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150 years of the Paris Commune

The Paris Commune of 1871

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On 18 March 1871, in Paris besieged by Prussian troops, the people took control of their city and for 72 days conducted the first experiment of life under popular control.

1. The tradition of the oppressed

There is a wall at the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris, known as "Le Mur des Fédérés". It was there that the last fighters of the Paris Commune were shot in May 1871, by Versailles troops. Every year, thousands - and sometimes, as in 1971, tens of thousands - of French people, but also people from all over the world, visit this exalted place of memory of the labour movement. They come alone or in demonstrations, with red flags or flowers, and sometimes sing an old love song, which became the song of the Communards: "Le Temps des Cerises". We do not pay homage to a man, a hero or a great thinker, but to a crowd of anonymous people who we refuse to forget.

As Walter Benjamin said in his theses "On the Concept of History" (1940), the struggle for emancipation is waged not only in the name of the future but also in the name of the defeated generations; the memory of enslaved ancestors and their struggles is one of the great sources of moral and political inspiration for revolutionary thought and action. The Paris Commune is therefore part of what Benjamin calls "the tradition of the oppressed", that is to say, of those privileged ("messianic") moments in history when the lower classes have succeeded, for a while, in breaking the continuity of history, the continuity of oppression; short - too short - periods of freedom, emancipation and justice which will, each time, serve as benchmarks and examples for new battles. Since 1871 it has continued to nourish the reflection and practice of revolutionaries, starting with Marx himself - as well as Bakunin - and then, in the twentieth century, Trotsky and Lenin.

2/ Marx and the 1871 Commune

Despite their disagreements within the First International, Marxists and libertarians worked together fraternally in support of the Paris Commune, that first great attempt at "proletarian power" in modern history. Certainly, the respective analyses of Marx and Bakunin on this revolutionary event were poles apart. We can summarize the theses of the first in the following terms: "The small group of convinced socialists who participated in the Commune were in a very difficult position.... They had to set up a revolutionary government and army against the government and army of Versailles." Faced with this reading of the civil war in France, which opposes two governments and two armies, the anti-state point of view of the second was quite explicit: "The Paris Commune was a revolution against the **state** itself, this supernatural runt of society."

Attentive and informed readers will have made the correction for themselves: the first opinion is that of ... Bakunin in his essay "The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State". While the second is a quote from ... Marx, in his first version of "The Civil War in France, 1871". We have purposely muddied the waters, to show that the differences - admittedly very real - between Marx and Bakunin, Marxists and libertarians, are not as simple and obvious as is thought.

Moreover, Marx rejoiced in the fact that, during the events of the Commune, the Proudhonians forgot their master's theses, while certain libertarians observed with pleasure that Marx's writings on the Commune abandoned centralism in favour of federalism.

Marx had proposed, as the central political slogan of the International Workingmen's Association - the First

International - this formula which he inscribed in the Inaugural Address of the IWA in 1864: "The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves". If the Commune of 1871 was so important in his eyes, it is precisely because it was the first revolutionary manifestation of this founding principle of the modern working class and socialist movement.

The Commune, Marx wrote in the Address in the name of the First International in 1871, "The Civil War in France" (and in the preparatory notices), was not the regime of a party or of a group, but "essentially the *government of the working class*", a "government of the people by the people", that is to say, "the taking back by the people and for the people of their own social vocation". For that, it was not enough to "conquer" the existing state apparatus: it was necessary to "break" it and replace it by another form of political power, as the Communards did, from their first decree - the abolition of the standing army and its replacement by the armed people. Here is what Marx wrote in a letter to his friend Kugelmann on 17 April, 1871, thus during the first weeks of the Commune: "If you look at the last chapter of my Eighteenth Brumaire you will find that I say that the next attempt of the French revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to smash it, and this is essential for every real people's revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting" [1]

What seemed to Marx to be decisive was not only the social legislation of the Commune - certain measures of which, such as the transformation of factories abandoned by their owners into workers' cooperatives, had a socialist dynamic - but above all its political significance as *workers' power*. As he wrote in the Address of 1871, "this new Commune, which breaks the power of the modern state" was the work of "plain working men" who "for the first time dared to infringe upon the governmental privilege of their 'natural superiors'". [2]

The Commune was neither a conspiracy nor a sudden surprise attack, it was "the people acting for themselves and by themselves". The correspondent of the *Daily News* newspaper found there was no leader exercising "supreme authority", which calls for an ironic comment from Marx: "It shocks the bourgeois who has an immense need for political idols and 'great men'".

