

Essay 1: People

My four-year-old son taught me about the Paris Commune. The Commune, which rose and fell exactly 150 years ago, was a short-lived experiment in democracy, a vision of internationalism, a gesture of radical defiance to the status quo, and a beacon of progressive, creative civic imagination. Depending on your views, it was heroic or a disaster or both. And I learned a lot about it from my son.

In London, where I live, when you push a buggy along a pavement, by and large people get out of your way. There is – generally speaking – a presumption in favour of clearing a path for the baby. In Italy, I have found, this is taken to extremes. On one occasion I saw a woman step off the pavement into the road, a good 200 yards ahead of us, in rapturous preparation for our passage. In Italy, of course, they coo unreservedly over young children out in public. In London, people are less demonstrative but I have seen many indulgent smiles directed at our boy. And why not? He is gorgeous.

But he was born – and lived the first year of his life – in Paris. And in Paris things are very different. In Paris, I found, when a pedestrian meets a buggy there is no presumption that the buggy has right of way and I would wheel our boy off the pavement just as often as the pedestrian stepped aside.

Also, while we occasionally saw indulgent smiles, as often we received unsolicited advice: our six-month-old would be crying, as babies do, and passers-by would tell us unprompted, he's hungry! or you need to wrap him up warmer, are you mad? Once, as I was carefully wheeling the buggy over a pedestrian crossing, a woman called out 'faites attention, monsieur!' with the same aghast intonation as if I had decided the best way to get our boy across the road was to fling him through the air.

And this taught me about the Paris Commune. Because, in London when we go outside we maintain a certain shield of domestic privacy around us, but in Paris the streets are a place of contestation and challenge and debate. They are on one level fundamentally egalitarian and non-deferential, even to baby buggies and their unsuspecting passengers. This is a state of affairs that goes back a couple of centuries to the Revolution but the roots of this political openness curl through the story of the Paris Commune. This week I want to look back at the 85 days of the Commune and think about how this sometimes cautionary tale continues to be a fertile ground for thinking about our own ongoing experiments in making a better society. Today my topic is The People.

The Siege

But what was the Commune and why and how did it arise?

150 years ago, the citizens of Paris had endured an appalling winter. France had just been swiftly and humiliatingly defeated in the Franco-Prussian War by the German army, which pressed its territorial advantage, surrounding and blockading Paris with the aim of starving the capital out. And starve they did, the deprivation leading Parisians to eat cats and dogs, then the animals in the Paris Zoo, and eventually for butchers to display and sell rat meat for public consumption. The winter of 1870-1871 was extremely cold and hypothermia killed more than the Prussian shelling. Typhoid and smallpox and respiratory illnesses were rampant, particularly among children, the poor and the elderly. But though Paris survived, there were worse humiliations to come.

The Prussians were laying siege to Paris in part to press for the most advantageous settlement of the peace and the armistice, signed on 26 February 1871, was punishing for France, involving the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, 5 billion francs in war reparations, and the German army to march in triumph down the Champs Élysées. The news was greeted with horror in Paris. The newspaper Le Rappel spoke for many in declaring this less an armistice than a capitulation. Had Paris really gone through the deprivations of the Siege to be betrayed like this? That the Government under the elderly and conservative Adolphe Thiers had abandoned Paris in favour of

the monarchist stronghold of Versailles further was further evidence that this was not a Government of the people.

During the Siege, Paris was defended by the National Guard, a local force, separate from the humiliated French army. Its democratically-organised battalions and its pay structures ensured that it drew from the more militant working-class populations of the city. In the last years of the Second Empire that had collapsed so ignominiously in the war the Emperor had relaxed restrictions on freedom of the press and of assembly. Paris then was a ferment of radical ideas, defended by a radicalised National Guard. The disjunction between Paris and the rest of France was made sharply apparent in the general elections in February, when conservative and monarchist parties claimed 62% of the deputies in the National Assembly but only 17% of the deputies representing Paris.

So on 18 March when Adolphe Thiers, fearing resistance to the Armistice, ordered his forces to seize the National Guard's cannon and take it into French hands, the Guard fought back. The army climbed the hill to Montmartre where the Guard had secured the cannon but found a crowd alerted to their arrival and ready to resist. After a French general was executed by the crowd – after ordering his troops to fire on them – Thiers ordered first the army, then all government personnel, to withdraw from Paris, leaving the city in the hands of National

Guard and the radicals. On the evening of 18 March, a red flag flew above the centre of Paris's local government, the Hôtel de Ville.

The Commune

And so began a two-month experiment in democracy. Paris had not had local elections for much of the century; the mayors of the city's twenty arrondissements had been directly appointed by the Emperor. In defiance of Thiers's government, Paris held elections eight days later and on 28 March was able to declare the formation of the Commune of Paris, a radical and ambitious attempt to reimagine what a city, what a society, what a culture might be, how politics might work, the ways its citizens – and Parisians were now emphatically 'citizens' – might participate in its processes.

I don't want to overstate the Commune's successes. Paris was still feeling the effects of the siege; the opportunity for self-government had come suddenly to a group largely unprepared for the task – the Communist Benoît Malon noted ruefully 'never has a revolution so surprised its revolutionaries'; the Commune was not immune to the propensity of the left to fight amongst itself and the loose coalition of Jacobins, Communists, Blanquists, Proudhonists, Bohemians, and old-48ers found plenty to fight about. The administrative structures that the Commune put in place were sometimes poorly

defined, overlapping, offering competing sources of decision-making and responsibility. The whole project was placed under the intolerable pressure of threats and shelling from the French Government.

And yet, there remains, for me, something inspiring and beautiful about the idea of the Commune. Our own democracy isn't so strong that we can't look to the Commune for lessons on how a well-functioning society should function, even if the Commune itself often fell short. But we might also find there lessons in the pressures states come under, the forces that undermine them, and how democracies fail.

