

# The Tragic Festival

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## Abstract

This article explores the idea of the ‘tragic festival’ advanced by Henri Lefebvre in his 1965 book *La proclamation de la Commune* and related texts from the 1960s and 70s. It contextualises his vision of the Commune as a violent revolutionary festival in terms of his explorations of tragedy in his earlier studies of Nietzsche and Pascal, while problematising the link between the festival and everyday life, as well as the festival and revolutionary transition (and its failure). The reconstruction of Lefebvre’s delineation of the Commune’s tragic ‘style’ is complemented by an excursus into the political origins of the Nietzschean theory of tragedy in the German philosopher’s horrified reaction at the incendiary insurgency of the Communards. The article concludes with a dialogue between Lefebvre’s theory of the tragic festival and the Italian mythologist Furio Jesi’s study of the symbology of the revolt, which also homes in on the nexus of tragedy, festivity and politics.

*Citoyens, nous avons vu tomber cette colonne ainsi que l’homme qui gît maintenant sur les excréments destinés à le recevoir. Cet homme qui a épouventé toutes les cours étrangères, est à vos pieds, impuissant. Lui qui a écrasé la République sous ses talons, le voilà foulé aux pieds du peuple. C’est le jour de la vengeance, c’est le défi jeté aux assassins de Versailles, c’est le moment où le peuple revendique ses droits.<sup>1</sup>*

- Speech by Henri Fortuné at the destruction of the Vendôme column, 16 May 1871 (cited in Lefebvre 2018, p. 389)

Since the Paris Commune, anything is possible anywhere in Europe, mainly because there are well-meaning, splendid liberal people everywhere who do not rightly know where justice ends and injustice begins . . . They are the ones opening the gates and paving the way for the dreadful masses everywhere.

- Jacob Burckhardt, Letter to Heinrich von Geymüller, 27 December 1874 (cited in Ruehl 2015, p. 87)

*La Commune est une bonne chose mal faite.*

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Citizens, we have seen the fall of this column as well as of the man who now lies on these excrements destined to receive him. This man [Napoleon I] who once frightened all the foreign courts is now at your feet, powerless. He who crushed the Republic under his talons, behold him trampled under the feet of the people. This is the day of vengeance, this is the challenge flung at the assassins of Versailles, this is the moment in which a people claims its rights’. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the French are my own. Lefebvre misidentifies the speaker as ‘Henri Festriné’. See <https://macommunedeparis.com/2019/01/02/la-bibliotheque-des-amies-et-amis-de-la-commune/>. On Henri Fortuné, whose original name was Fortuné Henry, see <https://maitron.fr/spip.php?article59332>. An erstwhile Fourierist poet, Fortuné was elected as a member of the Commune for the Xth *arrondissement*. He went into exile and was condemned to death *in absentia* in 1873. One of the charges against him was ‘Complicity, by provocation . . . in the voluntary destruction of the Vendôme Column and the residence of Monsieur Thiers’. He was the father of the anarchist militants Henry Fortuné and Emile Henry, guillotined in 1894 for having carried out the ‘propaganda of the deed’ with the bombing of the Café Terminus.

## 1. Henri Lefebvre: The Tragic Festival of the People

At a 1971 conference on the centenary of the Paris Commune, which also saw the participation of Pierre Vilar, Albert Soboul and Jean Maitron, among others, Henri Lefebvre presented a brief paper entitled 'L'avis du sociologue: état ou non-état'. The talk both looks back to Lefebvre's 1965 *La proclamation de la Commune* (already anticipated by the 1962 article 'La signification de la Commune', which sealed his break with the situationists<sup>3</sup>) and forward to his four volume confrontation with Marxist state theory, *De l'État* (1976-8). *Prima facie*, Lefebvre's intervention is preoccupied with returning to the well-trod debate on the place of the Commune in Marxian disputes about the 'withering away' or 'smashing' of the state, and by the historical experiment with a 'non-state state' – employed in evident polemic against any orthodox effort to subsume the Commune to the trajectory of state or Soviet socialism. But Lefebvre's 'sociological' contribution departs markedly from the standard fare. It orbits, elliptically, around two foci, which we could term the *event* and the *festival*. For Lefebvre, the enigma of the Commune lies first of all in the exiguity of its initial occasion. Employing terminology borrowed from the physical sciences, Lefebvre will speak of the emergence of the Commune as hinging on an 'analyser-catalyser'. As he explains: 'Dans une certaine situation, au cours d'un processus que l'on peut dire historique et que les historiens disent tel, où les éléments d'une situation nouvelle s'accumulent mais n'apparaissent pas encore dans leur spécificité, un événement mineur produit une espèce de cristallisation générale et une prise de conscience dans l'épaisseur opaque de la société existante.'<sup>4</sup> In *La proclamation*, the emergence of an 'spontanéité orientée' out of social 'saturation',<sup>5</sup> had been explored at length in terms of a dialectic of social de-structuration, pre-structuration and re-structuration,<sup>6</sup> and issued into a 'théorie de l'évènement'.<sup>7</sup> But, contrary to what the socio-physical terminology might initially suggest, Lefebvre's theory of the Commune gives great significance to the semiotic, aesthetic and linguistic dimensions of the 'communal revolution'. In particular, he stresses that the operation of the analyser-catalyser is perforce *symbolic*. Touching on the whole affair of the National Guard's cannons – which *La Proclamation* reconstructs at length – he sketches in his 1971 talk how a minor incident can acquire totalising force:

Un fait en apparence mineur: la présence des canons, le symbolisme de ces canons qui ont été payés par le peuple (mais le peuple ne raisonne pas simplement en termes d'argent, il raisonne en termes de symbole et les canons sont le symbole de son pouvoir possible), la présence de ces canons au-dessus de Paris et l'effort du pouvoir encore officiel et légal pour s'en emparer

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<sup>3</sup> Ross and Lefebvre 1997 for Lefebvre's picaresque account of this rift. In the second of their 'Theses on the Commune', which they would repeatedly claim Lefebvre had plagiarised, the situationists would briefly affirm the vision of Commune as 'the biggest festival of the nineteenth century'. Tragedy, however, is largely absent from their account, but for the theme of self-enmity or self-sabotage, nicely encapsulated in the dictum: 'The real "fifth column" is in the very minds of revolutionaries'. Debord et al. 2006, pp. 398-401.

<sup>4</sup> 'In a certain situation, in the course of a process that can be called historical and which historians term as such, in which the elements of a new situation accumulate but do not yet appear in their specificity, a minor event produces a kind of general crystallisation and an awareness [*prise de conscience*] amid the opaque density of the existing society'. Lefebvre 1972, p. 175.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 175 and 177.

