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Author(s): Monty Johnstone

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THE PARIS COMMUNE AND MARX'S CONCEPTION OF THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT

Monty Johnstone

The Paris Commune occupies a central position in Karl Marx's political thought. Already in his first draft of his *Address on the Civil War in France*, started in the middle of April 1871, he described it as "the initiation of the social revolution of the nineteenth century" which, whatever its fate in Paris, would "make *le tour du monde*."¹ It represented for him the first experience of the working class holding political power,² albeit extremely briefly and under exceptional circumstances in one city.

Since he had always refused on principle to follow his Utopian predecessors in "playing with fantastic pictures of the future structure of society,"³ the Commune provided Marx with the only opportunity in his lifetime to discuss in any detail the characteristics of the transition period that he believed lay between capitalism and a classless Communist society. Above all, a study of Marx's writings on the Commune is essential for an understanding of that part of his thought that has for a century aroused more bitter controversy than any other: his conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat and its relationship to democracy. This article limits itself to considering this one aspect of Marx's connection with the Commune.

Concept of Working Class Hegemony

From the autumn of 1870 Marx and Engels had opposed on tactical grounds any attempt at a rising in the French capital.⁴ However, as soon as they saw rebellion sparked by Thiers' attempt to seize the artillery of the National Guard, they declared their support for the Parisians.⁵ In a private letter to Ludwig Kugelmann in Hanover on 12 April 1871, Marx expressed his admiration for the "elasticity, historical initiative and capacity for sacrifice" of the Paris revolutionaries. The Commune, he wrote, was "the most glorious deed of our Party since the June insurrection in Paris" in 1848.⁶ The term "party" is used here in the "great historical sense," in which he had spoken in his letter to Freiligrath of 29 February 1860,⁷ to denote the movement of the workers as an independent class, as an expression of which he was now forcefully identifying the Commune.⁸ In another letter to Kugelmann, on 17 April 1871, Marx was even more enthusiastic. "The struggle of the working class against the capitalist class and its state has entered upon a new phase with the struggle in Paris," he wrote "Whatever the immediate results may be"—and already on 6 April in a letter to Liebknecht he had expressed himself very pessimistically on these⁹—"a new point of departure of world historic importance has been gained."¹⁰

It does not fall within the scope of this article to consider whether or

not Marx was right in his view of the proletarian character of the Commune. What it is my intention to establish—for this is also in dispute—is that this was indeed his view not only as expressed in his famous *Address on the Civil War in France*, issued in its final form just after the crushing of the Commune, but also on all other occasions.¹¹ Dr. Shlomo Avineri's assertion¹² that "the various drafts of *The Civil War in France* offer clear evidence that Marx considered the Commune not a working class affair, but a petty-bourgeois, democratic-radical émeute," does not stand examination. Marx's drafts in fact emphasize again and again his view that "the red flag, hissed¹³ by the Paris Commune, crowns in reality only the government of workmen for Paris!" and that "the workmen's revolution" had delivered "the true elements of the middle classes . . . from their sham representatives."¹⁴

In this last-quoted statement is expressed the essence of Marx's concept of proletarian hegemony, which occupies an important place in his theory of Socialist revolution.¹⁵ "For the first time in history," he wrote, "the petty and *moyenne* middle class has openly rallied round the workman's Revolution, and proclaimed it as the only means of their own salvation and that of France! It forms with them the bulk of the National Guard, it sits with them in the Commune, it mediates for them in the Union Republicaine." Only the working class could rescue them from financial ruin, as well as converting "science from an instrument of class rule into a popular force" and "the men of science" (i.e. the intellectuals) "into free agents of thought." Indeed, the "principal measures" that the Commune had taken after its establishment were "for the salvation of the middle class—the debtor class of Paris against the Creditor class!"¹⁶ A five-page section of Marx's first draft is devoted specifically to the peasantry.¹⁷ The main lines of its argument are incorporated in the final *Address*, which represents the Commune's victory as the peasants' only hope of freedom from debt. A Communal Constitution for all France would bring "the rural producers under the intellectual lead of the central towns of their districts, and there secure to them, in the working men, the natural trustees of their interests."¹⁸

The concept of working class political power did not therefore presuppose the necessity of the proletariat as the majority of the population.¹⁹ Writing three years after the Commune Marx explained:

"Where the peasant exists on a mass scale as a private property owner, where he constitutes a more or less substantial majority, as in all the states of the Western European continent . . . the following occurs: either he prevents, wrecks every workers' revolution, as he has done up till now in France; or the proletariat (for the peasant proprietor does not belong to the proletariat and even where, according to his position, he does belong to it, he does not believe that he does) must as a government take measures through which the peasant finds his position directly improved and which thus win him for the revolution."²⁰

Such a working class government would be based on an alliance with

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other classes which accepted proletarian leadership and gave it majority support in the country. Despite efforts to do so, which were made neither consistently nor early enough, the Paris workers did not succeed in persuading the peasant majority in the French provinces that it was the champion of their true interests. In the capital itself, however, Marx saw "the working class . . . openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative, even by the great bulk of the Paris middle class—shopkeepers, tradesmen, merchants—the wealthy capitalists alone excepted."²¹ With such a conception of hegemony in mind, he went on to declare: "If the Commune was thus the true representative of all the healthy elements of French society, and therefore the truly national government, it was at the same time, as a working men's government, as the bold champion of the emancipation of labour, emphatically international."²² There was for him no contradiction whatsoever in speaking of a "workmen's revolution" as a "people's revolution"²³ and the "working men's government" that it established as "a government of the people by the people."²⁴

The Dictatorship of the Proletariat

Marx did not actually use the words "dictatorship of the proletariat" to describe the Paris Commune. It was a term that he used synonymously with such expressions as "the rule of the proletariat" or "political power held by the working class," which occur much more frequently in his works.²⁵ One would hardly expect him to use such a phrase in his one work on the Commune, the *Address on the Civil War in France*, since this was not written in his own name but on behalf of the General Council of the First International with its British trade union members, to whom it would have been unfamiliar and potentially alarming.²⁶ If, however, we compare the way in which he characterizes the Commune with his description elsewhere of the function of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the identity becomes apparent.

