Politics, Performance, and the Organisational Mediation: The Paris Commune Theatre Law (1969, 10,350 words)

To be radical means to grasp things by the root. And the root for man is man himself.

Marx, *Toward a critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, 1843

And the root for theatre is people showing forth human relations to people.

A corollary, 1969

1. General: Politics and Performance (and Organisation)

In a certain sense, politics -- the organisation of people's living together -- is always implicit in theatre performance, whose one defining trait is the presence of figures showing forth human relations in the 'holy circle' of the stage. The only matter of special interest here would be to find out when, why, and how the normative framework of human relations on the stage begins to differ so radically from a code acceptable to the audience that the performance has to explicate, thematise, and make programmatic its new and strange ethics and politics. In modern history -- say, from the French Revolution on -- this explication has been related to the revolutionary upheavals of the body politic. In such cases, theatres as institutions and as creative ensembles have had to abandon their dream of a homogeneous audience which shares a common ethics with the stage and is at the same time representative of the society as a whole.

At moments of sufficient social tension some institutions and ensembles have been led to intervene more directly in everyday politics. Sometimes a theatre performance was supposed to be a spark for action on the world stage (as a rule in a capital city): Shakespeare created a paradigm for the mechanics of such a play within a play in Hamlet's Mousetrap. A memory of *Richard II* with its abdication scene being used by Essex's rebelling faction might well have gone into the making of the Players in *Hamlet* and the antecedents and effects of their little play, right up to the doctoring of the text by the politically minded patron of the performance. If Piscator (as we keep hearing from his pupil Miss Malina) really thought that the performance of Auber's *La Muette de Portici* -- a rather stuffy opera about Masaniello's revolution in Naples -- which sparked the 1830 Belgian revolt was the only instance of a theatre's effectively participating in historical events, one must charitably suppose that this was a manifestation of his Greenwich Village blues rather than of his knowledge of theatre history.

Piscator was right, though, if he was speaking about the last hundred years. With the growth of population and of urban and informational density, the thousand or so people gathered in a theatre have become far too small a percentage of the whole to be directly effective; the play-within-the-play dwindled to one marginal item in the mouths of Osrics. With the appearance of new media supplanting the classical pulpit, forum (club or coffeehouse), and stage -- that is with the rise of the mass press, mass socio-political organisations, and especially cinema, radio, and television -- theatre as an institution found itself relegated to a sometimes prestigious but certainly marginal and almost elitist position in social life. The groups wishing to exert a direct political influence could no longer be satisfied with the Shakespearean forms of a *Macbird! or The Screens* (Websterian or Fordian forms in this case). The generation which had produced the short-lived but extraordinary spectacle

hybrid of Happenings went easily outside the 'holy circle' and into the streets of New York, Paris or Chicago. The cause sanctified every street corner and made a backdrop of any wall -- and that is where the audience was, too, mostly looking through the camera eye (by courtesy of sensationalist commercial television corporations).

Such a movement may be logical, and perhaps even necessary, but it tends to pull *theatre* as known in the European tradition (i.e. based on an organised story) back again into the sturdier and more primitive *spectacle* form. Perhaps this is instinctive wisdom -- the crab of drama pulling its tender and vulnerable braincase back into the symbiotic shell of spectacle. The streetcorner mime and storyteller has survived the worst civilisation crashes in history; in the earthquakes to come, the light travelling 'guerrilla theatre' species may be the only chance for the survival of the theatre genus. Yet the term 'theatre' would then have to take on a meaning quite different from the present institutionalised symbiosis of drama and spectacle: the acting ensemble would contract out of the sessile institution, drama would be left to libraries or bonfires as the case may be, and spectacle revert to gesture and music, with such minimal verbal elements as are needed for minimal information and not for the cognitive and poetic, which demands redundancy.

Any modern actor is an intellectual in direct proportion to his making sense as an actor. Now intellectuals in our time generally, and with some historical justification, distrust organisations (when they don't kowtow before them). But for such a distrust, it seems obvious that much more attention would already have been paid to a third aspect of the field of politics and performance. This third aspect is neither politics in performances nor performances in politics, but the *organisational mediation* between politics and performances. What kind of organised ensembles (groups of performers) can and should exist if theatre art is neither a platonic idea in a timeless heaven nor a profit-oriented business in measured time? How can a performing group be organised when a coherent tradition of performing together for several years is necessary for any significant spectacle? Such an organisational mediation is crucial for both classical (ruling class) and anarchist (plebeian) theatre, for drama and 'mixed media' performing. For example, the excruciating incoherence (in their own terms) of most Happenings is surely due to the one-shot nature of their performing groups. Or, to employ what seems a clinching argument, somebody like myself who does not at all believe that classical dramatic theatre has outlived its usefulness and ought to be jettisoned, can be as interested in this field or theme as somebody who believes the opposite. The field might be called the politics of organising significant performances.

This theme has a general and a particular aspect. Its general aspect merges with an intelligent theory and practice of politics *tout court*, or, if you wish, with a critical anthropology: what kind of organisation of human relations is required (counter-indicated, optimal, etc.) for a given kind of spectacle? Or better: what kind of a society and social ethos is correlative to a given kind of spectacle, since it provides the spectacle with audience, themes, and points of view? Yet parallel with our general thinking about this general aspect (as citizens) we are (as people connected with theatre) directly faced with the *particular* aspects of spectacle organisation, and we cannot wait for society in general to straighten itself out and hand us solutions on a platter. 'Theatre now!' may be as impossible as 'Freedom now!' in any full sense: yet without such an endeavour there would be no Theatre (or Freedom) tomorrow either. Organisational liberation is a necessity of life, and a liberating theatre organisation is a necessity of theatre life. This necessity can only be met by a coherent and significant methodology.

