1871-2021: The red thread of the Paris Commune

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"On the 150th anniversary of the defeat of the Paris Commune we assert that the Commune is not dead, retracing its influence through the workers' and revolutionary movements until today."

Contents

- The right to the city and (…)
- May 68 and the vindication (…)
- Toppling monuments: "the (…)
- From the Women's Union to (…)
- Communal autonomy: from (…)
- The recovery of social space

"The body is on the ground, but the idea is still standing".

That was the response that the Versailles troops got after the *Semaine sanglante* ("Bloody week") and the subsequent massacre (Deleurmoz, 2020: 297). The Paris Commune would from then on survive as a myth for the popular classes, superior to that of the 1789 Revolution, since in contrast to the interclass character of the latter, it was led mainly by the working class. It provides the international labour movement with "an autonomous tradition, a legitimation" (Haupt, 1986: 42) that makes it destined to guarantee the emancipation of the "human race", in the expression popularized by Eugene Pottier in The Internationale, written in June 1871. Élisée Reclus, the well-known anarchist and Communard geographer, vindicated the legacy of the Commune because it "set up for the future, not through its governors but through its defenders, a more superior ideal to all the revolutions that preceded it… a new society in which there are no masters by birth, title or wealth, and no slaves by origin, caste or salary."(Ross, 2015:8).

A revolutionary legitimacy claimed by the IWA (International Workingmen's Association or First International), which advocated the necessary independence of the working class from conservatism, liberalism and bourgeois republicanism. A new phase then began in which the different currents within the International, after the departure of English Chartism, entered into a dispute over the strategic lessons to be drawn from the 72 days of existence of the Commune.

Marx and Bakunin also praised what the implementation of a previously unprecedented form of communal and federal organization had meant and Engels even proposed in 1875 a new political form that he called "Community" (*Gemeinwesen*), a good old German word equivalent to the French word "Commune" (Engels, 1981) as an alternative to the bourgeois state. However, soon the divergences exploded around the necessity or otherwise of political action, together with mutual accusations of Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism and differences over internal organizational methods, ending, as is known, with the abandonment of the International by the Bakuninists in 1872.

Beyond that split, what would continue to unite both currents would be claiming the Commune as a “symbol and example” (Haupt) of another democracy to be built and of the alternative emancipatory horizon for the “human race” to which they aspired. An Event whose lessons would be shared, as shown in works such as that of Kristin Ross (2015), not only by the Communards who survived the brutal repression and found refuge in other places, but also by great leaders of the labour movement such as Piotr Kropotkin and William Morris, or poets like Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Verlaine. It is this common claim that would be transmitted to successive generations through a long list of publications and a whole repertoire of poems and songs - such as “Le temps des cérises” - as well as places of memory such as the *Mur des Fédérés* in the cemetery of Père Lachaise in Paris.

The impact of the Commune thus survived the generation that led it and its debates, lessons and defeat have been a source of inspiration in the revolutionary imaginary and the international socialist movement. The anecdote is told of how Lenin danced in the snow in front of the Winter Palace on the seventy-third day of the Russian Revolution, since it had lasted one day longer than the Paris Commune. In “State and Revolution” (1917) Lenin radically changed his previous appreciations and based the project of revolutionary power to draw inspiration from the Commune. And the Commune should be understood less as an event in French national history than as part of a vast world picture that connects through the red thread of history the Russian Revolution with the workers’ insurrection in Asturias in 1934 [1], the insurgent Barcelona of July 1936, May 68, the Zapatista movement since 1994 and the Oaxaca Commune in 2006 in Mexico, the movement of the *indignados* in 2011 or the Kurdish libertarian confederalism under construction. Here, we will relate what the Commune has meant to some of the attempts at another possible world.

The right to the city and to decent housing, from yesterday to today

The Commune was a revolution in a place, “a single, unique and dramatic event, perhaps the most extraordinary of its kind in capitalist urban history.” (Harvey, 2000). A primarily spatial and urban event, which in the 1960s many considered the first realization of urban space as a revolutionary space. Thus it raised fundamental problems that we will later see reflected in other revolts but that above all continue to be key elements in the dispute over urban space today. To mention just some of the spatial problems posed by the Commune: the relationship of Paris with the provinces; the Commune as an immense rent strike; the social division of the city after Haussmann and the question of who, among those who inhabit it, has the right to the city and who does not; or military and tactical use during street fighting. These are some examples of the spatial issues that run through the Commune and that continue to question us today as issues to be radically overcome on all levels.

