The Paris Commune

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1. The Defence of Louise Michel

I do not wish to defend myself, I do not wish to be defended. I belong completely to the social revolution, and I declare that I accept complete responsibility for all my actions. I accept it completely and without reservations.

You accuse me of having taken part in the murder of the generals? To that I would reply Yes, if I had been in Montmartre when they wished to have the people fired on. I would not have hesitated to fire myself on those who gave such orders. But I do not understand why they were shot when they were prisoners, and I look on this action as arrant cowardice.

As for the burning of Paris, yes, I took part in it. I wished to oppose the invader from Versailles with a barrier of flames. I had no accomplices in this action. I acted on my own initiative.

I am told that I am an accomplice of the Commune. Certainly, yes, since the Commune wanted more than anything else the social revolution, and since the social revolution is the dearest of my desires. More than that, I have the honour of being one of the instigators of the Commune, which by the way had nothing–nothing, as is well known–to do with murders and arson. I who was present at all the sittings at the Town Hall, I declare that there was never any question of murder or arson.

Do you want to know who are really guilty? It is the politicians. And perhaps later light will be brought on to all these events which today it is found quite natural to blame on all partisans of the social revolution…

But why should I defend myself? I have already declared that I refuse to do so. You are men who are going to judge me. You sit before me unmasked. You are men and I am only a woman, and yet I look you in the eye. I know quite well that everything I could say will not make the least difference to your sentence. So a single last word before I sit down. We never wanted anything but the triumph of the great principles of the revolution. I swear it my our martyrs who fell at Satory, by our martyrs whom I acclaim loudly, and who will one day have their revenge.

Once more I belong to you. Do with me what you please. Take my life if you wish. I am not the woman to argue with you for a moment…

What I claim from you, you who call yourselves a Council of War, who sit as my judges, who do not disguise yourselves as a Commission of Pardons, you who are military men and deliver your judgement in the sight of all, is Satory where our brothers have already fallen.

I must be cut off from society. You have been told to do so. Well, the Commissioner of the Republic is right. Since it seems that any heart which beats for freedom has the right only to a lump of lead, I too claim my share. If you let me live, I shall never stop crying for revenge, and I shall avenge my brothers by denouncing the murderers in the Commission for Pardons…

I have finished. If you are not cowards, kill me!

2. The Paris Commune and the Anarchist Movement by Nicholas Walter

The Paris Commune, whose centenary has been widely 1 commemorated this year, is seldom thought of as having much connection with the anarchist movement. Its connection with the Marxist movement is well known, from Marx's own Address The Civil War in France written immediately after its fall, through the writings of such figures as Lenin and Trotsky, right down

to the work of Marxist scholars and propagandists today. But the Commune was at the time an inspiration for the whole revolutionary socialist movement, and the annual commemoration of the rising of March 18 used to be one occasion in the year when all the groups of the far left were united. Moreover there are certain aspects of the crisis of 1870 through 1871 which are open to a specifically anarchist interpretation, though this is scarcely mentioned in the enormous literature on the subject, and there have been important links between the Commune and the anarchist movement from the very beginning.

The closest personal link is represented by Louise Michel, who was not just one of the most active women in the Commune but was also one of the bravest of all its leaders. After agitating in the groups which prepared for the rising of March and fighting on the barricades in the struggle of May, she gave herself up to the authorities to secure the release of her mother, who had been taken as a hostage. At her trial on December 16, 1871, soon after the execution of Ferre, Rossel, and Bourgeois at Satory, she caused a sensation by not only not denying her part in the Commune, as so many others did, but deliberately glorying in it, in the speech which opens this FREEDOM Pamphlet–for which Victor Hugo wrote her a poem, Viro Major ('Greater than a Man').

Instead of being sentenced to death, as she had demanded, she was transported to New Caledonia in the South Pacific for life. But she never gave up her convictions, as so many others did, and remained active in her exile. And from her return to France under the amnesty of 1880 to her death in 1905 she remained ceaselessly active in the revolutionary socialist movement, moving rapidly towards anarchism and becoming the most energetic anarchist propagandist of the late nineteenth century–being arrested over and over again (she was imprisoned in 1883 through 1886, in 1886, and in 1890), even being shot and wounded in 1888 by a lunatic (whom she characteristically not only refused to prosecute but actually tried to save), and finally dying in Marseille in the middle of one of her vast speaking tours and receiving a gigantic funeral in Paris (said to have been the largest since Victor Hugo's in 1885). Her grave next to her mother's in the Levallier-Perret cemetery is still a place of pilgrimage, and there are still anarchist groups in France which take the name of the woman who literally devoted her whole life to the cause of the social revolution–which she identified first with the Paris Commune and then with the anarchist movement. (A full account of her life–Louise Michel, by Edith Thomas–has recently been published in France by Gallimard; let us hope it is soon translated into English.)

A link which is personally more tenuous but politically more significant is that with Bakunin. He was not in Paris at all during the crisis, but he was active in the commune movement of southern France, and took a crucial part in the events at Lyon and Marseille in autumn 1870. Moreover, during and immediately after the Paris Commune he wrote the first anarchist attempt to analyse its meaning–especially in The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State (the first English edition of which has just been published by CIRA, and will also appear in Anarchy 5).

