

The London Congress of 1881

Anarcho

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This article seeks to correct all too common generalisations and distortions about the London Congress of 1881. It indicates how looking solely at the resolutions – as most non-anarchists do – gives a distinctly false impression of both the Congress itself and anarchist ideas and strategy. This is an expanded version of the original which appeared in the blog of *An Anarchist FAQ* and then in *Black Flag Anarchist Review* (Spring 2023). This expanded version will appear in *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*.

Kropotkin’s speech on the nature of the coming social revolution amounted to an articulated programmatic statement... He emphasized the need for workers themselves to make the revolution and the important role of workers’ organizations, in which anarchists were to be involved, prior to the revolution... true revolutionary organizations can only be composed of workers...¹

Peter Kropotkin – “I ask the court not to confuse my speeches with resolutions concerning the diffusion of chemical knowledge”²

The 1881 London Congress is considered by some – usually non-anarchists – as a defining moment in anarchist history. James Joll, for example, suggests in his history of anarchism that “a number of leading revolutionaries, including [Peter] Kropotkin and [Errico] Malatesta, met in London and asserted their faith in the policy that illegality alone would lead to revolution, while many of them... called for the study of the technical sciences such as chemistry, to make bombs.” Indeed, those anarchists “who had not... gone over to the idea of legal political action were now committed to the tactics of ‘propaganda by the deed’ in its most extreme form. It is from anarchist actions over the next twenty years that the traditional picture of the anarchist is derived – a slinking figure with his hat pulled over his eyes and a smoking bomb in his pocket.”³ This is considered so well established that no references to support the claims were provided.

A similar picture is provided more recently by historian James Green who proclaimed that this “new ‘Black International’ formed in London” was the product of the following ideological milieu:

The anarchists who formed the new International Working People’s Association in London acted on their belief that socialist propaganda could not effectively reach workers through trade unions and political parties; nor would revolutionary change result from strikes, mass demonstrations and election campaigns... revolutionaries must resort to a new method – “propaganda by deed”. These revolutionaries believed an *attentat*, a violent act planned by a secret conspiracy and committed by a dedicated militant, could impress the world with the evil of the despotic state and with the fearless determination of those who intended to destroy it. Many European anarchists believed such deeds would terrorize the authorities who were targeted, arouse the masses and trigger a popular insurrection.⁴

¹ Martin A. Miller, *Kropotkin* (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1976), 146.

² “The Trial of the Anarchists at Lyons”, *Liberty* (Boston), 17 February 1883.

³ James Joll, *The Anarchists* (Cambridge: Methuen, 1979), 109–110.

⁴ James Green, *Death in the Haymarket* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006), 93.

This leads Green to suggest that the Chicago Anarchists “faithfully adhered to the lesson they had learned from Karl Marx: that socialism could be achieved only through the collective power of workers organised into aggressive trade unions”.⁵ Phil H. Goodstein likewise states that Kropotkin “rejected union organisation as being but another form of hierarchy and authority inimical to the anarchist ideal. Rather, he insisted, anarchist militants should organise themselves into small circles from which they would seek to educate the masses about the nature and goodness of anarchy.” This lead, eventually, to a reevaluation and “[by] 1892, the leaders of international anarchism, including Malatesta and Kropotkin... recognized the lamentable state of the anarchist movement. They sent out a circular at this time suggesting that anarchists involve themselves in the new syndicalist movement which was beginning to grow in Latin Europe.”⁶

What is significant about summaries like these is the lack of supporting evidence. Green, for example, does not refer to Caroline Cahm’s essential account of Kropotkin’s activities and ideas in his book despite it having the most detailed account of the 1881 London Congress available in English and being available since 1989.⁷ This reflects a general disinterest in understanding anarchist ideas by Green in favour of uninformed comments suggesting that the Chicago Anarchists remained Marxists due to their support for union struggle as if that were not Bakunin’s position rather than Marx’s (who sought to turn the International into an organisation which contested elections).

Neither Joll, Green nor Goodstein consulted the reports of the Congress nor discuss the wide range of views expressed. Yes, there were those attending who were infatuated by dynamite and extreme language – encouraged by the agents provocateurs who also attended – but that was not the position of all who organised or attended the event, quite the reverse.

Given this, it makes sense to consult the report of the 1881 Congress to get a better idea of what had been discussed at it and which was not reflected in the final motions. Once that is done, a far more informed awareness of differing anarchist perspectives will be gained and a better understanding of the dynamics of social movements, not least the relationship between those considered as “leaders” or theoreticians and those who share the same label.

Revisiting the Congress

The 1881 Congress is used for numerous purposes. The whole division of the American International Working People’s Association into a proto-syndicalist “Chicago” section and a “pure” anarchist section in New York is premised with the assumption that individual terrorism is *the* definitive “anarchist” tactic while collective class struggle is not anarchist at all. The fallacy of this assertion can be seen from two awkward facts.

