

Pëtr Kropotkin

The Commune of Paris

1880

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I. The Place of the Commune in Socialist Evolution

On March 18, 1871, the people of Paris rose against a despised and detested government, and proclaimed the city independent free, belonging to itself.

This overthrow of the central power took place without the usual stage effects of revolution, without the firing of guns, without the shedding of blood upon barricades. When the armed people came out into the streets, the rulers fled away, the troops evacuated the town, the civil functionaries hurriedly retreated to Versailles carrying everything they could with them. The government evaporated like a pond of stagnant water in a spring breeze, and on the nineteenth the great city of Paris found herself free from the impurity which had defiled her, with the loss of scarcely a drop of her children's blood.

Yet the change thus accomplished began a new era in that long series of revolutions whereby the peoples are marching from slavery to freedom. Under the name "Commune of Paris" a new idea was born, to become the starting point for future revolutions.

As is always the case, this fruitful idea was not the product of some one individual's brain, of the conceptions of some philosopher; it was born of the collective spirit, it sprang from the heart of a whole community. But at first it was vague, and many of those who acted upon and gave their lives for it did not look at it in the light in which we see it today; they did not realize the full extent of the revolution they inaugurated or the fertility of the new principle they tried to put in practice. It was only after they had begun to apply it that its future bearing slowly dawned upon them; it was only afterward, when the new principle came to be thought out, that it grew definite and precise and was seen in all its clearness, in all its beauty, its justice and the importance of its results.

During the five or six years that came before the Commune, socialism had taken a new departure in the spread and rapid growth of the International Workingmen's Association. In its local branches and general congresses the workers of Europe met together and took counsel with another upon the social question as they had never done before. Among those who saw that social revolution was inevitable and were actively busy in making ready for it, one problem above all others seemed to press for solution. "The existing development of industry will force a great economic revolution upon our society; this revolution will abolish private property, will put in common all the capital piled up by previous generations; but, what form of political grouping will be most suited to these changes in our economic system?"

"The grouping must not be merely national," answered the International Workingmen's Association, "it must extend across all artificial frontiers and boundary lines." And soon this grand idea sunk into the hearts of the peoples and took fast hold of their minds. Though it has been hunted down ever since by the united efforts of every species of reactionary, it is alive nevertheless, and when the voice of the peoples in revolt shall melt the obstacles to its development, it will reappear stronger than ever before.

But it still remained to discover what should be the component parts of this vast association.

To this question two answers were given, each the expression of a distinct

current of thought. One said the popular state; the other said anarchy.

The German socialists advocated that the state should take possession of all accumulated wealth and give it over to associations of workers and, further, should organize production and exchange, and generally watch over the life and activities of society.

To them the socialists of the Latin race, strong in revolutionary experience, replied that it would be a miracle if such a state could ever exist; but if it could, it would surely be the worst of tyrannies. This ideal of the all powerful and beneficent state is merely a copy from the past, they said; and they confronted it with a new ideal: anarchy, that is, the total abolition of the state, and social organization from the simple to the complex by means of the free federation of popular groups of producers and consumers.

It was soon admitted, even by the more liberal minded state socialists, that anarchy certainly represented a much better sort of organization than that aimed at by the popular state. But, they said, the anarchist ideal is so far off that just now we cannot trouble about it.

At the same time, it was true that the anarchist theory did need some short, clear mode of expression, some formula at once simple and practical, to show plainly its point of departure and embody its conceptions, to indicate how it was supported by an actually existing tendency among the people. A federation of workers' unions and groups of consumers regardless of frontiers and quite independent of existing states seemed too vague; and, moreover, it was easy to see that it could not fully satisfy all the infinite variety of human requirements. A clearer formula was wanted, one more easily grasped, one which had a firm foundation in the realities of actual life.

If the question had merely been how best to elaborate a theory, we should have said theories, as theories, are not of so very much importance. But as long as a new idea has not found a clear, precise form of statement, growing naturally out of things as they actually exist, it does not take hold of men's minds, does not inspire them to enter upon a decisive struggle. The people do not fling themselves into the unknown without some positive and clearly formulated idea to serve them, so to say, as a springboard when they reach the starting point.

As for this starting point, they must be led up to it by life itself.

