



Peter Kropotkin's anarchist vision of organization*

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Editors' introduction. Along with Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Michael Bakunin and Emma Goldman, Peter Kropotkin laid the foundations for anarchism both as a theoretical framework and an active political movement. In this piece, De Geus discusses the various aspects of Kropotkin's account of the ills of hierarchical organisation as well as the promise of an anarchist vision of society. The article is very much a work of its time in the sense that it connects Kropotkin's work to some of the key management theorists of the day, most notably Stafford Beer. Beer's organisational cybernetics (referred to in the text as 'bio-cybernetics') was picked up on by a number of anarchist writers in the 1960s and 70s. Colin Ward, for instance, wrote of it in his article 'Anarchism as a Theory of Organisation' (1966), which followed a discussion on the topic in *Anarchy*, the journal he edited (see Walter, 1963 and McEwan, 1963). These debates marked one of the periods where anarchism was taken most seriously as a theory of organisation. De Geus' piece here on Kropotkin does a remarkable job of underlining the core aspects of his work that are crucial to discussing anarchism alongside critical conceptions of management and organisation.

Introduction

Modern humanity inhabits a social environment which is dominated by large-scale and complex organizations. As Max Weber argued, the development of 'bureaucratic society' seems inevitable, but at the same time endangers the freedom of the organization's members (see Weber [1971: 330] and of course his still impressive

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Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft [1976]). In current society individuals have become mere cogs in the hierarchic-bureaucratic apparatus. However, both in scale and structure these organizations are at odds with the much cherished principles of self-realization and individual freedom. Whereas the individual prefers participation, liberty and self-government, the organizational system of today demands hierarchy, central control and obedience by its members.

Aside from that, these hierarchic-bureaucratic organizations are not very effective and efficient. Notable absentees in the debate about these social issues are the classical political theorists, notwithstanding the fact that these thinkers have in a long tradition developed valuable theories about organizational (state) systems. Over the years I have learned that the views on organization of prominent political philosophers are often neglected in current organization and management literature, while at the same time their reflections are highly relevant to modern organization and management theory.

In earlier work I have explored a number of visions on organization as found in the history of political theory, analyzing the potential of these particular ideas in political philosophy for modern organization theory, organization sociology and psychology (See for instance De Geus 1989; 1998; 2003). In this contribution, however, I have been asked to focus on the fascinating organizational reflections of one particular political theorist: Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921). In my view, Kropotkin can be interpreted as being an intelligent predecessor of bio-cybernetic organization theory, as found in the work of theorists such as Stafford Beer, and also of the organizational ideas of prominent thinkers including Henry Mintzberg and Gareth Morgan.

Kropotkin is one of the founders of anarchist social and political thought, and definitely belongs among the most inspiring authors in this field. My analysis is carried out with the objective of achieving a better understanding of today's organizational reality and of conceiving viable alternatives. I shall clarify the knowledge and expertise which can be found in the often ignored anarchist heritage of political theory in the area of organization and management thinking.

Peter Kropotkin became first known as a geologist and anthropologist who travelled around the Russian Empire and reported his scientific findings in articles and academic papers, but in the course of his life he developed into the most influential author of anarchist social theory. Elaborating on the work of preceding libertarian thinkers such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Michael Bakunin, he tried to provide anarchism with a rational scientific basis. Whereas Proudhon and Bakunin had not succeeded in designing a systematic and coherent theory of anarchism, Kropotkin devoted his whole life to fulfilling this task, engaging in profound research and

writing voluminous books. He endeavored to give the anarchist conception a high degree of coherence and unity, systematically making use of insights of the natural sciences. (For an excellent biography see Miller [1976]. A good introduction in the history and ideas of anarchism is Woodcock's *Anarchism* [1986].)

Specifically analyzing Kropotkin's work from an organizational point of view, I shall draw upon a variety of his books. The core of his organizational vision can be found in *Mutual aid*. Subsequently, the historic role of state organizations in *The state, its historic role* and several articles including *Anarchism, its philosophy and ideal*, *Anarchist communism* and *Modern science and anarchism* will be investigated. As the reader will find, the analysis of Kropotkin's innovative and surprisingly 'modern' organizational ideas will be completed by the indicative sketches of a future anarchist society which he provided in *Fields, factories and workshops* and also in *The conquest of bread*, as well as in a substantial number of articles and pamphlets.

