Peter Kropotkin, prophet of subsidiarity, inspired Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin

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More than ten years ago, Marcos and Luisa Zwick gave a presentation to an ecumenical group of church people who formed a committee to distribute funds that had been raised to help the destitute. The diocese really wanted us to receive a portion of these funds since the majority of the funds had been raised in Catholic parishes.

Trying to describe Casa Juan Diego, Marcos spoke about the Catholic Worker values of voluntary poverty and pacifism, but he made a glaring error when he mentioned that a core Catholic Worker value was anarchism. People gasped! The Catholic representative who supported giving us the money fell off his chair!

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!" What we meant was that Casa Juan Diego is a voluntary, nonbureaucratic organization where Catholics exercise their freedom to work without pay to better serve the poor. That was what anarchism meant. Needless to say, they gave us some money, but it took a long time for the Catholic representative to recover.

The founders of the Catholic Worker preferred to use the word personalism rather than anarchism because of the confusion between the word anarchy and chaos.

As early as 1913, Dorothy Day, still very young, had read Kropotkin. She and Peter Maurin had been together for twenty years, and she had no explicit religious faith. However, like Maurin, she was drawn to Kropotkin and his vision of how society could be reorganized to eliminate the injustice of wage slavery. She described Kropotkin's influence on her in her autobiography, The Long Solitude:

> "Kropotkin especially brought to my mind the condition of the poor, the working people. Although my only experience of the destitute was in books, the very fact that The Jungle (by Upton Sinclair) was about Chicago, where I live, whose streets I walk, made me feel that from then on my life would be intertwined with theirs, their interests would be mine; I had received a calling, a vocation, a direction for my life."

Dorothy Day later described in The Long Solitude (Madrid: Editorial Sal Terrae) what the Catholic Worker movement had in mind when it adopted many of the ideas of Peter Kropotkin, who was known as an anarchist:

> "Kropotkin very much wanted the same kind of social origin that Father Vincent McNabb, the Dominican preacher, G.K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, and other distributives favored, though they would have been horrified to hear the word anarchist, thinking it synonymous with chaos, not self-government as Proudhon defined it. Distributism is the English term for a society in which man has enough of this world's goods to enable him to lead a good life. Other words have been used to describe this theory: mutualism, federalism, pluralism, regionalism; but anarchism—the word first used as a taunt by its Marxist opponents—best brings to mind the tension that always exists between the concept of authority and liberty that haunts man until now."

Peter Kropotkin was born on December 21, 1842, in Moscow. His direct descent from the tsars of the old Rurik dynasty meant that he held the title of prince. He led a life of privilege and security from birth, pursuing a military career in obedience to his father, although Kropotkin's true interests lay in science, especially geography. In Memoirs of a Revolutionist, Kropotkin recounts that his recognition of social injustice began in his childhood. He witnessed the mistreatment of family servants and heard of the truly brutal practices common among the nobility.

Peter Kropotkin chose to be assigned to an army regiment in Siberia after military school. He spent five years as an officer, during which time he was allowed to explore unknown parts of the Sino-Russian border and conduct geographical research. He already showed little or no concern for seeking conventional success or a place in the political system. He also demonstrated an absolute faith in the basic goodness of ordinary people—a quality that would make his ideas attractive to Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day.

He developed many of his social theories by studying medieval village communities in Russia. He also developed a close relationship with the members of the Swiss watchmaking cooperative, which was organized in a non-authoritarian structure. Dorothy Day said in The Long Solitude that "He lived and worked so closely with villagers and artisans that his writings were practical manuals." His books and pamphlets made him the best-known and most respected anarchist by the end of the century. From 1880 to 1917, Kropotkin lived in London.

