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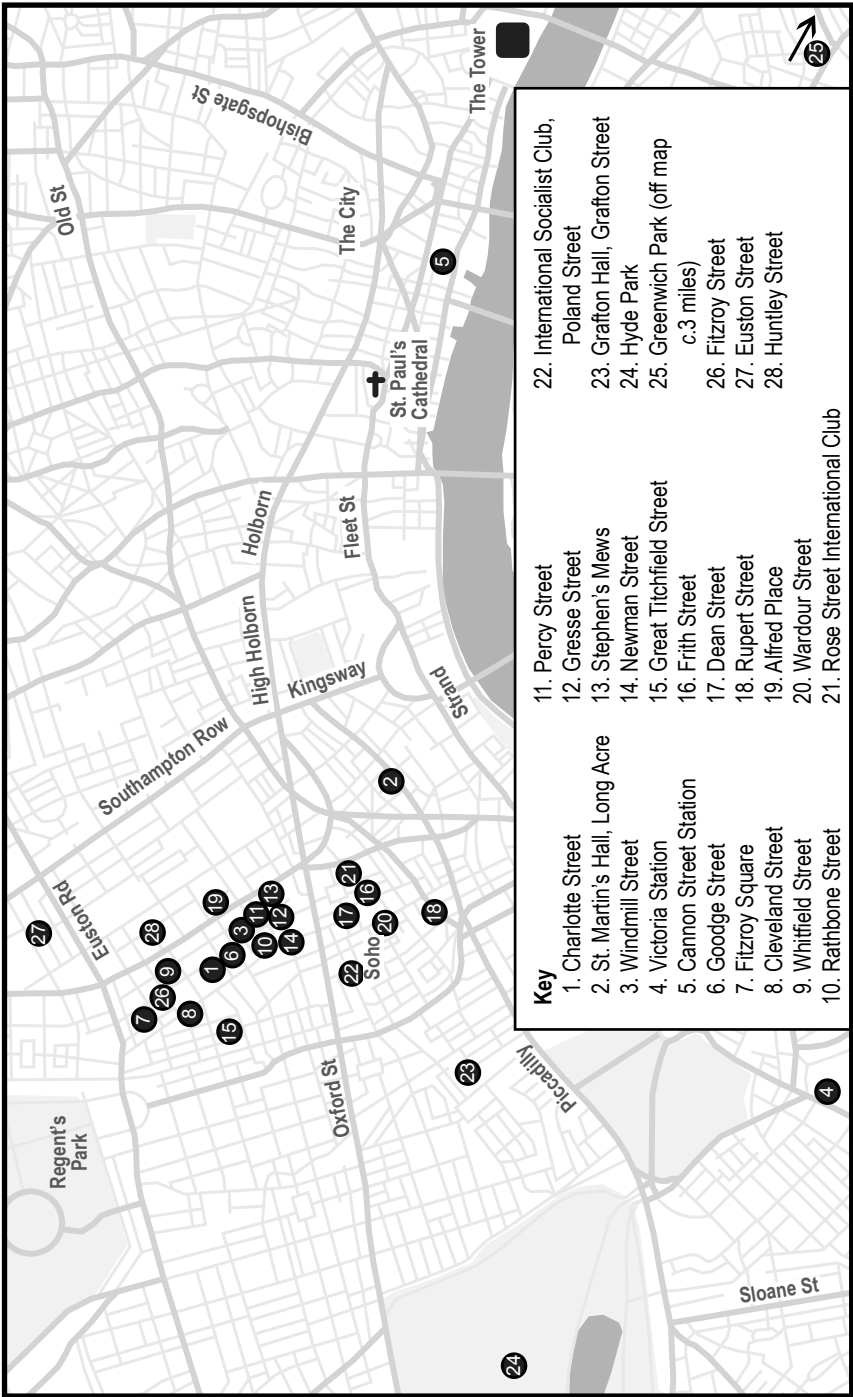
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8. 'Almost the only free city in the world': mapping out the French anarchist presence in London, late 1870s–1914

Constance Bantman

The French anarchists who stayed intermittently in London between the late 1870s and the First World War closed the chapter of cross-Channel revolutionary exile in the long nineteenth century. While Britain's anarchist movement was relatively weak, comrades from all over Europe fled to London from the late 1870s onwards, just as the movement was starting to gain ground. By the late 1880s, French circles counted a few dozen individuals, many of them hotheads who had fled France to avoid prosecution for their very radical views or illegal activities. As terrorism spread within anarchist circles in the early 1890s, with the doctrine of 'propaganda by the deed', France was swept by repression; voluntary departures and expulsions resulted in the arrival of about 500 French-speaking comrades in London by 1895. These anarchist 'compagnons', as they called themselves, were not the most numerous group in the capital – that accolade belonged to the Jewish anarchists living in the East End, followed by the Germans settled around what used to be the Middlesex Hospital in Mortimer Street, W1. The French were, however, regarded as the most vocal of these increasingly undesirable refugees and crystallized many of the public fears associated with anarchism. An amnesty allowed most of them to return to France in February 1895, and although its terms were not quite clear many seized this opportunity. Thereafter, in the less feverish climate of the late 1890s until the First World War, the French and international circles lived on, devoting themselves to educational activities based in clubs, study groups and schools, in addition to their militant endeavours, now increasingly focused on trade-union-based revolutionary syndicalism.

This chapter charts four decades of anarchist presence in London through the prisms of space and perception. As a result of its rich history of exile, London had by the end of the nineteenth century become a connotated space, a palimpsest. The most literate and educated anarchist exiles were certainly conscious of walking in the footsteps of illustrious refugees, as evidenced by regular references to the generations of revolutionaries who



Map 8.1. Places mentioned in the text (Base map: London c.1910)

had preceded them in London. These nodded primarily to the post-1848 waves, as journalists noted, for instance, that the anarchists congregated in one of the rooms of St. Martin’s Hall, where the International Working Men’s Association had been set up in 1864, or inscribed themselves in the Communards’ lineage: ‘One street in the French quarter has conquered fame: it is Charlotte Street and, on this road, one house deserves the honours of history: it is that of Victor Richard, the faithful friend of Vallès and Séverine’.¹ This historical perspective also informed the eyes of beholders, although they were more likely to stress the different character of the anarchists, and especially the discontinuity with the previous, morally noble generations of exiles and the peak of French presence in London:

How many French [in London]? A lot less than one may think. One should not assume that the streets of Soho and Fitzroy have regained since the recent explosions the very special character which they had after the Commune. A few rare French shop-fronts among the shop-fronts, a few vaguely familiar figures in Charlott-Street [*sic*] and in Wind-mill-Street [*sic*] and that’s it.²

The importance of this historical lineage means that the London years of the French anarchists can be read both in continuity and in contrast with the preceding waves of revolutionary exile, including from the point of view of outside observers who constantly compared the anarchists with their illustrious predecessors. Their growing hostility and the polemics provoked by the anarchists’ presence – suspected as well as seen – turned London into a contested space. The novelty that this presence represented must also be stressed, in order to convey the sense of puzzlement expressed by contemporaries – and by the exiles themselves – upon seeing or even just imagining these hundreds of individuals recreating an anarchist ‘Petite France’ in the streets of Soho and Fitzrovia. Their dismay stemmed from the fear of anarchist terrorism, because of the well-established reputation of the French as *dynamitards* or *bombistes*, but also from a culture shock, as these comrades were often described as quintessentially French artisans,

¹ ‘Conférences anarchistes à Londres’, *La Sociale*, 9 Aug. 1896. ‘Une rue du quartier français a conquis la célébrité: c’est Charlotte Street et, dans cette rue, une maison a droit aux honneurs de l’histoire: c’est celle de Victor Richard, fidèle ami de Vallès et de Séverine’ (C. Malato, *De la Commune à l’anarchie* (Paris, 1894), p. 276). All translations from French are by Constance Bantman, unless otherwise stated.

