

Essay 2: Education

150 years ago, the Paris Commune was a briefly-shining beacon of radicalism, egalitarianism, and internationalism. What I want to talk about today, however, is not its grand political stances, but its extraordinarily progressive attitude towards education.

Probably the most important thing that happened to me in my South-London state primary school in the late 1970s was the arrival of a new teacher, Mrs Harden. One of the first things that she did was to set up a small Drama club that met after school. In the Drama club we played games and we did improvisations and we acted out scenes and we sang songs and we created comic sketches and we did little dances to music and we even created shows that we performed in School Assembly.

That Mrs Harden changed my life does not overstate the case. Over 40 years later, I'm a playwright and a professor of theatre and I doubt I would be either of those things if I hadn't fallen under the mischievous spell of Mrs Harden and her Drama club. What I loved about Drama club and made me want – if I'm going to be perfectly honest with you – to stay in Drama club for the rest of my life was the mixture of play and learning; the combination of physical and mental exertion; the fact that it was fun and it was also hard; that you kept

discovering new things about yourself and your friends; and the unusual degree of equality in the room. We were all the same in Drama club; some of the classroom rivalries (Lambeth vs Westminster; boys vs girls; Liverpool vs Chelsea; Doctor Who vs Star Trek) seemed to be suspended. Even Mrs Harden herself didn't seem to be particularly 'in charge'; she just wanted to help make things happen. In fact, I wasn't aware that she was even teaching as such.

Reading about the Paris Commune has continually sent me back to that Drama Club, because it seems to me that in its openness, its creativity, its freedoms, the ghosts of the Commune were moving among us.

Religious Education

The Catholic Church had dominated Paris schools for most of the nineteenth century. Although the influence of the Church of education had been broken by the Revolution, it was restored at primary level by Napoleon in 1808 and seven years later at secondary. This was extended by the Falloux laws of 1850 and 1851 which promoted the establishment of religious schools. By 1870 over 80% of girls were being taught in religious institutions. For boys the number was lower but had nonetheless tripled since 1850. In Paris specifically, a third of children went to religious schools, another third went to

schools where religious instruction was usually part of the curriculum and the other third didn't go to school at all.

The Church was very largely on the conservative side of politics, lending its support to the Imperialist and Royalist tendency. As the novelist, journalist, and feminist Andre Léo wrote in the late 1860s, church schools were nothing more than 'training grounds for the subjects of the monarchy'. In saying so, she was saying nothing that would be contested by the other side. Adolphe Thiers, the great enemy of the Commune, had argued strongly for the involvement of priests in education, because priests can promote, as he put it:

that good philosophy which teaches that man is here to suffer and not that philosophy which says - be happy ...

If you think that here below you are entitled to a little bit of happiness, and if you do not find it in your actual situation, you will strike at rich people fearlessly for having kept you away from your happiness

For Thiers, explicitly, religious education was aimed at preventing the recognition of injustice and of avoiding dissent.

It's no surprise, therefore, that when the Commune was declared, there were soon calls for drastic educational

reform. On 20 April 1871, a group calling itself the New Education Society published a petition in the Official Journal of the Commune, calling for Education to be treated as 'a public service of primary importance'. The Journal concurred, calling education 'the mother of all issues'. The significance accorded to it may be judged by the composition of the Education Commission of the Commune Council, which historian Robert Tombs describes as 'one of the most distinguished such bodies France has ever had': chaired by one of the prime movers of the Commune, Edouard Vaillant, it also featured André Léo, the novelist Jules Vallès, the painter Gustave Courbet, and the poet Jean-Baptiste Clément whose stirring and regretful poem 'Le Temps des cerises' – The Time of Cherries – was set to music and became an anthem of the Commune.

What did the New Education Society want to see? Their demands were specific and clear: compulsory, universal education, free and paid for through general taxation, and from which all religious influence in terms of content, staffing and iconography was removed.

That the influence of the Catholic Church on education should be eliminated was a consensual position in the Paris Commune: the Montmartre Women's Vigilance Committee urged that secular educational centres be established to replace, as they put it, 'the schools and orphanages run by male and female

ignoramuses'. A thread running through the Commune's debates was that education needed to be re-established on a newly rational and scientific footing. This would be impossible if religious superstition, as most Communards saw it, held sway in the class room. Lay Teachers required a teaching qualification; nuns only needed a letter of support from their superior. When, in April, the Paris Commune announced the severance of Church and State, the effect soon rippled through the education system, sweeping the nuns and priests from the school room.

Girls' Education

The Society was, in effect, a pressure group and it consisted unusually of 3 men and 3 women, this elegant balance echoing another of their demands: that education should be just the same for boys and girls. This was a giant step. As Carolyn Eichner explains in her book on women in the Commune, in Second Empire France 'boys' education emphasised thought, reason, and logic, while girls' education stressed feeling, piety, and obedience'. To close up this divide was a bold attempt to reconfigure the very identity of the sexes, to help girls establish full autonomy, dignity, self-respect and therefore citizenship. The Commune overwhelmingly approved the principle of girls' education. The rabble-rousing newspaper Père Duchêne offered this caustic observation:

In a good republic maybe we should take even more care of girls' education than of boys', because it's on a citizenne's knee that we babble our first words, that we put together our first ideas.

The Versaillais who are busy bombarding Paris and firing their bloody shells right the way up the Champs Élysées – they must've had a hell of a bad upbringing, that's for sure!

