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Understanding the Paris Commune On its 150th Anniversary

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Understanding the Paris Commune On its 150th Anniversary

Abstract

The Paris Commune of 1871 only lasted from March 18 to May 28, just 72 days, yet it is one of the most celebrated events in socialist history. It is a legend. Yet, what was it? What is it for us today? A model for socialists? A heroic failure? Negation of the state? Or the first workers' government? Karl Marx wrote the most famous contemporary account, yet he failed to take up some of the Commune's serious problems. Why?

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Introduction

The Paris Commune of 1871 only lasted from March 18 to May 28, just 72 days, yet it is one of the most celebrated events in socialist history. It is a legend. Yet, what was it? What is it for us today? A model for socialists? A heroic failure? Negation of the state? Or the first workers' government? Karl Marx wrote the most famous contemporary account, yet he failed to take up some of the Commune's serious problems. Why?



In Part I of this essay, below, I look at the events of the Commune as they developed, relying largely on the work of Jacques Rougerie, whom we might call a representative of the school of “history from below,” and of Carolyn J. Eichner, a historian of women in the Commune. (Where quotations have no footnote, they come from Rougerie’s books.) In Part II, [following the notes to

Part I) I look critically at Marx's interpretation of the Commune to examine issues he declined to take up and the reason he neglected some important issues.

Part I — The Commune as it Was

The Emperor and the War

War and a humiliating French defeat created the crisis that brought about the Paris Commune. On September 1, 1870 at the Battle of Sedan the French Emperor Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon III), his government, and the French nation suffered a catastrophic defeat at the hands of the Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck. The commander-in-chief, Bonaparte, was himself captured together with several of his generals. It was the end of his reign that had lasted for over twenty years, first as president beginning in 1848 then, after a coup in 1852, as emperor.^[1] The Second Empire's Constitution of that year gave him all power, though he permitted and dominated an elected parliament. During his dictatorial rule French industry modernized and the urban population grew, while the country fought wars with Russia and Austria as well as extending the empire to Mexico and Indochina.

Allied with the bourgeoisie and the Catholic Church, Louis Napoleon stifled political life and limited democratic rights, outlawing meetings and suppressing newspapers. Still, he remained popular with both the very rich and the peasants. In 1868 the liberal and conservative factions of his Bonapartist Party won 78 percent of the vote and the Monarchists^[2] another 15 percent, while the Republican Party headed by Léon Gambetta, an outspoken critic and opponent of the emperor and a genuine democrat won only 10 percent. When in May of 1870 Louis Napoleon put forward a plebiscite on proposed reforms, seven out of eight voted for them. It was the two-thirds of the French people who were farmers who voted overwhelmingly for Bonaparte's parties and his plebiscites, but Parisians of all social classes generally voted for the Republicans.

At the outbreak of the war with Prussia, patriotic, chauvinistic fervor swept the country and all of France seemed to be with the Emperor — except for a few leftist union activists of the International Workingmen's Association (the First International) who demonstrated against the coming war in July 1870. The war was short, just six months, the Prussians won virtually every battle, and with their victory and capture of Louis Napoleon, the empire collapsed. In Paris amidst boisterous demonstrations a group of moderate Republican politicians proclaimed France to be a Republic while the Parisian parliamentary deputies led by Jules Ferry declared the formation of a Government of National Defense. They chose to head the government General Louis Jules Trochu, a conservative Catholic, who became governor of Paris and commander-in chief of the military and the guard.

It was a new day in France: The Empire dispatched. The Republic declared. Yet the country was still at war and the Prussian army, its path paved with victories, was marching toward Paris. Eugène Varlin, the outstanding leader of the First International in Paris, declared:

By all possible means, we will participate in the national defense, which is the most important thing at the moment. After the proclamation of the Republic, the horrendous war has taken on a new meaning; it is now a duel to the death between feudal monarchy and republican democracy.... Our revolution has not yet been carried out and we will do so, once freed from the invasion, and we will in a revolutionary way lay the foundations for the egalitarian society that we desire.

The emergence of the Commune as government of Paris would, however, be a slow and complicated process, with hesitation, missteps, and confusion as people tried to find their way forward.

Paris on the Eve of the Commune

Paris was a city of working people par excellence. In France as a whole, the population was 38 million while only 3.5 million were workers, but in Paris, a city of almost two million people, some 70 percent were wage-earners. The Parisian working class was not the industrial working class of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century that might come to mind. The working people of Paris were a diverse collection of artisans, workers, commercial employees, and the self-employed, largely small business owners with no employees. In 1866 some 57 percent of Parisians worked in industry and 12 percent in commerce, but overwhelmingly they labored in small shops, less than ten percent of which had over ten employees. Businesses with 100 or 200 workers were very few, and only the railroad had more than 1,000. Still in 1866 there were 455,400 workers, male and female. 120,600 employees (such as clerks), and 100,000 domestic workers. Paris had 26,633 garment workers, most of whom were women. Almost 12,000 workers produced luxury goods and there were also almost 5,000 metal workers and just over 5,000 wood and furniture workers. But there were over 50,000 commercial workers. Then too there were 120,000 owners of shops and ateliers, but many had no employees and incomes and standards of living not much different than workers and artisans. There were also many precarious workers who didn't have steady jobs. Below these groups, the numerous poor, the wretched, *les misérables*.

In 1853 Louis Napoleon Bonaparte had made George-Eugène Haussmann the prefect of Paris and charged him with rebuilding the city. Under his administration hundreds of buildings were torn down to make way for new avenues and boulevards, displacing 350,000 people. Real estate speculation and gentrification became serious problems, leading to limited housing and rising rents driving workers to the areas just outside the old city on its north, south, and east. While workers' wages and standard of living had risen since the Revolution of 1848, still many were poor; and gentrification created economic segregation as working people were driven out of the center of Paris. Historian Jacques Rougerie refers to the "pathologies" of the "red belt" around Paris at that time, among them the overcrowded conditions, higher levels of illness and mortality, and an epidemic of tuberculosis that took 10,691 lives in 1870.[\[3\]](#)

Facing increasing opposition to his government, in 1864–1866 Louis Napoleon permitted labor unions to organize and to strike and permitted some meetings and publications. Largely led by the First International, workers organized and there was hardly a trade in Paris that didn't have a union. For example, 6,000 of 12,000 bronze workers were organized, 12,000 of 30,000 mechanics, 1,000 of 1,500 iron workers, and 2,500 out of 3,500 typographers. During the late 1860s the International led waves of strikes and while some were victorious, many failed. As Varlin said, French workers had entered, “the epoch of resistance.” So, by 1870 there was a working-class movement with tens of thousands of adherents throughout France and thousands in Paris, many affiliated with the First International, on whose leading council sat Karl Marx.

