

Kropotkin: Class Warrior

Anarcho

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This is a write-up of the notes of a talk made at the 2014 London Anarchist bookfair. I have made a few slight changes/additions. On the day I skipped the section of “small-scale” production (“Kropotkin the Medievalist?") and covered the differences between communist-anarchism and syndicalism in the discussion period. It is based, of course, on the work I did for *Direct Struggle Against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology*. A newly translated article by Kropotkin from May 1890 (“The action of the masses and the individual”) is appended.

Kropotkin: Class Warrior

We think that we all know Kropotkin. It is best shown by a recent book entitled *The Prince of Co-operation* and can be found in many other works. For example, Carolyn Ashbaugh in her book *Lucy Parsons: American Revolutionary* proclaimed him the “gentle anarchist theoretician of non-violence”.

The reality is very different.

He was not a Tolstoy-like visionary dreaming of a new Middle Ages but rather a Russian prince who rejected his privileges to become a class warrior for the people, for the working masses: a committed and realistic revolutionary communist-anarchist.

Which raises an obvious question: How did we get this false picture of Kropotkin?

Perhaps it was Kropotkin’s own fault. After all, he had a jovial personality as well as a very bushy beard, he wanted the free distribution of goods and always preferred red to black flag. Yes, that is right – he comes across as the Anarchist Santa!

Champions and Legacies

However, to be serious any thinker’s legacy is determined by what texts are easily available and who champions you after your death. The “conventional wisdom” about the person is what results.

Take Proudhon, for example. Out of the over 20 volumes of the works he published during his life until recently very little was available in English: three complete books, three partial book translations and a few articles from the period of the 1848 revolution. It would be fair to say that he is better known via Marx and Engels than his own works – but, unfortunately, some forget that those two were *not* disinterested, accurate commentators!

In English-speaking world, he was championed after his death by Benjamin Tucker, the American Individualist Anarchist. There is some overlap but ultimately they held distinctly different ideas, most obviously Tucker had no critique of wage-labour nor understanding that exploitation occurred in production and so, unlike Proudhon, had no vision of workers’ self-management as a necessary part of anarchism.

These two facts mean that the conventional wisdom on Proudhon is mostly wrong but I hope that my anthology *Property is Theft!* is challenging that to some degree.

The Conventional Wisdom on Kropotkin

The same can be said of Kropotkin. The most easily available works by him are very general and theoretical introductions to anarchism, *not* those on the concrete political and strategic issues facing the movement. He was championed in the post-war period by the overtly “reformist” elements in British movement who, like Tucker and Proudhon, ignored most of his ideas.

I have quoted Carolyn Ashbaugh’s terrible book about Lucy Parsons as an example of how Kropotkin is misunderstood. So what is the picture of Kropotkin you get from such works? The clichés are well known: that he viewed nature and society through rose-tinted glasses; that he was utopian and backward looking; that he was utterly impractical and had no vision of how revolution would occur; that he saw libertarian communism being achieved more-or-less overnight as part of a fundamentally easy transformation.

Sadly for those who peddle such nonsense, none of this is true.

The Princess Bride syndrome

In the film the *Princess Bride* (an excellent book and film, by the way) a character repeatedly says “inconceivable” to which one of his compatriots finally replies:

“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”

This applies to anarchism, with writers on the subject repeatedly showing they simply do not understand what the word they are using means. Ashbaugh, for example, argues that Lucy Parsons and the Chicago anarchists were not anarchists. The “Chicago leaders, as early as 1883, were syndicalists” she asserted because “they had given up political work for work in the unions which they believed would provide the social organisation of the future”.

Here is Kropotkin from 1891:

“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?”

And again from a year later:

“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 re-organise production on new social bases. They will have to organise the life of the nation... They – the labourers, grouped together – not the politicians.”

Both these quotes are from speeches commemorating the deaths of the Chicago Martyrs so I guess Peter can join Lucy in not knowing what anarchism “really” is!

It could be argued that Kropotkin was speaking after the hanging of the Martyrs and so perhaps he had revised his ideas in light of their activities. Well, here is Kropotkin from “as early” as 1881:

“We have to organise the workers’ forces – not to make them into a fourth party in Parliament, but in order to make them a formidable MACHINE OF STRUGGLE

AGAINST CAPITAL. We have to group workers of all trades under this single purpose: “War on capitalist exploitation!” And we must prosecute that war relentlessly, day by day, by the strike, by agitation, *by every revolutionary means.*”

Was that not what the “Chicago leaders” had concluded in 1883? Little wonder, then, that Albert Parsons – Lucy’s husband and one of the Martyrs – included two of Kropotkin’s articles on communist-anarchism in his book *Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Scientific Basis!*

Not even wrong...

