

# Bekken on Bantman

Review: Jean Grave and the Networks of French Anarchism, 1854-1939

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a review of

Constance Bantman, *Jean Grave and the Networks of French Anarchism, 1854-1939*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. xv + 243 pp. \$89.00 (e-book), ISBN 978-3-030-66618-7.

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While Jean Grave is little known today (despite having been the subject of previous biographies), he played a key role in the anarchist movement a century ago, not only in France, where he edited the influential *La Révolte* (1887-94) and *Les Temps Nouveaux* (1895-1914), but internationally. There is a growing literature on the importance of regional and other transnational networks in facilitating the spread of anarchist ideas and publications. As Constance Bantman demonstrates in *Jean Grave and the Networks of French Anarchism, 1854-1939*, Grave and his publications were central to transnational networks of international anarchism in the prewar era.

Like Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Grave was a self-educated working-class intellectual. While by no means as sedentary as the opening passages of this important biography suggest (far from being confined to the attic rooms from which he issued his newspapers, Grave spent some years in exile in Switzerland, made regular trips to Wales in the 1890s while courting his second wife, and fled to England with her in 1914 when war broke out), Grave was a writer in a movement characterized, at least in the popular imagination, by action. While he and his publications were a central node for transnational anarchism, Grave's reluctance to engage in public speaking and in the organizing and meetings that sustained the movement's daily activity created an impression of aloofness and prevented the cross-fertilization with movement activists that played such a key role in the evolution of Peter Kropotkin's ideas. Indeed, Kropotkin urged Grave—the two had a long and close collaborative relationship—to participate in movement life more actively, noting that meetings offered as valuable an opportunity to spread ideas as did pamphlets and the paper.

But despite his general absence from the movement's physical spaces, Grave's publications gave extensive space to correspondence and reports from anarchists around the world, building a community of shared debates and identity and playing a central role in mobilizing international solidarity campaigns. Importantly, Grave's networks extended well beyond the anarchist movement, including artists and writers who provided vital support for his publications and

even politicians like Georges Clemenceau who offered some buffer against repression. As Bantman writes, “the publications which [Grave] oversaw had a near-global reach and shaped local movements in many ways. However, the French anarchist movement was also shaped by foreign developments, debates and exchanges and was engaged in multipolar, horizontal transnational discussions and campaigns. From worldwide exchanges of printed material and money to international networks of correspondents and translators as well as tactical discussions on a transcontinental scale, Grave and his papers illustrate all these entanglements, and sometimes pioneered them” (p. 6).

Born into a poor, working-class family, Grave attended a religious school for a few years after his family moved to Paris. He apprenticed as a shoemaker, attended Blanquist meetings with his father, and was drafted into the marine infantry—a miserable experience from which he was released following the death of his father (his mother and sister had died of consumption two years earlier). His experiences during the Commune and in the military left him with a lifelong revulsion for the military, an antimilitarism that animated nearly the entire radical movement of his day. After his release from the infantry, Grave attended socialist meetings, breaking with parliamentarism in 1880 in a speech to the Congrès Ouvrier du Centre: “all the money spent in appointing deputies would be more wisely used to buy dynamite to blow them up” (p. 24). He began writing for the anarchist press and soon came under the police surveillance that continued for most of his life. In 1882, Grave published his first book, *La Société au lendemain de la Révolution* (Society on the Morrow of Revolution), launching his reputation as an anarchist theorist with a knack for presenting complex ideas in accessible language. He also began distributing hundreds of copies of the Geneva-based *Le Révolté*, meeting editor Peter Kropotkin when he visited Paris. After Kropotkin’s expulsion from Switzerland, Grave moved to Geneva to take up the editorship of *Le Révolté*, which had become the leading French-language anarchist newspaper. Grave quit shoemaking, learned typesetting, and dedicated the rest of his life to the anarchist press.

Soon after Grave became editor, he called on readers to send in news of anarchist activity in their area, launching the interactive, networking model that would characterize his approach to anarchist publishing. He worked with other activists to smuggle *Le Révolté* into France, a necessity that continued even after the paper’s prohibition was officially lifted as border guards and postal officials were prone to seize copies of the paper (and sometimes the people distributing it). *Le Révolté* was not only widely read throughout France, its readership and support network included donors from Algeria, Argentina, Australia, Belgium, England, Germany, the Netherlands, Romania, South Africa, Uruguay, and the United States. It exchanged publications with newspapers everywhere there was an anarchist movement.

