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CHAPTER SIX

From the Revolutions of 1848–49 to the First People’s Democracy: The Paris Commune

The Revolution in Production was far from the only upheaval to upset nineteenth-century European society. With the end of the French Revolution and the later, final defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo, the forces of the old order appeared to consign the spirit of revolution to footnotes in historical tomes. In France, the fall of Napoleon allowed the so-called “holy alliance” of Britain, Russia, the Austrian Empire and reactionary Prussia to put a member of the Bourbon line back on the restored French throne in 1815. Exhausted by years of revolution, sacrifice and war, it was thought that the French people would accept this sad situation for generations to come. As it turned out, those that thought this way were dead wrong.

One of the most important dignitaries who misunderstood the mood of the population was King Charles X. Whether Charles actually thought God had chosen him to rule France or he merely had an unusually inept secret police, Charles was, one might say, clueless. By early 1830, Charles X had dissolved Parliament, suspended press freedom and called for new elections following his cleverly altered electoral system in which only one out of four former voters would still have the right to cast a ballot. The people responded with strikes and protests. At the end of July, after three days of street fighting, Charles X abandoned being “King by Grace of God” and opted more modestly for being alive by the grace of Britain and took flight across the Channel. This Bourbon ruler was quickly replaced by Louis-Phillipe, the liberal Duke of Orléans, who was said to have fought on the side of the Republic in 1792. This liberal, indeed bourgeois, monarch had the backing of businessmen who had deftly blocked attempts by other classes to establish a republic. Many bourgeois hoped this model of “constitutional monarchy” would spread. But Europe stayed, if not quiet, mostly subdued by the old regimes of order, as evident in the revolts within Italy and Germany that were quickly reduced to oblivion. One notable exception

were the Poles, who rose up bravely against the Russian czar, only to be brutally crushed and to watch another part of Poland disappear into the vastness of the Russian Empire.

The story of the 1830 revolution is oft presented as if it was achieved by highly nuanced arguments articulated in upper-class salons. In reality, it was the Paris crowd that forced Charles to abandon his throne for rainy England. Were the concerns of these ordinary people the same as the better-educated and much better-funded businessmen? Hardly. One detailed study of the 1830 crowd in revolutionary Paris suggests workers in the capital had reasons to revolt that owed little to the disputes between the Crown and the rich. Put simply, those who worked for a living were less preoccupied with constitutional disputes than with “lack of work, low wages [and] the high price of bread.”¹

It is also worth reflecting on the fact that the crowd very closely resembled that of 1789. These were not the desperate and dispossessed of society, but neither were they members of the middle class.² The crowds were made up of a large number of skilled craftsmen, as indicated in French police records. Most were not extremely young, but still not old enough to have personal experience of the 1789 revolution.³ By July, economic distress had become a vital motive behind the crowd protests. Beyond economic complaints, the most commonly voiced motive for the revolt was hatred of the Bourbons. In other words, the revolution came about because of traditional economic oppression and resentment towards the old regime, which fused into a radical cocktail backed by vague notions of liberty, equality and fraternity.⁴ These slogans and beliefs had now circulated throughout popular France for generations. They gave a common language and clear goals to people motivated to revolt by a number of varied grievances.

Within a generation, these and other causes would lead to a broader European Revolution in 1848. Sometimes called the “spring time of the people,” this revolution would once more start in Paris, but this time it would not end there. Massive popular demonstrations in Paris caused the abdication of King Louis Philippe, who was forced to flee to England in February 1848. The following month, large demonstrations in Vienna caused Prince von Metternich, architect of the post-Napoleonic European order, to resign and join the former French king in English exile. That same March of 1848 saw revolutionary crowds gather in Berlin where a startled king verbally accepted demands for elections, a constitution, freedom of the press and the unification of Prussia with other German states.

Throughout German-speaking lands that spring, rebels appeared to have the upper hand. An all-German National Assembly was elected and

began deliberations on May 18, 1848. This assembly was largely made up of liberals, and is also often called the “professors’ parliament,” as so many members were academics. Unable to agree on a constitution or much of anything else, the assembly quickly degenerated into little more than a debating society. By late 1848, the nobles and generals in Berlin, Vienna and elsewhere had regained their nerve and began to reverse all the changes set in motion earlier in the year. When in April 1849, the National Assembly proposed to the Prussian king that he become German emperor, he refused. With neither an army nor broad popular support, the Frankfurt Assembly was dissolved on May 31, 1849.⁵ Rebellion in Italy and elsewhere was largely crushed the same year.

