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Franck Frégosi

The “Ascent” of the Communards’ Wall at Père-Lachaise: A Secular Partisan Pilgrimage

For more than a century, the “ascent” of the Communards’ Wall at Père-Lachaise during the month of May has been an essential expression of secular pilgrimage, participated in by left-wing political activists, trade union activists, and Freemasons. For some, it is a question of honoring the memory of communards fallen and martyred under the fire of the Versailles government in May 1871 and, through them, all other combatants for the revolutionary cause. For others, it is also the occasion to celebrate the ideals of modern and liberal Freemasonry that the foundational experience of the Commune incarnated.

The “Wall” has, little by little, become established as the open-air *domus ecclesia* of a secular and revolutionary left. This secular space has become a new space of sacralization around which those who still believe in and hope for the coming of a more just and egalitarian society and for the completion of the work left unfinished by the revolts of March 1871, come to rest, to reassemble, and to recharge.

In the present article, our objective is to supplement classic studies (Dupront 1987; Chélini and Branthomme 2004) of the pilgrimage as a great time of religious mobilization, of the voluntary displacement of believers toward a supposedly sacred place, in view of drawing spiritual, symbolic, or even physiological benefits (healing), attesting to an effective encounter with the divine. We propose to rethink the notion of the pilgrimage on the basis of the highly symbolic site of the Communards’ Wall, in which there is rooted a certain workers’, socialist, libertarian, and freethinking tradition that has always cultivated the greatest defiance toward religion.

Our documentary sources confirm our conviction that here we are faced with a particular type of civil pilgrimage, the commemorative and partisan secular pilgrimage, which illustrates the crossover between the domain of the sacred and a form of partisan social mobilization – in short, the unconscious quest for the sacred and for replacement rituals for those whose philosophical and political choices generally distance them from classical religious rites.

We see these reflections as an extension of the historical and anthropological approach developed by Marc Abélès (1990) on contemporary republican rituals, and those of Claude Rivière (1988) on political liturgies.

What our analysis aims to explore are the unexpected religious dimensions that transpire in the various ceremonials, the corteges that seem like secularized processions that proceed to the Communards' Wall, as well as the forms of secular devotion that play out there. Our proposition will be developed in three stages:

- a brief recalling of the historical facts relating to the site in question;
- an enumeration of the types of social operators who assemble around it;
- a presentation of the concept of the commemorative and partisan secular pilgrimage, and the ritual devices in operation at the Wall.

The "Communards' Wall," Sacred Site of Parisian Workers' Memory

The origin of the annual commemorations of the last "bloody week" ("semaine sanglante") of the revolution is relatively little known. From 1871 to 1880, silence seems to prevail (Rebérioux 1997, 536) with grief still raw among the Parisian workers, but also because the regime of moral order ensured the containment of any disorderly outbreak. Thus, priority was given to the collection of funds for the families of political prisoners and exiles.

It seems that the first commemoration nevertheless took place in 1878, around March 18, in the form of a fraternal banquet at the initiative of Jules Guesde's newspaper *L'Égalité*. The chosen date marks the memory of the beginning of the Paris uprising (the execution of generals Le Comte and Clément and the departure of Thiers from the capital) rather than the "bloody week" that brought it to a close. What is more, the choice of the Wall at Père-Lachaise was not unanimously agreed upon: many other spaces bore traces and harbored remains of the 1871 insurgents, such as Montparnasse cemetery where, in a common grave, more communards were buried than at Père-Lachaise (Tartakowsky 1999), or the cemeteries of Charonne and Clichy. Tradition has it, however, that from Halloween 1871, the sites had begun discreetly to bloom with anonymous bouquets.

The first important assembly took place on May 23, 1880, just after the partial amnesty for former exiled and deported communards, which came into effect in March 1879, and just before the general amnesty of July 1880. It would be coordinated principally by the (Guesdist) Workers' Party via its associated relays such as the Socialist Committee for Aid to the Pardoned and Unpardoned (Comité socialiste d'aide aux amnistiés et non-amnistiés) and the Federated

Syndical Workers' Union of Workers of the Seine and the Socialist Press (Union fédérative ouvrière et l'Union syndicale des travailleurs de la Seine et la presse socialiste) which included the publications *L'Égalité* and *Le Prolétaire*. This funerary assembly centers around the common grave where the insurgents had been buried. The chosen location for these marches is a site situated in the 76th division, before the Charonne wall to the east of the cemetery. It would seem that it was there, on May 28, 1871, that one hundred forty-seven communards were executed by firing squad. Alongside them would have been the scattered corpses of thousands of communards. Sources vary as to the number of bodies thus abandoned: the most credible cite between eight hundred forty-seven and one thousand two hundred; the most mythic figure is twenty to thirty thousand persons (men, women, and children) shot to death, this number approximating more or less the entirety of the victims of the Commune.

It is here that, for decades, called by the militant press, all the friends of the Commune would march in a cortege. Public speeches would often punctuate the otherwise silent processions, which were a kind of funeral in memory of all those deprived of any such rites. It is through poems, popular song, and above all drawings and paintings that, little by little, the evocation of the Wall would become associated with that of the grave in which rested the bodies of the martyrs of the forces of Versailles. In the Communards' Wall we encounter a space that is no less sacralized and ritualized for its lack of any confessional emblem, and before which for two centuries militants have assembled in silence, laying wreaths. They also listen to lyrical recitals, read homilies in which the orators remember the martyrs of 1871 and the work of the Commune, and invite the living to pick up the flame of revolt and to pursue the work of the Parisian insurgents.

The Communards' Wall, a Valuable Plot

Throughout its history, this sacred place of Parisian workers' memory, despite its status as a graveyard, has been a site of tensions, not only between partisans and adversaries of the Commune, but also between brothers and comrades of the struggle who have later become enemies. In the past, it was also the object of careful monitoring by the public authorities, who were wary of seeing an unauthorized civic ceremony develop that might rapidly mutate into a street protest.

From 1880 to 1885, the tension is particularly lively between the republican government, all the anarchist factions, and rival socialist groups (Guesdists, Blanquists, Possibilists, and so on): the tricolor is often at odds with the red flag. The first commemorations often give rise to the expression of popular resentment; the homage to those shot in 1871 is coupled to a strong feeling of vengeance against the propertied, the bourgeois, and capitalists.

