Paradigm for Revolution?

The Paris Commune 1871-1971

Eugene Kamenka Editor

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Eugene Kamenka

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Australian National University Press
Canberra 1972

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Preface

In March 1871, in the aftermath of France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the workers, radicals and 'little people' of Paris rose in revolt. Napoleon III had surrendered to the Germans; the government and the armies of his Second Empire had collapsed. News of each defeat in that short, disastrous war had been met by mounting protest and unrest, especially in Paris, always the centre of radicalism and revolution. Thiers' Government of National Defence had capitulated to the Germans and had agreed to allow German troops to enter the city; on 18 March, the armed people of Paris, the National Guard, seized control of the city. They were protesting against the corruption and cowardice of the Second Empire, against the indecision and empty rhetoric of the legislators who had fled to Tours, Bordeaux and Versailles. They saw themselves as heirs of a great French revolutionary and Parisian tradition, as the carriers of popular initiative and popular courage, as the apostles of liberty, equality and fraternity in the face of mediocrity, self-seeking and financial corruption. They were republican, anti-clerical and, to a large extent and in at least some sense of the word, socialist. The Commune of Paris, proclaimed on 26 March 1871, was dedicated to these principles, to the belief in equality and in the moral grandeur and political capacity of the ordinary, 'little' people. It stood for social justice and for rapid improvement in the living conditions of the workers; it was surrounded, at least initially, by an aura of federalism, decentralisation, and participatory democracy.

For some sixty days the Commune and its armed National Guard controlled Paris. Education was removed from the control or influence of the church; a program of legislation improving working conditions and helping the poor was initiated with some modest provisions; delegates, many of them workingmen, were placed in charge of municipal services and activities and voted to have their wages reduced to those of an ordinary clerk. Meanwhile, outside Paris, Thiers' government, established at Versailles, threatened and screamed in

vilification while the bourgeois world invented and spread more and more calumnies regarding the mob that ruled Paris. On 1 May, as the Versailles troops began to endanger the Commune more seriously, it created a Committee of Public Safety that threatened to embark on a program of arrests and which widened the split between the centralising Blanquist revolutionary majority and the Proudhonian mutualist socialist minority. By the end of May, the government of Thiers and the forces of law and order had captured Paris, overthrown the Commune and acted against its members and supporters with a brutality which claimed, in a few weeks, more than twice as many victims as had suffered in the three years of terror that followed the Great French Revolution of 1789. In the one Week of Blood toward the end of May more than half the public buildings in Paris went up in flames; before the end of 1871, it has been claimed, nearly one hundred thousand Parisians had suffered death, imprisonment, exile or transportation.

The Paris Commune was an event in the history of France. It has also been seen as an event in the history of socialism and of revolutionary socialism in particular. Karl Marx, in the impassioned address which he wrote on behalf of the First International while the Versailles troops were still butchering the Communards and their families, proclaimed the Commune a glorious harbinger of a new society. Its martyrs, he said, would be enshrined in the great heart of the working class. Its social organisation and its ways of working, limited and temporary as they may have been, were for him and for many of his followers indicators of the great social regeneration that will become possible when the victory of the proletariat has been won and the State as a separate institution has been eradicated from social life. The Russian Revolution of 1917, as seen by Lenin, the 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' in China in 1966 and the years that followed, the May events in Paris in 1968, have all been seen, by some men at least, as attempts to bring into reality the spirit and the message of the Paris Commune of 1871. At a time when many socialist radicals have become disillusioned with the classical Soviet Marxist emphasis on industrialisation and centralised public authority, when they look to revolutionary ardour and popular participation, the Paris Commune has again been pushed forward — by some at least — as a paradigm for revolution, as a foreshadowing of the glorious future that socialism and revolution can vouchsafe for mankind.

In July of this year — the centenary year of the rise and the defeat of the Paris Commune — the History of Ideas Unit in the Australian National University organised a series of four public lectures to consider the meaning of the Paris Commune and its relevance for modern revolutionary theories and modern revolutionary hopes. Professor Rose, who has worked on the extreme radicals of the French Revolution, the *Enragés*, and on Babeuf, looked at the Commune as an event in French history; Professor Gough, another historian,

interested in French Catholicism, considered the Commune as part of the history of anti-clericalism. Dr Rubel, the distinguished French Marxologist and historian of socialism, spoke on socialism and the Commune, and I endeavoured, in the final lecture, to assess the significance of the Paris Commune for a socialist theory of society and to gauge its connection or lack of connection with the revolutionary strivings of today. In this volume I have collected these four lectures, together with what seems to me to be a splendid paper by Dr F.B. Smith, which was first presented in more professional seminar discussions of Marxism and the Commune that the History of Ideas Unit had organised within the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University. Because our public lectures were primarily concerned with the significance of the Paris Commune as an event in the history of radicalism and of revolutionary movements, they referred only by the way to the character of the forces of law and order that stood behind Thiers and his Government of National Defence. Dr Smith's paper helps to redress the balance; it enables us, even if indirectly, to assess the morality of the Communards in the light of the morality of those who stood against them. To make room for Dr Smith's paper and for a comparatively full chronology of events surrounding the Paris Commune, I have chosen to abridge my own concluding lecture; the main burden of the argument should nevertheless remain evident to the reader.

Canberra
September 1971

Eugene Kamenka

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Chronology of the Principal Events of the Paris Commune, with Selected Background Dates

1848

- February Revolution in Paris; Louis Philippe abdicates; Republic proclaimed.
- June Red Republicans rise against government troops and the National Guard; Paris in state of siege until insurgents surrender; revolutionaries finally suppressed: altogether 16,000 killed and wounded, 8,000 taken prisoner.
- 11 December (Prince) Louis Napoleon elected President of the French Republic.

1850

- 26 September Liberty of the press restricted.

1851

- 2 December *Coup d'état* planned by Louis Napoleon successfully carried out; Legislative Assembly dissolved, universal suffrage established, Paris declared in a state of siege and occupied by troops; 180 members of the Assembly arrested.
- 21 December Popular plebiscite on proposal to make Louis Napoleon's office of President of the Republic a ten-year appointment: 7,473,431 in favour, 641,351 against.

1852

- January Louis Napoleon installed as Prince-President and takes up residence at the Tuileries; 83 members of the Assembly and 575 others arrested for opposing the *coup d'état* of 1851 and taken to Le Havre for transportation to Cayenne; government orders the inscription 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity' to be erased from all public buildings; 'trees of liberty' everywhere hewn down and burnt.
- 21 November Plebiscite on Louis Napoleon's proposal to restore the Empire: 7,824,189 in favour, 253,145 against, 63,326 null.
- 2 December Louis Napoleon declared Emperor under the title Napoleon III.

1854

- 28 March France declares war on Russia.

1855

- 28 April Attempted assassination of the Emperor by Pianort.
- 8 September Attempted assassination of the Emperor by Bellemarre.

1856

- March Amnesty granted to 1,000 political prisoners; peace with Russia signed.

- 1857-1858** First Republicans elected to Legislative Chambers; economic crisis; attempted assassination of the Emperor on 14 January 1858; division of France into five military departments and passing of a Public Safety Bill in February 1858.

- 1859** General Amnesty for political prisoners; many exiles return.

- 1862** A delegation of 750 French workers' delegates, elected by workers throughout France, is sent, under Napoleon III's auspices, to attend the London International Exhibition. In Paris almost 200,000 workers voted to elect 200 of the delegates; on arriving in London a small group led by the

influential working class leader, Henri-Louis Tolain, makes contact with English trade union leaders. Tolain, a convinced Proudhonian and opponent of the 'direct action' revolutionary Blanquists, breaks with bourgeois members of the Paris Workers Commission after returning to Paris. Great distress in French manufacturing districts during the cotton famine of the American Civil War.

1863 Socialist candidates, including Tolain, put forward an independent socialist program for the May elections in France. Tolain visits London on the invitation of English workers to take part in a pro-Polish rally. Committee formed as a result of discussions in London to prepare basis for an international working-class organisation and to draft an Address to French workers.

1864

May Law banning combinations (trade unions) repealed; working class journals founded.

28 September The International Working Men's Association founded on the initiative of English, French and Italian workers at a meeting in St Martin's Hall, London, at which Karl Marx is present by invitation of the organisers. Tolain, Charles Limousin, a maker of pillow lace, and Parrochin, a bronze worker, elected to represent French workers; Karl Marx together with George Eccarius, a German tailor living in London, is to represent the German workers.

1865

19 January Death of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (born 1809).

31 March The law of suspects (or of public safety) suffered to expire.

18 December Riots by republican students at Paris, several of whom are expelled from the Academy of Medicine.

1866

September Inaugural Congress of the (First) International in Geneva.

1867

19 January Imperial decree announcing political reforms, relaxation of restrictions on the press.

September Second Congress of the International in Lausanne, 19 delegates from France.

1868 First and second trials of members of the French section of the International, including Tolain and Eugène Varlin, on charges of illegal political activity. Third Congress of the International in Brussels.

1869

26 April Legislative Assembly of 1863 dissolved.

June Fierce election riots in Paris.

13 July Emperor announces important political changes, including the introduction of ministerial responsibility.

1870

10 January Victor Noir, a radical journalist, killed by Pierre Bonaparte during an interview respecting a challenge sent to the radical journalist Rochefort.

22 January Great excitement amongst populace; prosecution of Rochefort for libel.

7-9 February Rochefort, sentenced to fine and imprisonment, arrested; barricades and riots in Paris, soon quelled.

21-27 March Trial of Pierre Bonaparte for murder of Noir; acquitted but ordered to pay compensation to Noir's family.

April Ministerial crisis over Emperor's proposal to hold a plebiscite to approve proposed liberalising changes in the Constitution.

8 May Plebiscite approves changes: 7,527,379 for, 1,530,909 against.

9-10 May Rioting and barricades in Paris.

June	Third trial of members of the French section of the First International.
15 July	Napoleon III announces war against Prussia; great majority of the Chamber supports war: the Republican Left opposes it.
6 August	French armies under Marshal MacMahon defeated in desperate battle of Woerth.
14 August	300 followers of Blanqui attack the La Villette Fire Station in Paris and march through the streets of the working-class suburb of Belleville calling for the Republic.
14-18 August	French armies under Marshal Bazaine defeated in several long and bloody battles before Metz.
1-2 September	MacMahon's retreating army of about 150,000, accompanied by the Emperor, is defeated at Sedan; Napoleon III surrenders to the King of Prussia.
4 September	Revolution at Paris after news of Emperor's surrender; Republic proclaimed; provisional Government of Defence formed.
7 September	The French Section of the International in Paris calls for the formation of vigilance committees, leading later to the formation of the Central Committee of the Twenty Arrondissements.
8 September	Decree convoking the Constituent Assembly of 750 members to be elected on 16 September.
18 September	Germans begin siege of Paris; population of Paris armed and by 30 September 375,000 National Guards said to be in Paris.
10-11 October	Blanqui, Gustave Flourens, Ledru-Rollin and other Red Republicans defeated in their attempt to establish the Commune at Paris.
27 October	Marshal Bazaine surrenders at Metz with an army of 170,000.
31 October	Riots in Paris at news of surrender; National Guard takes

over the Hôtel de Ville (Town Hall); Committee of Public Safety and Commune of Paris established but dispersed by government troops. Leaders arrested the following day.

- 3 November Government holds plebiscite in Paris to ascertain whether the people support maintaining the power of the Government of National Defence: 557,976 for the Government, 62,638 against.
- 4 November All able-bodied men between 20 and 40 years of age mobilised; mayors of the 20 *arrondissements* (districts) of Paris elected.

1871

- 6 January The Republican Central Committee of the Twenty Arrondissements, which has begun to call itself the Communal Delegation, posts a Red Bill condemning the Government and demanding that it give way to a Commune.
- 22-23 January Disturbances in Paris, including a riot at the Hôtel de Ville, suppressed by the army.
- 28 January Defence Minister Jules Favre meets Bismarck at Versailles and signs capitulation of Paris, which is disavowed three days later by Gambetta on behalf of the delegate government in Bordeaux.
- 8 February General election of a National Assembly.
- 15 February Government cancels pay for National Guard, except on proof of indigence.
- 17 February Thiers made Chief of the Executive Power of the French Republic by agreement of the parties in the Assembly.
- 20-23 February Delegation of the Twenty Arrondissements adopts declaration of principles forming itself into a 'revolutionary socialist party'.
- 26-28 February A strong party of the National Guard seizes 227 cannon, paid for by public subscription in Paris, and transports them to Montmartre and Belleville to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Germans.

- 1-3 March National Assembly ratifies peace terms allowing German occupation of Paris; some 30,000 Germans enter the city and leave 48 hours later.
- 10 March Government, which has already cancelled pay for the National Guard, votes to abolish the moratorium on rents and debts.
- 12 March Blanqui, Flourens and others sentenced to death for the insurrection of 31 October 1870.
- 15 March Central Committee of the Republican Federation of the National Guard elected.
- 18 March Insurrection at Paris; government troops attempt to seize the cannon rounded up by the National Guard and meet with fierce resistance from the populace. Two generals executed by rioting National Guard. Government, unsure of the troops, evacuates the capital; the National Guard takes over the Hôtel de Ville.
- 19 March The Central Committee of the National Guard takes possession of public offices and proclaims elections for the Commune.
- 20 March About 11,000 political prisoners in Paris, including Flourens, freed by the National Guard.
- 22-25 March Commune at Lyons; suppressed.
- 23-27 March Commune at Toulouse; suppressed.
- 24-28 March Commune at St-Etienne; suppressed.
- 24-31 March Commune at Narbonne; suppressed.
- 25 March-4 April Commune at Marseilles; suppressed.
- 26 March Election of the Council of the Commune in Paris, 229,167 electors of the 485,569 on the roll take part in the voting.
- 28 March Solemn proclamation of the Government of the Commune at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris; Central Committee of the National Guard formally resigns its independent authority.

- 29 March The Council of the Commune forms ten commissions to replace the deserted government departments and ministries; declares general moratorium on arrears of rent and on debts; sale of small pledges forbidden.
- 2 April Versailles troops attack village of Courbevoie between Paris and Versailles, provoking Communard fears of treacherous government attack under cover of negotiation between Thiers' government and the Commune; General Cluseret put in charge of the armies of the Commune. Commune decrees the separation of Church and State.
- 3-4 April Three columns of Communards march on Versailles; operation fails; Flourens killed. Communard prisoners shot out of hand as deserters by Versailles armies and commanders, those shot include the Communard leader General Duval. Archbishop Darboy, Archbishop of Paris, arrested by the Commune; Eudes, Delegate for War, forced to give up his commission, replaced by General Cluseret.
- 5 April Commune, in reaction to massacres of Communard prisoners, issues the decree on hostages, providing that anyone suspected of complicity with Versailles should be imprisoned as a hostage and that 'any execution of a prisoner of war or of a partisan of the regular government of Paris [i.e., the Commune] will immediately be followed by the execution of three times as many of the hostages'. (Some 200 priests, former *gendarmes* and members of the regular army living in Paris were arrested on the charge of complicity during April and May.) MacMahon elected head of the Versailles army.
- 6 April Commune's proclamation to the provinces; the guillotine burnt on the Place Voltaire.
- 13 April Commune decree to demolish the Vendôme Column.
- 16 April By-elections for vacant seats on Commune Council; decree providing for the repayment of all debts over three years without interest; decree permitting the take-over of abandoned factories by workers' societies.
- 18 April Reorganisation of Academy of Medicine.

- 19 April Declaration to the French people outlining the program of the Commune.
- 21 April Reorganisation of executive power of the Commune, choice of new delegates to the Commissions, now reduced to nine; revolutionary tribunal established, but inactive.
- 24 April Decree providing fixed payment for public offices (lawyers, bailiffs, etc.).
- 25 April Thiers guarantees safety and liberty to all supporters of the Commune who lay down their arms.
- 27 April Reports of massacre of Communard prisoners at Belle-Epine; apparently only four shot; Commune prohibits fines and deductions from salaries.
- 28 April Proclamation to the people of the provinces; prohibition of night work in bakeries; formation of Commission to organise lay school teaching. Miot proposes formation of a Committee of Public Safety.
- 1 May Versailles troops capture Clamart railway station and the Château-Issy, begin bombarding the capital; General Cluseret, recalled and arrested, replaced by Rossel as Delegate for War; Commune votes to establish Committee of Public Safety: 45 for, 23 against.
- 3-6 May Further advances by Versailles troops; seven Paris newspapers suppressed for pro-Versailles sentiments.
- 7 May Commune decree on pledges: free redemption of objects registered at value of less than 20 francs.
- 8-9 May Versailles troops capture Fort d'Issy, Rossel resigns as Delegate for War to be replaced by Delescluze; Commune votes to renew Committee of Public Safety.
- 10 May Thiers' government signs treaty of peace with Germany.
- 11 May Six more newspapers suppressed by Commune.
- 12 May Proclamation of new Committee of Public Safety to people of Paris.

- 15 May Proclamation of minority group in Commune, opposing the leadership of the Committee of Public Safety.
- 16 May Vendôme Column demolished.
- 17 May Explosion in cartridge factory near Champ de Mars; female battalion formed by the Communards; Commune decrees the immediate enforcement of the law of hostages, abolishes distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children for National Guard pensions.
- 18 May Committee of Public Safety suppresses ten more newspapers.
- 19 May Vaillant, Delegate for Education, decrees secularisation of schools.
- 21 May Last sitting of the full Commune; Versailles troops enter Paris by the Point-du-Jour (St Cloud) Gate: Cluseret tried by Commune, acquitted and freed.
- 22-28 May Bloody Week: heavy fighting in Paris, about 50,000 supporters of Commune reported dead, 25,000 prisoners; nearly a fourth part of Paris destroyed.
- 24 May Versailles troops capture Bank of France and Louvre; Commune moves to the Town Hall of the 11th Arrondissement; first execution of hostages, including Archbishop Darboy. Rigault, Public Prosecutor of the Commune, killed by Versailles troops.
- 25 May Last sitting of the Council of the Commune; Delescluze, after the session, deliberately exposes himself on the barricades and dies.
- 26 May Versailles troops attack Belleville; Commune executes 54 hostages (16 priests and 38 *gendarmes*); many women, fighting and casting petroleum into the flames, shot by Versailles troops.
- 27 May Mass executions of Commune supporters by the Versailles troops begin at Père Lachaise cemetery and continue for some days. The firing squads used the *mitrailleuse*, a multiple barrelled gun, for the executions.
- 28 May Last barricade captured; Varlin dies.

- 29 May Thiers issues decree disarming Paris and abolishing its National Guard.
- 30 May Wholesale execution of prisoners by Marquis de Gallifet; Paris put under martial law.
- November First death sentences at trials of Communards; Rossel executed.

1872

- May First deportations of condemned prisoners.

1880

- 11 July General Amnesty.

**The Paris Commune:
The last episode of the
French Revolution or
the first dictatorship
of the proletariat?**

R B Rose

'We need men of 1793', a revolutionary orator declared in Paris in November 1870. 'Marats, Dantons, Robespierres . . . Belleville will save Europe, only we need at Belleville a man of 1793'.¹ Four months later the people of the working-class suburb of Belleville rebelled against the government of Adolphe Thiers, and with the support of the Faubourg Saint-Antoine and of Montmartre they helped to revive, by the proclamation of the Paris Commune, an institution which had been dead since the fall of Robespierre in 1794. And if it is still less than clear exactly what the Communards were trying to accomplish during the two months of the Commune's existence, apart from keeping Thiers' troops out of the city, some of them at least, the members of the International Working Men's Association, were trying to save Europe, or at any rate to provide an object lesson of how the revolutionary proletariat would save Europe from the evils of tyrannical government, militarism and class oppression. 'Let "country" become an empty word, a valueless administrative division', the Ivry Station and Bercy Section of the International proclaimed on 16 April 1871. ' . . . Our country is wherever life is free and work is done. Peoples, workers, light is arising: let our blindness end. Down with tyrants and despots. France is dead, long live Humanity!'²

Yet at the same time other revolutionaries, the neo-Jacobins and the Blanquists, were quite consciously setting to work to complete the unfinished business of 1789. Two days after the uprising of 18 March 1871 the journal *La Commune* appeared carrying the date 29 ventôse of the year 79, anticipating the formal adoption by the Commune of Paris itself of the revolutionary calendar which had been introduced in 1793 and not abandoned until 1805. In May the Commune, mistaking itself for the Convention, surrendered its authority to a Committee of Public Safety, and the Proudhonist federalist minority

¹ Charles Rihs, *La Commune de Paris, sa structure et ses doctrines*, Geneva, 1955, p.43.

² R.W. Postgate, *Revolution from 1789 to 1906*, New York, 1962, p.298.

found itself, like the Girondin federalists of 1793, threatened with arrest and execution.

Was the Commune the last episode of the French Revolution, or was it the first dictatorship of the proletariat? If those who took part in the uprising themselves did not know the answer, how can subsequent historians be expected to do better? Indeed, ought they to be expected to bother themselves with such academic hair-splitting?

Would it not perhaps be better to ignore the mountain of interpretation which has been piled on this narrow base ever since Marx's classic account of the *Civil War in France*, and to strive instead to set the events of 1871 in their historic context, France between the Second Empire and the Third Republic?

Indeed, one recent American historian, Roger Williams, has gone to the lengths of altogether abolishing the Commune as a distinct revolution, choosing instead to write a book about *The French Revolution of 1870-1871*. The Commune, according to Williams, was thus no more than a transitional episode, 'the most radical moment in a revolution that began with the government of September 4, 1870, and which ended with the constitution of the Third Republic in 1875', while even the Revolution of 1870-1 was itself only another transitional episode, 'in essence the substitution of the conservative Third Republic for the Liberal Empire'.³

If it could be contained within such limits the task of describing the Commune would certainly be a much simpler one, but unfortunately the mountain is not so easily wished away. With the best will in the world no historian can succeed in separating description and interpretation, and the attempt to do so produces at best lifeless history.

In another, and frankly committed, history published in 1965⁴ Henri Lefebvre describes the Commune as the first socialist revolution, and as the only true dictatorship of the proletariat. Despite a certain indigestible quality in Lefebvre's expository style it is clear that a Parisian intellectual, writing in the pre-ambience of the 1968 revolution, has an infinitely greater understanding of the mood and style of the Commune than his American colleague.

It is impossible today to paint a convincing picture of the Commune without adding in some of the colours of Paris in 1968.

'Every time we study the history of the Commune', Trotsky wrote in 1921, 'we see it under a new aspect, thanks to the experience acquired in later revolutionary struggles'.

If part of the furniture of Lenin's tomb is a red flag from the Commune, this is a suitable symbol to remind us of that bleak morning in January 1918 when Lenin triumphantly pointed out to his comrades that the Bolsheviks had

³ Roger L. Williams, *The French Revolution of 1870-1871*, London, 1969, pp.x-xi.

⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *La proclamation de la Commune, 26 mars 1871*, Paris, 1965.

now held power one day longer than their Communard predecessors. Again, when we become aware that the Chinese Communist Party has chosen to commemorate the Commune with special emphasis — rather than the October Revolution — as the first Dictatorship of the Proletariat, and that the basis of the new social order in China is the revolutionary Commune, we cannot avoid seeing the Commune of 1871 ‘under a new aspect’.

Of course Professor Rubel will be looking more fully into the question of the socialist interpretation of the Commune later in these lectures. The purpose of raising these matters at this point is to suggest that the central question, ‘Was the Commune the dictatorship of the proletariat, and if so, what kind of a dictatorship of the proletariat?’, is not after all an academic question, but an essentially practical and relevant question to which some kind of answer must be and shall be given.

But first, let us try to establish the basic facts.

The history of the Paris Commune begins, strictly speaking, on 28 March 1871, when, in defiance of an elected French National Assembly and a legitimate French government, a quorum of elected representatives of the twenty arrondissements of Paris proclaimed the existence of a separate government and assumed legislative and administrative power over the geographical city of Paris. It came to an end on 2 prairial year 79 (25 May), when Charles Del-escluze signed the last formal proclamation and went out to die on the barricades, although forces loyal to the Commune continued to resist Thiers’ massive army of repression until 28 May. In formal terms therefore, the Paris Commune lasted two months, but the events of those two months were part of a revolution, and it is never easy to define when a revolution begins or ends. It could be argued that the proclamation of the Commune was the culmination of a movement which began as early as August 1870, with the first street demonstrations against the disastrous failures of the Second Empire in the early battles of the Franco-Prussian War. Perhaps a brief review of the circumstances would be useful at this point.

Under pressure from the skilful diplomatic manoeuvring of Bismarck and of a war party at court, and cheered on by an outburst of popular chauvinism, a reluctant Napoleon III had been driven to declare war on Prussia over the question of a Hohenzollern candidature to the Spanish throne. The war began in July 1870 and was confidently expected by everybody in France and most people in other countries to take the form of a French invasion of Germany. In fact there was a triumphant march, but it was in the opposite direction, towards Paris rather than Berlin. The French mobilisation was bungled; the French armies, led by a sick and incompetent Emperor, were outnumbered, outgunned and outmanoeuvred.

In the first week of August 1870 a series of French defeats in Alsace and

Lorraine heralded the beginning of the Prussian offensive, and within a fortnight the main French army was encircled at Metz. On 1 September Napoleon III himself was forced to surrender a second army of 87,000 men at Sedan.

