

# **POLITICAL ECONOMY FROM BELOW: COMMUNITARIAN ANARCHISM AS A NEGLECTED DISCOURSE IN HISTORIES OF ECONOMIC THOUGHT**

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This paper is written in the spirit which Elias Khalil (1995, pp.78-9) expressed in a recent essay in which he criticised the historiography of economic thought as inevitably leading to the dominant paradigm of neo-classical economics. Robert Heilbroner (1979, p.192) had earlier stated more pointedly a similar criticism of such historiography:

most contemporary texts on the history of [economic] “doctrines” judge and grade the works of the past by the degree to which they anticipate the present...From this widely shared point of view, the history of economic thought becomes a chronicle of mistakes and near-misses, a kind of voyager’s log as the profession gradually makes its way to the Promised Land - in effect, to the economics of the last fifty years.

The historiographical approach of this paper respects the historical and anthropological context within which ideas were formulated or uttered. It is only by listening to the voices of the past within their own social and political contexts, and by giving respect to their intentions and to the ‘truths’ as they perceived them – regardless of whether or not we like to hear what they said or believed – that we can approach an understanding of ‘what actually happened, though our answers will be partial and provisional...’ (Samuel, 1992, p.245).<sup>1</sup> The period covered here begins early in the nineteenth century and focuses on the *fin de siècle*; a time when competing discourses of political economy were in full cry.

The primary aim of this paper is to demonstrate the existence of a positive discourse of communitarian anarchist economic thought. A secondary aim is to show that there is intellectual space within the genre of ‘histories of economic thought’ that permits a claim for communitarian anarchism to stand alongside all other discourses of economic thought that compete with the hegemonic neo-classical paradigm. Throughout the twentieth century, histories of economic thought have ignored the positive dimensions of all socialist or anarchist discourses. Only the critiques of capitalism or proposals for the civilising of capitalism have been considered to be worthy of entry into the ‘voyager’s log’ of the course to the ‘Promised Land’. Most histories of economic thought selectively engage ‘socialism’ only through Marxism. These observations of the highly selective nature of histories of economic thought are not new (see, eg, Heilbroner 1979; Eff 1989; McCloskey 1983; Strassman 1993; Schabas 1992). It is still worth asking the question Schumpeter (1972, p.34) asked half a century ago, ‘Is the History of Economics a History of Ideologies?’

If the scientific basis of (neo-classical) economic theory is thought to be a defence against the criticisms of the historiography of economic thought noted above, history can counter-attack. Early French socialists believed their work to be scientific:

The socialist perspective was universally understood by its advocates to be the product of scientific inquiry, *la science sociale*. This . . . was virtually a fanatical viewpoint. Socialism . . . was a movement of ideas, a triumph of the human mind . . . The scientific ideas themselves were seen as the

product of man's naturally inventive mind coming to grips with the experiences of real life, such as, for example, a thwarted Revolution and the depredations of competitive capitalism (Corcoran 1983, p.7).

Marx and the self-styled anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1809-1865) were each thoroughly convinced of the scientific basis of their socialist and anarchist thought respectively. Proudhon can be heard in 1840 asserting that

By means of self-instruction and the acquisition of ideas, man finally acquires the idea of *science*, - that is, of a system of knowledge in harmony with the reality of things, and inferred from observation . . . And just as the right of force and the right of artifice retreat before the steady advance of justice . . . so the sovereignty of the will yields to the sovereignty of the reason, and must at last be lost in scientific socialism (Proudhon 1970, pp.276-7).

Note that these were the words of Proudhon, the anarchist, calling for 'scientific socialism', not those of Marx, who was still at University working on his Doctoral thesis at that time (McLennan, 1980, p.52). Science has been accessible to all ideologies.

The first part of this paper opens up intellectual 'space' within the genre of 'histories of economic thought' through a deconstruction of the notion of 'economic thought' and therefore its histories. This is achieved by a special focus on the anthropological and historical insights of the economic historian, Karl Polanyi, specifically his 'substantive' definition of the economy, and his demonstration of the social embeddedness of the economy. The characterisation and characteristics of 'communitarian anarchism' are then explored. The second part of the paper provides an overview of some of the basic economic ideas expressed by the leading communitarian anarchist theorist at the end of the nineteenth century, Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921), as an example of communitarian anarchist economic thought. The paper concludes that a generic approach to histories of economic thought cannot exclude communitarian anarchist thought on any grounds other than ideological bias.<sup>2</sup>

## **DECONSTRUCTION OF 'ECONOMIC THOUGHT'**

### **Polanyi and generic economic thought**

It is abundantly clear that if the current hegemonic high ground of the neo-classical 'economics' paradigm is viewed in its historical place, 'economic thought' as a term needs to decompose into a generic meaning. The neo-classical paradigm occupies a place in history and in the present, but it has never occupied history, or the present, alone. There have always been competing discourses. As soon as the need for decomposition of histories of 'economic thought' from sole focus on the neo-classical paradigm is acknowledged, the door is open more widely for other discourses to contribute to its meaning.

