

THE VISION OF KROPOTKIN

THE dreams of the Utopians, when applied to the affairs of imperfect humans, fail continuously, yet are continuously reborn, with new definitions of what must be done. The dreamers are accused by "practical men" of ignoring the facts of life, and the charge seems in many respects true, yet the practical men, the dreamers reply, close their minds to the underlying reality of human possibilities and the capacities of men and women to learn from experience. It is certainly the case that some institutions of a given society function as confinements which stand in the way of constructive change, and need to have their hold loosened, if not destroyed, while other institutions may serve as natural platforms for progress. History is, or ought to be, the study of human thinking about these matters and its consequences in the sequence of events. The documents to be studied in order to understand what ought to be done, and what should be avoided, form the curriculum.

For example, anyone who wants to understand American history ought to begin with, say, a reading of the *Federalist Papers* and Tom Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense*, both of which deal with the political and cultural institutions of the late eighteenth century. Paine set out, more or less successfully, to destroy the allegiance and loyalty of the colonists to the King of England, using for leverage the self-reliance and sense of freedom of the settlers in America. The *Federalist* writers used hard reasoning as a means of showing the need for a strong central government for the United States. We are likely to be persuaded that they were right, yet today, two hundred years after they made their arguments, we are equally likely to find that William Appleman Williams' case for the decentralist government of the Articles of Confederation applies very much to our time,

when the national state has become a very different affair from the sensible vehicle of order it was for Hamilton, Madison, and Jay. It is the regionalists who today speak to our condition, not the nationalists. In key with what the bioregionalists are now saying is the historical perspective provided by Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution*. In a chapter on "The Revolutionary Tradition," she points out that only Jefferson among the Founding Fathers realized that, after the War for Independence, the excitement and visionary fervor of the Declaration of Independence would be lost to the American people in the days of constitution-making, which required stability and no longer revolt.

. . . he knew, however dimly, that the Revolution, while it had given freedom to the people, had failed to provide a space where this freedom could be exercised. Only the representatives of the people, not the people themselves, had an opportunity to engage in those activities of "expressing, discussing and deciding" which in a positive sense are the activities of freedom. And since the state and federal governments, the proudest results of revolution, through sheer weight of their proper business were bound to overshadow in political importance the townships and their meeting halls—until what Emerson still considered to be "the unit of the Republic" and "the school of the people" in political matters had withered away—one might even come to the conclusion that there was less opportunity for the exercise of public freedom and the enjoyment of public happenings in the republic of the United States than there had existed in the colonies of British America. Lewis Mumford recently pointed out how the political importance of the township was never grasped by the founders, and that the failure to incorporate it into either the federal or the state constitutions was "one of the tragic oversights of post-revolutionary political development." Only Jefferson among the founders had a clear premonition of this tragedy, for his greatest fear was indeed lest "the abstract political system of democracy lacked concrete organs."

Today, far more than in Jefferson's time, we are beginning to realize the practical effect on our lives of a "democracy" that lacks "concrete organs." The threat of and preparations for nuclear war, over which "the people" have virtually no control is but one among several practical considerations. The virtual bankruptcy of the nation is another. The ills of both agriculture and industry, the sickness of our system of education, the pollution of water, air, land and sea are others. It must be admitted, however, that only a comparatively small minority of people are exercised about these matters, while the majority, in Neil Postman's apt phrase, is "amusing itself to death." Only when people begin to lose their jobs and their homes is public opinion really aroused, and then it is far too late for any immediate remedy.

Jefferson's dream has certainly not become true for our generation. He thought we would be all right as a country as long as most of us were farmers and small landowners, but today the nation is farmed by big machines and about four per cent of the population, and many of the medium and small sized farmers are in trouble. It is notable that the most articulate and intelligent reformers of the present are calling, not just for better methods of farming, but for the return to a vital small-community life. This is still a dream, but it may be the one most likely to come true as the only alternative to both economic and financial and cultural collapse. Pessimists think that the collapse will come first, while optimists hope it can be mitigated by the use of common sense. But very nearly all agree that the kind of change we need can only be born from trouble, probably a lot of trouble.