Dorothy Day recounted that, "Kropotkin and Tolstoy, the modern proponents of anarchism, were sincere and peaceful men. Kropotkin's classic book, Memoirs of a Revolutionist, was first published in the Atlantic Monthly in 1898. After the Russian Revolution, Kropotkin returned to Russia and, revered by workers and schoolchildren, lived in a provincial town outside Moscow until his early twenties. He in no way sympathized with the revolution, which had begun a dictatorship in the name of the proletariat, which would accomplish by terrorist force what Kropotkin sought to achieve through brotherly love."

Slave Wages

Kropotkin lived through a period of European history that featured barbaric exploitation of the poor by the wealthy—in particular, of workers by their employers. Entire generations were forced to leave their farms and small workshops to work in factories. There were, for the most part, no minimum wages or laws protecting labor. There were no children, no regulation of daily work hours, no days off, and no laws governing health and safety in the workplace. Workers became wage slaves, earning only enough to stay alive until they could produce the next generation so the system could continue.

Kropotkin found that the root of the problem was the factory system of production. One man, because he owned a factory and the machines, could benefit from the labor of many workers without actually having to produce anything himself.

Workers, by contrast, produced all of society's wealth, but were not allowed to keep almost anything because they did not control the means of production (i.e., the factory and the raw materials). Individual artisans could not make products as cheaply as factories, so they were forced to close their businesses and seek factory work for wages. Under this system, a small minority was allowed to obtain fabulous wealth, while the majority lived in oppressive poverty, poor nutrition, hellish working conditions, and a polluted environment.

This description could have been written today about the maquiladoras (factories of companies from the United States, Japan, South Korea, and Europe) located in many Third World countries to exploit cheap labor.

Urbanization

One might think of the decline of family farms as a recent phenomenon, but Kropotkin was aware of it more than a hundred years earlier and warned of its dangerous implications for society. In The Conquest of Bread, he blamed the poverty of rural peasants on three groups: "We know what a calamitous situation European agriculture is in. If the cultivator of the soil is not robbed by the landowner, he is robbed by the state. If the state taxes him moderately, the moneylender enslaves him by means of promissory notes, and soon turns him into a simple tenant of land that actually belongs to a finance company."

The landowner, the state, and the moneylender (today known as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization), by forcing the peasant to work excessively to pay his share, make it impossible to experiment with new, improved agricultural techniques. Thus, peasants, unable to make a decent living in their fields, were induced to seek their fortune in urban factories.

Once the social revolution had freed these peasants from the three "vampires," as Kropotkin called them, and advanced land preparation practices were put into general use, each small farm could produce a balanced diet for the larger number of people living on it. Peasant families would not have to move to the city in search of wage-paying jobs. Nor would they have to grow marketable crops to be shipped to other cities or exported. Instead, cities and their surrounding villages could produce enough food to feed their populations. Other countries, even the poorest, or those with the worst climates, could become self-sufficient using modern agricultural methods.

The World Food Summit held in Rome in November 1996 provides extraordinary evidence that Peter Kropotkin's theories about agriculture and hunger were ahead of their time. In his article, "The Hungry Seventh of the World," which appeared in America magazine on May 3, 1997, Martin M. McLaughlin reports on the Forum of non-governmental organizations that met in conjunction with the Summit. In its six-point model statement, it states: In its statement, "Profit for the Few or Food for All," the Forum rejects market-based efforts to solve world hunger. Instead, the first point of the six-point model statement states: "The capacity of the farming family, including indigenous peoples, women, and youth, along with local and regional food systems, must be strengthened." Regarding market-driven efforts to improve access to food, McLaughlin writes that, "In fact, the accelerated and unregulated food production activities of both manufacturing and commercial companies have had much to do with reducing access and thus limiting food security for peasants and poor consumers." The Forum affirmed Kropotkin's ideal of small-scale, agricultural food production for local consumption.

Kropotkin viewed urbanization (the process by which millions of people were crowded into small dwellings amidst garbage, pollution, and noise, living their lives without any contact with nature or plant cultivation) as entirely unnecessary.

