

Introduction to “Direct Struggle Against Capital”

Anarcho

March 25, 2020

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Kropotkin... was a prominent figure in the realm of learning, recognised as such by the foremost men of the world. But to us he meant much more than that. We saw in him the father of modern anarchism, its revolutionary spokesman and brilliant exponent of its relation to science, philosophy, and progressive thought. As a personality he towered high above most of his contemporaries by virtue of his humanity and faith in the masses. Anarchism to him was not an ideal for the select few. It was a constructive social theory, destined to usher in a new world for all of mankind. For this he had lived and laboured all his life.

– Emma Goldman¹

Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) was the foremost anarchist theoretician of the late 19th and early 20th century. His fellow anarchist and friend Errico Malatesta rightly stated he was “without doubt one of those who have contributed most” to the “elaboration and propagation of anarchist ideas” and has “well deserved the recognition and the admiration that all anarchists feel for him.”² Leading anarcho-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker stated he “owed a great deal to Kropotkin” and his books “had influenced my whole development, had shaped my whole life.” Kropotkin “was a scholar and a thinker, a man of extraordinarily wide reading and learning, a historian, geographer, economist and social philosopher.” He “was no utopist. He had a practical view of life.”³ For George Orwell, Kropotkin’s “inventive and pragmatic outlook” made him “one of the most persuasive of Anarchist writers.”⁴

Kropotkin’s ideas left their mark on the libertarian⁵ movement across the globe, a movement that is still indebted to his decades of activism within it as “one of the most seminal figures in the history of the anarchist movement” as well as “one of its most important theoreticians.”⁶ As Nicholas Walter summarised:

Kropotkin’s most characteristic doctrines are... anarchist communism as the end – that the whole of society should be organised on the basis of common ownership and popular control at grass roots – and of revolutionary expropriation as the means – that this must be accomplished by the forcible seizure by the mass of the people of all capital and property. His political doctrines may be summed up by the phrase used for the [title of the] Russian edition of *La Conquête du pain...*: “Bread and Liberty.”⁷

¹ *Living My Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1970) 2, 509.

² “Peter Kropotkin: Recollections and Criticisms of an Old Friend,” *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* (London: Freedom Press, 1993), 257.

³ *The London Years* (Nottingham/Oakland: Five Leaves Publications/AK Press, 2005), 146, 77.

⁴ “The Writer’s Dilemma,” *The Observer Years* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 227.

⁵ Sadly, it is necessary to explain what we mean by “libertarian” as this term has been appropriated by the free-market capitalist right. Socialist use of libertarian dates from 1858 when it was first used by communist-anarchist Joseph Déjacque as a synonym for anarchist for his paper *Le Libéraire, Journal du Mouvement Social*. This usage became more commonplace in the 1880s and 1895 saw leading anarchists Sébastien Faure and Louise Michel publish *Le Libéraire* in France. (Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism* [London: Freedom Press, 1995], 75–6, 145, 162) By the end of the 19th century libertarian was used as an alternative for anarchist internationally. The right-wing appropriation of the term dates from the 1950s and, in wider society, from the 1970s. Given that property is at its root and, significantly, property always trumps liberty in that ideology, anarchists suggest a far more accurate term would be “propertarian” (See my “150 Years of Libertarian,” *Freedom* 69: 23–24 [2008]). We will use the term *libertarian* in its original, correct, usage as an alternative for anti-State socialist.

⁶ Brian Morris, *Kropotkin: The Politics of Community* (New York: Humanity Books, 2004), 13.

⁷ “Kropotkin’s Anarchist Communism,” *The Anarchist Past and Other Essays* (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2007), 114–5.

While not the first advocate of communist-anarchism, Kropotkin was instrumental in helping it to become the dominant anarchist theory of the late 19th century, a position it holds to this day. His works were spread across the globe, influencing the labour and anarchist movements in Europe, the Americas and Asia (particularly in Japan, Korea and China). As well as being the world's leading anarchist thinker for five decades, Kropotkin was an active anarchist militant who participated in the many debates within the movement over strategy and tactics. He consistently advocated a vision of socialism from below, built by the working class managing their own struggles:

Workmen's organisations are the real force capable of accomplishing the social revolution – after the awakening of the proletariat has been accomplished, first by individual action, then by collective action, by strikes and revolts extending more and more; and where workmen's organisations have not allowed themselves to be dominated by the gentlemen who advocate 'the conquest of political power', but have continued to walk hand in hand with anarchists – as they have done in Spain – they have obtained, on the one hand, immediate results (an eight-hour day in certain trades in Catalonia), and on the other have made good propaganda for the social revolution – the one to come, not from the efforts of those highly-placed gentlemen, but from below, from workmen's organisations.⁸

His anarchism was built upon the awareness that the worker "claims his share in the riches he produces; he claims his share in the management of production; and he claims not only some additional well-being, but also his full rights in the higher enjoyment of science and art."⁹ His goal was to produce a society fit for humans to live in, prosper and fully develop their potential rather than one marked by classes and hierarchies within which most people simply survive. This vision of self-liberation of the oppressed is reflected in the strategies he advocated (direct action and revolutionary unionism), his vision of revolution (mass action to expropriate capital and destroy the state) as well as his sketches of a free society (created and managed from below by the people themselves, directly) and is expressed in numerous articles for the anarchist press.

Unfortunately, although critically important in getting a clear understanding of Kropotkin's politics, most of these writings are unknown.¹⁰ The most easily available of his texts are those that are very general and theoretical, *not* those dealing with the concrete political and strategic issues facing the anarchist movement at the time. This means that he far too often gets cast as a visionary or as a theorist rather than as an active anarchist militant actively engaged in the issues of the day, grappling with challenges facing the workers' movement and anarchist strategies within and outwith it to produce social transformation.

So in order to get a better grasp of Kropotkin's ideas, we need to look at the articles he wrote for the libertarian press, which he himself stated "are more expressive of my anarchist ideas."¹¹ While he mentions in passing anarchist advocacy of direct action, economic class war and revolutionary

⁸ quoted in G. Woodcock and I. Avakumovic, *The Anarchist Prince: a biographical study of Peter Kropotkin* (London: Boardman, 1950), 294–5.

⁹ "Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles," *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings* (New York: Dover Press, 2002), Roger N. Baldwin (ed.), 48–49.

¹⁰ The essential work on this aspect of Kropotkin's ideas is Caroline Cahm's excellent *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹¹ quoted in Walter, *The Anarchist Past and other essays*, 112.

unionism in his general introductions to libertarian ideas, it is his articles in anarchist newspapers which are more focused on these practical matters. As he acknowledged in one polemic over syndicalism in 1907, “I now ask myself if it would not be useful to make a selection of these articles” on the labour movement “and publish them in a volume” for if he had then it would show that he along with other anarchists had “always believed that the working class movement – organised in each trade for the *direct conflict* with Capital (today in France it is called Syndicalism and ‘direct action’) constitutes true strength, and is capable of *leading up* to the Social Revolution and *realising* it.”¹²

This anthology seeks to show the importance Kropotkin placed on the workers’ movement both as a fertile area for anarchist propaganda and as a means of creating libertarian communism. It seeks to challenge the all-too-common notion that he was a dreamer, presenting enticing visions of a better world but with no idea how to reach it. In reality, he was keenly aware of the need to understand capitalism and the state, to participate in the oppositional movements and struggles within it and to learn the lessons of previous revolutions to ensure the success of the next one.

To do so will show why Kropotkin’s influence was so great and the impact he had on the development of anarchism. It aims to combine his better-known theoretical works with the less well-known articles he wrote to influence the anarchist and workers’ movements, showing how he built upon and developed the libertarian ideas previously championed by Proudhon and Bakunin. These ideas, such as anti-statism, anti-capitalism, self-management, possession, socialisation, communal-economic federalism, decentralisation, working class self-emancipation, and so forth, are as important today as they were in his time. It aims to allow a new generation of radicals to gain an understanding of Kropotkin’s libertarian communism in order to develop it for the struggles we face today.

Anarchism before Kropotkin

Just as anarchism did not spring into existence, Minerva-like, in 1840 with the publication of Proudhon’s *What is Property?*, so Kropotkin’s ideas grew and developed over time, building upon workers’ struggles and the legacies of previous libertarian thinkers. When he became an anarchist, he was part of a movement which, influenced by Proudhon and Bakunin, had experienced both the joy and crushing defeat of the Paris Commune as well as the struggles within the International Working Men’s Association (IWMA) over political action and the so-called workers’ State.

In order to understand Kropotkin’s ideas and his contributions to the commonwealth of ideas which is anarchism, we first need to sketch their political context. While Kropotkin, particularly in his later works like the article on Anarchism for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, presented anarchism as something which has existed as long as hierarchical authority has, anarchism is better understood as being a specific socio-economic theory and movement which was born in the nineteenth century. Before 1840, no libertarian theory was called “anarchism” nor was there

¹² “Anarchists and Trade Unions,” *Freedom*, June, 1907.

any popular movement termed “anarchist” by its members (many had been called this by their governmental and wealthy opponents as an insult¹³).

This does not mean that anarchistic theories and movements did not exist – they did, but they only became retrospectively called anarchist once the anarchist movement discovered them. This can be seen from William Godwin, whom Kropotkin suggested had “stated in 1793 in a quite definite form the political and economic principle of Anarchism” and so was “the first theoriser of Socialism without government – that is to say, of Anarchism.”¹⁴ However, Godwin never used the term anarchism, and he was only rediscovered (along with Max Stirner) by anarchists in the 1890s. His ideas had no direct influence on anarchism, which developed independently after his death in 1836.

Therefore, regardless of the merit of the ideas of Godwin and Stirner, it would be anachronistic to discuss them when sketching anarchism before Kropotkin joined the movement. We therefore start with Proudhon’s reformist anarchism before discussing Bakunin’s contribution to revolutionary anarchism. The latter is particularly important, given that it was in the IWMA that many of the strategies normally associated with anarchism (union organising and struggle, social revolution, etc.) first developed: “Within these federations [of the IMWA] developed... what may be described as *modern anarchism*.”¹⁵ However, as will be seen, Proudhon’s influence in the IWMA was significant, and many of the ideas of revolutionary anarchism have their roots in his reformist anarchism.

This placing anarchism within a historical context does not mean, however, that it is the product of a few gifted individuals. While thinkers like Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin helped to develop anarchist ideas, anarchism itself “originated in everyday struggles” and “the Anarchist movement was renewed each time it received an impression from some great practical lesson: it derived its origin from the teachings of life itself.”¹⁶ Proudhon developed his ideas in the context of the rise of the French workers’ movement and its demands for self-managed workplace associations to replace wage-labour as well as the 1848 revolution.¹⁷ Bakunin, likewise, contributed to anarchism by taking up ideas already expressed within the IWMA by workers across Europe.

Little wonder, then, that Kropotkin stressed that “Anarchism had its origins in the same creative, constructive activity of the masses which has worked out in times past all the social institutions of mankind – and in the revolts... against the representatives of force, external to these social institutions, who had laid their hands on these institutions and used them for their own advantage.” In this sense “from all times there have been Anarchists and Statists” but “Anarchy was brought forth by the same critical and revolutionary protest which gave birth to Socialism in general.” Anarchism, unlike other forms of socialism, “lifted its sacrilegious arm, not only

¹³ So we find a supporter of Cromwell complaining about “Switzerizing Anarchists” during the English Revolution (George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* [Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986], 2nd Edition, 41) while Brissot dismissed the extreme radicals as “anarchists” during the French Revolution (*The Great French Revolution, 1789–1793* [London: Orbach and Chambers Ltd, 1971] 353).

¹⁴ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” *Environment and Evolution* (Montreal/New York: Black Rose, 1995), 62, 26.

¹⁵ “Anarchism,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 294.

¹⁶ “Modern Science and Anarchism”, 58, 57.

¹⁷ There was “close similarity between the associational ideal of Proudhon ... and the program of the Lyon Mutualists” and “it is likely that Proudhon was able to articulate his positive program more coherently because of the example of the silk workers of Lyon. The socialist ideal that he championed was already being realised, to a certain extent, by such workers.” (K. Steven Vincent, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Rise of French Republican Socialism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984], 164).

against Capitalism, but also against these pillars of Capitalism: Law, Authority, and the State.” All anarchist writers did was to “work out a general expression” of anarchism’s “principles, and the theoretical and scientific basis of its teachings.”¹⁸

The Birth of Anarchism: Proudhon and Mutualism

Anarchism as a named socio-economic theory and movement starts with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809–1865), a working-class French writer who was one of the most influential socialist thinkers of his time. His works defined anarchism as a form of libertarian (or anti-state) socialism with a goal of a federation of self-managed workplace and self-governing communities.

Proudhon ensured his fame with his seminal 1840 work *What is Property?* which, as well providing the enduring radical slogan “property is theft,” saw him proclaim: “I am an anarchist.” This book analysed the justifications for property, turning them against the institution, and concluded “that those who do not possess to-day are proprietors by the same title as those who do possess; but, instead of inferring therefrom that property should be shared by all, I demand, in the name of general security, its entire abolition.”¹⁹

Property, Proudhon argued, “violates equality by the rights of exclusion and increase, and freedom by despotism.” It has “perfect identity with theft” and the worker “has sold and surrendered his liberty” to the proprietor who exploits the workers by appropriating their “collective force.” Anarchy was “the absence of a master, of a sovereign,” while the proprietor was “synonymous” with the “sovereign,” for he “imposes his will as law, and suffers neither contradiction nor control.” Thus “property is despotism” as “each proprietor is sovereign lord within the sphere of his property” and so freedom and property were incompatible. Property had to be socialised, with “accumulated capital being social property” and the land “a common thing.” He also advocated industrial democracy: “every industry needs... leaders, instructors, superintendents... they must be chosen from the workers by the workers themselves.”²⁰

He developed these ideas in his 1846 *System of Economic Contradictions*. This analysed the contradictory nature of capitalism. For example, while machinery “promised us an increase of wealth” and “liberty” it also produced “an increase of poverty” and “brought us slavery” – having “degraded the worker by giving him a master, [it] completes his degeneracy by reducing him from the rank of artisan to that of unskilled labourer.” Under capitalism, machines “make the chains of serfdom heavier” and “deepen the abyss which separates the class that commands and enjoys from the class that obeys and suffers.”²¹

Under capitalism workers have “sold their arms and parted with their liberty” to the boss and so “[u]nder the regime of property, the surplus of labour, essentially collective, passes entirely,

¹⁸ “Modern Science and Anarchism”, 19, 16, 19, 57.

¹⁹ *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* (Edinburgh/Oakland/Baltimore: AK Press, 2011), Iain McKay (ed.), 87, 133, 91.

²⁰ *Property is Theft!*, 132, 117, 134, 135, 133, 135, 118, 105, 119. By “collective force” Proudhon meant the combined power of workers co-operating together. As the employer pays nothing for this extra labour-power produced by collective activity and co-operation, workers are exploited by capital: “A force of one thousand men working twenty days has been paid the same wages that one would be paid for working fifty-five years; but this force of one thousand has done in twenty days what a single man could not have accomplished, though he had laboured for a million centuries. Is the exchange an equitable one? Once more, no; when you have paid all the individual forces, the collective force still remains to be paid” (117).

²¹ *Property is Theft!*, 190, 192, 195.

like the revenue, to the proprietor.” However, “[b]y virtue of the principle of collective force, workers are the equals and associates of their leaders” and so “that association may be real, he who participates in it must do so” as “an active factor” with “a deliberative voice in the council” based on “equality.” This implied socialisation of property as workers must “straightway enjoy the rights and prerogatives of associates and even managers” when they join a workplace. Recognising that the “present form” of organising labour “is inadequate and transitory,” he urged “a solution based upon equality, – in other words, the organisation of labour, which involves the negation of political economy and the end of property.”²² As he summarised two years later:

under universal association, ownership of the land and of the instruments of labour is *social* ownership... We want the mines, canals, railways handed over to democratically organised workers’ associations... We want these associations to be models for agriculture, industry and trade, the pioneering core of that vast federation of companies and societies woven into the common cloth of the democratic and social Republic.²³

His influential 1851 work, *General Idea of the Revolution*, saw him at his most radical: “No authority, no government, not even popular, that is the Revolution”; “Capitalist and landlord exploitation stopped everywhere.” The State was “established for the rich against the poor,” its laws simply “[s]pider webs for the rich and powerful, steel chains for the weak and poor, fishing nets in the hands of the Government.” Co-operatives would ensure “wage-labour abolished” due to “the immorality, tyranny and theft suffered” in capitalist firms, which “plunder the bodies and souls of the wage-workers” and are “an outrage upon human dignity and personality.” Instead the “industry to be carried on, the work to be accomplished, are the common and undivided property of all those who take part therein.” Land and housing would “revert” to “the commune” with “repairs, management, and upkeep of buildings, as well as for new constructions” being organised by communes and “building workers’ associations.”²⁴ This would produce a federal system:

Unless democracy is a fraud, and the sovereignty of the People a joke, it must be admitted that each citizen in the sphere of his industry, each municipal, district or provincial council within its own territory, is the only natural and legitimate representative of the Sovereign.²⁵

Proudhon’s vision of a free economy was based on workers’ self-management of production with “the exchange of produce among working men’s associations by means of labour-cheques issued by the National Bank.”²⁶ Socially, he advocated a system of communal federalism as only

²² *Property is Theft!*, 212, 253, 77, 215, 213, 202, 170.

²³ *Property is Theft!*, 377–8. “Proudhon was not hostile to large industry. Clearly, he objected to many aspects of what these large enterprises had introduced into society... But he was not opposed in principle to large-scale production. What he desired was to humanise such production, to socialise it so that the worker would not be the mere appendage to a machine. Such a humanisation of large industries would result... from the introduction of strong workers’ associations. These associations would enable the workers to determine jointly by election how the enterprise was to be directed and operated on a day-to-day basis” (Vincent, 156).

²⁴ *Property is Theft!*, 568, 596, 562, 571, 596, 584, 578, 576.

²⁵ *Property is Theft!*, 595.

²⁶ Kropotkin, *The Coming Revival of Socialism* (London: Freedom Press, 1904), 9.

this ensured “not an abstract sovereignty of the people, as in the Constitution of 1793 and subsequent constitutions, or as in Rousseau’s Social Contract, but an effective sovereignty of the working, reigning, governing masses... how could it be otherwise if they are in charge of the whole economic system including labour, capital, credit, property and wealth?”²⁷ An *agricultural-industrial federation* would “shield the citizens” of the federated communes from “capitalist exploitation as much from the inside as from the outside” and stop “the political decay of the masses, economic serfdom or wage-labour, in a word, the inequality of conditions and fortunes.” This was necessary as “political right must have the buttress of economic right.”²⁸

Federation was based on mandating and recalling delegates for “we can follow [our deputies] step by step” and “make them transmit our arguments and our documents; we shall indicate our will to them, and when we are discontented, we will revoke them.” Thus “the imperative mandate, permanent revocability, are the most immediate, undeniable, consequences of the electoral principle. It is the inevitable program of all democracy.” He also urged “the National Assembly, through organisation of its committees, to exercise executive power, just the way it exercises legislative power through its joint deliberations and votes.”²⁹ These ideas, it must be noted, were applied during the Paris Commune and were praised by Karl Marx in *The Civil War in France*.³⁰ As anarchist James Guillaume argued at the time, “the Paris Revolution is federalist... in the sense given it years ago by the great socialist, Proudhon.” It is “above all the negation of the nation and the State.”³¹

To achieve these goals Proudhon opposed revolution in favour of reform. He saw mutual banking (co-operative credit) as the means by which labour would organise and emancipate itself, arguing it was “the organisation of labour’s greatest asset” and would lead to the “spontaneous, popular formation of groups, workshops or workers’ associations.”³² Proudhon did not abstractly compare an ideal system to the current one, arguing against such speculation by the Utopian Socialists. Rather than seeking to invent another perfect community or social panacea, he urged radicals to analyse, understand, and so transcend capitalism by seeing what tendencies within it point beyond it:

It is important, then, that we should resume the study of economic facts and practices, discover their meaning, and formulate their philosophy. Until this is done, no knowledge of social progress can be acquired, no reform attempted. The error of socialism has consisted hitherto in perpetuating religious reverie by launching forward into a fantastic future instead of seizing the reality which is crushing it.³³

He stressed that radicals had to be forward looking rather than seeking to recreate past glories, denouncing “this queer preoccupation which, in time of revolution, bedazzles the most steadfast

²⁷ *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (London: MacMillan, 1969), Stewart Edwards (ed.), 116–7.

²⁸ *Property is Theft!*, 711–2, 709.

²⁹ *Property is Theft!*, 273, 378.

³⁰ It is ironic to see Lenin asserting that anarchists “dismissed the question of political forms altogether” while repeating Proudhon’s ideas on mandated and recallable delegates and the fusion of executive and legislative functions as “the form... under which the economic emancipation of labour can take place”! (“The State and Revolution,” *Collected Works* 25: 431–2) To be fair to Lenin, Marx did not mention that these ideas were originally raised by someone whom he had spent considerable time attacking, often in extremely dishonest ways (see my introduction to *Property is Theft!*).

³¹ *The Paris Commune of 1871: The View From the Left* (London: Cape, 1972), Eugene Schulkind (ed.), 191.

³² *Property is Theft!*, 296, 500.

³³ *System of Economical Contradictions*, 128.

minds, and, when their burning aspirations carry them forward into the future, has them constantly harking back to the past... Could [society] not turn its gaze in the direction in which it is going?"³⁴ This was combined with a strong advocacy of working class self-emancipation:

Workers, labourers, men of the people, whoever you may be, the initiative of reform is yours. It is you who will accomplish that synthesis of social composition which will be the masterpiece of creation, and you alone can accomplish it.³⁵

Social reform had to be done outside of the State for "the problem of association consists in organising... the producers, and by this organisation subjecting capital and subordinating power. Such is the war that you have to sustain: a war of labour against capital; a war of liberty against authority; a war of the producer against the non-producer; a war of equality against privilege." He rejected the idea the State could be captured for social change, arguing that it "finds itself inevitably enchained to capital and directed against the proletariat" and so "it is of no use to change the holders of power or introduce some variation into its workings: an agricultural and industrial combination must be found by means of which power, today the ruler of society, shall become its slave." During the 1848 revolution he "propose[d] that a provisional committee be set up... amongst the workers... in opposition to the bourgeois representatives," so that "a new society be founded in the centre of the old society" for "the government can do nothing for you. But you can do everything for yourselves." This "organisation of popular societies was the pivot of democracy, the cornerstone of republican order" and would "rip the nails and teeth off State power and hand over the government's public force to the citizens."³⁶

These ideas would be expounded and developed by subsequent anarchists, not least Kropotkin, who highly respected Proudhon as "undoubtedly one of the greatest writers who have ever dealt with economical questions," a writer who "was "one of the most suggestive – maybe *the* most suggestive – amongst those writers who lead men to think for themselves. He has covered in his works nearly the whole field of human enterprise: economics, politics, art, war; and everywhere he has dealt with the subject in the most suggestive way."³⁷ Moreover, "the point of view of Proudhon" was "the only one which, in my opinion, was really scientific"³⁸ and the Frenchman was "the writer whom I like best of all those who wrote about the social question."³⁹ At "the bottom of" Proudhon's *General Idea of the Revolution* "lay a deeply *practical* idea – that of Anarchy."⁴⁰

This does not mean Kropotkin was uncritical of the French anarchist's ideas, specifically rejecting his reformism and ideas on payment by labour done, concluding that while as "a critic he

³⁴ *Property is Theft!*, 308.

³⁵ quoted in George Woodcock, *Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Biography* (Montréal: Black Rose, 1987), 64.

³⁶ *Property is Theft!*, 225–6, 321–2, 407. Proudhon, unlike later anarchists, did not view the *labour movement* as the basis for this "combination." He opposed strikes: "It is not by such methods that the workers will attain to wealth and – what is a thousand times more precious than wealth – liberty." (*System of Economical Contradictions* [Boston: Benjamin Tucker, 1888], 149)

³⁷ "Communist-Anarchism," *Act For Yourselves: Articles from FREEDOM 1886–1907* (London: Freedom Press, 1988), 97.

³⁸ "Edward Bellamy," *Freedom*, July 1898.

³⁹ quoted in *Freedom*, March-April, 1925.

⁴⁰ "Modern Science and Anarchism," 75.

is great, as a constructor weak.”⁴¹ Suffice it to say, this did not stop Kropotkin repeatedly noting Proudhon’s importance as a thinker and his contributions to anarchism.

Libertarians in the First International

Proudhon had infused anarchism with most of its basic concepts – anti-statism, anti-capitalism, federalism, workers’ self-management – as well as a clear focus on the working classes as the agents of social transformation premised on their self-organisation and self-emancipation, albeit within a reformist strategy. After his death in January 1865, Proudhon’s followers applied his ideas within the nascent labour movement across Europe but particularly in France. So when the French mutualists helped found the IWMA, libertarian ideas were set for a new evolution based on the requirements of this new environment – trade unions. This would give birth to *revolutionary* anarchism, initially collectivist and then communist.

It is necessary to stress that the IWMA was *not* created by Marx but by French and British trade unionists.⁴² Sadly, the Marx-centric perspective is common within radical circles, and so the IWMA itself is marginalised. Combined with an all-too-frequent ignorance of Proudhon’s ideas, this means that we do not know much about its debates, and what we think we know is often wrong.

This can be seen from the so-called “collectivism” debates which climaxed at the Basel Congress of 1869 with the success of a collectivist motion which was opposed by some of the French Internationalists. This is usually portrayed as the victory of Marxism over Proudhon’s ideas, but in reality, it was a debate on the specific issue of agricultural collectivisation:

The endorsement of collectivism by the International at the Basel Congress might appear to be a rejection of the French position on co-operatives. Actually, it was not, for collectivism as it was defined by its proponents meant simply the end of private ownership of agricultural land. Lumped together with this was usually the demand for common ownership of mines and railways.⁴³

Thus it was “not a debate over co-operative production in favour of some other model” but rather concerned its extension to agriculture. At the Geneva Congress of 1866 the French Internationalists usually labelled Proudhonists “persuaded the Congress to agree by unanimous vote that there was a higher goal – the suppression of ‘salaried status’ [i.e., wage-labour] – which... could be done only through co-operatives.” At the Lausanne Congress of 1867, they “acknowledged the necessity of public ownership of canals, roads, and mines” and there was “unanimous accord” on public ownership of “the means of transportation and exchange of goods.”⁴⁴ This was Proudhon’s position as well and the resolution on collectivisation had a remarkably Proudhonian tone, with it urging the collectivisation of roads, canals, railways, mines, quarries, collieries and forests, and these to be “ceded to ‘workers’ companies’ which would guarantee the ‘mutual rights’ of workers and would sell their goods or services at cost.” The land would “be turned

⁴¹ “Communist-Anarchism,” *Act For Yourself*, 97.