In fact, there were several left-wing groups active in Paris at the time. Most considered themselves to be Republicans, nearly all called for a decentralized federal government, while the radicals also advocated a democratic and social Republic, which many believed could come about through a peaceful revolution.^[4] The left was to look to the two democratic Republics of the time, Switzerland and the United States, where slavery had recently been defeated, as models. The Jacobins were those on the Republican left who looked back to the French Revolution of 1789 for inspiration and saw their job as finishing it. The Proudhonians, whose socialist ideal was based on the artisanal atelier, and though Pierre-Joseph Proudhon had died in 1865, they were influential. During the strikes of the 1860s in France, the Proudhonians had largely allied with the Internationalists^[5] in practice, though they maintained some of their old positions, such as opposition to women entering the workforce. There also still existed the pervasive influence of the old “communists” of the 1840s, utopian socialists each with an elaborate plan for the establishment of the perfect communist society.^[6] The Internationalists, whose leaders were socialists, often took the initiative and played a leading role in organizing a mass, democratic movement. Marx, a member of the First International council, and Engels, who also later became a member of its council, were kept informed of developments by Internationalists in Paris during the Commune. Marx and Engels offered them information and advice, though they did not and could not have controlled developments.^[7]

The Blanquists, a small group of followers of Louis Auguste Blanqui, known as “the old man,”^[8] advocated the formation of a conspiratorial group to carry out armed actions.^[9] Though Blanqui himself was in prison during the Commune, his followers played an active and sometimes leading role. The Russian revolutionary and a leader of the anarchist movement, Mikhail Bakunin, also showed up in France in 1871 and participated in unsuccessful uprisings in Lyon and Besançon. His ideas were influential and his followers active in Paris.^[10] Finally, there was also Giuseppe Garibaldi, the “Hero of Two Worlds,” the international fighter in Europe and Latin America for national self-determination and republican government, with his followers, the red shirts.

Women, socialist feminists *avant la lettre*,^[11] could be found within some of these groups, such as the Internationalist Elizabeth Dmitrieff and the anarchist Louise Michel. All of these groups agreed on their opposition to Louis Napoleon and rejected any return to the old French monarchy by its various pretenders. Nearly all, based on the theories of the Jacobins and the Proudhonians and in reaction to the Bonapartist dictatorship, aimed to decentralize France and create a

federation of communes. With the proclamation of the Republic, they all began to work to defend Paris and to reorganize the city and the country on a more democratic and socially progressive basis.

The People Organize the Defense of Paris

Working class and petty-bourgeois Parisians felt that the Emperor had dispossessed them, which is why the call for a Republic was first interpreted as the opportunity for working people to take back their city. Within hours of the proclamation of the Republic, the Internationalists showed up at City Hall with a list of demands including elections of a departmental government, abolition of the prefect of police, organization of a new municipal police, complete freedom of association, speech, and the press, the freeing of all political prisoners, and a draft of the able bodied to defend the country. They also published an address to the German people saying that they would defend their France from invasion and occupation, but that they looked forward to peace, liberty, equality, and fraternity in a future United States of Europe.

On September 5 the Internationalists called a meeting of Republicans to organize the defense of Paris. The 500 people who attended decided to organize “vigilance committees” in the Twenty Districts (*Arrondissements*) of Paris, headed by a Central Committee. Between September 5 and 10 they organized local committees and on September 11 the first meeting of the Central Committee. It in turn created several commissions: police, the schools, supply food to the population, defense, labor, and so on. Then on September 14 and 15, the Central Committee put up throughout Paris what is called “the first red poster,” reiterating a call for democratic elections and suppression of the police, but principally — with the Prussians bearing down on Paris — calling for a mass levy to defend the city, including women and children. It called for commandeering whatever materials were necessary for the defense of the city, the owners to be paid later. Still, the Central Committee at this point saw itself as an auxiliary to the new national republican government.

A week or so later, things had changed. The Central Committee meeting on September 20 voted unanimously to adopt the term “Commune” when referring to Paris, a term hundreds of years old that was associated with a rebellion in the fourteenth century and with the French Revolution of the 1790s. The Commune was defined as “a direct government by the citizens themselves,” sovereign and autonomous, promising to provide for all citizens and their families and to organize the defense of Paris and the country. It was suggested that Paris was the leader of the French nation and even the defender of a European revolution! These notions of the Commune as a revitalized, democratic municipal government and as the center of a national and even international revolution exist side-by-side throughout this period. Yet, these first attempts to adopt the term “Commune” and to constitute a new government with that name fizzled.

Paris Besieged

Meanwhile, by September 19 the Prussians had blockaded Paris and the siege of the city began. The situation became increasingly desperate, yet at the same time the people of Paris exercised a new found freedom. Out of the Vigilance Committees came political clubs of various persuasions, newspapers proliferated, everywhere people held meetings and discussions. One group declared, "The State or the Nation is nothing more than the gathering of the communes of France... We have been a crowd; we shall finally be a city."

Throughout October the Prussians continued to win victories, seized territory and virtually destroyed the French Army. A few sorties by Parisian troops were defeated. Various groups led by the radicals brought crowds to protest at City Hall and even briefly seized it demanding elections and more serious attention to defense. The Government of National Defense retook the building but allowed the radicals to leave unharmed. Yet a plebiscite on November 3 found that 323,373 citizens still supported the Government of National Defense made up of moderate Republicans, while only 53,584 opposed it.

With the coming of winter, Paris remained blockaded, it became "a city of the unemployed." Cold, famine, and an outbreak of cholera doubled the mortality rate. On January 6, 140 members of the Committee of the Twenty Districts of Paris, which the Internationalists had left and which was now dominated by the Blanquists, put up another Red Poster proposing to substitute a government of the Commune for the government that was failing to provide adequate defense. A group of Blanquist and other revolutionaries, including the anarchist feminist Louise Michel, marched to City Hall on January 22, leading to gunfire and six deaths, the first of the revolution.

With the city blockaded, commerce halted, and many shops closed, membership in the National Guard became the economic mainstay for many Parisians. Patriotism and necessity led to a strengthening of the Guard, made up of men from 20 to 40 years of age; a levy *en masse* theoretically brought it up to 300,000 men. Men in the guard were paid 30 sous (about thirty U.S. cents) per day, the cost of three loaves of bread. The Guard did not accept women. The Paris National Guard, however, took the radical measure of paying pensions to the widows and the children of soldiers' *unions libres* (common-law marriages), that is, unmarried women and what had previously been considered their illegitimate children. At the same time, the guard was a pillar of Republicanism and radicalism since most of those in the guard came from the petty-bourgeoisie or the working class and reflected popular attitudes.

Still things got worse. During the month of January, the Prussians fired 12,000 shells into starving Paris, hoping to break the city's will. Parts of the city were reduced to rubble and 400 people were killed or wounded. Seeing no way out, on January 28 the Government of National Defense, now in Bordeaux and representative largely of wealthy rural landowners, signed a temporary armistice with Bismarck that provided that the Prussian Army would not occupy the city. French soldiers would give up their arms but would not be taken prisoner, and the City of Paris would pay

reparations of 200 million francs. The National Guard would, however, retain its rifles and cannons in order to preserve order in the city.

The Thiers Government

With that truce established, elections to the French National Assembly were held on February 8, though, with many parts of the country occupied by the Prussian Army and communication with other areas disrupted, not all could vote. The Liberal Union of Adolphe Thiers, who had opposed the war with Prussia, which was made up of Liberals and moderate Republicans won 26 of the country's nominal 89 departments (all or part of five departments had been ceded to the Prussians), while Gambetta's Republicans won in only eight departments. The parliament was dominated by some 360 monarchists, semi-royalists, and Conservatives, and 15 Bonapartists; the success of these rightwing parties was principally due to the conservative, Catholic peasant vote, the rural people who made up two-thirds of the electorate. On the left were 150 Republicans, among them just 40 radical Republicans and a few socialists. In Paris, however, where 290,000 people voted, some 180,000 voted for Republicans, including such famous figures as the writer Victor Hugo; Louis Blanc, the hero of the Revolution of 1848; and Garibaldi, the international freedom fighter. Several Jacobins, Internationalists, as well as various socialists were also elected on the basis of about 40,000 votes.

