Kropotkin's Ideas

Mutual aid, evolution and revolution, conflict resolution, social individuality, and the metaphysics of nature

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Contents

a review of

Graham Purchase, *Evolution & Revolution: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Peter Kropotkin* (Petersham, Australia: Jura Books, 1996)

Graham Purchase's recent book, *Evolution & Revolution*, is a concise and generally useful assessment of Kropotkin's-life and work from a social anarchist perspective. In addition to presenting a brief biography of the famous anarchist, Purchase analyses Kropotkin's ideas on such topics as mutual aid, evolution and revolution, conflict resolution, social individuality, and the "metaphysics of nature."

Purchase argues convincingly that Kropotkin was far ahead of his time in many ways and that his thought remains relevant to contemporary political debates. For example, on a philosophical level, Kropotkin "expounds a theory of the self-organisation of matter and paints a picture of evolution as having been a self-organisation of life from the simple to the complex."

He sees order in nature and society "as a dynamic and ever changing equilibrium in which a multitude of forces compete with and complete one another in the formation of enduring but ever-fluid stability through unending natural diversity." Kropotkin thus transcended some of the limitations of his time and was a precursor of recent ecological, chaos and complexity theorists.

Purchase also makes the important point that Kropotkin's well-known radical decentralism addressed deeper questions than those of social scale or even of the social level at which decision-making takes place. Kropotkin, he says, "stressed culture" much more than these other factors. What was most essential to a liberatory society was a culture that nurtures a respect for "spontaneity," "personal autonomy," "individual significance" and "personality."

Communitarian Culture

In this context, Purchase applies to Kropotkin's thought a useful concept that Alan Ritter developed in his study of anarchist political theory: "communal individuality." The libertarian and communitarian culture proposed by Kropotkin fosters cultural and personal diversity, both of which are destroyed by what Purchase calls "state-monoculture" (though it might be better typified as "corporate monoculture," or "corporate-state monoculture").

Though Purchase is highly sympathetic to Kropotkin he does not hesitate to criticize the great anarchist harshly when his ideas stray from his fundamental cooperative, libertarian values. Examples include his rather nationalistic, fanatically anti-German position in World War I and his compromise with parliamentarianism in his later life. Purchase is also willing to call Kropotkin's classic *Mutual Aid* "a biased, one-sided and rhetorical work." Of course, he recognizes that certain crucial concepts were developed there, such as that "sociability" and cooperation have an important place in the evolution of many species, including mammals, and that these qualities offer intrinsic rewards rather than being of mere instrumental value.

However, Kropotkin, in his haste to refute the competitive, antagonistic, conflictive picture of nature presented by the Social Darwinists, sometimes lapses into a depiction of a harmonious, cooperative, symbiotic nature that was in its own way just as inadequate. However, this one-sidedness is a departure from Kropotkin's own presuppositions and the larger project embodied in his work.

Purchase wisely concentrates on this larger perspective, which is often holistic and organicist in nature. Kropotkin's attempts in his social theory to reconcile social order and unity with social diversity, individuality and spontaneity reflected his overall view of nature. According to Purchase, Kropotkin's view of both nature And society was based on the idea of "a dynamic unity of diversity" and he held that "variety, conflict even, is life and that uniformity its death."

Seamless and Unbroken

In Purchase's view, Kropotkin avoids the pitfalls of holism to which some holists succumb (and which ill-informed or hostile critics often attribute to holism in general). He credits Kropotkin with avoiding "the religion of superorganism," a "naively holistic outlook in which nature is regarded as a seamless and unbroken wholeness or unity" and an idealization of nature in which conflict, opposition and disequilibrium are explained away. Kropotkin adopted a more sophisticated holism that for Purchase places him well ahead of his time. Purchase argues that "Kropotkin's concept of complex self-regulation lies at the heart of our modern conception of natural processes and stability."

There is considerable truth in this view; yet Purchase might also have discussed the criticisms that have been directed at the reductionist aspects of systems theory and other contemporary tendencies with which he favorably links Kropotkin. Also, Purchase uses metaphors such as the organism as a "colony of separate individuals," and cells as "worlds of autonomous organisms" rather recklessly.

His discussions would have benefited greatly from a consideration of the extensive recent discussion in ecological thought and environmental ethics concerning the value and limitations of various organicist, communitarian and holistic concepts and metaphors.

Kropotkin and Lewis Mumford

Another area of Kropotkin's thought to which Purchase devotes well-deserved attention is his exploration of libertarian communitarian experiments and achievements across history. Purchase notes Kropotkin's important insights into the decentralist, participatory aspects of the French Revolution, and his ideas concerning a democratic and "environmentally holistic" approach to agriculture and industry. He also points out Kropotkin's noteworthy contributions to tracing the history of the battle between centralized power and "the autonomous and internally self-regulating city, village or community," a theme introduced into more recent social thought in Mumford's magisterial, work *The City in History.*

Though he gives Kropotkin due credit on this topic, he may go too far when he turns to critique. While Kropotkin may indeed have had a "Romantic" view of the Medieval cities, he was not really idealizing cities of the "Dark Ages," as Purchase states. Rather, his examples of free cities, vigorous municipal institutions, civic art and life "at their highest" are taken primarily from the ninth through thirteenth centuries. Many of the historical achievements of this epoch that Kropotkin admired were explored in rather precise detail and largely verified in Mumford's work.