Almost with the rigour of a behaviourist experiment every major defeat of the French armies in the field produced a revolutionary response in Paris. The revolution began, like the defeats, in a small way. The frontier battles of early August were followed by the first revolutionary *journée* on Sunday, 14 August, when three hundred followers of Auguste Blanqui mounted an attack on the fire-brigade barracks of the 'Pompiers de la Villette' (they had originally thought of the arsenal at the fortress of Vincennes, but prudently decided on a less heavily defended objective). They then marched through the streets towards Belleville calling for the Republic and 'Death to the Prussians', to the general stupefaction of the onlookers who had not been warned that a revolution was under way.

The 14 August affair was a failure: the Parisians were not ready yet for the Republic. By Sunday, 4 September, however, the situation had changed. The news of the Emperor's surrender at Sedan reached Paris on 3 September and everybody knew that the Prussians were on their way. This time not three hundred but tens of thousands of Parisians filled the streets in a demonstration for the Republic. The Empress Eugénie and the heir to the throne fled to England, and the Legislative Assembly proclaimed a provisional Government of National Defence, led by the Paris deputies. A fortnight later German armies completed the encirclement of Paris and turned the capital of France into a *de facto* city state. From this time on, from 18 September, Paris, though still nominally the seat of the national government, had a separate political existence from the rest of the country. What remained of unoccupied France was governed first from Tours where Gambetta set up the headquarters of Republican resistance, then from Bordeaux, and finally, after the armistice, from Versailles.

By the end of September, though it still had no independent city government, the beleaguered city-state of Paris did have an independent army, for in order to hold the Prussians there had been a mass arming of the population, until the Parisian National Guard, composed of amateur citizen soldiers drawn from all social classes, stood at 360,000 men. From now on the Parisian response to the galvanic shocks of defeat would inevitably take the form of armed rebellion and not merely of street demonstrations. The first new uprising took place on 31 October, in response to the news that Bazaine had surrendered at Metz, with an army of 170,000 troops, and it resulted in the temporary establishment of a revolutionary government at the Hôtel de Ville by National Guard insurgents. But despite Blanqui's strenuous efforts, the revolution failed to consolidate its hold, and the rebels were dispersed by forces loyal to the

Government of National Defence. At the beginning of 1871 the failure of the last attempt to break the siege of Paris by a fighting sortie produced yet another march on the Hôtel de Ville, on 22 January, which was only dispersed after some of the rebels had been shot down.

The initial uprising of the Paris Commune, the revolt of 18 March, in which a central committee of delegates of the Paris National Guard seized power and established a *de facto* government in Paris, was essentially a continuation of the same pattern. At the end of February Paris had learned the details of the last and greatest defeat of all.

In the last few days of January the Government of National Defence had admitted the impossibility of continuing resistance, signed a truce with the Prussians, and organised elections to choose a government which would have the authority to negotiate peace terms. A month later, when it became known that Thiers, the new head of state, had accepted a temporary Prussian occupation of Paris as part of the terms, the undefeated defenders of the city at first refused to accept, and the National Guard made quite spontaneous preparations to resist the Prussian entry; France might have surrendered, but Paris had not. Ultimately wiser counsels prevailed and a massacre was avoided, but only at the cost of diverting the frustrated patriotic rage of the Parisians away from the Prussians and against Thiers and the politicians of the Bordeaux Assembly who had empowered him to negotiate.

The ultimate provocation of 18 March, Thiers' attempt to disarm Paris by removing the cannon which had been used in the defence of the city and which had been largely both made and paid for by the Parisians, brought about the final explosion, as the city rose *en masse*: National Guards, regulars, proletarian housewives of Belleville, pimps and prostitutes of Montmartre, everybody, to protest a sense of intolerable betrayal by governments, bureaucrats, generals, the rural clodhoppers, and the royalist gentlemen they had elected to represent them at Bordeaux.

From the preceding paragraphs it might appear that the series of uprisings which began in August 1870 and culminated on 18 March were nothing more than patriotic reflexes. Patriotic reflexes they certainly were, but they were more than that. If the form was patriotic, the content was republican, socialist, and proletarian. If the Parisians rose against the Empire, and if they rose against its political heirs, the Government of National Defence and the government of M. Thiers, it was not simply because they resented the handling of a military campaign. The French Revolution of 1870 to 1871 was a much more profound protest.

For twenty years France had been governed by an Imperial regime founded on two acts of violence, the June Days of 1848, in which the bourgeoisie had

drowned the experiment of the Democratic and Social Republic in blood, and the *coup d'état* of 1852, during which the last embers of republican democracy had been stamped out. While the Emperor could count on the support of rural France more or less to the end, Paris was never reconciled to his rule. The elections of the Liberal Empire in the sixties had shown a steady climb in the vote for a republican opposition based on Paris and large provincial towns like Lyons and Marseilles. Nor was it simply a matter of votes. Just as, under the bourgeois reign of Louis Philippe, Lamartine had challenged the fundamental style of the regime with his best-selling history of the idealistic and adventurous Girondins, so, in protest against the dead weight of the bureaucracy of the Second Empire, Paris intellectuals turned for inspiration to the democratic and spontaneous phase of the revolution of 1789: Alfred Bougeart, for example, who wrote a life of Danton, and whose life of Marat earned him a four months' prison sentence in 1865, Ernest Hamel, whose sympathetic *Histoire de Robespierre* was completed in 1867, and Edmé Tridon, publisher, in 1865, of a defence of Hébert and Chaumette, the giants of the Paris Commune of 1793. In 1868 Raoul Rigault, the future police chief of the Commune, published yet another historical tribute to the Commune of 1793.

Such publications added new definition to the powerful general democratic republican tradition which had received its apotheosis in Jules Michelet's influential *History of the French Revolution*.

In the months after Sedan, Gambetta's desperate resistance campaign, by calling on Frenchmen to remember Valmy and the military miracles accomplished by the First Republic in 1792, closely identified republicanism and patriotism, and immensely strengthened both, but in the process it inevitably helped to create a revolutionary as well as a republican consciousness.

Our fathers in 1792 possessed neither the numbers, the riches, nor the science of today [Blanqui's newspaper proclaimed on the eve of the uprising of 31 October], but they were heroic. They saved the country and crushed the allied monarchs . . . Are we, with resources they never had, to perish beneath the heel of Prussia, before the contemptuous smile of Europe? . . . Our fathers of '92 rallied round a revolutionary government which trod underfoot the internal enemy, royalism, and drew the sword against its foreign accomplice, the foreign invader.⁵

The analogies were so strong that it was inevitable that some of the leading participants in the Commune of 1871 should have spoken and acted as if time had stood still since 1794, and as if the Commune was neither more nor less than the completion of a continuous revolution begun in 1789. Indeed in Blanqui's notes the assumption is explicit: the struggle which began in 1789 has never ended; it repeats itself again and again 'on the same field of battle,

⁵ Postgate, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

between the same combatants'; the living constantly assume the mantle of the dead to carry on the 'war of the past against the future'.⁶

Yet it remains true that others saw the struggle in new and different terms. On 20 March 1871 an official address of the Central Committee of the National Guard published a justification of the uprising of 18 March. 'The proletarians of the capital', the address ran, 'amidst the failures and treasons of the ruling classes, understood that the hour had struck for them to save the situation by taking into their own hands the direction of public affairs . . . They understood that it was their imperious duty and their absolute right to render themselves masters of their own destinies by seizing upon the governmental power.'⁷ Note that the revolution in this version has not been made by 'the people' or even by the *sans-culottes*, but by 'the proletarians of the capital'. Cited by Marx in his *Civil War in France*, it was this address which provided a foundation for the identification of the Commune by Engels as the first dictatorship of the proletariat.

The fact that, on the whole, most of the Communard documents that survive do not use this kind of 'proletarian' language does not alter the fact that a significant number of contemporaries and participants, and not just interested propagandists like Marx and Engels, or later historians, believed at the time that the Commune was a proletarian uprising. The existence of a specifically proletarian class-consciousness was thus a factor which distinguished the Commune from the French Revolution of 1789 and from those of 1830 and 1848.

How are we to account for this new factor? Superficially there might seem to be no problem. Everybody knows that the Industrial Revolution, with a take-off point somewhere in the 1840s, accelerated rapidly during the Second Empire. Marx and Engels often defined the proletariat in different ways, and in ways which suited different purposes, but from the *Communist Manifesto* and from later writings, particularly those of Engels, it is clear that they regarded the *revolutionary* proletariat as the product of modern, large-scale industry, steam-power, and the factory system.

Evidently what differentiated the uprising of 1871 from that of 1848 was the rise of modern industry in France and the concomitant rise of a class-conscious industrial proletariat. 'It is only since 1848', Engels confirms in the 1895 introduction to *Class Struggles in France*, 'that the economic revolution has caused big industry to take real root in France . . .'

The problem is that the facts, as far as we know them, will not sustain such a simple economic interpretation. Indeed some of the available statistics seem to imply a complete reversal of our usual comfortable assumptions in this region.

⁶ Alan B. Spitzer, *The Revolutionary Theories of Louis Auguste Blanqui*, New York, 1957, p.168.

⁷ Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, pp.313-14; cf. Postgate, *op. cit.*, p.317, for the version in Marx's *Civil War in France*.

In 1932 a French economic historian, Simiand, showed that between 1856 and 1876 the percentage of the total French population engaged in industry not only did not rise but actually fell significantly, from approximately 29 per cent to 26 per cent. Moreover between 1866 and 1872 there was even a substantial absolute decline in the number of industrial workers, from 3 millions in 1866 to fewer than 2½ millions in 1872.⁸ These figures, it should be noted, are for France as a whole, and what they mean may be subject to dispute. Where Paris is concerned, however, there is no dispute. The authorities are unanimous that the industrialisation which affected places like Le Creusot, Lille, and Alsace largely passed the capital by. 'Although industrialisation had increased enormously during the third quarter of the nineteenth century', the Marxist Frank Jellinek wrote in his 1937 account of the Commune, 'the Paris workers were still largely artisans. No proletarian class, organised by large-scale factory conditions had yet arisen'.⁹

The conclusion of another Marxist, Henri Lefebvre, in 1965, based on recent Soviet work, is that 'Only ten per cent of the Paris workers constitute a proletariat in the precise sense of the term, working in large-scale industry and not in artisanal or semi-artisanal enterprises'.¹⁰

Perhaps, nevertheless, the 10 per cent of true proletarians were the dominant element in the Commune uprising, as Lefebvre elsewhere implies, and so, despite everything, we can save the Marxist interpretation? It seems not. In 1964 a French researcher, Rougerie, published the results of a statistical investigation into the dossiers of more than 36,000 prisoners arrested for their participation in the Commune. This is Rougerie's conclusion: 'The Commune seems to be . . . an average Parisian. By its average age, profession and probably also its average origins, the insurgent population is, in a very great measure, the reflection, or a very close image of the normal population'. 'Large-scale industry in the modern sense of the word scarcely existed as yet in Paris', he continues. Even the newly developed Parisian metal industry, whose workers were certainly prominent in the uprising, 'is still chiefly small or medium scale . . . very close still to trades of the old type'.¹¹

Robert Wolfe's recent study of the Eighteenth Arrondissement at the time of the Commune only confirms the general consensus. Despite the factories, railway yards and machine shops of La Chapelle, Wolfe concludes that 'most workers in the 18th arrondissement as a whole were still artisans of the traditional type rather than factory workers' and that 'The revolutionary movement

⁸ Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, pp.72-5.

⁹ Frank Jellinek, *The Paris Commune of 1871*, London, 1937, p.33.

¹⁰ Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, p.73.

¹¹ J. Rougerie, 'Composition d'une population insurgée: la Commune', in *Le Mouvement Social*, no.48, juillet-septembre 1964, p.47.

of 1870-71 owed more to the artisan of Montmartre than it did to the proletarian of La Chapelle'.¹²

All this is very disturbing. Not only is the sociology of Paris in 1871 close to that of Paris in 1848, but it is also closer than we might have suspected to that of Paris in 1830 and even 1789. The Cail metal works at Grenelle, and the Lefauchaux arms factory, each with more than 2,000 workers, stand out, with the railway yards and repair shops, as islands of the new industrial world in an artisan and petit-bourgeois sea.

Henri Lefebvre is impelled to dismiss this kind of approach as 'naïve sociology'. But of course the real naivety is for a historian to take the Marxist categories too seriously. When participants in the Commune, or Frenchmen in the middle of the nineteenth century generally, used the term *proletaire* they meant something quite different by it than Marx and the Marxists.

Although Babeuf used the word once or twice in the 1790s, it is Blanqui who must probably be credited with introducing it into the modern political vocabulary of 1832. Asked to give his profession at the beginning of a political trial in that year Blanqui made the historic reply: 'Proletarian . . . the class of thirty million Frenchmen who live by their labour and who are deprived of political rights'.

It is in Blanqui's correspondence equally, in 1852, that we find a fuller definition of the contemporary class struggle which seems to reflect the general view of his contemporaries more accurately than that of Marx. Blanqui wrote:

The middle class comprises most of the individuals possessing a certain amount of wealth and education, financiers, merchants, proprietors, lawyers, doctors, bureaucrats, rentiers — all those living on their revenues and the exploitation of the workers. Add to these a fair number of landowners who have wealth but not education and you will have a maximum number of no more than four million. There remain thirty-two million proletarians without property, or with very little property, and living only by the product of their hands. It is between these two classes that the bitter war has arisen.¹³

If there was a proletarian class-consciousness in Paris in 1871, it was a consciousness of belonging to Blanqui's proletariat, not Marx's, to the exploited 90 per cent of the population, including without discrimination artisans, labourers, factory-workers and poor peasants alike. And this, essentially, was Proudhon's proletariat, and Louis Blanc's also.

But here we plunge straight back into paradox again, for, as Lefebvre points out, the basic life-style of this class differed very little from that of their grandfathers at the time of the first French Revolution. Over much of Paris there was still a vertical stratification of society, grading from the bourgeois on the first

¹² R. Wolfe, 'The Parisian Club de la Révolution of the 18th Arrondissement, 1870-71', in *Past and Present*, no. 39, April 1968, p. 83.

¹³ Spitzer, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

floor of the tenement up to the artisan family on the fifth and the servants in the garret. Despite the opening of the Bon Marché, the first of the great retail stores, during the Second Empire, the consumer society had not yet taken firm root. The Parisian worker still lived the frugal life of the *sans-culotte*, with few material possessions, and a barely adequate subsistence. He was still clearly distinguishable from the bourgeois by his manner of dress: but now it was the *blouson* and the *casquette* and not the cotton trousers and the stocking-cap which marked him off from the wealthier classes.

In 1871, as in 1793, the workers lived a close collective life, in the markets, in the bistros, and in the streets and public places of the city, a life chronicled in its seamier side in the crime novels of Eugène Sue.

Yet some things certainly had changed and were changing. To begin with, there were many more working-class Parisians than there had ever been before. Out of a population of more than 1,800,000 perhaps three-quarters of a million were workers or their dependants. Moreover the social geography of Paris had changed, partly as a result of Haussmann's grandiose remodelling of the city. The old working-class *quartiers* in the centre of the city had emptied, while new and almost exclusively working-class suburbs grew up on the periphery, and particularly in the East End, La Villette, Belleville, Charonne, Ménilmontant. Thanks to the geographical organisation of the National Guard by *arrondissement*, these districts were able to recruit battalions of a solidly proletarian character in 1870, a factor which was to prove of great importance in the events of 1871.

How much the proletarian consciousness of 1871 owed to the organising and propagandist influence of the International is an open question. Jellinek claims a membership of 70,000 for the Paris branch in 1870, yet much of this can only have been by way of shadowy affiliations from shadowy organisations. A recent study estimates the membership of the Montmartre branch, in a decidedly 'red' area of Paris at from fifty to a hundred members at the beginning of 1870.¹⁴ If this pattern was repeated in the other *arrondissements*, then we should have a maximum Parisian membership of no more than 2,000. This, though possibly too pessimistic, would certainly be closer to the assessment of the situation reported by Serrallier when the London headquarters of the International sent him over to Paris on a fact-finding expedition in 1870.¹⁵

Nevertheless, although far from the all-powerful red conspiracy it seemed to the contemporary bourgeoisie, the Paris branch of the International was a reality with its headquarters at no. 6, Place de la Corderie, and a respectable record, since its foundation in 1865, of trade-union organisation and propaganda.

¹⁴ Wolfe, *op. cit.*, p.85.

¹⁵ International Working Men's Association, *Documents of the First International*, 5 vols., Moscow [1963-8], vol.4, 1870-71, pp.139-45.

In the national elections of February 1871 the International united with the Federated Council of Trades Unions to present a common list of candidates and a common program, which included the following major points:

- necessity of the advent of the workers to political power;
- liquidation of the government oligarchy and of industrial feudalism;
- organisation of a Republic, which, in giving to the workers their means of production, just as that of 1792 gave the land to the peasants, will achieve political and social equality.¹⁶

About fifty thousand Parisians voted for this program on 8 February.¹⁷

Thus while the International certainly did not organise or govern the Commune, by launching such ideas it gave some form and direction to the proletarian consensus of the rank-and-file Communards.

There were certainly ample reasons why the Paris proletariat, however defined, should have been in a revolutionary mood in March 1871. Eight months of war and five months of siege had closed workshops and ruined tradesmen in thousands. The siege itself had embittered class relationships. The memory was fresh of starving working-class mothers queueing from before dawn on freezing winter mornings for a share of scanty rations, while there always seemed to be plenty of good food on the tables of those who could find the money. While the siege lasted the full effects of the economic and social crisis were masked by certain *ad hoc* measures necessary to preserve solidarity in the face of the enemy. The vast mass of unemployed and underemployed Parisians had been enrolled as paid members of the National Guard, with extra allowances for wives and children. They had been protected from immediate bankruptcy by a moratorium on the collection of debts, and from eviction by a moratorium on actions for arrears of rent. But suddenly, once the siege was over, without allowing adequate space for readjustment, the Bordeaux Assembly withdrew all these protections within a few days. On 15 February it was decreed that henceforth members of the National Guard must present certificates proving destitution before claiming any pay for their service. On 10 March the end of the moratorium on debts was decreed and at the same time the moratorium on evictions was also abolished. After risking their lives and after enduring the privations of the siege and the Prussian bombardment the proletarians of Paris were thus to be condemned to destitution by a bourgeois and Royalist Assembly which had recklessly squandered the gift of Parisian heroism in an abject capitulation before the invading Prussians, or so it seemed to the enraged masses who

¹⁶ Eugene W. Schulkind, 'The activity of popular organisations during the Paris Commune of 1871', in *French Historical Studies*, vol. I, no. 4, pp. 395-415; from the abridged reprint in R. Friguglietti and E. Kennedy, *The Shaping of Modern France*, London, 1969, p. 354.

¹⁷ Wolfe, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

rose on 18 March and drove the agents of M. Thiers' government out of Paris. The result, according to Lefebvre, was the first socialist revolution. Was the Paris Commune in fact a socialist government? There seem to be two chief ways of tackling this question: first to ask, 'Were the members of the Commune government socialists?', and secondly to ask, 'Did they follow recognisably socialist policies?'

The first question is not an easy one to answer. There were no formally organised socialist parties in Paris in 1871; there were socialist ideas abroad which were shared, more or less, by a great many people whose political positions were quite different in other respects.

The members of the General Council of the Commune were elected on 26 March by a 70 per cent poll of registered electors present in the capital, and their numbers were made up in by-elections on 16 April. Different historians break down the results in different ways. According to Roger Williams there appear finally to have been eighty-one members of the Commune, of whom a maximum of thirty-seven belonged to two socialist groups, including eleven followers of Blanqui and twenty-six affiliates of the French section of the Working Men's International. The largest single group consisted of thirty-four republican democrats, usually described as neo-Jacobins. Although the socialists were in a minority, there is no doubt that, had they been united, they might have been able to push through a fairly significant socialist program, at least on paper. There was no fundamental ideological reason why they should not do so. For the Blanquists, socialism was equated with the successful seizure of power by an elite on behalf of the proletariat. Any conscious planning of the post-revolutionary society was deliberately rejected in reaction against the dream worlds and nostrums of the Utopians, of Fourier and Cabet and their disciples. The nature of the future society would begin to define itself automatically on the morrow of the revolution.

Most of the Internationalists on the other hand had been influenced more or less by the anarchist doctrines of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. They thus believed that socialism could not be imposed by state action from above, but must grow up spontaneously, from the grass roots, through the conscious and voluntary co-operation of members of the working class with one another. The role of the State was to provide a favourable environment for this process. While the Blanquists were for a highly centralised dictatorship, the Proudhonists stood for the maximum of political devolution and communal autonomy. The creeds were thus as different, as Blanqui pointed out, as a fife and drums. But though 'the two instruments do not resemble one another in the least' he reflected 'they marry together extremely well and could make society dance very agreeably'.

Unfortunately, in the Paris Commune the instruments failed lamentably to

play the same tune. Blanqui had managed to get himself arrested on 17 March and his followers chose to pursue the line of a tactical alliance with the neo-Jacobins as a more immediately practical policy for the defence and consolidation of the revolution. This left the socialists with a program — the Internationalists — as an isolated and eventually a persecuted minority.

If the socialists were in a minority in the Socialist and Proletarian Commune of Paris, so too, incidentally, were the proletarians. Williams's estimate is that about thirty-three out of the eighty-one members may be described as worker-artisans, 'the majority of whom were artisanal rather than industrial workers'. Of the rest '30 might be called intellectuals', many of them journalists, and there were eleven white collar workers, five businessmen and two professional soldiers.

How far did this politically and socially heterogeneous collection of revolutionaries act in a socialist manner? On 19 April an official program of the Commune proclaimed:

The communal Revolution begun by popular initiative on March 18 inaugurates a new era of experimental, positive, scientific politics. It means the end of the old clerical and governmental world, of militarism, of bureaucracy, of exploitation, of speculation in stocks, of monopolies, of privilege, to which the proletariat owes its bondage and the fatherland its misfortunes and disasters.¹⁸

Brave words, but one looks in vain for the concrete acts that might vindicate them. Within a day or two of the triumph of the October Revolution Lenin had announced the program of his proletarian government: the nationalisation of the land, the establishment of workers' control in the factories, peace for all mankind.

The Paris Commune, after much discussion, abolished night work in bakeries.

It could, of course, be argued that if the Commune failed to act in a socialist way, it did at least act in a proletarian way. Among its first decrees were the abolition of the means test for paid service in the National Guard, the restoration of the moratorium on evictions and on prosecutions for debts. The sale of pledges in pawnshops was forbidden, and the return of nearly two million small pledges, chiefly tools and personal effects, was financed. Employers were forbidden to levy fines on salaries.

Moreover there was at least one Commune who could look further ahead. 'If we do nothing for the working class,' Léo Frankel told the council on 12 May, 'I see no reason for the Commune's existence'. 'We are not here only for municipal questions', he had warned the members earlier, 'but for social reforms'.¹⁹ Frankel was very much a minority within a minority; a Hungarian

¹⁸ Williams, *op. cit.*, p.140.

¹⁹ Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, pp.384, 378.

Jew, he was one of the two members of the International Group who was in correspondence with Marx and who understood something of the German socialist tradition. Thanks to Frankel's influence, the Commune's Committee of Trade, Labour and Industry, over which he presided, proposed, and on 16 April the Commune decreed, the confiscation of workshops abandoned by owners who had fled the capital and their handing over to the workers. For the implementation of the decree Frankel's committee called on the services of the trade unions, who were asked to form a committee to draw up an inventory of workshops and to submit plans for their immediate conversion into co-operative enterprises operated by the workers employed there.

But although this was probably the most revolutionary of all the Commune's measures, its limitations are in themselves highly suggestive. Note that the Commune did *not* decree the seizure of capitalist enterprises as a general principle, and even those owners who were dispossessed were promised compensation.

As a general conclusion indeed, it is impossible to quarrel with the verdict of another recent investigation into popular organisation under the Commune, that 'serious elaboration of a socialist perspective could not develop because of the brevity of the Commune's life, the grave military situation, and the absence of a group intent on developing one'.²⁰ Meanwhile, as everybody knows, the Bank of France continued to carry on its business, and even to advance money to the Commune. Less well known is the fact that the Paris Bourse remained open also during most of the period of the Commune; in fact there was a steady rise in the funds as the ultimate collapse of the Commune became daily more apparent.

For Marx, of course, such pedestrian details as I have been discussing were hardly relevant, for the Commune's greatest social measure was its own existence as an act: '... Paris all truth, Versailles, all lie', its tremendous vindication of the capacity of the proletariat to dispense with the tutelage of the bourgeoisie to create and administer its own state. For a present-day Marxist like Lefebvre the significance of the Commune lies equally not in any cold analysis of classes or decrees passed or not passed, but in its tempestuous evocation of the spirit of direct democracy and of the latent inventive capacity of the proletariat to destroy the institutional apparatus of alienation, the State, the Church, the hierarchies of administration, industry and finance. In Lefebvre's history the Commune is depicted as an abortive but inspiring attempt 'to realise the goal of the world revolutionary movement, the end of the state and of politics ... the metamorphosis of everyday life into a festival without end, a joy without any limitation or measure save the fatality of death itself indefinitely postponed'.²¹ There is no doubt that many of the Communards felt that way and that for

²⁰ Friguglietti and Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p.360.

²¹ Lefebvre, *op. cit.*, pp.39-40.

them, as for Lefebvre, the Commune was a great festival of the people, a Prometheus drama, and, finally, a revolutionary passion-play staged in a new and purified world.

