

## **“Those Deluded, Ill-Starred Men”: Frederick Douglass, the *New National Era*, and the Paris Commune**

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### **Abstract:**

The Paris Commune was the apotheosis of what unfolded in the 1848 European Revolutions, the first time the working class actually took political power, although briefly. Frederick Douglass covered the events of the Paris Commune closely in his newspaper, the *New National Era*. Douglass’s views on the Paris Commune, as of yet unexplored in detail by scholars, illuminate his relationship to democratic and social movements both abroad and in the United States. This essay examines in-depth the writings in Douglass’s newspaper on the Paris Commune and argues Douglass’s commitment to mass movements and oppositional politics did not necessarily extend to oppressed wage workers and was therefore situational, specifically as it related to class, labor, and republicanism. The Commune abroad and labor unrest at home motivated Douglass to examine the “labor question” for his readers. This brought to light his free labor prescription, with its assumption of a harmony of interests between capital and workers, to the problem of inequality and the exploitation of labor. Douglass supported, at key junctures, revolutionary movements and action both in Europe and at home, but his reaction to the Paris Commune exposes the limitations of his liberal political thought to take on an internationalist analysis of class conflict and labor struggles, especially when compared to contemporaries such as Benjamin Butler, Wendell Phillips, and Karl Marx. This study offers a unique contribution to Douglass scholarship while also building on research on Americans’ views of the Paris Commune and the retreat from Reconstruction. Douglass’s writings on the Paris Commune and the labor movement deserve more attention. They provide opportunities for historians, political theorists, and labor activists to augment our understanding of Douglass’s post-war career.

### **Keywords:**

Frederick Douglass, Paris Commune, Labor, Republicanism, Communism

### **Introduction**

On 12 April 1871, Karl Marx wrote from London to a colleague in Germany, “What resilience, what historical initiative, what a capacity for sacrifice in these Parisians!” While the future of the Paris Commune was still in doubt and mistakes had been made, Marx believed that, “However that may be, the present rising in Paris—even if it be crushed by the wolves, swine and vile curs of the old society—is the most glorious deed of our Party since the June insurrection in Paris.”<sup>1</sup> To conclude his May *Address of the General Council of the International Workingmen’s Association*, Marx wrote, “Working men’s Paris, with its Commune, will be for ever celebrated as

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works: Vol. 44: Marx and Engels: 1870–1873* (London, Eng.: Lawrence & Wishart, 1989), 131–32.

the glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class.”<sup>2</sup>

On 6 April 1871, Frederick Douglass, “with feelings of deep regret,” looked to Paris and saw “the spectacle of disastrous failure, and almost [felt] like despairing of the fitness of the French for self-government.”<sup>3</sup> Less than a month later, in the 4 May 1871 edition of *The New National Era*, Douglass wrote, “The most distressing and heart-sickening spectacle in the world is the bloody drama that is being enacted in France just now.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of glorious or heroic, to Douglass, the revolutionary workers of Paris, the Communards, were “deluded, ill-starred men.”<sup>5</sup>

What led these two political activists—on the same page during the Civil War in the United States—to take such differing positions and come to such different conclusions on the Civil War in France?<sup>6</sup> While scholars have examined Douglass’s thoughts and writings on the 1848 revolutions in Europe, his analysis of the working-class uprising in Paris in 1871 has not received the same scrutiny.<sup>7</sup>

The February Revolution of 1848 in France—which overthrew the monarchy, installed republican institutions, and emancipated slaves in the French colonies—initially inspired Douglass, convincing him that the “stupendous overturnings throughout the world, proclaim in the ear of American slaveholders...the downfall of slavery.” These events deeply affected Douglass and assured him that united action against slavery was possible. “So I believe here,” Douglass said before the American Anti-Slavery Society in May 1848, “after all we have said against the American people, there is yet an undercurrent pervading the mass of this country, uniting Democrat and Whig, and men of no party, taking hold in quarters we know not of, which shall one day rise up in one glorious fraternity for freedom, uniting into one mighty phalanx of freemen to bring down the haughty citadel of slavery with all its bloody towers and turrets.”<sup>8</sup>

While Douglass expressed solidarity with revolutionaries in Europe and their aims, and even argued that their revolutions had inspired slaves at home, he denounced the Chartists in England who took inspiration from the events on the continent. After anti-tax riots broke out in March, the Chartists had called a mass demonstration for 10 April 1848. They hoped for hundreds of thousands of protestors but “fewer than 10,000 marchers materialized” after the government banned the protest, deployed troops, and restricted political space. Benjamin Fagan quotes Douglass’s 5 May editorial as accusing the Chartists of attempting to “overawe the government” in a “wild and wicked measure.” Douglass thought a resort to force and revolution in England was

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<sup>2</sup> Marx, *Collected Works: Vol. 22*, 355.

<sup>3</sup> “Adulterated Republicanism,” *New National Era*, 6 April 1871.

<sup>4</sup> “Dark Prospects,” *New National Era*, 4 May 1871.

<sup>5</sup> “Dark Prospects,” *New National Era*, 8 June 1871.

<sup>6</sup> For details see August H. Nimtz and Kyle A. Edwards, *The Revolutionary Socialist and the Radical Liberal in the Second American Revolution: Comparing Karl Marx and Frederick Douglass in Real-Time* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill Publishers), forthcoming.

<sup>7</sup> See Benjamin Fagan, “The North Star and the Atlantic 1848,” *African American Review* 85, no. 3 (September 2014): 447–73; David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York, N.Y.: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 197, 240; Samuel Bernstein, “The Impact of the Paris Commune in the United States,” *The Massachusetts Review* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1971): 436 has one mention of Douglass: his “weekly charged the Communards with mobocracy, vandalism and terrorism like that of 1792.”; Phillip Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre: Americans and the Paris Commune* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), does not include an entry on Douglass in the index but does cite the *New National Era* when examining Benjamin Butler’s reaction to the Commune.

<sup>8</sup> Philip Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Vol. 1: Early Years, 1817–1849* (New York, N.Y.: International Publishers, 1950), 308; John W. Blassingame et al., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 1: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, 5 vols. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1979–1991), 4:119–20, 122, 127, see also 131–32.

inexcusable because of the political rights already won there. He wrote, “While the liberty of speech is allowed—while the freedom of the press is permitted, and the right of petition is respected, and while men are left free to originate reforms without, and Members are left free to propose and advocate them within the walls of Parliament, no excuse can be valid for resorting to the fearful use of brute force and bloodshed.”<sup>9</sup>

After the events of June 1848, when the Parisian workers took to the streets in defense of the national workshops and were crushed by the new government, Douglass’s praise faltered. Blaming “communists,” Douglass detested the “*Blouses*” who “subjected the infant Republic in a horrid baptism of blood” during the June Days. He denounced the “toil worn laborer,” whom he previously lauded, instead of criticizing the provisional French government and its response that led to the death of more than three thousand workers. Relying on the doctrine of moral suasion, Douglass argued that the actions of the workers, recently thrown into joblessness during an economic contraction, showed “the foolishness of relying upon the sword for that which can only be accomplished by preaching.”<sup>10</sup>

Did the mass anti-slavery movement and the conflagration of 1861–1865 it produced cause Douglass to reexamine and alter his interpretation of events? Or did his judgment of the Paris Commune remain consistent compared to how he viewed European revolutionaries in 1848? This study will address what Douglass thought of the Commune abroad and the labor question at home via his writings and editorial choices in his newspaper, the *New National Era*. It strives to illuminate Douglass’s relationship to the working-class movement, add complexity to his view on class, labor, and republicanism, and contemplate how these views, widespread among Northern liberals, may have played a role in the retreat from Reconstruction.

