

The Paris Commune

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Contents

| | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| March 18, 1871 | 3 |
| March 18–May 28, 1871 | 4 |

March 18, 1871

A celebrated historian, Lecky said that legend is often more truthful than history; and in so saying expresses, in a somewhat paradoxical form, a true and profound insight.

Legend is truer and more interesting than history; since, while history tries laboriously to establish hard facts about circumstances, events, and individuals, and only with difficulty manages to ascertain the truth, amid the complexity of always inadequate elements and contradictory witnesses; legend instead, being formed unconsciously and expressing, not the fact, but how people saw the fact, reveals the state of mind of a people, the innermost meaning of a historical moment.

This was the case for the revolutionary movement known as the Paris Commune, which erupted on March 18, 1871, and was suffocated in blood the following May. Even before there was a single positive fact established about it, every person interpreted it according to his own desires; and the legend that circulated throughout Europe and the world had a much greater influence than the precise knowledge of the facts could have had. The result is this: that the Paris Commune is claimed by all socialists of the world, while in reality it was not a socialist movement; that it is claimed by all anarchists, while it was not an anarchist movement.

In 1871 the minds were perfectly prepared to give the Parisian movement the significance it has been given; and most likely, if the repression had failed to snuff it out at birth, it really would have become what it was believed to be from the very beginning.

The reactionary force born out of the defeat of the 1848 European revolution was exhausted, and everybody sensed that the time was ripe for a new revolution.

The impotence of "liberal" principles left as a legacy to the posterity of the French Revolution at the end of the last century, had become clear; and new currents of ideas, new aspirations were exciting the masses. The "social question" had become the big question. The birth and rapid ascendancy of the International, a consequence that became a cause in turn of this situation, had given birth to hopes in some and fears in others of upcoming political and economic radical changes.

At this juncture, the Franco-Prussian war breaks out. Everything hangs in the balance; everyone anxiously watches the battlefield and makes predictions about what will happen after the war: the suspense merely increases the tension in people's minds.

As the French army is defeated and the Emperor taken prisoner, conservative and reactionary elements accept the republic as the only feasible solution for the moment, but with the firm intention either to re-establish the monarchy as soon as possible, or ensure that the republic does not really differ from the monarchy. The people, stunned by the thunder of war and discouraged by the defeats and betrayals, which continue with the republic just as with the empire, looks on wavering between hope, fear, and suspicion.

The people of Paris want to fight the besieging enemy, but are tricked, betrayed, and vanquished in partial sorties that seem, or are, organized deliberately to fail; they are subjected to a shameful surrender.

Provincial voters appoint an assembly made up of all the most reactionary elements that feudal and militaristic France contains; and this assembly, stigmatized with the name rural, hurries to accept all the conditions of peace imposed by Bismarck, and prepares to subject France to the rule of the saber and the aspersion.

Enough is enough.

Revolutionary elements begin to come together; the workers of Paris, Lyon, Marseilles, are champing at the bit, due partly to profound economic uneasiness, partly to patriotic feeling offended by the treachery and incompetence of the military and civilian leadership, and partly to hatred of the monarchy whose restoration is a threat.

The government understands that to protect its reactionary work Paris needs to be disarmed. On the night of March 17–18, secretly, it sent troops to seize the cannons that the national guard has held since the days of the siege; but the attempt is discovered, the alarm is sounded; the soldiers of the national guard, startled awake, rush to defend their cannons; the women accompanying them fling themselves into the midst of the troops, beg them, insult them, embrace them; the troops turn their rifles upside down and fraternize with the people. Two generals, Thomas and Lecomte, renowned butchers, are shot, as if in a pact of blood between the rebel troops and the insurgent people.

The next morning, March 18, all of Paris is shaken by the news; the authorities flee... the insurrection is triumphant.

