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Kropotkin: The Anarchist Formerly Known as Prince

Iain McKay

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Peter Alexeivich Kropotkin was born in Moscow on December the 9th in 1842 within a royal family that could trace its origins to the founders of the Tsarist regime. As a member of the Russian ruling class, he received the best education his father's exploitation of his serfs could provide. At the age of fifteen, he entered the Corps of Pages in St. Petersburg, an elite Court institution attached to the imperial household. He soon became recognised as its most brilliant student and became the personal page of the new Tzar, Alexander II. During this time Kropotkin, like Bakunin before him, became interested in politics and social issues as well as science.

In 1862 he was promoted to the army and, utilising the privilege that members of the Corps could choose their regiment, he decided to reject the career expected of him by his family and instead joined a Siberian Cossack regiment in the recently annexed Amur district. This, he thought, would allow him to pursue his scientific interests and to play his part in the reforms he hoped would follow on from Tzar Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs in 1861.

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In Siberia he saw the horrors of the Tzarist penal system at first hand and how his attempts at reform were frustrated by the central bureaucracy in St. Petersburg and local corruption. Kropotkin also became aware of anarchist ideas there, when the exiled poet Mikhail Mikhailov gave him a copy of Proudhon's *System of Economic Contradictions* to read. This made the young army officer "first regard himself as a socialist."¹ Turning to science, two years later he accepted charge of a geographical survey expedition, crossing North Manchuria from Transbaikalia to the Amur, and shortly afterwards was attached to another expedition which proceeded up the Sungari River into the heart of Manchuria. Kropotkin used both expeditions to pursue his scientific interests, yielding valuable geographical results. Looking back at the time, Kropotkin wrote:

The years I spent in Siberia taught me many lessons... I soon realised the absolute impossibility of doing anything really useful for the masses of the people by means of the administrative machinery. With this illusion I parted for ever... The constructive work of the unknown masses, which so seldom finds any mention in books, and the importance of that constructive work in the growth of forms of society, appeared before my eyes in a clear light... The part which the unknown masses play in the accomplishment of all important historical events... became evident to me from direct observation...

Having been brought up in a serf-owner's family, I entered active life, like all young men of my time, with a great deal of confidence in the necessity of commanding, ordering, scolding, punishing, and the like. But

¹ G. Woodcock and I. Avakumovic, *The Anarchist Prince: a biographical study of Peter Kropotkin* (T.V. Boardman, 1950), pp. 57–8

interest in geology."⁶¹ This can be seen from the fact that as well as his justly famous entry on *Anarchism*, he also contributed most of the Russian geographical articles to the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. His obituary in *The Geographical Journal* expressed regret that Kropotkin's "absorption" in his political views "seriously diminished the services which otherwise he might have rendered to Geography." He "was a keen observer, with a well-trained intellect, familiar with all the sciences bearing on his subject" and his "contributions to geographical science are of the highest value." Kropotkin "had a singularly attractive personality, sympathetic nature, a warm but perhaps too tender heart, and a wide knowledge in literature, science, and art."⁶²

Kropotkin, Emma Goldman summarised, "gave up his title and wealth for the cause of humanity. He did more: since becoming an anarchist he had forgone a brilliant scientific career to be better able to devote himself to the development and interpretation of anarchist philosophy. He became the most outstanding exponent of anarchist-communism, its clearest thinker and theoretician. He was recognised by friend and foe as one of the greatest minds and most unique personalities of the nineteenth century."⁶³

Science's loss was anarchism's gain.

⁶¹ David Roger Oldroyd, *Darwinian Impacts: An Introduction to the Darwinian revolution* (Open University Press, 1983), p. 237

⁶² *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 57, No. 4, (Apr., 1921), pp. 316–319

⁶³ *Living My Life*, vol. 1, p. 168

a letter in May 1920, arguing that he still believed “that the trade-union movement... will become a great power for laying the foundations of an anti-State communist society. If I were in France, where at this moment lies the centre of the industrial movement, and if I were in better health, I would be the first to rush headlong into this movement in favour of the First International – not the Second or the Third, which only represent the usurpation of the idea of the *workers’* International for the benefit of a party which is not half composed of workers.”⁵⁹ Sadly, his warnings, like the warnings of other libertarian eyewitnesses, were not heeded and the revolutionary socialist movement was side-tracked for decades first by the Bolshevik Myth and then Stalinism.

Kropotkin was by that time far too old and fail to actively participate in the revolution and spent most of his final years working on his unfinished *Ethics*. This was a project he had seen as necessary for some time and making the best of his situation he sought to complete it. Revising two articles on the evolution of morality written in 1904 and 1905 for its first chapters,⁶⁰ *Ethics* developed the theme by a systematic analysis of moral ideas from antiquity to the nineteenth century.

Kropotkin died on 8th of February, 1921 and his funeral was used by the Russian anarchist movement as a final public protest against Bolshevik tyranny.

