

# Marx, Lenin and the Commune

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On March 3, 1869, Marx wrote Kugelmann that the revolutionary movement in France was gaining momentum and that "the Parisians are beginning seriously to study their recent revolutionary past and to get ready for the newly approaching revolutionary struggle." Lenin calls particular attention to Marx's ability to feel the pulse of the epoch, and foresee approaching revolutionary crises.

"Pedants of Marxism," writes Lenin, "believe this is ethical nonsense, romanticism, absence of realism. No, gentlemen, this is a union of theory and practice of the class struggle."

On December 13, 1870, Marx wrote Kugelmann: "Whatever the outcome of the war, it has taught the French workers the use of arms, and this makes the future more hopeful." Three months before the Paris uprising Marx was already smelling powder, and foresaw the approaching crisis.

## MARX WRITES KUGELMAN ON THE COMMUNE

The celebrated letter to Kugelmann which Marx wrote on April 12, 1871, during the height of the Commune, and which Lenin considers the crowning letter of the entire collection begins:

"If you will turn to the last chapter of the 18th Brumaire you will see that according to my opinion the next revolutionary uprising in France will be an attempt to destroy the bureaucratic military machine instead of handing it over from one group to the other as was done previously. Such indeed is the preliminary condition of every genuinely popular revolution on the continent. This is exactly the attempt of our heroic Paris comrades. What dexterity, what historical initiative, what ability for self-sacrifice these Parisians display. After six months of starvation and destruction caused more by internal treachery than by the foreign enemy, they rise under Prussian bayonets as tho there was no war between France and Germany, as tho the enemy wasn't still at the gates of Paris. History records no such example of heroism. If they will be defeated it will be because of their 'magnanimity.' They should have immediately marched on Versailles, as soon as Viny and the reactionary portion of the Paris National Guard escaped from Paris. The opportune moment was missed on account of 'conscientiousness.' They did not want to start a civil war, as if the montrosity Thiers hadn't already begun it with his attempt to disarm Paris."

Marx, the revolutionary strategist, knew that when the enemy of revolutionary Paris was on the run, it was the job of the National

Guard to pursue Thiers' defeated army until it was annihilated, rather than allow it time to reorganize its forces and return to fight the Paris workers. Remembering Plekhanov's famous admonition after the failure of the December, 1905 uprising in Moscow—"They shouldn't have resorted to arms"—Lenin recalls that Marx warned the Parisian workers in September, 1870, when the Blanquists were bent upon the overthrow of the bourgeois government against unprepared uprisings.

"But how did Marx act when what he warned against what took place in March, 1871? Has he used it against his opponents—the Blanquists and Proudhonists who were leading the Commune? Has he like a school ma'am kept on repeating: I told you so, I warned you. Here you have your romancing, your revolutionary dreams. Perhaps he criticized the Communards as Plekhanov did the December fighters with a self-satisfied philistine reproach: 'They shouldn't have resorted to arms?' Marx considered an uprising in September, 1870, as insanity. Seeing a mass uprising in April, 1871, he gave the full attention of a participant in the great occurrences, which marked a step forward in the historic revolutionary movement."

In the second part of his letter to Kugelman, Marx mentions another grave error in the early history of the Commune:

"The Central Committee (of the National Guard) relinquished its powers too soon to pass them on to the Commune. Again on account of 'honesty' carried to suspicion. Be it as it may, this Paris uprising, even if it will be suppressed by the wolves, swine and dirty dogs of the old order, is the most glorious achievement of our party since the June uprising. Compare these Parisians, ready to storm the heavens, with hangers-on of the German-Prussian holy Roman empire with its antediluvian mascarades, reeking with the smell of the barracks, church, junkerdom, and especially philistinism."

Here again Marx, the centralist, realized that a successful revolutionary struggle against Thiers could have been carried out by the Paris workers only under the leadership of a centralized revolutionary authority which had the military resources at its command. This centralized authority was then the Central Committee of the National Guard. By renouncing its powers and turning over its authority to the loosely organized Commune, the National Guard dissipated the revolutionary energy of its armed forces.

