

150 Years Later: The Paris Commune Is Still a Beacon for Radical Change

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On this day in 1871, the working class of Paris seized control of the capital and established the Commune. Though it ruled for just two months, the world's first workers' government still stands as a vivid example of the kind of society workers themselves can create, according to their own vision of freedom and equality.

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The bourgeois of France had always come away with everything. Since the revolution of 1789, they had been the only ones to grow rich in periods of prosperity, while the working class had regularly borne the brunt of crises. But the proclamation of the Third Republic would open new horizons and offer an opportunity for a change of course. Napoleon III, having been defeated in battle at Sedan, was taken prisoner by the Prussians on September 4, 1870. In the following January, after a four-month siege of Paris, Otto von Bismarck obtained a French surrender and was able to impose harsh terms in the ensuing armistice.

National elections were held and Adolphe Thiers installed at the head of the executive power, with the support of a large Legitimist and Orleanist majority. In the capital, however, where the popular discontent was greater than elsewhere, radical republican and socialist forces swept the board. The prospect of a right-wing government that would leave social injustices intact, heaping the burden of the war on the least well off and seeking to disarm the city, triggered a new revolution on March 18. Thiers and his army had little choice but to decamp to Versailles.

Struggle and Government

To secure democratic legitimacy, the insurgents decided to hold free elections at once. On March 26, an overwhelming majority of Parisians (190,000 votes against 40,000) voted for candidates who supported the revolt, and seventy of the eighty-five elected representatives declared their support for the revolution. The fifteen moderate representatives of the *parti des maires*, a group comprising the former heads of certain *arrondissements*, immediately resigned and did not participate in the council of the Commune; they were joined shortly afterward by four Radicals.

The remaining sixty-six members — not always easy to distinguish because of dual political affiliations — represented a wide range of positions. Among them were twenty or so neo-Jacobin

republicans (including the renowned Charles Delescluze and Félix Pyat), a dozen followers of Auguste Blanqui, seventeen members of the International Working Men's Association (both mutualist partisans of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and collectivists linked to Karl Marx, often at odds with one another), and a couple of independents.

Most leaders of the Commune were workers or recognized representatives of the working class, and fourteen hailed from the National Guard. In fact, it was the central committee of the latter that invested power in the hands of the Commune — the prelude, as it turned out, to a long series of disagreements and conflicts between the two bodies.

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On March 28 a large number of citizens gathered in the vicinity of the Hôtel de Ville for festivities celebrating the new assembly, which now officially took the name of the Paris Commune. Although it would survive for no more than seventy-two days, it was the most important political event in the history of the nineteenth-century workers’ movement, rekindling hope among a population exhausted by months of hardship. Committees and groups sprang up in the popular quarters to lend support to the Commune, and every corner of the metropolis hosted initiatives to express solidarity and to plan the construction of a new world. Montmartre was baptized the “citadel of liberty.”

One of the most widespread sentiments was a desire to share with others. Militants like Louise Michel exemplified the spirit of self-abnegation; Victor Hugo wrote of her that she “did what the great wild souls do. [...] She glorified the crushed and downtrodden.” But it was not the impetus of a leader or a handful of charismatic figures that gave life to the Commune; its hallmark was its clearly collective dimension. Women and men came together voluntarily to pursue a common project of liberation. Self-government was not seen as a utopia. Self-emancipation was thought of as the essential task.

The Transformation of Political Power

Two of the first emergency decrees to stem the rampant poverty were a freeze on rent payments (it was said that “property should make its fair share of sacrifices”) and the selling of items valued below twenty francs in pawn shops. Nine collegial commissions were also supposed to replace the ministries for war, finance, general security, education, subsistence, labor and trade, foreign relations, and public service. A little later, a delegate was appointed to head each of these departments.

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On April 19, three days after further elections to fill thirty-one seats that became almost immediately vacant, the Commune adopted a *Declaration to the French People* that contained an “absolute guarantee of individual liberty, freedom of conscience and freedom of labor” as well as “the permanent intervention of citizens in communal affairs.” The conflict between Paris and Versailles, it affirmed, “cannot be ended through illusory compromises”; the people had a right and “obligation to fight and to win!”

Even more significant than this text — a somewhat ambiguous synthesis to avoid tensions among the

various political tendencies — were the concrete actions through which the Communards fought for a total transformation of political power. A set of reforms addressed not only the modalities but the very nature of political administration.

The Commune provided for the recall of elected representatives and for control over their actions by means of binding mandates (though this was by no means enough to settle the complex issue of political representation). Magistracies and other public offices, also subject to permanent control and possible recall, were not to be arbitrarily assigned, as in the past, but to be decided following an open contest or elections.

The clear aim was to prevent the public sphere from becoming the domain of professional politicians. Policy decisions were not relegated to small groups of functionaries, but had to be taken by the people. Armies and police forces would no longer be institutions set apart from the body of society. The separation between state and church was also a *sine qua non*.

