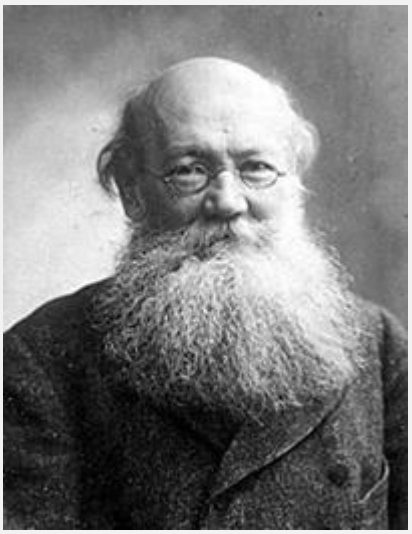
What PLPR can learn from **Peter Kropotkin**

By Harvey M. Jacobs, November 2024.



Kropotkin. Source: Wikipedia

Peter Kropotkin's ideas about space, land, and the city had great influence on foundational thinkers in spatial planning. Ebenezar Howard's 'three magnets' concept has explicit Kropotkin roots, as does Howard's specific garden cities proposal. Patrick Geddes use of eco-based regionalism as an analytic tool, and Lewis Mumford's historical analysis of city culture and his promotion of garden cities and environmental regionalism all draw directly from aspects of Kropotkin's work, and he is credited by each of them.

Who was Peter Kropotkin? Kropotkin was a luminary among a group of global celebrities at the turn of the 20th century. Admiration came from his work as a geographer, an ecologist, and a social theorist in the anarchist tradition. His talks in the U.S. drew tens of thousands, and at his death 20,000 people lined the funeral procession in Russia on a day in February so cold musical instruments froze. In particular, admiration came from his view of fundamental human nature and how the freeing of that nature would lead to a better life for most people.

Kropotkin was born in 1842 into Russian royalty. While a teenager, and at the express personal invitation of Czar Alexander the 2nd, Kropotkin joined the Czar's court. At the age of 20 he requested to be posted to Siberia (an unusual request for a royal page) where the basis for his subsequent fame emerged.

While in Siberia Kropotkin undertook study of the region's underlying geography; his conclusions revolutionized understanding of the region's structure. For his research he was awarded a gold medal from the Russian Geographical Society. He also undertook extensive ecological studies which led to his renown as a social theorist.

The precipitating event for Kropotkin's ecological and social theories was the publication of Darwin's On the Origin of Species in 1859. Kropotkin was a great admirer of Darwin and his theory of natural selection. But based on his ecological research in Siberia he challenged the assertion of competition being evolution's underlying force. Instead, Kropotkin argued that the dominant factor in natural selection was mutual aid among individuals. His ecological studies suggested that natural selection favored societies in which mutual aid thrived, and individuals in these societies had an innate predisposition to mutual aid. Evolution was not strictly about survival of the fittest.

Views on Kropotkin and his core ideas range widely. His untangling of Siberian geography stands. His ecological studies also stand and have increased legitimacy and currency. However, the link of his ecological studies to his social theories is what proved

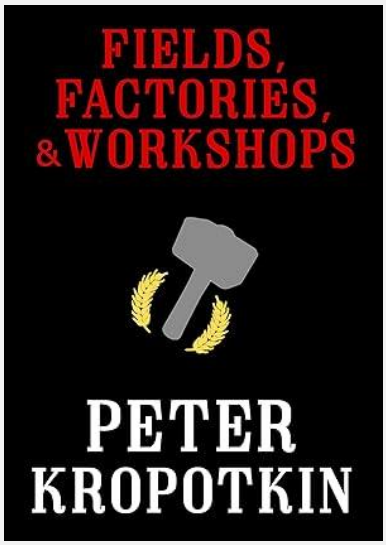
and continues to prove contentious; during his lifetime he was imprisoned in Russia and France and actively pursued by the Russian secret police.

What made Kropotkin so popular was that he offered a vision of attainable dignity and sustainability. His was a widely appealing vision of a future society, one we would today label a radically ecological sustainable society. For him and his admirers it was to be one based on mutual aid, voluntary associations, participatory democracy, and community-oriented forms of social organization. It would have local, regional, and inter-regional associations which would be eco-sustainable. Its focus would be on fundamental human rights.

For Kropotkin sociability was a natural law. So he challenged what he saw as the common misconception that anarchist societies would lack order and law; instead order would emerge from rules designed from below by those who felt their impact. These rules would encourage humanly scaled production systems and maximize individual freedom and social cohesion.

Kropotkin thought deeply about space, land, and the city as the modern city was taking its form in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, alongside modern industrialization and modern capitalism. His concerns are very contemporary ones for spatial planning – what David Harvey denoted as Social Justice and the City, and Henri Lefebvre The Right to the City. For Kropotkin the way to achieve both were institutions that promoted mutual aid.

What does Kropotkin offer us today? Many of his specific proposals have become essentially mainstream (such as urban agriculture, community gardens, community land trusts). His thoughts on land tenure were radical but are part of contemporary global discourse. But more importantly he offers an alternative lens – an anti-competitive (anti neo-classical economic lens) – for seeing and acting within the human and natural worlds. Kropotkin was an optimist about people. Where there was injustice in the world, Kropotkin attributed it largely to social institutions and the efforts of the powerful and privileged to hold on to their power and privilege. Just as Kropotkin inspired foundational thinkers in spatial planning (and their work has continued to inspire generations of spatial planners), his work and perspective can have ever more utility in the 21st century.



1899 book: Based on Kropotkin's time in the UK; a vision-program for urban-rural sustainability

This short article is a distillation of a lecture delivered 10 October 2024 as part of the program *Radically Alternative Views on Spatial Planning and Law: Kropotkin, Hayek, Kelsen*, as sponsored by AESOP Thematic Group on Planning Theories (plural), AESOP Thematic Group on Ethics, Values and Planning, and the International Academic Association on Planning, Law, and Property Rights