Engels noted in 1872-73 that "the views of German scientific socialism on the necessity of political action by the proletariat and its dictatorship as the transition to the abolition of classes and with them of the state . . . had already been expressed in *The Communist Manifesto* and since then on innumerable occasions."²⁷ In 1848, in the *Manifesto*, the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat (though not yet the term, which is first found in Marx in January 1850²⁸) is put forward as follows: "The first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy. The proletariat will use its supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e. of the proletariat organized as the ruling class."²⁹ In 1852, writing to J. Weydemeyer, he emphasized as something new in his theory, his belief that "the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of*

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the proletariat" and that "this dictatorship constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes and to a classless society*."³⁰ There is no record of Marx using the term again till 1871, four months after the end of the Commune. Then, at a dinner attended largely by Communard refugees, after referring to the Commune, he noted that, before it would be possible to eliminate the basis of class rule, "a proletarian dictature would become necessary."³¹ His best-known formulation of this idea in this period was made in 1875 in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, where he wrote: "Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. There corresponds to this also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*."³²

All these quotations make it clear that for Marx the dictatorship of the proletariat did not denote a classless society with a fully Socialist economy. It was to be a prolonged transitional phase, in which political power had passed to the workers, who would use it to destroy the economic basis for the existence of classes.³³

This corresponds to his description of the Commune as precisely such a transitional regime already in the first draft of his *Civil War*. It was "the political form of the social emancipation, of the liberation of labour from the usurpations (slaveholding) of the monopolists of the means of labour."³⁴ In the final *Address* this becomes the well-known statement that the Commune "was essentially a working class government . . . the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour. . . The Commune was . . . to serve as a lever for uprooting the economical foundations upon which rests the existence of classes, and therefore of class rule."³⁵

It is, in my opinion, anachronistic to argue that Marx made a distinction between a workers' government and the dictatorship of the proletariat, in the way that has at times been done by some twentieth century Marxists.³⁶ Nor do I find it plausible that Engels, whose agreement with Marx on all fundamental political questions is recorded in their correspondence over four decades, should have interpreted either the Commune or the concept of proletarian dictatorship differently from his great co-thinker. And Engels was to write quite unequivocally in his 1891 Preface to Marx's *Civil War*: "Dictatorship of the Proletariat. . . Do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat."³⁷

Was the Commune Socialist?

I n 1881, in an atmosphere very different from that in which, ten years earlier, he had produced his memorable vindication of Paris' March revolution, Marx wrote in a letter to the Dutch Socialist F. Domela-Nieuwenhuis that the Commune "was merely the rising of a city under exceptional conditions, the majority of the Commune was in no wise

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socialist, nor could it be."³⁸ I do not think that this statement invalidates the contention that Marx saw the Commune as a dictatorship of the proletariat, at least in embryonic form, although it may at first sight appear to do so. Already during its existence he had recognized how limited were the opportunities for it to realize its potential. Thus, in the first draft of *The Civil War*, he wrote: "The actual 'social' character of their Republic consists only in this, that the workmen govern the Paris Commune! As to their measures, they must by the nature of things, be primarily confined to the military defence of Paris and its approvisionnement."³⁹ There was "nothing socialist" in any of the Commune's decisions "except their tendency," he said, and he proceeded to welcome the fact that the "real conditions of the movement are no longer clouded in Utopian fables."⁴⁰ Similar points were made in the *Address*, which declared that "the great social measure of the Commune was its own working existence."⁴¹

The *Address* itself did however go farther than this by projecting into the future the tendencies that Marx believed to be expressed in the Commune's decision of 16 April in favour of the surrender to associations of workmen of all closed workshops with some compensation for their owners.⁴² Thus Marx concluded that "the Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few," aiming at "the expropriation of the expropriators" and leading to Communism.⁴³ This placing of "the *unconscious* tendencies of the Commune . . . to its credit as more or less conscious plans" was in Engels' view "justified and even necessary under the circumstances."⁴⁴ In doing so, Marx was anticipating the socialist measures that his class analysis of society (as well as his knowledge of the socialist trends and demands in the Paris labour movement) led him to expect sooner or later from a workers' government. "The political rule of the producer cannot coexist with the perpetuation of his social slavery," he wrote in the *Address*.⁴⁵ Such a concept was nothing new for Marx: it belonged to the heart of his dialectic of social development. Already in 1844, in *The Holy Family*, he and Engels had written: "The question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment *considers* as its aim. The question is *what the proletariat is*, and what, consequent on that *being*, it will be compelled to do."⁴⁶ In the first draft of *The Civil War* he wrote: "The Commune does not (do) away with the class struggles, through which the working classes strive for the abolition of all classes . . . but it affords the rational medium in which the class struggle can run through its different phases in the most rational and humane way."⁴⁷

The Paris Commune represented for Marx a rudimentary form of working class rule, of the dictatorship of the proletariat. If he could welcome in it a high level of *Selbsttätigkeit* (initiative, self-activity) on the part of the Paris workers, he had no illusions about their comparatively low level of *Selbstbewusstsein* (consciousness), related to the inade-

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quate level of development of industry and of an industrial proletariat.⁴⁸ He saw this reflected in the ideologies of Proudhonism and Blanquism, which he had criticized over the years and which predominated in one form or another among the largely semi-artisan Paris workers of that period. There was hardly a Marxist in the Commune.⁴⁹ The Paris members of Marx's own organization, the International Working Men's Association, the First International, came from the Proudhonist school of socialism. Contrary to the stories of the anti-Communard press of the period, Marx was neither able nor wished to dictate policy to them.⁵⁰ Above all, there was in Paris no working class party, such as Marx had long believed necessary for success and to the creation of which, in one country after another, he and Engels devoted themselves particularly actively after the defeat of the Commune, influenced by its weakness in this respect.⁵¹

