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Revolution and Evolution: Kropotkin's Anarchism

George Crowder

Anarchism is a world-concept based upon a mechanical explanation of all phenomena, embracing the whole of nature – that is, including in it the life of human societies and their economic, political, and moral problems. Its method of investigation is that of the exact natural sciences When philistine naturalists, seemingly basing their arguments on 'Darwinism', began to teach, 'Crush whoever is weaker than yourself, such is the law of nature', it was easy for us to prove first, that this was not Darwin's conclusion, and by the same scientific method to show that these scientists were on the wrong path; that no such law exists: that the life of animals teaches us something entirely different, and that their conclusions were absolutely unscientific. They were just as unscientific as for instance the assertion that the inequality of wealth is a law of nature, or that capitalism is the most advantageous form of social life calculated to promote progress. ... The anarchists conceive a society in which all the mutual relations of its members are regulated, not by laws, not by authorities, whether self-imposed or elected, but by mutual agreements between the members of that society and by a sum of social customs and habits – not petrified by law, routine, or superstition, but continually developing and continually readjusted in accordance with the ever-growing requirements of a free life stimulated by the progress of science, invention, and the steady growth of higher ideals. ... We understand the social revolution, not at all as a Jacobinist dictatorship [but] as a widespread popular movement, during which in every town and village within the region of the revolt, the masses will have to take upon themselves the task of rebuilding society ... without awaiting any orders and directions from above.¹

Anarchism aims at a society without the state, but that is not the same thing as a society without rules.² Contrary to the popular misidentification of anarchism with ‘anarchy’, or chaos, an anarchist society would be ordered, but ordered by rules freely accepted by people rather than by laws coercively imposed upon them by government. For the classical anarchists, who reached their peak of influence around 1880–1914, human oppression is principally due to three institutions: capitalism, religion and (most importantly) the state. Since each of these oppressive institutions supports the others, all have to be abolished in order for the good society to emerge. The desirable society will be characterized by individual liberty from coercion and ignorance and by economic equality instead of class domination.

Opposition to capitalism locates the anarchists within the mainstream of the socialist tradition alongside the Marxists. Like the Marxists, the anarchists are revolutionaries rather than reformers, believing that the social changes that are needed are too radical to be accepted by the dominant classes without a struggle. Where the anarchists differ crucially from the Marxists, however, is in their rejection of state authority even as a transitional means to the necessary social revolution.

The revolutionary stream in anarchism is balanced by another aspect, namely its intellectual debt to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The Scientific Revolution of the seventeenth century had shown the power of human reason to explain the natural world. Galileo, for example, had demonstrated how modern scientific method, combining empirical observation with mathematical calculation, could overturn the old Aristotelian (or ‘Scholastic’) understanding of cosmology. The Enlightenment and its nineteenth-century heirs sought to apply the same methods to the study of human society, both to explain society more satisfactorily and ultimately to improve or even to perfect it.

The classical anarchists saw themselves as standing in this line of succession. In part this explains their characteristic hostility towards religion, which they, like the Marxists, usually associated with outmoded and harmful superstition. It also goes some way towards explaining the anarchists’ optimism about the prospects for the future free society. If science can lay bare the basis of human morality then we should be able to identify moral laws of nature on which we can all agree just as we can agree on the descriptive laws of nature uncovered by the Scientific Revolution. Laws that command agreement need not be enforced.

The thought of Peter Kropotkin exemplifies all these general anarchist tendencies but he is especially interesting in his attempt to integrate the revolutionary and scientific elements of anarchism. Born in 1842 into the

aristocracy of tsarist Russia, the young Kropotkin received a military education that one might have expected to lead anywhere but to anarchism. However, by the mid-1870s he had emerged as a leading anarchist revolutionary, active in Russia, Switzerland and France. As a result of his membership of the first International Workingmen's Association, which was proscribed in France, he was imprisoned at Clairvaux from 1883 to 1886. After his release he emigrated to England, where he settled in London and devoted himself to writing. His advocacy of anarchism and his fascination with the natural world, especially through the lens of Darwinism, come together in several works, of which *Modern Science and Anarchism* is a good example.

