*H-France Revi*ew Vol. 20 (October 2020), No. 176

Julia Nicholls, *Revolutionary Thought after the Paris Commune, 1871-1885*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. vii + 309 pp. Bibliography and index. $99.99 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9781108499262; $32.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781108713344; $80.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781108600002.

Review by Julian Bourg, Boston College.

Revision is the historian's stock-in-trade. Explanations of the past do not endure. Interpretations change as constantly altering circumstances shift vantage points, and even new evidence comes into view more often as a consequence than as a cause of such temporal parallax. In another way, however, in recent decades revisionism has become a default mode of historical writing. To take classic examples from contemporary French historical studies, one thinks of post-colonialism successfully decentering the metropole, François Furet overcoming Marxist interpretations of the French Revolution, and Robert Faurisson's miserable *négationnisme* trying to abandon the facts of the Shoah. The extremely different normative consequences of such debates are clear, make no mistake, but so too is a certain historiographical pattern: the move to challenge and substitute prevailing views. The gesture of the hand that turns the kaleidoscope's viewfinder, offering up endlessly combining and dispersing shards of colored glass, is itself repetitive. Historical revisionism can thus seem both a regular gambit--knotting historical writing to its present--and also a seemingly expected, even obligatory move within the "ironist's cage" of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.[1]

Julia Nicholls has revised one of the most tired stereotypes of the early Third Republic: that in the wake of the Commune's defeat in 1871, little transpired by way of revolutionary thought in France until Marxist orthodoxy ascended in the mid-to-late 1880s. Not true. It turns out a lot was happening. Nicholls shows how the very real ruins of "the Bloody Week" (*la semaine sanglante*) that destroyed the Commune actually inspired sustained, fertile reflection on revolutionary politics throughout the 1870s, leading up to the pivotal 1880 amnesty of former Communards and then the elections of 1885. In political and often physical exile, veterans of the uprising undertook the challenging labor of laying the intellectual foundations of a "unified, autonomous, and politically viable" renewed revolutionary movement (p. 11). Drawing on truly awe-inspiring research and structured as a gripping series of concentric circles--from Communard memory to the French revolutionary tradition to Marxism and European revolution to colonialism as experienced and theorized by Communard deportees--*Revolutionary Thought after the Paris Commune* offers a surprising new look at an era and sensibility we thought we knew. One should pause on the stunning range of sources Nicholls has unearthed; hers is a work of superlative and, in the best sense, old-school research. The writing is deft and the organization

seamless. Nicholls writes solidly within the revisionist frame. Each chapter follows a formula: expose the limits of earlier scholarship and then correct the historical record. Less clear, however, are the stakes of the book. Beyond emendation, why today do we need to revisit revolutionary thought of the early Third Republic? Why is she writing and why are we reading this history? Although Nicholls occasionally gestures toward the resonant implications of *Revolutionary Thought after the Paris Commune*, its telling, if largely implicit connections to our own time deserve mention, since they promise to chisel away at the confining irony of revision for revision's sake.

Wisely, Nicholls does not pause long on the Commune itself. Her story concerns its afterlives. She identifies two lines of memory that sought to snatch possibility from the jaws of defeat. "Realists" such as Prosper-Olivier Lissagary and Benoît Malon held on to the Commune's aspirational vision, framing memorialization as "personal truth-telling" (p. 33). To them, the unfulfilled agenda of 1871 remained worthy: education, justice, public service, curtailing night work and instituting maximum salaries, separating church and state, and so forth. Failure had come at the hands of the reigning political class and through the errors of the miscalculating Blanquists and neo-Jacobins who had dominated the Commune. This latter grouping reflected the second memory strain. For the "Blanquist" sensibility, the tragic defeat of the Commune inspired a commemorative cult of martyrdom that accented trauma, victimization, and revenge. They turned the Mur des Fédérés in Père Lachaise into a shrine. Many of the "minority" realist faction fled to Switzerland, where their decentralizing federalism mixed with ambient anarchism, while the "majority" Blanquists tended to seek refuge in London, where they mourned their crushed dreams (p. 69). There was plenty of blame to go around, realists faulting unpropitious circumstances and the Blanquists railing against the forces of order. Such clear factionalism tends to undercut Nicholls's view that post-Commune French revolutionaries sought unity, even as it buttresses her main claim that revolutionaries did not magically disappear in the 1870s and 1880s.

