Rejecting the American Model: Peter Kropotkin's Radical Communalism

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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.

Keywords: Peter Kropotkin, anarchism, utopianism, communalism, intentional communities, Social Darwinism, Charles Fourier.

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

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communalism would be a defining feature of any future anarchist society.[2] 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 vehicle of anarchism.[3] 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.[4] 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.[5] Although

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[2] See: Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (New York, 1907), pp.iii-xii.

[3] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.8.

[4] See, for instance: P.A. Kropotkin, *The Great French Revolution 1789-1793* (London, 1909), pp.257-8.

[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

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 Fourierian mould had damaged the power of communalist propaganda. Kropotkin felt that the experimental societies that proliferated during the economically insecure antebellum period were defined by an elitist and self-centred desire to escape the iniquities of everyday life under capitalism. That the quality of life achieved by these communities was often abysmal, was further testament to the futility of trying to achieve socialism in isolation. His specific knowledge of these communities may have been limited, but this image of American communalism served a useful rhetorical purpose, as Kropotkin delineated his image of anarchist communalism in contradistinction to experiments in socialist living. Moreover, it shows him engaged in a creative reading of Fourier's ideas, a thinker that Kropotkin believed had offered precious theoretical insights, but who was also partly responsible for the failures of the communal movement.

The present article seeks to recover this overlooked argument in *The Conquest of Bread* and his oeuvre more generally, and clarify both Kropotkin's perception of what intentional communities in the United States were like, and what he believed to be their central weaknesses. It demonstrates that his critique of these communities formed an important aspect of his political identity. In rejecting their structural and qualitative features, he

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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.

constructed an image of anarchist communalism that sought to address these problems. In this

vein, Kropotkin developed a vision of anarchist communalism in which localised distribution

of resources was allied to inter-communal cooperation in practical and intellectual matters.

Owing much to Proudhon's federalism, Kropotkin's desire to break 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 agglomeration territoriale; c'est plutôt un nom générique, un synonyme de groupement d'égaux, ne connaissant ni frontiers ni murailles.[6]

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,

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[6] Pierre Kropotkine, *Paroles D'un Révolté* (Paris, [1885] N.D.), p.117. For a useful commentary on Proudhon's federalism, see: K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* (Oxford , 1984), pp.209-228,

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 system builders, Kropotkin's remained an activist philosophy, even though his later life was dominated by his scholarly preoccupations. The communalist arguments advanced in *The Conquest of Bread* are therefore crucial to his broader social theory. The second section investigates Fourier's overlooked influence on Kropotkin, before considering the profound impact of Fourier's work on utopian experimentation in mid-nineteenth century America. Cognisant of the failures of these societies, Kropotkin's critique of Fourier must be seen through this lens, as he attempted to salvage the enduring importance of certain ideas from a history of disaster. The final section looks at Kropotkin's excoriating comments on these communities themselves, and his

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[7] For a useful discussion of Comte's ideas, see: H.S. Jones, "Introduction" to Auguste Comte, *Early Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1998), especially pp.xii-xv. For a classic statement of Spencer's political position and its incompatibility with Comte's, consider: Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus the State: containing "The New Toryism," "The Coming Slavery," "The Sins of Legislators" and "The Great Political Superstition"* (London, 1881). For Kropotkin's sympathetic, but critical, view of Spencer's politics, see: P.A.K., " Anarchism" in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica: Eleventh Edition: Volume 1* (Cambridge, 1910), pp.914-919; P. Kropotkine, "Co-Operation: A Reply to Herbert Spencer" in *Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism* (Jan., 1897), pp.1-2; "Herbert Spencer" in *Freedom* (Feb., 1904), pp.7-8; "Herbert Spencer II" in *Freedom* (April-May, 1904), pp.15; "Hebert Spencer III" in *Freedom* (June, 1904), pp.23; "Herbert Spencer III Continued" in *Freedom* (Aug., 1904), pp.31; "Herbert Spencer III Continued" in *Freedom* (Sept., 1904), pp.35.

counter-image of anarchist communalism. Condemning the structural basis of these communities and the kind of life they offered their inhabitants, Kropotkin painted an image of an anarchism purged of their deficiencies, a rhetorical engagement that unmasks the complexity of his overarching political system.

