

Kropotkin: Reviewing The Classical Anarchist Tradition

by Ruth Kinna.

Edinburgh University Press, 2016, hbk £70, ISBN: 9780748642298, 272pp

by Elliot Rose

Peter Kropotkin presents an interesting figure in the history of both radical political thought and science. A Russian prince who became an anarchist, he made his name both as a geographer and scientific populariser, and an agitator for social reinvention. To anarchists he is either a canonical hero or an outdated antecedent of their own thought. To ethologists, psychologists, and ecologists he is an inspiration – somewhat behind current research but a pioneer of a beneficial perspective nevertheless.

Ruth Kinna's new book on Kropotkin's work reveals the nuances that shatter these simplistic accounts. For someone (such as myself) who might be drawn to Kropotkin because of his naturalistic viewpoint and his ethological approach, this book provides an enlightening and engaging account of the wider context and content of his philosophical and political approach. In particular Kinna illustrates how Kropotkin's various pursuits actually form a cohesive, syncretic and synthetic whole: his social theory is intimately tied to his scientific study and naturalistic perspective. She connects his admirable political honesty directly to his other scholarly pursuits, to show how a concern for justice suffused his intellectual life.

In the first two chapters Kinna explores the existing interpretations of Kropotkin's work. The first is predominantly concerned with how Kropotkin's ideas have been interpreted, used, and, at times, deployed to try and understand some of the tensions within anarchist thought, particularly the "classical" tradition with which he is associated. He thus becomes something of a milestone by which to judge what constitutes classical anarchism and what goes beyond (or falls short) of it. However by moving that milestone – by selectively (re)interpreting what Kropotkin thought or stood for – various movements and factions thus alter the terrain of these debates, whilst simultaneously leeching the sense or meaning from them.

The second chapter shifts the emphasis somewhat; here Kinna considers how differing portrayals of Kropotkin's place within a classical anarchist canon have been used to establish and reinforce the positions within later libertarian thought, as well as exploring his relationship his thought has (or, perhaps, how this relationship is portrayed) to movements

like 60s gradualist radicalism and the post-anarchism of the 90s. For example rejecting a superficial caricature of scientistic Kropotkinism forms part of a Postmodernist Postanarchism; whilst embracing some parts of Kropotkin's thought (and downplaying others) is used, by the authors of *Black Flame: The Revolutionary Class Politics of Anarchism and Syndicalism*, amongst others, to justify a particular conception of what "proper" anarchism is (in this case being something built on and inextricably linked with class struggle) (Kinna, 2016, pp. 36-41; Schmidt & van der Walt, 2009).

These two chapters form the first subdivision of the book, covering a unified theme. Various interpretations and reinterpretations of Kropotkin's work have been used in a justificatory manner: to build support or act as evidence. To some Kropotkin is a revolutionary, to others he is a gradualist, a quasi-reformer or early exponent of prefigurationism.¹ In either case he may be a relic of an outmoded enlightenment creed, or else the visionary who set the stage for a modern political anarchism. It all depends, naturally, on the interpreter's own predilections: whether they sympathise with classical anarchism, what they think "classical anarchism" actually means, and how they consider Kropotkin to be emblematic of (or how he transcends) this tradition.

However, here it is also clear that this is not an introductory text. Some awareness of the historiography of anarchism in general is beneficial when reading the first chapter. Reading chapter four I found myself with the sense that a lot of work had been done on an intellectual history of nineteenth century geography; yet only the findings are presented, leaving a number of allusions to factions, individuals, and paradigms with little explication of their actual positions.² As for the first section, readers unfamiliar with some of the details may wonder why, precisely, Malatesta looked unfavourably on Kropotkin's incorporation (or invocation) of science in elaborating his anarchism. In the second chapter Kinna quotes Gabriel Kuhn as saying "'traditional anarchism," while an important and ethical guide, has theoretically been embedded in the "naturalistic" and "essentialist" philosophy of the nineteenth century and its many epistemological shortcomings' (Kinna, 2016, p. 36), however here, besides some discussion of Kropotkin's own methodological flaws, there is relatively very little said about this philosophy or what its epistemological shortcomings actually are.

