

## CONVERSATION WITH KRISTIN ROSS

**Aurora Fernández Polanco**

*Complutense University of Madrid* / [aferpol@ucm.es](mailto:aferpol@ucm.es)

**Pablo Martínez**

*Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art* / [pmartinez@macba.cat](mailto:pmartinez@macba.cat)

**Kristin Ross**

*New York University* / [kr1@nyu.edu](mailto:kr1@nyu.edu)

Translated by Pilar García-Romeu

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forces cosmiques ont travaillé de concert à modifier incessamment l'aspect et la position de la gouttelette imperceptible; elle aussi est un monde comme les astres énormes qui roulent dans les cieux, et son orbite se développe de cycle en cycle, par un mouvement sans repos.

Toutefois notre regard n'est point assez vaste pour embrasser dans son ensemble le circuit de la goutte, et nous nous bornons à la suivre dans ses détours et ses chutes depuis son apparition dans la source jusqu'à son mélange avec l'eau du grand fleuve ou de l'océan. Faibles comme nous le sommes, nous tâchons de mesurer la nature à notre taille; chacun de ses phénomènes se résume pour nous en un petit nombre d'impressions

**Aurora Fernández Polanco:** I'd like to start with Elisée Reclus's *Histoire d'un ruisseau* ("History of a Stream"), a work that figures prominently in your book, [Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune \(Ed. Verso\)](#). When I read *History of a Stream*, I found so much theoretical overlap with your way of making history 'untimely.' I was reminded of Benjamin's idea that "the origin is a whirlpool in the river of becoming" (*Der Ursprung steht im Fluß des Werdens als Strudel*). Unlike Hegel's vision of time, different periods blend into one another as in a whirlpool. Reading your work, events do exist, but there is an untimeliness

and an unexpectedness to them. At the same time, we are so closely tied to history and we know how important it is in the political sphere to 'make history'. So my question is, how do you bring together these three concepts, "history, science and untimeliness?"

**Kristin Ross:** Well, there's a lot to discuss there. I think first of all that there is no linear or progressive story that leads us directly, say, from the Paris Commune to '68. I like to start from the present, and that is what I think gives me my vista onto the past. In other words, the past is very unpredictable. There are moments when it doesn't speak to us at all, and there are moments when, as Walter Benjamin suggests, it enters very, very forcefully into our present, and it illuminates our present. But there are many times when it doesn't speak at all, and there are many times when you must aggressively denaturalize and reconfigure what we think we know about the past in order to make it conversant with our political concerns today, because that's where you must begin—with today.

I think that there is absolutely no interest whatsoever in thinking about 1968, for example, except to the extent that it can tell us what is singular about our own time. So, I am a historian, but I'm not a fetishist of the past, and I don't believe that the past necessarily has lessons for us. But, in particular with respect to these major insurrectionary moments of the past that have been my preoccupation, what I like to do is go back and take a new look at them from the point of view of today and to play with their chronology, with their beginnings, with what are generally thought to be the origins of an event, and talk about the past in a new way so that it becomes visible to us. Because an event is largely invisible when it's incorporated into that old continuous chronology that we all learn. What we learn in school about France, for example, is that the Paris Commune was just one of the many insurrectionary moments —1789, 1830, 1848, 1871— as though it were nothing more than a link in the chain in the building of the French Republic. That's the story that you learn at school, and to me it's preposterous. How could the insurrection of thousands of workers taking control of their space, of their city, be a moment in the history of the formation of the French Republic? The Commune was anti-state and mostly indifferent to the nation. This is the way in which standard, linear, progressive histories re-appropriate these moments that are far more 'untimely,' as you've said.

**AFP:** I recently listened to your conversation with Alain Badiou<sup>1</sup> about your book *Communal Luxury* during which you say: 'No, the past does not teach.'

**KR:** Yes, I don't think it does... But that was a funny conversation, because he kept reiterating his opinion that the Commune was a failure, remember?

