

The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism

Anarcho

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There are a few sure things about reading history books. Firstly, and most obviously, you generally know how it ends (badly, in the case of the Paris Commune). What is important is what you learn from the events discussed. Secondly, when it is a Marxist account you are guaranteed that it will (at best) ignore or (at worse) distort the anarchist involvement and analysis of events.

In this, Leninist Donny Gluckstein's account of the Paris Commune¹ does not disappoint – he both ignores key aspects of the anarchist critique *and* distorts what parts he does cover. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that he is associated with the British SWP and its caricatures of anarchism are infamous.

The Paris Commune should be well known in libertarian circles so there should be no need to discuss its history in any great length. Not only were there “*among the Communards Anarchists and Syndicalists of a number of different brands*”² but Bakunin and Kropotkin saw the Commune as a striking confirmation (in both positive and negative senses) of anarchist ideas. It is fair to say that this event had a significant influence for all revolutionary socialists, anarchists as well as Marxists. Lenin, for example, placed the example of the Commune at the heart of his “**State and Revolution**” (while, of course, ignoring it when in power). Marx produced his classic “**Civil War in France**” and added what he considered its key lesson to the next preface the “**Communist Manifesto**” (a lesson which, as we will discuss, Lenin distorted somewhat).

We will use Gluckstein's book as means of exploring the lessons from the Commune, as well as to show how Leninists distort anarchism and how the standard Marxist interpretation he summarises and supports is flawed. It will reaffirm the anarchist influences on the Commune, the place of the Commune in anarchism and the anarchist critique of the revolution. It will also show how incredulous Leninist attempts to appropriate it for their tradition are. For, while Gluckstein praises the Commune for introducing “*workers' control of production*” and “*democracy from below*” (p. 53), he fails to mention the awkward fact that the Bolsheviks abolished both...

Proudhon

Most historians of the Commune split the Commune's political influences into Jacobin, Blanquist and Proudhonist. The Blanquists followed their eponymous hero, Louis Auguste Blanqui, in favouring a party of professional revolutionaries who would seize power in a coup and implement socialism from the top-down. The “Proudhonists” were a mixed bag, and Gluckstein splits them into right and left wings.

That the Commune was influenced by Proudhon's ideas goes without saying and the best that can be said of Gluckstein's account is that he at least acknowledges this by stating that Marx “*played a significant role [in the First International]. This does not mean, however, that the French section was full of Marxists. Here the Proudhonists were the most influential current.*”³ (p. 82)

¹ Donny Gluckstein, **The Paris Commune: A Revolutionary Democracy**, Bookmarks, 2006.

² G.D.H. Cole, **A History Of Socialist Thought**, Vol. 2, p. 167

³ Gluckstein downplays the key role the French Proudhonists played in setting up the International. He dates it to London, 1863 when, in fact, the negotiations that lead to its founding in 1864 began in 1862 when the Proudhonists visited the London International Exhibition. (George Woodcock, **Anarchism**, pp. 198–9) Marx played no role in setting up the International, turning up to the founding meeting in 1864 which was the product of over two years preparation by French and British trade unionists (both of whose ideas Marx despised).

However, his discussion of Proudhon's ideas is a travesty⁴. To be charitable, it simply repeats the standard Marxist analysis of the Frenchman's ideas so this account is not breaking new ground in distortion. Sadly, the standard Marxist account of Proudhon bears little relationship to his ideas. Given how regularly this nonsense is repeated, it is worthwhile contrasting Gluckstein's account to what the "father of anarchism" actually argued.

The usual Leninist equation of a market economy with capitalism is repeated, stating Proudhon's "*criticisms of the failings of capitalist society where sharp*" but he "*did not reject the market system as such.*" (p. 72) Like Marx⁵, Proudhon was well aware that the "*market system*" was not identical to capitalism, that "*capitalist society*" was marked by wage labour and that such an economic system was not the end of social evolution.⁶ And, like Marx, he repeatedly called for the abolition of wage labour (hence his consistent support for co-operatives). Yet Proudhon is presented as an advocate of wage slavery and it is asserted that he thought market exchange under capitalism was based on freedom and equality:

"It followed that, since the selling of labour was itself a form of commercial operation, when employees went to work for the bosses they were not being exploited because 'any man's labour can buy the value it represents.'"⁷ (p. 72)

Proudhon would have been surprised, as he explicitly denounced such a conclusion, arguing that property "*is the right to enjoy and dispose at will of another's goods – the fruit of an other's industry and labour*"⁸ He was well aware that workers' produced a value greater than what they received in wages:

*"Whoever labours becomes a proprietor – this is an inevitable deduction from the principles of political economy and jurisprudence. And when I say proprietor, I do not mean simply (as do our hypocritical economists) proprietor of his allowance, his salary, his wages, – I mean proprietor of the value he creates, and by which the master alone profits ... **The labourer retains, even after he has received his wages, a natural right in the thing he was produced.**"*⁹

This is an embryonic theory of surplus value, as recognised by more informed Marxists.¹⁰ Then there is Proudhon's concept of "*collective force*" which Edward Hyams summarises on the page before the one Gluckstein quotes to support his assertion.¹¹ As Hyams put it, the boss "*cheats [his workers] abominably*" for "*he has paid nothing for their collective effort, only for the individual*

⁴ At least he relegates Proudhon's sexism and racism to an endnote, where they should reside as they were in contradiction to his basic ideas – as subsequent libertarians argued.

⁵ "*Let us suppose the workers are themselves in possession of their respective means of production and exchange their commodities with one another. These commodities would not be products of capital.*" (Marx, **Capital**, vol. 3, p. 276)

⁶ "*The period through which we are now passing – that of machinery – is distinguished by a special characteristic, – WAGES.*" He denounced "*the radical vice of political economy*", namely "*affirming as a definitive state a transitory condition – namely, the division of society into patricians and proletarians.*" (**System of Economic Contradictions**, p. 198, p. 67)

⁷ Significantly, Gluckstein quotes Marx quoting Proudhon. He rarely quotes Proudhon directly, suggesting a lack of familiarity with source material. If he were at all familiar with Proudhon's work, he would have known that the anarchist sought to explain why this formula did not apply under capitalism and concluded that property was theft, i.e., exploitation.

⁸ **What is Property?**, p. 171

⁹ **What is Property?**, pp. 123–4

¹⁰ For example, John Ennenberg notes that Proudhon's ideas were "*anticipating what Marx and Engels were later to call the appropriation of surplus value*" (**Proudhon and His Age**, p. 55)

¹¹ Although Hyams does not use that term nor give it the centrality it deserves.

effort of each.”¹² Hyams also notes that Proudhon opposed all non-labour based income, including “rent, dividend, interest or profit”¹³ Or, to coin a phrase, “property is theft!”

Showing his utter ignorance of the matter, Gluckstein asserts that “Karl Marx, who studied Proudhon’s work carefully, had a very different analysis which located exploitation at the very heart of the capitalist production process.” (p. 72) In reality, anyone familiar with both would know that Marx repeated Proudhon’s analysis of the role of “collective force” in **Capital** in essentially the same fashion but, of course, without acknowledgement.¹⁴ Moreover, compare Marx’s comment from 1871 about the “despotism of capital over labour” (p. 97) to Proudhon’s “property is despotism”¹⁵ from 1840.

Clearly, Proudhon saw exploitation occurring in the workplace and so his “position that property is theft locates a fundamental antagonism between producers and owners at the heart of modern society. If the direct producers are the sole source of social value which the owners of capital are expropriating, then exploitation must be the root cause of ... inequality.”¹⁶ Even a basic awareness of his ideas would be sufficient to recognise that Gluckstein’s claim that, for Proudhon, exploitation “did not occur in the labour process” and so it “must come from outside of the commercial or capitalist relations, through force and fraud” (p. 72) is total nonsense.

Moreover, Proudhon linked rising inequality it to the hierarchical relationship created in the capitalist workplace.¹⁷ So Gluckstein’s conclusion “followed” only if you are totally ignorant of Proudhon’s ideas and are happy to consult secondary sources and cherry-pick quotes from them. Thus we find Proudhon arguing that socialism¹⁸ is “the abolition of capitalism and of wage-labour, the transformation of property, ... the effective and direct sovereignty of the workers.”¹⁹ Mutualism aimed at “the complete emancipation of the workers ... the abolition of the wage worker”: “Industrial Democracy must ... succeed Industrial Feudalism.”²⁰ He was well aware of the oppressive nature of wage labour:

“Do you know what it is to be a wage-worker? It is to labour under another, watchful for his prejudices even more than for his orders ... It is to have no mind of your own ... to know no stimulus

¹² Edward Hyams, **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: His Revolutionary Life, Mind and Works**, p. 43. Proudhon’s own account can be found in **What is Property?** (pp. 127–30) As K. Steven Wright notes, this was “[o]ne of the reasons Proudhon gave for rejecting ‘property’ [and] was to become an important motif of subsequent socialist thought.” Thus “collective endeavours produced an additional value” which was “unjustly appropriated by the **proprietaire**.” (**Pierre-Joseph Proudhon the Rise of French Republican Socialism** p. 64 , p. 65)

¹³ Edward Hyams, **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon**, p. 45

¹⁴ Marx discussed how a capitalist buys the labour-power of 100 men and “can set the 100 men to work. He pays them the value of 100 independent labour-powers, but does not pay them for the combined labour power of the 100.” (**Capital**, Vol. 1, p. 451)

¹⁵ **What is Property?**, p. 251. And, like Marx Proudhon was well aware of the role economics played in defending, justifying, rationalising capitalism: “Political economy – that is, proprietary despotism – can never be in the wrong: it must be the proletariat.” (**System of Economic Contradictions**, p. 188)

¹⁶ John Enrenberg, **Proudhon and His Age**, p. 56

¹⁷ “I have shown the contractor, at the birth of industry, negotiating on equal terms with his comrades, who have since become **his workmen**. It is plain, in fact, that this original equality was bound to disappear through the advantageous position of the master and the dependence of the wage-workers.” (Proudhon, **System of Economical Contradictions**, p. 202)

¹⁸ Like Bakunin and Kropotkin, Proudhon happily called himself a socialist while, of course, attacking state socialism as oppressive and exploitative.

¹⁹ quoted by John Ehrenberg, **Proudhon and his Age**, p. 111

²⁰ quoted by K. Steven Vincent, **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism** p. 222 and p. 167

save your daily bread and the fear of losing your job. The wage-worker is a man to whom the property owner who hires him says: What you are to do is to be none of your business; you have nothing to control in it...²¹

Gluckstein does, in passing, acknowledge Proudhon's real position by noting that big capitalists "could be excluded from commodity production through mutualism, or workers' co-operatives." (p. 75) If Proudhon *really* thought that exploitation did not occur within the workplace then why did he advocate co-operatives? Why did he consistently argue for the abolition of wage labour? Simply because, contra Gluckstein, Proudhon knew that industrial democracy, in which "all positions are elective, and the by-laws subject to the approval of the members," would ensure that "the collective force, which is a product of the community, ceases to be a source of profit to a small number of managers" and becomes "the property of all the workers." Thus "workmen's associations ... are full of hope both as a protest against the wage system, and as an affirmation of **reciprocity**" and their importance lies "in their denial of the rule of capitalists, money lenders and governments." His aim was "Capitalistic and proprietary exploitation, stopped everywhere, the wage system abolished, equal and just exchange guaranteed."²²

Gluckstein asserts with casual abandon that Proudhon's ideas are "easily recognisable as the precursor of neo-liberal economics today. But Proudhon's ideas were located in a different context and so took a far more radical form when adopted by the male artisan class." (p. 72) Since when did neo-liberalism refrain from using the state to impose its reforms and skew the market in favour of the capitalist class? When has the capitalist state ever left working class people alone when they act for themselves? Equally, when has an advocate of neo-liberal economics ever argued that laissez-faire capitalism meant "the victory of the strong over the weak, of those who own property over those who own nothing"?²³ Or denounced capitalist firms because they result in "the workman [being] subordinated, exploited: his permanent condition is one of obedience" and so people are related as "subordinates and superiors" with "two ... castes of masters and wage-workers, which is repugnant to a free and democratic society" and urged co-operatives to replace them?²⁴ Or suggested that "[w]e shall never have real workingman's associations until the government learns that public services should neither be operated by itself or handed over to private stock companies; but should be leased on contract to organised and responsible companies of workers."²⁵ Unsurprisingly, Proudhon had nothing but contempt for the neo-liberals of his time and they for him.²⁶

Then there is the usual Marxist nonsense that "Proudhon wanted to return society to an earlier golden age." (p. 73) In reality, he did not.²⁷ Proudhon tailored his ideas to the economy he faced. The French anarchist's support for artisan production is labelled as anachronistic while, ironi-

²¹ quoted by Dorothy W. Douglas, "Proudhon: A Prophet of 1848: Part II", pp. 35–59, **The American Journal of Sociology**, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 39

²² **The General Idea of the Revolution**, p. 222, p. 223, pp. 98–99 and p. 281. It should be noted that this translation renders "wage labour" as "wages system."

