

The Paris Commune

Marx, Mao, Tomorrow

Alain Badiou

The Classical Interpretation

In 1871, Karl Marx proposed an account of the Paris Commune that is wholly inscribed in the question of the state. For him, it comprises the first historical case in which the proletariat assumes its transitory function of the direction, or administration, of the entire society. From the Commune's initiatives and impasses, he is led to the conclusion that the state machine must not be "taken" or "occupied," but broken.

Let us note in passing that the chief fault of the analysis probably lies in the notion that, between March and May 1871, it was the question of power that was the order of the day. Thus, those tenacious "critiques" that have become commonplace: What the Commune supposedly lacked was decision-making capacity; *if* it had immediately marched on Versailles; *if* it had seized the gold of the Bank of France; and so on. To my mind, these *ifs* lack real content. In truth, the Commune had neither the means to address them properly, nor in all likelihood the means to arrive at them.

Marx's account in fact is ambiguous. On the one hand, he praises everything that appears to lead to a dissolution of the state and, more specifically, of the nation-state. In this vein, he notes: the Commune's abolition of a professional army in favor of directly arming the people; all the measures it took concerning the election and revocability of civil servants; the



Image by Jean Louis Mazieres of: Maximilien Luce. 1858-1941 Paris Orsay. Une rue de Paris en mai 1871
Dit aussi la Commune. A street of Paris in May 1871 also says the Commune. Vers 1905. Paris Orsay.

end it put to the separation of powers in favor of a decisive and executive function; and its internationalism (the financial delegate of the Commune was German, the military leaders Polish, etc.). But, on the other hand, he deplors incapacities that are actually statist incapacities [*incapacités étatiques*]: its weak military centralisation; its inability to define financial priorities; and its shortcomings concerning the national question, its address to other cities, what it did and did not say about the war with Prussia, and its rallying of the provincial masses.

It is striking to see that, twenty years after, in his 1891 preface to a new edition of Marx's text, Frederick Engels formalises the Commune's contradictions in the same way. He shows, in effect, that the two dominant political forces of the 1871 movement, the Proudhonians and the Blanquists, ended up doing exactly the opposite of their manifest ideology. The Blanquists were partisans of centralisation to excess and of armed plots in which a small number of resolute men would take power, to exercise it authoritatively to the advantage of the working masses. But, instead, they were led to proclaim a free federation of communes and the destructions of state bureaucracy. Proudhonians were hostile to any collective appropriation of the means of production and promoted small, self-managed enterprises. Yet they ended up supporting the formation of vast worker associations for the purpose of directing large-scale industry. Engels quite logically concludes from this that the Commune's weakness lay in the fact that its ideological forms were inappropriate for making decisions of state. And, moreover, that the result of this polar opposition is quite simply the end of Blanquism and Proudhonism, making way for a single "Marxism."

But what is the adequacy of the current Marx and Engels represented in 1871, and even much later, for the situation? By which extra means would its presumed hegemony have endowed the Commune?

The fact of the matter is that the ambiguity of Marx's account will be taken up [*sera levée*] both by the social-democratic disposition and by its Leninist radicalisation, that is, in the fundamental motif of the party, for over a century.

In effect, the "social-democratic" party, the party of the "working class"—or the "proletarian" party—and then later still the "communist" party, is simultaneously free in relation to the state and ordained to the exercise of power. It is a purely political organ that is constituted by subjective support—by ideological rupture—and as such is exterior to the state. With respect to domination, it is free; it bears the thematic of revolution or of the destruction of the bourgeois state. But the party is also the organiser of a centralised, disciplined capacity

that is entirely bent on taking state power. It bears the thematic of a new state, the state of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

It can be said, then, that the party realises the ambiguity of the Marxist account of the Commune, gives it body. It becomes the political site of a fundamental tension between the nonstate, even antistate, character of a politics of emancipation and the statist character of the victory and duration of that politics. Moreover, this is the case irrespective of whether the victory is insurrectional or electoral: the mental schema is the same.

