Lessons from the Paris Commune

Communist League "Spartacus" - Amsterdam

Foreword

The following pages contain three reflections that originally appeared as separate articles in the weekly magazine Spartacus on March 21, April 4, and April 18, 1953. All three articles deal with the Paris Commune of 1871. Here, they are collected as three chapters under a common title and have undergone minor expansion.

The title of this brochure speaks for itself, emphasizing that it is anything but a "concise" history of the Commune. Nevertheless, the need for literature on the history of the labor movement among today's proletarian youth prompted us to publish this work. Amsterdam, May 1, 1953

Communist League “Spartacus”

The Paris Commune and the Proletariat

On March 18, 1871, a revolution began in Paris. The city was besieged by German troops, and the revolution became known as *the Paris Commune*. Seventy days later, on May 28 of the same year, it was bloodily suppressed by a deadly reaction after a series of barricade battles in numerous places in the French capital. On May 30, 1871, two days later, the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association, founded in 1864, published a pamphlet written by Karl Marx explaining the significance of the Commune. Entitled The Civil War in France, the booklet concluded with the statement that "the Paris of the workers, with its Commune, will be forever remembered as the glorious harbinger of a new society."

Marx ended his reflections on the Paris Commune with these prophetic words, still under the impression of the events. Every year since then, workers from Paris and its suburbs have gone to the Père Lachaise cemetery on March 18 to cover the graves of the Commune fighters with red flowers. From the outset, the proletariat all over the world, from the Japanese textile factories to the Californian mines, have regarded the Commune of 1871 as their own cause.

The explanation for this—the fact that, as Marx wrote in The Civil War in France, "the martyrs of the Commune are enshrined in the great heart of the working class"—can already be found in this same piece published by the First International.

Marx wrote that the secret of the Commune was that it was truly and essentially "a government of the working class" and "the result of the struggle of the producing class against the exploiting class." He added that it was "the finally discovered political form in which the economic liberation of labor could be accomplished." We will examine this characterization by Marx in more detail later. We believe it is sufficient reason for all workers to study the Paris Commune.

If we wish to make a very modest contribution to this with this paper, we must first of all take a few moments to consider two political movements, both of which, each in its own way, have attempted or are still attempting to exploit the Commune for their own special purposes: *Bolshevism* and *social democracy*.

Following in the footsteps of Russian socialist Lavrov, it was Bolshevik *Trotsky* who hailed the Paris Commune as "the vague dawn of the first proletarian republic." There is no doubt that Trotsky regarded the so-called "Soviet Union" as the second "proletarian republic" and that he therefore wanted to indicate with these words from his book "Terrorism and Communism" that the revolution of 1917 was in every respect comparable to that which took place in Paris in March 1871.

However, the Bolsheviks are not justified in drawing such a parallel. During its relatively short existence, the Commune took a series of measures, which Marx approvingly lists in the aforementioned pamphlet, to replace the old state machinery with a completely different organization of social life. In this new organization, power rested with *the producers themselves,* and it was *no longer a state* in any form. In the Russian Revolution, however, the old state machinery was not replaced by a new social organization. Instead, an attempt was made to transform the half-bourgeois, half-feudal state into what Lenin and his comrades called the "proletarian state." In short, it was an attempt to use the existing state machinery for the purposes of the proletarian vanguard and the Bolshevik Party.

The Commune was formed by city councils elected by universal suffrage in the various districts of Paris. Its members were directly accountable to the working class and could be dismissed by their voters at any time. In contrast, the Workers' Councils in "Soviet" Russia, which had been established in a similar manner, were stripped of political power by the Bolshevik Party. The Bolsheviks were not accountable to the workers as a result of the October Revolution. On the contrary, the Russian working class was controlled by the Bolshevik Party, and it possessed no power. As a result, it was not liberated from wage slavery. The Paris Commune not only eliminated a *certain* form of class rule, as happened in Russia, but class rule *itself*. This is precisely why it is of such extraordinary significance to the international proletariat. It showed workers worldwide what a proletarian revolution is, while the Russian Revolution is an example of what a proletarian revolution is *not*.

