

The Paris Commune



**REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION
IN PARIS IN 1870-1871**

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Table of Contents

Presentation	3
I. Introduction	8
1.1 The historical and international context	9
1.2 Terminological preliminaries: what is the Commune?	14
II. The Revolution is marching on	18
2.1 Up until September 4 th 1870	18
2.2 September 4 th 1870	25
2.3 From September 4 th to October 31 st 1870	28
2.4 From October 31 st 1870 to January 22 nd 1871	36
2.5 From January 22 nd to March 18 th 1871	43
III. Victory and defeat of the insurrectionary movement	55
3.1 March 18 th 1871	55
3.2 March 19 th to 26 th	60
3.3 The government of the Commune at work	67
3.4 April 3 rd 1871	70
3.5 Bourgeois war or class war!	72
3.6 The Commune government's decrees	78
3.7 The public safety committees	91
IV. Defeat	98
4.1 La semaine sanglante	98
4.2 Another aspect of the counter-revolution	109
V. Conclusion	111
5.1 Elements of conclusion	111
5.2 Notes on the IWA, the Blanquists, and other militants	114
VI. Appendixes	131
6.1 Text signed <i>an old hébertiste</i>	131
6.2 An article from <i>Le Révolté</i> on March 18 th 1882	134
6.3 Elisée Reclus' testimony	137

Presentation

Why write a book about the Paris Commune?

This episode of our history was a qualitative leap in the affirmation of the human community against the terror imposed by capitalism.

It was a proletarian insurrection, a moment of rupture with the status quo established by capitalist domination, an end to the war which the bourgeoisie wages against the proletariat.

It was one of those moments during which the exploited class rises up out of the shadows to express its revolutionary vitality, its capacity to shake the foundations of this world which imprisons it, and so breaks the logic of commodity accumulation, profit-making and the increase in value of capital.

At such moments things fall apart – the vice which holds us to the workbench, the barracks which march us off to war, the wages which chain us to poverty, the property which prevents us from having the means of living, capital which destroys us all the more deeply.

Association imposes itself against the competition and separation which capital maintains in order to ensure its domination. Proletarians spill out of every work place, every army base. They meet, talk about how to organize the struggle, how to throw off the yoke of wage labor, how to impose their needs and organize insurrection.

The bourgeois world begins to sway, the very world which was built on wars for spoils, taking over the whole of the world's riches, general expropriation, exclusion, enslavement, wage labor. The bourgeois, fat with gold and quite sure of themselves, become pale with fear. Their dominant class position is threatened!

Different struggles in the world today pose through their acts the necessity of a qualitative leap in the confrontation against capitalist domination. These movements which are expressing themselves in Algeria, Iraq, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain and Jordan are powerful movements even if there is the danger of contenting oneself with one more political reform, one more change of head of State... which would only perpetuate capitalist domination and worsen the situation of war and misery. In order to face that danger it is necessary to understand these movements as expressions of a movement of abolition, and not reform, of the existing order. Not understanding them as Egyptian, Tunisian or Libyan movements... but as movements of a class which is one and the same,

seeking on a worldwide level to destroy the State which has imposed centuries of capital's dictatorship on the whole of the planet.

This is not a "spontaneous" explosion, contrary to what the media say, in that this movement is not without a past, without a previous history or in no way prepared or organized. Let's go back a bit:

- ★ Revolts in the Gafsa mining area in Tunisia in 2008
- ★ Numerous strikes, notably in the textile industry, in Egypt in 2010
- ★ Waves of riots in Algeria in 1988, in 2001, and on a regular basis up until today

All of this shows that what's going on in this region of the world is the fruit of numerous outbreaks of struggle going forwards at times, backwards at other times, and starting all over again at yet other times. And as we are writing other confrontations are still going on.

By the way, this last decade has been marked by other important struggles: Argentina (2001), Algeria (2001), Bolivia (2003), Oaxaca (2006), Bangladesh (2006-10), Greece (2008), Guadalupe (2009), Thailand (2010),... China, Peru, Ecuador... as well as the "hunger riots" in over thirty countries in the beginning of 2008.

What these movements have in common is that they all followed a number of confrontations which allowed proletarians to revive the tradition of struggle: reestablishing links of mutual aid, rebuilding solidarity networks, setting up places for discussion, redefining the means and the ends of the struggle... recalling the experiences of the past, deciding on the lessons we can draw from such experiences. These are all factors in a process of maturation and consolidation.

One more confrontation with the uncompromising nature of the State, one more rise in prices, one more set of wage restrictions, one more comrade cut down by bullets or by torture was enough... for revolt to explode, even stronger and more determined than before thanks to this redevelopment of proletarian association and organization.

The social explosions of the 1980s and the early 1990s were sporadic, disappearing just as suddenly as they emerged. It seems that today's social explosions last and leave behind traces in the form of discussion networks, the writing and circulating of balance sheets of struggles, the will to no longer be beaten down, and the will to look at things in the long run.

This abundance of struggle leads to passionate and impassioned discussions among revolutionary militants as they are touched by these struggles of

which they are themselves a part and an expression. What development is to be given to struggles? Is insurrection a necessary step? Can the proletariat do without insurrection? These questions and the debates which they lead to are the expression of multiple struggles which, starting with human needs, inevitably clash with the State. But the fact that insurrection does not always appear to be the obvious solution is also the expression of a breakdown which has taken place between current experiences and those of the past (such as the Paris Commune in Paris 1870-71). The trace and memory of these struggles has generally been lost.

The central question is: *How can we organize against the State so that the permanent war of the bourgeoisie against the proletariat may at last be over and done with?* This question is not a new one. Every important struggle has been confronted by it. Generations of proletarians who lived these confrontations and who were involved in efforts to make these insurrectionary movements take a qualitative leap – they left us precious lessons which it is important to re-appropriate. The strength of bourgeois domination is based on ignorance. The discontinuity in the transmission of the memory of past struggles is a gap which social-democratic forces rush into in order to better destroy our struggles. It's a question of our responsibility. This is not an intellectual debate. It is a question which is posed concretely in struggle. We have to talk about this responsibility.

Some people refuse this responsibility. They praise a sort of pure “spontaneity” of the proletariat which militants, by their presence and activities, would corrupt and deviate from its objectives! The starting point of this attitude is feeling *exterior* to the struggle, the fact that one does not feel involved, that one does not live it as an expression of a movement. More fundamentally it is democratic poison which, in the name of egalitarianism and anti-authoritarianism, condemns all those who dare to take the initiative to do things, moved by a greater clarity, fed with lessons of past struggles... It especially condemns those who associate so as to make all of these elements into a strength with which to contribute to qualitative leaps in the development of a struggle. It's time to break with these separations. Today, recognizing oneself in the totality of the proletariat's expressions is crucial. The divisions among our ranks make up the trump card for bourgeois domination. It's time to go beyond all of these antithetical attitudes, this exteriority, and to take up again with the need for organization, militant responsibility. Let's develop our criticism of this world and assume this criticism consciously and willingly so that the blows against the abolition of capitalist order may be ever more decisive and powerful.

A lot of historians have claimed that the March 18th 1871 insurrection in Paris was “spontaneous” as if it had not been the fruit of a process of maturing. Nothing could be further from the truth. There were riots in May and June 1869 as well as in May 1870. There was an attempt at insurrection in February 1870. From August 1870 until March 1871 there were several insurrectionary attacks, vast movements in which numerous proletarians – men, women, children – marched through the streets, opposed soldiers, and built barricades. *Among them*, were revolutionaries who had drawn lessons from the experiences of the past – 1793, 1830, 1848 – organized themselves in the aim of insurrection. We will see that they quickly set themselves to work to give a qualitative leap to this magnificent outburst. When we take a closer look we can see there was no separation between these different actors in the movement. The following text aspires to be a practical demonstration of this assertion.

Certain revolutionaries acted with intelligence, clarity, and authority. They perceived that imposing the Commune was a necessity for resolving the serious problems posed by *misery* and the continuation of a war of extermination. But this was not always the case. At some points solid militants showed themselves to be inconsequential, having an uncritical spirit, and an unconscious complicity with nationalist, communal-ist (*Proudhon*-ist), politicizing or other ideologies. This is tragic in that at decisive moments, the balance of forces on the point of changing, such inconsequential behavior would allow the State to take back all initiative for years to come.

During the Paris Commune just like today in the movements of struggle in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya,... the State proposes a switch to something more modern, more republican, more multiparty,... Emphasis is put on the departure of the bourgeois faction that was at the head of State, which is judged as being the one and only entity responsible for misery and repression.

*“Wherever there exist political parties each of them sees the cause of all evil in the fact that it is his adversary who is at the helm of the State and not himself. Even radical and revolutionary politicians seek the cause of evil not in the nature of the State but in a specific form of the State which they wish to replace by another specific form of the State.”*¹

So long as the proletariat gives some amount of credit to these forms of replacement it will remain an object of the dictatorship of profit. A *form* of domination changes and it’s the opportunity for the bourgeoisie to modernize the

¹ Karl Marx. “Critical glosses in the margin of the article ‘the king of Prussia and social reform, by a Prussian’”.

exploitation of labor power. If the proletariat accepts this change of form, the bourgeoisie is assured of social peace... up until the next outburst.

But what these movements have in common is that they have targeted a series of State institutions - police headquarters, courthouses, parliament buildings, party headquarters, voting centers, prisons, banks, department stores, luxury businesses,... – they express an implicit rejection of the totality of the capitalist system.

“*Que se vayan todos*” (“*may they all go*”) was the rallying cry heard throughout Argentina in November 2001. It expressed the feeling of being fed up with the slogans promoting switches in governments. The space the bourgeoisie has to maneuver in is smaller and smaller. Once they’re at the head of State they burn themselves out all the more quickly, leaving the world State of capital with a bottomless pit: no new spare solution will work. It is in these particular moments that we should be worthy of the challenge set to the world of money and property: contributing to its definitive destruction and to the elaboration of a world without State, without capital, without class, without exploitation.



REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION

IN PARIS IN 1870-1871

I. Introduction

In France, during the period of 1870-71, the proletariat was storming heaven. This struggle, which is better known as the *Paris Commune*, has become a historical and worldwide reference. It is a guiding light for proletarians, wherever they may be, in their struggle against capitalist exploitation, private property, the State. It is a point of reference in the night which reminds the proletariat of the path of its struggle and of the strength that it contains, the ability to overthrow existing order.

This movement principally affirmed itself in Paris with the March 18th 1871 insurrection, imposing a balance of forces which compelled the bourgeoisie to step back and to give up territory. It quickly became the epicenter of a shock wave which would be felt all over the world. On May 29th 1872 Johann Most wrote:

“On one side we could see the proletarians of every country, full of great hopes and easy confidence, with their heads turned to the men of the Commune, men they rightfully considered to be their vanguard in the present social war. On the other side were the factory vampires, the stock market knights, and all of the other parasites who, full of fear, shrunk their heads into their shoulders.”

This insurrectional movement became a fundamental reference. Millions of proletarians recognized themselves in the revolutionary aspirations at the heart of this magnificent movement which called bourgeois society into question. Despite the ferocious repression which punished the movement at its shortcomings the *Commune* left behind words, written in blood: **Revolution is possible**. A world without class, without State, without private property, without money, without labor can become a reality. The proletariat found hope and courage.

The analysis of such a movement is vital due to its historical and international repercussions. It is necessary to understand its strengths and its errors so that future struggles will not be broken by the same pitfalls. The lessons the proletariat draws from the past can only reinforce it. Our viewpoint is not backward looking. We find our identity in the past, our fundamental determi-

nations, as an exploited and revolutionary class. It is there that we seek the strength necessary to take up the struggle again, just as the tree plunges its roots into the soil so as to take the resources necessary to give it robustness and vitality.

Of course, this magnificent struggle was also the object of distortion, falsification and many facts were covered up. It became the object of a myth and it is high time to criticize this myth. This myth was built by social-democracy. It exploited the feelings of defeat and proletarian anger provoked by the tens of thousands killed, imprisoned, and exiled. It sought to show that the only possible means of changing the world were through pacifism, electoralism, and parliamentarianism. It distorted the profound meaning of the movement which had affirmed itself as a death sentence to the capitalist system and not simply its reform. It proclaimed that this was the very force of the movement and that all other struggles had to follow in the same well-worn tracks. However it proclaimed that all of the movement's force such as its ability to organize the insurrection was precisely where lay the error not to be repeated. It affirmed that this is what had led to defeat and repression. Of course, what it names defeat is *our defeat*. Whereas our victory means the defeat of social-democracy.

Numerous attempts have been made to distort the history of the struggle led by the proletariat in France in 1870-71. Against such attempts what matters to us is to take up the path of class confrontation, to analyze the solid backbones and to grasp the limits. It is important for us to go back to this important and generous movement which contained the grain of the destruction of the bourgeois system and the affirmation of the need for communism. This permits us to better distinguish which of the forces present were on the side of revolution and which were on the side of counter-revolution, in whom do we recognize ourselves, and in whom do we definitively see enemies.

1.1 The historical and international context

To understand the deep content of the insurrectional movement in France, it is necessary to view it in its historical and international context. This movement was part of a long continuity of different insurrectional movements which came before it and which influenced it.

From 1773 to 1802 there was a period of intense struggles in different parts of the world. What first comes to mind when we refer to this period are the mighty struggles which shook France during the *French Revolution*. Generally the emphasis put on this particular historical event covers up a number of im-

portant revolts which took place at the end of the 18th century. There were notably those which took place in France from 1792 to 1797 among which was the so-called “*Egalité*” attempt at insurrection organized by Babeuf and his comrades.

Let’s have a look at a very brief chronology of a long list of struggles.

In 1773 formidable struggles known as *Pougatchevina* took place in Russia. In the British colonies of America an outburst of struggles rose up against both the English colonial presence as well as the bourgeois demanding independence. In 1775 the *guerre des Farines* took place in France. From 1781 to 1787 there were revolts in the United Provinces. There were revolts against the Spanish Empire. In 1797 slave revolts in Santo Domingo (which would later become Haiti) took place, lasting several years. In 1798 revolts in Ireland left 30,000 insurgents dead.

What we perceive as essential is the interaction of these different struggles. Major events such as the *French Revolution* were made possible by a conjunction of a whole sum of revolts which took place in France as well as in different parts of the world. The presence of exiled proletarians and the major influence of the Atlantic proletariat, made up of sailors of different nationalities and having an internationalist approach to struggles is of great importance. Importance that we are now beginning to grasp².

There was a revival of insurrectionary movements in the beginning of 1830 in France, as well as in Belgium, Poland, and Russia.

From 1848 to 1851 a whole series of important uprisings blazed a path throughout Europe such as in February and June 1848, in Germany in 1848-49, in Italy...

Despite the ferocious repression, proletarians kept workers’ memory alive throughout these years in both written and oral form. We have no other explanation for the strength of the workers’ movements at the end of the 1860s which in France reached its peak in the insurrectionary development in 1870-71. The proletariat had the capacity to nurse itself on the struggles of the past, on the balance sheet of their strengths and weaknesses and so strengthened those to come. Those who had once known defeat passed on the experiences of struggle, the lessons to be learned. Different generations did not ignore one another. For example, just think of the “elders” of 1848 who mixed with

² We can read the books of Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker such as *The Many-Headed Hydra* concerning the importance of this transatlantic proletariat and its little known role in making ties between several continents from the 16th to the 18th century and their consequence in the “*maturing of minds in the metropolis*” as the historian Serge Bianchi put it.

young revolutionaries at the 1871 barricades! There were many informal meetings taking place in bars, at work, at the places where proletarians would gather, such as the *Place de la Grève*, in certain neighborhoods... as well as in more structured meetings (mutual aid and resistance associations, secret societies, book clubs, etc.). The need for association, for solidarity, remained alive. It was hidden from the eyes of the State, though it did sometimes rise up at street corners under the steadily rising pressure of the inevitable confrontation to come. Buonarroti, Blanqui and Marx are the most well-known militants of this red thread spanning through the century. But let's not forget other less well-known militants such as Weitling, Flora Tristan, Bronterre O'Brien... as well as those who shall forever remain unknown, who gave all of their strength to keep proletarian associationism alive and solid.

After the dark period of counter-revolution which fell upon insurgent Europe (1848-1851) there was not another revival of struggles on the scale of the continent until the beginning of the 1860s:

- ★ In Germany there were numerous struggles, particularly in the mines in Silesia. Many anti-war demonstrations took place all over the country during the Franco-Prussian War and later in solidarity with the *Commune*. Social agitation remained significant until 1872.
- ★ In Belgium numerous strikes broke out in the Borinage mines and in the steel industry in 1867.
- ★ In Switzerland there were strikes among construction workers in 1868-69.
- ★ In Great Britain, in Austro-Hungary, in Ireland, in the United States... proletarians entered the struggle.

In the same period, both in the decade preceding the *Commune* as well in the following one important movements were taking place:

- ★ In China the so called *Taiping* struggle lasted from 1851 to 1864. Its repression left tens of millions dead. "*It is perhaps the biggest peasant war of the modern world, if not of all time.*"
- ★ In Mexico one of the most important insurrectionary movements which the American continent would know was taking place. It lasted two years. The high point of the first seven months of struggle in 1869 was the *del Chaco* insurrection in the state of Mexico. The bourgeoisie was unable to put out the flames of this revolutionary fire for a long time.
- ★ In Crete a social struggle movement was beginning in 1866.

★ In Japan “*peasant rebellion movements were numerous between 1868 and 1877. Certain historians of Japan claim there were as many as 190, whereas during a period of two and a half centuries there had only been 600 in all.*”

★ In the United States insurrectionary strikes erupted in the main cities in 1877.

★ In Bosnia-Herzegovina and throughout the Balkans there was an uninterrupted series of proletarian uprisings against exploiters of various nationalities between 1875 and 1878.

★ In Spain uprisings, strikes and insurrections took place throughout 1873. The great insurrection of Carthagene started on July 12th and went on until its final defeat on January 13th 1874. Some of those who took part in the *Commune* lived in exile in Spain and took part in this nearly forgotten insurrection.

We are not trying to establish a definitive list of all of the riots, barricades, insurrections, organizations... especially because following a movement's traces and bringing forth its class dimension implies a very difficult task of research in that these traces have often been erased. Such a task would be a real battle against the systematic brainwashing that is organized to destroy any memory of struggle.

What we are interested in is the quality, the strength of these movements. The way they confronted the bourgeois world that was trying to impose its need, ever higher degrees of exploitation, reinforcing the State as a means of carrying out control, repression and the destruction of any remaining community of proletarian resistance, of struggle.

Although these struggles remained scattered and lacked both clarity and a determined will to break with their isolation they were all nonetheless opposing the same enemy, capital. They affirmed *de facto* the human need to do away with money, labor, and war. They affirmed their common essence. They were diverse expressions of the same worldwide being, the proletariat. How then, despite the clear existence of this common being, can we explain the isolation, the lack of affirmation of those struggles³? This question is all the more crucial in that it is still a topical question *this seems perfectly ok*. Still today the big problem in the proletariat's struggle is isolation, the difficulty in

³ This incapacity to recognize oneself in the struggle of proletarians on the other side of the world was manifest for example during the Kanake insurrection in 1878. The same proletarians who had fought against the bourgeoisie in France and were later deported to New Caledonia participated in the repression of this revolt.

recognizing oneself in struggles going on in other parts of the world, the difficulty in breaking with and going beyond language barriers, distances, particular histories and identities.

It's of no surprise that the bourgeoisie's interest is to present all of these struggles as just a bunch of different cases, born out of multiple causes, with no common essence. Thus the bourgeoisie speaks of "student" and "worker" struggles in Russia while they are "cantonal" in Spain, "farmer" in Italy and "national" in Ireland. For the bourgeoisie it is above all imperative to present all of these struggles within the non-classist framework of the nation and of national defense. Most of these struggles, including the *Paris Commune*, have been analyzed by bourgeois historiography as "national liberation" struggles. Obviously it is in the bourgeoisie's interest to hide the elements in these movements which express the community of proletarian struggle wherever they may spring up against the class of exploiters whether they're French or German, Russian or Chinese, Mexican or... Instead, the bourgeoisie affirms only the existence of a national moment of mobilization, regardless of class, against an "invading" enemy. The bourgeoisie tries to transform a "class against class" war into a bourgeois war. In the name of patriotism, in the name of liberating a territory the bourgeoisie puts an end to the birth of revolution and leads the proletariat to lose itself in a struggle which is no longer its own. In opposition to the bourgeoisie's work of destruction we are going to emphasize the fundamentally internationalist character of the struggle which was led principally by the proletariat in Paris in 1871 despite its trouble in overcoming the domination of a nationalist framework.

Despite the intrinsic internationalism expressed by all of these struggles it isn't easy for us to see what links were built between these different hotbeds of unrest, between different revolutionary militants on an international level during the 1860-70 period. It's obvious that there was no direct interaction between the *Taiping* struggles and those going on in Europe. This was not the case for the *French Revolution* as we remarked above. However we can say that such interaction appeared quite natural in other cases and that there were some attempts to make a qualitative leap, as these struggles were all taking place at the same time, in affirming the need to coordinate and clarify objectives.

The foundation of the International Workingmen's Club (IWA) in 1864 represented an important step in the organization of the world's proletariat. It came out of the same line as its forbears, the Communist League, created in 1847, and the International Association (1855-1859). The IWA's coming together was a response to this new wave of struggles. This was of great histori-

cal importance. Indeed, this was a meeting place for militants from many different backgrounds. The struggles in many different countries could be centralized there. Many rich debates and arguments took place there which resulted in an ever clearer affirmation of the program for the emancipation of humankind. This would then in turn give greater force to the ongoing struggles. In this way we can say that the struggle in one particular place was lived as a part of a whole, of this international “army” of the proletariat struggling openly against the bourgeoisie.

The example of a little known uprising can only buttress our affirmation. Who knew that there were links between the IWA, based at the time in Europe, and proletarians on the Caribbean island of Martinique? Who knew it had been so since 1865? Who knew that as soon as the September 4th 1870 proclamation of the republic was known, on September 22nd, an insurrection broke out in the south of the island? As soon as the news got around work ceased. Some plantation owners threatened to put down the strike by force. This galvanized the strikers into a forceful reaction of hatred against them. That’s how this general revolt began. Proletarians thought the time had come to radically call into question the social relationship with the plantation owners. They set sugar-making factories and administrative headquarters on fire. That’s how forty plantations went up in smoke in three nights. But the movement was soon crushed. These proletarians naively believed that the advent of the new form of State in Europe would support them in their struggle against their exploiters. They had not organized themselves for a long term struggle. This made repression harder to resist. At least a hundred insurgents were murdered. Insurrectionary movements began a few months later on March 15th 1871 in Kabylia in Algeria and later spread to the whole country. As is the case for Martinique we know very little about this struggle. The French army viciously put it down. There is a bloody irony in this case as the same troops used to put down the proletarians in Paris were duly used to put down the insurrection in Algeria.

We present our analysis of the movement of struggle in 1870-71 as it developed from period to period. This allows us to follow the evolution of the struggle between the classes in its principal phases. But first we are going to try to clarify what we mean by the *Commune*, to explain precisely what this name really refers to and implies.

1.2 Terminological preliminaries: what is the *Commune*?

In Paris, all of the rebellions and struggles against the State led by generations of proletarians throughout the centuries, such as Etienne Marcel’s rebel-

lion in 1356, were concentrated in the term *Commune*. In every time of crisis “*the people of Paris called out: Commune*”. This word came back in use during the insurrectional Commune of August 10th 1792 which, after affirming itself for several months, was forbidden by the Convention but expanded until it was eliminated (Thermidor 9th). This word sprang back after September 4th 1870 and became a rallying cry for proletarians who rose up against the whole of bourgeois forces more and more clearly. On October 8th 1870 the word *Commune* was openly used during a demonstration against the National Defense government: the proletariat made its demand “*Make room for the people, make room for the Commune*”. These same terms were used in the red poster which was put up throughout Paris on January 6th 1871.

For us there are different contents which overlap and confront one another in the term *Commune*: essentially the *Commune* as the proletariat’s revolutionary uprising, and the *Commune* as the government of Paris. Bourgeois historiography would not show this distinction because this would imply showing the class confrontation which was taking place. The confusion over these two contents is eminently harmful to the intelligence of the social movement in France in 1870-71. As a starting point for this analysis we would like to make some terminological (political) remarks which may help shed some light on the situation and remove the ambiguity which an undifferentiated reference to the *Commune* carries:

The newspaper *Le Révolté* affirmed unambiguously that “... *the Commune (...) was governmental and bourgeois*”:

“How could the masses fight for an order of things which left the people in misery out of respect for bourgeois private property (...) which allowed, at the height of revolution, for there to be bosses and workers in Paris (...)”.

Some years later, in 1898, Elisée Reclus made the distinction between the bourgeois work of the *Commune* government and what represented the term *Commune* in the eyes of proletarians:

“The word “Commune” was understood everywhere in the widest of meanings, pertaining to the whole of a new humanity, made up of free and equal comrades who recognize none of the former borders, and live in peaceful mutual assistance all the world over.”

A political balance sheet of the *Commune* necessarily leads to such explanations in its struggle against official historiography. These academics of bourgeois thought filter events through their own perspective which they describe using their own terminology. Their aim is to protect the organization of the society which they depend upon. When they identify the bourgeois reform-

ist decrees produced by the Commune government with the (confused but real) attacks which the proletariat made against the capitalist State the bourgeoisie is simply projecting today the same political concern which was already a driving force within it in 1871 as it faced armed proletarians: how can it bring the revolutionary movement in Paris back into the framework of a struggle for more republic, more democracy, more State.

That is why in the following text we have used two distinct terms:

- ★ the *Commune* which we refer to as such or preceded by the adjective “revolutionary” when we refer to the revolutionary movement in Paris.
- ★ the *Commune government* when we wish to speak about the reorganization of the State in its republican form and in its defense of the pillars of its society – private property, labor, money.

The *revolutionary Commune* has an undeniable suggestive power for the proletariat. To say the *Commune* to refer to the proletarian uprising in Paris is like saying the *Russian Revolution* to talk about the October 1917 insurrection in Petrograd. The proletariat’s strength in its struggle to affirm its needs, its communist project, was so great that it marked future generations with the time and place of their happenings. The *Commune, 1917, El Cordobazo, May 1968...* are terminological shortcuts which mark the proletariat’s struggle and with which it identifies.

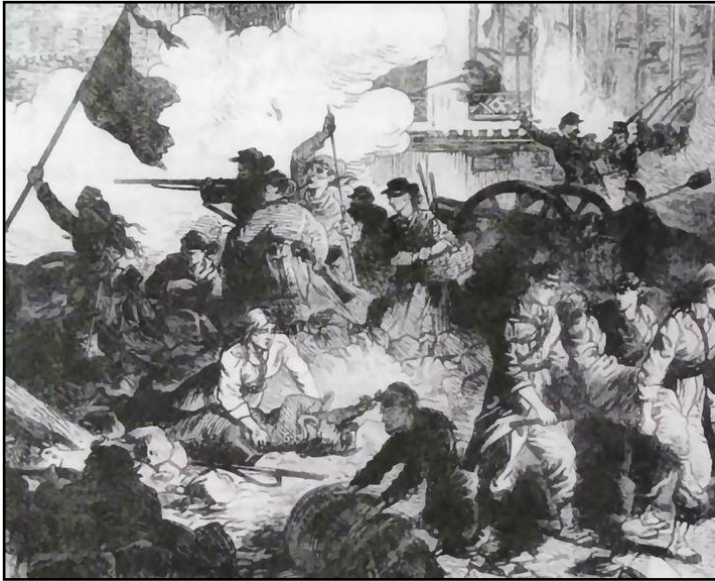
However when we talk about the *Commune government* we talk about capitalism’s capacity to break the proletariat’s party⁴. We refer to the bourgeoisie’s capacity for keeping its State alive. In order to do so it seeks to confiscate the initiatives and directives taken in the struggle by revolutionary workers so as to better destroy them. In distinguishing between the *Commune government* and the revolutionary movement we wish to point out this bourgeois recuperation, the capitalist State’s great capacity to adapt and co-opt workers’ elements so as to make its decisions seem credible. In doing so it seeks to defuse the revolutionary movement by legalizing it and transforming social attacks into a purely military confrontation – turning the class war, proletariat against bourgeoisie, into a bourgeois war, front against front, Paris against Versailles.

We can refer to one of the essential lessons which Marx drew from this revolutionary period in *The Civil War in France*:

⁴ As we show in the chapter entitled *Notes on the IWA, the Blanquists, and other militants* which we have written as a sort of conclusion to this text the use of this term has nothing to do with the classical, formal conception of social-democracy.

“I remark (...) that the next revolutionary attempt in France ought not to consist in putting the bureaucratic and military machine into other hands, as it has been the case until now, but instead in breaking it.”⁵

For us, this means that we are not going to try to distinguish between the “good” and the “bad” measures passed by the *Commune government* but instead to grasp its essence as an atomizing force against the proletariat’s power, and even more so against the direction which the proletariat was trying to give itself. Just because some militant workers, despite their anterior ruptures, participated in different levels of the Parisian municipal State apparatus (the government, executive commissions...) that did not give any revolutionary complexion to these structures. On the contrary, it’s an expression of the confusion which reigned among the avant-garde elements, the proletariat’s lack of determination. Mixing up the efforts of participants in the *Commune* to give themselves a revolutionary direction with the capitalist subject the *Commune government* never ceased to represent, is an enormous concession to the bourgeois history of the *Commune*.



⁵ Letter from Marx to Kugelmann dated April 12th 1871.

II. The Revolution is marching on

2.1 Up until September 4th 1870

*“In certain periods which usually precede great historical events, humanity’s great triumphs, everything seems to move forward at an accelerated pace, electricity is in the air: the minds, the hearts, the wills, everything seems to be marching forward in unison, in the conquest of new horizons. Then all throughout society an electrical current which unites the most distant individuals in one same feeling and all of the different minds into one thought, which marks everyone with the same will.”*⁶

The strengthening of the proletariat’s power in France at the time of the IWA’s foundation in 1864 and in the following years expressed itself in different ways. Strikes became numerous after 1868 and they were quite radical in the regions around Rouen, Roubaix, Lyons, Clermont-Ferrand, Mulhouse, Paris... 1870 was the climax of the struggles of the whole 19th century. Although the bourgeoisie responded to these struggles by sending in the army and causing massacres such as in Ricamarie (10 dead in June 1869) or in Aubin (17 dead in October 1869) we may note that in some industrial centers it was compelled to give in to the struggles’ demands by raising wages and lowering labor time. The proletariat was gaining in both strength and union.

This growing union was expressed in the reinforcement of revolutionary minorities which, from one experience to another, were becoming increasingly radicalized, were breaking away from various aspects of *Proudhonism*⁷, and were opening up to a wider following. As a result of the organizing efforts undertaken by militants such as Varlin, Bastelica, Aubry, Richard, Malon... and many other militants whose names history does not remember, in the spring of 1870 four big IWA federations – Paris, Rouen, Marseilles, Lyons – were created.

This growing union was an international phenomenon. Proletarians looked to struggles going on in other countries such as England, Switzerland, Italy... They expressed their solidarity by collecting money, and in circulating news-

⁶ Bakunin, August 1870, Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis. We must make it precise that there are several versions of this text bearing the same title. The English translation by Sam Dolgoff published in 1971 only represents an extract from one of these versions.

⁷ Proudhonism implied, among other things, the defense of individual property, a great mistrust of strikes, and the defense of women’s place as being in the home: “... *we don’t want them to give up [their home] so as to come and participate in a political assembly or in a club...*” while at that same time women such as N. Lemel, E. Dimitriev, and L. Michel were at the vanguard!

paper articles as a means of propaganda... They recognized these struggles as their own. Going back to César de Paepe “*The goal of the International is to bring together into one single group all of the proletariat’s strength.*” Proletarian internationalism was tending to become an organized force.

Other poles of proletarian assembly rose up such as the local federations of workers’ union halls or like cooperative restaurants such as those called *Marmite* which had been set up by Varlin and Nathalie Le Mel. These were real hotbeds of subversion in which revolutionary propaganda circulated. We would also like to add to this list the founding of the Blanquist organization, made up of young militants organized around Auguste Blanqui. They played an important role in the struggles at the time and they would later be found in the forefront in the months to come.

Other indications show that the proletariat tended to become an autonomous force. Public meetings were authorized in Paris as of June 1868. These quickly became revolutionary hot spots. Over a period of two years more than a thousand meetings⁸ were held. This allowed for debate, the circulation of information and solidarity actions, as well as the preparation of riots and attempts at insurrection such as those of May 12th and 15th 1869, February 7th and 9th 1870 (at Flourens’ initiative) and May 8th and 11th 1870. Social agitation in Paris was growing, especially in certain neighborhoods. The *red neighborhoods* were Belleville, Montmartre, la Villette, Ménilmontant, imposing the rhythm and the force of the confrontation with the State.