This is why the party will engender (particularly from Joseph Stalin onward) the figure of the party-state. The party-state is endowed with capacities designed to resolve problems the Commune left unresolved: a centralisation of the police and of military defence; the complete destruction of bourgeois economic decisions; the rallying and submission of the peasants to workers' hegemony; the creation of a powerful international, etc. It is not for nothing that, as legend has it, V.

I. Lenin danced in the snow the day Bolshevik power reached and surpassed the seventy-two days in which the Paris Commune's entire destiny was brought to a close.

Yet, although it may have provided a solution to the statist problems that the Commune was unable to resolve, it remains to be asked whether in solving them the party-state did not suppress a number of political problems that, to its merit, the Commune had been able to discern.

What is in any case striking is that, retroactively thought through the party-state, the Commune is reducible to two parameters: first, to its social determination (workers); and second, to a heroic but defective exercise of *power*. As a result, the Commune gets emptied of all properly political content. It is certainly commemorated, celebrated, and claimed, but only as a pure point for the articulation of the social nature of state power. But if that is all it consists in, then the Commune is *politically obsolete*. For it is rendered so by what Sylvain Lazarus had proposed to call the Stalinist political mode, for which the unique place of politics is the party.

That is why its *commemoration* also happens to proscribe its *reactivation*.

On this point there is an interesting story concerning Bertolt Brecht. After the war, Brecht returns prudently to "socialist" Germany, in which Soviet troops lay down the law. He sets out in the year of 1948 by stopping in Switzerland to get news of the situation from abroad. During his stay he writes, with the aid of Ruth Berlau, his lover at the time, a historical play called *The Days of the Commune*. This is a solidly documented work in which historical figures are combined with popular heroes. It is a play that is more lyrical and comical than epic; it is a good play, in my view, although rarely performed. Now, upon arriving in Germany, Brecht suggests staging *The Days of the Commune* to the authorities. Well, in the year 1949, the authorities in question declare such a performance inopportune! As socialism is in the process of being victoriously established in East Germany, there could be no reason to return to a difficult and outmoded episode of proletarian consciousness such as the Commune. Brecht, in sum, had not chosen the good calling card. He had not understood that, since Stalin had defined Leninism—reduced to the cult of the party—as "the Marxism of the epoch of victorious revolutions," returning to defeated revolutions was pointless.

That said, what is Brecht's interpretation of the Commune? In order to judge it, let us read the last three stanzas of the song titled "Resolution of the Communards":



Illustration of the Paris Commune adapted from the century edition of Cassell's History of England, (ca. 1900)

*Realising that we won't persuade you
 Into paying us a living wage
 We resolve that we will take the factories from you
 Realising that your loss will be our gain
 Realising that we can't depend on
 All the promises our rulers make
 We've resolved for us the Good Life starts with freedom
 Our future must be built by our dictate
 Realising that the roar of cannons
 Are the only words that speak to you
 We prove to you that we have learned our lesson
 In future we will turn the guns on you*

The Chinese Reactivation

During the Cultural Revolution, and especially between 1966 and 1972, the Paris Commune is reactivated and very often mentioned by Chinese Maoists, as if, caught in the grip of the rigid hierarchy of the party-state, they sought new references outside of the revolution of October 17 and official Leninism. Thus, in the Sixteen-Point Decision of August 1966, which is a text probably mostly written by Mao Zedong himself, a recommendation is given to seek inspiration in the Paris Commune, particularly as concerns the electing and recalling of the leaders of the new organisations emerging from the mass movements. After the overthrow of the municipality of Shanghai by revolutionary workers and students in January 1967, the new organ of power takes the Shanghai Commune as its name, pointing to the fact that some of the Maoists were trying to link up politically to questions of power and state in a mode other than that which had been canonised by the Stalinist form of the party.

