

Peter Kropotkin's Anarchist Communism

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Note: This is the second of a two-part article in our ongoing series on anarchist economics. Jeff Stein's review of the book Looking Forward in this issue is also part of this series. We welcome articles and letters joining in this discussion.

Kropotkin believed that the purpose of anarchist economics, indeed of any viable economic theory, was to satisfy human needs as efficiently as possible—to promote “the economical and social value of the human being.” LLR #11 presented Kropotkin’s argument that capitalism fails miserably on this score; this issue briefly reviews Kropotkin’s conception of the economic framework of a free society.

Our comrades began developing the idea of anarchist communism in the 1870s, during the course of the struggle within the First International against Marx’s authoritarianism. Kropotkin did not originate the theory (though many of its elements can be found in his earliest writings), but he quickly became one of its most prominent advocates. His arguments were influential in convincing the anarchist movement to abandon earlier mutualist and collectivist economic theories in favor of the anarchist communist principles supported by most anarchists by the mid-1880s.¹

Anarchist Communism

Economists, Kropotkin argued, made a fundamental mistake in beginning their studies from the standpoint of production. Instead, economics should be approached from the standpoint of consumption—of human needs. Needs should govern production; the purpose of anarchist economics is not so much to understand the workings of the capitalist economy (to the extent that it can be said to work at all), but rather to study “the needs of mankind, and the means of satisfying them with the least possible waste of human energy.” Although human needs are not met at present, there were no technical reasons why every family could not have comfortable homes, sufficient food, etc. The problem was not to increase productivity alone; rather, “production, having lost sight of the needs of man, has strayed in an absolutely wrong direction...”²

If the goal of an anarchist revolution was the well-being of all, then expropriation (of cities, houses, land, factories, etc.) must be the means. “This rich endowment, painfully won, built, fashioned or invented by our ancestors, must become common property, so that the collective interests of men may gain from it the greatest good for all.” Society, Kropotkin was convinced, must be reconstituted on a communist basis if humanity was ever to be truly free.

Everyone has, above all, the right to live, a free society must share the means of existence among all, without exception. “From the first day of the revolution the worker shall know that a new era is opening ... that henceforth none need crouch under the bridges while palaces are hard by, none need fast in the midst of plenty...”

In his monumental work, *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin devoted a lengthy chapter to rebutting such common objections as the notion that nobody would work without compulsion and that overseers were necessary to enforce quality standards. Free association, Kropotkin argued, was the solution to most of these objections. If sluggards and loafers began to proliferate, they

¹ Caroline Cahm, *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 41–67.

² Peter Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread*, New York University Press, 1972 (reprint of 1913 edition), pp. 190–92. Kropotkin raised similar arguments in his early (1873) essay, “Must We Occupy Ourselves with an Examination of the Ideal of a Future System?” In: M. Miller (ed.) *Selected Writings on Anarchism and Revolution* (MIT Press, 1970).

should be fed to the extent that available resources permitted, but treated as “ghost(s) of bourgeois society.” But very few people would in fact refuse to contribute to society, “there will be no need to manufacture a code of laws on their account.”³

Economists’ arguments in favor of property actually “only prove that man really produces most when he works in freedom...” Kropotkin argued that, far from shirking work when they do not receive a wage, when people work cooperatively for the good of all they achieve feats of productivity never realizable through economic or state coercion.

Well-being, that is to say the satisfaction of physical, artistic and moral needs, has always been the most powerful stimulant to work ... A free worker, who sees ease and luxury increasing for him and for others in proportion to his efforts spends infinitely far more energy and intelligence, and obtains first-class products in a far greater abundance.⁴

To the extent possible, all goods and services should be provided free of charge to all. Goods available in abundance should be available without limit; those in short supply should be rationed. Already, Kropotkin noted, many goods were provided based on need. Bridges no longer require tolls for passage; parks and gardens are open to all; many railroads offer monthly or annual passes; schools and roads are free; water is supplied to every house; libraries provide information to all without considering ability to pay, and offer assistance to those who do not know how to manage the catalogue. (That many of these services have been eroded in recent years does not invalidate his premise.)