His legacy, although damaged by his support of the Allies in the First World War, is still acknowledged by anarchists to this day. The power and breath of his work is staggering and leaves a rich source of ideas for libertarians today. Yet even while his contributions to anarchism were significant, he was also well known as a scientist and was “a naturalist of some renown, with specialised

⁵⁹ quoted by Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Anarchist Prince*, p. 419

⁶⁰ “The Ethical Need of the Present Day”, *The Nineteenth Century*, August 1904 and “The Morality of Nature”, *The Nineteenth Century*, March 1905

when, at an early stage, I had to manage serious enterprises and to deal with men, and when each mistake would lead at once to heavy consequences, I began to appreciate the difference between acting on the principle of command and discipline, and acting on the principle of common understanding. The former works admirably in a military parade, but it is worth nothing where real life is concerned, and the aim can be achieved only through the severe effort of many converging wills... I was prepared to become an anarchist.²

So while Kropotkin had “went to Siberia full of enthusiasm for the possibilities of national reform,” he left “five years later completely disillusioned.”³ Resigning from the army in 1867 because of the bloody repression of a revolt of Polish prisoners, he returned to St. Petersburg. There he began university and, at the same time, became the secretary of the physical geography section of the Russian Geographical Society. He made his name as a scientist and geographer when he proved that the existing maps of Asia misrepresented the physical formation of the country, the main structural lines being in fact from south-west to north-east, not from north to south, or from east to west as had been previously supposed. “There are not many joys in human life,” he later recounted, “equal to the joy of the sudden birth of a generalisation, illuminating the mind after a long period of patient research.”⁴

In 1871, while exploring glacial deposits in Finland and Sweden for the Russian Geographical Society, he was asked to be its secretary. However, his growing social consciousness made him refuse the offer, instead becoming a revolutionary socialist and agitator for social change. “Science is an excellent thing,” he recalled. “I

² *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Black Rose, 1989), pp. 201–2

³ Martin Miller, *Kropotkin* (University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 70

⁴ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, p. 211

knew its joys and valued them, perhaps more than many of my colleagues did”:

But what right had I to these highest joys, when all around me was nothing but misery and struggle for a mouldy bit of bread; when whatsoever I should spend to enable me to live in that world of higher emotions must needs be taken from the very mouths of those who grew the wheat and had not bread enough for their children?...

Knowledge is an immense power... What if that knowledge... should become the possession of all? Would not science itself progress in leaps and cause mankind to make strides in production, invention, and social creation, of which we are hardly in a condition now to measure the speed?

The masses want to know: they are willing to learn; they *can* learn... they are ready to widen their knowledge, only give it to them: only give them the means of getting leisure. This is the direction in which, and these are the kind of people for whom, I must work. All those sonorous phrases about making mankind progress, while at the same time the progress-makers stand aloof from those whom they pretend to push onwards, are mere sophisms made up by minds anxious to shake off a fretting contradiction.

So I sent my negative reply to the Geographical Society.⁵

Using the privileges of his scientific position, he visited Switzerland in 1872 and joined the International Workingmen’s Association (IWMA). At that time the Swiss labour movement was split

⁵ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, pp. 223–4

it confirmed his worse fears on both the tyranny of state socialism and the inability of centralised, hierarchical bodies to solve the many problems a social revolution inevitably throws up. As he put it in his famous 1919 letter to workers of the world:

The natural evils of State Communism are... increased tenfold under the excuse that all misfortunes of our life are due to the intervention of foreigners... the attempt to build up a Communist Republic on the lines of strongly-centralised State Communism under the iron rule of the Dictatorship of a party is ending in a failure. We learn in Russia how Communism cannot be introduced... so long as a country is governed by the dictatorship of a party, the Labour and Peasant Councils [soviets] evidently lose all their significance... when it comes to build up quite new forms of life... everything has to be worked out by men on the spot... an all-powerful centralised Government... proves absolutely incapable of doing that through its functionaries, no matter how countless they may be – it becomes a nuisance. It develops such a formidable bureaucracy... this is what you, the working men of the West, can and must avoid by all means...The immense constructive work that is required from a Social Revolution cannot be accomplished by a central Government... It requires the knowledge, the brains, and the willing collaboration of a mass of local and specialised forces, which alone can cope with the diversity of economical problems in their local aspects.⁵⁸

He ended his letter by repeating his call for a new international, one based on labour organisations. This was a call he reiterated in

⁵⁸ “Kropotkin says, Stop the War!”, *Freedom*, August 1920

part is to summon the slaves to revolt against their masters.⁵⁴

As such, it was misleading of Lenin in *The State and Revolution* to suggest that only a “few anarchists” had “a sense of honour and a conscience” and opposed the war.⁵⁵ Kropotkin, in reality, was completely isolated from the wider movement and it would have been an inglorious end for such an important rebel if the Tzar had not been overthrown by a mass revolt in early 1917.

Overjoyed to see the end of the hated autocracy, Kropotkin immediately made plans to return to Russia. Leaving in the summer of 1917, his farewell letter to the British workers saw him re-iterate one of the fundamental aims of anarchism: “The workers, the producers, must become the managers of the producing concern.”⁵⁶ Sadly, his pro-war position ensured that his influence in the developing revolution was minimal as he was completely at odds with the popular mood and the Russian libertarians, like the vast majority of anarchists, remained true to their anti-militarist, anti-imperialist and anti-state positions.