Purchase discusses in some detail the relevance of ethnological data, a topic that has given rise to much Kropotkinesque theorizing among anarchists. He notes that anthropologists have given abundant evidence of stateless societies in which "the withholding of essential forms of economic co-operation and social ostracism" were the major forms of social control.

Such evidence is, he rightly argues, important to the anarchist case for a voluntary, cooperative society. Yet he does not give enough attention (as few anarchists, including the classical anarchist theorists, ever have) to the complex issue of the possible repressiveness of public opinion and social pressure. He does, however, make the important point that anarchist decentralism would probably result in a spectrum of communities in which such repressiveness will probably exist to greater or lesser degrees, and that even the worst of such communities will be far less dangerous than are powerful and enormously destructive nation-states.

As the title of the book indicates, Purchase is particularly concerned with Kropotkin's views on evolution and revolution, themes that are central to all areas of his social theory. According to Kropotkin, rapid social change is "the consequence of a 'slow evolution' which had prepared the conditions." This idea was popularized in anarchist thought above all by Élisée Reclus, who wrote a widely reprinted pam-

phlet called "Evolution and Revolution," and a book-length work on anarchist politics called *Evolution, Revolution and the Anarchist Ideal.*

Kropotkin's account of the process of evolution, revolution and reaction is, however, a bit more simplistic than that of Reclus, who stresses the simultaneity of progression and regression at any given point in historical development, and the dual nature of any phenomenon.

Anarchist System Allows Change

Kropotkin believed that the state's centralization of power and control "disturbed the natural rates of change and development that would occur in a decentralized system." In some ways this is a good point. An anarchic system allows change to take place, as Purchase states, through the existence of a "dynamic equilibrium."

On the other hand, the state (and other institutions of domination) creates an acute imbalance in society and nature, and thus also generates the conditions for more accelerated or even cataclysmic change. In effect, the state (and more importantly today, the corporate economic oligarchy) creates the conditions for revolution. What might also be mentioned is that all of these developments, no matter how much they disturb certain "natural" conditions, are themselves perfectly "natural," in that they are part of the nature of things, "the order (and disorder) of nature."

It is perfectly natural that when certain human beings do very bad things, very bad consequences will follow. And if a revolution results from such consequences, this result will be just as natural as would be any benign process of evolution that would make such a revolution unnecessary.

While some of Purchase's criticisms of reformism are valid, he is, I think, too hasty in completely dismissing the positive significance of all reforms—for example, "environmental" and "feminist" legislation. He points out that a "few reforms here and there" will obviously not "change the prevailing logic of violence and destruction that the state capitalist system has unleashed upon the environment, the young and the weak." This is certainly true; yet it does not tell us much about the significance of specific struggles for reform. Reformist legislation may in some cases not only accomplish little, but even contribute to undermining the movement for more fundamental change. However, engagement in the fight for limited goals may also play a central role in the development by some activists of a commitment to fundamental social transformation. And some reforms (for example, demands for educational opportunities and literacy) may help empower groups that are marginalized and allow them to become more effective social agents.

There are various shortcomings in this work that might have been corrected with more careful editing. Some of the many quotations in this short book might better have been cut or paraphrased, especially in the case of the long and very long quotes. In one case the same twelve lines are quoted twice (pages 76 and 123). Also, the book ends rather abruptly though some topics might have received a bit more attention (for example, the implications of some of Kropotkin's ideas on technology, decentralization and agriculture). The book occasionally veers in too sectarian a direction for a work of careful analysis. It is simply unfair to Marx and to many later Marxists theorists and activists to claim that Marxism "was the result of the theoretical ramblings of one person's mind." However disastrous some of Marx's errors may have been, few have made a greater contribution than he did to dialectical thought and to the critique of ideology, and any off-hand dismissal of his work is entirely unjustified.

However, whatever shortcomings the work has, its strengths outweigh its weaknesses, and it offers the reader many thought-provoking ideas. On the whole, we should be grateful for Purchase's reassessment of Kropotkin from an anarchist perspective, and particularly for his efforts to show the contemporary relevance of many of Kropotkin's ideas on both the theoretical and practical levels.

FE note: Graham Purchase's article, "Kropotkin's Metaphysics of Nature," appeared in FE #337, Summer 1991. The issue also contains a postmortem of the Gulf War, and Ken Knabb's excellent, "The War and the Spectacle," both of which are useful reading in light of events in Kosovo.

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