New organizations, based on the same principle—to every man according to his needs—spring up under a thousand different forms; for without a certain leaven of Communism the present societies could not exist

Suppose that one of our great cities, so egotistic in ordinary times, were visited tomorrow by some calamity ... that same selfish city would decide that the first needs to satisfy were those of the children and the aged

How can we doubt, then, that when the instruments of production are placed at the service of all, when business is conducted on Communist principles, when labor, having recovered its place of honor in society, produces much more than is necessary to all—how can we doubt that this force (already so powerful will enlarge its sphere of action till it becomes the ruling principle of social life?⁵

Neither corporate nor government control of the economy served any useful purpose. Already in the 19th century letters could be sent between most countries without any overarching authority whatsoever. Instead, free agreements between scores of autonomous postal systems together made up an integrated postal network. Kropotkin cited several such examples to demonstrate that voluntary and completely non-coercive organizations could provide a complex network of services without the intervention of higher authorities. To this day one can travel across Europe over the lines of a dozen railway systems (capitalist and state “communist”) coordinated by voluntary agreements without any kind of central railway authority.

³ *Conquest of Bread*, pp. 55, 170,174.

⁴ *Conquest of Bread*, pp. 161–63.

⁵ *Conquest of Bread*, pp. 63–65.

There is no reason to imagine that similar principles could not be realized locally as well. As Colin Ward notes,

the whole pyramid of hierarchical authority, which has been built up in industry as in every other sphere of life, is a giant confidence trick Ossification began from the center ...

Every kind of human activity should begin from what is local and immediate, should link in a network with no center and no directing agency, hiving off new cells as the original ones grow. If there is any human activity that does not appear to fit this pattern our first question should be “Why not?” and our second should be “How can we re-arrange it so as to provide for local autonomy, local responsibility, and the fulfillment of local needs.”⁶

Methods

The new society would not be built through gradualist strategies or through government-imposed reforms—it could only be constructed by the people themselves, through direct action. Social revolution could not be imposed from above; rather society should be organized from below, and the revolution made by “the creative genius of local forces.”⁷ Kropotkin originally argued that strikes and other labor struggles could not substantially improve workers’ conditions, but later said the anarchist movement had

always advised taking an active part in those workers’ organizations which carry on the direct struggle of labor against capital and its protector—the State. Such a struggle... permits the worker to obtain some temporary improvements in the present conditions of work, while it opens his eyes to the evil that is done by capitalism and the State that supports it, and wakes up his thoughts concern the possibility of organizing consumption, production and exchange without the intervention of the capitalist and the State.⁸

Kropotkin called for expropriation not only of the means of production (land, mines, factories, etc.), but of all goods.

All is interdependent in a civilized society; it is impossible to reform anyone thing without altering the whole. On that day when we strike at private property... we shall be obliged to attack all its manifestations Once the principle of the “divine right of property” is shaken. No amount of theorizing will prevent its overthrow, here by the slaves of the soil, there by the slaves of the machine.

Since human beings “are not savages who can live in the woods without other shelter than the branches,” people will demand housing, food, clothing, and other items of consumption necessary to live any kind of decent life.⁹

⁶ Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, Freedom Press, 1982, pp. 54, 58.

⁷ Kropotkin, Letter to Lenin (1920), p. 337. In: Miller.

⁸ Kropotkin, “Modern Science and Anarchism” (1903), p. 171. In: R. Baldwin (ed.): *Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets*, Dover Publications, 1970.

⁹ Kropotkin, “Expropriation” (1895), pp. 171–72. In: Miller.

Shorter Hours

Kropotkin argued that, based upon the technology of his day, people would need put in no more than five hours a day of labor (for 25 years or so of their lives) in order to satisfy their needs for food, clothing, housing, wine, transportation and related necessities.

