

# INSURRECTIONS AND REVOLUTION

TRANSLATION BY PAUL SHARKEY

*In this article, which appeared in **Les Temps Nouveaux** (6<sup>th</sup> August 1910), Kropotkin stresses the need for local revolts as part of a revolution. He is clear that revolutions are not overnight events but rather a revolutionary process which can take years to blossom from their initial stirrings.*

IF THE REVOLUTION IS EVER TO BE FEASIBLE, LOCAL INSURRECTIONS ARE called for. Indeed, huge numbers of them. Towns and agricultural regions must also have a tradition of insurrections.

Even when a revolution is under way, as was the case in Russia in 1905, the series of insurrections in the towns and above all peasant uprisings must continue—the latter across great swathes of territory—so that the Revolution has time to grow and the reaction is prevented from marshalling its forces.

The whole of history is there for proof. And if the careerist leaders of the proletarian movement today—be they intellectuals or workers—preach the opposite, it is because they want no truck with revolution at all. *They fear it.* The people taken to the streets frightens them and they despise it, every bit as much as the bourgeois back in 1789 despised the pike-men [the *sans-culottes*].

Well, in the absence of such insurrections, of a whole chain of insurrections, revolution might never be within the bounds of possibility.

Which is understandable. For revolution to come to pass, discontent and the yearning to have done with oppression have to grow and spread to

large segments of the masses—the only ones from whom revolutionary *action* emanates. And once that discontent and that yearning are in place, local disturbances become inevitable. Nothing can stop them.

And let us not listen to talk of their being futile. That is a lie. Have there ever been *futile* insurrections? Isn't the recent uprising in Barcelona yet further proof to be added to the thousand others already provided by history?<sup>284</sup>

Didn't it take the transformation of the people's hatred of priestly rule into acts of violence, the burning of monasteries, and the entire intelligentsia of Europe bristling with outrage at [Francisco] Ferrer's cowardly murderers—before the first few and very timid steps were made in Spain towards liberation from Rome's yoke?

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When bourgeois and labour politicians denounce popular insurrections under another pretext, that they are *mindless* [*inconscient*]<sup>284</sup>—let us be clear about this once and for all: it is because they find nothing so repugnant as the people armed and in the streets. Monarchies and their comical coronation rites, the ignorance perpetuated by the clergy and the exploitation upheld by the capitalist, the famine in the countryside, the shootings, the mass hangings, the rampages of the White Terror—the politicians have no problems stomaching any of that! We need cast our minds no further back than the White Terror in France during the Bourbon restoration, the Blue Terror in the wake of 1848 and 1871, and the Black Terror in Russia since 1907.

They were able to stomach all of that wonderfully well, because there is something they hate much more than all the furies of the reaction: namely, the woollen cap and pike of 1789, the proletarian's red flag, the sickle strapped by the peasant to the end of a stick as a makeshift pike, or, worse still, the expropriations carried out in orderly and systematic fashion, almost like some religious act, by the Russian peasants' communes in 1904.

It is with the intention of imparting their hatred of popular unrest to revolutionaries emerging from the workers' ranks that they are now whispering these jesuitical—these treacherous—words into their ears: "Give a wide berth to *mindless* disturbances [*mouvements inconscient*]!" They are now trying to emasculate [*sic*] the revolutionary proletarians of the Latin countries

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284 The Tragic Week (or *Semana Trágica*), taking place between 25<sup>th</sup> July and 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1909, was an uprising of the working classes of Barcelona and other cities of Catalonia (Spain), bloodily put down by the Spanish army. It began as a general strike called by the syndicalist *Solidaridad Obrera* union federation and was caused by the calling-up of reserve troops by the Prime Minister to be sent as reinforcements when Spain renewed military-colonial activity in Morocco (the Second Rif War). The revolt was used as an excuse by the Spanish State to judicially murder libertarian educator Francisco Ferrer. (Editor)

by using that watchword, which has done such a fine job of bringing the German workers to heel.

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And who has done more to spread among the workers a clear, thought-out, concrete consciousness [*conscience*] of the communist-anarchist goal that needs to be posed ahead of the coming revolution than we anarchists have? Who, ever since Bakunin, has worked harder than the anarchist faction of the International to awaken in the working class—not just an intelligent consciousness [*conscience intelligente*] of the goal to be achieved, but also a knowledge of the historical, economic, moral and other factors making that goal desirable and attainable? And who has been more insistent than us that the bourgeoisie is always going to have the upper hand until such time as the workers are sure of what they want to obtain from the coming revolution?

But precisely because we are well aware of our purpose and know that it cannot be achieved in a single day,—we speak out against jesuitical misuse of the word *mindless* [*inconscient*] as applied to insurrections.

Precisely because we know that an *uprising* may well topple and change a government in one day, whereas a *revolution*, if it is to achieve a tangible outcome—a serious, lasting change in the distribution of economic forces—*takes three or four years of revolutionary upheaval*—for that very reason, we say to the workers:

The first uprisings of a revolution *cannot* be mounted with the notion of carrying out the wide-ranging and far reaching changes that only a revolution can effect, *once it has had time to ripen*.

The initial disturbances can have no purpose other than to weaken the machinery of government: to stop it, to damage it, and render it powerless, thereby creating an opening for subsequent developments in the upheaval.

Take the Paris Commune of 1871. [Eugène] Varlin was perfectly right to charge for the Hôtel de Ville [Town Hall] together with his battalion comrades at the first whisper of the 18<sup>th</sup> March insurrection. Was he supposed to have waited, as ordered by Engels and Marx from London, for the rising to proclaim its communist principles!!!