On 30 March Frankel wrote to Marx that this revolution would be the last, and that it would 'cut away the ground from under the feet of all future revolutions, since in the social domain there will be nothing left to demand'.²² To understand this mood of sudden release and confident energy, so characteristic of the first days of a revolution, we should remind ourselves of the nature of the regime which had been overthrown. The government of France under Napoleon III was a bureaucracy *par excellence*. A city without institutions of self-government, Paris was ruled by ministries and by prefects without any question of participation. During the siege another bureaucratic structure thrust itself forcibly on to the Parisian consciousness: the military hierarchy of the regular army. The uprising of 18 March may be seen as a great festival of destructurisation. Within the space of twenty-four hours all the structures of the Second Empire were pulled to pieces and their debris hurled outside the city ramparts. The ministers and their departmental chiefs followed the path of the regular army detachments in their headlong flight to Versailles. The old municipal police were murdered or fled.

The process of 'restructuring' did not begin, as is sometimes implied, with the revolution of 18 March; it was already well under way.

Wolfe's study of popular organisation in the Eighteenth Arrondissement has shown that ever since the beginning of January a shadow 'people's administration' had been waiting in the wings for the call to take control of Paris. The basic unit of this shadow government was the Comité de Surveillance, or Vigilance Committee of the arrondissement, but in Montmartre and probably elsewhere the arrondissement committee had encouraged the growth of local political societies or clubs in each of the constituent *quartiers* to provide a popular base.

On 1 January a central delegate meeting of representatives of the arrondissements had even, somewhat prematurely, constituted itself as the revolutionary Commune of Paris.²³

Thanks to the repression which followed the abortive rising of 22 January, the Central Committee of the Arrondissements was in disarray in February and March, and the initiative fell instead to the Central Committee of the National Guard. But this, too, was no more than a delegated committee which represented yet another 'counter-hegemony', the democratically-organised National Guard, a body which elected its officers and whose own grass-roots committees reached down through the battalions and legions to interlock in a complex manner with the arrondissement committees and popular clubs of the *quartiers*.

²² Ibid., p.355.

²³ Wolfe, *op. cit.*, pp.81-119.

The proclamation of the Commune on 28 March was thus the crucial symbol of the new structure of popular power, but it was not the whole story. The Central Committee of the National Guard continued to meet and its local committees to function until the end of the Commune, improvising administration, police, and defence, sometimes in co-operation, sometimes in uneasy competition with the parallel network of local club, Vigilance Committee and Commune.

Meanwhile the revolution of 18 March was the signal for a sudden surge of activity by spontaneous organisations. By May, clubs were meeting regularly in most of the larger churches of working-class neighbourhoods. Led by Gustave Courbet, the artists of Paris formed 'a collective', opened the museums and art collections to the people, and staged an international exhibition. Louise Michel and Elizabeth Dimitrieff achieved a federation of women's organisations which helped materially to stiffen the military defences of the Commune.

Yet there were limits to the democratic spontaneity of the Communards. The delegates who took over the national ministries sat at the same desks as their predecessors. They lowered their own salaries and raised those of their subordinates, and the head of the Post Office even called in a consultative council: but it was a consultative council of heads of departments, not of workers. Moreover, the conclusion of at least one modern investigator is that there was a striking discontinuity between the Commune Council at the centre and the popular organisations in the arrondissements, and he quotes the despairing cry of one of the Commune members only two days before the final tragic week:

The Commune has not drawn sufficient inspiration from the popular movement. It has not frequented the clubs enough . . . when Robespierre or Saint-Just would arrive at the Convention, they were fortified because they came from the club of the Jacobins or of the Cordeliers, just as Marat was forceful because he wrote what he heard in the midst of the labouring population.²⁴

In the beginning, when Frankel wrote to Marx on 30 March, everything seemed possible, and indeed a great deal probably was. As Marx pointed out, if the Central Committee of the National Guard had marched on Versailles immediately after 18 March, as the Blanquists urged, instead of calling for elections, they might very easily have destroyed the government not of Paris, but of France, and the revolution might have taken a broader and more fundamental course. As it was the news from Paris produced a flicker of support in the provinces, with the proclamation of Communes in Le Creusot, Lyons, Marseilles and Narbonne, all between 22 and 31 March. But the revolutionary moment was lost, and it could never be recaptured. By the time the Blanquists were finally permitted to attempt their march on Versailles, on 3 April, the soldiers of the regular army, who had mutinied and fraternised only days

²⁴ Friguglietti and Kennedy, *op. cit.*, p.357.

before, were ready to shoot down the Parisians, and the cannon of the Mont Valérien fort stopped the revolution in its tracks. From then on it was only a question of time while Thiers gathered his army of peasant soldiers until it numbered 130,000, filled them full of atrocity stories and threw them against the demoralised and feuding defenders of the Commune.

At the end of May the Communards fought for their city and for their revolution street by street until the fires finally died away. By then perhaps 30,000 had been killed. The repression was ferocious. The end of the fighting was followed by 100,000 arrests and more than 40,000 trials. The industrial districts of France remained under martial law for another five years, until 1876.

Many problems remain unanswered. Why did the Versailles troops open fire on 3 April? What thought processes allowed Thiers to resist the many attempts at compromise and mediation and insist on the appalling slaughter of Bloody Week? Why did the provinces fail to come to the aid of Paris when already the municipal elections at the end of April showed that a massive swing of public opinion to the Republicans had even then taken place? The fact remains that these things happened and did not happen, and that the Commune was crushed.

For Lefebvre this means merely that the experiment is adjourned. 'If we consider the sum of the prevailing banality', he wrote three years before the Paris uprising of May 1968, 'we may imagine the invention which might emerge from an analogous explosion in the so called modern world. A spontaneous explosion which is not today possible but which nothing makes absolutely impossible in the more distant future, since the reasons for revolt, discontents, frustration, are accumulating.'²⁵

But perhaps it is not the function of historians to prophesy, but merely to describe and analyse. If so then our conclusions must be quite different. The Paris Commune was a unique event, the product of a balance of political and social forces peculiar to France in the mid-nineteenth century, and of a revolutionary situation created by an equally unique juxtaposition of events, the Franco-Prussian War and the Siege of Paris. If it was, as it seems to have been in fact, a dictatorship of the proletariat, it was the dictatorship of a particular proletariat within a particular historic and national context, in circumstances which were never to be repeated, or even approximated, in later history.

No historical event is completely without its parallels and analogies in other epochs, and our understanding of other revolutions is inevitably deepened by what we know of the history of the Commune, just as our understanding of the Commune cannot but be deepened by a familiarity with the history of subsequent revolutions. But to regard the Commune as an inspiration for revolutionary tactics across the interval of a hundred years can only be described as irresponsible romanticism.

²⁵ Lefebvre, *op.cit.*, p.395.

Socialism and the Commune

Maximilien Rubel

One hundred years ago in the Paris Commune of 1871 we saw an unsuccessful attempt to build a new world, a socialist community. We must take care, however, to understand the word 'socialist' in the sense in which men understood it in 1871; we must not read into it the meaning and connotations it acquired later, especially after the Russian Revolution of 1917. The Russian Revolution is often seen as a continuation and renewal of the socialist aspirations of the Paris Commune; Lenin himself was concerned to push that revolution toward the goal which the Paris Commune had set itself, but which, through a lack of adequate leadership, the Commune was unable to reach: the goal of capturing the bourgeois state apparatus and of transforming it in such a way that a socialist mode of life becomes possible. There is thus a great temptation today to see the Paris Commune in close connection with the Russian Revolution, as part of the same story. As scholars, we must resist that temptation. We must think of the Paris Commune and of socialism in the terms in which they were understood by men of the nineteenth century; we must first look at the Paris Commune not in relation to the Russian Revolution but in relation to the socialist traditions of the Second Empire. Neither the word 'socialism' nor the doctrine understood by that name were inventions of the Paris Commune. In so far as the Commune was practically or theoretically socialist, it was making use of a specific intellectual heritage and displaying the impact of specific intellectual influences. This heritage, these influences, can be felt in the responsible leaders of the Commune and in the actions and ideas of the anonymous masses that took part in the struggle.¹

¹ The Commune was also part of an even wider history, of that remarkable series of events which begins with the nineteenth century and for the first time makes history into world history. The defeat of Napoleon and the spread of industrialism and urban life inaugurated a series of European crises which we can now see to be part of a universal crisis, unifying the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There is a tension between the forces of continuity and the forces of change that dominates the history of

In this lecture, then, we shall look at socialism and at the Paris Commune in their nineteenth-century context. I shall first discuss the nature and development of the socialist tradition in the Second Empire of Napoleon III. I shall then look at the consciousness of socialism displayed in the beliefs and practice of the Commune's adherents. Lastly, I shall discuss how contemporary socialists, in particular Marx and Engels, saw the Paris Commune.

I

The France of the Second Empire was still comparatively weakly and unevenly developed in terms of industry. It had, consequently, no strong or significant industrial proletariat on a national scale. The socialist movements of the Second Empire were based, numerically, on artisans; today they are all too often neglected or contemptuously dismissed as 'Utopian' or 'petty bourgeois' or 'Proudhonian'. Socialism, according to a current myth, was revived in France by the First International, often treated as the creation of Marx and Marxism. In fact, the International was founded on the initiative of French as well as English and Italian workers. The *workers* invited Marx to join the International and the relations between Marx and the workers who formed the International were not relations of domination and submission, but relations of mutual interaction and reciprocal influence.

After the defeat of 1848, liberal France, admittedly, saw socialism as a frightening spectre which had led to the loss of political liberties won in a bitter struggle and ultimately to the defeat of the Republic. Napoleon III's Second Empire, proclaimed in 1852, went, in the rest of the fifties, through its most reactionary militaristic phase. But if the Second Empire was not *industrially* strong, it did develop a financial and banking system that became the glory and the shame of Europe. Even in this period the socialist ideas spread by Saint-Simon, Fourier, Cabet, Leroux and Proudhon did not cease to have their educational effect. The followers of Saint-Simon, it is true, as the investors and founders of this modern banking system, quickly became its chief support. This is what Karl Marx called 'imperial socialism'.² Nevertheless, the financial speculations of the Saint-Simonians, though hardly socialist, stemmed from an ideological heritage stressed by the Saint-Simonians themselves. This heritage could and did arouse critical opposition precisely through its reference to the teaching of the master. With the comparative liberalisations of the 1860s, when the Emperor sought to use the workers as a counterweight to the liberals, socialism the immediate past as it will dominate the immediate future. Nothing illustrates the extent of this crisis more aptly than the stubborn refusal of the government of the French Republic today to celebrate an event that did much more to establish and definitively consolidate the Republic in France than it did to transform French society into a federation of autonomous Communes meant to be a model for the social regeneration of mankind.

² See M. Rubel, *Karl Marx devant le Bonapartisme*, Paris-The Hague, 1960, *passim*.

again comes more strongly to the fore. Indeed, there is no clearer evidence of the continued force of a genuine socialist tradition under the Bonapartist regime than the appeal which a group of socialists directed to the liberal deputies for the Seine in connection with the elections of 1863. Among the signatories to this appeal we find names — names of workers and of intellectuals — which come up again at the founding of the First International and in the Council of the Commune and in the Commune administration. These include Tolain, Longuet, Lefrançais, Briosne, Pierre Denis, etc. The appeal, basically, seeks to reintroduce socialism into French public political life, to make socialism an issue of public debate and to have workers stand as candidates for the Legislative Assembly. People who had defended the principles of the Revolution up to 1848 had then crossed over into the camp of reaction because of their fear of socialism, the appeal stressed. But since then the position had changed. Now in public assemblies men were again talking about the social question. The socialists behind the appeal offered to meet the liberals in public debate and to explain the program of legal measures necessary to accomplish a social revolution. We socialists know full well, they said, that one cannot revolutionise a society that does not want to be revolutionised. Therefore each of the two parties would only gain from such a debate, for the people expected both parties to formulate a program of legislation which would make possible equality of opportunity while maintaining the freedom to work and the freedom of commerce, creating neither spoliation nor bankruptcy. The aim must be the final victory of freedom, without which national dignity was impossible. For the first time since 1848, indeed, the workers again put up candidates (including Tolain), though none of them was successful. While Proudhon himself stood aloof from the political struggle, a group of independent-minded Proudhonians issued the Manifesto of the Sixty. It was a milestone in the renaissance of the working-class movement, in so far as it reduced the political conflict to the conflict and contradiction between capital and labour. French and English workers, who had met in London in 1862 and 1863, met again in London in 1864. The result of these contacts was the summoning of a meeting to form the International, held on 28 September 1864. For the English workers, whose trade unions already constituted a significant social force, as well as for the French, who had no real trade unions yet, the order of the day was to make effective the working-class vote.

The stubborn struggle of the French workers led the French government in May 1864 to lift the law banning combinations in spite of the opposition of the Legislative Assembly, of the conservative industrialists and of the liberals. Working-class journals were founded — *Tribune ouvrière*, *L'Avenir*, *Le Pays*. The first co-operative societies were becoming significant. Public discussions in newspapers and meetings spread the doctrines of the followers of Proudhon, of

the Mutualists, and those of the followers of Fourier, the Collectivists. Economic problems played a much greater role in these debates than political problems. The workers founded their own mutual benefit organisations; the elite of the French working class was concerned with gaining its intellectual independence through the serious study of economic and political ideas. The critical spirit of these workers was only sharpened by conflicts between themselves, conflicts which also emerged in the Congresses of the International, which was far from being monolithically Marxist.

In 1868, the government of the Second Empire indicted a number of working-class leaders, members of the French section of the First International, on charges of illegal political activity. The accused included Tolain, Héliçon, Camélinat and Murat, all of them workers or artisans. There is no better proof of the intellectual maturity of these working-class leaders than their own speeches before the court. What is even more remarkable is that the theoretical attitudes and principles displayed by these workers, who generally regarded themselves as followers of Proudhon, were in fact drawn from the published Addresses and Rules of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association, that is, of the First International. The author of these Addresses and Rules was Karl Marx, acting behind the scenes. His name was barely known to French workers; his ideas were.

The public prosecutor at this first trial of members of the International wants to show that the French section of the International, under cover of socio-economic activity, involved itself in purely political questions. He cites from the rules of the International Working Men's Association, seized in the possession of Tolain. The preamble to these rules states that 'the economic emancipation of the working classes is . . . the great end to which every political movement ought to be subordinated'. Tolain, asked what the goal of the International is, replies by simply reading the preamble and the rules. He admits that the Paris bureau has been very active in connection with the strikes in Paris, Amiens and Roubaix. The prosecutor cites the agenda of the congresses of the International in Geneva and Lausanne in 1866 and 1867, stressing that they covered not only economic questions, but also theoretical and political issues. Thus the agenda of the Geneva Congress included the question of taxes, standing armies and the influence of religious ideas on social, political and intellectual development and the Congress had declared itself opposed to the system of standing armies, seen as a negation of personal freedom, and to bureaucracy and police persecution.

Tolain, in reply, describes the French section of the International as a society or association, which, in contrast with others, has no leaders, no managers. It has only temporarily elected representatives whose function is only provisional, which does not make of them permanent bureaucrats. The harness-

maker, Dauthier, defends his entry into the International by saying that it gave him the opportunity to study political economy. Workers must thus free themselves from 'the clod'.

The trial goes to the Court of Appeal, where the worker-mechanic André Pierre Murat takes over the role of defending the accused. Murat again cites the preamble and the rules of the First International and develops some of the thoughts implicit in the agenda of the Geneva Congress drafted, like the preamble and the rules, by Marx. Murat asks how it can be that in France, the land of universal suffrage and of equality before the law, employers can behave as feudal lords in their dealings with their workers. Does this not mean that feudal justice reigns in France? To ask such questions is not to engage in politics, he says. The International takes no part in politics, because the International believes that politics mean suppression, conquest and force. Behind the concept of *raison d'état* we find criminality and enslavement; the art of government is nothing but deceit.

Murat talks about the development of democracy since 1789, describes the rise of the bourgeoisie in the eighteenth century, the defeats of 1830 and 1848 which heralded the emancipation of the working class — no longer as an emancipation from above but as a form of self-emancipation. The point is to attain equality of rights in practice and not merely in theory. Murat describes the great working-class strikes, the inhuman attitudes of the employers who appear as legislators, judges and policemen, and points out the dignified bearing of the workers. He stresses the consequences of industrial development, the growing anonymity of the entrepreneur and the methods of financial feudalism.

Tolain, for his part, asks scornfully whether he and his colleagues are being persecuted for having Montesquieu, Condorcet and La Boetie in their libraries? If one takes seriously current official political economy, as represented by the Collège de France, the result will be a serious social crisis. The socialists seek to accomplish the revolution of law and the coming of social justice by spreading their ideas, although existing circumstances tempt them to forcible revolution. Through this educational work socialists want to prepare the ground for a future society based on work and not on financial speculation and barter. Bourgeois values and virtues have become obsolete, the corruption of morals and the concentration of financial power in the hands of monopolists are the signs of a catastrophe, from which only the workers can save humanity. The Appeals Court uphold the original verdict, emphasising in a short sentence that the French section of the International formed a danger to public order, a danger that manifested itself in the subversive principles which the accused had proclaimed in regard to such questions as religion, property, capital and the relations between employers and workers.

A further trial of members of the International was held in May 1868. This

time nine accused stood before the court. Four of them — Varlin, Malon, Combault and Humbert — appear again during the Commune. Their speeches, like those of Tolain and Murat, demonstrated that the Marxian and the Proudhonian traditions had become part of a single complex of ideas. Varlin charges the bourgeoisie with having lost the moral capacity to rule. He and other defendants cite the preamble, the addresses and the rules of the International, written by Marx, yet they still see themselves as working in the spirit of Proudhon. At the third trial in June 1870, thirty-eight accused stand before the Court — most of them active later, before and during the Commune. They are charged, on the basis of the 1868 and 1869 Congresses of the International, with being members of a secret society dedicated to the abolition of property and the revolutionary overthrow of established order. For the first time in these Court proceedings, they are called Communists. Their speeches in defence follow the familiar pattern.

These trials, then, bring out for us the vitality of the socialist traditions in France and the inability of the Second Empire to crush it. Compared with the liberals, the socialists had social awareness, socialist consciousness, principled determination and a sense of a common goal. This goal was both French-Proudhonian and Marxian-International: it was a *common* goal indeed and the counterposition of the words 'Marxist' and 'Proudhonian' in this context is quite inapposite.

II

Let us now turn to the second topic: the consciousness of socialism displayed in the beliefs and the practice of the adherents of the Commune. Great social revolutions are heralded by the emergence of spiritual consciousness and a vigorous moral protest that appear in society *before* such social revolutions become a reality. If we take this statement in its simplest and most banal sense and apply it to the Commune, we might come to the conclusion that we were dealing, in the events of the Commune, with an unimportant social episode in the history of the French nation and with nothing more. But if this were true, we would still have to face a very important question — a question which points to a much deeper interpretation of the Commune. Why was the number of those butchered by the Versailles troops in that Bloody Week of May 1871 more than twice as great as the number who fell in the great terror of the French Revolution, which lasted not one week but two years? The number of people killed and sentenced to death or imprisonment in consequence of the uprising of June 1848, the year of the European Revolutions, was much less than the number killed and sentenced as a result of the Paris Commune. The trials that followed the Commune lasted for several years. By January 1875 military courts had handed out more than 50,000 convictions. Only when the Third Republic finally began to feel itself on a secure basis, did talk of amnesty arise. Only as

late as 1880, when the amnesty was formally proclaimed, could those Communards who were still living return from deportation or exile.

Numbers are significant, for they reveal what cannot be seen so easily from the superficial examination of historical processes. The significance of the Commune lies in the power of an idea. This idea has not ceased, since the Commune, to inspire or to disturb whole generations of men in their thinking and doing. We will find no more significant expression of this idea even today than the expression that was given it by the metal-worker Albert Theisz, later a Communard, when he faced his accusers at the third trial of members of the International in June 1870. The prosecutor had attempted to prevent Theisz from discussing so-called problems of political economy and Theisz replied:

Ever since 1789 all your constitutions have claimed that they guarantee liberty, equality and fraternity. Now it is simply the case that when a people appropriates an abstract philosophical, political or religious formula and erects such a formula as a goal to strive toward, it finds no rest, no peace until it makes this ideal a reality, until it brings it from the world of theory into the world of fact. So far as we are concerned, we want to pull the revolutionary formulae from those heights of political abstraction in which they have floated since 1789 down into social reality.³

The most sober historian, it is true, finds it a little difficult not to be ironic when he compares the actual reforms inaugurated by the Paris Commune of 1871 with the high revolutionary goals which the Commune set itself. For instance, Léo Frankel, one of the accused in the third trial of the members of the International, expounded before the court the Marxist theory concerning the concentration of capital and the immiserisation (*Verelendung*) of the masses; he stressed the consequent need to abolish the wage system. Yet this revolutionary jewellery-worker, as delegate for labour and exchange in the Commune, working together with Theisz, contented himself with abolishing night work in bakeries. This may now strike us as comic. But the historian must consider the circumstances in which the Commune took these and similar measures. Frankel knew perfectly well that the socialist character of the decree on bakeries consisted only in the fact that it was a measure which the workers forced on the employers as part of their fight for human working conditions. For Frankel, as for most of the militant Communards, whichever particular doctrinal school they belonged to, the socialism of the Commune consisted in the consciousness and the will involved in creating material and spiritual conditions which would enable the producing class to make itself a new creative force in society. The beginning of self-emancipation is self-education. There are no better examples in the history of the working-class movement of such free-spirited self-education as the work and bearing of those French workers, artisans and employees who,

³ *Troisième procès de l'Association Internationale des Travailleurs à Paris*, Paris, 1870; facsim. repr. Paris, 1969.

in the 1860s, organised or supported strikes, formed coalitions of workers, went to adult education courses after their day's work and spoke in the meetings in numerous clubs. The greatness of the Commune consisted in the fact that it did *not* claim to be socialist, because it was perfectly well aware of its limitations. For this reason it sometimes found nothing better than the refurbished slogans of 1789 and 1793. The greatness of the Commune consisted in the fact that it committed itself to no ideology and no party, that it knew how to limit its social doctrine and its social demands to elementary human rights and duties. The greatness of the Commune was its willingness to make sacrifices, to fight and to die for a form of social organisation for which the times were clearly not yet ripe.

The Commune, then, is stamped as socialist not by its deeds, but by the spirit that inspired those deeds. Karl Marx understood this clearly — we can see that from everything he wrote about the Commune. To this point I shall yet return. Historians and experts on the Commune frequently wax ironic about the ideological contradictions and discords in the numerous proclamations and manifestos of the Commune. Take only the contradiction we find in the Commune between a patriotism verging on jingoism or chauvinism and an internationalism bordering on empty enthusiasm. This contradiction cannot be denied. But it is enough to compare the men of the Commune with the professional politicians of the Assembly at Bordeaux and at Versailles to discern, in the incoherences of the Communard speeches and writings, human traits that we will not find in the statecraft of the so-called Government of National Defence. Only very rarely can we trace the authorship of the placards that covered the walls of Paris; we do not even know, in most cases, who composed the important appeals and manifestos. The various public bodies — the Central Committee of the National Guard, the Committee of the Twenty Arrondissements, the Council of the Commune, the various Commissions — almost never acted according to a centrally determined plan. Their decisions and proclamations depended on the specific opinions of the persons constituting the particular body responsible. We are still asking ourselves who could have been the author of that Manifesto which appeared in the *Journal Officiel* on 21 March, before the election of the Council of the Commune. Marx cited some sentences from it and based his interpretation of the Commune upon them. The sentences are:

The proletarians of Paris, amidst the failures and treasons of the ruling classes, have understood that the hour has struck for them to save the situation by taking into their own hands the direction of public affairs . . . They have understood that it is their imperious duty and their absolute right to render themselves masters of their own destinies, by seizing upon the governmental power.⁴

⁴ Manifesto of the Central Committee of the National Guard, meeting 18-20 March, published in the *Journal Officiel*, 21 March 1871. It is quoted by Marx in *The Civil War in*

In a later manifesto issued by the Commune on 19 April, headed 'The Declaration to the French people', presenting the claims of the revolution to Paris and the provinces, we find no hint of an attack on property and no mention of the word socialism. Yet this document reflects a socialist mentality; it emphasises with more force than most of the other manifestos the independent character of the workers' movement:

Once more Paris is acting and suffering for all of France; it is preparing, through its battles and its sacrifices, the intellectual, moral, administrative and economic regeneration of France . . . What is it asking for?

The recognition and the consolidation of the Republic, the only form of government compatible with the rights of the people and the normal and free development of society.

The absolute autonomy of the Commune extended to all localities of France, assuring to each its integral rights, and to every Frenchman the full exercise of his faculties and aptitudes as a man, a citizen, and a worker.

The only limits of the autonomy of the Commune will be the right of equal autonomy of all the other Communes adhering to the contract; those associations must assure the unity of France.

The inherent rights of the Commune are the following:

The responsibility for the communal budget, its receipts and expenditures; to impose and collect taxes; to direct local services; to organise its magistrature, its local police and its system of instruction; to administer the property belonging to the Commune.

The choice by election or competition, with the responsibility and the permanent right of control and recall of the communal magistrates and functionaries at all levels.

The absolute guarantee of individual liberty, freedom of conscience and the freedom to work.

The continuing co-operation of citizens in communal affairs through the free expression of their ideas, the free defence of their interests; the guarantee of these rights to be given by the Commune, the sole authority charged with supervising and ensuring the free and just exercise of the right of assembly and publicity.

