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Introduction

In September 1890 the anarchist Peter Kropotkin issued the first of a series of articles investigating the principles of Darwinian evolution. Later supplemented by two other sets of essays this series was published under the tide of *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution.*[1]

In his introduction to *Mutual Aid*, Kropotkin identifies the Russian biologist, Kessler, as the inspiration for the development of his evolutionary theory. It was Kessler, he claims, who impressed upon him the symbiotic aspects of natural selection and who alerted him to the 'corruption' of Darwin's hypothesis by Victorian 'social darwinists'. Kropotkin's elaboration of Kessler's thesis begins with a refutation of social darwinism and T.H. Huxley serves as the target of his attack.

Kropotkin devotes little space to the discussion of Huxley's ideas. Yet his dispute with Huxley has played a central role in modem evaluations of Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid. Most contemporary writers understand his assault on Huxley as a signal of his desire to bridge the gap between moral development and natural evolution.[2] This essay examines the cogency of this view and argues that it fails to make sense of Kropotkin's work. The paper divides into four parts: it begins with an outline of Kropotkin's critique of Huxley and then discusses various modem assessments of Kropotkin's work The third section examines Kropotkin's rejection of Hwrley in the context of these assessments. The final part demonstrates the weakness of the existing

[1] All the articles were published in *The Nineteenth Century.* The first set appeared between 1890 and 1896; the seoondbetween 1904 and 1905; and the final set between 1910 and 1919.

[2] With significant differences on the details and validity of Kropotldn's theory of mutual aid, this view has been advanced by writers including George Woodcock, Paul Avrich, William Reichert, Herbert Read, and David Miller. See references for details of publications.

interpretations and suggests an alternative read of Kropotkin's dispute with Huxley.

Kropotkin's Refutation of Huxley

Kropotkin's critique of Huxley focuses on the essay, 'The struggle for existence' (Huxley, 1888). Quoting selectively from this article, Kropotkin accuses Huxley of reducing Darwin's notion of the struggle 'to its narrowest limits'. As one of the 'ablest exponents of the theory of evolution' Huxley conceives 'the animal world as a world of perpetual struggle among half-starved individuals, thirsting for one another's blood'. Huxley and his cohorts have, Kropotkin continues:

> ... made modem literature resound with the warcry ofwoe to the vanquished, as ifit were the last word ofmodern biology. They raised the 'pltiless' struggle for personal advantages to the height of a biological principle which m a n must submit to as well, under the menace of otherwise succumbing in a world based upon mutual extermination (Kropotkin, 1890a, p.338).

Kropotkin compares ths representation of nature with Rousseau's portrayal of the primitive state and finds that Hwrley's image is an scientifically groundless as former's hypothetical state of nature (Kropotkin, 1890a, p.339). But it is also charmless: Hwrley's vision, Kropotkin suggests, is simply a restatement of the Hobbesian w a r of each against all CKropotlun, 1891, p.539).

Kropotkin traces the source of Huxley's error to his failure to appreciate the fullness of Darwin's conception of the 'struggle for existence'. In the *Origin of Species*, Kropotkin pointa out, Darwin specifically widened this notion beyond the competitive individual fight and describes the term as a metaphor. For Darwin, Kropotkin contents, 'the struggle' is one experienced by groups or species

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as a basis on which to construct an anarchist theory of human nature. Portrayed as Hobbesian and as social darwinian Huxley has inadvertently served to narrow the parameters of the debate about the theory of mutual aid in the same way that Kropotkin claims he deliberately constricted Darwin's conception of the struggle for existence.

