

'From the Medieval Commune'

Parole's D'un Revolte (1885)

Piotr Kropotkin

The Commune

When we say that the social revolution must be achieved by the liberation of the Communes, and that it is the Communes, absolutely independent, liberated from the tutelage of the State, that alone can give us the necessary setting for a revolution and the means of accomplishing it, we are reproached with wanting to recall to life a form of society that has already outlived its time. "But the Commune," they say, "belongs to another age! In setting out to destroy the State and put free communes in its place, you are looking to the past; you want to lead us back into the heart of the middle ages, to reignite the old communal wars, and destroy the national unities that have been so painfully achieved in the course of history. Very well, let us consider this criticism.

First, we must understand that comparisons with the past have only a relative value. If, in fact, the Commune as we envisage it were really a mere return towards the Commune of the Middle Ages, must we not recognize that the Commune today cannot possibly clothe itself again in the forms it assumed seven centuries ago? And is it not evident that if it were established in our days, in our century of railways and telegraphs, of cosmopolitan science and research into pure truth, the Commune would have an organization so different from that which it had in the twelfth century that we would be in the presence of an absolutely new fact, emerging in new conditions and leading inevitably to absolutely different consequences.

Besides, our adversaries, the defenders of the State, under its various forms, should remember that we can raise against them, objections as good as theirs. We in our turn can say to them and with much more reason, that it is they who have their eyes turned towards the past, since the State is a form just as old as the Commune. Only there is this difference; while the State in history represents the negation of all freedom, the triumph of the absolute and the arbitrary, the ruin of its subjects, torture and the scaffold, it is precisely in the liberties of the Commune and in the uprisings of peoples and Communes against the State that we rediscover the most beautiful pages of history. Certainly, in transporting ourselves into the past, it is not towards Louis XI, a Louis XV, a Catherine 11 that we turn our attention; it is rather towards the communes or republics of Amalfi and Florence, those of Toulouse and Laon, of Liege and Courtray, of Augsburg and Nuremberg, of Pskov and Novgorod.

It is not a matter on which we should be satisfied with mere words and sophistries; it is important to study and analyse closely, and not to imitate M. de Laveleye and his zealous students who confine themselves to telling us, "But the Commune belongs to the middle ages! In consequence it must be condemned!" "The State is a whole past of crime," we answer, "and therefore it is condemned with much more justification."

Between the Commune of the middle ages and that which might be established today, and probably will be established soon, there will be plenty of essential differences: a veritable abyss opened up by the six or seven centuries of human development and harsh experience. Let us examine the principal differences.

What was the purpose of that "conjunction" or "communion" made by the burgesses in such and such a city? It was a very modest one: to liberate themselves from the lords. The inhabitants, merchants and artisans, came together and swore not to allow "anyone whatever to do harm to one among them or to treat him from this time onward as a serf"; it was against the long-established masters that the Commune rose in arms. "Commune," said an author of the 12th century, quoted by Augustin Thierry, "is a new and detestable word, and this is how it must be understood: taxable people shall pay once only a year the rent they owe their lords. If they commit an offence, it shall be discharged by a legally fixed penalty; and the peasants shall be entirely exempt from the levies of money it has been customary to impose on them."

Thus it was actually against the lords that the Commune rose up in the middle ages. It is from the State that the Commune of today is seeking to liberate itself. This is an essential difference, for we must remember that it was actually the State, represented by the king who, later on, realizing that the Communes wished to make themselves independent of the lords, sent its armies "to punish," as the Chronicle says, "the presumption of these ne'er-dowells, who, in the name of the Commune, make a show of rebelling against the crown."

The Commune of tomorrow will know that it cannot admit any higher authority; above it there can only be the interests of the Federation, freely accepted by itself as well as the other communes. It will know that there can be no middle way: either the Commune will be absolutely free to adopt all the institutions it wishes and to make all the reforms and revolutions it finds necessary, or it will remain what it has been up to today, a mere branch of the State, restricted in all its movements, always on the point of entering into conflict with the State and sure of succumbing in the struggle that will follow. The Commune will know that it must break the State and replace it by the Federation, and it will act in that way. More than that, it will have the means to do so. Today it is not only small towns that raise the banner of communal insurrection, it is Paris, Lyon, Marseille, Cartagena, and soon all the great cities will unfurl the same flag. This will mean an essential difference from the Commune of the past.