While there were a wide range of motivations each reflecting the diverse interests of the rebels, as is always true in cases of social upheaval, the significance of the economic situation cannot be overstated. All too often, school textbooks mistakenly give the impression that the entire movement was wrapped up merely in histrionic debates regarding high ideals. But word on the streets, at the events themselves, was that the revolution had been sparked by economic want. Ideas like liberalism and nationalism helped to shape the events of 1848–49. Yet the urgency of the working people’s uprisings was largely the result of economic misery and the fear of future economic pain. Across Europe, wherever there was economic crisis, popular revolt soon followed. This is not to say that lawyers, journalists, doctors, academics and a wide range of professionals from the middle class were not part of the revolutionary wave. These people were important—some might argue vital. The point remains that it was laboring people who gave the movement the “muscle” it needed to have any chance of success. As Eric Hobsbawm commented,

... those who made the revolution were unquestionably the labouring poor. It was they who died on the urban barricades: in Berlin, there were only about fifteen representatives of the educated classes, about thirty master craftsmen, among the three hundred victims of the March fighting; in Milan only twelve students, white-collar workers or landlords among the 350 dead of the insurrection.”⁶

In theory, this mobilization of the working people was the great achievement of 1848, but proved to be an ideological challenge once realized. The appearance of common people on the stage of history became a problem for those who were accustomed to controlling the performance themselves. The republican-minded middle class may have been all for “the people”

on some rhetorical plane, but feared them in real life. The self-activity of workers, and other such “uncultured types,” was seen as little more than gate-crashing at the party that liberals wanted to attend exclusively. Middle-class republicans, who wanted to control the movement, now faced a clear choice: risk social revolution, or abandon liberal ideals by submitting to the old elites. The bulk of bourgeois reformers chose the latter out of fear of the former.

When assaulted with demands for representative government, a free press or, particularly in Italy and Germany, national unity, the old conservative ruling class had a powerful card to play. As soon as the fragile nature of the alliance between the bourgeois liberals and lower-class radicals became apparent, it was simply a matter of encouraging disunity among the opposition. There was a conscious policy of divide and conquer. The more perceptive representatives of the old order understood this well. As Count Cavour of Piedmont commented in 1846, when faced with the specter of social revolution, “the most enthusiastic republicans would be, we are convinced, the first to join the ranks of the conservative party.”⁷ In other words, formal equality is politically acceptable, actual economic equality is not.

There were other divisions and weaknesses within the opposition camp, notably the issue of women’s roles. The male-dominated rebels appear to have made little effort to mobilize or incorporate women into the radical project.⁸ Parisian women made up 40 percent of the manufacturing work force, often began strikes and in other ways asserted their own independence.⁹ As the nineteenth century progressed, working-class women became more active, from the Chartists to the 1848 revolutionaries.¹⁰ Women were increasingly forcing themselves into the public sphere.¹¹ Women were greatly influenced by and, at certain key junctures, influential in the events of 1848–49. Some scholars argue that, in Germany at least, 1848 marks the beginning of the modern women’s movement.¹²

Additionally, the distorting effects of the apparently easy and early successes of 1848 bred complacency among some. With the noteworthy exception of Marx, Engels and a handful of hardened radicals, a vast number of people believed that fundamental change had been achieved when a period of calm followed the initial revolts. This allowed the forces of reaction to regroup. In France, the establishment of the Second Republic underwrote these popular illusions. In German-speaking lands, it appeared that the princes and the nobility were ready to surrender their hold on power. Street fighting in Berlin and Vienna drove back the traditional

military to such an extent that many thought the people had won. These dreams of a popular victory by the people were soon dispelled.

A few words about Karl Marx¹³ and Frederick Engels are in order. Both were born into well-off German-speaking families; Engels was actually the son of a factory owner. In addition, each man was influenced by the philosophy of the Young Hegelians in Berlin. For many, this would mark a youthful period of intellectual curiosity followed by a return to a conventional position in society. Neither Marx nor Engels would follow this pattern. In fact, they would do just the opposite, by leaving purely philosophical pursuits behind for the more daring path of political activism. The pair first met in 1842 and became increasingly radicalized, drifting into a lifelong political collaboration. Marx was impressed with the first-hand research Engels had done on the English working class, while the latter had the deepest respect for the intellect of the slightly older Marx. They would remain friends for the rest of their lives while they turned out works like the *Communist Manifesto*, which was written jointly. Especially after the publication of Volume One of *Das Kapital*, Engels organized and edited Marx's writing.

Both radicals were active in the 1848–49 revolutions in their native Germany, and Engels even participated in some actual fighting in 1849. Later, they would provide the theoretical leadership of the International Working Men's Association, the so-called "First International." Later in their lives, as various workers parties formed which proclaimed themselves socialist, social-democratic, or even "Marxist," Marx and Engels gave no end of useful advice to these groups. Although both men were hugely respected in the labor movement and the object of much hero worship, the advice that Karl and Frederick imparted was more often than not ignored. Little wonder that by the 1870s, Marx was fond of saying, "I know only one thing. I'm not a Marxist." All the same, the ideas of these two German radical democrats would have a profound influence on sections of the European working class. Of these ideas, the thought that all history is the history of class struggle was an important contrast to previous theories of cooperation, or what Marx once called the "Universal Brotherhood Swindle." Even now, in the twenty-first century, the political ideas, philosophical method and moral positions advocated by Marx and Engels have significant influence on large groups of the common people.

