

Kropotkin's ecology

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“The present is where we get lost – if we forget our past and have no vision of the future.” So wrote the Ghanaian poet Ayi Kwei Armah.

This year marks the centenary of the death of the anarchist-geographer, Peter Kropotkin – a figure from the past who we should certainly not forget.

A talented Geographer, a pioneer social ecologist and a revolutionary socialist, Kropotkin generated a “treasure of fertile ideas” (as his friend Errico Malatesta put it) that still have contemporary relevance.

Philosophical

Born in Moscow in 1842, it is one of the curious ironies of history that Kropotkin, who became one of the fiercest opponents of all forms of state power, was born into the highest ranks of the Russian aristocracy. For his princely forebears had been among the earlier rulers of Russia.

After exploring and undertaking scientific research in the remote regions of Manchuria and Siberia during the 1860’s, Kropotkin was later to become a member of the International Workingmen’s Association.

He was twice imprisoned for his political activities. Coming to Britain in 1886 he was to remain an “honourable exile”, as Nicolas Walter described him, for the next thirty years.

Until his return to his native land in 1917 at the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. During his many years of exile, Kropotkin became one of the leading theoreticians of the anarchist movement, as well as continuing his scientific studies. In fact, Kropotkin’s portrait still hangs in the library of the Royal Geographical Society in London.

An evolutionary naturalist like Darwin, Kropotkin was a polymath, and multi-talented. He wrote books on the great French revolution, as he called it, on Russian literature, on climate change and the physical geography of Eurasia, on evolutionary biology and social ecology, as well as writing, in his final years a philosophical treatise on ethics.

Force

Here I will focus on one aspect of his rich and extensive oeuvre, namely, his seminal writings on social ecology.

At the heart of human life, for Kropotkin, there was an essential “paradox” given that, on the one hand, humans were an intrinsic part of nature, the product of an evolutionary process, and totally dependent upon the Natural World for food, water, and air – for their very existence.

But on the other hand, humans were in a sense “separate” from nature: the earth itself had existed for billions of years, long before humans emerged, and humans, as a species-being, were rather unique in combining a high degree of self-consciousness, a deep sociality, and in having developed complex symbolic cultures and technology.

Indeed, humans are now described as having become a “geological force” on the planet earth. Humans were in a sense “separate” from nature.

What is important about Kropotkin is that he always endeavoured to hold together these two dimensions of human social life.

Exploitative

He thus combined humanism, with its emphasis on human agency and human culture, and naturalism, fully recognizing the ecological dimension of human life, that humans are always “rooted in nature”. As a social philosopher Kropotkin was, therefore, fundamentally an ecological humanist, a social ecologist.

Two books that he wrote (both based on articles published in the 1890’s) exemplify his social ecology: these are “Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow” (1899) and “Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution” (1902).

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Kropotkin became increasingly concerned with two interrelated issues or developments.

One was the growing “abyss” that was developing between the countryside emptied of people and increasingly of its wildlife, and the city, with people living in squalor and poverty in overcrowded tenements and working in factories in which the conditions were unhealthy, exploitative, and completely undemocratic.

Cultivated

The other concern was the development within capitalism, of an industrial form of agriculture, a system of monoculture which depleted the fertility of the soil, and in which farming was geared not simply to the production of food but to the generation of profit.

He was also concerned that virtually all the land in Britain was privately owned, and that huge tracts of land were given over to shooting preserves – of pheasants and grouse – specifically for the recreational pursuits of a rich and powerful ruling class.

Although people like Trotsky, and liberal scholars generally, have depicted Kropotkin as a dreamy intellectual, a utopian socialist, completely out of touch with social and political “realities”, in fact Kropotkin was a very practical and down to earth scholar.

While Marx had spent his time in the library of the British Museum studying economics – mainly government reports, Kropotkin travelled widely making empirical studies of agricultural practices, and all his life, he and his wife Sophie cultivated an allotment. He even made his own furniture!