Tensions also divide the protestors among themselves: the red flag against the black flag, emblem of the anarchists. Although most participants obeyed the peaceful commemorative logic and the rites of the procession, certain anarchists – returned from exile after Louise Michel – plus some revolutionary socialists seek to escape from the processional logic and to adopt a more offensive logic. The idea of an armed popular insurrection is put forward, but it does not carry the day with everyone. Little by little, there emerges the idea of erecting a monument to the Federates. A committee of 1871 combatants is thus formed to support and advise the Committee of the Monument of the Federates, led by former communard Lissagaray. At the end of 1883, the socialists, with the support of the radicals, obtain from the municipal council a twenty-five year lease on a plot of land. A subscription is launched and, on March 16, 1884, the municipal council votes on a proposition inviting the administration to authorize the site. Afraid of seeing the Wall escape it little by little in favor of a space accessible to all, the monument committee raised in front of it, in vain, a thirty-seven-meter-long fence, paid for by subscription, and twelve stones brought from the Palais des Tuileries burned down by the insurgents in 1871. On May 23, marchers file past the wall and deposit plants and bushes there, a just as profitable (and less visible) way of progressively appropriating the coveted space.

From 1888, the occasion of the Boulangist crisis, tensions which up until that point had divided the revolutionary movement within itself would emerge into the open. The Possibilists who turned up at the wall on May 27 favored a forcible disruption of the Boulangist affair, whereas the Blanquists would spare Boulanger. In May 1889, skirmishes broke out again, this time between Vaillantist and Rochefortist socialists. Also in 1891, after the May 1 shooting in Fourmies, on the first French celebration of the *Fête du Travail*, when nine men, all under the age of 21, were killed – a massacre that would raise the indignation of all the leaders of the republican left, from Clemenceau to Jaurès – the ascent to the Wall was made in a dispersed fashion. It would have to wait until May 29, 1892, when a plan for a common march was made. But this unity crumbled already the following year. No fewer than seven speeches were given before the wall, often being cut short by cries of “Vive Ravachol, vive l’anarchie,” “Vive la Révolution,” provoking disorder and brawls.

The upsurge of anarchist attacks resulted in the vote on the so-called miscreant laws, which limit rights of expression and protest. The red flag was prohibited, and marchers arriving at the Communards' Wall had to approach in small groups and in silence, under the control of a police force widely deployed in front of and throughout the cemetery. Every cry of the type “Vive la Commune” or a verse of “The Internationale” was liable to unleash a police charge. This strategy of containment, combined with the opportunism of some elected socialists who support the Leftwing Bloc government, was to demobilize the socialists.

In 1904, after the municipal council vote for a perpetual lease, a marble plaque 2.20 m wide was affixed to the Wall, bearing in gold letters the sober reference "Aux morts de la Commune, 21-28 mai 1871" ("To the dead of the Commune, May 21-28, 1871").

From 1906, it was the SFIO (Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière / French Section of the Workers' International) who alone took in hand the organization of the commemorative march, boycotted by the anarchists and criticized by the independent socialists and former communards. The socialist party entertained a paradoxical relation with the Commune, formed of equal parts distance and fidelity; Jaurès, in particular, was hardly moved by the bloody and macabre evocation of the 1871 insurgents and preferred by far the way of reformism. In May 1909, after the fire taken by the strikers, the party took advantage of the anniversary of the Bloody Week to go after Clémenceau's government and put an end to his alliance with the radicals. In 1913, in place of the traditional pilgrimage to the wall, the party organized an assembly at Pré-Saint-Gervais, in which a hundred fifty thousand people would participate. Little by little, and despite these oscillations, the revolutionary spirit that remained tied to the 1871 Commune came to be crystallized in the celebration at the Communards' Wall.

The cortege carried on without a break from 1908 to 1914, and then from 1919 to 1939. The interwar years were marked by a reprise of the SFIO marches, endowed with socialist "commissars" charged with strictly controlling the militants entering the cemetery in small groups. When an event of any importance happened around the time of the Bloody Week, as after the violent repression of May 1, 1919, the party took advantage of the ascent to the Wall to mislead, giving the impression of being the party that strives to be faithful to revolutionary ideals, without, for all that, breaking from its political realism, faithful to the spirit rather than the letter of 1871. The SFIO, actively pursuing a parliamentarist strategy and a logic of government, could no longer permit the slightest overstepping of the mark; it ensured that order reigned before the Wall and endowed it with a precise ceremonial that made its cortege into a "knightly ceremony, a rite of passage permitting them to anchor their strategy, now become a parliamentary one, in a heritage that will legitimate it, but leave the way open to it" (Tartakowsky 1999, 99).

The procession itself seemed to see the beginning of a decrease in participation at this time. Its banalization and the politics of supervision of the homage to the Commune had won out over popular mobilization, despite the protests of the more radical elements of the party. The emergence, after the Tours Congress in December 1920, of the French section of the Communist International (Section française de l'Internationale communiste, SFIC), brought into being a rival formation to the left of the SFIO. The latter would in turn seek to appropriate the commemoration of the Bloody Week and more broadly the Commune as a whole. In the optic of communist formation, the 1871 Commune

was comprised and judged in the light of the 1917 October Revolution. It was saluted as an authentic revolution, but a revolution that did not succeed because it had no party that could effectively bring it to completion. In 1921, the communard Camélinat, the old director of the treasury during the Commune and a founding member of the new communist party, officially returned to the party the flag of the Commune, which would then be offered to the Soviets in 1924. Elevated into a pious relic, it would be deposited in Lenin's tomb. From then on, it would usually be two processions that arrived at the Wall, at different times of day and sometimes on different days. The SFIO, conscious of the numerical weakness of its forces, tried to close the gap with the communist marchers by mobilizing its federations from the whole of the Parisian area, confederated unions of the Seine, and solicits the sending of delegations of other European socialist parties. The anarchists promptly associated themselves with the march. The race to mobilization was accompanied by a conflict of memory and a political instrumentalization of the anniversary. The communists contributed to the fading of the funerary character of the procession in favor of a more decisive political marking of the event. The ceremony at the Wall was raised up as the first step of a mobilization that must be extended, with precise objectives, into the street. As for the socialists, they elevated themselves into guardians of "the tradition." They castigated the derailing of "a pious pilgrimage whose only aim is to honor the dead," as can be read in 1923 in *Le Populaire* (Tartakowsky 1999, 110-111).