So after all of these years of social peace, riots and barricades were back in the heart of Paris. In these moments there was interaction between the public meetings “*where the word revolution was on everybody’s lips*” and the street, in which proletarians, sometimes in arms, confronted the cops. The following quote sheds some light on the level of confrontation and the proletariat’s determination:

“At ten o’clock a wave of insurrection spread across the capital: in the eastern neighborhoods a gang armed with iron bars starts the movement. There are attempts at setting up barricades in several different points of Paris. The 20,000 demonstrators along the boulevards turn seditious. The Lefauchaux armoury is attacked. Despite the cavalry’s charges groups of rioters remain resolutely on the offensive. There are many arrests but the people remain in control of the street.”

⁸ On certain evenings there could be up to 15,000 or 20,000 participants at such meetings divided into different meeting rooms, in different districts. At its most intense period there were thousands of people who stood outside the doors unable to get in.

What was going on is simple. These strikes, associations, riots, amateurish barricades all announced the coming proletarian storm which was going to reign upon the bourgeoisie in the coming months. The Empire was unable to maintain social peace, to placate a proletariat which was gaining in both strength and consciousness.

Declaration of war

The French State declared war on Germany on July 19th 1870. The protagonists gave ridiculous diplomatic reasons which suited themselves fine. This was bourgeois society's answer to its concern for its own survival, for social peace, for repression against the exploited, putting an end to the proletariat's power. The State's interest, in Germany as well as in France, was in the war.

Struggles were also developing in Germany. A movement of strikes, protests and workers' associationism had been going on since 1868. It especially developed in the spring of 1869. In May 1869 the *Reichstag* voted for *the right to association and the right to strike*. It counted on social-democracy in order to hold back this movement. The legal framework, the social-democratic confines and the repression were not enough to prevent strikes, sometimes very tough ones, from exploding such as in the case of the mechanics in Hanover in November 1869 or that of the Waldenburg miners in Silesia during the winter of 1869-70. This is what brings us to the conclusion that the State's interest was in the war, be it in France or in Germany.

In France there was direct repression as well as various concessions. The IWA was put on trial three times so as to break its organizational structure, its power, and its rising influence. As none of this was enough war became the last resort to wear down this breaking wave. National union, the dream of bourgeois concord, could become a reality: enforcing the unity between the active proletariat and the French people around the traditional values of work, family, and country.

We can say that this holy union worked at first because the proletariat was incapable of stopping the deployment of troops and the departure of their class brothers for the battlefield. At the same time this holy union's drive to celebrate the reunion of the classes and the dissolving of the proletariat into a populist magma was unsuccessful. The proletariat did not let itself get sucked into the quagmire of nationalism and continued to struggle as if nothing special was going on:

"It would seem the imperial war does not bring about any burst of patriotism among workers. No social truce: strikes continued just like before the

war. The newspaper “*The Rappel*” in July and August 1870 continued to give news of coalitions and guild movements. For example in the August 4th issue one can find information about a new strike among painters and plasterers in Saint-Charmond, as well as news about an ongoing strike among metallurgists in Vienne. Stone carvers had created a resistance society. Marseilles typographers had created a mutual benefit society. In Rouen 800 mechanics discussed the project of creating a trade federation and considered “the productive strike to be the means to get to the proletariat’s emancipation.” Everything went on as if the workers did not feel concerned by this war.”

We can see an even more active approach on July 12th in Paris where IWA militants made a *call to workers of all countries* and organized demonstrations during which “they were roughed up by a furious crowd who booed them.” This same kind of idiot “crowd” would later be organized by the State in 1914 to spark up patriotic madness while the proletariat dragged its feet in answer to the nation’s call. It is a fact that the French bourgeoisie, under the mask of the Empire, tried to force the proletariat to accept its war while...

“The prefects themselves, in their reports to the government full of servile complacency, in July 1870 were obliged to point out that in 71 departments (out of a total of 87) the population was massively against the war.”

We may also note that in July in Germany and Austria IWA militants were imprisoned for having participated in daily demonstrations against the war. This internationalist attitude, despite its pacifist shortcomings, would be upheld throughout the conflict. Here is what Marx wrote on January 16th 1871:

“On a daily basis German workers’ meetings in favor of an honorable peace with France are broken up by the police.”

Just over three weeks after the beginning of the war the proletariat violently demonstrated its refusal of the holy union, in Paris as in the rest of France.

August 6th: The proletariat sacked the Paris stock exchange.

“The stock exchange was sacked by the people gone mad. Emile Ollivier, in his residence at Place Vendôme, had to face hostile crowds. (...) The next day on August 7th an enormous crowd marched on the avenues shouting “Weapons! Dethronement of the emperor! Republic!” The police were unable to break up the crowd. The cavalry charged.”⁹

⁹ Letter from Marx to the “Daily News”.

August 7th: Massive demonstrations took place as well as confrontations with *sergents de ville* in Paris as well as in many other cities such as Lyons, Marseilles, Toulouse as well as in several departments such as l'Indre and l'Ariège. The State reacted by proclaiming a state of emergency in Paris as well as in several other departments.

August 9th: Thousands of proletarians invaded the streets and encircled the *Palais-Bourbon* which held the *Assemblée Nationale*. The bourgeoisie was getting scared. Every one of its factions united into a single block against this eruption. It was this necessity to maintain order which explained why the left bourgeoisie put off the declaration of the republic despite the pressure to do so coming from the streets. The other reason that the left gave was that they still believed the French army was capable of beating Prussia. They didn't want "*a revolution at the moment*" because those who carried it out would be responsible for the army's defeat. The next day, on August 10th, many contingents of *troupes de lignes* as well as *gendarmes* (40,000 soldiers who were normally to leave for the front!) protected the seat of the legislative body while the police proceeded to make numerous arrests.

August 14th: The pressure had reached such a degree that the *Blanquists* tried to force the hand at *la Villette*. They tried in vain to lead the suburb inhabitants in a riot. After this failure many of the leaders were imprisoned or else sentenced to death like Eudes and Brideau, who would later be broken out of prison on September 4th. Meanwhile others went into hiding and waited for a more favorable time.

Although these proletarian actions were tainted with patriotic vexation after the French army's first defeats were announced it is undeniable that the bourgeoisie was getting scared. In addition to the presence of 40,000 soldiers to keep order the bourgeoisie reacted through a great wave of repression and a campaign of terror. These were carried out in the name of the fight against *agents provocateurs* in the pay of Prussia! Arthur Arnould wrote:

"At gatherings nobody dared speak to those around them. If anybody raised their voice so some manly words could be spoken the citizens around him immediately looked at him mistrustingly, thinking he must be an agent provocateur. Paris saw the police everywhere and this vision, this nightmare, dazed them and made them incapable of any common action."

The bourgeoisie armed sixty National Guard battalions on August 12th. Its perspective at the time was to "*arm the bourgeois, excluding proletarians, especially former soldiers so as to have sufficient strength to oppose the prole-*

*ariat's revolts, emboldened by the troops having been sent away (...)*¹⁰. So at the start these battalions were composed of “reliable” elements coming from bourgeois neighborhoods.

This National Guard originated in the permanent committee at the *Hôtel de Ville* which was made up of 48,000 men the day after the Bastille was captured in 1789. The bourgeoisie had organized this committee directly against the proletariat which had started arming itself, attacking prisons, and taking hold of stocks of flour. It wasn't until ten days after the strafing at the *Champs de mars* on July 17th 1791 that the National Guard would definitively get its name. Back then, as was later the case in 1848, class struggle was able to separate the members of this bourgeois organization which misery had driven to rise up against the status quo from those who longed to perpetuate it.

On August 8th 1870 the Jura prefect informed the government that “*rogue soldiers and national guardsmen want to form army corps. Everywhere people are demanding arms. Emotions are inflamed.*” Jules Simon was able to write that “*we were especially preoccupied with Paris (...) because the whole of Paris was rising up each day, demanding arms and threatening to seize them if they were not given...*” This explains why, not even a month later on September 6th, the bourgeoisie was compelled to arm sixty new “moderate” battalions. Yet all they received were old rifles whereas the regiments which had been recruited in bourgeois neighborhoods had new, high performance Enfeld rifles. Such rifles had already proven to be quite a marvel in the repression of the strike at Ricamarie. A few weeks later two hundred fifty-four National Guard battalions were formed, the majority of which were present in working class neighborhoods. In all, this made for 300,000 National Guardsmen (out of a total population of about two million). The organization and the arming of the National Guard became a danger for the bourgeoisie in that there were now proletarians in arms, stationed in their own neighborhoods. What's more, these National Guardsmen elected their leaders. These proletarians, despite their uniforms, quickly came to elect those whose anti-governmental practice matched the closest to the rising general feeling of discontent. Besides that, their pay was lousy.

At that point, during the highly charged month of August, every bourgeois faction, republican as well as imperialist, was scared of their historical enemy's brutal awakening. Bakunin summed up their practice this way:

¹⁰ Bakunin, Letter to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis, dated August 26th 1870 and published in September 1870.

*“It’s better off, they think, to have a dishonored France, lessened, momentarily submitted by the Prussians’ insolent will but with nonetheless the certain hope of rising up again rather than to have a France killed forever, as a State, by the social revolution.”*¹¹

If the bourgeoisie was clear about the threat it was facing, the proletariat was not conscious of its revolutionary potential. Its practice, its actions, though they may have contained a threat to the State’s stability, remained bogged down in patriotism. This obscured the perspective for uncompromising struggle against all bourgeois factions. He certainly had his reasons when the scoundrel Jules Favre said that...

“Order could only be guaranteed and the population of Paris could only be tamed by stirring up the patriotic fever running through it.”

This republican faction would know how to play its cards with this enormous weakness so as to nip in the bud any proletarian attempt at affirming itself on class grounds, a break with all of this political scheming! The only perspective which seemed to stand out at the time was that of a war of national defense, that is, in defense of the State.

The IWA, through the voice of its general council, that is, through Marx, placed itself on bourgeois grounds. The first IWA address on July 23rd justified a defensive war on the part of the German bourgeoisie and got mucked up in a lot of trifling considerations about the fact that this was a “*dynastic*” war opposing “*Bonapartist*” France to the Germany of the “*Junkers*”. This address placed itself on the grounds of the aggressor nation and the attacked nation, which, in the end, causes one to have to choose sides, one State against another State, a choice between one or another bourgeois faction, be it imperialist or republican. While this war, just like all bourgeois wars, is always waged against the proletariat.

The French military defeat can be explained as a result of the army’s complete negligence as opposed to the German army which was toughened after its victory at Sadowa (1866) against the Austro-Hungarian army. The German army was well-equipped, superior in both military force and intelligence. Hatred, powerless, and no longer credible the Empire was going to have to make room for another bourgeois faction.

¹¹ Bakunin, Letter to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis.

2.2 September 4th 1870

On September 2nd the German army captured a large part of the French army (including Bonaparte) at Sedan. This military defeat, synonymous with thousands of dead and wounded, was going to push the proletariat into action, despite the unending repression¹², the tight police control, and the intensification of hardship. It was time to slaughter the dying Empire, hated just as much as its very pillars: exploitation, misery and war! On September 3rd as soon as the defeat was announced the proletariat rose up. Shouting “*Dethrone the emperor! Republic!... from Belleville, from Ménilmontant, from Montmartre, workers poured forth in numerous columns.*” (Arthur Ranc, *Souvenirs, correspondance, 1831 – 1908*). But unable to clearly explain their anger or give a direction to their impulse they were easily overtaken by nationalist poison.

Blanquist militants were able to give a direction to the workers’ outburst. This was accomplished more easily in that even before proletarians had taken to the streets these militants had intensified revolutionary propaganda in order to prepare a demonstration on the fourth. Their strength was in their ability to give a framework to all of this energy and to give it a precise objective: the legislative body, the place where parliamentary scoundrels met. At this time they acted more in tune with the proletariat’s energy and the determination of the active proletariat, as opposed to the August 14th failure, and so were naturally brought to the head of the movement. Even if there were IWA militants, such as Chatelain, veteran fighter of 1848, it was Granger, Pilhes, Ranvier, Peyrouton, Trohel, Levraud, Balsenq... Blanquist militants, who stood out, “*in all, [they] came out to a few hundred disciplined and determined men, backed up by about two hundred students and workers who were accustomed to act with them, in the latest struggles against the Empire*”.

That’s how on September 4th 1870 an insurrectionary movement brought proletarians to the legislative body at the *Palais-Bourbon*. They invaded the building and dismissed the ministers. They found armed proletarians there in the uniform of the National Guard. They found in them other proletarians, as determined as they were, coming from the outskirts of the city. They also found a number of moderates as well as fans of the republican left who only wished for a personnel change at the head of State. At the time, proletarians were forcing their way through *gendarme* and army lines, meeting little serious resistance. The Blanquist militants formed two groups. One forced open the doors to the *Ste.Pélagie* and the *Cherche-Midi* prisons so as to liberate

¹² At the end of August 1870 a decree was voted and duly applied “*Any individual without means whose presence in Paris would constitute a danger for public order... will be expelled from the capitol.*”

imprisoned comrades. The other group went to the *Palais-Bourbon* so as to overthrow the Empire and proclaim the republic. The left members of parliament did not just stay sitting there. If the republic was proclaimed at the *Palais-Bourbon* they were going to have to share power with the Blanquists. As the proletariat was invading parliament Jules Favre, that republican scumbag, exclaimed:

“I beseech you. Not a day of blood. Don’t force brave French soldiers to turn their guns against you. They only bear arms against foreign lands. Let us all be united in the same thought, the thought of patriotism and of democracy (...) The Republic? We shouldn’t proclaim it here but at l’Hôtel de Ville.”

To remain at the Parliament (*l’Assemblée*) meant to dangerously link oneself to the memory of May 15th 1848, when, through the voices of Blanqui’s partisans, proletarians clearly affirmed their struggle against the bourgeoisie. Favre, expert in swindling and conniving, knew it was important to designate *l’Hôtel de Ville* as the best place to proclaim the Republic. Indeed, that is the place where the provisional governments of 1830 and 1848 had been proclaimed. And both had shown they were able to contain the proletariat despite its determination to bring its struggle further ahead.

In the beginning of August 1870, the same republican members of parliament, such as Favre, had run away when proletarians had asked them to overthrow the Empire. This time, they opportunistically played the role of a replacement faction for the bourgeoisie. The Blanquist militants, naive and unaccustomed to such bourgeois maneuvering, ended up losing the initiative in the movement.

The struggle’s limits

Ever since the *French Revolution* in 1789 the proletariat’s main weakness has been the ideology of politics. This weakness stems from a stupid admiration for this event. It reduces the force of a proletarian insurrectionary movement which, in its practice, tended to call into question the totality of the bourgeois world. Instead it prefers the taking of political power by its so-called representatives and the carrying out of a whole series of reforms which will in no way touch the basis of capitalist society, quite the contrary: nationalization, development of productive forces, agrarian reform... This ideology rests upon a false understanding of the notion of the State: it is understood as a neutral apparatus which different classes may occupy and use as they see fit. Though the State is nothing other than the dictatorship of Capital organized as

a force! The politician discourse is the following: *Workers, you have taken arms so as to topple over the government. Now it's time to let your representatives manage society in a new way!* The proletariat thus lets itself become dispossessed of the means and the goals of the struggle.

That's how these bourgeois got what they were after: breaking the movement which could have turned violently against them in the *Palais-Bourbon*. Heading back into the street, on the way to this symbolic place which is *l'Hôtel de Ville*, all of the revolutionary force and potential was watered down and lost. The Blanquist militants had been tricked. But their weakness is just the expression of a lack of rupture of the proletariat as a whole with this very *French Revolution* myth. In this way it contributed to channeling and containing the insurrectionary movement within the limits of bourgeois order, while at the same time invigorating one of politicism's streams of lifeblood which is republicanism.

Republicanism is the belief that the proclamation of the republic guarantees a change towards a better world. Ever since 1789 in France nearly every riot, struggle, insurrection... had been carried out in the name of the republic. On September 4th the proletariat fell into the same republican trap.

Yet Gambetta had precisely defined what this meant when he said:

*"Only the republican form allows for a harmonious conciliation between workers' rightful aspirations and the respect for the sacred right of property."*¹³

The only problem is that "*the respect for the sacred right of property*" always means more exploitation through work, more war, more misery. This republican ideal (parliament, elections...) would last throughout the 20th century and keeps on acting today as an ideological, terroristic, paralyzing straightjacket.¹⁴

Politicism manifested itself in the insurgents' tragic indecision as they ended up turning to "people's representatives" for the pursuit of their action. They distorted the very action which they had undertaken themselves: the sabotage of a session of parliament. In doing so the proletarians remained victims of

¹³ Letter dated August 20th 1870.

¹⁴ Following the defeat and repression of the Paris Commune many militants, who knew what it was like to take a blow, began to denounce the bourgeois content of the republic. "*The republic now proclaimed, freedom is named Thiers or Mac-Mahon, justice Dufaure, or Martel, or Broglie. The despot has gone. But despotism has gone on. No more is there a monarchy. There is the republic. And yet nothing has changed. That's because political despotism is just the outside form of economic slavery, of which it is both child and parent.*"

this representative, electoralist, rule-abiding, parliamentary fiction. The myth of a *fairer* representation had struck again. The proletariat would lay its head on the chopping block by being governed by republicans like Troch who at the end of August shouted from the rooftops:

“To avoid a revolution I will do anything I can.”

Militants in the forefront of struggle were themselves caught up in this politicist tendency. They later played the tragic farce of the historical cuckold, laying the victory the proletariat had won in the streets gun in hand at the feet of our enemies!

The proletariat’s lack of rupture with democratism could be found in each of its upsurges up until May 1871.



It’s important to note that at the same time that these events were taking place in Paris the proletariat’s force was expressing itself in other parts of the country (Lyons, Marseilles, Grenoble):

“In the autumn of 1870 there was a first revolutionary wave in which Paris did not play the leading role. The Commune had begun to exist in the country, notably in Marseilles and Lyons, in September. In the Midi and the southwest there had been some progress among leagues which had already united the essential characteristics of what would later be the Paris Commune. If war was the foremost of their preoccupations it was a revolutionary war.”¹⁵

What is tragic is that, at that time, no one made any effort whatsoever to coordinate or centralize these revolutionary hotspots. Each remained stuck within its own geographical limits. This in turn reinforced the movement’s limits, especially concerning chauvinism. This was especially the case in Paris. It temporarily caused the insurrectionary movement to suffocate. It turned the movement from its path and falsified its very roots as we shall see in the following chapter.

2.3 From September 4th to October 31st 1870

In this chapter we’ll see how the bourgeoisie took back the initiative. The proclamation of the republic was an end to the proletariat’s insurrectionary

¹⁵ Arthur Lehning, quoted from an article in *International Review of Social History*, volume XVII.

dynamic. The contradiction was clear: either the proletariat or the French people. For the proletariat the only solution was revolution, for the French people, it was military victory. Many would die and suffer before a revolutionary pole emerged from the nationalist, populist swamp into which the bourgeoisie was trying to drown us and that pole would be clearer and stronger than the previous one.

The proclamation of the republic brought the movement to a halt which lasted about two months, until hardship and terror pushed the proletariat to partly cast aside its republican illusions. But the initial poison of nationalism which “*is undoubtedly the most powerful feeling which capitalism can awaken and turn against revolution*”¹⁶ persisted until May 1871.

In September and October 1870 the problem for the republic was the following: How to maintain or to reconstitute an army able to shoot at the “reds” and the “riffraff”? Bazaine, the head of the French army, secretly negotiated with Bismarck for the return of the Rhine army which had been encircled at Metz... “*so as to have these troops carry out a 180° change in direction, substituting the protection of the social order instead of the defense of the national territory*”. The republic’s left faction, impulsed by Gambetta, was going to organize an “*all-out war*”. They did this out of their aspiration to fight against revolution and at the same time they echoed what was on the lips of many proletarians, prisoners of patriotic, ideological scum.

So the bourgeoisie was able to impose an apparent division on society: on one side were those who wanted a Prussian victory so they could crush the “reds” and on the other side were the “real patriots” who wanted an “*all-out war*” so as to impose a republican regime.

The nationalist trap was not dead, it had in fact been reinvigorated thanks to the new National Defense government. This time though, the government’s title carried the magical word “republican”. Nationalism was also soon to express itself in one of its multiple variations: the “treason” of the National Defense government. We put this “treason” between quotation marks because it was nothing but an expression of loyalty to the bourgeois program of the destruction of the proletariat. It consisted in sending massive numbers of proletarians to the front in such conditions that left no doubt as to their fate: the army’s defeat and massacre. The bourgeoisie made no mistake. At first it sent the most combative workers to the front lines. It had done the same thing in September 1792 to rid Paris of its most revolutionary elements. It cloaked this policy in the struggle against monarchist reaction. It did the same thing later in

¹⁶ Anton Pannekoek, *Concerning the Communist Party*.

Spain in 1936, emptying Barcelona of its insurgent proletarians by sending them to the Aragon front. Both the Empire and the Republic showed their true loyalty to the program of counter-revolution, beyond the rivalry between them: have a maximum number of proletarians killed in order to smother the movement of revolt! But the bourgeoisie still stood the chance of losing some feathers in this dangerous “game” which it was obliged to play. The transformation of the proletariat into the French people remained incomplete. The German army, which was also the enemy of the revolution, was more and more often likened to the National Defense government.

After September 4th nationalist madness really took hold of the proletariat: “*the fall of the Empire transformed the meaning of the war: yesterday Prussia faced an army; today it faces a people*”. This was so strong that different proletarian groups broke with two of the revolution’s fundamentals: class independence and internationalism. These groups found themselves on the same unclassist ground as the bourgeois forces which fought to impose a framework, designating the Germans as the only enemies. The revolutionary movement, spurred on by misery, would be unyielding in its definition of its real enemies – be they republicans or monarchists... be they French or German.

The nationalistic and chauvinistic practice of different proletarian groups and militants

Blanqui had a new newspaper *La Patrie en Danger* [The Nation in Danger] – quite a program in itself! – which appeared between September 7th and December 8th 1870. Through it he contributed to imposing a terrible confusion in the proletariat between social struggle and national struggle (despite the resistance of certain militants):

“There are no more nuances in Paris in the presence of the enemy. The September 4th government represents republican thought and national thought.”

Patriotic fever crushed Blanqui’s class reflexes, dissolving the very socialist perspectives which had once been his and ending up reducing him in the end to the basest racism:

“On this Earth where we debate the question of progress or the failure to act is of dignity or human servility, of the Latin race or the Germanic race.”

Blanqui’s practice and Blanquist militants’ practice undeniably contributed greatly to the proletariat’s confusion and disorientation in September 1870.

They saw themselves as following in the steps of the revolutionaries of the previous century whom they unfortunately identified as the *hébertistes*¹⁷. The Blanquist militants, just like the *hébertistes*, didn't understand the counter-revolutionary function of patriotism. One of their limits, and not the least, was in containing the struggle within a national framework. They rarely tried to situate the debate on an international level. The Blanquists' position can be illustrated in the following *La Patrie en Danger* quotation from September 1870:

“Don't forget that tomorrow we will be fighting not for a government, for caste or party ideas, not even for honor, principles or ideas, but instead for the very stuff of life, for the breath of all, for what makes up a human being in its highest form, for our country.”

The IWA, through the Parisian Federal Council's voice, ended up supporting the National Defense government. The IWA's French federations asked Gambetta to organize defense. The foreign branches approved. The French federations justified this chauvinism as a necessity for the sake of credibility towards the “people”, a prelude to the populism which would hold sway until May 1871. Here is how they expressed themselves even at this early point in the events in September:

“In the name of justice Republican France invites you [Germany] to take back your armies... By the voice of 38 million beings, animated by the same patriotic and revolutionary feeling...”

It was principally IWA and union hall militants who were behind the creation of twenty Republican vigilance and defense committees. During their first meeting on the evening of September 5th they decided that *“these committees would be at the disposal of the provisional government, to carry out measures for preserving order, and they would devote themselves wholeheartedly to the defense of the capitol”*. Despite the protagonists' good intentions, wanting to make workers' demands heard, this nationalist practice could only lead to a negation of the proletariat's struggle against the State. They devoted all of their militant energy entirely to the defense of these committees. This was detrimental to the reorganization of the IWA sections.

¹⁷ The *hébertiste* current in 1793-95 was a counter-revolutionary force which sought to place the proletariat's struggle onto the terrain of reform. The militant and historian Daniel Guérin made a good analysis of this bourgeois fraction which sought to deviate class hatred into nothing more than inoffensive dechristianization while simultaneously sending the most combative proletarians such as the *Enragés* to the guillotine.

For the IWA General Council in London the, critical, support for the republic was obvious: “*we salute the advent of the republic in France*”. In his second address to the IWA General Council, written between September 6th and 9th, Marx wrote:

“Any attempt at overthrowing the new government when the enemy is knocking at the gates of Paris would be desperate madness. French workers must do their duty as citizens. But at the same time they must not let themselves get carried away by the national memories of the Premier Empire (...). Calmly and resolutely they take advantage of the republican freedom to methodically proceed to their own class organization.”

Auguste Serraillier, sent by the London General Council, declared during the September 16th session of the Vigilance committee:

*“It is incredible to think that for six years people could be Internationals, abolish borders, no longer distinguish a foreigner, and then sink to the point where they are just so as to conserve their phony popularity of which sooner or later they will themselves be victims (...) But they know, just as I know, that they are fooling the people by flattering them. They can feel they are digging themselves into a hole. May I say they are afraid to frankly admit they are International. This is unfortunate. So it follows that they can do nothing better than to parody the 1793 revolution.”*¹⁸

It is tragic to see that all of these militants contributed in breaking the insurrectionary rush of September 3rd, as they were unable to understand its revolutionary force. As we have said earlier, it is important to recall that all of the proletariat’s explosive potential was first of all the expression of its visceral hatred for the bourgeoisie and its war. Nationalist poison came to replace this class reaction and to bring the proletariat to fight side by side with the bourgeoisie. Having gone through this cruel experience the proletariat would later be compelled to break with this situation and to struggle more clearly on its own class grounds. But in order to make this rupture it was going to have to go through the cruel experience of its alliance with the bourgeoisie first.

From October 1870 on the Paris siege brought on a shortage of everything. Proletarians’ living conditions, for which the government expressed nothing but contempt, compelled them to break with national unity. Inside of the *Republican Vigilance Committees*, which had at first been organized for a

¹⁸ This is quoted by Marx in a letter to César de Paepe dated September 14th 1870. As we may see Serraillier was no amateur at handling contradictions. He was mandated as a delegate by the General Council to work against the uprising and get the IWA to respect the positions in the Second Address.

better patriotic defense, a class expression was little by little starting to affirm itself. This was principally the case in proletarian neighborhoods such as Belleville, Montmartre, and la Villette which had already had a long tradition of struggle. Although they never made a clear break with nationalism they had come to distance themselves from the Republican Central Committee, which coordinated the *Republican Vigilance Committees*' activities, tied up in the defense of the nation.

On September 5th proletarians came out of their neighborhoods several times to demand the government defend the nation better. Each time they were ignored. On September 15th and October 8th the *Republican Vigilance Committees* criticized the National Defense government's indecision through posters. It was during the October 8th demonstration organized by the Republican Central Committee that the *Commune* was for the first time openly revendedicated.

Starting in October the proletariat began to come out of its state of lethargy:

★ Contradictions were running through it. It was compelled to struggle against everything that bourgeois society had taught it, reproducing this society while at the same time fighting against it. This was the case, as we have seen, for nationalism, politicism, parliamentarianism, bourgeois traps in which the proletariat gets stuck from time to time. But the winter situation with its repression, misery, cold and hunger pushed the proletariat to forge ahead.

★ The proletariat's strength could once again be felt through a myriad of organizations and meeting places. The more explosive the situation became the more rapidly events occurred. Not only were the *Republican Vigilance Committees* becoming increasingly radical, but they had also given birth to a whole series of organizations such as the clubs. These tended to break free from any support, even critical support, for the National Defense government.

While the *Republican Vigilance Committees* are quite well known the existence of proletarian clubs is much less well known. They sprang up as direct descendants of the public meetings which had been authorized since 1868. Proletarians debated about all of the inherent problems in a revolutionary process in such clubs as *le Club démocratique des Batignolles*, *le Club de la Révolution démocratique et sociale*, *le Club des Montagnards*, etc. Speculators, pawnshops, the National Defense government's lack of reactivity were most notably denounced here. The need for building the *Commune* was stated many times. These clubs became increasingly radical, parallel to the *Republican Vigilance Committees*. Many combative proletarians found a place for themselves there. They brought their grievances, their bitterness, their hatred. While governments changed dissent found continuity in the clubs!

★ Battalions of National Guardsmen left their *red neighborhoods* several times this month, led by Flourens, Sapia, and Duval to go to *l'Hôtel de Ville* in order to voice a series of demands. Their demands included a massive sortie against the German army, Enfeld rifles, municipal elections and the requisition and rationing of food. Each time the government, full of haughtiness and contempt, showed the delegations to the door. In such conditions it is of no surprise that the idea of a show of force had developed.

★ On October 27th the French army surrendered at Metz. Word of the surrender soon spread. The news didn't reach Paris until the 31st.

★ On October 31st the show of force became concrete.

That day a crowd of proletarians, regiments of the National Guard which had been won over to the revolution led by Blanquist militants, as well as rogue soldiers such as the famous *Tirailleurs de Belleville* led by Flourens, attacked *l'Hôtel de Ville*. The government was taken prisoner. But this show of force would soon amount to nothing. Militants who had been trying for weeks to get the movement's force to grow would now show themselves to be terrifyingly inconsistent. Once they were in control they started beating about the bush, freeing ministers and making them promise to resign and to leave their posts once the free *Commune* was elected. They had not at all realized that in the meantime the forces of counter-revolution were busy reorganizing and were encircling them. While revolutionaries and left republicans quibbled the *mobiles bretons* were taking position, aiming their guns at them and throwing them in prison.

The National Defense government consolidated the burial of this proletarian outburst by organizing a plebiscite¹⁹ on November 3rd which resulted in a majority of votes in favor of the government. It then organized municipal elections on November 5th and 7th which, despite a promise of amnesty, were accompanied by new arrests. So the bourgeoisie occupied the territory through elections. The tragedy of the whole story is that all revolutionary militants participated in this electoral circus, reinforcing the illusion that the struggle should take place in terms of law, while it is really on the grounds of force that it must be organized. Yet during these elections which on the whole signified massive support for the National Defense government there was massive abstention among the proletarians from the *red neighborhoods*²⁰. IWA and Blanquist militants had all (at least to the best of our knowledge) presented them-

¹⁹ The question was "Should the population maintain the powers of the National Defense government, yes or no?"

²⁰ There were 321,000 for the "yes", 54,000 for the "no" and... 200,000 abstentionists.

selves for office, giving full support for a practice which weakens the proletariat. These militants were not yet at a point of having a practice of opposition to all bourgeois governments regardless of their facade. As a result they contributed to spreading the poison of democratic mystification.

Starting on October 31st the tug of war between the National Defense government and the “reds” would become clearer and more intense. Once more the bourgeoisie was obliged to take measures to counter the proletarian pressure. The bourgeoisie, through its most extremist representatives, began to intensify its propaganda for a “better national defense”. But the new bourgeois faction born on September 4th was going to show its true face: for a growing number of proletarians it was no longer credible. Class antagonism appeared more and more clearly. The fog which had clouded the proletariat’s conscience and had prevented it from understanding this fundamental opposition deep down was beginning to lift. After the October 31st failure a process of radicalization and autonomization had begun to affirm itself here and there in different concrete expressions.

These ruptures were not easy to make. All of the weight of bourgeois ideology, patriotism, republicanism, the grand memories of the *French Revolution*, all of this weighed “*of a very heavy weight on the brains of the living*”²¹. This doesn’t mean that these weaknesses dominated completely. Breaches appeared in this counter-revolutionary block and, under the proletariat’s blows, they grew larger.

That was the state of things in this period when the watchword of “*Long live the Commune*” could be heard louder and louder. Proletarians shouted these words at bourgeois, frightening them as it recalled the memory of the proletarian struggle of 1789-1797 with its whiffs of rioting and vengeance. The riffraff uttered this cry. This same cry concentrated in itself the death of the movement through communalist ideology which *Proudhonian* politicians, republicans, and other democrats promoted. This was made easy in that its historical basis was 1793 in which the proletariat’s lack of clear-sightedness had led it onto the battlefields of a patriotic war against its class interests.