Much of *Modern Science and Anarchism* is devoted to attacking existing social, political and economic institutions and to sketching the anarchist alternatives. On the critical side Kropotkin focuses on what he sees as the nexus between capitalism and the state. The basic anarchist objection to capitalism is the standard socialist claim that economic inequality leads to class domination. In this connection Kropotkin neatly observes that the 'laissez-faire' principle celebrated by orthodox political economists in the tradition of Adam Smith in reality applies much more to the capitalists than to the working class, whose liberty is typically curtailed by taxes, monopolies and restrictions on the right to strike (182–3).

What is distinctive of anarchism, however, is its opposition to the state. For Kropotkin as for other anarchists, capitalism survives only because it is kept in place by the coercive force of government; if capitalism is to be abolished, the state must be abolished (181). The evil of the state extends beyond the maintenance of capitalism. Its essence is compulsion or coercion: while any society needs rules, the distinguishing mark of the state is that it turns 'customs', or freely accepted rules, into 'laws', which Kropotkin understands as rules coercively enforced by centralized, specialist authorities (175). Laws usually serve the interests only of those dominant groups who make them. But even when laws are directed towards desirable ends they undermine our capacity for genuinely moral action because we obey them out of 'fear of punishment' rather than from a sense of their rightness (157). In short, 'the State represents the negation of liberty and spoils even what it undertakes to do for the sake of general well-being' (165). These problems persist regardless of the form taken by the state. 'Representative' government suffers from them as much as dictatorship, and even an ostensibly 'socialist' government would have the same defects.

But Kropotkin sees that anarchism needs more than a critique of the state; it also needs a positive account of the alternative stateless society. As he expresses

it in the selected passage, this will be organized 'by mutual agreements between the members of that society and by a sum of social customs and habits' (157). Kropotkin envisages the good society as a series of 'communes', or small communities in which property is held in common, each internally structured by rules freely accepted by its members and all externally related by a system of free federation.

Kropotkin does acknowledge a division within anarchist thought between two main versions of the ideal social structure, corresponding to two rival accounts of economic distribution. On the one hand there is the 'mutualism' favoured by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and his followers, which rewards people in accordance with how long they spend at work (160). This scheme Kropotkin regards as unrealistic, in part because of the difficulty of equating the value of work with the amount of time spent working. He prefers the 'communist' alternative, in which goods and services are produced in common and distributed according to need (171–4). In this he agrees with the Marxists.

As noted earlier, however, Kropotkin and other anarchists depart from the Marxists over the question of how the transition is to be made from the existing capitalist state to the stateless communist future. Kropotkin accepts that the transition must be by way of revolution rather than parliamentary reform, but he implicitly condemns the Marxist account of revolution as authoritarian, and he replaces it with a characteristically anarchist theory emphasizing popular spontaneity. He also seeks to integrate this with an evolutionary explanation based on a distinctive interpretation of Darwin.

To focus on the evolutionary aspect first, this has to be set, as already mentioned, against the background of a general anarchist commitment to Enlightenment values of reason and scientific method. Thus, Kropotkin describes anarchism as 'a world-concept based upon a mechanical explanation of all phenomena, embracing the whole of nature' and claims that 'its method of investigation is that of the exact natural sciences' (150). He contrasts this scientific approach with 'the metaphysical fictions of old', which include, of course, religious views but extend also to 'the dialectical method' – a slap at the philosophical–historical speculations of Hegel and Marx (152). Rather than such predetermined patterns in history, it is 'the method of induction and deduction', so successful at explaining the natural world, that will also explain the social world. After all, 'the life of societies' is part of 'the phenomena of nature' (150).

The particular form in which science is most helpful to anarchist inquiry, Kropotkin believes, is that of Darwinism. Kropotkin was writing at a time when Charles Darwin's master-idea of the evolution of species by natural selection was

widely accepted as a model for theories in a range of fields – ethical, economic and political. But in these connections the dominant interpretation of Darwin, ‘social Darwinism’, was rejected by Kropotkin as a grotesque misunderstanding. For the social Darwinists, such as Herbert Spencer, the central message of Darwin is that nature is an arena of competitive struggle among individuals and groups which leads inexorably to ‘the survival of the fittest’ (Spencer’s phrase).³ This was thought to justify competitive institutions and practices such as laissez-faire economics and imperialist international relations. Kropotkin summarizes this message as ‘Crush whoever is weaker than yourself, such is the law of nature’, and he dismisses it as the conclusion of ‘philistine naturalists’ who have got Darwin all wrong (153).