It had to wait for the violent incidents of February 1934 for the two parties to decide to march together. In this year, thirty-seven thousand seven hundred participants, according to the prefecture of police, or a hundred thousand according to *L'Humanité*, marched before the Wall. After the victory of the Popular Front (Front populaire) in the 1936 general election, the two parties organized the commemoration in concert. Nearly six hundred thousand people would march during nine hours under the unique official slogan "1871-1936," in an atmosphere both joyful and solemn. It is a little as if, behind this unified energy, the Commune came to life again. *L'humanité* (cited by Tartakowsky 1999, 132) reports, "There was in the cemetery a kind of great joy, which did not profane the dead, but defied death," and *Le Populaire* declares: "Before the dead marched life." The rite of commemoration becomes a rite of resurrection. Affliction is transfigured into hope; the Commune is not dead, the Popular Front takes up the baton. Participants brandish portraits of Condorcet, Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau, along with those of the distant precursors of the 1871 insurgency, constructing through this act alone a lineage (Hervieu-Léger 1993) rooted in Enlightenment thinking, pursued in the revolutionary experience of 1789, and extended in the Commune. But the unity of 1936 was not to be repeated. Tensions returned; other perils darkened the horizon. The street became from then on the principal space for the expression of popular protest.

It is at the Liberation that the Wall finds favor again with the cadres and the communist militants. They will patriotically associate those fallen in the battle against the occupier or killed abroad with the homage to the dead of 1871. The count is no more than sixty thousand participants in 1945 at the Communist Party march. The SFIO will return to the Wall only episodically until 1947, bringing together twelve thousand people, and then in the fifties and up until 1969 when less than five hundred militants will make the journey, against three thousand for the PCF [Parti communiste français, French Communist Party]. The pilgrimage to the Communards' Wall tends to become, little by little, a discreet if not intimate pilgrimage in which the great parties of the left participate on a rather modest scale.

Today, they are content to appeal to their militants and sympathizers to associate themselves with the "ecumenical" commemoration of the Bloody Week organized each year by the Association des Amis de la Commune (Association of Friends of the Commune). This commemoration is supported by a collective which stretches from the PCF to the anarchists, through the PS (Parti socialiste, Socialist Party), the NPA (Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste, New Anticapitalist Party), the LCR (Ligue communiste révolutionnaire, Revolutionary Communist League), the LO (Lutte ouvrière, Workers' Struggle), the Freethinkers, the Greens, the Louise Michel Association, a group of Esperantists, and so on. It is, moreover, thanks to this association that in May 1968, when the cemetery staff were on strike, the march was still able to take place. Erstwhile principal organizers of the pilgrimage to the Communards' Wall, the PCF, like the PS, have today been demoted to the rank of mere acolytes, or even just pilgrims for a day, no more or less. Other groups have taken up the baton, such as the Grand Orient de France (GODF), which organizes its own ceremony on the margins of the official commemoration, conferring another type of sacredness on the site, that of a site of remembrance of Masonic Paris.

Contemporary Actors and Social Uses of the Pilgrimage to the Wall

Four types of social operators today practice, every year or more irregularly, the ascent to the Communards' Wall. The diversity of profiles of these pilgrims who march up the alleys of Père-Lachaise to present themselves at the Wall should not make us forget that their number remains quite small. But if this small number (between a few hundred and three thousand people) largely breaks with the great processions of the thirties or with the crowds of confessional pilgrimages, the diversity of groups who sacrifice to this processional rite testifies, as in religious pilgrimages, to the differentiated profile of the pilgrim, something that must be of interest to the sociologist.

Types of Pilgrims

For the purposes of our study, we have identified and distinguished partisan operators, associative operators, union operators, and philosophical operators.

Partisan Operators: This term designates the militant organizations, formations, and political parties who lay claim to the spirit, if not the letter, of the communalist experience and who, every year, on a fixed date or spontaneously, assemble before the Wall. Essentially we are talking here about left and extreme-left movements. Among them we find the socialist party, the communist party, Trotskyite currents (the LCR and then the NPA and LO), the Jacobin and republican left (MRS: Mouvement Région Savoie, Savoy Region Movement), the radicals (PRG: Parti Radical de Gauche, Radical Party of the Left). In practice, there is scarcely more than the (Chevènementist) Citizen and Republican Movement which, at the initiative of Jean-Marie Autexier (deputy for the socialist representative of the 20th arrondissement, George Pau-Langevin), organizes every May 12 or 18 its own assembly before the Wall under the rustic title of the "Fête des cerises" ("Festival of Cherries"). The other formations of the democratic left are happy to call for participation in marches organized through the network of associations.

As for the PS, it is essentially the section of the 20th arrondissement that is mobilized each year and leaves a wreath at the wall. The local elected members of the arrondissement and parliamentarians dressed in their tricolor sashes mix with different commemorative processions (GODE, Association des Amis de la Commune, etc.) and are invited to speak. Thus in May 2009, on the occasion of the ceremony organized by the GODE, the socialist deputy mayor of the arrondissement, Pascal Joseph, evoked "the permanent immortality of the work of the Commune."

Partisan groups, composed of revolutionary militants affiliated to groupuscules that are not recognized in the current political system, some of which have had direct recourse to or have supported clandestine and violent actions, also march to the Wall. This is the case with the militants of the anarchist groups, and especially those who have a greater or lesser claim to the heritage of Action directe (Direct Action). These latter groups prefer to come together outside of the usual official slots, especially for civil tributes marking the death of a militant. They consider themselves the authentic successors of the Commune. We can gauge here the symbolic importance that presenting oneself at the Communards' Wall, and thus inscribing oneself in an illustrious genealogy, takes on for these minoritarian organizations, when the dominant parties (PCF, PS, etc.) have gradually renounced these specific assemblies in favor of more unitary forms of mobilization.

