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## *Anarchism and the politics of utopia*

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## 12 Anarchism and the politics of utopia

Ruth Kinna

There is a curious paradox at the heart of contemporary debates about the relationship between utopian and anarchist studies. While anarchistic ideas have gained some purchase in utopian studies, there is a strong anti-utopian trend in modern anarchism. What is puzzling about this paradox is that both positions seem to be shaped by a common set of concerns. The anarchistic aspect of modern utopianism is marked by an engagement with an imaginative and open-ended exploration of alternative ways of being. Valérie Fournier's embrace of 'grass roots utopianism' flows from a rejection of utopias that prioritise 'destinations' over 'journeys' and "better states" over 'movement and process'.<sup>1</sup> The anti-utopian bent of modern anarchism is shaped by a worry that utopianism threatens precisely these kinds of practice. Jason McQuinn's anarchist treatment of utopianism is informed by a suspicion of ends. All preconceived ideals, he argues, necessarily constrain free thought. Anarchists must, therefore, take particular care when discussing the nature of anarchy for any such discussion runs the risk of embedding in the analysis an 'idealized, hypostatized vision'.<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to explain this paradox by looking at the different anarchist traditions to which these parties appeal. The former find inspiration in what might be called a romantic-anarchist tradition, exemplified - within political anarchism - by Gustav Landauer. Anarchist anti-utopians, by contrast, base their critiques of utopianism on a rationalist, scientific strain of anarchist thought, usually associated with Peter Kropotkin. Both sets of scholars might

agree with Fournier that it is possible and necessary to distinguish 'utopianism' as a way of thinking about qualitatively better states, opening up 'new conceptual spaces', from 'utopia' if this is understood as a perfectionist, highly prescriptive or monistic attempt to delineate "a" vision of "a" better society'.<sup>3</sup> But anarchistic utopians and anarchist anti-utopians part company in their understanding of the earlier generation's ability to hold these ideas apart.

If this explanation of the paradox is correct, it begs questions about the manner in which the two anarchist traditions have been represented. To what extent is it possible to distinguish a romantic from a rationalist tradition in anarchist thought? In this chapter I discuss these early anarchist conceptions of utopianism and argue that the differences have been exaggerated.

Certainly, Landauer and Kropotkin followed different paths, but they formulated their responses to utopianism in the same context, specifically through a political engagement with Marxism and an ideologically charged debate about scientific socialism. Landauer met this claim by rejecting science as a paradigm for anarchist debate and trumpeting utopianism. Kropotkin instead tried to expose the fraudulence of scientific socialism by contrasting its metaphysical underpinnings to the positivist foundations of his own anarcho-communism. These two responses could be harnessed easily within a single framework. Indeed, Landauer's concern that anarchists give content to the future in an effort to counter Marxism's projected development and Kropotkin's attempt to show that genuine science was neither teleological nor prescriptive came together in Warlam Tcherkesoff's work. Nineteenth century anarchists were utopians in the sociological sense that their thought

had a transcendent, transformative character, but neither Landauer nor Kropotkin fits easily into the categorisations suggested by contemporary utopian or anarchist anti-utopian thought. My contention is that their approach to anarchist utopianism has something to offer both.

## Utopianism and anarchist anti-utopianism

The contrasting impressions that modern theorists of utopianism and anarchist anti-utopians have of historical anarchism stem from the critical frameworks each have adopted for their treatments of utopianism rather than any strong divisions in early anarchist thought. At the turn-of-the-century, there was a strong consensus about the problems and possibilities of utopia in anarchist circles. This consensus is well documented but it has been mediated by a modern engagement with Marxism. On one side of the debate, modern theorists of utopianism have turned to anarchist (or anarchistic) ideas in order re-inject Marxism with a creative dimension that Marx and Engels are said to have wrongly overlooked. On the other, anarchist anti-utopians argue that nineteenth century anarchists, albeit unwittingly, introduced into anarchism a theory of history as deterministic as Marx's.

To start with the consensus: the common thread that runs through nineteenth-century anarchism is the rejection of blueprint utopia. Proudhon's pithy reform forever, utopias never encapsulates the general view, but within this, it is possible to distinguish two main concerns.<sup>4</sup> Some anarchists associated blueprints with notions of moral perfection or what Frank Manuel

has called the 'eternal Sabbath' of utopia.<sup>5</sup> Others were more disturbed by *phalansterisme*: the overly prescriptive design of the social order.

At the heart of the first complaint was a suspicion of abstract ideals. Proudhon's reflection on 'association' is indicative of this view. Like all abstract ideas, he argued, 'association' was wrongly understood as 'something finished, complete, absolute, unchangeable' - in other words, a utopia. Those 'who have taken up this Utopia have ended, without exception, in a SYSTEM'. The view chimed in with the critique of 'critical-utopian socialism' in the *Communist Manifesto* though Proudhon cast his net more widely than Marx, capturing Cabet, Leroux, Blanc, Babeuf, Morelly, More, Campanella and Plato under the banner of utopianism as well as the familiar triumvirate: Owen, Fourier and St. Simon.<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Rocker's objection to utopia followed in much the same vein. Anarchism, he argued, offers 'no patent solution for all human problems, no Utopia of a perfect social order ... since on principle it rejects all absolute schemes and concepts'.<sup>7</sup>

The second complaint - of *phalansterisme* - was that utopians mistakenly believed that it was possible to design an ideal social order and somehow to escape existing social arrangements by the construction of these ideals. This critique also dovetailed with Marx's and it found expression in arguments about the wisdom of community-building and about the designation of anarchists by their commitment to particular (usually economic) goals: so-called anarchists-without-adjective worried that disputes between anarcho-communists, individualists and collectivists suggested the pre-determination of anarchy whereas, Voltairine de Cleyre argued, '[I]berty and experiment alone can determine the best forms of society'.<sup>8</sup>

