

the movement gravitated towards labourism, he never faltered in his advocacy of a future communist society that in the words of his comrade William Morris, ‘had no consciousness of being governed.’ That he was able to sustain his position without recourse to sectarianism, rancor, belligerence or menace earned him the respect of many, including Morris.

Stephen Williams worked as an education officer for the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and UNISON in the UK between 1979 and 2011. He co-authored the two volumes of official NUPE history and since retirement has written on Morris’s socialism and the Socialist League. Florence Boos is the author of *History and Poetics in the Early Writings of William Morris* (2015). An expanded version of her edition of Morris’s *Socialist Diary* is scheduled for publication in early 2018.

KRISTEN ROSS’S *COMMUNAL LUXURY:  
THE POLITICAL IMAGINARY OF THE  
PARIS COMMUNE.*

London: Verso, 2015. 156 pages.

*Florence S. Boos*

Kristin Ross’s concise but elegantly written treatise, *Communal Luxury*, assesses Morris’s contributions to late nineteenth-century British socialism from a comparative and international perspective. Ross argues that the Paris Commune and three of its nineteenth-century interpreters—Peter Kropotkin, Elisée Reclus, and William Morris—enter “vividly into the figurability of the present” (p. 2), as characterized by modern populist resistance movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter. In her meditation on the antecedents and results of this seventy-two-day experiment in worker-controlled government, Ross identifies the actions by which women, educators, and artists refashioned a hierarchical social structure into an internationalist, egalitarian democracy. For readers less acquainted with French than English nineteenth-century history, it is arresting to read of the pioneering efforts of Elizabeth Dmitrieff (organizer for the Women’s Union), Eugène Pottier (educator-advocate of a “polytechnic,” multi-faceted education), and the artist Gustave Courbet (founder of the Federation of Artists, which abolished the distinction between “signed” and “unsigned” [lesser] arts). Morris appears throughout Ross’s account as a British advocate of similarly egalitarian views, formed during a period in which he visited Iceland and translated medieval Scandinavian sagas. She notes that Morris found in Icelandic history an opening of possibilities, a “parable of the days

to come” (p. 75), a quality also reflected in the events of his poetic epic on the Paris Commune, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, with its added “shocking characteristic: it happened in the present” (p. 76). Her account of émigré life in London emphasizes the extent to which solidarity and shared reflection on the Commune’s meanings characterized the uprising’s survivors, whose later theories were born from action rather than the reverse. Similarly Morris believed that the new society, like the Commune, would embody shared life on a human scale: “the secret of happiness lies in the taking of interest in all the details of life, in elevating them by art” (p. 113).

Viewing the sundry factions of 1880s British and émigré socialism in an eclectic light, Ross summarizes, “What they shared was a view of human living that left little or no place for either the state or party politics, the nation or the market” (p. 108). She also defends the lack of programmatic purity that characterized Morris and his associates: “what looks to be theoretical confusion may well be an astute and well-thought-out political strategy” (p. 111). Most important, “fellowship” for Morris meant kinship between persons freed to engage in creative labor, living in harmony with the variety of nature. For those who were influenced by the spirit of the Commune, Ross argues, “Nature’s repair could only come about through the complete dismantling of international commerce and the capitalist system. A systemic problem demanded a systemic solution” (p. 139).

It is refreshing to read a modern commentator who, instead of revisiting the electoralism versus anarchism debates of the 1880s, argues for the relevance of Morris’s program for “making socialists,” the Abensourian “education of desire” that must accompany any political change. This seems a message expressly geared to the moment, as many people despair of making immediate changes in entrenched or undemocratic political systems and redouble their efforts at local initiatives and issue-directed coalitions. At times, the comparative method of *Communal Luxury* can slightly flatten the nuances of Morris’s thought in order to posit resemblances with Kropotkin and Elise Reclus, a scientist and geographer, respectively, but in compensation, Ross’s relative disregard of the English political context for Morris’s ideas in favor of more internationalist, theoretical readings emphasizes their internal coherence and intellectual force. *Communal Luxury* deepens our understanding of Britain’s “socialist imaginary” through its suggestive account of its affinities with other European revolutionary movements.