He said it six or seven times, and I kept saying, 'Well, what about for the people that lived it? Was it a failure for them?' And he said, 'But it was a failure!' And then I said, 'But what about all the ideas that it unleashed?' 'It was a failure!' So I'm very interested in these positions that people take, evaluating movements after the fact, and I think people find an enormous amount of pleasure in saying that something was a failure. I'm not exactly sure what that pleasure is, but it's not one that I share. I have a very hard time judging whether something was a failure or a success. And yet, I think that many philosophers, political scientists, and political theorists see that as their job: to determine what were the errors, what were the failures, what were the goals and then speculate about why they were not reached. I find that to be a strange preoccupation, because it means that there's some sort of consensual agreement on what constitutes success in the steps of political emancipation, and I don't think that's true.

**Pablo Martínez:** In your book on 1968, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (ed. Chicago), one can see very clearly how what was happening in the '90s made you revisit '68. Reading your book about the Paris Commune, we wondered what it was about the present that made you return to that event and write about it in the terms you do.

**KR:** Why return now to '68? Is that your question? The immediate reason is the phenomenon of the commemoration of '68 this year, which is worldwide. You cannot imagine the places in the world that now want to celebrate or commemorate 1968. Malta, for example! What!? It's very, very strange. So, there's that less-important reason, the commemorative impetus, but the second reason is that I've been involved quite closely with the people in Notre-Dame-des-Landes. I was invited there in 2015 to talk about the continuities and discontinuities between the 1871 Paris Commune and what was happening there at the zad. I ended up translating a book written by a collective of zad inhabitants, the Mauvaise Troupe, into English—I believe it has also been translated into Spanish.<sup>2</sup> The time I spent at the zad caused me to think about these sorts of territorial movements that are grounded in particular situations, in particular land-based struggles. One of the things that really struck me in Paris this year was that the commemoration of May '68 was everywhere —posters, the number 68, the colloquia, the film shows, the museum exhibits, everything— and no one seemed particularly interested. I think that it was because of the framework of the commemoration, which I think of as a sort of deadening force. And yet there was one moment when something from the '60s came alive, which happened when—because of Notre-Dame-des-Landes— everyone began to recall and talk about the Larzac, the farmers' movement in the early '70s. (Of course when I talk about the '60s I always mean the 'long 1960s,' from the late '50s to the mid-'70s, the same chronology used by many others, like Fredric Jameson or Immanuel

Wallerstein). In the 1970s sheep-farmers of the Larzac region organized to prevent the state from expropriating their land to be used as an army training ground.

**AFP:** The Larzac —is that where Bernard Lambert was involved?

**KR:** Yes, Bernard Lambert, the co-founder of the Paysans-Travailleurs movement in western France, was involved in the Larzac, and the history of the Paysans-Travailleurs is very much a part of the origins of the zad at Notre-Dame-des-Landes.

**AFP:** I had never heard of him before reading your book, where you talk about his role in decentralizing May '68 and getting farmers involved. I found that fascinating —it is hard to imagine, from the perspective, say, of Rue Saint Jacques, in the center of Paris. And is that the same as Confédération Paysanne?

**KR:** It's the beginning of it, yes. It's really interesting because if you think about the '60s from the point of view of the ZAD, you see another whole history. When you encounter figures like Bernard Lambert you can then throw figures like Daniel Cohn-Bendit out the window —you don't need him any longer, if you ever did. Thank God! And this is generally the way I work, to try to make apparent a figure like Bernard Lambert by shifting around who occupies the center of the stage. Not because he was neglected or to even the playing field, but because someone like Lambert is much more important to a history of the 60s that is vital to our moment: a history made up of territorial movements like the Larzac, but also, especially, the major one in Japan, which was another anti-airport struggle that lasted ten years. Once again, farmers outside of Tokyo, joined by students and radical workers, fought the building of the Narita Airport on their farmland. These are long, long movements, with their own very interesting temporality. And the Larzac and the Narita struggles —which I now view as the most important, defining battles of the long 1960s— were more or less contemporaneous. In fact, the ZAD started in 1968 as well, because that was the moment that the government and local businessmen dreamt up the idea of the airport.

