

Kropotkin

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Russian main proponent of anarchist communism, Kropotkin (1842–1921) believed that Darwin's theory of evolution, properly applied, showed that human beings are social creatures who flourish best in small communities cemented together by mutual aid and voluntary associations. A guiding spirit of the international anarchist movement, Kropotkin was also a distinguished geographer, a scientist and a positivist. He was a geographer who carried out explorations of Siberia, Finland, and Manchuria before devoting his life to political activities. Kropotkin was a Russian aristocrat by birth but he renounced his title 1872 and henceforth devoted himself to the cause of social revolution, spending most of his later life in Western Europe and Britain.

Memoirs of a Revolutionist is the work in which Kropotkin summarized his ideas. This entertaining and candid autobiography of the great anarchist is highly impressive. There are fantastic characters – the millionaire gourmet prince who ate away a fortune; thrilling adventures – escape from the Peter and Paul prison, Petersburg's Bastille; amusing ironies on the run, as when he gets a job in London on Nature under an assumed name and is asked to review his own books. Lenin thought Kropotkin a worthy bore. Kropotkin regarded Lenin as an honorable tyrant. The main issue touched upon by the memoirs is the analysis of correlation between Darwinism and “the progressive evolution” of human society[1].

Memoirs of a Revolutionist helps track the life journey made by Kropotkin before he formulated his ideas. Born into an aristocratic Moscow family close to the Russian Imperial throne, Kropotkin was educated at an exclusive military academy, but at 20, filled with the desire to be useful, he renounced

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a brilliant career to serve for five years as a military administrator in Eastern Siberia. His hopes for liberal reform by Alexander II, the tsar who had abolished serfdom, were soon disappointed. He also lost any faith in the virtues of state discipline in society and began to move slowly towards an anarchist position. He now turned to scientific exploration of the nature, and his observations laid the foundations of his theory of "mutual aid"[2] among animal species.

Anarchism, as advanced by Peter Kropotkin, was equally prepared to recognize the profound influence of Darwinism on modern thought. Darwin, Kropotkin argued, made biology an advanced science by giving it an evolutionary principle of universal magnitude.

Darwin's theory, in his opinion, provided a key for reconstructing "the progressive evolution" not only of plants and animals but also of human society as a scientific challenge. Kropotkin did not deny the role of the struggle for existence in the evolutionary process, but he bitterly opposed Darwin's designation of that struggle as the primary motor of biological transformation. Kropotkin gave credit to *The Descent of Man*, one of Darwin's major works, for demonstrating the biological origins of morality, the foundation of "mutual aid".

Kropotkin's ideas have clear positivist coat. He saw the development of anarchism as one aspect of the whole movement of modern science towards an integrated philosophy. He believed that the dominant phenomenon in nature was harmony, arrived at by a continuous process of adjustment between contending forces. In human, as in animal societies, the dominant

phenomenon was mutual aid: thus once metaphysics, law and state authority had been shaken off, harmony could be realized.

Developing his idea of “ mutual aid” Kropotkin comes to a fair, as he believes, society, that is anarchist communism. It is a society without government, where harmony would be obtained not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements between the various groups, territorial and professional, instituted for the sake of production and consumption as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized society.

In such a society, as in organic life, Kropotkin believed harmony would result from “ an ever-changing adjustment and readjustment of equilibrium between a multitude of forces and influences”[3]. The individual would not be limited in the free expression of his powers in production by a capitalist monopoly, or by obedience, which only led to the sapping of initiative. On the contrary, he would be able to obtain the complete development of all his faculties: the fullest individuation.

Works Cited

Kropotkin, P. *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962

Shatz, Marshall S. *Essential Works of Anarchism*. New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972

[1] P. Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 498.

[2] P. Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 499.

[3] Marshall S. Shatz, *Essential Works of Anarchism*. (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1972), 269.