



Liberation Ecologies, circa 1871

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Readers of William Morris's political writings, especially those attentive to the milieu of late-nineteenth-century socialism in which he was writing, will have noted the influence of the Paris Commune of 1871 on Morris's thought. Memorialised annually by London's socialists, perhaps most vividly in Walter Crane's oft-reprinted 1888 cartoon 'Vive La Commune!' (see Figure 1), the Commune in its actual existence, as well as in its brutal suppression, haunted the British socialist movement like a ghost. That this ghost was still, somehow, vibrantly alive for decades following the Bloody Week that brought an end to the Commune in May 1871, and that it remains so today, is the argument of Kristin Ross's fascinating new study *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. Ross sets out to show the potency of the Commune's political imaginary for our own contemporary moment, and frames her study with the observation that 'the way people live now under the contemporary form of capitalism [...] bears more than a passing resemblance to the working conditions of the laborers and artisans of the nineteenth century who made the Commune'.¹ Given the exponential rise in income inequality that we have seen in recent decades, '[t]he world of the Communards is in fact much closer to us than is the world of our parents' (p. 3). Her

book seeks not only to describe the ‘political imaginary’ of the Commune – an imaginary premised, she argues, on the concept of ‘communal luxury’, a phrase she takes from the Federation of Artists’ Manifesto of April 1871 – but to show how this imaginary could and should inspire and expand our own political horizons today.

The Paris Commune was in effect for only seventy-two days in one barricaded city. In Ross’s expansive reading, however, the Commune as event extends well beyond these temporal and spatial perimeters. It is thus that Ross grants William Morris, who never set foot in the Commune proper, a starring role in the story of *Communal Luxury*. Morris, like the Communards, ‘was less interested in art than in creating and expanding the conditions for art’ (p. 62), and Ross aims to correct Morris scholarship that has ‘refrain[ed] from grounding’ Morris’s political and aesthetic thought ‘in its historical relationship’ with the Commune (p. 7). Of course, Morris was not in Paris during that spring of 1871 but was about to embark on his first journey to Iceland. Simultaneously, Ross points out, Peter Kropotkin (who had yet to meet Morris) was setting out to explore Finland. What the two men concluded during that summer of 1871 synchronised with the animating spirit of the Commune in Paris: ‘[i]t is worth noting the striking resemblance of Kropotkin’s experience in Finland in the summer of 1871 with that of his future friend and comrade, William Morris, traversing Iceland those same months on the back of a donkey. [...] The lesson Finland imparts to Kropotkin is a great deal like the lesson Morris learned in Iceland’ (pp. 69-70). Morris and Kropotkin recognise, Ross says, a ‘communal luxury’ in the pre-commercialised peasant communities of Iceland and Finland: a simplicity and plenitude that is socially equitable as well as individually satisfying, devoid of the bourgeois habits of waste and mindless consumption that have taken hold in commercial societies along with their counterparts, desperate poverty and need. Although Morris’s diaries record few comments about the Commune as it was unfolding, Ross points to evidence that his experience of Icelandic culture was, in fact, shaped by the recent event of the Commune: ‘[w]alking in Snæfellsnes, Iceland in mid-July 1871, Morris is reminded by the loose stones on the edges of the lava fields, of “a half-ruined Paris barricade”’ (p. 69).

This last point touches on what Morris scholars will encounter as one of the most important arguments of the book: namely, that Ross endeavours to rescue Morris as a political thinker from the charge of idealist impracticality, of head-in-the-clouds utopian romanticism. Such a charge has been levelled at him at least as far back as Friedrich Engels, who privately described Morris during the 1880s as ‘a pure sentimental dreamer’ and as ‘hopelessly muddle-headed’.² Ross’s book suggests that Morris’s vision of the achievement of communism without the institutions of the state was not a castle in the clouds dreamed up from nowhere; nor, she argues, was

the anarchist communism of Élisée Reclus or Peter Kropotkin. All of these thinkers, in her reading, were writing in the face of a praxis, a moment, an event: the Paris Commune. It was an event so pivotal, in Ross's analysis, that it transformed even Karl Marx's view of the role of the state within communism. During the twelve years that Marx lived after the Commune, Ross writes, he became increasingly interested in 'primitive agrarian communalism' in Russia and other parts of the world, in intellectual response to the Commune: 'the most significant and direct effect that the Commune's alternative ways of organizing social and economic life had on Marx was to make the actual existence of alternative, non-capitalist societies outside Europe more visible' (p. 82).

