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Author(s): Ruth Kinna

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# Fields of Vision: Kropotkin and Revolutionary Change<sup>1</sup>

*Ruth Kinna*

The rise of a global anti-capitalist protest movement is widely regarded as a sign of anarchism's revival. For some, the protest movement's complex diversity points to inherently anarchistic principles of organization. As Naomi Klein argues, the movement has a "decentralized, non-hierarchical structure." Instead of "forming a pyramid ... with leaders up on top and followers down below," it "mirrors the organic, decentralised, interlinked pathways of the internet ... a network of hubs and spokes ... [of] hundreds, possibly thousands of 'affinity groups' ..." ("Vision"). Anarchist activists make a stronger claim: no matter how the protesters describe their affiliations, the movement as a whole is rightly regarded as anarchist. Anarchism, David Graeber argues, "is the heart of the movement, its soul; the source of most of what's new and hopeful about it" (61). Other grass-roots activists warmly endorse this contention, treating the global protest movement as the clearest and strongest assertion of practical anarchism since 1968. After the protest in Seattle—the movement's "coming out party" (Klein 81)—*Fifth Estate* led with the headline "Much More Than A Few Broken Windows." The mass direct action, the report continued "and the new alliances formed in the streets and across international borders mark a hopeful escalation in a newly forming and worldwide movement of resistance to corporate globalization and capital" (1). In a more general discussion of summit protests and networks, Andrew Flood has argued:

With the emergence of the summit protest movement into the public eye after J18 and Seattle, anarchism gained an influence way beyond what the numbers of anarchists and the level of anarchist organization might have led you to predict. Quite quickly in the English-speaking world, anarchism emerged from being a fairly obscure and historical critique of the left to become one of the main poles in the globalization movement. (online resource)

The resurgence of anarchism in the international anti-capitalist movement has excited renewed academic interest in anarchist ideas. Particular attention has been focused on the relationship between the protest movement and so-called post-anarchism: anarchism that

reworks the “classical” theory that animated the nineteenth-century anarchist movement through the lens of poststructuralism and/or postmodernism. In a recent examination of anarchist organization, Patrick Reedy argues that the contemporary relevance of anarchism derives from “its affinity with post-structural thought” (186). Valérie Fournier finds a similar link, positing a triadic relationship between anarchism, grass-roots protest, and a Deleuzian concept of “rhizomatic action.”

In post-anarchist camps the link between postanarchist theory and the global protest movement is often made in exclusionary terms, and the rise of the protest movement is said to highlight the out-modedness of classical anarchism. Jon Purkis and James Bowen argue that this brand of anarchism, (associated with a broad spectrum of thinkers including Michael Bakunin, Alexander Berkman, William Godwin, Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin, Erico Malatesta and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon) raises “issues and principles that ... are still worthy of debate” and which are of historic interest. But when it comes to political practice, classical anarchism is ripe for a “major overhaul” (“Twenty-First Century Anarchism” 3). In their view, the rise of mass anti-capitalist protest and the emergence of post-anarchist thinking mark a “paradigm shift” in anarchism (“Changing Anarchism” 2-5).

Post-anarchists theorize the apparent shift from classical anarchism in different ways. Todd May’s well-known poststructuralist critique is not so much a rejection of classical anarchism as a revival of the Nietzschean and Stirnerite currents of thought that he claims were wrongly marginalized in the historical tradition.<sup>2</sup> May’s argument turns on the conception of power. Mainstream classical anarchism, he argues, focuses too narrowly on the oppressive power of a single entity—the state—and wrongly conceptualizes liberation in terms of its removal or abolition. Though power is located in the state and the economy, this is not its only location, and in any case, power cannot be eradicated, only relocated or reassigned. It follows that radical action is best seen as a process of discovering new spaces for experimentation and expression rather than a quest for the state’s or capitalism’s “abolition.” May’s recommendation is

that we not look in those two places so as to blind ourselves about the ubiquity of power’s operation. If capitalism and the state were the sole culprits, then eliminating them would by itself open us up to a utopian society. But we ought to be leery of such simple solutions. One of the lessons of the struggles against racism, misogyny, prejudice against gays and lesbians, etc. is that power and oppression are not reducible to a single site or a single operation. (“Post-structuralist Anarchism”)

SubStance #113, Vol. 36, no. 2, 2007

Because classical anarchists mistakenly consider change as the removal of state power, May suggests that they also identify anarchy with a unique event—"the revolution"—and the organization of a particular and fixed set of arrangements: in Fournier's terms, they harness "'a' vision of 'a' better society" when they should instead be thinking about "'better states,' 'possible futures' and 'visions of alternatives'" (192). As May argues, this is a mistake: there is "no Archimedian point for change," no final goal or liberated condition. Radical anarchist action is about continuous challenge, the movement of diverse groups asserting their power in particular ways and "the practices through which we conduct our lives" ("Poststructuralist Anarchism").

