



Research Article

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Social Kropotkinism: The Best ‘New Normal’ for Survival in the Post COVID-19, Climate Emergency World?

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Abstract

Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin was originally an evolutionary biologist, writing shortly after Charles Darwin, who pointed to collaboration rather than competition as the underlying driver of (human) evolution, development and survival. This paper questions why ‘Social Darwinism’ has entered the language when ‘Social Kropotkinism’ has not. We position Social Kropotkinism – based on mutual support and community cooperation as opposed to Darwinian survival of the fittest – as having value as a new societal organising principle that can help to ensure social justice and equitable distribution of increasingly scarce resources in the post-pandemic, climate emergency world. We chart the re-emergence of Kropotkin’s ideas of mutualism against the current literature on the evolution of human cooperation, showing how the blossoming of community-level mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has exposed and filled many cracks in UK Government provision of welfare and social care, is the inevitable end-result of the empathy and predisposition for cooperation that has underpinned the development of complex societies and civilisation.

Keywords: Anarchism, Kropotkin, evolution, mutual aid, community resilience, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

The current COVID-19 crisis has presented a stark warning for the future on the need for better collaboration if we are to address global challenges, including climate change, successfully (Cole and Dodds, 2020). While keeping one eye on the future, however, we also need to look back into the past

to remind ourselves not only why we need to work together but also that the answer to how we can do this may well be hardwired into our biology.

Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin identified the value of cooperation in his 1902 book *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (Kropotkin, 1902) after the seed of the idea was planted (in part) as he observed a Molucca crab in the Brighton Aquarium. He recalled being amazed by:

"[T]he extent of mutual assistance which these clumsy animals are capable of bestowing upon a comrade in case of need. One of them had fallen upon its back in a corner of the tank [...] Its comrades came to the rescue [they] came two at once, pushed their friend from beneath, and after strenuous efforts succeeded in lifting it upright; but then [an] iron bar would prevent them from achieving the work of rescue [...] After many attempts, one of the helpers would go into the depth of the tank and bring two other crabs." (Pyotr Kropotkin, 1902)

Kropotkin was struck not only by the fervour with which these crabs assisted their fellow but the mutualisation of that effort. He went on to show that such mutualism is embedded in many creatures, including humans.

So why, today, do we talk of social Darwinism – a celebration of human competition and dog-eat-dog survival – but not of social Kropotkinism, which would celebrate instead the human capacity for collaboration and sharing? As we exit the pandemic and turn our thoughts to how we reorganise society to be more resilient to the next Anthropocene emergency, this paper argues that the time has come to rehabilitate Kropotkin as a grandfather of evolutionary biology rather than ‘just’ an anarchist philosopher.

2. The Evolution of Cooperation

Evolutionary biologists and quaternary scientists (e.g. Khalidi et al, 2020) tell us that the African Humid Period – beginning around 14,500 years ago and marking a period during which Africa was wetter and more verdant than today – did something very special to the early humans who lived through it. This period of unusual stability in a previously harsh climate had made food more secure and plentiful, allowing our human ancestors to forage comfortably over smaller areas. No longer dependent on ranging over large areas to find food, humans began to settle. They domesticated animals and plants (Gupta, 2004), built boats (Rassia and Tsikis, 2020) and began to settle into more permanent villages (Hardy-Smith and Edwards, 2004).

Then, around 6,000 years ago, this unusual period of climate stability eased, and the environment became once again more challenging. Humans responded in a new, and very unique way: they began to extensively modify the land and intensify agricultural activity (Wright, 2017), farming new crops and taking the first steps on the journey to the highly complex societies we know today. To do this, they had to cooperate: work together towards common goals in order to achieve something that could not be achieved by one human alone. Some of this cooperation (e.g. skills needed for hunting a deer, see e.g. Stiner, 2013, or which required a division of labour, e.g. for collective child-minding, cooking, hunting or shelter construction, see Dunbar et al, 2014) was well embedded by the time the African plains started to dry out, suggesting that evolution was already selecting for the most cooperative *Homo sapiens* (and *Homo neanderthalensis* – see Gaudzinski-Windheuser et al, 2018).

Experiments show that humans are more naturally cooperative and collaborative than Chimpanzees (e.g. Harmann et al, 2011) and it seems that the larger and more complex society became, the more valuable (and attractive to mates) good cooperators became (Jaeggi and Gurven, 2013). As this happens, social skills take over from physical characteristics such as greater height or larger muscles in determining mate choice and thus conferring survival advantage but exactly how and why cooperation happens has fascinated evolutionary biologists for as long as the field has existed. Explanations for it are most prominent today in the work of Michael Tomasello, Co-Director

of the Max Planck Institute for Evolutional Biology in Germany, who points towards a 'joint intentionality' or 'sense of we' that is unique to humans (Tomasello, 2008), driving the way we think and act (Tomasello, 2012) and forming the basis for human morality (Tomasello and Vaish, 2013). Chimpanzees – our closest biological relatives – hunt side by side but squabble over the spoils (Tuomela, 2007). Humans work cooperatively and share. Doing so is embedded in our psychological hard-wiring – as Tomasello and others have shown – through a dual sense of altruism (we truly care about our fellow humans, even if we have nothing to gain from it, far more than other animals do) and obligation (once that altruism has embedded itself in our group thinking, such altruism becomes obligate, both a driver of and essential for the development of more complex social roles and, by extension, society).

