

Errico Malatesta

Anarchists, the War and Their Principles

1914–1931

THE ANARCHIST LIBRARY

Contents

| | |
|--|---|
| Anarchists Have Forgotten Their Principles (<i>Freedom</i> , November 1914) | 3 |
| Pro-Government Anarchists (<i>Freedom</i> , April 1916) | 5 |
| Peter Kropotkin — Recollections and Criticisms of an Old Friend (<i>Studi Sociali</i> April 15, 1931) | 7 |

Anarchists Have Forgotten Their Principles (*Freedom*, November 1914)

At the risk of passing as a simpleton, I confess that I would never have believed it possible that Socialists — even Social Democrats — would applaud and voluntarily take part, either on the side of the Germans or on the Allies, in a war like the one that is at present devastating Europe. But what is there to say when the same is done by Anarchists — not numerous, it is true, but having amongst them comrades whom we love and respect most?

It is said that the present situation shows the bankruptcy of “our formulas” — *i.e.*, of our principles — and that it will be necessary to revise them.

Generally speaking, every formula must be revised whenever it shows itself insufficient when coming into contact with fact; but it is not the case to-day, when the bankruptcy is not derived from the shortcoming of our formulas, but from the fact that these have been forgotten and betrayed.

Let us return to our principles.

I am not a “pacifist”. I fight, as we all do, for the triumph of peace and of fraternity amongst all human beings; but I know that a desire not to fight can only be fulfilled when neither side wants to, and that so long as men will be found who want to violate the liberties of others, it is incumbent on these others to defend themselves if they do not wish to be eternally beaten; and I also know that to attack is often the best, or the only, effective means of defending oneself. Besides, I think that the oppressed are always in a state of legitimate self-defense, and have always the right to attack the oppressors. I admit, therefore, that there are wars that are necessary, holy wars: and these are wars of liberation, such as are generally “civil wars” — *i.e.*, revolutions.

But what has the present war in common with human emancipation, which is our cause?

To-day we hear Socialists peak, just like any bourgeois, of “France,” or “Germany,” and of other political and national agglomerations — results of historical struggles — as of homogenous ethnographic units, each having its proper interests, aspirations, and mission, in opposition to the interests, aspirations and a mission of rival units. This may be true relatively, so long as the oppressed, and chiefly the workers, have no self-consciousness, fail to recognize the injustice of their oppressors. There is, then, the dominating class only that counts; and this class, owing to its desire to conserve and to enlarge its power, even its prejudices and its own ideas, may find it convenient to excite racial ambitions and hatred, and send its nation, its flock, against “foreign” countries, with a view to releasing them from their present oppressors, and submitting them to its own political economical domination.

But the mission of those who, like us, wish the end of all oppression and of all exploitation of man by man, is 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 the solidarity among all workers across the frontiers, as against any prejudice and any passion of either race or nationality.

And this we have always done. We have always preached that the workers of all countries are brothers, and that the enemy — the “foreigner” — is the exploiter, whether born near us or in a far-off country, whether speaking the same

language or any other. We have always chosen our friends, our companions-in-arms, as well as our enemies, because of the ideas they profess and of the position they occupy in the social struggle, and never for reasons of race or nationality. We have always fought against patriotism, which is a survival of the past, and serves well the interest of the oppressors; and we were proud of being internationalists, not only in words, but by the deep feelings of our souls.

And now that the most atrocious consequences of capitalist and State domination should indicate, even to the blind, that we were in the right, most of the Socialists and many Anarchists in the belligerent countries associate themselves with the Governments and the bourgeoisie of their respective countries, forgetting Socialism, the class struggle, international fraternity, and the rest.

What a downfall!

It is possible that the present events may have shown that national feelings are more alive, while feelings of international brotherhood are less rooted, than we thought; but this should be one more reason for intensifying, not abandoning, our antipatriotic propaganda. These events also show that in France, for example, religious sentiment is stronger, and the priests have a greater influence than we imagined. Is this a reason for our conversion to Roman Catholicism?

