

CLASSICAL BOOK REVIEW

Peter Kropotkin: Mutual Aid

Reviewed by Craig Brown, *Journal of Resistance Studies*

The intention behind the classical book review section of *JRS* is for contributors to give a more personal account of a book that has influenced their own ideas. For me, Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* provided a synthesis for various ideas relating to a scientific and philosophical basis of anarchism and nonviolence; latterly, it has informed my thoughts around constructive resistance. The notion of mutual aid as a 'spontaneous' societal response in solidarity with our fellow humans has suddenly gained far wider international relevance with the global spread of coronavirus; although I began writing this review at the end of 2019—and I am wary of making any claims over what could nevertheless potentially be the tremendous implications of the global pandemic—it is worth considering the present situation for showing the continued relevance of Kropotkin's ideas of mutual aid.

Mutual Aid

One of the enduring appeals of Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* is that it is rooted in natural science, embedded particularly in Darwin's (1874) assessment of human evolution in *Descent of Man*, while also developing the concept of mutual aid as a 'law of nature' previously proposed by Karl Kessler (Kropotkin, 1902:6). Kropotkin explains that, in engaging with Darwin's work:

I failed to find—although I was eagerly looking for it—that bitter struggle for the means of existence [...] which was considered by most Darwinists (though not always by Darwin himself) as the dominant characteristic of struggle for life, and the man factor of evolution (5).

Rather, 'mutual aid and mutual support carried on to an extent which made me suspect it a feature of the greatest importance for the maintenance of life, the preservation of each species, and its further evolution' (6). While Kropotkin acknowledges Alfred Russel Wallace (1914) and Darwin's separate formulation of the theory of evolution, in *Mutual Aid* Kropotkin (1902) is more concerned with the misapplication and over-emphasis of Darwin's

ideas of the ‘struggle for existence’ (12) by proponents of what we know as ‘social Darwinism’.

As Kropotkin explains, he does not propose mutual aid simply ‘as an argument in favour of a pre-human origin of moral instincts, but also as a law of Nature and a factor of evolution’. In this regard, he posits an ‘instinct’ of human solidarity as the recognition of ‘the close dependency 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’, which transcends ‘love, sympathy and self-sacrifice’ as an albeit ‘immense part in the progressive development of our moral feelings’. This results in far broader solidarity among individuals in communities throughout history, which Kropotkin traces.

In this regard, the wealth of examples Kropotkin provides is fascinating in itself, through chapters concerning ‘mutual aid among animals’, as well as two inappropriately titled to modern standards—‘mutual aid among savages’ and ‘mutual aid among the barbarians’. However, unlike Social Darwinists, Kropotkin evidently still acknowledges tribal peoples’ humanity, indeed admiring many of their moral principles through mutual aid (64-72) as surpassing those in the 19th Century state (147). Chapters V and VI on ‘mutual aid in the mediaeval city’ chart the formation of guilds and their basis of independent city states (109-113). How these resisted the development of feudalism and ultimately the development of the state is again enlightening; I find something powerful about Kropotkin’s examples:

The coutoume of Bayonne, written about 1273, contains such passages as these: “The people is anterior to the lords. It is the people, more numerous than all others, who, desirous of peace, has made the lords for bridling and knocking down the powerful ones” (129).

More than a precursor to the establishment of principles such as consent in power, this is a clear precedence of the people and their externality to structures upholding ‘power over’. If not more crucially, Kropotkin explains how the guilds and city states—originally a counter to merchant power and feudal lords (124)—ultimately came to feed into the centralisation of power, growth of individualism and privilege through the concept of mutual aid and support being realised to an insufficient degree, as they ‘cannot be limited to a small association; they must spread to its surroundings, or else the surroundings will absorb the association’ (137). This balanced assessment

clarifies that mutual aid is not a utopian aspiration based on a romanticised historical analysis, rather it is an idea that requires concerted thought in its appropriate application in order to be conducive to solidarity, happiness, justice and equity.

