

**PETER KROPOTKIN: Portrait of an Anarchist Prince**

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## 1. Life and career

Peter Kropotkin, Russian prince, was a person of many parts - indeed of remarkably many parts: would-be administrative reformer in Tsarist Russia, explorer, geographer/geologist, participant in the European anarchist and socialist movements as activist, journalist, pamphleteer and theoretician, explicatory scientific writer, campaigner for prison reform, social anthropologist, economic sociologist, historian, literary critic, and ethicist. What were Kropotkin's origins? Whence came this unusual combination of political activism and of polymathy fully meriting the characterisation of Kropotkin as "a renaissance genius who aspired to universal knowledge", to quote his principal biographers (Woodcock and Avakumovic, 1950:445)? And how did Kropotkin exercise his many talents throughout his life?

### *Childhood and schooling*

Kropotkin was born in 1842 into an aristocratic family which claimed to be descended from the dynasty of Rurik that had governed Russia before the Romanovs. Fellow revolutionaries jested that Kropotkin had more right to the throne of Russia than Alexander II who was only a German. Joking apart, the Kropotkins were a family which had played an active part in medieval Russia with its loose structure of semi-independent principalities. In 1857 Kropotkin left home for the élite military school, the Corps of Pages, where after a stay of four or five years those who passed the final examinations were received in any regiment which they chose. Each year the first 16 pupils of the highest form were nominated *pages de chambre*, as such being attached to a member of the imperial family who might be the Emperor.

As early as 1860 Kropotkin's potential for restiveness and independence of spirit was indicated in his leading role in a revolt against a martinet on the teaching staff, a role for which he was arrested and confined to the "black cell" for ten days. His reading at the Corps of Pages, much of it outside the school's curriculum, was unusually wide for a student of his age, and during this period he began to manifest his lifelong interest in scientific subjects. Kropotkin acknowledged the value of the exercises involving the application of scientific theory to concrete practice which were part of a corps student's training in military engineering. His early aptitude for understanding scientific thought led to his being entrusted with the task of compiling a new and up-to-date physics textbook under the supervision of the lecturer on whose lessons the book was based.

### *Siberia: administrative reform and disillusionment*

Upon graduation from the Corps of Pages in 1862, after serving as *page de chambre* to Alexander II himself, Kropotkin chose the newly created regiment, the Mountain Cossacks of the Amur. In this unconventional choice he was influenced by reports suggesting that there was scope for reform in Siberia, distant from St Petersburg and governed by some enlightened military administrators. Kropotkin's first assignment was to produce a report on Siberian prisons for which he conducted an extensive investigation of the whole Russian penal system. His report condemned the exile system and made several radical recommendations such as a proper

classification of prisoners, the provision of productive and paid work, and a plan for the transformation of prisons into reformatories. This was followed by a similarly reformist report on municipal self-government in Siberia. Kropotkin's reports were buried in St Petersburg and in 1863 his superior was replaced by an amiable but ineffective successor.

Kropotkin's deeper, longer-term response not only to the reception of his reports but also to reaction in St Petersburg and pervasive inefficiency and corruption in the provinces was the beginning of complete disillusionment regarding the possibility of achieving improvements within the existing regime. The result of this despair was eventually to lead him into the movement known as Narodniki, agrarian socialists or anarchists who believed that an eventually enlightened and organised peasantry, "avoiding the false lure of democracy so dear the liberals, would, through a national assembly, proclaim that henceforth the land was the peasants', and that a new Russia had arisen, a Russia of loosely federated and completely self-governing peasant communes" (Perlman, 1928: 52-54).

#### *Siberia: travels and exploration*

However, Kropotkin's immediate reaction to his deception was to turn to assignments offering the possibilities of exploration in remote areas. His journeys eventually entailed travel "over fifty thousand miles in carts, on board steamers, in boats, but chiefly on horseback" (Kropotkin, 1971c: 168). At several points during these journeys he also had to deal with dangerous situations. Three of these journeys – two to Manchuria and one to the vast, deserted mountain region between Northern Siberia and the upper reaches of the River Amur – proved to be a source of observations to Kropotkin concerning geography and animal life which were to prove important for his subsequent scientific and sociological work.

#### *St Petersburg and research*

Kropotkin's departure from Siberia and resignation from the army was triggered by the particularly brutal suppression of an insurrection of Polish exiles in 1866. In the following year he returned to St Petersburg and entered the university with the conviction that he needed to acquire the theoretical background required for fully working out the implications of the observations he had accumulated in his field work. Once back in St Petersburg he lectured to the Russian Geographical Society on one of his expeditions and accepted the offer of secretaryship of the Society's Physical Geography section. On his next – and last – expedition as a geographer he was sent by the Society to examine the ridges of glacial drift in the Baltic regions, spending most of his time in Finland.

While still in Finland in the autumn of 1871 he received an offer from the Russian Geographical Society of the position of its secretary. Experiencing greater mental leisure during this expedition he had devoted more time to the contrast between the undoubted joys of scientific life and the poverty and lack of access to knowledge of the great majority of people. As he put it, "Knowledge is an immense power. Man must know. But we already know much. What if that knowledge – and

only that – should become the possession of all? Would not science itself progress in leaps, and cause mankind to make strides in production, invention, and social creation, of which we are hardly in a condition now to measure the speed?” (Kropotkin, 1971c: 240). On the basis of such considerations he sent a reply to Geographical Society in which he turned down their offer, choosing instead the path of a Narodnik.

#### *Visit to Western Europe*

In 1872 Kropotkin visited Western Europe for the first time, spending most of his time in Switzerland. In Zurich he joined the local section of the International Workingman’s Association and during a visit to Geneva witnessed with distaste the exploitation for their political careers of the labour movement by local politicians. Thence he proceeded to the Jura mountains where the Jura Federation had become the centre of the Association’s Bakuninist wing which was in rebellion against its Marxist-dominated general council. Here he made the acquaintance of leading figures of the Bakuninist wing and, impressed by the congenial equalitarian relations and independence of thought which he found in the Jura Federation, decided that his place in the socialist movement was as an anarchist. After a visit to Belgium where he witnessed the agitation then taking place among the clothiers in Verviers he returned to Russia.

#### *Membership of Chaikovsky Circle and imprisonment*

Back in St Petersburg he resigned from the civil service and joined the Chaikovsky Circle, whose leading figure, Nicholas Chaikovsky, was the brother of the famous composer. The Circle had a propagandist and educational rather than conspiratorial character. However, its distribution of forbidden literature and its organisation of discussion groups among workers in St Petersburg, particularly those in the engineering, building and textile sectors, meant that it was a target for the police and that the meetings of the discussion groups had to be in secret. Kropotkin was now combining his geographical with political work for which he disguised himself as a peasant with the name, Borodin. In 1873 Kropotkin drafted his first significant political statement, a full fledged exposition of Narodnik ideas entitled “Should We Occupy Ourselves with Examining the Ideals of a Future Society” (reproduced in Kropotkin, 1993). This statement apparently served primarily as an intellectual memorandum for the Chaikovsky Circle but was only made public as a piece of evidence for the prosecution at the trial of 193 contacts of the Circle in 1878.

