November 2015

Myth and the Paris Commune

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Abstract

The Paris Commune of 1871 is an event in history that has had a special place in the hearts of many revolutionaries. Karl Marx called it "the first successful working class revolution". This paper looks at the events of the Paris Commune, as recounted in a work produced 25 years after the event occurred and, by means of comparison with more recent accounts, examines how it moved from a historical "reality" to a mythic history through the lens of secondary framing and historical mythology. This approach to the Paris Commune reveals many significantly different interpretations; pointing out that the true impact of an event may lie within the effect it can have on future generations. This calls to question the relevance of factual history, particularly in the case of events from so long ago. If one was not present at the event, then the framing of any future recounts of history depends solely on the author, and therefore, can arguably be viewed as interpretation rather than fact.

Introduction

Over 140 years after the Paris Commune, a blogger still invokes those fateful days concluding with the words: "Long live those in whom burns the flame that never dies. Vive la Commune!" (*Countercurrents,* 2011). The blog, *The Seventy-Two Greatest Days In History, Remembering The Paris Commune Of 1871*, illustrates the reverence with which the author speaks of the events that occurred between March 18 and May 28 of 1871 and how The Paris Commune serves as a "a source of joy, inspiration, and pride" for subsequent revolutionary movements (Fryett, 2011, para. 10). Further research into this movement has revealed many

different interpretations of these events. In one such interpretation, Gregor Dallas (1989) painted a strikingly different portrait of The Paris Commune, referring to it as "the first incident in history of modern political terrorism and hostage-taking" (p. 38). An article in the *Los Angeles Times* refers to the Commune as a "powerful political myth" (Pfaff, 1989):

> The myth of the Commune was--for the left--one of spontaneous popular organization, precocious communism, and vicious counterrevolution. Lenin's shroud was a Communard flag. For the right, the myth meant radicalism, anarchy, murder. These two myths embittered French politics for decades and contributed greatly to the ideologizing of European politics that gave the world totalitarianism. We are only now getting over it. (para. 11)

Edward Mason (1930) argued that socialists have taken the Commune from the history of France and, by means of interpretation, made it into a momentous event in socialism. Mason stated, "Marxian socialism, taking its stand on the economic interpretation of history, leads naturally to the creation of a *historical mythology*" (p. 9). Nothnagle (1989) defined historical mythology as "events, processes or persons from an earlier time which transmit religious or ideological beliefs to a certain group in an easily comprehended, emotionally moving forum" (as cited in Connelly, 2001, p. 6). The analysis of this social movement has vast implications in the areas of secondary framing and its effects on how social movements are viewed through the lenses of heroism or terrorism, depending on whose account one ascribes to. As scholars, this is relevant to all of us, as we may rely on the recounts of certain events or phenomena to conduct any research that we are pursuing. The overarching debate over the attainability of objectivity in research is something that has always intrigued me. Particularly, as a critical scholar, within the area of social movements and their ability to either inspire social action in future generations, or hinder

it, depending on the discourse surrounding the event. Due to the controversial recounts of the Commune, it is necessary to gain a more thorough understanding of The Paris Commune; look at the events of the Commune through the lens of secondary framing and historical mythology; analyze some examples of different interpretations; before finally, investigating some possible implications that this research could have in the area of social movement studies.

The Events of the Paris Commune

In order to further the understanding of The Paris Commune, and examine the problems that exist with presenting one's view as objective, I attempted to focus solely on the events that occurred. The "who, what, when, where" so to speak. Therefore, for the purposes of this section, I focused on examining the events of the Commune, beginning with the major events leading up to the establishment of the Commune and ending with its downfall. As I wished to discover how these events were framed within their historical context, source material dated within 25 years of the actual occurrence of the events was used. Different interpretations of these events will be discussed in subsequent sections.

