

# Reclaiming Bread

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The revolutionary rise of real baking

bread **PRINT** roses

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“If I survive, I will spend my whole life at the oven door seeing that no one is denied bread and, so as to give a lesson of charity, especially those who did not bring flour.”

Jose Marti

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radical simply means ‘grasping something at  
the root’

Angela Davies

# Introduction

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Fifth Avenue is laid in gold, every mansion a citadel of money and power. Yet here you stand, a giant, starved, and fettered...

You too, will have to learn that you have a right to share your neighbors' bread...

Well, then, demonstrate before the palaces of the rich; demand work. If they do not give you work, demand bread. If they deny you both, take bread. It is your sacred right.

Emma Goldman, Union Square, New York, 21 August 1893

## The question of bread

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In 1892 the anarchist thinker and activist Peter Kropotkin first published his complete recipe for the revolutionary transformation of society: 'La Conquete du Pain' in Paris. 'The

'Conquest of Bread' was subsequently serialised in the London journal, *Freedom*, and has been translated and reprinted numerous times. Kropotkin's focus was practical, describing (often in great detail) how goods could be better produced and distributed in a post-revolutionary society. Spurred by the fall of the Paris Commune, the revolutionary socialist government that ruled Paris briefly in 1871, Kropotkin believed fervently that social transformation dealing in ideals alone was destined to fail. A new society, he stressed, must be built on its ability to provide sustenance for all: It must be able to answer the question of bread. Fellow anarchist, Emma Goldman, speaking in Union Square, New York a year after the publication of Kropotkin's treatise echoed his call. "Take bread", she said: "It is your sacred right."

Over a century later, we are far from reaching the levels of social well-being imagined by Kropotkin and bread literally and metaphorically is still the trigger for, and the stuff of, revolutionary transformation and revolutionary metaphor. A so-called advanced society that is unable to provide for the basic needs of all, must, we believe, return to the question of bread with some urgency. But we go beyond Kropotkin's practical focus on subsistence to argue that the fundamentals of life are not only the means of survival, but a sound basis for the freedom to explore and evolve the self and the self in the community, to find meaning and purpose as part of the experience of being alive.

In the spirit of union leader, feminist and socialist Rose Schneiderman, we must provide bread for all, but we must find time and space for roses too. It is not enough that we simply aspire to provide subsistence (although that in itself is a struggle for much of the world's population), we can and must be able to provide the 'roses' that give deeper joy and meaning to all of our experiences, too. Providing bread and roses in the twenty-first-century means asking a series of fundamental questions about how we organise the economy and society, and how we distribute resources more equitably; both locally and globally.



*Bread of Life (Photo: Harald, licensed under Creative Commons)*

In this pamphlet we look at the political significance of bread over time and the relevance of Kropotkin's ideas, and anarchist thinking more broadly, to the challenges faced around the world today. We argue that the way that we produce bread could, in part at least, provide a firmer footing for a more equitable and sustainable society. Following Kropotkin's lead, we set out just a few of his ideas for the transformation of society, in what seem to us to be some of the key questions of our time: bread, work and leisure. We also make suggestions for a range of policies and practices that could begin the transformation.

## **Bread today: The unresolved question**

In the years following the global financial crash of 2007-08, the impacts of austerity have played out across Europe in hunger, exclusion, increasing inequality and the politics of fear and blame. Levels of inequality are rising, with recent research from the Equality Trust think-tank revealing that the 100 wealthiest individuals in the UK now have as much money as the poorest

18 million people. Property prices and rents are soaring in London, making life for those even on average incomes almost impossible to sustain. According to analysis of Land Registry data by the Nationwide Building Society, in London the proportion of sales involving homes costing more than £500,000 leaped from 13 per cent in 2007 to around 25 per cent in 2013. For properties costing more than £1 million, the figure more than doubled from 3 per cent to 6.5 per cent over the same period. Yet while the gilded elite enjoys the 'return to prosperity' the experience for the majority is very different. At least 4.7 million people in the UK now live in food poverty.<sup>1</sup> More than 900,000 people were given emergency food in 2013, an increase of 163 per cent on the previous year, according to figures from the Trussell Trust, the UK's biggest food bank charity.

The way that we currently produce food is not socially just, nor is it ecologically viable: even in the short to medium term. Between 1945 and 1994, the expansion of industrial farming has seen agricultural energy inputs worldwide increase four-fold while crop yields increased three-fold. Since the early 1960s, the global growth in cereals depended almost entirely on agricultural intensification, with little expansion in the area harvested.<sup>2</sup> In industrialised countries today, one food calorie requires an average of between seven to ten calories of fossil energy.<sup>3</sup> This deep dependence on oil to grow (the industrial chemicals and fertilizers needed to grow food on industrialised farms) and transport our food (the thousands of miles produce travels) has made oil companies rich, denuded our soils, hollowed out rural communities, led to land grabs and failed to deliver the solutions to world hunger promised by the Green Revolution.

