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Review: Evolution and Environment by Kropotkin

Anarcho

April 28, 2009

This work, volume 11 of *The Collected Works of Peter Kropotkin*, is in two parts. The first part is Kropotkin's classic book "*Modern Science and Anarchism*." The second part is concerned with his thoughts on the latest theories and experiments in biology and evolutionary thought. As will become clear, the combining of these two very different works is not as contradictory as it first seems.

"*Modern Science and Anarchism*" is Kropotkin's attempt to place anarchist theory in the scientific tendencies of 19th Century thought. In doing so, he stresses the importance of the inductive-deductive method, "*the method ... of natural sciences*," namely the analysis of everyday society and the basing of theory on the facts produced by that analysis rather than creating a theory in abstraction and fitting the facts into it. This methodology is particularly fruitful when it is used, as Kropotkin did, to analyse anarchism as a product of the class war ("*Anarchism ... originated in everyday struggles*," as he put it).

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In this way, Kropotkin stresses that anarchism is not a utopian theory but rather a product of the needs and aspirations of working class people, as expressed in their resistance to authority, exploitation and domination. In Kropotkin's eyes, all anarchist writers did was to "*work out a general expression of [anarchism's] principles, and the theoretical and scientific basis of its teachings*" derived from the experiences of working class people in struggle as well as analysing the evolutionary tendencies of society in general. Thus, Kropotkin (like Bakunin and Proudhon before him) placed socialistic tendencies in the struggle **within** but **against** capitalism, namely the generation of new forms of social organisation and ways of relating to and living together created in the resistance to capitalist and state oppression. In contrast, Marxism places socialistic tendencies towards socialism in the increasing centralisation of capital (to quote **Capital**, volume 1, the "*centralisation of the means of production and the socialisation of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder. The knell of capitalist private property sounds. The expropriators are expropriated*"). While capitalism may create its own "gravediggers," it is not working class **needs** that signify its end. Rather it is the **objective needs of production**, the contradiction between socialised production and private property (which ends with the actual socialisation of production). Thus Marxism (particularly in its Leninist form) sees socialism as a result of tendencies **within** but **part of** capitalism. Little wonder it proved, in practice, to be little more than the nationalisation of capital as capital ("*the new form of the Wage System,*" in Kropotkin's words) and a nightmare. Only a "professional revolutionary" — i.e. non-worker — such as Lenin could suggest the world as one big office or factory as a **positive** vision!

This vision of anarchism as a product of working class struggle and the organisations created by that struggle can be seen from Kropotkin's comments that "*the Anarchist movement was renewed each time it received an impression from some great practical lesson:*

working class people as well as scientific discoveries and methods. Thus he applies scientific methodology to the class struggle (i.e. the analysis of the facts of that struggle and then drawing conclusions from those facts) in order to base anarchism in that struggle and show that anarchism was a theoretical expression of it. Rather than produce a "scientific anarchism" — a "science" of the class struggle — Kropotkin applies the techniques of science to that struggle in order to ground anarchism in the struggle of the oppressed and to show it was a product of our own self-activity. This methodology is one anarchists should continue to apply while ignoring the mechanistic comments of Kropotkin. For this reason, in spite its flaws, this book (especially "***Modern Science and Anarchism***") is essential reading for anyone interesting in both analysing and changing the world.

Evolution and Environment

Peter Kropotkin

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and enhancing the liberation of the individual began by their own direct action.

One question does remain, however. If animals and plants adapt to changing environments then it implies that humans will adapt to hierarchical society. If this is the case, then the spirit of revolt can only occur from external influences, not from any need for liberty, equality or solidarity. It also implies that alienation cannot exist, as there is nothing to be alienated from (no human core, as people adapt). This can be inferred from Kropotkin's comments that "*Anarchism is a conception of the Universe based on the mechanical interpretation of phenomena.*" This vision is lacking in that it ignores the fact that freedom is an essential need for people, a need which has never been extinguished no matter how terrible the environment in which they live. Thus while people **do** adapt to their environment, they also try and change that environment to better satisfy their needs, needs which exist **in spite** of their environment. Hence Kropotkin's vision must be informed by Malatesta, who argued against Kropotkin's fatalism and mechanistic tendencies and reminded us that anarchy "*is a human aspiration*" and "*can be achieved through the exercise of the human will.*" This subjective element in the struggle for freedom is essential and one Kropotkin indicates well in "**Modern Science and Anarchism**" when he writes that "*Anarchy represents ... the creative constructive force of the masses, who elaborated common-law institutions in order to defend themselves against a domineering minority.*" In other words, anarchism comes from the resistance of those who do **not** adapt to hierarchical society and act to change it to one more fitting their needs and desires. Kropotkin was obviously aware of this but, unfortunately, did not see how it contradicted his mechanistic philosophy.