Situating *The Conquest of Bread*

By the time the first edition of *The Conquest of Bread* appeared in France in 1892, Kropotkin had already risen to notoriety in Europe. His controversial French imprisonment in 1883, on the grounds of belonging to the International Workingmen's Association, an 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.[8] 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.[9] 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.

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[8] George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumović, *The Anarchist Prince: A Biographical Study of Peter Kropotkin* (New York, 1971), pp.189-191.

[9] Woodcock, *Anarchist Prince*, p.194.

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.[10] 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.[11] 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 epistemological foundations, in pursuing this self-appointed task Kropotkin contributed to the continuing definition of anarchism as an independent political tradition, in particular the anarchist-communist strand of which he became the predominant theorist. Whereas Bakunin exchanged polemical barbs with Marx in missives and circulars, Kropotkin tended towards delineation and definition. This technique is captured in his entry on anarchism for the celebrated eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1910 – probably one of the few contributions to that work that continues to be referenced.[12] As Kropotkin justifiably stated in his article, although anarchism remained a multifaceted set of ideas and a splintered movement, the 'anarchist-communist' direction exercised the most significant influence,

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[10] James Joll, *The Anarchists* (London, 1979), p.107.

[11] In particular, see: Errico Malatesta, *Errico Malatesta: His Life & Ideas* (London, [1931] 1993), pp. 257-268; Rudolf Rocker, *The London Years* (Nottingham, [1956] 2005), pp.75-78.

[12] P.A.K., "Anarchism", pp.914-919. On the continuing use of this definition, see: Ruth Kinna, *Anarchism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford, 2005), p.17; Colin Ward and David Goodway, *Talking Anarchy* (Nottingham, 2003), p.25.

having displaced the 'collectivist' anarchism associated with Bakunin.[13] Although conspicuously uncritical of Bakunin, Kropotkin's politics principally diverged on the idea of remuneration in a post-capitalist society. Adopting a communist distributive ethic, captured in his oft-quoted slogan 'all is for all', Kropotkin argued that reward for work would allow hierarchy to insidiously return.[14] Whilst appearing to be a minor distinction, Kropotkin endeavoured to demonstrate the viability of distributive communism by highlighting the importance of mutuality in biological evolution and human history, and pointing to a latent anarchist ethical theory emerging from these processes. His desire to uncover the broad implications of anarchism, and emphasise its continuing relevance, meant that Kropotkin's systematic exposition of anarchist philosophy has proven his enduring contribution.

Kropotkin was well aware of the Comtean nature of his project. In *Modern Science and Anarchism*, a work written at the turn of 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

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[13] P.A.K., "Anarchism", p.917.

[14] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.26. For an exposition of his position on remuneration, see: Peter Kropotkin, "Communism and the Wage System [1888]" in Nicolas Walter and Heiner Becker (eds.) *Act for Yourselves: Articles from Freedom: 1886-1907* (London, 1998), pp.103-113.

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.

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 dalliance

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

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[15] Italics are Kropotkin's own. Peter Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchism [1912]" in George Woodcock (ed.) *Evolution and Environment* (Montréal, 1995), pp.15-107, p.33.

[16] Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchism", p.93. See also: Ruth Kinna, "Anarchism and the Politics of Utopia" in Laurence Davis and Kinna (eds.) *Anarchism and Utopianism* (Manchester, 2009), pp.221-240, p.233.

controversial intervention remains influential.[17] 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.[18] 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.[19] 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 in Human Society", which also appeared in

Nineteenth Century.[20] 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

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[17] Herbert Spencer, *The Principles of Biology* (London, 1864), p.444, 453, 469, 474. Kropotkin's importance is suggested by his foregrounding in popular works on altruism, Social Darwinism and evolutionary theory. Consider: Oren Harman, *The Price of Altruism: George Price and the Search for the Origins of Kindness* (London, 2011) and Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue* (London, 1997). On *Mutual Aid*, see: Ruth Kinna, "Kropotkin and Huxley" in *Politics*, 12:2 (1992), pp.41-7; Ruth Kinna, "Kropotkin's Theory of Mutual Aid in Historical Context" in *International Review of Social History* 40 (1995), pp.259-283.

