

# Kropotkin and Malatesta

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n.d.

*Counter-current* recently reproduced an article in which Malatesta attacked Kropotkin's intellectual oeuvre. This article wasn't the only one on the same subject published by the same author. I have read others which, in their time, had exercised in South America (where I then was) a real but passing influence in certain anarchist-communist milieux. I was myself, at first brush, impressed by his apparent logic, and at the death of Malatesta I affirmed in the Buenos Aires journal *Nervio* that the Malatestan principle was superior to that of Kropotkin.

But, as an autodidact in constant training, always searching, always studying, and taking up Kropotkin as well as Malatesta, it was not long before I convinced myself that the position of the latter led to an impasse, to a kind of medieval scholasticism in which study would be banned, and in which the dialectics of the most skillful literati would outweigh a thorough knowledge of the facts. That is, in rebuffing science we in reality rebuff all systematic and serious study of the different problems that occupy us—because such is what science is— and we condemn anarchist thought to be nothing more than prattle, more or less skilled, more or less eloquent, but without consistency and without the possibility of having a real scope in the social thought of the present and the future. That, in practical terms, was leading us to nothingness. Only the vain, in this century in which coordinated studies provide and continue to provide so many relevant factors which limit our pretensions to know everything and to wish to decide everything, can be satisfied with it.

Malatesta's critiques were formulated after the death of Kropotkin, which is and has been deeply regrettable. Taken on the whole, I daresay that only a few valid points stand. This is not apparent for those who have not read sufficiently either the attacker, or his target.

Malatesta is off-base when he presents Kropotkin as a simple "poet of science." It would first be necessary to know in what way he is qualified to say so. For all his keen intelligence does not change the fact that he was never anything but a student who frequented revolutionary circles more than the university, and that subsequently nothing in all of his writings permits us to attribute him a sufficient erudition to judge Kropotkin this way.

Kropotkin was, at 30 years of age, named the president of the Russian Geographical Society, for the brilliant discoveries he had made concerning the general orography of Asia. He was, replacing Huxley, the great continuator of Darwin, and a collaborator-editor of the British Encyclopedia. His value as a naturalist was apparent in books such as *Mutual Aid*, where for the first time he presented a whole social philosophy founded on the solidarity within animal species and in the

prehistory and history of humanity. Elisée Reclus got Kropotkin to collaborate in the editing of the *Universal Geography*, on what concerned Russia and Asia. Whoever has read *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* has seen his vast knowledge in material economy, a knowledge which, along with that of the history of civilization, bursts from the page in the first chapters of *The Conquest of Bread*, which we find in the powerful pamphlet *The State, Its Historic Role*, and in *Modern Science and Anarchy*. *Ethics* shows an immense erudition, and even this or that chapter in *Words of a Rebel* prove a knowledge which exceeded that of an amateur. If, at the moment of Kropotkin's imprisonment in France, men such as Herbert Spencer signed the petition in protest on behalf of the English scientific world, this was not only because he was a political criminal.

A "poet of science" he may have been, but he was much more than this. There have been greater men of science, but Kropotkin was one of them. And we can regret not having had many others of the same caliber—the one I cannot forget being Elisée Reclus.

Thus launched, Malatesta made some fundamental reproaches of Kropotkin. First, that of having based anarchy on science alone, and on nothing but science. For this he reproduced many times a phrase pulled from *Modern Science and Anarchy*. This sentence, thus: "Anarchy is a conception of the universe, based on a mechanical interpretation of phenomena, which embraces all of nature, including the life of societies." What does that have to do with anarchy? asked Malatesta, several times. Whether or not the universe is or is not explicable according to the latest discoveries of physics does not at all preclude that the oppression and exploitation of man by man are an injustice, and that we must fight them.

In this, he was right, and this first reaction is so obvious that he has all of his readers with him. But his first fault was to present this sentence, extracted from a paragraph which appeared in a chapter of a book which contains many others, as the only base which Kropotkin gave to anarchy.

I am obliged to say that in proceeding this way Malatesta absolutely deforms Kropotkin's thought. Anyone who reads *Modern Science and Anarchy* will see, on page 46 of the French edition, that the reproduced sentence belongs to the chapter entitled "The Place of Anarchy in Modern Science". There Kropotkin responds to the question: "What place does anarchy occupy in the great intellectual movement of the nineteenth century?" Situating himself on this ground where philosophy cannot ignore new discoveries, he explains that science, that is to say the knowledge acquired on the nature and constitution of matter, the mechanism of the universe and the evolution of living forms and social organisms, constitutes a whole which gives a sure basis to materialist philosophy; that this materialist philosophy, by eliminating the authoritarian conception that supposes a God as creator and director of the world, allows the development of a philosophy where progress is the work of a perfectly natural evolution, without the interposition of an exterior source or intelligence. That consequently natural laws—or rather natural "facts"—are essentially non-authoritarian, and that this vast synthesis of the world permits the elaboration of a new social philosophy. Thus, says Kropotkin, the place of anarchy is "ahead of the intellectual movement of the nineteenth century."