Associative Operators: A multitude of associations close to the milieus of the French left also complete the pilgrimage to the Wall. Active in the social, cultural, and historical domains, they recognize in the Paris Commune a historical event whose heritage and values should be preserved, just as one must honor the memory of those linked to it. Into this category fall the Louise Michel Association, who maintain the memory the work of Louise Michel – particularly in the pedagogical domain – as well as the Association des Amis de la Commune, who present themselves as the heirs of the communard brotherhood. Reputedly close to the Communist Party, this movement for popular education has since 1970 organized annually, on May 24, the “ecumenical” commemoration before the Communards’ Wall, with which all the political parties of the left, the extreme left, the Greens, the anarchists, Freethinkers, and other movements associate themselves. The rest of the year, they mount itinerant exhibitions dedicated to the Commune, and their members participate in public conferences centered around the work of the 1871 Commune.



Commemoration of 130 years of the Paris Commune (May 2011).

© Association des Amis de la Commune

Union Operators: Then come the unionist actors, most of whom – militants and sections often linked to the FO (Force Ouvrière, Workers’ Force) – associate themselves with the commemoration of May 24. This is also the case with the CGT (Confédération générale du travail, General Confederation of Labor) and the FSU (Fédération syndicale unitaire, United Union Federation). It was only in 1936 that the CGT participated for the first time in the march. Its memory, like that of the FO, inclines more toward the columbarium, where the ashes of a number of its former leaders are interred. Then it focuses on the 97th division of the cemetery, where it maintains its own concession, dedicated to the victims of the Charonne attack. Only the CGT and the FO organize every year, on the

margins of their cortege in the great Parisian march, their own commemoration of May 1, parallel with that of the GODF.

It should be noted that in May 2009, a group of journeymen workers (Compagnons des devoirs), wearing their distinctive garb behind the banner of their Cayenne de Lyon, took part in the GODF ceremony for the first time. And indeed, at the time of the Commune, many journeymen joined Masonic lodges and fought alongside the insurgents.



Constitution of a procession of dignitaries and banners of the GODF at Père Lachaise (May 1).

© Franck Frégosi

Philosophical Operators--The Masons of the GODF: If the presence of political operators of the left and extreme left is situated within a certain historical tradition linked to the workers' movement, the same cannot be said for certain other "pilgrims," such as the Freemasons of the GODF. Their official presence at the Wall is the outcome of a series of developments that go back only to the seventies. It is the reflection of a strategic choice, that of exteriorization, which is a good characterization of the type of Masonic practice that this order incarnates.

Although Parisian lodges quite quickly took up the custom of honoring the memory of the Masons involved in the Commune, this homage remained limited and was confined to Masonic sites only. It is to Fred Zeller, artist-painter and erstwhile secretary of Leon Trotsky, subsequently president of the Congress of Lodges of the Parisian Region of the GODF in the sixties, that we owe the first public ceremony of tribute before the Communards' Wall (Zeller 1976, 296). In 1971, the GODF, directed by the writer Jacques Mitterrand, celebrated the centenary of the Commune with great pomp, processions, and colloquiums. In May of that year, more than four thousand Masons of the Grand Orient, of *Le Droit Humain* and of the female Grand Lodge of France would arrive in a

procession with their decorations and their banners at the Communards’ Wall. On April 24, in the premises of the order on rue Cadet, a meeting open to the public would be organized and dedicated to the Commune. On this occasion, the whole of the Council of the Order and the Masons present solemnly intone “The Internationale,” joined by all the participants. In September 1971, Fred Zeller becomes the thirty-ninth Grand Master of the GODF. Under his leadership, the French Masonic order greatest in number begins to involve itself in a new and intense politics of externalization, which characterizes to this day its civil actions and distinguishes it from other orders.



GODF procession halting before the tomb of Baron Percy during the homage to the martyrs of the Commune, May 1, 2001.

© Franck Frégosi

No one would disagree that the Masons participated actively in the government of the Commune (eighteen out of seventy elected members of the Council of the Commune were Masons) and that many communards, after their deportation, were to become Masons, after the example of Louise Michel and Jean-Baptiste Clément (Dittmar 2003). Nonetheless, many of the Masons were proponents of the conciliatory line (Combes 2000, 162) who wished to avoid the bloodbath and tried, in vain, to reconcile the insurgents and Versailles (among whom were also Masons). As Luc Nefontaine correctly claims, “the Commune was not the offspring of the Masons, any more than the Revolution was” (1994, 61).

At a meeting of Masons at Châtelet on April 26, 1871, the majority of participants decides strongly in favor of the Commune and decides to go and meet its leaders. The members of the Council of the Order, the executive body of the GODF, then adopt a circular totally disavowing this initiative. The circular claims that "the Masonry of the Grand Orient de France is not at all bound by the resolution taken in the Châtelet assembly, and this resolution applies only to those Masons who personally voted for it."¹ A march – made up of a mixture of Masons drawn from some sixty lodges, along with Compagnons – took place on April 29, setting out from the carousel at Hôtel de Ville, toward Porte Maillot, where the banners of the lodges were finally raised. A commitment had been made: if the banners were touched by the bullets of Versailles, the whole of Parisian and provincial Freemasonry would line up behind the Commune and take up arms to defend it. But on May 29, the Council of the Order was to reaffirm that "Masonry has remained entirely separate from the criminal sedition that has appalled everyone, by covering Paris with blood and ruins, that there is no possible solidarity between its doctrines and those of the Commune and that, if certain men unworthy of the name of Masons have tried to transform our peaceful banner into a flag of civil war, the Grand Orient repudiates them as having forgotten their sacred duties" (Ligou 1987, 280). When, following this, the brother and pastor Frédéric Desmons was to propose that the Convent adopt a proposition of general amnesty for the insurgents of 1871, the Convent refused even to publicly debate the suggestion. In view of these facts, there is therefore a certain irony of history in seeing, marching past the Communards' Wall, the officials of an order whose predecessors, at the time, took great care to totally dissociate themselves from an experiment judged to be contrary to their peaceful ideals. It is just as anachronistic to hear today the officials of this order acting as if secularism was already, in 1871, one of the principles unanimously adopted by the order. At the time, so-called normal Freemasonry demanded of all its members the obligation to believe in the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. It was not until 1877 that the GODF was to reject these two imperatives and, with respect to the vote on the Law on the Separation of Church and State in 1905, the Freemasons were still not unanimous, even within the GODF itself.

