

Why the Paris Commune Still Resonates, 150 Years Later

The Paris Commune ended on this day in 1871, after just two months in power. How do we explain, Enzo Traverso asks, the longevity and freshness of the memory of a fleeting revolutionary government?



A barricade in the Paris Commune, March 18, 1871. (Musée Carnavalet / Wikimedia Commons)

There is a paradoxical discrepancy between the meteoric rise and fall of the Paris Commune, whose life did not exceed seventy-two days, and its lasting presence as a central experience in the Left's historical consciousness.

Viewed through the lens of what some scholars call "world history," what happened in Paris between March 18 and May 28, 1871, is almost insignificant. Most recent historians of the nineteenth century — think of the acclaimed works of Christopher Bayly and Jürgen Osterhammel — just mention it as a minor detail of the Franco-Prussian War. From the point of view of the takeoff of industrial and financial capitalism, urbanization and modernization, the consolidation of colonial empires, and the persistence of the Old Regime in an already bourgeois continent, the Paris Commune means nothing. Indeed, the Commune was even marginal in the Franco-Prussian War, since it happened seven months after Napoleon III's capitulation and the proclamation of the Republic, and two months after signing the armistice that transferred Alsace-Lorraine to German sovereignty. At the beginning of March, the victorious Prussian army had already paraded down the Champs-Élysées.

How to explain, then, the longevity and freshness of the memory of such a fleeting event? The answer lies in that which, from the beginning, everybody realized: the Commune's extraordinary symbolic dimension. They defended or stigmatized its legacy, but no one could ignore or diminish its impact. Many radical thinkers commemorated its martyrdom and welcomed it as both a sunset and a dawn: the end of the sequence of nineteenth-century democratic upheavals and the beginning of a new era of proletarian revolutions.

Carrying the Torch

Anarchists such as Peter Kropotkin and Mikhail Bakunin depicted the Commune as the announcement of the future, and Karl Marx emphasized the communist potentialities of the Paris experiment: “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 economical emancipation of labor.”

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As a nuanced historian like Georges Haupt pointed out, the Paris Commune quickly became both a *symbol* and an *example*: a symbol of socialism as a possible and desirable future, and an example to be integrated into socialist memory and to be critically meditated upon in view of the forthcoming struggles.

In the twentieth century, the legacy of the Paris Commune was largely appropriated and reinterpreted in the light of the Russian Revolution. During the crucial year 1917, and later, during the Russian Civil War, the Paris Commune haunted the Bolsheviks’ mind as — alternatively — a warning and a model. October 1917 had reinforced the symbol: the announcement of a new socialist age was no illusion. But it had also assimilated the lessons of the tragic defeat of 1871: the Bolsheviks should not repeat the delays, hesitations, and weaknesses of the Communards. In Russia, the White Army had been defeated by a stronger and pitiless revolutionary Terror.

In 1891, Friedrich Engels had defined the Paris Commune as a paradigm: it had showed what the “dictatorship of the proletariat” would look like. After 1917, the Commune became a prefiguration of the Bolshevik Revolution — it was relocated into a sequence representing the ascending march of socialism from its infancy in 1789 to its triumph in 1917, passing through 1830, 1848, and, precisely, 1871.

After the Second World War, this image was further reinforced by adding new steps on the irresistible advance toward socialism: China in 1949, Cuba in 1958, etc. The Commune —a sudden, unexpected and creative break of the historical continuum — had become a landmark in a new linear evolution theorized with the categories of Marxist historicism. The Communards had become heroic precursors. The Bolshevik attempt at inscribing the Paris Commune into a communist Pantheon is certainly debatable, but it should be critically understood rather than contemptuously rejected. No doubt, the Bolsheviks were obsessed with “the laws of history,” which they believed to have mastered and in which they located the supreme legitimacy of their political choices.

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When Leon Trotsky wrote *Terrorism and Communism* (1920) from his armored train, in the middle of a bloody civil war, Soviet power was struggling for its survival. In his mind, the ghosts of the Paris Commune were not rhetorical figures; they strongly resonated with the present as dramatic warnings. This was neither propaganda nor mythology: it was rather an extraordinary moment of empathy with the vanquished, when the past resurfaced into the present and cried out to be rescued. But it remained a revisit of the Commune through a purely military prism.