²³ quoted by Peter Marshall, **Demanding the Impossible**, p. 259

²⁴ **General Idea of the Revolution**, pp. 215–216

²⁵ quoted by Dorothy W. Douglas, "Proudhon: A Prophet of 1848: Part II", pp. 35–59, **The American Journal of Sociology**, Vol. 35, No. 1, p. 45

²⁶ "The school of Say," Proudhon argued, was "the chief focus of counter-revolution" and "has for ten years past seemed to exist only to protect and applaud the execrable work of the monopolists of money and necessities, deepening more and more the obscurity of a science [economics] naturally difficult and full of complications." (**The General Idea of the Revolution**, p. 225) All of which seems sadly too applicable today!

²⁷ "M. de Sismondi, like all men of patriarchal ideas, would like the division of labour, with machinery and manufactures, to be abandoned, and each family to return to the system of primitive indivision, – that is, to **each one by himself**,

cally, our Marxist presents more than enough evidence to show it reflected the realities of the contemporary economy. Thus we find the admission that, in 1871, “[o]lder forms of production predominated” as well as “the prevalence of artisans and handicraft production” in Paris and elsewhere in France. (p. 69) In other words, Proudhon advocated economic ideas applicable to the economic structure he lived in rather than, as with Marx, ones that only became predominant decades after his death.

Gluckstein does have some praise for Proudhon, noting that the “strengths of Proudhon’s approach – his anti-authoritarianism and stress on self-organisation by the working class – were adapted” by his followers. (p. 75) This is a significant improvement on, say, Engels who considered “anti-authoritarianism” as being total nonsense and inapplicable to modern society.²⁸ He also notes that “Proudhonism had deep roots in the working class movement and laid stress on action from below.” (p. 83) This is an improvement on Lenin who argued that “the organisational principle of revolutionary Social-Democracy ... strives to proceed from the top downward.”²⁹

Gluckstein does quote Proudhon arguing that “the social question can only be resolved by you, by you alone, without the assistance of power.”³⁰ (p. 74) So why did Proudhon stress self-organisation and change from below? This was because the French anarchist recognised that the state (“power”) was run by capital. As he put it, the state “finds itself inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat.”³¹ Equally, Proudhon was not convinced that any centralised state socialist structure would be anything other than state capitalism: “We do not want to see the State confiscate the mines, canals and railways; that would be to add to monarchy, and more wage slavery.”³²

This is something that Gluckstein, in theory, is aware. He notes that reformists have “founded on the state machine, the British Labour Party being one example. These movements thought they could use the existing power structures to bring about the changes they wanted.” (p. 63) The fate of Marxian Social Democracy shows the validity of Proudhon’s position. As predicted by Bakunin, those parties following Marx’s call to take part in “political action” have become reformist. Significantly, Gluckstein makes no mention of this (probably because the party he was a member of follows Marx’s position and singularly fails to learn the lessons of history).

Thus it is simply untrue to claim that Proudhon “held back from dealing with the core of the system – the exploitation at the heart of the capitalist-worker relationship, and the state which exists to protect that exploitative process.” (p. 76) He was well aware that the state was a capitalist tool

each one for himself, in the most literal meaning of the words. That would be to retrograde; it is impossible.” (Proudhon, **System of Economic Contradictions**, p. 206)

²⁸ See “On Authority” (**The Marx-Engels Reader**, pp. 730–3). For a critique of his argument, see **section H.4** of “**An Anarchist FAQ**” (www.anarchistfaq.org).

²⁹ Ironically, “the organisational principle of opportunist Social-Democracy” was “to proceed from the bottom upward, and, therefore, wherever possible ... upholds autonomism and ‘democracy,’ carried (by the overzealous) to the point of anarchism.” (**Collected Works**, vol. 7, pp. 396–7)

³⁰ Compare this to one Communard who urged people to “[e]xpect nothing from the government; do it yourself ... Associate yourself with comrades in the workshop, with your neighbours in your **quartier**.” (quoted by Martin Phillip Johnson, **The Paradise of Association**, p. 135)

³¹ **System of Economical Contradictions**, vol. 1, p. 399

³² **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, p. 62. This position was first raised in “**What is Property?**” and its critique of “communism” alongside property. He essentially argued that state communism (the only kind that existed then) would turn the “community” into a proprietor and its members into wage slaves.

and that wage labour lead to exploitation. The notion that Proudhon was not against wage labour simply cannot stand even a superficial look at his works.³³

In summary, then, Proudhon favoured workers' co-operatives (or association) as he was well aware that bosses kept part of the value produced by workers. That Gluckstein does not know this basic fact shows the superficial nature of his critique. Dependent on a selective reading of secondary sources, he ironically confirms the comments of one such author he quotes: "since [Marx's "**Poverty of Philosophy**"] no good Marxists have had to think about Proudhon. They have what is mother's milk to them, an *ex cathedra* judgement."³⁴

Associational Socialism

Unsurprisingly, as a Leninist, Gluckstein is keen (p. 197) to assign the idea of socialism based on co-operatives to Louis Blanc (although he misdates his influential work, **The Organisation of Labour**, to 1847 rather than 1840³⁵). This is utterly inadequate as, for example, Proudhon had also popularised the idea of workers associations (co-operatives) as the basis of socialism from 1840 onwards. His **General idea of the Revolution** of 1851 is particularly strong on this, although it can be found in earlier works like **What is Property?**³⁶ For Proudhon, the workplace should be come "little republics of workingmen."³⁷

Moreover, Proudhon was also for associations of associations. In 1848, for example, he called for wanted workplaces to be "handed over to democratically organised workers' associations" which would then form a "vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic social Republic."³⁸ Fifteen years later, he called this system an "agro-industrial federation" in **The Principle of Federation**. For Proudhon, this "defined" all of his economic ideas "developed over the last twenty-five years."³⁹ These ideas were taken up and expanded upon by the French Internationalists and Bakunin after Proudhon's death in 1865. Even Gluckstein cannot ignore this, noting that for Proudhon "the many tiny⁴⁰ economic units would federate together ... [and] would group into local communes ... and then upwards into regional and finally national federations" (p. 75)

However, acknowledging that other socialist thinkers raised the idea still gives credence to the false Leninist notion that the working class could not come up with socialistic ideas by themselves. In fact, Blanc and Proudhon simply took up the ideas expressed by workers and interpreted

³³ He did oppose communism and so was, as Kropotkin discussed in "The Collectivist Wages System" in **The Conquest of Bread** and elsewhere, in favour of the "wages system" (i.e., distribution by deed, not need) but this is not identical with support for workers selling their labour to a boss.

³⁴ Hymans, p. 92

³⁵ The original articles which were the basis of Blanc's book were written in 1839, i.e., after the idea of associationism was raised by the workers themselves.

³⁶ For an excellent overview of Proudhon's ideas on associational socialism and their evolution see **Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of the French Republican Socialism** by K. Steven Vincent.

³⁷ Quoted by Dorothy W. Douglas (p. 45) She correctly notes that "the co-operative movement ... syndicalism ... guild socialism ... all bear traces of the kind of self-governing industrial life to which Proudhon looked forward." (p. 54)

³⁸ **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, p. 62

³⁹ **The Principle of Federation**, p. 74

⁴⁰ It must be physiologically significant that Leninists write about Proudhon, and anarchists in general, advocating "small" and "tiny" workplaces. Apparently size **does** matter and Leninists think their productive units are much, much bigger than anarchist ones. In reality, of course, anarchists advocate appropriately sized workplaces and are not hung-up about their size. This applies to Proudhon just as much as later anarchists.

them in different ways.⁴¹ “Associationism” was born during the wave of strikes and protests unleashed by the 1830 revolution. That year saw Parisian printers, for example, producing a newspaper (**L’Artisan: Journal de la classes ouvriere**) which suggested that the only way to stop being exploited by a master was for workers to form co-operatives. During the strikes of 1833, this was echoed by other skilled workers and so co-operatives were seen by many workers as a method of emancipation from wage labour⁴². Proudhon even picked up the term **Mutualisme** from the workers in Lyon in the early 1840s and their ideas of co-operative credit, exchange and production influenced him as surely as his influenced the Lyon workers.⁴³ He did not, however, take up their ideas on strikes and insurrections (that would come later into anarchism with Varlin and Bakunin).⁴⁴

So when Proudhon, Varlin and Bakunin expressed support for workers associations as the basis of libertarian socialism they were hardly expressing new ideas but rather expressing a common perspective developed within working class circles and reflected in the mainland European sections of the First International.

It comes as no surprise, then, that during the Commune, numerous workers urged the Council to promote co-operatives as the means of solving the “*social question*.” The Communal Council itself decreed that workshops whose owners had fled should be given to “*the co-operative association of workers who were employed there*.” (p. 30) Like Proudhon, it raised the possibility that **all** large workplaces would be turned over to workers’ associations. However, the Commune (like Proudhon) was fundamentally gradualist in its approach. This failure to take a revolutionary approach was highlighted by Bakunin and subsequent libertarians as a key flaw in the Commune.

“Left Proudhonists” or Collectivists?

After Proudhon’s death, militants influenced by him revised and developed many of his ideas. Based on their experiences, many became (like Eugene Varlin) supporters and organisers of trade unions and strikes as well as rejecting his patriarchal notions. Gluckstein labels these “*Left Proudhonists*.” A better term would be “*collectivists*” – what Bakunin initially called his politics before taking up the term anarchist. Like the French militants, Bakunin favoured collective ownership, unions, strikes, the expropriation of capital by trade unions and a decentralised, federal social organisation based on communes and workplace associations.

As G.D.H. Cole puts it, the French Internationalists, including Varlin, were “*strongly hostile to centralisation. They were federalists, intent on building up working-class organisations on a local basis and them federating the local federations. The free France they looked forward was to be a*

⁴¹ Significantly, Proudhon criticised Blanc’s system because it was state run and financed. He simply did not believe that the capitalist state would pursue such reforms and, if it did, it would simply mean replacing capitalists with bureaucrats. As history shows, Proudhon was right.

⁴² Bernard H. Moss, “*Producer’s Associations and the Origins of French Socialism: ideology from below*”, pp 69–89, **Journal of Modern History**, Vol. 48, No. 1, p. 73

⁴³ According to K. Steven Vincent, there was “*close similarity between the associational ideal of Proudhon ... and the program of the Lyon Mutualists*” and “*it is likely that Proudhon was able to articulate his positive program more coherently because of the example of the silk workers of Lyon. The socialist ideal that he championed was already being realised, to a certain extent, by such workers.*” (**Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism**, p. 164)

⁴⁴ It should also be noted that the black flag was also raised by these artisans in 1831, which “*made their insurrection a memorable event in the history of anarchist thought*” as well as “*in the history of revolutionary symbols.*” (Murray Bookchin, **The Third Revolution**, vol. 2, p. 157)

country made up of locally autonomous communes, freely federated for common purposes which required action over larger areas ... In this sense they were Anarchists.” Varlin “had at bottom a great deal more in common with Proudhon than with Marx” and had a “Syndicalist outlook.”⁴⁵

“Varlin and the French Bakuninists,” George Woodcock notes, “had also [like the syndicalists] recognised before the Paris Commune the role of the trade unions in social struggle, and the general strike.”⁴⁶ To quote Varlin himself, unions have “the enormous advantage of making people accustomed to group life and thus preparing them for a more extended social organisation. They accustom people not only to get along with one another and to understand one another, but also to organise themselves, to discuss, and to reason from a collective perspective.” Moreover, as well as mitigating capitalist exploitation and oppression in the here and now, the unions also “form the natural elements of the social edifice of the future; it is they who can be easily transformed into producers associations; it is they who can make the social ingredients and the organisation of production work.”⁴⁷

The similarities with Bakunin’s ideas are obvious, although go unmentioned by Gluckstein.⁴⁸ Unsurprisingly, when Bakunin met Varlin at the International’s Basel Congress and, “once the program of the Alliance was explained to” Varlin he said he “shared the same ideas and agreed to co-ordinate with their revolutionary plans.”⁴⁹

Varlin, in other words, was part of the general development on the libertarian movement from reformist mutualism towards revolutionary collectivism, from Proudhon to Bakunin (so to speak). For Bakunin, his ideas were “Proudhonism widely developed and pushed to these, its final consequences.”⁵⁰ However, this is not to say that without Bakunin this would not have happened for Varlin “seems to have moved independently towards his collectivist position.”⁵¹ In other words, Bakunin became influential because he was part of a general development within Internationalist circles, ideas which he helped deepen but was also influenced by.

