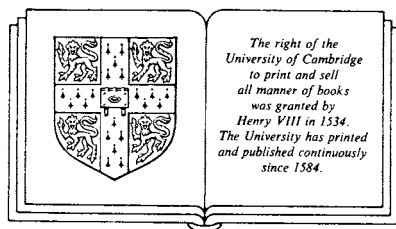


KROPOTKIN  
AND THE RISE OF  
REVOLUTIONARY ANARCHISM  
1872–1886

CAROLINE CAHM



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## INTRODUCTION

‘Peter Kropotkin is without doubt one of those who have contributed perhaps most – perhaps even more than Bakunin or Elisée Reclus – to the elaboration and propagation of anarchist ideas.’<sup>1</sup> So wrote his contemporary, Malatesta, Italy’s most famous militant and theorist of the time, who, if always a friend and comrade of Kropotkin, was also one of his sharpest critics.

A prominent revolutionary agitator as well as distinguished geographer, Kropotkin had a remarkable capacity for communicating easily with both the educated bourgeoisie and the oppressed classes. If he lacked the dramatic presence of Michael Bakunin and the oratorical brilliance of such figures as Sebastien Faure and Louise Michel, there was nevertheless a compelling persuasiveness in his writing which few could match. This persuasiveness sprang partly from his passionate and uncompromising concern for social justice but it was also due in no small part to the way he linked the development of anarchism to the development of science.

Kropotkin shared the optimism of the positivists in the limitless possibilities of the inductive deductive methods of scientific enquiry. In so doing he perhaps went further than Proudhon or even Reclus in rejecting as unscientific all metaphysics and the justification they gave to the power of church and state, whether emanating from the christian belief in an all-powerful god or from the hegelian concept of the universal spirit. In 1913 he went so far as to write a particularly savage attack on Bergson, the French philosopher, for denigrating science by arguing that intuition played an important part in scientific discovery.<sup>2</sup> Certainly he recognised the difficulties of attaining the same level of exactitude in sociological studies as in physics and chemistry. He did not share for instance Taine’s sweeping assertions about history as a sort of exact science and even in his youth, in a letter to his brother

Alexander, had pointed out that the work of the historian was necessarily coloured by his political beliefs.<sup>3</sup> He argued however that there was a special relationship between science and anarchism. Scientists of the past had always had some grand concept of social development which had given them the hypotheses or inspiration for their researches (Darwin's hypothesis regarding the role of the struggle for existence in the origin of species, for example, had been inspired by the conceptions of Malthus and bourgeois economy); in the contemporary world this inspiration for scientific research came from anarchism. In a letter to Guillaume in 1903 he claimed that it was now necessary to be an anarchist to be able to write about history, political economy or even biology.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, inspired by the synthetic approach pioneered by Comte and Spencer, he envisaged the possibility of arriving at a synthetic philosophy based on the mechanical interpretation of phenomena and embracing the whole of nature including the life of societies, which would provide an answer to the question of how progress could be achieved in terms of the well-being of the generality of mankind. Such a philosophy he argued was being elaborated partly by the study of the sciences and partly by anarchy. Anarchy, therefore, was no longer just a utopian theory – it represented the current of thought of the age.

The philosophy which is being elaborated by study of the sciences on the one hand and anarchy on the other, are two branches of one and the same great movement of minds: two sisters walking hand in hand. And that is why we can affirm that anarchy is no longer a utopia, a theory; it is a philosophy which impresses itself on our age.<sup>5</sup>

Kropotkin nevertheless rejected the ideas of absolute knowledge and truth which characterised both the rigid metaphysics of religion and the more dynamic dialectics of Hegel, and reflecting the less extreme positivist views of Claude Bernard, he actually envisaged the development of scientific knowledge in terms of an ever-changing approximation to truth. In his view there was something in the essential nature of anarchism with its insistence on free association and interaction between individuals which echoed this basic feature of science, something entirely lacking in other forms of socialism, particularly marxism. The latter he claimed was not in any case scientific at all. Marx and Engels, in confining themselves to the dialectical method in their study of human society and political economy had failed to provide real scientific proof for any of their affirmations about so called scientific socialism. 'Capital is a marvellous revolutionary pamphlet',

