Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism

Review

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2001, April

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a review of

Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872-1886, by Caroline Cahm, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

This excellent work of modern scholarship focuses upon a specific period of Kropotkin's life, 1872-1886, during which he was intensely involved in the development and propagation of European anarchism, through his actions, speeches and articles. This period of intense activism lies between Kropotkin's earlier involvement with Russian populism and his long exile in England, where he wrote the many longer books for which he remains famous today.

During these years he travelled widely throughout Western Europe, living for long periods in Switzerland (expelled 1881) and France, where he was imprisoned for three years (1883-6). Kropotkin's travels to countries with strong anarchist movements such as Belgium and Spain influenced his thinking. He also participated in anarchist conferences in Switzerland, Germany and London.

His achievements during this period were many and varied. Shortly after arriving in Switzerland he enthusiastically took part in a demonstration involving illegally carrying the red flag in honor of the Paris Commune. The success of the Berne demonstration rejuvenated, for a short time, the Jura federation which had fallen into decline since the death of Bakunin and his own internment in a Russian prison. This point in time also saw the beginning of Kropotkin's journalistic career. He contributed quite a number of articles to the Bulletin of the Jura Federation of the IWA during 1876-7. These articles were never published in English, nor since republished in French.

The value of Cahm's study is that it thoroughly examines important themes within this early journalism. Eminent scholars of Kropotkin, such as Martin Miller, regard Kropotkin's writings for the Bulletin and Rebel as some of his "best" and most "neglected." This neglect is a pity, for although about half of his contributions to the Bulletin were reports upon Russian affairs, primarily the trial of 1893, the other half include interesting and important contributions upon the ills of imperialism, parliamentary socialism and Marxism, a three-part analysis of the ills of British unionism, and articles upon U.S. labor issues.

In 1879, following the collapse of the Bulletin and L'Avant Garde (to which he contributed one article on the Pittsburgh strikes), Kropotkin founded, edited and contributed to a new newspaper, Rebel (Le Revolte), published at Geneva until 1885. Although Kropotkin's first political book Words of a Rebel (Paris 1885, edited and compiled by Reclus), contains a very readable selection of the leading articles from the Rebel, there are a few, particularly concerning unionism which might also have been reasonably included. There are also other minor articles, such as those dealing with the value and desirability of direct-action strike tactics as a method of reversing reformist parliamentary unionism in Britain and France, which are also of interest in this respect. Again Cahm, in focusing attention upon his neglected works upon the subject of reformist and revolutionary unionism, provides a valuable resource upon which to better assess Kropotkin's thinking upon these issues. This scholarship is very valuable as his complex and interesting viewpoints concerning syndicalism, unionism and anarchism have been obscured by anarchist-communist scholars with anti-syndicalist prejudices.

Towards the end of the period under review (1872-1886) Kropotkin took a central role in the defence at the Lyon Trial of 1883, which led to the imprisonment for several years of most

of France's leading anarchists, including Kropotkin himself, in a farcical display of state-justice, which, for a short time at least, led to widespread public sympathy for the prisoners and what they stood for. The imprisonment of the most active anarchists and the subsequent intense state repression of the movement meant that little remained upon his release in 1886 when he began his long exile from continental Europe in England, where he could no longer take an active part in its affairs (though he helped found and finance two subsequent French-language newspapers to which he contributed scores of articles over the next 30 years).

In addition to Kropotkin's journalism Cahm also draws heavily upon Kropotkin's correspondence with other comrades, much of which remains unpublished. The book also contains many useful general summaries of the views and activities of various groupings, newspapers and personalities of the period.

Having provided a general overview of the book, I will briefly summarize its central themes and conclusions.

Collectivism, Communism and Communalism

The study first explores the development of the anarchist communist idea by Reclus, Kropotkin and others. The discussion is largely concerned with debates concerning the broad vision of the anarchist society at which they were aiming: whether the anarchist ideal was to be conceived in terms of collectivism or communism. In anarchist communism, as advocated by Reclus and Kropotkin, consumption was to be dictated by needs rather than according to one's contribution as was the case under earlier collectivist or mutualist conceptions associated with Proudhon and Bakunin. Anarchist-communism conceived collectivism as being at best a stage along the road to anarchist-communism.

