

Kropotkin's Communism

M. Korn

1931

It was the development of the theory of anarchist communism that Kropotkin believed to be his main contribution to the theory of anarchism. Indeed, what had the economic ideal of the anarchist movement been before Kropotkin published a series of his famous articles in the *Le Révolté* newspaper in 1879, articles which eventually made up his book *Words of a Rebel*?

At the time of the foundation of the International, socialist doctrines were developed along two lines: state communism and Proudhonism. Communists sought to concentrate economic power in the hands of the state and to structure social life in a military fashion: strict discipline, “detachments” and “labor armies,” compulsory collective consumption in a barracks-like environment, etc. The communism of Louis Blanc and [Étienne] Cabet was precisely that kind of “war communism”; it may have proclaimed the principle “to each according to his needs,” but the actual needs had to be determined from above, by means of a kind of a “reallocation” system.¹

A social ideal like this could not, of course, satisfy free minds, and Proudhon put forward an arrangement of an entirely different, opposing type. He based the economic system of the future on the notion of *equality* and *reciprocity*: production and exchange were grounded on cooperative principles with members of society exchanging services and products of equal value. The privileges of capital are thus eliminated, but private property — though exclusively property actively in use for labor² — would continue, and the notion of its communalization does not enter into this arrangement.

As long ago as in the early years of the International, both ideals failed to satisfy the advanced socialists and, at the Congresses held in 1867 and 1868, the principle of *public* (in opposition to state) ownership of land and instruments of labor was adopted. In the years that followed, at the height of Bakunin’s activity, this idea was further developed to constitute, under the name of *collectivism*, the economic program of the federalist part of the International. The original meaning of the word “collectivism” later suffered a number of mutations, but at that time it meant: *public* (“collective”) possession of the land and the implements of production along with the organization of distribution within each anarchist federation community according to the preferences of the members of that community.³

The members of the International defined “collectivism” as non-state federalist communism, thus distancing themselves from the centralized state communism professed by Babeuf, Louis Blanc, Cabet, and Marx and his followers.⁴ That’s what Bakunin meant when he said at a congress: “I am not a communist, I am a collectivist.” When the “collectivists” of the International proclaimed the principle: “to each the whole result of his labor,” they did not mean that labor would be evaluated and rewarded by someone; they meant only that it would not be exploited and all

¹ Ed: Louis Jean Joseph Charles Blanc (1811 – 1882) was a French socialist politician and historian who was a staunch proponent of state funded state-funded, worker-owned “social workshops”; Étienne Cabet (1788 – 1856) was a French philosopher and utopian socialist who also believed in workers’ cooperatives and government control of community resources.

² Ed: Proudhon argued that while the means of production (land, factories, housing, etc.) should be socialized to end wage labor, the products of labor should be the property of the worker(s) who would possess and control the means used to create them. Thus, possession (of the means of life) would replace private property and the inequalities, oppression, and exploitation it created. Such a system would be a form of market socialism, with peasants, artisans, and worker-run co-operatives selling the product of their labor on the market rather than their labor to bosses and landlords.

³ Ed: Implements can also be translated to “means.”

⁴ Ed: François-Noël Babeuf (1760 – 1797) was an influential revolutionary thinker and proto-communist theorist.

the products of labor would be used to the benefit of the workers. How these products would be distributed was an open question, left to the decision of each community.

But as the development of ideas advanced, collectivism in that form became unsatisfactory, and the thought of the members of the International began to search for a definite answer to the open question, an answer that would be compatible with the principle of absence of a coercive force, of state power in society. An idea was proposed that the only thing that could guide the distribution was everyone's *needs*, and that an exact evaluation of each worker's labor was an impossible thing. In 1876, the Italian Federation of the International spoke in favor of "anarchist communism" at its congress in Florence and, four years later, the Jura Federation, the most influential one, arrived at the same decision (at the 1880 congress in Chaux-de-Fonds). At this congress, the old "collectivism" that only proclaimed communalization of the land and instruments of labor encountered the new idea of *anarchist communism* defended by Kropotkin, [Élisée] Reclus, and [Carlo] Cafiero, as the only idea compatible with a stateless system.⁵

The new idea triumphed, and since that time communism has entered the anarchist worldview as an inseparable part of it, at least in the eyes of the vast majority of anarchists. The credit for developing this idea on the basis of data drawn from both science and practical life must go to Kropotkin. It's owing to him that anarchism possesses this guiding economic principle.