72 Days of Utopia

The Communards, however, did not consider themselves as the actors or forerunners of a communist revolution. It was the Versailles propaganda that, emphasizing the significant presence of the disciples of Louis Auguste Blanqui among its leaders, denounced the Commune as a dangerous form of atheistic, vandalic, and barbarous communism. In its journals and its public debates, as well as in many testimonies of its protagonists, the Commune was usually described as a model of the “universal Republic” or, more pragmatically, as an experience of the “democratic and social Republic.” In fact, with very few exceptions, its actors did not wish to apply ideologies or preestablished measures; they invented a new form of social and political power, maybe even new “forms of life,” in the extraordinary circumstances of war and civil war, in a besieged and

impoverished city.

In a retrospective reflection, Élisée Reclus, the anarchist geographer who was one of its actors, described the Commune as:

a new society in which there are no masters by birth, title or wealth, and no slaves by origin, caste or salary. Everywhere the word “commune” was understood in the largest sense, as referring to a new humanity, made up of free and equal companions, oblivious to the existence of old boundaries, helping each other in peace from one end of the world to the other.

Initially, the Commune was a new *levée en masse*, inspired by the example of 1792, against the German enemy that had invaded the country and against the French government that wished to dismantle the defense of the city: the cannons of Belleville and Montmartre controlled by the National Guard. In other words, this revolutionary patriotism was directed against both an external enemy and the internal threat embodied by Adolphe Thiers and his executive of a conservative and monarchist majority in the newly proclaimed Republic.



Déjoué, chez L'Assiette à l'Onz. — Le 9. Mars 1871. — L'Assiette à l'Onz.

LA COMMUNE arrêtée par l'IGNORANCE & la RÉACTION

A satirical sketch by Georges Pilotell from March 1871, depicting the Commune defeating the forces of ignorance and reaction. (Wikimedia Commons)

The insurgents wished to establish a popular power based on principles of freedom, horizontal democracy, self-government, social justice, and equality, without knowing very well how these goals

could be concretely realized. Moreover, they claimed the restoration of municipal liberties and prerogatives confiscated by an authoritarian regime. They called “communalism” this federalist conception of democracy and self-management, a conception to which they were strongly attached (and which will become one of their major weaknesses in the eyes of Vladimir Lenin and Trotsky). Thus, their experience did not consist in applying preexisting models, according to the tradition of French utopian socialism; rather, they sought to invent a *new* utopia. They created something that did not exist before, brought forward by what Ernst Bloch called the “hot currents” of utopianism. The Paris Commune did not put into question the principle of property but submitted it to the priorities of collective needs. Instead of being a source of inequalities, property had to be “just and equitable.” It abolished debts at the pawn shops, fixed decent salaries, and established the self-management of the factories abandoned by their owners, when a significant part of the bourgeois class left the insurgent city. It abolished night shifts in the bakeries and introduced everywhere the election of labor representatives. It suspended the payment of rentals and requisitioned vacant housing. It did not take over the Bank of France, which belonged to the entire nation, thus leaving to its enemies a powerful weapon (another symptom of weakness, according to Marx and the Bolsheviks). Paris was as a city — the third-largest city in the world at the time — in which the power had been conquered by the laboring classes.

Among its juridical and political conquests, the Paris Commune established complete separation between the state and the Catholic Church, which had been a pillar of conservatism and Napoleon III’s regime. Secularism was extended to education, where female teachers obtained the same wages as their male colleagues. A reactionary conception of family was laid down by recognizing cohabiting couples and giving equal rights to their members; prostitution was assimilated to a form of slavery and abolished. The Commune did not extend voting rights to women — it is significant that neither Marx nor Lenin mentioned this as one of its limits or mistakes — but it gave them a new position in society.

The presence of women in the Commune was remarkable to the point that it became an obsessive target of Versailles propaganda, which depicted them as the *pétroleuses*: witches, harpies, nymphomaniacs, hysterical bodies, degenerated females who destroyed their families and all traditional values, abandoned their children and enjoyed the spectacle of fire in rapturous rituals. For decades, this negative myth would haunt conservative imaginaries around the world.



A 1911 painting by André Devambez depicting a barricade in the Paris Commune. (Wikimedia Commons)

For the seventy-two days the Commune existed, such emancipatory measures were proclaimed and had begun to be applied, but, beyond these formal policy reforms, the entire city seemed captured by an extraordinary effervescence and engaged in a process of social transformation from below. Artists and intellectuals — Paris was then the capital of European literary bohemia — created their own federations. Popular newspapers and graphic arts flourished for two months in a country whose official culture was radically hostile to the lower classes, usually depicting them as a despicable “mob.”

