Editorial: One Hundred Years with and without Kropotkin

Cord-Christian Casper, Billy Godfrey, Adeline Coignet

This special edition was born of a conference organised to commemorate the centenary year of Kropotkin's death in 2021. Our discussions there cohered around the relevance of Kropotkin's revolutionary anarchism, his evolutionary timescales, and his scientific commitments in a world quite unrecognisable from the one he left behind. We asked which of his ideas might require 'updating' to be made relevant to our historical conjuncture, or whether it is our image of Kropotkin that ought to be revised. How does his corpus already speak to the interrelated and overlapping crises of the Capitalocene (Moore 2016)? These are the principal questions that guide this issue as well. Our authors variously re-emphasise and reconstruct elements of Kropotkin's work across the gamut of disciplines to which he turned his hand: philosophy, ecology, evolutionary biology, agriculture, and anarchist praxis.

UPDATING KROPOTKIN

In the preface to the original edition of *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), György Lukács warned other socialists against trying to 'improve or correct' Marxism whenever they encountered some ostensibly critical flaw in Marx's analysis (1971, pxliii). While history may have proven Marx wrong about certain things, this was no reason to alter the method of Marx*ism*. For Lukács, attempts to 'update' dialectical materialism would inevitably lead to 'oversimplification, triviality and eclecticism' and, as such, were tantamount to abandoning Marxism altogether (1971, p1). In this vein, today's ecological Marxists maintain that Marxism in its orthodoxy can readily assimilate the latest developments in ecological science (Foster and Burkett 2016). But not everyone agrees. Other scholars insist that Marx's body of work is marred by an anti-ecological productivism, and that Marxism must be updated if it is to be an 'ecologically adequate economic theory' (Benton 1989, p63).

Whether or not Kropotkin's thought should be 'updated' or applied 'as is' to the present has not been subjected to the same level of scrutiny. What the Marxist debate draws attention to is the relationship between theory and its future. As Rudolf Schlesinger writes: 'the scientific value of a theory should be measured by its relation not to some possible future developments but to those social transformations which are sufficiently near to the elaboration of the theory' (1950, p3). It follows that historical developments do not necessarily falsify theoretical frameworks in retrospect, nor subsume their potential to point to latent, unrealised, or potential futures. For both Lukács and Schlesinger, being wrong about some of the ways in which history unfolds is no reason to jettison one's theoretical contributions altogether. In the case of anarchism as 'an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice' (Graeber 2004, p6), what is required instead is for that system to both be judged in its historical context and trained on the crises of the present. Applied to Kropotkin, this twofold approach means that we might uncover a 'thinker whose insights continue to outpace our current moment, a visionary whose ideals remain partially unrealized' (Ben-Meir 2023). Thus, the adaptation of Kropotkin's thought could proceed even if, of the four socio-economic developments anticipated by Kropotkin in *Fields, Factories and Workshops* (1899), only one (the decentralisation of global manufacturing) really came to pass (Ward 1998). According to this model of prefiguration, the assessment of Kropotkin's theory needs not hinge on an empirical, after-the-fact balance sheet of its successes and failures.

To assess a theorist's relevance based on their predictive abilities, then, is to judge them by an impossible standard. Perhaps we should heed Ernst Bloch's advice instead. When we look for unactualised potential in the ruins of history, in 'the *incomplete* wealth of the past', we gain '*additional revolutionary force*' (1977, p38, emphasis in original). In fact, 'the still subversive and utopian contents in the relations of people to people and nature, which are not past because they were never quite attained, can *only* be of use in this way' (Bloch 1977, p38, emphasis ours). What is more, any attempt to immediately functionalise Kropotkin's concepts – mutual aid, cooperation, federalism – runs the risk of isolating elements of his work. As Ruth Kinna puts it, 'the point of hovering over Kropotkin's work for a while is not to elicit lessons for twenty-first century action or produce an authoritative ideal-type against which "real" anarchists may benchmark their affinity. The point is to shed light on a set of ideas that have been badly misread and distorted' (2017, p2). Only critique can draw attention to this 'set', and to the consistency of Kropotkin's thought. Our authors show that elaborating a concept such as mutual aid depends on dismantling reductive versions that mistake its broad scope and wide applicability for self-evidence and simplicity.

WITHOUT KROPOTKIN

To think 'with Kropotkin' we must be 'without' a whole host of Kropotkins: without the determinist, the ineffectual 'apostle' of utopia, or the Enlightenment essentialist conjured up as a 'classical anarchist' by post-anarchists (Newman 2011, p25). Against these reductive figures, Kropotkin's work 'fascinates not because it gives us formulae for the future but because it shows us how to discover tendencies in the present which provide alternative paths out of the current crisis and out of the capitalist system' (Cleaver 1993). Our issue asks how scholars must utilise the Kropotkinian toolbox to tease out some of these alternatives. In this vein of 'discovery', the contribution by Ole Sandberg recovers a sophisticated process philosophy from Kropotkin's work. Sandberg argues that, throughout his oeuvre, Kropotkin emphasises becoming over fixity. This influenced his conception of matter as well as politics and history, all of which he understood as proceeding along the lines of conflict and diversity. Quite unlike the Enlightenment thinkers with whom he is sometimes associated, Kropotkin recognised human beings as composed of semi-autonomous faculties, free from any kind of 'essence' – benign or otherwise.

