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Why Russia Should Adopt Cooperative Economics
by Ravi Logan

In his book, *Bully for Brontosaurus*, scientific historian Stephen Jay Gould devotes a chapter to presenting Peter Kropotkin's views on biological evolution. Kropotkin is best known as a Russian revolutionary anarchist who believed in cooperative, rather than hierarchical and competitive, human relationships, and in devolving the power of the central state to local communities. It is less well known that his political views were based on a sophisticated view of evolution.

Kropotkin's ideas on evolution contrasted sharply with those of Victorian English intellectuals such as Thomas Huxley, who stated: ". . . the animal world is about on a level of a gladiator's show . . . whereby the strongest, live to fight another day." To the Victorian Darwinists, this view of nature gave substance to Thomas Malthus' belief in survival of the fittest, and bolstered the social Darwinist ethos of competition and unbridled private property rights.

Kropotkin could not accept Huxley's "gladiatorial" Darwinism as a valid account of evolutionary biology, believing instead that the predominant way in which species achieve success is through cooperation, not competition. (Kropotkin acknowledged the prevalence of inter-species conflict; it was intra-species conflict with which he took exception.) He also believed that nature provides guidance for human morality through its emphasis on sociability and cooperation, not unrestrained competitiveness.

Rather than adopt a view of nature that supported his political thesis, as do most social philosophers, Kropotkin's political views evolved from his scientific experience. As a young man, he spent five years as a naturalist studying the geology and zoology of eastern Russia. During this period, he observed that living things coped with the harsh Siberian environment primarily through cooperative behavior. In his book, *Mutual Aid*, written as a rebuttal to Huxley's essay, "The Struggle for Existence in Human Society," Kropotkin stated: "During the journeys which I made in my youth in Eastern Siberia and

Northern Manchuria . . . I failed to find - although I was eagerly looking for it - that bitter struggle for the means of existence among animals belonging to the same species, which was considered by most Darwinists as the dominant characteristic of struggle for life, and the main factor of evolution."

Kropotkin abhorred the social vision of the gladiatorial evolutionists. "They conceive of the animal world as a world of perpetual struggle among half-starved individuals, thirsting for one another's blood . . . They raise the 'pitiless' struggle for personal advantages to the height of a biological principle which man must submit to as well." Countering the social Darwinists, Kropotkin asserted, "If we . . . ask Nature: 'who are the fittest: those who are continually at war with each other, or those who support one another?' we at once see that those animals which acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest. They have more chances to survive, and they attain, in their respective classes, the highest development of intelligence and bodily organization." From his observation that mutual aid gives evolutionary advantage to living beings, he derived his political philosophy – a philosophy which stressed community and cooperative endeavor.

Kropotkin was not alone among Russian intellectuals in questioning British Darwinism. Rather, as Gould points out, "he represented a standard, well-developed Russian critique of Darwin, based on interesting reasons and coherent national traditions." The Russian school of evolution based its criticism of Darwin not only on their observations of natural history, but also out of political antipathy to social Darwinism. Daniel Todes, in his article "Darwin's Malthusian Metaphor and Russian Evolutionary Thought" (published in *Isis*, the leading history of science journal), observed that objections to the Western competitive world view were shared by Russian radicals and conservatives: "Radicals, who hoped to build a socialist society, saw Malthusianism as a reactionary current in bourgeois political economy. Conservatives, who hoped to preserve the communal virtues of tsarist Russia, saw it as an expression of the 'British national type.'"

Nineteenth-century Russian evolutionary theory had little impact on the development of biology or political theory in the Western industrial world, but the issues Kropotkin and his colleagues raised remain relevant. Now that Russia is in the process of choosing a new political and economic future, the substance of Kropotkin's vision of nature and society warrant reconsideration.

The Modern View

A century has passed since Kropotkin challenged the British evolutionists. How has a hundred years of accumulated scientific knowledge influenced the debate over fierce

competition versus mutual cooperation as the primary mechanism of species survival? Relevant evidence comes mainly from two sources: biology (particularly ecology) and social psychology.

A good analysis of the biological evidence is presented in the book, *The New Biology*, by Robert Augros and George Stanciu, summarized in their paper, "The Biology of Aggression and Cooperation" (*Noetic Sciences Review*, Winter 1989). Augros and Stanciu begin their analysis by observing that Darwin relied on eighteenth-century reductionist methodology, which tries to understand the whole through analysis of its parts. "He split nature into all its separate parts, individual plants and animals, and saw that everything was trying to reproduce itself as much as it could . . . Then when he put all those isolated organisms back together, he thought it was clear that such reproduction would lead to a shortage of space, of food, and other necessities of life. There was going to be severe competition, and therefore all of nature was going to be at war." The inevitable conclusion of reductionist methodology is that nature must be ruled by conflict.