By 1874 arrests had made serious inroads into the Circle, and Kropotkin decided to leave St Petersburg for Southern Russia. However, he felt that first he should present to the Geographical Society his report on the glaciation of Northern Russia. During the delay occasioned by his waiting for the meeting the police were able to assure themselves that Kropotkin was Borodin, and just before his departure from St Petersburg he was arrested by a detective accompanied by a recently arrested weaver who had turned informer.

Once in the fortress of Peter-and-Paul, where successive generations of the Tsar’s enemies had been imprisoned since the reign of Peter the Great, Kropotkin began a possibly interminable wait

for his trial. Through the intercession of friends and learned societies the Tsar eventually allowed him to receive the books and writing materials required for the completion of his report on European glaciations. However, partly owing to the psychological impact of the arrest and exile to Siberia for of his brother, Alexander, to whom he had always been particularly close and who was to commit suicide in 1886 in despair over the continuation of exile likely to make impossible a return to his once promising career as an astronomer, Kropotkin's health deteriorated. Afflicted with scurvy, in the spring of 1876 he was transferred to the prison attached to the St Petersburg military hospital.

### *Escape from prison*

At the hospital Kropotkin was permitted to walk in the prison yard, at the end of which was an open gate together with a sentry box that was unoccupied while the sentry was pacing up and down. It was through this gate that Kropotkin decided to make his escape on the basis of a plan agreed with his friends outside through letters in cipher. The principle of the plan was simple: Kropotkin would evade the sentry, run out through the gate, and be picked up by a waiting carriage. Successful execution, however, depended on split-second timing and assurance from friends posted over a distance of two miles that the streets leading from the prison were clear of peasant carts and other obstacles – an assurance conveyed to Kropotkin by a violinist playing in a rented bungalow close to the prison. At the prearranged signal Kropotkin managed to evade the sentry and to reach the waiting carriage which at breakneck speed was quickly lost to the prison guards. In a barber's shop Kropotkin had his beard shaved and then, with his driver, proceeded to the Islands, a fashionable promenade, and in the evening to a separate room in one of the St Petersburg's most fashionable restaurants where it was correctly assumed that the police would not search.

However, as Kropotkin was all too aware, his escape would be followed by raids throughout St Petersburg and by reinforced controls at Russia's frontiers. Thus, dressed in an officer's uniform and equipped with a friend's passport, he crossed Finland to a small remote port whence he sailed to Sweden. After crossing to Norway, under the assumed name of Alexis Levashov, he sailed for Hull in England for the beginning of an exile from Russia which was to last until 1917. Understandably Kropotkin's audacious escape became the stuff of legend.

### *Exile in England and Switzerland*

Once in England, to support himself, Kropotkin began what was eventually to prove a long career as a writer of articles and book reviews. One source of paid work was *Nature*, for which Kropotkin wrote concerning scientific publications and discoveries, and another was *The Times* for he wrote regular short pieces for concerning items in the foreign press. An amusing consequence of Kropotkin's work for *Nature* was his being asked by the assistant editor, James Keltie, ignorant not only of Russian but also of the true identity of Alexis Levashov, to review Kropotkin's own books on the Glacial Period and Orography of Asia. Pleased to be informed of the presence of the famous refugee in England, Keltie changed the assignment from an assessment of the book to an expository article on its contents.

In early 1877 Kropotkin left England for Switzerland, joined the Jura Federation of the International Workingman's Association, and settled in La Chaux-de-Fonds. A full life of political work now began in the form of travelling in Switzerland and abroad, lecturing, contributing to the *Jura Bulletin* and the new libertarian newspaper, *L'Avant Garde*, and initial research for what was to be Kropotkin's major historical treatise, *The Great French Revolution*. In 1878 among the Russian émigrés Kropotkin met and married Sophie Ananiev, a woman of Jewish and Slav descent who had abandoned her family in Siberia owing to disapproval of the way in which the workers at her father's gold mine were treated. She had subsequently worked as a midwife, eventually coming to Switzerland to recover from a collapse of her health.

After the official suppression of *L'Avant Garde* by the Swiss authorities, Kropotkin became editor of the new publication, *Le Révolté*, most of which he also had to write himself. Kropotkin's objective was "to write it in such a style that complicated historical and economical questions should be comprehensible to every intelligent worker" (Kropotkin, 1971c: 418). *Le Révolté* was to be the vehicle for some of his most celebrated political pieces, including his celebrated exhortation, *Appeal to the Young*, which during the following 12 years was translated into 14 European languages as well as Chinese and Japanese. Kropotkin viewed his work for *Le Révolté* as of critical importance: "I worked out here the foundations of nearly all that I wrote later on" (Kropotkin, 1971c: 424).

#### *Expulsion to France and return to and release from prison*

In 1881 Alexander II was assassinated. Kropotkin now heard that he was among those targeted by a secret organisation called the Holy League established by the Tsar's brother, Vladimir. He does not appear to have been unduly perturbed by this news but more importantly that summer he was the subject of an expulsion order by the Swiss authorities acting under the pressure of the Russian government and of a campaign in the official Russian press which menaced wholesale expulsion of Swiss governesses and ladies' maids (of whom there many living in Russia). Kropotkin settled in Thonon just across the border. After another period in England where he extended to *The Fortnightly Review* and *The Encyclopedia Britannica* the list of publications to which he was a contributor he returned to Thonon in the autumn of 1882 where he was arrested in December. He was tried along with more than 50 other prisoners for affiliation to the International Workingman's Association under a law passed after the Paris Commune. Although the Association had effectively ceased to exist in 1877, Kropotkin, together with three others, was condemned to five years in prison. Official pressures behind the trial were revealed when shortly afterwards the prosecuting counsel and one of the magistrates were presented by the Russian government with the Tsarist Cross of St Anne.

This time his prison was at Clairvaux where conditions were much better than they had been in his Russian gaols. He was permitted books but no newspapers, and during his imprisonment he never saw a copy of *Le Révolté* (which he had taken to calling his "gamin" or naughty boy). Lack of access to such publications clearly weighed on Kropotkin but more positively he was beginning to

shift the focus of his thinking from pamphleteering to the more systematic work which was to occupy more of his time subsequently. Once again his health deteriorated, this time leading to an attack of malaria, which was endemic around Clairvaux, as well as to a return of scurvy.

Kropotkin's trial and condemnation had caused a furore in important parts of the intellectual élite in England and France as well as in the press and among members of the Chamber of Deputies in the latter. Finally in January 1886 Kropotkin received an official pardon. He realised that he might still be subject to restrictions on his movements if he remained in France, and so decided to return to England. However, before leaving France he spent time on visits to market gardeners in Paris to discuss their methods of intensive agriculture, a subject he was to treat at length in his later writings, and delivered to a huge audience a lecture on "Anarchism and Its Place in Socialist Evolution".

