Rejecting the American Model
Peter Kropotkin’s Radical Communalism

Matthew S. Adams

This item was submitted to Loughborough University’s Institutional Repository by the author. Citation: ADAMS, M.S., 2014. Rejecting the American model: Peter Kropotkin’s radical communalism. History of Political Thought, 25 (1), pp. 147 — 173. This paper was accepted for publication in the journal History of Political Thought and the definitive published version is available at www.ingentaconnect.com.

Metadata Record: dspace.iboro.ac.uk. This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: creativecommons.org.

Please cite the published version.

cite the published version.
deficiencies. First, their economic organisation resulted in a precarious and unappealing existence; secondly, their isolation and poverty produced a culturally vapid existence; and thirdly, the burdens of communal life gave little space for individuality to develop. Kropotkin deployed this evaluation to contrast the diversity that his version of communal political thought would supposedly offer, and, in rejecting the American model, his utopianism came into clearer focus. The fairness of his characterisation of the variety of schemes that defined communal experimentation in the US in the mid-nineteenth century is certainly open to question, as is his certainty that anarchist communalism had the theoretical resources to avoid these pitfalls. Yet, to understand Kropotkin’s utopianism, it is crucial to comprehend his rhetorical construction of this image, and its deployment in his writing.

Matthew S. Adams
University of Durham

125 I would like to thank Stuart Jones, Martin Adams, Catherine Feely, the editor, and two anonymous HPT reviewers for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.
utopianism overlook his multifaceted engagement with theoretical and practical communalism. This was not a passing concern, but formed a central pillar of his political vision. That Kropotkin, in his 1906 preface to *The Conquest of Bread* confidently stated that the book’s ‘leading ideas must have been correct’, hints at this continuity, but the broader view of his intellectual output taken here affirms it.122 Although his most explicit criticism of American communalism appeared in *The Conquest of Bread*, the assumptions that this position rests upon, and the counter-image of anarchist communalism he conjured, were pervasive aspects of his theoretical edifice. Not only does this nuance our understanding of his communalism and its genesis, it also undermines the narrative that sees Kropotkin sliding in scholarly solitude in Britain.123 A fixation on the communes’ history and potential lay was central to *Paroles d’un Révolté* at the dawn of his career, and endured throughout his time in Britain, finding expression in scholarly texts like *Fields, Factories and Workshops* as well as marginal pieces in *Freedom*. That these expositions on the history and theory of communalism continued to be a prominent feature of his work attests to the conviction that lay behind Kropotkin’s vision of a communal future, and underscores the activist thrust of his philosophy. Utopianism, especially a belief that thinking about the shape of tomorrow could edify and galvanise social actors in the present, lay at the heart of Kropotkin’s politics.

Fourier’s work allowed these revolutionaries to see further. To see, in Kropotkin’s words, ‘samples of the bricks out of which the great synthetic building will have to be built, and even samples of some of its rooms.’124 Fourierists, however, had undermined the vitality of the vision. Their actions had clouded the image of communalism, and their social schemes suffered three major

---

122 Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.xi.
124 Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.xii
Fourier’s tendency to present blueprints for the future conflicted with Kropotkin’s focus on flux, temporality and contingency. The commune would ultimately create its own future in the course of revolution, not follow the dictates of the philosopher. There was then in Fourier’s theory a latent authoritarianism, and a distrust of ‘the masses’. Lack of a realistic understanding of revolution meant conversing with autocrats, and after all, Kropotkin’s image of Fourier seeking Napoleon’s help was not apocryphal. Nevertheless, Kropotkin borrowed much from Fourier. The shared belief in the sanctity of labour and its centrality to human happiness is patent, as is the assumption that the beautification of work itself is necessary to remove the need for coercion. And Fourier’s great insight, his bold contribution to socialist theory, was an indication of the unit that might make this system possible – the phalanstère. The priggish Kropotkin was silent on Fourier’s keen interest in sex, but otherwise the influence of Fourier is clear, and one that endures in anarchist political thought.

Those American pioneers of Fourierism that wandered into the wilderness to build heaven on earth had, however, amplified their master’s weaknesses and achieved none of his great insights. Kropotkin was well aware that these attempts had written a history of communalism redolent of failure, and, seeking to popularise anarchism, he strove to disentangle Fourier from these experiments. He used the image of the American commune – pious, austere and controlling – as a rhetorical device to juxtapose the liberties prof­fered by anarchist comm­unalism. Modern analyses of anarchist

---

120 Beecher, *Charles Fourier*, p.110, 134.
other for small defects of individual character’. Embellishing this theme, he posed the counter-intuitive conclusion that the larger the community, the smaller the burden of communal politics, and the greater the scope for individual expression:

The individual and [the] individual’s personality more easily disappear in a group of 2,000 than in a group of 200 or 20. It is extremely difficult to keep 50 or 100 persons in continuous full agreement. For 2,000, or 10,000 this is not required. They only need to agree as to some advantageous methods of common work, and are free to live in their own way.

With this in view, Kropotkin emphasised that bucolic isolation in American deserts was not the vision of vibrant communalism he had in mind. The best place, in contrast, ‘is near London or near Paris’, rather than secluded collectives serving as a ‘refuge for those who have abandoned the battle’.

Conclusion

Central to Kropotkin’s anarchism was an image of communal life in which the burdens of work were reduced, labour shared, leisure rendered productive and self-improving, and the opportunities for political participation maximised. Although fundamental to his politics, Kropotkin’s active engagement with a deeper tradition of theoretical and practical utopianism has been neglected. The transient popularity of Fourier’s work after his death was a testament to the many truths in this eccentric complex of ideas, but Kropotkin was also conscious of the multiple deficiencies of his system. For one, its very systematicity was a problem, and

Abstract

Kropotkin’s anarchism looked to a future defined by communalism. However, his understanding of this potential communal future has rarely been subject to analysis. Particularly important was his distinction between communalism and the tradition of communal experimentation in the US, which drew heavily on the ideas of Charles Fourier. Kropotkin was influenced by Fourier, but thought that attempts to found phalanstèries had been disastrous, vitiating the power of communalist propaganda. To defend the idea of a communal future, Kropotkin therefore advanced a tripartite critique of the US model of utopian experimentation. The image of American utopianism he created consequently served as a useful rhetorical device, allowing him to advance a counter-image of the anarchist communal theory that lay at the heart of his political theory.

