

# ROAR

Reflections on a Revolution

ISSUE #1 - SPRING 2016

Paris ★ Rojava ★ Oaxaca ★ Durban ★ Gwangju  
Barcelona ★ Venezuela ★ ... and much more



REVIVE LA COMMUNE!



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Issue #1

# Revive la Commune!

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*“What is the Commune,  
that sphinx so tantalizing  
to the bourgeois mind?”*

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# The Commune Lives

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**O**n March 18, 1871 the people of Paris rose up against their repressive and treacherous government, proclaimed a revolutionary commune and defiantly hoisted the red flag over the Hôtel de Ville. The event sent shockwaves throughout the continent: with armed citizens erecting barricades in working-class neighborhoods and government officials on the retreat to Versailles, the City of Light had suddenly fallen into the hands of its people. Over the next two months, all signs of state power evaporated from the French capital as the proletarians of Paris took charge of their own destiny, forming neighborhood councils and producer associations, electing moderately paid delegates subject to immediate recall, and instituting basic reforms like free access to public education, the granting of citizenship to immigrants, and the reopening of workplaces under worker control.

The Commune was eventually defeated at the hands of the Versailles government, setting the stage for the bloody massacre of up to 30,000 Communards and unarmed citizens. But for all the force and vengeance the Versaillais could muster, the Commune did not die—the idea survived its “own working existence” and lived on, subterraneously, in the sacrifices of its martyrs, the aspirations of its survivors and the writings of its leading theoreticians. Then, as today, the left was riven with sectarian divisions, but on this point socialists, communists and anarchists all seemed to agree: the Commune was to become a touchstone for all future attempts to establish a classless society—all efforts to build real democracy without capitalism or the state would sooner or later have to contend with the legacy bequeathed by the movement of 1871. As Kropotkin put it, “Under the name ‘Commune of Paris’ a new idea was born, to become the starting point for future revolutions.”

Today, as a new generation of activists and revolutionaries sets out to liberate the memory of the Commune from the stifling dogma of 20th century state socialism, reviving the communal imaginary in a new cycle of struggles, the resonance of the original event continues to be felt across the globe. This first print issue of *ROAR Magazine* takes a closer look at some of the contemporary struggles that picked up where the Commune left off—from the self-governing cantons of Rojava to the communal councils of Venezuela, from the Gwangju Uprising in South Korea to the Oaxaca Commune in Mexico, from the shantytowns of Durban to the City Hall of Barcelona, and from the “underground railroad” of communes in 1960s America to the communalist and cooperative movement in the US today. By tracing the genealogy of the commune-form back to indigenous societies, highlighting the independent development of communes in all corners of the globe, as well as the central role that women have played throughout this history, the issue also aims to contribute to the decolonization and liberation of the commune from the patriarchal and Eurocentric worldview that has long distorted attempts to theorize, envision and build a new life in common.

In these times of crisis, in which capital and the state struggle to reproduce themselves as the core of a stable social order and planetary life-support systems rapidly approach the point of collapse, the revival of the commune—internally bound up with the struggle for a free and classless society and the development of a rational, cooperative and ecological mode of production—becomes the most urgent order of the day. At this crossroads in history, where the echoes of a revolutionary past meet the exigencies of an imperiled future, the Commune is bound to rise again like a phoenix from the ashes, its evocative thunder-burst ringing forth once more for all the world to hear:

***Vive la Commune!***



All original illustrations by  
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# ***The Commune: Evolving Form of Freedom***

George Katsiaficas

**LIKE THE PARIS COMMUNE OF 1871,  
THE LESSER-KNOWN GWANGJU  
COMMUNE OF 1980 STANDS AS  
A CONCRETE EMBODIMENT OF  
FREEDOM'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL  
FORM.**

**F**rom revolutionary armies and parliaments at the end of the 18th century, to workers and soldiers' councils at the beginning of the 20th, grassroots insurgencies create new forms of power. In contrast to occupational or sectoral forms of self-government, communes—liberated spaces within which universal popular will is formulated through direct democracy and implemented by direct action—have been continually generated from below, the most famous example being the 1871 Paris Commune. Among today's European and American activists, there is widespread knowledge of Paris while only sparse and superficial recognition of the 1980 Gwangju Commune. One might have thought that a more contemporaneous event would be better known than its 19th century antecedent, yet, for a variety of reasons, including deeply rooted Eurocentric bias, the opposite is the case.

Our scant knowledge of contemporary communes can also be found in Soviet Communism's defamation of "spontaneity", an ideological imperative that reached such extremes that popular movements outside the control of the Communist Party were opposed from

the time of Makhno. More recently, in 1968 France and 1977 Italy, Communist Parties opposed insurgencies and sided with governments. Insurrections in the early 20th century—in St. Petersburg and Moscow in 1917, Budapest and Bavaria in 1919, and Hamburg, Canton, and Shanghai in 1923—were led by Leninist organizations intent on seizing power. In China, Korea, and Vietnam, protracted wars led by centralized parties were vital to national liberation.

Looking at the history of uprisings in the 18th and 19th centuries, one discerns a far different orientation of revolutionaries. Both Marx and Lenin enthusiastically embraced the Paris Commune as the embodiment of their aspirations. For Peter Kropotkin, the free commune became the ends and means of genuine revolution. He detested representative government and bureaucrats who sought to take upon themselves the responsibilities and rights of the people. Developing his thoughts in relation to the Paris Commune of 1871 as well as the Cartagena and Barcelona Communes that followed a few years later, Kropotkin noted that uprisings themselves inspired others to rise up—a phenomenon I understand as the

eros effect. Kropotkin believed that, “Not one, or two, or tens, but hundreds of similar revolts have preceded and must precede every revolution. Without these no revolution was ever wrought.”

Like the Paris Commune, Gwangju’s historical significance is international. Its lessons apply equally well to East and West, North and South. The 1980 people’s uprising, like earlier revolutionary moments, continues to have worldwide repercussions. An example of ordinary people taking power into their own hands, it was a precursor of the Asian Wave that overthrew eight dictatorships in the six years from 1986 to 1992. As the world-historical global movement of 1968 etched the contours of subsequent insurgencies—the disarmament movement in the early 1980s, vast mobilizations in Russia and Eastern Europe after 1989, the alterglobalization wave most visible in 1999 Seattle, and the 2011 global uprising (the Arab Spring, Greek anarchists, Spanish *indignados*, Wisconsin workers and Occupy Wall Street)—so the Paris Commune paved the way to the Gwangju Uprising, and Gwangju for subsequent waves—and not only in Asia.

Even when an uprising is brutally suppressed—as in both cases here—its being experienced publicly creates new desires and new needs, new fears and new hopes in people’s hearts and minds. In 1987, when South Koreans rose up in their historic 19-day June Uprising that finally overthrew the dictatorship, “Remember Gwangju!” was the key rallying cry. Two years later, on May 20, 1989, Chinese workers and students occupying Tiananmen Square invoked the memory of the Paris Commune in a joint statement in which they proclaimed that, “We will build another Wall of the Communards with our life’s blood.”

## COMPARING THE PARIS COMMUNE AND THE GWANGJU PEOPLE’S UPRISING

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In both Paris and Gwangju, citizens opposed their governments and effectively gained control of major cities in which hundreds of thousands of people created popular organs of political power that efficiently replaced traditional forms of government; grassroots armed resistance was widespread; criminal behavior all but disappeared and was replaced by genuine solidarity and cooperation among the citizenry; hierarchies of class, power, and status were suspended.

Both uprisings were produced by the accumulation of grievances against injustice and precipitated by extreme events. The Paris Commune arose in 1871 at the end of the Franco-Prussian War when the victorious Prussians advanced on the capital. When the National Assembly voted to surrender to Prussia, Parisians were disgusted. With the support of 215 of the existing 260 National Guard battalions, the National Guard of Paris seized control of the city in a *coup d’état* on March 18. Resisting their own government’s attacks, the Communards held out for 70 days against French troops armed and aided by their Prussian conquerors. The Communards established a functioning government that coordinated defense and met Parisians’ daily needs. Twice, elections were held. Finally, on May 28, overwhelming military force crushed the uprising, and thousands were killed in a “Bloody Week” of urban warfare.

Over a century later, the Gwangju People’s Uprising occurred at a time when the fire-power of militaries was multiplied by several orders of magnitude. There was no conquering foreign

army advancing on the city, but horrendous barbarity was inflicted on the people of Gwangju by elite South Korean paratrooper units pulled off the front lines with North Korea with the approval of the United States. Against flame-throwers and machine guns, thousands of people bravely fought back and drove the military out of the city.

Inside liberated Gwangju, daily citizens' assemblies of tens of thousands of people gave voice to years-old frustrations and pent-up aspirations of ordinary people. Local citizens' groups maintained order and created a new type of government—one of, by, and for the people. They held their liberated space for six days, a far shorter period than the Paris Commune. During such revolutionary moments, however, time is not a key variable—at least not as we ordinarily measure it. On May 27, 1980—almost the same day that the Paris Commune was crushed 109 years earlier—the Gwangju Commune was overwhelmed by tanks, helicopters, jets and thousands of paratroopers.

In order to contain both uprisings, to prevent them from spreading, the established governments isolated them. Cut off from the provinces, the Paris Commune nevertheless found many supporters, and similar communal experiments

erupted in many cities, from Marseille to Tours. In Gwangju, the revolt spread to at least sixteen neighboring sections of South Cholla province.

As in Paris, where Courbet participated in an artists' group that supported the Commune in many ways—most notably by tearing down the Vendôme column—artists in Gwangju also played vital roles. Clown theater groups took a central role in MC'ing the daily rallies; Hong

Sung-dam and visual artists made posters for the movement and the uprising's daily newspaper.

During both uprisings, women played significant roles, although they organized themselves in domains considered traditionally female within today's patriarchal division of labor. Strong feminist sentiment emerged among women in the International Workingmen's Association (IWA—also known as the First International) who took on care of the injured.

IWA women demanded gender equality and the abolition of prostitution. They organized worker cooperatives, like the restaurant La Marmite, which served free food for indigents.

Although barred from voting in initial elections, women were enfranchised by the Commune. In Gwangju, high school girls gathered and washed the corpses and helped care for the wounded. Although a few men were

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involved in cooking communal meals in Province Hall and around the city, women mainly staffed the public kitchens. Although some women carried arms during the Gwangju Uprising, a separate female battalion of the National Guard fought to defend Place Blanche when the Prussians and their French allies attacked.

In both cities, traitors to the uprisings and government supporters (including spies and saboteurs sent inside the Communes to disrupt and destroy them) were quite numerous. In Gwangju, government agents took the detonators from the basement of Province Hall, thereby rendering useless the dynamite brought there by Hwasun coal miners. Paris was “full” of internal enemies, and there were riots at Vendôme Place and the Bourse, insti-

gated by “loyal” citizens in constant contact with Versailles.

Nevertheless, the liberated realities of the Communes in Paris and Gwangju contradict the widely propagated myth that human beings are essentially evil and require strong governments to maintain order and justice. The behavior of citizens during these moments of liberation revealed an innate capacity for self-government, an instinct for peaceful cooperation. The defeated governments, not the autonomously governed people, acted with cruelty. In both 1871 and 1980, after the halcyon days of liberation were bloodily brought to an end, brutal repression was the meaning of “law and order.” Estimates of the number of people executed in the aftermath of the Paris Commune reach to 30,000, a num-





PHOTO BY JAN WELLMAN, VIA FLICKR

ber that does not include the thousands more who were summarily deported to distant Pacific holdings of the French Empire.

In Gwangju, far fewer people were killed. Although today's official count of the dead hovers around 200, most people then believed that at least 2,000 had been killed in the uprising. Hundreds disappeared. Even after the Gwangju Commune, the news of the uprising was so subversive that the military burned an unknown number of corpses, dumped others into unmarked graves or the sea, and destroyed its own records. To prevent word of the uprising from being spoken publicly, thousands of people were arrested, and hundreds tortured as the military tried to suppress even a whisper of its murders. At least a dozen people committed suicide as they proclaimed the truth of the massacre.

Both uprisings took place after many years of economic growth. The 1872 census put the number of industrial workers in France at 44 percent of the workforce, but there were probably no more than 15 factories that employed more than 100 workers each, and an additional hundred factories employed between 20 and 50 workers. Similarly, Gwangju in 1980 was the site of many small factories, a feature typical of the transition to higher forms of industrialization.

## DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO UPRISINGS

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In Gwangju, no preexisting armed force like the Parisian National Guard led the assault on power. Rather grassroots resistance to the brutality of the paratroopers threw forward men and women who rose to the occasion and ultimately organized themselves as the Citizens' Army. Liberated Gwangju came into being without the contrivance of political parties or preexistent governmental bodies. In the latter part of the 20th century, the Gwangju Commune reveals people's capacity to govern themselves far more wisely than military dictatorships or tiny elites—elected or not.

Like the insurgents of 1789, Parisian Communards considered the churches as enemy territory. In the first week of April, more than 200 priests were arrested, mainly through neighborhood initiatives. Without anyone telling them to do so, people turned parishes into community centers, orphanages and refuges where the city's poor could rest. In Gwangju, by contrast, churches significantly supported the uprising. Many churches became meeting places for their parishioners

to discuss the Commune and to participate in it, and the YMCA and YWCA were convergence centers for some of the most radical insurgents. No one was executed in liberated Gwangju. In Paris, as the city was about to fall, the Archbishop of Paris and a handful of priests were executed.

The Paris Commune included people of many European nationalities. Italian, Polish, German, Swiss and even Russian expatriates participated as equals. One of the commanding generals in charge of the city's defense was a Pole, and a Hungarian was elected to the government. While in Gwangju few foreigners were positioned—geographically or linguistically—to partake in the movement, Korean xenophilia welcomed journalists and even missionaries, who were applauded and welcomed.

Daily rallies of tens of thousands of people in Gwangju provided a forum for direct democracy where differences of opinion were passionately debated. People from all walks of life addressed the entire city—including leaders of criminal gangs who promised solidarity. Shoeshine boys, prostitutes, and people normally considered to be at the “bottom” of society participated as equals. Whereas in Paris, elected leaders issued proclamations, in Gwangju people made decisions directly. Two significant such determinations were not to surrender to the military (as some advocated) and to trade the military hundreds of weapons (a tiny fraction of the thousands in the hands of the insurgents) in exchange for the release of dozens of prisoners. When the General Assembly vocalized needs that required action, groups immediately took appropriate measures. So powerfully influential and intelligent were the deliberations of these assemblies that Gwangju citizens struggled for 17 years after the uprising to realize the three demands en-

dorsed by tens of thousands of people in 1980: punishment of those responsible for the massacre; an apology to citizens; and compensation to victims and their families.

Unlike Gwangju's general assemblies and direct democracy, a variety of representative structures existed in Paris. After the coup of March 18, the Central Committee of the National Guard immediately became the new government. Paris was full of already constituted organizations and parties, such as the First International to which Marx and Bakunin belonged, although at the beginning of the uprising its Parisian branch had no political program.

To legitimate the Commune, elections were held on March 26, and 287,000 men voted. Ninety members of the Commune were elected—but they included fifteen government supporters and nine citizens against the government but also against the March 18 insurrection. The next day, 200,000 people attended the installation of the new government at the Hôtel de Ville (City Hall). Unlike the free-flowing gatherings in Gwangju where everyone had a voice, the crowd in Paris watched as their representatives were sworn in, after which they simply left. The newly elected government proclaimed the enfranchisement of women, separation of church and state, no more night work in bakeries, no back rent for the poor, the arrest of reactionary priests, the re-opening of abandoned factories, and abolition of fines against workers—the last measure permitting workers to reclaim their tools from the city's pawnshops.

Elected representatives, however, were not the only power. Neighborhood associations acted as a “shadow government.” Three separate groups convened to make decisions at the Place de la Corderie, sometimes issuing mani-

festos together and at other times in opposition to each other. In many arrondissements, separate subcommittees formed and issued their own instructions. In addition, National Guard commanders also gave independent orders to their units. Within the cacophony of directives, officers in the field sometimes received three sets of conflicting orders. As a result, the elected government was practically powerless, rivaled in military affairs by the Central Committee and diminished in political power by autonomous arrondissement associations.

Tragically, the elected government was also mired in personal antagonisms among its members and depleted by elected representatives who refused to serve or resigned. Most significantly, it was weakened internally by those loyal to the old government, the bitter enemy of the Commune. Bad decisions—or a lack of any decision at all—soon became commonplace. Finally, as the representative system collapsed, on May 1, by a vote of 34 to 28, the government created a Committee of Public Safety “having authority over all...”

It appears that ordinary Parisians were not in favor of representative government, preferring instead direct democracy. As Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray tells us: “the popular masses, insensible to the bourgeois ideal of a municipal council, were bent on the Commune . . . What did they care for a council, even elective, but

without real liberties and fettered to the state—without authority over the administration of schools and hospitals, justice and police, and altogether unfit for grappling with the social slavery of its fellow citizens?”

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*Through substantive democracy—a far more empowering system than elections to choose rulers—the people of Paris and Gwangju reveal the trajectory of future forms of freedom.*

Here we see the most significant dimension of Paris and Gwangju: through substantive democracy—a far more empowering system than elections to choose rulers—the people of Paris and Gwangju reveal the trajectory of future forms of freedom. While elections in Paris led to increasing centralization of power in the hands of the Committee of Public

Safety, in Gwangju—despite the continual combat against the military—people resolutely maintained the communal form of deliberative democracy.

## THE LEGACY OF COMMUNES

The memory of the 19th century Paris Commune affected activists in Gwangju in 1980. In the course of dozens of interviews with former fighters in Gwangju, I found many people for whom the historical memory of the Paris Commune provided inspiration. Such direct connections illustrate how the legacy of uprisings, whether in Paris or Gwangju, is to empower others to struggle in the future. In the wake of both Paris and Gwangju, people were motivated, consciously or not, to participate in future struggles.

In the latter half of the 20th century, the revolutionary commune reappeared—initially in opposition to real-existing Communism. As early as 1957, Cornelius Castoriadis posited the deliberative decision-making of 1956 Hungarian workers’ councils as a model. Late 20th century grassroots Asian communes also have a robust history. Besides liberated Gwangju, massive takeovers involving direct democracy occurred at Bangkok’s Thammasat University in 1973, in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square in 1989, in Patan (Nepal) in 1990, and in Taipei’s Chiang Kai-shek Square in 1990. Similar 21st century communes, however paltry and malformed, emerged in Istanbul’s Taksim Square, in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and in Oaxaca’s central plaza. Like the rapid proliferation of Occupy Wall Street’s direct democracy, these insurgencies reveal people’s collective wisdom and capacity for self-government.

Looking ahead, we can expect waves of uprisings and newly generated communes to emerge on every continent. Whether or not they are synchronized and act in concert with each other may be a deciding factor in their long-term success. Today, the Paris and Gwangju Communes stand as concrete embodiments of the evolving form of freedom. They continue to provide all of us with a palpable feeling for the dignity of human beings and the possibility of freedom. ★

GEORGE KATSIAFICAS



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**Survival of  
the Paris  
Commune**

## THE COMMUNE OF 1871 WAS NEVER TRULY VANQUISHED—ITS POLITICAL IMAGINARY LIVED ON AND IS TODAY BEING LIBERATED AND REVIVED IN A NEW CYCLE OF STRUGGLES.

**K**ristin Ross is Professor of Comparative Literature at New York University. Her recent book, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune* (Verso, 2015), is a masterful study of the ideas and aspirations animating the historic working-class revolt of 1871. ROAR editor Jerome Roos spoke to her about the Commune's legacy, its impact on 19th century radical thought, and the revival of the communal imaginary in our times.



**ROAR:** *The Paris Commune has been studied and debated for almost a century and a half. How does your book add to our understanding of this world-historical event, and why did you decide to write it now?*

**Kristin Ross:** Like many people after 2011 I was struck by the return—from Oakland to Istanbul, Montreal to Madrid—of a political strategy based on seizing space, taking up space, rendering public places that the state considered private.

Militants across the world had reopened and were experiencing the space-time of occupation, with all the fundamental changes in daily life this implies. They experienced their own neighborhoods transformed into theaters for strategic operations and lived a profound modification of their own affective relation to urban space.

My books are always interventions into specific situations. Contemporary events drew me to a new reflection on the Paris Commune, which for many remains a kind of paradigm for the insurgent city. I decided to restage what took place in Paris in the spring of 1871 when artisans and communists, workers and anarchists took over the city and organized their lives according to principles of association and federation.

While much has been written about the military maneuvers and legislative disputes of the Communards, I wanted to revisit the inventions of the insurgents in such a way that some of today's most pressing problems and goals might emerge most vividly. The need, for example, to refashion an internationalist conjuncture, or the status of art and artists, the future of labor and

education, the commune-form and its relation to ecological theory and practice: these were my preoccupations.

