

When Kropotkin met Lenin

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Introduction

In 1970 the left libertarian Maurice Brinton presented a novel version of the victor's history thesis in an attempt to show why historical analysis of the Russian revolution remained an urgent task. Brinton was not interested in exposing the partiality of Soviet narratives of the revolution or in presenting an ideologically driven critique of past events or decisions. Instead he wanted to recover the revolution's conceptual history. He argued that, like it or not, post-revolutionary socialism was impregnated with the 'ethos, traditions and organisational conceptions of Bolshevism.'¹ Perhaps we were not all Bolsheviks then but we nonetheless inhabited the conceptual world that they had shaped. Failing to appreciate how profoundly the languages of socialism had been moulded in the course of past revolutionary struggles led modern political activists to formulate their politics imprecisely and feebly. Instead of interrogating the meaning of principles bequeathed by their revolutionary idols, the critics lazily repeated their old demands as if their sense was clear. History had been reduced to a vehicle for toothless finger-wagging and critical energy was diverted into the confirmation of deeply-rooted anti-Bolshevik positions.

Brinton's argument resonated with a charge made by the anarchist Voline much earlier: that the Bolsheviks had used propaganda to hijack slogans popularised by political rivals in order to advance policies that were entirely out of kilter with the opposition's proposals.² However Brinton was interested the content of the ideas, not their cynical manipulation. These critiques were not mutually exclusive, but he identified Voline as one of the purveyors of the reductive history he was attacking. Brinton's particular concern was to probe revolutionary demands for workers' control and show how the campaign spearheaded by the Factory Councils between 1917 and 1921 had been effectively halted by Bolshevik institutionalisation. Observing that the demand for workers' control remained a watchword of the post-68 European left — social democrats and socialist revolutionaries alike — he distinguished the management of production from its control. Management meant the 'total domination of the producer over the production process'³ and it entailed the assumption of all managerial functions by the working class. Control, on the other hand, signalled a mere change in the ownership of the means of production — for example, the transfer from private to state ownership — and it was therefore consistent with the consolidation of bureaucratic power. Having made this distinction, Brinton explained the instigation of Bolshevik state control and the demise of workers' management not only with reference to the opposition that the Factory Councils faced, but also by its internal shortcomings. The Factory Councils movement had been 'unable to proclaim its own objectives ... in clear and positive terms.' Reaching the end of history, albeit temporarily, has helped some recast Soviet communism as a romantic foil for neoliberalism. Yet even stalwart critics find it less easy to argue that the Bolshevik legacy in any of its forms now saturates socialism as it once did. Indeed, histories of modern libertarianism plot a dramatic reversal of Bolshevism's fortunes and the resurgence of anarchism, its nemesis. Seemingly outsmarted by Marxists in the two great nineteenth-century socialist internationals, crushed at Kronstadt and defeated during the Makhnovist campaigns in the Ukraine — then finally Spain — anarchism has emerged anew to capture the heart of the alter-

¹ Maurice Brinton, *The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control, 1917–1921. The State and Counter-Revolution* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1975 [1970]), p. iii.

² Voline, pseud. Vsevolod Mikhailovich Eichenbaum, *The Unknown Revolution* (Montreal: Black Rose, 1975 [1947]), p. 210.

³ Brinton, p. vii.

globalisation movement. The ‘battle for Seattle’ affirmed the ascendancy of anarchist sensibilities in social movement politics and the ‘anarchist turn’ in radical political theory has cemented anarchism’s revival. So is there any point in mulling over Russian revolutionary history? My view is that Brinton’s project, namely to try and understand what ‘the forces in conflict really represented,’⁴ rather than judge sets of historical actions from the vantage point of the present, is as instructive today as it was 50 years ago.

