

Peter Kropotkin: An Appreciation

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All over the world our Anarchist comrades have decided to celebrate the seventieth birthday of their beloved comrade and teacher, Peter Kropotkin.

If among living authors and Socialists any one deserves such a general demonstration of veneration and love, it is certainly Kropotkin, one of the greatest characters of our generation, and the real glory of his native land, Russia.

In my long life as Socialist and revolutionist, I have had the opportunity to meet many gifted and exceptional people, excelling by knowledge or talent, and distinguished by greatness of character. I knew even heroic men and women, as well as people with the stamp of genius on them. But Kropotkin stands out as a most conspicuous, strongly defined character even in that gallery of noble fighters for humanitarian ideals and intellectual liberation.

Kropotkin possesses in delightful harmony the qualities of a true inductive scientist and evolutionary philosopher with the greatness of a Socialist thinker and fighter inspired by the highest ideals of social justice. At the same time, by his temperament he is undoubtedly one of the most ardent and fearless propagandists of the Social Revolution, and of the complete emancipation of working humanity by its own initiative and efforts. And all these qualities are united in Kropotkin so closely and intimately that one cannot separate Kropotkin the scientist from Kropotkin the Socialist and revolutionist.

As scientist – geographer and geologist – Kropotkin is known by his theory of the formation of mountain chains and high plateaus, a theory now proved and accepted by science, and in recognition of which the mountains of Eastern Siberia explored by him have been named the Kropotkin Mountains.

As naturalist and inductive thinker on evolution, Kropotkin has earned undying glory and admiration by his ‘Mutual Aid’, a work which shows his vast knowledge as a naturalist and sociologist. The author gives us new powerful arguments for the principle of solidarity as a factor of evolution not only in human society but also in the animal world.

One of the most striking works by Kropotkin – I may even say classical in its form, deep knowledge, brilliant argumentation, and noble purpose – is his ‘Fields, Factories, and Workshop’. Here, with facts and figures, he shows to toiling humanity the abundance of produce obtainable, the comforts and pleasures of life possible, if physical and intellectual work are combined, if agriculture and industry go hand in hand. I think that during the last quarter of a century no book has appeared that is so invigorating, so encouraging and convincing to those who work for

a happier society. No wonder that a London democratic weekly advised its readers to buy this book by all means, even if they had to pawn their last shirt to raise the shilling.

Kropotkin as a Communist Anarchist and revolutionist ... but who of our readers does not know his numerous and inimitable writings on the Revolution, on Anarchist Communism, etc.? Here I will not dwell on those books; I have another aim in this article. I will attempt to give you an idea of the personal character, the charming individuality of the author of all those splendid books. First of all let me try to sketch Kropotkin at work.

I often ask myself if there exists another man equal to Kropotkin in quickness, intensity, punctuality, and variety of work. It is simply amazing what he is capable of doing in a single day. He reads incredibly much, in English, French, German and Russian, with minute interest he follows political and social events, science and literature, and especially the Anarchist movement of the whole world. His study, with its book-lined walls, has piles of papers, new books, etc., on the floor, tables and chairs. And all this material, if not read, is at least looked through, often annotated; parts are cut out, classified, and put away in boxes and portfolios made by himself. Kropotkin, as a recreation, used to occupy himself with carpentry and bookbinding; but now confines himself to the latter, and to the making of cartons for his notes. Whatever he does, he does quickly and with great exactitude; his notes and extracts are made with the speed of a stenographer, and all his work is done with beautiful neatness and correctness.

To give an idea of the variety of his work, I shall describe my last visit to Kropotkin. I went with a French scientist, also a great worker and a sincere admirer of Kropotkin. We found him in his study, hard at work, giving the last touches to a new edition of his 'Fields, Factories, and Workshops'. One side of his table was covered with the French proofs of 'La Science Moderne et L'Anarchie'. There was also the glossary in English for the coming FREEDOM edition of the same book. On a small table a half-finished article on Syndicalism was lying, and a pile of letters, some of them twelve pages, exchanged with an old friend and comrade of the Federation Jurassienne, and dealing with the origin of Syndicalism, awaited an answer. Newspapers and books everywhere; volumes and separate articles on Bakunin were about, as Kropotkin is at present editing a complete Russian edition of Bakunin's works. Between all these things, vigorous, alive, active as a young man, smiling heartily, Kropotkin himself. And people try to convince us that he is tired and must rest! 'Nonsense', said my French friend; 'this is not an old and tired man; he is more alive than many a young man of our present generation!' And really with his overflowing activity and spirits he animates the whole household.

Of course, it is only natural that a man of his learning and many-sided development is much sought after. Specialists and scientists, political and literary people, painters and musicians, and especially Socialist and Anarchist comrades and Russian revolutionists, are visitors to his house, and charmed by his straightforward simplicity and wholehearted interest. Even children are at once captivated, not only by his fatherly goodness, but by his capacity to share their enjoyment by playing for and with them, arousing their delighted amazement by his juggling tricks and representations.

At the end of the day, when the household has gone to rest, Kropotkin, with his usual consideration for those who have worked, moves about the house like a mouse, tiptoeing so as not to disturb those asleep, even if only the servant has gone to bed. Often he has whispered to me to be careful not to awaken her. Lighting his candle, he retires to his own room, sometimes till midnight, reading new publications for which he could not find time during the day. It is not astonishing that all those who come in contact with him love and adore him.

But there is another side to his character. Kropotkin, the political and social thinker, the revolutionist, the Anarchist Communist, with the fiery temperament of a fighter, with his inflexible principles, his insight into political and social problems, is yet more marvellous; he sees further, he understands better, he formulates clearer than any of his contemporaries. Few people feel so deeply and acutely the suffering and injustice of others, and he cannot rest until he has done all in his power to protest and help. From 1881, when he was expelled from Switzerland for having organised a meeting to protest against the execution of [Sofia] Perovskaya and her comrades, up till recently, when he feverishly wrote his 'Terror in Russia', that crushing act of accusation against the Tsar's wholesale murder and torture, he has always been the indefatigable defender of all the victims of social and political injustice.

Such is, in a few lines, Kropotkin the Anarchist, the scientist, and, above all, the man; beloved by his comrades and friends, respected and admired by all honest people of all countries.

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