Scientists fear that the peak and decline of fossil fuel reserves may also imply Peak Wheat: a limit to the quantities of grain we are able to grow globally in industrial conditions. Research by scientists at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln published recently in the journal *Nature Communications* argues that there have been abrupt declines or plateaus in the rate of production of major crops which undermine optimistic



projections of constantly increasing crop yields. As much as 31 per cent of total global rice, wheat and maize production has experienced “yield plateaus or abrupt decreases in yield gain, including rice in eastern Asia and wheat in northwest Europe.” As oil companies pour resources into the development of dirty and difficult to extract tar sands and controversial fracking, they attempt to present themselves as honourable citizens by funding the arts rather than investing in the wholesale transition to a post-carbon economy: it is clear that the worst of the politics of bread is yet to come.

The way that we produce bread is neither desirable, nor sustainable. Those who defend this status quo (and many of those who oppose it) argue that the current economic system cannot be transformed without a viable and coherent alternative. The problem is that, given the immediacy and severity of the challenges facing us, as ideologically motivated austerity measures impact on the most vulnerable, oppositional groups focus on fighting what is wrong with the current order rather than proposing new and better ways of living.

Mainstream politics (and media) is failing to make visible the range of ways all of our lives could change for the better, if the political will existed. More than this, to fight for change on the basis of the existing system, is to surrender to a deeply impoverished notion of the world as it could be. Nor is it to meet the pressing (and interlinked) challenges of a world that is growing more unequal and less ecologically sustainable. Surely we can do better? It is time to ask bigger questions about how we can work together to create the circumstances in which we can all live better and hopefully more fulfilled lives.

Neither is the corporate and political control of our lives complete. The reality is that in margins and liminal spaces, alternatives to the dominant status quo have been and are evolving. Because these initiatives are mostly small and local, they are either not visible or dismissed as too small to challenge the existing economic order. Experiments in self-help and mutual aid have emerged throughout human history from necessity and a conviction that we can, and must, create



*Children who fled Lawrence during the turbulent strike demonstrate in New York City*

a better life. The same is true today. Often inspired by experiments from the past, the physical and psychological architecture of a better future is nascent. People are not waiting for those in power to take the lead, but are getting on and taking action to recreate the world anew. In this pamphlet we explore some of those initiatives and how they might begin to transform the way that we live, work and play.

# Part I: Our Riches

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We have the temerity to declare that all have a right to bread, that there is bread enough for all, and that with this watchword of Bread for All the Revolution will triumph.

Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*

'The Conquest of Bread', was, in Kropotkin's words "a study of the needs of humanity, and the economic means to satisfy them."<sup>4</sup> In it, he documented what he considered to be the defects of Feudalism and later Capitalism as economic systems, with their dependence on the servitude of the majority through a deliberate maintenance of scarcity and poverty as social mechanisms of control. It has been some time since many of us have been tied to a feudal lord or factory boss, but for many of us consumer debt and mortgage burden keep us just as surely bonded. For many in domestic service, or trafficked for sex the control is just as direct.

Kropotkin maintained that there were other, more hopeful, ways of organising. He proposed systems founded on mutualism and voluntary cooperation, exemplars of which he believed abounded in both the natural world and throughout human history. For, he concluded: "The means of production being the collective work of humanity, the product should be the collective property of the race. Individual appropriation is neither just nor serviceable. All belongs to all. All things are for all men, since all men have need of them, since all men have worked in the measure of their strength to produce them, and since it is not possible to evaluate every one's part in the production of the world's wealth." Bread is used as both a

metaphorical and literal driver in a politics of sociability versus exploitation in Kropotkin's vision of a new society, and it is why his ideas deserve re-examination today.

Bread represents politics and class like almost no other foodstuff; the cost and availability of bread has been at least a factor behind most major revolutions and social upheavals in history; it embodies some of the worst aspects of exploitation in the food chain (it is easily adulterated, and modern industrially produced bread is but the latest example of this); the language of bread permeates our political consciousness: dole, daily bread, bread-line, bread and circuses. In Egyptian Arabic, the word for bread, aish, simply means 'life'.

Bread is also universal. Almost every cuisine the world over, with the exception of the frozen extremities of the planet, has its own form of bread. From flat breads, to dense rye breads and sourdough, the types vary, but the form remains instantly recognisable across and between cultures. The earliest forms of bread were the unleavened flat breads: a range of which survive through to today. From Himbasha in Ethiopian cuisine, Chapatti on the Indian subcontinent, to Bolani in Afghanistan and Bannock in the United Kingdom, bread reveals our diversity, our similarity and our difference.