Equally, Gluckstein considers Varlin’s work in overthrowing the Monarchy as in contradiction with Proudhon’s apolitical stance. That is debatable, but one thing is sure, namely that it is not in contradiction with general libertarian principles.⁵² Anarchists are well aware that republics can offer more opportunity for activity than dictatorships.⁵³ Anarchists, after all, took part in the protests which overthrew the Tsar in February 1917⁵⁴ as well as in Spain, 1931 (for example). The key is that they participated in such events to push them further, to turn them into social

⁴⁵ **A History Of Socialist Thought**, Vol. 2, p. 140, p. 168

⁴⁶ **Anarchism**, p. 263

⁴⁷ quoted by Julian P. W. Archer, **The First International in France, 1864–1872**, p. 196

⁴⁸ This is unsurprising, as Marxists regularly ignore the obvious links between Bakunin’s ideas and what later became known as anarcho-syndicalism – see **section H.2.8** of “**An Anarchist FAQ**”

⁴⁹ Julian P. W. Archer, **The First International in France, 1864–1872**, p. 186

⁵⁰ **Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 198

⁵¹ George Woodcock, **Anarchism**, p. 239

⁵² “The International does not reject politics of a general kind; it will be compelled to intervene in politics so long as it is forced to struggle against the bourgeoisie. It rejects only bourgeois politics.” (Bakunin, **The Political Philosophy of Bakunin**, p. 313)

⁵³ “The most imperfect republic is a thousand times better than the most enlightened monarchy ... The democratic system gradually educates the masses to public life.” (Bakunin, quoted by Daniel Guerin, **Anarchism**, p.20)

⁵⁴ While, significantly, the local Bolsheviks opposed the initial protests (just as Marx opposed attempts to rise in insurrection during the Franco-Prussian war).

revolutions rather than purely political ones.⁵⁵ This was Varlin's position as well when he noted that "*for us political revolution and social revolution are interdependent*" and "*in view of all the obstacles we now meet we feel that it will be impossible for us to organise the social revolution so long as we live under a government as authoritarian as the present one*"⁵⁶

So, given his links with Bakunin and the similarities in their politics, Gluckstein is right to state that "*Varlin showed what could be achieved*" (p. 84) but not in the sense he meant it! It was precisely the rise of the "collectivism" which Bakunin and Varlin subscribed to which finally forced Marx to move the General Council to America.

The Anarchist critique

In his discussion of the champions of the Commune, Gluckstein does at least acknowledge that anarchists have analysed it and claimed it as their own. He gives slightly less than 2 pages to the subject (what he terms the feminist critique is covered in more depth). It is, at best, superficial and, at worse, simply false. In fact, it feels utterly perfunctory and is self-contradictory.

The presentation of what Gluckstein terms the "*anarchist interpretation*" of the Commune starts badly, with the author asserting that "*Anarchists believe that the Commune cannot be described as a workers' government, because it abolished the very concept of government*" (p. 184) and quotes both Bakunin's and Kropotkin's famous essays on the Paris Commune as evidence. Yet, regardless of Gluckstein's assertions, Anarchists believe no such thing – as these very essays prove.

Central to the anarchist critique is precisely that one of the key problems with the Commune was that it retained a government within Paris while proclaiming the free federation of communes outside it. This was Bakunin's position, who noted that the Communards had "*set up a revolutionary government*" and so organised "*themselves in a Jacobin manner, forgetting or sacrificing the first conditions of revolutionary socialism.*"⁵⁷ Kropotkin repeated and extended this analysis, as admitted by Gluckstein himself: "*One of Kropotkin's complaints against the Commune was precisely that the masses co-operated with the centralised power they had created at the Hotel de Ville.*" (pp. 184–5) He even quotes Kropotkin arguing that "[t]here is no more reason for a government inside the commune than for a government outside." (p. 185) So how, in that case, could Anarchists think that the commune "*abolished*" government?

A key part⁵⁸ of Kropotkin's critique was that while "*proclaiming the free Commune, the people of Paris proclaimed an essential anarchist principle*" but "*they stopped mid-course*" and gave "*themselves a Communal Council copied from the old municipal councils.*" Thus the Paris Commune did not "*break with the tradition of the State, of representative government, and it did not attempt to*

⁵⁵ Kropotkin once noted that any French revolution would start as a "political" one, as revolutions were "*not made to order*" but "*however the revolution began, it would not stop with a mere change of government*" and "*attempts at expropriation*" would start. (**The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings**, p. 211) The role of anarchists would be to transform it into a social revolution.

⁵⁶ quoted by Eugene Schulkind, **The Paris Commune of 1871**, pp. 32–3, p. 33

⁵⁷ **Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 267

⁵⁸ Another was that the Commune "*treated the economic question as a secondary one, which would be attended to later on, after the triumph of the Commune ... But the crushing defeat which soon followed, and the blood-thirsty revenge taken by the middle class, proved once more that the triumph of a popular Commune was materially impossible without a parallel triumph of the people in the economic field.*" (**Words of a Rebel**, p. 74)

achieve within the Commune that organisation from the simple to the complex it inaugurated by proclaiming the independence and free federation of the Communes.” Kropotkin continually stressed that the revolutionaries were isolated from the masses and shut-up in the town hall which lead to disaster as the Commune council became “immobilised ... by red tape” and lost “the sensitivity that comes from continued contact with the masses ... Paralysed by their distancing from the revolutionary centre – the people – they themselves paralysed the popular initiative.”⁵⁹

Totally missing the point of the anarchist critique, our Marxist opines that “[i]f the Commune had only been a moment from below, the anarchist interpretation might have been correct” but the insurrection “founded a new focus of power.” (p. 185) Quite – and anarchists at the time and subsequently have noted that this “power” was simply not up to the task at hand. This can be seen from Gluckstein’s own account. He himself admits that the Commune was “overwhelmed” by suggestions from other bodies, the “sheer volume” of which “created difficulties” and it “found it hard to cope with the stream of people who crammed into the offices.” (pp. 47–8) He states that “[r]elations between the Commune” and “the Clubs and the mass meetings” are “harder to measure” (p. 50) which is a damning admission for someone claiming that the Commune implemented a new regime based on direct democracy. Even his conclusions against the “anarchist interpretation” are question begging:

“It was this combination of direct activity, plus an organised governmental structure (for all its inadequacies), that earned the Paris Commune its historic significance as the moment when an anti-capitalist movement was transformed into a power in its own right.” (p. 185)

Yes, “for all its inadequacies”! Rather than address whether “an organised governmental structure” undermines the “direct activity” of the masses and is up to solving the many tasks facing a social revolution as Kropotkin and other anarchists did, Gluckstein simply ignores the issue. He notes, in passing, the difficulties facing the Council trying to handle the numerous problems facing the revolution but does not draw any conclusions from them. Anarchists, however, would note that they confirm Bakunin’s 1870 prediction that any revolutionary government “could not fail to severely constrict the scope of revolutionary action because it is impossible, even for the most energetic and enterprising authoritarian revolutionary, to understand and deal effectively with all the manifold problems generated by the Revolution. For every dictatorship, be it exercised by an individual or collectively by relatively few individuals, is necessarily very circumscribed, very short-sighted, and its limited perception cannot, therefore, penetrate the depth and encompass the whole complex range of popular life.”⁶⁰

The people of Paris were also aware of this problem, with the inability of the Commune to be effective. As the Council “appeared increasingly incompetent or insufficiently revolutionary, clubs and committees became the vehicles for the assertion of direct sovereignty by means of association ... Had the Commune managed to last longer it is certain that Leftist factions of the clubs and committees and the National Guard would have posed serious, organised opposition to the Communal Council.”⁶¹ Before and during the Commune, there were attempts to federate various clubs and assemblies (such as the Delegation of the Twenty Arrondissements). These would have, eventu-

⁵⁹ **Words of a Rebel**, p. 97, p. 93, p. 97

⁶⁰ **Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 196

⁶¹ Martin Phillip Johnson, **The Paradise of Association**, pp. 162–3. Compare this to Bookchin’s comment that the Communal Council was “largely ignored ... after it was installed. The insurrection, the actual management of the city’s affairs and finally the fighting against the Versailles, were undertaken mainly by popular clubs, the neighbourhood vigilance committees, and the battalions of the National Guard. Had the Paris Commune (the Municipal Council) survived,

ally, produced a federal structure within the commune itself as the limitations of the Council became clear.

As such, Gluckstein was wrong to suggest that the Commune was a “*new form of government based on mass active democracy was generated – the first workers’ state.*” (p. 7) Insofar as it was based on “*mass active democracy*” it was not a state as it was based on what states have evolved to stop – mass participation in social life. As such, he is right to state that power “*from above, acting on those below, was challenged and the very foundations of the conventional state were undermined*” (p. 205) however he shows the typical Marxist confusion when he calls the new social institutions formed “*a new type of state which fused people and power.*” (p. 205) Which is understandable, given the false Marxist metaphysical notion that the state is simply “*a system of domination by one class over another*” (p. 205) rather than a set of institutions marked by specific social relationships required to maintain minority class rule over society.⁶²

So, in the words of Gluckstein, “*the reality was not simple.*” (p. 184) Sadly, this applies to his distortions of the “*anarchist interpretation*” rather than to the analysis he cannot bring himself to present never mind discuss. Simply put, to assert “*the anarchist belief that in 1871 the Commune had already abolished the state*” (p. 206) cannot be sustained by looking at what anarchists actually wrote about the Commune. In fact, one of our key critiques is that part of the Commune’s failings was precisely that it had **not** abolished the state **within** Paris itself.

Perhaps this obvious unwillingness to address the actual anarchist position helps, in part, to explain Gluckstein’s repeating of an all too common Marxist contradiction about anarchism. Thus we find him asserting that Proudhon’s “*disciple, Michael Bakunin, made the abolition of the state his central tenet*” (p. 74) while also being a case of the state being “*ignored*” “*anarchist style*” (p. 50) Needless to say, you cannot “*ignore*” the state if your goal is its “*abolition.*” In addition, it should be stressed that Bakunin’s “*central tenet*” was not simply the abolition of the state but, rather, as Wayne Thorpe correctly summarises, “*the simultaneous destruction of the state and of the capitalist system, accompanied by the organisation from below of a federalist system of administration based upon labour’s economic associations.*”⁶³

So, contra the Marxist tradition, it is **not** the case that the “*originality of the Commune lay in its determination to found a new type of state.*” (p. 63) Rather, its decentralised and federal form showed how to replace the state with a new form of social organisation, one which is based upon, rather than designed to exclude, mass participation. One of the limitations of the Commune, as Bakunin and Kropotkin stressed, was that it combined aspects of this new social organism with aspects of the state and, as a consequence, could not produce a successful social revolution.