As news of the Paris events scatters through Europe, instinctively all revolutionaries, socialists, anarchists, and republicans who looked upon the republic as a radical transformation of the social order, all friends of progress whose generous instincts were not paralyzed by belief in religious and political dogma, all, from Bakunin, to Marx, to Garibaldi, from the methodical German workers to the enthusiastic Italian revolutionary youth, were on the side of the Parisians, on the side of the Commune. And all reactionaries, all rulers, butchers, and people's tormentors were on the side of the government that, having escaped from Paris and selected the city of Versailles as its headquarters, was called the Versailles government. It was painful to find among the latter Giuseppe Mazzini, whose hieratic instinct clouded his intellect and his heart.

Revolutionaries and reactionaries believed it was a certain thing that the social revolution had broken out in Paris, and with this persuasion they judged the movement according to their tendencies.

The legend was created in one fell swoop, and this was a fortunate circumstance, as it had an immense effect on propaganda. In every country the socialist movement (socialist in the broad sense of the term) benefited from it, and in some countries, such as Italy, it almost gave birth to the movement. So big and beneficial was that influence that the legend persisted and persists to this day, alongside the now familiar history.

But while it is good to profit from the legend, which essentially means profiting from popular tendencies that materialize by idealizing an historical reality, it is also necessary to know the actual facts as they occurred, in order to benefit from the lessons of experience.

More of that in our next issue.

March 18–May 28, 1871

Even the simplest historical facts, always being the result of a thousand different factors, variously modified by a thousand circumstances, never exactly correspond to the ideal of one party or school of thought, and cannot fit into any ideological classification. This is especially true when it involves those great social events that all needs, all interests, all feelings, all ideas existing among the people of a country, consciously or unconsciously, contribute to determine—such events are not planned and prepared by a party nor provoked by their initiative, but are spontaneously born

by circumstances and thrust themselves upon parties and men of ideas, who must then accept them as they present themselves!

The March 18 insurrection and the resulting “Commune” was one of these events.

On the eve of March 18 all advanced men and the general population of the great cities felt the need for a revolution and intensely desired one.

But what sort of revolution was this? What aims were pursued?

In the latter years of the Empire the social question was widely debated in France and there was a spreading awareness of the need for a transformation that went beyond the political constitution. All socialistic ideas and systems that had excited minds during the decade prior to 1848 and which had been snuffed out by the reaction, had been brought back into discussion. The International proclaimed the principle that the emancipation of the workers had to be the workers’ own doing, and it was organizing the laboring masses outside of and in opposition to all bourgeois parties.

But the war had brought an end to that entire movement. The International in France did indeed protest the war and affirmed the solidarity between French workers and German workers, just as the German Internationalists did in turn; but patriotic prejudice prevailed, and they were not able to stop the war. The defeats of the French army, the surrender at Sedan, due to Napoleon’s incompetence and cowardice, the surrender at Metz due to Bazaine’s treason, the surrender at Paris where treason was again suspected, the shameful peace after arrogant boasting, increasingly offended and irritated nationalist sentiment. The intentions to restore the monarchy, clearly demonstrated by the government and the assembly, ensured that nearly every revolutionary element believed that the one and only big issue of the moment was to save the republic from the danger of restoration.

Among the people of Paris the prevalent desire was to establish a truly republican government... and to redo the war on Germany to take their revenge. When suddenly, unexpectedly, following the government’s flight after the failed attempt to seize the cannons that the national guard had successfully rescued from the Prussians, Paris found herself master of herself and with the need to see to her own destiny, and defend herself against the attempts at repression that the government hidden in Versailles was about to make.

The situation was faced as the circumstances allowed; but there was no understanding of the need to revolutionize society and spread the revolution beyond Paris, among the peasants, if only as the sole means of being able to win the material struggle.

There were certainly some who intended to develop the movement into social revolution, and the people, as in every insurrectionary movement, were animated by a more or less vague aspiration for justice and well-being. But the prevailing idea was to resist the government’s high-handedness, save the republic, and avenge French honor.

A free Commune was proclaimed... essentially because there was no way of imposing the will of Paris over all of France; however, a Parisian government was immediately appointed, which was a government like all the rest... although during the days when Paris had remained without a government—from March 18 until elections were held on April 3—it had shown that things of public interest, better than through orders from a government, could be accomplished through the efforts of everyone concerned, through Associations and Committees that had no powers beyond those given to them by popular approval.