[18] Peter Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (Montréal, [1902] 1989), p.1.

[19] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, p.3.

[20] Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (London, [1899] 1978), p.336.

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'.[21]

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.[22] 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.[23] Kropotkin did not engage explicitly with this argument in *Mutual Aid*, and instead charged Huxley with a thinly veiled 'Hobbesian' bias in his portrayal of nature.[24] 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

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[21] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, p.5, 293.

[22] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, p.xliii.

[23] Thomas H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics* (London, 1893).

[24] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, p.77. For Kropotkin's more detailed engagement with Huxley, see: Prince Kropotkin, *Ethics: Origin and Development* (Dorchester, [1924] N.D.) especially pp.284-287.

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.'[25] 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.[26] 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.[27] 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

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[25] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, p.60, 300.

[26] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, p.295. Kropotkin's view of history is sketched out most clearly in: Peter Kropotkin, "The State: Its Historic Role [1896]" in Woodcock (ed.) *Fugitive Writings*, pp.159-201, esp. p.200-1.

[27] Peter Kropotkin, "Anarchist Communism: Its Philosophy and Ideal [1897]" in George Woodcock (ed.) *Fugitive Writings* (Montréal, 1993), pp.99-121.

contemporarily in the modern nation-state.[28] 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.[29] 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.[30] 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.[31] 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.[32]

Kropotkin's epistemological writings aimed at uniting anarchism and modern science, and his historical reflections uncovered 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.

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[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.

[29] Peter Kropotkin, "The State: Its Historic Role [1896]" in Woodcock (ed.) *Fugitive Writings*, pp.159-201, esp. p.200-1.

[30] This phrase actually occurs in *Anarchist Morality*, but Kropotkin used similar metaphors in *The State*. Peter Kropotkin, "Anarchist Morality [1892]" in *Fugitive Writings*, pp.127-153, p.127. For more on Kropotkin's historical narrative, see: Matthew S. Adams, "Kropotkin: Evolution, Revolutionary Change and the End of History" in *Anarchist Studies*, Vol.19, No.1 (2011), pp.56-81; David Miller, *Anarchism* (London, 1984), p.70-77.

[31] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, p.166.

[32] On his varied use of 'Roman', consider: Kropotkin, "The State: Its Historic Role", p.160, 168, 169, 171, 198.

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.[33] 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.'[34] 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"'.[35]

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 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

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[33] Peter Kropotkin, "Preface [1911]" to Emile Pataud and Emile Pouget, *How We Shall Bring About the Revolution: Syndicalism and the Cooperative Commonwealth* (London, 1990), pp.xxxi-xxxvii (p.xxxii).

[34] Kropotkin, "Preface [1911]", p.xxxvii.

[35] Kropotkin, "Preface [1911]", p.xxxiv.

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.[36] 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.[37] 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.[38] 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.[39] 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 identity rested upon. An early piece in his book *Paroles d'un Révolté* (1885), which

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[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.

collected a range of articles published in the propagandist newspaper *Le Révolté* between 1879 and 1882, revealed a conviction that the commune was the revolutionary unit of the future, just as it had been crucial to previous social struggles:

> Les Communes, absolument indépendants, affranchies de la tutelle de l'Etat, qui pourront seules nous donner le milieu nécessaire à la révolution et le moyen de l'accomplir.[40]

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 siécles.'[41] 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 to a general reassessment of medievalism by the likes of William Morris.[42] 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

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[40] Kropotkine, *Paroles D'un Révolté* , p.105.

[41] Kropotkine, *Paroles D'un Révolté*, p.106.

[42] Ruth Kinna, *William Morris: The Art of Socialism* (Cardiff, 2000), pp.37-43.

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rulers…theocracies and despotic States' that had begun to colonise social life.[43] 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'.[44] 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.[45] 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 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.[46] 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

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[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.