While activists from the First International played an important role in the events, the Commune cannot be explained by the intervention of a vanguard group. In response to the calumnies of reaction, which presented the uprising as a conspiracy hatched by the IWA, Marx wrote: "The police-tinged bourgeois mind naturally figures to itself the International Working Men's Association as acting in the manner of a secret conspiracy, its central body ordering, from time to time, explosions in different countries. Our Association is, in fact, nothing but the international bond between the most advanced working men in the various countries of the civilized world. Wherever, in whatever shape, and under whatever conditions the class struggle obtains any consistency, it is but natural that members of our Association, should stand in the foreground." [3]

If Marx speaks sometimes of workers and sometimes of "people", it is because he was aware that the Commune was not only the work of the proletarian class in the strict sense, but also of sectors of the impoverished middle classes, intellectuals, women from various social strata, students and soldiers, all united around the red flag and the dream of a social republic. Not to mention the peasants, absent from the movement, but without whose support the uprising in Paris could only fail.

Another aspect of the Commune that Marx insists on is its internationalist character. Certainly, the people of Paris rose up in 1871 against the capitulating bourgeois politicians who reconciled with Bismarck and the Prussian army. But this national leap in no way took a nationalist form; not only because of the role of the militants of the French section of the First International, but also because the Commune appealed to combatants from all nations. The solidarity of the International Workingmen's Association, and the meetings in support of the Commune held in Breslau and other German cities, at the initiative of socialist workers, are the expression of this internationalist

significance of the uprising of the Parisian people. As Marx wrote in a resolution adopted by a meeting to celebrate the anniversary of the Commune in March 1872, the Communards were “the heroic vanguard ... of the menacing army of the universal proletariat”.

There exists, according to Walter Benjamin in his Theses of 1940, a unique constellation between a present moment in the struggle of the oppressed, and a precise event of the past, a unique image of this past which risks disappearing if it is not recognized. This is what happened during the Russian Revolution of 1905. Only Leon Trotsky saw the constellation between the Commune of 1871 and the struggle of the Russian Soviets in 1905: in his preface, written in December 1905, to the Russian edition of Marx's writings on the Commune, he observes that the example of 1871 shows that “it is possible for the workers to come to power in an economically backward country sooner than in an advanced country”. However, once in power, Russian workers will be led, like those in the Commune, to take measures which combine the liquidation of absolutism with the socialist revolution.

In 1905-1906, Trotsky was quite isolated in the defence of the 1871 model for the Russian revolution. Even Lenin, despite his criticisms of the Menshevik tactics of supporting the anti-Tsarist bourgeoisie, refused to regard the Commune as an example for the workers' movement in Russia. In his 1905 work, “Two Tactics of Social Democracy”, he criticized the Paris Commune for having confused the aims of the struggle for the republic with those of the struggle for socialism; for this reason, it was a form of government which would not resemble that of the future Russian revolutionary democratic government.

Things would turn out quite differently in 1917. From the April Theses, Lenin took the Paris Commune as a model for the Republic of Soviets which he proposed as a goal for the Russian revolutionaries, *precisely because it had effected the dialectical fusion* between the struggle for a democratic republic and the struggle for socialism. This idea would also be broadly developed in *State and Revolution* and all Lenin's other writings during the year 1917. The identification with the Communards was so strong that, according to contemporary accounts, Lenin had proudly celebrated the day when - just a few months after October 1917 - the power of the Soviets had succeeded in holding out one day more than the Commune of 1871.

The October revolution is therefore a striking example of this idea proposed by Walter Benjamin in his Theses: any genuine revolution is not only a leap towards the future, but also “a tiger leap into the past”, a dialectical leap towards a moment in the past laden with “present time” (*Jetztzeit*). Like Marx and Engels, Lenin and Trotsky criticized certain political or strategic errors of the Commune: for example, not taking the money from the Bank of France, not attacking Versailles, waiting for the enemy in the barricades of each neighbourhood. Nonetheless, they recognized in this event an unprecedented moment in modern history, the first attempt to “storm the heavens”, the first experience of social and political emancipation of the oppressed classes.