This became clearer to me when reading traditionalist conservative philosopher Roger Scruton's (2017) *Where We Are*, where he draws on some of the same examples as Kropotkin of natural 'networks of self-help' (29,35; Kropotkin, 1902:170-174) to show how Britain developed its entrepreneurial individualism. While a more libertarian form of decentralisation can emerge, it is perhaps the instinct for solidarity, that requires ever-broadening and reassertion during the decentralisation processes. Moreover, Kropotkin (1902) was evidently tracing the history of ideas of mutual aid, but not calling for a return to these past formulations. In the face of the state's monopolisation of violence and power over, mutual aid:

Flows still even now, and it seeks its way to find out a new expression which would not be the State, nor the medieval city, nor the village community of the barbarians, nor the savage clan, but would proceed from all of them, and yet be superior to them in its wider and more deeply human conceptions (139).

Moving towards this, the varied activities of communal solidarity that Kropotkin details can provide inspiration and practical guidance, an entire complementary human history (188), which is built on in further texts such as *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (Kropotkin, 1909). Further than this, Kropotkin (1902) clearly alludes to what has been explored as everyday resistance:

In our mutual relations every one of us has his moments of revolt against the fashionable individualistic creed of the day, and actions in which men are guided by their mutual aid inclinations constitute so great a part of our daily intercourse that if a stop to such actions could be put all further ethical progress would be stopped at once (148).

Here he also gives the suggestion that this everyday activity provides the impetus to 'constructive' resistance, both a reservoir of latent tendencies and direct contribution to mutual aid initiatives for 'new economic and social institutions [...] new ethical systems, and new religions' (145). While

individualism seems even more pervasive over a century after Kropotkin was writing, this activity ‘below the radar’ may mark an even more significant aspect of ongoing human evolution in maintaining and advancing ethical development and dignity. Moreover, mutual aid in evolution gives a universal grounding to constructive and everyday resistance as a shared experience, despite diverse manifestations across time and space.

Mutual Aid and Mutual Struggle in Evolution

In reviewing *Mutual Aid*, it is not just the aspects of social organisation in the text which are relevant to our time but the natural science underpinnings, particularly in considering the broader implications of the global coronavirus pandemic and mutual aid initiatives emerging in response. Darwin’s (1990) *Descent of Man*, originally published in 1871, provides little if anything of direct practical utility to resistance. Indeed, scientifically and philosophically it contains a number of broad tropes that were commonly held at the time, yet which would largely be considered severely problematic today. Examples are the tacit approval of imperialism as a means of extending civilised races’ transplanting of ‘the lower races’ (324), or men’s superior cognitive abilities over women (562). Some of Darwin’s language regarding ‘savages’ (303,314-315) and an apparent disdain and indeed disgust at certain practices, is evidently problematic to contemporary readers, and it is not difficult to see how this portrayal played into the colonial mentalities of the time and indeed the most heinous outcomes of social Darwinism in the 20th Century. There is the shadow of the eugenics movement as he discusses those of weak mind and body who ideally should not marry or bear children (323,596)—although Darwin only ever suggests ‘ought not’ at the level of individual discretion rather than collective sanction, with any action against such individuals on the basis of scientific distinction already rejected as callous behaviour under ‘an overwhelming present evil’ (323).

Indeed, this ‘individual discretion’ hints at the broader humanism of Darwin’s position:

The aid which we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy, which was originally acquired as part of the social instincts, but subsequently rendered, in the manner previously indicated, more tender and more widely diffused. Nor could we check our sympathy, even at the urging of hard reason,

without deterioration in the noblest part of our nature [...] if we were intentionally to neglect the weak and helpless, it could only be for a contingent benefit, with an overwhelming present evil. We must therefore bear the undoubtedly bad effects of the weak surviving and propagating their kind (323).

Evidently this remains a brutal statement in its language, although Darwin's fundamental argument is that ultimately, what makes us human in our noblest sense, our moral virtues, would be lost through neglect of those who are different. Moreover, Kropotkin (1902) challenges that brutal language about the weak directly:

As if thousands of weak-bodied and infirm poets, scientists, inventors, and reformers, together with other thousands of so-called "fools" and "weak-minded enthusiasts", were not the most precious weapons used by humanity in its struggle for existence by intellectual and moral arms, which Darwin himself emphasised (13).