<sup>6</sup> Lefebvre 2018, pp. 157-184. See also Lefebvre 2008, p. 354.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 372-5.

vont précipiter tout d'un coup, au sens littéral du mot «précipiter», la conscience de toute la capitale.<sup>8</sup>

Symbolism is here articulated with the affective or emotional dimension of this collective event, opening onto the second crucial contribution in Lefebvre's sociology of the Commune, namely the theory of the *festival*. Lefebvre's presents this theory as occasioned by an archival discovery. Working in Milan at the Istituto Feltrinelli, he came across the complete set of *L'Histoire vraie de la Commune*, published between 1878-1880 by an anonymous author, whom Lefebvre identifies as in all likelihood the exiled Communard Charles Prolès. It is there that Lefebvre encounters what he deems is a matchless chronicle of 18 March 1871 as a 'grande fête populaire'.<sup>9</sup> If the theory of the analysing-catalysing event is both a sociological complement to and displacement of traditional theories of political revolution, then the theory of the festival performs an analogous role vis-à-vis the notion of a *withering away* of the state, as we encounter a sociological perspective on the liquefaction of power. As Lefebvre remarks:

De proche en proche, Paris, qui n'était plus le Paris bourgeois – puisque les quartiers bourgeois s'étaient vidés –, Paris est descendu dans la rue. Qu'est-ce qui a disparu, qu'est-ce qui a fondu littéralement, comme un morceau de sucre dans l'eau - dans cette atmosphère de fête violente ? L'armée régulière a fondu. Les soldats, sur la Butte Montmartre, étaient entourés par des femmes qui leur tendaient du vin et des sandwiches. Au bout de quelques heures de cette espèce de kermesse extraordinaire, de fête violente, l'État avait disparu.<sup>10</sup>

This festival, which Lefebvre also explicitly links to the working classes explosive exercise of the right to the city, to its *centre*, from which they'd been displaced by bourgeois urbanism, is what brings the Commune into contact with our time.<sup>11</sup> Other seemingly minor facts can serve as analyser-catalysers that precipitate a latent and saturated situation. For Lefebvre, these are 1936 and 1968 as examples of 'la fête violente comme processus révolutionnaire'. From 17 December 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia to 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, the twenty-first century has not been short of such events.

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<sup>8</sup> 'A seemingly minor fact: the presence of the cannons, the symbolism of these cannons that were paid for by the people (but the people does not reason simply in terms of money, it reasons in terms of symbols and cannons are the symbols of its possible power), the presence of these cannons above Paris and the effort on the part of what is still the official and legal power to gain control of them will suddenly precipitate, in the literal sense of the term 'precipitate', the consciousness [*conscience*] of the whole capital.' Lefebvre 1972, p. 175. Regarding the cannons, in *La proclamation*, Lefebvre had written: 'Le peuple qui ne crée plus de symbolismes abstraits a trouvé ces symboles concrets' (The people who no longer creates abstract symbolisms has now found these concrete symbols'). Lefebvre 2018, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>10</sup> 'Step by step, Paris, which was no longer the bourgeois Paris – because the bourgeois neighbourhoods had emptied out – Paris descend to the streets. What disappeared, what literally melted, like a sugar cube in water – in this atmosphere of violent festival? The regular army melted away. The soldiers, on the Butte Montmartre, were surrounded by women who offered them wine and sandwiches. And then, what else melted? The police, as well as their institutions, and then the state apparatus. After a few hours of this extraordinary feast (*kermesse*) of sorts, this violent festival, the state had disappeared.' *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Elden helpfully encapsulates Lefebvre's argument about the marginalisation of the Parisian working classes before the Commune as follows: 'The uneven development of Paris is a significant issue behind the situation. Workers often lived in slum dwellings, with ever increasing rents, owned little other than the clothes they wore, and struggled to provide bread for their families. Wages improved slightly, but the cost of living rose quicker. Haussmann's plans displaced tens of thousands of workers from the central parts of the city. They truly had little to lose but their chains. The city had become dominated by industrialization on the economic level and the state on the political; as a capital it was a monstrous head on a body that was no longer the body of that head.' Elden 2004, p. 153.

In the discussion that followed his talk, Lefebvre was challenged repeatedly by the historians in attendance about his emphasis on the festival-like character of the Commune. His reply is to my mind of critical importance. First Lefebvre reminds his critics that for him a festival is no mere *kermesse*. It was precisely in order to anticipate the banalisation and trivialisation of the festival that, as he tells his audience, Lefebvre chose as *La proclamation*'s epigram a speech by Herakles from Sophocles' *Women of Trachis*, in which he speaks of his wasted body, caught in a net woven by the Furies, captive to unutterable bonds (in the French translation: *Venez, regardez, contemplez ce corps de misère...*). As he continues:

La violence et la fête ne sont pas nécessairement exclusives et il y a ce côté de rassemblement dans lequel on trouve à la fois l'écho des violences, et, d'autre part, le rire, une espèce de joie qui atteint des moments de frénésie, et même de violence déchaînée. La violence est longuement latente, et dans la fête, à un moment donné, elle peut se déchaîner. C'est ce qui s'est passé au moment de l'arrestation des généraux Lecomte et Thomas; le récit que j'ai cité décrit, aux environs de la place Pigalle, une kermesse, très exactement, et puis, tout d'un coup, la foule se précipite sur les deux généraux ; c'est alors la tragédie.<sup>12</sup>

While this quotation may suggest a rather one-dimensional view of the tragic character of the Commune, a mere acknowledgment of the bloody *dérapiage* of collective festivity. This would not do justice to the important, if generally neglected, place of the tragic in Lefebvre's work.<sup>13</sup>

Lefebvre's 1939 *Nietzsche* intervened into the debate on Nietzsche and fascism with striking sympathy and nuance, combining a conjunctural diagnosis of Nietzsche's tragic impasse with an effort to salvage the creative and disruptive dimensions of his thought. For Lefebvre, Nietzsche's effort to recover the Dionysian origins of a tragedy buried under the moralism and rationalism of a Socratic, Christian, and now 'socialist' history was a product of the inability to live with the uneven, motley interregnum in which he was condemned to live, after the compromised failure of the 1848 revolutions. Resonating with Bloch's contemporaneous analyses of proto-Nazi consciousness in *The Heritage of Our Time*, Lefebvre painted a Germany unable to work through and overcome its past, buried in toxic psychic and social *survivals*, and dominated by an unholy alliance of feudalism and finance. An unjustifiable present goaded Nietzsche into the doomed effort to recover tragedy not as a spectacle but as an *act* and a *myth*. It also pushed him to try to attain a kind of purity – identified by Lefebvre as the tragic quality par excellence. The great weakness of the tragic philosopher is that he will be vanquished by everything he has left behind to attain this purity, and that this purity will be tainted by a nostalgic inability to traverse the present. As Lefebvre writes of Nietzsche:

Son désir de combattre la bassesse et la «bigarrure» de la société bismarckienne se réfugie précisément tout à tour dans les survivances de l'époque patriarcale, dans les souvenirs de la Renaissance et de la Grèce, dans l'anarchisme des esthètes wagnériens adorateurs de l'art pour l'art et du génie solitaire, et, enfin, dans l'idée confuse d'une culture à venir.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 'Violence and festival do not necessarily exclude one another and there is this aspect of assemblies in which one finds both the echo of violences and, on the other side, laughter, a kind of joy that attains moments of frenzy, even of violence unleashed. Violence can be latent for a long time, and in the festival, at a given moment, it can be unleashed. That is what happened at the moment of the arrest of the generals Lecomte and Thomas; the account that I quote describes, in the environs of Place Pigalle, what is indeed a *kermesse*, and then, all of a sudden, the crowd throws itself upon the two generals. And then it's tragedy.' Lefebvre 1972, p. 187. For the chronicle of the deaths of Lecomte and Thomas, see Lefebvre 2018, pp. 244-8.

