

Advice to Those About to Emigrate

Pëtr Kropotkin

1893

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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

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In these days when Home Colonisation is seriously discussed, and is even tried, in England as an outlet for the populations of our congested towns, the following letters will be of much interest to our readers. A comrade in New South Wales, writing to Kropotkin for suggestions and advice, says:

“As you are probably aware, the Labour movement in Australia has advanced tremendously during the last four or five years. The reason, I believe, lies in the increased agitation in the minds of the people through the late strikes here and also in England and America. The Labor Party here got the worst of it in the last three big strikes, yet the importance of those strikes as factors in educating people’s minds cannot be overlooked — eg. direct results of defeat of the Maritime Strike were the formation of Labor Electoral Leagues all over New South Wales, and the sending in of thirty-four — Labor members into Parliament: result of last year’s Shearer’s Strike in Queensland has been the beginning of the New Australia movement about which I write.

The New Australia Movement is a proposal to all healthy and intelligent men and women to leave Australia and to go to a certain part of South America, there to establish Co-operative Settlements on Socialistic principles. The idea of this movement originated with Mr Lane, editor of the best Socialistic labor paper in Queensland. Three agents of the Association are at present in Argentina (S.A.), prospecting there for the best land for the settlement, and they have already found a site for it on the banks of the River Niger. In Australia we have five or six agents, Mr. Lane included, organising groups in different parts of the country, and the result has been better than we expected. We have already from five to six hundred members, and the first batch of settlers sails for Argentina some time in January.

It may seem strange that while thousands of men are emigrating annually from different parts of the world to Australia — the so-called working man’s Paradise — men should be found in Australia willing to leave behind the country which they have helped to raise up into a nation and to go to a foreign country which, perhaps, is no better than Australia. But this is not a case of “It’s better where we are not.” There is more than one reason why it would be better to establish the settlement in Argentina but I will cite only one: Capitalistic opposition would be too strong here in Australia. Capital is organised here stronger than ever it was before; it rules the Governments here. Again the motto of Socialists is “the world is my country, and we are going to act up to it. We’ll have no distinctions either in nationalities or in religions. All men are welcome — provided they are physically and morally healthy, and not afraid to work or to think.”

To which Kropotkin replies:

The fact that men and women, who have made Australia what it is, are compelled to migrate from it, speaks volumes in itself. “Make the land, be the dung which renders it productive, build the centres of civilisation which render it valuable — and go away!” That is the true picture of modern capitalist management. The same here, the same at the antipodes — always the same!

Every time I see men and women of energy, enterprise and initiative, starting similar colonies, I feel sorry You know how much Russia has lost of her best elements, those that had the capacity of being dissatisfied and of revolting against bad conditions, because she had at her very doors Siberia,

whereto the lovers of freedom could go and escape for a few years all the curses of the State — military service, bureaucracy, functionaries and their despotism.

What would become of the European revolutionary movement if most women and men of strong individuality — most of those ready to rebel — went to settle in distant lands, trying to make colonies there? Is there not work enough in each land for every one who wishes to work for the modification of the atrocious conditions of the present time? Are there not at hand enough opportunities for exercising the spirit of Solidarity which inspires the Communist? Do we not want here, in every great and small city, that communist spirit put into practice and radiating from small groups, however limited in extent, so as to make it permeate the whole society?

The longer we all live, the more we see that the very limited communist solidarity which is practised among all revolutionary, and especially all Anarchist groups exercises a much more powerful effect than if it were practised, even to its full extent, somewhere on the boundaries of the civilised world! Remember the change produced in all Russian society by Nihilism. Compare the manners, the habits of life at the time of Turgenev's "On the Eve" with present manners and habits. Not to mention that, besides the propaganda by example, which is carried on more or less here by all who have broken with old forms, there is going on hand in hand a propaganda of general socialist principles, Socialist agitation, and Socialistic enlightening of the masses; and this is what prepares the way for Communism on a grand scale in the cities of the civilised world itself.

Besides, when I recollect the numerous colonies, which have been started over the last 50 years, and the number of men and women, some of whom I knew personally, whose unflinching energies and perseverance I cannot but admire, and yet see the failures on record, I cannot but think that there is some great cause at work against such colonies.

