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# **A COMMON HORIZON FOR SITUATED STRUGGLES**



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Cover image by Arnaud César Villette.

licanism. The political aim of reactionary and revisionist historical narratives is identical to that of the statues of slavers: to suppress the potentials which still await, ready to be reawakened, in older moments. Demolition, literal or figurative, is a good first step.

The real opposition then, as I argue in *The Commune Form*, is not between defense and offense but rather between the act of defending per se and the other political act we are so frequently called upon to perform—that of resisting. I am very interested in the kind of solidarity we will need to begin to build a post-productionist world, and what struck me the most about Notre-Dame-des-Landes was the creation I experienced there of a form of solidarity that wove together extremely diverse groups and individuals. Defending—as a set of activities, processes, and social relations—seemed to me to generate a much stronger—that is, flexible and effective—solidarity than did movements or postures based on “resistance.” In defending, we set the agenda. We set the agenda by determining what we value, using criteria that may have little or nothing to do with existing measurements of value dictated by the market or the state. We begin with something we cherish and want to flourish. Resistance, on the other hand, lets the state determine the agenda. The game is already up, and the other side holds the cards.

*The Commune Form. The Transformation of Everyday Life* by Kristin Ross is now available with Verso Books.

**KR:** There is, in fact, no paradox at all in the use of offensive measures by movements engaged in defending agricultural land, protecting resources held in common, or fashioning a shared social space. Defense does not imply passivity or the avoidance of direct action—quite the contrary. Sabotage, excursions into the territory of the enemy, what SLT calls “disarming” (“we have the right to attack that which is killing us”), and other forms of creative destruction have long figured in the panoply of methods used to combat privatization, the pollution of land and water, and the ongoing colonization of everyday life more generally. One need only return to the magnificent demolition of the Vendôme Column—built to honor Napoleon’s imperial escapades—by Parisian Communards seeking to make their city more habitable. When the Communards blew up what William Morris called “that tired piece of Napoleonic upholstery,” they were creating a space of pure potentiality in their city. African-Americans and others in the Southern U.S. who turn to demolition to rid their social space of statues of Confederate generals and slavers do much the same. Rendering common places habitable for all, “producing” a space, both physical and social, that people fashion for themselves—what Henri Lefebvre called appropriation—is a necessary precondition for becoming political subjects.

Monuments, as Anne Boyer points out in *Garments Against Women*, are not interesting in and of themselves. They are interesting as part of an assemblage; they arrange space. They are interesting in the way in which they actively diminish all other aspects of the surrounding landscape. “Each highly perceptible thing,” she writes, “makes something else almost imperceptible.” Black southerners are lessened, literally *belittled*, when their everyday trajectories take them by the monuments to the Confederacy erected throughout the South.

The problem, as I see it, lies with monumentalizing as such, and relates to my own efforts in my writing to move certain icons or monuments dominating the stage in order that other questions and figures become visible in the history of the left—the better to “liberate” those figures and defend them. A certain amount of demolition is needed to rid the terrain of *idées reçues* that have congealed around past revolutionary events—like the idea that May ’68 was benign for the state, for example, or that the Paris Commune was jump-started out of a spasm of anti-Prussian repub-

**Ill Will:** How do you see your work on May 1968 in light of the strong anti-colonial strands of last year’s uprising in France, triggered by the police murder of Nahel Merzouk, a 17-year old of Algerian and Moroccan origins? It’s hard not to see the connections between Merzouk’s death and the police murder of Tortugueta, the Atlanta forest protester of Venezuelan origins murdered by police while sitting cross-legged in their tent with their hands up. What is the relationship between the boomerang-like return of anti-colonial revolt to the metropolis and contemporary ecological and place-based struggles? What role might your conception of restitution play in this return?