2. Particular: On Modern Types of Theatre Organisation

Significant theatre in our civilisation has, until the last hundred years or so, always had an individual patron susceptible to lapsing into good taste or at least tolerating it. In western Europe, individual, aristocratic patronage collapsed in the eighteenth century; in central and eastern Europe it lasted until the mid-19th century; while in the USA it never had a chance. Individual capitalist management began to collapse at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The new breed of monopolists (Shuberts in the USA, Tennent and Littler in Britain) not only quickly grew into impersonal enterprises but also ceased to support significant -- cognitive, poetic -- theatre. The big corporations in primary production have always practised patent hoarding and suppression of new processes on a mass scale; yet they never could do it quite as completely as did the theatre monopolists. Bound up with language, most theatre is commercially safe from international competition; some Craigian scenography and, of course, the Stanislavskian directing and acting which is the crowning achievement of 19th-century theatre, could be incorporated here and there in prestige productions without causing a real and permanent lapse into 20th-century significance. On the other hand, theatre monopoly had a huge investment in obsolete productive forces to protect: these 'productive forces' embrace the godawful buildings in the capital cities (especially New York) and the provinces as well as the organisational rules and customs of production in theatre industry, including prominently the Fuehrer principle and the carrot-and-stick (sell yourself or starve) incentive. Modest innovations in some aspects of production organisation, such as the Group Theatre, quickly failed because of their compromising modesty; potentially deeper going ones, such as the Federal Theatre, were quickly hounded out of existence. Nevertheless, these two groups and their echoes account for most of the significant US theatre in the 1930s and 1940s.

All this can only begin to suggest some main diachronic lines leading up to the argument (which deserves book-length development) that in our time no form of direct financial patronage which exerts power over theatre institutions and ensembles is capable of producing a significant theatre in any temporally consistent or spatially embracing sense: anything more, in fact, than the odd flash in the pan -- a fortuitous meeting of text and actor or director which is statistically bound to happen even at the worst of times

In a somewhat more systematic and synchronic form, the argument would run as follows. The three main roads which today seem open to the theatre as institutionalised art are: (1) monopoly control (commercialisation), (2) State control at various levels (nationalisation or municipalisation), and (3) self-management guaranteed by an economic and political democracy working upward from community level (socialisation).

Commercialisation implies in sociological terms the ideological rule of the economically dominant class. In aesthetic terms it means, in a technologically obsolete industry, the rule of the *ancien régime* in theatre arts: conservative Individualism, inert illusionism, and the sentimental pieties of the more-or-less well-made play. It is at best limited to and by the pre-1914 taste, however refurbished (for example Stanislavski plus psychoanalysis).

The effect of *nationalisation* depends on the historical role and present character of the State in various countries. In conjunction with conservative control over repertory and style, it can be instrumental in preventing the break-up of bourgeois (usually Victorian) tastes -- for example, in the Soviet Union after the 1920s, or in Teutonic-influenced *Mitteleuropa* where those tastes were until the 1960s not seriously threatened within the theatres. In other cases, enlightened nationalisation (especially at the municipal or regional level) can be beneficial, insofar as it may give a relatively free hand to various *de facto* self-managing ensembles,

usually grouped round a well-known figure (e.g. the first Soviet decade with Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, Tairov, Mikhoels, etc.; the Berliner Ensemble with Brecht; Vilar and Planchon in France; the Piccolo Teatro in Milan, etc). Yet in all cases, sooner or later, the creative element of the ensemble will come into conflict with the dominant State or even foundation bureaucracy, since it will be unable to respect the limits of the bureaucratic taste without becoming a museum such as the Comédie Française or the Vienna Burgtheater. That is why, in our day, people like Vilar and Strehler came to a dead end and had to resign.

Finally, only a socialised theatre, a *system of associations of creative theatre workers*, has a historical chance of achieving a coherent and significant body of theatre for our age -- much as the Elizabethan cluster of theatres achieved it between the time of Marlowe and that of Jonson. This follows of necessity if one accepts the strong argument for identifying the enjoyment specific to our age with a scenically organised insight into, and understanding of, contemporary possibilities – latent as well as actual-- for human relations. (See Brecht's *Short Organon* for a first theoretical formulation; but the whole of modern theatre juxtaposes what is with what could or should be.) Since these possibilities are startlingly variegated and new, they have to be searched for by a coherent group of theatre workers united by a common structure of feeling and view of people in the world, by common working ethics. (This does not necessarily mean a common ideology or lay religion, though it often turns out to be the none-too-happy case, e.g. the Living Theatre).

Now any well-trained Individualistic (Broadway) actor can follow standard rules of empathising with the *known* human relations by studying different roles each time in a different theatre, and trusting that their stereotyped nature and the director will coordinate discrepancies; and of course the star system is even easier, since the discrepancies between the star and the rest of the cast do not have to be ironed out. But there is no possibility whatsoever of delving for the New, of dialectically juxtaposing actual and latent possibilities on the stage, except by long cooperative work. The ideal Broadway actor is an interchangeable Pawn ready to leap into any role at a moment's notice; and the Queen (star) is always the Queen just as the Castles (co-stars) are always flanking her. Since the Pawns must also be self-propelled, they are promised that those which survive the move in and out of different squares (role statuses) into the endgame will get a 'break', i.e. a chance at becoming a Queen -- if you are not gobbled up in the hotly contested final square. Or to change this from chess into biblical imagery, the (few) righteous hardworking Marthas who also turn out to be God-favoured Marys will enjoy a revelation, a favourable Judgement Day when they shall finally sit at the right-hand side of the *New York Times*, yea even in televised flesh and not seen as through a mere missing fourth wall darkly. For theatre people encoded in such a mystical way, an intelligent search for the New is institutionally precluded.

To take the first example that comes to mind: *Waiting for Godot*, if one is to believe the critics, failed to find four top-grade commercialised actors in US theatre who would know how to play Beckett (apparently, there was one lucky throwback among them). That is no reflection on anybody's potential talent, but simply on everybody's educational context. How can you play *Endgame* if you don't know whether you are a Pawn or a checkmated King? Much less Brecht who also wants you to know *why* you are a Pawn and not a King! A full range of actors for Brecht (or, say, Genet) thus seems still unachievable for commercial theatre. In other words, no US Brecht or Genet could be performed by the commercial theatre, while the 'regional' theatres, such as the Guthrie or the Arena, though trying for a cooperative significance, have not fully established a viable alternative. Albee and Williams, reporters of the hysterical breakdown of Individualistic relations, remain the best Broadway can give today; and the undoubted talents of authors of *The Glass Menagerie* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia*

Woolf (both early but unsurpassed works) are in turn profoundly inflected by the theatre for which they write. Paradoxically, a self-managing collectivism turns out to be the only way back to really free, personal creative competition.

