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**Carolyn J. Eichner**, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. xii + 279 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN: 0-253-34442-5; \$24.95 U.S. (pb) ISBN: 0-253-21705-9.

Review by Victoria Thompson, Arizona State University.

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Carolyn Eichner's *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* places the activity of women revolutionaries in the context of a larger history of socialist and feminist agitation. Although Eichner focuses on three female participants of the Commune, André Léo (*née* Victoire-Léodile Béra), Elisabeth Dmitrieff (legally Elisavieta Koucheleva Tomanovskaia in 1871), and Paule Mink, her goal is not to produce a collective biography, but rather to use these women's lives as threads that allow her to analyze radical feminist and socialist politics in the late nineteenth century. Her work provides insight into the complex politics of the Commune, while also challenging the view that the events of 1871 were an exceptional moment in working-class history.

When the Paris Commune was formed in March 1871, André Léo, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, and Paule Mink were already active in radical politics. André Léo was a journalist and well-respected author whose novels criticized the inequalities women faced in marriage and in society. Her 1869 article "La femme et les moeurs," which appeared in *Le droit des femmes*, attacked the Proudhonian line of the Paris section of the International, one which stated that women belonged in the home rather than in the workshop or the political arena. Bridging spheres often seen as incompatible, Léo had ties to both male socialist and middle-class feminist milieus. She corresponded with American feminists, and was a founding member of the *Société du droit des femmes*, which advocated greater educational opportunities for women and the reform of laws regulating marriage.

Paule Mink, the daughter of Polish nobles exiled after the 1830-31 uprising against Russia, was similarly active in both feminist and socialist circles. Like Léo, she deplored the influence of the Catholic Church on women's lives and education and was a member of the *Société du droit des femmes*. She published articles, gave speeches advocating workers' and women's rights, and established a mutual aid society for working women.

Elisabeth Dmitrieff's apprenticeship in radical politics took place in Geneva. The illegitimate daughter of a Russian noble, Dmitrieff had money but lacked social acceptance. She was attracted early on to radical ideas, and in 1867 traveled to Switzerland. At age sixteen, she joined the Russian émigré section of the International, and was active in Geneva organizing workers. She also spent three months in London, studying working conditions and getting to know Karl Marx and his family.

Eichner argues that each woman's life experiences shaped her approach to the Commune. Léo, who before the Commune had been active primarily through her writings, both fiction and non-fiction, continued on this path, writing pamphlets and newspaper articles. Consonant with her long-held belief that "socio-political change required widespread, informed popular support," she also worked to establish secular schools for girls and boys (p. 98). Mink's experiences in public speaking before the Commune, as well as her predilection for violent, grass-roots action, led her to gravitate toward the Paris clubs that quickly formed with the outbreak of the Commune. Dmitrieff's experiences before the Commune were strongly shaped by her adherence to a Marxist vision of revolution led by an intellectual vanguard. She was thus perfectly poised to create the *Union des femmes*, a "highly structured"

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and “centralized” organization dedicated to rendering women’s work socially and economically valuable and to supporting women’s military participation in the Commune (p. 70).

Just as Eichner argues that each woman’s beliefs and experiences prior to 1871 shaped the scope and nature of her activity during the Commune, so too she shows how the experiences of the Commune had a different impact on each woman. All three escaped Paris during the final “Bloody Week” of the Commune and eventually made their way to Switzerland. Léo and Mink remained in Switzerland until an amnesty allowed them to return to France in 1880. During their years of exile, both continued to play an active role in socialist politics in general and in the International in particular, giving speeches and writing. Léo gradually withdrew from politics after her return to France, dying in relative obscurity in 1900. Mink, on the other hand, became widely known as a fiery speaker and active agitator. Despite suffering from illness and poverty, she regularly met with and spoke to various socialist organizations, hoping to forge them into a united front. And though she had long held that women were not yet educated enough to vote (indeed, for her, social change demanded insurrection, not suffrage), she ran as an illegal candidate for the 1893 Parisian municipal elections. Until her death, Mink remained a symbol of the dreams and aspirations that had been expressed—and experimented with—during the Commune.

