Introduction to Mutual Aid

An Illuminated Factor of Evolution

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Sometimes—not very often—a particularly cogent argument against reigning political common sense presents such a shock to the system that it becomes necessary to create an entire body of theory to refute it. Such interventions are themselves events, in the philosophical sense; that is, they reveal aspects of reality that had been largely invisible but, once revealed, seem so entirely obvious that they can never be unseen. Much of the work of the intellectual Right is identifying, and heading off, such challenges.

Let us offer three examples.

In the 1680s, a Huron-Wendat statesman named Kondiaronk, who had been to Europe and was intimately familiar with French and English settler society, engaged in a series of debates with the French governor of Quebec, and one of his chief aides, a certain Lahontan. In them he presented the argument that punitive law and the whole apparatus of the state exist not because of some fundamental flaw in human nature but owing to the existence of another set of institutions—private property, money—that by their very nature drive people to act in such ways as to make coercive measures necessary. Equality, he argued, is thus the condition for any meaningful freedom. These debates were later turned into a book by Lahontan, which in the first decades of the eighteenth century was wildly successful. It became a play that ran for twenty years in Paris, and seemingly every Enlightenment thinker wrote an imitation. Eventually, these arguments—and the broader indigenous critique of French society—grew so powerful that defenders of the existing social order such as Turgot and Adam Smith effectively had to invent the notion of social evolution as a direct riposte. Those who first came up with the argument that human societies could be organized according to stages of development, each with their own characteristic technologies and forms of organization, were quite explicit that that's what they were about. "Everyone loves freedom and equality," noted Turgot; the question is how much of either is consistent with an advanced commercial society based on a sophisticated division of labor. The resulting theories of social evolution dominated the nineteenth century, and are still very much with us, if in slightly modified form, today.

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth, the anarchist critique of the liberal state—that the rule of law was ultimately based on arbitrary violence, and ultimately, simply a secularized version of an all-powerful God that could create morality because it stood outside it—was taken so seriously by defenders of the state that right-wing legal theorists like Carl Schmitt ulti-

mately came up with the intellectual armature for fascism. Schmitt ends his most famous work, Political Theology, with a rant against Bakunin, whose rejection of "decisionism"—the arbitrary authority to create a legal order, but therefore also to set it aside—was ultimately, he claimed, every bit as arbitrary as the authority Bakunin claimed to be opposing. Schmitt's very conception of political theology, foundational for almost all contemporary right-wing thought, was an attempt to answer Bakunin's God and the State.

The challenge posed by Kropotkin's Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution arguably runs deeper still, since it's not just about the nature of government, but the nature of nature—that is, reality—itself.

Theories of social evolution, what Turgot first christened "progress," might have begun as a way of defusing the challenge of the indigenous critique, but they soon began to take a more virulent form, as hardcore liberals like Herbert Spencer began to represent social evolution not just as a matter of increasing complexity, differentiation, and integration, but as a kind of Hobbesian struggle for survival. The phrase "survival of the fittest" was actually coined in 1852 by Spencer, to describe human history—and ultimately, one assumes, to justify European genocide and colonialism. It was only taken up by Darwin some ten years later, when, in The Origin of Species, he used it as a way of describing the forms of natural selection he had identified in his famous expedition to the Galapagos Islands. At the time Kropotkin

was writing, in the 1880s and '90s, Darwin's ideas had been taken up by market liberals, most notoriously his "bulldog" Thomas Huxley, and the English naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, to propound what's often called a "gladiatorial view" of natural history. Species duke it out like boxers in a ring or bond traders on a market floor; the strong prevail.

Kropotkin's response—that cooperation is just as decisive a factor in natural selection than competition—was not entirely original.

He never pretended that it was. In fact he was not only drawing on the best biological, anthropological, archaeological, and historical knowledge available in his day, including his own explorations of Siberia, but also on an alternative Russian school of evolutionary theory which held that the English hypercompetitive school was based, as he put it, "a tissue of absurdities": men like "Kessler, Severtsov, Menzbir, Brandt—four great Russian zoologists, and a 5th lesser one, Poliakov, and finally myself, a simple traveler."