In *History of the Paris Commune 1871,* Thomas March (1896) told the story of the events surrounding the Paris Commune, and how they effected people involved. I will recount these events with the use of his voice, with an attempt to synthesize what happened within the context of this period of history. March spoke of the people of France and how they had heard rumors of the battles being waged on the German frontier in the kingdom of Prussia and "in and beyond Paris was all war-like activity: raising of troops, manufacture of arms, warehousing provisions, drilling recruits, erecting defense works" (p. 12). Poor people for miles around the city of Paris came flocking to the capitol and "the better protection its walls would afford them if the enemy came that far" (p. 12). Socialists and "internationalists" in France were not satisfied with the

lack of working-class representation within the new regime of the Government of National Defense which "was blown together by a whirlwind of popular enthusiasm" (p. 20), so they began organizing public meetings and "from the twenty committees, thus constituted a Central Committee, composed of four delegates from each committee, eighty in all" (p. 25). These were representative of working-class Parisians from every district.

As German soldiers continued to march toward Paris, National Guards within the city were greatly increased in numbers to help with the protection of the city, an action that would prove to be a main catalyst to the events that led to The Paris Commune. Meanwhile, the provisional government was experiencing numerous difficulties as a result of its fragile state; lacking the legal authority it really needed to govern the people. However, those involved knew that elections could not be held while the fighting continued. This led Adolphe Thiers, a politician and statesman with great official and diplomatic experience (March, 1896, p. 20), "to apply for an armistice, for the purpose of holding national elections and thereby placing the Government of the country upon a legal basis" (p. 35). Though the armistice was denied at this time, Thiers's action, considering the desire of the people to defend their own country with the "utmost vigor" was considered nothing short of an act of treason. The identity of the Parisians was an important factor in the development of this movement. March emphasized this: "A Frenchman loves his country and it was impossible to be light-hearted when it was threatened" (p. 12).

These important events, coupled with the continuous siege of Paris by German forces, left Parisians "discouraged in the idea of successful defeat of their foe" (March, 1896, p. 64). The overall social condition only exacerbated the problem, as Parisians found themselves "suffering from famine, dissatisfaction and anxiety" (p. 64). The siege had lasted four months,

every effort to relieve the city had proven futile and mortality rates were sky rocketing due to "deprivation of fresh food, cold weather and the Prussian bombardment" (p. 71). This led to the final push for armistice and the election of the National representative Assembly, which had the last word on all decisions of war-time activity. The reaction of Parisians was one of outrage, as March stated "the people of Paris called the surrender 'a monstrous trickery', shouting for immediate arraignment of the Government" (p. 75). Nevertheless, elections were held for the National Assembly on February 8th 1871. Forty-three members were elected to the National Assembly, including Adolphe Thiers, who was elected chief of executive power.

In the wake of numerous defeats at the hands of the Prussians, the Assembly felt that ending the war was of the utmost importance. On February 26th, 1871, Thiers signed the preliminaries of peace between France and Germany. Of the numerous stipulations that Thiers agreed to, none was as appalling to Parisians as the occupation of Paris by 30,000 Prussian soldiers. "The citizens, in whom the patriotism of Frenchman was immensely augmented by the pride of being Parisians, felt keenly the humiliation which such occupation implied" (March, 1896, p. 86). Determined not to bow to their enemies, the National Guard of Paris organized the seizing of numerous cannons, moving them to specific parts of the city, namely Montmartre, which was the highest point in the city. The National Assembly was moved to Versailles and Thiers made arrangements to take decisive action against the National Guard of Paris. "He was anxious to send a force so efficient and numerous that its prestige alone would act upon the insurgent National Guard and induce them to lay down their arms" (p. 91). Thiers estimated that he would need a force of 40,000 men to accomplish this.

The decision by Thiers to attempt to disarm the Parisian National Guard is viewed by many as the official beginning of the events of The Paris Commune. On March 18, 1871, Thiers

ordered his troops to take the cannons by force. At 4 a.m., Thiers' troops of National Guard marched on Montmartre and originally had the Parisian National Guard (or the Federates, as they were now being called), caught by surprise; by 6 a.m. "Federate Guards turned out of their beds and assembled in the streets, and were also joined by numbers of women and children" (p. 102). The women appealed to Thiers' troops, bringing them food and wine and the soldiers became "friendly and affable under the influence of the kindly attention shown to them" (p. 102). The growing crowds of federates, women and children advanced on the soldiers, who were ordered to fire on the crowd. It was at this point that many of Thiers's troops "broke ranks and refused to fire" (p. 103). Several other defections happened in the same fashion throughout Montmartre, and Thiers's attempts to seize the cannons were thwarted. Two generals of Thiers' Guard, Lacomte and Clement Thomas were "disarmed, arrested and executed by frenzied citizens and federates" (p. 108). Thiers retreated to Versailles, with the troops that hadn't defected.