Anti-clericalism and revolutionary iconoclasm frightened the ruling classes of the entire continent. The demolition of the Vendôme Column, described by the Communards as a symbol of militarism, imperialism, “false glory,” and “an insult by the victors to the vanquished,” became evidence of the Commune’s “vandalism,” which Gustave Courbet, the famous painter who led the Federation of Artists, paid for with imprisonment and exile.

Born as an expression of revolutionary patriotism, the Commune was deeply internationalist. It proclaimed that “any city should be authorized to confer citizenship to the foreigners who serve it,” and gave a concrete meaning to its principle of “universal Republic” by integrating thousands of

immigrants, exiles, and refugees who lived in the French capital. The archives record 1,725 foreign Communards, and in many cases, they took on important responsibilities: two out of three Commune armies were led by Polish commanders in chief, and the National Guard included an Italian legion. Many foreigners belonged to its board, like Léo Frankel, a Hungarian Jewish member of the International Working Men's Association, who was appointed minister of labor.

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The most indisputable evidence that the Commune had destroyed the bourgeois order lies in its replacement of the state military force with the National Guard, which had been rebuilt during the war as a popular militia. Writing on the spot, just after its final annihilation during the "bloody week" of May, Marx pointed out two distinctive features of the Paris Commune: its rupture with the state repressive machinery and its radical democracy. After conquering power, the working class quickly realized that it could not "simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." The old state military force had to be replaced with "the armed people."

Similarly, the working class created its own organs of power:

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 a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time.

Nobody knows if such a form of radical, direct democracy could work in the long term. In the USSR, it never really worked, except for a few months, because of the breakout of the civil war and the establishment of a party dictatorship. The horizontal character of democracy under the Commune was probably reinforced by the lack of charismatic leaders dominating its assemblies and institutions.

There was a plurality of remarkable personalities but no overwhelming figures such as Maximilien Robespierre, Lenin, or Trotsky.

This also depended on a curious coincidence: Bakunin was in Lyon and could not join Paris under siege; Auguste Blanqui had been arrested in southern France one day before the uprising of March 18. Therefore, radical democrats, social republicans, anarchists, Proudhonists, Blanquists, and even Marxists (a few Communards had a regular correspondence with the author of *The Communist Manifesto* living in London) worked together without struggling for a partisan leadership. In many cases, as during the crucial ballot for creating the Committee of Public Safety, the Blanquists and the members of the International Working Men's Association did not vote unanimously. This plurality of views was fruitful.

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The Commune was simultaneously a "destituent" power that destroyed the old state machinery, and a "constituent" power that established a new sovereignty opposed to the Versailles government. Thus, it was shaped by the tensions and ruptures that characterize any revolutionary process: on the one hand, the enthusiasm for a conquered freedom and the emotional élan of building the future; on the other hand, the necessity of creating new organs of coercion able to resist the inevitable reaction of the old rulers. Democratic communalism coexisted with a latent dictatorship in the middle of a civil war. The authoritarian measures claimed by Raoul Rigault, the Blanquist head of the Commune's security, echoed the Jacobin Terror and foreshadowed the Soviet Cheka. In the most dramatic moments of its ephemeral existence, the Commune executed its hostages.

Enemies of the Commune

Between the bloody week of May 1871 and the Russian Revolution, the memory of the Commune was censured and exorcised. For a decade, it was silently preserved by the vanquished and critically transmitted by the exiled. In France, the Commune became an unnamable event, always evoked by frightening allegories as a natural catastrophe. Its actors and accomplishments became the objects of a *damnatio memoriae* that simply erased them from the public sphere. At the top of Montmartre hill, where the uprising had started, the Sacré-Cœur basilica was built "to expiate the crimes of the Commune," which had executed the archbishop of Paris. Just after the repression, photogravures showing the Communards' deeds — from the execution of priests and the burning of churches to the destruction of property — inundated the entire country, gathered under the title *The Red Sabbath*. In

the following years, the adjective “red” was banned from official documents. While attracting socialist, anarchist, bohemian, and nonconformist writers and artists — think of painters such as Courbet, Honoré Daumier, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, and Édouard Manet, or writers like Jules Vallès and the young poet Arthur Rimbaud — the Commune was condemned by the overwhelming majority of French intellectuals. Gustave Flaubert, Victor Hugo, Edgar Quinet, George Sand, and Émile Zola viewed the Commune as an outburst of blind violence, even if some of them pleaded for amnesty after the bloody week.