Despite all these limiting factors, Marx expressed confidence in the Socialist tendencies that he believed inherent in the French working class to "work out their own emancipation" in the course of "long struggles . . . transforming circumstances and men."⁵² These would doubtless include the formation of their own political party as a vital factor in raising the level of consciousness and cohesion.⁵³ Marx's whole conception rejected any sort of paternalist tutelage. As Engels expressed it in his 1890 Preface to the *Communist Manifesto*: "For the ultimate triumph of the ideas set forth in the *Manifesto*, Marx relied solely and exclusively upon the intellectual development of the working class, as it necessarily had to ensue from united action and discussion."⁵⁴

What the Commune added to Marx's Theory

There has been much controversy as to whether Marx understood the dictatorship of the proletariat as "a social description, a statement of the class character of the political power"⁵⁵ or as a description, in addition, of the political power itself.⁵⁶ My own reading is that the concept was expressed by Marx first as the former: the rule of the working class, with its interest in the socialist transformation of society, directly counterposed to "the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie" by which he designated capitalist rule. Later, however, after the experience of the Paris Commune, he added a general indication of the type of state and the forms of government that he considered in keeping with its function of creating the basis for a classless and stateless society. These are suggested broadly in his description of the Commune as "the reabsorption of the State power by society as its own living forces instead of as forces controlling and subduing it, by the popular masses themselves, forming their own force instead of the organized force of their suppression—the political form of their social emancipation, instead of the artificial force . . . of society wielded for their oppression by their enemies."⁵⁷

To achieve this, presupposed smashing the "bureaucratic-military machine" of the capitalist state rather than transferring it into other hands.

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This, wrote Marx, was "the preliminary condition for every people's revolution on the continent."⁵⁸ Such a conception was not to be found in the *Communist Manifesto*, which, Marx and Engels now appreciated, had "in some details become antiquated." They therefore incorporated into their Preface to the German edition of 1872 the statement from their *Address on the Civil War* that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes." This point, they believed, had been "proved by the Commune."⁵⁹

The old bureaucratic state structure was to be replaced by "really democratic institutions,"⁶⁰ reflecting "the people acting for itself by itself."⁶¹ This meant that universal suffrage, "instead of deciding once in every three or six years who was to misrepresent the people" in a parliamentary talking shop, would be extended to give the people real control over administration at all levels.⁶² "The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary, body, executive and legislative at the same time," wrote Marx. "Instead of continuing to be the agent of the Central Government, the police was at once stripped of its political attributes, and turned into the responsible and at all times revocable agent of the Commune. . . . From the members of the Commune downward, the public service had to be done at *workmen's wages*." The first decree of the Commune was the replacement of the standing army by the armed people, comprising the National Guard, the bulk of whose members were working men.⁶³

Marx emphasized every anti-bureaucratic measure envisaged by the Commune. "Like the rest of public servants, magistrates and judges were to be elective, responsible and revocable," he wrote.⁶⁴ It was a question, as Engels was to point out in his 1891 Preface, of the need for the working class to "safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall at any moment."⁶⁵ All public functions, whether administrative, political or military, were to be made into "*real workmen's functions*, instead of the hidden attributes of a trained caste." The Commune pointed the way for getting rid of "the whole sham of state-mysteries and statepretensions" (sic).⁶⁶ It did not "pretend to infallibility" but published its doings and sayings and "initiated the public into all its shortcomings."⁶⁷

Repressive Measures

These predominantly "libertarian" prescriptions are not contradicted by Marx's criticisms of the Commune for "an excess of moderation" shown towards its enemies.⁶⁸ This was, in his view, the result of the Parisians' failure to recognize from the outset that Thiers had started a civil war against them, in which through "a too 'honourable' scrupulosity" they held back from taking the necessary initiatives.⁶⁹ In particular, he argued, they should have marched at once on Versailles after Thiers' forces had retreated there following the miscarriage of their attempt to seize the cannon at Montmartre on 18 March.⁷⁰ Instead of devoting themselves to

mounting such an offensive, "they lost precious moments . . . by the election of the Commune."⁷¹ It was not a question of opposing the election of a Commune, for which (as we have seen) he was full of praise as a model of democratic government, but of the inappropriate *timing* of these elections, which diverted attention from the urgent military task of the moment. As a corollary to this, the Central Committee "surrendered its power too soon" to the newly elected Commune,⁷² at a moment when its undivided authority was needed to deal with the hostile troops preparing to attack Paris from without and their reactionary supporters organizing armed demonstrations within. Marx's criticisms were dictated by considerations of wartime emergency. It was also from this standpoint alone that he approved the Commune's suspension of hostile papers two weeks after the Versailles troops had started attacking the outskirts of Paris and bombarding the city. "With the savage warfare of Versailles outside, and its attempts at corruption and conspiracy inside Paris," he wrote, "would the Commune not have shamefully betrayed its trust by affecting to keep up all the decencies and appearances of liberalism *as in a time of profound peace*?"⁷³ And he stressed how "free from . . . acts of violence" the Paris proletarian revolution had remained from 18 March till the entry of the Versailles troops into Paris.⁷⁴

If, for Marx, a proletarian dictatorship had to be prepared to have recourse to measures of coercion and repression, it should be solely against the minority of its active class enemies on behalf of the majority of the people, from whom it derived its mandate, and only under conditions of civil war.