During the period after his release, largely on the basis of pieces previously published and of his experience as both a would-be reformer and a prison inmate, Kropotkin compiled his book, *In Russian and French Prisons*. The book contains a graphic account of horrifying conditions in Russian gaols and of the long treks for those condemned to exile in Siberia, for whom reaching their destinations had long entailed walking 4,500 to more than 5,000 miles from Moscow (requiring up to two and a half years) and, even after reform in the 1860s which permitted for part of the journey by steamer, walking 2,000 to 3,000 miles. The book was first published in March 1887 but almost all copies were immediately bought and destroyed by agents of the Russian government. Reissuance by another publisher with precautions against a repetition of this experience followed shortly afterwards.

### *Residence in England*

Once in England again, Kropotkin's life changed from one dominated by political work and periods of imprisonment to one primarily of a scholar in the fields of social anthropology, sociology, history, and literary criticism. He lived in the outer suburbs of London and in Brighton, travelling in Britain to lecture mainly to socialist and labour groups. He was actively involved in the launching of the anarchist periodical, *Freedom*. His circle of friends and contacts included several well known figures of the British intelligentsia, particularly on the political Left, and he had cordial relations with leading geographers. Despite a robust constitution which had served him well during his earlier life Kropotkin suffered several bouts of illness. Indeed, the anarchist historian, Max Nettlau, described his life as a pattern in which "work, overwork, breakdown and enforced rest succeeded each other automatically" (Woodcock and Avakumovich, 1950: 259). The punishing schedule of work included not only the major books he authored during this period but also his writing for *Nature*, his contributions to *Freedom*, and substantial articles for the review, *The Nineteenth Century and After* on scientific and sociological subjects. His articles were now relatively well paid (£40 each for some articles for the latter publication, a rate generous for the times) and royalties began to come in from sales of his books.

### *Visits to North America*

Kropotkin's standing as a major anarchist continued to both to dog him and to stimulate interest in him. In 1896, invited to lecture in Paris (for which he had prepared the subsequently celebrated lecture on the state described below), he was refused entry to France. In 1897 He visited Canada and the United States, and in 1901 returned to the latter. During his travels in Canada he was particularly interested in the life of Mennonite settlers who had left Russia in the mid-1970s to avoid the obligation of military service and who lived in communally organised villages in the fertile and empty plains of North-West Canada. His impressions of the Mennonites played a role in his intervention with Canadian friends in favour of another group of peasant communists, the Doukhobors, who had also fallen out with the Russian government over military service. An approach to the Canadian government in which Kropotkin played a significant part led to the admission of twenty thousand Doukhobors to settle in the West of the country.

On his first visit to the United States Kropotkin gave several lectures on mutual aid and anarchism, and accepted a commission to write his reminiscences for *The Atlantic Monthly*, reminiscences which eventually became *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, now regarded as a classic account of the rebels of nineteenth-century Russia. His second visit also involved much lecturing including a series at the Lowell Institute of Boston where the subject was Russian literature and which formed the basis of Kropotkin's book, *Russian Literature Ideals and Realities* (Kropotkin, 1991). He was never able to return to the United States owing to a clause in the country's Immigration Law introduced after the assassination of President McKinley in 1901 by a young Polish worker called Czolgosz who claimed to be an anarchist, though he had no connection to any group.

### *The Azev affair*

The screen which separated Kropotkin from the world of revolutionism was still thin. His movements continued to be watched by Russian government agents. In 1908 he was drawn into an affair involving the terrorist, Azev (graphically described by Enzensberger, 1976: Dreamers of the Absolute Part II), in which Kropotkin's role was peripheral but which none the less illustrates the violent political undercurrents beneath the surface of a gilded age.

After the assassination of Alexander II the Ochrana (which translates from Russian as Protection), a highly specialised secret police established by the Emperor three years before his death, waged a ruthless fight against terrorist and opposition groups whose assassination attempts against royalty and high-level political and military figures were assuming almost epidemic proportions. A major role in the period's terrorism was played by The Fighting Organisation of Social Revolutionaries, which was formally an executive organ of the Russian Social Revolutionary Party (itself founded in 1900) but operated largely outside the Party's control. Azev was the remarkably enterprising practical leader of the Fighting Organisation's terrorist campaign which, to a great extent planned and organised by him, succeeded in eliminating a long list of major Russian figures including Count Plehve, Minister of the Interior at the time of his assassination.



From early 1905 an increasingly successful clampdown on the Fighting Organisation began. This led to suspicions within its leadership that the Organisation contained a high-level informer or informers. Reports were circulated by a Social Revolutionary journalist called Burtzev who accused Azev of being an Ochrana agent. Eventually Burtzev was summoned to testify before a court of honour in Paris of which Kropotkin was a member and whose role was expected to be nothing more than pacifying Burtzev. Kropotkin, with his long experience of government spies and *agents provocateurs*, was initially alone in taking Burtzev's allegations seriously. Eventually the journalist's circumstantial evidence convinced the judges and he was exonerated – and Azev by implication condemned and thus compelled to escape to Russia to avoid his own probable assassination. In 1909, in the Duma, Minister President Stolypin acknowledged that Azev had worked for the Russian police since 1892, eventually being assigned to the Moscow Ochrana section.

#### *World War 1 and Kropotkin's support for the Entente*

By 1914 Kropotkin had long believed that a war in Europe precipitated by Germany was inevitable. The rise of Germany in his view had been associated with the triumph of military and political despotism and with worship of the State, authority and State socialism – characteristics which were particularly indigestible for the anarchist and which he regarded as confining the minds even of European revolutionaries. When World War 1 began, Kropotkin declared his support for the Entente. In so doing he isolated himself from the mainstream of the anarchist movement, though a minority of important members joined him in his position and joined him in signing the pro-war Manifesto of the Sixteen.

Kropotkin's anti-Germanism was not unusual among longstanding opponents of the Tsarist regime, being shared, for example, by Alexander Herzen and Michael Bakunin. Since the reign of Catherine the Great, a German princess by birth, the ruling family "had been German in feeling and largely also in blood. Nicholas I had modelled his military methods on the Prussian army, and had sought unsuccessfully to build a Junker class similar to that which formed the military backbone of Germany". Opposed to Germany was France which, for all the faults of the Third Republic, was none the less the country which during its revolution of 1789-1793 had dismantled much of the economic as well as the political feudalism of the previous regime and towards which Kropotkin manifested "a kind of adoptive patriotism" (Woodcock and Avakumovic, 1950: 373-374). Kropotkin predicted that the war would have benign long-term political consequences, the alliance with England and France strengthening the liberalising forces in Russia. Whatever the ad hoc merits of such arguments, here Kropotkin was guilty of inconsistency with a fundamental tenet of his anarchism which would not identify nation states as representative of their peoples' qualities but substituted for them, as agents of social change and as linchpins of a better future society, the alternative entities such as communes and other free federative institutions.

