

The Paris Commune and Alterglobalism*

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The Paris Commune is a universal moment. We rediscover each time its significance in relation to the new questions that arise in building the future.

A specific event of extraordinary density

Obviously, one must take into account the particular situation of France and Paris in 1870, to recall the history of this event and its particular specific gravity. The Paris Commune was an extraordinary insurrection of the people of Paris. It lasted only 72 days, from March 18 to May 21, 1871, and was ferociously repressed during the bloody week of May 21 to 28, 1871. The causes of the Commune are both social and political. The Parisian working classes, workers, craftsmen and small shopkeepers lived in very difficult conditions; poverty was often extreme and working hours were around eleven hours a day. The political situation was dramatic. The Second Empire of Napoleon III collapsed following the defeat in the war against Prussia and the German Empire was proclaimed in Versailles on January 18, 1871. The Parisian population, which had suffered a very hard siege since September 1870, did not accept the capitulation. It enrolled massively in the National Guard and elected its officers. At the same time the newly elected National Assembly, with a monarchist majority, and the government, led by Thiers, fled Paris, which for them was "the capital of the revolutionary idea". They settled in Versailles and made an agreement with Bismarck to crush the insurrection.

On March 17, 1871, Thiers sent the troops to Paris to take back 227 cannons that had been stored in Montmartre and Belleville; the Parisians opposed them and fraternized with the soldiers; the working-class neighborhoods were covered with barricades. The Central Committee of the National Guard called for vigilance. The municipal elections took place on March 26, 1871. The Council of the Commune had to include 92 members. Of the 78 elected members who actually sat after the resignation of the moderates, 33 were workers, especially in the metal and construction industries and craftsmen in traditional trades. Together with the intellectual petty bourgeoisie, they formed a majority *social bloc*. **For the first time in history, one can speak of a workers' government.** It included all the republican, socialist and anarchist political tendencies. As in all revolutionary periods, there was an extraordinary political effervescence, punctuated by numerous elections. Passionate clubs listened to the speakers, discussed and put pressure on the elected officials. More than 70 new newspapers were created during the 72 days of the Commune. Parallel to the Paris Commune, uprisings and insurrections took place in more than fifteen cities in France, with brief attempts to form Communes, notably those of Lyon and Marseille which preceded Paris.

From March 29, 1871, the Council of the Commune governed Paris until May 20, through ten commissions: executive, military, subsistence, finance, justice, general security, labor, industry and trade, public services and education. The first decree of the Commune decided to abolish the army and the police, the main agents of repression in the service of bourgeois order. They were replaced by the people in arms. The Commune took a number of symbolic measures (destruction of the Vendôme column, adoption of the red flag and the republican calendar). The measures adopted were mainly social and dealt with the emergency (remission of unpaid rents, suspension of lawsuits for unpaid debts, postponement of the payment of debts and deadlines, etc.). Vacant housing was requisitioned, pensions were paid to the wounded and widows, and orphanages were created. Municipal canteens distributed bread and meals.

The emergency measures reflected new orientations. Abandoned workshops were requisitioned and handed over to workers' cooperatives after compensation to the owners; the management was elected by

the employees. Night work in bakeries was prohibited. Employer fines and wage deductions were forbidden. Management councils were to be elected every two weeks in the workshops.

Elected officials were controlled and discussed with, their mandate was imperative. Citizenship was opened to foreigners. One of the first mass women's movements was created; it demanded the right to work and equal pay. The Commune recognized the common-law union. Women fought against the Versailles on the barricades. Freedom of the press was affirmed and total freedom allowed for the foundation of a newspaper. The Commune decreed the separation of the Catholic Church and the State and the secularization of the property of religious congregations. The Commune provided for the election of civil servants by universal suffrage, including the judiciary and education, the introduction of a maximum salary and the prohibition of cumulation. It abolished the political and professional oath. Free marriage by mutual consent was recognized. Searches and requisitions without a warrant were prohibited. Education was secularized and denominational education prohibited. A commission composed exclusively of women was formed to reflect on the education of girls. Some district municipalities made school free and secular. Equal treatment between men and women in education was declared.