Parisians executing unarmed members of the Paris Commune. (Paukrus / Flickr)

For the French intellectual elite, the Commune did not result from a civil war; it was the awful expression of a collective disease, of a pandemic that threatened the national body and had to be crushed. As Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out, the most significant feature of anti-Commune literature was its “social biologism,” which consisted in associating class conflicts with natural pathologies. In his novel devoted to the Franco-Prussian War, *La Débâcle* (1892), Zola described the Commune as “a growing epidemic” and a “chronic befuddlement” provoked by hunger, alcohol, and syphilis under the conditions of a besieged city. In *The Origins of Contemporary France* (1878), historian Hippolyte Taine analyzed it as “a pathological germ which, having penetrated the blood of a suffering and seriously sick society, produced fever, delirium, and revolutionary convulsions.”

According to Maxime Du Camp, “virtually all those unfortunates who fought for the Commune were what alienism terms ‘sick.’” Cesare Lombroso, the Italian founder of criminal anthropology, submitted the Commune to the indisputable “scientific” test of anthropometry and, after analyzing the skulls of dozens of Communards, concluded that most of them revealed the typical traits of the “born criminal.” Many commentators privileged the language of zoology, grasping among the Communards the symptoms of bestiality and lycanthropy, a form of “barbaric regression” within a civilized world. In October 1871, Théophile Gautier compared the Communards to zoo animals that had suddenly escaped from their cages and terrorized in the city:

wild beasts, stinking animals, venomous creatures, all the refractory perversities that civilization has been unable to tame, those who love blood, those who are as amused by arson as by fireworks, those for whom theft is a delight, those for whom rape represents love, all those with the hearts of monsters, all those with deformed souls.

Such a demonic portrait was not exclusively French. In the United States, the *Chicago Tribune* compared the Paris Commune to an uprising of Comanche Indians. In Buenos Aires, *La Nación* deplored the Communards’ crimes and denounced the inspirer behind their attacks against civilization: Marx, “a true Lucifer,” whose letters from London had been found in the files of the Blanquist Raoul Rigault, the leader of the Committee of Public Safety. The myth of a “cosmopolitan” conspiracy behind the deeds of the Parisian workers focused on the International Workingmen’s Association, which became a sort of Satanic nightmare for European reaction and, in parallel,

according to Friedrich Engels, a “moral force” for the labor movement throughout the world.



A fiery demon representing the chaos of the Paris Commune in a colored etching by G. Cruikshank, 1871. (Wellcome Collection)

The colorful rhetoric of the Commune’s enemies belongs to a rich counterrevolutionary tradition. After the Russian Revolution, the language of reaction did not change significantly. Think of the White Guards’ posters portraying Trotsky as a Jewish ogre, or even of Winston Churchill, who depicted the Bolsheviks as a horde of baboons jumping on a hill made of the skulls of their victims. The bloody week of May 1871 was, at the same time, the sunset of the old counterrevolutions and the dawn of modern state repression. Fought on the barricades, it appeared at first glance as a repetition of June 1848, but this was a misleading facade. Most of the fallen Communards were not killed in the street combats but were executed, after summary trials, through methodic and serialized massacres. The Versailles army was composed neither of fanatic Bonapartists nor of provincial obscurantists who wished to punish a detested capital.

As historian Robert Tombs has convincingly explained, the soldiers who performed this planned, disciplined, organized, and impersonal slaughter did not carry the awareness that they were crushing a political uprising; they rather thought that they were extinguishing a criminal fire and cleansing the city of a dangerous disease. They acted without emotion, accomplishing a biopolitical task in order to sanitize a national body. Whereas General Patrice de MacMahon repeated in May 1871 the gestures of General Louis-Eugène Cavaignac in June 1848, his soldiers perpetrated a massacre that, revisited in the twenty-first century, brings to mind the systematic murder perpetrated by the Einsatzgruppen in 1943.

