
The phrase ‘communal luxury’ can be found in the Manifesto of the Paris Commune’s Federation of Artists, a document written by Eugene Pottier in the thick of political struggle. ‘We will work cooperatively toward our regeneration, the birth of communal luxury, future splendours and the Universal Republic’, he wrote. Kristin Ross, a well-known cultural theorist and professor of comparative literature at New York University, has borrowed the phrase for the title of her recent book retracing the political imaginary of the Commune because it aptly signifies the Communards’ demand ‘that beauty flourish in spaces shared in common and not just in special privatised preserves’ (p. 58). The pursuit of such a struggle meant ‘reconfiguring art to be fully integrated into everyday life’ (p. 58), an endeavour which appealed to Morris because of its simultaneous aesthetic and political audacity. Morris’s thinking about art and society had already begun to be influenced by a very similar commitment to aesthetic democracy during the late 1870s, before his entry into the socialist movement led him belatedly to become ‘one of the foremost British supporters of the memory of the Paris Commune’ (p. 61).

Ross’s titular phrase – *communal* luxury – verges on the oxymoronic. If ‘luxury’ were to be communised, to what extent could it still be thought of as luxurious? In a market-driven, capitalist society, the word tends to signify that which is out of the ordinary, or desirable in some way, without being indispensable, and is, therefore, usually identified with commodities that are almost certainly expensive. Luxury goods are, almost by definition, beyond the means of the multitude. To communise ‘luxury’, then, is to make it generally available in such a way that its social function as a marker of status, or privilege, becomes redundant. This is part of the reason why the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin included a chapter in *The Conquest of Bread* (1892) entitled ‘The need for luxury’: give us bread, but give us roses too. What remains of ‘luxury’ when everyone has access to it, or when it is reconceptualised as a need? If every house, say, were to be a ‘luxury’ house, the adjective would surely become superfluous. The struggle to achieve such a state of affairs animated Morris’s political practice, and his utopian vision of Nowhere, as much as it motivated Communard artists such as Gustave Courbet and Eugene Pottier. The aesthetic dimension of this political struggle is neatly captured by Ross: Morris, like the Communards, was interested in ‘creating and expanding the conditions for art’ (p. 61).

In another sense, though, the Communard artists were true to the etymological origins of the word, from Latin *luxuria*, or *luxus*, meaning abundance. It is perhaps no coincidence that Morris’s pattern-designs repeatedly offer images of organic
abundance – fruit ever on the vine, flowers ever in leaf. The Communards, like Morris, wanted luxury to abound. In their desire to make luxury plentiful the Communards anticipated, and stimulated, Morris’s heterodox version of communism, which was always about levelling upwards. Why should beauty not be abundant and universally available? The same motivations had inspired Morris’s youthful desire to transform the world with beauty. The oxymoronic character of Ross’s titular phrase serves as a timely reminder of the historically contingent nature of capitalist society, which restricts the meaning of ‘luxury’ by limiting its availability to those who can pay.

Morris also shared many of the Communards’ other preoccupations: overcoming the alienation between town and country; striving towards the integration of manual and mental labour; the internationalist supersession of the nation-state and national chauvinism, together with a commitment to local autonomy and particularity. These are some of the major theoretical and practical issues discussed by Ross in Communal Luxury, offering a clue as to why Morris appears as such a central figure in her relatively short, but admirably wide-ranging reconstruction of Communard thought. Ross’s first book, The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune (1988), offered similarly illuminating reflections on the French revolution of 1871, interwoven with readings of the poetry of Arthur Rimbaud. Ross makes clear in the introduction to Communal Luxury that her return to the subject has been partly inspired by recent political events, not least the Occupy movement and the questions it has raised, including ‘the problem of how to refashion an internationalist conjuncture, the future of education, labour, and the status of art, the commune-form and its relationship to ecological theory and practice’ (p. 2). Ross shares with Walter Benjamin a conviction that a history such as that of the Commune should not be locked up in the museum of historicism, but should be used instead as a resource of critical insight for the present.