The conclusion seems inescapable that if there is any future for significant theatre (dramatic and other) it lies in theatre groups organised on the basis of socialised self-management: run by the ensemble itself, with certain modalities of responsible interplay with the communities from which the audiences are drawn. (This is not community control, except insofar as the community may be thought of as an association of theatregoers, parallel to the theatre group as an association of theatre-makers -- the boundaries between these two groups are becoming rather fluid by now anyway.) Significantly, if one looks at the organisational forms of spontaneous new ensembles founded by the young in the last fifty years -- from the Soviet TRAM through European student theatre of the 1940s and 1950s, to the Living and subsequent US groups -- a more or less socialised self-management is their one common hallmark. All the ways. lead to Rome and highwaymen lurk on all of them.

The central discussion, then, into which I cannot now enter but which I would hope to see evolving among the people practically concerned, would not concern whether but how – what forms of self-management, and most importantly what interplays with what communities, are to be sought? As a critic from afar, I can decently contribute only methodological comment on certain practices, and historical examples and lessons which might prevent the battering at some cognitively open doors. The first contribution I tried briefly to approach above; and I may perhaps record that it is based on 20 or so years of intimate acquaintance (as theatregoer, theatre critic, member of theatre boards, and artistic advisor to a festival) with State, commercial, and self-management theatres. The second contribution -- a crucial historical example of organised discussion on theatre organisation – I propose to approach next through a brief survey of the 1871 Paris Commune law on theatres.

3. Individual: The Paris Commune on Theatre Organisation

> Do not expect from the Commune more than from yourself!
>
> Brecht, *Days of the Commune*, 1949

My purpose is not to discuss the 1871 Paris Commune, or even its brief practical endeavours to reorganise theatres as self-governing associations which would play for mass, popular audiences. Of course, such endeavours are implied in the debate which follows and form by themselves a very significant link in a vision and yearning as old as theatre and human creativity. That vision was resurrected in the theories of Diderot and Rousseau, in the practice of the 1789 Revolution, in utopian socialist thought down to 1848 and Wagner's essays on theatre written under that impulse. After 1871, it was to inspire Romain Rolland's and Firmin Gémier's concepts of 'théâtre populaire', Nietzsche's revaluation of Greek theatre, and most importantly the Soviet post-revolutionary theatre. Through these channels it has flowed into the mainstream of a worldwide 20th century debate on the rebirth of theatre. However, it is possible here to explain only the immediate contexts necessary for understanding the debate on theatre organisation in the Council (or Assembly), the highest body of the Paris Commune.

The Rhetorical Tradition Behind the Debate

To begin with, these are only the minutes of the debate, and anybody who has ever read the minutes of any meeting that did not strictly deal with facts and figures will appreciate how impossible it is to present creative thought in the best of digests. Second, the *Council members* (64 in all; no attendance record for this session was available to me) were strongly influenced by the French middle-class 19th-century political oratory and journalism. They were of preponderantly petty-bourgeois origin: 'clerks, physicians, teachers, lawyers, journalists', as their colleague and historian Lissagaray observes. (Of the speakers in the debate, Vaillant and Rastoul had been physicians, Urbain a teacher, the chairman Régère a veterinary surgeon, and Cournet, Pyat, and Vésinier – alas -- journalists.) True, 25 members of working-class origin also sat in the council -- a proportion unheard of in any bourgeois democracy then or since -- but they were overwhelmed both in number and, more importantly, in political style. Only a few, such as in this debate Langevin and notably Frankel, spoke with a distinctive voice. Ideological allegiances cut across social origin and divided the Council into a rainbow majority composed of 25-30 'radicals' interested primarily in political and not social change (e.g. Urbain and Régère) and 15-20 followers of either 'Blanquist' or 'neo-Jacobin' terrorist voluntarism (Pyat being the most pernicious phrasemonger among them). Sincere adherents of a 'democratic and social Republic,' this majority was under the sway of First Republic, especially Jacobin, rhetorics and forms, quite heedless of a very different situation. They liked theatrical gesture, posed as continuators of 'our forebears' of 1789-94 (even the realistic Vaillant did not escape this cliché), and were often as touchy as stars or, worse, hopeful understudies. Many of them were dominated by a magniloquent extremist phraseology from journalistic and political combats of the 1860s, falling easily into such contradictory bohemian stances as a demand for political terror but economic and institutional *laissez faire*. The minority -- revolutionary socialists of all shades, doctrines, and degrees of clarity -- consistently opposed the extremist political violence of the majority and demanded thoroughgoing societal changes. Though never organised formally, members of the Workers' International Association supplied the backbone of this minority and indeed of all socioeconomical measures of the Commune, as evidenced here in the endeavours of Vaillant, Frankel (the only one who could be called a Marxist), and Langevin.

For these reasons, most (though not all) speakers used in moments of such stress and lack of time as during this debate, going on amid heavy military operations -- and possibly the shorthand summariser helped this along -- a certain political jargon which is always difficult to translate because it is bound to sound faintly ludicrous out of context. (The benevolent reader should just imagine how the minutes of a US Senate Committee or indeed of the executive of any English language radical group would sound in French!) For example, a term such as 'la pensée' should probably, in this context, be rendered as 'creativity', and not as 'thought', but I have hesitated to foist interpretations on a historical document whenever not strictly necessary for an intelligible translation.

The Politics and Ideology of the Conflict over Theatre

The debate on theatre was sparked by a provisional draft decree submitted by Édouard Vaillant, the delegate for education ('enseignement': but the term was applied in a very wide sense corresponding probably to what we would today call cultural affairs, i.e. both education and the arts). A delegate was chairman of one of ten Commissions or Delegations to which the Commune -- rejecting the division into legislative and executive branches -- had delegated day

to day executive power. Each was therefore composed of about half a dozen Council members acting as a collegiate body which fused the functions of a parliamentary committee and a ministry. Though a Delegate might often be a person of considerable prestige, all decisions were reached by majority vote.