Division of Labor

One of the greatest evils associated with the factory system was the endless division of labor for the sake of efficiency. Instead of training workers in the procedure of building something, from start to finish, the factory owner or superintendent insisted that each worker specialize in a small task, to be done minute after minute, hour after hour.

"The modern ideal of a worker seems to be a man, or woman, or even a girl or boy, without the knowledge of any manual crafts, without any knowledge of the industry for which they work, who is only capable of doing all day and for a lifetime the same infinitesimal part of something: who from the age of thirteen to sixty pushes a coal cart to a designated place in the mine, or makes the spring of a knife, or one tenth of a pin." Pure servants to some machine of a certain description: simply flesh-and-blood parts of some immense machinery, with no idea of how and why the machinery makes its rhythmic movements.

Craftsmanship is being eliminated as the survival of a doomed past. The artist who once found satisfaction in the work of his hands is replaced by the human slave of an iron slave.

He conceded that, from the point of view of profit alone, the division of labor made sense. Material could be manufactured in massive quantities much more cheaply in large factories than in small workshops. But, Kropotkin insisted, it was not in the best interest of society for individuals to be treated this way.

In addition to being harmful to the human spirit, Kropotkin saw a purely commercial disadvantage in the division of labor. He noted that where small factories existed, whether using running water to turn a wheel or obtaining power by any other method, these were often the beginnings of new inventions and technologies. When the worker was familiar with the entire manufacturing operation and understood what was going on, he could perceive ways to improve the system.

The only valid reason for the existence of giant factories, in Kropotkin's analysis, was the production of immense products like locomotives and ocean-going ships. Everything else a free people might need could be produced in small factories and workshops, for local consumption, not for trade or export. Instead of competition among manufacturers driving down prices and inducing them to mistreat workers to increase their profit margins, each cooperative would produce what they could of their own groceries, clothing, shelter, and luxury goods. Each local group could build, in its own cluster of small factories, enough to cover its needs. Clothing could be made, from raw materials to finished products. Houses and furniture could be manufactured. Metals could be smelted, and implements made. In short, there were no barriers to complete self-sufficiency, and thus there was no need for speculators, middlemen, or intervenors.

Dorothy Day described Kropotkin's vision of cooperatives in The Long Solitude: "Kropotkin looked back to the brotherhood and town guilds of the Middle Ages, and thought of the new society as composed of confederate associations, cooperating in much the same way as the railroad companies of Europe or the mail departments of various countries now cooperate.

Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day, and Pope Leo XIII

Kropotkin felt that some religious leaders focused too much on eternity (there is no danger of that now) rather than basic human dignity and human rights. However, before the end of the century, the Catholic Church was discovering its voice on the social issue. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII, in his encyclical Rerum Novarum, called on employers to pay a fair wage and certified that workers had the right to organize unions. There are many similarities between the idea of subsidiarity so strongly endorsed in papal encyclicals and Kropotkin's ideas. It was also during this time that a young French villager brought his thoroughly Catholic perspective to the problem of poverty.

Peter Maurin was born and raised in a small mountain village in France, on the family farm. He had little experience of city life until he joined the De La Salle Brothers and went to Paris to study, and later to teach. It is possible that the contrast between the healthy, happy village life and the miserable conditions he encountered in the slums of Paris caused Maurin to seek ways to reconcile his Catholicism with economic reform. While Maurin was obtaining his teaching certificate and beginning his work at the school, Prince Kropotkin was publishing his most important books. The Conquest of Bread, Fields, Factories and Workshops, and Mutual Assistance were published while Maurin was in Paris. In 1907, Peter Maurin left the De La Salle Brothers; by this time, he had already read Kropotkin and adopted some of his ideas.