**AFP:** In our journal *Re-visiones* in 2018 we have an article<sup>3</sup> by a professor from Chiapas, Rocío Noémi Martínez, who wrote us from London to say how sad she was when the police came to destroy everything at the ZAD. And here is a picture she sent me in response to the police raid on the ZAD:



*(The mural reads: "Capitalism turns everything, absolutely everything, into goods. For capitalism, we women are just advertising, decoration... Enough of this capitalist system!")*

**KR:** There's a lot of movement back and forth between the ZAD and Chiapas.

**AFP:** That is such an interesting connection, isn't it?

**KR:** Yes, but it is not surprising that the people of the zad and the people of Chiapas would see themselves engaged in the same attempt to use and preserve land communally. A reconfigured sense of the '60s —which is basically what I will be talking about tomorrow<sup>4</sup>— can help us understand the origins of such a solidarity. If you go back and put a movement like the Larzac in France and the Narita Airport struggle in Japan in the center of the 1960s instead of on the outskirts, where they usually are, then you can make a larger historical argument. What we call the '60s is actually the moment when people began for the first time to think that the logic of development and the logic of protecting the living had become the great contradiction defining their lives. The current kinds of struggles are the continuation and result of that realization. In the Americas and Australia — Chiapas, Standing Rock, in Brazil, for example— these are largely indigenous struggles. The zad and other European movements, on the other hand, are made up of very different groups of people working together. In the case of the zad, though, it's interesting to consider the long-time farmers, those with the deep and historic relation to working that particular land, as having some of the authority and embedded history (in the good

sense) as indigenous peoples in the Americas do when it comes to generating and maintaining a movement. They play a similar role of defending and preserving the land and transmitting a way of life.

**AFP:** So this is outside of what Bourdieu might call the *doxa* of May '68, right? Because the *doxa* is the students, women, sexual relations...

**KR:** Yes, but you can even keep the standard chronological framework of May and June 1968, and simply look at Nantes rather than Paris. There you will see a very different phenomenon, because it was in Nantes '68 that the farmers joined the workers and the students. This created a very different movement, because the farmers were feeding the workers who were on strike, and it was a three-way operation: they were running the city. It's not accidental that what happened in '68 in Nantes has come to be known as "the Commune de Nantes.". So Nantes is very, very interesting, and those same farmers who drove their tractors into the center of town in May '68 were among those who didn't sell their land in nearby Notre-Dame-des-Landes for the airport. So there you have a real continuity.

**PM:** When the police came into the zad, they sought to destroy —first and foremost— a way of living that was communal. For me this connects back to the Spanish feminist motto, "*iNos quieren solas, nos tendrán solidarias!*" ("They want us alone, they'll find us united!"), and to the way in which neoliberalism seeks to destroy ways of communal life and to break the social tide.

Along these lines, and of course this question is pure speculation, we were wondering about how to generate a new social tide that is linked to this "communal luxury," which generates a whole different set of desires than those built up by capitalism over the past century on the basis of consumption, and which are aimed at a notion of progress that is divorced from wellbeing.

**KR:** This is one of the reasons why I've been so interested in these kinds of territorial movements. And that's a first step to the answer: a form of embeddedness. This is easy to talk about here in Barcelona, where certainly there's a desire to defend your city and to make it something more than a place of global capitalist transit that people simply pass through. And if you can do that, if you can stabilize in time, perhaps even a lifetime, you're going to create a way of life that is at least partially outside of the state and outside of the capitalist system, but you have to really form the sorts of commitments to a particular space that very few people are willing to do now.

You know, what interested me in some of the people I met at the ZAD was that they were veterans of the anti-globalization movement, many of whom had flown around the world to G8 meeting after G8 meeting to protest. But at a certain point they said, 'No, this isn't working, we have to build something ourselves and we have to build it in a space. It has got to be something that we build together.' And to do that, the extraordinary thing that they did was to realize that they had to work together with people that were completely unlike themselves, which is an enormous challenge. This isn't a little clique of people who all think the same way; it includes nuns, black bloc, anarchists, petit bourgeois shop keepers, old farmers, naturalists who don't even believe in farming —some very, very contradictory beliefs. And these were the people that formed the movement, and as they created a kind of embeddedness that was indistinguishable from defending the territory, they began to realize that what they were defending was not just the land —it had merely started out that way. You start by defending, say, an unpolluted environment or farmland, but over time, because these are long movements, what you're defending are the social relations that you've created with the people that you're working with. So, that includes the balance that you've fought for, the compromises you've made, the children that were born there in the meantime...