Connecting people, groups, and publications was a key focus; readers used *Le Révolté*’s columns to make contact with each other, to let its readers know about new publications and initiatives, and to request information. The paper printed articles and letters from around the world debating anarchist ideas and tactics and warning against infiltrators. Readers in the United States relied on *Le Révolté* to build a Francophone anarchist movement there, eventually launching their own publication. And Grave repeatedly used its columns to coordinate international campaigns, including several against Spain’s brutal repression of the anarchist movement. As part of these campaigns, Grave organized exchanges of information, funds, meeting announcements, and reports between exile circles in France, Spain, Latin America, and London. Later, he regularly published protests from the British-based Spanish Atrocities Committee (whose membership included anarchists and progressive members of Parliament),

including calls for granting complete autonomy to Cuba and the Philippines. In France, prominent authors including Émile Zola (who had earlier refused to support Grave's defense) and republican politician and journalist Georges Clemenceau joined the campaign to free Spain's anarchist political prisoners.

In 1885, the police expelled Grave and his wife (who soon died in childbirth) to France, where he and other comrades relaunched the paper. Grave settled in the infamous attic in the Mouffetard neighborhood, where he was to publish *Révolté* and its successors—the slightly retitled *La Révolte* and *Les Temps Nouveaux*—for the next two decades. (Grave himself moved to a separate apartment when the attic office became too cluttered and too public). The neighborhood was ideally situated at the intersection of Paris's industrial and university districts. A steady stream of visitors—activists and police alike—climbed the stairs to meet Grave and to obtain copies of the newspapers and pamphlets issued from the cramped rooms. Grave also traveled as far afield as London to meet with contributors; his correspondence with artists is replete with references to their encounters.

In 1887, *La Révolte* launched a literary supplement which drew the participation of many leading artists and writers and helped cement the paper's (and Grave's) reputation among intellectuals. The supplement published a wide array of material: literary and scientific, reformist and revolutionary. As Bantman notes, “the supplement made *La Révolte* the most consistent and long-lasting French publication in fostering an eclectic international artistic and literary anarchist canon, setting out a highly ambitious pedagogical remit for anarchism, which redefined the movement and broadened its appeal in France and globally” (p. 60).

Grave could be a contentious figure, often criticizing those whose ideas or tactics violated his understanding of anarchist tenets. In principle, he was a communist, but he was highly skeptical of efforts to build anarchist organizations. He rejected not only individualism, but also formal systems of accountability for his newspapers. He did not join the campaign over the Dreyfus Affair until 1898, ostensibly because of Dreyfus's bourgeois origins and the campaign's collaboration with politicians (though he later did not hesitate to work with some of those same politicians on behalf of Spanish anarchists). But Grave also denounced the “Jewish money” behind the campaign and referred to one of the judges involved in his own 1894 prosecutions as a “dirty Jew,” suggesting that antisemitism also played a role (p. 138).

Grave criticized what he saw as the limitations of syndicalism and union struggles in *Les Temps Nouveaux*. He believed that revolutionary unions might help develop class consciousness and secure piecemeal improvements but not revolutionary change, and by the early 1900s worried that syndicalism would absorb anarchism. Grave repeated these arguments in his 1908 pamphlet *Le Syndicalisme dans l'évolution sociale*. But he did open the pages of *Les Temps Nouveaux* to syndicalists, and also wrote for their papers. Grave was far more hostile toward the revived individualism. His 1897 pamphlet *L'Individu et la société* reiterated that “individual autonomy and initiative were the sources of anarchism and the revolution but firmly rejected unfettered and intellectual individualism at the expense of altruism and mankind's social nature.... The essay also rebutted Neo-Malthusianism with customary directness: ‘I think they are sorely mistaken, those who claim to solve the social question by limiting the birth rate’” (p. 130). His antipathy was so strong that in 1905 he refused to allow the individualist paper *L'Anarchie* to sell his pamphlets at their events. He was also dismissive of emerging lifestyle currents, such as naturism and vegetarianism.

