

# The Paris Commune as world- event

*By Constance Bantman*

---

**The Paris Commune is now a hundred and fifty years old. Quentin Deluermoz has written a global history of it, exploring its worldwide repercussions across space and time.**

---

À propos de : Quentin Deluermoz, *Commune(s) 1870-1871. Une traversée des mondes au XIXe siècle*, [Commune[s], 1870-1871: A Crossing of Nineteenth-Century Worlds], Paris, Seuil, l'Univers historique, 2020. 448 p., 25 €.

Quentin Deluermoz's book is one of the centerpieces of the scholarly commemoration of the Paris Commune's one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary, which has already yielded a body of work that is empirically and theoretically rich. The "(s)" in his book's title is its guiding thread: it refers to the Commune's multiplicity, its spaces and temporalities, before, during, and after the events that unfolded between March and May 1871. His reinterpretation of the Commune from a global standpoint is particularly remarkable. It puts into perspective and emphasizes the uniqueness and international impact of a revolution whose power to fascinate transcends space, time, and partisan affiliation.

## The universal republic

After a stimulating methodological introduction, the book is organized into three major parts: the global Commune, the Commune as lived experience, and the transformation of the Commune. The first section analyzes international perceptions and ramifications of the period between July 1870 and April 1871. It begins with a quote from the Chinese translator Zhang Deyi, who, finding himself in Paris on March 18, 1871, heard the cannons that marked the insurrection's beginning. This opening immediately highlights the Commune's international character, which is central to this section and the entire book. After considering the movements of the "cosmopolitan combatants" who flocked to France in 1870-1871, Deluermoz turns to popular agitations in China and Algeria, which reveal the "fractures in the French imperial nation-state" (p. 51). How the international press viewed the events of 1870-1871, which was essential in a period of massive expansion and diffusion of print, is visualized through maps showing how far these texts circulated. In contrast to "diffusionist" narratives, which concentrate exclusively on the Commune's effects and take its revolutionary influence for granted, the analysis of the way in which the Commune is perceived in space, at multiple levels, concludes this first part: it can be seen, for instance, in the young regime's fledgling diplomatic activity and its efforts to unite other cities (i.e., communes).

In taking the global character of the Commune as its starting point, the book de-centers the event in ways that are both obvious and striking. This choice makes sense, since the Commune belongs to a long sequence of international republican and social mobilizations between 1850 and 1860, in which the revolutionary symbolism associated with Paris was also a factor. Deluermoz shows the many local resonances and reinterpretations of the ideal of a "universal Republic" that inspired the period's revolutionary uprisings, as well as their ambiguities. Yet this change in perspective is also striking, and even disorienting, even though transnational work on the Commune has developed over the past two years, particularly as it relates to exile, international combatants, and nineteenth-century radicalism. Though there are numerous projects currently underway, denationalizing the historiography of revolutions, including that of the Commune, remains a long-term task.

Part two analyzes the communard experience in its most concrete forms, while always calling attention to the dialectic between the local and the global and the individual and the collective in a mosaic of variously configured insurrections and

repressions that are both connected and different. This section emphasizes the scope and diversity of the broader movement to which the Parisian insurrection belonged, from the Martinique uprising to the Algiers Commune, which preceded the Paris Commune, and from the town of Thiers (in the Puy-de-Dôme) to Lyon. All were driven by the same republican revolutionary dynamic, even as they were shaped by different chronologies and ideological legacies. Thus we go from the very brief communal protest movement in Thiers to the Lyon insurrection, the culmination of a century of working-class activism in this city, which also witnessed the intervention of the International Workingmen's Association (IWA) and Mikhail Bakunin. In Martinique, the aspiration to an egalitarian republic, opposed to the post-slavery order, prevailed.

## Revolution on the street corner

Out of all this emerges the Paris Commune, an "exceptional experience" and genuine revolutionary rupture. Considering the Commune "from below" is a path is already well traveled by social historians. It is illustrated in a recent work edited by Michel Cordillot (in the famous Maitron series of biographical dictionaries of the workers movement), *La Commune de Paris 1871*,<sup>1</sup> which highlights the Commune's actors, practices, and reinvention, whereas the Commune's centennial had focused on ideological divergences and institutional issues. Deluermoz places the emphasis on perceptions: the transformation of the city's space-time and sensory experience (such as colors, odors, statues, language, and information circulation), through which a space replete with political meaning was constructed. He chronicles the irruption and brief installation of the extraordinary in the daily life and business of the revolution, as seen in the military and economic relationships.