If all history is, at least in part, the history of economic struggle, it plays out particularly sharply through the history of bread. The type of bread that different classes were allowed to eat (dark rye/black breads, often adulterated with ammonium carbonate and other indigestible products, for the poor, fine wheaten and white loaves for the wealthy) has at times been legally defined. The thirteenth century Assize of Bread and Ale, which set a relationship between the price of wheat and the size of loaves, was the first law in British history to regulate the way that food was produced and sold. Amended twice in the nineteenth century it was only finally repealed in 1863. The price and style of bread is symptomatic of shifting class relations and the recent revival of interest in artisan production is the latest iteration of this: the irony being that the rougher, rye and dark breads are fashionable again amongst wealthier

consumers and white, processed, bread is associated with the less well-off.

Because bread has been emblematic of class division over time, it has been more than just a staple - it was often a portent of revolt. In Medieval France those who ate black bread would throw their crusts at any princeling they thought was ruling poorly. In France bread is still so symbolic that its price remained fixed until 1986, and to this day the holidays of Parisian bakers are regulated to ensure that citizens can still buy their baguettes.

We know some form of bread has existed for at least 30,000 years. The earliest evidence is of a sort of baked grain paste mixed with water – probably finding its descendants today in tortillas, chapattis, pitas and other flatbreads. Bread predates human farming by around 20,000 years, and would probably have been made and consumed as part of the hunter-gatherer's diet. Wheat and barley were amongst the first plants to be domesticated when we started developing agriculture around the Neolithic period 10,000 years ago.

This development of a settled, cereal-based diet was a hugely important turning point in human history, and had the profound effect of shifting our diet to a starchy-cereals base, away from meat and foraged fruits and vegetables. A move to settled communities allowed for the development of local economies; culture, trading, and the other stages of non-nomadic existence. Bread then, is pivotal to human culture. The museum of bread and culture in Ulm, Germany, pays homage to humanity's debt to bread with a collection of 18,000 objects ranging from the evolution of milling methods to works of art by Kollwitz, Picasso and Dali.

The growth of towns and cities throughout the Middle Ages saw a steady increase in the baking trade, as increasing divisions in labour and skills meant less food was produced directly in the home. Bakers' guilds were introduced to the UK in 1150 to protect the interests of members and to regulate controls governing the price and weight of bread, and in 1202 King John introduced the first laws governing the permitted

price of bread, the Assize of Bread and Ale. By Tudor times, Britain was enjoying increased prosperity and bread had become a real status symbol: the nobility ate small, fine white loaves called manchets; merchants and tradesmen ate wheaten cobs, while the poor had to be satisfied with bran loaves.

The history of bread also reveals the subtle ways in which exchanges with other cultures, through trade, conquest, or a complex web of both, have permeated almost every aspect of our lives. In the Georgian era the introduction of sieves made of Chinese silk helped to produce finer, whiter flour and white bread gradually became more widespread. Today more than 70 per cent of the bread we eat is white. Tin from mines in Cornwall began to be used to make baking tins at around this time, too. Bread baked in tins could be much more easily sliced and toasted – facilitating the ‘invention’ of the sandwich by John Montague, the fourth Earl of Sandwich who reputedly, like many of his contemporaries, did not want to interrupt his gambling by pausing for a meal. Perhaps again though, this is just another example of a member of the elite taking credit for the innovation and imagination of the lower classes. The use of some kind of bread to sit beneath, or wrap around, some other food, or used to scoop up some other type of food, goes back much further in human history, and is found in numerous much older cultures worldwide. However, in the nineteenth century the sandwich became much more widespread, as the rise of industrial society and the working classes made fast, portable and inexpensive meals essential.

The early 1790s brought a succession of terrible harvests in Britain, and the one of 1795 in particular was disastrous. The price of wheat almost doubled and food riots broke out up and down the country, in communities large and small. As the Historian E.P. Thompson points out, the riots were not just triggered by the scarcity of bread but a convergence of recession, the high point of enclosure, fears of foreign invasion and the state of anti-Jacobin panic.<sup>5</sup> Bread was a central metaphor for wider political fears and grievances. Riots then were generally not what we understand them to be today. They

were often quite orderly marches on the local grain store, particularly when communities felt that grain was being unfairly or illegally kept from them to artificially raise its price. The store would be broken open, often following negotiation with the local magistrate, and grain distributed to the waiting crowd so they might feed themselves.

