

History of Paris

Social Tensions in the Paris of the Commune

In the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871 one sees two forms of social tensions. The first one pits Paris against the rest of France, as the city asserts its historical role as the capital of the nation and center of republican liberty against the threat of the reactionary provinces. The second form can be seen more as a conflict with an idea rather than with another group. This idea is a form of capitalism, though the conflict is not with capitalism itself but its current exploitative incarnation and those who profit from it at the expense of others. Thus the social tension seen here is an internal one within the people of the city itself. An analysis of the Commune thus leaves one with two social conflicts: the city of Paris versus France fighting to remain a capital and center, and the city versus itself fighting to create a more rational, just economic order.

When considering Paris under the headings of city, capital, and center it is important that the terms are clear. By city one is referring to the municipality of Paris, both in legal organization and in social life. Thus Paris city includes questions of its inhabitants, their work and their social groupings. While the idea of city considers the social life of the inhabitants of the *polis*, the idea of capital is political. Thus when talking of capital one is considering issues of governance and political power. Paris capital is thus the seat of government and the lieu of all major political institutions. Finally one comes to the notion of center, which is rather more problematic thanks to the intangible nature of center. While notions of city and center can be easily confirmed by looking at physical manifestations of the urban populace or the national government, center is different. It is a notion not of a physical property, for a center need not be a point equal distance inside political or geographical boundaries, but rather of an intellectual property: the center is the brightest light, the source of direction and inspiration, and often the first source of action in any important movement in society.

For hundreds of years Paris had remained the uncontested capital of the French government and the center of the nation's economic and intellectual developments. From this long-developed importance one sees Paris develop the belief that it has the right and even duty to dictate the affairs of France. Thanks to the Prussian encirclement of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War the government was forced to flee its traditional seat. After many months of siege against Paris the new government was forced to concede defeat to the Prussians. This capitulation was seen by the Commune as an act of betrayal and even treason. The Communist newspaper appropriately titled *La Commune* explained this as a betrayal on the part of the provinces, who “abandoned the country that we wished to defend.”¹ The Commune, in their “Déclaration au Peuple Français,” the April 19, 1871 declaration which was to be their major statement of principle, likewise accused the government of treason and abandoning Paris: “avoir trahi la France et livré Paris à l'étranger.”² The government, which had fled Paris during the war, did not return to Paris once the war was over. Instead it installed itself in Versailles, which had just previously been headquarters of the Prussian military command during the siege. This too was seen as an affront to Paris: not only had the government surrendered Paris but it then refused to return to its time-honored capital. For example, the Comité Centrale de la Garde Nationale in a declaration described the government as “fugitif à Versailles.”³ Thus one sees the Communards taking umbrage to the usurpation of Paris' traditional power over the government of the country. Not only had the government cravenly surrendered to the country's hated enemy the Prussians, but it also failed to acknowledge Paris' role as capital of the nation. The Commune asserted of the continued role of Paris as political capital of France.

Paris of the Commune held the provinces accountable for many times “abandoning the country that they wished to defend.” It considered itself the center of republicanism and saw the provinces as reactionary enemies of revolutionary republicanism. This perception did not begin during the Franco-Prussian War but goes back many years. While memories of the Vendée and

1 Tombs, 797.

2 “Déclaration au Peuple Français,” *La Commune en Images*.

