Anarchists Are Not Naive About Human Nature

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vPzAn5fo60k

In the popular imagination anarchists are assumed to be naive optimists. It is thought that anyone who thinks humans can live a good life without capitalism and the state must do so because they think humans are angels who are naturally caring and benevolent. Anarchists in the 19th and early 20th centuries in fact had a very nuanced understanding of human nature.

Anarchists thought that all human beings across all societies have some characteristics in common. Michael Bakunin wrote that the key elements of "human existence" will "always remain the same: to be born, to develop and grow; to work in order to eat and drink, in order to have shelter and defend oneself, in order to maintain one's individual existence in the social equilibrium of his own species, to love, reproduce and then to die" (Bakunin 1964, 85-6). The exact same point is made by Rudolf Rocker. He claimed that,

> We are born, absorb nourishment, discard the waste material, move, procreate and approach dissolution without being able to change any part of the process. Necessities eventuate here which transcend our will . . . We are not compelled to consume our food in the shape nature offers it to us or to lie down to rest in the first convenient place, but we cannot keep from eating or sleeping, lest our physical existence should come to a sudden end (Rocker 1937, 24).

Since these common characteristics are constant across all human beings they must stem from certain basic facts about human biology. Anarchists did not, however, regard human nature as a static unchanging entity. Humans are, just like all species of animal, subject to evolutionary change via various processes including natural selection. As a result of this, Peter Kropotkin thought that there were "fundamental features of human character" which could "only be mediated by a very slow evolution" (Kropotkin 1895). Nor did anarchists view human nature as an abstract essence which exists outside of history. Anarchists distinguished between the innate characteristics which constitute all human beings and the manner in which these innate characteristics are developed during a person's life within a historically specific society. Bakunin thought that although humans possessed innate "faculties and dispositions" which are "natural" it was "the organisation of society" which "develops them, or on the other hand halts, or falsifies their development". Given this, "all individuals, with no exception, are at every moment of their lives what Nature and society have made them" (Bakunin 1964, 155). Kropotkin similarly wrote that "man is a result of both his inherited instincts and his education" (Kropotkin 2006, 228).

Anarchists thought that one of the main processes which modifies and develops the innate characteristics of human nature is human activity itself. Anarchists conceptualised human activity in terms of practice. Humans engage in practice when they deploy their capacities to satisfy a psychological drive and through doing so change the

world and themselves simultaneously. For example, when a person makes a sandwich they deploy their relevant capacities, such as being able to spread jam on bread, in order to satisfy their drive for a jam sandwich. In so doing they change the world – a jam sandwich now exists where before there was none – and they change themselves – they acquire the drive to have sandwiches with other kinds of jam or reproduce their capacity to make a sandwich. This idea can be seen in Kropotkin's advocacy of "teaching which, by the practice of the hand on wood, stone, metal, will speak to the brain and help to develop it" and thereby produce a child whose brain is "developed at once by the work of hand and mind" (Kropotkin 2014, 645).

If the capacities and drives a person has are continually determined by practice, and the practice people engage in varies across different social and historical contexts, then what capacities and drives people have, in turn, varies both socially and historically. This idea can be clearly seen in anarchist discussions of psychological drives, which were historically called needs. Luigi Galleani thought that when a human being develops themselves they acquire "a series of ever-more, growing and varied needs claiming satisfaction" which "vary, not only according to time and place, but also according to the temperament, disposition and development of each individual" (Galleani 2012, 43, 45).

The consequence of the theory of practice was that even capacities and drives which are universal among human beings are always mediated through and developed by historically specific forms of practice. All human being, for example, have the drive to consume water but how they do so and what specific kinds of liquid they have a drive to consume varies between and within societies. One person may satisfy their drive for liquid through drinking tea from a mug, whilst another person drinks milk from a glass through a straw. The universal capacities and drives which all human beings possess (except in cases of pathology) are, in turn, what enable people within specific contexts to develop historically specific capacities and drives. The universal capacity to acquire language, for example, enables human beings to invent, learn and alter a vast array of different specific languages such as French, Mandarin and Welsh. The characteristics which all humans have in common are, in other words, the foundation from which the great diversity of human life emerges. The extent to which anarchists thought this was the case can be seen in the fact that several anarchists claim that there is an infinite number of different kinds of person. Errico Malatesta, for example, wrote that in an anarchist society "the full potential of human nature could develop in its infinite variations" (Malatesta 2014, 402).

This was not to say that humans could transform themselves into anything they wanted. The nature of the innate characteristics which constitute all human beings places definite limits on what they can be shaped into. Humans cannot morph their arms into wings, their feet into claws or their hair into feathers. Although a human can develop themselves in many different directions, the scope of what they can possibly become is limited by the kind of animal that they are. As Rocker wrote, "man is unconditionally subject only to the laws of his physical being. He cannot change his

constitution. He cannot suspend the fundamental conditions of his physical being nor alter them according to his wish" (Rocker 1937, 27).