<sup>13</sup> Though his treatment of tragedy differs from my own, Grindon 2013 provides a very important exploration of Lefebvre's thinking on the festival, which also touches on its tragic dimensions. For a critical reflection on framing the Commune as a tragedy, see Ross 2015, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> 'His desire to fight the baseness and 'motley' character of Bismarckian society finds refuge first in the survivals of a patriarchal epoch, then in the memories of the Renaissance and Greece, then in the anarchism of Wagnerian

As this philosophy of tragedy consolidates its anti-democratic insight that Greek culture was founded on slavery and domination, engendering a purified conception of violence, it also, according to Lefebvre, ‘already expresses an emerging imperialism and unconsciously searches for a style for this imperialism’. But Nietzsche also intuited a tragic dialectic that could allow one to correct what Lefebvre deems the all-too satisfied speculative plenitude proper to Hegel with the experience of the ‘irrational, inhuman moments of existence: struggle, risk, voluptuousness, conquest and death’. But this tragic dialectic always falls back with Nietzsche into the purifying affirmation of the irrational moment, the inability to give concrete form to a ‘Third’ able to transcend and transmute the tragic duality (‘Dionysus the philosopher’, ‘Socrates the musician’). This impasse can ultimately be chalked up to Nietzsche’s refusal to confront the fact that tragedy’s singularity and force can only be truly appreciated if one is sensitive to its character as an art and form of *transition*, which, as Lefebvre notes (here echoing the contemporaneous comments by C.L.R. James on Shakespeare),<sup>15</sup> presupposes the dynamic clash of historical worlds, the tension and anxiety thrown up by social forces in conflict. This tragic dialectic, though disavowed in his regressive fantasies of transvaluation, was grasped by Nietzsche in his lectures on the pre-Socratics, where he wrote of Empedocles that:

En lui deux époques se combattent, l’époque des mythes, de la tragédie, de l’orgiasme – et celle de l’homme d’État démocratique, de l’orateur, du savant.<sup>16</sup>

Though somewhat more constrained by methodological orthodoxy than his *Nietzsche* (as we may suspect from the occasional footnote to Zhdanov or Stalin), the second volume of Lefebvre’s *Pascal* reprised the method and orientation of the ’39 book. Pascal both discovers and betrays a tragic dialectic, ossifying it into an ideological, mystifying dualism. Critically sparring with Lucien Goldmann’s contemporaneous study of Pascal and Racine, *Le Dieu caché*, Lefebvre rejects the idea of a ‘tragic worldview’ in which the individual thinker and his class (in Pascal’s case, the so-called *noblesse de robe*) would communicate without remainder. This would be to lose the temporal unevenness without which both historical materialism and tragedy itself become unthinkable. By ossifying the abyssal juxtaposition of self and world, we

élimine les conflits; les contradictions, les raisons profondes – historiques – de la «conscience tragique». On élimine les termes qui s’opposent à l’isolement de l’individu «privé», ainsi que les tentatives de résolution des conflits. Archaïsmes, sentiments féodaux issus du clan ou de la famille, sentiments et valeurs surgis des vieilles communautés agraires et urbaines ... cet ensemble vaste et mouvant disparaît. L’individu se réduit à une sorte de vide désespéré, à une essence négative ; et la vie à quelques instants tragiques.<sup>17</sup>

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aesthetes worshiping art for art’s sake and the solitary genius, and, finally in the confused idea of a culture to come.’ Lefebvre 1939, p. 50.

<sup>15</sup> James 1992.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Two epochs struggle within him: the epoch of myth, of tragedy, of orgiastic frenzy, and that of the democratic politician, orator, enlightener, allegorist, scientific man.’ Quoted in Lefebvre 1939, p. 156. This quote is in fact not from Nietzsche, but from the gloss in Bertram 2009, p. 22, which is listed in Lefebvre’s bibliography (it was published in 1918 in German and translated in 1932 into French). Incidentally, Bertram quotes Nietzsche’s letter mentioning the Paris Commune (discussed below) on p. 159, as an example of the influence of Goethe’s ‘Weimar’ on the early Nietzsche (he even calls him ‘Eckermannian’).

<sup>17</sup> ‘We eliminate the conflicts, the contradictions, the deep (historical) reasons of “tragic consciousness”. We eliminate the terms that are opposed to the isolation of the “private” individual, as well as the efforts at a resolution of conflicts. Archaisms, feudal feelings issuing from the clan or the family, feelings and values emerging from the old agrarian and urban communities ... this vast and moving ensemble disappears. The individual is reduced to a kind of desperate void, a negative essence; and life, to some tragic instants.’ Lefebvre 1953, p. 51.

A bad historical method is thus complicit with Pascal's own aestheticized ethics of human abasement, a mystified 'pseudo-dialectic' which traduces his own scientific and proto-materialist insights into infinity the better to subordinate them to an inscrutable and all-powerful theological infinity, making of the human being a 'speculative monster' torn by contradiction, beyond, *or rather beneath*, any dialectical movement – in Lefebvre's own words, 'infini brisé, en lutte contre lui-même'.<sup>18</sup> In the final analysis, for Lefebvre, Pascal's tragic vision sees man *from the point of view of death* – whence the juxtaposition of two mottos. First, Pascal's: 'considérer les choses périssables comme périssantes et même déjà périées' (consider perishable things as perishable and even already perished). Now, Lefebvre's 'Marxist maxim': 'considérer les choses naissantes comme grandissantes et même déjà grandies' (consider things being born as growing and even already grown).<sup>19</sup>

Could this second motto be applied to the concern *par excellence* of modern tragedy, namely revolts and revolutions?<sup>20</sup> That may be seen as a methodological principle behind Lefebvre's *La proclamation de la Commune*, but only if we also incorporate into our thinking of emancipation the negativity, the suffering that accompanies this 'growth'. As already noted, *La proclamation* presents a unique sociological theory of the Commune. It is also a patient and compelling montage of archival material like Prolès's 'true history' into an hour by hour chronicle of its unfolding, as well as a critical taxonomy of the Commune's shifting and antinomic ideological currents, not to mention an inquiry into revolutionary strategy. All of these dimensions reward immersion into the flow of Lefebvre's multi-layered narrative. But what I want to touch on here is the register in which Lefebvre articulates the 'tragic' character of the Commune, which is that of what he calls its *style*.

It is in terms of *style* that Lefebvre introduces the theme of tragedy in a markedly different key than the one applied to the philosophical and individual dramas of Pascal and Nietzsche, namely with relation to the character of the Commune as an grandiose collective festival (note that the criticism of Pascal and Nietzsche's undialectical philosophies of tragedy hinged on the way their *style* was a false resolution of real contradictions).<sup>21</sup> Tragedy here names the profound ambivalence of this festival, the festival of *community* becoming *communion*, as it mutates into a *spectacle*. Here we may pause to recall first, that Lefebvre's account of the meaning of the Commune was an object of polemical denunciation by Guy Debord, whose own *Société du spectacle* came out two years later; second, and more significantly, that Lefebvre is creatively transposing a crucial insight of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, namely tragedy's origins in collective popular ritual. By way of commentary of the Spartacist revolutionary Karl Liebknecht's dictum regarding 'the horrible and grandiose tragedy of the Commune', Lefebvre produces a capsular theory of collective tragedy – one with fascinating resonances with Furio Jesi's study of the symbology of another defeated uprising, Liebknecht's own Spartacus rebellion of 1919, to which we'll return in the final section. As Lefebvre writes:

Nous savons que la Tragédie et le Drame sont des fêtes sanglantes, au cours desquelles s'accomplit l'échec, le sacrifice et la mort du héros surhumain qui a défié son destin. Le malheur s'y change en grandeur et l'échec laisse une leçon de force et d'espoir dans le cœur purifié de ses lâches craintes. ... Ceux qui ont combattu au cri de La liberté ou la mort préfèrent la mort à la capitulation et à la

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 221.

<sup>20</sup> Williams 1979; Toscano 2019.