The reductionist premise is a core assumption of the Western intellectual paradigm. But this premise has come under sustained attack by a diversity of scientific disciplines, including biology (increasingly influenced by ecology, which focuses on the interactive processes in living systems). Biologists dissatisfied with reductionism are attempting to articulate a new biology, one which looks at wholes, at systems, and at synergisms (as well as at the functioning of parts). From this new biology we find, as Augros and Stanciu report, that "nature uses extraordinarily ingenious techniques to avoid conflict and competition, and that cooperation is extraordinarily widespread throughout all of nature."

Nature avoids competition in various ways: by separating species geographically into differing habitats; by sorting species into unique niches within habits; by spatial division according to gradations of environmental factors, such as oxygen content at different levels of a body of water; by territorial demarcations, as when cats mark out with their scent the space which is theirs; and by establishing dominance hierarchies within social groupings of animals.

Cooperation is fostered through a wide array of symbiotic arrangements. Many plants produce tasty fruits, which animals eat, later depositing the undigested seeds. The intestinal bacteria of grazing animals makes possible the breakdown of cellulose fibers into digestible fatty acids. Egyptian plovers get their food by cleaning parasites off the bodies of rhinoceroses. And clown fish are given protection by anemone, while serving as bait for the fish that the anemone eat. These are only examples of inter-species cooperation -- intra-species cooperation is even more commonplace.

At the time Kropotkin challenged British Darwinism, the scientific study of human behavior was in its infancy – Wilhelm Wundt had just begun the first psychology laboratory in Leipzig. In the debate as to whether competition or cooperation is more characteristic of human nature, the young field of psychology was mute. Today, however, there is a vast body of social psychology literature on this question.

Alfie Kohn, author of *No Contest: The Case Against Competition*, spent seven years reviewing more than 400 research studies dealing with competition and cooperation. Prior to his investigation, he believed that "competition can be natural and appropriate and healthy." After reviewing research findings, he radically revised this opinion, concluding that, "The ideal amount of competition . . . in any environment, the classroom, the workplace, the family, the playing field, is none . . . [Competition] is always destructive" (*Noetic Sciences Review*, Spring 1990).

According to Kohn, there are three principle consequences of competition. First, it has a negative effect on productivity and excellence. This is due to increased anxiety, inefficiency (as compared to cooperative sharing of resources and knowledge), and the undermining of inner motivation. Competition shifts the focus to victory over others, and away from intrinsic motivators such as curiosity, interest, excellence, and social interaction. Studies show that cooperative behavior, by contrast, consistently predicts good performance - a finding that holds true under a wide range of subject variables. Interestingly, the positive benefits of cooperation become more significant as tasks become more complex, or where greater creativity and problem-solving ability is required.

The second effect of competition is that it lowers self-esteem and hampers the development of sound, self-directed individuals. A strong sense of self is difficult to attain when self-evaluation is dependent on seeing how we measure up to others. On the other hand, those whose identity is formed in relation to how they contribute to group efforts generally possess greater self-confidence and higher self-esteem.

Finally, competition undermines human relationships. Humans are social beings; we best express our humanness in interaction with others. By creating winners and losers, competition is destructive to human unity and prevents close social feeling. In the competitive mode, people work at cross-purposes, or for personal gain. Some come out ahead, some behind; some win, some lose. It becomes impossible for people to move together, as is necessary for a harmonious human society.

Biology and social psychology are not the only disciplines which support cooperation as the natural basis for human interaction. Ethnological studies indicate that virtually all indigenous cultures operate on the basis of highly cooperative relationships.

Anthropologist Nancy Tanner has presented evidence to show that the predominant force driving early human evolution was cooperative social interaction, leading to the capacity of hominids to develop culture. And industrial psychology now promotes "worker participation" and team functioning because it is decisively more productive than hierarchical management.

Beyond Science

In 1910, while lying in his deathbed, Leo Tolstoy dictated his last letter, a letter of advice to his son and daughter. He told them, "The views you have acquired about Darwinism, evolution, and the struggle for existence won't explain to you the meaning of your life and won't give you guidance in your actions, and a life without an explanation of its meaning and importance, and without the unfailing guidance that stems from it is a pitiful existence. Think about it. I say it, probably on the eve of my death, because I love you."