Defeat and marginalization furthermore enabled radicals to revisit the French revolutionary tradition as a whole. Insofar as the Third Republic proposed to have completed the French Revolution, it came to neuter its more radical promises. Consequently, ex-Communards were almost obligated to avoid identifying with that foundational event. Nicholls shows how instead they wrote themselves into a kind of long-term tradition of noble failure, consciously cultivating connections to 1848 and to popular movements that preceded 1789, all the way back to the Albigensians! Again, it is notable that many self-described revolutionaries at the time did not regard 1871 as a definitive rupture or ending. Such big-picture thinking led some to recolor revolution with apocalyptic or religious hues and others to treat revolution as an "irrepressible force of nature" (p. 84). To be sure, the image of barricade veterans trying to stir up religio-revolutionary ferment in the provinces seems ironically proximate to the Moral Order politics that laid the cornerstone of Sacré Coeur in 1875. The patent failure of such projects, though, works against the claim of supposed political viability. More productive on the level of ideas were the revolution-as-evolution views of someone like Elisée Réclus. The naturalism and the scientism of the early Third Republic were at home in his vision of humanity's long-term progress, which included invariable setbacks such as 1871. Nicholls does not connect the dots between Réclus and those other contemporaneous proponents of the natural laws of revolution, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.

Marx is the problem. The view that *Revolutionary Thought after the Paris Commune* seeks to revise--that the 1870s and early 1880s were a void--ultimately derives from later self-justifying

marxisant narratives: until a properly Marxist party could be formed, the Communard generation wandered in a void. To undo this story, Nicholls quickly dismisses Marx's own views on the Commune without discussing them in detail. The French were, so to speak, *ailleurs* (elsewhere). Since there was no Marxism until Marx died, ex-Communards read Marx's thought in multiple ways. A "French Marx" is posited through a close reading of translations from the German to which Marx himself contributed, but these somewhat contorted textual expositions are asked to carry a lot of weight. Even more of a stretch is the claim that Marx's Germanness and Jewishness helped make him attractive to French revolutionaries suffering the sting of marginalization. That said, the basic point--prior to the mid-1880s, variety, flexibility, and experimentation were stronger forces than any alleged Marxist orthodoxy--is compelling in ways that do not require extensive proof.

Here, it would have been useful to have revisited in more detail the complicated terrain of conflicting revolutionary tendencies, including the Guesdists (classically understood as closest to Marx), the Possibilists (open to the slow march through electoral politics), and the Blanquists (whose putschist brand was in decline). The claim that they were all flexible and generative does not obviate the real fissures and ruptures that emerged among them in the late 1870s and early 1880s. True, Nicholls is after ideas not institutionalization, but avoiding, for instance, the complicated, admittedly tedious story of the increasingly schismatic workers' congresses between Paris (1876) and Saint Étienne (1882) leads to some confusion. The Guesdists and the possibilists were already breaking up at Le Havre (1880) and Reims (1881).[2] Regardless of aspirations for unified political viability, then, the left was as fractious and self-consuming as ever. It may be that the terms Marxist and anarchist "did not denote any meaningful intellectual identification or content" (p. 201). Nevertheless, there was a very real difference between those who were willing to play the game of electoral politics and those who saw such games as systematically distorted and rigged in advance. Nicholls cleaves toward the story of how ex-Communards came to acknowledge the gains of the Third Republic, push it to the left, and thus realize its potential. We learn less about other trends of post-1871 radicalism, such as that, for example, which led to the bomb-throwing 1890s and figures such as Auguste Vaillant and Émile Henry.[3]

The ripples extending out from the Commune-event--from memory to the French revolutionary tradition to European revolution in the guise of a French-Marx-before-Marxism--culminate in Nicholls's engaging treatments of Communards deported to the South Pacific and of their reflections on imperialism. In New Caledonia, exiled Communards attempted to realize their political ideals through social experimentation, creating, as it were, an alternative Republic in the tropics.[4] The republic was "a state of mind rather than a State" (p. 237). Nicholls underscores how the Communards seemed generally less interested in criticizing colonialism per se than in targeting the Moral Order Republic for its ineffectiveness and hypocrisy. Someone like Louise Michel could rail against colonial injustice while, not surprisingly, treating indigenous populations as children. Distance intensified ex-Communards' criticisms, but they were always dreaming of France. In her final chapter, Nicholls contrasts two revolutionary publications: Lissagaray's *La Bataille* favored protectionism and imperialism rightly understood, whereas *Le Travailleur*, close to Réclus, empathized with colonial subjects even to the point of endorsing a kind of exoticist fantasy that the West would be saved by non-European political cultures. Foregrounding such ambivalences over colonialism enables Nicholls to suggest that the colonial/anti-colonial frame may have limited value in our attempts to grasp the "universal solidarity" pursued by nineteenth-century revolutionaries. This concluding critique amounts to

a powerful shot across the bows of postcolonial French historical studies. The stakes of *Revolutionary Thought after the Paris Commune* begin to emerge most strongly here.

Before I conclude with this resonance, some brief, overall comments are in order. Nicholls makes a strong case that the 1870s and early 1880s were a time of fertile marginality, when ex-Communards digested their experiences while renewing their revolutionary engagement. We now know more about continuities, adaptations, and above all the intellectual flexibility of those who had shared the crucible experience of 1871. This moment is worth understanding in itself; it generated broad and accommodating reconsiderations of revolutionary politics and was "more collaborative and less clearly defined than has previously been thought" (p. 274). Still, it was a time of transition. Nicholls acknowledges that "many of the ideas of this period were quickly replaced," even as she tries to spin that overcoming "as a sign of [their] success" (p. 271). Much of her evidence suggests instead that the pursuit of ideas of a "unified, autonomous, and politically viable" revolutionary movement (p. 11) actually involved a great deal of factionalism (the underbelly of diversity) and marginality (tantamount to negligible political impact). The flexibility that Nicholls ascribes to her characters was less a virtue than a consequence of their failure to articulate or implement a unified, politically effective program; they had nothing left to lose because they had already lost.