The victory of Thiers and the conservative forces in the national elections was followed on February 17, 1871 by the humiliation of a Prussian Army victory parade through the streets of Paris. At the same time, honoring the armistice, the Prussians permitted trainloads of food to be brought into the city, while the Prussian Army began to withdraw to the east, though remaining near Paris. Thiers now became head of the new Third Republic and signed a mortifying treaty with Bismarck on February 26, ceding Alsace and Lorraine, agreeing to pay an indemnity of five billion francs, permitting the occupation of 43 French departments, and allowing 30,000 Prussians to occupy the department of the Seine. Victor Hugo called the treaty, "Hideous."

Thiers government also took three actions that would be devastating to the people of Paris. First, it reduced the pay of the National Guard. Second, it ended the de facto moratorium on evictions. And, third, it insisted on the payment of all bills due. The first would take away the income of hundreds of thousands of Parisians, the second would put tens of thousands of Parisians out on the street, and the third would bring bankruptcy to hundreds of small businesses. Shortly afterwards, fearing the reaction of the Parisians, on March 10 the National Assembly voted to move the government to Versailles. Thiers attempted to get the Prussians to occupy Paris for him, but Bismarck declined. Paris seethed. Defeated in war. Humiliated by the peace. Devastated by the new economic measures. And no longer the capital of the national government.

The Thiers government and much of the haute bourgeoisie having fled to Versailles, the people, the petty bourgeoisie and the working class — politically Republican, economically desperate, and emotionally raw — found themselves left to their own devices. What would the people do?

The Emergence of the Commune

Still, Paris had its Republican spirit and its National Guard with their rifles and the city's cannons. From February 24 to 27, while Bismarck and Thiers negotiated, some 100,000 members of the National Guard went to the Column of the People (the July Column) at the Bastille, to mourn the recent dead and to remember the martyrs of the Revolution of 1830, as well as to commemorate the Revolution of 1848 and the declaration that year of the Second Republic. Rougerie makes the interesting observation that at this moment, "All authority in Paris was gradually dissolving." Some new authority would have to come into existence.

In February, a non-commissioned officer named Courty and an officer named Georges Arnold began to organize the members of the National Guard into what was called the Federation, a movement that grew rapidly with the Prussian occupation. At first hesitant because of the mixed class character of the Guard, the leaders of the International were won over to the project and three of its members served on the Central Committee of the Federation, though many of the International's rank-and-file members had already joined. The Committee of the Twenty Districts also affiliated with the Federation.

How did the Federation organize? Each company of the Guard would send to the 500-member general assembly a soldier, an elected officer, and the company commander. Some 67 percent of the delegates elected were workers (some of them small shop owners), 15 percent were employees, and 8 percent were members of the liberal professions. From that group came the central committee made up of the 38 persons, similarly working class in composition but with more artists, writers, journalists. In addition, the central committee also contained 20 representatives of the trade unions, several of them Internationalists. This Federation described itself as "the barrier to any attempt to overturn the Republic, opposing all oppressors and exploiters." There was as yet no mention of the Commune.

Seeing that the city was radicalizing, Thiers himself personally led several thousand French government troops into Paris to suppress any rebellious movements; one of their objectives was to seize the city's forty cannons. The newly formed Federation of the Guard had placed most of the cannons in parks in working class neighborhoods such as Montmartre and Belleville. When on March 18 the Versailles government troops under General Claude Lecomte arrived at Montmartre to seize the cannons, neighborhood women raised the alarm and joined with the National Guardsmen, refusing to let Thiers troops take the cannons. When Lecomte ordered his troops to shoot, they turned their guns on him and took him prisoner.

In all the working class districts the Federation of the Guard and the general population drove out the French troops. Two rightwing Republican French Army generals, Lecomte and Clément Thomas, who had been involved the suppression of the Revolution of 1848, were summarily executed by the National Guard. As Rougerie writes, all of this was "nothing like an insurrection," yet this was the beginning of the Paris Commune.

The Federation took over City Hall and several government buildings. Throughout Paris, the National Guard and the people fought defensively, the Blanquists beginning to organize offensive actions as well. When Thiers saw that the French troops were fraternizing with the people, he retreated with his soldiers to Versailles. That night the Central Committee of the Federation met in City Hall. The various leading political groups took charge of the new government's commissions: The Internationalists headed finance. The Blanquists took charge of the police. Émile Eudes, an anarchist headed up the ministry of war. The Blanquists proposed launching an immediate attack on Versailles, but the proposal was rejected. The majority was reluctant to start a civil war, especially with the Prussians still at the gates of Paris.

The Federation's Central Committee at City Hall, together with the existing moderate Republican city government — made up of the mayors of the districts of and the city's deputies to the National Assembly — hoping to find a legal resolution immediately sought to reach an agreement with the Thiers government in Versailles. They demanded municipal elections, the election of the officers of the National Guard, and a moratorium on the collection of overdue bills. The National Assembly in Versailles rejected the call for municipal elections. Paris and Versailles could reach no agreement. A couple of days later, rightwing law and order forces in Paris demonstrated at the Place Vendôme, clashing with the National guard and leading to deaths on both sides.

The Central Committee of the Twenty Districts, the Federation, as well as the various political organizations gradually became aware that the legal path that they sought was not possible. They represented a new Republican government in Paris. The real one they would have said. Eude commented, "After March 18, Paris has no other government than that of the People. Paris has become a free city." The Internationalists agreed. In late March, the Central Committee ordered a freeze on the payment of overdue bills, a moratorium on evictions, the freeing of all political prisoners, and the abolition of the standing army. It also sent the National Guard to occupy several forts on the outskirts of Paris.

On March 26, elections were held for the Paris city council; 48% of the 474,569 eligible male citizens participated, women being ineligible to vote. In the rich neighborhoods few voted, while turnout was good in the working class and poor areas, some as high as 70%. The Committee of the Twenty Districts published a manifesto three days before the election that expressed the views of many on the left:

The Commune is the base of the political State, as the family is the embryo of society. It must be autonomous, govern and administer itself on the basis of its particular character, its traditions, its needs... allowing the national and federal political groups to exercise complete freedom, their character, and their complete sovereignty... This is the communal ideal that has existed since the twelfth century, affirmed by morality, law, and science, which will triumph.

People were voting for what many saw as the creation of the Republic of Paris, a democratic and social republic. On March 28 the new Paris government proclaimed the establishment of the

Commune before a crowd of 100,000 as people sang “La Marseillaise” and other Republican anthems.

After a second election held on April 16, the Commune government was finally made up of 79 members though no more than 50 or 60 generally attended its sessions. The Blanquists held nine seats; the Internationalists and the unions numbered forty; and the Free Masons [\[12\]](#) twenty. There were also Jacobins, old communists, and Proudhonians. Most were working people: thirty-three were workers (a few of those small shop owners) fourteen were employees, twelve were journalists, and twelve came from the liberal professions.

The Commune’s Work

The Commune met 57 times during its short life, though breaking with France’s own radical traditions, its meetings were held in secret and it did not begin to publish the proceedings until mid-April. Among its first acts was the creation of nine commissions to carry out the enormous administrative work of the city: public services, finances, education, justice, public safety, subsistence, labor and commerce, war, and foreign relations. Over those bodies it established an executive committee. Blanquists headed up many of the commissions, but Internationalists in the subcommittees did much of the administrative work.