We come now to a book that has come to MANAS from England, from the Freedom Press. It is Peter Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, and the editor, Colin Ward, has added "Tomorrow" to the title in acknowledgement that this work embodies a dream that has not yet come true, although the author believed it was on the

way and gathered evidence in support of this hope. Kropotkin, incidentally, was a member of the Freedom Group which in October 1886 produced the first issue of the anarchist journal, *Freedom*, which is still published, now as a weekly, and Colin Ward is one of the editors. Ward says in his Introduction:

The author of this remarkable book was born of aristocratic Russian parents in 1842, served as a boy in the Tsar's Corps of Pages, and as a young man travelled widely in Central Asia and the Far East, gaining a reputation as a geographer. He became involved in populist agitation, was imprisoned for two years, and made a sensational escape from a prison hospital in St. Petersburg. In Western Europe, he found his home in the anarchist movement and, after imprisonment for three years in France, settled in England. . . where he earned his living as a writer on scientific, social and political subjects. Apart from two journeys to the United States and Canada, and brief visits to Europe, he remained in Britain until 1917 when he returned to Russia. There he died in 1921. . . . One of the fullest biographies of Kropotkin is *The Anarchist Prince*, by George Woodcock.

Fields, Factories and Workshops began as a series of articles Kropotkin wrote in the 1880s and later made into a book (1899). He argues for "revolutionary changes in the direction of industry and agriculture." As an anarchist he was uninterested in invoking the power of government to bring about these changes. He believed that human intelligence would be enough to bring about the desired conditions. He has, Ward says, four points:

The first was that there is a trend for manufacturing industry to decentralize throughout the world, and that production for a local market is a rational and desirable tendency. The second was that this implies that each region of the globe must feed itself, and that intensive farming could meet the basic needs of a country like Britain. The third was that the dispersal of industry on a small scale and in combination with agriculture is also rational and desirable, and the fourth is that we need an education which combines manual and intellectual work.

There are various reasons for reading this book, all with substantial importance. First of all, one is inevitably impressed by the number of

dreams the modern reader finds himself sharing with Kropotkin. His idea of small-scale agriculture and industry in combination fits with the best thinking of the post-industrial age. Like so many others, including, for example, Simone Weil, he recognized that the electric motor frees factory production from the necessity of obtaining power from a single drive shaft in a large factory, making small-scale production in rural areas entirely feasible. The problem of small producers, he shows, is not production but sales, and this can be overcome by cooperative marketing associations, and has been in many cases. The "bigness" requirement of industry, except for a small number of undertakings which need to be large, is more a habit and a state of mind than anything else. Colin Ward says:

The very technological developments which, in the hands of people with statist, centralizing, authoritarian habits of mind, as well as in the hands of mere exploiters, demand greater concentration of industry, are also those which could make possible a local, intimate, decentralized society. . . .

And how have Kropotkin's decentralist and regionalist ideas fared? Once again the evidence is equivocal. On one side, we have a stream of advocates of decentralist planning: Ebenezer Howard, Patrick Geddes and Lewis Mumford, who have had some influence on official policy. But on the other, we have the "natural" movements of capital and labour which have contradicted the trends which he predicted. Howard's immensely inventive and influential book was first published under the title *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in the same year as Kropotkin's book. When it was re-issued as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* in 1902, Howard made use of Kropotkin's findings. His disciples, from Thomas Adams, first Secretary of the Garden Cities Association (later the T.C.P.A.), through Lewis Mumford, to Paul and Percival Goodman, have acknowledged the fertile influence of Kropotkin's work. Howard's book was a creative synthesis of decentralist ideas which, as Mumford declared, lay the foundation "for a new cycle in urban civilization: one in which the means of life will be subservient to the purposes of living, and in which the pattern needed for biological survival and economic efficiency will likewise lead to social and personal fulfillment." Kropotkin's similar vision can be traced

in an American, a Russian, or a Chinese context. In Israel the importance of Kropotkin's ideas on the decentralization of industry (in a context which has nothing to do with Zionist nationalism) can be seen in the work of a variety of thinkers from Martin Buber to Haim Halperin.

If one takes the trouble to read Woodcock's *Anarchist Prince*—as exciting as any novel—one begins to realize how and where this aristocratic youth obtained his ideas and arrived at his convictions. Too many people still suppose that anarchists are people who go about with bombs and who shoot at the wealthy and eminent. There was a time when such things happened, but they were a few in number and exploited by the conventional press. If you read Kropotkin, you find little else but both practical and moral common sense. A great many people nowadays are anarchists without knowing it. Anarchists are against coercion by official political power; they oppose the State, and who, among those who have minds, do not, a great deal of the time? Those fortunate enough to have the eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* might turn to the article on Anarchism, which Kropotkin wrote, along with the accounts of the Altai and Amur regions of Siberia, which he was the first to explore.

In his chapter on Small Industries and Industrial Villages, Kropotkin says toward the end:

The scattering of industries over the country—so as to bring the factory amidst the fields, to make agriculture derive all those profits which it always finds in being combined with industry (see the eastern states of America) and to produce a combination of industrial with agricultural work—is surely the next step to be made, as soon as a reorganization of our present conditions is possible. It is being made already, here and there, as we saw on the preceding pages. This step is imposed by the very necessity of *producing for the producers themselves*; it is imposed by the necessity for each healthy man and woman to spend a part of their lives in manual work in the free air; and it will be rendered the more necessary when the great social movements, which have now become unavoidable, come to disturb the present international trade, and compel each nation to revert to her own

resources for her own maintenance. Humanity as a whole, as well as each separate individual, will be gainers by the change, and the change will take place.

