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Great Anarchists

By Ruth Kinna

I was involved in a conversation about nihilism the other day. I'd been asked to recommend some readings and I included Kropotkin's *Appeal to the Young* – a text I'm fond of – in the list. The other members of the group were less familiar with it and less taken with it, too. Readers found it old-fashioned, sentimental and full of gendered language. Where were the women in this text? Kropotkin's call to intellectuals – apparently to bridge social divisions – appeared to be grounded in a syrupy view of class relations, and reinforced conventions about domestic relationships, to boot. It expressed the views of a privileged white European male and was really part of a culture that should be unpicked and challenged. We could have quibbled about historical context, rhetoric, political motivations and interpretation, but however you explain Kropotkin's ideas, this was all fair comment.

Still, I was struck by the frustration and incomprehension that the *Appeal* seemed to have caused, at least in some members of the group. 'Old-fashioned' not only referred to the language – making the text testing to read – but also redundant, of no interest and devoid of contemporary resonances. What was the point struggling with the style, when there was nothing stimulating or useful that anyone could take from the essay?

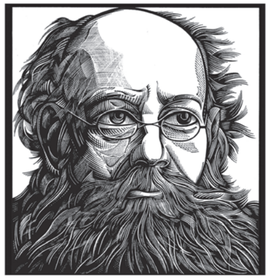
In the introduction to the first volume of her documentary history of Emma Goldman, Candice Falk observes that historians habitually ignored late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century anarchism, effectively purging it from official histories of the US. It was largely by dint of the anarchists' own efforts that a record of the traditions, ideas and cultures of the movement survived. Today, anarchists can thank two or three generations of historians for further bolstering the record and excavating a complex, multifaceted anarchist past. The collective effort has produced an extensive and growing body of material about the commitments and practices of a host of propagandists, and the circumstances in which they operated – their debates, passions, movements and experiences. There are lots of ways of engaging with it. We can mine it to shape policy, use it to uncover or recommend essential principles, or to advocate uniquely anarchist approaches or perspectives; we can pore over it to identify convergences with our preferences and positions and pinpoint strengths and short comings to build and re-build traditions. But whatever we do, we shouldn't just consign it to the dustbin or treat it as part of a movement politics that's dead and buried.

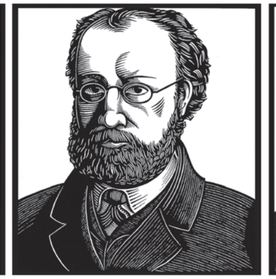
It's difficult to dispute the observation that times change. However you cut context, it's obviously true that the circumstances that Colin Ward found himself in during 1946, when the UK squatter movement started to gain momentum, was entirely different to the situation in 1976, when he produced *Housing: An Anarchist Approach*, or 1996 when George Monbiot helped set up the Pure Genius camp in Wandsworth. But part of Ward's brilliance was his ability to spot and explain political continuities over time and space. What was fifty years when the Digger and Leveller campaigns of 1646 still resonated?

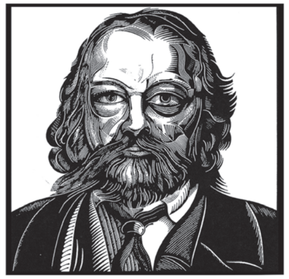
The move from the basic observation that we live in altered times to the formulation "that was then and this is now", the idea that activists should detach themselves from aspirations that appear outmoded, perhaps embarrassing, risks legislating on other people's convictions and behaviours and historicising the past in unhelpful ways. Once you decide that 'revolution', for example, is redundant, pointless or self-defeating, and that the proper response is to entirely re-ground critique, you not only narrow the frame of that concept, you universalise your perspective on the shift from past to present.

Rudolf Rocker's argument – which he took from William Godwin – that man [sic] is the measure of all things, rightly draws attention to the contribution that individuals have made to the construction of anarchist conventions and to the notion of 'greatness' that anarchists have typically adopted. The strong literary and oral tradition that nineteenth-century anarchists established usually revolved around the virtues and motivations of special characters, not the world historic shifts that Great Men of History were credited with. Bakunin was an early favourite – even with latter-day 'individualists' like Henry Seymour – because of his dispute with Marx. A plethora of sentimental, reverential commentaries habitually compared his honesty, verve and courage to Marx's Machiavellianism, frostiness and detachment. But there was no shortage of 'great anarchists' to celebrate. Kropotkin wrote about the selflessness of nihilist assassins in



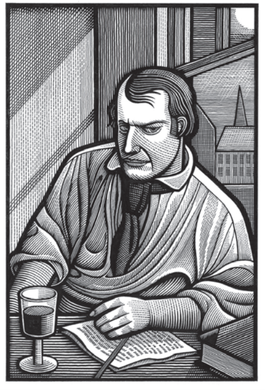












Russia. Charles Malato published pen portraits of their anarchist counterparts in France. Unable to find a comprehensive documentary history of feminist anarchism in the 1970s, Marian Leighton published studies of Louise Michel and Voltairine de Cleyre. The tone of her analysis differed markedly from the romantic nineteenth century commentaries. Lucy Parsons had described Michel's life as one "devoted to the interest of the working class; a life of self-abnegation, a life full of love, gentleness, tragedy, activity, sadness and kindness". Leighton provided a sharper psychological assessment alongside an analysis of the sanctification of women activists. Yet she similarly described Michel as a "prophetic type" whose behaviour exemplified her political beliefs, and she celebrated Michel's special ordinariness rather than her peculiar, muscular extraordinariness. Michel was a great anarchist because she modelled a general female experience rooted in mutual aid, empathy and care in revolutionary action.

Who counts as a great anarchist can never be firmly established. One of the strengths of anarchist politics is that it has no before or after 'science'. It's possible to identify foundational events but the interchange and exchange of anarchist and anarchistic theory and practice has no special pivot or anchor. As well as Louise Michel, Lucy Parsons included Florence Nightingale in the Famous Women of History series she published in The Liberator. Parsons didn't suggest that Nightingale was an anarchist, but she spotted a relationship between her and Michel. Nightingale had given up her class privilege and risked her life to help that "most stupid victim of our present system … the soldier". This was virtuous behaviour and it also hinted at an approach to solidarity and practical movement-building that Parsons was keen to explore.

The work of past anarchists won't give anyone answers, but it provides a rich store of ideas that has moulded a plural political tradition. There is no standard conception of democracy, violence, war, class or contractual obligation. While this makes anarchism complicated, it also makes it empowering. It seems odd to me that any movement that identifies even loosely with anarchism would detach itself from this store for fear of 'canonising' a literature, especially if that results in a turn to high philosophy or the importation of a set of generic practices detached from anarchist historical experience. Adaptation, modification, amendment is all good. But just being shy about the warts in anarchist history won't help advance anarchist thinking. The dismissal of an entire body of work and experience on the grounds that it's historically conditioned hardly helps, either. Everyone should be plucking anarchist tracts from the shelves. Most of them were written accessibly and for a mass audience. And if the style or language now jars, there should be plenty of commentaries and translations. The failure to make the anarchist back-catalogue available and intelligible to everyone interested in social transformation is a serious one.

Ruth Kinna is a professor of Political Theory at Loughborough University, working in the Department of Politics, History and International Relations where she specialises in political philosophy. Since 2007 she has been the editor of the journal Anarchist Studies.

Her most recent book is *The Government of No One: The Theory and Practice of Anarchism* (Pelican Books)