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The Paris Commune 1871

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translated by Patrick Watkins

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My name is Alain Dalotel. As a historian, I work in the field of social history with a special interest in all the questions related to ruptures: wars, revolutions, strikes, feminism, which also implies ruptures, and, in particular, the Commune. By the way, this is the latest book I've written on this subject, about André Léo, a manuscript which was used for the making of Peter Watkins' film *La Commune de Paris*.

We are now in front of the Fédéré wall, where a number of Communards are buried.

The question of the origins of *La Commune* is always a subject of debate. Some think that it was born out of a set of circumstances: the war of 1870 opposing the Second Empire and Prussia. Others find answers in the revolutionary movement which was very important, since the First International had already been founded in 1864 in London, by Karl Marx and others. Also, a very strong revolutionary movement builds up in Paris during the last years of the Empire as this liberal Empire had authorized public meetings.

Various revolutionary groups then managed to take control of this free public speech, well before the Commune, since these thousands of public meetings took place from 1868 to 1870. Then, the war broke out, and this movement of democratic and free speech continued throughout the Paris Siege with the birth of the "Red Clubs" which were the direct descendants of the previous public meetings which had finally been banned.

There was an extraordinary democratic outburst during the siege affecting all types of individual liberties. But what made this siege special was that the population was armed in the National Guard, alongside the regular troops. Approximately 300,000 men were enlisted and armed with Chassepot rifles, guns, and cannons. This quickly led to popular uprisings since the so-called Government of National Defense was accused of treason and capitulation. So, here are some other causes. Some causes are military; others are social... or revolutionary. The situation rapidly deteriorated under a very harsh siege which led to widespread destitution... and especially to the humiliation of this capitulation which took place at the end of January 1871. That's when a new organization is created: the Federation of the National Guard, which will lead to a new uprising, the 18th of March 1871.

The Commune starts on the 18th of March 1871, the day when the power is seized by the Fédérés (the National Guard) and Blanquist groups, and ends on the 28th of May 1871: 72 days for a revolution is a very short time indeed. The Commune passed a certain number of social measures, which were all geared towards the same generous aim. Towards children, etc., measures taken in favor of wage increases, they were all in the same vein. The most interesting social measure and the one, which most frightened the bourgeoisie, was the decree taken on the 16th of April concerning

the workshops abandoned by the employers. These workshops were supposed to be handed over to the workers' trade union committees. This really scared people, it is the truly socialist measure adopted by the Commune. It explains the strength of the repression, which will follow, but we'll talk about the huge scale of this repression later. On the other hand, one must remember that this is a time of civil war. Some trade unionists who are fighting in the ranks of the Fédérés are against the establishment of socialism because they believe the time is not ripe. What matters for them is the fight against Versailles. Don't forget, that the fighting is taking place to the west of Paris, just outside the ramparts, against a Versailles army, which is rapidly building up its strength with, after a while, the help of Prussia.

The Commune is associated with the idea of direct democracy.
So what does that mean?
At the time, there were numerous elections, everywhere and all the time, almost too many. For all kind of reasons, inside the National Guard, for example, to dismiss the leaders who are deemed unpopular, etc. This direct democracy is linked to the instantly revocable mandate. That is the central idea: an imperatival mandate. A program is defined and then someone is sent to defend it; if he doesn't do just that, he's liable to be dismissed, as I was saying earlier. Having said this, elections took place on the 26th of March; which brought to power at the Town Hall a certain number of revolutionaries. Those who weren't elected, left quite quickly. Then the debates started. We speak of debates but more often it was just shouting abuse. They would just shout at each other for weeks and weeks. Furthermore, it appears that these elected members had a difficult relationship with the neighborhood people, who would very often fume against their flabbiness. Very quickly the people become angry, they invade churches and

organize “Red Clubs” where they come to present their own programs and list their criticisms. These types of relations make things more and more difficult. Towards the end of the Commune, it seems that there developed a complete divorce between the representatives and their constituency. This situation went as far as to lead some Communards towards suicide. So this direct democracy led to quite a dramatic situation towards the end. In any event, during the Commune no one obeys anyone.