After the victory at Montmartre, March (1896) described the climate of governing ambiguity that shrouded Paris in the first few days before the Commune:

> Thus Paris was at one stroke deprived even of the semblance of Government, and delivered openly, by a confession of weakness that was beyond contradiction, to whosoever had strength or astuteness enough to seize the dropped reigns of authority. (p. 112)

On March 19th, 1871, the Central Committee, which consisted mostly of Federate Guard members hastily chosen to stand in as leaders, announced that communal elections would be held. "It was the duty of the citizens now to elect representatives who should govern the city and establish the veritable Republic" (March, 1896, p. 118). The Central Committee urged the citizens of Paris to "choose as their representatives only men who were modest, disinterested,

actors—in contradistinction to mere spinners—sincere, honest and of kindred sympathies and positions to themselves" (p. 139). Whether or not the committee assumed or hoped this would refer to them is left to interpretation. The elections were held from 8 a.m. to midnight on March 26th. Thiers promptly spread word throughout France that the election happened "without moral authority" and was, for all intents and purposes, illegal (p. 141). He also made the promise that "order would be restored at Paris as elsewhere" (p. 141).

The Paris Commune consisted of representatives elected each of the 20 arrondissements, or districts, of Paris. One of the most notable features of the Commune was that "the bulk of them were young and many belonged to the working class" (p. 147). On March 28th, over 100,000 National Guard, federates, and citizens of Paris celebrated the inauguration of the Paris Commune, shouting "Vive la Commune!" forgetting momentarily that 100,000 Versailles troops were gathering, "whose specific mission was to neutralize and annul that day's proceedings" (p. 151).

During their short time as the governing body of Paris, the commune enacted numerous decrees which, as March (1896) stated, "The National Assembly would have talked over for weeks, and probably then have rejected" (p. 159). These decrees were geared mainly toward two groups of people: the National Guard, who helped create the circumstances necessary for the Commune to exist, and the poor, who voted them in (p. 159). A few of these decrees included the suspension of the sale of unredeemed pledges in pawn shops and the "relieving of all rents owed by tenants, specifically during the months of October 1870 and January through April 1871" (p.160). Another decree enacted by the Commune was the complete separation of Church and State and the immediate order to nationalize all church property. This was the "beginning of the arrests, and in some cases, execution of priests, including eventually the Archbishop of Paris"

(p.164). Other decrees included pensions granted to unmarried spouses of National Guard who were killed in defense of the city and freedom of the press (p. 183). Abandoned workshops were to be given over to "workman's cooperative societies, for their common benefit" (p. 195).

March (1896) noted that there was little time for the enactment of these measures as the majority of labor power was given over to pressing military requirements (p. 195). In the midst of attempts at these "socialistic" decrees (p. 195) one must also examine that much of this governing body was still in a state of disarray and confusion. The sheer number of decrees being enacted "caused a sense of bewilderment and unreality to pervade the minds of all citizens who were not communards" (p. 162). Crucial government systems, such as, most notably, the judicial system, were not fully functioning, leading to unlawful arrests and imprisonment without trial (p. 162). Arguably the biggest mistake, according to March (1896) was the underestimation of the threat of Versailles and the fact that they did not immediately attack after the victory at Montmartre.

> Such a battle could hardly have ended in anything but victory for Parisians, but they were slow to comprehend the necessities of their unexpected success on the 18th and thus the vigilant and disciplined army at Versailles grew stronger by the day (p. 151).