On one level, then, the book serves to vindicate the Paris Commune in terms of its 'actual existence', not just its ideals. This departs from the tendency among Morris's contemporary socialists rather to 'wring [their] hands over the opportunities lost' in the Commune, as Ernest Belfort Bax put it in an 1886 review of Eleanor Marx's translation of Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray's *History of the Commune of 1871*.³ In her Introduction to the translation, Marx herself gave due historical weight to the Commune as 'the first attempt of the proletariat to govern itself'.⁴ Morris, however, along with co-authors Bax and Victor Dave in an 1886 pamphlet entitled *A Short Account of the Commune of Paris of 1871*, presented the Commune rather as a failure of parliamentarianism more than a success of autonomous collectivism:

The Commune, to speak with all respect, committed the mistake of supposing it possible to legalise its position. They did not act as if they clearly saw that they were in revolt against the corrupt society of the present, and accordingly they wasted precious time and opportunity in what may be called parliamentary *pros* and *cons*, instead of applying themselves to organising their splendid fighting material into a serious army.⁵

In Ross's reading, however, Morris was more impressed by the Commune as praxis than this quotation would suggest. Indeed, her book presents Morris as a political thinker who was not just dreamily imagining impracticable utopias, but whose politics were developing – like the politics of Karl Marx and others – in response to real events on the ground at this time, especially the Commune:

What unites and cross-pollinates thinkers like Morris, Marx, Reclus, Kropotkin, and others in the wake of the Commune, regardless of the political labels each might have chosen for himself, is a vision of social transformation predicated on a large voluntary federation of free associations existing at the

local level. In this sense we can speak of the development, in the wake of the Paris Commune's freeing itself from the power and authority of the State, of a new vision of revolution based on communal autonomy and the loose federation or association of these autonomous units.

(p. 111)

News from Nowhere (1890) is perhaps the work in which we can most obviously see how the Commune influenced Morris just as Ross claims. The socialist future depicted in *News from Nowhere* indeed consists of a 'voluntary federation of free associations existing at the local level', brought about by a 'vision of revolution based on communal autonomy'. The long chapter 'How the Change Came', for example, describes in tactical detail the militant revolution that brought Nowhere to this stage, and was clearly influenced by Morris's close study of the Commune.⁶

Ross argues that the destruction of the Vendôme Column, the Communards' act of 'spectacular demolition' in Paris, 'is revisioned speculatively' in the utopian future of *News from Nowhere*, where Trafalgar Square is transformed into an apricot orchard (p. 60). Morris wrote even more directly about the Commune in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, his serial epic poem of the Commune originally printed in the *Commonweal* in 1885-86, and in his article 'Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris', which ran in the *Commonweal* on 19 March 1887. After the Commune, the London socialist movement had been enlarged and invigorated by an influx of political refugees from Paris since, as Ross remarks, 'England and Switzerland refused to extradite political exiles and, in so doing, became the primary sites for refugees and fellow travelers to gather, to continue the political work of the Commune, and to elaborate together its thought' (p. 92). In 'Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris', Morris puts forth a view of the Commune as event and history that anticipates the presentist approach taken by Ross:

I have heard it said, and by good Socialists too, that it is a mistake to commemorate a defeat; but it seems to me that this means looking not at this event only, but at all history in too narrow a way. The Commune of Paris is but one link in the struggle which has gone on through all history of the oppressed against the oppressors; and without all the defeats of past times we should now have no hope of the final victory.⁷

So much did the London movement take this idea to heart that every year in March the Socialist League and other socialist and anarchist groups would commemorate and memorialise the Commune, to the extent that the annual celebration became

tantamount to a new holiday in the alternative culture of radical London.