Neither critique of blueprint utopia prevented anarchists from thinking about the future anarchist society. Indeed, even those who professed themselves anti-utopians believed that anarchist anti-utopianism was consistent with the exploration of anarchy or utopia. Colin Ward offers a modern defence of this position. By probing private dreams, he argues, we reflect on the particularity of our desires and thus make room for other people.<sup>9</sup> Nineteenth-century anarchists followed a slightly different tack, couching the argument in terms of the educative possibilities of utopia rather than its discursive function. For David Andrade education meant practical experimentation and it was a necessary part of securing revolutionary change. ‘When a few persons in any community are sufficiently educated in social principles, there need be no delay in carrying into practice the plan of campaign.’<sup>10</sup> Andrade’s own co-operative scheme was offered as just one model they might follow. In other circles, education was inspirational and it attached itself to elevated, idealistic aims.

By education, by free organisation, by individual and associated resistance to political and economic tyranny, the Anarchist hopes to achieve his aim ... Even our bitterest opponents admit the beauty of our “dream,” and reluctantly confess that it would be well for humanity if it were “possible.” Anarchist Communist propaganda is the intelligent, organised, determined effort to realise the “dream”, and to ensure that freedom and well-being for all *shall* be possible.<sup>11</sup>

These late nineteenth-century anarchist responses to utopianism were ably captured in Marie Lousie Berneri's *Journey Through Utopia*. Utopias, she argued, can be sorted into one of two categories: 'authoritarian' and 'anti-authoritarian'. The first seek 'the happiness of mankind through material well-being' but sink 'man's individuality into the group, and the greatness of the State.' The second demand 'a certain degree of material comfort' and consider 'that happiness is the result of the free expression of man's personality and must not be sacrificed to an arbitrary moral code or to the interests of the State'.<sup>12</sup> Utopia and anarchy are not irreconcilable ideas, but are consistent only when 'utopia points to an ideal life without becoming a plan, that is, a lifeless machine applied to living matter.' As a non-planned ideal, utopia 'truly becomes the realisation of progress'.<sup>13</sup> In their classic study *Utopian Thought in the Western World* the Manuels similarly describe the anarchist position as a rejection of blueprint utopia that falls short of anti-utopianism. There is, they note, no 'significant utopian novel or full-bodied description of a future utopian society whose author would identify himself as an anarchist.' And the reason is that anarchists viewed 'the world of anarchy' as 'a spontaneous creation of the free, untrammelled spirit of the men ... not fettered to any previously formulated plans or dogmas'. A blueprint of anarchy, they continue, 'would be self-contradictory, internally inconsistent, and anathema to anarchists'.<sup>14</sup> Yet just as Berneri identifies an anti-authoritarian trend in utopian thought, the Manuels also describe anarchism as a 'utopian condition.' Nineteenth-century anarchists were 'seduced ... into utterances about what an idea world should look like after the great outburst of destruction that would bring the new man into being'.<sup>15</sup>



The distinction between blueprint utopia and utopianism resonates in modern utopian theory, though the links between it and nineteenth-century political anarchism are indirect. The attraction of modern utopian theory to anarchism can be explained as a response to Marx's anti-utopianism, famously captured in his refusal to consider recipes for the cookshops of the future on the grounds that socialism would be shaped by the inevitable crisis of capitalism and proletarian class struggle. For Steven Lukes, this position was contradictory. Marx and Engels could hardly claim ignorance about the form(s) socialism was likely to take whilst also claiming insight into the development of history. Their mistake was to downplay the utopian implications of their thought; and the costs were 'disastrously' high. Believing that 'the ends would somehow call forth the appropriate means', Marxism 'almost totally failed to bring social and political imagination to bear upon real-life problems'.<sup>16</sup> The leaders of so-called 'actually existing socialism' instead forcibly adjusted socio-economic conditions to suit the theoretical assumptions of the historical model.

Since the 1970s, William Morris's *News From Nowhere* has been seen as one of the earliest attempts to make up for the lacuna in Marx's - and perhaps more pointedly, Engels' - imagination. Nevertheless, the most concerted effort to shift the balance within Marxism from science to utopia came, at around the same time, with a resurgence of interest in the Central European Jewish libertarian thought of the inter-war period. Michael Löwy's pioneering work argued that there was an elective affinity between Jewish messianic thought and libertarian utopianism which challenged the vulgar Marxist idea that history could be reduced to a 'mechanical, repetitive and

quantitative accumulation' and suggested that social transformations were open to active interventions and 'utopian novelty'.<sup>17</sup> Löwy pointed out that the inherently libertarian quality of Jewish messianic thought was not anarchist in any strict sense. Indeed, Ernst Bloch and Walter Benjamin - Marxist socialists - were two of the movement's central thinkers. Nonetheless, there was an important link to political anarchism through the work of Gustav Landauer, a significant figure both his own right and, after his murder in 1919 at the hands of Bavarian counter-revolutionaries, through the profound influence he exercised on other members of the group, notably, Martin Buber, as well as Bloch and Benjamin.<sup>18</sup>

The attractiveness of Landauer's work to modern theorists of utopianism stems from the poetic and mystical dimensions of his thought. As Löwy notes, Landauer's political thought was underpinned by a pantheistic religiosity, itself shaped by an interest in medieval Christianity and eighteenth-century Jewish mysticism. With these influences he fused a profound sense of nostalgia for community, inherited from German romanticism, a Nietzschean revolt against the philistinism of modern bourgeois society and a Rousseauian embrace of moral freedom. The result was a form of socialism that was at once conservative, libertarian and revolutionary and, more to the point, one that emphasised creativity, imagination, passion, intuition and free expression. These ingredients provided a perfect vehicle for utopianism. As Buber argued, Landauer understood that socialism 'can never be anything absolute. It is the continual becoming of human community in mankind, adapted and proportioned to whatever can be willed and done in the conditions given'.<sup>19</sup>