When we take into account how many, in the so-called civilized nations, produce nothing, how many work at harmful trades doomed to disappear, and lastly, how many are only useless middlemen, we see that in each nation the number of real producers could be doubled. [Kropotkin was writing at the dawn of the 20th century, the proportion is certainly very much higher today.] ... In fact, work could be reduced to four or even three hours a day, to produce all the goods that are produced now ...

Such a society could in return guarantee wellbeing more substantial than that enjoyed today by the middle classes. And, moreover, each worker belonging to this society would have at his disposal at least five hours a day which he could devote to science, art, and individual needs which do not come under the category of necessities, but will probably do so later on, when man's productivity will have been augmented and those objects will no longer appear luxurious.¹⁰

This latter point was, for Kropotkin, of the greatest importance. It was not enough merely to meet people's material wants—human beings must also be free to pursue their artistic and aesthetic senses. Kropotkin believed that luxury, far from being wasteful, was an absolute necessity. But if these joys, “now reserved to a few ... to give leisure and the possibility of developing everyone's intellectual capacities,” were to be obtained for all, then “the social revolution must guarantee daily bread to all.”¹¹

Tastes, Kropotkin recognized, varied widely. Some people required telescopes and laboratories to complete their lives, others require dance halls or machine shops. But all of this activity was best removed from the confines of capitalist production and carried out on a voluntary, cooperative basis after participants had completed their few hours of necessary labor. Freed from the drudgery of capitalist production, we would all be free to develop our creative instincts. Kropotkin was certain that the result would be finer art, available to all, and dramatic scientific advances (science was, after all, until relatively recently an entirely voluntary endeavor),

Work Need Not be Painful

Under current conditions, Kropotkin recognized, to do productive labor meant long hours in unhealthy workshops, chained to the same task for 20 or 30 years—maybe for one's entire life. It means living on a paltry wage, never sure what tomorrow will bring; and little opportunity to pursue the delights of science and art. But it was overwork, not work itself, that was repulsive to human nature:

Overwork for supplying the few with luxury—not work for the well-being of all. Work is a ... necessity which is health and life itself. If so many branches of useful work are so reluctantly done now, it is merely because they mean overwork, or

¹⁰ *Conquest of Bread*, pp. 122–23.

¹¹ *Conquest of Bread*, p. 124.

they are improperly organized... As to the childish question, repeated for fifty years: “Who would do disagreeable work?” frankly I regret that none of our savants has ever been brought to do it... If there is still work which is really disagreeable in itself, it is only because our scientific men have never cared to consider the means of rendering it less so. They have always known that there were plenty of starving men who would do it for a few cents a day.¹²

Kropotkin welcomed mechanization, so that “those who are now the beasts of burden of humanity [may] raise their backs ... to become at last men.” But at the same time he recognized that capitalism often introduced machinery in ways destructive both to human life and to the environment. Kropotkin was an early critic of factory farming in the midwestern United States, noting its propensity to exhaust the soil. Machinery must be integrated with rational cultivation practices and small-scale production.¹³

For Kropotkin, the purpose of agriculture—as all economic activity—was to meet human needs. Today, of course, production has little if anything to do with meeting human needs. A study of famines around the world, for example, has found no correlation between food production and starvation—indeed food is often exported from areas where people are dying of hunger and hunger-related diseases.¹⁴ Even in Kropotkin’s day, entire cities produced nothing but shoddy, second-rate goods, while other towns specialized in the manufacture of luxury goods out of reach of the bulk of the population.

Production must be reorganized on a new basis, and shifted from luxury and export goods to meeting genuine human needs. But it was not simply a matter of producing different goods—the way work was organized and carried out must be fundamentally transformed. When workers controlled their own workplaces, they would no longer tolerate poor conditions or allow their energies to be squandered in anti-social production.

Kropotkin felt it was also necessary to attack the division of labor that both Marxist and capitalist political economists have extolled as a prerequisite of improved productivity (although Marx did argue that ultimately labor should be reintegrated). Kropotkin was prepared to concede that it might well be the case that a person who did only one thing, over and over again, might indeed become quite proficient at it. But such a worker “would lose all interest in his work [and] would be entirely at the mercy of his employer with his limited handicraft.”

