

DISABLED COMMUNISTS AND ANARCHISTS

Disability Action Research Kollektive



Like many people in history, when communists and anarchists are remembered, their disabilities often go unacknowledged, even though they likely deeply impacted their lives and perspectives. Disabilities should not be seen as a shameful personal failure but as a neutral characteristic within the natural variation of humanity. Here is a brief biography of some of those revolutionaries.

Communism has the goal of a stateless, moneyless, and classless society. Through political revolution or democratic capture, capitalism would be abolished. All private ownership and profit from farms, businesses, and factories would be collectively owned by society, and businesses would be operated by the workers themselves. This would be achieved by taking over the power of the state and using that to abolish the divisions between the owners and the workers. The state is seen as something that would wither away on its own over time, as it only existed to maintain exploitation.

Anarchism shares the same final goal of a stateless, moneyless, and classless society, but the methods of how to get there are distinctly different. Power is seen as inherently corrupting, and taking over state power is seen as inevitably leading to an authoritarian dictatorship. Once people have state power, they do not give it up. Capitalism and the state are seen as mutually reinforcing structures and so both must be dismantled, either through revolution or by building social structures that make the state obsolete.



Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) was an influential Marxist intellectual and politician who was one of the founders of the Italian Communist Party. He also had restricted growth and a hunched back due to tuberculosis of the spine. Gramsci believed that every aspect of life was political. He is primarily known for his work on cultural hegemony, which is how the worldviews of the elites became that of the general population.

To him, culture played a significant role in societal domination, and that ideology transcended economic class boundaries. He was imprisoned by Mussolini's fascists and wrote his now-famous Prison Notebooks. Gramsci said, "What comes to pass does so not so much because a few people want it to happen, as because the mass of citizens abdicate their responsibility and let things be."



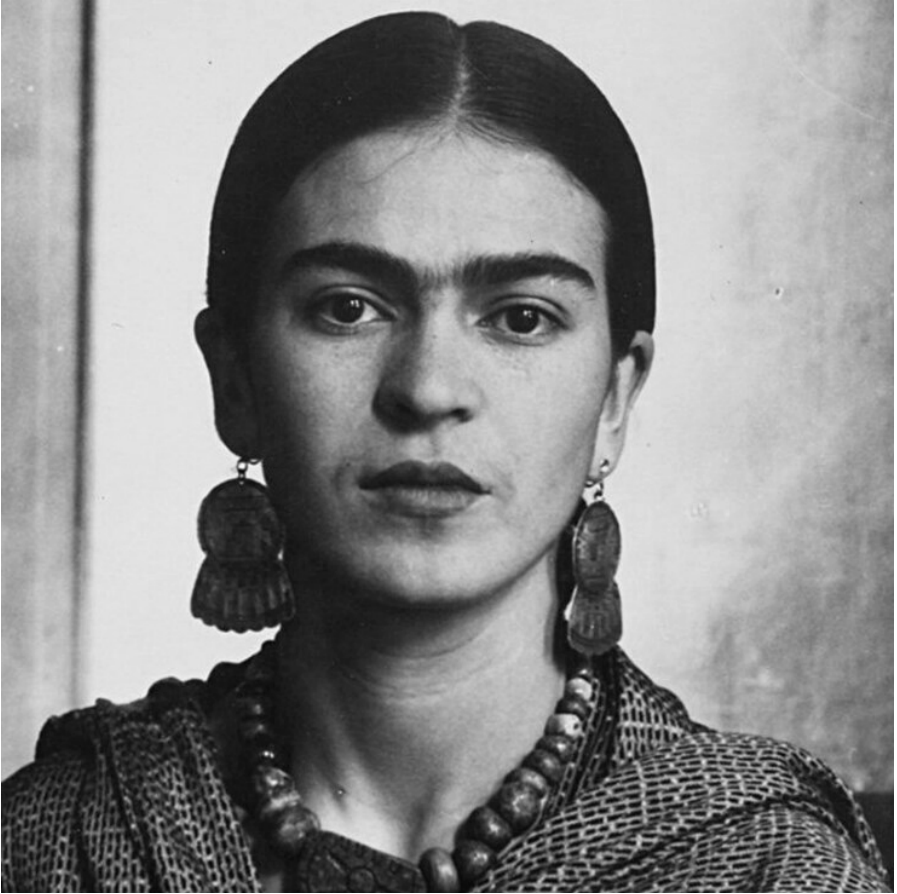
Ernesto 'Che' Guevara (1928-1967) was an Argentine revolutionary who played a role in the Cuban revolution. He was an insurgent commander and a military strategist who used guerilla warfare. Che had chronic asthma and was frequently bedridden, which was when he would spend his time reading and educating himself. He believed that through the education, people could learn to fight all forms of authority.