The largely negative response of modern anarchists to nineteenth-century anarchism reflects a theoretical worry about the status nineteenth-century anarchists attached to the idea of historical development. The problem here is not, as Lukes argues in respect of Marx, that the anarchists overplayed the concept of history and consequently disregarded utopia, but that they transformed what were intended to be educative models of anarchy into rigid utopias owing to a misplaced faith in natural scientific method and a conviction that history could be read like a rune. The charge, which is part methodological and part political, bears some of the hallmarks of liberal anti-totalitarianism associated with Popper, Hayek and others.<sup>20</sup> But whereas liberal critics recommended empirical methods to safeguard against utopianism, anarchist anti-utopians add an epistemological complaint derived from post-structuralism and postmodernist thought to argue that rationalism and empiricism are the fast tracks to utopia.

The story told by the Manuels is that nineteenth-century anarchist anti-utopianism was rooted in an 'ardent' belief 'in reason and the scientific method'.<sup>21</sup> As Frank Manuel points out, the resulting utopias were typically 'open-ended' and 'virtually all ... have continued metamorphoses built into their very frame'.<sup>22</sup> Critics disagree. Fastening on Kropotkin's work, they dismiss nineteenth-century anarchism as naturalistic scientism. According to this critique, anarchist theoreticians combined the language of science with a faulty understanding of scientific method to develop an evolutionary social science that was in Popper's terms, historicist. Anarchists - Kropotkin's Darwinian theory of mutual aid is a prime target - came to believe that it was possible to describe laws of history and use these laws to make predictions

about the future. The result was not so much a blueprint as a straightjacket. With knowledge of the course of evolution, anarchists had no more need of recipes for the future than Marx. They believed that there was no alternative future to the one history - anarchist theory - prescribed. Moreover, in their optimism and certainty that they had placed anarchism on a scientific foundation, these anarchists wrongly believed that evolution pointed towards the eradication of all social conflict. Robert Nozick, Jon Elster and Isaiah Berlin have all argued that utopia requires an unreasonable degree of consensus of its citizens, that it ignores trade-offs between competing moral values and leaves no room for genuine pluralism. This is the essence of the charge against Kropotkin's anarchist science: it breeds a utopianism that is both rigid and impossible.

Although Kropotkin's anarcho-communism ... lacks any invisible, hidden or directing hand, it promises to be the evolutionary culmination of the better side to human nature. The causal teleology is ... finalistic and illegitimate; its locus is in a self-directed evolutionary process whose goal is Kropotkin's utopia. We are all urged to give the process a helping hand, which in the absence of any power to direct it would have to be a receptive frame of mind so general as to constitute a universal consensus.<sup>23</sup>

Twenty-first century anarchist anti-utopian critics have resurrected these arguments, largely because of a political concern that nineteenth-century anarchists failed to distance themselves sufficiently from Marxism. Saul Newman has recently made the case, rejecting the nineteenth century's

scientific and rationalist frameworks and, in particular, Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid. His broad claim is that the anarchists fell 'into the same reductionist trap as Marxism'.<sup>24</sup>

Newman identifies three errors in traditional anarchist thought: a commitment to the 'idea of a rational social "object" that determines the revolutionary process,' a Manichean conception of liberation as the removal or abolition of state power and, finally, an ideal of a rational and moralised post-revolutionary subject. In sum:

classical anarchism ... is sustained ... by the utopian idea of society of the "other side" of power - a society ... without the distortions and dislocations wrought by power and authority. That is to say, there is a utopian fantasy of an Edenic state of fullness and reconciliation that would prevail in society once power relations have been eliminated. Furthermore, there is, in anarchism, an idealization of the subject - the subject is seen as embodying an inherent morality and rationality ... which has been distorted by political authority. In other words, there is a political fantasy that sustains the revolutionary desire at the heart of anarchism - this fantasy consists of a Manichean division between the subject and authority, and the promise of a return to a lost rational and moral social objectivity once this authority has been eliminated.<sup>25</sup>

Like the earlier generation of liberal and libertarian critics, Newman associates this vision of anarchy with stultifying uniformity. Classical anarchism is based on 'the fantasy of society without dislocation and

antagonism'.<sup>26</sup> Franco Ferrarotti advances a similar case. Classical anarchists, he argues, were not utopians in the modern sense of the word because they could not see social change as a 'piece-meal transformation which is constantly under the control of community judgment, in order to strike the best connection between what is ideally desirable and what is today already possible'. Their utopianism was based on 'grandiose, but highly unrealistic, dream of a totally liberated world through a cathartic revolution and a consequent palingenesis'.<sup>27</sup> Anarchists in the mould of Kropotkin thus rejected blue-prints but remained as utopian, or in Berneri's terms, 'authoritarian,' as any other schemers. This utopianism was the very opposite of the diverse, unbound utopianism that Löwy and others associate with Landauer. It was neither open-ended, nor offered a corrective to scientific socialism. Kropotkin failed to escape the scientific paradigms of the period and constrained anarchist hopes and dreams about the future in a utopian fantasy.

## Anarchism, Marxism and utopianism

As modern theorists suggest, Landauer and Kropotkin's relationship to utopianism was mediated by an understanding of scientific socialism, a term they associated with Marxist social democracy. And it is through the examination of their critical responses to Marxism that their relationship to utopianism can best be understood.