Five days later, April 17, Marx writes Kugelman again about the Commune. He takes issue with his friend who seemed to have compared the Paris rising to the protest demonstrations which took place in June, 1849, and which were of a petty bourgeois origin. Kugelman must have been questioning the wisdom of the

revolt and showed his scepticism regarding its outcome. "To create world history would be, of course, very easy if the struggle could be waged only under absolutely favorable circumstances," was Marx's caustic repartee.

He declared that in the case of of Commune "the decisive unfavorable circumstances must be sought, not in the general conditions of French society, but in the presence of Prussians at the very gates of Paris. This," he continued, "the bourgeois scoundrels of Versailles knew. That is why they put before the Parisians the alternative: either to accept the provoked struggle or to capitulate without a fight. The demoralization of the working class which would ensue as a result of the second instance would be a greater misfortune than the loss of any number of leaders. The struggle of the working class against the capitalist class and the state representing its interests, has, thanks to the Paris Commune, entered a new phase. However it may end this time, a new landmark of universal historical significance has been achieved just the same."

This was precisely Lenin's attitude regarding the December uprising in Moscow in 1905. The revolutionists of Moscow who had the support of the masses either had to accept the provocation of the Czar's troops or go down in moral defeat before the Moscow workers. Though defeated, the revolutionists came out of that unequal struggle glorified by the entire working class of Russia.

While the panicky Mensheviks were mumbling the Plekhanov formula: "They should not have resorted to arms," Lenin saw in the heroic struggle of the Moscow workers the revolutionary will to conquer of the Russian working class as a whole.

Commenting on Marx's observation that the Paris workers had to take up the fight, Lenin wrote:

"Marx could appreciate that there were moments in history when a struggle of the masses, even in a hopeless cause, was necessary, for the sake of the future education of these masses and their training for the next struggle."

It was this hopeful view of the Paris uprising applied to the revolutionary struggle of 1905 that led Lenin to maintain in 1907 in his introduction to the Kugelmann letters: "The working class of Russia has already demonstrated once and will prove again that it is able to 'storm the heavens.'" And it did in 1917.

#### THE COUNTER-REVOLUTION TRIUMPHS

The Commune existed only two months. During this time it showed, according to Engels, its class character in most of the

administrative acts. Among the social achievements of the Commune must be mentioned: the reorganization of the army to make it serve the interests of the Commune; the separation of the Church and State; removal of religious control over public education; abolition of night work in the bakeries; limitation of the payment of officials do not more than workers' wages; abolition of fines levied upon workers; and granting the workers the right to operate the shops and factories deserted or closed by their owners.

On the 40th anniversary of the Commune, Lenin wrote:

"In modern society the proletariat, enslaved by capital economically, cannot rule politically before breaking the chains which bind it to capital. This is why the Commune had to develop along socialist lines, that is, to attempt to overthrow the rule of the bourgeoisie, the rule of capital, the destruction of the very foundations of the present social order."

Cut off from the rest of the country, and having lost strategic opportunities at the beginning, the Communards were soon to fight for their very lives. Thiers reorganized his forces at Versailles. With the aid of soldiers hurriedly returned from the German camps and the benevolent attitude of the Prussian troops, he was able to marshall new forces and make war on Paris. Thiers' troops were permitted by the Prussians to concentrate around the city. From May 21 to 28 the city was subjected to a bombardment by the Versailles army. The Paris workers fought like lions. Fighting against odds the Commune fell amid ruin and destruction, brought by Thiers' avenging hordes. As a result of a week's fighting thousands lay prostrate in the streets, more thousands of captives were taken to the Pere-la-Chaise cemetery where they were slaughtered in groups and many more were exiled to penal colonies.

#### MARX'S EPIC ON THE COMMUNE

The blood of the Parisian workers, spilled in the course of proletarian emancipation hadn't dried when Marx read to the General Council of the First International, a paper which was destined to become one of the greatest pieces of political writing ever penned. Two days after the fall of the Commune, May 30, Marx read his famous "Address" entitled "The Civil War in France."