At the heart of these grievances, especially of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, was the urgency of the question of bread. During the nineteenth century, both during and after the reform of the Corn Laws in 1846, the price of wheat continued to be a heated political issue, particularly through years of recession during the latter half of the century. After 1877 the price of corn fluctuated wildly between 56 shillings in 1877 to 31 shillings in 1886. As more corn was imported, thousands of agricultural workers found they were destitute and headed for the cities: the decade 1871–1881 also saw a decline of over 92,000 agricultural workers. Over the course of the nineteenth century Britain's dependence on imported grain rose from 2 per cent in the 1830s to 65 per cent by the 1880s.

In part as a response to its growing industrial workforce, Britain rapidly became a pioneer of food processing, especially food that was aimed at the less well-off. Adulteration was a frequent public concern, and bread is a classic example. This rapid shift in the way that food was produced meant that the quality of foodstuffs could not be guaranteed. A *Lancet* enquiry in the 1850s revealed all tested bread to have been adulterated. This was also indicative: half the oatmeal and all but the best tea were contaminated, and milk and butter were routinely watered down. This was not just financially fraudulent, it was also potentially dangerous to health – plaster of Paris was found in bread, red lead in pepper and mahogany sawdust in coffee. London bread was a: "deleterious paste, mixed up with chalk, alum, and bone-ashes; insipid to the taste and destructive to the constitution."<sup>6</sup>

The adulteration of food continues to the present day: regulated to a greater or lesser degree. Even before the

horsemeat scandal of 2013 that revealed widespread corruption in the food chain, investigations had revealed chicken pumped full not just of water, but pork or beef protein. The high levels of salts, sugars and fats found in a range of processed foods are legal, although guidelines are regularly flouted and produce misleadingly labelled. Highly processed foods are aggressively marketed to the time- and money-poor, who are then blamed for their poor diets. Neither is the quality of the cheapest food the only way in which the poor pay for poor nutrition: in the US pay is so low in Wal-Mart and other chains that people in paid employment are forced to rely on welfare. The same is increasingly true in the UK.

Blaming the poor for poverty while failing to address the structural conditions that cause it is nothing new either. There was a great deal of middle-class handwringing about this state of affairs as Britain industrialised, as well as irritation at the refusal of the newly urbanising proletariat to cook better for itself. Books like *Cottage Comforts*, published in the 1820s and circulated widely for decades, exhorted the workers to stop drinking beer and instead 'make infusions of rue and strawberry', and stew ox-cheek and make pies from scratch. Such books demonstrated a breathtaking lack of awareness about the reality of working life in the factory system. For women as well as men, days started in the early hours of the morning. Twelve-hour plus working days rarely enabled elaborate and extensive food preparation, and also completely ignored the cost of fuel involved in the cooking itself. Factories Commission evidence in 1833 reported that women, "*brought up in the factory until they were married... are almost entirely ignorant of household duties... they are equally incapable of preparing... victuals.*"

Contemporary exhortations to improve the diet of the nation also lament the 'loss of skills' and proclaim the ease with which one can eat healthily on very little money, with little understanding of the wider implications of low income - from lack of access to basic cooking facilities to the cost of fuel needed to cook, for example, cheaper cuts of meat, particularly where, as with so much else, the poorest pay more



for basic services such as gas and electricity.<sup>7</sup> All this before we begin to consider what it means to work two, sometimes three jobs in order to make ends meet. Neither does it account for the enormous power of the food industry and its advertising campaigns, nor the industry's close links to government. Under Andrew Lansley's tenure at the Department of Health fast food companies and supermarkets were brought onto task forces that not only commented on, but developed policy on diet and health.<sup>8</sup>

The mechanisation of production developed in tandem with the industrialisation of the production of food, to ensure cheap food with long shelf life, necessary when whole families were working long factory hours. It was not just sandwiches, every aspect of our diet was affected by the march of industrial production. Britain's pioneering of 'convenience' food, produced as cheaply as possible, meant that products generated by battery farming, canning and other innovations took root in our diets early on. And the effects of cheap convenience food were psychological too; as George Orwell noted in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, "*when you are underfed, harassed, bored and miserable, you don't want to eat dull wholesome food... there is always something cheaply pleasant to tempt you... White bread and sugared tea don't nourish you to any extent but they are nicer... than brown bread and dripping and cold water.*" Seek comfort, and why not?

As industrialisation advanced, bread and the way it is consumed was transformed in its wake. In 1928 Otto Frederick Rohwedder launched the first ever bread-slicing machine. Commercially sliced bread resulted in uniform thinner slices, meaning that people ate more slices of bread at a time, and ate bread more frequently, because of its ease and convenience. This increased consumption of bread and, in turn, increased consumption of jam, margarine and other spreads on the bread.