After a brief period in Switzerland, Elisabeth Dmitrieff returned to a Russia where political reaction was on the rise. She tried to become involved in radical politics, but found it hard to locate a group that was ideologically compatible. In 1877, Dmitrieff married her lover, who had been convicted of murdering a magistrate and sentenced to exile in Siberia. Although her husband claimed his activity was political in nature, the political deportees in Siberia shunned the pair, considering him a common criminal. Since Dmitrieff had dropped her pseudonym upon her return to Russia to avoid arrest, the political deportees were unaware of her credentials as a leading figure in the Paris Commune. Around the turn of the century, she left her husband and moved with her daughters to Moscow, where she died in apparent poverty and obscurity around the time of the 1917 revolution.

Eichner weaves the story of these three women through her narrative of radical socialist and feminist politics. Although she refers to the methods exemplified in the collection edited by Jo Burr Margadant, *The New Biography*, stating that her study similarly “examines how Léo, Dmitrieff, and Mink each constructed political and public selves,” this work places greater focus on the activities and beliefs of these three women than on either the way in which they presented themselves to the public or on conflicts between their public and private lives (p. 7).<sup>[1]</sup> Eichner’s desire to use “the three women’s histories [as] a framework in which to investigate the overlapping and disparate strains of feminist socialisms” results in an account of these women’s lives that is focused almost exclusively on their involvement with radical politics (p. 7). Furthermore, the source material available to her is uneven, and does not cover the whole life history of any of the women, making a more conventional biographical approach difficult. Perhaps as a result, Eichner seeks less to recount their lives than to “view their lives as lenses through which the Commune can be reconstructed and analyzed from feminist perspectives” (p. 2).

Eichner’s study thus presents the lives of three radical women as a thread that allows her to explore myriad facets of radical socialist and feminist politics. This methodological emphasis is important, for it highlights what is original about this study. Although the topic of women in the Paris Commune remains underdeveloped, Léo, Dmitrieff, and Mink all have their biographers, and other scholars have explored the role of women’s activism in the Paris Commune.<sup>[2]</sup> Eichner adds to this body of work; she also proposes a new means of understanding the development and evolution of radical political movements. In this approach, she is inspired by the feminist principle that the personal is political, and thus seeks throughout the work to explore the intersection of these two spheres. “Revolutionary women created feminist socialisms,” she writes, “but these movements and ideas also created them” (p. 7). In highlighting the different approaches and experiences of three women who were involved in radical

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socialist and feminist politics, Eichner demonstrates the complexity of radical politics in the mid and late nineteenth-century.

Eichner succeeds in reminding us that all feminisms in late nineteenth-century France were not bourgeois and rights-based by focusing on feminism's socialist strain, a strain that was strongly shaped by the experience of the Commune. In particular, her study sheds light on the importance of the International to socialist feminism. The International provided an arena for all three women to develop their political careers before the Commune, and both Léo and Mink continued their involvement in the International after 1871. By offering "a contentious yet fairly flexible milieu for developing and expressing a wide range of socialisms," the International appears as a crucial organization in her account, one that provided these women with a group of like-minded peers who respected their abilities and ideas (p. 65). And although the politics of the International were, as Eichner stated, notoriously contentious and factionalized, the lives of the Léo, Dmitrieff and Mink serve as threads that guide the reader successfully through this political maze. Although she discusses the politics of the International in detail, even readers unfamiliar with the various factions of French socialism should come away from this book understanding its major ideological tendencies and conflicts. The inclusion of a fair amount of background material on topics familiar to specialists, such as attitudes toward women's work, also contributes to making Eichner's study accessible to a variety of readers.

In her account of radical socialist and feminist politics, Eichner characterizes the Commune as a critical juncture when radical women "seized the revolutionary moment to cross gender and class boundaries that limited their public and private behaviors" (p. 2). Yet despite the implication that the Commune was a moment of rupture, her success in placing the Commune within a larger--and longer--context of radical political activity tends to suggest a continuity of both ideas and activities among political radicals. Indeed, even her more nuanced statement, that "the Commune served as the catalyst that brought [the three women's] ideas into practice," appears inaccurate given the evidence she presents (p. 33). For the activities of Léo, Dmitrieff, and Mink during the Commune were very similar in nature--if not in scope and impact--to those they were engaged in before the Commune. Léo wrote and worked to expand women's education, Dmitrieff organized workers, and Mink spoke to popular assemblies. And although women's activities received greater recognition from the leadership of the Commune than from previous governments, they were still sometimes considered troublesome radicals, and some of their efforts, such as allowing women to fight alongside men, were outlawed by the Commune. Furthermore, Eichner suggests that even the less well-known participants of the Commune may not have experienced this episode as a radical break, at least not as far as their experiences as women and workers were concerned. She demonstrates not only how the more popular clubs were marginalized in the Commune, but also states that the attitudes of working-class women toward issues such as *unions libres* (concubinage) illustrate "the irrelevance of bourgeois standards to the lives of most working-class women" (p. 114). The Commune thus appears to be less a revolutionary anomaly than a more intense and dramatic moment in a longer history of radical activity.