Tolstoy's concerns about the Darwinism of his time were vindicated by history. In America, social Darwinism justified the unbridled economic exploitation of the robber barons. America's first billionaire, John D. Rockefeller, ruthlessly built up his Standard Oil monopoly believing that his efforts were sanctioned by the natural order. He said: "The growth of large business is merely a survival of the fittest."

In Germany, social Darwinism supplied justification for German militarism during World War I. Vernon Kellogg, an American biologist stationed during the war at the headquarters of the German Great General Staff, later described the Darwinian views of the German military officers in his book *Headquarters Nights*: "The creed of the Allmact ["all might" or omnipotence] of a natural selection based on violent and competitive struggle is the gospel of the German intellectuals; all else is illusion and anathema.... That human group which is in the most advanced evolutionary stage . . . should win in the struggle for existence, and this struggle should occur precisely that the various types may be tested, and the best not only preserved, but put in position to impose its kind of social organization on the others, or, alternatively, to destroy and replace them."

We now know that the dominant evolutionary thinking of Tolstoy's day was flawed, and that the minority view of Peter Kropotkin lies closer to the truth. But does this mean that "the new biology" should now become the basis for our moral truths and our social institutions?

It would certainly be unwise to ignore or dismiss the compelling findings of biology and social psychology. The post-reductionist, holistic science of our time can supply us with

deep insights into the general laws of nature--our own included. But can materialistic science, even formulated with an enlightened holistic paradigm, provide what Tolstoy wished for his children: a foundation for meaning and guidance for our lives?

The problems with materialism as a foundation for human values are twofold. First, science studies the phenomena of a dynamically changing world, and its theories and paradigms about the world are also constantly evolving. As Paul Samuelson once expressed: "Funeral by funeral, theory advances." The truths of science, while often robust, are not permanent, but subject to change. Human society is also part of the changing world, and must progressively adapt to new ideas and institutions. But finding purpose in human life is a different matter. We have innate need, many believe, to find purpose in that which is eternal and infinite.

The second problem with materialism is that mind is subtler than matter. The use of knowledge about the physical universe to define value structures for directed by the mind is inherently limited, as there are realms of human experience that transcend physicality. To limit our understanding of ourselves to that which can be explained materially is to restrict the comprehensive, integrated development of the human personality.

There is a growing consensus that the post-modernist episteme will not have materialist foundations. But neither is there much sentiment for a retreat to idealism. Idealism has been expressed in Socrates' fascistic vision of society lorded over by philosopher kings, in Shankaracharya's philosophy that the world is illusion, in medieval religion's obsession with heaven and obliviousness to suffering, and in Hegel's glorification of individual sublimation to the state. Its long history of defective and detrimental philosophies has discredited idealism as a basis for human welfare. If both scientific empiricism and idealistic philosophy are inadequate, then what alternative faculty of knowing can provide us with meaning and proper moral guidance?

Tolstoy's answer was that truth can only be achieved by looking within oneself, that a transcendent reason and power flows from within us, and that our highest purpose is to do its will. Tolstoy formulated a philosophy of Christian mysticism, but his core ideas are generally consistent with what Aldous Huxley (grandson of Thomas) termed the "perennial philosophies". Huxley noted that certain common themes have been expressed by humanity's great seers – those who derived their teachings from personal illumination, revelation or mystical experience. Though living in different times and cultures, their teachings share fundamental beliefs and values.

The American humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow studied "peak experiences" – the kinds of experience out of which the perennial philosophies originated. He termed the

cognitive state that arises during peak experiences "B-cognition," or cognition of being. He detailed his research in his book, *Religions, Values and Peak Experiences*, where he wrote that his "most important finding was the discovery of . . . B-values or the intrinsic values of Being." He went on to observe that "this list of the described characteristics of the world as it is perceived in our most perspicuous moments is about the same as what people through the ages have called eternal verities, or the spiritual values, or the highest values."

What do those whose values are derived from B-cognition have to say about the issue of contention between Huxley (the Darwinist) and Kropotkin? The consensus is definite: love and cooperation, not conflict and competition, are the eternal verities which should guide human relations.

Beyond Capitalism

P.R. Sarkar was a twentieth-century philosopher and spiritual teacher who was as concerned with social justice as he was with spiritual liberation. Sarkar, like others who espouse the perennial philosophy, believed that the B-cognition, or intuitional mode of knowing, is inherently synthetic. In contrast to reductionism and the rationalist approach to knowledge, which is analytical in nature, intuitional faculty of mind tends toward wholeness – its ultimate reach being a state of unitary consciousness in which individuals directly identify with the cosmic whole, rather than with a limited ego state.