(De)centralisation and Federalism

For most Marxists, any form of co-operation or co-ordination is “centralisation” or “centralism” and, correspondingly, decentralisation implies isolation and atomisation of forces. The anarchist system of federalism simply does not fit into this stark dichotomy.

it is extremely doubtful that it could have avoided conflict with these loosely formed street and militia formations.” (Post-Scarcity Anarchism, p. 90)

⁶² The difference between the evolutionary anarchist analysis of the state and the Marxist metaphysical one is discussed in *section H.3.7 of “An Anarchist FAQ”*

⁶³ “*The Workers Themselves*”, p. 6

Gluckstein does not disappoint and, like all Leninists, he confuses decentralisation with isolation, centralisation with co-ordination. He points to discussion within the Commune on “*whether to emphasise centralised direction or local initiative, freedom or authority*” (p. 159) and states that “[e]ven leading anarchists, who opposed centralisation on principle,” (p. 165) recognised the need for co-ordinated resistance to the central government and its forces. He contrasts the Communards distrust of central leadership with “*Versailles’s unified command*” (p. 165) and notes that the debate about the **Committee of Public Safety** was, at its heart, “*whether, given conditions of civil war, power could be decentralised immediately.*” (p. 52) He, of course, sides with the Blanquists as civil war showed “*workers could not dispense with a concentrated authority of their own. Lenin, recalling Marx, called this authority a workers’ state.*” (p. 206)

Yet no anarchist has ever argued against the idea of co-ordination of struggle. That is why we have consistently advocated federalism,⁶⁴ a position lost on Marxists. In fact, the Paris Commune brought the contradictions of the Marxist attacks on anarchism to the surface. Thus we read, say, Engels attacking anarchists for holding certain position yet praising the 1871 revolution when it implement exactly the same ideas. For example, in his deeply inaccurate diatribe “**The Bakuninists at Work**”, Engels was keen to distort the federalist ideas of anarchism, dismissing “*the so-called principle of anarchy, free federation of independent groups*” and that Bakunin “[a]s early as September 1870 (in his **Lettres a un francais**) ... had declared that the only way to drive the Prussians out of France by a revolutionary struggle was to do away with all forms of centralised leadership and leave each town, each village, each parish to wage war on its own.” For Engels anarchist federalism “*consisted precisely in the fact that each town acted on its own, declaring that the important thing was not co-operation with other towns but separation from them, this precluding any possibility of a combined attack.*” This meant “*the fragmentation and isolation of the revolutionary forces which enabled the government troops to smash one revolt after the other.*” According to Engels, the anarchist’s “*proclaimed [this] a principle of supreme revolutionary wisdom.*”⁶⁵

The truth is totally different. Bakunin did, of course, reject “*centralised leadership*” as it would be “*necessarily very circumscribed, very short-sighted, and its limited perception cannot, therefore, penetrate the depth and encompass the whole complex range of popular life.*” However, it is a falsehood to state that he denied the need for co-ordination of struggles and federal organisations from the bottom up. As he put it, the revolution must “*foster the self-organisation of the masses into autonomous bodies, federated from the bottom upwards.*” Rather than deny the need for co-ordination, Bakunin stressed it: “*the peasants, like the industrial city workers, should unite by federating the fighting battalions, district by district, assuring a common coordinated defence against internal and external enemies.*”⁶⁶ In this he repeated his earlier arguments concerning social revolution – arguments that Engels was well aware of. In other words, Engels deliberately misrepresented Bakunin’s political ideas.⁶⁷

Compare this to Engels praise for the Paris Commune which, he gushed, refuted the Blanquist notion of a revolution sprung by a vanguard which would create “*the strictest, dictatorial centralisation of all power in the hands of the new revolutionary government.*” Instead the Commune “*appealed to [the provinces] to form a free federation of all French Communes ... a national organi-*

⁶⁴ The “*Commune ... must break the State and replace it by the Federation.*” (Kropotkin, **Words of a Rebel**, p. 83)

⁶⁵ Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, p. 146, p. 141

⁶⁶ “*Letters to a Frenchman*”, **Bakunin on Anarchism**, p. 196, p. 206, p. 190

⁶⁷ It should also be pointed out that Engels’ diatribe was an attack on federalism when, in fact, federalism was **not** actually implemented.

sation which for the first time was really created by the nation itself. It was precisely the oppressing power of the former centralised government ... which was to fall everywhere, just as it had fallen in Paris.”⁶⁸ Clearly a “free federation” of Communes is bad when anarchists advocate it but excellent when workers in revolt advocate it! Why this was the case Engels failed to explain.

Equally, there were attempts to centralise power in the Commune, most notably the Communal Council itself (with it “concentrating power in fewer and fewer hands over the course of the Commune, centralising authority rather than broadening it”⁶⁹) and then the Blanquist/Jacobin inspired **Committee of Public Safety**. Neither seemed to have been successful for, with the latter a “proposal for [a] five-strong leadership [which] reflected widespread frustration with the existing arrangements” (p. 158) In the debate to form it, “the majority stressed the need for centralised decision-making at the expense of grass roots democracy” (p. 160) Sadly, though, it “performed no better than the Communal Council.” (p. 160) If centralisation is considered as automatically ensuring the means of success in a revolution, this failure should give pause for thought.

Significantly, conflict over who should organise resistance lead to “deadlock” (p. 143) Federal forces were, in fact, “receiving orders from no less than seven different sources” (p. 144) Rather than being an example of lack of centralisation, this is a symptom of it. It mirrors what happened during the centralised Bolshevik regime where “in practice, [the] hypercentralisation turned into infighting and scrambles for control among competing bureaucracies” and so “the not untypical example of a small condensed milk plant with few than 15 workers that became the object of a drawn-out competition among six organisations including the Supreme Council of National Economy, the Council of People’s Commissars of the Northern Region, the Vologda Council of People’s Commissars, and the Petrograd Food Commissariat.”⁷⁰ Bolshevik centralisation was inefficient for other reasons, as “it seems apparent that many workers themselves ... had now come to believe ... that confusion and anarchy [sic!] **at the top** were the major causes of their difficulties, and with some justification. The fact was that Bolshevik administration was chaotic ... Scores of competitive and conflicting Bolshevik and Soviet authorities issued contradictory orders, often brought to factories by armed Chekists. The Supreme Economic Council... issu[ed] dozens of orders and pass[ed] countless directives with virtually no real knowledge of affairs.”⁷¹

As well as the Commune showing that centralisation of power need not be as successful as Leninists assume, it also shows that representative bodies can easily give themselves more power at the expense of popular organisations. This can be seen from the **Committee of Public Safety** in the Commune, with a minority of council members (essentially those active in the International) arguing that “the Paris Commune has surrendered its authority to a dictatorship” and it was “hiding behind a dictatorship that the electorate have not authorised us to accept or to recognise.”⁷²

⁶⁸ Marx-Engels Selected Writings, pp. 256–7

⁶⁹ Martin Phillip Johnson, **The Paradise of Association**, pp. 185–6

⁷⁰ Samuel Farber, **Before Stalinism**, p. 73

⁷¹ William G. Rosenberg, **Russian Labour and Bolshevik Power**, p. 116

⁷² quoted by Eugene Schulkind, **The Paris Commune of 1871: The View from the Left**, p. 187. Significantly, Lenin’s regime did the same but from the moment it took power. The first act of the revolution was to create an executive **above** the soviet congress. As Samuel Farber argues “the very fact that a Sovnarkom had been created as a separate body from the CEC [Central Executive Committee] of the soviets clearly indicates that, Lenin’s **State and Revolution** notwithstanding, the separation of at least the top bodies of the executive and the legislative wings of the government remained in effect in the new Soviet system.” This suggests “that **State and Revolution** did not play a decisive role as a source of policy guidelines for ‘Leninism in power.’” After all, “immediately after the Revolution the Bolsheviks established an executive power ... as a clearly separate body from the leading body of the legislature... Therefore, some

So the example of the **Committee of Public Safety** shows, for anarchists, that it is difficult for the masses to control those they give power to even in the confines of one city. Gluckstein notes that the Commune could be “viewed as the organ of solidarity giving collective control through a workers’ state” (p. 184) Yet “collective control” is precisely what the state was designed to exclude! As Kropotkin stressed, “[t]o attack the central power, to strip it of its prerogatives, to decentralise, to dissolve authority, would have been to abandon to the people the control of its affairs, to run the risk of a truly popular revolution. That is why the bourgeoisie sought to reinforce the central government even more.”⁷³ Ironically, one Communard is quoted stating that the Commune’s aim was to “break the alien system of centralisation and thus destroy the only weapon that the privileged classes possess.” (p. 52)

Thus Gluckstein shows confusion when he states that “[d]irect democracy was the basis of the communal movement, and it had created an embryonic workers’ state, without which the defeat of capitalism and creation of a new society could not have been attempted.” (pp. 148–9) The creation of the “embryonic workers’ state” undermined the direct democracy which is required to ensure that capitalism is not replaced by state capitalism and that a genuinely new society is created rather than replacing the bosses.

Ultimately, this is the key ideological flaw in Marxism. While claiming to base itself on mass participation, direct democracy and so forth (“**socialism from below**”) it advocates a form of social organisation, centralisation, which is designed to exclude it.⁷⁴ Despite themselves, they end up advocating party rule (“**socialism from above**”) and ensure the defeat of the revolution from within if not from without.

“the form at last discovered...”?

For Marx, the Commune was “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour.”⁷⁵ He praised such aspects of the experiment as the Communal Council being made up of delegates who would could be recalled “bound by the **mandat impératif** (formal instructions) of his constituents,” that it was a “working, not a parliamentary, body, executive and legislative at the same time” and that “the standing army was to be replaced by a national militia.”⁷⁶ Marx is paraphrased: “What made the Parisian democratic structure so different?” Its representatives which “were ‘at all times revocable’ so delegates could not stray from the mandate of their electors.” (p. 199) The creation of a militia is also praised.

Yet this was not entirely true. While the Communards had applied these forms it is false to say that they had come entirely out of the blue. In fact, the Paris Commune applied ideas which anarchists had been discussing for some time. Proudhon, for example, raised the idea of binding

sections of the contemporary Left appear to have greatly overestimated the importance that **State and Revolution** had for Lenin’s government.” (**Before Stalinism**, pp. 20–1 and p. 38) This executive simply decreed itself legislative powers shortly after.

⁷³ **Words of a Rebel**, p. 143

⁷⁴ The state being the most obvious example of this, but it is equally applicable **within** Leninist parties where power is explicitly entrusted to a few leaders at the top of the party hierarchy.

⁷⁵ Unsurprisingly, Gluckstein does not mention Marx’s 1881 evaluation that the Commune was “merely the rising of a city under exceptional conditions, the majority of the Commune was in no wise socialist, nor could it be.” (**On the Paris Commune**, p. 293)

⁷⁶ **On the Paris Commune**, p. 75, pp. 72–3, p. 71, p. 72

mandates and assemblies of elected representatives being executive and legislative during the 1848 revolution:

“It is up to the National Assembly, through organisation of its committees, to exercise executive power, just the way it exercises legislative power ... Besides universal suffrage and as a consequence of universal suffrage, we want implementation of the binding mandate. Politicians balk at it! Which means that in their eyes, the people, in electing representatives, do not appoint mandatories but rather abjure their sovereignty! That is assuredly not socialism: it is not even democracy.”⁷⁷

The vision of a free society being a federation of communes was discussed by Proudhon in his 1863 book **“The Principle of Federation”** (which drew on ideas he had expressed previously – and even earlier, from the Great French Revolution). Bakunin repeated the same vision of a federal system of communes based on mandated and revocable delegates in the 1860s:

“the Alliance of all labour associations ... will constitute the Commune ... there will be a standing federation of the barricades and a Revolutionary Communal Council ... [made up of] delegates ... invested with binding mandates and accountable and revocable at all times ... all provinces, communes and associations ... [will] delegate deputies to an agreed place of assembly (all ... invested with binding mandated and accountable and subject to recall), in order to found the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces ... and to organise a revolutionary force with the capacity of defeating the reaction ... it is through the very act of extrapolation and organisation of the Revolution with an eye to the mutual defences of insurgent areas that the universality of the Revolution ... will emerge triumphant.”⁷⁸

What of abolishing the army and replacing it with a militia. For Gluckstein, the idea of a militia “owed nothing to ... Proudhon’s anarchist rejection of the state ... The federation wanted to replace the permanent army with a workers’ militia ... That completely subverted the idea of the state as something imposing its will upon society from above.” (p. 114) This is not entirely true, as Proudhon did raise the notion that “police, judiciary, administration, everywhere committed to the hands of the workers.”⁷⁹ However, as a reformist Proudhon did not address the issue of defence of a revolution. This was something which Bakunin raised in a striking prediction of what happened in 1871: “Immediately after established governments have been overthrown, communes will have to reorganise themselves along revolutionary lines ... In order to defend the revolution, their volunteers will at the same time form a communal militia. But no commune can defend itself in isolation. So it will be necessary to radiate revolution outward, to raise all of its neighbouring communes in revolt ... and to federate with them for common defence.”⁸⁰