Saul Newman arrives at similar conclusions from a different theoretical perspective, drawing on discourse analysis and psychoanalysis as well as poststructuralist thought. For Newman the problem of classical anarchism is that it is "an enlightenment-based radical political philosophy" that has at its heart "a dialectical relationship between freedom and authority." Nineteenth-century writers understood freedom as "an essential rational harmony ... disrupted by the operation of 'artificial' political authority." As a result, they believed that revolutionary action was about uncovering laws of "social essence" and "restoring harmony ... to social relations." Once the "truth" was revealed, political authority would be destroyed, effecting a "'return' to lost social fullness" ("Lacan" 300). Against this, Newman argues for a Lacanian "an-archic politics" that "distinguishes itself from classical anarchism." Bringing the theoretical turn back to the politics of the protest movement, he concludes that "what is broadly termed the 'anti-globalization' movement" is a "concrete example of ... an-archic politics" ("Lacan" 311). Like Purkis and Bowen, Newman sees a strong parallel between postanarchism and the global protest movement ("Interview").

The idea that classical anarchism is *politically* redundant—or largely irrelevant—because it is based on faulty theoretical premises is a common theme in post-anarchist writings. Lewis Call neatly summarizes the position:

Conventional anarchism relies too heavily upon categories that are politically and epistemologically suspect. These include scientific discourse, humanism and rationalist semiotics. As long as anarchists continue to employ this extremely suspect thinking it is extremely unlikely that they will be able to develop a revolutionary theory or praxis that will provide meaningful challenges either to capitalism or the state apparatus that sanctions that economic system. (qtd. in Nursey-Bray, 2)

This paper looks one “classical” anarchist text, Peter Kropotkin’s 1912 *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (“FFW”) in order to consider the postanarchist critique. I suggest that Kropotkin’s critique of capitalism and the theory of change are intermeshed in and through a theory of organization. As critics like May suggest, Kropotkin (1842-1921) believed it was possible to talk of “anarchy”—the order of statelessness—and argued that its realization hinged on the abolition of capitalism: his primary concern was to encourage workers and peasants to liberate themselves from exploitation and oppression. Moreover, as Newman suspects, his concern with capitalist injustice and state oppression encouraged him to argue that anarchy was the better social alternative. Yet he did not attempt to devise a model of an anarchist utopia or a blueprint for anarchy. Kropotkin delineated the parameters within which individuals and groups in anarchy might operate, all the while encouraging them to act for themselves: take local initiatives, engage in continuous, rebellious action, and carve out new spaces for anarchist exchange. Rather than being outmoded, Kropotkin’s proposals accommodated both dynamic change and diversity and are in many ways compatible with the kinds of political practices that postanarchists support. Indeed, his efforts to talk about the operation of anarchy are instructive. Armed with an idea of what it was he hoped to achieve, Kropotkin was in a good position to enter into meaningful dialogues with others about the purposes of their joint resistance.

### **The Argument of *Fields, Factories and Workshops***

Kropotkin’s book began life as a series of articles for the journal *The Nineteenth Century* and was first published in 1898. In it, as Colin Ward argues, Kropotkin addressed four issues:

Firstly he combated the idea that there were technical reasons for the tendency of industrial and agricultural organization in modern society to grow larger and larger ... Its second function ... was to cope with the problem posed by dependence on imported food which implies that a nation in revolt can be starved into submission. Its third function was to advocate the kind of dispersed production for local consumption which is appropriate to the kind of society he wanted, and its final purpose was to deny that the dehumanization of labor is the price we must pay for a modern industrial society’ (85).

Kropotkin placed an empirical argument that questioned the assumptions of classical economic theory at the heart of *Fields, Factories and Workshops*. Through this critique he endeavoured to show the

possibility of a revolutionary alternative to capitalism and provide a normative argument for its realization.

Kropotkin's critique of classical economics was wide-ranging, and he challenged virtually all of its basic premises, but Adam Smith was a special target in FFW (Knowles, 232-6). Kropotkin regarded Smith as the "father of political economy." His work, Kropotkin added, "has become an article of faith; and the whole economical history of the century ... has been ... an actual commentary upon it" (17). In other words, the operation of the liberal economic model was underwritten by the plausibility of Smith's work. And one of the central tenets of his economic theory, Kropotkin argued, was the division of labor.

When Kropotkin considered the practical implementation of Smith's idea, he identified a tension in the idea of division. This stemmed from two different ways in which the division encouraged specialization. Applied to production, Smith's theory subdivided laborers into sharply defined categories, separating agricultural from industrial workers and manual from "brain" workers. Within each unit of production, workers were further organized to perform highly specialized tasks: "making the spring of a penknife" pushing "the coal cart at a given spot of the mine" or, quoting Smith, "making the eighteenth part of a pin." In this context, the specialization that resulted from division referred only to the minuteness of the assigned tasks, not to any particular skill or capability. Indeed, organized by their particular tasks, industrial workers were alienated: they became "[m]ere servants to some machine ... mere flesh-and-bone parts of some immense machinery." And in contrast to earlier generations of artisans and laborers, they were incapable of understanding the machinery they operated, let alone of developing "knowledge of any handicraft" (18-19).