The Commune’s first measure was the suspension of rental debts, demonstrating the importance of urban space and the material conditions of the subaltern classes in its concerns. Housing has historically been configured as a means of expropriation of the wealth of the popular classes, while becoming a source of social unrest that has nurtured the evolution of anti-systemic movements throughout history. The suspension of rent debt has been configured from the Commune as a fundamental demand of urban movements to this day, with the paralysis of evictions and tenant strikes as a central element of the repertoire of collective action of the popular classes.

The transformation of the city during the Empire, configuring the bourgeois city that Haussmann projected, also brought as a counterpart the creation of the workers’ city of the other Paris. Haussmann’s work and the transformation of the land and the real estate market in Paris affected both the traditional notions of community and the socio-spatial structure of the city, displacing workers from the centre of a city that since then has been configured as a forbidden space for them:

“The return of the workers to the centre of Paris during the Commune derived, in part, from the political importance of the urban centre within a tradition of popular insurgency and, in part, from their desire to reclaim the public space from which they had been expelled, the streets that had once been theirs”. (Ross, 2018). The fight against the gentrification of neighbourhoods and city centres as spaces of representation of political power or showcases of city-consumption continues to be a central element in the struggle for the popular reappropriation of the city.

May 68 and the vindication of the Commune

In France, the memory of the Commune has always been alive in the workers’ movement. Proof of this has been the massive visits to the *Mur des Fédérés* in the Père Lachaise cemetery, every 18 March or 28 May, in tribute to the victims of the *Semaine sanglante*. That is why it is tempting, although historically imprecise, to compare the events of May 1968 with those of the spring of 1871. The truth is that from the 1960s some left-wing currents began to claim the legacy of the Commune, foremost among them the Situationist International and thinkers such as Henri Lefebvre, who also highlighted the importance of that experience in the will to change life, change the city, highlighting the role of the Commune as an urban event.

In May 68 that memory suddenly burst forth when in Paris, on 10 May in the midst of the protests, this cry was heard: “It’s the revenge of the Commune!” During those days, the 22 March Movement published a pamphlet that, under the title “Renew with the Paris Commune”, proposed to occupy the town hall while the cry “The Commune is not dead!” spread to many places, documentaries began to be screened, and the 65 issues of the Commune’s newspaper *Le Cri du peuple* were reissued in facsimile. Of course, it is evocative to see the migration of the slogans and the iconography of the Commune over a century to re-emerge in the same streets full of barricades.

In Marseille, the students at the Thiers institute occupied it changing the name to “Lycée de la Commune” and self-organization was promoted following their example. The protesters considered themselves heirs to the Paris Commune, its radical democratic legacy and of its internationalism, compared to what was represented by Thiers and the Versaillais: the newspaper “Action”, an organ of the Coordination of Action Committees, denounced French capitalism as a “worthy heir to the Versaillais who murdered the Communards”.

Throughout France, in many work or study centres the name of Commune was adopted. But perhaps the most advanced experience was that of the Nantes Commune: there, after the creation of Neighbourhood Committees, a Central Strike Committee of the entire city was constituted, supported by trade unions and peasant and student organisations, which was installed in the City Hall on 27 May as a new municipal authority, coordinating at the economic, commercial (bonds equivalent to a certain amount of food were issued), transport and teaching (nurseries were created for the children of strikers) levels until the end of the movement.

In many works about May 68 the word Commune would be in their headlines: *The Student Commune*, by Edgar Morin, *Journal of the Student Commune*, by Alain Schapp and Pierre Vidal-Naquet (in this they cite, for example, an edition of *La Cause du peuple* (the organ of an important Maoist current at the time) of 2 June 1968, in which de Gaulle was denounced as the representative of the new Versaillais. And after May many works of the Commune were reissued or new ones were published demonstrating a growing interest in the experience of the Commune in the context of the rise of social conflict in France.

