

have given birth (as it did in Northern Europe) to new municipal oligarchies around a colonialist merchant plutocracy. But such is the fate of all social movements: they break the old order and inspire a new one that begins to age as soon as it has taken shape. The *comuneros* never reached such a stage of maturity. Their history, as for all defeated revolutionaries, was obscured by the brightness of their myth. Yet, on the basis of available historical research, the most innovative and perhaps most lasting aspect of their project was the affirmation of the free city as a superior form of life and government. As a political revolution, the *Comunidades* of Castilla failed. As a citizen movement they brought together forever in the collective memory of the Spanish people the idea of freedom, the right of municipal self-government, and the hope for a better life.

### 3

## Cities and Revolution: The Commune of Paris, 1871

### Introduction

The *Commune* of Paris has generally been considered, particularly in the Marxist tradition, as the first major proletarian political insurrection.<sup>32</sup> For Lenin, the experience of the *Commune* demonstrated at the same time the possibility of a politically orientated working class movement and the necessity of the destruction of the bourgeois state, to be replaced, if the revolution was to last, by a proletarian state.<sup>33</sup> There is in fact a classical debate between the Leninist view and the libertarian interpretation of the *Commune*, or in more French terms, between the *Jacobins* and the *Proudhoniens*.<sup>34</sup> Was the *Commune* a process of radicalization of republican ideals when confronted with the military defeat of the nation and the collapse of the Second Empire? Was it instead a political revolution furthering the demand for political freedom into a new institutional organization relying upon the project of a voluntary federation of free communes? Or should we maintain the Marxist belief in the potentials of the *Commune* as a socialist revolution, largely frustrated because of the inability of the Utopian liberals to perceive their historical role in the same correct political terms as the active minority of the 'internationalist' socialists?

In fact, our research concerns are somewhat different. Without being able in this text either to reconstruct or to assess such a fundamental debate, we want to call attention to other possible historical meanings of the *Commune*, some of which are full of significance for our understanding of the urban problem. We are particularly interested in exploring the hypothesis, posed by the great Marxist philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, on the *Commune* as an urban revolution.<sup>35</sup> If such an interpretation is correct, the extraordinary impact of the *Commune* on the politics and ideology of the labour movement would be an indication of the historical relationship established between the urban problem and the social movement that holds the central role in the process of capitalist industrialization. Instead of being a retarded continuation of the French Revolution<sup>36</sup> or the announcement of the coming socialist revolution,<sup>37</sup> the

*Commune*, in this perspective, could be considered as the point of contact between the urban contradictions and the emerging labour movement, both in its most archaic aspects (the revolt of the *Sans Culottes* against the abuses of the powerful) and in its anticipatory themes (the self-management of society).

This fundamental dimension of the *Commune*, which Lefebvre has championed, has been largely neglected because of the politicization of the debate between Marxists and Libertarians in relation to its historical meaning. Yet, the careful consideration of the study of this dimension, and the historical evidence for it, might prove to be extremely helpful for our enterprise of exploring the changing relationships between city, society, and the state. We will rely for such an analysis on two essential historical sources for the reconstruction of the events of the *Commune*: the classic history by Lissagaray, himself a *communard*,<sup>38</sup> and the extraordinary research on the trials of the *communards* by Jacques Rougerie, whose preliminary findings were published in 1978.<sup>39</sup> Other works consulted are cited in the endnotes.

### The Communards

Who were the *communards*? What was the social composition of the *Commune*? At first glance, it appears to have been, on the basis of Table 3-1 constructed by Rougerie, a workers' insurrection unlike the insurgency of 1848 or the resistance to the *Coup d'Etat* of 1851. Furthermore, after his examination of the files of the trial against the *Commune*, Rougerie affirms that in almost every case the *communard* was a salaried person. And if clerks still were present among the 1871 revolutionaries, the liberal professions, renters, merchants, and clerks altogether account for only 16 per cent of people arrested in relationship with the

**Table 3.1** Occupational activity of Parisians arrested or deported after the *Commune* of 1871 and after the *Coup d'Etat* of 1851.