But the vision of political change went even deeper. The transfer of power into the hands of the people was needed to drastically reduce bureaucracy. The social sphere should take precedence over the political — as Henri de Saint-Simon had already maintained — so that politics would no longer be a specialized function but become progressively integrated into the activity of civil society. The social body would thus take back functions that had been transferred to the state.

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To overthrow the existing system of class rule was not sufficient; there had to be an end to class rule as such. All this would have fulfilled the Commune’s vision of the republic as a union of free, truly democratic associations promoting the emancipation of all its components. It would have added up to self-government of the producers.

Prioritizing Social Reforms

The Commune held that social reform was even more crucial than political change. It was the reason for the Commune’s existence, the barometer of its loyalty to its founding principles, and the key element differentiating it from the previous revolutions in 1789 and 1848. The Commune passed more than one measure with clear class connotations.

Deadlines for debt repayments were postponed by three years, without any additional interest charges. Evictions for nonpayment of rent were suspended, and a decree allowed vacant accommodation to be requisitioned for people without a roof over their heads. There were plans to shorten the working day (from the initial ten hours to the eight hours envisaged for the future), the widespread practice of imposing specious fines on workers simply as a wage-cutting measure was outlawed on pain of sanctions, and minimum wages were set at a respectable level.

As much as possible was done to increase food supplies and to lower prices. Night work at bakeries was banned, and a number of municipal meat stores were opened. Social assistance of various kinds was extended to weaker sections of the population — for example, food banks for abandoned women and children — and discussions were held on how to end the discrimination between legitimate and illegitimate children.

All the Communards sincerely believed that education was an essential factor for individual emancipation and any serious social and political change. School attendance was to become free and

compulsory for girls and boys alike, with religiously inspired instruction giving way to secular teaching along rational, scientific lines. Specially appointed commissions and the pages of the press featured many compelling arguments for investment in female education. To become a genuine “public service,” education had to offer equal opportunities to “children of both sexes.”

Moreover, “distinctions on grounds of race, nationality, religion or social position” should be prohibited. Early practical initiatives accompanied such advances in theory, and in more than one *arrondissement* thousands of working-class children entered school buildings for the first time and received classroom material free of charge.

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The Commune also adopted measures of a socialist character. It decreed that workshops abandoned by employers who had fled the city, with guarantees of compensation on their return, should be handed over to cooperative associations of workers. Theaters and museums — open for all without charge — were collectivized and placed under the management of the Federation of Artists, which was presided over by the painter and tireless militant Gustave Courbet. Some three hundred sculptors, architects, lithographers, and painters (among them Édouard Manet) participated in this body — an example taken up in the founding of an “Artists’ Federation” bringing together actors and people from the operatic world.

All these actions and provisions were introduced in the space of just fifty-four days, in a city still reeling from the effects of the Franco-Prussian War. The Commune was able to do its work only between March 29 and May 21, in the midst of heroic resistance to attacks by the Versaillais that also required a great expenditure of human energy and financial resources. Since the Commune had no means of coercion at its disposal, many of its decrees were not applied uniformly in the vast area of the city. Yet they displayed a remarkable drive to reshape society and pointed the way to possible change.

Collective and Feminist Struggle

The Commune was much more than the actions approved by its legislative assembly. It even aspired to redraw urban space. Such ambition was demonstrated by the decision to demolish the Vendôme Column, considered a monument to barbarism and a reprehensible symbol of war, and to secularize certain places of worship by handing them over for use by the community.

It was thanks to an extraordinary level of mass participation and a solid spirit of mutual assistance that the Commune persisted for as long as it did. Revolutionary clubs that sprang up in nearly every *arrondissement* played a noteworthy role. There were at least twenty-eight of them, representing one of the most eloquent examples of spontaneous mobilization.

Open every evening, they offered citizens the opportunity to meet after work to freely discuss the social and political situation, to check what their representatives had achieved, and to suggest alternative ways of solving day-to-day problems. They were horizontal associations, which favored the formation and expression of popular sovereignty as well as the creation of genuine spaces of sisterhood and fraternity, where everyone could breathe the intoxicating air of control over their own destiny.

This emancipatory trajectory had no place for national discrimination. Citizenship of the Commune

extended to all who strove for its development, and foreigners enjoyed the same social rights as French people. The principle of equality was evident in the prominent role played by the three thousand foreigners active in the Commune. Leó Frankel, a Hungarian member of the International Working Men's Association, was not only elected to the council of the Commune but served as its "minister" of labor — one of its key positions. Similarly, the Poles Jarosław Dąbrowski and Walery Wróblewski were distinguished generals at the head of the National Guard.

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Women, though still without the right to vote or to sit on the Council of the Commune, played an essential role in the critique of the social order. In many cases, they transgressed the norms of bourgeois society and asserted a new identity in opposition to the values of the patriarchal family, moving beyond domestic privacy to engage with the public sphere.