Grave faced a series of legal challenges in the 1890s, beginning with a six-month prison term for an article condemning the army's brutal repression of a labor demonstration and a long-standing conflict with the Société des Gens de Lettres over his practice of excerpting material in *La Révolte's* literary supplement, often without permission. Octave Mirbeau published a defense, pointing to the paper's quality and lamenting the practice of reducing ideas to commodities to be bought and sold. Several authors ultimately withdrew their complaints, and the case was quietly dropped. *La Révolte* closed amid a wave of repression in 1894, which saw Grave (and many others) charged with criminal conspiracy. Anarchist propaganda was outlawed. Grave was sentenced to two years in prison in one trial but acquitted (along with all but three of his codefendants) a few months later in the trial of thirty prominent anarchists.

Grave was released as part of a general amnesty in 1895, quickly released two books written in prison, and launched *Les Temps Nouveaux*. The new paper was similarly embedded in transnational networks and aided by a contribution of three hundred francs from Argentina. Unlike his previous ventures, articles were signed, highlighting its many prestigious contributors. But extensive space was devoted to networking, with dozens of short items from around the world appearing in each issue. *Les Temps Nouveaux* also issued a stream of illustrated pamphlets, broadening its reach both domestically and internationally. Grave's ties to radical artists were also reflected in the newspaper, which after 1905 regularly featured their artwork. And the new paper continued to play a central role in coordinating international campaigns against political repression of anarchists. Grave's international network was essential to the success of these campaigns, but locally his work was often overshadowed by publications with significantly larger circulations—in Grave's view undermining the anarchist character of the effort. Indeed, this tension spoke to a larger issue: Grave and *Les Temps Nouveaux* remained as well regarded as ever abroad, but were increasingly eclipsed in France by more action-oriented anarchist and syndicalist papers on the one side, and more respectable radical publications on the other.

There were contradictions in Grave's anarchism. His early newspapers largely ignored anticolonial struggles (though he condemned colonialism's racism, looting, and violence in *Moribund Society*, English translation, 1899), and when they addressed such issues tended to address them in terms of their impact on the conscripted workers who were sent to fight in imperialism's wars. Later, *Les Temps Nouveaux* featured extended articles questioning colonialism, reflecting increased interest in the broader anarchist movement. In 1900, he published a pamphlet, *La Colonisation*, denouncing state collusion with the army, assimilation, the plunder of natural resources, use of a "civilizing" rhetoric and the spreading of diseases along with colonization. In 1903, *Patriotisme et colonization* denounced both. But his sympathies with colonial subjects did not extend to the Irish, perhaps because of the circles he and his wife moved in in Britain.

Women's rights were also largely ignored in the pages of Grave's publications. Bantman notes that there were few women in the movement at the time, though earlier anarchists (including Bakunin) had stressed the importance of women's rights. In 1895, Grave wrote that men and women would have equal rights in the future anarchist society. But this goal was subordinated to the larger struggle for emancipation, and Grave published articles by other French anarchists attacking feminism. For Grave, class was the paramount issue, even as he kept his distance from the emerging syndicalist movement.

Bantman gives substantial attention to the material conditions in which Grave struggled to keep his publications afloat. This was a public struggle, one openly discussed in his papers' pages as he appealed to readers and to the broader networks in which he was immersed for sup-

port. Grave experimented with formats and features to attract new readers, and with a range of fundraising strategies, from raffles (the paper changed its name to *La Révolte* to escape prosecution for an illegal lottery) to selling paintings donated by artists sympathetic to the anarchist movement. His “personal and political connections ... allowed him to produce one of the longest-lived publications in the history of global anarchism[;] ... when these networks collapsed, so did his influence within the movement” (p. 11).

Bantman argues that Grave’s influence was gradually declining after 1905, in large part because his print-centric focus “increasingly failed the test of action. The revolutionary climate of the pre-war years, characterised by antimilitarist agitation, intense strike activity (repressed with exceptional violence), the rise of new insurrectionary anarchist currents, and finally the quandaries of the war demanded more creative and radical responses, making both Grave’s anarchism and his strategic vision for the paper seem outdated—although this only appeared fully once the war broke out” (p. 146). Looking back in his memoirs, Grave admitted that it had been the time to act, not talk, and that the circle around his newspaper should have been out in the streets.

Grave had gradually adopted a more gradualist perspective, increasingly seeing the revolution as a process. He was further from the day-to-day movement life, having moved to a small town outside Paris and married his longtime partner, Mabel Holland, in 1909. The paper now had a small staff, and several respected writers regularly contributed articles on culture, economics, labor, and anarchist theory. A steady flow of pamphlets emanated from its offices. The paper’s finances were increasingly tenuous, as more action-oriented papers drew more readers. Grave turned to raffles, stamp selling (making use of stamps from the letters and publications arriving from around the world), art sales, and incessant fundraising appeals to cover the mounting deficits.