3 Handbill of 23 March 1871 under the attribution of the Comité Centrale, *La Commune en Images*.

other Royalist attacks on the Great Revolution of 1789 existed, the principle sources of bitterness were the events of 1848. The anti-monarchist, republican revolution of February of that year was crushed by the election of Louis Napoleon. The plebiscite which put Louis Napoleon in power was a particular bitter point among many of the Commune: “we no longer want to submit to peasant plebiscites,”⁴ said one. *Le Cri du Peuple* in a March 24, 1871 article described it as Paris being “crushed by [peasant] ignorance... the brutal power of numbers! Coups d'état by the ballot box! Slaughter by the vote! ... Three times in fifty years Paris has chased [the governments] from its walls... and three times the peasants' votes have brought them back, under another cloak, into the enemy city.”⁵ Such views show an extraordinary arrogance and great disregard for the legitimacy of democratic elections, yet it accurately reveals the importance of this revolutionary republican sentiment in the Commune. Viewing themselves as the center of republicanism and political capital of France, the Communards believed it their right to choose the government of the nation, no matter what the election results said. This was an accusation of the government, to which the Commune replied in the “Déclaration au Peuple Français,” “Nos ennemis se trompent ou trompent le Pays quand ils accusent Paris de vouloir imposer sa volonté ou sa suprématie au reste de la nation.”⁶ Such a statement makes some sense when one considers the stated and sincere Commune goals of civic autonomy and decentralization. In the “Déclaration au Peuple Français” the commune demands “l'autonomie absolue de la Commune étendue à toutes les localités de la France.”⁷ However, it is not compatible with the hatred of the provinces and the governments they supported seen above. While it is tempting to just discount the “Déclaration au Peuple Français” as a propaganda piece intended to influence the provinces to the Commune side, a better answer is one forced to acknowledge a contradictory relation: on one side the city trying to assert its role as capital and center against a hostile government and on another side the city defending the rights of every

4 Tombs, 797.

5 Tombs, 797.

6 “Déclaration au Peuple Français,” *La Commune en Images*.

7 “Déclaration au Peuple Français,” *La Commune en Images*.

municipality. One may understand the Commune as simply wishing that all of France would just only acknowledge Paris' leading role as capital and center, yet willing to fight for this role if denied.

However, this Parisian bitterness did not spring simply from elections which did not go as Parisians wished. The June Days of 1848 provided Parisians with a concrete example of provincials attacking Parisian revolution. More than 100,000 thousand soldiers from throughout France were assembled to put down the June Days, with many being volunteers.⁸ One socialist warned at the start of the Commune: “Beware, if you raise that standard [of revolution] the government will throw all of France on to Paris, and I foresee fatal June Days.”⁹ As such, the Commune was quick to describe their opponents as reactionary provincials, and Catholic royalists at that. The Commune's handbill addressed “A La Garde Nationale de Paris” of April 2, 1871 describes the government troops as royalist conspirators, pontifical zouaves, Imperial police, Chouans, Vendéens, Bretons, and provincial gendarmes.¹⁰ Such provincials are considered superstitious savages, and one Communard newspaper declared, “rural France [is] the epitome of crass ignorance, stupid prejudice, mindlessness.”¹¹ It was not totally false to characterize the provincial supporters as reactionary, as monarchists were present in the government and Assemblée Nationale. One royalist declared, “Until now revolution has marched from Paris to the provinces. Now it is time for order to march from the provinces to Paris.”¹² However, Parisian accusations of extreme right reactionary troops fighting for the government were exaggerated. While there were Catholic volunteer groups, the government was sensitive to these Communard accusations and made a particular effort to avoid using these groups against Paris. However, groups formed from Parisian volunteers were used liberally, and for much of the heaviest fighting, as the government was aware of the propaganda effect of

8 Tombs, 804.

9 Tombs, 797.

10 Handbill of April 2, 1871 addressed “A La Garde Nationale de Paris” and attributed to the “Commune de Paris,” *La Commune en Images*.

11 Tombs, 798.

12 Tombs, 798.

Parisian fighting Parisian.¹³ These groups of anti-Communard Parisians served to counter-act Communard claims of civic unity against an antagonistic government.

