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Book Review: The Commune Form: The Transformation of Everyday Life by Kristin Ross

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Abstract: Michael Kirby reviews *The Commune Form: The Transformation of Everyday Life* by Kristin Ross. The book explores what Ross calls the "commune form", a type of political struggle that has appeared throughout history, most famously during the Paris Commune of 1871. While defining its particular relation to capitalism and the state, Ross highlights some more recent examples of the phenomenon, including the Stop Cop City movement in Atlanta and the ZAD [Zone à défendre] de Notre-Dame-des-Landes

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What does society look like after the revolution? This is the usual question posed to critical librarians and leftists in general, often accompanied by barely disguised sarcasm; the person who asks it frequently believes there can be no radical change, let alone a better society. But the question moreover implies a linear understanding of history, one that seeks to fit events into neatly defined, progressive slots: pre-, intra, or post-revolution. Problematising this linear way of thinking has been the focus of Kristen Ross's work for the better part of four decades. Perhaps best known for her 2016 book *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*, she returns to the subject once again in *The Commune Form: The Transformation of Everyday Life*. This time, however, the Paris Commune functions not so much as a discrete event primed for interpretation, but rather as the archetype of a specific form of political struggle that continues to reemerge from time to time, even in the present – what Ross calls the *commune form*.

Throughout the book, Ross introduces us to various conflicts that fit this description: Stop Cop City in Atlanta, the pipeline battles on indigenous territory, and activist groups like Soulèvements de la terre. They, of course, share some important commonalities. First and foremost, they are *local* in their political outlook. They involve groups of people attempting to defend land(s) that they have deemed integral to their way of life. One example is the ZAD [Zone à défendre] just outside of Nantes, whose members successfully stopped the building of an airport that would have destroyed valuable farmland. Another, the Stop Copy City movement in Atlanta, less successfully protested the construction of a police training center; its completion has unleashed hundreds of more cops into heavily red-lined neighborhoods.

None of these movements are, in any strict sense, legal. As Ross (2024) puts it: "For both Marx and Kropotkin, revolution is indistinguishable from the direct democracy of the commune form, and that democracy is an uprising *in excess of the political forms currently in place*" (p. 6) (my emphasis). This is to say, the political movements under discussion operate outside of the dominant liberal modes of political participation: voting booths, legal challenges, nonviolent protests. They resist, sometimes violently, the rule of law.

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Liberals would call this anarchy. Ross prefers to frame it in a different way: “The contradiction is not between the state and anarchy but between the state and another organization of political life, an alternative kind of political intelligence, a different kind of community. To the extent that the state recedes, the communes and their way of life flourish” (p. 6). This formulation – the state-commune spectrum, to put it simply – suggests that communal forms of life always exist, even in times when the capitalism seems omnipresent and thus insurmountable. Ross sums it up in the following way: “Something like communism is created against the grain of capitalism, alongside it and not after it” (p. 91).

I am reminded of the work of Erik Olin Wright (2010), who discusses what he calls the “intercises,” or gaps, that exist within a given economic system:

> “capitalism is often described as having developed in the intercises of feudal society […] Market relations developed in the cities, which were less fully integrated into feudal relations and over time this created the context within which proto-capitalist relations and practices could emerge and eventually flourish” (Wright 2010, 323).

Conferring with Wright, we might say that movements like Soulèvements de la terre or the various ZADs throughout France function much like capitalism did during feudalism; they constitute intercises in the dominant economic and political structure of our time: capitalism. Ross exhibits an understanding of history that differs greatly from the one espoused by your typical Marxist dialecticiation, who sees capitalism as paving the way for communism through its own internal contradictions. Rather, these movements are living communisms, arising not from capitalism’s contradictions, but from its (relative) absence. A withering away, in other words, of *the capitalist state in a specific, local context*. This is a good working definition of what Ross means by the “commune form.”

What do critically minded librarians and information professionals have to learn from these movements? One might suggest that libraries already act as “zones of defense”. They safeguard a community’s right to free information, and in doing so, prioritize a form of knowledge dissemination that is, in some sense, skeptical of the profit motive. One should not overstate the institution’s radical credentials, however. I tend to agree with Sam Popowich (2018), who has argued against viewing libraries as “arsenals of democratic culture”. As he puts it, there’s real danger in uncritically assuming that what librarians “[do] and how we are doing it is valuable in and of itself and should not be changed” (p. 31). Libraries, by and large, have denied their radical potential, opting instead to *support* capitalist liberal democracy; they have not, in any lasting way, taken the form of interceses or communes. But as Popowich is quick to point out, just because the overall sympathies of librarianship lie with the liberal democratic project, doesn’t mean that some of its component parts aren’t radical in essence, or that they can’t be turned towards radical ends.

Thus, *The Commune Form* inspires an alternative political project for librarianship, one that eschews the profession’s traditional view of itself as protector of liberal capitalist hegemony. Librarians could instead work to identify the interceses within their own institutional structures, defend them from further deterioration, and then, if possible, *extend their influence and power until they comprise the entirety of the profession*.

The answer to the question, “What comes after the revolution?” has a much simpler answer than one might assume; it could look a lot like some of the movements Ross

describes: direct democracies, local in nature, free from any need to legitimise themselves in eyes of the state. It may even take inspiration from parts of the open access movement already extant within librarianship: OERs, openly-sourced integrated library systems, etc. The goal, though, is to ensure that practices like open access are wrestled back from the control of cost-cutting obsessed administrators who, in co-opting what is potentially radical about our profession, forestall the substantial role librarians could play in engendering the political elsewhere we call – in accordance with Ross – a commune.

References

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Michael Kirby is an Assistant Professor in the library at CUNY Kingsborough Community College. Most recently, his work has appeared in the *Journal of Radical Librarianship* and the *Journal of Intellectual Freedom & Privacy*.