

Review: Kropotkin And The Rise Of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886

**Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886 by Caroline
Cahm (Cambridge University Press, 2002); 372pp. \$35**

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Contents

From Bakuninism to Anarcho-Communism	3
Revolutionary Action and 'Propaganda by Deed'	5
Kropotkin and the Unions	8
Conclusion	9

After Bakunin's death, without a doubt the single most important exponent of the revolutionary anarchist ideal was Peter Kropotkin. Sympathetic biographers have often regarded Kropotkin as something of a naive idealist or "gentle rebel". Yet he always maintained that idealism had to be expressed in action — often violent action — which should be in conformity with and directed towards the attainment of a clearly articulated aims and ideals. He was, above all, a man of action and an uncompromising revolutionary agitator. Indeed, the great anarchist historian Max Nettlau remarked that in comparison to other leading anarchist militants of the period such as Elisee Reclus, Kropotkin was "harder, less tolerant, and more disposed to be practical". This is the Peter Kropotkin of Caroline Cahm's study.

Cahm concentrates on the most active period of Kropotkin's career as a revolutionary agitator, a period which began with his commitment to Bakuninist ideas in 1872 and ended with his arrival in England in 1886 after some twelve years of energetic activity first in Russia, then in Switzerland and France. Cahm outlines Kropotkin's ideas and revolutionary practice, and assesses the influence of his life and work upon the development of the European anarchist movement during this crucial period.

What is refreshing about this book is that, unlike many academic studies of anarchist and socialist history, Cahm's extensive research has relied heavily on the anarchist press of the time period (mainly French and Swiss), congress notes and personal correspondence between Kropotkin and a number of his anarchist contemporaries. Many of the quotes used are translated into English for the first time. What comes out is a more balanced analysis of Kropotkin's ideas and activity of this period, one which dispels previous assumptions and misrepresentations (such as his alleged disregard of the revolutionary potential of the labor movement or uncritical support for 'propaganda by deed') and offers a more accurate representation of his lasting contributions to anarchism.

From Bakuninism to Anarcho-Communism

The first section of the book traces Kropotkin's theoretical development in the context of the general evolution of the European anarchist movement from collectivist Bakuninism to anarcho-communism.

From his first contact with the Swiss anarchist watchmakers of the Jura Federation in 1872 through his return to Russia and subsequent imprisonment for revolutionary activities (which lasted until 1876, when he escaped from prison and returned to Switzerland an exile), Kropotkin was an orthodox Bakuninist. In 1868, Bakunin in defining his anti-statist position, had declared himself to be a collectivist, that is he believed in the collective ownership of land and social wealth, with consumption organized around the distribution of the products of labor based on one's ability to produce (i.e. work).

Although Kropotkin is generally credited as the primary innovator of anarcho-communism, Cahm gives a more historically accurate account. Throughout the early 1870s, Kropotkin concerned himself mainly with revolutionary action and contributed very little to the development of anarcho-communist theory.

In reality it was Elisee Reclus, the French Bakuninist and ex-Communard, who first gave an expose of anarcho-communist ideas at a meeting of the Jura Federation in Lausanne, March 1876. By the summer of that year leading Italian anarchists (Malatesta, Cafiero, Covelli and Costa)

had decided to abandon collectivism and to persuade delegates at the forthcoming Congress of the Italian Federation to make a declaration for libertarian communism. The question of the socialization of consumption was raised in a series of articles in the Jura Federation's Bulletin throughout the second half of 1876, and in German-speaking Swiss anarchist circles Paul Brousse began to campaign vigorously for the adoption of anarcho-communism in the pages of *L'Arbeiter Zeitung*.