In France, the workers' attempt to change their place in society was met with a brutal suppression of their protests. The rebellion was provoked by the dissolution of the socialistic national workshops that in some ways, like medical care, had proven too successful for the rich to tolerate.¹⁴ Physical

repression was not the only, or most striking, part of the reaction to the commoners' struggle. Louis Napoleon, the nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, proved that universal (male) suffrage could be used for non-radical, even reactionary, ends. That voters can sometimes be manipulated into voting against their own interests is not a great revelation of the twenty-first century. In the nineteenth century, universal suffrage was thought to be a magic formula that would abolish tyranny and poverty. Capitalizing on this, on December 20, 1848, Louis Bonaparte was elected president of the French Republic, exploiting his famous name and presenting himself as all things to all people.

He particularly had massive support from France's rural population, in part because of his famous name but also because he promised no more taxes and a vague anti-bourgeois program. Once in office, he systematically planned to establish a dictatorship.¹⁵ He organized a successful *coup d'état* and proclaimed himself Napoleon III on December 2, 1852, Emperor of the Second Empire. In this enterprise, he achieved success by using techniques that would later be expanded upon by Mussolini and Hitler. Like the later dictators, he came to power by craftily combining open and legal political activity with covert illegal activities. He formed his own personal army, a precursor to the later Black Shirts of Mussolini and Brown Shirts of Hitler. He was a master of propaganda that relied on its persuasion, not factual accuracy. Bonaparte claimed to be a man of the people while he served the rich and rewarded friends and cronies.

In Germany, universal (male) suffrage would await Otto von Bismarck and his top-down drive for German unification in the decades to come. Instead, the rulers of German-speaking Europe deployed their armies against the revolution in a way not seen since the slaughter of the Peasants War of 1525.¹⁶ This story was repeated with minor variations throughout Europe, as reaction swept away the hopes of the "spring time of the people." At first look, with the notable exception of the abolition of serfdom in the Hapsburg empire, it seems like little changed despite all the noise and fury of 1848. France went from monarchy to republic only to shortly become a dictatorship known as the Second Empire. The once awe-inspiring rebellion by the Germans ultimately appeared to do little beyond enlarging the number of exiles in the US. Powerful czarist Russia remained largely quiet, while dissent in England was marginalized.

Little wonder that so many have seen 1848 as a failure. This attitude is understandable, but in many ways it is also wrong. Certainly it is true that the immediate results of the 1848–49 revolutions were far from what insurgents had dreamed. The revolutions, at first glance, seem to have done

little more than expose dissidents to repression. Thousands had to leave the nations of their birth, at times even crossing the Atlantic in order to make a new life in the Americas. But, when a longer view of European history is taken, the picture that emerges is quite different. Those small changes that at first were deemed insignificant turned out to have lasting effects in the light of history. Many of the demands of the 1848 rebels were in fact later achieved, albeit mostly by non-revolutionary leaders.¹⁷

One most decidedly revolutionary person who proved an exception to this general pattern was Giuseppe Garibaldi. A hardened radical, nationalist and later a member of the First International,¹⁸ Garibaldi landed in the Italian South in 1860 with a dedicated group of fighters. Their goal was to unify Italy and create a secular, democratic and social republic. Defying conventional wisdom, Garibaldi's ragtag band was able to achieve unexpected victories over professional military forces. These upsets were made possible by the rousing of the peasant masses, who thronged to the rebel army in hitherto unexpected numbers. In and of itself, this enlarged rebel mass ensured little besides a more generous spilling of blood. But the rebel leaders proved themselves to be innovative military tacticians. Rather than give battle to the better armed and trained forces opposed to them, Garibaldi's forces engaged in what has been called irregular warfare, better known today as guerrilla war.

While never minimizing the importance of these martial skills, the genius of this campaign was due to more than this new military science. Garibaldi, and his comrades in the leadership, had the ability to inspire their forces by treating peasants and other commoners as equals; they demoralized their enemies while relying on the popular rising of the common people to help accomplish their goals. In an article in the *New York Daily Tribune* on September 24, 1860, Engels captured some of this campaign's excitement. The co-author of the *Communist Manifesto* noted how along with military victories, insurrections broke out in provinces not yet occupied by the radical army. When the rebels confronted the traditional military forces, the latter often collapsed with only token resistance. In one situation, "whole regiments refused to march against the insurgents and desertions took place in bodies, even among the troops guarding Naples."¹⁹

The revolution spread northward toward Rome, home of the Pope, whom the rebels hoped to depose because of his opposition to both Italian unification and a republican form of government. Understandably, this was far from welcome news to the papacy nor to its French and Austrian supporters. Even if the papacy had not been an issue, the conservative rulers in Paris and Vienna had no taste for a democratic, republican Italy

to their south. Neither did the northern Italian kingdom of Piedmont led by the crafty Count Cavour, who had Piedmont's soldiers occupy northern Italy to check Garibaldi and postpone foreign intervention. This presented the revolutionaries with two disagreeable options. They could compromise with Cavour at the risk of abandoning many of the ideals for which they had fought. Alternatively, they could defy Piedmont and plunge Italy into a civil war that would almost surely have seen foreign intervention on the side of Cavour.