It is not enough, after the revolution, to simply reduce the hours of labor. Kropotkin found the notion that workers should be confined to a single repetitious activity a “horrible principle, so noxious to society, so brutalizing to the individual...” The Social Revolution must abolish the separation between manual and brain work, give workers control of their workplaces, abolish wage labor. “Then work will no longer appear a curse of fate; it will become what it should be—the free exercise of all the faculties of man.”¹⁵ Under the rubric of the division of labor, those who actually make things are not supposed to think or make decisions, while others “have the privilege of thinking for the others, and ... think badly because the whole world of those who toil with their hands is unknown to them.”

¹² Kropotkin, “Anarchist Communism: Its Basis and Principles” (1891), p. 71. In: Baldwin.

¹³ *Conquest of Bread*, pp. 70,75–76.

¹⁴ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines* (Clarendon Press, 1981). I take this summary from Ralf Dahrendorf’s *The Modern Social Conflict*, p. 9 (University of California Press, 1988).

¹⁵ *Conquest of Bread*, p. 164.

The division of labor means labelling and stamping men for life—some to splice rope in factories, some to be foremen in a business, others to shove huge coal baskets in a particular part of a mine; but none of them to have any idea of machinery as a whole, nor of business, nor of mines. And thereby they destroy the love of work and the capacity for invention...¹⁶

It would be far better, Kropotkin argued, for teachers to share in the duties of washing the floors, sweeping the school-yard, and the myriad of other tasks essential to school operations, than to allow the formation of an intelligentsia, “an aristocracy of skilled labor.”¹⁷

And much of the advantage derived from the division of labor is in any event lost through the necessity it creates to cart goods from place to place, and to create enormous bureaucracies to coordinate production of disparate parts that must ultimately be integrated into a single machine. “It is foolish indeed to export wheat and to import flour, to export wool and import cloth, to export iron and import machinery; not only because transportation is a waste of time and money, but, above all, because ... the industrial and technical capacities ... remain undeveloped if they are not exercised in a variety of industries.”¹⁸

Kropotkin argued that work duties should be rotated, that agricultural and industrial production should be integrated, that towns should (insofar as possible) produce their own food, and their own industrial products. The division of labor, in industry and in international trade, has been used as a mechanism for despoiling the great majority. With economic self-reliance, Kropotkin argued, people would be able to ensure that their needs were met. The advantages of centralized production are similarly illusory. While it is sometimes convenient for capitalists to bring their operations under central control (although even they increasingly find it necessary to encourage local initiative), this is not because of any technical advantages. Industry is centralized to facilitate market domination, not because of often non-existent economies of scale.¹⁹ To this day the high-tech, advanced industries so often held up to demonstrate the superiority of centralized control are often carried out in small-scale, dispersed operations. Decentralization is, in fact, more efficient.

Abolish the Wage System

Kropotkin argued that the coming social revolution’s “great[est] service to humanity” would be “to make the wage system in all its forms an impossibility.”²⁰ In Kropotkin’s day, most socialists acknowledged the need to abolish the wage system, but argued for its replacement by labor tokens representing either the “value” of people’s labor or time put in on the job. Kropotkin, too, argued for such a system in 1873.²¹ But he soon concluded that such schemes were both wildly impractical and thoroughly reformist:

Once the abolition of private property is proclaimed, and the possession in common of all the means of production is introduced, how can the wages system be main-

¹⁶ *Conquest of Bread*, pp. 198–99.

¹⁷ “Must We Occupy Ourselves ... ?” p. 56. In: Miller.

¹⁸ *Conquest of Bread*, p. 206.

¹⁹ Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow* (1899), pp. 153–54 (Freedom Press, 1985).

²⁰ “Expropriation,” p. 180. In: Miller.