(Absolute figures and Proportion over the Basis of 1,000)

Occupation	1871		1871		1851	
	Arrested	Per Thousand	Deported	Per Thousand	Arrested	Per Thousand
Agriculture	398	11	41	13	32	10
Wood industry	2,791	80	234	77	251	86
Textile & garment	1,348	39	103	34	224	76
Shoes	1,496	43	157	51	164	56
Leather	381	11	48	15	27	9
'Travail d'art, article de Paris' (Parisian craft)	2,413	69	221	73	198	67
Printing	925	27	84	27	71	24
Metallurgy	4,135	119	349	115	196	67
Construction	5,458	157	494	163	180	61
Labourers ( <i>Journaliers</i> )	5,198	149	549	181	149	50
Clerks	2,790	80	295	97	188	64
Domestic servants and janitors	1,699	49	52	17	93	31
Small merchants	1,516	43	104	34	237	81
Liberal professions and businessmen	1,169	33	76	25	380	129
TOTAL	34,722	1,000	3,023	1,000	2,924	1,000

Source: Jacques Rougerie, *Proces des Communards* (Paris: Gallimard-Archives, 1978).

**Table 3.2** Comparison between the occupational activity of the Parisian population, of the people who insurged during the *Commune*, and of the people deported after the Paris *Commune*, 1871. (Percentages over the Total Figure of each Category)

<i>Occupational Activity</i>	<i>Population of Paris (%)</i>	<i>People Insurged (%)</i>	<i>People Deported (%)</i>
Metallurgy	8	12	12
Construction	10	17	18
Labourers ( <i>Journaliers</i> )	20	14	15
Textile and garment and shoes industry	8	9	9
Artisans and printers	10	10	9

*Source:* Jacques Rougerie, *Proces des Communards*.

*Commune*, while they were 27 per cent in 1851. Thus, most *communards* were manual workers. But what kind of workers? According to Rougerie, they were salaried workers of the new industrial activities, and especially of the metallurgy. But if we have a closer look at Rougerie's own data presented in Table 3-2, the picture is somewhat more complex.

Among the insurgents the most important group, and most over-represented in relationship to the active Parisian population as a whole, was that of the construction workers. They were not representative of the modern industry. In fact they expressed the fantastic urban development and urban renewal activities in Paris during the Second Empire, under the rule of one of the most ambitious city planners in history, Haussmann. If we consider that unskilled labourers (*journaliers*) accounted for 14 per cent of the *communards* (though under-represented in relationship to the population), and that many of them were also probably employed in miscellaneous urban services including public works, it appears that Rougerie's conclusion is inadequate since it proceeds from the arbitrary assimilation of metallurgy, construction, and labourers. Only the first activity is related directly to the expansion of the modern industry. The same preponderance of construction workers appears if we consider people deported after the *Commune*, who were likely to have been the most active. The traditional artisan activities account for 18 per cent of them, the new industry (metallurgy) for 12 per cent; and activities related to the process of urbanization for 25 per cent to 33 per cent, depending upon the estimate of the population of *journaliers* involved in public works and urban services. Therefore, if it is true that the great majority of *communards* were workers, most of them were not industrial proletarians, but traditional artisans and construction workers related to the process of urban growth. Rougerie using a different argument also comes to a similar conclusion after considering the very archaic character of the process of work accomplished by the metallurgical industry. In sum, Rougerie writes, '... there are no true artisans, nor true proletarians. We observe an intermediate working class, although somewhat closer to its past.'<sup>40</sup>

Thus the use of the term 'worker' is misleading when we really want to determine if the *Commune* was in fact a major episode in the class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat over the control of industrialization. What Rougerie's data (the most complete available) show is the very popular social base of the *Commune*, formed by a mixture between the artisan worker and the urban labourers, with a very small ingredient of the new industrial proletariat.

To complete the social profile of the *communards*, we must add two essential remarks. First, if the petty bourgeoisie represents a clear minority among the insurgents, it clearly holds the majority among the elected officials of the *Commune*: there were only 25 workers among the

90 delegates elected in the revolutionary municipal elections of 26 March 1871. The great majority of the assembly (*La Commune*), according to Lissagaray, was formed by 'petty bourgeois': clerks, accountants, doctors, teachers, lawyers, and journalists.<sup>41</sup> Even more important, the majority of officers and cadres of the military force of the *Commune*, the *Garde Nationale*, was composed of clerks, printers, and small merchants.<sup>42</sup>