Landauer and Kropotkin elaborated their responses in the 1890s, when the ideological boundaries within European socialism were becoming less

permeable. The issue that galvanised the socialist movement and helped sort socialists into more clearly delineated camps was political action. This described a policy of constitutional engagement in bourgeois politics and a commitment to parliamentarism as a means of securing revolutionary change. Social democrats, following the model favoured by Engels and the German Social Democratic Party (SPD) spearheaded the policy, arguing that electoral struggle offered socialists a route to power and therefore a means to bring about socialist transformation. Opponents, many of whom did not think of themselves as anarchists, contested this view, typically arguing that participation in bourgeois politics was likely to breed reformism. To this argument the anarchists added another: the problem with parliamentarism was that it pointed to an inadequate conception of the state. Reiterating Bakunin's complaint that Marx's socialism required only shift of power within the state rather than the state's abolition, anarchists argued that statelessness had an organisational as well as a class dimension which socialist party politicking completely overlooked.<sup>28</sup> Landauer captured this view perfectly, attacking the model of social democracy pioneered in Germany as 'intolerant and despotic'. The party enjoyed phenomenal popular support but the strategy had 'hitherto led to miserable failure and shall always fail' because the structures of the state were replicated in the party's own organisation. Germany, Landauer argued, was the 'home of monarchism and militarism' and far from challenging these pillars of the state, the SPD exploited them.

[t]he German Social Democratic party in the most shameful way used this reactionary tendency of an oppressed people, this

dependence of the masses, as the basis upon which an extremely strict party rule could be constructed, strong enough to crush on every occasion the rising germs of freedom and revolt.<sup>29</sup>

Social democrats, led by Engels, forged the link between anarchist anti-parliamentarism and utopianism by arguing that the policy of political action was informed by Marx's discovery of historical materialism. Marx had conclusively shown that all systems of production were subject to internal contradictions and that these could be resolved only through class struggle. When socialists entered into electoral competition they were not, therefore, entering into bourgeois politics but waging class war in a political system that was about to explode in revolution. The Russian social democrat, George Pleckhanov, referred to the *Manifesto* to make the point:

The true revolutionists of our days ... "everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things;" which does not prevent them (but quite the contrary) from forming the proletariat into a party separate from all the exploiter parties, opposed to the whole "reactionary mass."<sup>30</sup>

Those, like Bakunin, who failed to see the oppositional and revolutionary force of political action simply showed that they were unable to digest the materialist conception of history. Their critique of political action was based on an assessment of 'the bourgeois parliamentary environment,' not the 'environment of the *electors*, the environment of a working-class party, conscious of its aim and well organised'.<sup>31</sup> The anarchist view was



unscientific and, therefore, utopian. Following Engels' re-conceptualisation of utopianism in *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*, Pleckhanov concluded:

The Anarchists are Utopians. Their point of view has nothing in common with that of modern scientific Socialism. But there are Utopias and Utopians. The great Utopians of the first half of our century were men of genius; they helped forward social science, which in their time was still entirely Utopian. The Utopians of today, the Anarchists ... have nothing to do with social science, which, in its onward march, has distanced them by at least half a century. Their "profound thinkers," their "lofty theorists," ... are the decadent Utopians, stricken with incurable intellectual anaemia. The great Utopians did much of the development of the working class movement. The Utopians of our days do nothing by retard its progress.<sup>32</sup>

The anarchists were not slow to respond. Tcherkesov led the charge:

For a long while we have been told that men of genius, of German extraction, have created a truly scientific idealism founded upon the metaphysics of Hegel ... But I long ago felt somewhat doubtful about it, because I knew that neither the metaphysics of Hegel nor the dialectical method so praised by Mr. Engels have had much influence among learned and thoughtful men [...]

I was very doubtful of anything really scientific could come of a philosophy rejected by science, condemned by historians ... by ... Marx himself ... But under the influence of the fabricators of a pretentious legend it is attempted to impose upon the workers ... this reactionary and aristocratic rubbish as a "scientific" basis for modern socialism. It is true that enlightened men of independent minds have pronounced against the evil attempt of Liebknecht, Engels, Plekhanoff, [Plekhanov] and others; but the tide of reaction rises rapidly. It is urgent to oppose it, to show the workers that their good faith is being abused, and that instead of humanitarian ideas, authority, bureaucracy, and officialism is being pressed upon them.<sup>33</sup>

Landauer and Kropotkin's efforts to reveal the flaws of social democracy were based on different logics. Landauer rejected the new pejorative spin the social democrats put on utopianism and openly attacked the notion that science provided a useful or appropriate foundation for socialism. In contrast, Kropotkin attempted to exploit the evaluative force of science but detach it from social democracy.

Landauer based his critique of Marx's thought on an idea of spirit. Spirit was the 'inner compulsion' which animated individuals, drawing them into collective actions and voluntary association; it was better thought of as a feeling than a concept. For example, spirit was expressed in the words: '*I know, I can, I may, I will, it must, and I should*'.<sup>34</sup> It was the 'grasping of the whole in a living universal,' the 'unity of separate things, concepts and men'.

In periods of change, spirit was 'ardent enthusiasm, courage in the struggle ... constructive activity'.<sup>35</sup> In all its myriad forms, spirit contrasted with the 'unspirit' - the 'external force, regimentation', the 'centralism of command' and discipline - of the state.<sup>36</sup> And in none of them could it be confused with the idealism or 'travesty of real spirit, namely Hegelian philosophy' which provided the foundation for Marx's 'eccentric and ludicrous scientific superstition'.<sup>37</sup> Landauer located the difference between these two conceptions in the idea of immanence. Instead of describing the indwelling, inherent, permanently pervading and sustaining spirit of the Christian scholars, 'immanence' in the Marxist tradition meant 'that nothing requires special efforts or mental insights, everything follows smoothly from the social process'. Specifically, it meant the 'so-called socialist forms of organization are already immanent in capitalism'.<sup>38</sup> In this guise, spirit was closely related to its opposite and it signalled the replacement of 'cultural will' with 'politics and party'.<sup>39</sup>