For five whole months Paris had been isolated by the German besiegers; for five whole months she had to draw upon her own vital resources and had learned to know the immense economic, intellectual, and moral strength which she possessed. She had caught a glimpse of her own force of initiative and realized what it meant. At the same time she had seen that the prating crew who seized power had no idea how to organize either the defense of France or its internal development. She had seen the central government at cross purposes with every manifestation of the intelligence of the mighty city. Finally, she had come to realize that any government must be powerless to guard against great disasters or to smooth the path of rapid evolution. During the siege her defenders, her workers, had suffered the most frightful privations, while her idlers reveled in insolent luxury, and thanks to the central government she had seen the failure of every attempt to put an end to these scandals. Each time that her people had showed signs of a desire for a free scope, the government had added weight to their chains. Naturally such experiences gave birth to the idea that Paris must make herself an independent commune, able to realize within her walls the wishes of her citizens.

The Commune of 1871 could be nothing but a first attempt. Beginning at the close of a great war, hemmed in between two armies ready to join hands and crush the people, it dared not unhesitatingly set forth upon the path of economic revolution. It neither boldly declared itself socialist nor proceeded to the expropriation of capital nor the organization of labor. It did not even take stock of the general resources of the city.

Nor did it break with the tradition of the state, of representative government. It did not seek to effect within the Commune that very organization from the simple to the complex which it inaugurated without, by proclaiming the independence and free federation of communes.

Yet it is certain that if the Commune of Paris could have lived a few months longer, it would have been inevitably driven by the force of circumstances toward both these revolutions. Let us not forget that the French middle class spent altogether four years (from 1789 to 1793) in revolutionary action before they changed a limited monarchy into a republic. Ought we then to be astonished that the people of Paris did not cross with one bound the space between an anarchist commune and the government of the spoilers? But let us also bear in mind that the next revolution, which in France and Spain at least will be communal, will take up the work of the Commune of Paris where it was interrupted by the massacres of the Versailles soldiery.

The Commune was defeated, and too well we know how the middle class avenged itself for the scare given it by the people when they shook their rulers' yoke loose upon their necks. It proved that there really are two classes in our modern society; on one side, the man who works and yields up to the monopolists of property more than half of what he produces and yet lightly passes over the wrong done him by his masters; on the other, the idler, the spoiler, hating his slave, ready to kill him like game, animated by the most savage instincts as soon as he is menaced in his possession. After having shut in the people of Paris and closed all means of exit, the Versailles government let loose soldiers upon them; soldiers brutalized by drink and barrack life, who had been publicly told to make short work of "the wolves and their cubs." To the people it was said:

You shall perish, whatever you do! If you are taken with arms in your hands, death! If you use them, death! If you beg for mercy, death! Whichever way you turn, right left, back, forward, up, down; death! You are not merely outside the law, you are outside humanity. Neither age nor sex shall save you and yours. You shall die, but first you shall taste the agony of your wife, your sister, your mother, your sons and daughters, even those in the cradle! Before your eyes the wounded man shall be taken out of the ambulance and hacked with bayonets or knocked down with the butt end of a rifle. He shall be dragged living by his broken leg or bleeding arm and flung like a suffering, groaning bundle of refuse into the gutter. Death! Death! Death!

And after this mad orgy, these piles of corpses, this wholesale extermination, came the petty revenge, the cat o' nine tails, the irons in the ship's hold, the blows and insults of the jailers, the semistarvation, all the refinements of cruelty. Can the people forget these base deeds?

Overthrown, but not conquered, the Commune in our days is born again. It is no longer a dream of the vanquished, caressing in imagination the lovely

mirage of hope. No! the “commune” of today is becoming the visible and definite aim of the revolution rumbling beneath our feet. The idea is sinking deep into the masses, it is giving them a rallying cry. We count on the present generation to bring about the social revolution within the commune, to put an end to the ignoble system of middleclass exploitation, to rid the people of the tutelage of the state, to inaugurate a new era of liberty, equality, solidarity in the evolution of the human race.

II. How the Commune Failed to Realize Its True Aim and Yet Set That Aim Before the World

Ten years already separate us from the day when the people of Paris overthrew the traitor government which raised itself to power at the downfall of the empire; how is it that the oppressed masses of the civilized world are still irresistibly drawn toward the movement of 1871? Why is the idea represented by the Commune of Paris so attractive to the workers of every land, of every nationality?