The Paris Commune has always been an important point of reference for the left but what is new about today is in part the entire post-1989 political context and the collapse of state socialism, which took to the grave a whole political imaginary. In my book, the Paris Commune reemerges freed from that historiography, and offering a clear alternative to the centralism of the socialist state. At the same time the Commune has never, in my opinion, fit easily into the role that French national history tries to make it play as a kind of radical sequence in the establishment of the Republic. By liberating it from the two histories that have instrumentalized it, I was certain we would be able to perceive the Commune anew as a laboratory of political invention.

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Commune from the  
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French national histories that have instrumentalized it, we are  
able to perceive the  
Commune anew as a  
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invention.*

*By choosing to focus on the afterlife of the Commune more than on the 72 days of “its own working existence”, you manage to unearth the myriad ways in which the Commune’s political imaginary actually survived the massacre and lived on in the struggles and thought of ex-Communards and their contemporaries. What do you consider to be the most important legacy of the Commune in this respect?*

I did not so much focus on the “afterlife” of the Commune as I did on its survival. In one

of my earlier books, *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, my subject was indeed, as the title suggests, something more like a memory study: how the '68 insurrections were represented and discussed ten, twenty, thirty years later. And today very interesting work is being written by what some choose to see as the “afterlives” or “reactivations” of the Paris Commune: studies of the Shanghai Commune, for example, or other aspects of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, or studies that look to the Zapatistas as a kind of reactivation of some of the gestures of 1871.

*Communal Luxury*, however, is limited to the life-span of the Communards and is centrifugal or geographic in its reach. I examine the shockwaves of the event as they reach Kropotkin in Finland or William Morris in Iceland, or as they propel the hard-pressed Communard exiles and refugees themselves

into far-reaching new political networks and ways of living in Switzerland, London and elsewhere in the aftermath of the massacre that brought the Commune to an end. The extremity and gore of that end, the Bloody Week of state violence that brought thousands of people to their deaths, has all too often proved to be an uncontrollable lure, making invisible the networks and pathways of survival, reinvention and political transmission that came in the years immediately after, and that concern me in the latter part of the book.



There's almost a wish on the part of historians to lock the whole event up into a neat 72-day episode that ends in tragedy. In that sense I wanted to examine the prolongation of Communard thought beyond the bloody carnage in the streets of Paris, its elaboration when the exiles met up with their supporters in England and the mountains of Switzerland. In so doing, of course, I am very much in agreement with Henri Lefebvre who tells us that the thought and theory of a movement is generated only with and after the movement itself. Struggles create new political forms and ways of doing as well as new theoretical understandings of these practices and forms.

On one level you could argue that it is the forms taken by that survival—a “life beyond life” as in the French word “*survie*”—that constitute the Commune’s most important legacy: the very fact that its own “working existence” continued, the refusal on the part of the survivors and their supporters to allow the catastrophe of the massacre to bring everything to an end.

*You could argue that the Commune’s most important legacy is the fact that its own “working existence” continued.*



At a more symbolic level, though, the legacy left by the thought generated by the Commune emerges in my book in the cluster of meanings that attach to the phrase I chose for the book’s title: “communal luxury.” I discovered the phrase tucked away in the final sentence of the Manifesto Eugène Pottier, Courbet and other artists wrote when they were organizing during the Commune. For them the phrase expressed a demand for something like public beauty—the idea that everyone has the right to live and work in pleasing circumstances, the demand that art and beauty should not be reserved for the enjoyment of the elite, but that they be fully integrated into daily public life.

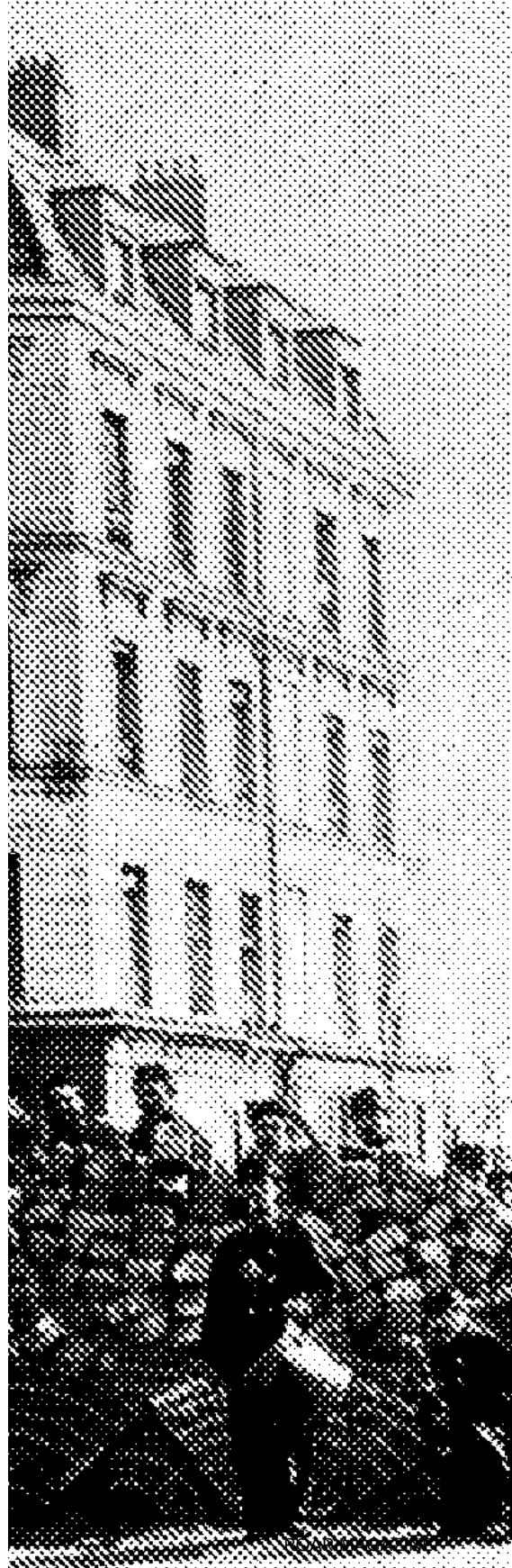
This may seem a merely “decorative” demand on the part of decorative artists and artisans, but it is a demand that in fact calls for nothing short of the total reinvention of what counts as wealth, what a society values. It is a call for the reinvention of wealth beyond

exchange-value. And in the work of Commune refugees like Eliséé Reclus and Paul Lafargue and fellow travelers like Peter Kropotkin and William Morris, what I am calling “communal luxury” was expanded into the vision of an ecologically viable human society. It’s striking that the work of Reclus, Lafargue and their friends is now at the center of the attention of ecological theorists who find there a level of environmental thought that died with that generation in the late 19th century and was not resuscitated again until the 1970s with figures like Murray Bookchin.

This is all exciting work, but it often fails to take into account how the experience of the Commune was part and parcel of the ecological perspective they developed. The experience of the Commune and its ruthless suppression made their analysis even more uncompromising. In their view, capitalism was a system of reckless waste that was causing the ecological degradation of the planet. The roots of ecological crisis were to be found in the centralized nation-state and the capitalist economic system. And they believed a systemic problem demands a systemic solution.

*Following up on the previous question, you particularly emphasize the profound impact of the Commune on Marx’s thinking at the time. Could you briefly discuss how the events of 1871 informed, changed or deepened Marx’s understanding of capitalist development and the struggle for a communist society?*

Marx knew about as much as it was possible for someone to know about what was transpiring in Paris streets that spring given his distance and the veritable wall of censorship—“a



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domination.*



Chinese wall of lies” in his terms—mounted by the Versailles to prevent accurate information from reaching French people in the countryside and foreigners alike. He looked at the Commune and was astonished to see for the first time in his life a living example of unscripted non-capitalist life in the flesh—the inverse of dailiness lived under state domination. For the very first time he saw people actually behaving as if they were the owners of their lives and not wage slaves.

In *Communal Luxury* I chart the profound changes the Commune’s existence brought to Marx’s thinking, and, more importantly, to his path: the new attention he paid in the decade following the Commune to peasant questions, to the world outside Europe, to pre-capitalist societies, and to the possibility of multiple routes to socialism. Seeing for the first time what non-alienated labor actually looked like had the paradoxical effect of strengthening Marx’s theory and causing a break with the very concept of theory.

But it must be said that I am less concerned with relating the Commune to the intellectual trajectories of Marx or some of the other well-known fellow travelers I discuss in the book, than I am in weaving together the thought, practices, and trajectories of contemporaries like Kropotkin, Marx, Reclus and Morris, shoemaker Gaillard and other lesser known figures into the relational web the event produced—a kind of “globalization from below.”

The socialist imaginary in the immediate wake of the Commune was fueled not only by the recent insurrection, but by elements that include medieval Iceland, the communist potential of ancient rural peasant communes in Russia and elsewhere, the beginnings of something called anarchist communism,

and a profound rethinking of solidarity from what we would call today an ecological perspective.

*You note how the Commune was really a shared project that “melted divergences between left factions.” Likewise, you yourself have little patience for sectarian squabbles that overemphasize the split between Marx and Bakunin, or between communism and anarchism, in the wake of the insurrection. What was it about the Commune that allowed these various tendencies to find common cause, and what—if anything—should the left take from this experience today?*

Life is too short for sectarianism. It is not that sectarianism didn’t exist under the Commune and in its wake. In fact, the left in the years immediately after the Commune is usually seen to be fiercely riven by the quarrel between Marx and Bakunin—a quarrel between Marxists and anarchists that is said to be responsible for the end of the First International, and a quarrel that is often tiresomely rehearsed today between those who believe economic exploitation is the root of all evil and those who believe that it’s political oppression.

What I chose to do in my book was to push Marx and Bakunin, those two old graybeards whose quarrel has been for so long all any of us could see or hear from that era, off the stage or at least to the sidelines for the moment in order to see what else there was to be seen. And what I discovered was a whole host of very interesting people who were neither slavishly loyal to Marxism nor to anarchism, but who made adroit use of both sets of ideas. This seems to me to resemble very closely the way militants today go about their political lives, perhaps because some of the



*What I discovered was a whole host of very interesting people who were neither slavishly loyal to Marxism nor to anarchism, but who made adroit use of both sets of ideas.*

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most sectarian types from both sides have left the scene.

Even so, my book has had its share of sectarian attack—for insufficient towing of the Marxist line and of the anarchist line, in about equal numbers!

*Many contemporary movements seem to harken back to the spirit of the commune in their own struggles. Do you believe we are experiencing a revival of the communal imaginary in our times? How would you account for the return of occupation-based political strategies and this renewed interest in the politics of urban space?*

I think there is clearly a revival of the communal imaginary today, but I don't agree with you that it is centered in the politics of urban space. The city today all too often presents young people with three choices: no work, badly paid

work, or meaningless work. Many have chosen to move to the countryside to lead lives that interweave struggle and social cooperation. When I think about the various struggles today, particularly in France which is the context I know best, they are often in rural areas, and are concerned with defending a way of life deemed “archaic” under capitalist modernization. Occupiers seek to create a form of regional self-sufficiency that does not entail retreating into a self-enclosed world, or eddying in isolated pools of self-referentiality.

This is a desire that emerged very strongly, by the way, in the period following the Commune, and I discuss at some length the many interesting debates on this subject that took place in the Jura mountains in Switzerland between refugees and their supporters all too aware of the dangers of isolation. From what I know of the current communal occupations of territories and terrains, occupiers and *Zadistes* claim a certain lineage not

only with the Paris Commune but with more recent struggles like the Larzac in the 1970s and important figures from that era like Bernard Lambert. It was Lambert, after all, who stood upon the Larzac plateau in 1973 and proclaimed to the thousands of people who had traveled there from all over France and beyond to support local farmers in their fight against being expelled from their land by the French Army, that “Never again will peasants be on the side of Versailles.”

When Lambert in his classic text, *Les Paysans dans la lutte des classes*, situated urban workers and peasants in the same place vis-à-vis capitalist modernity, he was mobilizing exactly the same rhetorical strategy that one of the main characters in my book, Communard

Elisée Reclus, does in his 1899 pamphlet, “A mon frère, le paysan.” And it’s the identical strategy underlying an even earlier pamphlet addressed to (but never received by) French in the countryside by besieged Communards in April 1871, “Au Travailleur des campagnes.” To quote Lambert: “Paysans, travailleurs, même combat.”

Today, the existence of ZADs—*zones à défendre*, or “zones to be defended”—and communes like Notre-Dame-des-Landes in France or No TAV outside of Turin, settlements that occupy spaces given over by the state to large infrastructural projects judged to be useless and imposed, mark the emergence of something like a distinctly alternative and combative rural life. This is a rural

life opposed to agribusiness, to the destruction of farmland, to the privatization of water and other resources, and to the construction by the state of infrastructural projects on a Pharaonic scale. We see here a real defiance with regard to the state. And at the same time the rural world is being defended as a space whose physical as well as cultural realities oppose the homogenizing logic

of capital. By refusing to move they are placing themselves at the center of combat.

The current remobilization of the commune-form, as I understand it, seeks in part to block the ongoing creation of a territorial network of privileged financial metropolitan centers whose development comes at a price: the destruction of the links that tie those centers to their immediate outskirts and

surroundings. It is those outskirts, rural or semi-rural in nature, that are then destined to decline in a kind of prolonged desertification, as finance capital sucks more and more personnel and resources into the work of transporting at higher and higher speed, and on a larger and larger scale, communication, goods and services between the designated loci of wealth.

Militants today often see themselves as fighting a distinctly new and neoliberal reality, but I don’t think it matters much whether we view neoliberalism as a distinctly novel phase of capitalism or not—the capitalist world they oppose was already substantially analyzed by Henri Lefebvre in his *Production of Space*, a book that came

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***The current remobilization of the commune-form seeks in part to block the ongoing creation of a territorial network of privileged financial metropolitan centers.***

out, I believe, in the early 1970s. There he showed how the increasing “planification” of space under capitalism was a movement in three parts: homogeneity, fragmentation and hierarchy.

The production of homogeneity is guaranteed by the unification of a global system with centers or points of metropolitan strength that dominate peripheral weaker points. Simultaneously, though, space becomes fragmented the better to be instrumentalized and appropriated: it comes to be divided up like graph paper into autonomous, Taylorized parcels with distinct localized functions. And an increasingly conscious and treacherous strategy divides all the rural and suburban zones, the satellites made up of small and medium cities, the banlieues and the bleak spaces left behind by the decomposition of agrarian life—all these semi-colonies to the metropolis—into more or less favored zones with most, of course, being destined for controlled, closely supervised, often precipitous decline.


Such contemporary struggles and occupations are, like the Paris Commune—of necessity—locally based. They are bound to a particular space and as such demand a specific political choice. They share all the concerns and aspirations that are place-specific in kind. But they are not localist or localizing in their aims. Communards, we should recall, were fiercely anti-state and largely indifferent to the nation. Under the Commune Paris wanted to be an autonomous unit in an international federation of communes. In this regard the Commune anticipated in act all kinds of possibilities such that even the projects it could not undertake and that remain at the level of a wish or an intention, like the federating project, retain a profound meaning. Site-specific struggles like Nôtre-Dame-des-Landes and No TAV are much better placed today to achieve the kind of international federation that Paris under the Commune had no time to achieve.



KRISTIN ROSS



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ROJAVA REVOLUTION

# Building Democracy

**WITHOUT THE STATE**

***THE ROJAVA REVOLUTION  
PROVIDES A HISTORIC OPPORTUNITY  
TO PUT THE COMMUNALIST MODEL  
OF DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM  
INTO PRACTICE.***

Dilar Dirik





# anarchy

“**W**hen people first came to our house a few years ago to ask if our family would like to participate in the communes, I threw stones at them to keep them away,” laughs Bushra, a young woman from Tirbespiye, Rojava. The mother of two belongs to an ultra-conservative religious sect. Before, she had never been allowed to leave her home and used to cover her entire body except her eyes.

“Now I actively shape my own community,” she says with a proud and radiant smile. “People come to me to seek help in solving social issues. But at the time, if you had asked me, I wouldn’t even have known what ‘council’ meant or what people do in assemblies.”

Today, around the world, people resort to alternative forms of autonomous organization to give their existence meaning again, to reflect human creativity’s desire to express itself as freedom. These collectives, communes, cooperatives and grassroots movements can be characterized as the people’s self-defense mechanisms against the encroachment of capitalism, patriarchy and the state.

At the same time, many indigenous peoples, cultures and communities that faced exclusion and marginalization have protected their communalist ways of living until this day. It is striking that communities that protected their existence against the evolving world order around them are often described in negative terms, as “lacking” something—notably, a state. The positivist and deterministic tendencies that dominate today’s historiography render such communities unusual,

uncivilized, backward. Statehood is assumed to be an inevitable consequence of civilization and modernity; a natural step in history's linear progress.

There are undoubtedly some genealogical and ontological differences between, for lack of a better word, "modern" revolutionary communes, and natural, organic communities. The former are developing primarily among radical circles in capitalist societies as uprisings against the dominant system, while the latter pose a threat to the hegemonic powers by nature of their very survival. But still, we cannot say that these organic communes are non-political, as opposed to the metropolitan communes with their intentional, goal-oriented politics.

Centuries, perhaps millennia of resistance against the capitalist world order are in fact very radical acts of defiance. For such communities, relatively untouched by global currents due to their characteristic features, natural geography or active resistance, communal politics is simply a natural part of the world. That is why many people in Rojava, for instance, the de facto autonomous Kurdish region in northern Syria where a radical social transformation is currently underway, refer to their revolution as "a return to our nature" or "the regaining of our social ethics." Throughout history, the Kurds suffered all sorts of denial, oppression, destruction, genocide and assimilation. They were excluded from the statist order on two fronts: not only were they denied their own state, they were simultaneously excluded from the mechanisms of the state structures around them. Yet the experience of statelessness also helped protect many societal ethics and values, as well as a sense of community—especially in the rural and mountainous villages far from the cities.

To this day, Alevi-Kurdish villages in particular are characterized by processes of common solution-finding and reconciliation rituals for social disputes based on ethics and forgiveness to the benefit of the community. But while this form of life is quite prevalent in Kurdistan, there is also a conscious new effort to establish a political system centered around communal values—the system of Democratic Confederalism, built through democratic autonomy with the commune at its heart.

## DEMOCRATIC CONFEDERALISM IN ROJAVA

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The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), like many national liberation movements, initially thought that the creation of an independent state would be the solution to violence and oppression. However, with the changing world after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the movement began to develop a fundamental self-criticism as well as a criticism of the dominant socialist politics of the time, which was still very much focused on seizing state power. Towards the end of the 1990s the PKK, under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan, began to articulate an alternative to the nation state and state socialism.

Upon studying the history of Kurdistan and the Middle East, as well as the nature of power, the current economic system and ecological issues, Öcalan came to the conclusion that the reason for humanity's "freedom problem" was not statelessness but the emergence of the state. In an attempt to subvert the domination of the system that institutionalized itself across the globe over the span of 5,000 years as a synthesis of pa-

triarchy, capitalism and the nation state, this alternative paradigm is based on the very opposite—women’s liberation, ecology and grassroots democracy.

Democratic Confederation is a social, political, and economic model of self-administration of different peoples, pioneered by women and the youth. It attempts to practically express the people’s will by viewing democracy as a method rather than an aim alone. It is democracy without the state.

While it proposes new normative structures to establish a conscious political system, Democratic Confederation also draws upon millennia-old forms of social organization that are still in existence across communities in Kurdistan and beyond. This model may seem far-fetched to our contemporary imagination, but it actually resonates well with the strong

desire for emancipation among the different peoples in the region. Although the system has been implemented in Bakur (North Kurdistan) for years, within the limits of Turkish state repression, it was in Rojava (West Kurdistan) that a historic opportunity emerged to put Democratic Confederation into practice.

The system places “democratic autonomy” at its heart: people organize themselves directly in the form of communes and create councils. In Rojava, this process is facilitated by Tev-Dem, the Movement for a Demo-

cratic Society. The commune is made up of a consciously self-organized neighborhood and constitutes the most essential and radical aspect of the democratic practice. It has committees working on different issues like peace and justice, economy, safety, education, women, youth and social services.

The communes send elected delegates to the councils. Village councils send delegates to the towns, town councils send delegates to the cities, and so on. Each of the communes

is autonomous, but they are linked to one another through a confederal structure for the purposes of coordination and the safeguarding of common principles. Only when issues cannot be resolved at the base, or when issues transcend the concerns of the lower-level councils, they are delegated to the next level. The “higher” instances are accountable to the “lower” levels

and report on their actions and decisions.