Vaillant's general policy was to assist a process of theatre socialisation as against its earlier commercial or court regimes. His delegation, and the Council as a whole, had already entrusted the Paris Artists' Federation, chaired by the eminent painter Gustave Courbet, with the organisation of expositions such as the annual Salon and with running the galleries and museums. It had thus implicitly accepted -- without prejudging the role of Commune supervision -- the aims of the Artists' Federation, defined in its statutes as 'the government of the art world by the artists' with the purpose of 'a preservation of the treasures of the past; a showing forth and valorisation of all elements of the present; and a culture-induced regeneration of the future.' Yet, the immediate occasion of Vaillant's draft decree was a struggle on his 'second front' inside the Council itself, against authoritarian, State control by the Delegation for General Security (also referred to as 'Societal Security') -- in practice, leaders of the Commune police and intelligence service under the redoubtable Rigault and his lieutenant Cournet.

On May 8, 1871, Cournet had fired the manager of the Paris Opéra for sabotaging the instructions of the Commune and appointed in his stead not only a new manager (an opera singer) but also a board of six members of whom four were security functionaries. Since theatre was at that time a great popular favourite and moulder of attitudes, any change in its state led to sensitive political reactions. Cournet's clumsy act had an immediate adverse effect on the Paris circles connected with the theatre, and Vaillant hastened to introduce a bill delimiting the jurisdictions of police and culture. However, any such bill also had to spell out the principle of self-management or association in the theatres, which then superseded the rights of individual proprietors. (These rights had dwindled fast in the 1860s: some privileged theatres had remained court-controlled, while others were being swiftly gobbled up by powerful outside trusts such as the Société Nantaise; private property had already been to a considerable degree divorced from personal creativity.)

Vaillant's proposal was warmly seconded by Urbain, a member of the Delegation for Education. As soon as openly challenged, even Cournet -- although palpably offended by references to the high-handedness of his police (of 'Societal Security', as he rectified pedantically) -- curtly agreed that theatres should be under the jurisdiction of the Education Commission. Vaillant's groping for an arrangement which would conciliate self-management by theatre artists with an overall accountability to his Delegation was thus attacked principally from another side. For in the Council, balancing the extreme of authoritarian Statism, there was a much stronger anarchoidal extremism, insistently represented in this debate by Pyat. Following Proudhon's posthumous book on art (*Du principe de l'art et de sa destination sociale*, 1865), whose basic thesis was that no government had the right to deal with art because any such contact would corrupt art, Pyat let loose two long diatribes (I calculate them at about 15-20 minutes) whose repetitive tenor -- often garnished with dubious facts, such as the one about Molière's theatre -- went squarely against not only governmental but any organised societal intervention into art matters by means of law or public subsidy. In that spirit, Pyat's ideological ally Vésinier countered Vaillant's motion with one of his own, which was eventually reduced to the amendment about abolishing 'all subsidies and privileges'. This finally became part of the Commune decree, although the abolition of subsidies (as Frankel pointed out by his question to Vésinier) was contradictory to the decree's aim of favouring self-managing theatre associations.

Although Vaillant had not worked out a mechanism for gearing single self-managing ensembles to an overall policy on theatre as a public service -- a problem admitting anyway of no solution without large-scale practical experiments over many years, or even decades -- his basic approach was quite clear: 'Our revolution has the duty to ensure the means of labour and production to the worker,' and 'theatres should belong to associations of artists': this is the vantage point from which he refused both 'State art' and freedom for proprietors (of buildings in his day; also of copyrights and investment capital in ours) to dictate to creative workers. Pursuing a very interesting line of thought -- also to be found in Marx -- he observed that 'exploitation in art... is perhaps even more intolerable than in a factory,' and ended by noting that even singers and actors are people: not instruments for and objects of consumption but subjects of economic needs and human justice. Theatres are 'not only throats but also stomachs', a witty counter-parable to Menenius Agrippa's one of the body politic. (This was to be picked up, from here or from the common basis in socialist doctrine, as applicable to plebeians in general in Brecht's adaptation of *Coriolanus*, see my chapter 7 in *To Brecht and Beyond*)

The clearest and most consistent exponent of a socialist golden mean between étatism and anarchy in this debate was Léo Frankel or Fränkel, a revolutionary worker-cum-intellectual (a prototypic 'organic intellectual' in Gramsci's sense) from Hungary. Tactfully prefacing his remarks by declaring he agreed both with Vaillant (on self-management) and Pyat (against State control), Frankel in fact rejected both Pyat's intellectual anarchism and some of Vaillant's inconsistencies. He pleaded for a full self-management by theatre workers' associations, including their right to elect the theatre manager. At the same time, he recognised the right and duty of 'the State as ensemble of individualities' (i.e. of a societal totality truly representative of public will rather than of a professional administrative apparatus, bureaucratic or parliamentarian) to deal with theatre and the arts generally. His attitude is the closest prefiguration of subsequent European socialist and revolutionary practice, most notably in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and Yugoslavia in the 1950s and 1960s.

The Time Context

An indication of the Paris Commune's tendencies of development can be found in the fact that after the Theatre Law was adopted at least one general meeting of opera artists (singers, musicians, dancers, and technical staff) was called to consider measures necessary for 'substituting for the exploitative regime in the theatre a regime of associations.' The newspaper of the Council member and future historian Lissagaray, *Le Tribun du peuple*, demanded that other 'interested citizens' from outside theatre (librettists, composers, etc.) should also be allowed to participate in the meeting. This brought up a promising possibility of reconciling general public interests and particular self-governing rights. Vaillant himself, as this debate shows, also envisaged that eventually a Delegation for Art, delimited from school matters, would be set up. As one can see from the session chairman's remarks about dance vs. education, such an idea would have had further supporters in the Council. But it was already too late. The debate itself, held on May 19, had had to be interrupted after Urbain's speech for urgent military considerations. Two days later, on the day the Theatre Law was published, the Versailles government army broached the defences of Paris. The final remark by Dr Rastoul, that he regretted two hours spent on theatre, was thus pragmatically right, and this almost Arcadian discussion while the long knives were being sharpened on the doorstep was to a certain point Quixotic. But from a non-pragmatic, cognitive point of view, Don Quixote is at least as right as Sancho; and this touching idealism is also a measure of the Paris Commune's historical significance. Its best people were fanatically determined to introduce into human relations,

regardless of practical roadblocks, 'Freedom now' -- a system of free association of all producers.