The answer is easy. The revolution of 1871 was above all a popular one. It was made by the people themselves, it sprang spontaneously from the midst of the mass, and it was among the great masses of the people that it found its defenders, its heroes, its martyrs. It is just because it was so thoroughly “low” that the middle class can never forgive it. And at the same time its moving spirit was the idea of a social revolution; vague certainly, perhaps unconscious, but still the effort to obtain at last, after the struggle of many centuries, true freedom, true equality for all men. It was the revolution of the lowest of the people marching forward to conquer their rights.

Attempts have been and are made to change the sense of this revolution, to represent it as a mere effort to regain the independence of Paris and thus to constitute a tiny state within France. But nothing can be more untrue. Paris did not seek to isolate herself from France, any more than to conquer it by force of arms; she did not care to shut herself within her walls like a nun in a convent; she was not inspired by the narrow spirit of the cloister. If she claimed her independence, if she tried to hinder the interference of the central power in her affairs, it was because she saw in that independence a means of quietly elaborating the bases of future organization and bringing about within herself a social revolution; a revolution which would have completely transformed the whole system of production and exchange by basing them on justice; which would have completely modified human relations by, putting them on a footing of equality; which would have formed our social morality anew by founding it upon equality and solidarity. Communal independence was then but a means for the people of Paris; the social revolution was their end.

And this end might have been attained if the revolution of March 18 had been able to take its natural course, if the people of Paris had not been cut to pieces by the assassins from Versailles. To find a clear, precise idea, comprehensible to all the world and summing up in a few words what was needed to accomplish the revolution, this was really the preoccupation of the people of Paris from the earliest days of their independence. But a great idea does not germinate in a day, however rapid the elaboration and propagation of ideas during periods of

revolution. It always needs a certain time to develop, to spread throughout the masses, to translate itself into action, and this time the Commune of Paris failed. It failed mostly because as we have before observed, socialism ten years ago was passing through a period of transition. The authoritative and semi-religious communism of 1848 had no longer any hold over the practical, freethinking minds of our epoch. The collectivism which attempted to yoke together the wage system and collective property was incomprehensible, unattractive, and bristling with difficulties in practical application. Free communism, anarchist communism, was only beginning to dawn upon the minds of the workers and scarcely ventured to provoke the attacks of the worshippers of government. Minds were undecided. Socialists themselves, having no definite end in view, did not dare to lay hands upon private property; they deluded themselves with the argument which has lulled the activities of many an age: "Let us first make sure of victory, and then see what can be done."

Make sure of victory! As if there were any way of forming a free commune without laying hands upon property! As if there were any way of conquering the foe while the great mass of the people is not directly interested in the triumph of the revolution, by seeing that it will bring material, moral and intellectual well-being to everybody.

The same thing happened with regard to the principle of government. By proclaiming the free Commune, the people of Paris proclaimed an essential anarchist principle, which was the breakdown of the state.

And yet, if we admit that a central government to regulate the relations of communes between themselves is quite needless, why should we admit its necessity to regulate the mutual relations of the groups which make up each commune? And if we leave the business of coming to a common understanding with regard to enterprises which concern several cities at once to the free initiative of the communes concerned, why refuse this same free initiative to the groups composing a single commune? There is no more reason for a government inside the commune than for a government outside.

But in 1871, the people of Paris, who have overthrown so many governments, were only making their first attempt to revolt against the governmental system itself; consequently they let themselves be carried away by the fetish worship of governments and set up one of their own. The result is a matter of history. Paris sent her devoted sons to the town hall. There, shelved in the midst of files of old papers, obliged to rule when their instincts prompted them to be and to act among the people, obliged to discuss when it was needful to act, to compromise when no compromise was the best policy, and, finally, losing the inspiration which only comes from continual contact with the masses, they saw themselves reduced to impotence. Being paralyzed by their separation from the people — the revolutionary center of light and heat — they themselves paralyzed the popular initiative. The Commune of Paris, the child of a period of transition, born beneath the Prussian guns, was doomed to perish. But by its eminently popular character it began a new series of revolutions, by its ideas it was the forerunner of the social revolution. Its lesson has been learned, and when France once more bristles with communes in revolt, the people are not likely to give themselves a government and expect that government to initiate revolutionary measures. When they have rid themselves of the parasites who devour them, they will take possession of all social wealth to share according to the principles of anarchist communism. And when they have entirely abolished

property government, and the state, they will form themselves freely according to the necessities indicated by life itself. Breaking its chains, overthrowing its idols, humanity will march onward to a better future, knowing neither masters nor slaves, keeping its veneration for the noble martyrs who bought with their blood and suffering those first attempts at emancipation which have enlightened our march toward the conquest of liberty.