² ‘Combien de Français là-bas? Infiniment moins qu’on ne le croit. Il ne faudrait pas supposer que les rues du Soho et de Fitzroy-Square ont retrouvé depuis les dernières explosions ce caractère tout particulier qu’elles avaient après la Commune. Quelques rares devantures françaises aux devantures des boutiques, quelques figures vaguement de connaissance dans Charlott-Street et dans Wind-mill-Street, et c’est tout’ (*La Marseillaise*, 31 May 1892).

settling down in London in the heyday of the Victorian age. The written testimonies left by the French in London, as well as by the British observers of these groups, testify to the same impression of strangeness and otherness, often conveyed by a close attention to details revealing cultural differences and idiosyncrasies. This chapter emphasizes the physicality of this anarchist presence by examining different scales in turn, from the international level – why, of all places, did the anarchists settle in Britain? – to the very local, investigating anarchist public and private spaces.

The international level: England

Multiple factors took the French anarchists to London in the late 1870s, but their presence there was generally not a matter of choice. A handful of them were already in the capital, and were ‘converted’ to anarchism in the Communards’ exilic circles. The Cercle d’Etudes Sociales de Londres set up in March 1880 was an important venue in this respect, although it was unambiguously republican and parliamentary. But most of the anarchists arrived in London in the course of the 1880s and early 1890s, at a time when, under the impact of anarchist attacks, many Western countries closed their borders to foreign exiles, turning the United Kingdom into ‘the only refuge for the rejected of Europe’.³ The country was exceptional in that political asylum was an integral part of liberal traditions which were a key element of national pride and identity.⁴ London remained comparatively immune to anarchist terrorist attacks throughout the nineteenth century – an exception which was both the cause and the consequence of its tolerance of anarchists. It was the target of Irish nationalist Fenian attacks between the 1860s and 1880s, but these seem to have had a minimal impact on the way anarchists were dealt with. Until 1902, the United States and Latin America (especially Argentina) were other possible destinations for the French companions, but for them as for previous exiles, Britain’s proximity to France was a key factor in the decision to seek shelter there: ‘There is America, of course: but apart from the fact that it is far from the centre of our operations, most of us cannot afford the journey’.⁵

Britain’s treatment of the anarchists remained unique until 1905, when the first Aliens Act since 1826 was passed, putting an end to several decades of open-door policy. Until then, the country relied on an original model

³ Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 4th ser., iii (5 Apr. 1892), cols. 681–2; ‘Aliens in London’, *Hansard*, 4, cxiv (19 Nov. 1902), cols. 1357–8.

⁴ B. Porter, *The Refugee Question in Mid-Victorian Politics* (Cambridge, 1979).

⁵ Préfecture de Police de Paris Archives (hereafter APP), BA 1474, report by Etoile, dated 27 June 1882: ‘Il y a bien l’Amérique: mais outre que c’est loin du centre de nos opérations, la plupart d’entre nous n’ont pas l’argent pour le voyage’.

of unrestricted immigration, whereby the control of potentially dangerous immigrants was implemented through the use of specific laws, notably the 1883 Explosive Substances Act which served to sentence several individuals suspected of terrorism in a few high-profile cases during the 1890s. The charge of incitement to murder was used to sentence the incendiary Prussian anarchist Johann Most in 1881. Very controversially, against the liberal dogma of political asylum, a few extraditions were granted by British courts, notably that of the French suspected terrorist Jean-Pierre François, known as ‘Francis’, in 1892. The use of provocateurs and intense police surveillance, both overt and covert, was pivotal to the country’s control strategy, and remains a vexed question to this day.⁶

British authorities were faced with remonstrances in pursuing this course of action. These mainly came from a broad lobby centring on the Conservative party, with Lord Salisbury and Charles Darling, MP as chief spokespersons. Detractors of this anarchist asylum castigated the tolerance of continued immigration, especially when a terrorist attack occurred on the continent or was suspected in Britain; they were especially incensed during the 1892 Walsall case (a suspected bomb plot involving British, French and Italian comrades), throughout 1893, when ‘propaganda by the deed’ peaked on the continent, and in early 1894, following the Greenwich explosion accidentally provoked by the Frenchman Martial Bourdin near the Observatory, with no other victim than himself. The unfettered freedom of speech and meeting which the comrades enjoyed in London also caused great indignation. The conservative and penny press were vocal in their denunciation of anarchism and the risks to which it exposed Britain; *The Times* was especially supportive of the Conservative politicians who called for legislation to thwart the ‘black peril’. Two main arguments were used in doing so. First, the dangers incurred by Britain in not adopting the same anti-anarchist measures as continental powers, especially with respect to freedom of expression and the publication of anarchist propaganda, and also the diplomatic tensions generated by this tolerance. *The Times* bemoaned:

Mr Asquith thinks it expedient to permit such incitements to go unpunished, when merely printed and not spoken, lest a prosecution should give too much importance to a handful of fanatics. But when these doctrines are put in practice in Paris, in Marseilles, in Barcelona and in Madrid, we owe it to our neighbours and to ourselves to take care that they shall not be preached among us in impunity.⁷

⁶ C. Bantman, *The French Anarchists in London: Exile and Transnationalism in the First Globalisation* (forthcoming Liverpool, 2013).

⁷ ‘The Anarchist Campaign against Society’, *The Times*, 11 Dec. 1893.

The second argument – a recurring theme – was the difference between the anarchists and the exiles of yore (especially the Huguenots and the 1848 generation), even for the Liberal party which sought to uphold free circulation and the right of asylum and was therefore relatively inclined to defend the anarchists. Thus, in the words of Lord Asquith,

When persons, instead of doing as political offenders in the strict sense of the word have been in the habit of doing, as the men of 1848 and 1867 did – instead of going out into the open field and meeting by force of arms the men to whom they were politically opposed – whets [*sic*] they resort to assassination and to dynamite, I say they are putting themselves as much outside the pale of political offenders as the man who in time of war goes and poisons the stream disentitles himself to be treated as a prisoner of war.⁸

Foreign pressures were also to be reckoned with, despite the suspicion that continental powers were rather pleased to be able to deport anarchists to Britain. Nonetheless, there were biting criticisms from the French conservative press, often playing on stereotypes, such as the alleged hypocrisy of the British: ‘The British mind requires the paramount motive of self-interest. The trials of others do not affect it, but it is extremely sensible to its own’, railed a French paper quoted by *The Times*, commenting on Lord Asquith’s leniency towards anarchists, except when they seemed to pose a direct threat.⁹ Diplomatic tensions arose over inter-police liaison and surveillance, but in the specific case of Anglo-French relations, no formal governmental pressure was exerted. In 1898, the French government briefly entertained the project of placing a *commissaire* in London to be exclusively in charge of anarchist surveillance, but gave up because this would be perceived as a violation of Britain’s official liberalism.¹⁰

Despite their notable presence in the press and in political discourses, anti-anarchist views seem to have met with relatively little echo among the British population. This is especially manifest in comparison with the working-class support rallied by the critics of mass eastern-European Jewish immigration into London’s East End, which could be heard from the mid 1880s onwards in the same conservative quarters. This support is evidenced by Trades Union Congress motions approving the idea of an Immigration Bill in 1892, 1894 and 1895, as well as the success of a xenophobic agitation group, the British Brothers League, in 1901–2. International disagreements over the control of anarchists came to a head with the 1898 and 1904 International

⁸ *Hansard*, 4, viii (9 Feb. 1893), cols. 915–1012.