Kropotkin declared in a letter to Guillaume, 'but its scientific significance is nil'.<sup>6</sup> The basic tenet of historical materialism that bourgeois society was going to give birth to socialism, apart from being essentially determinist and therefore exercising an inhibiting effect on the action of revolutionaries, was based on a false claim about the inevitable concentration of capital which had been discredited by the observations of Cherkesov and others. Marx's theory of value was a naïve formulation based on Ricardo's assertion of a direct relationship between labour and value, which, in the elaboration of the idea of surplus value, failed to recognise the real cost of labour measured in terms of poverty and deprivation; and the evil of the present system was not that there was a surplus value of production which went to the capitalist but that there should be any surplus value at all. As regards his socialist ideas Marx had simply used hegelian dialectics to repeat what the utopian socialists had said so well before him. He had failed to break free from the old metaphysics and his followers, the social democrats, bogged down in abstractions which hid careless analysis, had gone on repeating the formulas of progress their master had believed to be vaguely true fifty years before, without verifying or exploring them. Unlike the advocates of scientific materialism who were less concerned with the relationship between humanity and the natural universe and focussed their attention more narrowly on economics and history, Kropotkin clearly adopted an essentially holistic approach in his claim regarding the scientific basis of anarchism. In *Anarchism: its Philosophy and Ideal* he argued that advances in the natural sciences had demonstrated that the harmony observed in the universe was simply a temporary equilibrium established between all forces which could only last on the condition of being continually modified and representing at every instant the resultant of all conflicting actions. Making a direct comparison between the breakdown of harmony which produced eruptions of volcanos in nature and revolutions in human society, he insisted that the process regarding the achievement of harmony applied as much to the evolution of human society as it did to anything else in the natural universe. And it was this process, which, in his view, found direct expression in the anarchist conception of society where harmony was sought in a delicate balance resulting from the development of free associations which were constantly being modified to meet the multiple aspirations of all.

Kropotkin was very much influenced in all this both by Darwin's work in producing scientific evidence to substantiate the idea of evol-

ution and the advances in biology, zoology and anthropology which followed from it: he believed that in addition to making a clear break with the old metaphysics, they had made it possible to reconstruct not only the history of organisms but also the history of human institutions. But he had doubts about the importance Darwin attached to natural selection in the origin of species, particularly the idea of the struggle for existence associated with it which, as developed first by Spencer and then Huxley, conflicted sharply with Kropotkin's idea of harmony achieved through a delicate balance between all the forces in society and actually provided justification for the capitalist system. In direct response to Huxley's essay, 'The Struggle for Existence in Human Society',<sup>7</sup> which delineated the struggle for existence as a pitiless combat of each against all where evolution could be either progressive or regressive, Kropotkin therefore elaborated his own ideas of evolution which identified mutual aid as a major factor in the evolutionary process which, unlike combat between the members of the same species, always led to progressive evolution.

He was convinced that Darwin himself in later life recognised that the associated struggle against the environment was more important in the struggle for life than the individual struggle within the species and he maintained that the great scientist's ideas had been misrepresented by the social darwinists. Kropotkin nevertheless actually derived the inspiration for his work on mutual aid from his own observations of animal behaviour in Siberia and from a lecture given in 1879 by the Russian zoologist, Karl Kessler, who had suggested that in addition to the law of mutual struggle there was the law of mutual aid which was more important in the struggle for life and progressive evolution.<sup>8</sup> To substantiate this law of mutual aid he brought together a mass of evidence drawn from the work of zoologists, anthropologists, sociologists and historians. He concluded that this evidence showed that the vast majority of animal species lived in societies and found, in association, the best weapons for the struggle for life understood in 'the wide darwinian sense not as a struggle for the sheer means of existence but as a struggle against all natural conditions unfavourable to the species'. And he declared that those animal species in which mutual aid had attained its greatest development were invariably the most numerous, prosperous and open to further progress. In the case of human beings the strength of the mutual aid had given mankind the possibility of developing those institutions which had enabled it to survive in its hard



struggle against nature and to progress, whatever the misfortunes in its history.