The Various Aspects of the Tribute to the Commune

The fact that these different operators march once a year before the same Wall should not lead us to conclude that they come to this place motivated by the same sentiments, nor that their interpretations of the Commune and of its heritage are identical and transposable on every point. It is a fact, for example, that, as far as the Freemasons and Freethinkers are concerned, it is more the secular and anticlerical aspect of the Commune's work and the effective participation

1. *Bulletin of the GODF*, 3rd ser. 27 (1871): 22.

of Parisian Masons and Freethinkers at the highest level of communalist government that are brought to the fore and made the object of laudatory speeches, rather than the social measures adopted subsequently. If this secularist dimension of the Commune can hardly be contested from a strictly historical point of view, it nevertheless is not the source of such ardor on the part of other groups who march before the Wall.

It is on the part of the Grand Orient de France, members of the Council of the Order, and the delegation of Parisian lodges, that the reference to secularism is most clear, as well as among the militants of Free Thought. "Since April 2," declares Georges Ferré, Deputy Grand Master of the GODF, in 2007, "the first measures taken in the general assembly were separation of church and state and the cutting of budgetary support for religion. Brother Raoul Rigault proved particularly active in the secularization of public services... It was not until thirty-four years later, on December 9, 1905, that finally the separation was realized, under the leadership of brother Émile Combes." We should note in passing the persistence of received ideas: paternity of the law is attributed, in place of Aristide Briand, to Émile Combes, although the latter was not president of the Council at the time and although, what is more, he favored the reinforcement of the system of concordance. Maurice Azoulay, director of the Lorulot group of the Association of Freethinking, stated at the Wall on May 20, 2006:

We must not forget that on April 3, 1871, the decree separating church and state is proclaimed and pasted on the walls of Paris... It is the Paris Commune that instituted the political power through which gods and churches would no longer have anything to do with the Republic. It is since this day that freedom of conscience has been instituted. No one can ignore this individual freedom to which the entire civilized and intelligent world adheres. (Azoulay 2006)²

This porosity between discourses on the secularist heritage of the Commune finds itself accentuated by the fact that strong organizational links have historically always existed between the two groups concerned.³ As we have noted above, this marks a notable difference from the militants of the extreme left who, although they also evoke the separation of church and state, insist more on the social component of the measures taken by the Commune.

As for the Citizen and Republican Movement, alongside the social dimension, the patriotic aspect of the Commune is exalted:

The Commune is thus a social and patriotic act of resistance ... it is the people in arms who derailed the monarchies allied against the revolution. It is the people of

2. Maurice Azoulay, speech at Père-Lachaise, Paris, May 20, 2006, <http://lpgroupelorulot.voila.net/lacommunedeparis/index.html>.

3. The current national president of the Freethinkers is Marc Blondel, former FO union official, Freemason and member of the GODF; his vice-president is a former grand master of the GODF.

Paris who sought to continue the struggle rather than make any pact with the occupier, it is the people in the shadows who chose the Resistance, and it would be the anonymous, those of no rank, who would join de Gaulle in London. For more than two hundred years, the republicans allied national independence with the quest for social equality. There cannot be one without the other. In the Citizen and Republican Movement, we customarily say that social progress without national freedom is a fraud. (Autexier 2007)⁴

Secular, Commemorative and Partisan Pilgrimage

The annual commemoration of the dead of the Commune before the Communards' Wall has gradually become something like a secular, commemorative, and partisan pilgrimage.

A Secular Pilgrimage

The term "secular pilgrimage" is not in itself new. It has been used in particular to give an account either of journeys made by a famous person and his close companions to a particular place, or to designate the collective tribute rendered to a renowned person of the past distinguished by their major literary oeuvre and humanistic commitment.

To the first case corresponds the ascent of the Rock of Solutré (in the Saône-et-Loire district), which François Mitterrand climbed privately every Pentecost Sunday since 1946, and which, following his accession to the presidency of the Republic on May 10, 1981, would take on an eminently public dimension. Marc Abèlès perceives in this ritual "a dialogue between Mitterrand the man and the transcendence of historical France" (1990, 142). Mitterrand wrote of this pilgrimage, of which he himself was the creator: "From there, I perceive better what is going on, what is coming, and, above all, what is not going to change" (1975, 175). It is true that the former head of state also (always in a private capacity) visited other sites of pilgrimage; but in these cases they were Christian sites such as Vézelay or Taizé, where he often went on the eve of his ascent of Solutré.

It is also explicitly a question of a secular pilgrimage when we consider the public tribute rendered, since 1908, on every first Sunday of October, to the memory of Émile Zola in his house at Médan, which brings together four to five hundred people. This assembly, requested by the Zola family, is organized by the Association of *Cahiers Naturalistes*. On this occasion, personalities from the world of letters and politics are invited to speak, to deliver an address dedicated to Zola's humanism and activism:

4. Jean-Yves Autexier, speech at Père-Lachaise, Paris, May 12, 2007, <http://mrc37.blogspot.co.uk/2007/05/commmoration-de-la-commune-de-paris.html>.

I have the feeling of participating in a pilgrimage here, in the secular sense of the term – that is to say, an homage tinged with republican recognition. Recognition, because “Zola the man” and his work enjoy the warmest, most intimate place in the heart of this country’s popular culture. Zola – it is enough just to say his name ... to immediately give rise in our minds to images of resistance, struggles for justice, suffering endured and immense joy, profound despair and great hopes, revolts and victories that are never guaranteed. (Tasca 2000)

The pilgrimage to the Wall, on the example of worship before monuments to the dead, is “a secular religion with neither god nor priest” (Prost 1997, 219). This secular, or even secularist, character is reinforced by the fact that this pilgrimage also seeks to valorize events in which religions (essentially, Catholicism) are mostly the figures of repression, whose social influence must be legally limited by setting it apart from the public finances and all public support, and which must be struggled against politically, as being integral to an anachronistic and oppressive system. But this religion, rejected in its particular institutional dimension (the Catholic Church), is no less implicitly present as a continuing anthropological reality, among those nostalgic for the Commune, in the almost religious fervor and the ceremonial pomp deployed before the Communards’ Wall.