⁴² Marx fortuitously turned up to the founding meeting in 1864 after being invited by some German socialist exiles.

⁴³ Julian P. W. Archer, *The First International in France, 1864–1872: Its Origins, Theories, and Impact* (Lanham/Oxford: University Press of America, Inc, 1997), xxi.

⁴⁴ Archer, xxi, 69.

over to ‘agricultural companies’ (i.e., agricultural workers) with the same guarantees as those required of the ‘workers’ companies.’”⁴⁵ De Paepe himself clarified the issue: “Collective property would belong to society as a whole, but would be conceded to associations of workers. The State would be no more than a federation of various groups of workers.”⁴⁶ As Proudhon had advocated workers’ companies to run publicly owned industries as well as arguing the land was common property and be transferred to communes, the resolution was not the rejection of Proudhon’s ideas that many assume. In fact, it can be considered a logical fusion of his arguments on land ownership and workers’ associations. Given that the main leader of the “collectivist” position was César De Paepe, a self-proclaimed mutualist, this debate was fundamentally one amongst followers of Proudhon, not between mutualists and Marxists. Indeed, the 1869 resolution was consistent with Proudhon’s ideas meaning that “in the congresses of the First International the libertarian idea of self-management prevailed over the statist concept.”⁴⁷

It was also within the International that libertarians applied Proudhon’s ideas on “an agricultural and industrial combination” in the labour movement. Here we discover the syndicalist idea of unions as the means of both fighting capitalism and replacing it being raised.⁴⁸ They were first raised in the International by delegates from the Belgium section at the Brussels conference in 1868. Unions were for “the necessities of the present, but also the future social order,” the “embryos of the great workers’ companies which will one day replace the capitalist companies with their thousands of wage-earners, at least in all industries in which collective force is used and there is no middle way between wage slavery and association.” The “productive societies arising from the trades unions will embrace whole industries... thus forming a NEW CORPORATION” which would “be organised equitably, founded on mutuality and justice and open to all.”⁴⁹

The then secretary of the Belgium federation, Eugène Hins, wrote an article on these ideas in its newspaper *L’Internationale* which discussed how the current *Conseil fédéral* (federal council) made up of delegates from the *sociétés de résistance* (resistance societies) would co-ordinate the activities of the trades as well as fixing cost and sale prices (and so wages). The *sociétés de résistance* themselves would organise production. The International’s *sections* would include all workers and would reflect matters of general concern at a local level based on a *Comité administratif* (administrative council). Consumer co-operatives would function as communal shops (*bazars communaux*) and control the distribution of goods at cost-price (i.e., on a non-profit basis). General insurance funds would exist for old age, sickness and life-insurance based on the *caisses de secours mutuel et de prévoyance* (mutual aid and contingency funds). In this way “the economic and political organisations of the working classes were to remain outside the bourgeois framework, so that it could supersede the bourgeois institutions and power in the long run.”⁵⁰

At the Basle Congress of the IWMA this was repeated: “Trade Unions will continue to exist after the suppression of the wage system... they will be the organisation of labour.”⁵¹ This “mode of organisation leads to the labour representation of the future” as “wage slavery” is “replaced

⁴⁵ Archer, 128.

⁴⁶ quoted in Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 47.

⁴⁷ Guérin, *Anarchism*, 47.

⁴⁸ Rudolf Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2004), 46–7, 54.

⁴⁹ *Revolution from 1789 to 1906* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1962), P.W. Postgate (ed.), 393–4.

⁵⁰ D.E. Devreese, “An Inquiry Into the Causes and Nature of Organisation: Some Observations on the International Working Men’s Association, 1864-1872/1876,” *Internationalism in the Labour Movement 1830–1940* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), Frits van Holthoon and Marcel van der Linden (eds.), 1: 293–5.

⁵¹ *Revolution from 1789 to 1906*, 394.

by the free federation of free producers” while the organisation of trade unions “on the basis of town or country... leads to the commune of the future”: “Government is replaced by the assembled councils of the trade bodies, and by a committee of their respective delegates.”⁵²

This vision of a future economic regime based on federations of workers’ associations echoed Proudhon’s vision – right down to the words used! It reflected both current trade union organisation and the Frenchman’s ideas as expressed in, for example, *System of Economic Contradictions* and *On the Political Capacity of the Working Classes*, and was a common idea within the libertarian wing of the International:

As early as the 1860’s and 1870’s, the followers of Proudhon and Bakunin in the First International were proposing the formation of workers’ councils designed both as a weapon of class struggle against capitalists and as the structural basis of the future libertarian society.⁵³

So we see the Barcelona Internationalist paper *La Federación* argue, in November 1869, that the International “contains within itself the seeds of social regeneration... it holds the embryo of all future institutions.”⁵⁴ The next year saw French left-mutualist (and future Commune martyr) Eugène Varlin argue that unions “form the natural elements of the social edifice of the future; it is they who can be easily transformed into producers associations; it is they who can make the social ingredients and the organisation of production work.”⁵⁵

Bakunin and Revolutionary Anarchism

So by 1869 a clear collectivist current which advocated common ownership of both land and capital as well as embracing trade unions as both *the* means of struggle and the structure of a free society had developed in the IWMA. The most famous champion of these ideas was Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876).

Bakunin was, like Kropotkin, a Russian aristocrat who renounced his title to join the struggle against autocracy and became an anarchist. Embracing Hegelian philosophy as a student, Bakunin became a left-republican and spent time in Paris discussing ideas with his friend Proudhon. A man of action, he enthusiastically participated in the 1848 revolutions but was arrested and sent back to Tsarist Russia to be imprisoned in solitary confinement in the Peter-and-Paul prison. After pressure from his family, the Tsar finally reduced his sentence to exile in Siberia, from which he escaped to Europe. There he developed his ideas towards revolutionary anarchism and created the Alliance of Social Democracy to spread them. Failing to convince the League for Peace and Freedom to embrace libertarian socialism, he joined the IWMA in July 1868.

As Kropotkin summarised, Bakunin

found the proper surroundings and ground for his revolutionary agitation in the International Working Men’s Association. Here he saw masses of workers of all nations joining hands across frontiers, and striving to become strong enough in their Unions to throw off the yoke of Capitalism. And at once he understood what was the chief stronghold the workers had to storm, in

⁵² *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2005), Daniel Guérin (ed.), 218.

⁵³ Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2005), 73.

⁵⁴ quoted in Nettlau, 121.

⁵⁵ quoted in Archer, 196.

order to be successful in their struggle against Capital – *the State*... “*Destroy the State!*” became the war-cry ... “*Down with Capitalism and down with the State!*”⁵⁶

He took up and expanded upon the ideas already being expressed in the libertarian-wing of the IWMA, arguing that socialism had to be based on a federation of workers’ councils:

the federative Alliance of all working men’s associations... will constitute the Commune... by the creation of a Revolutionary Communal Council composed of one or two delegates... vested with plenary but accountable and removable mandates... all provinces, communes and associations... [would send] their representatives to an agreed meeting place... vested with similar mandates to constitute the federation of insurgent associations, communes and provinces... to organise a revolutionary force capable of defeating reaction... it is the very fact of the expansion and organisation of the revolution for the purpose of self-defence among the insurgent areas that will bring about the triumph of the revolution... Since revolution everywhere must be created by the people, and supreme control must always belong to the people organised in a free federation of agricultural and industrial associations... organised from the bottom upwards by means of revolutionary delegation.⁵⁷

Anarchists could only achieve their goal “by the development and organisation... of the social (and, by consequence, anti-political) power of the working masses as much in the towns as in the countryside.”⁵⁸ This meant that workers had to organise themselves at the point of production:

Toilers, count no longer on anyone but yourselves. Do not demoralise and paralyse your growing strength by being duped into alliances with bourgeois Radicalism... Abstain from all participation in bourgeois Radicalism and organise outside of it the forces of the proletariat. The bases of this organisation are... the workshops and the federation of workshops, the creation of fighting funds, instruments of struggle against the bourgeoisie, and their federation, not only national, but international.⁵⁹

A “living, powerful, socialist movement” can “be made a reality only by the awakened revolutionary consciousness, the collective will, and the organisation of the working masses themselves.”⁶⁰ The International, therefore, had to “expand and organise itself... so that when the Revolution... breaks out, there will be... a serious international organisation of workers’ associations... capable of replacing this departing world of States.”⁶¹ Therefore the “organisation of the trade sections, their federation in the International, and their representation by Chambers of Labour... bear in themselves the living germs of *the social order*, which is to replace the bourgeois world. They are creating not only the ideas but also the facts of the future itself.”⁶²

The “war between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie is unavoidable” as there was “an irreconcilable antagonism which results inevitably from their respective stations in life” and would only

⁵⁶ “Letter to the Bakunin Centenary Celebration,” *Freedom*, June 1914.

⁵⁷ *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), Arthur Lehning (ed.), 170–2.

⁵⁸ *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, 197–8.

⁵⁹ quoted in Kenafick, 120–1.

⁶⁰ *Bakunin on Anarchism* 2nd Edition (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), Sam Dolgoff (ed.), 212.

⁶¹ *The Basic Bakunin* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), Robert M. Cutler (ed.), 110.

⁶² *Bakunin on Anarchism* 2nd Edition (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), Sam Dolgoff (ed.), 255.

end with the “abolition of the bourgeoisie as a distinct class.” In order for the worker to “become strong” he “must unite” with other workers in “the union of all local and national workers’ associations into a world-wide association, *the great International Working-Men’s Association*.” It was only “through practice and collective experience” and “the progressive expansion and development of the economic struggle” that the worker would “recognise his true enemies: the privileged classes, including the clergy, the bourgeoisie, and the nobility; and the State, which exists only to safeguard all the privileges of those classes.” There was “but a single path, that of *emancipation through practical action*” which “has only one meaning. It means workers’ solidarity in their struggle against the bosses. It means *trades-unions, organisation, and the federation of resistance funds*.”⁶³

Strikes were “the beginnings of the social war of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie... Strikes are a valuable instrument from two points of view. Firstly, they electrify the masses... awaken in them the feeling of the deep antagonism which exists between their interests and those of the bourgeoisie... secondly they help immensely to provoke and establish between the workers of all trades, localities and countries the consciousness and very fact of solidarity: a twofold action, both negative and positive, which tends to constitute directly the new world of the proletariat, opposing it almost in an absolute way to the bourgeois world.”⁶⁴ In addition, as “strikes spread from one place to another, they come close to turning into a general strike. And with the ideas of emancipation that now hold sway over the proletariat, a general strike can result only in a great cataclysm which forces society to shed its old skin.”⁶⁵

Thus the socialist movement must be based on workplace organisation and struggles as strikes “create, organise, and form a workers’ army, an army which is bound to break down the power of the bourgeoisie and the State, and lay the ground for a new world.” However, this did not imply ignoring political issues or struggles. Anarchism, Bakunin stressed, “does not reject politics generally. It will certainly be forced to involve itself insofar as it will be forced to struggle against the bourgeois class. It only rejects bourgeois politics” as it “establishes the predatory domination of the bourgeoisie.”⁶⁶ This needed to be fought and to “create a people’s force capable of crushing the military and civil force of the State, it is necessary to organise the proletariat”⁶⁷ as revolution requires “an insurrection of all the people and the voluntary organisation of the workers from below upward.”⁶⁸

As well as union organisation, Bakunin also saw the need for anarchists to organise as anarchists to influence the class struggle. The Alliance of Social Democracy was “the necessary complement to the International. But the International and the Alliance, while having the same ultimate aims, perform different functions. The International endeavours to unify the working masses... regardless of nationality or religious and political beliefs, into one compact body: the Alliance, on the other hand, tries to give these masses a really revolutionary direction.” This did not mean that the Alliance was imposing a foreign theory onto the members of the unions, because the “programs of one and the other... differ only in the degree of their revolutionary develop-

⁶³ *The Basic Bakunin*, 97–103.

⁶⁴ quoted in Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872–1886*, 216–217

⁶⁵ *The Basic Bakunin*, 149–50.

⁶⁶ *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (New York: The Free Press, 1953), G.P. Maximov (ed.), 384–5, 313.

⁶⁷ quoted in K.J. Kenafick, *Michael Bakunin and Karl Marx* (Melbourne: A. Maller, 1948), 254.

⁶⁸ *Statism and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 179.

ment... The program of the Alliance represents the fullest unfolding of the International.”⁶⁹ The Alliance would work within popular organisations and “unleashes [the peoples’] will and gives wider opportunity for their self-determination and their social-economic organisation, which should be created by them alone from the bottom upwards.” It must “not in any circumstances... ever be their master... What is to be the chief aim and pursue of this organisation? *To help the people towards self-determination on the lines of the most complete equality and fullest human freedom in every direction, without the least interference from any sort of domination... that is without any sort of government control.*”⁷⁰

With these ideas Bakunin inevitably came into conflict with Marx. While the latter wished the International to become a political party and participate in elections (“political action”), Bakunin rejected this in favour of economic direct action by unions, predicted that when “common workers” are sent “to Legislative Assemblies” the result is that the “worker-deputies, transplanted into a bourgeois environment, into an atmosphere of purely bourgeois ideas, will in fact cease to be workers and, becoming Statesmen, they will become bourgeois... For men do not make their situations; on the contrary, men are made by them.”⁷¹ This analysis was confirmed by the rise of reformism within the ranks of Marxist Social Democracy.

This, however, reflected a deeper issue, namely on whether social transformation should proceed from above (by a few leaders) or from below (by the masses). A socialist State, whether created by elections or revolution, would not lead to liberation. The State, stressed Bakunin, “is the government from above downwards... by one or another minority.” It has “always been the patrimony of some privileged class” and “when all other classes have exhausted themselves” it “becomes the patrimony of the bureaucratic class.” The Marxist State “will not content itself with administering and governing the masses politically” it will “also administer the masses economically, concentrating in the hands of the State the production and distribution of wealth.” This will result in “a new class, a new hierarchy” which would exploit the masses as the State was “the sole proprietor” and “the only banker, capitalist, organiser, and director of all national labour, and the distributor of all its products.”⁷² This also was confirmed by the Bolshevik regime under Lenin.⁷³

This happens because “every State, even the pseudo-People’s State concocted by Mr. Marx, is in essence only a machine ruling the masses from above, through a privileged minority of conceited intellectuals who imagine that they know what the people need and want better than do the people themselves.”⁷⁴ Hence, Bakunin stressed, anarchists do “not accept, even in the process of revolutionary transition, either constituent assemblies, provisional governments or so-called revolutionary dictatorships; because we are convinced that revolution is only sincere, honest and real in the hands of the masses, and that when it is concentrated in those of a few ruling individuals it inevitably and immediately becomes reaction.”⁷⁵

⁶⁹ *Bakunin on Anarchism*, 157.

⁷⁰ *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, 191.

⁷¹ *The Basic Bakunin*, 108.

⁷² *Bakunin on Anarchism*, 317–8, 318, 217.

⁷³ See section H.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (Oakland/Edinburgh: AK Press, 2012) volume 2 for a discussion of the interplay of subjective (e.g., Bolshevik ideology) and objective factors (e.g., civil war, economic collapse, etc.) as well as how the former made the later worse.

⁷⁴ *Bakunin on Anarchism*, 338.

⁷⁵ *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, 237.

Thus, as Kropotkin suggested, the International was “essentially a working-men’s organisation, the workers understanding it as a labour movement and not as a political party.”⁷⁶ This was at the heart of the Bakunin-Marx conflict, a conflict which did not reflect personalities but rather different visions of the labour movement – the Marxists “endeavoured by means of all sorts of intrigues to transform the International Association, created for the purposes of *a direct struggle against capitalism*, into an arm of parliamentary politics.”⁷⁷ This struggle came to its head in 1872 and the Hague Congress, where gerrymandering by Marx and Engels ensured the expulsion of Bakunin and committed the International to “political action.”⁷⁸ The majority of the IWMA met at St. Imier in 1872 and urged “the proletarians of every land” to “establish solidarity of revolutionary action outside of all bourgeois politicking.” This “Organisation of Labour Resistance” created “a community of interests, trains [the proletariat] in collective living and prepares it for the supreme struggle.” The strike was “a precious weapon in the struggle” and “a product of the antagonism between labour and capital.” These “ordinary economic struggles” prepare “the proletariat for the great and final revolutionary conquest” which will destroy “all class difference.” The future socialist society would be created by the “proletariat itself, its trades bodies and the autonomous communes.”⁷⁹

Kropotkin embraced Bakunin’s position; for him, the IWMA was the classic example of what a genuine labour movement should be, namely “a vast organisation of trade unions, which it was intended to spread all over the world, and which would have carried on, with international support, the direct struggle of Labour against Capital.”⁸⁰ Within its libertarian wing “grew up then the young power which... took up the struggle for freedom in Europe and developed gradually into Communist Anarchism, with its ideal of economical and political equality, and its bold negation of the exploiting of man by Capital and State alike.”⁸¹

Anarchists, Kropotkin summarised, “do not seek to constitute, and invite the working men not to constitute, political parties in the parliaments. Accordingly, since the foundation of the International Working Men’s Association in 1864–1866, they have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital, without placing their faith in parliamentary legislation.”⁸²

Kropotkin’s ideas

Anarchism, then, has always been a form of libertarian socialism and opposed both State and capitalism. It sees the working class as the means of social transformation, for only those who were oppressed and exploited by capitalism and the State had an interest in freeing themselves from both. This was the theoretical context when Kropotkin joined the anarchist movement in

⁷⁶ *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Montreal/New York: Black Rose, 1989), 261.

⁷⁷ Kropotkin, “Bakunin,” *Freedom*, June-July 1905.

⁷⁸ “In its struggle against the collective power of the propertied classes the proletariat cannot act as a class except by constituting itself a political party, distinct from and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes... The conquest of political power has therefore become the great duty of the working class” (*Marx-Engels Collected Works* 23: 243).

⁷⁹ Robert Graham (Ed.), *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas* (Montréal/New York/London: Black Rose Books, 2005) 1:99–100.

⁸⁰ *The Coming Revival of Socialism*, 8.

⁸¹ “Bakunin,” *Freedom*, June-July 1905.

⁸² “Anarchism,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 287.

1872. By the time Kropotkin escaped from a Tsarist prison and went into exile in 1876, Bakunin was dead but the movement he was part of continued. Kropotkin contributed immensely to the further development of this rich commonwealth of ideas.

This can be seen in all aspects of Kropotkin's thought. Thus he defined anarchism as "the no-government system of socialism."⁸³ In this he, like Bakunin, followed Proudhon who stressed that "the capitalist principle" and the "governmental principle are one and the same principle" and so "the abolition of the exploitation of man by man and the abolition of government of man by man are one and the same formula." It is "to protect this exploitation of man by man that the State exists" and so anarchists are "simultaneously striving for the abolition of capital and of the State" for "if you do away with the former, you still have to do away with the latter, and *vice versa*."⁸⁴

Kropotkin (like Bakunin) also accepted most of Proudhon's fundamental principles such as workers' self-management of production, federalism, socialisation, anti-statism and anti-capitalism. He, like Bakunin, recognised the necessity of social revolution, rejecting Proudhon's reformism as well as his patriarchy in favour of a consistent libertarian egalitarianism. He took Bakunin's union based revolutionary anarchism and, like others in the IWMA, developed it towards an explicit acceptance of (libertarian) communism, the goal of distribution according to need rather than labour done.

In addition, Kropotkin applied his scientific training to anarchism. This meant gathering evidence and drawing conclusions from them, analysing capitalist society and discovering the tendencies within it that pointed to a future free society. Just as change had to come from below, from the actions of the people themselves, so revolutionary politics had to be based on an analysis of the facts and built upwards. While there is a tendency to portray him as someone pining for a past that never existed (such as idealising the Medieval Commune⁸⁵), the reality is different. Ironically, this is best seen by the very book often used to characterise him as backward-looking: *Fields, Factories and Workshops*. As becomes clear reading this work, his conclusions are based on a detailed analysis of industrial trends within all the major advanced capitalist economies of the time. Similarly with his arguments for communism and anarchism, which he supported with examples drawn from modern society. Thus he pointed to the federalism used within the European railways as evidence in favour of free agreement as well as examples of distribution according to need such as free roads, libraries, and so on.⁸⁶ He focused his analysis on *current* society:

We shall not construct a new society by looking backwards. We shall only do so by studying, as Proudhon has already advised, the *tendencies* of society today and so forecasting the society of tomorrow.

The only basis upon which it is possible to construct the society of the future is the *new* conceptions which germinate in men's minds. And these alone can give the

⁸³ "Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles," *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 46.

⁸⁴ *Property is Theft!*, 496, 535, 503, 506.

⁸⁵ Ignoring his explicit statements explaining how the modern Commune was *not* like the medieval one, Paul Avrich asserted "what Kropotkin yearned for was the decentralised society of medieval Europe, with a few up-to-date trappings." This "nostalgic desire for a simpler and richer life led him to idealise the autonomous social units of a bygone age"; machines placed "in small voluntary workshops" would "rescue human beings from the monotony and toil of large-scale capitalist enterprise" ("Kropotkin's Ethical Anarchism," *Anarchist Portraits* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988], 62–3).

⁸⁶ See, for example, "Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles."

revolutionary, aided by his revolutionary fire, the boldness of thought necessary for the success of the Revolution.⁸⁷

This applied to movements that arise *within* class society but in *opposition* to it. The “origin of the anarchist inception of society” lies in “the criticism... of the hierarchical organisations and the authoritarian conceptions of society” and “the analysis of the tendencies that are seen in the progressive movements of mankind.” Kropotkin discussed the various social institutions humanity had created to survive in the hostile environment of class society, institutions which “resist the encroachments upon their life and fortunes” by those “who endeavoured to establish their personal authority” over them. These took the form of “the primitive clan, the village community, the medieval guild” and the unions from which modern anarchism sprang: “the labour combinations... were an outcome of the same popular resistance to the growing power of the few – the capitalists in this case.”⁸⁸ This expressed itself during revolutions as well, when these popular organisations become strong enough to overthrow the current system and become the framework of a new one.

On Capitalism and the State

For anarchism capitalism is an exploitative, oppressive class-riddled economic system defended by a centralised, hierarchical State. Kropotkin echoed this analysis of Proudhon and Bakunin: “it is evident that in present-day society, divided as it is between masters and serfs, true liberty cannot exist; it will not exist so long as there are exploiters and slaves, government and governed.”⁸⁹

Modern society was based upon the “liberty to exploit human labour without any safeguard for the victims of such exploitation and the political power organised as to assure freedom of exploitation to the middle-class.”⁹⁰ Its political and economic aspects “are facts and conceptions which we cannot separate from each other. In the course of history these institutions have developed, supporting and reinforcing each other” and so they “are connected with each other – not as mere accidental co-incidences” but “by the links of cause and effect.”⁹¹ The two were interwoven, as “the *political* regime... is always an expression of the *economic* regime which exists at the heart of society.” This meant that regardless of how the State changes, it “continues to be shaped by the economic system, of which it is always the expression and, at the same time, the consecration and the sustaining force.”⁹²

Echoing Proudhon’s analysis of property as both theft (exploitation) and despotism (oppression), Kropotkin argued that under capitalism a worker was “forced to sell his work and his liberty to others who accumulate wealth by the labour of their serfs.”⁹³ Private property, as a result, meant that “individual freedom [has] remained, both in theory and in practice, more illusory than real” and that the “want of development of the personality (leading to herd-psychology) and the lack of individual creative power and initiative are certainly one of the chief defects of

⁸⁷ *Revolutionary Studies* (London: Office of the “Commonwealth,” 1892), 12.

⁸⁸ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 61.

⁸⁹ “Political Rights,” *Words of a Rebel* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1992), 43.

⁹⁰ *The Great French Revolution*, 10.

⁹¹ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 94.

⁹² “Representative Government,” *Words of a Rebel*, 118.

⁹³ “Expropriation,” *Words of a Rebel*, 208.

our time. Economical individualism has not kept its promise: it did not result in any striking development of individuality.”⁹⁴ This was for an obvious reason: “For the worker who *must sell* his labour, it is impossible to remain *free*, and it is precisely because it is impossible that we are anarchists and communists.”⁹⁵ Capitalism was rooted in exploitation and inequality:

The very essence of the present economic system is that the worker can never enjoy the well-being he has produced... Inevitably, industry is directed... not towards what is needed to satisfy the needs of all, but towards that which, at a given moment, brings in the greatest profit for a few. Of necessity, the abundance of some will be based on the poverty of others, and the straitened circumstances of the greater number will have to be maintained at all costs, that there may be hands to sell themselves for a part only of that which they are capable of producing; without which private accumulation of capital is impossible.⁹⁶

Private property in the means of production ensures that the worker “finds no acre to till, no machine to set in motion, unless he agrees to sell his labour for a sum inferior to its real value” and so “some part of the value of his produce will be unjustly taken by the employer.” Moreover, as production’s “only aim is to increase the profits of the capitalist” we have “continuous fluctuations of industry, the crisis coming periodically.”⁹⁷ Crisis was caused by over-production, that is “production that is above the purchasing power of the worker” which “remains fatally characteristic of the present capitalist production, because workers cannot buy with their salaries what they have produced and at the same time copiously nourish the swarm of idlers who live upon their work.”⁹⁸

Kropotkin also critiqued capitalist economics, arguing that it “has always confined itself to stating facts occurring in society, and justifying them in the interest of the dominant class... Having found [something] profitable to capitalists, it has set it up as a *principle*.”⁹⁹ He dismissed the “sophisms taught by economists, uttered more to confirm exploiters in their rights than to convert the exploited”¹⁰⁰ and recognised the role of economists as defenders of the class system:

Political Economy – that pseudo-science of the bourgeoisie – does not cease to give praise in every way to the benefits of individual property... [yet] the economists do not conclude, “The land to him who cultivates it.” On the contrary, they hasten to deduce from the situation, “The land to the lord who will get it cultivated by wage earners!”¹⁰¹

The State exists to defend this regime. It is “a society for mutual insurance between the landlord, the military commander, the judge, the priest, and later on the capitalist, in order to support

⁹⁴ *Ethics: Origin and Development* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), 27, 28.

⁹⁵ “Letter to Max Nettlau,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1970), Martin A. Miller (ed.), 305.

⁹⁶ “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 128.

⁹⁷ “Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 55, 69, 55.

⁹⁸ “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 127–128.

⁹⁹ “The Division of Labour,” *The Conquest of Bread* (Catania: Elephant Editions, 1985), 181.

¹⁰⁰ “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 126.