The organizational principle of 'mutual aid'

Mutual aid (1902) must be seen as Kropotkin's *magnum opus*. The book contains his most serious attempt to found anarchist theory on a scientific basis. On the grounds of biological, anthropological, ecological and historical findings, he tried to clarify the importance of mutual aid, solidarity and cooperation in our evolution. Essentially, Kropotkin's utopian organizational vision is embedded in his encompassing social and political theory of cooperation and mutual aid.

As a result of his many geographical explorations in Siberia, it had struck Kropotkin that among animals belonging to the same species no bitter struggle for the means of existence could be found, while according to Charles Darwin's followers this struggle had to be considered the main factor of evolution. Kropotkin observed that among animals mutual aid and support played a prominent role and he realized that this could be crucial to the maintenance and evolution of species. He was strengthened in his opinion when he read an article by professor Karl Kessler, a well-known Russian zoologist. In 1880 Kessler had written an article arguing that next to the law of mutual struggle, there is also a law of mutual aid in nature (see also the general preface to Kropotkin [1914]).

When in 1888 Thomas Henry Huxley published an essay on *The Struggle for existence and its bearing upon man*, Kropotkin was provoked to react. Huxley, who was a strong supporter of Darwin's evolutionary theory, thought of animals: 'from the point of view of the moralist, the animal world is on about the same level as a gladiator's show. The creatures are fairly well treated, and set to fight; whereby the strongest, the swiftest, and the cunningest live to fight another day', and in the same

vein on primitive men: 'Life was a continuous free fight, and beyond the limited and temporary relations of the family, the Hobbesian war of each against all was the normal state of existence' (Kropotkin, 1914: 4 [all subsequent references are to texts written by Kropotkin]).

Kropotkin sharply understood what the consequences of these arguments would be. They were a strong weapon in the hands of the defenders of a central state and of authoritarian government. If warfare and oppression were accepted as the very essence of human nature, the call for a powerful Hobbesian sovereign authority which enforces peace in society, would become plausible. Anyone who, on the other hand, would be able to show that solidarity and mutual aid were the main factors in history, would have a convincing argument with which to renounce a dominant state organization.

Kropotkin begins with an analysis of the animal world. After an elaborate argument he comes to the conclusion that the vast majority of animal species live in communities and for that reason have the best chances of survival. There may be severe wars between species, but within the community struggle for life is limited (*ibid.*: 6). The animals that have developed the practices of solidarity and mutual aid are invariably the most numerous, the most prosperous and the most open to further progress: 'The unsociable species, on the contrary are doomed to decay' (*ibid.*: 293). Mutual struggle is detrimental to a species and therefore the fundamental law of nature is one of mutual aid. But can this law be applied legitimately to both animals and humans?

Kropotkin then shifts his attention from the animal world to the world of primitive humanity. First, he attacks English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and criticizes the assumption that for primitive humanity a constant war of each against all was the normal state of existence. Hobbes makes the error of imagining that primitive people used to live in small family groups. Ethnological studies, on the contrary, reveal that 'Societies, bands, or tribes – not families – were the primitive form of organization of mankind and its earliest ancestors' (*ibid.*: 79).

From prehistoric ages onwards, humans lived in more extended societies, in which they cooperated to provide for their basic needs. From these first beginnings, mutual aid and cooperation have dominated over individualism and egoism. The development of human kind is a direct result of the cooperative spirit that is inherent in human nature. This proposition is supported by examples of the life of 'primitive' tribes like the Native Americans and the Inuit. In these tribes food is shared, people protect one another and controversies are dealt with in a peaceful manner, while

these communities maintained themselves 'knowing no kind of authority besides the authority of public opinion' (*ibid.*: 87).

Village communities constituted the next phase in the history of mankind and the development of forms of mutual aid. Generally, these were groups made up out of families who held the land in common property. In this communal culture, people would hunt and fish together, cultivate the soil, construct roads, bridges and houses, and all this in good harmony. Disputes between individual members were considered a communal affair that had to be decided by independent arbiters. When it involved very serious controversial issues, the case would be brought before the 'folkmete', which was bound to pass sentence in accordance with customary law (*ibid.*: 162-163).

Finally, the village communities were usually part of smaller or larger confederations, according to need and preference. For instance, to defend the borders of a common territory, people would federate voluntarily with neighboring village communities. For centuries, these institutions stood firm, but at a certain stage they were replaced by the medieval cities. In the cities of the Middle Ages, Kropotkin sees the culmination of practices of mutual aid and support, especially in the guilds. Rather sketchily, he analyzes the emergence of feudalism and the struggle between feudal lords and nascent cities, a competition that in first instance was decided in favor of the cities. A new life of mutual aid and liberty started to develop within the fortified walls of the medieval cities. They formed sheltered 'oases' in a general environment that was victim to feudal domination.

