

# THE CHARACTER OF THE COMMUNAL MOVEMENT IN FRANCE

by

Kang, Il-hyoo

Suwon university

Suwon, Korea

## Introduction

Since 19th century many historians have paid attention to the communal movement in France. Some "liberal" writers even regarded such a movement as the prefiguration of the French Revolution.<sup>1)</sup> And K. Marx pointed out on the basis of A. Thierry's studies that the struggle with the landed proprietors was conducted in the revolutionary form of a conjuratio and its most important result was the formation of the burgher commune as a social group which held itself aloof from the nobility and the rural population. Admittedly in the Middle Ages there were tensions between town and country, burgher and lord.<sup>2)</sup> Since then the attempts to present a picture of the communal movement have been influenced by an assumption of class conflict derived either from early liberal or Marxian analyses. Such a movement has been usually presented as an antifeudal or revolutionary movement. For example, M. Bloch said that, in the grip of the communal movement "with its violent hostility to a stratified society", the town appears to have become a center of "revolutionary ferment".<sup>3)</sup>

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1) F. Vercauteren(28), pp.118-119. (29), p.14

2)K. Marx and F.Engels(20), p.105 ff.

3)M.Bloch(4), p.355

It seems to me that many historians of the Middle Ages are increasingly abandoning those assumptions, yet some historians still stick to the class conflict thesis. Even a standard textbook on the history of institutions writes that:

"... the development of urban collectivity, especially in the form of the commune, was essentially revolutionary because it bore an antifeudal character... The originality of the communal movement consisted in the self-government".<sup>4)</sup>

In this paper I try to answer the following questions: "did the communal movement bear a revolutionary character?" and "was the commune the model of the most advanced autonomy?"

#### I.Ch. Petit-Dutaillis and A. Vermeesch's studies on the commune

Ch. Petit-Dutaillis corrected the idea that the commune had a revolutionary echo. The point of departure for his critique lies in a long under-estimated fact: the desire for peace which often induced lords to authorize the formation of the commune. According to him, the commune was originally —before the end of the 12th century— a sworn association. In this context, the establishment of commune had little or nothing to do with the self-government.<sup>5)</sup>

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4) J-L. Harouel(14). pp.168-180.

5) Ch. Petit-Dutaillis(25)

A. Vermeesch effectively criticized the "traditional" interpretation of the communal movement. He saw this interpretation, which viewed the commune as revolutionary and antifeudal, to be an imposition of a "1789 mentality" upon the medieval past. For him the commune was established basically as a peace-keeping institution; the communal movement appeared from the 11th century under the influence of the movement of "Peace of God". It seems to me that he went to the other extreme in minimizing the violence that occurred in the course of setting up some of the communes. Nevertheless his analysis of the communal movement, town by town, suggests that heretofore the extent of opposition to the movement by the urban lords—especially the ecclesiastical lords— has been vastly exaggerated.<sup>6</sup>

From these studies we can safely say that the commune was neither a movement for urban autonomy nor an association to overthrow the feudal system.

II. The establishment of the commune ; example of Laon: revolution or institutio pacis?

Between 1070, the date of its first manifestation, and the mid-twelfth century, the communal movement broke out in about twenty settlements, which are situated between the Rhine and Loire. Nevertheless the extent of the movement has been so exaggerated that one has discussed such a movement for the whole Western Europe.<sup>7</sup> Moreover in describing the movement, some historians have often

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6) A. Vermeesch (30)

7) A. Chedeville (7), p. 164

emphasized the struggles between the urban lords and the burghers. The model case to exemplify this point is the commune of Laon.

A very detailed account of this commune has been left by an eyewitness, Guibert de Nogent.<sup>8)</sup> His account is so famous that what he saw and experienced has often regarded as the communal movement—namely the violence and especially the death of a bishop.<sup>9)</sup> Here is his often quoted definition of the commune: "Commune is a new and detestable name for an arrangement made for them all to pay the customary head tax, which they owe their lords as a servile due, in a lump sum once a year, and if anyone commits a crime, he shall pay a fine set by law, and all other financial exactions which are customarily imposed on serfs are completely abolished".<sup>10)</sup>

I would like to point out some problems about this account. First, Guibert restricts here the purpose of a commune to the arbitrary payments. But in the first part of the chapter<sup>11)</sup> he also shows that the initiative for the commune came as a reaction against violence, illegality, and arbitrary exercise of judicial authority.<sup>12)</sup> Secondly, the late 11th and early 12th century was a period when the seigniorship was at its zenith and seigniorial extortion was systematic. According to Barthélemy, "all other financial exactions" quoted above were recently set up; the ecclesiastical lords of northern France disseminated them in the 11th century.<sup>13)</sup> Therefore it was the "new servitude"

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8) Guibert de Nogent (13)

9) Ibid., pp. 268-377

10) Ibid., pp. 320-321

11) Ibid., pp. 268-281

12) cf. J.F. Benton (3), P. 167.

that the commune refused. What it strove after was the return to "ancient" tariff rates.<sup>14</sup> In this respect the commune of Laon is a reaction against the arbitrary payment of seignior at its peak. This "new servitude" provoked the commune, direct prolongation of "Peace of God". Thirdly, it is true that the commune of Laon was established in violence, but we should not confuse the quarrels and violence with the revolution. The word 'revolution' is not suitable in this case; the malcontents of Laon did not call society as a whole into question.<sup>15</sup> In conclusion the commune of Laon is situated in the movement of peace.