So the awkward fact is that anarchists had been advocating these forms since Proudhon in the 1840s and they were developed by Bakunin in the 1860s. It is true, however, that nothing similar can be found in Marx until **after** the Commune which suggests, as Anarchist K.J. Kenafick states, “that the programme [the Commune] set out is ... the system of Federalism, which Bakunin had been advocating for years, and which had first been enunciated by Proudhon. The Proudhonists ... exercised considerable influence in the Commune. This ‘political form’ was therefore not ‘at last’ discovered; it had been discovered years ago; and now it was proven to be correct by the very fact that in the crisis

⁷⁷ **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, p. 63

⁷⁸ **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, pp. 155–6

⁷⁹ **The General Idea of the Revolution**, p. 281

⁸⁰ **No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, p. 142

*the Paris workers adopted it almost automatically, under the pressure of circumstance, rather than as the result of theory, as being the form most suitable to express working class aspirations.*⁸¹

So, clearly, the major influence in terms of “*political vision*” of the Commune was anarchism. The “*rough sketch of national organisation which the Commune had no time to develop*”⁸² which Marx praises but does not quote was written by a follower of Proudhon. It expounded a clearly **federalist** and “bottom-up” organisational structure. Based on this libertarian revolt, it is unsurprising that Marx’s defence of it took on a libertarian twist. As noted by Bakunin, who argued that its “*general effect was so striking that the Marxists themselves, who saw their ideas upset by the uprising, found themselves compelled to take their hats off to it. They went further, and proclaimed that its programme and purpose were their own, in face of the simplest logic ... This was a truly farcical change of costume, but they were bound to make it, for fear of being overtaken and left behind in the wave of feeling which the rising produced throughout the world.*”⁸³

That the ideas generated by workers in struggle reflected Bakunin’s predictions is not to suggest that the Internationalists influenced by him somehow injected these ideas into the struggle. Rather, both groups of people, subject to much the same experiences and theoretical discussions (particularly from Proudhon), drew similar conclusions from them. That Bakunin drew them first was simply good fortune. Paris was, after all, a hotbed of revolutionary ideas and practice⁸⁴ with its section of the International raising ideas which the Russian anarchist popularised and developed.

So, “[b]y the end of 1870 the vision of a Commune as a complete alternative to the existing power was emerging from club discussions” (p. 104) and these discussions were influenced by Internationalists just as they were influenced by them as well as Proudhon and Bakunin. Which disproves the Leninist assumption that the masses could not develop socialist consciousness on their own.

Destroying the state or the “state machine”

Marx and Engels had been advocating a democratic republic since the 1840s. Engels, for example, argued in 1847 that the revolution would “*inaugurate a **democratic constitution** and thereby, directly or indirectly, the political rule of the proletariat.*” Nearly 50 years later, he noted that the Communist Manifesto “*had already proclaimed the winning of universal suffrage, of democracy, as one of the first and most important tasks of the militant proletariat.*”^[85] In between these dates, both Marx and Engels had urged working class people to create a republic as this would achieve, eventually, the political domination of the working class – that is, a working class government.⁸⁵

Yet, for most Marxists, Marxism stands for the destruction of the current state and its replacement with a new so-called “workers” state, as discussed in Lenin’s “**State and Revolution.**”

⁸¹ **Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx**, pp. 212–3

⁸² **On the Paris Commune**, p. 72

⁸³ **Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 261

⁸⁴ As Gluckstein notes, Paris was rebuilt under Napoleon III to undermine revolution, with its newly build broad, straight boulevards explicitly designed to allow easy troop movements and to make building barricades more difficult.

⁸⁵ In 1881, Engels had argued that in Britain, “*where the industrial and agricultural working class forms the immense majority of the people, democracy means the dominion of the working class, neither more nor less. Let, then, that working class prepare itself for the task in store for it – the ruling of this great Empire ... And the best way to do this is to use the power already in their hands, the actual majority they possess ... to send to Parliament men of their own order.*” In case this was not clear enough, he lamented that “[e]verywhere the labourer struggles for political power, for direct representation of his class in the legislature – everywhere but in Great Britain.” (**Collected Works**, vol. 24, p. 405)

The source of Lenin's reinterpretation of Marx lies in his defence of the Paris Commune and the conclusion that "[o]ne thing especially was proved by the Commune" was that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes."⁸⁶

However, a close reading of Marx's essay on the Commune shows that Lenin's analysis is flawed. For Marx, the Commune was "formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms." Centrally, it was a case of "the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated."⁸⁷ In other words, the proletariat held power by means of winning elections in a democratic republic and then reformed aspects of the state machinery.

This position makes a mockery of Leninist claims that "Marxism" stands for destroying the old state and replacing it with a new one based on workers' councils. The Paris Commune was no such revolution. Rather it was an elected municipal council that made a series of reforms that abolished aspects of the old state while retaining its structure (complemented by direct democracy in popular clubs). This was what Marx and Engels meant when Lenin made great play on this in his "**State and Revolution**." Yet, at key points, Lenin had to clarify what Engels "really" meant.⁸⁸

This perspective on revolution can be seen when Engels argued in 1886 that while he and Marx saw "the gradual dissolution and ultimate disappearance of that political organisation called **the State**" as "one of the final results of the future revolution," they "at the same time ... have always held that ... the proletarian class will first have to possess itself of the organised political force of the State and with its aid stamp out the resistance of the Capitalist class and re-organise society." The idea that the proletariat needs to "possess" the existing state is made clear for while the anarchists "reverse the matter" by arguing that the revolution "has to **begin** by abolishing the political organisation of the State," for Marxists "the only organisation the victorious working class finds ready-made for use, is that of the State. It may require adaptation to the new functions. But to destroy that at such a moment, would be to destroy the only organism by means of which the working class can exert its newly conquered power."⁸⁹ Obviously the only institution which the working class "finds ready-made for use" is the bourgeois state, although, as Engels stressed, it "may require adaptation." As Engels later stated:

"If one thing is certain it is that our Party and the working class can only come to power under the form of a democratic republic. This is even the specific form for the dictatorship of the proletariat."⁹⁰

Thus "the republic ... is the **ready-for-use** form for the future rule of the proletariat."⁹¹ This schema is repeated in Engels introduction to Marx's "**The Civil War in France**." Arguing that the state "is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another" he noted that it is "at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, whose worst sides the victorious proletariat, just like the Commune, cannot avoid having to lop off at once

⁸⁶ This from the preface of the 1872 German edition of the **Communist Manifesto**, which in turn quoted Marx's "**The Civil War in France**." (**The Socialist Revolution**, p. 193)

⁸⁷ **On the Paris Commune**, p. 71, p. 73

⁸⁸ The Menshevik Julius Martov usefully explores this issue in a series of articles which were collected in the book "**The state and the socialist revolution**". This is essential reading to see how Lenin reinvented Marxism to distance it from the failures of Social Democracy, justify his own development away from what was mainstream Marxism and his actions during 1917.

⁸⁹ **The Socialist Revolution**, p. 262.

⁹⁰ **Collected Works**, vol. 27, p. 227.

⁹¹ Engels, **The Socialist Revolution**, p. 296

as much as possible.”⁹² Simply put, if the proletariat creates a **new** state system to replace the bourgeois one, then how can it be “*an evil inherited*” by it? If, as Lenin argued, Marx and Engels thought that the working class had to smash the bourgeois state and replace it with a new one, why would it have “*to lop off at once as much as possible*” from the state it had just “*inherited*”?

The simple fact is, there was a reason why mainstream Marxism took the view that revolution involved “political action” in which the party would take power and reform the state and introduce “socialism”, in other words repeat the Commune at a national level. The reason is that this was the position of Marx and Engels. This was confirmed by Engels in an 1884 letter clarifying this precise point: “*It is simply a question of showing that the victorious proletariat must first refashion the old bureaucratic, administrative centralised state power before it can use it for its own purposes*”⁹³

So, the Commune did not smash the existing state and replace it with a new one. Rather, the workers took political power via elections and used it to refashion the existing state. This is recognised by Gluckstein, but not explored, when he mentions that it was based on bourgeois electoral processes. He notes that the revolution used the “*elections under the old voting system to choose a communal council*” and so “*direct democracy*” was not “*built into the institutional framework*” as in the National Guard. It could “*still be expressed, but it was not closely tied in to the structure.*” (p. 133) Therefore, “*the council emerged from a conventional electoral system, where there is no organic link between elector and representative.*” (p. 134)

The key role the clubs⁹⁴ in the movement is pointed to, but notes that in later revolutions “*workplaces became the centres of mass debate.*” (p. 48) Echoing Trotsky, he argues that “[s]uch [small] units of production could not provide a collective focus for the working class. Instead that came from the National Guard and the clubs.” (p. 70) Not that you would know it from this book, that is repeating one of Bakunin’s criticisms of the Commune. In 1871, the Russian anarchist argued that while the Marxists sought the “*organisation of the political power of the working classes,*” the anarchists urged the “*organisation, not of the political but of the social power (and, by consequence, anti-political) power of the working masses*” and so the “*future social organisation must be made solely from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal.*”⁹⁵

Gluckstein notes (and presumably agrees with) that Trotsky (like Marx⁹⁶) was “*critical of [the Central Committee of the National Guard’s] abdication of power shortly after the 18 March revolution*” (p. 201) It, he states, “*divested itself of government responsibility and handed power to the Communal Council ... One consequence of this decision was to reduce the direct influence of the working class in the communal movement. Federation elections had an uniquely democratic character, because battalions met daily, giving ample scope for rank and file guardsmen to scrutinise*

⁹² **Marx-Engels Selected Works**, p. 258

⁹³ **The Socialist Revolution**, p. 266.

⁹⁴ Proudhon in 1849, had argued that the clubs which sprang up during the 1848 revolution “*had to be organised. The organisation of popular societies was the fulcrum of democracy, the corner-stone of the republican order.*” (**No Gods, No Masters**, vol. 1, p. 48)

⁹⁵ **Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 197, p. 206

⁹⁶ “*The Central Committee surrendered its power too soon.*” (**On the Paris Commune**, p. 284)

delegate's activities and keep working class interests to the fore."⁹⁷ (p. 133) Yet, surely, the communal elections increased working class participation in the Commune by widening its social base (and daily popular assemblies could also have been organised as they had been in 1792). Giving power to the Central Committee would have, by definition, disenfranchised all people not in the National Guard (such as most women, the elderly, workers, and so forth). The same can, of course, be said of the argument for basing communal institutions within the workplace. Gluckstein argues that in Paris this was "*precluded by the minuscule size of most production units and the fact that many were closed anyway.*" Which suggests a purely workplace system of councils would, by definition, exclude non-workers (i.e., the unemployed, the retired, housewives and so on).⁹⁸

It seems a strange form of logic to assert that increasing the popular base of a revolution means, in fact, reducing its working class influence. Also, like Marx and Trotsky, Gluckstein does not discuss the contradiction between asserting that the Central Committee should have retained power with the lavish praise for the Commune as the "*form at last discovered*" to achieve the emancipation of labour. It may be correct to say that the Commune "*would pay dearly for not marching on Versailles and holding municipal elections instead*" (p. 132) but then why praise the outcome of those elections, particularly when you note that this "*reduce[d] the direct influence of the working class in the communal movement*"?

Political Action and its alternatives

So there *is* one aspect of the Commune that was uniquely Marxist, namely the participation of socialists in the elections to the municipal council and the subsequent municipal government. As noted, since the 1840s Marx and Engels had urged workers to support (and, where necessary, fight for) the creation of a bourgeois republic and to use "political action" (namely, standing in elections) within it.

