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THE PARIS COMMUNE OF 1871 AND THE COMMUNARDS

There was agreement only on this watchword: create a plebeian government, render powerless the classes deemed responsible for so much public suffering and hardship. This was the general nature of the Commune of 1871, of which it can be said that for the last time in our history the word [Commune] recovered a little of its primitive meaning, of its power to call for the unity of fellow citizens against the oppressors.

—C. Petit-Dutaillis, *Les communes françaises*

IN CONTRAST TO THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS, OUR ANALYSIS OF THE political experience in Paris in 1871 focuses not on a particular form of organization but on a series of political forms that contributed to the advent or the historical deployment of the Commune. Through a host of political bodies, the Paris Commune of 1871 marked the establishment of a political form intended to put an end to state power, that is, power based on coercion, in order to institute a power constructed through the concerted action of the citizens. The Paris Commune stands as a refutation in practice of a certain line of thought whereby the state is considered desirable, or even indispensable, for the collective existence of modern individuals. However, the Communards' political action was not exempt from myth, particularly that of the Great Revolution of 1789, as evidenced by the creation of an ersatz Committee for Public Safety, which presaged the Commune's demise. The Paris Commune was a fragile undertaking; an experiment in freedom vulnerable to the desire for the One and, hence, in constant danger of turning into its opposite.

WHAT IS A COMMUNARD?

Just like the expressions “sans-culotte” and “English Jacobins,” the term “communard” was initially pejorative. Although it has gained currency today, it was

“very rarely used”¹ during the events of 1871. Actually, “communard” replaced the equally pejorative epithet “*communeux*,” which was widely used at the time of the Commune, especially by its adversaries. Beyond its “ignoble” origins, “communard” came to designate all sympathizers and members of the Commune and not just its elected officials or functionaries.

The social makeup of the Communards continues to be the subject of significant historical debate. Depending on the perspective adopted (e.g., the Commune as “the last revolution of the nineteenth century” versus the Commune as “the revolution of the future”), the Communards are presented as either artisans or proletarians. Rather than choosing between the two, we concur with the American historian Martin P. Johnson that an analysis of the social fabric of the Commune reveals its essentially composite nature: artisans, laborers, petit bourgeois, professionals, wage earners, merchants, etc. The Commune attracted women and men from a variety of social backgrounds and a wide range of trades and professions. In response to the proponents of either interpretation of the Commune, it can be objected that, in typically plebeian fashion, it was characterized by plurality. The political bodies of the Commune were not the preserve of one socioeconomic class but rather a rallying point and a forum for the expression of the same revolutionary desire to assert oneself as a political subject.² This is what prompts the leading French historian of the Commune, Jacques Rougerie, to state that the Communard “is in no way the modern proletarian.”³

The nature of the Communards’ cohesion was more political than socioeconomic. The use of the term “citizen” to address both male and female Communards testifies to their view of themselves as bound together in the same struggle for a more democratic political sphere. Hence, a Communard was “firstly an activist of the Revolution.”⁴ The designations “worker” and “proletarian” rarely occurred in communalist discourse.⁵ Yet this does not imply that social issues were considered secondary. On the contrary, such issues were inseparable from the creation of democratic communal bodies. Without doubt, the political cohesion of the Communards constitutes a distinctive feature of the plebeian experience.

TOWARD THE PARIS COMMUNE: A POLITICAL APPRENTICESHIP

The period preceding the establishment of the Paris Commune was a time of exceptional political and revolutionary ferment.⁶ In retrospect, it can be regarded as a stage of political apprenticeship for the communalist movement. This training was to be decisive because the communalist forces learned to act

in a concerted way and to seize the opportunities arising out of the political conjuncture in order to advance their political project.

During the siege of Paris (September 19, 1870–January 28, 1871) there were two coalitions seeking to establish an autonomous Commune and to neutralize the defeatist policy of the Government of National Defense.⁷ The first coalition, characterized by its moderation and a certain lack of coordination and organization, tried unsuccessfully to set up a Paris Commune in October 1870. Out of this failure came a second, more radical coalition whose aim was to establish a revolutionary Commune by going beyond the electoral process through the designation of its members from among the political clubs and societies of Paris. This more revolutionary coalition initiated two fruitless attempts to create a Commune in January 1871.

Both coalitions included militants active in popular political bodies. Thanks to Napoleon III's legislation concerning public meetings, the many opponents of the French bourgeoisie's regime could gather and make themselves more widely known to a public not restricted to political activists.⁸ The supporters of Auguste Blanqui, for example, gained notoriety for their oratory skills and their ability to arouse the sympathy of Parisian students and workers. The International Workingmen's Association (IWA), founded in 1864 and later known as the First International, also took part in preparing the Commune of 1871, with many of its members acting as elected officials and functionaries of the Commune. The First International refused to get politically involved, on the pretext that politics "means suppression, conquest and force,"⁹ but some of its key actors did not hesitate to do so. All this attests to the ideological diversity within the Commune.

The creation in 1870 of the Comité central républicain (Republican Central Committee), known simply as the Comité central, of the twenty arrondissements (districts) of Paris was to be crucial for the future Commune.¹⁰ The Central Committee, established at the instigation of activists from the International, was composed of members from a number of dissident political committees and groups in Paris. A vigilance committee was formed for each district. The Central Committee acted as the federative body, ensuring the coordination of efforts throughout the city. The vigilance committees had the "twofold objective" of defending both Paris and the Republic.¹¹ Here is how Gustave Lefrançais describes the responsibilities of these new plebeian political bodies:

The twenty vigilance committees were . . . revolutionary municipal structures, collecting whatever information was available on the operations of the official administrations in order to make known their true nature to a

central committee comprising delegates sent by the vigilance committees. The central committee was in turn responsible for coordinating any action designed to oppose the reactionary machinations of the Hôtel de Ville [City Hall] or to denounce them to the population of Paris.¹²

The reason the Central Committee played an essential role in the political action leading up to the Commune was in part because the International was divided as to its participation in the events surrounding the creation of the Paris Commune. Those like Gustave Lefrançais, Eugène Varlin, and Benoît Malon, who encouraged the International to get politically involved, were important actors within the Central Committee.¹³ But the latter cannot be reduced to a mere branch of the International,¹⁴ as that would be an offense against the heterogeneity of the Central Committee's members and the plurality of their backgrounds.¹⁵

