James Guillaume
Federalism
1871

In the second issue of *Solidarité*, dated April 1871, James Guillaume contributed this piece on the federative principle, in the context of the Paris Commune. Note the use of Proudhon's concept of "collective force."
Translation by Shawn P. Wilbur
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The true character of the revolution that was accomplished at Paris commence has been outlined in so marked a fashion that you, even the minds most unfamiliar with political theories, can now perceive it clearly.

The revolution of Paris is *federalist*.

The Parisian people want to have the liberty to organize themselves as they intend, without the rest of France having to mix in Parisian affairs; and at the same time, they renounce on their side all interference in the affairs of the departments, by urging them each to organize as their please, in the fullness of communal autonomy.

The different organizations which would be in this way freely constituted could then freely federate in order to mutually guarantee their rights and their independence.

It is important not to confuse federalism as it is understood by the Paris Commune with the so-called federalism which exists in Switzerland and in the United States of America.

Switzerland is simply a federative State, and that word alone already expresses all the differences between these two systems. Switzerland is a State, that is, it is a national unity; and, as a result, despite the federative appearance, sovereignty there is attributed to the nation in its ensemble. The cantons, instead of being considered as distinct individualities and absolute sovereigns, are supposed to be only fractions of a whole which is called the Swiss nation. A canton does not have the free disposition of itself: it can indeed, to a certain degree, manage its own affairs; but it does not possess true autonomy, its legislative faculties are limited by the federal constitution; and that federal constitution is not a contract, in the true sense of the word; it has not been accepted individually by each of the parties: it has been imposed on the cantons by the vote of a majority. A canton does not have the right to terminate the federal contract; it is forbidden from leaving the federation; it is even forbidden, as we see at this moment in the affairs of the Tessin, to divide in order to form new cantons. The least political or socialist movement, a strike for example, can bring federal troops into the canton.

Thus, federation, in Switzerland, is only in the words. It is not federation which is the true name of the Swiss system, it is decentralization. Switzerland realizes closely the system that had been established in France by the constitution of 1791, and that the Assembly of Versailles,

"inspired by the great principles of 1789," proposes to restore in order to seem to give in to federalist aspirations.

Federalism, in the sense given to it by the Paris Commune, and that was given to it many years ago by the great socialist Proudhon, who first scientifically outlined the theory, — federalism is above all the negation of the nation and the State.

For federalism, there is no more nation, no more national or territorial unity. There is only an agglomeration of federated communes, an agglomeration which has for its determining principle only the interests of the contracting parties, and which consequently has no regard for the questions of nationalism or of territory.

There is equally no more State, no more central power superior to the groups and imposing it them its authority: there is only the collective force resulting from the federation of the groups, and that collective force, which acts to maintenance and guarantee of the federal contract, — a true synallagmatic contract this time, stipulated individually by each of the parties, — this collective force, we say, can never become something prior and superior to the federated groups, something analogous to what the State is today to society and to the communes. The centralized and national State thus no longer exists, and the Communes enjoying the fullness of their independence, there is truly *an-archy*, absence of central authority.

But let us not believe that after having suppressed the States and nationalism, federalism leads to absolute individualism, to isolation, to egoism. No, federalism is socialist, and for it solidarity is inseparable from liberty. The communes, while remaining absolutely autonomous, feel themselves, by the force of things, in solidarity; and, without sacrificing any of their liberty, or, to put it better, to better assure their liberty, they unite themselves tightly by federative contracts, where they stipulate all that which touches their common interests: the large public services, the exchange of products, the guarantee of individual rights, and mutual aid in case of any aggression.

Let the French people, awakened finally by their misfortune, open their eyes to the light of truth: let them be in 1871 the initiators of the Federalist and Social Republic, as they were in 1793 the proclaimers of the rights of men; and in Europe, preserved from the gothic restoration

with which the German Empire threatens it, will shine in a near future the days of liberty and equality.