Thus, to summarize, the actors of the *Commune* were only a very marginal fraction of the industrial proletariat. The empirical analysis of the social profile of the *Communards* reveals a petty bourgeois elite, allied to some artisan workers, leading an army controlled by other petty bourgeois of a lower level and supported by a mass of salaried manual workers, most of whom were related not to the process of industrialization but to urban growth and real estate speculation. And if we give some credit to the estimate, proposed by Lissagaray, of 300,000 Parisians out of work at the moment of the *Commune*,<sup>43</sup> we can conclude that its characterization as a proletarian insurrection is, at least, doubtful. It appears, instead, as a popular revolution, far more popular than any other Parisian revolution. It is particularly noticeable that there was absolutely no participation by the liberal bourgeoisie. Yet the *communards* were not the *Canuts de Lyon*, proto-martyrs of the industrial class struggle. They were the people of a great city in the process of mutation, and the citizens of a Republic in quest of its institutions.

Last, but not least, the *Commune* was decisively an action by the women. Lissagaray, an eyewitness, writes, 'Women started first, as they did during the revolution. Those of 18 March, hardened by the war in which they had a double share of misery, did not wait for their men.'<sup>44</sup>



**Plate 3.1** The barricade of Chaussée Ménilmontant, 18 March 1871. (By kind permission of the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.)

It seems that their role during the *Commune* was crucial, and not just because of a few legendary figures such as Louise Michel, one of the few leaders to stand up in front of the military judges during the trials, and Elisabeth Dmitrieva, president of the Women's Unions and probably the connection between Karl Marx and the Commune. Women were the most active element in the mobilizations by the people, in the combat with the army, in the neighbourhood meetings, and in the street demonstrations. The great majority of these women were of 'common' origin. Their family situations were generally 'irregular', – according to the bourgeois morality – most of them living unmarried with men, and many being separated from their husbands. The press and the legal system were extremely harsh to these women, dubbed the *petroleuses*, because of the derogatory rumour according to which they carried bottles of petrol to start fires in the houses of bourgeois families. Many of the women that went on trial as *communards* had a criminal record – a fact that reveals the conditions in the nineteenth century cities where common women were often used as a source of pleasure by rich men and a source of profit by poor men. The world of lower class women was always on the edge of urban deviance.

Women's active participation in the *Commune* emphasises the popular and urban character of a social uprising in which the barricades were built more to mark spatially a social community in each neighbourhood than to be effective defenses against an army whose mobility was greatly facilitated by the military vision that Haussmann had applied in his city planning: large straight avenues to open the way for the charges of cavalry and the bullets of guns.

## The Programme of the Commune

How did the *communards* define themselves – more as people of Paris, or more as workers of the capital? At the level of the official proclamations of the *Commune*, there is no doubt as citizens (*citoyens*). Such was the term employed in the 'Declaration to the French People' of 19 April (1871), in the Electoral Manifesto of 26 March, and in most interventions in the debates of the Commune, of the Central Committee of the *Garde Nationale*, and in the *Comite-des-Vingt-Arrondissements*. Yet history has generally recalled another image, portrayed by a single but notorious declaration, published in the *Officiel* (the journal of the *Commune*) on 21 March, which spoke on behalf of the *proletaires*. This was the text cited and used in length by Marx, described as an anonymous statement by Rougerie, but by Lissagaray as a manifesto written by Moreau, Rogeard and Longuet. It seems to have been directly inspired by the *Commune's* socialist minority, linked to the *Internationale*, that relentlessly argued for the *Republique Sociale* and the right of workers to self-emancipation.

In fact such a two-fold expression would seem an accurate self-portrait for the *Commune*, for most of the leaders, and probably most of the *communards*, considered themselves citizens, fighting for the Republic and for Paris. For the socialist minority, either *blanquiste* or *internationalist*, they were citizens because they were proletarians, since only the working class was able to defend at that historical moment freedom and the country, given the betrayal of the bourgeoisie in collusion with the Prussians and the supporters of the *ancien régime*: the *Republique* would be *Republique Sociale* or would not be at all. But whether majority or minority, they were agreed that they were Parisians. The 'Declaration to the French People' speaks of the '... aspirations and wishes of the Paris population ...' and makes clear that, 'Once again, Paris works and suffers for the rest of France.' On the other hand, the famous article of 21 March, cited by Marx, describes the movement as being the action of '... the proletarians of the capital city.'<sup>45</sup> This self-definition as Parisian was a major theme of the *Commune*. It was