It is interesting to note that the contemporary understanding and application of the term 'collectivism' tends to surround debates concerning levels of collectivity within propaganda groups, rather than how to collectivize the real world. Not only did anarchists not apply the concept in this way at this time, but would probably have found the idea of declaring a propaganda group (a few individuals struggling to maintain a newspaper, hall or shop) a 'collective' a perverse absurdity, which indeed it is.

The debate between collectivism and communism will be familiar territory to most readers, but this study is particularly useful in underlining the importance of non-territorial communities of interest in Reclus' and Kropotkin's conception of anarchism. Despite often being credited with advocating small isolated communities, both thinkers, Cahm correctly concludes, did "not want to replace the authority of the state with the authority of the communes." (56) "We are not communalists/communists, we are anarchists; let us not forget that" (51) says Reclus, who had himself been a Paris Communard. Although isolated communal autonomism was rejected as means of revolution, Reclus and Kropotkin did not think that a purely economic focus, especially upon trades unions (58), was enough. Although communal autonomy and workers' organization were important, their anarchism was conceived as growing out of the extended neighborhood community linked by innumerable federations of interest groups in all fields of human inquiry, action and endeavor.

Propaganda by the Deed and Individualistic Acts of Political Terrorism

Two of the most common misrepresentations of Kropotkin is that he was a peace-loving individual who thought that a new society could be created by nonviolent cooperative means and, at the other extreme, that he advocated terrorist plots and bomb-throwing as a means of furthering the anarchist cause. In fact, Kropotkin had a brilliant military career before going over to the revolution, urged his comrades to carry revolvers to the Berne demonstration, and did not hesitate to arm himself if he thought he was likely to encounter police violence. He was expelled from Switzerland for producing a pamphlet praising the assassins of Tsar Alexander II and at other times praised similar acts of individualistic terrorism by Solovieff and Vera Zasulich. Whilst discussing Zasulich's actions at the Lyon trial of 1883, Kropotkin states, "I think that when a party, like the nihilists of Russia, finds itself in a position where it must either disappear, subside or answer violence with violence then it has no cause to hesitate and must necessarily use violence." (109)

Kropotkin's endorsement of such acts was, however, highly qualified. The unbelievable repression in Russia, Kropotkin as well as many others thought, had pushed the cream of Russia's youth into political terrorism out of pure desperation. Outside of the particular context of Russia, unless such acts were motivated by a spontaneous act of revenge against a hated individual or the like, Kropotkin generally thought them at best regrettable, sometimes abhorrent, and as having a generally negative consequence in terms of state repression and the public association of anarchism with individual violence and chaos.

Inspired by events in Russia, an insurrectionist view of propaganda in Italy, and the increasingly reformist and parliamentary direction of the labor movement, the idea of 'Propaganda by the Deed' became popular in anarchist circles. Kropotkin is often credited with founding or supporting this particular creed. It is also highly probable that he was the coauthor of one of the earliest articles using the slogan as its title. The article appeared in the Bulletin in 1877; much later, in 1909, he strongly denied any association with it. Cahm analyses his criticisms of the slogan closer to the time this article was written and convincingly argues that even at this early period Kropotkin was very critical and disturbed by the concept and its consequences. At first 'Propaganda by the Deed' was most probably an ill-defined call to engage in inspiring action, such as that of the Berne demonstration, rather than restricting oneself to oral and written propaganda. As such it did not exclude collective acts of revolt. Soon, however, it became associated with individualist and fairly indiscriminate acts of political violence.

Kropotkin, Cahm shows many times over, disliked the idea of an act of political violence being undertaken as a publicity stunt. He found it inauthentic, unethical and profoundly disturbing. Kropotkin was only interested in "serious acts of revolt," not "dramatic gestures" (103), and did not believe that individualistic or small-group action could be a substitute for oral and written propaganda." (105) For Kropotkin, the important point was that when individuals, outraged by the system, attempted to take the life of a man, they did so because he was a viper whom they hated, not because they wanted to make propaganda. (110) Kropotkin never subscribed to indiscriminate violence against the bourgeoisie or a narrow preoccupation with terrorist assaults on autocracy. Rather, Kropotkin advocated a broad approach where every possible opportunity was fully exploited for developing all sorts of revolutionary action, posters, newspapers, etc. (276)

Although sympathetic to individualistic acts of political terrorism in his native Russia, which he regarded as genuine acts of revolt against repression, he did not believe that individual acts of assassination could be any substitute for collective or popular revolutionary acts. Thus Kropotkin exhibited no unqualified enthusiasm for terrorism, and although supportive of it in certain instances had grave misgivings about individualistic acts of political terrorism. (129)

