Interview with Kristin Ross | May ’68: Beyond the Artificial Commemorations and Remembrances

*Interview with **Kristin Ross** by **Yavor Tarinski** for Babylonia Journal.*
*You can find the interview in Greek **here**.*

Kristin Ross gave an interview for Babylonia journal, analyzing the meanings and significance of May ’68. She will be among the keynote speakers at this year’s B-Fest (25^{th}-26^{th}-27^{th} of May in the Fine Arts School in Athens). *Ross is a professor of comparative literature at New York University and author of many books like “May ’68 and Its Afterlives”, “The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune” and “Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune”.*

Yavor Tarinski: This year marks the 50th anniversary of the rebellious May ‘68, when the Parisian youth took to the streets, challenging established social hierarchies and dominant myths. What is, according to you, the relevance that this date bears for us today?

Kristin Ross: The categories you use—“Parisian youth” and even “May ‘68,”—are precisely the narrative categories that I tried to put into question and actively dismantle in my book, *May ’68 and Its Afterlives*. Perhaps what your question shows is the tenacity that certain tropes and images hold in organizing our vision of the recent past. I don’t perceive “youth” *per se* to be the political subject of ’68; I don’t see the events as occurring in the French capital; and the worldwide set of political insurrections and social turbulence to which we have

given the name of “68” was certainly not limited to the month of May.

So, if what we call May ’68 bears any relevance for us today, we would have to look for it outside the parameters of your question, as I will discuss when I come to Athens: in western France, perhaps, or on the outskirts of Tokyo; in the fruits of the unexpected meetings between very different kinds of people—workers and farmers, for instance, or French students and Algerian immigrants—and the political subjectivization sparked by those encounters; in the great “protracted wars” like the Lip or Larzac in France for example, which traversed the long 1960s (a political sequence that extends, in my view, from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s), and which thus have a duration that far exceeds the month of May.

Y.T.: This period is seen by many as a pivotal one in the evolution of revolutionary thinking and praxis. On the one hand it shattered the idea of predetermined revolutionary subject, i.e. the working class, while on the other it challenged the privileges and leadership of “enlightened” experts (even of those that claim to hold expertise in revolution and social change), proposing instead radical forms of direct democracy. Many on the Left, however, have come to view this democratic decentralization as the ultimate reason for the revolt’s failure, since it prevented the social movements of that time from seizing state-power. You on the other hand seem to disagree with this narrative. What really made the rebellious events of May ’68 fail in their effort at radically transforming society, if you agree that they have failed?

K.R.: I am not a political theorist and try never to put myself in the position of gauging the success or failure of an insurrection or social movement. I don’t think the logic of failure/fulfillment gets us very far in our consideration of past movements, but it is a strikingly persistent logic. I’ll give you an example. A couple years ago, I had a discussion

with Alain Badiou during which he insisted on the Paris Commune as an example of failure. I was tempted to ask him what, in his opinion, a successful Commune at that time would have looked like! I have always found it very difficult to know what counts as success and what has failed. There's a saying in English: how many swallows make a summer?

The events that have preoccupied me—May '68 and the Paris Commune—are a paradise for what I call back-seat drivers, those after-the-fact experts who second-guess the historical actors and make an inventory of their errors. Why didn't the Communards march on Versailles? Why weren't they better organized militarily? Why did they waste their precious time (presuming, of course, they were aware of the imminent demise that would render their time so precious) quarreling in the Hôtel de Ville? Why didn't they seize the money from the bank? Why did French workers during '68 end their strike?

What is amazing to me is how unshakeable the desire to either teach the past a lesson or to have the past's "failures" teach us a lesson (which comes to the same thing) can be. With Badiou I tried several ways of avoiding the pedagogical paradigm he was adopting toward the past. I spoke about how, for those who lived the Commune, a real sense of liberation and network of solidarity were achieved. I spoke of the ideas unleashed, for us now to consider, precisely by the inventive nature of the event. (Of course, both of these statements hold true for '68 as well). And despite all that, Médiapart (the host of the discussion) still entitled the interview "The Lessons of the Commune!"

What this shows, I think is how much progressive thinking about emancipation still operates as though there were an agreed-upon blueprint of ends to be attained, and as though these ends could be precisely determined and then objectively measured as having been achieved or not achieved according to time-worn standards or to criteria drawn up in 2017. I think people enjoy being in the position of establishing, after the

fact, what was possible, impossible, too soon, too late, outmoded or unrealistic at any given moment. But what is lost when one adopts this position is any sense of the experimental dimension of politics.

In order to view the Commune or what occurred in any number of places during the ’68 years as laboratories of political invention, and to see the capacities set in motion when ordinary people work together to manage their own affairs, I had to try to completely disengage from any traces of the kind of balance-sheet logic I’ve been describing.

Y.T.: In your book “May ’68 and its Afterlives” you say that the anonymous militants that were active in the everyday neighborhood grassroots politics of May ’68, have been replaced in the “official” memory by leaders and spokesmen that appeared afterwards. A similar pattern you observe in another revolutionary moment in another book of yours – “Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune”. Why is that happening and how can the oppressed reclaim their history?