This is not simply a case of mining the Commune’s successes and failures for the appropriate ‘lessons’. In moments of political failure and defeat, the strategic mind inevitably turns to the balance sheet: what was lost and what was gained in the experience? As Ross argued in The Emergence of Social Space, this mindset, rational and calculating as it is, tends to overlook and ignore the desires, creative energies and imaginative forces that are released during moments of intense political struggle. In a Blochian register, we might think of the ‘cold’ and the ‘warm’ streams of Marxism. Many of the Commune’s commentators, hostile or otherwise, have tended to focus on the Communards’ strategic failures – their military misadventures or their tardiness in seizing the assets of the Bank of France. Morris, it must be said, lent his name to this kind of analysis, particularly in the Socialist League pamphlet A Short Account of the Commune of Paris (1886), co-authored with Ernest Belfort Bax and Victor Dave.
Ross, by contrast, accentuates those aspects of Morris’s celebration of the Commune in which he rescued it not only from the ‘dull lies of bourgeois history’ but also from the spurious “wisdom” of the sympathetic, but after-the-fact, observer/theorist’ (p. 96). This aspect of her discussion naturally focuses on *The Pilgrims of Hope* and *News from Nowhere* to a greater extent than it does on his journalism and public lectures. This is perhaps why Morris’s name often appears in conjunction with Reclus and Kropotkin, but rarely if at all with that of Bax.

Ross’s book is not simply another retelling of the Commune’s story and neither does it engage extensively with the existing historiography. Rather, she expands ‘the geographical and temporal frame of the event beyond the seventy-two Parisian days’ (p. 6) by tracing its origins back into the world of clubs and associations that gathered during the final years of the Second Empire to commemorate the revolution of 1848, where veterans of ’48 met with young workers involved in the Paris section of the International Workingman’s Association, as well as refugees from further afield. Ross simultaneously extends the scope of her project beyond the suppression of the Commune by taking account of the activities of some of the Commune’s many legatees and fellow-travellers, amongst whom she numbers Morris, Kropotkin and Marx, as well as those who had been more immediately involved, such as Élisée Reclus and Gustave Lefrançais. Some Communard exiles, such as the shoemakers Napoléon and Gustave Gaillard (père et fils) and Benoît Malon, found refuge in Switzerland after the Commune was brutally crushed, where they debated the principles of anarchist-communism with Geneva-based militants, including Reclus, Kropotkin, Lefrançais and Errico Malatesta.

These groupings formed the basis of a loose network that helped to consolidate the Communard imaginary. In Ross’s formulation, theirs was no simple gesture of commemoration: ‘[n]ot the memory of the event or its legacy […] but its prolongation [was] every bit as vital to the event’s logic as the initial acts of insurrection in the streets of the city’ (p. 6). These groupings worked at the ‘intersections in thought and sociability’ and devoted their energies to mutual engagement and participation in the elaboration of the Commune’s memory [and] to the generation of new political projects and debates in the 1870s and 1880s that grew out of the experience of the Commune. They took the form of journals, theoretical elaborations, debates, and shared meals. These paths taken – or better, constructed – during and after the Commune are both trajectories and the vectors of an analysis; they constitute a kind of ‘globalisation from below’ at the precise moment that in France, at least, a deeply conservative integralist sequence retrenching around national identity
in the wake of the Commune had begun, and that would extend at least through Vichy.

(p. 93)

The resulting cross-pollinations and transversal connections offer up a heady mix, blending Marx with the anarchist-communism of Malatesta and Kropotkin, in such a way as to guarantee that one can never quite be sure of one’s theoretical footing. This is another aspect of Ross’s account that speaks implicitly to our present moment. Ross notes that ‘what looks to be theoretical confusion may well be an astute and well-thought-out political strategy’, not least because a ‘strategic position based on non-alignment […] and on association over sectarianism, may well be worth considering today, and there are many indications that this has indeed become the case’ (p. 111). These indications are, frustratingly, left unspecified, but we might assume a link to the political experiments of the Occupy movement mentioned at the outset.

In reflecting on the lasting damage caused by the rupture between Marx and Bakunin in the First International, Ross also speculates about the extent to which theoretical refinement can be, in the last instance, politically disabling. Her own interest in the Commune, she explains, ‘has less to do with refining theoretical arguments or correcting theoretical error than with something like its opposite’, before suggesting that the ‘post-Commune period was […] like our own, not a period of great theoretical purity’. Tellingly, her next sentence turns to Morris, who, she argues, ‘was not alone in thinking that an obsession with such purity frequently gets in the way of the task of making socialists’ (p. 108). In a time of widespread disorganisation of radical and revolutionary forces, this approach clearly makes political sense. In historiographical terms, though, one might question whether Morris was as theoretically rudderless as is here implied. If he were, why would he have gone to the trouble of waging numerous polemics against both the parliamentary and anarchist factions of the Socialist League (jokers to the left of him, fools to the right)? Morris certainly wanted to make socialists, but he wanted to make socialists who shared his particular strategic outlook.