With the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks and the withdrawal of Russia from the slaughter of the war, the main cause of Kropotkin’s isolation from the anarchist movement was ended. This meant that he received a steady stream of visitors as revolutionaries across the world either visited revolutionary Russia, in the case of leading Italian anarcho-syndicalist Armando Borghi or, in the case of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, expelled to it.⁵⁷ Unsurprisingly, Kropotkin was critical of Lenin’s regime as

⁵⁴ “International Anarchist Manifesto on the War,” pp. 385–8, *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman’s Mother Earth*, p. 387

⁵⁵ *The Lenin Anthology* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1975), p. 380

⁵⁶ *Freedom*, July 1917

⁵⁷ Goldman recounted her visits to the ailing Kropotkin in *My Disillusionment in Russia* (Dover Publications Inc., 2003) and *Living My Life* while Berkman’s account can be found in *The Bolshevik Myth* (Pluto Press, 1989) and “Reminiscences of Kropotkin”, *Freedom*, March 1922

into two parts, one recognised by Marx and the General Council of the IWMA and the other grouped around Bakunin. This reflected, but predated, the wider split that had occurred in 1871 between the majority (libertarian) and the minority (Marxist) wings. Kropotkin took the opportunity to visit both factions, first to the non-anarchist wing where he was horrified to see its leaders manipulate a mass meeting in order to stop a strike they considered as harmful to the electoral chances of their candidate. He then visited the libertarian wing and the “separation between leaders and workers which I had noticed at Geneva in the Temple Unique did not exist in the Jura Mountains. There were a number of men who were more intelligent, and especially more active than the others; but that was all.” While he did not, much to his later regret, meet Bakunin it was during this visit to the Jura federation that he concluded “my views upon socialism were settled. I was an anarchist.”⁶

On returning to Russia, he took an active part in spreading revolutionary propaganda through the Chaikovsky Circle.⁷ He produced his first major libertarian work for this group, *Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?*, which not only sketched a vision of a free society obviously inspired by Proudhon and Bakunin but also a strategy of social change, like theirs, based on activity “among the peasantry and urban workers.” As the “insurrection must proceed among the peasantry and urban workers themselves,” revolutionaries “must not stand outside the people but among them, must serve not as a champion of some alien opinions worked out in isolation, but only as a more distinct, more complete expression of the demands of

⁶ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, p. 262, p. 267.

⁷ This was founded by a Chemistry student Nicholas Vasilevich Chaikovsky (1850–1926) and was part of the populist “To the People” movement (*narodniks*). Kropotkin joined as the group was discussing whether their direction would be further socialist propaganda among the educated youth or to make contact with the workers and peasants. Kropotkin, obviously, advocated the latter. (Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Anarchist Prince*, pp. 122–5)

the people themselves.”⁸ These were themes he would repeatedly return to.

He was arrested in 1874 for his activities and (like Bakunin before him) imprisoned in the infamous Peter-and-Paul fortress. After two years, his health failed and he was transferred to the prison block of the St. Petersburg military prison. This was the opportunity he and his populist comrades were waiting for and they organised his escape (as vividly described in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*).

In August 1876 he reached Britain and contemplated his position. He thought about returning to Russia, but considering himself “too well known to carry on an open propaganda, especially among the workers and the peasants” and rejecting conspiracies in favour of “a popular movement” he decided to remain in exile and join “the labouring and toiling masses” and “aid them to direct their efforts to the best advantage of all the workers” and “to deepen and to widen the ideals and principles which will underlie the coming social revolution.” He wanted “to awaken their own initiative, now that they were called upon to appear in the historical area as the builders of a new, equitable mode of organisation of society.” As part of this he rejected being supported by the movement, becoming a scientific journalist: “A socialist must always rely upon his own work for his living.”⁹

This proved to be a wise decision. While in exile in Western Europe he became a, if not the, leading exponent of the communist-anarchism which was replacing Bakunin’s collectivist-anarchism as the dominant theory in the libertarian movement (a position it holds to this day)¹⁰. He rejoined the libertarian-wing of the IWMA

⁸ *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution* (M.I.T. Press, 1970), pp. 85–6

⁹ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, p. 353–4

¹⁰ Communist-anarchism can be seen as a natural evolution from Bakunin’s ideas, the fundamental difference being on how quickly distribution according to need could be achieved after a revolution. While some communist-anarchists,

of military and political despotism; and at the same time the worship of the State, of authority and of State Socialism, which is in reality nothing but State Capitalism, triumphed in the ideas of a whole generation.”⁵¹ So blinded by his love of France as the home of revolution and fear that a German victory would set back the cause of (genuine) socialism and liberty for a generation as they had after 1870, Kropotkin rejected the anarchist position on war he formally advocated. It mattered little that he was in a tiny minority within the movement and that the Marxists saw almost all of their parties side with their states, the damage was done.⁵²

Almost leading all leading anarchists took an anti-war position, with Kropotkin’s old friend and comrade Errico Malatesta using the pages of *Freedom* to attack his anti-anarchist position.⁵³ Indeed, so at odds was Kropotkin’s position with his previous ideas that his former colleagues published his series of articles on “Wars and Capitalism” which had appeared the previous year in *Freedom* as a pamphlet as part of their anti-war work. In 1915, Berkman and Malatesta joined a host of other anarchists to sign an “International Anarchist Manifesto on the War” which proclaimed:

The role of the Anarchists ... is to continue to proclaim that there is only one war of liberation: that which in all countries is waged by the oppressed against the oppressors, by the exploited against the exploiters. Our

⁵¹ “Caesarism”, *Freedom*, June 1899

⁵² The pro-war anarchists were “not numerous, it is true, but [did have] amongst them comrades whom we love and respect most.” However, “almost all” of the anarchists “have remained faithful to their convictions” namely “to awaken a consciousness of the antagonism of interests between dominators and dominated, between exploiters and workers, and to develop the class struggle inside each country, and solidarity among all workers across the frontiers.” (Malatesta, *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas* (Freedom Press, 1984), p. 243, p. 248, p. 244)

⁵³ “Anarchists have forgotten their Principles” (*Freedom*, November 1914) and “Pro-Government Anarchists” (*Freedom*, April 1916) are also in *Errico Malatesta: His Life and Ideas*.