This minor point aside, these works are of use to anarchists today. Reading them remains one of the importance and practicality of anarchism. Rather than being an impractical utopia, Kropotkin links anarchist ideas and ideals with both the daily struggles of

it derived its origin from the teachings of life itself." He pointed to the experience of the Paris Commune and the trade union movement — "*the idea of independent Communes for the territorial organisation, and of federations of Trade Unions for the organisation of men [and women] in accordance with their different functions, gave a **concrete** conception of society regenerated by social revolution.*" Thus, for Kropotkin, the present and the future are linked by the struggle **against** capitalism (and the state) and the organisations and solidarity created by that struggle rather than the development of capitalism. After all, the centralisation/accumulation process pointed to by Marx exists precisely to support and increase the power of capitalists over their workers (in order to extract more profits from them via technological innovation) and society as a whole (to gain competitive advantage by the increased market power associated with big business). Capitalism seeks centralisation in order to empower and enrich the few. Why should this development be considered as the basis for socialism? Surely, by definition, it is **opposite** of socialism?

Unsurprisingly, rather than seeing the free society as one big office, Kropotkin saw it as a free federation of self-managing communes in which "*associations of men and women ... work on the land, in the factories, in the mines, and so on, [and are] themselves the managers of production.*" Rather than base society on the model of the (capitalist) workplace, Kropotkin envisioned the transformation of that workplace by the values of those resisting capitalist domination at the point of production and based the future society on the self-managed structures created by that struggle.

Again and again Kropotkin links anarchist ideas to the class struggle, to the everyday struggle of the oppressed to free themselves. Such a perspective is as essential now as it was then and it is for this reason that "**Modern Science and Anarchism**" should be read by all anarchists. It gives an essential base from which to develop and build anarchist theory in the future.

Also of interest is the way Kropotkin links revolutions in science with social movements and transformations. This is important, for as any student or pupil releases education does not exist in a vacuum. What is taught in schools, colleges and universities will be influenced by social struggles going on outside. If social struggle is low, radical ideas (in all areas of science, not only in the social sciences such as politics, economics and history) will find it difficult to be expressed. Indeed, they may be safely ignored as no one in authority will feel the need to refute them or even mention them. However, when social struggle heats up, new ideas appear and this enters all aspects of society, including education and science. People are to think new ideas and rebel against the authority of what passes for science as well as against the authority of the state or the boss.

Thus, as well as linking anarchism to the daily struggles of the oppressed, he links this struggle to the evolution of ideas, of science. This is to be expected as the ideal, as Bakunin argued, is the flower whose root lies in the material conditions of existence. The very process of struggle, the changing of those material conditions, will necessarily find expression in the world of science and thought. And it is this challenge to existing scientific authority which is expressed in the second half of the book.

This second half is entitled *“Thoughts on Evolution”* and contains articles on evolution previously unpublished in book form. The articles, dating from 1910 to 1915, is a discussion on the effects of the environment on planet and animal evolution and its relationship to previous theories on evolution (particularly those of Darwin — as in **Mutual Aid** Kropotkin links his ideas to aspects of Darwin’s thoughts ignored by his self-proclaimed followers). As well as being an interesting subject in itself, the articles are of interest to anarchists as they suggest that if animals and plants change quickly to changing environments, the same applies to humans. Thus different social environments would provoke different responses in the same species (and even the same individual).

It is these rapid adaptations to the environment which Kropotkin discusses, along with their influence on long-term evolutionary change (notably by pushing evolution in certain directions due to the changes it provokes in members of a given species). The research Kropotkin discusses implies that rather than there being a fixed and definite “human nature” people (like other animals) can adapt and evolve quickly to different environment circumstances. Thus an anarchist society is not against “human nature” simply because human nature will change in response to new stimuli (the *“direct action of the environment”*).

This fits nicely into Kropotkin’s ideas on the nature of anarchism as a product of struggle. If, as he argued, anarchist ideas and an anarchist society evolve from the very process of social struggle then there is nothing utopian in anarchism. People, by resisting power, create new forms of social organisation and modify their environment. This new environment encourages adaptations of those who experience it, thus a process of accumulate changes occurs in a specific direction provoked by the direct action of the (changing) environment on individuals. Kropotkin documents and discusses experiments and research by scientists of his day on the relatively fast changes plants and animals undergo in changing environments. Why should we expect humans to be different? In other words, Kropotkin was using the latest findings of scientific research and analysis to, firstly, challenge the bases of then existing scientific authority (a science usually used to justify the status quo) and, secondly, to indicate that a free society was not against “human nature” as that “nature” was influenced and changed by the *“direct action”* of the environment.

Thus the two sections of this work complement each other remarkably well. **Modern Science and Anarchism** arguing that anarchism comes from daily struggles and that this struggle changes society and *Thoughts on Evolution* arguing that the changing society would have a direct action on those within it, encouraging