However, such a change also implies a thorough modification of our present system of education. It implies a society composed of men and women, each of whom is able to work with his or her hands, as well as with his or her brain and to do so in more directions than one.

One could say that Kropotkin was the champion of intelligent self-sufficiency, for the spreading of industry in rural areas, for farmers to combine agriculture with small-scale production, a combination of mechanics with artisanship. He pointed out that the major inventions of the eighteenth century, which led to the industrial revolution, were the work of craftsmen and mechanics, not scientists. The inventions grew out of the intimate knowledge they had gained by working with their hands. Both Gandhi and Schumacher were of essentially the same view. Colin Ward says:

Dr. Schumacher identified the economic needs of the poor countries thus:

"First, that workplaces have to be created in the areas where the people are living now, and not primarily in metropolitan areas into which they tend to migrate.

"Second, that these work places must be, on average, cheap enough to be created in large numbers without this calling for an unattainable level of capital formation and imports.

"Third, that the production methods employed must be relatively simple, so that the demands for high skills are minimized, not only in the production process itself but also in matters of organization, raw-material supply, financing, marketing, and so forth.

"Fourth, that production should be mainly from local materials and mainly for local use."

He observed that these four requirements can be met only if there is a "regional" approach to development, and if there is a conscious effort to develop and apply an "intermediate" technology. When he started the Intermediate Technology Development Group, the kind of request that the Group received from Third World Countries was: "Some twenty years ago there existed a bit of

equipment which one could purchase for £20 to do a particular job. Now it costs £2,000 and is fully automated and we cannot afford to buy it. Can you help us?" And he comments: "These are the requirements of the poor people for whom nobody really cares. The powerful people, who are no longer poor are more interested in nuclear reactors, huge dams, steel works." His colleague George McRobie told me of the evolution of the Group's ideology. They began by considering the needs of the poor countries. Then they realized the importance of the principles they evolved for the poor areas of the rich world. And finally they came to see that in a world faced (as it is certainly going to be) with a crisis of resources and scarcity, and a superfluity of labor, these principles are of universal application. This is the point where they join hands with the advocates of "alternative" technology, who seek the satisfaction of human needs through the use of renewable resources: wind-power, water-power, tidal energy, solar energy, human energy, rather than through the reckless exploitation of finite mineral resources.

Kropotkin's demonstration that English farmlands, used as the Belgian and French farmers cultivate, could easily feed the entire English population has been verified by other researchers in recent years, while the observations of an American, added in his commentary by Colin Ward, are of particular interest. He quotes Sheldon Greene:

We know that each year 100,000 farms are abandoned and that rural America has sustained a population loss of 40 million people in the last fifty years. Concomitant with the abandonment of small farms and the migration to the cities of a heretofore agriculturally dependent rural population has been the increasing entry into agriculture of multi-purpose business interests, bringing with it an increase in farm size and absentee ownership of the land. Once-populous areas occupied by independent small land-owners interspersed with small rural service communities are being transformed into feudalistic estates—possibly one of the most significant economic and social transformations to be experienced in our history.

Fields, Factories and Workshops is one of the great humanitarian documents of European literature. It represents the considered optimism and hope of a revolutionist who believed in voluntary cooperation, in return to the land, and a

balance of widely distributed industry and agriculture. Colin Ward says in his final summary:

Kropotkin sought a society which combined labor-intensive agriculture and small-scale industry, both producing for local needs, in a decentralized pattern of settlement in which the division of labor had been replaced by the integration of brain-work and manual work, and he was optimistic enough to believe that the trends current in his day were leading to this kind of society. His picture of the future appealed to his fellow-anarchists as the kind of economic structure which would suit a worker-controlled federation of self-governing workshops and rural communes. It appealed to the ideologists of decentralist planning like Howard, Geddes and Mumford. It appealed to the advocates of small-holdings: those who wanted to see a highly productive intensive horticulture provide a good living for a new kind of sophisticated peasantry.

A reading of Woodcock's *Anarchist Prince* amplifies understanding of Kropotkin as a man, shows his extraordinary cultural background, and above all the respect he commanded among all the thoughtful men and women of his time. Very nearly all the good ideas of change and reform which are now taking hold have antecedents in Kropotkin's writings.

Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow may be purchased for £3.50 from Freedom Press, in Angel Alley, 84b Whitechapel High Street, London E1 7AX.