It was precisely because of this diversity that the Central Committee was from the outset split as to its political objectives and actions. The internal divisions became apparent during the demonstrations that began on October 5, 1870, when three separate demonstrations were held in the name of the Central Committee. Given the lack of organization and coordination, all three rallies were failures, and the rifts among Central Committee members deepened. Nevertheless, as the hardships caused by the siege grew more severe, the clubs in Paris experienced a degree of activity such that they were able to fill the political vacuum resulting from the discord within the Central Committee.¹⁶

The twists and turns of France's faltering military strategy in face of Bismarck's armies as well as the negotiation of an armistice to allow Paris to replenish its supply of basic goods further inflamed the anger of Parisians, already kindled by various revolutionary actions. On October 31, 1870, they rose up against the National Defense government. The insurrection was triggered by the Parisians' spontaneous initiatives, and the popular bodies, more specifically the Central Committee, provided the guiding framework. The Committee organized a march on the Hôtel de Ville and demanded that elections be held to establish the Paris Commune.¹⁷ Despite some confusion concerning the leadership of the revolt (at least three members of the Central Committee somehow fulfilled this role: G. Lefrançais, G. Flourens, and A. Blanqui), the mayor of Paris agreed to hold elections. While the Central Committee was negotiating, the vigilance committees launched assaults on a dozen *mairies d'arrondissement* (town halls). This, according to M. P. Johnson, was no mere coincidence but proof that there was a degree of coordination among popular organizations during the siege. However, the insurrection of October 31 was

not initiated by the Central Committee but was the product of the spontaneous actions of Parisians combined with the coordination effected by the popular organizations.¹⁸

The Government of National Defense had no intention of allowing the insurgents to set up a Commune in Paris. In the early morning of November 1, 1870, it took control of the Hôtel de Ville, which had been almost entirely abandoned by the revolutionaries, who were convinced of having won the day. To mollify those remaining (including Blanqui), the government promised to hold municipal elections. The maneuver enabled General Trochu, president of the National Defense government, to regain control of the political situation in Paris. He did indeed order the holding of elections but only on the level of the *mairies d'arrondissement*. He also pledged to step up the fight against the Germans, thereby strengthening his political base in Paris. Ultimately, the government reneged on its promise to amnesty the revolutionaries and arrested those who had taken part in the October 31 insurrection.¹⁹

In addition to the arrest of some of the key actors in the communalist movement (including Blanqui, Lefrançais, Pyat, and Vallès),²⁰ the Parisian revolutionaries suffered a serious blow when the National Defense government held a plebiscite with the aim of consolidating its political base. More than 322,000 Parisians voted to support the government while only 54,000 voted against it. Trochu took advantage of the favorable political circumstances to tighten his authoritarian grip on Paris.²¹ The leaders of the revolutionary opposition were thus obliged to rethink the movement's overall strategy. What emerged out of the first, generally moderate coalition was one decidedly more radical and revolutionary in terms of both its goals and methods,²² one that drew a lesson from the October 31 failure and the subterfuges of the Trochu government. The radicalization of the Parisian opposition gave rise to new organizations, while the Central Committee temporarily stood back.

Three new plebeian organizations stepped in: the *Légion garibaldienne* (Garibaldi Legion), the *Club central* (Central Club), and the *Ligue républicaine de défense à outrance* (the Republican All-out Defense League). The *Légion*, founded by militants close to the International, was established as a semiclandestine revolutionary federation striving for the advent of a democratic, social republic in France.²³ The purpose of the *Club central* was to gather and disseminate the propositions formulated at public meetings. It should be noted, however, that the *Club* seems to have suspended its activities between October 31 and the beginning of December. Finally, the *Ligue républicaine* brought together radical and moderate revolutionaries, which is why it would play a crucial role in the future Commune. The *Ligue*, which was quite secretive at

the outset, was responsible for the publication of two revolutionary newspapers and for the creation of the Club de la solidarité (Solidarity Club), which sought to associate itself with the popular organizations of Paris. Notwithstanding the moderates in its ranks, the Ligue républicaine carried out its activities under the leadership of its most radical members (the Blanquistes in particular).²⁴

The new plebeian organizations marked a turning point in the communalist movement's strategy. To outwit the police, closed and secret meetings were held, and more emphasis was placed on clandestine activities than on public gatherings. After October 31, the vision of the Commune to be created was altered. Henceforward, the revolutionaries fought for a revolutionary Commune, one based not on popular suffrage but on the clubs and committees of Paris. The Blanquistes played a decisive role in this shift, because they were able to persuade the various elements in the communalist movement of the validity of the new approach.²⁵ Furthermore, for supporters of the Commune the results of the plebiscite had discredited the ballot box solution.

On January 1, 1871, the Comité Central républicain des vingt arrondissements became the Délégation des vingt arrondissements (Delegation of the Twenty Districts), thereby signaling a renewed wish to constitute a Commune in Paris as well as elsewhere in France. Indeed, the Delegation sent representatives to the provinces to encourage and prepare the establishment of a communal power. However, the change of name implied more than a mere renewal of the Central Committee's political will. The general assembly of local vigilance committees (in the districts) that voted the name change also proclaimed the dissolution of the Central Committee. The innovative and revolutionary nature of this change must be underscored. The Delegation represented a new coalition of the Left, which, following the events of late October and early November, chose to establish the Commune in Paris through revolutionary means.²⁶

In fact, the Delegation of the Twenty Districts saw itself as the Commune to be constituted. The creation of a comité d'exécution (executive committee), also known as the comité d'initiative (initiative committee), made up of a limited number of members chosen from among those most dedicated to the communalist cause, suggests that the Delegation was seriously preparing for its arrival at the Hôtel de Ville.²⁷ The task incumbent upon the Committee was to organize the insurrection against the National Defense government. To this end, the Committee sat on a permanent basis and put forward the idea of a "red poster" with which the city would be placarded to announce the insurrection and publish the demands of the communalist movement. The demands reiterated the minimal program of the revolutionary clubs and committees of Paris: the distribution of foodstuffs to the needy, a fairer social sharing of the

hardships caused by the siege, etc. As William Serman notes, the red poster signified a certain erasure of the “ideological differences”²⁸ among the components of the communalist movement. It also incited Parisians to mobilize en masse against the blockade and encouraged them to overthrow the Government of National Defense. It furthermore provides an indication of the level of coordination and organization of the plebeian revolutionary bodies.²⁹ The many meetings of the supporters of the Commune preceding the circulation of the poster throughout Paris (January 6, 1871) confirmed its seditious and revolutionary character, with the speakers setting out exactly what needed to be done to ensure the Communards’ takeover of power.