### Frederick Douglass’s Denunciations of the Paris Commune

Frederick Douglass relocated from Rochester, New York to Washington DC to assume the editor’s role for the *New National Era*, a paper he purchased in 1870 that ran until 1874. Douglass hoped the paper, “a personal organ with large ambitions,” would “be one of the most influential in America.” The venue was to be “a national representative of one-eighth part of the forty millions of the American people,” that is, the Black population of the United States. The perspective of the paper would be in “unison with the best interests of all sections, this paper is the actual exponent of the views of all classes. Capital and labor meet and part as friends in these columns.” The platform of the weekly would be, “Free men, free soil, free speech, a free press, everywhere in the land. The ballot for all, education for all, fair wages for all.”<sup>11</sup>

Douglass began his paper’s commentary on the Paris Commune in the 30 March 1871 edition of his newspaper. The completion of a transatlantic telegraph cable in 1866 gave news writers and consumers almost instantaneous access to events happening in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Douglass started by explaining what he saw as the progressive results of “the struggles which have been

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<sup>9</sup>Fagan, “The North Star and the Atlantic 1848,” 61.

<sup>10</sup>Foner, *Volume 1*, 304–305, 325. Philip Foner, *Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Supplementary Volume 1844–1860* (New York, N.Y.: International Publishers, 1975), 86. The doctrine of moral suasion was in line with the nonresistance philosophy espoused by Garrisonian abolitionists. For an informative and brief overview, see David W. Blight, “William Lloyd Garrison at Two Hundred: His Radicalism and His Legacy for Our Time.” In *William Lloyd Garrison at Two Hundred: History, Legacy, and Memory*, ed. James Brewer Stewart (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2008), 1–11, especially 5–8.

<sup>11</sup> “Position of the New National Era,” *New National Era*, 30 March 1871; Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 521, 525.

<sup>12</sup>Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 62–65.

convulsing Europe of late [the Franco-Prussian War]...the downfall of Louis Napoleon and of the Pope.” Douglass did not give the French people credit for declaring the Republic, but instead claimed they had “been freed from an odious despotism by a beneficent enemy,” the armies of Prussia. In April, he wrote the French people “made no sacrifice for it...the Germans had done the work as efficiently and radically as ever work of liberation was done, and to the French the easy task was left of driving away some helpless imperial officials, of decreeing the *déchéance* [the downfall], and of proclaiming the Republic.” For Douglass, republican institutions were key, both as vehicles for self-rule and as an inspiration for other anti-monarchical fights. The task for France was “the higher glory of demonstrating to the world not only their own capability of self-government, but the excellence of republican institutions generally.” Most importantly, France needed to become “a true republic, resting on a solid foundation.”<sup>13</sup>

Douglass hoped to see the population of France united in creating a true republic, but instead he wrote, “we see them arrayed against each other before the German armies have evacuated the country.” Most alarming, “Radicalism has again run mad. The *Commune*, the city of Paris, has risen against the country, the Provisional Government, the Constituent Assembly, in short against everything and everybody that is not emphatically and unconditionally committed to the Reds.” On 18 March, the National Guard, described by August Nimtz as “a civic militia composed mainly of workers,” in the Parisian neighborhood of Montmartre refused to be disarmed by forces of the French Army, who fraternized for a time with the protestors and refused to attack, marking the birth of the Paris Commune. Douglass denounced these events, writing, “Discipline and subordination are at an end, and mob-law is supreme.” This, to Douglass, was an attack on the Republic. “The spectacle is the more disheartening and disappointing to all Republicans, here as well as in Europe, since they hailed the French republic most enthusiastically, and built great hopes on its example in Europe.”<sup>14</sup>

In the paper’s next issue, Douglass laid out his views on communists, true republicanism, and labor in the context of the young insurrection in Paris. In September 1870, in the midst of a disastrous military campaign by Emperor of France Louis Napoleon against the armies of Prussia, Parisians proclaimed the Republic, one that John Merriman describes as “a divided, fledgling republic.” Douglass championed said republic, writing in early April, “When, last fall, the Republic was proclaimed in France, it was quite natural that their cry of “*Vive la République!*” should have been echoed with sympathetic thrill by all lovers of liberty from one end of the world to the other.”<sup>15</sup>

The events of fall 1870 left Douglass hopeful that France would know “this time how to form a true Republic.” The working-class movement in Paris shattered these hopes. “It is consequently with feelings of deep regret that we look on the spectacle of disastrous failure,” Douglass explained, “and almost feel like despairing of the fitness of the French for self-government.” Douglass sided with “the regular Government” in their attempt “to save the Republic from the attempts of those Reds who, while honestly professing and believing themselves true republicans, evince a spirit of lawlessness and intolerance which, among us, would be considered anything but republican.” Douglass regarded the national elections that took place on 8 February

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<sup>13</sup> “Aspects and Prospects in Europe,” *New National Era*, 30 March 1871. “Adulterated Republicanism,” *New National Era*, 6 April 1871.

<sup>14</sup> “Prospects in Europe,” *New National Era*; John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune of 1871* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014), 40–45; August Nimtz, *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000), 211.

<sup>15</sup> Merriman, *Massacre*, 24–27; “Adulterated Republicanism,” *New National Era*, 6 April 1871; Marx made the case that the Commune actually embodied a “true Republic.” Marx and Engels, *Vol. 22*, 334.

1871 as legitimate. These elections, according to Merriman, “returned overwhelmingly conservative, monarchist deputies to the National Assembly” and later that month gave the conservative Adolphe Thiers, “the well-known and long-time anti-revolutionary,” executive power. While he recognized the odiousness of such a possibility, Douglass predicted “it is quite probable that German assistance will be required for the suppression of the insurrection, since there appears to be no organized military force ready that could be trusted with the task,” a consequence of troops fraternizing with the Communards.<sup>16</sup>

Douglass, a supporter of Radical Republicans at home, educated his readers about “the specific difference between radical republicanism among us and radical republicanism in France.” Douglass described the American version as “the most rational, clear-sighted, and tolerant, while in France republicanism will but too easily degenerate into Jacobinism and fanaticism, and produce terror instead of liberty.” Douglass then outlined what he took to be “true republicanism.” In the US, “republicanism is founded on feelings of philanthropy, justice, and benevolence, just as well as on reason. The principle of bestowing equal rights on all, of offering to all the same facilities for the acquisition of knowledge, wealth, and influence is as human as it is just.” In contrast, “French radicalism does not stop there. It is too intolerant, too mixed up with elements of hatred and resentment.” Specifically, Douglass opposed class resentment and a war on property. One radical French journal, Douglass explained, “makes war on property by raising the cry, ‘Death to the rich!’ which finds a hearty response from the many thousands who think wealth and poverty merely the result of a perverse state of society.”<sup>17</sup>

The problem with the social and democratic republic that many French workers were fighting for, in Douglass’s eyes, was that “republicanism in France is tainted with communism, and communism means not only the old hatred of the poor against the rich, but hatred of the ignorant against the learned, of the mediocre against the gifted, against every kind of superiority, and against society in its present state.” Parisian society—in its then present state—included poverty and divisions, with half a million people destitute. For Douglass, communism, with its “mania for leveling, wants to correct the inequality arising from these causes by ruminating labor not according to its intrinsic value to the world, or to the skill and intellect required for it, but according to the time spent over it.” Leveling would hurt the artists, writers, and scientists who Douglass saw as providing more value than the industrial proletariat. While Communism should “be entitled to fair play,” it is a “most dangerous error when it is made part of a political platform.” The French Revolution of 1848 was tainted with communism “and it proved a most pernicious element in it.” Communist influence in a republic would serve to destroy republican institutions, Douglass claimed: “Though communism is incompatible with the monarchical system, it is not truly republican in its spirit... It is rather a morbid excrescence, destructive of republican life, and it would not be surprising if communism and fanaticism combined should work the destruction of the present French Republic.”<sup>18</sup>

Douglass attributed the current insurrection to the work of socialist agitators,

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<sup>16</sup> “Adulterated Republicanism,” *New National Era*, 6 April 1871; Merriman, *Massacre*, 1:32–33, 39; Nimitz, *Marx and Engels*, 211. Douglass thought the Thiers government was “not guilty of any treasonable or tyrannical acts.” Marx, contra Douglass, laid out what he saw as the threats and actions from the Thiers government that forced Parisian workers to revolt. See Marx and Engels, *Vol. 22*, 319–20.