Another major driver of the transformation of our daily loaf was the introduction in 1961 of the Chorleywood process, using the energy-intensive mechanical working of dough and chemical



*In the bread queue (Photo: James Buck, licensed under Creative Commons)*

additives to dramatically reduce fermentation times. In a world obsessed with saving time, it made sense to shorten the process irrespective of the deleterious result on the end product. The concurrent search for high-yielding wheat varieties led to an enormous reduction of the range of wheat types grown, and according to the campaigning baker, Andrew Whitely, a 40 per cent reduction in wheat's nutritional value.<sup>9</sup>

There are now over 60 approved chemicals that can be added to processed bread. A deal of processing happens before the bread making process; for example, freshly milled flour is never white and has quite a strong odour, so it is gassed using chlorine dioxide; bleaches such as benzoyl peroxide and nitrogen peroxide along with maturing agents like potassium bromated or iodate are also common. A look at a sliced white loaf ingredients list recently yielded the following ingredients: enriched wheat flour, water, sugar, glucose-fructose, yeast, oat hull fibre, soybean oil, soya flour, wheat gluten, vegetable monoglycerides, calcium propionate, sodium stearoyl-2-lactylate, sorbic acid, calcium carbonate, calcium sulphate, monocalcium phosphate, calcium pantothenate, pyridoxine hydrochloride.

The adulteration of our daily loaf is now legally sanctioned, and regulated. The long list of official-sounding chemical compounds providing information that masks as much as it illuminates: lulled by the simplicity of the product (our daily bread) we fail to take note the chemical cocktail that has replaced traditional bread. Compare the ingredients of a mass-produced loaf with homemade bread, which can be as simple as flour and water and just how much the detailed list of ingredients masks is immediately apparent.

# Part II:

## Ways and means

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Without bread, all is misery

William Cobbett

Why, even to the best paid workman, this uncertainty of the morrow, in the midst of all the wealth inherited from the past, and in spite of powerful means of production, which could ensure comfort for all in return for a few hours daily toil?

Peter Kropotkin

### The history of production and the creation of scarcity

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This history of how we arrived at the industrialisation and impoverishment of our daily bread matters because although a plethora of alternatives is being cultivated on the margins, the vast majority of the bread we consume is still industrially produced. There is a clear class divide: those with disposable income and time to visit a bakery can choose to pay for an artisanal loaf, while for those on low incomes the only choice is nutritionally-barren industrial bread.

Food prices have spiked considerably in recent years, due to a combination of poor harvests (related to more extreme weather conditions and over-farming), political control, the use of grain as animal feed, the vast expansion of bio-fuels displacing crops grown to feed people, and the emergence of speculation on food as a commodity. Between January 2005 and June 2008, the rise in prices of foods such as maize, wheat and rice



*Wheat (Photo: Neha Viswanathan, licensed under Creative Commons)*

meant an average rise of food prices of 83 per cent. The World Development Movement (WDM) report that:

In the last six months of 2010 alone, more than 44 million people were driven into extreme poverty as a result of rising food prices. At the same time, banks and financial investors are making a killing. We estimate that Barclays makes up to £340 million a year from betting, or speculating, on food prices. In the last five years, the amount of financial speculation on food has nearly doubled, from \$65 billion to \$126 billion.<sup>10</sup>

WDM believes that the aggressive roll-back of regulation of food speculation has created a monstrous and complex financial product out of our daily bread. *“Since 1996, the share of the markets for foods like basic wheat held by speculators – who have no connection to food – has risen from 12 to 61 per cent.”*

Food riots spread across the globe in 2007–10 and were one of the major drivers behind the Arab Spring: according to Jane Harrigan of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) *“the food price spike was the final nail in the coffin for regimes that were failing to deliver on their side of the social contract.”*

The rallying cry of the 2011 Egyptian revolution was 'bread, freedom and social justice'. More recently, graffiti in the Egyptian capital declared: 'We don't want more beards, we want bread'. As in Kropotkin's time, the revolution is measured not only in its ideals, but its ability to provide the means of subsistence for all. When 'blockupy' shut down the European Central Bank in Frankfurt in May 2013 for its role in the austerity politics, resulting in unnecessary suffering for thousands of ordinary people, a banner read: 'We don't want bread, we want to take over the bakery'.

Getting bread 'right' means addressing everything politically, from access to land, food production systems, methods (and therefore the relationships) of production, the industrialization of national diets (and their increasing impacts on health outcomes, particularly for those on the lowest incomes) and the way we spend our time. This is why using our loaves matters so much.

# Part III:

## Agreeable work

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I'm going to make you bread like you've never seen before, and in this bread there will be love and friendship.