Thus Bakunin played a small but significant part in the movement which culminated in the Paris Commune; and the Paris Commune played a small but significant part in the final elaboration of his thought. Following the line in the Russian revolutionary tradition laid down by the populists from the 1840s, Bakunin saw the Russian peasant commune (obshchina) as the basis of a socialist society, to be realised by a movement involving peasants as well as urban workers. No such movement came into full existence in Russia in his lifetime: but the revolutionary insurrections which broke out in France during 1870 through 1871 took the form of independent communes in dozens of towns–including Lyon and Marseille where he was himself involved, and above all Paris itself. So it is not surprising that the last stage of Bakuninism (overlaying the

insurrectionism which ran through it from the barricades of Paris and Dresden in 1848 through 1849 to the abortive rising of Bologna in 1874) was based on a combination of the Russian peasant commune and the French urban commune –of populism and communalism. And after Bakunin's death in 1876 this position was developed further–especially in Switzerland by refugees from the Paris Commune such as Elisee Reclus. working with refugees from the Russian, Italian, and Spanish revolutionary movements–into the theory of anarchist communism, in which the commune played (and a century later still plays) an important part.

There are also personal links with other tendencies in the anarchist movement. One is represented by such Communards as Benoit Malon. Gustave Lefrancais, and Jean-Louis Pindy, also refugees in Switzerland who were for a time active as anarchists or near-anarchists, but who later became reformist socialists, especially after returning to France. The same is true of Paul Brousse, a French radical who moved to the left and went into exile as a result of the commune movement and its repression, and became an extremist anarchist–one of the first exponents of the theory of propaganda by deed during the 1870s–but who similarly turned to reformist socialism after 1880 and led the moderate Possibilists in the French socialist movement. (A full account of his political career–From Anarchism to Reformism by David Stafford–has recently been published by Weidenfeld and Nicolson.)

There are even personal links with the terrorist wing of the anarchist movement, which is frequently but mistakenly supposed to have no connection with the wider social movement. Emile Henry, the most intelligent and impressive of the anarchist propagandists by deed in the 1890s–the one who deliberately set out in 1894 to kill people at random, commenting that 'no bourgeois can be innocent'–was the son of a Communard : Fortune Henry, a member of the International who represented the 10th arrondissement on the Commune Council and managed to escape to Spain, being condemned to death in his absence. It seems likely that one of the motives behind the wave of revolutionary terrorism in late nineteenth-century France (which caused about 20 deaths) was the bitter personal memory of the counter-revolutionary terrorism at the end of the Paris Commune (which caused more than 20,000 deaths).

But perhaps the most significant single case is that of someone who did not actually take part in the Paris Commune but who was deeply influenced by it and who mediated its influence on the whole anarchist movement: Peter Kropotkin. In 1871 he was a clever young geographer in Russia, but he became a socialist that year in the shadow of the Commune, and began to turn away from a promising scientific career towards a dangerous political career. In the spring of 1872 he travelled for the first time to Western Europe, and joined the International in Switzerland. At the masonic Temple Unique which was the headquarters of the International in Geneva, he decided to devote his life to the socialist movement; and the circumstances of that decision are particularly significant in the present context. In his Memoirs of a Revolutionist, Kropotkin describes the event as follows :

"... every revolutionist has had a moment in his life when some circumstance, maybe unimportant in itself, has brought him to pronounce his oath of giving himself to the cause of revolution. I know that moment; I lived through it after one of the meetings at the Temple Unique, when I felt more acutely than ever before how cowardly are the educated men who hesitate to put their education, their knowledge, their energy, at the service of those who are so much in need of that education and that energy..."

This is vague enough; but in the material which Kropotkin later added to his Memoirs and which has been printed only in the Russian editions published since his death, he gives the date

of the meeting as March 18 and the occasion as the celebration of the Paris Commune–so it was in fact at the first anniversary commemoration of the Commune that Kropotkin began the political career which was to last for almost half a century.

When he then went on to the Jura and met James Guillaume at Neuchatel in April 1872, he tells us that he also met 'a French communard, who was a compositor', and who described the fall of the Commune while he was setting the type for a novel; Guillaume identified him in his history of the International as Andre Bastelica–a Corsican who was the leading Bakuninist in Marseille and who took part in the risings in both Lyon and Paris. Kropotkin also met Malon, then still close to anarchism. It was in the Jura, of course, that Kropotkin became specifically an anarchist, and when he returned to Russia in May 1872 he began anarchist activity in the Chaikovski Circle, the leading group in the populist movement at that time.

Kropotkin's chief activity in Russia from 1872 to 1874 was as a speaker at meetings of peasants and workers in St. Petersburg and Moscow, and the two main subjects of his lectures were the International and the Paris Commune. When he was arrested in St. Petersburg in March 1874 his lodgings were searched by the police, and the great majority of the books and pamphlets which they seized were about the Commune (a list, preserved in the state archives, was printed in the edition of his Diary published in Russia in 1923). Kropotkin was held in prison without trial from 1874 to 1876, first in the Peter-Paul Fortress, then after March 1876 in the St. Petersburg House of Detention where, as he tells us again in his Memoirs, by the traditional method of tapping on the walls he was able among other things 'to relate to a young neighbour the history of the Paris Commune from the beginning to the end. It took, however, a whole week's tapping'.

