

This letter, originally written in French, is from a collection of letters that Kropotkin wrote to Marie Goldsmith between 1897 and 1917. This letter appears on pages 510-513. I have included the original notes and translated them from the French. Translated by Christopher Coquard.

It is composed of two letters – the 23<sup>rd</sup> and the 24<sup>th</sup> February 1916. I have divided them in the text.

Confino, M. (1995). *Anarchistes en exil: Correspondance inédite de Pierre Kropotkine à Marie Goldsmith (1897-1919)*. IRENISE et Institut d'études slaves, Paris, France. ISBN : 0765-0213; ISBN : 2-7204-0217-6

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9 Chesham Street  
Brighton  
February 23, 1916

My very dear friend,

Do not be surprised to receive this letter in French. I cut my finger a little, and it is easier for me to write in French without having to change the Latin characters on my typewriter.

I just received your letter dated the 19<sup>th</sup>, and I have to admit that I do not completely understand the distinction you make between what is true in practice and what is true in theory. I know that is said quite often, but I have never been able to accept this distinction.<sup>1</sup> If what is affirmed in theory is not confirmed in practice, that means the theory is incomplete. It did not express the conditions in which the principle being affirmed is true.

In the 1860's we spent a lot of time on the flying machine, which was heavier than air. 'But it's impossible,' said the Academy basing itself on the calculations of Poisson. 'It has been proven,' they said, 'that to reach that specific height, the eagle uses a certain amount of horse-power. So never can any machine that has the equivalent of the weight of the Eagle's muscle's produce the amount of energy required.' But experiences proved the opposite. And so the Academy recognized that Poisson, in his formulas, did not take one thing into consideration: the air, under the wings, is not displaced in its mass, it is condensed under the wing, it produces energy, it helps to keep the eagle in flight.

All discussions between 'theory' and 'practice' are there. The theory was not incorrect. It was incomplete.

'The people are brothers, the tyrants are enemies,' said the theoreticians of socialism in 1848, and they developed an excellent theory. But they omitted the case where the tyrants and the people make common cause, in which case they should have said: 'The people would be brothers if they didn't follow their tyrants that render them enemies to each other.'

The International – the first one, the true one – understood this omission<sup>2</sup>. They also proclaimed the *independence of nations* and the revolt of oppressed nations against the people that oppress them while obeying their tyrants. It is in proclaiming *the duty* of all the free nations to help the Polish people, who had an insurrection in 1863, to rid themselves of the yoke of

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'affirmation' was crossed out.

<sup>2</sup> The word 'error' was crossed out.

autocratic Russia, supported by its people in this crime of oppression, this was the context in which the International was founded. The International did not declare itself cosmopolitan. It proclaimed the right of each nation to develop itself freely as it saw fit, its right to revolt against those who refused them this right, and *the duty* of all the workers to unite and *to revolt against all attempts of oppression of one nationality by another*. Therefore, Bakunin, in 1871, told the *German* workers that it was their duty to revolt against their government which wanted to conquer parts of France. But Bakunin and his friends, having known that the German people would not listen, made calls to all the revolutionaries of each nation to defend France against its invaders. And when all the members of the International in Paris held out their hands to the Blanquists and gave their support to the flag of the Commune, it was in the hope of chasing the Germans from France with the effort of the Communes in revolt. They understood that, in the case of success, it was the true, the only way to spark the social revolution, or, at least, to take its first steps.

It is also why we saw, in 1877, some 'Bakunists' and two intimate friends of Bakunin threw themselves, one group into the Balkan peninsula to support the insurrection in Herzégovine against the Turkish yoke, and the others to support this cause in the *Bulletin de la Fédération Juraissienne*. Later on, in 1881, one of them threw himself again, in Alexandria, to support the insurrection of Arabi Pancha for the independence of Egypt<sup>3</sup>. It is also for this reason that our publications have heroically struggled for the independence of Ireland, the Boers, the Caucus, Poland, Finland, without letting themselves be indoctrinated by those who said that the efforts of the workers must be dedicated to the 'conquest of power' by their class.

Here theory and practice walk hand in hand<sup>4</sup>. How can they be separated?

Throughout history we see nations conquering for the economic exploitation of other nations. Persia, Greece, Rome did only that. It is to have a rich bounty, to impose heavy tributes and to impose slavery that the Persians, Macedonians, Romans – especially the Romans – made their wars and their conquests.

