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150 years of the Paris Commune

After the Commune

- Features -

Publication date: Thursday 18 November 2021

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The twenty-eighth of May, 1871, was a Sunday. Most of the fighting in Paris was over. Only a few barricades remained, in and around Belleville, and these fell by 11 a.m. The sun was out, replacing the fog and rain that had darkened the preceding days. The executions, however, continued. Courts-martial and more spontaneous killings by the soldiers of the French republic had begun in earnest as soon as troops had entered Paris on the twenty-first.

Élie Reclus would later recall that Paris was "a workshop in which machine guns are at work." [1] Nineteen hundred Communards were rounded up and shot on that last Sunday, the guns spitting in the face of the Lord's commandment to keep the sabbath holy by doing no work. [2]

In the one hundred fifty years since the Paris Commune, the spectacular horror and grief of its death have competed with and sometimes overshadowed the dreams that animated its life. The Commune, declared in the teeth of both the invading Prussian army and the newborn republican government in Versailles, was given to multifarious interpretations, by participants and observers alike. It represented patriotic resistance to the Prussians and international solidarity with workers everywhere. It encoded municipal self-government and decentralization, but also the social regulation of workplaces and schools. It rested on the armed working classes, the national guard of Paris, but was directed from the Hôtel-de-Ville by a council of socialist and Blanquist doctrinaires.

The work of administration was undertaken by commissions that operated more or less autonomously. Some of these tasks – the provisioning of the population, basic municipal services like trash collection, the financial and postal services, and the oversight of workshops and employment – were undertaken with dedication and creativity. Some of the most famous Communards – Reclus and his brother Élisée, Eugène Pottier, Gustav Lefrançais, Léo Frankel, Gustav Courbet – served on these commissions and experimented freely with social reforms and utopian ideas.

Their initiatives were complemented by the work of fully independent groups like the Union des Femmes and the International Working Men's Association, not to mention the Federation of the National Guard, which had declared the Commune in the first place. Slogans like *association volontaire*, *autonomie*, and *République des travailleurs* adorned posters and circulars as people sought to use the unprecedented openness of communal politics to impose a new stamp on the social world, to put into practice the dreams they had long harboured of a world free of exploitation, class hierarchy, and competitive pressure.

BEYOND COMMUNAL LUXURY AND MASSACRE

The most prominent recent books on the Commune reinforce this dual picture of the Commune's dream-filled life and horrific death. John Merriman, the eminent historian of modern Europe, entitled his 2014 history of the Commune, simply, *Massacre*. Wrapped in sombre black, adorned by a chiaroscuro rendering of Paris in flames, Merriman's book is lavish in detailing the deaths that attended and followed the Commune's brief existence.

As if in rebuke, 2015 delivered Kristin Ross's *Communal Luxury*, militantly devoted to the political imaginary of the Communards and bedecked in the splendid and pacific teal of William Morris's floral design. Here the focus is on the hopes and aspirations of the Communards and those they inspired, and the scale of those dreams – unlike the scale of their deaths – is "livable, not sublime." [3]

Those who turn to Lissagaray's text will not find, in the first instance, either communal luxury or massacre. Instead, they will find an effort, impressive in scope and precise in detail, to explain the rise and fall of the Commune, its operations and its failings, its organization and its disorganization.

But this choice between dying and dreaming, between the unimaginable and imagination itself did not always define the memory of the Commune. The first history of the Commune, published in Belgium a short five years after the events, was Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray's *L'Histoire de la Commune de 1871*. Translated into German the next year under the careful and very active oversight of Karl Marx and into English in 1886 in a translation by Eleanor Marx Lissagaray's History is a classic. [4] Robert Tombs, one of the foremost revisionist historians of the Commune, admits that Lissagaray's work "is still after more than a century arguably the best general history of the Commune." [5]

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Lissagaray was a life-long journalist, and his History is a grand work of rapportage. He believed that it was his duty to tell the truth about the Commune, both to combat the slanders heaped on it by the victorious Third Republic and to give a true accounting to those who were inspired by the Commune and sought to make it again and make it better. "The children have the right to know the reasons for their parents' defeat," he wrote, and this means resisting not only the victors' history but also the "false revolutionary myths" and "sensational stories" of those who are attached in some way to the loss. [6]

This insistence on the factual truth of words spoken and things done, of the what and the why, is a valuable counterweight to both the sensationalism of the Commune's horrific end and the mythologizing that attends efforts to recover its disclosed possibilities.