While the communes are the areas for problem solving and organizing everyday life, the councils create action plans and policies for cohesion and coordination. At the start of the revolution and in the newly liberated areas, assemblies had to erect people’s councils first and only later began to develop the more decentralized grassroots organizational structures in the form of communes.

The communes work towards a “moral-political” society made up of conscious in-

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dividuals who understand how to resolve social issues and who take care of everyday self-governance as a common responsibility, rather than submitting to bureaucratic elites. All of this relies on the voluntary and free participation of the people, as opposed to coercion and the rule of law.

It is of course difficult to raise society's consciousness in a short span of time, especially where war conditions, embargoes, internalized mentalities and ancient despotic structures have been deeply institutionalized and can lead to power abuses and apolitical mindsets. An alternative education system, organized through academies, aims to promote a healthy social mentality, while self-organization practically reproduces a conscious society by mobilizing it in all spheres of life.

The women and youth organize autonomously and embody the social dynamics that are naturally inclined towards more democracy and less hierarchy. They position themselves "to the left" of the democratic autonomy model and formulate new forms of knowledge production and reproduction.

Today, the Kurdish freedom movement splits power equally between one woman and one man, from Qandil to Qamishlo to Paris. The idea behind the co-chair principle is both symbolic and practical—it decentralizes power and promotes consensus finding while symbolizing the harmony between women and men. Only women have the right to elect the female co-chair while the male co-chair is elected by everyone. Women organize their own, stronger, more ideologically conscious structures towards a women's confederation, starting with autonomous women's communes.





PHOTO BY KURDISHSTRUGGLE VIA FLICKR

## THE PRINCIPLE OF THE DEMOCRATIC NATION

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Another important principle articulated by Öcalan is the “democratic nation”. Unlike the nation state’s monist doctrine, which justifies itself through a chauvinistic myth, this concept envisions a society based on a common social contract and fundamental ethical principles such as gender equality. Thus, all individuals and groups, ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, intellectual identities and tendencies can express themselves freely and add diversity to this expansive, ethics-based nation in order to secure its democratization. The more diverse the nation, the stronger its democracy. The different groups and sections are also in charge of democratizing themselves from within.

In Rojava, Kurds, Arabs, Syriac Christians, Armenians, Turkmen and Chechens try to create a new life together. The same logic underlies the project of the People’s Democratic Party, or HDP, across the border in Turkey. The HDP united all communities of Mesopotamia and Anatolia under the umbrella of “free togetherness” in the democratic nation. Among its MPs it counts Kurds, Turks, Armenians, Arabs, Assyrians, Muslims, Alevis, Christians and Yazidis—a greater diversity than any other party in the Turkish Parliament. Contrasted with the monopolism of the nation-state ideology, the concept of the democratic nation serves as an ideological self-defense mechanism of diverse peoples.

Although many different communities actively participate in the Rojava revolution, long-standing resentments prevail. Entire tribal confederations of Arabs unilaterally expressed their support for the administration, but in some parts, Arabs remain suspicious.

Secret service documents reveal that already in the early 1960s, Syria's Baath party made highly sophisticated plans to pitch different communities against one another, especially in Cizire. On top of the pre-existing tensions, external forces additionally fuel and instrumentalize conflict between different communities to further their own agendas. The establishment of unity between the different ethnic and religious groups of Syria, and in the Middle East more generally, would make it more difficult to divide and rule the region.

One Arab member of the Rojava administration explained why this democratic model counts on so little support from the established as well as newly formed political groups in the region and beyond:

“*The democratic autonomy system in our three cantons shakes and upsets the whole world because the capitalist system does not want freedom and democracy for the Middle East, despite all its pretensions. That is why everyone attacks Rojava. The different forms of state exemplified by the Syrian Arab Republic under Assad and the Islamic State are two sides of the same coin as they deny and destroy the diversity mosaic of our region. But more and more Arabs from the rest of Syria come to Rojava to learn about democratic autonomy because they see a perspective for freedom here.*

## AN ALTERNATIVE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL VISION

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The effective system of self-organization, combined to some extent with the embargo, which necessitated self-reliance and thereby fueled creativity, spared Rojava from economic corruption through internal capitalist mindsets or external exploitation. Yet in order to defend revolutionary values beyond the war, a calibrated economic vision is needed for a socially just, ecological, feminist economy that can sustain an impoverished, traumatized and brutalized population.

How to engage wealthy people, who do not care for cooperatives, and avoid being charged with authoritarianism? How to arrange emancipatory and liberationist principles in the urgency of war and a survival economy? How to decentralize the economy while securing justice and revolutionary cohesion? For the people in Rojava, the answer lies in education.

“What does ecology mean to you?” a woman at the Ishtar women's academy in Rimelan asks her peers in a room decorated with photos of women like Sakine Cansiz and Rosa Luxemburg. An older woman with traditional

tattoos on her hands and face responds: “To me, being a mother means to be ecological. To live in harmony with the community and nature. Mothers know best how to maintain and organize this harmony.” Perhaps it is the ecological question that most clearly illustrates Rojava’s dilemma of having great principles and intentions and the willingness to sacrifice, while often lacking the conditions to implement these ideals. For obvious reasons, survival often has priority over environmentalism.

For the moment, at least, it is possible to speak of a transitional dual system in which the democratic self-administration of Rojava lays out revolutionary and ecological principles, carefully maneuvering them in war and real politics, while the grassroots movement organizes the population from below. At the cantonal level, especially with regards to foreign policy-related issues, centralist or at least non-revolutionary practices are to some extent inevitable, especially because Rojava is politically and economically between a rock and a hard place. It is the democratic autonomy system arising from the base that people generally refer to when they speak of the “Rojava revolution”.

The decentralizing dynamics of the grassroots organization, most notably in the communes, even serve as an internal opposition to the cantons and facilitate the democratization of the latter, which, due to their complicated political geography—further limited by non-revolutionary parties and groups within—can tend towards a concentration of power (though the cantons, as they currently are, are still far more decentralized and democratic than ordinary states).

Far more important than the exact mechanisms through which the popular will is expressed, is the meaning and impact of democratic autonomy on the people themselves. If I were to describe “radical democracy”, I would think especially of the working class people, the sometimes illiterate women in neighborhoods who decided to organize themselves in communes and who now make politics come to life. Children’s laughter and games, cackling chicken, scooting plastic chairs compose the melody for the stage in which decisions on electricity hours and neighborhood disputes are made. One should also note that the structures function better in rural areas and small neighborhoods than in big and complex cities, where more effort is needed to engage people. Here, power belongs to people who never had anything and who now write their own history.

“Do you want to see our vegetables?” Qadifa, an older Yazidi woman asks me in a center of Yekitiya Star, the women’s movement. She appears to have little interest in explaining the new system, but she is keen to show its fruits instead. We continue our conversation on the transformations of everyday life in Rojava while eating the delicious tomatoes of a women’s cooperative in the backyard.

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*Self-determination in  
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Self-determination in Rojava is being lived in the here and now, in everyday practice. Thousands of women like Qadifa, women previously completely marginalized, invisible and voiceless, now assume leadership positions

and shape society. Today, in the mornings, they can for the first time harvest their own tomatoes from the land that was colonized by the state for decades, while acting as judges in people’s courts in the afternoon.

Many families dedicate themselves fully to the revolution now; especially those who lost loved ones. Many family homes slowly start to function like the people's houses ("*mala ge*") that coordinate the population's needs: people walk into each other's houses with their children to criticize or discuss or suggest ideas on how to improve their new lives. Dinner table topics have changed. Social issues literally become social, by becoming everyone's responsibility. Every member of the community becomes a leader.

The slow transition of social decision-making from assigned buildings to the areas of everyday life is a fruit of the efforts to build a new moral-political society. For people from advanced capitalist countries this direct way of being in charge of one's life can seem scary sometimes, especially when important things like justice, education and security are now in the hands of people like oneself, rather than being surrendered to anonymous state apparatuses.

## THE COMMUNE'S LEGACY OF RESISTANCE

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One night I am sitting near Tell Mozan, once home to Urkesh, the 6,000-year-old ancient capital of the Hurrians. Nearby is the border between Syria and Turkey, less than a century old. While drinking tea with Meryem, a female commander of Kobane, we watch the lights of the town of Mardin in North Kurdistan, on the other side of the border.

"We fight on behalf of the community, the oppressed, of all women, for the unwritten pages of history," she says. Meryem is one of the many women who met Abdullah Öcalan in her youth, when he arrived in Rojava back

in the 1980s. Like thousands of women, in a quest for justice beyond her own life, one day she decided to become a freedom fighter in this region that is at the same time home to thousands of honor killings and thousands of goddesses, worshiped in all shapes and sizes.

What attracted anti-systemic movements around the world to the historic resistance in Kobane were perhaps the many ways in which the town's defense mirrored a millennia-old current of human struggle; the ways in which it carried universal traits that resonated with collective imaginaries of a different world. Many comparisons were made with the Paris Commune, the Battle of Stalingrad, the Spanish Civil War, and other almost mythical instances of popular resistance.

In the *ziggurats* of Sumer, massive temple complexes in ancient Mesopotamia, many hierarchical mechanisms began to be institutionalized for the first time: patriarchy, the state, slavery, the standing army and private property—the beginning of the formalized class society. This era brought about a far-reaching social rupture characterized by the loss of women's social status and the rise of the dominant male, especially the male priest, who seized the monopoly on knowledge. But this is also where *amargi*, the first word for the concept of freedom, literally "the return to mother", emerged around 2,300 B.C.

Öcalan proposes the idea of two civilizations: he claims that towards the end of the Neolithic Age with the rise of hierarchical structures in ancient Sumer a civilization developed based on hierarchy, violence, subjugation and monopolism—the "mainstream" or "dominant civilization". By contrast, what he calls "democratic civilization" represents the historic struggles of the marginalized, the oppressed, the poor and the excluded,



especially women. Democratic Confederalism is therefore a political product and manifestation of this age-old democratic civilization.

*The revolutionary commune is a historical heritage, a source of collective memory for the forces of democracy around the globe, and a conscious mechanism of self-defense against the state system.*

The democratic autonomy model it has given rise to, in turn, is not only a promising perspective for a peaceful and just solution to the traumatic conflicts of the region; in many ways, the emergence of the Rojava revolution illustrates how democratic autonomy may actually be the only way to survive. In this sense, the revolutionary commune is a historical heritage, a source of collective memory for the forces of democracy around the globe, and a conscious mechanism of self-defense against the state system. It carries a millennia-old legacy and manifests itself in novel ways today.

What unites historic moments of human resistance and the desire for another world, from the first freedom fighters of history to the Paris Commune to the uprising of the Zapatistas on to the freedom squares in Rojava, is the unbreakable power to dare to imagine. It is the courage to believe that oppression is not fate. It is the expression of humanity's ancient desire to set itself free.

*Bijî komunên me! Vive la commune! ★*

DILAR DIRIK



*Dilar Dirik is a Kurdish activist and a PhD candidate in the Sociology Department of the University of Cambridge. Her work examines the role of the women's struggle in articulating and building freedom in Kurdistan. She regularly writes on the Kurdish freedom movement for several international media.*



A HOMEMADE POLITICS

# Decolonizing the Commune

Richard Pithouse

## **AB AHLALI BASEM JONDOLO IN SOUTH AFRICA HAS SOUGHT TO STRUCTURE ITSELF AS A CONFEDERATION OF SELF-MANAGED AND DEMOCRATICALLY ORGANIZED COMMUNITIES IN STRUGGLE.**

**A**bahlali baseMjondolo is a movement largely based in shantytowns built on land occupations in and around the South African city of Durban. Since 2005 it has sought to build popular counter-power through the construction of self-managed and democratically organized communities engaged in a collective struggle.

While the movement has not used the term “commune”, it has, on occasion, been described by left theorists as seeking to constitute itself as a set of linked communes. This assessment has been based on the movement’s organizational form. But this struggle, while often strikingly similar to Raúl Zibechi’s account of territories in resistance in Latin America, is very different from how Marx and Bakunin imagined the struggles of the future in their reflections on the Paris Commune. It is primarily framed in terms of dignity, fundamentally grounded in the bonds within families and between neighbors, and often largely waged by women from and for bits of land in the interstices of the city.

If Abahlali baseMjondolo (the term means “residents of the shacks”) is to be productively connected to the idea of the commune in terms of a set of political commitments, it would require—as George Ciccariello-Maher has argued with regard to Venezuela—a detachment

of the concept from “a narrow sectarianism” with the intention to “craft a communism on local conditions that looks critically, in parallax, back at the European tradition.”

### **THE LAND OCCUPATION**

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In Durban, as in much of the world, one starting point for this work is that the passage from the rural to the urban seldom takes the form of passage, via expropriation, from the commons to the factory, from the life of a peasant to the life of a proletarian. And for many people born into working-class families long resident in the city, work—as their parents and grandparents knew it—is no longer available. When urban life is wageless, or when access to the wage occurs outside of the official rules governing the wage relation, the land occupation can enable popular access to land outside of the state and capital. And land, even a sliver of land on a steep hill, between two roads, along a river bank, or adjacent to a dump, can, along with the mud, fire and men with guns that come with shack life, enable spatial proximity to possibilities for livelihood, education, health care, recreation and so on.

Across South Africa, urban land has become a key site of popular contestation with the state

and the liberal property regime. In Durban the steep terrain also enables opportunities for new occupations within the zones of privilege, nodes of spatially concentrated, racialized power. But, again as in much of the world, dissident elites have often been skeptical about the political capacities of the urban poor. The worker or peasant has often been imagined as the subject of a “proper” politics, a politics to come in which industrial production or rural land would be the key site of struggle.

Abahlali baseMjondolo has, affirming what it has called “a politics of the poor”, disobeyed the various custodians of a “proper politics”, affirmed the value of an “out of order” politics and

taken the situation, the strivings and the struggles of its members seriously. It has affirmed the city as a site of struggle and impoverished people seeking to occupy, hold and develop land in the city as subjects of struggle. It has constructed a political imagination in which the neighborhood is seen as the primary site for both organization, through direct face-to-face deliberation and democratic decision-making, and the broader practices that sustain resilience.

A conception of political identity rooted in residence in a land occupation, whether established or new, has enabled the affirmation of a form of politics that exceeds the central categories through which impoverished people are more usually divided. This includes an eth-

nic conception of belonging that, in Durban, has increasingly been asserted by the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC), as well as a national conception of belonging, undergirded by a paranoid and vicious xenophobia, asserted by the ruling party, the state and much of wider society.

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The movement has been able to successfully resist these forms of division and has consistently taken a multi-ethnic form. People more ordinarily described as foreigners rather than comrades have often held important leadership positions, while the movement has been able to occupy and hold land and to sustain impressive popular support. But there

are significant limits to its reach, it has been subject to serious repression, and it has not been able to sustain the political autonomy of its larger occupations over the long-term.

## A HOMEMADE POLITICS

Abahlali baseMjondolo was formed in 2005 in a group of nearby shack settlements, all on well-established land occupations, some reaching back to the 1980s or even the late 1970s. The people who formed the movement drew on a rich repertoire of political experience that included participation in the ANC, trade unions and the popular struggles of the 1980s. There were also familial connections reaching back to key moments in the history of popular struggle

like the Durban strikes in 1973, the Mpondo Revolt in 1961, resistance to evictions in Durban in 1959 and the Bambatha Rebellion in 1906.

The movement was also shaped by practices and ideas developed in African-initiated churches and adapted from rural life. From the beginning ideas about a pre-colonial world in which personhood was respected and understood to be attained in relation to others were significant. But elements of the new liberal order, like rights-based conceptions of gender equality, as well as political traditions that claim descent from Marx, were also present. These were largely derived from trade unions and the alliance between the South African Communist Party and the ANC.

This new politics was often described as a “homemade politics” and as a “living politics”. The idea of a “homemade politics” carried some sense of bricolage, a general feature of life in a shack settlement, and both of these phrases marked a commitment to a mode of politics that emerges from everyday life, is fully within reach of the oppressed, and is fully owned by the oppressed.

The settlements where the movement was formed had all been dominated by the ANC. At the time the ANC, as Idea, was still entwined with the nation and the struggle that had brought it into being. As a result the break from the authority of the party, which resulted in autonomous elected structures being set up in each affiliated settlement, was often understood as a challenge to local party structures, rather than a rejection of the party altogether.

It was frequently assumed that the fundamental problem was that impoverished people living in shack settlements had somehow been forgotten in the new order. It was often thought that if they, like the industrial working class, could

develop an organizational form to successfully assert themselves as a particular category of people, with a particular set of interests—as the poor—the sympathetic attention of leading figures in the party, and elsewhere in society, could be won, and that recognition and inclusion could be attained.

But there was, from the beginning, also an evident commitment to attain inclusion in a manner that altered the nature of the system in various respects. One was with regard to how decisions are made. Reflecting on that moment, S’bu Zikode, a participant in the early discussions, recalls: “There was a realization, at the onset, that it was a mistake to give away our power.” There was a clear resolve that the right of people to fully participate in all decision-making relating to themselves and their communities, a right understood to have been expropriated by colonialism, needed to be restored.

The implication of this is that there was a commitment to dispersing power and to changing the nature of the relationship between the state and society. Another commitment that was present at the outset was a rejection of the commodification of land. Again this was often framed in terms of restoration.

## AN AUTONOMOUS POLITICS

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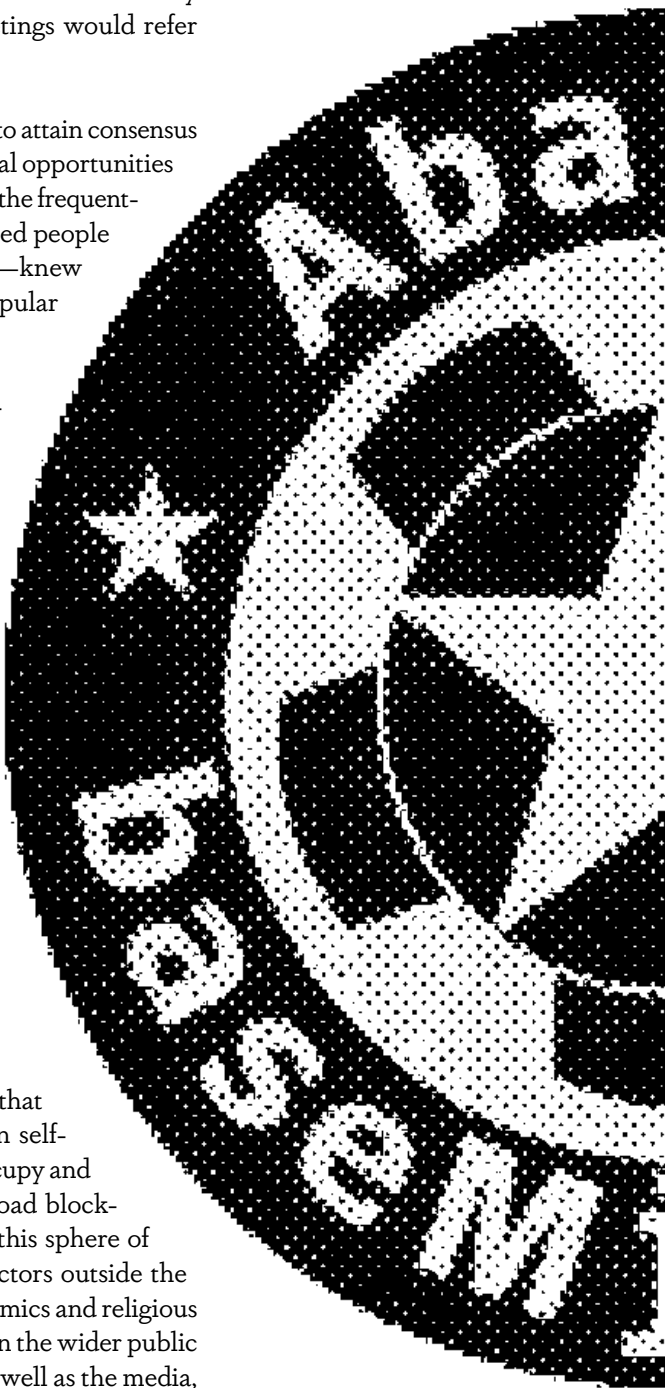
The political form of the movement was constituted around elected structures in each settlement affiliated to an elected central structure. Meetings were required to be open to all and held in the settlements at set times. They took the form of inclusive and slow deliberative processes that continued until consensus was attained. It was a politics consistently constituted around an open and face-to-face democracy. The role of elected leaders was understood to

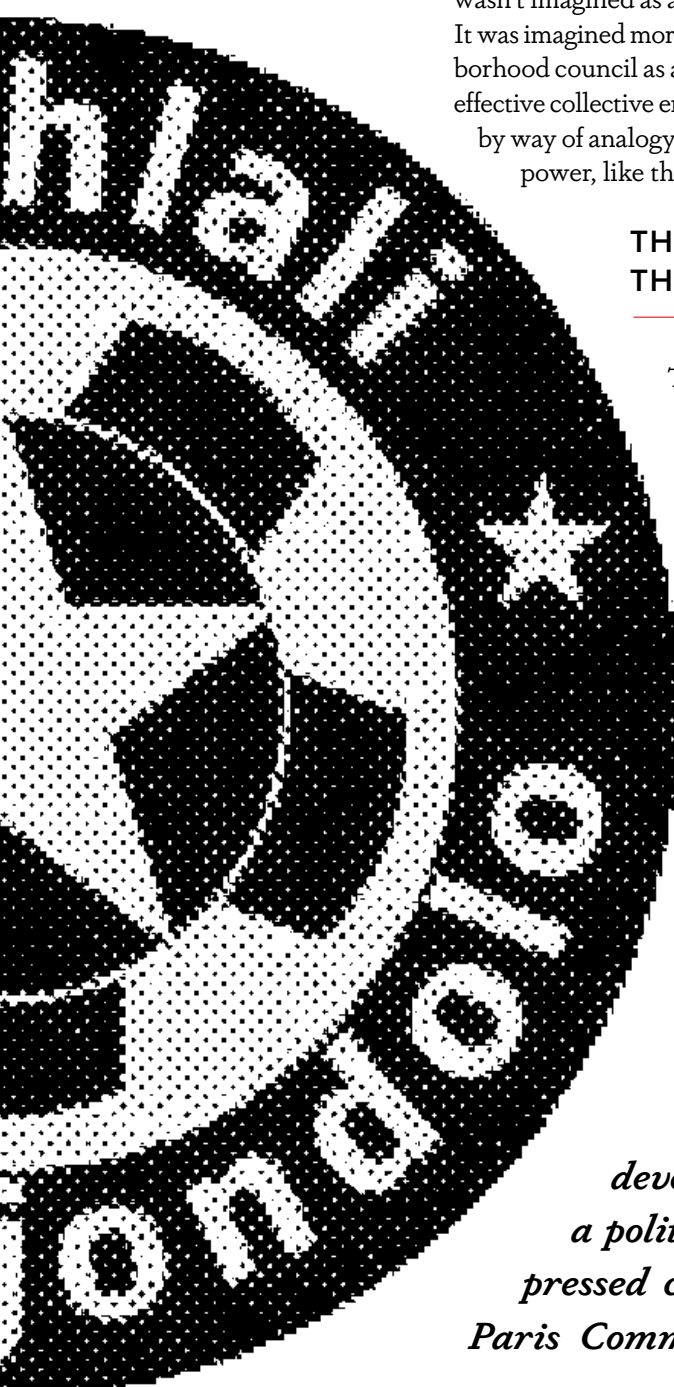
be to facilitate this kind of decision-making and to adhere to it. There were also frequent assemblies, often attended by hundreds of people, and the smaller meetings would refer important decisions to these assemblies.