Marcel Pagnol

A slow revolution in bread is already fermenting, while the politics of austerity combined with more unpredictable food growing conditions means that bread will become more, not less, political in the months and years to come. New experiments currently operating on the margins of the current economy could be taken up much more widely. When the Handmade Bakery in the Yorkshire Village of Sleathwaite couldn't access a conventional bank loan in 2011, they issued bread bonds, funding the construction of the bakery with bonds that are repaid in deliveries of bread. Since this first experiment with a Community Supported Bakery in the UK In 2011, Bread: Actually, The Breadshare Community Supported Bakery, Food4MaccDirect Bread Club, The Forest Bakehouse, Lewes Community Kitchen, Loaf Social Enterprise, Love Bread CIC, The Oxford Bread Group, Slow Dough Bakery, Steamie Bakehouse, the Leeds Bread Co-operative and Homebaked Anfield have involved their local communities in the development of their bakeries using everything from bread bonds and crowd-funding to membership schemes.

Other initiatives like the US-based Heritage Wheat Conservancy, are resurrecting older varieties of wheat, reviving local production and insulating against greater variation in climatic conditions. John Letts of the Oxford Bread Group worked to source ancient grains from sources around the world before re-introducing ancient landraces to Oxfordshire. The Brockwell Bake Association in South East London aside from



*Supporters and children of the Lawrence strikers lead a solidarity parade in New York City.*

assembling a collection of around 80 distinct heritage wheats from private sources and gene banks from the UK, France, Germany, Madeira and Holland is pursuing three main threads in development of crops grown in South London and by partner farmers in the South East England. The association is retrieving named local landraces, developing a winter 'landrace population' and studying the Madeiran landrace wheat as a crop and from a cultural and social perspective. Elsewhere land to grow organically and traditionally is being increased. In France, *Tierre des Liens* has raised over 32,000 Euros since 2006, and has used that money to take agricultural land out of the speculative economy for rent, in small plots, to organic farmers. One of their first tenants was a baker, keen to grow his own wheat.

Artisanal bakeries are springing up across the UK, many of which, such as the E5 bakehouse in Hackney, East London, provide bread-making classes for local schoolchildren, while others offer apprenticeships for young people not in education or employment (so-called 'neets'). The Leeds Bread Co-operative, one of the new wave of Community Supported Bakeries, aims to provide affordable loaves at five collection



points across the city. Other bakeries simply provide space and resources for local people to bake, in return for a small proportion of each batch sold to fund the project. There is much more that could be done, of course. Guerrilla gardens springing up in towns and cities could plant heritage wheat for bread as well as beauty. Community reclamation orders could be used to create urban wheat fields on vacant plots, and in abandoned buildings. We could revive the community bread ovens of the middle ages, or at least ensure a bread oven in every school.

As we struggle to overthrow systems and institutions that serve the wants of the few, we should heed Kropotkin's warning that: *"They [politicians] discussed various political questions at great length, but forgot to discuss the question of bread."* The question of bread today is but one of many issues that calls for a fundamental reappraisal of how we live, work and organise. Do this, in tandem with other social changes, and we might just begin to bring the co-operative society Kropotkin envisaged more widely into being. More than that: by baking and sharing bread we start to take back our time, the means of production and ferment the potential for lasting transformation.

# Part IV: Free Agreement and a Design for Plenty

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With a piece of bread in your hand you'll find paradise under a pine tree.

Russian proverb

It is significant that contemporary food adulteration scandals (such as the recent horsemeat found in a variety of pre-packaged foodstuffs) occur mostly in processed food which is blatantly targeted at people with low income. We know that diet-related ill-health, exemplified by a growing obesity crisis, is asymmetrical across class boundaries, with excess weight more prevalent in the poorer sections of society. As the food industry has grown in complexity and reach, it has become yet another example of an out-of-control free-market which preys on people by creating powerful desires for sub-standard, and in some cases harmful, products.

Rather like our banking system, the food industry has generated vast profits for its generals by mis-selling to the bottom, while squeezing the producer in the middle. US food writer and campaigner Michael Pollan notes that while surgeon generals and public health experts might be raising alarms about diet-related ill-health, "the president is signing farm bills designed to keep the river of cheap corn flowing, guaranteeing that the cheapest calories in the supermarket continue to be the unhealthiest."<sup>11</sup>

The UK government farms out 'free' market responsibility for our food to big business, which is detrimental for our individual and collective health. Is it any co-incidence that food business interests helped to construct the NHS White Paper 2012, *Equity and Excellence: Liberating the NHS?* In truth, government inaction on food policy is a root cause of the present problems. The underlying dynamic is typical of how a market-place in which consumers are required to trust producers and retailers operates. Underpinned by an ethos of business-friendly regulations, government and the food business trade on quality determined by a race for (excessive) profits, masquerading as competition. The whole thing runs on quality assurances which are virtually impossible to police, until some scandal comes to light, at which point a familiar rhetoric about exceptions proving the rule can be wheeled out along the supermarket highways (as demonstrated in a host of circumstances from the use of gangmasters, abuse of suppliers and the recent horsemeat affair, to the £250 million hole in Tesco's accounts caused by the company's failure to extract payments *from* its suppliers).