Brinton linked the tendency to ahistoricism amongst socialists to an anti-intellectual bias. Ironically, he felt that this had been encouraged by left intellectuals who had most to hide and most to lose from a historically informed critique. Discouraging conceptual questioning by throwing a blanket over the past most suited those keen to assert their ideological dominance over the revolutionary movement. The anti-intellectual ahistorical prejudice he observed in the 1970s has outlived the collapse of the Soviet empire, even if the priority given to activism over history reflects a commitment to anti-power and an eagerness to decouple political movements from their white, male, hetero-normative, Eurocentric pasts. But while historical detachment is now driven by motives diametrically opposed to those that Brinton detected, it still leaves open questions about the history of the revolution which deserve to be addressed. The issue I consider here revolves around the construction of the concept of revolution.

While the idea of revolution survives in contemporary theory and practice, in anarchist/ic circles ‘prefigurative politics’ has become the more popular idiom for change. Broadly describing a commitment to render the means and ends of change consistent, prefiguration is equally associated with institution-building, horizontal organisation and ethical behavioural practices. Expressing different forms of activism, prefiguration is difficult to pin down precisely. Yet it expresses two strong ideas. One is a rejection of old-style Leninist vanguardism, class dictatorship and party rule. In this sense prefiguration frames a means-end relationship that distinguishes anarchism as a politics of direct action and grass-roots organising. In another sense, prefiguration implies the rejection of forms of action associated by turns with class struggle, violence and cataclysmic emancipatory moments. Here it extends beyond the critique of Leninism to link a commitment to realise transformative change with forms of rebellion and disobedience that exclude big R revolution.

Kropotkin’s meeting with Lenin discussed below shows how these themes rely on concepts of revolution that have been historicised through the Russian experience. This fleeting single encounter also draws out a contrast between anarchist and Bolshevik ideas.⁵ The risk of returning to Russian revolutionary history to re-examine anarchist and Bolshevik concepts of revolution is that it encourages a misleadingly bipolar narrative. However, the point is neither to deny the complexity of the revolution nor to show what divided anarchists from Bolsheviks, still less Marxists – as if there were no greys in this relationship. Rather it is to consider what Kropotkin’s analysis of revolution, advanced in the course of a revolutionary struggle, represented, and where prefigurative ideas elaborated thereafter stand in relation to it.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Taken from P.A. Kropotkin, *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, ed. Martin A. Miller (Cambridge MASS: MIT Press, 1970), pp. 334–340.

The context: revolution or betrayal?

Kropotkin ended 36 years of near-continuous exile in Britain when he returned to Russia in June 1917. His meeting with Lenin in May 1919, two years before his death, was arranged by Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, department head of the Council of People's Commissars. Kropotkin was then a marginalised figure, alienated from most European revolutionary socialists on account of his decision to back the Allies in their war against the Central Powers. This decision had sparked an angry debate about Kropotkin's understanding of revolution, and whether in fact he was a revolutionary at all. Trotsky summed up a widely-held view when he charged the 'superannuated' Kropotkin with disavowing 'everything he had been teaching for almost half a century.'⁶ This damning judgment strongly resonated with the anarchist Errico Malatesta's critique of Kropotkin's 'anarcho-chauvinism.' Both argued that in backing the war Kropotkin had turned his back on revolution.

A second contrasting view recently advanced by Sergey Saytanov equally suggests that Kropotkin renounced revolution. This paints Kropotkin as an anarchist Eduard Bernstein – the leading revisionist Marxist within the Second International – who embraced gradualism in place of revolution. Confirming Trotsky's conclusion that Kropotkin had reversed his youthful position, Saytanov reads late Kropotkin as a principled reformist anarchist, not a revolutionary.⁷ This view similarly forecloses discussion of Kropotkin's late revolutionary politics.

