

St.Clair on Ross (2015)

Ross, Kristin. *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. London: Verso, 2015. Pp. 156. ISBN: 978-1781688397

Robert St.Clair, Dartmouth College

Kristin Ross has produced an engrossing essay on the socio-cultural and discursive context out of which the Paris Commune emerged—the “political imaginary” of the European left in the 1860s—and on its complex ideological and political afterlife. Shifting historical focus from the *Hôtel de ville* and its central committee, Ross explores an intersecting set of questions that preoccupied the left both prior to and in the wake of the Commune: from the labor market to feminism, aesthetics, and ecology. Ross’s methodological approach to the Paris Commune is thus a case of form following content. Her claims about the political event that rocked France in the spring of 1871, explicitly foregrounded in the opening chapter, are that it was: (1) egalitarian and democratic (63, 116); (2) internationalist in its composition and objectives (cf., 21–38, 79, 112); and (3) decentralized in practice and political form (32). The men and women of the revolution were not fighting for a top-down, centripetal political regime, but, ultimately, “the free union of autonomous collectives,” and a withering away of state bureaucracies. This was true not only in Europe, but in the colonies, too: “Africa will flourish,” one anonymous member of the revolutionary International allegedly said in a club meeting, “only when it administers itself” (32).

These axiological invariants notwithstanding, the image of the Commune that emerges in the first chapter is comparable to the act of constructing a barricade: part pragmatic improvisation, part radical and methodic re-wiring of the city (qua *civitas*, both in its materiality and its implications for citizens): “[Its] working existence [...] was [...] a concerted practice of importation: of models and ideas, phrases and slogans, from distant lands and from distant times [...], a powerful mix of pre-capitalist and pre-extra-national desires, equal part social revolution, local autonomy, and the memory of the insurrectional Commune that had made Paris the capital of revolution in 1792” (29). Though the scholarship in this chapter and claims about the Commune are solidly rooted in first-hand documents and micro-historiographies of worker culture under the Second Empire (Alain Faure, Jean-Claude Friermuth), the bracketing off of the Commune’s relation to the Republic and the revolutionary tradition it represents (as a point of imaginary reference as suggested by the quote above) is somewhat problematic with regard, for example, to the works of Robert Tombs or Jacques Rougerie.

In chapter two, Ross unpacks her understanding of the term “communal luxury,” which she locates in the explicit of the manifesto of the Commune’s Federation of Artists: “We will work cooperatively toward [...] communal luxury, future splendors and the Universal Republic,” concludes the Artist Federation’s manifesto (58). Unpacking the implications of this political horizon in pedagogy, aesthetics, and the everyday, “communal luxury” signposts, for Ross, the subversive and emancipatory core of democracy (the engagement with the thought of Jacques Rancière is most explicit in this chapter). Communal luxury involves both questions of individual freedom *and* solidarity, as well as the re-mapping of the value of value; it is short-hand for a revolutionary imaginary in which beauty and human potential are perceived as open-ended, as part of the common (141–42). By way of an example, Ross offers a masterful look at the Commune’s schools, the pedagogy of which was predicated on principles of utility and enjoyment, a morality of social solidarity and, to borrow from the Ranciérian lexicon that informs Ross’s analysis of Communard pedagogy, an axiom of radical equality of intelligences (40–43).

The case of Eugène Pottier, author of the *Internationale* and member of the Commune’s Artists’ Federation, is also the focus of sustained theoretical attention here, for Pottier was in many respects a living exemplum of the Commune’s political axiom of equality, of its desire to undo the divides between art and the everyday, between manual and abstract labor, to reimagine the relation of (f)utility and luxury.

In the final three chapters, Ross traces the after-effects of the Paris Commune in the works and thought of four key figures: William Morris, Karl Marx, Élisée Reclus, and Peter Kropotkin. Situating the trajectory of their thought within the context of the post-Commune period, Ross explores the influence of the Revolution through a fascinating variety of intersecting avenues: in Kropotkin and Reclus’s interest in bridging the ideological gaps between agricultural and industrial labor, and in their alternative eco-social accounts of evolution and nature based on solidarity, cooperation, and enmeshment rather than competition and scarcity (128–35); in Morris’s writings on Iceland and his poetic parables of socialism and art (74–76); and in Marx’s theory of living labor and social value, class struggle, and the stakes of the state in times of revolution (76–89).

The image of the Paris Commune that emerges from Kristin Ross’s *Communal Luxury* is, to borrow from her gloss on William

Morris, a kind of *parable* for our times: an image from the past set alongside our present, inviting us to reimagine our future—or, rather, an *à-venir* in which a gap is held open for the unpredictability of the Event, for the emergence of a difference within the contours of the given that is not deducible from its immanent logics. Though the imaginary is, in psychoanalysis perhaps as in politics, the space in which we are frequently mistaken for others (or mistaken about ourselves), it is also the space in which any relation to the other, to the self, and to the world becomes possible. The Paris Commune is thus an *image* of what might be done, proof that the impossible is not only possible, but has happened before. If, in our own moment, we are to have a chance at slamming the emergency brake on a vehicle careening catastrophically towards an unpleasant future (Benjamin), we might do well to turn our gaze toward the past and ponder the Commune, for, as Ross suggests in this marvelous and timely essay, its world is still in many ways ours.

Volume: 44.1-2

Year:

- 2015