[46] Peter Kropotkin, *Russian Literature: Ideals and Realities* (Montréal, [1905]1991), p.298. For a general overview, see: Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, "Afterword: The Problem of the Peasant" in Wayne S. Vucinich (ed.) *The Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Stanford, 1968), pp.263-284, p.272.

peasant commune offered an important example of socialism in action that revolutionaries in the west should heed.[47] 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.'[48] Even so, whilst criticising the 'patriarchalism' and parochialism of the *mir*, the commune remained the basic unit of Bakunin's utopian society.[49] 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*[50] featured heavily as the agent and locus of social transformation.[51] 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*, and the

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[47] Alexander Herzen, *From the Other Side and The Russian People and Socialism* (London, [1851] 1956), pp.165-208, p.189.

[48] Michel Bakounine, *Oeuvres: Tome II* (Paris, 1907), p.93.

[49] Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy* (Cambridge, [1873] 2005), p.209.

[50] Although technically referring to different forms of organisation, writers often used *obshchina* and *mir* interchangeably. See: Moshe Lewin, 'The *Obshchina* and the Village' in Roger Bartlett (ed.) *Land Commune and Peasant Community in Russia: Communal Forms in Imperial and Early Soviet Society* (London, 1990), pp.20-35.

[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.

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symbols of urbanism litter his British writings: 'museums, free libraries', 'parks and pleasure grounds' and 'tramways and railways'.[52] 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.[53] 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.[54] 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

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[52] Peter Kropotkin, "Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles [1887]" in *Fugitive Writings*, pp.72-94, p.83.

[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.

[54] Max Nettlau, "Peter Kropotkin at Work [1921]" in *The Raven*, Vol.5, No.4 (Oct.-Dec. 1992), pp.379-388, p.387; Nicolas Walter, "A flawless reminder of life left of left" in *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 10th October 1997, pp.27.

Distribution of Produce'.[55] The commune would merely serve as the 'depositary' 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.[56]

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*.'[57]

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 the Terror, Fourier, like many contemporary pioneers of socialism, baulked at the prospect of a period of transition defined by violence.[58] 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

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[55] Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchism", p.71.

[56] Italics are Kropotkin's own. Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.110, 89.

[57] Italics are Kropotkin's own. Kropotkin, "Modern Science and Anarchism", p.72.

[58] For a discussion of the complex relationship between early socialists and the question of violence, see: Pamela Pilbeam, *French Socialists Before Marx: Workers, Women and the Social Question in France* (Guildford, 2000), pp.27-38.

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.[59] 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.[60] 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.[61] The 'Commune insurgée, seen in Paris in 1871, hinted at the existence of a fresh revolutionary tradition:

> Sous le nom de *Commune de Paris*, naquit une *idée* nouvelle, appelée à devenir le point de depart des revolutions futures.[62]

Crucially, however, in reflecting on the centrality of the insurgent commune to the revolutionary opportunities that might lie ahead, Kropotkin was not renouncing the

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[59] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, [1848] 2002), p.254. Engels advanced a more sympathetic analysis of Fourier, 'one of the greatest satirists of all time', in *Anti-Dühring*. See: Frederick Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring's Revolution in Science (Anti-Düring)* (New York, 1939), p.284.

[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* (Ithaca, 1991), p.20.

[62] Italics are Kropotkin's own. Kropotkine, *Paroles D'un Révolté*, p.138, 120.

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.[63] 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 distribution of food and housing amidst social dislocation.[64] 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'.[65] 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.

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[63] Jonathan Beecher, *Charles Fourier: The Visionary and His World* (London, 1986), p.242; Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative*, p.365.

[64] See: Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, pp.61-113.

[65] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.77.

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.[66] 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'.[67] 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 Society'.[68] These articles were collected as *A Concise Exposition of the Doctrine of Association, or Plan for a Re-Organization of Society* (1843), which replaced the lengthy quotations from Fourier's work, characteristic of his earlier book, with a pithier exposition of

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[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.

[67] Albert Brisbane, *Social Destiny of Man: or, Association and Reorganization of Industry* (Philadelphia, 1840), p.iv.

