

Introduction by Friedrich Engels to The Civil War in France

written by Struggle - La Lucha

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This essay by Friedrich Engels is dated March 18, 1891, the 20th anniversary of the Paris Commune. It was published as an introduction to a new edition of The Civil War in France, a contemporary account and analysis of the Paris Commune, written by Karl Marx and delivered by him in multiple talks to the International Workingmen's Association from May 1870 to June 1871. Engels concludes: "Do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat."

On the 20th Anniversary of the Paris Commune

I did not anticipate that I would be asked to prepare a new edition of the Address of the General Council of the International on "[The Civil War in France](#)," and to write an introduction to it. Therefore I can only touch briefly here on the most important points. ...

On May 28, the last fighters of the Commune succumbed to superior forces on the slopes of Belleville; and only two days later, on May 30, Marx read to the General Council the work in which the historical significance of the Paris Commune is delineated in short powerful strokes, but with such clearness, and above all such truth, as has never again been attained on all the mass of literature which has been written on this subject.

If today, we look back at the activity and historical significance of the Paris Commune of 1871, we shall find it necessary to make a few additions to the account given in ["The Civil War in France."](#)

The members of the Commune were divided into a majority of the [Blanquists](#), who had also been predominant in the Central Committee of the National Guard; and a minority, members of the International Working Men's Association, chiefly consisting of adherents of the Proudhon school of socialism. The great majority of the Blanquists at that time were socialist only by revolutionary and proletarian instinct; only a few had attained greater clarity on the essential principles, through Vaillant, who was familiar with German scientific socialism. It is therefore comprehensible that in the economic sphere much was left undone which, according to our view today, the Commune ought to have done. The hardest thing to understand is certainly the holy awe with which they remained standing respectfully outside the gates of the Bank of France. This was also a serious political mistake. The bank in the hands of the Commune - this would have been worth more than 10,000 hostages. It would have meant the pressure of the whole of the French bourgeoisie on the Versailles government in favor of peace with the Commune, but what is still more wonderful is the correctness of so much that was actually done by the Commune, composed as it was of Blanquists and Proudhonists. Naturally, the Proudhonists were chiefly responsible for the economic decrees of the Commune, both for their praiseworthy and their unpraiseworthy aspects; as the Blanquists were for its political actions and omissions. And in both cases the irony of history willed - as is usual when doctrinaires come to the helm - that both did the opposite of what the doctrines of their school proscribed.

Proudhon, the Socialist of the small peasant and master-craftsman, regarded association with positive hatred. He said of it that there was more bad than good in it; that it was by nature sterile, even harmful, because it was a fetter on the freedom of the workers; that it was a pure dogma, unproductive and burdensome, in conflict

as much with the freedom of the workers as with economy of labor; that its disadvantages multiplied more swiftly than its advantages; that, as compared with it, competition, division of labor and private property were economic forces. Only for the exceptional cases – as Proudhon called them – of large-scale industry and large industrial units, such as railways, was there any place for the association of workers. (*Cf. Idee Generale de la Revolution, 3 etude.*)

By 1871, even in Paris, the centre of handicrafts, large-scale industry had already so much ceased to be an exceptional case that by far the most important decree of the Commune instituted an organization of large-scale industry and even of manufacture which was not based only on the association of workers in each factory, but also aimed at combining all these associations in one great union; in short an organization which, as Marx quite rightly says in “The Civil War,” must necessarily have led in the end to communism, that is to say, the direct antithesis of the Proudhon doctrine. And, therefore, the Commune was also the grave of the Proudhon school of socialism. Today this school has vanished from French working class circles; among them now, among the [Possibilists](#) no less than among the “Marxists,” Marx’s theory rules unchallenged. Only among the “radical” bourgeoisie are there still Proudhonists.