I understand that circumstances may arise owing to which the help of all is necessary for the general well-being: such as an epidemic, an earthquake, an invasion of barbarians, who kill and destroy all that comes under their hands. In such a case the class struggle, the differences of social standing must be forgotten, and common cause must be made against the common danger; but on the condition that these differences are forgotten on both sides. If any one is in prison during an earthquake, and there is a danger of his being crushed to death, it is our duty to save everybody, even the gaolers — on condition that the gaolers begin by opening the prison doors. But if the gaolers take all precautions for the safe custody of the prisoners during and after the catastrophe, it is then the duty of the prisoners towards themselves as well as towards their comrades in captivity to leave the gaolers to their troubles, and profit by the occasion to save themselves.

If, when foreign soldiers invade the *sacred soil of the Fatherland*, the privileged class were to renounce their privileges, and would act so that the “Fatherland” really became the common property of all the inhabitants, it would then be right that all should fight against the invaders. But if kings wish to remain kings, and the landlords wish to take care of *their* lands and of *their* houses, and the merchants wish to take care of *their* goods, and even sell them at a higher price, then the workers, the Socialists and Anarchists, should leave them to their own devices, while being themselves on the look-out for an opportunity to get rid of the oppressors inside the country, as well as of those coming from outside.

In all circumstances, it is the duty of the Socialists, and especially of the Anarchists, to do everything that can weaken the State and the capitalist class, and to take as the only guide to their conduct the interest of Socialism; or, if they are materially powerless to act efficaciously for their own cause, at least to refuse any voluntary help to the cause of the enemy, and stand aside to save at least their principles — which means to save the future.

* * *

All I have just said is theory, and perhaps it is accepted, in theory, by most of those who, in practice, do just the reverse. How, then, could it be applied to the present situation? What should we do, what should we wish, in the interests of our cause?

It is said, on this side of the Rhine, that the victory of the Allies would be the end of militarism, the triumph of civilization, international justice, etc. The same is said on the other side of the frontier about a German victory.

Personally, judging at their true value the “mad dog” of Berlin and the “old hangman” of Vienna, I have no greater confidence in the bloody Tsar, nor in the English diplomatists who oppress India, who betrayed Persia, who crushed the Boer Republics; nor in the French bourgeoisie, who massacred the natives of Morocco; nor in those of Belgium, who have allowed the Congo atrocities and have largely profited by them — and I only recall some of their misdeeds, taken at random, not to mention what all Governments and all capitalist classes do against the workers and the rebels in their own countries.

In my opinion, the victory of Germany would certainly mean the triumph of militarism and of reaction; but the triumph of the Allies would mean a Russo-English (*i.e.*, a knouto-capitalist) domination in Europe and in Asia, conscription and the development of the militarist spirit in England, and a Clerical and perhaps Monarchist reaction in France.

Besides, in my opinion, it is most probable that there will be no definite victory on either side. After a long war, an enormous loss of life and wealth, both sides being exhausted, some kind of peace will be patched up, leaving all questions open, thus preparing for a new war more murderous than the present.

The only hope is revolution; and as I think that it is from vanquished Germany that in all probability, owing to the present state of things, the revolution would break out, it is for this reason — and for this reason only — that I wish the defeat of Germany.

I may, of course, be mistaken in appreciating the true position. But what seems to be elementary and fundamental for all Socialists (Anarchists, or others) is that it is necessary to keep outside every kind of compromise with the Governments and the governing classes, so as to be able to profit by any opportunity that may present itself, and, in any case, to be able to restart and continue our revolutionary preparations and propaganda.

E. Malatesta

Pro-Government Anarchists (*Freedom*, April 1916)

A manifesto has just appeared, signed by Kropotkin, Grave, Malato, and a dozen other old comrades, in which, echoing the supporters of the Entente Governments who are demanding a fight to a finish and the crushing of Germany, they take their stand against any idea of “premature peace”.

