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Contents

N.B. The phrase 'Municipalizing Nature' is John Clark's, from his critique of Murray Bookchin's works.

Select Readings:

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    - *Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow*, London: Hutchinson & Co., 1899
    - *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, London: Heinemann, 1902
    - *Ethics: Origin and Development*, New York: McVeagh, 1924
    - 'What Geography Ought to Be.' *The Nineteenth Century*, December, 1885, pp. 940–956
    - 'What Man Can Get from Land.' *Cooperative Wholesale Society Annual*, 1897, pp. 358–394
2. Murray Bookchin, *Collected Works*
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differentiation of potentiality into actuality, in the course of which each new actuality becomes the potentiality for further differentiation and actualization. The reorganization of municipalities, their confederation into ever-larger networks that form a dual power in resisting the nation-state and remaking the constituents of people's representatives into men and women who participate in a direct democracy — all may take a considerable period of time to attain. But in the end, they alone can potentially eliminate the domination of human by human and thereby deal with those ecological problems whose growing magnitude threatens the existence of a biosphere than can support advanced forms of life. In the words of Murray Bookchin, someone who carried forward Kropotkin's legacy most creatively in recent times, perhaps the most apposite word for this kind of development is growth — growth not by mere accretion but by a truly immanent process of organic self-formation in a graded and increasingly differentiated direction.

The philosophical insights of the past five decades or so have had many fine and richly democratic moments. Old certainties have been shunned — among the casualties classical anarchism. Indeed some works have been brilliant in showing that power equations and hierarchies are housed even in the most radical forms of enlightenment thought. But before one brushes aside antique ecological socialism and a *ghostly and thin* libertarianism of a different time and place and conditions, one would do well to acknowledge and revisit old restless souls like Kropotkin and Morris. Tread their well-worn paths with care and you will be showered with a rare blessing: succor and a burning luminosity of purpose at the same time. I can vouch that statists, market liberals and born-again radicals will alike find worthy adversaries in them. And may be, just may be, such sojourns could provide an odd sheen to the newly acquired critical armory that adorns the blessed denizens of the brave new world.

The introduction to *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*, Peter Kropotkin's masterly rejoinder to competitive social Darwinists published in 1902, recounts the following anecdote: "When Eckermann told once to Goethe — it was in 1827 — that two little wren-fledglings, which had run away from him, were found by him next day in the nest of robin redbreasts (*Rothkehlchen*), which fed the little ones, together with their own youngsters, Goethe grew quite excited about this fact. He saw in it a confirmation of his pantheistic views, and said: — 'If it be true that this feeding of a stranger goes through all Nature as something having the character of a general law — then many an enigma would be solved.' He returned to this matter on the next day, and most earnestly entreated Eckermann (who was, as is known, a zoologist) to make a special study of the subject, adding that he would surely come "to quite invaluable treasuries of results."

This is the Goethe of *The Theory of Colors* and *Metamorphosis of Plants*, a unique dimension of the savant known and appreciated by artists and morphologists since. But why does a classical anarchist like Kropotkin needs to cite Goethe, whose inclinations for the storm and stress can only be matched by his surpassing urge to produce enduring literature and critiquing dilettantism at all levels? How the connection between ecology, evolution and philosophical anarchism gets stitched in the first place — before the advent of chaos and complexity theories, long before Earth First and Sierra Club became hip tags? Is it sound to dismiss such hitching as one more instance of misguided and modernist humanism as many radicals of our time — deep ecologists and votaries of biocentrism, not to speak of more mainstream anti-utopians — often tend to do?

I will talk about certain geographers and geologists then, who by the way, also underscored political radicalism for a generation during the turn of the last century, until more dogmatic pedants, unable to fathom (or digest) the breadth and grandeur of their vision, opted for various undemanding

possibilities. One feels an urgent need to revive the enormous legacy of such ecologically decentralist minds like Kropotkin and William Morris, Elisee Reclus and Paul Goodman, who among many others had advanced a serious and sophisticated challenge to varieties of rational and spiritual dogmatism that still haunts us, by pursuing ideas of naturalist heresy and constructive philosophical anarchism.

The first thing that strikes one is the breathtaking and tireless leap of imagination in this loose and confederated group, which for want of a better phrase, could be entitled as proto-social ecologists. Reclus' monumental 19-volume geography of the Earth, fruit of detailed empirical study across continents and moved as much by biological-egalitarianism as by objective geographical concerns, is the last ever such work written by a single man. Morris, an early eco-socialist who came close to identifying the dichotomy between nature and human society that Marx called in the *Capital* the "metabolic rift", was also an architect, engraver, textile designer, tapestry weaver, typographer, poet and the writer of that superb aesthetic utopia, *News from Nowhere*.