Ironically, these methodological flaws of Kropotkin's are critiqued by some of those coming from the very naturalistic perspective that the critics Kinna cites would themselves be sceptical of. Their grounds for dismissing Kropotkin, and by extension "classical anarchism", as positivist and humanist – that he places too much emphasis on an "essentialist" belief in human goodness and cooperativeness – are echoed by those such as the

primatologist Frans de Waal, who credits Kropotkin for presaging his own scientific and naturalistic view of humanity and human society, but criticises the old revolutionary for paying too little attention to the other aspect of human nature: its flaws, inconsistencies and, at times, selfishness.

In the second section Kinna explores Kropotkin's actual thought, through the lens of his experiences and his responses to the socio-political developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Interestingly, she disregards the emphasis some have put on his peripatetic exile. She is not convinced that developments in Kropotkin's thought mirror changes in his circumstances and the precise country (and thus political conditions) he found himself in. Rather there is a more-or-less consistent thread running throughout his work, which reflects certain key experiences and ideas encountered during his political awakening. Although an exile and an émigré, then, Kropotkin's anarchism is distinctly indebted to his Russian origins and ongoing concern for the Russian situation, both pre- and post-revolution (Kinna, 2016, pp. 50-52, 71-72).

Central to this is nihilism, and Kropotkin's relationship with nihilism is explored in the course of chapter three. It is, of course, a particular kind of nihilism: the practical, political nihilism of Tsarist Russia. For Kropotkin the nihilism of Russian rebels and feminists was the antidote to the excesses of a slavish, bourgeois egoism which he saw as embodied and exemplified by Nietzsche and Stirner. In his eyes, this veneration of heroic individualism contributed to the proliferation of pointless, terroristic violence amongst nineteenth century revolutionaries that hindered the anarchist pursuit of social justice. As Kinna explains:

Kropotkin worried that Nietzschean amorality may persuade anarchists that it was acceptable to enter into activities that were purely self-aggrandising and that misleadingly benchmarked liberation against the preparedness to flout all and any social conventions. (Kinna, 2016, p. 60)

Nihilism offered him an individualism which did not glorify the ego, and which meshed well with the naturalistic conception of the origins of morality and ethical action which he wished to articulate (Kinna, 2016, pp. 68-9, 75ff, 150-151). It also proved central to the development of his views on art: art was supposed to reflect real life and social existence – it is not an end in itself – and real life itself determines what is beautiful (Kinna, 2016, pp. 61-2, 74; Kropotkin, 1995). For Kropotkin idealism represented something aesthetically egoistic; nihilism's 'thoughtful realism', on the other hand, was emancipatory, both socially (it was associated with and helped inspire

female emancipatory movements within Russia) and ethically (Kropotkin linked it to his reading of Jean-Marie Guyau's "non-obligatory" ethics of constructive desire and vital flourishing). In particular, his analysis of the breach that Russian nihilist women created in the social order, merely by rejecting the behaviours and mores that were expected of them, lends a certain degree of credence to the idea that his thought intersects with and anticipates a prefigurationist stance. The realities of existence subverted the existing social order, even as they reflected a deliberate, thoughtful assessment of what a better world might be.

Kinna then moves on to explore Kropotkin's synthesis of his scientific and political interests. Whilst she notes that he is not as explicit as his fellow radical and geographer, Élisée Reclus, nevertheless she argues that his experiences and training as a geographer had a profound impact on the way in which Kropotkin developed his socio-political theory. This, needless to say, goes beyond the caricature of him (developed by some of the historiographical factions) as some kind of positivist, as well as painting a picture of his scientific interests as something more than the usual preoccupation with mutual aid and naturalistic ethics. According to Kinna Kropotkin's anarchist politics and opposition to the Tsarist regime came from a sensitivity to the relationship between the land and its people, with special reference to the usage of the land and the abuse of Russia's serfs – not to mention the deprivation of the ex-serfs after their emancipation by Tsar Alexander II. In doing so he drew direct connections between politics, economics and geography (broadly construed to include the linkages with human socio-political existence, or "human terrain" as some might call it). This doubtlessly connects both with his early life, interacting with the serfs and tenants of his family's estate, and with his experiences in the Amur region, when he became disillusioned with the efficacy and political will of centralised state power (Kropotkin, 1906, pp. 35-42, 120-40, 222; Woodcock and Avakumović, 1971, pp. 40-8). However what makes this relationship particularly interesting is what it reveals about the state and social formations: the 'callous indifference of the rich to the plight of the poor'; the autocratic stagnancy of the state; the petty corruption consequent to the establishment of ministers and their ministries (Kinna, 2016, pp. 82-87, 110). Kinna highlights something particularly interesting, in that Kropotkin does not rely on an economic class analysis but rather traces the web of alliances between various elite groups who participate in the exercise of power. To be sure, who takes the lion's share changes as economic and social conditions develop, but the groups negotiating the status quo represent the same separate sources of religious, political and economic power, negotiating amongst themselves for their shares.³ This anthropological account of power

underpins Kropotkin's social theory, including his characterisation of waged work as a transformed instantiation of slavery and his support for a decentralised, federalist approach to national and international organisation.