For better or, as some would argue, worse, the rebels led by Garibaldi opted for compromise. Although southern Italy was united with northern Italy by a plebiscite, many southerners experienced the new Italy less as liberation and more as occupation, as northern officials flocked southward to administer the lands. The faith that Garibaldi and so many radicals had placed in the newly created Italian Parliament quickly dissipated. Instead of being a means of reform for the common people, the Parliament was a talking shop where the rich and powerful cut deals for their, not the people's, benefit. With a mere 7 percent of the population entitled to cast a ballot, the new liberal Italy under the King of Piedmont was far from what the radicals had fought to create. Instead of a people's government or a social republic, the new Italy was a failed system created by the liberals forming an alliance with the remnants of the old feudal order.

It would be an error to conclude that the rich and powerful, represented by the likes of Louis Napoleon, Bismarck, or Cavour, were the only forces of significance. There were other agents of change in nineteenth-century Europe. They had little in the way of funds and they commanded no armies. Among the most important was the attempt of the International Working Men's Association (IWMA), also known to historians as the First International, to unite the workers of, if not yet the world, then Europe. The First International provided very real services to the struggling labor movement. The IWMA served as a source of communication and strike support in a pre-Internet age. The minutes of the General Council are rich in detail of requests for help in promoting work actions, notifying workers in other countries not to be tricked into becoming scabs and collecting funds to help workers' struggles. For example, the IWMA minutes from May 23, 1865 included a letter from Lyons explaining how wages were being cut using the argument of cheaper English production. It was resolved that the actual costs and price of labor in England would be researched and the facts sent to the French workers.²⁰ When London employers sought to import German tailors to break the work action of their laborers, the International warned off many unwitting strike breakers through the German labor

press.²¹ When boot makers in Geneva planned to fight for higher wages, they requested and received help from the IWMA who alerted workers in other nations.²² Sometimes, the IWMA's actions were more direct. In fall 1866, Belgian basket makers were brought to London to undercut wage levels in the trade. Members of the IWMA went straight to the workplace and "pointed out to the Belgians the injury they were inflicting on the English ... getting two of them to come out [of work] to have a glass of drink."²³ Within a day, all the Belgian workers in the shop had quit and were on their way back to the Continent.

This is not to say that the IWMA dealt in pure and simple trade unionism. For example, the plight of Irish political prisoners led to a demand for "better treatment for these unfortunate men."²⁴ The organization made a class analysis of the Irish situation. As one council member noted, "It was our business to show the Irish that it was only a class of the English that wrongs them and that the same class of Irish were as bad."²⁵ Later in April 1872, the General Council issued a declaration against "Police Terrorism in Ireland."²⁶ Ireland's relation to England was said to be the same as Poland's to czarist Russia. In other words, both nations were "oppressed nationalities."²⁷ At the risk of stating the obvious, the IWMA believed, and advocated, for independence and freedom for both.

From its start in 1864, the Provisional Rules of the Association argued, "The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves ... [and] that all efforts aimed at that great end have hitherto failed from want of solidarity." This absence of solidarity was seen not only within the working classes of any one specific nation but also "from the absence of a fraternal bond of union between the working classes of different countries."²⁸ This statement was more than noble words. It was also a guide to action. When war broke out between Prussia and Austria, the International condemned it as "a war for Empire, and as such is not calculated to benefit the peoples, as whichever becomes victor it will be but the substitution of one despot for another."²⁹ The IWMA advised workers "to be neutral" in such conflicts.³⁰ When the Prussian kaiser demanded a war loan to fight France, August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht, two IWMA members in the North German Parliament, refused to vote for war credits.³¹ The IWMA denounced the war and printed thousands of flyers in both French and German giving their reasons.³² Later in 1870, in the midst of the Franco-Prussian War, a group from Paterson, New Jersey sent £26 to be split equally between French and German sufferers of the war.³³ This was no mere symbolic gesture, as important as that might be, since according to one calculation this sum represents in 2014 well over

€22,000. Unfortunately for the organization, this size of donation was quite uncommon.

Many activists in the International had clear, if not prophetic, vision. Harriet Law, a member of the IMWA General Council from Manchester, remarked that machines “made women less dependent on men than they were before and would ultimately emancipate them from domestic slavery.”³⁴ All but written out of history, Law had an important career as a public speaker advocating secularism and women’s rights. For the better part of a decade, she was editor of *Secular Chronicle* in whose pages she fought for free thought and the liberation of women. It is noteworthy that the IWMA gave Law a platform for her views and that although an ally of Marx and Engels, she certainly appears to have considered herself their equal.³⁵

Despite its leadership in many areas, the International led a relatively short life. Certainly, the disputes between Marx and his supporters on the one hand and those of the anarchist Bakunin on the other played a major part in the organization’s demise.³⁶ This is in fact the accepted wisdom on what went wrong with the IWMA. But, there were other systematic difficulties experienced by the association as well.