Unsurprisingly, then, for Marx the Communal Council would "*serve as a lever for uprooting the economic foundations upon which rests the existence of classes.*"⁹⁹ This repeats the vision expounded in the **Communist Manifesto** which argued that "*the first step in the revolution by the working class*" is the "*rais[ing] the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.*" The proletariat "*will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeois, to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e. of the proletariat organised as the ruling class.*"¹⁰⁰

It is only in this sense that it is correct to state that "*the insurgents had no prior experiences of a successful anti-capitalist movement to draw upon. They were truly pioneering and cut a new path for others.*" (p. 8) Sadly, that "*new path*" was social democracy and the domination of Marxism within the international socialist movement. As Engels put it in 1884, the Commune was "*the grave of*

⁹⁷ Gluckstein also compares the social composition of the Central Committee to the Communal Council when discussing the reduction of working class influence. If the social background of those who make up a government helps determine that influence, what does that mean for Lenin's government?

⁹⁸ This is not as applicable to Bakunin who, elsewhere, stressed the importance of a "federation of the barricades" and the need to organise a federation of geographical organisations as well as federations of workplace based ones.

⁹⁹ **On the Paris Commune**, p. 75

¹⁰⁰ **The Marx-Engels Reader**, p. 490

the *old*, specifically French socialism, while being the cradle of the international communism, which is new for France.”¹⁰¹

In this “*new path*”, the Commune was relegated to an inspiration because there had been a democratically elected “*workers’ government*” and used as a warning of what would happen if a rising happened before the party was ready to secure power nationally. By 1895, Engels was praising the legal successes of social democracy in elections and mentioned the Commune only as an example of “*only one means by which the steady rise of the socialist fighting forces in Germany could be temporarily halted, and even thrown back for some time: a clash with the military, a blood-letting like that of 1871 in Paris.*” Now it was a case of the “*successful utilisation of universal suffrage*” which had now (quoting Marx’s word) been “*transformed by them from a means of deception ... into an instrument of emancipation.*”¹⁰² While insurrection was not totally dismissed, it was clear that Engels final article was a vindication of social democracy’s peaceful tactics, tactics that provoked the “*revisionism*” debates after his death (i.e., the attempt by its right-wing to bring the party’s rhetoric into line with its actual practice).¹⁰³

Thankfully, Engels comments proved premature. With the obvious descent of social democracy into opportunism, bureaucracy and reformism radical workers looked again to the federalist traditions in the First International which were kept alive by the anarchist movement and turned to syndicalism and industrial unionism. Only with the Russian Revolution (with the help of Fascism) did Marxism (in its Leninist form) became the predominant tendency in the revolutionary left. The path of federalism from below, as was predicted and developed by anarchists like Proudhon and Bakunin, lost ground before social democracy (in part, due to errors by anarchists themselves¹⁰⁴).

Be that as it may, for anarchists, the commune does present issues. After all, a key argument of anarchism is abstaining from “*political action*” as being irrelevant to creating socialism and opening up the possibility of reformism within the labour movement. Yet, here, surely is an example of “*political action*” which did produce a revolution (even one so limited in its initial acts as the Commune). Libertarian members of the International, such as Varlin, did successfully stand for election. Does this mean, as Marx and Engels argued, that the general anarchist position of standing in and abstaining from elections is wrong? If the Internationalists had abstained from participating in the elections would the Paris Commune have been different?

Clearly, the circumstances of the Commune’s elections are atypical and were conducted in a revolutionary situation (unlike the social-democratic strategy). However, given the limited nature of the reforms the Commune implemented and the lack of dynamism of the Commune’s Council, Kropotkin concluded that any such “*revolutionary government*” should be avoided.¹⁰⁵ While supporting the initial revolution, anarchists should have encouraged the creation of popular self-organisation in the community and workplace rather than seeking to focus the struggle

¹⁰¹ **On the Paris Commune**, p. 294

¹⁰² **The Socialist Revolution**, p. 320, p. 314

¹⁰³ Somewhat ironically, Gluckstein states that “*the communards no doubts of the limitations of suffrage operating where capitalist economics was dominant.*” (p. 46) Which is exactly why both the Blanquists and various shades of “*Proudhonists*” were against staving in elections. As history shows, social democracy became as reformist as Bakunin predicted (as Glickstein notes in the case of the Labour Party, “*they end up running the capitalist system*” (p. 204))

¹⁰⁴ Such as leaving participation in the labour movement and other struggles for reforms in favour of an abstract revolutionary position which meant, in practice, isolation from the working class.

¹⁰⁵ See his “*Revolutionary Government*” in **Words of a Rebel** where he uses the Commune as an example of an elected government. Significantly, Gluckstein does not reference this article.

onto electing a few leaders to act on behalf of the working class. The problem was its representative nature, that *“the people was not governing itself.”*¹⁰⁶

The aim, as Bakunin had stressed, would have been to build alternative forms of social organisation which could (initially) complement and (ultimately) replace the elected municipal council. Such institutions did exist, with such bodies as the **“Delegation of the Twenty Arrondissements”** which was an organisation that united many clubs and socialists. The Delegation did argue that it *“should be the revolutionary Commune arising from the clubs and committees of Paris, a decision reaffirmed in the revolutionary socialist Declaration of Principles of February 19.”*¹⁰⁷ However, desire to be inclusive with more moderate Republicans and present a common front against its enemies ensured that the elections to the municipal council were organised rather than popular assemblies.¹⁰⁸

However, there was support for such a radical solution. As Gluckstein notes, many *“[p]rominent insurgents encouraged mass involvement in the life of the new government and saw themselves as mandated delegates.”* (p. 46) However, this was hindered by the bourgeois institutional arrangements they inherited. The only way forward would be to have created a federation of popular assemblies (to quote one Communard: *“People, govern yourself through public meetings”* (p. 50)) Some communards did point to the sections and districts (*“the primary assemblies”*) of the Great French Revolution.¹⁰⁹ (p. 46)

Significantly, during the Commune, the Delegation *“began or joined a series of initiatives designed to more effectively unite popular organisations. It started a Federation of Clubs .. Had the Commune survived it is almost certain that these projects would have once again made the Delegation the centre of the revolutionary club and committee movement, as it had been during the siege and armistice.”* In other words, it *“returned to the idea of directing a central club in which delegates from all clubs and committees could meet ... it would be open to the public and would unite delegates from popular clubs.”*¹¹⁰

Unfortunately, there seemed to be little popular support for such a radical solution immediately after the March 18th insurrection. This shows the importance of libertarians being involved in social struggles and spreading their ideas in the masses of the general population during non-revolutionary times. As Bakunin noted, the libertarians *“felt the lack of support from the great masses of the people of Paris, and ... the organization of the International Association, itself imperfect, compromised hardly a few thousand persons”* as well as having *“to keep up a daily struggle against the Jacobin majority”* of the Commune Council.¹¹¹ With a deeper influence in popular organisations, the result may have been different.

¹⁰⁶ Kropotkin, **Words of a Rebel**, p. 120

¹⁰⁷ Martin Phillip Johnson, **The Paradise of Association**, p. 91

¹⁰⁸ The CNT-FAI made the same decision in July, 1936, when it agreed to the Popular Front inspired **“Central Committee of Anti-Fascist Militias”** rather than favouring the federation of neighbourhood “Defence Committees” (see Abel Paz’s **Durruti in the Spanish Revolution** for this possible *“federation of the barricades”*)

¹⁰⁹ Kropotkin argued that these practised *“Direct Self-Government”* and expressed *“the principles of anarchism”* which, therefore, *“had their origin, not in theoretical speculations, but in the deeds of the Great French Revolution.”* (**The Great French Revolution**, vol. 1, p. 203, p. 204)

¹¹⁰ Martin Phillip Johnson, **The Paradise of Association**, p. 197, p. 200

¹¹¹ **Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings**, p. 202

“nothing could be more foreign...”

Gluckstein approvingly quotes, and paraphrases, Trotsky’s infamous 1921 essay “**Lessons of the Commune**” and repeats its conclusions more tactfully than its author did. Needless to say, Gluckstein is as selective in his use of that work as he is with the anarchist ones he uses. For Trotsky, the Commune was not problematic for “*we will find in it one single lesson: a strong party leadership is needed.*” That is it. As for the Communards themselves “[w]hat they lacked was clarity in method and a centralized leading organization. That is why they were vanquished.” Thus the Commune was a classic example of what not to do rather than a source of hope for a better society.

What about the Commune’s aim for mass participation and direct democracy? Nonsense, for the Commune “*shows us the incapacity of the masses to choose their path, their indecision in the leadership of the movement, their fatal penchant to come to a halt after the first successes, thus permitting the enemy to regain its breath, to reestablish its position.*” So the increase democracy Gluckstein praises is seen purely as a means of securing party power and, once seized, the working class can get back to its traditional role of following orders.

The party, not the class, is seen as the key as “*it is the accumulated and organized experience of the proletariat*” and “*foresees theoretically the paths of development, all its stages.*” With the “*aid of the party*” the proletariat “*frees itself from the need of always recommencing its history: its hesitations, its lack of decision, its mistakes.*” Or, more bluntly, the proletariat “*frees itself*” from the need to govern itself and society. That can be left to the party which in Russia “*seized the power.*”¹¹²

Gluckstein approvingly quotes Communards arguing for “*communal France in federal form*” and that the “*triumph of the communal idea is ... the social revolution*” (p. 52) For Trotsky, such aspirations were simply wrong. The notion that “*each town has its sacred right of self-government*” was “*idealistic chatter – of the same gender as mundane anarchism.*” In fact, “*more than any other*” the French proletariat had been “*duped*” by the bourgeoisie for “*autonomist formulae*” are “*nothing but impediments on the feet of the proletariat, hampering its forward movement.*” Opposition to centralism was “*a heritage of petty bourgeois localism and autonomism*” and “*is without a doubt the weak side of a certain section of the French proletariat.*” Autonomy “*is the supreme guarantee of real activity and individual independence for certain revolutionists*” it was “*a great mistake which cost the French proletariat dearly.*” So the “*tendency towards particularism, whatever the form it may assume, is a heritage of the dead past. The sooner French communist-socialist communism and syndicalist communism emancipates itself from it, the better it will be for the proletarian revolution.*” “*Passivity and indecision,*” asserted Trotsky, “*were supported in this case by the sacred principle of federation and autonomy ... In sum, it was nothing but an attempt to replace the proletarian revolution, which was developing, by a petty bourgeois reform: communal autonomy.*”

So much for the Commune having “*planted the seeds of a new social world*”! (p. 53) While, for Marx, the Communards were “*storming heaven*”, for Trotsky they were nothing more than petit-bourgeois autonomist-anarchist federalists.

¹¹² In reality, of course, only the party leadership held effective power, as Trotsky also acknowledged. He notes that one member of the Central Committee demanded in October “*the proclamation of the dictatorship of the Central Committee of the party*” which, Trotsky argued, would have been “*anticipating the logical development of the struggle*” (he was against that suggestion simply because the time was not right and so it “*would have provoked great disorder at that moment*”).

And what of the popular organizations Gluckstein praises so highly? Their role was simple, to provide a link by which the party can implement its decisions. Thus it “*was indispensable to have an organization incarnating the political experience of the proletariat*” and by means of “*the Councils of Deputies ... the party could have been in continual contact with the masses, known their state of mind; its leading centre could each day put forward a slogan which, through the medium of the party’s militants, would have penetrated into the masses, uniting their thought and their will.*” The focus is at the top, and the decisions flow downwards – as it does in every class system. Ironically, Gluckstein praises that “*anti-hierarchical attitude of the insurgents.*” (p. 47)

Trotsky was also disparaging of the mass democracy in the National Guard, arguing that “[b]efore wide masses of soldiers acquire the experience of well choosing and selecting commanders, the revolution will be beaten by the enemy.”¹¹³ This meant that the “*methods of shapeless democracy (simple electability) must be supplemented and to a certain extent replaced by measures of selection from above.*”¹¹⁴ The revolution must create an organ composed of experienced, reliable organizers, in which one¹¹⁵ can have absolute confidence, give it full powers to choose, designate and educate the command.”

Gluckstein states, without irony, that the “*National Guard’s internal democracy guaranteed that coercive force belonged to the mass of the people, instead of being used against it.*” (p. 52) Yet here we have Trotsky asserting that such “*internal democracy*” **can** be replaced by appointment from above without, apparently, affecting the nature of the “*coercive force.*” The Red Army showed who is right – the Red Army “*belonged*” to the party rulers, not to the “*mass of the people*” and was regularly “*used against it*” to maintain Bolshevik rule.