Toppling monuments: “the iconoclastic fury”

Revolutions often bring iconoclastic fury, and the Commune was no exception. Be it spontaneous, like the burning of the guillotine in Voltaire Square by a group of people, mostly women, in an attempt to erase any equivalence between the revolution and the scaffold; or planned, such as the demolition of the Vendôme column as a monument to barbarism, a symbol of brute force and militarism. The strength of the Commune’s iconoclastic gesture as an anti-hierarchical act can be calibrated by the hysteria recorded in the narration of the event by the Versaillais, who denounced the demolition of the column as an attempt to destroy French history itself. The Communards were branded “vandals” and Gustave Courbet, one of those accused of being politically responsible for the demolition of the column, was imprisoned and sentenced for life to pay compensation for its reconstruction. But beyond the reactionary propaganda, the truth is that the Commune did want to settle accounts with the history of the French Empire, but not as a matter of the past but rather as an affirmation in the present, as an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial statement that connected with his idea of a “universal republic”.

The truth is that the “iconoclastic fury” has been reproduced in practically every revolution or protest movement throughout the 150 years of history from the demolition of the Vendôme column to the present day. A situation that has regained its relevance, placing itself at the centre of the political debate with the emergence of an anti-racist and decolonial movement that has put the statues of the military, colonizers and slaveholders in the crosshairs of its “iconoclastic fury”. Although the movement began in the United States, it soon caught on around the world, also reaching Europe where attacks on different statues followed, generating an angry response from the elites and conservative parties, who, as in an authentic revival of the Commune, accused the protesters of being vandals trying to erase history.

For example, Emmanuel Macron complained bitterly about iconoclastic actions against statues, and in a message to the French nation that Thiers himself could have delivered, he railed against anti-racist protesters for trying to erase the history of France: “This evening, I say to you very clearly, my dear fellow citizens, that the Republic will not erase any traces or any figures from its history. It will not forget any of its accomplishments. It will not topple any statue.” (Traverso, 2020) In his speech to the nation, Macron never mentioned either the victims of racism or French colonialism, a curious oversight. In the same vein, when protesters in Bristol tore down the statue of the slave trader Edward Colston, the British Home Secretary, Priti Patel, described the act as “totally disgraceful” and “unacceptable vandalism”.

But, as Traverso states, far from erasing the past, anti-racist iconoclasm embodies a new historical consciousness that inevitably affects the urban landscape. The statues in dispute celebrate the past and its actors, a simple fact that legitimizes their removal. Cities are living bodies that change according to the needs, values and desires of their inhabitants, and these transformations are always the result of political and cultural conflicts.

The truth is that statues, when they become an object of dispute, cease to be a matter of the past and become a direct part of our present. Demonstrating that racism or neo-colonialism are far from past but living elements of our present, leading to the iconoclastic fury against supposedly past statues, gives a historical dimension to the present struggles against racism and oppression. Here we again find a red thread that connects the Commune’s demolition of the Vendôme column with the anti-racist protests that are currently running through the streets of half the world.

_From the Women’s Union to the feminist strike

The Women’s Union was not only a very interesting initiative for the self-organization of women within the framework of the experience of the Commune, but in its short life it represented a break with the dominant feminist logic during the 19th century, closely linked to the demand for political rights, such as suffrage and traditional forms of republican politics in general.

During the Commune, participation in public life was not determined by electoral participation, but there were both mixed and autonomous spaces where female Communards could develop their public and political activity. Instead, from the momentum of the Women’s Union, feminist discourse and proposals focused on a complete reorganization of female work and the end of economic inequality based on gender. Highlighting decrees such as that of equal pay for male and female teachers, the proposal to create nursery schools in the vicinity of factories, incorporating a reproductive and care dimension to the issue of access to work that should be assumed communally. As well as the proposal made to the Labour Commission of the Commune by the Union for the constitution of sewing workshops and free productive associations in each arrondissement with the idea of being able to expand beyond Paris, building an alliance with other similar cooperatives in France and other countries, in order to facilitate the export and exchange of products.

Almost 150 years later, the feminist movement organized the first international strike of the 21st century. A milestone not only for the international workers’ movement and social movements, but also a paradigm shift in the feminist movement itself. As in its time was the contribution of the Commune, closely linked to the reorganization of work in all its spheres, ending economic inequality based on gender and ensuring that the obligation to sustain life does not fall only on women. Apart from the obvious distances of time and context, the truth is that we find a purple thread that connects the Commune’s feminist movement, which incipiently placed social reproduction at the centre of its demands, with the new feminist movement that has placed the capital-life contradiction at the centre of the debate.