Kropotkin's communism stems from two sources: on the one hand, from the study of economic phenomena and their historical development, and, on the other, from the social ideal of equality and freedom. His objective scientific research and his passionate search for a social formation into which maximum justice can be embodied consistently led him to the same solution: *anarchist communism*.

Over the centuries, step by step, by the labor of countless generations, by conquering nature, by developing productive forces, by improving technology, humanity has accumulated enormous wealth in the fertile fields, in the bowels of the earth, in vibrant cities. Countless technical improvements have made it possible to facilitate and reduce human labor; the broadest human needs can be satisfied to greater and greater extent. And it is only because a small handful of people have seized everything that is needed to create this wealth — land, machines, means of communication, education, culture, etc. — these *possibilities* remain possibilities without ever being translated into reality.

Our whole industry, says Kropotkin, our entire production, has embarked on a false course: instead of serving the needs of society, it is guided solely by the interests of profit. Hence the industrial crises, competition, and struggle for the market with its inevitable companions — constant wars. The monopoly of a small minority extends not only to material goods, but also to the gains of culture and education; the economic slavery of the vast majority makes true freedom and true equality impossible, prevents people from developing social feelings and, as this whole way of life is based on lies, lowers their moral standards.

Adjusted to this abnormal situation, modern political economy — from Adam Smith to Karl Marx — follows, in its entirety, a false path: it begins with production (accumulation of capital, role of machines, division of labor, etc.) and only then moves on to *consumption*, i.e., to the satisfaction of human needs; whereas, if it were what it is meant to be, i.e., the physiology of human

⁵ Ed: Jacques Élisée Reclus (1830 – 1905) was a renowned French geographer, writer and anarchist; Carlo Cafiero (1846 – 1892) was an Italian anarchist, champion of Mikhail Bakunin, and one of the main proponents of anarcho-communism.

society, it would “*study the needs of humanity, and the means of satisfying them with the least possible waste of human energy.*”⁶ One must always bear in mind that “*the goal of every production is the satisfaction of needs.*”⁷

Forgetting this truth leads to a situation which cannot last:

Under pain of death which has already befallen many states in antiquity, human societies are forced to return to first principles: the means of production being the collective work of humanity, they should be the collective property of the race. Individual appropriation is neither just nor serviceable. All things are for all people, since all people have need of them, since all people have worked in the measure of their strength to produce them, and since it is not possible to evaluate every individual’s part in the production of the world’s wealth... Yes, all is for all! If the man and the woman bear their fair share of work, they have a right to their fair share of all that is produced by all, and that share is enough to secure them well-being.⁸

In this total sum of social wealth, Kropotkin sees no way to distinguish between the *instruments of production and the commodities*, a distinction that characterizes socialist schools of the social-democratic type. How may the former be separated from the latter, especially in a civilized society?

We are not savages who can live in the woods, without other shelter than the branches... For the worker, a room, properly heated and lighted, is as much an instrument of production as the tool or the machine. It is the place where the nerves and sinews gather strength for the work of the morrow. The rest of the worker is the daily repairing of the machine. The same argument applies even more obviously to food. The so-called economists of whom we speak would hardly deny that the coal burnt in a machine is as necessary to production as raw cotton or iron ore. How then can food, without which the human machine is incapable of a slightest effort, be excluded from the list of things indispensable for production?⁹

The same is true for clothing and for everything else.