III. The Teachings of the Commune in Modern Socialism

The public meetings organized on March 18 in almost every town where there is a socialist group are well worthy of careful attention, not merely because they are a demonstration of the army of labor, but also because they afford an opportunity for gauging the sentiments of the socialists of both worlds. They are a better opportunity for “taking a poll” than could be given by any system of voting, an occasion when aspirations may be formulated uninfluenced by electoral party tactics. The workers do not meet simply to praise the heroism of the Parisian proletariat or to call for vengeance for the May massacres, while refreshing themselves with the memory of the brave struggle in Paris, they have gone further and discussed what lessons for the coming revolution must be drawn from the Commune of 1871. They ask what the mistakes of the commune were not for the sake of criticizing the men who made them but to bring out clearly how the prejudices about property and authority, which then reigned among workers’ organizations, hindered the bursting forth of the revolutionary idea and its subsequent developments into a beacon to light the world.

The lesson of 1871 has benefited the workers of every land, enabling them to break with their old prejudices and come to a clearer and simpler understanding as to what their revolution is to be.

The next rising of communes will not be merely a “communal” movement. Those who still think that independent, local self-governing bodies must be first established and that these must try to make economic reforms within their own localities are being carried along by the further development of the popular spirit, at least in France. The communes of the next revolution will proclaim and establish their independence by direct socialist revolutionary action, abolishing private property. When the revolutionary situation ripens, which may happen any day, and governments are swept away by the people, when the middle-class camp, which only exists by state protection, is thus thrown into disorder, the insurgent people will not wait until some new government decrees, in its marvelous wisdom, a few economic reforms.

They will not wait to expropriate the holders of social capital by a decree which necessarily would remain a dead letter if not accomplished in fact by the workers themselves. They will take possession on the spot and establish their rights by utilizing it without delay. They will organize themselves in the workshops to continue the work, but what they will produce will be what is wanted by the masses, not what gives the highest profit to employers. They will exchange their hovels for healthy dwellings in the houses of the rich; they will organize themselves to turn to immediate use the wealth stored up in the towns; they will take possession of it as if it had never been stolen from them

by the middle class.

And when the industrial baron who has been levying blackmail upon the worker is once evicted, production will continue, throwing off the trammels which impede it, putting an end to the speculations which kill and the confusion which disorganizes it, transforming itself according to the necessities of the movement under the impulsion given to it by free labor. "Men never worked in France as they did in 1793, after the soil was snatched from the hands of the nobles," says the historian Michelet. Never have men worked as they will on the day when labor becomes free and everything accomplished by the worker will be a source of well-being to the whole commune. An attempt has been made of late to establish a distinction between various sorts of social wealth, and the socialist party is divided upon the question. The present collectivist school, substituting a sort of dogmatic theory of collectivism for the collectivism of the old International (which was merely antiauthoritarian communism), has sought to establish a distinction between capital used for production and wealth supplying the necessities of life. Machinery, factories, raw material, means of communication, and the soil are on the one side, and dwellings, manufactured produce, clothing, commodities, on the other. The first are to be collective property, the second are designed, by the professors of this school of socialism, to remain private property.

There has been an attempt to set up this distinction, but popular good sense has got the better of it; it has found it illusory and impossible to establish. It is vicious in theory and fails in practical life. The workers understand that the house which shelters us, the coal and gas we burn, the fuel consumed by the human machine to sustain life, the clothing necessary for existence, the book we read for instruction, even the enjoyments we get, are all so many component parts of our existence, are all as necessary to successful production and the progressive development of humanity as machines, manufactories, raw materials, and other means of working. The workers are arriving at the conclusion that to maintain private property for this sort of wealth would be to maintain inequality, oppression, exploitation, to paralyze beforehand the results of the partial expropriation. Leaping over the fence set up in their path by theoretical collectivism, they are marching straight for the simplest and most practical form of antiauthoritarian communism.

