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***The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* by Kristin Ross**

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 192 pp, ISBN 9780816616879 (paperback)

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Probably because my first *home* was in a European Studies department – a constellation of subjects that has been largely decimated in the UK by a combination of neoliberal economics and parochial, monolingual nationalism - the monographs that have exerted the greatest influence upon me are all located beyond the parameters of Theatre and Performance Studies. So many of these texts have remained dear, but the one I cherish most - the one with the greatest contemporary resonance - is *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (1988) by Kristin Ross.

As opposed to merely spelling out the contemporary significance of Ross' text – her method of 'synchronic history' (1988: 10) makes that exercise largely redundant - I propose this short piece as a kind of academic love letter, an expression of respect and gratitude for an author whose political and poetic ways of doing history remain inspirational on so many levels.¹ I hope that this writing smells a little of the 'sea', to borrow a metaphor from Jacques Rancière whose name, along with those of Paul Lafargue, Elisée Reclus, Guy Debord, and Henri Lefebvre, I first encountered in Ross's writing.² And I hope too that it conjures the spectres of the Paris Commune whose 150th anniversary will be marked in the Spring of 2021.

¹ Citations are from the 2008 edition: Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2008 [1988]).

² Rancière imagines the sea as the space of politics; see his comments in *On the Shore of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London: Verso, 2007 [1992]), 1

In all of her texts, but especially in *The Emergence of Social Space*, Ross's research is an exercise in what I call *historical and political pneumatics*. The aim is explicit: to blast a fragment of a revolutionary past into the present, to *enthuse* and *infuse* the reader, to remind us of everything we still could be. To do that, Ross forges a mode of historical writing that looks to recover oppositional energies in very act of being expressed. Her prose is energetic, evocative, phenomenological, directly opposed to the metalepsis – the sheer deadliness – of New Historicism, one of the dominant discourses in the neo-liberal 1980s. 'By imagining', she wagers, 'the lived experience of actors in particular oppositional moments...one can avoid an analytic structure that insists on starting from the (predetermined) result' (10-11).

Ross is an archaeologist, a grave-digger, a conjurer of ghosts. For the Commune, as Ross reminds us, is a revolution whose past has often been erased, seen as a minor eruption by leftist historians, an embarrassment even, when compared to the sanctified revolutions of 1789 and 1917. Revolutions that supposedly changed things, while, all the while, keeping subjectivities, spaces, and institutions in place. As Ross has it, however, the 73 days of the Commune have never ended. Instead they contain in embryo a series of possibilities and potentials that are resurrected, again and again, each time a people, movement, or culture finds itself in revolt. Despite its violent repression at the hands of the French State (over 20,000 Communards were killed in one week), The Commune, for her, fulfilled its aims, and what it fulfilled is not so much a legacy to be handed down as a 'relay' to be re-established, an expression of the simple imperative driving all progressive politics: the question of what it means to live well.

But what is it that the Commune produced? Where did it succeed? Across five chapters that joyously collapse disciplinary ideas of urban history, revolutionary politics, and avant-garde poetics, Ross explains how the Commune gave rise to a new form of political organisation that challenged the primacy given to the State in Socialist thinking, a fact Marx himself picked up on in the much undervalued text *The Civil War in France* (1871). Crucially, it also impacted on how politics was

imagined, theorised and, above all else, practised. For in the Commune, revolutionary action was not the inevitable result of a historical process but, on the contrary, a more immediate and bodily response: the seizure of space, the desire to revolutionise everyday life itself. In this respect – and this is why Rimbaud and Rancière are so important to Ross's thinking in *The Emergence of Social Space* – the Commune looked to undo all specialisms, to disrupt the lived structures that policed what a person was and or could be. Through a series of brilliant close readings of Rimbaud's poems, analyses of political slogans and cartoons, and study of primary sources (diaries, letters, photographs, declarations), Ross, following Rancière and Lefebvre, shows how in the days of the Commune people found themselves *out of place* in a city – Paris - that during Napoléon III's Second Empire (1852-1870) had been subjected to the greatest exercise in urban disciplinarity ever attempted: the straight, monotonous and military lines of Georges-Eugène Haussmann's Boulevards. In the Communards' ruination of Paris's colonial architectures, sexuality and gender were de-created, historical divisions of labour were undone, and space and time were reconfigured. Anything could be art; anyone could be an artist. The point was not just to win power: it was to re-invent the very meaning of life itself – hence (again), the centrality of Rimbaud to her argument.

In Ross's account, Rimbaud is not dehistoricised, set up as a solitary, unique genius. On the contrary, his refusal of work and disdain for bourgeois life are resonant of the same frustrations experienced by many adolescents and young workers at the time in France, and whose alienation was one of the factors that lead to the Commune. Rimbaud's history, in other words, is a collective history, his writing the dream of a people who are not just 'still to come', but, more pertinently perhaps, were always already there. In an extraordinary passage which has resonances with the theatrical thinking of Antonin Artaud, Ross describes how laziness is not the opposite of work or a state of mind to be

equated with slowness, the torpor of boredom. Rather, to be lazy is to possess an adolescent body, to be willing to move at a speed that can never be measured or predicated in advance. Preempting Karen Barad, laziness is a condition of what she terms the 'virtual', an ability to act like a reptile, to shed one's skin without notice, to be available (*disponible*) for a million different transformations and mutations, to become other than self.

As we emerge (or not) from the Covid-19 pandemic, and are confronted with the possibility of large-scale unemployment, new forms of discipline and control, and a very real crisis in social housing and rent arrears, the Commune retains its revolutionary purchase. The Commune was an enormous rent strike, a struggle for control of the city, a desire for connection and transformation in an urban field that was unevenly distributed and rigidly segregated and where the working classes, along with women and young adults suffered the most. For it was these sections of the population who were tasked with repaying the debt for the disastrous Franco-Prussian War of 1870, which helped to create the conditions for the Commune in the first place. While the bourgeois State continued its capitalist sorcery, its commitment to commodity fetishism, the poor were made to foot the bill. The Communards revolted against this scenario and their strategies for living otherwise offer a palpable *exemplum*, an instance of what a proper alternative – a real one – to neo-liberal governance and Right-wing populism might be. More to the point and against all those discourses that lament the failure of the Communist imagination, the Commune happened. It existed, and its existence was ended by violence through an act of class war.

I could continue for some time unpacking the contemporary affordances of Ross's text, showing how, in her reading, the Commune opens up new forms of planetary thinking; of how Rimbaud's poems offer instances of a creolised, decolonised canon; of how the Commune influenced the postcolonial geographies and ethnographies of Elisée Reclus and Paul Lafargue

(Marx's Cuban son-in law), but I'd like to finish with something that is closer to home, one that is played in a minor key. As academics, embroiled in the relentless derangements of an educational control society, the inheritance of *The Emergence of Social Space* is found at a granular level: in how it invites us to think of research not as a measurable activity, the vocation of some professional mandarin, but, on the contrary, as a creative and political act that should look to pass on an energy of sorts, an enthusiasm, an exuberance, a desire for a different life whose newness has already been and whose time is always here - still.