As a principle of international trade, the division of labor worked in a rather different way. In this context, specialization was linked to capability or capacity. For example, the theory taught that that "Hungary and Russia are predestined by nature to grow corn ... that Britain had to provide the world-market with cottons, iron goods, and coal; Belgium with woollen cloth" (20). It was irrelevant that some economies were transformed into manufacturing bases and others directed to monoculture; the idea of the international division of labor, Kropotkin argued, was that each nation and "within each nation, each region" would have its own particular speciality, linked to climate, natural resources, tradition and culture. Trade was predicated on the exchange of these specialized goods.

Kropotkin admitted that the division of labor had been a short-term economic success. It had boosted the economies of Britain and France, later stimulating the development of Germany, Russia, America and Japan. Yet the practical effects of the division of labor suggested to Kropotkin that the systems of production and trade it had stimulated were destined to collapse. The “present industrial system” he argued in words reminiscent of Marx, “bears in itself the germs of its proper ruin” (23). Why? Kropotkin’s answer was that the efficiency gains that resulted from specialization in the production process undercut the ability of any nation to specialize in the world economy. He elaborated this argument by examining the development of capitalism.

Kropotkin explained the rise of capitalism by a combination of socio-economic and geo-political factors. In part he linked capitalism to modernization: demographic growth, urbanization, the rise of the bourgeoisie and the application of scientific ideas to industrial technology. And he identified the period following the French Revolution as the period of “take off.” In the other part, he linked capitalism to the rise of the state. From this point of view, the origins of capitalism lay in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, when the balance of trade shifted northwards from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, advantaging the nascent states of northern Europe—particularly Holland and England—and diminishing the influence of the hitherto powerful Italian cities (79). This complex of causes convinced Kropotkin that capitalism was a naturally expansive force, driven both by the desire of capitalists to maximize profit, and by the eagerness of political rulers to harness the economic power generated by industrial development to secure and/or enhance their political position. Capitalists inevitably extended their methods of production and exchange across the globe, and states helped and in some cases encouraged them to do so. The interrelationship of economic and political elites could be deduced from statistical data. In the period 1810-1878, Kropotkin noted, British entrepreneurs had invested between £1.1 billion and £2 billion in foreign industries and loans, generating around £300 million in revenue (29; 421). Elsewhere he captured the relationship between the state and capitalism in the following formula:

... the *state of economical forces* brought into action is determined by the technical development of diverse nations at a certain time in their history; but the *use* that will be made of these forces depends entirely on the *degree of servitude* towards their Government to which populations have allowed themselves to be reduced.

... economists who continue to consider economic forces alone ... without taking into account *the ideology of the State*, or the forces that each State necessarily places at the service of the rich ... remain



completely outside the realities of the economic and social world.  
("Wars and Capitalism," 19-20)

To return to the division of labor, Kropotkin's analysis of capitalism suggested that specialization in the eighteenth century had led to an international division of labor that was based on a necessarily unstable balance of economic power. As the world market grew, developed economies aided successive waves of undeveloped states to establish domestic manufacturing bases and trading centres that operated on the same model, but in competition with their own. In other words, Kropotkin argued, the expansion of the capitalist market was at the same time "*the consecutive development of nations*" (49). Capitalists were unable to see the contradiction and, while keenly exporting their model of production, they clung to the futile hope that they could treat foreign markets as client nations. Governments, too, were blind to the limitations of the system and continued to support market expansion—notably through colonization—in an effort to secure political domination. Kropotkin admonished both. His response to prevailing Western European views of China captured his general position. Against capitalists who fantasized the conquest of this massive market, he argued that China "will never be a serious customer to Europe; and when she begins to feel a need for goods of European patterns, she will produce them herself" (75-6). His warning to European governments who keenly awaited an opportunity to develop spheres of influence in the Far East was that the expansion of trade was more likely to stimulate China's military development and domination than to allow Westerners a foothold in the region. This was the experience in Japan (60).

Kropotkin believed that there were significant inequalities between states, but the upshot of his analysis was that it was no longer possible for any state to secure "commercial or industrial hegemony" (79). His second conclusion, which followed from this, was that the collapse of Smith's international model pointed to the redundancy of the division of labor—both domestically and internationally. Modern production, Kropotkin argued, was tending towards "integration". Though work continued to be organized by the principles of division, in the international sphere, the division of labor had all but collapsed. As Kropotkin explained:

Industries of all kinds decentralise ... and everywhere a variety, an integrated variety of trades grows, instead of specialization ... Each nation becomes in its turn a manufacturing nation; and the time is not far off when each nation of Europe, as well as the United States, and even the most backward nations of Asia and America, will themselves manufacture nearly everything they are in need of (74-5).