3/ The relevance of the Paris Commune in the 21st century

Each generation has its own reading, its own interpretation of the Commune of 1871, according to its historical experience, the needs of its present struggle, the aspirations and utopias which motivate it. What would its relevance be today, from the point of view of the radical left and the social and political movements of the early 21st century, from the Zapatistas of Chiapas to the “movement of movements”, the global justice movement?

Of course, the vast majority of militants and activists today know little about the Commune. There are nonetheless some affinities and resonances between the experience of the Parisian spring of 1871 and the struggles of today that deserve to be highlighted:

a) The Commune was a movement of **self-emancipation, self-organization and initiative from below**. No party tried to take the place of the popular classes, no vanguard wanted to “take power” in place of the workers. The militants of the French section of the First International were among the most active supporters of the popular

uprising, but they never wanted to set themselves up as the self-proclaimed “leadership” of the movement, they never attempted to monopolize power, or marginalize other political currents. The representatives of the Commune were democratically elected in the neighbourhoods and subjected to the permanent control of their popular base.

b) In other words: the Commune of 1871 was a **pluralist and unitary movement**, in which the partisans of Proudhon or (more rarely) of Marx, libertarians and Jacobins, Blanquists and “social republicans” all participated. Of course, there were debates and differences, sometimes even political clashes in the democratically elected bodies of the Commune. But in practice they acted in common, respected each other, focused their fire on the enemy and not on the comrade in struggle with whom they may have had disagreements. The ideological dogmas of each mattered less than the common objectives: social emancipation, the abolition of class privileges. As Marx himself acknowledged, the Jacobins forgot their authoritarian centralism, and the Proudhonians their “anti-political” principles.

c) As we saw above, it was an **authentically internationalist movement**, with the participation of fighters from several countries. The Commune elected a Polish revolutionary (Dombrowicz) to the leadership of its militia; a Hungarian-German worker (Leo Frankel) was commissar of labour. Of course, resistance to the Prussian occupation played a decisive role in triggering the Commune, but the appeal of the French insurgents to the people and to German social democracy, inspired by the utopia of the “United States of Europe” testifies to this internationalist consciousness.

d) Despite the weight of patriarchy in popular culture, the Commune was distinguished by the active and combative participation of women. The libertarian activist Louise Michel and the Russian revolutionary Elisabeth Dmitrieff are among the best known, but thousands of other women - designated with rage and hatred as “pétroléuses” by the Versailles reactionaries - took part in the fighting of April-May 1871. On 13 April, the citizens’ delegates sent to the Executive Committee of the Commune an address which stated the will of many women to participate in the defence of Paris, considering that: “The Commune, representative of the great principle proclaiming the annihilation of all privileges, of all inequalities, at the same time is committed to take into account the just demands of the entire population, without distinction of sex - a distinction created and maintained by the need for antagonism on which the privileges of the dominant classes rests”. The appeal was signed by the delegates, members of the Central Committee of Women Citizens: Adélaïde Valentin, Noémie Colleville, Marcand, Sophie Graix, Joséphine Pratt, Céline Delvainquier, Aimée Delvainquier, Elisabeth Dmitrieff.

e) Without having a precise socialist programme, the social measures of the Commune - for example, the handing over to the workers of factories abandoned by their bosses - had a radical anti-capitalist dynamic.

It is evident that the characteristics of the popular uprisings of our time - for example, the Zapatista uprising of 1994, that of the people of Buenos Aires in 2001, that which defeated the anti-Chavez coup attempt in Venezuela in 2002, or that against the villainous President Pinera in Chile in 2019 - to mention just a few recent examples from Latin America, are very different from those of the insurgent Paris of 1871. But many aspects of this first attempt at social emancipation of the oppressed retain an astonishing relevance and should be reflected on by the new generations. Without the memory of the past and its struggles there will be no fight for the utopia of the future.

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[1] https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/letters/71_04_12.htm

[2] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch05.htm>

[3] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/ch06.htm>