Still, we must give Kropotkin credit. He was much more than a simpler traveler. Such men had been successfully ignored by English Darwinians, in the heyday of empire—and, indeed, by almost everyone else. Kropotkin's shot across the bows was not. In part, this was no doubt because he presented his scientific findings in a larger political context, in a form that made it impossible to deny just how much the reigning version of Darwinian science was itself not just an unconscious reflection of taken-for-granted liberal categories. (As Marx so famously put it, "The anatomy of Man is the key to the anatomy of the ape.") It was an attempt to catapult the views of the commercial classes into universality. Darwinism at that time was still a conscious, militant political intervention to reshape common sense; a centrist insurgency, one might say, or perhaps better, a would-be centrist insurgency, since it was aimed at creating a new center. It was not yet common sense; it was an attempt to create a new universal common sense. If it was not, ultimately, completely successful, it was in a certain measure because of the very power of Kropotkin's counterargument.

It is not difficult to see what made these liberal intellectuals so uneasy. Consider the famous passage from Mutual Aid, which really deserves to be quoted in full: It is not love, and not even

sympathy (understood in its proper sense) which induces a herd of ruminants or of horses to form a ring in order to resist an attack of wolves; not love which induces wolves to form a pack for hunting; not love which induces kittens or lambs to play, or a dozen of species of young birds to spend their days together in the autumn; and it is neither love nor personal sympathy which induces many thousand fallow-deer scattered over a territory as large as France to form into a score of separate herds, all marching towards a given spot, in order to cross there a river. It is a feeling infinitely wider than love or personal sympathy—an instinct that has been slowly developed among animals and men in the course of an extremely long evolution, and which has taught animals and men alike the force they can borrow from the practice of mutual aid and support, and the joys they can find in social life… It is not love and not even sympathy upon which Society is based in mankind. It is the conscience—be it only at the stage of an instinct—of human solidarity. It is the unconscious recognition of the force that is borrowed by each man from the practice of mutual aid; of the close dependence of every one's happiness upon the happiness of all; and of the sense of justice, or equity which brings the individual to consider the rights of every other individual as equal to his own. Upon this broad and necessary foundation the still higher moral feelings are developed.

One need only consider the virulence of the reaction. At least two fields of study (admittedly, overlapping ones) sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, have since been created specifically to reconcile Kropotkin's points about cooperation between animals with the assumption that we are all ultimately driven by, as Dawkins was ultimately to put it, our "selfish genes." When the British biologist J.B.S. Haldane reportedly said that he would be willing to lay down his life to save "two brothers, four half-brothers or eight first cousins," he was simply parroting the kind of "scientific" calculus that was introduced everywhere to answer Kropotkin, in the same way that progress was invented to check Kondiaronk, or the doctrine of the state of exception, to check Bakunin. The phrase "selfish gene" was not chosen fortuitously. Kropotkin had revealed behavior in the natural world that was exactly the opposite of selfishness: the entire game of Darwinists now is to find some reason, any reason, to continue to insist that even the most playful, loving, whimsical, heroically self-sacrificing, or sociable behavior is really selfish after all.

The efforts of the intellectual right to meet the enormity of the challenge presented by Kropotkin's theory are understandable. As we have already pointed out, this is precisely what they are supposed to be doing. This is why they are referred to as "reactionaries." They don't really believe in political creativity as a value in itself—in fact they find it profoundly dangerous. As a result, right-wing intellectuals are mainly there to react to ideas put forward by the Left. But what about the intellectual Left?