Let me now turn to a more recent writer, Pat Stack of the British SWP. According to him, we anarchists “dismiss ... the importance of the collective nature of change” as anarchism “downplays the centrality of the working class”, argues that this class “is not the key to change” and “despises the collectivity”. For anarchists, “revolutions were not about ... collective struggle or advance”. He went on to assert that Kropotkin “far from seeing class conflict as the dynamic for social change as Marx did, saw co-operation being at the root of the social process” and it “follows that if class conflict is not the motor of change, the working class is not the agent and collective struggle not the means.”

Someone should have told Kropotkin:

“In order to be able to make revolution, the mass of workers must organise themselves, and resistance and the strike are excellent means by which workers can organise... What is required is to build resistance associations for each trade... and fight against the exploiters, to unify the workers’ organisations... to federate across borders... workers’ solidarity must become ... a daily reality”

Ironically for Stack, Kropotkin opposed the Marxism of his day (social democracy) because 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” into a vote-gathering machine. These awkward facts did not stop Stack smugly proclaiming that the syndicalists’ “huge advantage... over other anarchists [like Kropotkin] was their understanding of the power of the working class, the centrality of the point of production (the workplace) and the need for collective action”!

Perhaps this is unfair, because *Direct Struggle Against Capital* was not available? However, Caroline Cahm’s excellent *Kropotkin and the rise of revolutionary anarchism, 1872–1886* has been available since 1989 and this is *essential* reading if you are going to write about Kropotkin. Or – and here is a radical notion! – read him. You do not need to delve into rare pamphlets or journals resting in archives to discover Kropotkin’s position: he summarised it well in his justly famous 1910 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on anarchism:

“the anarchists... 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... they have endeavoured to promote their ideas directly amongst the labour organisations and to induce those unions to a direct struggle against capital...”

Okay, it is the SWP so what can you expect?

It is “A Factor of Evolution” for a reason...

Yet even normally sensible libertarian socialists can write nonsense about Kropotkin. Maurice Brinton, for example, stated that Kropotkin’s “aim is to convince and reason with (rather than to overthrow) those who oppress the masses” and that he stood for “a co-operation that clearly transcended the barriers of class.”

This is false: even *Mutual Aid* discusses unions and strikes. Yet it is important to note that this classic is not an anarchist book (as such) but rather a work of popular science by an anarchist. To understand Kropotkin’s ideas on class struggle and anarchism you need, perhaps unsurprisingly enough, to look at his explicitly *anarchist* works: “What solidarity can exist between the capitalist and the worker he exploits?... Between the governing and the governed?” Those works – and not *Mutual Aid* – which discuss anarchist perspectives on need to wage the class struggle and the importance of a militant labour movement in both improving things now and for social revolution. To quote from a series of articles in *Freedom* which were subsequently published as a pamphlet:

“We prefer the ameliorations which have been imposed by the workers upon their masters in a direct struggle... concessions... have always been achieved by the action of the trade-unions – by strikes, by labour revolts, or by menaces of labour war.”

As Kropotkin *continually* stressed, *Mutual Aid* was “one-sided”, it was “a book on the law of Mutual Aid, viewed at as one of the chief factors of evolution – not of *all* factors of evolution and their respective values.” If its critics had bothered to consult its sub-title (“*A Factor of Evolution*”) then the most obviously wrong claims would have been averted.

Kropotkin the Medievalist?

Another popular myth is that Kropotkin (to quote Stack) “looked backwards for change. He believed the ideal society would be based on small autonomous communities, devoted to small scale production.” This must be true because Marx had proclaimed this of Proudhon based on a book by the Frenchman – *System of Economic Contradictions* – that explicitly stated the opposite!

What of Kropotkin? After extensively studying the advanced Western economies of his time, he argued for *appropriate* scale technology:

“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.”

For Kropotkin, then, the scale of industry would be driven by *objective* technological facts rather than an ideologically-driven commitment to “small scale” production.

Moreover, he was well aware that the structure of industry today influenced by *class*: “the benefits which the owners of land or capital... can derive... from the under-paid work of the wage-labourer, or from the inferior position of one class of the community toward another class”. As a free society would not be using the same criteria as a capitalist one this meant that while it

will inherit an industrial structure that *has* to be just the starting point for “Socialism implies... a transformation of industry so that it may be adapted to the needs of the customer, not those of the profit-maker.”

