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## A Social History of the Ideas of the Paris Commune

Review of the book: Dupeyron, Jean-François. 2021. *Commun-Commune: penser la Commune de Paris (1871)*. Collection „Philosophie en cours”. Paris: Éditions Kimé.

Review of the book *Commun-Commune: penser la Commune de Paris (1871)*, published on the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune. The author of the publication aims to reconstruct the entire spectrum of political ideas circulating in “Free Paris” in the spring of 1871. The analysis is carried out from the perspective of the political practices and participants of events. The content of the studied ideas is considered only through the methods of their use and the consequences which influenced history. In the review this is interpreted as a manifestation of thinking close to the theoretical concept of the “social history of ideas”. Another important aspect of the reviewed book is the reflections on the politics of memory and legends, i.e. a mythologized approach to the past understood as a source of cognitive errors that hinder the proper understanding of events.

**Keywords:** Commune of Paris; social history of ideas; politics of memory; history of political thought

Spring 2021 marked the 150th anniversary of the Paris Commune, a legendary event not only for the French left. The celebrations were limited, due to the sanitary restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic, so the most visible places of remembrance turned out to be bookshop windows filled with anniversary publications. In addition to scholarly studies, there were also a number of popular science books and works of fiction, as well as comic books and music recordings.

An interesting feature of recent publications is the visible influence of the concept of the social history of political ideas<sup>1</sup>. This relatively new French current can be compared to the growing popularity of people's history in Poland in recent years. However, it focuses on a very specific aspect of the activity of 'the people', i.e. on finding in them the sources and the basic environment for the circulation of political ideas. This is very applicable to the studies on early socialist groups, which were mostly made up of workers rather than intellectuals. The great availability of sources (in France, numerous workers' newspapers were already appearing in the 1830s (Bouchet et al. 2015)) makes it possible to study the political activity of the working classes and their involvement in the formation of critical social ideas. Among the anniversary publications, alongside anthologies of texts by great writers commenting on the events of the Commune (Charentenay and Brahamcha-Marin 2021), there are also collected accounts and micro-histories of workers' participation in the events, sometimes even in fictional form (Bantigny 2021).

Although Jean-François Dupeyron does not make explicit theoretical declarations, in practice his book comes close to some of the assumptions that underpin the social history of political ideas. He aims to reconstruct the ideological panorama of a single historical event. His protagonists are not books or systematic theorists, but participants in the public life of the Commune, representatives of the Parisian popular strata. The object of the author's interest is how ideas acted during a particular moment in history, and how they indirectly determined its failure. It is thus a writing of the social history of ideas in line with the declarations of its theorists — 'from below', instead of 'from above', through their use among the popular strata for whom they were dedicated. According to this approach, it was not, for example, Marx who roused the people of Paris to an armed uprising with his views. It was rather quite the opposite — the Communards provided the theoretician with an

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1 The main theorists of this current are: Chloe Gaboriaux, Arnault Skornicki (Gaboriaux and Skornicki 2017), Thibaut Rioufreyt (Rioufreyt 2019) and the research group HiSoPo (Histoire sociale des idées politiques).

image of what communism might look like in practice. Marx himself admits this in his *On the Civil War in France*.

Jean-François Dupeyron is a French historian attached to the University of Bordeaux. He works on political philosophy and education, and he wrote a book on school reform during the Paris Commune (Dupeyron 2020). The title of his book, *Commun-Commune: penser la Commune de Paris (1871)*, might be a play on words that suggests rethinking the Paris Commune in the category of common goods. Does the word “penser” — thinking — also mean political thought, the history of ideas? The main aim of this book is to seek the causes of events in the political views guiding their actors. The author aims to unravel the reasons for the failure of the Commune. They lay in the heterogeneity of views, in contradictory visions of action, and in the inability to mount an effective struggle. He does not accuse the Communards of ineptitude in political cooperation or military action. He sees their weakness in their consistent adherence to ideological stances that could not withstand competition from the brutal aggression of the Versailles government. The modest ambition of this book, the author declares, is to contribute to a study of the political philosophy and political practices that circulated in ‘Free Paris’ in the spring of 1871. A second point of reference is the contemporary memory of the Commune and the exploration of the political use of its legacy.