One has to be very careful, although several people, along with Karl Marx, have stated that the Commune had abolished the state, I think that is not really the case. The Commune had a government, a weak one, which functioned through commissions and was called the Executive Commission. Later on, after the military setbacks, old models were sought like the Committee of Public Safety, two of which were set up but never functioned. So one has to be very careful, the Commune isn’t a lack of government; it’s a weak government. Weak because of discussions, conflicts, debates and no one knows exactly in which direction the Commune is going. Especially, there are the people down below who just don’t want to be governed. The word anarchist doesn’t exist or has a different meaning at the time. All the same, the Commune has a very strong libertarian aspect to it. As a matter of fact, Marx, in his pamphlet “Civil war in France”, presented an almost anarchistic picture, which was a slight distortion of the truth. Inside Town Hall, there was more tradition than most people think. And there was also a significant Jacobin element, which always advocates the need for a government and even of a dictatorship. And the debate between the majority and the minority showed that some people wanted to decide in the place of others. The only difference is that during the Commune, this doesn’t function anymore. That’s what is very new on a political level.

Most of the civil servants had fled to Versailles; for the postal services, for example, it was quite a big problem because everything had to be started from new. They had to find skilled people. The Commune was able to do all that and replace the people who'd left. The police force also left. Towards the end of the Empire and during the siege, the police were very unpopular. So it was totally unthinkable that a single cop might remain in Paris. To take this example, the Communards abolished the police. In fact, they renamed the police administration quarters, "the ex-police headquarters". Constables and policemen were replaced by National Guards. They managed to find the necessary people to run the public services: sewage system, etc. However, that's not a specifically revolutionary characteristic. One can only say that the Paris working class proved that it had the skills to run public affairs. But, once again, the most revolutionary aspect of the Commune cannot be found in this capacity for administration. They were capable of handling it, that's true. But things had to move much further than that. All the same, the Commune tried its best to associate the working class to the administration of the city.

It has been said, by Marx, for example, that the Commune was the government of the working class. Engels spoke of dictatorship of the proletariat. For sure, the workers played a central role in this revolutionary episode. However, to think that the Commune gave place to generalized economic self-management is a bit far-fetched. The attempts, which had taken place during the Empire and the siege, to establish and develop cooperatives were pursued on a larger scale and in a more optimistic environment during the Commune. But the problem remained the same, that is to say the funding, which meant dealing with the banks. Furthermore, not all the economy was run on a socialist basis during the Commune, far

from it. A certain number of employers or contractors stayed in Paris. The big bosses fled to Versailles as well as the main financial players. All the same, many people from the Bank of France stayed put and got along rather well with several elected members of the Commune, for example, Charles Beslay. The Bank of France was indeed threatened by some revolutionary battalions, but the Communards never took over the Bank. That would probably have happened had the Commune lasted a bit longer. In any case, the bank was safeguarded.

In terms of economy, what was needed was a wartime economy, since we were in the middle of a civil war. Therefore, a certain number of contracts were renewed with the existing employers and contractors. A certain number of important examples of self-management did take place in certain workshops like in the Louvre or in certain neighborhoods where abandoned workshops had been seized. Trade unionists and internationalists worked hard to run these self-managed businesses in a radically democratic environment, which was not always very productive. We know from Avrial who was an elected member for the 11th district, who had told Rossel, a military officer who had rallied the Commune, that it was very difficult to make this new socialist economy function. One reason it didn't function that well was also that there was a very big debate around this issue. I wrote an article in a popular magazine, and gave it the title "The Cooperative Trap". This issue was indeed the heart of a very harsh debate between the revolutionaries who wanted to start by taking political power, seize the political arena, and then provoke a socialist revolution and those who thought it was possible to gradually gain ground using the arena of economic revolution by developing these cooperatives. But the financial problem remains and also the question of organization. What's more these cooperatives were denounced by

some revolutionaries as recreating exploitative links between the real cooperative workers and auxiliaries who were generally younger and not given the same wages. So this was a real debate, which actually lasted all through the twentieth century, and goes on today. One could organize a seminar called "the difficulties of self-management" or the degree of phantasm in self-management.