Unfortunately, the respect Kropotkin's work and personality had naturally produced within anarchist circles also created something akin to hero-worship. The problems of this situation were exposed at the outbreak of war in 1914 when Kropotkin betrayed the anarchist principles of anti-militarism and anti-imperialism that he had previously advocated by supporting the allies. Thus the leading anarchist theoretician of his time and exile from Tzarist autocracy became, overnight, a defender of states and a supporter of the Tzar regime and its war effort. As a result he was expelled from the Freedom Group he had helped set up in 1886 and was isolated from the movement. Alexander Berkman's response can be considered typical:

We could not believe it... His arguments are weak and superficial... he lost sight of the most elemental fact of the situation, namely that the war in Europe is not a war of nations, but a war of capitalist governments for power and markets... it is only the ruling and capitalist cliques that are responsible for the war and alone stand to gain by its result... Kropotkin strangely fails to mention the *working classes* of the contending powers... Has not Kropotkin always taught us that the solidarity of labour throughout the world is the cornerstone of all true progress and that labour has no interest whatever in the quarrels of their governmental or industrial masters?⁵⁰

While Kropotkin's position came as a surprise to almost all of his comrades, glimpses of it could be seen, in passing, in some of his earlier works. In 1899, for example, he had argued that "the triumph of Germany in 1870 has retarded the social revolution for many years" because it was "the triumph of militarism in Europe,

⁵⁰ "In Reply to Kropotkin", pp. 380–1, *Anarchy! An Anthology of Emma Goldman's Mother Earth* (Counterpoint, 2001), pp. 380–1

in Switzerland and started to contribute articles to the Jura Federation's journal, *Bulletin de la Fédération Jurassienne de l'Association Internationale des Travailleurs*. It was there in 1878 that he met and married Sophie Ananieva, daughter of a Polish Jew exiled to Siberia for revolutionary activities.

In Switzerland he met and worked with many leading anarchist thinkers and activists, including many exiles from the bloody repression of the Paris Commune. He took the opportunity to discuss that revolt and its lessons, using these eyewitness accounts to build a critique of the revolt so that future revolutions would not make the same mistakes. He returned repeatedly to the 1871 revolution, stressing that its two key mistakes were political and economic. Politically, he acknowledged while it raised the vision of a federated France and so denied the national state, internally it was based on the existing town council. This caused immense problems as this structure could not handle the many problems facing the revolt so necessitating a far deeper and wider democratisation and decentralisation *within* the commune itself by creating a free federation of workplaces and communities. Economically, it did not start transforming the economy in a (libertarian) communist direction.¹¹

"It is obvious," summarised Kropotkin in one of his many articles on the subject, "that if the Commune could have held out against the besiegers for a longer time, the people would have perceived that its new rulers, however sincere and revolutionary, could not perform the great task of making an economical revolution for the workmen." This was "[b]ecause a deep revolution – an economical

unlike Bakunin, were hostile to reforms and working within the labour movement, this is not a fundamental communist-anarchist position as can be seen from Kropotkin's support for militant unionism and sympathies with anarcho-syndicalism. Caroline Cahm covers this period well in her book *Kropotkin and the rise of revolutionary anarchism, 1872–1886* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹¹ See my "The Paris Commune, Marxism and Anarchism", *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review* no. 50

revolution – was necessary; and an economical revolution can be made only by the people itself, not by orders from above. Because, like all governments, this government was a compromise with the past.”¹² These criticisms did not diminish his support for the Commune, which he considered as *the* defining revolutionary event of his lifetime, and he concluded that the autonomous federated commune was starting point for the coming social revolution.¹³

His first important contribution to anarchist thought was his address at the Jura Federation’s 1879 congress, “The Anarchist Idea from the Point of View of its Practical Realisation.” This was subsequently published as a pamphlet and was marked by Kropotkin’s continuation of the key ideas of Bakunin on the need of anarchists to “take advantage of all opportunities which may lead to an economic agitation... on the basis of the struggle of the exploited against the exploiters,” as “the best method of shaking this edifice [of the state] would be to stir up the economic struggle” with the aim of “the expropriation... of the large landed estates, of the instruments of labour... by the cultivators, the workers’ organisations, and the... communes.”¹⁴ He would return to these themes over the next four decades.

When the *Bulletin* ceased to appear and its successor suppressed by the Swiss authorities, Kropotkin founded *Le Révolté (The Rebel)* in 1879. This was “destined to be the most influential anarchist paper since the disappearance of Proudhon’s *Le Peuple* in 1850.”¹⁵ As well as editing the paper, he also wrote numerous articles with the aim of it being “moderate in tone, but revolutionary in substance, and I did my best to write it in such a style that complex historical

¹² “The Paris Commune”, *Freedom*, April 1887

¹³ Nicholas Walter, “The Paris Commune and the Anarchist Movement”, *The Anarchist Past of other essays* (Five Leaves Publications, 2007)

¹⁴ *Freedom*, 25th February, 1967. Kropotkin still used the term “collectivism” to describe these ideas rather than communism.