First, that Bakunin never suggested the former and wholeheartedly supported the latter. Even the condescending Bolshevik historian of the First International, G.M. Stekloff, had to admit

⁵ Green, 130. It is churlish, but essential, to note that this was Bakunin’s position within the International and *not* Marx’s who sought to turn it into an organisation of political parties and mocked Bakunin for holding the position Green attributes to him! See my “Another View: Syndicalism, Anarchism and Marxism,” *Anarchist Studies* 20: 1 (Spring 2012).

⁶ Phil H. Goodstein, *The theory of the general strike from the French Revolution to Poland* (Boulder/New York: East European Monographs, 1984), 46, 47.

⁷ Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

“[h]ow far, in this respect, [the attendees of the 1881 Congress] had departed from the teachings of their master, Bakunin! With all his faults, he had to the last continued to put his main trust in the mass movement of the workers; and we can hardly suppose that he would have voted for the resolution of the London Congress.”⁸

Second, that in 1881 many of the attendee’s contributions, not least Kropotkin’s, echoed Bakunin’s ideas and urged anarchist involvement in the workers’ movement as the means of creating and securing a social revolution. This can be seen from consulting the report of the Congress in *Le Révolté* rather than relying, as Green does, on summaries provided by others (James Joll, in this case⁹). Perhaps needless to say, Stekloff likewise carefully avoids quoting any of the delegates who *did* advocate participation in the workers’ movement and instead concentrated on the worse excesses, for obvious reasons.

Before presenting an aspect of the 1881 Congress which seems to have been forgotten, there is a need to debunk a few common mistakes made by Green and others. The 1881 Congress was not seeking to create a “new” International, least of all a “Black” or Anarchist International. As *Le Révolté* noted before the event, the Congress was to relaunch the International Workers’ Association :

The International Workers’ Association is the common ground on which this agreement [between “the Socialist-Revolutionaries of the two worlds”] was established, and henceforth the great Association which, ten years ago, made the bourgeoisie tremble, will take on a new life.¹⁰

Neither was it just anarchists who gathered in London for the aim was for “to see revolutionary-socialists of all shades enter in bulk into the ranks of the great INTERNATIONAL WORKERS’ ASSOCIATION.”¹¹ While definitely anti-parliamentary, the call was for “all those who... want the next revolution to be the SOCIAL REVOLUTION, [to] come and combine their efforts by grouping around the same flag, the red flag of the INTERNATIONAL WORKERS’ ASSOCIATION.”¹² Indeed, at one stage it was suggested that the organisation be called “International Socialist Revolutionary Association.” As such, its intended audience was wider than anarchists:

the community of radicals (excluding the orthodox socialists) in London and New York during the first years of the 1880s was an amalgam of discontented, displaced, and largely antistate socialists. They included antiparliamentarians, nihilists, social revolutionaries, Blanquists, and anarchists.¹³

⁸ G.M. Stekloff, *History of the First International* (Martin Lawrence: London, 1928), 360.

⁹ As one scathing review noted, Joll’s book “is neither a work of scholarship nor a work of political criticism which will convince anarchists or be taken into consideration by serious writers who undoubtedly will deal with the same subject in the future” and it “repeats the factual errors of other unoriginal historians as well as sowing his crop in the process of attempting to condense the material available.” (V.R., “Anarchism and the historians”, *Anarchy* 46 [December 1964], 357, 358)

¹⁰ “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 23 July 1881.

¹¹ “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 9 July 1881.

¹² “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 23 July 1881.

¹³ Tom Goyens, *Beer and Revolution: The German anarchist movement in New York City, 1880–1914* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 111.

The same can be said of other countries and so the delegates who attended included not only anarchists but also dissident Social-Democrats, Blanquists and others who shared little other than an opposition to parliamentary tactics.

As well as grouping many shades of anti-parliamentarian socialist, it should also be recalled that the Black Flag did not become associated with anarchism until 1883 with Louise Michel raising it in Paris during an unemployed workers demonstration in March, “the Black Flag came to play a crucial role” in anarchist protests around official Bastille day celebrations” in July¹⁴ and the launching in Lyons of the journal *Le Drapeau noir* in August. Even then it took decades before the Social-Democrats and Leninists had made the red flag a travesty of what it used to mean for it to become the definitive anarchist symbol. As such, the notion that the 1881 Congress sought to form a “Black International” is unlikely.¹⁵

In short, the 1881 Congress was neither new, “Black” nor exclusively anarchist: it was viewed by its organisers and attendees as old, Red and embracing all Revolutionary-Socialists.