The slow politics that results from the need to attain consensus before acting sometimes meant that political opportunities were missed. But because people—wary of the frequently crass instrumentalization of impoverished people by parties, the state and later NGOs too—knew that they fully owned this movement, popular support was sustained.

The early decision to refuse any participation in party politics or elections was vital to sustaining unity, and deflecting constant allegations of external conspiracy. For some people it was purely a tactical measure while for others it was a point of principle. But a clear distinction was drawn between “party politics” and “people’s politics”. For Zikode, “we realized that to be in a political party was to be confined, as in a coffin.” Despite extraordinary inducements and pressures the movement sustained its autonomy from political parties and, later on, NGOs. In both cases the response from constituted authority was to resort to colonial tropes and present the movement as criminals under the control of malicious external white authority.

While the movement always understood that its original and fundamental power lay in self-organized communities, the capacity to occupy and hold land and the use of disruption via road blockades, it was never solely concerned with this sphere of action. Alliances were also sought with actors outside the settlements, like journalists, lawyers, academics and religious leaders. There were regular interventions in the wider public sphere, via lawful forms of mass protest as well as the media, and an often very effective use of the courts to, in particular, take contestation over land off the terrain of violence.





Autonomy was taken seriously within the movement, but it wasn't imagined as an exodus from sites of constituted power. It was imagined more like Antonio Gramsci's idea of the neighborhood council as a political commitment that would enable effective collective engagement on other terrains. People spoke, by way of analogy, of occupying space in sites of constituted power, like the media or the university.

## THE LONG SHADOW OF THE STATE

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The organizational form developed by Abahlali baseMjondolo enabled a political space in which the oppressed, albeit it in this case self-identified as the poor rather than the working class, could, as Marx said of the Paris Commune, work out their own emancipation. Although this process has, at points, had to grapple with internal difficulties and frustrations—such as new entrants bringing in contradictory projects, families seeking to turn the risk and commitment of a child or sibling into a reward, or distortions consequent to repression—it has often been undertaken with a strong sense of collective excitement.

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*The organizational form developed by Abahlali enabled a political space in which the oppressed could, as Marx said of the Paris Commune, work out their own emancipation.*



BY ANDREA DIENER VIA FLICKR

But any affirmation of the commune as a political strategy rather than a description of an organizational form has to take careful account of the fact that, since 1871 and continuing with more recent experiences in, say, Oaxaca and Oakland, the declaration of a commune has seldom resulted in a sustainable political project. States rarely tolerate the emergence of even modest instances of dual power. In Durban the intersection of the ruling party, which employs technocratic, Stalinist and ethnic language to legitimate the centralization of authority, has used two primary strategies to regain control over territories in which a degree of political autonomy has been asserted.

One of these strategies is the simple exercise of violence—whether carried out by the police, private security, local party structures or assassins. Violence has been a constant presence during a decade of struggle. But there have been two periods of particularly intense repression that have both, in different ways, had a profound impact on the movement.

The first was the expulsion of the movement's leading members from the Kennedy Road settlement in 2009, via the destruction of their homes by armed men acting under the direction of local party structures, and with the support of the police. This was a process that continued for some months. The second was two assassinations, and a police murder, in the Marikana Land Occupation, in 2013, followed by another assassination in KwaNdengezi in 2014. Both periods of intense repression placed some people under severe stress resulting in anxiety and paranoia, as well as familial pressure, and resulted in real strains in the movement. In 2014, in an act of desperation when it seemed that murder





*Any affirmation of the commune as a political strategy has to take careful account of the fact that the declaration of a commune has seldom resulted in a sustainable political project.*

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was being carried out with impunity, a collective decision was taken to make a tactical vote against the ANC, with a view to raising the costs of repression for the ruling party, while remaining independent from any party political affiliation.

The second primary strategy of containment, frequently related to the exercise of violence, is the often very effective attempt to make independent development on occupied land very difficult while mediating access to state development through local party structures. For as long as the state has the capacity to demolish homes, an investment in building a brick and mortar house is not rational. Shacks, particularly

in acutely contested land occupations, are often designed to be cheap, perhaps built from pallets salvaged from a warehouse. They are sometimes designed to be able to be collapsed when the demolition squad comes and rebuilt when they have left.

When the state concedes the legitimacy of a land occupation and offers a housing development there will be significant opportunities for accumulation via local party structures, often enmeshed with local criminal networks, and access to the housing will be allocated through party structures. These two factors combine to make it almost impossible to benefit from development while being outside the party.

In a context in which the party machinery offers the only viable route out of impoverishment for many people, responsibilities to family can begin to conflict with responsibilities to neighbors and comrades. This can result in a situation where some members of the movement go over to these structures. It can also result in a situation in which party structures return, from outside, at gunpoint.

For these reasons it is very difficult to sustain the political autonomy of a territory once the state has conceded its legitimacy and brought it into the ambit of its development program. Material success—winning land and housing—becomes political defeat. This has meant that while Abahlali baseMjondolo has endured, and grown, during a decade of struggle in which the movement has always remained vibrant, the sites where the struggle is waged with most intensity have been dynamic.

## A MOMENT OF POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY

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If the political form of the commune is understood as the self-management of a spatially delimited community under popular democratic authority, then—although the term commune has not been used within the movement—it could certainly be argued that Abahlali baseMjondolo has been and, despite the trauma of serious repression, remains committed to the construction of a set of linked communes.

However, if the commune is understood as a form of politics with explicit commitments to the radical traditions developed in nineteenth century Europe, then things are more complex. Although the move-

ment's politics has evolved over the years it has always been committed to some principles that had a productive resonance with standard European conceptions of socialism and communism. This is true with regard to what, using Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar's terms, can be described as both its interior emancipatory horizon and the practical scope of its day-to-day actions.

But dignity has consistently been a far more central concept than socialism. The practical scope of the movement's work has overwhelmingly focused on the sphere of social reproduction rather than the sphere of industrial production.

In 2005 many people had thought that, via a powerful movement, they would secure land and housing, on their own terms, in a couple of years. Now there is a strong sense of the ANC as an outrightly oppressive force that is understood to have betrayed the national struggle by entering into a self-serving set of alliances to sustain the enduringly colonial structure of society. The horizon of struggle is much longer, and often more modest. Progress is understood to be a matter of resilience and resolve over the long haul, with most gains taking an incremental form.

But with a widening split within the ANC, and trade unions and organized students breaking from the ANC, there are new prospects for building alliances and solidarities outside of the ANC—alliances that could potentially enable a greater political reach on the part of what Abahlali baseMjondolo have termed, with reference to the self-organization of the oppressed, "the strong poor". The splits in the ruling party have already offered some respite to the movement and, in one neighborhood, a tac-

tical local alliance with Communist Party structures has helped to secure the—previously unimaginable—arrest of two ANC councilors for the assassination of an Abahlali baseMjondolo leader.

*The horizon of struggle today is much longer, and often more modest, with progress understood to be a matter of resilience and resolve over the long haul, with most gains taking an incremental form.*

If the idea of the commune has a future here it will have to be appropriated by the oppressed and rethought from within their actually existing strivings and struggles. This would have to include the work of making sense of a moment of political opportunity as the collapse of the moral authority of the ANC spreads from the shantytowns, to the mines, factories, parliament and university campuses. ★

RICHARD PITHOUSE



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COMMUNES IN HISTORY

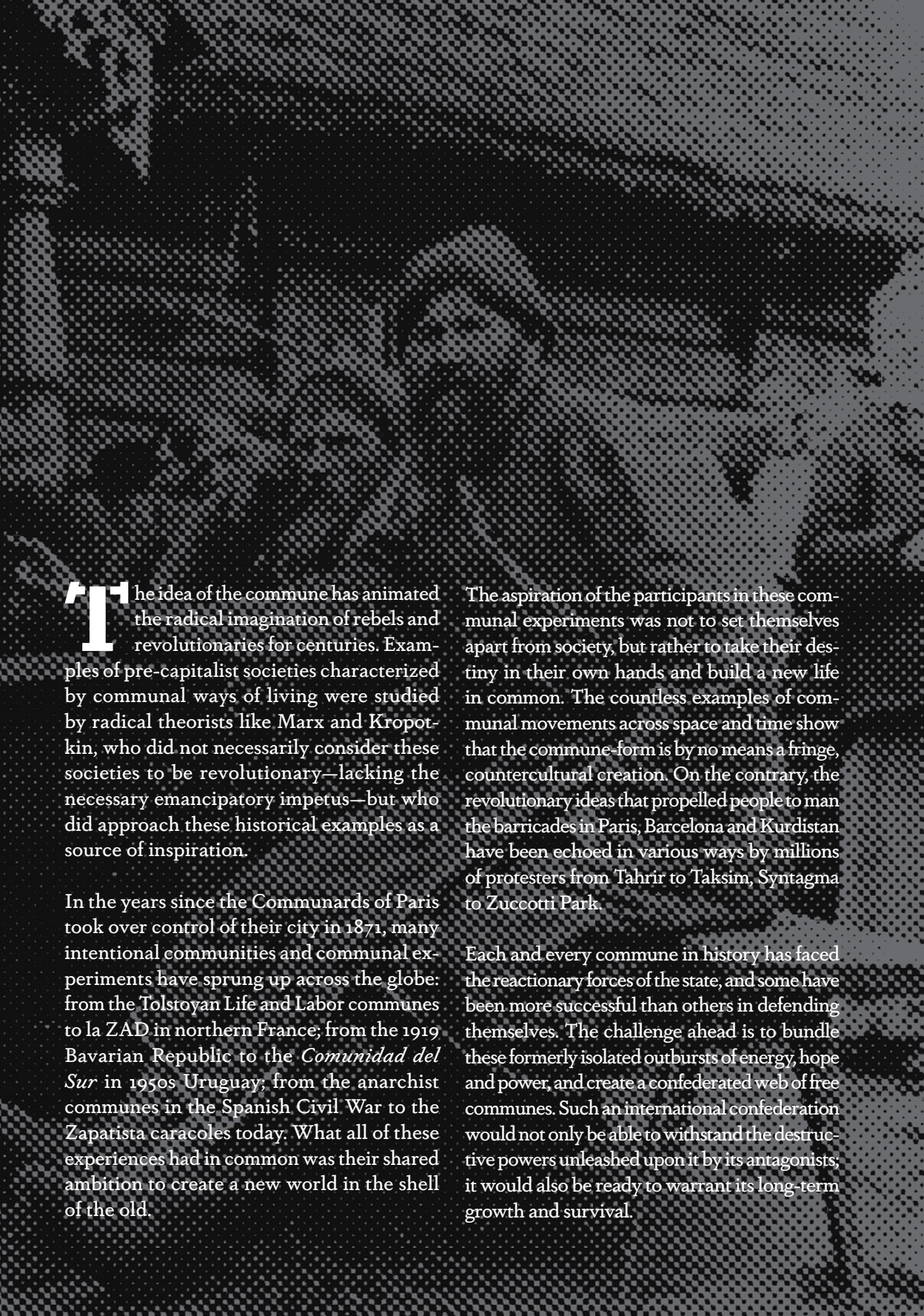
**FOR CENTURIES, COMMUNES AND COMMUNAL FORMS OF LIVING HAVE INSPIRED PEOPLE TO ORGANIZE THEMSELVES AS A REVOLUTIONARY COUNTER-POWER TO THE CENTRALIZED STATE.**

# Pirates, Peasants and Proletarians

ALL PHOTOS FROM WIKIMEDIA COMMONS



*Joris Leverink is an Istanbul-based political analyst, freelance writer and activist. He is an editor for ROAR Magazine, and a regular contributor on Turkish and Kurdish affairs for a range of international media.*



**T**he idea of the commune has animated the radical imagination of rebels and revolutionaries for centuries. Examples of pre-capitalist societies characterized by communal ways of living were studied by radical theorists like Marx and Kropotkin, who did not necessarily consider these societies to be revolutionary—lacking the necessary emancipatory impetus—but who did approach these historical examples as a source of inspiration.

In the years since the Communards of Paris took over control of their city in 1871, many intentional communities and communal experiments have sprung up across the globe: from the Tolstoyan Life and Labor communes to la ZAD in northern France; from the 1919 Bavarian Republic to the *Comunidad del Sur* in 1950s Uruguay; from the anarchist communes in the Spanish Civil War to the Zapatista caracoles today. What all of these experiences had in common was their shared ambition to create a new world in the shell of the old.

The aspiration of the participants in these communal experiments was not to set themselves apart from society, but rather to take their destiny in their own hands and build a new life in common. The countless examples of communal movements across space and time show that the commune-form is by no means a fringe, countercultural creation. On the contrary, the revolutionary ideas that propelled people to man the barricades in Paris, Barcelona and Kurdistan have been echoed in various ways by millions of protesters from Tahrir to Taksim, Syntagma to Zuccotti Park.

Each and every commune in history has faced the reactionary forces of the state, and some have been more successful than others in defending themselves. The challenge ahead is to bundle these formerly isolated outbursts of energy, hope and power, and create a confederated web of free communes. Such an international confederation would not only be able to withstand the destructive powers unleashed upon it by its antagonists; it would also be ready to warrant its long-term growth and survival.

# Indigenous and Maroon Communes



*In olden times, when a king sent his vogt to a village, the peasants received him with flowers in one hand and arms in the other, and asked him which law he intended to apply: the one he found in the village, or the one he brought with him?*

PETER KROPOTKIN

## RUSSIAN PEASANT COMMUNES

In his final years, Karl Marx dedicated himself in part to the study of Russian peasant communes, the *obshchina*, in whose practice of common land ownership he recognized a “starting point for a communist development”. In the Russian countryside, the common land was divided among the different households of a village community. This centuries-old tradition came to an end with the state-driven collectivization of land under Stalin in the 1930s.

For anarchist thinkers like Kropotkin and Bakunin the *obshchina* were an important source of inspiration too. In *Mutual Aid*, Kropotkin reflects positively on the advantages of community organization at the local level as opposed to centralized state authority.

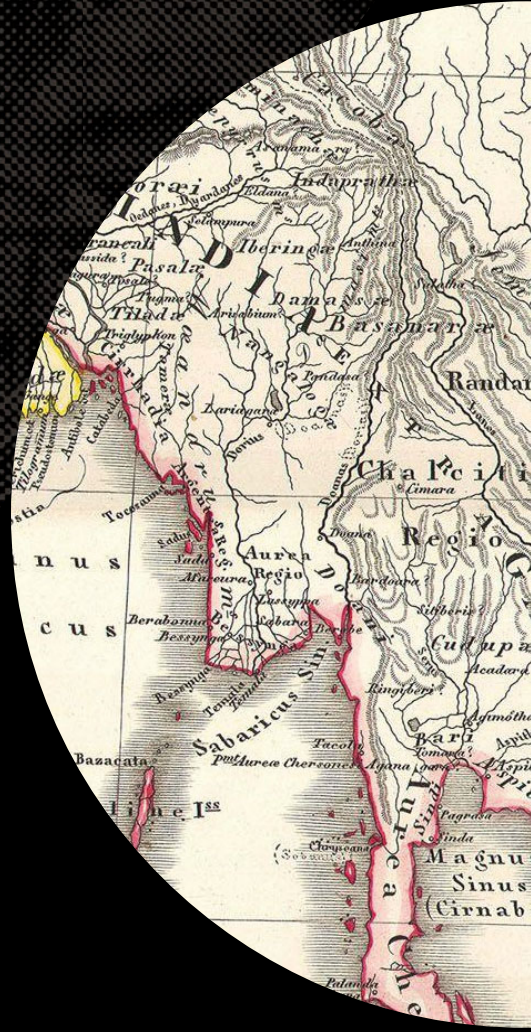


## MAROON COMMUNITIES

Along with the introduction of chattel slavery to the Western hemisphere by European colonists, a new phenomenon was born: Maroon communities. After escaping from the plantations, many former African slaves started organizing themselves in autonomous communities in the inaccessible interior of Caribbean islands and coastal colonies.

Their political organization was often modeled on traditional African societies, with land held in common by kinship groups and communal meetings functioning as popular assemblies. An entirely new culture of resistance, formed out of the eclectic mix of the different ethnic and religious backgrounds of its individual members, developed as part of the collective struggle for freedom.

To this day, many Maroon communities—like the ones in Jamaica and Suriname—remain to a large degree autonomous from the centralized governments of the contemporary states of which they have since become a part, and they carry on the traditions of self governance their ancestors have fought for for hundreds of years.



## ZOMIA

The highlands of Zomia, a series of interconnected mountainous regions that stretch from Vietnam to India, are considered by some to constitute “one of the largest remaining non-state spaces in the world.” The communal form of social organization of the peoples inhabiting these regions was famously studied by the American anthropologist and political scientist James C. Scott. He argues that, contrary to the general perception, the Hill Peoples were not the “primitive” ancestors of the more “civilized” communities living in the valleys, but rather were “runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys.”

PETER GELDERLOOS

*The communal economic life of the five nations played an important role in their ability to live in peace; a metaphor often used for the federation was bringing everyone to live together in the same longhouse and eat from the same bowl.*





## IROQUOIS LEAGUE

In the mid-12th century, a handful of indigenous nations in the American northwest entered into a confederation that has since become known as the “Iroquois League”. The Haudenosaunee society, or “People of the Longhouse”, was characterized by a federative structure, with councils being the key decision-making organ at the longhouse, village, national and league levels. In the 17th century Francois le Mercier, a French Jesuit, described how deputies from each nation would hold a general assembly every year “to make their complaints and receive the necessary satisfaction in mutual gifts.”

Men and women were considered equal, and there was a clear division of labor based on gender that allowed for a fluctuating balance of power depending on the issue at hand. Each level of society would have both women’s and men’s councils, and even though men would make the decisions at the “national level” regarding issues of war and peace, the women still held a veto power. The confederacy preserved the peace between the different Native American nations for many centuries.

