

Inquiry on the Commune

In 1897 *La Revue Blanche*, one of France's most important and influential literary journals, ran an "Inquiry on the Commune" in two of its issues asking participants the following three questions:

What was your role from March 18 to the end of May 1871?

What is your opinion of the insurrectionary movement of the Commune, and what do you think of its parliamentary, military, financial, and administrative organization?

In your opinion, what has been the influence of the Commune, both then and now, on events and ideas?

The following are chosen from among the dozens of participants.

Henri Rochefort

Q: What was your role during the Commune?

A: I simply did my duty as a journalist. I didn't take part in the Commune. But since I clearly published my opinion of Versailles, whose conduct I found odious, I was accused of provoking the rebellion.

Q: On March 18?

A: No, later. On March 18 I was in Arcachon, so ill that my death was announced. In Arcachon I received a visit from my children, who were dressed in mourning for their father.

Q: You arrived in Paris?

A: April 2, the day, I think, of Flourens' sortie. *Le Mot d'Ordre*, which I was writing for, was suppressed by Ladmirault, that old, vile, brute.

Q: Can we do without the epithets?

A: No. Ladmirault was an ignoble brute, as were all the professional soldiers. I ignored the prohibition. The government had slipped away to Versailles. I energetically supported Paris's rights. I spoke of Thiers's odious role and his abominable lies. Naturally, all of my sympathies were with the Communal movement, which was both socialist and patriotic.

The Commune was a protest against the peace of Bordeaux, a protest against the clerical and reactionary majority that dishonored us, a protest against the abuse of power of an assembly which, named to negotiate peace, had—without a mandate—declared itself constituent. But the Commune became authoritarian and suppressed the newspapers that weren't devoted to it. Raoul Rigault and Félix Pyat suppressed newspapers; Felix Pyat in particular suppressed newspapers for his own profit. I fought for freedom and good sense, as I did all my life. Raoul Rigault suppressed *Le Mot d'Ordre*. The pretext was my protest against the hostage decree, or rather its execution. We followed the example given by our African generals who, in the name of the government, had taken hostages there and massacred them. Those who had applauded the massacres and razzias in Africa found the Commune's conduct odious. I found it natural, but I didn't want the decree executed. It was this article that later led to me being placed before a military tribunal by the Versaillais. Idiocy! Idiocy! Always the soldiers! All imbeciles. Do you know what they held against me? It's that in the headline the word "hostages" was typed in capital letters. It's idiotic. I approved the decree and I protested against its execution. Raoul Rigault wanted to have me arrested. I was warned of this by a young man, a secretary of Rigault's I think.

Q: Forain?

A: No, not Forain, a member of the Commune's police. I left. I was arrested in Meaux on the 21st.

Q: Was there an order against you from the Versaillais?

A: Not at all; it was from Raoul Rigault. He was an excellent man, quite intelligent. All right. But he was for the fight to the finish. He knew what the Versaillais would do, and he was right. He took no extenuating circumstances into consideration. No quarter! He had participated in my newspaper, but he was a man who would have executed his best friend. If I had been seized by the Commune there was no question what would have happened to me. But in Meaux I was taken by the Versaillais. The commander of the German subdivision wanted to allow me to leave; I remained in prison despite the Prussians. At the court martial those brutes took no account of what I had to say. I was on the point of being executed; it was a near thing. Perhaps what saved me was Rossel's arrest, which occurred at just that moment. He went ahead of me. The court martial had already sentenced members of the Commune to death; it

condemned Rossel to death. Perhaps they decided to take it easy on me. I spent five months in prison. After a two-day trial I was sentenced to deportation for life, which in civil matters is equivalent to the death penalty. Even worse, we were dealing with such ignorant judges that they didn't even know that the death penalty in political matters had been abolished since 1848. Officers! I remember that in prison I was Rossel's neighbor. I had won over our guard by sharing with him the victuals that were sent to me; he let us talk. I owe him the few good hours that I passed with the unfortunate Rossel, who they didn't sentence to death, but who they assassinated. Note that before '48 the law punished soldiers who revolted or went over to the enemy with death. Since then the only ones punished with death were traitors: it is by virtue of this law that they killed Rossel. (M. Da Costa, who was present for the interview, observed that of three officers tried and judged by the government of the Third Republic, Rossel, Bazaine, and Dreyfus, only one was sentenced to death: Rossel.)