The very intense legislative activity of the Paris Commune was followed by the beginning of its implementation. As soon as it won, Thiers' government abolished all the measures. Some of them often reappeared long afterwards. Their mere statement demonstrated the coherence and innovation of a workers' government program that broke with the dominant bourgeois order. This considerable activity of the Commune was all the more remarkable because the constant preoccupation was to resist the offensive led by the "versillais", by the troops of Thiers' government. Bismarck freed the prisoners to reinforce this army. From March 21, the Versailles organized the second siege of Paris. The fighting was extremely violent. Some hostages were executed and a lot of destruction was caused. Despite a heroic resistance, the Commune was defeated. The 'Semaine Sanglante' (Bloody Week) began with the entry of Versailles troops into Paris on May 21 and ended with the final fighting at the Père Lachaise cemetery on May 28. The repression against the supporters of the Commune was merciless and ferocious. Paris had several mass graves with thousands of dead and shot.

This repression continued. From the first days of June 1871, the war councils, which would sit for four years, continued to order executions. Communards who did not manage to escape or go into exile were sentenced to hard labor and deported to the prison of New Caledonia. It was not before 1880 that Gambetta had the National Assembly voted for an amnesty. And it was only in 2016 that the National Assembly "proclaimed the rehabilitation of the victims of the Paris Commune of 1871".

SOME LESSONS FROM THE PARIS COMMUNE

The Commune is part of a chain of revolutions

It is an extension of some of them, those of 1789, 1793, 1830 and 1848. It anticipates others, those of 1905 and 1917, in Russia, the episodes of the Chinese revolution from 1917 to 1967, that of 1968, alterglobalism and the revolution of the squares from 2011. In return, each of these revolutions renews and allows for new understandings of what the Commune continues to bear. The reference to the Commune is extremely strong in May 1968 in Paris. The Parisian people rose up once again and the city was covered with barricades. In the world, between 1965 and 1973, a wave of revolutions put forward the ideas of social and political democracy.

Through alterglobalism and the movements of 2011, the Arab springs, the indignados, the occupy, the red squares, *the taksims*, *the HIRAK*, ...; a new generation is experimenting with new forms of organization through the mastery of digital and social networks, the affirmation of self-organization and horizontality. It tries to redefine, in different situations, forms of autonomy between movements and political

authorities. It looks for ways to link the individual and the collective. In the prolongation of the Commune and passing by the movements of the years 1968, the engagement in a movement links the practices and the theories and redefines the collective. The relationships between movements are based on equality and respect for diversity. Commitment naturally leads to a reflection on radicalism.

The Commune confirms the entry into history and the centrality of the working class

The Commune built from the working class a social bloc antagonistic to capitalism and the bourgeoisie. According to the International Workers' Association (IWA), it is the proletariat that can and must lead the struggle against capital because the proletariat, in its struggle for emancipation, is the bearer of the emancipation of all society. The Commune demonstrated the capacity of the working class to resist and to build a social bloc carrying a new project of society.

Alterglobalism has inherited and still has much to learn from the Commune. How can we define the centrality of the workers' movement and the new forms of the working class? Alterglobalism affirms the centrality of social movements. Proletarianization today affects all social strata that are not dominant. The alterglobalist movement inherited the diversity of opinions and forms of movements. Its unity results from the antagonism with capitalist globalization in its neoliberal phase. The will is to build an open, diversified space, facilitating the broadest alliances; it must also respond to the need for a space for action, for stricter forms of organization and for a more assertive political discourse.

The Commune is naturally internationalist

The 1st International, the International Working Men's Association (IWA), contributed to the Commune and was disrupted by the Commune. The Paris Commune inherited the formulations of the IWA, which characterized, from the analyses of Marx and Engels, capitalism as a world system generating a permanent structural crisis. Therefore, they believed, the anti-capitalist movement had to be international from the beginning. Internationalism has often been confused with internationals and questions of organization and parties. Already, the Commune had led Marx and Engels to reconsider several aspects of the Manifesto.