as representative of Paris that the *Commune* opposed the national parliament controlled by a rural majority that chose to locate itself in Versailles, the spatial symbol of the absolutist monarchy. Furthermore, parliament retaliated by threatening to relinquish Paris of its role as the nation's capital. As a matter of fact, most *communards* were as convinced of this as Lissagaray that '... the rural people, weak, unorganized, bounded by a thousand ties, could only be freed by the cities and the cities were dependent upon Paris.'<sup>46</sup> The *Commune* cannot be understood without this self-affirmation of the Parisian people and of the revolutionary role they intended to assume as the social and political vanguard of a rural France and of a monarchist Europe. It was a local society self-proclaimed as the universal revolutionary embryo. Louis XIV had declared, 'The state is me'. The people of Paris were replying, 'Society is us'. To the centralism of the French state, the *Commune* of Paris matched the centralism of a local civil society. This Parisian messianism imprinted itself forever on French culture and politics, and their relationship to the rest of the world.

This is why the first demand of the *Commune*, and the trigger of the movement, was the re-establishment of municipal freedom and its first political act was the organization of the first municipal elections of nineteenth century Paris. Furthermore the *communards* made it clear that they were asking for '... serious municipal liberties.'<sup>47</sup> These were to be the suppression of the *Prefecture* controlling the city's authority; the right for the 'National Guard' to name its chiefs and modify its organization; the proclamation of the Republic as the legal form of government; and the prohibition to the army to enter the territory of the municipality of Paris; – in effect, an institutional framework where the municipal liberties could be used to establish the self-government of the local civil society. And for the rest of France.' The absolute autonomy of the *Commune* extended to all localities in France, ensuring each one (of the localities) the integrity of their rights.' Also, it was intended '... to find in the great central administration, delegation of federated communes, the practical fulfilment of the same principles ...' that Paris had decided to put at work in its own institutions (Declaration of 19 April 1871) What were these principles?

#### *The Right for Each Commune to Decide:*

'The vote of the communal budget; the establishment and distribution of taxes; the direction of local services; the organization of the judiciary, of the police, and the education; the administration of communal property.'

'The power of the municipality in the designation, by election or appointment, with full responsibility and permanent right of control and revocation of all judges and communal officers of all kinds.'

'The absolute guarantee of individual freedom, of freedom of conscience and freedom of work.'

'The permanent intervention of citizens in the communal affairs, by the free expression of their ideas and the free defense of their interests.'

'The organization of the Urban Defense, and of the National Guard, that elects its chiefs, and has full responsibility to keep order in their city.'

#### *Declaration to the French People, 19 April 1871*

Thus, the *Commune* was primarily a municipal revolution, with the qualification that such an orientation does not imply any parochial view; on the contrary, the transformation of the state as a whole was at stake, with the municipal institution as the keystone of a new political

construction. Such a perspective was not only the result of the Proudhonian inspiration identifiable in the authors of the Declaration of 19 April, but was a constant theme found in all the actions and discourses of the *communards* in Paris, and was likewise present in the attempts to extend the *Commune* to the provinces of Lyon, Marseille, Toulouse, Le Creusot, and the Limousin. In Saint Etienne, a predominantly working class industrial city, the *Communards* killed the *prefet*<sup>48</sup> who was an industrial capitalist. In spite of the violent confrontation involving workers, the *communards* did not express any kind of anti-capitalist feelings, and their main claim was concerned again with the request for municipal liberties.

To be understood in its precise meaning, the dominance of the municipal theme among the *communards* needs to be placed within the framework of the division between Paris and the provinces, the city and the countryside. The great city as the nest of the freedom was the decisive element needed to escape the control of the central state, which would still likely to be dominated by the conservative majority. Because the conquest of local autonomy could allow the local civil societies of the cities to fully express their revolutionary inclination, municipal freedom was understood as a fundamental political asset for the forces struggling for social change. We are far away from the limited horizon of Jeffersonian localism. The municipal leanings of the *Commune* were not the expression of a particular taste for one version of political philosophy. It was a social programme that only makes sense when replaced in the specific historical context of the political relationship between cities and countryside in late nineteenth century France. With this hypothesis in mind, the *Commune's* strange mixture of revolutionary Jacobinism and Proudhonian federalism, observed to the great astonishment of many historians, seems less incomprehensible.