<sup>21</sup> While the tenor of tragedy in the passages on the festival is more in the vein of philosophy than literary theory, Lefebvre will also draw on the theory of genres to illuminate the political character of the Commune, for instance when he writes that popular consciousness is dramatic, while the army lives in an epic mode, since the people lives in history, while the army lives 'parmi les fantômes de l'histoire'. Lefebvre 2018, p. 96.

certitude de l'asservissement. Ils se battent encore, désespérément, follement, avec un courage sans bornes; puis ils allument de leurs propres mains le bûcher sur lequel ils veulent se consumer et disparaître. La tragédie se termine dans l'embrasement et un désastre dignes d'elle. Poursuivant jusqu'au bout et menant à ses dernières conséquences le défi titanique, le peuple de Paris envisage la fin de Paris et veut mourir avec ce qui est plus pour lui plus qu'un décor et plus qu'un cadre : sa ville, son corps. Ainsi la Fête devient drame et tragédie, tragédie absolue, drame prométhéen joué sans trace de jeu frivole, tragédie où le protagoniste, le chœur et le public coïncident de façon unique. Mais, dès le début, la Fête contenait le drame; le drame reprenait son sens primordial: fête collective et réelle, fête vécue par le peuple et pour le peuple, fête colossale accompagnée du sacrifice volontaire de l'acteur principal au cours de son échec, tragédie.<sup>22</sup>

This is both a wonderful and, as commentators have intimated, an unsettling and problematic passage. The emphasis on a 'voluntary' tragic *sacrifice* seems to channel the popular energies invested in the transmutation of everyday life into an inevitable self-immolation, which goes beyond the idea of a violent revolutionary festival to intimate a (Nietzschean, or even Bataille) continuity between archaic and modern festivities. Is there a tension, as Peter Starr has suggested, between the tragic character of the Commune being sealed by the wilful self-sacrifice of the people, on the one hand, and the notion of a heterogenesis of ends or *détournement*, on the other?<sup>23</sup> Though both may be seen variants of what Hegel treated as the essence of the tragic – namely the experience of 'oneself as an enemy' – the tragic festival seems to terminate, in conflagration, a dialectic, rather than prolong it.<sup>24</sup> Yet this dimension of the Commune's 'style' is also something that finds confirmation, for Lefebvre, in its chronicle. In his summary of the events of 23 May 1871, when the Communard have already lost Montmartre and only the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> *arrondissements*, the *rive gauche* and the Hôtel de Ville continue to resist, Lefebvre notes that fires are no longer being set for military reasons alone: 'beaucoup veulent s'ensevelir sous les ruines de Paris. Héraklès allume de ses mains son

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<sup>22</sup> 'We know that Tragedy and Drama are bloody festivals, during which are accomplished the defeat, sacrifice and death of the superhuman hero who has defied fate. Misfortune mutates into greatness and defeat leaves behind a lesson of force and hope in the heart purified from cowardly fears. ... Those who fought crying *Liberty or Death* prefer death to capitulation and the certainty of subjection. They continue to fight, desperately, madly, with boundless courage; then they light with their own hands the bonfire on which they want to be consumed and disappear. Tragedy ends in a conflagration and disaster worthy of it. Following to its very end and bringing to its ultimate consequences its titanic defiance, the people of Paris envisages the end of Paris and wants to die with that which is for it more than a stage-set [*décor*] or a frame: its city, its body. Thus the Festival becomes drama and tragedy, absolute tragedy, Promethean drama played without any hint of frivolous play, a tragedy in which the protagonist, the chorus and the audience coincide in a singular fashion. But, from the beginning, the Festival harboured the drama: a real and collective festival, a festival lived by the people and for the people, a colossal festival accompanied by the voluntary sacrifice of the principle actors in the course of its defeat, tragedy.' Lefebvre 2018, pp. 28-9. For an English version of this section of *La proclamation*, see Lefebvre 2003. See also the commentary in Elden 2004, pp. 117-20, which also explores the book's link to the first volume of the *Critique de la vie quotidienne* and its reflections on the rural festival, as well as on the decay of *style* into *culture*.

<sup>23</sup> Lefebvre has a pithy and effective formulation for the dynamic at the heart of tragedy as the heterogenesis of ends: 'La décision provoque l'événement, mais l'événement diffère de la volonté exprimée par la décision' (The decision provokes the event, but the event differs from the will expressed by the decision). *Ibid.*, p. 209. See also p. 39 on history's 'héroïsmes aveugles et ... dénouements tragiques' (blind heroisms and tragic denouements').

<sup>24</sup> As Starr asks: 'What is the ideological usefulness of Lefebvre's conception of festivity? At times, it operates a reversal of values, allowing Lefebvre to speak of those who possess nothing, and who use the fête to overcome a dearth of time and space in their everyday lives, as the "véritables riches". At others, it initiates a dialectical movement, whereby Lefebvre looks beyond an apparent decline of drama and unadministered festivity in the modern everyday to the dialectical overcoming of that decline in a "*métamorphose de la vie (quotidienne) en une fête sans fin*" – a transformation whose means, he suggests, "*sont là, à notre portée, dans les techniques, dans les machines, dans l'électronique et la cybernétique*". In both instances, festivity appears closely linked to what is arguably the master concept of Lefebvre's work, that of "everyday life." Starr 2005, p. 75.

bûcher. C'est ainsi que Pindy fera mettre le feu à l'Hôtel de Ville et Ferré au Palais de justice en même temps qu'à la préfecture de police'.<sup>25</sup>

Whether there is a dialectic at work in the tragic festival largely depends on how one envisages its relation to that key term of Lefebvre's writing *la vie quotidienne*. In the second volume of *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (1961), Lefebvre had written of how the tragic contains 'l'idée de l'échec (inévitabile) de toute volonté et de tout projet' (the idea of the (inevitable) failure of every intention and every project), while '[l]a quotidienneté, en ce sens, c'est le résidu et le produit du tragique et du destin. C'est le tragique étouffé, inaperçu, méconnu. C'est le destin qui attend son heure et que les gens qu'il concerne attendent en l'ignorant ou plus exactement en le méconnaissant. ... C'est donc le non-tragique, la source du tragique et son reste dépouillé, et le lieu vide du Destin, rempli d'un mélange informe de nécessité, de hasard, de liberté, de dangers, d'assurances, de risques et de sécurités'.<sup>26</sup> This surging and ebbing of everyday life into tragedy – which in the Commune had the streets and the 'body', the image and symbol of Paris as its arena – was the preoccupation of the theory of moments with which Lefebvre countered the theory of situations proposed by Debord and his comrades. From the vantage point of the second volume of the *Critique*, the Commune was not just an event, it was a *moment*, understood as 'une fête individuelle et librement célébrée, fête tragique, donc véritable fête' (an individual and freely celebrated festival, a tragic festival, and therefore a genuine festival).<sup>27</sup> For Lefebvre, the aim, at once practical and theoretical, was to break the contradiction between triviality and tragedy that governed the relation between everyday life and its upheavals.<sup>28</sup> When it came to the Commune, beyond the mass practical struggles for the withering away of the state, we needed to attend to 'le but plus lointain et le plus proche, le plus vaste et le plus immédiat: la métamorphose de la vie (quotidienne) en une fête sans fin, en une joie sans autre limite ni mesure que la fatalité de la mort, elle-même indéfiniment reculée'.<sup>29</sup> And yet he remained steadfast in affirming the centrality of failure to a theory of moments (and of revolutions), while also suggesting that failure comes in a variety of guises. As he observed:

L'instant de l'échec, dans le moment, a donc la plus grande importance. Il situe le drame : émergence du quotidien ou rechute sans avoir émergé, caricature ou tragédie, fête réussie ou cérémonie douteuse. L'échec en tant qu'inhérent au moment, à sa tentative, à sa folie et à sa grandeur, doit donc se considérer comme « terminus ad quem » et non comme « terminus a quo ».<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> 'many want to bury themselves beneath the ruins of Paris. Herakles lights the funeral pyre with his own hand. It is thus that Pindy will command the burning of the Hôtel de Ville and Ferré that of the Palace of Justice and the police prefecture'. Lefebvre 2018, p. 352.