The book is divided into two parts. The first deals with the politics of memory and it is a dissection of the three ‘legends’ of the Commune: the black, the red, and the ‘tricolour’ — or republican. It thus touches on one of the fundamental problems of all historical anniversaries, that of getting lost in myths. The second discusses the political practices and ideas of the Commune.

The starting point is a consideration of the problem of memory, which constitutes a pretext, a kind of justification, for taking up the subject of the Commune today. It allows us to look for traces of the Communist legacy in contemporary political practices and to find new inspirations for subversive collective action in the past. The three legends, which take up almost half of the book to dissect, are the three ways in which the memory of the Paris Commune operates today. Jean-François Dupeyron shows their limitations and the cognitive errors that impinge on contemporary interpretations of the events of 150 years ago, as well as on the shape of contemporary political disputes.

The most universal of these errors is the ‘loupe effect’, the simultaneous magnification and tightening of vision. This is expressed by focusing memory on piecemeal events that obscure the broader picture of

the era. In the case of the Commune, the most glaring element that attracts attention is the violence. Dupeyron points out that the focus on it also affects left-wing supporters of the Commune, who fall into martyrology. They forget all the positive dimensions of the popular government of Paris, its reforms — such as the introduction of the secular school — as well as the new forms of political life. For Karl Marx, this was the most important heritage of the experiment of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, not the glorious bloody defeat.

The black legend of the Commune exaggerates the scale of the violence on the Communards’ side. The book shows the mechanisms that are created to deprive the opponent of a voice and thus of any political significance. It is enough to point to a few ‘crimes’ — such as the killing of generals on the day of the uprising, and the execution of hostages during the ‘bloody week’. This criminalizes, and thus invalidates, all the political dimensions of the Commune. The refusal to recognize the opponents allows their political subjectivity to be ignored. In this light, the Communards are considered as rebels who use barbaric methods and who thus must be stopped and destroyed rather than negotiated with. The author shows that this mechanism makes it possible to simultaneously justify all the violence of the government troops. The brutal capture of the city and the crimes of the ‘bloody week’ appear, in the light of such arguments, to be the necessary means needed to restore peace. Social order, interpreted as the domination of the bourgeoisie, was treated as the supreme and non-negotiable good.

The author sees the reasons for this obsessive hatred in the central conception of the political philosophy of the Communards. It was a concept of popular sovereignty, totally rejecting the principles of the liberal order. As a political experiment, it was a mortal threat to the French bourgeoisie. This notion involved a radical concretization of democracy, no longer a surrender of political power to the people but an independent seizure by the people. It was the workers who took up most of the offices of the Commune, and Paris was ruled directly by its population not only at the political and municipal level but also in the workshops and factories, which posed an existential threat to the bourgeoisie as a class. Dupeyron argues that, for the privileged classes, this concretization of democracy was an assault on society and a ‘forbidden political’, unacceptable for inclusion in political discussion.

Some aspects of the Red Legend could be seen during the spring of 2021 in the windows of Parisian bookshops, or even more on the posters hanging around the city. These particularly emphasized the martyrdom dimension, showing scenes of heroic revolutionary struggle on the bar-

ricades. *Commun-Commune*, however, emphasizes above all the consequences of this legend for later socialist and revolutionary reflection and the cognitive dissonances characteristic of the leftist history of ideas. The Paris Commune is such a rich treasury of experiences, practices and ideas that everyone, as Dupeyron states, draws from it whatever they like. Sometimes much later ideas and practices were projected into the past, because political movements developing after 1871 traced their ideological roots back to the legend of the Commune. However, if we look at the facts, we find that the ideas of utopian socialism and conspiratorial revolutionism, characteristic for the first half of the nineteenth century, were evidently present. Among other things, the author analyses the problem of the concept of the proletariat. The character of the Communards cannot be clearly defined by this class. Dupeyron points out that even Marx referred to them simply as the French working class. His analyses can be summarized by the conclusion that the proletariat was a product rather than a decisive cause of the outbreak of the Commune. The historian notes:

We saw that the initial victory of the Commune was not the product of a so-called proletarian insurrection, as the red legend sometimes tells us, but depended on the powerful emergence of a political force combining various sectors of the population and possessing two essential weapons: a momentarily dominant military force and a network of republican and socialist circles well established in a significant part of Paris.