Two other evaluations keep the lines of inquiry open. Lenin's critical assessment painted Kropotkin as a disreputable revolutionary. Having described Kropotkin as an anarchist-patriot who hung on the coat-tails of the bourgeoisie during the war, Lenin met him in 1919 to talk about the principles and character of revolution. At the end of their encounter he floated the idea of publishing Kropotkin's *The Great French Revolution*, pitching the project as a contribution to socialist enlightenment. He had earlier run the proposal past Bonch-Bruевич, this time sharing his earnest assessment of the book's educational value: releasing a hundred thousand copies to libraries and reading rooms across the country would enable the masses to 'understand the distinction between the petty bourgeois anarchist and the true communist world view of revolutionary Marxism.'⁸ If Lenin was Machiavellian, he perhaps held Kropotkin's anarchism to be consistently petit bourgeois. From this perspective, Kropotkin's support for the Allied campaign was part and parcel of his degraded anarchist revolutionism. Emma Goldman, who had been deeply saddened by Kropotkin's wartime stance, added a different twist to Lenin's assessment of his consistency. Visiting Kropotkin in Russia, she compared her growing disillusionment with 'the Revolution and in the masses' with his enduring belief in its significance, undiminished even by the October coup.⁹ Quietly unhooking the pro-war/anti-revolution link which other anti-war revolutionaries invoked to expose Kropotkin's betrayal, Goldman also challenged Lenin's critique of Kropotkin's petit bourgeois tendencies as a mischaracterisation of his anarchism. By her reckoning Kropotkin, though wrong about the war, had nevertheless remained a committed anarchist and revolutionary. The support he lent to the co-operative movement and anarcho-syndicalism was not only consistent with his pre-war anarchist theorising it also flowed from a

⁶ Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution: Vol. II*, trans Max Eastman (Ann Arbor, 1957), p. 230.

⁷ Sergey V. Saytanov, *The Argumentation of Peter Kropotkin's Anarcho-Reformism in his Social-Political Anarchist Views (According to Russian Materials)*, trans. Natalia I. Saytanonva, (Moscow: Ontoprint, 2014).

⁸ In Miller ed. p. 326.

⁹ Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* vol. II (New York: Dover, 1970 [1931]), p. 863.

practical concern to re-energise the forces that Bolshevik terror had succeeded in paralysing.¹⁰ As Goldman noted, it stemmed directly from continuing engagement in revolutionary struggles and his desire to learn from them.

For his part, Kropotkin presented his views not as a rejection of revolution but as an alternative conception. His insistence that Lenin appoint a co-operative to print cheap editions of his literary output and his refusal to take 250,000 roubles from the State Publishing Company when the currency 'still stood well' was a not-so-small measure of the resilience of his anarchist ethics.¹¹ When he and Lenin met he invoked the means-ends distinction to suggest that they disagreed only about methods. This was perhaps disingenuous; but he was frank in his defence of revolution against Lenin's Bolshevik concept.

Two concepts of revolution

It seems unlikely that Kropotkin would ever have approved of what he had heard of Lenin's commitment to the withering away of the state, or that he would have mistaken Engels' slogan to be one of Marx's most important and original contributions to state theory, as Bonch-Bruевич claimed. Always opposed to Marxism and never even temporarily 'dazzled' by the 'glitter of Bolshevism,' (as Goldman admitted that she had been), Kropotkin dubbed Lenin a Jacobin before the war and continued to do so when he spoke to Goldman in March 1920.¹² Bolshevism, he told her, was the use of mass terror for the achievement of 'political supremacy.'¹³ Kropotkin was perhaps more inclined to suggest to Lenin that they had more in common than this candid opinion indicated because he wanted to wrench concessions from him; to ease the pressure on the local co-ops in his home town Dmitrov, which party officials were busily closing down. Certainly, the exchanges with Lenin turned on their predicament.

The meeting opened with a discussion about the composition of the co-ops. Did they provide sanctuary to would-be capitalists – kulaks, landowners, merchants and the like? The disagreement between them on this question revealed a deeper tension about socialist education, the nature of authority and the destruction of capitalism. None of these issues was tackled directly. Lenin led the exchanges throughout, determining the major themes and shaping the course of the discussion. But he did not dominate the debate because Kropotkin met his points obliquely.