Introduction

Peter Kropotkin’s anarchist utopia The Conquest of Bread attempted to anticipate the multiple objections to the viability of anarchism. Addressing the critical questions of an imaginary interlocutor was one of Kropotkin’s favoured rhetorical devices, and in his 1892 work, it was applied thoroughly to present a detailed exposition of what an anarchist world might look like. In a preface added to the 1906 translation, Kropotkin made it clear that communalism would be a defining feature of any future anarchist society. The Paris Commune of 1871, a prominent event in socialist mythology, had revealed the continuing practicability of communal organisation in the context of mass society, he argued, and anarchist revolutionaries should look to the ‘agro-industrial commune’ as the

---

117 Peter Kropotkin, "Proposed Communist Settlement: A New Colony for Tyneside or Wearside" in The Newcastle Daily Chronicle, 20th February, 1895, pp.4

1 Matthew S. Adams, Department of History, Durham University, 43 North Bailey, Durham, DH1 3EX.
2 See: Peter Kropotkin, The Conquest of Bread (New York, 1907), pp.iii-xii.
vehicle of anarchism. Yet, Kropotkin observed that communalism was not only the surest means of approximating anarchism in a future society, but also a guiding logic of the revolutionary transition itself. Instead of a state-led revolution of a Marxian variety, he suggested that the spirit of communalisation would necessarily emerge in the earliest days of an upheaval, as the state retreated and popular initiative filled the vacuum. Kropotkin’s reading of the French Revolution confirmed the truth of this theory, demonstrating at once the seductive qualities of untrammelled power, but also the formidable resourcefulness slumbering in the cities and villages. History too had revealed the power of communal organisation.

While The Conquest of Bread was keen to distinguish anarchism from competing strands of socialist thought by emphasising Kropotkin’s antipathy to the state, a feature less commented upon is its specific theoretical understanding of communalism. A central aspect of Kropotkin’s political theory was a criticism of the ‘intentional communities’ that he believed characterised a certain type of futile socialism prevalent in the United States. Although greatly inspired by the work of Charles Fourier, a figure Kropotkin placed at the apex of the history of modern socialism, he believed that attempts to realise communal societies in a Fouri-

---

3 Kropotkin, Conquest of Bread, p.8.
5 Although a product of contemporary social science, and therefore not a term that Kropotkin employed, ‘intentional’ community is a useful shorthand for those utopian experiments that flourished in nineteenth-century America. Denoting communities established to preserve a ‘unique collective purpose’ and ‘usually comprised of a relatively small group of individuals who...created a unique way of life for the attainment of an articulated set of goals’, experiments like this, taking inspiration from a variety of ideas, grew on the intellectual and physical landscape. John W. Friesen and Virginia Lyons Friesen, The Palgrave Companion to North American Utopias (New York, 2004), pp.15–16. See also: Barry Shenker, Intentional Communities: Ideology and Alienation in Communal Societies (London, 1986), pp.10–12.

6 Anarchist communalism, in contrast, must rest on a different set of premises.

Fundamental to Kropotkin’s vision of a future anarchist community was that fulfilment and improvement must become a realistic project for all members of the community. Communalism would offer unparalleled opportunities for participation, but the space to withdraw was equally precious. This would take a number of forms, but one aspect of communal living he explicitly rejected was group dining. Returning to the motif of the ‘barrack’, he noted that such communal practices failed to take account of the fact that ‘when folks have done working, they...desire the company of those with whom they find themselves in sympathy.’ For Kropotkin this reflected the simple fact expressed in Mutual Aid, that individuals often act oppressively – a point overlooked by those that see his moral theory as narrowly optimistic. ‘Even for two real brothers to live together in the same house’, he reflected, was not always conducive to harmonious life, suggesting that the onerous demand for continual association in utopian communities was naïve. Statements like this had implications for the size of Kropotkin’s imagined community. Although he insisted that impersonal entities like the modern state must be superseded by comparatively small communities, in voicing concerns at the potential for overbearing communality he suggested that they must significantly larger than the communal experiments familiar in the US. Adopting the example of the ‘steamboat’, Kropotkin highlighted the rapidity with which ‘20 passengers’ soon ‘begin to hate each

---

Tocqueville and Mill’s concern that democratic societies could act tyrannically towards dissenting inhabitants a common frame of reference. Modern anarchist thinkers like Todd May advance similar charges against Kropotkin, albeit drawing inspiration from continental philosophy. Commenting on Kropotkin’s suggestion that social care was the surest way to deal with antisocial behaviour, May has accused Kropotkin of advancing a ‘concept of the norm as the prototype of the properly human.’ Diminutive communities might increase the space for political participation, but this curtails the opportunity to escape the judgemental gaze of one’s neighbours.

Objections like these pose legitimate questions of Kropotkin’s communal approach to maximising freedom, but what tends to be neglected is the fact that he repeatedly advanced an analogous critique of authoritarianism in utopian experiments. He echoed, for instance, Marx’s depiction of ‘barrack communism’ when approvingly discussing Proudhon’s opposition to ‘all schemes of communism, according to which mankind would be driven into communistic monasteries or barracks’. These experiments in living, he had reflected earlier, had had the pernicious effect of deforming the popular meaning of the word communism, with ‘most people’ thinking ‘of the more or less Christian and monastic and always authoritarian communism advocated in the


the physical isolation of the commune was an attempt to prevent parochialism, finding expression in his comment that:

Pour nous, «Commune» n’est plus une agglomération territoriale; c’est plutôt un nom générique, un synonyme de groupement d’égaux, ne connaissant ni frontiers ni murailles.⁶(1)

This organisational ethos underpinned Kropotkin’s anarchist communalism, and the flexibility it enshrined found an echo in his approach to the question of work and leisure in an anarchist society. These ideas emerged from an interaction with a tradition of communal thinking, particularly in its Fourierian origins, which he was critical of in its practical manifestations but, nonetheless, fundamentally indebted to.