THE INEVITABILITY OF CIVIL WAR

Lissagaray took for granted that a revolutionary uprising by the proletariat, and a consequent remaking of the social and political world by that same class, is both desirable and on the agenda. For this reason, his History treats the course of events in Paris as a failed attempt to do what is to be done, and thus as a source of practical lessons, both positive and negative. Lissagaray was not a great tactician as he proved with series of rather disastrous political maneuvers within the French Marxist scene in the 1880s but he was a sharp observer of the dynamics that hobbled and undermined the Commune from its first few weeks of existence.

What Lissagaray saw, above all else, was that the citizens of Paris did not take seriously the inevitability of civil war. In his words, they "could never understand that the Commune was a barricade, not a government." "This was the general error," he wrote, "the superstitious belief in their governmental longevity." [7]

At first, this did not seem true. The first official act of the Central Committee of the National Guard the agency that would declare the Commune on the eighteenth of March was to order barricades built around the parts of the city through which the victorious Prussian army was to parade on the first of March. The point was to keep the Prussian soldiers and the Parisian guardsmen isolated from one another. They saw that any attack on the Prussians by Parisians "would result in the immediate overthrow of the Republic" by Bismarck. As much as the National Guard hated and distrusted the new government of France led by Adolphe Thiers and controlled by a majority of monarchist representatives they understood that a Prussian-installed government would be worse. They held their

fire.

At this initial stage before the Commune was declared the National Guard operated "as an insurance company against a coup-d'état," and its Central Committee was, therefore, merely "a sentinel." [8] For precisely this reason, it could draw on very broad support, both within and beyond the National Guard battalions. Paris was the stronghold of republican sentiment, so a near consensus on that question united broad swaths of the population who would not have been able to agree on any more positive set of aims.

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When Theirs's government turned against Paris and tried to seize the National Guard's two hundred fifty cannon on the eighteenth, therefore, this spirit of unanimity carried over to the defence of the cannon and the declaration of the Commune. But, as the city busied itself with preparing for Communal elections and making the social revolution that followed from Paris's proletariat being in charge of the whole city, it also turned inwards. They did not even shut the city's gates. The Journal Officiel in Versailles called it civil war, but Paris did not notice. The Commune "did not see" that it was now engaged in "a life-and-death struggle with the Assembly of Versailles." [9]

"HOLY AUTONOMY" AND ITS DISCONTENTS

As a consequence, despite the heady excitement of the first weeks of the Commune's existence, a shadow hung over everything. The Central Committee set Communal elections for the twenty-sixth, but there had been few public meetings to establish the mandates of those elected. There was no process of public opinion formation or any setting of aims. "Instead of voting for a programme," therefore, the people of Paris "voted for names." [10] In place of the Central Committee, "unadorned with great men" and devoted to a simple and single purpose, the new Council of the Commune "abounded in chapels, groups, semi-celebrities, and hence endless competition and rivalry." [11]

The thing about a clear minimal programme is that it allows people to set aside all their other differences for the sake of the common project. You are not asked to agree about very much, which means that the costs of cooperation to your self-perception and your other concerns are low. The alternative, though, is what Lissagaray saw take hold in Paris. Valuing voluntary associations above all else, the Communards sought out or created groups in which they could enjoy the greatest possible agreement and pursue the most fully articulated projects of reform and transformation. They dreamed of autonomy, and meant to enjoy what they had of it while it lasted.

But "holy autonomy, which forbade interfering with the autonomy of one's neighbour," thereby also forbade arming the neighbouring communes in order to attack Versailles. [12] National Guard battalions were left alone, each to do what it willed with whatever resources it could muster. And people defected left and right. The Commune may have had 60,000 men under arms in late March. By the time the real fighting began, they had only about 20,000 men and women doing the fighting. [13] The voting rolls dropped precipitously as citizens fled, especially but not exclusively those from the wealthier neighbourhoods. [14] Since everything depended upon self-identifying with the Commune and its affiliated associations, self-dis-identification sapped the Commune of its strength.

Lissagaray thought that the only chance was for the Commune to appeal to the rest of France. The city needed the provinces in order to survive, and the provinces needed the city in order to be free. The Commune fights for the Republic, he proposed, and the Commune's enemy the central government, with its taxes and its bureaucrats and its coalition of monarchists eager to reinstate one royal house or the other is also the enemy of the peasant. Thus, the Commune did not want to impose Paris's dream of workers' cooperatives and social revolution on the peasants,

but to join them in removing the obstacles to their dreams. The Council of the Commune, though, made no such appeal. Instead of pledging to fight for the liberty of the provinces, they declared that "Paris works and suffers for all France," and that the provinces had a duty to fight for Paris, their saviour.