Che became internationally famous as a martyr after being executed by the Bolivian Army. He said "If you tremble with indignation at every injustice, then you are a comrade of mine... Above all, always be capable of feeling deeply any injustice committed against anyone, anywhere in the world. This is the most beautiful quality in a revolutionary".



Bradford Lomax (1950-1984) was an American disability and civil rights activist. He set up a free health clinic and founded a Centre for Independent Living which he planned to be a radical disability-centred community hub. He was a member of the Black Panther Party, had multiple sclerosis and used a wheelchair. Lomax and 100 others took part in the 504 Sit-In protest that occupied a government office building for 26 days.

He mobilised the Black Panthers to support the protest with food, supplies and publicity. The protest led to increased accessibility to federally funded programs like schools. A fellow activist said, "Without the presence of Brad Lomax and Chuck Jackson, the Black Panthers would not have fed the 504 participants occupying the H.E.W. building... without that food, the sit-in would have collapsed".



Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) was an incredibly influential artist who was also involved in radical politics. She was a member of the Mexican Communist Party and was a lifelong critic of US imperialism and the injustices of capitalism. Kahlo had polio and was involved in a traffic accident that led to mobility impairments as well as chronic pain. She had an adapted easel so she could paint from bed, and used her art to express her personal struggles and to challenge societal norms.

Kahlo believed in feminism and anti-imperialism. She protested US intervention in Guatemala, raised funds for anti-fascists during the Spanish Civil War. "Nobody is separate from anybody else – nobody fights for themselves. Everything is all and one, Anguish and pain – pleasure and death are no more than a process of existence".



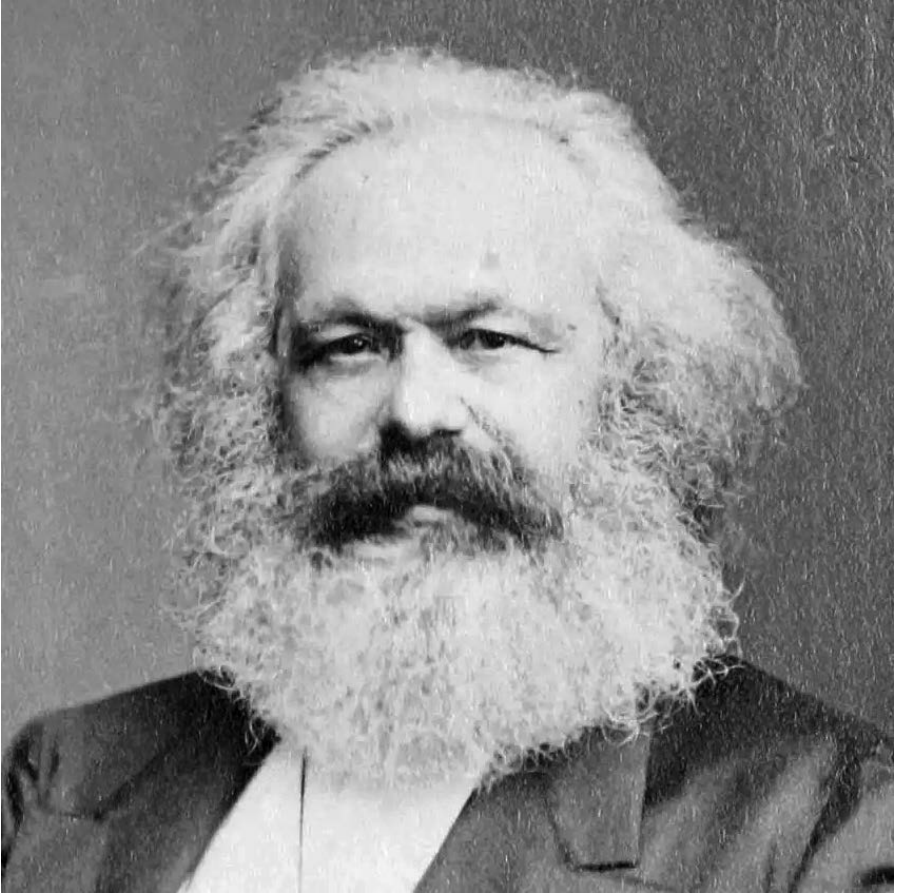
Helen Keller (1880-1968) was an American Christian Socialist and communist. She is best known as a political figure and writer on a range of topics such as equality and social justice. Keller was Deafblind but was also an advocate of eugenics. She participated in marches to get women voting rights and access to abortions. Keller also supported labour rights, opposed military intervention and advocated for disability rights.