The organisation of urban defence and of the National Guard, which elects its own leaders and is alone responsible for the maintenance of order in this city

The unity which has been imposed on us up till this day by the empire, the monarchy and the parliamentary system is only despotic centralism, unintelligent, arbitrary or onerous.

The political unity which Paris desires is the *voluntary association of all local initiative*, the spontaneous and free competition of all individual efforts in view of a common goal: the well-being, the liberty and the security of all.

The communal revolution, begun by the popular initiative of the 18th of March, inaugurates a new era of experimental, positive and scientific politics.

France in Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, 3 vols., Moscow, 1969, vol.2, p.217; in the Peking 1966 ed. of *The Civil War in France*, pp.63-4 Marx gives the date of the Manifesto as 18 March and later as 20 March.

It means the end of the old governmental and clerical world, of militarism, of bureaucracy, of exploitation, of speculation, monopoly, and privilege, which are responsible for the servitude of the proletariat and for the country's misfortunes and disasters. . . .⁵

Marx cites only portions of these manifestos. He is mainly interested in those ideas that enable him to develop his conception of the seizure of power by the proletariat. At the time, Marx did not know (he found out a few years later when reading Lissagaray's *History of the Commune*) that there had been long and passionate debates in the Central Committee of the National Guard in the week between 19 March and 26 March. In these debates we hear the words 'autonomous Commune' and also 'federation of Communes'. E. Millière, a member of the extreme Left of the Republicans, a Jacobin who had been elected to the National Assembly on 8 February, warned against such words:

Take care. If you unfurl this banner, the government will let the whole of France loose on Paris and I foresee for the future a repetition of the fatal June days [in which the 1848 revolution was crushed]. The hour of the social revolution has not yet struck. Your rebellion is victorious today; it can be destroyed tomorrow. Think in terms of deriving as much benefit as possible from your present success and do not be afraid to content yourselves with small advances. I beseech you to leave the National Assembly and the mayors freedom to act.⁶

Millière was one of the most decided opponents of the Second Empire and in Rochefort's newspaper *La Marseillaise* he had put forward a kind of communistic ethic. He took part in the events of the Commune though he was not a member. This did not save him from being arrested on the second last day of the fighting and from being shot on the steps of the Panthéon without trial. As Millière asked why he was being shot, the commanding officer replied that he had read Millière's newspaper articles and that Millière hated society. 'Yes', replied Millière. 'I hate *this* society.'

The hatred of this society was what Millière had in common with all the socialists who were sentenced in the trials of members of the International. Most of those sentenced were to play leading roles in the Commune — for example Varlin, Malon, Combault, Avrial, Murat, Johannard, Theisz and Frankel. From their statements and from other evidence before and during the Commune, we know that for them socialism and communism were basically identical concepts and that circumstances forced them to act in a common spirit. The split between the majority and the minority in the Commune did not result from deep doctrinal differences; it stemmed primarily from different conceptions of the immediate measures necessary to secure the existence and

⁵ For the full French text of the 'Déclaration au peuple français', 19 April 1871, see Jacques Rougerie (ed.), *Procès des Communards* (Coll. Archives), Paris, 1964, pp.151-5.

⁶ For an alternative English translation, see P.O. Lissagaray, *History of the Commune of 1871*, Brussels, 1876; rev. version trans. Eleanor Marx Aveling, New York, 1898, p.96.

continuation of the Commune. Gustave Lefrançais and Jules Andrieu, both civil servants in the Commune, both members of the minority, saw this quite clearly. That minority on 1 May voted against establishing a Committee of Public Safety to safeguard the future of the Commune. The Jacobin members of the Commune had favoured such a limited dictatorship, looking back to the Great French Revolution and forgetting that the Committee of Public Safety created by the Convention in 1793 was created in opposition to the then Commune. That first Committee of Public Safety indeed undermined the influence of the Commune and handed over its most important members to the guillotine. Lefrançais, speaking to his electors on 20 May 1871 in order to justify his vote against the revival of a Committee of Public Safety, stressed that both the majority and the minority had the same aim. Together they wanted to strengthen the Republic, to achieve an economic transformation which would give labour that social preponderance which was its due. The divergencies between the majority and minority, he said, were solely about the means one must use to achieve this aim. Lefrançais, who knew that the end of the Commune was near, concluded his speech as follows:

We are not much concerned with the judgment which will perhaps later fall upon our obscure personalities. When we discovered that there were political differences between us and the majority, we did not use this discovery to condemn some and to praise others. We expressed our differences so that later, when the Commune has been defeated, men will know that the picture that has been given of the Commune up to now is not the correct picture. We expressed our viewpoint so that the principles to which the Commune owes its foundations will rise glorious and victorious from the grave that its enemies are preparing for it.⁷

The socialism of the Commune has not been investigated systematically, even in modern times. It seems to me that two publications are very important for an understanding of the doctrine of the Commune. One of these is Gustave Lefrançais' *Etude sur le mouvement communaliste à Paris en 1871* [Study of the Communalist Movement in Paris in 1871], published in Switzerland a few months after the fall of the Commune. The other is the manuscript of Jules Andrieu, *Notes pour servir à l'histoire de la Commune de Paris en 1871* [Notes toward the History of the Commune of Paris in 1871], which will shortly be published for the first time in Paris.

The communalist revolution advocated by Lefrançais aimed to restore to individuals and to local groups the right to express their political and social interests directly — a right so far usurped by governments. Lefrançais opens his book thus:

⁷ G. Lefrançais, *Etude sur le mouvement communaliste à Paris en 1871*, Neuchâtel, 1871. The passage quoted is the closing paragraph of Lefrançais' 'Discours', included in the 'Pièces justificatives' at the end of the book, pp.60-4.

Since 1789 France has been torn between two alternatives which dominate the past and the future of modern society. These alternatives are authority and law, that is to say, the arbitrary exercise of power on the one hand and the attainment of justice through law on the other. Law must become a guarantee for all citizens instead of expressing the interests of authority and consequently damaging a true social order.⁸

Jules Andrieu, son of a teacher, a self-taught employee in the municipal government of Paris, fond of popular poetry and himself a poet, became the delegate for public services during the Commune. In a theoretical chapter in his *Notes toward the History of the Commune* he explains that for him the cause of labour finds its best champions among the middle class, among people born at the meeting point of all classes. Such people have a passion for social justice – the middle-class radical is a socialist but not a professional revolutionist. He is an innovator, taking his starting point from present conditions, but he is conservative as well as revolutionary. He demolishes but he replaces. What kind of socialism is this, Andrieu asks. Does it have Fourier or Saint-Simon or Proudhon for its prophet? He answers:

We do not deny to any of these their genius, their love of humanity and the large number of sound ideas that they have launched upon the current of modern thought. But the independent radical cannot put himself in tow to any of their particular theories. A social reformation cannot be proclaimed ready-made and it will not spring as a fully armed Minerva from the brain of any single man.⁹

For Andrieu the first need is the need for political reform; he wants a law which will resolve the contradictions of centralisation and decentralisation. He outlines what he calls a physiology of society by taking analogies from the animal kingdom. The family is for him the social protoplasm. The basic factor in society is the Commune, whose task it is to ensure material security for all. Then comes the department, and then the nation. Commune, department and nation, each have their separate field of legislation and the rights and duties of each should be defined in fundamental programs which would prevent the risk of collision. The communes should elect their communal councils; the united communal councils should elect the council of the departments; the united departmental councils should elect the national council. Universal suffrage is thus organised. It would cease to be the dangerous element which it is at present. It would rectify and educate itself.

I have had time to set out the socialist consciousness of the Commune only

⁸ Ibid., Introduction, p.15.

⁹ J. Andrieu, *Notes pour servir à l'histoire de la Commune de Paris en 1871*, ed. M. Rubel and L. Janover, Paris, 1971, p.198. The chapter from which this is taken appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*, vol.X, new series, 1871, pp.571-98, under the title 'The Paris Commune: a chapter towards its theory and history'.

in the most sketchy manner. I wanted to bring out the richness of thought and conception that the servants of the Commune expressed in their struggle — a struggle which aimed at a goal common to them all. Above all, they wanted a free Paris, 'Paris ville libre', as a point of departure. If they were not able to achieve their goal, they did bring about, through the free expression of their personal conceptions of society, the only thing that could have been brought about at that time. Their thoughts and their actions present us with an instructive model. They tell us what must be avoided if the history of socialism and of the working-class movement is not to be converted into a permanent record of martyrdom.

III

I turn now to the view that contemporary socialists outside France, namely Marx and Engels, took of the Commune.

To understand Marx's attitude, we must keep two things in mind:

1. Marx was not a scientific thinker in the strict, narrow sense of the word.
2. Marx came to socialism not by way of scientific considerations, but as the result of an ethical decision, of a value-judgment.

On the question of Marx as a scientific thinker, it should be emphasised that Marx never saw theory as an end in itself. He was concerned, from the start, to use his theoretical discoveries in the service of a cause which he regarded as decisive for the development of a modern society unsurpassed in its technical achievements.

So far as Marx's departure from a value-judgment, from a moral decision, is concerned, let us remember this: Marx came to socialism and to the working-class movement before he began to study political economy. He reached his decision not on the basis of a scientific investigation but on moral grounds. He read the histories of the French Revolution and German and French utopian thinkers; he formed the conviction that modern society suffers from two main evils: the State and money. Marx had felt the effects of these two institutions on his own person when he was still a very young man — first, when as a journalist in the Prussian Rhineland, he struggled for the cause of liberalism; second when he departed into exile completely without means and had to earn a living by his pen. He was to show later that these two fundamental evils of modern society were necessary consequences and categories of the capitalist system of production.

In the institutions of the State and money Marx found the cause of a particular condition of the modern civilisation based on science and technology — a condition which he called the alienation of man. This alienation is a symptom of decay and deprivation that manifests itself not only in the wage labourer but also in the exploiter, in the capitalist.

Marx discovered — we might as well say Marx *invented* — the social force

whose vocation it was to free modern mankind from the two evils of State and money. This social force was the modern wage labourer, the working class, the proletariat. Marx *discovered* the modern proletariat and he *invented* the historical mission of the proletariat. The historical mission of the proletariat is neither an economic nor a sociological concept: it is an ethical concept.

To put it briefly, all this shows that Marx already had the ethical values for which he was determined to fight from then on; he already had them when he decided to struggle for their realisation by becoming the theoretician of the proletariat. Marx's great projected study of economics, of which *Das Kapital* forms only a part, was for Marx simultaneously the analysis and the critique of the existing economic and social system. The book on *Capital* of which Marx again completed only a part, was the scientific critique of the system of money. The book on *The State*, which Marx envisaged as part of his plan in writing a study of economics, was not even begun. Specific historic events, however, gave Marx the opportunity of expressing his fundamental thoughts concerning the State. *The Commune was such an event and such an opportunity* — but it was not the first event and opportunity.

The first empirical opportunity that Marx had for surmounting the economic or materialist framework of his theory of history and bringing out the creative will to freedom of the working class from a seemingly unimportant example was offered him by the Silesian weavers' revolt during the summer of 1844. It was a limited local revolt of a few thousand poor weavers: yet an army had to be mobilised to suppress it. This itself proved that the revolt was not directed against the King of Prussia and the Prussian State, but against the bourgeoisie as a social class. Marx argued that no State, no matter how strong its religious feeling, can abolish pauperism by political means. A political country such as England is the proof of this — it is the land of Poor Laws and work houses. During the French Revolution, too, the Convention could not get rid of the poor by entrusting the Committee of Public Safety with preparing necessary plans and proposals. In so far as states have been concerned with pauperism, they have confined themselves to administrative and charitable measures. No state is inclined to seek the basis of social ills in the principle of the state itself, in that existing organisation of society of which the state is the official expression. Purely political thought, of which the French Revolution is the classic expression, is incapable of comprehending social ills. The first outbreaks of the French proletariat were suppressed in blood; consider the workers of Lyons in 1834. These workers believed that they were pursuing only political aims, but in fact they were, as Marx puts it, 'soldiers of socialism'. Their political understanding distorted their social instinct. The Silesian uprising, for Marx, demonstrates one thing: the modern worker is isolated from real community, from human existence, by his own labour. Even a particular reaction, a revolt aimed

against this intolerable isolation, is more universal than a political revolution because man is more universal than the citizen and human life is more universal than political life. However particular an industrial revolt may be, Marx goes on, it conceals within itself a *universal soul*: no matter how universal a *political* revolt may be, it conceals a narrow-minded spirit under the most gigantic form. A social revolution is a protest of man against a dehumanised life even if it occurs in only one factory district. The political soul of a revolution strives toward state power; when it is successful, it organises a ruling group in society at the expense of society. Marx admits that one can speak of a political revolution with a social soul, but it is senseless to speak of a social revolution with a political soul. Socialism requires a political act in so far as it needs to overthrow and dissolve the preceding order. 'But where its organising activity begins, where its own aim and spirit emerge, there socialism throws off the political husk.' The evil lies not in a specific form of the state, but in the nature of the state. '*The existence of the State and the existence of slavery are indivisible.*'¹⁰

These were Marx's thoughts in 1844, when he started studying political economy. Twenty-seven years later he was to repeat the lessons he had drawn from the Silesian weavers' revolt. By then he had already published the first volume of *Capital* and finished in manuscript a large part of the two subsequent volumes.

What then, we may justly ask, has happened to the so-called materialist interpretation of history?

To put this question, and it seems at first sight a fair question, is to criticise Marx's decision to come out on behalf of the Commune. If there was any theory which could have made Marx deny his support to those Parisian workers, artisans and petty bourgeois who had undertaken the hopeless adventure of beginning a proletarian revolution, it was his own theory, the materialist interpretation of history.

Marx remained faithful to this theory when he wrote his Second Address on the Franco-Prussian War in France after the Republic had been proclaimed on 4 September 1870. Marx knew that the Republic had not undermined the throne, but had simply filled a vacant seat. The Republic had been proclaimed not as an act of social overthrow, but as a measure of national defence. The Orleanists had seized the commanding positions in the army and the police. They had inherited from the Empire not only its ruins, but also its dread of the working class. They intended the Republic to serve as nothing but a bridge to an Orleanist Restoration. Marx knew well the conditions and the disabilities of the French working class, just as he knew of the revolutionary intentions of

¹⁰ Karl Marx, 'Kritische Randglossen zu dem Artikel "Der König von Preussen und die Sozialreform. Von einem Preussen"', in Marx-Engels, *Werke*, Berlin, 1960-8, vol. I, pp. 392-409, at p. 409 and pp. 401-2.

certain circles in France. Nevertheless, he issued the following warning:

Any attempt at upsetting the new government in the present crisis, when the enemy is almost knocking at the doors of Paris, would be a desperate folly. The French workmen must perform their duties as citizens; but, at the same time, they must not allow themselves to be deluded by the national *souvenirs* of 1792, as the French peasants allowed themselves to be deluded by the national *souvenirs* of the First Empire. They have not to recapitulate the past, but to build up the future. Let them calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of republican liberty, for the work of their own class organisation. It will endow them with fresh Herculean powers for the regeneration of France, and our common task — the emancipation of labour. Upon their energies and wisdom hinges the fate of the Republic.¹¹

The views that Marx is expressing here are completely in accord with the so-called materialist interpretation of history, a theory which can only explore and explain the fundamental connections of *past* history. So far as the *future* is concerned, in so far as we are dealing with a possible transformation of social relationships, we are dealing with what is from the point of view of the working class a creative act. Such an act can have lasting results only if economic and intellectual conditions are ripe for it. It can take place only at the end of a process of economic and technological development. In September 1870 these conditions were only partly present in France: France was a country of small peasants, with an industry that was developing only sporadically and with a financial system based on speculation and fraud.

When the Commune was proclaimed, it was quite clear to Marx that it could not lead to a socialist revolution, just as it was quite clear to him in 1844 that the weavers' revolt in Silesia was not and could not become a socialist revolution. The Silesian weavers had proved that their material deprivation had not strangled in them the feeling of human dignity and the striving towards freedom. They knew who was responsible for their becoming miserable slaves — not the King of Prussia, but the bourgeois owners of the factories. Marx does not speak of their social *instincts*, as he does in speaking of the French *canuts* in Lyons. He speaks of the theoretical and *conscious* character of the Silesian weavers' revolt. Of course, Marx is exaggerating: he is creating in literary imagination those events which he expects and hopes for as consequences of a creative revolutionary act. What source, what document is Marx relying upon when he describes the doings of the Silesian weaver as a theoretically conscious act? He does not rely on a statistical sociological investigation; he bases himself on Heinrich Heine's 'Song of the Weavers'. In Heine's poem the watchword of the struggle is the opposition to the society of private property. The weavers destroy not only the machines but also the account books and titles to property;

¹¹ 'Second Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association on the Franco-Prussian War', in Marx-Engels, *Selected Works*, vol. 2, p. 200; in the Peking 1966 ed. of Marx, *The Civil War in France*, pp. 35-6.

they act not only against the visible enemy, the industrial master, but also against the hidden enemy — the banker. Marx even asserts that 'not a single English labourer revolt has been conducted with equal courage, deliberation and persistence'.¹² To prove the high level of the intellectual capacity and development of the German worker, Marx refers to the utopian writings of the journeyman tailor Wilhelm Weitling 'which frequently surpass Proudhon in regard to theory, though they are inferior in execution'.¹³

Literary imagination and utopia — we must not forget these components of Marx's teaching if we want to understand his attitude to the Commune. The revolt of the Silesian weavers symbolises the struggle against private property and against money. The Commune symbolises the 'negation' of the state. Here we have the key to Marx's backing of the hopeless struggle of the Commune. His position in these terms comes out more clearly in the first draft of the Address on the Civil War in France, a draft which Marx completed as the Commune struggled in agony, than in the final version. Lenin, with the barest modicum of a justification, read into this final version the concept of a workers' state — a term which Marx never uses. He could not have read such a concept into or out of the first draft of the address. In the first draft Marx specifically asserted that the Commune was not a revolution against a specific form of the state — legitimist, constitutional, republican or imperial. It was a revolution against the state as such, against that monstrous abortion produced by society.¹⁴ For Marx the Commune represented the political form of social emancipation; Marx is careful to emphasise that as a political form the Commune is not the social movement of the working class and consequently not the movement of the universal regeneration of humanity. It is only the practical and organised means for that regeneration.

Lenin, writing before the October Revolution, and feeling the need to base himself on an exegesis of Marx's address, was concerned with capturing state power for his own party. We can understand his need to ignore the first draft and to invent the myth of a workers' state. But why does Friedrich Engels, writing an introduction to Marx's addresses on the Commune eight years after his friend's death, treat the Commune as the model of a dictatorship of the proletariat? Lenin had political and tactical reasons; Engels seemed to have no reason at all. He must have known that for Marx the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat applies strictly to the transitional stage of proletarian democracy, in which the whole of society has entered upon the process of economic and political transformation. Capitalism prepares the ground for this; the dis-

¹² Marx, 'Kritische Randglossen', p.404.

¹³ Ibid., p.405.

¹⁴ Marx, 'First Draft of *The Civil War in France*', in his *The Civil War in France*, Peking, 1966, p.166.

solution and transcending of capitalism that results is not an accidental phenomenon. The Commune *was* an accidental phenomenon, which neither changed the economic structure of French society nor succeeded in abolishing the established political institutions of the state machinery of France. For Marx, indeed, the dictatorship of the proletariat is the revolution triumphant; the *defeat* of the Commune is complete and sufficient reason for not considering such a working-class government (limited in time and space to a single, besieged and starving city) as constituting the transitional period between capitalism and socialism. Ten years after the Commune, in a letter written to the Dutch socialist Domela Nieuwenhuis in February 1881,¹⁵ Marx emphasised precisely this: the Commune was an uprising in exceptional circumstances; it was not and could not be the foundation of a socialist society. If the Communards had had only a small modicum of common sense, they would have reached a compromise with Versailles, he said. The legend of a workers' state was created by Engels and reappeared in Lenin's myth concerning the Russian Soviets. Lenin did not — perhaps he could not — heed the warnings which Marx addressed to the French workers in September 1870, when he asked them to perform their duties as citizens and not to be deluded by the national souvenirs of 1792. 'They have not to recapitulate the past, but to build up the future. Let them calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of republican liberty, for the work of their own class organisation. It will endow them with fresh Herculean powers for the regeneration of France, and our common task — the emancipation of labour.'¹⁶

Lenin was forced to recapitulate the past while he thought that he was starting to build the future, to realise the dream of the Communards. Instead of commenting on Marx's Address on the Commune, Lenin would have been better advised to read *Capital* — where he would have been reminded of the 'law of the economic movement of modern society' — and to meditate on the following paragraph which Marx wrote twenty years before the Paris uprising of 18 March 1871:

*The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot start being a revolution until it has cleansed itself of the superstitious regard for the past. Earlier revolutions needed world-historical memories so as to blind themselves to their own content. To become aware of its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. In former revolutions phrases went beyond content; now content goes beyond the phrase.'*¹⁷

¹⁵ Marx, Letter to F. Domela Nieuwenhuis, 22 February 1881, in Marx-Engels, *Werke*, vol.35, p.160.

¹⁶ Cf. Marx, 'Second Address', p.200; Peking, 1966 ed., pp.35-6.

¹⁷ Cf. Marx, 'Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in Marx-Engels, *Selected Works* vol. 1, p.400.

**Reflections on the death
of an Archbishop**

Austin Gough

There was a distinct occupational risk in being Archbishop of Paris in the nineteenth century. Monseigneur Affre had been killed on the barricades during the Revolution of 1848, while trying to appeal for peace; Monseigneur Sibour was assassinated in 1857 by a deranged member of his own clergy. These were accidents, without very much historical significance; but the violent death of Monseigneur Georges Darboy is part of a great drama of French politics, and not in any sense an accident. It has historical causes and historical effects.

As soon as the Law of Hostages came into effect, on 4 April 1871, the Archbishop of Paris was arrested and taken to the office of the Public Prosecutor of the Commune. Here an almost legendary confrontation took place. On the one side was Darboy, fifty-eight years old, learned, urbane, worldly, with a wide reputation as a liberal and tolerant churchman. Facing him across the table was the brilliant and ferocious 25-year-old Prosecutor, Raoul Rigault, the classic student revolutionary. Rigault had been imprisoned three times for sedition while he was still a student; after taking his baccalaureate in both science and letters, he had enrolled for medicine with the expressed aim of politicising the medical faculty. By the end of the Second Empire he was recognised as one of the most bitter and formidable intellectuals of the extreme Left. Darboy was used to dealing with cabinet ministers and civil servants; confronted with something entirely outside his experience, he made a tactical mistake, and decided to be ecclesiastical. He made the sign of the cross and began: 'Mes enfants . . .' Rigault cut him short. 'There are no children here, only magistrates. For 1800 years you people have been calling us your children and your brethren, and it's time we had an end of it.' A list of charges was handed to Darboy: he had unlawfully held property belonging to the people, to wit, church buildings, works of art, chalices, and so on. Darboy refused to sign this document because it described him as 'ex-Archbishop of Paris'; after some discussion the phrase was struck out, and re-written as 'a certain Darboy, who describes himself as

Archbishop of Paris'. He still refused to sign, and was taken away to prison.

The Commune badly needed a hostage of this magnitude, partly in order to bring pressure on the Versailles government to stop them from shooting Communard prisoners, and partly to have a really important figure to exchange for Blanqui, who was imprisoned at Versailles. But why particularly an Archbishop? Writing some years afterwards, Jules Guesde criticised the Communards for having 'allowed themselves to be distracted by the essentially bourgeois grievance of anticlericalism . . . They took their hostages from sacristies and the Archbishop's palace, when they had Rothschild at their mercy'. Guesde saw anticlericalism as an irrelevance, a mere froth on the surface of the real problems of society, and he under-estimated the extent to which, for many of the Communards, it was central to their political doctrine.

The anticlericalism of the Communards cuts across the usual divisions into Jacobin and Blanquist 'majority', Proudhonist 'minority', and National Guard Central Committee. If we begin, instead, with class, occupation and individual backgrounds, we can discover a spectrum of attitudes towards religion, and towards the clergy; it ranges, one might say, from ultra-violet anticlericalism at one end to infra-red anticlericalism at the other. We have to begin with the impressive roster of *universitaires*, and especially the sons of professors, who were later to play an active part in the Commune. Since the 1850s the universities had stood for positivism, rationalism and enthusiasm for experimental science, and for the positivists the Church represented a continuous murmur of opposition, rising sometimes to a tumult that could drive them from their chairs and lectureships. Gustave Flourens and his father, for example, both held chairs of physiology at the *Collège de France*; Flourens the younger had to resign because of clerical pressure when his course was denounced as being 'incompatible with religious belief'. Tony Moilin was another physiologist, assistant professor to the great Claude Bernard, the leading scientific positivist whom many Catholics regarded as an agent of the Antichrist. The medical faculty, in fact, hardly needed Rigault's efforts to politicise it. The brothers Elisée and Elie Reclus, frequent targets of the Catholic press, were two of the seven gifted children of a Protestant pastor who had been harassed by the Catholic clergy for many years. Elisée Reclus was a professor of geography with advanced opinions which he expressed in pamphlets and newspaper articles; his brother Elie had first trained for the Protestant ministry but by the end of the Second Empire he was Director of the Bibliothèque Nationale. Arthur Arnould, who was to be an important minority spokesman in the Commune, was the son of a professor who had come under fire from the clergy for his rationalist opinions; Arnould himself published a book on the Inquisition in 1869.