<sup>17</sup> “Adulterated Republicanism,” *New National Era*.

<sup>18</sup> “Adulterated Republicanism,” *New National Era*; Merriman, *Massacre*, 2, 5. Of the June 1848 events, Douglass wrote, “the communists of Paris are chiefly responsible for this last confused scene of human slaughter. They have been the agents, if not the principals in the concern, and to them must attach the glory or shame of the foul undertaking.” Foner, *Supplementary Volume*, 86–87.

acknowledged that there were such agitators in the United States, and reprinted a story from the *Pall Mall Gazette* intended to characterize the ordinary supporters of the Commune as dim-witted. To obtain a “proper understanding of the Red movement in the French capital,” Douglass wanted his readers to know that the Commune “is the work of the Socialist agitators, who obtain supporters among the more ignorant class of workingmen by promising them what no community and no Government on earth can give them—a division of property and a life of ease without labor.” If anyone thought that only Europe contained radicals like this, Douglass assured his audience, “These agitators are not unknown among us, and they will be recognized by the ingeniously suggestive platitudes” mentioned in the story printed in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Douglass then reproduced the article where a correspondent conversed with a National Guard member stationed at a barricade intending to show that the rebellious workers did not understand the doctrines for which they were fighting.<sup>19</sup>

In a 4 May 1871 article titled “Dark Prospects,” a title used repeatedly while covering the events in Paris, Douglass showed that his unit of analysis was the nation-state and not opposing classes. Douglass related to his readers incredulously, “For weeks a struggle is carried on, in which the insurrectionists evince as much bitterness and animosity against the regular Government as they did against the victorious Germans.” This sort of conflict within the nation led Douglass to characterize the events as the “most distressing and heart-sickening spectacle in the world.” Douglass also put forward his theory of what led to this “heart-sickening spectacle.” He pointed to “the state of demoralization, of corruption, and mutual distrust, which lead the unfortunate people to rage more furiously and destructively against each other than any foreign enemy could do.” There was a “spirit of distrust pervading the minds of the people.”<sup>20</sup>

As for the claims of the Communards—“The demand of the Commune to elect its own municipal officers is reasonable enough,” Douglass wrote. Merriman reports that, “Unlike all the other 36,000 cities, towns and villages in France, Paris did not have the right to elect a mayor.” In addition, Napoleon appointed the *arrondissement* municipal council. Nevertheless, Douglass deplored the means used by Parisian workers to achieve their ends. “There is, however, no cause in the world so good,” Douglass wrote, “that would not become bad when pressed by such outrages and excesses as are the order of the day: when political assassinations are openly advocated and practiced, and a despotism is exercised in the name of liberty hardly less oppressive and odious than the yoke of the Emperor.”<sup>21</sup> Douglass seemed to be reading news from sources friendly to the Thiers regime. Future scholarship would show the bourgeois government engaged in the slaughter of tens of thousands of prisoners from the beginning of hostilities, while only 66 or 68 hostages were killed by the Commune.<sup>22</sup>

Even though Douglass acknowledged that Thiers “always was a steadfast supporter of Louis Philippe,” he thought “the accusation set forth by the Commune that the Government intends to turn traitor to the Republic and to erect another monarchy on its ruins,” was unjustified. Instead, it was the communists who threatened the republic and opened the door to royal restoration: “The real danger to the Republic seems rather to threaten from the Reds, who, if successful, would establish a reign of terror, bring disgrace on the very name of the Republic, and republican institutions generally, and finally open the path for another line of monarchs, either ‘by the grace

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<sup>19</sup> “The Revolters Delusion,” *New National Era*, 27 April 1871.

<sup>20</sup> “Dark Prospects,” *New National Era*, 4 May 1871.

<sup>21</sup> “Dark Prospects,” *New National Era*; Merriman, *Massacre*, 13–14.

<sup>22</sup> Merriman, *Massacre*, 118–22, 203–24.

of God' or by the right of usurpation."<sup>23</sup>

For the moment, Douglass saw both opportunity and threat, writing "there is little doubt that the Government will finally come out victorious, and that order will be restored for a while; yet the elements of trouble and discord are too powerful to hope that an era of quiet and prosperity is to follow." He instructed his readers and the French people that the only safeguard against monarchism on the one side, and the tyranny of political fanaticism and mobocracy on the other, is in that truly republican spirit which, while securing fair play, equal rights, and equal liberty, and protection to all, leaves everything else to free development, and abstains entirely from meddling with particular social and religious theories or systems, and from the attempt to force them on a people.<sup>24</sup>

Writing in the middle of May, Douglass cheered the Versailles government troops, disparaged communism in comparison with true republicanism, and contrasted class conflict in France with that in the United States. Douglass had been reading news "with promises of the speedy suppression of the insurrection," and concluded "that the insurrection is near its collapse." He did not believe meritorious generalship on the part of the government had led to their success but instead cited "the demoralization, the dissensions [sic], the general distrust, and the lack of discipline among the Reds," along with the fact that "the provinces have remained quiet, instead of echoing and following the actions of the Commune."<sup>25</sup>

Crushing the Commune would not necessarily lead to a successful French Republic, according to Douglass. The issues at stake were too fundamental. "The conflict between wealth and poverty, between capital and labor... and others of equal importance are at the bottom of it, besides distrust of the honesty of the government and its fidelity to the republican cause." These issues did not inevitably lead to violent conflict. "It is true," he argued, "the difficulties arising from these sources do not necessitate a bloody revolution; indeed, they agitate more or less the whole civilised world, our own country as well as others... there indeed be no apprehension that they will lead to violent uprising and bloodshed of a formidable character." In the United States, Douglass thought "[f]ull liberty" would act as a safety valve. Americans were free to agitate, discuss, and experiment "under the protection of republican institutions, taking away any need to resort to revolution."<sup>26</sup>

On the contrary, there was something about the French temperament that prevented them from acting on the same principles. They had "the insurmountable obstacle opposed by their own unfortunate disposition, their incapacity to comprehend the very rudiments of true republican liberty." French radicals had a "lawless spirit, that prompts them to achieve by revolution that which ought to be left to free development, the tyrannical disposition that assumes to lay down laws, to regulate and decree in matters which concern only the choice and convictions of the individual." This "knowledge of the French character," his own or via a European correspondent, impelled Douglass "to look on the future of the French republic with as much apprehension as sorrow over the delusions of a people, which even in its errors, inspires more pity than indignation, when we remember how for ages it has been the victim of misrule and despotism."<sup>27</sup>

It is possible that Otilie Assing, Douglass's longtime intellectual companion, influenced

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<sup>23</sup> "Dark Prospects," *New National Era*.

<sup>24</sup> "Dark Prospects," *New National Era*.

<sup>25</sup> "No Peace in France," *New National Era*, 18 May 1871.

<sup>26</sup> "No Peace," *New National Era*. Douglass wrote, "the mere suppression of the insurrection by military force will be succeeded by more than an outside restoration of order, and it would be vain to dream of an era of peace and republican prosperity."

