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Parties

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THE LEGACY OF THE COMMUNE

The Commune has been variously interpreted. Most famously, Karl Marx and his followers hailed it as the dawn of the age of proletarian revolution and the precursor of a new form of popular revolutionary government, the dictatorship of the proletariat. They praised the courage of its “martyrs,” and the song *L’Internationale*, written by Commune member Eugène Pottier, became a lasting revolutionary anthem. Marx and especially Vladimir Ilyich Lenin argued that the Commune’s failure proved the need for less decency, more ruthlessness, and more disciplined leadership in the future. The Soviet Union later claimed to have fulfilled the Commune’s aims: as a symbolic gesture, Lenin’s body was wrapped in a red Fédéré flag. Later historians have broken away from the Marxist interpretation, stressing the specifically French, republican, and Parisian nature of the Commune. It was, writes Jacques Rougerie, the end of an era, “dusk not dawn.” François Furet concludes that “in this Paris in flames, the French Revolution bade farewell to history.” However, some historians and sociologists, especially in America and Britain, have suggested that in certain other ways—as a specifically urban revolution, for example, in which women played such a prominent part—the Commune can be seen as dawn as well as dusk.

See also *European Revolutions of 1848; Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels*.

ROBERT TOMBS

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ry in China, Mao would write, “If there is to be revolution, there must be a revolutionary party.”

THE JACOBINS: PROTOTYPE OF THE REVOLUTIONARY PARTY

It is one of the ironies of history that the prototype of the revolutionary party, the Jacobins of the French Revolution, did not think of themselves as a revolutionary party at all. Inspired as they were by the political writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Jacobins viewed parties as “factions,” more likely to fragment the “general will” than to assist in its formation. The Jacobin Club, founded in 1789 as the Breton Club, soon called itself the Society of Friends of the Constitution and functioned at first more as a reading and debating society than as a political club. It came to be known as the Jacobins because its members met in a hall of the Jacobin monastic order. Most early members were committed to the ideal of a constitutional monarchy and saw the club as a vehicle for the enlightenment of the citizenry under such a system. Affiliated clubs soon formed in provincial French cities and towns. By March 1791, 426 clubs existed; four months later the number exceeded 900.

By 1793 the Paris club, known as the “mother society,” stood at the center of an impressive national network, corresponding on a regular basis with clubs in virtually every town and major village of France. The Paris club counted among its members nearly every radical deputy in the National Convention and functioned as a sort of shadow parliament. Important issues of the day were discussed first in the Jacobin Club. The will of the club was then carried to the National Convention and communicated to affiliated clubs in the provinces. No true party discipline existed. For example, some provincial clubs disagreed with the Paris club and broke their affiliation in the winter and spring of 1793. But there certainly was a revolutionary élan, and Jacobins thought of themselves as a revolutionary elite. In the Year II, the year of the Terror, the Jacobin network functioned as an informal arm of the Montagnard government, carrying out policies dictated from Paris. With the fall of Maximilien Robespierre in July 1794 the Jacobin clubs went into decline, and in November the government ordered them closed. Thus, the ascendancy of the Jacobin Club was coterminous with the radical phase of the French Revolution, and the ideals of the Revolution, as well as its excesses, came to be explicitly associated with Jacobinism.

The collapse of the Napoleonic empire in 1814 left the ideals of the French Revolution still flickering in Europe, particularly in those regions in which Napoleon’s armies had awakened nationalist aspirations. In Italy and other parts of southern Europe, a secret society known as the Carbonari

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“A revolution is not a dinner party,” wrote Mao Zedong in 1927, yet at the time it was axiomatic that a *revolutionary party* was essential to the success of revolution. Six years earlier Mao had participated in the founding of the Chinese Communist Party at a moment when the revolutionary movement was in disarray in China and there were very few communists in the country. Just twenty years later, in 1948, on the eve of Communist victo-

kept the Jacobin tradition alive. Among the Carbonari's leaders was Filippo Michele Buonarroti, who had been a member of the Jacobin Club in the 1790s. Buonarroti's writings inspired August Blanqui, a Frenchman who remained committed throughout the nineteenth century to the idea that a dedicated group of revolutionary conspirators, championing the ideals of social and political equality, could seize control of the state by launching a successful coup. Blanqui attempted many such coups, all failures, for which he spent many years in prison. His heroic failures served both to sustain the revolutionary tradition in Europe and to convince those who followed that an organized party was necessary.

THE ROAD TO THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION

Most of the revolutionary upheavals that occurred in Europe in the nineteenth century were led by underground parties, and nearly all of them were unsuccessful. Most notable was the wave of revolutions that swept across Europe in 1848. In that same year, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*, which offered both a theory of revolution and a call for the creation of a communist party to lead a proletarian revolution against bourgeois, capitalist society. Marx himself played a leading role in the First Workingman's International, founded in 1864, the first effort to create such a party. But revolutions remained essentially national, not international, affairs, and the failure of the Paris Commune in 1871 seemed to provide conclusive evidence that a proletarian revolution could not succeed without a disciplined revolutionary party in the lead.

That lesson was most cogently applied by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, the founder and leader of the Russian Bolsheviks, initially rivals to the Mensheviks within the Social Democratic Party. Lenin argued that a successful revolutionary party must base its policies and actions on revolutionary theory, must be led by a narrow elite of disciplined and committed activists who were linked to the masses, and must be prepared to overthrow the existing political order by violent means. Although leadership was to be centralized, decisions were to be collective, a practice described as "democratic centralism." The Mensheviks favored a broader-based party and were open to the possibility of gaining power through parliamentary elections. It was Lenin and the Bolsheviks who prevailed, however, seizing power in October 1917 by violent revolution.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks exported their blueprint for revolution, to be led by a disciplined, tightly organized party, through the creation of the Communist International (Comintern) in 1919. Communist parties sprang up throughout western Europe, but the most dramatic developments occurred in China, where in 1905 Sun Yat-sen had founded a loosely structured party known as the Revolu-

tionary Alliance. Comintern advisers urged Sun, and later Chiang Kai-shek, to form a more disciplined party, which became the Kuomintang. Thereafter, China's revolutionary history was a struggle between the Kuomintang, a nationalist party, and the Chinese Communist Party, led by Mao Zedong. Mao built on Lenin's ideas but insisted that the dynamic force in a Chinese revolution would be the peasantry, not the proletariat. Mao introduced the concept of the "mass line," by which party cadres would draw upon and cultivate the revolutionary potential of the peasantry.

Most revolutions in the twentieth century have followed the Russian or Chinese model, with a revolutionary party taking the lead. Examples are the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which still dominates Mexican politics; the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria; the Sandinistas (FSLN) in Nicaragua; and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador. Some revolutions, however, have not been led by a tightly organized party. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was led by Islamic clerics, and organized parties played little role in the wave of revolutions in Eastern Europe in 1989. Solidarity, in Poland, for example, could more properly be described as a social movement than as a revolutionary party.

Just as the increased repressive power of the modern state once made a disciplined, revolutionary party essential to a successful revolution, the advent of the computer age may render the idea of a revolutionary party obsolete, given the capacity of computer networks to disseminate information around the world almost instantaneously and therefore to generate and sustain social movements with revolutionary potential.

See also *Bonarroti, Filippo Michele; Chinese Communist Revolution (1921-1949); European Revolutions of 1820; European Revolutions of 1848; French Revolution (1789-1815); Italian Risorgimento (1789-1870); Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich; Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels; Paris Commune (1871); Russian Revolution of 1917.*

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