While these London events do not receive more than glancing attention in Ross's study, they are part of the long shadow that she sees the Commune casting prior to and well beyond its seventy-two days. Ross takes the view that 'if we begin with the state, we end with the state' (p. 14), and thus begins her study instead with the reunions, associations and clubs in pre-Commune France that 'created and instilled the idea – well before the fact – of a social commune' (p. 14). The spirit of these groups spilled into post-Commune London, too, along with the exiled Communards. A young Olive Garnett, to take one example, describes in her diary attending a commemorative celebration organised by London anarchists at the South Place Institute: '[i]t was a very interesting gathering, the hall was crammed'.⁸ Twelve speakers took the platform, Garnett writes, including Kropotkin as well as Louise Michel, the 'Red Virgin' of the Commune, who gave a 'poetical speech in French', translated by Kropotkin.⁹ The event ended with a rendition of the 'Marseillaise'. In the pages of the *Commonweal*, Morris's socialist newspaper, we find numerous references to celebrations of this kind, such as a notice in the 10 March 1888 issue of an upcoming celebration of the Commune's anniversary. 'Songs for the Celebration' appeared on 16 March 1889, providing lyrics so that readers could join the singing at 'The Celebration of the Eighteenth Anniversary of the Paris Commune'. The songs included two British and two French: 'All for the Cause' by William Morris, 'When the People Have their Own Again' by H. Halliday Sparling, 'La Carmagnole' and 'Marseillaise'. These annual celebrations to mark the Commune's anniversary brought exiles from Paris into regular political communion with British socialists, corresponding with Ross's argument that the transnational socialist and anarchist community produced by the exile of the Communards itself 'belongs to the political praxis of the Commune' and 'make[s] up the relational web the event produced' (p. 93).

One of the most exciting and unexpected angles of Ross's book, however, is the way in which she finds the early roots of eco-socialism and an ecological critique of capitalism within the Commune and within the 'relational web' that the Commune produced. In her discussion of Kropotkin's journey to Finland, for example, Ross describes his work as a geographer and suggests that the discoveries of this trip enabled him to see human social and economic arrangements in terms of their instability as well as their inextricability with the earth and with natural processes: '[a]s if in fast motion, he watches as vast geologic eras succeed each other as all the strata of an immense expanse of Russia and Europe open themselves up to reveal the history of glacial movement, climate change, and the development over centuries of the drought-prone regions of the south' (p. 68). Ross develops, too, a convincing



Figure 1: Walter Crane, 'Vive La Commune!', printed on fine paper for framing, distributed as a supplement to *Commonweal*, 4: 115 (24 March 1888).

connection between Kropotkin and Élisée Reclus, two anti-state communists whose communism emerged, in part, from the far-reaching vistas of geography. Their work as geographers enabled them to see the vast and ever-shifting range of ways by which human society interacts with the land – by which human society is, indeed, co-produced by the land – and to imagine how humans might interact with the land in the future. Geographers study space, Ross writes, and the spatial analysis of culture ‘introduces non-human differences and agendas into the mix: the geological makeup of the earth, climate, the existence of other species. Space forces a confrontation with – or accommodation to – the non-human world’ (p. 136). Part of what Reclus and Kropotkin learn from the non-human world is that that which seems fixed is, in reality, utterly mutable, and they absorb this as a political lesson. Morris comes to similar ecological conclusions, Ross suggests, from his own spatial analysis of the aesthetic and the built environment.

Ross goes further, however, beyond Kropotkin, Morris and Reclus, to identify in our current moment of ecological crisis – a crisis produced by capitalist accumulation and exchange – an urgent, collective yearning toward the ideals of communal luxury and autonomous collectivism at the heart of the Commune’s political imaginary. She suggests, indeed, that the Commune’s history will ‘appeal to contemporary readers not just in its prescient understanding of the anti-ecological nature of capitalism, but in the refreshingly *uncompromising* nature of that understanding’ (p. 139). Far from reading the Communards as overly invested in legalising their position with respect to the state, as Bax did in 1886, Ross argues rather that ‘there was no question for any of them of reform or of a piecemeal solution. Nature’s repair could only come about through the complete dismantling of international commerce and the capitalist system’ (p. 139). This last point is one that has become increasingly impossible to deny in recent years, and is now being made by a wide range of critics of capitalism, from Naomi Klein to Pope Francis. Jason Moore’s important new work of eco-theory, *Capitalism and the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (2015), persuasively argues, indeed, that capitalist civilisation ‘does not have an ecological regime; it is an ecological regime’, one that has now ‘exhausted the historical relation that enabled it to appropriate the work of nature with such extraordinary and unprecedented power’.¹⁰ Faced with a historically anomalous rise of atmospheric greenhouse gases in the years since the industrial revolution – a metric that so clearly refutes capitalism’s narrative of unending global progress – we find ourselves newly drawn, like Morris, to what Ross calls ‘non-growth-driven cultures’ (p. 74). Ultimately, this is what the term ‘communal luxury’ affords us at this critical historical juncture: a sense of abundance without accumulation, waste and unevenness.

