

REVIEWS

Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*

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FRANCIS MULHERN

AFTERLIVES OF THE COMMUNE

L'imaginaire de la Commune is the title of Kristin Ross's new book in its first, French edition. It is debatable whether this laconic phrasing could have survived the passage into English with its resonances unimpaired. Verso's more elaborate formulation is properly informative, recalling an event and its animating vision, and defining the emphasis of Ross's treatment, which falls on a triumph of political and social imagination. What it surrenders, though, is the great, stirring generality of the simple phrase 'The Commune!'—'the rallying cry' as well as 'the thing itself'—which the author herself insists upon, as she ranges through the experiences of seventy-two days in Paris in the spring of 1871, reconstructing an altogether more extensive and complex time-space, both objective and inward, of communes past, present and to come.

The unique military conjuncture is well known: the victorious Prussians camped to the east of the capital, staying their hand, as the defeated government forces, now regrouped at Versailles to the west, began a sustained bombardment of the city's revolutionaries. But in Ross's treatment, even a strict measurement of time reaches back some years into the later 1860s, which saw a ferment of political discussion among the workers of Paris, as the Second Empire faltered. 'It is the clubs and the associations that have done all the harm,' was one police official's retrospective judgement. There, in what one anti-Communard author called 'the Collège de France of insurrection', the idea of the 'social Commune' had taken shape well before the

collapse of official resistance to Prussia's armies. Its imaginative hold on posterity would be greater and longer-lived, sustained through the 1870s and 80s and beyond by those who had survived the bloody repression to make it to the Commune colonies of London and Geneva—and also by such unflagging champions as Peter Kropotkin and William Morris. Only one French veteran, the geographer and anarchist thinker Élisée Reclus, gets as much attention as these two, a Russian gentleman-scientist and an English poet and decorator who had neither first-hand experience of the insurrection nor even much initial awareness of what was unfolding—in contrast, say, with Marx, who, in his London exile, was intensely engaged. But that is in keeping with Ross's understanding of the Commune's imaginary, which is not inhibited either by national borders or by the programmed sequences of modernizing reason. It is a four-dimensional network of sorts in which familiar lines of political inheritance criss-cross with new bondings in the present and retrospective acts of affiliation that enrich the significance of the events they look back on. Thus, Jacobin and Proudhonist currents were predictably to the fore from the outset; Elisabeth Dmitrieff, the founder of the Women's Union, opened a key intellectual 'transversal' between Marx and revolutionary forces in Russia; Kropotkin and Morris became a part of the memory of the Commune by virtue of their embrace of its historic promise and their own later individual contributions to the thought-cluster for which it offered the foremost symbol—in a word, its imaginary.

This is a long-standing preoccupation in Ross's work, as readers of her first book, *The Emergence of Social Space* (1988), centred on the poetry of Rimbaud, will be aware. The constructions of social memory and their political implications were the matter of an incisive critical study, *May '68 and Its Afterlives* (2002). *Communal Luxury* bears a close relation to both these books, as historical writing in a modernist mode: Bloch's *Erbschaft* is an explicit presence in it, and the Benjamin of the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' is Ross's inspiration for the priorities she sets herself. 'I have preferred', she says, to attend to the 'voices and actions' of the Communards themselves, rather than

the long chorus of political commentary or analysis—whether celebratory or critical—that followed. I have not been concerned with weighing the Commune's successes or failures, nor with ascertaining in any direct way the lessons it might have provided or might continue to provide for the movements, insurrections and revolutions that have come in its wake. It is not clear to me that the past actually *gives* lessons.

