

“The 1871 Paris Commune is an ode to emancipation, which crosses time”

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On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune, our comrades Olivier Besancenot and Michael Lowy have published *Marx a Paris, 1871: le livre blanc de Jenny*. We talked to Olivier Besancenot on this occasion. [1]

Julien Salingue - For this book, you have chosen a rather original format, since it is a political fiction, recounting a visit by Marx to Paris during the Commune. Why did you make this choice?

Olivier Besancenot - It followed on a discussion with Michael, and I think it was Michael who came up with the idea first, with the goal of doing something a little out of step with what has already been done and which will be repeated on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Commune. Basically, it was a question of finding something striking, original, to illustrate Marx's thinking on the Paris Commune. We therefore imagined this clandestine, improbable journey of Marx, led by his daughter Jenny, within the Commune itself, with meetings with some of its leading figures, in order to bring out Marx's political thinking on the Commune. It is actually remarkable to see how his ideas emerged in the heat of the action. A pertinent immediate analysis (the Call to the International, *The Civil War in France* [2], but also a political, strategic, global questioning.

This is one of Marx's great strengths: to be able to understand that from the unfolding of events themselves can be born a process of emancipation that has not necessarily been imagined on paper, in think tanks, or even in the offices of the International. Marx's writings on this famous force of emancipation that was finally found when he speaks of the Commune, were extremely advanced in relation to a whole range of sectors of the workers' movement, the revolutionary movement, with even intonations that are sometimes more libertarian than those of some libertarians. A reflection on emancipation, on confrontation with the state apparatus, on the need to build forms of political, democratic sovereignty...

Exactly. To put it in a very synthetic way: what did the Commune change for Marx?

I would say that it was the idea that it is not enough for the state apparatus to change hands, from a social class point of view, in order to change the nature of the state, in that it is an oppressive system, a boa constrictor, to use Marx's phrase, which stifles civil society and democracy. And therefore that it must be extinguished, that we should go towards the extinction of the state, and that one of the possible avenues for this extinction was shown by the policies of the Commune in action: revocability of elected officials, a cap on the remuneration of elected officials and magistrates, etc. All these concrete policies that call into question the heart of the bureaucracy that is the state apparatus. And with the Commune there was a beginning of extinction, which could not really be fully illustrated because of the duration of the Commune [72 days], but a glimpse of the future all the same, and that Marx immediately understood that and immediately analysed it. And this would have an impact on Marx's thinking, on the debates and the culture of the workers'

movement in general.

Marx followed all the debates, what was happening in the world, the social and political situations, and while he had not imagined that the insurrection would come from Paris, he delved into the analysis of the Commune, immediately, although he had been a little caught off guard and was at the time immersed in reflection on the analysis of the capitalist system and its crises. And his strength was to produce analyses as events unfolded, to grasp their scope.

To bring all this to life, you imagine encounters between Marx and certain personalities of the Commune, in Paris, during the insurrection. Looking at them we notice a significant presence of women: Louise Michel, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, Nathalie Lemel, but also of course Jenny Marx who accompanies her father. Is it from a desire on your part to highlight in particular the role of women in the Paris uprising?

It was not necessarily theorized and constructed, but we realized, as we looked at real figures, that women played a central role in the social and political history of the Commune. This was the case from the start of the uprising, with the protection of the guns against their potential takeover by the Versaillais in the streets of Montmartre, at the call of the vigilance committee of the citizens of Montmartre, around Louise Michel in particular. But it was also the role and the place taken by women, against the zeitgeist of the time, because machismo was present, even within the International and in the various revolutionary clubs. A revolutionary event such as the Commune, but this applies to all revolutionary events, is the outpouring of phenomena that have been simmering in society for months and months, or even more, which was the case in Paris, with in particular a multitude of revolutionary clubs, in which women became more and more involved. We can also think of the siege of Paris by the Prussians, during which Nathalie Lemel was, with the cooperative “La Ménagère” and the restaurant “La Marmite” at the centre of popular solidarity and mutual aid, to come to the aid of almost 10,000 Parisians who were dying of hunger. So the Women’s Union, which was formed in the eye of the storm of the Commune, was the product of all this previous work, and when Élisabeth Dmitrieff (representative of the International) arrived and participated in the founding of the Women’s Union, much of the activity was already underway, entrenched.