¹⁵ George Woodcock, *Anarchism* (Penguin Books Ltd, 1986), p. 164

stressed that the task of anarchists was “to aid the people to display in full its creative powers for working out new institutions, leading to free Anarchist-Communism” against the “two enemies” of Capital and the State. The workers “will not be lulled with mere patchwork reforms of present conditions.”⁴⁷

This was expressed in the growing syndicalist revolt in Britain, a labour militancy which reflected a global trend away from parliamentarianism towards Kropotkin’s long advocated ideas on revolutionary workplace class struggle. Unsurprisingly, leading British syndicalist Tom Mann proclaimed Kropotkin “our grand old comrade” and his opinions were sought for a preface to the 1913 English translation of the classic syndicalist novel *How We Shall Make the Revolution*.⁴⁸ These developments confirmed Kropotkin’s hopes of 1907 when wrote to the British anarcho-syndicalist *The Voice of Labour* to “tell you why my warmest greetings and hopes go to the new paper”:

The free organisation of labour, independent of all parliamentary parties, and aiming at the *direct* solution – by the working men themselves and working through their own Unions – of the immense social problem which now stands before civilised mankind, such a Labour organisation, wide and powerful, has become the necessity of the moment... The working men realise the great mistake they committed when they substituted Parliamentary politics for Direct Action of the Labour organisations in enforcing their demands upon the land and capital owning classes...⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Letter, *Freedom*, January 1913

⁴⁸ Foreword, Émile Pataud and Émile Pouget, *How We Shall Make the Revolution* (Pluto Press, 1989), p. xxx

⁴⁹ quoted by John Taylor Caldwell, *Come Dungeons Dark: The Life and Times of Guy Aldred, Glasgow Anarchist* (Luath Press Ltd, 1988), p. 63

decades, such as the necessity of libertarians to take join the popular masses and take an active part in the labour movement. He stressed that unions were “natural organs for the direct struggle with capitalism and for the composition of the future order” and that the general strike was “a powerful weapon of struggle.”⁴⁵

Kropotkin took an active part in documenting the state repression of the Tzarist regime, producing *The Terror in Russia* in 1909. That year also saw the publication of *The Great French Revolution*, one of the best accounts of the revolution. The work is a classic example of social history, a history from below which recounts the actions of the masses in the pushing the revolution forward. As he summarised, “it is to this true fount and origin of the Revolution – the people’s readiness to take up arms – that the historians of the Revolution have not yet done justice – the justice owed to it by the history of civilisation.” He succeeded in this and showed how “the principles of anarchism... already dated from 1789, and that they had their origin, not in theoretical speculations, but in the *deeds* of the Great French Revolution.” This was because “the Revolution began by creating the Commune... and through this institution it gained... immense power” and “laid the foundations of a new, free, social organisation.” He added: “the libertarians would no doubt do the same today.”⁴⁶

As a world famous scientist and anarchist, he was ideally situated to produce the entry on Anarchism for the 11th edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1910. He continued his writing on science in numerous journals at this time as well as contributing to the anarchist press. An expanded second English-language edition of *Modern Science and Anarchism* appeared in December 1912, published to mark Kropotkin’s 70th birthday by the group around *Freedom*. Age had not diminished his hopes or activity, and he still

⁴⁵ quoted by Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (AK Press, 2005), pp. 81–2

⁴⁶ *The Great French Revolution* (Elephant Editions, 1986), vol. 1., p. 35, p. 204, p. 200, p. 206

and economic questions should be comprehensive to every intelligent worker.”¹⁶

Due to pressure from the Russian ambassador, he was expelled from Switzerland in 1881 after attending the International Anarchist conference in London. Eventually Kropotkin settled in France and continued to contribute to the anarchist press and movement. As well as damning critiques of the current system and arguments for anarchism, a key aspect of this revolutionary journalism was to encourage French anarchists to follow the lead of the libertarians in the IWMA and work within the labour movement. For example, in an article on 12th of November 1881, he urged French libertarians to follow the example of their Spanish comrades who had remained “[f]aithful to the Anarchist traditions of the International” and brought their “energy to workers’ organisations.” His “advice to the French workers” was “to take up again ... the tradition of the International, to organise themselves outside of all political parties by inscribing on their banner solidarity *in the struggle against capital*” and “build up a force which will crush Capital... the revolutionary trade association.”¹⁷

This work quickly made Kropotkin well known to the authorities and he was arrested as part of a general crackdown on the anarchist movement in 1882. After a trial in Lyon in 1883, which was utilised by the 53 defendants to expound their anarchist ideas, he was given a five-year prison sentence. The Police Correctional Court ostensibly claimed this was for being a member of an illegal organisation, the IWMA (which had been outlawed after the brutal repression of the Paris Commune). Kropotkin drafted the defendants’ famous statement of principles and, along with the defence speeches, it was published in *Le Révolté* and as a pamphlet.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, pp. 389–90

¹⁷ quoted by Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution* (Freedom Press, 1975), p. 31

¹⁸ see Nicholas Walter, “The Lyon Trial”, pp. 91–8, *The Anarchist Past and Other Essays*.

It was during this imprisonment that his first anarchist book, *Paroles d'un Révolté* (*Words of a Rebel*), appeared. Edited by friend, comrade and fellow internationally respected geographer Élisée Reclus and published in 1885, it was a collection of articles from *Le Révolté* and contained many of his most famous pieces (such as “Revolutionary Government”, “The Commune of Paris”, “The Spirit of Revolt” and “Appeal to the Young”). After repeated international campaigns, he was finally released in 1886 and settled in England where he helped found the anarchist newspaper *Freedom*. His second anarchist book, *In Russian and French Prisons*, was published in 1887 and contained an account of his experiences as a political prisoner as well as a searing condemnation and critique of the penal system. That year also saw the birth of his and Sophie’s daughter, Alexandra (their only child).