But it is Kropotkin who gave a variegated and nuanced shape to the link between nature and politics early on and inaugurated a definitive strand in what is now designated as the field of political ecology. It is said that Tsar Nicholas I became so enchanted with the eight-year-old Kropotkin in a ball that the Tsar decreed that he may be inducted into the most prestigious military school in Russia — the *Corps de Pages*. As a graduate with brilliant records from the academy, he could have chosen any branch of elite military regiment, but Kropotkin chose the newly formed and highly disreputable Siberian regiment, selecting the Mounting Cossacks of the Amur. And thus began his explorations of the wilderness of North-East Asia. He wasted no time and became part of two reform committees: one on prison reform and the other on regional self-administration of Eastern Siberia. During this time, he also traveled exten-

Let not to get a living be thy trade, but thy sport." He leaves the couple stranded with their arms akimbo, wondering about their own coarseness and possibilities of surviving the night. Another more recent example of what has gone rancid in ecological radicalism can be cited from an interview in *Simply Living*, an Australian periodical. David Foreman and Professor Bill Devall, high priests of the deep ecology movement are talking to each other, when at a juncture Foreman, frankly informs Devall that "When I tell people the worst thing we could do in Ethiopia is to give aid — the best thing would be to just let nature seek its own balance, to let the people there just starve — they think this is monstrous… Likewise, letting the USA be an overflow valve for problems in Latin America is not solving a thing. It's just putting more pressure on the resources we have in the USA." Something sinister is happening here. Hate as we do the politics of alms distribution, this cannot be a self sufficiency argument.

A more considered naturalism takes a different route. Foremost: it realizes that once essentialized a naturalist argument can be used for buttressing sheer conservatism and new age narcissism. It is also careful not to tumble into the mainstream liberal trap of doing away with our visions and nightmares, fallings and tremblings. One does not look for compensatory escapisms — either way. Such naturalism vouchsafes by increased differentiation and a processual way of thinking. It acknowledges that our serious ecological dislocations are related to specific social, aesthetic and ethical issues. Mere sublimation to Gaia or to any undifferentiated notion of planetary oneness sadly leads to an Eco-la-la land. A considered naturalism advances an ethics of complementarity in which humans play an accommodating and creative role in perpetuating the integrity of our ecology, in unfolding an evolution that Kropotkin so treasures. In ontological terms, dialectical causality is not merely motion, force, or changes of form but things and phenomena in development, the

nology. Husbanding, horticulture and gardening particularly caught his imagination. Agriculture means working with nature, not counter to it. And mixed farming does seem to work in tandem with nature, contra extensive farming techniques. Little did he know that his ideas will be tested at the altar of hard reality by the end of his life. When Kropotkin and his wife Sofia, after a lifelong deportation in parts of Europe, eventually returned to their home country in 1917, they were predictably persecuted by the Bolsheviks. Their scholarly associations suppressed, the two were internally exiled in a small village — Dimitrov, about forty miles from Moscow. Winters were harsh with little fuel and food was always an issue. But the Kropotkins fortunately had a cow and Sofia was able to obtain sufficient produce from their vegetable garden. Along with trying to finish his book on vitalist Ethics, Kropotkin founded a museum and sought to apply his horticultural ideas by forming the Dimitrov Cooperative Union, which was eventually suppressed by the communist party.

What Kropotkin is alluding then seems to be a rather sophisticated form of naturalism; with an acute consciousness of human endeavor and role in the whole process. And yet, utopias of sufficiency are not all cut from the same green cloth. Let me cite two counter examples to drive home what social ecology is not. Admire as one does Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, one excruciatingly painful and embarrassing moment appears when recounting his days in the Baker Farm, Thoreau narrates an encounter with a poor and destitute Irish couple — John Field and his wife, toiling hard in grueling circumstances, unable to meet ends. Thoreau laments their lack of subtlety in understanding nature and arithmetic! And in a flourish that becomes a true enterprising prophet, declares: "Grow wild according to thy nature, like these sedges and brakes, which will never become English bay. Let the thunder rumble; what if it threaten ruin to farmers' crops? That is not its errand to thee. Take shelter under the cloud, while they flee to carts and sheds.

sively in the wildest mountain tracks of Siberia and initiated empirical study of the topography and geology of the region. At one point Kropotkin made a daring geographical expedition to Chinese Manchuria. Disguised as merchants, as his team sought to cross a porous border through the Khingan mountains, an ageing frontier guard, unimpressed with Kropotkin's passport, consisting of a single sheet of stamped paper, refused the team entry. An old copy of a bulky Moscow newspaper was duly presented along with, and the old fogey hindered them no more.