Apart from a decor that belongs to religious ceremonies (banners, symbols, etc.), the GODF’s procession toward the Wall has the allure of a springtime walk where the participants, sometimes accompanied by their friends, are quite happy to use cell phones, to banter loudly with each other, and to poke fun at the *bons mots*. This cheerful ambience is in contrast to the gravity of the official speeches made at the Wall, but gives to the tribute to the dead of the Commune that festive, relaxed dimension that belongs to any pilgrimage, and which stifles any hint of radicalism. This indicates very well the coexistence of different temporalities according to which the participant is by turns a walker out for a spree, a young brother surrounded by his elders, and a secular militant fascinated by the symbolism of the Commune. But all share a set of values and references within the framework of an elective brotherhood (Hervieu-Léger 1993, 217).

A Commemorative Pilgrimage

This pilgrimage is commemorative because it is concerned, above all, with remembering the 1871 sacrifice of the communards, with honoring the memory of combatants (comparable to martyrs) and simple citizens who fell under the fire of troops sent by the government that had withdrawn to Versailles. This commemorative dimension has in the past taken on a funerary tone that is less noticeable in our times. It would then have been a matter of putting right an injustice done to the dead insurgents – that of not having received civil funerals and the tribute of their relatives and friends, but also that of having been massacred by their compatriots and by a government that claimed, one way or another, the Republic. It is the Communist Party that will actively participate, in

the interwar years, in the progressive effacement of the funerary rite in favor of a greater politicization of the sequence. This process will see a clear inflection after the Second World War, after which it will be a matter, instead, of honoring the *résistants* and those who were deported.

In this commemorative sequence, the emotional dimension finds plenty of opportunity for expression, and can give rise to a certain form of political radicalism – small-scale, certainly, for it is practiced by a limited number of militants, but one which nonetheless translates into a kind of “publicization of grievances” (Latte 2009, 119). On the part of both the militants of the radical left and the associated actors such as the GODF Freemasons, all discourses seek to associate the struggles of the 1871 Commune with the social struggles and challenges of today. Thus Guy Arcizet, Grand Master of the GODF, declared in May 2011 that the lesson of the Commune remained entirely current insofar as it expressed, above all, the refusal of fatalism (the armistice, social exploitation) and that it was the responsibility of Masons, in their turn, to return to everyday reality and to refuse the persistence of exclusion, racism, and the rise of populism in Europe. While recognizing that the Versailles government could not be compared to the Nazi occupants of France, nor Adolphe Thiers to Philippe Pétain, it was nonetheless the case, to his eyes, that the Commune continued to resonate as a time when the spirit of resistance was strong.

To remember the work of the Commune is to incite women and men of today to act as its worthy heirs. The recalling of the past turns into a celebration of political courage, the achievements of this experience into a eulogy of actions to take in the present and in the future.

A Partisan Pilgrimage

The partisan character resides in the fact that, unlike other civic and republican ceremonies that take place before monuments to the dead, like that of November 11, what is exalted before the Communards' Wall is not some strictly patriotic sentiment, nor is it a matter of staging some consensual vision of the nation. It is above all a matter of just honoring the memory of the victims of an illegitimate repression: in short, of repairing an injustice done to the martyred Parisian people. In a direct lineage from the ceremonies in honor of the republican martyrs who fell under the Restoration, the tribute to those shot in 1871 lays bare civil dissent, it participates in the “cult of the vanquished” (Fureix 2009, 435) in which we find, intrinsically mixed, memory, grief, revolutionary violence, and punitive justice. As Emmanuel Fureix writes: “the vanquished, in paying tribute to their dead, call for a perpetuation of the conflict, in the name of a vengeance for the community, but yet more, of a violated sovereignty of the people” (Fureix 2009, 454).

This is a “red” pilgrimage: the flags that predominate before the wall illustrate this well enough! The red, and sometimes the black, are always *de rigueur*. The tricolor flag only officially made its appearance in 1945 at the initiative of the Communist Party and is often found today, in a minimalist version, on the sashes of the elected of the city of Paris and the parliamentarians who participate in the GODF march on May 1.

A Secular Liturgy in Procession Form

The ceremonies take place according to a precise liturgical calendar that begins on May 1 with the morning assembly of the GODF, then the CGT and the FO. On May 18, it is the turn of the MRC, and on May 24 the rally organized by the Friends of the Commune takes place. Apart from these landmark dates, the sites are also visited on the occasion of ceremonies linked to the anniversary of the death of particular political figures or revolutionary militants.⁵

The rites in use before the wall are of a processional type. They make this special site at once a memorial, before which one comes to remember the departed, and a permanent space of sanctification for the revolutionaries of today and the partisans of a universal republic.



GODF officials lay wreaths on the tomb of Jean-Baptiste Clément (May 1, 2008).

© Lacot.

5. According to the marchers, groups of Freethinkers sometimes also organize their own march during the month of May.



Banners of the Lodges.

© Franck Frégosi.

The civil and partisan religion expressed on this occasion consists in part, firstly, in a secularized perpetuation of the cult of the bodies of the saints (Dupront 1987, 383) through the cult of the dead of the Commune, of those martyrs, witnesses of an interrupted social republic whose memory is perpetuated by a faithful core who every year remember and organize commemorative gatherings. It is concretized by the laying of wreaths, rings of red carnations or simple bouquets of briar rose at the wall, the presence of these floral adornments explicitly referring to the cult of the dead.