The Blanquists fared no better. Brought up in the school of conspiracy, and held together by the strict discipline which went with it, they started out from the viewpoint that a relatively small number of resolute, well-organized men would be able, at a given favorable moment, not only seize the helm of state, but also by energetic and relentless action, to keep power until they succeeded in drawing the mass of the people into the revolution and ranging them round the small band of leaders. this conception involved, above all, the strictest dictatorship and centralization of all power in the hands of the new revolutionary government. And what did the Commune, with its majority of these same Blanquists, actually do? In all its proclamations to the French in the provinces, it appealed to them to form a free

federation of all French Communes

with Paris, a national organization, which for the first time was really to be created by the nation itself. It was precisely the oppressing power of the former centralized government, army, political police and bureaucracy, which Napoleon had created in 1798 and since then had been taken over by every new government as a welcome instrument and used against its opponents, it was precisely this power which was to fall everywhere, just as it had already fallen in Paris.

From the outset the Commune was compelled to recognize that the working class, once come to power, could not manage with the old state machine; that in order not to lose again its only just conquered supremacy, this working class must, on the one hand, do away with all the old repressive machinery previously used against it itself, and, on the other, safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall at any moment. What had been the characteristic attribute of the former state? Society had created its own organs to look after its common interests,

originally through simple division of labor. But these organs, at whose head was the state power, had in the course of time, in pursuance of their own special interests, transformed themselves from the servants of society into the masters of society, as can be seen, for example, not only in the hereditary monarchy, but equally also in the democratic republic. Nowhere do "politicians" form a more separate, powerful section of the nation than in North America. There, each of the two great parties which alternately succeed each other in power is itself in turn controlled by people who make a business of politics, who speculate on

seats in the legislative assemblies of the Union as well as of the separate states, or who make a living by carrying on agitation for their party and on its victory are rewarded with positions.

It is well known that the Americans have been striving for 30 years to shake off this yoke, which has become intolerable, and that in spite of all they can do they

continue to sink ever deeper in this swamp of corruption. It is precisely in America that we see best how there takes place this process of the state power making itself independent in relation to society, whose mere instrument it was originally intended to be. Here there exists no dynasty, no nobility, no standing army, beyond the few men keeping watch on the Indians, no bureaucracy with permanent posts or the right to pensions. and nevertheless we find here two great gangs of political speculators, who alternately take possession of the state power and exploit it by the most corrupt means and for the most corrupt ends - and the nation is powerless against these two great cartels of politicians, who are ostensibly its servants, but in reality exploit and plunder it.

Against this transformation of the state and the organs of the state from servants of society into masters of society - an inevitable transformation in all previous states - the Commune made use of two infallible expedients. In this first place, it filled all posts - administrative, judicial, and educational - by election on the basis of universal suffrage of all concerned, with the right of the same electors to recall their delegate at any time. And in the second place, all officials, high or low, were paid only the wages received by other workers. The highest salary paid by the Commune to anyone was 6,000 francs. In this way an effective barrier to place-hunting and careerism was set up, even apart from the binding mandates to delegates to representative bodies which were also added in profusion.

This shattering of the former state power and its replacement by a new and really democratic state is described in detail in the third section of "The Civil War." But it was necessary to dwell briefly here once more on some of its features, because in Germany particularly the superstitious belief in the state has been carried over from philosophy into the general consciousness of the bourgeoisie and even to many workers. According to the philosophical notion, "the state is the realization of the idea" or the Kingdom of God on earth, translated into philosophical terms, the sphere in which eternal truth and justice is or should be realized. And from this

follows a superstitious reverence for the state and everything connected with it, which takes roots the more readily as people from their childhood are accustomed to imagine that the

affairs and interests common to the whole of society could not be looked after otherwise than as they have been looked after in the past, that is, through the state and its well-paid officials. And people think they have taken quite an extraordinary bold step forward when they have rid themselves of belief in hereditary monarchy and swear by the democratic republic. In reality, however, the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than in the monarchy; and at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, whose worst sides the proletariat, just like the Commune, cannot avoid having to lop off at the earliest possible moment, until such time as a new generation, reared in new and free social conditions, will be able to throw the entire lumber of the state on the scrap-heap.

Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.

Frederick Engels

London, on the 20th anniversary of the Paris Commune, March 18, 1891.

Source: [Marx/Engels Internet Archive](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1891/03/18910318.htm)