### *The revolutions of 1917 and Kropotkin's return to Russia*

With the February and the October revolutions in Russia in 1917 Kropotkin began his return to the anarchist fold. Initially, however, he misinterpreted the significance of the February revolution, viewing it as furnishing an opportunity to strengthen the Russia's war effort and underestimating the profound war weariness amongst workers and peasants. Despite his age and growing frailty Kropotkin left England for the last time, sailing to Russia in the early summer. His re-entry into the policy debate once back in Russia was gradual, hampered by his support for the war which the Bolsheviks exploited to discredit both him and more generally the Russian anarchist movement. However, with the end of Russia's participation in the war Kropotkin began once more to devote himself to the classical anarchist issues of social organisation and freedom, now in a radically changed environment.

### *Critic of the Bolshevik regime*

The focus of his attention now became the need to move Russia in a federalist direction. His opposition to government centralisation led him to membership of the Federalist League, a group "who hoped, by publishing important economic and social data, to encourage the various localities to attempt their own industrial and agricultural recovery without relying on the dubious efficiency of the central authorities" (Woodcock and Avakumovic, 1950: 404). As Kropotkin put it in a lecture in January 1918, "The impossibility of directing from one single centre 180 million people spread over an exceedingly checkered territory, considerably larger than Europe, becomes every day clearer, as it becomes daily clearer that the true creative power of those millions of men could only exert itself when they feel they possess the fullest liberty to work out their own peculiarities and build their own life in accordance with their aspirations, the physical aptitudes of their territories and their historical past".

Publication of the work of the Federalist League was blocked by the Bolsheviks who decided to suppress the organisation in the spring of 1918 as part of their campaign against minority groups seen to threaten centralised authority. But Kropotkin continued to express his views to various interlocutors. In a message to Western workers delivered to a Miss Ronfield during a visit by delegates of the British Labour Party he returned to his support for federalism (Berner, n.d.: 14-15). Concerning the new regime he said that it was teaching the world how communism should not be imposed. In principle a role for Soviets or of workers' and peasants' councils was a wonderful idea but so long as the country was submitted to the dictatorship of a party, such councils lost all meaning. They could not be free and effective consultative bodies in the absence of freedom of the press (justified by the Bolsheviks on the grounds of the existence of a state of war) and when elections were held under the autocratic pressure of the party. To set aside cooperation and to trust instead to the genius of party dictators was synonymous with destroying Russia's independent groups such as the syndicates called professional unions and local consumers' cooperatives through their transformation into bureaucratic organs of the party.

As the anarchist movement was increasingly subject to Bolshevik repression, Kropotkin renewed his many contacts within it. However Kropotkin's position became similar to that of Tolstoy during his last years under the Tsarist regime: he was allowed to speak out and was left in peace. The Bolsheviks realised that making a martyr of so well known a revolutionary, especially in view of his outspoken opposition to the attempts at armed interference in Russian affairs by foreign expeditionary forces from various countries, would harm themselves more than Kropotkin could. Instead the Bolsheviks made unsuccessful attempts to secure his cooperation. Indeed, in April 1919 Lenin arranged a meeting at which he set out for Kropotkin his plan for revolution through the State. Kropotkin acknowledged that their ultimate goals had common features but that in the meantime the help which he could give would consist of drawing "your attention to your wrong and irregular doings" (Woodcock and Avakumovic, 1950: 416).

Lenin requested that Kropotkin do this but there is no evidence that Kropotkin's letters to him had any effect. One of these letters in the autumn of 1920 protested in extraordinarily forthright terms against the Bolsheviks' tactics of taking hostages to protect themselves against their enemies' violence:

"I have read in today's *Pravda* an official communiqué from the Council of People's Commissars, according to which it has been decided to keep as hostages several officers of Wrangle's army [the counter-revolutionary Cossaks of the Don]. I cannot believe that there is no single man about you to tell you that such decisions recall the darkest Middle Ages, the period of the Crusades. Vladimir Ilyich, your concrete actions are completely unworthy of the ideas you pretend to hold.

Is it possible that you do not know what a hostage really is – a man imprisoned not because of a crime he has committed, but only because it suits his enemies to exert blackmail on his companions ? These men must feel very much like men who have been condemned to death, and whose inhuman executioners announce every day at noon that the execution has been postponed until the next day. If you admit such methods, one can foresee that one day you will use torture, as was done in the Middle Ages. ...What future lies in store for Communism when one of its most important defenders tramples in this way on every honest feeling."

### *Book on ethics and death*

Much of what was to be the final period of Kropotkin's life was devoted to his planned monumental book on ethics, of which he completed only the first volume on the development of ethical thought together with notes for the second in which he intended to set out his own views. During this period when he lived in Dmitrov, a village about forty miles North of Moscow, he received many visitors from abroad but was conscious that the end was near. As he put it in a letter to his doctor in May 1920, "I have only a little time left to live. My heart has beaten about as long as it is capable of doing". In the middle of January 1921 he was left prostrate by an attack of pneumonia from which he never recovered, dying on 8 February.

The Bolshevik government offered a State funeral which Kropotkin's entourage declined in accordance with what they were sure would have been the dead man's own wishes. On the day of the funeral a huge crowd followed the coffin through the streets of Moscow to the cemetery of

the Novo-Dezhichi monastery. The crowd did not include the incarcerated anarchists whose release for the funeral day had been requested of the authorities by Kropotkin's Funeral Commission (organised by representatives of Russian anarchist groups). The crowd carried banners of the political parties, trade unions, scientific and literary societies, and student organisations as well as the black flags of the anarchist groups in a mass demonstration of a kind henceforth no longer permitted by the government.

## **2. Personality**

Oscar Wilde described Kropotkin as a person who had lived a perfectly fulfilled life. This characterisation Kropotkin achieved despite the expulsions, imprisonment, and betrayals which he experienced at various times. As his biographers put it, "He had many ideological enemies, but few men of celebrity in their own time have had so few personal foes; even those who were bitterly opposed to his teachings usually found his modesty and sincerity difficult to resist" (Woodcock and Avakumovic, 1950: 438). For his part, with a few exceptions, Kropotkin tended to focus on the conditions and roles which influenced or determined the actions of his adversaries rather than on the personal responsibility for their behaviour towards himself and towards those close to him. Even at the time of the assassination of Alexander II the reaction of Kropotkin was nuanced as he described "a man possessed of military gallantry, but devoid of the courage of a statesman, a man of strong passions and weak will – it seemed that the tragedy developed with the unavoidable fatality of one of Shakespeare's dramas" (Kropotkin, 1971c: 433). Kropotkin's capacity to relate to people, his openness, and hospitality explain his remarkable number of friends in the different countries where he spent his life.

As described at the age of 44, "he was short, not more than five and a half feet, slight in build, with unusually small feet, a slender waist and a large head. He wore a full brown beard, seldom trimmed and never lacking its distinctive character" (Woodcock and Avakumovic, 1950: 211). Always naturally frugal, he had proved his physical robustness during his expeditions in Siberia, a robustness which no doubt helped him to surmount the frequent bouts of ill health from which he suffered after settling in England.