Social thinkers who could make such contributions include Karl Polanyi, Thorstein Veblen, Emile Durkheim, Peter Kropotkin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Karl Marx, John Kenneth Galbraith, Gunnar Myrdal, E. F. (Fritz) Schumacher, and many others, from various political persuasions and academic disciplines, and especially those adopting historical and anthropological insights. There is an implicit and often explicit call within these works for a return to an essential humanist perspective in production and distribution of our basic means of subsistence. It will suffice for the purpose of this paper to draw upon the work of Karl Polanyi (1957a, 1957b, 1957c

and 1977) to open up the intellectual 'space' for a claim for a legitimate place for the communitarian anarchism of Kropotkin within histories of economic thought. Polanyi made strenuous efforts to isolate the ideological from the ethnographic dimensions of an essential human 'economy'. Institutional economists and economic anthropologists particularly are aware of the analytical value of Polanyi's work.<sup>3</sup>

The value of Polanyi's insights for economists and historians is the way in which he tried to cut through ideology in economics; to the extent that he has become difficult to categorise into any particular stream or 'school' of thought. That circumstance itself can be taken to be a measure of his success. Polanyi's 'vision' was of a 'free, co-operative, democratic and just society based on social ownership and control of economic resources' and was 'not grounded in technological or economic determinism' (Polanyi-Levitt 1994, p.130). He was essentially a humanist and a free thinker. There are two main aspects of Polanyi's work which are especially relevant to opening up the concept of 'economic thought' here. They are his 'substantive' definition of the economy, and his demonstration of the social embeddedness of all economies.

Polanyi (1957a, pp.243-4) considered two meanings of the word 'economic' which have 'independent roots': 'substantive' and 'formal'. The 'formal' definition 'refers to a definite situation of choice, mainly, that between the different uses of means induced by an insufficiency of those means' - it is a 'logic of rational action'. It is this 'formal' definition which underpins the neo-classical paradigm. The 'substantive' definition 'derives from man's dependence for his living upon nature and his fellows. *It refers to the interchange with his natural and social environment, in so far as this results in supplying him with the means of material want satisfaction*'. In the 'substantive' definition, if there is choice, 'it need not be induced by the limiting effect of a "scarcity" of the means...'. Polanyi referred here to water, air, and a loving mother's devotion to her infant as examples. Polanyi's substantive definition of the economy makes no commitment to any notions of choice or scarcity or insufficiency of means in the way in which they are basic postulates of the neo-classical economics paradigm: 'Choice...does not necessarily imply insufficiency of means. But neither does insufficiency of means imply either choice or scarcity' (Polanyi 1977, p.26). These notions are each contingent on prevailing circumstances in society and are wholly variable possibilities rather than irrefutable assumptions.

It is this 'substantive' definition which provides one way of deconstructing the expression 'economic thought' from the strictures of the neo-classical economics paradigm. As Polanyi (1957a, p.244) observed, 'only the substantive meaning of "economic" is capable of yielding the concepts that are required by the social sciences for an investigation of all the empirical economies of the past and present'. Polanyi was not talking of a purely theoretical approach here; it is anthropological and empirical. It is a concept of 'economic' which involves a society as it was and as it is, or could be. As the Institutionalist economist Gülbahar Tezel (1996, pp.607-8) has noted;

It is a minimal definition of economy which calls attention to similarities among economies otherwise as different as those of the Trobriand Islands, nineteenth century Britain and the planned economy of the Soviet Union.

The second aspect of Polanyi's work that is relevant here is his conclusion that the economy is embedded in society: 'The outstanding discovery of recent historical and anthropological research is that man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social relationships. He does not act so as to safeguard his individual interest in the possession of material goods; he acts so as to safeguard his social standing, his social

claims, his social assets. He values material goods only in so far as they serve this end' (1957b, p.46). There can be no distinction between the economy and the rest of society, except that which has been artificially created by the development of abstract economic theory based on the idea of a self-regulating market. As Polanyi concluded:

The institutional structure of the economy need not compel, as with the market system, economising actions. The implications of such an insight for all the social sciences which must deal with the economy could hardly be more far-reaching. Nothing less than a fundamentally different starting point for the analysis of the human economy as a social process is required (1957c, p.240).

In 1848, the anarchist thinker Proudhon had asserted that 'political economy is not the science of society, but contains, in itself, the materials of that science, in the same way that chaos before the creation contained the elements of the universe' (cited in Cohen 1927, p.58). For Proudhon also, political economy (capitalist 'classical economics' in his time) could not set itself above social reality; it was a part of the society which it inhabited. The economy was socially embedded, and it will be seen shortly that Kropotkin held a similar belief.

## **CHARACTERISATIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITARIAN ANARCHISM**

### **Characterisations of anarchism**

Anarchism has been most often understood to involve violent revolutionary overthrowing of the existing state (and its economic system) with nothing more than anarchy (meaning unstructured social chaos), or a 'utopian' dream of harmonious communal life, as a post-revolutionary outcome for society. Whereas these perceptions and imperatives can be found in numerous published definitions of anarchism<sup>4</sup>, they are far from being representative of anarchist theorising about the characteristics of future society.

The undeniable violence of some elements of anarchist activism, especially late in the nineteenth century, must be read into the bloody context of state colonialist activities outside of Britain and Western Europe, and considered in the context of state repression through restrictive laws and police action against socialist and anarchist protest activities which opposed contemporary economic and political systems (see Kropotkin 1988, pp.118-119). The question of revolution was always, to anarchists, a choice between violent overthrow of a system which was seen by them never to be capable of reforming itself, and a more evolutionary 'social revolution' which would take time, perhaps even generations, together with widespread education of the people. Albert Lindemann (1983, p.159) has noted that 'The bomb throwers undoubtedly gained the most attention, but most anarchists expressed a preference for nonviolent solutions'.