First, there were certain inherent problems that presented themselves to an organization whose goal was to be international in scope. In an age before the invention of the Internet or other means of global communication, there was a regrettable tendency for members closest to the organization’s center, London, to have the most influence. This also applied to the division between those members who could and could not, often for lack of means, attend international conferences and congresses. Frequently, governments prevented or impeded the travel of IWMA members, such as in 1868 when Belgium passed a law allowing the government to expel non-citizens without specific cause. The law was passed with the International specifically mentioned as one reason for the legislation.³⁷

More concretely limiting for the IWMA was lack of funds. A study of the financial records contained in the *Documents of the First International* reveal that the organization lived literally from hand to mouth. Despite constant rumors spread by police agents and political opponents that the leaders of the organization were those “who live on the workers’ money,”³⁸ the evidence suggests that being an International activist often meant spending one’s own funds.³⁹ Add to this the costs of arrests, police attacks, confiscation of newspapers and other publications, and the facts underlying the poverty of the organization are clear.

Despite all these limitations, the IWMA directly promoted international solidarity. This was not always easy as the particular nature of each local struggle might obscure the global essence of the situation. Even when the organizational position was thoughtful and farsighted, change did not automatically follow. Thus, no amount of enthusiastic thanks to the International from Polish exiles who agreed with the IWMA stance towards their nation⁴⁰ could solve the incredible complexity of the problems facing partitioned Poland, which was divided between Russia, Prussia and Austria. The problems facing the newly united Italy often defied easy solutions, even though Garibaldi was an enthusiastic member of the Association.⁴¹ Recognizing that one solution would not apply exactly the same everywhere, the *General Rules of the IWMA* allowed for local autonomy.⁴²

Based in Europe, the organization often could only give advice rather than concrete assistance to radical supporters outside their mainly Western European base of support. Yet the organization was always more admired, and feared than one would imagine, looking at their actual membership, which was never much more than some few thousands, and their financial base in the cold light of hindsight. This was understood at the time by the leadership. Marx, for example, argued against revealing true membership numbers “as the outside public always thought the active members much more numerous than they really were.”⁴³ This meant the IWMA was to get credit, or blame, far beyond their actual strength to control events.

French novelist Emile Zola captured some of the initial, certainly naïve, enthusiasm the IWMA must have provoked in some workers. In *Germinal*, his classic work of fiction revealing the lives of miners, Zola includes a character named Etienne. The author puts these words in Etienne's mouth early in the novel as news of the IWMA is spreading throughout France: the International has

... just been founded in London. Wasn't it a superb accomplishment, to have launched this campaign through which justice would at last triumph? With no more frontiers, the workers of the whole world would rise up and unite, to make sure that the worker kept the fruits of his labour.⁴⁴

Although *Germinal* is a work of fiction, it is not difficult to think that some may have had exactly that response.

From the very beginnings of the IWMA, their rules and regulations stressed the need for labor solidarity between workers, regardless of the nation state of residency.⁴⁵ Nor was this solidarity extended only to Europeans. In 1867, the General Council discussed the French occupation

of Mexico and condemned the official press of Europe for attempting to gloss over the crimes committed by Maximilian in his desire to destroy those Mexicans fighting for their country.⁴⁶ One must return to the fact that the very real limitations and weakness of the International were not necessarily generally known at the time. If so, why would a Swiss watch manufacturer feel it necessary to publicly announce he would not hire IWMA members?⁴⁷ Or, why would the authorities in Geneva feel that a small number of copies of a paper influenced by the International deserved suppression?⁴⁸ Authorities went to great lengths trying to incite ethnic tension between sections of the organization. In 1871, the mainstream press claimed that all Germans were to be expelled from the association.⁴⁹ The Pope even weighed in, joining the attacks on the IWMA, claiming it, “would subvert all order and all law”⁵⁰

The organization pushed back against the rising tide of nationalism and racism, with admittedly only limited success, in a manner that can only be seen as commendable in a world that witnessed the massacres and genocide of the twentieth century. Despite personal backsliding, the IWMA was committed to a class-based rather than racially or ethnically based worldview. At a time when many, if not most, people accepted racial differences as scientifically proven, the counter-example of the association stands as a sharp exception. Fear of the IWMA’s ideologies gaining wider acceptance led an international combination of manufacturers to declare one of their most important purposes was to “spy into the action and working of the International Working Men’s Association . . . and to execute such measures against it as the Government may officially demand.”⁵¹