Kropotkin's remarkable intellectual range should be evident from the personal history above. He was also an accomplished linguist, capable of speaking German and Italian as well as English and French, with a working knowledge of Scandinavian languages, Finnish and Dutch, and an acquaintanceship with Mongol and Manchu. Eventually his English became fluent, though his writing in the language occasionally needed polishing by his friends.

In view of the acts of revolutionaries during the period from the 1880s until the outbreak of war in 1914 Kropotkin was often questioned as to his attitude towards political violence. Early in his career as a revolutionist he endorsed the idea that propaganda of the word needed on occasion to be accompanied revolutionary actions including violence, even though he never himself participated in planning or carrying out such actions. Although personally possessed of a naturally

gentle character, he never explicitly abandoned the view that in certain circumstances, particularly in response to the state-sponsored violence to which opponents of the regimes of the time were frequently subject, violent acts could be the only possible means of protest. In the 1890s, faced by the wave of assassinations in Europe and some brutal acts in France, he came to regard violence as harmful except when used in self-defence during a revolution. Perhaps Tolstoy best summed up Kropotkin's eventual attitude to violence when he remarked that "His arguments do not seem to be the expression of his opinions, but only of his fidelity to the banner under which he has served so honestly all his life" (Introduction of George Woodcock to Kropotkin, 1992: 10).

Kropotkin's attitude towards women during his early years might be characterised as one of romantic courtesy accompanied by the sexual puritanism not uncommon among Narodniki, but not an attitude involving acceptance of women as equals. Partly no doubt as a result of his first-hand experience of the courage and capabilities of fellow woman anarchists as well as of criticisms from Emma Goldman of his failure to face the implications of sexual emancipation his attitude seems to have evolved. His account of the agenda of an anarchist society in *The Conquest of Bread* (see below) welcomes at some length the effects on the emancipation of women of the elimination of household drudgery through mechanical devices and the provision of communal domestic services.

Kropotkin's charisma and his almost iconic status as the anarchist movement's principal sage was to have a downside towards the end of his life. These characteristics help to explain the emotionally and politically wrenching effects on the movement of his obstinacy regarding fellow anarchists' views opposed to his own support for the Entente in World War 1. Moreover the isolation associated with this obstinacy helps to explain Kropotkin's initial failure to grasp the implications of the two revolutions in Russia in 1917.

### **3. Major writings**

#### *Scientific*

Kropotkin's work as a geographer and geologist can conveniently be treated under three headings: the orography of Eastern Asia, Arctic geography, and glaciations and desiccation in the region extending Southwards from Scandinavia to Central Europe. For each of these subjects he had to study a large amount of observations made by others – sometimes unarranged observations made by travellers – and for the first and third he was also able to exploit observations made during his own expeditions in Siberia and In Sweden and Finland.

His work on Asian orography led him to carry out a redrafting of the map of the region based on a new view of Asia's main structural lines and of Siberia not as a single, vast plain stretching from the Urals to the Pacific but as a series of plateaux edged by ancient mountain ranges. The modern map of Asia largely incorporates this structural conception. Kropotkin's map and an explanatory paper were published by the Russian Geographical Society after his imprisonment in 1874.

The second of Kropotkin's major scientific reports was drafted as part of preparations for an expedition for which the Ministry of Finance eventually was unwilling to provide the financing. On the basis of his study of Arctic currents and the disposition of ice on the coast of Novaya Zemlya he suggested the existence of an unknown land close to the latter. Kropotkin's contentions were subsequently vindicated by the discovery of an archipelago by a subsequent Austrian polar expedition.

Regarding glaciation and desiccation Kropotkin himself provides the following account of his vision:

"Even now, as I was looking on the lakes and hillocks of Finland, new and beautiful generalisations arose before my eyes. I saw in a remote past, at the very dawn of mankind, the ice accumulating from year to year in the northern archipelagos, over Scandinavia and Finland...Life dwindled in that part of the Northern Hemisphere...Ages passed away, till the melting of the ice began, and with it came the lake period, when countless lakes were formed in the cavities...Another series of ages passed before an extremely slow process of drying up set in, and vegetation began its slow invasion from the south. And now we are fully in the period of a rapid desiccation, accompanied by the formation of dry prairies and steppes, and man has to find the means to put a check to that desiccation to which Central Asia has fallen, and which menaces South-Eastern Europe" (Kropotkin, 1971c: 239).

Kropotkin's completed work on glaciation came in two volumes. The first was published by the Russian Geographical Society in 1876 while he was still in prison. The second was seized by the secret police on his escape and was not released until 1895 when it was handed over to the Geographical Society which sent it to Kropotkin in England. By this time the ideas contained in the volume were well known and had been further developed by other scientists so that the time for publication had passed.

Kropotkin believed that measures for combating the desiccation which he had identified should be considered such as tree planting on a large scale with the help of artesian wells. However, although Kropotkin was an appreciative and insightful observer of the natural environment, he was not an ecologist in the modern sense of the word. Assumptions about the abundance of natural resources in the 1793 work, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, of the pioneering anarchist thinker, William Godwin, were part of the inspiration for contrary arguments in Malthus's *Essay on Population*. Provided the world's resources were properly managed, Godwin's assumptions as to natural abundance were shared – and the validity of Malthus's fears were thus denied – by Kropotkin, as is evident from *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, the work in which he treats agriculture at length.

Kropotkin's other scientific writing largely consists of explication for *Nature* and the *Nineteenth Century* rather than original research. Many of his articles for the latter publication concerned evolution and natural selection. Though dated since they were written before the integration of genetics and evolutionary biology, they nevertheless provide remarkably lucid and detailed accounts of scientific controversies of the time, particularly concerning the theory associated with

Lamarck on the role, or the absence of the role, of the inheritance in plants and animals of characters acquired through the environment (Kropotkin, 1995).

### *Mutual aid and ethics*

During his third expedition in Siberia, on which he was accompanied by his zoologist friend, Polyakoff, Kropotkin had remarked mutual dependency and cooperation among animals of the same species rather than the keen competition which Charles Darwin's recently published *Origin of Species* had led him to expect. This left a strong impression and became the inspiration for his most famous book, *Mutual Aid A Factor in Evolution* (Kropotkin, 1972a), and for the assumptions about human nature which underpinned his anarchist agenda.

The trigger for this book was a paper, "Struggle for existence and its bearing on man", by a major figure in the development of higher biological education in England, Thomas Henry Huxley. The paper set out a version of natural selection among animals dominated by the triumph of the strong beak and sharp claw and devoid of mutual aid. Huxley also maintained that a similar process operated among primitive men in which "the weakest and stupidest went to the wall, while the toughest and shrewdest, those who were best fitted to cope with their circumstances, but not best in another way, survived." Arguments of a similar kind without Huxley's qualification ("but not best in another way") were widely used at this time to rationalise survival and success in the world of business in the form of the association by important sociologists and economists of fitness, on the one hand, and success as manifested in the accumulation of wealth, on the other.