However, she continues, 'Like Walter Benjamin . . . I believe that there are moments when a particular event or struggle enters vividly into the figurability of the present, and this seems to me to be the case with the Commune

today.’ The alternatives mapped here are not so stark, in truth. Ross’s arresting declaration implies a different style of learning, not the conclusion that there is nothing to learn. The lessons are in the first place historical, and the procedure, following Henri Lefebvre, involves both ‘the lived’ and the ‘conceptual’, retracing the actual words and actions of the insurgents—such as Reclus and Dmitrieff—and also pursuing certain ‘logics’ arising from them. Her purpose is to return to the Commune as it can now be more easily seen, without interpretive pre-emption by two state narratives that have in her view worked to confine its meaning and force. The first and more insistent has been that of official French political culture, which has represented the insurrection as a convulsive episode in the long march, since concluded, towards the Republic. The second, which has lost much of its authority since the collapse of the powers and the movement that sponsored it, is the narrative of ‘state-communism’, in which the Commune became ‘the failed revolution of which [the Russian October] would be the corrective’. Rejecting both narratives, Ross disclaims any intention of founding a third, and it is true that the network she traces, with its openness and unprogrammed transversals through spaces and times, does not much resemble the grand narratives of the Fifth Republic and the Soviet Union. What, then, is the specific character of this political imaginary and what is its force, as it enters ‘into the configurability of the present’?

The Commune was ‘an audacious act of internationalism’—that above all, in one veteran’s judgement. The first city-wide institutional form of the revolution, the Central Committee of the Twenty Arrondissements, was the creation of the International Workingmen’s Association, whose Paris membership at this time was reportedly 50,000. Foreigners were welcomed from the start, and supporters such as Dmitrieff were made citizens in recognition of their engagement. (The Versailles authorities were correspondingly obsessed with the involvement of foreigners in the Commune, circulating ridiculously inflated estimates of numbers laced with the usual xenophobic slurs.) However, Dmitrieff’s new-found citizenship was Parisian, not French, and was awarded pending the day when ‘the Universal Republic [would] make her a citizen of humanity’. Ross herself chooses as the symbolic point of departure for the Commune a political meeting in the autumn of 1868, when, as one old revolutionary recorded, a certain maker of artificial flowers rose to speak, and, dispensing with the established etiquette of such gatherings, began not with the ‘sacramental’ *Mesdames et Messieurs* but with *Citoyennes et citoyens!* ‘The room erupted in applause.’ The sacrament was that of the nation, which the Commune’s revolutionaries repudiated, wanting Paris to be, in Ross’s words, ‘not the capital of France but an autonomous collective in a universal federation of peoples’. This was not the false universalism of the French state, be it imperial or newly republican:

anti-colonial and anti-chauvinist sentiment ran strongly in the city, and as one Commune put it, the Republic itself was merely 'the last form, and not the least malevolent' of authoritarian rule.

Casting off the illusions and trammels of the nation, the revolutionaries of the Universal Republic, or 'the workers' republic', as the International also termed it, set their faces against the state as well. For all the radicalism of particular social reforms—the invention of the crèche system, for instance, or the remaking of education—the truly momentous originality of the Commune lay, as Marx declared, in the very fact of its 'working existence', which constituted a blow against the state as such as a mode of social organization. The elected Commune was not a parliamentary body but an organ uniting legislative and executive powers; the standing army was abolished; permanent offices were recast to be occupied in principle by anyone, at a worker's salary and subject to recall; priests were dispatched to 'the recesses of private life'. In the 'simple fact' of itself, as Ross puts it, the Commune discovered the means of working-class self-emancipation, what Engels would call a state 'that is not, properly speaking, a state, but is "what exists in common".' Within its ranks, however, there were significant differences in understanding of the scope of political practice. Whereas the International's immediate response to the proclamation of a new republic had been to call for elections to a municipal government, months later the members of the Women's Union, 'the Commune's largest and most effective organization', 'showed no interest in parliamentary or rights-based demands', and were 'indifferent to the vote'; 'participation in public life . . . was for them in no way tied to the franchise.'