Whereas spirit gave full scope to desire and will as the motors of revolutionary change, Landauer linked Marxist un-spirit to an idea of revolution that tied action to phases of development outside human control. This idea raised problems of agency and it also pointed to a lack of revolutionary ambition. Properly understood, he argued, socialism was 'the tendency of will of unified men to create something new for the sake of an ideal'.<sup>40</sup> It was supposed to make real things that were 'otherwise hidden in our soul, in the structures and rhythms of art, in the faith-structures of religion, in dream and love, in dancing limbs and gleaming glances'.<sup>41</sup> Marxists failed to appreciate this dimension of socialism and were mere 'executive organs of the law of development'.<sup>42</sup> To illustrate the poverty of Marxism Landauer

contrasted the attitude of the socialist to the dry, mechanistic method of the politician. Socialists were poets, Marxists, plotters. Socialism was prophetic, Marxism predictive. The socialist knows the 'whole of society and of the past; feels and knows whence we come and then determines where we are headed'. Marxists knew only economics. Socialism was 'a cultural movement, a struggle for beauty, greatness, abundance of the peoples.'<sup>43</sup> 'Philistine' and 'pigmy-socialism' described 'the uncultured plodder who knows nothing more important, nothing more splendid, nothing more sacred than technology and its progress'.<sup>44</sup> The father of Marxism was not will or longing, but steam.<sup>45</sup>

Not only did Landauer conclude from this analysis that the achievement of classlessness in social democracy would leave the fabric of the capitalist state intact (the 'broad, centralized state' he argued 'already resembles his state of the future quite closely'),<sup>46</sup> he also suggested that Marx and the social democrats warmly embraced this kind of socialism, using science to cloak the normative implications of their theory. In particular, Landauer feared that the practical result of social democracy would be the imposition of technologically advanced, highly industrialised system of production and the eradication of all traditional, rural and communal practises. In 1896, as the Second International voted to make the commitment to political action a condition of entry, he put this resolution to the alternative Anarchist conference:

The Anarchists no longer believe in the fatalistic and jesuitical doctrine of Marx, which declares the spread of Capitalism on a

large scale and the elimination of all smaller producers to be necessary conditions for the realisation of Socialism.

As to the land question:

1. We reject State aid ...
2. We want to spread the principles of Free Socialism among labourers and peasants as well
3. We desire that the peasants hinder proletarianisation [sic] by associating themselves with their labourers in agricultural co-operative associations ... and creating organisations which might be the nuclei of socialistic Society.
4. Considering that the desire just expressed can in many cases not be realised, we advise in the meantime labourers, as well as farmers and peasants, to unite for an energetic economic struggle against their exploiters.<sup>47</sup>

Though Marx represented himself as a scientist, Landauer's analysis suggested that he was a utopian of sorts - a utopian in Popper's sense. 'Utopianists,' Popper notes, 'believe that their aims or ends are not a matter of choice, or of moral decision, but that they may be scientifically discovered by them within their fields of inquiry'.<sup>48</sup> Landauer's premises were, of course, at odds with Popper's, but his conclusion was not dissimilar: Marx did not need to elaborate a clear vision of the future because his theory of history pointed to an image that was so familiar it hardly needed fleshing out. Marxists denied 'that their doctrine is merely a product of technical centralisation of enterprises.' However, it was clear to Landauer that 'all these forms of desolate, ugly, uniform, restrictive, and repressive centralism were ...

exemplary for Marxism'.<sup>49</sup> Marx's utopia was a 'mirror image of the Utopia of the sated bourgeois' and the 'product of undisturbed laboratory development of capitalism'.<sup>50</sup> It was no accident that Marxist science designated capitalism as a necessary stage of historical development and a foundation for socialism, because Marx's socialism was only a form of the bureaucratic, centralised and militarised capitalist state. Marx was a dreamer but 'never was a dream emptier and drier'. Indeed, of all 'unimaginative fantasists' Landauer argued, 'the Marxists are the worst'.<sup>51</sup>

Keen to disassociate himself from this kind of utopianism, Landauer tied his own brand of socialism to the tradition Marx claimed to have superceded:

Yes ... we want to do what you call experiments. We want to make attempts. We want to create from the heart, and then we want, if it must be, to suffer shipwreck and bear defeat, until we have the victory and land is sighted ... Ashen-faced, drowsy men ... are leading our people ... Where are the ... victorious Reds who will laugh at these gray faces? The Marxists don't like to hear such words, such attacks, which they call relapses, such enthusiastic unscientific challenges. I know, and that is exactly why I feel so good at having told them this.<sup>52</sup>

The tone of Kropotkin's critique of Marx was very different and it had a methodological as well as philosophical dimension, fastening on two issues: first Marx's indebtedness to Hegelian metaphysics and second, his rejection of natural scientific methods. These related ideas pointed to two different

problems. Whereas the Hegelian legacy wrongly suggested that history followed a predictable path, Marx's preference for metaphysics over natural science led him to a faulty understanding of the future.

Drawing on Comte's sociology, Kropotkin painted Hegelian philosophy as an outmoded form of thinking that rested on the mistaken assumption - attributable, in modern times, to Kant - that it is possible to distinguish phenomena from noumena; 'the domain of physics' from what Kropotkin confusingly called 'mental phenomena'.<sup>53</sup> Accepting this distinction, metaphysicians like Hegel at once attempted to overcome it. Kropotkin admitted that his ideas were 'sometimes poetical' and, moreover, they had succeeded in generating some useful generalisations about 'the unity of physical and "spiritual" nature'.<sup>54</sup> But the shortcomings were considerable: 'the dialectic method' was 'despairingly vague' and 'mostly based on naïve assertions.' Hegel's 'total absence of proofs' was 'concealed by the vagueness of the arguments ... nebulous reasonings ... and grotesquely heavy style'.<sup>55</sup> Kropotkin found one example of nebulosity in the concept of innateness.<sup>56</sup> Echoing Landauer's critique of 'immanence', Kropotkin argued that this concept enabled Hegelians to claim that there was a logic to history whilst disagreeing about its content. Hegel's generalisations were so 'abstract and cloudy' that 'one could deduce from them ... the revolutionary spirit of Bakunin ... the revolutionary Jacobinism of Marx, and the "Recognition of what exists," which led so many "right wing" Hegelians to make "Peace with reality"'. Yet, these same generalisations were also 'easily exaggerated, and ... represented as indisputable *laws*'.<sup>57</sup>