The effects of the siege were especially harsh for Parisians. Each week over a thousand of them died of the disease and famine ensuing from the Prussian blockade. Hence, supporters of the Commune hoped that the red poster’s call would be taken up by large numbers of people. But they underestimated the strength of many Parisians’ continuing faith in their government. The poster failed to arouse the enthusiasm of the masses or even of large crowds. Only a few hundred people responded. Worse still for the communalist movement, the number of posters immediately torn down was so great that one communalist club voted for a new printing.³⁰

However, the effects of the siege of Paris were so devastating that by mid-January the potential existed for a new insurrection. Especially since the National Defense government appeared to be preparing to sign an armistice, with the implication that the Parisians’ sacrifice and suffering would have been in vain. This is what led communalist militants, more specifically the Delegation of the Twenty Districts, to organize an attempt to seize power on January 22. The clubs and committees in the districts made ready, and a secret “execution” committee coordinated the operations of the communalist movement’s different components.³¹

However, as had been the case with the red posters, only a small number of insurgents showed up on the appointed date. The government brutally crushed the insurrection. Contrary to the claims of certain historians and participants who witnessed this episode firsthand, Martin P. Johnson argues that the failure of January 22 cannot be ascribed to a lack of organization within the communalist political bodies.³² Instead, the events of January 22 demonstrated their high degree of organization as well as the absence of the minimal level of popular support that all revolutionary movements require. To intimidate the Trochu government, Parisians would have to mobilize on a massive scale. For this to occur in the strongly patriotic climate of 1870–1871, a conjunction of the national and communalist causes was required.³³

Reacting to this failed uprising even more severely than it had after the revolt of October 31, 1870, the Trochu government cracked down on the revolutionaries. It not only closed the clubs and banned public meetings of the communalist forces, but it also censored two major opposition newspapers: Félix Pyat's *Le Combat* and Charles Delescluze's *Le Réveil*. For Johnson, the closing of the clubs, the arrests of many key militants, and the signing of the armistice (January 26, 1871) had the combined effect of closing a chapter in the communalist movement's development. Although this period was marked by failures, the political lessons drawn from it were considerable: "the months of agitation and the experience of coordinating initiatives and combining efforts had forged a viable revolutionary coalition and a radical political culture."³⁴

The Delegation of the Twenty Districts, which brought together the most revolutionary elements—including members of the International, supporters of Auguste Blanqui, and Jacobins—was at the core of revolutionary activities. Other clubs, such as the Republican League, were more broadly based, drawing moderate elements favorable to republicanism into the communalist movement. The revolts of October 31 and January 22 enabled these organizations to learn to work in concert in order to advance a shared political project: the establishment of a communalist democracy in Paris.

The period immediately preceding the inauguration of the Paris Commune (from the armistice of January 27 until March 18, 1871) witnessed the creation of a coalition whose objective was to institute a specific political project: a revolutionary, socialist Commune. In comparison with the previous clubs and associations, this coalition displayed greater ideological cohesion and strived for a stronger focusing of revolutionary efforts. Ideologically, its goal was the political empowerment of workers, the destruction of the dominant political oligarchy, the end of industrial feudalism, and the achievement of political freedom through social equality.³⁵ At the center of the new movement were the Delegation of the Twenty Districts, the International Association of Workingmen, and the *Chambre fédérale de sociétés ouvrières* (Federative Chamber of Workers' Associations). The coalition was thus made up of the most dedicated communalist bodies and the most determined activists.

In parallel to the establishment of the coalition, the *Comité central de la garde nationale* (Central Committee of the National Guard) was created. The formation of a coordination center of the people's army, the *Garde nationale*, would prove decisive in the communalist forces' takeover of power. The Central Committee's goal was to federate the numerous sections of the National Guard. As some members of the Central Committee belonged to the communalist movement, a strategy aimed at "merging" the revolutionary socialist

movement and the National Guard could be carried out. What occurred on March 18, 1871, was the fruit of that merger.³⁶

The political context in the early part of 1871 remained a difficult one for the communalist movement. The Government of National Defense banned the communalist clubs and associations, and the Delegation of the Twenty Districts disappeared after January 22. Many of its members were either imprisoned by Trochu or on the run. But the elections planned for February 8 induced the Delegation to reemerge. In preparation for that date, the key components of the “revolutionary socialist” movement—the Delegation, the IWA, and the Federal Chamber—produced a common slate of candidates. This was one of the first gestures of the new coalition.³⁷ Among the list of revolutionary socialist candidates were familiar names such as Garibaldi, Blanqui, and Pyat as well as those of lesser-known militants belonging to the IWA and the movement of communalist clubs and associations.

The election results transformed France’s urban centers into republican islands “in an ocean of monarchist peasants.”³⁸ In Paris, the majority of those elected were moderate republicans, but a few “revolutionary socialist” candidates were also victorious (B. Malon, H. Tolain, and F. Gambon), along with other left-wing candidates. M. P. Johnson puts the proportion of votes in favor of “revolutionary socialists” in Paris at approximately 15 percent; thus, the communalist option represented a significant minority in the capital.

The monarchists’ overwhelming victory nourished the apprehensions of the republicans and revived the fear, especially in Paris, of a monarchist restoration. The new National Assembly, convened in Bordeaux, refused to proclaim the republic and constituted a government composed of a monarchist majority under the leadership of Adolphe Thiers. Pointing to the state of public finances, the Assembly refused to pay members of the National Guard in Paris who were unable to prove that they were destitute. The exodus of a part of the Parisian bourgeoisie to the provinces and the scarcity of soldiers of the French armed forces enabled the revolutionaries to strengthen their base in the capital. What’s more, there were in Paris 240,000 armed National Guard soldiers disappointed by their treatment at the hands of the Bordeaux monarchists. In addition, the economic effects of the siege and the war continued to weigh heavily on Parisians, especially the poor and the petite bourgeoisie. Finally, for many Parisians the loss of Paris’s status as capital provided more evidence of the Thiers government’s intention to restore the monarchy.³⁹

Taken together, these factors created favorable conditions for a new attempt to establish a Commune. The “revolutionary socialist” movement was particularly active throughout this period. As a body engaged in direct political

action, the coalition was rooted in the popular organizations and promoted the active participation of militants in the coming revolution. For example, the IWA encouraged its members to seek election in the National Guard's central committee in order to rally it to the communalist cause. This is precisely what took place in the first weeks of March, when the majority of seats in the central committee were taken by revolutionary socialist militants.⁴⁰

On March 18, 1871, the supporters of the Commune finally succeeded in taking power. Thanks to the fraternization of the people of Paris with the troops deployed by Thiers early that morning to take control of the capital (as well as the National Guard's artillery), the Communards took Paris's Hôtel de Ville by storm, together with a number of town halls in the districts. By the afternoon, the police was in retreat, thereby confirming the triumph of the Commune and leaving the power in the hands of the National Guard, now an essential component of the communalist movement. While the events of March 18 were not the results of prior planning on the part of the Delegation or the IWA, the Communards took power thanks to the political experience they had acquired in the committees and associations.⁴¹ The people's involvement in the overthrow of the French state proved—to say the least—decisive.