The gathering properly speaking is generally preceded by a secular processional liturgy, itself a very colorful affair. For the GODF, the course of the ceremony is always identical: the gathering of participants at ten o'clock at the main entrance to the cemetery, the constitution of the cortege that marches on foot down the Chemin des Acacias to the Communards' Wall, and the laying of wreaths. In the course of this ceremony, the GODF systematically pauses to associate with the tribute paid to the 1871 martyrs various other figures that are bearers of humanist ideals. Thus in 2011, apart from Jean-Baptiste Clément, honored during the procession of the walk to the Wall were also Baron Percy (1754-1825), doctor of the Imperial armies, and the Countess of Lavalette (1769-1855). At each of these halts, the Grand Master and one of his brothers recount the acts and the fame of the persons honored, often linked to Freemasonry. These halts are as many secular stations in an ascent whose culminating point remains the Wall. The progress concretizes in action the existence of a glorious and uninterrupted historical lineage that associates humanist Freemasonry steeped in Enlightenment ideals and the communards. Thus the governing idea of this gathering is confirmed: that Freemasonry is not only a sister of the Republic, but also a sister of the Commune. In the other corteges, during the crossing of the cemetery, scarlet banners and standards are unfurled and waved in the wind, sometimes a few black flags appear at the margins of the march, or banners of the GODF lodges. The ceremonial carries on usually before or after a minute of silence, "a secular form of prayer" (Prost 1997, 212), with speeches that have the feel of secular homilies for militants or brothers and Masons who revere the communard experience as the dawn of a revolutionary and humanist leap forward, a first step toward the advent of an egalitarian society, always yet to come. Once they have processed to the wall, the protocol of the GODF dictates that an elected representative of the arrondissement make a speech. The latter begins by praising the ever-rebellious spirit of his arrondissement and sets the scene of an ideological continuity between the social work of the Commune and the actions undertaken by the socialist members for the arrondissement. But very quickly the tone becomes more solemn: the speech resonates then with the names of Robespierre, Marx, Engels, and those of the communards of the 20th arrondissement (Bergeret, Flourens, etc.) Religious metaphors mix with Masonic formulae: the "living stones" of the graves of Père-Lachaise are evoked, and the participants are invited "to plunge their hands into this sacred earth." Freemasonry is not absent from these speeches, either, when the speaker evokes "ladies and gentlemen the officials of the Orders of friends, present today or bound to us by the long living chain of the Tradition ... *Salut et Fraternité*," or when the presence at the Communards' Wall is compared to the ordeal of the earth (Joseph 2010). The Grand Master on hand reads his speech in turn. This is often the occasion for him to engage in a Masonic annexation of the work of the Commune. Freemasonry is valorized as the major inspiration behind the Commune's reforms. The humanist and social ideal promoted by Freemasonry tend to become the exclusive references for the Commune, instead and in place of ideological contributions from socialist

or even anarchist currents. This speech participates in a smoothing over of the 1871 events, by way of which its ideological plurality is erased, while making the GODF the guardian of the communalist tradition.

For the GODE, to the sound of the barrel organ of the street singer Riton la Manivelle, the celebration is completed by the singing, taken up in chorus, of "Temps des cerises." As the song normally marks the official end of the ceremony, with the officials exchanging salutes, the participants intone "The Internationale."

The scenario is reversed with the other corteges: with raised fists, the militants sing "The Internationale," sometimes followed by "Temps des cerises." It is obvious that in relation to the other corteges of associations or political parties, the GODF's, with all its ceremonials and its decor, belongs most to the tradition of the processions of religious pilgrimages – those of Lourdes, Sainte-Anne-d'Auray, and Santiago de Compostela. Everything is here: the robed celebrants (members of the Council of the Order), their yellow, green, and gold necklaces as the secular equivalent of stoles, accompanied by the worthy members of historical lodges that participated in the Commune, sister and brother masters wearing their cords of sky blue (French Rite) or blue with red border (Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite), followed by the banners of lodges bearing the symbols (square, compass, equilateral triangle, columns, etc.), flowers, and, in the place of the canticle or "Ave Maria," the "Temps des cerises."

All of these details bring to mind more a religious procession than a march of those "nostalgic" for the eve of the revolution.

The Communards' Wall: Memorial for Revolutionaries and Space of Secular Sanctification

The Communards' Wall is for the communist and extreme left what Mont-Valérien incarnates for the France of the Gaullist resistance: a memorial, a funerary space, a site of remembrance before which one comes to honor not only those who fell in 1871, but all political leaders, or at least all revolutionary militants, of all times. This site is thus charged with a sacrificial aura, with a sacredness born of the blood spilled in 1871.

A Wall of remembrance, it becomes by extension the wall of hope, where the revolutionaries of today can ultimately come to be rejuvenated and to "commune" with the spirits, the shades of revolutionaries of the past, thus constituting a secular communion of all the "rebel saints".

This political sacredness is subsequently confirmed by the burials in the rest of the cemetery, and, facing the Wall, that of the great revolutionary figures of the nineteenth century: the Longuet-Lafargues (son and daughter of Marx), Jean-Baptiste Clément, the author of "Temps des cerises," and other communards. On the circular road, and in the same division, between the monuments

to the deportation (Sachsenhausen, Auschwitz, Ravensbrück ...) and to the heroes of the resistance, we find the tombs of certain communist leaders: here rest Henri Barbusse, Paul Vaillant-Couturier, Maurice Thorez, Marcel Cachin, Jacques Duclos, and then a little further out, Waldeck Rochet, Gaston Plissonnier, and many combatants of the Spanish Civil War.

For the ten-year anniversary of the death of Georges Marchais, the central committee of the PCF came to the Wall to leave a memorial wreath – proof, in the absence of the body of the deceased, who is not buried at Père-Lachaise, that in the communist imagination the site remains charged with a special aura, like a “substitute Pantheon” (Tartakowsky 1999, 167).

For many militant revolutionaries, the Wall is the site *par excellence* which one visits to pay tribute to comrades of struggles past. Thus after the private funeral service for Joëlle Aubron, ex-prisoner and former member of the group Action directe, the militants of the extreme left organized to meet at Père-Lachaise. Here, on March 18, 2006, the anniversary of the beginning of the Commune, a crowd of sympathizers and militants, men and women with their faces covered, carrying wreaths and bouquets of red flowers, sang “The Internationale” as red flags fluttered in the wind: they honored their “comrade and friend” Joëlle Aubron. On this occasion, a parallel was established between the unfinished work of the Commune and the contemporary activism of Joëlle Aubron, on national and international levels.



