

# Theses on the Paris Commune - Situationist International



The Situationists reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of a great revolutionary moment; "*the biggest festival of the nineteenth century*".

"...it is time we examine the Commune not just as an outmoded example of revolutionary primitivism, all of whose mistakes can easily be overcome, but as a positive experiment whose whole truth has yet to be rediscovered and fulfilled."

## Theses on the Paris Commune

### 1

"The classical workers movement must be reexamined without any illusions, particularly without any illusions regarding its various political and pseudotheoretical heirs, because all they have inherited is its failure. The apparent successes of this movement are actually its fundamental failures (reformism or the establishment of a state bureaucracy), while its failures (the Paris Commune or the 1934 Asturian revolt) are its most promising successes so far, for us and for the future" (*Internationale Situationniste* #7).

### 2

The Commune was the biggest festival of the nineteenth century. Underlying the events of that spring of 1871 one can see the insurgents' feeling that they had become the masters of their own history, not so much on the level of "governmental" politics as on the level of their everyday life. (Consider, for example, the *games* everyone played with their weapons: they were in fact playing with power.) It is *also* in this sense that Marx should be understood when he says that "the most important social measure of the Commune was its own existence in acts."(1)

### 3

Engels's remark, "Look at the Paris Commune — *that* was the dictatorship of the proletariat," should be taken seriously in order to reveal what the dictatorship of the proletariat is not (the various forms of state dictatorship over the proletariat in the name of the proletariat).

### 4

It has been easy to make justified criticisms of the Commune's obvious lack of a *coherent organizational structure*. But as the problem of political structures seems far more complex to us today than the would-be heirs of the Bolshevik-type structure claim it to be, it is time that we examine the Commune not just as an outmoded example of revolutionary primitivism, all of whose mistakes can easily be overcome, but as a positive experiment whose whole truth has yet to be rediscovered and fulfilled.

### 5

The Commune had no leaders. And this at a time when the idea of the necessity of leaders was universally accepted in the workers movement. This is the first reason for its paradoxical successes and failures. The official organizers of the Commune were incompetent (compared with Marx or Lenin, or even Blanqui). But on the other hand, the various "irresponsible" acts of that moment are precisely what is needed for the continuation of the revolutionary movement of our own time (even if the circumstances restricted almost all those acts to the purely destructive level — the most famous example being the rebel who, when a suspect bourgeois insisted that he had never had anything to do with politics, replied, "That's precisely why I'm going to kill you").

### 6

The vital importance of the general arming of the people was manifested practically and symbolically from the beginning to the end of the movement. By and large the right to impose popular will by force was not surrendered and left to any specialized detachments. This exemplary autonomy of the armed groups had its unfortunate flip side in their lack of coordination: at no point in the offensive or defensive struggle against Versailles did the people's forces attain military effectiveness. It should be borne in mind, however, that the Spanish revolution was lost — as, in the final analysis, was the civil war itself — in the name of such a transformation into a "republican army." The contradiction between autonomy and coordination would seem to have been largely related to the technological level of the period.

### 7

The Commune represents *the only implementation of a revolutionary urbanism* to date — attacking on the spot the petrified signs of the dominant organization of life, understanding social space in political terms, refusing to accept the innocence of any monument. Anyone who disparages this attack as some "lumpenproletarian nihilism," some "irresponsibility of the *pétroleuses*,"(2) should specify what he believes to be of positive value in the present society and worth preserving (it will turn out to be almost everything). "All space is already occupied by the enemy. . . . Authentic urbanism will appear when the absence of this occupation is created in certain zones. What we call construction starts there. It can be

clarified by the *positive void* concept developed by modern physics” (Basic Program of Unitary Urbanism, *Internationale Situationniste* #6).

