

# Jean-François Dupeyron: In the School of the Paris Commune. The Story of Another School – A Secondary Publication

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**Abstract:** We know it, we have learned it, and often we teach it: public schools became secular for the first time in 1882. Well, no! As Jean-François Dupeyron said, the first secular public school in France was that of the Commune. Understanding why this fact was – and still is – obscured is the subject of Jean-François Dupeyron’s book, *A L’École de la Commune de Paris: L’Histoire d’une Autre École*. The author’s thesis is that, during the second half of the 19th century and up to World War I, the workers’ movement developed the project of another school, a school independent of both the Church and the State. It is against this other school, desired by the Commune and then the labor exchanges and the General Confederation of Labor, which was at the time of revolutionary syndicalists, that Jules Ferry’s school was constructed. Why has this “history of another school” been concealed?

**Keywords:** School; Paris; Jean-François Dupeyron

**Online publication:** May 15, 2024

## 1. Introduction

In 2021, the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune took place, which began on March 18, 1871, with a popular uprising that prevented government troops from reclaiming the cannons and ended in bloodshed on May 28, 1871, at the end of the Bloody Week. The book, which includes a useful chronology, opens with a prologue presenting two emblematic scenes, and two singular events:

On one hand, the reception on April 1, 1871, of delegates (three women and three men) from the New Education society by members of the communal assembly, to whom a request is presented demanding the secularization of public schools, a republican education, a rational and comprehensive instruction, and the use of experimental methods;

On the other hand, the publication, in the January 20, 1914 issue of *La Vie Ouvrière* (the CGT’s union magazine), of a review of John Dewey’s book *L’École et L’Enfant* by the teacher Maurice Dubois (of libertarian tendency).

The goal of Dupeyron's book is to understand what connects these two surprising scenes. How did the workers' movement, in the second half of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, develop and attempt to implement the educational project of another school than those of the Church and the State, a school for workers organized by and for workers? Why has this remarkable history been ignored and even obscured by the dominant republican narrative of the history of education? "The educational work of the Commune and the pedagogical aspirations of revolutionary syndicalism before the Great War are largely ignored," writes Dupeyron <sup>[1]</sup>.

They are, he shows, because they do not fit into the dominant paradigm according to which the Third Republic was the first to establish a secular republican school form (Ferry Law of 1882 and Goblet Law of 1886), followed by the pedagogical movement of the New Education, and later the alignment of the workers' movement and teaching unionism with the state republican school to improve it from within. Against this paradigm, three hypotheses structure the author's investigation: the hypothesis of continuous school governmentality from the First Empire, that of the primacy of emancipation, and that of the anteriority of the New Education over the Republican school established by Ferry.

### **1.1. A continuous school governmentality**

The author uses the Foucauldian concept of governmentality, understood as the rational governmentality of the State, that is, this specific form of power that targets the population and of which the school is a major apparatus. From this perspective, the objective of the mass schooling of children of the people is the governance of dangerous classes through the shaping of their children, with the formation of the citizen and emancipation through education being, according to Dupeyron, merely ideological dressing. The republican school is created by Jules Ferry and the conservative Republicans, not only against the Church but also and especially against the workers' movement to prevent a popular revolution. Mayor of Paris at the time of the uprising on March 18, 1871, Ferry fled to Versailles and provided unconditional support for the repression organized by Adolphe Thiers <sup>[2]</sup>. However, the author acknowledges, that the secular school was early on and persistently the site of tension between the strategy of power and the reform movement led by pedagogical and union activists, which opened the possibility of "a paradoxical and emancipatory use of knowledge" <sup>[3]</sup>.

### **1.2. The primacy of emancipation**

It is because the working classes - at least some of them - had taken steps towards emancipation that the governmentality of the bourgeois state continuously exerted itself on them. Emancipation, Dupeyron insists in eloquent passages, comes first, both logically and chronologically. Everything begins with the popular uprising of March 18th and with the individual and collective acts of rebellion that preceded it (especially between 1830 and 1848). It is not about schooling children or establishing an assembly of representatives of the people to gradually emancipate them. Emancipation is not the horizon of instruction and communal power; it is the condition, as Dupeyron shows in line with Jacques Rancière: "Emancipation is a necessary initial revolution, the moment when the student and the plebeian sovereignly decide to cease depending on a master" <sup>[4]</sup>. This is the lesson, both educational and political, of the Commune. As James Guillaume writes in the "Letter to Fernand Buisson" published in *La Vie Ouvrière* on November 20, 1913, "For their emancipation, the working people know that they must rely only on themselves; they also know that it will be enough for them to want to be free to become so" <sup>[5]</sup>. It was the uprising, that is to say, the initial gesture of emancipation, which made the educational work of the Commune possible, just as the decision to learn by oneself is the condition of instruction and an act of emancipation. "Let our people," wrote Mikhail Bakunin in 1868 in *The Science and*

the People, “begin by liberating themselves, and when they are free, they will want and know how to learn everything by themselves”<sup>[6]</sup>.