[68] Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative*, p.30, 33.

his principles.[69] Selling surprisingly well, Brisbane was able to establish the journal *The Phalanx*, which ran for six years as 'the chief organ of a national Fourierist movement.'[70]

In importing Fourier's ideas, Brisbane's efforts led to an explosion of intentional communities founded on the belief that Fourier's diagnosis of the inhumanity of capitalism was correct, and his alternative vision compelling. One of the earliest was Brook Farm in Massachusetts, co-founded by Nathaniel Hawthorne who would later fictionalize his experiences in *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). Initially inspired by Transcendentalism, Brook Farm shifted to Fourierism in 1844 once Brisbane's influence began to take hold.[71] The number of intentional communities organised upon avowedly Fourieristic lines peaked in these years, and was reflected in the names many adopted. The pioneering North American Phalanx in New Jersey was followed by self-described phalanxes in LaGrange Co., Indiana; Leraysville, Pennsylvania; Sodus Bay, New York; Trumbull, Ohio; Clermont Co., Ohio; Ripon, Wisconsin; Mahaska Co., Iowa; Sangamon Co., Illinois; Muskingum Co., Ohio and Fulton Co., Illinois. The unequivocally named Pigeon River Fourier Colony in Sheboygan, Wisconsin and Fourier Phalanx in Dearborn, Indiana, made the debt these communities owed to the Frenchman's communalist ideas explicit.[72]

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[69] Albert Brisbane, *A Concise Exposition of the Doctrine of Association, or Plan for a Re-Organization of Society* (New York, 1844).

[70] Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative*, p.34.

[71] Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative*, p.2, 51-9. See also: Friesen and Friesen, *North American Utopias*, pp.132-136.

[72] Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative*, pp.407-408. See also: Robert P. Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Secular Communities, 1824-2000* (West Port, CA, 2004), pp.23-52.

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

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[73] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.viii, xii.

[74] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.xii.

[75] Dan McKanan, "Making Sense of Failure: From Death to Resurrection in Nineteenth-Century American Communitarianism" in *Utopian Studies*, Vol.18, No.2 (2007), pp.159-192, p.159.

ravaged by fire in 1846.[76] As one writer pointed out, although there was a boom in Fourierist colonies, there also tended to be considerable movement between them, as refuges from one communal disaster sought refuge in another.[77] For Josiah Warren, later America's 'first' anarchist, the experience of communal living, whilst not an unmitigated disaster, was a lesson in the preciousness of individuality.[78] Warren's early heeding of this perhaps explains John Stuart Mill's comment that his *On Liberty* (1859) bore traces of this 'remarkable American', as Warren bristled at the conformity he felt at the Owenite colony of New Harmony in Indiana.[79] His reaction was not to dismiss the utility of communal experimentation, indeed he would participate in several other ventures, but to vociferously declaim the 'SOVEREIGNTY OF THE INDIVIDUAL.'[80] 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.'[81] For Kropotkin, born in the year that Brook Farm became Fourierist, comments like these offered an important dissection of

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[76] McKanan, "Making Sense of Failure", pp.163-166; Richard Francis, *Transcendental Utopias: Individual and Community at Brook Farm, Fruitlands, and Walden* (Ithaca, 2007), p.38.

[77] Everett Webber, *Escape to Utopia: The Communal Movement in America* (New York, 1959), pp.192-199.

[78] George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (London, 1962), p.431. For a useful discussion of Warren's interpretation of Fourier and the broader relationship between American anarchism and the phase of communal experimentation, see: James J. Martin, *Men Against the State: The Expositors of Individualist Anarchism in America, 1827-1908* (New York, 1957), pp.11-107.

[79] John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* (London, [1873] 1989), p.191.

[80] Josiah Warren, "True Civilization: A Subject of Vital and Serious Interest to All People; but most Immediately to Men and Women of Labor and Sorrow" in Irvin Horowitz (ed.) *The Anarchists* (New Jersey, 2005), pp.322-330, p.322.

[81] Warren quoted in Webber, *Escape to Utopia*, p.154.

the ideas behind utopian schemes. More importantly, it was criticisms of this type that his communitarian political thought would seek to address.