In their conflicts with the Church these men attracted the support of a very articulate public of university-educated radicals, of whom, once again, a number

of leading Communards are absolutely typical. Gaston Crémieux and Eugène Protot, for example, were brilliant law students who chose to practise amongst the working class and to make their name defending republicans and trade unionists. Georges Clemenceau began his career as a doctor with anticlerical opinions. Raoul Urbain, who was the instigator of the Hostages Law in 1871, was a schoolmaster who had been in the front line of many skirmishes with the clergy. Rigault and Vaillant were all-round intellectuals with qualifications in both literature and science. There is also an interesting sub-category of failed students: Emile Eudes had failed pharmacy through spending too much time on politics, and Victor Jaclard had been expelled as an agitator in the final year of his medical course. From these faces we could make up an Identikit picture of 'the anticlerical of the Second Empire', who wrote letters to the press and campaigned on the positivist side in controversies with the Church.

For this group of radical intellectuals, the case against religion began with the privileged position which the Church had enjoyed in France since the Napoleonic Concordat of 1802. The Concordat provided that all expenses of the Church, including the salaries of the clergy and the building of churches and schools, were paid by the State; the Church directly controlled most of the primary schools, and had an influential voice in the running of secondary schools and universities; cardinals sat in the Senate, and bishops had an assured public platform whenever they spoke on political or social questions. In a popular phrase the clergy were 'civil servants in black uniforms', and the analogy was all the stronger in that a bishop was paid 12,000 francs a year, the same as the top administrative grade of the civil service, while a parish priest got 1,200 francs, or about the same as a deputy postmaster. But although so much power was conceded to religion, the French Catholic Church in reality rested on very shaky foundations. Bishops spoke as if they had behind them millions of devout, disciplined Catholics, an army which could be marched on to the political battlefield — at election times, for example — with its banners flying and its cannon ready to blast the opposition; but in fact the number of practising Catholics in France was very small. Whole regions were totally de-Christianised. The cities were full of churches, convents, seminaries and colleges, but religious practice, as measured by the number of adults who came to Mass on Easter Sundays, hardly ever rose above 10 per cent; in most towns only 2 or 3 per cent of men ever went inside a church. Even in regions like Brittany and the Vendée the congregations were composed mainly of women; the expansion of the railway network, strongly resisted by the clergy, had had its usual effect of bringing remote areas under the influence of metropolitan culture, and metropolitan indifference to religion.

The radicals went on to argue that although Church and State were officially bound together, in reality they were very unequal and were growing further

apart every day. There was an increasing disparity, they said, between the flavour of secular society and the flavour of nineteenth-century religion. French society was moving towards greater tolerance, and the acceptance of scientific and rationalist ideas. The government's attitude was really neutral, not openly hostile to religion, but not especially favourable to it either, in spite of the Concordat; even in the Ministry of Religious Affairs they took the rather superficial line that the Church had to move with the times, and come to terms with a scientific and pluralist environment. But the Church was moving in the opposite direction, partly, of course, in reaction against this very secularisation of society, but mainly because of certain internal developments of Catholicism since 1848: the rise of neo-Thomist philosophy at Rome, the increasing centralisation of the Church and the emphasis on the authority of the Pope, and then the loss, in 1860, of the Church's temporal power in Italy. The result was a profound suspicion of the secular world, and a tendency to take an unreal and apocalyptic view of politics as a final definitive struggle between 'Revelation and Revolution', between the forces of good, led by the Papacy, and the forces of evil and disruption let loose on the world by Voltaire and Rousseau.

In France the polarisation between Church and society was made much sharper by the efforts of the great Catholic journalist Louis Veuillot, who came to dominate religious controversy during the Second Empire. Veuillot was a convert, a brilliant editor with a coarse and witty style that devastated his opponents within the Church and outside it. His daily newspaper, the *Univers*, became more valuable to the clergy than their seminary textbooks. Veuillot told them that they ought to be more assertive: in an ideal state, he said, the clergy would exercise a firm paternal control over public life. The concepts of liberty and tolerance were relics of pagan antiquity and had no place in a Christian state. (Veuillot said that the Persians should have won at Marathon: Europe would have been spared the influence of Socrates, Plato and Demosthenes.) The Inquisition ought to be revived to deal with liberals, Protestants, agnostics, headmasters and Jews. When the radical paper *Le Siècle* accused him of saying in effect, that when the Church was weak, Catholics should demand protection from the State, but that when the Church was strong it should persecute dissenters without mercy, Veuillot replied defiantly: why not? Truth has to prevail. The public took the *Univers* at its own valuation, as the authentic voice of Catholicism. Veuillot was known to be in the highest favour at Rome; French bishops wrote articles for him, and the parish clergy read the *Univers* from the pulpit instead of sermons. The *Univers* was always the driving force behind the periodic campaigns by the clergy to have certain professors of science or history dismissed for 'Voltaireanism' and other related offences.

So the Church in the period of the Second Empire presented a belligerent and uncongenial face to the educated public; and in retaliation the secular press

emphasised the theme of the ignorance of the clergy. Students for the priesthood were taught no history, except in a few seminaries where it was taught by being read aloud at mealtimes, and no literature or economics or current affairs. What they learned of these matters afterwards came mostly from editorials in Veuillot's *Univers*. The radical journalist Rochefort complained that if one tried to engage a bishop in serious argument he immediately began talking about the miraculous appearance of the Virgin Mary at La Salette. The seminaries did have a crisis of recruitment, and could not insist on high academic standards; but if anyone mentioned the obvious decline since the eighteenth century, when the seminaries had turned out priests who read Greek and subscribed to the *Encyclopaedia*, the Church authorities replied: 'precisely: do you want us to train another generation like Siéyès and Talleyrand?'

To go back, then, to the conversation between Darboy and Rigault in 1871, the conventional phrase 'My children' was the worst thing the Archbishop could have said. It evoked the entire conflict of the past twenty years, when the Church had persisted in behaving as an authoritarian parent or guardian of society, in spite of growing doubts about its qualifications to act as a guardian.

In the late 1860s, what we might call the official Left, that is, the republican opposition centred around Gambetta, Jules Ferry and Jules Simon, had taken up a position with regard to the Church which is expressed in the Belleville Program prepared for the elections of 1869: this called for the separation of Church and State and the ending of all State subsidies to religion, and stated that as far as possible education should be taken out of the hands of the clergy and made entirely secular. But these republicans were professional politicians, with strong support from the socially conservative Masonic lodges. They were deists, not atheists, and their religious program was tentative: they wanted separation of Church and State but had no thought of abolishing religion altogether. The Belleville Program implies that after the State has withdrawn its direct support for religion, the Catholic Church can be allowed to exist as a private organisation in the community, like a political party or a trade union.

The radical intellectuals whose backgrounds I've already described, and who were later to be Communards, found this moderate approach unsatisfying. By the later sixties the opinion in radical circles was that the Church ought to disappear completely; and this feeling was strengthened by the episode of the Papal Syllabus of Errors in 1864. For at least a decade there had been a liberal wing within the Catholic Church, composed of upper-class laymen and a small but important group of senior clergy with university degrees apart from their seminary training. These men, variously known as 'Catholic liberals' and 'gallicans', had put forward the view that Catholic political doctrine was really quite compatible with the 'principles of 1789', or in other words with the free institutions of nineteenth-century Europe, the free press, liberty of conscience,

and so on; they had also urged the hierarchy to recognise the need for a better-educated clergy capable of taking the lead in science and social progress, or at the least capable of understanding and co-operating with the changes in modern society. The Papal Syllabus of 1864 was a tabulated list of eighty 'pernicious errors of modern thought'; it firmly repudiated all the proposals of the liberal wing, and it gave notice that the Church was likely to be even more intransigent in social and intellectual matters in the future. After the Syllabus, and particularly after reading the commentaries on the Syllabus by Veuillot and other right-wing interpreters, the radicals became noticeably more receptive to a tougher line against the Church, and I think that it was at this time that the anti-religious ideas of Proudhon and Blanqui began to make a substantial impact on an educated public.

The writings of Proudhon and Blanqui on religion came suddenly into great notoriety in about 1867, after many years of more or less clandestine circulation. The laws relating to press freedom and public assembly were liberalised in 1867, and this led to a great outburst of pamphlet literature, and to an important series of public meetings in Paris at which all kinds of social topics were debated: economics, divorce, education, belief in God. Proudhonists and Blanquists won every argument; and on the subject of religion they were particularly trenchant. Proudhon's main point was historical: religion had served a purpose when mankind was in a primitive state: it was no longer necessary now that the human race had matured. In the nineteenth century, he said, religion was 'the most powerful institution perpetuating ignorance and political oppression' — political oppression because the clergy taught schoolchildren to be submissive and docile and to ignore the manifest injustices of life in this world. Religion kept man in subjection, without the confidence in his own powers which he needed in order to change society. In a sensible country, Proudhon said, priests would be prosecuted for fraud. The Blanquists went further. As with the much-disputed escalation from pot to heroin, once one had been convinced by Proudhon's arguments it was hard not to succumb to the more exhilarating and dangerous formulae of Blanqui. The difference can be expressed like this: Proudhon wanted to dissolve the Church; Blanqui wanted to cut the throats of the priests. 'War on the supernatural — *voilà l'ennemi!*' The idea of God, Blanqui said, was evil and anti-human. Society was 'crushed beneath the combined weight of the sacristy, the stock exchange and the military barracks'. All revolutions must begin by completely exterminating religion and all its ministers; 'the world is sick from centuries of Christianity, and only drastic surgery will cure it'.

For Blanqui anticlericalism was not merely an aspect of his social theory, but one of the foundations of it. The majority of his surviving writings are devoted to attacks on religion. Anticlericalism is an important factor in

Blanqui's doctrine of the necessity for a revolutionary elite centred in the capital: the basic reason, he maintained, why revolution would never well up spontaneously from the masses was that the French provinces were politically hopeless; the great mass of peasants and landowners were under the thumb of the clergy. The Blanquists believed this in spite of so many of them having come from the provinces themselves. Their experience had been in the towns, and it was a common delusion of smalltown radicals that just beyond their municipal boundaries began the dark mysterious countryside, full of superstitious peasants, unmentionable customs, and all-powerful alliances of château and presbytery. In fact, most peasants, even in the supposedly devout regions, disliked the clergy and were absolutely resistant to any attempts to influence them from the pulpit in politics or in behaviour. The peasants did, however, hate the cities, and especially after 1848 they hated the workers of Paris; so that the Blanquists were right in the strategical sense to distrust the provincial mass vote and to believe in the need for a metropolitan elite, but wrong about the real reasons for this.

Whatever the nuances of opinion amongst the middle-class radicals I have been discussing so far, the doctrines of Proudhon and Blanqui remind us also of a great subterranean reservoir of anticlerical feeling: the urban working class hated the clergy without any reservations. Of the 60,000 workers in the industrial city of Lille, for example, only a few hundred could be counted as Catholics. The men would cross the street to avoid walking past a Catholic church; a visiting English priest asked innocently if the workers of Lille belonged perhaps to some strict Protestant sect. The institutional arrangements of the Church seemed designed, anyway, to keep the working class at arm's length. To attend Mass cost 10 centimes 'for a chair'. The clergy had a scale of charges for funerals, from a sumptuous display with Requiem Mass for 50 francs, down to a squalid and perfunctory burial for 3.50c; and no service at all would be conducted for a worker who had lived in sin, or had been killed in a brawl. But simply not practising religion did not relieve the workers from the attentions of the clergy, because of the Church's influence on the civil law. The Church, for example, was responsible for the fact that while the ordinary charge for registering the birth of a child was 2 francs, it cost 7.50c (or three days' pay) to register the birth of an illegitimate child; the clergy then refused to baptise or confirm illegitimate children, a serious matter for a worker's family as many employers asked for a confirmation certificate before a boy would be given a job. When the missionary Orders came to the industrial cities they went round the workers' apartments preaching against contraception: 'God knows what He is doing', said one missionary pamphlet; 'as the family expands, He provides the necessities of life'. As the necessities of life were more often than not provided by sending 8 year-old girls to work in the factories, this line of argument went

down badly. Another pamphlet said: 'The only cure for social injustice is for all to return to a Christian life. The workers especially must avoid sensualism and materialism.' To a man who earned 1.50c a day, working for shareholders whose dividends were 20,000 francs a month, this was insulting; on the wages of 1860 the workers were safe from the higher flights of sensualism and materialism. When they thought about religion at all, the workers displayed their feelings in the cabarets, in drunken parodies of Catholic ritual. One of the left-wing political clubs was modelled satirically on the Catholic 'Society of Mary'; the club was called the 'Society of Marianne' (the female symbol of republican France), and had a litany in imitation of litanies to the Virgin Mary:

Hail Marianne, full of strength, the people are with thee; blessed be the Republic.

Holy Marianne, Mother of just rights, have pity on us and deliver us.

Holy Virgin Marianne, liberty of the captive, patrimony of the poor, asylum of those banished from France, hope of the weak and afflicted;

Mother of liberty, deliver us from kings and popes.

Mother of equality, deliver us from aristocrats.

Mother of fraternity, deliver us from troopers and gendarmes.

Mother of justice, deliver us from judges.

Virgin of truth, deliver us from diplomats.

Virgin of honesty, deliver us from police spies.

Deliver us from taxes, from the Stock Exchange, from Government loans.

Long live the democratic and social Republic.

Amen.

Priests who had lived amongst the workers had no illusions about the future of religion in the cities. They could find only degrees of hatred. The ordinary workers hated religion; workers who had served their seven years as conscript soldiers were even worse, very brutal and irreverent, and ready for violence against the clergy at the slightest provocation; the working-class women could hardly be relied upon as a softening and Christianising influence — according to police reports they were the worst of the lot: they thought of nothing but sex, money and drink, and spat at priests in the street.

Proudhon said that the Church, on its side, hated the poor. This was unfair to a number of priests who were very sympathetic to the urban working class. One priest who was asked by some middle-class parishioners to lend the church hall for a dance in aid of the poor, replied: 'I tell you, the poor will make *you* dance one of these days'. Some clergy made efforts to investigate working-class housing conditions, wages and other problems to see where charity could best be applied, but the workers they spoke to were always convinced that they were spying for the police. In general, the efforts of priests with a social conscience were paralysed by the rigidity of Catholic social doctrine at this time;

they had to believe in private charity, and to reject any organised social reform by governments as socialism. The one serious attempt by the Church to establish a *rapprochement* with the working class, through the St Vincent de Paul Society, failed completely, and its failure brings us to the principal overriding grievance of the workers against religion.

The St Vincent de Paul Society and its subsidiary, the Society of St Joseph, organised several hundred clubs throughout France, where workers could enjoy free meals, musical evenings, games and discussions. It was no secret, however, that the St Vincent de Paul movement was run by Catholic politicians of the extreme Right, and that the whole enterprise was subsidised by industrialists and landowners. The workers suspected a plot by bosses and priests together to convert them into 'model employees', and of course they stayed away. The Society was patronised mainly by petit-bourgeois, even on the nights when free meals were being offered. One of the organisers of the St Vincent de Paul movement wrote many years later:

We never attracted the real workers, but only the laggards of industry, the dunces of the factory, employees of clerical bookshops, retired sacristans, *concièrges*, and the office-boys of our own organisation.

Under the Second Empire the local branches declined into being virtually employment agencies for people of this type.

But the most important complaint against the St Vincent de Paul Society concerned its political action since 1848. Given the political experience of the French working class, in fact, no initiative by any organ of the Church could possibly have succeeded; and we have to remember that the Communards of 1871 included a great many men with first-hand memories of 1848 and the early years of the Empire. In February 1848 the clergy had blessed the trees of liberty planted to celebrate the democratic revolution; then in June 1848 they had been entirely on the side of 'Order' against the social revolution; the St Vincent de Paul Society had provided some thousands of recruits for the platoons of the Garde Mobile, who had gone to the barricades to fight the revolutionary workers with the greatest enthusiasm. After the June Days the clergy in Paris refused to say masses for workers killed on the barricades, although the masses for members of the National Guard and the Garde Mobile went on for weeks. In 1851 the Church supported Louis Napoleon's *coup d'état* and the purge of socialists that followed it, and bishops rose to extraordinary heights of rhetoric about the victory of Order. Here is the Bishop of Arras addressing his clergy after the *coup*:

Gentlemen, I urge you to give full support to this astonishing Prince who has dared to accept the almost supernatural task of saving France . . . May God bless him for all that he has done for us, far beyond our hopes.

The clergy and the St Vincent de Paul Society were very active in the elections

of the period, campaigning for conservative candidates in 1849, for imperialists in 1852, for legitimists in 1863 and 1869, but always against the Left. When he thought about the political record of the Church in his own lifetime, Proudhon became uncharacteristically violent. On this point he agrees with Blanqui:

The Church, whose incense and caresses are all for the conquerors, and its curses all for the conquered, is piling up for itself the most inexorable revenge. There isn't an honest man today who doesn't say to himself: shall I die without killing a priest?

When the Second Empire fell in September 1870 nobody was surprised — and least of all the clergy — to find that the Church was one of the primary targets of the Left. Ecclesiastical affairs had been particularly lively for the preceding eighteen months. In the elections of 1869 the clergy had campaigned so vigorously on a program of 'getting rid of 1789' that in some areas the peasants had become afraid that pre-Revolutionary feudal rights were going to be restored, including the *jus primae noctis*. Throughout 1870 the Vatican Council overshadowed even the news from Prussia, and the Catholic press had announced as if it were an article of faith that the Pope's infallibility extended to politics and civil law as well as doctrine. The radicals had not imagined that they would have their revenge so soon. The provisional Commune at Lyons on 4 September 1870 immediately arrested magistrates, police commissioners and priests, as if they formed a natural group. All over France there were attacks on the Jesuit colleges. Georges Clemenceau, elected mayor of the Eighteenth Arrondissement of Paris, began by abolishing Catholic education.

In the light of the immediate background, and, of course, of the atmosphere of excitement and crisis surrounding the formation of the Commune in Paris, the extraordinary thing is that the Commune's religious policy was so moderate. The Proclamation to the Departments in April did have overtones of violence: it spoke of 'thought confined and submitted to the rod of Jesuitism, and your sons regimented against their will by priests who turn them into slaves of tyrants and executioners' — but when the Commune sat down to legislate for the separation of Church and State its members were concerned, as with so many other matters, to give an impression of sober responsibility. Nothing was said about killing priests. The Decree itself might almost have been written by Jules Simon.

Considering that the first of all principles of the French Republic is liberty;

Considering that the liberty of conscience is the first of all liberties;

Considering that the State budget for religion is contrary to this principle, because it taxes citizens against their will [a reference to the realities of low religious practice?];

And considering that the clergy have been the accomplices of the monarchy in its crimes against liberty, the Commune decrees:

- (a) that the Church is separated from the State;
- (b) that the State budget for religion is suppressed;
- (c) that all possessions of the clergy are confiscated as national property . . .

But events were running on too quickly for this moderate approach. The churches, which the Commune government left open, became filled with crowds of workers who gave obscene sermons from the pulpits and stuck pipes in the mouths of statues. Mass meetings were held in the churches to decide what should be done with the clergy; motions were proposed 'to throw all nuns in the river', and 'to burn Archbishop Darboy alive on the Champ de Mars'; a group of women proposed that priests be declared outlaws and hunted with butchers' knives and sickles.

At the height of this agitation, M. Thiers at Versailles declined, with a variety of specious excuses, to exchange Blanqui for Darboy. Faced directly with the problem, the leaders of the Commune knew that they could not carry out the threat to execute Darboy. Several of them resigned over the question of the hostages. Rigault himself had said that the enemies of the Left deserved no tolerance; in a sinister echo of Louis Veuillot he wrote: 'to be tolerant, not to employ the force one has at one's disposal, is to condemn oneself to feebleness and defeat'. But Rigault could not bring himself to order Darboy to be shot. He did nothing more about Darboy, and when it became clear that some other priests held in the prisons were in danger of being murdered, he gave them passports to enable them to escape from the city. As the formal authority of the Commune disintegrated, however, and the Versailles troops began to move into Paris, shooting hostages as they advanced, the more violent and implacable anti-clericals took command. 'If the Commune hesitates over the hostages', said one of the working-class news-sheets, 'the people will carry out its threats for it'. No hostages were killed, certainly, until the last days, when the government troops had already shot many thousands without trial; then seventy-four were executed, twenty-four of them priests.

Darboy was shot with Senator Louis Bonjean, the president of the judiciary under the Second Empire. After the first volley Darboy remained standing, although wounded in the head. He lifted his hand in a gesture of benediction towards the firing-squad, but another volley brought him down. One of the squad said afterwards to Jules Vallès: 'Darboy tried to give us his blessing, but we gave him *our* blessing all right'. This conversation was a turning-point in Vallès' opinions: he reflected later that Darboy and Bonjean were, classically, the 'enemy', and had really been crushed by historical forces; all the same, he thought, the whole episode was revolting and a bad omen for a movement dedicated to liberty.

I should like to end with a hypothesis. The usual explanation given for Thiers' refusal to exchange Darboy for Blanqui is that he wanted to provoke

the Commune into some conspicuous act of brutality, to justify the Government's repression later on. There is, however, another aspect. The Communards had reasoned that the Assembly at Versailles, known to be overwhelmingly Catholic, could not possibly allow an Archbishop to be shot. But the Catholics in the Assembly were ultramontanes, by which I mean, in this context, that they belonged to the extreme Right wing of the laity who took their tone from the Syllabus of 1864, and were vigorous supporters of the Declaration of Infallibility in 1870 — and to these men Darboy was almost *worse* than Blanqui. It was widely known in the Church, and should have been known to some of the Communards, that Darboy had been a central figure in the group of Catholic liberals whom I mentioned earlier. He had encouraged his own clergy to respect science and scholarship; he had opposed the preparation of the Syllabus of Errors, and done everything he could to prevent its publication; the Pope had written an open letter accusing him of the heresy of Febronianism; at the Vatican Council he had been the leader of the minority who had spoken against the Declaration of Infallibility; and behind the scenes he had advised Napoleon III to think about the possibility of a French National Church which would be liberal in style and independent of Rome in matters of politics and social doctrine. Ironically, one of his most useful colleagues in all this movement of resistance within the Church had been Senator Louis Bonjean, who was the most distinguished of all the Catholic liberals of the professional classes. With this background, Darboy and Bonjean had hardly a single friend in the Versailles Assembly; some of the Catholic parliamentarians afterwards made very curious and unsympathetic remarks about their deaths, as did Pius IX. But an interesting possibility: if the Communards had chosen an ultramontane prelate like Monseigneur de Ségur, or if they had been able to arrest, perhaps, Louis Veuillot, Thiers might have found that he had to accept the offer of an exchange; the Assembly would have insisted. One thing we can be certain of is that if Darboy and Bonjean had lived, the Archbishopric of Paris, a very important power base in Catholic Europe, would have remained in the hands of a liberal, and the progressive movement in the Catholic Church would have been better able to recover from the effects of the Syllabus and the Vatican Council. The lack of men like Darboy and Bonjean delayed the development of the Church towards the more socially conscious and tolerant pattern that we have seen in the twentieth century; but then the wrong men frequently die in revolutions.

Some British reactions to the Commune

FB Smith

The British have not been good at understanding the French: but then they have not tried very hard and the French have not encouraged them. This has not stopped dozens of British historians and commentators from moralising upon the French and their revolutions. British reactions to the Commune form part of the pattern. If the ignorance of events was perhaps greater than usual, so also was the indignation, moralising, and fear of infection. This sketchy anthology of reactions offers no revelations about the Commune but it does indicate some deeply held, but now forgotten, fears and hopes for Britain.

The anthology is sketchy, partly because it was hastily prepared, but mainly because of the comparative paucity of recorded contemporary comment. Amongst the eminent Victorians whose voluminous 'life and letters' I consulted, Disraeli, Huxley, Newman, Darwin, Millais, Hughes, George Eliot, Tennyson, Holyoake, Sidgwick, Wilkie Collins, Watts, Wallace, Mill, Florence Nightingale, John Bright and Robert Browning made no reference to the Commune in their correspondence or memoranda as published. Yet several mention the Franco-Prussian War and the restoration of the Thiers government. Indeed, there is a striking similarity in their fluent remarks upon the war and their apparent silence during the three months of the Commune. It would seem that middle-class literate English people were bewildered by the Commune and too repelled to mention it.

Official policy gave them no lead. There was no debate in the parliament on the Commune and no official statement on it. Gladstone, the Prime Minister, expressed the rulers' bafflement and repugnance in his uniquely evasive way when fending off a backbencher's motion intended to imply support for the Versailles government:

We have received no telegram relating to the unfortunate and terrible events that are occurring in Paris; and I cannot wonder at that, considering that the representatives of the British Government would be unwilling to send

intelligence of such matters until they could be quite certain of its accuracy. So far as a judgment can be formed from the unofficial telegrams, I think there is some room for hoping that there may have been a degree of exaggeration in the details, although I apprehend that there is no room for any hope whatever that great catastrophes have not occurred. . . events so entirely, I think, without precedent in history. . . For my own part, I will not attempt to characterise by any epithet the circumstance of which we have obtained partial knowledge, and I would the rather refrain from doing so, because I am conscious that there are no epithets which could adequately or in any degree give satisfaction to the feelings with which every man's mind and heart must be oppressed. I do not think that at the present moment the House could usefully express any opinion; but I am quite sure there is no Member of this House who, if the expression of its opinion could give the slightest comfort to France under circumstances so extraordinary, would not be prompt to avail himself of an opportunity of expressing his sympathy.¹

That was the end of that motion.