Kropotkin found Marx's materialist theory of history even less satisfactory than Hegel's idealist version. On the one hand, advances in knowledge showed the bankruptcy of the science Marx claimed to have discovered. On the other, the path of development traced by Marx's theory highlighted just how out of step with popular aspirations his brand of socialism really was. Kropotkin fleshed out the first complaint by contrasting dialectical reasoning with natural science. The latter was predicated on two principles: that all phenomena could be understood by the same method of inquiry and that knowledge was based on the application of 'inductive-deductive' method. In *Modern Science and Anarchism* he explained:

We have heard of late very much about the dialectic method, recommended to us by Social Democrats in order to elaborate the Socialist ideal. But we no more admit this method than would natural science. The dialectic method reminds the modern naturalist of something very antiquated that has had its day and is forgotten ... No discovery of the nineteenth century, in mechanics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, or anthropology, has been made by the dialectic method. All the immense acquisitions of the century are due to the use of the inductive-deductive method - the only scientific method. And as man is a part of Nature, as his personal and social life is a natural phenomenon ... there is no reason why we should ... abandon the method which till then has been so useful, and look for another method in the realms of metaphysics.<sup>58</sup>



Pursuing his second complaint, Kropotkin argued that Marx's failure to understand modern science led him to append to his theory of history an illiberal and unworkable ideal. Like Landauer, he represented this ideal as 'the worship of the centralised State'.<sup>59</sup> More precisely, in social democracy Kropotkin argued that this basic tenet supported a policy of gradual change 'to mitigate ... exploitation' by means of 'legal limitations' and a commitment to the state nationalisation of major services. The result, Kropotkin argued, was '*State Capitalism*'.<sup>60</sup> Had Marx been a genuine scientist and based his political theory on deductions supported by careful empirical observation he would have realised, as Kropotkin did, that the tendency of history was towards anarchy - the abolition of the state and capitalism - not its capture and control. He would have understood that the desire for liberation, evidenced in countless popular revolutionary movements, was not a locomotive of history, but merely the expression of a strong human drive which, through the advances of modern science, nineteenth-century activists now knew could be satisfied. And finally, he would have understood that the purpose of science was not to uncover a law of development, but to find 'an answer to a plain question well put.'

The question put by Anarchism might be expressed in the following way: "Which social forms best guarantee in such and such societies, and in humanity at large, the greatest sum of happiness, and therefore the greatest sum of vitality?"<sup>61</sup>

Wrapping anarchism in the mantle of science, Kropotkin did not exploit the pejorative understanding of utopia in order to denigrate Marxism. Instead, returning to the history of socialism, he challenged the basis of the dichotomy Engels had promoted. Socialists, he argued, were never properly divided into scientists and utopians but primarily into authoritarian and anti-authoritarian camps. For example, of the so-called utopians, St. Simon fell in the first division and Fourier and Owen the second.<sup>62</sup> Marx, too, was an authoritarian, though Kropotkin traced his lineage from Babeuf, Blanqui and the 'secret political organisation of the "Materialist Communists"' which burgeoned in the 1830s and forties, rather than St. Simon.<sup>63</sup> Tracing his intellectual inheritance to Proudhon, with whom Owen had 'joined hands,' he put himself squarely in the anti-authoritarian camp. Thus, just as Landauer tied anarchism to a pre-Marxist experimental form of socialism, Kropotkin used his analysis of science to demonstrate his links with early anti-authoritarian pre-Marxist socialists and to highlight the superiority of *his vision* to the social democratic alternative.

Kropotkin's attempt to place anarchism on a scientific foundation was not historicist in the sense in which Landauer accused Marx. Using admittedly contestable arguments about the process of scientific inquiry and the unity of scientific methods, Kropotkin claimed that natural science provided a foundation for the kind of creative exercises at the heart of Landauer's work. To return to the analogy with Popper, he combined piecemeal social engineering - a desire to 'design ... remodel and service ... social institutions' without regard for the 'ends ... of human activity' - with revolutionary ambition.<sup>64</sup> The important difference between his work and

Landauer's was that Kropotkin believed that the centralisation of production and the exploitation of the existing technology anticipated by the social democratic state reflected Marx's *political preferences*, not a scientifically informed view. In contrast, Landauer believed that Marx's science had some validity; left unhindered western societies were sure to develop along the alienating, industrially advanced lines that Marx described. Nevertheless both Landauer and Kropotkin defended utopianism as a tool to consider the possibilities of socialism and elaborate the principles of anarchist organisation.