3. Mirror Neurons and Empathy

The social theorist Jeremy Rifkin (2009) has discussed a neurological phenomenon called 'mirror neurons', arguing that they are proof that our desire to be social animals is part of a uniquely human neurobiology. He argues vehemently that we are predisposed for empathy, whereas self-interest is a secondary force. Humans experience direct emotional connections between individuals that allows for shared experiences: it is the presence of mirror neurons that helps us to do this. Mirror neurons enable us to be empathetic, as when witnessing the actions and/or plight of others, they fire the same feelings in the viewer as the person viewed is likely experiencing. Rifkin argues that just as civilisation is now globally connected, so too are our empathic responses. This connection, which can be especially strong between humans who are part of the same 'imagined community' (be that a nation, a religion, political party, a subculture and so on that is not based on direct kin bonds) is a tangible one. A downside, however, is that this empathy can be coerced, manipulated and stage-managed by the State or others (Veroli, 2016).

We see evidence of our innate empathy in, for example, the development of care systems that provide for those who are economically inactive and need to be supported by their community, as well as for who can provide for themselves (Cole, 2020). We are all in this together because we are indeed 'we', a collective entity, more than a collection of 'I's who happen to be inhabiting the same space – as many animal groups are – and 'we' are stronger together.

Furthermore, scientific evidence is now suggesting that the human body can no longer be considered 'individual' at all. It has long been a widely held view in microbiological science that the human body is home to many more bacteria than there are cells in the human body (Savage, 1977). Recent years has seen increasing interest in researching the 'microbiome', the "the ecological community of commensal, symbiotic, and pathogenic microorganisms that literally share our body space" (Lederberg and McCray, 2001). More than simply living inside us, the microbes act as another organ of the human body that is as important to our day-to-day functioning as our heart, liver, spleen or brain. Purely by cell count, we are not 'only' human. This alien community of microbiota can influence the kinds of foods we crave, the way we communicate, and even the way we think and feel (Alcock et al, 2014). The human body has 21,000 genes or so that all go towards making us 'who we are', but our microbiomes contain another 8 million, which interact with our bodies, tweak our immune system, shift the workings of our guts and brain neurones and generally help us function (Coniff, 2013). As Kramer and Bressan (2015) have suggested;

"Whereas our cohabitation with one or another [other organisms] may not pose a strong challenge to the commonly shared assumption that humans are unitary individuals, the presence of a large number and wide variety of such entities—and the power they have on us—renders this assumption untenable. We are not organisms but super-organisms. ... It is time to change the very concept we have of ourselves and to realize that one human individual is neither just human nor just one individual".

4. Cooperation and Morality

This interest in cooperation – between humans, and between humans and other life forms – what drove it and how it has manifested since *Homo sapiens* diverged from our last common ancestor (with Chimpanzees, with earlier hominid species or with the Neanderthals), drives research into the evolution of human morality, partner choice, culture and governance, in fact anything that makes us uniquely human. As Christine Korsgaard says in her book *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Korsgaard, 1996), “the primal scene of morality is not one in which I do something to you or you do something to me, but one in which we do something together”. And yet Kropotkin, the evolutionary biologist who first proposed this, and who set the template for how and why humans cooperate, is largely forgotten or, to be more accurate, ignored by biologists and evolutionists. He is seen today a radical political philosopher with little regard for the scientific observations on which his philosophy was based. But the COVID-19 pandemic may have set the foundations for a new social Kropotkinism.

Over a hundred years before Tomasello was writing about human cooperation, Kropotkin had already recognised that mutualism and cooperation drove early human development, not survival of the fittest. We must tread carefully here, because as any evolutionary biologist worth their salt will be quick to point out, Charles Darwin never even said “survival of the fittest” (Darwin, 1964), the quote was in fact said of his work in the mid-20th century (Wallbank et al, 2000). Even then it was never meant to mean ‘the biggest, strongest and most able to bully others’ but, ‘the best suited – and/or able to adapt – to the current environment’. This is ‘fit’ in the sense of how a jigsaw puzzle piece fits, not how ‘fit’ an athlete is (see e.g. Thomas, 2004). Humans had survived and flourished because they were adaptable, flexible and most importantly able to manipulate the environment to fit around them, rather than vice versa. This can be achieved on a much faster timescale than biological evolution. It takes generations of genetic selection to develop thicker fur if the climate drops, or thinner fur if it warms, but a shelter can be built in hours, particularly if it can be warmed by fire. And particularly if you collaborate with others to build it. This will inevitably involve having to share it with them once you have, but that is not much of a price to pay for survival, especially if it means you get to enjoy other mutually beneficial skills too, such as the food your tribemates were gathering while you were building the shelter.

5. Collective Intelligence

Sociologist Lester Frank Ward (Ward, 1906), writing at around the same time as Kropotkin but on social organisation rather than evolution, lauded the ‘collective intelligence’ of society:

“The extent to which [society will benefit in the future] will be based upon collective intelligence. This is to society what brainpower is to the individual.”