Education was another matter, necessarily, and the Commune moved quickly to reshape its institutions and practices, with the International again taking a leading part. At this time, one-third of the city's children were educated in religious schools and the same proportion not at all. Henceforward, education was to be free, compulsory and secular, for girls as well as boys, and its ethos would be integralist or 'polytechnical', aiming at the 'harmonious development' of the person, developing individuals capable of skilled labour and an active cultural life. 'He who wields a tool should be able to write a book, write it with passion and talent', went one statement of the ideal—or at least 'take a break from his daily work through artistic, literary or scientific culture, without ceasing for all that to be a producer'. Manual labour itself was to be valorized. One Jesuit institution was repurposed as a technical school for adolescent boys, while the *École des Beaux-Arts* now housed equivalent provision for girls; teaching positions were open to any skilled worker aged forty or over. In the thinking of the Commune's boldest educational theorist, the poet, fabric designer and Fourierist Eugène Pottier, these initiatives embodied a radical and

consequential egalitarianism and a deeply optimistic pedagogy whose first principle was ‘everything is in everything’: any knowledge offers a good place from which to commence new learning.

Art too was drawn into this process, with outcomes ranging in implication from the necessary but limited to the socially visionary. The painter Gustave Courbet, speaking from a position in the fine arts, urged complete independence for artists as a cultural estate, unconstrained by either censorship or subsidy. However, as Ross emphasizes, the Commune was strikingly rich in artists—not only alumni of the schools who had not made good but also practitioners of the decorative and other applied arts, fine woodworking and shoemaking very conspicuous among them—and here again old divisions were to be superseded. The Manifesto for an Artists’ Federation, proposed in response to a call by Courbet—and drafted by Pottier—aimed to rally ‘all artistic intelligences’, and ten of the forty-seven representatives elected at a founding meeting were from the decorative disciplines. Most significantly, as Ross notes, the Federation made no attempt to specify the nature of art or to determine criteria for evaluating works claiming that title: its purpose was to create conditions ‘assuring the liberty of all’. Here too it was the ‘simple fact’ of itself, a collective gesture overturning the received social order of culture, that was important. The Manifesto had ‘enormous’ impact, according to one contemporary, not because it raised ‘the artistic level’ but because it ‘spread art everywhere’. As Ross writes, its concluding statement envisaged ‘transforming the aesthetic coordinates of the entire community’ as one moment in the making of the Universal Republic. This gives something of the flavour of what came to be known as ‘cherry time’, after a popular song of the day, *Le temps des cerises*: or in the phrase that gives her book its title, ‘the birth of communal luxury’.

Ross’s accounts of the Commune’s ‘working existence’, rendered with economy and ease and an engaging array of portraiture that can only be noted here, take up the first half of her book. In the second, her focus shifts to its afterlife in the revolutionary emigration—following, among others, Reclus and one of his most salient political interlocutors, Gustave Lefrançais—and the ‘web’ of associations that the memory and example of 1871 soon wove. An impassioned loyalty was just one of the ties that bound Kropotkin and Morris to the Commune, and Ross rightly dwells on this moving reflex of fellow-feeling and its inventive symbolism. (The Morris of *News from Nowhere* re-enacted the insurgents’ levelling of the Victory Column in the place Vendôme in his decision to have Trafalgar Square reborn as an orchard.) But her main emphasis lies in the plane of historical vision: both thinkers rejected progressivist understandings of revolution that reduced it to a culmination of modern historical tendencies. Thus, Morris was critical of the ‘unmixed modern’, seeing in ‘communitarian or tribal societies of the

past'—above all medieval Iceland—'clues to the economic forms of a free life in the future'. Evolutionary biology rather than romantic art led Kropotkin along a convergent line of thought, persuading him of the adaptive value of cooperation in harsh, thinly populated spaces such as Siberia or the outlying Nordic territories and illuminating the social potential of Russia's ages-old system of communal agriculture, the *obshchina*. (Reclus shared Morris's fascination with Iceland, and was to recruit his fellow-scientist Kropotkin to write for his great *Nouvelle géographie universelle*.) Marx too can be claimed for this school of revolutionary 'anachronism': Ross sees in the writing of his last decade a significant re-evaluation of non-capitalist social forms. We should not be too afraid of the word 'archaic', he wrote to Vera Zaslulich, explaining that nothing in *Capital* implied the necessary supersession of the *obshchina*, which might or might not survive as the social basis of a post-capitalist agriculture. Everything would depend on the historical circumstances. 'The new, for Kropotkin as for Morris, could only be modelled on anachronisms landlocked in the present', Ross writes. 'Being attentive to the energies of the outmoded was one way to think oneself into the future.'