Rossel was assassinated. I was sentenced to deportation for life to a fortified place as leader of a gang and for inciting to revolt. Jules Simon later told me that Thiers had done all in his power to prevent me from being executed. Cisse the thief, the swindler who poisoned himself, Cisse the general, the minister of war, the supporter of Order and Religion, Cisse demanded that I be executed. In the name of the army he demanded my execution. Thiers defended me. He carried on. He cried. He said that they couldn't put to death a former member of the government. If they executed members of the government... he... But the fact is, it appears he cried in my behalf. He didn't even want me deported. In the end he agreed that I be imprisoned on an island outside of France. There are no islands that aren't outside France. But in the prison prepared for me on Saint-Marguerite, Bazaine was also imprisoned. Edmond Adam showed me a letter from the director of that prison, telling him he wouldn't be a severe host in my regard, but that I would have to do picket duty. You understand that I didn't want any kind of exceptional treatment, and I feared being a prisoner who was, so to speak, on parole. I was already thinking of escaping. In the midst of all this, on May 24 Thiers was overthrown and I was deported. It's pointless, isn't it, to tell you how I escaped, with Jourde, Olivier Pain, Paschal Grousset, Ballière, Granthille; how I lived in London, in Geneva, and finally my return...

Q: Your triumphal return. And your opinion of the Commune?

A: As the Empire had fallen, we believed in the republic. When we ended up with an Assembly even more clerical and reactionary than the preceding ones, we revolted. The majority had exasperated me, and that's why I tendered my resignation in Bordeaux. The Parisians had had enough. The Commune was the explosion of duped and betrayed republican sentiments. Thiers admitted it: the insurrection was produced by the exasperation of disappointed patriotism. Governments rarely change, and they continue to exasperate the governed.

(Going on to talk about Greece, M. Rochefort shows us a statuette that the Greeks just sent him, and ingeniously explains to us what a Tanagra is.)

Q: But the Commune, your opinion?

A: The Commune, quite simply, is the only honest government there has been in France since Pharamond. The rulers earned 15 francs a day. Since then they cost us a bit more. I was with them when I was deported. Not a single one of these men had a sou.

Q: But these honest men, do you think that they were able, were well inspired?

A: It depends. There were moderates and extremists. Naturally, it was the extremists who were right. When you want to act you can't take half measures, or else... Look, the Greeks are hardly anything compared to France, but if they remain boastful up to the bitter end, they'll likely win out over all the powers.

Q: The administration?

A: I know very little about it.

Q: And the influence of the Commune?

A: Enormous. The massacres by the Versaillais have forever discredited bourgeois society. And then the Commune saved the republic.

Q: That we have.

A: I don't want to say anything. Nevertheless, it remains the example.

Paschal Grousset

Member of the Commune, Delegate for External Relations.
Currently a Deputy

It's not only a chapter of my life story that you are asking about, it's a whole volume. The volume is written, but will only come out after my death. Let it sleep. In a few words, here are my feelings about March 18.

It's hardly necessary to affirm that 2,000,000 men don't rise up without reason, don't fight for nine weeks and don't leave 35,000 corpses on the streets without having good reasons.

For many, these reasons were the result of the long suffering which is the life of seven-eighths of a so-called civilized nation. For others they were principally born of obsidional angers, of a great effort made sterile through official incompetence, of the shame of the capitulation, and also by an agreement made easier by the coming together of civic forces. For most people the dominant idea, the main idea, was the primordial need to defend the republic, directly attacked by a clerical and royalist Assembly.