The data published in the book testify against the thesis of the popular spontaneity and proletarian character of the Paris uprising. They show that the Assembly of the Commune was mainly composed of skilled workers and artisans of various ideological affiliations, organized in associations that had existed long before March 1871.

At the core of the republican legend is the dispute over legality and democracy. The republican critique of the Commune is the result of contradictions in the idea of the republic that had been growing during the 19th century. The differences between the bourgeois and the social republic, which appeared for the first time in 1848, became evident in 1870. Dupeyron distinguishes three competing conceptions of the republic of the spring of 1871: the Jacobin republic, the social republic and the republic of 'order'. The latter was pursued by the National Assembly in Versailles. It was composed, moreover, largely of monarchists unable to agree on a dynasty — Bourbon or Orleans, which resulted in the creation of a 'republic without republicans'. The party of order was

content with a formal change of power — from monarchical to republican, without linking it to any social reorganisation. It could be said that it succeeded in finally dominating contemporary reflection on the republic and democracy, for which the social question is no necessary complement. Starting from the conviction of the legitimacy of the bourgeois republic with an elected popular national assembly and the government of Thiers at its head, the republican opportunists or formalists, as their socialist critics called them, treated the Commune as an unjustified rebellion against the republic. Dupeyron recalls on several occasions that the participants in the Commune themselves were not free from doubts about the legitimacy of their enterprise and the extent of the prerogatives to which they could claim. This contributed to the paralysis of decision-making, especially on the question of offensive military action.

The differences between these concepts result from different understandings of the substance of the republic. The author writes that for the ‘reds’ the republic is a form of social life: “You do not live under the rule of the Republic, but in the Republic”. In their opinion, true republican life is characterised by the real absence of all forms of domination in individual life (concrete freedom), real equality, and the dignity of participating in the common policies.

Although Jean-François Dupeyron considers all three legends equally, which could create the appearance of objectivity, he makes no secret of which side he sympathises with. While he refutes the black and the republican as pointless — demonstrating, for example, the incompleteness of the bourgeois conception of the republic and the truly republican character of the Commune. In the case of the red legend, he is skeptical only of the martyrdom approach and the anachronisms that detach the Commune from its true ideological roots and class structure. He tries to highlight the positive achievements: in the sphere of institutions, ideas and political practices, and appreciates the value of memory and making political use of it today. That is why *Commun-Commune* can be called an engaged book that looks at the Commune as an ideological laboratory, examining how political ideas worked in practice.

The second part of the book abandons the question of the politics of memory and takes up the fundamental theme of the history of ideas. However, it is shown from an unusual position. It tells the story of political practices and their actors, when the ideas appear as tools used by the militants of the Paris Commune. This approach allows us to rethink the methodology of the history of ideas and intellectual history. In the history of political practices, we observe the relative independence

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of ideas and their users. Ideas exceed the range their creators' causality. The thinker — creator of political, social, or economic ideas, after writing key works and creating a circle of disciples around him, retires into the shadows, but his ideas continue to evolve. This interpretative stance is admittedly atypical of the classical history of ideas, where the study of the author's intentions (Skinner) or changes in the meaning of key concepts (Koselleck) is advocated first and foremost. But it is useful in the study of political practices and the efficacy or the causality of ideas. The ruling ideas of a rebellious Paris were mostly 'orphaned'. The Proudhonists had lost Pierre-Joseph Proudhon a few years earlier, while Auguste Blanqui, the head of Blanquism, was currently in prison, and was thus unable to lead his partisans. On the other hand, there were very few Marxists in the Commune, and Marx himself, although he followed events, did not seek to direct them behind the scenes. In contrast, the International Workingmen's Association was acting more like a trade union. In Paris, they lacked a unified leadership and clear ideological programme. Dupeyron devotes a separate chapter to each group, but the emphasis is on action in practice, rather than dwelling on the thought of systematic theorists.

The longevity and susceptibility to transformation over time, even after the death of the founder, can even be considered a characteristic of the groups of the French Left in the nineteenth century. Dupeyron mentions Saint-Simonians and the phalansterian movement as the probable roots of the pacifism of certain Communards. These movements are examples of orphan ideas, developed after the death of their creators — Saint-Simon and Fourier, which had a great influence on the development of early socialism. Thanks to the author's focus not on the creators of ideas but on their users, he shows a very interesting tension between theory and practice, the verification of thoughts and the drawing of real consequences from them.

