

Culture

Tick, tick, boom

How Swiss watchmakers shaped Peter Kropotkin's ideas

"Unrueh", a prizewinning film, dramatises a real visit made by the Russian anarchist to the Jura mountains



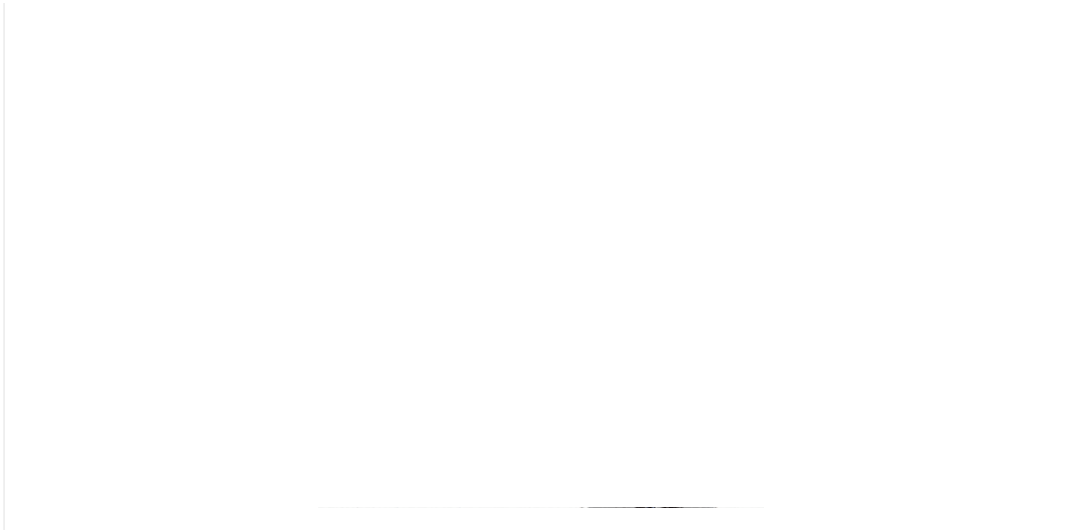
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WHEN HE ARRIVED in Switzerland in 1872, Peter Kropotkin was not yet a globally renowned anarchist. Born to a Russian aristocratic family, he had spent years undertaking geographical and scientific surveys in Siberia, Finland and Sweden before devoting himself to revolutionary politics and social justice. He joined the Circle of Tchaikovsky, a subversive group, in 1872 and was arrested in 1874. Thanks to works including "The Conquest of Bread" (1892) and "Fields, Factories and Workshops" (1899), Kropotkin became known as the "father of anarcho-communism".

But first came his visit to a valley in the Jura mountains, renowned for its watchmakers, to chart a new map and learn about workers' movements. He was inspired by the craftsmen's "egalitarian relations" and "independence of thought". "When I came away from the mountains, after a week's stay with the watchmakers, my views upon socialism were settled," he later wrote in his memoirs. "I was an anarchist."



Kropotkin's visit to this unlikely hotbed of freethinkers is the subject of a new film, "Unrueh" ("Unrest"), which won a prize at this year's Berlin International Film Festival. He arrives in the area at a moment of great technological change: photography, the telegraph and time measurement have seized the imagination of the town. (Strangely, multiple time zones are in effect in the area, such that the local watch factory adheres to a different clock to the municipality at large, or the railway.)

The title of the film does not only refer to political agitation: "unrueh" is also the term for a wheel at the centre of the watch mechanism that maintains equilibrium. It is a suggestive metaphor for the workings of St Imier, as frustrated watchmakers are beginning to organise. Factory managers have become zealous about efficiency, to labourers' chagrin: Josephine, a young worker who emerges as a central character in the film, is ordered to adopt a new route to the factory floor to save precious steps and seconds. She takes an interest in the Russian arrival in town.

Kropotkin had renounced his origins in 1871; the short-lived Paris Commune of that year remained influential. During that vanishingly brief, much-mythologised revolution, working-class Parisians decreed the separation of church and state and the abolition of child labour. Citizens in St Imier had access to a news system, delivered via telegraph, which shared dispatches from anarchists from cities across the world. The film's loose but flowing narrative shows workers huddling in public squares or on factory floors, murmuring over what is to be done, or voting on sending money to assist far-off comrades.

Direct democracy had been instituted on a federal level in 1848 and the possibility of radical change hangs in the air. This is a rare film that harnesses the crackling energy of a particular historical moment—from the telegraph operator who impatiently tells Kropotkin to stop wasting her time with missives in sloppy handwriting, to the roving photographer who sells postcards of famous faces and takes an image of the Russian in case he proves valuable one day.

