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Mutual Aid: Kropotkin versus Jones

Anarcho

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I'm not sure why, but there seems to be a tendency by academics to discuss anarchism without actually bothering to find out much, if anything, about. George Monbiot does this quite regularly, with equally regular amusement for those who have even a basic understanding of libertarian theory. The latest is Steve Jones, Professor of Genetics at UCL, in his new book "**Coral: A Pessimist in Paradise**".

The anarchist in question is Kropotkin, specifically his ideas on "*mutual aid*." However, it is clear that Jones is hardly knowledgeable on the subject. The basic mistakes are staggering. The Jura Federation was not founded in 1871. Kropotkin did not battle Marx in the First International (that was another bearded Russian, Bakunin). Kropotkin did not return to "Bolshevik" Russia nor did he die three years later in 1920. He returned after the February revolution in 1917 and, consequently, before the Bolshevik revolution and died in 1921, nearly 4 years later after seeing his predictions on the poverty of state communism fulfilled by Lenin's regime. Somewhat bizarrely, Jones talks of Soviet Russia's experiment in

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“*mutualism*” so it seems that not only Trotskyists are ignorant of Lenin’s stated desire to create state capitalism in Russia and his systematic campaign against co-operation in the workplace in favour of one-man management (as documented by Maurice Brinton’s classic “**The Bolsheviks and Workers’ Control**”).

The usual anarchist bogeymen are raised, with the assassinations of various heads of states mentioned but, of course, not the state violence which provoked these acts of revenge. Apparently the death of one King of Italy is worth mentioning but not the peasants killed by his troops. Strangely, Jones said these acts prefigured the worse slaughters of the 20th century. While propaganda by the deed was a flawed tactic used by anarchists, it was hardly invented by us (Russian Populists killed Tsar Alexander II, for example) nor can it be equated to the systematic state terrorism of the subsequent century or, for that matter, the 19th – over 20,000 Communards were slaughtered in reprisals after the Paris Commune. It is always amazing how killing members of the ruling class is never forgotten yet mass murder by it can slip through the pages of the history books...

Even in the area where you think Jones would be knowledgeable, namely evolutionary theory, he simply repeats the standard misrepresentation of Kropotkin’s ideas on “**Mutual Aid**.” Kropotkin is always raised by those seeking to attack the notion that co-operation and other forms of ethical behaviour can be routed in nature. Socio-biology, it appears, is only for the right and those who seek to provide evidence from nature that mutual aid is as much a factor of evolution as mutual struggle must be denounced – no matter how inaccurately. Jones obviously considers Kropotkin as the perfect example of a proponent of romantic co-operation, praising a mutual aid which does not exist. “*Symbiosis marks each stage in evolution,*” writes Jones, “*but the notion of mutual aid, a joint effort to a common end, has been superseded by a sterner view: that such arrangements began with simple exploitation. Disease, parasitism and cannibalism have been around since life began.*”

Yet Kropotkin would not have disagreed. He stressed that mutual aid “*represents one of the factors of evolution*”, another being “*the self-assertion of the individual, not only to attain personal or caste superiority, economical, political, and spiritual, but also in its much more important although less evident function of breaking through the bonds, always prone to become crystallised, which the tribe, the village community, the city, and the State impose upon the individual*” Thus Kropotkin recognised that there is class struggle within society as well as “*the self-assertion of the individual taken as a progressive element*” (i.e., struggle against forms of social association which now hinder individual freedom and development).

At no time did he deny the role of struggle, in fact the opposite as he stressed that the book’s examples concentrated on mutual aid simply because mutual struggle (between individuals of the same species) had “*already been analysed, described, and glorified from time immemorial*” and, as such, he felt no need to illustrate it. He did note that it “*was necessary to show, first of all, the immense part which this factor plays in the evolution of both the animal world and human societies. Only after this has been fully recognised will it be possible to proceed to a comparison between the two factors.*”

So at no stage did Kropotkin deny either factor (unlike the bourgeois apologists he was refuting). He recognised the importance of struggle or competition as a means of survival but also argued that co-operation within a species was the best means for it to survive in a hostile environment (i.e., mutual aid is an expression of, not an alternative to, self-interest as should be obvious from the term). This applied to life under capitalism. In the hostile environment of class society, then the only way in which working class people could survive would be to practice mutual aid (in other words, solidarity). Little wonder, then, that Kropotkin listed strikes and unions as expressions of mutual aid in capitalist society. He was, after all, a revolutionary.

It should also be noted that **Mutual Aid** is primarily a work of popular science and not a work on revolutionary anarchist theory

like, say, **The Conquest of Bread** or **Words of a Rebel**. As such, it does not present a full example of Kropotkin's revolutionary ideas and how mutual aid fits into them. He was well aware that mutual aid (or solidarity) could not be applied between classes in a class society. Indeed, his chapters on mutual aid under capitalism contain the strike and union and as he put it in an earlier work: "*What solidarity can exist between the capitalist and the worker he exploits? Between the head of an army and the soldier? Between the governing and the governed?*"

For Jones, the anarchists have wrongly drawn lessons from nature and are now consigned to the fringes of politics, "*sidelined by the iron rules of greed that rule the globe.*" Of course, the fact that the major anarchist movements in the world were crushed by the iron rule of fascism and communism goes unmentioned. Nor is the fact that anarchism is growing as more and more people are becoming aware that co-operation by the many against the greed of the few is in their self-interest.

But this is beside the point, given the massive contradiction this exposes in Jones' argument. Earlier in **Coral**, he had warned against drawing political or ethical lessons from biology, stating that "*to scientists neither symbiosis nor the struggle for existence has much of a message for human affairs.*" He attacks philosophers like Nietzsche and political thinkers like Marx for drawing lessons for human society from nature. This is forgotten when he turns to Kropotkin. Then we have an assertion that the "*iron rule of greed*" is a universal law of nature. Apparently nature does have a message for human affairs after all and it just happens to co-incidence with the dominant economic system and the interests of its ruling elite.

Significantly, Kropotkin considered **Mutual Aid** as an attempt to write a history of evolution from below, from the perspective of the oppressed. As he put it, history, "*such as it has hitherto been written, is almost entirely a description of the ways and means by which theocracy, military power, autocracy, and, later on, the richer*

classes' rule have been promoted, established, and maintained." The "*mutual aid factor has been hitherto totally lost sight of; it was simply denied, or even scoffed at.*"

Sadly, Jones seems to have contributed to this denial and scoffing and, in the process, exposed his ignorance of the subject he is attacking. Surely the job of editors is to pick up such elementary errors? Stephen J. Gould's "**Kropotkin was no crackpot**" (in his **Bully for Brontosaurus**) covers this ground more accurately and more sympathetically. Or, then again, you could read Kropotkin's book or, if that is too much work, consult its sub-title: "**A factor of evolution.**"