However, personally I have remained intrigued by Darwin's direct statement on matters presented above—which have evidently been comprehensively discussed since the 19th Century, although I think adequately situate Darwin on the right side of history in terms of rejecting 'social Darwinism', as Kropotkin (1902) himself concluded (12-13).

The Politics of Survival

Analysis of biopolitics and biopower is well-established in critical theory and indeed the field of resistance studies, and it is worth connecting to Kropotkin. Evans (2020) has recently cautioned how outbreaks such as the coronavirus can easily incite racism, with the modern state founded on the concept of delineating populations into 'infected versus non-infected, healthy versus unhealthy'. More broadly, Agamben (1998) explored such notions under the concept of 'bare life', where every individual under the 'new biopolitical horizon of states with national sovereignty' (82) is potentially expendable in the interests of the health of that state. Kropotkin (1902) himself provides a glimpse of such analysis as he charts the undermining of mutual aid from the 11th Century, by 'the students of Roman law and the prelates of the Church', who:

Taught from the pulpit, the University chair, and the judges' bench, that salvation must be sought for in a strongly-centralised State, placed under a semi-divine authority; that one man can and must be the saviour of society, and that in the name of public salvation he can commit any violence; burn men and women at the stake, make them perish under indescribable tortures, plunge whole provinces into the most abject misery [...] They began to find no authority too extensive, no killing by degrees too cruel, once it was 'for public safety' (138).

This critique has re-emerged of an excessive focus on risk and the definition of indeterminate and interminable threats by the state leading to ever greater securitisation (Dillon, 2008).

Such a politics centred on 'survival' has been considered cautiously in the critical theory literature (Evans & Reid, 2015:4-5)—with the global coronavirus pandemic having seen a reappraisal and reassertion of the state's significance in relation to Hobbes' conception of the state of nature (Runciman, 2020). Rather than a constant state of insecurity, I have found that Kropotkin and a closer reading of Darwin show how what we mean by survival could be reorientated if mutual aid is considered to underpin so much of human endurance and evolution. Even those 'pastime', interest and hobby groups, the arts which may seem extraneous to survival and that are not necessarily concerned with resistance but still invite exploration of the human condition, have as Kropotkin notes maintained humanity's mutual aid tendencies in the face of individualisation (176-177) and what is their devaluation under neoliberalism. While we may ultimately wish to reject the language of 'survival' as excessively problematic, it may be countered and subsumed under our understanding of mutual aid.

Mutual Aid as a Response to Coronavirus

If we consider the mutual aid position as one of solidarity and dignity, this is not necessarily reflected in state responses to the coronavirus. In the UK, the British government's initial response was for the population to acquire herd immunity, necessarily sacrificing the 'weakest'—later realised to mean as many as 500,000 people. One wants to find the human concern in this at least from a utilitarian perspective, although the significance of adequately healthy bodies to enable continued economic vigour seems more reflective of the dominant neoliberal model. This becomes more disconcerting when

one considers any bearing that social Darwinism might have had on this position; the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's unelected Chief Adviser Dominic Cummings' dalliance with eugenics, and his call for 'misfits and weirdos' to join the civil service recently led to the employment of an open advocate of eugenics (Mason & Sample, 2020; Raw, 2020). Again it is not just Kropotkin's practical assessment of mutual aid, but also his appraisal of evolutionary theory that becomes important in light of this. Kropotkin's (1902) cautioned that:

It happened with Darwin's theory as it always happens with theories having any bearing upon human relations. Instead of widening it according to his own hints, his followers narrowed it still more (13).

There is significant work to do in challenging the mutually reinforcing tropes of social Darwinism and the state of nature that still dominate presentation of human history, and which Kropotkin warned against (56).