To gain a clearer picture of Kropotkin’s engagement with communalist history, and its influence on his utopian political theory, the three points of analysis below make a number of interrelated claims. First, the act of contextualising Kropotkin’s The Conquest of Bread in terms of his broader corpus hints at the surprising comprehensiveness of his work. Appreciating his intellectual context and particularly his indebtedness to a tradition of system-building social philosophy represented by Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer, makes this essential unity clearer, and challenges attempts to discern any significant theoretical break in his work. Whilst influenced by Comte and Spencer’s synthetic epistemologies, Kropotkin’s reading of the two mostly elided their political divergences – namely, Comte’s sympathy for centralised planning and Spencer’s overt hostility to centralisation. Kropotkin’s politics therefore lay closer to Spencer’s, a proximity that he acknowledged, but on Comte’s Saint-Simonian heritage, he remained largely silent.⁷ Despite adopting the nomenclature of the sys-

---

³ For a useful discussion of Comte’s ideas, see: H.S. Jones, “Introduction” to Auguste Comte, Early Political Writings (Cambridge, 1998), especially pp.xii-

---

the vibrant intellectual and cultural life of the communal movement stemmed from its political and social organization. The developed network of guilds that nurtured labour and encouraged pride in work, was one factor that Kropotkin highlighted in the medieval commune that raised ‘handicraft’ to a position that had not been matched.¹⁰⁷ But more than this, Kropotkin suggested that a ‘grand idea’ incandesced within the walls of the commune. ‘Like Greek art’, he wrote, medieval culture ‘sprang out of a conception of brotherhood and unity fostered by the city’.¹⁰⁸ In Fields, Factories and Workshops, Kropotkin returned to this theme. Mentioning John Ruskin, an inveterate enthusiast for medieval craftwork, he argued that culture would necessarily languish until handiwork was placed on a similar level to that which it had occupied in the communes. More crucially, the cooperation that communalism rested upon would lead this aesthetic change, with ‘humanity breaking its present bonds... [and]...making a new start in the higher principles of solidarity’. Communal life, in Kropotkin’s thinking, would stand in stark contrast to the American experiments where the pleasures and variety of life were crushed by dull necessity. He concluded with an affirmation of his romantic influences, by quoting Goethe: ‘Greifn nur hinen ins volle Menschenleben...Ein jeber lebt’s – nicht vielen ist’s bekannt.’¹⁰⁹(8) To seize this full life would embolden modern art, spark creativity and initiate a social life textured by aesthetic sophistication, and for Kropotkin, the crucible for this development was communalism.

The third and final criticism that Kropotkin levelled at communal experiments concerned their tendency to destroy the freedom that they sought through their overbearing communality. In the history of political thought such anxieties are familiar, with both

¹⁰⁷ Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, p.209, 192.
¹⁰⁸ Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, p.211.

(8) Only reach into full human life...Everybody lives, not many are known.
Factories and Workshops remerges the vision of an anarchist community visible at the start of his career, but in this instance, framed as a critique of the assumptions of conventional political economy. In fact, the book begins by challenging Adam Smith’s alleged obsession with the division of labour, ultimately countering that small-scale production organised federally was the solution to the anarchy of capitalist production. Parallel to this, Kropotkin presented a utopian image contrasting with the economic impoverishment and cultural mundanity he believed characteristic of earlier communal experiments. Small-scale productive units had obvious ‘moral and physical advantages’ when juxtaposed with industrial behemoths like Manchester – a city that reoccurred in Victorian discourse as the exemplar of capitalism’s brutality. With industrial zoning overcome in the shape of the ‘factory amidst the fields’, Kropotkin believed that working-life could be quickly revolutionized. Echoing Fourier’s call for the variation of labour, he concluded that the spatial implications of the ‘agro-industrial’ organization leant itself admirably to the rotation of tasks. And, coupled with the rational application of the technological advances of the nineteenth-century that he had championed in The Conquest of Bread, he optimistically assessed that the burden of work, particularly its most toilsome varieties, could be exponentially reduced.

With the anarchist commune organised in such a manner, the manumission of proletarian drones would supposedly bring with it a culture that would surpass the achievements of the Renaissance. Although Kropotkin insisted that a return to medieval communalism was not an option, nor necessarily desirable, he believed that...
organisation prohibited at the time of the Commune, sparked an outcry. That the International had largely ceased to exist post-1877 suggested that the prosecutors were anxious to be seen taking action after a recent spate of terrorist acts. Nevertheless, despite spurious evidence, Kropotkin was imprisoned. Indicative of his growing scholarly renown, at this stage a consequence of his work in the field of orography, a petition was started that attracted the signatures of a cross-section of British cultural life, including many academics, writers and scientists. Upon his release in 1886, Kropotkin sensed that France was no longer a comfortable place to propagate anarchist ideas, and so began a thirty-one year exile in Britain. Plagued by ill health, the pressures of supporting his family through his writing, and the comparatively embryonic nature of the anarchist movement in Britain meant that his extended sojourn marked a period of decreasing involvement with practical politics.

Whilst signalling a decline in practical activity, Kropotkin’s British exile also marked the period when he rose to prominence as the major theorist of anarchism – a mantle he inherited from Mikhail Bakunin. Although hostile to the idea of leadership, and sceptical of anything that might imply intellectual authority, even Kropotkin’s anarchist opponents tended to concede his stature. In contrast to the notoriously chaotic and impulsive Bakunin, Kropotkin’s major achievement was the patient elaboration of his ideas in a variety of forms, and his attempt to relate anarchist thought to contemporary developments in science and philosophy. Convinced of the importance of providing anarchism with robust

organisation prohibited at the time of the Commune, sparked an outcry. That the International had largely ceased to exist post-1877 suggested that the prosecutors were anxious to be seen taking action after a recent spate of terrorist acts. Nevertheless, despite spurious evidence, Kropotkin was imprisoned. Indicative of his growing scholarly renown, at this stage a consequence of his work in the field of orography, a petition was started that attracted the signatures of a cross-section of British cultural life, including many academics, writers and scientists. Upon his release in 1886, Kropotkin sensed that France was no longer a comfortable place to propagate anarchist ideas, and so began a thirty-one year exile in Britain. Plagued by ill health, the pressures of supporting his family through his writing, and the comparatively embryonic nature of the anarchist movement in Britain meant that his extended sojourn marked a period of decreasing involvement with practical politics.