POLITICAL CLUBS UNDER THE COMMUNE: A RADICAL DEMOCRACY

Analyzing the “political clubs” active during the Paris Commune offers fertile grounds for understanding the foundations of the Communards' political action. It was in the local political organizations that the plebeian experience took shape through the institution of a communalist “people's politics” and the revival of the agoraphilic democratic tradition. The expression “political club” refers to associations whose *raison d'être* was political debate and action. Such clubs first appeared during the French Revolution and were hallmarks of nineteenth-century politics.⁴² The clubs multiplied during the Paris Commune of 1871, with education, discussion, and, ultimately, political action as their objectives. Members could keep abreast of news in the district, take part in discussions, and organize upcoming political actions. As conduits between the official organs of the Commune and the Parisian plebs, the clubs made it possible to minimize the distance between the governed and the governing. Within the three major sites of communal power (the Hôtel de Ville, the district town halls, and the streets), the political role played by the clubs was primordial.⁴³ Indeed, two-thirds of the elected members of the Commune came from the clubs, and eighteen out of twenty districts were represented by

a majority of Communards belonging to the club movement. The importance of the clubs for the Commune was such that a top official of the French Interior Ministry would forcefully underscore the major responsibility of the clubs and associations in the revolution of March 18.⁴⁴ Thus, not only did plebeian political practice during the siege lead to the advent of the Commune, but it was also a determinant in the growth of radical democratic bodies. This genuine apprenticeship in political action and democracy engendered a climate where political freedom and self-emancipation could occupy center stage on the political scene. The main actors of the Commune wanted to consolidate and develop this new political spirit, as reflected in the forms of political organization of 1871.

There were three levels of communalist political power. First, the civil and military administration, for which the Hôtel de Ville of Paris was the decision-making headquarters. Second, the district town halls, where the communalist vigilance committees and clubs played a crucial role. Finally, the streets, squares, and neighborhood meeting places, where public opinion was formed and expressed and where the presence of communalist militants made itself most strongly felt. In fact, supporters of the Commune played a part at every level of power.⁴⁵ Moreover, the communal power structure ensured the involvement of the capital's inhabitants in the various decision-making bodies.

Following negotiations with the district town halls, the Central Committee of the National Guard, installed at the Hôtel de Ville since March 18, decided to hold elections based on universal suffrage in order to lend the communalist revolution electoral legitimacy. A number of important actors in the Delegation of the Twenty Districts wanted the Commune to adopt a more revolutionary approach. Nevertheless, the Delegation endorsed the idea of elections and mapped out a strategy to ensure the presence of its militants at Paris's city hall and the district town halls.⁴⁶ In so doing, it opened up the communalist project to both moderate and radical republicans. For the Delegation, the outcome of the March elections was a major victory, which indeed "revenged" the disastrous results of February.⁴⁷ The political experience gained in the previous contest no doubt served to enhance the Delegation's electoral vigor in March. But the victory was attributable primarily to the work of the vigilance committees in every district.⁴⁸ Among the various groups competing in the elections, only the communalist movement could count on a critical mass of experienced and committed activists. The result of this numerical and organizational advantage was the election of a majority of Commune supporters in March,⁴⁹ which contributed to the success of communalist ideas and representatives in Paris. The

elected Commune was thus consistent with the pre-March 18 communalist movement, thanks to the political apprenticeship acquired in the local clubs and associations.

The exact number of clubs and associations that existed in Paris during the Commune is nearly impossible to ascertain. This is because certain clubs were quite short-lived, and others changed their names and locations. M. P. Johnson nevertheless maintains that this movement, born prior to March 18, began to expand as of that date. At its peak (early May 1871), there were between thirty and thirty-five large clubs as well as an even greater number of committees and associations specialized in areas such as education and social issues.⁵⁰ The frequency of meetings is also difficult to determine. Some notices in the daily newspapers of that period refer to daily meetings, whereas the assemblies of other clubs were convened only three times a week. Although certain districts were more active than others (clubs in the popular districts were more dynamic than those in the bourgeois districts), the clubs' activities affected the districts of Paris as a whole.

In several districts, the participation of the local vigilance committees, the rank-and-file organizations of the Delegation of the Twenty Districts, was vital for the movement of clubs and associations. In the fifth and sixth districts, for instance, they promoted activities and meetings. Furthermore, the vigilance committees acted as liaisons among the various clubs in the districts, thereby consolidating the base of the communalist movement while at the same time enabling the many to take part in public affairs. One of the vigilance committee's goals was, in fact, to foster the multiplication of clubs and associations throughout the city. The vigilance committee in the nineteenth district, for example, wanted to divide it into subdistricts, each of which would have a communalist club.⁵¹ This project expressed a desire to disseminate the spirit of the clubs and associations as widely as possible and to ensure that strong ties existed among them.

The attendance at clubs and committees varied according to their missions. In general, the large clubs concerned with the affairs of a single district brought together the inhabitants of that area. However, the associations and committees specializing, for instance, in education or issues related to the place of women in the communalist revolution attracted citizens from various districts.⁵² But the number of participants in the specialized associations was small, no doubt because they were scattered throughout Paris. Nevertheless, as Serman points out, it was in the clubs that "the anonymous masses voiced their opinion."⁵³

Meetings of clubs and associations typically included women and even children. The communalist public space was thus open to individuals regarded

until then as “apolitical.”⁵⁴ This broader—and, what’s more, sustained—participation is surprising, especially in the context of a civil war, which might have dissuaded many citizens from getting involved. Yet attendance at the large clubs in the districts remained strong throughout the Commune’s brief career.

Small groups of militants were responsible for ensuring the orderly running of club and association meetings and of the drafting of communalist manifestos and newspaper articles. Most clubs appear to have had such cores of dedicated activists whose function was to act as public speakers. The same was true of the mairies d’arrondissement and the Paris Hôtel de Ville, where civil and military administration tasks were performed by committed rank-and-file militants.

