

RADCLIFFE-BROWN AND KROPOTKIN:  
THE HERITAGE OF ANARCHISM IN BRITISH SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

“The Anarchist, Prince Kropotkin” seems an unlikely epithet for a man whose concept of society strongly influenced British social anthropology. Yet Kropotkin’s ideas were among the most salient influences on social anthropology during its formative years and defined an approach to enquiry that persists to the present. Apparently this influence has never been discerned or acknowledged.

Kropotkin has been relegated to a minor position among social philosophers. In his *History of Western Philosophy*, Lord Russell neglects to mention Kropotkin’s name even once (Russell 1945), nor does Kropotkin receive any attention from Harris in his *Rise of Anthropological Theory* (Harris 1968). Yet despite his personal obscurity in this regard, Kropotkin’s ideas through their influence on Radcliffe-Brown helped set the tone of British social anthropology during the first half of this century.

Kropotkin has been doomed to share with his anarchist colleagues the onus of having traveled down a “dead end” (cf. Jolls: 1965). Anarchists failed to achieve the far-reaching changes in society to which they dedicated themselves, and as a pacific anarchist, even the notoriety of a Bakunin passed Kropotkin by. Only recently, as contemporary moods have shifted toward deep social dissatisfaction, have the writings of Kropotkin been given much serious attention (cf. Goodman 1968:519).

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Kropotkin’s influence as a social thinker had much more significance. During his years in England after his arrival in 1886, Kropotkin personified anarchist thought at a time when anarchism was in vogue. A prominent and beloved social figure, Prince Kropotkin drank tea with Herbert Spencer, lectured on geography and was called by Oscar Wilde one of the two happy men he had ever met (Pipes 1968: 465).

In this era anthropology in Britain remained strongly evolutionary in its approach, and for a time, the notion of “social Darwinism” enjoyed a comfortable acceptance. Radcliffe-Brown entered

Trinity College at Cambridge in 1901. As we shall see below, the influence of Kropotkin’s ideas did much to shape Radcliffe-Brown’s approach to the study of societies.

KROPOTKIN

Born of landed Russian nobility, Kropotkin was a descendant of the Grand Princes of Smolensk and spent his early years in great material comfort. He served as a page in the court of Alexander II. Later, however, he came to renounce his aristocratic privilege and volunteered for an army post in Siberia attached to a Cossack regiment.

Kropotkin took a great interest in Darwin’s theories of the processes of evolution. Cognizant of the notion of “survival of the fittest,” Kropotkin observed interactions among animals and within peasant communities and Cossack bands during his tenure in Siberia and formulated his own interpretation of Darwin’s postulates. Following the suggestion of the Russian zoologist Kessler, Kropotkin developed the conviction that mutual assistance and cooperation rather than aggressive competition among individuals are the primary forces for evolutionary progress—that mutual aid is the “chief factor in progressive evolution” (Kropotkin 1923:44). Kropotkin did not deny the existence of struggle (1955:57), but he maintained that “those animals which acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest” (1955:6).

It might be emphasized here that Kropotkin in his own mind at least did not oppose Darwin. He subscribed to the concept of survival of the fittest but gave fitness the more explicit meaning of a capacity for mutual cooperation. In this Kropotkin found himself opposed to proponents of contemporary social Darwinism whose concept of the natural world conjured flying fur and bloody claws. Kropotkin rightly felt that such ideas were misinterpretations or misapplications of Darwin’s basic tenets. Kropotkin did not feel himself opposed to Darwin, and he believed that his own observations were essentially in agreement with Darwin’s postulates.

Kropotkin saw in all social groups a natural tendency toward cooperation and mutual aid based

on individual relationships. This led him to embrace anarchy as a social philosophy, maintaining that no form of government is either necessary or desirable in human society. Kropotkin felt that his theories had a solid, verifiable scientific basis (Averich 1967:30). He viewed himself as a scientist as well as a social philosopher.

The above points are most relevant to the concerns of this paper since they describe, briefly, the outline of Kropotkin's beliefs about the nature of human society. Kropotkin's beliefs were important in affecting Radcliffe-Brown's approach to the scientific study of the same subject. Other of Kropotkin's views deriving from these are more normative and political in essence and are addressed to specific social changes.

Kropotkin was jailed for his views. He escaped first to France and then fled to England in 1886, where he stayed until the revolution in 1917 summoned him back to Russia to spend the last few years of his life. While Kropotkin lived in England, however, he involved himself in literary circles, and we get the impression that he all but became the toast of intellectual England during the period. He lectured often before the Royal Geographical Society and became acquainted with Herbert Spencer, whose works he had read and translated and who now joined him at tea (Kropotkin 1967:261).

Anarchistic thought was very much in fashion in England during this period, despite the occasional scares provoked by bombings and other instances of "propaganda by the deed" perpetrated by anarchists with stronger terrorist leanings than Kropotkin. These incidents led to some alarmist journalism. No doubt some of Kropotkin's attractiveness at the time lay in the very naughtiness of anarchism, at the same time expressed in a pleasing and tranquil form by the benign, bald and bearded prince. For this rather brief period, Kropotkin personified anarchist thought in England.