In 1876 Kropotkin managed to escape from the St. Petersburg prison hospital, and left Russia to live in exile for forty years. In 1877 he went to Switzerland to work in the Jura Federation, and met more Communards, especially Pindy, Lefrangais, and Elisee Reclus. There he joined in developing the theory of anarchist communism, which as we have seen derived to a large extent from the experiences and implications of the Commune. In 1877 through 1878 he was active for a time in Paris, trying to revive the socialist movement there after the eclipse following the destruction of the Commune, and in his Memoirs he mentions 'the first commemoration of the Commune, in March, 1878', when 'we surely were not two hundred'. (According to Jean Maitron, the historian of French anarchism, the Commune had in fact been commemorated in March 1877, but only by private meetings.)

In 1879 Kropotkin, who had been contributing to various anarchist papers, began to publish his own, Le Revolte; it was then that he started the series of essays which established his reputation as the leading theorist of anarchism, including several on the Paris Commune. Every March he wrote an anniversary article, and the three for 1880, 1881, and 1882 were put together to form a single chapter in his book Paroles d'un Revolte, which was made up of essays from Le Revolte and published in 1885 while he was in prison in France. (A new translation of this chapter is included in this pamphlet.)

Other chapters in Paroles d'un Revolte include an essay on the modern commune, as distinct from the medieval commune (and, it is now necessary to add, as distinct from the more recent sense too), making use of the experience of the Paris Commune; and also essays on representative and revolutionary government, both emphasising the Commune's error of relying on elected representatives to carry out the work of the social revolution which the people should have carried out themselves. And in the essay on order (which was included in FREEDOM Pamphlet 4 last September) he took the Paris Commune as the final example of both order and disorder :

Order is the Paris Commune drowned in blood. It is the death of 30,000 men, women and children, cut to pieces by shells, shot down, buried in quicklime beneath the streets of Paris…

Disorder … is the people of Paris fighting for a new idea and, when they die in the massacres, leaving to humanity the idea of the free commune, and opening the way for the revolution which we can feel approaching and which will be the Social Revolution.

After he was released from prison in France in 1886, Kropotkin settled in England, where he lived for thirty years. As he says in his Memoirs, 'the socialist movement in England was in full swing', and he took an active part in the growing agitation, writing in FREEDOM (which he helped to found in October 1886) and other papers and speaking at meetings all over the country. One of his particular subjects was still the Paris Commune, and he produced anniversary articles and speeches every March. Thus William Morris, writing about the Commune meeting at South Place on March 18, 1886, described it as 'a great success, and the place crowded. Kropotkin new come from prison spoke, and I made his acquaintance there' (Letter to John Carruthers, March 25, 1886); and a year later he similarly described the Commune meeting at South Place on March 17, 1887: 'We had a fine meeting last night to celebrate the Commune–crowded. Kropotkin spoke in English and very well' (Letter to Bruce Glasier, March 18, 1887). (The latter speech was published in the seventh issue of FREEDOM, April 1887, and would be well worth reprinting.)

At the same time Kropotkin continued to write in the French anarchist press, especially in his old paper, which was now published in Paris and changed its name to La Revolte. Once more his most important essays were collected in a book, La Conquete du Pain, a sequel to Paroles d'un Revolte, which was published in 1892 and later translated into English as The Conquest of Bread (1906). This time there was no chapter specifically about the Paris Commune, but the whole conception of the future society expounded in the book is based on it. As Kropotkin put it in his preface to the second English edition of 1913, the Commune "was too short-lived to give any positive result… But the working-classes of the old International saw at once its historical significance. They understood that the free commune would be henceforth the medium in which the ideas of modern Socialism may come to realization… These are the ideas to which I have endeavoured to give a more or less definitive expression in this book."

And the same point was made in the prefaces to the Russian editions of The Conquest of Bread, and also in the postcript to the last Russian edition of Paroles d'un Revolte, (which was included in FREEDOM Pamphlet 5 last November): 'I had in view above all a large urban commune getting rid of the capitalist yoke, especially Paris, with its working population full of intelligence and possessing, thanks to the lessons of the past, great organising capability.'

Kropotkin maintained his interest in the Paris Commune for many years more. In 1892 he wrote a preface for the Russian pamphlet edition of Bakunin's essay on the Commune, which was also included in the French pamphlet edition of the essay in 1899. Then in 1899 he included several references to the Commune in Memoirs of a Revolutionist, repeating the criticisms of the Communards for wasting time and energy on elections to and debates in the Commune Council and for not expropriating private property–i.e. because they were not anarchist or communist: 'The Commune of Paris was a terrible example of an outbreak with insufficiently determined ideals.'

He returned to the same theme in Modern Science and Anarchism (first published in Russian in 1901; an American translation was published in 1903, and an enlarged English translation was published by the Freedom Press in 1912). The Paris Commune and other similar risings in France and Spain during 1870 through 1873 showed 'what the political aspect of a Social Revolution

ought to be': 'the free, independent Communist Commune'. But once more the anarchist and communist morals were drawn: 'If no central Government was needed to rule the independent Communes, if the national Government is thrown overboard and national unity is obtained by free federation, then a central municipal Government become equally useless and noxious. The same federative principle would do within the Commune.' And at the same time the failure of the communalist risings 'proved once more that the triumph of a popular Commune was not materially possible without the parallel triumph of the people in the economic field'.