One of the most interesting characteristics of the Commune is the development of a vast women's movement. For some reason or another, the women were involved. One historic defeat – which was best forgotten – was that of the French revolution where the woman's movement had been eliminated by the Jacobins. Once more, we see women rise up during the Commune, in the midst of a relatively macho revolutionary world. We talked about the soldiers; well, they didn't like the idea of women asking to participate in the armed struggle against Versailles. They finally didn't receive weapons, at least some of them, until the days of the bloody week to defend Montmartre. Which was quite an incredible thing to do, since they asked a group of only 50 women to save the Commune by defending Montmartre, which was the symbol and birthplace of the Commune. So they put up barricades, and along with the men they fire on the enemy. Some die and others are massacred. Some managed to survive and bear witness.

After the fall of the Commune or its "failure", the revolutionary movement followed a different path and logic: to establish an organized party of the working class. This leads towards the Bolshevik party... and others. The commune, which hasn't been forgotten, becomes a negative reference: Don't do what they did. And now that all these parties and countries have failed to establish socialism and that the Berlin wall is down, once more people from all over the world look towards this Paris Commune to try and find its secrets. What made its strength, what were its weaknesses?

Well, its strength is part of its weaknesses and its weaknesses are part of its strength: Direct democracy, this way of speaking out, and taking time for debate. In the light of the current events – they were in the middle of a civil war – the time wasn't necessarily best suited to organize debates and quarrels. But this also means that we dream of a Commune that never existed. On a military level, things were of course very complicated, since neither the elected members of the Commune nor the officers of the National Guard obeyed. The "Ministers" or war delegates were completely ignored. In fact, a whole series of those officials fell one after the other. So, it must be said that the Communards were totally opposed to all forms of hierarchy. Even when they did nominate leaders, it was only to be able to disobey them. So, here again we find this libertarian element, even if the word didn't exist at the time, which characterizes the Commune and makes it very specific. It remains a reference today; as on the one side, socialism is disintegrating or has disintegrated in the East, and, on the other, neo-liberalism doesn't work. So what should be done? Well, let's study the Commune, that's the best way to identify the value of those ideas and the way to put them into practice.

The Commune has simultaneously been a negative and a positive reference. As the revolutionary movement took another path, the only heritage was that of the actual armed seizure of political power by the Commune. That was true for the Bolsheviks, as well as for the Spartacists, and all other revolutionary movements, even if there aren't that many left nowadays. The Commune has always been remembered in a commemorative way. It also had other aspects, a purely patriotic one. The Commune wasn't used as a model and quite soon even the French workers' movement and event anarchist groups distanced themselves from this model. There would no longer be any insurrections in France. We did

have direct action by anarchist groups who did things like throwing bombs in various places. But, on a more general level, the strategy adopted by the workers' movement will be the weapon of the general strike even among the libertarians, since they were the ones to establish the main trade unions like the CGT. So, the Commune remained something quite sympathetic but globally negative. Nowadays, things have really changed, as there are more and more people who are really interested in the Commune. One thing for certain is that this wall of the Fédérés has seen all sorts of things. All the world's revolutionary movements have come to this place of pilgrimage. I once met a Chinese man from Shanghai who told me about the proletarian Cultural Revolution. He knew about the Commune. He said that in Chinese schools the Commune was taught even though it was totally unknown here in France because it was illegal to bring that subject up in schools.

From whatever angle you prefer to take it: The Commune is, first of all, an armed revolution. So, in terms of the means, it's already very specific. A Communard newspaper once stated: "Every citizen is a soldier". That's the basic idea of the *Fédération*; you can't enjoy full citizenship if you are not armed. And that's a big difference compared to the current situation in our societies where the people are defenseless against the state. One thing that must really be stressed is that the Paris Commune of 1871 is a direct democracy and this particular direct democracy has nothing to do with participatory democracy. The Commune is not about reforming the public services; it's about changing society, not adapting it. In 1871, people want revolution and think they have the capacity to make it happen with guns and cannons.

André Léo (alias Léonide Champseix), who was one of the most important women of the Commune, probably more important than her friend Louise Michel, wrote a very good article in her review

La Sociale called “The Soldiers of Ideas”. First and foremost, that’s what the Commune is about: people speaking out, discussing issues and debating about the revolutionary utopia. Because resistance can’t exist without utopia; lest it fall into the trap of near-sighted nationalism. Revolutionary socialism and communism as a whole, even in its libertarian tendencies, is built on a corpus of ideas and especially on debate. And if the Commune is able to teach us anything, it would be that we must get together, discuss, debate and when possible, unite.

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