By acknowledgmg the breadth of Kropotkin's argument it is possible to tie up what are otherwise theoretical loose ends. Recognising that Kropotkin‘s target was Malthus rather than Huxley also alters the political gloss of *Mutual Aid.* Accordmg to this reading, *Mutual Aid* is not a text designed to promote consciousness-raising but a demand for the restructuring of society in accordance with the hitherto 'natural' development of history. In overcoming Malthus and synthesising Darwinian and Lamarkian ideas Kropotkin clears the way for a renewed discussion of the possibility of anarcho-communism. In the fist place the theory of mutual aid promises, in the proper environment, the creation of amoral spirit equal to the task of regulating social relations in the absence of the State. Second, Kropowin's conception of evolution indicates that the way forward lies in following the organisational patterns worked out in the past: in decentralisation and in the re-creation of community. Third, in demolishing the competitive basis of Darwinian evolution, Kropotlun surmounts the major objections to his anarchist plan: the problem of scarcity. He thus secures a 'scientific' basis for the realisation of communal self-sufficiency and, in tun, the principle of dutribution according to need. Finally, by placing anarchist principles of organisation on a natural foundation Kropotkin provides a rallying cry for anarchist change by calling for the demolition of institutions unfavourable to the expression of the 'natural' co-operative spirit.

against the ravages of nature. whilst in later editions of his work Darwin accepted the applicability of Spencer's epithet, Kropotkin argues that he never congidered that the biologically 'fittest' were the most cunning or pow& individuals. Contrary to Huxley, Darwin identified the fittest to be the most sociable and cooperative groups (Kropotkin, 1890a, pp. 337–42.)

Implicitly recognising the contentiousness of his claims Kropotkin explains the popular appeal of Huxley's social darwinism by pointing to the shortcominga of Darwin's onginal work. Unfortunately, Kmpotkin explains, Darwin was so eager to impress his general theory of natural selection on his readers that he neglected to emphasise the importance of his metaphorical conception of the 'struggle'. Even more unfortunately, Kropotkin adds, Darwin laboured at atime when the biological proofs that he required to sustain his argument were lacking. Moreover, though his work progressed to encompass a more co-operative image of nature, Darwin himself became too ill to complete his researches. Thus, Kropotkin argues, in order to provide his hypothesis of natural selection with some theoretical backing Darwin was initially forced to posit the Malthusian assumption of scarcity and he did not live long enough to correct his mistake (Kropotkin, 1989a 1910).

Huxley's representation of Darwin is not, Kropotkin concedes, without foundation. But as an exposition based on the deficiencies of Darwin's work it is irredeemably flawed. In elaborating the theory of mutual aid, Kropotkin assumes the Darwinian mantel in an effort to redress the balance.

Assessments of Mutual Aid

Mutual Aid advances a simple thesis of natural cooperation. The theory does not deny the existence of competition within groups or species but dectively ignores it. Kropotkin's theory of mutual

aid also diminishes the importance of inter-species struggle (though, Kropotkin acknowledges mankind's aggressiveness to other animal life). Where Kropotkin allows competition between groups he usually writea in favour of nature's 'underdogs', showing how bands of the most feeble creatures can effectively right off the fiercest predator, in order to reifmate the importance of common action (Kropotkin, 1890b, pp.669–701)

Kropotkin sustains his argument with an intricately interwoven tapestry of biological, anthropological, historical and sociological data. The book divides into four sections. It begins with an account of animal life. The Kropotkin presents studies of various ancient and modern 'barbarian' and 'savage' societies. In the third section he examines the organisation of the medieval city-states. He concludes the study with an account of the practice of mutual aid in the modern world.

Kropotkin's layering of information is typical — works falling within both the sociological and more strictly scientific traditions of the Victorian era were classically interdisciplinary, fusing metaphysical and political questions with scientific argument — though his message is specifically anarchist. Modern authors have not ignored this interplay between Kropotkin‘8 science and his politics but emphasis has been placed on the work‘s biological underpinning.

Kropotkin's theory has not been treated uncritically by modem writers but it has enjoyed a generally warm reception. Criticism attaches to Kropotkin‘s method and to the objectivity of his research (Baldwin, 1970; Woodcock and Avakumovic, 1950; Martin Miller, 1976). Kropotkin's fiercest critics also attack the naturalism of his approach (David Miller, 1983; Walter, 1971). In spite of these acknowledged flaws the theory of mutual aid is still regarded as being 'scientific' and Kropotkin is widely feted for his achievement in estabhhmg anarchism on a scientific basis (Mondolfo, 1930; G.D.H. Cole, 1954; Avrich, 1988). Whilst Baldwin, for example, judges that 'preconceptions' colour large parts of *Mutual Aid* he does not query