Against social darwinism and in support of anarchism, Kropotkin was undoubtedly convinced that his survey of animal and human behaviour had established the importance of the factor of mutual aid for progressive evolution. At the same time he was well aware of the limitations of that survey. In a letter to Landauer in 1903 about the German edition of his book, he firmly resisted any change to the title, *Mutual Aid: a Factor of Evolution* (1902), which would give the erroneous impression that he had answered the question about *how* mutual aid affected evolution.<sup>9</sup> He went on to say that several years further work would be required to provide some sort of answer to such a question because, in response to the growing importance of lamarckism, he would be obliged to show that species developed through the effect of direct accommodation to the environment, isolation etc., without an internal struggle for survival between its members. Clearly Kropotkin would have liked to carry his work on mutual aid further by enlisting the support of lamarckian ideas against those darwinists who insisted on a bitter struggle between members of the same species as the major factor in evolution. And in fact he contributed a number of articles to the *Nineteenth Century and After* on the subject of the inheritance of acquired characteristics which, although acknowledging the limitations of the research done so far and the difficulty of verifying its claims, were very sympathetic to lamarckism.<sup>10</sup> Certainly lamarckism was gaining ground in the first decades of the present century but the rediscovery at this time of the experiments of Mendel, an obscure German scientist in the 1850s, was already laying the foundation of the study of modern genetics which ultimately would deprive lamarckism of any real scientific validity.

Meanwhile, such concessions about the need for further study did not prevent Kropotkin from going on to claim that mutual aid was the mainspring for the development of morality in human society. Again, although he insisted on the continuity between Darwin's ideas and his own, he took his inspiration from someone else, in this instance J.-M. Guyau who in his *Esquisse d'une morale sans obligation ni sanction* (1884) had argued that the moral instinct in human beings required no coercion, compulsory obligation or sanction from above but developed as a result of the very need they had to live a full, intensive, productive life. Kropotkin declared that it was in the mutual aid instinct which

Darwin had considered to be 'more permanently at work in social animals than even the purely egotistic instinct of direct self preservation', that the origin was to be found of 'those feelings of benevolence and of that partial identification of the individual with the group which were the starting-point of all the higher ethical feelings'. And those ethical feelings, according to Kropotkin, developed into the general conceptions of right and wrong containing 'the fundamental principles of equity and mutual sympathy, which applied to all sentient beings, just as principles of mechanics derived from observation on the surface of the earth applied to matter in space'.<sup>11</sup> Far from giving a lesson in a-moralism, as had been argued by individualists like Stirner and Nietzsche and darwinists like Spencer and Huxley, nature was the first ethical teacher of man. Society in the absence of authority as exercised through church and state would become neither the community of egotists celebrated by the former nor a community of warring individuals portrayed by the latter. In *Anarchist Morality* he contended that in fact it was the oppression and exploitation generated by the church and more particularly the capitalist state which had undermined the very social cohesion on which the development of morality depended. An anarchist society where the liberty of the individual would be constrained by nothing but the necessity of finding cooperation, support and sympathy amongst his neighbours would actually foster that human solidarity out of which the higher ideals of justice and equity evolved. As for the individualists, he claimed that in their rejection of any conception of right and wrong and their exaltation of the individuality of the few without concern for the oppression of the many, they were advocating a foolish egoism which contained the negation of its own ideal regarding the attainment of 'a complete, broad and more perfectly attainable individuality'.<sup>12</sup>