Until at least the middle of the nineteenth century, there was no clarity of differences between anarchists or between anarchisms and socialisms. As Paul Corcoran (1983, pp.1-2, emphasis in original) points out, 'Early French socialism was already a richly elaborated political, intellectual and literary movement when Karl Marx was still a student at the University of Berlin', and that 'socialist ideas had gained a *wide currency* in France by 1840'. Not only were many of the doctrines of Marx's so-called 'scientific socialism' anticipated or espoused by early French socialists and the anarchist Proudhon, but there was, at least in the early work of Marx

and Engels, little difference between their ideas and those of the early socialists and anarchists.<sup>5</sup> The basic common ground was a commitment to social justice and community control of land and the means of production (Williams 1988, pp.286-287). In a discussion of the anarchist thought of Kropotkin in 1918, the logical-positivist philosopher and state socialist Bertrand Russell felt able to assert that 'The *economic* organization of society, as conceived by Anarchist Communists, does not differ greatly from that which is sought by Socialists. Their difference from Socialists is in the matter of government...' (1970, p.50, emphasis in original).

The hegemony of Marxist 'scientific socialism' by the end of the nineteenth century has overwhelmed knowledge today of the mosaic of syncretic and differing generic socialist and anarchist ideas which were thoroughly alive throughout the century.<sup>6</sup> It is important to note Lindemann's (1983, p.159) suggestion that, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the 'followers' of anarchism, 'while scattered, inconstant, and often difficult to identify, probably exceeded in absolute numbers for Europe as a whole the followers of the Marxists'.

As far as the labelling of socialisms or anarchism as being 'utopian' is concerned, the practice has only had relevance from competing ideological perspectives, even within the discourse of socialism generally:

The early French socialists not infrequently attacked each other for being 'utopian', and the phrase 'French utopian socialism' became a commonplace in Marxist and non-Marxist literature to refer to Saint-Simon, Fourier, Proudhon and a few other obscure writers, largely by way of acknowledging them as 'precursors' of Marxism before dismissing them (Corcoran 1983, p.11).

All competing ideologies have seen each other as being 'utopian'. The naked appearance of the label 'utopian' should always sound a warning of the need for close examination of its meaning and the reasons for its use in those particular circumstances.<sup>7</sup>

### **Characteristics of communitarian anarchism**

Communitarian anarchism is best seen as a form of generic socialism, an imperative for community solidarity and social justice, common possession of land and the means of production, but which denies the need for a state.<sup>8</sup> The concept of a 'state' can be problematic in this context. It is most relevant to hear an anarchist speak on the subject:

The state idea means something quite different from the idea of government. It not only includes the existence of a power situated above society, but also of a territorial concentration as well as the concentration of many functions of the life of societies in the hands of a few . . . see in it the institution, developed in the history of human societies, to prevent direct association among men, to shackle the development of local and individual initiative, to crush existing liberties, to prevent their new blossoming - all this in order to subject the masses to the will of the minorities (Kropotkin 1975, pp.213,259).

The 'communitarian' label is necessary in order to differentiate a community form of anarchism from an individualist form. By the end of the nineteenth century, there had developed two distinct streams of anarchist thought; distinct from each other, and each distinct from state socialism. Individualist anarchism argued that the liberty of the individual was paramount and that, within society, each should be free to

follow one's own will without restraint. There should be no need for a state to control society or to dictate behavioural rules or norms to the individual.

The foremost historian of anarchism at the end of the nineteenth century, Max Nettlau (1865-1944) who knew many of the individualist and communitarian anarchists personally, traced the roots of individualist anarchism to America, in the form of what he called 'libertarian spiritualism', a reaction against the growing authoritarianism and 'the political machine' in America in the late eighteenth century (Nettlau 1996, Ch.3). One of the members of the famous American Owenite community 'New Harmony', Josiah Warren (1798-1874), in the mid-1820's broke away from the community life and espoused a theory of individualist anarchism. Warren believed that 'social community living, conducted in a spirit of altruism, was a practical impossibility . . . [he] came to repudiate any compulsion that a collective group might impose on individuals for the performance of public services' (Nettlau 1996, pp.32-3). Warren's ideas spread widely, especially through his books *Equitable Commerce* (1846) and *Practical Details in Equitable Commerce* (1852), and through the lectures and writings of a follower of Warren, Stephen Pearl Andrews. Later in the century, these ideas were taken forward by many others (Nettlau 1996, pp.33-6). Whilst within the writings of some individualist anarchists it may be possible to discern elements of a need for community co-operation, it does not follow that such characteristics represent a fundamental commitment to the community as a basis for social life. It is this latter commitment which essentially differentiates between the two, almost opposing, streams of anarchist thought.

In contrast, the communitarian anarchists 'had faith in people's associative and federative tendencies' and their propensity to form communal groups of cooperation and solidarity. They were anti-statist, and fought against the growing monopolisation of capital and its ill-effects on the common people (Nettlau 1996, pp.45-51). Community solidarity was therefore an idea both of refuge and refusal. Proudhon was the first comprehensive exponent of these ideas of 'positive anarchy', with belief in a natural 'social instinct' which underpinned social justice:

To practise justice is to obey the social instinct; to do an act of justice is to do a social act...man is moved by an internal attraction towards his fellow, by a secret sympathy which causes him to love, congratulate, condole; so that, to resist this attraction, his will must struggle against his nature (Proudhon 1970, pp.226-7).

Josiah Warren believed that 'self-sovereignty is an instinct of every living organism . . .' (Warren 1863, p.10). We can see Warren's individualist 'instinct' juxtaposed against the 'social instinct' of Proudhon. Proudhon's and other communitarian anarchist ideas spread widely towards the end of the century, especially in the aftermath of the so-called 'Darwinian revolution', to become more finely articulated in the writings of intellectual anarchists such as Élisée Reclus (1830-1905) and Peter Kropotkin's evolutionary-inspired concept of 'mutual aid' (see Fleming 1979; Kropotkin 1972a). Communitarian anarchism requires some form of commitment, whether philosophical or evolutionary, to the notions of human solidarity and a propensity for spontaneous co-operation in the absence of restraining state, political, or economic power from above.