Yet, these attempts are precarious. This can be witnessed in the fact that, as power had been “seized” and it was imperative to install new organs of that provincial and municipal power, the name *Commune* is quickly abandoned, and replaced by the much more indistinct title of *Revolutionary Committee*. This can also be witnessed in the centennial commemoration of the Commune in China in 1971. That this commemoration involved more than just commemorating, that it still contained the elements of a reactivation, is evident in the magnitude of the demonstrations. Millions of people march all throughout China. But little by little the revolutionary parenthesis is closed, which is evident in the official text published for the occasion, a text that some of us read at the time, and that a far fewer number of us have conserved and can reread (which has probably become very difficult for the Chinese to do). The text in question is: *Long Live the Victory of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat! In Commemoration of the Centenary of the Paris Commune*.

It is totally ambivalent.

Significantly, it contains in the epigraph a formula written by Marx at the time of the Commune itself: “If the Commune should be destroyed, the struggle would only be postponed. The principles of the Commune are eternal and indestructible; they will present themselves again and again until the working class is liberated.”

This choice confirms that even in 1971 the Chinese consider that the Commune is not simply a glorious (but obsolete) episode of the history of worker insurrections but a historical exposition of principles that are to be reactivated. Hear,

also, a statement echoing Marx's statement, possibly one of Mao's: "If the Cultural Revolution fails, its principles will remain no less the order of the day." Which indicates once more that the Cultural Revolution extends a thread that is linked more to the Commune than to October 1917.

The Commune's relevance is likewise made evident by the content of its celebration, in which Chinese communists are opposed to Soviet leaders. For example:

At the time when the proletariat and the revolutionary people of the world are marking the grand centenary of the Paris Commune, the Soviet revisionist renegade clique is putting on an act, talking glibly about "loyalty to the principles of the commune" and making itself up as the successor to the Paris Commune. It has no sense of shame at all. What rights have the Soviet revisionist renegades to talk about the Paris Commune?

It is within the framework of this ideological opposition between creative revolutionary Marxism and retrograde statism that the text situates both Mao's contribution and, singularly, the Cultural Revolution itself, in continuity with the Commune:

The salvoes of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution initiated and led by Chairman Mao himself have destroyed the bourgeois headquarters headed by that renegade, hidden traitor and scab Liu Shao-chi and exploded the imperialists' and modern revisionists' fond dream of restoring capitalism in China. Chairman Mao has comprehensively summed up the positive and negative aspects of the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat, inherited, defended and developed the Marxist-Leninist theory of the proletarian revolution and the dictatorship of the proletariat and solved, in theory and practice, the most important question of our time—the question of consolidating the dictatorship of the proletariat and preventing the restoration of capitalism.

The capital formula is "consolidating the dictatorship of the proletariat." To invoke the Paris Commune here is to understand that the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be a simple statist formula, and that pursuing the march toward communism necessitates recourse to a revolutionary mobilisation of the masses. In other words, just as the Parisian

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workers of March 18, 1871, had done for the first time in history, it was considered necessary to invent within an ongoing revolutionary experience—always a somewhat precarious and unpredictable decision—new forms for a proletarian state. What is more, early on in the piece, the Maoists had already declared the Cultural Revolution to

be "the finally discovered form of the dictatorship of the proletariat."

Nevertheless, the general conception articulating politics and state remains unchanged. The attempted revolutionary reactivation of the Paris Commune remains inscribed in the anterior account and, in particular, is still dominated by the tutelary figure of the party. This is clearly shown in the passage on the Commune's shortcomings:

The fundamental cause of the failure of the Paris Commune was that, owing to the historical conditions, Marxism had not yet achieved a dominant position in the workers' movement and a proletarian revolutionary Party with

Marxism as its guiding thought had not yet come into being... Historical experience shows that where a very favorable revolutionary situation and revolutionary enthusiasm on the part of the masses exist, it is still necessary to have a strong core of leadership of the proletariat, that is, "a revolutionary party...built on the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary theory and in the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary style."

