

Some critical comments on "Lessons from the Paris Commune"

This brochure by the *Communist League 'Spartacus'*¹ is still relevant today. It briefly summarizes some of the lessons Marx learned from the Commune. More importantly, the text skillfully refutes Arthur Rosenberg's claim that Marx appropriated the Commune. This claim is also found among anarchists who argue that the Commune was influenced by Blanqui, Blanc, Proudhon, and others. Similar claims are found in a text by Karl Korsch from 1929², and Jasper Bernes recently referred to Korsch³ for them. Finally, the brochure highlights the spontaneous development of the 1871 revolution rejecting the claims of vanguard such as the Bolsheviks. These claims are still brought forward today by all kinds of neo-Leninists.

At the same time, the argumentation on these three positive points is weak. We recognize the essence of the theoretical decline of the *Communist League 'Spartacus'*, which in 1964 resulted in the unclear split between the group *Daad en Gedachte* and the *League*, which had not called itself communist for some time. Consequently, the *Spartacus League* and *Daad en Gedachte* were no longer called *council communists* but contemptuously referred to as *councilists*. Theo Maassen, the author of this brochure, joined *D&G*, as did like Cajo Brendel.

Spontaneous development

The core of what would later become known as "councilism" can be seen in the 1953 brochure, which overestimates "spontaneity." This vague concept hides the fact that an outbreak of workers' struggles is preceded by a development of consciousness, often expressed by a minority, in addition to changing circumstances. The brochure mentions a few examples of this.

First is the Commune of Lyon. It was a short-lived revolutionary movement in Lyon, France, from 1870 to 1871. Republicans and activists from various leftist groups seized power and established an autonomous government. The commune organized elections, but it was dissolved after the restoration of republican "normality." This led to frustration among the most radical elements, who had hoped for another revolution. These radical elements attempted to regain power twice, but without success. These events took place in Lyon in the context of a

¹ Communist League 'Spartacus', [Spartacus on: Lessons from the Paris Commune](#) (1953).

² Karl Korsch, [Revolutionary Commune](#) (1929).

³ Jasper Bernes, *The Future of Revolution. Communist Prospects from the Paris Commune to the George Floyd Uprising* (2025), p. 30

revolutionary wave of similar uprisings in most major French cities after the collapse of the Second French Empire. This wave culminated in the Paris Commune of 1871.⁴

The brochure briefly quotes Talès, who wrote that the idea of a "social republic" gained popularity in the months before the Commune.

However, the brochure quickly glosses over these details, stating that the Commune Revolution occurred without a determined party or program leading the masses. This is a "Leninist" caricature of the Bolshevik Party during the Russian Revolution of 1917 that does not correspond to reality in Russia.

Incidentally, the *Communist League 'Spartacus'* also attempted to found a party in 1945, albeit of a completely different type.⁵

It is a small step from denying the prior development of a revolutionary minority and its stimulating role in the 'spontaneous' development of mass struggle and consciousness to denying the role of the *Communist League 'Spartacus'* itself and limiting oneself to retrospective analyses as a hobby. The text provides examples of the important views of the revolutionary minority that could have influenced the Commune, such as Marx's advice to take control of the National Bank and militarily reinforce Montmartre. His critiques of other decisions could have delayed the Commune's rapid defeat.

Like everyone else, Marx was surprised by the outbreak of the Commune. He considered the revolution premature because of the predominance of small businesses. However, when the uprising broke out in Paris, he firmly supported it while maintaining his view that Germany's large-scale industrial development offered more opportunities. Indeed, a new Commune organization emerged in large-scale industry in 1905 and 1917 in Russia and in 1918 in Germany, Austria, and Hungary: the workers' councils. Marx's writings on the Commune offer analyses and lessons for the future development of the workers' struggle. In contrast, the *Spartacus* brochure argues that Marx was mistaken and that the spontaneous Commune helped him correct his mistake.

Incomplete refutation of Rosenberg

Of course, there is nothing wrong with the workers' struggles leading to new insights, which are clearly acknowledged. However, is it accurate for the brochure to write the following about Marx?

" (...) the 1871 revolution enabled him to clearly state how the liberation of the working class could and could not occur. In doing so, he in fact (and strictly speaking for the second time)

⁴ Wikipedia, [Lyon Commune](#). Unfortunately, the brochure lacks any information about the Lyon Commune. We refer to Wikipedia.

⁵ Communists' League 'Spartacus' [Tasks and Characteristics of the New party](#) (1945)

criticized a view that had been proclaimed by none other than himself in the Communist Manifesto.

There, he developed the program of the workers' revolution: the proletariat's conquest of the state. However, in his writings about the Paris Commune, he states, "The working class cannot simply take possession of the existing state machinery and set it in motion for its own purposes'."

The pamphlet makes this claim in order to deny the proletarian character of the Russian Revolution. However, in doing so, it misjudges the class character of three revolutions: those of 1848 (Manifesto), 1871 (Commune), and 1917 (October Revolution). It also misjudges how Marx responded to the first two and how the Bolsheviks responded to the third.

- Germany 1848 was a bourgeois revolution. Marx's tactic was that of permanent revolution, a bourgeois revolution carried out by the proletariat in Germany, which would then, together with the rebellious proletariat of France, embark on the path to proletarian revolution. The revolution failed.
- 1871 was the first successful proletarian revolution, with limitations because it took place within a petty-bourgeois mode of production.
- The 1917 Proletarian Revolution was led by councils in large-scale industry. Following the model of The Communist Manifesto (1848), the Bolsheviks mistakenly interpreted the 1917 revolution as a bourgeois revolution carried out by the proletariat.⁶ The council communists regarded it at best as a dual revolution: bourgeois and proletarian.

In 1871, Marx did not correct a mistake made in 1848. The failed German Revolution of 1848 was a bourgeois revolution, involving the *conquest* of the feudal state rather than its *destruction*. This was not a matter of Marx's will, ideals, or malicious intent, as Bakunin and the Bakuninists believed. Marx's strategy in *The Communist Manifesto* and his other writings was based on the experience of previous successful bourgeois revolutions that took over the feudal state and transformed it according to their class interests. The 1871 revolution confirmed Marx's early insights that the proletarian revolution would meet its mortal enemy in the exploiters' state.

Incomplete lessons

Engels characterized the Commune as the *dictatorship of the proletariat*.⁷

⁶ For further explanation, see: [The fatal myth of the bourgeois revolution in Russia](#). A critique of Wagner's 'Theses on Bolshevism'

⁷ F. Engels: "Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat." (1891, [Postscript](#) of the Introduction by Frederick Engels to Marx' Civil War in France)

This brings us to an omission from the lessons on the Paris Commune. It was the dictatorship of the proletariat, meaning a dictatorship of the broadest masses of workers over the bourgeoisie. As an organ for suppressing the counterrevolution, the Commune was therefore also a half-state, 'half' in the sense that it would disappear with the bourgeoisie and all classes. The brochure misrepresents this with formulations such as the following:

" The destruction of the state, the creation of an organization in which power rested with the producers themselves, and which was no longer a state in any form (...)"

The striking aspect of *"which was no longer a state in any form"* is not its similarity to the anarchist view, but rather its difference from the council communist GIC's view in the 1930s. The GIC characterized the control of industry by workers' councils as the *"economic dictatorship of the proletariat."* ⁸

Fredo Corvo, 10/21/2025

⁸ GIC, *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution*, second edition, originally published in 1935. Red & Black Books, 2018.