To summarise: Kropotkin countered Lenin's plan to deploy party workers in order to enlighten the masses with a warning about the poisonous effects of unenlightened authority and authoritarianism; he responded to Lenin's appeal to pass on information about recalcitrant individuals in the co-ops with a promise to report bureaucratic power abuses; he followed Lenin's blunt advocacy of civil war with a comment about the need to avoid the intoxications of power and the domination of workers by party non-workers. Talking past Kropotkin in a similar way, Lenin greeted Kropotkin's critique of authority with a reflection on the inevitability of errors or, as he put it, the impossibility of wearing white gloves while waging revolution. He countered Kropotkin's enthusiastic assessment of the revolutionary potential of west European co-operatives and industrial unions by rejecting syndicalism and relating the counter-power of the co-ops to the enormous

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 864.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 770.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 755; 770.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 864.

armed might of capitalist states. Lenin responded to Kropotkin's endorsement of struggle, 'desperate struggle,' as an essential ingredient of revolutionary change by contrasting the uselessness of anarchist tactics – individual acts of violence – with the energy and power of 'massive red terror.' Lenin's reply to Kropotkin's critique of party-workers in workers' organisations was to reiterate the need to enlighten the illiterate, backward masses. This final return prompted Lenin's offer to publish Kropotkin's history of the French Revolution.

Overall, two different conceptions of revolution can be seen in this encounter. Each was informed by active engagement in struggle: Lenin's was shaped by the demands to co-ordinate collective action against global capitalism while Kropotkin's was informed by the desire to build alliances with grass roots institutions, self-organising for local sustainability in a period of revolutionary upheaval. Kropotkin's critique provides modern anarchists with plenty of ammunition against Leninism but it is less easy to see how his concept of revolution dovetails with the models embedded in prefiguration.

Anarchy and the revolution

When Brinton rebuked anti-Bolsheviks for reproducing 'finger-wagging history,' he failed to consider how traditions of opposition had also framed the conceptual worlds that revolutionary socialists inhabited after the revolution. Perhaps it was easier for anarchists to construct this tradition than it was for non-anarchist anti or non-Bolshevik revolutionaries. For while the tensions created by the realignment of the revolutionary left with the founding of the Comintern were also felt in anarchist circles, events like Kronstadt, the Makhnovist campaign and Goldman's disillusionment forcefully sharpened anarchism's anti-Marxist alignment. The breaks-in-continuity thesis that attempted to drive a wedge between Leninism and Stalinism, advanced by Victor Serge, Isaac Deutscher and others, hardly troubled anarchists. Indeed, anarchists supported histories that combined versions of the Jacobin critique that Kropotkin pioneered to argue that Bakunin's break with Marx anticipated the later anarchist analysis of Leninist revolutionary organisation. The vanguard party, democratic centralism, proletarian dictatorship and one-party rule are integral to this history and provide the foil for anarchist transformation. Horizontalism, direct action and decentralisation – the linchpins of anarchist politics – represent the reverse of Bolshevik methods.

Brinton also overlooked the extent to which the legacy of war left its mark on anarchism. If anarchism, like other oppositional currents, was impregnated with the ethos, traditions and organisational conceptions of Bolshevism, it was as a determinedly anti-war revolutionary movement. Nazi aggression reignited an anarchist debate about war and revolution, but its impact was trivial compared to the fall-out in 1914. By 1939, the anti-war/anti-revolution juxtaposition that had prevailed against Kropotkin grounded anarchist politics. This shift historicised revolution as the violent seizure of power, exemplified in the Russian revolution and the Bolshevik coup. In this understanding, anarchist revolution involves the rejection of Leninism's organisational trappings and the deployment of violence.