This is where things get a bit confusing. While the right-wing intellectuals sought to neutralize Kropotkin's evolutionary holism by developing entire intellectual systems, the Marxist Left pretended that his intervention had never occurred. One might even hazard to say that the Marxist response to Kropotkin's emphasis on cooperative federalism was to further develop the aspects of Marx's own theory that pulled most sharply in the other direction: that is, its most productivist and progressivist aspects. Rich insights from Mutual Aid were at best ignored and, at worst, brushed off with a patronizing chuckle. There has been such a persistent tendency in Marxist scholarship, and by extension, left-leaning scholarship in general, of ridiculing Kropotkin's "lifeboat socialism" and "naive utopianism" that a renowned biologist, Stephen Jay Gould, felt compelled to insist, in a famous essay, that "Kropotkin was no crackpot."

There are two possible explanations for this strategic dismissal.

One is pure sectarianism. As already noted, Kropotkin's intellectual intervention was part of a larger political project. The late nineteenth century and early twentieth saw the foundations of the welfare state, whose key institutions were, indeed, largely created by mutual aid groups, entirely independently of the state, then gradually coopted by states and political parties. Most right and left intellectuals were perfectly aligned on this one: Bismarck fully admitted he created German social welfare institutions as a "bribe" to the working class so they would not become socialists; socialists insisted that anything from social insurance to public libraries be run not by the neighborhood and syndical groups that had actually created them but by top-down vanguardist parties. In this context both saw writing off Kropotkin's ethical socialist proposals as tomfoolery as a paramount imperative. It's also worth remembering that—partly for this very reason—in the period between 1900 and 1917, anarchist and libertarian Marxist ideas were much more popular among the working class themselves than the Marxism of Lenin and Kautsky. It took the victory of Lenin's branch of the Bolshevik party in Russia (at the time, considered the right wing of the Bolsheviks), and the suppression of the Soviets, Proletkult, and other bottom-up initiatives in the Soviet Union itself, to finally put these debates to rest.

There's another possible explanation though, one that has more to do with what might be called the "positionality" of both traditional Marxism and contemporary social theory. What is the role of a radical intellectual? Most intellectuals still do claim to be radicals of some sort or another. In theory they all agree with Marx that it's not enough to understand the world; the point is to change it. But what does this actually mean in practice?

In one important paragraph of Mutual Aid, Kropotkin offers a suggestion: the role of a radical scholar is to "restore the real proportion between conflict and union." This might sound obscure, but he clarifies. Radical scholars are "bound to enter a minute analysis of the thousands of facts and faint indications accidentally preserved in the relics of the past; to interpret them with the aid of contemporary ethnology; and after having heard so much about what used to divide men, to reconstruct stone by stone the institutions which used to unite them."

One of the authors still remembers his youthful excitement after reading these lines. How different from the lifeless training received in the nation-centered academy! This recommendation should be read together with that of Karl Marx, whose energy went into understanding the organization and development of capitalist commodity production. In Capital, the only real attention to cooperation is an examination of cooperative activities as forms and consequences of factory production, where workers "merely form a particular mode of existence of capital." It would seem that two projects complement each other very well. Kropotkin aimed to understand precisely what it was that an alienated worker had lost. But to integrate the two would mean to understand how even capitalism is ultimately founded on communism ("mutual aid"), even if it's a communism it does not acknowledge; how communism is not an abstract, distant ideal, impossible to maintain, but a lived practical reality we all engage in daily, to different degrees, and that even factories could not operate without it—even if much of it operates on the sly, between the cracks, or shifts, or informally, or in what's not said, or entirely subversively. It's become fashionable lately to say that capitalism has entered a new phase in which it has become parasitical of forms of creative cooperation, largely on the internet.

This is nonsense. It has always been so.