Kropotkin adduced evidence in contradiction with Huxley's thesis not only from the animal world but also from the work of social anthropologists concerning early humankind. Kropotkin cites much evidence concerning the customs and behavioural norms which governed the life of tribes and their relations with other tribes. On this basis he argues that sociability contributes to evolutionary success among humans as well as animals. Much of *Mutual Aid* is devoted to tracing the influence of sociability throughout history. Kropotkin's fundamental proposition is that communities with institutional infrastructure which depended on mutual aid were successful and prosperous, and that abandonment of that principle and acceptance instead of the domination of the authority of the state led to the erosion of people's welfare and eventual societal failure. Evidence for this view of human evolution from a long sweep of history and from a geographically diverse set of societies is condensed in Kropotkin's essay, *The State: Its Historical Role* (reproduced in Kropotkin (1993)).

Exemplars of his proposition are free cities of medieval Europe (mostly in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth cities).<sup>1</sup> Geographical location, external commerce and resistance to external

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<sup>1</sup> Of interest in this context are Kropotkin's comments on Switzerland. "There, the union first asserted itself among the village communes (the old cantons)...And since in Switzerland the separation between town and village [inhabited by peasants typically at political loggerheads with city burghers] had not been as far-reaching as in countries where the towns were engaged in large-scale commerce with distant areas, the towns gave assistance to the peasant

interference gave each of these communities its own history. But, Kropotkin maintained (Kropotkin, 1993: 172-175), their internal organisation and constitutions were based on similar principles. Towns were divided geographically into sections or sectors occupied mainly by those exercising a well established trade or “art”. Those exercising new trades occupied the suburbs which in due course were enclosed in a new fortified wall. Each street or parish represented a territorial unit with its own popular assembly, forum, popular tribunal, priest, militia, banner, and often even a seal (symbol of sovereignty). The professional unit, often approximately identified with section or district, was the guild. Guilds had institutions and procedures similar to those at parish level just described.

The city was the union of its constituent entities, with its own plenary assembly in the grand forum. It dealt with other cities as sovereign, in some cases federating with them, and concluded alliances either nationally or outside the national territory. The free contracts between cities formed the basis of what was eventually to become international law. The trades acted similarly: their commercial and craft relations went beyond the city, and their agreements could be made without taking into account nationality.

The internal commerce was a matter for the guilds, prices being established by mutual agreement. Early in the period of the free cities external commerce was a matter for the city, only later becoming a monopoly of the merchants’ guilds and subsequently also of individual merchants.

Group selection for mutual cooperation or the division of labour within animal groups would now be widely accepted among biologists, though on the basis of a more finely calibrated concept of altruism than that of Kropotkin’s time (Mayr, 1997: 202, 242, and chapter 12). However, group selection for humans, it would probably be equally widely accepted, is the joint result of inborn tendencies and learning. In other words selection among humans reflects cultural as well as biological pressures, culture being defined as that which is transmitted by older to younger individuals by learning and by example. Greater emphasis on cultural selection reduces, without eliminating, the historical influence of biologically determined sociability and should thus accord a smaller role in the design of improved social and economic arrangements than that which is implied by Kropotkin’s discussion in *Mutual Aid*.

In the book on ethics on which he was working at the end of his life and which in many ways was a sequel to *Mutual Aid* Kropotkin elaborated an ethics where more emphasis is placed on tendencies among humans operating in a direction opposite to that of sociability and mutual aid. “The chief demand which is now addressed to ethics is to do its best to find...the common element in the two sets of diametrically opposed feelings which exist in man, and thus to help mankind find a synthesis, and not a compromise between the two. In one set are the feelings which induce man to subdue other men in order to utilize them for his individual ends, while those in the other set

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insurrection of the sixteenth century and thus the union included towns and villages to constitute a federation which continues to this day” (Kropotkin, 1993a: 185).



induce human beings to unite for attaining common ends by common effort: the first answering to that fundamental need of human nature – struggle, and the second representing another equally fundamental tendency – the desire of unity and mutual sympathy” (Kropotkin, 1968: 22). In something of an understatement Kropotkin acknowledged that “it is equally unquestionable that moral feeling can easily become dulled due to the stern struggle for existence, or to the developments of instincts of robbery which at times acquire great intensity among certain tribes and nations” (Kropotkin, 1968: 234), and which of course Kropotkin had witnessed himself during his young adulthood in Tsarist Russia.

Regrettably we do not have Kropotkin’s own attempt at an ethical synthesis bringing together the implications of the two conflicting human impulses, striving for justice, on the one hand, and the striving for domination or power over others, on the other. What he has left us in his first volume is a remarkably balanced survey of morality among animals and primitive men, and of the development of the concepts of justice and eventually of self-sacrifice (i.e. of giving more than simply required by justice) and their relation to other major philosophical themes among Greek and Roman thinkers and in Christian and post-Christian thought up to the end of the nineteenth century. Kropotkin’s own conclusions, which would presumably have included his attempt at the synthesis of the two conflicting tendencies of mutual aid and striving for domination, were intended for a second volume for which only a mass of notes exist.

#### *Agenda for an anarchist society*

Kropotkin’s articulation of his version of the anarchist agenda was initially written for *Le Revolté* and - after a forced change of name owing to the publication’s spreading of ant-militarist propaganda – in *La Rêvolte*. In elaborated form these articles were published as a book, *The Conquest of Bread* (Kropotkin, 1972b).

By the 1870s the following ideas had become generally features of libertarian socialism of the time, particularly the Fourierist version:

1. The Commune, i.e. a small territorial unit, was to be considered the basis of a new socialist society.
2. The Commune was to be the depositary of all commodities produced in the surrounding locality as well the intermediary for exchange. It would also be the association of consumers and often the producing unit (which might also, however, be a professional and not a territorial group or alternatively a federation of producing groups).
3. The Communes would freely federate in order to constitute the Federation, the Region, or the Nation.
4. Labour had to be rendered attractive since no solution of the Social Question was possible so long as this had not been achieved.
5. Maintenance of harmony in such communities did not require coercion since the influence of public opinion alone would suffice.

Distribution of goods would take place within each commune through a system agreed upon by the Commune itself (Kropotkin, 1995: 72-73).

This corpus of ideas was the starting-point many of the themes of *The Conquest of Bread* but Kropotkin also provided his own gloss on them as well as extending his agenda to cover several topics. Thus the book includes discussion of agricultural and industrial production, the decentralisation of industry, integration of mental and manual skills in education, facilities for the pursuit of leisure activities, emancipation of women, and the growth and importance of arrangements covering activities such cross-border railway travel, shipping and the provision of lifeboat services which were freely agreed among private individuals without government origination or sponsorship (arrangements that Kropotkin considered a useful source of lessons and precedents for social organisation more generally).