Cultural

In his small book of reflections *Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow*, which Colin Ward described as one of “the great prophetic works of the nineteenth century”, Kropotkin advocated the following:

- That all forms of industry, whether factories or workshops, must be decentralized, and he made a plea for what we would now describe as the “greening” of city life.
- That a future agriculture must be both diverse and intensive, involving vegetable gardens, intensive field cultivation, irrigated meadows, orchards, greenhouse culture, as well as kitchen gardens. Through these, Kropotkin argued, high yields of a variety of crops could

be produced. Self-sufficiency in food could be achieved, he felt, without recourse to industrial farming (under capitalism), if the cultivator could be free of the three “vultures” (as Kropotkin described then) – the state, the landowner, and the banker. Kropotkin thus opposed both the state collectivization of agriculture and capitalist farming.

- That labour, in both industry and agriculture, should – and could – be reduced to a few hours a day, enabling people in a community to have plenty of time for leisure pursuits and cultural activities.

Brutish

All this, Kropotkin recognized, would involve a social revolution, and the creation of an ecological society based on anarchist communist principles.

It is worth noting, that Kropotkin’s book had an important influence on many people, including for example, Lev Tolstoy, Ebenezer Howard (and his advocacy of garden cities), Lewis Mumford and Paul Goodman.

The book on “Mutual Aid” is perhaps the best known of all of Kropotkin’s works and is still in print. A work of popular science, it expressed Kropotkin’s concern at the end of the nineteenth century, at the rise of a school of thought that became known as “Social Darwinism”.

What initially provoked Kropotkin was an article by Thomas Huxley, who was widely known as “Darwin’s bulldog”, given his defence of Darwin’s theory, published in the journal *The Nineteenth Century* in 1888.

It was titled, *The Struggle for Existence and its Bearing upon Man*. Quoting Hobbes Huxley specifically described life in nature – both organic nature and the social life of tribal people – as being one that was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”.

Mutual aid

Following Huxley, the Social Darwinists – which included such ruthless American entrepreneurs as Rockefeller and Carnegie – applied Darwinian theory – specifically Herbert Spencer’s concept of the “survival of the fittest” to human social life.

This concept was used as an ideological justification to promote capitalism and imperialism, and the colonial exploitation of tribal peoples. It also implied that humans were by nature, motivated by aggressive impulses, and were intrinsically selfish, egoistic, competitive, and possessive individualists.

Kropotkin, of course, was critical of Rousseau, and never doubted the existence – the reality – of conflict, competition, and egoism (subjective agency), in both the living world and in human social life.

But he nevertheless strongly challenged the Hobbesian (capitalist) worldview, arguing that it was exaggerated and completely one-sided. He therefore came to write a series of articles on “mutual aid” – the cooperative activities and mutual support and care that was expressed not only by animals, but in all human societies and throughout history.

The mutual aid tendency, or what he also described as “anarchy” was also clearly evident “among ourselves” people in Western Societies.

It co-existed with, and often in opposition to, the state and capitalist institutions. Mutual aid (or anarchy) was expressed, Kropotkin argued, in worker's associations, trade unions, family life, religious charities, various clubs and cultural societies, as well as many other forms of voluntary associations. Mutual Aid, Kropotkin stressed, was an important factor in evolution and in human social life.

Plunders

Mutual Aid is not an anarchist text, nor a work of political theory, but it does reflect Kropotkin's conception of a future society that he described as free or anarchist communism.

This would imply the need for a social revolution and a form of politics that involved the following three essential tenets or principles:

- A rejection of the state and all forms of hierarchy and oppression that inhibited the autonomy and well being of the person as a unique social being;
- A repudiation of the capitalist market economy, along with its wage system (which for Kropotkin was a form of slavery) private property, its competitive ethos and its ideology of possessive individualism;
- And finally, a vision of a future ecological society, based on mutual aid, voluntary associations, participatory forms of democracy and a community-oriented form of social organization. Such a society would both enhance the fullest expression of individual liberty and express a mutualism, a co-operative relationship with the natural world.

In an era when corporate capitalism reigns triumphant, creating conditions that induce fear, social dislocations, gross economic inequalities, and an acute ecological crisis, Kropotkin's vision, and his form of politics, still has a contemporary relevance.

In contrast to the advocates of the "Green New Deal" — supported by Naomi Klein et al — Kropotkin would have insisted that the capitalist state rather than being the solution to the ecological crisis was in fact the cause of it.

For, as the social ecologist Murray Bookchin long ago argued, capitalism in symbiotic relationship with the state plunders the earth in search of profits and is as a result the main cause of the "modern crisis".

This Author

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