### III. The leaders in the communal movement: the urban patriciate

To Pirenne, the institution and structure of the medieval town had no connection with those of rural society. Town and countryside were sharply separated. Such an idea seems to have been reflected on the origin of the medieval townsmen. He argued that the bourgeoisie sprang from the landless wanderers and foot-loose adventures and their "initial capital" could be attributed to luck; the wandering proletarian (like St. Goderic) might have accidentally struck upon a lost treasure, or found the opportunity to rob some wealth and even to earn it.<sup>16</sup>

But other historians' studies have revealed that most of the urban population

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13) D. Barthélemy (2), pp. 114-115. See also (1), pp. 234-357.

14) Ibid. Cf. J. Foviaux (12), pp. 126-138.

15) For the contents of Laon's communal charter, J. Foviaux (12), pp. 145-147.

16) H. Pirenne (26)

came from the surrounding rural areas and often possessed wealth before and after their immigration to the town.<sup>17</sup> For example, in Picardy — the cradle of commune — the displacements of individuals and families in the period 1125-75 averaged between two to fifteen kilometers, with a few rare exceptions ranging from thirty to forty kilometers.<sup>18</sup>

These studies may be useful to research the origin of the patriciate who was often the richest and who held the municipal government. Now we can answer the following questions: "Whence came these patricians?" and "Whence came their wealth?" Patrician families had a local origin not far from the town. And in almost all cases, the patricians or their ancestors were persons who were connected with the local lords or the ecclesiastical authorities as their agents or servants.<sup>19</sup> Namely the early patriciate derived from the families with landed wealth or revenues acquired from services to a great lord. I don't deny that some of the "foot-loose adventurers" became the patricians. But that was not a common case.

It is easier in the light of the composition of the early urban patriciate to understand the peaceful establishment of communal governments in the 11th and 12th centuries. The class-conflict thesis that see in these communal movements the rise of a new class must be modified. With the exception of relatively few cases, the establishment of the commune proceeded largely with the encouragement or the passive acceptance of the town lords both lay and ecclesiastical.<sup>20</sup> There

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17) J. Lestocquoy (18), (19). C.E. Perrin(22). Massiet du Biest(21), Desportes(9), pp.420-421.

18) R. Fossier(11), t. I, p. 291.

19) For example, C.E. Perrin(23), t. II, p. 211. J. Lestocquoy(18), (19).

was little about the commune that was revolutionary in intent.

#### IV. The contents of the communal charter ; autonomy or subordination?

The charters of communes varied in length, emphasis and completeness. And their contents usually gave an incomplete picture of a town's internal life, and in some cases reflected only the particular events. In other cases a charter remained altogether silent concerning important aspects of the town's government.<sup>20</sup> Despite the limitation of these documents, they can be used to obtain information on the relationship of the communes with the the feudal lords including kings.

Some historian have contended that "real communes" were given the political and administrative autonomy. Tournai is a model for this case. According to Petit-Dutaillis, Tournai was a "super commune" in that it enjoyed exceptionally wide autonomy.<sup>21</sup> In reality, while the feudal lords generally conserved their right of high justice,<sup>22</sup> the commune of Tournai exercised this high justice. But an article of its charter obliged the town to send king 300 well-armed foot-soldiers.<sup>23</sup> The case of Saint-Quentan, which is estimated to have been one

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20) A. Vermeesch(30), pp.81-120.

21) S. J. Kupper(16), pp.114-115. See also Ch. Petit-Dutaillis(24).

22) Ch. Petit-Dutaillis(25), p.49.

23) For example, articles 1,3 of the charter(1189).

24) S, J. Kupper(16), pp.199-200.

of the capetian communes that enjoyed wide autonomy, is similar. The clause dealing with military service implies unlimited obligation; "Every time we convene the commune, the commune will rally to our banners".<sup>25</sup> These examples indicate that the self-government was not acquired one-sidedly by the burghers but granted by the kings in return for the military service.

In many of the charters of communes, Kings—especially Philip Augustus—required the burgenses to give him ost and chevauchée, but the clauses of administrative or political autonomy in which the burghers surely took a great interest are relatively scanty. All in all the "independence" which was the ideal of so many communes rarely went beyond varying degrees of limited administrative autonomy.

Lastly, let's ponder over the word "liberty" (libertas) which appears in medieval charters and legal records. A. Harding, for instance, argues that in the majority of the cases it refers to an essentially political freedom. According to him, though "liberty" normally appears in the sense of a privilege, these privileges came to include the rights of government which may be fairly regarded as the right of independent political action.<sup>26</sup> But, in my opinion, we should pay attention to P. Michaud-Quantin's analysis of liberty: "...Essentially the liberty in the Middle Ages is opposed to the arbitrary acts of the superior. The men in the Middle Ages thought themselves to be free if the obligations imposed on them were the object of legal definition or bilateral contract. To be free is to have the power to discuss the limits of submission and to acquire the defined status fixing the rights and obligations."<sup>27</sup>

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25) Article 32 of the charter (1195).

26) A. Harding (13)



## Conclusion

We must appreciate the significance of the communal movement. For the ideological reasons certain authors have insisted that the commune shook the feudal system and established a sort of a liberal and democratic government. But it is clear that despite the assertions of some writers who glorified the medieval commune as the "triumphs for the Third Estates", the commune was in all aspects neither revolutionary nor democratic. In addition I subscribe to the claim of J. Heers that: "...so called 'social' or 'popular' revolts, peasant or urban uprising can surely in no case be reduced to a class struggle... For these periods class feelings remains to be proven."<sup>28</sup>

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27)Quoted in J.Le Goff(17), p. 273. See also Vercauteren(29), p.20.

28)J. Heers(15), pp.4-5.

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