¹⁰¹ “Expropriation,” *Words of a Rebel*, 209–10.

each other's authority over the people, and for exploiting the poverty of the masses and getting rich themselves." Such was the "origin of the State; such was its history; and such is its present essence" and the "rich perfectly well know that if the machinery of the State ceased to protect them, their power over the labouring classes would be gone immediately."¹⁰² The "mission of all governments" is "to protect and maintain by force" the "privileges of the possessing classes."¹⁰³

A key part of this role has been State intervention to create and support capitalism. The rise of capitalism has always seen the State "tighten the screw for the worker" and "impose industrial serfdom." While preaching laissez-faire for itself, the bourgeoisie "was at pains not to sweep away... the power of the State over industry, over the factory serf."¹⁰⁴ This has continued to this day and, rhetoric notwithstanding, the State has always intervened to support capitalism:

while all Governments have given the capitalists and monopolists full liberty to enrich themselves with the underpaid labour of working men... they have *never, nowhere* given the working men the liberty of opposing that exploitation. Never has any Government applied the 'leave things alone' principle to the exploited masses. It reserved it for the exploiters only...

What, then, is the use of talking, with Marx, about the 'primary accumulation' – as if this 'push' given to the capitalists were a thing of the past?...

In short, nowhere has the system of 'non-intervention of the State' ever existed. Everywhere the State has been, and still is, the main pillar and the creator, direct and indirect, of Capitalism and its powers over the masses. Nowhere, since States have grown up, have the masses had the freedom of resisting the oppression by capitalists... The State has *always* interfered in the economic life in favour of the capitalist exploiter. It has always granted him protection in robbery, given aid and support for further enrichment. *And it could not be otherwise.* To do so was one of the functions – the chief mission – of the State.¹⁰⁵

This analysis applied to modern so-called democratic States as "representative democracy" was an "organ of capitalist domination."¹⁰⁶ This outcome is no accident. The State has evolved certain characteristics that ensure it. The State "not only includes the existence of a power situated above society, but also of a *territorial concentration* as well as the concentration *in the hands of a few of many functions in the life of societies.*" It "implies some new relationships between members of

¹⁰² "Modern Science and Anarchism," 94, 97.

¹⁰³ "Law and Authority," *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 214.

¹⁰⁴ *The State: Its Historic Role* (London: Freedom Press, 1987), 52–3.

¹⁰⁵ "Modern Science and Anarchism," 96–7. As can be seen Kropotkin took umbrage at Marx's account of "primitive accumulation" in volume 1 of *Capital* as it suggested that State intervention was an early and passed historical phase which had created capitalism. This produced an "erroneous division between the primary accumulation of capital and its present-day formation" and the "minimising of the role of the contemporary State in the process of capital accumulation" leads to "a harmful practical application" ("Western Europe," *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 221).

¹⁰⁶ "Representative Government," *Words of a Rebel*, 127. Even if, by some unlikely occurrence, the State *did* limit itself and refused to actively intervene in society (as desired by classical liberals like Herbert Spencer and modern proprietarians), this would be no great improvement as it left private hierarchies intact and so "its practical solution of the social problem is miserable – so miserable as to lead us to inquire if the talk of 'No force' be merely an excuse for supporting landlord and capitalist domination." ("Communist-Anarchism," *Act For Yourselves*, 98).

society... in order to subject some classes to the domination of others” and this becomes obvious “when one studies the origins of the State.”¹⁰⁷ This centralisation is required to ensure minority rule and so the structure of the State reflected its role as defender of the exploitation of the many by the few:

To attack the central power, to strip it of its prerogatives, to decentralise, to dissolve authority, would have been to abandon to the people the control of its affairs, to run the risk of a truly popular revolution. That is why the bourgeoisie sought to reinforce the central government even more¹⁰⁸

Using the example of the French Revolution, Kropotkin showed how the middle classes “now that they had seen and felt the strength of the people” did “all they could to dominate the people, to disarm them and to drive them back into subjection” and “made haste to legislate in such a way that the political power which was slipping out of the hand of the Court should not fall into the hands of the people.”¹⁰⁹ Centralisation took power away from the mass of the people and gave it to the few and so while the “people have tried at different times to become an influence in the State, to control it, to be served by it” they “have never succeeded.” Instead, it has “always ended in the abandonment of this mechanism of hierarchy and laws to others than the people: to the sovereign after the revolutions of the sixteenth century; to the bourgeois after those of the seventeenth in England and eighteenth in France.”¹¹⁰

The State was not some evil imposed on society from outside, but one which grows out of it and which, while sharing key features, evolves alongside it. “Every economic phase has a political phase corresponding to it,” he argued “A society founded on serfdom, is in keeping with absolute monarchy; a society based on the wage system, and the exploitation of the masses by the capitalists finds its political expression in parliamentarianism.” As such, the State form changes and evolves, but its basic function (defender of minority rule) and structure (delegated power into the hands of a few) remains. Moreover, the State has not always existed and to confuse all forms of social organisation with it would be a mistake made only by those “who cannot visualise Society without a concentration of the State.” To do so “is to overlook the fact that Man lived in Societies for thousands of years before the State had been heard of” and that “large numbers of people” have “lived in communes and free federations.” The State “is only one of the forms assumed by society in the course of history. Why then make no distinction between what is permanent and what is accidental?”¹¹¹ It was a particular form of social organisation and so “the word ‘State’... should be reserved for those societies with the hierarchical system and centralisation.”¹¹² That is, those where “the people was not governing itself.”¹¹³

Based on this evolutionary analysis of the State and its links with capitalism, anarchists drew the conclusion “that the State organisation, having been the force to which the minorities resorted for establishing and organising their power over the masses, cannot be the force which

¹⁰⁷ *The State: Its Historic Role*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ “Representative Government,” *Words of a Rebel*, 143.

¹⁰⁹ *The Great French Revolution*, 159, 163.

¹¹⁰ *Revolutionary Studies*, 18–9. Kropotkin would surely have added the bureaucracy after the Russian Revolution if he had revised this article before his death.

¹¹¹ *The State: Its Historic Role*, 9–10.

¹¹² *Ethics*, 317fn.

¹¹³ “Representative Government,” *Words of a Rebel*, 120.

will serve to destroy these privileges.”¹¹⁴ It exists “to protect exploitation, speculation and private property; it is itself the by-product of the rapine of the people. The proletarian must rely on his own hands; he can expect nothing of the State. It is nothing more than an organisation devised to hinder emancipation at all costs.”¹¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, Kropotkin was critical of those socialists who viewed the (capitalist) State as both a means “to save themselves from the horrors of the economic regime created by that very same State” and “to achieve the social revolution through the State by preserving and even extending most of its powers.”¹¹⁶

On State Socialism

Given an analysis of capitalism as an exploitative class system, Kropotkin (like most anarchists) viewed himself as a socialist and insisted that anarchists “constitute the left wing” of the socialist movement.¹¹⁷ Yet, at the same time, he warned of the dangers of State socialism both in terms of tactics and final goals. So if anarchism was the “left-wing” of the socialist movement, then Marxism was its “right-wing”:

It is self-evident that when we speak of a revival of ‘Socialism,’ we don’t mean a revival of ‘Social Democracy.’ The writers of the last school have done all they could to make people believe that Social Democracy *is* Socialism, and Socialism is nothing but Social Democracy. But everyone can easily ascertain for himself that Social Democracy is only *one fraction* of the great Socialist movement: the fraction which believes that all necessary changes in the Socialist direction can be accomplished by Parliamentary reforms within the present State... and that when all main branches of production shall be owned by the State, and governed by a Democratic Parliament, and every working man will be a wage worker for the State – this will be Socialism. There remains, however, a very considerable number of Socialists who maintain that Socialism cannot be limited to such a meek reform; that it implies much deeper changes, economical and political; and that the above reform cannot be realised within the present State by its representative institutions. Many begin thus to see that it is not by acquiring power in Parliament – under the unavoidable penalty of ceasing to be a Socialist party and gradually becoming a ‘Moderate Radical’ party – that the changes required by *Socialism* can ever be realised. Social Democracy is the right wing of the great Socialist movement not this movement itself. It is, then, a revival of Socialism altogether that we see coming – one of its causes being precisely the failure of Social Democracy to bring about the great changes which mankind needs and claims at the present moment of its history.¹¹⁸

In terms of tactics, Kropotkin opposed the Marxism of his time (Social Democracy) as it had “moved away from a pure labour movement, in the sense of a direct struggle against capitalists by means of strikes, unions, and so forth. Strikes repelled them because they diverted the workers’

¹¹⁴ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 82.

¹¹⁵ “The Breakdown of the State,” *Words of a Rebel*, 27.

¹¹⁶ *The State: Its Historic Role*, 55, 9.

¹¹⁷ “Anarchism,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 285.

¹¹⁸ *The Coming Revival of Socialism*, 1.

forces from parliamentary agitation.” Marxists “recognised the State and pyramidal methods of organisation” which “stifled the revolutionary spirit of the rank-and-file workers” while anarchists “recognised neither the State nor pyramidal organisation” and “rejecting a narrowly political struggle, inevitably became a more revolutionary party, both in theory and in practice.”¹¹⁹

Social Democrats, because of their electioneering, “are continually driven by the force of circumstances to become tools of the ruling classes in keeping things as they are.”¹²⁰ Anarchists stressed economic class struggle because “it would be desirable to have no futile political struggle to meddle with it and to obstruct” the revolution: “There should be the workers on the one side, the possessing classes on the other side, and the social economical problem in its purity between the two.”¹²¹ Thus rather than encourage “the direct action of the Labour Unions,” Marxism turned the labour movement into “an electoral, political, and Parliamentary movement, which could but waste and destroy their real forces.”¹²²

Echoing Bakunin, he saw that “those who yesterday were considered socialists are today letting go of socialism, by renouncing its mother idea” of “the need to... to abolish individual ownership of... social capital” and “passing over into the camp of the bourgeoisie, while retaining, so as to hide their turnabout, the label of socialism.”¹²³ “As if the bourgeoisie,” he argued, “still holding on to its capital, could allow” the Marxists “to experiment with socialism even if they succeeded in gaining control of power! As if the conquest of the municipalities were possible without the conquest of the factories.” History has proven Kropotkin correct on the differences in results between direct action and electioneering:

However moderate the war cry – provided it is in the domain of relations between capital and labour – as soon as it proceeds to put it into practice by revolutionary methods, it ends by increasing it and will be led to demand the overthrow of the regime of property. On the other hand a party which confines itself to parliamentary politics ends up abandoning its programme, however advanced it may have been at the beginning.¹²⁴

As well as causing the rise of reformism within the labour movement, Marxism also failed to understand that the modern State could not be utilised to create socialism. As Kropotkin stressed, “one does not make an historical institution follow in the direction to which one points – that is in the opposite direction to the one it has taken over the centuries.” To expect this would be a “a sad and tragic mistake” simply because “the old machine, the old organisation, [was] slowly developed in the course of history to crush freedom, to crush the individual, to establish oppression on a legal basis, to create monopolists, to lead minds astray by accustoming them to servitude.” It is “the greatest hindrance to the birth of a society based on equality and liberty, as well as the historic means designed to prevent this blossoming.”¹²⁵ A social revolution needs new, non-statist, forms of social organisation to succeed:

¹¹⁹ “Western Europe,” *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*, 207–8, 212, 209.

¹²⁰ “The Chicago Anniversary,” *Freedom*, December 1891.

¹²¹ “Past and Future,” *Freedom*, April 1889.

¹²² “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 57.

¹²³ “All of us Socialists,” *Words of a Rebel*, 181, 180.

¹²⁴ quoted in Cahm, 252.

¹²⁵ *The State: Its Historic Role*, 57–8, 9.

To give full scope to socialism entails rebuilding from top to bottom a society dominated by the narrow individualism of the shopkeeper... it is a question of completely reshaping all relationships... In every street, in every hamlet, in every group of men gathered around a factory or along a section of the railway line, the creative, constructive and organisational spirit must be awakened in order to rebuild life – in the factory, in the village, in the store, in production and in distribution of supplies. All relations between individuals and great centres of population have to be made all over again, from the very day, from the very moment one alters the existing commercial or administrative organisation.

And they expect this immense task, requiring the free expression of popular genius, to be carried out within the framework of the State and the pyramidal organisation which is the essence of the State! They expect the State... to become the lever for the accomplishment of this immense transformation. They want to direct the renewal of a society by means of decrees and electoral majorities... How ridiculous!¹²⁶

Kropotkin's opposition to State socialism was not focused purely on the negative effects of replacing class struggle on the economic terrain with "political action" within bourgeois States. He also warned of the dangers associated with handing economic decision-making to the State. This would simply be the "mere substitution" of "the State as the universal capitalist for the present capitalists."¹²⁷ This was nothing more than the "idea of the State as Capitalist, to which the Social-Democratic fraction of the great Socialist Party is now trying to reduce Socialism."¹²⁸ However, "a highly complex State machine... leads to the formation of a class especially concerned with State management, which, using its acquired experience, begins to deceive the rest for its personal advantage."¹²⁹ These warnings echoed those of Proudhon and Bakunin and so it was unsurprising that anarchists were quick to recognise the Bolshevik regime as "State capitalist."¹³⁰ Marxism would simply see the bourgeois replaced by the bureaucracy:

The anarchists consider... that to hand over to the State all the main sources of economic life – the land, the mines, the railways, banking, insurance, and so on – as also the management of all the main branches of industry... would mean to create a new instrument of tyranny. State capitalism would only increase the powers of bureaucracy and capitalism.¹³¹

Kropotkin simply did not think that such a regime could function and meet the needs of the people as the "economic changes that will result from the social revolution will be so immense and

¹²⁶ *The State: Its Historic Role*, 58–9.

¹²⁷ "Modern Science and Anarchism," 106.

¹²⁸ *The Great French Revolution*, 11.

¹²⁹ "Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?," *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 61.

¹³⁰ This, it must be noted, cannot be said for most Marxists, who had great difficulty recognising the exploitative nature of the Bolshevik regime. Trotsky, while recognising that the bureaucracy enriched itself at the expense of the workers, refused to describe Stalinism as State capitalism (unsurprisingly, as any *serious* analysis of social relationships under Stalin would recognise the continuity when he and Lenin were in power). Tony Cliff of the British SWP did argue that Stalinism was State capitalist in the 1940s (two decades after anarchists had) but his analysis was deeply flawed and failed to draw the obvious links to Lenin's regime. See section H.3.13 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (volume 2).

¹³¹ *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 286.

so profound... that it will be impossible for one or even a number of individuals to elaborate the social forms to which a further society must give birth. The elaboration of new social forms can only be the collective work of the masses.”¹³² The notion that a “strongly centralised Government” could “*command* that a prescribed quantity” of a good “be sent to such a place on such a day” and be “received on a given day by a specified official and stored in particular warehouses” was not only “undesirable” but also “wildly Utopian.”¹³³ During his discussion of the benefits of free agreement against State tutelage, Kropotkin noted that only the former allowed the utilisation of “the co-operation, the enthusiasm, the local knowledge” of the people.¹³⁴

Kropotkin’s own experience had shown how the “high functionaries” of the Tsarist bureaucracy “were simply charming in their innocent ignorance” of the areas they were meant to be administering and how, thanks to Marxism, the socialist ideal had “lost the character of something that had to be worked out by the labour organisations themselves, and became State management of industries... State capitalism.” As an anarchist, he knew that governments become “isolated from the masses” and so “the very success of socialism” required “the ideas of no-government, of self-reliance, of free initiative of the individual” to be “preached side by side with those of socialised ownership and production.” Thus it was essential that socialism was decentralised, federal and participatory, that the “structure of the society which we longed for” was “worked out, in theory and practice, from beneath” by “all labour unions” with “a full knowledge of local needs of each trade and each locality.”¹³⁵

This analysis applies to both Social Democracy and its offspring Leninism. In 1917, while distancing Marxism from the predictable (and predicted, by anarchists) consequences of working within the bourgeois State, Lenin argued the bourgeois State had to be smashed and replaced by a soviet State modelled on the Paris Commune.¹³⁶ However, Bolshevism retained a centralised State structure and so replaced the initiative of all with that of the few at the top of the new social hierarchy – with disastrous results.¹³⁷ As the Russian Revolution degenerated before his eyes, Kropotkin’s warnings on State socialism were vindicated:

The natural evils of State communism are... increased tenfold under the excuse that all misfortunes of our life are due to the intervention of foreigners... the attempt to build up a communist republic on the lines of strongly-centralised State communism under the iron rule of the Dictatorship of a party is ending in a failure. We learn in Russia *how Communism cannot be introduced*... so long as a country is governed by the dictatorship of a party, the labour and peasant councils [soviets] evidently lose all their significance... when it comes to build up quite new forms of life... everything

¹³² “Revolutionary Government,” *Words of a Rebel*, 175.

¹³³ “Food,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 82–3.

¹³⁴ “Free Agreement,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 137.

¹³⁵ *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 184, 360, 374–5, 376.

¹³⁶ Space precludes a discussion of whether Lenin’s account of Marxism was correct or how genuine his desire for soviet rather than party power was. These issues and many more are discussed in section H of *An Anarchist FAQ* (volume 2). Section H.1.7 compares Bolshevism in power to Lenin’s *The State and Revolution* while section H.3.10 shows how Marx and Engels repeatedly argued that the workers had to seize the bourgeois republic and use it to create socialism. This can be seen, to quote just one example, when Engels stated in 1894 that a “republic, in relation to the proletariat, differs from a monarchy only in that it is the *ready-made* political form for the future rule of the proletariat. You [in France] have the advantage of us in that it is already in being; we, for our part, shall have to waste 24 hours creating it...” (*Marx-Engels Collected Works* 50: 276).

¹³⁷ See section H.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (volume 2).

has to be worked out by men on the spot... an all-powerful centralised government... proves absolutely incapable of doing that through its functionaries, no matter how countless they may be – it becomes a nuisance. It develops such a formidable bureaucracy... this is what you, the working men of the West, can and must avoid by all means... The immense constructive work that is required from a social revolution cannot be accomplished by a central government... It requires the knowledge, the brains, and the willing collaboration of a mass of local and specialised forces, which alone can cope with the diversity of economical problems in their local aspects.¹³⁸

Like the Russian anarchists in 1905 and 1917, Kropotkin argued that the soviets “controlling the political and economical life of the country is a grand idea.” However, this was not what happened in Russia and they are “reduced” to a “passive role.” The “pressure of party dictatorship ... becomes a death sentence on the new construction.”¹³⁹ He stressed that “production and exchange represented an undertaking so complicated that the plans of the State socialists... would prove to be absolutely ineffective as soon as they were applied to life. No government would be able to organise production if the workers themselves through their unions did not do it in each branch of industry; for in all production there arise daily thousands of difficulties which no government can solve or foresee... Only the efforts of thousands of intelligences working on the problems can co-operate in the development of a new social system and find the best solutions for the thousands of local needs.”¹⁴⁰ As he correctly predicted:

The Communists, with their methods, instead of putting the people on the path to Communism, will finish by making them hate its very name. Perhaps they are sincere, but their system hinders them introducing in practice the least principle of Communism... The saddest thing is that they recognise nothing, do not wish to acknowledge their errors, and every day take away from the masses a fragment of the conquests of the revolution, to the profit of the centralising State.¹⁴¹

The Bolsheviks “have shown how the Revolution is *not* to be made.”¹⁴² Creating communism by “a strongly centralised State makes success absolutely impossible and paralyses the constructive work of the people.”¹⁴³ Social reconstruction required the “co-operation the labouring classes of all nations” and “for that purpose the idea of a great International of all working men of the world must be renewed... there must be a Union of all the Trade Unions of the world – of all those who produce the wealth of the world – united, in order to free the production of the world from its present enslavement to Capital.”¹⁴⁴

On Class Struggle and the Workers’ Movement

Given that workers were exploited and oppressed by capitalism and that the State exists to defend it, Kropotkin viewed the class struggle as inherent within capitalism: “a great contest

¹³⁸ “Message to the Workers of the Western World,” *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*, 250–2.

¹³⁹ “Message to the Workers of the Western World,” *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*, 251–2.

¹⁴⁰ “Extract from the Postscript of ‘Words of a Rebel,’” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 76–7.

¹⁴¹ quoted in G. Woodcock and I. Avakumovic, 417.

¹⁴² quoted in Alexander Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth* (London: Pluto Press, 1989), 75.

¹⁴³ “Letter to Brandes,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 320.

¹⁴⁴ “Message to the Workers of the Western World,” *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*, 253–4.

between labour and capital – which constitutes the very essence of modern history.”¹⁴⁵ The social position of the working class people ensured their key role in the struggle for freedom:

Being exploited today at the bottom of the social ladder, it is to his [the worker’s] advantage to demand equality. He has never ceased demanding it, he has fought for it and will fight for it again, whereas the bourgeois... thinks it is to his advantage to maintain inequality.¹⁴⁶

So Kropotkin, like his Marxist opponents, viewed the popular masses (workers and peasants) as the only agents of social transformation.¹⁴⁷ Thus “the Anarchists have always advised taking an active part in those workers’ organisations which carry on the *direct* struggle of Labour against Capital and its protector, – the State.” This struggle “permits the worker to obtain some temporary improvements in the present conditions of work, while it opens his eyes to the evil that is done by Capitalism and the State that supports it, and wakes up his thoughts concerning the possibility of organising consumption, production, and exchange without the intervention of the capitalist and the State.”¹⁴⁸

Kropotkin was well aware of the importance of popular, mass, struggles as “any popular movement is a step towards the social revolution. It awakens the spirit of revolt, it makes men accustomed to seeing the established order (or rather the established disorder) as eminently unstable.”¹⁴⁹ The key popular movement for communist-anarchists was the trade unions and so Kropotkin (like Bakunin before him) saw the necessity of anarchists participating in the labour movement:

Since the enemy on whom we declare war is capital, it is against capital that we have to direct our efforts, without allowing ourselves to be distracted from our aim by the sham agitation of political parties. Since the great struggle for which we prepare ourselves, is an essentially economic struggle, it is on the economic ground that our agitation has to take place.¹⁵⁰

Kropotkin had “always preached active participation in the workers’ movement, in the *revolutionary workers’ movement*.”¹⁵¹ This is reflected throughout his anarchist career, from his earliest activism onwards. So in Tsarist Russia in the early 1870s he argued that radical activity had to

¹⁴⁵ quoted in Paul Avrich, *The Haymarket Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 350.

¹⁴⁶ “Letter to Nettlau,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 300.

¹⁴⁷ What Davide Turcato calls “labour-orientated anarchism” which has “a link with a tradition of working-class anarchism that goes back to the origin of anarchism as a movement: Bakunin’s federalist international.” This includes syndicalism and the communist-anarchism. (“The 1896 London Congress: Epilogue or Prologue?,” *New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism: the Individual, the National and the Transnational* [Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010], David Berry and Constance Bantman (eds.), 110–1). In anarchist circles, this is usually referred to as “class struggle anarchism.” In another important article, Turcato stresses that the usual way of categorising anarchism (in terms of favoured economic system) is flawed as the key issues within the movement were, and are, to do with tactics and strategy, specifically anarchist approaches to the labour movement (“European Anarchism in the 1890s: Why Labor Matters in Categorising Anarchism,” *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labour and Society*, vol. 12, September 2009).

¹⁴⁸ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 82–3.

¹⁴⁹ “Theory and Practice,” *Words of a Rebel*, 203.

¹⁵⁰ quoted in Cahm, 255.

¹⁵¹ “Letter to Nettlau,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 304.

be made “among the peasantry and urban workers” as “[o]nly then can [insurrection] count on success.”¹⁵² He reiterated this position a few months before his death:

the trade-union movement... will become a great power for laying the foundations of an anti-State communist society. If I were in France, where at this moment lies the centre of the industrial movement, and if I were in better health, I would be the first to rush headlong into this movement in favour of the First International – not the Second or the Third, which only represent the usurpation of the idea of the *workers’* International for the benefit of a party which is not half composed of workers.¹⁵³

This was because in a social revolution “a decisive blow will have to be administered to private property: from the beginning, the workers will have to proceed to take over all social wealth so as to put it into common ownership. This revolution can only be carried out by the workers themselves.” In order to do this, the “great mass of workers will not only have to constitute itself outside the bourgeoisie... it will have to take action of its own during the period which will precede the revolution... and this sort of action can only be carried out when a strong *workers’ organisation* exists.” This meant it was “the mass of workers we have to seek to organise. We... have to submerge ourselves in the organisation of the people... help them to translate [their] aspirations and hatreds into action. When the mass of workers is organised and we are with it to strengthen its revolutionary idea, to make the spirit of revolt against capital germinate there... then it will be the social revolution.”¹⁵⁴

Therefore “to make the revolution, the mass of workers will have to organise themselves. Resistance and the strike are excellent means of organisation for doing this.” It was “a question of organising societies of resistance for all trades in each town, of creating resistance funds against the exploiters, of giving more solidarity to the workers’ organisations of each town and of putting them in contact with those of other towns, of federating them... Workers’ solidarity must no longer be an empty word but practised each day between all trades and all nations.”¹⁵⁵ The unions would take over production:

No one can underrate the importance of this labour movement for the coming revolution. It will be those agglomerations of wealth producers which will have to reorganise production on new social bases... to organise the life of the nation... and means of production. They – the labourers, grouped together – not the politicians.¹⁵⁶

Kropotkin was critical of trade unions that limited their goals and argued that anarchists had to work to widen the unions’ vision, to get them to go beyond just higher wages and better conditions.¹⁵⁷ Hence his often repeated positive comments on the Spanish anarchist movement as well as his praise for the activities of the American anarchists in the early 1880s: “Were not our Chicago Comrades right in despising politics, and saying the struggle against robbery must be carried on in the workshop and the street, by deeds not words?”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² “Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 85–6.

¹⁵³ quoted in Woodcock and Avakumovic, 419.

¹⁵⁴ quoted in Cahm, 153–4.

¹⁵⁵ quoted in Cahm, 255–6.

¹⁵⁶ “Commemoration of the Chicago Martyrs,” *Freedom*, December 1892.

¹⁵⁷ See, for example, “The Development of Trade Unionism,” *Freedom*, March 1898.

¹⁵⁸ “The Chicago Anniversary,” *Freedom*, December 1891.