The actual position of the British government was confused. Lord Lyons, their ambassador in Paris, had been requested by the Provisional Government to remove to Versailles and had promptly done so upon receiving permission from Westminster. Thus British recognition of the Thiers government was implicitly confirmed and there was no official recognition of the Commune. Lyons's understudy, Malet, who was later to have a distinguished career in the Foreign Office, was left behind in Paris to man the embassy. He attempted of his own initiative, as I understand it, to negotiate with the Commune leaders for the protection of the Commune's hostages, Archbishop Darboy and the others. This initiative was expressly countermanded by the Queen.²

Now that we have reached the top, we may open our conspectus with the Queen, and then move down the ranks. The Queen's diary, Osborne, 8 April 1871:

Still dreadful news from Paris. The Commune have everything their own way, and they go on quite as in the days of the old Revolution. . . though they have not yet proceeded to commit all the same horrors. They have, however, thrown priests into prison, etc. They have burnt the guillotine and shoot people instead.

On 14 April she forbade the Foreign Secretary, Lord Granville, to communicate with the Communards in any circumstances, even to mediate for prisoners:

The Queen scarcely thinks it necessary to allude to the characters of those who now rule in Paris, which, if the newspaper reports be true, are such as would repel all desire for association on the part of honest men.

Granville had in fact already authorised mediation and was compelled, against his judgment, to countermand his earlier permission. He might have argued

¹ *Parliamentary Debates*, 3, vol.CCVI, col.1265.

² *Parliamentary Debates*, 3, vol.CCV, col.336.

more strongly with the Queen had British property been shelled, but it happened that such property escaped destruction throughout the Commune and its suppression. Meanwhile the Queen was busy succouring Louis Napoleon, the Duc d'Aumale, and Duc de Nemours.³

The British government feared involvement through reports in Clubland that thousands, hundreds, scores of Englishmen had fought on the side of the Commune and had been captured by the Versaillais. But events turned out well for them. Only about twenty Englishmen appear to have been made prisoner in Paris during and after the May days; only one, William Lowe, aged 12, was found with a revolver on the barricades and was therefore subject to the death penalty.⁴ The Thiers government prudently released him. Bismarck, incidentally, used the rumours that lots of British were fighting for the Commune to foment anti-British opinion in Germany.⁵

In this, as in so many other matters affecting German-British relations, Bismarck misjudged British attitudes. Opinion in Britain during the Franco-Prussian War had been vocally pro-German. British spokesmen upheld the Prussians as a fellow Protestant nation fighting the battle of enlightenment and progress against a reactionary Catholic country led by a despot, a despot moreover who had vaingloriously declared war on an unoffending, aspiring people. These views were summed up in a letter from Thomas Carlyle who, of course, had long been Germanophile, to *The Times* of 11 November 1870. Carlyle proclaimed that it was 'very idle, dangerous, and misguided. . . to lament for France'. The history of France through the ages was the history of violence, plunder and deceit. 'The quantity of conscious mendacity that France, official and other, has perpetrated latterly, especially since July, is something wonderful and fearful'. This mendacity, most of all, demonstrated how far France lagged in the progress of humanity against shams. 'The German race, not the Gaelic, [were] now to be the protagonist in that immense world drama and from them [Carlyle expected] better issues'. Then 'noble, patient, deep, pious and solid Germany should be at length welded into a Nation, and become Queen of the Continent, instead of vapouring, vainglorious, gesticulating, quarrelsome, restless and over-sensitive France'. This, Carlyle remarked, with his usual grandiose stucco confidence, was 'the hopefulest public fact' that had occurred in his time. Thus even before France's political behaviour became fully reprehensible there was little sympathy for her.

Francis Kilvert, an introverted Anglican clergyman in darkest Radnorshire, shared in his mild way Carlyle's dislike of the French. On Brothering Monday, 20 March, he noted in his diary:

³ George Earle Buckle (ed.), *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, second series, London, 1926, vol.II, pp.126-8.

⁴ *Parliamentary Debates*, 3, vol.CCVI, cols.1254, 1266, 1745-6.

⁵ *Parliamentary Debates*, 3, vol.CCVI, col.1777.

Miserable news from Paris. Another Revolution, barricades, the troops of the line fraternizing with the insurgent National Guards, two Generals shot, two more in the hands and tender mercies of the beastly cowardly Paris mob. Those Parisians are the scum of the earth, and Paris is the crater of the volcano, France, and a bottomless pit of revolution and anarchy.⁶

His metaphors are revealing. 'Volcano', 'revolution', 'bottomless pit' clearly derive from the opening passages of Book III of Carlyle's *French Revolution*. For Kilvert, as for many other middle-class Englishmen, metaphors of violence established the event in his thoughts and closed his mind to further inquiry. Given the utter remoteness from things Parisian of their own peaceful surroundings, perhaps metaphor was the only means by which the events could be realised.

Kilvert's placing the event immediately in the context of 1789 is typical of a number of conservative, middle of the road commentators. The July 1871 issue of the *Edinburgh Review* contains an article by William Stigand, a journalist with legal training and an authority on France. According to Stigand:

The figures of la Commune and the Reign of Terror start once more from the canvas and live — degenerate, indeed contemptible, obscure by the side of their nefarious prototypes, but animated by the same passions, and performing with unabated fury the same parts.

He went on to predict the emergence of a Committee of Public Safety and the reign of the guillotine. He appears to have been unaware that the Commune had abolished the latter. Ultimately, he foresaw the Commune ending with the same sanguinary ambition as its predecessor in a revolutionary war.

Beyond these foreshadowings from past experience, Stigand discerned some elements in the Commune that were new. It 'was a terrible thing', but perhaps it was worthwhile if it displayed 'how ugly communism is'.⁷ The Communards were not, like their predecessors, anarchistic Rousseauist revolutionaries who wanted to overturn authority, but went beyond 1793 in determining to transform the proper relations of property. In this the Commune was a fearful omen for the world, a portent of the coming world war over property. Yet in this very overturning of the relations of property lay hope. Stigand predicted that the Commune would fail precisely because the Communards had wrecked the Parisian economy: they had wickedly driven out the wealthy and thereby deprived themselves of the money with which to pay for their communistic experiment. Again Stigand appears to have been unaware that the Bourse and banks remained busy throughout the Commune. With the experiment doomed for want of

⁶ William Plomer (ed.), *Kilvert's Diary*, 3 vols., London, 1969, vol.I, p.314. Kilvert did not mention the Commune again until the May days, when he commented vehemently on the burning of Paris (p.348).

⁷ [William Stigand], 'Communal France', in *Edinburgh Review*, vol.CXXXIV, July 1871, pp.252ff.

finance, the end, Stigand argued with comforting gloom, must be negative destruction and the despair of the Communards.

John Morley and J.M. Ludlow, the Christian Socialist friend of Charles Kingsley, took a more sophisticated line of opposition. Morley and Ludlow condemned the Commune because they saw it as 'treasonable to Western defence'. By weakening France the Parisians would destroy the possibility of an eventual Franco-British alliance against the despotic axis, Russia, Prussia and Austria. Hence British freedom and the progress of Western Europe which it underpinned would come under threat from despotism. Ludlow had been Francophile since the 1840s and was haunted by the news of France, the cultural hope of Europe, tearing herself apart. Nonetheless, Ludlow worked to assist Communard refugees and was primarily responsible for saving J.J. Elisée Reclus, the great geographer, from transportation to New Caledonia and helping him to settle in Switzerland. But Ludlow's hatred of the Commune ran deep; he respected Reclus as 'an absolute gentleman' but refused to speak to him again.⁸

John Morley feared a probable Russian-Prussian axis growing upon the destruction of France not primarily because it loomed as a barrier to European liberalism but rather because the axis opened the way to communism, first in Eastern Europe, then spreading to the West. The axis would be inherently unstable and subject to violent peasant revolt: for which the Commune supplied a model to the dull Slav peasantry. French ingenuity would form a potent new force when compounded with Slav tribal propensities.

The Slav peoples are the most instinctively and phrenetically communistic in their aspirations. Add to these Slav aspirations French form, grace, practical enthusiasm, always eager to move in the communistic direction. Do you — who are not a communist — [he asked his friend, the lawyer journalist Frederic Harrison, who defended the Commune] think there is not far more peril to the foundations of Europe in this politico-social alliance of peoples with such ideas, than in the Prussian Junkers?

Morley also reverted to an age-old racial fear in Europe. The Commune, he thought, 'was a reversion to those Gothic, Visigothic, Ostrogothic, barbarous, invasions of the decaying empire — wh. had no polity nor plan, but that of destroying and taking possession'.⁹

Since Sedan he had become decidedly pro-German, preferring 'German ideas of society, and even of government. . . of course. . . liberal German, not German Junker ideas'. The Germans were orderly and steady, while the French were 'heady and intolerant' and unvirtuous. The Commune typically displayed their hollowness and Morley expected that the 'phrase-mongering curs, whom an Uhlan or two [would] suffice to send howling back into their dens' would end as cowardly traitors to their own cause. Typically devoid of faith, the

⁸ N.C. Masterman, *John Malcolm Ludlow*, Cambridge, 1963, pp.210-11.

⁹ D.A. Hamer, *John Morley*, Oxford, 1968, pp.362-3.

Commune would lapse into dissension and savagery. Echoing Carlyle, he declared that the 'new society will have to be perfected. . .not by Celts, but by Teutons, who can take deeper draughts'.¹⁰ In this belief Morley was at one with many of his countrymen, who regarded the Celts, the French, the Welsh and the Scots, let alone the Irish, as lesser breeds ruled by their emotions, incapable of submitting to the rule of law and the liberalism that emanated from it. Against this background Morley's stubborn support of Irish Home Rule becomes even more difficult to understand. Indeed, his professions on the Commune are also difficult to interpret. While he privately denounced the Commune to some friends who were against it, he told Frederic Harrison, its defender that:

I go with you in every word, and cannot say how grateful I am to you for so humane a deliverance. It will reach the heart of every man young enough to have a human fibre left in him.¹¹

Racial assumptions also underlie the explanation of the Commune offered by Lord Houghton, the biographer of Keats, a Francophile friend of Thiers, and the man who introduced de Sade's works to England. Houghton asserted that the Commune was the result of incursions of rootless Anglo-Saxon foreigners, Germans and English, who had plotted to overthrow the legitimate Provisional Government. The 'foreigners' explanation is frequently produced by commentators who dislike civil disturbance, as students of the Eureka Stockade and other revolts will easily appreciate. Like Stigand in the *Edinburgh Review*, Houghton regarded the Commune as a portent of class war. And like other conservative liberals, he feared what he conceived as Gladstone's 'demophile' wooing of the populace. He wrote to Gladstone in September, after the suppression of the Commune:

I am no alarmist but it is undeniable that a new and thoroughly false conception of the relations of work and wealth is invading European society, and of which the Paris Commune is the last expression. Therefore any word from such a man as you implying that you look on individual wealth as anything else than a reserve of public wealth, and that there can be antagonism between them, is infinitely dangerous. . .a certain encouragement is now given by some thoughtful men, not only to the envy of the superior material well-being of others, which is bad enough, but to a jealousy of intellectual eminence, and a dislike of culture itself.¹²

This argument reverts to the debates on the Second Reform Bill, in which Houghton had taken a prominent part. It revives the anxiety about the preservation of the rule of the educated in an electorate with a working-class majority, and the differences about tests of fitness to vote in the polity. Houghton, echoing Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, was also deeply disturbed about

¹⁰ Ibid., p.262.

¹¹ Frederic Harrison, *Autobiographic Memoirs*, 2 vols., London, 1911, vol.II, pp.26-7.

¹² James Pope Hennessy, *Monckton Milnes: The Flight of Youth 1851-1885*, London, 1951, p.233.

the fate of education and literature in a polity dominated by the narrowest and least instructed. The demolition of the Vendôme Column and the burning of the Tuileries and what Houghton imagined to be the destruction of Paris, proved the inherent vandalism of the mob.

The most telling attack on the Commune came from the future Tory Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury. His first article was probably prepared in April/early May and published anonymously in the October number of the *Quarterly Review*. He espoused the conspiracy theory. The Commune was the product of the International: and it was the more dangerous precisely because the International was international. The *émeute* in Paris represented an infection from which Britain could not remain immune. Towards confirming his conspiracy theory Salisbury analysed about twenty names listed as leaders of the Commune. He used 'communist' interchangeably with 'Blanquist' and got the allegiances of two men, Milliére and Chalain, completely wrong, but within the assumptions of the day and the available information it must have been a persuasive performance. Naturally Salisbury emphasised the participation of Léo Frankel, the Hungarian-German, the one man who neatly fits his case. He also subsequently highlighted Marx, 'a mischievous, hotheaded and intemperate German', in one of the earliest public references to Marx in England.

Salisbury's superior information also shows in his perception of the Communards' antipathy to religion and the significance of their laicisation of education. Nothing showed more clearly, he argued, the Commune's overturning of the traditional order than their abandoning of the force that had moulded the European social order for two millennia. Salisbury, characteristically hard-headed and pessimistic, asserted that the breaking of the religious order could never be mended and that the future promised only catastrophe. The Commune was preface to a controversy that would 'thrust old-style ruling class politics into the background, in favour of a social conflict the most critical and the most embittered that [had] yet shaken the fabric of civilization'. Henceforth social change was to come not from slow progress, but the impetus of class violence, fomented by the International. It would be a 'death-struggle. . . between Socialism and existing civilization'. Therefore existing civilisation, representing property and the rule of the best, must in self-defence and regardless of liberal qualms, suppress the Commune and the International. 'There are religions so hostile to morality, so poisonous to the life-springs of society, that they are outside the pale of human tolerance'.¹³

By contrast with Kilvert, Salisbury's metaphors derive from that textbook on revolutions analogous to Carlyle's *French Revolution*, Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*. Writing after the May days, Salisbury reflected that it had been 'a strange

¹³ [Lord Salisbury], 'The Commune and the Internationale', in *Quarterly Review*, vol. CXXXI, 1871, pp.550-9.

disordered period in which all moral and intellectual qualities were crossly fitted together; in which only the cruel were spirited, in which only the loyal were feeble, in which only the mean were wise'. The Commune had comprised 'a rabble who believed in no God and no man [here he echoes a defensive remark by Frederic Harrison] but had perished with the courage of fanatics'. Salisbury professed no false sympathy with those Communards butchered during the May days, or shot or transported in the following months. Even the butchery might be viewed as a Providential warning to Britain: 'It [was] the destiny of France to exhibit for the benefit of others', he noted complacently, 'the special forms of modern civilization in their most aggravated form'.¹⁴

Salisbury also shared with Dickens a conception of the city as spontaneous generator of unrest and revolution. Cities were obstacles to good government. Their massed ignorance and atomised anonymity enabled the press to exercise undue influence and inflame emotions that were already heightened by the continual mingling and abrasion of thousands of human creatures. The press fomented unrest by spreading rumours and news about the ruling classes inimical to good order. The concentration of workingmen in cities enabled them to be organised and led by agitators to coerce their employers. Salisbury admitted to acquiescing reluctantly in this last development, provided that British workingmen restricted their interest to organising only for better wages, as they had done hitherto. But the Commune and the International showed how sinister intellectuals could infect workingmen with ideas that went beyond mere wages issues and aimed at total social change. Rural workers would remain respectful, Salisbury was confident, although even as he was writing the Agricultural Labourers Union was proving the opposite. Nonetheless cities remained the unsolved problem. They were the necessary ancillary to aristocratic predominance, the seats of rule, justice, finance and fashion, the homes of art galleries and libraries, the havens of pleasure, yet they were simultaneously the breeding grounds of anarchy. Paris, the pre-eminent home of art and pleasure, was the pre-eminent home of anarchy and socialism. And London could not escape: already it was the home of the International.

The danger was the greater in England, in Salisbury's view, because the Liberals controlled the great cities. Led by Gladstone, whom Salisbury believed to be reckless and probably mad, the Liberals would overturn society in bowing to the demands of their urban proletarian masters. Led by John Stuart Mill and the Land Tenure Reform League, the Liberals had already begun to attack property. George Odger, the trade unionist collaborator with the Liberals, and Frederic Harrison, a class traitor, were attacking social distinctions and seeking to institute a sterile equality. As yet, class hatred in Britain was a weak imitation of that which possessed the French mob, but again it could only increase in

¹⁴ Ibid., p.566.

the future. The 'party of resistance' could slow the infection by muzzling Gladstone and working for 'class mutuality', but ultimately the cause was hopeless.¹⁵ Salisbury's view of the greater volatility of the Parisian mob again has echoes in the *French Revolution*:

Other mobs are dull masses; which roll onwards with a dull fierce tenacity, a dull fierce heat, but emit no light-flashes of genius as they go. The French mob. . . is among the liveliest phenomena of our world. So rapid, audacious; so clear-sighted, inventive, prompt to seize the moment; instinct with life to its finger-ends! That talent. . . distinguishes. . . the French People from all Peoples, ancient and modern.¹⁶

The leaders of the International agreed with Salisbury and Carlyle. The English workingmen were phlegmatic. Marx and Engels thought them contemptible. The Frenchman, Dupont, a member of the Commune, remarked of them:

The English have all the material necessary for the social revolution; but what they lack is the spirit of generalization and the revolutionary passions . . . What folly then — nay, what a crime — to allow it [the International] to fall into hands purely English.¹⁷

Several commentators puzzled over the difference between turbulent Paris and quiet London. The puzzle was the more intriguing because London, so much bigger than Paris, should have exhibited more of the ills of great cities — unrest, cholera, illiteracy, blasphemy. The commentators, Stigand of the *Edinburgh Review* for example, noted that municipal institutions were stronger in Britain because they nourished and utilised ideals of civic duty, whereas in France centralisation had blighted municipal power and virtue. The propertied classes in France were not educated to contribute to the maintenance of civil order. None, except Frederic Harrison, saw the Commune as an attempt to institute civic virtue and repudiate that compulsory unification that descended from the absolute monarchies of Louis XIV and Henri II.¹⁸

Centralisation also bred frustration and passion. Frenchmen were of course, Stigand remarked, instinctively immoral and passionate and the very stopping of outlets in municipal politics for energy and antagonism had bred 'an insane hatred of capital and the rights of property. . . superadded to the political passions of the Revolution'. This belief did not prevent Stigand from turning to denounce the Communards' intention to establish free cities and effectively decentralise France. This could lead only to anarchy and socialism. Hitherto the French, passionate beings that they were, had been held in control by the upper classes through a centralised bureaucracy. Decentralise and the ferocity

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution*, Modern Library Edition, New York (first published 1837), p.198.

¹⁷ Quoted by Salisbury, in 'The Commune and the Internationale', p.556.

¹⁸ [William Stigand], 'Communal France', p.255; Frederic Harrison, 'The Revolution of the Commune', in *Fortnightly Review*, vol.IX, May 1871.

of the poor would be unleashed, as it had been in the Jacquerie and the Vendée. Better, Stigand argued, to have centralisation and hatred kept in check, than the decentralisation and socialism threatened by the Commune.¹⁹

Mazzini, in the *Contemporary Review*, opposed the Commune for similar reasons. By promising to disintegrate France it was revealed as an 'anti-national' movement and therefore as a movement which could not realise the highest aspirations of man. Moreover, by declaring against private property, as Mazzini believed, the Commune proved itself to be anti-individualistic and inimical to the collectivisation of duty. He saw Marx as the prophet of the Commune's degrading cosmopolitan tendencies. Marx was 'a man of domineering disposition . . . governed by no earnest, philosophical, or religious belief, having, I fear, more elements of anger (even if just) than of love in his nature, and the character of whose intellect — acute, but dissolvent — resembles that of Proudhon'.²⁰

By 1872 Salisbury, writing his second article on the Commune for the *Quarterly Review*, played down his earlier conspiracy theory. Obviously impressed with new information, he allowed that several of the Communards were cultured, idealistic men and set his emphasis upon the grievances of the Paris artisans whom they led. His lesson was similar to that preached by W.H. Smith and other observers.²¹ British rulers needed to show greater tolerance in industrial disputes. The sores of the cities needed to be lanced: slums must be rebuilt, schools established, workingmen's clubs supported. Aristocrats and employers must accept their social responsibilities to further social unity and preserve the social order. Charles Kingsley's and Thomas Hughes's reactions to the Commune were very similar to Salisbury's and their message akin to his. But they had long preceded him in regarding foetid cities as sources of political as well as epidemiological corruption and in trying to improve matters. The Commune made Kingsley very gloomy: it showed the near hopelessness of working to combat the wens. Paris showed the 'anarchy of irreverence' bred by 'the merest fancies and prejudices of the Press' in overcrowded rookeries. Good government, the rule of the educated and the responsible, had long been rendered impossible in France by such growths and Kingsley saw 'a possibility of government becoming as impossible in England'.²²

The sources of Salisbury's new information are apparently the excellent

¹⁹ [William Stigand], 'Communal France', pp.276ff. See also Stigand's second article, 'The Commune of Paris', *Edinburgh Review*, vol.CXXXIV, October 1871, p.523, and Helen Taylor, 'Paris and France', in *Fortnightly Review*, vol.IX, April 1871.

²⁰ G. Mazzini, 'The International', in *Contemporary Review*, parts I and II, vol.XX, 1872.

²¹ [Lord Salisbury], 'The Proletariat on a False Scent', in *Quarterly Review*, vol.CXXXII, January 1872; W.H. Smith, 'Mr W.R. Greg's Political Essays', in *Contemporary Review*, vol.XX, 1872, p.234.

²² *Charles Kingsley*, edited by his wife, 2 vols., London, 1878, vol.II, p.357; W.H.G. Armytage, *A.J. Mundella*, London, 1951, pp.96-8.

articles by eye witnesses and participants in *Fraser's Magazine* and the *Fortnightly Review* and possibly the letters subsequently collected in William Gibson's *Paris during the Commune*. He could hardly have depended upon the London newspapers. These show the editors as uniformly against the Commune and eager to print lurid accounts of killings and burnings damaging to the Communards. They also uncritically purveyed the lies emanating from Versailles and Brussels: about Blanqui's direction of the destruction of Paris and the harsh treatment of the hostages, about the Garibaldis and the shooting of generals Lecomte and Thomas, about the animalism and enormous numbers of the *petroleuses*. The picture in *The Times*, *Daily News*, *Morning Post*, *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Observer* is contemptuous, ill-informed, and inconsequential. The illustrations in the *Illustrated London News* present an unrelieved sequence of destruction, violence and bloodshed. The good order in the streets during April is hardly reported at all. That minority of the British public which read the respectable London press must have been thoroughly confused and had their horrid expectations of the Commune, of rampaging petrol-bombing prostitutes, thoroughly fulfilled. The correspondents' neglect of the bakery hours issue, the moratorium on pawnshops, the closure of the brothels, the attempt by the Communards to negotiate about hostages with Versailles, all exhibit the blatant bias in the news available to British readers. Even Salisbury, who apparently studied the Commune intently, shows no grasp of the day-to-day work of the Commune.

The contemptuous, puzzled resentment of the editors permeates *The Times's* dismissal of the notion that the Commune could be the outcome of the intolerable sufferings of Parisian workers:

We are not aware that as a rule they were ill paid, or over-worked, or in any way oppressed. We should rather infer that they were in receipt of good wages, that they possessed education as well as skill, and that they had leisure enough and to spare for discussion and thought. The misfortune was that they thought of one subject only, until their conceptions grew actually monstrous; they never looked beyond their own workshops; they considered that none but working people had ever done any duties, or suffered any wrongs, and that no others, therefore, were entitled to any rights. The one object of their hatred, envy and antagonism was capital, and they resolved to take capital into their own hands. For the future they would live easy lives, and be the lords instead of the slaves of their old detested enemy.²³

The newspapers were agreed that there had been a catastrophic social reversal in Paris. Laurence Oliphant, traveller, mystic, man on the spot during several revolutions, was *The Times's* correspondent. He discarded his silken top hat and frock coat after the declaration of the Commune and went about in a soft hat and tweeds. He reported on 22 March:

The people. . . were. . . handed over to the tender mercies of a parcel of

²³ *The Times*, quoted by Humphrey Sandwith, 'Earl Russell, The Commune, and Christianity', in *Fortnightly Review*, vol.X, 1871, p.41.

roughs not one of whom had ever been heard of except discredibly. . . Here are the rowdy quarters in full possession of the whole city, mounting guard over the most fashionable resorts, pointing cannon into the houses of wealthy fathers of families, hustling *petits crevés* off the pavements, waving flags, beating drums, blowing bugles.²⁴

Oliphant then got out of Paris, as did other British correspondents including Alfred Austin and Henry Vizetelly. Perhaps some of the virulence of the newspaper stories comes from self-ashamed men ensconced in London compiling their reports from Versailles news-sheets. Yet Oliphant was among the few hostile witnesses to explain the advent of the Commune as an 'accident' resulting from the craven failure of the Provisional Government. He noted that the workingmen never expected to rule Paris and therefore were completely unprepared. Hence some of *The Times* reports, presumably by Oliphant, ambiguously explain the confusions and crises of the Commune in terms of the difficulties of the situation and the ignorance of the Communards, rather than their innate wickedness.

Nonetheless, the sin of humbling one's betters was unforgivable. According to the conservative *Observer*:

The Reign of Terror was now duly established — the rowdies swarmed down in large herds to the Place Vendôme. The next day ruffians, with red scarves, steaming of alcohol, paraded in pomp, dragging their cannon after them about the Boulevards, and taunting, as well they might, their fellow citizens with their supineness. . . In short, they are masters of the situation. . . Their *Officiel* placards, in large type, a letter which they profess to have received from General Schlottheim, Commandant of the Prussian troops at Compiègne, assuring the rabble that the Prussians have no intention to interfere with them so long as they refrain from any hostile movement towards the German Army! The convicts who rule us reply thereto, they have no aggressive intentions towards the Prussians. . . .