The whole tragedy of when the struggle is no longer in our own hands is summed up in this contradiction. Politicians were already salivating over the administrative entity which they were going to manage while proletarians cried out their desire to do away with misery. The denaturation of the communist watchword “*Long live the Commune*” by reformists could be summed up as “*Long live communalism!*”, that is to say long live socialism in one city,

²¹ Marx, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon.

federalism, the management of small units of capital, the exploitation of the submitted proletariat, disappeared into the people...

2.4 From October 31st 1870 to January 22nd 1871

From October 31st until the end of December the revolutionary movement and its active minorities underwent repression and had to fall back. The republican faction wasn't worn out yet. The proletariat was in great part still dominated by the force of nationalism and did not radically oppose the National Defense government.

The republic's objective was clear, contrary to the proletariat which was calling for the defense of Paris and no longer knew who its enemy was: massacre proletarians through war, confine revolutionary militants to Paris under surveillance and carry out the government's starvation policy. As Marx specified:

"Trochu found it much more important to keep the Reds out of the way in Paris, helped by his Breton bodyguards (who rendered him the same services as the Corsicans did for Louis Bonaparte), than to fight the Prussians. That is the real secret behind the defeats which took place as much in Paris as in the rest of France, wherever the bourgeoisie, in agreement with the majority of local authorities, applied the same principle."²²

Paris was virtually encircled by the German army. The National Defense government, while pretending to organize a break in this encirclement, organized the massacre in the following way:

★ The Champigny sortie took place from November 28th until December 2nd. It was stopped during the attack. General Ducrot asked for a twenty-four hour ceasefire "*so as to pick up the dead*". The German army took advantage of this moment to reinforce itself with over 30,000 more men. Then the cold began (-10 Celsius or 14 degrees Fahrenheit). The French soldiers had neither tents nor blankets and they ended up spending twenty-four hours in such conditions. Several of them died of cold. The German army attacked, leaving total disorder and carnage.

★ The Stains sortie took place on December 21st. It was made halfheartedly and without a plan. It was carried out in full daylight after having been sent out and exposed for two days. At the very moment when Ducrot

²² Marx in his December 4th 1870 letter to Kugelmann.

launched the troops the artillery, which was supposed to support the attacks, suddenly stopped firing. It was a massacre.

★ The Buzenval sortie on January 19th was perceived by proletarians as a clear attempt to knowingly send them to their deaths. High command had engaged twice the men necessary: 90,000 men along a 6 km front. What's more, there were no officers to guide the men nor was there any artillery... According to Ducrot "*Public opinion will not be satisfied until there are 10,000 National Guardsmen lying on the ground.*" There were 3,000 dead and wounded. Those who came back were exasperated and cried out "*Long live peace!*" which, in this context, simply meant "*down with war!*" These proletarians were ripe for revolt!

The following quotation clearly illustrates the bourgeoisie's position:

"Little by little, this cruel yet logical thought began to enter into the leaders' minds, that all of these turbulent people [National Guardsmen] would not calm down until some of them had been killed, and so, in order to cure Paris of its fever, it was necessary to take a few pints of blood."

Proletarians died massively because of these criminal sorties, not only because they were caught in the crossfire but also because of the cold, sickness (pneumonia, bronchitis, smallpox, typhoid fever, etc.) and hunger! Indeed there was a systematic starvation of proletarians through rationing and requisitions. Numerous militants denounced this. Arthur Arnould bore witness:

"After March 18th ... one could find huge quantities of flour, wheat, potatoes, rice, salt, meat, etc. Enough to feed the whole Parisian population. These provisions, despite the National Defense government's negligence, which had let a large part of it rot, were more than enough to feed the National Guard during the two months during which the Commune lasted."

Flourens hit the nail on the head:

"Moreover, Mr. Ferry does not requisition so as to distribute rations little by little as need sees fit. He does this in order to stock and lose them. The potatoes which he had found he let rot in his cellars before throwing them away. The cheese which he had found he let it be devoured by rats."

Like in every bourgeois war rationing and requisitions were organized so as to terrorize the proletariat through unending lines to get bread, meat and wood. Contrary to Arnould who spoke of negligence, we wish to emphasize that it was the bourgeoisie's deliberate policy.

In November famine appeared in Paris²³. This was just the start of the proletarians' suffering. One often had to choose between heating and eating... rats, when they weren't too expensive! Hunger, cold, the intensification of fighting against the Prussian troops, bombardment, suspicion toward this government which was showing more and more crudely that organizing the defense of Paris was not its main objective – all of these factors drove the proletariat to the forefront. Its recovery expressed its action on different structural levels:

★ There was intense revolutionary agitation among the National Guard which was more and more clearly falling apart. Its many regiments were changing their sights from fighting “*Prussiens de l'extérieur*” to fighting “*Prussiens de l'intérieur*”²⁴ as Bakunin wrote. He got to say it this way first. A few decades later other revolutionaries would express this more clearly, saying “*The enemy is in “your” own country. It is “your” own bourgeoisie*”. Nationalist poison had not disappeared but the questions being asked were becoming increasingly radical.

★ Rogue soldiers created their own battalions, inside which the social question was taking an ever growing importance while the national question was fading away.

★ During the month of January some arms factories were attacked.

Inside of revolutionary clubs preoccupations were evolving in the following way:

★ Throughout September and October there were confused demands for the dismissal of the National Defense government and the postponing of elections.

★ In November there were unending complaints about the high cost of living and rationing, denunciation of monopolies.

★ During December there was an increasingly strong tendency to hold secret meetings. The starvation of proletarians and the massacring of the National Guardsmen were denounced. Free housing was demanded.

²³ Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*: “From hour to hour the sting of hunger was increasing, and horse-flesh had become a delicacy. Dogs, cats, and rats were eagerly devoured. The women waited for hours in the cold and mud for a starvation allowance. For bread they got black grout, that tortured the stomach. Children died on their mothers' empty breasts.”

²⁴ From fighting “exterior Prussians” to fighting “interior Prussians”.

★ At the end of December in the Blanqui club, after deaths from hunger and cold, there was a public position in favor of stealing firewood and looting food.

★ Starting in early January: Instead of calling for resistance against the German army, proletarians began demanding the *Commune*... They were seeing the enemy more and more clearly as being in their own country. There was a violent denunciation of monopolists and speculators, those who wanted to commit “treason”, that is surrender, after having become rich:

“As long as they had food they could sell at ten times the price they had bought it they were all for “all out resistance”. Now those who have sold everything and who no longer have any profit to be made have started calling for surrender.”

Concerning the activity within the *Republican Vigilance Committees* we may note the following evolution:

★ There was an intense activity in autumn with discussions, complaints against the government of misery and a growing tendency to organize outside of government structures. Things were more and more focused on struggle.

★ Blanquist militants, under the cover of the Defense League, were going to act within these committees which the IWA militants had deserted since the end of November. The Defense League was a semi-secret armed organization especially robust in the 13th, 14th, and 20th *districts*. The time had decidedly come to organize secret action through which to impose the *Commune*.

In Paris the economy was at a standstill. Armistice was in the air.

We are going to take a break from our chronological presentation so as to say a few words about an insurrectionary attempt which more often than not goes unmentioned when it is not blatantly denied. However this is essential in the process of rupture and in this militant will to impose another direction. We know the January 6th 1871 red poster written by Vallès, Rigault, Tridon... in the name of the *Republican Vigilance Committees* and which was posted up throughout Paris, calling for the dismissal of “Judas’ gang” (that’s how the government was called in the suburbs).

The January 6th 1871 red poster

To the people of Paris

The delegates of the Twenty districts of Paris.

Has the government which on September 4th took on the task of national defense carried out its mission? No!

We are 500,000 combattants yet 200,000 Prussians hold us back! Whose responsibility is it if not that of those who govern us? Their only thought was to negotiate instead of forging cannons and making weapons.

They refused mass conscription.

They let Bonapartists alone and jailed republicans.

It wasn't until after two months had already gone by that they finally decided to react against the Prussians the day after October 31st. Because of their sluggishness, their indecision, their inertia, they have led us to the very edge of ruin: they knew neither how to administer nor how to fight yet they had all of the resources, food, and men at their disposal.

They were incapable of understanding that in a city under siege all those who support the struggle to save the nation deserve an equal share to receive nourishment. They were incapable of planning ahead. When there could have been abundance there was only misery. Many died of the cold and many were close to dying of hunger. Women suffered. Children languished and succumbed. Military leadership was worse still: sorties with no objective, murderous struggles with no results, repeated failures which could have discouraged even the bravest, and Paris was getting bombed. The government has shown us its true valor. It is killing us. If we are to save Paris we must do some quick decision making. The government only answers to the threat a reproach in public opinion. It declares that it will maintain ORDER, just like Bonaparte prior to Sedan.

If the men at l'Hôtel de Ville still have some patriotism left inside of them then their duty is to step down and to let the people of Paris take charge of their own deliverance. The municipality or the Commune, whatever may be its name, is the only hope for refuge, its last resort against death.

Any addition to or mixing with the current power would be nothing more than a bandage on a wooden leg, committing the same erring ways and the same disasters. The perpetuation of this regime can only lead to capitulation. We have learned from Metz and Rouen that capitulation not only and always means famine, but the ruin of everyone, ruin and shame. It means the National Guard army taken to Germany as prisoners, paraded in the streets, and insulted by foreigners. Commerce at a standstill. Industry at a standstill. Paris crushed by the amount of war reparations to be paid. That is what either incompetence or treason have prepared for us.

Can the Grand People of [17]89, who destroyed the Bastilles and turned over thrones, wait in inert despair, for the cold and hunger to turn its heart to ice while the enemy is counting its every beat, its last drop of blood? No!

The population of Paris will never accept this shame and misery. They know that there is still time, that decisive measures will allow for workers to live and for everyone to join the battle.

GENERAL REQUISITION – FREE RATIONS – MASSIVE ATTACK

The politics, strategy and administration of September 4th, in continuity with the Empire, have been judged.

MAKE WAY FOR THE PEOPLE! MAKE WAY FOR THE COMMUNE!

The delegates of the Twenty Districts of Paris

This poster was actually all that remained of an action of quite a different scale! The slogans “*Make way for the people! Make way for the Commune!*” which we can read at the bottom of the poster were to be taken literally. There was nothing vague about their intentions. They weren’t referring to something faraway. The poster was meant to simply announce the seizure of power by the *Communal Delegation of the Twenty Districts*. The National Guard Central Committee’s objective, or rather the objective of some of its most energetic militants, was to “*install the revolutionary Commune by revolutionary means*”. Here is what comes out of the minutes to the National Guard Central Committee’s December 30th meeting:

“The president [a Blanquist militant] declared there was no longer any need to discuss what had happened the day before, that the Commune was constituted and that the important thing was to work out what measures it should take so as to carry out its mission in a revolutionary way. He proposed the constitution of an implementation committee made up of a small number of resolute members. Some 11th and 18th district delegates supported the implementation committee saying that the time had come to act and that there was not a minute to lose. They claimed their men were permanently in possession of arms and ammunition, ready to do battle at all times. This was also the case in the clubs.”

It was Blanquist militants such as Tridon²⁵, Sapia, Ferré, Brideau, Caria, Duval who defended this necessity. But they ended up getting fooled by

²⁵ On October 9th 1870 this militant wrote “*There is Commune and Commune. Just like there is a pile of wood and a pile of wood. The revolutionary Commune which saved France and on*

smooth talkers such as Chassin, a moderate republican, who refused to take on the responsibility of a show of force.

“The red poster, though it was useless in the end, was nevertheless put up. It is my view that you cannot understand its real meaning without looking at the revolutionary context which has so far been ignored. One could have remarked as much. Outside of this context the poster seems curiously unexpected, untimely, doing no good for revolutionaries and provoking a violent reaction from the government.”

Indeed! The repression which came down in full force pushed the most radical militants who had not yet been arrested into hiding. It’s a pity that the Blanquist militants hadn’t been more consequential with their logic! This case allows us to see what happens when you stop right in the middle of an action.

The government had become aware of the danger of having armed battalions which placed themselves too openly on revolutionary grounds. In the beginning of December it arrested Flourens and disbanded the *Tirailleurs de Belleville*. On January 21st Flourens and different Blanquist leaders were busted out of the Mazas prison. This commando action was carried out by Cipriani, who had been Flourens’ comrade for years, at the head of the *Tirailleurs de Belleville* which had gathered despite the government’s order to disband. After Flourens’ death this irregular force changed their name to *Flourens’ avengers*.

“On the night of January 21st some National Guardsmen led by Blanquists freed the men who had been arrested during the October 31st events.”

On January 22nd there was a new attempt at seizing *l’Hôtel de Ville*. Battalions of insurgents positioned themselves. They were led by revolutionaries such as Rigault, Sapia, Duval, Louise Michel... Beside them a crowd was shouting “*Down with Trochu*” and “*Death to traitors*”. Gustave Chaudey²⁶, as the deputy mayor of Paris, received the delegates of the National Guard battalions who were demanding the *Commune*. At the very same moment *mobiles bretons* began to fire, leaving about thirty dead, including Sapia.

August 10th and in September (1792) founded the republic was not the result of a normal election, the bourgeois result of the herd heading to the ballot box. It was the result of a supreme convulsion, like lava out of a volcano.”

²⁶ He was one of the people who carried out Proudhon’s last will and testament. We defended “*an alliance of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie*” during the Geneva congress of the IWA in 1865. In a poster entitled “*To the voters of the 9th district*” put up during the municipal elections on November 5th 1870 he wrote “*Since September 4th I have not ceased, in conformity to the principles which I have always defended in my writing, to resist the idea of the Paris Commune (...)* On October 31st I struggled for three hours in the mayors’ chamber against the invaders of *l’Hôtel de Ville*.”

The proletariat had decided on the objective of taking *l'Hôtel de Ville* on January 22nd. But in doing so it exposed itself and was easily shot by the bourgeois troops which were massed together inside. These repressive blows momentarily weakened the revolutionary movement and let the National Guard Central Committee step in and propose itself as the organization centralizing all of the proletariat's struggles against the "*Prussiens de l'intérieur*".

Unfortunately this new bloody defeat had to happen before two lessons could be learned:

- ★ that the organization of actions has to be done secretly;

- ★ and, especially since the attempt at insurrection on December 30th which only produced the red poster, it was clearly time to prepare for a more radical insurrection, without illusions about parliament, without illusions about any republican bourgeois faction. This time the interior enemy was consciously grasped as an enemy.

In order to sum things up we can say that the general movement was becoming increasingly radical. It was more clearly distinguishing itself from the National Defense government. It pushed certain militants to give an insurrectional direction. The Blanquist militants' responsibility in the proletariat's violent actions had evolved since the August 14th events which had ended in a fiasco at la Villette. They were carried by the movement. It supported them. They felt it living inside of them. They consciously headed most of the proletarians' efforts to organize themselves as a force. They were in command of the "red" regiments of the National Guard and of battalions of rogue soldiers. They were frankly determined to have a violent confrontation with the State. They were preparing themselves and organizing it. They were present in most of the clubs, committees,... their influence in the suburbs was growing. What is tragic in this movement of rupture was the nearly total absence of IWA militants. They were incapable of seeing the evolution taking place. They continued to reorganize their sections and to make conciliatory propaganda, quite beneath the level of what was fermenting inside of the proletariat.

2.5 From January 22nd to March 18th 1871

The armistice was signed on January 28th. The cannons fell silent. Disarmament had officially begun. In reality proletarians weren't giving up their guns. They remained ready for battle. We can say that after this date the tensions between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat intensified. The proletariat's

past experiences had intensified its consciousness. Towards the end of January the bourgeoisie struck back in two different ways: General Vinoy²⁷ ordered the clubs to close and outlawed seventeen different newspapers. The bourgeoisie had used starvation in order to weaken proletarians' combat force. They now used the return of food so as to impose the armistice on proletarians as a convenient solution.

“We tell them that we had to give in because of the lack of food. But it's been two days now, since the first rumors of armistice, that food has magically reappeared because speculators can no longer count on its rarity.”

National elections were organized for February 8th. Paradoxically, at the same time that the proletariat was becoming more radicalized most revolutionary militants were getting caught up in parliamentarianism, thus reinforcing the criminal illusion that the electoral trampoline constitutes a viable means of struggle against the bourgeoisie. We could see the pathetic spectacle of the IWA's Parisian federation wallowing in the mud of this campaign to such a degree that they ended up presenting a list of candidates which they were sharing with openly bourgeois elements. We may note that despite this a small minority of IWA militants called for abstention, dictated by *“the dangers of sending IWA members to Bordeaux, to witness, even while protesting, the shame of a treaty like the one which the bourgeoisie is preparing us.”* It seems that at least part of this minority later abandoned this position arguing that *“the republic is at stake. We must defend it. The assembly [in this case the assembly was made up of several sections – from Grenelle, Vaurigard, les Ternes, Batignolles] was consulted and now declares by a strong majority that the International should take part in the electoral struggle.”*

During February and March 1871 the proletariat was becoming further radicalized and was acting more and more for itself. This movement towards autonomy was taking on greater proportions. We have found a whole series of important acts which show that the proletariat was tending more and more to act offensively, to take the initiative instead of simply reacting blow for blow. These actions were carried out by Blanquist militants as well as by National Guard regiments and even by soldiers of the regular army which was completely falling apart. Likewise in certain neighborhoods such as Belleville, Montmartre, La Villette in which proletarians demonstrated violently every day, attacking *sergents de ville* and officers while fraternizing with soldiers.

February 24th. Massive demonstrations took place this day in commemoration of the February 1848 revolution. National Guard battalions, *gardes mo-*

²⁷ As of January 22nd he was the head of staff of the Paris army, following Trochu.

biles de la Seine, and the regular army mixed and fraternized at *place de la Bastille*.

February 25th. These gatherings had become even bigger. In the afternoon the armed guard which was to intervene and put them down ended up on the side of the demonstrators.

February 26th. A *sergent de ville* had the gall to note down the regiment numbers of the National Guard deserters. He was promptly thrown into the Seine River where he drowned. On this same day National Guardsmen seized thirty-eight cannons at *place Wagram* and 300 rifles at the *gare de l'est* despite the fact that they were being guarded by soldiers. All of these were later left in the neighborhoods in which the cops no longer dared to go. In the evening four army battalions which were supposed to occupy *place de la Bastille* fraternized with the demonstrators and then withdrew. During the evening and early the next morning demonstrations were organized against the eventual presence of the German army. Thousands of National Guardsmen marched in the night, invading bourgeois neighborhoods. Montmartre had reached the boiling point.

February 27th. At four in the morning the *Sainte-Pelagie* prison was attacked in order to free comrades. Three million shells were seized at the *Pantheon* as well as in other military supply depots by National Guardsmen. That day the demonstration headed to the *Pépinière* army barracks, near the *gare Saint Lazare*, so as to call on sailors there to join the movement. Some sixty men joined them.

February 28th. This time it was the *gare de l'est* to which National Guardsmen paid a visit. They took great quantities of arms and ammunition. In Belleville four regiments which were to station there were obliged to leave. The officers couldn't take a step in the streets without being insulted and attacked. They were completely unable to stop the movement of fraternization between National Guardsmen and the inhabitants of the neighborhood. Concretely, the army deserted Belleville and Montmartre. This same day some fifty thousand National Guardsmen gathered together to decide to oppose with force the German army's possible entry into Paris. However, the Provisional Commission of the National Guard Federation, supported by the Committee of the twenty districts in collaboration with Vinoy, did all that they could to oppose a possible confrontation. Here is how the National Guard Central Committee expressed itself in a poster put up that same day.

“The National Guard, in unison with the army in cordon all around, will see to it that the enemy, isolated and cut off from our city, will be incapable of communicating with the entrenched parts of Paris.

The Central Committee calls all members of the National Guard to lend their support in carrying out the measures necessary for reaching this goal and for avoiding any confrontation which would lead to the immediate overthrow of the republic.”

March 2nd. Cannons were seized at the city walls in the twelfth district. Two thousand rifles were seized at *l’hôpital Saint Antoine*. The demonstrations continued at *place de la Bastille*.

March 3rd. Gunpowder disappeared from a bastion in the city walls of the twelfth *district*. Arms and ammunition went missing at the *Gobelins* police station. We may note that Vinoy later explained that he had refused to intervene because he was “*conscious of the weakness of his troops*”. This is a sign that the bourgeoisie was incapable of leading repression against all of these actions.

March 4th. Twenty-nine howitzers as well as ammunition were taken at la Villette. Cannons “*disappeared*” at la Chapelle. A detachment of the Republican Guard, an elite unit, especially hated by proletarians, was obliged to evacuate its premises at rue Mouffetard. This kind of action continued in the following days. For example, the Fourth sector of Vinoy’s army indicated that 1,592,637 shells had been stolen.

March 8th. An insurrectional sector was formed within the 9th sector at the *Barrière d’Italie*. Duval was named commander. He organized things independently of the National Guard Central Committee which he considered to be too moderate.

March 10th. Two laws were voted. One demanded the payment of bills of exchange and the other the payment of rent. A moratorium on rent had been pronounced during the siege. These decrees were looked upon as a provocation. Thousands of proletarians had been thrown onto the street, incapable of paying rent. Thousands of small business owners went bankrupt and remained with no perspectives. All these malcontents went on to join the steadily rising current of revolt.

All of these acts taken as a whole show that an insurrectional process was ripening and growing in size.

Now let’s get down to the famous story of the cannons which has caused so much ink to be spilled.

Official historiography maintains the simplistic version according to which the March 18th insurrection took place in response to a “provoca-

tion” by Versailles who tried to take back cannons that were under the control of the National Guard.

It’s important to know that there were negotiations going on between the government and the National Guard Central Committee for taking back the cannons. They had almost concluded their agreement. Even the 61st battalion of Montmartre, which was one of the most combative, had publically proposed to give the cannons back to the government. But that was without taking into account the proletariat’s reaction. So...

March 13th. This was the day when the army planned to take back the cannons which were on the *butte de Montmartre*. They brought horses to pull the cannons. But angry proletarians opposed them and prevented them from moving a thing. For the government this was a real fiasco.

March 16th. The same thing happened but this time at *place des Vosges*. Both horses and armed escorts had been brought along. The reaction was identical. Angry proletarians opposed them and prevented them from moving a thing. The next day demonstrations continued in the neighborhood. Barricades were set up. All of this was taking place the day before March 18th!

Regarding these two examples it should be noted that the National Guard Central Committee, which we will go on about further, played no role whatsoever in the reactions against the attempted removal of the cannons. On the contrary.

But before going further in the course of events of those days such as on March 18th we have to examine a few important elements such as:

1. The decomposition of the army.
2. An analysis of what the National Guard Central Committee was and of the important role it played in the proletariat’s ideological and practical disarmament.
3. The strategy of the bourgeois faction being led by Thiers.

1. The state of the regular army

Let’s back up a little. This army was completely falling apart. We have already seen how the government was obliged to evacuate entire barracks and how officers were being attacked and insulted. One of the army’s first principles was no longer being respected: keep the soldiers in their barracks and away from the rest of the population. Moreover the *maréchal de Castellane*’s instructions on March 18th 1858 were very precise about this:

*“Never must troops be uncertain against a riot... [They] must never allow themselves to be approached by a column of rioters, by women and children; hesitation by infantry in opening fire can compromise it and cause it to be disarmed. At 200 paces the rioters must be warned to stop; if they disobey, once the summations have been made... fire must be opened immediately. Women and children... are the vanguard of the enemy and must be treated as such.”*²⁸

Soldiers were bivouacking in the streets and in public parks. They stayed in wooden shacks set up in city squares. Others received tickets which allowed them to be billeted on the local inhabitants. This could only favor movements of fraternization. But it went even further. On March 9th battalions of *gardes mobiles* mutinied, arrested their officers and took them to the National Guard Central Committee... which promptly released them!

This is why Vinoy wanted to get the troops out of Paris as quickly as possible. As leaving by train would take too long he decided during the month of March to organize the departure by foot of three columns for Orléans. But many men were missing when it was time to go. In the meanwhile reinforcements, apparently more reliable, were arriving from different parts of the country. But no preparation had been made to accommodate them. This was a problem. But it coincided with the problem of food rations which, as of March, had diminished. Many men fell sick. There are references to as many as 40,000 sick and wounded. The climate necessary to maintain discipline had ceased to exist. This was reinforced by the fact that new officers possessed neither the capacity nor the will to put an end to the indiscipline, apathy, and discouragement which was paralyzing the army more and more.

2. The birth of the National Guard Central Committee

The National Guard was increasingly escaping the State's control. Many proletarians who had enrolled in the National Guard refused military discipline, no longer obeyed orders given by officers, rejected the objectives decided by the State... More and more often they transformed their situation. They were proletarians beneath their uniforms and they armed themselves against the State, against the bourgeois army, and defended their own interests. They recognized themselves more and more as proletarians, defining their own class needs. They were no longer fighting other proletarians but instead their class enemy, the bourgeoisie and its program for restoring capitalist order. In doing

²⁸ Quoted in *The War Against Paris* by Robert Tombs.

so they seriously upset this repressive arm of the State. Entire National Guard battalions were won over to the revolution.

The government was trying to find a way to get rid of this National Guard, full of indiscipline and insubordination. On February 15th it decided to suspend their pay except for the poorest among them. This measure increased the National Guardsmen's hatred for the government. So on the same day they decided to "*federate*" themselves, that is, to give themselves a new leadership, clearly distinct from that of the government. This "Federation" came as a response to the need to regroup and to centralize the National Guard battalions who refused the armistice, who wanted to continue the war, and above all who were radically opposed to the government. So at first this federation was an expression of a process of rupture, an attempt at the autonomous organization of the forces who refused the government's logic, an attempt to overthrow the National Guard's leadership.

This was unacceptable for the bourgeoisie. It was dangerous. Such a step opened the door to the constitution of a proletarian army. It could not allow this initiative to run the risk of undermining its control of the situation and changing the balance of powers in the proletariat's favor.

These acts demonstrated an undeniably strong affirmation of the proletarian movement. But as we'll also see, this movement wasn't strong enough to rid itself of the State's structures, to organize itself autonomously, to give itself a clearly revolutionary direction.

The lack of well-defined perspectives, the difficulty for the revolutionary minority to structure itself around a clear revolutionary program led the proletariat to progressively leave the terrain of the struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie during its combat against the Versailles army. Instead it came to embrace a terrain foreign to its interests: the defense of Paris, the support for the Commune government against the Versailles who were seen as traitors to the nation. This opposition brought them to defend one bourgeois faction against another one. This ambiguity brought an end to the process of decomposition which the National Guard had been undergoing. The ruptures with bourgeois discipline were no longer making way towards putting an end to the bourgeoisie's armed body. On the contrary, rather than result in the constitution of a new armed force, rid of bourgeois discipline, military logic, hierarchy, the proletariat ended up submitting to the direction of the National Guard Central Committee which had just been put together. The National Guard Central Committee's project was to reform and thus reinforce the armed forces.

As Marx said:

“The working class cannot content itself with taking the State apparatus as such and making it functions for its own use.”

The bourgeois army is not to be occupied or diverted. It is to be destroyed once and for all. This is the case for the army just as it is for all of the State’s other components. The Commune government would make its prerogative out of the illusion that one could simply divert the bourgeois State apparatus and use it as a means to different ends.

At the end of February the National Guard Central Committee was established (officially ratified on March 3rd). Its establishment superseded the process of rupture by installing a leadership which would do whatever it could in order to invert that process. From the very start this organism was absolutely not a proletarian one and it did its best to prevent the constitution of the proletariat as a force.

It especially went about its task in the following way: The class struggle took place within the National Guard, the fracture between proletarian ruptures and bourgeois reformist aims. This distinction operated through attitude, indiscipline, insubordination, revolt. It made up a real process of refining of proletarian forces. This expressed itself geographically in the fact that the real forces of the proletariat were in the suburbs, just as much among the rogue soldiers as among the National Guard regiments which had come over to the side of the revolution. Bourgeois historiography presents insurgent Paris as a homogeneous entity, unanimously grouped together behind the Commune government, without class borders and indivisible in its patriotic fervor. But reality was completely different. The National Guard Central Committee did its best to appear to be an emanation of the whole of the National Guard so as to avoid the danger of a clearer delimitation between the classes and to present the revolutionary expressions as simply one variety of expressions among the many others.

The bourgeoisie had to both stop and to recuperate this rupture with social consensus. It did so by creating an organism to lead the National Guard Federation. In a nutshell, it was all about eliminating, through control, the revolution among the National Guard ranks.

These proletarian forces were lacking in both vigilance and clarity. They were going to sway between the revolution which implied assuming its direction outside and against the National Guard Central Committee and the support for this very committee.

On February 28th the Parisian IWA federation and the embryo of the future National Guard Central Committee appealed for calm as they faced the agita-

tion of proletarians waiting for the imminent occupation of Paris by the Germany army:

“The present members believe it is their duty to declare that in their view any attack would serve to expose the people to the blows of the revolution’s enemies, German or French monarchists, who would drown social demands in a river of blood.”

We can see that even the best Blanquist or IWA militants lacked the strength to free themselves from their republican false friends whom they mixed with in the National Guard Central Committee. Although they had so far been on the side of revolution, quite a number of them would team up with well-known reformists who mostly came from the republican breeding grounds but exhibited a very radical visage. Together they would form the National Guard Central Committee which would play an important role in the containment of the movement, in imposing a reformist framework, in disarming the proletariat. This fact is symptomatic of the movement’s hesitation, prevarication and weaknesses despite all of its combativity.

As a result of these weaknesses the democratic and parliamentarian bourgeoisie was able to impose its disorganizing structures and ideologies on the proletariat. These were completely foreign to its being. In that many militants declared themselves to be *republicans*, they defined a common space in which the revolutionary movement ended up negotiating with the left faction of the bourgeoisie. The decisions which they were negotiating would turn out to be disastrous for the movement. The republicanism within the proletariat made for an open door for bourgeois democrats well positioned on the left. They would progressively take over the movement’s leadership so as to better undermine it. It was this particular bourgeois ideology, this material force “inside” of the movement, which was the most harmful in that it was the most efficient in the disorganization in every aspect of our struggle.

The creation of the National Guard Central Committee constituted *de facto* a new bourgeois faction. It was made up of left-wing republicans, IWA members, Blanquists... who were co-opted because their aptitude at giving a pseudo-revolutionary coherence to this faction. This faction never ceased wanting to build a political alternative, a new government, bringing the struggle into the arena of parliament.

The revolutionaries’ interest for this National Guard Central Committee expressed their will to give the proletariat an organ through which to centralize its struggles. This was truly a dire necessity at the time. But their great error was to believe the National Guard Central Committee was going to play that role. Their participation showed their lack of rupture with republican ide-

ology. The creation of the National Guard Central Committee was the definitive expression of republican victory, of legality, of popular legitimacy, of parliamentarianism, of patriotism.

The process of the formation of the National Guard Central Committee in February and March 1871 expressed this class contradiction very well. The proletariat needed to centralize its strength within a red guard and the bourgeoisie needed to disorganize this strength by structuring it into a bourgeois army painted red.

As tensions intensified we would later see:

The revolutionary minority distinguished itself from the practice of this reformism in organizing the insurrection in February and March outside of the National Guard Central Committee. In April they organized the extension of the struggle.

This revolutionary minority represented a proletarian tendency within this National Guard Central Committee but it lacked the strength to split away from the bourgeois present within it and to break with it.

3. Strategy of the bourgeois faction led by Thiers

The National Defense government's capacity to adapt to the evolution of the struggle was sufficient for it to get beyond its wait-and-see policy, its passivity. At the same time it was able to avoid direct confrontation with the proletariat which the Emperor's supporters were calling for. At this stage the government no longer knew which regiments it could count on. Consequently any direct confrontation could very well have had disastrous results. From that point on the government proceeded in a completely different way. In early March it prepared its retreat to Versailles. It evacuated the regiments which were the least contaminated by defeatism out of Paris. In the rest of the country it disarmed the less reliable regiments and imprisoned the agitators. The regiments which supported the Empire were also moved away from Paris. The monarchist faction cried out against this initiative. But it ended up backing the Thiers faction which turned out to be the only one capable of getting rid of the reds, the riffraff, once and for all!

The bourgeoisie started feeling confident again. At this time the faction around Thiers, the most lucid, had a clearer vision of the outcome of the class struggle than the proletariat itself. All throughout this social tug of war, since August 1870, the revolutionary movement had not been strong enough to identify its own objectives and to define its enemies. The bourgeoisie, despite

the clashes between the different factions which composed it, never forgot where the real danger lay, much more than the presence of Prussian troops at the gates of Paris, it was the proletariat in arms.

During all of these events the Thiers faction had maneuvered cleverly:

★ In August they supported, and so hid behind, the monarchist members of parliament when it was time to put an end to revolt through war.

