

'peculiarly "conservative"' and 'both small and isolated'. It is this latter respect especially that I think poses problems for (again, as the author admits) 'generalizing from the perceptions and consciousness of the Ollerton striking community' (p. 209). It is a pity that no comparative study was conducted to offset this.

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Peter Kropotkin: From Prince to Rebel by George Woodcock and Ivan Avakumovic.
Black Rose Books, Montreal/New York, 1990 edn., 465 pp., C\$38.95, C\$19.95
paper.

In the wake of the global discrediting of Marxism, perhaps we should expect a resurrection of enthusiasm for anarchist gurus, at least among those likely to be swayed by infantile disorders. This supposition may have been behind the decision to republish this biography of Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921), who became the leading anarchist in Europe after the death of Bakunin in 1876.

Kropotkin was born with a platinum spoon in his mouth and was one of the Corps of Pages who served the Czar in St Petersburg. He became an army officer, and in the early and mid-1860s became famous as an explorer and professional geographer and geologist, contributing to the mapping of Siberia and explanations of the structure of the central Asian plateau. However, like many of his contemporaries, he became increasingly critical of the czarist regime and embarked upon a revolutionary career which led to his imprisonment in 1874. He escaped from prison in 1876, largely because the spectacular incompetence of the authorities ran a close second to the incompetence of his revolutionary comrades. He spent time in Switzerland, Belgium and France before settling in England in 1886, where he lived until the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. He then spent four miserable years seeing many of his illusions shattered as the Bolsheviks consolidated their power.

Kropotkin's principal contribution to political theory lay in his attempt to provide scientific foundations for anarchism: he maintained that 'mutual aid', rather than the Darwinian process of competition and struggle for survival, was the fundamental evolutionary law which operated both in nature and in human societies. This thesis he outlined at tedious length, especially in *Mutual Aid*. He contended that sociability is the great advantage in the struggle for life, and therefore the natural condition of all evolutionary organisms. The existence of law, private property and the state prevented people developing the instinctive solidarity which would make government unnecessary. It followed, or so he claimed, that the state and coercive centralization in industrial enterprises were unnatural, and would eventually be destroyed as people's consciousness rose and they became aware of the parasitic nature of both the state and capitalists. In his reflections on crime and punishment, consistent with these convictions, he maintained that the solution was the abolition of prisons and a humane understanding of criminals. An interesting public policy proposal for serial killers.

Kropotkin's political alternative is one that would appeal to the organic and unwashed collectivists in the Green Party: a society of small communities based on co-operation, the abolition of the division of labour, the possession of land and factories by the producers, manual work a duty for all, no privileged categories of

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workers, and 'labour cheques' rather than money as the mechanism of reward. Such a society, he maintained, would maximize human potential and be stable. As one of his American libertarian critics Benjamin Tucker argued, 'Kropotkinian anarchism means the liberty to eat, but not to cook; to drink, but not to brew; to wear but not to spin; to dwell, but not to build; to give, but not to sell or buy; to think, but not to print; to speak, but not to hire a hall; to dance, but not to pay the fiddler.' Kropotkin's answers to 'what is to be done with the free rider?' are none too convincing. He argues that after people are freed from compulsion they will work much harder. He gives as examples the productivity of French and Russian peasants after their emancipation, without noting that the key explanation for their increased productivity was that they now worked for themselves within a legal framework in which they owned their land and were free of parasitic rentiers.

Kropotkin's dreams are not especially attractive to those who enjoy modern cities. His biographers are gently critical of his sexually puritanical nature, his hostility to birth-control and his romantic sexism, but do not question whether or not a reactionary rustic romanticism lurks behind all of his thinking. They record without comment his moaning in Switzerland about people 'lounging about in cafés' gossiping about the theatre and bourgeois weddings. They chide Kropotkin's wife's apparent delight in being Princess Kropotkin, but comment: 'against this it must be remembered that, but for her consistent loyalty and care, Kropotkin would not have lived so long as he did or have completed so much important work.' Devoted slavery to an anarchist guru is evidently a forgivable form of human self-abasement.

Those who want to can find material in this biography that would enable them to reclaim Kropotkin for modern causes. He can be proclaimed as the first post-Fordist by the readers of *Marxism Today*, although I imagine his appeal will be largely confined to those who are green in all senses of that colour. They can claim that he was a consistent critic of Marxism–Leninism, but then so were many others, including social democrats and democratic socialists. They can claim him as a gentle anarchist who tempered the enthusiasm of those of his comrades who thought that an education in chemistry made a good anarchist, but then they must concede that he shared the same naive view of representative democracy as his bomb-loving comrades. 'History teaches us that all governments are alike and equal . . . Evil, in the eyes of anarchists, does not reside in one form of government more than in another. It is in the governmental idea itself, it is in the principle of authority.' Fortunately, in his practical conduct he did not follow this absurd thesis — indeed, his vigorous anti-Germanism and francophilism (very Russian traits) led him to support the Entente in the 1914 war. As Leon Trotsky put it, 'The superannuated anarchist Kropotkin, who had had a weakness ever since youth for the Narodniks, made use of the war to disavow everything he had been teaching for almost half a century. This denouncer of the State supported the Entente.'

The libertarian Right can also claim Kropotkin as an ancestor if they wish: 'The substitution, in human relationships, of a free contract, perpetually revisable, for administration and legal tutelage, for imposed discipline, is our ideal.' Indeed, the libertarian Right share with him the absurd view that human societies are perpetually revisable rationalist enterprises, with no important role for habit, tradition or culture in explaining human conduct.

Kropotkin's biological/scientific foundations for anarchism were not credible to his contemporaries, and there is no reason why we should be any more charitable. His belief in the inheritance of acquired characteristics is not scientifically accepted or politically intelligent since it offers lethal support to political reactionaries of a

racist and sexist bent. Moreover, Darwinian or neo-Darwinian biological theory is entirely capable of explaining co-operative behaviour without recourse to a theory of natural sociability. And even if we accepted Kropotkin's thesis that humans are naturally altruistically sociable (personally, I'm agnostic), he and his followers must explain why states, law and private property came into existence and have been significantly correlated with human civilization and the growth of scientific knowledge. They do not do so.

Kropotkin, on the evidence of this biography, seems to have been a relatively humourless and puritanical man with the propensity to be very boring. George Bernard Shaw charitably described him as 'amiable to the point of saintliness . . . His only weakness was a habit of prophesying war within the next fortnight. And it came true in the end.'

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