Far from being anecdotal, this approach shows the ways in which the daily life of this "*Commune vive*" (i.e., "living" and "lived" Commune) in its varied practices, reinvented social relationships. It also brings to light the Commune's specificities as a revolution. Thus the forward-looking orientation of its achievements and projects, which can be seen in its linguistic practices, may explain the modernity that was retroactively attributed to it. But the Commune was also "a revolution in which the actors knew quite early on that the outcome would be horrific" (p. 203). Most importantly, the attention that Deluermoz gives to practices and lived experience

---

<sup>1</sup> Michel Cordillot, ed. *La Commune de Paris 1871. Les acteurs, l'événement, les lieux* (The Paris Commune of 1871: The Actors, Events, and Places), Paris, Éditions de l'Atelier, 2021.

challenge the traditional verdict that the Commune was short on accomplishments. He stresses that the local perspective, the transformation of social relations and historical experience, and the institutional innovations that the Commune initiated are so many signs of an ongoing revolution.

## Resurgences and resonances

Part three is devoted to the conclusion of this phase of the Commune--when, between 1871 and 1880, it entered the realm of history and memory--and to its multiple resurgences in subsequent decades. The *semaine sanglante* or "Bloody Week" initiated a return to order through executions, trials, and military tribunals, but also through reappropriations of urban space and new discourses in the press. Deluermoz offers a panoramic view of the return to political, legal, symbolic, familial, social, administrative, and gender normalcy. The construction of the Commune as the "new specter of revolutionary deviance" (p. 275) went hand in hand with inevitable calls to protect "European civilization" and strengthen "the liberal state," which manifested themselves in the formalization of international law, civilizational rhetoric, and the preservation of free trade. Reacting to the revolutionary trauma, surveillance practices were developed in and between states, culminating with the consolidation of imperial metropolises, notably in Algeria. Many of these trends predated the Commune but were hastened by 1871 and its local impact.

Yet the last word belongs to the extraordinary historical power of the communard "flame"--and its intermittent, endlessly adapted and reinterpreted reappearances. This legacy is both theoretical and practical, taking form in the analyses of Marx and Bakunin and the resulting Marxist and anarchist traditions--themselves diverse and contested--as seen in the cantonalist movement in Spain, and later in Cuba, Italy, and Egypt. 1917 and the founding of the Soviet Union constitute another major reinterpretation of the Commune, a dynamic that remains very alive at present, as with the *Nuit Debout* protests in Paris in 2016 (which consisted of nightly meetings in major French cities in opposition to a proposed reform of labor regulations). As with its universal significance and its reconceptualization of the nation and class, the global resonance of 1871, Deluermoz argues, follows logically from the fact that the Commune was global from the outset. The book ends by considering the contemporary meaning of the Commune and the "constantly revived hope to change

the world as it is" (p. 333), following a conclusion that addresses the event's stakes and the reception and the status of the Commune in the revolutionary century.

## **A transnational reinterpretation of revolutions**

If the idea of an interpretation of the event and its repercussions "at the ground level," as Deluermoz describes his approach, accurately describes his remarkable archival work and his emphasis on the lived experience of the Commune, his broad geographic and interpretive scope, as well as his rich historical and theoretical interrogations, are just as striking.

One of the study's primary goals lies in its very subtle reconceptualizations, whether at the level of its overall argument or in its micro-analyses. The book is persuasive for the very things that it does not assert and which it qualifies. Consider its position on revolutionary messianism and nationalism: France's place in the upheavals connected with the Commune is defined as "a major pole, among others, that was active amidst other dynamics, while also being affected by them" (p. 118). Deluermoz eschews any hint of revolutionary Franco-centrism, yet without ignoring the impact of power relations, notably colonial ones. This makes possible a transnational and global history that is rigorous both in its examination of sources and its conceptual apparatus, which benefits from recourse to a rich English-language historiography that is often poorly known in France. Inventive borrowings from sociology, anthropology, and the historiography of other periods (particularly the Wars of Religion) illuminate its analysis. The book emphasizes gray areas, causal gradations, and examples of indifference, incomprehension, reinterpretation, and contradiction, offering an assessment of the Commune's multiple and constantly shifting meanings and potentialities, even as it avoids dogmatism and restrictive systematizing.

The contribution of this transnational reinterpretation and, more generally, of Deluermoz's conceptual framework owes much to the skill and precision of his style. Besides its well-conceived maps, the book offers, at the end of part two, a hypothetical essay on the Commune's temporalities and an assemblage of quotes on the Bloody Week that deconstructs press rhetoric, restoring raw observations of the repression (p. 231). The fact that the book is always anchored in sources saves it from purely theoretical digressions and allows it to restore the event and perceptions of it in their

depth and multiple meanings, by virtue of the interpretations it proposes that put the archives in perspective and acknowledge the event and its many facets in all their density.

Scholarship on the Commune will be enriched by this original and rigorous book. This "crossing of nineteenth-century worlds," to quote its subtitle, keeps its promise, offering a chronological and spatial exploration of the second half of the nineteenth century and the transnational character of revolutions.

First published in [laviedesidees.fr](http://laviedesidees.fr), March 18, 2021

Translated by Michael Behrent with the support of [Cairn.info](http://Cairn.info)

Published in [booksandideas.net](http://booksandideas.net), February 23, 2023