The degree to which Eichner believes that the Commune altered both French politics and the lives of the three radical women discussed in this study is also unclear at times. Although engaging in radical politics was difficult and dangerous in France before the 1880 amnesty, it was not impossible. Just before returning legally to France, Mink had made a clandestine trip to Paris to speak to a group purportedly dedicated to helping the orphans of the Commune. And after 1880, Léo and Mink continued the sorts of political activities they had been engaged in before, during, and after the Commune in Geneva. And although Eichner makes an argument that Mink, who remained most politically active of the three women after the Commune, shifted her ideological orientation, her statements on this issue are confusing. For example, on the same page, she both asserts that Mink's feminist socialism was popular in *fin-de-siècle* France due to its "grass-roots, radical alternative to the era's increasingly reformist

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parliamentary socialisms,” and states that the Commune caused her to “abandon her grass roots anarchist individualism as insufficiently powerful to incite insurrection” (p. 206).

Perhaps because of the dissonance between Eichner’s stated position that the Commune was a “turning point” and the evidence she provides in favor of continuity, the organization of the book sometimes serves more to confuse than to clarify (p. 209). For example, although Eichner has divided the book into three sections—“Before,” “During,” and “After”—her narrative does not always respect these chronological divides. The “Before” section begins with an account of the events of the Commune, while one of the “During” chapters discusses the gender biases of the Military Tribunals established after the Commune was suppressed. The inclusion of background material in “During” chapters is helpful to understand Eichner’s analysis, but again obscures the importance of a chronological divide.

Ironically, it is Eichner’s success in placing the Commune within a longer and larger context of socialist and feminist politics in the mid and late nineteenth-century that contributes to the confusion over whether the Commune should be seen through the lens of continuity or rupture. While this already rich book provides adequate food for thought, her final chapter suggests that an exploration of the symbolic use of the Commune in radical politics after 1871 might help resolve this issue. In this chapter, the evocation of Paule Mink’s funeral cortege, followed by “thousands of socialists and feminist socialists [...] shouting out support for revolution and the rebirth of the Commune,” best suggests the importance of the Commune as a chronological marker (p. 201). While activists may have pursued similar goals in similar ways before and after the Commune, it is clear that in the decades following 1871, the Commune served as the most vivid symbol in France of the possibility of remaking the world along more equitable lines. It thus took precedence over previous revolutionary moments, including 1848 and 1789. In promoting the belief that the Commune was “a unique historical opening,” one that could and should be replicated in the future, activists kept alive the dream of a “world of seemingly limitless potential” for generations of French working men and women (p. 210).

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## NOTES

[1] Jo Burr Margadant, ed., *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). An example of a work that focuses on how prominent women actively shaped their public personas is Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Whitney Walton explores the conflicts between private life and public personas in *Eve’s Proud Descendants: Four Women Writers and Republican Politics in Nineteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[2] Sylvie Braibant, *Elisabeth Dmitrieff: Aristocrate et pétroleuse* (Paris : Belfond, 1993); Alain Delotel, *Paule Minck: Communarde et féministe* (Paris: Syros, 1968); and Fernanda Gastaldello, *André Léo (1824-1900), femme écrivain au XIXe siècle* (Chauvigny: Association des publications Chauvinoises, 2001). In addition to a handful of articles and book chapters by a variety of authors, the best-known accounts of women in the Commune remain Gay Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996) and Edith Thomas, *The Women Incendiaries*, trans. James and Starr Atkinson (New York: Georges Braziller, 1966).

Victoria E. Thompson  
Arizona State University  
victoria.thompson@asu.edu

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