Kropotkin insisted on the need for economic rather than political terrorism - economic direct action involving spontaneous and leaderless economic and social revolt (131) as well as through social-economic organizations such as trades unions and communities at both the local and international level. Although he showed a remarkably strong degree of sympathy and support for Perovskya's tsaricide of 1881 (Kropotkin idolized Perovskaya, knowing her intimately through his earlier membership of the Chaikovky circle), Cahm suggests, that a careful reading of his 1881 pamphlet reveals that he wanted to pay tribute to her as great populist agitator and organizer of newspapers, meetings and groups. More generally Kropotkin was "disturbed by the narrowly political nature of Russian terrorism, which was not backed up by revolutionary action among the peasants." (142-4) Kropotkin insisted very firmly on the "primacy of the economic struggle of the masses and not to replace the development of mass action through the open organization of the IWA with isolated conspiratorial groups preoccupied with attacks upon the government."

"Purely political action, i.e. attacks on government, would not produce a sustained popular attack on the economic system but only a limited demand for a change of government." (167) Kropotkin, who was hostile to tightly controlled conspiratorialism and influenced by concepts of individual spontaneity championed by Reclus, hoped that anarchists might play a catalytic role in identifying with the popular struggle. Taking models such as the Irish Land League or the Spanish anarchist movement, he began to advocate a combination of individual and collective revolutionary action which was economic rather than political and based upon international workers organized for violent strikes and economic terrorism. (274) Economic terrorism was thus more effective than political terrorism. Increasingly disturbed by the increase and belief in political violence, Kropotkin, in his letter to the 1881 London anarchist congress, argued instead for the "spontaneous action, originating from worker's protest, arising from the situation itself." He also felt that the anarchist movement has become isolated from the lives of the workers. (174)

With the coming of the labor revolt in the Lyon area of France, he declared that the "period of simply attacking crowned heads was over, the workers were now attacking their real enemies, the economic oppressors." (182) The time had now come for "anarchists to direct their efforts into the economic field instead of the increasing preoccupation with dramatic action by individuals." (199) Popular mass expropriation had been abandoned because of "failure to concentrate on revolutionary action which was economic rather than political." (203) The central importance of the concept of economic expropriation and social revolution rather than political action was later to become a major theme of his Kropotkin's anarchist classic The Conquest of Bread.

Thus Kropotkin attached progressively less importance to isolated acts of revolt, particularly after 1880 which saw the rise of new militant unionism and a vogue in France for violent individualist illegalism, which had only negative propaganda value and led to the repression of the wider movement. (205) Kropotkin increasingly came to see revolutionary unionism as a vehicle for economic terrorism, which he came to advocate in response to the experiences which the anarchist movement underwent during the period of declining significance and alienation from the people. (207)

Unionism: Reformist and Revolutionary

In some of Kropotkin's earliest journalism he was highly critical of British trades unionism and the formation of the trades union congress in 1871 which had resulted in a situation where "on the dozen occasions when the parliamentary committee of Congress would visit a minister, they would 'exchange compliments with each other on their good manners and separate mutually enchanted.'" (235) Kropotkin thought that the conciliatory, reformist, pacifistic, parliamentary nature of British trades unionism was persuading the more youthful labor movement in other parts of Europe to adopt similar methods. "He feared that the trade union movements of the continent would develop along the lines of British trades unionism," with its emphasis on reducing working hours and wage increases. (240) Although Kropotkin advocated proto-syndicalist methods he was not fundamentally anti-unionist either. It was British trades unionism with which he was particularly disgusted. In contrast, he was sympathetic to the Pittsburgh strikes of 1877, which had "involved revolutionary not parliamentary" action (242). He was sympathetic also to the direct actionism of the Irish Land league (252).