Kropotkin's observations pointed to conclusions which, in some ways, dovetailed with those of the German Social Democrat, Eduard Bernstein (1850-1932). Indeed, Kropotkin was quite excited by Bernstein's revision of Marx's theory of concentration, which he began to publish in 1894. In parallel to the forces that encouraged the concentration of capital, Bernstein argued that there were others that encouraged small, private enterprises to flourish. Where Kropotkin parted company with Bernstein was in his estimation of growing prosperity of the workers under capitalism and the transformative potential of the economic trend. Bernstein believed that rising living standards and the pattern of economic development made socialist revolution virtually redundant. Socialism would emerge from within the body of civilization, and did not require the abolition of capitalism. For critics like the British social democrat, Ernest Belfort Bax (1854-1926), Bernstein's conclusion suggested that he had "lost sight of the ultimate object of the movement." Bernstein put a more positive spin on his position but admitted: "the movement was everything ... what is *normally* called the final goal of socialism was nothing" (5).

Like Bax, Kropotkin thought Bernstein's idea of evolution highly dubious—notwithstanding his commitment to a version of Darwinian theory, the theory of mutual aid.<sup>3</sup> The continued impoverishment of the masses and the principle of specialization in labor meant that social revolution—"a general and sudden reconstruction of the foundations of ... society"—was "absolutely necessary" ("Modern Science," 13). Another world was possible, but only if the shortcomings of Smith's system were exploited. Consequently, Kropotkin urged that the trends he observed in the international system be pushed to their furthest possible limit: the rejection of the international division of labor and the embrace of autarky through the close integration of agriculture and industry on a local level. Combined with the expropriation of property and the abolition of the division of labor in work, local self-sufficiency made the abandonment of the market in favor of an anarcho-communist system of distribution possible.<sup>4</sup> Kropotkin openly described his vision:

Have the factory and the workshop at the gates of your fields and gardens ... Not those large establishments ... but the countless variety of workshops and factories which are required to satisfy the infinite diversity of tastes ... Not those factories in which children lose all appearance of children ... but those airy and hygienic ... factories in which human life is of more account than machinery and the making of extra profits ... factories and workshops into which men, women and children will not be driven by hunger, but will be attracted by the desire of finding an activity suited to their tastes ... ("FFW" 417).

### Revolutionary Action

Kropotkin vented the full force of his anti-capitalism in a normative argument that ran alongside this empirical analysis of the division of labor. Long before he started to write FFW, he had condemned capitalism on the grounds that it was exploitative: it was based on uneven property rights, enforced through law, which enabled a privileged minority of owners to force the majority of propertyless workers and peasants to produce goods that would be sold for profit and indulgence. In FFW, Kropotkin advanced the same critique. Indeed, when he considered the effects of specialization in production he admitted that its characteristic features—"pitiless oppression, massacre of children, pauperism, and insecurity of life"—had more to do with "the present conditions of division into capitalists and laborers, into property-holders and masses living on uncertain wages" than with specialization *per se* (77). Yet specialization added considerably to the misery of the workers because it imposed artificial social barriers to learning, so raising "the contempt of manual labor to the height of a theory" (365). In international trade, too, Kropotkin argued that the division of labor exacerbated the problems posed by capitalism.<sup>5</sup> He focused on two particular phenomena: the movement of capital and under-consumption. On the first point he argued that where economies were geared towards international trade, capitalism drove down the wages and conditions of the most exploited workers and peasants. Capital, he argued, "knows no fatherland ... if high profits can be derived from the work of Indian coolies whose wages are only one-half of those of English workmen, or even less, capital will migrate to India ... " (57). On the second—under-consumption—he argued that the international division of labor was a source of economic instability. In the same period, the liberal theorist J. A. Hobson argued that domestic under-consumption explained movements of finance capital, providing a drive for imperialism. Kropotkin's understanding, which he derived from Proudhon, was different. His "scientific" view was "that a million workers who have produced ... all that is necessary for our consumption ... cannot buy those same products, for in their selling they compromise ... the profit of the master and the capitalist in general." Underconsumption, he argued, explained trade cycle fluctuations and capitalism's periodic depressions. Because of domestic under-consumption, "each nation produces more than it can purchase with the sum of salaries" ("Bellamy"). The result was the growth of the export market. Yet export-driven economies, Kropotkin argued, were in an analogous position to non-trading states like Switzerland: their ability

to sell goods abroad was as uncertain and variable as seasonal tourism ("FFW" 63). Once consumers found new suppliers (which they were bound to do when capital moved so freely), profits collapsed, wages plummeted, and consumption fell. The net result was mass unemployment and all its attendant miseries.