The history of theatre in the last hundred years turned into different channels. Instead of a time for general assemblies of theatre workers, the next seven days (May 21-28) became the infamous 'bloody week', when between 15,000 and 40,000 Communards (the exact number is still unknown) were executed in the Paris streets. This solved the question of theatre organisation for quite a while. But even in strict theatre or drama terms, there was a price to pay. Towards the end of the century, the tolerant liberal critic Emile Faguet sighed publicly: 'Every evening all Paris theatres play the same piece under different titles. All of us in France feel we are rotting away. This general malaise has been felt more or less clearly since 1815; but it has turned into anxiety since 1870. What will come of this? A renaissance or a final disaster?'

The Personal Context

The persons in this debate were both individual and representative or typical (see 'Cast' below). Only two points will be noted here. First, parallel with its class composition, the Commune Council had an age composition quite different from established political norms. The Versailles government's youngest member was 53, its head, Thiers, 74, and its average age 63 years. Only five of the 64 Commune Council members were over 60 (including Pyat); the average age of its two subsequent supreme bodies, the Executive and the Committee for Public Safety, was 38. Of those taking part in the debate, Vaillant had 31 years, Régère 55, Cournet 33, Pyat 51, Vésinier 48, Frankel 27, and Rastoul 36.

Second, the protagonists -- Vaillant, the mostly silent Cournet, Pyat, and Frankel -- were members of the Executive Council and/or Delegates: they were representative figures of the Commune and of its ideological crosscurrents. That is perhaps what gave the following debate, beneath its specific verbiage, a classical clearness and dramatic rhythm worthy of Shaw, or should we say Racine?

4. Exemplary: The Debate on the Theatre Law of the Paris Commune, May 19, 1871 (uncut text of minutes) [1]

Cast (in order of their appearance)

Edouard Vaillant (1840-1915): engineer, doctor of sciences, physician, studied in France and Germany, Blanquist, member of the International and of the Central Committee of the Paris National Guard. Member of the Council's Executive Commission and Delegate for Education. Condemned to death after the Commune, took refuge in London, politically active, left the International as 'insufficiently revolutionary' after its 1872 Congress. Newspaper editor in France after the 1880 amnesty, from 1893 Member of Parliament for a plebeian suburb of Paris, from 1901 in the United Socialist Party. For all his vacillations into extremes, Vaillant was one of the most interesting and significant figures of the Commune and of French politico-intellectual life of the last third of 19th century. (See M. Dommanget's biography.)

Raoul Urbain (1836-1902): private teacher, political orator, one of the most extreme and controversial members of the 'majority,' member of Delegations for Education and for War.

Condemned to perpetual hard labour after the Commune, after the amnesty worked as an obscure clerk in the Paris prefecture, far from politics.

Dominique-Théodore Régère de Montmore (1816-?): chairman of the May 19 session, veterinary surgeon, political orator, member of the 'majority' and of the Delegation for Finance. After the Commune sentenced to deportation to a fortress, where history loses him.

Frédéric-Etienne Cournet (1838-85): clerk in commerce, then newspaper editor, several times imprisoned as Blanquist, fought in the Prussian siege of Paris. Member of the 'majority', of the Executive Commission, of Delegations for General Security and for War, Delegate of Security (head of police) April 24- May 13. Condemned to death after the Commune, took refuge in England, Blanquist delegate to the 1872 Congress of the International. After the amnesty. journalist and Blanquist activist in Lyons and Paris.

Félix Pyat (1810-89): journalist, also writer of social problem plays, such as *Le Chiffonnier de Paris*, 1847, active in the 1848 revolution, radical deputy in the Second Republic, refugee after 1849 in Belgium and England. Returned to France in 1869 to pursue energetic anti-government journalism, fined and imprisoned, fled again to England. Returned to Paris after the fall of Napoleon III, founded the newspaper *Combat* and, when that was suppressed, *Le Vengeur*. One of the best known opposition journalists in Paris, he seems however to have taken no part in the insurrection which proclaimed the Commune, and he disappeared as soon as street fighting began in May. A leader of extremist Jacobins in the Council, member of its Executive Commission and later of the Committee for Public Safety. Condemned to death after the Commune, lived in exile, re-entered political journalism after the amnesty, Member of Parliament in 1888. Pyat was 'typical of the ineffectual, idealistic, and bombastic revolutionaries' (Mason), 'a good pamphleteer but detestable politician, without clear ideas, without programme (Bruhat--Dautry--Tersen). His attitudes and his taste for longwinded oratory are well exemplified by this debate.

Camille-Pierre Langevin (dates unknown): metal-turner, a leading member of the Paris section of the International, imprisoned in 1870, sergeant in the Paris National Guard; member of the 'minority' with vaguely Proudhonist leanings, member of the Delegation for Justice. Emigrated after the Commune, returned in 1880 and devoted himself to organising workers' consumer co-operatives. A good representative of the workers' rank and file in the Commune. Brecht's Langevin in *The Days of the Commune* seems to fuse the real prototype with Fränkel and the author's imagination.

Pierre Vésinier (1823-1902): journalist, exiled after 1852, became the secretary of Eugène Sue. Expelled from several countries for anti-Bonapartist writings. Member of the London section of the International, returned to France in 1868 as political journalist and speaker, imprisoned, then fought in the Prussian siege of Paris. Edited the newspaper *Paris Libre* and later also the *Journal Officiel*. 'Jacobin' member of the 'majority' and of the Delegation for Public Services, assistant secretary of Council. Condemned to death after the Commune, took refuge in London where he quarrelled with almost all other refugees and wrote venomous attacks against them. Returned to France after 1880, seems to have abandoned radical politics. Another unfortunate example of the journalistic 'radical bohemians' in the Commune.

Léo Fränkel (1844-96): born in Budapest, became a socialist while a student in Germany, imprisoned with Bebel in 1864, exile in England and friend of Marx, founded the Lyons section of the International in 1867. Jewellery worker in Paris, condemned with Langevin in the 1870 trial, after the fall of the Second Empire reconstituted the French Council of the International. One of the most realistic 'minority' members, Delegate for Labour, Industry, and Exchanges [i.e. Commerce], 'in fact, with 27 years, the first minister for labour of the first workers' state' (Bruhat--Dautry--Tersen), introduced a series of pioneering labour laws and measures. Wounded in the final fighting, condemned to death, refugee in London where he continued to work for the International. Returned to Hungary in 1876 and was one of the pioneers of the Hungarian socialist movement. Imprisoned 1882-84 after a strike, moved to Vienna and worked for newspapers. Returned to Paris and participated in the 1889 founding Congress of the Second International as well as in its subsequent congresses. Lived in penury as correspondent of a German socialist newspaper, died from pneumonia (read exhaustion). His final wish was to be buried at the Père Lachaise cemetery of the Communards, in a red flag. An exemplary 19th-century socialist. (See M. Aranyossi's biography (Berlin, 1957).