Although the final citation about the party is by Mao, it could have just as easily been by Stalin. This is why, in spite of its activism and its militancy, the Maoist vision of the Commune ultimately remained prisoner of the party-state framework and, hence, of what I have called the "first account."

At the end of this sketch of the classical interpretation, and of that which is in exception to it, we can say that today the political visibility of the Paris Commune is not at all evident. At least, that is, if what we mean by "today" is the moment when we have to take up the challenge of thinking politics outside its subjection to the state and outside the framework of parties or party.

And yet the Commune was a political sequence that, precisely, did not situate itself in such a subjection or in such a framework. The method will thus consist in putting to one side the classical interpretation and tackling the political facts and determinations of the Commune using a completely different method.

What Is the "Left"?

To start with, let us note that before the Commune there had been a number of more or less armed popular and workers' movements in France in a dialectic with the question of state power. We can pass over the terrible days of June 1848 when the question of power is thought not to have been posed: the workers, cornered and chased from Paris upon the closing of national workshops, fought silently, without leadership, without perspective. Despair, fury, massacres. But there were the Trois Glorieuses of July 1830 and the fall of Charles X; there was February 1848 and the fall of Louis-Philippe; and, lastly, there was September 4, 1870, and the fall of Napoleon III. In the space of forty years, young Republicans and armed workers brought about the downfall of two monarchies and an empire. That is exactly why, considering France to be the "classic land of class struggle," Marx wrote those masterpieces *The Class Struggles in France*, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon Bonaparte*, and *The Civil War in France*.

As regards 1830, 1848, and 1870, we must note that they share a fundamental trait, one that is all the more fundamental as it is still of relevance today. The mass political movement is largely proletarian. But there is general acceptance that

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the final result of the movement will involve the coming to power of cliques of Republican or Orleanist politicians. The gap between politics and state is tangible here: the parliamentary projection of the political movement attests in effect to a political incapacity as to the state. But it is also noticeable that this incapacity is in the medium term experienced [vécu] as a failing of the movement itself and not as the price of a structural gap between the state and political invention. At bottom, the thesis prevails,

subjectively, within the proletarian movement, that there is or ought to be a continuity between a political mass movement and its statist bottom line. Hence the recurrent theme of "betrayal" (that is, the politicians in power betray the

political movement. But did they ever have any other intention, indeed, any other *function*?). And each time this hopeless motif of betrayal leads to a liquidation of political movement, often for long periods.

That is of utmost interest. Recall that the popular movement of May 1968 and its “leftist” sequence wore themselves out rallying to François Mitterrand’s aid already well before 1981. Further away still, the radical novelty and political expectancy of the resistance movements between 1940 and 1945 came to little after the liberation, when the old parties were returned to power under the cover of Charles de Gaulle. Today, the ambient “movementism”—from the mobilisation of unions against pension reform, the nuit debout movement against labor law reform, to the Yellow Vests—only gives birth to the François Hollandes, Emmanuel Macrons, or Jean-Luc Mélenchons of our time. All these creatures continue the work of the Commune’s assassins and still-celebrated founders of the Republic, the Jules Favres, the Jules Simons, the Jules Ferrys (those whom Henri Guillemin calls “the republic of the Jules”), with the Adolphe Thiers and Ernest Picards waiting in the wings. And today we are still being called on to “rebuild the left.” What a farce! It is true that the memory of the Commune also testifies to the constant tactics of adjustment that parliamentary swindlers undertake in relation to eruptions of mass politics: Does not the *Mur des fédérés*, meagre symbol of martyred workers, lie next to the grand avenue Léon Gambetta, that parliamentary combatant and founder, along with “the Jules,” of the Third Republic?

