

KROPOTKIN'S "THE CONQUEST OF BREAD" FOR TODAY; ANARCHIST POLITICAL ECONOMICS

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For forty years, Peter Kropotkin (1842—1921) was active in the anarchist movement. "Kropotkin...was the chief exponent of the ideas of the European anarchist movement, which for the most part, only developed after Bakunin's death." (Cahm 1989; p. ix) One of his most well-known books was *The Conquest of Bread*. Written clearly and understandably, it laid out his program of anarchist-communism and is still widely read throughout the world.

Some anarchists and other radicals ask whether it is worth considering the work of dead white men with bushy beards. Times have changed, they point out; society, technology, and anarchism have evolved.

However, while there have been many changes in society, certain basic dynamics have remained. We still live under capitalism, where a minority rules by exploiting the working majority. The state still exists throughout the world, repressing the people and waging wars. It props up—and is propped up by—capitalism. Other forms of oppression still exist (patriarchy, racism, nationalism, imperialism, heterosexism, ecological destruction, etc.). These also are supported by, and support, capitalism and the state.

Anarchism was created by Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman, and many other workers and activists, in order to deal with capitalism, statism, and other oppressions. We do not have to re-invent the wheel. Contemporary anarchists have a great deal to learn from their predecessors. This includes learning from their mistakes. We can see further than they did, only because we stand on their shoulders.

Paul Goodman, perhaps the most well-known anarchist of "the sixties," wrote, "The ways that Kropotkin suggested, how men can at once begin to live better, are still the ways; the evils he attacked are mostly still the evils..." (Ward 1985; p. iv)

Economic Science

Kropotkin declared, "the only economic science worthy the name [is] a science which might be called 'The Study of the Needs of Humanity and of the Economic Means to satisfy them.'" (p. 94)

His view of “economic science” does not focus on how capitalism works, as does bourgeois economics as well as Marxism (from another angle). It does not emphasize how goods are presently produced. He criticizes all economists, “from Adam Smith to Marx,” whose theory “begins with Production...” rather than starting with “Consumption, that is to say, of the means necessary to satisfy the needs of individuals...” (p. 201)

It looks toward the future, the ways a better economy might work. While Kropotkin regards this as a scientific approach, there is a moral aspect to it (again, unlike bourgeois or Marxist political economy). How could we determine what human needs should be satisfied without considering values?

Although not the central focus of this book, Kropotkin does discuss the functioning of capitalism—if only to show that it does not satisfy “the Needs of Humanity.” He points out the immense growth of productivity in industry and agriculture. Unlike previous ages, he writes, society could now potentially provide everyone with enough for a fulfilling life. This was written in the late 19th century. How much more true is it today!

However, “The socialists have said it....All that is necessary for production...have been seized by the few....The few only allow the many to work on condition of themselves receiving the lion’s share....These few prevent the remainder of men from producing the things they need, and force them to produce...whatever offers the greatest profits to the monopolists. In this [analysis] is the substance of all socialism.” (p. 55) (Unlike some present-day anarchists, Kropotkin regarded anarchism as a variety of socialism.)

All this is true, every word. The basis of capitalism (and landlordism) is exploitation of the working people. “The landlord owes his riches to the poverty of the peasants, and the wealth of the capitalist comes from the same source”—the poverty of the workers. (p. 85) I would add that the question of what is “poverty” is not an absolute criterion but a relative one, depending on the level of productivity, the cultural background, and the history of working class struggle.

Kropotkin refers to “the comparative well-being of a certain category of young robust workmen, skilled in certain branches of industry.... This well-being...is the exclusive right of a few....” (p. 131) He is touching on what has been called “the aristocracy of labor.” However, he notes that even these workers are insecure and vulnerable to the ups and downs of the economy, resulting in periodic unemployment.

Their better work situations depend, he says, on the poverty of the many and on capitalist super-profits from imperialism. “Eastern lands in a backward state are exploited by the West, in order that, under the capitalist system, workers in a few privileged industries may obtain certain limited comforts of life.” (p. 132) In any case, even the better-off workers are still exploited, producing more value than they get back. (The concept of a “labor aristocracy” may be seen as a distinct layer of workers, but it is probably better to see the working class in terms of a graduated polarity.)

In this book, Kropotkin refers repeatedly to imperialism, colonialism, and war. “The state...finds it necessary to maintain an expensive army, because the traders of all nations are perpetually fighting for the markets, and any day a little quarrel arising from the exploitation of some part of Asia or Africa may result in war.” (p. 91) In a sarcastic tone, he writes, “Since all our [bourgeois] civilization is based on the exploitation of inferior races and countries with less advanced industrial systems, the Revolution will confer a boon at the very outset, by menacing that ‘civilization,’ and allowing the so-called inferior races to free themselves.” (pp. 114-5) (He does not consider that the colonized peoples might have revolutions before the imperialist nations do.)