The results of his landmark studies on physical geography were warmly received by the leading geographical journals of his day. In 1871, he was asked to participate in a geological expedition to Finland and Sweden, during which he, still under 30, also received an offer from the Imperial Geographical Society to become its Secretary, which he politely declined. The delights of scientific discovery could not outweigh his empathy for average Siberians, who had barely enough food to eat. Much later, in his *Memoirs*, he reflected: "The years that I spent in Siberia taught me many lessons which I could hardly have learned elsewhere. Although I did not formulate my observations in terms borrowed from party struggles, I may now say that I lost in Siberia whatever faith in State discipline I had cherished before. I was prepared to become an anarchist."

One can see the circumstances that provided him with a still germinating but brilliant insight: that nature can and ought to be married with democratic and egalitarian possibilities. One entry point to the ecological radicalism inherent in Kropotkin's idea of nature is his consideration of mountain formation and his emphasis on the plasticity of glacial ice sheets. His approach is dynamic and processual, right from the beginning. To Kropotkin instability is the hallmark of living systems: "Everything changes in nature, everything is incessantly modified — systems, wages, planets, climates, varieties of plants and animals, the human species — Why

should human institutions perpetuate themselves!" This is a significant observation, because hitherto, the reigning view was that nature revels in an unchanging harmonic balance, until man stamps his discord over it. The ecosystem was conceived often in organismal and developmental terms, even as late as the 1960s. Kropotkin overturned such pessimism by accepting and professing dynamic change as normal and necessary. He also crucially never dissociated humans from the biotic nature — a view that divides ecologists even today. More of this later.

The other axis is of course his emphasis on a deep, enduring sociality among living creatures. Its not that Kropotkin dismissed competition and predation altogether — his data simply did not back such a conclusion. He thought himself to be a Darwinist enough, but found the likes of Huxley and Spencer wanting in observation and interpretation. What he suggested rather was an ingenious hypothesis: that there is a dichotomy within the struggle for existence itself. Yes, organisms do compete against each other, but since organisms also have to negotiate nature and other such adversities, they coalesce and cooperate and get mutually benefited, which itself is necessary for a certain kind of evolutionary logic to work. One recalls Darwin's pregnant passage about evolutionary struggle in *On the Origin of Species*: "I use this term in a large and metaphorical sense…Two canine animals, in a state of dearth, may be truly said to struggle with each other which shall get food and live. But a plant on the edge of a desert is said to struggle for life against the drought…As the mistletoe is disseminated by birds, its existence depends on birds: and it may metaphorically be said to struggle with other fruit bearing plants, in order to tempt birds, to devour and thus disseminate its seeds rather than those of other plants. In these several senses, which pass into each other, I use for convenience sake the general term of struggle for existence."

Cooperation is not consciously contractual in Kroptkin — instead, it is best described as a league for mutual defence. There is a consistent thrust on mixed flocks and interspecific mutualism in his observations. The primary focus is groups rather than species. A complex pattern of interpersonal interaction in structured communities steadily fuels his ecological and political imagination. Teamwork at the level of daily survival is a key to mutual survival and flourish: collective mechanisms for defense against predators (mobbing in birds), cooperative hunting behaviors (lions), group moderation of the environment (beavers), migration, hibernation, demarcating feeding territories and so forth all do provide a wider economic success that can hardly be achieved by individuated, solitary creatures.

In his later formulations on the nature of anarchist commune, Kropotkin shows a similar inclination for non-territorial communities of interest in the development of decentralized and non-hierarchical social systems. And such cooperation is to be grounded on four simple pillars: enquiry, expertise, need and endeavor. He is in fact quite vociferous against the idea of experimenting communities on a small and partisan scale, since he witnessed first hand how spirited men and women suffered by hoping to form communities in the east, fleeing from autocratic Russia. To construct a wall between a group and the rest of humanity merely speaks of the group's egotistical desire to live in isolation: "Communes are not agglomerations of men in a territory, and know neither walls nor boundaries; the commune is a clustering of like minded persons, not a closed integer. The various groups in one commune will feel themselves drawn to similar groups in other communes; they will unite themselves with these as firmly as with their fellow citizens; and thus there will come about communities of interest whose members are scattered over a thousand cities and villages," that's what he believes.

But he also takes a profound interest in improving the productivity of rural life by deploying appropriately scaled tech-