Grassroots mutual aid initiatives have quickly emerged in response to Coronavirus (for example Covidmutualaid.org, 2020; Mutualaiddistasterrelief.org, 2020). In my own small town with a population of 2600, one aspect of mutual aid has been to establish an informal food bank in the town hall for those in dire need. This would seem to bear out Kropotkin's assessment that such inclinations are latent within communities (while also enduring in 'normal' community life in various guises). Moreover, there is now considerable discussion of the implications of coronavirus for our societies and the capitalist system, including (but certainly not limited to) those disadvantaged for years by the gig economy (see Gordon, Gurley, Ongweso Jr & Pearson, 2020; Mason, 2020; Smith, 2020). The more overtly political tool of a general strike among gig economy workers is something Gordon et al. (2020) suggest could be supported through mutual aid activities. This situation and any analysis of it is of course in extreme flux, although when the UK's Financial Times (2020) is advocating 'ideas until recently considered eccentric, such as basic income and wealth taxes', either eyes have been opened to the situation of many precarious workers now that middle classes are also suffering, or there is a desperate attempt to maintain 'liddism' (see Rogers, 2002:10) in the face of a potentially revolutionary situation. For me, the message from Kropotkin (1902) is no quarter; that the state's centralisation of power and misuse of violence is at risk of increasing in response to coronavirus in the name of population security, and open

mutual aid principles and initiatives will ultimately be quashed. However, it is through the decentralised, mutual aid initiatives that Kropotkin's text detailed over a century ago that energy may be directed to establish a more dignified and just society for all.

References

Agamben, G. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK. 2020. Covid-19 Mutual Aid UK: Local Organising to Support the Most Vulnerable in our Communities. *Covidmutualaid.org*. Available from: <https://covidmutualaid.org/>

Darwin, C. 1874. *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. 2nd ed. London: John Murray.

Darwin, C. 1990. *The Descent of Man: and Selection in Relation to Sex*. Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc.

Dillon, M. 2008. Lethal Freedom: Divine Violence and the Machiavellian Moment. *Theory & Event*. **11**(2), (no pagination).

Evans, B., and J. Reid. 2015. Exhausted by resilience: response to the commentaries. *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*. 3(2), pp.154-159.

Evans, B. 2020. This is the Real Reason Outbreaks like the Coronavirus are so Quick to Inspire Racism. *The Independent* [Online]. 12th March. Available from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/coronavirus-italy-uk-racism-antisemitism-cases-plague-pandemic-a9394391.html>

Gordon, A., L.K. Gurley, E. Ongweso Jr, and J. Pearson. 2020. Coronavirus Is a Labor Crisis, and a General Strike Might Be Next. *Vice*. [Online]. 2nd April. Available from: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/z3b9ny/coronavirus-general-strike

Kropotkin, P.A. 1902. *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution*. Public Domain Book

Kropotkin, P.A. 1909. *Fields, Factories and Workshops*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd.

Mason, Paul. 2020. The coronavirus crisis shows we need an entirely new economic system. *New Statesman*. [Online]. 18th March. Available from: <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/economy/2020/03/coronavirus-crisis-economic-collapse-capitalism>

Mason, R., and I. Sample. 2020. Sabisky Row: Dominic Cummings Criticised over ‘Designer Babies’ Post. *The Guardian*. [Online]. 19th February. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/feb/19/sabisky-row-dominic-cummings-criticised-over-designer-babies-post>

Mutual Aid Disaster Relief. 2020. When Every Community is Ground Zero: Pulling Each Other Through a Pandemic. *Mutualaiddisasterrelief.org*. Available from: <https://mutualaiddisasterrelief.org/when-every-community-is-ground-zero-pulling-each-other-through-a-pandemic/>

Raw, L. 2020. I Warned about the Spreading Influence of Eugenics – Yet an Advocate was able to Work at Downing Street. *The Independent*. 17th February. Available from: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/eugenics-andrew-sabisky-boris-johnson-downing-street-racism-dominic-cummings-a9341051.html>

Rogers, P. 2002. *Losing Control: Global Security in the Twenty-First Century*. 2nd ed. London: Pluto Press.

Runciman, D. 2020. Coronavirus has not suspended politics – it has revealed the nature of power. *The Guardian*. [Online]. 27th March. Available from: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/mar/27/coronavirus-politics-lockdown-hobbes>

Scruton, R. 2017. *Where We Are: The State of Britain Now*. London: Bloomsbury.

Smith, John. 2020. Why Coronavirus could spark a capitalist supernova. *Open Democracy* [Online]. 31st March. Available from: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/why-coronavirus-could-spark-capitalist-supernova/>

Wallace, A.R. 1914. *The World of Life: A Manifestation of Creative Power, Directive Mind and Ultimate Purpose*. Chapman and Hall: London