## COMMUNITARIAN ANARCHIST ECONOMIC THOUGHT

### Kropotkin and the marginalisation of anarchist economic thought

By the turn of the nineteenth century, Peter Alexeivich Kropotkin, a Russian prince-turned-anarchist, had become the seminal theorist of communitarian anarchism – ‘anarchist communism’ in his terminology (Lindemann 1983, pp.158-9,162). Born into a Russian aristocratic family, becoming a member of the Corps of Pages in the Tsar’s palace, Kropotkin was destined for an aristocratic military career. For reasons which he set out in detail in his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, he resiled from that predestined path, becoming eventually an internationally respected geographer, with one of the best educations Russia could provide (Kropotkin 1971). To date, virtually all analyses of his life and his work have concentrated on the biographical and political dimensions: his early life in Russia, the years of anarchist activism in Switzerland and France, and his perceived role as a sage or prophet for the itinerant and exiled anarchists of Europe. Kropotkin was an intellectual by aspiration and by profession, and he had a familiarity with political economy through his early studies as a young aristocrat in Russia. His political writings from their earliest days possessed economic underpinnings (see Cole 1964, pp.342-8; Woodcock & Avakumovic 1970, p.90; Kropotkin 1971, esp. the essay ‘Expropriation’).

The voice of Schumpeter can offer a positive opinion regarding the history of anarchist economic thought, and Kropotkin’s work in particular. His *History of Economic Analysis*, first published in 1954 (although relating back to an earlier ‘sketch’ of 1914) is a classic work within the history of economic thought (Roll 1973, p.12n). Schumpeter’s *History* included a very short discussion of anarchism, and Kropotkin was acknowledged, though in a footnote:

The best known communist thinker of the subsequent period [after Bakunin], P.A. Kropotkin (1842-1921), is a different case [to Bakunin]. He [Kropotkin] made non-negligible efforts at analysis and his sociology of law is not without interest, though sufficiently so to warrant his exclusion from our report. Of course, for a history of economic and political thought (as contrasted with analysis), both he and Bakunin are of immense importance. And still more so for a sociology of economic and political thought. How tsarist society came to produce - in its higher and highest circles - revolutionary communism is in itself a fascinating problem: a crack cavalry regiment was not the worst of nurseries for communist impulses (Schumpeter 1972, p.458n).<sup>9</sup>

Schumpeter’s engagement with, and marginalising of, Kropotkin was explicit. He implied that Kropotkin’s work did not make a direct contribution to neoclassical economic analysis (Schumpeter 1972, pp.34-43). His noting of the ‘immense importance’ of Kropotkin’s work to ‘a history of economic and political thought’, however, is especially telling given Schumpeter’s credentials as a historian of economic thought. His assertion that Kropotkin made ‘non-negligible efforts at analysis’ was a gross understatement; one has only to read Kropotkin’s *Fields, Factories, and Workshops* to understand the breadth and depth of Kropotkin’s ‘efforts at analysis’ (Kropotkin, n.d.).

Just after the turn of the century, a definitive history of ‘economic doctrines’ had seriously attempted to engage with anarchism, and took special note of Kropotkin’s ideas. Gide and Rist’s (1915) *A History of Economic Doctrines* was first published in 1909. Apparently following Eltzbacher’s history of a group of prominent

anarchists, titled *Anarchism*,<sup>10</sup> their account of anarchism concentrated on the writings of Proudhon, Bakunin, Kropotkin (called by Gide and Rist ‘the real founders of anarchy’) Jean Grave, and Élisée Reclus. Gide and Rist’s work indicated that they were aware of the early polemical writings of Kropotkin as well as his later writings, *The Conquest of Bread* and *Mutual Aid*. They gave an exposition of ‘Anarchist’ society, based primarily on Kropotkin’s writings, but added that revolution was a ‘necessary part of the anarchist doctrine’. They especially focussed on the writings of Kropotkin and Bakunin regarding revolution and, whilst noting that these activists did not revel in violence, they concluded that violent revolution was ‘the real programme of the anarchists’. In this way, Gide and Rist exhibited mixed chronologies of anarchist writings and, despite the extensive range of material of which they were aware and which was available to them, they concluded polemically that violence was at the core of anarchist thought (see Gide & Rist 1915, pp.xv,637n,637-639).

It is probable that the influence of Eltzbacher’s history of anarchism distorted the record of late nineteenth century anarchist thought, especially through ‘the implicit rejection of the importance of the socialist impulse within the thought of the European anarchists’ (Fleming, 1979, pp.20-21). Gide and Rist may have been misguided in this way. In any event, they fell into political economy ‘pedigree-plotting’. As Stark (1994, pp.161-162) has noted, ‘Gide and Rist...add dogmatic *valuations* from the standpoint of modern doctrine, which is made the touchstone of right and wrong’. Despite value judgements, Gide and Rist did engage with anarchist doctrines sufficiently seriously to discuss the influence of ‘anarchy’ on ‘the working classes in general’. They concluded that anarchist activism had led to a revival of individualism and that it had ‘begotten a reaction against the centralising socialism of Marx’. Its success had been ‘especially great’ in Latin nations and Austria, ‘where it seemed for a time as if it would supplant socialism altogether’. Anarchism had also experienced ‘very marked progress’ in France, Italy and Spain (Gide & Rist, 1915, p.640). Apart from Schumpeter’s footnote, this was apparently the last occasion when a ‘mainstream’ history of economic thought took account of anarchism.

