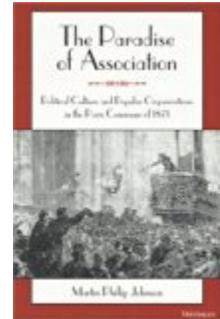


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Martin Phillip Johnson. *The Paradise of Association: Political Culture and Popular Organization in the Paris Commune of 1871.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996. viii + 321 pp. \$44.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-10724-7.

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Twenty years ago, following a spate of studies on the centennial of the Commune, Gordon Wright, in his article “The Anti-Commune: Paris, 1871” in *French Historical Studies* (Spring, 1977) called for a moratorium in Commune studies until the bicentennial of 2071. Subsequently, with the fall of almost all the states based on Leninist principles of political organization—recall the story of Lenin dancing in the snow when his revolution had lasted longer than the Commune—one would think the Commune would be even less appealing as a focus of study. Fortunately, this is not the case, as Johnson’s study demonstrates, along with other recent works by Roger Gould (*Insurgent Identities: Class, Community, and Protest in Paris from 1848 to the Commune* [Chicago, 1995]) and Gay Gullickson (*Unruly Women Of Paris: Images of the Commune* [Ithaca, 1996]). As the revolutionary cycle of the twentieth century comes to a close, scholars are returning to one of the inspirations for this cycle to explore its meaning anew. These important studies demonstrate that this insurrection still contains powerful messages.

Martin Johnson, a lecturer at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, offers a fresh theoretical perspective, original research, and a lively rereading of the Commune’s long and crowded historiography. He considers his book “the third volume of a collective trilogy on popular organization from 1868 to 1871” (p. vii), the previous two being Alain Dalotel, Alain Faure, and Jean-Claude Freiermuth’s *Aux origines de la Commune: le mouvement des reunions publiques a Paris 1868-1870* (Paris, 1980) and R. D. Wolfe’s dissertation, “The Origins of the Commune: The Popular Organizations of 1868-71” (Harvard University, 1965). The fresh perspective derives from Johnson’s use of the concept of political culture, especially that as-

sociated with such historians of the French Revolution as Lynn Hunt and Keith Michael Baker. His central argument is that “the Paris Commune resulted primarily from revolutionary action by popular organizations and was shaped by the unique political culture fostered within them” (pp. 2-3). This political culture was not solely restricted to the working class; instead, “Clubistes constituted not a social class but rather a culturally and politically defined revolutionary community” (p. 6). His complex and intricate study amply illustrates this point. What follows can only provide a partial summary of the book’s two parts and seven chapters.

Part One examines the origins of the Commune, and Part Two “the new world” which the Communards envisioned. Chapter One, “Club Politics during the Siege of Paris,” traces the development of the political culture surrounding the clubs and committees and in addition shows that the originators of the Republican Central Committee had previously been heads of public meetings which the Imperial Police authorized during the final years of Napoleon III’s empire. Next, he argues that the Republican Central Committee which these militants created “was the single most important organization in the revolutionary movement that preceded the Commune” (p. 23). His detail—including material he recently uncovered in police reports in the *Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris* on the Red Poster of 6 January 1871 (showing that this placard “was more than a cry of outrage”; it “announced an insurrection planned in advance and executed by revolutionary popular organizations” [p. 41])—makes for fascinating reading. The selected quotations of revolutionary club discourse and the details of police frustration at their inability to penetrate secret club meetings are also very interesting. By January 1871 these rev-

olutionaries were ready to mount the next offensive.

Chapter Two (concerning the Revolutionary Socialist Party) persuasively reveals how these revolutionary clubistes consciously achieved a symbiosis between their own movement and the National Guard, revived and expanded to include 300,000 Parisians by the new Republican government following the fall of the Empire on 4 September 1870. As a result “Vigilance committees eventually administered ten arrondissements during the Commune. The rest were administered by National Guard delegations, by the members of the Communal Council elected on March 26, or by councils appointed by those members” (p. 86). Johnson places greater emphasis than do previous authors on the festivities, saluting the 1848 Revolution on February 24 as the start of the “revolutionary cycle that led to the Commune” (p. 78). But at the same time he argues, as countless historians have argued before him, that this revolutionary ferment “culminated in the discovery that a socialist society could be realized only after the seizure of power by a Revolutionary Socialist Party” (p. 74).