However, there was still no strong sympathy for anarcho-communism among the mainstream of the European anarchist movement. The first tentative step in this direction was only taken by the Jura Federation at their annual congress at La Chaux-de-Fonds in 1880. At these meetings both Kropotkin and Reclus spoke in favor of an anarcho-communist program, but it was the Italian militant Carlo Cafiero who made the most persuasive contribution to the discussion. He declared that the socialization of capital without the socialization of the products of labor would entail the preservation of the monetary system and the ability to accumulate wealth which, once associated with the right of inheritance, would ensure the disappearance of all equality. The individual apportionment of products, moreover, would result not only in the re-establishment of inequality among people, but also of inequality between different types of work with non-manual labor for the better-off and manual labor for the poorest, a system bringing with it the rebirth of the system of reward and punishment. With respect to collective work, it was in any case impossible to evaluate the individual contribution even in terms of labor as the socialists suggested, for, as they themselves had conceded, everyone was not capable of producing the same amount in a given time.¹

The only serious objection to communism, according to Cafiero, came from those who, whilst accepting it as an ultimate aim, argued that the shortage of products at the beginning would necessitate a rationing in distribution which would be best worked out on the basis of the amount of labor each individual contributed to production. Rationing, however, he insisted, 'must be organized on the basis of needs and not merits'². He concluded by stating:

"One cannot be an anarchist without being a communist. For the least idea of limitation contains already in itself the germs of authoritarianism. It could not manifest itself without immediately engendering the law, the judge, the policeman. We must be communists, for it is in communism that we realize true equality."³

Despite the reservations of leading anarchist militants like James Guillaume and Adhemar Schwitzguebel, the Congress adopted an uncompromisingly anarcho-communist program for the Jura Federation.

It would be a full eighteen months after the Congress of La Chaux-de-Fonds that Kropotkin began to discuss anarcho-communist ideas in the pages of *Le Revolte*. His first major contribution was in the area of popular expropriation. In November and December 1882, he published a series of articles on the subject, arguing that a libertarian communist revolution would not succeed unless everything that could be used to exploit the people was immediately expropriated and socialized for the benefit of all. Partial expropriation, according to Kropotkin, would lead to the re-establishment of the old order — 'If social wealth remains in the hands of the few who

¹ Cahm, 'Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872-1886'; pp. 56-7

² *ibid*

³ Carlo Cafiero's report to the Jura Federation entitled 'Anarchy and Communism', 1880

own it now... the insurrection will not be a revolution, and everything will have to begin again'⁴. Similarly, expropriation had to be carried out on a large scale, otherwise it would not be possible to ensure that immediate improvement in the lot of the oppressed, which was essential in giving the people a real commitment to defend the revolution against reaction:

“General expropriation alone can satisfy the multitude of the suffering and oppressed. We must take it from the realm of theory into that of practice. But in order that expropriation should correspond to the principle that private property should be abolished and given to all, that expropriation must be accomplished on a massive scale. On a small scale, it will only be seen as vulgar pillage; on a large scale, it is the beginning of social reorganization. [...] The entire means of production must revert to the community, social property held by private individuals must go back to its true master – everyone – so that each may have their broad share in consumption, thus production may continue in all that is necessary and useful, and social life, far from being interrupted be taken up again with the greatest energy.”⁵

By 1883 Kropotkin began to emerge as a major exponent of anarcho-communism, partly because of the success of *Le Revolte* and partly because of the leading role he played in the anarchist trials at Lyon. Certainly, it is likely that he was the principle author of the ‘Anarchist Declaration’ read out to the court on January 12, 1883, which contained a summary of the ideals of the accused:

“We ourselves believe that capital, the common inheritance of humanity, since it is the fruit of the collaboration of generations past and present, must be at the disposal of all, in such a way that no one can be excluded; and that no one, on the other hand, can seize any part to the detriment of the rest. We want, in a word, equality: real equality, as a corollary or rather a prime condition of liberty. From each according to abilities, to each according to needs: no prescription can prevail against claims which are both legitimate and necessary.”⁶

Kropotkin spent the next three years in prison for revolutionary activities in France, and was unable to make any substantial contributions in the elaboration of anarcho-communist theory until his release in 1886, when, convinced that effective action demanded a further clarification of the anarcho-communist view regarding the socialization of wealth, he wrote the articles on expropriation which were to provide the basis for ‘The Conquest of Bread’ (1892). The skill and eloquence with which Kropotkin developed his ideas certainly seems to have secured a general acceptance for anarcho-communism in the European anarchist movement throughout the 1890’s.