Peter Maurin agreed with Kropotkin and his condemnation of nineteenth-century labor practices and with the Russian vision of independent agricultural communities rather than authoritarian, centralized states. After moving first to Canada and then to the United States, Maurin gave up working for wages. But he, as a Catholic and pacifist, had to reconcile Kropotkin's anarchism with the Kingdom of God. He had to find a system that combined social transformation and fidelity to the Gospel. This system, formally expressed by Emmanuel Mounier in his Personalist Manifesto, was part of a personalist literature that included the works of Nicolas Berdyaev, G. K. Chesterton, and others beginning with Saint Francis of Assisi.

Personalism begins with the idea that all institutions and organizations, public as well as private, should be ordered to the material and spiritual good of all people. While communists, fascists, and laissez-faire capitalists might talk about the common good, they seek to achieve it at the expense of individuals. Individuals must suffer and be sacrificed for the sake of some large, abstract agglomeration such as the nation, the corporation, the party, or the economy. Under personalism, these ideals have value only to the extent that they facilitate the dignity and freedom of each person, and do not harm any person—not even a single one. As Marc H. Ellis wrote in his article, "Peter Maurin: To Bring the Social Order to Christ," Peter Maurin "thought that the social order had a singular mission: to protect and nurture the person's journey toward the mystery of God, thus promoting the possibility of salvation." (A Revolution of the Heart, Orbis Books).

The second principle of Maurin's personalism is that, while the whole of society must "protect and nurture" each individual, the true work of salvation, including the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, is accomplished by Jesus Christ through persons, not structures. Personalism is personal involvement with the lives and problems of those around us, especially the poor. Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day emphatically did not want to form an agency or office to shelter the destitute and feed the hungry. They had strong criticism of government social service efforts because they were so impersonal. Dorothy elaborated in a 1949 article for Commonweal:

> "Peter noted that we have resorted to the responsibility of the state through relief, social legislation, and social security, that we no longer practice personal responsibility, but are repeating the words of the first murderer, 'Am I my brother's keeper?'" In The Long Loneliness, she recounts a conversation with Peter: "He always reminded me that we were our brother's keeper, and that the unit of society is the family; that we should feel a sense of personal responsibility to care for our own, and for our neighbors, at personal sacrifice. 'This is a first principle,' he always said. 'It is not the function of the state to penetrate these domains… Charity is personal. Charity is love.'"

The Anarchist Personalist Alternative to the State

In a column that appeared in the New York Catholic Worker in 1936, titled "To Christ—To the Land!", Dorothy announced that the New York group was going to start a farming community. She wrote: "To those who have asked us, 'What do you have to offer in the way of a constructive program for a new social order?' we have answered again and again, 'Peter Maurin's three-point program of round-table discussions, houses of hospitality, farming communities.'"

It is important to note the reference to a new social order. The Catholic Workers were not merely seeking a way to live according to their own faith—they were advancing Maurin's three-point program as a way of life for all. They were calling the world to adopt their vision, just as Jesus called everyone to accept his vision of the Kingdom. In The Long Solitude, Dorothy added,

> "Ours was a program of vast scope, seeking workers' ownership of the means of production, the abolition of assembly lines, the decentralization of factories, the restoration of crafts, and ownership of their lands. This meant, naturally, an emphasis on the agrarian and rural aspects of our economy and a shift of emphasis from the city to the land."

This program of socioeconomic reforms sounds like Kropotkin's, because the Russian, with his atheism, had a very Christian dedication to the dignity and worth of the person. He saw the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and denounced the political systems that created and promoted them.

But Kropotkin was confused about the best way to make this vision a reality. He placed great faith in education (as did Peter Maurin), but he hoped that transformation would be spontaneous. One day, many of the workers would stop cooperating with the corrupt system, unite into functioning regional communities, and begin to live without the benefit of arbitrary authority.

The Catholic Worker movement, by contrast, had a much more realistic idea of its role in changing the world.