Ross's book has stirred much interest, including a special feature in the *Journal of William Morris Studies* (21, no. 4, 2016), in which three critics offer insights on its perspectives. In "Liberation Ecologies, circa 1871," Elizabeth Carolyn Miller finds Ross's study of the Commune distinctive in considering the communal associations that predated and prepared for the eventual political uprising and for its portrayal of Morris as well attuned to the pragmatic political currents of his day. She identifies the ecological strand of Morris's and Kropotkin's thought, preluded in each case by travel to an allegedly more primitive preindustrial culture (Iceland and Finland, respectively), where both men "learn[ed] from the non-human world [that] that which seemed fixed is, in reality, utterly unstable" (p. 14). In the end, one can view the Commune as anticipatory of recent regional movements for environmental justice and its ideal of "*communal luxury*"—plenitude without excess—as a continuing inspiration today.

In "The Stones in the Garden," Matthew Beaumont ruminates on a metaphor that Morris used in an 1871 letter to his wife: the loose stones at the edge of a lava field are like his "idea of a half-ruined Paris barricade" (Kelvin, ed., Morris, *Collected Letters*, 1, 146). Beaumont notes that Morris's sojourn in Iceland suggested the value of history in prompting hope for the future, but only if wrested from attempts to suppress its revolutionary meanings. Morris's veneration for the Commune embodied his search for an anticipatory "concrete utopia," defined by the Marxist philosopher Ernest Bloch as a "methodical organ for the new" (*JWMS* 21.4, 21). Beaumont further points out that for Morris, an egalitarian society must also be pastoral: that the lava field Morris describes also lay near a garden may suggest the different, possibly contradictory "warm and cold currents" of his later revolutionary imagination.

In "Reclaiming the Commune, Reclaiming William Morris...Again," Michelle Weinroth notes approvingly that Ross's text "gives Communard artisans pride of place: shoemakers, box-makers, fabric designers, porters, etc." Nonetheless, she argues that *Communal Luxury* is also "an utopian romance dressed in the apparel of an unorthodox history of ideas" (p. 24) and offers a Marxist critique of Ross's somewhat anachronistic encomium as avoiding Nowhere's radical elimination of a capitalist marketplace. Responding to the Communards' destruction of the statue of Napoleon in the Place Vendôme, she notes, "It is not an *aesthetic of space*... which must be altered, but a condition of labor" (p. 28); as Morris contended, within a competitive sys-

tem, "luxury" and dearth are now inextricably linked. Weinroth also points to the need to confront the brutal repression that ended the Commune, finding connection between the tragic loss of life and Morris's pained recognition of the necessary delays of history, for "without the defeats of past times we should now have no hope of final victory" ("Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris," *Commonweal*, 19 March 1887). In the end, the fact that a book on the imaginative legacy of the Paris Commune should evoke such engaged responses speaks well for the intellectual subtlety and courage of the Commune's nineteenth-century advocates, as well as to the anxieties that the spectacle of a suppressed populist uprising evokes in those who advocate for significant social change.

## MLA 2018 IN NEW YORK CITY

**The Modern Language Association Convention** will be held in New York City 4-7 January, 2018. Friday January 5<sup>th</sup> will be a full day, with two sessions at the Sheraton Hotel, followed by a tour of an exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite materials at the Morgan Library and our annual dinner. Free session passes are available for non-MLA members, and if you would like one, please let Jason Martinek know before the convention at [jasondmartinek@gmail.com](mailto:jasondmartinek@gmail.com).

### "THE PRE-RAPHAELITES AND THE MORGAN LIBRARY"

Organized by Paul Acker, is scheduled for **1:45-3:00 p. m.** in the Sutton Place Room at the Sheraton. The topics and speakers are:

- "Utopia under Construction: News from Nowhere in the Pierpont Morgan Library," Meaghan Freeman, Manhattanville College
- "Finders, Eyes, and Sympathy': The Kelmscott Chaucer Platinotypes," Heather Bozant Witcher, St. Louis University
- "The Pierpont Morgan Library as Pre-Raphaelite Archive," Paul L. Acker, St. Louis University

### "OBJECTIFYING MORRIS"

The official William Morris Society session will be held **3:30-4:45** in the Bowery Room, Sheraton. The speakers will be:

- "Materially Relational: William Morris and the Hybrid Literary Object," Rachel A. Ernst, Boston College
- "William Morris's Interior Design Creations and His Love of Mythology," Corinna Margarete Illingworth, independent scholar