<sup>27</sup> "No Peace," *New National Era*.

these pronouncements on the French temperament and character. Assing, a middle class liberal from Germany, immigrated to the United States in 1851 and first met Douglass in 1856 with plans to translate his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, into German.<sup>28</sup> Assing wrote to her sister in August 1872 claiming the editorials of the *New National Era* were joint projects between her and Douglass.<sup>29</sup> She began writing articles for the paper, signed “R.,” in 1873.<sup>30</sup>

However, when it came to the 1848 revolution in her homeland, “she herself had not participated in the popular politics nor expressed more than a passing interest in the subject.”<sup>31</sup> Douglass, while certainly collaborating with Assing as a member of the *New National Era* team,<sup>32</sup> maintained a consistent analysis of class, republicanism, and revolution when analyzing the events of 1848 and 1871. The extant evidence—Assing had her correspondence with Douglass burned after her death<sup>33</sup>—and modern scholarship do not reveal any specific documentation indicating Assing wrote articles on the Paris Commune or was anything more than a like-minded collaborator with Douglass on the topic. Further, modern scholars believe Assing had a habit of “[w]histling in the dark” and Douglass “figured much larger in her life, or in the life that she portrayed to her other correspondents, than she in his.”<sup>34</sup> Because of the missing evidence, due to the destruction of letters after Assing’s death and the fire that destroyed volumes of documents in Douglass’s Rochester home in 1872, this characterization of Assing’s influence can only be speculation and she may have had more influence on Douglass’s views on the Paris Commune than allowed for here.

While Douglass deplored the slaughter of prisoners by Thiers’s troops during the last days of the Commune, he mistakenly reported to his readers that the brutality came from each side in equal measure. Multiple articles in the 1 June 1871 issue focused on the property destruction that occurred in Paris during the last days of barricade fighting. “They are acts of vandalism,” Douglass claimed, “prompted by a love of destruction peculiar to the most degenerate among human brutes... The demolition of the column of the Place Vendome, the monument of bygone French glory; the burning of the Tuileries, the Palais Royal, the Hotel de Ville... will tell heavily in history against this generation of the French people.” Douglass did not examine the strategic importance of demolishing key buildings during street fighting or consider what monuments glorifying the French monarchy might mean to workers fighting for a social and democratic republic. It escaped his attention that while the Communards destroyed property as they retreated, Versailles troops carried out “the notorious slaughter... beyond anything that Paris had seen then or since.”<sup>35</sup>

Douglass described the last stands of the Parisian workers in another 1 June 1871 article. “The insurgents in Paris have defended themselves bravely,” Douglass reported, “and have held out for a long time, but must soon succumb.” Putting the destruction of property and the slaughter

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<sup>28</sup> Maria Diedrich, *Love Across Color Lines: Otilie Assing & Frederick Douglass* (New York, N.Y.: Hill and Wang, 1999), 142.

<sup>29</sup> Leigh Fought, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass* (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 2017), 212–13; Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 529–30.

<sup>30</sup> Diedrich, *Love Across Color Lines*, 294–95, 412–13n112.

<sup>31</sup> Fought, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass*, 147.

<sup>32</sup> On Assing as a “team” member, see Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 525.

<sup>33</sup> Diedrich, *Love Across Color Lines*, 380.

<sup>34</sup> For “whistling in the dark,” see Diedrich, *Love Across Color Lines*, 299. For “figured much larger...,” see Fought, *Women in the World of Frederick Douglass*, 218–19.

<sup>35</sup> “The Last Act of the Insurrection,” *New National Era*, 1 June 1871; Nimtz, *Marx and Engels*, 214. Douglass continued to omit any reports he may have received of mass executions carried out by the soldiers and officers of Versailles, but he did abhor the “murder of the Archbishop of Paris and over fifty other victims in Mazas prison.” Marx more accurately described the violence of the Civil War in France. See Marx and Engels, *Vol. 22*, 323–24, 327.

of prisoners on the same plane, he wrote, “The slaughter in the streets has been fearful, and the destruction of valuable property and historic columns, buildings, and treasures of arts, immense and deplorable, but the government forces have been steadily gaining ground and now have the control,” a positive development in Douglass’s eyes. He even previewed the mass executions at what would come to be called The Communards’ Wall. “Another body,” he described to his readers, “had been driven into the cemetery of Pere la Chaise.”<sup>36</sup>

Then he turned immediately, and spilled much more ink, to describe some of the beautiful buildings damaged or destroyed in the fighting. Douglass wanted to tell his readers about the history and magnificence of the Palace of the Tuileries, the column at the Place Vendome, and the Hotel de Ville. This destruction showed “the insanity of the Paris mob,” not determination to defeat monarchism and establish a true republic. Douglass described, without self-reflection, how the monarchy confiscated the wealth of France to build an imperial palace that was “grand and imposing,” “gorgeously decorated,” “splendid,” and “of unrivaled elegance.”<sup>37</sup> To Douglass, only a frenzied mob of fanatical workers would want to wipe away such monuments.

### **Recognition of the Cruelty of the Versailles Government**

Once the horrors of the suppression of the people of Paris by the Versailles politicians, generals, and troops became apparent for Douglass, he became a severe critic of the conservative bourgeois republican government while never converting to the cause of the Commune. Beginning with the 8 June 1871 issue, Douglass shared information about what Merriman calls, “Thiers’s bloody repression,” and, “The Versailles killing machines.” Douglass questioned the possibility of a true republic being built on such brutality.<sup>38</sup>

Douglass implied he had not heard of the mass executions the Versailles military had been carrying out since the start of the conflict. “For weeks the world has been the horrified spectator of the bloody deeds committed by the French insurgents, and to-day the weight of sympathy is almost reversed in consequence of the savage cruelty with which the government is wreaking its revenge on those deluded, ill-starred men”—Douglass’s description that entitles this article. While he believed some of the acts could be waved off as carried out by individual soldiers, he also understood that “many, too, are the acts of cruelty by which a government calling itself republican is asserting its authority.” He recognized now that monarchists and reactionaries headed the Versailles army. “Old politicians of the times of Louis Philippe,” Douglass wrote, “and generals of the Empire never suspected of republicanism, much less of Red republicanism, have instituted a reign of terror reminding one of the first French revolution.”<sup>39</sup>

Readers of the *New National Era* were given a glimpse at the criminality and barbarism that went into suppressing the Commune. While the guillotine of revolutions past was

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<sup>36</sup> “Unfortunate Paris,” *New National Era*, 1 June 1871.

<sup>37</sup> “Unfortunate Paris,” *New National Era*. Marx seemed to speak directly to Douglass when he wrote, “no sooner do the working men anywhere take the subject into their own hands with a will, then uprisings at once all the apologetic phraseology of the mouthpieces of present society... as if capitalist society was still in its purest state of virgin innocence, with its antagonisms still undeveloped, with its delusions still unexploded, with its prostitute realities not yet laid bare.” Marx and Engels, *Vol. 22*, 335.

<sup>38</sup> “Prospects in Europe,” *New National Era*, 8 June 1871. Merriman, *Massacre*, 189, 239.

<sup>39</sup> “Prospects in Europe,” *New National Era*. As Merriman demonstrates, Thiers had expressed support for the restoration of the monarchy in the past and “three commanders of the army - Joseph Vinoy, Patrice de MacMahon, and Gaston Galliffet - were conservatives, Bonapartists to be sure, but who would prefer without question a monarchy to a republic.” Merriman, *Massacre*, 34.

objectionable enough, “the victims sentenced now-a-days by drumhead court-martial are slaughtered by hundreds, by means of mitrailleuses or volleys fired by whole companies.” This sort of indiscriminate firing into crowds of prisoners was not efficient, leading to “all stages of mutilation and agony, until after repeated volleys the merciful bullet will reach them that is to give them the final blow.” Douglass admonished the “government calling itself republican” and advised leniency, if only because the rebels were under a “revolutionary spell.” He thought, “it is safe to assume that by far the larger number, when looked upon from a higher stand-point, must be considered innocent, since in an insurrection of such dimensions the masses are always the blind and deluded tools of their leaders.”<sup>40</sup>