In freeing itself from the lords, did the Commune of the middle ages free itself also from those rich merchants who, by the sale of merchandise and capital goods, had gained private wealth in the heart of the city? Not at all! Having demolished the towers of the overlord, the inhabitant of the town very soon saw within the Commune itself the citadels of the rich merchants who sought to subdue him being built, and the internal history of the Communes in the middle ages was that of bitter struggle between the rich and the poor, a struggle that ended inevitably with the king's intervention. As a new aristocracy took shape in the very heart of the Commune the people, having fallen into the same kind of servitude to the lord within the city as it had hitherto suffered to the lord outside, understood that it had nothing to defend in the Commune; its members deserted the walls they had built to gain their liberty and which the regime of individualism had turned into the ramparts of a new servitude. Having nothing to lose, the people let the rich merchants defend themselves, and these relations were usually limited to a treaty for the defence of urban rights against the lords, or perhaps a pact of solidarity for the mutual protection of the citizens of the communes on their distant journeys. And when real leagues were formed among the towns, as in Lombardy, Spain and Belgium, these leagues were too lacking in homogeneity and too fragile because of the diversity of privileges, and soon broke up into isolated groups or succumbed under the attacks of the neighbouring states.

How different from the groups that might come into existence today! A small commune could not survive a week without being forced by circumstances to establish stable relations with industrial, commercial and artistic centres, and these centres, in their turn, would feel the need to open their doors wide to the inhabitants of nearby villages, of the surrounding communes, and of the more distant cities.

If one of these cities were to proclaim the Commune tomorrow, were to abolish within itself all individual property, were to introduce complete communism, i.e. the collective enjoyment of social capital, of the tools of work and the products of that work, in a mere few days- provided it were not surrounded by hostile armies- the convoys of carts would arrive at the markets. The traders would send to the city from distant ports their cargoes of raw materials. The products of the city's industries, having satisfied the needs of the population, would go to seek buyers in the four corners of the earth. Visitors would arrive in crowds, peasants, citizens of nearby towns, and foreigners, and they would depart to tell in their own homes of the marvellous life of the free city where everyone worked, where nobody was any longer poor or oppressed, where all enjoyed the fruits of their labour, without anyone seizing a lion's share. There would be no fear of isolation; if the communists in the United States had

reason to complain in their communal colonies, it was not because of isolation, but rather because of the intrusion of the surrounding bourgeois world in their communal affairs.

The fact is that today commerce and exchange, while overflowing the bounds of national frontiers, have also destroyed the walls of the ancient cities. They have established a cohesion that did not exist in the middle ages. All the inhabited places of western Europe are so intimately linked with each other that isolation has become impossible for any of them; there is not a village, however highly perched it may be on its mountain ridge, that has not an industrial and commercial centre towards which it gravitates, and with which it cannot break its links.