Alterglobalism is by definition an internationalism confirmed by the increasingly dominant character of the struggle against globalization. The World Social Forums are a search for new forms of internationalism closer to the 1st International for the diversity of the forms that it brings together than to the internationals that followed it, characterized by a monopoly of the avant-garde parties. The debate is open today in the alterglobalist movement on the forms of the movement: is it necessary to have an open, diverse and multiple space or is it necessary to have a more organized and political space of action. We probably need both, an open forum on the one hand, and a more organized international on the other. Here again, how to build both and what relation between the two?

The Commune is revolutionary and naturally radical

The Commune was an extraordinary revolutionary moment. A revolution is a moment of transcending and invention. *Everything appears and becomes possible*. Legitimacy prevails over legality. The State and its institutions, bureaucracy and technocracy no longer dominate daily life. Of course, we know that the confrontation with the forces of order is inescapable and the repression will be there, opening a space for violence. In the case of the Commune it was terrible. But Revolutions are creative and festive. All those who lived revolutionary moments, during the liberation struggles, the years 1968, the movements of the *squares*, remember them. They do not forget the repression and the defeats, but they keep the memory of the transcendences, the festive moments, the brightness. The artists express this moment; the Commune was an intense moment of cultural and artistic creation.

The opening up of possibilities leads to the radicalism of proposals, in the sense of a return to the root of the questions. It is no longer the prohibitions that prevail, it is the practice that imposes its demands. The responses and proposals of the communards are naturally radical. Their first decree decided to abolish the police and the army. Education became free. The non-functioning workshops were handed over to workers' associations. This radicalism was not excessive, it functioned as a matter of course. The alterglobalism without having been able to find itself in a position of power shares with the Commune this search through forums with festive and creative moments of liberation. It affirms that another world is possible and necessary.

The Commune renews the debate on revolutionary strategy, on the state and on transition

The Commune revolutionized the way of thinking about the Revolution. After the Commune, Marx proposed the decline of the state. Immanuel Wallerstein explains: "After much discussion, the internationalists renewed the strategy of the bourgeoisie: to create a party, to conquer the State, to change society". But a party created to conquer the state becomes a state-party before it even conquers the state, and the state is not enough to change society. The debate is also about the nature of the transition. The model of the Grand Soir was abandoned. The transition is a long and contradictory process. Alternative approaches are involved in changing society; the bourgeoisie was able to bring about capitalist social relations under feudalism. The revolutions accelerate the evolutions, they are not alternative to long durations.

Alterglobalism is confronted with the question of revolutionary strategy and the relationship to the state, with the offensive of neoliberalism seeking to reduce states to their regulatory functions of police and repression. The pandemic crisis has highlighted the importance of institutions, the need for public action and the role of public services. The new question concerns the hypothesis of the exhaustion of neoliberalism and even of capitalism; it questions the nature of the possible new modes of production, perhaps unequal, which are candidates for the succession of capitalism. This hypothesis is reinforced by a considerable new element, that of the ecological crisis and in particular the climate urgency.

The Commune highlighted the question of democracy

It was to reinvent the relationship between the social and the political. The first demand, that of democracy in work; the liberation of work and the abolition of monopolies, privileges and bureaucracy. Social democracy accompanies economic democracy with the reclaiming of vacant houses and the lowering of rents, the setting of a minimum wage in calls for tender, etc. The Commune put forward political democracy. It defined direct democracy and self-government with the respect of universal suffrage, the control of elected officials through revocability, the imperative mandate and the common deliberation. Civil servants, judges and magistrates were liable and could be dismissed. The Commune played a role in the advancement of democracy through the emancipation of women. Women imposed the right to fight and many women, like Louise Michel, played a fundamental and recognized role in the events. This was a step in the long struggle of women for equal rights. Democracy also concerns class alliances. As early as September 1871, the IWA raised the question of the alliance with the peasants and adopted a resolution on the means to ensure the adhesion of the agricultural producers to the movement of the industrial proletariat.