**PM:** That reminds me of something Aurora and I were talking about before, which is that, while virtually all of the examples in your books and interviews are related to occupation —to this idea of occupying and putting the body in a place in the here and now— you rarely discuss the Occupy movement or the other related movements that emerged in 2011.

**KR:** Of course, I participated in New York Occupy, directly and also in terms of thinking about it later. But when I wrote *Communal Luxury* I didn't want to be very heavy-handed. I wanted readers to make their own connections. But sure, that was the only reason to go back to the Paris Commune at that moment: the return in our own times of a political practice characterized by seizing space, making space public again.

**AFP:** This is Notre-Dame-des-Landes?



**KR:** Yes, that's the library

**AFP:** And this is the Spanish Revolution, in Puerta del Sol.



**KR:** Oh, perfect.

**AFP:** So, while we are playing with images, here are another three: Paul Lafargue's *Le droit à la paresse* ("The Right to be Lazy"), graffiti of the May



'68 slogan "Ne travaillez jamais" ("Never work"), and then the recent book *No more work* by James Livingston. There's another line of continuity, don't you think?



**KR:** Sure, a figure like Commune Paul Lafargue emerges again as someone speaking very forcefully to us now. I mean, he is part of a whole anti-productivist line of thinkers that people are very concerned with today, thinkers that include many of the people involved in the Commune. It is not surprising that people involved today in reviving different vernacular Commune-forms should treasure this genealogy of thinkers. The Commune as a figure is at the center of this, because the commune-form entails a shift away from the factory as a site for political process. You know, the whole 19th century sort of organized us towards thinking about the factory, the work place, workers, etc., political economy and its critique as being at the center of political struggle. But the commune as a form has a broader social base. You can have unemployed people, animals, children, the elderly—all these people and entities are part of the commune. And it is more feminist too, because it goes back to what you were saying earlier about creating a way of life, about working on everyday life and managing the affairs and details of everyday life communally.

**AFP:** Exactly, that is linked to the current idea of a feminist economy based on care...

**PM:** ...or the notion of interdependence.

**KR:** And that's really what I was amazed by at the ZAD. You know, they don't ask for much—they have built a self-reliance precisely on the basis of interdependence, with the creation of an autonomous kind of zone that is not at all closed in on itself, that is in fact quite porous. They had to be porous to accept all the help that they were getting from the outside and to further the relations of solidarity that they were creating with other movements like Chiapas, other ZADs around the world, or even with striking postal workers in nearby Nantes.

**AFP:** So, back to the three pictures, do you think that the situationist graffiti, "Ne travaillez jamais," responds to something essentially different?

**KR:** The situationists were never that important to me, they were too tied into an avant-gardism that rubbed me the wrong way. You know, one of the things that struck me about the ZAD is that people there work all the time. But it's travail attrayant (to evoke the term of another precursor, Fourier) and not salaried labor. And that makes all the difference. When I spend a few days there, I'm completely exhausted, not just by the work, which is generally farm labor, or cooking for fifty or a hundred people. I'm exhausted by socializing that much, by the social interactions which are non-stop. I'm used to spending a lot of time by myself.

**AFP:** Exhausted, but in William Morris's words, happy.

**KR:** Yes, very, very happy.

**AFP:** Because it is the *réenchantement du monde*, "putting the joy back in the world," through the material, the physical. It is the opposite of the abstract nature of capital.

**KR:** True, but it is also very, very hard work, and the third thing that is even harder, and that I don't know if I could do myself—I don't have the patience—is what I mentioned about all the very different kinds of people there. You can imagine the work it takes to get along. They sometimes have six-hour meetings every night, just to talk things out.

**PM:** Wow. So given that reality on the ground, could you give us an example of what "communal luxury" would consist of in these sorts of communities today? How does this concept of *réenchantement de la vie* or "putting the joy back in life" show up nowadays? In your book on the Commune it's clear, but the context is so different in the present that a few examples could be helpful.

**KR:** When my book came out in France, I wanted the title to be *Luxe Communal* and my editor, Éric Hazan, said, 'Impossible, because for the French today, the word "communal" as an adjective is mainly used for things like municipal swimming pools. It evokes boring things like local elections.' I don't know if it's the same in Spanish. Is it?