She said “The few own the many because they possess the means of livelihood of all ... The country is governed for the richest, for the corporations, the bankers, the land speculators, and for the exploiters of labour... The majority of mankind is ground down by industrial oppression in order that the small remnant may live in ease”.



Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a Soviet educational psychologist and Marxist. He lived with tuberculosis which eventually killed him. Vygotsky contributed significantly to deaf and special education, which included sign language research. He was a radical long before the revolution and his position on educating disabled children is extremely progressive even by modern standards.

He is known for his Zone of Proximal Development theory and sociocultural learning theory. Vygotsky said "The teacher must adopt the role of facilitator, not content provider" and "The individual becomes for himself what he is in himself through what he manifests for others".



Karl Marx (1818-1883) was an influential German revolutionary socialist and writer who made major contributions to economics and philosophy. He had pneumonia, liver problems and a chronic and incapacitating skin condition which may have been Hidradenitis Suppurativa, which often interrupted his work. Marx is best known for writing the Communist Manifesto and Das Kapital.

His core ideas are that history is defined by the struggle between the owning class and that of the working class, and that capitalism would create increasingly larger economic catastrophes before self-destructing. The goal was to abolish the private ownership of factories and farms and have society collectively own them instead. He is known for the saying "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs".



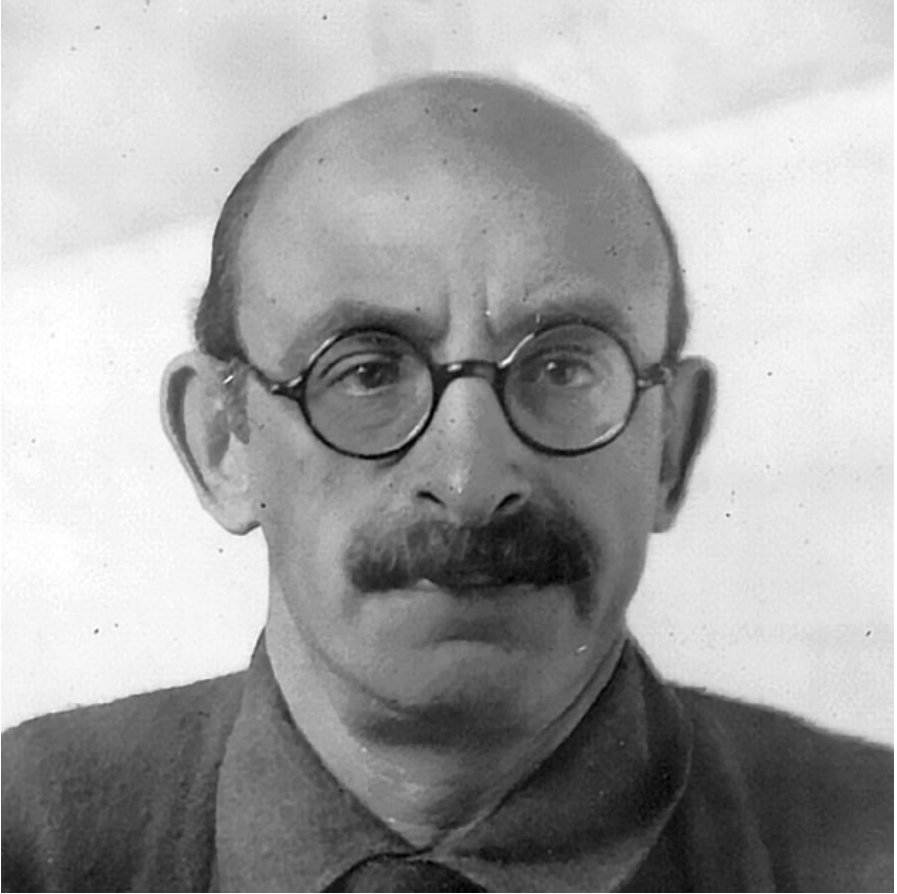
Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919) was a Polish political radical, intellectual and author. She played a role in founding the Communist Party of Germany. Luxemburg had a congenital bone condition that impacted her hips and legs and made walking difficult. She advocated a path to socialism through revolutionary mass action and international solidarity to overthrow capitalism.