For Leninism, elections were a means to achieve the end of party power and not valued in themselves. “*Electability, democratic methods,*” Trotsky stressed, “*are but one of the instruments in the hands of the proletariat and its party*” and must not be considered as “*a fetish, a remedy for all evils. The methods of electability must be combined with those of appointments.*” The key, therefore, was “*that at its head, above the wards, the districts, the groups, there is an apparatus which is centralized and bound together by an iron discipline.*” Ultimately, mass participation has to be considered a “*weak*” side for Trotskyists, for it “*reflects*” and “*manifests the spirit of indecision, of waiting, the tendency to be inactive after the first successes.*” Can it be any wonder, then, that the Bolsheviks had concluded that the “*dictatorship of the proletariat*” could only be achieved by party dictatorship, i.e. the “*dictatorship over the proletariat*” that Bakunin had warned of?

So if, as Gluckstein states, “*the Proudhonists realised that mass popular involvement was essential for the creation of a new society*” (p. 206) the Leninists quickly came to realise that mass popular involvement was an optional extra, something which could be abolished as long as the party held

¹¹³ Would this not be equally applicable in the mass organisations created by the revolution? As Blanqui would surely have argued, waiting for the masses to gather the experience needed to elect the revolutionary party into power may take too long..

¹¹⁴ It should be noted that the Bolsheviks did **not** “*supplement*” internal democracy in the armed force, they abolished it – and before the civil war started. As Trotsky’s decree of March, 1918, put it “*the principle of election is politically purposeless and technically inexpedient, and it has been, in practice, abolished by decree*” (quoted by Maurice Brinton, **For Workers’ Power**, p. 337)

¹¹⁵ As Maurice Brinton and Philippe Guillaume so rightly note: “*Who is this anonymous and mysterious ‘one’? Who is to bestow ‘absolute confidence’ in the revolutionary organ and the revolutionary organisers? Is it the masses? Is it the Party ‘acting in the interests of the masses’? Is it the Party leaders ‘acting in the interests of the Party’ as a whole? Is Trotsky’s ambiguity on this point entirely accidental?*” (“*The Commune, Paris 1871*”, Maurice Brinton, **For Workers’ Power**, p. 60fn)

power – particularly if that mass participation clashed with party interests. Given these opinions and the reality of Bolshevism in power, it seems incredible that Gluckstein can state that Leninism “stands for the direct democracy and liberating qualities so abundant in the Paris Commune.” (p. 206) If, as Marx stated, “nothing could be more foreign to the spirit of the Commune than to supersede universal suffrage by hierarchical investiture”¹¹⁶ then Leninism cannot be considered as anything but foreign to that spirit.¹¹⁷

It will, of course, be objected that while the Commune was drowned in blood, the Russian Revolution successfully repulsed the Whites and Imperialist forces. Yet military victory obscures the fact that **the revolution itself** was lost within six months of the Bolshevik seizure of power. The counter-revolution **was** victorious, but it was draped in the Red Flag.¹¹⁸

Missing the Party?

The standard Leninist complaint about the Commune is stressed, it lacked a vanguard party. “The problem was,” it is stated “lack of ideological clarity and absence of good leadership” (p. 149) While few anarchists would deny the importance of theoretical clarity and the importance of giving a lead, we do have problems with the notion that such influence should be organised in the Leninist fashion.

Gluckstein does admit that Marx recommended the French not to revolt after the defeat of the Empire. Rather, he urged them to “not allow themselves to be deluded by the national souvenirs of 1792.” (p. 196) Marx is duly quoted, it is suggested this was Marx not being a “mindless sycophant [of the Commune]. He feared, for example, that the Parisian movement might be mesmerised by the Great Revolution.” (p. 196) In fact, it was a call not to create a revolutionary commune – that is, not to do what they did on March 18th, 1871!¹¹⁹ Instead, he urged them to “calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of republican liberty.” (i.e., organise a political party and vote in the next election).

Which brings up a problem for the Leninist support for “democratic centralism.” Gluckstein claims that there were two people who could be considered Marxists in the Commune. Marx opposed any attempt at revolution. As a Leninist, this raises the interesting issue that if the Communards had been Marxists and had followed Marx’s suggestions then the Paris Commune would never have happened (or, more likely, like the February revolution of 1917, it would have

¹¹⁶ Marx and Engels, **On the Paris Commune**, p. 73

¹¹⁷ Also compare Marx’s praise that the Commune Council combined executive and legislative roles with Gluckstein’s comments that this “created a real predicament for the Commune.” (p. 151) It should also be noted that the first act of the Bolshevik regime was to create an executive body above the national soviet congress. A few weeks later, this executive simply decreed legislative power for itself. This was the exact opposite of the Commune and in direct contradiction to Lenin’s “**State and Revolution**.”

¹¹⁸ It should also be noted that the Commune was born in insurrection on the 18th of March, 1871. 50 years later saw the Kronstadt Commune crushed by the Bolsheviks. “The victors are celebrating the anniversary of the Commune of 1871. Trotsky and Zinoviev denounce Thiers and Gallifet for the slaughter of the Paris rebels...” (Alexander Berkman, **The Bolshevik Myth**, p. 303) As an additional irony, the Bolsheviks renamed the dreadnought **Sevastopol** whose sailors led the revolt the “**Parizhskaya Kommuna**.”

¹¹⁹ Somewhat ironically, Gluckstein quotes a Communard urging the people to “form the Commune and save the Republic, as was done in 1793” (p. 104) which was precisely the opposite of Marx’s wishes and precisely what the Parisians did do!

happened anyway in the face of Marxist opposition). What this says about the “efficiency” of centralised organisation is unexplored.

Thus, if we take Trotsky’s eulogy to the role of the party seriously we can conclude that if such a party had existed in Paris then the Commune would never have happened! Equally, it was not “the Party” (i.e., Marx and Engels) who discovered the “*political form*” Marxists have paid lip-service to, but rather the masses themselves. Undoubtedly, they were aided, but not dictated to, by revolutionaries within their midst – revolutionaries whose ideas were dismissed as nonsense by the German socialists – but they were **not** organised in a Leninist fashion.¹²⁰

It could be objected that the Russian Revolution succeeded while the Commune, like Spain in 1936, was defeated and so, as Trotsky continually stressed, the role of the party must have been the decisive factor. Yet the Bolshevik regime was hardly socialist and, consequently, cannot be considered a “success” – for, surely, the “success” of a socialist revolution is marked by whether it creates socialism? Lenin and Trotsky at the head of a party dictatorship presiding over a state capitalist economy is not a successful revolution, it was the prelude to Stalinism.

As would be expected, Gluckstein presents the standard Leninist account of the degeneration of the Bolshevik Revolution. Thus the “*democratic Soviet system was eventually sapped by civil war and destroyed by internal counter-revolution*”¹²¹ (p. 201) and so ignores the awkward fact that the Bolsheviks had effectively turned the soviets into irrelevant bodies by centralising state power into the hands of the Bolshevik executives from top to bottom and then gerrymandering (and abolishing) any which threatened to be elected with (or achieved) a non-Bolshevik majority **before** the civil war started in May, 1918.¹²²

Somewhat contradictorily, Gluckstein states that “*the soviets overcame their initial weakness and won a civil war*” (p. 202) which is nonsense, as the Kronstadt rebellion was crushed precisely **because** it called for genuine soviet democracy. And what was this “*initial weakness*” and how was it “*overcame*”? He states that “*Trotsky believed the presence of the Bolshevik Party within the Soviets was crucial to their success,*” (p. 202) more precisely “*the party helped overcome the ‘weak side’ of an inexperienced direct mass democracy, and made operative the ‘strong side’ – the ability to represent and move vast numbers into action, and lead them to victory*” (p. 202) If by “*overcame*” Gluckstein meant “*abolished*” then he would be closer to the truth! The ideological confusions are clear, though. The whole point of direct democracy is not to “*represent*” the masses and allow a few party leaders to “*move*” them but to allow the masses to govern themselves and act for themselves and, by this process, revolutionise themselves as well as society. This is the “*strong side*” of mass democracy. In the Russian Revolution, “*the party*” eliminated “*inexperienced direct mass democracy*” and replaced it with rule by the party.

This was a key lesson drawn by leading Bolsheviks from the Russian Revolution and, retroactively, from the Commune. Trotsky argued quite explicitly that “*the proletariat can take power only through its vanguard*” and that “*the necessity for state power arises from an insufficient cultural level of the masses and their heterogeneity.*” Only with “*support of the vanguard by the class*”

¹²⁰ If the party is so important, then “*how can we explain that the Commune, with its petty-bourgeois leadership, was capable of introducing to the modern world the most advanced conceptions of proletarian democracy?*” (Brinton and Guillaume, “*The Commune, Paris 1871*”, **For Workers’ Power**, p. 53)

¹²¹ He references Chris Harman’s deeply flawed “**How the Revolution was Lost**” which I have critiqued in detail in **Black Flag** (numbers 226 to 228)

¹²² For more details see **section 6** of the appendix “*What Happened During the Russian Revolution*” of “**An Anarchist FAQ**”.

can there be the “conquest of power” and it was in “*this sense the proletarian revolution and dictatorship are the work of the whole class, but only under the leadership of the vanguard.*” Thus, rather than the working class as a whole seizing power, it is the “vanguard” which takes power – “*a revolutionary party, even after seizing power ... is still by no means the sovereign ruler of society.*” Thus state power is required to **govern the masses**, who cannot exercise power themselves. As Trotsky put it, “[t]hose who propose the abstraction of Soviets to the party dictatorship should understand that only thanks to the Bolshevik leadership were the Soviets able to lift themselves out of the mud of reformism and attain the state form of the proletariat.”¹²³ And what happens when the masses and the vanguard clash? As Trotsky put it in 1939:

*“The very same masses are at different times inspired by different moods and objectives. It is just for this reason that a centralised organisation of the vanguard is indispensable. Only a party, wielding the authority it has won, is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves ... if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the proletariat is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself.”*¹²⁴

Compare this to Engels arguing that the Commune showed that the proletariat, “*in order not to lose again its only just conquered supremacy,*” would have “*to safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall at any moment.*”¹²⁵ Not much room for mass direct democracy, instant recall and mandated delegates under Trotsky whose regime, by definition, requires an army apart from the people, requires a state in the usual sense of the word as a power existing apart from the general population and above them.

The inevitable side effect of this was that it placed the people back into their customary role of governed, oppressed and exploited. In other words, it recreated the very class system which the Commune aimed to eliminate and precisely why the Communards implemented the **mandat impératif** and why one Communist argued that the democratically organised National Guard “*gives to the city a national militia which defends the citizens against power, instead of an army which defends the state from the citizens.*” (p. 51)

The replacement of working class power by party power flows logically both from the nature of the state and from the vanguardism at the heart of Leninism. The state, by its very nature, empowers those at its centre and so automatically replaces popular power with power in the hands of a few party leaders. And if the party is the decisive factor in a “successful” revolution than anything that weakens its hold on power cannot but harm the revolution. Including working class democracy. As Trotsky put it in 1936, the “*revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party is ... an*

¹²³ “*Stalinism and Bolshevism*”, pp. 479–96, **Writings 1936–37**, p. 490, p. 488, p. 495

¹²⁴ **The Moralists and Sycophants**, p. 59

¹²⁵ **Marx-Engels Selected Works**, p. 257; Compare this to Engels attack on anarchist support for binding mandates. Then it was a case of this being part of Bakunin’s plans to control the international “*for a secret society ... there is nothing more convenient than the imperative mandate*” as all its members vote on one way, while the others will “*contradict one another.*” Without these binding mandates, “*the common sense of the independent delegates will swiftly unite them in a common party against the party of the secret society.*” Obviously the notion that delegates from a group should reflect the wishes of that group was lost on Engels. He even questioned the utility of this system for “*if all electors gave their delegates imperative mandates concerning all points in the agenda, meetings and debates of the delegates would be superfluous.*” (**Collected Works**, vol. 22, p. 281 and p. 277) It should be noted that Trotsky shared Engels dislike of “representatives” being forced to actually represent the views of their constituents within the party. (**In Defense of Marxism**, pp. 80–1)

objective necessity” and the “revolutionary party (*vanguard*) which renounces its own dictatorship surrenders the masses to the counter-revolution”¹²⁶

Ironically, Gluckstein states that today’s politicians “*may pay lip-service to democracy but they seek to anaesthetise people with their words.*” (p. 46) Given Trotsky’s critique of the Commune, repeated more tactfully here, we could say the same about Leninism. All in all, Lenin’s 1905 judgment that the Commune “*confused the tasks of fighting for a republic with those of fighting for socialism*” and so “*it was a government **such as ours should not be***”¹²⁷ seems more than applicable when comparing the Paris Commune to the Bolshevik revolution and the lessons Lenin and Trotsky drew from both.