**Kristin Ross:** My work on May ’68 is not changed at all by the anti-colonial strands of last year’s uprisings in France after the police murder of Nahel Merzouk. In fact, the argument I make in the book I wrote many years ago, *May ’68 and its Afterlives*, concerns the principal role played by the anti-colonial wars, in Algeria and Vietnam particularly, in the insurrections that sprang up in Paris streets and throughout Europe and beyond: the worldwide 1960s. This is a common enough perception now, but when I wrote the book in the late 1990s, the dominant idea of ’68 in France was that of a misguided panty-raid of sorts, the uprisings attributed to college boys not being allowed to enter girls’ dorms at night. Workers—let alone Vietnamese peasants—were nowhere in sight, the largest strike in French history “disappeared” by a narrow and self-interested focus on the biography of a few turncoat student leaders anxious to make their way in the corporate media.

What *does* alter my thinking about the '68 years is illustrated by my shift in focus, in *The Commune Form*, towards movements like what was occurring at the same time in a provincial city like Nantes—the whole set of alliances and networks formed there between *paysans*, students, and striking workers and their families as they set about together to recreate, manage, feed, and live their city and its environs as an insurrectional commune. The experience was short-lived, but far more consequential now, from the perspective of today's preoccupations, than what was occurring in the capital. When we shift our focus to Nantes, we can begin to see the outlines of another whole history, one that reaches back to mid-century, to the political consciousness informing the Paysans-Travailleurs [peasants-workers] movement, for example, a consciousness and orientation that had already made that region the center of a new agricultural left. And when Nantes comes into view, then the Larzac can no longer be seen as an afterthought of the long 1960s or a waning in its energies. The Larzac and the long battle to block the building of the Narita Airport in Japan can now be seen as events that reconfigure the entire history of the second half of the twentieth century up to our own time.

I wonder what exactly *are* the connections you see between Nahel Merzouk's death and the death of Tortugueta, the Atlanta protester at the Stop Cop City occupation—other than that they both occurred unnecessarily and at the hands of the police? What if we were to begin with the differences rather than the connections, especially when we can all agree that police violence is both on the rise and highly unwanted. And especially when the situations of Merzouk and Tortugueta were so very different. The difference, as I see it, is that Tortugueta was murdered at least in large part because they made the political choice to devote themselves to trying to save the Weelaunee Forest from being clear-cut and transformed into a cop training facility. That decision demanded a physical displacement on their part to the occupation site and undoubtedly any number of other existential modifications of their daily life. This is how they came to be in a tent in the forest. Nahel Merzouk, on the other hand, was stopped and murdered while merely driving near his neighborhood in a car. For him, as for countless adolescents of color, in France and in the United States, it was life (and death) as usual. I am obviously not suggesting that one death is less disturbing or less unjustifiable than the

a solid and quite vast tissue of supportive and pleasurable social relations. Much of the skill and energy of SLT now is devoted to demonstrating, to well-intentioned people who have never tried it before, that it is possible—even desirable—to work together with people whose political codes and identities differ from their own: political education, in other words, of a highly practical, pragmatic variety.

The commune form, as I see it, must be reanimated and made entirely contemporary if it is to be effective. The medieval commune, which had freed itself from the lords but was busy serving the interests of the wealthy merchants within its walls, practiced a fiercely chauvinistic form of self-protection, defending its own regional site against any incursions from neighboring communes. SLT has effectively reworked the form, and rendered it available to confront the new social, economic and ecological conditions we face. Where the ancient commune was designed to defend its own regional site, the contemporary mode of the commune form manifests itself transregionally, in a number of territories that find themselves “federated,” as it were, by the actions of SLT. I do think that in many ways SLT has resolved the problem of “federation” that eluded the Communards of the 19th century. It has created a common horizon of situated struggles.