Sadly, Kropotkin’s common sense is lost on Leninists and their “big is beautiful” dogma – and it must be stressed that Bolshevik utilisation of inherited capitalist structures in 1917 and 1918 just created *state* capitalism in Russia, not socialism.

The curse of Paul Avrich

Brinton’s and Stack’s comments are based on Paul Avrich’s book *The Russian Anarchists*. Much of this book is correct and important, with ground-breaking accounts of the factory committee movement in 1917 and the role of anarchists in the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917. However, its many positive reviews hide the awkward fact that it gets many things wrong (at best, incomplete), most obviously the ideas of Bakunin and Kropotkin.

Indeed, all the clichés we associate with Kropotkin are there: his “benign optimism”, how “nostalgic yearning for a simpler but fuller life led him to idealise the autonomous social units of bygone years”, that he “looked backward”, thought there would be a “spontaneous” and “speedy” revolution, that “co-operation rather than conflict lay at the root of human progress” and that he gave only “qualified support” to syndicalism.

Yet if you read closely enough Avrich presents enough actual facts to refute the impression given. For example, he proclaims that syndicalism was inspired by Marx’s “doctrine of class struggle” yet on the same page writes how “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”. Avrich suggests that “nor [for Kropotkin] could the trade unions become the nuclei of the anarchist commonwealth” *after* quoting him on unions being “natural organs for the direct struggle with capitalism and for the composition of the future order”. Avrich also quotes Kropotkin on the general strike being “a powerful weapon of struggle” but fails to mention that Engels caricatured and mocked the idea when it was raised by Bakunin and his followers in the First International (words used, incidentally, by orthodox social democrats in the Second International against both syndicalism and their more radical fellows).

Worse, Avrich also often presents a selective account of texts to support his clichés. He argued 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”. Yet reading his anarchist works you quickly see that Kropotkin embraced the “doctrine of class struggle”.

This can be seen from the pamphlet Avrich quotes Kropotkin on unions and the general strike which also argued that a working class movement was needed which “wages a *direct*, unmediated battle of labour against capital – not through parliament but directly by means that are generally available to all workers and only the workers”. Anarchists had “to awaken in the workers and peasants an understanding of their own power, of their determining voice in the revolution and of what they can accomplish in their own interests.” Clearly “the partisans of syndicalism” and

Kropotkin *shared* the same perspective. It was also Bakunin's position and, indeed, Avrich writes of Bakunin's "all-encompassing class war".

So there is nothing specifically "Marxian" about advocating class struggle. It is annoying when an otherwise useful book makes mistakes like that...

Not anti-syndicalist but syndicalism-plus

Unsurprisingly, given this, Avrich presents a chronology that reflected and reinforced the conventional wisdom on anarchism and syndicalism, suggesting that the failure of propaganda by deed in the "early [eighteen-]nineties... created widespread disillusionment... causing large numbers of French anarchists to enter workers' unions".

Yet Kropotkin was advocating "syndicalism" (anarchist involvement in the labour movement and unmediated class struggle on the economic arena) in Russia in the early 1870s before being arrested and imprisoned in 1874, in France after escaping from his Tsarist prison and before being arrested and imprisoned in 1882 and, finally, in France and Britain from 1889 onwards.

These facts contradict the standard narrative on anarchism and syndicalism. The successful *return* to syndicalism dates from the 1889 London Dock Strike with Kropotkin talking of the General Strike starting the revolution in 1889 and 1890, as did Malatesta and other leading communist-anarchists. This was simply returning to ideas raised by the likes of Bakunin in the 1860s and 1870s in the First International.

What, then, are the differences between communist-anarchism and syndicalism?

For communist-anarchists, while important in the class struggle and anarchist activity trade unions were not *automatically* revolutionary. As Kropotkin summarised in a letter:

"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... There is need of the other element which Malatesta speaks of *and which Bakunin always professed*"

There was, then, a need for anarchists to organise as anarchists and so Kropotkin thought that "the formation of an anarchist party... far from being prejudicial to the common revolutionary cause, is desirable and useful to the greatest degree".

Similarly, the General Strike was an excellent means of starting a revolution and "a good method of struggle, [but] it does not free the people that use it from the necessity of an armed struggle against the dominating order". Syndicalists, moreover, "considerably attenuated the resistance that the Social Revolution will probably meet with on its way".