It should be noted that despite the vicious insults of provincials there were efforts within the Commune to reach out to the people of France. The Comité Central's statement of March 23, 1871 declared that it had received sympathetic delegations from points throughout France: "Le Comité central a reçu hier et aujourd'hui plusieurs délégations des villes de Lyon, Bordeaux, Marseille, Rouen, etc., qui sont venues savoir quelle était la nature de notre Revolution et qui sont reparties au plus vite pour aller donner le signal d'un mouvement analogue, qui est préparé partout."¹⁴ Given the extent of Communard attacks on the provinces one would be inclined to write off such claims as wishful thinking. However, this is not the case. There were sympathetic uprisings in Lyon, Marseilles, and Toulouse over the course of March and April, though admittedly short-lived!¹⁵ These uprisings, combined with the efforts of regional and local authorities to persuade Thiers and the government to come to an agreement with the Commune, caused one Communard to declare in April, "France is all ready to follow Paris."¹⁶ While revealing a naive optimism, this statement also shows the extent to which the Commune assumed that all of France should follow it, as the obvious capital and center of France. Only the most optimistic could construe a compromise settlement with the government after over a month of civil war as a sign of France following Paris. However, it must be acknowledged that as the government wished to impose the status quo, any settlement represented some sort of victory for Paris. Of course, no settlement was made and the Commune was eventually crushed, showing definitely that France was *not* all ready to follow Paris.

The second source of tension is less straight forward than the first. This tension is one of social conflict within the society of the city, with different economic classes placed in

13 Tombs, 802.

14 Handbill of 23 March 1871 under the attribution of the Comité Central, *La Commune en Images*.

15 Tombs, 805.

16 Tombs, 805.

opposition. However, the words and actions of the Commune are quite contradictory and suggest a more moderate stance. At first glance the Commune appears as a workers rebellion or revolution, and thus extremely anti-capitalist. Price declares that “this was essentially an insurrection of the poor.”¹⁷ Likewise he sees unity within the Commune forged thanks to a desire to end the rule of those viewed as their oppressors. In addition, the demands of the Commune became more and more antibourgeois as the situation worsened.¹⁸ An increased class-consciousness was brought to bear against the bourgeoisie, who were accused of betraying Paris to the Prussians because they preferred them to the Reds. Even Victor Hugo, a long opponent of the Imperial government, was rejected as a candidate for the Commune because he was perceived as too bourgeois.¹⁹ Most radically, the “Déclaration au Peuple Français” promised to “universaliser le pouvoir et la propriété.”²⁰ Thus one sees a strong antagonism between workers and the bourgeoisie. The desire to universalize property seems to be nothing more than the abolition of private property, a quite radical anti-capitalist act indeed. Thus one is inclined to interpret the Commune as a class conflict, revealing a social division inside the unit of city.

However, despite such professed radical anti-capitalist sentiments the Commune was actually quite moderate and made a particular effort to unite most social classes. Tombs sees the demonization of government troops as Choans, Vendéens, and others as a replacement for the traditional working class enemies of bourgeoisie, shopkeepers, and landlords in an effort to reduce class conflicts.²¹ The principle author of the “Déclaration au Peuple Français,” Pierre Denis, explained that the Commune sought to “bridge the gulf which separates the people from the bourgeoisie ... efface castes, classes and parties in associating their interests.”²² The goal of unifying the people of Paris suggests that the principle enemy of the people was seen not as the bourgeoisie per se, as a distinction was made between financiers and industrialists and small

17 Price, 82.

18 Price, 82.

19 Price, 83.

20 “Déclaration au Peuple Français,” *La Commune en Images*.

21 Tombs, 807.

22 Price, 80.

businessmen. While financiers and other wealthy businessmen were disliked, “the patron of a small business, still the typical Parisian employer, was regarded as a worker.”²³ Thus there is not a crude distinction between the bourgeoisie and workers, though classes are important.

