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150 Years of the Paris Commune

The Vendôme Column and the internationalism of the Commune

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The internationalism of the Paris Commune may be one of its most important and original political legacies. It demonstrates the complexity of a movement with multiple political motivations, which began as a patriotic revolt before the Prussian siege of Paris, although this national impulse did not in any way take a nationalist form; on the contrary, it led to the development of an enthusiastically internationalist practice and discourse. “As one of its former members recalled years later, it was, above all else, ‘an audacious act of internationalism’. Under the Commune, Paris wanted to be not the capital of France, but an autonomous collective in a universal federation of peoples. It did not wish to be a state, but rather an element, a unit in a federation of communes that was ultimately international in scale.” [1]

From the proclamation of the Third Republic, in the revolt of 4 September 1870, a gradual duality of powers emerged within Paris between the Government of National Defence and the Central Committee of the National Guard. A dispute centred on who held the legitimacy of the republican revolution of September and the resistance against the Prussian troops in national defence. But it was not only a clash of legitimacies, but gradually, as the siege of Paris progressed, a clash of projects between the bourgeois Republic and the universal Republic. As Marx put it in “The Civil War in France” the slogan of ‘social republic’ expressed “a vague aspiration after a republic that was not only to supersede the monarchical form of class rule, but class rule itself. The Commune was the positive form of that republic.” In this sense, “it is important to recall the vehemence with which many Commune survivors combated the idea that they had acted to ‘save the republic’. ‘The republic of our dreams was surely not the one we have. We wanted it democratic, social and universal, not plutocratic’.” (Ross, 2015)

In fact, the Universal Republic, far from implying a return to the principles of the bourgeois Revolution of 1789, rather marked a break with its legacy, relying on a proletarian internationalism truly consistent with the idea of equality and fraternity. This break was especially symbolic with the burning of the guillotine in Place de Voltaire on 10 April, breaking any equivalence between the revolution and the scaffold; and the destruction on 16 May of the Vendôme column as an anti-imperialist reaffirmation: as Louise Michel said, “it was decided to demolish the Vendôme column, a symbol of brutal force, an affirmation of imperial despotism, because this monument threatened the brotherhood of the peoples”.

For most historians, the internationalism of the Commune is measured in the number of foreigners it incorporated under its banner and the importance of the positions they held: a Hungarian-German, Frankel, as Minister of Labour, a Pole, Dombrowski, in charge of defence, and a Russian, Dimitrieff, as founder of the Women’s Union. And the truth is that the presence of so many foreigners in the Commune obsessed the Versaillais. In fact, the image of the Commune full of Poles, Germans and Italians was a common insult in anti-Communard discourse, generated in part by the recurrent assimilation of the foreigner with the figure of the “foreign agitator” and of the Commune with the International, accused of serving hidden foreign interests contrary to those of the nation.

Marx himself had to deny these accusations in “The Civil War in France”: “The police-tinged bourgeois mind naturally figures to itself the International Working Men’s Association as acting in the manner of a secret conspiracy, its central body ordering, from time to time, explosions in different countries. Our Association is, in fact, nothing but the international bond between the most advanced working men in the various countries of the civilized world.”

But the internationalism of the Commune was much more than the number or name of the foreigners who participated in its development. As Marx affirmed, the Commune “was an international government in the full sense of the word (...) that annexed the workers of the entire world to France”. The internationalism of the Commune was

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constructed as an antithesis to the colonialism and nationalist chauvinism of the Empire. Perhaps the most genuine example of communal internationalism as an antagonism to French imperialism, was the decree of 12 April by which the demolition of the Vendôme column was decided. Which said the following

“We consider the imperial column in Place Vendôme to be a monument to barbarism, a symbol of brute force and false glory, an affirmation of militarism, a denial of international law, a permanent insult from the victors to the vanquished, a perpetual attack against one of the great principles of the French Republic, fraternity:

Decree:

Sole Article: The column in Place Vendôme will be demolished”.

Finally, the Vendôme column was not destroyed until a month later, on 16 May, when the Commune was already on the verge of exhaustion and defeat, which gives the fact, in addition to its political value, a certain heroic connotation. And if we judge the strength and political impact of the gesture by the reactions it generated among its detractors who considered it an attack on the very history of France, we will understand the importance of the act itself at the height of colonialism.

The strength of the Commune’s iconoclastic gesture as an anti-hierarchical and anti-imperialist act can be measured by the hysteria recorded in the narration of the event by the Versaillais, who denounced the demolition of the column as an attempt to destroy French history itself. The Communards were branded as “vandals” and Gustave Courbet, one of those accused of being politically responsible for the demolition of the column, was imprisoned and sentenced for life to pay compensation for its reconstruction. But beyond the reactionary propaganda, the truth is that the Commune did want to settle accounts with the history of the French Empire, not as a matter of the past but rather as an affirmation in the present, as an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial statement that connected with its idea of a “universal republic”.

The truth is that the "iconoclastic fury" has been reproduced in practically all revolutions or protest movements throughout the 150 years of history from the demolition of the Vendôme column to the present day. It is thus clear that statues, when they become an object of dispute, cease to be a matter of the past, and become a direct part of our present. Demonstrating that racism or neo-colonialism are far from the past but living elements of our present, so that the “iconoclastic fury” against supposedly past statues gives a historical dimension to the struggles of the present against racism and oppression. A red thread that connects the demolition of the Vendôme column during the Commune and its internationalist idea of a “universal republic” with the anti-racist protests in the streets of half the world. Remembering the Commune 150 years later should not be understood, therefore, as a nostalgic or academic exercise, but as a militant one, rescuing essential political legacies such as the Commune’s anti-imperialist internationalism for our present struggles.

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[1] Ross, Kristin (2015) Communal Luxury. London: Verso.