## TRADITIONAL AFRICAN SOCIETIES

Many traditional African societies were founded on a form of communalism. Some of the most important features of African communalism are the absence of classes and exploitative social relations; equality at the level of distribution of social produce; and strong family and kinship ties as the basis of social life.

In the words of Sam Mbah and I.E. Igariwey: “Under communalism, by virtue of being a member of a family or community, every African was (is) assured of sufficient land to meet his or her own needs.” Disputes were often settled by conciliation and mutual compromise, whereas decisions in many traditional societies were often made through consensus.

The political organization in many traditional societies was horizontal in nature, with the leadership centered around elders who often shared the work with the rest of the community. Leadership was seldom imposed, coerced or centralized, but rather formed in response to the needs of the community, having the interest of the group as an indivisible unit at heart.



# Communal Revolts in Old Europe

1378

## REVOLT OF THE CIOMPI IN FLORENCE



“*Strip all of us naked, you will see that we are alike; dress us in their clothes and them in ours, and without a doubt, we shall appear noble and they ignoble, for only poverty and riches make us unequal.*”

In his reflections on the Ciompi revolt in late 14th century Florence, Machiavelli attributed these words to an anonymous leader of the popular uprising. He considered the revolt an exemplary struggle between two groups of people, where one party—the wool carders, or *ciompi*—fought for freedom, while the other—the patrician oligarchy—was determined to abolish it.

After rising up to their social superiors, the unrepresented textile workers of Florence managed to establish a revolutionary commune that governed the city for a month between July and August, in what historians recognize as one of the first workers' revolts in European history.



1520-'21

## REVOLT OF THE COMUNEROS

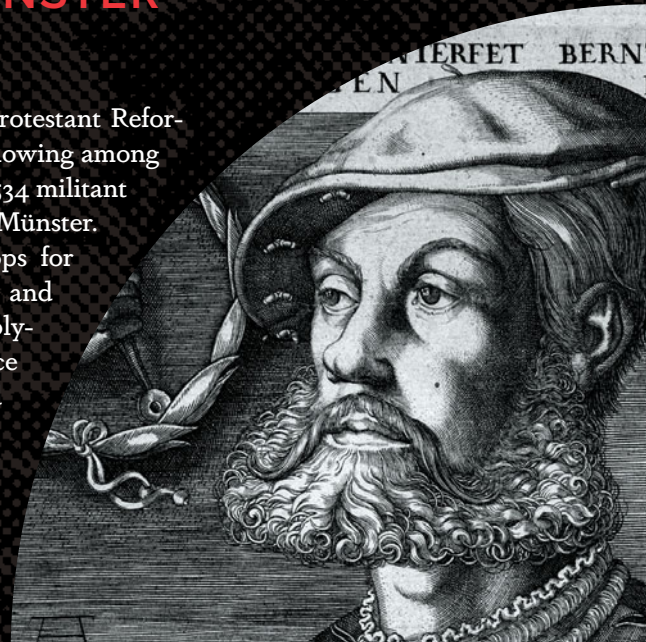
In February 1520, the unpopular Holy Roman Emperor Charles V left Spain for Germany, leaving the country in the hands of a Dutch bishop. Soon, anti-government riots broke out in Toledo; local *Comuneros* expelled the mayor and declared the city an independent community. Cities like Valladolid, Tordesillas followed suit, where city councils known as *Comunidades* ousted local rulers and seized power in a similar fashion.

Over the course of one year the rebellion expanded horizontally. Its anti-feudal character and the promotion of ideas of freedom and democracy appealed not only to the urban populations, but also to the peasantry. The latter sided with the *Comuneros* in an attempt to break the power of the rural nobility. The inclusion of the peasantry turned the rebellion into a mass uprising that can be seen as one of the first modern revolutions.

1534-'35

## ANABAPTIST COMMUNE OF MÜNSTER

As a radical sect that emerged out of the Protestant Reformation, the Anabaptists attracted a large following among oppressed peasants and the urban poor. In 1534 militant Anabaptists took control over the town of Münster. While under siege from the Bishop's troops for months, they abolished private property and canceled all debts. The introduction of polygamy, the Anabaptists' religious intolerance and an emerging leadership cult centered around the self-declared "King of Münster" all played their part in the eventual defeat of the commune.



“*England is not a free people, till the poor that have no land have a free allowance to dig and labour the commons.*”

GERRARD WINSTANLEY, 1649

1649-'52

## THE DIGGERS

In April 1649 a dozen Protestant men settled on common land in St George's Hill, Surrey, south of London. They called themselves “Diggers”, or “True Levellers”, and they were moved by a radical belief in the possibility to create an egalitarian, classless society.

One of the movement's founders, Gerrard Winstanley, brought together a group of commoners and soldiers who collectively decided to occupy common land to stave off starvation and promote their revolutionary political agenda. From the Digger's perspective there was no compromise on how to organize society: man would either live in total freedom or under tyranny.



Despite a protracted violent campaign by local landowners and the clergy, the rural commune continued to grow and successfully resisted eviction by the army for over a year. The Diggers' belief that there could be no political freedom without economic freedom would be echoed in the demands of the French *Communards* more than 200 years later.



# Pirate Communes



*The organization of the pirate ship in the early 18th century was an experiment in radical, anarchistic forms of democratic organizing which were explicitly opposed to the systems of authority on conventional sailing vessels.*

**CHRIS LAND**

In the 17th and 18th centuries there were few groups that placed themselves so explicitly outside of polite society as the pirate and buccaneer communities that could be found from the Caribbean all the way to the east African coast. Long before the French Revolution and its values of freedom, equality and brotherhood captured the collective imagination in Europe, many pirate communities—both on shore and on the ships—were already structured along radically democratic lines.

Pirate ships have been described as “floating democracies” and were characterized by highly egalitarian forms of social organization. Pirate codes such as the one established by the Brethren of the Coast—a collective of buccaneers based in Tortuga, off the coast of Haiti—often stressed the equality of all signatories and were formulated and agreed upon through collective and egalitarian processes.



## LIBERTALIA

Possibly the most famous pirate colony was Libertalia, reportedly founded in northern Madagascar in the late 17th century. It began when Captain Misson and the crew of his French warship were converted to a form of atheist communism by a renegade Dominican priest called Caraccioli. The wealth of the ship was collectivized and the party embarked on a career of piracy. Slaves were freed from conquered slave ships and welcomed to the collective. In the Bay of Antongil, blessed with fertile soil, the pirates founded their independent colony, renouncing their previous nationalities and calling themselves “Liberi” instead. According to legend, Libertalia continued to exist for approximately 25 years, continuing to take in freed slaves and other pirates.

*The vast Difference betwixt Man and Man, the one wallowing in Luxury, and the other in the most pinching Necessity, was owing only to Avarice and Ambition on the one Hand, and a pusillanimous Subjection on the other.*

**CARACCIOLI**

Some controversy remains over whether Libertalia is anything more than a popular myth—the only source is Captain Charles Johnson’s book, *A General History of the Pyrates*, published in 1728. Although the existence of Libertalia was never proven, individual aspects of the story were almost certainly true. In the words of historian Marcus Rediker: “In a deeper historical and political sense Misson and Libertalia were not simply fictions ... Libertalia was a fictive expression of living traditions, practices and dreams of an Atlantic working class, many of which were observed, synthesized and translated into discourse by [Johnson].”



# Communalist Colonies

In March 1890 the Italian anarchist Giovanni Rossi arrived in Palmeiras, Paraná, in Brazil where he founded the Cecilia Colony. Since his early youth, Rossi had been fascinated by utopian socialism and communitarian ideas. At the age of 22 he published the novel *Un Comune Socialista* (1878), in which he laid out his theory on the organization of anarchist communities.



1890 - '95

## CECILIA COLONY

Earlier, in 1887, Rossi was invited by a left-leaning local landowner to found the agricultural cooperative Cittadella between Milan and Bologna. Although the cooperative thrived economically, the peasants who made up the cooperative had little interest in anarcho-communist thought, which led Rossi to abandon the project in 1889.

The Cecilia Colony was founded by just half a dozen men, but grew to about 250 members in less than a year's time. Around 80 acres of land were cultivated collectively, and several workshops were set up. The intention was also to found a school based on libertarian pedagogical principles, but it opened only irregularly.

Rossi's intention was to create a community without hierarchical forms of organization, bureaucracy or coercive discipline. After five years, the commune succumbed to pressure from neighboring hostile communities and the antagonism of the local administration.



## SOCIALIST COLONIES IN THE US AND UK

Around the turn of the 19th century a number of so-called “colonies” were founded in the US and UK. Some of these colonies lasted for only a few years, but others were more successful.

In 1895 followers of the anarchist thinker Peter Kropotkin established the first explicitly anarcho-communist community in the UK: the **Clousden Hill Free Communist and Cooperative Colony**. For seven years the small cooperative worked the land, aiming to put its ideas of personal improvement, mutual aid, and intensive agriculture combined with industry into practice.

**The Home Colony** was founded in 1896 in the state of Washington, in the far northwest of the US. It was an intentional community based on anarchist philosophy where over the course of its 23 years in existence hundreds of anarchists, communists, feminists and freethinkers found a home.

**The Whiteway Colony** is a particularly notable example of an autonomous community that has withstood the test of time: founded by Tolstoyans in 1898 it continues to exist to this day. It has since lost the explicitly anarchist outlook that characterized the colony in its early days, but a number of communal facilities continue to be held in common and the community is still governed by a general meeting of its residents.

From 1914 to 1939 the **New Llano Colony** was a cooperative community founded on 20,000 acres of land in west central Louisiana by socialist organizer Job Harriman. More than its ideology, it was the practice of social cooperation that attracted large numbers of new members. Poor leadership and social and cultural shortcomings eventually led to its demise.



# 20<sup>th</sup> Century Mass Movements

1918 - '21

When a significant part of the Ukraine was liberated by the anarchist Makhnovists in 1918, the region soon came to be ruled by confederation of worker unions, farmer committees, and neighborhood and soldier councils.

*The majority of the laboring population saw the organizing of agricultural communes as the healthy beginning of a new social life.*



NESTOR  
MAKHNO

## FREE TERRITORIES

Protection for the libertarian communes that sprung up both in the countryside and in the cities was provided by Nestor Makhno's Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army—anarchist militias characterized by a direct democratic form of organization. The Free Territories were under constant attack from four different armies: Russian Bolsheviks and monarchists, Ukrainian nationalists and German imperialists.

Despite the continuous threat of war, serious efforts were made to set up agrarian communes, or “free worker-peasant soviets”, in the liberated territories. Property that had formerly belonged to large landowners was redistributed, and control over the land was seized by members of the communes. The Makhnovists were eventually defeated after their betrayal by the Bolsheviks, who saw the anarchists as a fundamental threat to their power.



1929 – '31

## SHINMIN AUTONOMOUS REGION



After General Franco's coup, republican and revolutionary forces united across Spain to resist the spread of fascism. State power collapsed in many rural areas where in response thousands of agrarian collectives were formed under the auspices of the CNT-FAI, the confederation of anarcho-syndicalist unions. These collectives were organized on the principles of libertarian communism and mutualism, and were governed by village assemblies and councils of ordinary citizens. In many places money was abolished and production levels went up significantly.

One of the lesser known communalist projects in history is that of the avowedly anarchist Korean People's Association in Manchuria. At a time when Korea was under attack from both Japanese colonialists and Soviet imperialists, revolutionary forces declared an autonomous region that was home to around two million people.

One of the leaders of the movement was the anarchist general Kim Jwa-Jin, who oversaw the construction of independent communes linked together in a confederal system. In the three years before the revolutionary project succumbed to ongoing outside attacks, its hundreds of interconnected rural collectives were governed by councils at the municipal, district and regional levels.

General Kim Jwa-Jin was assassinated in January 1930 while repairing a rice mill that was built to increase the farmers' independence from outside merchants. His revolutionary project would outlive him only by 1,5 years.

1936 – '39

## REVOLUTIONARY SPAIN

“*The Lacandon Commune is not a regime, but a practice ... a laboratory of new social relations [that] recovers old aspirations of the movements for self-emancipation. ...*

*Their existence isn't the expression of a moral nostalgia, but the living expression of a new politics.* **LUIS HERNÁNDEZ**

## ZAPATISTA CARACOLES

The Zapatista Army of National Liberation, or EZLN, rose up against the Mexican state on January 1, 1994. Before long the army of the Zapatistas was caught up in fierce battles with the federal army and paramilitary groups that eventually led to the liberation and creation of autonomous zones, municipalities and communities in Chiapas. Across the region, different ethnic groups together occupy the same *zonas* and *caracoles*, where decisions are taken at the community level by local assemblies.

1994 -

# Communes in History

## NEAPOLITAN REPUBLIC

A fiercely anti-authoritarian popular uprising led by the Neapolitan fisherman Masaniello saw tax records burned, prisons opened, and power seized by the urban proletariat.

1647

1837

## SEMINOLE NATION

A multicultural nation and military alliance of escaped slaves and Native American Seminoles in Florida fought off the US army, European invaders and slave catchers.





## PARIS COMMUNE

For 71 days the Communards and the popular militia of the National Guard took over control of Paris, installed a proletarian government and erected numerous barricades to keep out France's regular army.

## BUDAPEST COMMUNE

Betrayed by the Bolsheviks, the Revolutionary Council in Budapest, instigated by socialists, anarchists and syndicalists, was crushed soon after its initiation.

## COMUNIDAD DEL SUR

Starting as a printing press for anarchist literature in Uruguay's capital, it has since grown into a ecological commune with two dozen members.

1871

1917

1919 1927

1950

1979

## BAVARIAN COUNCIL REPUBLIC

For one month the Free State of Bavaria in southern Germany was declared a workers' council republic.

## SHANGHAI COMMUNE

The worker uprising in Shanghai was inspired by the Paris Commune. Armed worker militias rose up against local warlords and installed a direct democratic people's government.

## MARINALEDA

Over the course of 35 years, the people of Marinaleda—led by their charismatic mayor Juan Manuel Sánchez Gordillo—have transformed an impoverished agricultural town into a contemporary rural commune.



WOMEN AT THE BARRICADES

An illustration in a painterly style with a warm, orange-toned background. It depicts four women in red and white striped clothing interacting with a large stack of vintage computer monitors. One woman stands at the top, holding a red star-shaped object. Another woman is seated on the left, looking at a monitor. A third woman is seated on the right, wearing a red face mask. In the foreground, a fourth woman, also wearing a red face mask, looks directly at the viewer. The overall composition suggests a theme of digital activism or community organizing.

# Self-Reproduction and the Oaxaca Comunne

Barucha Peller

## **THE OAXACA UPRISING OF 2006 TEACHES US THAT ANY SERIOUS ANTI-CAPITALIST MOVEMENT MUST ENGAGE DIRECTLY WITH THE GENDERED LOGIC OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION.**

**I**n 2006 a popular mass uprising swept the southern state of Oaxaca, Mexico, galvanizing hundreds of thousands of participants around the region and removing state power from the capital city and dozens of other municipalities. For nearly six months, there were no police in Oaxaca City, and at one point the cityscape was transformed by up to 3,000 barricades.

After years of repressive, authoritarian rule at the hands of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and Governor Ulises Ruiz, the uprising was triggered by a violent eviction of a teachers' encampment in a central plaza during an annual strike of the Section 22 union on June 14. Thousands of Oaxacans poured into the streets to take back the square from police, and a spontaneous insurrection grew in which state authorities were physically removed and squares, government buildings, media outlets and city buses were taken over by protesters.

The movement formed a horizontal, central organizing body, the Popular Assembly of the People of Oaxaca (APPO), which demanded the ousting of Ulises Ruiz. For seven months one of the poorest states in Mexico attempted to reorganize society without state governance or capitalist social institutions. When broadcasts from occupied radio stations began to sign off with the slogan "Transmitting from the Oaxaca Commune," comparisons made to the historic Paris Commune were met with the response:

"The Paris Commune lasted 70 days. We have lasted more than 100!"

The Oaxaca Commune ended on November 25, 2006 after the movement lost the battle for the streets to a violent and brutal siege by federal police and government-backed paramilitaries. By the end of the uprising, hundreds of people had been arrested and dozens were disappeared or assassinated.

### **EVERYDAY LIFE AT THE BARRICADES**

The formation of the Commune cannot be separated from the social organization of its everyday activity. The Oaxaca Commune was formulated not out of the means of the uprising—the barricades, the occupations—but out of the social relations formed by organizing everyday life to reproduce such means. Rather than being atomized into the home, the reproduction of everyday life was reorganized to disavow the capitalist logic of a gendered social division of labor and to give way to communal resourcing, belonging and life as a terrain of struggle.

While the APPO provided a formal alternative to state governance as a political body, the incredible longevity of the Oaxaca uprising and the takeover of the capital by the movement meant that questions of everyday life and the informal economy became key sites of

contestation and a project of the political imagination in their own right. During the uprising the women's movement directly raised some of these questions and also demonstrated that a conscious confrontation with the social division of labor is necessary to build a commune that actually challenges state power through the de-commodification of common resources and the de-privatization of domestic and reproductive labor.

A central contradiction in the Oaxaca Commune, as we will see, was therefore based around the social, political and strategic questions that arose when men attempted to uphold the gendered division of labor and force women back into the home.

The barricades that made up the cityscape of the Oaxaca Commune were not only sites of physical defense against military attacks, but were also home to a myriad of reproductive activities in which historically feminized labor became the basis for transformed social relations. The barricades were places where the people of Oaxaca slept, cooked and shared food, had sex, shared news, and came together at the end of the day. Resources such as food, water, gasoline and medical supplies were re-appropriated and redistributed, and in the same way, reproductive labor was re-appropriated from the specialized sphere of the home and became the underscoring way to reimagine social life and collective bonds.

Rather than returning home at night and turning on the television, Oaxacans would return to the barricades and listen to transmissions from occupied radio stations together before turning in for the night on makeshift beds of cardboard and blankets. At all hours of the day, coffee was carried out of homes or businesses and was brewed over fires at the barricade and passed around. Romantic messages and "shout-outs" were sent between participants on different barricades via the occupied radio.

Everyday events at the barricades, from distributing food from a Doritos truck that had been re-appropriated after being stopped on the highway to holding educational workshops, recreated a community infrastructure that is usually naturalized as women's labor in the home and in neighborhoods. People belonged to the Commune simply because they took part in this reproduction of daily life—from cooking at the barricades, carrying coffee to the barricades from homes or businesses, carrying news between barricades, to making molotovs at barricades, stacking rocks or simply sharing stories.

Maintaining the barricades through maintaining day-to-day life on the barricades excavated the "home" and the work women do in the home as a buried site of isolated, unrecognized labor to reformulate such activities as public and collective relationships of struggle. The social organization of reproductive labor on the

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*A central contradiction in the Oaxaca Commune was based around the questions that arose when men attempted to uphold the gendered division of labor and force women back into the home.*”



barricades began to erode the capitalist, gendered division of labor in which reproductive labor creates value or labor capacity elsewhere for capitalist extraction. The collectivization and generalization of reproductive activities allowed the movement to become increasingly “self-reproducing” and as such increasingly threatening to the social order.

Self-reproduction, or the movement’s ability to directly reproduce itself in day-to-day terms without the mediation of a gendered division of labor or an invisibilized labor force of women doing all the tasks necessary to maintain life so that the movement could persist, meant that the Oaxaca uprising reproduced itself as Commune. Self-reproduction forged a collective subjectivity out of the barricades as a shared experience of everyday life.

When people began to identify themselves as *barricadistas*, and then by specific barricades (“I am from la Barricada de Cinco Changos”, or “I am from la Barricada de Sonora”), there was a clear shift in subjective identification away from roles assigned by waged labor (“I am a doctor” or “I am a student”) or other subjectivities organized by capitalism. In these ways, the Commune forged subjects that identified not by the commodification of their labor but by the collectivization of everyday relationships and the means of self-reproduction at the barricades.

## THE WOMEN’S TELEVISION OCCUPATION

The flashpoint of the Oaxaca Commune, and what was understood as the emergence of a women’s movement, was the bold takeover of the state television and radio station, Canal Nueve, by thousands of women on August 1, 2006. Enraged at the media for spreading lies about the movement, an all-women’s march

called the *cazerola* (pots and pans) converged on the doors of the station and demanded 15 minutes of airtime. When they were denied, women forced their way into the station and spontaneously took it over. The women quickly taught themselves how to use the station’s equipment and began statewide television and radio broadcasts.