★ In September they contained the proletariat's destructive eruption through a policy of change in the government.

★ During all of the fall and winter they played the patriotism card and sent hard to control proletarians off to be massacred.

★ At last in March they rejected the conciliatory solution proposed by the National Guard Central Committee as well as the monarchist faction's haste. They organized the retreat to Versailles. All along they were clearly conscious of the inevitable character of the coming class confrontation. Their strategy was to put off the confrontation until they were sure they could win. They left Paris so as to reconquer Paris!

Thus the government had been planning its withdrawal to Versailles since March. It was preparing and above all deciding upon the time and the place of the coming confrontation with the proletariat in arms. The Thiers faction possessed a political clarity and a great capacity for anticipation which would later assure its victory. Indeed, despite the fact that the population was becoming increasingly proletarianized and coming to join the revolutionary movement, despite the fact the government had lost all of its credit in their eyes, despite the fact that the army was less and less reliable and disciplined, the Thiers faction knew how to prepare the conditions for the confrontation: sorting through and selecting battalions, choosing withdrawal, reorganizing the army, preparing for the final attack, etc. Thiers knew that the level of class against class confrontation was going to reach beyond any other so far. On January 23rd Bismarck himself advised Jules Favre:

“Provoke a riot while you still have an army to put it down with.”

On March 17th, the day before its show of force, the government arrested Blanqui. Its plan was the military occupation of the city. Its objective was to disarm the city, especially the red neighborhoods which posed a constant threat. On September 4th, October 8th, October 31st, etc. the greatest show of proletarian strength had come from these neighborhoods towards *l'Hôtel de Ville*.

Choppin, the assistant police prefect, spent that night making lists of National Guard Central Committee members and of the most well-known militants who were to be arrested at the same time as the cannons were being seized at Montmartre. Army columns were to advance through the city followed by cops who were to arrest whoever was on the lists.

On the eve of March 18th the bourgeoisie, more precisely the Thiers faction, was preparing for a merciless armed confrontation. Meanwhile, the left-wing faction around the National Guard Central Committee was quite ready to avoid an insurrection. This explains how the National Guard Central Committee had officially proposed to return the cannons, “*on condition that we find a way not to hurt the National Guardsmen’s feelings*” (Arthur Arnould). He emphasized “*we couldn’t take the spirit of conciliation further.*” We have already seen what would happen on March 13th and 16th!



III. Victory and defeat of the insurrectionary movement

3.1 March 18th 1871

We have seen above how the proletariat affirmed its strength within different structures despite the government's attempt to impose social peace, despite the National Guard Central Committee's pacifism. Historiography depicts these events as the fruit of pure spontaneity. Contrary to this vision the March 18th events did not come out of nowhere like a roar of thunder on an otherwise sunny day. The bourgeoisie could not stand the proletariat's growing autonomy nor the fact that it was armed. It also could not stand the complete disorganization of commerce and industry. The proletariat no longer wanted to put up with misery, hunger, and cold... the enemy classes were going to confront one another.

During the night of March 17th to 18th the government had surrounded certain strategic points such as *Montmartre*, the *Buttes-Chaumont*, and the *place Puebla* (in *Belleville*), as well as the *place des Vosges* so as to stock the cannons. Columns of soldiers were on the move throughout Paris. Some National Guardsmen who wanted to resist were killed. But the army did not dispose of the material means to move the cannons. It was lacking in both horses and time. The officers were rejoicing. They sent a victory declaration to the newspapers. They locked up a few soldiers who wanted to fraternize with the National Guardsmen who had come to prevent the removal of the cannons. The clock was ticking.

In the early morning word got out of what was going on. There was an immediate reaction. The proletariat rose up and drove back this attack. We would like to emphasize the presence of women and children in this process. Women were the first to react. They went with their children to scold the soldiers standing guard. They called out to them, mixed with them, offered them something to eat and drink. There were several cases of disobedience among the soldiers despite their officers' threats. Finally, touched as they were by this show of humanity, the soldiers refused to obey the order to open fire. Even more, two officers, two perfect scoundrels, General Clément Thomas and General Lecomte were stopped and then shot without any form of judicial quibbling.

Soon barricades arose in the working class neighborhoods. Battalions coming down from the suburbs started an offensive movement to take back the strategic positions. Just as in Petrograd in 1917 and in Barcelona in 1936, the occupation of the city's strategic positions was the prime objective.

The proletarian reaction occurred outside of the National Guard Central Committee. Revolutionaries, whether or not they were members of the National Guard Central Committee, led their battalions on their own initiative and positioned themselves to face Thiers' soldiers. Da Costa emphasized:

“During the entire morning the neighborhoods rose up and were driven on by either the Vigilance committee or else by determined battalion commanders or even by Central Committee members. They acted without any preliminary agreement, without any orders, and on their own initiative.”

The movement of fraternization among proletarians who were nevertheless enrolled in different uniforms was so strong that combat was very rare. This fraternization was the result of the process of the army's ongoing ruin which had begun in February if not earlier. This condition was furthered by the pressure of the events.

The bourgeoisie was conscious of this process. It had to test its forces in order to determine which of them it could still rely on. The whole Montmartre cannon affair had *de facto* allowed for a separation between the regiments which remained loyal from those who had gone over to the side of the revolution.

Colonel Paturel managed to bring two convoys as he left *Moulin de la Galette*. However Lecompte's column's attempt to remove cannons turned into a fiasco. The government had some idea of the outcome of this show of force but was nevertheless greatly surprised by the proletariat's retaliation. Especially when it observed the battalions coming from workers' suburbs and discovered their capacity to mobilize on their own initiative without any orders from the National Guard Central Committee and to occupy strategic positions in order to face Thiers' troops and to hinder their movement. The government was also surprised by the intensity of defeatism within the army.

It's important to emphasize that this uprising was not just a quick explosion in response to the blow dealt by the enemy. Its success was notably a result of the continuity given by revolutionary militants to organizing within the Vigilance committee, clubs, “red” battalions within the National Guard, rogue soldiers and other proletarian associations. This was the result of the activity of militants, whether or not they were Blanquists, IWA members or “party-less”, whether or not they were in the National Guard Central Committee. They were able to give a revolutionary direction and to bring multiple militant energies together in action.

Its success can be explained by all of the conspirational and insurrectional activity that certain Blanquist militants had organized in continuity with the

(unfortunate) attempts of January 6th and 22nd so as to form a revolutionary army. A few years later Eudes bore witness:

“On March 10th I found him [Duval] already acting as the leader of the 13th légion. He and I agreed then concerning our two légions (I was then head of the 20th) which were joined by the 14th légion led by Henry and the 15th led by a committee headed by Chauvière, the 18th which was in the hands of the Montmartre Vigilance committee which was presided by Ferré, as well as a few 11th and 19th battalions. We were directly at the head of all of this without having to go through the National Guard Central Committee which wasn’t able to offer the necessary guarantees.

We divided up into two commands, one on the left bank under Duval’s orders and one on the right bank under mine. The fast pace of the chain of events prevented the organization of a revolutionary army. All we could do on March 18th was to take the préfecture de police (Duval and the 13th légion) and l’Hôtel de Ville (the 20th légion and I).”

During this day Duval and the 13th and 15th district troops came up from the southern neighborhoods spurred on not by the National Guard Central Committee but by the revolution. Early in the morning a telegram reported to Thiers and his ministers that *“in the 13th district cannons are firing blanks so as to call for a riot”*. About fifteen cannons were set up around the city hall pointing towards the avenues. Young proletarians dug trenches and set up barricades. The cops from the police stations were arrested and taken to prison. During the afternoon Duval and his men went on to attack, taking over the *gare d’Orléans*, the *Jardin des Plantes*, and the *préfecture de police* at 8 pm. A large part of the left bank was already in their hands. Around 3 pm they headed for *l’Hôtel de Ville* which they saw as their next objective. Simultaneously Eudes was heading down from the north with the proletarians of Belleville on his own initiative. This was also the case for Varlin who was rounding up Batignolles IWA members. So there was a structured and efficient class force, a combativity which would inevitably lead to a confrontation with the National Guard Central Committee.

The balance sheet which these revolutionaries had drawn from their past experiences, their failures, their militant activity over the last years and especially over the last months, all of this goes to show that they were consciously preparing for confrontation and that they were contributing to the organization of the proletariat as a force. Militants such as Eudes, Duval, Henry, Chauvière were getting ready for the confrontation which they knew was inevitable. This was the complete opposite of the National Guard Central Committee, which *“wasn’t able to offer the necessary guarantees”* – and for a very good reason!

Since the end of February these militants had been busy chasing away cops and customs officers, attacking arms depots, expropriating cannons, giving themselves the means to resist as they had done in the 13th district before March 18th. This is how these militants became subjects of their and our history. They were actors in the revolution. It was the insurrectionary movement's strength which was able to impose the task of the insurrection's preparation on the clearest militants.

The weakness laid in the fact that although these militants were able to act in a revolutionary way despite the fact that they belonged to the National Guard Central Committee at no point did they push more consequently towards a break with it. We'll come back to this point further along in the text.

The National Guard Central Committee was lagging behind as the events unfolded, nearly inexistent. Yet it was going to reap the benefits of this proletarian uprising and undermine all attempts to develop the struggle's extension. As the National Guard Central Committee took over it imposed a coherent direction which emphasized stalling although this was precisely the moment when it was urgent to extend the movement or else see the death of the revolution! The question was: given that a rapid victory appeared to be a certitude... why not hunt down the beast which had gone to seek refuge in Versailles?

The bourgeoisie wasn't wasting time. That night the government and long columns of *gendarmes* and soldiers (either loyal to the government or undecided) headed all the way to Versailles without a hitch. On March 19th Jules Favre wrote:

"The government only gave up Paris in order to preserve the army. But the rioting crowd should take heed, if the Assemblée nationale is in Versailles it is its plan to return [to Paris] in order to put down the riot and to fight it resolutely."

The revolutionary forces did not perceive how crucial this moment was. The reorganization of bourgeois forces was able to go about with hardly any problems. For the bourgeoisie the most important thing was to prevent the revolution from further corrupting its armed forces. So it eliminated the contact between the still undecided forces and those which had clearly been won over to the revolution. This retreat was a small price to pay in order to assure the final victory. The retreat also left the revolutionary strongholds isolated.

In order to survive a struggle must develop in the sense that it must break with different aspects of this society of misery and death, but also in the sense that it must spread geographically. In this case it was the isolation of the proletariat in Paris which prevented the possibility of developing revolutionary

defeatism, of making propaganda for the undecided troops, of getting in contact with the demoralized soldiers, of targeting their officers who, at that time, were able to parade around again in Versailles without fear of being assaulted and insulted.

What's more, the isolation of the proletariat's struggle came to be identified with the defense of Paris, "*abandoned*" to the Prussians. The bourgeois forces which remained in Paris found it easy to plunge the insurrectionary movement into the defense of the "free city". "Defend Paris" and "Manage the victory" would be the medium through which to drown the insurgent proletariat in a struggle which was no longer its own, leaving the proletarians of the suburbs feeling alone and powerless. Two questions came to play. How could Paris be further isolated? And even more, how could the red neighborhoods be further isolated within Paris?

This situation made for quite a lot of confusion. At first the revolutionary movement in Paris had expressed itself under the banner of the defense of France, then of Paris, but in January and February it became clear that for a growing number of proletarians the enemy was in Paris itself. But with the repolarization of the situation this clarity became less marked. Who was the enemy now? Was it Thiers and his clique entrenched in Versailles, Bismarck and his troops encircling Paris, or would one have to flush it out from hiding within Paris?

Those who condemned Thiers for abandoning Paris to the Prussians had found a card to play which they had not been expecting. By playing this card they were able to bring the proletariat to struggle alongside the *Commune government*. Defending Paris was no longer necessarily defending the revolution. On the contrary... it was in the name of "*saving Paris*" that the proletarian struggle was deviated from its class against class confrontation and bogged down in the problems related to the management "*of victory*". The myth of the "free city" led the struggle down the slippery path from the defense of the revolution to the defense of a territory in which the proletarian strongholds of the red neighborhoods were but a minority. This repolarization of the situation allowed for the transformation of the class war into a bourgeois war.

Today we can say that it was a serious mistake to have let the enemy leave, to have not pursued it so as to continue to weaken it and organize its definitive collapse. Not only was it a serious mistake to let the enemy reorganize but also to have let the movement get confined to Paris. For the bourgeoisie it was important to organize the counter-revolution while saving what it was still possible to save, by regrouping the forces which were still available and by preparing them to take back the city with a vengeance. What was also im-

portant was to cut off the revolution from any possibility for extension, from any other tendencies to develop the revolution. It was a question of isolating it, tiring it out, and then, later, crushing it.

3.2 March 19th to 26th

For over a year proletarians had been told again and again that their enemies were the Prussians. Despite this brainwashing the proletarian movement turned against “its own” officers, “its own” bourgeois and so concretely attacked nationalism. Under the banner of nationalism one is submitted to the nation, an entity ignorant of class divisions in which the proletariat is nothing but labor force or cannon fodder. As one of its factions had headed to Versailles the bourgeoisie now introduced new subterfuges. It redistributed the roles between Paris and Versailles along with its new division of tasks between the Commune government and the Thiers government catching the proletariat in a trap. Thus after March 19th other aspects, complementary to the counter-revolution, played a role in relaying nationalism: a lack of rupture with the bourgeois left, politicism, parliamentarianism, republicanism.

The proletariat was incapable of making the insurrectionary qualitative leap which would have constituted the crushing of the Versailles vermin and would have put an end to its hesitation, its delegation of power, its submission to legalism. The importance of those limits led the insurrectional movement to let the National Guard Central Committee decide its fate. While most of the forces within the National Guard Central Committee sought to confine themselves to the management of daily affairs in Paris and to the preparation of elections there was nevertheless one faction which, pushed by the force of the revolution, called for marching on Versailles and doing away with the *Assemblée nationale*.

It was a critical moment and the time had come for action. On one side the army was busy withdrawing back to Versailles and was completely falling apart. On the other side there were thousands of proletarians who were ready at a moment's notice to head for Versailles in order to fight the enemy. This mobilization was so great that it very nearly completely destabilized the bourgeoisie, preventing its reorganization and so changing the balance of forces. Yet the weakness of the movement expressed itself in that thousands of these proletarians left things up to the authority of the National Guard Central Committee: masses of them came and signed up as volunteers at *l'Hôtel de Ville*, then they waited... for the National Guard Central Committee to take charge of the counterattack and make the necessary decisions so as to act vigorously.

But the latter had no such intentions. It even made a show of honor out of imposing a political solution and giving the responsibility for the events to come to a government which would be elected by universal suffrage. The National Guard Central Committee went on to put all of its energy into organizing elections and so in this way did all that it could to set up mechanisms by which to smother the movement and to pacify the situation. In this respect it fully dedicated itself to its counter-revolutionary function. The bubbling revolutionary energy within it would never be capable of giving itself another direction.

The National Guard Central Committee became the inevitable entity through which to decide on the movement's future and it occupied the forefront in the coming events. This was the case for a variety of reasons: the force of legalism, the proletariat's incapacity to assume an insurrectionary qualitative leap to the point of crushing the Versailles vermin, the lack of clarity and decision among the movement's most radical militants such as Eudes and Duval.

These militants were to find themselves out on a limb. Their participation in the National Guard Central Committee gave it the credibility it needed to nab the reins of the movement. The National Guard Central Committee never had any intention of supporting the actions they proposed. They were going to tire themselves out trying to change the National Guard Central Committee's decisions while at the same time the latter saw its pretention of being the movement's mouthpiece reinforced.

While carrying on with their activity all throughout March 18th, militants such as Duval, Eudes, Brunel and other Blanquists who participated in the National Guard Central Committee, proposed to march on Versailles. Duval:

“Citizens, we have just been told that most of the members of the government are still in Paris. In the 1st and 2nd districts resistance is being organized. Soldiers are leaving for Versailles. We have to take action quickly, take ministers hostage, disperse hostile battalions, prevent the enemy from leaving.”

Other militants who did not participate in the National Guard Central Committee such as Ferré and Jaclard also called for this sortie. But they were only repeating the same error they had committed during the arrest of General Chanzy on March 18th: instead of relying on the most combative proletarians who didn't give a damn about legalistic quibbling they left things up to the authority of the so-called revolutionary National Guard Central Committee.

The only acts which leaned in that direction were assumed by Jean Allemane. As early as March 19th he went to Versailles with other comrades and prepared an attack plan which he later submitted to Billoray (member of the IWA, National Guard Central Committee, as well as the future Commune government) on the 22nd. Then he went back to plotting. But Billoray decided to ignore this project. In doing so he compromised both the revolution's development and the very lives of the militants involved in this revolutionary activity. This opposition reveals the practical class gap existing between those who dared to take risks without hesitation in order to respond to the struggle's needs and those who were simply busy preparing the democratic and murderous circus.

Jean Allemane's attempt to spread revolutionary defeatism in Versailles fully responded to the necessities and the possibilities of the development of the struggle at that time. Indeed, as we previously emphasized, the troops were not yet reliable: soldiers insulted their officers, many of them left to join Paris, those who remained owed their obedience to their fear of the *gendarmes*. The general feeling among the soldiers was sympathy for what was going on in Paris.

What was the National Guard Central Committee doing? It was managing affairs of State. In order to do this it was busy handing out posts in the government, formal responsibilities, entirely involved in the bourgeois preoccupation of managing the Republic's resources. Comrades such as Eudes found themselves promoted to "minister of war", Duval and Rigault "ministers of the *préfecture de police*", Varlin and Jourde "ministers of Finance"... In the meantime counter-revolution was being organized. It scoffed at so much indecision. Even a bourgeois bastard like Vinoy (head of the Versailles troops until April 14th) realized the proletariat's "military" error which he assimilated with the National Guard Central Committee:

"The National Guard Central Committee committed a great and irreparable mistake in not pursuing its advantages, in abstaining from immediately marching on Versailles."

Another grave error was not occupying *Mont-Valérien* right away. This was a military stronghold situated in the west of Paris. It was strategically important because its height allowed it to oversee the entire city. The Versailles troops took it over in the night of March 19th to 20th.

Marx told of the National Guard Central Committee's counter-revolutionary activity:

“It would seem that the Parisians have got the worst of it. It is their fault. But it is in fact their fault out of an excess of honesty. The National Guard Central Committee and later the Commune would leave that mean little runt Thiers all the time that he needed to concentrate enemy forces:

1/ First of all because they are filled with the mad notion of not setting off civil war, as if Thiers hadn't already begun it by trying to disarm Paris by force, as if the Assemblée Nationale, assembled only to decide on war or peace with Prussia, had not also declared war on the République?

2/ Because they didn't want for there to be the least bit of doubt that they had not seized power they lost precious time because of the Commune's election, the organization of which was taking up a lot of time when it was precisely the moment for going directly to Versailles after the defeat of the reactionaries in Paris.”

While counter-revolution was reorganizing itself in Versailles the National Guard Central Committee was splitting hairs and holding back, channeling revolutionary energy into the management of “daily business”. Time was more precious than ever. The revolution could not wait. Its stoppage, even momentary, meant its death. The National Guard Central Committee's respect for legality was so strong that when the elected officials of Paris asked them to leave *l'Hôtel de ville*, arguing that they had not been elected, they consented. Negotiations went on for two days ending in an agreement in the early morning of March 20th which stipulated that *“at four o'clock in the morning Varlin and the other members of the National Guard Central Committee consented to evacuate l'Hôtel de Ville, the ministries, the town halls, all of the administrative buildings and to give them back to the Municipality”*. The revolution's force could still be felt as this compromise was rejected by *“Vigilance committees which ordered the National Guard Central Committee to pursue its occupation of l'Hôtel de Ville until the elections. Varlin's efforts were in vain”*. Yet this does show that Varlin's efforts as well as those of other National Guard Central Committee members such as Moreau and Jourde... contributed to keeping proletarians centered on this rubbish instead of acting against Versailles. De facto, not acting against Versailles amounted to letting the counter-revolution have free reign to reorganize itself by getting a disciplined army back on its feet, submitted and isolated from the proletariat in Paris, and prepare the coming massacre.

Management also meant submission to the power of money. The Bank of France contained 3 billion francs of wealth, of which about 300 million was in cash. It was guarded by only a few battalions of National Guardsmen loyal to Versailles. It was only logical that a militant like Varlin should propose to take

this war treasure which was lying within reach. In regards to this question a police report was precise:

“During the second meeting of the National Guard Central Committee being held at l’Hôtel de Ville on March 19th 1871 Varlin proposed to take over the Bank of France after the National Guardsmen received their pay late. This project was ruled out, ending in favor of a loan of two million.”

The National Guard Central Committee crouched down before this institution. It went so far as to beg a few miserable alms with which to finance the pay for the *Fédérés* as well as the daily affairs of State administration.

Money’s strength was so great that it had reduced revolutionary instinct to nothing. Democratic mechanisms like voting, submission to the majority, respect for legality had already weakened it. Indispensable (and relatively simple) tasks for the struggles’ development were circumvented and instead ended in simply begging to money’s power. Certain revolutionaries such as Varlin were absorbed by all of these castrating mechanisms. A lack of clarity, of rupture, of determination had left them paralyzed and immersed in this movement of capital’s reform.

Nevertheless the Bank of France could have been used as a war chest in this moment of social instability. Obviously you cannot buy revolution and there’s nothing mercantile about the criteria for its extension. Yet money remains the sinews of war. The proletariat should have tried preventing the Thiers faction from benefiting from this indispensable logistic support which it used to help reorganize itself.

This is how the National Guard Central Committee became increasingly important in the hours and days to come. The most radical elements making up the opposition which had shown itself as of March 19th were quickly wiped out and coopted into the management of the bourgeois necessities of the hour. The National Guard Central Committee came to impose itself more and more as the unavoidable authority and the official spokesman with the elected officials of Paris, Versailles and the German army. As Da Costa put it:

“It recognizes both the Assemblée and Thiers’ government on the double condition that the program of Parisian demands be accepted and that no harm be done to the République which resulted from the pacifistic revolution of September 4th 1870.”

The National Guard Central Committee made a show of its force and its representativity through a series of acts such as:

★ On March 19th the National Guard Central Committee had the General Chanzy released. He had been taken prisoner the day before by Duval who wished to use him as a hostage. Many proletarians preferred shooting him as they had General Clément and General Thomas.

★ On that same day the National Guard Central Committee upheld the liberty of the press after the occupation of different bourgeois newspapers by proletarians who had come to put an end to their counter-revolutionary propaganda.

★ On March 21st the German army was worried about the risk of revolution. The National Guard Central Committee responded:

“The revolution accomplished in Paris by the National Guard Central Committee is of an essentially municipal character and is in no way aggressive towards the German armies.”

The National Guard Central Committee took a number of measures on March 21st which were quite popular, especially with the poorest. But in doing so it did nothing more than ratify a situation which it could not have opposed. As Lissagaray said:

“The same day the Central Committee suspended the sale of objects pledged in the pawnshops, prolonged the overdue bills for a month, and forbade landlords to dismiss their tenants till further notice.”

The mayors of Paris as well as a few deputies wished to postpone the date of the elections for the Commune government. The National Guard Central Committee found itself once more stuck in the quagmire of discussions which went on for several days. The National Guard Central Committee decided to break off these discussions after the Vigilance Committees had pressed to put an end to them. On March 21st groups of bourgeois demonstrated their hostility for the revolution at Place Vendôme. A National Guard red battalion put down the demonstration. Most of those who favored the legitimacy of elections condemned this action. Despite such acts of resistance the proletariat was getting itself stuck in the trap of parliamentarianism. As a result the counter-revolution was able to find the time it needed to reorganize. Thiers was no fool and he commented on this whole circus by saying:

“We would have been lost if not for the help given by the mayors and a few deputies in Paris who were able to amuse the people from l’Hôtel de Ville [the National Guard Central Committee].”

In a different period Engels had already emphasized that *“the defensive position is the death of any armed insurrection”*. The proletarian movement’s

force was not great enough to push aside the reformists and their sabotage. The latter took advantage of that weakness and rose up as new managers, hungry to take the provisional March 18th victory as their own in order to transform it into a defeat.

Proletarian militants went very far in their compromise with their enemies of the other bourgeois faction: endless discussions with the mayors who had stayed in Paris, preparation of how and when the elections were to be carried out, discussion with Versailles about the legitimacy of elections. During this very crucial period militants continued to put their faith in the National Guard Central Committee and so remained stuck in never ending discussions, time was spent struggling against the revolution. They missed the fragile instants during which everything could have suddenly changed. The National Guard Central Committee's disorganizing practice was an arm used against the movement. It prepared the cannon balls which Versailles would be using to shoot the proletariat soon afterwards.

Nevertheless as far as generalization of the struggle is concerned, it was quite a remarkable period! During the month of March in France insurrectionary movements burst forth:

- ★ March 22nd to the 25th in Lyons
- ★ March 23rd to April 4th in Marseilles
- ★ March 24th to 31st in Narbonne
- ★ March 24th to 27th in Toulouse
- ★ March 24th to 28th in St. Etienne
- ★ March 26th to 28th in Creusot

This movement of struggle touched many cities and regions of France, especially where the worker's movement had been strong after 1868 and where the IWA's influence was important. It reminds us that we have to put things into perspective when we think about the isolation of Paris. However, akin to what was happening in Paris, these movements, even if they were very rich, remained confused and dispersed. The militants themselves were unable to give a clearer direction to this boiling revolutionary energy. Not only had revolutionaries made almost no serious attempts to understand these insurrectionary endeavors as being part of a single struggle against the old world. They hadn't even tried to take up the responsibility of coordinating and centralizing these struggles.

In the meantime... “*while pretending to negotiate with Paris Thiers was able to gain enough to time prepare the war against Paris.*” – The Civil War in France, Marx.

The image of the National Guard Central Committee surfing on the proletariat’s insurrectionary wave (so as to better exhaust its force) would be all the more easily preserved because of its short period of existence. Thus the proletariat didn’t have the time to push its confrontation further, to verify the fiber and the nature of this organism... and to reject it. The National Guard Central Committee hurried to pass its power to a future government backed up by the official recognition of elections.

Revolutionary militants didn’t take their ruptures to the point of breaking away from the National Guard Central Committee and organizing their perspectives outside of and against this structure. On the contrary, they wanted to keep it the way it was after March 26th, the date of elections. They remained a part of the National Guard Central Committee and they failed to make ruptures with its reformist practice. March 24th Eudes, Brunel and Duval, were called by the National Guard Central Committee, to take over the military leadership. But by then it was already too late. They found themselves at the head of a structure which had been emptied of its principal strength and which would only play a superficial role in the course of the events to come.

The proletarians who focused on the National Guard Central Committee left it to concentrate on the coming elections for the Commune government. They were caught up in this electoral farce and so they delegated their strength to patented bourgeois. Falling once again in a bourgeois trap.

3.3 The government of the Commune at work

Parliamentary madness was in full swing in Paris. The Commune government elections were being held. Militants like Ferré, Rigault, Varlin and many others who had been through prisons, barricades, strikes, demonstrations, exile, agitation, through rich and multiple experiences of struggle... were now preparing to take on the loathsome role of deputy.

On March 26th the Commune government was elected. The establishment of this government embodied and reinforced the polarization between Paris and Versailles which both sides had actively sought out. It was one more step in the crystallization of the two bourgeois factions whose common and fundamental objective was the struggle against the insurrectionary movement and the reestablishment of social peace.

The Thiers government was aiming to crush the insurgent proletariat before any reorganization of the State. Whereas the Commune government was seeking social harmony through a program of reforms of a socialist, humanist taint so as to put the proletariat to sleep. Their functions were complementary. But the Thiers faction needed time. From a military standpoint it wasn't ready yet.

Concerning the reorganization of the army we can sum up Thiers' program in these few points:

- ★ The Versailles troops were to be isolated and housed in their barracks. This was done so as to break the ties with insurgents. The soldiers underwent an intense brainwashing campaign. There was the instigation of an *esprit de corps* against the danger which was now being labeled "Parisian".

- ★ Purges were carried out against thousands of undisciplined and unreliable proletarians, many of whom were kicked out of the army while others were sent to Algeria on March 19th where they would participate in the repression of the insurrectionary movement in *Kabylie*.

- ★ Soldiers were kept under the watch of *gendarmes* and informers.

- ★ Discipline and fear were used to transform these proletarians despite their uniforms into a military machine capable of massacring other proletarians without a second thought.

In the meantime the Commune government was proclaiming a speech which consisted in trying to make believe that "*men go about their activity through the use of reasoning and that the justice of the Commune cause is self-evident for all French people...*"

One need only read Beslay's speeches. He was a great defender of the Bank of France... as well as an IWA member. At the moment of the Commune's proclamation he declared:

"The Commune will take care of all local questions. The département will take care of all regional questions. The government will take care of all national questions..."

He concluded: "*Let us not go beyond this limit which our program has defined. The nation and the government will be happy and proud to applaud this revolution which is so great and so simple.*"

Here is the definition of communalism: the unpretentious management of affairs of State at a local level. This left the Thiers faction's hands free to take back the reigns of the State. In retrospect we can say that indeed none of this government's protagonists ever once went beyond this limit. In this respect

they contributed to cutting Paris off from the rest of the world, isolating and disarming the proletariat.

Democratic mystification's force was at its height! Parliamentarianism benefited from all of its counter-revolutionary force! A struggle between factions, left/right oppositions, majority decisions... took up all of the room. Publicizing the debates, favored by the majority, was lauded as a guarantee against the abuse of power. Even the IWA members (who made up one fourth of the deputies) and the Blanquists were nothing more than vulgar puppets in this parliamentary circus. By accepting to participate they found themselves both ideologically and practically paralyzed. A terrible force of inertia resulted. This inertia was broken momentarily on only a few rare occasions such as during the April 3rd sortie and the execution of hostages. Occasional bursts of lucidity led them to carry out acts which were totally opposed to the Commune government's politics and at last were heading in the direction of developing the revolution. However the electoral farce, communalism and legalism got the upper hand and disarmed the proletariat, leaving it so for the coming repression.

The whole of the measures taken by the Commune government were made to preserve bourgeois social relationships. If we take a look at another extract from Beslay's declaration the day after the Commune was proclaimed we can see the respect shown for the fundamental value of capitalist society:

“The Republic of 1871 is a workman, who above all wants liberty to construct peace. Peace and work, that is our future! That is our certitude for our revenge and for our social regeneration.”

None of the bourgeois world's pillars were called into question. On the contrary, we will see further in the text as we examine a series of decrees that the Commune government showed itself at its best in a state of extreme timidity concerning bourgeois institutions such as the pawnshops and the Bank of France. It showed itself to be much more capable of carrying out decisions when it was dealing with symbolic objectives such as knocking down the Vendôme Column or destroying Thiers' house. This was all a question of tricking the proletariat. The latter had not yet declared defeat but was nonetheless clearly disoriented.

The very function of this government, in continuity with the National Guard Central Committee's practice, was the disorganization of the proletariat's avant-garde.

Parliamentary democracy had managed to destroy the insurrectionary movement from the inside. Now the bourgeoisie needed only to destroy it from the outside with the democracy of cannon fire.

3.4 April 3rd 1871

On the eve of April 3rd Versailles took back the initiative towards an immediate tactical goal: attacking Courbevoie, controlling the Neuilly Bridge which crosses the Seine so as to prevent the *Fédérés* from going for fresh supplies and also preventing any revolutionary contagion.

The National Guardsmen were no match in this standard military confrontation. This contributed to lowering their morale. For the Versailles troops it was another story. For them this attack had proven the unity of the Versailles army and they felt like they were on top of the world.

Those proletarians who really believed the Commune government was defending their interests, who had faith in its capacity for initiative, were quite surprised to learn that it hadn't decided anything to counter the attack. This lack of answers and decisions was the guiding line of the Commune government and it would maintain it until the end: inactivity, immobility... It let the Versailles army creep into the breaches, their troops invaded Paris and the slaughter began.

The attack of Courbevoie was followed by the systematic bombardment of Paris which would prove to be even worse than during the siege made by the German army. In reaction masses of proletarians came down from the red neighborhoods shouting "*To Versailles! To Versailles!*":

"A battalion of 300 women marched up the Champs-Élysées, the red flag at their head, demanding to sally forth against the enemy."

The proletarians' pressure was building. It soon became unbearable for Blanquists such as Eudes, Duval and Bergeret who reverted to their revolutionary attitude of previous times. They decided, outside of and against the Commune government, to organize a military sortie. During this time the Commune government was busy legislating over the question of the separation of Church and State. The government abstained from participating in the sortie, not even Cluseret, IWA member, who had been named minister of War on April 2nd. Cluseret gave himself the role of the good guy when he later wrote in his memoirs that he was content "*to watch the events*". Lissagaray wrote:

“Cluseret took good care not to take possession of his post, allowed the generals to ruin themselves, and on the 3rd appeared before the Council to denounce their childishness. It was this military pamphlet-monger, with no pledge but the decoration he had won [on the side of the slaughterers] against the Socialists of 1848, who had played the marionette in three insurrections, whom the Socialists of 1871 charged with the defense of their Revolution...”