Whilst signalling a decline in practical activity, Kropotkin’s British exile also marked the period when he rose to prominence as the major theorist of anarchism – a mantle he inherited from Mikhail Bakunin. Although hostile to the idea of leadership, and sceptical of anything that might imply intellectual authority, even Kropotkin’s anarchist opponents tended to concede his stature. In contrast to the notoriously chaotic and impulsive Bakunin, Kropotkin’s major achievement was the patient elaboration of his ideas in a variety of forms, and his attempt to relate anarchist thought to contemporary developments in science and philosophy. Convinced of the importance of providing anarchism with robust and even the most skilful painters produced canvases devoid of authenticity. Kropotkin’s positive sense of liberty, a desire for humans to ‘be their own master’, carried with it a notion of the life worth living, and this facet of his thought was prominent in his comments on the necessity of luxury in a communal society. The ‘founders of new societies’ in the deserts ‘never understood’ the ‘infinite variety of human tastes’ Kropotkin objected, and as capitalism would continue to stunt creativity, a successful anarchist community must address this issue as a matter of urgency. To stifle individuality in this manner, as he suggested some of the more monastic communal experiments had done, could only ever kill the communal spirit. Inevitably, ‘individual tastes broke forth, and caused general discontent’ producing disagreements and quarrels that, in Kropotkin’s reading, split such communities.

The power of Kropotkin’s constructed image of these intentional communities lay in its rhetorical utility in painting a counter-image of anarchist communalism. Concerned that agricultural toil and cultural piety were not conducive to intellectual growth, he presented a vision of a community defined by varied labour and cultural diversity. Vitaly, Kropotkin argued that these were intertwined goals; that the right kind of economic reorganisation held before it the opportunity for aesthetic rebirth. In this sense, Kropotkin’s book *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899), can usefully be seen as a companion project to *The Conquest of Bread*. A more scholarly text, in it he was at pains to expose Britain’s potential for achieving agricultural self-sufficiency hidden in contemporary European agricultural statistics. From the pages of *Fields,

---


---


Farm. Many communalists were workers from ‘civilised countries’ unused to agricultural toil, they enter ‘worse material conditions than their previous ones’ deprived of the palliative ‘trifles’ that make life endurable.96 Fighting for ‘5, 10, often more, years’ the ‘most crushing difficulties’, the life left behind began to look preferable to toiling in ‘American deserts’.97

Kropotkin’s critique of the economic basis of American communalism fed directly into his second line of analysis, a pronounced condemnation of the cultural asceticism he saw reigning within them. Writing in The Conquest of Bread, he wryly observed that burdensome labour was mirrored in an austere cultural climate:

They believed that if the community could procure sufficient cloth to dress all its members, a music-room in which the ‘brothers’ could strum a piece of music, or act a play from time to time, it was enough. They forgot that the feeling for art existed in the agriculturist as well as in the burgher.98

Central to Kropotkin’s emancipatory vision was the notion that the material and intellectual quality of life must be improved. Cautioning against economic austerity, his romantic faith in the potential for individuality to flourish in the right environment led Kropotkin to call for a society that offered opportunities for intellectual development as well. After all, when, in a typically fin-de-siècle exhortation he bemoaned the cultural decadence of the bourgeoisie, he pointed out that wealth was no guarantor of taste. Currently, ‘art can only vegetate’ with ‘philistine’ artists lagging ‘far behind the great masters of the Renaissance’,

---

the century, but not translated into English until 1912, he made his desire to develop the credentials of anarchism as a synthetic philosophy. Offering a detailed intellectual history of European social and scientific thought, the work sought to demonstrate that the liberation of scientific reasoning from religious dogma was mirrored by the emergence of socialist thinking. For Kropotkin, thinkers like Comte and Spencer demonstrated the growing power and sophistication of modern science, as its methods were transposed from the natural to social worlds, and sociology pointed to the potential for the elaboration of provisional laws of social development. Kropotkin even attributed Comte’s inability to escape deist thinking in his moral theory a consequence of his failure to abide by his own scientific strictures, a weakness amplified by his historical isolation from Darwinism. Overlooking the ‘positivist conclusions’ to which his observation of mutual support in animal communities pointed, due to the immaturity of ‘biological knowledge’, theology crept back into Comte’s social thought, tarnishing his considerable intellectual achievement.15 Placing his own work at the zenith of this intellectual trajectory, Kropotkin believed that his anarchism rested on firmer foundations, and was able to achieve the synthetic philosophical ambitions that partially eluded Comte and Spencer. Although couched in terms of scientific truth, Kropotkin was nevertheless anxious to insist that an element of provisionality remained, and that the revolutionising tendencies of modern scientific discovery would not cease.16 Given this scope for constant innovation, the anarchist must be attentive to the future progress of science.


93 For free communism to be a viable system, he recognised that labour must be attractive. Pleasurable labour therefore held a deeper meaning than simply the absence of exploitative relations or wearying toil, with work itself becoming an enlivening activity willingly performed. Here too there is a direct inheritance from Fourier, but it was an influence felt acutely by Morris also.94 Tapping into the romantic defence of artisanal labour prevalent in nineteenth-century socialism, Kropotkin followed suit and adopted the language of virility and authenticity to describe this future state. The failure of modern art lay in its lack of ‘strength’, he wrote, something that could only be cured by the purifying experience of labour: ‘the joy of hauling the heavy net…the joys…of the vivid light of the blast furnace.’ In turn, uniting pleasurable labour with mechanical sophistication – ‘the life in a machine’ – meant Kropotkin could address the issue of abundance.95 Focusing his gaze on the American experiments, he observed that the precarious livelihood they eked from inhospitable soils fell short of the bounty that communalism might obtain. Writing in Freedom, the British anarchist newspaper he helped found, Kropotkin noted that the economic frugality demanded by these communal experiments served to undermine the communal movement. ‘Peasants no doubt succeed in founding such colonies’, he observed, arguing that the arduous labour interspersed with periods of indigence they experienced in ‘their mother country’ meant that after several years work ‘they feel better off’. Communities that managed to scrape an existence in this manner were usually felled by the precariousness of their isolation, Kropotkin noted, alluding to ‘special conditions’ like failed harvests or the fire that swept through Brook

94 Kinna, William Morris, p.149.
95 Kropotkin, Conquest of Bread, p.141.
labour would emerge. Typically, Fourier gave a series of prescriptions to correct this situation, but central to them was the insistence that work must be modelled, and he advanced a parallel condemnation of work under capitalism painting a portrait of workers reduced to ‘flesh and bone’ appendages of some immense machinery. To overcome this situation, he proposed, it necessary to ‘return to a state of affairs where corn is grown, and manufactured goods fabricated, for the use of those very people who grow and produce them.’