Although by August the APPO had been broadcasting from two radio stations in the capital city, the horizon of possibilities for the movement broadened beyond what anyone had imagined when the highpowered transmissions of the state television and radio stations were in the hands of the women of the Oaxaca uprising. Collectivizing communication and creating media as a communal form was a necessary part of reclaiming everyday life in terms of what these women called its “truths”. Many women who took over the station referred repeatedly to presenting the “truth” as a motivation for taking over the station and, as one woman aptly put it, “to present a little bit of so much truth that exists.”

This “so much truth” that the women sought to unveil on the radio and television station was a description of the economic and social conditions experienced by the communities most vulnerable to the socially destructive effects of neoliberal structural adjustment and the racist and repressive hegemony of the PRI. The privatization of public resources not only has deep neo-colonial effects on indigenous groups, which make up 70 percent of the population of Oaxaca state, but capitalist enclosures of resources and services such as education, healthcare and basic community infrastructure burdened women particularly, as such issues tend to be heavily “feminized” and mystified as “women’s work”.

The women’s broadcasts thus brought together indigenous groups, the urban poor and house-



PHOTO BY THE AUTHOR

wives to analyze these everyday realities across the state and to galvanize people to participate in the uprising. The ability of the “masses” to communicate *en masse* revealed not only a collective suffering but a collective will to continue *en la lucha*. The Commune may not have known itself as such were it not for the images and voices of so many others and the collective truths that were transmitted from the occupied station.

## GENDERED CONTRADICTIONS

The tension over upholding the gendered, social division of labor became a central limit to the Oaxaca Commune realizing a collective identity in struggle. This contradiction arose in the Canal Nueve occupation and persisted on the barricades. When women fought to take control of social reproduction at the barricades and on the *plantones* (the occupied squares) by refusing to limit their contributions to the movement to the private sphere, domestic violence and threats as well as men’s refusal to collectivize work in the home undermined the entire structure of Commune and women’s ability to remain in the streets. As Ita, a participant in the Canal Nueve takeover explained:

“ There were comrades who complained that since August 1 (the takeover of Canal Nueve), my woman doesn’t serve me. There were many women who suffered domestic violence for being at the occupations and marches, sometimes their husbands even attempted to divorce or separate. The husbands didn’t take well to the idea of women abandoning the housework to participate politically. They didn’t help in the sense of doing the housework, such as taking care of kids or washing clothes, so that the women could continue being at the station.



*The horizon of possibilities for the movement broadened beyond what anyone had imagined when the highpowered transmissions of the state television and radio stations were in the hands of the women of the Oaxaca uprising.*



The number of women circulating at the Canal Nueve occupation dwindled little by little as women had no other choice but to return home and take care of children or perform other domestic labor. On August 21, after three weeks of the Canal Nueve occupation, paramilitaries took advantage of the low numbers and shot up the network transmitters, rendering them useless. And yet the women were relentless: they came into the streets again the next day and led movement participants to take over and occupy ten different radio stations, four of which remained in the hands of the Commune for an extended period.

While housework required many women to return home, women on the whole did not solemnly submit to patriarchal violence and threats. One woman continued to defend a

barricade after her husband broke her arm to prevent her from going to the streets. As Eva, a housewife, noted: “Nobody came to take us out of our houses saying, ‘go to the struggle’. On the contrary, they said: ‘stop leaving the house, calm down’—they repressed us. But we dared.”

So conscious were women of the gendered contradictions that were sure to arise due to their participation in the uprising that they hung a banner in the occupied television studio that appeared on screen during the first broadcasts reading: “When a woman moves forward, not one man is left behind.” In this respect, women tried to appeal to a sense of class belonging, suggesting that the women’s movement was an advancement for the class as a whole. Nevertheless, the tension over women’s participation in the movement was never

resolved for the greater strategic or political project of the Commune. As Eva put it simply: “we kept fighting on two different fronts—against the system, and with the men inside our own movement.”

Reproductive labor was at once a limit to women’s participation as well as a galvanizing force for women’s autonomy and collective organizing. The power of communication and sociability in identifying and forging collective struggles did not only occur in the occupied media broadcasts but also in the informal discus-

sions between women in the Canal Nueve occupation. When for the first times in their lives women had a space autonomous from men, they found that the authoritarian regime of the state and the economy extended into their experience of the social division of labor and everyday life in the home and with family. As Ita put it: “The beautiful thing that happened there was that at night all of us women began to talk about our life stories, and that’s where we got more rage to continue in this struggle—not just to topple the government, but to organize as women to confront what the majority of us are living.”

Being part of the Commune therefore did not mean that women universalized their political participation alongside everyone else, but that they understood their participation as specified by their struggle against the social division of labor and capitalism’s commodification of reproductive labor inside the home. The ten-

sion over upholding the social division of labor meant that for women fighting the government and fighting over reproductive labor became one and the same struggle.

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*“Nobody came to take us out of our houses saying, ‘go to the struggle’. On the contrary, they said: ‘stop leaving the house, calm down’—they repressed us. But we dared.”*

Revolutionizing everyday life by taking back spaces and resources from their commodified and privatized forms was a central tenet of the Oaxaca Commune. It underpinned the way in which the movement evolved from its central demand to remove the governor to an articulation of how his policies had upheld capitalism’s encroachment

on every sphere of public life. But it was the women’s articulation of exploitation in the home that truly called for a reorganization of everyday life outside of the logic of capitalism.

## INFORMAL PROCESSES OF COLLECTIVIZATION

Just as reproductive and unwaged labor is often informal, the informal social relations and the daily gestures of solidarity and mutual aid within the Commune constituted a political imaginary beyond—and at times without—the formal representations of the movement, the APPO.

In analyzing the Oaxaca uprising, the left has mostly centralized the APPO in its attempts to describe and account for the incredible seven months of insurrection against capitalism and the state. But this focus on purely formal or-

ganizing structures of the movement mimics in a sense the capitalist division of labor, in which value is only produced in a formal sphere, overlooking the social aspects of organizing that occurred beside public political demands and organizations. While the APPO was described as a movement of movements, and the political demands issued from the APPO—mainly the removal of the governing party—encompassed a collective political will, its description did not serve to encompass the informal processes of collectivization that struggled with the question of reproducing everyday life.

The sense of collective identity that underscored the Oaxaca Commune was not solely an identification with the APPO. In fact, many participants—especially housewives and the urban poor—identified themselves as militants of the uprising but not as a part of the APPO. It would require an entire separate sociological inquiry to examine all the reasons why participants in the uprising did not identify with the APPO or how the APPO failed to encompass the whole of the demographically diverse sectors of the uprising in its particular structures of organization and representation; certainly, women fought unsuccessfully for more equalized participation in the APPO, giving rise to another gendered contradiction of the uprising. It was not until November, seven months after the uprising began, that the APPO brought gender representation into express consideration, and failed then, even after the momentous women’s movement, to account for participatory parity.

Ultimately, the experience of everyday life that formulated the Oaxaca Commune and the articulations of women participants concerning the limitations of the Commune help broaden our understanding of struggle as a confrontation with ways in which capitalism has commodified reproductive labor into a feminized sphere—in which any serious anti-capitalist movement must engage directly with the gendered logic of the reproduction of collective social life. ★

BARUCHA PELLER



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UNDERGROUND ECONOMY

# Reclaiming the American Commons

A QUIET UPSURGE OF COOPERATIVE ACTIVITY HAS BEEN TAKING PLACE ACROSS THE US, WHERE PEOPLE ARE TURNING TO THE COMMONS TO REBUILD A SENSE OF COMMUNITY.

John Curl



# COMM

**A** quiet, sweeping upsurge of cooperative activity has been taking place throughout the United States in recent decades. All over the American map, millions of people now realize that the existing economic system has failed in the core purpose of any economic system: to offer a decent life and future to all.

Since everybody needs to survive, people everywhere are turning to mutual aid, collectivity, cooperatives, communalist ventures and commons of every sort. The story is not in the statistics. The vast majority of this activity is under the radar, in the informal, underground economy, in unincorporated associations. That is both a weakness and a strength. Think Occupy.

## HISTORIC COLLECTIVITY IN AMERICA

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America has historically always been a center of collective activity. That observation may seem to fly in the face of the stereotype of Americans being all about individualism and competition, but the truth is that from its earliest days the North American continent has been fertile soil to cooperative and communalist movements, based on people working together to provide for their mutual needs. Native American culture was built on those principles, and cooperative communities were integral to the entire project of working people immigrating here to escape poverty and oppression. Every wave of immigrants spontaneously created cooperative economic and social structures.

When settlers expanded westward in search of a better life, they often did so through cooperative means and formed cooperative settlements. The internal dynamics of American settler culture were intrinsically communalist in nature. But the entire colonial project also had a dark underside that can never be fully expunged: native people were already occupying the land, and the settlers were not only refugees, but also invaders—the vanguard of a tragic clash of civilizations.

The industrialization of the early 19th century brought a new form of oppression to America, and working people responded with the first

modern social movements. Communalism was one of the earliest of these movements. It began in America in 1825, with the group of intentional communities inspired by New Harmony, and then renewed again in the 1840s. Like the movement of a century later, they too aimed at constructing a new society through communities based on collectivity and cooperation, but they eventually hit the limits of access to land and resources.

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In the same era, worker cooperatives became an integral part of the early union movement. America was becoming increasingly dominated by capital, while working people were increasingly disenfranchised. The wage system, tied to the industrial revolution, was on the rise, and workers fought and resisted being made permanent wage slaves. They

saw the wage system, in which people rent themselves to other people, as a form of bondage, and they formed worker-owned cooperatives to prevent themselves from being dragged down into it.

The early union and co-op movements culminated in the precipitous rise of the Knights of Labor and their counter-institutional challenge to capitalism through erecting an alternative economic system of cooperatives. They planned to replace capitalism with what they called the Cooperative Commonwealth. Their defeat in 1886 and the destruction of their worker co-ops by the



forces of capital was a historic turning point in American social history. A few years later, their rural allies in the Farmers' Alliance suffered a parallel defeat with the destruction of their agricultural co-ops. These defeats resulted in the triumph of the "gilded age" reign of the robber barons.

In the early 1900s and during the Great Depression of the 1930s, radical collectivist, syndicalist and cooperative movements surged again. But very little of them remained after World War II, leaving the US deeply regimented and militarized. Progressive ideas were expunged from schools and politics, and to express even mildly left opinions in the McCarthy era, you risked being branded a traitor. Parents feared losing their jobs and told their kids to keep their mouths shut in school.

## LIVING THE REVOLUTION

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As the generation that grew up in this airless atmosphere came of age, we were suddenly told that we were being shipped off to Asia to defend "freedom" from Communism. Tens of thousands of young people were being ripped out of their lives and tossed as cannon fodder into a war they opposed. Their overwhelming response was to resist and to turn to each other to invent a new set of liberating social relations, to reject what the country had become and create an oppositional collective, communal and cooperative "counter-culture".

We created communal living spaces in both rural and urban settings. Many never even had a name. Just to know about them, you needed to have connections through friends or friends of friends. They had no long-term sustainability, but formed and reformed.

Since the world was so unstable and torn by social upheaval, the focus was on liberation, not sustainability. By today's standards, most were not stable intentional communities. Shared living spaces are of course still ubiquitous among young people today, and the main difference was the prevailing atmosphere in society.

The idea at the time was to live the revolution. Unlike many radical organizations of previous generations, our internal organizations needed to reflect our goals. The purpose was liberation, and we could only accomplish that directly, by liberating ourselves. What was holding us all back from living in liberated ways? In some ways the structure of society was doing just that, while in other ways we were oppressing ourselves and each other. We need liberated spaces to experiment in, where each could help liberate the others.

Collectivity led to many cultural victories in that era. But these turned into political defeats as a frightened country retreated to law and order under Reaganism.

## COLLECTIVITY IN TODAY'S AMERICA

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The current Communities Directory lists 2,364 intentional communities in America, including income-sharing communes, eco-villages, co-housing, residential land trusts, student co-ops and spiritual communities. These are all projects where people choose to live together sustainably, on the basis of common values, with goals of personal, cultural and social transformation. Intentional communities are just one aspect of collectivity, of the commons.

Much of the communalist and cooperative movement in the US is still underground,

in the informal economy. But the above-ground movement is expanding rapidly today, in response to the economic crises of this century, which globalized capitalism is not geared to handle or solve. Do an internet search for worker co-ops, collectives, farmer co-ops, housing co-ops, food co-ops, intentional communities, land trusts, any kind of co-op you can imagine, and you will discover vast numbers. You will also find an extensive network of organizations around the country doing cooperative education, innovation, funding and developing

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Large numbers of non-profits and social justice organizations have expanded their horizons to include co-ops, particularly worker co-ops and related social enterprises, community enterprises and solidarity enterprises. Go to the websites of the US Federation of Worker Cooperatives, the Network of Bay Area Worker Cooperatives and other regional networks. Cities are supporting worker co-ops as an economic development strategy. The New York City recently granted \$1.2 million to fund worker cooperative development.

## AN UNDERGROUND RAILROAD OF COMMUNES

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For me, participation in the communalist and cooperative movement started back in the mid-1960s, when I lived at Drop City, the fabled commune in southern Colorado. At the height of the movement of that era, we were part of a loose network of intentional communities, and we entertained the notion that American society was collapsing and we were constructing the basis of a new social order.

No directory of communes existed, but if you knew where to go, you could cross the country and never have to stay at a motel. The Vietnam War was raging, and the draft was the spark that ignited the movement. Communal spaces formed a kind of underground railroad, where resisters could travel commune to commune until they reached refuge in Canada.

Each of the 1960s communes was organized around a space that belonged to no one person. Since the planet, the original commons, was almost entirely privatized, with everyone dispossessed except the elite, groups of dispossessed decided to start creating small commons of their own. That was at the core of the movement. But we soon hit a wall: only those with significant financial resources could have access to land, and you cannot conjure up alternative real estate. It was that contradiction that stopped the movement in its tracks. With the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, many communes disbanded and few new ones formed.

Eventually intentional communities began to proliferate again, as experiments in new ways of living, and continued to draw many people, as



they still do today. To some extent, the drive of this new communalism remains the same: to restore a sense of community in an economic system where families, neighborhoods and entire populations are at the mercy of developers and planners, where people are moved around like cattle, with profit maximization being the primary consideration.

## THE WEST BERKELEY PLAN

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But people need not necessarily form communes to restore a sense of community. Many movements today aim to defend communities by protecting the commons. In this sense, it is worth pointing out that historical experiences like the Paris Commune were by their very nature centered around reclaiming the commons and defending “social property” in the fight against privatization.

An inspiring example of a contemporary movement aiming to protect the commons from economic attacks and displacement can be found in West Berkeley, California. Outsiders who visit this area often wonder why in 2016 it has not been totally swept up in the relentless gentrification that has decimated and transformed so many other Bay Area neighborhoods. Why it is still full of funky little homes, local businesses, artists, artisans and industries? The secret answer is the West Berkeley Plan, through which a long-established, mixed-use urban neighborhood successfully created, recognized and defended a threatened commons.

The West Berkeley Plan was a radical transformative structure right in the heart of mainstream society, which all the developers strenuously opposed, since it limited their capacity to exploit and extract profit.

Yet the movement eventually rose above the opposition and implemented the Plan by a unanimous vote of the city council. We had allies in city hall. That turned out to be key.

It began in the 1980s, when, during an era of expansive Reaganism, I brought several council members down to West Berkeley and showed them around the thriving and economically diverse community that at was at risk of displacement. Meanwhile a community group formed called West Berkeley MAARS, which stood for Merchants, Artists, Artisans, and Residents. The city council passed an “urgency ordinance” to stop wild gentrification and stabilize the situation, because there was no area plan in place to govern development in the neighborhood.

The first thing we tried was a commercial rent stabilization ordinance for industrial spaces. Berkeley already had commercial rent regulations protecting small merchants in two gentrifying commercial districts across town, as well as residential rent control. These ordinances treated affordable rental space as a commons. The community needed to protect that commons to remain a diverse community. But within weeks after the city council passed the West Berkeley ordinance, the state legislature intervened with a law outlawing all commercial rent control in California. It was then that the city council initiated the West Berkeley Plan process.

The Plan was based on the radical concept of a neighborhood planning and administering itself by consensus. All the stakeholders attended big public meetings, refereed by the city. Over a period of several years large numbers of people participated, argued, fought and ultimately came to acceptable compromises in which every sector had enough of their needs met. All the groups in West Berke-

ley could stay. No one would be pushed out by unchecked gentrification. This was true community-based planning in the best sense of the term.

We managed to stabilize the situation through zoning. We created a series of industrial zones, in which industrial and arts-and-crafts spaces were protected. Industrial and art space was recognized as a commons. Once landlords realized they could only rent out an industrial space to an industry or artisan, and not convert it to a higher-paying use, they had to accept the situation and rents no longer escalated. Since an industrial or arts-and-crafts space use can only generate a modest income level, and since a landlord can only replace an industrial tenant with another industrial tenant, landlords had to accept community stability.

Although developers continued to attack the West Berkeley Plan before the ink was even dry, over the decades the plan has held. This continued success has been largely due to the ongoing efforts of another community organization called West Berkeley Artisans and Industrial Companies (WEBAIC), which took over the struggle from MAARS.

The West Berkeley Plan showed a way forward. The Plan struck a great blow to gentrification, achieved a triumph for diversity and community, and successfully created and protected a commons. It is a living demonstration of how, when grassroots activist community groups and progressive elements in municipal government work together, the impossible can become possible.

## **COLLECTIVITY: A WAY FORWARD**

Today’s cooperative, communalist and collectivist movements emerged in the early years

of the 21st century. While many intentional communities continue to thrive, living communally is not an option for the vast majority of the US population, who are struggling just to stay where they are and working to transform their existing communities. Nevertheless, people everywhere are turning to mutual aid, collectivity, cooperatives, communalist ventures and the commons for an alternative.

*People everywhere are turning to mutual aid, collectivity, cooperatives, communalist ventures and the commons for an alternative.*



Today the US is no longer a powerhouse of heavy industry (apart from munitions), and the civil economy is largely based on services and small production. Our movement is not capable of challenging the commanding heights of the economy, like the Knights of Labor once tried to do, but it *is* taking over the margins. The objective now is to multiply and thrive, horizontally not hierarchically, in the age-old task of trying, under adversity, to create a sustainable humane society to live in, in balance with the natural world—a great commons.

Collectivity can involve many kinds of sharing, and they all enrich life. When we create collectivity among ourselves, we are creating commons. Collectivity and commons are of enormous value: by creating commons, by taking back and defending them, by filling our lives as much as we can with collectivity, with community, we bring about progressive and sustainable social change.

In a real sense, then, widespread collectivity and cooperation in our lives is already changing the world. ★

JOHN CURL



*John Curl is the author of For All The People: Uncovering the Hidden History of Cooperatives, Cooperative Movements and Communalism in America (PM Press, 2009). He is a long-time member of Heartwood Cooperative Woodshop.*

The background of the cover is a teal color with faint, concentric circular lines. The central illustration is a dark, textured figure, possibly a person or a creature, wearing a large, brown, textured hat or hood. The figure is holding a flag with three horizontal stripes of red, yellow, and red. The overall style is painterly and expressive.

BARCELONA EN COMÚ

# The Disobedient City and the Stateless Nation

Kate Shea Baird

**WHILE BARCELONA EN COMÚ BUILDS ON THE SAME TRADITION OF LOCAL AUTONOMY AND ANTI-STATISM, THE CATALAN QUESTION SETS IT APART FROM THE PARIS COMMUNE.**

**B**arcelona's default setting is "disobedient". In 1870, it hosted the founding congress of the anarchist movement in Spain, a political current that has influenced the city's politics ever since. In 1919, its workers led the La Canadenca strike, winning the right to an 8-hour limit on working days. Barcelona was one of the bastions of Republican resistance during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s and, in 1970, it was the clandestine birthplace of the first gay liberation movement on the Iberian Peninsula.

In his rip-roaring history of his native city, *Rebel Barcelona*, the journalist Guillem Martínez argues that Barcelona's non-conformist character is the product of its unique relationship to the Catalan nation and the Spanish state. As he points out, "Barcelona is the largest city in Europe that isn't the capital of a state. It's also home to the greatest concentration of Catalan speakers, the most spoken language without a state in Europe. Barcelona is, if one observes these two striking peculiarities, a European oddity." According to Martínez, Barcelona is neither Catalonia nor Spain; rather, its rebellious history can be understood through its contentious relationship with both nations, particularly the latter.



If the status of Catalonia has influenced the emergence and evolution of urban rebellions in Barcelona in the past, today is no exception. In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, social movements in Barcelona—from the PAH housing rights platform to the *indignados* occupation of Catalonia Square and the 15MPaRato anti-corruption group—have sprung up and evolved in parallel to a growing popular revindication of Catalan sovereignty.

