Kropotkin: Inspiration for Catholic Workers

Anonymous

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In February of this year we read in our reading club about Peter Kropotkin, the Russian geographer, anarcho-communist and visionary. His ideas are one of the sources of inspiration for the Catholic Worker movement.

Kropotkin is best known for his book *Mutual Aid*. In this book he criticizes Darwin's theory that progress mainly occurs through mutual struggle and survival of the fittest. Kropotkin argues that there is indeed mutual struggle, but that when studying both groups of people and groups of animals he mainly sees mutual aid. In the book he asks whether mutual aid has not been a much more important factor for progress in history than mutual struggle.

Anarchist watchmakers

Kropotkin (1842–1921) grew up in Tsarist Russia as a child of the aristocracy. His father had thousands of serfs (a kind of slave) who worked for him. As a teenager, he joined the Tsar's Page Corps. He then joined the army, but made the remarkable choice to be sent to Siberia. At the age of 20, he left to do research on the penal system. In Siberia, he was impressed by the self-reliance of the communities in remote villages and he studied the animal kingdom. He became increasingly critical of the system of serfdom and the penal system. When a revolt among prisoners was brutally suppressed, he resigned. He went on to study mathematics and geography.

At the age of thirty, Kropotkin traveled to Switzerland and met anarchist watchmakers. In his memoirs he wrote: "And when I came out of the mountains after a week with the watchmakers, I had made up my mind. I was an anarchist." Two years later, he ends up in prison in Russia for his activism. He is allowed to finish his book on the Ice Age and the map of Siberia in prison. He escapes two years later and lives in Switzerland, France and England, where he founds and writes anarchist-communist magazines.

Kropotkin develops into an enormous visionary for a different kind of society. He believes that a revolution is needed to an anarchist-communist society, characterized by communal production of goods, free distribution of the produced and mutual aid. He rejects any form of central authority (such as a government) and believes in small, autonomous communities, where all property is communal and where production is in the hands of the community. Everyone contributes according to their ability and takes according to their needs.

Activist and scientist

After the February Revolution in 1917, he returns to Russia, hoping to contribute to the new communist society. However, the October Revolution follows and the Bolsheviks build a system of state communism with centralist authority. Kropotkin is deeply disappointed. He writes a letter to Lenin several times to point out the excesses and dies four years later.

Kropotkin was an activist throughout his life. At the same time, he was also a valued scientist; as a geographer, he published on the Ice Age and worked on the map of Siberia. He published in the journal *Nature*. His book *Mutual Aid* is a scientific argument about the behavior of groups of animals and people. (As a reading club, we found *Mutual Aid* quite tough material.) He wrote books focused on the revolution, which read like propaganda against the state and capitalism (such as the book *The Conquest of Bread*). He then worked out in detail how cooperation should be organized after the revolution (in the book *Fields, Factories and Workshops*).

Giving according to ability

During the reading group, we discussed how Kropotkin influenced the Catholic Worker movement. Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, the founders of the Catholic Worker, were certainly familiar with Kropotkin's work. Dorothy Day read his Memoirs of a Revolutionary as a student. She adopted the concept of cooperation based on free choice into the Catholic Worker movement. The Catholic Worker movement itself is anarchist in nature; there is no central office, anyone can start a Catholic Worker house, and all communities are autonomous (although we also know that when Dorothy Day was alive, she felt responsible for – and involved herself with – all the communities that existed at the time).

In some communities, there is still an emphatically anarchist wind blowing; visitors and housemates are not expected to help keep the house running, in the spirit of 'who am I to tell you what to do?'. Co-founder Peter Maurin had also clearly read Kropotkin. We immediately thought of him in the chapter Brain Work and Manual Work in the book Fields, Factories and Workshops. Peter Maurin was convinced that the worker and the scientist should discuss and work together on the land. The influence of Peter Maurin's ideas led to the creation of Catholic Worker farms.

When it comes to the anarchist wind in our Catholic Worker community, we find that the Noël House is a healthier version of an anarchist house: everyone contributes according to their ability and can choose what they want to contribute, but everyone helps with the washing up and cleaning.

The evening about Kropotkin provided much food for thought. One wondered how Kropotkin's faith in a different society affected his life and choices; another wondered whether you can believe in a society in which you give according to your ability and take according to your need if you believe less than Kropotkin in the goodness of man. A third was particularly impressed by the fearless choices that Kropotkin made from an early age. Finally, faith was missed; Every human being also has spiritual needs about which Kropotkin remains silent. But still: Kropotkin is definitely worth reading!

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