Given the close ties between the clubs and the vigilance committees and between the vigilance committees and the communal administration in Paris, the Commune can be said to have maintained an ongoing connection with the popular movement: “In these circumstances the distance between the leadership and the rank and file was virtually nonexistent.”⁵⁵ By virtue of the operation of the clubs and associations, the Commune managed to create local democratic bodies while administering the city at the same time. The free and open character of the local political bodies points to the genuinely democratic nature of the Paris Commune and its founding organizations.

An examination of the political culture engendered by the communalist clubs and associations brings to light the Communards’ ideological cohesion centered on the notion that the Commune was engaged in a struggle between two worlds: on one hand, the old world of hierarchy, competition, and domination, and on the other, the new world (yet to be built) based on equality, association, and liberty.⁵⁶ This can also be framed in terms of a Commune setting a new, scientific era of politics against the old world of the government and the clergy. The “Declaration to the French People” adopted by the Commune affirms:

The communal Revolution, initiated by the people on March 18, inaugurates a new era of experimental, positive, and scientific politics. It puts an end to the old world of governments and clerics, of militarism, bureaucracy, exploitation, speculation, monopolies, and privileges, to which the proletariat owes its servitude, and the country its misfortunes and disasters.⁵⁷

First among the ideals impugned and the enemies identified by the Communalists was perhaps the clergy.⁵⁸ As provider of public instruction and medical

care, the Catholic Church exercised a great deal of influence and played a decisive role in maintaining the rule of the few over the many throughout the nineteenth century. The communalist fight for secularization was conducted largely by rank-and-file activists, who on occasion would take certain members of the clergy hostage but were generally content to expel them from the schools and hospitals. In this struggle the Communards sometimes resorted to violence, both verbal and physical. It was the militant base of the Commune that applied the anticlerical policies.⁵⁹ In particular, the hatred of the clergy paved the way for the appropriation of churches for the purpose of holding club and association meetings. In fact, former churches were among the most important sites of action and discussion in "Paris Libre 1871."

This struggle points to a significant difference between 1848 and 1871. Whereas the revolutionaries of June 1848 believed that religion was compatible with the revolution, this was evidently no longer the case in 1871. In this connection, one must keep in mind the major impact of positivism on the evolution of the communalist revolution,⁶⁰ as evidenced by the Commune's homage to the socialist philosopher Pierre Leroux. Indeed, while it underscored Leroux's contribution to socialism, the Commune refrained from "any solidarity with the religious tendencies that always served to support [his] system of social transformation."⁶¹ For most Communards, science was closely associated with social progress, whereas religion was an agent of obscurantism and subjugation.

The Communards were motivated by a certain idea of "revolutionary justice," one based on a distinction between "legality" and "rights." Legality referred to what was allowed by current laws, which were deemed nothing more than instruments for preserving the established order, hence biased in favor of the dominators at the expense of the dominated. Rights, on the other hand, set in motion a dynamic favorable to the emergence of justice, notwithstanding the dominant groups' demands for social or political conservation. Revolutionary justice, closer to rights than to legality, therefore implies obedience to a Law transcending the codes voted by politicians.⁶² It is on these grounds that the Communards, when they were tried by Versailles after the fall of the Commune, would refute the illegality of certain actions.

Even though physical violence was rare, verbal and symbolic violence as well as the potential for physical violence produced a climate of fear in Paris for the opponents of the Commune (known as *réfractaires*, i.e., recalcitrants), a climate for which the club and association membership was largely responsible. However, the Communards did not resort to gratuitous violence. For

them, acts of violence came under the head of revolutionary justice, and they believed such acts to be compatible with the building of the “new world” of the Commune. It must be stressed, however, that the Communards did accept differences of opinion concerning the operation or direction of the Commune. In other words, a space for discussion and action was open to those who accepted the principle of the Commune. People were free to challenge its key actors as well as the actions of the Central Committee. But political tolerance did not extend to the recalcitrants. Thus, certain adversaries of the Commune were arrested and imprisoned by militants of clubs and associations in the districts. In addition to priests, former police officers and property owners were targeted by the Communards.⁶³ More than mere discussion groups, the rank-and-file political organizations of the Commune were sites of direct political action.

The communalist conception of revolutionary justice involved a specific vision of equality among citizens. For the Communards, equality could no longer be abstract; hence, it was less a subject for debate in the clubs and associations than a principle for action whose application in everyday life was imperative. Hardships as well as responsibilities and duties had to be shared among the various groups making up Parisian society. For example, communalist activists wanted the Commune to pursue the policy, introduced by the National Defense government, of requisitioning foodstuffs. The requisition policy ensured that the poor had the same access to basic goods as the wealthy. Beyond equal access for the dominated and the dominators, there was also a desire for genuine equality among Communards. Therefore, the salaries of the officials and representatives of the Commune were capped so as not to exceed four times the average salary of a worker.⁶⁴

It was through the struggle for true equality among citizens that the Communards succeeded in reversing certain traditional social relationships. The reversal involved the transformation of an established power relationship into its contrary, a transposition that was widespread under the Commune. Among the more significant reversals was the arrest of former police officers by liberated political prisoners, as revolutionary justice sometimes requires the detention of agents of the fallen regime. Other instances include atheist meetings held in churches, anticlerical speeches delivered from the pulpit, as well as “dressing up idols to look like canteen women or national guards.”⁶⁵ Conversely, the street—formerly a Mecca for militant communalist demonstrations—gradually turned into a meeting place for the moderate and conservative forces of Paris.⁶⁶ Ultimately, the equality advocated by the Communards entailed a threefold destitution of the dominant classes: political, economic,

and social. This was without doubt the most consequential reversal effected by the Paris Commune and may in part explain the bourgeoisie's outpouring of hate and vindictiveness during the Bloody Week.

The creation of a Committee for Public Safety manifested the desire to situate the Commune within the French revolutionary tradition. Its establishment furthermore represented a decisive step in the history of 1871, because it broke the revolutionary alliance between the majority wishing to adopt radical and authoritarian methods to defend the Commune and the minority supporting a more democratic approach. This measure was connected with the communalist movement that had developed in the clubs and associations of the districts.⁶⁷ The initial impetus in support of a Committee for Public Safety had originated in the vigilance committees of the nineteenth district.⁶⁸ Not one club or association spoke out against the idea of such a committee, and many voiced their endorsement.

In May, the Communal council came out in favor of creating a five-member committee empowered to take strong measures to protect the Commune and ensure military victory over the Versailles forces. The split between the "authoritarian" majority and the "democratic" minority was accentuated by the makeup of the Committee for Public Safety, whose members all belonged to the majority. In addition, the democratic minority was excluded from the Communal commissions, in particular the military commission. On May 15, 1871, the minority temporarily withdrew from the Communal Council and published a manifesto stating the reasons for their opposition to the Committee for Public Safety.