The capitalist Press publishes, with natural satisfaction, extracts from the manifesto, and announces it as the work of “leaders of the International Anarchist Movement.”

Anarchists, almost all of whom have remained faithful to their convictions, owe it to themselves to protest against this attempt to implicate Anarchism in the continuance of a ferocious slaughter that has never held promise of any

benefit to the cause of Justice and Liberty, and which now shows itself to be absolutely barren and resultless even from the standpoint of the rulers on either side.

The good faith and good intentions of those who have signed the manifesto are beyond all question. But, however painful it may be to disagree with old friends who have rendered so many services to that which in the past was our common cause, one cannot — having regard to sincerity, and in the interest of our movement for emancipation — fail to dissociate oneself from comrades who consider themselves able to reconcile Anarchist ideas and co-operation with the Governments and capitalist classes of certain countries in their strife against the capitalists and Governments of certain other countries.

During the present war we have seen Republicans placing themselves at the service of kings, Socialists making common the cause with the ruling class, Labourists serving the interests of capitalists; but in reality all these people are, in varying degrees, Conservatives — believers in the mission of the State, and their hesitation can be understood when the only remedy lay in the destruction of every Governmental chain and the unloosing of the Social Revolution. But such hesitation is incomprehensible in the case of Anarchists.

We hold that the State is incapable of good. In the field of international as well as of individual relations it can only combat aggression by making itself the aggressor; it can only hinder crime by organising and committing still greater crime.

Even on the supposition — which is far from being the truth — that Germany alone was responsible for the present war, it is proved that, as long as governmental methods are adhered to, Germany can only be resisted by suppressing all liberty and reviving the power of all the forces of reaction. Except the popular Revolution, there is no other way of resisting the menace of a disciplined Army but to try and have a stronger and more disciplined Army; so that the sternest anti-militarists, if they are not Anarchists, and if they are afraid of the destruction of the State, are inevitably led to become ardent militarists.

In fact, in the problematical hope of crushing Prussian Militarism, they have renounced all the spirit and all the traditions of Liberty; they have Prussianised England and France; they have submitted themselves to Tsarism; they have restored the prestige of the tottering throne of Italy.

Can Anarchists accept this state of things for a single moment without renouncing all right to call themselves Anarchists? To me, even foreign domination suffered by force and leading to revolt, is preferable to domestic oppression meekly, almost gratefully, accepted, in the belief that by this means we are preserved from a greater evil.

It is useless to say that this is a question of an exceptional time, and that after having contributed to the victory of the Entente in “this war,” we shall return, each into his own camp, to the struggle for his own ideal.

If it is necessary to-day to work in harmony with the Government and the capitalist to defend ourselves against “the German menace,” it will be necessary afterwards, as well as during the war.

However great may be the defeat of the German Army — if it is true that it will be defeated — it will never be possible to prevent the German patriots thinking of, and preparing for, revenge; and the patriots of the other countries, very reasonably from their own point of view, will want to hold themselves in

readiness so that they may not again be taken unawares. This means that Prussian Militarism will become a permanent and regular institution in all countries.

What will then be said by the self-styled Anarchists who to-day desire the victory of one of the warring alliances? Will they go on calling themselves anti-militarists and preaching disarmament, refusal to do military service, and sabotage against National Defense, only to become, at the first threat of war, recruiting-sergeants for those Governments that they have attempted to disarm and paralyse?

It will be said that these things will come to an end when the German people have rid themselves of their tyrants and ceased to be a menace to Europe by destroying militarism in their own country. But, if that is the case, the Germans who think, and rightfully so, that English and French domination (to say nothing of Tsarist Russia) would be so more delightful to the Germans than German domination to the French and English, will desire first to wait for the Russians and the others to destroy their own militarism, and will meanwhile continue to increase their own country's Army.