An attempt was made to make peace with the government provided that the existence of the republic was guaranteed; and the attempts failed only because of the criminal stubbornness

of the government, of the hatred and desire for revenge against Parisians of the Bonapartist generals' (temporarily posing as republicans), and of the thirst for blood and power of the morally monstrous Adolphe Thiers, who controlled the executive power.

In the organization of the armed forces, defensively and offensively, the old military traditions were followed.

True, there was none of the scandalous salaries of other governments, but the principle of privilege and a hierarchy of salaries were respected, as these ranged from 6 thousand lire a year paid to rulers to thirty soldi a day paid to soldiers.

The arrangements to defend against the Commune's internal enemies were the usual police procedures of house searches, arrests, suppression of newspapers and other and worse violations of freedom.

Private ownership was rigorously respected. The rich peacefully continued to possess their wealth and, even during the scarcity of the siege, managed to carouse and mock at the misery not only of the people, but also of those fighting for the Commune. Benoît Malon, who was a member of the Commune's government (Council) recounts how the *Fédérés* (the name given to the soldiers of the Commune) returning from combat disheveled and bloodied through the wealthier avenues, were insulted and called thirty-pennies by the bourgeois seated outside the luxurious cafés, drinking and smoking.

The Commune's work (manufacturing uniforms for soldiers) was subcontracted out to entrepreneurs who had people work for little money.

The soldiers of the Commune were sent to guard the treasures of the Bank of France, from whom loans were sought with all the same formalities and guarantees used in the financial transactions of bourgeois governments.

The only undertakings of vaguely socialist leanings were (if memory does not fail us) a decree against nighttime work in bakeries; a decree (never implemented) that gave workers united in cooperatives the right to take over factories deserted by owners, as long as they compensated the owners upon their return; a postponement of payments on rents and debts, some meager distribution of food to the hungry, and the return, free of charge, of pawned items of minimal value:—all things that can be done (and most of which have been done repeatedly) by a bourgeois and monarchist government, in the interest itself of public "order" and the tranquility of the bourgeois.

And along with this, a great deal of declarations of principles, very advanced but never implemented; eloquent manifestos to the French people, to the peasants, to the people of the entire world, which never went beyond words; and symbolic acts, such as the demolition of the Vendôme column and the burning of the guillotine, certainly of great moral value, but of no practical importance.

This is what the Paris Commune actually was.

Given the people who took part in it, given the preceding ferment of ideas that the war could interrupt but not destroy, given how the European public interpreted the movement, something that could not have failed to influence the movement itself, one can surmise that, had the movement not been so quickly drowned in blood, perhaps it would have turned into social revolution.

But was it not mainly the direction in which the movement was taken to cause the Commune's failure—even from a military point of view?

If armed bands of Parisians, prior to the tightening of the siege, had ventured into the countryside to preach expropriation and help the locals carry it out, the movement would have spread

and the government would not have been able to assemble its forces and send them all against Paris.

If within Paris the bourgeoisie had been expropriated and everything made available to the people, then the entire population would have been interested in the revolution and would have defended it;—while instead, according to the reports of the Communards themselves, only a small number of inhabitants took part in the fighting, and in the last days the Commune’s defenders numbered no more than ten thousand.

The Commune was defeated, and it was defeated without having done what could and should have been done to win, because the principle of authority killed its momentum.

We do not intend to blame the men, who all gave admirable proof of their selflessness, devotion, heroism.

And we would be deceiving ourselves if we claimed that it was the fault of the “leaders.”

The “leaders” exists only as long as the people want and tolerate them; and they are what the people allow them to be.

The problem lies within the people themselves: it is within the people that we must fight the cult of authority, the faith in the necessity and usefulness of government. Once this is done the revolution may triumph.

Let us honor the martyrs of the Paris Commune, who, even though they chose the wrong path, gave their lives for freedom.

But let us put ourselves in a position to do better than them.

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