⁹ *La Liberté*, cited in ‘The Anarchist Conspiracy’, *The Times*, 19 Feb. 1894.

¹⁰ Paris, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères Archives, file ‘Anarchistes, 1890–1906. Affaires diverses, police des étrangers, anarchistes’, letter from Paul Cambon dated 10 Jan. 1900.

Anti-Anarchist conferences in Rome and St. Petersburg respectively, after which the overwhelming majority of the participants decided to strengthen their anti-anarchist legislation. Britain was the notable exception in refusing to do so, as well as France in 1904.¹¹ However, just a few years later, in 1905, an Aliens Act was passed, making entry into British territory more restricted for ‘the insane, the diseased, the criminal, the putative public charge’. The rules concerning political asylum were also considerably tightened, with the anarchists in mind: asylum would only be granted ‘to avoid prosecution or punishment on religious or political grounds or prosecution for an offence of a political character, or to avoid prosecution involving danger to life or limb on account of religious or political belief’.¹²

The anarchists had acted as a catalyst in the revision of Britain’s liberal policy, but their impact must be understood in the broader context of the mass immigration of impoverished workers from eastern Europe and the growing national self-doubt which came together for the passing of the act. There were calls for the law to be made more stringent in 1911, following two highly publicized criminal cases involving Latvian ‘anarchists’; however, it was only in 1914 that the outbreak of the war led to reinforced controls on new arrivals. By then, foreign spies rather than anarchists had become the authorities’ main target.

In view of such tolerance – or at least indifference – in the face of anarchists, it is not surprising that Britain’s liberalism was frequently commented on by the exiles, either approvingly or critically; it had been a running theme of cross-Channel exchanges and a cause of admiration for many continental refugees throughout the nineteenth century.¹³ As exiles promoting radical views, the anarchists were indeed in an especially propitious position to assess the virtues of this ideology in practice. The few companions who commented on their British sojourn generally praised their hosts. The Franco-Italian writer, journalist and activist Charles Malato set out his views very clearly in the first page of his memoir, *Les Joyeusetés de l’exil*: ‘O Albion’s big metropolis, of you I shall not speak a bad word because, for three years, you gave me hospitality – if not a joyful one, at least wide and free, without any *concierge* and hardly any police’.¹⁴ He was

¹¹ R. Bach Jensen, ‘The International Anti-Anarchist Conference of 1898 and the origins of Interpol’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, xvi (1981), 323–4.

¹² *Hansard*, 4, cxlix (17 July 1905), cols. 903–57.

¹³ J. Garrigues, ‘Un autre modèle pour la République: l’influence des Britanniques sur les libéraux français (1870–80)’, in *La France et l’Angleterre au XIXe siècle*, ed. S. Aprile and F. Bensimon (Paris, 2006), pp. 177–88; M. Isabella, *Risorgimento in Exile: Italian Emigrés and the Liberal International in the Post-Napoleonic Era* (Oxford, 2009).

¹⁴ ‘O grande métropole d’Albion, de toi je ne veux point médire, car, pendant trois ans,

also quoted on the subject by the *Pall Mall Gazette*, declaring London to be 'almost the only free city in the world'.¹⁵ Similarly, the Communard-turned-anarchist Louise Michel and the journalist Emile Pouget praised British tolerance – usually in contrast with France's unrelenting repression and police surveillance. Pouget repeatedly referred to the civil liberties which prevailed across the Channel; writing about a cab drivers' demonstration, he noted that 'in France, the troops would have been called on, and the police would have resorted to sabres and truncheons. In London – a country which is not a republic – the cabmen were left to demonstrate as they pleased'.¹⁶

However, the hypocrisy of so-called liberal Britain was also a sub-theme in the few memoirs of exile: the anarchist writer Zo d'Axa wrote some very bitter pages about his experiences in London. For him, 'Those revolutionaries who, on the credentials of traditional hospitality, come to London, are falling into a mousetrap ... Expulsion is unheard of! True – but spying is constant. The refugees are followed, their addresses and occupations are investigated'.¹⁷ It remains true that in terms of public liberties, there was a sharp contrast between British methods and France's very harsh treatment of anarchists, with the 'Wicked Laws' (*Lois Scélérates*) of 1892–3 – hence the paradox whereby monarchical Britain seemed to uphold republican values far better than France.

Lastly, when analysing the companions' half-hearted choice to live in Britain, the very notion of physical presence must be qualified, on at least two grounds. First, more than any previous generation of exiles, the London groups had significant transnational ties with France, Spain, Italy, the United States and beyond, and were an important hub in the global anarchist diaspora. Anarchist networks operated for the diffusion of propagandist material, of persons and, as a consequence, of political ideas. The greatest fear of many contemporaries was that these networks also sustained terrorist activities. The spy who wrote that 'London is the great centre of anarchy; it is in London that it lives in peace and sets about

tu m'as donné l'hospitalité, sinon gaie, du moins large et libre, avec absence de concierge et à peine de police!' (C. Malato, *Les Joyeusetés de l'exil* (1897; Paris, 1985), p. 5).

¹⁵ 'The Foreign Anarchists in London', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 27 Apr. 1892.

¹⁶ 'En France on aurait mobilisé la troupe, et la police aurait joué du sabre ou du casse-tête. A Londres, – pays pas républicanaille – on a laissé les colignons manifester à leur guise' (*La Sociale*, 9 June 1896).

¹⁷ 'Les révolutionnaires qui, sur la foi de la traditionnelle hospitalité, viennent à Londres, tombent dans une souricière ... L'expulsion est inconnue! Oui, mais l'espionnage est constant. On suit les réfugiés, on s'enquiert de leur adresse, de leurs occupations' (Z. d'Axa, *De Mazas à Jerusalem* (Paris, 1895), p. 90).

developing’,¹⁸ voiced the thoughts of many, and the press was instrumental in shaping these concerns. This idea of London as the centre of a global conspiracy was omnipresent: ‘There is in London a central committee of international anarchy, and not only are orders sent from there, but also the money to implement all the decisions’.¹⁹ London’s place as the centre of the great anarchist conspiracy was also often denied, even by the movement’s detractors: ‘As for the statements, often repeated by English newspapers of standing and repute that London was – and is – the headquarters of the sect, the city whence the order for this or that deed went forth, no greater nonsense was ever written’.²⁰ However, such objections were ineffective in denting the idea that the city was the theatre of shady, threatening dealings. This interplay between the local and the transnational added an important dimension to the way the exiles were perceived, as it fed many fantasies about the international ramifications of the conspiracy allegedly led from London.

The notion of the physical presence of the anarchists in Britain was also made more complex by their almost complete lack of integration in their host society (examined below), as a result of which they appeared as a foreign body in the city. From the perspective of those observing the London groups from outside, the combination of national isolation with transnationalism conjured up an aura of mystery, as they seemed to be present yet elusive in London, while possibly entertaining some links all over the world: all the elements feeding a conspiratorial imagination were in place.