LISSAGARAY'S LESSONS

We might condense and generalize the practical lessons Lissagaray drew from the Commune under four headings.

First, social movements for liberation should expect resistance, and should plan for the eventuality of opposition. Armed civil war may be forestalled or avoided altogether, but not by pretending it can't happen. The current social order has, by definition, powerful constituencies in favour of its continuance in perpetuity. Real interests are threatened by any substantial effort to change the world, and no one should expect those real interests to evaporate in the light of one's moral example.

Second, therefore, the forces of revolution must agree to agree on a minimum program that can unite as broad a coalition as possible. Robin D.G. Kelley is certainly right that "the conditions and very existence of social movements enable" what he calls freedom dreams, imagined worlds of possibility. [\[15\]](#) But those freedom dreams are going to remain heterogeneous to one another, and counting on a shared dream holding the movement together in the face of committed opposition is bound to fail.

Third, any revolution will need aid and assistance from non-revolutionaries, just as the Commune needed aid and assistance from the French provinces if it were ever going to survive. The enemies of any movement of liberation will also have other enemies. The movement, to have any hope of success, will have to both appeal to those "enemies-of-my-enemies" and do so in full cognizance that they are not, thereby, "my friends." It can hope to do so by saying repeatedly and loudly how the liberation it seeks will also free these non-revolutionary segments of the population to live as they wish.

Finally, the surest sign that any movement of liberation is strong and healthy is that it is pushing to the fore previously unknown figures. Lissagaray damns those who fail to "recognize the force manifesting itself through unknown men," [\[16\]](#) and measures the vitality of the Central Committee and the Council by the extent to which l'inconnus predominate in their makeup. The reliance on the previously unknown both keeps the movement close to the grassroots and indicates the strength of the popular mandate behind the minimum program. As "semi-celebrities" come to dominate the movement, so to do cliques and contests among personalities.

MAKING HISTORY MEANS MAKING MISTAKES

These practical lessons of the Communards should be recalled today, alongside the more familiar melancholy regarding their martyrdom and celebration of their utopian imaginations.

Lissagaray's History certainly celebrates and heroizes the Communards, especially the obscure men and women who populated the meetings, built and defended the barricades, and proposed and discussed the mandates binding their delegates to the Council. In this regard, it ought to be regarded as a founding document in the tradition of "history from below." The everyday workers and shopkeepers of Paris were not passive victims of historical circumstance, according to Lissagaray, but active makers and shapers of their own history.

In contrast to the social histories and "microhistories" that came to dominate historical attention to the agency of the common people, however, Lissagaray portrays the working classes of Paris as the agents of revolution, not as the agents of cultural production, or of resistance, or of self-fashioning. And in making history by making a revolution, they also made mistakes. Movements for liberation create freedom dreams, but not necessarily the means of realizing them. The risk of focusing only on the beauty of the dreams or the agony of the loss is that we lose sight of the fact that the Communards were trying to do something and they failed. Their failure, too, is part of the history they made. If we don't want to fail, too, then we have to heed Lissagaray: "There might be something more terrible than the defeat: to misconstrue or to forget its causes." [17]

May 26, 2021

Source: [Spectre](#)

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[1] Élie Reclus, *La Commune de Paris au jour le jour* (Saint-Martin-de-Bonfossé: Théolib, 2001 [1908]), p. 370.

[2] John Merriman, *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), p. 225.

[3] Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London & New York: Verso, 2015), p. 8.

[4] See Daniel Gaido, "The First Workers' Government in History: Karl Marx's Addenda to Lissagaray's History of the Commune of 1871," *Historical Materialism* (2021): 1-64 (DOI: 10.1163/1569206X-12341972). and Rachel Holmes, *Eleanor Marx: A Life* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), chapters 7 & 15.

[5] Robert Tombs, *The Paris Commune, 1871* (New York: Longman, 1999), p. 203.

[6] Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*, trans. Eleanor Marx (London & New York: Verso, 2012 [1886]), p. 5. Available online [here](#).

[7] Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, pp. 194-95.

[8] Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, p. 61 (translation modified)

[9] Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, p. 74.

[10] Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, p. 127.

[11] Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, p. 127.

[12] Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, p. 165.

[13] Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune*, p. 150; Merriman, *Massacre*, p. 211.

[14] Lissagaray, History of the Paris Commune, p. 162.

[15] Robin D.G. Kelley, Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination (New York: Penguin/Random House, 2003), p. 9.

[16] Lissagaray, History of the Paris Commune, p. 81.

[17] Lissagaray, History of the Paris Commune, p. 126.