The republic of our dreams was assuredly not the one we have. We wanted it to be democratic and social, and not plutocratic. We wanted to make it a precision instrument of economic transformation. For us, republic was synonymous with regeneration. Amid the smoking ruins of the fatherland it seemed to us necessary and right to completely disqualify the men and institutions who had caused these ruins. We needed new schools, a new morality, and new guides. Work for all, education for all, national defense for all, unshakeable confidence in the destiny of our race: these were the slogans that spontaneously rose from the heart of a bloodied Paris and which in its eyes was embodied by the republic.

The siege left us militarily organized; this is why our revolution was both military and civil. The ruling classes had just given the measure of their criminal incapacity. This is why our revolution was proletarian and marks the pivotal fact of modern times, which is the direct access of the workers to the mysteries of power.

As for the Commune, for us as for those of 1792, it was the chance and provisional organism that is born at moments of crisis to take social evolution in hand and to lead it to its goal.

You already know how the struggle was engaged and what its course was. Thanks to the complicity of Germany, which purposely turned its 300,000 prisoners over to the Assembly at Versailles, Paris fell before

numbers. But at least, by its heroic effort it gave republican France the time to take itself in hand. Formal commitments were made by Thiers with the delegates of the major, frightened cities. When the blood was washed from our streets it was discovered that Paris's program was the only practical one.

It is thus that from our holocaust, from our pain, from the tears of our mothers, that the republican pact was solidified. In the meanwhile, the municipal law was voted. On this point as well Paris won the day.

As for the economic transformation, it was put off for a quarter century. But who today would dare to say that it has not remained inevitable? Poverty grows along with mechanical progress. In this beautiful France, thousands of arms have nothing to do. The malaise of every class is betrayed by symptoms that are more obvious with each passing day. The impotence of old formulas, the incoherence of institutions and acts is clear for all to see. The hour is approaching when on this point too, the program of March 18 will impose itself by the force of circumstances. For we who wanted to advance it this hour will be that of historic justice.

Edouard Vaillant

Member of the Commune, currently Deputy

Without being as clear about it as I am now, I was nevertheless convinced from the beginning of the revolution of March 18, that there should be only one dominant preoccupation and goal: the fight against Versailles. To be or not to be—for the Commune that was the whole question. The facts, the circumstances had posed things in this way. If not to win, it had at least to last. However important it was to make manifest its revolutionary socialist character by all possible acts, nothing could better affirm this character than its very existence, its resistance. It was that and the rage, the fury of capitalism's reaction; the coalesced efforts against Paris of Versailles and Bismarck.

Those who during the siege had participated in the agitation, in the revolutionary socialist action concentrated at the Corderie, seat of the Committee of the Twenty Arrondissements and who, at the cry of "Vive la Commune!" had attacked the Hôtel de Ville on October 8, penetrated it October 31, and on January 22 had attempted, for the defense of the republic and for the revolution, to seize power, these people were not in a state of uncertainty. Throughout the siege they had seen the revolutionary movement grow, though it didn't attract the populace, duped by the

lies and charlatanry of its rulers. They were able to foresee the popular anger and revolt on the day of disillusionment and open betrayal. And this is indeed what happened when, after having responded to our red poster that it wouldn't capitulate, the government capitulated and from hatred of the revolution, surrendered Paris and the country to the monarchic invader, which had become its counter-revolutionary ally.

Events had dispersed the committee of the Corderie and the arrondissement committees. Their most active members had made the mistake of going into the provinces, to such a point that they weren't at the head of the tumultuously growing movement that followed the governmental betrayal, where all the angered and rebellious currents of opinion would finally mix together.

The Central Committee of the National Guard was the expression of that uncertain and intermediary period, from which came, with the March 26th election, the elected Commune.

Several revolutionaries from the Corderie and revolutionaries and socialists from various groups entered the Commune. And so this election gave it a momentum, a direction, that was more socialist. The elected Commune was far from being what the committee of the Corderie would have been: a revolutionary Commune, master of power. It had neither that unity of ideas and action or energy. It was a deliberative assembly without sufficient cohesion, whose decisiveness wasn't on a par with its good will and intentions. What we can say in praise of it is that it was truly the representative, the socialist representative of Paris in revolt, and it did its best to represent it and defend it.