As a result of these suspicions, Britain and London as asylums were contested spaces. The anarchists were a catalyst and a political stake in the oscillation evidenced by British politicians between free trade and protectionism during this period, including in the area of migration. The polemics unleashed by their presence in London were made all the more acute by Britain’s unique policy on asylum until the early years of the twentieth century, and by the refugees’ overwhelming spatial concentration in the capital, and in particular in the areas of Soho and Fitzrovia.

The national level: heading for London

On 25 April 1892, with the approach of May Day, upon hearing of new expulsions from France, *The Times* lamented the fact that ‘England will be a

¹⁸ APP, BA 1509, unsigned report dated 6 Dec. 1893: ‘Londres est le grand centre de l’anarchie; c’est à Londres qu’elle vit paisible et procède à son développement’.

¹⁹ APP, BA 1509, report by Frouard dated 31 July 1894: ‘Il existe à Londres un comité central de l’anarchie internationale et que non seulement les ordres partent de là, mais aussi l’argent nécessaire pour accomplir toutes les décisions’.

²⁰ E. Vizetelly, *The Anarchists* (1911), p. 71.

safer hiding-place, and London – to quote Johnson with a slight variation – will be the common shore of Paris and Berlin'.²¹ Indeed, the great majority of comrades made their way to London from France, usually arriving via Victoria or Cannon Street stations. And from there they headed for the 'French quarter', in Soho and Fitzrovia. However, before homing in on the French quarter, it is worth following the divergent itineraries of the small minority of comrades who, for personal or socio-economic reasons, chose not to settle in the capital.

A handful of exiles lived briefly or permanently outside London. Scotland sheltered an important exile, Paul Reclus, who was the nephew of Elisée Reclus, one of the founding fathers of anarchist communism and a former London exile himself. Edinburgh was also visited by the sociologist Augustin Hamon, author of books on the psychology of soldiers and of a *Psychologie de l'anarchiste-socialiste*.²² In both cases, personal connections and professional opportunities were determining factors in these geographical choices. It was probably the availability of work which took several comrades to large industrial cities such as Birmingham and Liverpool; the latter was also a port of call for those who hoped to travel on to North or Latin America. One spy's comments on a comrade's trip to Birmingham illustrate the combination of factors in individual mobility choices: he announced that the relatively well-known and active comrade Louis Grandidier, being subject to intense police surveillance in London, would 'soon go to Birmingham and stay with an Italian; there, he will be introduced to a French bookshop owner and they will look for a job for him'.²³ Gustave Mollet, originally from Roanne, stopped briefly in London before opting for Norwich, possibly because of the city's dynamic local movement. Mollet was one of the very few French comrades who stayed in Britain after 1895, appearing in the 1901 census under the name 'Mollett'. Brighton provided a hiding-place for comrade Constant Martin, whom the police were especially interested in arresting. Other locations in the south-east offered peaceful retreats to those who sought quiet and anonymity, starting with Peter Kropotkin in Bromley, with occasional visits to the seaside in Brighton and Eastbourne.²⁴ Similarly, Louise Michel moved to

²¹ *The Times*, 25 Apr. 1892.

²² Amsterdam, International Institute of Social History (hereafter IISH), Augustin Frédéric Adolphe Hamon papers, letter from Pouget to Hamon (not dated but probably Dec. 1894/Jan. 1895).

²³ APP, BA 1509, report by Z.6 dated 8 Dec. 1893: '[Grandidier] ira sous peu à Birmingham et descendra chez un Italien; de là, il sera présenté chez un libraire français où on doit lui chercher du travail'.

²⁴ Paris, Institut Français d'Histoire Sociale (hereafter IFHS), Grave correspondence,

Dulwich after leaving the hustle and bustle of the French quarter. Lucien Pemjean praised his provincial location of Alton (Hampshire) in a very bucolic fashion: ‘This occupation, this countryside, this fresh air – all this novelty is so refreshing, restful and reinvigorating for me’.²⁵ In almost every case, a clear desire to distance oneself geographically and politically from London’s disreputable circles was mentioned as a factor.

For indeed, London was the destination of choice for most of the refugees, and they were so concentrated in the capital that the word ‘colonies’ was frequently used to describe their groupings²⁶ – a term which denoted both geographical concentration and a sense of internal organization and isolation. Walking in the footsteps of the 1848 generation and the Communards, the anarchists settled down in Soho and Fitzrovia, in an area with a long-established tradition of hosting continental exiles and political radicals, which was known as ‘the French quarter’ and carried an aura of disrepute: ‘a telling pout’ thus appeared on the face of Malato’s cab-driver when he was told where to take his passenger.²⁷ British and international onlookers were not the only ones to be somewhat put off by these anarchist colonies; there was a strong connection between the comrades’ geographical localization and their political affiliations, so that most lived in the French quarter, but the elite (that is to say mainly the writers and journalists) of the exiles preferred to stay outside this area. This was the case for Malato, who eventually settled down in the suburb of Hampstead. Pouget was in Islington, and other comrades were reported to be in Camden.²⁸ The Italian activist Errico Malatesta lived in Islington, the veteran Gustave Brocher in Camberwell and Auguste Coulon in Balham. In this case, a marginal location most probably testified to a need for discretion, since Coulon was a spy and provocateur in the pay of the Metropolitan Police Special Branch. An interesting case is that of Victor Cails, one of the very few comrades who strove to meet the anarchist ideal of the *trimardeur*, that is to say the rootless wandering militant. His itinerary was more typical of a British working-

letters from Kropotkin dated 3 Sept. 1894, 14 and 22 Feb. 1912 (from Brighton), 3 July 1902 (from Eastbourne). Most of Kropotkin’s other letters were written from Bromley.

²⁵ IISH, Zo d’Axa archive, letter from Lucien Pemjean dated 23 Sept. 1894, sent from ‘Wey cottage, Alton (Hants)’: ‘Cette occupation, cette campagne, ce bon air, ces paisibles bêtes, tout ce nouveau me rafraîchit, me repose et me retrempe’.

²⁶ APP, BA 1509, report dated 23 Oct. 1894; IISH, Augustin Frédéric Adolphe Hamon papers, letter from Emile Pouget dated 15 Aug. 1894: ‘D’Axa, Cipriani, Darien sont ici. La colonie augmente!’ (‘D’Axa, Cipriani, Darien are here. The colony is increasing!’).

²⁷ Malato, *Joyeusetés de l’exil*, p. 6: ‘une moue significative’.

²⁸ APP, BA 1510, report by Jarvis dated 8 Apr. 1896: ‘Lemée demeure à Camden Town et fabrique des drogues pour les femmes’ (‘Lemée remains at Camden town and manufactures drugs for women’).

class man than of a French anarchist, since he remained in Britain after the 1895 amnesty, and was employed in the very early years of the twentieth century in Millwall Docks and on the construction site of the Victoria and Albert Museum.²⁹

The map of the anarchist colonies was therefore a political and socio-economic one. The comrades' overwhelming concentration in a few streets points to the paradox of their mobility, which occurred within a very restricted and already mapped-out space. This was not a voyage of cultural discovery; on the contrary, in most cases, installation followed a historical, linguistic and social logic. Nonetheless, there were divergent itineraries, which testify to the extent and diversity of the French presence in Britain and show a significant occurrence of French working-class travel even outside London, in a period usually associated with the rise of middle-class cross-Channel tourism.