So it must be stressed that Kropotkin's arguments for anarchist participation in the labour movement was a recurring theme in his works.¹⁵⁹ The early 1880s saw him write numerous articles on the subject in an attempt to counter the ultra-revolutionary posturing which had overtaken the French anarchist movement in the late 1870s.¹⁶⁰ Imprisonment and exile after the Lyon trial hindered his work but he returned to the task in 1889 after the success of the London Dockers' strike. The May 1st demonstrations saw him reiterating his earlier arguments for anarchist participation in the labour movement.¹⁶¹ He urged anarchists in France to use the 1891 May Day demonstrations to rejoin popular movements, contributing his immense influence to a growing tendency in libertarian circles arguing for participation in the labour movement.¹⁶² Unlike the attempt ten years previously, this call for anarchist participation in the labour movement was more successful. French Anarchists joined the labour movement in increasing numbers, leading to the rise of revolutionary syndicalism in the mid-1890s.¹⁶³

Thus the anarchist movement "[b]y calling with all its strength for the solidarity of the workers" helped create "a labour movement which has no connection with the parliamentary camp of social democracy." This was "anti-parliamentary unionism in the tradition of the old-time In-

¹⁵⁹ Kropotkin has often been presented as an early advocate of "propaganda by the deed." Daniel Guérin, for example, mistakenly attributes "L'Action" (*Le Révolté*, 25th December 1880) to Kropotkin before stating he "deserves credit being one of the first to confess his errors and to recognise the sterility" of individual action and "proposed a return to mass trade unionism like... the First International." (*Anarchism*, 74–5, 78). Carlo Cafiero, however, wrote this article, while Kropotkin, at this time, was "was anxious to revive the International as an organisation for aggressive strike action to counteract the influence of parliamentary socialists on the labour movement." (Cahm, 139–40, 257) As he later recounted: "I have always been against... this idea of propaganda by deed... which I have always found false" (quoted in Cahm, 160).

¹⁶⁰ Without much success, as shown when he asked a prosecution witness at the Lyon trial whether he had succeeded in having "the International reconstituted" and received the reply: "No. They did not find it revolutionary enough." (*Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 420).

¹⁶¹ Anarchists across Europe shared this desire to use the May Day demonstrations for workers' direct action and libertarian propaganda. Malatesta's involvement in May First events in France (1890), Italy (1891) and Spain (1892) are explored in an important article by Davide Turcato entitled "Collective Action, Opacity, and the 'Problem of Irrationality': Anarchism and the First of May, 1890–1892" (*Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 5:1, Spring 2011).

¹⁶² In these articles "Kropotkin developed his ideas about the need for anarchist involvement in the new militant unionism and the May Day movement, both to counteract the influence of reformists and social democrats and to give these popular movements a revolutionary character: he also explained how anarchists could propagandise the people through active involvement in their struggles without betraying one word of their anarchist principles." (Cahm, 267–8) As Michelle Perrot summarises:

Two courses of action had been proposed to the workers [...] the [Marxist] Guesdists called for a peaceful holiday [...] marked only by deputations to the authorities, carrying petitions [...] The anarchists wanted mass rallies in the street, a popular, lively and violent demonstration directed against the class enemy, the bosses and their factories, a revolt by the "slave-labourers" against their "slave-drivers" [...] [Anarchists] did their best to guide it into their own preferred channels: not deferential appeals to the public authorities, which they regarded as a form of acceptance of and submission to a State they challenged, but direct action on a massive scale at grass-roots level [...] in order to provoke a spectacular incident which would lend itself to propaganda and the affirmation of more widespread solidarity. Above all, it was to be directed against the employers [...] Hatred for the "exploiters" was the crucible of consciousness and the ferment of the workers' struggle. ("The First of May 1890 in France: the birth of a working-class ritual," 143–171, *The Power of the Past: Essays for Eric Hobsbawm* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], Pat Thane, Geoffrey Crossick and Roderick Floud (eds.), 155, 159–60).

¹⁶³ Constance Bantman, "From Trade Unionism to Syndicalisme Révolutionnaire to Syndicalism: The British Origins of French Syndicalism," *New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism*, 126–140.

ternational Working Men's Association" and "what in France, Switzerland is called anti-political syndicalism."¹⁶⁴

However, Kropotkin did not ignore the need for non-economic (political) rights and struggles. Anarchists "are not asserting, as has sometimes been said, that political rights have *no* value for us." Rather, political liberties cannot be defended "by way of a law, a scrap of paper that could be torn up at the least whim of the rulers." Only direct action can do that, for "it is only by transforming ourselves into a force, capable of imposing our will, that we shall succeed in making our rights respected." When the masses go "into the streets and take up the defence of our rights" then "nobody will dare dispute those rights, nor any others that we choose to demand. Then, and only then, shall we have truly gained such rights, for which we might plead to parliament for decades in vain." Humanity "retains only the rights it has won by hard struggle and is ready to defend at every moment, with arms in hand." In short: "freedoms are not given, they are taken."¹⁶⁵ So while rejecting "politics" and stressing the necessity of workplace struggles, he recognised the need to consider all aspects of life:

we do not mean by this that we should neglect opportunities of carrying out agitation on all the questions of national life which are raised around us. On the contrary, we think that socialists must take advantage of all opportunities which may lead to an economic agitation; and we are convinced that each agitation, begun on the basis of the struggle of the exploited against the exploiters, however circumscribed its sphere of action, the ends proposed, and the ideas advanced may be to begin with, may become a fruitful source of socialist agitation... It would therefore be useful... not to pass proudly by the various questions which concern the workers in their districts, for the sole reason that these questions have only very little to do with socialism. On the contrary, taking part in all questions and taking advantage of the interest which they arouse, we could work to spread agitation to a wider extent and... seek to enlarge theoretical conceptions and awaken the spirit of independence and rebellion in those who are interested in the agitation which is produced. This participation is all the more necessary because it presents a unique method of fighting the false opinions which are spread by the bourgeoisie at every opportunity of this kind¹⁶⁶

Thus basic political liberties were "extorted from parliament by force, by agitations that threatened to become rebellions. It was by establishing trade unions and practising strike action despite the edicts of Parliament and the hangings" that workers "won the right to associate and strike" in Britain for example.¹⁶⁷ "All that was progressive in the life of the civilised world," he argued was "centred around the labour movement."¹⁶⁸ So it was "absolutely impossible... to confine the ideas of the working mass within the narrow circle of reductions in working hours and wage increases... The social question compels attention."¹⁶⁹ Thus direct action leads to a wider perspective:

¹⁶⁴ Letter to Kōtoku Shūsui, quoted in John Crump, *Hatta Shūzō and Pure Anarchism in Interwar Japan*, 23–4.

¹⁶⁵ "Political Rights," *Words of a Rebel*, 39, 43, 42, 43.

¹⁶⁶ "The Anarchist Idea from the Point of View of its Practical Realisation," *Freedom*, 25th February 1967.

¹⁶⁷ "Representative Government," *Words of a Rebel*, 123–4.

¹⁶⁸ "Letter on Repression of Workers in Russia," *Freedom*, July 1901.

¹⁶⁹ quoted in Cahm, 241.

It is not only more wages that labour wants. Not only shorter hours... It agitates for the disappearance of the capitalist system. It wants to expropriate the capitalist, to make all into its own hands – fields, docks, railways, flourmills and storehouses and to organise everything in the interest of those who produce.¹⁷⁰

In this way anarchist communism “wins more and more ground among those working-men who try to get a clear conception as to the forthcoming revolutionary action. The syndicalist and trade union movements, which permit the workingmen to realise their solidarity and to feel the community of their interests better than any election, prepare the way for these conceptions.”¹⁷¹

On Syndicalism and Revolutionary Minorities

Given the key part working class organisation and struggle played in his politics it should come as no surprise that Kropotkin was very supportive of syndicalism, arguing that “the current opinions of the French syndicalists are organically linked with the early ideas of the left wing of the International.”¹⁷² Both syndicalism and communist-anarchism traced their roots to the libertarian wing of the IWMA and supported workers’ direct action against capital.¹⁷³ They are not identical though. There are three main differences – the need for anarchist groups, the difficulties facing a revolution and the structure of a libertarian society.

First, Kropotkin did not think that syndicalism by itself would automatically become or remain revolutionary. As he explained in a letter to an Italian comrade in 1914:

My opinion is absolutely that which was expressed by Malatesta... The syndicate is absolutely necessary. It is the only form of worker’s association which allows the direct struggle against capital to be carried on without a plunge into parliamentarianism. But, evidently, it does not achieve this goal automatically, since in Germany, in France and in England, we have the example of syndicates linked to the parliamentary struggle, while in Germany the Catholic syndicates are very powerful, and so on. There is need of the other element which Malatesta speaks of *and which Bakunin always professed*.¹⁷⁴

This “other element” was the anarchist group and unsurprisingly Kropotkin had been, like Malatesta, a member of Bakunin’s Alliance of Social Democracy. Unlike many syndicalists who considered the revolutionary unions as all that was needed to achieve a social revolution,¹⁷⁵ Kropotkin was well aware of the need for anarchists to influence the class struggle in a revolutionary direction and so “the task we impose ourselves” is to acquire “sufficient influence to

¹⁷⁰ *The Coming Revival of Socialism*, 7–8.

¹⁷¹ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 85.

¹⁷² quoted in Nettlau, 279.

¹⁷³ The notion, usually advanced by Leninists, that revolutionary anarchism rejects class struggle or is significantly different to syndicalism is untenable, for reasons explored in sections H.2.2, H.2.7 and H.2.8 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (volume 2). A similar analysis can be found in the excellent account provided by Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, volume 1 (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2009).

¹⁷⁴ quoted in Nettlau, 280–1.

¹⁷⁵ As French Syndicalist Pierre Monatte put it in 1907: “the syndicat [is] the organ and the general strike the instrument of social transformation... syndicalism is sufficient unto itself” (*The International Anarchist Congress (1907)* [Edmonton: Black Cat Press, 2009], Maurizio Antonioli (ed.), 112–5).

induce the workmen to avail themselves of the first opportunity of taking possession of land and the mines, of railways and factories,” to bring working class people “to the conviction that they must rely on themselves to get rid of the oppression of Capital.”¹⁷⁶

Kropotkin was “convinced... that the formation of an anarchist party... far from being prejudicial to the common revolutionary cause, is desirable and useful to the greatest degree.”¹⁷⁷ Hence the need “to unite the most active individuals into one general organisation.” Revolutionaries “must not stand outside the people but among them, must serve not as a champion of some alien opinions worked out in isolation, but only as a more distinct, more complete expression of the demands of the people themselves.”¹⁷⁸ Anarchist groups had to encourage the spirit of revolt within the working classes and before the revolution “affirmed its aspirations openly in the streets, by actions” and so ensure that they “will get the best hearing.”¹⁷⁹ As he explained after the 1905 Russian Revolution:

I write with the idea that the paper must become an organ for the foundation of a durable, serious anarchist party in Russia. The current revolutionary period will not last one year or two. It will go on. And in this period there must develop such an anarchist party, one which will be not only a fighting party of attack (which could be Blanquist as well), but a party which represents the anarchist framework of thought, in its existing theories, in its understanding of the predominant role of the people, in its conception of the progressive life of the people, etc., a party which must itself experience the Russian revolution.¹⁸⁰

Anarchists had to participate within popular movements and struggles so that the “idea of anarchist communism, today represented by feeble minorities, but increasingly finding popular expression, will make its way among the mass of the people. Spreading everywhere, the anarchist groups... will take strength from the support they find among the people, and will raise the red flag of the revolution.” When revolution breaks out, “what is now the minority will become the People, the great mass, and that mass rising against property and the State, will march forward towards anarchist communism.”¹⁸¹

Second, Kropotkin recognised that capitalism and the State would require a popular insurrection to abolish. So while many syndicalists viewed a general strike with workplace occupations as sufficient for revolution, he disagreed: “although a general strike is a good method of struggle, it does not free the people that use it from the necessity of an armed struggle against the dominating order.”¹⁸² As will be discussed below, he, like Bakunin and other communist-anarchists like Malatesta, was well aware of the need for both insurrection and defence of a social revolution.

¹⁷⁶ “Act for Yourselves,” *Act for Yourselves*, 32.

¹⁷⁷ **Predislovie k rabote Mikhaila Bakunina Parizhskaia kommuna i poniatie o gosudarstvennosti** (Geneva: Anarkhicheskaya Biblioteka, 1892), 2 (Translation: Will Firth). Thanks to Lucien van der Walt for providing a copy of this rare pamphlet and ensuring its translation.

¹⁷⁸ “Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 95, 86.

¹⁷⁹ “The Spirit of Revolt,” *Words of a Rebel*, 189.

¹⁸⁰ quoted in Martin A. Miller, Kropotkin (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 207–8.

¹⁸¹ “Revolutionary Minorities,” *Words of a Rebel*, 75.

¹⁸² “Zakliucheniiia s’ezda,” *Russkaia Revoliuciia i Anarkhizm: Doklady i Zakliucheniiia 1906 g.* (London: Kleb i Volia, 1907), P. A. Kropotkin, (ed.), 10 (Translation: Josephien van Kessel)

The publication of *How We Shall Bring about the Revolution* by leading French syndicalists Pataud and Pouget in 1909 showed that many syndicalists had recognised the validity of the communist-anarchist critique. It discussed how the general strike “very soon changed into an insurrectional strike” and that the unions “sought to arm themselves” into an “organisation of defence, with a Trade Union and Federal basis.”¹⁸³ However, their account of the defeating of the counter-revolutionary forces is extremely short and remarkably easy making Kropotkin note in his preface to the English translation that they had “considerably attenuated the resistance that the Social Revolution will probably meet with on its way.”¹⁸⁴

Kropotkin took a more realistic position, arguing that “a society in which the workers would have a dominant voice” would require a revolution to create, “a revolution far more profound than any of the revolutions which history had on record.” In such a rebellion, however, “the workers would have against them, not the rotten generation of aristocrats against whom the French peasants and republicans had to fight in the [eighteenth] century – and even that fight was a desperate one – but the far more powerful, intellectually and physically, middle-classes, which have at their service all the potent machinery of the modern State.” Thus “each time that such a period of accelerated evolution and reconstruction on a grand scale begins, civil war is liable to break out on a small or large scale.”¹⁸⁵ Given the conflicts of both the Russian and Spanish revolutions, Kropotkin’s warnings proved prescient.¹⁸⁶

Third, while advocating the idea of unions seizing workplaces and organising production in a free society, Kropotkin did not consider this as all that was required. Workers would become “the managers of production” but in a system “of independent Communes for the territorial organisation, and of federations of Trade Unions for the organisation of men in accordance with their different functions” as well as “thousands upon thousands of free combines and societies growing up everywhere for the satisfaction of all possible and imaginable needs.” This was the “concrete conception of society regenerated by a social revolution.”¹⁸⁷ As syndicalism focused on just *one* aspect of this vision, Kropotkin considered it as incomplete.

This is reflected in his preface to Pataud and Pouget. Kropotkin heartily recommends the book and as it shows “how the Trade Unions, groups formed for combat against Capital, could transform themselves, in a time of Revolution, into groups for production.” He adds “it is not Anarchism that they picture for us” for it is the Trade Union Congress “which discusses” matters “that will be settled on the spot” and which “local life, alone, is in a position to solve.” Be that as it may, the authors had “the life-giving breath of Anarchism in their conceptions of the future” due to the mass action it discusses and, undoubtedly, because it stresses one key feature of an anarchist society (namely unions organising production).¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *How We Shall Bring about the Revolution: Syndicalism and the Cooperative Commonwealth* (London: Pluto Press, 1990), 94, 158.

¹⁸⁴ Preface, Pataud and Pouget, xxxvi.

¹⁸⁵ *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 270–1.

¹⁸⁶ Significantly, the “Declaration of the Principles of Revolutionary Syndicalism” endorsed at the founding of the syndicalist International Workers Association in 1922 states that it recognised “violence as a means of defence against the violent methods of the ruling classes” and so “defence of the revolution” must “be entrusted to the masses themselves and their economic organisations.” (quoted in Schmidt and van der Walt, *Black Flame*, 198) This was applied by the CNT in the Spanish Revolution when it organised workers militias to fight Franco’s forces.

¹⁸⁷ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 78–9.

¹⁸⁸ Preface, Pataud and Pouget, xxxiv-xxxv.

So historian James Joll was wrong to assert that “as far as effective action by the Anarchist movement was concerned, it was [the French syndicalist] Monatte rather than Malatesta who was right” in 1907 during their famous exchange on syndicalism at the International Anarchist Congress.¹⁸⁹ Anyone familiar with Kropotkin’s or Malatesta’s ideas and activism know that communist-anarchists were hardly against anarchists working in unions. Kropotkin’s position, like that of Malatesta, was not anti-syndicalism but rather syndicalism-plus.¹⁹⁰

So communist-anarchists and the syndicalists held similar viewpoints. Both advocated working class self-emancipation by means of economic organisation and struggle against both capital and the State. Kropotkin, like other revolutionary anarchists, was arguing for these ideas decades before the term “syndicalism” was coined. This explained “the closest rapport between the left-wing of the International and present-day syndicalism, the close rapport between anarchism and syndicalism and the ideological contrast between Marxism and the principles of Social Democracy and syndicalism”¹⁹¹ However, he was well aware that a union need not, by its very nature, become or remain revolutionary. It needed the action of anarchists within it to bring it to its full potential.

On National Liberation

Anarchism does not limit itself to just fighting economic and political oppression and exploitation but rather “works to destroy authority in all its aspects” and “refuses all hierarchical organisation.”¹⁹² This means that as well as statism and capitalism, anarchists also opposed, for example, patriarchal relationships between the sexes as the “revolution, intoxicated with the beautiful words, Liberty, Equality, Solidarity, would not be a revolution if it maintained slavery at home. Half humanity subjected to the slavery of the hearth would still have to rebel against the other half.”¹⁹³ It also applied between nations and ethnic groups and, unsurprisingly, Kropotkin was a supporter of national liberation struggles:

True internationalism will never be attained except by the independence of each nationality, little or large, compact or disunited – just as anarchy is in the independence

¹⁸⁹ *The Anarchists* 2nd Edition (London: Methuen, 1979), 188. Joll clearly misunderstands Malatesta’s critique, presenting him as being opposed to syndicalism and anarchist participation in the workers’ movement. However, Malatesta explicitly states his support of the latter and that he was arguing against those libertarians who “take this means [unions] as an end” and allowed themselves “to be absorbed” by the labour movement. He agreed that the syndicates are “organisations fighting in the class war for amelioration of the conditions of labour, and as unions of productive workers which can help in the transformation of capitalist society into Anarchist Communist society” and that it is “the duty of Anarchists to constitute the revolutionary element in those organisations.” The Syndicalist movement is “a powerful means of revolution, but not... a substitute for revolution... armed insurrection and expropriation by force” (*The International Anarchist Congress (1907)*, 122, 126, 132–2).

¹⁹⁰ At the 1907 Congress, Malatesta “made it clear that he would only address his disagreements with the syndicalists, being confident that an audience of comrades would not exchange that for a rejection of organisation and labour activism. One these points... Malatesta was in complete agreement with the syndicalists.” (Davide Turcato, “European Anarchism in the 1890s: Why Labor Matters in Categorising Anarchism,” *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labour and Society* 12, September 2009, 462).

¹⁹¹ Kropotkin, quoted in Nettlau, 279–80.

¹⁹² “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 137

¹⁹³ “Agreeable Work,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 128. It should be noted that while Kropotkin was a committed advocate of women’s equality, he wrote very little about it. As with many male radicals of his time, opposing patriarchy was not considered as important as, say, fighting capitalism or the State.

of each individual. If we say no government of man over man, how can [we] permit the government of conquered nationalities by the conquering nationalities?¹⁹⁴

This meant that anarchists “do not treat questions of nationality lightly, and we are firmly persuaded that as long as there are States, be they called Empires, Kingdoms, bourgeois Republics or even Social Democratic Republics, the danger of a weak nation being invaded, crushed and exploited by its more powerful neighbours will remain.”¹⁹⁵

Kropotkin lived during the time when direct imperialism reached its height. He was well aware that the conquest of colonies by European powers (and so imperialist rivalries) were driven both by reasons of State and economic interest. With the workers “being unable to purchase with their wages the riches they are producing, industry must search for new markets elsewhere, amidst the middle classes of other nations. It must find markets, in the East, in Africa, anywhere; it must increase, by trade, the number of its serfs in Egypt, in India, on the Congo. But everywhere it finds competitors in other nations which rapidly enter into the same line of industrial development. And wars, continuous wars, must be fought for the supremacy in the world-market – wars for the possession of the East, wars for getting possession of the seas, wars for the right of imposing heavy duties on foreign merchandise.”¹⁹⁶ Capital “knows no fatherland; and if high profits can be derived from the work of Indian coolies whose wages are only one-half of those of English workmen, or even less, capital will migrate to India, as it has gone to Russia, although its migration may mean starvation for Lancashire.”¹⁹⁷ This shaped modern warfare:

men no longer fight for the pleasure of kings, they fight for the integrity of revenues and for the growing wealth... [and] benefit of the barons of high finance and industry... political preponderance... is quite simply a matter of economic preponderance in international markets. What Germany, France, Russia, England, and Austria are all trying to win... is not military preponderance: it is economic domination. It is the right to impose their goods and their customs tariffs on their neighbours; the right to exploit industrially backward peoples... to appropriate from a neighbour either a port which will activate commerce, or a province where surplus merchandise can be unloaded... When we fight today, it is to guarantee our great industrialists a profit of 30%, to assure the financial barons their domination at the Bourse, and to provide the shareholders of mines and railways with their incomes.¹⁹⁸

Genuine internationalism had to oppose imperialism and to “proclaim the complete liberty of each nation, however small it might be, and its absolute right to develop along the lines it wished.”¹⁹⁹ Indeed, “it is very possible that the more internationalist a man becomes, the greater will be his regard for the local individualities which make up the international family, the more he will seek to develop local, individual characteristics.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁴ quoted in Miller, 231.

¹⁹⁵ “Caesarism,” *Freedom*, June 1899.

¹⁹⁶ “Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 55–6.

¹⁹⁷ *Fields, Factories and Workshops: or, Industry combined with agriculture and brain work with manual work* (London: T. Nelson, 1912), 57.

¹⁹⁸ “War,” *Words of a Rebel*, 65–6.

¹⁹⁹ quoted in Jean Caroline Cahm, “Kropotkin and the Anarchist Movement,” Eric Cahm and Vladimir Claude Fiserà (eds.), *Socialism and Nationalism*, 1, 57.

²⁰⁰ quoted in Jean Caroline Cahm, 53.

However, while opposing foreign oppression Kropotkin was not blind to the limitations of nationalism and its aim to simply create an independent country. Given his stress on change from below, by the oppressed masses themselves, he argued that in order to be successful any national liberation movement had to take up the social question. Hence the “failure of all nationalist movements... lies in this curse... that the economic question... remains on the side... it seems to me that in each national movement we have a major task: to set forth the question [of nationalism] on an economic basis and carry out agitation against serfdom, etc. at one with the struggle against [oppression by] foreign nationality.”²⁰¹ This meant that “a national movement which does not include in its platform the demand for an economical change advantageous to the masses has no chance of success unless supported by foreign aid.”²⁰² Anarchists, then, should not ignore national liberation struggles because they lacked a clearly defined socialist politics. Rather, “when revolt breaks out, when men arm themselves against their exploiters – others who are oppressed should be with them. They should enlarge the meaning of their revolt, raise up among them a flag which represents a superior ideal – without doubt, always!”²⁰³

Anarchists, Kropotkin argued, should work within national liberation movements in order to broaden their vision and to turn them into human liberation struggles – from all forms of oppression, economic, political, social and national. The aim would not be a fragmentation of humanity into isolated peoples but rather the creation of a universal human community sharing the globe based upon a free federation of free peoples no longer divided by classes or hierarchies.

On Mutual Aid and Ethics

The role of co-operation in animal and human life was the theme of Kropotkin’s most famous work, *Mutual Aid*.²⁰⁴ However, it is primarily a work of popular science, *not* an explicitly anarchist work. This means that it has to be supplemented by his revolutionary writings in order to place its arguments in the correct context. Moreover, the methodology used – the study, from below, of the evolution of popular institutions – was anarchistic in nature. “You have seen, with *Mutual Aid*,” he wrote, “what a remarkable, powerful *tool of investigation* the anarchist tendency represents.”²⁰⁵ In this Kropotkin applied his scientific training:

The inductive-deductive method which we employ in natural sciences has so well proved its efficacy that the nineteenth century has been able to advance science in a hundred years more than it had progressed before during two thousand years. And when men of science began, in the second half of the century, to apply the same method to the study of human societies, never did they stumble upon an obstacle which rendered its rejection necessary, or made advisable a return to the mediaeval

²⁰¹ quoted in Miller, 230.

²⁰² quoted in Jean Caroline Cahm, 56.

²⁰³ quoted in Jean Caroline Cahm, 56.

²⁰⁴ As with communist-anarchism, while Kropotkin is its best known advocate he did not invent the idea of mutual aid. As Daniel P. Todes has shown, in the nineteenth century “mutual aid remained an uncontroversial element in Russian evolutionary thought.” (*Darwin Without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], 31). Also see his “Darwin’s Malthusian Metaphor and Russian Evolutionary Thought, 1859–1917” (*Isis* 78:294), an important essay which was reprinted as “The Scientific Background of Kropotkin’s *Mutual Aid*” in *The Raven* (6: 4). Todes work places Kropotkin into the context of Russian Darwinism.

²⁰⁵ quoted in Ruth Kinna, “Kropotkin’s theory of Mutual Aid in Historical Context,” *International Review of Social History* 40, 279.

scholasticism resuscitated by Hegel. Besides, when some naturalists, doing honour to their bourgeois education, and pretending to be followers of the scientific method of Darwin, told us: “Crush whoever is weaker than yourself: such is the law of Nature!” it was easy for us to prove, first, that this was *not* Darwin’s conclusion, and, using the same scientific method, to show that these scientists were on the wrong path: that such a law does not exist, that Nature teaches us a very different lesson, and that their conclusions were in nowise scientific.²⁰⁶

Kropotkin’s ideas on mutual aid have been subject to misunderstanding and, at times, distortion.²⁰⁷ Much of this would have been avoided if critics had consulted its sub-title: “A Factor of Evolution”. Kropotkin never denied that individual competition existed, stating that the work concentrated on co-operation simply because struggle had “already been analysed, described, and glorified from time immemorial.” It “was necessary to show, first of all, the immense part which this factor [mutual aid] plays in the evolution of both the animal world and human societies. Only after this has been fully recognised will it be possible to proceed to a comparison between the two factors.” It was “a book on the law of Mutual Aid, viewed as one of the chief factors of evolution – not of *all* factors of evolution and their respective values.”²⁰⁸

So there is no need to ponder why we have the State and capitalism if we are naturally co-operative. Both have arisen precisely because we are also naturally competitive and, as a result, people exploit and oppress others – until the oppressed organise to stop them!²⁰⁹ Relations within a species “contained elements of both competition and co-operation, the relative importance of which varied according to circumstances... Although the relative importance of competition and co-operation fluctuated by season and circumstance, natural selection generated a historical tendency toward co-operation... Species that co-operated had a better chance of survival in the struggle for life than did less sociable ones.” This applied to humans too, as history “testified to a constant struggle between tendencies toward competition and co-operation”²¹⁰

Rather than idealise nature, Kropotkin simply argued that the notion of life as a constant struggle between individuals is an “exaggeration” which “is even more unscientific than Rousseau’s idealisation” of nature. Mutual Aid “is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle” and that the question was who is the fittest: those who compete against each other or those who co-operate in the struggle against a harsh environment. He presented extensive evidence that showed that “those animals which acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest” because “life in societies is the most powerful weapon in the struggle for life, taken in its widest sense.” Co-operation provides “more chances to survive” and animals and humans “find in association the

²⁰⁶ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 54.