Luxemburg was critical of the social democratic as well as the Leninist wings of Marxism. She also founded an anti-war Spartacus League later and encouraged labour unions to declare an anti-war general strike, for which she was imprisoned. She said "Before a revolution happens, it is perceived as impossible; after it happens, it is seen as having been inevitable".



Albert Libertad (1875-1908) was a French individualist anarchist who advocated for the dissolution of all hierarchies. He was described as magnetically attractive, a one-man demonstration, and the heart and soul of the liberation movement. Libertad did not have full use of his legs but he skilfully wielded his walking sticks in fights against the authorities.

He thought that one had to embody revolution oneself by living free, instead of waiting for a better future. Libertad was against conformity, work, marriage, military service, and voting. He believed that "All laws are wicked, all judgments are unfair, all judges are wrong, all prisoners are innocent".



Alexander Berkman (1870-1936) was a Russian-American writer and activist. He had chronic pain, and depression and often complained about fatigue in his letters. He believed that through direct action the ideas that would lead to revolution would be spread. Berkman attempted to assassinate a business owner during a strike and was imprisoned. He wrote the book *The ABC of Anarchism* and edited the anarchist *Journal Mother Earth* with Emma Goldman.

He was deported to Russia and became a vocal critic of the Soviet Union. He said "What is this thing we call government? Is it anything but organized violence? The law orders you to obey, and if you don't obey, it will compel you by force - all governments, all law and authority finally rest on force and violence, on punishment or fear of punishment".



Evgenia Iaroslavskaja-Markon (1902-1931) was an anti-Soviet revolutionary who had prosthetic legs. She worked as an anti-religious academic lecturer, and later as a fortune teller and thief. Markon was an active anti-government and anti-authoritarian activist who also helped storm a prison to release political prisoners.

While at a gulag in Siberia, she threw a stone at the head of the officer who had executed her husband and paid for that with her own life. She believed that “Everyone is innocent, sinless and not responsible for their acts, character is created by a chain of causation, that depends on everything in the world, not on the single person”.



Leonard Augustine Motler (1888-1967) was a British anarchist communist, and wrote for a range of radical publications. He was Deaf, without speech and was an Esperantist. He wrote regularly for radical left-wing publications such as *The Clarion*, *The Women's Dreadnought*, *Freedom*, *the Voice of Labour*. He was editor of *Satire: A Paper of Social Criticism*, "a worker's paper, run by workers", which was raided by the police during the First World War because of its anti-war and anti-capitalist messaging.

"Get busy. Set up some sort of workers' revolutionary organisation in your shop, in your street, on the land or on the broad high-highways of the sea. The business of the day is first the revolution, second the revolution, third the revolution. Up and at it. The Revolution tomorrow".