The urban level

Charlotte Street and Goudge Street were the very heart of London's 'small anarchist Republic':³⁰

Since the beginning, Charlotte Street has been for the French exiled in London what the Agora was for the Greeks, the Forum for the Romans and [Paris's] boulevard de la Villette at one in the morning for the paladins of decadence: it is a constantly-open meeting place; it is, at the same time, a landmark ... after 15 minutes, [I] had found Paris – Paris in London.³¹

The association with Fitzrovia was essential to the negative perception of the anarchists – and vice versa. By the end of the nineteenth century, the area already carried sordid connotations, and the anarchists added to its social hotchpotch. While some parts were affluent and middle-class, 'some inner and eastern areas of Fitzrovia attracted the political and artistic dissidents who were to give the area its specific character'.³² In addition to Charlotte Street and Fitzroy Square, French anarchists could be found on both sides of Oxford Street. To the north, they lived in Cleveland Street, Whitfield

²⁹ IISH, Lucien Descaves collection, Louise Michel papers, letter from Victor Cails to Louise Michel dated 2 July 1903.

³⁰ 'Cette petite république anarchiste' (Malato, *Joyusetés de l'exil*, p. 29).

³¹ 'Charlotte Street ... a, depuis son origine, été pour les Français proscrits à Londres, ce que fut l'Agora pour les Grecs, le Forum pour les Romains et le Boulevard de la Villette à une heure du matin, pour les paladins de la décadence: c'est un lieu, toujours ouvert, de réunion; c'est, en même temps, un point de repère ... au bout d'un quart d'heure [j']avais retrouvé Paris, – Paris à Londres' (Malato, *Joyusetés de l'exil*, pp. 6–7).

³² M. Pentelow and M. Rowe, *Characters of Fitzrovia* (2001), p. 13.

Street, Goodge Street, Rathbone Street, Percy Street, Gresse Street, Stephen's Mews, Newman Street, Great Titchfield Street and Windmill Street. To the south, they lived mainly in Frith Street, Dean Street, Rupert Street, Alfred Place and Wardour Street.

This spatial concentration determined the reception of the anarchists; there was a strong visual element in the moral panic which they triggered. Many negative depictions of the anarchist colonies were variations on this theme of the threatening strangers in the city, and the press issued constant reminders – be they emphases or hints – of their presence in the heart of London. For instance, in December 1894, the sensationalist *Evening News* ran a series on London's anarchist groups, with the headline '8,000 Anarchists in London – where these enemies of society live in the great metropolis'. The French consistently attracted special attention because of their supposed extremism: 'Between Soho Square and Leicester Square are to be found a small group of the most dangerous anarchists in London, the mysterious and bloodthirsty Anonymat'.³³ The notion of the enemy secretly lurking within the community and plotting against it – a classic trope in conspiracy narratives³⁴ – occurred in several different forms. It can be seen in the suspicion that these undesirable guests were planning to attack key political landmarks in London:

The Metropolitan police is said to have just uncovered a true anarchist conspiracy. The affiliates, numbering about 200, were planning to create an explosion, this week, at Westminster Palace, Saint-James (the residence of HM Queen Victoria), and Mr Gladstone's private residence.³⁵

It was also latent in the repeated – and not always untrue – claim that London harboured foreign terrorists in hiding:

We are increasingly certain that comrades Meunier and Francis are hiding in the club's vicinity. Indeed, the area could not fit them any better; very populous, frequented by the French Jews and also by London's most villainous individuals; they will be completely safe there.³⁶

³³ '8,000 Anarchists in London', *Evening News*, 17 Dec. 1894, p. 2.

³⁴ R. Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris, 1986), pp. 25–62.

³⁵ 'La police londonienne vient de découvrir, paraît-il, le centre d'une véritable conspiration anarchiste. Les affiliés, au nombre de deux cents environ, se proposaient de faire sauter cette semaine, Westminster Palace (le Parlement), Saint-James, résidence de SM la reine Victoria et la demeure particulière de M. Gladstone' ('Les anarchistes à Londres', *La Cocarde*, 17 Feb. 1894).

³⁶ APP, BA 1508, report by Z.2 dated 11 Sept. 1892: 'On est de plus en plus certain que les compagnons Meunier et Francis sont cachés non loin du club. En effet le quartier est on ne peut mieux choisi; très populeux, fréquenté par les juifs français et surtout par tout ce qu'il y a de plus crapule dans Londres, ils s'y trouvent en parfait sécurité'.

The sense of danger evoked by the anarchists compounded the horror aroused by the vision of the modern, industrial city of which London was the epitome – dark, labyrinthine, potentially revolutionary.³⁷ All of these traits are dramatized in Joseph Conrad's fictionalized account of the Greenwich affair, *The Secret Agent*, which tellingly concludes with a sentence capturing this idea of the malevolent anarchists lurking within the community: 'He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men'.³⁸

Nonetheless, such discourses were more characteristic of the peak of the moral panic stirred by this anarchist presence, and fears ebbed in the late 1890s. Around 1894 already, at the climax of the terrorist period and of police surveillance in both France and London, spies remarked that the comrades were increasingly isolated and scattered:

Since the Autonomie business [i.e., the police raid of the main anarchist club in February 1894, following the Greenwich explosion], the anarchists in refuge in London have spread here and there and only meet up very rarely in comparison to what used to be the case.³⁹

This was, however, mainly an effect of the closure of their main haunt, the Autonomie Club; a decade later, there were far fewer French anarchists in London, but those who were still present in the capital tended to live in the same areas. By 1901, even spies dispelled rumours of anarchist agitation, and the notion of an anarchist quarter had pretty much disappeared: 'In fact, the movement has never been so calm. The groups which meet from time to time only do so for little unimportant chats. Most of those who attend the clubs only do so to be entertained with singing or dancing'.⁴⁰ By 1909, the time of nostalgia had come and verbal radicalism prevailed, replacing anarchist antics and public anxieties. Malatesta wrote of an old Italian comrade:

There is nothing interesting here ... We live just as we used to 20 years ago, with the difference that there is even less of a movement than there used to

³⁷ C. Bantman, 'Anarchist scares in the late-Victorian city: an urban symptom?', in *Keeping the Lid On: Urban Eruptions and Social Control since the 19th Century*, ed. S. Finding, L. Barrow and F. Poirier (Newcastle, 2010), pp. 31–8.

³⁸ J. Conrad, *The Secret Agent* (1907; 1997), p. 229.

³⁹ APP, BA 1509, report by Léon dated 17 March 1894: 'Depuis l'affaire de l'Autonomie, les anarchistes réfugiés à Londres se sont dispersés un peu partout et ne se rencontrent que très rarement en comparaison de ce qui se passait autrefois'.

⁴⁰ APP, BA 435, report by Bornibus dated 6 Nov. 1901: 'Or, jamais le mouvement n'a été aussi calme. Les groupes qui se réunissent de temps en temps ne le font que pour de petites causeries sans importance. La plupart de ceux qui fréquentent ces réunions sont de jeunes ouvriers qui ne vont dans les clubs que pour se distraire en chantant ou en dansant'.