While the contributions made at the Congress expressed a range of views, it is fair to say that it is those most infatuated with dynamite and “propaganda by the deed” have been stressed in accounts of it. In terms of the latter, such fixation projects backwards subsequent assassinations onto the term which, at the time, did not have such a strict meaning: it referred to a range of activities – from popular revolutions like Paris Commune to demonstrations organised in the face of official opposition.¹⁶ Likewise, most of the acts subsequent labelled “propaganda by the deed” were in fact acts of revenge against officials associated with repression of anarchists or workers – in short, they were not considered as acts of propaganda nor viewed as provoking out of nowhere some mass revolt.¹⁷

Syndicalism *avant la lettre*

That the delegates had a range of views can be seen from the many who favoured what would become termed “syndicalism” but which had earlier been championed by Bakunin and other militants within the First International including the Spanish and Jura Federations which sent delegates to the 1881 Congress. Thus the summaries provided by Green and others would undoubtedly have come as a surprise to the delegates sent by Spanish unions or those, like Kropotkin, who viewed the Spanish movement as a model for others to follow. To quote the delegate from the Spanish Regional Federation:

Despite the persecution of the International in Spain, the organisation has remained intact since 1873. It is purely economic, consisting of organised trades and mixed

¹⁴ C. Alexander McKinley, *Illegitimate children of the Enlightenment: anarchists and the French Revolution, 1880–1914* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 194.

¹⁵ The source of this name appears to be the American socialist Burnette G. Haskell, who wrote of Bakunin being expelled by Marx in 1872 from the First International with “30 of the delegates with the aid of whom he established what has since been called the Black International” in a lengthy document written for the Pittsburgh Congress of October 1883. Sadly, he did not indicate who called it that other than himself. This document also appears to be the source of the much quoted but apparently apocryphal 1872 quote by Bismarck: “Crowned heads, wealth and privilege well may tremble should ever again the Black and the Red unite!” (Chester McA. Destler, “Shall Red and Black Unite? An American Revolutionary Document of 1883”, *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 14, No. 4 [December, 1945], 447).

¹⁶ Caroline Cahm summarises well the evolution of the term – and indicates Kropotkin’s opposition to it.

¹⁷ Nunzio Pernicone and Fraser Ottanelli, *Assassins against the Old Order: Italian Anarchist Violence in Fin de Siecle* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

sections. The strike by organised trades is not the goal, it is a means; and it is used for different purposes, either to organise workers or as a means of attack... We do not think that the revolution can be made by a *coup de main*, but we are sure that if there is no powerful workers' organisation and men of action amongst the mass of workers, the revolution could easily be conjured away by the bourgeoisie...

It is only in the workers' organisation that we can find the necessary revolutionary force. If, instead of entertaining theoretical discussions, we had begun to work in the workers' organisation, we would already have had a force which, at this moment, would have only had to be brought together internationally.¹⁸

The Jura Federation delegate likewise noted that "despite the so-called sovereignty of the people, poverty has also shown that political struggles must disappear in order to make way for the economic struggle, the only one that can serve and benefit the proletariat." "All expressions of working-class life," he continued, "strikes, demonstrations caused by unemployment and lack of work were followed and supported by the groups. Ongoing relations with workers not yet organised have been found absolutely necessary and will continue." The delegate of the Socialist-Revolutionary Groups of Bern and Basle likewise wanted "the Congress to result in a strong organisation of the proletariat of all countries". A delegate from circles in Brussels and Verviers was "also in favour of organisation by trades, but outside of any political concerns." This would "achieve the Revolution" and "forces the workers to take of their interests." They were "supporters of strikes" and argued that defeats were "mainly due to the lack of agreement, the lack of revolutionary organisation."¹⁹ Such views were again advocated by the Spanish Federation's delegate:

The bases of the organisation [in Spain] are the trades; besides these, in each locality there are mixed sections, composed of people belonging to various trades. The Spanish Federation... attaches great importance to this organisation of trades. It is convinced that this kind of organisation is the only one which enables it to unite the great mass of workers, to sow the ideas of social revolution with full force and to prepare the forces which, on the day of the revolution, without waiting for orders from anywhere, will seize the instruments of labour and social capital... on the day of the revolution... where it is well organised, it will show real strength.²⁰

This was echoed by the delegate from the Union of Building Workers of Catalonia who explained "the need to organise trades" for they were of "the opinion that during the next revolution, it is the workers themselves who must seize the instruments of labour, we must, wherever we can, organise this force which alone will be able to accomplish the revolution." The delegate of the German Socialist-Revolutionary groups in Switzerland agreed that "the organisation of trades, as it exists in Spain, is excellent. The trades must be organised, and men of action must enter into these organisations" and so we "must therefore declare loudly that the emancipation of the workers is our goal and the organisation of workers – our means." The Jura Federation

¹⁸ "Le Congrès International de Londres", *Le Révolté*, 23 July 1881.

¹⁹ "Le Congrès International de Londres", *Le Révolté*, 23 July 1881.

