

Great Anarchists

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First published in London, 2018
by Dog Section Press and Active Distribution
Printed by Što Citaš, Zagreb, Croatia

ISSN 2631-3499-02

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Graphic design by Matt Bonner at revoltdesign.org
Dog Section Press logo by Marco Bevilacqua

RUTH KINNA

Ruth Kinna is a professor of Political Theory at Loughborough University, working in the Department of Politics, History and International Relations where she specialises in political philosophy. Since 2007 she has been the editor of the journal *Anarchist Studies*.

CLIFFORD HARPER

Clifford Harper is a worker, illustrator, and militant anarchist. He has worked for many radical and alternative publications, the international anarchist movement and almost all of the UK national newspapers.



GREAT ANARCHISTS

These short introductions delve into the anarchist canon to recover some of the distinctive ideas that historical anarchists advanced to address problems relevant to their circumstances. Although these contexts were special, many of the issues the anarchists wrestled with still plague our lives. Anarchists developed a body of writing about power, domination, injustice and exploitation, education, prisons and a lot more besides. Honing in on different facets of the anarchist canon is not just an interesting archaeological exercise. The persistence, development and adaptation of anarchist traditions depends on our surveying the historical landscape of ideas and drawing on the resources it contains. The theoretical toolbox that this small assortment of anarchists helped to construct is there to use, amend and adapt.

Agitate, Educate, Organise!



LOUISE MICHEL

Educator, poet, dramatist, novelist, movement historian, orator and agitator Louise Michel rose to prominence during the Paris Commune (1870-71) and acquired a commanding public profile in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Michel was one of some 4,500 Communards deported to New Caledonia in 1872. When she was amnestied in 1880, an estimated 10,000-strong crowd gathered to greet her at Paris' St. Lazare station. Another 50,000 turned out in 1905 for her funeral. Michael Shaack's 1889 highly prejudicial history of anarchism correctly identified her as one of the leading lights of what he referred to darkly as the Red Internationale. Max Nettlau's more astute observation was that Michel's prestige was so immense that her mere presence at a meeting was enough to guarantee a large and enthusiastic audience.

Working as a teacher during the September 1870 siege of Paris, Michel organised a soup kitchen for her pupils before piloting the Montmartre Vigilance committees. These allocated work, received and distributed donations, arranged home visits to care for the sick, the elderly and the poor. She participated in the March 1871 actions that thwarted the Versailles government's attempts to disarm Paris and stood with the battalions at Montmartre in the Commune's final hours. Her surrender, prompted by the threat of her beloved mother's execution, resulted in her trial and deportation to New Caledonia.

Disappointment doesn't quite cover what Michel experienced when she witnessed the ferocious retribution the French government exacted on tens of thousands of Communards in the Bloody Week of May 1871, but she turned to anarchism convinced of the bankruptcy of republicanism. Prior to this she'd distinguished herself as a critic of Napoleon III, encouraged by the writer Victor Hugo, one of the Emperor's most taxing opponents. Not surprisingly given her involvement in the Union des Femmes, an organisation that

united hundreds of militant women in the defence of Paris, she was rediscovered in the 1970s as an early and ardent feminist. Her nickname the Red Virgin has since sparked reflections on her sexuality. Internationalism was a persistent theme in her writing. Audacity was another. Her poem *Black Marseillaise* (1865) calls on the people to stop sleeping, stand up, and be “strong and great” – it’s “the reluctant man that betrays tomorrow”. In 1880 she endorsed Emile Gautier’s Anarchist Manifesto. It decried capitalism, private property and government tyranny, chiming with her general view that power monopolised is evil. The last line called for bread for all, work for all, independence, and justice; it also demanded knowledge for all. This commitment to education was another thick seam in her politics, and one that she approached as a keen practitioner.

KNOWLEDGE, VIRTUE AND SCIENCE

Michel taught throughout her life, first in villages of the Haut Marne close to her family home

and then in Paris. She spent nine years in a day-school in Montmartre before buying her own establishment in 1865. In New Caledonia, she ran classes for the children of the indigenous people, the Kanaks. In 1890, when she left France for London, she launched the International Socialist School in Fitzrovia. Her methods were always innovative and usually regarded as subversive. Her habit of taking pupils outside to learn about natural science tipped the parents of her charges in the Haut Marne over the edge.