Kropotkin's argument suggested that the struggle against capitalism depended on finding a way to overcome the qualitative effects of the division of labor, as well as exploitation. It also suggested that there were strong reasons to find a solution to these problems. In his pamphlet *Wars and Capitalism*, he argued that the free development of capitalism would result in the expansion of state power and increased international tension. Indeed, the writing was already on the wall. Locked in a futile struggle for hegemony, great states had taken direct control of armament production. "[B]esides their own arsenals" they had established "huge private factories, where guns, armour-plates for ironclads of lesser size, shells, gunpowder, cartridges, etc. are manufactured." "Large sums of money," Kropotkin continued, "are spent by all States in the construction of these auxiliary factories, where the most skilled workmen and engineers are to be found gathered together, ready to fabricate engines of destruction on a great scale ..." (12). The tone of FFW was calmer but even here Kropotkin noted that the state's involvement in trade had led to the expansion of its public power. Germany in particular had begun to take a direct role in education in order to provide the reserves of "workmen and technologists endowed with ... superior technical and scientific education" necessary for the success of its armaments programmes (31).

There was no suggestion—as there was in Marx's theory of class struggle and inevitable capitalist collapse—that revolution would follow from the ruination of capitalist trade and the resulting growth of the state. On the contrary, as the international division of labor entered its death throes, it provided the dynamic for states to enter into direct and bloody conflicts. "The reason for modern war" Kropotkin claimed, "is always competition for markets and the right to exploit nations backward in industry" (*Wars and Capitalism*, 1). Specialization was supposed to provide a foundation for harmonious international relations. The consequences of its failure were terrible: unless there was a revolution it was likely to result in mutual extermination.

What was to be done? Kropotkin's answer was that local communities should take immediate and direct charge of their own well-being.

He had already sketched the plan for revolution elaborated in *Fields, Factories and Workshops* in *The Conquest of Bread* (1885). In this work, he had argued that revolutionary success depended on the ability of the popular

movement to sustain itself. Revolution was not a political event, even though the desire for change was driven by political demands. And revolutionary campaigns were not exclusively about popular insurrection and armed struggle—though both were necessary. Revolution was about challenging existing patterns of ownership and systems of control. While these challenges were likely to provoke violence, the development of alternatives would provide the necessities required to sustain revolutionary actions. Above all, Kropotkin argued, “it is bread that the Revolution needs!” (68). And the best way to provide it—and other necessities like shelter and clothes—was for individuals to take direct control of the land and the means of production by expropriation.

*Fields, Factories and Workshops* was based on the same logic, but was also informed by syndicalist ideas. Kropotkin warmed to syndicalism for two reasons. First, labor organizations—syndicates and trade unions—provided anarchists with an important point of contact with the mass of the oppressed.<sup>6</sup> Because they organized outside the framework of institutional politics, they provided an instrument for genuine revolutionary change, circumventing the state. In 1912 he wrote to the historian Max Nettlau that the “State phases which we are traversing now seems to be unavoidable.” However, by helping “the Labor Unions to enter into a temporary possession of the industrial concerns” anarchists would be providing “an effective means to check the State Nationalization” (“Correspondence”). The second reason that Kropotkin responded positively to syndicalism was because he believed that the revolutionary general strike dovetailed with the concept of revolution that he had developed in *The Conquest of Bread*. History, he argued in 1905, taught two lessons. The first was that revolution is possible. The second was that the general strike provided the springboard. It was the act that “would unite the workers ... and will put the great problem of *Work and Exploitation* before mankind in all its nudity, free of all political tinsel” (“Commune Meeting”).

Yet Kropotkin was not an anarcho-syndicalist. Though he warmly endorsed Emile Pataud’s and Emile Pouget’s imaginary account of the general strike, he argued that the scenario they painted was “not Anarchism” (xxxiv). One problem was that syndicalists tended to think of the strike as a simple downing of tools and an excuse for idleness, while the system miraculously collapsed. In contrast, Kropotkin argued:

We want the result of social revolution. We must also want the means to achieve it: revolutionary struggle and expropriation achieved through the revolutionary struggle. A strike is a declaration of war. But the war must follow the declaration without delay. Folded arms are not enough.

SubStance #113, Vol. 36, no. 2, 2007

The workers declare to the bourgeois: "We no longer wish to work for you." But a second declaration must necessarily follow this: "Nor do we want to starve to death and do nothing. That's why we're taking supplies wherever we find them, and we're immediately starting to produce more, *for ourselves, for the producers, only for those who come and work with us, at our sides!*" ("La Leçon" 12)<sup>7</sup>

The second problem was that when syndicalists decided to uncross their arms and begin the process of expropriation, they mistakenly represented what was only one aspect of revolutionary struggle as its totality. *Fields, Factories and Workshops* made up for this shortfall in anarcho-syndicalist thinking by providing a role for non-labor organizations. Workers would begin to construct the framework of the post-revolutionary economy in the heart of capitalism, as syndicalists proposed, but they would do so through a wide range of co-operative and communal bodies: "From the village, the township ... From individual, local action" ("Coming Revival"). Moreover, rather than just "getting rid of the drones and taking possession of the works" they would help exploit the growing trend towards integration to transform the economy ("Trade Unionism," 11). Writing at the turn of the century, Kropotkin argued:

We see growing more and more ... the attempt of the cities to organise such things as tramways, gas, the water supply and so on. It is a childish movement yet, and will remain so as long as it continues in the hands of governing bodies. But bring it to its logical conclusion, let it take its full development, and then the people themselves take possession of the land, of the city, of all its houses, of all the city contains, for the satisfaction of all needs of the population. ("Trade Unionism", 11)

In FFW Kropotkin argued that the small collective actions necessary to secure a revolution in ownership would also result in a transformation of the environment and the creation a new form of social living: the industrial village. By taking initiatives to provide for their own well-being, individuals—working collectively—would reject large-scale in favor of local production. Later anarcho-syndicalists imagined the integration of agriculture and industry through the industrialization of agriculture. Kropotkin's ideal was technologically sophisticated, reliant on the adoption of intensive farming methods (with which he became acquainted on his trips to the Channel Islands), mechanization and constant invention. But it had a more romantic flavor than some of these later plans: the garden city movement, he argued, was an indicator of the future (350).

### Evaluating *Fields, Factories and Workshops*

Economic conditions have changed markedly since Kropotkin published his book. Though many activists would endorse the basic relationship he posits between states and economic interests, they are more likely to be exercised by alienating effects of consumerism than the immorality of indulgence. There are, moreover, a whole set of issues that Kropotkin neither anticipated nor discussed: the rise of corporate power, media domination and the loss of the commons. Similarly, whereas Kropotkin identified competition for hegemony as the major cause of international instability, modern scholars and activists point to the rise of a new hegemony of the US as the most destabilizing and worrying development in world politics (“What is Globalization?”). Finally, alternatives to capitalism are now cast in rather different terms than Kropotkin’s. One of his concerns was to show that anarcho-communism was more efficient than the “anarchy” (= chaos) of the market, and that the abolition of capitalism would bring a significant reduction in necessary labor-time.<sup>8</sup> Though some modern anti-capitalists would endorse this very nineteenth-century concern with the expansion of leisure time, others would reject the work agenda altogether and still others would prioritize issues of sustainability and social ecology over the reduction of the working day (“Alternatives to Corporate Globalization”).

How does his work fare against the charges levelled by post-anarchists—that Kropotkin’s “classical” anarchism is outmoded and largely irrelevant to the global protest movement? Postanarchists might raise three objections to FFW. First, his understanding of the tendency towards integration is historicist. Second, it describes an idea of liberation that is narrowly class-based (turning on the desire to seize control of the means of production) and third, it wrongly counter-poses a critique of the capitalist state with a utopian vision of anarchy. FFW does not lend any of these claims unqualified support.

For critics like Saul Newman, perhaps the most worrying aspect of FFW is the suggestion that there is a detectable “tendency” toward integration. Does this mean that the struggle for anarchy was driven by an external logic? Newman answers affirmatively. The idea that history could be described as “the unfolding of a fundamental law” is characteristic of classical anarchism (“Postanarchism”). More particularly, in a reflection on *Ethics*, Kropotkin’s last, posthumously published book, Newman argues,

Kropotkin believed that there was a natural sociability to be found among both animals and humans, upon which free cooperation and



ethical action could be established. Therefore, the subject's struggle for freedom is determined by the dialectical unfolding of this rational truth, and the overcoming of the external limitations of political power and authority. ("Lacan" 300).

The answer Kropotkin provides in FFW is slightly different. Certainly, Kropotkin argued that individuals were sociable: this was a central belief he shared with Proudhon and Bakunin. He also argued that "integration" was rational and technologically possible. But he strongly rejected the idea that either followed an external logic such that behavior was shaped or guided by laws of development. In contrast to Marxists like Bax, Kropotkin explicitly disavowed the Hegelian metaphysical and teleological belief that "the intellectual and emotional life of man is unrolled "according to the inherent laws of the Spirit" ("Modern Science" 39). What he called "laws" of development were nothing more than generalizations based on observation and experience. As Kropotkin put the point in FFW: "mechanical invention comes before the discovery of the scientific law" (400). The tendency towards integration did not point to a particular "end" any more than does the observed tendency towards global warming—though the forecast of the former made the exploration of certain practical strategies possible.

Admittedly, Kropotkin talked in terms of "progress," and following Comte, understood history as a process of increasing rationalization. This idea lay behind his claim that there was a considerable overlap in the ideas and thought processes of disparate peoples.

Knowledge and invention, boldness of thought and enterprise, conquests of genius and improvements of social organization have become international growths; and no kind of progress—intellectual, industrial or social—can be kept within political boundaries ... Continually we learn that the same scientific discovery, or technical invention, has been made within a few days' distance, in countries a thousand miles apart; as if there were a kind of atmosphere which favours the germination of a given idea at a given moment. And such an atmosphere exists: steam, print and the common stock of knowledge have created it. (80-81)

Yet Kropotkin acknowledged that rationalization was not a guarantee of progress. It was entirely possible that the modern state would scuttle the chances of real development in dramatic and violent ways. This was one of the concerns that underpinned Kropotkin's critique of specialization. In capitalism the division of labor had deskilled the labor-force, enabling a minority of "brain" workers to develop ideas in the abstract, to speculate about laws of science and to shape the future in accordance with these abstractions. It had impeded the free flow of ideas, leaving workers and peasants alienated and subordinated to the organizational concepts defined by the few. The key to enchantment lay

SubStance #113, Vol. 36, no. 2, 2007



in the abolition of this division. Through integration, everyone would be able to exploit their creative genius to the full and so contribute to the development of knowledge in a way that capitalism and the state prevented. The power relations that threatened the calamitous collapse of capitalism in war would be avoided, and all would share equally in the determination of the future (392).