The difference between such a mass democratic "dictatorship" and one by a small elite was brought out sharply by Engels in 1874 in his article, "The Programme of the Blanquist Communard Refugees." In it he contrasted the Marxist conception of "the dictatorship . . . of the whole revolutionary class, the proletariat" with "Blanqui's conception of every revolution as the *coup de main* of a small revolutionary minority." From the latter followed the necessity after its success of "the dictatorship . . . of the small number of those who carried out the *coup* and who are themselves already in advance organized under the dictatorship of one or a few individuals."⁷⁵

In Marx's writings on the Commune, there is nothing to suggest that he would have favoured a one-party system or any sort of monolithic political structure, let alone a "personality cult." On the contrary, what emerges is a pluralistic conception of the Commune as "a thoroughly expansive political form, while all previous forms of government had been emphatically repressive."⁷⁶ In his first draft Marx quoted an extract from the London *Daily News*, which deplored the fact that the Commune was "a concourse of equivalent atoms, each one jealous of another and *none endowed with supreme control over the others*." The last phrase was underlined by Marx, who noted that "the bourgeois . . . wants political idols and 'great men' immensely."⁷⁷

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An Alien Body in Marx's Thought?

It had been widely argued that the ideas developed by Marx in *The Civil War in France*, emphasizing destruction of the power of the centralized bureaucratic state machine, constitute an alien body in his thought.⁷⁸ In my opinion, this view is not borne out by an examination of his writings. On the contrary, from the early 1840s throughout his life, there runs the strong and continuous theme of the struggle against bureaucracy. Already in 1843 in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State*, he was denouncing bureaucracy as "the 'state formalism' of civil society . . . a particular, closed society in the state" which "constitutes itself as an actual power and becomes its own material content." Its universal spirit was "the secret, the mystery sustained within bureaucracy itself by hierarchy and maintained on the outside as a closed corporation."⁷⁹ Opposing the monarchic rule favoured by Hegel, he argued for a democracy where "the constitution itself appears only as one determination, and indeed the self-determination of the people . . . based on its actual foundation, on actual man and the actual people, not only implicitly and in its essence, but in its existence and actuality."⁸⁰ The "atomization" of bourgeois society "in its political act" resulted directly from the fact that "the community . . . , in which the individual exists, is civil society separated from the state, or the political state is an abstraction from it."⁸¹

In 1852, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx denounced the executive power of the French state "with its enormous bureaucratic and military organization" as an "appalling parasitic body which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores." All revolutions hitherto had "perfected this machine instead of smashing it."⁸²

Marx took up these themes and developed them, often in very similar terms, in *The Civil War*, presenting the Commune as "the direct anti-thesis" of the Second Empire with its "State power, apparently soaring high above society."⁸³ What the Commune envisaged, he wrote, was to "restore to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the state parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of society."⁸⁴ These last words were quoted and underlined by Bakunin's Comrade-in-arms, James Guillaume, as "a remarkable passage . . . where Marx seems to have abandoned his own programme."⁸⁵ Even Lenin, copying out Marx's reference to the "destruction of the state power" as "a parasitic excrescence"⁸⁶ alongside the copious other extracts from *The Civil War* in his famous "Blue Notebook," was led to exclaim: "By calling 'the state' a parasitical excrescence, Marx 'almost' speaks of the abolition of the state." He added, however, in my opinion correctly: "The point, of course, is not the term, but the essence."⁸⁷ It is easy to "discover" any amount of verbal contradictions if quotations from Marx and Engels are viewed in isolation. From the context in this case, it is clear that the state power that Marx wished to destroy was specifically "the State power which claimed to be the embodiment of (a national) unity independent of, and superior to,

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the nation itself.”⁸⁸ This state, acting as “the master instead of the servant of society,”⁸⁹ served “full-grown bourgeois society” as “a means for the enslavement of labour by capital.”⁹⁰ The Commune stood for the destruction of *such* a state and its replacement by one of a new type, in which “the merely repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated,” whilst “its legitimate functions were to be wrested from an authority usurping preeminence over society itself, and restored to the responsible agents of society.”⁹¹

Centralism and Local Autonomy

Did Marx’s *Civil War in France* represent theoretically “a partial retreat of Marxism in the face of Proudhonism”?⁹² Was Marx now championing the standpoint, which he had opposed in the International, of the French Proudhonists who wanted “everything to be dissolved into small ‘groups’ or ‘communes,’ which in turn form an ‘association,’ but no state”?⁹³ A close examination of the text does not support such a conclusion despite its superficial plausibility.

In his first draft, Marx showed that in a France “organized into self-working and selfgoverning communes” the “state-functions” would not disappear but would be “reduced to a few functions for general national purposes.”⁹⁴ In the *Address* he emphasized:

“The few but important functions which would remain for a central government were not to be suppressed, as has been intentionally mis-stated, but were to be discharged by Communal, and therefore strictly responsible agents. The unity of the nation was not to be broken, but, on the contrary, to be organized by the Communal Constitution.”

And, in case there should still be any doubt, he went on: “The Communal Constitution has been mistaken

for an attempt to break up into a federation of small States, as dreamt of by Montesquieu and the Girondins, that unity of great nations which, if originally brought about by political force, has now become a powerful coefficient of social production. The antagonism of the Commune against the State power has been mistaken for an exaggerated form of the ancient struggle against over-centralization.”⁹⁵

Moreover, Marx made it clear that “united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan,”⁹⁶ thereby securing the centralization of the economic system to which the *Communist Manifesto* had attached so much importance.⁹⁷

Marx had always been and remained a centralist. However for him, as for subsequent Marxists, the issue was not one of centralization versus decentralization, but of finding the right balance between the two. The equilibrium was inevitably a shifting one, varying from one country to another and as between different historical periods. In 1848–50, he saw the strongest possible centralization as the *sine qua non* of the bourgeois-democratic revolution in Germany directed against the feudal absolutism

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entrenched in its petty principalities.⁹⁸ In France, in 1871, the problem was of the opposite character. Already in 1852, in his *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx had pointed to "the most extraordinary centralization" of the French bourgeois state which found its counterpart "in the helpless dependence, in the loose shapelessness of the actual body politic."⁹⁹ Even "a bridge, a schoolhouse and the communal property of a village community" were "snatched from the activity of society's members themselves and made the object of government activity."¹⁰⁰ One can hardly charge Marx with inconsistency for not putting forward the same demands in a proletarian revolution directed against such bureaucratic-capitalist overcentralization as he had in a bourgeois democratic revolution against feudal particularism!