### **Kropotkin’s economic thought: an overview**

There was a hard core of ‘scientific’ thought which underscored Kropotkin’s writings. This was particularly evident in those produced during his life in exile in Britain: from 1886, when he arrived fresh from a French prison, until his return to Russia in 1917. This was a stable period in Kropotkin’s life, in contrast to the political repression he had experienced as an active anarchist in continental Europe. He relished his family life in Britain and the opportunity he found for pursuit of his intellectual goals (Cole 1964, pp.347-8). Although in Kropotkin’s study ‘The walls were lined with books up to the ceiling [and] the desk was heaped with papers and periodicals’ (Rocker 1956, p.148), his anarchist thought did not emerge from a mind closeted with dusty books. As Kropotkin remarked, ‘anarchy and communism’ was not ‘the product of philosophic speculators, created by savants in dim lights of their studies . . . [it was] Born of the people . . .’ (1992, p.71).

In contrast to the belief in the need for a state and notions of entrenched individual and state competitive struggle which were so much in evidence towards the end of the century (Cole 1953, pp.98,103-104; Read 1994, pp.221,224), Kropotkin perceived a tendency towards human solidarity or social co-operation in history and in contemporary society, which he translated into his economic thought through the evolutionary notion of ‘mutual aid’. For Kropotkin, it was the competitive



underpinnings of capitalist political economy, and the authoritarian character of both capitalist and (prospective) socialist societies, which led him to articulate a dissenting political economy of ‘anarchist communism’.

Kropotkin was well-aware of the intellectual impact of his anarchist communist approach on the concept of political economy more generally: ‘There is not one single principle of Political Economy that does not change its aspect if you look at it from our point of view’ (1972b, p.193). This was written in the early 1890s at a time when Alfred Marshall had assumed a leading role in British economic thought. Kropotkin was not referring to the classical political economy of Smith and Ricardo; he was confronting the emerging neo-classical paradigm. Kropotkin defined political economy from a ‘world-concept’ perspective: ‘Anarchism is a world-concept based upon a mechanical explanation of all phenomena, embracing the whole of nature - that is, including in it the life of human societies and their economic, political, and moral problems’ (1968b, p.150). For Kropotkin, it followed that political economy

ought to occupy with respect to human societies a place in science similar to that held by physiology in relation to plants and animals...It should aim at *studying the needs of society and the various means, both hitherto used and available under the present state of scientific knowledge, for their satisfaction*. It should try to analyze how far the present means are expedient and satisfactory, economic or wasteful; and then, since the ultimate end of every science (as Bacon had already stated) is obviously prediction and practical application to the demands of life, it should concern itself with the discovery of means for the satisfaction of these needs with the smallest possible waste of labor and with the greatest benefit to mankind in general (1968b, p.180, emphasis in original).

Kropotkin was precise in this definition and appears to have carefully weighed his words; he was articulating a connection between ‘modern science’ and ‘anarchism’. In abridged or slightly varied forms, he had retained this concept of political economy throughout his writings. It was at once, ‘world-concept’, natural-scientific, and directed towards satisfying the essential needs of all humanity.

In *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin noted the ‘essential basis of all Political Economy’ as being ‘the study of the most favourable conditions for giving society the greatest amount of useful products with the least waste of human energy . . .’ (1972b, p.160). Kropotkin’s reference to ‘useful products’ did not imply a production-oriented approach to political economy: ‘Anarchism understands...that in political economy attention must be directed first of all to so-called “consumption” . . . so as to provide food, clothing and shelter for all . . . “Production”, on the other hand, must be so adapted as to satisfy this primary, fundamental need of society’ (1968b, p.193). He noted that, in the same way as anarchist communism looked at ‘society and its political organization’ from a perspective which differed from that of ‘all the authoritarian schools’,

We study needs of the individuals, and the means by which we satisfy them, before discussing Production, Exchange, Taxation, Government, and so on...If you open the works of any economist you will find that he begins with PRODUCTION, i.e., by the analysis of the means employed nowadays for the creation of wealth...From Adam Smith to Marx, all have proceeded along these lines . . . Only in the latter parts of their books do they treat of CONSUMPTION, that is to say, of the means resorted to in our present society to satisfy the needs of the individuals . . . (1972b, p.190, emphasis in original).

For Kropotkin, whilst it could be claimed that it was logical to start with production - 'before satisfying needs you must create the wherewithal to satisfy them' - it would be at least as logical 'to begin by considering the needs, and afterwards to discuss how production is, and ought to be, organized, in order to satisfy these needs' (1972b, p.190).

Kropotkin's writings exhibited a commitment to evolutionary 'science'. He considered Darwin's *Origin of Species* to be an 'immortal work' which 'revolutionalized all biological sciences'. However he had only a fragmentary and highly conditional acceptance of parts of Spencer's writings; even though he was unreserved in his claim that Spencer had 'fully proved the necessity of placing the principles of morality on a scientific basis . . .' (1971, pp.97,115; 1968c, p.295). In his pursuit of science, Kropotkin was very much a part of, and a product of, a post-Darwinian and positivist intellectual environment. It was evident both in his professional career as a geographer and in his anarchist theorising. His 1902 pamphlet *Modern Science and Anarchism* exhibited a deep connection between his anarchism and 'science'. For Kropotkin, anarchism's 'complete scientific basis' could only be developed after 'that awakening of naturalism which brought into being the natural-scientific study of human social institutions' (1968b, p.192).