And yet, given the degree of unevenness into which capitalism has led us, what

are the stakes and risks of reanimating a Communal vision of a ‘decentralized world’ characterised by ‘regional self-sufficiency’ (p. 141), such as we see at the conclusion of Ross’s book? For if regional decentralisation still seemed feasible as an eco-socialist platform in 1871, it seems more problematic today given the concentration of pollution and other environmental dangers in impoverished regions, and given the accelerating drumbeat of regional and planetary environmental catastrophes associated with climate change. Environmental crisis has taught us relationality; it has taught us, as John Bellamy Foster puts it in *Marx’s Ecology*, that ‘[a]n ecological community and its environment must therefore be seen as a dialectical whole’.¹¹ And yet, under centuries of capitalism, the borders of ‘ecological community’ have been annihilated to the extent that it is now difficult to conceive of this dialectical whole at any scale smaller than the planet itself. Perhaps one means by which Ross might address this problem of scale would be to connect the Communal vision of self-sufficiency forward with what Arturo Escobar calls ‘subaltern strategies of localization by communities and social movements’ among indigenous peoples in so-called ‘developing’ regions.¹² One might profitably read the history of the Commune in conjunction with the history of such recent regional movements for environmental justice, although Ross does not get to these ‘liberation ecologies’ here.

Communal Luxury succeeds, nevertheless, as a crisp and convincing argument to connect the moment of the Paris Commune to our own moment – economically, ecologically and politically. While the book unquestionably uses broad strokes and wears its scholarship lightly, its accessibility and availability as a political resource (due, in no small part, to its short length) would have been compromised by a fussier approach. Ross’s magnificent and moving title – *Communal Luxury* – encapsulates and celebrates an essential concept that animated the work of the Communards, as well as the work of William Morris, and continues, thanks to Ross’s study, to inspire today.

NOTES

1. Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2015), p. 3. Hereafter, references will appear in parentheses in the body of the article.
2. See Engels to Bebel, 18 August 1886, and Engels to Sorge, 4 June 1887, in ‘Marx and Engels on the British Working Class Movement, 1879-1895, Part IV’, *Labour Monthly*, 16: 2 (February 1934), 120-26 (120, 123-24).
3. E. Belfort Bax, ‘Lissagaray’s [sic] “History of the Commune”’, *Commonweal*, 2: 47 (4 December 1886), 283.
4. Eleanor Marx, ‘Introduction’ to Lissagaray, *History of the Commune of 1871*, trans. by Eleanor Marx (New York: International, 1898), p. vii.
5. E. Belfort Bax, Victor Dave and William Morris, *A Short Account of the Commune of Paris of 1871*, *The Socialist Platform*, No. 4 (London: Socialist League, 1886), p. 65, available online: <<https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001341058>> [last accessed 5 March 2016].
6. Other critics have made this point. See, for example, David Leopold, ‘Introduction’, in William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. by David Leopold (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. xxxvii. See also,

- J.B.Wright, "'The Valiant Dead': William Morris and the Paris Commune of 1871", *JWMS*, 13:2 (Spring 1999), 34-38.
7. William Morris, 'Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris', *Commonweal*, 3: 62 (19 March 1887), 89-90.
 8. *Tea and Anarchy! The Bloomsbury Diary of Olive Garnett 1890-1893*, ed. by Barry C. Johnson (London: Bartlett's Press, 1989), p. 163.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015), pp. 112, 295.
 11. John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), p. 16.
 12. Arturo Escobar, *Territories of Difference: Place, Movements, Life, Redes* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 32.