The fundamental idea of *The Conquest of Bread* is that both the instruments and the fruits of production are the collective achievement of humanity and thus should not be appropriated by a minority. As Kropotkin puts it,

“All belongs to all. All things are for all men, since all men have need of them, since all have worked in the measure of their strength to produce them, and since it is not possible to evaluate every one’s part in the production of the world’s wealth...

But nowadays, in the present state of industry, when everything is interdependent, when each branch of production is knit up with all the rest, the attempt to claim Individualist origin for the products of industry is absolutely untenable. The astonishing perfection attained by the textile or mining industries in civilised countries is due to the simultaneous development of a thousand industries, great and small, to the extension of the railroad system, to inter-oceanic navigation, to the manual skill of thousands of workers, to a certain standard of culture reached by the working classes as a whole – to the labourers, in short, of men in every corner of the globe “(Kropotkin, 1972b: 49 and 61).

This position is of course in contradiction with the traditions of most orthodox economics and of cost accounting which seek to identify the contribution of individuals (as well as of other factors) to the value of production and on this basis to establish rules for costing and remuneration. But it also brought Kropotkin into conflict with much collectivist thinking which involved attempts by an authority within producers’ associations or by some official body to measure individual performance – in the absence of course of capitalist class relations – and on this basis to supervise the distribution of goods and services. Like other libertarian socialists, Kropotkin supported the organisation of distribution at the level of the commune. However, he also proposed at least in the case of basic goods and services a principle of needs under which individuals would be the judges of their own requirements. This idea, which went beyond much libertarian socialist thinking, presupposed a highly benign conception of the anarchist communism which would prevail once coercion and inequality had been abolished.

As with all utopian and alternative visions of society the question had to be faced of how the transition to such a society was to be achieved. The adherents of libertarian socialism or anarchism, Kropotkin included, acknowledged that insurrection or revolution would be necessary but generally – and it is fair to add inevitably – leaving the scenario ill defined. Russian revolutionaries (of which the Narodniki described earlier are an example) generally believed in a direct transition from absolutism to socialism, the mass of small farmers and peasants asserting their communal property of the land directly. If – and this is a big if – the insurrection were to take the form of a decision by this group were to assert such rights, the prospect of success was not completely unrealistic. Russia after all was a huge agrarian nation and the forces of authority would have had to be prepared to start a civil war with an uncertain outcome to reverse the insurrection. For countries with more developed and diversified structures foreseeing the possible course of insurrection was more difficult.

However, one thing on which libertarian socialists of all hues (unlike the Bolsheviks) insisted was that the insurrection should be a popular movement and not one imposed from above. As Kropotkin put it, “[the revolution] must take the form of a widely spread popular movement, during which movement, in every town and village invaded by the insurrectionist spirit, the masses set themselves to the work of reconstructing society...without waiting for schemes and orders from above...They may not be – they are sure not to be – the *majority* of the nation. But if they are a respectably numerous minority of cities and villages scattered over the country...they will be able to win the right to pursue their own course” (Kropotkin, 1995: 100-101).

After his return to Russia in 1917 there are indications that Kropotkin’s federalism may have begun to take a more pragmatic form which entailed acknowledgement of its usefulness as an instrument for countering the Bolshevik project of imposing a highly centralised state. Initially at least according to the Kropotkin of this period a new federalist Russia would have been based on pre-existing entities of the Russian Empire such as Finland, the Baltic provinces, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Siberia and others, each of the new entities receiving international recognition of its right to govern itself. This idea has a top-down dimension lacking in Kropotkin’s earlier writings on federalism. However, Kropotkin still envisaged eventually a time when each component of the new Russian federation would itself be a federation of free cities and rural communes (Berneri, n.d.: 14).

#### *Production, location of economic activity and the integration of work*

Kropotkin’s long treatise, *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (Kropotkin P, 1974a) was directed at a wide audience. The book contains a wealth of information both in the text and in no less than 25 statistical and empirical appendices as well as advocacy which is not narrowly political. Reading it, one can imagine that “Kropotkin was never without his notebook when visiting a field, factory or workshop (which he did more frequently than most economic theorists)” (Kropotkin, 1974b: 159). The book can be broken down into three parts. The first identifies a trend for

manufacturing industry to decentralise internationally, and argues that production primarily for a local market is both rational and desirable. The second contains a long and detailed survey of agricultural land use and techniques in several European countries and North America, and on the basis of this information argues that, if Great Britain adopted certain improvements, it could meet its own basic needs for food. In the third section Kropotkin makes the case for the decentralisation of small-scale industry. He also argues for approaches to work and education which are based on a better integration of the mental and the manual.

The first part of the book begins with a frontal critique of the trade theory of comparative costs according to which nations should specialise in particular branches of production so that the principle of the division of labour with its supposed efficiencies is extended from national to global level. Kropotkin believed that even at the national level division of labour and specialisation could prove stultifying. International specialisation seemed to him not to be the way forward. As he put it,

“Nations...refuse to be specialised...In proportion as technical knowledge becomes everyone’s virtual domain, in proportion as it becomes international, and can be concealed no longer, each nation acquires the possibility of applying the whole variety of her energies to the whole variety of industrial and agricultural pursuits. Knowledge ignores artificial political boundaries. So also do the industries; and the present tendency of humanity is to have the greatest possible variety of industries gathered in each country, in each separate region, side by side with agriculture” (Kropotkin, 1974a: 22).

The direction of progress in Kropotkin’s view should be towards the production for consumption by growers and producers themselves. Colonial relations would be unnecessary in a world based on this principle.

Underlying the section of the book on agricultural production is the same argument already put forward in the first section, that the exploitation of a country’s potential and thus its competitiveness is not a datum but the result of human decisions and initiatives. This is exemplified by the case of Great Britain, the reasons for whose assumed lack of competitiveness in agriculture and thus whose need for imports to cover a large proportion of the country’s food needs Kropotkin enumerates as follows:

“Many causes have combined to produce that undesirable result. The concentration of landownership in the hands of big landowners;...the development of a class of both landlords and farmers who rely chiefly upon other incomes than those which they draw from the land, and for whom farming has thus become a sort of by-occupation or sport; the rapid development of game reserves for sportsmen, both British and foreign; the absence of men of initiative who would have shown to the nation the necessity of a new departure; ...the absence of institutions which could spread practical agricultural knowledge” (Kropotkin, 1974a: 97).

Kropotkin compares British agricultural land use and techniques unfavourably with those of European territories including the Channel Islands, and of North America. He devotes a particularly detailed treatment to the horticultural and labour-intensive market-garden

production around certain European cities and in the Channel Islands. Whereas adoption of improved land use and of improved horticulture in Great Britain on the scale proposed by Kropotkin smacked of utopia and would have required a major reorganisation of agriculture's ancillary services - services largely ignored by Kropotkin, subsequent commentators have none the less noted that in World War 2 Great Britain did radically reduce its dependence on many categories of imported food, continuing during the postwar period to be substantially more self-sufficient in food products than before 1940.