²⁰ "Le Congrès International de Londres", *Le Révolté*, 23 July 1881.

delegate stressed it was “in favour of organisation by trades, in order to oblige workers to take care of their interests” and it “declare[d] itself against any participation in politics.” Strikes were “a powerful means of action, especially if they assume a revolutionary character.”²¹

Interestingly, given claims of a divide between New York and Chicago groups in the IWPA, the delegate from the German Revolutionary Socialists of New York lamented that “revolutionary workers” had not been able to “penetrate” a recent brewers strike “since the opportunity for making revolutionary propaganda was very good.” While “not forgetting” the “necessity of secret organisation,” they were “of the opinion that we must penetrate into all workers’ organisations. We do not deny the necessity of open propaganda, since this must attract to us the mass which still remains outside the movement”.²²

Another perspective was raised by the Italian delegates – Malatesta and Merlino – who seemed to want to turn the International into an anarchist federation which would stress the political aspects of the revolution although they also wanted an “organisation which puts us in constant contact with the masses and gives us a means of propagating our ideas amongst them, of pushing them to revolt.”²³

Kropotkin and the Labour Movement before the London Congress

It was Peter Kropotkin who was the most vocal advocate of anarchists working within the labour movement at the Congress. This reflected *Le Révolté* and its attempts to stop the workers’ movement being diverted from economic struggle into standing candidates in elections (as advocated by Marxists) after the rebirth of the French labour movement in the late 1870s.

For Kropotkin, taking part in elections meant socialists would water down their ideas to get votes and, even if successful, the workers would simply be sending “their best men” to become “stupefied in an environment where they will be unable to do anything”. Instead, socialists should “remain in the ranks of the people, working for the organisation of the workers’ forces, for the propaganda of communism, to revive in the despondent people the feeling of its strength”. A “sincere revolutionary” would not “exchange life amongst the people for the intrigues” of parliament or the municipal council and, by “participating in elections”, they “make themselves accomplices of this grand deception which consists in making the people believe that it is new laws which lead to progress, and that social institutions can be changed by legislators” and that “it is in parliament or in the municipal councils that the lever of the next revolution is to be found, and not in the initiative of the people themselves, in popular revolt.” This meant socialists should use the election period not to chase votes but to “point out social iniquities and say how to remedy them – by slaying forever the principle of individual property, as soon as the opportunity is given by the disorganisation of the central power.” They should “provide a glimpse of the possibility, the necessity of anti-authoritarian communism” and “boldly describe the means that the International will use to carry out its programme.”²⁴ Sadly, the French labour movement at this time rejected this perspective and embraced “political action”, the outcome confirming Kropotkin’s fears.

²¹ “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 23 July 1881.

²² “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 23 July 1881.

²³ “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 6 August 1881.

²⁴ “Les Élections”, *Le Révolté*, 25 December 1880.

Looking back at this period a few months before the London Congress, *Le Révolté* indicated its hopes for the expected rebirth of International:

Two years ago, an awakening occurred within the masses of the workers in France... We believed then that, once the torpor had been shaken off, a vast workers' organisation would be set up encompassing everything; trade unions [*chambres syndicales*], co-operatives [*corporations de metiers*], unemployed workers, study groups etc., etc. – a vast organisation animated by a single sentiment, the economic emancipation of the worker, pursuing a single goal, the war on capital in all its aspects!... We therefore dreamt of a strong workers' organisation, welcoming into its bosom all the exploited and waging war against bourgeois exploitation, widely sowing the ideas of socialism and preparing for the social revolution. We saw the International Workers' Association being reborn everywhere from its ashes, and standing up before the bourgeois world, terrifying it.

It did not happen [because radicals and Marxists used the movement to try and get elected to political office] ...

It is time, then, to put an end to this dismal comedy. Do French workers want to emancipate themselves from the yoke of capital? Do they want the next revolution to benefit them? Do they want it to be more than just a change of government? That it is a social revolution?

—Let them reconstitute the international – the international, pursuing the defence of the interests of labour, the International waging war on Capital... in order to abolish it... The International Workers' Association, which inscribes the Social Revolution on its flag and prepares for *this* Revolution by struggle and action in the economic terrain, the Workers' International and not a league of politicians.²⁵

An article written by Kropotkin in the same issue concluded that anarchists had “to organise the workers' forces—not to make them a fourth party in Parliament but to make them a formidable ENGINE OF STRUGGLE AGAINST CAPITAL. We have to group workers of all trades with this single purpose: ‘war on capitalist exploitation!’ And we must prosecute this war relentlessly, every day, by the strike, by agitation, *by every revolutionary means*.” The workers must be “united into a single union” which would be “waging an unrelenting war on capital” in order to “emerge victorious, having crushed the tyrant of capital and State for good.” The need, he concluded, was to “build our league, the Workers' League against exploiters of every kind!”²⁶

Workers' organisation was seen both as a means to win improvements today and to prepare for revolution tomorrow. This was shown well by an article in *Le Révolté* on the ten-hour day law:

²⁵ “Le Parti Ouvrier Français”, *Le Révolté*, 5 February 1881.

