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# The Paris Commune

Voltairine de Cleyre

The Paris Commune, like other spectacular events in human history, has become the clinging point for many legends, alike among its enemies and among its friends. Indeed, one must often question which was the real Commune, the legend or the fact,—what was actually lived, or the conception of it which has shaped itself in the world-mind during those forty odd years that have gone since the 18th of March, 1871.

It is thus with doctrines, it is thus with personalities, it is thus with events.

Which is the real Christianity, the simple doctrine attributed to Christ or the practical preaching and realizing of organized Christianity? Which is the real Abraham Lincoln,—the clever politician who emancipated the chattel slaves as an act of policy, or the legendary apostle of human liberty, who rises like a gigantic figure of iconoclastic right smiting old wrongs and receiving the martyr's crown therefor?

Which is the real Commune,—the thing that was, or the thing our orators have painted it? Which will be the influencing power in the days that are to come? Our Commune commemorators are wont to say, and surely they believe, that the declaration of the

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The Selected Works of Voltairine de Cleyre: Poems, Essays,  
Sketches and Stories, 1885-1911

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Commune was the spontaneous assertion of independence by the Parisian masses, consciously alive to the fact that the national government of France had treated them most outrageously in the matter of defense against the Prussian army. They believe that the farce of the situation in which the city found itself, had opened the eyes of the general populace to the fact that the national government, so far from serving the supposed prime purpose of government, viz., as a means of defense against a foreign invader, was in reality a thing so apart from them and their interests that it preferred to leave them to the mercy of the Prussians, to endangering its own supremacy by assisting in their defense, or permitting them to defend themselves.

It is a pity that this legendary figure of Awakened Paris is not a true one. The Commune, in fact, was not the work of the whole people of Paris, nor a majority of the people of Paris. The Commune was really established by a comparatively small number of able, nay brilliant, and supremely devoted men and women from *every* walk in life, but with a relatively high percentage of military men, engineers, and political journalists, some of whom had time and again been in prison before for seditious writing or acts of rebellion. They flocked in from their exile in the neighboring countries, thinking that now they saw the opportunity for retrieving former errors, and arousing the people to renew and to extend the struggle of 1848. It is true that there were also teachers, artists, designers, architects and builders, skilled craftsmen of every sort. And perhaps no chapter in the whole story is more inspiring than the description of the gatherings of the workers, which took place night after night in every quarter of the beleaguered city, previous to the 18th of March and thereafter. To such meetings went those who burned with fervor of faith in what the people might and would accomplish, and, with the radiant vision of a new social day shining in their eyes, endeavored to make it clear to those who listened. One almost catches the redolence of outbursting faith, that rising of the sap of hope and courage and daring, like an incense of spring; al-

most feels himself there, partaking in the work, the danger, the glorious, mistaken assurance which was theirs.

And yet the truth must have been that these apostles of the Commune were blinded by their own enthusiasm, deafened by the enthusiasm they evoked in others, to the fact that the great unvoiced majority who did not attend public meetings, who sat within their houses or kept silent in the shops, were not converted or affected by their teachings.

We are told by those who should know, the survivors among the Communards themselves, that the actual number of persons who were aggressive, moving spirits in the great uprising was not greatly above 2,000. The mass of the people were, as they would probably be in this city to-day under like circumstances, indifferent as to what went on over their heads, so that the peace and quiet of their individual lives was restored, so that the siege of the Prussians was raised, and themselves permitted to go about their business. If the Commune could assure that, good luck to it! They were tired of the siege; and they longed for their old familiar miseries to which they were in some respect accustomed; they hardly dreamed of anything better.

But, as is usually the case when strategic moments arise, these same plain, stolid, indifferent people, who neither know nor care about fine theories of political right, municipal sovereignty, and so forth, see more directly into the logic of a situation than those who have confused their minds with much theorizing. Likewise the people of Paris in general, when the Commune had become an established fact, saw that the only consequent proceeding would be to make war economically as well as politically, to cut off any source of supply to the national army which lay within the city. Instead of doing that, the government of the Commune, anxious to prove itself more law-abiding than the old regime, stupidly defended the property right of its enemies, and continued to let the Bank of France furnish supplies to those who were financing the army of Versailles, the very army which was to cut their throats.

Naturally, the plain people grew disgusted with so senseless a program, and in the main took no part in the final struggle with the Versailles troops, nor even opposed the idea of their entrance into the city. Probably a goodly number even drew a sigh of relief at the prospect of a return to the smaller evil of the two. Little enough did they dream that the way back lay through their own blood, and that they, who had never lifted hand or voice for the Commune, would become its martyrs. Little did they conceive the wild revenge of Law and Order upon Rebellion, the saturnalia of restored Power.