This is underlined in the third section of Kinna's book – chapters five and six – where she explores the more prescriptive, utopian aspects of Kropotkin's social thought. These, she argues, are no less dependant on his previous commitments, being rooted in his nihilist-inspired 'thoughtful realism' which makes scientific, empirical study subordinate to the needs and desires of human beings. Kropotkin had confidence in the scientific method, in its ability to describe the true (naturalistic) genealogy of our ethical sentiments, and of the power of reason to show how and why modern society falls short of satisfying them. Yet he was not the caricature positivist – he was aware that human values affected scientific analysis and deductions, and that this could pose a problem for analysis, as well as a spur to pursue certain lines of enquiry and a measure by which to judge the worth of scientific pursuits (Kinna, 2016, pp. 106-8). Crucially he did not see this as undermining his scientific approach, rather it was a precondition for conducting a (good and honest) scientific enquiry that acknowledges the potential for reflexivity. As she notes in chapter four: 'In [Kropotkin's] hands, geography was an instrument to reveal the contingencies of history, freeing it from the analysis of what existed and hooking it up with a conception of what might be' (Kinna, 2016, pp. 92). This squares with what geographer Bob Galois considered to be Kropotkin's characteristic idea of nature: that nature is 'holistic or organic' (i.e. all-encompassing and emergent, rather than pseudo-scientific woo), 'historic', and 'spontaneous' (Galois, 1976; cf. Kinna, 2016, pp. 94-5).

Kropotkin's naturalistic sensitivity also emerges in his treatment of freedom, which Kinna describes as being 'theorised using geography' (Kinna, 2016, pp. 145). For Kropotkin the idea of liberty as non-interference was unrealistic (being predicated on the abstraction of the individual from the social context) and counterproductive (insofar as it required an external authority to guarantee the right to non-interference). Instead freedom was analogous to free movement – both of individual bodies and of ideas – and unfreedom was the restriction of movement. That is, domination and enslavement came through the external, artificial, and top-down imposition of regulatory and organisational principles. This was his answer both to the state socialism of Marx and to Benjamin Tucker's individualism, since both relied on a labour theory of value which was fundamentally unable to account for production as a social rather than economic fact (Kinna, 2016, pp. 143-6). For both of these the idea of assigning value to a product would result, said Kropotkin, in the worker losing their autonomy and ability to

decide for themselves what work was valuable. Obviously Kropotkin's anarchist communism would need some organisational principle, but these codes would be open to criticism and amendment in a way that metaphysical, law-giving entities or the theory of value are not. The way a society organises itself is up for continual adjustment, much in the same manner as that advocated by Harold Barclay in the conclusion to his anthropological treatment of "people without government" (Kinna, 2016; pp. 152, 197-8; Barclay, 1990). As proof that this was a feasible proposal Kropotkin fell back on his naturalistic ethics – whilst people weren't perfect, Kropotkin was (optimistically) confident that their evolved sense of justice and moral right would serve to underpin a harmonious social existence. After all, his critique of religion was that it co-opted this natural moral sense for its own use as a tool of power and control.

His "activist" writings focussed more squarely on the political. Whilst this resulted in a separation of his political and scientific views (at least on the page), it was because Kropotkin had a definite end in mind. His aim was twofold: to encourage and shore up the will of the dispossessed and disenfranchised, and to demonstrate the feasibility of alternatives to the status quo. If this was utopian, he and Kinna both argue, it was because the ideals held up challenged conventional wisdom, not because they were in themselves impossible to attain. "Utopian", in the pejorative sense, was more aptly applicable to those ideas that constructed abstract systems from 'favourable principles' – and this included the Jacobin republic built on "right" and parliamentary social democrats (Kinna, 2016, pp. 130-3). Kropotkin's sense of uncertainty and spontaneity (cultivated in his study of nature) make themselves felt in his rejection of teleological sociologies and philosophies of history. There is no sense of inevitability and historic events are seen as less predictable, given that Kropotkin eschews an economic science in favour of empirical geography and anthropology. Furthermore, whilst there is a sense of progress – Kropotkin is confident that there has been social change in step with the development of technology and geopolitical movements – there is also an awareness of the potential for regression. Indeed for Kropotkin the state represents a "lower" form of social organisation, given that it encourages aggression and (a destructive form of) competition (Kinna, 2016, pp. 98-101, 127-32). As a consequence, radicals should and must take action, in order to realise the better world which he is adamant is possible (but not an outcome guaranteed by a "science" of history).