The history of the Middle Ages is one of the best illustrations of the power of ideals and principles in human life. In Kropotkin's view, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries one could discern the domination of a conglomerate of four interdependent ideas: self-reliance, federalism, sovereignty of the group and the construction of the political body from the simple to the composite. These leading ideas were reflected in the emerging brotherhoods or guilds and new forms of political organization (*ibid.*: 220). With the continuous divergence of occupations, arts and crafts and the increasing trade with distant countries, new organizations grew up in which groups of carpenters, builders and tradesmen assembled in order to defend common goals.

The guilds had a social character. If one of the 'brothers' was struck by some serious misfortune, such as severe illness or a burned-down house, he could always count on the support of his fellow guild members. Within the brotherhood, controversies were subject to guild jurisdiction and tried by a jury of the members according to the official statutes. As far as it concerned internal affairs, the guilds were sovereign and decisions were taken in the general meetings. In this way the guilds were organized

on basis of the principles of mutual aid, self-jurisdiction and sovereignty (*ibid.*: 187-192). According to Kropotkin, the only problem was to conceive of an organizational form that would render a federation of the guilds possible, without interfering with the associations of village communities, thus 'to federate these into one harmonious whole' (*ibid.*: 177). When this combination was found, nothing could prevent the further success of the cities.

The medieval town was actually made up of a double federation (1977: 25). It consisted of a federative structure of territorial units of the city and next to it was a federation of the guilds. It should be noted that both groups, cities and guilds, maintained their sovereignty, were not directed from above and remained independent entities. Moreover, the towns united on a voluntary basis for purposes of trade (e.g., the well-known Hanseatic Towns in northern Europe), or for reasons of defense.

The period of the eleventh to the fifteenth century could thus be described 'as an immense attempt at securing mutual aid and support on a grand scale, by means of the principles of federation and association carried on through all manifestations of human life and to all possible degrees' (1914: 208). The federation spirit had permeated all spheres of life, with the elements of freedom, mutual aid and organization growing from simple to complex at its core.

The consequences of this development were immense. In the fifteenth century, the landscape of Europe had changed dramatically. Arts, crafts and sciences had begun to flourish in a spectacular way. Thanks to the guilds, the incomes were relatively high, the working days short and social facilities in case of illness and disability were introduced. The cities of the Middle Ages had become flourishing centers of culture and prosperity and Kropotkin concludes 'that never, either before or since, has mankind known a period of relative well-being for all, as in the cities of the middle ages. The poverty, insecurity and physical exploitation of labor that exist in our times were then unknown' (1977: 27).

In the course of the sixteenth century, however, cracks became visible in the federative structures. The system of voluntary cooperation between and within the cities gradually began to erode. 'Barbarians' were to destroy the sensitive network of federation. And who was this barbarian foe? It was the state: the triple alliance of the military chief, the judge and the priest that in one blow crushed the power of society.

The historic role of the centralized and hierarchical state

Towards the end of the fifteenth century a process of state formation became imminent in Europe. In the country, powerful feudal lords had been able to enlarge their territories. By force, scheming and sword, some feudal lords grew in power at the expense of others, and as a result the seeds of mighty states could germinate (*ibid.*: 31-36). Yet the decline of the medieval cities with their decentralized and federative structures did not come unexpectedly. Increasingly the cities were troubled by various internal problems. There were, for example, controversies between the families of 'burghers' and newcomers. The former had monopolized all benefits from communal trade and land: trade more and more became the privilege of the merchant and artisan families. Another cause was that most cities based their wealth uniquely upon commerce and industry, to the neglect of agriculture (1914: 220).

Notwithstanding, the major cause of the decay of communal institutions in the cities lay deeper. In Kropotkin's view, the dominant *ideas* and *principles* had gradually altered. Through the teachings of Roman law and the prelates of the church, a deep modification of leading ideas had taken place. In the preceding centuries, self-reliance, federalism and sovereignty of each group had been the leading principles, but from the eleventh century onwards, the conceptions changed:

For two or three hundred years they taught from the pulpit, the University chair and the judge's bench, that salvation must be sought for in a strongly centralized State, placed under a semi-divine authority; and that one man can and must be the savior of society, and that in the name of public salvation he can commit any violence. (*ibid.*: 221)

By these teachings, continually repeated and brought under public attention, the old federalist principle came under heavy attack. Bitterly, Kropotkin concludes 'that man fell in love with authority' and 'that the old federalist principle faded away and the very creative genius of the mass died out. The Roman idea was victorious, and in such circumstances the centralized state had in the cities a ready prey' (1977: 36). The spirit of initiative and free association was fading away and yielded to the spirit of discipline and 'to pyramidal authoritarian organization' (1914: 226). Thus the sixteenth century could be summarized as the era in which the powerful feudal lords, supported by the church, conquered the free cities and federations. After a prolonged and heavy struggle, in which the stronger lords subdued the less powerful ones, the victory of the centralized states over the communes was finally accomplished.