K.R.: My books were each written to intervene into specific situations. In the late 1990s I began thinking about ’68 and the way it had been remembered, debated, trivialized, and forgotten over the years. The reason for my fascination with that question at that moment had nothing to do with a commemoration or other artificial date of remembrance.

Instead, what motivated me was the way in which the 1995 labor strikes in France, followed by anti-globalization protests in Seattle and Genoa, had awakened new manifestations of political expression in France and elsewhere and new forms of a vigorous anti-capitalism after the long dormancy of the 1980s. It was this revitalized political momentum that led me to write my history of May’s afterlives. The workers’ movements had dislodged a sentiment of oblivion, if not triviality, that had settled over the ’68 years, and I felt

the need to try to show the way the events, what had happened concretely to a staggeringly varied array of ordinary people throughout France, had not only receded from view, but had in fact been actively "disappeared" behind walls of grand abstractions, fusty clichés and unanchored invocations. The re-emergence of the labor movement in the 90s jarred the 60s loose from all the images and phrases put into place in France and elsewhere by a confluence of forces—the media, the institution of the commemoration, and the ex-gauchistes converted to the imperatives of the market.

At that time only a few faces—I'm talking about men like Bernard Henri-Levy, Andre Glucksmann, Bernard Kouchner, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, and Alain Finkelkraut—were visible, and only their voices could be heard over the French airways, recounting what was taken to be the official account of the movement. These self-appointed and media-anointed spokesmen (we have their equivalents in the United States), all of whom could be relied upon to re-enact at the drop of a hat the renunciation of the errors of their youth, were those I called in my book the official memory functionaries.

The labor strikes of the winter of 1995 not only succeeded in forcing a government climb down over the issue of changes to the pensions of public sector workers, they also wrested control of the memory of '68 from the official spokespeople and reminded people what all the combined forces of oblivion, including what we can now see as a kind of Americanization of the memory of French May, had helped them to forget: that May '68 was the largest mass movement in modern French history, the most important strike in the history of the French labor movement, and the only "general" insurrection western, overdeveloped countries had experienced since World War II.

In any mass political movement on the left, there is always the danger of what I call "personalization" to take place—that process whereby people involved in a leaderless social movement on a massive scale allow the forces of order or the

media to concentrate the task of "representing the movement" and speaking for it, in just a few central figures. But this kind of monopolizing of the memory of an event by official spokespeople did not really occur to anywhere the same extent in the case of the Commune as it did with '68. After all, many Communards were dead at the end of the Bloody Week, the survivors were scattered throughout Europe and even the United States. Despite all sorts of censorship on the part of the French government, survivors were able to publish their memoirs and accounts, mostly in Switzerland.

Historians writing in the wake of the Commune do, of course, tend to concentrate their attention on the same figures: Louise Michel, for example, or Gustave Courbet. In my thinking about historical processes, I find that it is always interesting to shove these kind of leading men and leading women to the back of the stage—if only to see who or what becomes visible when one does so.

Y.T.: Your work encompasses another pivotal revolutionary moment – The Paris Commune. In "The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune" you write that the Commune was not just an uprising against the acts of the Second Empire, but perhaps more than all, a revolt against deep forms of social regimentation. One patter, for example, that seems to be shared by both is the urge from the grassroots towards dismantling bureaucratically imposed social roles and identities. Can this and other parallels be drawn between these two urban revolutionary experiences?

K.R.: Yes, I believe that deep forms of social regimentation were under attack in both moments—during the Commune and during May '68. Artists and artisans under the Commune managed to dismantle the central hierarchy at the heart of 19th century artistic production—the hierarchy that gave "fine" artists (sculptors and painters) vast financial privilege, status, and security over decorative artists, craftspeople and

artisans. And one way of looking at ’68 is as a massive crisis in functionalism—students no longer functioned as students, farmers stopped farming, and workers quit working.

There’s a nice quote from Maurice Blanchot, of all people, that sums up the situation quite accurately. The specific force of May, he wrote, derived from the fact that “in this so-called student action, students never acted as students, but as the revealers of a total crisis, as bearers of a power of rupture putting into question the regime, the State, the society.” The same could be said about farmers at that time—they acted as farmers but as far more than farmers as well; they were thinking about their situation and the question of agriculture politically and not just sociologically.

Y.T.: In 1988 you wrote that if workers are those who are not allowed to transform the space/time allotted them, then revolution consists not in changing the juridical form that allots space/time but rather in completely transforming the nature of space/time. Such traits we saw in both May ’68 and the Paris Commune. Do you see such revolutionary potential in the contemporary age, in which political apathy, mindless consumerism and generalized cynicism seem to reign?

K.R.: May ’68 holds absolutely no interest at all for me except to the extent that it can enter into the figurability of our present and illuminate our current situation. If it doesn’t, we are right to consign it to the dust-heap. As a group of radical historians put it in the wake of ’68, “Think the past politically in order to think the present historically.” Their message was a two-pronged attack. First: think the present both as scandal and as something that can change. And second: history is much too important a matter to be left to historians.

Any analysis of an historical event, and especially the 1960s, conveys a judgment about the present situation. When

confronted with any attempt to represent the 60s, we have to ask ourselves what is being fought for in the present, *what is being defended now.* These are the questions I intend to pursue in my lecture in Athens.