The distinction between instruments of production and commodities, artificially established by economists, not only does not stand up to logical criticism, but also cannot be put into practice. “In our society everything is so closely interconnected that it is impossible to touch one branch of the production without affecting all the others.”¹⁰

At the moment of transformation of capitalist order into a socialist formation, expropriation must affect everything; half-measures will only cause an enormous upheaval in society by disrupting its routines and will lead to overall discontent. One cannot, for example, expropriate the landed estates and hand them over to the peasants, while leaving the factories in the possession of the capitalists; one cannot hand the factories over to the workers, while leaving the trade, the banks, the stock exchange in their present form. “It is impossible for society to organize itself

⁶ *The Conquest of Bread (Bread and Freedom — Khleb i Volya)*, Golos Truda (The Voice of Labor) Publishers, 172.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 57.

following two opposite principles: on the one hand, to make common property of all that has been produced up to the present day, and on the other hand, to keep strictly private property of what will be produced by the individual with public instruments and supplies..."¹¹ Kropotkin strongly condemns all **labor remuneration**, all buying and selling.

It is impossible to reward everyone for his or her labor without exploiting this labor and violating justice. All socialist systems establishing remuneration in proportion to labor (be it in cash, worker's checks, or in kind) thus make an essential concession to the spirit of capitalist society. At first glance, this seems to be a paradox. "In fact," writes Kropotkin in his critique of the wage labor system,¹² "in a society like ours, in which the more that people work the less they are remunerated, this principle, at first sight, may appear to be a yearning for justice. But it is really only the perpetuation of past injustice."

"It was by virtue of this principle that wagedom began — 'to each according to his deeds' — to end in the glaring inequalities and all the abominations of present society. From the very day work was appraised in currency, or in any other form of wage, from the very day it was agreed upon that workers would only receive the wage they could secure for themselves; the whole history of the State-aided Capitalist Society was as good as written..."

"Services rendered to society, be they work in the factory, or in the fields, or intellectual services, *cannot be valued in money*. There can be no exact measure of value (of what has been wrongly-termed exchange value), nor of use value, with regard to production... We may roughly say that the worker who during their lifetime has deprived themselves of leisure ten hours a day has given far more to society than the one who has only been deprived of leisure five hours a day, or who has not been deprived at all. But we cannot take what the worker has done over two hours and say that the yield is worth twice as much as the yield of another individual, working only one hour, and remunerate the worker in proportion. It would be disregarding all that is complex in industry, in agriculture, in the whole life of present society; it would be ignoring to what extent all individual work is the result of past and present labor of society as a whole. It would mean believing ourselves to be living in the Stone Age, whereas we are living in an age of steel."¹³

Kropotkin, therefore, recognizes no real basis under the labor theory of value, which plays, as we know, the most essential role in Marxist economics. Similarly, he does not recognize the distinction between simple labor and skilled labor which some socialist schools subscribe to. On the basis of Ricardo's and Marx's theory of value, they try to justify this distinction scientifically by arguing that training a technician costs society more than training a simple worker, that the "cost of production" of the former is greater. Kropotkin argues that the colossal inequality existing in this respect in modern society is not created by the "cost of production," but by the existing *monopoly on knowledge*: knowledge constitutes a kind of capital, which can be exploited more easily because high pay for skilled labor is often simply a matter of profit calculated by the entrepreneur. Kropotkin believes that maintaining these distinctions in a socialist society — even if they were to be considerably mitigated — is extremely harmful, because it would mean "the

¹¹ *Sovremennaya Nauka i Anarkhiya (Modern Science and Anarchism)*, Golos Truda (The Voice of Labor) Publishers, 88.

¹² See the chapter "The Collectivist Wages System" in *The Conquest of Bread*.

¹³ *The Conquest of Bread (Bread and Freedom — Khleb i Volya)*, Golos Truda (The Voice of Labor) Publishers, 164–165.