Douglass compared the reaction of the victorious Versailles government unfavorably to the victorious Union government of the Civil War in the United States. Contrary to the “leniency and magnanimity on the side of the North,” the government of France “seems determined to outdo the Commune in its persecutions, and it is by far more responsible for its acts, since its chiefs are not acting under the influence of fanaticism.” Douglass specified what type of Communards deserved mercy—true republicans with “no sympathy for the communists.”<sup>41</sup> Now doubting a true republic which would act as an effective symbol for anti-monarchical movements in Europe could be built in France, Douglass wrote, “what kind of a republic will it be that has been inaugurated by such hecatombs of blood on both sides? Has it any chance to stand and last among a nation that thus far has shown itself ignorant of its first principles? And is it worth, does it deserve to last, unless it is founded on true liberty and magnanimity?” There was a possibility that Bourbons and Orleanists would form an alliance, restoring the monarchy. If that were to occur, “[n]ew troubles, strifes, and revolutions would be the result, and new experiments,” like the Commune, “might be tried, without giving to the country what it needs most—peace and liberty.”<sup>42</sup>

In the 15 June edition, Douglass used a strike in Washington DC to compare the US reality to France, promote his free labor theory of labor relations, or from a working-class perspective, class collaborationism, and offer advice to American workers. Douglass saw the strike as a danger whose worst impacts were avoided: “A cloud no bigger than a man’s hand...its bolts were withheld.” In Douglass’s opinion, this was thanks to the Territorial Governor of Washington DC, Republican Henry Cooke, appointed by Ulysses S. Grant in late February 1871, and other politicians.<sup>43</sup>

Douglass reported, using language at variance with his usually sympathetic treatment of workers,<sup>44</sup> that, “A large body of muscle and of untrained mind and heart was in a perilous condition running loose in our streets. It wanted higher wages and fewer hours of labor, and struck for both.” Where “pride and fury” guided Thiers and his government, “temperance, forbearance, and wisdom” guided Cooke and the government in Washington DC. Class conflict evident in Paris was not limited to the Old World, “riot and bloodshed” was possible “in the streets of Washington.”

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<sup>40</sup> “Prospects in Europe,” *New National Era*.

<sup>41</sup> “Prospects in Europe,” *New National Era*.

<sup>42</sup> “Prospects in Europe,” *New National Era*.

<sup>43</sup> “Wisdom in the Counsels of Washington,” *New National Era*, 15 June 1871. In this same issue, Douglass attacked the French government for planning to build “interior fortifications” as a means to prevent the next Commune. Arguably revealing why the Commune was necessary, Douglass now understood it was natural that members of the government “should be distrusted and accused as traitors.” “Defenses Against the People,” *New National Era*, 15 June 1871.

<sup>44</sup> For a blatantly anti-working-class perspective that deserves more scrutiny, which Douglass included in the *New National Era*, see the letter from Philadelphia correspondent RTG, likely Richard Theodore Greener, published on the front page of the October 19 edition: Frederick Douglass, “Communications. Letter from Philadelphia,” *New National Era*, 19 October 1871.

Douglass warned some were “forgetful that we might have the same [the hell of horrors enacted in Paris] here on a smaller scale.” Douglass recognized that, “There is a terrible gulf between capital and labor constantly liable to tempests and whirlwinds.” But fortunately, “the strike is now ended, the men are at work, good sense on both sides has prevailed, the laborers get not all they demanded, but more than they formerly received, and all goes on peacefully again.”<sup>45</sup>

Douglass then provided guidance to workers considering going on strike and those who would advise them to do so. Certainly influenced by racist White workers violently turning him away from work and his sons’ denial of membership in an all-White printers’ union, Douglass opposed blocking strikebreakers from crossing picket lines.<sup>46</sup> “It may be well and needful at times to strike,” Douglass cautioned, “but it can never be well to take the law into your own hands and undertake to prevent other men from working.” This would amount to “despotism and anarchy” which could not “be safely tolerated for an hour.” Workers had attempted to engage in such action and Douglass wrote, “should the law be defied in this city by such conduct again, sterner measures of repression will doubtless be resorted to than were seen ten days ago.” Douglass, after giving cover to stern measures of repression against strikers assured his readers his sympathy was with laborers, and he understood their plight as a freeman and former slave. Because he empathized with their suffering, “we are slow to favor strikes among laborers, for they almost in every instance get the worst of it.”<sup>47</sup>

In one of the *New National Era*’s last sustained treatments of the events in France, Douglass hoped for “truly prominent, distinguished men” to come forward to lead, while comparing the morals of the French people to the German Empire, continuing his criticism of monarchists and communists alike. Almost wishing for another Bonaparte, Douglass wrote, “not one man has yet appeared to relieve the darkness of the picture, none to give promise by his patriotism, his love of liberty, and his energy to pacify the conflicting elements, of vindicating the dignity of the nation, and of making a living reality of the present sham of a Republic.” At the same time he searched for a great man to take the helm, he warned against Bonapartism.

When a population is demoralized, he argued, it is less likely that the “[m]ost honest man should obtain supreme influence, but rather the most adroit, the shrewdest plotter and intriguer... the one who will besides have the gift of flattering the vanity of the masses by empty promises of future glory.” Another Napoleon would lead to another conflagration. “A man possessed of no higher abilities and worth than Napoleon might again succeed for a while,” Douglass argued, “to be sent into exile by another revolution.” He blamed the Second Empire of Napoleon which acted to “demoralize and corrupt the people more and more, yet it required the Commune and its insurrection, it required the unworthy Assembly, with all its intriguing, unscrupulous Orleanists, Bonapartists, and Legitimists, to reveal the whole depth of rottenness.”<sup>48</sup>

To Douglass, the communists and monarchists were two sides of the same coin. The conservative assembly might have wanted to institute a terror, but if the communists were successful, an era of tyranny would follow their ascent. As Douglass put it:

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<sup>45</sup> “Wisdom in the Counsels of Washington,” *New National Era*, 15 June 1871.

<sup>46</sup> Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 91, 504; Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2014), 242–54, 277–280.

<sup>47</sup> “Wisdom of Washington,” *New National Era*.

<sup>48</sup> “The Coming Man,” *New National Era*, 22 June 1871. Marx agreed that “rottenness” had matured during the Second Empire, but his solution was the “revolutionary overthrow of the political and social conditions that had engendered” the Empire, which the Commune attempted as the “self-sacrificing champion of France.” See Marx and Engels, *Vol.* 22, 322.

If the Assembly consists largely of plotters and conspirators, watching the opportunity to betray the Republic and erect another reign of *white* terror, like the Restoration, on its ruins, the radical Republicans are contaminated with communism and red fanaticism, and their victory would mark the beginning of an era of the most odious despotism of the mob.<sup>49</sup>

Without an honest man to institute on his own a true republic, Douglass called for a pox on both houses of monarchists and the democratic mass action of the mob.

### **Defenses of the Commune and Communards Printed in the *New National Era***

In late June and early July, Douglass reprinted from other newspapers a profile of Henri, Count of Chambord, a favorite candidate for the Throne of France, an article from the *Vicksburg Herald* that described the Republican government of Ulysses S. Grant as “the Radical Commune in Washington,” plus an article from the *New York Tribune* that compared lynch mobs to “the devilish spectacles of the Paris Commune,” mentioning briefly that “[t]wenty-five hundred women, convicted of setting fire or attempting to set fire to buildings in Paris have been sentenced to transportation to New Caledonia,” the French penal colony.<sup>50</sup> But Douglass did not examine the Commune in-depth himself.