The democratic transformation initiated by the Commune demanded forms of local self-government that would make possible the greatest measure of initiative and popular participation at grass-roots level, whilst preserving a united republic with a central authority. The programme of the Commune—the Declaration to the French People of 19 April—incorporated both these elements.¹⁰¹ (The fact that the Commune adopted it unanimously minus one vote bears out Engels' point, in his 1891 Preface to *The Civil War*, that in the course of the revolution the Proudhonists evolved from their hard anti-centralist and the Blanquists from their supercentralist positions.)¹⁰² Marx felt able to write approvingly of this "rough sketch of national organization which the Commune had no time to develop,"¹⁰³ despite its ambiguity on the nature of the relationship between "the absolute autonomy of the communes" and "the great central administration."¹⁰⁴ This indefiniteness is reflected in Marx's account in *The Civil War*, which he did not think was the place to subject these proposals to detailed critical examination.¹⁰⁵ The more so because he considered the broad outlines of the suggested Communal Constitution as justified by its social essence: the superseding of the old governmental machinery "by real self-government, which in Paris and the great cities, the social strongholds of the working class, was the government of the working class."¹⁰⁶ Except on this condition, "the Communal Constitution would have been an impossibility and a delusion."¹⁰⁷

Marx spoke favourably of proposals for a national structure whereby the rural communes, which were to be established even in the smallest hamlets, would "administer their common affairs by an assembly of delegates in the central town" of each district. "These district assemblies were again to send deputies to the National Delegation in Paris, each delegate to be at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents."¹⁰⁸ Nowhere, however, did he try to present this particular method of indirect election as the only possible system for a working class administration, and he was in fact never to refer to it again. What was of lasting importance for him in this connection was that future society should develop organs of local self-government with a large measure of autonomy and scope for initiative from

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below.¹⁰⁹ Thus in 1874 or 75, in his notes on Bakunin's *Statism and Anarchy*, he meets Bakunin's challenge: "The Germans number about forty million. Will, e.g. all forty million be members of the government?" with the comment: "Certainly! Since the matter begins with the self-government of the commune (*Gemeinde*)."¹¹⁰ Similarly, twenty years after the Commune, in his *Critique of the Social Democratic (Erfurt) Draft Programme*, arguing for a unitary rather than a federal republic in Germany, Engels demanded within it "complete self-government in province, district and commune (*Gemeinde*) through officials elected by universal suffrage."¹¹¹

Conclusions

Marx on the Commune reveals no dramatic turn in his political thought. Paris' spring revolution did however provide the experience, of international relevance, that crystallized into positive forms the attitudes inherent in his long-standing criticisms of the political alienation in capitalist and feudal states. With this, as I have argued, he added a new dimension to his concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. This entailed a thoroughgoing participatory democracy, combining direct democracy at the base with the election at regional and national levels of delegates operating under continuous control and briefing from below. Such forms were necessary for the adequate expression and safeguarding of the class character of the new transitional regime, which would begin to transcend the divorce between state and civil society that Marx had deplored as early as 1843, and to prepare the way for a classless and stateless society.

The Commune, in the seventy-two days of its existence, could but suggest the first steps to be taken along this road, and Marx felt himself obliged to extrapolate some of the others from the tendencies that he perceived in it. His views were therefore only a first outline, derived from this particular "model,"¹¹² which reflected a localized experience in France of 1871. It could not be more than the initial stage of a proletarian dictatorship, neither fully developed nor nationally based, whose days were probably numbered from the start. Much of Marx's exposition was consequently sketchy, tentative and in need of development in the light of subsequent revolutions. These never came in his own lifetime, but there has been no lack of revolutionary experience for Marxists to scrutinize and generalize from in the last fifty years. It is a weakness that they have not adequately done so, in order to carry much further forward the analysis of post-capitalist societies in the light of these subsequent events.

Yet, even after a hundred years, Marx's deeply democratic, anti-élitist, anti-bureaucratic *Civil War in France* retains its relevance as the starting point for such theoretical elaboration. Its basic ideas, reflecting his horror of giant state bureaucracies alienating man politically, depriving him of effective control of his society and constricting all his activities, have a highly topical ring. So do the ideas that he counterposed, under the inspiration of the Commune, for "the self-government of the producers,"¹¹³

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with "the haughteous masters of the people" replaced by "their always removable servants . . . continuously under public supervision."¹⁴