Revolution sanctioning and recognizing as a principle a brutal fact we submit to nowadays, but that we nevertheless find unjust.”¹⁴

In general, the principle of *evaluation* and *remuneration* of labor must be abandoned once and for all. If the social revolution does not do this, says Kropotkin, it will put an obstacle to the further development of humanity and maintain the unsolved problem that we have inherited from the past. “‘The works of each!’ But human society would not exist for more than two consecutive generations if everyone did not give infinitely more than that for which he is paid... if workers had not given, at least sometimes, without demanding an equivalent, if workers did not give just to those from whom they expect no reward.”¹⁵

“If middle-class society is decaying, if we have got into a blind alley from which we cannot emerge without attacking past institutions with torch and hatchet, it is precisely because we have calculated too much; because we have let ourselves be influenced into *giving* only to *receive*, because we have aimed at turning society into a commercial company based on *debit* and *credit*.”¹⁶

And so, Kropotkin calls for the courage of thought, for the courage of building a new world on new foundations. And for this purpose, it is first of all necessary to “put people’s *needs* above their *works*,” it is necessary to “recognize, and loudly proclaim, that every one, whatever their status in the old society, whether strong or weak, capable or incapable, has, before everything, *the right to live*, and that society is bound to share amongst all the means of existence at its disposal.”¹⁷

“Let us have no limit to what the community possesses in abundance, but equal sharing and dividing of those commodities which are scarce or apt to run short.”¹⁸ But what shall we be guided by when establishing those necessary limitations? Who will have to endure them? It goes without saying that Kropotkin cannot accept the existence of different categories of citizens based on their value — economic or political — in society, nor can he accept any importance in this respect of their present occupation or past social position.

His measure is simpler and more humane; it is the only humane measure: privileges are accorded to those who find it most difficult to endure deprivation — the weak and the sick, the children and the old. This is so natural, so understandable to everybody that, on *this* basis, it is not difficult to come to a mutual agreement without any confrontation or coercion.

Therefore, at the heart of the new society, there is voluntary labor and the right of everyone to live. This immediately raises a number of questions. Would not such a communist society be a society of hungry, destitute people? Wouldn’t labor productivity fall in the absence of the nudging spur of hunger? Kropotkin, on the contrary, shows by a number of examples how much the productivity of human labor has always risen when labor became at least comparatively free: after the abolition of feudal rights in France in 1792, after the abolition of slavery of the Negroes in America, and after the destruction of serfdom in Russia.

And — on a smaller scale — all of the examples of collective free labor (in Russian, Swiss, and German villages, in worker’s cooperative associations, among American pioneers, among the Russian Doukhobors in Canada, in Mennonite communities, etc., etc.) — that they show such

¹⁴ Ibid., 162.

¹⁵ Ibid., 162.

¹⁶ Ibid., 167–168.

¹⁷ Ibid., 135.

¹⁸ Ibid., 70.

productivity, such a surge of energy in the workers, that no enterprise using wage labor can match.

“Wage labor is servile labor, which cannot and is not supposed to yield all that it is capable of. It is time to put an end to this tale of wages as the best means of obtaining productive labor. If today’s industry yields a hundred times more than it did in the epoch of our ancestors, we owe it to the rapid development of physics and chemistry at the end of the last century; this happened not owing to the capitalist system of wage labor, but in spite of it.”¹⁹

It is freedom that is able to raise labor productivity, while all other measures, all pressure from above, whether in the form of disciplinary measures, whether in the form of piecework wages, all share the opposite effect. They are vestiges of slavery and serfdom, when Russian landlords used to say amongst themselves that the peasants were lazy and would not work the land if not watched.

And do we not now see in Russia a brilliant confirmation of Kropotkin’s words: labor productivity is falling, the country is sliding into poverty, while disciplinary measures are increasing and increasing, turning the country into barracks and the workers into mobilized soldiers?

Then there is another question: let us suppose that communism is able to ensure well-being and even wealth to society, but will it not also kill personal freedom? State communism will, answers Kropotkin, but anarchist communism will not.