**Ill Will:** You've argued that “defending the conditions for a dignified life on this planet has become the new and incontrovertible horizon of meaning of all political struggle,” and you've linked this axiom to a new style of political organizing that you call “defensive construction.” On the one hand, the inspiring struggles waged at ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, at Lützerath, in the Susa Valley or at Standing Rock appear to confirm your hypothesis. At the same time, these territorial defense movements have paradoxically sustained themselves through *offensive* forms of action, including mobilizations in nearby cities, sabotage, demonstrations at the homes of executives...to say nothing of the valve-turnings, the arson of construction equipment, and so on... Such offensive tendencies seem to have even crept to the fore with the emergence of SDT's campaigns, which—although spoken of as “disarmaments”—nevertheless involve activists determining the time, space, and nature of the conflict from their own initiative. How do you conceive of the relation between defense and offense in these new forms of struggle? Has this relation undergone notable shifts?

level but instead made in response to local conditions by those inhabitants directly involved in the action. This year members of SLT published a book, *Premières secousses*, which will hopefully appear soon in English, recounting and critiquing their actions thus far, in view of thinking the future orientation of the movement.

But an “orientation” is exactly what they have already provided, in the short span of their existence. SLT is not a party, it’s not a social class—anyone can join. The movement avoids the fixity of class or party but it is nevertheless *organized*. Its members have managed to create something like a global ambition—an orientation—out of struggles whose reason for existing derives from the specific needs of the beings that inhabit particular regions. For this reason, I see them as the commune form for our time.

At the end of *Communal Luxury* (2015), I restage a number of discussions that transpired in the Jura mountains and other sites of exile, between Commune survivors like Reclus and Lefrançais, intent on analyzing and critiquing what had just transpired in the streets of Paris. For them and other survivors, the main problem they had confronted in building the Commune was the absence of any means of “federating” with other forces and populations, whether in the countryside or among other emergent communes in Marseille, Saint-Étienne, and elsewhere at the time. The extreme isolation of the Parisian Communards, exacerbated not only by the Versailles guns but by the lies told to country-dwellers about what the “partageux” (sharers), as the Versailles called them, were doing in the city, was, to the minds of many survivors, the greatest problem they faced. This was a problem, needless to say, that I don’t believe the Internet or some other technological fix could have solved. The perils of isolation, of a little coterie or chapel of the like-minded, is a recurrent danger of the commune form, as Kropotkin and Reclus regularly point out. In the case of the ZAD at NDDL, such a danger was overcome by the highly porous nature of its boundaries, the constant stream of people, ideas, and vegetables that poured back and forth, as well as the care taken by its inhabitants to build and communicate with the various support committees that had sprung up across the country after moments of state intervention. The particular form and mode of organizing taken by SLT builds upon this history and benefits from the previous convivial labor that wove together

other. Merzouk’s murder by a racist police force, as he went about his daily life, reveals once again the unchanging and putrid colonial situation of the *banlieues* surrounding French cities (whose inhabitants reacted accordingly). Tortugueta’s death—the first state murder of an ecological activist in the United States—was just that, the murder of an activist.

As for going about articulating the colonial question with the ecological question, I think one good way to begin would be to return to CLR James’ powerful insight, in *The Black Jacobins*, that the whole agro-industrial complex of today has its point of origin in the New World plantation system. It all starts then and there.

**Ill Will:** The 19th and 20th century revolutionary tradition taught us to think of revolution as a “great evening,” a compressed decisive event. When such events become unimaginable, or when uprisings don’t scale up this far, there’s a risk of depression, despair, or even nihilism. The desire for a decisive revolutionary break transforms into a desire for a decisive collapse. You write instead that revolution as you envision it needn’t be totalizing but can happen *pièce à pièce*, bit by bit. You also challenge us to stretch the temporal frame in which we understand movements; for example, in your account of the long struggle against the Nantes airport prior to the creation of the ZAD as an occupation. When we think through this frame, revolution becomes a problem we can tackle here and now once again. In short, you seem to say that collapsism and other nihilisms rest on a misunderstanding of the nature of revolution in our era. Can you say more about this? What explains the persistence of this misunderstanding, and how do we go about correcting it?