For the minority, "concerned with social and anti-authoritarian measures,"⁶⁹ the creation of a Committee for Public Safety represented the centralization of power and the marginalization of the democratic ideal that the Commune must embody. It appeared to be a backward step, whereas the Commune was supposed to be forward looking. Thus, the Committee for Public Safety seemed to the minority a "parody of the past" and a "revolutionary pasticcio," whose power would lack authority.⁷⁰ The painter Gustave Courbet, a minority member of the Communal council, aptly describes the minority's sense of the impossibility of returning to the past:

I would like for all the titles and words belonging to the Revolution of '89 and '93 to be applied to that period alone. Today, they no longer mean the same thing, nor can they be used with the same appropriateness or the same acceptations. The titles Public Safety, Montagnards, Girondins, Jacobins, and so forth cannot be used in the republican socialist move-

ment. We represent the years between '93 and '71 with the mentality that must characterize our own temperament and emanate from it. To me, this seems all the more evident because we resemble plagiarists, and we are reproducing to our detriment a terror that does not belong to our times. Let us use terms that our revolution suggests to us.⁷¹

The minority not only decried an initiative that it regarded as anachronistic, but it also rejected the idea of a dictatorship imposing a specific policy on the Commune and its local bodies.⁷² That is why it withdrew from the Communal Council and returned to the district town halls to work more closely with communalist activists. The minority also included anti-Robespierrists, such as Jules Vallès,⁷³ who no doubt did not wish to see a repetition of the Jacobin offensive against the sans-culottes in Year II. The concern about the fate of the Communards belonging to the local associations and clubs stemmed also from the memory of the sans-culottes in the sectional societies.⁷⁴ It attests to the democratic ideal found in Paris in 1871. Despite breaking with the majority, the minority recognized in its manifesto their common adherence to the same broad objectives, specifically, "political freedom [and] the emancipation of the workers."⁷⁵

For the majority, whose members included Jacobins and Blanquists as well as "Independent Revolutionaries,"⁷⁶ the creation of the Committee for Public Safety was necessary for the sake of efficiency in the fight against Versailles. Indeed, the properly democratic proceedings of the deliberative organs of the Commune appear to have slowed up decision making, which was a problem inasmuch as the imperatives of war required a swifter administrative process.⁷⁷ In response to the accusation of wanting to establish a dictatorship, it could be argued that the Committee for Public Safety was accountable to the council of the Commune, which remained free to determine its own composition. Finally, the Committee for Public Safety in fact did not organize a new "Terror."⁷⁸ With respect to military organization, the Committee proved so inefficient that its composition had to be modified soon after it was established.⁷⁹

Beyond the divisions between the majority and the minority in the Communal Council, the words and symbols of the French Revolution affected the revolutionaries' political analysis and activism in France throughout the nineteenth century.⁸⁰ The Great Revolution in a way served as an analytical framework for the purpose of making political events and issues intelligible. During the Commune, communalist speakers and journalists did not hesitate to situate the revolution of March 18 in a continuum with 1793, and they held up its major protagonists—Robespierre, Marat, and other celebrated names of the

Revolution—as role models. The Committee for Public Safety can therefore be viewed as a product of the French Revolution's undeniable power of attraction.

The language and institutions of the French Revolution remained at the heart of the struggle for the Commune. By creating an ersatz Committee for Public Safety, the majority in the Communal Council and the communalist militants who supported this initiative yielded to the “myth of 1793,” the idea that history could repeat itself but with results different from those of 1793. But what if this yielding to the myth of 1793 were viewed as indicative of the transformation of liberty into its opposite, servitude? From that perspective, the Commune, an example of a people's politics opening the way to political freedom, can be thought of as having succumbed to the One, to the desire for unity as represented by the Committee for Public Safety. Accordingly, the reliance on the Committee would signify the beginning of the Commune's decline as a political regime of liberty. The establishment of such a committee implies the introduction of “leaders of the plebs” and, hence, of the possibility of a “Dictatorship.” The Commune no longer evolved in keeping with the desire to achieve self-emancipation based on the “natural . . . authority” or “intelligen[ce]”⁸¹ that would enable the many to acquire true political autonomy. With the creation of the Public Safety Committee, the legacy of the French Revolution proved harmful for freedom and emancipation. That is perhaps why Gustave Lefrançais, a member of the minority, wrote:

“Happy are the peoples who have no history!” says the philosopher, whose name has been forgotten. And we readily add: How happy the Commune would be if it had no revolutionary traditions! For indeed, the sole concern of the vast majority of its members, preoccupied with historical memories, was to take up—as the accepted phrase would have it—“the great tradition of '93” interrupted by the fall of the Hébertistes, say the Blanquistes; by Thermidor, say the Jacobins.⁸²

Karl Marx as well, no doubt concerned about the direction taken by something as precious as a communalist revolution, affirms that the task of the Communards would be “not to recapitulate the past, but to build up the future.”⁸³ Thus, the French Revolution's hold on the minds of the Communards prevented them from being creative and imaginative in the face of the threats confronting the Commune. Rather than blazing its own potentially original trail, the council of the Commune engaged in pastiche, thereby sacrificing the democratic nature of the free political regime established through the communal insurrection of March 18, 1871.

THE COMMUNALIST CONTRIBUTION: CRITIQUE OF POLITICS, PRACTICE OF FREEDOM

It remains for us to specify the Commune's contribution to the communalist and agoraphile traditions. The Paris Commune of 1871 was an attempt to build a modern form of political organization outside the framework of the state. Indeed, it belonged to a movement opposed to the modern nineteenth-century state. It established a noncoercive power and thus introduced a different organization of collective existence, one better suited to the idea of a democracy where active citizenship is a crucial element of the community's overall functioning. It is Karl Marx who must be credited with having identified the Paris Commune's antistate contribution. His reading of the communalist revolution offers a fruitful approach to analyzing the Commune's contribution to our understanding of a people's politics and of modern political freedom.⁸⁴

In the third part of *The Civil War in France* (1871), Marx presents an interpretation of the Commune that situates it within the antistate current. For him the Commune could have been content to take over the instruments of the modern state and put them at the service of the dominated, especially since those instruments were ubiquitous in French society at the time. The central power of the state, in particular through the standing army, the bureaucracy, and the police, as well as the clergy and the legal system, had developed greatly since it was born under the ancien régime. Indeed, the centralized power of the state had been consolidated by the Empire. And this state power "assumed more and more the character of the national power of capital over labor, of a public force organized for social enslavement, of an engine of class despotism." According to Marx, the Empire increased the subordination of social groups to the class of property owners, whose economic hegemony it ensured. Thus, the bourgeoisie was able to develop enormously under the Empire: "Its industry and commerce expanded to colossal dimensions; financial swindling celebrated cosmopolitan orgies; the misery of the masses was set off by the shameless display of gorgeous, meretricious and debased luxury."⁸⁵ While the bourgeoisie was busy accumulating vast wealth, the power of the imperial state was corrupted. For Marx, it represented the ultimate development of the tool enabling the bourgeoisie to liberate itself from the snares of feudalism. That liberation, however, required the subjugation of all social classes to the imperatives of capital. This was accomplished thanks to state power and implied that the accumulation of capital would be the primary objective of the Empire's economic policy, to the detriment of fair wages for workers.