REFERENCES

- ¹ K. Marx, *The Civil War in France* (Peking, 1966), hereafter *C. W. F. P.*, p. 166. This edition carries the two preliminary drafts in Marx's original English, previously published only in *Arkhiv Marks'a i Engels'a* (Moscow, 1934), Vol. III (VIII). ² Preface to the 1872 German Edition of *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in K. Marx/F. Engels, *Selected Works* (Moscow/London, 1950), hereafter *S. W.*, I, 22. ³ K. Marx to F. A. Sorge, 19 October 1877, *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow/London, 1956), hereafter *S. C.*, p. 376. See, also, *Manifesto*, *S. W.*, I, 58-59. ⁴ K. Marx, *The Civil War in France*, *S. W.*, I, p. 451; Marx to Engels, 6 September 1870, in K. Marx/F. Engels, *Werke* (Berlin, 1956-68), XXXIII, 54. ⁵ Minutes of Meeting of General Council of 21 March 1871, in *Documents of the First International* (Moscow/London, n.d.), IV, 160-162. ⁶ *S. C.*, pp. 318-319. ⁷ *Werke*, XXX, 495. ⁸ It was in the same sense that Engels was to speak of the Commune, in his letter to Sorge of 12-17 September 1874, as "without any doubt the child of the International intellectually, although the International did not lift a finger to produce it." (*S. C.*, p. 350.) ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 317. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 320. ¹¹ At least from 12 April, by which time he had had an opportunity to form a well-grounded impression of the situation in Paris through the reports of couriers, letters and newspapers. He filled two notebooks with extracts about the Commune from French and British papers. The first, with extracts from 18 March to 1 May used for writing *The Civil War in France* and containing some marginal comments, was published in *Arkhiv Marks'a i Engels'a*, III (VIII). The second, with extracts from 1 April to 23 May and not used for any of his works, is published in Vol. XV (1963) of the *Arkhiv*. ¹² In his erudite, stimulating, but frequently highly contentious *Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge, 1968), p. 247. ¹³ This is, of course, a gallicism: *bissé-raised*. The sometimes bizarre English in the preliminary drafts is due to the fact that they were only notes often drawing on material from the French press. ¹⁴ First Draft, *C. W. F. P.*, pp. 182, 178. Similar statements in the first draft can be found on pp. 136, 160, 166, 168, 170 and 171, and in the second draft on pp. 216, 218, 227, 232, 237, 244 and 247. ¹⁵ Marx already formulated this idea in his *Class Struggles in France* (1850), in which he used the expression "dictatorship of the working class" for the first time. "The French workers could not advance," he wrote, "until the course of the revolution had aroused the mass of the nation, peasants and petty bourgeois, standing between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, against (the bourgeois) order, against the rule of capital, and had forced it to attach itself to the proletarians as their protagonists." (*S. W.*, I, 137.) See, also, his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): "The peasants find their natural ally and leader in the *urban proletariat*, whose task is the overthrow of the bourgeois order." (*Ibid.*, p. 306. Emphasis in original.) ¹⁶ First Draft, *C. W. F. P.*, pp. 178-9. The Union Républicaine was a bourgeois organization formed in Paris in April 1871, which aimed peacefully to abolish the Commune and end the civil war by mediating between Versailles and Paris. This draft contains a section entitled "Measures for the Working Class" (pp. 150-152), followed by one headed "Measures for Working Class, but mostly for the Middle Classes" (pp. 152-153). ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-177. ¹⁸ *S. W.*, I, 473, 476-477. This passage should not be taken to imply that he and Engels favored a dictatorship of the city over the countryside. They disagreed in particular with the prevalent Blanquist idea of a dictatorship of Paris. See F. Engels to K. Marx, 6 July 1869: "It is a strange idea that the dictatorship of Paris over France, on which the first revolution foundered, could come about once again without further ado and with a different outcome." (*Werke*, XXXII, 336.) ¹⁹ Such a viewpoint was attributed to Marx particularly by German Social Democratic theorists. See, e.g., H. Cunow, *Die Marx'sche Geschichts-, Gesellschafts- und Staatsauffassung* (Berlin, 1920), p. 329: "In Marx's view the proletariat will only come to rule when it already comprises the great majority of the population." In his *Dictatorship of the Proletariat* (Manchester, 1919), Karl Kautsky wrote:

"The dictatorship of the proletariat was for (Marx) a condition which necessarily arose in a real democracy, because of the overwhelming numbers of the proletariat." (p. 45). However, he modified this on the next page, where he stated that "as a rule the proletariat will only attain to power when it represents the majority of the population, or, at least, has the latter behind it. . . . This was the opinion of Marx and Engels."²⁰ *Marginal Notes on Bakunin's "Statism and Anarchy," Werke*, XVIII, 630-633. ²¹ *S. W.*, I, 475. ²² *Ibid.*, 477. ²³ *S. C.*, p. 318. ²⁴ *C. W. F. P.*, p. 182; *S. W.*, I, 478. ²⁵ See H. Draper's extremely well-documented study, "Marx and the dictatorship of the proletariat," in *Cahiers de l'Institut de Science Economique Appliquée*, Série S, *Etudes de Marxologie* (Paris, 1962), No. 6, pp. 5-73. ²⁶ Whilst it is true that two British trade union leaders, Odger and Lucraft, repudiated the *Address* anyway, 19 other British members of the General Council approved it. (See K. Marx, "A Reply on the First International," 1878, in *Labour Monthly*, London, September 1954, p. 420.) ²⁷ F. Engels, *The Housing Question*, *S. W.*, I, p. 555. Engels' statement stands in contradiction to—one might say in refutation of—those attempting to present the dictatorship of the proletariat as an incidental or subsidiary element in Marx. Among them Karl Kautsky, who referred to it as a "*Wörtchen*" that Marx used once "in a letter in 1875" (K. Kautsky, *Die Diktatur des Proletariats*, Vienna, 1918, p. 60), and Karl Diehl for whom "the demand for the dictatorship of the proletariat, as well as the word itself, only play an insignificant role in the works of Marx and Engels." (K. Diehl, *Die Diktatur des Proletariats und das Rätesystem*, Jena, 1920, p. 44). More recently, Shlomo Avineri (*Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, p. 204) contrasts the passage in the *Communist Manifesto* (see my Note 29 below) to the "dictatorship of the proletariat," which term Marx allegedly "does not use more than two or three times in his life, and then always in what is basically a private communication." ²⁸ In the form of "dictatorship of the working class," in *The Class Struggles in France* (*S. W.*, I, 149). In his article (see my Note 25 above), H. Draper attacks "the myth that Marx took the term . . . from Blanqui," showing that there is no recorded use of the term by the latter (pp. 15-19). ²⁹ *S. W.*, I, p. 50. ³⁰ *S. C.*, p. 86. Emphasis in original. ³¹ Reported in *The World* (New York), 15 October 1871, and reproduced in *New Politics* (New York), II, Summer 1953, 132. (A German translation appears in *Werke*, 17, p. 433.) ³² *S. W.*, II, 30. Emphasis in original. ³³ See, e.g. Marx's comment on Bakunin's statement that the Marxists "console themselves with the thought that this dictatorship will only be ephemeral and short": "*Non, mon cher! The class rule (Klassenherrschaft) of the workers over the strata of the old world struggling against them must last for as long as the economic basis of the existence of classes is not destroyed.*" (*Marginal Notes on Bakunin, Werke*, XVIII, 636. Emphasis in original.) cf. K. Diehl, *Die Diktatur*, p. 45, who asserts that Marx saw the dictatorship of the proletariat as "only a short ephemeral state of emergency." ³⁴ *C. W. F. P.*, p. 171. Emphasis in original. ³⁵ *S. W.*, I, 473-474. ³⁶ Notably in June 1922, when the Communist International advanced the slogan of a "workers' government," seen by many of its leaders as a stage preparatory to, and separate from, the dictatorship of the proletariat. The resolution of its enlarged Executive Committee on this occasion cited the Paris Commune in support of this conception as "a workers' government, a bloc of the working class parties and groups opposing the bourgeoisie . . . a stage on the road to the establishment of Socialist rule." (See A. Reisberg, "On the Workers' Government Slogan in 1922," in *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Arbeiterbewegung* (Berlin, 1967), IX, 1035-36, 1040.) This approach is reflected in the later Hungarian Marxist historian Erik Molnar, who considered that "a working class government is not synonymous with dictatorship of the proletariat" and that Engels' characterization of the Commune as the latter was at variance with Marx's description. In his view the Commune "did not arrive at the stage of the dictatorship of the proletariat, it did not go beyond that of the democratic revolution and . . . the concrete definition that one can give of the Commune is that it was a democratic dictatorship of the working class and the petty bourgeoisie, under the leadership of the former." (E. Molnar, *La Politique d'Alliances du Marxisme*, 1848-1889, Budapest, 1967, pp. 217-219.) ³⁷ *S. W.*, I, 440. ³⁸ *S. C.*, 410. This passage has been widely quoted as "Marx's final verdict on the Commune" (G. Lichtheim, *Marx-*