Industrial bread production is perhaps yet more scandalous in this context: no longer subject to chalk dust, the lack of nutritional benefit is simply par for the course in a wider web of food-production-politics which relies on cheap manufacture and exploitation of the consumer. This has been thrown into sharper relief with an ongoing squeeze on household budgets; and a Prime Minister inadvertently showing himself to be completely out of touch with the cost of a loaf. When asked in an interview in October 2013 the price of value bread, David Cameron said "I don't buy the value stuff. I have a bread maker at home". It sounds suspiciously like: Let them eat cake.

Kropotkin was right. The revolution can at least begin with bread. As he wrote in *The Conquest of Bread*: "A revolution is more than a mere change of the prevailing political system. It implies the awakening of human intelligence, the increasing of the inventive spirit tenfold, a hundredfold; it is the dawn of a new science... It is a revolution in the minds of men [sic], as deep, and deeper still, than in their institutions".

Delve beneath the crust, and the production of bread as a revolutionary metaphor is rich in meaning. In the fermentation that begins when flour meets water and air, we find inspiration for the self-organising systems that are the foundation of anarchist thinking. The combination of ingredients come together to produce something quite other to the constituent elements: a living example of the power of co-operative culture. The starter constantly regenerates (if it is tended and cared for) and can be harvested and shared. The diversity of bread that can be produced from a simple sourdough starter knows the limits only of the human imagination. Each loaf changes according to the person who has baked it – bread baked from a single starter is never quite uniform. Baking bread this way takes longer and for now, it is restricted to the few: it doesn't have to be this way. Taking time to bake bread, and enjoying the process raises serious questions about an economic system that has made this impossible and a health system that values the profits of multinational corporations over the foundations of sound nutrition.

In the bakeries springing up throughout the global north we find a rejection of the impoverishment of industrialised production, and in the process of making, we find purpose and useful work. We find social injustice in the nutritional apocalypse that has accompanied the rise of 'cheap' food over the past 60 or more years. In the industrialised world cheap has meant hollowing out the health value of a range of staple foodstuffs, while in the global south structural adjustment programmes and IMF conditions have forced the withdrawal of government subsidies that guaranteed basic nutrition for all. All this has been 'achieved' in the name of economic 'progress'. Under the pressure of austerity programmes that echo the structural adjustment programmes imposed on the global south in the 1980s and 1990s, food banks have returned to Europe.

We demand justice, but also recognise the revolution that is already underway. Small-scale projects are leading the way and creating a future in which we can all have bread and roses, but there is a role for local and national government in

the transformation of society too. Here, we outline a range of policies and practices that could rapidly speed the provision of bread and roses for all, including:

- **A National Basic Income, and the transformation of work:** An unconditional basic income would give people the option to reduce their working hours without sacrificing their income. This would help to distribute available work more equitably, and improve working conditions while freeing people to spend more time doing other things they find meaningful, such as contributing to their local communities, reading, making music or art;
- **Community Requisition Orders:** Food banks are not a sufficient response to food security. Communities should be given the right to take over patches of land and use it for food production in a new generation of Community Supported Allotments;
- **Community right to buy and right to try:** Communities should be given the right to buy vacant premises, and try new experiments in the collective production and distribution of food-creating centres providing fresh, affordable food where it is needed most;
- **National Gardening Leave:** a new, voluntary scheme to introduce a shorter working week that would help to distribute available work more equitably would complement the adaptation of a wide range of available spaces for the rapid expansion of gardening, both productive and aesthetic, in Britain's towns and cities;
- **A bakery in every school and bread-making as part of the curriculum:** Teaching children how to bake would introduce them to principles of self-organising, and equip them with a skill that provides not only pleasure, but the means of subsistence.

Each of these proposals can and should be implemented nationally, but are equally applicable to local communities and individual workplaces or projects. Many of us can take back control of the production of bread in our own homes, and for



### *Homebaked Anfield*

those who can't, bakeries, schools and other community kitchens could offer oven space in a new 'community oven' scheme. Community bread ovens would not only provide access to the means of production, but would strengthen community links, creating the potential for new initiatives to emerge as social capital is rebuilt. Taking back the production of our daily bread is not only metaphorically powerful: it is a practical step towards far more wide reaching social and political change. Try baking our own bread – together – and it becomes clear how much more we can do for ourselves.

