COMMUNAL LUXURY

The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune

KRISTIN ROSS

VERSO
London • New York

This English-language edition first published by Verso 2015

First published as *L'Imaginaire de la Commune*

A shorter version of Chapter 1 appeared in article form in *History of the Present* 4:1 (Spring 2014), while an article based on Chapter 3 was published in *Critical Inquiry* 41:2 (Winter 2015).

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Verso
UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201
www.versobooks.com

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-1-78168-839-7 (HC)
eISBN-13: 978-1-78168-841-0 (US)
eISBN-13: 978-1-78168-840-3 (UK)

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Typeset in Electra by MJ & N Gavan, Truro, Cornwall
Printed in the US by Maple Press

Contents

timely reading of the entire manuscript, helped bring it to completion. Thanks also to Jacques Lezra for making the department at NYU a good working environment, to Stella Maglani-Belkacem at La Fabrique for her attentive support, and to my editor in the UK, Sebastian Budgen, for comradely assistance of various and sundry kinds.

This book is for Harry and Adrian, who each in his own way helped make it possible in every which way.

Introduction

In this book I have tried to piece together the elements of an imaginary that fueled and outlived the event known as the Paris Commune of 1871—an imaginary to which the Communards and I have given the name "communal luxury." For seventy-two days in the spring of 1871, a worker-led insurrection transformed the city of Paris into an autonomous Commune and set about improvising the free organization of its social life according to principles of association and cooperation. Since then, everything that occurred in Paris that spring—from the shock of ordinary people in a major European capital exercising powers and capacities normally reserved for a ruling elite to the savagery of the state's retaliation against them—has generated controversy and analysis. The historical landscape of the Commune I sketch here is at once lived and conceptual. By "lived," I mean that the materials I have used to compose it are the actual words spoken, attitudes adopted, and physical actions performed by the insurgents and some of their fellow travelers and contemporary supporters nearby. Conceptual, in the sense that these words and actions are themselves productive of a number of logics I have felt

compelled to follow through in the pages that follow. I have taken as my starting point the idea that it is only by abiding insistently with the particular nature and context of the actors' words and inventions that we can arrive at the Commune's more centrifugal effects. It is a striking fact that, amidst the voluminous quantity of political analysis the Commune has inspired, Communard *thought* has historically received little attention, even from writers and scholars politically sympathetic to the event's memory. And yet, much of that thought—what the insurrectionists did, what they thought and said about what they did, the significance they gave to their actions, the names and words they embraced, imported or disputed—has been readily available, reissued, for example, in France by leftist editor François Maspero during the last period of high visibility of the Commune, the 1960s and '70s. I have preferred to linger with those voices and actions, rather than with 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 at all clear to me that the past actually *gives* lessons. Like Walter Benjamin, though, 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 world political scene of 2011 was dominated by the figure and phenomenology of the encampment or occupation, and it was the return of an occupational form of protest that compelled me, in turn, to go back to the political culture of the Paris Commune with a different set of questions than those that animated the historical poetics of the Commune I wrote in the 1980s.[1] The concerns that dominate today's political agenda—the problem of how to refashion an internationalist conjuncture, the future of education, labor, and the status of art, the commune-form and its relationship to ecological theory and practice—these preoccupations undoubtedly played

1 See Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988; London and New York: Verso, 2008).

a role in guiding the way I look now at Commune culture for they form the structuring themes of the book. For the most part, I have not felt the need to make explicit the Commune's resonances with the politics of today, although I believe those resonances do indeed exist—some of them quite humorous, as when the *New York Times* reported unknowingly the name of the young activist they were interviewing in the streets of Oakland, California in November 2011 as Louise Michel.[2] There is little need to spell out in detail how the way people live now under the contemporary form of capitalism—with the collapse of the labor market, the growth of the informal economy, and the undermining of systems of social solidarity throughout the overdeveloped world—bears more than a passing resemblance to the working conditions of the laborers and artisans of the nineteenth century who made the Commune, most of whom spent most of their time not working but *looking for work*. It has become increasingly apparent, particularly after the unraveling of societies like Greece and Spain, that we are not all destined to be immaterial laborers inhabiting a post-modern creative capitalist techno-utopia the way some futurologists told us we were ten years ago—and continue desperately to try to tell us even today. The way people live now—working part-time, studying and working at the same time, straddling those two worlds or the gap between the work they were trained to do and the work they find themselves doing in order to get by, or negotiating the huge distances they must commute or migrate across in order to find work—all this suggests to me, and to others as well, that the world of the Communards is in fact much closer to us than is the world of our parents. It seems utterly reasonable to me that younger people today, put off by a career trajectory in video-game design, hedge-fund management, or smart-phone bureaucracy, trying to carve out spaces and ways to live on the edges of various informal economies, testing the possibilities and limitations of *living differently now* within a thriving—if crisis-ridden—global capitalist economy, might well find interesting the debates that took place among Communard refugees and fellow travelers in the Juras in

2 Malia Wollan, "Occupy Oakland Regroups, Calling for a Strike," *New York Times*, November 1, 2011.

the 1870s that led to the theorizing of something called "anarchist communism"—debates, that is, about decentralized communities, how they might come into being and flourish, and the way they might become "federated" with each other in relations of solidarity.