This is a worthy intellectual project. For some reason, almost no one is interested in carrying it out. Instead of examining how the relations of hierarchy and exploitation are reproduced, refused, and entangled with relations of mutual aid, how relations of care become continuous

with relations of violence, but nonetheless hold together systems of violence so that they don't entirely fall apart, both traditional Marxism and contemporary social theory have stubbornly dismissed pretty much anything suggestive of generosity, cooperation, or altruism as some kind of bourgeois illusion. Conflict and egoistic calculation proved to be more interesting than "union." (Similarly, it is fairly common for academic leftists to write about Carl Schmitt or Turgot, while is almost impossible to find those who write about Bakunin and Kondiaronk.) As Marx himself complained, under the capitalist mode of production, to exist is to accumulate for the last few decades we have heard little else than relentless exhortations on cynical strategies used to increase our respective (social, cultural, or material) capital. These are framed as critiques. But if all you're willing to talk about is that which you claim to stand against, if all you can imagine is what you claim to stand against, then in what sense do you actually stand against it? Sometimes it seems as if the academic Left has ended up as a result gradually internalizing and reproducing all the most distressing aspects of the neoliberal economism it claims to oppose, to the point where, reading many such analyses (we're going to be nice and not mention any names), one finds oneself asking, how different all of this really is from the sociobiological hypothesis that our behavior is governed by "selfish genes!"

Admittedly, this kind of internalization of the enemy reached its heyday in the 1980s and '90s, when the global Left was in full retreat. Things have moved on. Is Kropotkin relevant again? Well, obviously, Kropotkin was always relevant, but this book is being released in the belief that there is a new, radicalized generation, many of whom have never been exposed to these ideas directly, but who show all signs of being able to make a more clear-minded assessment of the global situation than their parents and grandparents, if only because they know that if they don't, the world in store for them will soon become an absolute hellscape.

It's already beginning to happen. The political relevance of ideas first espoused in Mutual Aid is being rediscovered by the new generations of social movements across the planet. The ongoing social revolution in Democratic Federation of Northeast Syria (Rojava) has been profoundly influenced by Kropotkin's writings about social ecology and cooperative federalism, in part via the works of Murray Bookchin, in part by going back to the source, in large part too by drawing on their own Kurdish traditions and revolutionary experience.

Kurdish revolutionaries have taken on the task of constructing a new social science antagonistic to knowledge structures of capitalist modernity. Those involved in collective projects of sociology of freedom and jineoloji have indeed begun to "reconstruct stone by stone the institutions which used to unite" people and struggles. In the Global North, everywhere from various occupy movements to solidarity projects confronting the Covid-19 pandemic, mutual aid has emerged as a key phrase used by activists and mainstream journalists alike. At present, mutual aid is invoked in migrant solidarity mobilizations in Greece and in the organization of Zapatista society in Chiapas. Even scholars are rumored to occasionally use it.

When Mutual Aid was first released in 1902, there were few scientists courageous enough to challenge the idea that capitalism and nationalism were rooted in human nature, or that the authority of states was ultimately inviolable. Most who did were, indeed, written off as crackpots or, if they were too obviously important to be dismissed in this way, like Albert Einstein, as "eccentrics" whose political views had about as much significance as their unusual hairstyles. The rest of the world though is moving along. Will the scientists—even, possibly, the social scientists—eventually follow?

We write this introduction during a wave of global popular revolt against racism and state violence, as public authorities spew venom against "anarchists" in much the way they did in Kropotkin's time. It seems a peculiarly fitting moment to raise a glass to that old "despiser of law and private property" who changed the face of science in ways that continue to affect us today. Pyotr Kropotkin's scholarship was careful and colorful, insightful and revolutionary. It has also aged unusually well. Kropotkin's rejection of both capitalism and bureaucratic socialism, his predictions of where the latter might lead, have been vindicated time and time again. Looking back at most of the arguments that raged in his day, there's really no question about who was actually right.

Obviously, there are still those who virulently disagree on this count. Some are clinging to the dream of boarding ships long since passed. Others are well paid to think the things they do. As for the authors of this modest introduction, many decades after first encountering this delightful book, we find ourselves—once again—surprised by just how deeply we agree with its central argument. The only viable alternative to capitalist barbarism is stateless socialism, a product, as the great geographer never ceased to remind us, "of tendencies that are apparent now in the society" and that were "always, in some sense, imminent in the present."

To create a new world, we can only start by rediscovering what is and his always been right before our eyes.

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