**PM:** No, not at all, the root *comun-* has preserved both senses in Spanish. It's true that, for example, a building co-op is called a *comunidad de vecinos*, but *comunal* is very often used to refer to the commons.

**KR:** It's an interesting question with these different languages. Do you have "communes" in Spain? I mean, administratively, is Spain broken down into "communes" like France is?

**PM:** The equivalent in Spain is the *comunidades autónomas*, but all the same, the term encompasses both senses.

**KR:** Interesting, because in France, given that administrative definition, my editor said, 'No, no, you can't.' And I insisted, 'But it's a citation from a Communard manifesto... Why not?' But he was convinced, 'No, no, no, no, no. Contemporary French people would not understand it.' So I was very

disappointed. And that's why in French the title is boring: *L'imaginaire de la Commune*.

**PM:** Wow, which is totally different. For us it's very, very powerful as a political concept, *Luxe Communal*. In the PEI (Independent Studies Program), we're working with thinker Emilio Santiago Muño around the concept of *luxurious poverty* as a response to the crisis of civilization brought on by ecological collapse. We are looking at how to respond with joy to the growing scarcity that we'll face in the coming years, restoring life's enchantment through activities that don't need fuel or carbon energy, like reading, walking, poetry, the arts... This is why we find the concept of "communal luxury" so evocative.

**KR:** Exactly, because it almost seems like an oxymoron, right? I was thinking about that because, one of the times I went to the ZAD, they were building that library—I don't know if you've seen the outside of it, but basically it is a lighthouse in the middle of the ZAD. And the ocean is nowhere nearby, but they were building a lighthouse. So I said, 'Why are you building a lighthouse? Is it defensive? Is it so that you can see the cops when they're coming?' And they said, 'No, it's communal luxury. It's the seventh wonder of the ZAD.' So, there's your example. It's perfect, right?

**PM:** It's perfect.

**KR:** The idea of a lighthouse in the middle of a field.

**AFP:** I see this as one of the key arguments of the book, that to share is not only to share misery, but also to share communal abundance.

**KR:** When the Communards used the phrase *luxe communale* it was in part to counteract propaganda on the part of the Versailles who were calling them the *partageurs* in order to frighten the people out in the countryside. When they said the *partageurs* they meant that sharing could only be sharing misery. But what if sharing is not the sharing of misery? That's the point that they were making by embracing the idea of sharing and saying, 'No, it's luxurious, it's not misery.'

**AFP:** It's true that after the 2011 Spanish Revolution we changed our perspective—and I'm speaking as a professor, as someone associated with academia— but in general it's all municipalism and associations in the street, but no way of thinking and working. I don't know, I think it's not like it used to be. The shouting was very loud, and when we shouted "They don't represent us!" that was the end of the performance... Saying 'You, you aren't going to represent me' is a very strong experience. It all reminds me, though, of [Harvey's assertion](#) that neighborhood vegetable gardens are great, but they aren't the revolution.

**PM:** David Harvey did say that, and actually it is something we wanted to ask you about. To say that urban gardening won't change the world is pretty provocative.

**KR:** Oh, I know, I mean, I have a lot of respect for David Harvey, and he's very good actually on these geographical movements, precisely because he says that they are very different. They involve making an existential choice: either the airport will be there or it won't, it's a yes or no question, are you for it or against it? In the quote that you just mentioned though, I don't agree with him, I think that little *potagers* in cities do change things.

**PM:** Yeah, for me this is linked to this idea of the social tide, no?

**KR:** Right.

**PM:** Because the role of small communities is very important.

**KR:** Yes, perhaps David still has a really standard kind of notion of what constitutes a revolution. But to my mind things are so bad now that people don't even have a social life. You have to start there, you have to start by building that, just forms of association and cooperation. Replace domination with association, as Fourier would say.