If I refrain from harnessing the Commune's reverberations in any more explicit way to the events and political culture of the present, it is in part because what intrigues me most about the event now is the way it has become unmoored—liberated, like Rimbaud's *Drunken Boat* perhaps, especially after 1989—from the two dominant historiographies that had anchored the way it could be represented and understood: official state-communist history, on the one hand, and national French republican history on the other. Having been liberated from these two imposing lineages and narrative structures, I feel no hurry to corral it into another. The end of state-communism freed the Commune from the role it had played in official communist historiography; after 1989 it was untethered from Lenin's apocryphal dance in the snow in front of the Winter Palace on the seventy-third day of the Russian Revolution—the day, that is, that the Revolution had lasted one day longer than the Commune and in so doing turned the latter into the failed revolution of which the new one would be the corrective. And much of my argument in what follows is directed at clarifying the way the Commune never really quite belonged to the French national fiction, to the heroic radical sequence of French republicanism, of which it was purported to be the last nineteenth-century spasm. If we take seriously the statement of one of its better-known participants, Gustave Courbet, to the effect that during the Commune "Paris has renounced being the capital of France,"[3] it becomes difficult to maintain with any great conviction the notion that it was the insurgents who fought and died in great numbers in Paris who somehow "saved the Republic."

The imaginary the Paris Commune leaves to us is thus neither that of a national republican middle class nor that of a state-managed collectivism. Communal luxury is neither the (French) bourgeois luxury that surrounds it nor the utilitarian state collectivist

3 Gustave Courbet, letter to his parents, April 30, 1871, in Petra Ten-Doesschate Chu, ed., *Correspondance de Courbet* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), p. 366.

experiments that succeeded it and dominated the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps this is why another of its participants, many years later and in the midst of a highly critical evaluation of its political structure, concluded that

> the Commune ... set up for the future, not through its governors but through its defenders, a more superior ideal to all the revolutions that preceded it ... a new society in which there are no masters by birth, title or wealth, and no slaves by origin, caste or salary. Everywhere the word "commune" was understood in the largest sense, as referring to a new humanity, made up of free and equal companions, oblivious to the existence of old boundaries, helping each other in peace from one end of the world to the other.[4]

In their capacity to think together domains of the social formation that the bourgeoisie devotes itself to keeping apart—city and country, notably, but also theory and practice, mental and manual labor—the Communards tried to restart French history on another basis entirely. That basis and that history, though, could no longer be thought of as exactly "French" or national in its contours. It was at once smaller and far more expansive than that. The Communal imagination operated on the preferred scale of the local autonomous unit within an internationalist horizon. It had little room for the nation, or, for that matter, for the market or the state. This proved to be an extremely potent set of desires in the context in which it was generated—for what better moment to launch such an expansive project than when the French state, and the repressive bourgeois society it supported, had been so roundly defeated?

At the beginning of this introduction, I referred to the Commune as a worker-led insurrection that lasted seventy-two days and transformed Paris into an autonomous Commune whose social life was recalibrated according to principles of cooperation and association. Yet even a simple representation like this one of the facts of the event can become part of the problem. To explore what is meant by "communal luxury" I have had to expand the chronological and

4 Elisée Reclus, in *La Revue blanche, 1871: Enquête sur la Commune* [1897] (Paris: Editions de l'amateur, 2011), pp. 81–2. Here and elsewhere, translations from the French are mine.

geographical frame of the event beyond the seventy-two Parisian days—from the March 18 attempted seizure of the cannons to the final bloody days of the massacre at the end of May—by which it is usually circumscribed. Following Alain Dalotel and others, I begin the event within the fever that erupted in working-class reunions and clubs in the final years of the Empire. And I end it with an extensive examination of the thought that was produced in the 1870s and 1880s when Communard refugees and exiles in England and Switzerland like Elisée Reclus, André Léo, Paul Lafargue, and Gustave Lefrançais, among others, met up with and collaborated with a number of their supporters and fellow travelers—people like Marx, Kropotkin, and William Morris. Though geographically distant from the spring insurrection, these last three of its contemporaries—like another, Arthur Rimbaud, about whom I have written elsewhere—were among the many for whom what had transpired in Paris during those few weeks had become a turning point in their lives and in their thinking.