Then in his letters to Max Nettlau of 1901 through 1902, refuting the claims of individualism and the argument that anarchists should seek allies among bourgeois sympathisers, Kropotkin insisted that it is the masses of the people who fight for liberty and equality against, not with, the bourgeoisie–above all in Paris in 1871. In his preface to the Italian edition of Paroles d'un Revolte (which was included in FREEDOM Pamphlet 5 last November), he suggested that the defeat of France in 1870 and the fall of the Commune in 1871 together led to the eclipse of revolutionary France and the triumph of militarist Germany in Europe; and in his letter to Gustav Steffen about the First World War (published in FREEDOM, October 1914) he went so far as to suggest that the failure of the Commune had led to the war.

In his writings for the Russian anarchist movement, Kropotkin frequently returned to the subject of the Paris Commune, notably in a series of articles on it in his paper Listki 'Khleb i Volya' during 1907 which were immediately reprinted as a pamphlet–Parizhskaya Kommuna (1907). This was quite separate from the pamphlet reprinted from Paroles d'un Revolte, though they are often confused, but the message was still the same. After the 1917 Revolution, however, Kropotkin seldom mentioned the Paris Commune again, and referred much more often to the Great French Revolution of 1789 through 1794 during the last years of his life.

But it was in the month after Kropotkins death–in March 1921–that Kronstadt rose and fell, and that Alexander Berkman pointed out the irony of the Bolsheviks celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Paris Commune the day after they had destroyed the Kronstadt Commune. By that time the idea of the commune had deeply penetrated the consciousness of the anarchist movement and scarcely needed to be mentioned to be understood. Yet there are times when it should be mentioned. This year we have commemorated at the same time the hundredth anniversary of the destruction of the Paris Commune by French liberals and the destruction of the Kronstadt Commune by Russian communists. However many times it is destroyed, and whoever destroys it, the idea of the free city which rises in revolution and abolishes authority and property together cannot be destroyed, and remains one of the basic components of political anarchism. Following the consistent anarchist critique of the Paris Commune over a century, we would not do everything the Communards did or leave undone everything they left undone; but we do feel that we are closer to what they tried to do than either the liberals or the communists who have patronised and misinterpreted them with false praise. For us at least, in the words of the old song, 'the Commune is not dead!'

3. Kropotkin: Three essays on the Commune

The theory of the state and the practice of the Commune

On March 18, 1871, the people of Paris rose against a despised and detested government, and proclaimed the city independent, free, belonging to itself. This overthrow of the central power

took place without the usual stage effects of revolution, without the firing of guns, without the shedding of blood upon barricades. When the armed people came out into the streets, the rulers fled away, the troops evacuated the town, the civil servants hurriedly retreated to Versailles carrying everything they could with them. The government evaporated like a pond of stagnant water in a spring breeze, and on March 19 the great city of Paris found herself free from the impurity which had defiled her, with the loss of scarcely a drop of her children's blood.

Yet the change thus accomplished began a new era in that long series of revolutions by which the peoples are marching from slavery to freedom. Under the name of the Paris Commune a new idea was born, to become the starting point for future revolutions.

As is always the case, this fruitful idea was not the product of some one individual's brain, of the conceptions of some philosopher; it was born of the collective spirit, it sprang from the heart of a whole community. But at first it was vague, and many of those who acted upon and gave their lives for it did not look at it in the light in which we see it today; they did not realize the full extent of the revolution they were inaugurating of the fertility of the new principle they were trying to put into practice. It was only after they had begun to apply it that its future significance slowly dawned upon them; it was only afterwards, when the new principle came to be thought out, that it grew definite and precise and was seen in all its clearness, in all its beauty, its justice, and the importance of its results.

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From the time that socialism had taken a new leap forward during the five or six years which preceded the Commune, one question above all preoccupied the theoreticians of the approaching social revolution. This was the question of knowing what would be the form of political organization of society most favourable for that great economic revolution which the present development of industry is forcing upon our generation, and which must bring about the abolition of individual property and the taking into common of all the capital accumulated by previous generations.

The International Working Men's Association gave this reply. The organization, it said, must not be confined to a single nation; it must extend over artificial frontiers. And soon this great idea sank into the hearts of the people and took fast hold of their minds. Though it has been hunted down ever since by the united efforts of every kind of reactionary, it is alive nevertheless, and when the voice of the rebellious peoples destroys the obstacles to its development, it will reappear stronger than ever before.

But it still remained to know what should be the component parts of this vast association.

To this question two answers Were given, each the expression of a distinct current of thought: one said the people's state; the other said anarchy.

The German socialists advocated that the state should take possession of all accumulated wealth and give it to workers' associations and, further, should organize production and exchange, and generally watch over the life and activities of society.

To which the socialists of the Latin race, strong in revolutionary experience, replied that it would be a miracle if such a state could ever exist; but if it could, it would surely be the worst of tyrannies. This ideal of the omnipotent and beneficent state is merely a copy from the past, they said; and they opposed it with a new ideal–an-archy: that is, the total abolition of the state and social organization from the simple to the complex by means of the free federation of popular forces, of producers and consumers.

It was soon admitted, even by a few 'statists' less imbued with governmental prejudices, that anarchy certainly represents a much better sort of organization than that aimed at by the people's state; but, they said, the anarchist ideal is so far off that just now we cannot trouble about it. On the other hand the anarchist theory lacked a concrete and at the same time simple formula to show plainly its point of departure, to embody its conceptions, and to indicate that it was supported by a tendency actually existing among the people. The federation of workers' unions and consumers' groups extending over frontiers and independent of existing states- still seemed too vague; and at the same time it was easy to see that it could not take in the whole diversity of human requirements. A clearer formula was needed, one more easily grasped, one which had a firm foundation in the realities of life.