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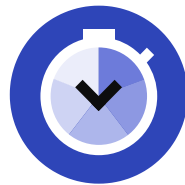
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In “Unrueh” police officers are usually close by, quick to disperse groups or remind citizens of the rules. Their polite prompts are an assertion of control, but the director of the film, Cyril Schäublin, employs intriguingly off-kilter compositions to suggest that an alternate order might be afoot. Cropping feet or placing people to one side of a tree or a house in the frame resists a purely picturesque view of the Swiss valley. (Mr Schäublin is himself part of a family of watchmakers and drew on interviews he conducted with his grandmother and others about their lives.) In bestowing an award on “Unrueh”, the Berlinale jury praised the “strange and unsettling calm” of its portrayal.

A line in “The Third Man”, a noir film of 1949, has long been treated as the last word on Swiss culture: that 500 years of democracy have produced nothing grander than the cuckoo clock. It is easy to forget that Switzerland was in fact the birthplace of Dadaism and, as “Unrueh” shows, the environment that created the vaunted Swiss clock also fostered an independent streak fierce enough to inspire the likes of Kropotkin. Returning to Russia, he was jailed, escaped and soon returned again for a longer stay in this anarchist stronghold in the heart of Switzerland. Without the watchmakers, Kropotkin wrote, his critiques of capitalism and interest in mutual aid “might have remained mere abstractions for a long time”. ■

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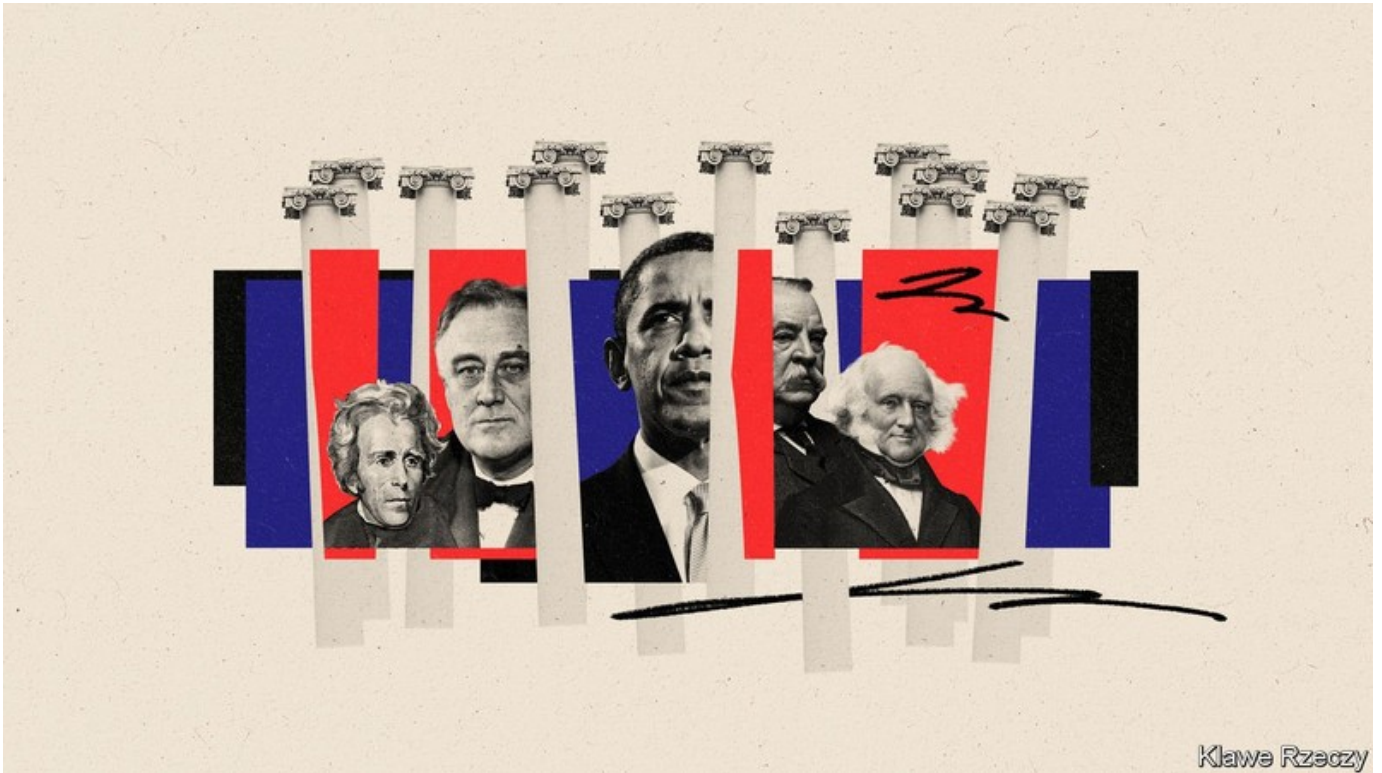
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