<sup>26</sup> Lefebvre 1961, p. 141; Lefebvre 2008, pp. 137-8: 'the everyday is both the residual deposit and the product of the tragic and of destiny. It is the tragic which has been smothered, undetected and unrecognized. It is destiny awaiting its hour and which the people it concerns await without knowing it, or more exactly without recognizing it. ... Therefore the everyday is also the non-tragic, the source of the tragic and its naked remains, and the empty place of Destiny, filled with an amorphous mixture of necessity, chance, freedom, dangers, assurances, risks and securities'. I am grateful to Grindon 2013 for directing my attention to the link between *La proclamation* and the *Critique* as concerns the articulation of tragedy and festival.

<sup>27</sup> Lefebvre 1961, p. 348; Lefebvre 2008, p. 348.

<sup>28</sup> Lefebvre 1961, p. 349; Lefebvre 2008, p. 349.

<sup>29</sup> 'its farthest and closest, its greatest and most immediate goal: the metamorphosis of (everyday) life into a festival without end, into a joy with no other limit nor measure than the fatality of death, itself infinitely pushed back'. Lefebvre 2018, p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> Lefebvre 1961, p. 351; Lefebvre 2008, p. 351: 'in the moment, the instant of greatest importance is the instant of failure. The drama is situated within that instant of failure; it is the emergence from the everyday or collapse on failing to emerge, it is a caricature or a tragedy, a successful festival or a dubious ceremony. In so far as it is inherent to the moment, to its goal, to its madness and its grandeur, failure must be considered as *terminus ad quem* and not as *terminus a quo*'.



Even the ‘most beautiful dawn ever to have shone over a city’, that of 19 March 1871, is lined by a failure that only heightens its splendour. As Lefebvre declaims: ‘La grande ville, la Cité, simplement en manifestant – en se manifestant –, a accompli un acte unique, un acte que l’échec ne rendra que plus inoubliable’.<sup>31</sup> Lefebvre strives to move beyond this image of triumphant downfall, however, and think through the heritage of failure, through the dialectic of victory and defeat. The Commune is at one and the same time the herald of the virtualities of the future and the ‘préfiguration d’un échec beaucoup plus vaste’ (prefiguration of a much vaster defeat) (‘. And yet failures such as that of the Commune are also ‘victories, opening onto the future, on condition that we once again seize and maintain their truth’ (victoires, ouvertes sur l’avenir, à condition de ressaisir et d’en maintenir la vérité) – something which requires attentiveness to the style of the Commune, as Festival and Drama.<sup>32</sup>

Yet style is not all. As already noted, Lefebvre is deeply attentive to the classed and gendered social texture of the Commune restructuring of everyday life, to the experimental invention of all kinds of ‘non-state state’ institutions and non-bourgeois forms of life, but also to Leninist problems of strategy. The ‘moment’ of the tragic festival does not subsume these other historical, sociological, political and military dimensions of the brief and brilliant life of the Commune. On one level, the tragic festival – as narrated, for instance, in Prolès’s *Vraie histoire* – is the means through which the military and bureaucratic machinery of the state melts away, locally and temporarily. On the other, it could be seen to supplant and deflect the strategic moment, its ludic suspension of time occluding the timeliness demanded by a conflict fought against all odds and possibilities. At the ideological level, the complement of the tragic festival is an ideology which is not merely antinomic – as would be suggested by a purely doctrinal reflection on the combination of Jacobin centralisation and Proudhonian federalism<sup>33</sup> – but which in its affirmative ‘confusion’<sup>34</sup> wields a mobilising force that ‘correct theory’ sorely lacks, a confusion which has as its sociological referent a destructured-restructuring ‘people’ uneasily pinned to a monolithic class or political identity. Lefebvre will write, vis-à-vis the motley philosophy of the Commune, of a prodigiously potent ‘ideological-political “complex”’, whose power stems from how it combines ‘l’affectif et le volontaire, le rêve et la pensée, le passé et l’avenir’ (the affective and the voluntary, dream and thought, past and future). In a tragic key, the force of this complex is also its weakness. As Lefebvre notes: ‘Cette puissance idéologique, véritable mélange explosif, destinée à ouvrir le passage aux forces les plus spontanées, enveloppe les germes de sa perte. Le mélange ne peut pas, à l’épreuve de la pratique, ne pas éclater en fragments hétérogènes’.<sup>35</sup>

In my third and concluding section, I want to explore, through Furio Jesi’s investigations into what he termed the ‘symbolology of revolt’, the role played by myths and images in the configuration of this revolutionary tragedy. This will hopefully allow us further to elucidate the nature of the Commune as a ‘violent revolutionary festival’ but also better to circumscribe the meaning, or even the style, of its defeat. Before doing so, I want however to take an archaeological backward step, to consider the political origins of the philosophy of the tragic,

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<sup>31</sup> the great town, the City, simply by manifesting – by manifesting itself – accomplished a unique act, an act that defeat will only make more unforgettable’. Lefebvre 2018, p. 261.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 44-5. On history as ‘drama’, see also p. 24.

<sup>33</sup> On decentralisation beyond its Proudhonian variants, see Ross 2015, p. 113.

<sup>34</sup> See Starr 2005. Starr cites Lefebvre writing of ‘une grande confusion, celle de la vie spontanée et créatrice’. Lefebvre 2018, p. 128.

<sup>35</sup> ‘This ideological power [puissance], destined to open the way to the most spontaneous forces, harbours the germs of its loss. The mix cannot, in the test of practice, fail to splinter into heterogeneous fragments’. Ibid., p. 127.

in the response to the Commune itself by one of the major sources of Lefebvre's thinking about violent festivals, namely Nietzsche.

## 2. Friedrich Nietzsche: The Crisis of Civilisation from Socrates to the Paris Commune

In the self-critical retrospect that accompanied the 1886 edition of *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche was forthright about the conjuncture that catalysed his book:

Whatever underlies this questionable book, it must be a most stimulating and supremely important question and, furthermore, a profoundly personal one – as is attested by the times in which it was written, and in spite of which it was written, the turbulent period of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1. While the thunder of the Battle of Worth rolled across Europe, the brooder and lover of riddles who fathered the book was sitting in some corner of the Alps, utterly preoccupied with his ponderings and riddles and consequently very troubled and untroubled at one and the same time, writing down his thoughts about the Greeks – the core of this odd and rather inaccessible book to which this late preface (or postscript) is to be dedicated. A few weeks later he was himself beneath the walls of Metz and still obsessed with the question marks he had placed over the alleged 'cheerfulness' of the Greeks; until finally, in that extremely tense month when peace was being discussed at Versailles, he too made peace with himself and, whilst recovering slowly from an illness which he had brought back from the field, reached a settled and definitive view in his own mind of the 'Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music'...<sup>36</sup>

The spirited montage no doubt hides the horrors experienced by a volunteer medical orderly on the frontlines, but it also cloaks a more specifically *political* trauma that accompanied the gestation of Nietzsche's first major work. In his critical intellectual biography and 'balance-sheet', Domenico Losurdo compellingly demonstrates the intimate link between Nietzsche's metapolitical figure of the tragic – the cultural-political project harboured by his inventive Greco-German synthesis – and his horrified *reaction* at the apocryphal news of the incineration of the Louvre at the hands of the insurrectionaries of the Paris Commune.<sup>37</sup> In Losurdo's interpretation, the Commune, viewed through this stark juxtaposition between levelling plebeian violence and the summits of aesthetic creation, serves as a kind of negative event that indelibly marks the anti-revolutionary animus of Nietzsche's philosophy. In a letter of 21 June 1871 to his friend Carl von Gersdorff, Nietzsche had written:

When I heard of the fires in Paris, I felt for several days annihilated and was overwhelmed by fears and doubts; the entire scholarly, scientific, philosophical, and artistic existence seemed an absurdity, if a single day could wipe out the most glorious works of art, even whole periods of art; I clung with earnest conviction to the metaphysical value of art, which cannot exist for the sake of poor human beings but which has higher missions to fulfill.<sup>38</sup>

In another letter, he referred to the day when he came to hear of the Louvre's destruction as the worst day of his life.<sup>39</sup> Nietzsche, like many of his contemporaries believed the 'fake news'

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<sup>36</sup> Nietzsche 1999, p. 3.