Dr Paul Philémon Rastoul (1835-75): physician in a poor quarter of Paris, political orator, member of 'minority' and Delegation of Public Works, concerned primarily with the ambulance service. Condemned after the Commune to deportation to New Caledonia, drowned while attempting to escape.

Minutes

Citizen Vaillant, Delegate for Education: I am asking the council to reach a decision in the matter of delimitation of functions.

The theatres are up to a point within the jurisdiction of [the Delegation for] Security, whose duty it is to supervise the premises and to ensure the maintenance of morality. But theatres should primarily be looked upon as eminent educational organisations, and in a Republic they should be looked upon as such only. Our forebears thought of them in this way, so that the Convent by its decree of Germinal, Year II, decided the supervision of theatre should be entrusted to the Commission for the People's Education. The [Delegation for] General Security should still be entrusted with supervising the premises; but we should not forget that, just as the Revolution of 1789 gave the land to the peasants, our Revolution of March 18 has the duty to ensure the means of labour and production to the worker.

Theatres should belong to associations of artists, and it is to that end that the Delegation for Education has thought it necessary to assemble all artists. I am asking the Council to ratify by its decision that theatres are within the jurisdiction of the Delegation for Education. Let the Delegation for Security exercise a strict supervision, especially in the circumstances of war in which we now find ourselves. But the [Delegation for] Security has just appointed the director of the Opera; this fact seems to prejudge [the conduct of] Council policy.[2]

I am therefore asking the Council for a favourable decision, and I hope to obtain it.

Citizen Urbain: Citizen Vaillant has already proved his competence in the educational field, but I must add to this that the power of the police over theatres should be limited exclusively to keeping order during performances. As far as the putting on of plays is concerned, the best we can do is to put the theatres under the jurisdiction of Education. Theatres are the widest and best means of the people's education. The former governments made theatre into a means of teaching all the vices, we shall make it a means of teaching all the civic virtues. We cannot

tolerate any more the vile spectacles in theatre, we shall transmute a nation of corrupt people[3] into a nation of citizens! (*Cries of 'very good'*)

♦ ♦ ♦

Citizen Chairman[4]: Citizen Vaillant asked at the beginning of our session that we solve the theatre problems; he insists that a discussion be opened on this matter.

Citizen Cournet: I believe that theatres are a means for the education of the people, and that they should be transferred to [the Delegation for] Education.

Citizen Chairman: I must confess that I personally do not quite see the connection between education and choreography. Still, I shall read Vaillant's motion:
In accordance with the principles outlined by the First Republic and expressed in the Law of Germinal 11, Year II, The Commune decrees:

> Theatres belong under the jurisdiction of the Delegation for Education in all matters of their organisation and administration. The Delegation is mandated to put a stop to the system of theatre exploitation by a manager or by a group of entrepreneurs, and to substitute for it in the shortest possible time a system of association.
>
> Édouard Vaillant.'

Citizen Félix Pyat: I do not understand citizen Vaillant's proposal, nor do I understand citizen Cournet's. I cannot tolerate the interference of the State into the field of theatre nor into the field of literature. In a State which is still in swaddling clothes, theatres need the patronage of a Richelieu, of a Maecenas; but in a free country, which proclaims freedom of personality and freedom of thought, putting theatres under the tutelage of the State is un-Republican. You have a right to supervise the carrying out of the thought's faculties, but to outline its path--that is tyranny, not only unbearable but also fatal for thought.

It is the glory of French theatre that it freed itself from tutelage. When Molière founded his theatre, an officially licensed theatre already existed, but this was not the theatre of Molière. Molière founded his theatre just as a contrast to the one subsidised and patronised by the State. In this moment, I am not opposed to an attentive supervision of theatres, but I stand for an absolute right of individual thought to express itself in the form it wishes to.

Citizen Vaillant: Citizen Pyat has perhaps not grasped the import of my proposal. The First Republic did not think of the freedom of theatre in the way we think of it today. It managed them in a somewhat dictatorial way. For example, it ordered them to stage a given play three times a week. But bear in mind that when one acts justly, one always acts in the name of freedom. And when the State is the Commune, it is its duty to intervene often, to intervene [into matters of art] in the name of justice and freedom.

I think that this is a field of major interest for the State, where intense political activity is called for. More than that, it is in our interest that the police should not meddle in societal matters. We have [instead] to try building up socialist institutions everywhere.

A specific feature of the 19th-century revolution is that wherever a product exists [it demands that] the producer should be fully remunerated. The product of [work to] the worker--- this axiom of truth is applicable to all; this truth must be applied to the artist in equal measure as to any other producer.

In art, exploitation is perhaps even more intolerable than in a factory; all theatre personnel are exploited from top to bottom. A dancer has to sell herself in order to live. In a word, this was robbery from beginning to end.

It is indispensable to institute in the theatre a regime of equality, the regime of association. The duty of the police is only to deal with guarantees of morality and with security measures.

I demand the formation of a special Delegation for [jurisdiction over] works of art; but it is clear that the police has no place in such a Delegation, which should properly be within the framework of the educational system. It is the duty of the general theatre administration to change the present regime of property and privilege into a system of associations which is wholly in the artists' hands.

Citizen Cournet: Theatres did not fall within the jurisdiction of the police, but of the [Delegation for] General Security -- this is the first error I want to point out.

The second error is to believe that General Security has prejudged [the conduct of] Commune policy by appointing the director of the Opera.

Citizen Felix Pyat: I am very happy to see that citizen Vaillant has agreed that theatre problems are a matter of association. Association is better than management, especially management by one man. But allow me to note that you cannot forbid that private enterprises should possess managements. You cannot declare that no Paris citizen has a right to open a theatre.