Along with this fundamental goal of municipal liberties, the *Commune* also put forward some basic socio-economic demands, the first of which was the cancellation of all housing rents that were due, together with a fair legislation on the payment of commercial leases and financial loans. The spark that triggered the *Commune* (along with the attempt to disarm the National Guard on 18 March) was, in fact, the approval on 13 March of a decree requiring the forceful payment of all due rents and commercial debts. According to Lissagaray, 'Three hundred thousand workers, shopkeepers, artisans, small businessmen and merchants who had spent their savings during the siege [by the Prussians] and did not yet have any earnings were thrown into bankruptcy, depending on the will of the landlord. Between 13 and 17 March there were 50,000 legal demands for seizure.'<sup>49</sup> That is why once the insurrection was victorious, on 21 March, the Central Committee of the National Guard banned the sale of personal objects deposited in the *Mont-de-Piete*<sup>50</sup> to guarantee the loans. The same decision extended for a month the term to pay commercial debts, and explicitly forbade any tenants' eviction at the request of the landlords. So, the first series of social measures taken by the *Commune* did not concern the control over the means of production or over the working conditions. They were aimed, instead, at protecting people against speculation and at stopping the process of massive tenant eviction that was under way due to the dramatic increase in housing rents caused by urban growth and war calamities.

Even the measures taken later by the *Commune's* Delegation of Work and Exchange, controlled by the internationalist socialist Leo Frankel, were directed against the injustice of the bosses rather than towards the establishment of workers' control. They were: suppression of night work for the bakers; proposal of suppressing the pawnshops; and a ban on the arbitrary retention of a part of the workers' wages by management as a means of enforcing labour discipline. There was, in fact, a major initiative with a socialist orientation: the Decree of 16 April that opened the possibility of transforming all factories and shops abandoned by their owners into workers' co-operatives. But it must be noted that such a collectivization of

the means of production concerned only the bourgeois on the run (actually quite a few), and still foresaw the voluntary reselling of the property of the workers if the owner should return. In fact, only 10 shops in all were requisitioned and reorganized under workers' self-management. Once again we can perceive the active presence of a socialist minority that was unable to direct the movement as a whole. The relationships with the capitalists were less troubled than one might imagine in the midst of a social revolution. If the Mechanical Workers' Union was considering taking control of the Usine Barriquand, one of the biggest industrial factories, some other companies not only continued to work, but two of the most important, Godillot and Cail, equipped the insurgent National Guard with shoes and machine guns. The *Commune* respectfully asked for loans from the Bank of France, whose gold and treasury bills could have been confiscated without any problem, and did not attack the banks or any other capitalist institution. The social goals of the *communards* were aimed at fighting speculation more than abolishing exploitation.

Municipal freedom and the well-being of the people were the main concerns in the programme of the *Commune*. It also fought for *La Republique* and for *La France*, but in a much more tenuous manner. To be sure, the revolution of the *Commune* was sparked by the defense both of Paris against the Prussians and of the Republic against the monarchists. But of the two, republicanism was less important to the *Commune*; with the exception of Delescluze, all republican representatives, including those with leftist feelings, chose to join the parliament in Versailles and remained there throughout the entire process of confrontation and repression of the *Commune*. The leader of the left, Gambetta, openly opposed the *Commune*. The *communards* did not need the guns of the National Guard to preserve the Republic in 1871. The conservative majority of the parliament was a better political formula for the preservation of social order than the shaken remnants of the defeated Second Empire. The *communards* were republicans, but the *Commune* was not an act of republicanism.

What about the patriotic theme? According to Rougerie, this was one of the great motivations of the *Commune*, the popular indignation against the military defeat and the betrayal of the nation by incompetent and selfish politicians. These feelings were clearly very strong during the siege of Paris and in the months preceding the *Commune*. But it does not seem that the patriotic motive was a real driving force in the popular movement. One of the important achievements of the leaders of the *Commune*, before 18 March, was to convince the National Guard to abandon its project of a desperate armed resistance against the Prussian army when the latter decided to occupy some strategic military positions in Paris. Also, during the *Commune*, an implicit status quo was observed between the *communards* and the occupying troops. Lissagaray, an exalted patriot and an advocate of all-out resistance against the Prussians, actually recognized the reality of negotiations between the *Commune* and the Prussian Army, which did nothing to stop the *communard* militia when it occupied the Fort of Vincennes, theoretically under Prussian jurisdiction. Rougerie's arguments refer more to the National Guard than to the *Commune* as a whole. And, if the Guard was the crucial element of the insurrection during the two month process of the *Commune*, the main enemy was clearly identified as Versailles whose army was the real threat to the *communards*. On this particular point, Rougerie's view is probably biased by his source – the proceedings of the trials. Most *communards* used their republican and patriotic motivations as an argument to justify their action, playing down social and political principles in the hope of alleviating their punishment. In fact, the *Commune* co-existed with the Prussians. Yet this reality does not mean that the *communards* were the accomplices of the invader; as the reactionary press tried to make believe. In fact, Bismarck consciously facilitated the repression of the *Commune* by repatriating 60,000 war prisoners to make possible the reconstruction of the Versailles army. Once the