The development of the great industrial centres has done even more. Even today, of course, parochialism can create many jealousies between neighbouring communes, delaying their alliance and even inflaming fratricidal struggles. But even if such jealousies may at first hinder the direct federation of two communes, their federation can in fact be established by the mediation of the great centres. Today, two small neighbouring municipalities may have nothing that really links them directly; the scantiness of the relations they maintain serves rather to create conflicts than to link them in the bonds of solidarity. But the two of them have already a common centre with which they are in constant communication and without which they could not survive; and whatever may be their local jealousies they will see themselves obliged to come together through the mediation of the large town where they get their provisions and to which they take their products; each of them will have to become part of the same federation so as to maintain their relations with the urban focus and group themselves around it. Yet this centre will not be able to establish an intrusive preponderance of its own over the communes in its environment. Thanks to the infinite variety of the needs of industry and commerce, all inhabited places have already several centres which they are attached, and as their needs develop, they will enter into relations with further places that can satisfy new needs. Our needs are in fact so various, and they emerge with such rapidity, that soon a single federation will not be sufficient to satisfy them all. The Commune will then feel the need to contract other alliances, to enter into other federations. Belonging to one group for the acquisition of food supplies, it will have to join a second group to obtain other goods, such as metals, and then a third and a fourth group for textiles and works of art. Take up an economic atlas of any country, and you will see that economic frontiers do not exist: the zones of production and exchange of various products interpenetrate each other, tangle with each other, impose themselves on each other. In the same way the federations of Communes, if they were to follow their free development, would very soon start to mingle and intersect, and in this way form a network that would be compact, "one and indivisible," in quite a different way from these statist groupings whose parts are no more than juxtaposed, like the rods bundled around the lictor's axe.

Thus, let us repeat, those who come and say to us that the Communes, once they are freed of the tutelage of the State, will clash together and destroy each other in internecine wars, forget one thing: the intimate pattern of linking that exists already between various localities, thanks to the centres of industrial and commercial gravitation, thanks to the multitude of these centres, thanks to their incessant intercourse. They do not take into account what the middle ages actually were, with their closed cities and their caravans trailing slowly over difficult roads under the eyes of the robber barons; they forget those currents of men, of merchandise, of telegrams, of ideas and feelings, that now circulate among our cities like the waters of rivers that never dry up; they have no real idea of the difference between the two epochs they seek to compare.

Besides, is not history there to prove to us that the instinct for federation has already become one of the most pressing needs of humanity? It will be enough one day if the State becomes disorganized for one reason or another, if the machine of oppression fails in its operations, for the free alliances to appear of their own accord. Let us remember the spontaneous federations of the armed bourgeoisie during the Great Revolution. Let us remember the federations that surged up spontaneously in Spain and saved the independence of the country when the State was shaken to its foundations by the conquering armies of Napoleon. As soon as the State is no longer in a position to impose a forced union, union rises up of its own accord,

according to natural needs. Overthrow the State, and the federal society will surge out of its ruins, truly one, truly indivisible, but free and growing in solidarity because of its freedom.

But there is another thing to be considered. For the burgesses of the middle ages the Commune was an isolated State, clearly separated from others by its frontiers. For us, "Commune" no longer means a territorial agglomeration; it is rather a generic name, a synonym for the grouping of equals which knows neither frontiers nor walls. The social Commune will soon cease to be a clearly defined entity. Each group in the Commune will necessarily be drawn towards similar groups in other communes; they will come together and the links that federate them will be as solid as those that attach them to their fellow citizens, and in this way there will emerge a Commune of interests whose members are scattered in a thousand towns and villages. Each individual will find the full satisfaction of his needs only by grouping with other individuals who have the same tastes but inhabit a hundred other communes.

Today already free societies are beginning to open up an immense field of human activity. It is no longer merely to satisfy scientific, literary or artistic interests that humanity constitutes its societies. It is no longer merely to pursue the class struggle that men enter into leagues.

One would have difficulty nowadays finding one of the multiple and varied manifestations of human activity that is not already represented by freely constituted societies, and their number keeps on growing unceasingly, each day invading new fields of action, even among those that were once considered the preserve of the State. Literature, arts, sciences, education, commerce, industries, transport, amusements, public health, museums, far off enterprises, polar expeditions, even territorial defence against aggressors, care for the wounded, and the very courts of law: everywhere we see personal initiative emerging and assuming the form of free societies. This is the tendency, the distinctive trait of the second half of the 19th century.

Taking free flight, and finding an immense new field of application, that tendency will serve as the basis for the society of the future. It is by free groupings that the social Commune will be organized, and these groupings will overthrow walls and frontiers. There will be millions of communes, no longer territorial, but extending their hands across rivers, mountain chains and oceans, uniting individuals and peoples in the four corners of the earth into the same single family of equals. ▲