Revolutionary Action and ‘Propaganda by Deed’

Rejecting the strategy and tactics of parliamentary socialists, the general policy of the European anarchist movement tended to alternate between revolutionary trade unionism and acts of revolt

⁴ ‘L’Expropriation’, *Le Revolte*, November 25, 1882

⁵ ‘L’Expropriation’, *Le Revolte*, December 23, 1882

⁶ ‘Declaration des anarchistes accusés devant le tribunal correctionnel de Lyon’, *Le Revolte*, January 20-February 3, 1883

by individuals and small groups. The second section of 'Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886' primarily deals with the latter forms of action, which were associated with the notion of propaganda by deed and developed out of the failure of insurrectionary action in the early 1870's.

Propaganda by deed is a political slogan which today tends to be associated specifically with isolated terrorist acts carried out by a few anarchists in the 1890's. In fact, the concept, developed in Bakuninist circles in the 1870's, was originally defined as insurrectionalist acts which were intended to affirm socialist principles by deeds. As early as 1870, Bakunin himself stated:

“Now we all have to embark together on the revolutionary ocean, and henceforth spread our principles no longer by words but by deeds — for this is the most popular, most powerful and the most irresistible form of propaganda.”⁷

In the aftermath of the 1873 Catalanist uprisings in Spain, the French Bakuninist Paul Brousse went further, declaring:

“Revolutionary propaganda is made not only by the pen and the spoken word, by books, pamphlets, public meetings, and newspapers, it is above all made in the open, in the midst of the piled-up paving stones of the barricades, on days when the exasperated people make war on the mercenary forces of reaction... From a socialist point of view, we have arrived at the point of action — Let us act, if only from the point of view of propaganda. Perhaps victory will crown our efforts, and if it is martyrdom let us remember that the idea does not perish by the sword, does not fall beneath bullets. Let us never forget that it is the blood of the people which nourishes and makes fertile the ground of Revolution.”⁸

It was Brousse who later coined the phrase 'propaganda by deed' in an article which ran in *L'Arbeiter Zeitung* in December 1876.

Although Kropotkin always attached a great deal of importance to heroic acts of self-sacrifice to encourage the development of the popular spirit of revolt, he never liked the slogan 'propaganda by deed', and did not use it to describe his own ideas of revolutionary action. On the contrary, in his mind this slogan implied that action was to be undertaken as a publicity stunt rather than as a genuine act of revolt against oppression. Nevertheless, from the very beginning of his revolutionary career he was preoccupied with the necessity of action in addition to oral and written propaganda, and he certainly supported the forms of action adopted by the early advocates of propaganda by deed.

In 1879, Kropotkin outlined his ideas for a program of action for the anarchist movement in a document entitled 'L'idée anarchiste au point de vue de sa réalisation pratique' for the *Jura Federation's Bulletin*. He identified three phases in the revolutionary process — a preparatory period, which would be followed by a period of ferment which, in its turn, would lead to the period of transformation (the revolution itself). He then suggested a program of anarchist action appropriate to each of these phases.⁹

⁷ 'Lettre à l'Ætâ€™ un Français', in Michel Bakounine sur la Guerre Franco-Allemande et la revolution sociale en France

⁸ *La Solidarite Revolutionnaire*, July 8, 1873

⁹ Cahm, 'Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886'; pp. 125–6

During both the preparatory period and period of ferment, Kropotkin declared that anarchists would need to concentrate their efforts on widespread propaganda (by both word and deed) in favor of expropriation and libertarian communism. Once the period of ferment had begun, revolutionary ideas would spread much more quickly, at which point anarchists should take advantage of any opportunity to agitate among workers around all questions of everyday life in order to ‘awake the spirit of independence and revolt’. During the revolution itself, the duty of anarchists would be one of direct action, that is, a policy of revolutionary activity that would incite popular expropriation among the masses.