Postanarchists might still object that Kropotkin's analysis was based on shaky epistemological foundations: this is perhaps the thrust of Lewis Call's critique of science, and it underpins Newman's critique. But this argument misses the point, and reflects the tendency of postanarchists to bundle together a disparate set of writers in one artificial grouping, in a way that obscures important differences of thought, time, geography, culture and political argument. If Kropotkin's positivism implied a faulty fact-value distinction, his concern was not to insist on this distinction, but to re-inject socialism with a sense of purpose. In *FFW*, he tried to show that anarchist values and choices could and ought to be realized. His vision was one of limitless diversity. As he explained to Max Nettlau in 1895:

With the specific mode of action of anyone we have nothing whatever to do. Anarchists advocate the propagation of their ideas by all means that lead to that end, and everyone is the best judge of his own actions. No one is required to do anything that is against his inclination. Experience is in this as in other matters the best teacher, and the necessary experience can only be gained by entire freedom of action ...

Nothing is more contrary to the real spirit of Anarchy than uniformity and intolerance. Freedom of development implies difference of development, hence difference of ideas and actions. ("Notes")

Kropotkin's commitment to the view that—as Todd May puts it—there is “some central hinge about which political change could or should revolve” must also be qualified. The argument of *FFW* was to show how capitalist exploitation might be overcome. As Kropotkin argued in the conclusion to the book, the parameters of his analysis were set by his assumptions that “happiness ... can be found in the full and varied exercise of the different capacities of the human being, in work that need not be over-work, and in the consciousness that one is not endeavouring to base his own happiness upon the misery of others” (420). Yet Kropotkin did not suggest that the abolition of economic exploitation was a sufficient condition for liberation. Indeed, he criticized syndicalists for making this very mistake. Nor did he infer that capitalism was the only site of oppression, though his judgement was that it was the most important—a point he argued heatedly with the feminist Emma Goldman. The tendency towards integration would not provide a panacea for all ills.

Indeed, the framework set by the industrial village could not “guarantee happiness, because happiness depends as much ... upon the individual himself as upon his surroundings” (420).

The final charge, that Kropotkin wrongly believed the revolution described a single event, leading to the realization of a utopia, also seems wide of the mark. While Kropotkin’s understanding of the general strike suggested that there would be particular moments of revolutionary activity, more or less violent, one of the central arguments of *Fields, Factories and Workshops* was that anarchy described a complex and dynamic movement. It was not a matter of going to sleep in a statist system one night and waking up in utopia the next morning. Kropotkin believed that revolution was necessary, but it was work in progress as much as a cataclysmic event; and its success depended centrally on the extent to which individuals were able and/or willing to seize initiatives and act for themselves. Freeing themselves from the certainties of dialectical materialism was the first step.

These qualifications to Kropotkin’s position suggest that the theory of change and organization FFW describes is compatible with the practices of the global protest movement that postanarchists embrace. To conclude, I would also contend that Kropotkin’s work has something to contribute to modern activism.

The fundamental difference between Kropotkin’s view and the position adopted by alter-globalizers is that Kropotkin specifies the boundaries of united action, allowing diversity within it. Alter-globalizers have tended to reverse this relationship: there are no boundaries, but many movements. Modern writers would of course take issue with the possibility of evolutionary socialism and the concept of civilization, but this stance strangely echoes Bernstein’s revisionism. In the context of anti-capitalist debates, there are two implications. The first is that anti-capitalist protest is not so much about confronting capitalism, but about finding spaces for autonomous action within it. The second is that there is little need to discuss the purposes of action with other actors/activists and that all components of the movement are equally valuable. It would be wrong to suggest that these conclusions necessarily follow from the theoretical critique of “classical” anarchism. Nevertheless they are supported by the analyses of the anti-capitalist movement that postanarchists embrace. For example, writing in 2000, Naomi Klein admitted that “the mass protests ... were a hotchpotch of slogans and causes,” that it was “hard to decode the connections between Mumia’s incarceration and the fate of the sea turtle” or, indeed, “find

coherence in these large scale shows of strength." Still, she argued, it was a mistake to believe that the movement lacked and was in need of "vision" ("Vision").<sup>9</sup> Kropotkin would have disagreed. And his view that anti-capitalism was consistent with discussions of purpose dovetails with Bob Black's critique of traditional anarchism. In his anti-leftist critique Black writes:

"The struggle against oppression"—what a fine phrase! A circus tent—commodious enough to cover every leftist cause, however clownish, and the less relevant it is to the revolution of everyday life, the better. Free Mumia! Independence for East Timor! Medicines for Cuba! Ban land mines! Ban dirty books! Viva Chiapas! Legalize pot! Save the whales! Free Nelson Mandela! - no wait, they already did that, now he is a head of state and will any anarchist's life ever be the same? Everybody is welcome under the big top, on one condition: that he refrain from any and all critique of any and all of the others. You sign my petition and I'll sign yours ...