Consequently, the Paris Commune of 1871 was for Marx the “direct antithesis to the empire.” Under the Commune, Paris became the site of an attempt to abolish class domination through the abolition of state power. Since the state as political form was historically the propertied classes’ tool for dominating the nonpropertied classes, the Commune did not seek to put the modern state apparatus in the hands of the dominated. To the contrary, in fact, one of the Commune’s first acts was to eliminate the standing army and replace it with the National Guard, that is, the “armed people.”⁸⁶ By thus abolishing one of the most crucial (and most visible) components of state power, the Commune constructed a collective existence different from the one established by the ancien régime and reinforced by the Empire. The Commune thereby attacked the symbol par excellence of the sovereignty of the modern state, that is, the state force responsible for protecting the country’s territorial integrity. That is why for Marx the revolution of 1871 proved to be a revolution against the state.

The political form adopted by the Commune was an innovation in the form of the modern state. Not quite an executive power nor altogether a legislative power, it combined both inasmuch as its members deliberated and then applied the ratified decisions. It also dealt with the apparatuses of central power. The police, for example, “was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible and at all times revocable agent of the Commune.” The bureaucratic apparatus generally underwent the same treatment as the police: “Public functions ceased to be the private property of the tools of the Central Government.”⁸⁷ Instead they were put in the service of the Commune and, hence, of the needs of the many.

The Commune took on not only the tangible instruments of state and bourgeois domination but also the spiritual bedrock of that domination: the Church. As we have seen, the struggle against the clergy was fervently waged by the militants of the clubs and associations in the districts. According to Marx, this anticlerical struggle was part of the communal attempt to break the power of the state. Moreover, removing education from the dominance of the priests and the state made it possible to liberate science “from the fetters which class prejudice and governmental forces had imposed upon it.”⁸⁸ The spiritual control of the French bourgeoisie through the intermediary of the Church was thus undermined by the Communards’ offensive against Catholicism.

The establishment of the Commune could have altered the political structure of France as a whole. Indeed, the Communards wished for the Commune’s political form to be adopted throughout the land, so as to become “the political form of even the smallest country hamlet.” A system of delegation from one administrative level to the next would have made communes the basis of a

new form of national unity, with truly democratic foundations, since it would have enabled everyone to take part. Concretely, from the hamlet to the county seat, from the county seat to the department, and from the department to the National Assembly in Paris, elected and revocable delegates would have made decisions and implemented the policies of the communes of France. In opposition to national unity ensured by "State power which claimed to be the embodiment of that unity independent of, and superior to, the nation itself,"⁸⁹ the Commune put forward a sort of democratic federation of communes of which the Paris Commune would be the hub.

For Marx, an original political form such as the Paris Commune was commonly apt to be mistaken for older political structures. Hence, March 18, 1871, was believed by many to be a return to the medieval communes that had preceded and later served as the foundations for state power. Furthermore, the fight of the Paris Commune against state power was also "mistaken for an exaggerated form of the ancient struggle against over-centralisation." But, writes Marx, the Commune of 1871 can hardly be reduced to such formations or historical struggles. The novelty of the Commune resided above all in its desire to liberate "all the forces hitherto absorbed by the state parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society."⁹⁰ In other words, by freeing society from the grip of the modern state's coercive power, the Commune could ultimately have set free the lifeblood of French society. The acknowledgment of this unprecedented task would suffice to set aside any identification of the Paris Commune with older historical political forms and struggles.

It is at this point in his analysis that Marx introduces the enigmatic notion of the "Communal Constitution." Though not developed at length, the idea of a "Communal Constitution" enables us to grasp more firmly the political innovation of which the events of 1871 were the vehicle. The "Communal Constitution" struggles against the state as "a parasitic excrescence," which ineluctably strives to serve its own interests. The Communal Constitution would seek to guarantee the free development of citizens while at the same time recognizing "municipal liberty." Thus, the Communal Constitution could have "initiated the regeneration of France."⁹¹ But the Communal Constitution could have this effect only on one condition: that it be a working-class government. As such, it could have brought about the emancipation of, as Saint-Simon puts it, "the most numerous and poorest class." According to Marx, by emancipating the proletariat, the Communal Constitution would have prepared the way for the emancipation of humankind.

For Marx, the "secret" of the Commune was precisely that "it was essentially a working-class government," that is, the political form capable of "work[ing]

out the economic emancipation of labour.”⁹² As the end product of the struggle between the dominators and dominated, or between the workers and the bourgeoisie, the Paris Commune represented the establishment of a political administration whose objectives coincided with the needs of the dominated. The Commune was therefore a revolution against the state but not against the idea of government.

Marx nevertheless recognizes that the policies implemented by the Commune were modest. Still, the elimination of the night shift for bakers indicates the direction that the Commune’s initiatives would have taken. The bias in favor of ordinary people was perceptible in most of the measures taken by the Communal Council. Yet, writes Marx, “the great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence.”⁹³ That is why the particular measures of the Commune cannot in themselves serve to evaluate an emancipatory undertaking such as this.

The identification of the Commune as a revolution against the state is perhaps the most fertile element of Karl Marx’s interpretation, especially since this outlook was shared by certain actors of the Commune. Gustave Lefrançais, for example, asserted that the Communards who endorsed the creation of a Committee for Public Safety (i.e., the majority) failed to understand that the Commune as a political form rejected the modern state. Unaware of the antistate specificity of the Commune, the majority succumbed to the myth of 1793 and, especially, to the “raison d’état,”⁹⁴ which explains the recourse to an instrument as bureaucratic and potentially lethal for liberty as the Committee for Public Safety.