“The Commune was shaped by the tensions and ruptures that characterize any revolutionary process.” The magnitude of the repression was considerable. Historians are still investigating the number of the dead, with estimates varying from 5,400 to 20,000. This significant discrepancy results from the difficulty of accounting for the dead in the streets, the victims of military executions and the thousands who perished in the following days of untreated wounds. The report established in 1875 by General Raymond Appert of the Versailles army mentioned 38,614 arrests and 50,000 sentences issued by the war council, which resulted in more than 10,000 convictions. A further 3,800 Communards were deported to New Caledonia (where many of them supported the Kanak rebellion in 1878).

Almost 6,000 among those who escaped from capture spent the following decade in exile. Most of them fled to England, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, and Italy, but also to the United States and several Latin American countries. We know the names of many exiled intellectuals (Gustave Courbet, Leó Frankel, Paul Lafargue, Louise Michel, Élie and Élisée Reclus, Jules Vallès), but the great majority of the exiles were craftsmen and manual workers.

Twenty-First-Century Communes

The ghosts of the Commune have resurfaced in the twenty-first century. We heard their echoes in [Oaxaca, Mexico, in 2006](#), then in 2011, first in Tunisia and Egypt, then in New York, with Occupy Wall Street, and in Puerta del Sol, Madrid, with the 15M. A few years later they came back to France, with the Nuit debout of spring 2017 in Paris and the ZAD (“zones to defend”) of Brittany. The Kurdish fighters of Rojava claimed the Commune’s legacy by creating an incredible experience of armed, egalitarian, feminist, direct democracy in a Middle East devastated by neocolonial, fascist, and fundamentalist wars. To all of them, the Commune was meaningful, the opposite of a dead realm of memory.

Once again, the Commune's legacy has experienced an unexpected metamorphosis. An eloquent mirror of this change is the afterlife of Louise Michel, one of the most popular figures of the Paris uprising, whose virtuous and sacrificial image of the "red virgin" has been replaced by that of a queer feminist. And a similar shift has occurred with the social dimension of the Commune. Its actors are increasingly recognized as craftsmen, workers, teachers, militiamen of the National Guard, employees, bohemian artists and writers; a minority of them were factory workers, while a great number were seasonal or daily laborers.

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The social profile of the average Communard was much closer to that of many contemporary young people — precarious workers, students, and intellectuals — than to that of twentieth-century industrial workers. The heterogeneous internal composition of this largely preindustrial working class is now seen to bear many affinities, despite their different historical contexts, with the postindustrial proletarian layers of neoliberal capitalism. They did and do not believe in linear and gradual progress, but rather express a certain proclivity for radical breaks, as profound as they are ephemeral. Whereas its social and political conquests were quickly destroyed — some of them would be achieved decades later — the Commune has survived throughout a century and a half as, above all, the interruption of the homogeneous and linear time of capitalism and the irruption of a new, qualitative time of self-emancipation. From this point of view, it has not become a "future past" — a bygone nineteenth-century utopia — but remains the representation of a possible future that still reverberates in the present.

Liberated from the historical teleology of twentieth-century communism, the Commune has been extracted from the sequence of defeated twentieth-century revolutions and rediscovered as a moment of singular and irreducible collective freedom. No longer viewed as an immature and ephemeral prefiguration of Bolshevism, its relevance and actuality are grasped precisely in what was usually considered its main limits: its lack of centralism, hierarchies, or hegemonic leadership; its federalism; and its search for new forms of horizontal democracy rather than building an effective dictatorship. In short, what is rediscovered in the Commune is its *communalism*, which powerfully resonates with current debates about the "commons": a collective reappropriation of nature, knowledge, and wealth against the neoliberal process of global privatization. Like the Commune, the recent experiences mentioned above did not aim at applying abstract models; they were creative moments of the invention of the future.

In this way, they fit remarkably the definition of the Commune given by Engels in 1875 in a letter to August Bebel whose relevance has been pertinently pointed out by Kristin Ross. The word "Commune," Engels explained, does not correspond with "community" or "municipality." He saw it as the equivalent of the "excellent old German word *Gemeinwesen*," which did not designate a "state" but rather "what exists in common." In a letter to his friend Ludwig Kugelmann, written in April 1871, Marx defined the Paris Commune with a lyric image, a metaphor borrowed from Homer: "storming heaven."

Like Titans assaulting Olympus, they had overthrown their own rulers. This is, perhaps, the key to understanding the incredible longevity of those seventy-two Parisian spring days in 1871.