



Publishing anarchism: Pyotr Kropotkin and British print cultures, 1876–1917



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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the relationship between the famous anarchist geographer Pyotr Kropotkin and his most important British editors, John Scott Keltie and James Knowles. It analyses their unpublished correspondence, which has survived, for the most part, in the state archive of the Russian Federation. Drawing on recent literature on anarchist geographies, transnational anarchism and historical geographies of science, it examines the material construction of Kropotkin's works on mutual aid, decentralisation and 'scientific anarchism', which were originally published as articles for British periodicals. The paper argues that Kropotkin's acquaintance with liberal editors was not only a matter of necessity but a conscious strategy on his part to circulate political concepts outside activist milieus, thereby taking advantage of the public venues then available for geographers. In this way, Kropotkin succeeded in getting paid for working almost full-time as an anarchist propagandist. The paper also contributes to the wider field of critical, radical and anarchist geographies by providing early examples of knowledge struggles against creationism, Malthusianism and environmental determinisms which have lessons for the present.

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This paper explores the British publishing networks of the well-known anarchist geographer Pyotr Kropotkin (1842–1921), a Russian exile who spent a great part of his life and career in London. It uses primary sources to analyse Kropotkin's work for the British periodical press, in particular the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (first published in Edinburgh from 1768), *Statesman's Year Book* (published in London from 1864), *The Nineteenth Century* (London, 1877) and *Nature* (London, 1869). Indeed, although Kropotkin's papers for *The Nineteenth Century* constituted the bases for some of his most famous books, such as *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1898), *Mutual Aid* (1902), *Modern Science and Anarchism* (1903), *The Great French Revolution* (1909) and *Ethics* (1921), little attention has been paid to the material circumstances of these works' initial production. In order to do so, I analyse Kropotkin's unpublished correspondence with his main editors: James Thomas Knowles (1831–1908) and John Scott Keltie (1840–1927).

In recent years historical geographies of science have drawn increasingly on contextual readings, acknowledging the importance of places and material conditions for the production of

knowledge through its localisations, circulations and materialistic hermeneutics.¹ In this work scientific and political ideas are understood not as 'conjured out of thin air', but circulating through the world in ways which are conditioned by local situations. Understanding those contexts allows us to better understand how these ideas are different in different places.² In this paper I discuss the significance of such local, material conditions of life and work for Kropotkin's scientific and militant activities during his time in Western Europe (and mainly in Britain) from 1876 to 1917. My main argument is that collaboration with the British periodical press presented a set of opportunities to the Russian anarchist: it was simultaneously a way to secure an income, a means to participate in key political and geographical debates (such as those on evolutionism) and a method of spreading anarchist ideas to a wider

¹ D.N. Livingstone, *Putting Science in its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*, Chicago, 2003; D.N. Livingstone and C.W.J. Withers (Eds), *Geographies of Nineteenth-Century Science*, Chicago, 2011; S. Naylor, Historical geography: knowledge, in place and on the move, *Progress in Human Geography* 29 (2005) 626–634; J. Secord, Knowledge in transit, *Isis* 95 (2004) 654–672; R. Mayhew, Materialist hermeneutics, textuality and the history of geography: print spaces in British geography, *Journal of Historical Geography* 33 (2007) 466–488.

² D.N. Livingstone, *Dealing with Darwin: Place, Politics, and Rhetoric in Religious Engagements with Evolution*, Baltimore, 2014.

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audience. The collaboration with liberals such as Knowles and Keltie should be understood as a strategy deployed by Kropotkin and other anarchist geographers to make their ideas circulate in all possible ways at a time when geographers employed varied communication strategies to gain both scientific and public status.³ Thus, I argue that there is a continuity between Kropotkin as a scientist and Kropotkin as an anarchist, challenging biographies which have described a certain disconnectedness between the 'heroic' first part of Kropotkin's life – as explorer, militant and prisoner – and the second part, starting in 1886, as an intellectual comfortably settled in an English cottage, and therefore of less interest for militant histories.⁴ In this sense, the paper contributes to more recent Kropotkin scholarship which tries to address the contexts for his activities more carefully.⁵ The materials I analyse explain how more conventional geographical publishing helped him to succeed in being paid to work as a full-time anarchist propagandist, while Kropotkin's engagement with the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 shows that he never renounced direct political commitment.

Recent literature on anarchist geographies and their genealogies has shown that geography and anarchism share a number of methodological concerns in building critical views on spaces and societies.⁶ In this paper, I identify Kropotkin's works as 'anarchist geographies' at a time when this concept did not exist. I do so for two main reasons. First, although Kropotkin's books were not identified as geography at the time, they address topics that interest critical and radical geographers today.⁷ Second, the works of his that were labelled as (physical) geography, such as Kropotkin's papers for the *Geographical Journal*, which hardly mention anarchism explicitly at all, and have generally been deemed more 'conventional' by his biographers, did have political relevance for nineteenth-century debates on science and politics because Kropotkin, like other anarchist geographers, used them as a way of 'attacking religion'.⁸

In producing these works, Kropotkin's relationship with his editors was a compromise on his part motivated by both political and economic opportunities. This was a period in the history of the book characterised by an increasing commodification of knowledge with authors struggling to maintain editorial control of their texts.⁹ As I will show, from the 1870s Keltie wittingly acted as a sort of 'Trojan horse' for Kropotkin, the exposure of whose works to British publics was facilitated by his editor's personal acquaintance with the Russian geographer and their shared social networks. From the

1880s onwards, Knowles then became the principal orchestrator of Kropotkin's popularity among British publics, showing himself to be even cleverer than Keltie in sensing editorial opportunities.