The third and fourth chapters fit especially closely together. Chapter Three examines the role of club and committee leaders in creating the Commune “at three distinct levels.” They took over administration, first at the *Hotel de Ville*, and second at the twenty arrondissement *mairies*. Third, they canvassed “the squares, meeting halls, and streets where public opinion was formed and expressed” (p. 89). Chapter Four then delineates the essential role which associations played in creating a wide and welcoming associational life for a whole spectrum of groups and interests. Johnson presents a compelling case that the “new world” the Communards were trying to make “was not some purely utopian vision, that Communards were day-by-day making the revolution” (p. 132), and that the result was not a dictatorship of the proletariat.

In Chapter Five, “The Structures of Club Society,” he first discusses the number of clubs and associations under the Commune and then elaborates on why the Commune was not dictatorial. Johnson admits that it is hard to tell how many associations, committees, and clubs existed under the Commune. At least thirty to thirty-five large popular clubs were functioning by early May, and he has found advertisements for sixty-five separate meetings held by that date. This constant contact “between clubs and vigilance committees, on the one hand, and between vigilance committees and the administration of Paris, on the other, suggests that throughout the city the

revolutionary leadership and the mass of Communards were in direct contact on a daily basis” (p. 172). Club activity was essentially voluntary, insuring that the distance between state and society was minimal. Naturally, he adds, government and governed were much closer in districts dominated by workers and the lower middle class than in affluent ones. Johnson does not speculate on whether this might have increased if the commune had remained in power longer, but the crucial point is that mechanisms were in place, which was not usually the case in twentieth-century revolutionary governments, to insure that the leaders did not lose contact with their base. The chapter also includes profiles of 733 club militants for which he has found detailed information. Club leaders were more likely to be older, married, and more educated than those arrested for participation in the Commune by the military and police of the Versailles government. Nevertheless, these leaders also usually had criminal records under the Empire for political crimes or infractions against public order. This collective portrait reinforces the image of the Commune as one based on the political culture which developed in the popular organizations rather than on a narrow definition of social class.

Chapter Six, “Components of Club Culture,” provides an anthropology of these meetings. He argues that Communards were intent on transforming not merely language and symbols but also behaviors. A good example is the way in which they turned churches into clubs, banished the Catholic liturgy, and put a revolutionary catechism in its place. In one of the few comparisons with Peter Amann’s study of the Parisian clubs of the 1848 Revolution, Johnson notes that anticlericalism was much more pronounced in 1871 than it had been earlier. He also illustrates the trajectory of club life with an in-depth look at one of them, the Club Communal. Like most clubs, this one developed from an earlier public meeting sponsored by the local vigilance committee. When attendance swelled, the club moved to Saint Nicolas des Champs church. Typically, the participants appear to have lived in the immediate vicinity, most members being artisans and shopkeepers. Their leaders and orators included several journalists.

Johnson’s final chapter, “Gender and Clubiste Political Culture,” superbly illustrates the point that “Women’s associations, and popular organizations more generally, had become a means of stating and enforcing an inversion of power relations” (p. 272). Although statements satisfying our notions of complete gender equality are impossible to find, the capacious concept of citizen (both

in its male and female form) enabled women to seize many civic prerogatives. His discussion of the way in which the *Union des femmes pour la defense de Paris et les soins aux blesses* enlarged women's role is excellent, because he is able to show how their association connected to the Commune's overall emphasis on freedom through association.

His conclusion offers convincing arguments to demonstrate why legions of previous historians have underestimated the role of revolutionary action by popular organizations. Such associational action, centered on neighborhood and clubs rather than on the workshop, did not fit the Marxist and, later, the Leninist revolutionary model. Only with the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War did such structures again assume their proper importance. But Johnson is much more tentative when he discusses the Commune's legacy. His comments on the Commune's exacerbation of class conflicts between 1871 and 1914 and on its role in the formation of French Socialism and modern politics are not as innovative as most of his earlier points. It may be a measure of our philosophical and historical distance from 1968 that he does not mention these "events."

This ambitious and provocative rethinking of the

Commune raises a number of questions. For instance, I believe Johnson underestimates the role of informal neighborhood sociability (and in particular my own specialty, the cafe) in the development of the Commune. How could the Commune's political culture have sprung up so fast and been so effective without the development of these social networks? Another related factor not given due weight is the role of the National Guard, especially its vital organizational and sociable functions. Furthermore, in his delineation of club and associational life Johnson does not sufficiently explore how it also proved diffuse and divisive. Finally, the study would have been even richer with more comparisons to Parisian clubs during the Revolutions of 1789 and 1848. However, these points stand out not so much as deficiencies, but rather as inspirations for future research. In short, this book should be on the shelf of everyone interested in the history of revolutions in France. Johnson provides a crucial and valuable lesson for future leftist movements on the importance of association and sociability.

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