And then, how long will the Revolution be delayed? How long Anarchy? Must we always wait for the others to begin?

The line of conduct for Anarchists is clearly marked out by the very logic of their aspirations.

The war ought to have been prevented by bringing about the Revolution, or at least by making the Government afraid of the Revolution. Either the strength or the skill necessary for this has been lacking.

Peace ought to be imposed by bringing about the Revolution, or at least by threatening to do so. To the present time, the strength or the skill is wanting.

Well! There is only one remedy: to do better in future. More than ever we must avoid compromise; deepen the chasm between capitalists and wage slaves, between rulers and ruled; preach expropriation of private property and the destruction of States as the only means of guaranteeing fraternity between the peoples and Justice and Liberty for all; and we must prepare to accomplish these things.

Meanwhile it seems to me that it is criminal to do anything that tends to prolong the war, that slaughters men destroys wealth, and hinders all resumption of the struggle for emancipation. It appears to me that preaching "war to the end" is really playing the game of the German rulers, who are deceiving their subjects and inflaming their ardor for fighting by persuading them that their opponents desire to crush and enslave the German people.

To-day, as ever, let this be our slogan: Down with Capitalists and Governments, all Capitalists and Governments!

Long live the peoples, all the peoples!

Errico Malatesta

Peter Kropotkin — Recollections and Criticisms of an Old Friend (*Studi Sociali* April 15, 1931)

Peter Kropotkin is without doubt one of those who have contributed perhaps more — perhaps more even than Bakunin and Elisee Reclus — to the elaboration

and propagation of anarchist ideas. And he has therefore well deserved the recognition and the admiration that all anarchists feel for him.

But in homage to the truth and in the greater interest of the cause, one must recognize that his activity has not all been wholly beneficial. It was not his fault; on the contrary, it was the very eminence of his qualities which gave rise to the ills I am proposing to discuss.

Naturally, Kropotkin being a mortal among mortals could not always avoid error and embrace the whole truth. One should have therefore profited by his invaluable contribution and continued the search which would lead to further advances. But his literary talents, the importance and volume of his output, his indefatigable activity, the prestige that came to him from his reputation as a great scientist, the fact that he had given up a highly privileged position to defend, at the cost of suffering and danger, the popular cause, and furthermore the fascination of his personality which held the attention of those who had the good fortune to meet him, all made him acquire a notoriety and an influence such that he appeared, and to a great extent he really was, the recognized master for most anarchists.

As a result of which, criticism was discouraged and the development of the anarchist idea was arrested. For many years, in spite of the inconcolastic and progressive spirit of anarchists, most of them so far as theory and propaganda were concerned, did no more than study and quote Kropotkin. To express oneself other than the way he did was considered by many comrades almost as heresy.

It would therefore be opportune to subject Kropotkin's teaching to close and critical analysis in order to separate that which is ever real and alive from that which was more recent thought and experience will have shown to be mistaken. A matter which would concern not only Kropotkin, for the errors that one can blame him for having committed were already being professed by anarchists before Kropotkin acquired his eminent place in the movement: he confirmed them and made them last by adding the weight of his talent and his prestige; but all us old militants, or almost all of us, have our share of responsibility.

* * *

In writing now about Kropotkin I do not intend to examine his teachings. I only wish to record a few impressions and recollections, which may I believe, serve to make better known his moral and intellectual stature as well as understanding more clearly his qualities and his faults.

But first of all I will say a few words which come from the heart because I cannot think of Kropotkin without being moved by the recollection of his immense goodness. I remember what he did in Geneva in the winter of 1879 to help a group of Italian refugees in dire straits, among them myself; I remember the small attentions, I would call maternal, which he bestowed on me when one night in London having been the victim on an accident I went and knocked on his door; I recall the innumerable kind actions towards all sorts of people; I remember the cordial atmosphere with which he was surrounded. Because he was a really good person, of that goodness which is almost unconscious and needs to relieve all suffering and be surrounded by smiles and happiness. One

would have in fact said that he was good without knowing it; in any case he didn't like one saying so, and he was offended when I wrote in an article on the occasion of his 70th birthday that his goodness was the first of his qualities. He would rather boast of his energy and courage — perhaps because these latter qualities had been developed in, and for, the struggle, whereas goodness was the spontaneous expression of his intimate nature.