Such reinterpretation can be grounded in practical applications. Both Claudia Firth and Tomas Pewton offer instances of mutual aid in action. In her piece, 'Mutual Aid and Technology in the Time of Covid', Firth traces the emergence of Covid Mutual Aid Groups (CMAGs) during the early months of the pandemic and assesses their relation to Kropotkin's ideas of mutual aid. She examines the role of technology in facilitating the proliferation of these groups, and explores their potential, downfall, and possible afterlives. This account presents mutual aid as part of a political struggle against neoliberal rationality which, if nurtured properly, could engender a 'social Kropotkinism'. Pewton's article, 'Reimagining the Food System', advocates for the immediate practical relevance of mutual aid as a means of attaining food security and sovereignty. Alternatives to the failing capitalist food system can be found communally, as demonstrated by the workers' food cooperative OrganicLea. Pewton presents a convergence of OrganicLea's practices and the Kropotkinian call for a reorganised system of production. While both articles demonstrate how Kropotkin's principles withstand the test of time, the examples of grassroots organisation and practical cooperation in agriculture indicate that those principles require some modification to suit the unique challenges posed by new media and the evolution of the global food system respectively. These analyses of Kropotkin's thought in practice show that prefigurative action requires a precise account of the present figuration of commodity production, exploitation, and capitalist accumulation.

Being 'without Kropotkin' also entails being without a teleological course of development. As our contributors point out with different emphasis, the notion of Kropotkin as a placid utopian is not borne out by his work to begin with. His is a philosophy of class struggle, conflict, and revolution – any work of extrapolating, reworking, and adapting would do well to take this dynamic iteration of Kropotkin as its starting point. Such reinterpretation finds precedent in Kropotkin's own writing. After all, as a thinker of adaptive change in nature and revolutionary change in social life, he called for systems to be 'continually developed and readjusted in accordance with the ever-growing requirements of a free life' (1912 [1903], p45). Being without Kropotkin means ridding ourselves of the caricatures of Kropotkin's science (as positivism, rationalism, Manichaeism) or politics (as 'non-violent' and 'gradualist', Kinna 2016, p197). Kropotkin was neither a hopeful idealist nor a nineteenth-century Enlightenment essentialist. Once we dismantle these outmoded versions of Kropotkin, his rethinking of statehood, evolution, community, and revolution can be properly apprehended.

WITH KROPOTKIN

Kropotkin's synthetic philosophy associated a wide range of social and cultural movements with anarchism and showed how anarchist principles 'chimed with the most significant developments in modern science – evolutionary biology, quantum physics, astronomy' (Kinna 2017, p202). This openness to reformulation – as a 'mode of action, a utopia, a social theory, a way of thinking or reasoning about the world, a critical theory and a way of comprehending the totality of nature' (Kinna 2017, p201) – makes his concepts adaptive by design. Instead of *needing* to be recast in contemporary terms, Kropotkin's internationalist, scientifically grounded and materialist politics offers a procedure to discover analogous interrelations now: between emergent authoritarianism and resource extraction, immiseration and emissions, militarisation and deforestation, environmental exploitation and racialised border regimes. Placing Kropotkin's anarchism in these entangled contexts reminds us that 'just as our crisis is not simply a political crisis, but a metaphysical crisis, the coming shifts and desire for radical change will not be one-dimensional, but rather intra-relational' (Akomolafe and Ladha 2017, p835). Before applying Kropotkin's work to these crises, he must be recovered as a thinker of adaptive change in social and natural environments.

So, in what sense are we 'with Kropotkin'? Well, on this basis we can make the case that Kropotkin's thought was sufficiently coherent and versatile to make sense of the present. It remains relevant so long as we live under capitalism and the crises it depends on for its reproduction. The second strand of our issue contends that we are just beginning to catch up with the implications of Kropotkin's thought. The contribution by Jelena Pantel, Selva Varengo, and Federico Venturini shows how Kropotkin's observations of cooperation and mutualism among humans and nonhumans has been vindicated by modern ecological science. Drawing too on Murray Bookchin, they argue that advancements in ecology and evolutionary biology – coupled with the insistence that human beings are of, and have co-evolved with, the natural world – allow us to disrupt bourgeois narratives about the emergence of hierarchy and domination in human societies.

Discovering how we are 'with Kropotkin' also means giving up the notion that this strand of anarchism offers a particular trajectory towards a point at which 'the State will be destroyed and a new life will begin in thousands of centres, on the principle of an energetic initiative of the individual, of groups, of free agreement' (Kropotkin [1896] 1908, p42). Closing our issue, Zoe Baker's 'Kropotkin and Revolution' reconstructs Kropotkin's concept of social revolution and the forms of collective agency it requires. Placing 'revolution' within Kropotkin's timeline of (by no means inevitable) shifts from evolution to ferment and revolution, this paper teases out the nuanced dynamics between determinism and agency. In so doing it highlights the importance of recovering the precise contours of an anarchist theory before we can proceed with its application.

The contributors to this collection show Kropotkin's thought to be immediately relevant in a range of contexts – so long as we treat it with seriousness, recover its consistency, and critique its distortions before the work of adaptation begins. One hundred years after his death, we remain with and without Kropotkin.

Cord-Christian Casper is a lecturer in English Literature at LMU Munich. His research focuses on ecocriticism, new materialism, and political literature.

Billy Godfrey is a PhD student at Loughborough University researching animal liberation, materialism and ecosocialism.

Adeline Coignet is in the final year of her PhD at the University of Nottingham researching Anarchist Entrepreneurs.

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