The third section of the book begins with a survey of industry designed to document the continuing vitality of workshops and small-scale industry and to draw out its implications for industrial concentration. Kropotkin's findings contradicted important Marxist and capitalist thinking of Kropotkin's time but anticipated the conclusions of many post-World-War-2 analysts of industrial trends. Kropotkin was especially interested in what he called industrial villages where small factories were located in the rural economy, existing side by side with agriculture. His survey of the types of organisation, technologies, and the employment opportunities associated with such villages led him to conclude that the social benefits of industrial villages outweighed the social costs. He thus advocated the promotion of such villages together with mitigation of their disadvantages through cooperative organisation of their buying of inputs and the sale of their output. Here Kropotkin's ideas and findings, based as they were on cross-country research, were to influence advocates of decentralised planning such as Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford, Ebenezer Howard (promoter of the movement for Garden Cities), Gandhian supporters of developing industry on a village scale, and Chinese planners. However, another of Kropotkin's propositions about the integration of different economic activities, that individual's working lives should be shared between mental and manual work, has failed to achieve widespread support outside certain crafts, specialisation remaining the norm for most people.

#### *Other writings*

Kropotkin's non-scientific writing was voluminous, much of it in the form of revolutionist articles and lectures. Two of his major books deserve further mention here, *In Russian and French Prisons* (Kropotkin, 1971a) and *The Great French Revolution* (Kropotkin, 1971b).

The factual content of the first book was mentioned above. Kropotkin believed that the moral influence of prisons was destructive and, after a survey of the writings of criminologists and prison reformers, expressed predictable support for improving social and economic conditions as the most effective way of reducing the size of prison populations. He also drew special attention to findings that prisoners rarely consider their imprisonment just. Partly as a reflection of this he emphasised the restraint on crime of communal influences in the form of mutual support and transparency for which Kropotkin provides historical examples – in China and in Slavonian and Swiss agrarian communes (Kropotkin, 1971a: 361, 367-368). An anarchist regime would also rely on such communal influences as a substitute for conventional penal policies.

Kropotkin's long history of the French revolution had its origins in an interest dating from his adolescence. Although the narrative documents the events as they unfolded, the emphasis of Kropotkin's account is on the struggle at political level after 1789 to abolish not only political but also economic feudalism. His account also provided him with an opportunity to document the role played by communes and sections in this struggle.

#### 4. Assessment

In what measure – considered from a long-term perspective – can Kropotkin's life and work be considered a success? Here this question can be addressed in only a limited way since a fully fledged answer would require an examination of the history of the anarchist movement and of the role in it of Kropotkin's thinking and personality.

Assessment of Kropotkin must start from acknowledgement that actual realisation of anarchist societies along the lines that he envisaged remains a dream. Kropotkin's critics would maintain that the dream's distance from reality reflects partly Kropotkin's excessive optimism concerning human nature as well too idealised a view of a society based on communes and too narrow and too Manichean a view of the State – a view which overemphasises the record of violence, incompetence and corruption as opposed to the potential for acting for the common good. It has also been charged, not without justification, that the brilliant faculty of generalisation evident in Kropotkin's writings (which undoubtedly contributed to their literally global circulation, for example, the volume of articles, *Words of a Rebel*, being translated into Italian, Spanish, Bulgarian, Russian and Chinese) is accompanied by susceptibility to oversimplification.

Concerning Kropotkin's understanding of human nature the critics are only partly justified. Kropotkin's life as evidenced by his own accounts and those of other writers furnishes ample indications of an acute understanding of the strengths and weakness of the psychology of both foes and friends, a quality necessary to his successful surmounting of many often difficult and dangerous situations during his eventful life. That natural optimism contributed to his ability to surmount these situations is no doubt true but this was due the optimism's role in Kropotkin's temperament.

Kropotkin's blueprint for an anarchist utopia does presuppose that the natural goodness of humankind would contribute to its success once the yokes of coercion and deprivation had been removed. Here – though we have no practical test of Kropotkin's assumption - he may well exaggerate the likely extent of the disappearance even in an anarchist society of less important but still significant struggles over the distribution of authority and of the mutual antagonisms which these would cause. However, it should not be forgotten that unreal or oversimplified assumptions about human psychology are qualities shared by Kropotkin with many other political and economic thinkers including several who have played an important a role in modern discussion of the preferred framework for society and the economy.

Criticisms of Kropotkin's vision also focus on his use of the free cities of the European Middle Ages as a model for the institutional infrastructure of anarchist society. Here he is accused of ignoring the negative features of these cities – their internal strife, their undermining from within by rich merchant classes, and their failure to reach an accommodation with the surrounding peasantry which left the peasantry susceptible to offers of alliance with the nobility in its objective of bringing the cities to heel. Kropotkin denies the charge of ignoring the cities' internal strife, and maintains that of itself the strife does not contradict the basic freedom of life within them. Moreover while he uses the free cities' internal structure and federative dimensions to give a more concrete, less abstract form to his own blueprint, he acknowledges that a communal society in his own time would differ in essential respects from the medieval model: "Between the Commune of the middle ages and that which might be established today...there will be plenty of essential differences: a veritable abyss opened up by the six or seven centuries of human development and harsh experience" (Kropotkin, 1992: 82). Many of these differences in Kropotkin's view actually favour the establishment of federative arrangements. For example, he cites the multiplication of links between cities due to commerce and exchange, which often overflow national boundaries and "have also destroyed the walls of the ancient cities" (Kropotkin, 1992: 86).

If utopias such as that put forward by Kropotkin have a poor track record of actual realisation, what useful purpose can they serve? Arguably, their very quality as utopias furnishes valuable alternative perspectives when we subject our ways of doing and thinking to critical scrutiny. Indeed, such utopias can serve as a kind of mirror in which the ugly, dysfunctional features – and less frequently the admirable features – of our doing and thinking stand out more clearly. Here, precisely because Kropotkin's underlying assumptions are so different from those of non-anarchist schools of thought and perhaps also because of the integration into his system of so many different branches of knowledge, Kropotkin's work can still illuminate.

Of special significance is Kropotkin's anarchist perspective on liberty and community. The most influential systems of thought currently prevalent in Western Europe and North America take the individual as the basic unit for the study of different dimensions of human behaviour and for their assumptions for analysis and prescription regarding society and the economy. In Kropotkin's scheme – as well as in those of many other anarchist thinkers –, to which liberty is as fundamental as it is to modern individualism, individuals are not abstracted to the same degree from the communities to which they belong. Indeed, the integrated treatment of individuals and communities – in Kropotkin's scheme of course communities freely entered into and of which there may be several for any individual – underpins Kropotkin's analysis of society and his blueprints for a better world. Since Kropotkin's time there have of course been several other important communitarian thinkers and philosophers. Nevertheless, Kropotkin's legacy, even when one sets aside the historical and revolutionist context in which it was originally developed, remains of interest owing to way in which communitarian thinking is woven into a programme

covering a very broad range of issues including society's institutional infrastructure, labour and employment, cross-border economic relations, and norms and ethics.

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