It is in this context that Guanyem, the citizen platform later renamed Barcelona en Comú and currently governing Barcelona city hall, was launched in June of 2014. BComú's ambivalent relationship with the independence movement in Catalonia, complementary and antagonistic by turns, is perhaps the feature that most sets it apart from its predecessors and contemporaries in the radical municipalist tradition.

## THE PARIS COMMUNE AND URBAN INTERNATIONALISM

The Paris Commune—the revolutionary government that ran the French capital for a few, brief weeks in 1871—has become something of a touchstone of contemporary radical municipalism, and provides a useful archetype from which to reflect on the national exceptionalism of BComú.

In her exploration of the “political imaginary” of the Commune, Kristin Ross explains 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, the market or the state.” She eloquently describes how the Communards reclaimed the vocabulary of *citoyen* and *citoyenne* from the 1789

Revolution, not to indicate national belonging, but to identify a social cleavage within the nation and speak to the non-nationally circumscribed “free” woman or man. Echoes of this strain of “glocalism” are evident in many urban struggles today, from the *indignados* in Spain to the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. Such movements are intrinsically place-bound but, at the same time, hyper-connected with and mutually supportive of, their revolutionary peers in cities across the world.

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*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, the market or the state.*

For its part, BComú shares the classic municipalist values of local autonomy and anti-statism. One of its early policy documents is illustrative of this spirit, insisting that “public authorities must value, support and, above all, not get in the way of associationism, self-organization and citizen management of public services and spaces, in order to move towards public-community governance of the city.” BComú also follows in the internationalist tradition of the Paris Commune. One



of its priorities is to make Barcelona a global “capital of change”, an example to municipal movements in cities around the world. The discourse of BComú on the refugee crisis, during which it has criticized the paralysis of European states and made clear that cities are willing and able to respond in their place, captures both of these strands in its thinking.

However, while in 19th century Paris a rejection of the state implied the simultaneous rejection of the French nation state under construction at the time, the same cannot be said of 21st century Barcelona. Certainly, BComú shares the Commune’s hostility towards the state and its corresponding nationalism (Spanish, in this case); it made headlines around the world when it removed royal symbols from the city council chamber shortly after taking office. However, BComú’s relationship with the stateless Catalan nation is contested and, as we will see, the source of its characteristic reluctance to reject the concept of the nation per se.

## THE PARIS COMMUNE AND URBAN INTERNATIONALISM

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BComú was born at a moment in which the *dret a decidir* (right to decide) of Catalonia dominated the political agenda. In this context, the “municipal wager”—the strategy of activists and new political parties in Spain of making their electoral debut at local level—had a particular advantage in Barcelona: the ability to unite groups and individuals with diverse positions on the national question. Nevertheless, the movement’s initial manifesto did implicitly acknowledge the sovereignty debate, saying: “because we believe in the right to decide, we want to decide, here and now, how we need and want Barcelona to be.”

BComú’s defence of Catalan sovereignty as part of a broader demand for democratization—“the right to decide everything”—became a point of consensus among the wide range of views on independence within the municipal movement. In a statement of support for the pro-independence demonstrations held on the Catalan national day in September of 2014, BComú emphasized that it was:

“ *A plural space shared by people with multiple identities and origins, with diverse perceptions of the national and territorial question. This plurality ranges from support for independence or federalism, through to many who believe that, in current circumstances, a democratic breakaway is required before a free federal or confederal agreement can be reached between equals. In our view, all of these options are legitimate and must be welcome in a municipal project like our own that seeks to break with the status quo.*

This ambivalence on the national question sets BComú apart from both the explicitly anti-nationalist tradition of the Paris Commune and from those municipal movements, such as the Popular Unity Candidacies (CUP) in Catalonia or the pro-Kurdish Peoples’ Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey, that are explicitly tied to projects of national liberation. BComú has what could be described as an attitude of sceptical sympathy towards the Catalan independence movement (as opposed to the principle of self-determination itself, which it defends wholeheartedly). As we shall see, this position is not always a comfortable one in the current political climate.

## THE SPANISH STATE: A COMMON ADVERSARY

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Both the Spanish municipal movement and the Catalan independence movement are, in their own ways, popular responses to the post-2008

one shares the goal of independence or not, the movement is a democratic reaction to an authoritarian state that it is at best dismissive, at worst oppressive, of national minorities. Indeed, support for independence shot up after a number of articles of the Catalan statute of autonomy (including



PHOTO BY DANNY CAMINAL

economic and political crisis. As movements that demand a more direct involvement of citizens in decision-making, they have a common adversary in the centralist, Spanish state.

BComú's sympathy for the independence cause is based on a recognition that, whether

that which recognized Catalan nationhood), which had been approved by both the Catalan and Spanish parliaments, and through a referendum, were ruled unconstitutional by the Spanish Supreme Court in 2010. Since then, the central government and Spanish courts have steadfastly

rejected attempts to hold a referendum on independence.

In this context, BComú has consistently defended the democratic legitimacy of the independence movement, including by participating in the annual pro-independence

for independence on November 9 to express their rejection of the central government's refusal to hold a referendum.

BComú has also been a staunch and vocal supporter of Catalan cultural and linguistic rights, both of which have been the subject



demonstrations on the Catalan national day, by supporting the symbolic poll on independence held on November 9, 2014, and by condemning the subsequent indictment of members of the Catalan government for holding the vote. BComú's then mayoral candidate, Ada Colau, went so far as to say that federalists should vote

of state repression in recent history. As an organization, BComú has a policy of communicating in Catalan as standard and has called for the Catalan government to disobey a 2013 education law (the LOMCE) that threatens to dismantle the practice of teaching in Catalan in public schools.

## THE ENEMY WITHIN?

However, BComú's nuanced position on independence has not been welcomed by either side of what is an increasingly polarized national debate. Despite its attempts to maintain a municipal identity, both the pro- and anti-independence camps have tried to shoehorn BComú into the opposing side of the national axis.

This strategy was clear during the local elections, which pro-independence parties framed as a proxy vote on independence (as they have every election since). The incumbent CiU government, as well as the Republican Left and the CUP, all included Catalan independence in their election programs. During the election campaign, BComú's loyalty to Catalonia was under constant scrutiny and its refusal to take sides on

the independence issue interpreted as either political cowardice or cynical electioneering. Ada Colau's personal views on independence were the subject of constant speculation, and the exceptional occasions on which she spoke in Spanish rather than Catalan were picked up on and politicized by the pro-independence media. A tweet by TV pundit Bernat Dedéu on the eve of the elections summed up the tone of the campaign: "Barcelona can't have a Spanish mayoress. It's that simple."

The reaction of anti-independence forces to the emergence of BComú has been similarly hostile, with both the PP and Ciudadanos branding BComú "separatists". The most virulent anti-

independence discourse has been directed at BComú's Argentine-born Deputy Mayor, Gerardo Pisarello. The most notorious example of this hostility took place in September 2015, during the Mercè festival, when Pisarello removed a Spanish flag that had been unfurled on the city hall balcony by a PP councillor. In the aftermath, Pisarello was subject to a storm of xenophobic abuse, including a tweet by Ciudadanos MEP, Juan Carlos Girauta, telling him

to "get your dirty hands off my flag."

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*Attempts to portray Barcelona en Comú as the foreign enemy within have parallels with the arguments employed by the anti-Communards in Paris.*

These attempts to portray BComú as the foreign enemy within have parallels with the arguments employed by the anti-Communards. The critics of the Paris Commune were obsessed by the number of foreigners (real or imagined) among its ranks, a phe-

nomenon that Ross describes as "part of the historical tendency of the dominant classes to exhibit class racism, considering workers as, in fact, foreign to the nation." For its part, BComú has hit back at accusations of treachery by questioning the patriotism of parties whose members have been caught hiding their fortunes in foreign tax havens—an argument that could have come straight out of a speech by Communard Elisabeth Dmitrieff.

## THE THREAT FROM BELOW

The source of the mutual hostility between the municipal movement and the Spanish state is relatively easy to identify: the municipal move-

ment in Barcelona and the rest of Spain represents the most successful assault on establishment institutions since the start of the crisis. What is more, this is a movement whose diverse manifestations in the different national territories of the country are making visible a plurinational reality that stands in stark contrast to Spain's homogenizing national narrative.

By contrast, the tensions and synergies between BComú and the Catalan national project are more difficult to untangle. BComú has been steadfast in its support for the legitimacy of the aspirations of the independence movement, even while it has been subject to continual attacks from many of its protagonists. It is clear that, in a context in which there is a powerful, widespread appetite for an alternative to the status quo, certain sectors of the pro-independence camp have seen BComú as a threat to what was their near-monopoly of the "change" agenda in Catalonia from 2012-'14.

Currently, the municipal movement is being treated, rightly or wrongly, as one of the most significant political threats to the Spanish establishment and the Catalan independence movement. Against this backdrop there is little doubt that, like the city of Barcelona itself, BComú will in the months and years ahead continue to be defined, at least in part, by its fractious relationship with both the nation state and the stateless nation. ★

KATE SHEA BAIRD



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CHAVISMO AT THE CROSSROADS

# ¡COMUNAL ONADA!

George Ciccariello-Maher



**THE ONLY POSSIBLE SAVIORS OF THE BOLIVARIAN PROCESS ARE THOSE WHO HAVE SAVED IT ON EVERY OTHER OCCASION—AND WHO TODAY COALESCE AROUND THE HORIZON OF THE COMMUNE.**

**H**ave you heard about Venezuela's communes? Have you heard that there are hundreds of thousands of people in nearly 1,500 communes struggling to take control of their territories, their labor, and their lives? If you haven't heard, you're not the only one. As the mainstream media howls about economic crisis and authoritarianism, there is little mention of the grassroots revolutionaries who have always been the backbone of the Bolivarian process.

This blindspot is reproduced by an international left whose dogmas and pieties creak and groan when confronted with a political process that doesn't fit, in which the state, oil, and a uniformed soldier have all played key roles. It's a sad testament to the state of the left that when we think of communes we are more likely to think of nine arrests in rural France than the ongoing efforts of these hundreds of thousands. But nowhere is communism pure, and the challenges Venezuela's *comuneros* confront today are ones that we neglect at our own peril.

## “REVOLUTIONS ARE NOT MADE BY LAWS”

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What is a commune? Concretely speaking, Venezuela’s communes bring together communal councils—local units of direct democratic self-government—with productive units known as social production enterprises. The latter can be either state-owned or, more commonly, directly owned by the communes themselves. Direct ownership means that it is the communal parliament itself—composed of delegates from each council—that debates and decides what is produced, how much the workers are paid, how to distribute the product, and how best to reinvest any surplus into the commune itself.

Just as the late Hugo Chávez did not create the Bolivarian Revolution, the Venezuelan state did not create the communes or the communal councils that they comprise. Instead, the revolutionary movements that “created Chávez” did not simply stop there and stand back to admire their creation—they have continued their formative work in and on the world by building radically democratic and participatory self-government from the bottom-up. Before the communal councils existed on paper, *barrio* residents were forming assemblies to debate both local affairs and how to bring about revolutionary change on the national level.

And before the communes existed on paper, many of these same organizers had begun to expand and consolidate communal control over broader swathes of territory. After all, as Marx insisted among others, “revolutions are not made with laws.”

But what the state *has* done has been to recognize the existence of first the councils and then the communes, formalizing their struc-

ture—for better and for worse—and even encouraging their expansion. Within the state apparatus, the communes found no greater ally than Chávez himself who, knowing full well that his days were numbered, dedicated the last major speech before his death to the expansion of what he called the “communal state.” And since his death, grassroots revolutionaries have

seized upon his words for the leverage they provide: insisting that to be a Chavista is to be a *comunero* and that those who undermine popular power are no less than traitors.

## COMMUNES AGAINST THE STATE

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And traitors there are plenty. Not only did the state not create the communes, but the majority of the state apparatus is openly hostile to communal power. This is especially true of local elected officials—Chavistas very

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*Within the state apparatus, the communes found no greater ally than Chávez himself who dedicated the last major speech to the expansion of what he called the “communal state.”*



much included—who positively loathe these expressions of grassroots democracy that cut into their territory and resources and threaten their legitimacy as leaders. Thus while many local leaders wear Chavista red while mouthing the words of popular participation and revolution, in practice they routinely attack, undermine and obstruct the most participatory and revolutionary spaces in Venezuelan society today.

Ángel Prado, a spokesperson for the sprawling El Maizal commune in the central-west of the country that today cultivates 800 hectares of corn, explains how the history of the commune is a testament to the tense relations between communal power and the state. It took grassroots pressure for Chávez to throw his weight behind these *comuneros* by expropriating the land, but even when he did so, the lands passed into the hands of the state agricultural corporation.

Organizers were left wondering, “why is the state here if this belongs to the commune?” and had to undertake a second struggle against the “revolutionary” state. By organizing themselves and nearby communities and by proving they could produce even more effectively than corrupt bureaucrats, El Maizal eventually gained the support of Chávez to take over the land for themselves. But even today, Prado argues that local Chavista leaders and the PSUV represent their “principal enemies,” and are actively attempting to “extinguish the commune.” “We *comuneros* share very little with the governing party,” he insists.

For some—like the longtime militant Roland Denis—this clash comes as no surprise. The phrase “communal state” is “a camouflaged name for the communist state,” and even an outright oxymoron. If Marx had described the Paris Commune as “a revolution against

the State itself,” Denis wonders: “What state, if we are actually talking about a non-state? The communal state is a non-state, otherwise it’s a bureaucratic-corporative state.” Ideally, “the communes could create a productive capacity that begins to compete with capitalism, with its own internal rules and logic, and this could really progressively generate a non-state. There are some very interesting communes moving in this direction.”

## FREE SOCIALIST TERRITORIES

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Alongside the political antagonism of local leaders, the communes face a daunting economic challenge that is, in fact, their *raison d’être*. Since the discovery of oil in the early 20th century, the Venezuelan economy has been almost entirely reshaped in its image: cheap imports and a lack of support for the peasantry saw an exodus from the countryside into the cities, making Venezuela simultaneously the most urban country in Latin America—93.5 percent of the population lives in cities—and the only country in the region to import more food than it exports (nearly 80 percent of food by the 1990s).

The communes are an ambitious attempt to reverse this trajectory by encouraging self-managed production geared toward what people actually need on the local level, and what the country needs as a whole. It is therefore no surprise to find the bulk of Venezuela’s communes in the countryside—the entire communal project requires reversing this migration, decentralizing the Venezuelan population and its production. Toward this end, the communes are producing—directly and democratically—millions of tons of coffee, corn, plantains and bananas annually, and straining upward for increased regional and national coordination.

COMUNA PIO TA  
TODOS LOS SIN CASA  
ORGANIZADOS EN

CONT





PHOTO BY VERO CANINO

Groups of communes are coming together from below to form regional structures known as “communal axes” or “political-territorial corridors.” According to Alex Alayo, a member of the El Maizal commune, the goal is to develop what he calls “free socialist territories” in which communes exchange directly with one another, cutting out the global economy and the domestic capitalists entirely. Through this broader integration, the communes will be able “to communalize or even communize” entire territories not from above, but as an expansive form of self-government from below.

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*The expansion of the communes into regional structures has led to a tense dual power situation, the uncomfortable and even antagonistic coexistence of the new with the old.*

This expansion has led to a tense dual power situation, the uncomfortable and even antagonistic coexistence of the new with the old. On the one hand, there is what Alayo considers a popular government in a bourgeois state structure, and on the other hand, this expanding network of communal territories “building a new state” from below. Tensions and “frictions” are inevitable, and will only increase as the communes expand: “Here we are fighting an outright war against the tradi-

tional, bourgeois state. Chávez invited us to build the communal state, and that’s going to have a lot of enemies. Chávez may even have been the only public functionary who agreed with it completely.”

## PRODUCING THE COMMUNE

If there is a single most important contradiction internal to the communal project, it is this: not all communes produce goods. While Venezuela’s urbanization saw the rural population abandoning potentially productive lands, the other end of their journey saw them congregating in barrios where little production has ever taken place. Barrio residents have been the spearhead of the Bolivarian Revolution since they set it into motion by rebellion against neoliberal reform in the 1989 Caracazo, but without production there is no hope for communal autonomy and sustainability.

Where the terrain is unproductive, however, communes have responded creatively and in different ways. Some have developed a productive apparatus where none had existed with the support of government loans or the demand of state companies for specific goods. Others have sought to adapt to the economic terrain of the *barrios* themselves by establishing communal mechanisms for the circulation of people (transport collectives) and goods (distribution centers). Still others have developed communal linkages that bridge the urban/rural divide by establishing barter exchanges between urban and rural communes.

Most ambitiously, some communes have demanded control over local urban industries. When a beer factory in Barquisimeto previously owned by the Brazilian transnational Brahma (now a subsidiary of Anheuser-Busch) was closed, workers took over the factory and

began to bottle water for local distribution. Today, the workers continue to resist court orders to remove them, and are demanding the factory be expropriated and placed under the direct democratic control of the nearby Pío Tamayo commune.

Producing goods is not everything, however. Former commune minister Reinaldo Iturriza argues that while communes need to produce, “the commune is also something that is produced.” In other words, especially amid and against the atomization of urban areas, producing communal culture is a primary and very concrete task. For example, I spoke with young *comuneros* in Barrio Sin Techos, in the violent area of El Cementerio in southern Caracas, for whom establishing a commune meant producing something very tangible: a local gang truce and a vibrant and cooperative youth culture.

## CRISIS AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION

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The Venezuelan communes are emerging against the daunting backdrop of sharpening economic crisis. The plummeting price of oil, the government’s ineffective response to a currency devaluation spiral, and the continued reliance of a “socialist” government on private-sector importers have all conspired to pull the rug out from under the stable growth of the Chávez years. Economically, this has meant periodic shortages and long lines for certain, price-controlled goods, as importers would rather speculate on the currency than fill the shelves.

But every crisis is also an opportunity. Venezuela’s communes today are struggling to produce, but there is good reason to believe that they are more productive than either the private or state sector. In this case, the crisis itself and the corruption and treason of the private sector might be enough to force the Bolivarian government to throw its weight behind the communes as a productive alternative. And while the sharp decline in oil income has hit the communes hard, it has also forced a long-overdue national debate about the country’s endemic oil dependency.

Politically, Venezuela’s oil dependency has also meant reliance on cheap imports—a reliance that has become the government’s Achilles’ heel, and we have all seen the result. Shortages and long lines have whittled away at popular support for Chavismo while providing a pretext for first right-wing protests (in early 2014), and more recently, a landslide opposition victory for control of the National Assembly (in December 2015). While the government continues to blame



*The time has come to bet it all on the communes. The wager may seem a risky one, but the alternative to the communes is no alternative at all.*

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the crisis on an “economic war” carried out by opposition forces, this disastrous defeat shows clearly enough that many Venezuelans are not convinced.

The consequences of the opposition victory in the National Assembly are very real: right-wing forces are already strategizing how best to remove Maduro from office before his term is up, and planning to roll back many crucial gains of the Bolivarian process. The communes are directly in the crosshairs, with the Assembly threatening to revoke communal rights to land expropriated under Chávez and Maduro. This first major defeat for Chavismo at the polls immediately galvanized revolutionary ferment at the grassroots, sparking street assemblies and sharp public debates about what had gone wrong.

But it remains to be seen whether the “whip of the counter-revolution” will provide an

alibi for continued government inaction or a foothold for new qualitative leaps. As is so often the case, the biggest challenge of all lay precisely on the political level: if Chavismo united can’t even defeat the opposition in elections, then what hope is there for a Chavismo divided—communes against what is called the “endogenous right”? Reversing a century of perverted economic development while simultaneously confronting the opposition, right-wing Chavistas, and the machinations of US imperialism might seem an impossible task.

But no one ever said communism would be easy...

## THE COMMUNAL WAGER

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The time has come to bet it all on the communes. The wager may seem a risky one, but

according to one estimate, 2013 alone saw some \$20 billion (with a “b”) simply disappear into a black hole of fake import companies—imagine what the communes could do with \$20 billion! The middle class, the *ni-ni’s* (neither-nors) in the center, the parasitic bourgeoisie, the state bureaucracy, a Socialist Party (PSUV) incapable of even winning elections, increasingly corrupt military sectors—the alternative to the communes is no alternative at all.

For Ángel Prado of El Maizal commune, the only possible saviors of the Bolivarian process are those who have saved it on every other occasion—and who today coalesce around the horizon of the commune:

“*It’s radical Chavismo that participates in the commune, hardline Chavismo, those who have been Chavistas their entire lives... the grassroots sectors that withstood the guarimba protests [of 2014], that withstood the coup d’état and oil strike [of 2002-2003], that resisted all of these and neutralized the right-wing.*

If the government doesn’t embrace this hard core of Chavismo, it can’t possible hope to survive. “And if the government—with all of the challenges of imports, hoarding, and prices—is fucked, who else can solve this? We can, the communes... because we don’t depend on the state.” The wager today is the wager of always, one best expressed by the late Venezuelan writer Aquiles Nazoa: “I believe in the creative powers of the people.”