Of course, Marx was unable to compare the Bolshevik Revolution to the Paris Commune. Nevertheless, 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) 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." In a letter to his friend *Kugelmann* in Hanover, dated April 12, 1871, when the Commune still held power in Paris, Marx wrote: "If you reread the last chapter of my Eighteenth Brumaire, you will find that I express the expectation that, in a future revolution in France, the bureaucratic-military machinery will not simply pass from one hand to another as it has until now. Rather, an attempt will be made to break it. That is the condition for any real popular revolution on the continent. That attempt is also being made by our heroic Parisian party comrades." Later, when Friedrich *Engels*, Marx's loyal friend, explicitly emphasized these thoughts, he too spoke of "smashing the old state power."

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 direct ac-countability of the elected Commune members to the proletarian voters, the responsibility of the elected representatives to the working masses—all this, according to Marx, was its "secret," its *essence*.

This view sharply contrasts with that of Social Democrats like the late Karl *Kautsky*, who was regarded for years as the theoretical head of German and European Socialists. He remained completely committed to the position of The Communist Manifesto that political power in the bourgeois state must be seized and consistently regarded this as the most important lesson of the Commune: its members were elected by universal suffrage.

Incredible as it may seem, what Kautsky and his social democratic kindred spirits sought to prove was that the real power of the working class, as Marx had regarded it, had already been achieved within capitalist society by the first quarter of the 19th century. For example, in a country like the Netherlands, this power had existed for almost twenty years by the mid-1930s, when Kautsky had finalized his views.

In this regard, the social democrats overlooked the fact that, at the time of the Paris Commune elections, almost all bourgeois elements had left the city. Thus, the universal suffrage of the

Commune could not be equated with that of capitalist class society, where "democracy" is merely the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, the social democrats overlooked — or perhaps concealed — that Marx held parliamentarian democracy in such low regard that he approvingly stated that the Commune "did not want to be a *parliamentary* body, but a *working* body."

In a charming little book about the Commune, the Frenchman C. *Talès* discusses how everything that felt and thought bourgeois sought refuge in flight. He then notes that never before had there been a revolution that damaged the old state machinery. This sentence appears in a passage in which he demonstrates that the 1871 revolution inevitably had to do so because it was faced with the necessity of "perishing or creating something new."

The Paris Commune of 1871 did indeed create something new. An important fact to note: immediately after Karl Marx's remarks about this first proletarian revolution is that it did so without a determined party unfolding its program in advance or marching at the head of the masses. In his aforementioned booklet, Talès thoroughly describes the complete absence of such a party, thereby proving that the proletarian masses themselves gave political form to their revolutionary will in their Commune at that time in Paris. The proletariat of that time taught a significant lesson to today's proletariat, showing the hidden forces that lie dormant in the class oppressed by capitalism.

Even today, many in the labor movement still have difficulty understanding the lessons of the Paris Commune. Is it any wonder that the ruling classes of that time, convinced of their own power and abilities, had no confidence in the workers' capabilities and waited for their revolutionary attempts to fail? "I did not believe," said *Jules Favre*, a French bourgeois of that time, "that the Parisian rebels would be able to steer their little boat." But in March and April of 1871, the "unbelievable" became reality. In addition to the important political and social lessons the Commune offers, this is perhaps the most encouraging one for today's workers.

Karl Marx and the Paris Commune of 1871

Two days after the French bourgeoisie brutally suppressed the Paris Commune, Karl Marx finished writing the document in London with which the International Workingmen's Association addressed the proletariat worldwide, as discussed in the previous chapter. There are numerous misunderstandings about this booklet, Karl Marx's "The Civil War in France," and thus about Marx's relationship to the first proletarian revolution. These misunderstandings have proven very difficult to eradicate to this day.

Essentially, they all come back to the idea that the Paris Commune took a Proudhonist stance on the state, which was completely different from Marx's stance. When Marx wrote the "Address on the Civil War in France" for the First International, he is believed to have concealed all his theoretical and tactical differences with the men of the Commune. Marx approved of the Commune's efforts to dissolve the centralized state and endorsed the Address from beginning to end. Marx portrayed the Commune as a shining example for workers worldwide. And in doing so—and still according to the error we are concerned with here—he denied his own point of view.