The IWMA was able to influence working-class movements in those countries that were within their geographical and political sphere. The International relied on influence as their mode of operation rather than giving orders or attempting to control—as opposed to the later Comintern. Through this influence the International, during its brief life, achieved a number of important breakthroughs. One scholar notes the International scored two lasting achievements: it became “the first effective international support for workers on strike . . . [and was] the medium through which the ideas of Marx penetrated the new labour movements of Europe.”⁵² Not only did it engage in strike support, the IWMA even pressed for the idea of international trade unions. Even as it was going into decline, Paul LaFargue, Marx’s son-in-law and a leading French socialist, was pushing for the Association to organize international trade unions.⁵³ This First International additionally served to spread political theory, mainly shaped by Marx and Engels to be sure, to rising social movements and radical political

parties. A quick look at some of the parties that the IWMA influenced will suggest its European importance.

Of course, scholars have argued that the International ultimately failed even in those locales where it had a short period of glory. So it has been argued about Ireland. Even here, however, the argument can be made that the impact of the IWMA far outlasted its organizational life. As one author comments

... any history limited to the organization failure of the First International in Ireland would be incomplete. The IWMA continued and strengthened a tradition of social protest ... elements of Marxist thought, such as the reality of class war and the necessity for working-class solidarity, can be discerned in the speeches of socialists who first learned of them during the existence of the IWMA in Ireland.⁵⁴

Even among the German labor movement, whose leaders so frustrated Marx, the International helped push the evolution of radical thought by stressing "internationalism, class-consciousness, socialist politics and Marxist philosophy."⁵⁵ France was certainly strongly influenced both before and after the Paris Commune.⁵⁶ Thanks to the hard work of the Dutch police we know quite a bit about the IWMA in the Netherlands.⁵⁷ Even the famously conservative trade unions of Britain were unable to completely resist the allure of an international organization devoted to the betterment of their class. While the British may have remained in the main non-revolutionary, they were touched by both the idea of socialism and the idea of working-class internationalism.⁵⁸

That the Association played a part in mobilizing the common people is obvious. Not only were actual members mobilized, but vast numbers of those who never formally took out a membership card were influenced by the group's ideas. This was possible precisely because it was an open organization, not a secret society; the ideas and finances were mainly an open book. Of course, this meant it was easy for police spies to infiltrate the IWMA or for members to publicly go over to the enemy, as did two French comrades who left to support the dictator Bonaparte.⁵⁹

What destroyed the IWMA? Often overlooked for more obscure ideological disputes is the reign of reaction that hit Europe in the aftermath of the Paris Commune. This repression supplemented already existing police intimidation and spying. As one historian comments, "It was the European reaction inspired by fear of the Commune and the International, rather than Bakunin's attempts at a takeover, which wrecked Marx's Inter-

national.”⁶⁰ In the wake of the destruction of the first workers’ government in Paris in 1871, it became open season on the IWMA.⁶¹ Police in Leipzig warned taverns that their licenses would be in danger if IWMA members were seen gathering within.⁶² One chief of police attempted to found an IWMA section so that his agents could intervene as delegates in congresses.⁶³ Even “liberal” Britain was thrown into the frenzy with Prime Minister Gladstone reportedly thinking of expelling Marx and others from the country.⁶⁴ One Member of Parliament claimed leaders of the International had both planned the Commune and ordered the French Communards to execute the Paris Archbishop.⁶⁵ The mainstream press bayed like a pack of hounds thirsty for the blood of the International.⁶⁶

But the problems that led to the demise of the IWMA were of little concern to the region we now call Germany. Around the time Italy was born, and slightly after the rise and fall of the IWMA, Germany was still a confusing stew of 39 different kingdoms, duchies, principalities and city-states. Before undergoing a Prussian-led, top-down unification, it was not even generally agreed upon what territories should make up a German-speaking nation. Should a greater Germany be established which included the still-powerful Austrians, or should it be a smaller nation-state that excluded the lands ruled by the Hapsburgs? During 1848, a German national assembly met at Frankfurt am Main, naïvely hoping to convince their hereditary rulers to commit political suicide. But when class and self-interest won the day, hopes for a united Germany with freedom of speech, trial by jury and so forth were crushed. The next attempt at unification, though successful, was undemocratic and authoritarian. It was not the result of popular movements but rather the skillful use of force by Otto von Bismarck of Prussia.

In a series of carefully crafted maneuvers in the early 1860s, Bismarck first allied with Austria to fight Denmark over their southern provinces of Schleswig and Holstein. Next in 1866, the Prussians provoked a war with the Roman Catholic Austrians, uniting most of the Protestant northern German lands in the process. Austria, like Denmark before it, was quickly defeated and forced to pull back from German affairs. Now, the Berlin-based militarists faced a delicate situation. The southern German states were Catholic and had traditionally looked to Vienna, not Berlin, for leadership. Bismarck wisely gambled that, in the final analysis, the southern Germans would prove more anti-French than anti-Prussian. In 1870, Prussia cleverly created a diplomatic incident that provoked the reckless French dictator Louis Napoleon into declaring war. Bismarck successfully painted this misstep by Paris as foreign aggression against all Germans. The southern Germans joined with the Prussian-led northern federation to defeat the

corrupt and inept French government in a brief war. Before the other great powers (e.g. Britain, Russia) had time to consider the implications of the German victory, the German Empire was proclaimed in January 1871.