After describing innovative political practices, the author of *Commun-Commune* focuses on the actors of events and their ideological affiliations. He shows a mosaic of parties, ideological groups and associations: Proudhonists, Blanquists, neo-Jacobins, Freemasons, and members of the Workmen's International. Most interesting are the examples of selected activists and juxtapositions, which show that these groups were not homogeneous and closed. This was particularly characteristic of the International. Members of the other groups belonged in parallel to them. The tables presenting the results of the municipal elections show not only the ideological spectrum of the activists: the low voter turnout testifies to the fragile political legitimacy of those who were

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elected. Thus it confirmed their legitimate fears of overly bold and undemocratic revolutionary moves.

The ideological heterogeneity of the main actors of the Commune caused internal conflicts and, above all, different concepts of action. Dupeyron points here to one of the most important causes of the fall of the Commune. The defeat of the armed confrontation with Versailles' troops was not only due to military weakness. The disparity of forces turned in favour of Thiers' government only in early April. Reflexively, then, one asks: why did the Communards, after the outbreak of the uprising, allow members of the government and the National Assembly to leave Paris peacefully and then delay striking Versailles?

Dupeyron argues that such an action would have been incompatible with the deeply republican views of most members of the Commune. They were paralysed by discussions of legalism and strenuous attempts to gain legitimacy for their power. The belief in 'popular sovereignty' told the Commune's leaders to focus on municipal elections, that is, on confirming that the Commune was the authentic representation of the people of Paris. This did not entail the right to impose their regime by force on the whole of France. The revolt of Paris was intended to act as an example for other cities in France to introduce a sovereign popular republic. The author points out that the name of this regime was used in a way that was atypical of French political culture. Traditionally the republic is a universal idea in France, based on centralized power, directed from Paris. Indeed, for the Communards the republic should be federal, based above all on respect for regional self-government and local communes. In fact, they usually referred to themselves as 'fédérés' — the Federalists, while 'the Communards' was the name introduced later on — by their opponents.

Using this key example, the author shows how the republican ideas of its representatives were an important factor in the history of the Paris Commune. If it had nevertheless been decided to spread the revolution across the country, unleashing chaos (including seizing the Bank of France), then the uprising would presumably still have been crushed with the help of the Prussian army. However, it would not have been the same Commune, which the author values not for its military successes but for its examples of new political practices.

Revolutionary social practices are the themes the author focuses on in this part of the book. He shows where, at the level of which institutions, red republicanism differed from 'formal' republicanism. Concrete democracy reached as far as the workplaces and was maximally egalitarian — equating the salaries of government officials with skilled workers.



To explain the intention of the protagonists of the Commune, Dupeyron cites an interpretation in which Martin Breaugh (Breaugh 2007) compares popular uprisings with the plebeian uprising in Rome in 494 BC. At that time, the plebeians refused to participate in an unjust republic denying them political rights and left the city. Their rebellion was a way of creating equal positions from which to negotiate with the dominants. The hill of the Aventine where they settled is compared to the Parisian hill of Montmartre, where the Paris uprising began, caused by a feeling of deprivation of dignity, and not only at the level of economic inequality. The cannons of the National Guard, bought with popular contributions during the Prussian siege, a symbol of popular self-defence and sovereignty, were collected on the hill. An attempt to take them away became the incident that started the uprising. Like the Roman plebeians with the Senate, the Parisian workers also wanted to negotiate with the National Assembly, on an equal level, they demanded that their vote be recognized as valid. They repeatedly tried to start negotiations with the government, at least to discuss the exchange of hostages. Using this example, Jean-François Dupeyron tries to prove that the Commune council fought first and foremost for recognition and for the right to negotiate, rather than for the destruction of the government at Versailles through armed action.