While long a controversial figure in the anarchist movement, Grave was widely respected as a propagandist and an intellectual until World War I. When war broke out, Grave suspended publication of *Les Temps Nouveaux* and moved to England. The February 1915 “International Anarchist Manifesto on the War,” published in *Freedom*, in New York’s Spanish-language *Cultura Obrera*, the Italian paper *Volontà*, and *Mother Earth*, among many others, called on anarchists to spread “the spirit of revolt” and “discontent in peoples and armies” (p. 174). Pro-Entente anarchists led by Kropotkin and Grave responded with the March 1916 “Manifesto of the Sixteen,” declaring themselves in support of the allies—tearing apart the international anarchist movement which remained overwhelmingly opposed to militarism in general and to that war in particular.

It took Grave some time to abandon his antimilitarist convictions. He saw no prospect for preventing the war in the face of a divided anarchist movement, the capitulation of the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) in France to war fever, and the socialists’ embrace of patriotism. Grave still shared the anarchist belief that a general strike or revolution was the correct response to war, but “it was all too clear that no one was moving and ... I could not do the revolution just by myself” (p. 166). Kropotkin’s approach was different. He had long been concerned about German militarism and believed that a defensive war could be justified, whereas “Grave’s starting point in 1914 was much closer to the dominant anarchist antimilitarist and internationalist discourse.... [H]e openly criticised the analogy with the French revolutionary patriotism of 1792 used by Kropotkin and other supporters of the war” (p. 167).

Grave initially expected the war to be brief and worked with groups such as the UK-based Union of Democratic Control to press for a just peace. He unsuccessfully tried to encourage a similar movement in France, though his letters urging this may have been intercepted by censors.

The now-censored press remained Grave's primary site for political action. Well into 1915, Grave continued to criticize French nationalism and militarism while also advocating self-defense; he called for mutual disarmament and grassroots reconciliation as the way forward. Kropotkin rejected these efforts as an illusion and pressed his longtime friend to reconsider. In the debates that followed, Grave argued that German workers might be inspired to rebel by such an effort, and that its military defeat threatened resurgent nationalism on both sides, laying the foundation for future wars.

*Les Temps Nouveaux's* contributors remaining in France were also divided; they began publication of a bulletin between 1914 and 1916, gradually drifting toward pacifism even as Grave was becoming supportive of what he increasingly saw as a defensive war. Grave challenged the right of the Paris group to the *Temps Nouveaux* name and had them locked out of its offices, which his supporters then used to issue an irregular Bulletin as the war dragged on. In August 1915, the group issued a manifesto stating that peace was more important than any of Germany's wrongs; in December, they joined the international socialist pacifist movement launched at the Zimmerwald conference.

Grave returned to France but never recovered his position in a badly shaken movement. When *Le Liberaire* was relaunched in 1919, its first issue featured a scathing denunciation of Grave and the other supporters of the war. Grave attempted to revive *Les Temps Nouveaux* but withdrew after several months, as neither his collaborators nor the antiwar majority showed any interest in his ideas about rebuilding the movement. He followed with a series of ninety-nine pamphlets, the "Publications de *La Révolte et des Temps Nouveaux*" (1920-1936), which showed his continued engagement with a range of new subjects and his continued international focus. But by then, even the police had decided he was no longer important enough to spy on. In his final years, Grave also published a memoir, which received respectful attention in the mainstream political press but was reviled by his fellow anarchists.

While there are places where one could wish for more detail, this important book documents the central role of networks in the anarchist movement and the central role that Grave and his publications played in those networks at the turn of the century. It also adds to our understanding of how Grave ended up endorsing the war despite what had been a lifetime of antimilitarist propaganda—an apostasy that undermined his legacy, but which it is now clear he undertook only reluctantly after the failure of his earlier efforts to build a movement to end the war through negotiations for a just peace.

Grave died on December 8, 1939. One of his last pamphlets had looked to the Spanish Revolution, which he greeted with great enthusiasm but also the knowledge that it was beyond the scope of his diminished publication to address. The revolution had been crushed several months before his death, and the authoritarianism and war he had long feared were ascendant. But Grave remained an anarchist to the end, albeit one whose activity was increasingly limited to correspondence with comrades around the world and to documenting the history of the movement at whose center he had once stood.

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