For the next three centuries these 'hierarchical' states systematically tried to weed out all federalist institutions in which the mutual aid tendency had previously found its expression. The village communities were deprived of their independent

folkmoles, courts and administration; the guilds lost their freedom and were placed under the central control of the state. In the words of Kropotkin: ‘the folkmote, the elected justices and administration, the sovereign parish and the sovereign guild – were annihilated; the State’s functionary took possession of every link of what formerly was an organic whole’ (*ibid.*). Henceforth, state and church took care of matters of general interest. It was taught in the universities and from the pulpit ‘that the State alone could represent the bonds of Union between the subjects; that federalism and particularism were the enemies of progress, and the State was the only proper initiator of further development’ (*ibid.*).

Citizens that used to be embedded in a rich network of cooperative social relations now became un-emancipated and isolated subjects of the nation-state. All intermediary associations were absorbed by the state and the federative principle was substituted by the principles of central control, submission and discipline (1977: 40). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, this development was completed and the free associations between neighborhoods, guilds, villages and towns were on the verge of extinction (*ibid.*: 27). The social, economic and political consequences were massive. Since the state, according to Kropotkin, is synonymous with warfare, Europe was devastated by wars (*ibid.*: 30). The states took over education and created a spirit of servitude in the minds of the individuals. The state destroyed existing forms of free organization and, last but not least, the state became ‘the chief instrument for the few to monopolize the land, and the capitalists to appropriate a quite disproportionate share of the yearly accumulated surplus of production’ (1975: 109).

In Kropotkin’s analysis, this was as true for the monarchies of the sixteenth century as it was for the so-called ‘democratic republics’ of the nineteenth century. The elite of the republican nation states had changed names but had not altered essentially ‘all that huge organization to assure and extend the exploitation of the masses in favor of a few privileged groups, which is the essence of the State institution’ (1977: 53). The territorial and functional centralization, its pyramidal organization, its favoritism and its role as the creator of monopolies had remained exactly the same (*ibid.*).

As such, Kropotkin had little faith in so-called representative governments. He felt that the parliamentary system was never meant to be a free political organization for all citizens: ‘Built up by the middle classes to hold their own against royalty, sanctioning, and at the same time strengthening, their sway over the workers, parliamentary rule is pre-eminently a middle-class rule’ (1985: 159). In his analysis, to every new economic phase corresponded a distinctive political system. Absolute monarchy corresponded to serfdom, while representative government corresponded

to capitalism and the systematic exploitation of workers by the owners of the means of production (1970a: 52).

Interestingly, Kropotkin regarded the state and capitalism as two inseparable concepts, which had developed side by side in history, mutually supporting and reinforcing one another: 'They are bound together not by a mere coincidence of contemporaneous development, but by the bond of cause and effect, effect and cause' (*ibid.*: 83). Hence, he concludes that whoever wanted to abolish capitalism, would also have to dispense with the centralized nation-state (*ibid.*). One cannot use representative government as an instrument to liberate economy and society, since a new form of economic organization will necessarily require a radically alternative political structure (*ibid.*: 84). Kropotkin realized very well that as soon as socialist economic principles were introduced, new forms of social and political organization would have to be invented. In his vision, progress cannot come about by the enlargement of governmental functions, but only by the abolishment of state authority. He concludes 'that true progress lies in the direction of decentralization, both territorial and functional, in the development of the spirit of local and personal initiative, and of free federation from the simple to the compound' (1975: 110). What Kropotkin exactly meant by this formula will be explained in the next section.

Radically new organizational tendencies

In Kropotkin's view, anarchism must be seen as an ideal of society that can indeed be realized in the future. Crucially, it is not merely founded on ideals, but on social and organizational trends and tendencies which are already developing in human society. Anarchism is based 'on an analysis of tendencies of an evolution that is already going on in society and on inductions therefrom as to the future' (*ibid.*: 66). Analyzing those trends and tendencies, one would find that at the end of the eighteenth century a strong centralizing and authoritarian tendency had taken place. Yet at the same time the mutual-aid tendency had been maintained and cherished among the masses (1914: 223).