That this exceeds the intellectual preoccupations of Malatesta is his own affair. Bakunin, before Kropotkin, had elaborated a similar philosophy. For him, socialism was the direct and logical consequence of the materialist conception of the universe. But we well know that he had other reasons to fight. Kropotkin also had his own. Reading him is enough to know this.

Because, as Malatesta seems to ignore, from the first chapter of *Modern Science and Anarchy*, everyone can read: "Like socialism in general, and like every other social movement, anarchy

is born among the people, and it will only maintain its vitality and its creative force as long as it remains popular.” On page 3 he insists at length on this claim. Then he shows the popular elements fighting against oppression, creating customs such as judicial norms, but preceded most often by ”more or less isolated individuals who rebelled.”

”All reformers, politicians, religious leaders, economists,” he writes, ”belonged to the first category. And, among them, one always finds individuals who, without waiting for all of their fellow citizens, or even for a minority of them, to be imbued with the same intentions, rose up against oppression—whether in more or less numerous groups, or all alone, as individuals if they were not followed. We encounter these revolutionaries in all epochs of history.”

The basis of anarchy is therefore not limited to the latest discoveries of physics, and it’s a complete distortion of Kropotkin’s thought to say so.

It’s another unfounded reproach of Malatesta’s that depicts Kropotkin as advocating the submission of man to universal determinism, in the sacred name of science. If some ”scientists” have written similar things, Kropotkin is not responsible, anymore than Malatesta is responsible that in the name of his ”voluntarism” some individuals chuck bombs to demonstrate their revolutionary will [*volonté* - trans.]. Kropotkin—and here again Bakunin who had preceded him, with an unsurpassable depth—was too intelligent not to know that the human will, however determined it may be, is also, on its own scale, a factor on the cosmic and above all planetary determinism, and never, in any writing, did he recommend the submission of man to physical laws, or laws of biology. The citations I have given are sufficient proof.

We can prove it again by reading all of Kropotkin’s books. Whether it be in *The Great French Revolution*, in his *Memoirs [of a Revolutionist]*, in *Words of a Rebel*, in *Modern Science and Anarchy*, in various pamphlets, for instance ”Anarchist Morality,” in which he exhorts the youth to struggle for justice, in the name of fullness of life; in the pamphlet ”To The Young,” etc., Kropotkin always considered the factor of human will (which is the principle Malatestan discovery) as one of the necessary elements of history. To take one aspect of his thought—which in every way exceeds philosophic mediocrity—and making it all of his thought, is not a fair treatment, and not ethically defensible.

I am familiar with nearly everything which has been published of Malatesta’s writings, in Italian and in Spanish, and I am familiar with Kropotkin, as with other theorists of anarchism. I can say that as concerns science, Malatesta is the only one who took this negative and contemptuous view of science. It’s a position which coincides with the dangerous antiscientific reaction of a certain spiritualist philosophy of which Benedetto Croce is the most notable theorist in Italy. That we would react against the excesses of the materialist conceptions of the nineteenth century, which ignore too much, in the slow discovery of truth, of that which psychology and the study of the physical world would reveal to us, is good and necessary. That we would repudiate science itself: no. That is why, in certain anarchist milieux where we study, the influence exercised by Malatesta and his voluntarist philosophy—it is already nonsense to oppose the will to science—has been ephemeral. This is why, in occupying myself with with economy, sociology, and the reorganization of society (other than in the imagination), not contenting myself with the discursive method to understand the origin of the state and the evolution of human societies, I have taken an entirely different path than that given by Malatesta. Not having been born infused with science, nor with a genius sufficient in itself, I modestly believed I had to study.

In my intellectual formation, it is the method recommended by Kropotkin which has proved for me to be the most useful. But, let us repeat it, was this method solely Kropotkinian? Not at all.

All the non-individualist anarchist social thinkers: Proudhon, Bakounine, Elisée Reclus, Ricardo Mella, Pietro Gori, Anselmo Lorenzo, Jean Grave, Tarrida del Marmol, etc., have seen in science, that is, it must be repeated again, in knowledge as broad, serious and profound as possible, one of the bases or one of the weapons of anarchism. In this sense, Malatesta is the only one of his opinion, and in attacking Kropotkin, he attacks all the others.

He has the right to take the position that pleases him, but if I already responded to his anti-Kropotkin articles, if I answer them tirelessly, it is because they demolish, for those who are not warned, Kropotkin as a sociologist and as a thinker. Reading this articles, we might believe that it is useless to read Kropotkin, and useless to study. Sociology becomes the domain of those who know how to rattle off an article according to their momentary inspiration, and to defend (because they have an excellent literary don, in Malatesta) the most contradictory things under an apparent logic of reasoning. It is a dialectical question, a question of dialectical games.

