

Proposed Communist Settlement: A New Colony for Tyneside or Wearside

Pëtr Kropotkin

1895

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Editor's Preface

Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) was one of the greatest anarchist theoreticians of his time. Although he admired the directly democratic and non-authoritarian practices of the traditional peasant village commune, he was never an advocate of small and isolated communal experimentalism. Many people, upon reading his works, have been inspired to found such communities, both in his own time as well as the hippies of the 1960s (a period when Kropotkin's major works were republished and influential). Kropotkin did not consider such ventures were likely to be successful or useful in achieving wider revolutionary goals. His friend, Elisee Reclus, who had been involved in such a venture in South America in his youth, was even more hostile to small communal experiments. It is a pity that some of the founders of the many hippy communes in the 1960s (nearly all of which faded rather quickly) did not read Kropotkin more carefully. Unfortunately, they made the same mistakes as many anarchists, communists and socialists had made a century before them. In the anarchist press today one still finds adverts for prospective small and isolated anarchist colonies. Also, many commentaries about Kropotkin still misrepresent him as having had a vision of society consisting of unfederated and independent village-like settlements and of advocating small communal experiments as a means of achieving an anarchist society. The following speech and two 'open' letters, which have not been in print for a century, clearly show, that although not emotionally opposed to such ventures, he was highly sceptical about their chances of success and generally believed them to be a drain upon the energies of the anarchist movement. Despite his warnings, these articles also contain much good and practical advice to those who are still tempted to found small experimental communes in the wilderness, or perhaps, those tempted in some future era to colonise space.

Graham Purchase

A number of Communists resident in the North of England have decided to found a settlement somewhat on the lines of Mr. Herbert Mill's home colony at Starnthwaite, but to be conducted on Communistic principles. The Promoters of the scheme are in negotiation for various parcels of land, but have not yet come to a final decision as to the locality in which their camp shall be pitched. We are, however, informed that, unless unforeseen and unanticipated difficulties present themselves at the eleventh hour, the colony will be established either on Tyneside or Wearside, probably the latter. Prince Kropotkin having been invited to become the treasurer of the fund, has returned the following answer:

Viola Cottage, Bromley, Kent, Feb. 16, 1895.

Dear Comrade,

Thank you very much for your kind letter and your extremely clear statements of the facts. Thank you still more for your trust in me. But I must say at once that by no means could I act as a treasurer. To this I am the least appropriate person, as I never was able to keep accounts of my own earnings and spendings. Moreover I really have no time.

As to your scheme, I must say that I have little confidence in schemes of communist communities started under the present conditions, and always regret to see men and women going to suffer all sorts of privations in order, in most cases, to find only disappointment at the end: retiring for many years from the work of propaganda of ideas among the great masses, and of aid to the masses in their emancipation, for making an experiment which has many chances for being a failure.

But I must also say that your scheme has several points which undoubtedly give it much more chance of success than most previous experiments were in possession of. For years I have preached that once there are men decided to make such an experiment, it must be made:

1. Not in distant countries, where they would find, in addition to their own difficulties, all the hardships which a pioneer of culture has to cope with in an uninhabited country (and I only too well know by my own and my friends' experience how great these difficulties are), but in the neighbourhood of large cities. In such cases every member of the community can enjoy the many benefits of civilisation; the struggle for life is easier, on account of the facilities for taking advantage of the mark done by our forefathers and for profiting by the experience of our neighbours; and every member who is discontented with communal life can at any given moment return to the individualist life of the present society. One can, in such case, enjoy the intellectual, scientific, and artistic life of our civilisation without necessarily abandoning the community.
2. That a new community, instead of imitating the example of our forefathers, and starting with extensive agriculture, with all its hardships, accidents, drawbacks, and amount of hard work required, very often superior to the forces of the colonists, ought to open new ways of production as it opens new ways of consumption. It must, it seems to me, start with intensive agriculture — that is, market gardening culture, aided as much as possible by culture under glass. Besides the advantages of security in the crops, obtained by their variety and the very means of culture, this sort of culture has the advantage of allowing the community to utilise even the weakest forces; and every one knows how weakened most

of the town workers are by the homicidal conditions under which most of the industries are now organised.

3. That the first condition of success, as proved by the anama peasant communities, the Young Icaris, and several others, is to divest communism from its monastical and barrack garments, and to conceive it as the life of independent families, united together by the desire of obtaining material and moral wellbeing by combining their efforts. The theory, according to which family life has to be entirely destroyed in order to obtain some economy in fuel used in the kitchen, or for heating the space of its dining rooms, is utterly false; and it is most certain that the Young Icarians are absolutely correct in introducing as much as possible of family and friendly grouping life, even in the ways they are taking their meals.
4. It seems to me proved by evidence that, men being neither the angels nor the slaves they are supposed to be by the authoritarian utopians — Anarchist principles are the only ones under which a community has any chances to succeed. In the hundreds of histories of communities which I have had the opportunity to read, I always saw that the introduction of any sort of elected authority has always been, without one single exception, the point which the community stranded upon; while, on the other side, those communities enjoyed a partial and sometimes very substantial success, which accepted no authority besides the unanimous decision of the folkmoot, and preferred, as a couple of hundred of millions of Slavonian peasants do, and as the German Communists in America did, to discuss every matter so long as a unanimous decision of the folkmoot could be arrived at. Communists, who are bound to live in a narrow circle of a few individuals, in which circle the petty struggles for dominion are the more acutely felt, ought decidedly to abandon the Utopias of elected committees' management and majority rule; they must bend before the reality of practice which is at work for many hundreds of years in hundreds of thousands of village communities — the folkmoot — and they must remember that in these communities, majority rule and elected government have always been synonymous and concomitant with disintegration — never with consolidation.