Although framed as a ‘return’, Kropotkin’s solution was not a primitivistic retreat from industrial civilization. Fourier railed against industrial production, and Kropotkin echoed his condemnation of a factory system that stymied the physical and personal development of those chained to the production line, but the medievalism that accompanied this refrain for William Morris and Thorold Rogers did not appeal. In the right social setting, Kropotkin insisted, technological sophistication could ensure rather than retard emancipation, and he rebuked Morris for failing to notice the ‘gracefulness’ of the machine. Given the complexity of Morris’ views on mechanisation, Kropotkin was unduly critical of this aspect of his thought, but his defence of technology

These themes came together in Kropotkin’s most famous work, Mutual Aid, completed whilst in Britain, and responding chiefly to British thinkers. As his critique of Comte implied, Kropotkin was convinced of the validity of Darwinian theory and its potential for wider application, but bristled at its perversion into an apologia for domination at the hands of Social Darwinists. The idea that Darwinian evolutionary theory was useful for comprehending social development more broadly was a characteristically Victorian view, something Spencer’s voluminous output alone is testimony. Yet, whilst Spencer’s alliance with Darwinism is only remembered for his pithy summation of natural selection in the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ in his long forgotten Principles of Biology (1864), Kropotkin’s controversial intervention remains influential. Originally conceived as a series six articles for the periodical Nineteenth Century and published between 1890 and 1896, the thrust of Kropotkin’s argument was that the complexity of the ‘struggle for survival’ thesis had been overlooked due to the ideological hegemony of capitalist individualism. Darwin’s great insight, which allowed us to ‘embrace an immensely wide range of phenomena in one single generalization’, had been deformed by the persistence of the ‘old Malthusian leaven’ that the competition ‘between each and all’ was the law of life. T.H. Huxley, the man who did so much to popularise Darwin’s work, is charged with being particularly guilty of this crime, in his ‘atrocious’ article ‘The Struggle for Existence’.
istence in Human Society”, which also appeared in Nineteenth Century. Kropotkin inveighed against Huxley’s cavalier approach to empiricism, commenting that his scientific observation of the natural world was as reliable as Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s ruminations on early humanity, the only difference being that whereas one saw nature drenched in blood, the other saw ‘love, peace and harmony’ prevailing. That Kropotkin rejected Rousseau’s vision of nature as equally absurd is important, and foreshadowed his argument that, although the tendency to self-assertion and aggression was a significant factor in survival, its overemphasis had skewed our understanding of evolution. Instead, he concluded that those animal societies most effective in practising mutual aid were those most likely to proliferate and advance, whereas ‘the unsociable species, on the contrary, are doomed to decay’. The broader intellectual context of Mutual Aid is important, for whilst Kropotkin spent only two chapters musing on the sociable habits of marmots and mice, he devoted six to tracing cooperation in human societies. In these chapters the real significance of his argument becomes clear, particularly his attempt to conceive evolution contra both Huxley and Spencer. Although he thought Spencer had recognised the importance of solidarity in animal communities, Kropotkin objected that he failed to carry this through to understanding human relations. This is mirrored in his reading of Huxley, where although Kropotkin reproached the biologist for his sanguine vision of nature, the real thrust of Huxley’s argument was that animal communities could not be a matrix for human ethics, a position he would develop in his famous Romanes Lecture at Oxford in 1893. Kropotkin did not engage explicitly with this argument in Mutual Aid, and instead charged Huxley with a thinly


21 Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, p.5, 293.
22 Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, p.xliii.
“American Deserts”: Austerity, Piety and Hegemony

Whilst scholars have tended to neglect the influence of Fourier upon Kropotkin, the extent to which Kropotkin was combating the legacy of Fourierists has been totally ignored. This complex engagement with a tradition of political thinking and praxis formed a crucial aspect of Kropotkin’s anarchist communalism, as he attempted to demonstrate the enduring potential of communal ideas against a history riddled with failure. In defending communalism, Kropotkin developed a significant critique of communal experiments of a Fourierist variety, challenging their economic, social and cultural composition, whilst maintaining that Fourier’s principal theses remained valid. *The Conquest of Bread* made this explicit, but across Kropotkin’s oeuvre, his criticism of intentional communities served to define his own brand of communal utopia, in which the inadequacies of the American communalists were overcome. Rejecting the American model, Kropotkin presented an anarchist utopianism.

He was not alone in challenging the basis of American communalism from an anarchist perspective. His friend and fellow-geographer Elisée Reclus, who also perceived anarchism through the lens of contemporary science, had advanced a parallel criticism of utopian experimentation. Writing on ‘anarchy’ in the British periodical *Contemporary Review*, Reclus began by noting that ‘to most Englishmen the word anarchy is so evil-sounding that ordinary readers…will probably turn from these pages with aversion’. For the intrepid reader, Reclus offered an overview of anarchist ideas similar in tone to Kropotkin’s exhortative *Paroles D’un Révolté*, in which laissez-faire capitalism, imperialism, and the
davez ‘Hobbesian’ bias in his portrayal of nature. A subtext in this work, however, and one that Kropotkin was to expand elsewhere, was that seeing human ethics in relation to nature was indeed fruitful. In chapters investigating the social life of the tribe, village community and the medieval commune, Kropotkin traced the supposed continuation of the mutual aid principle through history, in a variety of customs and institutions introduced to help life prosper. Culminating in an analysis of mutual aid ‘amongst ourselves’, he suggested that in spite of the development of the modern state and its ‘iron rules’, the mutual aid tendency continued to assert itself in a quixotic mix of associations including friendly societies, bicycling clubs and Swiss Cantons. *Mutual Aid* thus paved the way for Kropotkin to draw a connection between the instinctually cooperative actions of animals that secured survival, and the ‘higher moral sentiments’ refined by humans that had their ‘origins’ in ‘the practice of mutual aid.’ Conscious that human history did not represent the steady triumph of solidarity however, Kropotkin reminded the reader that egotistical and competitive principles could occasionally predominate, an oscillation that structured the historical process. The latent constructive power of cooperation was nonetheless cause for optimism, and in the right social context, held before it a rich future.