Dupeyron is not a historian focused on military issues. His search for the causes of defeat is intended to show the importance of ideological motivations and their influence on historical events. Their consequence was the social policy of the Commune, sometimes incoherent but often innovative. For the author, this and the radically revolutionary practices constitute the most interesting political legacy of the Commune, which can still be relevant today. This is part of the 'activism' of a book that openly avoids neutrality. It is published, after all, in a year which, by virtue of its round anniversary, cannot be neutral for addressing such topics. Relating the experience of the Commune to modern times and finding political inspiration in it seems to me the weakest element of the book. The aim is interesting, but its implementation is not convincing; it lacks passion and lively commitment. The reminiscent declarations get lost in the book's narrative and seem haphazard. Perhaps this shows the natural limitations of the historian of ideas, who cannot effectively combine the temperament of a researcher and an activist.

*Commun-Commune* is not so much a synthesis of the main political ideas of the French left at the end of the Second Empire: Proudhonism, Blanquism and neo-Jacobinism; above all, it is a demonstration of these ideas in action. Ideas are revealed in the use of the popular class, the

workers, for whom they were intended. This allows us to see their causality, their dynamism, their transformations, and the social base on which they 'exist'. I consider this to be the greatest value of Dupeyron's book, in which he pursues a new French way of writing the history of ideas, especially in terms of examining the circulation and functioning of ideas in political practices.

Behind the stories of the actors of the Commune, there is, of course, solid source and archival work. What is particularly valuable is the predominance of collective shots. They depict the groups through which the figures in question passed, but always against the collective background. This shows their heterogeneity and dynamism, as well as their simultaneous participation in various decision-making bodies, parties and associations. Political movements are shown as networked structures, undergoing transformations and at the same time endowed with causality that exceeds the capacity of individuals. For historians, as well as biographers, it can be a valuable source of comparative information. Although Jean-François Dupeyron is not a methodological theorist, he shows how the history of ideas can be combined in practice with the description and explanation of events. This is an interesting direction that could prove to be an inspiration for both researchers of ideas and traditional historians. For the former, this would entail extending reflection to the sociological conditions of ideas and the consequences of their actions, for the latter, it would mean including ideologies as real actors.

Dupeyron's interpretation, on the one hand, can fill us with hope. It shows the example of a well-organized and functioning commune which pursued democratic ideals. The demand to radicalize democracy to remove any form of oppression resulted in the extension of the common goods to the economic sphere as well. It was much further beyond the political field to which moderate republicans were limited. Thus, the Communards show us that democracy cannot exist as long as the common goods are limited to political rights and personal freedom. In this radical sense, it has not yet existed in any European country. The author does not claim this explicitly, but he encourages us to rethink the heritage of the Commune beyond the three legends and to analyse the potential of the political practices of the Communards.

On the other hand, there is no romanticizing of the myth of the Commune in this book. The author does not wonder why it failed, does not search for the guilty or speculate as to how it could have succeeded. By analysing the political ideas of the protagonists of the Commune, he shows their limitations, and the consequences of the positions they admitted. A community like the Paris Commune could work well in

a relatively small area, without the threat of external aggression. To cover a larger territory, it should form a federation with neighbouring communes. Dupeyron here articulates the core problem that the Commune faced at the macro level. This challenge has not yet been solved by anyone anywhere. Perhaps the ineffectiveness of communes internationally is the reason why so many revolutionaries treated democratic institutions with reluctance. The Bolshevik Revolution survived longer than the Paris Commune because of its renunciation of what was most controversial but also most revolutionary in Paris: federalism and radical democracy.

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**Tytuł:** Społeczna historia idei Komuny Paryskiej

**Abstrakt:** Recenzja książki *Commun-Commune: penser la Commune de Paris (1871)*.

Autor wydanej w 150. rocznicę Komuny Paryskiej publikacji stawia sobie za cel zrekonstruowanie całego spektrum idei politycznych krążących po „Wolnym Paryżu” wiosną 1871 roku. Analizy dokonuje z perspektywy praktyk politycznych i uczestników wydarzeń, rozważając treść badanych idei tylko przez sposoby ich użycia oraz konsekwencje, którymi zaważyły na historii. W recenzji jest to interpretowane jako przejaw myślenia bliskiego teoretycznej koncepcji „społecznej historii idei”. Ważnym aspektem recenzowanej książki są też refleksje na temat polityki pamięci oraz legend, czyli zmitologizowanego podejścia do przeszłości rozumianego jako źródło błędów poznawczych, utrudniających właściwe rozumienie wydarzeń.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Komuna Paryska, społeczna historia idei, polityka pamięci, historia myśli politycznej