The *New National Era* did print defenses of the Paris Commune from allies of Douglass—radicals Benjamin Butler and Wendell Phillips, among others—mostly after the savagery of the suppression of the Parisian workers became apparent, but also as the Bloody Week was unfolding. Douglass thought that if Butler and Phillips led “the workingmens’ movement” in the United States, it would be “a guarantee that the movement will not be an instrument of social destruction as in Paris.” Enemies of Butler and Phillips pointed out they were both wealthy men in an effort to class-bait workers and divide them from these two potential leaders. Douglass accused such critics of “introducing a conflict between capital and labor such as has twice within a century made Paris run blood and the sky over her to redden with wrath and fire.”<sup>51</sup>

Some Americans, unlike Douglass, “thought the Paris Commune was a natural extension of American republicanism, as exemplified in the Civil War.” One of these Yankees was General and Congressman Benjamin Butler, who swung from the antebellum Massachusetts Democratic Party to Union General, advocated confiscation of and freedom for slaves during the Civil War, and finally to post-war radical supporter of the Commune. Some dismissed him as “politically unstable.” Later in the decade, E.L. Godkin would decry him as “the greatest socialistic demagogue of our day.”<sup>52</sup>

On 6 July 1871, Douglass featured a long article, taken from “a speech at the dedication of the new town hall in Gloucester,” given by Benjamin Butler, which Phillip Katz describes as a “campaign speech.” In this speech, Butler situated the Commune as of equal or greater importance in its effect on human liberty than the US Civil War, employing language often used to describe

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<sup>49</sup> “Coming Man,” *New National Era*.

<sup>50</sup> “Profile of ‘The Count De Chambord, The favorite Candidate for the Throne of France,’” *New National Era*, June 29, 1871; “Voice of the South,” *New National Era*, 29 June 1871; “News Clippings,” *New National Era*, 29 June 1871; “The Civilization of the Haiter,” *New National Era*, July 6, 1871; “News Clippings,” *New National Era*, 6 July 1871; Merriman, *Massacre*, 249.

<sup>51</sup> “Just and Unjust Criticism,” *New National Era*, 20 July 1871.

<sup>52</sup> Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 94, 165; Heather Cox Richardson, *The Death of Reconstruction: Race, Labor, and Politics in the Post-Civil War North, 1865–1901* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 117.

the struggle against slavery. He described the Commune as an attempt at self-government, while Douglass thought it showed the French incapacity for the same. Butler defended the tactics of the Communards; with the audience at a town hall in mind, he described their attempts to gain control over their own municipal government as laudable and a direct descendent of struggles for democracy in the United States.<sup>53</sup>

“Here we see a town hall built by the people, and for the people,” Butler told his audience. And this reminded him of “the great event which has distinguished this year, and perhaps its effect on human liberty will distinguish this century, possibly overshadowing the great act of emancipation by which this country liberated four millions of people.” For Butler, “The reason why liberty has never found a firm foothold in the Old World is a want of town or municipal organization.” “What was that Commune?” Butler asked. “It was an endeavor of the people of the city of Paris to have a town government such as we enjoy here... that they should not be ruled against their consent by the general government of France.” Obtaining this sort of liberty was as normal to Americans as the “air we breathe, or the water we drink.”<sup>54</sup>

The Paris Commune, in Butler’s mind, was an attempt at self-determination and a “struggle of the working man, the struggle of the laborer of the middle class for self government which should be the germ of a future republic.” The brutal suppression of the workers struggling for liberty will have consequences throughout the Old World. “The crushing out of a people struggling for such a government has,” Butler predicted, “rolled back the tide of republican liberty in Europe for years and years, if not forever.”<sup>55</sup>

Butler seemed to reply directly to Douglass when he defended the destruction of property by the retreating Communards. He lamented the slander and misunderstanding facing the defeated Parisian workers. Of the structures built “by kings and princes” set aflame, Butler defended destroying property dedicated to the “great deeds of the first Napoleon...erected as an emblem of the military glory of a despot.” He explained to his audience, “The first act of a free people was to tear it down and level it to the ground,” and asked, “Was not that in accordance with the spirit of free institutions?”<sup>56</sup>

Echoing the phrase commonly known from Lincoln’s second inaugural address to describe the wealth built up by the American slaves, Butler asked his audience, “Does it lie in the mouth of the lover of American liberty to say that the laboring men of Paris should not pull down the places of kings, raised by despotism and wrong, by unrequited labor, which never in any free government could have been made?” Butler wanted Americans to remember the Paris Commune as “the endeavor to obtain that which we enjoy—a municipal government...It was the affect of a wronged people arising in its wrath and its madness.” As Douglass did, Butler condemned the butchery of the Thiers government, but he went further and asked his listeners to read about the struggle of the Commune, which would help with “strengthening your love for the institutions of your own Government.”<sup>57</sup>

Katz describes Wendell Phillips as “the most prominent member” of “the Commune’s middle-class sympathizers, who either endorsed the Commune’s revolutionary program or insisted that Americans keep an open mind about the experiment in Paris.” As the speeches reprinted in

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<sup>53</sup> “General Butler on the French Situation,” *New National Era*, 6 July 1871. On Butler and the Commune see Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 94, 127, 139, 165, 183.

<sup>54</sup> “Butler French Situation,” *New National Era*.

<sup>55</sup> “Butler French Situation,” *New National Era*.

<sup>56</sup> “Butler French Situation,” *New National Era*. Marx echoed Butler’s descriptions of the property destruction in the Commune’s last days, calling it a “heroic self-holocaust.” See Marx and Engels, *Vol. 22*: 350.

<sup>57</sup> “Butler French Situation,” *New National Era*.

Douglass's newspaper indicated, Phillips "was one of the few abolitionist ideologues to make the transition from antislavery to prolabor agitation, and he was always willing to link those reforms with the world-historical drive towards freedom."<sup>58</sup>

Douglass printed two addresses made by Phillips, given months apart, where Phillips expounded on the Commune and the labor question more generally. In May 1871, Phillips spoke before an anniversary meeting of the Reform League where he offered prescriptions on how to avoid the Commune at home while defending the radical republicans of Paris. One of the resolutions before the Reform League, presented by Phillips, claimed "no way exists to avert the Communism which now distresses society in France except for capital and labor to meet at once on equal terms." Phillips argued that capitalists and corporations commanded more power and wealth than working people and needed to be reined in in order to meet on equal terms with labor. He warned if you "scratch New York, and you will find Paris just below the surface." This discontent resulted from "impressing the laboring classes with the belief that there is no such thing as justice, and that law is not sacred." Frustration among the workers could develop into revolution. Referencing the New York City Draft Riots of 1863, Phillips said, "When July, 1863, comes again in 1873, perhaps they won't hang negroes to a lamp post—they will indulge in a millionaire."<sup>59</sup>

Douglass shared a speech by Phillips in the 2 November issue of his newspaper on "theories of labor." Phillips briefly addressed the Paris Commune in this lecture. "The moment you make a rich class and a poor class by the cunning of corporations," he argued, "there is no republic." The goal of the labor movement, in Phillips's mind, was to find where poverty and misery come from and solve the problem facing millions of people. There were different methods to solve this problem. "Paris wrote her indignation in fire and blood in opposition to wrong." Phillips did not prefer this method, continuing, "This is the Prussian and Italian method, and to some extent the German, but the English and American people do not take the sword into the council chamber." Phillips claimed, "Our weapon is the ballot." But unfortunately, "The great mass of this country is verging towards a European condition of affairs as regards capital." This is the consequence of rich men "making vassals of our institutions... in one half of the States there is no republic."<sup>60</sup> Phillips's remedy for these ills was discussion and voting, not the fire and blood of the Paris Commune.<sup>61</sup>

Before the end of 1871, Douglass wrote a defense of two other participants in the Paris Commune. He believed the government should spare the lives of Henri Rochefort and Louis Rossel. Rochefort was a "strident but erratic opponent of the imperial regime," who joined the provisional government in September 1870. Douglass described Rochefort as "pure and blameless in his life as any public man in France... made a victim solely on account of his uncompromising republicanism." Communism did not taint Rochefort like the other radicals and he "advocated pure, uncontaminated republicanism."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 80.