To these four points I have come, from what I know of the actual life of Communist communities, such as has been written down by numbers of Russians and West Europeans who had no theoretical conceptions, promoted no theoretical views, but simply put down on paper or verbally told me what they had lived through. Misery, dullness of life, and the consequent growth of the spirit of intrigue for power, have always been the two chief causes of non-success.

Now, as far as I see from your letter, the community which you try to bring into existence takes the above four points as fundamental, and in so doing it has, I believe, as many more chances of success.

To these four points I should also add a fifth, on which you are agreed, of course, beforehand. It is to do all possible for reducing household work to the lowest minimum, and to find out for that purpose, and to invent if necessary, all possible arrangements. In most communities this point was awfully neglected. The woman and the girl remained in the new society as they were in the old one — the slaves of the community. Arrangements to reduce as much as possible the incredible amount of work which our women uselessly spend in the rearing up of children, as well as in household work, are, in my opinion, as essential to the success of a community as the proper arrangement of the fields, the greenhouses or the agricultural machinery. Even more. But

while every community dreams of having the most perfect agricultural or industrial machinery, it seldom pays attention to the squandering of the forces of the honest slave, the woman. Some steps in advance have been made in Guise's familistere. Others could wisely be found out. But, with all that, a community started within the present society has to cope with many almost fatal difficulties.

The absence of communist spirit is, perhaps, the least of them. While the fundamental features of human character can only be mediated by a very slow evolution, the relative amounts of individualist and mutual aid spirit are among the most changeable features of man. Both being equally products of an anterior development, their relative amounts are seen to change in individuals and even societies with a rapidity which would strike the sociologist if he only paid attention to the subject, and analysed the corresponding facts.

The chief difficulty is in the smallness itself of the community. In a large community, the asperities of everyone's character are smoothed, they are less important and less remarked. In a small group they attain, owing to the very conditions of life, an undue importance. More contact between neighbours than exists nowadays, is absolutely necessary. Men have tried in vain to live in isolation, and to throw upon the government's shoulders all the petty affairs which they are bound to attend to themselves. But in a small community, the contact is too close, and, what is worse, the individual features of character acquire an undue importance, as they bear upon the whole life of the community. The familiar example of 20 prisoners shut up in one room, or of the 20 passengers of a steamboat, who soon begin to hate each other for small defects of individual character, is well worthy of note.

In order to succeed, the Communist experiment, being an experiment in mutual accommodation among humans, ought to be made on a grand scale. A whole city of, at least, 20,000 inhabitants, ought to organise itself for self-managed consumption of the first necessities of life (houses and essential furniture, food and clothing), with a large development of free groupings for the satisfaction of the higher artistic, scientific, and literary needs and hobbies — before it be possible to say anything about the experimentally tested capacities, or incapacities, of our contemporaries for Communist life. (By the way, the experiment is not so unfeasible as it might seem at first sight.)

The next great difficulty is this. We are not indigenous people untouched by civilisation who can begin a tribal life with a hut and a few arrows. Even if no hunting laws did exist, we should care — the majority at least — for some additional comfort and for some better stimulants for higher life than a drop of whisky supplied by the trader in exchange for furs. But in most cases, a Communist community is compelled to start with even less than that, as it is burdened by a debt for the land it is permitted to settle upon, and is looked at as a nuisance by the surrounding land and industry lords. It usually starts with a heavy debt, while it ought to start with its share of the capital which has been produced by the accumulated labour of the precedent generations. Misery and a terrible struggle for the sheer necessities of life is therefore the usual condition for all the Communist colonies which have hitherto been attempted, to say nothing of the above hostility. This is why I could not insist too much upon your wise decision of starting intensive culture under the guidance of experienced gardeners that is, the most remunerative of all modes of agriculture.

And then comes in the difficulty of men being not accustomed to hard agricultural work, navvies' work and building trades work — that is, exactly those sorts of work which are most in request in the young colony.

And finally, there is the difficulty with which all such colonies had to contend. The moment they begin to become prosperous, they are inundated by newcomers mostly the unsuccessful ones in the present life, those whose energy is already broken by years of unemployment and a long series of privations, of which so few of the rich ones have the slightest idea. What they ought to have before setting to work would be rest and given good food, and then set to hard work. This difficulty is not a theoretical one; all the Communist colonies in America have experienced it; and unless the colonists throw overboard the very principles of Communism and proclaim themselves individualists — small bourgeois, who have succeeded and will keep for themselves the advantages of their own position — in which case, the communist principle having once been abandoned, the community is doomed to fail under the duality which has crept in; or, they accept the newcomers with an unfriendly feeling (“they know nothing of the hardships we have had to go through,” the old stock say), and gradually they are really inundated by men whose numbers soon exceed the capital to be worked with. For a Communist colony, the very success thus becomes a cause of ultimate failure.

This is why some of the Labour leaders in America and their sympathisers from the Chicago middle classes who intended during the last Chicago strike to retire to some remote state of the Union, and there to start with a socialist territory which they would have defended against aggression from without, had more chances of success than a small Communist colony.

Here is, dear comrade, what I had to say in answer to your letter. By no means should I like to discourage you and your comrades. I simply think that “forewarned means forearmed.” The better one sees the difficulties in his way, the better he can cope with them. Once you feel inclined to attempt the experiment, although knowing all its difficulties — there must be no hesitation in making it. Earnest men will always find out in it something to learn themselves and to teach their comrades.

Once your inclinations go this way — certainly go on! You have some more chances of success than many of your forerunners, and I am sure you will find sympathies in your way. Mine will certainly follow you, and if you think that the publication of this letter can bring you sympathisers, publish it as an open letter to comrades intending to start a Communist colony.

Yours fraternally,

P. Kropotkin.

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