifice and ascetic devotion. By the time he died in 1881 Blanqui, for example, had spent over half of life in prison. By the 1870s the majority of French activists had publicly distanced themselves from these more

[47] A. Lecler, 'Évolution – Révolution', *Le Prolétaire*, 28 August 1880.

traditional models of revolution, yet participation in the revolutionary movement nonetheless continued to involve a substantial degree of dedication. Most commonly, this new dedication manifested itself in revolutionaries' increasing interest in and commitment to party organisation.[48] Whether in the form of sacrifice or of political parties, however, the message remained the same: revolution was an exclusive activity that, compared to other political positions, required an unusual level of dedication and commitment.

The characterisation of revolution as a natural event enabled activists to diminish the importance of this commitment. If revolution, were a natural, inevitable, and holistic process, then every action was a revolutionary act. Indeed, Reclus observed, '[i]n many a town where there is not one organised socialist group, all the workers without exception are already more or less consciously socialists'.[49] While determination, education, and organisation were undoubtedly useful, they were by no means necessary requirements for prospective revolutionaries.

By presenting revolution as a force of nature, they removed the constraints that a revolutionary lifestyle had previously imposed upon its adherents. This, activists hoped, would directly address what they believed to be a drain upon their numbers prompted largely by the rise of the Opportunists – an actively republican and reforming, less demanding alternative to revolution. By suggesting that, rather than a demanding life of dedication, being a revolutionary now required little in the way of sacrifice, activists aimed to remove the choice between ease and revolution and consequently render it a more attractive political prospect, both to complete outsiders and to former revolutionaries.

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[48] 'Manifeste du Comité central électoral', *Le Citoyen*, 10 December 1880.
[49] Reclus, *Évolution et Révolution*, p.8; p.13; p.17.

Equally, this new definition of revolution also smoothed activists' own reintegration into French political life. As well as heeding Reclus's advice to take potential 'shy radicals' more seriously, revolutionaries began to reassess their own level of participation in public life. After the fall of the Commune revolutionaries had, as Reclus observed, largely withdrawn from more mainstream politics. While revolutionaries' own hand had to a large extent been forced by exile and deportation, many activists spent the 1870s suggesting that their followers in France also abstain from national politics.[50] Yet while this policy of non-intervention had been justifiable from exiled revolutionaries looking in from the outside as the Moral Order politicians that had repressed the Commune ruled France, following the installation of the Opportunists and especially the general amnesty it began to look increasingly outdated and counterproductive.

Accordingly, towards the end of the 1870s revolutionary ideas on political participation underwent a significant public (if not private[51]) shift. As *Le Prolétaire* observed, 'all or nothing politics' usually led to 'nothing at all', and following their return to France in 1880 revolutionaries became increasingly involved in mainstream politics. Indeed, by 1883 even Marxists such as Deville had thrown their full weight behind political participation and reform, arguing that '[t]o grant reforms is to arm us; it is to strengthen us against our adversaries, who become weaker as we become stronger. The appetite grows with eating'. In practical terms, this represented not a change or a compromise, but a complete about turn from their political stance during the 1870s. Reclus's redefinition of revolution as the practice of everyday life, however, enabled

[50] See for example G. Lefrançais, *Un Communard aux électeurs français* (Geneva: publisher not specified, 1875).

[51] Although their circumstances meant that they had few practical avenues for expressing it, revolutionaries had, to a much greater extent than previous historians have allowed, remained interested in politics and political participation after the Commune and throughout the 1870s. See for example B. Malon, *L'Internationale: son histoire et ses principes* (Lyons: Extrait de la *République républicaine*, 1872), p.25; Arnould, *L'État et la Révolution*, p.198.

activists' to argue that, while different, their new stance was no less revolutionary, thereby smoothing both this public theoretical transition and revolutionaries' return to France.

Despite its vocal criticisms of the revolutionary movement during the 1870s, Reclus's evolutionary thesis proved popular because it enabled revolutionaries to deal more effectively with the shifting political landscape of the early 1880s. By positioning revolution as a force of nature rather than an act of will, Reclus and other activists both broadened and generalised its meaning, creating a revolution more attuned to the (relatively) stable political conditions of France during the early 1880s. According to this definition, any action could be a revolutionary action, enabling activists to make significant alterations to their tactics and to accommodate a variety of different opinions and approaches without compromising either their unity as a 'revolutionary movement' or their status as revolutionaries.

At the same time it must be noted that evolution was not a miracle cure. While this definition of revolution permitted many ideas and actions, it was defined by none of them. In the sense that it broadened revolution's meaning and scope, and rendered it more appealing, this was its great virtue. In doing so, however, it also essentially stripped revolution of any specific meaning, potentially leaving both the French population and revolutionaries themselves unsure of what precisely they stood for. In fact, this trade-off – of rendering revolution at once more palatable and less clearly defined – could be said to be characteristic of activists' thought on revolution as a whole during this period.

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In his classic 1978 *Penser la Révolution française*, François Furet urged his readers to remember that '[t]he Revolution is over.'[52] With regard to the late nineteenth century, however, historians have remained unable or unwilling to escape the Revolution's spell. Our understanding of French revolutionary thought in the period that immediately followed the fall of the Paris Commune has been circumscribed by this preoccupation. It has led historians to define 'revolution' as a concept bounded by the frameworks of 1789 and its successors, and thus hopelessly anachronistic in the changed circumstances of the Republican State.

As this paper has demonstrated, this was not case. While the Commune may have heralded 'the defeat of a certain idea of revolution', it certainly did not signal the end of revolution's relevance as a concept.[53] Rather than a cult to the past, activists continued to conceive of revolution as an active political concept and sought out a variety of ways to redefine it, thus ensuring that it remained relevant, popular, and viable following the fall of the Commune. While 1789 featured in these attempts, it was accorded no special status. Indeed, activists' purpose in defining revolution in such broad terms was precisely to decouple the concept from its recent French iterations.

Activists during the post-Commune period, however, were not the first to attempt to broaden revolution's meaning in this way. Rather, it had been a feature of revolutionary and radical thought since at least the 1850s, when those defeated in 1848 began to search for new ways to define and present revolution in order to demonstrate that their political ambitions were neither naïve nor utopian. While the formulations of the 1870s and early 1880s may have represented a shift from those of 1870-71, the ways in which activists thought about revolution were in fact much the same. The point at

[52] 'The French Revolution is over', in Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 1-81.
[53] R.P. Tombs, *Paris, bivouac des révolutions: la Commune de 1871* (Paris: Éditions Libertalia, 2014. First published in English, 1999), pp.434-435.

which thought on revolution shifted decisively during the nineteenth century, both in France and elsewhere in Europe, was perhaps not 1871, but 1848.