²⁰⁷ For a detailed discussion of *Mutual Aid* and modern scientific theory as well as refutation of the many myths associated with it, see my *Mutual Aid: An Introduction and Evaluation* 2nd Edition, (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2010).

²⁰⁸ *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution* (London: Freedom Press: 2009), 230–1, 26.

²⁰⁹ Some reject anarchism because, they claim, it does not recognise that people are basically nasty and will abuse freedom. If that were the case, it makes little sense to give such terrible people power! As Kropotkin noted, “while our opponents seem to admit there is a kind of salt of the earth – the rulers, the employers, the leaders – who, happily enough, prevent those bad men – the ruled, the exploited, the led – from becoming still worse than they are” we anarchists “maintain that *both* rulers and ruled are spoiled by authority” and “*both* exploiters and exploited are spoiled by exploitation.” So “there is [a] difference, and a very important one. We admit the imperfections of human nature, but we make no exception for the rulers. *They* make it, although sometimes unconsciously, and because we make no such exception, they say that we are dreamers.” (“Are We Good Enough?” *Act for Yourselves*, 83).

²¹⁰ Todes, *Darwin Without Malthus*, 134, 135.

best arms for the struggle for life: understood, of course, in its wide Darwinian sense.”²¹¹ This analysis has been vindicated:

Kropotkin’s ideas, though unorthodox, were scientifically respectable, and indeed the contention that mutual aid can be a means of increasing fitness had become a standard part of modern sociobiology.²¹²

Another misunderstanding is confusing mutual aid with altruism. Kropotkin’s “arguments rested, not on the notion... that love was inherent to the natural world, but on an analysis of the dynamics of the struggle for existence.”²¹³ Mutual aid, rather than mutual struggle, between members of the same group or species was the best means of surviving: it is neither love nor sympathy that causes animals to assist one another, but rather a more hard-nosed recognition that it is in their own interests for survival to do so. This co-operation and group living, however, was the “broad and necessary foundation” upon which “the still higher moral feelings are developed.”²¹⁴ As such, it was “the real foundation of our ethical conceptions.”²¹⁵ So mutual aid helps to *explain* altruistic actions and sentiments (and why these have evolved), but it is *not* identical. As he explained in a subsequent work, “*Mutual Aid-Justice-Morality* are thus the consecutive steps of an ascending series.” Morality “developed later than the others” and so was “an unstable feeling and the least imperative of the three.” Mutual aid simply ensured “the ground is prepared for the further and the more general development of more refined relations.”²¹⁶

Thus mutual aid was the basis of ethical behaviour (including altruism) but not identical. This meant the moral concepts were subject to change: “Man is a result of both his inherited instincts and his education.”²¹⁷ For Kropotkin, human action was not genetically predetermined but rather influenced its surroundings:

While the fundamental features of human characters can only be mediated by a very slow evolution, the relative amount of individualist and mutual aid spirit are among the most changeable features of man. Both being equally products of an anterior development, their relative amounts are seen to change in individuals and even societies with a rapidity which would strike the sociologist if only he paid attention to the subject, and analysed the corresponding facts.²¹⁸

²¹¹ *Mutual Aid*, 104, 32, 33, 68, 33, 229.

²¹² Douglas H. Boucher, “The Idea of Mutualism, Past and Future”, *The Biology of Mutualism: Biology and Evolution* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), Douglas H. Boucher (ed.), 17.

²¹³ Todes, 132.

²¹⁴ *Mutual Aid*, 24.

²¹⁵ *Mutual Aid*, 233. Kropotkin, it should be noted, had been discussing the evolutionary base for ethics since the early 1880s (see “Law and Authority” in *Words of a Rebel*, for example).

²¹⁶ *Ethics*, 30–1. Like Kropotkin’s arguments on mutual aid, this analysis is also becoming part of evolutionary science. Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006) has a useful discussion of “Does our moral sense have a Darwinian Origin?”. This echoes Kropotkin, for if “the only lesson Nature gives to man is one of evil” then you “necessarily has to admit the existence of some other, extra-natural, or super-natural influence which inspires man with conceptions of ‘supreme good’” which “nullifies” attempts “at explaining evolution by the action of natural forces only.” (*Ethics*, 13).

²¹⁷ *Mutual Aid*, 217.

²¹⁸ “Proposed Communist Settlement: A New Colony for Tyneside or Wearside,” *The Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 20th February 1895.

A hierarchical society will shape people in certain (negative) ways and produce a “human nature” radically different from a libertarian one. “In a society based on exploitation and servitude,” he stressed, “human nature itself is degraded” and “authority and servility walk ever hand in hand.” Capitalism, religion and government are “the great sources of moral depravity.”²¹⁹ While morality had an evolutionary basis, it was the most changeable aspect of humanity and his last work, *Ethics*, was a critical overview of how these concepts have developed over the millennia.

Therefore, anarchists recognise that social customs change within and between societies. What was once considered normal or natural may come to be seen as oppressive and hateful. This is because the “conception of good or evil varies according to the degree of intelligence or of knowledge acquired. There is nothing unchangeable about it.”²²⁰ The key thing, then, was to “inquire into the substance of those institutions which bred jealousies and of those which diminish them.”²²¹ If hierarchy degrades, then freedom can raise. So “when we hear men saying that Anarchists imagine men much better than they really are, we merely wonder how intelligent people can repeat that nonsense. Do we not say continually that the only means of rendering men less rapacious and egotistic, less ambitious and less slavish at the same time, is to eliminate those conditions which favour the growth of egotism and rapacity, of slavishness and ambition?”²²² Thus we change ourselves when we change the world.

Another of the great myths associated with Kropotkin and *Mutual Aid* in particular is the notion that both ignore class struggle in favour of some sort of cross-class co-operation. Thus we find Paul Avrich asserting that “the partisans of syndicalism went beyond Kropotkin by reconciling the principle of mutual assistance with the Marxian doctrine of class struggle. For the syndicalists, mutual aid did not embrace humanity as a whole, but existed only within the ranks of a single class, the proletariat, enhancing its solidarity in the battle with the manufacturers.”²²³

This is incorrect on many levels. Kropotkin clearly embraced the “doctrine of class struggle” as had Bakunin before him and so there is nothing specifically “Marxian” about it: For anarchists, “history is nothing but a struggle between the rulers and the ruled, the oppressors and the oppressed”²²⁴ and so we seek to “awaken the spirit of revolt in the hearts of the city workers, and to direct it towards the natural enemy of the wage-earner – the monopolist of the instruments of work and of raw materials.”²²⁵ Co-operation could not be applied between classes: “What solidarity can exist between the capitalist and the worker he exploits?... Between the governing and the governed?”²²⁶

This awareness is reflected in *Mutual Aid* as well, which is hardly silent on social struggle highlighting as it did trade unions and strikes. Nor was this an accident, as this expressed his desire “to show the incredible... amount of mutual aid support among workers, as manifested

²¹⁹ “Anarchist Morality,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 104, 81, 106.

²²⁰ “Anarchist Morality,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 92.

²²¹ “Co-operation: A Reply to Herbert Spencer,” *Freedom*, January 1897.

²²² “Are We Good Enough?,” *Act for Yourselves*, 83.

²²³ *The Russian Anarchists*, 80.

²²⁴ “Are We Good Enough?,” *Act for Yourselves*, 85.

²²⁵ “The Spirit of Revolt,” *Words of a Rebel*, 190.

²²⁶ “The Inevitability of Revolution,” *Words of a Rebel*, 30.

during strikes.”²²⁷ Indeed, a major theme of the book is the evolution of mutual aid institutions in response to social change and class conflict.

Mutual Aid also provides substantial evidence to support the anarchist theory of social change. People have always organised themselves to resist the negative results of mutual struggle (such as the oppression and exploitation resulting from private property, the State and other social hierarchies) and these forms of mutual aid take many forms, including village folkmoots, neighbourhood forums, unions, strikes, guilds, co-operatives, and so on). Thus the mutual aid tendency “continued to live in the villages and among the poorer classes in the towns” and “in so far as” new “economical and social institutions” were “a creation of the masses” they “have all originated from the same source” of mutual aid. By these means, the masses “maintained their own social organisation, which was based upon their own conceptions of equity, mutual aid, and mutual support... even when they were submitted to the most ferocious theocracy or autocracy.”²²⁸

Thus institutions of mutual aid created by the masses to survive under capitalism become the basis of a free society. A strike showed “the organising capacities displayed by the working men”²²⁹ and “trains the participants for a common management of affairs and for distribution of responsibilities, distinguishes the people most talented and devoted to a common cause, and finally, forces the others to get to know these people and strengthens their influence.”²³⁰ Unsurprisingly, then, labour unions were “natural organs for the direct struggle with capitalism and for the composition of the future social order.”²³¹

Kropotkin also pointed to “the strikingly independent, freely federated activity of the ‘Sections’ of Paris and all great cities and many small ‘Communes’ during the French Revolution” in 1793.²³² The “Revolution began by creating the Commune... and through this institution it gained... immense power” and “[b]y acting in this way – and the libertarians would no doubt do the same today – the districts of Paris laid the foundations of a new, free, social organisation.” Thus “the principles of anarchism... already dated from 1789” and “they had their origin, not in theoretical speculations, but in the *deeds* of the Great French Revolution.”²³³ During the Russian Revolution of 1905, Kropotkin was in favour of joining the soviets as long as they remained “organs of struggle against the bourgeoisie and the State, and not organs of authority.” Anarchists participation in the soviets was “completely right” as they were “not a government but a place for revolutionary discussion.”²³⁴ “Without the participation of local forces,” Kropotkin argued in 1920 “without an organisation from below of the peasants and workers themselves, it is impos-

²²⁷ quoted in Ruth Kinna, “Kropotkin’s theory of Mutual Aid in Historical Context,” *International Review of Social History* 40:2, 279. Trade unionism expressed the “worker’s need of mutual support” and they formed “vigorous federal organisations... to support the branches during strikes and prosecutions.” Every year “there are thousands of strikes... the most severe and protracted contests being, as a rule, the so-called ‘sympathy strikes,’ which are entered upon to support locked-out comrades or to maintain the rights of the unions.” Anyone (like Kropotkin) who had “lived among strikers speak with admiration of the mutual aid and support which are constantly practised by them.” (*Mutual Aid*, 209–12).

²²⁸ *Mutual Aid*, 181, 107.

²²⁹ *The Coming Revival of Socialism*, 19.

²³⁰ “Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 113.

²³¹ quoted in Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, 81.

²³² “Modern Science and Anarchism,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 158–9.

²³³ *The Great French Revolution*, 180, 186, 184.

²³⁴ quoted in Miller, 212, 213.

sible to build a new life.” The soviets “served precisely this function of creating an organisation from below.”²³⁵

Kropotkin, in summary, was showing how the future was appearing in the present, how we create the new world as we fight against the old.

On Social Revolution

Popular struggles and mutual aid institutions like unions, while essential to improve working class conditions under capitalism, were not seen as an end in themselves. Rather, they were the best means of creating a free society. The class struggle was the link between today and a better tomorrow with “collective revolt – strikes and working-class insurrections – both preparing, in men’s minds as in actions, a revolt of the masses, a revolution.”²³⁶ Thus economic struggle against exploitation turns into a political struggle against the State:

There is no serious strike that occurs today without the appearance of troops, the exchange of blows and some acts of revolt. Here they fight with the troops; there they march on the factories... in Pittsburgh in the United States, the strikers found themselves masters of a territory as large as France, and the strike became the signal for a general revolt against the State; in Ireland the peasants on strike found themselves in open revolt against the State. Thanks to government intervention the rebel against the factory becomes the rebel against the State.²³⁷

Social revolution was required to destroy both the State and capitalism – neither could be reformed away. Working class people had to “rely on themselves to get rid of the oppression of Capital, without expecting that the same thing can be done for them by anybody else. The emancipation of the workmen must be the act of the workmen themselves.”²³⁸ It was that class “which, alone, will take arms and make the revolution.”²³⁹

Social revolution was a “mass rising up against property and the State.”²⁴⁰ It would be based on expropriation, “the guiding word of the coming revolution, without which it will fail in its historic mission: the complete expropriation of all those who have the means of exploiting human beings; the return to the community of the nation of everything that in the hands of anyone can be used to exploit others.”²⁴¹ It was “only through a Social Revolution, made by the workers themselves, that the present exploitation of Labour by Capital can be altered.”²⁴²

Kropotkin was not foolish enough to believe that a free society would be created overnight.²⁴³ For anarchists a social revolution is a *process* and not an event (although, of course, a process

²³⁵ “Two Letters to Lenin,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 337.

²³⁶ “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 144.

²³⁷ quoted in Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872–1886*, 256.

²³⁸ “Act for Yourselves,” *Act for Yourselves*, 32.

²³⁹ “Letter to Nettlau,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 304.

²⁴⁰ “Revolutionary Minorities,” *Words of a Rebel*, 75.

²⁴¹ “Expropriation,” *Words of a Rebel*, 207–8.

²⁴² “Municipal Socialism,” *Act for Yourselves*, 95–6. *Freedom* reported that Kropotkin “mocked... the doubts as to the abilities of the workers for self-organisation. In his opinion, every step of progress has come from the masses of the great unknown and not from the writers of books” (“The Commune Celebrations,” *Freedom*, April 1890).

²⁴³ As he put to those infatuated with propaganda by the deed: “A structure based on centuries of history cannot be destroyed with a few kilos of explosives” (quoted in Miller, *Kropotkin*, 174).

marked by such events as general strikes, uprisings, insurrections and so on). Indeed, he continually stressed that a revolution would face extensive problems, not least economic disruption:

Suppose we have entered a revolutionary period, with or without civil war – it does not matter, – a period when old institutions are falling into ruins and new ones are growing in their place. The movement may be limited to one State, or spread over the world, – it will have nevertheless the same consequence: an immediate slackening of individual enterprise all over Europe. Capital will conceal itself, and hundreds of capitalists will prefer to abandon their undertakings and go to watering-places rather than abandon their unfixed capital in industrial production. And we know how a restriction of production in any one branch of industry affects many others, and these in turn spread wider and wider the area of depression.

Already, at this moment, millions of those who have created all riches suffer from want of what must be considered *necessaries* for the life of a civilised man... Let the slightest commotion be felt in the industrial world, and it will take the shape of a general stoppage of work. Let the first attempt at expropriation be made, and the capitalist production of our days will at once come to a stop, and millions and millions of ‘unemployed’ will join the ranks of those who are already unemployed now.

More than that... The very first advance towards a Socialist society will imply a thorough reorganisation of industry as *to what we have to produce*. Socialism implies... a transformation of industry so that it may be adapted to the needs of the customer, not those of the profit-maker. Many a branch of industry must disappear, or limits its production; many a new one must develop. We are now producing a great deal for export. But the export trade will be the first to be reduced as soon as attempts at Social Revolution are made...

All that *can* be, and *will* be reorganised in time – not by the State, of course (why, then, not say by Providence?), but by the workers themselves...²⁴⁴

So Kropotkin was well aware that a revolution would face many problems, including the disruption of economic activity, civil war and isolation: “the reconstruction of Society in accordance with more equitable principles *will* necessitate a disturbed period.”²⁴⁵ Hence anarchists “do not believe that in any country the Revolution will be accomplished at a stroke, in the twinkling of an eye, as some socialists dream.” A “political revolution can be accomplished without shaking the foundations of industry, but a revolution where the people lay hands upon property will inevitably paralyse exchange and production... This point cannot be too much insisted upon; the reorganisation of industry on a new basis... cannot be accomplished in a few days.”²⁴⁶

As with many other aspects of anarchist theory, many Marxists are not aware of Kropotkin’s position. Marxist Bertell Ollman’s words are typical: “Unlike anarcho-communists, none of us

²⁴⁴ “The First Work of the Revolution,” *Act for Yourself*, 57–9. See also “Food” in *The Conquest of Bread* and “Rocks Ahead” in *Act For Yourself*.

²⁴⁵ “Revolution and Famine,” *Act For Yourself*, 67.

²⁴⁶ “Food,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 72–3, 81.

believe that communism will emerge full blown from a socialist revolution. Some kind of transition and period of indeterminate length for it to occur are required.”²⁴⁷ In reality, Kropotkin held no such position and recognised revolution as a long process: “It is a whole insurrectionary period of three, four, perhaps five years that we must traverse to accomplish our revolution in the property system and in social organisation.”²⁴⁸ The revolution would move towards communism over time:

we know that an *uprising* can overthrow and change a government in one day, while a *revolution* needs three or four years of revolutionary convulsion to arrive at tangible results... if we should expect the revolution, from its *earliest* insurrections, to have a communist character, we would have to relinquish the possibility of a revolution, since in that case there would be need of a strong majority to agree on carrying through a change in the direction of communism.²⁴⁹

So “the Revolution will take a different character in each of the different European nations; the point attained in the socialisation of wealth will not be everywhere the same.”²⁵⁰ It was by its very nature a learning process, and “by degrees, the revolutionary education of the people was being accomplished by the revolution itself.”²⁵¹

Given this, it is strange to claim that anarchists thought a “full blown” communist society was possible “overnight” given that anarchists had always stressed the difficulties facing a social revolution. Ironically, while Kropotkin was discussing the problems facing a revolution the Marxists of the time were suggesting the opposite. It took until 1920 and Nikolai Bukharin’s (infamous) *The Economics of the Transition Period* for Marxists to recognise this basic point. Bukharin noted four “real costs of revolution” and that “great revolutions were always accompanied by destructive civil wars.” This “may appear to have been an obvious point, but it apparently came as something of a revelation to many Bolsheviks. It directly opposed the prevailing Social Democratic assumption that the transition to socialism would be relatively painless... Profound or not, Bolsheviks generally came to accept the ‘law’ and to regard it as a significant discovery by Bukharin.”²⁵² The Bolsheviks sought to cope with this inevitable disruption by State coercion and centralism, which made matters much worse.

It was the very problems a revolutionary period would face which recommended the anarchist solution. Socialism could only be built from the bottom up and “the next revolution” will be “accomplished outside Parliament, by the free initiative of British workmen, who will take possession for themselves of capital, land, houses, and instruments of labour, and then combine in order to start life on new lines of local independence... No Parliament, however noisy, will help accomplish the Social Revolution... it is not to parliamentary rule that the revolted workmen will look for the economic and political reorganisation of the People.”²⁵³ Economically, this

²⁴⁷ *Market Socialism: The Debate among Socialists* (New York: Routledge, 1998), Bertell Ollman (ed.), 177.

²⁴⁸ “Revolutionary Minorities,” *Words of a Rebel*, 72.

²⁴⁹ quoted in Nettlau, 282–3.

²⁵⁰ “Food,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 81–2.

²⁵¹ *The Great French Revolution*, 241.

²⁵² Stephan F. Cohen, “In Praise of War Communism: Bukharin’s The Economics of the Transition Period,” *Revolution and politics in Russia: essays in memory of B.I. Nicolaevsky* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press for the International Affairs Center, 1973), Alexander and Janet Rabinowitch with Ladis K.D. Kristof (eds.), 195–6.

²⁵³ “Parliamentary Rule,” *Act For Yourselves*, 41.

meant that the “workers, the producers, must become the managers of the producing concern”²⁵⁴ and the expropriation of “everything that enables any man – be he financier, mill-owner, or landlord – to appropriate the product of others’ toil.” This meant “the property of the great landlords is socialised,” housing “taken over by the Commune,” industry “communalised” and turned over “to those who work in them.” In short: “oust the landowners, and hand over the mills and factories to the worker.”²⁵⁵ Politically, workers “would federate as soon as they would have broken the capitalist yoke in their own city.”²⁵⁶ Like Proudhon and Bakunin, Kropotkin argued this federation would be based on mandated and recallable delegates, not representatives:

The question of true delegation versus representation can be better understood if one imagines a hundred or two hundred men, who meet each day in their work and share common concerns... who have discussed every aspect of the question that concerns them and have reached a decision. They then choose someone and send him to reach an agreement with other delegates of the same kind... The delegate is not authorised to do more than explain to other delegates the considerations that have led his colleagues to their conclusion. Not being able to impose anything, he will seek an understanding and will return with a simple proposition which his mandatories can accept or refuse. This is what happens when true delegation comes into being; when the communes send their delegates to other communes, they need no other kind of mandate.²⁵⁷

Revolution was an immense work of social transformation. It could not be left to a few leaders, whether local or national. A revolutionary government would result in people “confiding in their governors, entrusted to them the charge of taking the initiative” rather than “acting for themselves” and “advancing in the direction of the new order of things.” Social change is the product of “the people in action” and “the brain of a few individuals [are] absolutely incapable of finding solutions” to the problems a revolt will face, solutions “which can only spring from the life of the people.” For anarchists, a revolution “is not a simple change of governors. It is the taking possession by the people of all social wealth” and this cannot be achieved “by decrees emanating from a government.” This “economic change” will be “so immense and so profound” that it is “impossible for one or any individual to elaborate the different social forms which must spring up in the society of the future. This elaboration of new social forms can only be made by the collective work of the masses” and “[a]ny authority external to it will only be an obstacle,” a “drag on the action of the people.” A revolutionary State, therefore, “becomes the greatest obsta-

²⁵⁴ *Freedom*, July 1917. The importance of workers’ management of production was proven during the Russian Revolution. As Maurice Brinton proved in “The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control” (*For Workers’ Power: The Selected Writings of Maurice Brinton* [Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2004], David Goodway (ed.)), Lenin had at best a vision of worker *supervision* of capitalists in transition towards socialism. This was quickly replaced by “dictatorial” one-man management so effectively placing industry (and the workers!) under the management (and so exploitation) of the State bureaucracy.

²⁵⁵ “Expropriation,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 61–3.

²⁵⁶ “Municipal Socialism,” *Act For Yourself*, 92.

²⁵⁷ “Representative Government,” *Words of a Rebel*, 133. This applies to all forms of social and economic organisation as the commune “no longer means a territorial agglomeration; it is rather a generic name, a synonym for the grouping of equals which knows neither frontiers nor walls” (“The Commune,” *Words of a Rebel*, 88).

cle to the revolution” and to “dislodge it” requires the people “to take up arms, to make another revolution.”²⁵⁸

This was the lesson of the Paris Commune, a revolt which Kropotkin analysed in detail and discussed many times. Central to his critique was that it retained a government within Paris whilst proclaiming the free federation of communes outwith. This was Bakunin’s position, who praised it as “a bold and outspoken negation of the State” but also noted that the Communards had set up “a revolutionary government” and so organised “themselves in reactionary Jacobin fashion, forgetting or sacrificing what they themselves knew were the first conditions of revolutionary socialism” rather than “by the free association or federation of workers, firstly in their unions, then in the communes, regions, nations and finally in a great federation, international and universal” organised “solely from the bottom upwards.”²⁵⁹

Kropotkin expanded upon Bakunin’s analysis, arguing that while “proclaiming the free Commune, the people of Paris proclaimed an essential anarchist principle” but “they stopped mid-course” and gave “themselves a Communal Council copied from the old municipal councils.” Thus the Paris Commune did not “break with the tradition of the State, of representative government, and it did not attempt to achieve within the Commune that organisation from the simple to the complex it inaugurated by proclaiming the independence and free federation of the Communes.” Isolated in the town hall, the Commune council became “immobilised... by red tape” and lost “the sensitivity that comes from continued contact with the masses... Paralysed by their distancing from the revolutionary centre – the people – they themselves paralysed the popular initiative.”²⁶⁰

The other major flaw in the Commune was that it “treated the economic question as a secondary one, which would be attended to later on, *after* the triumph of the Commune... But the crushing defeat which soon followed, and the blood-thirsty revenge taken by the middle class, proved once more that the triumph of a popular Commune was materially impossible without a parallel triumph of the people in the economic field.”²⁶¹

For Kropotkin, then, the lessons of the Paris Commune were fourfold. Firstly, a decentralised confederation of communities is the necessary political form of a free society, “the point of departure for future revolutions” and “the precise and visible aim of the revolution.”²⁶² Secondly, “if no central government was needed to rule the independent communes, if national government is thrown overboard and national unity is obtained by free federation, then a central *municipal* government becomes equally useless and noxious. The same federative principle would do

²⁵⁸ “Revolutionary Government,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 240, 241, 247–8, 248, 249, 241, 242.

²⁵⁹ *Michael Bakunin: Selected Writings*, 199, 202, 206. While many Marxists think of the Paris Commune as a soviet-like body, in fact, as Marx recorded, it was “formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal [male] suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms” (“The Civil War in France,” *Marx-Engels Collected Works* 22: 331).

²⁶⁰ “The Paris Commune,” *Words of a Rebel*, 97, 93, 97. As Leninist Donny Gluckstein notes, the Commune “founded a new focus of power” but admits that it was “overwhelmed” by suggestions from other bodies, the “sheer volume” of which “created difficulties” and it “found it hard to cope with the stream of people who crammed into the offices.” (*The Paris Commune: A Revolutionary Democracy* [London: Bookmarks, 2006], 185, 47–8) Sadly he fails to discuss the implications of this or draw any conclusions, unlike Kropotkin who noted that this “power” was simply not up to the task at hand. Unsurprisingly, Gluckstein’s account of the anarchist critique of the Commune is just as superficial as well as being confused and factually incorrect (see my “The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism,” *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* no. 50).

²⁶¹ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 74.