The true lesson from Darwin, Kropotkin argues, is ‘that the life of animals teaches us something entirely different’ (153). Although he does not go into detail in *Modern Science and Anarchism*, Kropotkin explains elsewhere that the central message is one of ‘mutual aid’, the title of one of his most influential books.⁴ In this view it remains true that the realm of nature is one of a struggle for existence, but this is primarily not a struggle among individuals or groups within a species but rather the struggle of a species as a whole to survive in an often-hostile environment. ‘Besides the law of Mutual Struggle, there is in Nature the law of Mutual Aid, which, for the success of the struggle for life, and especially for the progressive evolution of the species, is far more important than the law of mutual contest.’⁵

For Kropotkin, then, Darwin really teaches the importance, and the naturalness, of co-operation rather than competition. The political implications of Darwinism point not in the direction of economic laissez-faire and imperialism but rather towards libertarian communism – that is, towards anarchism as Kropotkin understands it. Powerful tendencies towards voluntary co-operation lie deep within human nature. These have been submerged or distorted by artificial institutions like the state, which is a ‘superstructure’ invented to serve the selfish interests of the few (192). But mutual aid survives in human experience like an underground stream.

Indeed, Kropotkin believes that mutual aid is gradually but increasingly winning through in contemporary society. Here he refers to the emergence of ‘thousands upon thousands of free organisations for all sorts of needs: economic (agreements between the railway companies, the labour syndicates, trusts of employers, agricultural co-operation, co-operation for export, etc.), political, intellectual, artistic, educational, and so on’ (168–9). None of these arrangements depends on the state; all draw upon the natural instinct to co-operate.

However, Kropotkin's anarchism does not rely on evolution alone; we must also 'promote evolution' in the desirable direction through revolutionary action (154). In so doing we should learn from the mistakes of past revolutions. The great French Revolution of 1789, the Europe-wide revolutions of 1848, the Paris Commune of 1871 – the ultimate failure of all of these is due, Kropotkin argues, to their reliance on the methods of government in attempting to plan, inspire and direct the course of the revolution. As William Godwin recognized as early as the 1790s, the use of 'governmental authority' has always 'acted as a retarding force upon the revolutionary movement' (154). The Jacobin Committee of Public Safety and even the Council of the 1871 Commune served only to perpetuate the ways of the state, becoming incipient states in their turn.

The true social revolution must itself take a form that anticipates the kind of society it is intended to inaugurate – that is, the revolution must be 'a widespread popular movement' that ignites spontaneously among the people of 'every town and village within the region of the revolt' (188). Rather than led or directed by any kind of distinct authority, it must be the pure expression of 'the collective spirit of the masses' (189).

Kropotkin does allow, however, that such a revolution has to be preceded by a period of 'incubation' in which the trail is blazed by the isolated protests of individuals and small groups: 'Not one, or two, or tens, but *hundreds* of similar revolts have preceded *and must precede* every revolution' (190). Again, though, these 'partial revolts' must be spontaneous rather than deliberately organized by anything like a central authority, since 'the character of every revolution is determined by the character and aim of the uprisings by which it is preceded' (191).

Although Kropotkin does not say so explicitly, he may have in mind here a partial defence of 'propaganda by the deed', the anarchist practice of inspiring revolution by actions as well as words. Notoriously, propaganda by deed came to be associated with the assassinations and bombings that terrorized Europe in the name of anarchism around the turn of the twentieth century. Kropotkin did not approve of these actions but he was inclined to explain them as understandable acts of desperation.⁶

Does Kropotkin's kind of anarchism represent a fundamental redefinition of revolution? Here two issues are striking: whether the state is a necessary tool of revolution or an obstacle to its achievement and whether anarchists like Kropotkin are neorevolutionaries or not revolutionaries at all.