This happens frequently with Malatesta. I had, around 1934, with his disciple Luigi Fabbri, who then published *Studi Sociali* in Montevideo, a correspondence in which this comrade and friend wrote me that it would be necessary to pass through authoritarian stages before the triumph of our ideas in a revolution. I responded to him that he had the duty to write what he thought, and proposed to him a debate in his journal in which I collaborated. He accepted. Fabbri defended ideas which were those of Malatesta, as he emphasized in his letter. They seemed to me so different from what I knew of the latter that I began to read methodically the articles, pamphlets, and collections of articles of Malatesta and I noticed that he advocated the same issues, always with the same dialectical ease, the same gift of reasoning which in turn makes the uninformed reader accept the most contradictory theses. With the same convincing logic he declared that if anarchists did not know how to orient the revolution by putting themselves at its head, it would be the authoritarians who would do it, "and then, goodbye to anarchy!"; or that the anarchists being a minority, could not think of making an anarchist revolution without exercising a dictatorship, which would be the negation of anarchy; or that, as we could not cope with all the tasks that a revolution would impose, we should be content with other parties taking charge of them (and we still wonder what would happen to anarchy); then, and this was his last position, that in a revolution we had to limit ourselves to "free experimentalism." In what did that consist? To demand from the Bolshevik Communists, arms in hand if necessary, our right to practice our ideas, to experiment them freely in the anarchist islands formed in the midst of the dictatorial revolution. The slightest logic, and historical experience, proved to us that this would never be possible. It was enough to remember what had happened in Russia. Even if they did not resort to violent dissolution and massacre against us, as Trotsky had done in Russia, it would be enough to deprive us of raw materials to stifle such attempts dangerous for the dictatorship. Malatesta did not seem to perceive this. And all these contradictory dispositions were defended almost simultaneously. It was the same with other problems of decisive importance, such as that of unions before a revolution. Six months apart, Malatesta advocated their disappearance because, being born out of the struggle against capitalism, they would have no reason to exist after capitalism, or else the activity of anarchists in the unions, the use of which he advocated as the basis of the new society. Also, contradictions as to the most recommendable economic legal principle. Malatesta defended anarchist communism quite well, and also certain formes of collectivism. And when Fabbri wrote a book on the thought of his master— which thought had, in part, paralyzed his own—he could only conclude that in economy, Malatesta wanted "freedom."

The absence of method, of coordinated thought has caused a brilliant intelligence, a sharp mind to be somehow wasted for lack of coherence, of continuity, of will in intellectual effort.

Moreover, Malatesta, more briefly, impugned Bakunin, reproaching him, as if this had been the essential and the only aspect of the thought of this formidable man as a thinker and organizer, of having defied nature. It is truly disconcerting.

Of course, one finds some errors in Kropotkin's writings. I have already formulated my reservations on various points. Malatesta was right when he wrote—though others have said it as well—that Kropotkin elaborated certain ideas, then strove to justify them through science. But does this go against the use of science in sociology, of the scientific method, applied according to the aptitudes and the culture of each, of the systematic and serious study, coordinated, controlled and recontrolled which, even if it does not claim to be scientific, is so without knowing it? Not at all. When Kropotkin sees only mutual aid associations in the corporations of the Middle Ages, he can be criticized for not having sufficiently emphasized the struggles and inter-corporative inequalities and the formation of a bourgeoisie of masters against the companions who were to compose the proletariat. When he opposes the customary rights to the state, we can respond that if it is the case that human societies have been known, in certain periods, to live on the basis of these rights, that customs have been often worse than the law, and that all things considered, the latter is still preferable. When he attributes to the masses a too-spontaneous creative gift, we can respond that is wrong to do so because he also recommends what the Kropotkinist "mass" has not wanted to see, the responsible and relentless activity of revolutionary minorities, and that of the anarchist minority for the present and the immediate future.

We can still make other reproaches, justified and founded otherwise than those of Malatesta. But I ask if, in the elaboration of all sciences, in the research and discovery of all the great truths which involve prolonged studies, has it not always been so? Must science be abandoned if it has made more than one mistake? To demolish everything because contradictions are revealed in the successive contributions of researchers? And to fall back on an empiricism dominated by ignorance or irresponsibility?

Whatever may be the errors for which we may reproach Kropotkin, at the very least the method he recommended offers, as is proper with all scientific method, the possibility of correction, rectification, and successive complement. Those who apply it will have a much greater chance to find the truth than those who will write a bit haphazardly, as has Malatesta. A social movement, a social philosophy, a current of thought cannot work usefully, according to the goals they pursue, unless they act in an organic way, in a continuity of coherent efforts where the critical spirit, which oversees all research, is a guide for a better construction.

Malatesta has not been an example of this, and he himself, the anti-Kropotkinian, was Kropotkinian in the best of his pamphlets, the small masterpiece, "Anarchy." The theses he developed there are borrowed from *Mutual Aid*, which I name again, because this book, with all we learn therein, poses the foundation of a biological and social philosophy, theoretical and practical, of immense scope. If we are capable of developing the fundamental theses and intrinsic possibilities, even as we prune what may appear to us to be questionable, our ideas will exert an enormous positive influence on the future of humanity. They will not exert any with the "thought," or the Malatestan method of thought-absent-method, in spite of the sometimes interesting insights which one finds there.

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