

The Paris Commune was, like so much of the revolutionary history of our period, important not so much for what it achieved as for what it forecast; it was more formidable as a symbol than as a fact. Its actual history is overlaid by the enormously powerful myth it generated, both in France itself and (through Karl Marx) in the international socialist movement; a myth which reverberates to this day, notably in the Chinese People's Republic.¹⁰ It was extraordinary, heroic, dramatic and tragic, but in terms of hard fact it was a brief, and in the opinion of most serious observers doomed, insurrectionary government of the workers in a single city, whose major achievement was that it actually was a *government*, even though it lasted less than two months. Lenin, after October 1917, was to count the days until the date when he could triumphantly say: we have lasted longer than the Commune. Yet historians should resist the temptation to diminish it retrospectively. If it did not threaten the bourgeois order seriously, it frightened the wits out of it by its mere existence. Its life and death were surrounded by panic and hysteria, especially in the international press, which accused it of instituting communism, expropriating the rich and sharing their

wives, terror, wholesale massacre, chaos, anarchy and whatever else haunted the nightmares of the respectable classes—all, needless to say, deliberately plotted by the International. More to the point, governments themselves felt the need to take action against the international threat to order and civilization. Apart from the international collaboration of policemen and a tendency (regarded as more scandalous than than it would be today) to deny fugitive Communards the protected status of political refugees, the Austrian Chancellor—backed by Bismarck, not a man given to panic reactions—suggested the formation of a capitalists' counter-International. Fear of revolution was a major factor in the construction of the Three Emperors' League of 1873 (Germany, Austria, Russia), which was seen as a new Holy Alliance 'against European radicalism that has been threatening all thrones and institutions',¹¹ though the rapid decline of the International had made this object less urgent by the time it was actually signed. The significant fact about this nervousness was that what governments now feared was not social revolution in general, but *proletarian* revolution. Marxists, who have seen the International and the Commune essentially as a proletarian movement, were thus at one with the governments and 'respectable' public opinion of the time.

And indeed the Commune was a *workers'* insurrection—and if the word describes men and women 'halfway between "people" and "proletariat"' rather than factory workers, it would also fit the activists of labour movements elsewhere at this period.¹² The 36,000 arrested Communards were virtually a cross-section of popular labouring Paris: 8 per cent white-collar workers, 7 per cent servants, 10 per cent small shopkeepers and the like, but the rest overwhelmingly workers—from the building trades, the metal trades, general labouring, followed by the more traditional skilled crafts (furniture, luxury articles, printing, clothing), which also provided a disproportionate number of the cadres;* and of course the ever-radical shoemakers. But was the Commune a *socialist* revolution? Almost certainly yes, though its socialism was still essentially the pre-1848 dream of self-governing co-operative or corporative units of producers, now also appealing for radical and systematic government intervention.

* Thirty-two per cent of the arrested printers in the National Guard were officers or non-commissioned officers, 19 per cent of the woodworkers, but only 7 per cent of the building workers.

Its practical achievements were far more modest, but that was hardly its fault.

For the Commune was a beleaguered regime, the child of war and the siege of Paris, the response to capitulation. The advance of the Prussians in 1870 broke the neck of Napoleon III's empire. The moderate republicans who overthrew him continued the war half-heartedly and then gave up, realizing that the only resistance that remained possible implied a revolutionary mobilization of the masses, a new Jacobin and social republic. In Paris, besieged and abandoned by its government and bourgeoisie, effective power had in any case fallen into the hands of the mayors of the *arrondissements* (districts) and the National Guard, i.e. in practice the popular and working-class quarters. The attempt to disarm the National Guard after the capitulation which provoked the revolution took the form of the independent municipal organization of Paris (the 'Commune'). But the Commune was almost immediately itself besieged by the national government (now situated at Versailles)—the surrounding and victorious German army refraining from intervention. The two months of the Commune were a period of almost unbroken war against the overwhelming forces of Versailles: hardly a fortnight after its proclamation on 18 March it had lost the initiative. By 21 May the enemy had entered Paris and the final week merely demonstrated that the working people of Paris could die as hard as they had lived. The Versaillais lost perhaps 1,100 in killed and missing, and the Commune had also executed perhaps a hundred hostages.

Who knows how many Communards were killed during the fighting? Thousands were massacred after it: the Versaillais admitted to 17,000, but the number cannot be more than half of the truth. Over 43,000 were taken prisoner, 10,000 were sentenced, of whom almost half were sent to penal exile in New Caledonia, the rest to prison. This was the revenge of the 'respectable people'. Henceforth a river of blood ran between the workers of Paris and their 'betters'. And henceforth also the social revolutionaries knew what awaited them if they did not manage to maintain power.