²⁶ “Les Ennemis du Peuple”, *Le Révolté*, 5 February 1881. Kropotkin “Enemies of the People”, *Words of a Rebel*, 234.

It is obvious that the great mass of French workers understand perfectly that it is not by laws that work in the factories will be made less excessive. Indeed, it is certain, and the experience of England, the United States, Switzerland, etc., etc., have proved it: it is not by legislation that work hours can be reduced; it is by the *strike*, when it is supported by a strong *national and international workers' organisation*. It is essential for French workers to re-establish a militant organisation, with the purpose of defending the interests of labour. When they lay the first foundations of this organisation; when the workers' organisation sets its the goal, not of making its most active members deputies and senators, impotent and traitors – but the struggle against capital by the strike and by force; and when this organisation is established internally – which, of course, will give a new impetus to the organisation of workers in all countries – then the hours of work will be reduced, and not only to ten, but to nine, to eight; and not only will the hours of work be reduced, but the working masses will have their own organisation, ready to act in the interest of the worker, the day when events bring about the revolution.

The essential thing is therefore to begin the grouping of the workers' forces, not in a party of candidates, but in an international party of struggle against capital.²⁷

The task of anarchists – like the International – was “to awaken the spirit of revolt amongst the urban workers, and to direct it against the natural enemy of the wage worker – the monopolist of the instruments of labour and of raw materials.”²⁸

So rather than believe – to requote Green – that “socialist propaganda could not effectively reach workers through trade unions... nor would revolutionary change result from strikes”, Kropotkin and *Le Révolté* before the London Congress had repeatedly stressed the importance of both trade unions and strikes for anarchist activity and to achieve a free socialist society. Indeed, they welcomed the July meeting precisely because they hoped it would revive the International as an organisation for militant strike action and counteract the nefarious influence of parliamentary socialists on the labour movement.

Kropotkin at the London Congress and after

Kropotkin attended the London Congress as the delegate of both *Le Révolté* and a Lyons Revolutionary-Socialist group, advocating the ideas which he had raised previously on anarchist involvement in the labour movement. At it he defended “anarchist-communism as the goal and, as a means, *popular* revolution, prepared by the revolutionary action of the worker himself against his enemies.” Through its newspaper and pamphlets, the former “seeks to speak to the great mass. It does not speak to the converted, but above all to those who are not yet completely converted.”²⁹ This perspective permeated his longest contribution at the Congress and reflected the ideas on workers' organisation and struggle he had earlier advocated in *Le Révolté*:

²⁷ “Les Heures de Travail”, *Le Révolté*, 14 May 1881.

²⁸ “L'Esprit de Révolte”, *Le Révolté*, 28 May 1881. Kropotkin “The Spirit of Revolt”, *Words of a Rebel*, 170.

²⁹ “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 6 August 1881.

The delegate of *Le Révolté* does not believe that the question of a programme can be neglected. To know what kind of organisation we want to establish, we must determine the goal we are aiming for. If we thought, for example, that it was enough to overthrow the government, to put ourselves in its place and decree the revolution, we could form ourselves into an army of conspirators, having all the characteristics of the old secret societies with their leaders and deputy leaders. But that is not how we conceive of the revolution, at least in the Jura Federation and in Lyon. We believe that, in order for the next revolution not to be conjured away by the bourgeoisie, it must deal a decisive blow to individual property: it must proceed, from the very beginning, with taking possession, by the workers, of all social wealth, to put it in common. This revolution can only be made *by the workers themselves*: it can only be made when the workers of the towns and the peasants, rebelling against all power, in each locality, in each town, in each village, *themselves* seize the wealth now belonging to the exploiters, without waiting for this benefit to come from any government.

For this it is necessary that the great mass of workers not only constitute itself outside the bourgeoisie, but that, during the period which will precede the revolution, it must have its own action. Until now, the socialist party has been rather theoretical: it left *action* to bourgeois revolutionaries. Now it must become a party of action, but a party of *action which* is its own, and this kind of action can only be conducted when there exists a strong *workers' organisation*.

We were told about the role of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. The revolutionary bourgeoisie can conspire, it can overthrow a government – it cannot make a revolution. It is the people, only the people, who can overthrow the regime of individual property.

As soon as this is admitted, the character of the organisation which we have to form follows immediately. It is the mass of workers we must seek to organise. We, the small revolutionary groups, must submerge ourselves in the organisation of the people, draw inspiration from their hatreds, from their aspirations, and help them to translate those aspirations and these hatreds into actions. When the mass of workers is organised and we are with them, to strengthen their revolutionary idea, to germinate within them the spirit of revolt against capital – and the opportunities for that will not be lacking – then we shall have the right to hope that the next revolution will not be conjured away, as previous revolutions have been: that it will be the social revolution.³⁰

This reflected his perspective that “the International Workers’ Association... represents an idea, a principle: it is the emancipation of the workers by the workers themselves, and this other: the economic revolution above all, any political movement must be subordinated to the goal of economic revolution”.³¹ Arguing against the fixation of some attendees on “chemistry”,

³⁰ “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 6 August 1881.