### 1.3. The priority of the New Education

According to the dominant paradigm, New Education appeared in Europe at the end of the 19th century (in France, in 1898, with the publication of Edmond Demolins’ book, *L’Education Nouvelle: L’Ecole des Roches*). One of the important contributions of Dupeyron’s book is to show that in France, New Education predates the creation of the republican school and that it is first and foremost socialist. The association that presented itself to the Commune on April 1, 1871, already claimed to be part of New Education, and as early as 1848, the first New Education Review appeared, directed by a Fourierist<sup>[7]</sup>. Even before the Commune, a new pedagogy advocating for the coeducation of girls and boys, the workshop class, integral education, and non-confessional moral formation was elaborated and even experimented with by the workers’ movement (for example, in the Icarian communist communities and Fourierist phalansteries). “Socialist New Education is thus much older than the pedagogical movement created by some non-socialist educators in 1899 and than the republican school instituted by Jules Ferry, the latter being essentially a reaction to the advent of the plural project of socialist New Education - and not the other way around”<sup>[8]</sup>. But to define New Education, dominant historiography only considers pedagogical criteria and leaves aside the profusion of projects conceived by various socialisms, a profusion that prepared the educational action of the Commune. Dupeyron distinguishes two categories of questions addressed by the different socialisms, those that were taken up by the order republicans (secularism, gratuitousness) and those that constitute the specificity of socialist educations and that were rejected by these republicans (integral education and polytechnical teaching, workshop school, syndical method, experimental method). The syndical (or self-management) method opposes the state method, it is the most subversive element of socialist education. The author defines it as the “devolution of power to the social actors directly concerned”<sup>[9]</sup>. The syndical method affirms “worker sovereignty”<sup>[10]</sup>, it focuses education on work - not on knowledge and citizenship. The Commune, relying on the district town halls and republican and workers’ associations, implemented the syndical method and not the state method. The school desired by the Commune is a separate school not only from the Church but also and above all from the State. It is to counter this worker and socialist separatism that the conservative bourgeoisie established the secular state school.

## 2. The school of the commune

Instead of focusing, as the dominant historiography would, on the actions of the Communal Assembly and major figures (Édouard Vaillant, Louise Michel), Dupeyron highlights initiatives from republican, internationalist (the AIT, i.e., the International Workingmen’s Association or First International), Freemason, freethinker, and Protestant associations and networks. He calls this method “a Maitronization”<sup>[11]</sup>, meaning a study of the Commune, in the manner of Jean Maitron, through the biographies of “non-famous” actors: for example, the remarkable figure of Maria Verdure, unknown to dominant historiography and whom Michèle Audin made the heroine of her novel, *Comme une Rivière Bleue* (2017). This method is all the more relevant for the study of the Commune as its educational action follows the syndical method. Thus, its program does not come from the Communal Assembly or even from the Education Commission and Vaillant, but from an association, in this case, New Education in its request of April 1. The role of Vaillant and the Education Commission (whose members all belong to the AIT) is mainly to federate and amplify local initiatives and give them a socialist dimension. Thus, the Decree of April 2, 1871, on the separation of Church and State, energized and accelerated the movement of republicanization and secularization of schools. Vaillant also issued a revolutionary decree, of

equal pay between men and women in primary education. The Commune tried to implement a “two-tier school reform”<sup>[12]</sup>: to continue the construction of a republican school begun during the Siege of Paris and to build a socialist school. Due to lack of time (April 2 is also the date of the first military attack by the Versaillais) and human and financial resources, this second project could not be successfully carried out.

In this chapter on the school of the Commune, Dupeyron devotes a 17-page study<sup>[13]</sup> to the great figure of the republican school: Ferdinand Buisson. Indeed, Buisson’s links to the Commune and the workers’ movement are generally underestimated, if not ignored, and his thoughts and actions are reduced to liberal Protestantism and republicanism, that is, to what is compatible with the dominant paradigm. However, Buisson was a bridge between the idea of the Republic and that of Socialism. Dupeyron recalls his ties, through James Guillaume, to libertarian socialists, the AIT, some fighters of the Commune (such as Élie and Élisée Reclus), and revolutionary syndicalism of the CGT. During the Commune, Buisson resided in Batignolles, where he was close to the AIT. He engaged in the construction of a new education linked to the workers’ movement by taking the direction of a secular orphanage in Batignolles. He did not participate in military combat but took risks, during the Bloody Week, by helping Benoît Malon escape arrest and death through the Protestant network. Later, he associated former actors of the Commune (like the Reclus brothers) with both editions of the Dictionary of Pedagogy and Primary Instruction, and in 1888 he chose James Guillaume (a member of the AIT and supporter of the Commune) to be the editorial secretary of the Dictionary. Buisson defended the right of teachers to unionize and remained in contact with the revolutionary syndicalist CGT. “Aware of the balance of power,” writes Dupeyron, he “invested in the state school while keeping an eye on the workers’ school project, as the CGT took it over”<sup>[14]</sup>.

