

Preface*

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by *Paul Goodman*

The new interest in Kropotkin is part of the world-wide revival of Anarchist action and thought, in both «private enterprise» and socialist countries. So Bakunin, Kropotkin, and the other Anarchists were right after all: the real enemies have proved to be the State (whose health is war), over-centralized organization, the authoritarian personality of people. The call is for grass- roots social structures, spontaneity and mutual aid, direct action and doing it yourself, education for self-reliance and agitation for freedom. Marxists now talk a good deal about alienation and liberals have picked it up, especially «youth alienation», but this is what Anarchists were always talking about, without neo-Hegelian trimmings. They knew it by human feeling

* Paul Goodman, «Preface» to Pëtr Kropotkin, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, Horizon Press, New York, 1968.

and common observation. Closely studying the social history of rural communes and medieval towns, Kropotkin concluded that men did not have to be ruled.

Yet mankind being what it was, it probably has been necessary to experiment the obvious abstract recipe of «rational» central planning in order to get a bellyful of it. Kant said that men always try out all the wrong ways before, perforce, they choose the right one. Writing in 1898, Kropotkin was far off base in his slighting estimate of the prospects of Marxian Socialism. Indeed, for the first half of this century it seemed that the trend toward universal social engineering and a general shambles was irreversible. But the recalcitrance of human nature, that Kropotkin used to admire, has stubbornly begun to reassert itself and we shall not have universal social engineering. We may still have the general shambles. The bureaucracy and stupidity of the Great Powers are now no worse than when Kropotkin wrote these *Memoirs*, but their technical and organization ability to do mischief is immensely greater. Patience is a salient virtue of political moralists, but the philosophers of the past did not have to figure with atom bombs and so forth.

When young radicals come across *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, they are surprised at how similar their peers were in 1875. Kropotkin's description of the generation gap is poignant – all the «elder brothers» had been, as we say, co-opted. Those who have done work among the dispossessed in Harlem, Roxbury, and Detroit recognize *V'Narod*, going to the people where they are and on their own terms, and they also recognize the ambiguities involved.

Some young people are miffed at the similarities and do not want to hear about them, for it is an article of faith

among *moderni* – as they called themselves in 1500 – that nothing like themselves has ever happened. But these are the lively youth of every pre-revolutionary age, when the powers that be have become morally bankrupt and administratively incompetent. They sprang up before the Reformation, as *Sturm und Drang* before the French Revolution, as the Narodniki in Russia, and as our hippies and New Left. And it is not just an eternal return; something useful did come out of the previous upheavals, though we certainly need to do better.

Kropotkin's running critique of the System of formal education also continually strikes home. With a trenchant empirical observation he solves the precise dilemma that bedevils our most prestigious pedagogical theorists. Some hold that you can teach any proposition to anybody, whereas others insist that there is required a long prior training in intellectual habits, which the «culturally disadvantaged» do not have. Kropotkin says, «My experience is that when you speak to the Russian peasant plainly, and start from concrete facts, there is no generalization from the whole world of natural and social science which cannot be conveyed to a man of average intelligence, *if you yourself understand it concretely*». But oh what a revolution in our school System that little clause implies!

But the chief lesson, in my opinion, that Kropotkin has to teach young people is how an authentic professional becomes a revolutionary. Today many of the best students believe that to be a professional at all is to be a fink of the System; and to be a scientist or artist is frivolous when there is so much in justice and suffering in the world. Kropotkin himself was an archetypal nineteenth-century scientist: a lone adventurer warmly cooperating with his peers in their voluntary associations, scrupulously dutiful to the scien-

tific method, and blushing with pride when Mother Nature occasionally came across with an answer just for him. Of course he could not give this up – it was his way of being in the world. There is a pathetic hilarity in the story that, whereas other agitators could get out of town and escape the police, he had to stay and explain to the geological society his thesis on the Ice Cap. He had plenty of time to write it up in jail. His experience, however, was that just by trying to pursue his profession with courage and integrity he found that there must be revolutionary changes in society. Perhaps the critical episode was his effort to do something for the agronomy and economy of the Siberian Cossacks :

When I returned with my report, I received congratulations on all sides. I was promoted. I got special rewards. All the measures I recommended were accepted – special grants of money were given... The higher administration of Siberia was influenced by excellent intentions. Everything considered, it was far more enlightened than the administration of any other province of Russia... But it was an administration – a branch of the tree that had its root in St. Petersburg, and that was quite sufficient to paralyze its excellent intentions and to make it interfere with all beginnings of local spontaneous life and progress... I became convinced of the absolute uselessness of such efforts.

It was so that one became an Anarchist.

The new Anarchism is in, so to speak, a Bakuninist phase: the emphasis is on agitation, direct action, sometimes disruption to bring bad operations to a stop. Kropotkin, in his prime, belonged to a more mature Anarchism that did revolutionary agitation as the day's work

but was already «discussing», as Kropotkin calls it, the possibilities of Anarchist technology, ecology, pedagogy, rural life, industrial management. It was just here that the Scientific Socialists thought of nothing and have accomplished nothing, despite their agitational success. They have merely carried on the arrangements of the old order, sometimes a little better, sometimes a lot worse. Our young Anarchists have few such «discussions». They understand as well as Bazaroff the need for a new style of life, but it is hard to tell what the content of this is, except for interpersonal relations. Often they sound as if the high technology, after they have disrupted it, will grind on automatically, while they are supported like Indians on a reservation, with motorcycles and good hi-fi, occasionally hitch-hiking to a be-in in Golden Gate Park. Kropotkin's generation had a more interesting notion of freedom.