²⁶² “The Paris Commune,” *Words of a Rebel*, 90.

within the commune.”²⁶³ This meant the need for “a better means of agitating. The revolutionaries amongst the people appeared to understand that the Council of the Commune ought to be considered a useless show, a tribute paid to the traditions of the past; that the people not only should not disarm, but that they should maintain concurrently with the Council their intimate organisation, their federated groups, and that from these groups and not from the *Hotel de-Ville* should spring the necessary measures for the triumph of the revolution.”²⁶⁴ Any future Commune “must not repeat within itself the error of entrusting a few men with the management of all its affairs... It must organise itself on the principle of ‘no rulers’”²⁶⁵ and be based on a confederation of neighbourhood and workplace assemblies freely co-operating. Thirdly, it is critically important to unify political and economic revolutions into a *social* revolution: “They tried to consolidate the Commune first and put off the social revolution until later, whereas the only way to proceed was *to consolidate the Commune by means of the social revolution!*” Economic revolution had to start immediately for “the insurgent people will not wait for any old government in its marvellous wisdom to decree economic reforms. They will abolish individual property by themselves taking possession, in the name of the whole people and by violent expropriation of the whole of social wealth... they will take possession and establish their rights of usufruct immediately. They will organise the workshops so that they will continue production.”²⁶⁶ Fourthly, the rebelled communes needed to federate: “Let each commune free itself first; then the freed communes will be brought to unite their efforts.” Thus “each city, each village, was free to join the movement” and create “great federations of revolted communes.”²⁶⁷

Given this we can see how false it was of Lenin to assert that “the best of the anarchists” argued that we “must think *only* of destroying the old State machine; it is no use probing into the *concrete* lessons of earlier proletarian revolutions and analysing *what* to put in the place of what has been destroyed, and *how*.”²⁶⁸ No anarchist thinker has ever proclaimed such nonsense. Kropotkin analysed numerous revolutions, particularly the Paris Commune, precisely to learn their lessons. Ironically, while it took Lenin until 1917 to advocate the soviets as the basis of a socialist State, libertarians in Russia saw their potential over a decade before. The syndicalists “regarded the soviets... as admirable versions of the *bourses du travail*, but with a revolutionary function added to suit Russian conditions. Open to all leftist workers regardless of specific political affiliation, the soviets were to act as nonpartisan labour councils improvised ‘from below’... with the aim of bringing down the old regime.” Kropotkin was associated with the anarchists of *Khleb i Volya* (*Bread and Freedom*) who “also likened the 1905 Petersburg Soviet – as a non-party mass organisation – to the central committee of the Paris Commune of 1871.”²⁶⁹ In 1907 anarchists concluded

²⁶³ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 163–164.

²⁶⁴ *Revolutionary Studies*, 29–30. The Council “appeared increasingly incompetent or insufficiently revolutionary, clubs and committees became the vehicles for the assertion of direct sovereignty by means of association... Had the Commune managed to last longer it is certain that Leftist factions of the clubs and committees and the National Guard would have posed serious, organised opposition to the Communal Council.” (Martin Phillip Johnson, *The paradise of association: political culture and popular organizations in the Paris Commune of 1871* [Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996], 162–3) Before and during the Commune, there were attempts to federate various clubs and assemblies (such as the Delegation of the Twenty Arrondissements). These would have, eventually, produced a federal structure within the commune itself as the limitations of the Council became clear.

²⁶⁵ “A General View,” *Act For Yourselves*, 80.

²⁶⁶ “The Paris Commune,” *Words of a Rebel*, 94, 97, 99.

²⁶⁷ “The Paris Commune,” *Freedom*, April 1887.

²⁶⁸ “The State and Revolution,” *Collected Works* 25: 488.

²⁶⁹ Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*, 80–1.

that the revolution required “the proclamation in villages and towns of workers’ communes with soviets... at their head.”²⁷⁰

So Lenin, typically, reversed the facts – it was Marxists who were notoriously silent on the nature of socialist revolution while anarchists had written extensively on the subject.²⁷¹ This was because “there are periods in human development when a conflict is unavoidable, and civil war breaks out quite independently of the will of particular individuals” and the question was “how to attain the greatest results with the most limited amount of civil war, the smallest number of victims, and a minimum of mutual embitterment.” To achieve this there was “only one means; namely, that the oppressed part of society should obtain the clearest possible conception of what they intend to achieve, and how, and that they should be imbued with the enthusiasm which is necessary for that achievement.”²⁷²

Needless to say, while trying to learn the lessons of past revolutions Kropotkin was clear that we must not try to repeat the past. Echoing a similar warning made by Proudhon at the start of the 1848 revolution, he stressed the need to look forwards:

Even at the time the revolutionary fever seized the people they did not seek their ideal in the future. They sought it in the past.

Instead of dreaming of a *new* revolution they sighed for those of the past. In 1793 they dreamed of establishing a Rome or an ancient Sparta. In 1848 they wished to re-commence at 1792. In 1848 they admired in secret the Jacobins of 1793. The German revolutionary of our days dreams of reproducing 1848, and the executive committee of Petersburg take Blanqui and Barbès for their ideal.

Even in constructing an Utopia of future life, none dare break through the laws of antiquity. Ancient Rome presses with all its weight on our century.”²⁷³

So while the autonomous federated commune was the basic unit of a free society, how this would be structured would vary according to circumstances. Thus Kropotkin pointed to both the neighbourhood based sections of the French Revolution and the workplace soviets of the Russian. The common feature was that they were popular organisations built and run from below for to “make a revolution it is not... enough that there should be... risings... It is necessary that after the risings there should be something new in the institutions” that make up society, “which would permit new forms of life to be elaborated and established.”²⁷⁴ These new bodies would

²⁷⁰ quoted in Alexandre Skirda, *Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organisation from Proudhon to May 1968* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2002), 77.

²⁷¹ This was, in part, caused by Marx’s stated unwillingness to write the “recipes... for the cook-shops of the future.” (“Postface to the Second Edition,” *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* [London: Penguin Books, 1976] 1: 99). Another reason was the poverty of their visions. Lenin, for example, suggested that the postal service, in which workers are usually employed by the State under capitalism, was “an example of the socialist economic system” and argued that we needed to “organise the *whole* economy on the lines of the postal service” (“The State and Revolution,” *Collected Works* 25: 426–7). Kropotkin, in contrast, argued that working class bodies like trade unions taking into their “hands the management of production” and co-operatives “for production and for distribution, both in industry and agriculture” were “partial experiments” expressing aspects of “communist society.” This was because “Socialist forms of life could find a much easier realisation” by means of these bodies “than by a State organisation” (“Preface,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 22–23).

²⁷² *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 270–1.

²⁷³ *Revolutionary Studies*, 11.

²⁷⁴ *The Great French Revolution*, 180.

not be perfect in every way and the role of anarchists would be to work within these popular organisations to push them in a libertarian direction:

We do not believe that these Communes will make a full application of our Anarchist principles. But we do believe that while the revolution will be the result of all revolutionary parties, our ideas, our teachings also will have their effect. There surely will be less reliance upon authority, and very much more upon our own efforts.

We may be sure that as soon as separate groups of workers are able to alter the present bad system, they will try to do so. If they can take possession of a factory they will. And from these separate efforts will result the revolution, extending its sphere, co-ordinating and combining the separate acts.²⁷⁵

Lenin is also responsible for many Marxists believing that anarchists have no notion that a revolution needs to be defended.²⁷⁶ In reality Kropotkin (like Bakunin before him) recognised that it “is self-evident that” the ruling classes “will not let themselves be expropriated without opposing resistance.”²⁷⁷ This necessitated both insurrection and the defence of the revolution as “only an armed populace” can oppose counter-revolution by means of “the armament of entire unions, the expedient distribution of duties to unions and so on.”²⁷⁸ So if “armed brigands attack a people, is not that same people, armed with good weapons, the surest rampart to oppose to the foreign aggressor?” Invaders can only “be repulsed by a popular rising alone.”²⁷⁹

Kropotkin’s vision of revolution was based on the arming of the people: “the French people will seize the arms, and when the people of Paris is armed it acts. And its act will be the proclamation of the Commune.”²⁸⁰ Freedom had to be defended and a “people who know how to organise the accumulation of wealth and its reproduction in the interest of the whole of society, no longer need to be governed. A people who will itself be the armed force of the country and who will know how to give to armed citizens the necessary cohesion and unity of action will no longer need to be commanded.”²⁸¹ This applied to both the creation and the defence of a free society:

The only way in which a state of Anarchy can be obtained is for each man who is oppressed to act as if he were at liberty, in defiance of all authority to the contrary... In speaking of the Revolution, we signify the aggregate of so many successful individual and group revolts as will enable every person within the revolutionised territory to act in perfect freedom... without having to constantly dread the prevention or

²⁷⁵ “Past and Future,” *Freedom*, April 1889.

²⁷⁶ See section H.2.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (volume 2) for a discussion of anarchist ideas on defending a revolution and why a federation of communes and their voluntary militias are not a State.

²⁷⁷ “Municipal Socialism,” *Act for Yourself*, 95.

²⁷⁸ “Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 65.

²⁷⁹ *The Place of Anarchism in Socialistic Evolution: Address delivered in Paris* (London: William Reeves, 1887), 10.

²⁸⁰ “Past and Future,” *Freedom*, April 1889.

²⁸¹ *Revolutionary Studies*, 30. While not explicitly stating so, it is clear that Kropotkin had in mind the popular volunteer armies of the French Revolution which were based on “the system of the election of officers by the soldiers themselves.” This ensured the “reorganising” of the Republic’s “army on a democratic basis.” These “*sans-culotte* armies” needed “all the genius of the Revolution and all the youthful audacity of a people awakened from its long sleep, all the faith of the revolutionists in a future of equality, to persist, in the Titanic struggle which the *sans-culottes* had to carry on against the invaders and the traitors.” (*The Great French Revolution*, 380, 462).

the vengeance of an opposing power upholding the former system... Under these circumstance it is obvious that any visible reprisal could and would be met by a resumption of the same revolutionary action on the part of the individuals or groups affected, and that the *maintenance* of a state of Anarchy in this manner would be far easier than the gaining of a state of Anarchy by the same methods and in the face of hitherto unshaken opposition.²⁸²

As Kropotkin stressed: “When it comes to a struggle, in every town and in every village, against the forces of the old *régime*, which, after a moment of stupor, reorganise themselves to stop the revolution – it is only the impulse of the revolutionists on the spot which can overcome that powerful resistance.”²⁸³

This recognition of the need of violence by the oppressed to end the systemic violence of class society and defend themselves against those seeking to re-enslave them did not mean Kropotkin favoured violence for its own sake. He was very clear that revolutionary terror was not an instrument for liberation: “Very sad would be the future of the revolution if it could only triumph by terror.”²⁸⁴ This was the lesson of the French Revolution for the “revolutionary tribunal and the guillotine could not make up for the lack of a constructive communist theory.”²⁸⁵ His warnings were proven right by the Bolshevik regime, where the Red Terror did not deter the (far worse) White Terror but was also used by the new regime against the workers and peasants to secure its hold on power.²⁸⁶

In summary, Kropotkin’s vision of revolution is a realistic account that squarely faces problems and presents concrete solutions to them. Anarchists, moreover, can point to various revolutionary events that support this conclusion. During the Russian Revolution the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine successfully applied anarchist ideas while fighting both White and Red tyranny. While the Bolsheviks disbanded soviets, broke strikes, repressed socialist opposition groups, abolished democracy in the military and imposed “dictatorial” one-man management in the workplace, the Makhnovists protected freedom of speech and organisation, called soviet congresses, encouraged workers’ self-management of production and maintained army democracy.²⁸⁷ In the Spanish Revolution, libertarians successfully expropriated workplaces and applied

²⁸² “The Permanence of Society After the Revolution,” *Act for Yourself*, 87–8.

²⁸³ *The Great French Revolution*, 247.

²⁸⁴ “The people do not reign by terror,” Kropotkin continued. Terror, “serves, above all, the governing classes. It prepares the ground for the less scrupulous of them” and “serves no other end... than to forge chains for the people. It kills individual initiative, which is the soul of revolutions; it perpetuates the idea of obedience to a strong government. It prepares the dictatorship which throttles the revolutionary tribunal.” (*Revolutionary Studies*, 16–17).

²⁸⁵ *The Great French Revolution*, 499.

²⁸⁶ As Lenin expounded to a conference of his Political Police, the Cheka, in 1920: “Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves.” (*Collected Works* 42: 170) Details of the Bolshevik repression of working class protest from early 1918 to 1921 can be found in section H.6.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (volume 2).

²⁸⁷ See Peter Arshinov’s *The History of the Makhnovist Movement 1918–1921* (London: Freedom Press, 2005) or Alexandre Skirda’s *Nestor Makhno Anarchy’s Cossack: The struggle for free soviets in the Ukraine 1917–1921* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2004) for details.

workers' self-management, created rural collectives and a self-managed militia to fight Franco's forces while maintaining extensive freedom for non-fascist groups.²⁸⁸

On Anarchy and Communism

While recognising there were different forms of anarchism and the need for free experimentation, Kropotkin also argued that a free society, one that abolished private property, had "to organise itself on the lines of Communistic Anarchy. Anarchy leads to Communism, and Communism to Anarchy" if you are serious in "the pursuit of equality."²⁸⁹ He spent as much time explaining why communism (distribution according to need rather than deed) was the best economic form to secure the maximum of individual liberty as well as for anarchy (the necessity for decentralisation, federalism, free agreement and self-management).

Communist-anarchist society would be based on "voluntary associations" which would "represent an interwoven network, composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations of all sizes and degrees, local, regional, national and international temporary or more or less permanent – for all possible purposes: production, consumption and exchange, communications, sanitary arrangements, education, mutual protection, defence of the territory, and so on; and, on the other side, for the satisfaction of an ever-increasing number of scientific, artistic, literary and sociable needs."²⁹⁰ A free society (by definition) would be created from below, by the masses themselves, and so reflect the wishes of those who create it:

A question which we are often asked is: "How will you organise the future society on Anarchist principles?" If the question were put to... someone who fancies that a group of men is able to organise society as they like, it would seem natural. But in the ears of an Anarchist, it sounds very strangely, and the only answer we can give to it is: 'We cannot organise you. It will depend upon *you* what sort of organisation you choose."²⁹¹

Thus "after a certain period of fumbling a new form of organisation of production and exchange, limited at first but later widespread; and this form will correspond much more to popular aspirations and to the demands of life and of mutual relations than to any theory – however beautiful it may be – which is worked out either by the thought and imagination of reformers or by the labours of any kind of legislative body". This, however, did not stop Kropotkin "predicting right now that" in areas influenced by anarchists "the bases of this new organisation" will be "the free federation of producer groups and the free federation of communes and of groups of independent communes."²⁹²

So while the specifics of a free society would be worked out based on the wishes of those creating it and the objective circumstances they face, a free society had to have some basic features to qualify as such. This included socialisation of wealth, self-management of production by

²⁸⁸ See section I.8 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (volume 2) for details. Space precludes a discussion of the Spanish anarchists beyond noting that the revolution failed because they did not apply all their ideas (due to fears of isolation and the threat of Franco). In contrast, the Russian Revolution failed precisely because the Bolsheviks *did* apply their theories.

²⁸⁹ "Anarchist Communism," *The Conquest of Bread*, 45.

²⁹⁰ "Anarchism," *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 284.

²⁹¹ "Act for Yourselfes," *Act for Yourselfes*, 32.

²⁹² "The Anarchist Idea from the Point of View of its Practical Realisation," *Freedom*, 25th February 1967.

workers, communal self-government, federalism and free agreement. Without these individual liberty would be reduced, as it was under capitalism, to picking masters.²⁹³

Libertarian communism was “the best basis for individual development and freedom; not that individualism which drives men to the war of each against all” but “that which represents the full expansion of man’s faculties, the superior development of what is original in him, the greatest fruitfulness of intelligence, feeling and will.” This was because the “most powerful development of individuality, of individual originality” can “only be produced when the first needs of food and shelter are satisfied” and “when man’s time is no longer taken up by the meaner side of daily subsistence, – then only, his intelligence, his artistic taste, his inventive spirit, his genius, can develop freely and ever strive to greater achievements.”²⁹⁴

Thus the aim was “a society of equals, who will not be compelled to sell their hands and their brains to those who choose to employ them... but who will be able to apply their knowledge and capacities to production, in an organism so constructed as to combine all the efforts for procuring the greatest possible well-being for all, while full, free scope will be left for every individual initiative.”²⁹⁵ So a revolution “is more than a mere change of the prevailing political system... It is a revolution in the minds of men, as deep, and deeper still, than in their institutions... the sole fact of having laid hands on middle-class property will imply the necessity of completely re-organising the whole of economic life in the workplaces, the dockyards, the factories.”²⁹⁶

Economically, the aim of communist-anarchism was “the socialisation of wealth and integrated labour combined with the fullest possible freedom of the individual.”²⁹⁷ The commune “shall take possession of all the soil, the dwelling-houses, the manufactures, the mines and the means of communication” and the “free organisations of workers would be able to carry on production on the farm and on the factory, as well [as], and probably much better, than it is conducted now under the individual ownership of the capitalist.”²⁹⁸ A free economy existed only when “associations of men and women who would work on the land, in the factories, in the mines, and so on, became themselves the managers of production.”²⁹⁹ As he summarised: “Free workers, on free land, with free machinery, and freely using all the powers given to man by science.”³⁰⁰

This vision of a socialised economy based on workers’ self-management was similar to that expounded by Proudhon and Bakunin. Kropotkin, however, extended socialisation to the products created by these socialised means of production and while not the first to advocate it, he was instrumental in winning most anarchists to communism. Given that communism has been advocated by authoritarians before and after Kropotkin, it is important to stress that all that is meant by the term is distribution according to need.³⁰¹ It does *not* imply a commitment to central planning (as in the USSR), quite the reverse as communism “must result from thousands of

²⁹³ Space excludes covering all aspects of a libertarian communist society. Section I of *An Anarchist FAQ* (volume 2) discusses many of the issues in more detail.

²⁹⁴ “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 141

²⁹⁵ *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 372.

²⁹⁶ “The Decentralisation of Industry,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 192.

²⁹⁷ “Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 54.

²⁹⁸ “Communism and the Wage System: Expropriation,” *Act for Yourselves*, 104, 103.

²⁹⁹ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 78.

³⁰⁰ “Communist-Anarchism,” *Act for Yourselves*, 102.

³⁰¹ As Kropotkin noted, “before and in 1848, the theory was put forward in such a shape as to fully account for Proudhon’s distrust as to its effect upon liberty. The old idea of Communism was the idea of monastic communities under the severe rule of elders or of men of science for directing priests. The last vestiges of liberty and of individual

separate local actions, all directed towards the same aim. It cannot be dictated by a central body: it must result from the numberless local needs and wants.”³⁰²

Kropotkin favoured distribution according to a person’s needs rather their deeds for three reasons:

First, because “in the present state of industry, when everything is interdependent, when each branch of production is knit up with all the rest, the attempt to claim an individualist origin for the products of industry is untenable.” So it “is utterly impossible to draw a distinction between the work of each” and to “estimate the share of each in the riches which *all* contribute to amass”³⁰³ Modern production is collective and each task is an important as another for if one is not done the whole suffers.

Second, there is the logical contradiction of the abolition of property in the means of production and a “system of remuneration for work done” in consumption. It is “evident that a society cannot be based on two absolutely opposed principles, two principles that contradict one another continually.” How can labour-money be advocated “when we admit that houses, fields, and factories will no longer be private property, and that they will belong to the commune or the nation?”³⁰⁴ So the “common possession of the instruments of labour must necessarily bring with it the enjoyment in common of the fruits of common labour.” Thus a “new form of property requires a new form of remuneration. A new method of production cannot exist side by side with the old forms of consumption, any more than it can adapt itself to the old forms of political organisation.”³⁰⁵

Third, there was the question of justice. It was simply fairer to share according to need as work done did not take into account the many factors that impact on a person’s ability to work. Thus “a man of forty, father of three children, has other needs than a young man of twenty” and “the woman who suckles her infant and spends sleepless nights at its bedside, cannot do as much *work* as the man who has slept peacefully.” Moreover, “the needs of the individual, do not always correspond to his *works*.” This is obviously the case with children, the sick and the elderly and so we should “put the *needs* above the *works*, and first of all to recognise *the right to live*, and later on *the right to well-being* for all those who took their share in production.”³⁰⁶ In short, “the labour cheque of the economist acts in the same way [as wages]; he does not care about the needs of the family, and pays twice as much to the girl who has worked twice as many hours as the mother, in total disregard of the fact that for society as a whole the mother is giving twice as much labour.”³⁰⁷

So modern industry, logic and justice implied communism and a society where “every member of the community knows that after a few hours of productive toil he will have a right to all the

energy would be destroyed, if humanity ever had to go through such a communism” (“Communist-Anarchism,” *Act for Yourselves*, 98).

³⁰² “Practical Questions,” *Act for Yourselves*, 54.

³⁰³ “The Collectivist Wages System,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 170.

³⁰⁴ “The Collectivist Wages System,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 161.

³⁰⁵ “Anarchist Communism,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 46.

³⁰⁶ “The Collectivist Wages System,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 170, 171.

³⁰⁷ “Communism and the Wage System – The New Wage-System: or Payment by Results,” *Act for Yourselves*, 108–9.

pleasures that civilisation procures, and to those deeper sources of enjoyment which art and science offer to all who seek them.”³⁰⁸ Anarchist communism would be based on the following principles:

We undertake to give you the use of our houses, stores, streets, means of transport, schools, museums, etc., on condition that, from twenty to forty-five or fifty years of age, you consecrate four or five hours a day to some work recognised as necessary to existence. Choose yourself the producing group which you wish to join, or organise a new group, provided that it will undertake to produce necessaries. And as for the remainder of your time, combine together with whomsoever you like, for recreation, art, or science, according to the bent of your taste... Twelve or fifteen hundred hours of work a year is all we ask of you. For that amount of work we guarantee to you the free use of all that these groups produce, or will produce.³⁰⁹

Anarchist-Communism would have wider implications. Industry would be transformed and become “airy and hygienic, and consequently economical, factories in which human life is of more account than machinery and the making of extra profits.”³¹⁰ This applied to the structure of industry as well, for “production, having lost sight of the *needs* of man, has strayed in an absolutely wrong direction” and “its organisation is at fault... let us... reorganise production so as to really satisfy all needs.”³¹¹ Based on a detailed analysis of current economic statistics and trends, Kropotkin argued that this meant a “scattering of industries over the country – so as to bring the factory amidst the fields... agriculture... combined with industry... to produce a combination of industrial with agricultural work.” This was “surely the next step to be made, as soon as a reorganisation of our present conditions is possible” and “is imposed by the very necessity of *producing for the producers themselves*.”³¹² Thus:

Have the factory and the workshop at the gates of your fields and gardens, and work in them. Not those large establishments, of course, in which huge masses of metals have to be dealt with and which are better placed at certain spots indicated by Nature, but the countless variety of workshops and factories which are required to satisfy the infinite diversity of tastes among civilised men... factories and workshops which men, women and children will not be driven by hunger, but will be attracted by the desire of finding an activity suited to their tastes, and where, aided by the motor and the machine, they will choose the branch of activity which best suits their inclinations.³¹³

This perspective flowed naturally from Kropotkin’s awareness that industry, technology and the structure of both were the products of a society and economy marked by classes and hierarchy.

³⁰⁸ “Expropriation,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 61. As indicated above, Kropotkin was well aware that it may not be possible to introduce full communism immediately after a social revolution although he was sure that “some sort of partial Communism” and “this first step towards Communism will compel” the workers “to go further in the same direction” (“Communism and the Wage System – The New Wage-System: or Payment by Results,” *Act For Yourself*, 113).

³⁰⁹ “Objections,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 153–4.

³¹⁰ *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, 417.

³¹¹ “Consumption and Production,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 176.

³¹² *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, 361.

³¹³ *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, 417.

This meant that all were shaped by what was considered efficient by the criteria of the owning class. Since the workplace is “a strictly private enterprise, its owners find it advantageous to have all the branches of a given industry under their own management: they thus cumulate the profits of the successful transformations of the raw material.” However, “from a *technical* point of view the advantages of such an accumulation are trifling and often doubtful.” Thus “the ‘concentration’ so much spoken of is often nothing but an amalgamation of capitalists for the purpose of *dominating the market*, not for cheapening the technical process.”³¹⁴

Thus socialisation necessitated industry being decentralised and integrated with agriculture, both organised at an *appropriate* level. The notion that Kropotkin aimed for small, self-sufficient, communes is a misunderstanding of his ideas.³¹⁵ Industry, he argued, would come to the village “not in its present shape of a capitalist factory” but “in the shape of a socially organised industrial production, with the full aid of machinery and technical knowledge.” This, however, was in the context of advocating the use of appropriate sizes of workplaces based on the technical needs of production: “if we analyse the modern industries, we soon discover that for some of them the co-operation of hundred, even thousands, of workers gathered at the same spot is really necessary. The great iron works and mining enterprises decidedly belong to that category; oceanic steamers cannot be built in village factories.”³¹⁶ Federalism would ensure a *rational* decentralisation and co-operation so if an industry or workplace needed to be organised on a large-scale it would continue to be.

So while industry would be expropriated by its workers and managed by them, the revolution did not stop there. Its long-term goal would be to transform the industrial structure, not keep it as it is. Unlike Lenin, Kropotkin recognised that the industrial structure developed within capitalism could not be simply taken over and ran in the interests of all.³¹⁷ A successful revolution would need to start transforming industry shaped by the necessities of profit-making by the few as this cannot, by definition, be one suitable for meeting the needs of all. A socialist economy cannot have as its aim *increasing* the centralisation and concentration of technology, industry and industrial structure produced within class society to secure the profits and power of the few. As the Bolshevik revolution showed, this simply placed industry under the control of a new class – the bureaucracy.³¹⁸

³¹⁴ *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, 353–4.

³¹⁵ According to Leninist Paul Stack, Kropotkin wanted a society based on “small autonomous communities, devoted to small scale production” and “looked backwards for change.” Showing his grasp of the subject, Stack also proclaimed that for the Russian, “class conflict is not the motor of change, the working class is not the agent and collective struggle not the means”! (“Anarchy in the UK?,” *Socialist Review*, No. 246).

³¹⁶ *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, 349, 352.

³¹⁷ State capitalism, Lenin wrote in May 1917, “is a complete *material* preparation for socialism, the threshold of socialism.” Socialism “is nothing but the next step forward from State capitalist monopoly” and is “merely State-capitalist monopoly *which is made to serve the interests of the whole people* and has to that extent *ceased* to be capitalist monopoly.” When “the separate establishments are amalgamated into a single syndicate, this economy [of production] can attain tremendous proportions, as economic science teaches us.” (“The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat it,” *Collected Works* 25: 358–9, 344) However, the growth of large-scale industry within capitalism is based on a *capitalist* criterion of economy and the structures it creates reflect this. “Are the means now in use for satisfying human needs, under... production for profit, really *economical*?” asked Kropotkin. They have “never took into consideration the economical and social value of the human being” and so do they “really lead to economy in the expenditure of human forces?” (*Fields, Factories and Workshops*, 410–1).