Thus we are left at the mercy of the mob. They keep guard over us, order us about, and do as they please; and when you reproach the well-intentioned friends of order, who are unquestionably in an enormous majority, they shrug their shoulders. Every one shifts the blame to anybody else. M. Thiers says in the Chamber that when General Aurelles summoned the National Guard to follow him they did not show. . . The Mayor of Passy has ordered barricades to be erected in his quarters, as an attack is apprehended. All the shops have been closed for some days past, as also are all the public offices.

Most of the decrees are the work of illiterate members of the *Internationale*; they consist of candid attacks on the rights of property, on the individual rights of citizens, such as you may expect from vulgar Socialists. . . The leaders of the Commune represent only the instincts of the *proletariat*. They represent these instincts in their lowest form; their motto is not the proud

²⁴ Philip Henderson, *The Life of Laurence Oliphant*, London, 1956, p.174. See also Alfred Austin, *The Autobiography*, 2 vols., London, 1911, vol.II, pp.82-90; Ernest Alfred Vizetelly, *My Days of Adventure*, London, 1914.

motto of the Lyons workmen, 'Vivre en travaillant, ou mourir en combattant.' It is rather 'Vivre sans travailler, et tuer sans combattre.' Their creed is not a political one; they don't care for a Republic any more than for a Monarchy.²⁵

The very perception of people's faces seemed to change under the stress of social outrage. Thomas Chenery, who was to succeed Delane as editor of *The Times*, wrote from the Grand Hotel in Paris on 9 April that he was surprised to see worthy bourgeois ordered about by National Guardsmen. After remarking that order prevailed in the streets, he went on, inconsequentially:

The greater part of them are of a very low type indeed. You will remember at the time of Beales's riots [about Parliamentary Reform in 1866-7] how London was overspread with a class which nobody seemed ever to have seen before. . . It is the same here now. . . I have always been accustomed to uphold the Parisian poor man as essentially clean, respectable and sober. Those I see about me now are in appearance as different as possible from the people one might notice on a *fête* day. Red scorbutic faces, villainous features and expressions, abound on every side; I feel sure all the worst characters in Paris are under arms. . . I have seen more drunkenness within the last two days than in all the time I have spent in Paris. It was said to be so in the old Revolution. . . How they get so much on 30 sous a day is a mystery to me.²⁶

The resident Methodist minister in Paris, prim William Gibson, noticed the same phenomena. As in times of cholera, frightened middle-class people saw the city as regurgitating its lower depths.²⁷

A number of people whom one might have expected to have sympathised with the Commune were alienated by the shooting of the generals, which proved the brutal inchoate nature of the revolt. One was George Meredith, who had been intensely Francophile until the Franco-Prussian War. He grieved for the French in defeat and the blow to European civilisation that would follow with the eclipse of France, but reflected that the French had only themselves to blame, for they had begun the War in arrogant pursuit of glory. His hopes revived with the proclamation of the Provisional Government, but on 23 March he sadly confided to his radical friend Admiral Maxse that the 'assassination of Thomas and Lecomte' had 'ruined the Republic'. 'Impatient fury [was] their curse'.²⁸ He did not write about the Commune again.

Thomas Carlyle was naturally more vehement, if no less confused. He wrote to John Carlyle on 29 May:

²⁵ *Observer*, 26 March, 9 April 1871, quoted by Marion Miliband, *The Observer of the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1966, pp.223-5.

²⁶ Chenery to Delane, 'Grand Hotel, Paris', 9 April 1871; Arthur Irwin Dasent, *John Thadeus Delane*, 2 vols., London, 1908, vol.II, p.283.

²⁷ William Gibson, *Paris during the Commune, 1871*, London, 1872. (Collected letters to the *Watchman* and *Wesleyan Advertiser*, 1871.)

²⁸ George Meredith to Admiral Maxse, 27 February, 23 March 1871, in C.L. Cline (ed.), *The Letters of George Meredith*, 3 vols., Oxford, 1970, vol.I, pp.470-4.

I am much in the dark about the real meaning of all these quasi-infernal Bedlamisms, upon which no newspaper that I look into has anything to say except 'horrible', 'shameful', and 'O Lord, I thank thee that we Englishmen are not as other men'. One thing I can see in these murderous ragings by the poorest classes in Paris, that they are a tremendous proclamation to the upper classes of all countries: 'Our condition, after eighty-two years of struggling. . . is still unimproved and if you cannot mend it we will blow up the world — ourselves and you.'²⁹

He too was afraid that Paris was setting the pattern for future urban anarchy.

Charles Mackay, the old Anti-Corn Law poet, had long been a respectable journalist by 1871 and he turned his old metres into versifying Carlyle:

Beneath the caldron crack'd
 A pool and whirl of flame,
 Around the caldron gambol'd and howl'd
 A crowd without a name;
 Fierce war-hags and assassin harlots,
 Incendiaries, thieves,
 Liars, blasphemers, and parasites,
 As thick as the summer leaves;
 And still they clamour'd and shouted,
 'Blood! blood! blood!
 Let the hell-broth sputter and boil,
 With a nation's tears for water!
 Blood! blood! blood!
 Slabby and thick as mud,
 To sprinkle the hungry soil
 In the carnival of slaughter!'

.....
 Oh, Liberty! choicest of blessings,
 To thee in our trouble we fly;
 The liberty born of the gutter,
 When Murder ran rollicking by.
 The liberty fierce as the whirlwind
 To do what we like when we will;
 And each for himself to interpret,
 Whether to spare or to kill.
 So arm! citizens, arm!³⁰

John Ruskin was writing *Fors Clavigera* when the Commune began and might well have admired some of the aspirations about the dignity of work and civic duty proclaimed by the Communards. But during April-May he suffered one of his black depressions and the entries in *Fors Clavigera* for these months suggest his total derangement. The 'harmful and filthy action of the temporary meddlers, such as the hanging of seventeen priests before breakfast', as he exclaimed

²⁹ J.A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London, 1834-1881*, 2 vols., London, 1885, vol.II, pp.405-6.

³⁰ Charles Mackay, 'The Walpurgis Dance during the reign of the Commune 1871'; 'The Hymn of the Commune 1871'.

in 'Love's Meinie', left him full of hatred for the Commune. He was distressed by the levelling of the Vendôme Column and the desecration of the Chapel of Our Lady of Victories. But such wanton outrages proved the degradation of the workingmen by the competitive system and the desperation of their lives. The violence portended, as for Salisbury and Goldwin Smith, a moral warning to Britain: 'The *Real* war in Europe, of which the fighting in Paris is the Inauguration, is between these [Capitalists] and the workman, such as these have made him. They have kept him poor, ignorant and sinful, that they might, without his knowledge, gather for themselves the produce of his toil. At last, a dim insight into the fact of this dawns on him; and they. . . will meet.'³¹

A more commonplace personality, Lady Stanley of Alderley, writing to her daughter Kate Amberley on 30 May, announced herself appalled and alarmed by the monstrous wickedness of the Parisian incendiaries. Lady Stanley took her cue from the newspapers. She recalled that

some time ago in one of the newspapers [there appeared] a statement that requisitions for petroleum were ordered (by the Commune I suppose) & this morn we see that an order for setting fire to one of the public buildings was found in an insurgent's pocket — Painful, almost impossible as it is to believe, there can be little doubt that it was a wild & wicked deed of vengeance committed by the leaders of a wild & wicked party — who have forfeited by the insane violence of their deeds whatever admiration & sympathy one might have felt for some of their objects.

Still, Lady Stanley was unusual among aristocrats in deploring the 'wholesale murder' committed by the Versailles troops and the 'party of order'.³²

The shooting of the Archbishop also upset Lord Shaftesbury, the intensely anti-Catholic evangelical reformer. The shock compelled him to offer his sympathy to Archbishop Manning, in typical Shaftesbury style:

One line to express my deep sympathy with you, and my intense horror in respect of the murder of that good, excellent and pious prelate, the Archbishop of Paris. . . But it is of no use to dwell just now on this satanical event. Hell is let loose. Can there be no combination among those who differ on many, and, indeed, important points, to withstand the torrent of blasphemy and crime? . . . Can we not go thus far together, to press, by every legitimate means, on the minds of our people in London that there is a Creator, a Redeemer, and a judgment to come?³³

Shaftesbury and Manning had been friendly for a year before this letter. The Commune completed their alliance in the fight against blasphemy and socialism. Officially, the Church gave no lead on the Commune; a Trollopean exchange in the *Life of Archbishop Tait* between Lord Stratford de Redcliffe, the old Great

³¹ John Ruskin, 'Love's Meinie', in *Collected Works*, vol. XXV, p. 127.

³² Bertrand and Patricia Russell, *The Amberley Papers*, 2 vols., London, 1937, vol. II, pp. 402-3.

³³ Edwin Hodder, *The Life and Work of the Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, K.G.*, London, 1887, p. 653.

Elchi, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, perhaps indicates why.³⁴

Parisians implicated in the Commune seem to have begun to escape the city from about the third week of April. By May the numbers seeking refuge in England had greatly increased. Their arrival presented difficulties for the British government, for during the Anglo-French rapprochement of the 1860s passports between France and Britain had been dispensed with and thus there was no effective control on Communards entering London and finding succour there. Yet the British officials had no desire to offend the Thiers government. Hence there were rumours in the parliamentary lobbies that the government intended to reintroduce passport controls to stop the flow of Communards. In general, Thiers was happy to have the Communards flee, and indeed deported several, but he planned to seek extradition of a few of the more notorious refugees. The British government protested against the deportations to Britain and Thiers stopped them; but the government also intimated that it would not assist extradition proceedings. Diehards like Lord Clanricarde wanted the reintroduction of controls to stop the flow of refugees and ensure their detention in France where they would meet condign punishment for their 'plunder, arson and murder'. The Tory former Foreign Minister, Lord Malmesbury, supported Clanricarde:

There ought to be no morbid sympathy — in this country, at all events — for these Communists. The Communists of Paris as a body surpassed all former criminals who had ever committed atrocities in France — including even those who shed so much blood during the Reign of Terror. . . Had these Communists the least feeling of honour they would have respected the misfortunes of France when the Prussians were at the gates of her capital; but, instead of that, they brought about a civil war while the Prussians were still on French soil — and, indeed there was no assassination at which they stopped short from the day when they murdered two innocent Generals till that on which they put to death the Archbishop of Paris and the other hostages. They ended their misdeeds by destroying by fire their own capital city. It was impossible to feel sympathy for such men. There was one sentiment deeply rooted in the heart of all Revolutionists and it was that of intense vanity.³⁵

The Ministers successfully evaded the demand for passports by pointing out that they would complicate aristocratic travel again. Lord Granville recalled that he had experienced great inconvenience in Switzerland where he had been compelled to have his servant travel first class with him because they were entered on the same document. The government apparently used the dispute with the French over the reintroduction of passports to hold up the repatriation of Communards; and so a number of prominent Communards may have owed their lives to Lord Granville's concern for comfort and his purse.

³⁴ Randall Thomas Davidson, *Life of Archibald Campbell Tait*, 2 vols., London, 1891, vol. II, pp. 569-71.

³⁵ *Parliamentary Debates*, 3, vol. CCXII, cols. 336-8.

Other ultra-respectable groups shared Lord Malmesbury's detestation of the Communards as criminals. During the suppression the *Naval and Military Gazette* of 27 May found a short-term solution to the contemporary controversy over vivisection in Europe and the British campaign to save aged horses:

The scientific French doctors who uphold the principle of vivisection on wornout cab-horses, frogs, cats, and other animals of the so-called lower species, should be allowed to exercise their talents upon such of the Communists as can be proved to have had a hand in the destruction of all that is beautiful in Paris. We are deliberately of opinion that hanging is too good a death for such villains to die, and if medical science can be advanced by operating upon the living bodies of the malefactors who have crucified their country, we, at least, should find no fault with the experiment.³⁶

The defenders of the Commune were led by Frederic Harrison, Comtist, Oxford lawyer, and friend of George Eliot. He was a strange lonely figure in the nineteenth-century scene who, incidentally, regretted in his old age that he had ever helped the Commune. In 1870 he had called in the *Fortnightly Review*, as a good Francophile Comtist, for British armed intervention on the French side in order to save European civilisation from Teuton barbarism. The British affirmation of neutrality had disgusted him.³⁷

He rejoiced in the Commune as an upsurge of the French spirit and a rebuff to British complacency. 'The genius of France, recoiling from beneath the iron strokes of Germany, has again resumed her task of moulding the society of Europe.' The Commune was 'the finest conception' of the age. It was the first 'true social revolution'. He did not excuse the shooting of the generals and the hostages, and he could not excuse the 'strong communistic side', for communism, as he said, was 'incompatible with human nature': it was a mere political answer to social questions and therefore defied sociology. But all great movements in human progress, early Christianity, the English Civil War, had made political mistakes and shed some blood. Although he added, with justice, that the British newspapers had exaggerated the degree of bloodshed during the Commune. Harrison was one of the handful of commentators to emphasise that the newspapers contained lies about the pillage, sacking of churches, mass drunkenness and murder, and he is almost unique in quoting from Commune informants.

Harrison's superior insight and information makes his discussion of the social

³⁶ *Naval and Military Gazette*, 27 May 1871, quoted by Sandwith, op. cit., p.40. The second part of this quotation, with slight differences, is also quoted in Eleanor Marx Aveling's translation of Lissagaray's *History of the Commune of 1871*, New York, 1898, p.388. This second, fuller edition includes several events and opinions as presented in *The Times*, *Daily News*, *Fraser's Magazine* and other journals. Probably British writings contributed little to the shaping of Lissagaray's work, but it would still be rewarding to trace Lissagaray's (or Eleanor Marx's?) handling of these sources.

³⁷ Harrison, 'The Revolution of the Commune'.

composition of the Commune committees and their aims still valuable. He noted that the Committees were 'largely recruited from the trading and professional classes'. He was almost alone in describing the National Guard as a 'disciplined and courageous' force. He denied the common argument in Britain that the Thiers government had legitimacy from the elections and asserted instead that it was a self-imposed revolutionary regime with no support in the French cities. It followed that Thiers and his colleagues had even less legitimacy, in Harrison's view, than the Commune which did have the proven electoral support of the people of Paris; and the people of Paris were independent of the rest of France and had no wish to be either subjected to or dominant over the rest of their backward countrymen. Harrison went on to argue that if the Commune achieved its ideal of a free city it would end French delusions of glory, realise the humanity inherent in French civilisation, and thus equip France truly to lead Europe. The French sense of 'form' would gradually permeate Europe and lend elegance and percipience to Western thought and art. In social affairs the Commune marked the dawn of the Comtist positive state. It heralded the reign of the progressive, free spirit and the banishment of the proprietary appetite and state oppression. The hereditary principle would be replaced by a meritocracy committed to the improvement of all. Universal suffrage, which installed the rule of the stupid and unprogressive, as French experience proved, would be repudiated in favour of 'direct government', the freedom of each individual in each free city to promote his betterment and lift the spirit of man. Here, as elsewhere in comment on the Commune, we find an echo of the controversy about the Second Reform Bill and Harrison's advocacy of a wider suffrage.

The Commune committees and the abolition of the standing army showed how direct government by free spirits would work. All would participate according to their talents in the government, administration and defence of the community. The introduction of civic military duty was the ultimate proof of dedication. The plans to seize empty workshops did show signs of working-class animus against capitalists, but the working classes wanted to put property and wealth to moral use, and to end competition. They had not committed mere confiscation and destruction. The Commune had been gentle in its treatment of private property.

Harrison was one of the very few in my sample to perceive the full horror of the May days. He did not defend the incendiarism of the Communards, but did protest that newspapers greatly exaggerated it: and it did not, as *The Times* proposed, constitute an excuse for the slaughter that ensued. Such buildings as had been destroyed deliberately rather than by shelling from Thiers' forces had been sacrificed in the interests of public defence. He measured the tens of thousands killed by the Versailles troops against the sixty-four hostages slain by the Communards. 'The bloody vengeance of the monarchists [was] much worse than any-

thing the Commune [had] perpetrated'. He also remarked perceptively that the bloody suppression of the Commune would 'fix it in the memory of the future'.

Some historians claim that the British Positivists uniformly defended the Commune but the printed sources at least show that Harrison stood almost alone in seeing the Commune in all its complexity and publicly upholding its aspirations. Dr Bridges apologised for it only when it was finished. E.S. Beesly guardedly defended the republicanism and internationalism of the Commune, and explained its exigencies, but he dissociated himself from its reported attacks on property. He reserved his stronger fire for the congenial job of attacking the British press. Richard Congreve appears to have remained silent.³⁸

Other isolated defenders included E.E. Bowen, 'A Vicar of the Church of England' as he called himself in his description of the Commune in *Fraser's Magazine*. Bowen, a celebrated Harrow master and author of 'Forty Years On', had been in Paris during March-May and had been impressed by the moral fervour and good order of the people, especially their suppression of the brothels, which he considered the Commune's finest act.³⁹ He continued to defend the Commune throughout his life. Others were angered by the ferocity of the suppression, including Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who is not recorded as having commented earlier, but was roused by the persecution of Courbet, pointing out, correctly, that Courbet had merely begun the alteration of the medallions on the plinth of the Vendôme Column at the orders of the Provisional Government and that the demolition had not been instigated by him. Rossetti immediately sent a public subscription to the Communards' Refugees Fund.⁴⁰

The most perceptive defender of all is Gerard Manley Hopkins. He wrote to Robert Bridges on 2 August:

I must tell you I am always thinking of the Communist future. The too intelligent artisan is master of the situation I believe. Perhaps that is what everyone believes, I do not see the papers. . . often enough to know. It is what Carlyle has long been threatening and foretold. . . He preaches obedience but I do not think he has done much except to ridicule instead of strengthening the hands of the powers that be. . . .

However I am afraid some great revolution is not far off. Horrible to say, in a manner I am a Communist. Their ideal of hating some things is nobler than that professed by any secular statesman I know of. . . Besides it is just. I do not mean that the means of getting to it are. But it is a dreadful thing for the greatest and most necessary part of a very rich nation to live a hard life without dignity, knowledge, comforts, delight, or hopes in the midst of plenty — which plenty they make.

³⁸ Frederic Harrison, 'The Fall of the Commune', in *Fortnightly Review*, vol.IX, August 1871. *Beehive*, 8, 22 July 1871.

³⁹ [E.E. Bowen], 'At Paris, Just Before the End', by a Vicar of the Church of England, *Fraser's Magazine*, vol.IV, August 1871.

⁴⁰ W. Minto (ed.), *Autobiographical Notes of the Life of William Bell Scott*, 2 vols., London, 1892, vol.II, p.162.

They profess that they do not care what they wreck and burn, the old civilisation and order must be destroyed. This is a dreadful look-out but what has the old civilisation done for them? As it at present stands in England it is itself in great measure founded on wrecking. But they got none of the spoils, they came in for nothing but harm from it then and thereafter. England has grown hugely wealthy but this wealth has not reached the working classes; I expect it has made their condition worse.

Besides this iniquitous order the old civilisation embodies another order mostly old but what is new in direct entail from the old, the old religion, learning, law, art, etc., and all the history that is preserved in standing monuments. But as the working classes have not been educated they know next to nothing of all this and cannot be expected to care if they destroy it. . . .⁴¹

Bridges, a Church and King man, was offended by this letter and did not reply for more than two and a half years, and then he responded only lukewarmly to a pathetic letter from Hopkins seeking to renew their friendship. The very simplicity and inescapability of Hopkins's analysis must really have disturbed Bridges. Hopkins obviously knew his Carlyle, but unlike most Carlyleans he interpreted the master in the proper context of the 1870s.

Another interesting sequestered defender is William James Linton, the wood engraver, poet and republican, and friend of G.P. Cluseret, the Commune general. Linton had been a Chartist delegate to the French Provisional Government of 1848. He had seen that revolution destroyed, as he conceived it, by French chauvinism and, indeed, his analysis of 1848 is very shrewd. Linton was an emigré in New York in 1871, working as a wood engraver. He read all the newspapers he could find and avidly kept up with the course of the Commune. He explained the declaration of the Commune, in a manner that makes sense to the modern reader, as the only effective response to the need to resist the Prussians. The National Guards, he declared, were patriots, not assassins or pillagers. They had been driven to exercise control because Thiers and Favre had failed them. Under the circumstances of betrayal, siege and hunger, that control had been commendably restrained and just. He utterly denied that the Commune was instituting communism; rather, he said, the Commune was fighting for municipal rights, the right that Parisians should govern themselves and be freed of the despotism of Napoleon and Thiers. Linton, the ill-educated artisan living far from the scene, also was unique in explicitly defending the shooting of the generals, by remarking that it had, after all, been the generals' job to shoot Communards. He also refuted the current lie that the shooting had been the work of the Garibaldis and showed the falsity of the claim that Blanqui was leading the Commune. Linton's articles were published in the *Anti-Slavery Standard*, and have been mistakenly attributed to its distinguished editor,

⁴¹ Jean-Georges Ritz, *Robert Bridges and Gerard Hopkins 1863-1889*, London, 1960, pp.54-6.

Wendell Phillips. Unfortunately, it appears that Phillips made no public defence of the Commune.⁴²

Linton was also a disciple of Mazzini, who, as we have seen, denounced the Commune for fragmenting France and hindering the attainment of 'nationality'. Linton subsequently wrote several dramatic conversations, including one called 'Delescluze on the Barricade', which oddly is a dialogue with Mazzini. In this he tried to reconcile his heroes by having them agree that the Commune was but the first manifestation of an eventual federation of 'national communes' that would sweep France and express the spirit of the people by embodying their rights and duties.⁴³

He explained the fall of the Commune in terms of his experience of 1848. The Parisians had failed to incorporate the 'theory of duty' into the legislative system and had plumped instead for unrestrained individualism. The selfishness and mistrust engendered by individualism had inhibited the leaders from carrying through the reforms in labour conditions which would have won the working classes to the Commune. Abolition of night baking and workshop fines were peripheral remedies compared with the grievances of the majority of workers concerning hours, wages, and lack of respect from their overseers. The leaders of the Commune showed too little understanding of the yearnings of the people and too little faith in the people's readiness to work for the common good. The nationalisation of the workshops was never achieved and even the communal appropriation of those workshops abandoned by their owners was bungled. Instead, the people were left without a stake in the Commune and their reserves of altruism and physical strength were never tapped. But there would, Linton was sure, be another chance. Paris and England would yet be beacons for the world.

Linton's analysis glossed over the violence and, in explaining the Communards' defeat, underestimated the strength of arms and hatred pitted against them. Yet he remains one of the handful of people in the United States courageous enough to speak out and informed enough to understand.

It is very difficult to find evidence about the opinions of the British working classes on the Commune. London republican and radical groups, headed by the International Democratic Association, arranged a demonstration in Hyde Park on 16 April to support the Commune. Despite contemporary and present-day claims it was not a success. A.L. Morton in *Marxism Today* (March 1971) remarks that 'estimates of as high as 30,000 people are said to have attended the meeting'. Bruce, the Home Secretary, transmitting to the Queen the reports of his police agents who mixed in the crowd, calculated that there were 600. The

⁴² W.J. Linton, *The Paris Commune*, Boston, 1871.

⁴³ W.J. Linton, *Delescluze on the Barricade*, Appledore (1875?).

organisers themselves only expected 10,000.⁴⁴ This meeting made no impact and appears to have had no successors. Yet one informed observer believed that British workingmen did at least passively sympathise with the Commune. Thomas Wright, the 'Journeyman Engineer', a journalist and former artisan, who moved among the working people in London and Birmingham in the 1860s and 1870s, noted that the working classes 'generally approved the Commune, especially as a Republican movement', but that they did not like its communist leanings which threatened to keep the idler level with the worker. The working people, according to Wright, respected the Communards as patriots ready to fight for their country, when their betters had deserted, and most of all, they esteemed the Commune for introducing true internationalism and ending French chauvinism. British workmen condemned the burning of Paris as bad policy, rather than as bad in itself. And they half-approved the attack on Papist churches and the killing of the clerical hostages. In general, Wright thought, the working classes saw the Commune as a struggle of the 'have nots' against the 'haves': the moratorium on pawnshops, which directly related to the British working classes' experience, was particularly welcome. Tantalisingly Wright stops here, leaving dozens of important questions unanswered. His account squares with the one reasonably detailed record of the views of a Nottingham needle trade artisan, Thomas Smith, in *Marxism Today* for March 1971. If we accept Wright's and Smith's emphases on republicanism, anti-clericalism and unpragmatic class antagonism as the focal points of British approval, we must start to revise our notions about the contents of working-class radicalism in this period.⁴⁵

However, British working-class support remained passive. Two prominent leaders, George Odger, the trade unionist and Charles Bradlaugh, the republican secularist, refused to attend the Hyde Park meeting because it threatened to damage their standing in London and might have linked them with the International, although the latter, indeed, had not organised this meeting. Bradlaugh, who was prominent during the Franco-Prussian War and subsequently in helping refugees, was rather quiet during the Commune, as were Holyoake, Lucraft and Applegarth.⁴⁶ The *Beehive*, the mouthpiece of Left radicalism among the

⁴⁴ A.L. Morton, 'Britain and the Paris Commune', in *Marxism Today*, March 1971, p.82. H.A. Bruce to the Queen, 17 April 1871, in *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, p.130; *Documents of the First International 1870-1871*, Moscow, n.d., pp.172-8, 216-20.