In a series of texts, Kropotkin endeavoured to texture this conception of anarchist politics, whilst at the same time maintain its credentials as an activist philosophy. The pamphlet *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal* (1897) developed Kropotkin’s notion of science as a decentring force, and suggested that this tendency would

---

develop in social life, with anarchist organisation the surest approximation of this metaphysical malleability. Indeed, Kropotkin proposed that human history was defined by a clash between these competing forces, with local and communal organisation continually confronted by the powers of reaction, manifested historically in the states of antiquity, ‘barbarian’ kings and petty despots and contemporarily in the modern nation-state. This representation of the historical process was an important theme in Mutual Aid, but also in the extended pamphlet The State: Its Historic Role (1896), which was written in the same year that Kropotkin completed his more famous work. In both, Kropotkin sketched a philosophy of history in which the conflict between authority and liberty was perpetual across the ages, with the ‘pendulum’ swing between these tendencies defining European history. In certain epochs, the communal spirit had proven resilient and ‘oases amidst the…forest’ emerged, as with the emergence of communalism in the twelfth century. During others, reaction triumphed, and Rome provided Kropotkin with a useful analogy for a state that was strongly centralised and strived to spread this domination.

Kropotkin’s epistemological writings aimed at uniting anarchism and modern science, and his historical reflections uncovered tendencies defining European history. In certain epochs, the communal spirit had proven resilient and ‘oases amidst the…forest’ emerged, as with the emergence of communalism in the twelfth century. During others, reaction triumphed, and Rome provided Kropotkin with a useful analogy for a state that was strongly centralised and strived to spread this domination. For Warren, this was something many communes forgot, and was summed up in his perhaps apocryphal conclusion that New Harmony had suffered ‘from too much democracy – the community was talked to death.’ For Kropotkin, born in the year that Brook Farm became Fourierist, comments like these offered an important dissection of the ideas behind utopian schemes. More importantly, it was criticisms of this type that his communitarian political thought would seek to address.

28 Although Victorian convention gave Kropotkin little lexical latitude, he was nevertheless sceptical of the term ‘barbarian’, and often placed it in knowing quotation marks. See: Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, p.124.
31 Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, p.166.
Although unfamiliar with the exact nature of many of these communal experiments, Kropotkin was keenly aware of the damage that these intentional societies had done to communalist propaganda. This fed into a layered critique of practical communalism, a critique deployed by Kropotkin in order to stress the uniqueness of his own vision of the commune. Despite being influenced by Fourier, and seeing many of his ideas as enduringly relevant, in part Kropotkin felt that the weaknesses of these societies lay in Fourier’s own system. His lack of a vigorous revolutionary strategy left his scheme reliant on the whim of ‘some great ruler’.73 And at the heart of Fourier’s project Kropotkin saw a failure in nerve similar to that which confounded Comte. Opening up ‘the wide horizons’ of possibility, both thinkers flinched, falling back on a religious dogma: Comte’s secular Christianity, and Fourier’s messianism. The ‘experiments’ of Fourier therefore served only to tutor ‘human thought’ in what might be achieved, but the anarchist commune would be moulded and tested in the heat of revolution.74

An important practical factor in Kropotkin’s relationship to American intentional societies was that whilst Fourierian communes had proliferated, these experiments did not prove robust. Indeed, it became common, one commentator has noted, for “Four-year-ites” to replace Fourierite as the epithet for some of the more half-hearted denizens of these communes.75 They were ephemeral for a number of reasons, ranging from economic mismanagement and the selection of agriculturally inappropriate locations, to the lack of durable mechanisms for solving disputes. Brook Farm, one of the most successful, was ravaged by fire in 1846.76 As one writer pointed out, although there was a boom in Fourierist colonies, a world defined by a clash between centralisers and decentralisers since time immemorial. Yet, these were not intended as academic ruminations, and an image of the life worth living formed a central pillar of Kropotkin’s social philosophy. In this vein, he persistently defended the utility of utopianism as a means of animating action in the present. Writing a foreword to Emile Pataud and Emile Pouget’s syndicalist utopia How We Shall Bring About the Revolution (1909), Kropotkin offered a qualified defence of thinking in concrete terms about the kind of society that revolutionaries desired. It was important, he maintained, not to ‘attach more importance to a book’ than was appropriate, for ‘a book is not a gospel’, and revolution was the product of multiple wills and factors that a single author could not comprehend.77 But in spite of this, he conceded that Pouget and Pataud’s provocative work ‘makes us think’ about the potential problems that might confront revolutionaries, and ‘the better we understand what we want...the fewer obstacles the Revolution meets on its way; the fewer struggles it will have to sustain, and the fewer victims it will cost’.78 It was this spirit, Kropotkin noted, that informed his own dalliance with utopian literature ‘thirty years ago’ when he ‘sketched a communal utopia in “The Conquest of Bread”’.79

That Kropotkin felt The Conquest of Bread remained an important contribution to the field is suggested by the fact that it was printed in English in 1906, and then again in 1913, with only superficial changes. It was Kropotkin’s most explicit statement of anarchist-communist principles, as in a series of chapters he imagined a populace gripped by a revolutionary fervour akin to that of the Paris Commune. The seventeen substantive chapters centred

---

73 Kropotkin, Conquest of Bread, p.viii, xii.
74 Kropotkin, Conquest of Bread, p.xii.
76 McKanan, “Making Sense of Failure”, pp.163–166; Richard Francis, Tran-
on a variety of issues that might confront a community as it challenged existing social structures, but Kropotkin’s main ambitions were to demonstrate the practicability of anarchism as a form of organisation, and advance a moral argument showing its superiority to capitalism. Thus, early chapters ‘Our riches’ and ‘Well-being for all’, reflect on the enormous productive capacities secured by human ingenuity, and bemoan the ‘wrong direction’ in which production ‘tends’ as ‘speculators’ direct decision-making.  