On April 2nd, Versailles troops began their attacks on Paris. These battles ensued for five weeks, until May 21st 1871, when the Versailles army "broke through weak barricades on the western side of the city" (p. 255). This seven-day period is referred to as bloody week or *semaine sanglante*. During this time, desperate attempts by communards to defend the city were ultimately crushed by the Versailles forces. As March (1896) described, "the defenders of the city fought bravely and tenaciously, what they lacked mostly was outside themselves—capable officering and generalship" (p. 262). In all the chaos, federates set fire to buildings and shot 52

hostages, including, as previously mentioned, the archbishop. Although specific numbers are contested depending on interpretation of the events of the final day, the ferocity with which the Versailles troops dispatched the remaining communards cannot be overlooked and "the battle became, in its last hours, even more bloody and relentless than before" (p. 335). March argued that the Versailles troops were "pitiless in their vengeance, were in the thick of massacre" (p. 339), though he also asserted it may not have been as terrible as communist recollection makes it out to be. Further retribution was carried out by the Versailles Court-Martial, "its judgments were most relentless and scores or hundreds of persons, National Guard and others, were shot by its orders, often upon the scantiest evidence" (p. 339). On the last day, 140 communards were taken to the cemetery at Pere Lachaise and lined up in groups of ten to be shot, leading later to the construction of the famous Communards' Wall. Arrests and penalties continued even after Paris was taken by Versailles on May 28th 1871. The total number, as with many numbers in the case of these events, is left up to scrutiny; but according to a report from the National Assembly in 1875, the number of arrests totaled 36,309 (p. 347).

Considerations of Historical Objectivity

It is almost impossible to recall a full history of an event such as this. Even a history as thorough and timely as the research used for this account is not without its faults. Further research into the author of this book turned up very little, so few assumptions can be made into his background and his reasoning for recalling these events the way that he does. Though at times he was rather critical of the Commune, he also chastised Thiers and the actions of the Versailles troops, so his immediate bias cannot be determined. As he willingly points out throughout the course of this book:

This instance is only one out of very many I have met with in the course of this work,

where even a simple question of fact appears to be beyond the range of absolute denial or

affirmation. I have not troubled the reader with details of these doubtful statements

except in a few cases, trusting rather to use my own judgment and to insert that which,

after considering all the circumstances known to me, appeared most likely to be true

.(March, 1896, p. 144)

I would argue that history can be difficult to report objectively. When history is subject to

interpretation, we must consider what is really more important to determine: the actual events

that happened during the time period, or what the interpretation of these events means to people

today. I have found that my own assumptions have been an important factor in how I have

interpreted these events, even so far as determining why I decided to pursue this research at all.

To further investigate this interpretation of historical events, it is important to delve further into

the use of secondary framing and historical mythology.

Secondary Framing

Goffman's (1974) notion of frames is that of "interpretive schemata that people use to

identify, label, and render meaningful events in their lives" (as cited in Buechler, 2011, p. 146).

Framing puts boundaries around some social phenomena, allowing people to organize experience

and guide actions, both in life and social movements. What makes secondary framing so

significant, especially in the study of the symbolism of significant historical social movements,

such as the Paris Commune, is that the framing is being done by an actor that is outside the

movement itself (usually many years later) rather than by an actor within the movement as it is

happening. Therefore, I would argue that the perceived accuracy of the framing can only be

determined by the reader themselves.   In the case of the Paris Commune, two particular types of

framing are evident, even within the secondary frames: identity framing and master frames. Snow & Benford (1988) asserted that *identity framing* constructs collective identities by identifying protagonists (followers, allies and supporters), antagonists (enemies and opponents) and audiences (neutral bystanders). *Master frames* refers to the framing of grievances (injustice, oppression and exploitation) and solutions (justice liberation and fairness). I will explore the use of these frames in many different examples of narratives on the Paris Commune. For the purposes of this analysis, the focus will be on two specific examples. The first is an article, featured in *Against the Current,* a socialist journal produced by *Solidarity*, a magazine with strong socialist, anarchist and feminist voice. The second example is an article written in *History Today*, which was founded in 1951 and is an example of "popular history" or the "mixing of styles, genres and periods to achieve a fusion of intellectual excitement and readability" ("History Today," n.d., para. 4). Other examples will also be used to further emphasize the stark difference in the points of view of many different authors on the recounting of the events that occurred in Paris in 1871. When analyzing the events of the Paris Commune, the writings of Karl Marx are of obvious importance. The absence of Marx's analysis (other than second-hand citations in other sources) is acknowledged as a limitation to this research. However, I chose the following sources based on their extreme interpretive differences and also to emphasize the fact that although the Paris Commune took place over 140 years ago, it is still a relevant and symbolic social movement for many people today.