Marx wrote "The Civil War in France" to meet the attacks upon the Commune from the bourgeois and reformist ranks. In true Marx fashion he drew a picture of the forces which brought it about and hurled his invectives against the bourgeoisie and its agents. He knew that all crimes in existence would be charged against the Paris workers, just as the Bolsheviks were accused of

all crimes which could be conjured up by the morbid mind. He unmasked the enemies of the Commune before they had a chance to speak. He also had in mind the faint-hearted, the 'I told you so' revolutionists, when he analyzed the conditions under which the Commune had to work and glorified the heroism and revolutionary self-sacrifice of the proletarian workers of Paris.

"The Civil War in France" will forever remain a literary communist landmark because one sees in it not only Marx the theoretician, but also the tribune of the people, the fighter, the revolutionary strategist, the enthusiastic leader, the defender of his class.

#### MARX AND ENGELS ON THE STATE

"The Civil War in France" is a great revolutionary classic. The third part of it is particularly replete with passages which will always remain guideposts for the student and active worker in the Communist movement. It is here that we find analyzed the most important contribution of the Commune. At the very beginning of this section we come across the famous passage which was used the following year by Marx and Engels in an introduction to a new edition of the Communist Manifesto and which they considered as an important amendment of the Manifesto.

Marx asks: "What is the Commune, that sphinx so tantalizing to the bourgeois mind?" He answers by quoting from the proclamation of the Central Committee on March 18: "The proletarians of Paris, amidst the failures and treasons of the ruling class, have understood that the hour has struck for them to save the situation by taking over into their own hands the direction of public affairs. . . . They have understood that it is their imperious duty and their absolute right to render themselves masters of their own destinies, by seizing upon the governmental power." Then follows Marx's historic comment: "*But the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery and wield it for its own purposes.*" It was this theme and Marx's discussion of the origin and development of the bourgeois State which served Lenin as text for his "State and Revolution." Readers of that important study of the State, "the problem of all problems" according to Bukharin, will find profuse quotations from this part of "The Civil War in France." It should be remembered that already on April 12th, in his letter to Kugelman, Marx spoke about "the destruction of the bureaucratic political machine," as a prerequisite of a real popular revolution.

In 1891, the 20th anniversary of the Commune, Engels wrote an introduction to a new German edition of "The Civil War in

France.” (The available English translation of the pamphlet has only part of that introduction. The reason for the omission of the second part is not given. Whether his omission was an act of vandalism or of ignorance, the writer is not prepared at present to venture an opinion.) In criticising the Commune for not taking over the Bank of France and using it for its own advantage, Engels points out that the Commune tried to utilize the old government apparatus. He comes back to what Marx took up in his “Address” by asserting that “the Commune should have recognized that the workers, having assumed power, cannot rule with the old State power, the machinery used before for its own exploitation.” Engels concludes:

“In truth, the State is nothing but an apparatus for the oppression of one class by another, in a democratic republic not less than in a monarchy.”

Marx analyzed the nature of the capitalist state thus:

“At the same pace at which the progress of modern industry developed, widened, intensified the class antagonism between capital and labor, the State power assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labor, a public force organized for social enslavement, an engine of class despotism. After every revolution, marking a progressive phase in the class struggle, the purely repressive character of the State power stands out in bolder and bolder relief.”

Again, after analyzing the results of the various revolutions from 1830 to 1871, Marx concludes on the nature of the capitalist State: “Democracy is, at the same time, the most prostitute and the ultimate form of the State which nascent middle-class society had commenced to elaborate as a means of its own emancipation from feudalism, and which full-grown bourgeois society had finally transformed into a means for the enslavement of labor by capital.” The Commune, according to Marx, “was not only to supersede the monarchical form of class rule, but class rule itself.” The different measures of the Commune were aimed at the very foundations of bourgeois rule. It was “to serve as a lever for uprooting the economical foundations upon which rests the existence of classes and therefore class rule. With labor emancipated, every man becomes a working man and productive labor ceases to be a class attribute.” Marx saw in the Commune not merely a revolt, not only an experiment. He saw in it a proletarian dictatorship exercising the will of the working class to abolish these forms which made class rule possible.