However, it is better to consider such class conflict in the light of the fact that the Commune was wrestling with the current, exploitative form of capitalism. This can be seen in the mostly moderate attempts at economic reform put forth during the Commune. Jourde, the Commune's main financial expert, sought “to restore business confidence, to reduce the city budget and taxes, whilst doubling the education budget, and above all attack speculation on the stock market.”²⁴ In the “Déclaration au Peuple Français” one also finds clear examples of this reformist attitude: “Paris se réserve d'opérer comme il l'entendra, chez lui, les réformes administratives et économiques réclame sa population; de créer des institutions propres à développer et propager l'instruction, la production, l'échange et le crédit.”²⁵ Likewise, in a March 29, 1871 handbill of the Commune de Paris, the Commune promises to repair “l'industrie compromise, le travail suspendu, les transactions commerciales paralysées.”²⁶ Considering such promises, one notices that the emphasis is on economic reform, not revolution, in order improve the living conditions of Parisians. Thus capitalism itself is not seen as the culprit, but rather an exploitative form of it is, in which a wealthy and powerful few enrich themselves on the labor of workers suffering from “the brutalities of a harsh everyday existence.”²⁷ The Commune declares, “C'est la fin du vieux monde gouvernemental et clérical, ... de l'exploitation, ... des monopoles.”²⁸ While perhaps referring to government power, it is not unreasonable to suggest that this statement also refers to the current system of capitalism, in which the concentration of economic power into a few very few companies created a condition ripe for exploitation of workers and consumers at the hands of monopolies.

23 Price, 80.

24 Price, 79.

25 “Déclaration au Peuple Français,” *La Commune en Images*.

26 Handbill of March 29, 1871 attributed to the Commune de Paris, *La Commune en Images*.

27 Price, 86.

28 “Déclaration au Peuple Français,” *La Commune en Images*.

Thus “it was for material improvement and human dignity that men fought.”²⁹ One can understand this struggle as against an economic system, rather than a group of people. However, the system produces winners as well as losers and they are surely targets of popular ire.

The efforts of the Commune to reform economic and social conditions were not efforts to turn back the clock on capitalism. The language of the Commune reveals an acceptance of capitalism and a general modernist spirit. The “Déclaration au Peuple Français” attacks “la centralisation despotique, inintelligente, arbitraire ou onéreuse.”³⁰ The choice of adjectives here is important, as it shows a premium being placed on intelligent and rational rules. The Déclaration later announces that “la Révolution communale... inaugure une ère nouvelle de politique expérimentale, positive, scientifique.” Again, the choice of words is telling, as it shows the Commune embracing the rational scientific beliefs influential at the time, and which were part of the notions of progress and modernism. This idea of modernism is also present in the Déclaration, as the Commune declares, “nous avons la mission d'accomplir la Révolution moderne.” Thus, in the end, is there a social conflict revealed in the Commune's economic aspirations? The answer must be affirmative, for one sees the rejection of the current socio-economic order. The rejection is not complete, as it is a desire for reform rather than revolution, nor does it exclude all who are not naturally considered workers. However, there are those considered too bourgeois who are attacked and excluded. This conflict with capitalism is a tension within Paris city but also an attempt to reinvent Paris center of capitalism, from one of exploitative to positive industry.

The social tensions between Paris and France were both a conflict in which the city attempted to reassert its role as national capital and center and a tool of Communard leaders to distract Parisians from the tensions existing within the city. Just as many nations find unity in common opposition to a foreign enemy, so too does one see during the Commune a

29 Price, 85.

30 “Déclaration au Peuple Français,” *La Commune en Images*.

rapprochement between the working classes and the bourgeoisie against the provincials.

However, social tensions within the city did exist and cannot be ignored. Occurring thanks to class conflict brought upon by social inequality, these tensions are addressed by the Commune by efforts to reform the economy. Such efforts at economic reform are significant, as they show Parisian ambivalence in social relations. However, these reform efforts also show Paris' enduring role as an intellectual and economic center. While not the first instance of efforts to address the excesses of industrial capitalism internationally, the attempts during the Commune are notable in their vigor and visibility. Again, Paris, in the form of the Commune, makes itself a leader and center for the movement to address the wrongs of industrial capitalism and would inspire efforts throughout the world.

Bibliography

La Commune en Images. Paris: F. Maspero, 1982.

Price, R. D. "Ideology and Motivation in the Paris Commune of 1871." *The Historical Journal* **15**, No. 1 (March, 1971), 75-86.

Tombs, Robert. "Paris and the Rural Hordes: An Exploration of Myth and Reality in the French Civil War of 1871." *The Historical Journal* **29**, No. 4 (Dec., 1986), 795-808.