openly admits the inadequacy of his original exposition and suggests an outright rejection of Malthus in favour of a synthesis of Darwin with Lamarck (Kropotkin, 1910, pp.86–7). pursuing this line of argument Kropotkin develops his theory to distinguish between two concepts: biological and ethical mutual aid. The first is an adaptation of Darwinian ideas and refers to an instinctual desire to co-operate, common to all species. In the second Kropotkin introduces the Lamarckian factor to suggest that the spirit of mutual aid becomes habitual in certain environments (the autonomous federated anarchist commune being the most conducive environment for the ethical spirit). As it does so the biological impulse gives rise to particular ethical sentiments. He describes these sentiments in terms of a threefold progression &om mutual aid to justice and ultimately to morality (Kropotkin, 1904; 1905; 1910). Between 1912 and 1919 Kropotkin firrther elaborates his ideas, presenting the final statement of his thesis in *Ethics* (Kropotkin, 1968, chs. 1–3).

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that Kropotkin intended to defend anarchism against Hwley's Hobbesian image of the natural world. The description of nature as 'red in tooth and claw' and his explicit identification of anarchy with the violence of this natural world seriously undermined the anarchuk case. But Kropotkin‘s rejection of Huxley is only the starting point for a much wider ranging discussion — a discussion which ended, unfinished, at his death As they have concentrated so heavily on Kropotkin's challenge to social darwinism, modem writers have lost the sense of this progression and have focused their attention on the biologicalevolutionary aspects of Kropotkin‘s theory. To this extent, Kropotkin's defence of anarchism against Huxley has served to highlight the scientific credibility of the anarchist position. In the context of a discussion of evolution, Kropotkin's defence has also been extended and used

restrictions that are placed on the practice of mutual aid outside the immediate clan or tribal group (Kropotkin, 1891, pp.558–9). In his examination of medieval society Kropotkin similarly argues that it was the weakness of the principle of mutual aid which led to the decline of the city-states and to the rise of the modern centralised State (Kropotkin, 1894, pp.404–17).

Rather than showing the natural moral progression of mankind the theory of mutual aid explains the rise of individualism whilst denying it a basis in science. Moreover, in this and in his later discussions of the theory of mutual aid Kropotkin demonstrates that his primary target is not Huxley, but Malthus. For it is Malthus' work, not Huxley's, that establishes the existence of competition in nature and which denies the theoretical possibility of ethical perfectibility and ultimately anarchy.

In Darwin's work, Malthus' theory of population increase provides the basis on which to explain chance variation by natural selection. In social darwinian thinking (accepting the validity of the distinction Kropotkin draws between the political and the scientific) Kropotkin perceives that competition has been raised to the height of a moral precept (Desmond and Moore, 1991, pp.262–69). Responding to both arguments at once he denies Darwin's hypothesis of natural selection in order to refute the political value of competition. Kropotkin readily admits that the competitive struggle exists; the charge constitutes one of the major lines of his attack on capitalism But, he argues, it can be overcome. The key to success lies in effective organisation: if species co-operate and maximise their natural developmental potential they will be able to surmount the hindrancea of the natural environment and ensure their future survival.

In *Mutual Aid*, Kropotkin attempts to write Darwin's premises out of the evolutionary scheme by postulating the effectiveness of natural checks to population growth as an alternative to the assumption of geometric increase (Kropotkin, 1890a, pp.717–17). Yet the problem posed by Malthus continues to wony him In 1910 he

the scientific value of the work (Baldwin, pp.6–7). Woodcock's attitude is equally paradoxical: again questioning Kropotkin's objectivity he argues that his findmgs have been validated by most modem biology and sociology (Woodcock, 1979, p.201). Critics of anarchism similarly accord Kropotkin's work scientific status, comparing the soundness of his reasoning to the apparently muddle-headed rambling of Bakunin (Kelly, 1982, p.158). Avrich's concise assessment of *Mutual Aid* reflects the consensus:

> *Mutual Aid* has become a classic. With the exception of his memoirs it is his best known work and is widely regarded as his masterpiece… The reasons are not hard to find. *Mutual Aid* is more than a contribution to the theory of evolution … it was his most successful attempt to provide anarchist theory with a scientific foundation (Avrich, 1988, p.59).