“Communism, as an economic institution, can take all forms, from total personal freedom to the total enslavement of all.”²⁰ But any other economic form is worse in this respect, because it inevitably requires the existence of coercive power: where wage labor and private property are preserved, some people are made dependent on others and the privileges created must be forcefully guarded against possible encroachments from the disadvantaged part of society. Not only is communism not in conflict with personal freedom, but, on the contrary, “without communism man will never attain the full development of his personality, which is perhaps the most ardent desire of every thinking being.”²¹

Communism, at least in relation to the necessities of life, constitutes the solution to which modern societies are heading, and in a civilized society, the only possible form of communism is the one proposed by anarchists, i.e., communism without any authorities. Any other kind of communism is impossible. We have outgrown it. Communism, in its essence, presupposes the equality of all members of the commune and therefore denies all power. On the other hand, no anarchical society of a certain size is conceivable that would not begin by providing everyone with at least a certain level of living comforts obtained jointly by all. Thus, the concepts of communism and anarchism necessarily complement each other.²²

Objections are put forward against communism, among other things, on the grounds of the failure that commonly befalls various communist societies — religious communities or socialist colonies. Both suffer from shortcomings that have nothing to do with communism, and it is from these shortcomings that they perish. In the first place, Kropotkin remarks, they are usually too

¹⁹ *The Conquest of Bread (Bread and Freedom — Khleb i Volya)*, Golos Truda (The Voice of Labor) Publishers, 146

²⁰ *Sovremennaya Nauka i Anarkhiya (Modern Science and Anarchism)*, 140

²¹ *Ibid.*, 141.

²² *Ibid.*, 85.

small and unconnected; their members, by force of things, live an artificial life in a too limited sphere of interests. These communities withdraw from the life of the rest of humanity, from its struggles, from its progress.

Besides, they always demand the total subordination of their members to the collective: everyone's life is controlled, they never belong to themselves, all of their time is absorbed by the community. This is why all at least remotely independent people, especially young people, usually run away from such communities. "Phalansteries are repugnant to millions of human beings."²³ It is true that even the most reserved individual certainly feels the necessity of meeting their fellows for the purpose of common work which becomes more attractive the more the individual feels themselves a part of an immense whole. But it is not so for the hours of leisure, reserved for rest and intimacy... Sometimes a phalanstery is a necessity, but it would be hateful, were it the general rule... As to considerations of economy, which are sometimes laid stress on in favor of phalansteries, they are those of a petty tradesman. The most important economy, the only reasonable one, is to make life pleasant for all, because the person who is satisfied with their life produces infinitely more than the person who curses their surroundings."²⁴

These are some considerations that should now be well thought upon by those who see the goal of socialist construction in the "socialization of living" and expect in such a way to cure the evils created by using similar methods imbued with military spirit.

In essence, Kropotkin notes, the objections to anarchist communism raised by other socialist schools are not fundamental: almost all recognize communism and anarchism as *an ideal*. After all, Marxists also outline the disappearance of the state following the disappearance of classes as a future endeavor. Anarchist communism is usually rejected on the grounds of its allegedly utopian nature. The majority of socialists do not see the possibility of a direct transition from capitalism to anarchist communism and aim their practical work not at it, but at that form of economic life which, in their opinion, will be realized during the inevitable transitional period. Kropotkin did not seek to prove that anarchist communism would necessarily be implemented immediately in its perfect form, but he did put the question of the transitional period differently.

"But we must remember that any discussion of the transitions that will have to be made on the way to the goal will be utterly useless unless it is based on the study of those directions, those rudimentary transitional forms that are already emerging."²⁵ And here, Kropotkin points out that these directions lead exactly to communism. We cannot dwell here on the numerous examples and proofs of this; we refer the reader, therefore, to the text itself.