If the question had merely been how best to elaborate a theory, we should have said that theories, as theories, are not of so much importance. But so long as a new idea has not found a clear, precise form of statement, growing naturally out of things as they actually exist, it does not take hold of men's minds, does not inspire them to enter upon a decisive struggle. The people do not fling themselves into the unknown without some positive and clearly formulated idea to serve them, so to speak, as a springboard at the starting-point.

As for this starting-point, they must be led up to it by life itself.

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For five months Paris, isolated by the siege, had drawn on its own livelihood, and had learnt to know the immense economic, intellectual, and moral resources it disposes of; it had caught a glimpse of its strength of initiative and understood what it meant. At the same time it had seen that the chattering gang which had seized power had no idea how to organize either the defence of France or its internal development. It had seen the central government at cross purposes with every manifestation of the intelligence of the great city. It had understood more than that: the powerlessness of any government to guard against great disasters or to smooth the path of rapid revolution. During the siege it had suffered frightful privations, privations of the workers and defenders of the city, alongside the insolent luxury of the idlers, and thanks to the central government it had seen the failure of every attempt to put an end to this scandalous system. Each time that the people wished to take a free leap forward, the government added weight to their chains and tied on a ball, and naturally the idea was born that Paris should set itself up as an independent commune, able to put into practice within its walls what was dictated by the will of the people!

This word, the Commune, then came from all lips.

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The Commune of 1871 could be nothing but a first attempt. Beginning at the close of a war, hemmed in between two armies ready to join hands and crush the people, it dared not unhesitatingly set forth upon the path of economic revolution; it neither boldly declared itself socialist, nor proceeded with the expropriation of capital or the organization of labour; nor did it even take stock of the general resources of the city. Neither did it break with the tradition of the state, of representative government, and it did not seek to establish within the Commune that organization from the simple to the 'complex which it inaugurated by proclaiming the independence and free federation of the communes. Yet it is certain that if the Paris Commune had lived a few months longer it would inevitably have been driven by the force of circumstances towards both these revolutions. Let us not forget that the bourgeoisie took four years of a revolutionary period to change a limited monarchy into a bourgeois republic, and we should not be astonished that

the people of Paris did not cross with a single bound the space between the anarchist commune and the government of robbers. But let us also bear in mind that the next revolution, which in France and certainly in Spain as well will be communalist, will take up the work of the Paris Commune where it was checked by the massacres of the Versailles army.

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The Commune was defeated, and we know how the bourgeoisie avenged itself for the fright the people had given it in shaking off the yoke of their rulers. It proved that there really are two classes in modern society: on one side, the man who works and gives up to the capitalist more than half of what he produces, and passes too easily over the crimes of his masters; on the other, the idler, the well-fed, animated by the instincts of a wild beast, hating his 'slave, ready to massacre him like game.

After shutting the people of Paris in and blocking up all the __exits, they let loose the soldiers, brutalized by barrack life and drink, and told them publicly: 'Kill these wolves and their young!' And they said to the people:

"Whatever you do, you shall perish! If you are caught with arms in your hands–death! If you lay down your arms–death! If you use them–death! If you beg for mercy–death! Whichever way you turn, right, left, forward, back, up, down–death! You are not merely outside the law, but outside mankind. Neither age nor sex shall save you or yours. You shall die, but first you shall taste the agony of your wife, your sister, your mother, your daughters, your sons, even in the cradle! Before your eyes the wounded man shall be taken out of the ambulance and hacked with bayonets or beaten with rifle-butts. He shall be dragged alive by his broken leg or bleeding arm and flung into the gutter as a groaning, suffering bundle of rubbish.

"Death! Death! Death!"[1]

And then after this insane orgy over the piles of corpses, after this mass extermination, came the petty yet atrocious vengeance which is still going on–the cat-o'-nine-tails, the thumbscrews, the irons in the ship's hold, the whips and truncheons of the warders, insults, hunger, all the refinements of cruelty.

Will the people forget this hangman's work?

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Overthrown, but not conquered, the Commune is reborn today. It is no longer only a dream of the vanquished, caressing in their imagination the lovely mirage of hope; no! the 'Commune' is today becoming the visible and definite aim of the revolution rumbling beneath our feet. The idea is sinking into the masses, it is giving them a rallying cry, and we firmly count on the present generation to bring about the social revolution within the commune, to put an end to the ignoble bourgeois exploitation, to rid the people of the tutelage of the state, and to inaugurate in the evolution of the human race a new era of liberty, equality, and solidarity.

Popular aspirations and popular prejudices in the Commune

Ten years already separate us from the day when the people of Paris, overthrowing the traitor government which had seized power at the downfall of the Empire, set themselves up as a Commune and proclaimed their absolute independence.[2] And yet it is still towards that date of March

[1] We take these lines from the Popular and Parliamentary History of the Paris Commune by Arthur Arnould, a work which we have pleasure in bringing to the attention of our readers.

[2] Written in March 1881.

18, 1871, that we turn our gaze, it is to it that our best memories are attached; it is the anniversary of that memorable day that the proletariat of both hemispheres intends to celebrate solemnly, and tomorrow night hundreds of thousands of workers' hearts will beat in unison, fraternizing across frontiers and oceans, in Europe, in the United States, in South America, in memory of the rebellion of the Paris proletariat.