<sup>59</sup> "The May Anniversaries," *New National Era*, 18 May 1871. On Phillips and the Paris Commune see Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 61, 80–81, 92–95, 112, 126–27, 142, 165, 167. Phillips connected the fight against racist terror with the struggle of laborers in America. "If you want Grant to sit in the White House, if you want secession to stay in its grave, if you want law and order to reign in the great commonwealth, we want to crush the Ku-Klux on the one hand and corporation tyranny on the other."

<sup>60</sup> "Wendell Phillips – Speech at Springfield-His Theories on Labor," *New National Era*, 2 November 1871.

<sup>61</sup> Douglass also shared defenses of the Paris Commune from Frederic Harrison and George Wilkes. Harrison wanted to defend Charles Delescluze, a veteran of June 1848 and elected member of the Commune. Wilkes wanted to counter the propaganda that painted Communards as incendiaries who torched their own city. See "A Defense of the Communists by Frederic Harrison," *New National Era*, 31 Aug. 1871. "Mr. George Wilkes," 28 September 1871.

<sup>62</sup> Merriman, *Massacre*, 25. "The Sentence of Rochefort," *New National Era*, 5 October 1871.

Louis Rossel served a short-lived stint as Delegate of War for the Commune in early May 1871, as Versailles troops entered the city. His execution in November 1871 led Douglass to write, “Outrage upon outrage, murder upon murder, are committed in France in the name of law, and, what is worse, the name and form of the Republic are used as in mockery for a rule which, for oppression and cruelty, bids fair to outdo even the defunct Empire.” Douglass charged Rossel met the firing squad’s bullets because of “his true republicanism.” Providing a relativistic defense of rebellion and treason, Douglass wrote,

He took part in the insurrection of the Commune, but not an act of wanton cruelty or destruction, no crime could be charged on him, save the problematic crime of rebellion and treason—a crime about as old as civilization itself, universally branded as something horrible, and yet most relative and varying according to individual and party convictions, political creeds, the tendencies of the period, and particularly determined by success or defeat.

Douglass remained convinced that the Republic of Moral Order “differs only in form from the Empire; but not in essence,” and its members were the true heirs of Napoleon.<sup>63</sup>

### **A Brief Examination of Douglass “On the Labor Question”**

The Paris Commune, along with labor unrest in the United States, compelled Douglass to address the labor question in multiple late summer and fall 1871 editions of the *New National Era*. “The labor question,” Douglass wrote by way of introduction, “of which in this country the abolition of slavery, of property in man, was the first grand step—is not free from the evils of ignorance, passion, ambition, selfishness, and demagogism.” It was natural, Douglass thought, that working people, Chinese, Irish, or Black, felt discontent when the “non-producers now receive the larger share of what those who labor produce.”<sup>64</sup>

Douglass sounded radical when he wrote, “The civilization, then, looked at in its material aspect alone, which on the one hand constantly increases its wealth-creating capacities and on the other as steadily leaves out of the direct benefits thereof at least seven-tenths of all who live within its influence, cannot have realized the fundamental condition of its continuance.” The number of workers joining the labor movement would compel a hearing, Douglass thought, and could not be ignored. “It is the duty of those who have been lifted up by this general movement, this attrition of classes, of which the coming struggle of the ‘proletariat’ (to use a word common in European discussion, though hardly yet generally applicable to our condition) is the final and natural consequence.” Douglass’s solution was to urge his readers to support a bill introduced in Congress that would set up a commission of three people to “investigate the subject of the wages and hours of labor, and of the division of the joint profits of labor and capital between the laborer and the capitalist.”<sup>65</sup>

In examining two recent strikes where workers were demanding a reduction in the ten-hour day, Douglass saw the employers as reasonable. But he also conceded that it was “evident that ten

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<sup>63</sup> “The Execution of Rossel,” *New National Era*, 7 December 1871. On Rossel, see Merriman, *Massacre*, 123–27, 248–49.

<sup>64</sup> Philip Foner, *The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass: Volume 4: Reconstruction and After* (New York, N.Y.: International Publishers, 1955), 264, 282.

<sup>65</sup> Foner, *Volume 4*, 283–84. It is certainly possible that Ottilie Assing or her German-American friends in Hoboken, N.J. brought Douglass’s attention to the “proletariat.”

hours' uninterrupted hard work, with the addition of the time required to commute to the factory and back, will, in the long run, reduce the laborer to the level of a beast of burden." Douglass was able to discern cracks in free labor ideology via the proletarianization of labor. He wrote, "the uniform, mechanical, and exhausting factory work, which keeps him busy uninterruptedly year after year, without offering him any prospect of ever becoming independent, nay, of ever achieving more than keeps starvation from his door, cannot fail either to make him desperate, or to smother all higher impulses and aspirations in him."<sup>66</sup>

However, Douglass's prescriptions are less convincing than his insights. He believed, "Those abuses we are outgrowing however, and not even the conservatism of monarchical Europe can stem the tide of modern ideas." If workers decided to strike, Douglass stated he would support them "always provided, however, that such results are achieved solely by moral persuasion, and neither violence nor intimidation are resorted to... such deeds only serve to reverse the balance of wrong, and would substitute one odious tyranny for another."<sup>67</sup> Douglass's liberal worldview<sup>68</sup> allowed him to argue that workers defending their picket lines were just as despicable as capitalists driving workers as beasts of burden.

Nicholas Buccola demonstrates, "Douglass was concerned about the fundamental unfairness and legitimate discontent of the burgeoning industrial capitalist system" and his "response to the labor question reveals that on this issue he was closer to the reform liberal view than he was to the libertarian view." While Buccola examines Douglass's commitment "to the institution of private property and the idea of free labor as pillars of individual liberty," and the tension between that commitment and the "gross inequalities" of postbellum America, he avoids treatment of Douglass's criticism of labor organizations and their defense of picket lines. Douglass's defense of strikebreakers and his response to the Paris Commune provide more evidence of Douglass's position "as a member of the liberal family."<sup>69</sup>

Waldo E. Martin Jr. explains that Douglass evinced a "procapitalist spirit" and "criticized trade unions for excessive hostility toward their capitalist antagonists." As David Blight argues, Douglass did not turn to labor organizations "largely because of their discriminatory practices against black and Chinese workers." Labor unions, Douglass also believed, stood in the way of workers becoming capitalists themselves. As opposed to workers' self-organization, he looked to an enlightened Republican government, which had gained legitimacy in his eyes via the crusade to overthrow slavery and their proposed commissions on labor and capital. Unions, whether they were enforcing picket lines, limiting overtime, or excluding Black workers, were "utterly incompatible with true republican principles and institutions." Martin persuasively maintains that Douglass's contention that capital and labor were on more equal footing in the United States than in Europe "contradicted the increasing degradation of labor as well as the overwhelming

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<sup>66</sup> "The Labor Question," *New National Era*, 26 October 1871.

<sup>67</sup> "Labor Question," *New National Era*.

<sup>68</sup> Studies that elucidate Douglass's liberal worldview include Peter C. Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism* (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas Press, 2008), see especially his discussion of Douglass's natural rights principles. For a discussion of Douglass and interpretations of his political philosophy as classical or reform liberalism, see Nicholas Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass: In Pursuit of American Liberty* (New York, N.Y.: New York University Press, 2012). For a critique of Douglass's liberalism that influences this study, see Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *The Mind of Frederick Douglass* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), especially 70–72, 129–130. Douglass's liberal worldview included the defense of private property, a harmony of interests between capital and labor, the end of property in man, a defense of bourgeois republican institutions, and equality before the law.