The themes explored by Landauer and Kropotkin were brought together in the work of Warlaam Tcherkesov. In *Pages of Socialist History* Tcherkesov argued that the claims social democrats made about the distinctiveness and originality of Marx's science were baseless. If Marx contributed anything original to socialism it was, as the economist Vladimir Simkhovitch argued, 'his systematic coordination of ideas'.<sup>65</sup> The 'cornerstone' of Marx's socialism, the theory of capitalist concentration, Tcherkesov argued, was the unhappy result of blending so-called French utopian socialism with German philosophy. Bluntly, Marx and Engels had plagiarised the writings of the Fourierists Eugène Buret and Victor Considerant and mixed their ideas with Hegel's 'reactionary metaphysics'.<sup>66</sup> In his study of Considerant, Jonathan Beecher argues that Tcherkesov's claim should be dismissed since Marxism has at its heart 'an argument concerning the laws of historical change and the necessity of revolution which is not to be found in Considerant'.<sup>67</sup> Tcherkesov's argument was not, however, that Marx - still less Engels - remained faithful to the spirit of French socialism, but that

his Hegelianism seriously distorted its arguments. Whereas Considerant 'so clearly indicated and formulated capitalist concentration of capital as a great social evil,' Marx 'turned it into a beneficent social law which would mechanically and peacefully liberate human society without any effort on its own side'.<sup>68</sup> Simkhovitch's objection was that this interpretation badly underestimated the importance Marx attached to revolutionary class struggle - 'a conception that permeates the whole Marxian system'.<sup>69</sup> On this point, Tcherkesov argued that though it was Engels, not Marx, who denied the need for force in the revolutionary process,<sup>70</sup> the discovery of the 'law of capitalistic concentration' had established an 'economic fatalism' which encouraged Engels' view.<sup>71</sup> In contrast to the revolutionaries of the 1840s - 'Blanqui, Dejacques, Flocon and others' - and, indeed, 'peaceful French socialists' like Considerant, Marx rejected calls for 'immediate revolutionary action and social revolution' and 'immediate social reform', substituting in their stead a bloodless idea of spontaneous evolutionary change.<sup>72</sup>

Turning to the substance of Marx's work, Tcherkesov questioned the arguments for concentration. In general, he argued that genuine - i.e. natural, inductive - scientific methods suggested that the processes of social transformation were a good deal more complicated than Marx's theory suggested.<sup>73</sup> Marx claimed to be a materialist, but his 'evolutionary generalisations' were based on 'economism' - not the same thing at all.<sup>74</sup> In particular, he argued that economic indicators lent no support to Marx's theory. Looking at data from 1840 to 1900, Tcherkesov concluded that the 'numbers neither of potentates of capital nor of smaller capitalists are diminished'.<sup>75</sup> As Max Nettlau pointed out, Tcherkesov's analysis ran parallel

to Eduard Bernstein's revisionism.<sup>76</sup> However, whereas Bernstein questioned the idea of capitalist concentration in order to encourage a wholehearted embrace of parliamentarism, Tcherkesov advocated its abandonment and a return to revolutionary struggle. The theory of concentration, he argued:

lies at the root of the parliamentary tactics of State Socialists. From this point of view, the solution to the social question ... becomes delightfully simple and easy. No need for an economic struggle ... no need to begin here and now to practice brotherly relations between man and man; ... It is enough that the workers should vote for members of parliament who call themselves Socialists, that the number of these M.P.s should increase to the extent of a majority in the House, that they should decree State Collectivism or Communism, and all exploiters will peaceably submit to the decision of parliament. The capitalists will have no choice ... for ... their numbers will be reduced to an infinitesimal proportion of the nation.<sup>77</sup>

Once socialists realised the fallaciousness of Marx's theory, Tcherkesov's hope was that they would use genuine - i.e. natural - scientific methods to help them make their own history and return, as Landauer suggested, to utopian notions of desire. Pleckanov's definition of a utopian, he noted, was 'one who, starting from an abstract principle, seeks for a perfect social organisation'. Tcherkesoff's lengthy response is worth quoting in full:

Read that sentence carefully, and you will discover that utopians are men of principle, and that they wish to reorganize present society, based on exploitation, ignorance, and oppression, in order to make out of it a solidary (sic) and communistic society, where the individual will have liberty, education and happiness among his fellow men, likewise, free enlightened, and happy. I confess to being a utopian. I am even afraid of not being so enough; for I might be suspected of being a man without principles, like Engels and his disciples, and like them, of being capable of distorting scientific terminology, the conception of Socialism, and lastly, instead of preaching emancipation and solidarity, of being capable of dishonouring myself so far as to preach the organization of the army of labour, especially of agriculture, discipline, subordination; in a word, Social Democracy.<sup>78</sup>

## Anarchism, utopianism and anti-utopian anarchism

What does the analysis of these anarchist critiques of scientific socialism show about the nature of Landauer and Kropotkin's utopianism? In different ways, Landauer, Kropotkin and Tcherkesoff identified two flaws in Marxism: it was fatalistic and it pointed to a picture of socialism that was deeply unattractive. Politically, they argued, Marx's so-called science supported a misguided and futile strategy. Landauer also accused Marx of adopting a theoretical framework that was alienating and uncreative, recommending that socialists jettison science in favour of imagination. In contrast, Kropotkin and Tcherkesoff argued that Marx's reasoning was unscientific and that natural

science indicated that it was possible to resist social democracy. As Kropotkin explained there was no certainty that it could be resisted: 'we do not consider as "laws" certain "correlations" indicated by them'.<sup>79</sup> Indeed, it was 'possible that we are wrong, and they [the Marxists] are right,'<sup>80</sup> notwithstanding the economic trends Tcherkesoff detected. The answer then, was to think about how to exploit knowable trends to meet desirable goals. Here, Kropotkin, Tcherkesoff and Landauer were agreed. As Landauer put it: the socialist 'feels and knows whence we come and then determines where we are headed'.<sup>81</sup> Each had a clear idea of what they wanted anarchy to look like. None of them wanted to prescribe how all should live. Landauer, then, had an image of anarchy and was not quite the open-ended utopian of modern utopian theory. Kropotkin was confident that science demonstrated that anarchy was a viable alternative to social democracy, but contrary to anarchist anti-utopian critics, relied on the struggles of real people in the real world to give it content and ensure its delivery. For both, utopianism was an essential part of the revolutionary struggle.