I come now again to your point of view: if you want to institute association in the theatres supported by the State, you have that right since you are paying. But I am first of all asking: what is the use of the state having a theatre, of Berry[5] farmers paying for opera dancers? To my mind, that is absurd.

We are communalists and federalists; we have already proclaimed this. Let the Paris Commune, then, if it wishes to spend funds for an opera theatre, abstain from forcing the farmers from Beauce[6] to participate in it, let it not manifest tyranny compelling them to pay taxes so that a theatre might exist on one of the boulevards of Paris. I protest against an opera theatre paid for by the whole of France so that it might operate in Paris.

Later on, if you find it useful to create a communal opera [in Paris], a thing I do not agree with, then let the Commune pay for its keep. Then, but only then, will you have the right to prescribe for your actors the organisational form which pleases you.

As far as any patronage and influence on art are concerned, I find that this would be an assault on the freedom of human thought; at the same time, it would be illogical for you to do it. There should be no State literature or State science, just as there should be no State religion. The academy of medicine and the academy of music should completely disappear in their present form; they personify in art, science, literature a tyranny identical to the tyranny of religion.

I have in these matters the experience of what I saw in other countries, and I do not hesitate to declare that if French science is retarded, if its genius yields pride of place to the genius of other nations, the reason for it must lie in such an unhealthy patronage. What important work have we produced since French theatre, since the Comédie Française came under the governance of courtiers? It has borne only insignificant fruit, a kind of artistic stillbirth.

Does England, the homeland of Newton, have academies supported by the State? Not at all! Their academies are always local and independent, and functioning in a federative way they draw their advantage from their freedom.

I raise my voice therefore against the patronage system which is being proposed to you because I am deeply persuaded that, if our literature and science are dead from the 18th century on, they can -- regardless of all your good intentions -- be renewed only in full freedom.

Citizen Langevin: I do not share the opinion of citizen Pyat. If the theatre is an educational instrument, I propose that the Commune should exercise a strict and serious supervision over this branch of education. I believe that the reason for the halting progress of literature should not be sought in excessive supervision but much rather in a tolerance shown to bad literature. Therefore, I am in favour of the Commune's control over theatres.

Citizen Vésinier: I shall read a draft proposal:

> 'The Commune decrees:
>
> 1. All subsidies and monopolies in the theatre are abolished.
>
> 2. Theatre is completely free.
>
> 3. Any misdemeanour or crime in theatre is a misdemeanour and crime in common law, and is to be repressed and punished as such.
>
> Vésinier'

There are no misdemeanours or crimes of theatre, of press, of literature just as there is no crime of thought. There can be crimes caused by theatre plays; but they are normal crimes in common law, pertaining to normal legal procedures.

We strive for freedom, for the right to do whatever does no harm to anybody else, but we do not wish a regulated freedom, subject to special laws. That is why I put before you the above draft proposal.

Citizen Vaillant (*Delegate for Education*): Citizens, we should deal in politics rather than in metaphysics. While not wanting to make any attack on freedom, we are faced with the practical task of carrying through a thorough reorganisation. Theatres -- that means not only throats but also stomachs. In them, there are people who earn disproportionately much and people who do not earn enough. Therefore, it is necessary that the Commune regulate certain situations of a moral and material character. Clearly, we do not want a State art. The only thing [as far as supervision goes] which should be done at this moment is to ensure public security and morals. An end should be put to all forms of exploitation. Who is to do this? A Delegation whose special task this is, until the time you create a General Delegation which will put an end to the old society. My proposal is thus an organisational measure.

Citizen Vésinier: I withdraw my proposal, and I ask that it should not be published in the *Journal Officiel*. While we are being shot at is not the time to talk about theatres.

Citizen Félix Pyat: I know that in a time of fighting, just as in Year II [of the First Republic], there can exist a full right of deciding about all manifestations of thought, regardless of its form- be it the press, the theatre or the painter's brush. If you use it for the purpose of stirring up civil war, you will be suppressed. But as far as the future is concerned, I stand by what I have said. (*Cries of 'Let's vote!'*)

Citizen Chairman: Here is the proposal of citizen Vaillant. (*Reads it aloud.*)

Citizen Vésinier: I wish to propose an amendment to the proposed decree of citizen Vaillant. I propose the following: 'Theatre monopolies and subsidies are abolished.'

Citizen Félix Pyat: But Vaillant's[7] proposal will impede a manager who wants to open a theatre, since he will think only associations can open theatres.

Citizen Léo Fränkel: I agree with the opinion of citizen Vaillant as well as with that of citizen Pyat. Let me explain. Truly, the fact that theatres depend upon any Delegation seems to me extraordinarily detrimental to the cause of socialism which we want to further. The management must depend on the members of the association: it is their right to elect the manager. On the other hand, I do not agree with citizen Félix Pyat when he affirms that the State must in no case further the associations or intervene into matters of theatre. The State considered as a power which incarcerates thought into a hothouse, as in the time of Napoleon III, has no business intervening into the affairs of the people, which are foreign to it. But when the State can be considered as the ensemble of individualities, it is its duty to enter into matters of literature as well as into matters of education. We have heard here that thought must be free, that reason should have no protectors. But I shall cite here the example of two Frenchmen: of Diderot, who was supported by Russia, and Voltaire, who was supported by Frederick of Prussia.

Summing up, I think that theatres should be put under the surveillance of the Delegation for Education, which would further the associations by all possible means.

Citizen Chairman: Citizen Vaillant has withdrawn a part of his draft proposal. None the less, he is still maintaining the organisational paragraph, which in my opinion he could also drop. In these circumstances, I think the decree can be put to the vote.

Citizen Vésinier: May I remind you that I submitted an amendment?

Citizen Fränkel: I ask citizen Vésinier whether he would include under the term of 'subsidy', which is in his amendment, a credit given with the aim of furthering associations?

Citizen Vésinier: Yes. Associations can be furthered. But any association can be formed freely, without granting to it any subsidy or monopoly.

[The decree of citizen Vaillant with the amendment is put to the vote and adopted.]

♦ ♦ ♦

Citizen Rastoul: I regret that we spent two hours on discussing theatres.