However, his immediate work after release was to continue the elaboration of communist-anarchism and its vision of revolution. Returning to the theme of the last chapter of *Words of a Rebel* on expropriation, Kropotkin started a series of articles in *Le Révolté*¹⁹ and *Freedom* indicating what an anarchist social revolution could be like, what issues it had to deal with as well as sketching the outline of a society freeing itself from the evils of the state and capitalism.²⁰ Many of the French articles were later revised and incorporated into his classic work *La Conquête du Pain* in 1892 (translated into English in 1906 as *The Conquest of Bread*).²¹ These articles he considered as “the constructive part of an anarchist-communist society” (“so far as it can now be forecast”) in contrast to “the crit-

¹⁹ It became *La Révolte* (*Revolt*) in 1887 after being prosecuted for anti-militarist propaganda.

²⁰ His last article in *Le Révolté* before his arrest in 1882 was the second part of “L’Expropriation” (December 23rd) while his first one upon release in 1886 was “L’Expropriation” (February 14th)

²¹ The equivalent articles from *Freedom* were finally combined into a book with the publication of *Act For Yourselves* in 1987 (see the introduction by editors Nicholas Walter and Heiner Becker).

feature of the Russian revolution is the ascendancy which labour has taken in it. It is not social democrats, or revolutionary socialists, or anarchists, who take the lead in the present revolution. It is labour – the workingmen.” He pointed to the workers’ councils (soviets) being formed and how “the general strike was advocated by the Latin workingmen as a weapon which would be irresistible in the hands of labour for imposing its will. The Russian revolution has demonstrated that they were right.”⁴³ He urged the extension of the political struggle against autocracy into an economic one against capitalism:

The work of demolition can only be accomplished by the direct participation of the whole of the people. And they will only act in the name of their immediate and popular needs. The land to the peasant; the factory, the workshop, the railway and the rest to the worker.⁴⁴

He also worked to influence the Russian anarchist movement, participating in a series of meetings to discuss developments and recommend specific tactics as well as contributing numerous articles to the Russian anarchist papers *Khleb i Volya* (*Bread and Freedom*) and *Listki “Khleb i Volya”* (*Leaflets from Bread and Freedom*). His aim, as in the 1870s and 1880s, was to produce an anarchism which saw the necessity of working within *popular* movements and organisations, as opposed to the minority insurrectionism that influenced so many of his Russian comrades. The proceedings of one conference in 1906 were later published in a pamphlet *The Russian Revolution and Anarchism*. Kropotkin’s lectures in this work are, in many ways, a summation of his ideas on the nature and activity of anarchist movement and its role during a revolutionary period. It reiterates themes Kropotkin had been stressing for

⁴³ “The Russian Revolution”, *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution*, pp. 287–8

⁴⁴ quoted by Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Anarchist Prince*, p. 369

freedom, while freemen take it themselves.” This applied to “political action” so beloved by Marxists as well, for “the best fighter in Parliament is good only as long as there is the clamour of the crowd in the street to spur him on.” Ultimately, the belief in politicians acting for the people was a spell but “the spell has been broken. From beneath – not from above! From the villages, the townships – not from Westminster!”⁴¹ The net effect of Marxism was to *de*-radicalise the socialist movement:

And now we find that although parliamentary action has always been represented as the means for obtaining small concessions to the advantage of the worker, these concessions, however insignificant they may be, have been won, all of them, by strikes... and by the standing menace of still more serious labour wars. The presence of a number of more or less Socialistic deputies in parliament does not... dispense the working man in the least maintaining his trade organisations in full mental and material readiness for war. On the contrary, it is only by the constant menace of a declaration of war, and by real war – and in proportion to this readiness – that the workers have won any victories; while the tactics of the politicians have always been to weaken the anti-capitalist labour organisations...⁴²

When the long expected and hoped for Revolution broke out in Russia in 1905, Kropotkin took a keen interest in it and in helping the nascent libertarian movement to influence it. He wrote many articles on the developments in Russia, stressing the necessity for Russian workers and peasants to struggle for both political *and* economic change. He happily pointed out that the “prominent

⁴¹ *The Coming Revival of Socialism* (Freedom Group, 1904), p. 23

⁴² *Politics and Socialism* (Freedom Group, 1903), p. 15

ical part” contained in *Words of a Rebel*.²² Obviously based on the lessons he had drawn from the Paris Commune, the *Conquest of Bread* stressed the need for the expropriation of private property, the necessity of free communism and the creation of a new social system based on free federations of popular social and economic organisations which facilitated mass participation in building a new society based on liberty, equality and solidarity.

During this time Kropotkin also re-iterated his earlier arguments from the early 1880s on the necessity of anarchists to become involved in popular movements, particularly the labour movement. Inspired in part by the success of the London Dockers’ strike in the summer of 1889, he returned to this subject in a series of articles starting in September of that year. The following year he urged anarchists to take part in mass movements, arguing for the importance of mobilising on the 1st of May 1891 and turning it into a general strike against exploitation.

Unlike his previous attempt in the early 1880s, these arguments were successful and anarchists joined the unions in increasing numbers so leading to the rise of French revolutionary syndicalism by the mid-1890s.²³ This was undoubtedly due to a ground-swelling of support for this tactic which, after the marginalisation of anarchism in France and Italy in the 1880s as a result of ultra-revolutionary posturing (aided by police spies), saw numerous leading anarchists like Kropotkin, Malatesta, Pouget and a host of others arguing for the return to the successful strategies of the so-called “Bakuninists” in the First International.²⁴ As Kropotkin summarised in 1907:

²² *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, p. 463

²³ It should be stressed that anarchists in Spain, Cuba, Mexico, Chicago and elsewhere had continued their involvement in the labour movement in the 1880s while Errico Malatesta took a leading role in organising labour unions during his time in Argentina in the mid-1880s.