And in these conquests it was not only the governing and superior classes (the military, the merchants) that profited. The mass of the people profited as well for a certain time. It sufficed to belong to the conquering nation to profit materially, even though they lost their liberty and in the end the conquering nation fell into decadence. We only have to look to the Roman plebs<sup>5</sup> during the era of the Caesars.

And indeed, the socialists during the 1840's, and even under the reign of Napoleon the 3<sup>rd</sup>, knew this and they did not shy away from talking about it. It is only in the last 30 or 40 years that is forgotten in the socialist propaganda<sup>6</sup>. Ever since we have tried to get the workers votes for the conquest of power (within the capitalist system) we don't ever dare say, in my opinion, to the workers: *'You see, you also allow yourselves to be taken by the Capitalist gangrene. Now only to see how many amongst you only want to exploit those of your neighbours less advanced in*

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<sup>3</sup> The last two paragraphs of this letter are cited (with sources) in the Russian translation by Marc Pierrot in a short article 'P.A. Kropotkin u vijna', *Int, sbornik*, pp. 164-165.

<sup>4</sup> Kropotkin crossed out the phrase: *'There is without doubt theoreticians that badly explain their ideas, and this is what happened with the socialists.'*

<sup>5</sup> The Plebs were conquered, non-Roman people who were granted certain rights and privileges after conquest. They benefitted marginally from the conquest of the Romans in their respective countries.

<sup>6</sup> The words *'from the extreme orient'* were crossed out.

*industry. How many amongst you wants to make the fried menus of the colonial bureaucrats, how many aspire to take privileged positions in different jobs in Africa, in Asia, or even in the more backward countries of Europe.'*

But this happens with much more intensity than it creates, with a shocking rapidity, a whole series of jobs are created that are branches of the state administration: railroads, mines, lines of communication, teaching, state printing facilities, war materials, etc. All those who aspire to be beneficiaries of the state, and how many workers dream of being foremen before, and entrepreneurs afterwards in the conquered countries, either by the army, or by commercial treaties imposed under threat of war.<sup>7</sup>

This danger has already taken on menacing proportions, and it gets worse with every year. Take only into consideration the formidable growth, each year, in the budgets of all states, analyse them, and you will see which part is dedicated to the budgets to all types of bureaucrats and of industrial divisions, that have become state industries; mail, railways, taxation, national insurance, state banks, etc.

And what is worse, is that teaching which justifies all of this under the name of Marxism<sup>8</sup>. This teaching that says that you have to help to the development of the grandest possible capitalism possible, because we can only arrive at socialism once capitalism has reached this evolutionary point. With this type of teaching we can quickly justify the the conquests of the capitalist and militarist state.

In getting themselves killed for conquering colonies for the German Empire, it is thought that they are contributing to the concentration of capitalism and of the strengthening of the state, which is believed to advance the cause of socialism. The German imperialists need colonies. It is a good method to enrich themselves. But<sup>9</sup> to work to render profitable to the capitalists and the German state the colonies that are already possessed in Africa, to do there the pioneering work that has already been done by the Anglo-Saxons in America, in Australia, etc., and the Russian in Oriental Europe and in Siberia, would be too long and too difficult. Haven't the Teutonic horseman already indicated a shorter path – that of conquest? And did Bismarck not already say that they could have the French colonies in Africa by seizing Paris? This is a perspective which, we know, has not ceased to haunt many German political writers in the last 30 years.

Also, the bourgeois, the city worker and the German peasant which, obeying a military decree, killed with ferocity the non-combatant Belgians and French 'to sow terror in the populations and to impede them from starting a populist war,' are persuaded that by doing these massacres they are contributing to the prosperity of the German state; and in so doing they prepare their own prosperity. And if the soldier is a university student or a social-democrat, such as was the case in Louvain, he would add that by these massacres he was only aiding in the development of an

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<sup>7</sup> The following paragraph was crossed out: *'Which of us has spoken to workers of this danger that threatens them? Who has denounced this mass of workers that makes a false leap to 'class war', that supports the bourgeois in their conquests and places themselves on the side of the capitalists whenever the opportunity comes to enrich themselves at the cost of a neighbouring country.'*

<sup>8</sup> And Kropotkin crossed out: *'That which Marx would have repudiated – that he already repudiated n saying to Engels: 'Call me what you will, but not a Marxist!'*

<sup>9</sup> The words *'possessing colonies in Africa and Asia'* were crossed out.

