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A student journal

Review: “Kropotkin, Read, and the Intellectual History of British Anarchism: Between Reason and Romanticism” by Matthew S. Adams

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Stable URL: <http://www.globalhistories.com/index.php/GHSJ/article/view/45>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2015.45>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Dec. 2015), pp. 99–100

ISSN: 2366-780X

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Publisher information:

‘Global Histories: A Student Journal’ is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. ‘Global Histories’ is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

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Kropotkin, Read, and the Intellectual History of British Anarchism: Between Reason and Romanticism

by Matthew S. Adams, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Pp. 264, Hardback £ 60, ISBN 978-1-137-39260-2

REVIEWED BY OSCAR NORRIS-BROUGHTON

Oscar completed his BA in Intellectual History at the University of Sussex in 2010, focusing on the development of democracy in Germany during the late 19th and early 20th century. Upon completion of his undergraduate studies he moved to Germany in order to write about the migration of radical ideas and individuals across the globe. This interest drew him towards undertaking an MA in Global History at both Humboldt University and the Free University of Berlin in 2013. His main research interests include industrial democracy, anarchism, nationalism, socialism, the works of Gustav Landauer, and the Weimar Republic.

This volume serves as an excellent account of British anarchism as an intellectual history, which explores the translation and impact of ideas and practices within a transregional context. Although marginal as a political force, anarchist ideas developed in Britain into a distinctive political and philosophical movement. *Kropotkin, Read, and the Intellectual History of British Anarchism* explores this typically overlooked history, offering a new engagement with the works of Peter Kropotkin and Herbert Read, and examining the ways in which they endeavoured to articulate a politics fit for the particular challenges of Britain.

Notably, this volume attempts to engage with Quentin Skinner's observation that it is extremely problematic to reach an understanding of political life within intellectual history by merely exploring on the level of high abstraction the ideas of individuals. Instead Skinner recommends surrounding classic texts with layers of ideological context, which encourage the understanding of political life. Adams successfully follows this approach by thematically exploring the impact generated by Kropotkin's arrival in UK at the end of the nineteenth century upon his own work and its reception within the context of British political life. Specifically Adams highlights the distinct lack of an anarchist movement in Britain during this period, particularly in contrast to continental Europe. This, he claims, served to stimulate Kropotkin into developing a new approach in order to articulate his anarchism, whereby he began to specifically develop an anarchist philosophy which would be palatable within Britain. In this way, Adams highlights how Kropotkin was instrumental as a figure for the translation of many of the ideas and practices associated with continental anarchist movements to Britain. Chief amongst these strategies was an attempt to draw together positivist arguments and revolutionary politics, which is most clearly identifiable in key texts such as *Mutual Aid* (1902) and *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1898).

Adams also explores the impact of these ideas within the British intellectual context, highlighting the context of British socialism in relation to the key figures, such as G.D.H. Cole and the guild socialist movement. Adams' principal focus is however the reception of Kropotkin's work by the literary figure and anarchist Herbert Read. This relationship is significant owing to their polar opposite approaches towards anarchism, which is reflected in the subtitle of the book *Between Reason and Romanticism*. Adams is successful in highlighting this contradiction between the scientific rationalist approach of many late nineteenth century and early twentieth century anarchists, socialists and syndicalists within Europe typified by Kropotkin, and the romanticist bohemian wing of anarchism which seemingly stood in opposition to this approach and is characterised by Read in this case. This seemingly contradictory dynamic is understood by Adams to have many points of mutual overlap and agreement within the British context particularly in relation to the development of ideas of revolution and utopia.

While this attempt to overlap these positions historically is broadly successful and particularly innovative in relation to the British case, Adams' work ultimately suffers from a failure to draw parallels between this case and others, most notably figures such as Gustav Landauer and Rudolf Rocker in Germany, France, Britain and the USA, who engaged in similar debates between romantic and rationalist approaches towards anarchism.

One of the most interesting points Adams makes is towards the existence of an "imagined anarchist community", which developed around the distribution and translation of texts and ideas between varying locations. In this regard Adams is part of a relatively recent trend amongst historians of anarchism, such as Anthony Gorman and Davide Turcato who have similarly drawn attention to trans-regional and global links shared between anarchist individuals and groups between a multitude of locations. These connections help to solidify the idea of an imagined community of anarchists and related radical movements. Unfortunately Adams does not stress this point heavily enough and in particular fails to fully explore the particular role played by the British Isles in relation to this global network, instead limiting the focus of his analysis to the relationship between Kropotkin and Read.