Given this increase in the powers of production, a consequence of ‘all that our ancestors’ had achieved, Kropotkin suggested that universal ‘well-being’ was no phantasm. Having presented this preparatory argument, and suggested that ‘expropriation’ must be confidently initiated to universalise these benefits, Kropotkin offered a series of technical discussions concerning issues such as ‘food’, ‘dwellings’ and ‘clothing’. In each case, he concluded that an almost spontaneous ‘communalization’ initiated by the people would secure equitable distribution during any upheaval. Comparatively Spartan conditions might prevail during the revolutionary period, but Kropotkin was adamant that revolutionary success rested on achieving more than bread and shelter alone. Anarchism must offer a qualitatively better life than the morally corrupting atmosphere nurtured under capitalism, and the latter chapters of The Conquest of Bread were devoted to elaborating this image of a communal society characterised by purposeful labour, relative luxury, and the space for intellectual improvement. In short, his argument amounted to an assertion that any anarchist future must also be communalist.

An idea of communalisation was therefore an integral one to Kropotkin’s normative political vision, but the commune also occupied a prominent position in the historical narrative that his political ideas.

---

36 Kropotkin, Conquest of Bread, p.11.
37 Kropotkin, Conquest of Bread, p.15
38 Kropotkin, Conquest of Bread, p.62. See also, pp.77–9, 100–9.
39 Kropotkin, Conquest of Bread, p.124.
tion of food and housing amidst social dislocation. The ethos that predominates during this change, a ‘natural Communism’ that allows the free use of anything possessed in abundance and voluntary rationing for scarce resources, he thought would endure, it being ‘so inherent in common sense’. With the period of revolutionary transition successfully negotiated, the real promise of the commune lay in its supposed ability to secure material abundance and, in turn, create new spaces for individual expression.

Fourier waited in vain for someone to fund his experiment in communal living, but in the years following his death plenty of people inspired by his ideas sought to build communes upon Fourierist lines. It was the legacy of these adventures in communal living that Kropotkin would later combat, in an attempt to rescue Fourier’s valuable contribution to socialist theory. Albert Brisbane was to become the chief populariser of Fourier’s ideas in the US, publishing the Social Destiny of Man: or, Association and Reorganization of Industry in 1840, which raised Fourier to the level of a ‘bold and original genius...like Columbus, Copernicus and Newton’. Such hagiography might appear peculiar given that Fourier was reluctant to engage with Brisbane, who found himself in Paris in 1833, only to be persuaded by the offer off five-francs an hour to tutor the young American. Returning home the following year, Brisbane’s zealous propagandizing began in 1839 with a variety of short-lived periodicals, before his breakthrough in the form of an invitation to contribute a regular column to the New York Tribune entitled ‘Association; or, Principles of a True Organization of Industry’.

Kropotkin did not envisage his historical investigations as a fundamentally academic pursuit, but was a firm believer in the idea that knowledge of the past could help avoid pitfalls in the present. In this vein, he warned that historical reflection bears only a ‘valeur relative’ and ‘la Commune, aujourd’hui ne peut revêtir les forms qu’elle pernait il y a sept siècles.’ Nevertheless, for tomorrow’s radical communes to pose any significant threat to the state, Kropotkin insisted that familiarity with the history of communalism was vital. It is little surprise, therefore, that Kropotkin regularly returned to the medieval communalism as symbolic of past struggles against imperious despots, expressed in the middle chapters of Mutual Aid. His British context is important here, for Kropotkin’s romantic proclivities were encouraged by the romantic reaction to capitalism that was a prominent thread in British socialist thinking in the late nineteenth-century, an approach that led...

---

64 See: Kropotkin, Conquest of Bread, pp.61–113.
65 Kropotkin, Conquest of Bread, p.77.
66 There was one attempt to realise a Fourierist scheme in 1832 near Condé-sur-Vesgre, but Fourier was distinctly dissatisfied with the results. Brian J.L. Berry, America’s Utopian Experiments: Communal Havens from Long-Wave Crises (Hanover, 1992), p.88.

(2) The Communes, absolutely independent, freed from the supervision of the State, who alone can give us the necessary medium for the revolution and the means to accomplish it.

(3) relative value

(4) the Commune today can not assume the forms that it perished seven centuries ago.
to a general reassessment of medievalism by the likes of William Morris. Although he did not buy into this mythology wholesale, he was nevertheless impressed by what he perceived as the essentially organic emergence of the communalist movement, and its subsequent civic achievements. Casting his eye over European history, Kropotkin suggested that the vitality of the communal movement lay in its spontaneous growth in resistance to the ‘pretty rulers...theocracies and despotic States’ that had begun to colonise social life. The ‘fortified city’ rose to resist the ‘lord’s castle’ and in these city-states ‘they instituted their “co-jurations”, their “fraternities”, their “friendships”, united in one common idea, and boldly marching towards a new life of mutual support and liberty’. These societies may have been riddled with structural and political weaknesses ensuring their eventual collapse, but he believed that history’s greatest cultural and scientific advances had obvious roots in the cobbled streets of those city-states. If only this social form could be revitalised and purged of these imperfections, Kropotkin was confident a brighter future would dawn.

The Influence of Fourier: Communes and Communalists

The notion that communalism held before it the possibility of redemption was a common one in the history of socialist thought. In Russian radical history the peasant commune, or mir, held a prominent place in the affections of dissenting intellectuals, and a young Kropotkin was profoundly influenced by this mythology. Alexander Herzen for instance, who Kropotkin

43 Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, p.162.
44 Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, p.163.
45 For the commune’s achievements, see: Kropotkin, Mutual Aid, p.209–215 and for its weaknesses see: Mutual Aid, pp.215–222.

Sous le nom de Commune de Paris, naquit une idée nouvelle, appelée à devenir le point de départ des révolutions futures.62(7)

Crucially, however, in reflecting on the centrality of the insurgent commune to the revolutionary opportunities that might lie ahead, Kropotkin was not renouncing the Fourierian tradition, but modernising it. Aspects of the future that Fourier had imagined continued to appeal, but now Kropotkin thought saw more clearly how it might be achieved.