The fact is that the idea for which the French proletariat spilt its blood in Paris, and for which it suffered in the swamps of New Caledonia, is one of those ideas which contain a whole revolution in themselves, a broad idea which can cover with the folds of its flag all the revolutionary tendencies of the peoples marching towards their emancipation.

To be sure, if we confined ourselves to observing only the concrete and palpable deeds achieved by the Paris Commune, we would have to say that this idea was not wide enough, that it covered only a very small part of the revolutionary programme. But if on the contrary we observe the spirit which inspired the masses of the people at the time of the movement of March 18, the tendencies which were trying to come to the surface and didn't have time to enter the realm of reality because, before coming into the open, they were already smothered under the piles of corpses–we shall then understand the whole significance of the movement and the sympathy it arouses within the masses of both hemispheres. The Commune enraptures hearts not by what it did but by what it intended to do one day.

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What was the origin of this irresistible force which draws towards the movement of 1871 the sympathy of all the oppressed masses? What idea does the Paris Commune represent? And why is this idea so attractive to the workers of every land, of every nationality?

The answer is easy. The revolution of 1871 was above all a popular one. It was made by the people themselves, it sprang spontaneously from within the masses, and it was among the great mass of the people that it found its defenders, its heroes, its martyrs–and it is exactly for this 'mob' character that the bourgeoisie will never forgive it. And at the same time the moving idea of this revolution–vague, it is true, unconscious perhaps, but nevertheless pronounced and running through all its actions–is the idea of the social revolution, trying at last to establish after so many centuries of struggle real liberty and real equality for all.

It was the revolution of 'the mob' marching forward to conquer its rights.

Attempts have been made, it is true, and are still being made to change the real direction of this revolution and to represent it as a simple attempt to regain the independence of Paris and thus to constitute a little state within France. But nothing can be less true. Paris did not try to isolate itself from France, any more than to conquer it by force of arms; it did not try to shut itself up within its walls like a monk in a cloister; it was not inspired by a narrow parochial spirit. If it claimed its independence, if it wished to prevent the interference of the central power in its affairs, it was because it saw in that independence a means of quietly working out the bases of future organization and bringing about within itself a social revolution–a revolution which would have completely transformed the whole system of production and exchange by basing them on justice, which would have completely modified human relations by putting them on a footing of equality, and which would have remade the morality of our society by giving it a basis in the principles of equity and solidarity.

Communal independence was then but a means for the people of Paris, and the social revolution was their end.

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This end would have certainly been attained if the revolution of March 18 had been able to take its natural course, if the people of Paris had not been slashed, stabbed, shot and disembowelled by the murderers of Versailles. To find a clear and precise idea, comprehensible to everyone and summing up in a few words what had to be done to bring about the revolution–such was indeed the preoccupation of the people of Paris from the earliest days of their independence. But a great idea does not germinate in a day, however rapid the elaboration and propagation of ideas during revolutionary periods. It always needs a certain time to develop, to spread throughout the masses, and to translate itself into action, and the Paris Commune lacked this time.

It lacked more than this, because ten years ago the ideas of modern socialism were themselves passing through a period of transition. The Commune was born so to speak between two eras in the development of modern socialism. In 1871 the authoritarian, governmental, and more or less religious communism of 1848 no longer had any hold over the practical and libertarian minds of our era. Where could you find today a Parisian who would agree to shut himself up in a Phalansterian barracks? On the other hand the collectivism which wished to yoke together the wage system and collective property remained incomprehensible, unattractive, and bristling with difficulties in its practical application. And free communism, anarchist communism, was scarcely dawning; it scarcely ventured to provoke the attacks of the worshippers of governmentalism.

Minds were undecided, and the socialists themselves didn't feel bold enough to begin the demolition of individual property, having no definite end in view. Then they let themselves be fooled by the argument which humbugs have repeated for centuries : 'Let us first make sure of victory; after that we shall see what can be done.'

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First make sure of victory! As if there were any way of forming a free commune so long as you don't touch property! As if there were any way of defeating the enemy so long as the great mass of the people is not directly interested in the triumph of the revolution, by seeing that it will bring material, intellectual, and moral well-being for everyone! They tried to consolidate the Commune first and put off the social revolution until later, whereas the only way to proceed was to consolidate the Commune by means of the social revolution!

The same thing happened with the principle of government. By proclaiming the free commune, the people of Paris were proclaiming an essentially anarchist principle; but, since the idea of anarchism had at that time only faintly dawned in men's minds, it was checked half-way, and within the Commune people decided in favour of the old principle of authority, giving themselves a Commune Council, copied from the municipal councils.

If indeed we admit that a central government is absolutely useless to regulate the relations of communes between themselves, why should we admit its necessity to regulate the mutual relations of the groups which make up the commune? And if we leave to the free initiative of the communes the business of coming to a common understanding with regard to enterprises concerning several cities at once, why refuse this same initiative to the groups composing a commune? There is no more reason for a government inside a commune than for a government above the commune.

But in 1871 the people of Paris, who have overthrown so many governments, were making only their first attempt to rebel against the governmental system itself; so they let themselves be carried away by governmental fetishism and gave themselves a government. The consequences of that are known. The people sent their devoted sons to the town hall. There, immobilized, in the midst of paperwork, forced to rule when their instincts prompted them to be and to move among

the people, forced to discuss when it was necessary to act, and losing the inspiration which comes from continual contact with the masses, they found themselves reduced to impotence. Paralysed by their removal from the revolutionary source, the people, they themselves paralysed the popular initiative.