As impressive as this accomplishment was, it had some very negative results. Liberalism was jettisoned along with most of the ideals of 1848. Most hitherto liberal German bourgeois would satisfy themselves with unification, even if it came without a republic. Often overlooked is that at the same time, German conservatives “became themselves the prisoners of the nationalistic sentiment with which they sought to broaden their popular support.”⁶⁷ As noted before, the bourgeoisie had abandoned their attachment to liberal, republican ideas out of fear of those who actually made change possible: the common people or to be more specific, the proletariat. Why was the business class willing to abandon virtually everything but remained wedded to the concept of the nation-state?

The reason, as is so often the case for those in business, was material gain. The disunity of German-speaking central Europe had been a huge obstacle to the expansion of business and a drain on profits. For all the noble talk that frequently accompanies nationalist movements, for the bourgeoisie it all came down to money. One factory owner-turned-revolutionary observed that it was not any love of freedom that drove the well-off to the flag of German unity. No:

... it was the desire of the practical merchant and industrialist arising out of immediate business needs to sweep away all the historically inherited small junk which was obstructing the free development of commerce and industry ... German unity had become an economic necessity.⁶⁸

Out of Louis Napoleon's farcical military downfall, as was noted, came a united Germany in 1871. But, a new nation-state forged by Bismarck's policy of blood and iron was not the only offspring of the French government's debacle. Along with the birth of a powerful new entity Germany, which was more of an army with a state than a state with an army, came its mirror opposite, the Commune. Also, the Commune of Paris, an experiment in popular democracy that still inspires today.

The Commune was the result of neither conspiracy nor preplanned program. It grew out of the demise of the French Second Empire and the grand bourgeoisie's willingness to abandon Paris to the victorious Prussians. As one author observed, “it was the Parisian solution to the collapse of legally constituted authority in the vacuum of defeat that followed the 1870 Franco-Prussian war.”⁶⁹ The actual nature of the Commune has long been

a source of confusion. At the time, even a supportive Karl Marx called it a “sphinx” because it seemed so mysterious. One historian chalks up the difficulty in describing the Paris Commune to the fact that it was a “genuine mass democratic movement, reflecting an abundance of different ideas, [so] no easy definition could suffice.”⁷⁰ It has been hailed as the first workers’ state and said to be a purely local reaction to a collapsed state apparatus. Some have made the case that it was both things at the same time. Many scholars have never really made up their mind.

By March 1871, the citizens of Paris had endured months of suffering, military humiliation and the death of loved ones. When the Bonaparte dictatorship was replaced with the Third Republic, things should have improved dramatically but for most of the common people they had not. The new government capitulated repeatedly to the German-speaking invaders. The entry of Bismarck’s troops into Paris, albeit only for a limited and mainly symbolic occupation, was a bitter experience for most Parisians. The National Guard of Paris reorganized itself and elected a central committee. Steadily but without a clear vision of where they were going, the Guard transformed itself into an alternative government that challenged the legitimacy of the Republic headed by Adolphe Thiers. On March 18, this provisional government attempted to disarm Paris by sending in regular army units to seize cannons and arms. The soldiers, however, fraternized with the city’s common people and refused to carry out orders. When told to fire on radical crowds, the troops refused and even killed two of their own generals. Most soldiers then peacefully went back to their family homes, although some stayed to fight with Paris.⁷¹ Two days later, Thiers and his “National Assembly” fled to the calm and relative safety of Versailles, the former home of Louis XVI. The Civil War in France had begun.

The richest residents of Paris, who had not fled during the war, followed suit very soon after this and left the capital as well. Paris was left in the hands of what can only be called the common people. A detailed study of more than 36,000 Communards who were arrested later found only 8 percent had been what we would call “white-collar workers” and a mere 4 percent were small businesspeople, with another 4 percent coming from the professional strata of doctors and lawyers. The remaining 84 percent of Paris was mainly from the manual trades and in almost all cases were wage earners.⁷² Not surprising, therefore, that so many have viewed the Commune as a workers’ uprising. While the Commune attempted to practice liberty, equality and solidarity and, for example, restricted the

highest government salary to 6,000 francs, the gathering at the old palace of the French kings was cut from a different cloth.⁷³

German playwright Bertolt Brecht captured the spirit of Thiers and his colleagues in the play, *The Days of the Commune*. Brecht penned this fictional, but all too believable, dialogue in which Thiers spoke to Jules Faure in these words:

... our civilization is founded on property. Property must be protected at all costs. They [Paris] have the nerve to dictate to use what we must give up and what we can keep? Get me sabres, get me cavalry, if it takes a sea of blood to wash Paris clean of its vermin then let us have a sea of blood.⁷⁴

It is true that from a military viewpoint, the Paris Commune probably didn't have much of a chance. After all, the bulk of the nation's military assets were under the control of the Versailles government, not revolutionary Paris. All the same, reactionaries feared that if the ideas boiling up in the capital ever spread to the countryside that situation might change.⁷⁵ What was so dangerous about the Communards' ideas?