As the crisis deepens and divides the state against itself, setting the opposition-controlled National Assembly against the Maduro government, anything is possible. The only certainty is that the tipping point is rushing forth to greet us, and Chavismo will either move decisively to the left or retreat to the right. But retreat would be as cowardly as it is naïve—as goes the commune, so goes the Bolivarian Revolution as a whole. As Chávez himself often put it, the choice on the table is increasingly between *la comuna o nada*, the commune or nothing. ★

GEORGE CICCARIELLO-MAHER



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COMMON GROUND

*THE REVIVAL OF THE  
COMMUNE PROVIDES AN  
OPPORTUNITY TO INFUSE  
A DIVIDED AND DISORIENTED  
LEFT WITH A SHARED  
PROJECT AND A CLEAR-EYED  
SENSE OF PURPOSE.*

*Jerome Roos*





**THE POLITICAL  
FORM AT LAST  
REDISCOVERED**



*Overthrown, but not conquered,  
the Commune in our days is born  
again. It is no longer a dream of  
the vanquished, caressing in  
imagination the lovely mirage of  
hope. No! the 'commune' of today  
is becoming the visible and definite  
aim of the revolution rumbling  
beneath our feet.*

**T**hus wrote Peter Kropotkin in his reflections on the Paris Commune, ten years after the fact. The words might as well have been written today, nearly a century and a half later. At a time when capitalism and the state are both visibly struggling to reproduce themselves as the core of a stable social order, deregulating their own governance structures just as they disorganize the opposition, it is no coincidence that the commune arises once more as the horizon of a new cycle of struggles, imprinting itself upon the present as the definite aim of the 21st century revolution.

It is clear by now that the global financial crisis has forced a rupture in established conceptions of emancipatory politics. In a landscape littered with the debris of social democracy, in which an entire generation comes of age with life prospects incomparably more bleak than those of their parents, a radical space is opening up—from below and to the left—that could offer much-needed common ground for the divided and disoriented opposition to converge and organize upon. After decades of sectarianism and strife, the time has come to close the rift and chart a collective way forward.

In this light, the revival of the commune provides an opportunity to infuse the left with a shared project and a clear-eyed sense of purpose. But just as the renascent communal imaginary generates a whole new field of possibility, so it raises a host of long-standing practical and theoretical questions. To begin with: “What is the Commune, that sphinx so tantalizing to the bourgeois mind?”

## WHAT IS THE COMMUNE?

Historically speaking, communal ways of organizing social life long precede the development of the modern state, and humanity on the whole has spent far more time living communally than it has under capitalism. To an extent, historical experience therefore lends credence to the proposition that, in the long run, the commune-form might secure a far more stable social order than the state-form, whose contradictory unity with crisis-prone finance capital renders it increasingly vulnerable to social conflict and systemic chaos, not to mention ecological catastrophe. On this point, indigenous communities and peasant communes may hold some important clues for the identification of alternative developmental pathways—which helps explain why revolutionary theorists like Marx and Kropotkin spent many years studying such pre-capitalist societies.

Nevertheless, there are clearly important differences between these ancient communal forms and the type of revolutionary commune of which we are speaking here, not least in terms of the latter’s emancipatory, future-oriented and internationalist horizon. Crucially, the modern commune fully embraces the expansiveness and universality of the socialist ideal. To paraphrase Subcomandante Marcos, whose Zapatista movement has formed its own autonomous indigenous communes in

southern Mexico, the revolutionary commune is “not a dream from the past [or] something that came from our ancestors. It comes to us from the future; it is the next step that we have to take.”

This understanding of the commune as the political form of the future first emerged in the working-class sections of Paris during the French Revolution of 1789, but only really began to take shape in the workers’ reunions of Second Empire Paris, as a new idea that departed not only from the parochialism of isolated pre-capitalist communities and the romanticism of marginalized Utopian mini-societies, but also from the bourgeois revolutions of the modern era. Within this context, the commune initially took the form of a slogan whose “emotion and affective charge,” Kristin Ross writes, “far exceeded any of the meanings associated with the word.” Its unifying power effectively “melted divergences between left factions, enabling solidarity, alliance, and a shared project.”

When the revolutionary communal ideal finally took on a concrete form in the uprising of March 18, 1871, its radical potential once again overflowed any prior meanings attached to the concept. Ross cites the communard Arthur Arnould on this point, who insisted that “the Paris Commune was something *more* and something *other* than an uprising. It was the advent of a principle, the affirmation of a politics. In a word, it was not only one more revolution, it was a new revolution, carrying in the folds of its flag a wholly original and characteristic program.”

Perhaps the most characteristic element of this program, Ross notes, is the fact that it was not based on any theoretical blueprints. Rather, it was the open-ended outcome of a collective process of struggle and experimentation

in which the Commune constituted itself as a “laboratory of political innovation” whose “great social measure,” in Marx’s words, “was its own working existence.” There are important resonances here with contemporary experience. When Marina Sitrin and Dario Azzellini refer to the square occupations of 2011 as “laboratories for democracy”, or Manuela Zechner speaks of Spain’s municipal platforms as “laboratories of social intelligence”, we are essentially witnessing the redeployment of the Commune’s experimental politics in our time.

But just as the Paris Commune was something more than an uprising, so it was something more than a political laboratory. Ultimately, it was a concrete manifestation of substantive freedom and *real* democracy—in the ancient Greek sense of the word—as the power of the people. In the short space of just two months, the Communards managed to liberate and organize a vast urban space in one of Europe’s largest metropolitan areas, establishing a direct democratic form of popular self-government that—in George Katsiaficas’ words—saw “hundreds of thousands of people creat[ing] popular organs of political power that efficiently replaced traditional forms of government.”

## THE COMMUNE AND THE STATE

This unprecedented experience in popular autonomy immediately raised the theoretic-

cal and practical question of the Commune’s relation to the existing state apparatus. For the anarchists, who had long argued and fought for the abolition of the centralized state and its substitution by a confederation of freely associating communes, the experience of 1871 was a real-life affirmation of the revolutionary ideal. Bakunin, for one, saw in the Commune “a bold, clearly formulated negation of the state.” Kropotkin held that, “by proclaiming the free Commune, the people of Paris proclaimed an essential anarchist principle, which was the breakdown of the state.”

Marx and Engels—who in the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848 had still called for greater state centralization after the revolution—

reached a remarkably similar conclusion as their anarchist counterparts. The spontaneous insurrection of the Parisian proletariat and the living experience of the Commune had informed Marx’s thinking on the revolutionary question, compelling him to recognize that “this program has in some details become antiquated.” And so, in 1872, he added a

crucial revision to the preface of the manifesto’s third German edition, noting that: “One thing especially was proved by the Commune, [namely], that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.’” As Engels would later write:

“  
*The Paris Commune  
was something more  
and something other  
than an uprising.  
It was the advent  
of a principle, the  
affirmation of  
a politics.*”

“ From the outset the Commune was compelled to recognize that the working class, once come to power, could not manage with the old state machine; that in order not to lose again its only just conquered supremacy, this working class must, on the one hand, do away with all the old repressive machinery previously used against itself [i.e., substituting the armed people for the standing army], and, on the other, safeguard itself against its own deputies and officials, by declaring them all, without exception, subject to recall at any moment.

The fact that subsequent generations of Marxists overlooked, obscured and in many cases actively distorted these important lessons from the Commune will forever stand as a testament to the tragedies of 20th century state socialism, both in its authoritarian and in its social-democratic forms. The historical fact remains that, starting on March 18, 1871, the Communards immediately set out to dismantle the existing state apparatus—a move that was enthusiastically applauded by Marx and his anarchist critics alike.

The Commune’s stance on the national question was equally characteristic as its stance on the state. Citing the extension of citizenship rights to immigrants and the election of a number of foreigners to the council, Kristin Ross highlights the Communards’ unwavering commitment to a radical working-class internationalism: “The Communal imagination,” she writes, “operated on the preferred scale of the local autonomous unit within an internationalist horizon.” This sentiment was powerfully expressed in the celebrated slogan that “the flag of the Commune is the flag of the World Republic.”

As for the rest of France, the political form of the commune was to become the building block of the whole territory—all cities, towns, villages and “even the smallest country hamlet” were to be reorganized as autonomous communes, which would elect recallable delegates to their own local and regional councils, which would in turn send recallable delegates to Paris. As Marx stressed: “the unity of the nation was not to be broken, but, on the contrary, to be organized by Communal Constitution, and to become a reality by the destruction of the state power.” From there on out, France would freely associate itself with other nations to form a global confederation of communes.

All of this rightly led Marx to conclude that the Commune was a “thoroughly expansive political form, while all the previous forms of government had been emphatically repressive. It’s true secret,” Marx argued, “was this: it was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labor.”

## THE COMMUNE AND THE ECONOMY

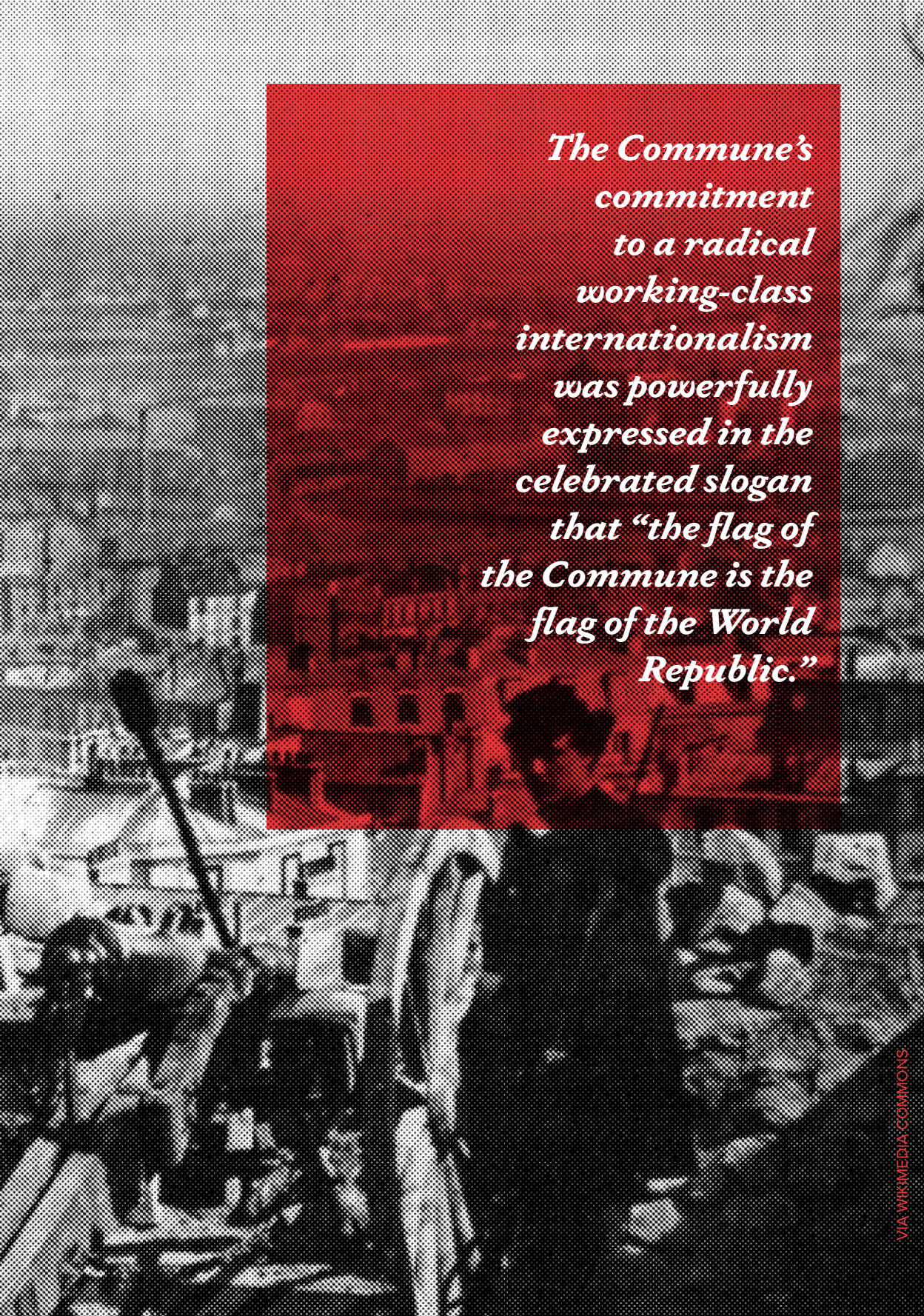
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As a working class government, the political form of the Commune was therefore inseparable from its economic corollary of communal ownership. The Communards themselves took this point very seriously: in addition to a number of other basic social reforms, the Commune decreed that all closed workplaces be turned over to their respective producer associations and reopened as cooperatives under worker control. While it obviously did not have the time to fully socialize the Parisian economy, the Commune's more radical elements certainly did push in this direction.

The Communist journal *La Cause*, for instance, described its stance as follows: "As the foundation of economic justice, we advance two fundamental theses: the land belongs to those who work it with their own hands: to the agricultural communes. Capital and all the tools of labor [belong to] the workers: to the workers' associations." Similarly, the Russian socialist and feminist revolutionary Elisabeth Dmitrieff, co-founder of the Women's Union in the Paris Commune, declared that:

“ *There is only one way of reorganizing labor so that the producer is guaranteed the product of his own work, and that is by setting up free producer associations which will share out the profits from the various industries. The establishment of these associations would put an end to the exploitation and enslavement of labor by capital, and would at last guarantee the workers the management of their own affairs.*





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The Commune can therefore be seen as an incipient attempt to break down the bourgeois firewall between political democracy and economic democracy. By pushing for the means of production to be held in common, for workplaces to be democratized and for the fruits of labor to accrue to their direct producers, the Commune—in Marx’ words—“intended to abolish that class property which makes the labor of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to [transform] the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labor, into mere instruments of free and associated labor.”

## THE COMMUNE AND SOCIETY

But the expansive nature of the Commune meant that emancipation did not stop at the factory gates—it inevitably spilled over into the city at large, opening up the field of struggles to a multitude of social actors who would otherwise have been overlooked, excluded or actively subordinated to the traditional vanguard of the industrial proletariat. This included the various forms of precarious, self-employed, deterritorialized and unwaged labor, as well as the unemployed, which as distinct social groups tend to be easier to organize territorially or communally than sectorally or occupationally. Of course the category of the unwaged crucially includes historically feminized reproductive labor, which helps explain why women have always played such a central role in communal struggles.

It is well known that the women of Paris were among the first to mobilize when the regular army moved in to seize the cannons of the National Guard at Montmartre. Fraterniz-

ing with the soldiers, the women convinced many to ignore their officers’ orders or even turn their weapons on their superiors. Apart from performing crucial tasks in the Commune’s defense, like building barricades and caring for the wounded, many women—like the legendary anarchist revolutionary Louise Michel—directly participated in the street fighting. When the vengeful Versaillais finally closed in on the city in mid-May, the bourgeois demonization of female *pétroleuses* burning down buildings at random served in large part to discredit women’s heroic role in the revolt.

“

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It is important to emphasize, in this respect, that the commune-form is ultimately but the political moment of a much profounder and more protracted *social* revolution; a revolution in which women in particular have much to gain. As Elisabeth Dmitrieff put it in her declaration for the Women's Union, "the reorganization of female labor is an extremely urgent matter, when one considers that in the society of the past it was the most exploited form of all." In addition to the right to divorce and education for girls, Dmitrieff and her comrades therefore fought for equal pay for women and for the weapons and ammunitions industry—in which the majority of workers were women—to be socialized and operated directly by the *Union des Femmes*.

Nevertheless, as Barucha Peller importantly points out in relation to Oaxaca, the expansiveness of the commune-form is by no means guaranteed, and much will depend on how the movement confronts the gendered logic of social reproduction. When men resist women's active participation in the commune, either by forcing them to "stay home" or by refusing to share in the burden of reproductive and historically feminized labor, the whole revolutionary process will stall in its tracks. The construction of the commune and the empowerment of women and other oppressed, exploited and marginalized social groups (including racial, ethnic and sexual minorities) is therefore not just a question of equal rights and equal pay; it is ultimately a question of building a new life in common.

## THE COMMUNE IN OUR TIME

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Today, as the second era of globalization draws to a close amidst the deepest and most protracted capitalist crisis since the 1930s, many of the practical and theoretical questions first raised by the Commune are presenting themselves

anew. As Kristin Ross astutely points out, "the way people live now [suggests] that the world of the Communards is in fact much closer to us than is the world of our parents." Just as then, a long wave of economic expansion has just run its course. Amidst the rising unemployment, the mountains of debt, the unaffordable housing, the generalized state of precarity and the growing urban discontent, a new generation of "proletarians" is growing up to the gradual realization that this system offers them nothing but Starbucks, smartphones and slavery.

Meanwhile, new wars are raging, millions of people are on the move and fascism openly celebrates its comeback. Some states in Southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East are already in an advanced state of disintegration, while the false sense of stability in the neoliberal heartland—generated purely by the financial largesse of increasingly unresponsive governments and the monetary extravagance of unaccountable central bankers—is punctuated ever so regularly by explosive urban riots of growing scope and intensity. Market turmoil has become the new normal, social tensions are rising across the board, and the establishment seems clueless about what to do. A busload full of people now controls more than half the world's wealth while humanity hurtles itself headlong into the abyss of ecological self-destruction. As cities burn, panic-stricken states strike back with more repression, more intimidation, more control. Yes, the glory days of democratic capitalism are truly over—and the left had better adapt to that fact.

In his last major essay before death, Murray Bookchin wrote that the most pressing challenge facing the left at the dawn of the 21st century was to find innovative new ways to "incorporate the best of the revolutionary tradition—Marxism and anarchism—in ways and forms that speak to the kind of problems

that face the present.” The answer, he suggested, was to be found in the revolutionary project that “originated in the Paris Commune”; a rational project centered on the construction of an international confederation of self-governing regions and municipalities operating within ecological limits and in accordance with “the principles and practice of communal ownership.”

*The glory days of democratic capitalism are truly over—and the left had better adapt to that fact. The commune is the horizon we must now look towards.*

This is the horizon we must now look towards. This can be our common ground—our definite aim and our collective sense of direction. The time has come to shake off the yoke of the 20th century and start building the Commune of communes. As Kropotkin ended his clarion call many a year ago: “We count on the present generation to bring about the social revolution within the commune, to put an end to the ignoble system of bourgeois exploitation, to rid the people of the tutelage of the state, to inaugurate a new era of liberty, equality, solidarity in the evolution of the human race.” ★

*Vive la Commune!*

JEROME ROOS



*Jerome Roos is the founder and editor of ROAR Magazine, and a PhD candidate in International Political Economy at the European University Institute.*

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# RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE

## LIBERTÉ - ÉGALITÉ - FRATERNITÉ

# COMMUNE DE PARIS

### To the French people:

Paris and the entire nation must know the nature, the reason, and the goal of the revolution that is being carried out. ... The Commune has the obligation to affirm and determine the aspirations and wishes of the populace of Paris, to define the character of the movement of March 18, misunderstood, unknown and slandered by the politicians seated at Versailles.

What does it ask for?

The recognition and consolidation of the Republic, the only form of government compatible with the rights of the people and the normal and free development of society.

The absolute autonomy of the Commune extended to all localities in France and assuring to each one its full rights, and to every Frenchman the full exercise of his faculties and abilities as man, citizen and producer.

The only limit to the autonomy of the Commune should be the equal right to autonomy for all communes adhering to the contract, whose association shall ensure French unity. ...Unity, as it has been imposed on us until today by the Empire, the monarchy or parliamentarism is nothing but unintelligent, arbitrary or onerous centralization.

Political unity, as Paris wants it, is the voluntary association of all local initiatives, the spontaneous and free concourse of all individual energies in view of a common goal: the well-being, the freedom and the security of all.

The communal revolution, begun by popular initiative on March 18, begins a new era of experimental, positive, scientific politics. It is the end of the old governmental and clerical world, of militarism and bureaucracy, of exploitation, speculation, monopolies and privileges to which the proletariat owe their servitude and the Fatherland its misfortunes and disasters.

As for us, citizens of Paris, our mission is the accomplishing of the modern Revolution, the largest and most fecund of all those which have illuminated history.

It is our obligation to fight and to win.

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*April 20th, 1871*