

# Kropotkin – The Geographer, Anarchist and Russian Prince

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## Kropotkin's life and work

Born Prince Peter Kropotkin in Moscow in 1842 into the aristocracy of Tsarist Russia, the events of Kropotkin's life and scope of writings are extraordinary. He was an explorer, scientist and geographer. He was also a revolutionary, first as a socialist and then as an anarchist. He was imprisoned in both Russia (from where he made a daring escape) and later in France – and he became the leading figurehead and theorist of the international anarchist movement from the 1880s until his death in 1917.

Educated in an elite military school, he served as an army officer from 1862 to 1867 leading several important geographical and geological expeditions in Eastern Siberia and Manchuria. Resigning his commission in 1867, he continued his field research and publishing geographical works for the Russian Geographical Society, elaborating his original theories on the orography of Asia and the desiccation of Eurasia following the last glaciations (Ferretti, 2011).

Seemingly destined for a brilliant scientific career (Shatz, 1995), a life-changing decision came in 1871 when, while on a geographical expedition in Finland, he received a telegram offering him the post of secretary of the Russian Geographical Society. Influenced by the French anarchist Proudhon and struck by the poverty of the Finish peasants, as he had been by those in Siberia, Kropotkin declined, resolving instead to join the underground revolutionary movement in Russia. He visited socialists in Switzerland in 1872 where, according to his autobiography, the watchmakers of the Jura mountain region made the greatest impression upon him: 'when I came away from the mountains, after a week's stay with the watchmakers, my views upon socialism were settled. I was an anarchist' (Kropotkin, 1901, p.267).

Returning to St Petersburg in Russia he joined the revolutionary underground, was imprisoned for these activities in 1874, committed an adventurous prison break in June 1876 and escaped to England. In 1877 he moved to Switzerland and engaged in the anarchist movement, but after the Russian Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 Kropotkin was expelled, moving to France. Kropotkin was later arrested in France for political reasons and sentenced in January 1883 to 5 years in prison. Given his stature as a scientist and geographer he was allowed to continue studying in prison, receiving support from leading Fellows of the Royal Geographical Society in London such as John Scott Keltie and Halford Mackinder, and other famous scientists lobbied for his release. (Kropotkin's portrait still hangs in the offices of the RGS today). In prison in France he wrote 'What Geography Ought to Be', an educational manifesto arguing that geography should teach children natural sciences, that all men are brethren, and to respect other races. On release from prison in 1886 he settled in England and helped to found the anarchist newspaper *Freedom*.

Apart from two extended lecture tours to the United States and Canada, Kropotkin remained in England until 1917, writing geographical articles for the journal *Nature* and small scientific columns for *The Times* newspaper while simultaneously

continuing his anarchist writings. He only returned to Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Encountering the poverty and conditions there he pleaded unsuccessfully with Lenin, both by letter and in person, to act on the failings of the new regime. He died in February 1921 and 20,000 people attended his funeral, which was adorned with black anarchist flags (Shatz, 1995).

### **A brief account of Kropotkin's ideas**

Kropotkin advocated anarchist communism as the fairest and most just way to organise society and to achieve the well-being of all its people – not just the wealthy who owned the means to create wealth and lived off the work of others. Kropotkin's fullest statement of anarchist communism is to be found in *The Conquest of Bread* (1892), the most in-depth description of the anarchist society he envisioned. Under anarchist communism not only would the means of production be socialized, but also the distribution of goods. The distribution of goods was to be based not on individual contribution in the labour process, but on need alone. In terms of watchwords this can be summarised by saying that 'to each according to his labour' was replaced by 'to each according to his needs' (Shatz, 1995, pp.xv-xvi).

Kropotkin was clear in his strategy for bringing about this necessary revolution, completely rejecting the parliamentary path: 'This cannot be brought about by Act of Parliament, but only by taking immediate and effective possession of all that is necessary to ensure the well being of all'. Kropotkin was adamant that an anarchist communist society could only be achieved by a social revolution carried out by the people themselves. Differentiating his anarchist communism from the Marxists, Kropotkin rejected any kind of transitional government or temporary seizure of power by a revolutionary party as this would inevitably lead to the continued existence of the state. Kropotkin therefore devoted much attention in *The Conquest of Bread* to revolutionary expropriation of property, the method by which the people themselves would carry out the economic and social transformation (Shatz, 1995, pp.xvi-xvii). He wanted to organise a way 'to feed the hungry, to satisfy all wants, to meet all needs, to produce not for the special benefit of this one or that one, but so as to ensure to society as a whole its life and further development'.