In *Mutual aid* and *The conquest of bread*, Kropotkin shows extensively that the traditional basis of mutual aid and support had managed to survive and that anti-centralist and anti-authoritarian forms of organization were able to withstand the power of the state. Outside the domains of state and church there were countless societies, clubs and alliances for recreational purposes, study, research and education. Nineteenth century Europe was covered with voluntary associations for agriculture, industry, charity, sciences and so on (*ibid.*: 279). Arguably, some of them were short lived, others had long and successful lives, but they all had one

aspect in common: ‘All strive – while maintaining the independence of each group, circle, branch, or section – to federate, to unite, across frontiers as well as among each nation; to cover all the life of civilized men with a net, meshes of which are intersected and interwoven’ (1970a: 132).

These voluntary societies, clubs and alliances had gradually started to take over some of the functions of the state. The institutions of mutual aid re-asserted themselves in everyday life, notwithstanding the efforts of the state to destroy the traditional habits and customs of mutual aid and support. This was in fact the dominant development that Kropotkin observed in his days. Closely related to this was the century’s dominant tendency towards decentralization, home rule and free agreement, essentially the founding stones of Kropotkin’s libertarian organizational vision.

A closer inspection of Kropotkin’s anarchist organizational principles

Kropotkin’s ideal and free society of the future strongly resembled the decentralized and federative structures of the Middle Ages. In short, he conceived of a society without government: ‘All the mutual relations of its members are regulated, not by laws, not by authorities, whether self-imposed or elected, but by mutual agreements between the members of that society and by the sum of social customs and habits – not petrified by law, routine, or superstition, but continually developing and continually readjusted in accordance with the ever growing requirements of a free life stimulated by the progress of science, invention, and the steady growth of higher ideals’ (1957: 66). Also in his *Memoirs of a revolutionist* (1899), Kropotkin accentuates that the ideal society will constantly modify because it resembles a living, evolving organism (1971: 399). I shall now work out the basic principles of his anarchist organization theory: decentralization, self-government and free agreements.

Decentralization: economic and political

In various places, Kropotkin elaborates on the tendency towards decentralization. In *Fields, factories and workshops* he states that in industry as well as in politics, centralization has many admirers, but that in both spheres the concept of centralization needed drastic revision.

Firstly, in the sphere of the economy, large factories offer considerable inconveniences, as they are incapable of reforming their machinery according to changing consumer demands. These immense factories were generally characterized by a military organization, a strict division of labor and very bad working conditions. For that reason, Kropotkin argued for a fundamental decentralization of production.

The goods would be produced in small-scale factories and workshops, evenly scattered round the countryside and situated within walking distance of the fields and gardens. The result would be a small-scale society in which men and women would combine agricultural and industrial activities in ecologically responsible ways.

This would be a society in which a balance between intellectual work and manual work is achieved and the former division of labor has been put to an end. By raising the number of real producers of wealth in society (no more room for capitalist idlers...) and by increasing the productivity of labor with modern machines, more than half of the working day would become available to everyone for the pursuit of art, science or any hobby one might prefer (1904: 79). In this libertarian society, production is basically set up for the satisfaction of 'real needs', rather than for industrial growth, profit making or excessive accumulation. Work would become easy and pleasant and suited to everybody's individual tastes, as is exemplified in the following quotation:

Have the factory and the workshop at the gates of your fields and gardens, and work in them. Not those large establishments, of course, in which huge masses of metals have to be dealt with and which are better placed at certain spots indicated by nature, but the countless variety of workshops and factories which are required to satisfy the infinite diversity of tastes among civilized men. Not those factories in which children lose all the appearance of children in the atmosphere of an industrial hell, but those airy and hygienic, and consequently economical, factories in which human life is of more account than machinery and the making of extra profits, of which we already find a few samples here and there; factories and workshops into which men, women and children will not be driven by hunger, but will be attracted by the desire of finding an activity suited to their tastes, and where, aided by the motor and the machine, they will choose the branch of activity which suits best their inclinations. (*ibid.*: 217-218)

All in all, the libertarian organizational tendency which he envisaged was one moving towards human scale, independent and environmentally sound agricultural-industrial communities, where work would be short, varied and agreeable (1985: 110-120). Kropotkin believed that modern production techniques would multiply production in industry and agriculture and would ensure that regions could be self-sufficient. In many respects, this fundamental decentralization of the economy is advantageous: 'It is to the advantage of every region, every nation, to grow their own wheat, their own vegetables, and to manufacture at home most of the produce they consume. This diversity is the surest pledge of the complete development of production by mutual cooperation, and the moving cause of progress, while specialization is now a hindrance to progress' (*ibid.*:189).