But to all this the Commune stands as an exception. For *the Commune is what broke, for the first time, and to this day in France, for the only time, with the parliamentary and “democratic” destiny of popular and workers’ political movements.*

On the evening of the resistance in the workers’ districts, March 18, 1871, when the troops had withdrawn not having been able to take the cannons, there could have been an appeal to return to order, to negotiate with the government, and to have a new clique of opportunists pulled out of history’s hat. This time there would be nothing of the sort.

Everything is concentrated in the declaration by the Central Committee of the National Guard, which was widely distributed on March 19: “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.”

This time, this unique time, destiny was not put back in the hands of competent politicians. This time, this unique time,

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betrayal was invoked as a state of things to avoid and not as the simple result of an unfortunate choice. This time, this unique time, the proposal was to deal with the situation solely on the basis of the resources of the proletarian movement.

Herein lies a real political declaration. The task is to think its content.

But first a structural definition is essential: *Let us call “the left” the set of parliamentary political personnel that proclaim that they are the only ones equipped to bear the general consequences of a singular political movement.* Or, in more contemporary terms, that they are the only ones able to provide “social movements” with a “political perspective.”

Thus, we can describe the declaration of March 19, 1871, precisely as *a declaration to break with the left.*

That is obviously what the Communards had to pay for with their own blood. Because, since at least 1830, the “left” has been the established order’s sole recourse during movements of great magnitude. Again, in May 1968, as Georges Pompidou very quickly understood, only the French Communist Party was able to reestablish order in the factories. The Commune is the unique example of a break with the left on such a scale. This, in passing, is what sheds light on the

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exceptional virtue, on the paradigmatic contribution—far greater than October 17—it had for Chinese revolutionaries between 1965 and 1968, and for French Maoists between 1966 and 1976: periods when the task was precisely to break with all subjection to that fundamental emblem, the “left,” an emblem that—

whether they were in power or in opposition (but, in a profound way, a “great” Communist party is *always* in power)—the Communist parties had turned into.

True, after being crushed, leftist “memory” absorbed the Commune. The mediation of that paradoxical incorporation took the form of a parliamentary combat for amnesty for exiled or still-imprisoned Communards. Through this combat the left hoped for a risk-free consolidation of its electoral power. After that came the epoch—about which I have said a word—of commemorations.

Today, the Commune’s political visibility must be restored by a process of disincorporation: born of rupture with the left, it must be extracted from the leftist hermeneutics that have overwhelmed it for so long. In doing this, let us take advantage of the fact that the left, whose baseness is constitutive, has now fallen so low that it is no longer needed to maintain what I call the capital-parliamentary order. Faithfulness to the Paris Commune is not a matter of remembrance, but of new thinking and future political invention.

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While Marx was at first inclined to give capitalism more credit than it deserved for developing the backward areas of the world, his slashing attack on colonialism, in the first volume of *Capital*, fully documented as it was, plus his well-known articles on India, gave such a strong—indeed unanswerable—condemnation of colonialism on purely humanitarian grounds, that Marxism has ever since, and rightly, been considered to have opposed the colonial system as such. Even before the new outburst of colony-hunting that set in around 1870, international socialism had given notice of just what to expect. So it was, that soon after the Second International was founded in 1889, it went on record as strongly condemning the colonial system, and this remained its position, in spite of attacks from the right, down to the First World War. The reasons for the new outburst of colonialism had still to be given a Marxist interpretation, and the rights of colonial areas to national movements and governments of their own had to be integrated into Marxist theory, but this was not too great a task for later generations to shoulder. Marx’s genius and industry had indeed given capitalism a staggering blow at its weakest point.

—Horace B. Davis,

Nationalism and Socialism (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 69.



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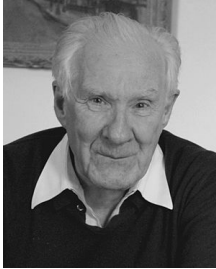
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