This opinion is completely wrong. It is incorrect for two reasons. First, it misjudges the Commune. Second, it creates a false contradiction between Karl Marx's writings and thoughts about the 1871 revolution.

Unfortunately, this misconception has become widespread. It is found not only among Proudhonists and their close associates, but also among professional historians, such as Professor Arthur Rosenberg, who was once part of the Third International but later broke away from it.

In his 1938 book, "Demokratie und Sozialismus", Rosenberg proclaims all the errors listed above about the Paris Commune and Karl Marx. He expresses himself particularly harshly, claiming that Marx appropriated the Commune *for himself* through his writing on the Civil War in France. Rosenberg calls this "a partial retreat of Marxism before Proudhonism." He adds that "theoretical correctness was always unimportant to Marx compared to the great tasks of the movement."

As we noted in the first chapter, most misunderstandings about Marx's relationship to the Commune stem from a failure to understand that he simultaneously criticized some of his earlier views while writing about this revolution. The case with Rosenberg is somewhat different. Marx's self-criticism did not escape him, but he does not take it seriously. In practical terms, this makes little difference, but we have deliberately mentioned Rosenberg because we want to focus specifically on his point of view here. We believe that critiquing Rosenberg's assertions is the best way to clarify Karl Marx's *true* relationship with the Paris Commune.

According to Arthur *Rosenberg*, Marx concealed his true opinion of the Commune "for the sake of the movement's future." However, Marx expressed his views much earlier in works such as "The Class Struggle in France" (1849), "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852), and the introduction to "Critique of Political Economy" (1859). Importantly, all of these works point in the same direction as his critique of 1871.

Rosenberg ignores the earlier criticism, apparently because he does not take Marx's self-criticism from 1871 seriously. According to Rosenberg, Marx remained silent about his true position at that time. How does Rosenberg arrive at the conclusion that Marx judged the Commune differently than he explained in his writing about it? Rosenberg claims that Marx considered a centralized government in the spirit of Robespierre necessary. However, this was the position Marx took in 1848 when he wrote The Communist Manifesto, and he changed his position since then. Rosenberg fails to acknowledge this change and thus concludes that Marx's position on the state differed from that of the Communards.

This is not the only argument against Rosenberg's view. If one does not consider Marx's statement in his writing on the Commune — "the working class cannot simply take possession of the existing state machinery and set it in motion for its own purposes" — to be his real position, how can one explain his similar expression in a letter to Dr. *Kugelmann*? This letter was not intended for publication. There was no reason to mince words in it. This is all the more significant because Dr. Kugelmann was one of Marx's closest friends, and they had been corresponding for years. This letter proves that, when Marx wrote about the 1871 revolution, he was expressing his *true* thoughts.

Not only can Marx's opinion of the Commune be found in his writing for the International, but it can also be found in his letters to Commune fighters *Fränkel* and *Varlin*, to Prof. *Beesly*, and

to Dr. *Kugelmann*. In these letters, Marx precisely formulated his criticism of the Commune. Rosenberg claims that the core of Marx's criticism is the view that a centralized government in the spirit of Robespierre would have been necessary. However, this idea is nowhere to be found in these letters. The mistakes of the Commune, as described by Marx, are as follows:

First, he says they should have marched directly to Versailles, where the headquarters of the reactionaries were located. The reactionaries were plotting to suppress the revolution by military force. Had they done so at a time when the bourgeoisie still had to gather its forces, they would have won the game. At the very least, they would have prevented General *Galifet* from bringing his troops against the Commune in May. The revolutionary workers missed the right moment out of conscientious objections. They did not want to start a civil war. As Marx wrote, the civil war had already been started by the bourgeois politician *Thiers*. Marx was referring to the fact that, in March 1871, Thiers attempted to deprive revolutionary Paris of its cannons. This military maneuver became the direct cause of the uprising.

Marx's second objection is that the Central Committee relinquished its provisional power too soon after taking it on the first day of the revolution and making way for the Commune. This is an objection that, as is indirectly apparent from his explanations, is shared by Talès.

Thirdly, Marx believed that revolutionary Paris wasted too much time on trivialities, a view supported by numerous examples in the writings of historians of the Commune, such as Talès and Lissagaray.