Anarchists thought that human beings were social animals who had a tendency to engage in two main kinds of behaviour: struggle and co-operation. Malatesta wrote that humans possessed the "harsh instinct of wanting to predominate and to profit at the expense of others" and "the thirst for domination, rivalry, envy and all the unhealthy passions which set man against man". These negative passions co-existed with "another feeling which draws him closer to his neighbour, the feeling of sympathy, tolerance, of love". As a result human history contained "violence, wars, carnage (besides the ruthless exploitation of the labour of others) and innumerable tyrannies and slavery" alongside "mutual aid, unceasing and voluntary exchange of services, affection, love, friendship and all that which draws people closer together in brotherhood". From these facts Malatesta drew the conclusion that human beings were "a social animal whose existence depends on the continued physical and spiritual relations between human beings" which are "based either on affinity, solidarity and love, or on hostility and struggle" (Malatesta 2015, 65-6, 68).

The same position was advocated by Kropotkin. It is sometimes falsely claimed that Kropotkin only focused on the second tendency of human beings to co-operate with one another and ignored the darker side of human nature. This stems from a lack of familiarity with Kropotkin's book Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution. As the book's subtitle and introduction makes clear, Kropotkin thought that mutual aid was one among several factors of evolution, rather than the sole factor (Kropotkin 2006, xvii-xviii). Kropotkin expanded upon this point in chapter 1. He argued that a naturalist would be wrong to view "the life of animals" as only "a field of slaughter" or "nothing but harmony and peace" (Kropotkin 2006, 4). The animal world instead featured both conflict and co-operation. He wrote,

> as we study animals . . . we at once perceive that though there is an immense amount of warfare and extermination going on amidst various species, and especially amidst various classes of animals, there is, at the same time, as much, or perhaps even more, of mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defence amidst animals belonging to the same species or, at least, to the same society. Sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle (Kropotkin 2006, 4-5).

Kropotkin thought that human beings were not different from other animals in this respect. He wrote in his book Ethics: Origin and Development that there are "two sets of diametrically opposed feelings which exist in man". These "are the feelings which induce man to subdue other men in order to utilise them for his individual ends" and the feelings which "induce human beings to unite for attaining common ends by common effort". The first corresponds "to that fundamental need of human nature – struggle" and the second to the "equally fundamental tendency – the desire of unity and mutual

sympathy" (Kropotkin 1924, 22). Charlotte Wilson similarly wrote that "the history of men living in a social state is one long record of a never-ending contest between certain opposing natural impulses developed by the life in common." This "struggle" which humans observe "within our own nature and in the world of men around us" occurred between "the anti-social desire to monopolise and dominate, and the social desires which find their highest expression in fraternity" (Wilson 2000, 38-9).

Anarchists did not think that there was a strict dichotomy between domination and co-operation such that a social structure only ever contained one or the other. Anarchists understood that people can co-operate with one another to engage in domination, such as the police working together in order to effectively beat up protesters. It is furthermore the case that institutions which are based on domination are generally reproduced through co-operative social relations. Under capitalism, for example, workers are subject to domination and exploitation by the capitalist who employs them. Yet these same capitalist businesses would quickly go bankrupt if workers did not co-operate with one another in order to collectively produce various goods or services (Malatesta 2014, 121-6).

Anarchists repeatedly emphasized both the good and the bad aspects of human beings in their overviews of history. Within Mutual Aid Kropotkin noted multiple examples of the San people in South Africa co-operating and being sympathetic towards one another, such as hunting in common, engaging in affectionate behaviour, and rescuing someone if they were drowning in water (Kropotkin 2006, 72-3). This went alongside Kropotkin noting examples of domination. He wrote,

> when Europeans settled in their territory and destroyed deer, the Bushmen began stealing the settlers' cattle, whereupon a war of extermination, too horrible to be related here, was waged against them. Five hundred Bushmen were slaughtered in 1775, three thousand in 1808 and 1809 . . . They were poisoned like rats, killed by hunters lying in ambush before the carcass of some animal, killed whenever met with. So that our knowledge of the Bushmen, being chiefly borrowed from those same people who exterminated them, is necessarily limited (Kropotkin 2006, 72).

Far from being naive about human nature, anarchists were extremely aware of the fact that humans are capable of committing atrocities against one another. Anarchists, in addition to this, thought that the extent to which human beings engaged in domination or co-operation varied significantly between different contexts. Kropotkin wrote,

> the relative amounts of individualist and mutual aid spirit are among the most changeable features of man. Both being equally products of an anterior development, their relative amounts are seen to change in individuals and even societies with a rapidity which would strike the sociologist if he only paid attention to the subject, and analysed the corresponding facts (Kropotkin 1895).