* * *

I had the honour and good fortune of being for many years linked to Kropotkin by the warmest friendship.

We loved each other because we were inspired by the same passion, by the same hopes... and also by the same illusions.

Both of us were optimistic by temperament (I believe nevertheless that Kropotkin's optimism surpassed mine by a long chalk and possibly sprung from a different source) and we saw things with rose tinted spectacles — alas! Everything was too rosy — we then hoped, and it is more than fifty years ago, in a revolution to be made in the immediate future which was to have ushered in our ideal society. During these long years there were certainly periods of doubt and discouragement. I remember Kropotkin once telling me: My dear Errico, I fear we are alone, you and I, in believing a revolution to be near at hand". But they were passing moods; very soon confidence returned; we explained away the existing difficulties and the skepticism of the comrades and went on working and hoping.

Nevertheless it must not be imagined that on all questions we shared the same views. On the contrary, on many fundamentals we were far from being in agreement, and almost every time we met we would have noisy and heated discussions; but as Kropotkin always felt sure that right was on his side, and could not calmly suffer to be contradicted, and J, on the other hand, had great respect for his erudition and deep concern for his uncertain health, these discussions always ended by changing the subject to avoid undue excitement.

But this did not in any way harm the intimacy of our relationship, because we loved each other and because we collaborated for sentimental rather than intellectual reasons. Whatever may have been our differences of interpretation of the facts, of the arguments by which we justified our actions, in practice we wanted the same things and were motivated by the same intense feeling for freedom, justice and the being of all mankind. We could therefore get on together.

And in fact there was never serious disagreement between us until that day in 1914 when we were faced with a question of practical conduct of capital importance to both of us: that of the attitude to be adopted by anarchists to the War. On that occasion Kropotkin's old preferences for all that which is Russian and French were reawakened and exacerbated in him, and he declared himself an enthusiastic supporter of the *Entente*. He seemed to forget that he was an Internationalist, a socialist and an anarchist; he forgot what he himself had written only a short time before about the war that the Capitalists were preparing, and began expressing admiration for the worst Allied statesmen and Generals, and at the same time treated as cowards the anarchists who refused

to join the *Union Sacre*, regretting that his age and his poor health prevented him from taking up rifle and marching against the Germans. It was impossible therefore to see eye to eye: for me he was a truly pathological case. All the same it was one of the saddest, most painful moments of my life (and, I dare to suggest, for him too) when, after a more than acrimonious discussion, we parted like adversaries, almost as enemies.

Great was my sorrow at the loss of the friend and for the harm done to the cause as a result of the confusion that would be created among the comrades by his defection. But in spite of everything the love and esteem which I felt for the man were unimpaired, just as the hope that once the moment of euphoria had passed and their proper perspective, he would admit his mistake and return to the movement, the Kropotkin of old.

* * *

Kropotkin was at the same time a scientist and a social reformer. He was inspired by two passions: the desire for knowledge and the desire to act for the good of humanity, two noble passions which can be mutually useful and which one would like to see in all men, without being, for all this, one and the same thing. But Kropotkin was an eminently systematic personality and he wanted to explain everything with one principle, and reduce everything to unity and often, did so, in my opinion, at the expense of logic.

Thus he used science to support his social aspirations, because in his opinion, they were simply rigorous scientific deductions.