"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.[82] 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*

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[82] For treatments of Kropotkin that highlight the relevance of Fourier's thought, see: Brian Morris, *Kropotkin: The Politics of Community* (New York, 2004); Woodcock, *The Anarchist Prince*, p.10, 317.

D'un Révolté, in which laissez-faire capitalism, imperialism, and the dreadful delights of London's poverty were juxtaposed with the 'long cry for…fraternal equality' heard through history.[83] American communalism, however, was not part of this cry, and Reclus condemned the haughty isolationism of communalists seeking escape from the strife. 'Here is the fighting ground', he wrote, 'and us anarchists' will never 'separate ourselves from the world to build a little church, hidden in some vast wilderness.' Aside from the moral duty to engage in struggle, Reclus pointed to the transience of many of these communities as a symbol of the futility of retiring from the fight. 'They carry within themselves the seeds of their own dissolution', and adopting a characteristically scientific metaphor, he concluded that the members of these communities will inevitably be 'reabsorbed by Nature's law of gravitation into the world which they have left.'[84]

Kropotkin's critique of communalism was more substantial than Reclus', and one that reveals lines of continuity and disruption with Fourier's work. In evaluating these communities his first angle of investigation was economic, and despite the hardship endured by many phalanxes, Kropotkin still found Fourier's economic ideas compelling. A central tenet of Fourier's socialist vision was a hatred for the existing organisation of work, which he deemed inherently dehumanizing. Whereas 'beavers, bees, wasps, and ants' went about their work with 'delight', the 'Russian...and Algerian...work out of fear of the whip or the cudgel; the English and French work from fear of the hunger which besets their poor households.'[85] Yet,

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[83] Elisée Reclus, "Anarchy: By an Anarchist" in *Contemporary Review* Vol.45 (Jan. 1884), pp.627-641, p.627, 628.

[84] Reclus, "Anarchy: By an Anarchist", p.637.

[85] Charles Fourier in Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu, *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier: Selected Texts on Work, Love, and Passionate Attraction* (Boston, 1971), pp.144-5.

Fourier insisted that compulsion or anxiety need not underpin labour, and if it were purged of 'the loathsome aspects that make work in the present state so odious' a newfound joy in labour would emerge.[86] Typically, Fourier gave a series of prescriptions to correct this situation, but central to them was the insistence that work must be made aesthetically appealing, varied and purposeful.[87] Kropotkin's vision of anarchism was similarly based on the belief that labour must be remodelled, 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'.[88] 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.*'[89]

Although framed as a 'return', Kropotkin's solution was not a primitivistic retreat from industrial civilization.[90] 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.[91] In the right social setting, Kropotkin insisted, technological sophistication could ensure rather than retard emancipation, and he

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[86] Fourier in *The Utopian Vision*, pp.274-5.

[87] Fourier in *The Utopian Vision*, p.275.

[88] Peter Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (Montréal, [1899] 1994), p.1

[89] Italics are Kropotkin's own. Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, p.20.

[90] Primitivism within the anarchist tradition is not a modern phenomenon, and such arguments would have been familiar to Kropotkin. See: C. Alexander McKinley, *Illegitimate Children of the Enlightenment: Anarchists and the French Revolution, 1880-1914* (New York, 2008), p.96.

[91] A. Dwight Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (London, 1985), p.155.

rebuked Morris for failing to notice the 'gracefulness' of the machine.[92] Given the complexity of Morris' views on mechanisation, Kropotkin was unduly critical of this aspect of his thought, but his defence of technology tapped into two deeper concerns: the issue of pleasurable labour and abundance.[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,

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[92] Kropotkin, *Memoirs*, p.95.

[93] On Morris' ambiguity, consider: William Morris, "How We Live and How We Might Live" in A.L. Morton (ed.) *Political Writings of William Morris* (London, 1973), pp.134-158, p.152.

[94] Kinna, *William Morris*, p.149.

[95] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.141.

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 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

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[96] P. Kropotkin, "Advice to Those About to Emigrate" in *Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism* (March, 1893), pp. 14.

[97] Kropotkin, "Advice to Those About to Emigrate", p.14; Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.126.

[98] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.126.