Secondly, turning to the dominant organizational forms of Europe in the Middle Ages, Kropotkin advocated a decentralized political structure, both territorial and functional. Territorially, according to him, the evident tendency was to form groups

of autonomous communes, villages and towns (1975: 87-88). Functionally, he envisaged that tasks formerly carried out by the state would be left to, or taken over by, a multitude of organizations, associations and larger groups. In a natural way, a new form of society would evolve in which all these organizations collaborated for the sake of the satisfaction of economic, educational, intellectual and artistic needs (1975: 398).

The idea of 'self-government'

Under all circumstances, these associations, communes and wider groups fully maintained their independence and the right to arrange internal affairs. In this context, Kropotkin writes about 'home rule, even for the smallest unit or group' (*ibid.*: 86), or about 'self-government' and 'sovereignty of the group' (*ibid.*). All groups would approximate the organizational form of the guilds and neighborhoods of the Middle Ages, based on the active participation of the members in the general meetings.

Free agreements

Free agreements constituted the third leading principle of Kropotkin's anarchist organizational vision. As a matter of fact, in *The conquest of bread* he devotes a whole chapter to this specific subject. In his age free agreements between associations and groups had assumed an increasingly important role and were responsible for the abandonment of many of the state's functions. As striking manifestations he points to the railways and postal services in various European countries. They did not form an international railway or postal parliament, regulating the running of trains or postal affairs by law. The national organizations cooperated by free agreement, by exchange of letters and proposals, and by congresses at which delegates met to discuss matters of mutual interest. Specific issues were first discussed within the countries:

then they sent delegates acquainted with the special question to be discussed at the congress, and they sent delegates – not rulers. Their delegates returned from the congress with no laws in their pockets but with proposals of agreements. Such is the way now (the very old way, too) for dealing with questions of public interest – not the way of law making by means of a representative government. (1985: 68)

This all condensed into a flexible system of delegates meeting at congresses, debating issues and subsequently returning to their groups, not with a law, but with the draft of a contract to be accepted or rejected. In this, Kropotkin saw a revolutionary organizational principle that in the end would make the centralized state fully redundant (*ibid.*: 135). He underlined that not only the international postal services and railways functioned on the basis of 'free agreement and free aid', but

also the Red Cross societies as well as the English Life Boat Association. These organizations all started from autonomous groups acting in concert for mutual goals, by means of delegates acting by free agreements (1970a: 53).

Two contrasting visions on organization

Throughout history, Kropotkin differentiates between two opposing organizational tendencies. On the one side there is the Roman, Imperial and authoritarian approach: centralist, hierarchical, working from the top to the bottom; organization as a pyramid of authority. On the other side stands the popular, federalist and libertarian approach: decentralized, freely federated, functioning from the periphery to the center; organization as a form autonomy and self-regulation (*ibid.*: 52). This last tendency leaned towards 'no-government', while the former was focused on state dominance. In the federalist tradition, organization was equated with the concept of 'anarchy'.

Kropotkin was well aware that in daily linguistic usage the term 'anarchy' was often equated with disorder. According to him, this interpretation was based on at least two false assumptions. First, that in the absence of a state, chaos and disorder would inevitably follow. Secondly, that the peace and order produced by a strong central state was always beneficial. In his view both assumptions were extremely doubtful. In many areas where the state does not intervene, a harmonious situation is achieved, while the order produced by the state is often superficial and hardly bearable (*ibid.*: 62).

Hence the goal of society is not 'unity' or 'order', but an organic and natural 'harmony' (1975: 108). Whereas order, unity and stability were realized by means of submission to law and obedience, this natural harmony was the result of the earlier mentioned free agreements concluded between the various societal groups, representing an interwoven network of federations of all sizes and degrees. Against the monolithic unity that was typical for centrally ruled state systems, Kropotkin portrayed the anarchist structure as a 'union' or an 'association' (see, for example, 1914: 186 [union] and 282 [association]). It was a union for mutual aid and support 'without imposing upon men the fetters of the state, but giving full liberty of expression to the creative genius of each separate group of individuals in art, crafts, science, commerce (...)' (see also 1914: 186).

Specific characteristics of the anarchist organization concept

Organization as a free order of autonomous entities

The recurring theme of Kropotkin's thinking was the necessity to abolish authoritarian leadership and central authority. Already at a young age he developed a strong aversion of pyramidal and centralized forms, and noted that in truly important matters commanding and discipline were useless. So what, then, are his major objections against hierarchical authority?

