

THE PLEBS THREE CENTURIES

39

JACOBIN, '93. COMMUNARD, '71. BOLSHEVIK, '17

This article by T. A. Jackson, organiser of the North Eastern Labour College District, originally appeared in "The Socialist," March, 18, 1920. It has been revised and partly re-written. The decisive victories of the Red Armies of Russia over all invaders give it a special interest at the present time

TO commemorate the martyred Paris Commune of 1871 has for long been an indispensable annual ritual with the militants of the proletariat. On sentimental grounds alone the twenty or thirty thousand victims of the bourgeois "restoration of order" make an imperative claim upon the memory of all professing any respect for the aspirations of the workers "rightly struggling to be free." And the fact that the Commune during its three months of life flew as its flag the "Red" of the International Republic, has made it a point of honour for all enlisted under that banner to keep green its memory.

It is not often noted that those most punctilious in their performance of this ritual of Commune celebration are just the ones who most generally incur the condemnation of being "too hard," "too material," "too narrow," and "too dogmatic." And still less has it been noted how wide is the difference between the theoretical outlook of those who revere and the Communards whose memory they preserve. How comes it that the "narrow" Marxist who is "intolerant" of theoretical differences is so tolerant of these? How is it that the "material" Marxist who is contemptuous of "sentimentality" "sentimentalises" over the Commune of '71?

The answer is that, critics notwithstanding, there is no such thing as a Marxian Dogma—even though fools (notoriously difficult to exclude!) have sought to father their folly upon Marx. Marxism is NOT a series of propositions or intellectual concepts to be used as instruments for dividing the Sheep of Orthodoxy from the Goats of Damnation. It is a METHOD of handling and classifying the facts of social experience, past, present, and to come. For the Marxist (rightly so called) an event is of importance as a manifestation of social tendencies—as something which has grown out of something, and from which in turn something will result. And it is in his analysis of this process of transformation, and his discriminations between apparent and real likenesses, differences, and interconnections, that the Marxist proves his worth.

Is the Commune, for example, to be understood as caused by the *theories* of the Communards or by the whole circumstances of the period of which these *theories* were an essential ingredient? That this is no mere academic question will be seen if we ask the same question about the Soviet Republic of Russia. Is this the outcome of the *theories* of Lenin, or are these theories themselves social products and forces whose rise and extension is conditioned by the whole social circumstances of modern Europe?

The historic incidents which led to the establishment of the Commune of '71 are sufficiently well known to readers of the PLEBS. What needs emphasis is the lesson taught by the Commune—taught by its success as well as its failure.

The Theory of the Commune

When, as a result of a spontaneous movement of resistance to counter-revolution, the Central Committee of the National Guard (raised during the siege and predominantly proletarian in its composition) found itself sole

governing authority of Paris, the first question on the agenda was what to do with the power which had dropped unsought into its hands. The holding of an election was inevitable in any case, and a Town Council, or its French equivalent, a "Commune," was, because customary, the most natural form in which to express the ideas or ideals in the minds of those upon whom circumstances had thrust the duty of a decision. To elect a Town Council was a matter of course; what called for deliberation was the problem of the relations between Paris and the rest of France.

In proclaiming Paris an independent Commune, the newly-elected Council was in no wise aiming at a parody of the typical institution of the later mediæval times. The general theoretical standpoint of the Commune was that of Humanitarian Democracy. Mingled with this, modifying and colouring its mode of expression, was the typical Parisian tradition—the memory of the Jacobins of the great French Revolution. That the "will of the people" should prevail was their first great intention, and hence their thoughts turned naturally to the theoretical high-water mark of Jacobin Democracy—the Constitution of '93. In that Constitution (beautifully planned but never enforced) provision was made for giving perfect expression to the "will of the people." The electors would meet in their primary assemblies in every district, and not merely select a delegate to the National Assembly (as well as the local Magistrates), but discuss and decide upon the mandate to be given him. Laws would be initiated in the primary assemblies, and thus would be created not merely "representative government," but "direct legislation."

The Commune, with a similar ideal in view, made its appeal to France at large. Had that appeal met with a sympathetic response, each local district and municipality would have constituted itself an independent self-governing unit. Then the units in a province would federate, as would the provinces in their turn, and so constitute a Federal whole. Thus would have been created the Federal Republic, for which Paris fought and bled—a Republic in which the armed people had replaced the standing army, the Communal delegates the functionaries of the Central State, and the Federal Council derived from the Communes was a machine of co-ordination replacing an instrument of coercion.