I have no special competence to judge Kropotkin as a scientist. I know that he had in his early youth rendered notable service to geography and geology, and I appreciate the great importance of his book on Mutual Aid, and I am convinced that with his vast culture and noble intelligence, could have made a greater contribution to the advancement of the sciences had his thoughts and activity not been absorbed in the social struggle. Nevertheless it seems to me that he lacked that something which goes to make a true man of science; the capacity to forget one's aspirations and preconceptions and observe facts with cold objectivity. He seemed to be to be what I would gladly call, a poet of science. By an original intuition, he might have succeeded in foreseeing new truths, but these truths would have needed to be verified by others with less, or no imagination, but who were better equipped with what is called the scientific spirit. Kropotkin was too passionate to be an accurate observer.

His normal procedure was to start with a hypothesis and then look for the facts that would confirm it — which may be a good method for discovering new things; but what happened, and quite unintentionally, was that he did not see the ones which invalidated his hypothesis.

He could not bring himself to admit a fact, and often not even consider it, if he had not first managed to explain it, that is to fit it into his system.

As an example I will recount an episode in which I played a part.

When I was in the Argentinean Pampas (in the years 1885 to 1889), I happened to read something about the experiments in hypnosis by the School of Nancy, which was new to me. I was very interested in the subject but had no opportunity at the time to find out more. When I was back again in Europe I

saw Kropotkin in London, and asked him if he could give me some information on hypnosis. Kropotkin flatly denied that there was any truth in it; that it was either all a fake or a question of hallucinations. Some time later I saw him again, and the conversation turned once more onto the subject. To my great surprise I found that his opinion had completely changed; hypnotic phenomena had become a subject of interest deserving to be studied. What had happened then? Had he learned new facts or had he had convincing proofs of those he had previously denied? Not at all. He had, quite simply, read in a book, by I don't know which German physiologist, a theory in the relationship between the two hemispheres of the brain which could serve to explain, well or badly, the phenomena of hypnosis.

In view of this mental predisposition which allowed him to accommodate things to suit himself in questions of pure science, in which there are no reasons why passion should obfuscate the intellect, one could foresee what would happen over those questions which intimately concerned his deepest wishes and his most cherished hopes.

* * *

Kropotkin adhered to the materialist philosophy that prevailed among scientists in the second half of the 19th century, the philosophy of Moleschott, Buchner, Vogt and others; and consequently his concept of the Universe was rigorously mechanistic.

According to his system, Will (a creative power whose source and nature we cannot comprehend, just as, likewise, we do not understand the nature and source of "matter" or of any of the other "first principles") — I was saying, Will which contributed much or little in determining the conduct of individuals — and of society, does not exist and is a mere illusion. All that has been, that is and will be, from the path of the stars to the birth and decline of a civilization, from the perfume of a rose to the smile on a mother's lips, from an earthquake to the thoughts of a Newton, from a tyrant's cruelty to a saint's goodness, everything had to, must, and will occur as a result of an inevitable sequence of causes and effects of mechanical origin, which leaves no possibility of variety. The illusion of Will is itself a mechanical fact.

Naturally if Will has no power, if everything is necessary and cannot be otherwise, then ideas of freedom, justice and responsibility have no meaning, and have no bearing on reality.

Thus logically all we can do is to contemplate what is happening in the world, with indifference, pleasure or pain, depending on one's personal feelings, without hope and without the possibility of changing anything.

* * *

So Kropotkin, who was very critical of the fatalism of the Marxists, was, himself the victim of mechanistic fatalism which is far more inhibiting.

But philosophy could not kill the powerful Will that was in Kropotkin. He was too strongly convinced of the truth of his system to abandon it or stand by

passively while others cast doubt on it; he was too passionate, and too desirous of liberty and justice to be halted by the difficulty of a logical contradiction, and give up the struggle. He got round the dilemma by introducing anarchism into his system and making it into a scientific truth.

He would seek confirmation for his view by maintaining that all recent discoveries in all the sciences, from astronomy right through to biology and sociology coincided in demonstrating always more clearly that anarchy is the form of social organization which is imposed by natural laws.