There was much ardor and hatred against Versailles. Flourens wrote to Bergeret:

“I’ve got 10,000 men from the 2nd legion at l’avenue des Ternes. They are full of ardor and want nothing more than to march on Versailles.”

What about the organization of the sortie? In reality everything was lacking. Nothing had been prepared, neither provisions nor ammunition, neither artillery support nor a means of liaison. Bernard Noël wrote:

“Every man took himself to be la République and thought that it would be enough for la République to show itself for Versailles to run away in terror and give up.”

On April 3rd at three o’clock in the morning Eudes, Duval, Bergeret and Flourens did their best to keep three columns of soldiers together as they set off on a resolute march towards Versailles. A few shells were fired from Mont Valérien. Some of them hit the Bergeret column. Although they affected little damage they provoked panic. This left the initiative once more to the Versailles troops. This happened all the more quickly in that proletarians had an easy victory in mind.

“Surrender and your lives will be spared,’ General Pellé had told them. The Parisians surrendered. The Versaillese at once seized the soldiers fighting in the ranks of the Federals and shot them. The prisoners, between two lines of chasseurs, were sent on to Versailles, while their officers, bare-headed, their braid torn off, were put at the head of the convoy.

At Petit-Bicetre they met the general-in-Chief, Vinoy. He commanded that the officers be shot, but the leader of the escort reminding him of General Pellé’s promise (...) ‘You are awful scoundrels,’ said Vinoy; and, turning to his officers, ‘Shoot them.’ (...) Thus the army of order inaugurated the civil war by the massacre of the prisoners.”

What is tragic about this sortie is that there was no autonomous decision-making structure which could have supervised this action as part of a plan of the revolution’s extension, which could have conceived this attack as part of

the class war and thus sought to avoid the front against front model of the battlefield. First it should have undermined the enemy by developing revolutionary defeatism, rallying soldiers from the other side who hesitated to join the revolutionary cause and then directly attack the Versailles government.

The total lack of preparation, the criminal naivety of the militants still loyal to the Commune government, lost as they were in their communalist illusions – all of this could never have resulted in anything but disaster: dozens of dead and wounded, prisoners such as Duval and Flourens basely murdered, others were tortured and then kept prisoner on boats for months. It was disastrous actions like these which lowered the morale of the most combative proletarians while leaving the field open for the Versailles forces who had taken back the initiative. From that point on the *Communards* would undergo their attacks.

The April 3rd sortie can be considered as the last attempt the proletariat made to break with the Parisian yoke and to develop the revolution. The proletariat hadn't seized the opportunity to pursue the Versailles troops in the days following March 18th. The failure of the April 3rd was the tolling of the bell for the proletariat's capacity to turn around the balance of powers between the classes, to spread the revolution, to distance itself from the Commune government and to develop its class autonomy. From that moment, class war became bourgeois war against the proletariat.

3.5 Bourgeois war or class war!

Today we can affirm that the Commune government objectively (that is in its deeds, independently of its discourse) served the counter-revolution. However it did have to defend itself from the different tendencies within it which came to question its lack of initiative, its inertia, its disorganization, often qualified as "negligence", regarding military affairs. We saw that the April 3rd sortie, which we consider to be the proletariat's last attempt to develop the revolution, could only be organized outside of and against this government. We are not interested in trying to determine if the victory against Versailles by April 3rd was still possible in strictly military terms. What we wish to emphasize is the fact that the Commune government did nothing to militarily organize this sortie nor did it seek to carry out any other form of resistance against the encirclement of Paris.

Let us quote Elisée Reclus who was taken prisoner during the April 3rd sortie:

“During the first days of the Commune military organization was grotesque, as worthless as it had been during the first siege, with that pathetic Trochu at its head.”

Lissagaray wrote a detailed description of the absence of organization for the defense of Paris. Among other things he emphasized the following:

“No observer of any perspicacity could fail to see that Cluseret’s promised offensive was not possibly going to take place before the end of April. In Paris, active and devoted men exhausted their strength in enervating struggles with the bureaux, the committees, the sub-committees, and the thousand pretentious rival administrations, often losing a whole day in order to obtain possession of a single cannon. At the ramparts, some artillerymen riddled the line of Versailles, and, asking for nothing but bread and iron, stood to their pieces until torn away by shells. [...] At the ramparts, some artillerymen riddled the line of Versailles, and, asking for nothing but bread and iron, stood to their pieces until torn away by shells. The forts, their casemates staved in, their embrasures destroyed, lustily answered the fire from the heights. Brave skirmishers, unprotected, surprised the line-soldiers in their lurking-places. All this devotion and dazzling heroism were spent in vain, like the steam of an engine escaping through hundreds of outlets.”

“The Artillery Committee, born on March 18th, and the War Committee were bickering over cannons. [...] So it was impossible to constitute a central depot or even to know the exact number of cannons.[...] Pieces of long range remained to the last moment lying along the ramparts, while the forts had only pieces of seven and twelve centimeters to answer the huge cannon of Marine, and often the munitions sent were not of corresponding calibre.”

“Of the 1,200 cannon possessed by Paris, only 200 were utilized.”

“The armament service was unable to provide all of the men on campaign with chassepot rifles. After their victory the Versailles troops discovered 285,000 of them, plus 190,000 flintlock rifles, and 14,000 Enfield rifles.”

How did the government manage to maintain this criminal trickery?

The Commune government’s objective from the start was to restore order to the National Guard battalions, to reintroduce military discipline, to take back their control, and, to start, put an end to the authority of the National Guard Central Committee. A military commission was set up as early as March 29th and:

“It replaced the National Guard Central Committee. This commission was in charge of the discipline, armament, outfits, and equipment of the National Guard. It is in charge of elaborating the decrees concerning the National Guard. It alone is in charge of staff headquarters at the place Vendôme. It must assure, along with the General Security Commission, the Commune’s security and keep the Versailles troops’ activities under surveillance.”

The aim was to put an end to all of the proletariat’s initiatives towards self-organization, reinforcing the monopoly of arms, putting them into the Commune government’s hands. Gustave Lefrançais, active member of the Commune government, was explicit in his intervention during the April 12th session:

“He asked that the Commune take into account the following: Despite the decree declaring that no public force other than the National Guard would be established in Paris little structures have formed which give orders and create posts. He wished for the Commune to invite the War Committee delegate to allow the establishment of none other than the special armed corps such as artillerymen and navymen [...] Citizen Lefrançais [...] placed the following text on the editor’s desk: ‘In that the Commune wishes to respect the terms of its decrees it invites the delegate of the War Committee to immediately furnish the Executive Committee with the necessary information for disbanding or maintaining the different irregular forces which have been created outside of the National Guard’.”

This process of militarization, as this extract emphasizes, was not a smooth one. Small groups disobeyed the orders to enlist and tried to keep the initiative. Thus:

“without anyone having ordered it or authorized its creation, an irregular army, recruited on a volunteer basis [...] started springing up spontaneously, especially in May. We can count thirty or so such as the “the Montmartre Rogues”, the “Flourens’ Avengers”, the Bergeret Scouts”, the “Montrouge Volunteers”, the “Rogue Soldiers of the Revolution”, the “Turcos of the Commune”.”

Just like in Russia in 1917, in Spain in 1936, when the proletariat takes up arms and organizes its own militias, armed groups, battalions,... the bourgeoisie always tries, in the name of efficiency and the need for centralization, to take back the control of these arms, to reintroduce bourgeois discipline, hierarchy and court-martials so as to smother and kill all proletarian initiative.

Thus it was in the name of the necessity to defend Paris that the Commune government established militarization. Its aim was to put an end to the proletariat's armament and to disband the irregular forces created during the height of the struggle.

This is what the militarization of these irregular forces made up of the proletariat's most determined elements was all about, thus subverting their strike force and bringing proletarians back to their function as cannon fodder. This was the real goal dictated in the Commune government's decrees: restore hierarchy, stripes, medals, differences in pay, court-martials, dungeons, and executions... in a nutshell, restore bourgeois discipline.

The trick lay in the fact that all of this was decided in the name of organizing the defense of Paris. Thus Cluseret went on to head military operations while the bodies of those proletarians who had fallen in combat during the April 3rd sortie were still warm. He declared that he was preparing a system of barricades with which to defend the city. The people had to be kept busy, to be tricked, to be put to sleep! What really happened? Nothing. No barricades of this sort were ever built. This made Thiers' troops' rapid entry into Paris, as of May 21st, and the *bloody week* even easier.

The decrees on the National Guard started the process of militarization which was spreading and encompassing all of society. After April 8th the Commune government began a census, imposed the draft, and tracked down deserters... The Central Committee and the future Public Safety Committee shared the same gung ho discourse.

The Commune government, through Cluseret, decreed the general enlistment of all men between the ages of 18 and 40, their posting in newly reformed National Guard units, and their departure for the front lines! It was time to bring back a number of customs which had of late fallen out of use due to the army's decay: setting up shock troops, reestablishing the death penalty for deserters and draft dodgers, court-martials, as well as other disciplinary measures which are indispensable for maintaining order in a bourgeois army. Government officials hurriedly applied these measures in their *districts*. In addition to this there was a willful disorganization – regiments were abandoned with no further orders, contradictory orders were circulating, orders were not being transmitted, reinforcements arrived too late or sometimes not at all, ammunition and supplies were not distributed – the Commune government's activity could engender nothing more than low morale among the troops. In doing so it pursued the same policy of exhaustion and decimation which had been set in place by Trochu when he was a member of the National Defense government which was later carried out by Rossel.

The transformation of the defense of Paris into a war of front against front could only give victory to the side having the greatest military power, the one regrouped at Versailles under Thiers' orders. It continued using money from the Bank of France which went about its business free of any interference by the Commune government. It reorganized its army and negotiated with Bismarck for the return of 60,000 soldiers who'd been taken prisoner as well as the authorization to boost its troops to 130,000 strong in order to take back Paris.

The proletariat is less well armed. It can only win the battle on the ground by harassing the enemy in small, mobile units, striking where and when least expected. This creates surprise, confusion, and reduces the morale within the regular army.

The war was changing in character. Proletarians were sent to the front lines against Versailles. They found themselves confined to their forts under enemy fire. They were not being supported. They were not receiving reinforcements. Soon they started deserting. Allemane emphasized:

“Unfortunately, enthusiasm had disappeared and the draft dodgers and deserters numbered in the thousands.”

This movement of desertion was in complete opposition to the Commune government's line. The proletariat rallied behind the defense of Paris which led it to see deserters as simply unwilling to fight. Often they were compelled to return to the front.

A “battalion of women” in the 12th district, for example, tried forcing such unwilling men to take up arms and head to the front. The red clubs vigorously called for this measure to be enforced. For the proletarians sent to the front it was clear that their interest lay in refusing to be marched straight into a massacre, in rebelling against this war which was not theirs, in refusing their enlistment. Instead their interest lay in returning to their neighborhoods and organizing themselves in units of the irregular army. Despite the decrees which sought to enforce this ongoing process of militarization the number of such irregular units, in May, was increasing.

However, the numerous plans to deliberately organize the defeat had left a situation dominated by demoralization.

On one side there was militarization and on the other side the irregular units which, although their numbers were on the rise, remained an increasingly marginalized minority. This *fédéré* officer bore witness:

“We lived in a house in which all of the residents were part of the insurgent battalions. Every day I was insulted and threatened. Women would never stop telling me that I was young and that it was shameful that I should remain at home.”

For the Commune government the front was nothing but a diversion, a line of defense which was never assured. It was, in the end, nothing but a deathtrap to which it could send enraged proletarians, exposing them to the Versailles’s fire and doing away with them.

For most proletarians the front was a line of defense for the bastion of their revolution. They wanted it to live up to their hopes and demanded that the government carry out the necessary steps.

For a minority of proletarians it had become increasingly clear that everything was being done so as to deliberately organize their loss. The front no longer had any meaning, except as a place where one could serve as cannon fodder. They were unwilling to enlist and so were called “gold-brickers”, “cowards”, or even “traitors”.

This movement of deserters and irregular units didn’t have the strength necessary to reverse the situation as it faced the rise in patriotism. It remained in a state of passive refusal, of discouragement, and of demobilization.

More generally we can say that no organized force, no clear-sighted militant, no expression of the direction or centralization of the struggle expressed itself with sufficient force to upset the dramatic course of events. Until the end the most combative proletarians were caught up in trying to shake up the Commune government, trying to put pressure on it so that it would really do its job of defending insurgent Paris. The problem was that this was seen as a lack of coherence – the dereliction of duty, the mistakes, the failure to act – and the will was then to put pressure on the Commune government so as to get things back in order. Instead there was a clear and coherent will to send the proletariat to its defeat.

The Commune government deputies swiftly picked up the failure of the April 3rd sortie as a means to discourage and quiet those who still believed it was possible to defend insurgent Paris. It is truly striking to see the similarity between Cluseret’s war correspondence and that of Thiers. Both were triumphant!

The result: On May 21st there were only 12,000 *Fédérés* in Paris!

Surprisingly, proletarians, facing Versailles's fire, proudly defended themselves on the barricades to the very end despite their total disorganization and general state of exhaustion.

3.6 The Commune government's decrees

From a bourgeois point of view the Commune government had an advantage over the National Defense government. It had been elected through universal suffrage and therefore benefited from legitimacy. The partisans of the Commune government were alone in reaping any glory from this parliamentary legitimacy. For Versailles, the immediate objective had been reached: pushing Paris into an electoral campaign and thus buying some time so as to better prepare its return with a vengeance. After March 26th the two governments would prolong this masquerade to the point of carrying out a legal battle through the press over the legality of the election. That is how the State occupied people with a marionette show with one hand while sharpening its weapons with the other. On one side the Commune government was making one boring statement after the other and on the other side Versailles was reorganizing its forces and preparing to enter Paris.

History generally presents the Commune government's decrees as the act of the revolution. But if we take a closer look at these decrees we can see that none of them corresponded to the necessities of the hour. They were neither an attempt to extend nor even to defend the revolution. If one reads very quickly there is nevertheless one decree which, on paper, seems to correspond to the struggle's necessities. So that's why we'll spend some time on it here. Both the genesis and the definitive version of this decree illustrates the Commune government's will to always act within the framework of legality, of the respect of law, of social pacification.

The decree on hostages or how to defend legality and justice

The Versailles forces met no serious counter-attack from the Commune forces and their arrogance was without limits. They tortured and killed the Communards whom they had captured during the April 3rd sortie. As a means of retaliation the Commune government issued the decree on hostages on April 5th. It was remarkably harsh... on paper. As was too often the case with this government their speech was nothing but a lot of hot air. In practice they showed their true talent by making sure this decree would not be applied! When the Versailles learned this, through their many spies in Paris, they con-

tinued their torture: raping, killing the wounded, piling prisoners into sinister jails...

Looking at how this decree came to be allows one to better understand how proletarian militants could get bogged down in the defense of rights while on the eve of April 4th they had been fighting on the terrain of force. This was the case of the decrees to be immediately applied as well as the more general decrees concerning property, the Church, and the army.

In the evening of April 4th the Commune government's members learned that Duval, Flourens and others had been killed. Here is part of the description of the scene:

"Everybody is standing. "We must avenge them... We must retaliate by shooting as well". The most violent proposals were applauded. Rigault wants to shoot the archbishop who'd been arrested the day before and was detained in Mazas... He also wants to shoot the priests and Jesuits who'd been arrested at the same time. "Open the prisons to the people. They will carry out justice." yelled someone..."

It's exactly then that Protot, the Justice delegate, spoke:

"I wish to recall to the Commune the great responsibility which it will have it does not resist this move towards violence to which some people wish to lead it. "You don't respond to a massacre with another massacre. We cannot violate people's rights. We must act legally." The hall was in an uproar. Rastoul called out to me "So if they keep on killing us we'll continue doing nothing more than legality." I answered "We can be fearsome to our enemies and yet remain just and human... Not all of those in the prisons are the Commune's enemies. There are also those who were denounced, some of whom may be innocent... What we can do is to make a legal resolution, write it out, discuss it, and adopt it if we approve it. This would allow for the institution of a means of reprisal while remaining within the framework of law."

This is how he intervened in order to prevent any immediate counter-attack. He threw cold water onto the flames. But this very zeal was imprisoned by bourgeois legality to such a degree that the same persons who demanded retaliation ended up applauding Protot and asking him to write the decree on hostages. This shows how individuals steeped in legality, justice and peace are able to calm, channel and deviate the class rush to organize counter-terror. The decree was just a piece of paper after all, and in a short while the decree on hostages would have been emptied of any content.

We wish to emphasize the key sentence from Protot's intervention: "... while remaining within the framework of law." because it allows us to better understand the limits of the environment which contained not only the most reformist elements of the government but also proletarian militants like Eudes, Vaillant, Clément, and Rigault. Such militants continued to defend certain fundamental revolutionary positions such as the struggle against private property and the necessity of organizing counter-terror while at the same time they remained prisoners to the Commune government's logic.

But the proletariat wanted revenge for the slaughters perpetrated by the Versailles. And this decree was just aiming at both gaining popularity and quietening the proletarians' anger.

On May 26th during the *bloody week*, cornered by the Versailles troops, the proletariat finally decided to carry out the necessary counter-terror and shot the hostages. The militants who had voted the decree continued to strongly oppose its implementation, jeopardizing their own lives!

Proletarians had had enough of getting bombed. They were also disgusted with the criminal orientation of the Commune government. Under their pressure, militants like Raoul Rigault and Ferré assumed acts of counter-terror: imprisoning the bourgeois who remained at large (spies, priests, officers, bankers and others), executing scoundrels such as Chaudey, in opposition to the Commune government. It wasn't until one was facing the Versailles cannons, fed up with the never-ending parliamentary discussions, sickened by all of the swindling that one could clearly take the side of the struggle's needs and get rid of the government's prerogatives.

At last it was clear that not carrying out this decree objectively joined in the State terrorism carried out by Versailles.

Blanqui had shown the path of intransigence:

"The freedom which pleads against communism is a freedom that we know. It is the freedom to subjugate, the freedom to exploit as one sees fit, the freedom to achieve greatness, as Renan says, while using the multitudes as a stepping stone. What you call freedom is what the people call oppression and crime. The people no longer want to feed it with their flesh and blood."

Other decrees

The Parisian government like any government, full of legalist hysteria, legislated! Municipal tax, pawnshop reform, putting an end to night work for

bakers... While proletarians in different cities and regions in France were rising up... these decrees were aiming at communalism.

Overall the Commune government acted so as to “manage victory”. The tendency for politicism thrived: different reelections for the Commune government, a shift in who headed what, the jungle of commissions and their never-ending recomposition, chatter, votes... all of this manic parliamentary activity expressed and developed a growing gap between the proletariat in arms and those who considered themselves to be its representatives.

The Commune government channeled proletarians in their struggle and led them astray from their class interests in order to reinforce itself as a real bourgeois alternative to the Versailles government. Analyzing the decrees one by one could lead to the supposition that there had been some attempt, albeit an insufficient one, to respond to the struggle’s needs. But by placing the decrees within their general context we can see that certain decrees did nothing more than react little by little to the urgent necessity of temporarily relieving the proletariat’s living conditions so as to avoid any attack on dear and holy private property. Other decrees were nothing more than a trick. In one case or another, the function of these decrees was to calm the proletariat, to make it wait, to dispossess it of its struggle, and to throw a bone to those proletarians who were riled up.

The Commune’s admirers have made a big deal out of these decrees. They present them as the seed of a communist society and/or a rupture with the old one. Yet this was by no means the case. The new managers had undertaken the task of defending Paris within the framework of a war of front against front. They sought to reorganize the economy and to manage the commerce of labor force. This was in no way a break with the logic of value, of private property, of the exploitation of labor. It was only logical that they make reformist decrees. Some of the decrees were not even on par with those that had been issued by previous governments.

The social upheaval of the moment was so great that acts of rupture with the reign of money could take place. Like an *old hébertiste* wrote:

“In this moment there is only one right, that of the proletarian against the property owner and the capitalist, that of the poor against the rich and the bourgeois, that of the disinherited against the well off and those overcome with pleasure. Poor and proletarians, we have no other desire, we want nothing more than joy and ease. If the cake isn’t big enough for everybody to have an equal share then let us be the first to get a slice. We have been waiting long enough...”

Yet the Commune government defended the rights of the banker and the property owner. In the decrees such as those concerning housing, pawnshops, and city taxes we can see that it did nothing more than respect private property. Vaillant may have spoken eloquently as he said *“Remember that you must strike property through our socialist decrees.”* But this was nothing but a lot of hot air. In practice all of the members of the government followed in the steps of Jourde, the reformist, which he demonstrated during the discussions concerning pawnshops:

“Destroying pawnshops would be an attack on private property. It’s something which we have never done. I do not believe it would be wise, useful or intelligent to proceed in this way.”

The *old hébertiste* took a stand to the contrary of this bourgeois position:

“What do we hear at l’Hôtel de Ville? Talk of respect. Talk of rights. Talk of integrity. Talk of decency. And even, may the devil take me, talk which is delicate in nature. All of this nonsense is uttered so as to cover and excuse the oppression of proletarians by the rich and the bourgeois. Believe me, citizen, there is even talk of capital and of interest rates.”

The decree on rent issued on March 29th was pathetic in that it didn’t simply abolish rent but instead cancelled the last three payments and extended this to all of the levels of the population. It left the proletariat to deal with its landlords on its own:

“Instead of housing the people once and for all in the homes of the rich and the bourgeois there is instead this humiliating measure on the last three payments of rent, accompanied by even further humiliating considerations, and then in the future they’ll be left to the vulture’s claws. They are left in a cesspool.” – an *old hébertiste*

On April 24th **the decree on the requisition of vacant apartments** was adopted. This was done only because of the pressure coming from the ongoing events – finding housing for the inhabitants of Neuilly who fled the Versailles cannons – that the Commune government adopted it. Its housing policy actually consisted in keeping proletarians in the miserable neighborhoods just like the previous governments had done. Paris was kept divided in two: the bourgeois to the west and the proletarians to the east. Yet the situation was urgent. J. Allemane vigorously denounced this situation:

“A few unoccupied homes have been requisitioned. But there has been no move to demolish the rotting buildings in which thousands of proletarians become weak and then die while thousands of fine houses in the rich neighborhoods remain vacant.”

For us, it's clear that we cannot qualitatively break with such a condition of misery without:

“The expropriation of current landlords through the occupation of their buildings by workers who are homeless or who live in cramped places.”

The decree on pawnshops was to go no further than the measures which had been taken by previous governments. It was nothing but show. The decree (which wasn't adopted until May 6th, after endless discussions, and wasn't applicable until May 20th) did state that all of the goods which had been left for a sum of under 50 francs could be taken back for free. But the Commune government also committed itself to completely reimbursing the pawnshop administration, meaning the stockholders, who were real vampires for the proletariat.

“And what about the decree on pawnshops? Instead of making the rich, the bourgeois, the exploiters vomit back up what they had stolen thanks to this institution be it in furniture, in money, in food, and using it for the benefit of the proletarian, so that he may know pleasure, ease and even luxury, it left him the trifle of 50 francs and that's it. Then we stop, we back up, so as to not displease the pawnshop stockholders.” – an old hébertiste

The order on city taxes was adopted by the National Guard Central Committee after March 24th. It maintained the city tax at the gates to Paris. It also remained on the terrain of capital and favored bourgeois interests as much as possible. This tax on goods was a source of revenue of some importance for the new government. For proletarians it was one more expense. Historically proletarians had hated this tax. On July 13th 1789 proletarians driven by hunger attacked city tax posts at the city gates, looting the goods there and then setting them on fire.

“The tax [city tax] on consumer products and in this case essentially food continued to keep the poor down during the Commune while fiscal reform would have started with its suppression.”

Revolutionaries in Lyon had put an end to the city tax in September 1870!

Concerning tax collection we can read in the April 3rd issue of the *Journal Officiel* (the organ for the publication of newly adapted laws) that the Commune government asked that:

“... until a new law has decided upon a more equitable way by which everyone may participate in the Republic's spending we are counting on you to pay your contribution to the Commune tax collectors.”

Yet the government never ceased showing respect for the Bank of France and its 3 billion francs!

The decree on night work for bakers, adopted on April 20th and officially applied on May 3rd, was one of the rare decrees which could seem positive. It abolished night work for bakers and did away with the go-betweens who did all of the hiring for the bakeries and who received a cut of the workers' pay. Bakery workers had gone on strike many times during the Second Empire and they did so again in April 1871. On April 8th they sent their demands to the government but received no answer. So 300 of them demonstrated in front of l'Hôtel de Ville on April 20th, demanding satisfaction. The workers threatened to "*break their ovens*". This decree was hastily adopted. It's presented by those who adore the Commune government as a socialist measure yet it had already been under study for two years during the Second Empire. Although this measure may have resulted in a lesser exploitation of some workers the government did nothing to lift the ban on going on strike for bakery workers nor did it do a thing about the miserable wages which were common in this profession.

The proletariat's growing weakness

"The government's first duty is to carry out its decrees. If it isn't firm enough to do so then its adversaries will be quick to take advantage of this weakness and it will be a blow to the morale of its partisans, even the most enthusiastic of them. That is what is happening now. The best republicans among us spill their blood while the non-application of the decrees allows for a crowd of able-bodied people to not only peacefully go about their business but to even mock those who are in combat... As a citizen I fear in my heart that the Commune's weakness may well put an end to our beautiful projects for the future."

The text signed by an *old hébertiste* vigorously criticizes these decrees. But it was typical of this period in which there were many strong words and texts calling for revenge, though few acts which were able to strike real blows against capital's interests. In this same way the quote from this proletarian's letter expresses the contradiction in which the proletariat was struggling. There was a certain lucidity about the government's function and yet an incapacity to break with this incoherent legalistic framework and organize so as to impose the most elemental needs. We can take two examples to illustrate this situation.

★ During the application of the decree on rent many proletarians took this opportunity to not pay the landlord the following rent either and moved out in the middle of the night! But it didn't go any further than that. At this moment there wasn't even the roughest outline of a more offensive movement negating property through occupying bourgeois homes.

★ During the application of the decree on pawnshops well-behaved proletarians waited in line to be able to get back their possessions. There were some 1,800,000 such pieces of property left at the pawnshops. This gives some indication of the level of misery. But only 41,928 were reclaimed. Let us recall that there were only three days in which to retrieve items. On the second day a crowd of women came forth, interrupting the process, calling to hurry things up. It was National Guardsmen, loyal to the government, who counter-attacked in order to protect this institution!

Some Commune government members were quite conscious of the potential danger which the proletariat represented. J.B. Clément wrote the following passage:

“There is no doubt about it. If the Commune sessions had been open to the public, the people would have solved the rent question by throwing both us and our projects out the window.”

There is nothing unreasonable about an assembly deliberating in secret about military strategies. But it's another story when the same necessity of secrecy is referred to when discussing ordinary affairs. The government was being cautious about the proletariat's reaction as it became increasingly infuriated, recognizing itself less and less in the deputies' jabbering.

This bourgeois assembly refrained from taking even the most elementary of measures against the landlords. J.B. Clément, member of this mind-numbing assembly, reacted:

“Citizens, I cried out, I'm warning you. If the decree on rent is not voted today and in a way which makes it completely favorable to tenants I'll head out tomorrow with the Montmartre battalions.”

The revolution's movement continued to express itself in the *Vigilance Committees*, red clubs... despite the failure of the April 3rd sortie and the blow it had undergone through the creation of the National Guard Central Committee. Inside the clubs (which sometimes met in churches, thus subverting those dens of slavery) the revolution was being discussed. The names of the clubs were quite eloquent: Proletarian Club, Revolution Club, Social Revolution Club, Black Ball Club... It's in these places that the needs of the time were affirmed the most clearly: execution of hostages, Blanqui's liberation, arming

women, patrolling the suburbs against spies, obligation for all able-bodied men to defend the revolution, the suppression of the Church, the arrest of the clergy, the expropriation of the means of production, the organization of proletarians as a force against Versailles, the preparation of barricades. A growing distrust for the deputies could also be found here.

Proletarians were undertaking various initiatives, moving in the direction of the autonomization of their movement, such as:

- ★ creating a Union of women for the defense of Paris and the care for the wounded towards the middle of April.

- ★ creating a Federation of clubs in the beginning of May.

These initiatives were important in that they were attempts at tightening up the ranks among proletarians, at taking charge of the situation. They attempted to respond to the growing helplessness of proletarians who stood by in anger and vexation as they waited for the government to respond to the struggle's needs and to organize revolutionary energies. The situation was strongly marked by dispersion and wandering. An overheated atmosphere produced many fiery speeches which remained mere words, rarely followed by acts. These radical impulses were of little consequence.

Verbal radicalism remained (and remains to this day) an important limit, a trap in which the proletariat got tied up and fell asleep. Malon emphasized this very well:

“In the ardent hotbeds of popular passion the Commune was considered moderate and the minority was considered reactionary. “Since the people are always swindled by its elected officials” said the fiery speech makers, they should tear up their mandate and proceed about their business in a revolutionary way! We don’t care about the personalities! The reactionaries must be vanquished. The traitors must perish. The people must triumph. And the people will triumph if we are worthy of the people.” This radical hot air went on, rising higher and higher, and taking the militant part of the masses with it.”

These initiatives marked a break with this constant jabbering and an opposition to the clampdown on proletarian battalions forced into the new National Guard. They marked a tendency to distinguish the gap between the movement of the revolution and the Commune government's reformism and managementism. This was an expression of an attempt to move towards proletarian autonomy.

But this movement remained weak. It was unable to concretely give a different direction than that of the Commune government. It was unable to defend Paris as a bastion of the revolution against the growing threat of the Versailles forces which were slowly but surely elaborating a plan to take back Paris.

The dominant tendency was to be found in the faction of proletarians who, despite a certain degree of lucidity, remained held back by their trust in the government whose actions they considered “*sluggish*”. Despite their critiques they thought the Commune government had the means to be the master of the situation and they demanded that it do what was necessary. The talk at the time in the clubs clearly illustrated this dead end:

“As we consider the moment of supreme peril in which we find our social institutions and the sluggishness with which the members of the Commune have produced decrees and made revolutionary acts which are the only things which may yet save the situation and assure the success of the revolution which began so happily on March 18th, the members of our section address ourselves to you, our elected officials, to remediate this state of things which will otherwise inevitably lead to our loss if you should continue as you have been doing (...).

You are the masters of Paris. You are a government at the head of a great power, the city of Paris! Nothing in you is lacking (...).

What do you fear, you who are masters of the situation, if it’s money that you need you can have it printed: do you not see that with each day devoted to the defense one more throne is overturned and the workers of the world rally ever more around us as we defend the cause.”

It wasn’t until the moment of the *bloody week* that this same proletariat, with a knife at its throat, would lose its illusions about “*the selfishness and cold cruelty the bourgeois soul contains*”, as Allemane put it.

Sleight of hand...

On May 16th the Vendôme column was torn down while the city was being riddled with shells. This reminds us of the Roman expression: *panem et circenses* (bread and games). These were used to amuse and occupy the population! We can say the same thing for the destruction of the Bréa chapel, decreed on April 27th; the destruction of Louis XVI’s expiatory chapel, and the destruction of Thiers’ house on May 11th. It was “*easier than killing power*” in Jean Allemane’s words.

For yet another time in history the proletariat's hatred for these symbols of bourgeois power was used in order to "*amuse the people*" and keep its attention away from the urgent need to do other actions. The only symbol which was destroyed without any state mediation by the direct anger of proletarians was the guillotine which was burned. The 137th battalion of the National Guard had forcefully requisitioned it on April 6th so that this could be done. This was not at all the case for the Vendôme column. In order to be part of the audience one even had to have a pass stamped by the Vendôme square major!

The Commune government however did spend a lot of energy distracting the proletariat by promoting political spectacles which were just as sterile as they were illusory such as the Free Masons who called for reconciliation between Paris and Versailles. On April 29th they demonstrated through Paris and the armed ramparts carrying a white banner which bore the slogan "*Let us love one another*"! As we might have guessed, this had no practical results.

The April 2nd **decree on the requisition of religious goods** on the separation of Church and State also corresponded to this need to throw the angry dog a bone. The angry dog wanted to eat some priests or at least imprison them! Historically, the proletariat in its struggle against its exploiters has always attacked priests. In practice this decree signified that the Commune government would not attack Church property (nor would it attack the property of bankers or industrialists). In order to stop the proletarians who were grabbing priests and occupying churches to organize their clubs, Arnould demanded to leave the churches open so "*that the population may freely enter them*". Only Rigault closed a few churches.