From the very beginning, the French government were keen to paint the Communards as barbarians and criminals. The novelist Edmond de Goncourt, who was unpersuaded by the Commune, recorded in his Journal on 19 March seeing a group of National Guardsmen and being 'overcome with disgust at the sight of their stupid, abject faces, in which triumph and intoxication created a sort of dissolute radiance'.

This vilification of the Communards rested on the earlier demonisation of the Parisian poor under the Second Empire which had provided cover for bulldozing the slums and moving their inhabitants out of the city altogether. Now the same images were pressed into service by Thiers to dehumanise the

radicals of the Commune and permit their even more brutal suppression. A propaganda effort, aimed at the rest of France and the world beyond, presented these radical democrats as a criminal rabble.

But this does not accurately describe the Commune. Despite the bombardments from Versailles, the financial blockades and ongoing shortages, the roads continued to be cleaned, the shops continued to open, taxes were still collected, and, in some respects, life continued as before. Many of the new policies that terrified the bourgeoisie would not have raised an eyebrow a century later: the Commune pushed for unemployment benefit, rent controls, business insurance, job centres, and soup kitchens. Prices rose but nothing like they had under the siege and in several districts the local mayoralty bought meat at wholesale prices and sold it on at cost. Salaries of public servants were capped, the poor were given access to credit, and on the shopfloor supervisors were elected by the employees they supervised.

But the Commune was not just an opportunity for solid welfare policies but a chance to dream. In one of the political clubs in which radical ideas circulated a woman declared, repurposing the language of the despised church, 'The day of justice is at hand ... Proletarians, you will be born again'. Independence, then as now, was an opportunity to reimagine the

world and how it could be. Precisely at the moment when the nation state had become the dominant unit of geopolitical organisation (the Prussian federation had been replaced by the German nation a matter of weeks before the Commune was declared), the Commune looked both higher and lower than the nation, imagining autonomous self-governing Communes spreading across France and then out across the world.

Democracy

What have we to learn from this, you may ask? Don't we have a democracy? Perhaps we do - but what the Commune shows is that democracy is nothing without imagination and debate. The Communards believed in free elections because it made politicians accountable to the people. But it also imposed a corresponding responsibility on the people to make themselves heard - as a Commune poster in central Paris put it, democracy requires 'the permanent intervention of citizens in communal affairs through the free expression of their ideas and free defence of their interests'. Being inserted into the politics of the time is not, therefore, about the broadcast-only model that we have in social media. It is about being part of the swirl of ideas, letting your convictions be changed and developed in contact with others, ensuring that your principles are tested and informed.

The Commune had a great taste for debate. 90 new newspapers sprung up during the Commune, from the dryly formal Journal Officiel de la Commune to the enjoyably swearsy Père Duchêne. The Commune Council itself met 57 times in the two months of the Commune, almost every day. The Council's debates were published and their ideas debated in the newspapers and political clubs. In some ways, we can see in the Commune an attempt to found a truly deliberative democracy in which the public space is a site for the circulation and combat of ideas. In a very small way, I think, my surprising experiences with a baby buggy on the streets of Paris are part of a legacy of the Commune.

So the Commune was not a stupid rabble as its detractors believed. It was a fledgling deliberative democracy in which representation, free speech, free assembly and imagination were locked together in an attempt to create a new kind of citizenship and a new kind of polis.

The Crowd

On 6 May, the Commune used the Tuileries Palace to mount a concert raising funds for the wounded. Rosa Bordas, a star of the café-concerts, sang a song which includes the lines:

It's a rabble you say?

Well then – I'm part of it!

But if you treat people as a rabble, you'll get a rabble.

That dehumanising rhetoric found its culmination in the semaine sanglante, the 'bloody week' of 21-28 March, in which French soldiers stormed into Paris, conducting summary executions, machine-gunning prisoners into mass graves, shooting wounded combatants and citizens alike. Estimates of the dead are anything from 6,000 to 30,000. Although the Versaillais forces had spent the previous six weeks shelling the city, the victorious French blamed all the destruction on the villainous Commune. There were atrocities on the Communard side – the wholly unwarranted execution of the Archbishop of Paris Georges Darboy, for example – but some of the more infamous actions, setting fire to the Hotel de Ville for example, were prompted by a desperate (and unsuccessful) attempt to slow the progress of an invading army that seemed to be exorcising its humiliation at the hands of the Prussians by massacring its compatriots, with a shoot on sight, shoot to kill policy.

The success – if it can be called a success – of the French army in crushing the Commune meant that their bogeyman description of it became an image of the dangers of the people that lasted for decades. Earlier figures like Baudelaire who writes of the crowd as offering a new experience of the city,

a vast glacial flow in which one can become ecstatically absorbed. After the Commune, writings on the crowd took on a much darker aspect. In 1895, Gustave Le Bon wrote *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* in which he described crowds as atavistic and irrational, collective hosts in which false and dangerous ideas generate and spread. This would later get taken up as a kind of manual for manipulating crowds to undermine democracy in a movement that, for a second time, would put German boots on the streets of Paris.

Even now, we're not immune to being whipped up as a crowd, to letting polarised insult take the place of democratic debate. The ability of a reactionary government to turn a nation against its capital is also not alien to us.

But behind the rabble and the rabble-rousing lies the Commune, 150 years old this year, and a noble exploration in imaginative democracy and a democratic imagination.

So what did this democracy imagine for its citizens?

Despite the drama of its founding and the violence of its end, in some respects the Commission was a moment for ambitious kindness and radical care. Nowhere is this clearer and more

surprising then in its attitude to education, which is where I shall turn next.