Jacobin and Commune

The points of resemblance between this and the Jacobin Constitution are fairly obvious. Their differences are none the less noteworthy. They are alike in their "democratic" provision of machinery to enable the common citizen to express his will to the exclusion of all prescriptive rights and privileges; a likeness that finds expression also in their common enthusiasm for formula. "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." They differ widely in their resultant form. For the Jacobin the Assembly of Delegates, equipped with imperative mandates, would become the constituted authority of the Republic—one and indivisible. The local administration, therefore, would be by means of functionaries appointed by and acting for this constituted authority.

For the Commune the problem was less one of breaking the power of tyrants than of creating the power of the common people (by now predominantly proletarian). The interdependence of craft and craft, of town and country, of factory, shop, and home—in a word, the economic structure into which the individual "citizen" fitted as a part of a complex whole, had forced itself upon the practical recognition of all in the social strife of the previous half-century.

Communism in one or other of its forms had claimed the allegiance of a large percentage of the proletariat. It still tended to move within the framework of the old concepts in that it seldom passed beyond the stage of a doctrinaire panacea capable of ready-made application, or that of denunciation of the want of "justice" or "equality" or "harmony" in the distribution of social products.

Hence, in place of the Republic, one and indivisible, of the Jacobin, the theorists of the Commune offered the Republic, Federal and Social. For the Jacobin the unit of society was the "individual"—the citizen. For the Communard the unit was the local association—the Commune. For the Jacobin the Central State was supreme; for the Communard, the locality.

Proletarian Consciousness and Jacobinism

The difference between the Jacobin ideal and that of the Communard was further emphasised by the existence in Paris, in addition to the Utopians of the schools of Fourier and Cabet, of a small but active minority aware of the social basis of this above-noted contrast. To the Jacobin human society was composed of a number of individuals all of whom possessed the same characteristic, "human nature." Man being naturally virtuous, only the imperfection and injustice of social institutions prevented the reign of Justice, Reason and Equality.

The experience of nearly eighty years of social striving, including the street battles of Thermidor and Vendémiaire, the "whiff of grape-shot," the July and February revolutions, the "days of June," the coup d'état of Napoleon the Little, and the September revolution after Sedan, had helped a few to the recognition of the fact that human society concealed beneath its fair "equalitarian" exterior the reality of a dominant bourgeoisie, whose "right" to property was one of the "sacred, inalienable rights" the great Revolution had won. Given the "right" to bourgeois property, with the co-relative fact of a proletariat subject to the vicissitudes of the labour market, and the "right of insurrection" when claimed by these latter was apt (in Marx's phrase) to translate "Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity" into "Infantry, Cavalry, Artillery." To infringe the sacred right of property by strikes, trade unions, or other "seditious conspiracies in restraint of trade" was to threaten the well-being of the Republic. The Jacobin theory was thus revealed as an expression of the class aspirations of the bourgeoisie alone. This once perceived, it became possible to formulate a proletarian morality and policy in opposition to the ideology of the Bourgeois State. Such social theorising as there was in opposition to the prevailing order was naturally most popular with proletarians, and received in its turn an impress at their hand.

The theory that the Great Revolution had made the earth "safe" for the "people" was opposed by the theory that the revolution was yet to be completed in a Proletarian Sense. The International Working-Men's Association had appeared, and stimulated alike the practical and theoretical activity of the proletariat. The outlook of the Commune accordingly differed from that of Jacobinism in that it contained in quasi-Jacobin forms a content of strong proletarian *class-consciousness*. In place of that of a social "structure" of unit-individuals arose the concept of a social "organism," of functioning groups and classes. For the fight between "Human Nature" and "Tyranny" there was substituted the class struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie. And it was so because in the interval a new social fact had emerged—bourgeois mass production with the concomitant interdependence of the proletarians and their subordination to the production process.

Viewed in this light, the Federal Republican ideal represented the political consciousness of the proletariat, still entangled in the forms inherited from the revolutionary period of the bourgeoisie.

"Right" and Revolution

This, perhaps, becomes most apparent if we compare the Commune with a contemporary event—the Russian Revolution. In this case, also, the bowels of human society have been wrung with agony at the thought of "violence," "disorder" and "outrage." We have had the same mechanical yelp of "anarchy" and the same denunciation of "tyranny" as formed the accompaniment to the Great Revolution and the Commune. And we have also had the curious phenomenon that men who started out primarily with a passion for peace, and a hatred of violence, have been forced to organise war on a colossal scale as the only alternative to annihilation by the forces of frantic counter-revolution.

In the Jacobin period none were more sincerely pacifist and universalist than the enthusiasts of the National Convention. None the less necessity drove them to the formation of the Revolutionary Army, the *levy en masse*, the military instrument which made possible the triumphs of Napoleon I.