⁴⁵ Thomas Wright, 'The English Working Classes and the Paris Commune', in *Fraser's Magazine*, vol.IV, July 1871; Peter Wyncoll, 'Thomas Smith: A Working Class Defender of the Commune', in *Marxism Today*, March 1971. Some other workingmen who supported the Commune are mentioned by Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists*, London, 1965, pp.232-7. The essays by Harrison, Smith, and Wright are now conveniently gathered in *The English Defence of the Commune 1871*, ed. Royden Harrison, London, 1971.

⁴⁶ Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner, *Charles Bradlaugh*, 2 vols., London, 1895, vol.I, pp.322-31; *The Letters of Queen Victoria*, p.130.

artisans and intellectuals in London, was not, as has been claimed, vehemently pro-Commune, nor was the *Eastern Post*, in which Marx published statements for the International. Only *Reynolds Newspaper*, the 'gutter' radical, anti-clerical sheet was outspokenly pro-Commune, together with the middle-class *Examiner*, edited by the courageous eccentric, Fox Bourne. No trade union is recorded as contributing officially to the Refugees' Fund.

Reynolds welcomed the Commune as giving a fillip to the republican cause in Britain. Their republicanism was tough and irreverent. They emphasised the shady associations of the Prince of Wales and the rapacity of a royal family ever keen to grab more public money: *Reynolds's* name for the Queen was 'the horse leech'.⁴⁷

The Commune slightly preceded the upsurge of republican sentiment in Britain, with the opening of Dilke's campaign to limit and publish the Civil List and his triumphant tour of the North, in alliance with Joseph Cowen. Their cause received unexpected help when the Queen inadvertently chose Good Friday as the day for a ball at Balmoral. The *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Leeds Mercury* published the announcement of 'dance and song and jocund cheer' for Good Friday and the devout in England, especially the Nonconformists, found themselves deeply offended. Many turned out to applaud Dilke and Cowen in protest against their disreputable monarch. But despite its popular support republicanism made small headway among the ruling classes. When Dilke moved his motion on the Civil List early in 1872, many of the members walked out and the rest stayed to jeer. Such a scene had been unknown in the House since the 1840s. Dilke was ostracised in the clubs. The reaction might have been less vehement if the Commune had not come as a terrible warning of the dangers of meddling with symbolic authority. Liberals and radicals who might otherwise have countenanced the idea that the Queen become the last crowned head of Britain were completely scared. Justin McCarthy, who was a shrewd observer, remarked that the Commune killed republican sentiment in Britain. This was its single most important result across the Channel.⁴⁸

The bloody suppression of the Commune gradually produced a martyrology and vague reverence for it in radical circles. In the 1880s, led by William Morris and Walter Crane, the socialist sects appropriated the Commune as a symbol of working-class dedication. The young Belfort Bax shed tears during the *semaine sanglante* and adopted the fraternity embodied in the Commune as the 'only true religion for human beings'. Wemyss Reid, the Liberal journalist, visited Paris soon after the suppression and ever afterwards softened his disapproval of the revolt.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Tom Cullen, *The Empress Brown*, London, 1969, p.133.

⁴⁸ Justin McCarthy, *A History of Our Own Times*, 4 vols., London, 1893, vol.IV, pp.172-4.

⁴⁹ Ernest Belfort Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflexions of a Mid and Late Victorian*, New York, 1967, pp.28-30. See also *A Short History of the Paris Commune*, London, 1907, and

Eventually in Britain the Commune became an old, unhappy, far-off thing, shorn of its ideological terrors, epitomised in the disoriented ageing Communard exiles clustered in Soho. George R. Sims, the 'songster of the people', caught the tone exactly:

Not a word! not a word, Marguerite!
 It's the step of the priest on the stairs.
 Hark! he comes with his soft-falling feet,
 Just to trap me, the wretch, unawares.
 Put your hand on my mouth if I speak,
 If I breathe but a word of the past;
 I can tell the old fox by his creak;
 Stand your back to the door — make it fast!
 'Tis not he! Now I breathe! Give me air,
 For I choke in this horrible stench;
 Let the hunted beast die in his lair
 Like a beast that is human, and French.
 Fling the door on its hinges, I say,
 And keep back the walls, lest they crush
 And encompass and mangle their prey,
 For the fever consumes me — Hark! hush!
 All my brain is aflame, and it reels,
 And runs back to that terrible time,
 And I know not whose figure 'tis kneels,
 Or whose lips breathe the words of my clime.
 Is it thou, O my love! that I left
 Dead and cold on the blood-sodden graves?
 Or art priest, of all honour bereft,
 Come to spy on the outcast who raves?
 What was that? 'Twas the roll of the drum.
 Up and out, for our lives, Marguerite!
 Seize the musket hung yonder, and come;
 For the troops of Versailles line the street.
 See! our comrades are rushing this way,
 And the city is all in a blaze;
 We must fight for our lives, love, to-day,
 In the kingdom of death — Père la Chaise.
 Here, my own, 'mid the tombs of the dead,
 Let us fight for the children of France;
 In the wind wave our banners of red,
 In the May sun our drawn sabres glance.
 Now, O Liberty, goddess of men!
 We are doomed, but we kneel at thy shrine.
 We are one to the foul traitors' ten,
 Let our blood lave thine altars divine.

Kiss me here, 'mid the graves, Marguerite;
 Grip your sabre, and crouch by this tomb.
 Cut them down as they pass at your feet —
 Crying, "Traitors, you come to your doom!"
 Do you see, love, the legends they bear? —
 These headstones that shelter us now —
 And the yellow wreaths, too, "*A nos frères*,"
 For our brothers, remember our vow!

For a tyrant our land was betrayed,
 For a coward our heroes were slain,
 Through our life-blood would Bonaparte wade
 To the height of his glory again.
 Though his throne has been hurled in the dust,
 He has covered our banners with shame,
 And our France is a prey to the lust
 Of the fiends who dishonour and maim.
 And the troops of Versailles, what are they?
 Tools of knaves who but plot his return.
 Men of Paris, they're vipers to slay,
 Send their souls into Hades to burn!
 Wipe his stain from our honour, and rise
 From this carnage ennobled and free.
 God of justice, we cry to the skies, —
 When have people been tortured as we?

Marguerite, are you there with your sword?
 Pretty wench! Why, it's red to the hilt!
 Oh, they fight like she-devils, this horde
 Of fair women — young — slenderly built.
 'Tis thy glory, O France, when our girls
 And our women for thee give their lives,
 When a weak arm the keen sabre whirls,
 And aims straight at our Fatherland's gyves.

Now the balls come like hail on the stones,
 We are pent in and caught by the foe;
 Do you hear me, sweetheart? How she moans!
 Creep away through the tombs — let us go!
 Marguerite! Marguerite! Do you hear?
 Sweet, how bloody your hands are, and lips!
 You are wounded, my brave Marguerite!
 Curse the fiends! It's her life-blood that drips!

You are dead, Marguerite, for our France,
 And your name shall be writ on her scroll;
 When they find your poor body, perchance
 They will maul you, and dig you a hole.
 I must fly — I have fought — we have lost.
Vive la Commune! but still *saute qui peut*.
 Henceforth I'm a waif, tempest-tost,
 But I fly, for Thiers' butchers pursue.

Where's our crown — that poor girl's and my own?

Where the laurels we won in the fight?

She is dead — I'm an outcast — alone,

Yet we fought for the people and right.

Now the land that I loved claims my life.

Were I known, even here in the street,

Men would shun me; and as to my wife,

By what name would they call Marguerite?

Curse you, man — you're the priest after all!

Lo, the mist clears away from my eyes,

And if any strange words I let fall

In my ravings just now, they were lies.

But I'm ill, and I'm hungry — and, priest,

In this den I go mad, and at times,

When I rave, snarl, and snap like a beast,

You might fancy me tortured by crimes.

I'm a teacher of languages, please,

And the fever has stricken me down;

All my papers are right — look at these,

There's my name and my age — How you frown!

Do you think I'm a — Curse you, you know!

You'll betray me! Bah! what need I care?

Paris butchers can't kill in Soho.

Fling that door open wide! Give me air!

I'm a Communist, priest, at death's door,

Far away from the France that I love.

Just one boon, ere I die, I implore, —

As you hope for God's mercy above:

When my soul clasps my own Marguerite,

And my body man lays to its rest,

Put her name on the stone at my feet

And a clod of French earth on my breast.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ 'Dagonet' [George R. Sims], 'In A Cellar In Soho'.

**The Paris Commune and
revolution today**

Eugene Kamenka

I

The latter half of the 1960s saw a remarkable revival of revolutionary enthusiasm and revolutionary rhetoric, stretching from Peking and Shanghai to Tokyo, Paris and New York. The tumult has come from various quarters; the slogans have been drawn from many conflicting and competing radical traditions. As always, extreme radicals have felt betrayed, rather than comforted, by the successes of their forebears. The new romantic student revolutionary needed as an ideal type a revolution that had not reached its end: a revolution that had not 'ossified' into a stable government, that had not culminated in the creation of a centralised authority as strong or stronger than the one it had replaced, a revolution that had not re-established a structured society and that had not allowed men to lapse back into the private decencies — and the attendant indecencies — of normal civic life. The new revolutionaries, in short, needed a revolution that had failed. Superficially, the Paris Commune offered such an ideal — it was a revolution that had been drowned in blood by counterrevolutionaries before its Committee of Public Safety had become institutionalised, before the waning revolutionary enthusiasm of the masses too obviously demanded supplementation by dictatorship and terror, and before the administration of a city at war had had to cope with the problems of a nation at peace.

Professor Rose, in the first of our lectures, warned that the Paris Commune was a unique event. It was produced by a balance of forces peculiar to mid-nineteenth-century France and by the equally unique juxtaposition of events in the Franco-Prussian War and the Siege of Paris. To regard the Commune as an inspiration for revolutionary tactics across the interval of a hundred years, he said, can only be described as irresponsible romanticism. Dr Rubel, while largely agreeing with Professor Rose's account of the origins and of the practical prospects of the Commune in France in 1871, saw the language and the actions of the Communards as transcending their particular national and historical circumstances. The Paris Commune for Dr Rubel provides the substance for a Sorelian

myth. It is a symbol of the greatness, the compassion and the humanity that can be found in socialism. If I have understood aright the point of Dr Rubel's final quotation from Marx, then he sees the Commune as a *positive* myth, as a foreshadowing, in poetic form, of the only rational future that mankind can strive for. More crudely, that is how some of the radical students in Paris in 1968 saw the Commune: as a poetic symbol of the world that could be built by direct action, participatory democracy and genuinely revolutionary socialism. The French Communist Party and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union greeted this with predictable restraint, but the Chinese Communists, for a time at least, had already proudly claimed the Commune as the model for their 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' and their supposedly genuine and revolutionary concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Thus, in April 1966, Cheng Chih-szu proclaimed in the theoretical journal *Hongqi* [Red Flag]:

The Paris Commune was a great, epoch-making revolution. It was the proletariat's first rehearsal in taking up arms to overthrow the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie and establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, to overthrow the capitalist system and establish the socialist system. The heroes of the Commune bequeathed us invaluable lessons and experience gained at the cost of their blood.¹

The lessons of the Commune for the revolutionary socialist today were equally clear to the author and his editors; so clear, and so important, that they were set out as sub-headings:

The Proletariat Can Win the Right to Emancipate Itself Only by Taking Up Arms. The First Tenet of a Proletarian Who Refuses to Be a Slave is to Keep a Firm Grip on His Rifle. . .

The Proletariat Must Adopt Revolutionary Methods to Seize State Power, Smash the Bourgeois Military-Bureaucratic Machine, and Establish the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. . .

The Proletariat Which Has Seized Power Must Prevent the Transformation of Its State Organs from Servants of Society into Masters of Society. High Salaries and Multiple Salaries for Concurrently-Held Posts Must be Abolished Among All Cadres Working in Proletarian State Organs, and These Cadres Must Not Enjoy Any Special Privileges.

The 'Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution' in China has since ended, though not before the People's Liberation Army had stepped in to 'organise' and 'rationalise' the 'spontaneous' revolution. The 'Maoists', or self-styled 'Maoists', who proclaimed their intention, in January and February 1967, of establishing Communes modelled on the Paris Commune in Peking, Shanghai and the northern industrial city of Taiyuan, failed — almost immediately; in place of Communes and elections and decentralisation they got 'revolutionary committees' dominated by the military. Now such ultra-leftist cadres have been

¹ Cheng Chih-szu, 'The Great Lessons of the Paris Commune', in *Hongqi*, no.4, 1966; English version in *The Peking Review* of 1 April (no.14) 1966, pp.23ff., at p.24.

denounced as members of the anarchist and undisciplined May Sixteenth Movement and removed from positions of power. And at the other end of the world, the May 1968 events in Paris have let loose a flood of rhetoric and have then subsided. True, they have led to some university reforms but, even before that, they also led to a massive electoral victory for de Gaulle.

In student newspapers in Australia, of course, we can still be told — by that small but vocal minority which has as little understanding of the present and the future as it has conception of the past — that there is only one way to commemorate the centenary of the Paris Commune: to create more and more Communes. But can Communes be created by will alone? And if so, to what end? The question Professor Rose put in the opening lecture of the series is still the crucial one: Is the Paris Commune at least a possible ideal for the future or is it a romantic dream based on a projection of the past, and therefore almost totally irrelevant to the real problems facing societies today?

II

The French Revolution of 1789, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote in his classic work *L'ancien régime et la révolution*,

has given the impression of striving for a renewal of mankind and not merely for the reform of France. It has therefore kindled a passion such as even the most violent political revolutions have not hitherto been able to produce. It started a proselytising campaign and brought propaganda into the world. In this way, it eventually assumed a religious character, which astonished contemporaries. Even more, it became itself a kind of religion. . . one which has flooded the world with its fighters, its apostles and its martyrs.

The French Revolution was indeed, or at least it proved to be, what Hegel called a world-historical event: it was the revolution that symbolised, politically, the birth of the modern era. It was the revolution that contained within it the seeds of innumerable subsequent revolutions; it gave the world the very Idea of Revolution, an idea that has proved more powerful and more important than that other eighteenth-century invention — the Idea of Happiness. The world that followed the French upheaval of 1789, as Hegel saw, stood under the category of the *Incomplete* — for the portentous implications of the French idea of revolution would continue to work themselves out in history until they had engulfed the world. They have done so and they are still doing so. The implications of the French Revolution, of the change-over from the concept of subject to that of citizen, are not yet exhausted.

The men who launched the Paris Commune of 1871 and were active in its affairs worked, to a considerable extent, under the direct influence of the French Revolution. Professor Rose has already reminded us of this and even a Marxist historian of the Commune, Frank Jellinek, emphasises the strength of a backward-looking Jacobin republicanism in Paris, especially as the political

and economic disillusionment with the Empire grew stronger after 1868. As he puts it:

Neo-Jacobinism became the creed not only of old revolutionary die-hards like Delescluze and Pyat, but of many militant bourgeois republicans, and even of some of the workers who looked upon themselves as Parisians rather than proletarians. In the neo-Jacobin legend — for legend it was — the Great Spontaneous Commune of 1793, the Commune of Marat, Pache, Hébert, Chaumette, was supposed to have arisen under the leadership of the Jacobin Club, annihilated kings and aristos, abolished God, swept, by the irresistible surge of volunteer armies animated by uncontrollable revolutionary enthusiasm, the foreign invader from the sacred soil of Republican France; the Revolution carried its arms and its message of freedom over Europe; despots trembled, tyranny, corruption and privilege were dispersed, and Liberty, Equality and Fraternity triumphed to the blare of the 'Marseillaise', the challenge of the tricolour on the breeze, the clang of the guillotine and the roar of Republican guns amid the gorges of the Ardennes; and Paris, purged of traitors at home and victorious in arms abroad, was the centre and direct force of the whole Great Revolution.

The neo-Jacobins were thus republican, anti-clerical, terroristic and patriotic, seeing in 1848 a stifled and ineffective continuation of 1793. They had little conception of a radical social revolution.²

This latter conception, going beyond the purely political preoccupations of the French Revolution, is supposed to have been provided by the socialists, rather than the radical republicans, and especially by the Proudhonian-Internationalist minority, a minority that had some cause, by May 1871, to fear that the 'real revolutionaries', the Blanquist-neo-Jacobin alliance, might deal with it as the original Jacobins had dealt with the Gironde.

Today, the Paris Commune is often treated as though its specific new contribution to the theory and practice of revolution were the concept of participation, of direct democracy. This has been elevated, by Marx and by others, as a specifically socialist, proletarian view of politics and administration, also going well beyond the political demands and conceptions of the French Revolution of 1789. Yet some of you will remember that Professor George Rudé, that very eminent authority on the French Revolution, devoted a whole lecture in our 1970 series of lectures to the topic of participation as a political demand in the French Revolution. The demand was made by the *sans-culottes* who had come to dominate the Paris sections and the Commune between August and December of 1793. The *sans-culottes*, as Professor Rudé himself insists, were not socialists — they were small craftsmen and tradesmen who stood at the limit of egalitarian individualism. These *sans-culottes*, as Professor Rudé puts it,

Having seized control of the Sections in the course of a series of stormy sessions in August and September, . . . insisted that they should be fully autonomous, without government supervision or control, and that they should

² Frank Jellinek, *The Paris Commune of 1871*, London, 1937, p.28.

remain *en permanence*, that is in permanent session, instead of being restricted to twice-weekly meetings as the Convention had prescribed. The Parisian *sans-culottes* went considerably further. They claimed the right, through their primary assemblies (which, in Paris, were the 48 Sections), to have a preliminary say in all legislative measures, to brief their elected representatives by an 'imperative mandate', and to recall, at short notice, any deputies who ignored the instructions of their constituents. They claimed further powers as well; for if the Convention, or parliament, behaved unjustly or ignored the people's wishes (or, more precisely, the wishes of the people of Paris) they would have not only the right, but the 'sacred' obligation, to stage an insurrection and overthrow the government and Assembly by force. This theory of 'direct democracy', which played so important a role in the political thinking of the Parisian *sans-culottes*, was of course absolute anathema to the man in authority in the Committees of government, the Jacobin Club and the Convention, including even the more advanced of the democrats such as Robespierre and Saint-Just.³

Of course, as Professor Rudé says, the *sans-culottes* could draw on certain theoretical ideas put about by intellectuals, by Montesquieu or Rousseau, and relayed in speeches in the Jacobin Club. But fundamentally, I should argue, in this revolution as in many others, the concern with 'participation' arises out of the immediate experience of 'the little people' in a period of social upheaval and administrative breakdown. They have felt the temporary elation of exercising a collective power of initiative, expressed in riots as well as discussions, they rush in to fill the temporary vacuum left by the collapse of previous political structures and social and administrative hierarchies. As Rudé puts it:

the *sans-culottes*' direct experience and their participation in revolutionary events helped them to arrive at these conclusions; it was not just a matter of assimilating the ideas of others. This experience and participation might take any one, or more, of three forms. First, there was the experience of shortage and rising living costs, the realisation of which was simple enough without any 'philosophical' elucidations! Then there was the matter of directly participating in the work of revolution, either by taking part in riots or demonstrations or (at a later stage) 'militating' in the Sections or serving on local committees. The long succession of revolutionary events, or *journées*, such as the assault on the Bastille, the capture of the Tuileries or the expulsion of the Gironde from the Assembly, not to mention such food riots as those of February and September 1793, provided in themselves a rich fund of experience. Just as important, no doubt, was the day-to-day participation in the work of Sectional committees, anti-hoarding committees, *comités révolutionnaires*, Popular Societies, battalions of the National Guard, and even in the policy-making sessions of the Paris Commune which, slowly after August 1792 and swiftly after July 1793, became a regular feature of the political life of the Parisian *sans-culottes*. So, out of this experience and this participation in events there began to emerge new leaders and spokesmen for the

³ G.F.E. Rudé, 'The French Revolution and "Participation"', in Eugene Kamenka (ed.), *A World in Revolution? The University Lectures 1970*, Canberra, 1970, p.21.

sans-culotte point of view. But they remained confined to the lower organs of revolutionary government. In the National Convention itself, there were never more than a handful of *sans-culottes*; and not one of these was from the capital itself.

But, in spite of their exclusion from the higher ranks of government and legislation, the *sans-culottes*, in their heyday – roughly from July to December 1793 – wielded a considerable influence and exercised a substantial degree of authority. From this pinnacle of power their decline took place in three main stages. In the first place, they were ‘de-moted’ by their own partners in revolutionary activity, the Jacobins themselves. In December 1793, the Convention passed the Law of 14th Frimaire, which, by establishing a strongly centralised ‘revolutionary’ government, whittled down considerably the powers of the Parisian *sans-culottes*. The revolutionary committees of the Sections (their particular strongholds) were made responsible to the Committee of General Security at the centre; and, soon after, many of the popular societies were closed down, and Hébert and the ‘Hébertists’, who had been among their most articulate spokesmen, were arrested and guillotined in Robespierre’s struggle with ‘the factions’. The Commune, for long a centre of ‘Hébertism’ and ‘sans-culottism’ was purged and the empty places filled up with men who could be relied upon for their loyalty to the main Jacobin group. From now on, local initiative was killed and the Sections ceased to be much more than rubber-stamps for the government’s decisions; and, as Saint-Just lamented, ‘la révolution est glacée’ (which means, roughly, that the Revolution had become ossified).⁴

I have quoted at length from Professor Rudé because his account of the demand for direct democracy by the *sans-culottes* in the Paris Sections in 1793, his description of their exercise of this democracy and of the details of their downfall are of central importance in understanding the limitations of the Paris Commune, in understanding why it is *not* a model of revolution or of socialist democracy that has universal application and lasting significance. The demand for participation, for direct democracy, is not a specifically socialist or proletarian demand: it is the demand of little people in a municipal setting. It is made possible by a breakdown of governmental authority and by a period of revolutionary activity that draws these little people into political and administrative life; it does not and it cannot operate at a national level; it is destroyed when national or international considerations and national government once again become paramount. Then the revolution turns against the masses, then it commences to eat its children. The story of the rise and fall of the *sans-culottes* in the Paris Sections of 1793 repeats itself not only in Paris in 1871, and in 1968, but in Petrograd in 1917-19 and in Peking and Shanghai in 1967. It would have run its full course in the Paris Commune if the Commune had ever become a *real*, as opposed to a *fantasy*, revolution. Its anarchist overtones were linked with, and dependent upon, its total isolation from the real business of transforming or of governing a nation. For a real revolution, as *Hongqi* reminded its

⁴ Ibid., pp.22-3.

readers on 4 February 1967 — in the very hour that the ultra-leftists were proclaiming the need for Communes — is not the act of abolishing all authority, but of replacing one authority by another:

Some persons oppose all authority. This is an expression of the inherent bad characteristics of the petty bourgeoisie, an expression of anarchism. . . Engels wrote, 'Have these gentlemen' — the anti-authoritarians — 'ever seen a revolution? A revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is. It is an act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon'.⁵

The Paris Commune began with rank-and-file elections and ended with a Committee of Public Safety. The Lenin who proclaimed the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets' in 1917 acquiesced in the butchery of the Kronstadt sailors — the heroes of the Bolshevik revolution — in 1921, when they had charged Lenin with having established a dictatorship *over* the Soviets. The Chinese Communists, far more aware of the history of revolutions and of the realities of power than M. Cohn-Bendit, hail the Paris Commune, in guarded words, as federalist, decentralising, participatory, democratic, but see it above all as Blanqui and his Committee of Public Safety saw it — as the *Dictatorship* of the Proletariat. Such dictatorships, the history of *real* revolutions has shown, are not exercised *by* the proletariat, but *over* it; they inaugurate not a reign of freedom but a stronger and more pervasive form of centralised administrative authority and social control. The demand for participatory democracy, mass action, decentralised Communes results — *in practice* — not in total destruction of centralised authority, of the State, the Party, the Jacobin Club, the Committee of Public Safety, but in the destruction of all those particular institutions and class formations that act as a check on centralised authority. The demand for Communes polarises society into the State on the one hand and a formless mass of atomic individuals on the other: it actually *increases* the opportunities for centralised manipulation and control instead of decreasing them. It is no accident that the village Commune reached its consummate form in the most despotic and most centralised of States.

⁵ Hongqi, 4 February 1967, 'Revolutionary Discipline and Revolutionary Authority of the Proletariat', as cited by P.H.M. Jones in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 16 February 1967, p.225.

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In March 1871, in the aftermath of France's humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the workers, radicals, and 'little people' of Paris rose in revolt. The rebels saw themselves as heirs to a great French revolutionary and Parisian tradition, carriers of the demand for popular initiative and popular participation. They were republican, anti-clerical, and, to a large extent, socialist. The Commune of Paris which they proclaimed on 26 March 1871 was dedicated to these principles and beliefs. It has been seen, by some, as the

paradigm for the dictatorship of the proletariat and the coming socialist regeneration of mankind.

One hundred years after these events, a series of lectures was organised at the Australian National University to consider the meaning of the Paris Commune and its relevance for modern revolutionary theories and hopes. The lectures have been collected here, together with a detailed chronology of the events of the Commune. The collection is of vital interest to students of history and of revolutions, for, in recounting the events of the Paris Commune, it endeavours to assess its significance in world history. It seeks to determine whether the Commune was a unique event in the history of France — or Paris — or a symbolic rehearsal for a future social revolution.