#### RADCLIFFE-BROWN

It is always a rather tenuous proposition to assert the direct influence of one man on another, particularly where such influence is not explicitly acknowledged. Inherent in such an attempt is the danger of a speculative resort to posthumous mind reading. No doubt most theorists, and certainly this was the case with Radcliffe-Brown, derive their own ideas from innumerable influences and experiences with the differential importance of these being primarily a matter of degree.

In regard to the functional approach, Radcliffe-Brown acknowledges his debt to Durkheim and to earlier positivists. He also cites Spencer for certain ideas while strongly disagreeing with him on

others. These influences on Radcliffe-Brown seem altogether apparent—yet to consider Radcliffe-Brown merely a direct descendant of Durkheim, with Spencer as a mother's brother, leaves much that characterizes his work unexplained.

Very little is known of Radcliffe-Brown's early years (Eggan and Warner 1956:544). He entered Trinity College in 1901. Remarkably enough, Stanner reveals that during his days at Cambridge, Radcliffe-Brown, who was then simply Alfred Reginald Brown, was known to his colleagues as "Anarchy" Brown (Stanner 1968:287). Stanner indicates that Radcliffe-Brown's penchant for anarchism was later tempered to a mild socialism. Nonetheless, during his university days Radcliffe-Brown apparently took a rather strong if fleeting interest in anarchist thought.

During this period from 1901 to 1908, Kropotkin was still holding forth in the parlors of literary England. Kropotkin's book, *Mutual Aid*, was published in London in 1902. Considering that Kropotkin was then the most prominent anarchist thinker in England, it is inconceivable that a student at Cambridge with an interest in anarchism would not have read Kropotkin or at least been familiar with his ideas. It seems especially safe to assume this of young "Anarchy" Brown.

This much may be conjectured then: Radcliffe-Brown during his student days was exposed to the ideas of Kropotkin, and apparently for a time, he had a strong interest in anarchism. What effect these ideas may have had on Radcliffe-Brown's social theory has yet to be established.

As mentioned above, in perusing Radcliffe-Brown's writings it is relatively easy to confirm the influence of Durkheim and Spencer. His notions of the systemic interrelatedness of social institutions is the heritage of numerous thinkers, borrowing from Montesquieu's *rapports*, Comte and others through Durkheim. Radcliffe-Brown's organic analogy has an immediate predecessor in Spencer although modified and employed differently. But many aspects of Radcliffe-Brown's approach seem directly attributable to Kropotkin.

One unbroken theme that runs through Radcliffe-Brown's writing is the emphasis on harmonious patterned interaction among individuals which contributes ultimately to the maintenance of the social structure. Radcliffe-Brown has been criticized (e.g. Murdock 1951) for his failure to consider the individual in his studies of human society, and indeed, he did feel that specific individuals are irrelevant as such. Individuals as persons were interchangeable with respect to the social structure, but the roles held by individuals and their patterned interactions were the essence of the social system. He wrote quite explicitly that "I regard as a part of the social

structure all social relations of person to person" (Radcliffe-Brown 1940b).

It was the relationship between individuals in which he was most interested. Radcliffe-Brown, much more than Durkheim who tended to conceive of the social system more completely in terms of interacting institutions, felt that a thorough understanding of society must begin with cognizance of the nature of person-to-person interaction.

. . . in social anthropology, as I define it, what we have to investigate are the forms of association to be found amongst human beings (Radcliffe-Brown 1940b)

In his conception of society,

Individual human beings, the essential units in this instance, are connected by a definite set of social relations into an integrated whole (1935:396).

Radcliffe-Brown's social analyses all shared a common thread of concern with the ways in which the social process is maintained and with the reduction of conflict through institutionalized relationships of obligation, love or respect. In "The Mother's Brother in South Africa," he analyzed kin relationships in terms of a network of interpersonal ties (1924). In dealing with joking relationships, he analyzed the phenomenon as a patterned means of maintaining harmony through the social treatment of a potentially disruptive relationship.

The show of hostility, the perpetual disrespect, is a continual expression of that social disjunction which is an essential part of the whole structural situation, but over which, without destroying or even weakening it, there is provided the social conjunction of friendliness and mutual aid (1940a:198).

Radcliffe-Brown's approach to the study of society suggests a preconception of positive relationships among individuals. Certainly this attitude borrowed nothing from the notions of social Darwinism held by many of his forbears and contemporaries. Indeed, this approach, which perhaps might better be called an attitude, was much more like that of Kropotkin than that of Spencer or even Durkheim. Although Durkheim did concern himself with social solidarity, his analyses focused more on a generalized or collective approach.

It was Kropotkin who maintained that the essence of social solidarity rests on mutual obligations and aid between society's individual members. From the very earliest of Radcliffe-Brown's writings, this same notion forms a major theme, and many of his analyses set about to demonstrate the overall harmonious effects of these interpersonal relationships on the social whole.

The continuity of structure is maintained by the process of social life, which consists of the activities and interactions of the individual human beings and of organized groups into which they are united (1935:396).