Michel understood education as a process of cultivation. It had two aspects: knowledge acquisition and the cultivation of the mind was one, the second centred on the development of virtue.

In bourgeois society, these aspects had been packaged to conflate the cultivation of virtue with technical prowess. This in turn was associated with a narrow programme of book-learning. The result was that instruction was characterised by discipline rather than discovery, and that the ability to regurgitate the findings of established scholars was revered as a sign of superiority. Anyone excluded from education – which was most of

the population – was automatically deemed both stupid and brutish. Similarly, knowledge acquired from outside the proscribed curriculum was dismissed as unfounded and uncivilised.

Michel was not averse to book-learning. Nor was she disdainful of scholarship. She immersed herself in libraries, spent most of her earnings on books, and marvelled at her uncle's historical erudition. But her own education owed as much to her familiarity with the local landscapes, observation, and experimentation as it did to conventional reading, and she learned equally from stories, myths and legends as she did from the insights of the eminent. Education was about stimulating the imagination as well as absorbing facts. Michel habitually used drama and music to inspire her own pupils. When she settled in New Caledonia she had no difficulty appreciating the role that legend played in indigenous culture or in understanding the qualities that these tales helped nourish in the Kanak people. Mastering enough of the local language to educate herself, she studied their customs, music and oral traditions, noting the similarities with Scandinavian and European

folk traditions and reporting the results to her European friends. The Kanaks were not civilised, as the French bourgeoisie styled themselves, and they lacked the technical ability that the colonisers possessed. So when they rebelled against their white masters in 1878, they were quickly mown down by superior weaponry. Almost alone in supporting the Kanak insurrection, Michel took the view that the rebels were the more cultured, because they lacked French manners.

Science properly linked knowledge acquisition and virtue. For Michel, science was a tool of empowerment and cultural improvement. Contentiously describing New Caledonia as the ‘stone-age’, she imagined how advanced knowledge could be applied to alleviate suffering and hardship. Yet noticing at the same time that abominable forms of exploitation existed in the non-human as well as the human realm, Michel also argued that the potential for science to shape nature ethically depended on the adoption of particular approaches and methods.

Science relied on the acknowledgment of fallibility, the courage to challenge received wisdom, and

the ability to harness talents in combined effort. Using status to shut down inquiry, dismissing new hypotheses by appealing to established truths, and rejecting new practices merely because they conflicted with existing norms were all deeply unscientific practices. Similarly, science could only be advanced by ethical methods. Michel therefore demanded the abandonment of animal experiments, convinced that use of cruel or exploitative methods fatally undermined the prospects of making any genuinely scientific advances. There was an integral relationship between ends and means.

WOMEN, EDUCATION AND TRANSFORMATION

Aware that rural workers of the Haut Marne were largely excluded from education, Michel understood the class barriers to science at an early age. Yet it was the injustice and power inequalities that affected women that really exercised her as an anarchist. The idea that ordinary people had

to go hungry at some point in the year, believing it was impossible to produce enough food to go around, was false knowledge; however, the most pernicious bogus science was reserved for women. She noticed that her own work was only considered interesting when she published under a male pseudonym and that she was ridiculed for experimenting with plant vaccines in New Caledonia because she was a mere woman-amateur. She saw too that special programmes of learning delivered to girls were designed to reinforce gendered hierarchy. No wonder that men were content to keep women in childlike states, convincing themselves that their own courage was necessitated by women's cowardice. Declaring the proletarian a slave, Michel noted that the wife of the proletarian was still more enslaved. And the same power relations prevailed in New Caledonia as in France. The word used by indigenous people for woman was *nemo*, meaning 'nothing'. Although Michel played on the idea when she endorsed the bravery of the Russian nihilist women who struck at the heart of tyranny by despatching their rulers, she believed that the term expressed a universal patriarchal sentiment.

Michel's observations complicated her calls for science to be re-grounded in the common sense of the people. While this was a good rule of thumb, she recognised that elites were not alone in lacking virtue. Too many people were habituated to the prejudices disseminated by false science. Under no illusion about the depth of popular ignorance, she despaired when she saw a Paris crowd gather in 1862 to revel in the republican Jules Miot's imprisonment. This was the same crowd that rallied for public executions, and its members could scarce be found when bodies were needed to rip up paving stones and build barricades. It was no more 'the people' than the Marseillaise was the anthem of the revolution once it had been appropriated by the Third Republic. For Michel 'the people' was a dynamic concept not a constituency. It was forged through revolutionary action not by mobilising opposition to random enemies of the republic. Even when it emerged, as it did in the defence of Paris, it was imperfect. Michel noted that her male comrades made encouraging sounds about women's organising but too often paid lip-service to the rights of women. Proudhon's conservatism cast a long shadow over the French revolutionary movement.