Marx's second objection, that the Central Committee relinquished its power too soon, could be seen as supporting Rosenberg's view. However, this would only be the case if one were to take Marx's words out of context. One must not forget that, in a letter to Prof. *Beesly* dated June 12, 1871 (i.e., after the fall of the Commune), Marx wrote that he had provided the Commune with military advice regarding the defense of the *Montmartre* district. Notably, he did not mention anything about "a government in the spirit of Robespierre." He certainly would have mentioned it if it had been as significant to him as Rosenberg assumes.

What are we to make of Rosenberg's words that Marx always considered it unimportant whether he was theoretically right when the great tasks of the revolutionary movement were at stake? This opinion is easily refuted because Rosenberg himself has already done so elsewhere in the same book, "Demokratie und Sozialismus," from which all of this information was derived. In a chapter devoted to differences of opinion among democratic exiles in the ten years following the defeat of the 1848 Revolution, Rosenberg describes how it took the emigrant clubs in London some time to realize that Jacobin democracy, which had been the goal in 1848, had had its day. Marx and Engels, who understood this immediately, remained voices crying in the wilderness. Most of the exiles refused to accept the revolution's defeat. They lived under the illusion that they could continue the struggle where it left off in 1848. They abandoned Marx and Engels. They lost all connections with democratic or revolutionary movements.

As Rosenberg puts it, "This situation in 1851 was the political low point in the careers of Marx and Engels and in their relationship with the working class. (...) As far as the matter itself was concerned, however, Marx and Engels remained completely unmoved. They did not make the

slightest concession in their theory or personal connections. (...) Marx continued his scientific work, firmly convinced that the future would belong to him." [1]

Would Marx really — and this is what Rosenberg's view boils down to — have taken a different stance at the time of the Commune? On an issue that was at least as important, if not more so?

Rosenberg, the Proudhonists, and others who share their views completely overlook the fact that Marx never developed a theory that prescribed how capitalism should develop, nor did he impose certain commandments on the proletarian revolution, stipulating that it must develop in one way and one way only. He investigated how capitalism *would* develop based on its laws of motion. Rather than providing social prescriptions, he attempted to explain social reality and how it changes through the actions of individuals and the classes to which they belong. This is why, contrary to Rosenberg's claims, Marx never believed the future belonged to him; he always believed the future belonged to the proletariat. In any case, he was always willing to revise his opinions when reality dictated it. The Paris Commune was one of those necessities.

The Paris Commune and the Communards

When studying the history of the Paris Commune, one of the first things that strikes you is how strongly it was the work of the masses themselves. In doing so, the masses demonstrated the accuracy of the International Workingmen's Association's (the First International) insight from seven years earlier, in 1864, that the liberation of the working class must be achieved by the working class *itself*. Incidentally, these masses did not intend to prove this point. They weren't "out to achieve anything," and if they had been accused on March 18, the eve of the revolution, of "wanting to carry out a revolution the likes of which history had never seen before," they would have been most surprised.

Remarkably, at the beginning of the shocking events of March 1871, there was no revolutionary *consciousness* among the Parisian masses. This is the second great historical lesson of the Commune.

Of course, the Paris Commune uprising, like any other revolution, did not happen out of nowhere. There was discontent in Paris and unrest among the proletariat. As early as September 4, 1870, a popular movement began, and by October 31 of that year, the cry "Long live the Commune!" could be heard. On January 22, 1871, the cry could still be heard. However, discontent is not the same as revolutionary zeal and an understanding of the issues facing workers.

When *Talès* describes the history of the Commune, he notes that the concept of a "*social* republic" gained popularity in the months preceding it. However, he also shows that, at the beginning of the revolution, the "Communards" were not revolutionaries. "However," he adds, "they would soon become so." Indeed! Circumstances prompted the Parisian workers to take revolutionary action in 1871. They did not start a revolution because they had a revolutionary consciousness; rather, the opposite occurred: when a revolution proved to be the only way to solve their problems, they simultaneously revolutionized their consciousness. When they

[1] Rosenberg, "Demokratie und Sozialismus," Amsterdam, 1938, p. 136.

began to change circumstances, they also changed themselves. Those who doubt the revolutionary potential of the working class should take this to heart.