<sup>69</sup> Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*, 54. See also, 52–53, 135–36.

dominance of capital in the rapidly industrializing United States.”<sup>70</sup>

### **The Commune and the End of Reconstruction**

The Paris Commune demanded intense scrutiny from Americans, who were in the middle of the first nation-wide attempt at interracial democracy, that is, Reconstruction. This section places Douglass’s views on the Commune in political context, especially amongst other liberals in the US. The reaction of many Americans to the Paris Commune—Republicans and abolitionists included—did not portend well for this first attempt at interracial democracy. As Katz illustrates, radicals like Lydia Maria Child attacking Phillips and others associating social change with anarchy was not a promising sign for the experiment in interracial democracy “whose end would be hastened by association with the Paris Commune.” The Commune “became an excuse to assert a bolder elitism, or even to retreat from Reconstruction,” Katz convincingly writes.<sup>71</sup>

Douglass never retreated from his vision of Reconstruction as a project to win equal citizenship for Black Americans, but he was unwilling to defend the only coalition that could have made it a reality—the multiracial working class, Caucasian wageworkers and farmers, immigrant and native born, along with the freedpeople—the eventual goal of instituting a state that not only represented the interests of the producing classes for the first time but also defended those interests. His platform of free men, free soil, free speech, a free press, the ballot for all, education for all, and fair wages for all was tenuous in the hands of northern and southern capitalists.

“The growing American tension over workers and the nature of the nation’s political economy heightened dramatically with the establishment of the Paris Commune,” explains Heather Cox Richardson. By this time, Douglass certainly counted himself among the propertied Americans terrified by the Commune and opposed what he saw as the turmoil of the mob in power. Douglass’s commentary on the outbreak of strikes and the labor question seemed to indicate he was one of the many Americans Richardson describes who were more nervous about workers using force to defend their interests than willing to truly solidarize with them. Events after the Civil War fed Republican fears that workers would try to gain property through collective action. Republicans, liberals, and even radical abolitionists formed part of a group “that clung to the idea that the true American system depended on a harmony of interest between labor and capital.” The prospectus of Douglass’s *New National Era*, as well as his analysis of strikes and labor organizations, clearly placed him among this group. While Douglass expressed sympathy with striking workers, he opposed effective defenses of their picket lines and their drive to affect their working conditions through their own organizations.<sup>72</sup>

### **Conclusion**

This article examines a side of Frederick Douglass ignored in the many studies and collections that have explored his life, political philosophy, speeches, and writings.<sup>73</sup> The Paris

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<sup>70</sup> Martin, *Mind of Frederick Douglass*, 129. Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 560. “Labor Question,” *New National Era*. “Labor in Iron-Manufactories and Workingmen,” *New National Era*, 28 December. 1871.

<sup>71</sup> Katz, *From Appomattox to Montmartre*, 93, 117.

<sup>72</sup> Richardson, *Death of Reconstruction*, xii–xiii, 24, 44, 85–86, 89, 94.

<sup>73</sup> Examples of illuminating studies of Douglass that do not examine his views on the Paris Commune include Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*; William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991); Peter Myers, *Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism*; Michaël Roy, Editor, *Frederick Douglass in Context* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 2021). For an examination of the the *laissez-*

Commune was the apotheosis of what unfolded in the 1848 European Revolutions, the first time the working class took political power, although briefly. Douglass devoted considerable amounts of time and energy analyzing the events in France and reporting them to the readers of the *New National Era*. He also printed commentary and opinions contrary to his own from his allies Benjamin Butler and Wendell Phillips.

Douglass was a liberal social reformer, maybe the best US liberalism had to offer. He supported revolutionary action and oppositional politics at key junctures, such as with the Liberty Party and Radical Abolitionists, the mass anti-slavery movement that began to develop in 1854, and John Brown. These movements led to the election of a president in 1860 committed to stopping the expansion of slavery, opening the road to immediate, uncompensated abolition, a revolutionary end. He fought for and helped recruit the Black liberation army that played a leading role in making that revolutionary end a reality. However, consistent with his analysis of the European Spring in 1848, Douglass denounced and criticized the attempt of workers in Paris to take history into their own hands after the institution of republican structures. He accepted the accounts of mob-rule and anarchy promoted by the Thiers government and printed in American newspapers. While he opposed the Second Empire of France, Douglass concluded that communism tainted French republicanism and formed just as much an antithesis to true republicanism as the restoration of the monarchy. Karl Marx believed a true republic required real democratic institutions in the hands of working people—what the Commune briefly realized, notwithstanding Douglass’s less flattering portrait. His reaction to the Paris Commune exposes the limitations of Douglass’s liberal political thought to take on an internationalist analysis of class conflict and labor struggles.

The Paris Commune and the labor upsurge coming out of the Civil War in the United States pressured Douglass to spend time and space in his newspaper analyzing the labor question. While he expressed sympathy with workers attempting to improve their lives, he advocated for conciliation between capital and workers while condemning labor organizations and their picket lines. Douglass relied on the newly consolidated capitalist government in the United States, led by Republicans, rightly credited with crushing the Confederacy and passing the Reconstruction Amendments to the Constitution, to mediate between workers and their bosses with the goal of finding a harmony of interests. Douglass apparently did not agree with the claim that only the working class, in all its skin colors and other identities, has a class interest in ridding the world of social inequality. It would be difficult to make a credible case that Douglass contributed to the eventual downfall of Reconstruction, the worst setback in the history of the American working class. However, the views he expressed on the Paris Commune, as of yet unexamined, and his opposition to effective labor organization after the Civil War dovetailed with the views of other northern liberals that historians have identified as playing a significant role in the retreat from Reconstruction.<sup>74</sup> As David Montgomery teaches, Radical Republicans’ goal was equality before the law within a unified nation. “But beyond equality lay demands of wage earners to which the equalitarian formula provided no meaningful answer, but which rebounded to confound the efforts of equality’s ardent advocates. Class conflict, in other words, was the submerged shoal on which Radical dreams foundered.”<sup>75</sup>

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faire underpinnings of Douglass’s thought, see Martin, *The Mind of Frederick Douglass*. For a brief treatment of Douglass’s opposition to socialism and communism with no mention of the Commune, see Buccola, *The Political Thought of Frederick Douglass*.

<sup>74</sup> On the defeat of Radical Reconstruction as “the worst setback” for the American working class in history, see Farrell Dobbs, *Revolutionary Continuity: The Early Years, 1848–1917* (New York, N.Y.: Pathfinder Press, 1980; 2009), 69.

<sup>75</sup> David Montgomery, *Beyond Equality: Labor and the Radical Republicans 1862–1872* (New York, N.Y.: Alfred A.

Marx would have been in accord with Douglass that the American labor movement's "first grand step" toward the emancipation of labor was "the abolition of slavery, of property in man," as Douglass put it in October 1871. In November 1864, Marx, on behalf of the International Working Men's Association, congratulated Lincoln on his reelection. He took the opportunity to remind the president that as long as

the working men, the true political power of the North, allowed slavery to defile their own republic; while before the Negro, mastered and sold without his concurrence, they boasted it the highest prerogative of the white-skinned labourer to sell himself and choose his own master; they were unable to attain the true freedom of labour or to support their European brethren in their struggle for emancipation, but this barrier to progress has been swept off by the red sea of civil war.<sup>76</sup>

Three years later in *Capital*, published in 1867, he returned to his still so current insight. "In the United States of North America, every independent movement of the workers was paralysed so long as slavery disfigured a part of the Republic. Labour cannot emancipate itself in the white skin where in the black it is branded."<sup>77</sup> Both Marx and Douglass wholeheartedly backed emancipation, the abolition of slavery, and the Union cause in the Civil War, the "first grand step," but Marx saw the reconstructed bourgeois republic as an indispensable means to an end, power in the hands of the working class, and not the end in itself, as Douglass did.

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Knopf, 1967), x.

<sup>76</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works Vol. 20: Marx and Engels: 1864–1868* (London, Eng.: Lawrence & Wishart, 1985), 20.

<sup>77</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx & Engels Collected Works Vol. 35: Karl Marx Capital: Volume 1*, (London, Eng.: Lawrence & Wishart, 1996), 305.