**AFP:** In Spain, Rancière's *Ignorant Schoolmaster* (which you translated into English) was all the rage at almost the exact same time as the 2011 Revolution. Back then we used to read it a lot in Pablo's group Las Lindes. If you really read that book, you see that Jacotot, the "ignorant schoolmaster", who is also a character in *Communal Luxury*, really sums it all up. Things can change, in my classes, in my students. And that's so important, because I have an enormous social responsibility: I teach many, many, many people. And readings aren't interchangeable, it's not the same to read Rancière's book as it is to read something else. So this goes back to the examples of the 19th century, the Commune, the people you're talking about. These are still such relevant issues, that we keep rediscovering them over and over. There are things we thought we had lost but then, reading your book, we said, 'Ah! There they are!' So, sure, maybe it's not the great Revolution, it's not macropolitics, but it is micropolitics, as you say.

**KR:** Actually I don't talk about micropolitics.

**PM:** Why don't you talk about micropolitics?

**KR:** I don't know. It's just not a term that I find useful.

**PM:** But David Harvey, in this quote, was thinking in terms of the macro, wasn't he? It seemed to me that he was essentially mocking these, for lack of a better term, micropolitical groups —be they feminists, individuals, or activists— and saying that starting a labor coop and a community garden is not revolutionary, because The Revolution is something else. And this goes back to something you said earlier, I think. I mean, this is a very patriarchal notion, right? This idea that we have to plan everything out before acting.

**KR:** Right.

**PM:** It's so... patriarchal, so modern: take out a blank sheet of paper, come up with important terms like 'revolution,' and then outline your plan, instead of getting right down to doing things and generating relationships.

**AFP:** I don't know if it's patriarchal but it certainly is dad-like.

**KR:** I think you're right; I remember I was on a panel with David one time. It was during Occupy and I said something like, 'Well, you know, you can start anywhere, you don't have to start at the beginning.' And he said, 'Yes, but it will be co-opted.' So he went immediately to the logic of co-optation rather than to a more Jacotot approach, let's say.

**AFP:** Something that I think is all too often overlooked is the Mexican '68, because in May '68 in Paris nobody died, but in Mexico, in October in Tlatelolco, hundreds of students were murdered. So, I think we in European or American academia are still not talking enough about what happened that year in Mexico City.

**KR:** That's true. One of the good things that you can say about these commemorations is that they are becoming more international. More attention is being paid to what happened in Mexico, and what happened even in more unexpected places like North Africa and all over the world.

**AFP:** So, in this way, in the same way that you criticize the de-historicization of the event, as I believe you have called it, we could also point to a de-territorialization of the event. Because if all we keep saying is 'France,' '1968,' 'May,' 'Paris,' we never get around to talking about Mexico. It really opened my eyes when you said, 'No, no, it's not Paris, it's Nantes, it's the small villages, it's everywhere.' And so if you spatialize history, you realize that there are '68s everywhere, that perhaps it is the *doxa* that has kept us from seeing them.

**KR:** It's amazing what an incredible control those media figures, who were former activists, held for so long. In the 1980s it was impossible to see anything outside of them; they successfully made themselves into the lone voices and interpreters of the movement. I mean, it was insane, it was absolutely insane. I think that because I came from the outside, I was able to see it much more easily than a lot of French people.

**PM:** I was hoping you could elaborate on an expression you use in *Communal Luxury* that I really love, which is, "it is actions that produce dreams and not the reverse." I think it is such an illuminating quote, and one so closely tied to the Paris Commune, May '68 and the Occupy movement in Spain. How can this notion stand up against our semiotic machines that generate things, concepts, terms, and also dreams?

**KR:** I think that political ideas and political actions are not at all the same thing, but they need to move towards each other and re-connect in order to give each other life. And it was Henri Lefebvre who said that it's actions and political movement that generate theory, and not the reverse. So that's what I was thinking of when I said that, because nowadays, I do think that political theorists are the bane of our existence., I really cannot take them

seriously. They begin with concepts —and then they make the masses of humans who are out there struggling as well as the poor dead Communards certify the correctness of their concept!

And so I try never to start with a concept, because when you do, you're stuck in that role. For example, with the Commune, for years all I did was read every single thing that was in print written by a Communard, and I didn't read what Trotsky said about the Commune, I didn't read what Mao said about the Commune, I just threw all that away and concentrated on the language of the Communards, what words they were using when they spoke to each other, how they talked about their own desires, how they left certain words behind, because they weren't accurate, how they debated certain words.