Now in their meetings the revolutionary workers are distinctly stating their right to all social wealth and the necessity of abolishing private property in articles of consumption as well as in those of reproduction: "On the day of the revolution, we shall seize upon all wealth stored up in the towns and put it in common," say the speakers, and the audiences confirm the statements with their unanimous approval. "Let each take from the pile what he needs and be sure that in the warehouses of our towns there will be enough food to feed everyone until free production has made a fair start; in the shops of our towns there are enough clothes to dress everyone, kept there in reserve while outside there is nakedness and poverty. There are even enough luxuries for each to choose among them according to his liking."

Judging by what is said at commune commemoration meetings in France and elsewhere, the workers have made up their minds that the coming revolution will introduce anarchist communism and the free reorganization of production. These two points seem settled and in these respects the communes of the next revolution will not repeat the errors of their forerunners, who so generously shed

their blood to clear the path for future progress.

There is, however, a third and no less important point upon which agreement is not yet reached, though it is not so very far off. This is the question of government.

As is well known, there are two sections of the Socialist party, completely divided by this point. "On the very day of the revolution," says the one, "we must constitute a government to take possession of the supreme power. A strong, powerful, resolute government will make the revolution by decreeing this and that, and forcing all to obey its commands."

"A miserable delusion!" says the other. "Any central government, taking upon itself to rule a nation, must certainly be a mere hindrance to the revolution. It cannot fail to be made up of the most incongruous elements, and its very essence as a government is conservatism. It will do nothing but hold back the revolution in communes ready to go ahead, without being able to inspire backward communes with the breath of revolution. The same within a commune in revolt. Either the communal government will merely sanction accomplished facts and then it will be a useless and dangerous bit of machinery; or else it will wish to take the lead to make rules for what has yet to be freely worked out by the people themselves if it is to be really viable. It will apply theories where all society ought to work out fresh forms of common life with that creative force which springs up in the social organism when it breaks its chains and sees new and larger horizons opening before it. The men in power will obstruct this outburst, without doing any of the things they might themselves have done if they had remained among the people, working with them in the new organization instead of shutting themselves up in ministerial offices and wearing themselves out in idle debates. The revolutionary government will be a hindrance and a danger; powerless for good, formidable for ill; therefore, what is the use of having it?"

However natural and just, this argument still runs counter to a great many prejudices stored up and accredited by those who have had an interest in maintaining the religion of government, side by side with the religions of property and of theology.

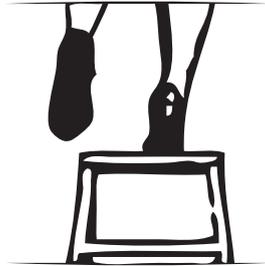
This prejudice, the last of the three, still exists and is a danger to the coming revolution, though it already shows signs of decay. "We will manage our business ourselves without waiting for the orders of a government, we will trample underfoot those who try to force us to accept them as priests, property owners or rulers," the workers have begun to say. We must hope that the anarchist party will continue to combat government worship vigorously, and never allow itself to be dragged or enticed into a struggle for power. We must hope that in the years which remain to us before the revolution the prejudice in favor of government may be so shaken that it will not be strong enough to draw off the people on a false route.

The communes of the next revolution will not only break down the state and substitute free federation for parliamentary rule; they will part with parliamentary rule within the commune itself. They will trust the free organization of food supply and production to free groups of workers which will federate with like groups in other cities and villages not through the medium of a communal parliament but directly, to accomplish their aim.

They will be anarchist within the commune as they will be anarchist outside it and only thus will they avoid the horrors of defeat, the furies of reaction.

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October 17, 2009



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Author: Pëtr Kropotkin
Title: The Commune of Paris
Publication date: 1880

Retrieved on February 25th, 2009 from
http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/kropotkin/pcommune.html
The original English version appeared as Freedom Pamphlets, no. 2, London: W. Reeves,
1895, based on the original French version published in Le Révolté, March 20, 1880