The writings of Lefrançais also point to the regeneration of politics of which the Commune was an agent. For, as Marx maintains, while its negative content was the rejection of the modern state as an inevitably self-serving form, the Commune’s positive and innovative contents resided perhaps in the idea of the possibility for everyone to take part in public life. In other words, the Paris Commune’s contribution to the communalist and agoraphile traditions has been the creation of a democratic regime based on the blossoming of a civic life open to the participation of all citizens favorable to the communalist enterprise. Through the clubs and associations in the districts, the Commune embodied the resurgence of political freedom in the heart of modernity. By struggling against state—that is, coercive—power (a power exercised on others), the political experience of the Commune brought in a noncoercive form of power, one that emerges through the concerted action of the citizens (a power exercised with others).

Gustave Lefrançais's writings testify to the twofold mission of the Commune: challenging state power and building a free political regime based on power that arises with others. He asserts,

The revolution of March 18th . . . did not bring with it mere modifications of the administrative and political workings of the country. Its goal was not simply to decentralize power. On pain of giving the lie to its initial affirmations, it had the mission of erasing Power itself, of restoring to all members of the social body their effective sovereignty by substituting the right to direct initiative of those concerned—the governed—for the pernicious, corrupting, and henceforth impotent action of the government, which it had to reduce to the role of an ordinary administrative agency.⁹⁵

What does this signify? Perhaps Lefrançais chooses to capitalize the term “power” in order to underscore its majesty and imperial sovereignty. From his decidedly antiauthoritarian perspective, “Power” can only refer to state power, to the state's exercise of coercive force. By suppressing “Power,” the Commune therefore had to place “effective sovereignty” in the hands of the citizens in order to bring about a form of self-government. In the words of Jacques Rougerie, “The communard revolutionary wants full and complete popular sovereignty. Full sovereignty through the direct government of the people, by the people, is a demand that one sees constantly affirmed.”⁹⁶ What Lefrançais suggests here is that in opposition to the coercive and corrupt rule of the dominators, the Commune proposes to the dominated the right to direct political initiative. Hence, a noncoercive “power” arises, a power whose wellspring is the concerted action of citizens.

By referring to the Paris Commune's antistate struggle, one can identify two distinct models of “government,” the first being the state as government imposing a direction on collective existence and the second being the Commune as a government founded on the concerted action of the citizens. The first case involves a gubernator⁹⁷ state, a state government that, like a ship's captain, controls the rudder of political and social life. In this situation, the vision of collective existence is nurtured primarily by “agoraphobia.” Indeed, this conception of the state rests on the distancing of citizens from public affairs. The sovereign state seeks to impose itself on the political community, or, to borrow Marx's terms, it constantly strives for greater independence from social life. This desire for autonomy, which expresses itself through an increasingly stifling authoritarianism, enables the gubernator state to occupy—in the manner of a

“parasitic excrescence”—more and more space in the daily lives of individuals while at the same time denying them daily access to its domains.

The Commune, as a different form of government, was constituted through the recognition of the citizens’ role in community affairs. The communal government had no wish to direct, as the gubernator state does, but accepted the reciprocity between the various organs of government and the local democratic bodies. The communal experience was based precisely on the idea of sovereignty being not restricted to the government apparatus but exercised in the associations and clubs of the districts. By ridding the Commune of the coercive force proper to the gubernator state, the Communards established a political institution involving a truly democratic rule of Law. Would this be the deeper meaning that Marx intended with the enigmatic phrase “Communal Constitution”? If so, a “subterranean” continuity can be drawn between what the young Marx meant by “true democracy” in his 1843 manuscript *Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*⁹⁸ and the notion of a “Communal Constitution” found in his later text on the Paris Commune, *The Civil War in France* (1871).⁹⁹

In *Souvenirs d’un révolutionnaire*, Gustave Lefrançais reexamines the distinctiveness of the Commune as an attempt to organize modern democratic collective existence in a new way. He advances the hypothesis that the attempt to introduce a plebeian political configuration was precisely what aroused the murderous hatred displayed by the Versaillais during the Bloody Week. Addressing the bourgeois anti-Communards, Lefrançais writes,

The Commune demonstrated that the proletariat was ready to manage itself and could get along without you, whereas you claim to be the only ones able to “run things.” The obvious proof of this was the immediate reorganization of the public services that you had abandoned. . . . The Commune attempted to substitute direct action and the citizens’ continuous supervision for your governments, all based on the “raison d’état,” which conceals and shields your pillaging and every sort of government villainy.¹⁰⁰

Hence, what the Paris Commune opposed to the “raison d’état” and the crude “Machiavellianism” of the French state exiled in Versailles were forms of political organization that respected the human political condition, forms that above all were attentive to the many and allowed citizens to participate actively in decision-making bodies. By rejecting the “raison d’état” and its freedom-

destroying imperatives, the Commune shows us the possibility of building a truly free political regime in the heart of modernity.

It remains for us to determine what sort of “reason” the Commune wanted to substitute for the “raison d’état.” Given the brevity of the communal experience, there can be only a partial answer to that question. We can affirm, nevertheless, that such “reason” was not based on instrumental objectives. Indeed, instrumental rationality is characteristic of the “raison d’état.” Nor does the communal rationality seem to have been that of communicative action or rationality as theorized by Jürgen Habermas.¹⁰¹ Communal democracy was more than deliberative; it involved a significant element of direct action that cannot be reduced to a communicative activity. Rather, what the communal experience points to is an alternative conception of rationality concerned more with justice than with economic performance or efficiency, as confirmed by the previously mentioned example of the elimination of the night shift for bakers.

As a critique of the politics of the modern state and a practice of politics as a site of human freedom, the Paris Commune is exemplary in that it attempted to institute a different organization of modern collective existence, and it did so in the exceedingly difficult context of a civil war followed by a military defeat. The analyses of Marx and Lefrançais enable us to grasp both the negative and creative contributions of the communalist revolution. On a more practical level, what emerges from the above examination of the communalist political enterprise is the shape of the “new politics”¹⁰² (or “new world”) that the actors of the Commune hoped for. The Communards strived for a world with more solidarity, more justice, and more equality among the various social groups. These plebeian aspirations could be realized only through the establishment of local democratic bodies, such as the district clubs and associations. For such aspirations to be fulfilled, the modern state, that instrument of political domination, had to be done away with. And the communalist political bodies were the only possible political alternative to state power.

Tumultuous, adversarial, and sometimes even violent, communalist political action was founded upon the possibility for everyone to take part in political life. Thus, the Commune bore witness to the political capacity of the many. To those who consider the plebs to be subpolitical, the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871 shows that the many are capable of instituting a politics of the people and that when they do, political freedom ensues. Here, communalism and agoraphilia once again emerged together through this further modern affirmation of the plebeian principle.