In the first place he argues that hierarchical authority leads to a lack of freedom among the organization members at the base of the organization. Generally, hierarchy leads to compliance, compliance leads to slavery and slavery is nothing but losing the fundamental human right to follow one's own will and to be free from interference.

Second, by exercising hierarchical authority even good people tend to become corrupted: 'We affirm that the best of men is made essentially bad by the exercise of authority' (1970a: 135). Nobody is without mistakes, Kropotkin argues, so even the best among us will be corrupted when using their political power, and that's why 'we take men for what they are worth and that is why they hate the government of man by man' (1970b: 130). Besides, in his view, no division of power or system of checks and balances and mutual control of authority will ever be effective.

Thirdly, hierarchical authority is ineffective. According to Kropotkin, it is inadvisable to transfer political power to a small minority group. If this would be done the leadership would have to rule and decide on numerous issues where they would totally lack the much needed expertise and information. For instance, he argues that no government would ever be capable of successfully centrally organizing and regulating the economic production of a whole nation:

for in all production there arise daily thousands of difficulties which no government can solve or foresee. It is certainly impossible to foresee everything. Only the efforts of thousands of intelligences working on the problems can cooperate in the development of a new social system and find the best solution for the thousands of local needs. (1970a: 76-77)

Only those who are closely involved can be aware of all the details and situational factors, and hence should be able to take decisions, without orders or commands from the top.

Fourth, hierarchical authority produces conformity and obedience among organizational members. Fear of being punished and obedience lead to a loss of taking initiatives and to mental slavery. People will start to behave themselves as mere 'servants' and will degenerate intellectually, artistically and morally. They will stop using their full capacities and will lose their autonomy and decisiveness. It is no wonder Kropotkin was arguing for a radical change in the relations between

individuals from hierarchical to relations that would be authority free. Admittedly, Kropotkin did not argue that this would lead to a complete and fully unrestricted freedom of man and women in society.

Because of the necessity for humans to cooperate, liberty would not be fully unrestricted, but would come close to the best and most extended form of freedom possible. Ultimately, the new anarchist society would eradicate the former order with its Roman structures of authority, and leave room for personal initiatives and having a say in the decentralized social, economic and political units. In such a free, anarchist society, humans will base their actions on rational thinking, in interaction with the ethical conceptions of their environment, 'and thus be able to reach full individualization' (1975: 108-109).

Fifth, Kropotkin's trust in the viability of introducing organizations without hierarchy and discipline was rooted in a positive evaluation of the capacities and potential of ordinary organization members. In this area, his *Memoirs of a revolutionist* are most informative of his particular views. In his *Memoirs* he repeatedly alludes to the sound mind and rationality of the Russian peasants which he had met in his younger years. Also during his long travels in Siberia he was impressed by the great intelligence of the peasants and local villagers, and in his work he describes their 'remarkable sharpness' (1970b: 136).

Later in his life when he had visited the watchmakers in the Swiss Jura, he notes: 'The clearness of insight, the soundness of judgment, the capacity for disentangling complex social questions (...) deeply impressed me' (*ibid.*: 130). Overall, he was very positive about the creativity, autonomy and intellect of the many the workers that he had met over the years. In the future, improvements in the field of education and working conditions would make it possible for workers to participate in decision making and become optimally acquainted with the anarchist ideas of self-regulation, self-steering systems and self-realization.

Sixth, Kropotkin suggests a free form of organization in which the individual must become the central agent. Far ahead of his time, his ideal organizational model is like a system of modules that are 'self-regulating'. There are subunits (individuals, municipalities, provinces, etc.) which possess local autonomy and which can federate on a voluntary basis with the other units. In general, he looks at organization not as a hierarchical order based on the exercise of central control, on discipline and obedience, but as the 'ordering of freedom'. He argues for a view on organization in which the emphasis is put on consistently finding 'spaces of freedom'. In a strikingly 'modern' way, he favors a loose, flexible and federative framework, in which the various entities would be autonomous and cooperate on the basis of free agreements.

The necessary prerequisite of social equality

Next to a need for radical changes in political and economic organization, Kropotkin stressed the necessity of social equality. The political and economic revolution would have to go hand in hand: after all, what could political liberty mean if people were slaves from an economic point of view?