³¹⁸ The Bolsheviks created the Supreme Economic Council (*Vesenka*) in December of 1917, and “was widely acknowledged by them as a move towards ‘statisation’ (*ogosudarstvenniye*) of economic authority.” It began “to build,

So a free society would start to restructure its industry to reflect human needs and, Kropotkin argued, this would see *integration* predominate:

a society of integrated, combined labour. A society where each individual is a producer of both manual and intellectual work; where each able-bodied human being is a worker, and where each worker works both in the field and the industrial workshop; where every aggregation of individuals, large enough to dispose of a certain variety of natural resources – it may be a nation, or rather a region – produces and itself consumes most of its own agricultural and manufactured produce.³¹⁹

This did not mean that individuals or regions would do everything. Some regions simply do not have the necessary conditions for certain industries or agricultural produce and so the “geographical distribution of industries in a given country depends... to a great extent upon a complexus of natural conditions; it is obvious that there are spots which are best suited for the development of certain industries.” Similarly, people would pick activities that interest them. “It is evident,” noted Kropotkin, “that all men and women cannot equally enjoy the pursuit of scientific work. The variety of inclinations is such that some will find more pleasure in science, some others in art, and others again in some of the numberless branches of the production of wealth.”³²⁰

This indicates a wider point. Liberating work and restructuring industry, however important, was a means to an end, namely to secure the material means by which individuals can express their individuality as they see fit:

we must recognise that man has other needs besides food, and as the strength of Anarchy lies precisely in that it understands *all* human faculties and *all* passions, and ignores none, we shall... contrive to satisfy all his intellectual and artistic needs... He will discharge his task in the field, the factory, and so on, which he owes to society as his contribution to the general production. And he will employ the second half of his day, his week, or his year, to satisfy his artistic or scientific needs, or his hobbies.³²¹

Associations will be created for all human interests and activities. So as well as meeting basic needs “we expect more from the Revolution,” to provide all with “the higher delights... of science, and especially of scientific discovery; of art, and especially artistic creation” as well as “to give

from the top, its ‘unified administration’ of particular industries. The pattern is informative” as it “gradually took over” the Tsarist State agencies “and converted them... into administrative organs subject to [its] direction and control.” The Bolsheviks “clearly opted” for the taking over of “the institutions of bourgeois economic power and use them to their own ends.” This system “necessarily implies the perpetuation of hierarchical relations within production itself, and therefore the perpetuation of class society.” (Maurice Brinton, “The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control,” *For Workers’ Power*, 323, 335, 324) As discussed in section H.6.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (volume 2), this centralised economic regime completely mismanaged the economy and made the problems facing the revolution much worse. In short, the problems Kropotkin had identified in the Paris Commune were repeated on a far greater scale, both economically and politically.

³¹⁹ *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, 23.

³²⁰ *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, 355, 406. Anarchists “fully recognise the necessity of specialisation of knowledge, but we maintain that specialisation must follow general education, and that general education must be given in science and handicraft alike. To the division of society into brain workers and manual workers we oppose the combination of both kinds of activities.” So “while a *temporary* division of functions remains the surest guarantee of success in each separate undertaking, the *permanent* division is doomed to disappear, and to be substituted by a variety of pursuits – intellectual, industrial, and agricultural – corresponding to the different capacities of the individual, as well as to the variety of capacities within every human aggregate” (369, 22).

³²¹ “The Need for Luxury,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 110–1.

leisure and the possibility of developing everyone's intellectual capacities" and so "[a]fter bread has been secured, leisure is the supreme aim."³²² These needs would be met by free association:

He who wishes for a grand piano will enter the association of musical instrument makers. And by giving the association part of his half-days' leisure, he will soon possess the piano of his dreams. If he is fond of astronomical studies he will join the association of astronomers... and he will have the telescope he desires by taking his share of the associated work... In short, the five or seven hours a day which each will have at his disposal, after having consecrated several hours to the production of necessities, would amply suffice to satisfy all longings for luxury, however varied. Thousands of associations would undertake to supply them.³²³

This expression of individuality was key. Communism, for Kropotkin, did *not* imply communal living in the sense of one big family. This was "repugnant to millions of human beings. The most reserved man certainly feels the necessity of meeting his fellows for the purpose of common work... But it is not so for the hours of leisure, reserved for rest and intimacy." Communal living in the sense of everyone living under one roof "can please some, and even all at a certain period of their life, but the great mass prefers family life (family life of the future, be it understood). They prefer isolated apartments." Such a regime (as desired by the so-called Utopian Socialists) "would be hateful, were it the general rule. Isolation, alternating with time spent in society, is the normal desire of human nature."³²⁴ Thus the aim is "Communism, but not the monastic or barrack-room Communism formerly advocated [by utopian or State socialists], but the free Communism which places the products reaped or manufactured at the disposal of all, leaving to each the liberty to consume them as he pleases in his own home."³²⁵

Equally, Kropotkin rejected the idea of people being forced to join communes. An anarchist revolution "would take care not to touch the holding of the peasant who cultivates it himself with his children and without wage labour. But we would expropriate all land that was not cultivated by the hands of those who at present possess the land."³²⁶ So an independent worker would be free to work for themselves as he "exploits nobody, and nobody would have the right to interfere with his work" and so "we see no use in taking the tools... to give to another worker."³²⁷

Anarchy cannot exist without a socialist economic system as "political equality is possible only where there is economical equality; that the labourer who tills the ground for the landlord never will be the political equal of the landlord, nor the factory worker the equal of his employer, nor the ruled the equal of the ruler." This meant that "unity within each Commune will not exist as long as there are within that Commune the rich possessor of wealth and the hired labourer" and so that means "the common possession by the whole of the Commune of all its wealth: houses and gardens, fields and streets, manufactories and railways." Only then will people "be equal economically and politically. And then they will be *free*."³²⁸ Both were inevitably linked:

³²² "The Need for Luxury," *The Conquest of Bread*, 108.

³²³ "The Need for Luxury," *The Conquest of Bread*, 120.

³²⁴ "Agreeable Work," *The Conquest of Bread*, 123-4.

³²⁵ *The Place of Anarchism in Socialistic Evolution*, 7.

³²⁶ "Expropriation," *Words of a Rebel*, 214.

³²⁷ "Communism and the Wage System: Expropriation," *Act for Yourselves*, 104-5.

³²⁸ "A General View," *Act for Yourselves*, 78, 79, 80.

A new economic phase demands a new political phase. A revolution as profound as that dreamed of by the socialists cannot accept the mould of an out-dated political life. A new society based on equality of condition, on the collective possession of the instruments of work, cannot tolerate for a week... the representative system... if we want the social revolution, we must seek a form of political organisation that will correspond to the new method of economic organisation... The future belongs to the free groupings of interests and not to governmental centralisation; it belongs to freedom and not to authority.³²⁹

The social structure of an anarchist society will be the opposite of the current system. Instead of being centralised and hierarchical as in a State, it will be decentralised and organised from the bottom up. A “new form of political organisation has to be worked out the moment that socialist principles shall enter our life” and this “will have to be *more popular, more decentralised*” and so “socialism must become *more popular*, more communalistic, and less dependent upon indirect government through elected representatives. It must become more *self-governing*.”³³⁰ Unity would be achieved by means of federalism and so the commune “cannot admit any higher authority: above it there can only be the interests of the Federation, freely accepted by itself as well as the other Communes.”³³¹ The nation “of the future will be the federation of these free organisms, economically and politically free. Slaves cannot easily federate; free men can and do.”³³²

Kropotkin did not think communes would crush individuality, quite the reverse. Anarchism aimed to “rouse the spirit of initiative in individuals and in groups,” to “create in their mutual relations a movement and a life based on the principles of free understanding” and recognise that “*variety, conflict even, is life and that uniformity is death*.”³³³ “Nothing is more contrary to the real spirit of Anarchy than uniformity and intolerance,” he argued. “Freedom of development implies difference of development, hence difference of ideas and actions.” Experience, then, is “the best teacher, and the necessary experience can only be gained by entire freedom of action.”³³⁴

Nor was Kropotkin naïve enough to think there would be no anti-social (or “criminal”) acts in a free society. Freedom had to be defended, whether from counter-revolution, individuals coercing others or someone “drawing from society all that he can, and monopolising from others as much as possible.” If anti-social acts occurred then the rest of the community “have it in their power to apply a prompt check by boycotting such a person and refusing to help him with their labour or to willingly supply him with any articles in their possession. They have it in their power to use force against him. They have these powers individually as well as collectively. Being either past rebels who have been inspired with the spirit of liberty, or else habituated to enjoy freedom from their infancy, they are hardly to rest passive in view of what they feel to be wrong.”³³⁵ Solidarity and mutual aid would both create anarchy and preserve it: “No more laws! No more

³²⁹ “Representative Government,” *Words of a Rebel*, 143–4.

³³⁰ “Modern Science and Anarchism,” 184, 185.

³³¹ “The Commune,” *Words of a Rebel*, 83.

³³² “A General View,” *Act for Yourselves*, 80.

³³³ “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 143.

³³⁴ quoted in Ruth Kinna, “Fields of Vision: Kropotkin and Revolutionary Change,” *SubStance* 36: 2, 81.

³³⁵ “The Permanence of Society After the Revolution,” *Act for Yourselves*, 88.

judges! Liberty, equality, and practical human sympathy are the most effective barriers we can oppose to the anti-social instinct of certain among us.”³³⁶

Kropotkin did not think that communist-anarchism would be a perfect society – far from it. It simply aimed for “well-being for all” and “the possibility of living like human beings” in a “society better than ours.” It is “high time for the worker to assert his right to the common inheritance, and to enter into possession of it.”³³⁷

Conclusion

While we anarchists, rightly, reject calling our ideas after individuals we can recognise the contributions of those, like Kropotkin, who helped enrich the commonwealth of ideas which is anarchism. Particularly, as with Kropotkin, when their analysis is so powerful and their conclusions still ring true in area after area.

Capitalism is still an exploitative system in which the labour of the many enrich the few. It is still oppressive and based on the worker selling their liberty to gain access to the means of production and the land. The State still exists to defend this economic system and any social-democratic reforms simply blunt its worst excesses to keep the system going. Working class people still need to create their own mutual aid institutions (particularly given the onslaught on the welfare State by politicians seeking to appease their wealthy backers). In terms of current action, Kropotkin’s call for anarchists to take part in popular movements to influence them in libertarian direction is still correct:

We are to organise the workers’ forces – not to make them into a fourth party in parliament, but to turn them into a formidable machine for struggle against capital. We have to group all the trades together under the single aim, ‘war against capitalist exploitation!’ And we have to pursue this war continually each day, by the strike, by agitation, and by *all revolutionary methods*.³³⁸

In terms of his scientific work, his arguments in *Mutual Aid* that co-operation is an important factor in evolution are now a standard part of biological theory while the theory that our ethical ideas have an evolutionary basis is now considered cutting-edge research by scientists unaware of Kropotkin’s work a hundred years ago. His critique of Marxism has also been vindicated. “Communist organisations,” he correctly argued, “must be the work of all, a natural growth, a product of the constructive genius of the great mass. Communism cannot be imposed from above; it could not live even for a few months if the constant and daily co-operation of all did not uphold it. It must be free.”³³⁹ Given its descent into reformism, most Marxists deny that Social Democracy was really Marxist in the first place while Leninism was simply a party dictatorship presiding over a State capitalist economy. It simply swapped one ruling class (the bourgeoisie) for another (the bureaucracy).

³³⁶ “Law and Authority,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 218. Also see “Prisons and Their Moral Influence on Prisoners,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 218–235.

³³⁷ “Well-Being for All,” *The Conquest of Bread*, 44. Kropotkin, incidentally, stated that in *News From Nowhere* William Morris had “produced perhaps the most thoroughly and deeply Anarchistic conception of future society that has ever been written.” (“In Memory of William Morris,” *Freedom*, November 1896).

³³⁸ quoted in Cahm, 250.

³³⁹ “Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal,” *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 140.

Given the accuracy of Bakunin's and Kropotkin's warnings about State socialism, it is understandable that new generations of radicals should turn to libertarian ideas. Particularly given that Kropotkin's analysis of the problems a social revolution would face and the necessity for decentralisation, local action and federalism to solve them have been confirmed time and again. Unless socialism is rooted in liberty, in self-management, in direct action and solidarity, it will not be *genuinely* socialist. The Makhnovist movement during the Russian Revolution shows that revolution need not result in swapping one set of bosses for another.

In short, Kropotkin's communist-anarchism has been vindicated. However, he would have been the first to argue that we cannot simply repeat his ideas, parrot-like. Just as Bakunin built upon Proudhon's ideas and Kropotkin developed Bakunin's contributions, we need to build upon Kropotkin's work. Like him, we need to analyse the society we are in and those movements within it which are resisting its exploitative and oppressive nature – that is, working class struggle and self-organisation in the 21st century. Thanks to Kropotkin we can build upon firm foundations. We hope that this anthology will inspire more people will take up his call to action:

The failure of the middle classes is now complete, and you, the workers, must take into your hands the inheritance. Consider all that vast accumulation of cultivable lands, these cities, these railways, these ships, this accumulated knowledge, as *yours*, take hold of them: you are called upon by history to do so – to undertake the management of all these treasures for the benefit of all.³⁴⁰

We have a choice. "Anarchism," argued Kropotkin, "is not a mere insight into a remote future. Already now, whatever the sphere of action of the individual, he can act, either in accordance with anarchist principles or on an opposite line."³⁴¹ Therefore we can either act for ourselves, build upon the revolutionary ideas of Kropotkin, fight for a better world and taste the joys of freedom or we can remain servants to the few. Which way we go, as he put it, "lies with you!"³⁴²

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Kropotkin: A Biographical Sketch

Peter Alexeivich Kropotkin was born in Moscow on the 9th of December 1842 within a royal family that could trace its origins to the founders of the Tsarist regime. As a member of the Russian ruling class, he received the best education his father's exploitation of his serfs could provide. At the age of fifteen, he entered the Corps of Pages in St. Petersburg, an elite Court institution attached to the imperial household. He was soon recognised as its most brilliant student and became the personal page of the new Tsar, Alexander II. During this time Kropotkin, like Bakunin before him, became interested in politics and social issues as well as science.

In 1862, he was promoted to the army, and utilising his privilege, as a member of the Corps, to choose his regiment, he decided to reject the career expected of him by his family, instead joining a Siberian Cossack regiment in the recently annexed Amur district. This, he thought, would allow

³⁴⁰ "The Eleventh of November," *Freedom*, December, 1898.

³⁴¹ "Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles," *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings*, 75.

³⁴² *The State: Its Historic Role*, 60.

him to pursue his scientific interests and to play his part in the reforms he hoped would follow from the emancipation of the serfs in 1861.

In Siberia, he saw the horrors of the Tsarist penal system at first hand and his attempts at reform were frustrated by the central bureaucracy in St. Petersburg and local corruption. Kropotkin also became aware of anarchist ideas there, when the exiled poet Mikhail Mikhailov gave him a copy of Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions*. This made the young army officer "first regard himself as a socialist."³⁴³ Turning to science, he accepted charge of a geographical survey expedition, crossing North Manchuria from Transbaikalia to the Amur and shortly afterwards was attached to another expedition which proceeded up the Sungari River into the heart of Manchuria. Kropotkin used both expeditions to pursue his scientific interests, yielding valuable geographical results. Looking back at this time, he wrote:

The years I spent in Siberia taught me many lessons... I soon realised the absolute impossibility of doing anything really useful for the masses of the people by means of the administrative machinery. With this illusion I parted for ever... The constructive work of the unknown masses, which so seldom finds any mention in books, and the importance of that constructive work in the growth of forms of society, appeared before my eyes in a clear light... The part which the unknown masses play in the accomplishment of all important historical events... became evident to me from direct observation...

Having been brought up in a serf-owner's family, I entered active life, like all young men of my time, with a great deal of confidence in the necessity of commanding, ordering, scolding, punishing, and the like. But when, at an early stage, I had to manage serious enterprises and to deal with men, and when each mistake would lead at once to heavy consequences, I began to appreciate the difference between acting on the principle of command and discipline, and acting on the principle of common understanding. The former works admirably in a military parade, but it is worth nothing where real life is concerned, and the aim can be achieved only through the severe effort of many converging wills... I was prepared to become an anarchist.³⁴⁴

So while Kropotkin had gone to Siberia "full of enthusiasm for the possibilities of national reform," he left "five years later completely disillusioned."³⁴⁵ Resigning from the army in 1867 because of the bloody repression of a revolt of Polish prisoners, he returned to St. Petersburg. There he began university and, at the same time, became the secretary of the physical geography section of the Russian Geographical Society. He made his name as a scientist and geographer when he proved that the existing maps of Asia misrepresented its physical formation, the main structural lines being in fact from south-west to north-east, not from north to south or east to west, as had been previously supposed. "There are not many joys in human life," he later recounted, "equal to the joy of the sudden birth of a generalisation, illuminating the mind after a long period of patient research."³⁴⁶

³⁴³ Woodcock and Avakumovic, 57–8.

³⁴⁴ *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 201–2.

³⁴⁵ Miller, 70.

³⁴⁶ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, 211.

In 1871, while exploring glacial deposits in Finland and Sweden for the Russian Geographical Society, he was asked to be its secretary. However, his growing social consciousness made him refuse the offer, instead becoming a revolutionary socialist and agitator for social change. “Science is an excellent thing,” he recalled. “I knew its joys and valued them, perhaps more than many of my colleagues did”:

But what right had I to these highest joys, when all around me was nothing but misery and struggle for a mouldy bit of bread; when whatsoever I should spend to enable me to live in that world of higher emotions must needs be taken from the very mouths of those who grew the wheat and had not bread enough for their children?...

Knowledge is an immense power... What if that knowledge... should become the possession of all? Would not science itself progress in leaps and cause mankind to make strides in production, invention, and social creation, of which we are hardly in a condition now to measure the speed?

The masses want to know: they are willing to learn; they *can* learn... they are ready to widen their knowledge, only give it to them: only give them the means of getting leisure. This is the direction in which, and these are the kind of people for whom, I must work. All those sonorous phrases about making mankind progress, while at the same time the progress-makers stand aloof from those whom they pretend to push onwards, are mere sophisms made up by minds anxious to shake off a fretting contradiction.

So I sent my negative reply to the Geographical Society.³⁴⁷

Using the privileges of his scientific position, he visited Switzerland in 1872 and joined the International Workingmen’s Association (IWMA). At that time the Swiss labour movement was split into two parts, one recognised by Marx and the General Council of the IWMA and the other grouped around Bakunin. This reflected, but predated, the wider split that had occurred in 1871 between the majority (libertarian) and the minority (Marxist) wings. Kropotkin took the opportunity to visit both factions, first to the non-anarchist wing, meeting at the Temple Unique, a Masonic hall in Geneva, where he was horrified to see its leaders manipulate a mass meeting in order stop a strike they considered as harmful to the electoral chances of their candidate. He then visited the libertarian wing and the “separation between leaders and workers which I had noticed at Geneva in the Temple Unique did not exist in the Jura Mountains. There were a number of men who were more intelligent, and especially more active than the others; but that was all.” While he did not, much to his later regret, meet Bakunin it was during this visit to the Jura federation that he concluded “my views upon socialism were settled. I was an anarchist.”³⁴⁸

On returning to Russia, he took an active part in spreading revolutionary propaganda through the Chaikovsky Circle.³⁴⁹ He produced his first major libertarian work for this group, “Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?,” which not only sketched

³⁴⁷ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, 223–4.

³⁴⁸ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, 262, 267.

³⁴⁹ This was associated with the student Nicholas Chaikovsky and was part of the populist “To the People” movement (*narodniks*). Kropotkin joined as the group was discussing whether their direction would be further socialist propaganda among the educated youth or to make contact with the workers and peasants. Kropotkin, obviously, advocated the latter. (Woodcock and Avakumovic, 122–5).

a vision of a free society obviously inspired by Proudhon and Bakunin but also a strategy of social change based, like theirs, on the workers and peasants. As Chaikovsky later recalled, Kropotkin spoke “in favour of an immediate concentration of all the forces of the organisation in working-class circles without waiting for the perfecting of the propaganda groups recruited from the students.”³⁵⁰

He was arrested in 1874 for his activities and (like Bakunin before him) imprisoned in the infamous Peter-and-Paul fortress. After two years, his health failed and he was transferred to the prison block of the St. Petersburg military prison. This was the opportunity he and his populist comrades were waiting for, and they organised his escape (as vividly described in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*).

In August 1876, he reached Britain. Contemplating his position, he thought about returning to Russia, but considering himself “too well known to carry on an open propaganda, especially among the workers and the peasants” and rejecting conspiracies in favour of “a popular movement,” he decided to remain in exile and join “the labouring and toiling masses,” to “aid them to direct their efforts to the best advantage of all the workers,” and to “deepen and to widen the ideals and principles which will underlie the coming social revolution.” He wanted “to awaken their own initiative, now that they were called upon to appear in the historical arena as the builders of a new, equitable mode of organisation of society.” As part of this he rejected being supported by the movement, becoming a scientific journalist: “A socialist must always rely upon his own work for his living.”³⁵¹

This proved to be a wise decision. While in exile in Western Europe, he became a leading exponent of the communist anarchism which was then replacing Bakunin’s collectivist anarchism as the dominant theory in the libertarian movement.³⁵² He rejoined the libertarian-wing of the IWMA in Switzerland and started to contribute articles to the Jura Federation’s journal, *Bulletin de la Fédération Jurassienne de l’Association Internationale des Travailleurs*. It was there in 1878 that he met and married Sophie Ananieva, daughter of a Polish Jew exiled to Siberia for revolutionary activities.

In Switzerland, he met and worked with leading anarchist thinkers and activists, including many exiles from the bloody repression of the Paris Commune. He took the opportunity to discuss that revolt and its lessons, using these eyewitness accounts to build a critique of the revolt so that future revolutions would not make the same mistakes. Politically, he acknowledged that while it raised the vision of a federated France and so denied the national State, internally, it was based on the existing town council. This caused immense problems, as this structure could not handle the many problems facing the revolt, which necessitated a far deeper and wider democratisation and decentralisation *within* the commune itself: the creation of a free federation of workplaces and communities. Economically, it had not begun to transform the economy in a (libertarian) communist direction.

³⁵⁰ Chaikovsky, quoted in Woodcock and Avakumovic, 124–5.

³⁵¹ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, 353–4.

³⁵² Communist-anarchism can be seen as a natural evolution from Bakunin’s ideas, the fundamental difference being on how quickly distribution according to need could be achieved after a revolution. While some communist-anarchists, unlike Bakunin, were hostile to reforms and working within the labour movement, this is not a fundamental communist-anarchist position as can be seen from Kropotkin’s support for militant unionism and sympathies with anarcho-syndicalism. Caroline Cahm covers this period well in her book *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886*.

“It is obvious,” summarised Kropotkin in one of his many articles on the subject, “that if the Commune could have held out against the besiegers for a longer time, the people would have perceived that its new rulers, however sincere and revolutionary, could not perform the great task of making an economical revolution for the workmen.” This was “[b]ecause a deep revolution – an economical revolution – was necessary; and an economical revolution can be made only by the people itself, not by orders from above. Because, like all governments, this government was a compromise with the past.”³⁵³ These criticisms did not diminish his support for the Commune, which he considered as *the* defining revolutionary event of his lifetime, and he concluded that the autonomous federated commune was the starting point for the coming social revolution.

His first important contribution to anarchist thought was his address at the Jura Federation’s 1879 congress, “The Anarchist Idea from the Point of View of its Practical Realisation,” subsequently published as a pamphlet. It carried forward Bakunin’s key ideas concerning “stir[ring] up the economic struggle” as “the best method of shaking” the State, ensuring its “inevitable downfall,” and “the expropriation... of the large landed estates, of the instruments of labour... by the cultivators, the workers’ organisations, and the... communes.”³⁵⁴ He would return repeatedly to these themes over the next four decades.

When the *Bulletin* ceased to appear and its successor was suppressed by the Swiss authorities, Kropotkin founded *Le Révolté* (*The Rebel*) in 1879. This was “destined to be the most influential anarchist paper since the disappearance of Proudhon’s *Le Peuple* in 1850.”³⁵⁵ As well as editing the paper, he also wrote numerous articles with the aim of it being “moderate in tone, but revolutionary in substance, and I did my best to write it in such a style that complex historical and economic questions should be comprehensible to every intelligent worker.”³⁵⁶

Due to pressure from the Russian ambassador, he was expelled from Switzerland in 1881 after attending an International Anarchist conference in London. Eventually, Kropotkin settled in France, where he continued to contribute to the anarchist press and movement. As well as damning critiques of the current system and arguments for anarchism, a key aspect of this revolutionary journalism was to encourage French anarchists, like the libertarians in the IWMA, to work within the labour movement. For example, in an article on 12th of November 1881, he urged the French to follow the example of their Spanish comrades who had remained “[f]aithful to the Anarchist traditions of the International” and brought their “energy to workers’ organisations.” His “advice to the French workers” was “to take up again ... the tradition of the International, to organise themselves outside of all political parties by inscribing on their banner solidarity *in the struggle against capital*” and “build up a force which will crush Capital... the revolutionary trade association.”³⁵⁷

This work quickly made Kropotkin well known to the authorities and he was arrested as part of a general crackdown on the anarchist movement in 1882. After a trial in Lyon in 1883, which was utilised by the 53 defendants to expound their anarchist ideas, he was given a five-year prison sentence. The Police Correctional Court ostensibly claimed this was for being a member of an illegal organisation, the IWMA (which had been outlawed after the Paris Commune). Kropotkin

³⁵³ “The Paris Commune,” *Freedom*, April 1887.

³⁵⁴ *Freedom*, 25th February, 1967. Kropotkin still used the term “collectivism” to describe these ideas rather than communism.

³⁵⁵ Woodcock, *Anarchism*, 164.

³⁵⁶ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, 389–90.

³⁵⁷ quoted in Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1975), 31.

drafted the defendants' famous statement of principles and, along with the defence speeches, it was published in *Le Révolté* and as a pamphlet.

It was during this imprisonment that his first anarchist book, *Paroles d'un Révolté (Words of a Rebel)*, appeared. Edited by friend, comrade and fellow internationally respected geographer Élisée Reclus and published in 1885, it was a collection of articles from *Le Révolté* and contained many of his most famous pieces, such as "Revolutionary Government," "The Commune of Paris," "The Spirit of Revolt" and "Appeal to the Young." After repeated international campaigns, he was finally released in 1886, and he settled in England, where he helped found the anarchist newspaper, *Freedom*. His second anarchist book, *In Russian and French Prisons*, published in 1887, contained an account of his experiences as a political prisoner as well as a searing condemnation and critique of the penal system. That year also saw the birth of his and Sophie's only child, Alexandra.