Those who acquire synthetic knowledge inevitably develop a growing sense of the unity and interconnectedness of life. Based on this universal spiritual perception, Sarkar believed it possible for humanity to recognize its integrated, interdependent existence, and move collectively to achieve its material, psychic and spiritual aspirations. He termed this ideal *universalism*.

Sarkar rejected competition and upheld cooperation: "In every field of collective life there should be cooperation amongst the members of society." In this respect, his thinking is not novel, it has been espoused by many people of wisdom. But he went beyond other spiritual philosophers in his use of perennial philosophy values to formulate socioeconomic theory.

Sarkar insisted that collective efforts should take the form of *coordinated cooperation*, not subordinated cooperation. Subordinated cooperation occurs "where people do something individually or collectively, but keep themselves under other peoples' supervision." Coordinated cooperation occurs "between free human beings, each with equal rights and mutual respect for each other, and each working for the welfare of the

other." In relation to this ideal form of social relationships, he observed that none of the present socioeconomic systems are based on coordinated cooperation, but on subordinated cooperation, and that this "results in the degeneration of society's moral fabric."

Sarkar formulated a spiritual perspective on wealth: "This universe is created in the imagination of the Supreme Entity, so the ownership of this universe . . . does not belong to any particular individual; everything is the patrimony of us all. Every living being can utilize their rightful share of this property. . . . [T]his whole animate world is a large joint family in which nature has not assigned any property to any particular individual."

Sarkar termed this conception of wealth *cosmic inheritance*, and made clear its implications for economic theory: "According to genuine spiritual ideology, the system of individual ownership cannot be accepted as absolute and final, hence capitalism, too, cannot be supported." Cosmic ownership also undermines "state capitalism" - communism's command economy system in which there is state ownership of wealth.

Based on his premises of universalism, coordinated cooperation, and cosmic inheritance, Sarkar formulated an alternative economics that he called *cooperative economics*.

While Sarkar rejected the rigidities of rationalism and reductionism, he did not reject rationality and empiricism. He relied on spiritually derived truth to provide the value structure and premises of his economics, but he also insisted that its practical implementation would require close observation of human nature and economic dynamics. By insisting that social theory follow from social experience, Sarkar avoided many utopian errors.

For example, while Sarkar agreed with Kropotkin's rejection of capitalism, his economic theory takes a much different position on production incentives. Kropotkin, like Marx, advocated "from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs." In Sarkar's view, this high sounding ideal "will reap no harvest in the hard soil of the world." Without suitable incentives, productivity declines, and society as a whole suffers - as occurred in the Soviet Union.

New Foundations for Russia

Cartesian reductionism formed the epistemological basis for Malthusianism and social Darwinism, which in turn provided intellectual rationale for the greed of capitalism. Dialectical materialism attempted to create an antithesis to reductionist thinking, but

its materialism brought spiritual poverty. And, by promoting such utopian notions as the classless society and production without material incentive, its materialism capitulated to idealism and floundered on its inner contradictions. Both capitalism and communism have failed to adequately serve human welfare, and have eroded the moral, cultural and ecological fabric of the world. The future of humanity must lie with a new economics, erected on sounder foundations.

Economist Jaroslav Vanek, in his paper "Towards a Strategy of Democracy, Political and Economic, in Russia," points out that communal economic activity had deep roots in Russia's pre-Revolution village economies. This tradition of cooperation apparently came to the fore in 1917. According to Professor George Gurvitch, a participating witness to the October revolution, there was a brief nine month period immediately following the Russian Revolution when an embryonic economic system based on democratic cooperation prevailed. This system was supported in early Bolshevik Party congresses – until party leaders imposed political and economic centralism.

As in 1917, Russia now finds itself poised at a momentous juncture, with a choice of futures spread before it. Were Russia to choose a cooperative economy to replace communism, there would be much supporting logic. A cooperative economy would have consistency with the traditional values of village life. It would be a revival of the initial economic ideal chosen by the people following the downfall of Tsarist tyranny. It would vindicate the evolutionary views of Kropotkin and be supported by contemporary scientific understandings of human nature. And it would be compatible with the sentiment for social equity which socialism imbued in the Russian psyche.

But beyond the compelling logic of tradition, science, and economics, there is a more profound reason for Russia to adopt economic cooperation: cooperation is supported by spiritual truth. For those, like Tolstoy, who insist that humans need an enduring source of meaning in their lives and the guidance of proper values, cooperative economics is congruent with the eternal verities. It is the economic system Tolstoy would have wanted for his children, and for all of the children of Mother Russia.

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