We can also add that most of the citizens who were delegates there did honor to their mandates. And we must pay honors less to them than to the revolutionary and enthusiastic environment that lifted everything up and made it grow. It was an environment that in those unforgettable and admirable weeks, made of the people of Paris in arms—at first to guard its weapons against reaction and the provocations of Versailles, and then increasingly for working class emancipation and the revolution—a people of combatants and citizens.

And in fact, as the threat of defeat became more pressing, the revolutionary spirit increasingly animated those who remained standing, those who lived, who fought. They truly represented Paris and its people. It is their fight and their death that constituted their grandeur in the eyes of

the world, made all the greater by the ferocity of those who carried out the massacres: the grandeur of the Paris Commune.

When for many days Paris was isolated, in flames, slaughtered by the Versaillais assassins, was dying, in the eyes of all it became the incarnation of the proletariat fighting for its deliverance and the revolution militant. The prolonged fury of Versaillais reaction, applauded and assisted by the reaction and capitalism of all countries, spread this impression everywhere, confirmed this effect, made this calling to life of the organized revolt of all the poor, of all the oppressed more striking.

And so the struggle and the fall of the Commune, its history and legend, were the universal evocation of socialist and revolutionary consciousness. And in those countries where there had until then only been democratic demands, socialism was affirmed. If socialism wasn't born of the Commune, it is from the Commune that dates that portion of international revolution that no longer wants to give battle in a city in order to be surrounded and crushed, but which instead wants, at the head of the proletarians of each and every country, to attack national and international reaction and put an end to the capitalist regime.

M. Pindy

Member of the Commune

What do I think of the insurrection, of its organization? I think we acted like children who try to imitate grown-ups whose names and reputations subjugate them, and not like men with force (at least a certain force) should have done in the face of the eternal enemy. I am far from being a passionate admirer of what we did during the Commune, and I think that aside from a minority of our colleagues whose time at the Hôtel de Ville gave them the idea that they were statesmen, the others, and the people along with them, have become convinced that the best of governments is worth nothing and that authority, in whatever hands it is placed, is always harmful to the advancement of humanity.

Le Chaux-de-Fonds

M. Dereure

Cobbler

Elected in November 1870 to the municipality of the 18th arrondissement with Clemenceau, Lafont, and Jaclard, I remained at my

fighting post, faithful to the insurrection. Elected a member of the Commune on March 26, I fought for its cause until the final day of combat.

Q: The parliamentary organization?

A: The Commune concerned itself far too much with details it would have been preferable to look after only after the military victory. It was powerfully organized. The Central Committee of the National Guard, which had been elected to prevent the Prussians from entering Paris and which met March 18 at the Hôtel de Ville, didn't understand its role and didn't want to take the responsibility for throwing its battalions at Versailles from the beginning. It left Thiers the time to organize the besieging army and it only worried about the elections to the Commune. Nevertheless, it had taken measures to seize the forts, but it sent the absinthe addict Lullier to Mont-Valérien; I had to shake Lullier, dead drunk, on a couch in the Hôtel de Ville. And based on the illusory promise of the fort's commander, the traitor didn't leave at the fort the battalions he had brought there. And after the sortie of April 3, a sortie that had been organized by some members of the Commune without the consent of the latter, the Parisians were stupefied and immediately demoralized at finding themselves under fire from Mont-Valérien. Confidence was lost. I estimate that after this defeat there weren't 40,000 men who in rotation defended Paris. I was often at the forward position and the constant request of the superior officers was, "We are lacking men; we need reinforcements." Towards the end of the Commune I was delegated to Dombrowski to keep an eye on his actions. Versailles had offered him a million to withdraw his forces from one of the gates; he had himself denounced this fact to the Committee of Public Safety. Did he betray? This is a point difficult to elucidate. I am convinced that he was not a traitor. What I saw was that it was absolutely impossible to send companies to the Point du Jour. The cannons of Mont-Valérien, of Montretout, and the heights of Issy rained down on it. Something interesting is that the chateau of La Muette, where the general staff was located, only received two cannon shots, one on the staircase and one in the stable. Placed as it was—within range of the cannons of Mont-Valérien—it should have been pulverized. There must have been two or three informants on the general staff whose lives had to be preserved.

