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Review: Kropotkin and the Anarchist Intellectual Tradition

Anarcho

July 6, 2017

Peter Kropotkin needs little introduction. The Russian Prince who became one of the leading anarchist thinkers of his time, his articles and books are still – rightly – recommended to those seeking to understand anarchism and have convinced many to join the movement.

As such, Mac Laughlin is right that Kropotkin’s “teachings could be an important source of inspiration” for modern radicals. (111) However, if this book had been published thirty years ago it would have been welcomed – albeit with some reservations – as a useful summary of the conventional wisdom on Kropotkin in the English-speaking movement. Yet this wisdom, derived from George Woodcock’s work, was questionable then and subsequent research has exposed its extremely weak foundations.

Mac Laughlin, for example, repeats the commonplace – but still wrong – notion that both Proudhon and Kropotkin were opposed to large-scale industry. (231) This is not true

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as both supported *appropriate* scales of industry. Kropotkin argued that capitalism distorted scale by its drive for profits and in many industries the current large-scale was not needed for technical efficiency but rather dominating the market. Likewise, Kropotkin was at pains to reject the idea of “the essential goodness of humans” (241) and instead argued that mutual aid and mutual struggle were both factors of evolution and so of our nature. Which predominated depended on the kind of society we built and a libertarian society needed to be vigilant against the anti-social acts of the few. This meant ensuring that, for example, everyone who can works, yet when discussing the use of social pressure to ensure this and other “social responsibilities” he suggests that “Kropotkin, like Godwin, was not immune from the temptations of self-righteousness.” (168) While there is a danger of social conformity – which Kropotkin was aware of – it is not “self-righteousness” to postulate the need for societal self-defence as basic reciprocity is implied in the expression *mutual aid*. “Tit-for-tat” is an evolutionary stable mechanism for a reason.

So we have Kropotkin “the gentle sage” (49) and we are treated to Woodcock’s account of his life. This means it is somewhat apologetic concerning Kropotkin’s actual revolutionary class struggle politics and the labour movement repeats uncritically Woodcock’s suggestion that as early as 1891 Kropotkin was moving to a reformist position, embracing “evolutionary change” rather than revolution and “becoming increasingly less confident in the imminence of the anarchist revolution.” (237) Given that this is based on little more than one quote from a single talk given in Leeds, it is surprising to see it repeated.

Mac Laughlin proclaims that Kropotkin was both “deeply involved with the trade union movement and workers’ struggles” (89) and that there “were times, he argued, when class warfare and political violence could be considered the lesser evil.” (111) He even prefaces a quote on anarchist involvement in the

of modern political writing, as can be seen from Ruth Kinna’s recent book on Kropotkin. Sadly, unlike Kinna’s book which is redeemed by new research on Kropotkin’s ideas, Mac Laughlin more or less just repeats what Woodcock and others have written.

Surprisingly, the book makes no mention of Caroline Cahm’s *Peter Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism* (1989) which is still the best account of his ideas nor Daniel Todes’ important work on the Russian engagement with Darwin, *Darwin without Malthus* (1989), which places Kropotkin’s work in its intellectual and social context.

While the aim of this book cannot be faulted, sadly it fails to live up to its promise. Overall, it is an adequate – if dated – introduction to Kropotkin which reflects the perspective of its main influences – Woodcock above all. In terms of readability and wider engagement with the issues Kropotkin raises, Brian Morris’ book *Kropotkin: The Politics of Community* (2004) is far better.

Kropotkin and the Anarchist Intellectual Tradition

Jim Mac Laughlin

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with the (admittedly untrue) claim that “[b]y the time Bakunin died in 1876, Kropotkin was already revered as a prominent leftist intellectual in Europe’s leading radical circles.” (88) His fame came much latter – indeed, until the 1890s his articles went unsigned for he was one activist amongst many contributing to the Anarchist press.

Yet even in terms of summarising the conventional (Woodcockian) wisdom of 1986 there are issues with the work. There is much quoting of Kropotkin – which is good – but his clear prose is in marked contrast to the often jargon-ridden comments added between them. Kropotkin deliberately wrote in a manner which any worker could understand – both in his anarchist writings and in his scientific writings. The same cannot be said of Mac Laughlin. The contrast between Kropotkin’s style and the modern-day “activist” or “academic” writing with its unneeded and unnecessary terminology is all too obvious. Take this passage as an example:

“the Communards had managed to articulate a discordant decentralised vision of urban life that was radically opposed to compartmentalisation of urban space and the hierarchical control of urban life in Paris” (229)

Why was it “discordant”? Is that good or bad? Presumably it is good, but I am at a loss to understand why. Likewise, I’ve read many – but not all, I admit – Communard proclamations and writings and I am not sure what the “compartmentalisation of urban space” is meant to mean in this context. These words have presumably been used for a reason, but *why* is hard to fathom – beyond *sounding* impressive and deep.