One could have pointed out that whatever are the conclusions that can be drawn from contemporary science, it was a fact that if new discoveries were to destroy present scientific beliefs, he would have remained an anarchist in spite of science, just as he was an anarchist in spite of logic. But Kropotkin would not have been able to admit the possibility of a conflict between science and his social aspirations and would have always thought up a means, no matter whether it was logical or not, to reconcile his mechanistic philosophy with his anarchism.

Thus, after having said that "anarchy is a concept of the Universe based on the mechanical interpretation of phenomena which embrace the whole of nature including the life of societies" (*I confess I have never succeeded in understanding what this might mean*) Kropotkin would forget his mechanistic concept as a matter of no importance, and throw himself into the struggle with the fire, enthusiasm and confidence of one who believes in the efficacy of his Will and who hopes by his activity to obtain or contribute to the achievement of the things he wants.

* * *

In point of fact Kropotkin's anarchism and communism were much more the consequence of his sensibility than of reason. In him the heart spoke first and then reason followed to justify and reinforce the impulses of the heart.

What constituted the true essence of his character was his love of mankind, the sympathy he had for the poor and the oppressed. He truly suffered for others, and found injustice intolerable even if it operated in his favour.

At the time when I frequented him in London, he earned his living by collaborating to scientific magazines and other publications, and lived in relatively comfortable circumstances; but he felt a kind of remorse at being better off than most manual workers and always seemed to want to excuse himself for the small comforts he could afford. He often said, when speaking of himself and of those in similar circumstances: "If we have been able to educate ourselves and develop our faculties; if we have access to intellectual satisfactions and live in not too bad material circumstances, it is because we have benefited, through and accident of rebirth, by the exploitation to which the workers are subjected; and therefore the struggle for the emancipation of the workers is a duty, a debt which we must repay."

It was for his love of justice, and as if by way of expiating the privileges that he had enjoyed, that he had given up his position, neglected his studies he so enjoyed, to devote himself to the education of the workers of St. Petersburg and the struggle against the despotism of the Tsars. Urged on by these same

feelings he had subsequently joined the International and accepted anarchist ideas. Finally, among the different interpretations of anarchism he chose and made his own the communist-anarchist program which, being based on solidarity and on love, goes beyond justice itself.

But as was obviously foreseeable, his philosophy was not without influence on the way he conceived the future and on the form the struggle for its achievement should take.

Since, according to his philosophy that which occurs must necessarily occur, so also the communist-anarchism he desired, must inevitably triumph as if by a law of Nature.

And this freed him from any doubt and removed all difficulties from his path. The bourgeois world was destined to crumble; it was already breaking up and revolutionary action only served to hasten the process.

His immense influence as a propagandist as well as stemming from his great talents, rested on the fact that he showed things to be so simple, so easy, so inevitable, that those who heard him speak or read his articles were immediately fired with enthusiasm.

Moral problems vanished because he attributed to the "people", the working masses, great abilities and all the virtues. With reason he praised the moral influence of work, but did not sufficiently clearly see the depressing and corrupting effects of misery and subjection. And he thought that it would be sufficient to abolish the capitalists' privileges and the rulers' power for all men immediately to start loving each other as brothers and to care for the interests of others as they would for their own.