In Russia a similar combination of reaction has forced the pacifist Trotsky to organise armies on a scale and with an efficiency which would have astonished Carnot (the "organiser of victory"), and to create in the "Red Army" a force which makes even the massed battalions of Dumouriez, Hoche, Jourdan, and Kellerman look puny. The parallel holds good in the case of the Commune. From the orgy of fraternal ecstasy with which they inaugurated their reign the Communards were rudely awakened by the shells of the Versaillaise "defenders of law and order," and so forced to put their "sentiments" in their pocket and fight for their lives—succeeding sufficiently well to make their last heroic death-struggle the classic instance of the proletarian revolutionist dying joyfully for the "magnificent dream" of the Solidarity of the Human Race.

It is not enough to become possessed of Government authority—the problem is to use it. And as Marx notes, nothing proves that better than the Commune. If social questions were decided automatically by the principle that "right is might" the Commune would have endured. The one thing the Commune lacked was the one thing needful—might; without which no right was ever considered, let alone recognised.

Outside of Paris the proletariat was nowhere, either in numbers or consciousness, *strong* enough to come to the rescue. The Versaillaise Government prevailed because it possessed the requisite strength. And it possessed it because social development had not yet sufficiently consolidated the proletariat in numbers, in economic function, and in understanding to enable them to undertake the revolutionary transformation of society.

The Theory of Revolution

The growth of the proletariat and the consequent intensification of the class antagonism had, naturally enough, provoked increasingly furious struggles for relief and betterment on the part of the subject and exploited class. The development of the technique of revolution is instructive. During the Great Revolution the citizens of Paris, organised in their sections and armed "in defence of the revolution," were, because of their numbers, unity, and organisation, coupled with the isolation of Paris (due to bad means of communication), able to enforce their will upon the National Assembly.

As the size of the standing army grew, and with it the complication of the administrative machinery, so necessarily those who contemplated revolution had to face the need for a bigger army of revolution and for undermining the morale of the Government troops. Both entailed something more than a meeting of a Jacobin Club or of electors convoked in their sections. They entailed propaganda and organisation on an elaborate scale. Hence, there was developed a system of clubs and secret societies contemplating naively the weakening of the force at the disposal of authority and the organisation of another able to seize the apparatus of office and rule in its stead.

This from 1825 to 1870 was, with varying modifications, the popular theory of revolution throughout the world. The clubs of '48, the League of the Just, and the Fenian Brotherhood all show the same general outlines, though their emotional content varies. The experience of the Commune, however, demonstrated past all doubt that the problem cannot be solved in so naive a fashion. The loyalty of the army is merely a symptom of the all but universal acceptance of a given form of government. Only when the mass of the population has lost all faith in Government institutions, and when, in addition, great and vital needs that demand a revolutionary transformation are clamouring for satisfaction, can a revolution be possible nowadays. The possibility of revolution thus rests on an economic foundation; the propaganda of revolution, awaiting economic development, is forced into legalist and Parliamentary channels.

But ripened economic development reveals the insufficiency not merely of bourgeois rule, but of the machinery thereof, and hence the revolutionary theory now must include a concept of a new machinery of revolution as well as a new machine of government.

What the "sections" of Parisian citizens were to the Great Revolution the "clubs" were to the '48 and '71. The clubs gave rise in turn to the political group or branch and the "syndicate" or trade union branch, and these in their turn have given rise to a new instrument of revolution—the Workers' Council—the Soviet. The development from Jacobin Section through Communist Club to the Revolutionary Soviet marks the transformation of society from the capitalist system to the Workers' Republic.

THOS. A. JACKSON

PLEASE NOTE

FEB. 12 & 13 THE PLEBS ANNUAL MEET WILL BE HELD AT BRADFORD, AND ALL MEMBERS AND SUPPORTERS ARE HEREWITH CORDIALLY INVITED TO ATTEND.

THE meeting on Saturday will open at 2.30 p.m. in the Co-operative Café (opposite Reformers' Bookshop, in Sunbridge Road), and continue till 7 p.m. (with half-hour tea interval). On Sunday, when League and Class organisation will be discussed, proceedings will open at 11.30 a.m. and continue till 3.30 p.m. The Sunday place of meeting will be the Textile Workers' Rooms, 3 Westgate.

Will all members intending to be present write to Mrs. COATES, 141 Girlington Road, Bradford, *before February 5*, to say exactly what accommodation they require? Bradford comrades have offered hospitality, but this is, of course, limited. Tea on Saturday (2s. 6d.), and light refreshments on Sunday, will be provided for those only who have previously notified Mrs. COATES.