It also means for those of us outside of certain academic and activist circles cannot help feeling we are being dropped into a conversation without context or subtitles (so to speak). This is not limited to Mac Laughlin’s work – it sadly marks much

labour movement from *Modern Science and Anarchism* with the suggestion that this was written “in response to those who accused him of placing too much faith in evolutionary theory and too little in revolutionary action” (98) Yet at the time it was well known that Kropotkin had *always* advocated class struggle and had done so since joining the Federalist wing of the First International in the 1870s. While this is most obviously shown by the articles he wrote for *Les Temps Nouveaux* and *Freedom*, it is not absent from his more general works.

Even a quick glance through the anarchist papers for which Kropotkin wrote would show how wrong it is to suggest that he had a “penchant for scientific research and intellectual debate rather than polemics and political propaganda.” (238–9) His articles for *Les Temps Nouveaux*, for example, see him return again and again to polemics against Marxism and for what became known as a syndicalist labour movement. These are interspersed amongst articles reflecting his research on anarchism and the Great French Revolution but these too were works of political propaganda and polemic – not least, for modern revolutionaries to learn from the history of previous revolutions. Needless to say, *Mutual Aid* is not silent on class and social conflict – quite the reverse.

This reflects a major weakness of the book, namely its attempt to downplay the influence of Bakunin on both Anarchism and Kropotkin’s ideas. Like Woodcock, Mac Laughlin seeks to portray Kropotkin as a near-pacifist, closer to Tolstoy than Bakunin. Thus we find that “compared to Bakunin and others who believed in the efficacy of anarchist-inspired acts of political violence, Kropotkin represented the reasonable face of European anarchism.” (50) Yet Bakunin did not advocate “propaganda by the deed” and both Russians advocated insurrection as well as militant working class direct action as a means to win reforms today and prepare for revolution tomorrow.

Mac Laughlin is aware of this, suggesting that Kropotkin’s support for the Allies in 1914 was “not inconsistent with his

otherwise ambiguous views on political violence” (111) but Kropotkin was no more “ambiguous” on “political violence” than Bakunin as both were revolutionaries. The problem with Kropotkin in 1914 was that he advocated violence in defence of States and Capital rather than for their destruction. As Malatesta lamented, while Bakunin in 1870 argued for a popular revolution as the basis to stop German invasion Kropotkin in 1914 eschewed this – and was praised by the jin-goists accordingly so showing how State-approved “political violence” is rarely seen for what it is.

So in spite of the obvious impact of Bakunin on Kropotkin, the former gets little mention beyond suggesting that he fits the stereotype of the violent revolutionary better than Kropotkin whom he seeks – like Woodcock before him – to sanitise. Hence the recurring contrast of Kropotkin to “small groups” of anarchists who were “determined to demonstrate their opposition to authority through political acts of violence” which some suggest “prominent” anarchists of “inspiring”. (89) Given that *every* political theory has produced such groups, I am at a loss to understand why it behoves some Anarchists to constantly refer to it when Republicans, Marxists, Nationalists, and so on rarely feel the need.

Yet while Bakunin is rarely mentioned, space is given to William Godwin even though he had little impact on the development of anarchism as a movement and a theory. This means that while Proudhon’s *General Idea of the Revolution* is “still ranked among anarchism’s most important texts”, the same cannot be said of, say, Godwin’s book (111–2) and, unsurprisingly, Kropotkin mentions him more or less in passing while concentrating on the First International. Mac Laughlin also includes a discussion of someone – Gerrard Winstanley – whom Kropotkin did not mention yet we are informed his writings “laid the foundations of modern anarchism.” (9)

It could be argued that this follows Kropotkin, who also presents Anarchism as having a long history but a close

reading of his work shows that he was well aware that modern, revolutionary, Anarchism was born in the First International. He also noted that Anarchism was a product of both the class struggle and the scientific analysis of societies. In that sense, yes, Anarchistic ideas have appeared before Proudhon used the word “Anarchist”. Yes, scientific theories *are* discovered independently. So it would stagger belief that no one had looked at an oppressive and exploitative society and not concluded that it could be changed and then acted accordingly. However, to draw conclusions similar to Anarchism but independently of and anterior to it does not equal laying its foundations in any meaningful sense. Which means that while there can be Anarchy before Anarchism and, likewise, anarchistic ideas and movements can develop independently of it, this does not mean that modern Anarchism was not born in the First International.

Woodcock took Kropotkin’s sketching of precursors to a new level and Mac Laughlin follows this. Indeed, there are passages which remind you of Woodcock’s account – this is unsurprising as it is essentially a summation of previous works on Kropotkin rather than new research. There is no attempt to look into the many papers Kropotkin was associated with during his life as an anarchist thinker and activist. Instead, we have accounts of the most accessible – and so most general – of Kropotkin’s voluminous output. This cannot help skewing how Kropotkin is viewed.

This perspective can be seen from comments like Kropotkin having “embarked on the lonely path of the international anarchist theorist”. (89) Sadly, Mac Laughlin does not square this comment with how popular Kropotkin actually was in Anarchist and radical circles, as shown by the regular visits to his home by those seeking his advice and invites to speak at public events. This does reflect the image of a “gentle sage” struggling with his revolutionary politics and at odds with a wider, revolutionary, movement fostered by Woodcock. Nor does it square