

**Quentin Deluermoz, *Commune(s), 1870–1871. Une traversée des mondes au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris (Éditions du Seuil) 2020, 431 p., ISBN 978-2-02-139372-9, EUR 25,00.**

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Quentin Deluermoz's »Commune(s) 1870–1871. Une traversée des mondes au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle« is a welcome and absorbing addition to the body of literature on the Paris Commune. Although the Commune has experienced something of a renaissance over the past decade, which reached its apex with the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2021, it has been a significant point of political and social interest since its inception in March 1871. Deluermoz's book seeks to answer why this is: what about the Commune has made it so enduringly significant and so malleable? What might we, as historians, have missed (p. 8)?

This is not a new question. Academics, politicians, and social commentators have been seeking to provide answers to it for decades. Traditionally, the enduring fascination with the Commune has been explained as the result of two factors. Firstly, its links to earlier, more successful French revolutions from 1789 to 1848. These were routinely emphasised by Communards themselves, both intellectually through the language in which they framed their struggle and practically in the form of objects like barricades.

The explanatory second factor has traditionally been the Russian Revolution of 1917. Many have argued that this turbocharged the Commune's popularity, cementing it as a predecessor to or originator of socialist revolution and introducing it to a much wider global audience. The Commune's enduring popularity lay in its enduring status as either an *aube* or a *crépuscule*, to quote the late Jacques Rougerie: a fixed point in larger narratives about communism, workers' movements, or the modern liberal state.

Deluermoz, along with other recent studies from the likes of Robert Tombs, Éric Fournier, and Laure Godineau, rejects these explanations as too simplistic. Not only do they largely overlook the richness and complexity of the Commune itself, but they are also unable to fully explain either why the Commune was so globally popular before 1917 or why it has remained so after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. This body of literature has sought to complicate and contextualise the Commune, and offer more nuanced interpretations of what happened and why it has remained so popular.

»Commune(s)« builds on this, although Deluermoz executes it on a much broader scale than other studies have. Methodologically, he draws on varied approaches from history and other disciplines such as sociology. Chronologically, he casts back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century



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and forward to the 1890s and beyond. Geographically, he situates the Commune within a vast web of connections and spaces that span from the local to the global, encompassing France, Spain, Mexico, Martinique, China, and the United States amongst others (p. 28).

The book is divided into three parts. Part One situates the Commune in its geographical and temporal contexts. It begins by reconstructing the radicalism of the period after 1848, which took in events like the Italian wars of unification, the American Civil War, and insurrections in Poland (p. 49). These movements could in no way be said to have been coordinated, yet they all contributed to an atmosphere of increasing global radicalism in which key concepts like the organisation of labour and associationism were forged (p. 49). Deluermoz persuasively shows how the Commune both emerged from and added to this atmosphere: how essential these fragmentary connections are to understanding the Commune and how the events of 1871 help to visualise this »vast space of republican and social contestation« (p. 49).

The rest of Part One reconstructs the global repercussions of the Commune. In the French imperial context, these were largely legal and constitutional. Deluermoz shows how the Commune brought to the fore the essentially imperial nature of the French nation-state (p. 61). Metropolitan cohesion was essential to maintaining imperial and global power, which, in turn, was vital to holding the country together. In this context, the Commune acted as a kind of »legal anomaly«, which helped to forge links between radicals fighting state and imperial power in Paris, Marseilles, and Algiers (p. 74).

Overall, the intense global media attention led to the Commune often becoming a »domestic event« in many of the countries in which it was reported on (p. 86). This was not orchestrated by the Communards themselves. Taken up and interpreted according to local needs, the image and idea of the Commune were often entirely removed from the control of its participants (p. 106). The Commune, Deluermoz concludes, played out on multiple different scales in multiple different arenas, creating a »series of disjunctures« (p. 119). As an event, it was enmeshed in the global radicalism of the times, yet also managed at points to reshape it (p. 116).

Part Two moves back to the local. It seeks to reconstruct the »Communard experience« from the ground up and understand what Communards thought they were creating, free from thoughts of its end (p. 124). The purpose, Deluermoz argues, is not to divine a single cause or origin, but to come to a greater understanding of the efficacy of the movement itself (p. 146). He highlights, among other things, the Commune's intense legalism (p. 157), its dissolution of the distinction between public and private, and its politicisation of vast parts of social life (p. 158). It offered a »completely different Republic« (p. 169).



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This part of the book pushes back against characterisations of the Commune as insignificant and unsuccessful. While it may have been fragmented and discordant, and meant many different things to many different people, it nonetheless led to profound (if only momentary) social change (p. 176–177). Rather than trying to assign the Commune a specific meaning, it is better to approach it as a »hétérochronie«, as movement (p. 226), or as an »historical expression of the possible« (p. 325). This helps to explain both its enduring significance and its elusiveness.

Part Three looks at the Commune's import in the decades immediately after its fall. Constitutional and structural change was minimal. Rather than leading to regime change, like previous French revolutions, the violent upheaval of the Commune led instead to the reinforcement of the liberal state (p. 277). Culturally, however, the Commune was transformative, and the idea of the Commune (whether good or bad) took up permanent residence in the French political lexicon, penetrating right to heart of the establishment (p. 296). The Commune, for French citizens and others around the world, came to act as a conduit into different ways of thinking about the world (p. 315–316).

The story of the Commune's posthumous significance is thus not one of simple diffusionism outward from Paris (p. 313), or of a single fixed path towards a well-defined meaning or ideology (p. 316). Rather, it had many and varied uses, it journeyed along knotty paths, and meant many different things to many different people (p. 316). It both emerged from and helped to partially reshape the global radicalism of the 1860s and 1870s, although in heterogenous and highly localised ways.

The book concludes with a coda regarding 1917. While the Russian Revolution may have recharged the significance of references to the Commune, Deluermoz suggests, it did not broaden its appeal or make it globally famous. Rather, it had been those things already since the 1870s. Indeed, the fact that these local reference points already existed may partly explain why the language of the Commune could be relaunched so successfully in 1917 (p. 317). This is an extremely interesting suggestion, and it would perhaps have been good to see it explored in more depth.

»Commune(s)« is a hugely ambitious, exhaustively researched, and enjoyable book. Its arguments are clear and persuasive and it makes a valuable addition to the historiographies of the Paris Commune, modern France, and global radicalism.



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