³¹ “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 6 August 1881.

Kropotkin stressed the importance of written and oral propaganda – rather than just vaguely defined “deeds” – in building a mass movement in both towns and villages:

For propaganda in the countryside, he recommends the dissemination of tens and hundreds of thousands, if possible, of little leaflets, which explain in a few words the aim of the International and its ideas about the organisation of society which should, in our opinion, arise from the next revolution. Let it be said frankly that we want the expropriation of the land of all those who do not cultivate the land themselves and the placing of these lands into common ownership, at the disposal of the communes. Let us say it at the same time, openly and without reticence and without rhetoric, to the peasants, a few words, on a leaflet, and let these leaflets be disseminated to the masses... And what is needed for the Revolution is to be able to rouse, lead, the great mass of the people. Without this uprising of the masses, no revolution can be victorious...³²

Kropotkin also recognised the need for a more formal approach to organisation, arguing “that it is necessary to institute regular Congresses, and that this be stated in the federal pact. Regular Congresses give a certain vitality to the party, and serve to fortify the organisation... Groups prepare better for the Congress when we know in advance that it will take place and when.”³³

This perspective was not reflected in the Congress resolutions and while the need for propaganda in the countryside was recognised, the need for propaganda by deeds and the study of chemistry were included. “Again,” Kropotkin argued, “this is only one means of struggle, while there are so many others which, unfortunately, are completely neglected at the moment.”³⁴ He returned to these arguments in articles written in the months following the congress which amount to a critique of its resolutions and a defence of the position he had championed at it.

First to appear was an account of the Spanish labour movement, contrasting it positively with France for the former had remained “[f]aithful to the anarchist traditions of the International” with anarchists bringing “the assistance of their energy to the workers’ organisation and work to build this force that will crush capital on the day of revolution: the revolutionary trades union”³⁵ This was followed by a two-part article on workers organisations which expanded upon his arguments made at the London Congress as regards the necessity of a programme.³⁶ It is worth quoting at length:

To be able to make the revolution, the mass of workers must be organised, and resistance and the strike are excellent means for organising workers. They have an immense advantage over those advocated at present (worker candidates, forming a workers’ political party, etc.), namely not diverting the movement, but keeping it in constant struggle with the principal enemy, the capitalist. The strike and the resistance fund provide the means to organise... It is a question of organising in every town resistance societies for all trades, to create resistance funds and to fight

³² “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 20 August 1881.

³³ “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 20 August 1881.

³⁴ “Le Congrès International de Londres”, *Le Révolté*, 20 August 1881.

³⁵ “Le Mouvement Ouvrier en Espagne”, *Le Révolté*, 12 November 1881; Peter Kropotkin “The Workers’ Movement in Spain”, *Words of a Rebel* (Oakland: PM Press, 2022), 239.

³⁶ “L’organisation Ouvrière”, *Le Révolté*, 10 and 24 December 1881.

against the exploiters, to unify the workers' organisations of each town and trade and to put them in contact with those of other towns, to federate them across France, to federate them across borders, internationally. Workers' solidarity must no longer be an empty word but must be practiced every day, between all trades, between all nations.... It was by organising resistance against the boss that the International managed to group more than two million workers and to build up that force before which the bourgeoisie and governments trembled... The use of the strike did not prevent the Sections of the International from grasping the social question in all its complexity. On the contrary, it helped them as it was used to spread the idea amongst the masses at the same time....

The goal of the revolution being the expropriation of the holders of society's wealth, it is against these holders that we must organise. We must make every effort to create a vast workers' organisation that pursues this goal....³⁷

In short, Kropotkin at the London Congress was seeking to resurrect the International as an "Internationale grévistes" – a strikers International – with anarchist groups at its head. This anarchist participation within the labour movement built upon the work of Bakunin and his associates, best expressed by the example of the Spanish anarchist and labour movements. Like Bakunin, he stressed the necessity of anarchists to build a revolutionary labour movement which rejected political action in favour of strikes and other forms of what was later to be termed "direct action" but which Kropotkin called "the direct struggle against capital." Like Bakunin, he also saw the necessity of anarchists to organise as anarchists to influence this mass movement. As he put it in 1914:

My opinion is absolutely that which was expressed by Malatesta... The syndicate is absolutely necessary. It is the only form of worker's association which allows the direct struggle against capital to be carried on without a plunge into parliamentarism. But, evidently, it does not achieve this goal automatically... There is need of the other element which Malatesta speaks of *and which Bakunin always professed*.³⁸

It is this recognition of the necessity for anarchist groups – in other words, the equivalent of Bakunin's Alliance – which differentiates Kropotkin's anarchist-communism from revolutionary syndicalism as well as seeing the need for federations of community and interest groupings to complement federations of workers' associations in the economic sphere.