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be ... Reava [most likely Rava] is still in London and he sells paintings ... I sometimes bump into him; but every time a sovereign is killed, he comes to see us and rejoice with a bottle.⁴¹

The local level: anarchist haunts

What were the anarchist spaces in London? First and foremost, their clubs. The anarchist movement took off in London during and as a result of the golden age of ‘Metropolitan clubland’ radicalism,⁴² and it is therefore hardly surprising that clubs appeared as the most congenial setting for anarchist exilic militancy; in France, by contrast, the comrades usually met in halls (‘salles’). Given the centrality of clubs of all allegiances in Britain’s political life, it may also be an effect of cultural mimicry which led the French and international comrades to set up their own clubs at an early date. The adoption of specifically ‘English’ features was even acknowledged by spies: ‘The anarchists in London have an anarchist club much like English clubs. There is a buffet which is run by a steward.⁴³ He serves drinks on Sundays and gives food to club members’.⁴⁴

From the early 1880s onwards, French, British and other European comrades formed clubs where they could congregate and, more often than not, clash with one another, as exiles were legendarily wont to do. First came the Rose Street International Club (1881–2), dominated by German exiles and set up in the aftermath of the 1881 International Revolutionary Socialist Congress in London, which aimed to recreate the International Working Men’s Association. Both the club and the association soon foundered, and the former was replaced with another international endeavour, the International Socialist Club of Poland Street: ‘We have a beautiful club, with all the desirable commodities – large meeting rooms, billiard table etc’, Brocher proudly wrote in November 1882.⁴⁵ The next international venture was the Stephen Mews Club in 1885, where the French had their

⁴¹ IISH, Brocher archive, letter from Errico Malatesta to Victorine Brocher dated 27 Aug. 1909: ‘Ici rien d’intéressant, à notre point de vue. Nous vivons toujours comme il y a vingt ans, avec la différence qu’il y a encore moins de mouvement qu’alors ... Reava est toujours à Londres ... Je le rencontre de temps en temps par hasard; mais toutes les fois qu’on tue un souverain, il vient nous voir pour se réjouir du fait en buvant une bouteille’.

⁴² S. Shipley, *Club Life and Socialism in Mid-Victorian London* (1972), p. 21.

⁴³ The English word appears in the original quotation; the orthographic variation is correct in French.

⁴⁴ APP, BA 1508, report by Pépin dated 2 Aug. 1893: ‘Les anarchistes à Londres ont un club anarchiste comme le sont les clubs anglais. Il s’y trouve un buffet qui est dirigé par un steward. Celui-ci sert le dimanche des boissons et donne à manger aux membres du club’.

⁴⁵ IISH, Brocher archive, letter dated 29 Nov. 1882: ‘Nous avons un beau club avec toutes les commodités désirables, grandes salles de réunion, billards etc.’

own section; the club was raided by the police that same year. Of all these meeting points, none was more famous – or rather infamous – than the Autonomie Club, an international gathering place where different meeting days were designated for each national section, and which doubled up as a soup kitchen and makeshift shelter for the most destitute companions. The club, originally set up in 1886 at 32 Charlotte Street and then relocated to 6 Windmill Street, catalysed all the myths and public fears associated with anarchism, and was believed to be the ‘centre of the whole Anarchist organisation in the Metropolis’.⁴⁶ *The Times* casually described it as ‘the headquarters’ of London’s ‘dovecote of anarchists’.⁴⁷ Malato summarized its widely distorted public image:

It was there, claimed reporters lacking inspiration and happy to speculate on bourgeois terrors for three pennies a line, that all the conspiracies meant to explode on the continent were plotted, that all the tragic resolutions were made, that dynamite, potassium chlorate, nitrobenzene, rack-a-rock and green powder were fabricated.⁴⁸

By the time the club was raided by Chief Inspector Melville of the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police and his men, in February 1894 following the Greenwich explosion, the club had become famous above all for ‘being infested with the police spies of various governments’.⁴⁹ Even the most prolific and sensationalist writers on anarchism acknowledged then that it was ‘doubtful whether these clubs were ever the hotbeds of conspiracy that has sometimes been represented’,⁵⁰ but such stories certainly sold well.

These clubs were venues for propaganda, where national and international meetings took place, as well as commemorations of the Paris Commune on 18 March and, after 1887, of the six anarchists executed in Chicago on 11 November following their involvement in May Day protests. The clubs also hosted cultural activities which had a political dimension, such as talks, plays or concerts, often with a view to fundraising in defence of a specific cause. As early as 1884, when there were just a few dozen anarchists in London, one spy commented on a recent anarchist cultural evening: ‘Of the concert, I will not say a word: it was weak beyond words. As for the fourth act of *Charlotte Corday*, it was performed by: Marillat as Danton,

⁴⁶ ‘Anarchism in London’, *The Graphic*, 24 Feb. 1894.

⁴⁷ ‘The explosion in Greenwich Park’, *The Times*, 17 Feb. 1894.

⁴⁸ ‘Là ... se tramaient tous les complots destinés à exploser sur le continent, se prenaient toutes les résolutions tragiques, se fabriquaient la dynamite, le chlorate de potasse, la nitrobenzine, le rack-a-rock et la poudre verte’ (Malato, *Joyeusetés de l’exil*, p. 57).

⁴⁹ ‘Anarchist Conspiracies’, *Western Mail*, 17 Feb. 1894.

⁵⁰ F. Dubois, *The Anarchist Peril*, trans. R. Derechef (1894), pp. 270–1.

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Lucas as Robespierre, Raoux as Marat’.⁵¹ Malato devoted a chapter of his London memoir to the performance in March 1893 of the play he had penned, *Mariage par la dynamite*, a ‘one-act vaudeville’, which copiously mocked the Paris police.⁵²

Larger events bringing together all of the international groups took place in Grafton Hall, 55 Grafton Street. Other venues patronized with some regularity included the Athenaeum Hall, Liberty Hall (located out of the comrades’ usual area, in Peckham Street in south-east London), as well as the occasional pub room or restaurant.⁵³ After the high tide of the French anarchist proscription in London, the political sociability of the exiles who stayed on was more diffuse, with no mention being made of regular meeting points.⁵⁴

After the clubs, the street and a number of open spaces were the most important political spaces for the anarchists. Hyde Park was a favourite for May Day demonstrations, which became a militant ritual after 1890, provoking the sniggers of onlookers who found it difficult to regard anarchist manifestations as actual political events – in the same way as it was increasingly problematic to treat them as political refugees:

In Hyde Park, as elsewhere, man is a gregarious animal. With the help of banners and music and speechifying, any number of species can be brought together. They come in their thousands to hear some glib-tongued fellow speak, and they would come just as readily for the amusement of seeing him hanged.⁵⁵

The public nature of these events could also be a source of pride for some as it testified to the country’s unique freedom of speech: ‘In the great London Parks on every Sunday, streams of oratory are poured forth almost uninterruptedly from morning till dusk ... Every variety of opinion is expressed, from the solemn exhortations of the Evangelist to the wild absurdities of the Anarchist’.⁵⁶

Unsurprisingly, however, the street was an often disputed territory. Malato, in a vein reminiscent of Jules Vallès’s *La Rue à Londres*, noted that London life was ‘all interior ... the cold street without benches is a

⁵¹ APP, BA 435, report by Etoile dated 20 Nov. 1884: ‘Du concert, on ne dira rien: il a été d’une faiblesse inénarrable. Quant au 4ème acte de “Charlotte Corday” il a été bien interprété par: Marillat dans le rôle de Danton; Lucas, dans celui de Robespierre; Raoux dans le rôle de Marat’.