_Communal autonomy: from the Zapatistas to the Kurds

Since 1994, *Zapatismo* has represented the link between the community tradition of the indigenous peoples of Mexico with the decentralized, autonomous and direct democracy model of the Commune. Representatives do not make decisions on behalf of their community, but rather act as community delegates, revocable and subject to public scrutiny. In the *juntas* of good government, the regional government space of the Zapatista autonomous municipalities, rotating delegates represent their community. The *juntas* are constantly renewed and allow training in government and interest in public affairs for a large number of people. This rotation also shows a characteristic of Zapatista politics, which is the absence of professionalism in politics, everyone governs for a short time and in stages, and no one has a monopoly on political representation. This model of direct democracy and Zapatista autonomy has developed in the context of a low intensity war with constant harassment by the Mexican state and paramilitary groups.

In a climate of exceptionality, violence and open military conflict, Kurdish democratic confederalism has developed, inspired by the writings of the American anarchist Murray Bookchin, a supporter of a municipalist and environmental socialism. In the purest Commune style, the historical leader of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) has theorized the construction of a stateless democracy as an alternative to capitalist modernity. A constellation of interrelated and coordinated organizations, ranging from the smallest and most active units, the communes, which are managed from a shared leadership (a man and a woman); to the cantons where the different communes of a region are coordinated. Each commune holds elections to choose its representatives at the higher levels and the municipal councils decide who goes to the Cantonal Public Council. The cantons have their own constitution and their government and parliament, in addition to their own courts, whose tasks and duties are stipulated in the Social Contract which effectively forms the constitution for the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. [2] Finally, all these new entities are grouped into the Union of Kurdish Communities (KCK), which is the body that, as a confederation, brings together all of them. A model of social and political organization based on decentralization and direct democracy that is very reminiscent of that Universal Republic as a “confederation of free peoples”" defended by Communards such as Élisée Reclus.

The recovery of social space. From the Arab Spring to the camps of the indignant

In 2011 the world political scene was dominated by the figure and the phenomenology of camps or occupations, a global outrage that ranged from the Arab spring to the Puerta del Sol through Syntagma Square to the very heart of Wall Street. A movement that vindicated the public space as a form of protest and that in many ways was reminiscent of the political culture of the Commune.

The cry for real democracy was already contesting the limits of formal democracy calling for more democracy, trying to resolve the split between what really exists and what should be. This demand for democracy appealed to the same Commune principles that sought to go beyond the limits of formal republican democracy to achieve a social republic.

Likewise, the occupation of public spaces in cities, through the symbolic taking of squares, represented the emergence of a fundamentally spatial and urban protest movement that claimed the city as a space in dispute. Also, like the Commune, by politicizing social practices and the use made of public space, it built a powerful social space. The squares became the equivalent of the clubs of the Commune, with frenzied social activity and public debate.

Because if we observe the *indignados* movement of 2011, beyond the spectacular and symbolic event of the camps, we can see how its extension and capillary nature turned the “neighbourhood” into a place of collective aggregation, of social anchoring in the territorial and in the daily realities of people. This allowed the incipient development of a “moral economy of the crowd” (EP Thompson, 1971) through the proliferation of worker cooperatives, time banks and bartering of services, urban gardens, social unionism with the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) in the Spanish case, community health centres in the Greek neighbourhoods, food banks and so on. The construction of social space as a political sphere beyond the institutions in which any citizen can actively participate in public affairs, recalls the revolutionary reappropriation of urban public space by the Commune.

A collective imaginary that is topical again 150 years later in the movements and revolts that foreshadow a new world through new practices instituting a real democracy. An imaginary, in short, that today also links with the demand for the common, for cooperation and mutual support, against the new enclosures, privatizations and appropriations of common and public goods that global capitalism has been imposing during almost fifty years of neoliberal hegemony that threaten to be prolonged in the midst of the current pandemic, ecosocial and multiple crisis. Rethinking the Paris Commune should not be understood as an academic or nostalgic exercise, but as a militant one. Because as Walter Benjamin said, we must recover the art of narrating history in a way that allows us to ignite from the past the spark of hope in the present. Thus, knowledge of past experiences of struggle can become an inspiring instrument for our present conflict.

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P.S.

• International Viewpoint. Friday 28 May 2021:
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https://jacobinlat.com/2021/05/03/el-hilo-rojo-de-la-comuna/

Footnotes

[1] A popular uprising which, as Antoni Domènech recalled, represented “the largest proletarian insurrection in the history of Spain, and the most important in Western Europe since the Paris Commune of 1871, dragging behind it the entire working population.” (Domènech, 2004: 442)

[2] It would be like the constitution of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria, the text can be found here.