Yet it is only by the way that *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* is about Anarchist thought and history; it is as a work of literature that it lives on. Except for the last section, which Kropotkin added later and which deals like a chronicle with matters almost contemporary, the book is a work of long reflection and literary imagination, a series of pictures vividly particular and tellingly typical, the poetry that is more philosophical than history. The episodes are chosen with great economy to give the essence, «a man in his times». Everything is what the hero directly experienced, as in a biography, yet he himself almost entirely vanishes into a sequence of responses to important social scenes: serfdom and the nobility of Russia, city and country life, the pages' academy and the Czar's court, adventure in the wilderness and the world of Science, escape to the West. It is a very

artful performance, an individual life as pure social action. Yet it is undoubtedly ingenuous. The taste of it is like a sprig of peppermint or a stalk of spring rhubarb.

Anarchy is the political philosophy of skilled artisans and farmers who do not need a boss; of men in dangerous occupations, like miners, lumbermen, or explorers, who learn to rely on themselves and one another; of aristocrats who can afford to be idealistic and who know what is behind the show of power; of artists and scientists who respect the facts but are not timid about inventing something out of their heads. Kropotkin was all of these.

The psychoanalysis, the deep motivation, is embarrassingly obvious; Kropotkin could never have written it this way if he had known Freud, which would have been a pity. Beautiful Mama dies when our hero is a small child. Papa, who is of coarser clay, takes another wife who is cold and tries to expunge all traces of previous paradise. Only the serfs conspiratorially keep alive the warm sentiment of Mama. The boy is under pressure to become a warrior like Papa, but he bides his time, accumulates experience, and then goes his own way, to strike at the very principle of paternal authority, the State, the Czar himself. What is remarkable about the story in the case of Kropotkin, however, is that, blessed with intellect, boyish beauty, money, and luck, he altogether abjures resentment and envy, and seeks reconciliation. In the book this happens almost comically during the description of M. Poulain, the pedantic tutor brought in after Papa's remarriage. The passage starts with an account of authoritarian lessons and a taste of the birch-rod; but suddenly the child is rescued by his sister, and the author at once relents : «No sooner had M. Poulain

discharged himself of his heavy educational duties than he became quite another man, a lively comrade instead of a gruesome teacher». From that point, on page 16, there is not a trace of ill will in the *Memoirs* of Kropotkin, not toward anybody. And 400 pages later he explains his position as editor of a revolutionary periodical:

Socialist papers have often a tendency to become mere annals of complaints about existing conditions. The oppression of the laborers in the mine, the factory, the field is relate; the misery and sufferings of the workers during strikes are told in vivid pictures; their helplessness in the struggle against employers is insisted upon; and this succession of hopeless efforts exercises a most depressing influence on the reader... I thought, on the contrary, that a revolutionary paper must be, above all, a record of these symptoms which everywhere announce the coming of a new era, the germination of new forms of social life, the growing revolt against antiquated institutions. Those symptoms should be watched, brought together in their intimate connection, and so grouped as to show to the hesitating minds of the greater number the invisible and often unconscious support which advanced ideas find everywhere when a revival of thought takes place in society... It is hope, not despair, which makes successful revolutions.

By and large, this is true. To keep going requires a thirst for paradise. Just to get out of a trap does not produce a lasting commitment. To wreak vengeance, or for the oppressed to take the place of the mighty, changes little. But of course this is the point of view of a natural aristocrat, who assumes that all men are potentially aristocrats.

There is a curious doctrine of will in Kropotkin, paradoxical for a philosopher who was so conscious of biological, social, and historical forces. It is a much less arbitrary and «existential» kind of Will than in Bakunin or Max Stirner, but it is certainly more personal and psychological than historical determinists would allow. It *is* paradoxical; in my opinion, it is just about what the reality seems to be – among energetic and resourceful people.

Without doubt, the tonic objectivity of these *Memoirs* is protected by a certain amount of repression. The sexual reticence is extraordinary, far beyond the Victorian (public) standard. I count one disapproving comment on the fun and games at the pages' academy, and one disapproving comment on remarks about women that Mikhael (Bakunin) would have to put down – that is all. On page 424 we are suddenly told about «my wife», but not a mention before. There is an absolute silence about either his own religious beliefs, or the organized church, or the religion of the serfs. His literary references reveal the same diffidence toward irrational experience; he praises the classical Turgueneff and the satirical Goncharoff, but there is one glancing mention of Tolstoy and no mention at all of Dostoyevsky. Except for horses to drive, there are no animals, although he speaks of them so lovingly and admiringly in *Mutual Aid*, where there is a political and scientific reason to do so. Indeed, though everything is spirited and feelingful, the single passage that is not active and objective, that is passional, is the terrible cry when he is locked up and as if abandoned in the Fortress. I guess that John Dewey is the only moralist of equal intellectual power who is literally quite so cagey about self-revelation, at the same time as being perfectly open. It is a bonus of pragmatism.

Conversely, Kropotkin has an obsessional lust to praise, and to have something to praise. The viability of mankind is hopefully a self-proving hypothesis. He gives us lists of his beautiful friends and enumerates their virtues and achievements.

For an American – writing in the summer of 1968 – there is a particular poignancy to Kropotkin's occasional sentences about the United States. He takes it for granted that we are the free common people whom he believes in. (We had recently liberated our serfs.) He mentions the happy dream of a United States of Siberia, presumably to be federated with ourselves. He points out that the dissident pacifist communities of the Dukhobors find «hearty support in the United States».



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