These causes I imagine to be two, and I recommend them to your most careful consideration: First, the colonies are usually not numerous enough. If you are a small family, united by bonds of common education and thousands of family bonds, you may succeed. If you are more than that, you must be numerous: 2000 souls will succeed better than 200, on account of the variety there would be of characters, aptitudes, inclinations. The individual and the individual's personality more easily disappear in a group of 2000 than in a group of 200 or 20. It is extremely difficult to keep 50 or 100 persons in continuous full agreement. For 2000 or 10,000 this is **not** required. They only need agree as to some advantageous methods of common work, and are free otherwise to live in their own way.

The second difficulty is this: Peasants no doubt succeed in founding such colonies because, in their mother country, the conditions are so bad that, after 2 or 3 years of very hard work, they feel better off than before. Their colonies only disintegrate when they (through some special conditions) fall from bad to worse.

But most Communistic colonies are composed chiefly of men who are put, in the colony; into worse material conditions than their previous ones. However bad the present conditions, the worker in a civilised country, **if he is permitted by the exploiters to work**, and if he is an average worker, has certain conditions of life, which in most cases he does not find in the colony, where 5, 10, often more, years he has to fight against the most crushing difficulties.

In the colony he works hard, and has none of the trifles which civilisation gives, and which we all like so much, and he has no prospect of having them. He also feels less personal liberty in his actions — it is always the case in small communities — and he is deprived of the higher stimuli which he has in his mother country — even of the struggle in a large arena which every active nature likes.

That is why, I have long since thought, that if I were one of those who start colonies, I should never go into the wilderness. A Communist Colony? Well, the best spot for it is near London or near Paris!

And even if it started without, or with very little, capital or land, I am persuaded that the privations one would have to impose upon himself to make such a colony thrive in a London suburb would be much less than the privations one must endure to make a colony thrive in Argentina

I have read a good deal about the first steps of colonists in America, both in records and private letters; I saw many colonists on the fertile plains of the middle Amur in Siberia, so I have some idea what these privations are, and I am firmly persuaded that if 20 of 200 persons had endured like privations in starting a Communist farm near London — they would be prosperous now.

Of course the chief thing in such a case would be not to undertake agriculture in the way it was practiced 2000 years ago, but the agriculture which is required now i.e., gardening and most intensive culture, combined with **handicraft**.

When I saw at Harrow (NE London suburb) what is obtained from a horrid, heavy clay by intensive labor a Labor which is still a plaything in comparison with the labor a colony has to face in unbroken countries — I always thought that if I were a born “colonist” I should try to colonise here, not in South America.

Reasoned, intensive gardening to grow all sorts of vegetables (and perhaps to attempt intensive culture of wheat) — guided by the experience of real gardeners and in accordance with the advice readily received from neighbours; that alone might give nearly the whole of the colony’s food, and pay the rent, as well as permit the concern to increase gradually — even if one half of the colony’s adults were compelled to work all the year round in a factory (or, still better, one half of the year only), to earn the necessary money; while the other half obtained from the land, by intensive culture, all that is required for living. And such a colony close to a big city would have the advantage of not cutting itself off from the civilised world; it would be part of it, and would enjoy some of its joys, which are so attractive for one who has a taste for learning or art. A lecture, good music, a good library would be within reach of the colonist, not to say that he would remain in contact with the Communists who carry on the active work of propaganda and agitation amidst the old world; he might even join in whenever he liked.

I am persuaded that if a Communist colony can live together in our present society it can only live near a big city. But, even in its best, it will only be a refuge for those who have abandoned the battle, which has to be fought — face to face with the enemy...I need not tell you that, if the colony is to have any chance of success, it ought to have no directors, no superintendents, no balloting, no voting whatsoever. These, and the intrigues they give rise to, have always been the stumbling blocks of the colonies. Are the new settlers less intelligent, less capable than a Russian village *mir* that goes to settle in Siberia? The Russian peasants live without authority, agree at their meetings for common work, and are intelligent enough not to have authorities or ballots, and to arrive at unanimity in their decisions. Are the Australians inferior to them in any way that they need rulers?

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