In looking at the secondary identity and master framing of the article *This is What Democracy Looks Like! Remembering the Paris Commune (Against the Current)* it is difficult not to focus on the choice of title. Mann (2011) recounted the heroic tale of the "establishment of the world's first worker's government" (p. 14). The use of the word *democracy* in the title

already sets up for the reader the master frame of justice and liberation. Throughout his recount

of the events of the Paris Commune, he continued to use master frames in referring to the

activities of the Versailles troops as "savagery" and "ferocious repression" (p. 17). Mann

utilized identity frames throughout the article, framing the protagonist Commune "as an

outstanding example of revolutionary working-class energy, determination and creativity" (p.

14). Also, though Mann acknowledged that there were "programmatic weaknesses within the

leadership of the Commune" (p. 17), far more emphasis is placed on the social measures it

enacted and the fact that, as Marx (1871) stated, it was "was essentially a working class

government, the product of the struggle of the producing classes against the appropriating class"

(as cited in Mann, 2011, p. 16). One striking secondary frame, arguably a mixture of identity

and master framing is how Mann describes the bloody week. The emphasis on the savage

slaughter of the communards builds the master frame of oppression and the antagonistic frame of

Thiers' troops. Lastly, as previously stated, the number of deaths the Commune suffered during

bloody week is of great debate, with many, sources, including this one, stating as many as 30,000

were killed in the battle and the summary executions that followed (p. 17). Another example in

which secondary framing is used to commemorate the first successful working-class revolution,

as Marx often referred to it, is that of Edwards (2007), who utilized identity framing in the

vilification of Adolphe Thiers. Edwards included quotations of Thiers referring to the

communards as "wretched" people to be dispatched. He also strongly emphasized the positive

social measures enacted by the Commune. These examples give readers a hint of the of the

emotion and dedication felt by those who identify as socialist, anarchist in regard to the events of

The Paris Commune. To them, it was a shining symbol of justice and revolution, squashed by

the ruling class. However, this contrasts sharply with the second example I analyzed, which produced a very intriguing relationship comparison

In the second example, *An Exercise in Terror? The Paris Commune (History Today),* Dallas (1989), described a far different look at the events of the Commune. Again, the title in itself is an example of master framing, with the social and political implications attached to the word *terrorism*. Continuing with master frames, Dallas referred to the events of the Commune as "cycles of violence" and the "first incident in history of modern political terrorism and hostage taking" (p. 38). The focus on the events surrounding the capture and execution of priests and the archbishop, served as an identity frame vilifying the Communards. This example takes identity framing even further by framing the audience (innocent bystanders) of the hostages. This article framed the actions of the Commune very differently as well, highlighting the chaos and disarray by stating "at least five political bodies could have claimed to be government" (p. 39). Serman (1871) echoed this sentiment, calling it "tragic anarchy that limited its work to pinhole realizations and illusory statements of principle" (as cited in Archer, 1987). Dallas made very little mention of the social measures enacted by the Commune, except to highlight the separation of church and state in reference to the hostages (p. 41). He even went so far as to frame the Communards as cowards, stating that when Thiers attacked, many of them fled to their own districts and changed into civilian clothes (p. 44). Though Dallas acknowledged the "reprisals" against the Commune, even giving a range of numbers between 20,000 and 30,000, it was only briefly in the last two paragraphs. As with the first example, the number of Communards killed during "Bloody Week" varies greatly. The Encyclopedia Britannica cited numbers as low as 18,000 ("Commune of Paris", para. 6). Tombs (2012) estimated the number to be as low as 12,000 (p. 682). These numbers are incredibly significant when it comes to recounting the tale

of the Paris Commune of 1871. It is this event in history that, as Marx stated, "has always had a special place in the hearts and minds of revolutionaries, and can inspire today's activist generation with the potential for 'power to the people'" (Mann, 2011, p. 14). Therefore, it is imperative to gain a thorough understanding of historical mythology, and the effects it can have on the symbolic impact of future movements.