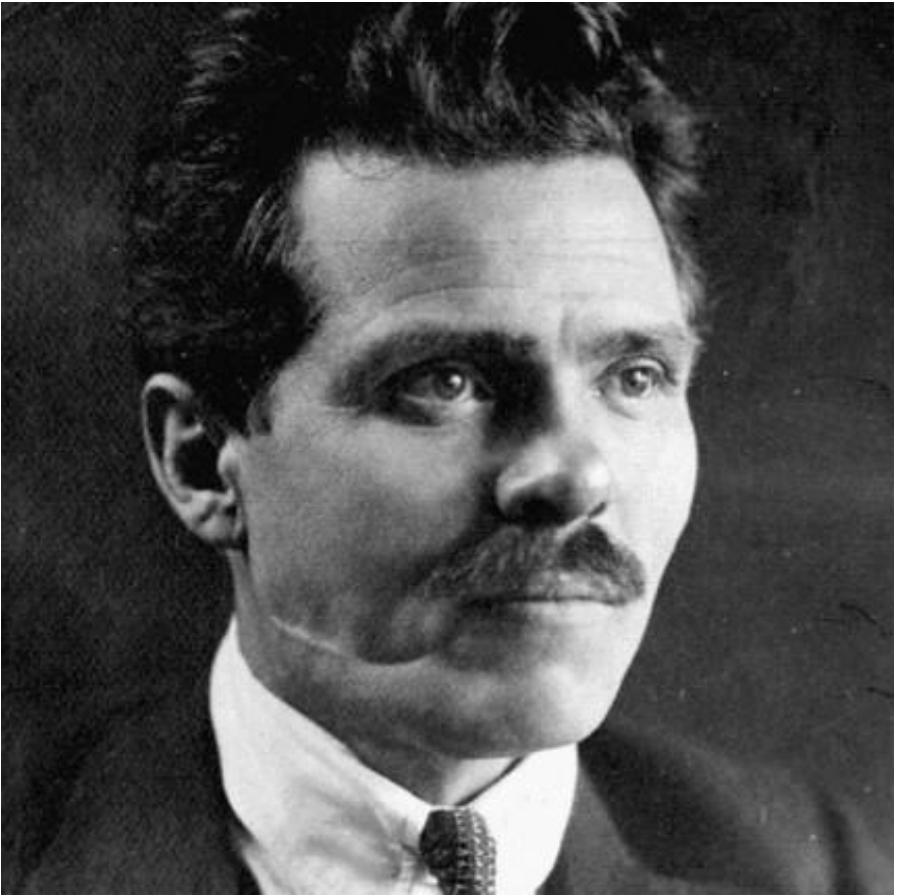
Lucy Parsons (1851-1942) was an American labour organiser, public speaker and writer. She participated in the mass strikes of 1877, and in the May Day movement for an 8-hour workday. Parsons believed in the use of violent direct action or the threat of it to help workers achieve their demands. Her husband Albert Parsons was executed after the Haymarket Massacre.

Lucy considered marriage, family structures and children to be integral parts of life. This was in contrast to the ideas of having romantic relationships without marriage, which were popular in the anarchist movement. She lost her sight in later life but continued her activism. Lucy and her disabled son died in a house fire. She is known for saying “Never be deceived that the rich will allow you to vote away their wealth”.