Kropotkin utilised 'social investigation' as a fundamental methodology. Empirical inquiry and data collection were youthful elements in Kropotkin's 'scientific' mode of thought and became crucial to his later theoretical work (Kropotkin 1971, p.103). He used 'social investigation' to enable him to acquire data and statistics from which he deduced and supported the core theses of his political economy. The material from which Kropotkin drew his 'data' was extensive and non-partisan. His sources were primarily British, French, German, and Russian. This methodology was far from unique to Kropotkin, although it was a relatively recent innovation in social inquiry in Britain. McBriar has noted that 'the Socialists were dependent on the work of social investigators - of Charles Booth above all'. Socialists interpreted Booth's (and others) findings as meaning that 'scientific investigation had tipped the balance decisively in favour of social causes of poverty being more important than individual failings' (McBriar 1987, p.90).<sup>11</sup>

The components of Kropotkin's integrated view of anarchist communism were drawn together in the following words, reproduced here at length as they paint efficiently an overall picture of the genesis of a communitarian anarchist commune, in this case, Paris (1972b, pp.103-104)<sup>12</sup>:

With all the mechanical inventions of the century; with all the intelligence and technical skill of the worker accustomed to deal with complicated machinery; with inventors, chemists, professors of botany, practical botanists like the market gardeners of Gennevilliers; with all the plant that they could use for multiplying and improving machinery; and, finally, with the organizing spirit of the Parisian people, their pluck and energy - with all these at its command, the agriculture of the anarchist Commune of Paris would be a very different thing from the rude husbandry of the Ardennes.

Steam, electricity, the heat of the sun and the breath of the wind, will ere long be pressed into service. The steam plough and the steam harrow will quickly do the rough work of preparation, and the soil, thus cleaned and enriched, will only need the intelligent care of man, and of woman even more than man, to be clothed with luxuriant vegetation - not once but three or four times in the year.

He then drew out the social returns from this approach to political economy:

Thus, learning the art of horticulture from experts, and trying experiments in different methods on small patches of soil reserved for the purpose, vying with each other to obtain the best returns, finding in physical exercise, without exhaustion or overwork, the health and strength which so often flags in cities - men, women and children will gladly turn to the labour of the fields, when it is no longer a slavish drudgery, but has become a pleasure, a festival, a renewal of health and joy . . .

Significantly for an understanding of Kropotkin's political economy, the concept of the 'commune' developed and became complex in his thought. It was no longer that of a small self-contained village community: 'For us, "commune" no longer means a territorial agglomeration; it is rather a generic name, a synonym for the grouping of equals which knows neither frontiers nor walls.' The 'commune' had become a community of interests, without geographical boundaries:

The social Commune will soon cease to be a clearly defined entity...there will emerge a Commune of interests whose members are scattered in a thousand towns and villages. Each individual will find the full satisfaction of his needs only by grouping with other individuals who have the same tastes but inhabit a hundred other communes (1992, pp.88-9).

The rapid growth and global spread in usage of the Internet, largely outside of the control or direction of any state, immediately springs to mind as potentially facilitating Kropotkin's anarchistic 'communes of interests'. A similar comment could be made with respect to satellite communications. Kropotkin would have been excited to see technology move in these border-crossing directions.

It is important not to misunderstand Kropotkin's view of communitarian anarchist society by considering only this variable institution of a 'commune', whether of territory or of interests. The commune idea has often been used as a basis for denigrating anarchist ideas. Kropotkin was well aware of this. He acknowledged that once food and shelter requirements had been satisfied, the need for less-essential goods or pursuits would be 'more keenly felt'. Almost anticipating a parody of many 'hippie' communes of the 1960s, Kropotkin noted that (as the founders of 'new societies...in American deserts' had realised) after essential needs had been met, 'a music-room in which the "brothers" could strum a piece of music, or act a play from time to time' was not enough (1972b, p.125). He persuasively described the way in which institutions such as the Red Cross Society (which operates voluntarily even under the fire of war), the Lifeboat Association, cross-border Postal Union co-operation, the co-operation in railway construction across Europe without directing authority, and 'thousands' of other examples have each associated and co-operated voluntarily (1968a, pp.65-68). His vision was for 'the highest development of voluntary association in all its aspects, in all possible degrees, for all imaginable aims; ever changing, ever modified associations which carry in themselves the elements of their durability and constantly assume new forms which answer best to the multiple aspirations of all' (1968d, p.124). There was no question as to whether or not anarchist society would comprise social or economic institutions:

Communist customs and institutions are of absolute necessity for society, not only to solve economic difficulties, but also to maintain and develop social customs that bring men in contact with one another (1968d, p.137).

For Kropotkin, a new form of economy embedded in society would bring about a new form of political society. There was no fundamental difference between Marx and Kropotkin in this belief. Kropotkin was under no illusion that 'politics' would simply disappear in communitarian anarchism. He was a realist. 'A new form of

political organization has to be worked out the moment that socialist principles shall enter into our life. And it is self-evident that this new form will have to be *more popular, more decentralized, and nearer to the folk-mote self-government* than representative government can ever be' (1968b, p.184, emphasis in original). There are echoes of this mode of thought to be heard in present political societies.

Kropotkin's political economy was a 'world-concept'. There would be 'plenty for all' in terms of available resources; that is, he denied the existence of fundamental scarcity of resources to produce human needs. In this way, his political economy was in sharp contrast to the assumption of scarcity which underpinned classical political economy. The aim of anarchist communism was to produce for the consumption needs of all human-kind, not just for the privileged few. Kropotkin was scathing in his criticism of the way in which Malthus' writings on the world's inability to feed its population had influenced 'the wealth-possessing minority'. For Kropotkin, 'Few books have exercised so pernicious an influence upon the general development of economic thought...' (n.d., p.158). He described the presence of Malthus' thought within the neo-classical economics paradigm in the following way:

This postulate stands, undiscussed, in the background of whatever political economy, classical or socialist, has to say about exchange-value, wages, sale of labour force, rent, exchange, and consumption. Political economy never rises above the hypothesis of a *limited and insufficient supply of the necessaries of life*; it takes it for granted. And all theories connected with political economy retain the same erroneous principle. Nearly all socialists, too, admit the postulate (n.d., pp.159-160, emphasis in original).