After this the debate on theatre matters was closed, and the Commune adopted the decree in the following form:

> 'The Commune of Paris, in accordance with the principles outlined by the First Republic and elucidated in the Law of Germinal 10, Year II, decrees:
> – All theatres are within the jurisdiction of the Delegation for Education.
> – All subsidies and monopolies in theatres are abolished.

– The Delegation [of Education] is given the mandate to end the regime of theatre exploitation by a manager or a group of entrepreneurs, and to substitute for it in the shortest possible time a regime of associations.'[8]

Notes

[1] I have attempted to translate this debate as faithfully as possible. However, a number of passages are elliptical, and I have supplied the missing parts in parenthesis. More complicated are a number of other passages which are imprecise and sometimes unclear. Whenever it was not possible to translate them literally. I have used my best guess according to the context of the argument. A real critical or 'diplomatic' treatment of these minutes was not possible here.

It should be noted that in the session of May 21 (or of 1st prairial, Year 79) -- reproduced in the Commune official daily *Journal Officiel* of 22 May 1871 (facsimile reprint, Paris, Maspéro, 1970), as well as in the Bourgin-Henriot edition cited, pp. 470-72 -- several Council members protested against the truncated accounts of the debates reproduced in the *Journal Officiel*. Two of them, Régère and Rastoul, had been participants in the debate on the Theatre Law. Indeed, Régère's protest referred directly to it:

> Thus, in what concerns the Vaillant proposal on theatres, I would have liked to see reproduced [in the *Journal Officiel*] the developments given to this question; this would have proved to our enemies that we are not so afraid of their menaces that we would not have time to deal with questions of this kind and to preserve our independence of language. In particular, some very lofty meditations by citizen Félix Pyat have not been published; I demand the reproduction of these passages cut in the *Officiel*.

However, the interventions of Vaillant were also truncated. In this latter session, Vaillant explained he had authorised Vésinier (who edited the *Journal Officiel*) to cut them. But there was more to this: the cut was apparently demanded by the Committee of Public Safety, the supreme body of the Commune at the time. who might have felt the argument otiose at a time of heavy combats.

None of this, dealing as it does with cuts in the newspaper condensation, affects these minutes. I am sorry to say that a suggestion questioning the minutes based on this was nonetheless tacked on to the French translation of my article in *Travail théâtral* no. 2 (1971), 82, without consulting me, by the editors (reportedly by M. Emile Copfermann). The first publication of this chapter in *The Drama Review* no. 44 was accompanied by photographs of the speakers and of some other aspects of the Commune; I refer the interested reader to them.

[2] Cournet's ordinance of 9 May, published in the *Journal Officiel* of the following day, revoked the manager of the Paris Opéra because he had sabotaged a benefit performance for war victims and musicians. It appointed another provisional manager and, what is more important, a commission of six members 'to watch over the interests of musical art and artists' -- an ambiguous formulation giving the Security people a bridgehead in the arts susceptible of indefinite expansion. Vaillaint's draft decree and the debate about it efficiently scuttled this strategy, providing incidentally an excellent example for socialists in power of how to deal with their own police bureaucracy: by prompt and public challenge.

[3] Urbain's reference to 'vile spectacles', as well as Vaillant's later reference to economic and sexual exploitation of theatre people (especially women), were based on theatre life during

Napoleon III's reign which favoured not only frivolity but a systematic voyeurist eroticism that was, in the government's opinion, a good channelling of energies which might otherwise have been more dangerously employed. A dancer, for example, was supposed to provide all of her many indispensable dresses herself, which practically meant that all dancers had to be mistresses of rich Parisians; the situation of singers and leading actresses was not very different. There is a great deal of evidence about this, perhaps the best known of which are novels such as Zola's *Nana*.

[4] The chairman of that session was D.T. Régère; the present member of the Executive was Eugène Pottier, a designer and also member of the executive of the Paris Artists' Federation -- who was a few weeks after the session, while hiding from the Versailles terror, to write the words for the *Internationale*.

[5] This is a prime example of Pyat's shallow demagoguery. Soon after settling in Paris, Molière's company became 'patronised by the State' just as its rivals: it received a building for performances and an official court name ('troupe de Monsieur"). As for subsidies, according to the company's own precise books (*Registre de la Grange* 1658-1685 [Paris, 1876]), it varied in the 1660/1 to 1672/3 seasons between 3,500 and 25,500 livres yearly, or between 7 and 38 per cent of total receipts. Of course, Pyat's ideological 'free market' premise is as shaky as his theatre history.

[6] Both Berry and Beauce are rural provinces in the heart of France, presumably very far -- geographically and in tastes -- from caring for or benefiting from a Paris theatre, especially opera. The argument is, of course, demagogic and specious.

[7] I have changed 'your proposal' into 'Vaillant's proposal' because Pyat was obviously not referring to Vésinier's amendment but back to the mainstream of the debate.

[8] The French text may be of interest:

> 'Les théâtres relèvent de la Délégation à l'Enseignement. Toute subvention et monopole des théâtres sont supprimés. La délégation est chargée de faire cesser, pour les théâtres, le régime de l'exploitation par un directeur ou une société, et d'y substituer, dans le plus bref délai, le régime de l'association'

(*The Paris Commune Journal Officiel* of 21 May 1871, p. 622 ; see note on the rest of the minutes below.)

Bibliography

Deservedly the most famous history of the Commune is the one by its member P.O. Lissagaray, *Histoire de la Commune de 1871* (Bruxelles, 1876), reedited many times later in France and elsewhere. To my mind still the most illuminating socio-political comment is K. Marx's *The Civil War in France* (London, 1871 -- of which the best edition with pertinent companion pieces seems to be the French one at Éd. Sociales [Paris, 1953]), as well as V.1. Lenin's in various articles culminating in *The State and Revolution* and in *The Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky* (both Moscow 1918). The following list has been established strictly for its informational usefulness, although I find that the organizing ideologies in a number of the books are rather inadequate and prevent a full understanding of the subject, from

anti-socialists such as Mason to Stalinists such as Bruhat—Dautry--Tersen or anarchists such as Ollivier.

The debate of the Council of the Commune has been taken from its minutes in the *Procès-verbaux de la Commune de 1871,* éd. critique par Georges Bourgin et Gabriel Henriot (Paris, 1945). 2: 413-14 and 425-30.

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