**KR:** We’ve long ago forgotten the fantasy of an abolition of private property arriving by decree from a central revolutionary power. Just as we’ve stopped waiting for the “right moment,” the conjuncture that would bring about, in one fell swoop, systemic change for everyone across the planet. A centralized plan that would liberate us from capitalism is as difficult to imagine as all the technological fixes needed to repair what capitalism has done to the lived environment. Equally implausible or hard to imagine is a state government responding decisively and positively to the demands of well-behaved “save the climate” marches in its capital city.

The vacuum left by so many disappointments can easily be filled with nihilism, personality collapse, the loss of any meaning to life. In *The Commune Form*, I trace the political memory of an archaic form that flourishes when the state withdraws, and which as your question suggests, can be understood as offering an alternative understanding of, and temporality to, revolution. Certainly, both Marx and Kropotkin saw it as such: the commune form, in their view, was both the context and content of revolution, revolution's setting *and* the means of bringing it about. The commune as a form is both recognizable and infinitely transmutable, changing incessantly according to different situations and historical moments. The book is in large part an exercise in re-localizing, re-staging some examples of the form's instantiations (the Nantes Commune, Stop Cop City, for example), and working out the system of echoes that make those experiences, and the commune form itself, figurable for us today.

So, the vacuum left by disappointment can be filled by nihilism or it can be filled by action: action, as Miguel Abensour reminds us, creates its own utopian horizon. It's the capacity of struggle in the present, the capacity for collective action that creates dreams and desire—not the reverse.

And they create dreams and desires that all the privatized and state-approved pleasures, the whole repetitive world of underwhelming products available by next-day delivery, can't satisfy. What a world harnessed to the total digitalization of society offers in the way of compensation can no longer make up for such a fundamental loss in any way we might have about the world we inhabit.

It really comes down to the question of pleasure and the possibility of other worlds, as the university administrators who called in the cops *instantaneously* upon the first sign of a Gaza occupation on campus last spring, knew well. The French Minister of Transport, responding to the ongoing attempt to establish a ZAD at the site of a planned highway construction near Toulouse, recently made clear what was at stake for the authorities and powers that be: "A ZAD is not a benign or happy gathering, it's not a festival; it's a violation of the elementary rules of private property and public space." Now, while the second half of his statement is undoubtedly true, the threat, for the government is actually revealed in the resentment dripping from the first part of his statement:

what is unacceptable is the possibility of unscheduled and other convivial pleasures or of a life not limited to values based on economy, hierarchy and prestige.

**Ill Will:** *The Commune Form* will introduce many English-speaking readers to Les Soulèvements de la Terre [Earth Uprisings] for the first time, and you sketch out how this campaign "grew organically out of the ZAD" following its victory over the airport. But unlike the ZAD, which intervened in national politics by defending a single place, Soulèvements is mobilizing actions on a national basis to support local struggles. Could you speak to this shift in strategy and what it means for the concept of *defense*?

**KR:** When I say that SLT grew organically out of the ZAD, I'm pointing to its composition—in the Zadian sense of the term. The main tributaries that flow into SLT (autonomists from the ZAD, members of the Confédération Paysanne union, and climate activists from XR and elsewhere) are distinct groups with their own histories, who have different political codes and advocate and engage in different, often conflicting methods of action. This, however, is precisely the movement's greatest strength. Neither violence nor non-violence, legal methods or illegal ones are fetishized. When different elements act differently but in solidarity, with equality presumed (in the Rancièrian sense) across all the different groups and demonstrated by those deciding to act together, it becomes complicated for the state to intervene, or to circumscribe or recuperate the movement—which is not to say that it doesn't try, as we saw so vividly last year. Heterogeneity—the "complementarity of methods" that was born at the ZAD—favors flexibility and the ability to adapt to the realities of the terrain.

For a few years now, SLT has been amplifying and connecting particular ecological and *paysan* struggles throughout France. Motivated by the conviction that the recurrent call to "save the climate" was overly abstract and ultimately disempowering in its effects, SLT went about bringing the slogan down to Earth—in fact, to particular plots of earth, i.e., to specific, organized, pragmatic territorial interventions. Appropriate tactics for these interventions are not determined at a national or movement-wide