I have altered the customary temporal and spatial limits of the Commune to include the way it spilled out into these adjacent scenes for two very precise reasons. The expanded temporality allows me to show that the civil war was not, as is usually stated, an outgrowth of the patriotism and circumstantial hardships brought on by the foreign war. It allows me, in fact, to show something like the reverse: the foreign war as a momentary aspect of an ongoing civil war. Secondly, foregrounding the theoretical production that followed and was produced by the movement in exile outside of France (rather than, say, the thinkers that preceded it, the Proudhons or the Blanquis) allows me to trace, in the displacements, intersections, and writings of the survivors, a kind of afterlife that does not exactly *come after* but in my view is part and parcel of the event itself. The French word *survie* evokes this nicely: a life beyond life. Not the memory of the event or its legacy, although some form of these are surely already in the making, but its *prolongation*, every bit as vital to the event's logic as the initial acts of insurrection in the streets of the city. It is a continuation of the combat by other means. In the dialectic of the lived and the conceived—the phrase is Henri Lefebvre's—the thought of a movement is generated only with and after it: unleashed

by the creative energies and excess of the movement itself. Actions produce dreams and ideas, and not the reverse.

Thought so intimately tied to the excess of an event does not have the finesse and fine tuning of theory produced at a safe distance, whether geographical or chronological. It bears the traces of its moment—or better, it views itself as *still a part of* the actual building of that moment, and so it is a rough-hewn, constructive kind of thought. It bears little resemblance to "high theory" in the usual sense of the term. *The Civil War in France* is not the same kind of book as *Capital*. And if Reclus and Morris, for example, are sometimes thought of as wooly or unsystematic thinkers, it is because they insisted on looking upon thinking as creating and building a context where ideas might be both productive and immediately effective in their moment.

When I first wrote about Communard Elisée Reclus twenty-five years ago, his work was virtually unknown outside of studies by a few pioneering anti-colonial geographers like Béatrice Giblin and Yves Lacoste. Now he is at the center of an enormous amount of international attention directed at rethinking his work as a kind of ecologism *avant la lettre*. His writings on anarchism, like those of Kropotkin, have also been the subject of renewed interest. And, at the same time, William Morris has emerged in the minds of many as a founding voice in the discourse of "socialist ecology." But the focus of current scholarship, as helpful as it has been for my own thinking, refrains from grounding, except in passing, any of the political thinking of Morris, Kropotkin, or Reclus in its historical relationship with what Morris called "the attempt to establish society on the basis of the freedom of labour, which we call the Commune of Paris of 1871."[5] Establishing that connection is part of the work of the last sections of the book. Another focus is a comparison of the profound and interrelated rethinking, in the work of these three writers, of what Reclus called solidarity, Morris called "fellowship," and Kropotkin "mutual aid," not as a moral or ethical sensibility, but as political strategy.

5 William Morris, "The Hopes of Civilization," in A. L. Morton, ed., *The Political Writings of William Morris* (London: Wishart, 1973), p. 175.

As I have attempted to trace the immediate *survie* of the movement—what occurred in the lifetime of its participants—I have been reminded of an image borrowed from Reclus's favorite book among the many that he authored, *L'Histoire d'un ruisseau*. In that little book, written for schoolchildren and often given out as a school prize, he evokes the serpentine form of the "tiny system of rivulets that appear on the sand after the ocean's wave has retreated."[6] If, for our purposes, the wave is both the enormity of the Commune's aspiration and accomplishments and the violence of the massacre that crushed it, then in the wake of *and in the midst of* these two counter-movements of gargantuan force, a tiny system of airholes, the evidence of an unseen world, appears—already—in the sand. That system of rapid exchanges, intersections, and collaborations, of symbolic forms of solidarity and scattered, often ephemeral encounters, may well be momentary but it is also a momentum—and this is what I have tried to convey in the latter part of the book. *L'Histoire d'un ruisseau* is also useful to us here in another way, for it suggests how we might understand the disproportionate historical power of the Commune as event in relation to its relatively small scale. The book was part of a series commissioned by Pierre-Jules Hetzel, publisher of Jules Verne, Proudhon, and Turgenev, who designed the series with a typically mid-nineteenth-century encyclopedic ambition: to provide for adolescents a "literature of histories"—the history of things and elements not usually considered to have a history. Thus, a well-known astronomer was asked to write a history of the sky, and Viollet-le-Duc authored a history of an hôtel-de-ville and a cathedral. Reclus's choice, to write a history of a brook or stream, reflected his predilection for a kind of non-pathological geographic scale that favored the field, for example, or the village, or the *quartier*. The Commune, we might say, is perhaps best figured as having the qualities Reclus attributes in his book to the mountain stream. Its scale and geography are livable, not sublime. The stream, in his view, was superior to the river because of the unpredictability of its course. The river's torrents of water barrel down a deep furrow pre-carved by the thousands of

6 Elisée Reclus, *Histoire d'un ruisseau* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1995), p. 93.

gallons that have preceded it; the stream, on the other hand, makes its own way. But for that very reason, the relative strength of the waters of any mountain brook is proportionately greater than that of the Amazon.