*Commune* was defeated, during the *Semaine Sanglante*, the Prussians stopped hundreds of escaping *communards*, sending them back to their killers. So there was no complicity between the *Commune* and the Prussian army but a common convenience to wait and see. The Parisian people hated the Prussians, but did not resist the foreign occupation: they used their situation to denounce the government of Versailles which was more willing to mobilize an army against Paris than against Berlin.

The *Commune* was born in a context of patriotic exaltation and republican ideals, but the *communards* died for the freedom of their city and the welfare of their people.

## The Adversary of the Commune

The general line of our argument on the historical significance of the *Commune* appears to be strongly reinforced by the *communards*' own definition of their social adversary. Let us begin by stating the adversary was neither the bourgeoisie, nor the capitalists. And such a lack of direct opposition was reciprocated by the capitalists. On the contrary, during the massive arrests after the *Commune*, industrial entrepreneurs often went to the police to give personal letters and favourable statements to guarantee the 'good morality' of their workers, frequently obtaining their freedom. It is obvious that such a 'generosity' was influenced by the shortage in skilled workers in a city ready to go back to the serious business of capitalist development. Yet the bourgeoisie's attitude was a clear sign that this was not a direct confrontation between capital and the industrial proletariat, since each time such a confrontation occurred, the entrepreneurs were the first to ask for exemption from punishment of labour militants.

In fact, those apparently possessed by hatred against the *communards* during the savage repression that followed their defeat were the urban landlords and their janitors (the universally hated Parisian *concierges*). The unpaid rents of the *Commune* period were brutally punished with tenants categorically denounced as '*communards*' and exposed to possible imprisonment, deportation, or, in the early days, execution. The *Commune* of Paris holds the dubious title of being the most repressed rent strike in history.

For the *communards*, the enemy was also the speculator, the stockpiling merchant, the smuggler, the lender, the merchant who betted on the misery of the families to seize their scarce property, or the lender who charged abusive interest, exploiting dramatic needs. In sum, the enemy was the manipulator of the rules of exchange, not the one who appropriated the means of production. The *communards* opposed the ugly merchant, not the exploitative capitalist.

But the main enemies, as the violence of the *Commune* clearly emphasized, were the priests and the police – that is, the personal expressions of the *ancien régime*, the controllers of everyday life, the accountants of the old morality. They were the ones who were taken hostage and were the ones who were shot when the despair of defeat joined the desire for revenge against the coming massacre. Here we are still in the midst of the French Revolution – the obsession with the reactionary Church that had survived the rise of liberty and with a bureaucratic state that was rebounding with even greater repressive powers. To overcome the backwardness of rural France, it was necessary to curb the Church's cultural hegemony. To supersede a centralized state, it was essential to crush its police. For the *Commune* of Paris surplus value was a historical abstraction, but the *curé* and the *gendarme* were the daily nightmares and obvious targets.

This was not then a proletarian and socialist revolution unaware of its own historical

meaning, but a popular citizen revolution, fighting for municipal freedom and for social justice and to defend the Republic against the *ancien régime*. Was it, at the same time, an 'urban revolution' and if so, in what sense? And what do we add to the historical knowledge by proposing such an interpretation?