²¹ “Must We Occupy Ourselves ... ?” pp. 68–69.

tained in any form? This is, nevertheless, what collectivists are doing when they recommend the use of the ‘labor-cheques’ as a mode of remuneration for labor.²²

Today labor vouchers are out of favor, but most socialists still accept the wage system and money, often disguised as consumption credits, as inevitable. Proponents of such schemes argue that they are needed “in order to avoid systematic and massive misallocation of time and resources.” The marketplace is, of course, a time-tested mechanism for ascertaining social needs and preferences for goods. The reason there is mass starvation in Africa is not because the market doesn’t work to meet human needs, but because our fellow workers prefer not to eat.

Such devices make sense only within the framework of a market economy where goods are produced and distributed not on the basis of need, but on ability to pay. Whether such an economic system maintains wage differentials (the arguments against these were reviewed in the first installment) or proclaims equal wages (or, perhaps, wage differentials favoring those engaged in “disagreeable or unhealthy work”), it nevertheless upholds an organization of production and consumption which originated in private property and which is realizable only within its constraints.²³

Kropotkin refuted such arguments 100 years ago, when they were still fresh:

They say, “No private property,” and immediately after strive to maintain private property in its daily manifestations

It can never be. For the day on which old institutions will fall under the proletarian axe voices will call out: ‘Bread, shelter, ease for all!’ And those voices will be listened to; the people will say: ‘Let us begin by allaying our thirst for life, for happiness, for liberty, that we have never quenched. And when we shall have tasted of this joy, we will set to work to demolish the last vestiges of middle class rule: its morality drawn from account-books its “debit and credit” philosophy ... and we shall build in the name of Communism and Anarchy.’²⁴

If there was a genuine shortage of necessities, Kropotkin argued that it was more just to ration goods than to maintain mechanisms for exchange. The wage system, in all its forms, should be rejected in favor of communist principles; for if wages are to be maintained (whether based on labor, or any other measure) a State apparatus is perforce necessary as well.

But the fundamental point, for Kropotkin, was that people must seize control of their economic destiny—must be prepared to experiment with new processes and new methods of organization

²² Kropotkin, “The Wage System,” pp. 94–96. In: V. Richards, *Why Work* (Freedom Press). *Conquest of Bread*, p. 176.

²³ For an example of one such approach see Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel’s *Looking Forward: Participatory Economics for the Twenty-First Century*, reviewed this issue. Similarly, the WSA’s Richard Laubach argues, in the *Discussion Bulletin* (#23, May 1987, p. 21; #25, Sept. 1987, pp. 17–22), for “giving all workers a set of votes on what to produce ... ‘consumption credits’” used “to acquire goods and services [and thereby] provide information about the community’s cumulative preferences.” (He does not mean that we would inform central planners of our consumption plans for the coming year; an unwieldy system, though not a market economy. Instead, consumers would be provided with an equal number of “consumption credits” which they would use to buy things from stores, just as with money.) We are clearly talking about money here, and an economic system which must quickly either revert to a full-fledged market economy or to central planning—in either case one that has little if anything to do with meeting human needs and promoting human freedom.

²⁴ *Conquest of Bread*, pp. 179, 189.

while taking advantage of the existing methods to meet immediate needs. The technical means of satisfying human needs, Kropotkin was convinced, were at hand,

The only thing that may be wanting to the Revolution is the boldness of initiative ...
Ceasing to produce for unknown buyers, and looking in its midst for needs and tastes to be satisfied, society will liberally assure the life and ease of each of its members, as well as that moral satisfaction which work gives when freely chosen and freely accomplished...²⁵

The Social Revolution would build on the basis of what was—seizing the existing industries and goods to meet immediate needs and as the building blocks from which we would construct a free society. And while it is neither possible nor desirable to spell out in every detail how such an economy might operate, Kropotkin argued that it was in fact essential to think about its general outlines in advance, so that we might build with a purpose.

Expropriation, direct action, federalism and self-management were, for Kropotkin, the means. But a society not built upon communist principles would inevitably succumb to the central power it established to oversee production and distribution. Only the free distribution of necessities, in all their variety, on the basis not of position or productivity, but of need, was compatible with a free society.

²⁵ *Conquest of Bread*, p. 229.

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