Finally, unions were just *one* aspect of a free society. Kropotkin agreed that workers must become "the managers of production" in "federations of Trade Unions for the organisation of men in accordance with their different functions" but also there was the need for "independent Communes for the territorial organisation" as well as "thousands upon thousands of free combines and societies growing up everywhere for the satisfaction of all possible and imaginable needs."

The Real Kropotkin

As you can see, based on this critique of the “conventional wisdom” you see the *real* Kropotkin. This is, I must stress, *not* the “unknown” Kropotkin as this information was there, if you could be bothered to do the research. It was also there in his “high-level” works, if you bothered to pay attention. As noted, even *Mutual Aid* is not silent on the class struggle, unions, strikes and so on.

So there is a reason *Direct Struggle Against Capital* is so entitled – class war was a core aspect of Kropotkin’s ideas *from the start*. This is hardly surprising, as he joined the so-called “Bakuninist” wing of the First International with its union based organisation and struggle, its vision of social revolution rooted in the general strike, insurrection and workers’ councils as well as its advocacy of workers’ self-management of their own organisations, struggles and – in the future – workplaces and communities.

There is no fundamental difference between the politics of Kropotkin and Bakunin: the problem is simply that Bakunin’s ideas are not well known (but that is for another time!).

So what were Kropotkin’s *real* politics?

He was a realistic, practical revolutionary anarchist engaged in the issues of the day and committed to anarchist involvement in mass movements, particularly – but not exclusively – the labour movement. He argued from the early 1870s to his death for “direct struggle against capital”, for labour organisations to fight and replace capitalism – we needed to “build up a force capable of imposing better working conditions on the bosses, but also... to create among the working classes the union structures that might some day replace the bosses and take into their own hands the production and management of every industry.”

He was against electioneering as it was reformist and undermined the socialist movement as political parties are “continually driven by the force of circumstances to become tools of the ruling classes in keeping things as they are.” Given the fate of the Marxism of his day, he raised the obvious question:

“Are we going to abandon the terrain of the economic struggle, of the worker against the capitalist, in order to become compliant tools in the hands of the politicians?”

Kropotkin saw the growing mass movement as the link between now and socialism, urging libertarians to get involved in mass movements to influence and radicalise them. For example, he was a keen advocate of the campaign to mark May Day by demonstrations and strikes. This participation in popular movements was needed and urged anarchists “not [to] wait for the revolution to fall upon us unsolicited, like manna from heaven”, always remember that “without the masses, no revolution” and that “the man of action’s place is where the masses are”. Popular movements and struggles, like strikes, would produce a social revolution because “[t]hanks to government intervention, the factory rebel becomes a rebel against the State.”

Contrary to the myths, Kropotkin saw the revolution as a long and difficult process that took 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”

He was explicitly against the notion of one-day revolutions and argued that libertarians “do not believe... the Revolution will be accomplished at a stroke, in the twinkling of an eye, as some socialists dream.” He was well aware a revolutionary people would be facing economic crisis and disruption as well as counter-revolution, recognising – for he was no pacifist – that the working class is that class “which, alone, will take arms and make the revolution” and a “people that will itself be the armed strength of the country and which will have afforded armed citizens the requisite cohesion and concerted action, will no longer be susceptible to being ordered around.”

Simply put, anarchism was best not because revolution was easy but *because it was difficult*. It needed mass participation to overcome its many problems and because the change needed was “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”. He pointed to the Paris Commune as evidence that “[a]ny authority external to [the people] will only be an obstacle” and freely federated communities and workplaces as the alternative.

Needless to say, his predictions about the problems that the social revolution would face were confirmed by the Russian Revolution – as were his warnings over statist “solutions” to them.

Conclusion

So you can see why this talk is entitled *Kropotkin: Class Warrior* and why *Direct Struggle Against Capital* has that title. His message is still valid:

“The enemy on whom we declare war is capital, and it is against capital that we will direct all our efforts, taking care not to become distracted from our goal by the phony campaigns and arguments of the political parties. The great struggle that we are preparing for is essentially *economic*, and so it is on the economic terrain that we should focus our activities.”

On issue after issue he was proven right. Libertarians today must recognise the wealth of ideas he left us in his articles and books and rescue his legacy from the false pictures painted of it by, at best, well-meaning but uncomprehending liberals or, at worst, malicious Marxists seeking to rescue the Bolshevik Myth by distorting the ideas of anarchist thinkers.

Yet there is no point reading Kropotkin without also thinking about *our* struggles and problems and how we apply and develop what is best and valid in his ideas *today*.

Let us discuss how to do that – it would be what Kropotkin would have wished.

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