### **An Urban Revolution**

The *Commune* of Paris was an urban revolution at three different levels. First of all, it was a movement in opposition to the entire rural society, that is not only to the dominating classes but to the totality of classes and groups that formed the social world of the French countryside in the nineteenth century. Not only was it an urban based movement, but a mobilization self-defined as Parisian, in spite of the fact that three-quarters of the *communards* arrested were born in the provinces. Such a 'Parisianism' was not a form of primitive localism, but the affirmation of a local society whose economic and social development required a large autonomy in relationship to a political order based on an elected parliament, in which the interests of local societies far behind the level of social development and political consciousness reached by Paris still predominated. In fact, the established tradition of French centralism has always created a gap between Paris and the provinces, so that the problem of the centre and of the periphery have never been placed in the same historical problematic. In the *Commune* of Paris there was little intra-industrial opposition (bourgeoisie versus proletariat) nor a confrontation between the industrial and agricultural worlds. There was, instead, a political opposition between the city and the countryside, even if the Parisian bourgeoisie scared by the process of social radicalization of the *Commune*, finally rallied the dominant rural classes.

There was a second urban dimension of the *Commune*, closer to our contemporary concerns, and its most popular demand: the cancellation of rents, and through this measure, the claim to curb the speculation associated with the housing crisis. It was, as we have said, the first official measure approved by the *Commune*. To understand the significance of the matter, we should remember the conditions which were present in Paris at the end of the Second Empire.<sup>51</sup> The situation was characterized by an accelerated process of urban growth that brought to the city hundreds of thousands of poor provincial immigrants with no place to live. Many of these Parisians were those same construction workers and labourers that formed the main contingent of the *communards*. They were particularly sensitive to the housing issues, since they were the producers of an essential good to which they hardly had access. Furthermore, the housing crisis was not only caused by the massive immigration from the provinces but was also the consequence of massive displacement resulting from Haussmann's gigantic restructuring of Paris.<sup>52</sup> He opened up the city by tracing the grand boulevards, undertook public works so that the urban area could be expanded, and provided public services so that real estate businesses could build, buy, sell, and make fantastic profits. Land speculation became the most important field of investment for financial capital, and was for many years counted *the* substantial 'game to play'. With such a grandiose scheme and such immediate incentives, the city was rapidly transformed. Popular neighbourhoods disappeared or were gentrified. The new bourgeoisie in Paris expanded towards the West, on the ruins of the old *faubourgs*. The intra-urban exodus of displaced tenants rejoined the flow of immigrants to overcrowd the remaining popular wards, particularly at Belleville in the East, Montmartre in the North, and around the Butte-aux-Cailles, in the South-east: they all became the key points of the *Commune*.

The landlords took advantage of the acuteness of the housing crisis. They packed the tenants into dilapidated, tiny apartments; they charged very high rents; they policed the buildings

with their *concierges*; and they proceeded to evict immediately those who delayed payments, since a very tight market guaranteed them full occupancy.

Given this background, the indignation of the Parisians is easily understood, when on 13 March 1871, the Parliament of Versailles passed a law authorizing eviction of tenants who had not paid their rent during the siege of Paris. Not only did they foresee a tidal wave of forceful evictions (that actually took place after the *Commune*), but such a law underlined the corruption of a government actively committed to the speculators. The real estate businesses remaking Paris for their profit and the landlords disciplining their tenants were much more immediate sources of concern for the people of Paris than the industrial shadow of capitalist exploitation.

Nevertheless if we are entitled to consider the *Commune* of Paris as an urban social movement, this is because it was primarily a municipal revolution, as we have tried to argue. By municipal revolution we mean a popular mobilization aimed at radically transforming the political institutions that represented the local society, both in their internal organization and in their relationship to the central state. *Vis-à-vis* the state, the *Commune* claimed the right to local autonomy and the extension of local governments' administration over all spheres of social life. *Vis-à-vis* the people, the *Commune* asked for the democratization of political institutions, advocating the permanent participation of citizens in the municipal government by means of a decentralization of power towards the ward committees.

At the third (and more general) level, the reconstruction of the state on the basis of the communal model was at stake. For the *Commune* of Paris, the city was essentially a particular political culture, a form of popular democracy, articulating grassroots democracy and representative democracy to reorganize the nation by the connection between successive levels of political delegation. Some observers and political personalities have blamed the lack of effectiveness of the *Commune* on the absence of a coherent revolutionary leadership.<sup>53</sup> In fact, the *Commune* elected a *Comite de Salut Public* with full powers: power that was never able to be exercised, since each ward and each administration acted autonomously and co-operated on the basis of reciprocal exchanges. When the *polytechnicien* Roussel, the Defense Delegate, tried to organize a unified and disciplined army, he was disobeyed, and finally arrested, by a National Guard that was used to electing its own chiefs. We can criticize the incapacity of the *communards* to seize state power and to keep it, but we cannot ignore their coherence in relationship to their own goals, namely the construction of new political institutions based upon the notions of federalism, municipalism, and popular participation. This coherence, and their stubborn refusal to rebuild a centralized state, made their defeat inevitable once the *Commune* was confined to Paris.