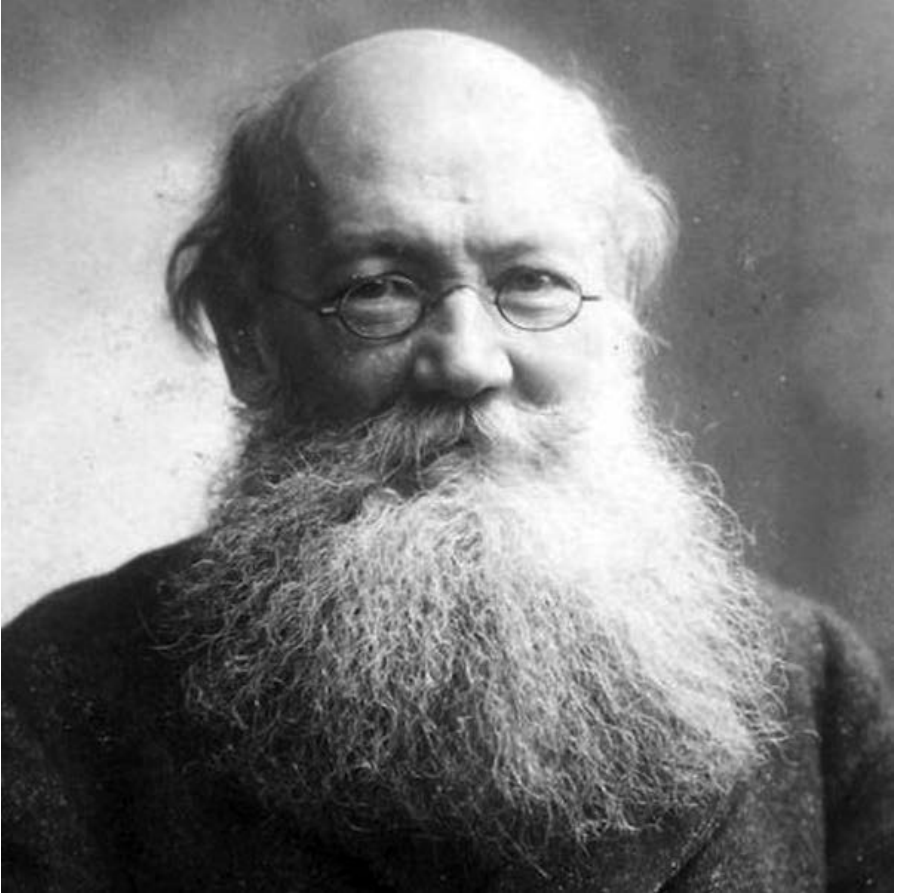
Mikhail Bakunin (1814-1876) was a Russian revolutionary anarchist. He was involved in uprisings which led him to be imprisoned, sentenced to death and finally exiled to Siberia. He had scurvy and lost his teeth from his imprisonment, which also ruined his stomach. He would vomit out any food except finely chopped cabbage. Bakunin foresaw the reformist nature of social democracy and the authoritarianism of state socialism. He had antisemitic ethnic prejudices which were at odds with his stated egalitarian principles.

He once said “I am truly free only when all human beings, men and women, are equally free. The freedom of other men, far from negating or limiting my freedom, is, on the contrary, its necessary premise and confirmation”.



Nestor Makhno (1842-1934) was a charismatic Ukrainian anarchist revolutionary general who led the Black Army during the Russian Civil War. He had a prominent facial scar, lived with tuberculosis and had continual problems with badly-healed wounds which affected his health and mobility. His army innovated new tactics such as adding mounted machine guns to carts pulled by horses.

"The more a man becomes aware, through reflection, of his servile condition, the more indignant he becomes, the more the anarchist spirit of freedom, determination and action waxes inside him. That is true of every individual, man or woman, even though they may never have heard the word 'anarchism' before." And "Burn their laws and destroy their prisons, kill the hangmen, the bane of mankind. Smash authority!"



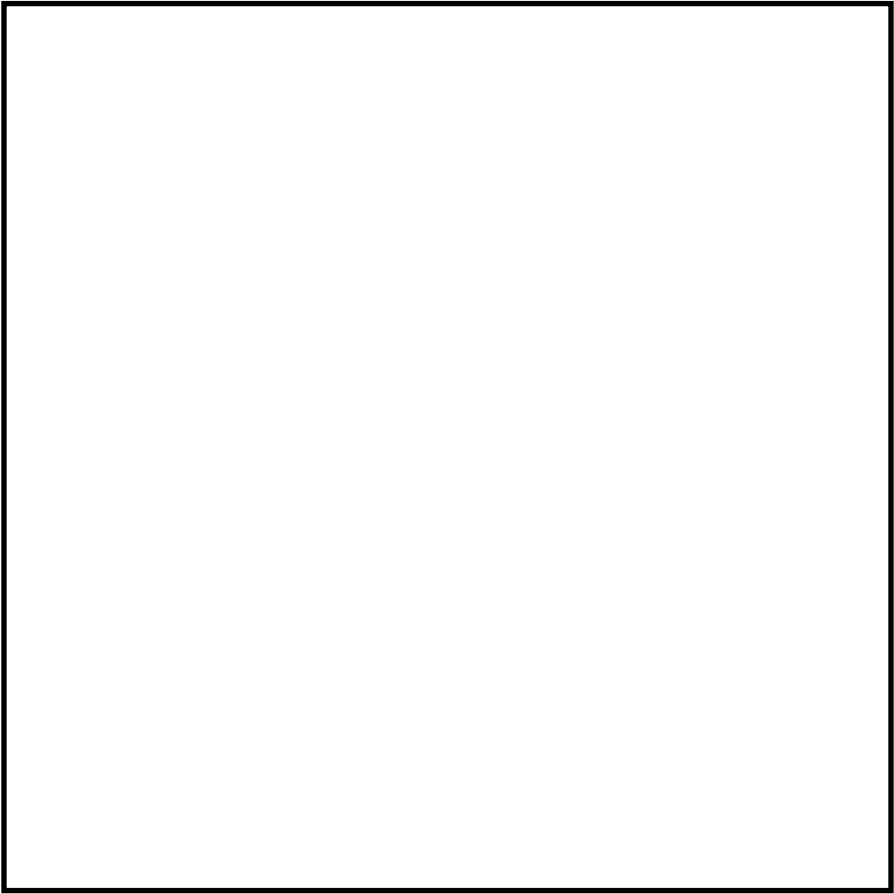
Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) was a geographer and a leading Russian anarchist philosopher in his lifetime. He also had malaria, and scurvy, and lost his teeth while in a Siberian prison. Kropotkin's work emphasized the importance of decentralised communist societies based on voluntary cooperation instead of centralised government control.