Kropotkin, an unheeded leader?

This is not to suggest that Kropotkin's position was then reflective of anarchist opinion everywhere, far from it. As he recounted from the Lyons trial in 1883:

³⁷ "L'organisation Ouvrière", *Le Révolté*, 24 December 1881; Kropotkin "Workers' Organisation", *Words of a Rebel*, 247–250. Also see Kropotkin "Theory and Practice", *Words of a Rebel*, 185.

³⁸ quoted in Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1996), 280–1.

“Did you ever hear the International Workingmen’s Association spoken of at Lyons?”

“Never,” he replied sulkily.

When I returned from the London congress of 1881, and did all I could to have the International reconstituted in France, did I succeed?

“No. They did not find it revolutionary enough.”³⁹

It took under the 1890s before French anarchists recognised the importance of working within the labour movement, a position championed again by Kropotkin in the years following the 1889 London Dock Strike. Thus some of the conventional wisdom on the development of anarchism is at best incomplete, at worse wrong. Thus we discover that Kropotkin rather than Emile Pouget first raised sabotage (*ca’canny*) within the anarchist press (in 1891).⁴⁰ Likewise it was Kropotkin rather than Fernand Pelloutier who initially championed anarchist involvement in the labour movement in 1890.⁴¹ This follows consistently from his arguments made at the London Congress of 1881 and in articles written before and after it.

Accounts of the Congress also reflect the standard account of the differences between collectivist and communist anarchism, especially in Spain. “Between 1878 and 1880,” states George R. Esenwein, “the ideological drift towards communism was given impetus by two distinguished theoreticians, Peter Kropotkin and Elisée Reclus... By 1880, Kropotkin, along with most of the anarchists outside of Spain, had come round to accepting the doctrine.”⁴² This was reflected in changing tactics:

With regard to the day-to-day practice of anarchism, the communists were at odds with the collectivists... The communists were intractably opposed to trade unions, which were viewed as essentially reformist bodies... invariably accompanied by the three most iniquitous features of capitalism: bureaucracy, hierarchy, and corruption... they preferred to set up small, loosely federated groups composed of dedicated militants... The communists’ deep hostility towards trade unions was matched by their equally profound faith in the power of spontaneous revolutionary acts. Quite understandably, they tended to shun strikes and other forms of economic warfare in favour of violent methods, extolling above all the virtues of propaganda by the deed.⁴³

Spanish communist-anarchists “knowledge of the theory was derived largely from foreign anarchists sources, especially in the pages of *Le Revolté* (Geneva), where articles by Malatesta,

³⁹ *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1989), 420.

⁴⁰ “Les Grèves Anglaises”, *La Révolte*, 21 February 1891; “The English Strikes”, *Black Flag Anarchist Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Winter 2022), 64–5.

⁴¹ For example, “Le Mouvement Ouvrier En Angleterre”, *La Révolte*, 13 September 1890; “The Labour Movement in England”, *Black Flag Anarchist Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Winter 2022), 62–3.

⁴² George R. Esenwein, *Anarchist ideology and the working-class movement in Spain, 1868–1898* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 109.

⁴³ Esenwein, 108–9.

Kropotkin, and other leading proponents of communism frequently appeared.”⁴⁴ Yet, as can be seen from the London Congress of 1881 and his writings for that journal, Kropotkin’s anarchist-communism was *not* the same as that of the Spanish militants.⁴⁵ Instead, it was the strategy of the collectivists which Kropotkin pointed to as being correct and to be emulated by anarchist-communists in France and elsewhere. This, it must be stressed, is a recurring theme of Kropotkin’s writings across the decades.

This raises important questions on the nature of role and influence of those considered “leaders” within the anarchist movement. The fact that the leading advocate of communist-anarchism expounded ideas which so many suggest – explicitly or implicitly – as alien to it means that these commentators’ notions of what it is are distinctly flawed. It would be better to acknowledge that just as anarchism itself has many tendencies – mutualism, collectivism, communism, syndicalism, etc. – so these sub-tendencies themselves have many tendencies.

Anarchist-communism is not a monolith and its grassroots adherents can be very selective in what they take from what are considered its leading theoreticians and activists. Hence, for example, the constant conflicts within the Italian movement between Malatesta and anti-organisationist anarchist-communists and his preference to work with Spanish collectivist-anarchists who shared his labour orientated strategy rather than communists who shared his preferences the distribution of goods in a future free society.⁴⁶ Likewise, it is reflected in the clear differences between Kropotkin’s essentially collectivist strategy expounded in 1881 and that of French and Spanish anarchist-communists who rejected it in favour of dynamite bluster and a self-defeating ultra-radicalism.