The Commune began to pass new laws, though it should be understood that given the situation, many of these were more aspirational than doable. The leftist leadership of the Commune, which loathed the Catholic Church, voted for an end to financial subsidies for the church, the complete separation of church, and the takeover of church property. Many political clubs appropriated churches for their meetings. The Commune made education lay, free, and obligatory and approved schools for both boys and girls. Men and women teachers were to be paid the same wage. Education was to be based not on religious dogma but on science. The justice system, headed by Blanquist Eugène Porot, was also overhauled, with all of the many old court positions abolished and with the establishment of elected juries, as well as an end to court fees.

The Commune immediately worked to alleviate the situation of working people, including small businesses, and the poor. The Commune stopped evictions, undid some that had taken place, and returned rents, it also stopped the collection of overdue bills, allowing them to be paid over three years. Conscription was abolished, but all male citizens were called upon to form part of the National Guard, which assured them an income.

During most of the Second Empire, labor unions had been suppressed, though in the 1860s a series of strike waves had revived them. Yet the unions did not play the leading role, which fell instead to the Commune’s Labor Commission. Two Internationalists, Leó Frankel and Benoît Malon, headed up that Commission that now undertook to improve workers’ lives. Workshops were created for the unemployed. The Commune abolished the practice of fining workers or withholding workers’ pay; it abolished night work in bakeries; and it forbade expensive initiation

fees. The national pawnshop was transformed into a people's bank and pawned items under 20 francs were to be returned to the owners. The Labor Commission called for work to be organized by workers themselves through the trade organizations of the artisans,^[13] with an association of production for each trade, supported by the Commune which offered financial credit.

The Commune took over state-owned monopolies such as tobacco and the national printing company, which were then turned over to be run by the workers. The Commune also confiscated (without indemnification) companies that had been abandoned by their owners during the siege; they too were turned over to the appropriate workers associations. Some of those then attempted to expand and bring other related shops under the control of the unions. Rougerie calls this a “*syndicalisation*” (union appropriation) of the means of production. Most of the means of production, however, factories, ateliers and shops, remained in private hands.

Everything in the economy depended, of course, on the Bank of France, which surprisingly provided credit and currency to both Versailles and Paris. During the period of the Commune the Bank provided Paris with 16.7 million francs, while Versailles received 257.6 million. The Commune apparently hesitated to seize the bank, because it held mostly paper bills, the gold and silver backing of the currency having been removed to the port city of Brest in Brittany in 1870. Communards apparently feared that seizure of the bank would disrupt the already delicate balance of the weak and unstable Paris economy.

No doubt because its leaders saw the Commune as the harbinger and the first expression of the future United States of Europe, they welcomed the participation of the foreign-born. Several foreigners played leading roles as military officers in the National Guard, among them two Poles, Jaroslav Dombrowski and Walery Antoni Wróblewski. Another Guard officer, the son of Spanish and Italian parents and a former fighter alongside Garibaldi, was Napoléon La Cécilia. Leó Frankel, a Hungarian Jew who had worked in Germany before coming to France was a leader of the Labor commission, while the Russian-born Elizabeth Dmitrieff, organized the Women's Union.

Women in the Commune

In addition to the Commune's official work, Parisians organized on their own. In April of 1871 Elizabeth Dmitrieff, an Internationalist, published a call to the women of Paris to join together in creating a new organization.

Citoyennes ^[14], *the decisive hour has arrived. It is time that the old world came to an end! We want to be free! And France is not rising alone, all the civilized people have their eyes on Paris....Citoyennes, all resolved, all united....to the gates of Paris, on the barricades, in the neighborhoods, everywhere! We will seize the moment....And if the arms and bayonets are all being used by our brothers, we will use paving stones to crush the traitors!*^[15]

The women of Paris then created the Women's Union to Defend Paris and Care for the Wounded with branches in each district of Paris, with some 130 women serving in the group central committee, and with an estimated 1,000 members.

In a world of strict job segregation and male resentment of women workers as low-wage competitors, Dmitrieff and others in the Women's Union advocated economic equality. They wanted to be able to do the same jobs as men and be paid the same wages. This led to a debate with the Proudhonists in particular (Rougerie calls them "anti-feminists") as well as others who believed that women should be excluded from wage labor and dedicate themselves to the home and children. Working with the Commune leadership, the Women's Union organized women's cooperative workshops, but in a way that allowed women to continue to work from home. They formed producers' cooperatives in cloth production, garment making, and fine handwork in the luxury goods of seasonal flowers, and feathers. The Union appealed to the Commune for loans and for meeting spaces. Men such as the Internationalist Eugene Varlin of the International supported the women's demands.

The Women's Union desired opportunities for women to work in ateliers and factories, but also wanted to join in the military struggle, arguing that women should serve "in the ambulances, at the cooking stove, and on the barricades." While forbidden from joining the National Guard, they did all of those and some died on the Commune's barricades. Other women's organizations demanded education, the right to divorce, and the recognition of illegitimate children. There were demands that men's unmarried female partners have the same rights as wives and some women called for the abolition of prostitution. Women, especially those on the left, expressed little or no interest in the right to vote, perhaps because Louis Napoleon's plebiscites had discredited elections.

Much of what the Commune and organizations such as the Women's Union proposed remained aspirational in a city under siege and isolated from trade with the surrounding areas that usually provided food. Few of the Commune's resolutions could be carried out in full and the 72-days that it lasted would prove too short a time to do much of what they proposed.

The National Guard, which formed the foundation of the Commune, was itself weak. While there were nominally 180,000 men, many failed to show up and those who did were often undisciplined. Rougerie speculates that there may have been thirty or forty thousand actual troops or perhaps even less. Still, throughout Paris, even if incompletely, working people had taken the running of the city into their own hands.

The Crushing of the Commune

The attempts of Paris over two months to find support from provincial cities had failed. Several other cities in France had proclaimed communes, some even before Paris, but those communes, the most important one having arisen in Lyons and Marseilles, remained isolated or had been

crushed. The peasants of the nation, two-thirds of the population, Catholic and conservative, supported Versailles or at least wanted nothing to do with Paris which was associated in their minds with landowners and creditors. At the same time, the moderate League of the Republican Union, made up in part of rural landlords, wanted to arrange a reconciliation between Paris and Versailles, but it was viewed by the Commune as a group of traitors; and when they tried to organize a national conference of Republican municipalities to resolve the crisis, Thiers prevented it.

The Parisian National Guard and other forces nominally numbered 234 battalions and forty companies — including a battalion of women and one of children — theoretically about 250,000 troops. But in reality, only about thirty or forty thousand fought in April and May, and perhaps only 10,000 during the “bloody week” that ended the Commune. Thiers on the other hand had 130,000 soldiers and recruited 6,000 volunteers of the Seine district who would play a particularly vicious role in the attack on the Commune.

Thiers launched the attack on the Commune on April 11, the Versailles army first taking a number of outlying villages in the south. The army besieged and bombarded Paris just as the Prussians had done. Early on May 21 the army overran an untended outpost and then moved into the city. The Versailles invaders attacked the working-class neighborhoods where the Parisians had constructed five or six hundred blockades from cobblestones, most defended by cannon or machine gun. The battles were intense in the neighborhoods of Montmartre, Belleville, and Faubourg St. Antoine. Parisian men and women fought in the streets while some women threw objects from the upper floors of their houses on the invaders below. Whenever Versailles’ soldiers took a blockade, they executed the prisoners. By May 27 it had come down to hand-to-hand combat and the next day it was all over. The Commune was drowned in blood.

The Commune’s defenders, at the urging of Blanquists, executed at least 100 hostages, including the massacre of 36 on Haxo Street. Varlin and other Internationalists tried to stop these pointless killings, acts of revenge that had not taken place in the earlier nineteenth century revolutions. In killing their prisoners, the Blanquists stooped to the level of Versailles, which had been doing the same thing all along.