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ism, London, 1961, p. 121), which "contradicts both the express statements and the entire spirit of Marx's *Civil War in France*." (B. D. Wolfe, *Marxism*, London, 1967, p. 147.) ³⁹ C. W. F. P., pp. 182-183. ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184. ⁴¹ S. W., I, 478. ⁴² The decree to set up a commission to prepare for this is reported in the first draft (C. W. F. P., pp. 150-151) and summarized in the *Address* (S. W., I, 478). Its full text is given in Jacques Rougerie's new book on the Commune, along with some very interesting supplementary documents on its economic policies. He insists on the Socialist spirit and perspectives that animated them. (J. Rougerie, *Paris libre 1871*, Paris, 1971, pp. 173-190.) ⁴³ S. W., I, 474. ⁴⁴ F. Engels to E. Bernstein, 1 January 1884, S. C., p. 440. Emphasis in original. ⁴⁵ S. W., I, 474. ⁴⁶ K. Marx/F. Engels, *The Holy Family* (London, 1956), p. 53. Emphasis in original. ⁴⁷ C. W. F. P., p. 171. ⁴⁸ For this reason Marx had written in 1870 that England, rather than France, was "for the present the most important country for the workers' revolution and moreover the *only* country in which the material conditions for this revolution have developed to a certain degree of maturity." (K. Marx to F. S. Meyer and A. Vogt, 9 April 1870, S. C., p. 287. Emphasis in original.) ⁴⁹ Perhaps only A. Serrailier, Elizabeth Dimitrieva and Leo Frankel could be called Marxists, though not at the time themselves very developed ones. (See, e.g. Marx's criticism of Frankel's misunderstanding of his theory of value, *Werke*, XXXII, 474.) ⁵⁰ See Marx's second draft indicating that neither "the Paris, or any other branch of the International received its *mot d'ordre* from a centre." (C. W. F. P., p. 244.) His private letter to Frankel and Varlin of 13 May 1871 bears this out. (S. C., p. 321-322.) There is no record here or elsewhere of his attempting from London to satisfy Frankel's request for advice on reforms to be introduced by the Department of Public Works, for which he was responsible. (See F. Mehring, *Karl Marx*, London, 1948, p. 449.) This is in keeping with his criticism of those, like Lassalle and Proudhon who instead of basing themselves on "the genuine elements of the class movement, . . . wanted to prescribe the course to be followed by this movement according to a certain doctrinaire recipe." (K. Marx to J. B. Schweitzer, 13 October 1868, S. C., pp. 257-258.) For Marx, "every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes." (*Critique of Gotha Programme*, S. W., II, 15.) ⁵¹ Even before the Commune, impressed particularly by the electoral successes of Liebknecht's and Bebel's German Social Democratic Workers' Party (founded at Eisenach in 1869), Marx and Engels were anxious that the International should promote such parties, as is shown by Engels' letter of 13 February 1871 to the Spanish Federal Council of the International (S. C., pp. 314-315). After the Commune this became a central question for them and was reflected in the famous Resolution IX of the London Conference of the International in September 1871, incorporated into the latter's General Rules, which saw the "constitution of the proletariat into a political party" as "indispensable to ensure the triumph of the social Revolution and of its ultimate goal: the abolition of classes." (S. W., I, p. 352.) For a discussion of how Marx and Engels conceived of such a party in differing historical contexts, see my "Marx and Engels and the Concept of the Party," in *The Socialist Register—1967* (London), pp. 121-158. ⁵² S. W., I, 474. ⁵³ The organizations and groups from out of which such a party could have been formed already existed in the various Paris workers' organizations (especially the branches of the International), Socialist political clubs, neighbourhood vigilance committees, *Union des femmes pour la défense de Paris et des soins aux blessés* etc. (See E. W. Schulkind, "The Activity of Popular Organizations During the Paris Commune of 1871," in *French Historical Studies*, 1960, 394-415; J. Rougerie, *Paris libre*, pp. 73-81: "Vers la formation d'un 'parti' socialistes révolutionnaire;" J. Bruhat, E. Tersen et. al., *La Commune de 1871*, Paris, 1960, pp. 153, 162 ff.) ⁵⁴ S. W., I, 30. ⁵⁵ H. Draper, "Marx the Proletariat," p. 66. Draper appears to have modified this subsequently. More recently he has written that for Marx and Engels "the idea of the Commune state, any genuine workers' state, is not merely a state with a different class rule but a *new type of state* altogether." ("The Death of the State in Marx and Engels," in *The Socialist Register—1970*, p. 301.) ⁵⁶ This is the view of Ralph Miliband "Marx and the State," *Socialist Register—1965*, p. 289. ⁵⁷ First draft, C. W. F. P., p. 168. ⁵⁸ K. Marx to L. Kugelmann, 12 April 1871, S. C., p. 318. ⁵⁹ S. W., I, 22. ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 473. ⁶¹ First draft, C. W. F. P.,