Did they sleep, I wonder, on the night before the 20th of May, when that dark thunder of vengeance was gathering to break? Many slept well the next night, and still sleep; for "then began a murder grim and great,"—a murder whose painted image, even after these forty years have risen and sunk upon it, sends the blood shuddering backward, and sets the teeth in uttermost horror and hate. MacMahon placarded the streets with peace and sent his troops to make it; in the name of that Peace, Gallifet, an incarnation of hell, set his men the example and rode up and down the streets of Paris, dashing out children's brains. Did a hand appear at a shutter, the window was riddled with bullets. Did a cry of protest escape from any throat, the house was invaded, its inhabitants driven out, lined against the walls, and shot where they stood. The doctors and the nurses at the bedsides of the wounded, the very sick in the hospitals, themselves were slaughtered where they lay. Such was MacMahon's peace.

After the street massacres, the organized massacres at the bastions, the stakes of Satory, the huddled masses of prisoners, the grim visitor with the lantern, the ghastly call to rise and follow, the trenches dug by the condemned in the slippery, blood-soaked ground for their own corpses to fall in. Thirty thousand people butchered! Butchered by the sateless vengeance of authority and the insane blood-lust of the professional soldier! butchered without a pretense of reason, a shadow of inquiry, merely as the gust of insensate rage blew!

Such are they who think they can see the way of progress broad and clear through the slit in a ballot box. I fear their works will have some uncalculated consequences also, if ever they execute them; I fear their narrowly enclosed view deceives them much. Climbing a hill is a different affair from voting oneself at the top.

No matter: Man always hopes; Life always hopes. When a definite object cannot be outlined, the indomitable spirit of hope still impels the living mass to move toward something—something that shall somehow be better.

What help is there? No help from outside power; no help from overhead; no help from the Sky, pray to it ever so much; no help from the strong hand of wise men, nor of good men, however wise or good. Such help always ends in despotism. Nor yet is there help in the abnegation of generous fanatics whose efforts end in deplorable fiasco, as did the Commune. Help lies only in the general will of those who do the work to say how, when, and where they shall do it.

The force of the lesson of the Commune is that people cannot be made free who have not conceived freedom; yet through such examples they may learn to conceive it. It cannot be bestowed as a gift; it must be taken by those who want it. Let us hope that those who would have given it, bought that much by their sacrifice, that they touched the unseeing eyes of the somnambulist proletariat with a light which has made them dream, at least, of waking.

beloved, waiting to reward your daring passion with the fervors of fresh creation. Are you feeble and timid of spirit? Bow your head to the ground. Still you must meet the future; still you must go in the track of the others. You may hinder them, you may make them lag; you cannot stop them, nor yourself.

Struggle waits—abortive struggle, crushed struggle, mistaken struggle, long and often. And worse than all this, *Waiting waits*,—the long dead-level of inaction, when no one does anything, when even the daring can only move in self-returning circles; when no one knows what to do, except to endure the ever-tightening pressure of intolerable conditions, how to better which he knows not; when living appears a monotonous journey through a featureless wilderness, wherein the same pitiless word "Useless" stares at one from every aimless path one seeks to follow in the despairing search for a way out. And happier is he who perishes in the mistaken struggle than he who, with a hot and chafing soul, but with clear discernment, sees that he is doomed to go on indefinitely in submission to the wrongs that are. What hope is there? That the increasing pressure of conditions may quicken intelligences; that even out of mistaken struggle, frustrate struggle, unforeseen *good* consequences may flow, just as out of undeniable improvements in material life, unforeseeable ill results are consequent.

The Commune hoped to free Paris, and by so setting an example free many other cities. It went down in utter defeat, and no city was freed thereby. But out of this defeat the knowledge and skill of craftsmanship of its people went abroad over other lands, both into civilized centers and to wild waste places; and wherever its art went, its idea went also, so that the "Commune," the idealized Commune, has become a watchword through the workshops of the world, wherever there are even a few workers seeking to awaken their fellows.

There are those who have definite hopes; those who think they know precisely how overwork and underwork and poverty, and all their consequences of spiritual enslavement, are to be abolished.

After the orgy of fury, the orgy of the inquisition. The gathering of the prisoners in cellar holes, where they must squat or lie upon damp earth, and see the light daily only for some short half hour when an unexpellable sun ray shot through some unstopped crevice. The shifting of them day and night across the country, sometimes in stock yard wagons, stifled, starved, and jammed together, as even our butchering civilization is ashamed to jam pigs for the slaughter; sometimes by dreadful marches, mostly by night, often with the rain beating on them, the butts of the soldiers' muskets striking them, as they lagged through weakness or through lameness.