He is best known for the books *The Conquest of Bread* and *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*. "Competition is the law of the jungle, but cooperation is the law of civilization" and "All is for all! If the man and the woman bear their fair share of work, they have a right to their fair share of all that is produced by all, and that share is enough to secure them well-being ... What we proclaim is The Right to Well-Being: Well-Being for All!"



Voltairine de Cleyre (1866-1912) was an American anarchist-feminist writer and poet who experienced a lifelong chronic pain condition and had frequent recurring illnesses as well as depression and long-term injuries after being shot. She left a significant body of work in the form of speeches, essays, poems and stories, advocating for the abolition of capitalism and hierarchies.

De Cleyre was also a strong critic of the institution of marriage, believing that it was a trap for women, leaving them vulnerable to physical, emotional, sexual and economic violence and exploitation. "This is what the government is, has always been, the creator and defender of privilege; the organization of oppression and revenge. To hope that it can ever become anything else is the vainest of delusions."



Tell your story

Would you like to know more?

Free Essays

Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History,
by Douglas Baynton.

Impairment as a human constant : Cross-Cultural and Historical
Perspectives on Variation, *by Scheer & Groce.*

The Fight Against Ableism, *by Itxi Guerra.*

Capitalism and Disability, *by Marta Russell & Ravi Malhotra*

Are you an Anarchist? The answer may surprise you, David Graeber.

For a future made by us all-Questions and Answers about Anarchism,
by Rebel City.

Life Without Law, An introduction to anarchist politics,
by Strangers In a Tangled Wilderness.

The Communist Manifesto, *by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.*

Wage Labour and Capital, *by Karl Marx.*

Books

Black Disability Politics, *by Sami Schalk*

Capitalism and Disability: Selected Writings, *by Marta Russell*

A Very Capitalist Condition: A History and Politics of Disability, *Roddy Slorach*

Empire of Normality: Neurodiversity and Capitalism, *Robert Chapman.*

Health Communism, *by Adler-Bolton and Vierkant.*

Anarchism - A Beginner's Guide, *by Ruth Kinna (+ all her other books)*

Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive
Accumulation, *by Silvia Federici*

The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development, *Michael Lebowitz.*

Democracy Against Capitalism: Renewing Historical Materialism,
by Ellen Meiksins Wood.

Free online resources:

(Primer and Q&A) <https://anarchy.works/primer.html>

(Library) <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/>

(Library) <https://libcom.org/>

(Library) <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/library>

(Multimedia resource) <https://www.radical-guide.com/>

This zine is produced by the
Disability Action Research Kollektive (DARK)
and features work by
Richard Amm, Dai O'Brien and Michael Skyer.

© 2024. This work is openly licensed via CC BY-SA.

This license enables reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format, so long as attribution is given to the creator. The license allows for commercial and non-commercial use. If you remix, adapt, or build upon the material, you must license the modified material under identical terms.