But, in this connection, it does not hurt to recall another expression. We all know how often Kropotkin's extreme optimism is mentioned — with condescending praise by some ("idealist, wonderful man!") and with censure by others. Indeed, they usually say, such a social system does not require a modern person, but a much more morally advanced one. And they put aside any thought of this until the time when people develop in some unknown way. Yes, of course, Kropotkin believes in people, especially in their ability to develop and in those feelings of sociality and solidarity inherent in their nature; but isn't this kind of optimism an indispensable

²³ Ed: A phalanstery is a building containing a phalange, or group of people living together in community, free of external regulation and holding property in common. It was first conceptualized by the utopian socialist Charles Fourier. Kropotkin cautions that this organizational method becomes authoritarian in nature because the community's needs eventually subsume the individual's autonomy.

²⁴ *The Conquest of Bread (Bread and Freedom — Khleb i Volya)*, Golos Truda (The Voice of Labor) Publishers, 118.

²⁵ *Sovremennaya Nauka i Anarkhiya (Modern Science and Anarchism)*, 123.

characteristic of all people of progress, revolutionaries and reformers? After all, the argument that people are imperfect, that people are “immature,” that they are savage, ignorant, etc., has always been the domain of conservatives of all kinds, of defenders of the existing order against all attempts at liberation.

However, progressive people have always known that to raise people to be better, more advanced, more cultured, they should first be raised to better living conditions; that slavery can never teach you to be free; and that a war of all against all can never engender humane feelings.²⁶

The same is true here: only the anarchist system will produce accomplished anarchists like Kropotkin was, and like few others are today. Therefore, it is necessary to work for it, to advance in its direction without waiting for the quality of people to rise: people will grow as freedom and equality in social formations expand. And, at any rate, it is not the socialists, nor the people of the future, who can ever be entitled to use the argument of the masses being imperfect and unprepared.

Kropotkin’s anarchist communism is endorsed by a vast majority of anarchists, but not by all. There are individualist anarchists, some of whom are proponents of private property, while others have little concern at all for future social organization, concentrating their attention on the inner freedom of an individual in any social order; there are also Proudhonist anarchists. But the fact that anarchist communism is accepted by all those involved in the social struggle of our time, chiefly in the workers’ movement, is not a coincidence nor a question of the temporary success of one idea or another.

Only communism provides the guiding thread in solving a series of issues of positive construction, because it constitutes the necessary condition for making a stateless society possible. All other anarchist systems are plagued by insoluble internal contradictions; anarchist communism alone meets both the requirements of theoretical consistency and those that can foster the creation of practical programs.

Author Biography

Marie Goldsmith (1871 – 1933), pseudonyms M. Korn or M. Isidine, was a Russian anarchist and biologist who spent most of her life in France. She was a close friend and colleague to Kropotkin and translated many of his publications between French and Russian during their lifetime. Their correspondences even reveal that there were plans for Goldsmith to help him assemble a second volume of *Mutual Aid*. Although sadly overlooked since her untimely passing, Goldsmith’s life and work are now the subject of a research project meant to bring her scientific and anarchist writing into the twenty-first century. Visit here for more details: mariegoldsmith.uk.

²⁶ Ed: A reference to the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes wrote that a “war of all against all” would surely break out in the absence of a state in his seminal work, *Leviathan*, a supposition anarchists obviously rejected.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



M. Korn
Kropotkin's Communism
1931

This translation was originally published in *Black Flag Vol. 2 No. 3 2022 p. 20–26*. This document sourced from mariegoldsmith.uk/archives

Editor's note: Korn, M. "Kropotkin's Communism," in *International collection dedicated to the tenth anniversary of the death of P.A.Kropotkin*, ed. Grigory Maximov (Chicago, 1931), 34–46. This essay by the anarchist Marie Goldsmith was first published in Russian in a 1931 anthology recognizing the ten year anniversary of Peter Kropotkin's death. Almost one hundred years after that anthology was printed, the article has been translated by Alexandra Agranovich and edited by Christopher Coquard and Søren Hough with the goal of preserving Goldsmith's original meaning and stylistic emphases. Footnotes by the translator or editors are prefaced "Ed:" while all other footnotes are from Marie Goldsmith's original article. Her references to page numbers in Kropotkin's books and pamphlets correspond to the Russian editions.

theanarchistlibrary.org