Although Kropotkin insisted on the importance of the development of morality out of the practice of mutual aid, he recognised that the self-assertiveness of the individual was also an important factor for progressive evolution because it helped break the bonds that society imposed on the individual when institutions began to petrify. At the same time however, he argued, in so far as this same self-assertiveness also led both individuals and groups to struggle with each other for supremacy, it militated against the development of morality and progressive evolution. There had been in fact two major tendencies at work throughout the history of human societies, he claimed, the one which was the popular creative tendency where people worked out for

themselves the institutions necessary to make life in society possible, and the other which was the authoritarian, oppressive tendency where priests, sorcerers and military leaders endeavoured to establish their power over everyone else. It was this latter tendency acting in conflict with the popular tendency which had been responsible for the development of those political and economic systems where the privileged few established and maintained their power over, and at the expense of, the majority. The social tensions created by these systems of which the modern capitalist state was the most repressive example, inevitably led to revolutions – revolutions which, in spite of their final defeat in the face of a resurgence of the forces of reaction, always resulted in some reassertion of popular initiative and progress towards a free society. Kropotkin of course associated anarchism with the popular creative tendency as he associated statism with its opposite. He saw evidence of free communalism, for example, in the assertion of independence from feudal authority by medieval cities whose social organisation had been based on guild associations. It was only in the French Revolution however, that he saw the beginnings of socialism and the divisions between authoritarian and anti-authoritarian within it which were to produce state socialism on one hand and anarchism on the other.

Kropotkin saw the beginnings of the ideas of state socialism partly in the jacobinist communism of the babouvist conspiracies of 1794–5 which had later re-emerged in the ideas of Weitling, Cabet and Blanqui and partly in Saint-Simonism, the communism of Blanc and the collectivism of Pecqueur and Vidal which had been associated with the 1848 revolution – all of which, in his view, to a greater or less degree advocated a form of socialism which transformed the individual into a mere functionary of the state. Anarchist ideas by contrast, had originated amongst the *enragés*, the uncompromising agitators of the French Revolution who had demanded popular control as well as real economic equality; these ideas had found expression in Godwin's idea of anti-statist social revolution and been developed in Fourier's proposals for socialistic communities based on free association, the cooperative socialism of Owen and the mutualism of Proudhon.

But whilst Kropotkin associated the origins of the two currents of socialist ideas with particular thinkers and agitators and recognised the importance of the latter's role in helping to clarify the vague ideas of the masses, he nevertheless believed that socialism as a social movement, like all others, originated from among the people and maintained its vitality and creative force only so long as it remained a movement of the

people. The ideas of Chaliar and Lange which foreshadowed the utopian vision of Fourier, had been associated with the communalist movement in Paris and the provinces in the French Revolution. The socialist ideas of both currents, in spite of the dismal failure of state socialist schemes in the revolution of 1848, had gained a new strength and significance in the development of the International Workingmen's Association in the sixties. It was the popular insurrections sparked off by the Paris Commune of 1871 which had finally demonstrated the ineffectiveness of state socialism and the need for free and independent communes to carry through the social revolution. Latin peoples had been particularly responsive to the lesson of the Commune of Paris, hence their sympathetic response to the anarchism of Bakunin and the strength of the Anti-authoritarian International in Latin countries. Germanic peoples with their authoritarian traditions, however, had taken a quite different lesson from the Commune and had supported the authoritarian socialism of Marx, hence the strength of social democracy in these countries.

Historically speaking, in terms of progressive evolution the marxists had made a major error in Kropotkin's view by encouraging the persistence of the authoritarian tendency in the socialist movement. Only the masses themselves, he insisted, could carry through a social revolution. And one of his greatest anxieties was that unless anarchists helped the people define and clarify their ideals they would go on, as they had done before, choosing methods which were political and parliamentary and therefore inconsistent with their realisation. Even if the masses requires neither detailed programmes nor blueprints to guide them in the building up of a free and just society, it was essential they understood the need to take political and economic control into their own hands from the very beginning if they were to be able to do it. For all its communalism and populism, the revolt of the Paris Commune had ended in such a terrible defeat because the people had clung onto the old governmental prejudice, abandoning popular power and initiative to an elected government which had failed to keep in touch with the creative energy of the people and to consolidate popular support by carrying through a social revolution. Kropotkin endeavoured to substantiate his argument by an exploration of the possibilities of creating an anarchist communist society in *The Conquest of Bread* (1892) and *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1898) – books in which he developed his economic ideas as well as his views concerning education which are associated with them.