Besides referring to the exploitation of industrial workers, peasants, and oppressed nations (mostly People of Color), Kropotkin raises the oppression of women: “Woman, too, at last claims her share in the emancipation of humanity. She no longer wants to be the beast of burden of the house.” (p. 153) “A revolution...would not be a revolution if it maintained slavery at home. Half humanity subjected to the slavery of the hearth would still have to rebel against the other half.” (p.156-7)

His proposals for the liberation of women involve the increased use of machinery and cooperation in cleaning, cooking, laundry, etc. However, he accepts that these are all “women’s work,” even if socialized and made less burdensome. Childcare is specifically women’s work, without any mention of socialization. “Women [will be] engaged in the education of their children...” (p. 136) While advanced for his time, this way of thinking was still behind the views of the best socialist feminists.

Post-Capitalist Economies

In *The Conquest of Bread*, his presentation of post-capitalism is not a detailed blueprint, as the “utopian socialists” often drew up. Neither is it as vague as that of Marx, who essentially proposed that the workers take state power and then see what happens

next (with a few predictions scattered through his writings). Instead, Kropotkin is providing principles for an anarchist-communist society, to argue for its possibility. “But whether the revolution would everywhere exhibit the same characteristics is doubtful.” (p. 109)

Kropotkin proposed the socialization of the economy: the land, factories, workshops, productive machinery, railroads, roads, warehouses, housing, restaurants, natural resources, and so on. “Society itself will be forced to take production in hand, in its entirety, and to reorganize it to meet the needs of the whole people.” (p. 99)

However, he was adamantly against the program of “state socialism” (or “authoritarian Communism”): that the state should take over much or all of the economy. This would involve top-down centralized direction and planning. The workers would still be taking orders from bosses; bureaucrats would become the new ruling class; and the economy would be as inefficient as ever. In practice it would be state capitalism. All this, Kropotkin and other anarchists predicted, well before the advent of Stalinist Russia and its off-shoots.

Nor was Kropotkin only against revolutionary dictatorships. He was just as vehemently opposed to putting a parliamentary republic in charge of a nationalized economy. Such a “representative democracy” (including the U.S. system) was still a state, hierarchical and centralized, and developed to serve capitalism. At best it was incompetent to manage the affairs of a whole nation. At worst, it was repressive and fraudulent, giving the workers the illusion that they are a free people. Even if the population voted every few years, the state would be ruled by the top managers, bureaucrats, and bourgeoisie. Workers would still sell their working ability for wages or salaries, still labor under bosses, carrying out alienating labor, and being exploited.

The socialized (or communized) economy must not be managed by a socially-alienated body, backed by armed forces, standing over the working people—that is, a state. Instead it should be organized, by free, self-governing, associations of the people. Industries would be run by workers’ councils and the directly-democratic assemblies of communities. Peasant villages would collectively decide how to organize their farming.

There would be popular associations to distribute goods once produced. Communal kitchens might do the basic cooking, with families free to finish the cooking at home if they did not want to eat collectively. The various cooperatives,

communes, and associations would be federated and networked into systems of coordination.

“The free agro-industrial communes...must be vast agglomerations like Paris, or still better, small territories. These communes would federate, even irrespectively of national frontiers...and large labor associations might come into existence for the inter-communal service of the railways, the docks, and so on.” (pp. 50-51)

He gives the example of the European railroad system, which goes from Turkey to France, crossing borders, without there being an overall government to arrange matters. Instead, the railroad companies sent delegates to conferences and made agreements to coordinate their roads, schedules, rail gauges, etc. And this was done under capitalism, with Europe divided into nation-states! (A similar argument could be made today as to international air traffic, coordinated through agreement, without a world state.) Under anarchist-communism, regional and international coordination would provide democratic economic planning from the bottom up.

He rejects the “collectivist” program, in which workers would be paid for the hours they work, in money or in labor-notes. The workers would buy back commodities with their dollars or coupons. Kropotkin was disagreeing with programs proposed by P.J. Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin (despite agreement on other issues) and also with Marx’s prediction of two stages of post-revolutionary economies. In the first, the workers would be paid in labor-notes; only in the higher stage would there be full communism.

How, he asks, can we judge how much effort different workers put out in the same amount of time? Should there be different levels of payment according to skill and training? Does not all production depend on the mass cooperation of a great number of people, in the past and in the present? How, then, judge how much any individual worker contributed to the final product? Don’t different workers have different needs, so that equality of payment leads to inequality of lives?