While the fighting was still taking place, fires broke out, some caused by cannon fire and others by arsonists. The Communards intentionally burned down City Hall, “the people’s house” rather than turn it over to the Versailles. They also set fire to the Tuileries, the haunt of kings, and to the Palace of Justice, the source of so much injustice. Louise Michel, the anarchist, who was called “*la petrolouse*” (the woman arsonist), proclaimed, “Paris will be ours or it will not be!” A third of Paris was burned.

Versailles claimed that in the taking of the city it had lost 877 men, 183 disappeared, and 6,454 wounded, while somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 Parisians died during the “bloody week.” Officially, 43,522 people — men, women, and children — were arrested at the time and another 20,000 over the next several months. Eventually over 36,000 were tried, 87 were condemned to

death and others to prison or deportation to French penal colonies. Thiers and the bourgeoisie, having destroyed the Commune, now ruled France's Third Republic.

Part II — Marx's Commune: An Appreciation and a Critique

The Paris Commune of 1871 only lasted from March 18 to May 28, just 72 days, yet it is one of the most celebrated events in socialist history.¹ It is a legend. But, what was it? And what is it for us today? A model for socialists? A heroic failure? A negation of the state? Or the first workers' government?

Karl Marx, then a member of the leading council of the International Working Men's Association (or First International), gave the Commune his wholehearted and passionate approval. He also wrote the most famous contemporary account of the Commune, his magnificent essay *The Civil War in France*. Though the Commune had not been organized by and was not led by the International, though its leadership was largely in the hands of ideological rivals, the Blanquists and Proudhonians, though the workers' government failed to take the decisive action he thought necessary to defeat the capitalist class, and even though he recognized early on that the Commune was doomed to defeat, Marx did not hesitate to give it his complete support, to vindicate it, and to insist that the International support it; after it was crushed, he did not cease to defend its reputation and to commemorate it. He did so simply because he believed that the Paris Commune represented a democratic workers' government, the first such government ever. He was absolutely right to do so. Yet it is also the case that, as we will see, he failed to take up some of the Commune's serious problems. What issues did he decline to comment on? And why did he avoid them?

Marx writes in *The Civil War in France*, his principal interpretation of the Commune,

The Commune was formed of the municipal councilors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.²

In Friedrich Engels' introduction to Marx's essay, written on the twentieth anniversary of the Commune, he remarks that it was "the really democratic state."³

Marx praises the Commune's progressive measures: its abolition of conscription and the standing army, National Guard made up of the citizens in arms, confirmation of foreigners elected to the Commune, election of representatives and voters right to recall them, payment of workingmen's wages to Commune officials, separation of church and state, end of subsidies to the church, and

nationalization of church property. He also mentions the destruction of the Vendôme Column, the monument erected by Napoleon I that was widely viewed as a symbol of chauvinism and militarism.⁴ And he listed all of the labor measures as well, from the abolition of night work for bakers to an end to fines and withholding of wages, as well as turning over closed factories to the workers themselves.⁵

While all of those were important, Marx writes, “its true secret was this. It was essentially a working-class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor.”⁶ It is that sentence that has captivated the imagination of all succeeding interpreters of the event: the notion of a workers’ government that could emancipate labor. As he writes in another passage, “The great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence. Its special measures could but betoken the tendency of a government of the people by the people.”⁷ For Marx, the Commune clearly represented an example of a profoundly democratic workers’ government.

Marx Passes Over Some of the Commune’s Problems

In writing on the Commune, Marx was under certain constraints that placed limits on his analysis. First, he wrote as a member of the First International’s leadership council; consequently, he had to write in terms of the positions recently agreed upon at the International’s last convention, positions that reflected the consensus among the loyalists of Joseph-Pierre Proudhon, the British trade unionists, and Marx’s own followers in the group. He was thus writing not as Marx but as spokesperson for the International.

Second, while Marx was absolutely right to defend the Commune’s democratic structure, he chose not to discuss some of its significant weaknesses. We can easily understand why he might have done so. First, while it was not published until June of 1871, *The Civil War in France* was written in April and May, before the Commune had been crushed by the Versailles army sent by Adolphe Thiers. No doubt Marx focused on defending the Commune because he knew it would face a vicious attack by the Versailles government, and because he believed it would in all likelihood be defeated. Marx was, naturally, concerned with the strategic questions facing the Commune, which he may have believed took precedence, in the moment, over questions of principle. In any case, reading Marx’s account, it is clear that he avoids certain issues on which he had long had strong views.

Women’s Suffrage

For one, Marx, who generally took progressive positions on women’s rights, failed to mention that the Commune’s “universal suffrage” was in fact universal *male* suffrage. Half the adult population was excluded from the vote: the women. Also, since women were excluded from the National Guard, the largest and most important organization of the Commune, they could not vote

in the Federation of the Guard either. During the period of the Commune, women did not express a desire for the vote, but we know that some women had demanded the vote in the French Revolutions of 1789 and many more in 1848; and we know, of course, that women's full political participation is essential to any genuinely democratic socialist society, as Marx agreed. For even though Marx failed to mention the female vote, he was already an advocate of women's political participation. And it is not surprising he would be, since it had for years been a major issue.

Women's political equality was, of course, not a new question. Olympe de Gouge's "Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen" had been published in 1791 in France during the Revolution, while Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" was published in England in 1792; both had called for political equality and women's suffrage. During the Revolution of 1848, French women had demanded the right to vote, and attempted to do so. In May of 1867, John Stuart Mill gave his speech "On the Admission of Women to the Electoral Franchise" to the House of Commons of the British Parliament, whose debates Marx followed closely.

In the 1860s, Marx had already argued for women's equality in the International Workingmen's Association, which accepted women members. Marx himself made the motion for the formation of women's branches.⁸ Elisabeth Dmitrieff, who left London for Paris to join the Commune and organized the Union of Women, was in fact sent as an agent of the International. We know from his letters that Marx was already a believer in women's political equality. For example, in a December 12, 1868, letter to his comrade, Dr. Louis Kugelmann, Marx wrote:

Tell your wife I never suspected her of being one of Generaless [*sic*] Geck's subordinates. My question was only intended as a joke. In any case ladies cannot complain of the *International*, for it has elected a lady, Madame Law, to be a member of the General Council.⁹

Joking aside, great progress was evident in the last Congress of the American "Labor Union" in that among other things, it treated working women with complete equality. While in this respect the English, and still more the gallant French, are burdened with a spirit of narrow-mindedness. Anybody who knows anything of history knows that great social changes are impossible without the feminine ferment. Social progress can be measured exactly by the social position of the fair sex (the ugly ones included).¹⁰

We can see that Marx, despite his joke in poor taste, believed in women's "complete equality" well before the Commune.

Not that long after the Commune, Engels wrote to his friend Ida Pauli,

When we get to the helm, women will not only vote, but also be elected and give speeches. The latter is already happening here in the school administration, and last November I gave all seven

of my votes to a lady ... What makes the ladies on the local school boards stand out is the fact that they talk very little and work a lot, on average each as much as three men.¹¹

Knowing the views of Marx and Engels in this period on the question of women's political equality, one has to assume that the two made a conscious decision in their contemporaneous and even in their later writings on the Commune not to take up the issue of the lack of women's suffrage in the Commune. Yet one has to think that it is precisely in a moment of such radical change in Paris that it was possible to raise such an issue, and that had women won the vote, that might have made the movement more democratic and perhaps more radical. And after the Commune had been defeated, there was no reason not to go back and point out that it had failed to enfranchise half the adult population.