²⁴ Constance Bantman, “From Trade Unionism to Syndicalisme Révolutionnaire to Syndicalism: The British Origins of French Syndicalism”, *New Perspectives on anarchism, labour and syndicalism : the individual, the national and the*

Revolutionary Anarchist Communist propaganda within the Labour Unions had always been a favourite mode of action in the Federalist or 'Bakunist' section of the International Working Men's Association. In Spain and in Italy it had been especially successful. Now it was resorted to, with evident success, in France, and *Freedom* eagerly advocated this sort of propaganda, carefully taking note of its successes all over the world.²⁵

Somewhat ironically, given that the most famous period of anarchism terrorism in France was from March 1892 to June 1894²⁶, leading anarchists had turned to advocating libertarian involvement in the labour movement over two years previously. Or, more correctly, anarchists *returned* to syndicalism as Kropotkin's arguments from late 1889 onwards reflected those he had made in Russia in the early 1870s and in exile in the early 1880s. As such, the all-to-common notion that anarchists turned to syndicalism in response to the failure of "propaganda by the deed" is untenable – particularly given the syndicalist ideas championed by Bakunin and other revolutionary anarchists in the First International.²⁷

During the early 1890s, Kropotkin spent some time critiquing the rise of Social Democracy and the Second International. Correctly predicting that this would lead to the watering down of socialism, he advocated an International based purely on labour unions committed to "*the direct struggle of Labour against Capi-*

transnational (Cambridge Scholars, 2010), edited by David Berry and Constance Bantman, pp. 126–140

²⁵ "1886–1907: Glimpses into the Labour Movement in this Country", *Act for Yourself* (Freedom Press, 1987), pp. 119–20

²⁶ Woodcock, *Anarchism*, p. 253

²⁷ See my "Another View: Syndicalism, Anarchism and Marxism", *Anarchist Studies*, vol. 20, No. 1, 2012; for an excellent and comprehensive account see Michael Schmidt and Lucien van der Walt, *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, volume 1 (AK Press, 2009).

have sounded as if we were quarrelling. Sophie, quietly sewing a dress for her daughter, tried several times to direct our talk into less vociferous channels, but in vain. Peter and I paced the room in growing agitation, each strenuously upholding his side of the question. At last I paused with the remark: "All right, dear comrade, when I have reached your age, the sex question may no longer be of importance to me. But it is now, and it is a tremendous factor for thousands, millions even, of young people." Peter stopped short, an amused smile lighting up his kindly face. "Fancy, I didn't think of that," he replied. "Perhaps you are right, after all." He beamed affectionately upon me, with a humorous twinkle in his eye.⁴⁰

While having abandoned the possibility of pursuing his promising career as a scientist, he was keen to apply his scientific knowledge and training to the anarchist movement. This produced not only *Mutual Aid* but also a lengthy anarchist book entitled *Modern Science and Anarchism*. Originally written for the Russian movement in 1901, it was an educational and polemical work aiming to explain the basic ideas and history of anarchism and place it within the social, economic and intellectual tendencies of the times. It was soon translated into other languages. During that year, Kropotkin also visited America for the second time to talk on the subject of Russian literature (a passion of his). These lectures were subsequently revised and published as the book *Russian Literature* in 1905.

In the early 1900s, he also wrote a series of articles on socialism, subsequently reprinted as the pamphlets *Socialism and Politics* and *The Coming Revival of Socialism*. Real change could only come from below, he argued, by the action of the masses themselves as "[o]nly slaves trust to a goddess that shall bring them

⁴⁰ *Living My Life* (Dover Publications Inc., 1971), vol. 1, p. 253

bility of using it for popular social transformation. This work “in a way [can] be regarded as the final chapter” of *Mutual Aid*.³⁸

Kropotkin also found time to serialise his reminiscences for an American magazine the *Atlantic Monthly* under the title “Autobiography of a Revolutionist”, subsequently published as *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* in 1899. This was a lively account of Kropotkin’s first 57 years and is an engrossing account of the development of his ideas, his transformation from Prince to revolutionary. It presents a vivid picture of Imperial Russia and the revolutionary movement in both it and Western Europe. Sadly, the twelve years between being exiled in Britain and writing his memoirs are not described in anything like the rich detail of the first forty-five.³⁹

Kropotkin also went on regular speaking tours, giving talks at socialist and trade union events across Britain and twice visiting North America. His home was regularly visited by anarchists from across the globe seeking to meet and discuss ideas with him. Emma Goldman recounted one such discussion:

“The paper [*Free Society*] is doing splendid work,” he warmly agreed, “but it would do more if it would not waste so much space discussing sex.” I disagreed, and we became involved in a heated argument about the place of the sex problem in anarchist propaganda. Peter’s view was that woman’s equality with man had nothing to do with sex; it was a matter of brains. “When she is his equal intellectually and shares in his social ideals,” he said, “she will be as free as he.” We both got somewhat excited, and our voices must

³⁸ Woodcock and Avakumovic, *The Anarchist Prince*, p. 338

³⁹ Kropotkin wrote two versions on his memoirs, one in English and one in Russian. While very similar, the Russian text had rewritten passages as well two additional chapters. *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) contains a chapter entitled “Western Europe” which is newly translated from the Russian edition.