From below and above?

Which shows the limitations of Marxism and its confusions about the state. For Gluckstein, the Commune “*inextricably linked change from below and the state*” (p. 50) and “*Parisian direct democracy made the masses part of the state, and the state part of the masses.*” (p. 204) He suggests that Marx synthesised Proudhonism and Blanquism (p. 83), that Marx’s contribution was to “*synthesise their insights*” (p. 206)

If “Proudhonism” stressed action from below then Blanquism stresses action from above, by the state, for they recognised the need for “*socialist organisation to overcome their capitalist opponents*” (p. 206) Thus the Commune shows that “*discipline*¹²⁸ *under a centralised command was absolutely vital to mould a fighting force out of the workers of Paris. This was not an optional extra.*” (p. 141) It is cryptically noted that “[i]n time the Commune’s open, direct democracy would have selected more effective leaders from their midst, but it did not survive long enough for this to occur.” (p. 141) Does this not imply that, when push comes to shove, the “revolutionary party” will simply appoint “*more effective leaders*” from above? This is precisely what the Bolshevik did do.

In 1905, Lenin mocked the Mensheviks for only wanting “*pressure from below*” which was “*pressure by the citizens on the revolutionary government.*” Instead, he argued for “*pressure ... from above as well as from below,*” where “*pressure from above*” was “*pressure by the revolutionary government on the citizens.*” He noted that Engels “*appreciated the importance of action from above*” and that he saw the need for “*the utilisation of the revolutionary governmental power.*” Lenin summarised his position (which he considered as being in line with orthodox Marxism): “*Limitation, in principle, of revolutionary action to pressure from below and renunciation of pressure also from above is **anarchism.***”¹²⁹

¹²⁶ **Writings 1936–37**, pp. 513–4; This is identical to his 1921 position, when the party was “*entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy!*” “*As if the Party were not entitled to assert its dictatorship even if that dictatorship temporarily clashed with the passing moods of the workers’ democracy!*” (quoted by Maurice Brinton, **For Workers’ Power**, p. 371) Where is the room for recalling representatives under such a regime?

¹²⁷ **Collected Works**, vol. 9, p. 81

¹²⁸ Somewhat incredibly, Gluckstein references Trotsky on the need for a “*Communist discipline*” not based on “*the rod!*” (p. 141) In reality, the Red Army was based on the rod, with its appointed officers having numerous techniques to enforce obedience up to and including firing squads.

¹²⁹ Marx, Engels and Lenin, **Anarchism and Anarcho-Syndicalism**, pp. 189–90, p. 193, p. 195, p. 196; This seems to have been a common Bolshevik position at the time, with Stalin stressing in the same year that “*action only from ‘below’ was “an anarchist principle, which does, indeed, fundamentally contradict Social-Democratic tactics.”* (**Collected Works**, vol. 1, p. 149)

Given that Lenin had rejected the idea of “*only from below*” as an anarchist principle (which it is), we need to bear in mind that Leninist calls for “*democracy from below*” are **always** placed in the context of a Leninist government. Lenin always stressed that the **Bolsheviks** would “*take over full state power;*” that they “*can and must take state power into their own hands.*”¹³⁰ Leninist “*democracy from below*” always means representative government, **not** popular power or self-management. So in 1918 it was the concrete situation of a “*revolutionary*” government exercising power “*from above*” onto the very class it claimed to represent. As Lenin summarised to his political police, the Cheka, in 1920: “*Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves.*”¹³¹

Which is precisely why anarchists reject socialism “*from above*” in favour of one created “*from below.*” In the state, it is always the leaders at the top who have power, not the masses. Few revolutionary anarchists deny the need for self-discipline and the need to co-ordinate revolutionary struggle and defence. From Bakunin on, it was considered a truism that there was a need to federate revolutionary forces to defeat reaction.¹³² What we recognise is that giving power to a few leaders is a fatal mistake, that they will implement what **they** consider as “*socialism*” and override the creative actions from below so necessary to the success of a revolution and the building of socialism.¹³³

As history shows, “*from below*” and “*from above*” cannot be combined. The latter will always undermine the former simply because that was what it was designed to do!

Leninism as Blanquism

Ultimately, the reader is left with the feeling that for all his talk of mass participation the writer’s sympathies rest with the Blanquists and their vision of a centralised revolution conducted by professional revolutionaries who knew what they wanted (“*Solid organisation and clear leadership were distinguishing features of Blanquism*”¹³⁴ (p. 78)). This can be seen from his less than critical account of Blanqui’s politics. Given the obvious similarities of Leninism to Blanquism this is not unsurprising as any systematic critique of the latter would be applicable to the former.

For example, Gluckstein quotes Blanqui’s opinion that socialist consciousness has to be injected into the working class by “*an elite minority*” of the bourgeoisie and that the revolution’s “*soldiers*

¹³⁰ **Selected Works**, vol. 2, p. 352

¹³¹ **Collected Works**, vol. 42, p. 170

¹³² See **section H.2.1** of “**An Anarchist FAQ**” for details.

¹³³ For example: “*On three occasions in the first months of Soviet power, the [factory] committees leaders sought to bring their model [of socialism based on workers’ self-management of the economy] into being. At each point the party leadership overruled them. The Bolshevik alternative was to vest both managerial **and** control powers in organs of the state which were subordinate to the central authorities, and formed by them.*” (Thomas F. Remington, **Building Socialism in Bolshevik Russia**, p. 38) This was in-line with pre-October Bolshevik notions on building “*socialism*” and ensured that the revolution developed in a state capitalist fashion (both in the sense Lenin desired and in the sense which anarchists warned would be the inevitable result of state socialism).

¹³⁴ A bit like the Stalinist (and Trotskyist) eulogising of Lenin as the key factor producing the October revolution, Gluckstein states that “*if Blanqui had been at the helm some of the most disastrous errors of the Commune’s military campaign would have been avoided.*” (p. 80) He quotes Marx indulging in this (Blanqui would “*give the Commune a leader*” (p. 80))

are workers though the leaders are not.” (p. 77) The parallels with Lenin’s arguments in “**What is to be Done?**” are obvious.¹³⁵ Then there is Blanqui’s belief, quoted by Gluckstein, “that workers would need to be educated into communism over a period of time because ‘the working class, accustomed to the yoke by long years of oppression and misery [is led] by their masters like blind beasts’” (p. 78) Or, as Lenin argued in 1920, “the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation embracing the whole of the class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here, in one of the most backward) the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded, and so corrupted in parts ... that an organisation taking in the whole proletariat cannot directly exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard ... Such is the basic mechanism of the dictatorship of the proletariat, and the essentials of transitions from capitalism to communism ... for the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised by a mass proletarian organisation.”¹³⁶

Gluckstein does present some criticism of Blanquism, namely that it was conspiratorial and so could not play the role Blanqui hoped for it. Thus the Blanquists “came closest to having a revolutionary party” but were “not linked organically to the wider movement through daily participation”, “debating and battling for leadership” and so did not have “an instant mass following.” (p. 76, p. 79) Which meant their hopes for seizing power were impossible to put into practice as they lacked mass support – or even awareness that they even existed or that their insurrections were taking place.

While he lambasts Proudhon for ideas he (mostly) did not actually hold, Gluckstein simply presents the ideas of Blanqui. It is significant that his criticism of Blanqui is so mooted (much the same could be said of Marx). He states that the Proudhonists and Blanquists have “no direct modern descendants” but “archetypes of tendencies in our movement” (p. 71) but, obviously, this is **not** the case. The “left-Proudhonists” (i.e., collectivists) have descendants in the anarchist movement while the Blanquists, bar their secrecy, are the Trotskyists.¹³⁷

Conclusions

The Paris Commune and its lessons are important for current revolutionaries, whether state socialists or anarchists. Its short existence raised all sorts of key issues for those seeking to change the world: should socialists take part in elections, how do we fight reaction, can a government be revolutionary...

Sadly, Gluckstein’s work does not present an accurate account of the lessons learned from the Commune. Too much the Leninist, he simply does not understand the anarchist critique or the libertarian position in general. As his nonsense about Proudhon shows, most Marxists

¹³⁵ “Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers **only from without**, that is, only outside of the economic struggle.” Lenin stressed the Marxist orthodoxy of his claims and quoted the “profoundly true and important” comments of Karl Kautsky that it was “absolutely untrue” that “socialist consciousness” was a “necessary and direct result of the proletarian class struggle.” Rather, “socialism and the class struggle arise side by side and not one out of the other ... Modern socialist consciousness can arise only on the basis of profound scientific knowledge ... The vehicles of science are not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia: it was on the minds of some members of this stratum that modern socialism originate.” Thus “socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without.” (**Essential Works of Lenin**, p. 112, pp. 81–2)

¹³⁶ Lenin, **Collected Works**, vol. 32, p. 21

¹³⁷ Gluckstein probably would consider the insurrectionists and, perhaps, the “Black Bloc” as the authentic descendants of Blanqui but, unlike the Trotskyists, they do not advocate party rule after the revolution. On balance, the Trotskyists are closer to Blanquism overall.

have no shame in exposing their ignorance of anarchism to the world. He is far too willing to repeat the standard Marxist distortions about our ideas and, in consequence, does not provide his readers with a means of evaluating whether Kropotkin or Lenin were right. Equally, he fails to critically evaluate his own ideological leaders and so fails to discuss the obvious contradictions between Marxist accounts and what actually happened. Inconvenient arguments and conclusions are ignored, presenting a false picture of Leninism and its relation to the Commune.

So, in terms of presenting a general history of the Commune it is adequate. In terms of learning its lessons and presenting an accurate account of the libertarian critique it is flawed (to the point of despair, at times). While Gluckstein states that “*Marxism learns from mass struggles rather than preaching sermons*” (p. 206) that seems debatable, as he seems unwilling to learn much from the Commune beyond the pressing need for a vanguard party to seize power.

For anarchists, Gluckstein’s work shows that our critique of the Commune, and of Marxism, remains valid. Anarchists should take heart that the ideas that we have been expounding since the 1840s were applied successfully, if in a limited fashion, in the Commune and in later revolutions. We should also stress that while Marxists subsequently have taken many of them up (at least in theory) we advocated them first. The Commune shows that these libertarian principles cannot, however, be combined with statism. Retaining a state structure, even one complemented by popular institutions, suggest simply cannot handle the numerous problems facing a revolution. The Marxist notion that political action to secure a workers’ government, even in the unusual circumstances of post-insurrection Paris, simply isolates revolutionaries from the masses and puts barriers in the path of social change. The Russian Revolution confirms this. Free federations of self-managed groups can be the only basis for a successful revolution.

Some may question the wisdom of producing a lengthy critique of a flawed book by a member of an obscure Leninist party. However, we hope the article shows that it is important to do so in order to, firstly, learn the lessons of the past and, secondly, correct the mistakes and distortions of those who try to appropriate revolts which are, at their core, libertarian in nature. The distorted Leninist account of the Commune, Anarchism and Marxism has been left unchallenged for so long that it has, for many honest revolutionaries, become the only analysis. As can be seen, this is not the case. So, yes, we can agree with Gluckstein that the Commune “*deserves to be more than an obscure, if inspiring, reference point.*” (pp. 7–8) It also deserves more than to be used as a reference point for those whose practice and ideology are so at direct odds with it.

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- [85]**The Socialist Revolution**, p. 50, p. 313

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An anarchist analysis of the Paris Commune of 1871, showing how it was influenced by anarchism and what lessons anarchists drew from it. It also discusses the Marxist and Leninist analyses of the Commune, showing how alien Leninism is to the spirit of the Commune and to the genuine Marxist theory of the state.

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