**economic law:**<sup>10</sup> states *must* possess colonies. And in thus helping he was only accelerating the accomplishment of the destinies foretold by wise men and prophets – that of the eventual arrival of the socialist state.

And therefore, dear friend, don't you agree that rather than saying that *the* socialist theory and practice are currently finding themselves in contradiction, we should say that theory, *incompletely elaborated*, has thus been by this polluted, and this is why our thinking and our feelings are opposed to what we thought what the *complete* theory. When we say: 'No more war!' we brandish our flag with a superb ideal. But we do not take account of the development of capitalist instincts amongst the workers, or of this false theory – *the divination of capitalism as an element of socialist progress* – that we preached to the workers all around the world.

Accept this, and accept also that we, as anarchists, share our own part of the blame.

## LETTER #2

February 24, 1916

I wrote you this letter yesterday because I believe that one must react against this idea that we hear a little of everywhere: that 'theory' and 'practice' must be separate. It is a tendency that would be deadly to all progressive movements, if it is to spread further. It is already quite rampant – '*die alte Mume, die Schlange*<sup>11</sup>,' as Goethe said - , '*der Schwaerme*<sup>12</sup>' in the opinion of modern Germany.

Last night I thought again of the utility of putting, at the head or at the end of the declaration, a declaration of principles. But it appears to me very difficult to find a formula that can rally the partisans of the declaration of Zimmerwald and ourselves. Furthermore, the essential is that if we put a declaration of principles to speak of a subject thoroughly 'practical', they would say to us: 'Always with your theories! It suffices to determine if now is the time to make peace or not, and you come to cram us with your anarchist ideas!'

I will continue to write on the subject discussed in my letter – how to undermine this deadly tendency for the workers, under the pretext of being practical people to follow the bourgeoisie, all the while speaking of 'class war.' Therein lies the weak point of all the socialist and anarchist propaganda. Because the workers of the cities do not take into account anything but the money they make day to day, that they are able to get from their bosses or from the state, and is taken from the workers on the fields, or from those 'backward nations' that the countries more advanced in industry (bourgeois and workers together) agree together that they should be exploited. It is the *widening of the socialist ideal that is imposed on us*. And, next to this – the capacity to take advantage of conditions created by the war to introduce into *current* life, organizations where the production and the consumption are socialized. Here this is already

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<sup>10</sup> Kropotkin crossed out : '*of those pertaining to the capitalist extension of a State, forced to become a colonial State*.

<sup>11</sup> *The old coward, the serpent* – I have asked German translators and went online – this is the best I can do to translate it – what I think is meant is '*an old evil tendency that comes again and again*'.

<sup>12</sup> *Der schärmer* – someone who dreams too much or does only that, and unrealistic individual (translation of this German phrase by Anna Nizamieva.

being done here and there on a more or less large scale. However, unfortunately, the socialists are good for nothing. It is Lloyd George who has taken the initiative; it is state socialism which is being introduced to the workers rendering their 'class war' to the asking of a few more dollars for their salaries.

*I will be finishing my letter now. Just a couple of words about the war indemnities. My dear friend, my comrade, how could you write this! The 5 billion dollar war indemnity of 1871 was spent on an enormous strengthening of the army, and as soon as 1875, Bismarck intended to declare a new war against France, in order to take Champagne and to claim new indemnities. It was the intervention on the part of Alexander II that stopped it. He went to Berlin and declared that he did not recommend to start a war as he would not tolerate a new dismemberment of France. If the war ends like this – with the liberation of Belgium and France with big war indemnities – the whole of Germany will consider the war lost and, with 10 billion dollars at its disposal, will come down to strengthen its military power.<sup>13</sup>*

*Do you want it to be so? You certainly don't. I see the only outcome of the war now: liberation of the territories that were taken by force and establishing peace on the German frontiers, or recognition by Germany that it has taken more than it is able to swallow and peace on the terms of status quo ante, without any indemnities but with a reparation for all the destruction and demolitions of fortresses in Alsace-Lorraine, and Metz in particular, that threaten Paris. At least, dismantle Metz, if France is unable to take it. But I believe that it will achieve that goal.*

*It's enough, though. I am tired. Hugs to you and your Mother.*

PK.

*I enclose an extract from a letter to Grave.*

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<sup>13</sup> These last two paragraphs and the end of the letter were written in Russian and translated by Alexandra Agranovich and edited by Christopher Coquard.