Finally the Commune government did take a few measures which we have listed here in no particular order:

- ★ The preservation of working papers, established during the Empire and hated.

- ★ The minting of new coins which bore the following words: "God protects France" and "Work, National Guarantee"!

- ★ Alas! The Commune government was unable to complete its project of establishing an identity card for every citizen!

- ★ Respect for the stock market which would open its doors once more on March 28th and go about its business. Long live capitalism!

On the defense of private property... or how the Bank of France was never even worried

There was a deep-rooted respect for private property (banks, workshops, houses, etc.) among revolutionaries and even among proletarians in general. During the *bloody week* J. Allemane remarked:

“The fighters prefer getting killed behind their miniscule entrenchments rather than invading houses, making holes in the walls to see and to shoot out of, making passageways which would protect them from encirclement.”

It's of no great surprise that the French section of the IWA, whose program was strongly influenced by Proudhon, had no intention of abolishing private property. Proudhon himself declared:

“I do not intend to suppress private property but instead to socialize it, that is, to reduce it into small enterprises and take away its power.”

When it came to the protection of that honored institution known as the Bank of France this respect for private property was especially detrimental. During all of these months it had never once been threatened. This was a clear expression of the Commune government's concerns: even the stock market rates were published every day in the government's *Journal Officiel*. No comment!

Later Jourde, who was quoted earlier in the text, would openly assume this policy of defending private property and financial institutions. Standing before the Versailles judges he declared:

“On my honor I affirm that I said to myself: if the Bank of France is touched then France will be lost. Yet the Bank had to give up some funds, otherwise the suburbs would rise up...”

At first glance it seems absurd not to have attacked the Bank of France in that it would have made for easy work. The proletariat was fully capable of carrying it out. After March 19th no force in Paris could have stopped such an attack, in any case not the miserable battalions grouping 430 National Guards. The Commune government's honor was intact. The world of money's most sacred place was revered! This incredible weakness was caused by the respect for private property. Varlin had put the question to the National Guard Central Committee which hurriedly voted: No! Of course not!... Ever since that moment nothing was being done in order to grab ahold of money. Money is the cold, impersonal, material expression of the proletariat's blood, sweat and tears. On April 1st some *Fédérés* robbed a city tax post at gunpoint and took its treasure chest. Varlin then protested, calling this act an “*usurpation of power*”

by a few Central Committee members.” Thus we can affirm, contrary to those who speak of the “error” of not attacking the Bank of France, that this was simply in full conformity with this government’s democratic nature.

J. Allemane could only condemn this position:

“While the Commune is in a position to take what it needs to win its delegates barely manage to get de Plœüc to part with 20 million [francs], and all the while Thiers, far from Paris, receives some 258 [million].”

Let it be made quite clear, Thiers had this sum collected with a horsedrawn carriage. The city tax made sure the circulation of commodities was safe and sound. Such submission to bourgeois society left this militant outraged. He concluded with this pertinent remark:

“This lack of audacity, born from the incomprehension of both the people and their elected officials, will be found each time one is to attack the privileges of the owners.”

Right after March 18th the seizure of the Bank of France would certainly have created a wave of panic in the ranks of the bourgeoisie. But as time went on the Thiers faction not only reinforced itself but it also benefited from the trust of bankers... and of Bismarck. We can even affirm that at one point the bourgeoisie could have sacrificed these billions as long as the capitalist social relationship was preserved.

Nevertheless there were militants who were perfectly conscious that the Bank of France had to be seized without a moment’s hesitation. The Blanquist militant, Trohel, wrote to Rigault on April 14th:

“[...] I would like to do away with the bourgeoisie once and for all. I see only one means of doing so: seizing the Bank of France [...] giving a 5000 franc bonus to every volunteer, taking care of the dead and wounded, shooting anyone who refused to march, sending 200 million to serve as a treasure chest for the International, immediately returning all of the objects in the municipal pawnshops [...] Time is running out. Revolutions, like the dead, go fast.”

The difficulty, the impossibility even, of organizing the seizure of the Bank of France can be explained by the weight of legalism. But an additional aspect was Beslay’s determination to defend it tooth and nail. There were several attempts to enter the Bank of France. These were not carried out in order to occupy it and kick out its director, de Plœüc, but simply to see if there were arms hidden there. This was the case on April 8th and May 12th. Rigault, Ferré and Cournet organized the latter, relying on the support of the volunteer battal-

ions *Flourens' avengers* and the *Garibaldiens*. In doing so they put themselves in opposition to the majority of the Commune government of which Beslay was a member. Beslay threatened to resign. Unfortunately these comrades remained prisoners to this government and these attempts did not amount to a permanent occupation! It wasn't until May 23rd that the Public Safety Committee would demand, with the threat of violence, that 500,000 francs be handed over. They received the money immediately. It is of no surprise that Beslay was compensated by the fiendish Thiers. He received a letter of safe-conduct to leave into exile while at the same time proletarians, unable to flee, had to count on their class brothers' solidarity in order to hide and to escape, risking their lives.

3.7 The public safety committees

The Commune government's image was getting tarnished as April went on. Display after display of combativity were stopped short because of the deliberate organization of defeat. Morale was low. The stakes were clear, getting the proletariat to lose its remaining strength and organizing the defeat.

Proletarians were infuriated by the constant shelling of the city by the Versailles troops which were stationed just a short distance away. They were exasperated by the lack of organization of the counter-attack, the lack of material, the contradictory orders, the positions which were won and then abandoned, the shortcomings in maintaining outposts, the shoddy surveillance of the ramparts...

On May 1st the Commune government established a Public Safety Committee. It was meant to control and head different commissions all in the name of a so-called greater efficiency in the struggle against Versailles. The Commune government purported to be carrying out a dictatorship so as to better counter-attack Versailles. In doing so it perpetuated the illusion that it had set itself to the task of defending Paris and of putting an end to the growing massacres such as that of some 200 *Fédérés* who had gotten their throats cut on May 3rd at Moulin-Sacquet by the Versailles troops. In fact it did nothing at all and the military setbacks accumulated: the fall of Clamart on May 2nd and that of the Issy fort on May 8th. It monopolized the initiative in finding an answer. In doing so it reinforced the proletariat's passivity, bringing it to expect this committee to save the day.

On the outside it appeared uncompromising. Its tone sought to be reassuring. Some even went so far as to mock the Versailles' pretention of taking back Paris any time soon. After having quickly ridiculed itself it was dissolved

on May 9th. The Commune government immediately began reorganizing it! The second Public Safety Committee had the same historical function as its predecessor, maintaining the Commune government's immobilism. This Public Safety Committee inaugurated its demagogic contribution by decreeing the demolition of Thiers' house! These different embryonic *seems ok* Public Safety Committees would never do anything but prolong the Central committee and Commune government's actions.

The struggles' objectives were so confused that very few of those who had contributed to the movement's direction during this year of struggle were able to distinguish themselves from the orientation the Commune government was giving. Most of the movement's leaders were either dead or else caught up in the parliamentary circus. Yet others such as Ferré, Eudes, and Rigault who had partially assumed the struggles' needs were incapable of giving a greater force to the meager beginnings of ruptures which the movement had shown.

In the middle of May the situation had evolved to such a point that a group of Blanquists, among whom were Eudes and Rigault, as well as some generals, such as Rossel, were thinking of an action through which to overthrow the Commune government. This project was never carried out for a lack of a real alternative. It seems that it was Rigault, conscious of its impossibility, who put an end to this project.

Some members of the Commune government opposed this Public Safety Committee and formed a minority group. But by remaining within the parliamentary framework they participated in the polarization of being for or against the Public Safety Committee and so only added to the confusion.

Most of the militants involved in the Commune government benefited from a certain prestige due to their revolutionary past. These same militants found themselves sucked deeper and deeper into the defense of private property and the management capital and they had started taking a liking to it. Not only were such militants lost to the cause of revolution but, worse still, they provided a leftist veneer to this bourgeois government and so contributed in preventing a perspective of rupture from developing.

Outbreak of struggles in the rest of France

While the deputies and their cronies were voting, endlessly blabbering and entertaining the proletariat with preposterous tricks in Paris... in the rest of the country there was a surge in struggles in April in solidarity with the struggle in Paris. The historian Albert Ollivier explains:

“In certain cities such as Rouen and Le Havre workers displayed their sympathy for Paris despite the instructions of the ‘left-wing’ parties. In Grenoble the crowd prevented the departure of troops and ammunition from leaving the train station and heading to Versailles. Demonstrators in Nîmes shouted “Long live the Commune! Down with Versailles!”. In Bordeaux the police were even fired upon. In Périgueux workers seized machine guns. In Varilhes there was an attempt at derailing a train which was bringing ammunition. For a few days the red flag flew in many towns and villages.”

The example of the struggle in Paris went on to inspire others. Proletarians in Rouen, in Le Havre, in Grenoble, in Nîmes, in Bordeaux, in Périgueux, in Varilhes... and in many others towns and villages recognized themselves in the struggle of the proletarians in Paris. This recognition was an enactment of the fact that the proletariat’s struggle, wherever it expresses itself, is one. Proletarians attacked and took over town halls and confronted troops to the shouts of “Long live the Commune! Down with Versailles!”. The real spread of the movement sprang from this basis of solidarity.

The development of any struggle inevitably leads to its extension to every city, region, and country! Going beyond Paris, destroying borders! An insurrectionary movement which remains confined to one place cannot resist joining the bourgeois forces which it will inevitably have to face. The only perspective is to break with isolation and to avoid at all costs falling into the trap of a front against front war in which the bourgeoisie will always have superior firepower. That’s why the spread of the movement was really so important, crucial.

This movement had been going on since March. The red flag had been flying in Lyon in the workers’ neighborhood *la Guillotière* ever since March 19th. This neighborhood had risen up against voting after the announcement of elections for March 30th which would consolidate the Versailles power. On the morning of March 30th National Guardsmen seized the ballot boxes and placed sentries at the entrance to the voting center. A revolutionary commission settled in the town hall. Military leaders ordered other battalions to attack but they soon found the troops were not reliable. Many soldiers disapproved of such an attack. They didn’t want to be soldiers on the side of Versailles. They were surrounded by an encouraging crowd and ended up breaking ranks. The 38th infantry regiment was ordered forwards. The crowd acted the same way as before, passing among the lines of soldiers, and begging them not to fire. The officers were compelled to march their troops back to the barracks. In the meantime proletarians were fortifying *la Guillotière* and building barricades.

The 38th regiment was back. But this time they were supervised by a battalion of chasseurs. Together they attacked. Then the *la Guillotière* battalions were disarmed.

Jeanne Gaillard wrote a short timeline of similar events. We have reproduced it here:

“**April 4th**: Demonstrators in Limoges tried to proclaim the Commune.

April 10th-11th: There was an insurrectional movement in La Charité-sur-Loire.

April 14th: Radicals and IWA members decide to support the Commune gun in hand.

April 15th-18th: There was an insurrectional movement in Cosne and in Saint-Amand (in the Cher département in the center of France).

April 16th: There were demonstrations throughout France against sending troops and ammunition to Versailles.

April 17th: 300 people marched in a demonstration in Bordeaux. The red flag flew in Cosne. Attempts were made at establishing a commune in Voiron, Tullins, and Saint-Marcellin.

April 19th: The red flag flew in Neuvy (in Nièvre).

April 30th: There was an attempt at insurrection in the faubourg de la Guillotière in Lyon. Caulet de Tayac and Dumont had been sent there by the Paris Commune to take part.

May 1st: A red flag flew on the front of the Montgaris Theater.

May 2nd-3rd: Commune partisans tried stopping trains in Varilhes (in Ariège).

May 7th-8th: Insurrectional movement in Montereau.

May 12th-15th: Commune emissaries tried making an uprising in Nièvre.

May 22nd: Trouble in Romans (in the Drôme).

May 24th: There was fighting in Vorion and Vienne.”

“On [April] 5th ... [...] The workmen of Rouen declared their adhesion to the Commune; [...] On the 16th April, at Grenoble, 600 men, women, and children went to the station to prevent the departure of the troops and munitions for Versailles. On the 18th, at Nimes, the people, headed by a red flag, marched through the town to the cry of ‘Vive la Commune! Vive Par-

is! Down with Versailles!’ On the 16th, 17th, 18th, there were disturbances at Bordeaux. Some police agents were imprisoned, some officers ill-treated, the infantry barracks pelted with stones, the people crying, ‘Vive Paris! Death to the traitors!’ The movement even spread to the agricultural classes. At Saincoin in the Cher, at the Charité-sur-Loire, at Pouilly in the Nièvre, the National Guards in arms carried about the red flag. Cosne followed on the 18th, Fleury-sur-Loire on the 19th. The red flag was permanently hoisted in the Ariege; at Foix they stopped the transport of the cannon; at Varilhes they tried to run the munition trains off the lines. At Périgueux, the workmen of the railway station seized the machine-guns.”

[...]

“With heart and soul the workmen of France were with Paris. The employees at the railway stations harangued the soldiers on their passage, adjuring them to raise the butt-ends of their guns; the official posters were torn down during the night. [...]”

Yet this spreading movement found its limit in the fact that it remained determined by the movement of struggle in Paris. Its gaze was set on Paris and it remained in wait of how things would go there. This prevented proletarians from these other cities from developing their own initiatives. It prevented them from understanding that solidarity isn’t just acting in the same way but it also means taking things further.

It’s in this respect that communalist ideology bore its great counter-revolutionary weight. Spontaneously the movement demanded nothing more than to spread beyond the walls of Paris, to carry out acts of fraternization with the proletarians on the Prussian side, while proletarians throughout all of Europe were holding their breath, waiting for news from Paris... the Commune government’s horizon remained limited to:

“The Commission will be in charge of keeping up friendly relations among the different communes of France, which should result in a federation.”

Or better still, on a similar note:

“The Commune will take care of local affairs. The département will take care of regional affairs. The government will take care of national affairs... Let us not go beyond this limit.”

There is no mention whatsoever of struggle, much less any mention of the unification of struggles. The government’s only concern seemed to be diplomacy. We will go further than Thalès who wrote of the Commune government

that “*the work was as weak as the method*” because this work was first of all criminal.

Was it time to reproach the Commune government for not seeking to spread the movement beyond Paris? Or to have organized it badly? There were a few emissaries. But what, in fact, did they do?

In his book, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871* Lissagaray harshly criticized Paschal Grousset and other heads of the Exterior Relations Commission:

“We could make powerful diversions in the center, in the east, in the west, in the south, causing trouble at train stations, blocking both reinforcements and artillery being sent to Versailles. The delegation [editor’s note: sent on April 6th] was satisfied with sending a few emissaries, who were both unknowledgeable and without authority. Some traitors even exploited the delegation by pocketing its money and handing its instructions to Versailles [...] This delegation, which had been especially created for exterior relations, had come to forget about the rest of the world. Throughout Europe the working class was enthusiastically taking in news from Paris. In their hearts they were fighting side by side with the great city which had become their own capitol. They held meetings, processions, speeches. Their newspapers, most of them far from wealthy, courageously fought against the libel of the bourgeois press. The delegation’s duty was to reinforce such precious auxiliaries. But it did nothing of the sort.”

The government remained loyal to itself and its program: communalism. From the very start its only concern was managing the affairs of the city of Paris.

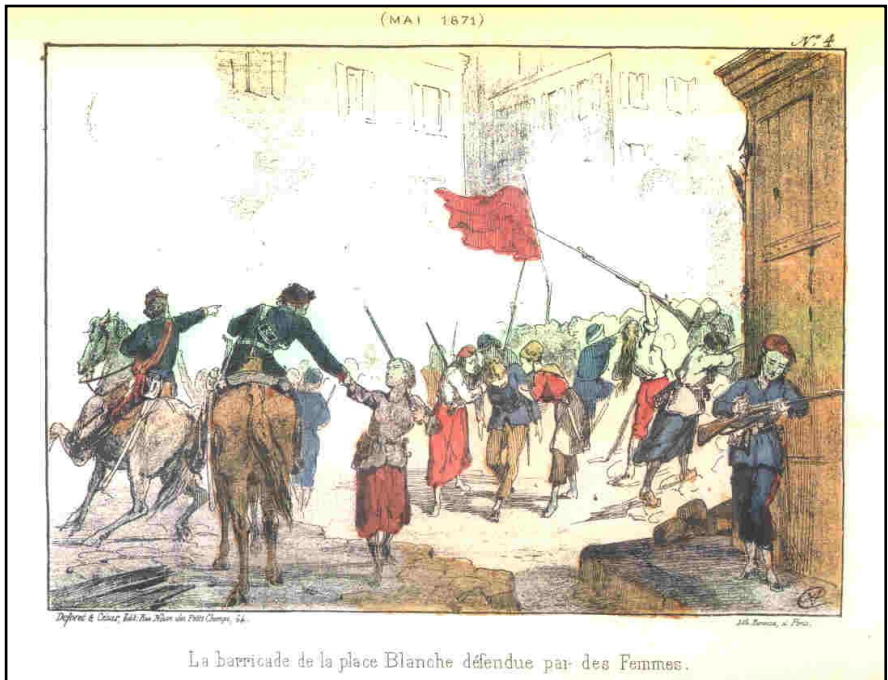
Managing the misery of daily life, all that just so as to confine the struggle to Paris and disarm proletarians... For this government it was out of the question to push towards the unification of struggles! If we take into account the concrete implications of communalist ideology support for this government appears downright criminal.

The Commune government didn’t understand what was at stake in spreading the struggle to the rest of the country. It couldn’t understand this endeavor and it sabotaged efforts to do so. The most lucid militants, prisoners to this governmental logic, didn’t grasp these struggles as a convergent dynamic but as simply additions to what was going on in Paris.

The Versailles government, however, had very well understood the question of this extension and the danger that it represented. It was visibly betting on the strategy which consists in breaking, dividing, and isolating. In order to

carry this out the control of the press and the means of communication played an important role. It was thanks to this control that Thiers was able to tell whatever he wanted whenever he wanted, lying and inventing all he wanted in regards to the events.

This was all the more the case for what was going on in Paris about which he had painted the most horrible picture possible in order to inspire disgust, fear, and rejection.



IV. The Defeat

4.1 The bloody week

“The political upheaval which has been unending in the last sixty years in France has led it to seriously consider the influence which Paris has had on her destiny. It would seem she is no longer inclined to bow before the ambition courts and the small army of rioters which have centered their propaganda on the capital so as to better exploit for themselves the moral and legitimate influence it bears on the rest of the country. The government’s most important goal is always to remain in control of the capital. If politics did not oblige it to act in such a way honor and humanity would nevertheless compel it to act according to this imperious law. To abandon the great city to the horrible tyranny of the riot would be a crime. So one must be capable of using any means which art and prevention may suggest in order to remain master of Paris.”

This text was written in 1849 by General Bugeaud. It was so explicit that the French State did not allow its publication until 1997. He had proved himself to be a butcher at the *Rue Trasonain* in 1834 ordering all of the inhabitants to be killed with bayonets. He acted much the same against insurgents in Algeria. He wrote too clearly about how to organize against the proletariat, basing himself particularly on the example of the repression of the June 1848 insurrection. It would have been to the proletariat’s advantage in Paris to have known just how determined the French State, personified by Thiers, was to reestablish order at any cost and by “*any means*”. We’re not going to quibble about whether or not Thiers wanted such a massacre. He wanted to wipe out the revolutionary perspective for a long time. He wanted to throw the red flag into oblivion. The objective was to put an end to the danger which the fiery proletarian class had shown itself capable of ever since 1789 and which had not yet been sufficiently put down!

This crushing was made possible by the coming together of two elements: the inflexible determination of the Thiers fraction to rebuild the army and clean Paris of the red vermin and the political disarming of the proletariat by the Commune government.

Yet Thiers did not accomplish this task easily. Lissagaray emphasized:

“What did Thiers have left on March 19th with which to govern France? He had neither an army nor a canon nor even the big cities.”

The situation was marked by the balance of forces which the proletariat had imposed in the insurrectionary period preceding March 18th. For example on April 13th seven detachments arrived in Paris. Two of them showed their support for the Commune. The others were undecided. What could be done to isolate Paris? What could be done to prevent the movement from spreading? How could the scattered troops be rebuilt into an army and sent to attack?

As we mentioned previously the staff headquarters got rid of its most uncontrollable regiments.

In addition to the disciplinary measures already mentioned now newspapers (such as *Le Gaulois* and *Le Soir*) now joined in the game of brainwashing soldiers with their sickening propaganda. These newspapers were distributed by the police and the *gendarmarie* even to the furthest positions. The objective was to create the portrait of an enemy worth hating, a foreigner, incarnating every vice. The objective was to destroy the idea that those fighting on the other side were brothers, cousins, or workmates. Any lie could be of use in order to reach this objective.

Staff headquarters called on reliable elements to supervise soldiers who felt little desire to go and fight. There were the *gendarmes* and the volunteers of the 1st Army corps who spearheaded all of the attacks and who showed how to massacre the *Fédérés* without a second thought. There were elements from the Faron division who had stayed on the sidelines of the March 18th insurrection. There were the marines and an elite company of scouts. *Gendarmes* were called on to supervise the troops. Blanqui's remark on soldiers in his *Manual for an Armed Insurrection* was exact:

“In civil disorders, with rare exceptions soldiers march only with loathing, by force and brandy. They would like to be elsewhere and more often look behind than ahead. But an iron hand retains them as slaves and victims of a pitiless discipline; without any affection for authority, they obey only fear and are lacking in any initiative. A detachment which is cut off is a lost detachment. The commanders are not unaware of this, and worry above all to maintain communication between all their forces. This need ends up monopolizing a sizeable portion of their manpower.”

That was Mr. Thiers' job, getting soldiers ready to march and to kill, march and not retreat, “*take no prisoners*” as the military says, shooting disarmed proletarians, killing the wounded, continuing their dirty work as they wallow in blood, walking on the intestines of those whom they killed with their own hands. The goal was to make them incapable of ever feeling they were the brothers of those who fell, to make them feel foreign to the struggle carried out by their class brothers.

Nevertheless Thiers took steps to prevent the prolonged contact between the troops and the Paris population²⁹. Despite all of the brainwashing soldiers only marched with a gun at their backs, fearing that it would be their turn to be shot if they refused to carry out this filthy job. At that moment they found themselves caught up in a system which was even more difficult to get out of.

But it's important to emphasize that even at this stage in the events it was still possible to break ranks, to be disgusted by such cruelty, to be aware of the carnage. It was still possible to turn against those who consider the foot soldier to be nothing more than cannon fodder, who give the orders, who count the dead, who coldly calculate the gains and losses, who define the political objectives of the massacre and as a result move up in the military hierarchy. It was still possible to quit marching, to refuse to fight. Throw down one's gun? That would've been simply suicidal. At this point in the movement of troops the only possibility was to turn one's guns against one's officers, making sure not to be shot in the back, organizing mutiny and giving another course to the confrontation: organizing the defeat of one's own army and the fraternization with the camp which had until then been referred to as the *enemy*.

Thiers' army had wanted this army to be "*the best that France had ever had*". The difference lay in the fundamental determination between the officers and the soldiers. The former were looking to be promoted. The latter were nothing but cannon fodder. The former were the instigators, the strategists, the planners of massacre. The latter were beasts of burden, doing the dirty work, masses to be maneuvered and manipulated and ready to make any sacrifice. We in no way wish to excuse the soldiers guilty of having participated in this immense operation of social pacification, of having gotten up to their necks in this massive killing. But it is nevertheless important to emphasize that for soldiers there always exists the possibility to mutiny, to break ranks, to upset the balance of forces, and to join the side of those in revolt.

This shows the irresponsibility of all of the revolutionary militants, of all of the active proletarians, who didn't go, after March 18th and during the two following months, to meet these proletarians dressed in loathsome uniforms who had shown on several occasions that they weren't spontaneously attached to the counter-revolution's bloody project. It turned out that the Versailles troops, freshly reorganized, beaten into shape, submitted, weren't considered to be reliable up until the end of the massacre.

²⁹ "*Vinoy ordered that the men should be lodged apart from the public, 'in the interests of discipline', and he advised MacMahon to withdraw the bulk of the troops to Versailles, as longer contact with the Parisians could have 'the most undesirable results'.*" in *The War Against Paris*, Robert Tombs.

The Commune government's bombastic calls towards the brothers forced into being soldiers for Versailles, while the troops had already entered Paris, were simply criminal in that nothing had been done so as to make such a call into a reality. On the contrary it kept the illusion going that the mere mention of the Commune's greatness would be sufficient to push the Versailles soldiers into the arms of the *Fédérés* despite the precedent massacres which had been publicized in the *Journal Officiel* as well as in newspapers such as *Le Cri du Peuple*.

Ever since April Thiers had been negotiating with Bismarck for the liberation of prisoners and the permission to constitute an army in order to lay siege to Paris. Simply put, the siege of Paris was made up on the eastern side by the Prussian armies and on the western side by the Versailles armies.

The May 10th peace agreement allowed Thiers to definitively remove all of the troops and bring them back to Versailles, to facilitate the return of prisoners, particularly the loyal ones such as officers and special forces such as the *fusiliers marins* and the marine infantry, which could be depended on to help keep the less reliable troops in line. He had shown himself quite capable of neutralizing revolt of the rebellious troops in the rest of France through a variety of means: isolation, alcohol, keeping them busy, sending them off to Algeria. In five weeks he managed to increase his army from 25,000 to 170,000 men. Towards the end of April the Versailles army became operational.

The agreement with Bismarck clearly shows how different bourgeois factions can put aside their differences and act together when it's a question of fighting the main enemy: the proletariat in arms. The supreme interest of capital expresses itself beyond the competing interests of different bourgeois factions. Above all the danger of revolution is to be eradicated. Forces had to be united against the proletariat. From that point on Thiers was clearly in charge. He was only waiting for the right moment to deal out the finishing blow.

On May 21st at 3 pm the Versailles army entered Paris through the Point du Jour gate which had been completely abandoned. The *Garde nationale de l'Ordre* (policemen and *gendarmes*) carried out the first organized massacres as well as those which would soon follow. It worked with method. First there was a military advance so as to conquer a series of important positions. Then policemen and *gendarmes* who knew the city well would carry out searches and arrests based on lists which had been prepared in advance. They pointed out to the soldiers those who were to be taken away to specific locations and locked up before being shot. Summary tribunals called *prévôts* were set up in the city as the troops advanced. They were set up at *Châtelet*, in barracks such

as *Lobau* and *Dupleix*, in prisons such as *La Roquette*, and other places such as *l'Ecole polytechnique*, the *gare du Nord* and the *gare de l'Est*, the *Jardins du Luxembourg*, and the *Jardin des Plantes*.

At first the proletariat, surprised by the attack, put up no resistance. The noise of the firing squads in *parc Monceau* shed them of their illusions stirred them into action. They began to resist valiantly. They didn't have a general plan for defense but they managed to back one another up by calling out to proletarians from other neighborhoods. It was at this precise moment, on May 22nd, that Delescluze, the civil delegate to the Ministry of War, after having refused to acknowledge the presence of the Versailles troops in the city and after having refused that a call to arms be made, signed the following proclamation in the name of the Public Safety Committee:

“Enough of militarism! No more general staff decorated with medals on every stitch. Make way for the people, for the downtrodden! The time for revolutionary war has come. The people know nothing of learned strategies. But when they have a gun in their hands and cobblestones under their feet they have no fear of all of the monarchist school’s strategists.”

As to the practical means by which to carry this out... Nothing!

We're not going to quote the whole loathsome text. In a nutshell it ends up saying “*to each his own neighborhood*” and to each his own load of shit. This only heightened the general disorganization and made things easier for Versailles. Blanqui, having learned some lessons from the insurrection in June 1848, wrote the following in his [*Manual for an Armed Insurrection*](#):

“Both armies are in position. Let us look at their maneuvers. Here will be laid bare the vice of popular tactics, the undoubted cause of the disaster.

Neither direction nor general command, not even coordination between the combatants. Each barricade has its particular group, more or less numerous, but always isolated. Whether it numbers ten or one hundred men, it does not maintain any communication with the other positions. Often there is not even a leader to direct the defense, and if there is, his influence is next to nil. The fighters do whatever comes into their head. They stay, they leave, they return, according to their good pleasure. In the evening, they go to sleep.

Nothing is known of what is happening elsewhere and they do not trouble themselves further. Rumors circulate, some black, some rosy. They listen peaceably to the cannons and the gunfire, while drinking at the wine merchants. As for sending relief to the positions under attack, there is not even the thought of it. “Let each defend his post, and all will be well,” say the

strongest. This singular reasoning is because the majority of the insurgents fight in their own district, a capital fault which has disastrous consequences, in particular the denunciation by their neighbors, after the defeat. [...]

This is how one perishes through absurdity!

When, thanks to such grave faults, the great Parisian revolt of 1848 was shattered like glass by the most pitiful of governments, what catastrophe should we not fear if we begin again with the same stupidity, before a savage militarism, which now has in its service the recent conquests of science and technology: railways, the electric telegraph, rifled cannon, the breech-loading rifles?"

It's a pity this text hadn't been pondered over in time.

Along the same lines the National Guard Central Committee published a poster on May 24th (!) calling for reconciliation with Versailles, after having specified that its true enemy had always been civil war. They were bastards to the very end!

We're not going to go over this awful week in detail as that would imply describing all of the different military operations which resulted in the defeat. At the end, when it was too late, the proletariat showed its strength and courage. The resistance in the red neighborhoods was the most determined. Facing atrocious repression the proletariat didn't hesitate to set fire to certain buildings which were of great historical significance for the bourgeoisie as well as places of centralization for the State: *les Tuileries, le Palais Royal, la Préfecture de Police, l'Hôtel de ville, le palais de la Légion d'honneur, le Conseil d'Etat, la Cour des Comptes, le Ministère des Finances,...* From May 25th on the *Fédérés* in the red neighborhoods such as Belleville, Ménilmontant, and la Villette were capable of renewing with the most energetic combat methods and carrying out a strategy to defend themselves thus linking themselves to the strength of the 1848 fighting.

During this same period, on May 26th, proletarians who'd had enough of the ongoing massacres went to the prisons to seek out the priests, *gendarmes*, cops, spies... and shot about sixty of them at Rue Haxo. Blanquist militants also made their share of executions. On May 23rd Rigault had Chaudey shot for his responsibility, which he assumed until the very end, in the shooting at *l'Hôtel de Ville* on January 22nd. On May 24th Ferré signed an order for the execution of six hostages. In doing so they were acting completely outside of and against most of the members of the Commune government. Pacifistic ideology was so strongly implanted among these politicians that they tried to

oppose such acts of vengeance and in doings so had to stand the chance of being shot themselves!

It's awful to see a militant like Varlin opposing the execution of cops and priests when we know that he himself would later be dragged through the streets of Paris for hours, beaten, mutilated, and then shot by Versailles. Leniency towards the enemy is a fatal mistake!³⁰

Although these were the sorts of acts which should have been carried on since a long time it was too late for these executions to have any impact on the advance of the Versailles troops.

*“He [Thiers] knew that his shells were setting Paris on fire, that the massacre of the prisoners, of the wounded, would fatally entail that of the hostages. But what cared he for the fate of a few priests and a few gendarmes? What cared the bourgeoisie if it triumphed amidst ruins — if on these ruins it could write, ‘Socialism is finished! Finished for a long time!’”*³¹

Of course, the bourgeoisie jumped at the opportunity to point to these bursts of counter-terror in order to demonize proletarians, to slander the militants who reacted to the advancing tide of Versailles troops... while this same bourgeoisie, in the name of the defense of civilization, organized a systematic massacre. Here is what Jean Allemande had to say to those who believed this propaganda:

“To the sensitive souls who will read these lines and who, quite without reason, would accuse the revolutionaries of dwelling on thoughts of massacre, we answer by inviting them to reread their history, and not just the parts relating the horrors of the bloody week, but instead the parts in which the privileged, facing the working class’s demands, drowned thousands of these miserable in their own blood.”

Social-democratic literature has always put special emphasis on the bloody week, making a detailed, morbid description of the massacres carried out by Versailles. It particularly emphasizes the atrocities, inherent to this type of repression, carried out by the Versailles soldiers full of hatred against proletarians. In doing so this bourgeois framework puts forth an interpretation which favors seeing the massacres as totally blind, void of any precise objective.

³⁰ Vallès, in a crisis of bourgeois humanity, reproached a Fédéré for having shot an archbishop. The latter answered him *“You see, citizen, my bullet really did make a hole in heaven!”*. This proletarian illustrated our class position on religion, the secret of which can be pierced through a critique by arms.