Thus, if by urban we understand,<sup>54</sup> at once, the reference to a specific spatial form (opposed to the rural form), the growing importance of a particular category of means of consumption (housing and urban services), and the autonomous political expression of a local and civil society (struggling to survive the pressures of the central state), we must accept that the *Commune* of Paris was an urban revolution, on the basis of historical discussion.

This seems to be the social meaning of the *Commune* in spite of the fact that the insurrection was triggered by a series of specific political events: the defeat in the war with Prussia; the breakdown of the Second Empire; and the hardships of the republican transition.

The *Commune* left a very important trace on the city, as well as on the politics and ideology of the twentieth century. Ideologically, the myth of the *Commune* simultaneously inspired the Marxist-Leninist theory of the state and that of self-managerial federalism – an unlikely combination. Politically, the fierce repression that followed the defeat of the *communards*<sup>55</sup> made the French labour movement and French socialism more revolutionary and more

centralist: more revolutionary because the blood of the martyrs reminded them for many years of the difficulty of introducing an alternative social logic into a democratic state still dominated by a ruling class ready to kill to preserve its interests; more centralist because the municipal perspective had proved to be a failure – to succeed it was still necessary to climb to the summit of the political system. Such an understandable characterization, which resembled Tsarist Russia more than republican France, deeply influenced the political vision of the French left for decades. Municipal politics were considered as a mere step towards 'real' power, given the conception of the state as a crude instrument of power. The underestimation of the importance of processes of local civil societies and indeed the tendency to ignore issues of everyday life was characteristic of those plotting the avenues to state power. The consequences were very grave for the chances of developing a new cultural hegemony and a new political legitimacy for the socialist project in France.

The defeat of the *Commune* also had a dramatic lasting effect on the city of Paris. The government tightened its control, appointing the *Prefet de Police* to govern the city, and, in effect, the Parisians lost all political autonomy, something they only regained in 1977. And yet before giving back political freedom, the ruling elites took good care to favour the *embourgeoisement* of Paris through social segregation and urban renewal.<sup>56</sup> The absence of any power in the Parisian municipal institutions left the city without any defense against real estate speculation and, later on against the functional arrangements required to fulfil the needs of industrial and financial capital. As a result, Paris enjoys the most permanent housing crisis of all Western capitals. Thus the *Versaillais* finally conquered Paris. In April 1977, the first mayor of Paris with real power in almost 200 years was democratically elected. He was Jacques Chirac, the conservative leader of the neo-Gaullist right wing. Yet in 1977 only 1.5 million people were living in the city of Paris, as opposed to the total 9.4 million of the Paris Metropolitan Area. The remaining millions were living in the suburbs, most of them governed by socialist-communist municipal councils. They are the real heirs of the *Commune*.

The *Commune* is still alive fulfilling the wish cried by the *communards* at the time of their execution. It lives on as a message that the city exists against the state. It says as well that if most social movements are not class struggles (the *Commune* itself was not), they often challenge those institutions which are used both to control peoples' everyday life and to organize the power of the ruling classes. Because of this we can understand how an urban revolution became such a source of inspiration for the labour movement. The experience of the *Commune* nourished working class consciousness when it came to confronting the major obstacle to be met beyond the gates of the factory: the state. The labour movement, relying on its historical role as the class of producers and strengthened by the experience of industrial discipline, would eventually be able to successfully fight the capitalist state, penetrating it in parts and destroying it in others. Yet, by the same historical process, the working class movement was itself penetrated or absorbed by the state in many countries and at different levels. The *Commune*, at once an archaic urban revolt and an anticipatory communal Utopia, sank in a sea of blood. But its themes of grassroots participation and municipal democracy are today more appealing to us than the anthem of proletarian dictatorship, whose only lasting sounds are those of the chains forged on its behalf. Yet the labour movement could not accomplish the municipal revolution and nor could the *Commune*, an urban social movement, undertake the socialist revolution.