Book Review: Reclaiming the legacy of the Paris Commune

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Jane Shallice reviews *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*, by Kristin Ross.

"We will work cooperatively towards our regeneration, the birth of communal luxury, the future splendours and the Universal Republic", concludes the Manifesto for an Artists' Federation, in April 1871.

Intellectually we are too often bound by the idea that days to come will be inevitably structured by the present. Kristin Ross's book considers the Paris Commune as a moment in time and a place that levered open the possibilities of something other than the accepted or probable futures. Ross argues that the Commune, seen now as liberated from contradictory legacies of French republicanism and the official communist states, had a far more radical DNA. This engaging book explores both its gestation and more importantly its legacy.

The importance of the Commune, lasting a mere 72 days, was for Marx its very working existence. A short period when the working class of Paris seized the time and, going 'beyond the cellular regime of nationality' and without any blue print, became, in Ross's words, a 'working laboratory of political inventions, improvised on the spot or hobbled together out of past scenarios or phrases, reconfigured as need be, and fed by desires awakened in the popular reunions at the end of Empire'. Presented with a dramatically sudden opportunity, the Commune were determined to organise life on principles of association and cooperation.

By the 1860s, following the defeats of the European uprisings in 1848, a desperate working class had formed local societies, with 'ambulatory orators', which organised public meetings in each area to debate how people could have better lives. They explored questions of right of assembly, censorship, work both for men and for women, and the right to form unions. Presented with a dramatically sudden opportunity, this active network of people, seasoned in political debates within a myriad of local structures, straightway attempted to organise demands of daily life, marrying together questions of production and consumption, wishing to develop a framework of 'communal luxury'. In establishing all as 'citoyennes and citoyens', the flag was that of the Universal Republic, to which all were admitted. Its revolutionary significance was emphasised by the burning of the guillotine, the pulling down of the Vendome Volume (the witness to Napoleon's imperial conquests), and the establishment of the Women's Union.

Ross however chooses to consider in detail two radical initiatives which from that fragmentary moment have a long term significance. Within weeks the Communards established free secular public education, and were debating the principles of an 'integral' education which would bridge manual and intellectual labour. Ross recognises that 'more important than any laws the Communards were able to enact was simply the way in which their daily workings inverted

entrenched hierarchies and divisions… between manual and artistic and intellectual labour'.

This was mirrored by the parallel debates within the Federation of Artists, including Gustave Courbet, Anatole Marquet de Vasselot, and the shoemaker Napoleon Gaillard, which aimed to confront the dominance of the market, of ownership and hierarchy in art. Gaillard was photographed in front of the barricade he designed, proudly establishing that such work was a work of art and luxury. Luxury being understood as the right to public spaces and to live and work in pleasing and conducive environments.

After its horrendous ending, true to form the French state engaged in an orgy of violence, as though blood would eradicate any trace of that inspirational moment, and Ross explores the waves of its transmission by exiles and thinkers. There is relatively little emphasis on Marx and Engels and the ways in which the Commune dramatically influenced their thinking. Instead, she concentrates primarily on the writings and work of the anarchist communists, including Élisée Reclus, an anarchist geographer who participated in the Commune but sadly is relatively unknown in English, Peter Kropotkin, a Russian anarchist and geographer, and William Morris, and argues that 'what they shared was a view of human living that left little or no place for either the state or party politics, the nation or the market'. For each of them the commune held the seeds of the revolutionary form for the future and all rejected localism, aware of the dangers of isolation and parochialism but also establishing that any commune, in Kropotkin's words, needed to 'extend itself, to universalise itself… In place of communal privileges it has to put human solidarity'.

Ross writes well with great commitment, aware that today 'people who spend their time seeking work' in lives of increasingly fragility under neoliberalism have a greater resonance with those men and women of 1871, than with their own parents. Today the categorial separations between different traditions of communism and anarchism are being readdressed, whether in battles around ecological issues, the nature of work, the continuing crises of the state. Our responses, like those of the Communards, have to be inclusive, open, democratic, supportive, critical and thinking beyond the present.

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P.S.

* Red Pepper, September 2015: http://www.redpepper.org.uk/the-legacy-of-the-paris-commune-and-the-possibility-of-a-different-future/