Poor Means, Pure Means

Their faith taught Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, and the early Catholic Workers that any good they hoped to do in the world had to be accomplished by pure means. No matter how bad the system was, or how much they wanted to change it, they could not use or favor violence. They could not force. Furthermore, they dedicated themselves to using "poor means." They could not propagandize in the way Kropotkin suggested without taking the initiative in their own lives. As long as someone was suffering poverty and need, Catholic Workers would embrace voluntary poverty. Furthermore, they would work to alleviate the involuntary poverty of others.

While Prince Kropotkin deplored the conditions under which the poor had to live in his time, there is no record that he actually provided material assistance to poor people as part of his program.

Maurin's personalism, by contrast, combined propaganda with direct action from the beginning, for two reasons. First, because Jesus not only taught and exhorted, but also healed, exorcised, and ultimately died for us on the Cross. The leaders of the Catholic Worker movement felt they

should do the same to the best of their ability. They saw themselves as continuing Jesus' work and decided to use his methods, including direct action.

The second reason was that Peter Maurin had recognized that revolution was primarily a matter of personal transformation, not mass conversion. Each person had to make their own break with the dominant culture.

Another of the meager means the Catholic Worker used to carry out their revolution, and which was not part of Kropotkin's plan, was prayer. The Catholic Workers had their own version of historical determination, based on the Gospel idea of the Kingdom of God. There is no doubt that Peter Maurin saw their program as a step toward the Kingdom. However, as they began to establish their houses of hospitality and operate bread lines, the Catholic Workers painfully realized how far from fulfilling God's plan was. Although idealistic, they had to contend with the harsh reality of sin, suffering, injustice, and destitution. The problems they saw were far more complex and difficult than any theorist, even one as knowledgeable as Kropotkin, could grasp.

Faced with the enormity of the task they had undertaken, they not only worked to carry out Peter Maurin's personalist revolution. They prayed for it as well, taking their cue from the saints, who "worked as if everything depended on them, but prayed as if everything depended on God."

The Situation Today

The Catholic Worker began with propaganda—the first newspaper publication was published before the first house of hospitality was opened. However, by October 1933, three months later, they were providing people with food, shelter, and clothing as a community. The houses soon began to be established across the country. In a way, the Catholic Workers were realizing Kropotkin's dream of free federal communities replacing government rule. However, these free communities departed from Kropotkin's vision in several important respects.

First, they were not self-sufficient. They did not grow enough food to sustain themselves, nor did they provide for their needs by establishing small factories and workshops. The houses of hospitality offered food, shelter, and clothing to the poor, but they depended on newspaper sales, donations, and divine intervention to pay their expenses. The farms that were established later provided some food, but functioned more as retreat centers and sanctuaries from urban life than as productive farms.

Second, the Catholic Worker's community life did not attract large numbers of people. Kropotkin expected entire towns and cities to reorganize into free communities. Instead, handfuls of people came together in semi-permanent community groups. Hundreds, even thousands, of poor people were helped each year, but the vast majority did not stay and join in the work. For these reasons, houses of hospitality did not replace the government. Kropotkin's voluntary associations, by performing all the worthy work of the state, were supposed to make the state redundant and obsolete. When there was no longer a need for a government, it would disband. What happened was the opposite. Throughout the century, the size and power of the state continued to grow.

Despite these discouraging signs, however, the personalism of the Catholic Worker continued to grow, and the workers themselves gladly remained. Kropotkin's lofty goals—the end of poverty and war, and the replacement of the coercive state with free communities—seemed further away than ever. Yet some people were helped, voices were raised against the war, and some who had

placed their trust in the state were converted to the ideal of Christian community. And this ideal, based on the principle of mutual aid and support, remained alive and still flourishing in the Catholic Worker movement today. Peter Maurin's goal of a society in which "it is easier to be good" is still being pursued and achieved on a small but growing scale.

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This is the eleventh article in the series about the roots of the Catholic Worker movement, the saints and philosophers who influenced Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in the movement's development. It features Peter Kropotkin, whose works were known and studied by Peter and Dorothy even before they met.