Kinna's Kropotkin comes across as more of a gradualist than the stereotypical anarchist: political change will only be achieved by social reorganisation from the ground up, and will take different forms in different

contexts; but in keeping with her overall thesis the issue is more complex than that (cf. Kinna, 2016, pp. 151-2,166-9). Kropotkin adamantly argued that would-be radicals should derive explicit, positive ideals and aims from practical critique of injustice. He was also pragmatic, insisting that anarchism actually consisted in action aimed at realising these ideals. Whilst at times this meant support for revolution and revolutionary change, as well as social reconfiguration, the variation of his ideas comes about as a result of his experiences of nineteenth century Russian and European politics – crucially, from his impressions of what was and wasn't working, and the way he interpreted the motivations and good faith of those involved (Kinna, 2016, pp. 157- 161). Abstracting from this historical milieu – in order to claim him for prefigurationism or as a class-war revolutionary – only obscures these nuances and their origins, and the tendency towards abstraction is what drove the historiographical tensions examined in the first two chapters. In essence, his thought and action resist both the qualified hagiography of second-wave anarchists, as well as the sneering, contrarian post-ism of their inheritors and rivals. True to his own approach, his thought cannot be abstracted without losing its true meaning.

Kropotkin probably isn't for the kind of person who uses "xhey" when "they" will do. His anarchism emerges from a set of principles and beliefs to which he cleaved, not a self-image of what it means to be part of a radical or subaltern politics. It is a naturalistic, humanistic view of the world (and he was aware his particular anarchism was one of several similar views); of how it is and should be; and a reflexive notion of how that view develops in response to impositions or injustice. It is not an identity to be affirmed and defended. His politics proceed from a concern for a consistent, honest, and socially-contextualised freedom; 'constructed through resistance and not based on an abstraction' (Kinna, 2016, pp. 1-3, 133, 201-202). Kinna makes it clear that Kropotkin's thought is not – to paraphrase Emma Goldman – an ideal, but a social theory.

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Endnotes

¹ i.e. The notion that anti-hierarchical or self-organised forms of life can be constructed within a nation-state society, shifting civil society towards an anarchic mode of existence and – in some accounts at least – leading to the

eventual winnowing away of the state and domination, literally prefiguring the forms of social organisation that would constitute a stateless society. In other accounts, or in the anthropological approach adopted by David Graeber (2007) or Harold Barclay (1990), these forms are a necessary counterbalance to a hierarchical structure which may never entirely be negated, but can be resisted and subverted at crucial junctures.

² Meanwhile there is some unhelpful historical elision on page 148, in that her characterisation of Lamarckian evolution more closely resembles modern “neo-Lamarckism” – she identifies it with ‘the environment individuals helped to create’ – than it does the Lamarckian theory of acquired characteristics Kropotkin was familiar with (although it does reflect the wider view of adaptive fitness Kropotkin held, of which his reading of Lamarck undoubtedly had some influence). Conversely there is some ironic anachronism in her use of the term ‘neo-Darwinian’ to describe the view Kropotkin opposed, given that this term and theoretical construct did not exist until well after evolutionary biologists had made the connection between Mendel’s genetic theory of hereditary transmission and Darwin’s theory of natural selection.

³ Parenthetically, this has some obvious virtues. A Marxist analysis of Malaysian politics, for example, would struggle to explain the comparative dearth of power enjoyed by the Chinese-Malay, the economic elite who control much of the nation’s capital wealth. Conversely Kropotkin’s analysis of power, developed via his critique of the Russian state and as presented by Kinna, could easily be applied to the Malay context with a few minor adjustments to take account of the particular national and religious identity deployed by Malaysia’s political elites in the process of securing their powerbase (though even here there remain striking similarities with the Russian ‘official nationalism’ Kropotkin dealt with. See Kinna, 2016, pp. 83-4).

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