As is well known, the Revolution of 1871 began when, on March 18, the reactionary bourgeois Thiers attempted to seize control of the cannons in Paris with the help of the military. The Parisians prevented this, opposing the bourgeois government and the National Assembly (the so-called "representatives of the people") in Versailles. By doing so, they took their fate into their own hands. The Commune represented a complete break with official France. Initially, they did not understand this at all. *Varlin*, a Commune member who was known outside of France because of his membership in the International, received a letter from James *Guillaume*, a Swiss, expressing the idea that the events in Paris had "struck the hour of an international revolution." Varlin replied that there was no question of such a revolution. It is possible, even probable, that Thiers initially understood the historical and social significance of the Commune much better than the Communards themselves did. However, that significance would soon become clear to them because:

First, the Central Committee, formed on March 18, took full power precisely because of the break with the bourgeoisie.

Second, the Commune, elected on March 26 and consisting almost entirely of proletarians or direct representatives of the proletariat, took over the Central Committee's power. The Commune was guided entirely by proletarian interests in its measures and decisions. As Talès notes, they gained their political education not in parliamentary meetings but in workers' meetings.

The proletarian character of the Commune was evident from its initial actions. It made two decisions regarding rents and debts to alleviate the hardship experienced by the Parisian proletariat during the German siege. The Commune also began reorganizing public life as a whole and abolished bourgeois discipline in the National Guard. This stripped the Guard of its military character. Thus, it became an instrument of revolutionary defense rather than an instrument of oppression of the working class. Unfortunately, this instrument was not used to its full potential, despite being well supplied with weapons and ammunition due to a series of circumstances. The bourgeois clique in Versailles was not dispersed before it had been able to create a military apparatus strong enough to crush the Commune; it was also neglected — despite repeated and urgent warnings from Marx in London, as we have seen — to fortify the heights of Montmartre when there was still time.

However, the extent to which the Communards' consciousness changed during the revolution became clear around mid-April 1871. In a manifesto, they declared:

> "Paris works and suffers for the whole of France, and through its struggle and sacrifices, it prepares for its spiritual, moral, administrative, and economic recovery. The Commune Revolution, which began on March 18 at the initiative of the people, heralds a new era."

The consequences of this were not immediately apparent. Like the insight itself, they first had to be accepted by people, one by one. They had to be conquered as spiritual possessions. This process took time, precious time during which necessary mistakes and missteps were made. It is no coincidence that, of all the working committees established by the Commune, the one for "Labor and Trade" achieved the most by far. As workers and men of practical experience, the Communards were primarily concerned with practical details and the *specific* problems directly

related to the daily lives of their class. Night work and the Bank of Loan were abolished, and the expropriation of workshops was prepared and partially begun. The Communards were much less understanding of *general* problems closely related to the class character of their revolution because, *in practice*, these issues arise later than practical ones.

Thus, they allowed themselves to be intimidated by the vice-governor of the Bank of France, who added the following to the Commune delegate *Beslay*: "The Bank of France is the wealth of the country. If you attack it, production will no longer be possible, and you will bankrupt everything." Rather than responding that the labor of the proletariat was the only source of wealth and that the function of money had ended with the demise of capitalist production, the Commune quietly permitted the Bank of France's money to be transported to Versailles. There, it was used to recruit counterrevolutionary mercenaries who would ultimately bring about the Commune's downfall.

The strength of the Commune was that it did not have any "great men," but rather, the Communards were the direct representatives of the masses. However, the Communards were insufficiently educated and lacked revolutionary maturity, an inevitable consequence of the limited development of the capitalist system of production at that time.

There is ample evidence suggesting that they were rapidly acquiring this maturity during the revolution. However, the Commune simply had little time. The shocked bourgeoisie did everything in its power to destroy the Commune because, as one of its representatives declared, the bourgeoisie simply could not allow "the bricklayers to exercise power." Nevertheless, the fact that the Commune made it possible for ordinary bricklayers to exercise power remains its immortal merit, despite all its weaknesses, mistakes, and failures.

Source

aaap.be. Transcription with slight improvements to Dutch spelling and language, translation in English with help of Deepl.com Translate and Write: F.C. October 2025.