Two models of anarchist change can be distilled from these critical histories of the Russian experience. Each assesses anarchist revolution by the internal consistency of ends and means and rejects Leninism and war-mongering in the name of prefigurative change. Their lineages are often traced to one of Kropotkin's two most vocal anti-war critics. The Malatestan version advocates

collective class-struggle against capitalism while rejecting proletarian dictatorship. The Goldman variation calls for creative cultural transformation. The Malatestan concept legitimises class violence for anti-capitalist ends while the Goldman principle excludes violence as an expression of dictatorship. Even though it bears some resemblance to the broad anti-Bolshevik historical conceptualisation, the idea of revolution that emerges from Kropotkin's encounter with Lenin contrasts with both models.

It would be odd to discover that in 1920 Kropotkin did not draw on the anti-Marxist critique he had rehearsed before the revolution when given the opportunity to discuss policy with Lenin; his general analysis of state socialism is clear in his denunciation of the Bolsheviks' use of torture and hostage-taking.¹⁴ Yet his quarrel with Lenin had a different focus to the later historical critique of Leninism. Kropotkin pressed his arguments about the rejection of bureaucracy, party control and the corruptions of power in response to Lenin's claims about proletarian education. Kropotkin rejected these claims and similarly disputed the necessity of charging party officials with the responsibility of weeding out class enemies. And when Kropotkin contacted Lenin again later, taking seriously Lenin's ambiguous invitation to prolong their exchange, he also referred to the damaging effects of the influx of 'ideological communists' into local non-party committees and their detachment from the soviets. Contained within Kropotkin's organisational critique of Bolshevik party policy was a defence of self-government which resembled the idea of management that Brinton defended. In addition, in contesting Bolshevik social engineering, Kropotkin tied anarchist self-government firmly to local co-operation, detaching anarchist revolution from the harmonisation of class interests. Kropotkin's revolutionaries were not to be moulded into communists, nor were they anarchist activists.

Violence was not central to Kropotkin's concept of revolution, though it was core for Lenin (as it is, in different ways, in debates about prefigurative politics, too). Fastening on the global effects of micro-political changes, Kropotkin downplayed the idea of revolution as class war, while also suggesting that Lenin was right to dispense with 'white gloves.' His analysis of revolution turned on social, economic and political dislocation. He saw it as replete with dangers and potential harms, yet offering an opportunity for the oppressed to rid themselves of their masters and take direct control of their own affairs. As Alexander Berkman later noted, this view committed 'Kropotkinists' to reject the institutionalisation of violence 'in the hands of the Tcheka,' but also to prefer pragmatism over abstract theorisation.¹⁵ The 'desperate struggle' of revolution pitted ordinary workers against their old and would-be new oppressors in conditions of social breakdown. The concerns Kropotkin expressed to Lenin were that the Party's suppression of local forces greatly contributed to the looming threat of famine and threatened further to disrupt the meagre, already interrupted supplies of firewood, spring seed and soap. His conviction was that Tsarist White Terror had spread 'utter contempt for human life' and induced 'habits of violence' amongst those now battling to sustain themselves. These pressures would likely intensify habitual aggression on the ground.¹⁶ Kropotkin believed that the duty of revolutionaries therefore was to support the constructive efforts of local people to provide for their wellbeing and help mitigate the worst deprivations revolution entailed. The combined impact of multiple small movements was never calculable but was always potentially revolutionary. On this view, big R

¹⁴ In Miller, pp. 338–9. For an analysis of Kropotkin's libertarian anti-state theory see David Shub, 'Kropotkin and Lenin,' *The Russian Review*, 12: 4 (October 1953), pp. 227–234.

¹⁵ Alexander Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth, Diary 1920–22 Extracts* (London: Virus, n.d. [1925]), p. 28.

¹⁶ P.A. Kropotkin, *The Terror in Russia: An Appeal to the British Nation*, (London: Methuen, 1909), p. 8.

revolution was a regressive move intended to channel local forces through the imposition of laws. Had he lived to see it, Kropotkin might have pointed to primitive socialist accumulation as an example. Revolution was a process driven by re-construction of everyday life in the absence of authority. 'Anywhere you look,' Kropotkin told Lenin, 'a basis for nonauthority flares up.'¹⁷

¹⁷ In Miller, pp. 328-9.

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