Educational opportunities for women and girls proliferated. The Commune equalised teachers' pay for men and women and raised it too. A leading feminist and Communarde, Paule Mink, opened a new school for girls in the Saint-Pierre Church in Montmartre. The radical educationalist Marguerite Tinayre was appointed the first ever female inspector of schools – a small step one might think but one that led to furious condemnation after the Commune fell, the summary execution of her husband, and a ten-year exile for her.

Teaching the Whole Person

The policy of teaching boys and girls the same things and in the same way pointed to a new idea of what education should be. It was not that girls should now be taught the curriculum that boys had enjoyed; it was that the full range of topics and experiences should be offered to all. The New Education

Society insisted that education should be 'rational and complete' and by 'complete' they meant that the whole child should be educated. Adolphe Thiers had once said 'reading, writing, arithmetic, that is what we need – the rest is superfluous'; the Commune disagreed. As Kristin Ross shows in her dazzling study Communal Luxury, the Commune favoured an 'integral' education that educated the mind and the body, was manual and intellectual. The radical journalist Henri Bellenger wrote in Le Vengeur newspaper on 8 April: 'he who wields a tool should be able to write a book ... The artisan must be able to take a break from his daily work through artistic, literary or scientific culture, without ceasing for all that to be a producer'.

It is easy to make the mistake of thinking that the Commune is directly connected to Communism. In fact, a Commune means only a self-governing town or city. The founding of the Paris Commune harked back to the Commune de Paris set up in 1789 and which three years later was successful in deposing the King and establishing France first Republic. That said, Bellenger's words are vaguely reminiscent of one of Karl Marx's rare evocations of Communist life when he argued in German Ideology that in the perfect society it would be possible for me 'to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind to, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic'.

Marx was not an influence here, though. These words, written in the mid-1840s, were not published until the 1930s. Indeed Marx, writing 25 years before the Commune displays a certainly pastoral nostalgia, seeming to evoke some kind of holistic primitivism. The Commune on the other hand is resolutely of its own time: the image evoked is of a worker engaged in industrial production finding pleasure and fulfilment in engaging in creative and intellectual pursuits integrated into their working day. Perhaps both approaches are responding to the dislocating social and personal effects of industrialisation and mass urbanisation – the population of Paris had just doubled in the last 20 years. The Commune is finding a way to prepare everyone – men and women – to develop a fuller, richer, more expansive personhood to participate in all areas of life, to navigate and erase the new social divisions between work and leisure, between the creative and the mechanical, between hand and mind.

Several institutions were planned to embody this new approach to education. A plan for a new 'industrial school' was sent to the Hôtel de Ville and published on 2 April. It would cater for children aged 12 years and up who would be taught in mixed ability classes in which 'practical work would alternate with a study of scientific theories and the industrial arts'. One Mme Maniere proposed herself as its headmistress, commending

her plan to the Council for its bold advances in teaching girls physical skills 'a great improvement,' wrote Mme Maniere, 'on the needlework school at present managed by nuns'. Some version of that was agreed by Edouard Vaillant, who requisitioned the Ecole des Beaux-Arts on rue Bonaparte in the 6th arrondissement for the project. Its curriculum included literature, science, sculpture, drawing and designs. Workers were invited to apply to be teachers and it opened on 12 May and lasted barely two weeks before the French invaded. A similar technical school for boys was planned to replace a Jesuit School on the rue Lhomond but the Commune was crushed before it could open.

Nurseries

Even more remarkable was the plan for nurseries and crèches proposed by Maria Verdure, a member of the New Education Society, her lover, Charles Decoudray, and his brother Félix, and again published in the Journal Officiel on the 15 and 17 May 1871. Recognising the difficulty working-class women had breast-feeding their children while also holding down a job, they proposed a network of creches scattered through the factory districts. So far, so practical. But the plans went much further, designing the experience for the children from top to bottom. These nurseries must be sited in areas with low buildings so that the rooms can be filled with light and air. Everything should be arranged to create a pleasing and playful

environment for the children because 'boredom is [children's] greatest affliction': they therefore insist, 'all sorts of toys should be available, such as carts, an organ, and aviary full of birds; paintings or sculptures should be displayed, showing animals or trees, that is, real objects and not religious fabrications' (Maria Verdure was not done with her anticlerical education plans). They stipulate carpeting to create soft play areas and specify that the teachers should do all the jobs of the nursery on a rota, so that the staff do not get bored and pass that boredom onto the kids. Even the teacher's clothes must add to the child's pleasure: 'dress should not be drab,' they write, 'and black should be banished from the nursery'.

For this contribution to the Commune, Charles Decoudray was arrested and sentenced to transportation in New Caledonia, though before he could be taken he died of an aneurysm, five days after he and Marie married. The idea, however, remained alive in Third Republic policy circles and bit by bit the Verdure-Decoudray plan was enacted. When our child was born, in Paris, nearly five years ago, our visits to our local nursery found a colourful, cheerful room, suffused with light and air, filled with toys and games, staffed by sunny, friendly staff who might have stepped straight out of the Commune.

Epilogue

Indeed, we are still catching up with the Commune in education practice. We still tend to silo people into hand or mind, apprentices and degrees, vocational and blue skies, technical and intellectual. But sometimes, we know education can be different and it's something I am pleased to say I discovered many years ago in an after-school Drama Club in Burdett Coutts School, Victoria. Mrs Harden died four years ago, but two years before that I was lucky enough to meet up with her and express my gratitude and appreciation to the first true Communarde I ever knew.

The Commune's determination to tear up the usual distinctions between mind and body, the technical and the creative, had consequences for the role and meaning of art in the Commune. In tomorrow's essay, I want to explore what art did for the Commune and what the Commune did for art.