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Born during a period of transition, at a time when the ideas of socialism and authority were undergoing a profound modification; emerging from a war, in an isolated centre, under the guns of the Prussians, the Paris Commune was bound to perish.

But by its eminently popular character it began a new era in the series of revolutions, and through its ideas it was the precursor of a great social revolution. The unheard of, cowardly, and ferocious massacres with which the bourgeoisie celebrated its fall, the mean vengeance which the torturers have perpetrated on their prisoners for nine years, these cannibalistic orgies have opened up between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat a chasm which will never be filled. At the time of the next revolution, the people will know what has to be done; they will know what awaits them if they don't gain a decisive victory, and they will act accordingly.'

Indeed we now know that on the day when France bristles with insurgent communes, the people must no longer give themselves a government and expect that government to initiate revolutionary measures. When they have made a clean sweep of the parasites who devour them, they will themselves take possession of all social wealth so as to put it into common according to the principles of anarchist communism. And when they have entirely abolished property, government, and the state, they will form themselves freely according to the necessities dictated to them by life itself. Breaking its chains and overthrowing its idols, mankind will march them towards a better future, no longer knowing either masters or slaves, keeping its veneration only for the noble martyrs who paid with their blood and sufferings for those first attempts at emancipation which have lighted our way in our march towards the conquest of freedom.

From the Paris Commune to anarchist communism

The celebrations and public meetings organized on March 18 in all the towns where there are socialist groups deserve all our attention, not merely because they are a demonstration of the army of the proletariat, but more as an expression of the feelings which inspire the socialists of both hemispheres. They are 'polled' in this way better than by all imaginable methods of voting, and they formulate their aspirations in full freedom, without letting themselves be influenced by electoral tactics.

Indeed the proletarians meeting on this day no longer confine themselves to praising the heroism of the Paris proletariat, or to calling for vengeance for the May massacres. While refreshing themselves with the memory of the heroic struggle in Paris, they have gone further. They are discussing what lessons for the next revolution must be drawn from the Commune of 1871; they are asking what the mistakes of the Commune were, not to criticize the men who made them, but to bring out how the prejudices about property and authority, which were at that time prevalent in the workers' organizations, prevented the revolutionary idea from coming to light, being developed, and illuminating the whole world with its life-giving light.

The lesson of 1871 has benefited the proletariat of the whole world, and, breaking with their old prejudices, the proletarians have said clearly and simply what they understand their revolution to be.

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It is certain from now on that the next rising of communes will not be merely a communalist movement. Those who still think that it is necessary to establish the independent commune and then within this commune attempt to carry out economic reforms are being left behind by the development of the popular mind. It is through revolutionary socialist actions, abolishing individual property, that the communes of the next revolution will assert and establish their independence.

On the day when, as a result of the development of the revolutionary situation, governments are swept away by the people, and the camp of the bourgeoisie, which is maintained only by the protection of the state, is thrown into disorder–on that day (and it is not far off), the insurgent people will not wait until some government decrees in its amazing wisdom some economic reforms. They will themselves abolish individual property by a violent expropriation, taking possession in the name of the whole people of all the social wealth accumulated by the labour of previous generations. They will not confine themselves to expropriating the holders of social capital by a decree which would remain a dead letter; they will take possession of it on the spot and will establish their rights by making use of it without delay. They will organize themselves in the factories to keep them working; they will exchange their hovels for salubrious dwellings in the houses of the bourgeoisie; they will organize themselves to make immediate use of all the wealth stored up in the towns; they will take possession of it as if it had never been stolen from them by the bourgeoisie. Once the industrial baron who deducts profits from the worker has been evicted, production will continue, shaking off the restraints which obstruct it, abolishing the speculations which kill it and the muddle which disorganizes it, and transforming itself according to the needs of the moment under the impulse which will be given to it by free labour. 'People never worked in France as they did in 1793, after the land was snatched from the hands of the nobles,' says Michelet. People have never worked as they will on the day when work has become free, when every advance by the worker will be a source of well-being for the whole commune.

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On the subject of social wealth, an attempt has been made to establish a distinction between two kinds, and has even managed to divide the socialist party over this distinction. The school which today is called collectivist, substituting for the collectivism of the old International (which was only anti-authoritarian communism) a sort of doctrinaire collectivism, has tried to establish a distinction between capital which is used for production and wealth which is used to supply the necessities of life. Machinery, factories, raw materials, means of communication, and land on one side; and homes, manufactured goods, clothing, foodstuffs on the other. The former becoming collective property; the latter intended, according to the learned representatives of this school, to remain individual property.

An attempt has been made to establish this distinction. But the good sense of the people has quickly got the better of it. They have realized that this distinction is illusory and impossible to establish. Unsound in theory, it fails before the reality of life. The workers have realized that the house which shelters us, the coal and gas which we burn, the nourishment which the human machine burns to maintain life, the clothing which man covers himself with to protect his existence, the book which he reads for instruction, even the pleasure which he gets, are so many integral parts of his existence, are just as necessary for the success of production and for the progressive development of mankind as machines, factories, raw materials and other media of production. They have realized that to maintain individual property for this kind of wealth would

be to maintain inequality, oppression, exploitation, to paralyse in advance the results of partial expropriation. Leaping the hurdles put in their way by theoretical collectivism, they are going straight for the simplest and most practical form of anti-authoritarian communism.

in fact in their meetings the proletarians are clearly asserting their right to all social wealth and the necessity of abolishing individual property as much in consumer goods as in those for further production. 'On the day of the revolution, we shall seize all wealth, all goods stored up in the towns, and we shall put them in common,' say the spokesmen of the working masses, and the audiences confirm this by their unanimous approval.