Historical Mythology and Future Implications

As previously stated, Nothnagle (1989) described historical myths as "events processes or persons from an earlier time, which transmit religious or ideological belief to a specified group in an easily comprehended, emotionally moving forum" (as cited in Connelly, 2001, p. 6). When considering the significance of the Paris Commune, one must consider the effect on the socialist movement itself. Regardless of what one might think is true or false, the narratives on marxist.org are among the first results to appear when one searches for information on the Commune. The Paris Commune is very significant to those within the socialist movement as is evidenced by the fact that people still visit the cemetery at Pere Lachaise on the March 18th anniversary and the mere fact that this event is of such importance that it would still be written and debated about over 140 years after it happened. Edward S. Mason illustrated the importance of, not so much the events of the Paris Commune, but the narratives written about it and what they have meant to the people who adhere to them. "It has made its contribution to the socialist calendar of saints and has embellished socialist mythology with many a dramatic episode" (Mason, 1930, p. 296). Mason cited Engels' remarks, "the anniversary of the Paris Commune became the first general holiday for the entire proletariat" (p. 297). He argued that socialists have, in a sense, taken the Commune as their own, making it one of the most important of all battles in the war between bourgeois and proletariat (p. 297), calling to mind class consciousness

and revolutionary urgency. Mason also described the effects of bloody week on European

socialism, stating some even called it the worst day of their lives. The overall meaning of the

Commune to socialists was that of "widespread revolution that was made by workers in the

interest of the oppressed" (p. 299). These ideals are definitely evident in socialist writings on the

Commune, including the example from *Against the Current* previously mentioned. It is also

worth mentioning, however, that some manner of the same strategies may be utilized by those

articles portraying the Commune negatively. Mann (2011) described "reaction and historical

memory" after the fall of the commune:

> The forces of reaction in France worked hard to portray the communards as a dangerous,
>
> depraved cosmopolitan threat to civilization itself, a group that was perhaps not quite
>
> human, an image designed to suggest that its brutal repression was just, even necessary
>
> (p. 17).

The implications of the construction of historical mythologies and their impacts on certain

groups are two-fold: increased motivational persuasive rhetoric and increased distrust for those

with opposing viewpoints. As is evident in the examples which hold the Commune in high

regard, the call for people to remember the glory and sacrifice of the Paris Commune could be

used with the right rhetorical tactics as a call to action. As I mentioned earlier, it is impossible to

remove my own assumptions about the event and how they have affected the research that I am

conducting. As I am very interested in the power of social movement rhetoric, it was difficult to

try and write without including my own voice, which identifies with the working-class

Communards. I believe that this illustrates the power of historical social movements on current

social action research. The fact that the majority of information on this event is second-hand (or

even third or fourth hand at this point) really only strengthens the persuasive opportunities for

this message, as people will feel less inclined to feel dissonance about a message if it really can't be *known* what the truth actually entails. The second implication is increased distrust in opposition. As can be seen in the above quotation, those in support of the events of the Paris Commune see the truth as being twisted and warped to justify the atrocities that went on at the hands of the Versailles troops; a convenient cover-up by those ruling forces that crushed the Commune in the first place. This exemplifies significant distrust of the authority figures in power at the time of these event, and could arguably the same distrust could be displaced upon those authors whose viewpoints differ from their own.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the truth of what happened in Paris between March 18th and May 28th, 1871 cannot be fully comprehended unless one was there to witness it themselves, and considering the average human lifespan is not generally 140 years, secondary framing and historical mythologies will continue to permeate this event and those who believe strongly in it. A historical event can be "revolutionary justice" for some, and "tragic anarchy" for others, depending on whose research one is looking at. Comparing the interpretive examples on either side showed drastic differences in language, description and presentation of "facts". The historical mythology that frames the Paris Commune for socialists is that of working-class solidarity and, as previously mentioned, could be a feasible call to action. However, whether or not this event is used as a catalyst for social action within these groups is a subject for further research within the areas of group communication and protest rhetoric. The significance of this examination is in the assertion that history, especially historically significant events that are centuries old, are fluid and should be subject to interpretation. Therefore, context and the ideological stance of an author must always be considered when researching historical "facts" in our academic world.

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