The Role of Kropotkin's Dispute with Huxley in the Assessment of Mutual Aid

The good reputation that Mutual Aid enjoys cannot be explained with reference to Kropotkin's dispute with Huxley alone. Some writers stress the importance of Kropotkin's geographical training and his fieldwork in Siberia in evaluating his work (Cole, 1954; Avrich, 19881, but in estimating the scientific worth of *Mutual Aid* the overwhelming majority of writers do comment on what they see as Kropotkin's successful demolition of Huxley's apparent vulgarisation of Darwinism.

Significantly, studies which take Kropotkin's rejection of Huxley's observed social darwinism as a starting point for their assessments have blindly followed his misrepresentation of Huxley's point (David Miller, 1976; 1983). More damningly, whilst Kropotkin eventually corrects his error, admitting Huxley's wider

ethical concerns, (Kropotkin, 1968, p.49) modem writers have exacerbated the original distortion and have portrayed Huxley as an unrepentant defender of unfettered laissez-faire liberalism (Martin Miller, 1976; Montague, 1976; Marshall, 1992). The charge is unfounded. As Darwin's 'bulldog', Huxley used the concept of evolution as a stick with which to beat the Church but he did not recommend the 'survival of the fittest' as a model for human morality. In his later essays he specifically advocated that a distinction be drawn between human ethics and what he considered to be the ugly reality of the natural world (Huxley, 1888; 1893).

This misrepresentation of Hwdey's work by modem authors is surprising in view of the stir that was caused by the publication in 1893 of Huxley's Romanes Lecture: amazed contemporaries understood his discussion of natural and ethical evolution to mark a return to theological principles. Yet the oversight may be explained in terms of the opportunity that Kropotkin's refutation of Hwdey provides to present the anarchist case in 'scientific' terms. Focusing attention on the Hobbesian' aspects of Kropotkin's argument (notwithstanding his later developments of the theory) recent authors have presented *Mutual Aid* as the most forceful statement of two anarchist 'truths': that society is possible in the absence of the State and that mankind is naturally adapted to living in such a society without additional law (Woodcock, 1979, p.201). In spite of the crudeness of the Hobbesian defence, this interpretation of Kropotkin's intentions has persuaded even the critics (David Miller, 1983).

In so far as the theory of mutual aid is interpreted in this way, the general impact of Kropotkin's rebuttal of Huxley has been to limit debate about *Mutual Aid*. But in some cases, the injustice of the judgement passed by modem authors on Huxley's work has given rise to a more distorted reading of Kropotkin's theory. As Huxley is portrayed as an advocate ofthe 'survival of the fittest' the theory of mutual aid is alternatively represented a thesis of natural moral

development This interpretation is advanced in Peter Marshall's recent analysis:

> According to Kmpotkin, evolutionary theory... will demonstrate the poesibility of anarchism rather than justit;, the capitalist system. Anarchism as social philosophy is... in keeping with evolving human nature. Kropotkin not only argues that this is an accurate and true description of nature and the human species, but sees it aa pmviding the ground for morality... Human beings are therefore naturally moral (Marahall, 1989, p. 136)

In related arguments other writers have interpreted *Mutual Aid* as examination of developing moral consciousness (Reichert, 1967; Read, 1968; Ward, 1982; Ad&, 1988). But Marshall's argument may be pursued for the weakness shared by all these positions is apparent in his own discussion.

Marshall identifies the problem to be Kropotkin's: how, he asks, can the theory of mutual aid explain the existence of the State and the failure of human ethical evolution? If human beings are naturally moral, how does Kropotkin explain what he condemns as the rampant individualism of the capitalist world? The question ignores the possibility that in Kropotkin's o w n work this difEculty does not arise.

For Kropotkin, there is no necessary evolution of morality. There is only a potential It is precisely this point he wants to make in Mutual Aid: 'true' morality, he explains, will not simply emerge, it must be willed back into existence. The apirit of mutual aid may have progressed from the clan, to the tribe and to the village community. It may also have received its most deliberate and perfect expression in the organisation of the medieval cities. But the practice of mutual aid has been always imperfect. Thus, in his discussion of primitive societies Kropotkin points to the