³¹ Lissagaray, History of the Paris Commune of 1871.

Thus the full responsibility is put on the soldiers alone. We can see an illustration of this thesis in the following quote:

“The soldiers, exasperated by the siege under the eyes of the enemy, by the war fought in the streets and the attacks by fire... came to dismiss the insurgents as murderers and incendiaries. The official order to take prisoners of those who surrendered was not observed.” (Robert Tombs: *“The war against Paris”*)

It would be wrong to content oneself with a simplistic explanation of an *“excessive fury”* which took hold of the soldiers. Viewing things this way leads one to be silent as to the fact that this massacre had been thought out, planned, organized, for weeks by the Versailles general staff. The latter had been organizing the National Guards of Order who had remained in Paris ever since April 1st. It has also sent agents, spies, troublemakers, skillful at spreading fake news and rumors, committing acts of sabotage, provoking defection... and bringing the knowledge of the layout of the barricades in Paris back to Versailles. Several of them held official positions: one of them, quite audacious, presented himself at the Ministry of War and was named head of the 7th légion while another was put in charge of a munitions depot. Conspiring abbots and priests showed themselves to be quite capable of stirring up hatred among the soldiers sent to “clean up” Paris.

“Staff officers, service chiefs, fond of assuming consequential airs, discussed the most delicate matters in the cafés of the boulevards, full of spies.”

“It was butchery, nothing more, nothing less. At other places the prisoners were conducted before the provost courts, with which Paris swarmed since the Monday. These had not sprung up at random, and, as has been believed, in the midst of the fury of the struggle. It was proved before the courts-martial that the number and seats of these provost courts, with their respective jurisdictions, had been appointed at Versailles before the entry of the troops.”

The majority of those who were killed had been sentenced to death at court martials before being sent before firing squads. Some, but far fewer, died in the relentless fighting. Mac-mahon, Cissey, Douay, Vabre, Dorel, Bruat, Gallifet, under the sinister authority of Thiers, were the ones truly responsible for the massacre. They are the ones who coldly calculated, estimated, and organized the systematic extermination of the insurgents.

This cold and impersonal killing was the fruit of a real political will. In this respect it inaugurated a new era of scientific repression. This massacre provid-

ed lessons for future generations of officers learning how to radically carry out repression in an urban setting, how to pull evil up by the roots.

It's clear that even such a wide elimination of all of those who participated in the movement, particularly targeting the most combative and influential sectors of the proletariat, does not do away with evil. Repression may, for a time, annihilate the strength to fight. But it only pushes back the moment when the bell shall toll not for the revolt against this system, but against this system which generates ever more war, misery...

Repression is in measure to the bourgeoisie's fear of losing its power and to the measure of the strength of the revolution in turning its world upside down. Repression's objective is double. In the short term, it seeks to destroy the revolutionary wave which rises up like a fever, breaking with national consensus, spreading, becoming more substantial, and seeking the fall of the State. In the long term, it seeks to reinforce the principle of authority so dear to the State, through the reorganization and perfection of repressive corps – armed forces, the police, judicial and social control – as a potential force, a permanent threat, ready to be released at the first sign of revolutionary upheaval.

After 1871 social-democracy, in accepting this dominant force, materialized in different national sectors carrying out its function and rejecting the perspective of the destruction of the old world through insurrectional violence. In the majority of its written documents and in its first public commemorations after 1878 social-democracy laid out the horrors committed by the counter-revolution (without, of course, referring to the criminal responsibility of the Commune government) while putting forth its pacifistic political strategy, the central axis of which was the conquest of political power... through the ballot box. But riots, barricades, and other such violent confrontations with the State are presented as out of date and just barely worthy of being presented in a museum of what is no more and which could be referred to from time to time so as to emphasize the un pitying repression which followed each time. That's a good reason to get rid of these useless practices, isn't it? All of social-democracy's practice comes down to reinforcing the State and its monopoly on terror.

The only answer to the massacre and to the fear which the bourgeoisie tries to drive so deeply into us, to social-democracy's pacifying humanism, is to break bourgeois power by revindicating revolutionary violence. This is what Marx wrote in the New Rhenan Gazette on November 7th 1848, after the massacres in Paris in June and in Vienna in October:

“The purposeless massacres perpetrated since the June and October events, the tedious offering of sacrifices since February and March, the very cannibalism of the counterrevolution will convince the nations that there is only one way in which the murderous death agonies of the old society and the bloody birth throes of the new society can be shortened, simplified and concentrated, and that way is revolutionary terror.”

The Cannibalism of Counter-revolution

During the fighting against the Versailles army prior to the beginning of the bloody week there were: 3,000 dead.

During the bloody week: between 15,000 and 35,000 dead according to different historians, manipulating the numbers so as to defend one partisan interpretation over another of the repression.

Imprisoned in ships, prisons, or other places: 20,000. At least a thousand of the latter died there.

13,700 sentences to do stretches, for some, up to 9 years.

Deported: 3,859. Dozens died during each voyage and hundreds died of desperation in New Caledonia.

We must also refer to a commonly “forgotten” fact: the presence of 120 deported Algerians involved in the 1871 insurrection in Algeria, as well as that of Aurès in 1876, and that of Bou-Amama in 1881. They would not be given amnesty until dozens of years after the deported from mainland France had received theirs!

The catalogue of Versailles’s atrocities is long and varied: massacre of prisoners, of Fédérés who were caught gun in hand, or sometimes just on the basis of having blackened hands or a red shoulder which may have felt the impact of a rifle’s recoil. Women suspected of being “pétroleuses” (fire bomb throwers) were massacred. Firemen suspected of having started fires in Paris, and especially guilty of remaining in the city after March 18th, were massacred. The wounded as well as the medical personnel were massacred. In a nutshell, the proletariat was massacred, guilty of storming heaven: *“a [holy terror] colonel had Lévêque the mason, member of the National Guard Central Committee, shot. The officer later expressed his indignant surprise: ‘A mason who wanted to govern France!’”* That pretty much sums up the bourgeois’ contempt, its indignation at seeing proletarians take responsibility within the movement of the destruction of the old world. What more can we say about the massacres?

Let us not forget the lesson which the bourgeoisie had taught us: “*The soil of Paris is covered with their corpses. We may hope this terrible spectacle may yet be a lesson to those insurgents who dared declare themselves partisans of the Paris Commune.*” Adolphe Thiers, May 25th 1871.

A few acts of proletarian resistance despite the terror

What acts of proletarian solidarity were there while the Versailles repression was coming down, while the carnage was at its hardest, in May and June 1871? Some of these acts were carried out by proletarians under their German army uniforms. Such acts were rare yet real. Certain communards had been able to flee the bloodbath thanks to these other proletarians who disobeyed orders, renewing with class reflexes such as internationalism. Let us quote from Engels in his 1891 introduction to *The Civil War in France*:

“The Prussian troops, surrounding the north-eastern half of Paris had orders not to allow any fugitives to pass; but the officers often shut their eyes when the soldiers paid more obedience to the dictates of humanity than to those of the Supreme Command...”

But were the acts of a small minority. The majority of Prussian soldiers contributed in the repression by stopping those trying to flee. Sometimes they lay traps for them by dressing up in Red Cross uniforms, for example, or by making them believe they would help them!

In Paris a number of heroic acts allowed for communards to escape from repression be it momentarily or definitely. Indeed, the cops were actively looking for those who hadn’t fled prior to May 21st and who had fought until the very end. They owed their safety to those courageous few who had hidden them, be it for an hour, a day, or a week.

We may take note of these proletarian reactions in the working class neighborhoods after the bloody week. Soldiers and officers’ of Thiers’ army were sometimes shot at as late as July. Even a general almost got his as he stood outside of a barracks! The Versailles newspapers could not understand “*what reason, even the most futile, of hatred one could have for soldiers who had the most inoffensive look in the world.*”³²

Thousands were in exile, mostly in Switzerland and in England. They were given a brotherly welcome by the IWA militants who helped them to survive by providing them with a place to stay and finding them work.

³² Lissagaray, History of the Paris Commune of 1871.

4.2 Another aspect of the counter-revolution

It's necessary to remember that most French writers at the time were on the side of Versailles.

The bourgeoisie's fear for the specter of communism was very poetically expressed by these delicate human beings. Let's quote from a few of them:

Leconte de Lisle: *“At last it is over. I hope the repression will be such that nothing will move again. As for me, I would desire for this repression to be quite radical.”*

Anatole France: *“At last the government of crime and madness is rotting at this hour upon the execution field.”*

Gustave Flaubert: *“I believe the entire Commune should have been sentenced to the galleys and these bloody imbeciles should have been forced to pick up the pieces of Paris with a chain around their necks like galley slaves.”*

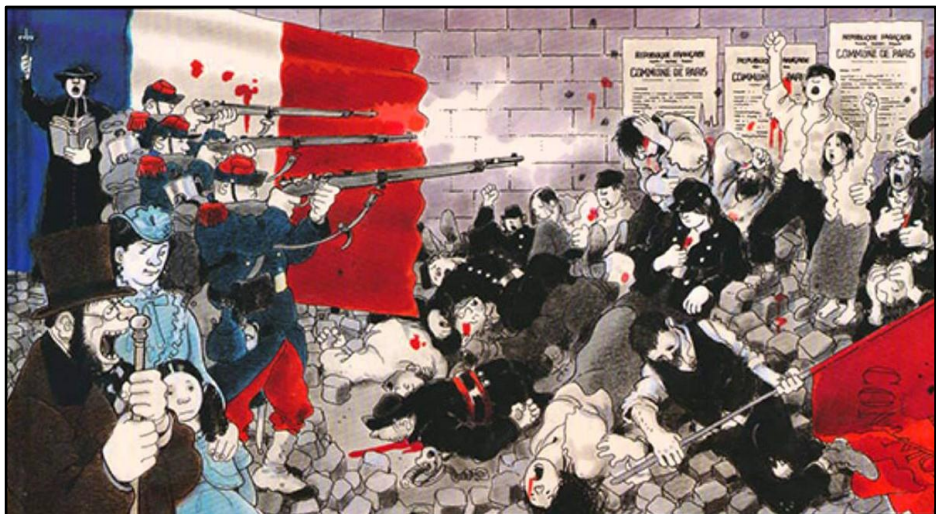
Georges Sand was pro-Versailles through and through. She had shown the way to go after April 6th and the unfortunate sortie made by the *Fédérés*, by writing *“Everything is going well for Versailles. The Fédérés' collapse is complete. There is still thieving going on and there are still arrests taking place in Paris. We cannot mourn the crushing of such demagoguery.”*

Emile Zola, the legend, was a *“socialist despite himself”* according to the Stalinist Barbusse. He's seen as a defender of the workers with his descriptions of miners' working conditions in *Germinal*. He truly adored misery. He was never anything but an enemy for the proletariat once the latter started calling bourgeois order into question. On April 19th he wrote *“Oh, how much does one truly desire the Versailles troops assault so as to free Paris.”* On May 24th he continued *“... may the work of purification take place...”* Finally on May 30th he decided to write a little moral lesson: *“the bloodbath which the people of Paris have just undergone was perhaps a horrible necessity so as to calm certain fevers. Now you may see them grow up in wisdom and in splendor.”*³³

After all of this literary rot let us now give you a purifying breath of fresh air. The bloody week was barely over when Eugène Pottier, hiding from the Versailles killers, wrote a song of hope for all of humanity:

³³ Julie Moens, Zola, l'imposteur.

*No more deluded by reaction,
On tyrants only we'll make war!
The soldiers too will take strike action,
They'll break ranks and fight no more!
And if those cannibals keep trying,
To sacrifice us to their pride,
They soon shall hear the bullets flying,
We'll shoot the generals on our own side.*



Conclusion

5.1 Elements of conclusion

“February 1848

May this date be for us a salutary warning. May this victory, so quickly turned into defeat, this stillborn triumph at least serve as a lesson to us.

Oh! Many were saying, on the very eve, that today isn't like in 1830. The people was not going to let a bunch of political physicists steal away the Revolution. The people knows what public speech is worth. You'd have to be plenty clever to fool it with a trick of slight of hand by which it could be shown, for an instant, “the best of republics”. It would just take the time to show it before letting it disappear again, saying “Good people, generous people, magnanimous people, heroes for three days, brave comrades, each and every one of you has a place in my heart.” and other fatuous remarks of the same kind. Ha! Ha!... Ha! Yes, indeed, one added, this time will not be like the others. We've got experience on our side. And it's a lesson which has cost us dearly! A victorious insurrection had come and all the more so it was in our favor. Oh vanity and popular ignorance! The boasting of slaves fashioned under the yoke! February 24th came. Barricades covered Paris. Victorious insurgents covered the barricades. It was not the next day, but that very same day, that the Revolution was stolen under the noses of the combatants. In 1848 just as in 1830 one put one's back into it. But this time around just like the previous time our backs were broken. In its insurrectional outburst the multitude like a mighty horse had smashed the yoke. It stamped on the ground braying its cry of freedom. They believed they had finished with servitude. Ephemeral illusion! A soon to be punished presumption! It needed only to be grabbed by the bride, the bit grating against its teeth, and hitched up again to the ancient chariot of the State.

And that is not all! May the people once more rear up and kick, knock its imperial robe to the ground. Then tomorrow perhaps! Before the sun has even set, alas! It will once more go back to its passive obedience, tamed by chatterboxes, the sting of sentences, the horsemanship of some Franconi dressed for riding pants, wearing the vest of Robespierre, and the hat of the Regency!”

– Joseph Déjacque – 1857

That's what could truly be taken as a very precise premonition. Indeed, how is it that in 1871 once more insurgents were taken in by the grand speeches at public squares, the forceful words, and all of the empty promises? But to content ourselves with the above assessment would be to willfully ignore that between the first clashes and the bloody week the movement had undergone a development, an intensification of its class contradictions. We cannot sweep all of this under the rug with the pretext that in the end the movement was defeated.

Doing so would be forgetting that in 1871 the proletariat imposed a balance of forces which threatened the State at its very foundations.

Doing so would be omitting that soldiers had not only refused to fire on the insurgents but even more had pointed their guns in the air before turning them on the officers who had ordered them to fire.

Doing so would be omitting the insurrectional movement which culminated on March 18th before ending with the scattering the final regiments remaining in Paris.

Doing so would be denying that in France in 1871 it was the proletariat who put an end to the imperialist war in which the French and Prussian empires were ready to be swallowed up. The proletariat had imposed a balance of forces which compelled the French State and the Prussian State to abandon their bellicose projects. The two belligerent factions were compelled to give up their respective positions and to elaborate a peace agreement so as to fight the proletarian insurrection which tended to generalize across the whole of France. The bourgeoisie had to put aside its particular dissensions, its competing aims, and unify its efforts as it faced the rising revolutionary movement. The main enemy had become the proletarian insurrection and so its objective was to overcome the revolution and to destroy the perspective of communism.

There was a great outburst calling the old world into question but its very limits dramatically led it to its defeat.

The bourgeoisie was weakened and nearly scattered... The proletariat had risen up not only in Paris but in a number of different cities in France. Yet no measures were taken until April 2nd so as to consolidate the balance of forces which had been won on March 18th. No measure was taken so as to spread the struggle, to keep the initiative amidst the scattering of the armed forces, in order to defend insurgent Paris!

As we have already emphasized the army was in state of total confusion. There were acts of indiscipline, refusals to obey orders, signs of disrespect for hierarchy... and they were multiplying. But none took advantage of these

signs of the army's decomposition so as to organize the army's long term defeat and to rally together the regiments which were still hesitating to join the revolution once and for all. It's in this sense that pursuing the bourgeois forces on their flight to Versailles had its full importance. Some positions were expressed in this sense but they were poorly organized and remained few and far between. Attempts to carry out this necessary measure – such as the April 3rd sortie – were done under the assumption that they could count on the Commune government's support.

The reaction on April 3rd was already very late. Two weeks had gone by during which Thiers was busy. He'd been negotiating with Bismarck so as to recuperate the troops being held prisoner on the Prussian side. He'd been organizing the siege of Paris. He'd been forcing the rest of France to adhere to his project of putting down the insurrection and taking back Paris. He did so by carrying out repression against those other Communes which were springing up here and there as well as by using intrigue against the bourgeois fractions which questioned his authority.

Militants who sought to break the movement's confinement to Paris and take back the offensive were hindered by the National Guard Central Committee's, and later the Commune government's, politics. They ended up acting against these structures' orders but without clearly assuming the fact that in order to fully carry out these initiatives nothing short of a clear rupture was necessary. They persevered in the idea that such structures would support them in the end, that it was only a question of a poor coordination of decisions, of poor communication, of the incompetence of particular people...

Worse still, after the disaster of the April 3rd sortie, the militant who had spearheaded this initiative and who made it back – many of them having lost their lives – did not draw the lessons of this defeat.

Not only in France but internationally class contradictions brought countless impulsions to struggle to appear here and there, as we emphasized in the introduction. But *the proletariat was not conscious of its strength*. There lies the key to all of the revolution's radical development, stemming from instinctive class action and moving to a deeper consciousness of the struggle. That's why this type of generous expression of proletarian fiber affirms each time more strongly the necessity of the militant work of clarification of the movement's objectives, of the revolutionary preparation of the insurrection. This task was partially assumed by militant forces during the movement.

Despite the terrible limits present in their actions it's important to emphasize the decisive presence of militants in the movement. They had been organizing for a long time. They were accustomed to fighting. They were rich with

past experiences. At times they were able to contribute to a qualitative leap in setting the classes apart.

5.2 Notes on the IWA, the Blanquists, and other militants

In a struggle of this scale it isn't easy to determine which were the strongest moments, where, when, and how they took place. Which were the most advanced points of rupture with the national consensus and how were these ruptures crystallized, structured, and organized by the forces which expressed them? In other words, how did the proletariat, emerging out of the cesspool of nationalism, the pit of social-democracy, manage to affirm itself as a class, manage to affirm its own dynamic, and organize itself as a force, as a party.

In order to determine the places and the structures where revolutionary energies were expressed and organized we ought to start by eliminating the judgments – and there are many of them – in which sanctions are made against different actions purely on the basis of the formal membership of the militants or groups of militants which carried them out – belonging to such a current, such an association, such a party...

The experience of the Commune showed us very clearly that the IWA's mark just as for the Blanquist militants' mark was not always synonymous with radical rupture from the Commune government's program. So it is important not to content ourselves with titles, flags, self-proclaiming, or even the presence of such or such political entity or such or such militant in order to analyze an event, an action, a confrontation, or a position.

It is important to start from the real movement of class confrontation from which militant forces emerge. At times these forces may bear decisive ruptures, contributing to a qualitative leap in marking the dividing line between the classes and their fundamentally opposed objectives. At other times these forces may get mixed up in pacifistic consensus, thus contributing to the general confusion and the proletariat's loss of autonomy.

We reject all analysis which refuses to recognize a revolutionary character in the proletariat's expressions except for when these expressions make an explicit reference to their own ideological prejudices. For example, Marxist ideology defends the Paris federation of the IWA as *the* representative of the party of the proletariat in the Commune, because of its membership in the IWA of which Marx was a part.

This way of proceeding prevents one from making any evaluation of the direction which the IWA Paris federation militants were defending. It also pre-

vents one from taking into consideration any expression or movement which, without belonging to the IWA, may have, at some time, shown itself to be of a clearer perception. The point of view which we denounce does not base itself on different militants' real practice but only on their membership in such or such current, association, party. This is essentially idealist in that its starting point is the idea (having been conceived beforehand) of the movement rather than the movement itself.

However, we try to evaluate the most clairvoyant and organized forces of the proletariat based on their capacity or incapacity to affirm the proletariat's revolutionary essence, its social project which by its very nature is the negation in act of the existing social order – the abolition of classes, of labor, of capital, of State – and the affirmation of the need for communism – a society without money, without exchange, without private property... a reaffirmation of the human community.

Concretely, in that at the beginning of a class confrontation the dominant ideology is that of the dominant class, the clarification of the proletariat's revolutionary objectives is always undertaken by minorities.

The evaluation of the proletariat's effort at organizing consists then in the evaluation of the real capacity of these minorities to put forth proletarian objectives in the struggle, making the movement of the abolition of the existing order clearer. More concretely, concerning the movement in France in 1870-71 we wish to evaluate the revolutionary minorities' capacity to distinguish themselves from republican bourgeois forces, from the Commune government and to evaluate their capacity to develop the proletariat's autonomy, to work towards the extension of the movement, to centralize different expressions of struggle into one single expression, to organize the insurrection against all bourgeois forces present.

Different forces and structures of militant energy came out of this movement. Some of them existed beforehand such as the IWA Paris federation and the Blanquist militants. Others rose up out of the immediate context such as the revolutionary clubs, Vigilance Committees, National Guard Red Battalions, Belleville Sharpshooters, Flourens' Avengers, Union of Women for the Defense of Paris... Each of these forces, as well as their totality, expressed the process of the constitution of the party of the proletariat.

Those who are sometimes called the "party-less" militants or groups of militants are also a part of this process. They may not have been members of a precise organization but their presence, their dynamism, their acts, their positions are part of the multiple concrete expressions of this process.

Not all of the forces in this process have the same importance, the same impact, the same responsibility.

In that the Blanquists and the Paris federation of the IWA had been constituted before the movement's explosion in Paris and in that they had benefited from the experience of past struggles on both a national and an international level they bore a greater responsibility for how the movement's force would express and organize itself.

That is why we are going to take the time and the space here, in addition to what we've already developed in the previous chapters, to analyze these two militant forces more closely – their strengths, their limits, and above all their practice during the movement, their capacity to galvanize the proletariat's forces, to clarify the movement's objectives, to go further in the rupture between nationalism and internationalism, between republic and revolution.



The *International Working Men's Association* constituted an attempt by the proletariat to give itself a common international direction. It was extremely important to give a material response to the need to centralize struggles beyond borders. Despite the fact that it only concerned the so-called civilized world it was the strongest expression of proletarian internationalism in the 19th century.

It was precisely this dimension which frightened the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie led an international campaign starting in May 1871, hunting down all of the IWA's militants, seeking to destroy this threat. This reaction was much more an expression of the fear inspired by the potential force of a united proletariat, much more than of what the IWA really succeeded in organizing. For the bourgeoisie what was at stake was far more than just destroying the perspective of each conflict which it did easily so long as it remained isolated. What was at stake was the destruction of the proletariat's confidence in its capacity to organize itself and oppose the bourgeoisie as an international force – indeed, it was a question of destroying the very idea of proletarian internationalism structured as a powerful force.

The repression against militants of the German branch of the IWA who had, in July 1870, demonstrated their opposition to the Franco-Prussian War is an example. Affirming proletarian internationalism on both sides of the border at the moment of the general mobilization of the bourgeois armies and the war which Bismarck and Napoleon III were about to carry out was a matter of court-martial for the bourgeoisie.

Marx had finished writing the first “Address of the General Council of the IWA on the Franco-Prussian War” on July 23rd, eight days after France and Germany had plunged the proletariat into war. The text emphasized certain selections from resolutions which had been adopted by German workers such as the following:

“We are happy to grasp the fraternal hand stretched out to us by the workmen of France. Mindful of the watchword of the International Working Men’s Association: Proletarians of all countries, unite, we shall never forget that the workmen of all countries are our friends and the despots of all countries our enemies.”

“We,” they say, “join with heart and hand your protestation... Solemnly, we promise that neither the sound of the trumpets, nor the roar of the cannon, neither victory nor defeat, shall divert us from our common work for the union of the children of toil of all countries.”

But the pacifistic illusions which pervaded these declarations against the war caused them to remain mere declarations. For the proletariat in Germany the war meant giving up its strikes, giving up its intentions of fraternization, and undergoing a greater level of misery.

Recognizing the “defensive” character of the war fought on the Prussian side (and thus one reason for which proletarians should support it) is one of the reasons for which the IWA was so inconsistent in its struggle against the war! This “defensive” character is all the more bizarre in that the army led by Bismarck would quickly cross the border and defeat the French army on its own territory. In any case, supporting the advance of capital’s army is against the proletariat!

As we saw earlier the Paris federation of the IWA lapsed into the exaltation of patriotism. The Blanquists also succumbed to the nationalist fever and published the newspaper *La Patrie en Danger* [The Nation in Danger] on September 7th 1870. Generally speaking, during these events very few militants saw the situation clearly and escaped getting sucked into it – so few in fact that it was even the norm!

So we can see how particular situations, local contingencies, can prevail over and create confusion among militants to such a degree that they renounce a key position of the proletariat, to the expression of its very essence: the proletariat is a worldwide class with its very own interests which are irremediably antagonistic to those of the bourgeoisie. This means that all struggles, no matter where they take place, no matter what the particular conditions are in which they are expressed – all of these struggles are one and the same – they

are fundamentally of the same nature and possess the same objective. That is what defines internationalism. This means that the immediate needs of struggle are:

★ the abolition of borders of all sorts, sectorial, geographic, political or otherwise and

★ the organization of the defeat of the bourgeoisie, whether it is republican or Bonapartist and no matter what its particular position may be in the world chessboard *seems fine*.

All patriotism necessarily leads us to choose sides with one bourgeois faction or another and to take up arms against our class brothers. All particularism leads to denying the particular and worldwide character of the proletarian class.

Just as the events showed us: communalism, the will to stick to the management of local affairs, was indeed a moment of affirmation of particularism in total opposition to an international and internationalist point of view. Paradoxically, the Internationals of the IWA defended communalism in France.

In a manifesto from May 1869 the French branch of the IWA extolled:

“Communes, departments, and colonies liberated from all supervision concerning local affairs, administered by freely elected representatives...”

In September 1870, in what is considered to be the French branch of the IWA’s program, they proclaimed:

“What we all want is that each commune may regain its municipal independence and govern itself in the midst of a free France. Still more, we want the Federation of communes.”

On March 25th 1871 Varlin answered an emissary of Bakunin:

“... this has nothing to do with an internationalist revolution, the March 18th movement had no other demand than that of the municipal emancipation of Paris and that this goal had been met; that elections had been scheduled for the next day, the 26th, and that once the Municipal Council was elected then the [National Guard] Central Committee would resign from its powers and all would be done.”

In May 1871 H. Goullé, a member of the IWA, reaffirmed

“The federation of the Communes of France is the only way for us.”

These positions dramatically contributed to confining the struggle to Paris and propping up the criminal policy of the Commune government as the events demonstrated.

Before the declaration of war the Paris federation of the IWA grouped together almost all of the combative workers in the capitol. This was thanks to the organizing efforts and the centralization of struggles by certain militants such as Varlin, Héligon, Combault, André Murat, Theisz, and others for years.

During the many strikes of 1866-67 and 1869-70 proletarians joined the IWA massively. But that was not enough for these newly created sections to turn out to be an active force. In most cases they collapsed once the strike was over. The number of active militants was modest: about 2,000 at the time. This is why we can say that the IWA was a shining force but not yet an organized and powerful body which militants such as Varlin in Paris, Aubry in Rouen, Richard in Lyons, Bastelica in Marseille and others would take on the task of transforming it into. One of the numerous activities they carried out to achieve this aim was the participation in workers' societies and the federal chamber of workers' societies in Paris. It led to the radicalization of at least a minority of the IWA Paris federation.

But after the declaration of war the events would extol the IWA's least clear positions. The French branch of the IWA was strongly influenced by *Proudhonism*, an ideology of management of which communalism is an expression. Communalism sought the emancipation of communes from central State supervision. This sort of emancipation had nothing to do with class relations, exploitation or submission. What did this municipal emancipation demanded by the communalists correspond to? It corresponded to nothing but a greater freedom of movement for the circulation of commodities. Indeed, it was federalism, cooperativism, mutualism... which led the IWA astray from the fundamental calling into question of the foundations of the capitalist social relationship: the dispossession of the means of living and enslavement to labor.

The list is long: critical support for the Republic, acceptance to take seat in the national assembly in Bordeaux, participation in the campaign to elect a Commune government, respect for private property and financial institutions, positions against the creation of an irregular force outside of the National Guard, position against the execution of hostages...

There was undeniably a great gap between the revolutionary force of the 1870-71 movement and the management politics to which the IWA Paris federation militants confined their schemes. In the heat of the events these mili-

tants were unable to undo their Proudhonist illusions and for the most part evolved in the shadows of the left republican bourgeois.

Very few of these militants would rekindle the fire which had burned in them before 1870. This fire brought them to assume a role of leadership of the proletariat through their practice of organizing strikes and other expressions of the real movement of emancipation of wage slavery.

We must not hesitate to affirm that these militants' practice after March 18th was frankly counter-revolutionary – when they refused to attack the Bank of France, or when they refused to apply measures of counter-terror, which were the only measures capable, for a time, of calming down the bellicose fever of the Versailles army. A certain lack of clarity in a period of relative social peace can have no real counter-revolutionary outcome. But in crucial moments it may have a completely different impact and may turn into an effective force for counter-revolution. This incapacity to distinguish itself from republicanism had a great impact on the IWA Paris federation. This incapacity was reinforced by the position taken by the IWA international bureau in the *Second address of the general council of the International Working Men's Association on the Franco-Prussian War* which Marx finished writing on September 9th 1870 which proclaimed:

“The French working class moves, therefore, under circumstances of extreme difficulty. Any attempt at upsetting the new government in the present crisis, when the enemy is almost knocking at the doors of Paris, would be a desperate folly. The French workmen must perform their duties as citizens; but, at the same time, they must not allow themselves to be swayed by the national souvenirs of 1792, as the French peasant allowed themselves to be deluded by the national souvenirs of the First Empire. They have not to recapitulate the past, but to build up the future. Let them calmly and resolutely improve the opportunities of republican liberty, for the work of their own class organization. It will gift them with fresh herculean powers for the regeneration of France, and our common task – the emancipation of labor. Upon their energies and wisdom hinges the fate of the republic.”

The third *Address of the general council of the IWA on the civil war in France in 1871* which was finished on May 31st 1871 marked a change in the IWA's stand. The repression which Thiers had led left the streets of Paris full of corpses. It was time for a balance sheet. Marx recognized that it was a war led against the proletariat. He denounced the collusion between Bismarck and Thiers in the encirclement of Paris and in the peace accords in which the restitution of imprisoned French troops was negotiated in order to reinforce the

French army. Was it too early to distinguish the proletariat's expression in the Commune from bourgeois politics, which in its acts was akin to Thiers' intrigue? The border between revolution and counter-revolution, as we emphasized earlier, wasn't between Paris and Versailles but within the Commune itself between the insurgent proletariat and the Commune government. In that the Commune government worked towards the disorganization and the disarming of the insurgent proletariat it placed itself on the same side as those who would make the final attack: Thiers with Bismarck's aid. Nowhere was this mentioned in the third address. Universal suffrage, municipal freedom, and the whole of the Commune government's reforms were proclaimed without the least amount of distance. What had caused this lack of judgment? The repression against all those more or less involved in the Paris Commune, the shock of the news announcing thousands of executions, the letters in blood describing the agony in the last barricades. Undoubtedly.



In general, bourgeois historiography – books, brochures, newspaper articles written after the fact – has given much more importance to the role played by IWA members whereas the Blanquists end up relegated to a secondary role. The reason for this is that these historians operate the same way social-democracy has always operated: presenting the movement's pitfalls as the strongest moments and presenting the moments when the proletariat was really a danger for bourgeois domination as the least interesting moments, something not to be remembered, or, worse still, as deviations to be condemned.

Social-democracy valued precisely everything in the IWA which we have emphasized as its limits: managementism, communalism, reformism, republicanism... all of these democratic mechanisms which absorbed militants' energy, dulled their judgment, and moved them away from the needs of class struggle.

The only thing social-democracy remembers about the Blanquists is their clear decision to organize insurrection. They do not wish to give any value to that clarity, of course, except in the sense of: What can we do so that the proletariat does not remember this point as an unavoidable necessity of struggle? How can we divert it from the path of this decision? With social-democracy this has been dealt with through years of propaganda in favor of universal suffrage. Class against class confrontation had to be abandoned and the path of parliamentarism had to be trusted. A new era of pacifistic progress towards socialism had begun. The *bloody week* was the proof for social-democracy that the practice of insurrection was a lost cause. Any intransigence in struggle, any attempts to organize self-defense or counter-terror were promptly

denounced as “Blanquism”. “Blanquism” was the label under which anything for which social-democracy felt contempt was classified. It was pointed to as some kind of black plague which threatened those proletarians who might give in to the temptation to fight back, blow for blow.



But what about the real practice of **Blanquist militants**?