The Women's Union for the Defense of Paris and Care for the Wounded, whose origin owed a great deal to the tireless activity of the First International member Elisabeth Dmitrieff, was centrally involved in identifying strategic social battles. Women achieved the closure of licensed brothels, won parity for female and male teachers, coined the slogan "equal pay for equal work," demanded equal rights within marriage and the recognition of free unions, and promoted exclusively female chambers in labor unions.

When the military situation worsened in mid-May, with the Versailles at the gates of Paris, women took up arms and formed a battalion of their own. Many would breathe their last on the barricades. Bourgeois propaganda subjected them to the most vicious attacks, dubbing them *les pétroleuses* and accusing them of having set the city ablaze during the street battles.

To Centralize or Decentralize?

The genuine democracy that the Communards sought to establish was an ambitious and difficult project. Popular sovereignty required the participation of the greatest possible number of citizens. From late March on, Paris witnessed the mushrooming of central commissions, local subcommittees, revolutionary clubs and soldiers' battalions, which flanked the already complex duopoly of the Council of the Commune and the central committee of the National Guard.

The latter had retained military control, often acting as a veritable counterpower to the council. Although direct involvement of the population was a vital guarantee of democracy, the multiple authorities in play made the decision-making process particularly difficult and meant that the implementation of decrees was a tortuous affair.

The problem of the relationship between central authority and local bodies led to quite a few chaotic, at times paralyzing, situations. The delicate balance broke down altogether when, faced with the war emergency, indiscipline within the National Guard, and the growing inefficacy of government, Jules Miot proposed the creation of a five-person Committee of Public Safety, along the lines of Maximilien Robespierre's dictatorial model in 1793.

The measure was approved on the First of May, by a majority of forty-five to twenty-three. It proved to be a dramatic error, which marked the beginning of the end for a novel political experiment and split the Commune into two opposing blocs.

The first of these, made up of neo-Jacobins and Blanquists, leaned toward the concentration of power and, in the end, to the primacy of the political over the social dimension. The second, including a majority of members of the International Working Men's Association, regarded the social sphere as more significant than the political. They thought that a separation of powers was necessary and insisted that the republic must never call political freedoms into question.

Coordinated by the indefatigable Eugène Varlin, this latter bloc sharply rejected the authoritarian drift and did not take part in the elections of the Committee of Public Safety. In its view, the centralization of powers in the hands of a few individuals would flatly contradict the founding postulates of the Commune, since its elected representatives did not possess sovereignty — that belonged to the people — and had no right to cede it to a particular body.

On May 21, when the minority again took part in a session of the Council of the Commune, a new attempt was made to weave unity in its ranks. But it was already too late.

The Commune as Synonym of Revolution

The Paris Commune was brutally crushed by the armies of Versailles. During the *semaine sanglante*, the week of blood-letting between May 21 and 28, a total of seventeen thousand to twenty-five thousand citizens were slaughtered. The last hostilities took place along the walls of Père Lachaise Cemetery. A young Arthur Rimbaud described the French capital as “a mournful, almost dead city.” It was the bloodiest massacre in the history of France.

Only six thousand managed to escape into exile in England, Belgium, and Switzerland. The number of prisoners taken was 43,522. A hundred of these received death sentences, following summary trials before courts martial, and another 13,500 were sent to prison or forced labor, or deported to remote areas such as New Caledonia. Some who went there solidarized with and shared the fate of the Algerian leaders of the anti-colonial Mokrani revolt, which had broken out at the same time as the Commune and also been drowned in blood by French troops.

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The spectre of the Commune intensified the anti-socialist repression all over Europe. Passing over the unprecedented violence of the Thiers state, the conservative and liberal press accused the Communards of the worst crimes and expressed great relief at the restoration of the “natural order” and bourgeois legality, as well as satisfaction with the triumph of “civilization” over anarchy.

Those who had dared to violate the authority and attack the privileges of the ruling class were punished in exemplary fashion. Women were once again treated as inferior beings, and workers, with dirty, calloused hands who had brazenly presumed to govern, were driven back into positions for which they were deemed more suitable.

And yet, the insurrection in Paris gave strength to workers' struggles and pushed them in more radical directions. On the morrow of its defeat, Eugène Pottier wrote what was destined to become the most celebrated anthem of the workers' movement: “Let us group together and tomorrow / The Internationale / Will be the human race!”

Paris had shown that the aim had to be one of building a society radically different from capitalism. Henceforth, even if “the time of cherries” [*le temps des cerises*] (to quote the title of the communard

Jean-Baptiste Clément's famous verse), never returned for its protagonists, the Commune embodied the idea of social-political change and its practical application. It became synonymous with the very concept of revolution, with an ontological experience of the working class. In *The Civil War in France*, Karl Marx stated that this "vanguard of the modern proletariat" had succeeded in "attaching the workers of the world to France."

The Paris Commune changed the consciousness of workers and their collective perception. At a distance of a hundred fifty years, its red flag continues to flutter and to remind us that an alternative is always possible. *Vive la Commune!*

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P.S.

- Jacobin. 03.18.2021:
<https://jacobinmag.com/2021/03/paris-commune-radical-change-history-revolution>
- Translation by Patrick Camiller.

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