## 8

The Paris Commune succumbed less to the force of arms than to the force of habit. The most scandalous practical example was the refusal to use the cannons to seize the French National Bank when money was so desperately needed. During the entire existence of the Commune the bank remained a Versailles enclave in Paris, defended by nothing more than a few rifles and the mystique of property and theft. The other ideological habits proved in every respect equally disastrous (the resurrection of Jacobinism, the defeatist strategy of barricades in memory of 1848, etc.).

## 9

The Commune shows how those who defend the old world always benefit in one way or another from the complicity of revolutionaries — particularly of those revolutionaries who merely *think about* revolution, and who turn out to still *think like* the defenders. In this way the old world retains bases (ideology, language, customs, tastes) among its enemies, and uses them to reconquer the terrain it has lost. (Only the thought-in-acts natural to the revolutionary proletariat escapes it irrevocably: the Tax Bureau went up in flames.) The real “fifth column” is in the very minds of revolutionaries.

## 10

The story of the arsonists who during the final days of the Commune went to destroy Notre-Dame, only to find it defended by an armed battalion of Commune artists, is a richly provocative example of direct democracy. It gives an idea of the kind of problems that will need to be resolved in the perspective of the power of the councils. Were those artists right to defend a cathedral in the name of eternal aesthetic values — and in the final analysis, in the name of museum culture — while other people wanted to express themselves then and there by making this destruction symbolize their absolute defiance of a society that, in its moment of triumph, was about to consign their entire lives to silence and oblivion? The artist partisans of the Commune, acting as specialists, already found themselves in conflict with an extremist form of struggle against alienation. The Communards must be criticized for not having dared to answer the totalitarian terror of power with the use of the totality of their weapons. Everything indicates that the poets who at that moment actually expressed the Commune’s inherent poetry were simply *wiped out*. The Commune’s mass of unaccomplished acts enabled its tentative actions to be turned into “atrocities” and their memory to be censored. Saint-Just’s remark, “Those who make revolution half way only dig their own graves,” also explains his *own* silence.(3)

## 11

Theoreticians who examine the history of this movement from a divinely omniscient viewpoint (like that found in classical novels) can easily demonstrate that the Commune was objectively doomed to failure and could not have been successfully consummated. They forget that for those who really lived it, the consummation was *already there*.

## 12

The audacity and inventiveness of the Commune must obviously be measured not in relation to our time, but in terms of the political, intellectual and moral attitudes of its own time, in terms of the solidarity of all the common assumptions that it blasted to pieces. The profound *solidarity* of presently prevailing assumptions (right and left) gives us an idea of the inventiveness we can expect of a comparable explosion today.

### 13

The social war of which the Commune was one episode is still being fought today (though its superficial conditions have changed considerably). In the task of “making conscious the unconscious tendencies of the Commune” (Engels), the last word has yet to be said.

### 14

For almost twenty years in France the Stalinists and the leftist Christians have agreed, in memory of their anti-German national front, to stress the element of national disarray and offended patriotism in the Commune. (According to the current Stalinist line, “the French people petitioned to be better governed” and were finally driven to desperate measures by the treachery of the unpatriotic right wing of the bourgeoisie.) In order to refute this pious nonsense it would suffice to consider the role played by all the foreigners who came to fight for the Commune. As Marx said, the Commune was the inevitable battle, the climax of 23 years of struggle in Europe by “our party.”

GUY DEBORD, ATTILA KOTÁNYI, RAOUL VANEIGEM  
18 March 1962



Paris, 29 mai 1871.  
Lendemain de guerre  
civile. Les pelles  
d'exécution se font entendre, au sein  
du Luxembourg, aux  
l'École militaire. Allées  
ruinées des bâtiments  
incendiés et barricades  
encore dressées.

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[TRANSLATOR'S NOTES]

1. The Marx quotation and the following one by Engels are from *The Civil War in France*.
2. *pétroleuses*: Commune women who were rumored (probably falsely) to have burned down many Parisian buildings during the final days of the Commune by throwing bottles of petroleum.
3. Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just, one of the Jacobin leaders during the French Revolution, was executed along with Robespierre in 1794.

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