The revolutionaries of Paris were perfectly right to throw themselves into that rising, even though many of those with rifles slung over their shoulders certainly had no idea of the communistic turn that the *communalist* republican rising *might* subsequently take—a rising upon which they had embarked in order to ensure the independence of Paris, but which might well have run deeper, had it lasted.

They understood that, in accordance with the revolutionary propaganda that they had been mounting against the established regime, they had a duty to throw themselves into an insurrectionary movement against that system. The people had taken to the streets, having risen up against the very same Thiers, Ferry and the whole gang of opportunistic bourgeois whom they had

so often attacked before. Was it not their duty to stand with the people—and to embark with them upon the task of demolition?

Where they went wrong was that *they too* were not communist enough to push forward the economic reconstruction of society. And then they let themselves be hoisted into the Commune's government. It was not, as has so often been claimed in our ranks, in allowing the setting up of a Commune government. It was beyond their capability to prevent that,—given the authoritarian bent in the minds of the day. Their offence was that *they* let themselves be hoisted into power, let themselves be locked into a government alongside the likes of Félix Pyat<sup>285</sup> and all the bourgeois who were hostile toward a people's economic revolution. Their duty was to remain on the streets, in their own districts, with the people—as propagandists and organisers of the de facto equality that they all craved: joining in with the people as they looked to their food and their livelihoods and the city's defences; living alongside the poor, getting impassioned about *their* everyday issues, their interests, and rebuilding, in the sections, the life of society with them; *against* the Commune's government, obviously, which represented the Jacobin, Robespierist, anti-communist bourgeoisie.

There is every chance, every likelihood, indeed, that one third of France being overrun by the Germans, the Commune's rebellion, launched in the immediate aftermath of a disastrous war, might have been defeated all the same. That was the danger—the inescapable fate, one might say—of every revolutionary upheaval that erupts after a luckless war—a danger that would not have arisen had revolutionaries made it their business, from 1869 onwards, to push forward a movement against the Empire, which was already falling apart.

However, despite being defeated, the Commune might at least have bequeathed to posterity the notion of a communist revolution in addition to a communalist or cantonalist revolution.

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In any case, were we to wait for the Revolution to display an openly communist or indeed collectivist character right from its initial insurrections, that would be tantamount to throwing the idea of Revolution overboard

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285 Félix Pyat (1810–1889) was a French Jacobin-Socialist journalist and politician. A participant in the 1848 revolution, he fought a duel with Proudhon, who had called him the aristocrat of democracy. He joined Ledru-Rollin in the attempted insurrection of 13<sup>th</sup> June 1849 and after its failure went into exile. He returned to France after the deposing of Napoleon III. During the Paris Commune, he joined the Committee of Public Safety and was blamed for the loss of the Fort of Issy. He escaped the vengeance of the Versailles government and went again into exile. He was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in March 1888 and took his seat on the extreme Left. (Editor)

once and for all. For that to be a possibility, it would require that a large majority be already in agreement upon effecting a communist change, which is generally not the case, since it is primarily the turns taken by a revolution that can draw the masses over to communism, just as they did in 1793.<sup>286</sup> This is what our bourgeois and worker careerists are afraid of. They understand that a popular revolution, were it to last, would bring the people over to communism. They know that the initial popular insurrections would rattle the government. But then that would bring the people—“undisciplined” proletarians—on to the streets and these would soon be demanding “de facto equality.” And, were that period of “anarchy” to last, communist ideas would, of necessity, become more sharply defined and would embed themselves during the upheaval as lessons taught by actual experience.

And that is precisely what they do not want! Minor adjustments to the present exploitation, a few concessions granted here and there by the exploiters, that is all they require. “Later, we shall see,” they say. They have time to wait and see! Oh no! Even should it fall to revolutionaries to perish in the initial popular uprisings, they have a duty not to stand aloof from them. If they cherish the purpose that their intellect and expertise have devised, they will be among the people—with the peasant insurgents in the countryside and with the proletarians in the towns.

Only after having shaken the government and the State to their deepest foundations will anarchist-communist ideas make their way into the masses and crystallise there. So—once the first obstacles erected by organised force have been swept aside—only then will life come along and raise the major issues of economic equality and suggest how these might be resolved. Only then will minds emboldened by events be able to commit themselves bravely to the destruction of old forms and to the construction of new forms of social life.

Only then will the Revolution that will embody our aspirations and live up to our wishes be able to blossom.

So let us miss no opportunity to volunteer our services to the people in its uprisings, so as to pave the way for that revolution. Let us help them to take their first few steps! And away with the hypnotisers [*les endormeurs*]<sup>287</sup>.

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286 Kropotkin discusses the activists and ideas of these “Anarchists” (as they were labeled by their enemies) in his classic history *The Great French Revolution* and well as the article “Anarchists in the French Revolution” in *Freedom* (December 1903 and January 1904). (Editor)

287 Kropotkin is referring to those who seek to beguile, smooth-talk or otherwise pacify the working class with hopes of change by means of reforms legislated by politicians rather than, as anarchists argued, by direct action and economic self-organisation. It should be noted that in June–July 1869, shortly after joining the *International Working Men’s Association*, Bakunin wrote a series of articles for the Swiss newspaper *L’Égalité* on this issue entitled “Les endormeurs” (“The Hypnotizers,” *The Basic Bakunin: Writings, 1869–1871*, [Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1992], Robert M. Cutler [ed.]). (Editor)