To examine these relationships I draw on sources surviving in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) in Moscow, where unpublished letters received by Kropotkin from more than three thousand international correspondents have been the object of exploratory studies.¹⁰ I focus here on the folders containing more than a hundred letters from Knowles from 1882 to 1906 and almost four hundred from Keltie from 1877 to 1917. Kropotkin's answers survive only partially in Keltie's archives at the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) in London (less than hundred letters from 1882 to 1917) and in Knowles's archives in Westminster Library (only few letters from 1905 to 1906), making it sometimes difficult to reconstruct their exchanges in detail.

The first part of the paper explains the importance of the periodical press for disseminating the ideas of early anarchist geographers throughout the English-speaking world, drawing upon recent literature on both anarchist geographies and geographies of print culture. In the second section, I begin by examining the correspondence between Kropotkin and Keltie using the concept of sociability to highlight the importance of friendship and shared personal networks for launching Kropotkin's reputation in the British publishing world. I then analyse the contours of the publishing arrangements negotiated between Keltie and Kropotkin, and expose the ways in which these masked their political differences. The depth of these differences were only revealed when Kropotkin left England in 1917 and returned to Russia. The final part of the paper addresses the relationship between Kropotkin and Knowles, and shows how, while initially productive, it deteriorated to a point, with the first Russian revolution in 1905, when relations were broken off. However, before these impasses were reached Kropotkin had produced a remarkable array of 'anarchist geographies' through the liberal British periodical press.

Militant networks and publishing networks

In recent years, a rich interdisciplinary literature has addressed anarchism, past and present, as a transnational movement whose multilingual and multicultural characteristics were due mainly to many of its militants being politically persecuted exiles or economic migrants.¹¹ The group of anarchist geographers established in Switzerland during the exile of French militants and scholars such as Élisée Reclus (1830–1905), and other political refugees, such as Mikhail Dragomanov (1841–1895), Lev Mečnikov/Léon Metchnikoff (1838–1888) and Kropotkin himself, has been studied as an example of these transnational militant and intellectual networks.¹² London, where Kropotkin resided for decades, and where Reclus also often travelled, is considered as one of the main international hubs for transnational anarchism in the Age of Empire.¹³

³ C.W.J. Withers, Towards a history of geography in the public sphere, *History of Science* (1998) 45–78; C.W.J. Withers, D. Finnegan and R. Higgitt, Geography's other histories? Geography and science in the British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1831–1933, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31 (2006) 433–451.

⁴ I. Avakumović and G. Woodcock, *The Anarchist Prince: A Biographical Study of Peter Kropotkin*, New York, 1971; C. Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism: 1872–1886*, Cambridge, 1989; M. Miller, *Kropotkin*, Chicago, 1976.

⁵ M. Adams, *Kropotkin, Read and the Intellectual History of British Anarchism*, London, 2015; R. Kinna, *Kropotkin: Reviewing the Classical Anarchist Tradition*, Edinburgh, 2016.

⁶ S. Springer, A.J. Barker, G. Brown, A. Ince and J. Pickerill, Reanimating anarchist geographies: a new burst of colour, *Antipode* 44 (2012) 1591–1604; F. Ferretti, *Élisée Reclus, pour une Géographie Nouvelle*, Paris, 2014; S. Springer, *The Anarchist Roots of Geography: Toward Spatial Emancipation*, Minneapolis, 2016.

⁷ Considering Kropotkin's rediscovery in the 1970s, I would argue that these works had an influence on the development of contemporary geographies. See M.M. Breitbart, Impressions of an anarchist landscape, *Antipode* 7 (1975) 44–49; R. Peet, For Kropotkin, *Antipode* 7 (1975) 42–43.

⁸ M. Nettle, *Eliseo Reclus: Vida de un Sabio Justo y Rebelde*, volume 2, Barcelona, 1930, 49.

⁹ I. Keighren, C.W.J. Withers and B. Bell, *Travels into Print: Exploration, Writing, and Publishing with John Murray, 1773–1859*, Chicago, 2015.

¹⁰ F. Ferretti, The correspondence between Élisée Reclus and Pëtr Kropotkin as a source for the history of geography, *Journal of Historical Geography* 37 (2011) 216–222; D. Slatter, The correspondence of P.A. Kropotkin as historical source material, *Slavonic and East European Review* 72 (1994) 277–288.

¹¹ C. Bantman, *The French Anarchists in London, 1880–1914: Exile and Transnationalism in the First Globalisation*, Liverpool, 2013; S. Hirsch and L. Van der Walt (Eds), *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940*, Leiden and Boston, 2010; D. Turcato, Italian anarchism as a transnational movement, 1885–1915, *International Review of Social History* 52 (2007) 407–444.

¹² Ferretti, *Élisée Reclus*; P. Pelletier, *Géographie et Anarchie: Reclus, Kropotkine, Metchnikoff*, Paris, 2013.

¹³ Bantman, *The French Anarchists*; P. Di Paola, *The Knights Errant of Anarchy: London and the Italian Anarchist Diaspora (1880–1917)*, Liverpool, 2013.

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