However, his immediate work after release was to continue the elaboration of communist-anarchism and its vision of revolution. Returning to the theme of the last chapter of *Words of a Rebel* on expropriation, Kropotkin started a series of articles in *Le Révolté*³⁵⁸ and *Freedom* indicating what an anarchist social revolution could be like, what issues it had to deal with as well as sketching the outline of a society freeing itself from the evils of the State and capitalism.³⁵⁹ Many of the French articles were later revised and incorporated into *La Conquête du Pain (The Conquest of Bread)* in 1892, a work he considered as "the constructive part of an anarchist-communist society" ("so far as it can now be forecast") in contrast to "the critical part" contained in *Words of a Rebel*.³⁶⁰ Obviously based on the lessons he had drawn from the Paris Commune, *The Conquest of Bread* stressed the need for the expropriation of private property, free communism, and the creation of a new social system based on federations of popular social and economic organisations.

During this time Kropotkin also reiterated his arguments from the early 1880s on the necessity of anarchists becoming involved in popular movements, particularly the labour movement.³⁶¹ Inspired in part by the success of the London Dockers' strike in the summer of 1889, he returned to this subject in a series of articles starting in September of that year. The following year he urged anarchists to take part in mass movements, arguing for the importance of mobilising on the 1st of May 1891 and turning it into a general strike against exploitation. This campaign by leading anarchists such as Kropotkin, Malatesta, Pouget, and a host of others bore fruit, and increasing numbers of anarchists joined the unions in France, ultimately leading to the rise of revolutionary syndicalism. The marginalisation of anarchism in France in the 1880s as a result of ultra-revolutionary posturing (aided by police spies) ended with a return to the successful strategies of the libertarians in the First International:

Revolutionary Anarchist Communist propaganda within the Labour Unions had always been a favourite mode of action in the Federalist or 'Bakunist' section of the International Working Men's Association. In Spain and in Italy, it had been especially

³⁵⁸ It became *La Révolte (Revolt)* in 1887 after being prosecuted for anti-militarist propaganda.

³⁵⁹ His last article in *Le Révolté* before his arrest in 1882 was the second part of "L'Expropriation" (December 23rd) while his first one upon release in 1886 was "L'Expropriation" (February 14th).

³⁶⁰ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, 463. The equivalent articles from *Freedom* were finally combined into a book with the publication of *Act For Yourselves* in 1988.

³⁶¹ It should be stressed that anarchists in Spain, Cuba, Mexico, Chicago and elsewhere had continued their involvement in the labour movement in the 1880s while Errico Malatesta took a leading role in organising labour unions during his time in Argentina in the mid-1880s.

successful. Now it was resorted to, with evident success, in France, and *Freedom* eagerly advocated this sort of propaganda, carefully taking note of its successes all over the world.³⁶²

Somewhat ironically, given that the most famous period of anarchist terrorism in France was from March 1892 to June 1894³⁶³, leading anarchists had turned to advocating libertarian involvement in the labour movement over two years previously. As such, the all-too-common notion that anarchists turned to syndicalism in response to the failure of “propaganda by the deed” is untenable – particularly given the syndicalist ideas championed by Bakunin and other revolutionary anarchists in the First International; more correctly, anarchists *returned* to revolutionary unionism.³⁶⁴

During the early 1890s, Kropotkin spent some time critiquing the rise of Social Democracy and the Second International. Correctly predicting that this would lead to the watering down of socialism, he advocated an International based purely on labour unions committed to “*the direct struggle of Labour against Capital*.”³⁶⁵ He also took an active part in urging anarchists to secure mandates to attend the 1896 London Congress of the Second International.³⁶⁶ While not attending himself, he took part in the protest meeting after the anarchists were expelled, stating that “we are all delighted to see that such an enormous mass of workers, by sending delegates to the Congress, expressed their determination to fight against Capital and to take property out of the hands of the monopolists and exploiters of labour.” However, he hoped “that only workers’ associations will be admitted at future congresses: we want delegates not as Social Democrats nor as Anarchists, but as men who have won the confidence of a workers’ association, whatever be their personal opinion.” He also denounced “voting by nationalities in an assembly purporting to be a really international one.”³⁶⁷

As well as writing for the anarchist press, Kropotkin also contributed scientific works to a range of leading journals. Many of these later became books, such as *Fields, Factories and Workshops: or, Industry Combined with Agriculture and Brain Work with Manual Work* (1898) and *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902). The former saw him analyse trends within modern economies, arguing that the future socialist society must integrate agriculture and industrial as well as manual and intellectual labour based on the use of appropriately scaled technology to humanise work. He recognised, unlike many socialists, that the current industrial structure reflected the drive for profits and power of the few and, consequently, had to be transformed in order to make it suitable for humanity. The latter was based on a series of articles written in response to “The Struggle for Existence in Human Society,” written by Thomas Henry Huxley, Britain’s leading advocate of Darwin’s ideas. Kropotkin considered his speculation on human society as simply “atrocious”³⁶⁸ and in direct contradiction to the facts of both nature and history. Kropotkin’s replies to Huxley, later revised and collected in *Mutual Aid*, first appeared in the journal *The Nineteenth Century* between 1890 and 1896.

³⁶² “1886–1907: Glimpses into the Labour Movement in this Country,” *Act for Yourself*, 119–20.

³⁶³ Woodcock, *Anarchism*, 253.

³⁶⁴ See my “Another View: Syndicalism, Anarchism and Marxism,” *Anarchist Studies* 20:1.

³⁶⁵ “Kropotkin’s Letter [to French and British trade union delegates],” *Freedom*, September 1901.

³⁶⁶ Davide Turcato, “The 1896 London Congress: Epilogue or Prologue?,” *New Perspectives on Anarchism, Labour and Syndicalism*, 110–125.

³⁶⁷ Report, *Freedom*, August–September, 1896.

³⁶⁸ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, 464.

Mutual Aid is probably Kropotkin's most famous book, and as its sub-title suggests ("A Factor of Evolution"), it did not deny the fact of (individual) competition in animals or human society (nor the class struggle). It was a work of popular science that aimed to present evidence against the predominant vision of nature as one, like capitalism, rooted in individualistic competition and was highly successful in so doing. As noted Darwinist Stephen Jay Gould concluded: "Kropotkin's basic argument is correct. Struggle does occur in many modes, and some lead to co-operation among members of a species as the best pathway to advantage for individuals."³⁶⁹ Kropotkin's *The State: Its Historic Role*, written in 1897, can "in a way be regarded as the final chapter" of *Mutual Aid*, discussing as it does the evolution of the State and the impossibility of using it for popular social transformation.³⁷⁰

Kropotkin also found time to serialise his reminiscences for an American magazine the *Atlantic Monthly* under the title "Autobiography of a Revolutionist," subsequently published as *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* in 1899. This was a lively account of Kropotkin's first 57 years and the development of his ideas, his transformation from Prince to revolutionary. It presents a vivid picture of Imperial Russia and the revolutionary movement in both it and Western Europe. Sadly, the twelve years between being exiled in Britain and writing his memoirs are not described in anything like the rich detail of the first forty-five.³⁷¹

Kropotkin also went on regular speaking tours, giving talks at socialist and trade union events across Britain and twice visiting North America. His home was regularly visited by anarchists from across the globe seeking to meet and discuss ideas with him. Emma Goldman recounted one such discussion:

"The paper [*Free Society*] is doing splendid work," he warmly agreed, "but it would do more if it would not waste so much space discussing sex." I disagreed, and we became involved in a heated argument about the place of the sex problem in anarchist propaganda. Peter's view was that woman's equality with man had nothing to do with sex; it was a matter of brains. "When she is his equal intellectually and shares in his social ideals," he said, "she will be as free as he." We both got somewhat excited, and our voices must have sounded as if we were quarrelling. Sophie, quietly sewing a dress for her daughter, tried several times to direct our talk into less vociferous channels, but in vain. Peter and I paced the room in growing agitation, each strenuously upholding his side of the question. At last I paused with the remark: "All right, dear comrade, when I have reached your age, the sex question may no longer be of importance to me. But it is now, and it is a tremendous factor for thousands, millions even, of young people." Peter stopped short, an amused smile lighting up his kindly face. "Fancy, I didn't think of that," he replied. "Perhaps you are right, after all." He beamed affectionately upon me, with a humorous twinkle in his eye.³⁷²

³⁶⁹ "Kropotkin Was No Crackpot," *Bully for Brontosaurus: Reflections in Natural History* (London: Penguin, 1991), 338.

³⁷⁰ Woodcock and Avakumovic, 338.

³⁷¹ Kropotkin wrote two versions of his memoirs, one in English and one in Russian. While very similar, the Russian text had rewritten passages as well two additional chapters. *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings* contains a chapter entitled "Western Europe" which is newly translated from the Russian edition.

³⁷² *Living My Life* 1, 253.

While having abandoned the possibility of pursuing his promising career as a scientist, he was keen to apply his scientific knowledge and training to the anarchist movement. This produced not only *Mutual Aid* but also a lengthy anarchist work entitled *Modern Science and Anarchism*. Originally written for the Russian movement in 1901, it was an educational and polemical work aiming to explain the basic ideas and history of anarchism and place it within the social, economic and intellectual tendencies of the times. It was soon translated into other languages. During that year, Kropotkin also visited America for the second time to talk on the subject of Russian literature, a passion of his. These lectures were subsequently revised and published as the book *Russian Literature* in 1905.

In the early 1900s, he also wrote a series of articles on socialism, subsequently reprinted as the pamphlets *Socialism and Politics* and *The Coming Revival of Socialism*. Real change could only come from below, he argued, by the action of the masses themselves: “Only slaves trust to a goddess that shall bring them freedom, while freemen take it themselves.” This applied to “political action” so beloved by Marxists as well, for “the best fighter in Parliament is good only as long as there is the clamour of the crowd in the street to spur him on.” Ultimately, the belief in politicians acting for the people was a spell but “the spell has been broken. From beneath – not from above! From the villages, the townships – not from Westminster!”³⁷³ The net effect of Marxism was to *de-radicalise* the socialist movement:

And now we find that although parliamentary action has always been represented as the means for obtaining small concessions to the advantage of the worker, these concessions, however insignificant they may be, have been won, all of them, by strikes... and by the standing menace of still more serious labour wars. The presence of a number of more or less Socialistic deputies in parliament does not... dispense the working man in the least maintaining his trade organisations in full mental and material readiness for war. On the contrary, it is only by the constant menace of a declaration of war, and by real war – and in proportion to this readiness – that the workers have won any victories; while the tactics of the politicians have always been to weaken the anti-capitalist labour organisations...³⁷⁴

When the long expected and hoped-for Revolution broke out in Russia in 1905, Kropotkin took a keen interest in it and in helping the nascent libertarian movement to influence it. He wrote many articles on developments in Russia, stressing the necessity for workers and peasants to struggle for both political *and* economic change. He happily pointed out that the “prominent feature of the Russian revolution is the ascendancy which labour has taken in it. It is not social democrats, or revolutionary socialists, or anarchists, who take the lead in the present revolution. It is labour – the workingmen.” He pointed to the workers’ councils (soviets) being formed and how “the general strike was advocated by the Latin workingmen as a weapon which would be irresistible in the hands of labour for imposing its will. The Russian revolution has demonstrated that they were right.”³⁷⁵ He urged the extension of the political struggle against autocracy into an economic one against capitalism:

³⁷³ *The Coming Revival of Socialism*, 23.

³⁷⁴ *Politics and Socialism* (London: Freedom Group, 1903), 15.

³⁷⁵ “The Russian Revolution,” *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, 287–8.

The work of demolition can only be accomplished by the direct participation of the whole of the people. And they will only act in the name of their immediate and popular needs. The land to the peasant; the factory, the workshop, the railway and the rest to the worker.³⁷⁶

He also worked to influence the Russian anarchist movement, participating in a series of meetings to discuss developments and recommend specific tactics as well as contributing numerous articles to the Russian anarchist papers *Khleb i Volya* (*Bread and Freedom*) and *Listki "Khleb i Volya"* (*Leaflets from Bread and Freedom*). His aim, as in the 1870s and 1880s, was to produce an anarchism which saw the necessity of working within *popular* movements and organisations, as opposed to the minority insurrectionism that influenced so many of his Russian comrades. The proceedings of one conference in 1906 were later published as a pamphlet *The Russian Revolution and Anarchism*. Kropotkin's lectures in this work are, in many ways, a summation of his ideas on the nature and activity of anarchist movement and its role during a revolutionary period.

Kropotkin took an active part in documenting the State repression of the Tsarist regime, producing *The Terror in Russia* in 1909. That year also saw the publication of *The Great French Revolution*, one of the best accounts of the revolution. The work is a classic example of social history, a history from below which recounts the actions of the masses in the pushing the revolution forward. It aimed to "study the popular current" and "it is to this true fount and origin of the Revolution – the people's readiness to take up arms – that the historians of the Revolution have not yet done justice – the justice owed to it by the history of civilisation."³⁷⁷

As a world famous scientist and anarchist, he was ideally situated to produce the entry on Anarchism for the 11th edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1910. Age had not diminished his hopes or activity, and he still stressed that the task of anarchists was "to aid the people to display in full its creative powers for working out new institutions, leading to free Anarchist-Communism" against the "two enemies" of Capital and the State. The workers "will not be lulled with mere patchwork reforms of present conditions."³⁷⁸ These words reflected the growing syndicalist revolt in Britain, a labour militancy that was part of a global trend away from parliamentarianism towards Kropotkin's long advocated ideas on revolutionary workplace class struggle. Unsurprisingly, leading British syndicalist Tom Mann proclaimed Kropotkin "our grand old comrade," and his opinions were sought for a preface to the 1913 English translation of the classic syndicalist novel, *How We Shall Make the Revolution*.³⁷⁹ These developments confirmed Kropotkin's hopes of 1907, expressed when writing to the British anarcho-syndicalist *The Voice of Labour* to "tell you why my warmest greetings and hopes go to the new paper":

The free organisation of labour, independent of all parliamentary parties, and aiming at the *direct* solution – by the working men themselves and working through their own Unions – of the immense social problem which now stands before civilised mankind, such a Labour organisation, wide and powerful, has become the necessity of the moment... The working men realise the great mistake they committed when

³⁷⁶ quoted in Woodcock and Avakumovic, 369.

³⁷⁷ *The Great French Revolution*, 15.

³⁷⁸ Letter, *Freedom*, January 1913.

³⁷⁹ Foreword, Pataud and Pouget, xxx.

they substituted Parliamentary politics for Direct Action of the Labour organisations in enforcing their demands upon the land and capital owning classes...³⁸⁰

Unfortunately, the respect Kropotkin's work and personality had naturally produced within anarchist circles also created something akin to hero-worship. The problems of this situation were exposed at the outbreak of war in 1914 when Kropotkin betrayed the anarchist principles of anti-militarism and anti-imperialism that he had previously advocated by supporting the Allies. Thus the leading anarchist theoretician of his time became, overnight, a defender of States and their war effort. As a result he was expelled from the Freedom Group he had helped set up in 1886 and, along with the very few colleagues who shared his opinion, was isolated from the movement. Alexander Berkman's response can be considered typical:

We could not believe it... His arguments are weak and superficial... he lost sight of the most elemental fact of the situation, namely that the war in Europe is not a war of nations, but a war of capitalist governments for power and markets... it is only the ruling and capitalist cliques that are responsible for the war and alone stand to gain by its result... Kropotkin strangely fails to mention the *working classes* of the contending powers... Has not Kropotkin always taught us that the solidarity of labour throughout the world is the cornerstone of all true progress and that labour has no interest whatever in the quarrels of their governmental or industrial masters?³⁸¹

While Kropotkin's position came as a surprise to almost all of his comrades, glimpses of it could be seen, in passing, in some of his earlier works. In 1899, for example, he had argued that "the triumph of Germany in 1870 has retarded the social revolution for many years" because it was "the triumph of militarism in Europe, of military and political despotism; and at the same time the worship of the State, of authority and of State Socialism, which is in reality nothing but State Capitalism, triumphed in the ideas of a whole generation."³⁸² So blinded by his love of France as the home of revolution and fear that a German victory would set back the cause of (genuine) socialism and liberty for a generation as they had after 1870, Kropotkin rejected the anarchist and syndicalist position on war. It mattered little that he was in a tiny minority within the movement and that the Marxists saw almost all of their parties side with their States, the damage was done.

Almost all leading anarchists took an anti-war position, with Kropotkin's old friend and comrade Errico Malatesta using the pages of *Freedom* to attack his anti-anarchist position.³⁸³ Indeed, so at odds was Kropotkin's position with his previous ideas that his former colleagues published his series of articles on "Wars and Capitalism" which had appeared the previous year in *Freedom*

³⁸⁰ quoted in John Taylor Caldwell, *Come Dungeons Dark: The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist* (Bar, Ayrshire: Luath Press Ltd, 1988), 63.

³⁸¹ "In Reply to Kropotkin," *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth* (Washington: Counterpoint, 2001), 380-1.

³⁸² "Caesarism," *Freedom*, June 1899.

³⁸³ "Anarchists have forgotten their Principles" (*Freedom*, November 1914) and "Pro-Government Anarchists" (*Freedom*, April 1916). The pro-war anarchists were "not numerous, it is true, but amongst them [are] comrades whom we love and respect most." However, "almost all" of the anarchists "have remained faithful to their convictions" namely "to awaken a consciousness of the antagonism of interests between dominators and dominated, between exploiters and workers, and to develop the class struggle inside each country, and solidarity among all workers across the frontiers." (Malatesta, *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*, 243, 248, 244).

as a pamphlet as part of their anti-war work. In 1915, Berkman and Malatesta joined a host of other anarchists to sign an “International Anarchist Manifesto on the War”:

The role of the Anarchists ... is to continue to proclaim that there is only one war of liberation: that which in all countries is waged by the oppressed against the oppressors, by the exploited against the exploiters. Our part is to summon the slaves to revolt against their masters.³⁸⁴

As such, it was misleading of Lenin to suggest that only a “few anarchists” had “a sense of honour and a conscience” and opposed the war.³⁸⁵ Kropotkin, in reality, was one of a very small number of anarchists who supported the war and along with them was rejected by the rest of the movement as a result.

This isolation would have been an inglorious end for such an important rebel if the Tsar had not been overthrown by a mass revolt in early 1917. Overjoyed to see the end of the hated autocracy, Kropotkin immediately made plans to return to Russia. Leaving in the summer of 1917, he returned to Russia, where his pro-war position ensured that his influence in the developing revolution was minimal. He was completely at odds with the popular mood, and the Russian libertarians, like the vast majority of anarchists, remained true to their anti-militarist, anti-imperialist, and anti-statist positions.

With the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks and the withdrawal of Russia from the slaughter of the war, the main cause of Kropotkin’s isolation from the anarchist movement was ended. This meant that he received a steady stream of visitors as radicals across the world either visited revolutionary Russia, in the case of leading Italian syndicalist Armando Borghi or, in the case of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, were expelled to it.³⁸⁶ Unsurprisingly, Kropotkin was critical of Lenin’s regime, as it confirmed his worst fears concerning both the tyranny of State socialism and the inability of centralised, hierarchical bodies to solve the many problems a social revolution inevitably encounters. Sadly, his warnings, like the warnings of other libertarian eyewitnesses, were not heeded, and the revolutionary socialist movement was side-tracked for decades, first by the Bolshevik myth and then by Stalinism.

Kropotkin was, by that time, far too old and frail to actively participate in the revolution, and spent most of his final years working on his unfinished *Ethics*. This was a project he had seen as necessary for some time, and making the best of his situation, he sought to complete it. Revising two articles on the evolution of morality written in 1904 and 1905 for its first chapters,³⁸⁷ *Ethics* developed the theme by a systematic analysis of moral ideas from antiquity to the nineteenth century.

Kropotkin died on 8th of February 1921, and his funeral was used by the Russian anarchist movement as a final public protest against Bolshevik tyranny. His legacy, although damaged by his support of the Allies in the First World War, is still acknowledged by anarchists to this day,

³⁸⁴ “International Anarchist Manifesto on the War,” *Anarchy!*, 387.

³⁸⁵ “The State and Revolution,” *Collected Works* 25: 470–1.

³⁸⁶ Goldman recounted her visits to the ailing Kropotkin in *My Disillusionment in Russia* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 2003) and *Living My Life* while Berkman’s account can be found in *The Bolshevik Myth* (London: Pluto Press, 1989) and “Reminiscences of Kropotkin,” *Freedom*, March 1922.

³⁸⁷ “The Ethical Need of the Present Day,” *The Nineteenth Century*, August 1904 and “The Morality of Nature,” *The Nineteenth Century*, March 1905.

as the power and breadth of his work is staggering, and it remains a rich source of ideas for libertarians.

Further Reading

A great many of Kropotkin's works are available online. In terms of published works, George Woodcock edited Kropotkin's *Collected Works* shortly before his death in 1995. In 11 volumes, it includes all his major writings as well as numerous important essays and articles.³⁸⁸ This collection is by no means complete, missing out the articles collated in *Act For Yourself* (Freedom Press, 1988) for example. It is also missing a very large number of articles in French and Russian anarchist papers which have never been translated as well as many in *Freedom* and other English language papers which have never appeared in book form.

A useful collection of his pamphlets is available in *Anarchism: A Collection of Revolutionary Writings* (Dover Press, 2002). This was formerly published as *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets* and contains much of his best short work, although some are abridged without indication of the edits. The collection *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) contains the 1913 2nd edition of *The Conquest of Bread*, newly translated material from the Russian editions of Kropotkin's memoirs as well as shorter articles and letters. A new version of the 1906 1st edition of *The Conquest of Bread* (AK Press, 2008) has also appeared, with a new introduction. Also available is Kropotkin's classic argument for appropriate technology and the integration of agriculture and industry, *Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow* (Freedom Press, 1985) edited by Colin Ward.

Daniel Guérin's essential *No Gods, No Masters: An Anthology of Anarchism* (AK Press, 2005) has a section on Kropotkin while George Woodcock's *The Anarchist Reader* (Fontana Press, 1977) has various extracts from Kropotkin's works. In addition, volume 1 of Robert Graham's *Anarchism: A Documentary History of Libertarian Ideas* (Black Rose Books, 2005) has numerous extracts from his works. Some articles and talks by Kropotkin are available in *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth* (Counterpoint, 2001).

In terms of Kropotkin's life story, the most obvious starting place must be his own autobiography, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, first published in English in 1899 and reprinted as part of his *Collected Works*. There are three biographies available. The one by George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic (*The Anarchist Prince: a biographical study of Peter Kropotkin*) has been republished as *From Prince to Rebel* (Black Rose Books, 1989) as a supplement to the *Collected Works* project. As this dates from 1950, it should be supplemented by Martin A. Miller's biography *Kropotkin* (University of Chicago Press, 1976). *The anarchist-geographer: an introduction to the life of Peter Kropotkin* (Genge, 2007) by Brian Morris is a useful, if short, work on this matter. Caroline Cahm's *Kropotkin and the rise of revolutionary anarchism, 1872–1886* (Cambridge University Press, 1989) is essential reading, as it covers the development of Kropotkin's communist-anarchist ideas when he was an active militant in the European anarchist movement.

For good introductions to Kropotkin's ideas by anarchists, *Evolution and Revolution: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Peter Kropotkin* (Jura Books, 1996) by Graham Purchase

³⁸⁸ Published by Black Rose, it includes *The Conquest of Bread*; *Ethics*; *Fugitive Writings*; *Evolution and Environment*; *Fields, Factories and Workshops*; *In Russian and French Prisons*; *Great French Revolution*; *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*; *Mutual Aid*; *Russian Literature*; and *Words of a Rebel*.

and *Kropotkin: The Politics of Community* (Humanity Books, 2004) by Brian Morris should be consulted. Both cover his basic ideas and life, as well as indicating how modern research has confirmed them. Nicholas Walter's *The Anarchist Past and Other Essays* (Five Leaves Publications, 2007) contains many useful articles on Kropotkin or related subjects (for example, the Lyon trial of 1883, the Paris Commune and Russian Anarchism). Harry Cleaver's "Kropotkin, Self-valorization and the Crisis of Marxism" essay (*Anarchist Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 2) is an excellent introduction to Kropotkin's ideas written from a libertarian Marxist perspective.

The two standard general histories of anarchism, George Woodcock's *Anarchism: A history of libertarian ideas and movements* (Penguin Books, 1986) and Peter Marshall's *Demanding the Impossible: A history of Anarchism* (Fontana, 1993), both have chapters on Kropotkin's life and ideas. Paul Avrich's *The Russian Anarchists* (AK Press, 2005) and the anthology *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton University Press, 1988) both contain useful accounts of Kropotkin's ideas and life.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Paul Sharkey, James Bar Bowen, Will Firth, Josephien van Kessel and Thomas Swann for their kindness in translating texts. Without their work, this anthology would be impoverished. I would also like to thank David Berry and Lucien van de Walt for their useful comments on my Introduction as well as Brian Morris for his thoughts on an early draft of my Biographical Sketch.

I would also like to thank the staff of Senate House Library (London) and the International Institute of Social History for their help in supplying articles from *Freedom, The Voice of Labour, Le Révolté, La Révolte* and *Les Temps Nouveaux*.

The on-line *Anarchy Archives* maintained by Dana Ward was particularly useful as it has electronic versions of Kropotkin's books. Thanks to Robert Graham's *Anarchism Weblog* for Nicholas Walter's translations of the 1904 preface and 1919 postscript of *Words of a Rebel*.

Many thanks to Axel Barenboim for providing me with copies of key articles from *Le Révolté* which were not in the International Institute of Social History; Alex Prichard for getting me a copy of *The Coming Revival of Socialism*; and Lucien van der Walt for finding a copy of Kropotkin's 1892 preface to Bakunin's *The Paris Commune and the Idea of the State* and ensuring its translation.

Finally, I would like to thank my partner for her support as well as her knowledge, experience and patience in answering my numerous questions on issues related to translating from French. She also kindly volunteered, without being asked, to transcribe many of Kropotkin's articles from *Freedom* into electronic format.

End Notes

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Anarcho
Introduction to “Direct Struggle Against Capital”
March 25, 2020

Retrieved on 24th April 2021 from anarchism.pageabode.com

This is the introduction to *Direct Struggle Against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology* (AK Press, 2014). It is a comprehensive selection of texts, many of which are translated or reprinted for the first time. As the introduction shows, Kropotkin was not some kind of anarcho-Santa but rather a revolutionary anarchist with a clear idea of what was wrong with society, how to change it and what a better world should be like. The book is still available, so please consider buying it for AK Press.

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