Like Kropotkin, Radcliffe-Brown did not deny the existence of struggle and disruptive conflict. But neither did he give a great deal of attention to either except in discussing the manner in which conflict is resolved. Radcliffe-Brown has been criticized for creating a social model in static equilibrium to the extent that such a model precludes explanation of social change. The questions to which Radcliffe-Brown addressed himself, however, were not concerned with the ways in which societies change, but rather, with the ways in which societies are able to exist.

Kropotkinesque interpretations of social phenomena appear throughout Radcliffe-Brown's work.

A social relation does not result from a similarity of interests, but rests either on the mutual interest of persons in one another, or on one or more common interests, or on a combination of both of these (1940b).

Radcliffe-Brown did not consider the imposition of any governmental institutions as a primary factor in the maintenance of society although this view may have been shaped primarily by the nature of the societies with which he concerned himself. Instead, Radcliffe-Brown considered the maintenance of order and the control of conflict in terms of general social pressure of the group on the individual.

The sanctions existing in a community constitute motives in the individual for the regulation of his conflict in conformity with usage . . . what is called conscience is thus in the widest sense the reflex in the individual of the sanctions of the society (1933).

The notion of society maintained through cooperation and social harmony did not originate with Kropotkin, of course, any more than ideas of systemic interrelationships among social institutions originated with Durkheim. Since it has been established that Radcliffe-Brown was exposed to these thinkers, however, it seems reasonable to suppose that the appearance of these ideas in his work is largely attributable to their influence on him. In the case of Durkheim and Spencer, this influence was acknowledged by Radcliffe-Brown himself.

The acquaintance of Spencer with Kropotkin also may have resulted in some exchange of ideas between the two. One passage by Radcliffe-Brown almost seems to bring the three major influences together in a single statement:

. . . there are the institutional arrangements by which an orderly social life is maintained, so that what Spencer called co-operation is provided for and conflict is restrained or regulated (1965:9).

Whether direct or indirect, Kropotkin's influence in shaping the attitude with which Radcliffe-Brown approached the study of human societies ultimately had much to do with the direction taken by subsequent British social anthropology

because of the stature attained by Radcliffe-Brown.

Another figure comparable in prominence to and contemporary with Radcliffe-Brown, namely Malinowski, had also taken note of the ideas of Kropotkin. Without speculating on the depth of Kropotkin's influence on Malinowski, we might simply indicate that Malinowski made specific reference to the anarchist.

Prince Peter Kropotkin was quite right in pointing out that mutual aid between individuals of a cooperative community is the dominant concept, while the struggle between the individuals for survival can not be applied to human societies as a whole (Malinowski 1960:143).

Malinowski's ultimate effect on the development of theory in social anthropology has been less than Radcliffe-Brown's, but here again, an awareness of Kropotkin's ideas can be seen.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Given the knowledge of both Radcliffe-Brown's awareness of Kropotkin during his early years and the alternative approaches to studies of human society prevalent at the time, the influence of Kropotkin on Radcliffe-Brown's concept of the nature of society seems indisputable. From Durkheim and Spencer, Radcliffe-Brown procured tools of analysis and the suggestion for a social model, but the more nebulous attitude with which he approached human societies as subjects of study owes much more to the ideas of Kropotkin.

Like Kropotkin, Radcliffe-Brown discerned harmonious patterns of interaction among individuals. Applying the functionalist insights of Durkheim, he endeavored to demonstrate the contribution of these patterned interactions to the maintenance of the total social structure. Borrowing the organic analogy from Spencer, he used it to illustrate the way in which the institutional parts of society articulate in a system of interdependence. Like Kropotkin he gave the impression that the social system was maintained from within, and he was little concerned with governmental forms as institutional isolates controlling social interaction.

Like Kropotkin, Radcliffe-Brown visualized human society as an aggregate of mutually interdependent individuals organized into social networks whose essence partakes much more of harmonious interaction than of conflict and disruption. Where conflict does appear to be inherent or built into the structure, as in the case of institutionalized joking relationships, Radcliffe-Brown took pains to demonstrate that this apparent but controlled disruption is an essential part of the maintenance of the social order.

Although Radcliffe-Brown refrained from anything resembling a reference to human nature, it seems evident from his writings that he considered

human beings prone to mutually congenial behavior rather than to the murderous competition envisaged by the social Darwinists who were his contemporaries. This seems implicit in his reference to "spontaneous movements toward reintegration" in human societies (Radcliffe-Brown 1935:399).

While Kropotkin's initial influence on Radcliffe-Brown merely seems to have affected the attitude with which the latter applied the concepts and analytical tools of Durkheimian functionalism to the study of societies, it might be suggested that this emphasis on harmonious interpersonal relationships as the core of social structure was a basis for his intensive concern with and analysis of kinship as opposed to governmental structures.

If Radcliffe-Brown's kinship studies owe a great deal of their impetus to Kropotkin's ideas about the nature of human societies, then Kropotkin's ultimate influence on social anthropology seems very significant indeed because it stimulated an approach that set the tone of enquiry and affected the kinds of analytical questions asked. If this conclusion may be accepted, we may begin to see the extent of Kropotkin's effect on anthropology, first on Radcliffe-Brown and subsequently on his students in England and the United States.

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