In *The Conquest of Bread* Kropotkin sought to demonstrate the importance and practicability of establishing everyone's right to well-being from the first day of the revolution, by the people themselves taking possession of all social wealth so that the exploiters could no longer appropriate the product of the labour of others and it could be distributed amongst all members of society according to need. There were already examples in contemporary society – the organisation of national libraries, public water supplies, the lifeboat service – of the recognition of the principle 'to each according to his/her need'. Attacking the collectivists and social democrats for seeking only the collectivisation of the instruments of production, he argued that everything was so interdependent in modern society that it would be impossible to reform the part without the whole – half measures would simply disrupt the system of production and spread discontent. For the worker, shelter, food and clothing were as much instruments of production as tools and machines. Moreover, the wages system which belonged to the capitalist system of production had an inbuilt tendency to promote inequality and injustice: it was impossible to determine the value of the individual contribution to production accurately and fairly, there would always be those unable to earn sufficient for themselves and their dependents, whilst the marxist distinction between qualified and simple work would inevitably reintroduce the inequalities of present society. To proclaim the abolition of private property with regard to the instruments of production and then to deny it with regard to everything else was to attempt to base society on two totally opposing principles: such a society would either end up reverting back to the system of private property or transforming itself into a communist society.

Kropotkin did not accept that problems of scarcity would make the abolition of the wages system and distribution according to need impossible except as a long term aim, as the marxists and social democrats claimed. Shortages occasioned by the disruption of production during the first days of the revolution would be solved by a system of rationing organised by local communities. Given the modern advances in scientific knowledge, the enthusiasm and commitment of the masses would soon ensure the production of goods sufficient to meet the needs of society. Indeed he was convinced that production could be so improved and expanded in an anarchist communist society that each adult between the ages of twenty or twenty-two and forty-five or fifty would only need to work a five-hour day to provide for everyone's needs. In *Fields, Factories and Workshops* he went on to discuss in

some detail the defects of contemporary food production and how they could be eradicated in a system more appropriate to the development of natural resources and the satisfaction of human need. In so doing he denounced the pernicious effects of the theory of Malthus, which, in declaring that population always presses on the means of subsistence, continued to provide a kind of scientific argument about the inevitability of poverty in support of the present system, even though it had been discredited by the enormous increase in man's productive powers during the nineteenth century. 'We have no right to complain of over-population, and no need to fear it in the future', he declared, 'Our means of obtaining from the soil whatever we want, under *any* climate and upon *any* soil, have lately been improved at such a rate that we cannot foresee yet what is the limit of productivity of a few acres of land'.<sup>13</sup> The evidence for this claim was challenged by the proponents of neo-malthusianism who, arguing that success in combating poverty depended on restricting population growth, had founded a movement in 1879 to promote and spread the knowledge of birth control. Kropotkin, however, who from the first had sharply criticised the movement as a diversion from the revolutionary struggle, whilst acknowledging the benefits to the poor of limiting the size of their families did not think the arguments of neo-malthusianism deserved serious consideration.<sup>14</sup>

He claimed that the main problem about the modern system of production was that as a system organised purely to secure profits for the few it could not function effectively and efficiently in providing for the needs of society as a whole. Preoccupation with the maximisation of profit through the division of labour as extolled by bourgeois economists had led to over-specialisation where industrialised countries had failed to develop their agricultural resources, preferring to concentrate on the production of manufactured goods at the expense of turning the workers into slaves of huge machines and having to face recurring economic crises as other nations became industrialised and the competition for markets intensified. Such a system, he warned, carried within it the seeds of its own decay. Taking a line which contrasted sharply with that of the marxists who saw in specialisation and the centralisation of production an essential part of the historical process leading to socialism, Kropotkin argued that increasing specialisation actually conflicted with the tendencies of human life where variety was the characteristic feature of a territory and its inhabitants. In place of over-specialisation there would have to