Ward believed that while the society of the day made heroes of great engineers such as Isambard Kingdom Brunel and Thomas Telford, such individual geniuses can do nothing without a social structure that enables them to emerge, supports them and allows them to thrive. He wrote that society acts collectively: by working together through an enabling mechanism, individual members of society make it something much greater than the sum of its parts.

As great thinkers such as Kropotkin and Ward were writing down their thoughts, in the political sphere the cooperative movement was gaining traction (Fairbain, 1994) as a means of enacting mutual aid at a societal level. The Rochdale Pioneers were one of the groups to codify the aims, objectives and rules of ‘cooperativism’ as an organising principle. Established by 28 by ordinary working people in 1844, the Rochdale Pioneers pooled their resources to open a shop offering basic necessities (butter, flour, oatmeal, sugar and candles) – an affordable shop of the people, by the people and for the people.

In 1907, the Rochdale Pioneers introduced a minimum wage (90 years before it became a legal

requirement in the UK). Enshrined in their mission statement was equality for men and women, including equal voting rights long before this became part of British representative democracy in 1928. One 120 years ago, in terms of the most appropriate societal organising principle Kropotkin had our evolutionary drivers pegged.

This brings us back to the question of why, today, is the term ‘social Darwinism’ commonplace, used to describe the way in which ‘the strong’ in society win out over ‘the weak’ (and often used as an excuse for inequality, as if this is merely natural selection playing out), but we don’t use or consider social Kropotkinism – the real “We’re all in this together”? This overlooking of Kropotkin is even more confusing when one considers that nothing in Darwin or Kropotkin’s own writings run contrary to those of the other (Łastowski, 1998). Only the misuse of both has positioned them at the opposite ends of the political spectrum – pushing social Darwinism as an excuse for eugenics, Laissez-faire capitalism and imperialism, while kettling Kropotkin into political rather than biological theory as a grandfather of anarchist philosophy but not of biology. Are people really so scared of the idea that humans evolved to be good at working together and caring about one another – in other words, that we actually want to?

6. Cooperation after COVID-19

It has taken another pressing challenge – the global COVID-19 pandemic – to remind us that working together is better for everyone than working apart. Scholars of disaster studies such as Rebecca Solnit (Solnit, 2010) have long lauded the human spirit of togetherness that emerges in the aftermath of hurricanes, floods and other emergencies, and the current crisis has seen a groundswell of mutual aid of precisely the type Kropotkin envisaged, based not on outdated notions of charity but more because deep down, we somehow know it’s the right thing to do.

The crisis has exposed and reminded us of the difference between German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies’ ideas of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* (Tönnies 2012). *Gemeinschaft* is the idea of emotional bonds that bind society together, whereas *gesellschaft* is more contractual. Since the Industrial Revolution, bonds between people have become more and more contractual, but the pandemic saw a rise in community spirit based on emotion, empathy and reciprocity. When the transactional structures between State and citizen failed to deliver, the bonds between people rose again and the emotional bonds out-performed the contractual ones. We now need to ensure this situation endures post-pandemic.

7. Towards a Society Based on Community Support and Mutual Aid

The answer to how to do so may be to turn once again to the philosophy of Kropotkin and the biological drivers it points to that underly how society should be organised. Under social Kropotkinism rather than social Darwinism, the more ‘natural’ society becomes one based on the unit of community, rather than the individual – a concept that is already seeping into the fields of planetary health and sustainability with a similar rehabilitation of other under-rated political thinkers who call for a focus more on communities than individuals (e.g. Nobert Elias, see e.g. Quilley and Zywert, 2019). A renewed focus on more egalitarian and equal communities is needed now more than ever because the more we share, the more secure we can be in having enough for ourselves and others. This suits the politics of the Anthropocene far more than it did the Industrial Revolution. Strive for too much and we risk losing out not just individually but collectively in the tragedy of the commons (Hardin, 1968; Ostrom, 2008) – as we are seeing played out across the world from carbon emissions to the plastic waste generated by consumerism. Through a thoroughly pandemic inflected lens, it is becoming clear that it isn’t always easy to disentangle our individual health from our community’s health. If we lose sight of one another, and of ourselves collectively, we risk creating the very disasters we think only the ‘strongest’ can survive.

The rehabilitation of Kropotkin into evolutionary thinking could be the perfect tonic to this

impending disaster. School and biology curricula need to be repopulated with his ideas and, at the same time need to reorient prevailing ideas of Darwin's survival of the fittest to something more akin to what Darwin himself intended. By doing so, we should start to see – as Ward argued for – less of a celebration of humans as individuals but a celebration of humans as a collective, only able to achieve what we have because we have achieved it together. The field of sociobiology has made some previous attempts to argue for Kropotkin's place in its conceptual framework (e.g. Eastowski, 1998) but we need to push harder and into more fields, a task for which interdisciplinary researchers are ideally suited. As the climate emergency increasingly challenges our resources and forces us to adapt to new contexts, remembering that we survive best when we survive together might just be the strongest message the Anthropocene has.

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