Expropriation and anti-capitalist revolt were common themes in much of Kropotkin’s writing during this period. Even during the early 1880’s, when, for a brief period he became less preoccupied with collective action and began to show a greater enthusiasm for acts of revolt carried out by individuals and small groups, he was still more interested in economic, rather than political, forms of terrorism. For inspiration he turned to the proliferation of spontaneous acts of revolt — popular riots, archive burnings, refusals to pay taxes and rents, and the burning of plantations and factories — in Spain and Italy. He saw in these acts a spontaneous awakening among the masses which would lead to a general insurrection.

In an effort to revive the International Workers’ Association, a congress was held in London in 1881. This was to be the infamous meeting of international revolutionaries where propaganda by deed was formerly adopted as a strategy and tactic. As a majority of delegates accepted that the aim of the Internationalists should be to create ‘a powerful instrument to attack society violently and defend revolutionary interests’, debate centered on strategic questions over which forms of struggle anarchists should prioritize in their revolutionary program. Malatesta argued that more importance should be given to the struggle against governments, because it was the State which maintained and protected the system of economic oppression. Kropotkin flatly rejected this proposal, declaring that a narrow political struggle against the State implied the creation of a hierarchical party of conspirators to take power and declare revolution. “If we think, for example, that it is enough to overthrow the government, to put ourselves in its place and decree the revolution, we could set ourselves up as an army of conspirators, with all the characteristics of the old secret societies with their leaders and deputy leaders.” He maintained that a future revolution would be sabotaged by the bourgeoisie unless the masses themselves struck at the system of private property.

Contrary to Malatesta’s vision of a conspiratorial revolutionary organization, Kropotkin argued that the role of the International should be to organize among the working class and help translate popular hatreds and aspirations into anti-capitalist revolt:

“It is the mass of workers we have to seek to organize. We, the little revolutionary groups, have to submerge ourselves in the organization of the people, be inspired by their hatreds, their aspirations, and help them translate those hatreds and aspirations into actions. When the mass of workers is organized and we are with it to strengthen its revolutionary idea, to make the spirit of revolt against Capital germinate there — and the opportunities for that will not be wanting — then we shall be entitled to hope that the next revolution will not be conjured away as the revolutions of the past have been: then it will be the social revolution.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Kropotkin, quoted from the London IWA Congress notes

Although Kropotkin did not hold a majority position among congress delegates, he held firm to his ideas throughout the proceedings. He rejected the view that conspiratorial struggle against governments could result in the destruction of the power of the State; he believed that this could only be brought about by a genuinely popular struggle to destroy the economic system which gave the State its power and *raison d'être*, and argued that the primary role of anarchist revolutionaries was to organize among the working class.

The draft declaration of the 1881 London Congress which was finally adopted made some accommodation to Kropotkin's position, but stressed, above all, the importance of propaganda by deed and the study of bomb-making. Kropotkin remained critical of the positions adopted, although he never officially disassociated himself from propaganda by deed, he immediately set to work writing a series of articles for *Le Revolte* which elaborated on his own positions around the question of revolutionary action.

Kropotkin and the Unions

The last major section of Cahm's study should be of particular interest to anarcho-communists, as it reflects an important debate which continues to this day. It deals with the relationship between revolutionary anarchists of the period and the growing trade union movement, with a particular focus on Kropotkin's critical attitude toward unionism.

The revolutionary self-activity of the working class has always been a central feature of anarcho-communism. However, there has been some ambivalence towards the organized expression of this self-activity found within trade unions. The trade union movement, for all its potential for mobilizing the masses, has often tended to be moderate in its aims and hierarchical in its organization. Nonetheless, most of the early anarchists of the Jura Federation argued in favor of trade unions as an important means to build up working class power against capitalism through organized militancy and practical international solidarity. The one exception would be the Italian Federation, who, still favoring insurrectionary methods of struggle, declared trade unions to be 'a reactionary institution' and denounced partial strikes as 'diversionary activity'.