The driving force of Kropotkin's political economy arose from his perceived need to satisfy the needs of all; to achieve the 'greatest good for all', to provide a measure of 'wealth and ease' for all.

Kropotkin had called for a reduction in working hours and a shorter working life. It would be possible to 'guarantee well-being' to all members of a society in a working week consisting of only 'five hours a day from the age of twenty or twenty-two to forty-five or fifty . . .' (1972b, p.123). Here was a crucial point of difference with classical political economy: 'Unfortunately, the metaphysics called political economy has never troubled about that which should have been its essence - economy of labour' (1968d, p.130). He believed that bourgeois economic thought had taken no interest in these aspects of economy in the life of the worker: 'few economists, as yet, have recognised that this is the proper domain of economics...' (n.d., pp.ix-x).

The notion of 'capital' was another essential difference between political economists and Kropotkin. It was obviously central to capitalist political economy, and Kropotkin was well aware of its function. In an uncomfortable reflection of the nature of 'capital' a century later (see e.g. Hutton 1996, Ch.3, Ch.10), he observed that:

We are told that capital, that product of work of all humankind which has been accumulated in the hands of the few, is fleeing from agriculture and industry for lack of confidence. But where will it find its perch, once it has left the strong-boxes? It can go to furnish the harems of the Sultan . . . it can supply the wars . . . it can be used to found a joint stock company, not to produce anything, but simply to lead in a couple of years to a scandalous failure . . . But above all, capital can plunge into speculation, the great game of the stock exchange . . . Speculation killing industry - that is what they call the intelligent management of business! (1992, p.22).

The 'capital' of capitalist political economy was seen by Kropotkin as being to the benefit of the few and of little productive use in terms of his own goal for human

society; the well-being of all. In an astute series of observations, Kropotkin noted that “Knowledge ignores artificial political boundaries. So also do the industries . . .”; and ‘Capital is international and, protection or no protection, it crosses the frontiers’ (n.d., pp.22,36).<sup>13</sup> These observations have since become widely acknowledged through concepts such as the ‘globalisation of capital’ (and ‘globalisation’ generally) within today’s politics and economics.

Élisée Reclus, in 1885, gave us a glimpse of the man who was the source of this economic thought, in this lament of society’s vilification of Kropotkin:

Among those who have observed his life from near or far, there is nobody who does not respect him, who does not bear witness to his great intelligence and his heart overflowing with goodwill...His crime has been to love the poor and the powerless; his offense has been to plead their cause. Public opinion is unanimous in respecting this man, and yet it is not surprised to see the prison door close firmly upon him . . . (Kropotkin 1992, ‘Introduction’, p.16).<sup>14</sup>

It is time that Kropotkin’s economic thought was released from its century-long intellectual prison.

In locating Kropotkin’s economic thought in confrontation with other political economies, there is a need to be as specific as possible as to which political economy or stream of economic thought is being confronted. Concurrently with Kropotkin’s development of anarchist communist political economy, Alfred Marshall, Professor of Political Economy at Cambridge University from 1885, was pulling together the threads of political economy into a seminal work. It is notable that, in his *Principles of Economics* and in an earlier essay, Marshall (1922, pp.23, 252, 782; 1925b, pp.110-118) can be found engaged in discussion of concepts such as ‘pleasurable work’, ‘brain work’ and ‘manual work’, halving the typical hours of work, and the benefits of intellectual and artistic enjoyment for the worker. He could also seriously contemplate a society where private property was unknown and where ‘public honours’ could substitute for money as a measure of ‘the strength of motives’. These are echoes, perhaps spectres, of Kropotkin’s mode of thought - even if not of Kropotkin’s writings.

Kropotkin’s economic thought can readily withstand detailed comparison with competing economic discourses of his time. His ‘world-concept’ economic thought sits comfortably within Polanyi’s substantive definition of the economy and anticipates Polanyi’s insight into the social embeddedness of the economy. Kropotkin did not deny the necessity for institutions within anarchist political economy and he was under no illusions as to the value to the community of modern industry and innovation. For Kropotkin, communitarian anarchist political economy came from the people and it was therefore in its essence a “political economy from below”. He threw down this challenge to competing political economies:

Whether or not anarchism is right in its conclusions will be shown by a scientific criticism of its bases and by the practical life of the future...Its conclusions can be verified only by the same natural-scientific, inductive method by which every science and every scientific concept of the universe is created (1968b, p.193).

## **Concluding remarks**

Kropotkin’s work did not fall or fade into obscurity after it was published. His writings were widely read and were translated into many different languages in his

own time and since: 'Kropotkin's work in the field of anarchist teaching was popularized through cheap pamphlets, sold up into the hundreds of thousands in practically every European language, and Chinese and Japanese as well' (Baldwin 1968, p.31). It was the communitarian anarchism of Kropotkin which found its way to Chinese intellectuals in the early years of the Chinese Revolution, before Marxist socialism had begun to take a firm hold in their own thought (Pickowicz 1990, pp.450-467). Diego Abad de Santillan acknowledged that Kropotkin's work was the major influence in anarchist economic thought associated with the Spanish Civil War during the 1930s (Kern 1978, p.137). Kropotkin's communitarian anarchism also had a deep effect on the German anarchist Gustav Landauer, who was influential in early theorising regarding Israel's 'kibbutz' concepts. Landauer first translated many of Kropotkin's writings into German (Hyman 1977, pp.38-9, 61, 98-9). Today, many writings of 'deep ecologists' who seek a decentralised and less brutal industrialised society look to the communitarian anarchism of Kropotkin, amongst that of other anarchist thinkers from the past (see esp. Bookchin 1972).