be an integration and combination of labour where every able-bodied human being in free association with others would do intellectual as well as manual labour and work in both field and workshop whilst every region would produce and consume most of its own agricultural and manufactured produce. Inspired by Fourier's vision of free association in agreeable work Kropotkin contended that in a society based on the integration of labour where the individual could achieve the fullest development of his/her capacities and interests, enjoy varied activity, and work in a healthy environment where the factory was no longer divorced from the countryside, work would no longer be a burden and the level and quality of production would be much higher than under the present system.

A system of integrated labour implied a complete change in the system of education. Kropotkin, therefore, advocated integral education where everyone would be educated in the use of hand and brain to end the pernicious division between intellectual and manual work which depressed the achievement levels of everyone and slowed up scientific and technical progress.

No other leading anarchist either before or since has associated anarchism as closely as Kropotkin did with the development of science. Critical though they were of metaphysics and dialectics, Proudhon and Bakunin were strongly influenced by both in their language and thought. Bakunin was anxious that science should be the property of all because it would point to the general causes of individual suffering and reveal the general conditions necessary for the real emancipation of individuals in society. But he was not prepared to go any further in recognising close, positive links between free socialism and science. He denounced as monstrous any attempt to force practical life into strict conformity with the abstract data of science: science should never interfere with the practical organisation of society for, apart from always being imperfect, it concerned itself with abstraction and was forced therefore by its nature to ignore the lives of real individuals. He attacked the marxists who wanted to accord a powerful position to savants not only because he believed they would be corrupted by power just as surely as everyone else in authority but also because he was convinced that they could only be intellectual socialists since scientific thought was not directly related to practical experience. The workers for all their ignorance and prejudice were instinctively socialist as a result of their experience of oppression; the development of socialist thought which they lacked would be achieved through the develop-

ment of the practical action in fighting oppression. Reclus, as a scientist, made a much clearer break with the language and thought of metaphysics and dialectics. He was in fact much closer to Kropotkin than any other major figure in the anarchist movement. Nevertheless there are clear differences between the two men in the way they related science to anarchism. Reclus saw revolution as the culmination of an evolutionary process where the final resistance to change was overcome whereas Kropotkin saw it in the more elaborate terms of a breakdown in harmony to produce a new readjustment between all the forces in society. Even though he believed that a knowledge of natural laws and history was essential to enable the masses to define their ideals and discover the way to secure the realisation of those ideals, Reclus did not share Kropotkin's preoccupation with the idea of anarchist communism as the basis of a synthetic philosophy, and rather like Bakunin he focussed his attention on the democratisation of science. Partly because he seems to have had much less structured and detailed views of history and evolution and partly because he was more concerned to denounce the enslaving effect on men's minds of religion, Reclus was less inclined than Kropotkin to identify marxism, social democracy or even particular races with the authoritarian tendency of history and regressive evolution. He seems in fact to have been much more interested in the development of the individual than Kropotkin, seeing here the beginning of that evolutionary and revolutionary process which would culminate in the creation of a free and just society.

Other leading anarchists were actually very critical of the way Kropotkin linked anarchism with science. Malatesta claimed that what he called 'scientific anarchism', like 'scientific socialism', had been derived from scientism, which, as a result of a belief in the unlimited possibilities of science, had equated scientific truth with human aspirations when it really only concerned the discovery of facts and the laws governing the inevitable occurrence and repetition of those facts. Not everything in the universe could be subjected to a mechanistic explanation: if it could, everything would be predestined and there would be no point in the struggle to create a better society. Kropotkin's idea of anarchism as a synthetic philosophy was, in Malatesta's view, a nonsense. Anarchy was an aspiration which could be achieved through the exercise of the human will. It could not be equated with a mechanical conception of the universe and should not be confused with either science or any given philosophical system even though it could profit from advances in science and philosophic thought. He rejected