Other Democratic Questions

While the Commune was a government of the working people, it also had some other serious limitations that Marx did not discuss. Take the question of the Commune's meetings, which were held *in secret*. The justification for this was, as Communard Paschal Grousset put it, that they were "a council of war." Several Communards, however, criticized this stealthy practice and demanded, to no avail, that the meetings be public. Only after April 18 were the proceedings of the meetings published in the *Journal officiel*.¹² Marx praised the Commune for publishing a record of its activities,¹³ but surely its publication was no substitute for open meetings that could be observed and made subject to popular control. As historian Jacques Rougerie writes, "The secrecy that surrounded the deliberations of the Commune could hardly have been accepted by the Parisian people who demanded 'direct' democracy and the control of the elected by those who elected them."¹⁴

Insiders also complained that the Commune engaged in endless and pointless discussions, in which its members were so often at odds with each other that business could not be conducted. To deal with this problem, the Commune elected a new Executive Committee made up of the heads of the various commissions, but this meant decisions were still made in closed meetings, just by an even smaller number of people.¹⁵

Another issue is the question of the repression of civil rights. As Rougerie observes, "The Commune experienced a real drift toward repression and that is surely the least sympathetic side of this popular adventure."¹⁶ Raoul Rigault and other Blanquists took charge of the Commune's police force. Blanqui said that Rigault had "the soul of a policeman." Rigault and his men viewed everyone with suspicion, and they took as prisoners the archbishop, the judge of the court of appeals, several priests, and others. Note that they were simply held hostage, rather than charged and held for trial. The police also pillaged churches and some wealthy people's homes. As for freedom of the press, Rigault's police shut down thirty newspapers, most of them conservative, but also *The Commune*, which was edited by Jean-Baptiste Millière, a leftist critic of the Commune's errors.¹⁷ Prosper Olivier Lissagaray had a somewhat different critique of the

Blanquist police, charging them with being ineffective: “The culpable heedlessness, which the people have paid for with their blood, was the salvation of criminals.”¹⁸

The Commune proposed to be a moral revolution, and Rigault’s police immediately put up signs that read “Death to Thieves.” They arrested people for public drunkenness, stopped public gambling, shut down houses of prostitution, and when those women then turned to street walking, arrested 270 of them in one month.¹⁹ Clearly most of those arrested would have been working-class and poor people. The worst action of the Blanquist-led police force was the pointless massacre of their hostages in the last days of the Commune, which imitated rather than rose above the pernicious example set by Versailles.

Another example of this drift toward a police state was the formation in May 1871 of the Committee of Public Safety. It was named, of course, for the original Committee of Public Safety established in 1793 during the French Revolution and responsible for overseeing the Terror, during which three hundred thousand were arrested, seventeen thousand were officially executed, and another ten thousand were unofficially killed or perished in prison. The motion to create a Committee of Public Safety divided the Commune into a majority of Blanquists, Jacobins, and Proudhonians, who were in favor, and a minority, mostly made up of Internationalists, who were against. Gustave Lefrançais, a member of the minority, wrote of the Commune debate on the Committee of Public Safety that it divided into,

the pure revolutionary party, composed of Jacobins and Blanquists, differentiated only by the fact that the former wanted the dictatorship of a group, while the second group wanted the dictatorship of a single person, to clear the terrain before proceeding to the reconstruction of a new order of things ... the socialists [on the other hand] were absolute adversaries of the notion of an authoritarian government; they were convinced that the social revolution could not be carried out until the existing political institutions had given way to new institutions having as their foundation communal autonomy.²⁰

The final vote to establish the Committee of Public Safety in early May was 45 to 23. The minority was made up, says Rougerie, of the “authentic socialists,” mostly members of the International. The minority issued a statement saying:

By a special and specific vote, the Commune of Paris, has abdicated its power, transferring it into the hands of a dictatorship which it has named Public Safety ...

We, like the majority, wish to carry out the political and social renovations, but unlike their way of thinking, we make our demands in the name of the voters whom we represent, with the right to answer alone for our acts before the voters, without having between us the authority of a supreme dictatorship, which our mandate neither permits us to accept or to recognize.²¹

The democratic socialists of the International rejected and repudiated the authoritarianism of the Commune's majority. The internationalists, believing in socialism from below, refused to accept the idea of a new society octroyed from above.²²

After being reorganized on May 10–11, 1871, the Commune's Committee of Public Safety was made up almost entirely of Jacobins and Blanquists. On May 15, the majority of the Commune leadership declared itself to be the "revolutionary fraction" and proceeded to purge the minority. That is, the authoritarians purged the democratic socialists. The conjunction of the Jacobins' nostalgia for the great bloodletting of the 1790s and the Blanquists' predilection for police work never really got off the ground, since all attention had to be directed toward the military defense of Paris against Versailles.

We should note that in *The Civil War in France*, Marx himself never used the term "dictatorship of the proletariat." He only used it to describe the Commune at the October banquet on the seventh anniversary of the founding of the International Workingmen's Association. Scholar-activist Hal Draper argues that in using the term as a descriptor of the Commune, Marx never meant the use of special dictatorial powers, but simply the workers' democratic institutions.²³

In *The Civil War in France*, written when Paris was under attack, Marx did not discuss these differences between the authoritarian majority and the democratic-socialist minority, though certainly he was well aware of them, being in regular contact with various representatives of the International in Paris.²⁴ During what was no doubt a moment of vulnerability, he did not want to discuss the Commune's internal divisions. Today, we have no reason to overlook them. We should, I believe, place ourselves on the side of the minority who opposed creating a dictatorship over the Commune's elected representatives.

Could the Commune Have Been Saved?

Marx's strongest critique of the Commune, in fact, concerns a moment that preceded its formal declaration: the failure of the Central Committee of the Twenty Districts to attack Versailles before Thiers had concentrated his military forces there. Marx writes:

In their reluctance to continue the civil war opened by Thiers' burglarious attempt on Montmartre, the Central Committee made itself, this time, guilty of a decisive mistake in not at once marching upon Versailles, then completely helpless, and thus putting an end to the conspiracies of Thiers and his Rurals.²⁵

Marx views this failure to strike at the opportune moment as one that permitted Thiers to strengthen his forces and launch another campaign against Paris in April. In fact, the Blanquists had put forward a motion for an attack on Versailles, but it was rejected by the majority of the committee.

While Marx's criticism is correct, one has to ask: What would then have happened had the Paris Commune carried the revolution to Versailles? Had it done so, Paris would have been spared immediate attack by Versailles, but surely the bourgeoisie would have organized, either under Thiers or another government and army, to undertake the crushing of the armed working people of Paris. The bourgeois government would have attempted to reach an accommodation with German chancellor Otto von Bismarck and have tried again to get him to invade Paris. The creation of another army would have necessitated the continued suppression of the communes springing up in other cities and winning the continued support of the rural population for the Thiers government. So, this question takes us to another, that of the peasantry who formed two-thirds of the French population. Could the Commune have survived by winning over the peasantry?