<sup>37</sup> In what it would be nice to see as a dialectical in-joke at Nietzsche's expense, the English section of the Situationist International (which counted among its few members T.J. Clark, quite preoccupied as of late both with Nietzsche and tragedy) produced a poster which, over a blurry black and white image of Paris burning, declares: 'The Communards burn the Louvre, the most radical artistic act of the nineteenth-century'.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche 1996b, p. 81. This does not gainsay the evident presence of an anti-plebeian and reactionary animus in *The Birth of Tragedy*, with Nietzsche willing himself to be far less magnanimous in print, and more resolutely donning the armour of the cultural warrior. On Nietzsche and the Commune, see also the pioneering discussion in Sautet 1981, as well as the contextualisation and commentary of the letter to von Gersdorff in Montinari 1999, pp. 76-81.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Ruehl 2004, p. 87 (who nicely terms the fantasised event an 'act of proletarian iconoclasm').

about the destruction of the Louvre. While the Tuileries palace had been set alight, the Louvre was unharmed. Losurdo skews the case in his favour for a seamless image of Nietzsche as a counter-revolutionary by not quoting the following lines from the letter: 'But even when the pain was at its worst, I could not cast a stone against those blasphemers, who were to me only carriers of the general guilt, which gives much food for thought'.<sup>40</sup> Losurdo detects the obvious repercussions of this presence of the Commune in an important passage from *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche gives full vent to his polemic against the figure of Socrates, twinned here with Euripides, though not yet fused with the castigation of Christian morality which will define his mature philosophy:

We should not now disguise from ourselves what lies hidden in the womb of this Socratic culture: an optimism which imagines itself to be limitless! We should not now take fright when the fruits of this optimism ripen, when the acid of this kind of culture trickles down to the very lowest levels of our society so that it gradually begins to tremble from burgeoning surges and desires, when the belief in the earthly happiness of all, when the belief that such a general culture of knowledge is possible, gradually transforms itself into the menacing demand for such Alexandrian happiness on earth, into the invocation of a Euripidean *deus ex machina*! It should be noted that Alexandrian culture needs a slave-class in order to exist in the long term; as it views existence optimistically, however, it denies the necessity of such a class and is therefore heading towards horrifying extinction when the effects of its fine words of seduction and pacification, such as 'human dignity' and 'the dignity of labour', are exhausted. There is nothing more terrible than a class of barbaric slaves which has learned to regard its existence as an injustice and which sets out to take revenge, not just for itself but for all future generations.<sup>41</sup>

As Losurdo comments, the *Birth* could have easily, and perhaps more aptly, carried the title or subtitle: *The Crisis of Civilisation from Socrates to the Paris Commune*.<sup>42</sup> The emphasis on discontinuity and difference that is elsewhere associated with Nietzsche's critique of historicist modes of thought, not least in the *Genealogy*, is absent here; in its place, we find a continuity so improbable (between Alexandrian culture under the sign of Socrates-Euripides and nineteenth-century revolution) as to constitute a kind of counter-myth – a tale about the remote origins of decadence that will later be relayed, in terms of the same lexicon of domination, as the slave revolt in morality. Even more relevant perhaps for our purposes, is Nietzsche's claim, repeated *ad nauseam* in published and unpublished works alike, but stated here with exemplary clarity about the cruel presuppositions of morality, the violence at the heart of piety, the anti-human foundations of humanism. Walter Benjamin's much-quoted adage about there being no document of civilisation that was not simultaneously a document of barbarism is a *leitmotiv* of Nietzsche's thought, with the momentous difference that for Nietzsche this was something to be *affirmed*. Here, as José Emilio Esteban Enguita has persuasively argued<sup>43</sup> is the abiding core of Nietzsche's tragic politics – so alien to Lefebvre's in its orientation – and the early source of his efforts to reinvent or transvalue aristocracy after the implosion of feudalism, the *Ancien Régime* and their threadbare moralities and metaphysics – efforts perhaps best encapsulated in the notion of a *pathos of distance*, the capstone of Nietzsche's thinking of hierarchy, rank and authority. As Nietzsche wrote in a fragment from 1870-1:

Art is the excessive and free force of a people that does not waste away in the struggle for existence. Here is demonstrated the *cruel* reality of a *culture*, to the extent that it erects its triumphal arcs over subjugation and annihilation.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Nietzsche 1996b, p. 81. As Sautet observes: 'But the proletarian's effort still remains for him an act of madness, and a frightening one at that'. Sautet 1981, p. 13.

<sup>41</sup> Nietzsche 1999, pp. 86-7.

<sup>42</sup> Losurdo 1999, p. 11; Losurdo 2002, pp. 13-17. See now Losurdo 2019.

<sup>43</sup> 'La máscara política de Dioniso' [Dionysus's Political Mask], Introduction to Nietzsche 2004, pp. 9-50.

<sup>44</sup> Nietzsche 2004, p. 61.

Some of the difficulty in seizing upon the socio-historical over-determinations of the Nietzschean concept of the tragic, which Lefebvre's own work on the German philosopher does not always capture, is also a function of Nietzsche's own moves away, during the drafting of his first major work, from an explicitly political articulation of his recovery of the traduced origins of the tragic. In April 1870, when Nietzsche was still thinking of entitling his work-in-progress *Socrates and Instinct*, he envisaged a quadripartite structure, with four chapters respectively devoted to ethics, aesthetics, religion and mythology, and, last but not least, the theory of the state.<sup>45</sup> In autumn 1870, he was considering a different title: *Tragedy and Free Spirits: Considerations on the Ethico-Political Meaning of Musical Drama*. By the Spring of 1871, Nietzsche had reframed his project in a register far closer to its final shape – now entitled *Origins and Purpose of Tragedy. An Aesthetic Treatise. With a Preface to Richard Wagner*.<sup>46</sup> This subtraction of the political could lead us to qualify somewhat the starkness of Losurdo's thesis. That said, the text on the theory of the state that Nietzsche excised from his now aesthetic treatise and gifted to Cosima Wagner on Christmas 1872 as one of five prefaces for unwritten books is a powerful record of the political philosophy of hierarchy that the young Nietzsche felt he could extract from an anti-Socratic reading of Ancient Greek politics.<sup>47</sup> This 'politics of tragedy' is largely articulated around the thesis of the necessity of slavery – a thesis that at the end of his philosophical life, Nietzsche would repeatedly link to the requirement to invent new forms of domination, new orders of rank which, rather than looking nostalgically to ancient or feudal pasts, would assume the reality of democratic levelling and internationalisation as their battlefield. As Nietzsche declares in 'The Greek State':

we must learn to identify as a cruel-sounding truth the fact that slavery belongs to the essence of a culture: a truth, granted, that leaves open no doubt about the absolute value of existence. This truth is the culture which gnaws at the liver of the Promethean promoter of culture. The misery of men living a life of toil has to be increased to make the production of the world of art possible for a small number of Olympian men.<sup>48</sup>

The continuation of his argument is illuminated by the (false) fires of the Commune, inasmuch as the refusal to accept domination as the precondition of culture brings together all the strains of rationalist, progressive thought, while simultaneously insinuating the possibility that beyond acts of proletarian iconoclasm may spread out a far more devastating horizon, one in which compassion – which Nietzsche here seems to sympathetically inhabit *malgré lui* – could swamp creation:

Here we find the source of that hatred that has been nourished by the Communists and Socialists as well as their paler descendants, the white race of 'Liberals' of every age against the arts, but also against classical antiquity. If culture were really left to the discretion of a people, if inescapable powers, which are law and restraint to the individual, did not rule, then the glorification of spiritual poverty and the iconoclastic destruction of the claims of art would be more than the revolt of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ugolini 2007, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13-14.