'Decentralizing the flow of history' is her bold metaphor for the kind of historical thinking practised by Morris or Reclus, and it is apt, inasmuch as 'centralism' is the recurring value in a pattern of negative association to which the Commune stands as the exemplary opposite. It represents the dominance of the capital over the provinces, the city over the countryside, the metropolises over the colonized world, the imperatives of progress against the faltering stubbornness of 'outmoded' ways, the seemingly illimitable scale of the cities and factories draining the life from older, more modest kinds of workplace and settlement. Above all else, it represents the state itself, with its standing army, police and bureaucracy as the institutional antitheses of popular autonomy—and not only the Imperial regime and the bourgeois Republic now raised over the dead bodies of the Communards but any state, actual or envisaged. This, Ross maintains, was the sense of the only amendment that Marx thought it necessary to make for the new, 1872 edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, the categorical declaration from *The Civil War in France* that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery and wield it for their own purpose'. In this, he indicated 'clearly the distance that the Commune made him take toward his earlier thoughts about state centralization'.

Élisée Reclus was one of those to live that correction in their personal experience of the Commune. A 'socialist republican' at the outbreak of the revolt, he emerged an advocate of the world federation of autonomous communes, a vision which, by 1880, had acquired the name 'anarchist communism'. As a variety of anarchism, this differed from the 'collectivist' strain associated with Proudhon in its demand for 'the complete extinction of

exchange value', an end to money and markets, and a disalienation of labour of which the Commune had given a foretaste. In the spectrum of communism, it stood for an immediate and categorical liquidation of the state as a social form—a point of principle shared by Kropotkin though not, for example, Morris, who, as George Bernard Shaw recalled, 'would not countenance Anarchism on any terms'. Fifty years on, and for much or all of the twentieth century, such differences would be so many calls to schism, sometimes with deadly outcomes; the fate of Barcelona's commune is an inescapable reference here. However, in the revolutionary culture of the 1870s and after, Ross sees a non-purist model that is perhaps worth the effort of emulation:

The post-Commune period was, I think, like our own, not a period of great theoretical purity. And William Morris was not alone in thinking that an obsession with such purity frequently gets in the way of the task of making socialists.

Passages like this remind us that for all its rich interest and value as a work of historical retrieval and remembrance, *Communal Luxury* is a book with designs on the future, even if Ross has a way of deflecting close scrutiny in this respect. In it, or rather by virtue of it, for this is a self-aware work of construction, Reclus, Marx, Morris, Kropotkin and others such as Lefrançais come together as the constituents of an informal canon, diversely shaped and self-identified, politically, supporting a distinctive vision of revolutionary communism, a 'social transformation predicated on a large voluntary federation of free associations existing at the local level', a commune of communes. Ross holds out the immensely appealing prospect of an integrally green communism in a society freed from capital, state and national passions, a general instance, perhaps, of her preferred intellectual orientation, which she presents as an undoctinaire exchange between Marxism and anarchism. However, this takes us a long way from the Commune, as fact or vision, and the Marx of this dialogue is already something of an anarchist. Ross makes a good deal of his late reflections on the *obshchina*, and the change of perspective she sees in it. But his judgement there seems broadly consistent with his early scepticism about the prospects for successful 'local' communism, and he certainly did not accord any strategic weight to this communal form. Isolated and technically primitive, the *obshchina* might turn out to be a beneficiary of revolution, he believed, but would not be its agent. Its fate would be largely decided, one way or the other, by the great social forces concentrated in the cities. As for the Commune itself, the lesson confirmed in its short lifetime was both older and, crucially, more specific than Ross allows. It is the actually existing state that cannot 'simply' be taken over 'ready-made', not the state-form or centralism as such. Marx reported and endorsed the Commune's view that its own working constitution

should be the model for all public authority countrywide; but he rejected as a deliberate misrepresentation the suggestion that the non-repressive functions of central government were all to disappear along with the army and officialdom—he was with Lefrançais in this—and as ‘mistaken’ the belief that the general spread of communal self-government would mean the end of the territorial nation. The revolutionary process that the workers of Paris had embarked upon was necessarily protracted and fallible, Marx insisted; ‘they have no ideals to realize’, only ‘their own emancipation . . . to work out’. His writings on the Commune embody that belief, finding a register that was unavailable in principle to Reclus, for all his great personal distinction, as an absolutist of the Universal Republic. Here, contrary to an old stereotype, it is not Marx who seems the doctrinaire.