Instead, Kropotkin proposes anarchist-communism and the end of the wage-system. (No connection to [big-“c”] Communist Parties.) All able-bodied adults would be expected to work for a set number of hours (he suggests four or five) on some socially-necessary task, in a voluntary group. This would entitle them to the social standard of food, clothing, housing, etc. If they want something more, they are free to participate in additional groups which produce music, books, musical instruments, art, more varied food and clothing, and whatever “luxuries” they may desire.

The classical definition of (small-“c”) communism is “From each according to their ability; to each according to their needs.” Except for having to engage in a minimum of necessary labor, under communism there is no connection between work and consumption. “The system is this: no stint or limit to what the community possesses in abundance, but equal sharing and dividing of those commodities which are scarce or apt to run short.” (p. 105) Of goods which are plentiful, people can take what they want; of scarce goods, there may be rationing.

Kropotkin argues that food could be grown far more abundantly in regions than it is. He provides evidence from market gardens and the then-best agricultural practices to support this claim. In many ways, post-capitalist economies could be more decentralized and regionalized than under today’s corporate imperialism.

He makes similar claims as to increased productivity in industry, without the drain of capitalist misdirection of production toward profitability. Technology could be redesigned to make work more creative, fulfilling, and interesting. “A factory could be made as healthy and pleasant as a scientific laboratory.” (p. 150) “Free men will create new conditions, and their work will be pleasant and infinitely more productive.” (p. 152)

Society would overcome the divisions between mental and manual labor, between giving orders and taking them, between agricultural and industrial labor, and between work, art, and play. This mostly answers the question of how to get people to work without the lash of poverty and the reward of wages.

In a later edition of *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin notes that he provided more material for these assertions in a sequel. “A fuller development of these ideas will be found in my book, *Fields, Factories, and Workshops*.” (p. 220) It is subtitled *Industry Combined with Agriculture and Brain Work with Manual Work*. (Kropotkin 1974) (Later, Colin Ward re-edited this work, replacing Kropotkin’s lengthy reports of evidence with more recent data to support his claims.) (Ward 1985)

Since then there has been a vast literature relevant to Kropotkin’s perspective. Radicals and even liberals have come to advocate worker managed enterprises. (See my overview; Price 2014) Virtually every industry has somewhere been democratically managed, successfully, by producer and/or consumer cooperatives. Meanwhile modern technology has provided possibilities of small scale and wide spread production, which can yet be coordinated over vast distances. (Carson 2010) The possibility, even the necessity, of smaller, organic, farms for an ecologically safe future, has also been demonstrated. (McKibben 2007)

Kropotkin laid the basis for what has been called “alternate,” “appropriate,” “liberatory,” or “humanistic” technology. But he did not himself quite advocate it. He thought that productive technology was evolving in that direction—smaller, more flexible, and more able to be controlled by the workers in a creative and democratic fashion. He did not advocate a conscious effort to deliberately refashion technology away from its capitalist form to a liberatory form, as later alternate technologists have. (McRobie 1981)

Similarly he laid the basis for an ecological approach to industry and agriculture. However, he only criticized the capitalist economy for its holding back the production of useful goods, including food, and for its mistreatment of the working class. He had an ecological consciousness, as a professional geographer and naturalist. But he rarely critiqued capitalist agriculture and industry for their destructive impact on the natural environment. This was to come later, by anarchists following in his footsteps—especially by Murray Bookchin. (Biehl 2015; Bookchin 1980)

Revolution

Various anarchists have admired Kropotkin for showing how a free and cooperative society might work, without a state or capitalist class. They believe that such a society might be achieved gradually and piecemeal, peacefully and “democratically”, with little, if any, forcible conflict. Such was the view of Paul Goodman, Colin Ward, and, in our time, David Graeber and many others. This was not Kropotkin’s perspective, but that of P.J. Proudhon before him.

Kropotkin did not believe that the rich and powerful would give up their riches and power easily, even if a big majority wanted a new society. They would have to be forcibly expropriated, their wealth, their land, their productive machinery, their money, and their politicians all taken away from them. “Expropriation...must apply to everything that enables any man...to appropriate the product of others’ toil.” (p. 89)

How the anarchist minority should act in non-revolutionary periods is not discussed in this volume. Kropotkin was for anarchists participating in unions, strikes, and other popular struggles, even for limited goals. Meanwhile they should continue to advocate revolutionary anarchist-communism. (Cahm 1989)

He expected a revolution to break out in a time of economic crisis. “It is certain that the coming Revolution...will burst upon us in the middle of a great industrial crisis.”