Strikingly, many of the figures and ideas examined in this book approached republicanism: "Revolutionaries to a large extent saw themselves as a pressure group operating from within the theoretical boundaries of the Third Republic, rather than as a direct practical or intellectual alternative to it" (p. 276). Demands for universal suffrage and secular education may have drawn on the experience of the Commune but they seem closer to Jules Ferry than to the ambitions of Louis Blanc, Louis-Auguste Blanqui, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and other key nineteenth-century French theorists of revolution. The observation does not discredit Nicholls's important recovery of a large cast of non-iconic figures. However, "revolution" for her characters tended to mean reform; to be sure, faster and more thoroughgoing reform aligned with republican principles, but reform nonetheless. Revolution as a wholesale, even violent overthrow of an existing system--say, bourgeois property and institutions--does not figure much here. If it is true that "the concept of 'imperialism' itself remained vague in their thought," ultimately, so too did their concept of revolution (p. 267). In the end, though, to her great credit Nicholls shows how social republicanism culminating in electoral politics germinated in the wake of the Commune, and she has masterfully deepened our understanding of the period between that event (whose "endings" can no longer be automatically supposed) and the subsequent era's socialists, anarcho-syndicalists, and, yes, Marxists such as the *Parti ouvrier français*. In a word, she has added a valuable missing chapter to "the Republican moment," her revolutionary reformists standing alongside the well-known businessmen, Protestants, Jews, lawyers, painters, and others who built the early Third Republic.[5]

What are we to make of these revolutionary reformists today? In what ways does this revision connect to our present? One has the sneaking suspicion that the recovery of these forgotten revolutionaries--thinking and planning on the margins, coming to terms with a paradigmatic event by surpassing it--intersects with or even extols a certain contemporary radicalism. This is purely speculative; I have no idea what Nicholls's politics are. But that is beside the point. History matters to historians in part because we can locate in it the refracted images of our own present. Some today might recognize themselves in the ex-Communards' capacity to express "affinities with strangers" (p. 263) and, as Nicholls, citing Leela Gandhi, puts it, a "'politics of friendship'"

(p. 267).[6] Contemporary alter-globalization and anti-capitalist movements can relate to fin-de-siècle revolutionaries' "vision of a decentralized society" (p. 264) and "transnational approach [that] empowered small, marginal groups" (p. 265). Further analogies between the late-nineteenth and early-twenty-first centuries emerge with respect to experimentation, "perpetual intellectual adaptation," rejection of fixed traditions, and capacity "to invest familiar terms such as equality and solidarity with fresh meanings more appropriate to their circumstances" (p. 276). So too, now as then, the lens of empire may have limited capacity to envisage forms of universal solidarity.

Nicholls is too subtle to declare these filiations so plainly, but in not closing the circle a little more tightly, she might understate her accomplishment. For the value of revision depends on something other than setting the record straight; it involves drawing out transferrable, timely qualities. Potential connections to our own moment emerge as she sidesteps, indeed displaces the Commune event and folds the ex-Communards into a longer history. The story to emphasize, then, is not the irruption of dramatic, punctuating events but rather the long, intervening flatlands where most people live most of the time and where history as memory, often-modest action, and anticipation typically flows. The two implications function together: on the one hand, we can dispense with the old image of the Commune as both a tragic end and an unsurpassed horizon that determined the European left until the Russian Revolution; on the other hand, aspects of French radical thought from the 1870s and 1880s might speak to some today. Such contingent analogy represents one way to escape the ironist's cage of revision for revision's sake. Perhaps a remaining irony might simply be that the framework of historical revisionism itself issued from internecine fights among European Marxists during the 1890s, a decade after Nicholls's non-Marxist French radicals had passed from the scene.[7]

NOTES

[1] Michael Roth, *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

[2] Léon de Seilhac, *Les Congrès ouvriers en France (1876–1897)* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1899).

[3] John Merriman, *The Dynamite Club: How a Bombing in Fin-de-Siècle Paris Ignited the Age of Modern Terror* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016 [2009]).

[4] Eric T. Jennings, *Vichy in the Tropics: Pétain's National Revolution in Madagascar, Guadeloupe, and Indochina, 1940–44* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

[5] Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

[6] Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006).

[7] Henry Tudor and J. M. Tudor, ed., *Marxism and Social Democracy: The Revisionist Debate, 1896–1898* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Julian Bourg
Boston College
bourgj@bc.edu

ISSN 1553-9172