For Kropotkin then, anarchist communism means that the 'right to work' has been replaced by 'the right to well-being'. It was 'high time for the worker to assert his right to the common inheritance, and to enter into possession of it' (*The Conquest of Bread*, p.30). This realization of well-being shows, Kropotkin held, that anarchism and communism are compatible because expropriation and the abolition of private property means every society will be forced to organize itself on the lines of communistic anarchy. As soon as the respect for private property has been shaken, says Kropotkin, and the necessities of maintaining life drive the workers towards communism, the production must become communal. The workers will no longer accept that the 'millions of horse-power of our steam engines are the just property of those who possess them now. They will consider them as a common legacy from past generations, and thus use them for supplying the needs of the whole community' (*The Conquest of Bread*, p.30).

In his arguments on food and farming Kropotkin raises the theme of the relationship between urban and rural areas. The social revolution is not just for the urban factories,

it must also include the countryside:

The emancipation of the proletariat will not even be possible while the revolutionary movement fails to embrace the countryside. The insurgent communes will be unable to maintain themselves for a single day, if the insurrection does not spread at the same time among the villages. ...

...Therein lies the success of the revolution. It will be victorious only on the day when the workers in the factories and the cultivators in the field march hand in hand to the conquest of equality for all, carrying happiness into the cottage as well as into the buildings of the great industrial agglomerations (Words of a Rebel, 1992, [1885] pp.102-3).

As well as his works on anarchism and geography, Kropotkin wrote articles and books on geology, evolution, natural science, prison reform, education, a history of the French Revolution, agriculture, ethics – and this list is not exhaustive. He was also an early advocate for women's equality. He is properly considered as the last of the great 'classical' anarchist thinkers.

Among his key works are *The Conquest of Bread* (1892) (his fullest statement of anarchist communism and of the anarchist society he envisioned); *Factories, Fields and Workshops* (1899), where he discusses the integration of urban and rural economies; and *Mutual Aid* (1902), which argued that cooperation between species, not competition, was the guiding factor in evolution. Kropotkin was strongly influenced by Darwin but a strong opponent of Thomas Huxley's 'social Darwinism' and its justification for capitalism. Kropotkin wrote *Mutual Aid* in response to Huxley's ideas and to substantiate his theory of mutual aid; the book brought together masses of evidence from zoologists, anthropologists, sociologists and historians (Cahm, 1989).

Kropotkin's enduring influence is both to anarchism and geography, and the links he opened up between them. Recent research into the state archive of the Russian Federation details a lengthy correspondence of letters sent by Élisée Reclus (a contemporary French geographer and anarchist) to Kropotkin between 1882 and 1905. The letters highlight 'the relationships between geography, politics and public education, and the role of these anarchist geographers in the construction of geographical knowledge' (Ferretti, 2011).

Moreover, Springer (2013, p.46) has argued that the impact of Kropotkin and Reclus 'continue to reverberate within contemporary geographical theory, influencing everything from the way geographers think about ethnicity and race, to questions of social organisation, capital accumulation, to conceptualisations urban and regional planning, as well as with discussions surrounding environment'. Kropotkin's influence on geography as a discipline extended to inspire the emergence of radical geography in the late 1960s and 1970s, with Richard Pete (1975) founding editor of *Antipode* so inspired by Kropotkin that he argued radical geography should accept anarcho-communism at its point of departure (Springer, 2013, pp.51-2).

### **What parts of which module(s) does this asset relate to, and how?**

While you will not find many, if indeed any, direct references to Kropotkin in Open University geography and environment modules, the issues about which he wrote and

the ideas he developed are still of central concern to geographical thinking and environmental studies, and you will be able to make connections between his ideas to many key topics and concerns in all our geography and environment modules and also in our core level 1 interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary modules.

For example, consider the topic of 'Riots and disorder on the street' (DD102, Book 2, chapter 8) which covers issues of political ideology, radicalism and private property – all these issues were a main part of Kropotkin's political theory and feature throughout his writings. Kropotkin was a strong critic of private property, which was a key part of his anarchist political philosophy and most clearly articulated in *The Conquest of Bread*. The French Revolution is also discussed here – Kropotkin wrote a history of the French Revolution and many pamphlets and articles on it as well on its role in the history of socialism.

Topics such as the role of the state, political legitimacy, democracy, authority, inequality of wealth accumulation, class, markets and freedom are covered in Book 2, chapter 9 of DD102 under the chapter heading 'governing inequalities'. These are all major issues Kropotkin wrote about from a radical and anarchist perspective in almost all his key writings.