<sup>47</sup> On 'The Greek State', see Ruehl 2004, with its stress on the anti-democratic influence of Jacob Burckhardt and its fascinating discussion of the Prometheus-frontispiece to the first edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* as an emblematic representation of Nietzsche's desire 'to liberate himself from his *Über*-father Wagner and the anti-capitalist, egalitarian ideas that the latter continued to embrace twenty-three years after the failed revolutions of 1848-1849'. Ruehl stresses that among the reasons for Nietzsche's increasing anti-socialist phobia was the restive character of the working classes in Basel itself, which only four months after his inaugural lecture as a professor of philology had hosted the Fourth Congress of the International Working Men's Association, with the presence of Wagner's old comrade from the Dresden uprising of 1849, Mikhail Bakunin.

<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche 2006, p. 166.

oppressed masses against drone-like individuals: it would be the cry of compassion tearing down the walls of culture; the urge for justice, for equal sharing of the pain, would swamp all other ideas.<sup>49</sup>

### 3. Furio Jesi: The Political Suspension of Time

The iconoclastic, incendiary mass thus presided, in its own fashion, the birth of that theory of the tragic that Lefebvre would refunction to foreground the violent festivities that communist theories have often left by the wayside. To recover the tragic dimensions of the Commune meant for Lefebvre also to vindicate its mythical ones. What Nietzsche castigated as the ‘glorification of spiritual poverty and the iconoclastic destruction of the claims of art’, Lefebvre sought to rehabilitate. The myth of the Commune crystallised out of the collective imagining of ‘la possibilité d’une sorte de nouveau et vaste contrat social, substituant immédiatement et en toute liberté aux liens étatiques des liens de libre association entre les parties contractantes. Il y a un mythe parce qu’ils se réfèrent consciemment ou non à des faits historiques dont le contenu réel fut bien différent de cette image. Il y a un mythe enfin parce qu’ils vont se sacrifier à l’image sacrée d’une transcendance : la Cité sainte, désacralisée et reconsacrée par la Révolution à la Liberté’.<sup>50</sup> While little of this transcendence seems to transpire from Prolés’s chronicle of the largely female crowds disarming the monopoly of violence on 18 March,<sup>51</sup> it is amply evident in Lefebvre’s extract from *Le Cri du peuple*’s editorial of March 30, entitled ‘La Fête’, which declaims, in the purple tones of Republican liturgy:

C’est aujourd’hui la fête nuptiale de l’idée et de la République.  
Demain, citoyens-soldats, pour féconder la Commune acclamée et épousée la veille, il faudra reprendre, toujours fiers, maintenant libres, sa place à l’atelier et au comptoir.  
Après la poésie du triomphe, la prose du travail.<sup>52</sup>

This myth, like the one famously affirmed by Georges Sorel, is composed of blocs of images, but above all by the image of Paris.<sup>53</sup>

As we had occasion to note in the first section, the reliance of the political precarious and ideologically antinomic Commune on the ‘confused’ energy of myth and image is a *leitmotiv* in Lefebvre’s *La proclamation*, while also subtending his delineation of the Commune’s tragic style, as well as of the festival’s tendency towards self-immolation. It is perhaps illuminating, in this regard, to bring Lefebvre’s work into dialogue with one of the thinkers who did most to explore – and to *critique* in a sense akin to Benjamin’s critique of violence – the nexus of myth, festival and politics, the Italian mythologist and Germanist Furio Jesi.<sup>54</sup> Jesi’s turn to the study

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<sup>49</sup> Nietzsche 2006, pp. 166-7. Note the resonance with Burckhardt’s remarks on liberals and the Commune in our epigram.

<sup>50</sup> ‘the possibility of a kind of new and vast social contract, immediately and in all liberty replacing the bonds of the state with the ties of free association between contracting parties. There is a myth because they refer, whether consciously or otherwise to historical facts whose real content was other than this image. There is myth, finally, because [the Communards] will sacrifice themselves to the sacred image of a transcendence: the holy City, deconsecrated and reconsecrated by the Revolution for Freedom’. Lefebvre 2018, pp. 126-7.

<sup>51</sup> But see Lefebvre 2018, p. 119 on the ambiguous role of images and symbols of femininity in the Commune.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Today is the marriage feast of the idea and the Republic. Tomorrow, citizen-soldiers, to impregnate the Commune that we acclaimed and wedded yesterday, we will need to take up our place again, with renewed pride, in the workshop and behind the counter. After the poetry of victory, the prose of labour.’ Ibid., pp. 327-8. The play of prose and poetry has curious, inverted echoes of Marx and Engels’s *Manifesto*,

<sup>53</sup> Lefebvre 2018, pp. 112-119, on ‘the popular image of society’, and pp. 120-3, on ‘the image of Paris’. See also Starr 2005, pp. 76-77.

<sup>54</sup> For an introduction to Jesi, see especially Cavalletti’s introduction to Jesi 2014 and, with specific reference to Jesi’s theory of the festival or festivity (*la festa*), Cavalletti 2019. See also Aarons 2019a.

of what he termed the ‘symbology of revolt’, elaborated in the posthumously published book *Spartakus* and his 1972 essay on Rimbaud’s *Bateau ivre*, was itself catalysed by the events of 68, as he declared in a letter of rupture with his teacher in matters mythological, the Hungarian thinker Karoly Kerényi, dated 16 May 1968:

If fate dictates that I should be forced to address these words to the person whom I’ve considered my teacher ever since adolescence, it means the times are particularly dark. I doubt, what’s more, that they’ll brighten before first becoming even darker—before, that is, reaching the extreme point of crisis. This crisis will probably unfold in the streets and be fought with weapons; a crisis in which even a teacher and a disciple, a father and a son, will concretely find themselves to be enemies, in opposite camps.<sup>55</sup>

Notwithstanding the partisan, even Manichean sense of participation in the violent festival of revolution, Jesi, far from celebrating the ‘myth of ‘68’ as a repetition of the myth of the general strike would come to elaborate a theoretical practice oriented towards the destitution of the ‘mythological machine’, including and especially the one operative in the politics of revolt and revolution. In *Spartakus*, this took the form of a mythological and phenomenological inquiry into the literary archive of the 1919 uprising (with special attention to Bertolt Brecht and Thomas Mann). What Jesi was particularly attentive to was the conjunction in the Spartacist experience of mobilising myths of enmity and conflict, on the one hand, and the suspension of historical time, on the other. A symbological and mythological critique of this conjunction also served to provide a nuanced and empathetic perspective on the failure of 1919, not unlike the nexus of myth, festival and tragedy in Lefebvre’s *La proclamation*.<sup>56</sup> Jesi’s little phenomenology of revolt also resonates compellingly with Lefebvre’s account of the ‘Manichean’ dimensions of the ‘l’image populaire de la société’ under the Commune,<sup>57</sup> as well as his invocation, with reference to the manifesto of Internationale for the Commune’s elections, of ‘l’idée grandiose et naïve d’une fin instantanée de la durée historique’.<sup>58</sup> It is in the mythical images of a final combat against the enemy, that the ‘unanimism’ of revolt resides.<sup>59</sup> As Jesi explains:

The clash of the revolt distils the symbolic components of the ideology that has put the strategy in motion and only these are truly perceived by the combatants. The adversary of the moment truly becomes *the enemy*, the rifle or club or bicycle chain truly becomes *the weapon*, the victory of the moment—be it partial or total—truly becomes, in and of itself, *a just and good act* for the defence of freedom, the defence of one’s class, the hegemony of one’s class. Every revolt is a battle, but a battle in which one has deliberately chosen to participate. The instant of revolt determines one’s sudden self-realization and self-objectification as part of a collectivity. The battle between good and evil, between survival and death, between success and failure, in which everyone is individually involved each and every day, is identified with the battle of the whole collectivity—everyone has the same weapons, everyone faces the same obstacles, the same enemy. Everyone experiences the epiphany of the same symbols—everyone’s individual space, dominated by one’s personal symbols, by the shelter from historical time that everyone enjoys in their individual symbology and mythology, expands, becoming the symbolic space common to an entire collective, the shelter from historical time in which the collective finds safety.<sup>60</sup>

As in Lefebvre, though on the basis of a more painstaking excavation of the operations of what he called the ‘mythological machine’, Jesi also depicts the myth of revolt – compounded of

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<sup>55</sup> Quoted in Jesi 2014, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> For an excellent analysis of the logic of this critique, see Cavalletti’s introduction to Jesi 2014, pp. 15-21.

<sup>57</sup> Lefebvre 2018, p. 112.

<sup>58</sup> ‘grandiose and naïve idea of an instantaneous end of historical duration’. Lefebvre 2018, p. 320.

<sup>59</sup> I take the term ‘unanimism’, as opposed to ‘unanimity’, from Pierre Vilar’s (very critical) reply to Lefebvre 1972, p. 185.

<sup>60</sup> Jesi 2014, p. 53.

images and symbols – as the condition of im/possibility of emancipation, as the (tragic) motor of both victory *and* defeat. Though the lines above were penned with reference to the Spartacist uprising, Jesi will appropriate sections of *Spartakus* for incorporation into an essay on Rimbaud, in which they will come to speak of the experience of not Berlin 1919 but Paris 1871 as an insurgent city.

Jesi's essay is a dense and coruscating exploration of Rimbaud's poetics, oriented in particular, through the operative category of the commonplace (*luogo comune*, also *topos*) to grasping the relationship between infancy, difference (*diversità*) and 'savagery', on the one hand, and commodification-civilisation, on the other – with poetry perilously poised as both the exploitation of difference and its resistance. As Jesi notes, the participation of Rimbaud in the Commune is likely a... myth (he appears to have reached Paris in September 1871), but what his work does convey is a poetic correlate to the *revolt* (rather than revolution) that exploded in the Commune. Here is the passage, *détourné* from *Spartakus*, and now brought to bear on the relation between the poetic revolt of infancy and difference in Rimbaud and the conflagrations of the Commune:

We can love a city, recognize its streets and houses in our deepest secret memories; but only in the hour of revolt is a city truly felt as the "haut-lieu" and at the same time as our city: ours, because it belongs to the "I" and at the same time to "others"; ours, because it is the field of a battle chosen both individually and collectively; ours, because it is a circumscribed space where historical time is suspended and each act has a value of itself, in its absolutely immediate consequences. We take possession of a city by fleeing or advancing in the clash much more fully than by playing in its courtyards as children or strolling arm in arm through its streets years later. In the hour of revolt we are no longer alone in the city; but when the revolt has passed, no matter its outcome, each of us reverts to being an individual in a society, whether better, worse or the same as before. ... It was no longer a matter of living and acting within the framework of tactics and strategy, where medium-term objectives might be very far from the final objective while still prefiguring it—the greater the distance, the more anxious the wait. "Now or never!" It was a matter of acting once and for all, and the fruit of the action was contained in the action itself.<sup>61</sup>

In this collective epiphany of revolt and its disaggregation into the bad everydayness of individuality we witness a movement akin to that between triviality and festival in Lefebvre's tragic theory of moments. Furio Jesi is arguably one of the most significant theorist of festival and festivity of the twentieth-century,<sup>62</sup> and it is striking that in his epistemological and ethnological essay on the 'Knowability of the Festival', which originally served as the introduction to an anthology of texts entitled precisely *La Festa*,<sup>63</sup> he formulates the problem in terms that recall the Lefebvrian problem of the staggered dialectic between the tragic festival and *la vie quotidienne*. As Jesi remarks, continuing the discourse on difference sketched out in

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<sup>61</sup> Jesi 2019, p. 1011.

<sup>62</sup> See Cavalletti 2019 and Aarons 2019b, who also notes in passing the affinities between Jesi and Lefebvre around the latter's writings on the Commune (pp. 1042-3).

<sup>63</sup> Jesi 1977. The final appendix to *La Festa*, which Jesi selects in order to illustrate the contention that the festivals of the French Revolution will ultimately betray their Rousseauian inspiration by becoming 'emblems of collective duty [*dover essere collettivo*]' (Jesi 2013, p. 88) is taken from the *History of the French Revolution* by Louis Adolphe Thiers, the very architect of those 'reactionary massacres' (Marx, *The Civil War in France*) that followed in the wake of the Commune. It is worth quoting briefly from Thiers's own anti-popular theory of the festival here, which follows a description of the first festival of the goddess Reason on 10 November 1795 (20<sup>th</sup> Brumaire): 'We certainly cannot avoid disgust in the face of these scenes devoid of meditation and good faith, in which a people altered its cult without understanding either the old or the new. But when is the people in good faith? When is it capable of understanding the dogmas that are given to it in order to believe in them? Generally, what does the people need? Great assemblies that satisfy its need to find itself gathered; symbolic spectacles in which it is reminded continuously of the idea of a higher power; festivals that make homage to men who got closest to the good, the beautiful, the great; in brief: temples, ceremonies, saints'. Quoted in Jesi 1977, p. 214.

his Rimbaud essay: ‘The everyday [*il quotidiano*] in the instant of its unveiling is the *different* [*diverso*] – man, in the instant that he appears in the festive state, is the *different*. The everyday in the phase of its occultation and man in the non-festive state are the well-known and the same [*il noto e l’uguale*].’<sup>64</sup>

I have tried both to untangle and knot some of the threads linking Nietzsche, Lefebvre and Jesi around the charged and ambivalent notion of the Commune as a tragic festival. In particular I hope to have suggested, following Lefebvre’s centenary observations on the ‘sociology’ of 1871, how this conceptualisation, or perhaps more appropriately this *image* of the Commune, both enables *and* ultimately occludes the horizon of a withering away of the state – or how *this* kind of tragedy is in a sense the tragedy of a transition arrested and ‘sacrificed’.<sup>65</sup> In this sense too, to quote Lefebvre, the Commune remains ‘close to us’.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Jesi 2013, p. 104. Translation forthcoming: Jesi 2021.

<sup>65</sup> On tragedy’s relationship to transition, see Toscano 2019. Lefebvre touches on the relationship between the ‘cruel festivals’ of past revolutions and a transitional period that would put an end to the opposition between the quotidian and the Festival in Lefebvre 1968, pp. 73-4; Lefebvre 1971, p. 36.

<sup>66</sup> “La Commune est proche de nous...” Lefebvre 1972, p. 177.



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