Morris is a consistent presence in the book. Acknowledging the biographical significance of his concurrent visit to Iceland during the unfolding events in Paris, Ross’s third chapter weaves together a deft reading of Reclus’s and Morris’s indebtedness to the Nordic island nation and the geographical research conducted by Kropotkin in the ridges and glacial drifts of Sweden, Finland and Siberia during the early 1870s. This research helped Kropotkin to formulate his anti-Social-Darwinist theory of mutual aid, finding in the natural environment of these countries
an example of evolutionary cooperation rather than competition. Ross’s chapter is entitled ‘The Literature of the North’, in a nod to Morris’s lecture ‘The Early Literature of the North – Iceland’ (1887). As she puts it:

What is important is to recognise in Morris’s and Reclus’s fascination with medieval Iceland their way of going about decentralising the flow of history. […]. It is a way of allowing other paths taken through historical time, including the time to come, to become visible. The persistence of non-growth-driven cultures in the present builds confidence in the possibility of anachronism by allowing encounters in one’s own moment with actually embodied aspects of the past, stranded or land-locked, as it were, but still sporadically perceptible. Evoking communitarian or tribal societies of the past may provide clues to the free forms of whole new economic life in the future. By granting pre-capitalist societies an exemplary status or by investing them with uncommon significance they in turn offer ideas that can be appropriated […].

(pp. 74-75)

Ross also finds a parallel for Morris’s experience of Iceland in Marx’s late researches on the Russian peasant commune (обшина or mir), brought to Marx’s attention by the Communist exile Elisabeth Dmitrieff and elaborated in his correspondence with Kropotkin’s friend Vera Zasulich. Much like Marx’s attitude to the peasant commune, Morris approached the Icelandic past in an attempt to activate it and to make it useable in the socialist movement’s present tense. The historical supersession of medieval Iceland’s collectivist way of life, much like the ‘failure’ of the Commune, was of less consequence for Morris than the fact that ‘in both cases, for those who lived it, a type of liberty and a network of solidarity were realised, and out of local defeat there may well come a prototype for future social revolutions’ (p. 75).

Ross reiterates a substantially similar point at the conclusion to chapter four, ‘The Seeds Beneath the Snow’. After tracing the trajectories and theoretical debates of Communist exiles in London and Switzerland, she moves on to consider the three-way dialogue between Morris, Kropotkin and Paul Lafargue on the state and industrial society. Ross argues that one way of conceptualising the new, for Morris and Kropotkin, was to think about ‘anachronisms land-locked in the present. Being attentive to the energies of the outmoded was one way to think oneself into the future’ (p. 116). Thinking beyond the capitalist nation-state might, paradoxically, involve revisiting its pre-history. Morris’s historicism was thus not a dead, sterile affair. On the contrary, in looking backwards, he looked forwards with much greater insight and imagination than, say, Edward Bellamy. Ross draws out this point in relation to
Morris’s aesthetic preferences as well, pointing out that ‘[t]hose who continue to accuse Morris of a musty or romanticised medievalism view both the art of pre-modern times and Morris’s relationship to that art very differently than he himself did. Where his critics see a nostalgic entrancement on his part with art objects from the past, Morris saw an art that was not external to the everyday or, as is supposed, elevated above it and trying vainly to enter it’ (p. 63).

The Commune was short-lived and murdered in the cradle, but it represents a moment of crisis that was experienced so intensely by its participants that its duration can hardly be measured in crudely quantitative terms, as a matter of mere days and months. Many of the Communards were brutally, savagely slaughtered by the Versaillais soldiers – the ‘vile dwarf’s stroke’, as Morris put it in The Pilgrims of Hope, referring to the military machinations of Adolphe Thiers. Their deeds, however, continue to resonate and draw attention from figures as diverse as the political philosopher Alain Badiou and the Yale historian John Merriman. Ross’s book can properly be thought of as a continuation of the tradition, or, rather, the set of practices, which it surveys, extending the temporal frame of the Commune by making the political imaginary of its partisans live in the present. It might be worthwhile pausing to consider whether this contrapuntal attitude to the historical past represents a potentially fruitful way to approach Morris in 2015 and beyond. As Ross has so clearly shown, it would certainly be an eminently Morrisian way to approach Morris.

Owen Holland


During the mid-Victorian period there was extensive discussion of recent styles and tendencies in art, architecture and poetry. Why, in an age full of new ideas and technological changes – which cry out for inclusion in the culture of the time – were the Victorians obsessed with setting Gothic against Classical buildings? Or were these merely facades? Why did Pre-Raphaelite art present so many medieval scenes? Why could Dante Gabriel Rossetti never complete his contemporary painting called Found? Turning to poetry, why did Arthur Hugh Clough remonstrate so often with Matthew Arnold about the classical subject-matter of his poems? To which Arnold answered, in a letter dated February 1849: ‘[r]eflect too […] how deeply unpoetical the age and all one’s surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving:— but unpoetical.’