The Commune established a territorial democracy that strongly linked the population, the territory and the institutions. The radical currents of Municipalism find their sources in the revolutionary history of the transformation of a capital city into a "Commune". The reference starts from the Paris Commune but is not restricted to it. This was the case in Petrograd in 1917, Hamburg in 1923, Barcelona in 1937. In the 1980s, practices of self-government on a communal scale were proposed, notably with Murray

Bookchin's "libertarian municipalism", the Zapatista experience in Chiapas, the participatory budgets of Porto Alegre, Ecological and democratic issues are highlighted. Since 2011, the "movement of the squares" takes up with the occupations and opened a new phase of municipalism.

Alterglobalism proposes to build a strategic alliance between local institutions and social and citizen movements to renew political action. The democratic imperative requires a reinvention of politics. The mistrust of citizens is considerable; it calls into question representative and delegative forms. The democratic question concerns all societies, at all levels, local, national and global. It also concerns the movements and the World Social Forum. We find this issue in the question of attempts at including progressive governments. How to reconcile a radical social and ecological transformation with a real democracy? How to define democratic relations between movements, parties and governments? The forms of politics are challenged. It is urgent to reinvent the relationship between "movement forms" and "party forms". Movements must define the political role they can play. The parties must abandon their pretension of vanguard destined to direct the movements. Under these conditions, the parties, as movements, could find their place in the World Social Forums.

The Paris Commune and the new chain of revolutions

In the relationship between the social and the political, the 2nd International, with Rosa Luxembourge and Lenin, elaborated a new dimension with the consideration of imperialism. The new chain of revolutions associated, to the known forms of social and political, the struggles of national liberation. The strategic orientation for human rights was widened in 1848 to the rights of the peoples; it remained to take into account the decolonization. In Bandung in 1955, at the meeting of the first independent states, Chou en Lai declared: ***"the states want their independence, the nations their liberation, the peoples their revolution"***. After the Second World War, decolonization became an essential issue.

From 1980 onwards, a new phase of capitalism was imposed with neoliberal globalization through the debt crisis and structural adjustment plans. The alterglobalism movement is the anti-systemic movement of neoliberalism. The financial crisis of 2008 shows the limits of neoliberalism. Financial capital and multinational companies impose an austeritarian turn (austerity and authoritarianism). The violence of the confrontations and the awareness of the necessary radicalism give a new relevance to the Paris Commune. At the Belém Social Forum in 2009, the proposals put forward were the socialization of finance and forms of self-government. The notions put forward were: the commons, buen vivir, the democratization of democracy. The peasant movement, La Via Campesina, defining itself as a peasant workforce, proposes peasant agriculture, the refusal of GMOs, food sovereignty. The women's movement, the ecological movement and the indigenous peoples' movement have put forward the fight against discrimination and the necessary reinvention of the relationship between the human species and Nature.

Capitalism in crisis is always more offensive. It seeks to subordinate work even more through the use of new technologies, especially digital technology. It increases inequalities, with the unimaginable incomes of the richest, on the one hand, and poverty and misery, on the other. It refuses to take into account the ecological crisis, in particular the climate urgency, reinforced by the pandemic crisis. It resists the demand for equality carried by women's rights. After the first phase of decolonization, that of the independence of States, it resists the second phase, that of the liberation of nations and peoples. ***It refuses to see that discrimination and racism are, today, the deadly consequences of the unfinished decolonization.***

The new chain of revolutions defines the necessary transformation: social, against inequalities; ecological, for new relations between the human species and Nature; democratic, for the respect of individual and collective freedoms; geopolitical, against the forms of domination. The new social bloc antagonistic to neoliberalism and capitalism is formed by the alliance of movements: the workers' movement, always central, the peasant movement of agricultural producers as defined by the IWA after the Commune, the

ecologist movement, the women's movement in struggle against millennial relationships, the movement against discrimination and racism and for dignity, the movement of indigenous peoples.

The commune's achievement contradicts the claim of all the powers that pretend that there are no alternatives. There are alternatives! Another world is possible and necessary! This is why one cannot speak of the failure of a revolution without putting it into a process. Can we speak of the failure of the Commune? Can we imagine that a single event translates into a complete change, capable of wrapping up history? ***Certainly, the Commune ended with a ferocious and bloody repression; but with all that it revealed, invented, projected, it revealed new possibilities on the paths of emancipation.***

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