There was always room for more scientific education and Michel's view was that women would spearhead the next advances. Experience taught her that women were braver than men, less fainthearted and more able to accept necessity. Men advertised their importance by causing a lot of brouhaha; women went about their business quietly, but actually made the important decisions. Unlike men, they were capable of acting without hate, without anger and without pity. Noting that anarchy was often fostered by discipline, Michel argued that women were similarly spurred on by the villainy perpetrated against them: "We jeer at the incredible sight of big-shots, cheap punks, hoods, old men, young men, scoundrels – all turned into idiots by accepting as truth a whole heap of nonsensical ideas which have dominated the thinking of the human race. We jeer at the sight of those male creatures judging women's intellects by weighing the brains of women in their dirty paws".

SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

The premise underpinning Michel's educational practice was that everyone was educable. Her response to the Breton sharpshooters who fired on demonstrators standing outside the Hôtel de Ville in January 1871 was that they were misguided but not beyond instruction. One day they would be able to see that they had acted from a misplaced sense of duty and they would take up her cause. The question she asked herself was how to close the gap between infallible false knowledge and fallible true science.

Michel had no pat answers and proposed continual propaganda. This of course included insurrection but also writing, lecturing, orchestrating strikes and even fly-posting police officers' coats when the wall space ran out. Michel was not averse to targeted assassination either. Hugo had taught her the virtue of republican violence. Taking the lesson into her anarchism, she refused to condemn the so-called propagandists by the deed whose

acts shocked the bourgeois world in the 1890s. She further argued that tyrannicide was effective in absolutist and oligarchic regimes and that, ethically, the nihilists were right to argue that it was better to kill one person than allow mass slaughter.

Making some room for consequential reasoning in anarchist practice, Michel was torn on the question of electioneering. On the one hand she argued that illegal ‘dead’ candidacies – those that inevitably resulted in the disbarring of successful candidates – had some propaganda value. She therefore allowed her name to go forward on a candidate list for the 1881 general election because women were prohibited from voting or serving as representatives. The symbolic action asserted a rightful demand for equality. On the other hand she admitted that the promotion of dead candidacies could be misconstrued. One possibility was that the gesture could be mistaken as a commitment to a sectional cause. Observers might wrongly conclude that Michel prioritised the equality of women over the advancement of human emancipation by women’s revolutionary action. The other possibility was that her

participation in the process would legitimise the electoral process by instigating demands for its reform. Firmly convinced that electioneering was pointless, she withdrew her candidacy.

Michel's reflections on this issue highlighted another aspect of her approach to education. This touched on her personal sense of virtue and the integrity of revolutionary memory. Emerging from the Commune with her hopes of change intact, Michel also revised down her estimations of likely short-term gains. Taking a longer view, she concluded that the construction of the Commune's history was part of the revolutionary struggle. Only too aware that she was the subject of grotesque press mis-reporting and that her reputed ugliness was part and parcel of the Commune's demonisation she used every platform at her disposal to promote the beauty of revolutionary ideas. Her refusal to acknowledge court authority, her defiant acknowledgment of her responsibility for inciting insurrection, and her demand that the judges execute her were all acts of self-curation. Believing that revolutionaries were bullets adapted to struggle, Michel wanted it known that she was

unapologetic and forever wedded to revolutionary transformation. She adopted the same stance in 1883, when accused of riot and looting. Was she moved by the charges? No, absolutely indifferent. She only challenged the evidence “for the sake of the honour of the Revolution”. She fired back at the prosecutor: “I have never prostrated myself in front of anyone, and I have never asked for mercy. You can say anything you want to about us, you can sentence us to prison, but I do not want you to dishonour us”.

Great Anarchists

**BY RUTH KINNA
& CLIFFORD HARPER**

1. Peter Kropotkin
2. Voltairine de Cleyre
3. Mikhail Bakunin
4. Louise Michel
5. Oscar Wilde
6. Max Stirner
7. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
8. Lucy Parsons
9. William Godwin
10. Errico Malatesta







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