Q: Financially?

A: If the Commune would have placed an embargo on the Bank [of France] everything would have worked much better, and it's not just a question of that Bank, but of all the banks. And they should have also seized the daily receipts of all the railroad companies. A detail: I remember seeing the directors of these companies at the ministry of Finance, where Varlin had invited them. They were across from two workers, Varlin, a bookbinder and me, a cobbler. And these people who are said to be so arrogant, showed such obsequiousness that I'm still disgusted by it.

Q: Administratively?

A: All services were easily reorganized and functioned with no difficulty.

Q: What do you think of the role of the Central Committee after the elections to the Commune?

A: There was a harmful duality, but it was impossible for the Commune to smash the Central Committee, which had the National Guard in its hands.

Q: Did you have the illusion that you could emerge victors?

A: We had no illusions. And in general the members of the Commune sacrificed their lives. But with regard to the masses, we didn't think the repression would be so ignobly cruel.

Q: Once the Versaillais were in Paris, do you think that all the members of the Commune did their duty?

A: No, it seems that the primary concern of some among them was to hide. In the final hours I recall seeing Ranvier, Varlin, Ferré, Gambon, Theisz, Jourde, Serrailleur, and Trinquet. Others were fighting at other points; others had been taken prisoner or had been blocked in their neighborhoods. Durand, Rigault, and Varlin were executed. Delescluze died at the barricades. Others were wounded: Vermorel, Arnaud, Protot, and Brunel. If, many were able to escape once the battle was finished, it's because the Empire's police had been totally disorganized.

Q: And the barricades?

A: The barricades were good, but we didn't make enough use of houses. The Versaillais, on the contrary, knew how to use them. In the final days,

the best defenders of the Commune were unquestionably the children and the elderly.

Jean Allemane

Editor-in-chief of the *Parti Ouvrier*

March 18, 1871 was a day that was wished for and prepared by M. Thiers and his accomplices, determined to have done with the popular National Guard (the armed workers), in the same way that their kin of the provisional government of 1848 put an end to the workers of the national workshops.

The mistake these rotters committed was, in the first case, that of unmasking themselves by assisting the Bank of France in ruining hundreds of small merchants and factory owners by deciding the cessation of the deferral of commercial payments. This could very well have had serious consequences if, instead of well-intentioned citizens and unknowing socialists, the Central Committee had been composed of determined men capable of guiding affairs by beginning their attack at the true center of resistance: the Bank of France. The members of the middle class, who were already overexcited by the patriotic disappointment, would have applauded the most daring measures.

Had determined men been in power during the insurrection, Messieurs Thiers and de Ploëuc, authorized representatives of the upper bourgeoisie and high finance, would have had nothing left to do but say their mea culpa for having unleashed the hurricane. But the members of the Central Committee—as was later the case with those of the Commune—were motivated strictly by sentiments. Their lack of resolution, compounded by economic ignorance, made them lose the benefits of an exceptionally favorable situation, since in the eyes of all concerned the government's attack had taken on the character of a monarchical restoration. This led sincere republicans to avoid placing any obstacles before measures that were clearly socialist and revolutionary.

The main thing was to move quickly, and this was precisely what wasn't done.

Proclamations, more proclamations, and still more proclamations. During this time the reactionary beast recovered from the turmoil caused by the unforeseen resistance and the incidents of the war. This resistance caused the finest flower of the canaille to scurry to Versailles and, assisted by all the cowardice and all the parasitism that was being held at bay, the

reactionary beast prepared its revenge. A revenge which history will recognize was at the same high level as the braggarts that the flat-footed Maxime Du Camp called “the party of honest men.”