Despite Kropotkin's early enthusiasm for the radical workers' associations of the Swiss Jura, he held serious reservations about trade unionism in general, particularly the trade union movement which was beginning to emerge in England at the time. In a series of articles which appeared between May and July 1877 in the Jura Federation's *Bulletin* he insisted on the necessity for an organization of workers using revolutionary methods and imbued with revolutionary aims (that is, a total rejection of legal action and short-term aims), and argued against the parliamentary reformism associated with the English trade union movement.

It was not until the violent U.S. railway strike of 1877, which took a near insurrectionary character, that Kropotkin began to seriously consider the revolutionary potential of trade unionism. This increasingly sympathetic position was further reinforced when he visited Spain for six weeks in the summer of 1878. According to Max Nettlau, Kropotkin derived a new inspiration from his rediscovery of the revolutionary spirit of the old International in Spain which seemed to have disappeared from among the trade unionists in England, Belgium and the Jura¹¹. It was after his visit to Spain that Kropotkin began to urge a more clearly defined policy of revolutionary action — both inside and outside the trade unions — on the Jura Federation.

¹¹ *La Premiere Internationale en Espagne*, pp. 307–8

Around this period, Kropotkin wrote a series of articles in *Le Revolte* entitled 'L'organisation ouvrière' which were addressed specifically to the labor movement. These articles denounced legislative reforms (such as the ten hours bill) and the participation of French trade unions in the forthcoming elections, and insisted on the need to develop workers' organizations to wage a relentless war against capitalism. Although highly critical of the increasingly reformist direction of the French trade unions, Kropotkin was still optimistic about their revolutionary potential and fought hard against parliamentarianism in the labor movement. He saw the proliferation of strikes (which, by now, increasingly involved violent confrontations with the forces of the State) as a means both of developing the popular spirit of revolt and spreading anarchist ideas among the working class, and called for greater anarchist participation in trade unions so as to not become isolated from the labor movement.

He explained that "while the trade unions stuck to the illegal ground as prohibited organizations, and proceeded by strike and by force, they constituted a terrible power that the employers end up respecting. Once the unions had secured legal status and had abandoned revolutionary tactics the movement had turned into a fourth estate made up of an elite of labor which had become a mere attachment of the liberal bourgeoisie and which was content to limit its demands to the microscopic reforms contained in liberal party programs"¹².

A resolution about trade unions (which seems to reflect Kropotkin's ideas of this period) was passed at the Jura Federation's annual Congress of 1882 which stated: 'The Congress, recognizing the great utility of every workers' organization, declares solidarity with every strike and every struggle on the economic ground'. The previous preoccupation with trade union organization and the need to form more unions had now been replaced by a concern to radicalize the trade unions from within and to urge upon members the need to develop and intensify the anti-capitalist struggle through militant strike action.

Despite Kropotkin's preoccupation with trade union organization and militant strike action during the early 1880's, he firmly rejected the syndicalist view among many Jurassians, which considered trade unions as the basis of the new society. He was unwavering in his view that 'the Commune' (local urban and agricultural communities) would act as the basic unit in the future libertarian communist society, and disliked the vision of society narrowly based on workers' organizations. To this day, this is one of the main theoretical distinctions between anarcho-communism and anarcho-syndicalism.

Conclusion

Overall, Cahm's 'Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886' is an important contribution to the historical study of Peter Kropotkin and the impact he had on the revolutionary anarchist tradition during its most important period of development. By relying primarily on the anarchist press from this period (most notably, *Le Revolte*) and personal correspondence, Cahm is able to provide a more accurate study and analysis of Kropotkin's ideas — his contributions to anarcho-communist theory and overall revolutionary praxis — within their proper movement context. Cahm is a generally accessible writer, managing to cover fairly complex ideas and detailed history without falling victim to overly academic theoretical muddle or a dry list of dates and events. With that said, it is unfortunate that, do to its expensive cover price

¹² 'La Ligue et les Trade Unions', *Le Revolte*, October 1, 1881

(\$35!), 'Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism, 1872–1886' will not be widely read by Kropotkin's intended audience (the working class!) and will instead collect dust amongst the inactivity of privileged academic circles.

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