Does the nature of economic thought really matter? Are the histories really of any significance to human society? Today's capitalist societies are increasingly fragmenting. The opening gap between rich and poor, the growth of informal economies, the failure of the 'market economy' to naturally germinate in the fertile soil of the ex-state socialist countries, the continuing humanitarian catastrophes of starving people (see e.g. Mingione 1991), indicate that we have not reached the 'end of economics'. There is need for any and all economic thought to be accessible in the search for solutions to social and environmental degradation. Through utilising the insights of Polanyi (who has been unfairly called upon here to stand alone in providing an analytical basis for deconstructing the notion of 'economic thought') it has been shown that there is more than sufficient intellectual 'space' for positive dissenting discourses within histories of economic thought. There is no reason whatsoever, other than ideological bias, why the economic thought embodied in communitarian anarchism should not hold a place within histories of economic thought. Alfred Marshall, in 1897, comparing contemporary economists with the 'old', drew a colourful sketch of the increasing power of the 'science' of economics, and economists:

They no longer wield the big battle-axe and sound the loud war cry like a Coeur de Lion; they keep in the background like a modern general: but they control larger forces than before. They exert a more far-reaching and more powerful influence on ideas: and ideas fashion the world ever more and more (1925a, p.297).

It is the power/knowledge wielded by ideologically selective histories which makes it imperative to rectify the neglect of discourses such as that of communitarian anarchism.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this historiographical approach see, for example, Skinner (1988, pp.246-7); LaCapra (1980, p.275). See also arguments which advocate an “anti-foundational anthropological epistemology” as playing ‘an important role in prescribing the forms of explanation appropriate to the history of ideas’ (Bevir 1999, p.218).

<sup>2</sup> The word ‘ideology’ as used in this paper reflects the Marxist insight, expressed clearly by Schumpeter: ‘people’s ideas are likely to glorify the interests and actions of the classes that are in a position to assert themselves and therefore are likely to draw or to imply pictures of them that may be seriously at variance with the truth’. Of course, ‘truth’ itself is a variable, but ‘ideology’ essentially represents the wielding of power (Schumpeter 1972, p.35).

<sup>3</sup> For strong support of Polanyi’s historical and anthropological analysis of the embeddedness of the economy, see Stanfield (1989, pp.267-9). See also Halperin (1994) especially Ch.1 and Ch. 2, for her development of a generic model of the economy based on Polanyi’s anthropological insights. See also, for example, Stanfield (1986); Hodgson (1999); North (1977); Tezel (1996).

<sup>4</sup> For an early version see, for example, *Palgrave’s Dictionary of Political Economy*, (1925) p.38; more recently, see Williams (1988) p.38.

<sup>5</sup> Corcoran (1983, p.14) notes: ‘It can be widely demonstrated that early French socialist thinkers developed ideas later claimed as original with Marxian historical materialism’. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon was ‘very much the ancestor of much Syndicalist and Anarchist-Communist thought...’, despite his being often labelled a socialist - which today implies state socialism. See also Cole (1965) pp.202, 214.

<sup>6</sup> Enrico Ferri, for example, an Italian criminologist and Deputy, in 1894 wrote *Socialism and Positive Science: Darwin-Spencer-Marx*, which also incorporated elements of Kropotkin’s anarchist communist thought (Ferri 1909); Emile Vandervelde’s *Collectivism and Industrial Evolution* claimed to have reconciled the ‘apparent contradiction of principles’ between anarchist communism and ‘collectivism’, and cited Kropotkin’s anarchist ideas as an ideal for society (Vandervelde 1907). Both books were published by the British Independent Labour Party’s (ILP) *The Socialist Library*, edited by J. Ramsay MacDonald, M.P. This type of material was feeding directly into the mainstream of ‘socialism’ at the end of the century. Ferri’s book was first published in 1894, translated into French, German, and Spanish in 1895, published in England and America in 1901, then produced in three editions by the ILP, in 1905, 1906, and 1909. See Flint (1908) pp.36-37 for contemporary comments on these and other *fin de siècle* socialist writings.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Hodgson (1999, pp.4-9) for a rare discussion of the label ‘utopia’ within the discourse of economics, and his explanation of his own use of the word.

<sup>8</sup> Kropotkin (1968a, p.46), in an essay published in 1887, called it ‘Anarchism, the no-government system of socialism...’

<sup>9</sup> Kropotkin had been ‘attache to the Governor-General of East Siberia for Cossack affairs’ in the 1860s (Kropotkin 1971, p.198).

<sup>10</sup> Eltzbacher’s history first appeared in 1900 as ‘a “scientific” attempt to grasp the essentials of anarchist thought...and was quickly accepted as the standard work’ (Fleming 1979, p.19).

<sup>11</sup> Charles Booth’s ‘great social survey’ *Life and Labour of the People of London* was undertaken during the 1880s and 1890s. For many of Kropotkin’s sources of data, see Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, especially the Appendices.

<sup>12</sup> Kropotkin’s reference to Gennevilliers was to an area near Paris where vegetables were grown in large irrigated fields. See (1972b, Editor’s footnote, p.103).

<sup>13</sup> It is not claimed here that these insights were unique to Kropotkin. For example, Marx had earlier written of ‘world money’, ‘universal money’, and the ‘theory of colonisation’. See Marx (1989, pp.150-2); (1963, pp.14, 765).

<sup>14</sup> Kropotkin was tried with a group of other anarchists in Lyons in 1883 and spent three years in Clairvaux prison. (Kropotkin, 1971, pp.451, 458).

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