**AFP:** That's why I was so happy when I saw you'd cited Arlette Farge, whom I love, because that's just what she does: she mines the streets of the 18th century, searching for the voices, the cries —cries are important too, you know— even the caresses of the people. But in the archives it's a different story. That's why I like how you say, 'No, I have worked with materials of all kinds, public archives, private archives, fliers, newspaper articles, documentary images, memorabilia.' We really liked that you called all of that an "evocation," and not a set of concepts.

**KR:** You can arrive at a very different narrative if you do that, as opposed to writing yet another book debating whether the Commune was anarchist or Marxist or whatever —these kinds of rather pointless exercises. They do nothing for us.

To take another example, Arlette Farge is a wonderful historian, but historians are also part of the problem. You can read articles about the Commune and how it was international, and when a historian says, 'The Commune was international,' they've counted the number of Polish people, the number of Italians who participated, the number of Spanish, and they've counted them and they say, 'Ok, it's international.' Now, I think that the Commune was international, but the way I chose to show that was with a single figure, Elisabeth Dmitrieff, the Russian who single-handedly brought together these major international theories, simply by her movements, and who she spoke to, and her interactions, and her own political thinking, her own political acts. And suddenly you have Chernyshevsky and Marx, they're on the streets of Paris as well, in the form of Elisabeth Dmitrieff and her invention, along with the seamstresses of Paris, of the Women's Union, which was the single most effective organization of the Commune. So she was bringing the old Russian forms of the commune (the *artel* and the *obshina*) into play in Paris, and this is what's important about the international dimensions of the Commune, not that a Pole was the head of the army or an example like that. Anyway, you can get me talking at great length about my battles with historians, political scientists and political theorists!

**AFP:** No, but our work has a great deal in common with your approach to rewriting history.

**PM:** But there's something in your last book that maybe is connected to this idea that you've put in practice of approaching the past with the concepts of the present. This may be a sort of daring assertion, but when we read the Communards in your book, their ideas don't seem so far removed from something like ecofeminism, right? And this is precisely because you've placed the role of women at the center, along with the role of ecology and growth. I was struck by all these people in the 19th century speaking out against the idea of growth, productivity and production.

**KR:** Again, I don't think I approach the past by beginning with present-day concepts. Present-day political desires, perhaps, or strategies —not concepts. As for your example, many Communards were still very attached to a form of artisanal work, which isn't surprising since they were primarily artisanal workers and day-laborers themselves. But if you concentrate very strongly not only on what workers do but on what they say, that's the only way I know of to restage an event and its reverberations. And the centrifugal effects that occurred in the lifetime of the Communards included some of the survivors meeting up with people like Marx and Kropotkin and Morris, and other fellow travelers. So, I became more and more interested in what happened immediately after the Commune. Usually people stop with the Bloody Week, because the Bloody Week is so dramatic, it's the natural endpoint. But this is what I mean about opening up beginnings and endings, and telling the story differently. It's important because it enables us to see the event differently. When you open up the ending and look at what happened when the Communards met up with people like Morris and Kropotkin, then you can see how what occurred in Paris helped generate ideas that we can only now see as ecological. Of course, they didn't have that word then.

**AFP:** No.

**KR:** But it was what they were thinking about, and that was part of communal luxury from the outset, because communal luxury is in some ways the idea that everyone has the right to live and work in a pleasing environment. And that sounds like it's not a big demand, but it's actually the biggest demand that you can make, because it entails completely transfiguring our relationship to labor, to the lived environment, to natural resources. It's really a call for a set of practices that put an end to luxury based on class difference.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VpTi6L31MSo>; Spanish translation: <http://comunizar.com.ar/kristin-ross-alain-badie-u-la-comuna-paris-1871/>

<sup>2</sup> Mauvaise Troupe Collective, *The Zad and NoTAV*, trans and preface, Kristin Ross (London: Verso, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.re-visiones.net/index.php/RE-VISIONES/article/view/286>

<sup>4</sup> Kristin Ross was invited to MACBA to participate in the course "A Short Century: Poetics and politics from 1929 to the Present." A video of her lecture can be seen at <https://www.macba.cat/en/terrains-and-territories-of-the-long-sixties>