In *The conquest of bread* Kropotkin investigates the capitalist relations of production. The system of private property produced riches for the few, brought exploitation and poverty for the many and thus led to unjust social inequality. In his opinion this situation was unacceptable from an ethical point of view: ‘the means of production being the collective work of humanity, the product should be the collective property of the race. Individual appropriation is neither just nor serviceable. All belongs to all. All things are for all men, since all men have need of them, since all men have worked in the measure of their strength to produce them, and since it is not possible to evaluate every one’s part in the production of the world’s wealth’ (1985: 33). Kropotkin argued for well-being for all by abolishing private property and the returning of land, machinery, factories, means of transportation, etc., into the hands of the community. This would end the capitalist exploitation of labor, since both the means of production and the goods produced would become common property.

In his plans for the reconstruction of society, Kropotkin chose to abandon the traditional wage system. Since in the present state of industry every branch is completely interdependent, any attempt to identify an individual origin for products has become untenable (*ibid.*: 146 and 70). His new freedom oriented society was based on the principle – ‘to every man according to his needs’ (*ibid.*: 170). The final result would consist of an anarchist-communist society in which economic exploitation and domination were abolished and equal relations and feelings of solidarity would take their place. Kropotkin was convinced that the resulting social equality would foster a new sense of justice and raise the moral level of humanity, producing an unprecedented feeling of general well-being and harmony in society (1975: 73).

Conclusion

Nineteenth-century libertarian Peter Kropotkin has developed an alternative line of organizational thinking which completely breaks with traditional ideas about central rule, control and hierarchy. He contributed to elaborating a freedom-oriented ‘anarchist’ organization which opposes today’s predominantly bureaucratic and hierarchical organizational society. Starting from the idea of the primacy of

individual liberty, mutual aid and interdependence between humans, he was far ahead of his time and created a surprisingly modern organization theory and promising anarchist vision for society. As a matter of fact, his reflections have influenced many radical social and political thinkers, such as William Morris, Aldous Huxley, Murray Bookchin and also Kirkpatrick Sale ('bioregionalism'). Moreover, he can be seen as an important predecessor of bio-cybernetic organization theory as found in the work of contemporary theorists such as Stafford Beer and of the ideas on organization of well-established researchers including Henry Mintzberg and Gareth Morgan.

His general design of a free and socially just society is based on the creation of self-regulating and self-governing entities, as in his view is the case in most natural systems. He underlines the necessity and efficiency of self-regulation and the redundancy and inefficiency of central rule. Strikingly, his vision of an anarchist society strongly resembles relatively modern bio-cybernetic organizational theories and systems of 'self-regulating' modules. In society there exist basic units (individuals, associations, communes, etc.) which have to possess autonomy, and which can co-operate and federate on a voluntary basis with the other units.

Kropotkin rejects hierarchy and argues for a concept of society in which the emphasis lies on finding 'spaces for human freedom'. He wants a loose, flexible and federative framework, in which the various entities voluntarily cooperate on the basis of free agreements. The central notions of his theory are autonomy, federalism, mutual aid, minimal central control and above all political and economic decentralization. Hierarchy, discipline and the exercise of power from the top are again and again criticized. Kropotkin's approach emphasizes the full freedom of every human being and assumes that the needs of the organizational system must be subordinated to the individual rights and liberties of the participants.

In Kropotkin's anarchist organizational vision, the production of goods would take place in small scale factories and workshops, evenly dispersed in the country and situated near to the local fields and gardens. In his plans, people would combine intellectual work with manual labor and have ample opportunity to pursue new branches of art and knowledge. There would be no need for working overtime and people would have the real opportunity to develop their individual capacities.

Due to improved efficiency and modern technology, more than enough goods and services could be produced in such a system: real human needs could easily be satisfied. In Kropotkin's view there is no place for individual appropriation and private property. Equal social relations would develop, which would in turn produce a sense of justice and morality in society. Kropotkin argues that a harmonious

stateless situation would result, where all the relations of its members are ruled by mutual aid and voluntary agreements.

Kropotkin's anarchist organizational ideas are intriguing and surely not without promise. His anarchist concept stresses that in future society loose and flexible forms of organization are quintessential. Ideally, organizations must consistently aim at the goal of individual and collective liberty. In general, he argues, men and women possess all the qualities suiting them for a life of full freedom, self-rule and self-regulation. In line with this, individual freedom and social equality are the only acceptable foundations of human organization, be it a state, a village or a productive economic unit. In sum, we must reject still dominant ancient concepts of central control, hierarchical rule, command and discipline. Organization and management must always be based on 'self-guidance' because the individual him or herself knows best how to deal with the demands and conditions of the specific situation. Only then can individual liberty and rights be assured and well-informed, wise and rational organizational and managerial decisions be made.

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