Then the detention prisons, with their long-drawn agonies of hunger, cold, vermin, and disease, and the ever-looming darkness of waiting death. Follow the tortures of friends and relatives of Communards or suspected Communards, to make them betray the whereabouts of their friends.

Could they who had seen these things "forgive and forget"? They who had seen ten year old children lashed to make them tell where their fathers were. Women driven mad before the terrible choice of giving up their sons who had fought, or their daughters who had not, to the brutality of the soldiery.

After the tortures of the hunt, the tortures of the trials, solemn farces, cat-like cruelties. Then the long hopeless line of exiles marching from the prison to the port, crowded on the transport ships, watched like caged animals, forbidden to speak, the cannon always threatening above them, and so drifted away, away to exile lands, to barren islands and fever shores—there to waste away in loneliness, in uselessness, in futile dreams of freedom that ended in chains upon the ankles or death on the coral reefs—all this was the Mercy and the Wisdom shown by the national government to the rebel city whose works are the glory of France, and whose beauty is the Beauty of the World. Whatever other lesson we have to learn, this one is certain: the glutless revenge of restored Authority. If ever one rebels, let him rebel to the end; there is no

hope so futile as hope in either the justice or the mercy of a power against which a rebellion has been raised. No faith so simple or so foolish as faith in the discrimination, the judgement, or the wisdom of a reconquering government.

Whether at that time the essential principle of the independent Commune could have been realized or not, through a general response of the other cities of France by like action (in case Paris had continued to maintain the struggle some months longer), I am not historian enough, nor historic prophet enough, to say. I incline to think not. But certainly the struggle would have been far other, far more fruitful in its results, both then and later, (even if finally overthrown), had it really been a movement of all those people who were so indiscriminately murdered for it, so vilely tortured, so mercilessly exiled. For had it really been the deliberate expression of a million people's will to be free, they would have seized whatever supplies were being furnished the enemy from within their own gates; they would have repudiated property rights created by the very power they were seeking to overthrow. They would have seen what was necessary, and done it.

Had the real Communards themselves seen the logic of their own effort, and understood that to upset the political system of dependence which enslaves the Communes they must upset the economic institutions which beget the centralized State; had they proclaimed a general communalization of the city's resources they might have won the people to full faith in the struggle and aroused a ten-fold effort to win out. If that again had been followed by a like contagion in the other cities of France (which was a possibility) the flame might have caught throughout Latin Europe, and those countries might now be living a practical example of the extension of a modified Socialism and local autonomy. This is what is likely to happen at the next similar outbreak, if politicians are so impolitic as to provoke the like. There are those among the best social students who feel sure that such will be the course of progress.

I frankly say that I cannot see the path of future progress,—my vision is not large enough, nor my viewpoint high enough. Where others perhaps behold the morning sunlight, I can discern only mists—blowing dust and moving glooms which obscure the future. I do not know where the path leads nor how it goes. Only when looking backward, I can catch glimpses of that long, terrible, toil-some way by which humanity has gone forward; even that I do not see clearly,—just stretches of it here and there. But I see enough of it to know that never has it been a straight, undeviating line. Always the path winds and returns, and even in the moment of gaining something, there is something lost.

Against the onslaught of Nature, Man collects his social strength, and loses thereby the freedom of his more isolated condition. Against the inconveniences of primitive society, he hurls his inventive genius,—compasses land, sea, and air,—and by the very act of conquering his limitations binds fresh fetters on himself, creating a wealth which he enslaves himself to produce!

And this is the Path of Progress, which there was no foreseeing!

What waits them? And what hope is there? and what help is there?

What waits? The Unknown waits, as it has always waited,—dark, vague, immense, impenetrable—the Mystery which allures the young and strong saying, "Come and cope with me"; the Mystery from which the old and wise shrink back, saying, "Better to endure the evils that we have than fly to others that we know not of"; the old and wise, but alas! the cold-blooded! The Mystery of the still unbound strengths of earth, sun, and depths, the loosing of any one of which may so alter the face of all that has been done that what now we think a guarantee of liberty may become the very chain of slavery, as has been the case before with freedoms laboriously won by act, and then set down in words for unborn men to abide by. And yet—It waits.

Are you strong and courageous? The Unknown invites you to the struggle, dares you to its conquering. Nay, it is perhaps your future