Given their conception of human nature, anarchists thought that the main reason for this variation in human behaviour was differences in people's environment and the forms of practice they engaged in and were subject to. This led anarchists to argue that the oppression and exploitation which occurred within existing society was not the product of human nature considered in isolation. They instead stemmed from the manner in which the raw materials of human nature were developed through participation within social structures. To quote Malatesta, "social wrongs do not depend on the wickedness of one master or the other, one governor or the other, but rather on masters and governments as institutions; therefore, the remedy does not lie in changing the individual rulers, instead it is necessary to demolish the principle itself by which men dominate over men" (Malatesta 2014, 415).

Anarchists viewed capitalism and the state as hierarchical social structures based on a division between a minority who command and a majority who obey. They are pyramids in which decision making flows from the top to the bottom. The majority of the population are workers who lack real decision making power over the nature of their life, workplace, community or society as a whole. They are instead subject to the rule of an economic ruling class – capitalists, bankers, heads of state owned companies etc – and a political ruling class – politicians, heads of the police, generals etc. The decisions of the ruling classes are, in turn, implemented by a vast array of individuals raised up above the rest of the population and granted special powers of command, such as corporate managers, police officers and prison guards.

Those at the top of hierarchies not only wield power over others but are also transformed and corrupted through doing so due to the forms of practice they are engaging in. Bakunin argued that,

> Nothing is as dangerous for man's personal morality as the habit of commanding. The best of men, the most intelligent, unselfish, generous, and pure, will always and inevitably be corrupted in this pursuit. Two feelings inherent in the exercise of power never fail to produce this demoralization: contempt for the masses, and, for the man in power, an exaggerated sense of his own worth (Bakunin 1980, 145).

The same point was made by Elisée Reclus. He wrote,

> Anarchists contend that the state and all that it implies are not any kind of pure essence, much less a philosophical abstraction, but rather a collection of individuals placed in a specific milieu and subjected to its influence. Those individuals are raised up above their fellow citizens in dignity, power, and preferential treatment, and are consequently compelled to think themselves superior to the common people. Yet in reality the multitude of temptations besetting them almost inevitably leads them to fall below the general level (Reclus 2013, 122).

It is common for defenders of hierarchy to claim that capitalism and the state are necessary due to the negative characteristics of human nature. If workers are incapable of governing themselves then they must be led by enlightened CEOs. If people murder, steal and rape then society must be protected by the police, prisons and the law. Yet it is these hierarchical systems which bring out the worst in people and make the greatest atrocities possible. As Kropotkin wrote,

> when we hear men saying that the Anarchists imagine men much better than they really are, we merely wonder how intelligent people can repeat that nonsense. . . We maintain that both rulers and ruled are spoiled by authority; both exploiters and exploited are spoiled by exploitation; while our opponents seem to admit that there is a kind of salt of the earth — the rulers, the employers, the leaders — who, happily enough, prevent those bad men — the ruled, the exploited, the led — from becoming still worse than they are. There is the difference, and a very important one. We admit the imperfections of human nature, but we make no exception for the rulers (Kropotkin 2014, 609).

Anarchists argued that if human beings are imperfect animals capable of committing the most appalling acts against one another, then this imperfection is the strongest reason for why no person should be raised up above the rest of society and granted the institutionalised power to command and impose their decisions on others through force or the threat of it (Malatesta 2015, 40). An individual serial killer can do a great deal of harm armed only with a knife. Their capacity for violence is, however, nothing compared to what rulers wielding the knife of state power are capable of. This can be seen in the fact that millions of people have been killed by states during the history of imperialism and colonialism. An individual thief may break into my home and steal my television but their theft is nothing compared to the vast plunder of resources, destruction of the natural environment and oppression of workers carried out by the corporations which manufactured my television and extracted the raw materials it is made out of. The greatest crimes are carried out not by isolated sadistic individuals but by vast social structures which enable a ruling minority to violently impose their will on the working classes.

As a result of this anarchists concluded that hierarchical and centralised institutions should be abolished in favour of horizontal free association between equals. Within an anarchist society people with the desire or predisposition to oppress and exploit other people would still exist. They would not, however, find themselves in a situation where there are positions of power they can take over and use to engage in oppression and exploitation on a large scale. In Bakunin's words,

> Do you want to prevent men from ever oppressing other men? Arrange matters such that they never have the opportunity. Do you want them to

> respect the liberty, rights and human character of their fellow men? Arrange matters such that they are compelled to respect them — compelled not by the will or oppression of other men, nor by the repression of the State and legislation, which are necessarily represented and implemented by men and would make them slaves in their turn, but by the actual organization of the social environment, so constituted that while leaving each man to enjoy the utmost possible liberty it gives no one the power to set himself above others or to dominate them. . . (Bakunin 1973, 152-3).

Given the above, anarchists would argue that it is not they who are naive about human nature but the defenders of hierarchy. Authoritarians imagine that emancipation can be achieved if good people with the correct ideas take control of the reigns of power. Anarchists realise that this has never happened and will never happen. Irrespective of people's good intentions or the stories they tell themselves, they will be corrupted by their position at a top of a hierarchy and become primarily concerned with exercising and expanding their power over others in order to serve their own interests. If human beings are not inherently good, then no person is good enough to be a ruler

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