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Review: Kropotkin: Reviewing the Classical Anarchist Tradition by Ruth Kinna

Anarcho

June 11, 2019

Anarchists from Proudhon onwards have met with misunderstanding and not a little deliberate distortion. Peter Kropotkin, despite being one of the most widely read anarchist thinkers, has also suffered this fate. This, perhaps, is due to him being so widely read for the most easily available works are those he wrote as general introductions to anarchism. The more numerous works he wrote for the anarchist press addressing the issues it was facing remain mostly buried in archives.

This has helped a distinctly false picture of Kropotkin – as, basically, anarcho-Santa – to emerge. Ruth Kinna’s book aims to challenge this and to ‘rescue Kropotkin from the framework of classical anarchism and to explain the politics that led him to support the Entente powers in 1914’. (197) Using an impressive array of research, she easily refutes those seeking to distance Kropotkin from Bakunin as well as showing the vacuous nature of the so-called “new anarchist” position which turned the world’s leading revolu-

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tionary class struggle anarchist into an advocate of counter-culture reformism. In the process she addresses the so-called “third wave” of anarchism, “post-anarchism”, which continued this misreading but for different ends.

Kinna does this in an extremely summarised fashion – at times too summarised as it often felt to this reader like being dropped into the middle of a conversation without sufficient context. That “post-anarchism” (unsurprisingly given its jargon ridden nature) has little traction outside of academic circles explains most of the obscurity and so more context would have helped – we do not all have access to the time or resources to follow-up the footnotes. Hopefully this will help those infatuated with “post-anarchism” recognise that while anarchism *is* a class based theory it has always been more than that.

Kinna is right that Kropotkin has been misunderstood, that the common perspective of his politics is distinctly at odds with what he actually advocated, and her book helps put the record straight. I do disagree with some of emphasises and some of the references used do not fully support the weight they are being subject to. For example, Kropotkin’s Russian roots and understandable interest in the Russian revolutionary movement is all too often overlooked. Kinna, rightly, reminds us of both of these and has unearthed some significant material. However, she goes too far in the opposite direction. Kropotkin’s main focus, even during his long exile in Britain, was always France. She also over-eggs the influence of Nihilism in Kropotkin’s politics – he went from being a liberal-socialist-reformist to an anarchist in Western Europe and returned to Russia as a ‘Bakuninist.’ Similarly, *Mutual Aid* was not the product of polemics in the anarchist movement around Nietzsche but rather, as Kropotkin states in his autobiography, a response to Thomas Huxley’s misuse of Darwin with regards human society.

However, these are minor points. Kinna is right to question the notion of “classical” anarchism – a meaningless notion at best par-

ticularly so when those who had no influence in the development of anarchism as a theory and movement are included (such as Godwin and Stirner). She has succeeded in this as well as explaining Kropotkin’s ideas and situating them within their many influences, not least the science of geography.

She is less successful when arguing that Kropotkin’s position to support the allies can be explained by his anarchism. Certainly he did view his position as being consistent with anti-militarism but other anarchists were genuinely surprised and shocked by his position – rightly so, given what he had argued previously. Thus the anti-war Freedom group continued to sell his pamphlet “Wars and Capitalism” and which *Mother Earth* reprinted because “[n]o better answer can be made to Kropotkin’s changed attitude than his own argument against war written in 1913”. (Vol. IX, No. 9). Reading that work it is easy to see why but Kinna does not really address the obvious contradiction.

Anarchists do make mistakes, act in non-anarchist ways and often (like Kropotkin or the CNT-FAI) justify this by twisting anarchism. The likes of Malatesta, Goldman and Berkman at the time refuted both Kropotkin’s claim that a victory for Germany would have a worse effect than its defeat and that his position was consistent with communist-anarchism. While Kinna is right to look deeper than Kropotkin’s alleged Germanophobia to explain his decision to back the Allies in 1914, her argument is unconvincing.

Overall, the work contains useful research but within an academic framework which many anarchists – and perhaps those researching anarchism – will consider obscure. However, it is an important contribution to our understanding of Kropotkin and enriching our perspectives on the anarchist tradition.

Kropotkin: Reviewing the Classical Anarchist Tradition

Ruth Kinna

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2016