Conclusion: a missed opportunity

The assumption that if self-proclaimed anarchist-communists advocated a certain strategy it was because they were following the lead of the theoreticians of anarchist-communism, most obviously Kropotkin, must be rejected and a more dynamic perspective based on what was actually advocated used. This can be seen from Kropotkin’s contributions at the London Congress of 1881 and the articles he wrote for *Le Révolté* on the same theme compared to what is asserted as being communist-anarchist ideas on strategy. These contributions, moreover, are identical to those raised before and after the Congress showing a remarkable consistency over the near 50 years he spent in the anarchist movement.⁴⁷

The London Congress was not a success. Kropotkin did not manage to get his ideas fully accepted and included in its resolutions. Here, the role of agent provocateurs should not be discounted. As is well known, one delegate, from the journal *La Révolution Sociale*, was, like the

⁴⁴ Esenwein, 111.

⁴⁵ It may be suggested that as these articles were published anonymously and only identified as Kropotkin’s relatively recently (namely by Caroline Cahm), the readership would have no way of knowing these were reflective of his ideas. However, articles in *Le Révolté* were usually published without an author indicated and, as such, all had the same influence.

⁴⁶ Davide Turcato, “European Anarchism in the 1890s: Why Labor Matters in Categorising Anarchism,” *WorkingUSA: The Journal of Labour and Society* 12 (September 2009).

⁴⁷ Peter Kropotkin, *Direct Struggle Against Capital: A Peter Kropotkin Anthology* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2014), Iain McKay (ed.).

newspaper, funded by the Parisian prefect of police (who also wrote articles for it). As Kropotkin later recalled:

To start a paper, subsidized by the police, with a police agent at its head, is an old plan, and the prefect of the Paris police, Andrieux, resorted to it in 1881...

The paper was of an unheard-of violence; burning, assassination, dynamite bombs, – there was nothing but that in it. I met the man, the editor of the paper, when I went to the London congress, and... my opinions concerning him were settled. At the congress, during which he introduced all sorts of terrible resolutions, all present kept aloof from him...

To make a long story short, he was unmasked a couple of months later, and the paper was stopped forever on the very next day. Then, a couple of years after that, the prefect of police, Andrieux, published his Memoirs, and in this book he told all about the paper which he had started, and the explosions which his agents had organized at Paris, by putting sardine-boxes filled with something under the statue of Thiers.⁴⁸

Likewise, the negative impact of the desire to gather together all anti-parliamentarian socialists at the Congress must be acknowledged:

The temporary phase of anarchism was determined by various factors. There was the reaction against the turncoats who went over to parliamentarism. (Andrea Costa and Paul Brousse among others); indignation against the authoritarian socialists who were busy scrambling for seats in parliament; the example of fortitude and sacrifice set by Russian nihilists. This period was also marked by the influx into anarchist ranks of many revolutionary socialists, of old French Blanquists and German Social-Democrats, who were chiefly attracted by the spirit of thorough-going revolt which characterised the anarchists; these newcomers brought with them a narrow and rigid outlook, typical of authoritarians, which caused libertarian thinking to grow torpid, immobile, stationary and dogmatic... this ran counter to the ideas of Malatesta or Kropotkin⁴⁹

Thus notions of the “anarchist” or “anarchist-communist” nature of the Congress resolutions were shaped not by anarchists like Kropotkin but rather the Paris police and non-anarchist attendees as well as anarchists influenced by them far more than by Kropotkin. As such, to use the resolutions of the Congress or the activities of certain anarchist-communists to define the theory or the ideas of its leading advocates like Kropotkin is both unfair and inaccurate – particularly as very definitive claims are made with very little research or evidence provided.

Looking at the contributions of actual anarchist delegates, a radically different perspective of anarchism becomes clear and one which links far more concretely to the ideas championed in the International by Bakunin and his associates. As such, the Congress must be considered as a missed opportunity for if Kropotkin’s arguments had been heeded then the turn – or, more correctly, the *return*, given “Bakuninist” ideas within the First International – to syndicalist tactics would have started a decade earlier and social-democracy would have not made the advances it did in France, Italy and countries.

⁴⁸ Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, 445–6.

⁴⁹ Max Nettlau, *A Short History of Anarchism* (London: Freedom Press, 1996), 148–9.

While speculating about alternative historical paths can be an entertaining activity, it is ultimately a fruitless one. Far better to revisit the accounts of the past and challenge the assumptions made by even the most informed commentator by discussing the contributions made and linking these to both the wider movement then current and those of the immediate past and future. Once that is done, a different understanding of the 1881 London Congress becomes possible, one which challenges the conventional wisdom and better explains the interaction of the ideas of those deemed to be leaders and the activists who are assumed to follow them.

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