# Part V:

## The Kropotkin Loaf

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While, over time, we can develop the skills needed to make bread from flour and water alone we start with an easy-to-access recipe using dried yeast. The revolution in the head begins with the first act of doing.

A tribute to the author of *The Conquest of Bread*, this will make a light Russian rye loaf. The flavours at the end are optional - and this will work well with rosemary, chopped figs, apricots and other sorts of nut, as you wish.

Rye flour 400g  
Wholemeal spelt flour 400g  
Strong white flour 100g  
Easy-bake dried yeast 10g  
Fine sea salt 1 tsp  
Warm water 600ml  
Honey 3 tbsp  
Shelled walnuts 100g  
Grated parmesan 75g

Put the flours into a warm, generously sized mixing bowl with the dried yeast and salt, and mix well.

Lightly warm the water with the honey, stirring to dissolve, then pour into the flour and yeast. Mix the ingredients to form a sticky dough, then tip on to a floured board or work surface.

Form the dough into a ball, then knead by hand, pulling and stretching the dough, for a good 4 or 5 minutes.

Lightly oil the bowl then return the dough to it, cover with a tea cloth or clingfilm, then set aside in a warm place for about an hour, until the dough is half as big again.

Remove the dough from the bowl, place on a lightly floured board and knead again, for just a minute or two, incorporating the walnuts and parmesan as you go. Divide the dough in half, then place in the prepared loaf tins, cover and set aside for a further 30 minutes until risen. Set the oven at 220C/gas mark 8. Bake for 30 minutes, until crisp on top. Remove from the oven, leave for 10 minutes in its tin, then lift out and leave to cool before slicing, if you can wait that long.



# Endnotes

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1. See Centre for Economic and Business, commissioned by Kellogg's: *Hard to Swallow: The Facts About Food Poverty*, March 2013
2. UNEP (2011). Decoupling natural resource use and environmental impacts from economic growth, A Report of the Working Group on Decoupling to the International Resource Panel. Fischer-Kowalski, M., Swilling, M., von Weizsäcker, E.U., Ren, Y., Moriguchi, Y., Crane, W., Krausmann, F., Eisenmenger, N., Giljum, S., Hennicke, P., Romero Lankao, P., Siriban Manalang, A.
3. Dahlberg, K. (2000). Agriculture, food systems, energy and global change. *Science* 290:1300
4. Kropotkin, P: *The Conquest of Bread*, Bibliolife, 2008. All quotes taken from Kropotkin. It's a short read – discover it for yourself!
5. See Thompson, E.P, *Customs in Common*, New York: New Press, 1993 *The Moral Economy of the Crowd*
6. See Cockayne, E., *Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench in England 1600-1770*, Yale: YUP, 2007 (quoting Tobias Smollett) p.92
7. See Caplovitz, D., (1967) *The Poor Pay More: Consumer Practices of Low-Income Families*, Free Pr; 4TH PRINTING edition (October 1967)
8. Lawrence, F., McDonalds and PepsiCo to help write UK Health Policy, *The Guardian*, Saturday 13 November 2010.
9. Whitley, A., *Bread Matters: Why and How to Make Your Own*, London: Fourth Estate, 2008
10. See WDM: <http://www.wdm.org.uk/stop-bankers-betting-food/food-speculation-resources>
11. Pollan, M, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006, p.108

# Resources

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## **Websites:**

Bread, print & roses: [breadprintandroses.org](http://breadprintandroses.org)

The Real Bread Campaign: [sustainweb.org/realbread](http://sustainweb.org/realbread)

Community Supported Baking: [http://www.sustainweb.org/realbread/community\\_supported\\_baking/](http://www.sustainweb.org/realbread/community_supported_baking/)

Decan Development Society: [ddsindia.com](http://ddsindia.com)

Terre De Liens: [terredeliens.org](http://terredeliens.org)

## **Publications:**

The Conquest of Bread, Peter Kropotkin

Knead to Know: the Real Bread Starter, The Real Bread Campaign

Bread Matters: Why and How to Make Your Own, Andrew Whitely

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Written by  
Ruth Potts and Molly Conisbee

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bread, print & roses is a small, but growing collective that explores new thinking and fresh approaches to living in response to turbulent times. We publish seditious pamphlets, lead and promote radical walks, host workshops in practical skills from baking to community organising, and create spaces where people can come together to make change happen. We celebrate the stuff of life, and strive for a meaning and beauty for all.

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