With regard to anarchist organization, Kropotkin argued that the anarchist movement should have both a secret small group concerned with organizing economic terrorism as well as a large an open mass movement dedicated to revolutionary unionism and international solidarity. (252) Malatesta strongly objected to Kropotkin's approach at this time, arguing for a insurrectionist rather than union approach to revolution, which had been the dominant method in his native Italy. In contrast, Kropotkin advocated strike action and argued that the IWA was essentially a strikers' international. Through the strike the workers learned about organization and solidarity, and when the state tried to violently repress them "Thanks to government intervention the rebel against the factory becomes the rebel against the state." (256) Kropotkin was "anxious to revive the international as an organization for aggressive strike action to counteract the influence of parliamentary socialists on the labor movement." (257)

Although anarchists were involved in the Lyon disturbances and dominated some unions, such as the shoemakers, the repression of French anarchists during and after 1883 effectively prevented organization aimed at the radicalization of French unions. Whilst Kropotkin was in prison the Rebel "was disturbed by the failure of the anarchists in France to make any significant impact on labor struggles outside protest meetings and demonstrations of the unemployed" (which the anarchists had succeeded very well in organizing). This had happened, at least partly, "because they had failed to involve themselves with labor at the workplace level outside of the strikes." (263) The same could be said of the anarchist movement of today. In the mid-1880s, however, "in their effort to distance themselves from the parliamentary socialists and unionists they had lost contact with the mainstream of industrial organization" (265). This was of course not necessarily the anarchists' fault, the "enfeoffment of trade unions" and "repression of anarchist organization" were largely responsible.

Cahm goes on to correctly note that a couple of years after the period covered in the study, Kropotkin's interest in the revolutionary potentiality of the union movement was revived, primarily in response to the New Unionism of 1899, most notably the Great Dock Strike and the tactics of the Glasgow dockers, with which he was particularly impressed. He was also enthusiastic about the May Day movement (266). However following the crushing defeat of the Russian general strike of 1906 his interest in the revolutionary potential of unionism declined.

The rise of French Syndicalism, up until the outbreak of World War I, also provided a new basis for the development of revolutionary unionism. Kropotkin never opposed syndicalism as an important means of achieving anarchism, but "disliked the vision of a society narrowly based on worker's organization." (269) In a letter to Grave in 1902, he wrote, "If syndicalism is taken up as the main and sole object of propaganda, then things are indeed bad." In several letters and some articles Kropotkin indicates that he did not "associate anarchism with syndicalism," but thought that revolutionary syndicalism and direct actionism represented a "revival of the great movement of the anti-authoritarian international." (268-9) Similar viewpoints are expressed in a later article "Syndicalism and Anarchism" (which Cahm does not cite) published in 1912, where he again argues that syndicalism was the revival of an authentic revolutionary unionism identical to that of the workers international, such as had existed prior to trade union involvement with parliamentary socialism. In a letter to Bertoni in March 1914, Kropotkin wrote "The syndicate is absolutely necessary. It is the only form of workers' grouping which permits the direct struggle to be maintained against capital without falling into parliamentarism." (269)

Malatesta, as is well known, thought that the anarcho-syndicalists were turning a means into an aim. Like Malatesta, Kropotkin saw syndicalism as one means of achieving a much broader conception of anarchist society that included the revolutionization of non-industrial municipal, agricultural and neighborhood social structures. Reclus was much more sceptical of the value of unions than Kropotkin (244), but like Kropotkin structured his vision around the "local urban and agricultural community, not the territorial commune." (247) This is sometimes referred to as the extended neighborhood model. Communities were to be based upon "free association of individuals" (248) and interest-related federations. Their view of anarchist society is one which is not narrowly structured around the workplace or industrial activities as envisioned by extreme syndicalist visions of future society. This does not however amount to a rejection of Syndicalism, as some people have claimed. Kropotkin believed in the importance of revolutionary unionism, but did not see it as an end in itself, but as part of a much broader vision and range of methods for social transformation.

In his desire to find viable forms of anarchist action, as opposed to parliamentarism, Kropotkin was responding sympathetically but not uncritically to all forms of contemporary protest (273).

End Comments

It would be fair to say that this is not an introductory book. A reader unfamiliar with anarchist history and theory and some prior knowledge of Kropotkin's life and times would have little to gain from it. On the other hand, someone with the requisite knowledge and an interest in gaining a clearer understanding of this important period of Kropotkin's career and/or of the debates which were taking place in continental anarchism at this time has much to gain from studying this work.

In criticism, the footnoting is not always clearly referenced and the author could have made some effort to place the material and Kropotkin's life in its historical context in such a way as to make it more accessible to a somewhat wider audience. Although published in 1989, it is still most probably available from CUP. But as most major university libraries generally as a matter of course obtain all Cambridge University books, it is readily available to those with access to such facilities.

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Scanned from Anarcho-Syndicalist Review 31 (April 2001)

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