### 3. The project of the syndical school

In the last chapter of the book, the author shows that, despite the crushing of the Commune, the project of another school, a socialist school, remained alive in the workers’ movement until the First World War. It participates in the self-emancipation movement of the workers: “to self-emancipation corresponded self-education”<sup>[15]</sup>. Worker autonomy, or as the author calls it, “worker sovereignty”<sup>[10]</sup>, means the independence of the trade union movement not only from the bourgeois state but also from socialist parties and the affirmation of the working class’s ability to take control of its affairs, involves the implementation of socialist education and the construction of a school different from the secular state school: the “red school”<sup>[16]</sup>, the syndical school. It is the labor exchanges (which federated in 1892) and the CGT (founded in 1895) that continue the educational action of the Commune. However, history according to the dominant paradigm suggests that the failure of the Commune also means the end of the project of a socialist school and the beginning of the era of the secular republican state school, to which the workers’ movement would have gradually rallied. Dupeyron refutes this version of the history of the school by showing that the labor exchanges were conceived (notably by Fernand Pelloutier) as a counter-society, “a heterotopia, a worker enclave in capitalist society”<sup>[17]</sup>. “It is,” writes Gustave Lefrançais (a libertarian teacher and actor of the Commune), “the retreat of workers to the Aventine Hill, separating from the bourgeois world, organizing themselves outside of it and against it”<sup>[10]</sup>. Dupeyron calls this worker separatism “pan-syndicalism”<sup>[18]</sup>, this “worker Aventine Hill”<sup>[10]</sup> aimed at making the labor exchanges “worker Communes”<sup>[19]</sup> with their institutions of which the syndical school would necessarily be part. Dupeyron’s thesis is that “it was through this pansyndical movement [...] that the political spirit and the school project of the Paris Commune passed most coherently, to the point of producing early interest in John Dewey in one of the major journals of revolutionary syndicalism in 1914”<sup>[19]</sup>.

In 1900, the Congress of the Labor Exchanges called for the construction of a worker primary education.

But unionist teachers and the CGT wonder: should another school be built within the labor exchanges or should the existing public school be improved? The project of the red school stalls, due to a lack of financial means and human commitments. Very few children are enrolled in this other school. On the eve of the war, the rallying to the secular state school prevails and puts an end to the dream of a syndical school. However, this did not prevent the development of pedagogical reflection in the CGT. Libertarian educators like James Guillaume, Sébastien Faure, and Maurice Dubois write in CGT publications. “It was this network that saw the interest of Dewey’s work for the workers’ movement. [...] Revolutionary syndicalist thought on the school question was ready to welcome John Dewey’s work”<sup>[20]</sup>.

#### 4. Critical examination

Jean-François Dupeyron’s book is important not only because it provides knowledge about the Paris Commune and the labor exchanges and the young CGT, but also because it overturns the dominant paradigm on the history of secular education and that of the New Education. But isn’t it a militant book? We make a distinction between activism and engagement. *À L’École de la Commune de Paris* is an engaged book, but it is not a militant book. It pays tribute to all those anonymous individuals who, together, made the Commune; it is not neutral – but isn’t neutrality an illusion? – it is written from the perspective of the actors of the Commune and the workers’ movement. It is an engaged book and also an academic book, rigorous in terms of scholarship: work on archives and writings of the actors of the Commune, reading of historians of the Commune, the workers’ movement, the school, and the New Education<sup>[21]</sup>. However, some gaps can be noted: the work says nothing about secondary education and higher education, and, in terms of bibliography, it does not mention Frédéric Mole’s important book, *L’École Laïque pour une République Sociale: Controverses Pédagogiques et Politiques* (1900–1914).

#### 5. Conclusion

Jean-François Dupeyron’s book is a book about the school of the Commune, but it is also a book about the school of the workers’ movement as it “learns from the Commune” and, through *À L’École de la Commune de Paris*, a book about emancipation. It repositions the educational action of the Commune in a long history, that of the idea of socialist education from the second half of the 19th century to 1914. Is the idea of another school dead? The lesson of the Commune, concludes Dupeyron, is that the project of another society than capitalist society can only succeed if anticipations of this other society are already built within capitalist society itself<sup>[22]</sup>. But can we anticipate another society without implementing another education or even another school? This is, ultimately, the problem posed by this book.

#### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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