By maintaining the public image of a common struggle against oppression, leftists conceal, not only their actual fragmentation, incoherence and weakness, but—paradoxically—what they really do share: acquiescence in the essential elements of state/class society. Those who are content with the illusion of community are reluctant to risk losing its modest satisfactions, and maybe more, by going for the real thing. All the advanced industrialized democracies tolerate a leftist loyal opposition, which is only fair, since it tolerates them. ("Theses")

Klein's choice of "vision" or "movement" is surely based on a false dichotomy. As *Do or Die* argues, it is possible be clear about intentions without wishing to impose them on others:

... the most important thing we can do is to be more upfront about what we're for, and not just uncritically work with whoever says they're against the same things as us. Whatever words we choose, "our" movement has developed over the years into something that is anarchist ... communist ... and ecological ... Of course, there's diversity of opinion, but there are themes that we share or it wouldn't make sense to talk of a "movement" at all. These themes aren't things we should keep hidden behind vague slogans and only talk about in private. They're at the heart of what we're all about. ("Vampire Alert!")

*Fields, Factories and Workshops* provides precisely this kind of clarity. We might criticize or even reject Kropotkin's vision of anarchy—he would not have expected anything else. But in the discussion we might learn something tangible about diversity. Far from being outmoded, Kropotkin's approach might yet prove instructive.

Loughborough University, UK

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### Notes

1. I'd like to thank Dave Berry, Laurence Davis, Rob Knowles, Saul Newman and Alex Prichard for their thoughtful and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Additional thanks to Dave Berry for translating the French quote in the text.
2. See T. May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism*. Friedrich Nietzsche was critical of political anarchism (classifying the anarchist, like the Christian, as a decadent) but he found an audience with late nineteenth-century anarchists, particularly in France and the United States. His admirers included Emma Goldman who is often placed in the "classical" tradition by modern postanarchists. "Stirnerite" refers to the work of Max Stirner (Johann Caspar Schmidt), the target for Marx's ridicule as St. Max in *The German Ideology* and the author of *Einzig und sein Eigentum* (trans. as *The Ego and its Own*).
3. For a discussion of Kropotkin's understanding of Darwin and the theory of mutual aid, see R. Kinna, "Kropotkin's Theory of Mutual Aid in Historical Context," *International Review of Social History*, 40 (1995), 259-283.
4. For a discussion see Y. Oved, "The Future Society According to Kropotkin."
5. One of Kropotkin's complaints was that the individual rights that underpinned capitalism and the national rivalries promoted by the division of labor combined to inhibit the free flow of knowledge through the enforcement of intellectual property rights in copyright and patents.
6. Kropotkin's commitment to labor organization can be traced back to the 1870s, but it received a fillip in 1896 when the Second International voted to exclude anarchists—and other socialists who refused to accept the policy of political action—from its congresses. This move highlighted the potential isolation of the anarchists from the working mass. In the absence of any alternative, Kropotkin feared that the workers were likely to support the social democratic policy of electoral struggle as the best possible strategy for change. For a discussion see Martin A. Miller, *Kropotkin*, Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1976, 176-7.

7. "Nous voulons le résultat de la révolution sociale. Nous devons en vouloir le moyen: la lutte révolutionnaire, l'expropriation accomplie de fait. La grève, c'est la déclaration d'une guerre. Mais la guerre doit suivre la déclaration sans retard. Les bras croisés ne suffiraient pas.  
"Les travailleurs déclarent aux bourgeois: 'Nous ne voulons plus travailler pour vous.' Mais une seconde déclaration doit nécessairement suivre celle-ci: 'Nous ne tenons pas non plus à crever de faim les bras croisés. C'est pourquoi nous prenons les provisions, là où il y en a, et nous nous mettons sur-le-champ à en produire de nouvelles, pour nous-mêmes, qui travaillons, pour ceux-là seuls qui viendront travailler avec nous, à nos côtés!'"
8. Kropotkin considered that consumption patterns and production values would change in anarcho-communism. For example, in his foreward to *French Gardening*, he argued that growers would stop cultivating "early vegetables out of season" once they were liberated from profit motives. The use of modern horticultural methods and the spread of collective knowledge would thereafter increase yields and reduce "labor and the area required for growing that amount of produce" (ix).
9. The reference to Mumia is to the campaign to free Mumia Abu-Jamal, currently on death row having been convicted of the murder of a police officer in Philadelphia, 1981.