Speaking about those who usually prattle of the emancipation of labor until labor really begins to emancipate itself, Marx says:

"The Commune, they exclaim, intends to abolish property, the basis of all civilization! Yes, gentlemen, the Commune intended to abolish the class property which makes the labor of many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. . . . But this is Communism, 'impossible' Communism!"

Marx shows that the middle classes had everything to gain from the Commune, and in fact, the Paris petty bourgeoisie benefited by the legislation regarding the moratorium on debts and the payments of rentals. Similarly, in the case of the peasants, Marx declares that the Commune was perfectly right in telling the peasants that "its victory was their only hope."

#### MARX ON "NATIONAL DEFENSE"

Marx speaks of the last stand of the Paris workers, who fought against terrific odds. He shows how their defeat was accomplished under Bismark's patronage. The fact that they were but recently enemies did not prevent the Prussians from helping Thiers in his murderous work. Marx was moved to make the following observation on the nature of nationalism and war, after witnessing the cooperation of the German militarists and French reactionaries in their onslaught on the Commune:

"The highest heroic effort of which old society is still capable is national war: and it is now proved to be a mere governmental humbug, intended to defer the struggle of the classes thrown aside as soon as that class struggle bursts out in civil war. Class rule is no longer able to disguise itself in a national uniform; the national governments are *one* as against the proletariat."

How many socialist parties of the warring nations remembered this passage in August, 1914. Plekhanov called upon the Russian socialists to fight against Prussianism. Scheidemann and Ebert yelled about the Russian Cossacks, threatening the "free" institutions of Germany. Renaudel and Vandervelde exhorted the French and Belgian workers to defend the fatherland in the name of democracy and national interest. Henderson did the same in England, and Spargo in America. A class peace was demanded so that the workers and capitalists might all unite to fight their "common" enemy. Only the Russian Bolsheviks and minorities in the various socialist parties did not surrender their socialism and refused to fall a prey to this apostasy. The social-patriotic parties during the war have continued their class peace after the war and are today the stone around the neck of the workers who still follow them.

## THE COMMUNE—THE FIRST PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION

The Commune is the great tradition of the French working class. The mute walls of Pere-la-Chaise remind the French workers of the heroism of their proletarian fathers who fought for freedom from wage slavery. The Commune is also the heritage of the entire proletariat. It was the first revolution with the workers not only fighting in it but also controlling and directing it towards proletarian aims. As Lenin wrote in 1908:

“The Commune taught the European workers to consider concretely the question of the social revolution.”

The Commune is one of the brightest jewels in the workers' revolutionary diadem. Marx's tribute at the close of his historic Address testifies to the fealty of the world's proletariat to the memory of the valiant Communards and to the cause in behalf of which they fought:

“Workingmen's Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of the new society. Its martyrs are enshrined in the great heart of the working class. Its exterminators history has already nailed to that pillory from which all the prayers of their priests will not avail to redeem them.”

## ENGELS ON THE COMMUNE AS A DICTATORSHIP

The Commune was the first attempt at proletarian dictatorship. It was not victorious but it was the prototype of the lasting dictatorship inaugurated by the Russian workers forty-six years afterwards. The socialists, wedded to bourgeois democracy, claim that the founders of scientific socialism did not favor proletarian dictatorship and that only the “Byzantine” Bolsheviks introduced it into the Marxian lexicon. Engels' introduction to “The Civil War in France” written in 1891, closes with the following passage:

“The German philistine (read ‘socialist’—A. T.) has recently been possessed of a wholesome fear for the phrase: dictatorship of the proletariat. Well then, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship is like? Look at the Paris Commune! This was the dictatorship of the proletariat!”