'Let each person take from the store what he needs, and we may be sure that in the warehouses of our towns there will be enough food to feed everyone until the day when free production makes a new start. In the shops of our towns there are enough clothes to clothe everyone, stored there unsold, next to general poverty. There are even enough luxury goods for everyone to choose according to taste.'

That–judging by what is said at the meetings–is how the proletarian mass imagines the revolution: the immediate introduction of anarchist communism, and the free organization of production. These two points are settled, and in this respect the communes of the revolution which is knocking on the door will no longer repeat the errors of their forerunners which by shedding their blood so generously have cleared the way for the future.

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The same agreement has not yet been reached–though it is not far away–on another point, no less important, on the question of government.

It is known that there are two schools of thought face to face, completely divided on this question. 'It is necessary,' says one, 'on the very day of the revolution to set up a government to take power. This strong, powerful and resolute government will make the revolution by decreeing this and that and by imposing obedience to its decrees.'

'A sad delusion!' says the other. 'Every central government, taking it on itself to rule a nation, being formed inevitably from disparate elements and being conservative by virtue of its governmental essence, would be only a hindrance to the revolution. It would only obstruct the revolution in the communes ready to go ahead, without being able to inspire backward communes with the spirit of revolution. The same within a commune in revolt. Either the commune government will only sanction things already done, and then it will be a useless and dangerous mechanism; or else it will want to take the lead: it will make rules for what has still to be worked out freely by the people themselves if it is to be viable; it will apply theories where the whole of society must work out new forms of common life with that creative force which arises in the social organism when it breaks its chains and sees new and wider horizons opening up in front of it. The men in power will obstruct this enthusiasm, without carrying out any of the things which they would have been capable of themselves if they had remained within the people, working out the new organization with them instead of shutting themselves up in government ministries and wearing themselves out in idle debates. A government will be a hindrance and a danger; powerless to do good, full of strength to do evil; so what is the point of it?'

However natural and correct this argument is, it nevertheless runs up against age-old prejudices stored up and given credit by those who have had an interest in maintaining the religion of government side by side with the religion of property and the religion of god.

This prejudice–the last of the series, God, Property, Government–still exists and is a danger to the next revolution. But it can already be stated that it is in decline. 'We shall manage our business

ourselves, without waiting for orders from a government, and we shall take no notice of those who try to force themselves on us as priests, proprietors, or government,' the proletarians are already saying. So it is to be hoped that if the anarchist party continues to struggle vigorously against the religion of governmentalism, and if it does not itself stray from the path by letting itself be drawn into struggles for power–it is to be hoped, we say, that in the few years which still remain to us before the revolution the governmental prejudice will be shaken sufficiently not to be able any more to draw the proletarian masses into a false road.

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There is however a regrettable omission in the popular meetings which we want to point out. This is that nothing, or almost nothing, is done about the countryside. Everything is confined to the towns. The countryside might not exist for the workers in the towns. Even the speakers who talk about the character of the next revolution avoid mentioning the countryside and the land. They do not know the peasant or his desires, and they don't venture to speak in his name. Is it necessary to insist at length on the danger arising from this? The emancipation of the proletariat will not be even possible so long as the revolutionary movement does not include the villages. The insurgent communes will not be able to hold out for even a Year if the insurrection is not at the same time spread in the villages. When taxes, mortgages, and rents are abolished, when the institutions which levy them are scattered to the four winds, it is certain that the villages will understand the advantages of this revolution. But in any case it would be unwise to count on the diffusion of the revolutionary idea from the towns into the countryside without preparing ideas in advance. It is necessary to know here and now what the peasant wants, how the revolution in the villages is to be understood, how the thorny question of property in land is to be resolved. It is necessary to say to the peasant in advance what the town proletarian and his allies propose to do, that he has nothing to fear from the measures which will be harmful to the landowner. It is necessary that on his side the town worker gets used to respecting the peasant and to working in agreement with him.

But for this the workers must take on the task of spreading propaganda in the villages. It is important that in each town there should be a small special organization, a branch of the Land League, for propaganda among the peasants. It is necessary that this kind of propaganda should be considered as a duty under the same heading as propaganda in the industrial centres.

The beginning will be difficult; but let us remember that the success of the revolution is at stake. It will only be victorious on the day when the factory worker and the field labourer proceed hand in hand to the conquest of equality for all, bringing happiness to the country cottage as well as to the buildings of the large industrial areas.

Editor's NOTE

This essay consists of three separate articles which were first published in Kropotkin's paper Le Revolte for the anniversaries of the Paris Commune in March 1880, March 1881, and March 1882. They were put together to form a single chapter of Kropotkin's first political book ('La Commune de Paris', Paroles d'un Revolte, Paris 1885). The first English translation was published eighty years ago as the second Freedom Pamphlet (The Commune of Paris, London 1891), and was reprinted five years later in the American Liberty Library (The Commune of Paris, Columbus Junction 1896); it has recently been included in an abridged and inaccurate version in Martin

A. Miller's edition of Kropotkin's Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution (reviewed in FREEDOM on June 26). The translation has now been revised by Nicolas Walter to make the original version of the essay available in English for the first time.

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