There is no doubt that the anarchists depart from the statist pattern laid down by the French Revolution and later taken up by the Bolshevik

Revolution – indeed, they do so self-consciously and deliberately, for the reasons given. But that scarcely disqualifies them as revolutionaries, since they clearly demand radical social change that requires an emphatic break with the past. Nor are they opposed to violent means where those are judged to be necessary, although it must be open to question whether violence is essential to revolution. The case of Kropotkin becomes more complex at the point where he tries to combine revolution and evolution, ‘internal war’ with mutual aid, immediate with gradual change. It is this nexus that raises the thorniest critical questions for Kropotkin’s view.

Kropotkin’s reinterpretation of Darwin is interesting and one might say a more humane reading than that of the social Darwinists, but it suffers from similar problems. A standard objection to thinkers like Spencer is that they try to extract their ethical and political conclusions from a thesis that is essentially descriptive or factual rather than normative, thereby violating ‘Hume’s law’ against deriving ‘ought’ statements from ‘is’ statements. Even if competition and violence are prominent features of the natural world it does not follow that we ought to promote these; perhaps we ought to restrain or manage them.

Similarly, even supposing that mutual aid is a significant factor in nature as Kropotkin claims, it is a further step to argue that it ought to be emphasized more than other factors and values. There may be good reasons to promote mutual aid, but those reasons are not given simply by pointing to mutual aid as a fact. Kropotkin cooks the books when he refers to mutual aid as a factor not merely in evolution but in ‘progressive’ evolution – presumably that evolution of which we approve. His thesis mixes up claims of fact and claims of value.

Further, if mutual aid really is as potent an evolutionary force as Kropotkin says it is, why should we, and how can we, ‘promote’ it? This seems to be the role of revolution as Kropotkin conceives it: to supplement or expedite the mutual-aid developments that are already present in the underlying pattern of social evolution. But supplementing or expediting an evolutionary process would be like supplementing or expediting the law of gravity.

On the other hand, Kropotkin’s social revolution is itself a kind of evolutionary process, since it cannot be led, planned or inspired by anything like a central authority; rather, it must arise spontaneously from ‘the people’. Such a view looks prescient as a critique of Marxism–Leninism, under which the vanguard party did indeed reconstitute itself as a new oppressive state. But the price for the anarchists’ revolutionary purism was the frustration of waiting for the proper social revolution to occur under its own volition. Evidence of that frustration can perhaps be seen in the excesses of propaganda by deed.

The deepest level of difficulty for Kropotkin's view, and for anarchism in general, concerns the possibility of agreement. For Kropotkin and the anarchists, state coercion is unnecessary because people are capable of agreeing on the rules that will govern them without the use of force. Behind this is an assumption of something like the ancient doctrine of natural law, the idea that there is an objective law of morality inherent in human nature. In Kropotkin's version this will be revealed by modern scientific method, in particular using the evolutionary model of Darwin.

But what if, as so many people have believed in recent times, there is no such natural law? Conceptions of natural law depend on ideas of human nature, which are widely disputed. Or what if there is such a law but it is highly generic, leaving room for reasonable divergence of opinion over more detailed principles and applications? Perhaps there are natural principles of morals and politics but these are sometimes conflicting rather than harmonious, calling for hard choices that once again invite disagreement and conflict.⁷

Again, whatever ethical principles there may be, it is questionable whether they can be identified by the natural sciences. While the sciences observe the world objectively, from the outside as it were, moral and political life is lived from the inside, bounded and informed by particular languages and cultures.⁸ These vary and the variations divide people. All human beings can agree that $2 + 2 = 4$ and that water boils at 100 degrees Celsius. But the desirability of social institutions depends to some extent on local and historical conditions, and even on personal experiences, that cannot be captured in an abstract and objective scientific law. This is not to say that there are no objective and universal goods or that agreement is never possible in these and other cases. It is to say that the methods of the natural sciences are unlikely to substitute for the kind of local, historical and personal judgements that are unavoidable in morals and politics and that always tend to divide people.

Even where there is substantial agreement on the rules to be followed, experience suggests that we cannot rely on everyone to follow those rules consistently. As John Locke points out, people are apt to favour their own interests when they interpret and apply the rules.⁹ Disputes break out, and these are best settled by an independent authority – government.

The currently dominant view in political theory is that there are too many points at which disagreement and conflict can arise for modern societies to dispense with coercive laws. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Kropotkin's optimism runs aground on this hard truth.

Further reading

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