Marx, in his 1852 essay "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," had, in what became a very famous passage, discussed the French peasantry as it was at that time:

The small-holding peasants form an enormous mass whose members live in similar conditions but without entering into manifold relations with each other. Their mode of production isolates them from one another instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse. The isolation is furthered by France's poor means of communication and the poverty of the peasants. Their field of production, the small holding, permits no division of labor in its cultivation, no application of science, and therefore no multifariousness of development, no diversity of talent, no wealth of social relationships. Each individual peasant family is almost self-sufficient, directly produces most of its consumer needs, and thus acquires its means of life more through an exchange with nature than in intercourse with society. A small holding, the peasant and his family; beside it another small holding, another peasant and another family. A few score of these constitute a village, and a few score villages constitute a department. Thus, the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of homonymous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes.²⁶

And what are the political implications of this? He draws them out:

Insofar as millions of families live under conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. Insofar as there is merely a local interconnection among these small-holding peasants, and the identity of their interests forms no community, no national bond, and no political organization among them, they do not constitute a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or a convention. They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, an unlimited governmental power which protects them from the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. The political influence of the small-holding peasants, therefore, finds its final expression in the executive power which subordinates society to itself.²⁷

This was the basis of the political power of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon III); the peasants had received their land from the French Revolution, which they identified with his uncle Napoleon Bonaparte (Napoleon I), and therefore they transferred their loyalty to him.

Had the peasantry changed enough by 1870 that it could be won over to working-class leadership, to a labor party, to deeper reform, and possibly to a new revolution?

Things had changed some. France had been building railroads since 1852, and by 1870 the basic framework of the national railway system was already in place. Railroads made possible the commercialization of the peasants' crops, tending to create greater inequality in the countryside, a growth in the number of large farmers, a reduction of some peasants to agricultural laborers, and the migration of some laborers to the cities. The larger farmers tended to lead the smaller ones, while the Catholic Church provided the cultural glue to keep the peasantry together as a bloc.²⁸ The question is, could the Commune have reached these peasants and won them to support the democratic, social Republic?

Marx argued in *The Civil War in France* that indeed the Commune could have won over the peasants with fundamentally economic arguments regarding taxes and tithes. He writes:

The Commune ... in one of its first proclamations declared that the true originators of the war would be made to pay its costs. The Commune would have delivered the peasant of the blood tax — would have given him a cheap government — transformed his present bloodsuckers, the notary, advocate, executor, and other judicial vampires, into salaried communal agents, elected by and responsible to himself. It would have freed him of the tyranny of the *garde champêtre*, the gendarme and the prefect; would have put enlightenment by the school master in the place of stultification by the priest.²⁹

Indeed, Marx goes so far as to claim that “three months communication of Communal Paris with the provinces would bring about a general rising of the peasants.”³⁰

Marx's view that the peasantry could be won away from conservative political parties (Bonapartist, Royalist, and Liberal) in just a few months of propagandizing by the Commune seems overly optimistic. The countryside's new wealthy farmers, its bourgeoisie, and its officials, though a minority, would have waged their own propaganda war to turn the peasantry against Paris' usurious bankers, landowners, and other elites, and especially against the socialists and communists who wanted to socialize property and redistribute wealth, including the peasants' land. The bourgeoisie would have railed against the atheists, who wanted to destroy the church. It seems a stretch of the imagination to think that in a few months, or even in a year or two, the Commune could lead a national uprising of the peasantry in a country where the peasants *already owned their own land* — for three or four generations, in fact. Moreover, peasant incomes — whether of landowners, tenants, or laborers — had improved somewhat under the Second Empire. Bumper crops and integration into the national economy, thanks to the railroads, had led to a

general prosperity; and while some were still quite poor, in general the peasants had become “a kind of middle class.”³¹ Could this new “middle-class” peasantry have been won to a worker-led revolution?

If Marx is right about the potentiality of the Commune to lead the peasants, and if a new revolutionary government could have been established, then the next fight would have been with the great powers of Europe, which, just as they did in the 1790s, would join together to crush the Parisian workers. Prussia is already at the gates of the city. England could land forces in Dunkirk. The Low Countries could invade from the north. Could the Commune, now a national workers’ and peasants’ movement, have survived? Would there have been the necessary international solidarity? Would an international revolutionary wave sweep the continent, such as had taken place in 1848, and would happen again in 1918? The odds seem long, given that between 1848 and 1918, the Paris Commune was the only major revolutionary workers’ movement in Europe. Not until the period from 1905 to 1910 do we see Europe-wide radical democratic and socialist movements. All of this is very speculative, of course, and doesn’t detract from Marx’s analysis, but it does lead us to wonder whether the Commune, even had it attacked Versailles, as Marx thought necessary, could have been saved and could have succeeded in the longer term.

Smashing the State

Marx believed that the experience of the Commune taught the workers’ and socialist movements many things, but the most important was the idea that workers could not take over and use the capitalist state, but rather that the state would have to be smashed and a new democratic workers’ state created in its place. In April 1871, Marx wrote to Louis Kugelmann:

If you look at the last chapter of my Eighteenth Brumaire you will find that I say that the next attempt of the French revolution will be no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic-military machine from one hand to another, but to *smash* it, and this is essential for every real people’s revolution on the Continent. And this is what our heroic Party comrades in Paris are attempting.³²

What was the state to which Marx referred? It was, in his words, “the centralized state power, with its ubiquitous organs of standing army, police, bureaucracy, clergy, and judicature.”³³ In other passages, Marx refers to this as the “parasite state,” which lives off of the society that it oppresses.

As we know, the Parisian workers had not actually had to smash this state because much of the state bureaucracy and the army had been removed to Versailles. The old police force had remained behind to deal with the situation, but with Paris in rebellion, it quickly became clear that it could not. As Rougerie wrote, by February, “all authority in Paris was gradually dissolving.” It was this crumbling of the state in Paris that made it possible for the Parisian workers to create their own democratic state institutions such as the Central Committee of the Districts, the Federation of the National Guard, and then the Commune, as well as a new police force.

The Central Committee and the Commune passed resolutions abolishing the standing army and reorganizing the old police, and they created new commissions to replace the old bureaucracy, but they did not smash the state; in Paris, by then, there was little state to smash, because it had fled to Versailles. As we know, the state subsequently returned to Paris to retake power.

Could the Commune Have Led to Socialism?

Marx argued that the Commune “intended to abolish class-property,” the cause of exploitation. He asked the Commune’s bourgeois critics, who argued that communism was impossible, “What else, gentlemen, would it be but Communism, ‘possible’ Communism?”³⁴ Engels in his 1891 introduction to *The Civil Wars in France* elaborates, writing:

By 1871, large-scale industry had already so much ceased to be an exceptional case even in Paris, the center of artistic handicrafts, that by far the most important decree of the Commune instituted an organization of large-scale industry and even of manufacture which was not only to be based on the association of the workers in each factory, but also to combine all these associations in one great union; in short, an organization which as Marx quite rightly says in *The Civil War*, must necessarily have led in the end to communism.³⁵

Does it really seem likely that the Commune might have led to communism? In fact, large-scale industry did *not* exist in Paris at the time, except in a handful of enterprises;³⁶ the unions *did not*, at the time, accomplish the creation of a “great union”;³⁷ and, it is not at all clear that the momentum existed to establish a socialist society that would have ended in communism.

While Marx and Engels may have believed that the Commune’s thrust would lead to communism, if pressed, they would have had to admit that, in fact, it had *not* abolished private property in the means of production and had only seized a few national enterprises like tobacco, and that only a few workplaces had been abandoned by their owners. He may be right that, had the Commune had more time and had it become a successful national movement, it would have established a socialist society, “possible Communism.” It does not seem, however, that this was possible. What both the study of the Commune’s history and a review of Marx’s analysis suggest is that the Commune’s great achievements were fundamentally democratic and not socialist.

