City, state and commune [An anarchist guide to ... the city]

An Anarchist Guide to the City

Ruth Kinna

In 1894 Emile Henry detonated a bomb in the Cafe Terminus, located close to the Gare St. Lazare in Paris. In his defence speech he famously claimed that the cafe's patrons were bourgeois and that none could therefore be regarded as innocent.

Henry has been described as the first modern terrorist: someone radicalised by his association with extremists who acted independently in order to protest against the systematic injustices he saw in his everyday life. Keen to narrate the story of Henry's radicalisation, the prosecuting judge pointed out that he was also the son of a Communard – a participant in the 1871 Paris Commune, the workers' revolutionary government that was formed to resist German occupation in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war. The Commune controlled Paris from March to May that year, when it was crushed by a French Government eager to uphold its treaty obligations. In addition to the thousands of rebels like Louise Michel who were deported to New Caledonia, an estimated 20,000 Parisians were killed in the round-up that followed the Commune's defeat. The Sacré-Cœur in Monmartre, built to atone for the Communards' sins, and the Mur des Fédérés in the Père Lachaise cemetery, where 147 participants were shot and dumped into an open pit, are the Commune's enduring memorials.

The annual commemoration for the Commune was one of the two most important dates on the anarchist calendar in the nineteenth century, the other being the May Day events to remember the judicial killing of the Haymarket anarchists. And until 1936, when Barcelona became the symbol for anarchist organising, Paris was probably the most important city in the anarchists' revolutionary imaginary.

In his immediate reflection on the Commune, Bakunin described it as movement of the people and an intuitive expression of anarchist socialism. The Commune was a heroic defeat, but more than that, it had inaugurated a new wave of revolutionary activism. By giving expression to an internationalist ideal alien to the state system the Communards had aspired to achieve the 'complete emancipation of the masses of the people and their solidarity ... across and despite state borders'. Ten years later Kropotkin echoed Bakunin's words. The Commune was limitless. It described a form of organisation that extended across artificial frontiers. It had brought people together in networks that facilitated the direct management of production and the distribution of food, arms, clothing and other resources during the crisis periods and beyond. Future grass-roots insurrections would follow the example that the Commune had set, wherever they happened to occur. Paris would be resurrected.

Used as a shorthand term to describe the social revolution, Paris and the Commune became synonyms for the interactions of groups and individuals who recognised their equality and refused to fix barriers to their interconnection. For Kropotkin, Reclus and Landauer the realisation of the revolution necessitated the dissolution of the cultural barriers that divided urban from rural workers and the integration of rural practices in urban spaces. At the same time, they thought of the Commune as a unique movement of the city.

The longer story of the Commune that Landauer narrated in his monumental essay *The Revolution*, explained why. Landauer's account touched on the rising of the Paris Commune and the storming of the Bastille in 1789 but was focussed on the sixteenth and seventeenth century revolts: the Day of the Barricades in 1588, when the people of Paris seized control of the Bastille and the Arsenal in a popular insurrection against the King and the rebellion of 1648 at the start of the French civil wars. Rejecting conventional histories that focused on the religious and elite dimensions of these struggles, Landauer described both as expressions of a federalist and republican spirit which pitched the free commune of Paris against monarchical absolutism and statism. Faithful to the idea of the city that Bakunin and Kropotkin attached to the 1871 Commune, Landauer did not hark back to a romanticised conception of the medieval of city-state. Quite the opposite: his account of the Paris Commune was designed to show how different generations responded consistently to the processes of centralisation and control that were by then already well underway. The sociological conditions that shaped successive Parisian risings altered radically over time. By the seventeenth century, Landauer noted, 'the *contents* of politics became more important than its form or its representatives'. With the rise of constitutional representative government and the expansion of trade and business, monarchical power was considerably diminished. But his message was 'don't be fooled'! The gradual diffusion of power from the sovereign and the associated move from simplicity to complexity only concealed the state's consolidation. The significance of the city – symbolised by the resistance of Paris and the Commune – was re-affirmed.