The topics of land ownership, population food, property rights and human rights – again, all are areas on which Kropotkin wrote about and analysed in depth. These issues are the subject of Book 1, chapter 3 'Introducing common resources and right' in DD103. Kropotkin's most famous book *Mutual Aid*, and also his later book *Modern Science and Anarchism*, examine the role of science and the development of ethics in human societies and also focus on the topic of evolution; these topics are to be found in the sections on environmentalism and industrialisation, science and ethics in Chapter 2 'The Politics of Environment' in DD103.

Issues concerning the relation between the urban and rural economy and environment were examined by Kropotkin in another one of his famous books *Factories, Fields and Workshops*. In this work he discusses sustainability. A direct link from his ideas on these areas can be found and applied to Block 6 'Cities and Sustainability' of U116 – the core level one environmental studies module.

Turning now to topics you will study at level 2 geography and environmental modules with the OU, Kropotkin was a strong opponent of Thomas Huxley's 'social Darwinism' and in direct response to Huxley wrote his classic *Mutual Aid*, which argued that cooperation between species, and not competition, was the guiding factor in evolution. From this Kropotkin drew his social ideas on cooperative societies and ultimately his anarchist communism. When you study DST206, you will encounter a section in Block 2, chapter 5, on the theory of evolution by natural selection and which discusses the pioneering contributions made by Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley. In the following chapter of DST206 you'll be able to make links on the main topic there – on how environmental issues are made public, and also the concepts of the 'all affected principle', to Kropotkin's views on well-being which was a central feature of his work in *The Conquest of Bread*. Kropotkin's views on how and why we should value nature are also directly relevant to the discussion on public goods, private goods, use values and instrumental values, which you will also find are also the major topics of Chapter 7 in Block 2, titled 'Valuing Nature'.

In recent decades ideas and debates about globalisation have featured strongly in studies of human geography, and the moral and political implications of justice between peoples across the world is another issue which was also being written about over 100 years ago by Kropotkin. When you study our second level module DD205, very strong links from Kropotkin's ideas can be made to chapter 7 'Geographies of solidarities' in Block 2. The topics under consideration here make it read like it was written by a modern-day Kropotkin! This chapter is completely relevant in every respect to the work of this radical geographical and anarchist thinker, and it is fascinating to see how much this issue has developed – and in some aspects not changed at all - over the intervening years.

Finally, in relation to DD205 and how Kropotkin's ideas link to the content there, when you read Chapter 8 'Good food: ethical consumption and global change' you will find topics and themes covered there which Kropotkin wrote about in *The Conquest of Bread* and also in *Factories, Fields and Workshops*. In both these works he wrote extensively on food production, and also, originally for his time, on consumption.

If you are studying or planning to study our level three environmental politics module DU311, the end of Book 3 three (chapter 5, 'Ethics and citizenship') discusses a very interesting history of ethics and moral philosophy linked to the topic of environmental citizenship. This chapter, anticipating the EMA on this module, highlights what social scientists call normative questions, that is questions which are value-laden and prescriptive – typically taking the form of questions such as 'what ought to be done?'. This very question is the fourth and final module question of DU311, and the whole topic of ethics and the environment was another lifelong concern about which Kropotkin wrote extensively. Indeed, he laboured on his huge work, *Ethics*, over a couple of decades; it was still unfinished when he died, although most of it was published posthumously.

In short, some of the fundamental questions about the scope of geography as a discipline concern how societies develop, how relationships of power are constructed and maintained, how people live together, how they work, produce food and relate to their environment, how agricultural and industrial economies develop and are linked; topics like these are universal and will encounter them across your Open University studies of geography and the environment. Do not, however, think of these topics and issues as new, they were debated and discussed by geographical and radical thinkers like Kropotkin in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Of course such fundamental concerns have developed and changed in detail since that time, but arguably we are no closer yet to definitive answers and solutions in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is why the study of great thinkers of the past is still relevant, because they speak to us today. An English student would still expect to study Shakespeare at university, so a geography or environment student should still study Kropotkin!

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## External websites

Anarchy Archives

[http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/kropotkin/Kropotkinarchive.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/kropotkin/Kropotkinarchive.html)

Anarchist Studies Network

<http://www.anarchist-studies-network.org.uk>

Institute for anarchist studies

<http://anarchiststudies.org/about/>

Freedom Press  
<http://freedomnews.org.uk>

ZNet  
<https://zcomm.org/znet/>