Marx himself was actually not nearly as sanguine as Engels. In a February 1881 letter to Dutch socialist Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis regarding populist governments, Marx stated:

Perhaps you will refer me to the Paris Commune; but apart from the fact that this was merely the rising of a city under exceptional conditions, the majority of the Commune was in no wise socialist, nor could it be. With a modicum of common sense, however, it could have reached a compromise with Versailles useful to the whole mass of the people — that only thing that could be

reached at the time. The appropriation of the Bank of France alone would have been enough to put an end with the terror to the vaunt of the Versailles people, etc., etc.³⁸

Marx had, to his credit, defended the revolutionary workers of Paris when they rose up against the bourgeois government of Thiers, but upon reflection almost a decade later, he saw no possibility of socialism or victory. Seizing the Bank of France would have given the Commune a negotiating chip with which to reach a peaceful resolution of the conflict, saving thousands of lives and allowing the Parisians to fight another day for their social republic, for their Commune. Political theorist Stathis Kouvelakis suggests that this represented part of a more general rejection of the notion of armed revolution in favor of a parliamentary struggle for power in republics such as England, France, and Germany, reserving force for the fight for democracy and socialism under authoritarian governments.³⁹

Socialists today should learn from both the successes and failures of the Commune. We should emulate the democratic achievements, the creation of organizations of workers to take over and run institutions, and we should strive to reproduce and extend that sort of democratic accomplishment. The Commune created a workers' administration, but a real workers' state never fully emerged. The Commune — unlike the Russian Revolution of October 1917 — never had the opportunity to face the more difficult challenges of establishing a democratic collectivist state and society that might open the way to communism.

Perhaps Marx, as spokesperson for the International, could not speak in his own voice. And no doubt he was also concerned not to criticize the Commune while it was under attack and, he feared, about to be crushed. So he hesitated to discuss some of the Commune's problematic issues. Today, 150 years later, we have no reason not to discuss them; in fact, we have a responsibility to do so.

Notes (Part I):

[1] Napoleon Bonaparte had become the first emperor in 1804; his nephew Louis Napoleon Bonaparte was the second emperor.

[2] Monarchists wished to reestablish the old French royal families, either Bourbon or its Orleans branch.

[3] “After averaging 8,250 deaths per year from pulmonary tuberculosis between 1865 and 1869, Paris suddenly saw this figure balloon to 10,691 in 1870 and 11,900 in 1871 before falling back to a mere 7,436 in 1872.” David S. Barnes, *The Making of a Social Disease* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995). From the Introduction. E-book available at: <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft8t1nb5rp&chunk.id=introduction&to.c.depth=1&toc.id=introduction&brand=ucpress>

[4] The word “social” meant with a concern for the social problems, principally poverty. We might think of it as meaning something like the word “progressive” as we use it in the United States today.

[5] I use the word “Internationalist” here to refer to those affiliated with or following the political lead of the First International with which Karl Marx was affiliated.

[6] Though Charles Fourier had died in 1837, he is the prototype of these communists of the 1840s. Marx and Engels called them “utopian socialists.”

[7] Stathis Kouvélakis, “On the Commune,” Part I, at <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5039-on-the-paris-commune-part-1> He argues that Marx and Engels, even though they were not in Paris, should be considered participants in the Commune.

[8] Blanqui was 65 at the time of the Commune.

[9] Blanqui represented the continuation of the tradition of Gracchus Babeuf, leader of the “conspiracy of equals” that organized to overthrow the Directory in 1796, a revolutionary theory passed down by Phillippe Buonarroti to Blanqui.

[10] Particularly through Bakunin’s “Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis”, which can be found at: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/bakunin/works/1870/letter-frenchman.htm#s1>

[11] The words *féminisme* and *féministe* in their modern sense did not exist in French until the 1880s.

[12] In France in the nineteenth century Free Masons generally advocated the Republic and opposed the Catholic Church, placing them on the left.

[13] *Les Chambres de métiers et de l'artisanat*. These were not unions but something like guilds.

[14] Women citizens.

[15] Cited in Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. 17

Notes (Part II):

1. In writing this essay I have relied principally on three books by Jacques Rougerie: *Paris Libre 1871* (Paris: Editions de Seuil, 1971); *La Commune et les Communards* (Paris: Editions Gallimard 2018); and *La commune de 1871, "Que sais-je ?," no. 581* (Paris: PUF, 2019). On women in the Commune, I have turned to Carolyn J. Eichner, *Surmounting the Barricades: Women in the Paris Commune* (Indiana University Press, 2004). See also interview with Mathilde Larrère, "They Were All the More Monstrous Because They Were Women, They Transgressed Everything," *International Viewpoint*, March 27, 2021, available at internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7085; and [video interview with Larrère, March 30, 2021 \(in French\)](#).

2. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Writing on the Paris Commune*, Hal Draper, ed. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 73. (Hereafter: Draper edition.)

3. Friedrich Engels, "[1891 Introduction to *The Civil War in France*](#)."

4. Draper edition, 73–75.

5. Draper edition, 81.

6. Draper edition, 76.

7. Draper edition, 81.

8. Hal Draper, "[Marx and Engels on Women's Liberation](#)," *International Socialism*, S1, no.44 (July/August 1970)

9. Harriet Law, a Marxist, was an advocate of women's suffrage.

10. Karl Marx, *Letters to Kugelmann* (New York: International Publishers, 1934), 83.

11. Friedrich Engels [to Ida Pauli, February 14, 1877](#), in *Marx-Engels Werke*, vol. 34 (Dietz Verlag 1973, 253.

12. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 37.

13. Draper Edition, 83.

14. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 37.

15. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 38.

16. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 47: "Par ailleurs — la situation l'exigeait-elle à ce point ? — *la Commune connut une réelle dérive policière, et c'est la côte assurément le moins sympathique de cette aventure populaire.*"

17. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 47–48.

18. Prosper Olivier Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*, Eleanor Marx, trans. (Atenas Editores Asociados, 2016), 255.

19. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 48.

20. Gustave Lefrançais, *Étude sur le mouvement communalliste à Paris en 1871* (Neuchâtel, 1871), 189–90, cited in Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 255–56, 406n.

21. Rougerie, *La Commune et les Communards*, 287.

22. According to Stathis Kouvélakis, Marx agreed with neither of the majority nor the minority.

23. Hal Draper, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat from Marx to Lenin* (Monthly Review, 1987), 1–41.

24. Stathis Kouvélakis, “[On the Commune](#),” part 1, *Verso blog*, March 29, 2021, Kouvélakis argues that Marx and Engels, even though they were not in Paris, should be considered participants in the Commune.

25. Draper edition, 67.

26. Karl Marx, “[The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte](#),” (1852), in *Die Revolution* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1937).

27. Marx, “Eighteenth Brumaire.”

28. Alain Plessis, *The Rise and Fall of the Second Empire, 1852–1871* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 108–10.

29. Draper edition, 79.

30. Draper edition, 80.

31. Plessis, *Rise and Fall of the Second Empire*, 108–10.

32. Marx, *Letterx to Louis Kugelmann*, p. 123..

33. Marx, “[Third Address](#),” May 1871.

34. Draper edition, 76–77.

35. Draper edition, 31

36. Rougerie, *Paris Libre 1871*, 9–13.

37. Unions played a role, but the Chambres des Métiers were more important. There was no “one big union.”

38. Karl Marx to Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis, February 22, 1881, in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 337–39.

39. Stathis Kouvélakis, “[On the Paris Commune,](#)” part 3, *Verso blog*, April 3, 2021,

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