In the same way he did not see the material difficulties, or he easily dismissed them. He had accepted the idea, widely held among the anarchists at the time, that the accumulated stocks of food and manufactured goods, were so abundant that for a long time to come it would not be necessary to worry about production; and he always declared that the immediate problem was one of consumption, that for the triumph of the revolution it was necessary to satisfy the needs of everyone immediately as well as abundantly, and that production would follow the rhythm of consumption. From this idea came that of "taking from the storehouses" ("presanel mucchio"), which he popularised and which is certainly the simplest way of conceiving communism and the most likely to please the masses, but which is also the most primitive, as well as truly utopian, way. And when he was made to observe that this accumulation of products could not possibly exist, because the bosses normally allow for the production of what they can sell at a profit, and that possibly at the beginning of a revolution it would be necessary to organize a system of rationing, and press for an intensification of production rather than call upon to help themselves from a storehouse which in the event would be nonexistent, Kropotkin set about studying the problem at first hand and arrived at the conclusion that in fact such abundance did not exist and that some countries were continually threatened by shortages. But he recovered by thinking of the great potentialities of agriculture aided by science. He took as examples the results obtained by a few cultivators and gifted agronomists over limited areas and drew the most encouraging conclusions, without thinking of the difficulties that would be put in the way by the ignorance and aversion of peasants to what is change, and in any case to the time that would be needed to achieve general acceptance of the new forms of cultivation and of distribution.

As always, Kropotkin saw things as he would have wished them to be and as we all hope they will be one day; he considered as existing or immediately realizable that which must be won through long and bitter struggle.

* * *

At bottom Kropotkin conceived nature as a kind of Providence, thanks to which there had to be harmony in all things, including human societies.

And this has led many anarchists to repeat that “*Anarchy is Natural Order*”, a phrase with an exquisite kropotkinian flavour.

If it is true that the law of Nature is Harmony, I suggest one would be entitled to ask why Nature has waited for anarchists to be born, and goes on waiting for them to triumph, in order to destroy the terrible and destructive conflicts from which mankind has already suffered.

Would one not be closer to the truth in saying that anarchy is the struggle, in human society, against the disharmonies of Nature?

* * *

I have stressed the two errors which, in my opinion, Kropotkin committed — his theory of fatalism and his excessive optimism, because I believe I have observed the harmful results they have produced on our movement.

There were comrades who took the fatalist theory — which they euphemistically referred to as determinism — seriously and as a result lost all revolutionary spirit. The revolution, they said, is not made; it will come when the time is ripe for it, and it is useless, unscientific and even ridiculous to try to provoke it. And armed with such sound reasons, they withdrew from the movement and went about their own business. But it would be wrong to believe that this was a convenient excuse to withdraw from the struggle. I have known many comrades of great courage and worth, who have exposed themselves to great dangers and who have sacrificed their freedom and even their lives in the name of anarchy while being convinced of the uselessness of their actions. They have acted out of disgust for present society, in a spirit of revenge, out of desperation, or the love of the grand gesture, but without thinking thereby of serving the cause of revolution, and consequently without selecting the target and the opportune moment, or without bothering to coordinate their action with that of others.

On the other hand, those who without troubling themselves with philosophy have wanted to work towards, and for, the revolution, have imagined the problems as much simpler than they are in reality, did not foresee the difficulties, and prepare for them... and because of this we have found ourselves impotent even when there was perhaps a chance of effective action.

May the errors of the past serve to teach us to do better in the future.

* * *

I have said what I had to say.

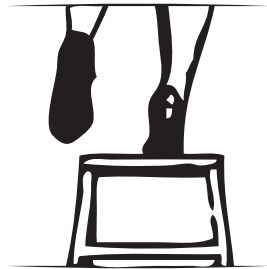
I do not think my strictures on him can diminish Kropotkin, the person, who remains, in spite of everything one of the shining lights of our movement.

If they are just, they will serve to show that no man is free from error, not even when he is gifted with the great intelligence and the generous heart of a Kropotkin.

In any case anarchists will always find in his writings a treasury of fertile ideas and in his life an example and an incentive in the struggle for all that is good.

THE ANARCHIST LIBRARY

October 17, 2009



Anti-Copyright.
<http://theanarchistlibrary.org>
Author: Errico Malatesta
Title: Anarchists, the War and Their
Principles
Publication date: 1914–1931

Retrieved on March 3rd from
http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/malatesta/ForgottenPrinciples.html
Articles from Freedom, November 1914, Freedom, April 1916, and Studi Sociali April 15,
1931