The theoretical emphasis that Kropotkin placed on the commune as a unit of social transformation is an important area of divergence from Fourier. Whilst the two held broadly congruent images of the organisational potential of the commune, an important difference was that for Kropotkin communalisation was a means of struggle as well as an end in itself. Fourier’s fixation on the size of the phalanstère and its combination of personalities – 810 ‘passional types’ meaning an ideal community size of 1,620 so that everyone had a partner – implies an essential fixity to his vision, even if he postponed the liberation of certain sexual mores to a future state of Harmony. To Kropotkin, in contrast, the commune represented an essentially malleable form of organisation. Keenly aware of the logistical difficulties that exist in revolutionary situations, the commune would offer the organisational élan to deal with a period of stress – securing the evocative ‘bread’ in the title of his book. The commune was therefore a resolutely revolutionary agent, charged by Kropotkin with adopting essential functions like the distribu-
the Terror, Fourier, like many contemporary pioneers of socialism, baulked at the prospect of a period of transition defined by violence. Marx and Engels famous dissection of utopian socialism stemmed in part from a critique of this interpretation, for theorising a post-capitalist future whilst capitalism was in its infancy, led to failure to appreciate the structural factors necessary to engender revolutionary consciousness. Socialists like Fourier therefore looked to ‘historical action...to yield to their personal inventive action’, and understood communalism as the agent of a millennial reconciliation of the antagonistic forces unleashed by capitalist economics. Interestingly, even though Kropotkin was deeply sceptical of Marxism’s claims to scientific validity, he concurred with the assessment that Fourier had a faulty understanding of the change from capitalism to communism. He noted that Fourier, as a witness to the Revolution, ‘naturally’ inclined ‘to advocate peaceable solutions only’, but that this was inadequate. Modern socialism, he concluded, had rid itself of the optimistic belief that universal agreement could usher in a new civilisation, and now ‘social revolution’ lay at the heart of its emancipatory philosophy. Whereas Fourier returned home every day to await the arrival of the benevolent capitalist to bankroll his new society, to Kropotkin’s mind, modern socialism had uncovered a more realistic solution. The ‘Commune insurgée, seen in Paris in 1871, hinted at the existence of a fresh revolutionary tradition: 

---


60 Kropotkin, ‘Modern Science and Anarchism’, p.72.

61 This anecdote is taken from Carl J. Guarneri’s excellent study. See: Carl J. Guarneri, The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America deemed a ‘profound thinker’ and a gifted propagandist, returned to the peasant commune as a source of inspiration once his illusions were shattered by the docility of workers in the west. In Herzen’s open letter to Jules Michelet, reacting to the historian’s unsympathetic depiction of the Russian people in a recent work on the oppression of Poland, Herzen opined that the peasant commune offered an important example of socialism in action that revolutionaries in the west should heed. The equally cosmopolitan Bakunin, who enjoyed a fractious friendship with Herzen, held a less enthusiastic image of the mir, but still insisted upon the revolutionary potential of the peasantry – despite, that is, lamenting that ‘les paysans français sont parfaitement ignorants’. Even so, whilst criticising the ‘patriarchalism’ and parochialism of the mir, the commune remained the basic unit of Bakunin’s utopian society. Kropotkin held a more romantic view of the mir than Bakunin, but whereas both Bakunin and Herzen’s image of the peasant commune remained essentially static as they travelled from east to west, Kropotkin’s physical journey was mirrored in a reduced focus on the mir. In his first political statement, the tedious ‘Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?’ (1873), written after Kropotkin’s brief involvement with the populist Circle of Chaikovsky, the obshchina fea-
tured heavily as the agent and locus of social transformation. As his politics matured in Switzerland, France and Britain, the imagery of Russian populism gave way to examples more fitting to his immediate context. The medieval city-state and the Paris Commune dominate Paroles D’un Révolté(6), and the symbols of urbanism litter his British writings: ‘museums, free libraries’, ‘parks and pleasure grounds’ and ‘tramways and railways’. While Kropotkin groped for an effective vocabulary, he remained unflinchingly consistent in his aim: to emphasise the constructive power of communalism.

It is clear that history was important to Kropotkin, and he began many of his articles and books by situating his brand of anarchism in a broader history of socialism, in which the nineteenth-century pioneers of communalism occupied an important place. The eccentric Charles Fourier (1772–1837), described by one commentator as ‘a visionary and crank of the first order’, was a figure frequently mentioned by Kropotkin, who praised his theoretical attempts to unite a communistic distributive ethic with communal living. Kropotkin’s friend Max Nettlau, commonly described as the ‘Herodotus of anarchism’ (although the persistently contrarian Nicolas Walter objected that, in fact, he was its Thucydides), observed that Kropotkin was frustrated by the time constraints that meant he could not devote more time to writing on Fourier. Despite this regret, Kropotkin did return to the Frenchman frequently, believing that his great insight was that the commune or ‘phalanx’ might operate as storehouse for goods and thereby offer ‘the solution of the great problem of Exchange and Distribution of Produce’. The commune would merely serve as the ‘depository’ for these goods, and offer a means of organising their distribution that bypassed the profiteering intermediaries of capitalism. Kropotkin adopted this idea in The Conquest of Bread, suggesting that an anarchist society might make use of ‘communal stores’ from which individuals were free to take what they please:

The peasant would only withhold what he needed for his own use, and would send the rest into the cities, feeling for the first time in course of history that these toiling townsfolk were his comrades – his brethren, and not his exploiters.

In Kropotkin’s reading of Fourier two values underpinned this enviable form of association, and both found their way into The Conquest of Bread as fundamental features of an anarchist society. First, production should be organised so that there ‘must be no disagreeable labour’; and secondly, befitting a ‘society organised on the principle of free association’ it was crucial that ‘no sort of coercion must be exercised’. Despite Kropotkin’s obvious indebtedness to Fourier’s communalist ideas, the two parted ways in how they believed this future might be secured. Coming of age during the bloodletting of

---

51 Peter Kropotkin, “Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System? [1873]” in Fugitive Writings, pp.13–68. On the Circle of Chaikovsky, see: Kropotkin, Memoirs, p.212–223.
53 Kropotkin, Modern Science and Anarchism, p.71. It should be noted, however, that Fourier remained committed to private property and was sceptical of the idea of equality. See: Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, Utopian Thought in the Western World (Cambridge, MA, 1979), pp.666–667.

(6) Words of a Revolt