Tributes to Joëlle Aubron at the Communards’ Wall (March 18, 2006).

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What more symbolic tribute could we pay than to gather in this place? From the Paris Commune to the political activism of Joëlle in the armed struggle, a guiding red thread of combatants for freedom stretches out, and it is this spirit of resistance and of struggle that we link to her ... For the liberation of all imprisoned militants of Action direct! For a classless and prisonless society! Long live the Commune!⁶

It would be the same story after the burial of Bruno Baudrillart, an extreme-left militant who also received a tribute at the Communards' Wall, in October 2007, under the unifying slogan: "For a lived communism, for communism forever."⁷ He is depicted as belonging "to a long chain of rebels, conscious militants who from struggle to struggle affirm that another society is possible, that exploitation is intolerable."⁸ In doing so, these militants seek not only to celebrate the memory of their comrades; through their presence at the Wall to which they affix, during the event, photographs of the deceased, this site seems to remain, through the centuries, the proxy tomb of all rebels and, beyond that, a space of sanctification, and even an open-air sanctuary for the Revolution.

As regards history, it is the funerary character that has proved essential and has remained in effect for certain leftist groupuscules. One marches to the Wall to honor the insurgents of 1871 and to celebrate the memory of today's deceased rebels, of all those who agitate for the revolutionary cause and the coming of a classless society. These rites, constitutive of a workers' and revolutionary and highly "schematizing" (Rivière 1988, 157) memory, leave a lot of room for the repetition of slogans of the type "Long live the Commune, Long live the classless society." They tend to engrave into the minds of participants an often bipolar, Manichean vision of historical reality. The same goes for the GODF, where the speeches given all seek to show that the ideals of the Commune coincide more with those of the liberal Freemasonry, of which the GODF is the epicenter in France, than with any political (Marxist, socialist, etc.) ideology.

As Claude Rivière has shown, these rites celebrate a lost golden age, more or less mythologized (the social Republic of 1871), and some of its great achievements (the separation of church and state, the creation of secular and free schools, the creation of primary schools for girls and professional colleges, cooperatives of production, etc.), and are designed to create consensus around an historical episode that is often reduced to just its bloody and subversive character, rather than remembering the emancipatory and progressivist tenor of the time. For it is at the same time a matter of a partisan consensus, limited to the different families of the French left and extreme left. Unlike civil secular rites, which are generally

6. "Hommage à Joëlle Aubron, texte lu au Mur des Fédérés" (Homage to Joëlle Aubron; Text Read at the Communards' Wall), March 18, 2006, <http://nlpf.samizdat.net/spip.php?article125>.

7. "L'hommage à Bruno le 13 octobre au Père-Lachaise," blog of *L'Internationale*, October 14, 2007, <http://linter.over-blog.com/article-13077570.html>.

8. Ibid.

situated within a system of government that they attempt to stage, to confirm, the ascent to the Wall always has a tone of protest about it, with red flags sometimes emblazoned with the hammer and sickle. Even if the Wall has been registered on the list of historical monuments, for some nostalgic for the social revolution this pilgrimage will always resonate with a contestation of the social order in place. It is the occasion, in a springtime setting, to publicly denounce, for some (militants of the extreme left and some associated operators) the persistence of social injustice and thus the urgency of a political project worthy of that of the 1871 Commune, where for others (the socialist, noncommunist left), it will be a matter of a simple tribute paid in principle to a historical episode that marked Parisian workers’ memory. For the GODF Masons, it is a matter less of exalting the proletarian revolution than of trying to appropriate an event and show that Freemasonry played a role of the first order in it and did not hesitate to engage society and work for social progress and secularism. It is, above all, the occasion for the leaders of this allegiance to pose in turn as the guardians of the heritage of the Commune, to appeal for vigilance in the face of every (hypothetical) challenge to secularism, erected as the supreme value of Masonic activism.



Banners of the Lodges at the Communards’ Wall (May 1, 2011)

© Franck Frégosi

The Communards’ Wall at Père-Lachaise is an authentic site of pilgrimage for a heterogeneous set of democratic and revolutionary militants of the left, Freethinkers, and Freemasons. This space has become the endpoint of corteges, of militant secular processions where red flags take the place of (or mix with)

Masonic banners, where raised fists and "The Internationale" go alongside the cords of Masonic officials emblazoned with the square and compasses, intoning the "Chant des cerises." Here we find secularized forms of the celebration of the cult of the martyrs, testimonies to a revolutionary faith or hope.

To the memorial or commemorative logic, we should add the will to place current activism on a continuum with that of the communards of days gone by. On this basis, throughout these ceremonies before the Wall, a veritable lineage of belief has been progressively constructed in the memory of militants, a sacred continuity that brings together across the ages the revolutionaries of 1871 and those of later years in an immense procession, a strange secular communion of revolutionary saints, where the commemoration of past struggles becomes a celebration of the present combats.

The analogy between these secular processions and Christian religious processions is reinforced by the place where these gatherings take place, a cemetery. Although it is not, in the minds of the "faithful" of the Wall, a question of believing in the resurrection of the flesh, the idea of resurrection nevertheless remains metaphorically present in their declarations. "As the communards come out of their tomb riddled with bullets, to relight the flame of our activism," declares one of these faithful, "we say, with Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx: 'the Commune that the powers of the old world thought they had exterminated lives more than ever, and we can cry with you: Long live the Commune'" (Joseph 2010).

The rebels of 1871 may be dead, but the spirit of the Commune continues to breathe, here, at the Communards' Wall, more than ever.

Franck FRÉGOSI
UMR 7354 Droit, Religion, Entreprise et Société,
Université de Strasbourg,
franck.fregosi@orange.fr

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Abstract

We encounter a new particular type of pilgrimage, which is secular-commemorative and partisan, illustrating a crossover between the domain of the "sacred" and a form of partisan social mobilization: in brief, the unconscious quest for sacredness and rites of replacement for those whose philosophic and political choices usually diverge from the classic religious rites.