However, it may be that the point of this rather awkward association of Marx with anarchist communism lies in the more familiar association that is thereby weakened and made marginal. The name of Lenin occurs just three times in *Communal Luxury*, once as that of the man who is said to have danced in the snow outside the Winter Palace to celebrate the seventy-third day of Soviet power—the lifespan of the Commune plus one—and twice identifying an author with a ready eye for a borrowable book title, such as *What Is To Be Done?* (Chernyshevsky) or *The State and Revolution* (Arnould). There is no acknowledgement that this light-footed, light-fingered character might have shared in the political imaginary of the Commune in anything more than a petty, rivalrous spirit, with Petrograd as the corrective to Parisian failure. Yet the memory of the Commune was at the heart of Lenin’s political advocacy in the spring of 1917, after the fall of Tsardom, as the all-important revolutionary-democratic precedent to follow—in fact, a reality already coming into being in the Russian capital, where the army and police no longer held sway over the people. At the same time, the agrarian politics of the revolution pass without recall, leaving the impression that between the debates over the *obshchina* and the investigations of Gramsci and Mariátegui four decades later, the record of Marx’s posterity is a strategic drought. As it was, the key texts of that time showed a striking attentiveness and flexibility in their assessment of changing political conditions in the countryside, subject to the principle that new dispositions on the land, which would be nationalized, must be decided by the peasant soviets themselves. But these considerations and others like them involve seeing the second Commune as Ross insists on seeing the first, in its unfolding as a process and an idea with unspent claims on the future. It is only with a rigorous effort of retrospection, from a vantage-point well beyond 1989, that it can be set aside as a relic of the punctured triumphalism of ‘state communism’.

‘The Commune *state*’ was Lenin’s characteristic phrasing, for he had no doubt that the work of revolution involved more than dismantling the old

agencies of class domination and recreating social relations on a new footing. In Paris, the hope of common luxury had been shadowed from earliest days by the threat of subversion and defeat. Spies and reactionary conspiracies were a problem from the beginning. There was an explosion of popular sentiment in the scores of newspaper titles that now appeared; but others sympathetic to the Versailles government, including *Le Figaro*, were ordered to close. Above all, there was the military outlook, which quickly darkened and then got far worse, the city's isolated and ill-coordinated defenders facing an army eight or nine times their number. All these called for exceptional measures in more or less painful tension—if not flat contradiction—with the norms of 'the democratic, social Commune', yet were demanded in the interests of collective self-preservation, as many came to agree, in the controversies that arose as Thiers's army drew nearer. And to that extent, the public authority would retain at least some of the characteristics of a state. Paris was reduced, after just ten weeks of freedom, in a government massacre that left some 25,000 men, women and children dead—a median estimate—and this before the onset of a merciless judicial repression that continued for years. The scale of official barbarism was overwhelming, so much so that the idea of it nearly drowns the point it nevertheless conveys. If we are drawn to the imaginary of the Commune, with its lyric air and unquenchable spirit, this is not least because, unsurprisingly, imagining was a large part of what it could actually do, in the time available to it. The wonder is that it achieved so much. Granted a longer term, it would have had to cope more systematically with the other side of the lengthy process it had embarked upon, imagining the exigencies of self-preservation in an implacable capitalist environment just as resourcefully as it had imagined the forms of freely associated life. The lessons were drawn just the same—and lessons is what they inescapably are, all of them, whether inspirational or cautionary, however they may be refigured—by Marx and Morris, and by Lenin too, as he worked for the birth of an unexpected second Commune state in another fallen empire, in 1917.