(p. 98) Given the instability of capitalism and the suffering of working people, he regarded a revolution as inevitable in the foreseeable future. “Revolution, for whose coming we look, not two hundred years hence, but soon, very soon.” (p. 89)

In this situation, anarchists should call on the people to completely expropriate the capitalists, to take away their industries, means of transportation, warehouses, housing, land, and other wealth. “On the day we strike at private property, under any one of its forms, we shall be obliged to attack them all.” (p. 92) This must not be given over to the state, which should be dismantled rather than strengthened.

Workers should take over their factories and workshops and run them, producing useful goods, and planning for reorganizing the process of production. Small farmers should take over the land, including unused land, and begin to produce food for all of the people.

“Citizens, men and women both, will form themselves into bands of volunteers and address themselves to the task of making a rough inventory of the contents of each shop and warehouse....In every block of houses, in every street, in every town ward, bands of volunteers will have been organized.” (p. 103) Coordinating with each other, committees should account for existing stores of food and distribute it equitably—while setting up consumers’ cooperatives. Similarly, popular committees should investigate what housing was available and what were the housing needs, and organize a redistribution of shelter. Plans for building more housing would also be made.

Kropotkin does not write of the need for producing armaments, distributing them among the people, organizing a democratic popular military (a militia) to defend against counterrevolutionary armed forces of the old regime. Also the need to spread propaganda among the regular army’s ranks (daughters and sons of the working people). But this would fit into his program.

Full anarchist-communism could not be implemented overnight. Some have criticized revolutionary anarchists for thinking that a new society could be created instantly. Certainly this was not Kropotkin’s view. “We do not believe that in any one country the Revolution will be accomplished at a stroke, in the twinkling of an eye.” (p. 110) It will be a process and a struggle, relying on the needs and the creativity of the working people.

Kropotkin’s prediction of an inevitable revolution, coming soon, may sound absurd today. “...This revolution is imminent,...it may break out in a very few years.” (p. 67) However, he lived to see the 1917 Russian Revolution, which was followed by a

revolution in Germany and other rebellions and uprisings throughout Europe. That these revolutions failed or were distorted (as in Russia) is true, but he was raising real possibilities. However, we must abandon all talk of revolutionary “inevitability,” “certainty,” or “imminence” (which Marxists also have claimed). It is not inevitable that a world revolution of the workers and all oppressed will happen before, say, a nuclear war or ecological catastrophe.

Yet, in places, Kropotkin suggests that the revolution is not so much inevitable as an alternative possibility, a choice—that society faces what Rosa Luxemburg called “socialism or barbarism.” “A society cannot live thus;” Kropotkin wrote, “it must return to truth or cease to exist....Under pain of death, human societies are forced to return to first principles:...All things are for all.” (p. 61) Capitalism continues to be crisis-prone, unstable, and the cause of great suffering. It threatens humanity with just such military and/or ecological disasters. “Under pain of death” the need for a revolution, and the possibilities of such a revolution, remain.

Anarchist Political Economy

Nearing the end of the book, Kropotkin restates his definition of the “science” of “Political Economy” as “The study of the needs of humanity, and of the means of satisfying them with the least possible waste of human energy.” (p. 202) He contrasts this with Marx’s focus on how capitalism works (Marx’s “critique of political economy”). This he rejects (he specifically rejects the labor theory of value and the tendency of capital toward concentration and centralization).

In my opinion, Kropotkin’s approach has both weaknesses and strengths. Without more than his limited overview of how capitalism functions, it is not possible to understand how capitalism has survived so long, or what caused the prosperity after World War II, or what caused it to end in the seventies, or the nature of state capitalist regimes, or why capitalism must be so terribly destructive to nature. Or other topics. It may be an unfortunate legacy of Kropotkin’s influence that there have been virtually no anarchist writings on the economics of capitalism since Proudhon.

But Kropotkin’s approach provides workers and others with a vision, a moral goal, which is also practical and workable. It leads to strategies for action in a revolution. It provides a standard by which to judge societies—which Marxism sadly lacks when facing mass-murdering dictatorships calling themselves “Marxist.” The libertarian and humanistic aspects of Marx’s views easily wore off because they were never central to

Marx's project. Such humanism, participatory-democracy, and scientific hope were central to Kropotkin. He was not perfect (see Price 2022) but our present-day perspectives are extensions of Kropotkin's revolutionary anarchist vision.

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(There are various books about Kropotkin as well as collections of his writings. I recommend Iain McKay's Kropotkin anthology. It has an excellent "Introduction," summarizing his ideas and life.)

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