⁵² Malato, *Joyusetés de l’exil*, pp. 94–103.

⁵³ APP, BA 1509, report by Cottance dated 19 Dec. 1894; APP, BA1509, report by Jarvis dated 3 July 1895.

⁵⁴ APP, BA 1509, report by Bourgeois dated 12 Feb. 1895.

⁵⁵ *The Times*, 25 Apr. 1892.

⁵⁶ ‘The Forum of the Park’, *The Graphic*, 10 Dec. 1887.

place which you only go through, and do not stop in'.⁵⁷ And yet, it was an important stage in the comrades' daily existence and political activities. Comrades met one another when strolling in the French quarter – a method, so to speak, adopted by the spies in charge of anarchist surveillance. One explained: 'All these individuals, you can believe it, are nowhere to be found in the refugees' quarter. We walk four times a day in Charlotte Street ... but we never meet them there'.⁵⁸ Indeed, the street was associated above all with the many *mouchards* or informers, both British and continental, constantly watching over the refugees in order to spot people and gather intelligence: 'The London police are currently pestering Lapie, exerting surveillance both day and night in front of his bookshop'.⁵⁹

The streets of London also provided a stage for demonstrations, notably on the occasion of funerals, which were choice opportunities for anarchist professions of faith. When Mrs. Mowbray, the wife of the respected British companion Charles Mowbray, was buried in April 1892, the papers depicted 'a collection of crowds, consisting for the most part of very harmless people, in search of a little excitement as a set off to the tedium of everyday life'.⁶⁰ But, in February 1894, the funeral procession of the French comrade Martial Bourdin, killed in Greenwich Park by the detonation of the bomb he was carrying, was attacked by passers-by. It was repeatedly suggested that the attackers had been paid by the British police, in an attempt to stage public hostility to anarchism;⁶¹ however that may be, the anarchists' public presence was increasingly resented, as evidenced by several debates in the House of Commons over their right to hold public demonstrations, which were started by Conservatives and opposed by Liberals in the name of freedom of speech.⁶² However, both parties eventually agreed to censor the anarchists' public presence, notably during the very tense period of 'propaganda by the deed'.⁶³ This fear of public anarchist gatherings echoes the great panics triggered by the workers' strikes and unemployed demonstrations of 1886–9, in the West End (Bloody Sunday) and the London Docks. The

⁵⁷ Malato, *Joyeusetés de l'exil*, p. 15.

⁵⁸ APP, BA 1508, report by Z.6 dated 1 March 1893: 'Tous ces individus, croyez-le bien, ne se trouvent pas dans le quartier des réfugiés. On passe 4 fois par jours dans Charlotte Street et on voit fréquemment Richard, mais jamais on ne les y rencontre'.

⁵⁹ APP, BA 1508, report by Z.6 dated 7 July 1893: 'La police de Londres tracasse en ce moment le nommé Lapie devant la librairie duquel elle fait exercer une surveillance non seulement le jour mais encore dans la soirée'.

⁶⁰ *The Times*, 25 Apr. 1892.

⁶¹ 'L'anarchie à Londres. Une interview du chef de la police anglaise', *L'Eclair*, 3 March 1894.

⁶² *Hansard*, 4, xviii (14 Nov. 1893), cols. 874–5.

⁶³ *Hansard*, 4, xviii (28 Nov. 1893), cols. 1909–10.

fears associated with the sheer sight of the anarchists as a group must be understood in a broader context of social unrest, where agitation by the proletariat in the industrial metropolis was a cause of great concern and fear. The French origins of the companions, and therefore the immediate association in public minds with the revolution, certainly increased the sense of unease which they provoked.

Just off the street, and returning to the French quarter, two shops functioned as meeting points for the exiles and the spies watching over them. The first was the bookshop of Armand Lapie at 30 Goodge Street; the other was the grocery of Victor Richard, a former Communeard who was supportive of anarchists without being one, located at 67 Charlotte Street. This last place was such an anarchist landmark that Malato advised future exiles in London to go straight there; interestingly, he also suggested that they pay a visit to William Morris, whose address Louise Michel would be able to provide.⁶⁴

Schools and other educational settings were prime militant venues for the *compagnons*. The first school set up by anarchists in London was Louise Michel's Ecole Anarchiste Internationale, which opened in Fitzroy Street in 1890 and testified to the French comrades' lasting interest in pedagogical ventures. The school, whose short-lived existence ended with yet another bomb scandal involving the provocateur Coulon, emphasized the individual's integral development and bore the trace of the ideas of Mikhail Bakunin and the libertarian pedagogue Paul Robin. It caught the attention of the future leading educationalist Margaret McMillan, who later pioneered the socialist Sunday School movement.⁶⁵ In the pacified context of the early twentieth century, the French and other international exiles were increasingly interested in pedagogic and cultural activities, such as concerts, conferences and language classes.⁶⁶ February 1905 saw the inauguration of a Université Populaire set up by comrades of various nationalities in Euston Street.⁶⁷ This mirrored the development of similar initiatives in France at the same time, as part of the educational endeavours which followed the Dreyfus affair. The founders aimed 'to educate workers, by letting them see (through a free loan library, classes, conferences, etc.) a better future, based on a more scientific understanding of social life and by bringing them in the present the joys which knowledge brings'.⁶⁸ Theatrical performances were scheduled

⁶⁴ Malato, *Joyusetés de l'exil*, pp. 166–7.

⁶⁵ M. McMillan, *The Life of Rachel McMillan* (1927), pp. 58–9.

⁶⁶ P. DiPaola, 'Italian anarchists in London (1870–1914)' (unpublished Goldsmiths, University of London PhD thesis, 2004), p. 226.

⁶⁷ APP, BA 1510, report by Bornibus dated 20 Feb. 1905; APP, BA 1510, report by Bornibus dated 3 March 1905.

⁶⁸ APP, BA 1510, prospectus 'Université Populaire de Londres'.

during the opening week, with plays by Georges Courteline and Octave Mirbeau;⁶⁹ there were also conferences on politics and evening classes in geometry, linguistics, English, physics and chemistry, mathematics, history and sociology. But the Université Populaire de Londres quickly collapsed, due to funding issues and dissensions between its German members, on the one hand, and French and Italian participants on the other.⁷⁰

Given how difficult it was for the comrades to find and hold a job, their workplaces are hard to inventory. Most of the exiles were craftsmen and took on makeshift, often multiple activities to get by during their time abroad, frequently setting up shops in their own dwellings. A few of them had shops, such as Lapie's bookshop, where the spy Cottance (full name unknown) briefly ran a little toyshop/bazaar before he was exposed.⁷¹ François Bourdin, a tailor and the brother of Martial Bourdin, worked 'in a small and dingy workshop in Great Titchfield Street'.⁷² Several anarchists took on jobs in the traditionally French-oriented sectors of catering and teaching. Malato, Brocher and Michel were private tutors working in well-to-do families.⁷³ The hospitality sector, where Frenchness held a certain cachet, provided opportunities to some, including at the very chic Café Royal.⁷⁴ The brief *tour d'horizon* written by the informant Jarvis (full name unknown) testifies to the very casual, almost random nature of employment for the comrades: 'Lemée lives in Camden Town and makes drugs for women ... Ségot and Gouriot are going to set up a business as lantern-makers. Charpentier and Péroux are penniless'.⁷⁵ But the very precarious nature of employment meant that workplaces could be the street; comrade Bidault sold 'tie pins in the street, Oxford Street, mainly at the corner of Rat Bone Place [*sic*]'.⁷⁶ Anarchists were also frequently associated with prostitution. This was due to a widespread tendency to associate them with moral depravity, but also to the fact that Soho had been a pick-up place for French prostitutes for decades and, lastly, to the actual presence of a number of procurers among the comrades.