First, they established a radical participatory form of democracy that was in almost complete contradiction to traditional parliamentary systems. This new democratic experiment relied on the mobilization of the average citizen whereas traditional republics had depended on popular apathy, encouraging an attitude among the common people that governing ought to be left up to the "better sort." Further, the social reforms in the sphere of education were alone sufficient for the Commune to earn a secure place in the heart of radicals.⁷⁶ In the same spirit, night work for bakers was abolished and labor conditions improved throughout all branches of the economy, as abandoned workshops were converted into worker-owned cooperatives.⁷⁷ One aspect of the Commune experiment all too seldom mentioned is the vital role of women.

Books written by, for and about men typically narrate the events in 1871 Paris as if all the females in the capital were at home cooking. When women are introduced into the story, it is often only as the libel that they ran around (irrationally) setting fires during the fall of the Commune.⁷⁸ This depiction is far from the reality, as described by eyewitnesses to female involvement in the rebellion. Of notable significance was Elisabeth Dmitrieff, founder of the International in Russia, who was also a key figure in the *Union de Femmes*, a particularly important woman's organization.⁷⁹ Moreover, there were women active in various political clubs throughout the brief lifespan

of the Commune. Another important female participant was the anarchist, Louise Michel, who fought oppression in Paris and continued her fight when sentenced to a South Pacific penal colony.⁸⁰

The *Union de Femmes* was arguably the most advanced expression of class-consciousness during the Commune. By mobilizing working-class women into active participation in the life of the Commune, they helped partially overcome centuries of anti-female prejudice. Women achieved positions of power within the new administration. Female Communards administered welfare and worked on educational reform, including increasing schooling for girls. Progressively, old tired clichés employed against the idea of women’s equality were dismissed as baseless as arguments in defense of slavery.⁸¹ The radical women of the Commune struggled towards critiques of gender, class, culture and traditional power arrangements. Not surprisingly, different female thinkers came to various conclusions. Yet, all attempted to build bridges to a world of gender equality and social justice.⁸²

At first, all this revolutionary activity by women, typically from the lower orders of society, might appear strange or even fanciful. Yet, there is a massive amount of hard evidence that confirms the vital role of the Commune’s female members. This mobilization corresponds to a certain cold logic. As Edith Thomas argued decades ago, “it is understandable that women, who are the first to suffer under the social order, would have a hand in a revolutionary movement aimed at changing that order.”⁸³ Throughout April 1871, the women of Paris together with their male comrades proceeded to build one of the most democratic and egalitarian societies ever witnessed in Europe. Obviously, the forces of tradition and order could not stand for this—particularly as it might spread beyond Paris. On May 21, troops dispatched by the Versailles government entered Paris. Despite heroic resistance, the Communards were unable to overcome the heavily armed and professionally led forces. In the actual street fighting, the Commune lost between 3,000 and 10,000 people while the invaders lost only 877.⁸⁴

An even higher pile of corpses was to be erected in the “bloody week” that followed close on to the military defeat of the Commune. Determined to, in Thiers’s words, “bleed democracy dry for a generation,” the capitalist state took revenge on radical Paris with an estimated 40,000 executed. Women made up about a fifth of these murdered civilians. Another 50,000 individuals were arrested, often on evidence as scant as being found to have the calloused hands of a worker. While many were later released, over 10,000 of these were sentenced with as many as 4,000 transported to a penal

colony in New Caledonia. This number was so large that it took the French Navy a year to move this massive human cargo of radicalism.⁸⁵

Given the short life and violent death of the Commune, it is reasonable to ask, why is it still so important? The Commune did not establish a long-lasting government nor did it immediately transform society in any obvious way. Yet, as an example (a myth some might say), of common people rising up not just to protest but to take power and rule, it gives hope to the left and nightmares to the right. It is an exaggeration to say, as one historian did, that the working class in France was made “as a result of the construction of a collective memory, the myth of the Paris Commune.”⁸⁶ All the same, the Commune was an important part in the consciousness of the European labor movement. The victors understood the power of this example and did all they could to destroy the memory,⁸⁷ but it is remembered to the present day. In any number of ways, the Commune is a founding myth, a memory or story for the organized, particularly radical, working class in Europe. In spite of the setback the left suffered when Paris fell and the vicious repression that followed, the commoners were able to organize themselves successfully in the years after the suppression of the Commune and before the great imperialist slaughter of 1914–18.