In telling the story of Paris, Landauer filled out an anarchist idea of the city. Anarchists are rightly fond of his statement, 'the state is a social relationship; a certain way of people relating to one another'. But this was only half the story. The state also had an institutional and constitutional form. Likewise, the city embodied a particular spirit and it described a corresponding approach to organisation. The city was defined against state in all of its guises: court and the king and representative government and bureaucracy.

A distinctive current in post-war anarchist writing complicates this nineteenth century narrative. Rather than being the other to the state, the city appears constituted by it. Appalled by processes of urban development, Murray Bookchin bemoaned the production of what he called hierarchical space and the transformation of the city into a vast, soulless marketplace. Cities eroded the democratic, egalitarian, communitarian principles that animated his anarchism in the 1970s. Though he found signs of life in a plethora of grass-roots countercultural communities he argued that cities were otherwise dead 'functional urban designs without human values and rationally organized space without civic content'. Pre-empting some of Bookchin's themes, Paul Goodman turned to utopian planning to re-imagine the city. The modern city was longer a place of freedom, inventiveness and transgression and was instead characterised by vast inequality, deprivation, zoning and segregation. Hideous corporate investment-led changes had transformed the physical environment to suit the empty routine of commuter-life and the vacuity of the consumer cultures. For Goodman, modern city living barely rivalled the complacent stupidity of suburban life. Cities were functional if imagined as massive department stores, but dysfunctional on any other measure. These themes persist in anarchist writing. Using anarchist-inspired urban aesthetics to offer alternatives to contemporary ills Fatemeh Ziaei argues that recent trends have undermined our social and physical health and encouraged the adoption of unsustainable ways of living. Cities, she says, are 'filled with disease, crime, harassment, exploitation, isolation, hunger and ignorance'.

From the historical anarchist perspective, it appears that the state has wormed its way into the city and brought about its internal collapse. This was one of the scenarios Landauer sketched in 1907: the state would take control of the management economic life and solidify its democratic credentials to protect citizens from each other and insulate them from 'poverty, abandonment and despair'. The city would be absorbed and subverted in the process. What he called the surrogate community of the authoritarian power would co-exist 'in confusion' with the true spiritual union of the city. State and city may be distinguishable but their separation would be abstract not real. His recommendation to those interested in re-taking the squares, abandoning current measures of efficiency, recalibrating standards of well-being and constructing alternatives to the institutions that regulate city life was to insist on their divorce.

The international politics of the state shows just how tricky Landauer's project is. Towards the end of *The Revolution*, Landauer remarked that the annual celebration of the storming of the Bastille evoked a genuinely revolutionary spirit. It was not just a mechanical or routine memorial. It was an expression of collective strength, connectedness and unity. Things are different now. Insinuating itself in the life of the city, the state has also appropriated the city's struggles, celebrating them in national festivals. July 14 is an obvious example. No surprise to find that Paris tourist guides direct visitors to enjoy the spectacular views from the romantic Sacré-Cœur and that the Mur des Fédérés is an off-the-beaten-track curiosity. The incorporation of the city doesn't mean that the biases of the state are permanently concealed. They're made plain enough when city-dwellers exposed to perpetual, arbitrary violence respond in kind are condemned for attacking those responsible for protecting their security. Even so, the intermeshing of the city and the state leaves Occupiers and autonomous voices within the city at a disadvantage especially in moments when heads of state stand shoulder-to-shoulder and vie with each other to speak in the city's name. When Emile Henry was executed, Paris anarchists decried the hypocrisy of the state but struggled to defend his actions in terms of principles of justice he rejected as bourgeois. Now that the state represents its universalised values as the city's own, it's becoming all the more difficult to defend democracy against the state and resist the polarisation of politics that attacks on the city provoke.