p. 141. ⁶² S. W., I, 472. ⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 470-471. Emphasis in original. ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 471. ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 438. In his *Marxism: a Re-examination* (Princeton, 1967), Irving M. Zeitlin refers to this passage as "almost a verbatim anticipation of Michels' thesis on the 'iron law of oligarchy.'" (p. 151.) It should, however, be stressed that for Marx and Engels such bureaucratic dangers did not constitute an "iron law" but a *tendency* that should and could be overcome. ⁶⁶ First draft, C. W. F. P., p. 170. Emphasis in original. ⁶⁷ S. W., I, 479. This was not fully implemented in practice, in common with certain other features or intentions of the Commune cited by Marx. ⁶⁸ Second draft, C. W. F. P., p. 223. ⁶⁹ Marx to Kugelmann, S. C., p. 319. ⁷⁰ *Ibid.* ⁷¹ K. Marx to W. Liebknecht, 6 April 1871, *Ibid.*, p. 317. ⁷² Marx to Kugelmann. ⁷³ S. W., I, 478-479. My emphasis. Marx's comment refers only to the suppression of "Party-of-Order" (i.e. right-wing, reactionary, anti-Communal) papers and not to the banning by the Committee of Public Safety in the last days of the Commune also of some critical revolutionary papers. (See F. Jellinek, *The Paris Commune of 1871*, London, 1937, pp. 295-296.) ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 463. ⁷⁵ *Werke*, XVIII, 529. ⁷⁶ S. W., I, 473. ⁷⁷ C. W. F. P., p. 157. ⁷⁸ This argument was advanced first by Bakunin and his followers. See J. Guillaume, *L'Internationale: Documents et Souvenirs* (Paris, 1907), II, 191-192. ⁷⁹ *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, translated & edited by L. D. Easton and K. H. Guddat (New York, 1967), pp. 184-186. Emphasis in original. ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173. Emphasis in original. ⁸¹ *Werke*, I, 283. ⁸² S. W., I, 301. ⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 470. ⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 473. ⁸⁵ Guillaume, *L'Internationale*, II, 191-192. ⁸⁶ S. W., I, 472. ⁸⁷ V. I. Lenin, *Marxizm o Gosudarstve* (Moscow, 1958), p. 90. This is the notebook that Lenin took into hiding with him in the summer of 1917 and which he used for writing his *State and Revolution*. ⁸⁸ S. W., I, 472. ⁸⁹ First draft, C. W. F. P., p. 167. ⁹⁰ S. W., I, 470. ⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 472. ⁹² A. Rosenberg, *Democracy and Socialism* (London, 1939), p. 204. This viewpoint was strongly advanced in 1898 by Eduard Bernstein in his well-known *Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus* (English edition, *Evolutionary Socialism*, London, 1909, pp. 156 ff.). Lenin replied to it in *State and Revolution* (Moscow, 1965), pp. 47-50 in the section entitled "Organization of National Unity." ⁹³ K. Marx to F. Engels, 20 June 1866, S. C., p. 216. ⁹⁴ C. W. F. P., p. 171. ⁹⁵ S. W., I, 472. ⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 474. ⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51. ⁹⁸ See, e.g. K. Marx/F. Engels, *Address of the Central Committee to the Communist League*, March 1850: "The workers . . . must not only strive for a single and indivisible German republic, but also within this republic for the most determined centralization of power in the hands of the state authority. They must not allow themselves to be misguided by the democratic talk of freedom for the communities, of self-government." The France of 1793 was cited as an example of such strict centralization. In a note to the 1885 edition, Engels indicated that this passage "was based on a misunderstanding" of French revolutionary experience: local authorities had acted with complete freedom, which had served as a most powerful lever for the revolution. And he drew the general conclusion that "local and provincial self-government" did not stand "in contradiction to political, national centralization." (S. W., I, 106-107.) ⁹⁹ S. W., I, 258. ¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 301. ¹⁰¹ See full text in Rougerie, *Paris libre*, pp. 153-156, and Rougerie's rejection of the interpretation of it as a "Proudhonist" text (pp. 156-157). ¹⁰² S. W., I, 437-438. ¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 471-472. ¹⁰⁴ Rougerie, *Paris libre*, p. 154. ¹⁰⁵ Although he does make some criticisms of Communal weaknesses in it, *The Civil War* was written primarily as a "Kampfschrift" (Mehring), in which Marx saw himself acting as the "Ehrenretter" of the Commune. (K. Marx to F. A. Sorge, 9 November 1871, *Werke*, XXXIII, 314.) ¹⁰⁶ Second draft, C. W. F. P., p. 232. ¹⁰⁷ S. W., I, 473-474. ¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 472. ¹⁰⁹ In 1850, in the March Address, Marx and Engels had put forward a perspective of dual power, whereby alongside new official bourgeois democratic governments, the workers would "establish simultaneously their own revolutionary workers' governments, whether in the form of municipal committees and municipal councils or in the form of workers' clubs or workers' committees." (S. W., I, 104.) Now, on the basis of the experience of the Commune, Marx was envisaging that in the cities such local organs of working class power should become basic units of a proletarian state. ¹¹⁰ *Werke*, XVIII, 634. ¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 237. ¹¹² See, e.g., Second draft, C. W. F. P., p. 232: "As Paris was the initiator and the model we have to refer to it." ¹¹³ S. W., I, p. 471. ¹¹⁴ First draft, C. W. F. P., p. 169.