In the 1960s Bruce McSheehy argued that 'in a world in which utopianism has become universally stigmatised, [utopianism] is still necessary.' 'Toward what goal' he asked 'is socialism reaching?' 'No society', he suggested 'can exist without a goal, without a fulfilment'.<sup>82</sup> Landauer and Kropotkin would have agreed. Perhaps, though, Tcherkesov should have the last word: 'And you also, friend and reader, I wish with all my heart that you should always remain a man of principle. Every honest man must have principles and if this quality belongs to utopians, be a utopian.'<sup>83</sup>

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> V. Fournier, 'Utopianism and the cultivation of possibilities: grassroots movements of hope', in M. Parker (ed), *Utopia and Organisation*, p.192

<sup>2</sup> J. McQuinn, 'Primitivism as ideology'

<sup>3</sup> Fournier, 'Utopianism', p. 192. Fournier adopts a harder stance on 'utopia'; nevertheless, the distinction between 'utopia' and 'utopianism' usefully captures the central issues of this debate. I am grateful to Laurence Davis for drawing my attention to the nuances of 'utopia' and 'utopianism'.

<sup>4</sup> P. J. Proudhon, *Theorie de l'Impot*, p. i, 5. I am grateful to Alex Prichard for drawing my attention to this comment.

<sup>5</sup> F. E. Manuel, 'Toward a psychological history of utopias', *Daedalus*, 94:2 (1965), 304.

<sup>6</sup> P. J. Proudhon, *The General Idea of the Revolution*, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> R. Rocker, *Anarcho-syndicalism*, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> V. de Cleyre, 'The making of an anarchist', in *Quiet Rumours: An Anarcha-Feminist Anthology*, p. 51.

<sup>9</sup> C. Ward, *Utopia*, p. 8.

<sup>10</sup> D. Andrade, *An Anarchist Plan of Campaign*, p. 2

<sup>11</sup> 'Anarchist communism: its aims and principles', *Freedom* (August-September 1902), p. 40; emphasis in original.

<sup>12</sup> M. L. Berneri, *Journey Through Utopia*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> F. E. Manuel and F. P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, p. 737.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 737.



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- <sup>16</sup> S. Lukes, 'Marxism and utopianism', in P. Alexander and R. Gill (eds), *Utopias*, p. 166.
- <sup>17</sup> M. Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe*, p. 208.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. 138.
- <sup>19</sup> M. Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, p. 56.
- <sup>20</sup> For a discussion see B. Goodwin, 'Utopia defended against the liberals', *Political Studies*, 28:3 (1980), 384-400.
- <sup>21</sup> Manuel and Manuel, *Utopian Thought*, p. 737.
- <sup>22</sup> Manuel, 'Toward a psychological history of utopia', p. 304.
- <sup>23</sup> C. J. Erasmus, *In Search of the Common Good: Utopian Experiments Past and Future*, p. 289.
- <sup>24</sup> S. Newman, 'The place of power in political discourse', *International Political Science Review*, 25:2 (2004), 142.
- <sup>25</sup> S. Newman, 'Interrogating the master: Lacan and radical politics', *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, 9:3 (2004), 304.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* p. 308.
- <sup>27</sup> F. Ferrarotti, 'Foreshadowings of postmodernism: counter-cultures of the apocalypse', *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 9:2 (1995), 260.
- <sup>28</sup> See S.F. Bloom, 'The "withering away" of the state', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 7:1 (1946) 113-121; R. Adamiak, 'The withering away of the state: a reconsideration', *Journal of Politics*, 32:1 (1970) 3-18.
- <sup>29</sup> G. Landauer, *Social Democracy in Germany* (London, 1896), p. 2.
- <sup>30</sup> G. Plekhanov [Plechanoff], *Anarchism and Socialism*, trans. E. Marx

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Aveling, p. 97.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 98-9; emphasis in original.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 127.

<sup>33</sup> W. Tcherkesov, 'Socialism or Democracy', *Supplement to Freedom* (June 1895), pp. 18-19.

<sup>34</sup> G. Landauer, *For Socialism*, p. 51; emphasis in original.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 46.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* p. 44.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* p. 48.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 45.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* p. 65.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* p. 61.

<sup>47</sup> 'Report of anarchist conference', *Supplement to Freedom* (August-September 1896), p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> K. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, p. 68.

<sup>49</sup> Landauer, *For Socialism*, p. 66.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.* p. 72.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63.

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- <sup>53</sup> P. A. Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchism*, p. 24.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p. 27.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p. 27.
- <sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28; emphasis in original.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* p. 40.
- <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p. 61.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* p. 67; emphasis in original.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 52-5.
- <sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* p. 51.
- <sup>64</sup> Popper, *Poverty of Historicism*, p. 59
- <sup>65</sup> V. G. Simkhovitch, *Marxism Versus Socialism*, p. 151.
- <sup>66</sup> W. Tcherkesov [Tcherkesoff], *Pages of Socialist History: Teachings and Acts of Social Democracy*, p. 82.
- <sup>67</sup> J. Beecher, *Victor Considerant and the Rise and Fall of French Romantic Socialism*, p.164.
- <sup>68</sup> Tcherkesov, *Pages of Socialist History*, p. 24.
- <sup>69</sup> Simkhovitch, *Marxism Versus Socialism*, p. 148.
- <sup>70</sup> Tcherkesov, *Pages of Socialist History*, p. 76.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* p. 24.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* p. 68.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* p. 32.

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- <sup>76</sup> M. Nettleau, *German Social Democracy and E. Bernstein*, p. 14.
- <sup>77</sup> Tcherkesov, *Pages of Socialist History*, p. 23.
- <sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* p. 86.
- <sup>79</sup> Kropotkin, *Modern Science and Anarchism*, p. 78.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p. 79.
- <sup>81</sup> Landauer, *For Socialism*, p. 45.
- <sup>82</sup> B. McSheehy, 'Anarchism and Socialism', *Monthly Review*, 21:4 (1969), 59.
- <sup>83</sup> Tcherkesov, *Pages of Socialist History*, p. 86.

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