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', and even the most skilful painters produced canvases devoid of authenticity.[99] 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.[100] 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. Vitally, 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*

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[99] Italics are Kropotkin's own. Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.140, 139, 138, 141.

[100] Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty" in Henry Hardy (ed.) *Liberty* (Oxford, 2002), pp.166-217, p.178.

Conquest of Bread.[101] 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, 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.[102] 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.[103] With industrial

zoning overcome in the shape of the 'factory amidst the fields', Kropotkin believed that

working-life could be quickly revolutionized.[104] 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.[105] And, coupled with the rational application of the

technological advances of the nineteenth-century that he had championed in *The Conquest of*

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[101] For more on this convincing argument, see: Ruth Kinna, "Fields of Vision: Kropotkin and Revolutionary

Change" in *SubStance* 113, Vol.36, No.2 (2007), pp.67-86.

[102] Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, pp.1-20.

[103] Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, p.151. For a relevant discussion of Victorian visions of

Manchester, see: Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class* (New York, 1974), pp.3-66.

[104] Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, p.148.

[105] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.x.

Bread, he optimistically assessed that the burden of work, particularly its most toilsome varieties, could be exponentially reduced.[106]

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 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

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[106] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, pp.144-155.

[107] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, p.209, 192.

[108] Kropotkin, *Mutual Aid*, p.211.

Goethe: '*Greift nur hinen ins volle Menschenleben…Ein jeber lebt's – nicht vielen ist's bekannt.*'[109] 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 Tocqueville and Mill's concern that democratic societies could act tyrannically towards dissenting inhabitants a common frame of reference.[110] Modern *anarchistant* 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.[111] 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

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[109] Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, p.180.

[110] See: Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: and Two Essays on America* (London, [1835] 2003), pp.292-300; J.S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings* (Cambridge, [1859] 1989), p.8. For a useful analysis of this theme, see: Alan Ritter, *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis* (Cambridge, 1980).

[111] Todd May, "Is Post-Structuralist Theory Anarchist?" in *Post-Anarchism: A Reader* (London, 2011), p.43.

which mankind would be driven into communistic monasteries or barracks'.[112] 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 first half of this century'.[113] 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.'[114] 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

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[112] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The Alliance of Socialist Democracy and the International Working Men's Association: Report and Documents Published by Decision of the Hague Congress of the International [1873]" in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 23* (London, 1988), pp.454-580, p.543; Kropotkin, "Anarchism", p.915.

[113] P. Kropotkine, "Communism and Anarchy" in *Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism* (July, 1901), pp.30-31, p.30.

[114] P. Kropotkine, "Domestic Slavery" in *Freedom: A Journal of Anarchist Communism* (July, 1891), pp.47-48, p.47.

theory as narrowly optimistic.[115] '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.[116] 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 other for small defects of individual character'.[117] 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

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[115] In this vein, see: Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Founders, The Golden Age, The Breakdown* (London, 2005), p.370. For a competing interpretation, see: David Morland, *Demanding the Impossible?: Human Nature and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Social Anarchism* (London, 1998).

[116] Kropotkine, "Communism and Anarchy", p.31.

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

London or near Paris', rather than secluded collectives serving as a 'refuge for those who have abandoned the battle'.[118]

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 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'.[119] Lacking a realistic understanding of revolution meant conversing with autocrats, and after all, Kropotkin's image of Fourier seeking Napoleon's help was not apocryphal.[120] 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

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[118] Kropotkin, "Advice to Those About to Emigrate", p.14.

[119] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.vii.

[120] Beecher, *Charles Fourier*, p.110, 134.

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.[121]

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 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

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[121] Terrance Kissack, *Free Comrades: Anarchism and Homosexuality in the United States, 1895-1917* (Edinburgh, 2008), p.26, 100-1; Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu, "Introduction" to *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier*, pp.1-75, pp.55-65. For Fourier in modern anarchism, consider: Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (Palo Alto, 1982), pp.329-333.

[122] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.xi.

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 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

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[123] For this narrative, see: Woodcock, *Anarchist Prince*, p.415-430; Miller, *Anarchism*, pp.71-77.

[124] Kropotkin, *Conquest of Bread*, p.xii

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.

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