tal.”²⁸ He also took an active part in urging anarchists to secure mandates to attend the 1896 London Congress of the Second International.²⁹ While not attending himself, he took part in the protest meeting after the anarchists were expelled stating that “we are all delighted to see that such an enormous mass of workers, by sending delegates to the Congress, expressed their determination to fight against Capital and to take property out of the hands of the monopolists and exploiters of labour.” However, he hoped “that only workers’ associations will be admitted at future congresses: we want delegates not as Social Democrats nor as Anarchists, but as men who have won the confidence of a workers’ association, whatever be their personal opinion.” He also “depreciates the voting by nationalities in an assembly purporting to be a really international one.”³⁰

Given the number of articles written explicitly to influence the libertarian movement in what Kropotkin considered the best direction, it would be fair to say that his published anarchist books do not give a complete idea of his politics. The most easily available of Kropotkin’s texts are those that are very general and theoretical, *not* those dealing with concrete political and strategic issues facing the anarchist movement at the time. So, unfortunately, this means that he far too often gets cast as a visionary or as a theorist rather than as an active anarchist militant actively engaged in the issues of the day, grappling with challenges facing the workers’ movement and anarchist strategies within and outwith it to produce social transformation.

This means that in order to get a better grasp of Kropotkin’s ideas we need to look at the many articles he wrote for the libertarian press, which he himself stated “are more expressive of my

²⁸ Letter to French and British trade union delegates, *Freedom*, September 1891

²⁹ Davide Turcato, “The 1896 London Congress: Epilogue or Prologue?,” *New Perspectives on anarchism, labour and syndicalism*, pp. 126–140

³⁰ *Freedom*, August-September, 1896

anarchist ideas.”³¹ Thus while he mentions in passing anarchist advocacy of direct action, economic class war and revolutionary unionism in his general introductions to libertarian ideas, his articles in anarchist newspapers are more focused on these practical matters. As he acknowledged in one polemic over syndicalism in 1907, “I now ask myself if it would not be useful to make a selection of these articles [on the labour movement] and publish them in a volume” for if he had then it would show that he along with other anarchists had “always believed that the working class movement – organised in each trade for the *direct conflict* with Capital (today in France it is called Syndicalism and ‘direct action’) constitutes, true strength, and is capable of *leading up* to the Social Revolution and *realising* it.”³²

As well writing for the anarchist press, Kropotkin also contributed scientific works to a range of leading journals. Many of these later became books, such as *Fields, Factories and Workshops* and *Mutual Aid*. The former saw him analyse trends within modern economies, arguing that the future socialist society must integrate agriculture and industrial as well as manual and intellectual labour based on the use of appropriately scaled technology to humanise work. He recognised, unlike many socialists, that the current industrial structure reflected the drive for profits and power of the few and, consequently, had to be transformed in order to make it suitable for humanity.³³ The latter was based on a series of articles written in response to Thomas Henry

³¹ Quoted by Nicholas Walter, “Kropotkin’s Anarchist-Communism”, *The Anarchist Past and other essays*, p. 112

³² “Anarchists and Trade Unions”, *Freedom*, June, 1907

³³ Perhaps needless to say, Kropotkin’s argument has been twisted, particularly by Marxists, into a desire for “small-scale” production. While Kropotkin did argue that much of industry within capitalism was larger than technical efficiency demanded in order for capitalists to increase their profits, he was well aware that many industries could not be decentralised and *explicitly stated so*. Rather than make a fetish of small-scale production (perhaps in an unthinking response to the Marxist fetish of large-scale industry), Kropotkin advocated *appropriate* scales of

Huxley’s “The Struggle for Existence in Human Society” written in 1888. While Huxley was considered Britain’s leading advocate of Darwin’s ideas, Kropotkin considered his speculation on human society as simply “atrocious”³⁴ and in direct contradiction to the facts of both nature and history. Kropotkin’s replies to Huxley appeared in the journal *The Nineteenth Century* between 1890 and 1896 and were expanded to form *Mutual Aid* in 1902.

Mutual Aid is probably Kropotkin’s most famous book and as its sub-title suggests (“A Factor of Evolution”) he did not deny the fact of (individual) competition in animals or human society. Nor did he, as many Marxists assert, deny the class struggle.³⁵ Rather it was a work of popular science that aimed to present evidence against the predominant vision of nature as one, like capitalism, rooted in individualistic competition and was highly successful in so doing.³⁶ As noted Darwinist Stephen Jay Gould concluded: “Kropotkin’s basic argument is correct. Struggle does occur in many modes, and some lead to co-operation among members of a species as the best pathway to advantage for individuals.”³⁷ At the same time as these articles on mutual aid, Kropotkin also wrote his essay *The State: Its Historic Role* that discusses the nature of the state and the impossi-

production which would vary from industry to industry based on the objective technical requirements.

³⁴ *Memoirs of Revolutionist*, p. 464

³⁵ In 1895, when researching the articles that would become the chapter “Mutual Aid Amongst Ourselves” of *Mutual Aid*, he wrote to fellow anarchist Max Nettlau of his desire “to show the incredible... amount of mutual aid support among workers, as manifested during strikes.” (quoted by Ruth Kinna, “Kropotkin’s theory of Mutual Aid in Historical Context”, pp. 259–283, *International Review of Social History*, No. 40, p. 279) Needless to say, that chapter discusses both unions and strikes as examples of mutual aid within modern society.

³⁶ see my *Mutual Aid: An Introduction and Evaluation* (AK Press, 2011) for a discussion of how Kropotkin’s ideas have fared as well as refutations of the various myths that surround that classic work.

³⁷ “Kropotkin was no crackpot”, *Bully for Brontosaurus* (Penguin, 1991), p. 338