It is true that when we think of “the women of the Commune”, it is the figure of Louise Michel who comes most often to mind, sometimes, often even, “forgetting” Elisabeth Dmitrieff. This is not the case in your book, where she occupies an important place, commensurate with her role during the Commune.

It is true that she is less well known than Louise Michel, and that she remains a name that evokes something, but we do not really know what. However, her name, beyond the feminist struggle, the struggle for women’s rights in the heart of the Commune, with the Women’s Union, is also associated with self-management. Elisabeth Dmitrieff and her action represent one of the first examples of self-management on this scale.

Dmitrieff influenced the Commune as much as she was the product of it. She was a young Russian immigrant who became completely caught up in Chernychevsky’s novel What is to be done?. A novel whose heroine emancipates herself from her own milieu, made up of arranged marriages. She draws inspiration from the traditional forms of pooling of goods and production that existed in some localities of the Russian peasantry, which was known as obchchina, and transposes it to workers’ cooperatives. Reading this novel inflamed Elisabeth Dmitrieff, who emancipated herself from her milieu, politicized herself, especially alongside political refugees in Switzerland, where she met Marxists, then went to London and met Marx, discussed with him... Kristin Ross talked about all this in The Imaginary of the Commune. And when she arrived Marx appreciated her and took her into

consideration, to the point of sending her as her emissary to Paris during the Commune, so that she could be his eyes and ears.

After a few days she found herself at the head of the Women's Union, alongside Nathalie Lemel and others, and her first project, which she discussed with Léo Frankel, was to form self-managed workers' cooperatives, where the workers would pay themselves, to make for example fabrics for sandbags for the ramparts or uniforms for the National Guard. So Dmitrieff also represented an experience that was unfortunately also aborted because of the short duration of the Commune.

How did you choose the different characters Marx encounters in your book? Did you try to fix criteria to give an "overview" or did these characters impose themselves?

We didn't make a cast list, we did it instinctively, I think. As we do each time we write together, Michael and I shared out the chapters, and then the names imposed themselves, added up together... The question we asked ourselves, because it is the limit of the genre, was the risk of redoing a history of the Commune a little too "from above", with names that we already knew. But what guided us were Marx's writings on the Commune, so we were obliged to follow the thread of the political relations that Marx had, often remotely, at the time, and thus to have him discuss with these personalities.

So to sum up, a book on the Commune, on Marx's thought, but also a book that is meant to say things about current events?

The Commune is an ode to emancipation, which crosses time, and a good reminder in the face of all bureaucratic flaws.

It is also a way of resourcing ourselves in internationalism. Because yes, the Commune was born from a popular uprising against the siege, the advance of Bismarck's troops, and the will to win the war. But among the great figures of the Commune, as well as among the anonymous Communards, there were thousands and thousands of exiles, often political, but also economic : Prussian, Italian, Polish, Russian... The Commune was an internationalist act.

And it is also a way of remembering that our political history did not begin with the Russian Revolution of 1917. It has previous roots, and all the debates that irrigated the international workers' movement following the crushing of the Commune, emphasizing in particular what the Communards had failed to do - seizing the Bank of France, marching on Versailles, etc. - make it possible to understand what the political obsessions of the Bolsheviks were. We understand better the famous dance in the snow of Lenin on the day when the Russian revolution had "held" for a day longer, compared to the Commune.

Across time, the Commune is not only its failures, but a source of living inspiration, the first experience of popular emancipation and power, of the power of the exploited and oppressed, with all its limitations, but which speaks to us across the decades. And we realize that, 150 years later, it is an unresolved matter with the powers that be: the Commune still does not have a good press in the thinking of the ruling class, and we see to what point the attitudes that produced Versailles have not disappeared.

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P.S.

- Translation IVP. Wednesday 24 March 2021:
<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7080>

Footnotes

[1] The English version *Marx in Paris 1871* is scheduled for publication by Haymarket in March 2022.

[2] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/civil-war-france/>