Private homes were, like work, characterized by precariousness. A degree of nomadism was the norm, because of financial difficulties, police

⁶⁹ *Les Temps Nouveaux*, 25 Apr. 1903.

⁷⁰ APP, BA 1510, report by Bornibus dated 24 Apr. 1905.

⁷¹ APP, BA 1509, report by Lapeyre dated 14 Dec. 1894.

⁷² 'Anarchism in London', *The Graphic*, 24 Feb. 1894.

⁷³ Malato, *Joyusetés de l'exil*, pp. 84–8.

⁷⁴ APP, BA 1508, report by Y.3 dated 1 Dec. 1893.

⁷⁵ APP, BA 1510, report by Jarvis dated 8 Apr. 1896: 'Lemée demeure à Camden Town et fabrique des drogues pour les femmes ... Ségot et Gouriot vont s'établir fabricants de lanternes. Charpentier et Péroux sont à bout de ressources'.

⁷⁶ APP, BA 1508, report by Z.6 dated 15 June 1893: Bidault 'vend des épingles de cravates dans la rue, Oxford street, principalement au coin de Rat Bone Place [*sic*]'.

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surveillance and the stigma attached to French migrants (‘coming from France was a poor reference’, Michel reminisced).⁷⁷ Most comrades lived in the furnished lodgings typical of the capital’s poorer areas; in Soho and Fitzrovia,

Only very well-off artisans could afford a house. Most rented rooms in a house that was subdivided. Better-off families might have two, or even three, rooms. Other labouring people could only afford temporary rooms in a common lodging house, where their neighbours might be prostitutes or criminals.⁷⁸

Louise Michel first lived in Huntley Street in ‘a small bedroom. A bed, next to the only window, a desk littered with books or writings’.⁷⁹ The house itself was one ‘of blackened bricks, like the others’.⁸⁰ Pouget similarly lived ‘in the top floor of a little house in a back street in Islington’.⁸¹ Even when one found accommodation, instability remained the rule: ‘Pouget cannot find anywhere to live and is sick of London’, a spy reported back just before the editor of the *Père Peinard* returned to France.⁸² The poorest comrades lived in the street (several died or caught very serious illnesses as a result of homelessness) or slept on the floor of the Autonomie Club.⁸³ Many made a stop in one of the houses run by Ernest Delebecque, at 28–30 Charlotte Street, where rooms could be rented out. Families were split into different houses, and sharing a room with other comrades (French or, quite often, Italian) was frequent.⁸⁴ Outside the French quarter and beyond London, accommodation was more spacious and affordable too; Lucien Pemjean thus prided himself on the three-bed cottage he could afford in Hampshire. However, most of the comrades lived in such dire conditions, and London was such an established destination for French exiles, that Louise Michel entertained for some time the project of an ‘auberge des proscrits’, a hostel or hotel for exiles, which was to be funded by a conference tour in the United States in 1895–6 but never saw the light of day.⁸⁵

⁷⁷ ‘C’était une mauvaise recommandation que de venir de France’ (L. Michel, *Histoire de ma vie, deuxième et troisième parties. Londres 1904* (1904; Lyon, 2000), p. 135).

⁷⁸ Pentelow and Rowe, *Characters of Fitzrovia*, p. 15.

⁷⁹ IISH, Louise Michel collection, item 1050, ‘Les anarchistes entre eux’, about the London groups (1892): ‘comme demeure, une petite chambre. Un lit, près de l’unique fenêtre un bureau couvert de livres ou d’écrits’.

⁸⁰ Malato, *Joyeusetés de l’exil*, p. 17.

⁸¹ ‘Anarchists in London’, *Daily News*, 12 Aug. 1897.

⁸² APP, BA1509, report by Satin dated 30 Nov. 1894: ‘Pouget ne peut trouver à se loger et est dégoûté de Londres’.

⁸³ Malato, *Joyeusetés de l’exil*, p. 29.

⁸⁴ APP, BA 1509, report by Satin dated 22 Sept. 1894; report by Z.6 dated 30 July 1894.

⁸⁵ ‘Notes sur Louise Michel’, *La Sociale*, 1 Dec. 1895.

Conclusion: liberty, equality, opportunity

During their time in London, did the anarchists enjoy the delights of 'liberty, equality and opportunity'? The theme of liberty was, of course, a recurring motif whenever debates on this anarchist asylum took place, as expressed through the topos that liberal England represented the values of the French Republic better than France itself. However, their extremely difficult material circumstances meant that no one among the French anarchists went as far as to claim that Britain was fairer from the perspective of its economic and social organization. Malato summed it all up with the untranslatable pun in the very first paragraph of his memoir: 'I disembarked in the big city which its inhabitants call London – *prononcez "l'on n'donne" et n'ajoutez rien* [pronounced 'one gives' and add 'nothing']'.⁸⁶ Although Louise Michel praised the infamous institution of the workhouse as evidence that 'England considered it a duty to look after those without bread or shelter',⁸⁷ most references to Britain's economic and social system confirmed the entrenched stereotype of a profoundly unequal order. Malato saw it embodied in London's houses – 'refined hedonism for some, sordid wretchedness for others'.⁸⁸ In their closed-off circles, torn apart by personal and political quarrels, the comrades did, however, experience some sense of brotherhood and solidarity, which also explains their proclivity to geographical concentration. Zo d'Axa encapsulated the comrades' isolated existence with a metaphor – with the inevitable, stereotypical references to insularity and racial opposition between Latin and northern European nations: 'Each English person strangely symbolises the country, these insulars representing as many unapproachable little islands where warm-hued plant sap does not rise'.⁸⁹

The key term to describe the anarchist experience in London was in fact that of opportunity – paradoxical as this may seem for individuals and groups so isolated and forlorn. This was not professional opportunity, although a handful of exiles were able to create useful professional networks during their forced stay abroad. London afforded its French visitors a truly unique political opportunity, by allowing them to form contacts with

⁸⁶ 'Je débarquai dans cette grande ville que ses habitants appellent London' (Malato, *Joyeusetés de l'exil*, p. 5).

⁸⁷ 'L'Angleterre, elle, considère comme un devoir de s'occuper de ceux qui n'ont ni pain ni abri' (L. Michel, *Mémoires de Louise Michel écrits par elle-même* (Paris, 1886), p. 385).

⁸⁸ 'Jouissance raffinée chez les uns, misère sordide chez les autres' (Malato, *Joyeusetés de l'exil*, p. 24).

⁸⁹ 'Chaque Anglais symbolise étrangement le pays: ces insulaires figurant autant de petites îles inabordable où ne s'éveille point la sève des plantes aux tons chauds' (d'Axa, *De Mazas*, p. 77).

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their international counterparts. The new direction of French anarchism towards revolutionary syndicalism after 1894 owed a lot to the personal contacts formed in London and the joint reflection possible in London’s international meeting places. The networks formed in London thus allowed the French movement to survive at a time of heavy repression, and also to reinvent itself.⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Bantman, *French Anarchists in London*.