March 18, 1871 was willed by its leaders and could have marked the epoch of a new world for the despoiled. But in order to do this, instead of chattering, it should have struck the bourgeoisie at its most sensitive point: the safe!

That done, all that would have had to be left was to use the gold to disorganize the Versaillais gangs, something much easier to do in Paris than should have been. Had they been deprived of their gold then steel, resolutely employed, would have put an end to capitalist resistance.

Too “48-er” to consider this, the men of the Central Committee unconsciously repaired the errors committed by M. Thiers and his accomplices, and allowed them to prepare the murders of the Bloody Week.

Jean Grave

Editor of *Les Temps Nouveaux*

Grave took no part in the Commune, but his opinion seemed of interest to us, the opinion of a revolutionary of today on the revolutionaries of the past.

What I think of the parliamentary, financial, military, and administrative organization of the Commune can be summed up in just a few words.

It was too parliamentary, financial, military, and administrative and not revolutionary enough.

To start with, while every day the battalions of Federals gathered at their meeting places waiting for the order to march on Versailles, a movement whose urgency was clear to all, the Central Committee, on the pretext that it didn't have regular power, thought only of organizing elections, while the army of order was reforming in Versailles.

The Commune, once elected, busied itself with passing laws and decrees, most of which were not implemented, because those they were aimed at realized that the Commune legislated much, but acted little.

Revolutionaries! That's nevertheless what they thought they were, but only in words and parades. So little were they really revolutionaries that

even invested with the suffrage of the Parisians they continued to consider themselves intruders in the halls of power.

They lacked money, when hundreds of millions slept in the Bank of France. All they would have needed to do would have been to send out against the bank two or three battalions of National Guardsmen to have the Marquis de Ploëuc—who so easily fooled them—go flee into the shadows.

They voted the law on hostages and never dared implement it, while Versailles continued to massacre the Federals who fell into their hands.

I'm not saying that it should have executed the handful of gendarmes and obscure priests it had in its hands. Versailles could have not have cared less: the serious hostages were out of the Commune's reach. But it had the survey records, the mortgage office, the notary records, everything that regulates bourgeois property. If instead of making threats the Commune had actually set all the paperwork on fire, had taken control of the bank, the same bourgeois who insulted the imprisoned Federals would have forced Thiers to apologize to them on their behalf.

In a revolution, legality is not only a joke, but a hindrance; it can only serve the partisans of the order of affairs we want to destroy. It's not speeches, paperwork, or laws that are needed during a revolutionary period, but acts.

Instead of voting for the forfeiture of bosses in flight, they should immediately have placed their workshops in the possession of the workers, who would have put them in operation. And it was the same for everything. Instead of laws and decrees that would have remained dead letters, they needed facts. Then they would have been taken seriously.

They wanted to play at being soldiers, to parade in the uniforms of Jacobin officers, as if revolutionaries had to make a disciplined war.

Attacked by the government of Versailles, they should have contented themselves with self-defence. But they should only have given up ground foot by foot; they should have sapped terrain and houses so that every forward step of the soldiers of order would have been the equivalent of a defeat for them.

No, even backed against the wall in Paris they still wanted to develop strategy. They put up enormous barricades which, intended to confront a designated point, were turned by the enemy. Impregnable head on, they left their defenders wide open from behind. It would have been so easy to crenellate houses, to make each of them a fortress and only abandon

them after having set them on fire or blown them up. The Commune respected property! Versailles, its defender, was less scrupulous and didn't hesitate to destroy houses when they had to turn a barricade.

Now, it must be said that the men of the Commune aren't responsible for what wasn't done. They were of their period, and in their time if there was a vague socialist sentiment, no one, neither leaders nor soldiers, had clearly defined ideas. So it was inevitable that everyone end up mired in uncertainty.

Triumphant, the Commune would have become a government like the others. A new revolution would have been needed to bring it down. Vanquished, it synthesized all proletarian aspirations, and gave momentum to the movement of ideas of which we of today are the product.