What we call the Blanquists is the constitution of a group of revolutionaries around Auguste Blanqui starting in 1865. They intervened in different milieus (at first among the free masons, at non-religious funerals, then later in strikes, demonstrations, public meetings, riots). We also use this name to refer to a clandestine organization of combat groups. There are several kinds of strong points in this group:

There is a clear distinction between social classes. Blanqui had always been clear about the irreconcilable antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. In 1852 he wrote to Maillard denouncing the term *democrat* which he judged as being “*an instrument for schemers*”. Concerning those who used this term he wrote:

“This is why they ban the terms: proletarians and bourgeois. They have a clear and precise meaning. They say things categorically. That is what is so displeasing. They are rejected as provocations of civil war. Isn’t that reason enough to open your eyes? What have we been forced to do for so long if not wage civil war? And against who? Oh! That is precisely the question which they try to muddle up and confuse through the obscurity of words; because it’s a question of preventing the two enemy flags from being set one in front of the other, so as to swindle for the victorious flag the benefits of the victory and to allow the defeated to move gently to the side of the victors once the fight is over. They don’t want the two adversary camps to be called by their real names: proletariat, bourgeoisie. Yet, they have no others.”

A categorical rejection of alliances with republican and socialist bourgeois such as L. Blanc, Ledru-Rollin, Crémieux, Albert... who had all shared the responsibility for the repression against the proletariat in 1848. The February 1851 London toast is a lapidary denunciation of these republicans. Here’s an extract:

“What pitfall threatens the revolution of tomorrow?

The pitfall which fell into yesterday’s pitfall: the deplorable popularity of the bourgeois disguised as orators.

Ledru-Rollin, Louis Blanc, Crémieux, Lamartine, Garnier-Pagès, Dupont de l'Eure, Flocon, Albert, Arago, Marrast!

Gloomy list! Sinister names, written in letters of blood on all of the cobblestones of democratic Europe!

It was the provisional government which killed the Revolution. On its shoulders lays the responsibility of all of the disasters, the blood of so many thousands of victims."

The necessity for the proletariat to organize clandestinely, to prepare the insurrection.

And the need to struggle to prevent infiltration by cops and informers (task successfully carried out by R. Rigault).

The fundamental aspect to all of the Blanquist militants' activity was the necessity of preparing the insurrection. All of his life Blanqui sought to give a qualitative leap to the movement, contrary to the idea which later went around according to which it was in spite of the balance of forces at the time. The different attempts at insurrection, May 12th and 13th 1839, August 14th September 4th, and later December 1870, were not actions undertaken blindly, without serious analysis. It was during periods marked by demonstrations, confrontations with the police, that at one point the Blanquists decided to turn to action, after an intense preparation. It is not because these attempts failed that they should be thrown on the scrapheap. Those who agree to do so situate themselves necessarily on the grounds of pacifistic reform of bourgeois society. As Emilio Lussu wrote:

"(...) There doesn't exist a thermometer which can scientifically measure its temperature and that's precisely what constitutes the unknown in any insurrection and the risky side which is involved in any revolution. If it weren't like this then an insurrection would be a reliable operation without risk or peril."

In coherence with this goal, combat groups organized clandestinely. In 1870 they were about 800 strong (out of a total of 2,000 to 3,000 militants in all), including 100 men armed with rifles. These groups were set up on the right bank of the Seine river by Jaclard, Duval, Genton covering neighborhoods such as Montmartre, La Chapelle, Belleville... and on the left bank they were set up by Eudes and Granger. It is remarkable to see these groups constituted on a local basis (by neighborhood) as well as on the basis of workshops (in metallurgy, in boiler works, in foundries).

In light of these activities it is no surprise to find the Blanquists in the front lines carrying out energetic actions against the Empire, the National Defense government, and then against Versailles. Let us recall that it was among the Blanquists that the April 3rd sally was organized in order to break with the closing in of Paris and to take down Thiers and his clique. It was also among them that the few actions of counter-terror were organized so as to dissuade Thiers from continuing to humiliate, torture, and execute prisoners.

Blanquist militants were educated at the school of plotting and accustomed to clandestine struggle. They constituted an organizational force. In 1870 they had already been present in struggles for six years (forty for Blanqui). The eruptions of insurrection drove them to the forefront, to the front lines of confrontation. But once they found themselves at the head of the movement they were completely clueless. Their vision of insurrection was limited to an essentially military affair. The political dimension escaped them. What direction should be given to the war against the bourgeoisie? Once the forces of repression (army, police, gendarmerie) are neutralized what should be done with the balance of forces? What should be done with the political forces in presence? What should be done with social relationships?

The limit of their conception of the insurrection was expressed by a non-assumption of the insurrection as a political act. Social-democracy also based itself on this limit so as to later assimilate the Blanquists' practice during the Commune into being merely "adventurist", "putchist", disconnected from struggle – social-democracy was deepening its strategy by mocking them: the eradication of insurgent perspectives from proletariat's memory.

In concrete terms, in 1870-71 this military vision of the insurrection would cause the balance of forces in favor of the proletariat, and all of their efforts to that aim, to slip out of their hands.

Above all, they were not distant enough to be able to evaluate the Republic government and the National Defense government. They had the same problem later concerning their evaluation of the National Guard Central Committee and the Commune government. This had a lot of influence at very crucial moments and it was due to their separation between the political and the military issues.

We have already made mention of their patriotic compromise. In September 1870, as we emphasized, when the Empire was overthrown and the republic was declared, and the National Defense government was getting started not a single proletarian group was able to resist the call of the patriotic sirens. The Blanquists took this to an even higher level by brutally abandoning the struggle against the enemy class and calling on the proletariat to put itself "*without*

nuance or parties” in the service of the French nation! – In *La Patrie en Danger* [The Nation in Danger], calls for republican collaboration and national defense laid side by side with the most awful racist madness. Indeed, France was associated with civilization and the *Kraut* with barbarism. The latter was described as having “*flat feet and the hands of a monkey*” as well as “*a meter more of intestines than we do*”! The Blanquists’ attitude in September 1870 was all the more harmful because through their previous revolutionary exploits they had gained a lot of credit in the eyes of the proletariat. It was this credit which at such a crucial moment as the contradiction between nationalism and communism allowed for national union to be consolidated; exactly what the bourgeoisie had been calling for so as to lead its war against Germany.

It was the Blanquists who assumed the principal attempts at giving a qualitative leap to the movement in Paris between January 1870 and May 1871 despite their limits which were also an expression of the general balance of forces. Throughout the events they were carried forwards by the movement as we have shown. They assumed a real role in galvanizing the proletariat’s combativeness. It’s in this organizing effort that we recognize an expression of the party of the proletariat as a general tendency to affirm itself as a class.



We also see how the lack of clarity concerning class objectives among militants, whether they were Blanquists or IWA members, prevented them from making the necessary ruptures with republican forces. Most of the time they left the initiative to the bourgeoisie.

Their activity prior to July 1870 consisted in organizing precisely outside of bourgeois structures and in developing the self-organization of the proletariat. But in the great haste of the events these militants lost this capacity. They had been accustomed to developing resistance in the shadows of omnipresent repression. They were surprised, disoriented, and overtaken by the course of the events. They weren’t able to see things with the necessary distance to be able to adapt themselves to the new conditions of struggle. Each of these organizations lost the advantage of their accumulated experience. None of them were able to use the past as a force for the present. At certain moments they were walking on the razor’s edge and at other times they had clearly fallen over to the side of counter-revolution. They expressed the proletariat’s general incapacity to make a clean break with the structures which society put in place as answers to new situations as the events continued taking place.

In fact the republican faction was quite skillful. Each time the struggle became more radical they created new structures in answer. They were flexible

enough to be able to adapt, jump back and bring the proletariat into the arena where they alone defined the rules of combat. This capacity of adaptation – to the fall of the Empire, to the proclamation of the republic, to the National Defense government, to the National Guard Central Committee, to the elections, to the Commune government, to the Public Safety Committees – managed to prevent clear outbursts and ruptures from taking place and in doing so it made the dividing line between bourgeoisie and proletariat unclear.

Within this framework the proletarian movement and its revolutionary minorities were disoriented. As soon as they struck a fatal blow to one bourgeois faction they were completely baffled at how quickly another bourgeois faction filled the vacant space. Although it was in the very front lines during the events several times, the proletariat remained baffled when faced with the possibilities of taking the direction of the events and imposing its own class objectives. Although it showed a great combativeness it also showed a propensity for getting taken in by the republican promises.

Once more we can see that the combativeness is rarely what is lacking in the proletariat. What is lacking is the direction to give to its struggle, the definition of its class objectives.



As we have seen, the moments of affirmation of the proletarian movement, i.e. the clearest and most determined moments such as moments of decision to reject of bourgeois alternatives, were never upheld in a continuous way neither by any militant structure nor by any militant or any organized body... neither by the Blanquists nor by the IWA, neither by the Red clubs nor by the irregular forces or the “party-less”. Each and every one of them shifted around back and forth across the dividing line between the classes, at times at the forefront of ruptures with the republican mob, while at other times full of one’s responsibility as a member of the Commune government. Neither the Blanquist militants nor the IWA, neither the Red clubs nor the irregular army, nor the “party-less” neither on their own nor all together represented *the* proletariat’s party during the movement of insurrection in Paris in 1870-71. These organizations were but incomplete, limited, and contingent concretions of the party. They are an expression of the tendency to organize as the party.

Each of the moments which are strong in decision and clarity, each moment of rupture with republican consensus, is the expression of the living proletariat as it organizes itself as the party. It is a process during which the proletariat becomes conscious of its strength, organizes itself more and more clearly, outside and against the structures of bourgeois State, putting forth its own

class objectives, recognizing itself as a class and developing its own organizational structures.

In his February 2nd 1860 letter to Freiligrath Marx expressed this process concerning the wave of struggles during the years 1848-50:

“The League [League of Communists founded in 1847] just as the Society of Seasons in Paris, just as a hundred other such societies was but an episode in the history of the party which bursts forth from all sides and quite naturally from the soil of society.”

Otherwise put, in order to evaluate the moments in which the party expressed itself in the Commune’s history it is necessary to go back to the key moments of rupture during this struggle and to those which organically expressed the most totalizing perspectives, beyond the limit of such or such organization born during the midst of the struggle and necessarily containing a lot of contradictions.

More generally, throughout history, it is the presence in the struggle of a concentration of experiences of the proletariat’s struggle that expresses the existence of the party. It gives a concrete form to a living organized force aimed at defeating the enemy and imposing the dictatorship of human needs. It is a historical reality which expresses itself far beyond any particular organization born out of particular circumstances and far beyond the distance in space and time between the various generations of militants.

The proletariat’s historical party refers to the whole of the expressions of yesterday, today and tomorrow which assume an organized practice of the defense of the proletarian objective of the destruction of wage slavery.

As far as the particular wave of struggle of 1870-71 in France is concerned, we recognize the affirmation of the party in the whole of the militant energies, be they revolutionary minorities structured in different ways, be they “party-less” (i.e. called that way because their members did not belong to any organizations) or structures born out of the struggle. Armed with the memory accumulated during previous battles (such as 1848 which had been fed on that of 1792-97,...), these militant energies structured the struggle around the need to end the bourgeois war and to make a qualitative step in the struggle against this world of private property and labor. When the Blanquist or the IWA militants, the members of the clubs or the “party-less” acted in the sense of affirming the struggle’s needs against the directives of the National Guard Central Committee or of the Commune government then they were acting as the party of the proletariat.

Struggles characteristically generate organizational structures, revolutionary minorities which after having learned lessons from past struggles are more capable of identifying the different traps of counter-revolution. The accumulated memory of generations of militants whose practice was clear about the dividing line between the classes, between revolutionary practice and the practice which is the work of counter-revolution. This memory is of crucial importance so that new social explosions do not run into the same pitfalls. This memory, when it is translated into positions turns past experience into a clear and intransigent guiding force. That is why revolutionary minorities which put this priority at the center of their activity are important. This priority for memory is not an activity turned towards the past but a guideline to be put forth in present and future struggles.

The proletariat's party in history could be summed up as the accumulated experience of the proletariat in history, whether concentrated in the form of memory or still in the memory of struggles and practices of rupture.

That doesn't turn it into an unreal being, some sort of lifeless metaphysical being without contradictions. On the contrary, the historical party only exists in the different structures which are created by the proletariat. These concrete forms are necessarily limited but are constantly in search of a qualitative leap allowing them to assure the victory of revolution.

Addendum

The Leninist conception of party was adopted by Trotsky in his *Lessons of the Paris Commune* written in 1921. The latter considered that in 1870-71 "*The Parisian proletariat had neither a party, nor leaders to whom it would have been closely bound by previous struggles.*" This is the conception of the party which Lenin developed in *What is to be done?*. According to this conception the proletariat is an unconscious mass incapable of rising beyond "spontaneous", "trade-unionist" revolts, and if left on its own it could only struggle on economic grounds, organizing itself into trade-unions and carrying out the minimum program. So he comes to the conclusion that what is necessary is a party made up of intellectuals capable to bringing consciousness to the proletariat, carrying out a struggle on political grounds, and fulfilling the maximum program.

This conception reproduces all of the social-democratic separations between economy and politics, between minimum program and maximum program, between immediate struggles and historical struggles, between mass and party, between spontaneity and consciousness,... categories which truly be-

long to democracy, to the functioning of capital and to its own reform program. The proletariat would have only immediate preoccupations whereas the party, high and mighty, would be conscious of its historical interests and thus its own different objectives! According to this point of view the proletariat isn't a historical being fighting for its needs but the instrument of an idea which shapes it. In this way Lenin, in the footsteps of Kautsky, reproduces vulgar materialism operating a separation within the living body between consciousness and matter: on the one hand an inert body made of playdough and on the other hand the idea, alone in its capacity to make matter come alive³⁴. For social-democracy only such a party can lead the masses. We need only read what Lenin quoted from Karl Kautsky in *What is to be done?*:

*“The vehicle of science is not the proletariat, but the bourgeois intelligentsia: it was in the minds of individual members of this stratum that modern socialism originated, and it was they who communicated it to the more intellectually developed proletarians who, in their turn, introduce it into the proletarian class struggle where conditions allow that to be done. Thus, socialist consciousness is something introduced into the proletarian class struggle from without and not something that arose within it spontaneously [urwüchsig].”*³⁵

We totally disagree with this Leninist (Trotskyist-Stalinist) party which in its acts carried out repression against the proletarian insurrection in Russia and in the rest of the world. It got the capitalist economy back up and working again. It eliminated all of the revolutionary forces which did not recognize the Bolshevik party's authority. Trotsky led the red army several times against insurgent proletarians, in Kronstadt, in Ukraine... and we don't give a damn about his lessons from the Commune which he drew up in the image of what the Bolshevik party had done to the revolution in Russia. If there's a party that never existed it was the Bolshevik party as the party of the proletariat. The Leninist conception of the Party is in the image of what Russia had become, an immense concentration camp of cheap labor for an unequalled capitalist development. This was a terrible and terrifying experience which sealed more than seventy years of counter-revolution carried out in the name of communism and revolution, in the name of the party of the proletariat! That's

³⁴ This vision is not the prerogative on the Marxist-Leninists alone. Anarchist ideology functions along the exact same scheme although there may be differences in form such as in written propaganda as opposed to propaganda by the deed, exemplary action... The point is that it is once more all about educating the masses, bringing them the idea of struggle. In the two cases the starting point is not the movement of social matter but the idea that they have about it. This is specific to idealism.

³⁵ This is from a text by Karl Kautsky which has not yet been translated into English.

where the difficulty stems from when one tries to talk today about revolution, the proletariat seeking to constitute itself as a party, without being assimilated with those who turned the *Communist International* into a multinational representing Russia's capitalist interests throughout the world and who turned the *Communist Parties* into ambassadors undertaking the most immense process of repression of revolution in the world.

The present text's objective is not to develop the critique of Marxist-Leninist ideology but this addition is necessary because of the important weight this ideology has in the world today. It is responsible for the recurring confusion between any affirmation of the process of the proletariat's constitution in class/party and this Leninist/Trotskyist/Stalinist ideology.

In reality there is no separation between class and party. There is a process of affirmation, of organization of one same being: the revolutionary proletariat expressing its own need, the need for communism – communism which, if we must be precise, has nothing to do with the wage slavery which was never put to an end in Russia.

Let's take back the revolutionary content of these terms such as "proletariat" and "communism" whose meanings have so long been twisted and misused. It is a question of our struggle against our condition as an exploited class which means that we are deprived daily of the product of our labor, deprived of any means of living besides that which consists of the sale of our vital energy, our strength, our sweat,... to the class which possesses the means of production, the capitalists. Let's keep on fighting all of the way to the establishment of worldwide commune, of the human community, of communism!



So far our aim has been to try to sketch a portrait of the movement's principal limits and strengths. We started by going over the events themselves in order to distance ourselves from the uncritical praise which is generally given to the movement. Such praise gives the Commune government the role of the good guy while it was worryingly trying to demonstrate to the whole of the bourgeoisie what a good State manager it could be. Praise is ignorance of what really happened, blind to which casts facts into the shadows of doubt when they are susceptible to cause trouble and push people to think. Such praise is the organization of the forgetting of the lived experience, no matter how deep, violent, and bloody its traces may be. It's the construction of a dominant ideology which allows the State to control our memories.

That's why we've decided to reserve an important place for quotes from original sources. These were the protagonists and those who, still marked by events were able to draw pertinent lessons, making the class contradictions clear. Even if this may have only amounted to a few brief moments of lucidity within the general confusion these words are still every bit as hard hitting. Even today they show us the path to take.

With this framework in mind we offer the following documents for you to read.

6.1 Text signed *an old hébertiste*

(This text was addressed to the citizen Audouinaud, member of the National Guard Central Committee, on April 28th 1871.)

Although I don't know you I am nevertheless addressing myself to you because it is your name which is at the top of the National Guard Central Committee list and I suppose that you will pass on my observations to your colleagues.

Citizen, things are not working out like they should be. The Commune has shown itself unable to rise to its task. We must change our course as soon as possible. Our course so far has been nothing but old monarchist and parliamentary bad habits. Nothing but considerations for economic, philosophical, and social prejudices. Not a single revolutionary measure as the people would have it. What is the law on rent? Instead of housing the people once and for all

in the homes of the rich and the bourgeois there is instead this humiliating measure on the last three payments of rent, accompanied by even further humiliating considerations, and then in the future they'll be left to the vulture's claws. They are left in the gutter.

What of the project concerning pawnshops? Instead of forcing the rich, the bourgeois, the exploiters to vomit up their riches which they've accumulated from this institution so as to take their furniture, money, and food in order for the proletarian to at last get to know the pleasure of plenty, and even luxury, he is given, no I am wrong, there's a proposal to give him the beautiful gift of 50 francs, then we step back, hesitate, out of consideration for the pawnshops' stockholders.

What has been done concerning food? There are municipal cafeterias which serve a disgusting mix of compote *stew* while next door there are gourmet restaurants in which the rich and the bourgeois can pamper themselves. This is going on at a time when it would be so easy to get a hold of the wine cellars and food reserves of those who are enjoying themselves today as well as the merchants who feed them.

What do we hear at l'Hôtel de Ville? Talk of respect. Talk of rights. Talk of integrity. Talk of decency. And even, may the devil take me, talk which is delicate in nature. All of this nonsense is uttered so as to cover and excuse the oppression of proletarians by the rich and the bourgeois. Believe me, citizen, there is even talk of capital and of interest rates.

I ask you, you and your colleagues, is this not a breakdown, desertion, and treason?

In this moment there is only one right, that of the proletarian against the property owner and the capitalist, that of the poor against the rich and the bourgeois, that of the disinherited against the well off and those overcome with pleasure. Poor and proletarians, we have no other desire, we want nothing more than joy and ease. If the cake isn't big enough for everybody to have an equal share then let us be the first to get a slice. We have been waiting long enough...

Let us no longer be fooled by the old, meaningless words like integrity, respect for property, for the law, for the fruit of one's labor, and for one's savings. All of this belongs to us proletarians. Everything is ours. And we're going to take it back. Listen up, you bunch of silver tongues l'Hôtel de Ville rascals. The air in your gilded salons has already corrupted you! We'll take it all, I'm telling you. And if you don't carry out regular and general measures we'll take it when we see fit, when it suits us, but mark my words, we will

take it. You can go ahead and put up posters saying: Death to looters! Death to thieves! Do you think that bothers us? We will be the strongest. That's just tough luck because the prejudice against us is well implanted and because there will be a lot of waste and lost values. But all of that is your own fault, l'Hôtel de Ville parliamentarians. Instead of destroying the old prejudices you feed them, you water them with moral and sentimental words. Instead of giving us our due through a general measure of requisition you talk and act like people who have no idea of what the proletariat is demanding.

There is yet another prejudice that I see rising in the posters and decrees from the Préfecture de police [police headquarters]. It is that of prudery, decency, and public morals. In what old philosophical and religious moral books have they found these meaningless words? Meaningless? Oh no! I am wrong. They do have a meaning. They have been created so as to take nature's pleasure away from the naive and reserve it for the rich and well off. Back off with your posters, your decrees, oh citizens of the Préfecture de police! There is no decency, no prudery, no vice, no prostitution. Nature does not care for such stupidity. Nature has its needs, its demands, and one must satisfy it however one wishes, where and when one desires. When you want and where you want... Be it by chance, after a long wait or at a first meeting, with whomever we should fancy, just as we proletarians do when we are among ourselves. Only today what we need is your daughters, oh rich and well off. We need your wives so they may be of benefit to the proletarian and be a benefit to all in one big family. Carry out this measure with no delay, prudish Commune, otherwise we will carry it out ourselves. And let me tell you we'll do so gallantly. Alas, I am not referring to my own self. My age would allow me to be but a spectator to this great and magnificent feast which will be the inauguration of the true community. Whether or not the result should be as grand as I imagine it the proletariat is merely seeking in this celebration its due. For long enough the rich and well off have kept the most beautiful women for themselves leaving for others only the ugly, the stupid, and the cantankerous. We could not have our pick but had to content ourselves with the leftovers. Those women they went out with became invariably infected with their own pride. So I have shrugged my shoulders while reading the decree concerning cafés in which there is reference to prostitution... Get back, old prejudices, get back to the shadows! May the breath of reason cause these imaginary phantoms of theft, looting, rape, and incest to disappear... That is what we proletarians declare...

And you, members of the Commune, may the spirit of the hébertistes inspire you. Reject these old prejudices such as virtue, prudery, and humanity. Go forwards. Base yourselves on what is real, on what is strong. Upon your

flag write this motto: everyone to everyone, every woman for every man and for none. But for the moment restrict it to the benefit of the proletariat. You should know, Citizens of the National Guard Central Committee, that a storm is rumbling. Make no delay in kicking these idealist chatterboxes out of the Commune. Put down these stupid newspapers including the spineless “Père Duchêne” and put down those who should resist.

Salutations and hébertism!

6.2 An article from *Le Révolté* on March 18th 1882

The Commune of 1871

Eleven years have passed since the people of Paris were moved by their fear of a coup d'état and their shame over the surrender imposed by a government which was either cowardly or corrupt on the one hand and by a vague feeling of having a civilizing mission and noble though undetermined aspirations towards brotherhood and universal happiness on the other hand. The people rose up and chased away the republic's government in a vigorous outburst and proclaimed themselves to be their own masters... and for a brief moment they were.

A great hope filled whatever was revolutionary in Europe at the announce of the Parisian revolution.

Everyone awaited great events. To the young, enthusiastic, and naive socialists and to those of us who were already in the struggle at the time it felt like being on the eve of a socialist [17]93, on the eve of a [17]93 of all of humanity!

Alas! Not three months had gone by before Paris was filled with corpses. The prisons and the pontoons were filled with thousands of men. The elite of the Parisian proletariat was destined to languish and die both physically and morally in the penal colonies of New Caledonia. Order prevailed in Paris.

The revolutionary world of 1871 generally considered the fall of Paris to be an accident of the material struggle. Many tried to explain the defeat by the presence of the Prussians, by the fatigue of having undergone two sieges, by the capital error of not marching on Versailles from the very start, by the military errors or by acts of treason of one sort or another.

Very few had understood and said how the Commune had fallen principally because it had not lived up to its *raison d'être*, because though it rose in the name of a new idea and was greeted as the revolution of proletarians it never

dared break away from old Jacobin behavior. It was governmental and bourgeois.

But, year after year this interpretation of the Parisian events, confirmed by a greater knowledge of the facts, has gained terrain and has become the nearly unanimous opinion of the socialists.

The welcome which the civilized world had in store for the Paris Commune was one of the great moments of doubt which history has presented to us. The state of men's minds showed they were beginning to understand that socialism was the future, the prior history leading up to the Commune, the manifestoes expressing socialist feelings and using a socialist terminology, the specter of the International which was haunting men's minds, the popular and spontaneous origin of the movement. All of these factors, in addition to the bourgeoisie's panic which led it to see red everywhere, established the opinion that the Commune had been socialist.

In terms of propaganda it was quite a success. We can even say that this error is part of the cause of the expansion which the socialist party went through in Europe after the Commune. But at present the situation has changed. If this error maintains itself it could prove fatal to the revolution by causing us to commit once more all of the errors which killed the 1871 movement.

By the way, the bourgeoisie which unwittingly rendered us this service in 1871 is once more rendering us a service today – so long as we are not, ourselves, blind. The radicals – those bourgeois who, though they may not be the worst, are nevertheless the most dangerous enemies of the proletariat, have inscribed all of the Commune's *demands* in their program because they see it as a way of amusing the people while posing no danger for bourgeois privilege. We ought to take advantage of this warning!

We do not intend to blame the men of the Commune. We have our own faults to atone for and we think that those who have never made a mistake are those who have never done anything. But as we celebrate the popular movement of 1871, as we honor the dedicated men who defended it, we wish to take advantage of the errors of the past so as to draw a lesson for the future. We wish to prevent any weak man from using the old opinion about the Paris Commune so as to, consciously or unconsciously, play a part in a game of the radical bourgeoisie.

Let's look at the facts. A part from a few speeches and a couple of demonstrations which were more or less socialist – it would be difficult to find a movement which did not produce an abundance of these – apart from a few

measures were more marked by philanthropy than by revolution – through what act is the Commune to have affirmed the new idea?

Apart from the Jacobin routine we can only find one single fact: the demand for the right to autonomy. But even – without insisting on what one might mean by autonomy, proclaimed by the Commune, this was only a half measure.

What is autonomy outside of the social revolution? It is like freedom outside of equality: it is nothing if not an expression of the reaction.

What changes did the Paris Commune bring to the field of production, consumption, and exchange? What changes did it bring to political functions? Was it not simply a government like any other government which sought to calm the popular movement? Did it not extoll the same respect for private property as would a rich widow? What was the use of this revolution?

How could it resist the coalition of all of the bourgeoisies in the situation it was in, void of interest and ideas?

Revolutions only triumph with the masses. If all of the Parisians had supported the Commune it would have triumphed. But how could the masses have fought for a social order which left the people in a state of misery out of respect for the bourgeois' property and which acted responsibly towards the billion sitting in the bank? When it left the people rot in their hovels, in the shadow of palaces occupied by the bourgeoisie? When it allowed during the height of revolution in Paris for there to still be bosses and workers, exploiters and exploited? When the big and small fish of the bourgeoisie spent their time indulging in cafés mocking those who for low wages would go off to be ridled by the bullets of Versailles?

The masses, on the whole, did not and could not support the Commune movement.

After having castrated the movement a government was to be formed in Paris because... well, because one cannot do without one. How was this power thus delegated put to use? One might say the Paris Commune felt ashamed of its audacity. Its principal occupation was to justify itself to the rest of Europe which was marked by Versailles' slander and to remain within the limits of legality.

It was defeated but it deserved this defeat. We ought to do better in the future.

Next time we are not going to leave things up to a government. It will be the people, directly and without delegation, who will expropriate the bour-

geois and who will organize by itself and for itself the exploitation of social wealth.

6.3 Elisée Reclus' testimony³⁶

My role in the Commune was in no way official. I found myself in the anonymous crowd of the combatants and the defeated. I was simply a National Guardsman during the first days of the struggle. Then, after April 5th, and for a year's time I was held in different prisons in Satory, Tréberon, St. Germain, Versailles, Paris. I could only base my opinion of the Commune on hearsay *and by the later study of documents and men.*

It seemed that in the first years after the Commune all of those who had participated in the movement expressed solidarity due to the repression and the outrages which they had had to undergo together. I did not then allow myself to cast judgement over men who, in my opinion, had been less than dignified of the cause which they claimed to defend. But the time has come to say the truth in that impartial history has begun and the point is to gather lessons in the perspective of future events. Thus I can affirm that the military organization during the first days of the Commune was grotesque, as useless as it had been during the first siege, led by the appalling Trochu. The proclamations were bombastic. The disorder was general. The acts were ridiculous.

We may judge from this simple fact: General Duval was on the Châtillon plateau with 2000 men. They had neither food nor ammunition. A growing crowd of Versailles soldiers was surrounding them. They did not hesitate to ask for reinforcements. A call to arms was sounded in our district, around the Pantheon, summing some six hundred men to the square by 5 o'clock. We desired to march immediately into action, full of ardor as we were, in the company of other groups of soldiers coming from the neighborhoods to the south of Paris. But it seemed this movement was not in conformity to the military precedent. We were marched towards the place Vendôme where, without food, without means of bivouacking, we were left on our own for more than half of the night. Our only comfort was hearing the brilliant officers occupying the new staff headquarters as they sang:

“Drink, drink to the Independence of the World!”

At two o'clock in the morning we received an order from the general commanding us to take leave of our precarious abode at the place Vendôme and to march on the place de la Concorde. There we tried to sleep on the hard

³⁶ In “Revue Blanche”, 1898, “Enquête sur la Commune de Paris”.

ground until six o'clock in the morning. Our numbers were already greatly diminished by desertion. Then we were led to Châtillon. We could feel this first bivouac in the aches in our bones. We had no food whatsoever. During the march our numbers dwindled further still. The day before we had been six hundred but now there were only fifty of us as we reached the plateau. This was half an hour before Versailles troops, pretending to rally the cause of the revolution, were helped as they climbed the ramparts to the repeated shouts of "*We are brothers! Let us embrace! Long live the republic!*". We were taken prisoner. All of those who we could be identified by their uniform or by the appearance as having been soldiers were shot by the surrounding wall of a nearby castle.

According to what I have gathered from my companions I do not find it hard to believe that in other acts of war our plumed leaders, at least those who led the first sorties, showed the same negligence lack of intelligence. Perhaps the Commune government was more capable in other matters. In any case history would tell how these improvised ministers remained honest in their exercise of power. But we were asking something else of them: to have good sense and the will which went with the situation and to act consequently. Was it not with a true sense of stupor that we saw them continue in the erring ways of official rulers: keeping all of the officialdom but changing only the men, maintaining all of the bureaucracy, letting the city tax people carry out their functions from their duty house, and protecting the convoy of money which the Bank of France sent to Versailles every day. The vertigo of power and the spirit inane routine had grasped them. These men who were expected to act heroically and lay their lives on the line had the inconceivable and shameful naivety to address diplomatic notes to the powerful in a style which would have found the approval of Metternich and the Talleyrand. They understood nothing of the revolutionary movement which had led them to l'Hôtel de Ville.

What the leaders did not do the nameless crowd carried out. Many, 30,000 or maybe 40,000, who died around Paris for the cause which they had loved. Many still were those who fell inside of the city under machine gun fire to the cry of "*Long live the Commune!*". We know from the debates within the Versailles assembly that this people, their throats cut, saved, through their attitude, the republican form of the French government. Yet the present republic which is ready of doing whatever it must in order to be a good servant to the Tsar and the Kaiser is so far from the practice of freedom that it would be puerile to feel any kind of recognition towards the Commune for this vain word which it conserved. It had done something else. Not its rulers but its defenders had erected an ideal for the future which was quite superior to that of all of the

previous revolutions. It sought to enlist those who wanted to continue, in France and throughout the world, to struggle for a new society in which there would be neither masters by birth nor titles, nor money, neither enslaved by birth, nor cast, nor wages. The word “Commune” was understood everywhere in the widest of meanings, pertaining to the whole of a new humanity, made up of free and equal comrades who recognize none of the former borders, and live in peaceful mutual assistance all the world over.



This is why they prohibit the use of the terms proletarians and bourgeois. Those words have a clear and distinct meaning; they state things categorically – and this is what they dislike. They reject these terms as provoking civil war. Is this reason alone not enough to open your eyes? What have we been compelled to do for so long now, if not to make civil war? And against whom? Ah! This is precisely the question that they seek to muddle by using obscure words: their aim is to prevent the two opposing flags from confronting each other directly, so as to cheat the victorious flag of the fruits of victory, and to allow the vanquished to join the victors gradually and smoothly once the fighting has ended. They do not want the two opposing camps to call themselves by their true names: proletariat, bourgeois. However, they have no others.

Auguste Blanqui – 1852