

Notes on
*Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*¹

By P. Kropotkin

New York: McClure Phillip & Co., 1902

No Date

Mutual Aid Among Animals:²

Followers of Darwin narrowed his views on the doctrine of the struggle for existence:

In fact, if we take Huxley, who certainly is considered as one of the ablest exponents of the theory of evolution, were we not taught by him, in a paper on the "struggle for existence and its bearing upon man" that "from the point of view of the moralist, the animal world is on about the same level as the gladiator's show. The creatures are fairly well treated, and set to fight; whereby the strongest, the swiftest, and the cunningest live to fight another day. The spectator has no need to turn his thumb down, as no quarter is given." (*Nineteenth Century*, Feb. 1888, p. 165). Or, further down in the same article, did he not tell us that, as among animals, so among primitive men, "the weakest and stupidest went to the wall, while the toughest and shrewdest, those who were best fitted to cope with their circumstances, but not the best in another way survived. Life was a continuous free fight, and beyond the limited and temporary relations of the family, the Hobbesian war of

¹ Much of the text in this document appears to be transcribed by Earl Davis Pyotr Kropotkin's book *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*, P. Kropotkin, 1902. Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin (1842-1921) was a Russian political activist, scientist and philosopher. He was a proponent of a decentralized communist society, and was disappointed with the results of the Bolshevik state.

² The first chapter of the book is titled, "Mutual Aid Among Animals."

each against all was the normal state of existence." (*Nineteenth Century*, Feb. 1888, p. 165). Cited by Kropotkin, (Page 4.)

Mutual Aid:

Sociability is as much a law of nature as mutual struggle. (Page 5.)

Who are the fittest: those who are continually at war with each other, or those who support one another? (Page 6.)

Citation from Prof. Kessler's address delivered before a congress of Naturalists in Jan. 1880. Pub. In *Memoirs of the St. Petersburg Society of Naturalists*, Vol XI, 1880.:

Professor Kessler concludes as follows: "I obviously do not deny the struggle for existence, but I maintain that the progressive development of the animal kingdom, and especially of mankind, is favored much more by mutual support than by mutual struggle. ... All organic beings have two essential needs: that of nutrition, and that of propagating the species. The former brings them to a struggle and to mutual extermination, while the needs of maintaining the species bring them to approach one another and to support one another. But I am inclined to think that in the evolution of the organic world—in the progressive modification of organic beings—mutual support among individuals plays a much more important part than their mutual struggle. (Page 8.)

That mode of life (i.e., mutual aid) also necessarily resulted in the development of essential feature of the life of ants: the immense development of individual initiative which, in its turn, evidently led to the development of that high and varied intelligence which cannot but strike the human observer. (Page. 14.)

It is well known that there always are a number of bees which prefer a life of robbery to the

laborious life of a worker; and that both periods of scarcity and periods of an unusually rich supply of food lead to an increase of the robbing class. When our crops are in and there remains but little to gather in our meadows and fields, robbing bees become of more frequent occurrence; while, on the other side, about the sugar plantations of the West Indies and the sugar refineries of Europe, robbery, laziness, and very often drunkenness become quite usual with the bees. (Page 17.)

The cunningest and the shrewdest are eliminated in favor of those who understand the advantages of sociable life and mutual support. (Page 18.)

Happily enough competition is not the rule either in the animal world or in mankind. It is limited among animals to exceptional periods, and natural selection finds better fields for its activity. Better conditions are created by the *elimination of competition* by means of mutual aid and mutual support. In the great struggle for life—for the greatest possible fulness and intensity of life with the least waste of energy—natural selection continually seeks out the ways precisely for avoiding competition as much as possible. The ants combine in nest and nations; they pile up their stores, they rear their cattle—and thus avoid competition; and natural selection picks out of the ants' family the species which know best how to avoid competition, with its unavoidably deleterious consequences. Most of our birds slowly move southwards as the winter comes, or gather in numberless societies and undertake long journeys—and thus avoid competition. Many rodents fall asleep when the time comes that competition should set in; while other rodents store food for the winter, and gather in larger villages for obtaining the necessary protection when at work. The reindeer, when the lichens are dry in the interior of the continent, migrate towards the sea. Buffaloes cross an immense continent in order to find

plenty of food. And the beavers, when they grow numerous on a river, divide into two parties, and go, the old ones down the river, and the young ones up the river—and avoid competition. And when animals can neither fall asleep, nor migrate, nor lay in stores, nor themselves grow their food like the ants, they do what the titmouse does, and what Wallace (Darwinism, ch. V) has so charmingly described: they resort to new kinds of food—and thus, again, avoid competition. "Don't compete!—competition is always injurious to the species, and you have plenty of resources to avoid it!" That is the tendency of nature, not always realized in full, but always present. That is the watchword which comes to us from the bush, the forest, the river, the ocean. "Therefore combine—practice mutual aid! That is the surest means for giving to each and to all the greatest safety, the best guarantee of existence and progress, bodily, intellectual, and moral." That is what Nature teaches us; and that is what all those animals which have attained the highest position in their respective classes have done. That is also what man—the most primitive man—has been doing; and that is why man has reached the position upon which we stand ... (Conclusion to chapters on mutual aid among animals, Pages 74-5.)

Mutual Aid among savages?

Evidences of social life among cave dwellers.

In the valleys of the tributaries of the Dordogne, the surface of the rocks is in some places entirely covered with caves which were inhabited by Paleolithic men. Sometimes the cave-dwellings are superposed in stories, and they certainly recall much more the nesting colonies of swallows than the dens of carnivores. As to the flint implements, implements discovered in these caves, to use Lubbock's words, "one may say without exaggeration that they are numberless." The same is true of other paleolithic stations. ... So that men lived in societies, and had germs of

a tribal worship, even at that extremely remote epoch. (Pages 80-1.)

The high standard of tribal morality of the Eskimos has often been mentioned in general literature. Nevertheless the following remarks upon the manners of the Aleuts—nearly akin to the Eskimos—will better illustrate savage morality as a whole. They were written after ten years stay among the Aleuts, by a most remarkable man—the Russian missionary, Veniaminoff. I sum them up mostly in his own words,—“Endurability” (he wrote) “is their chief feature. It is simply colossal. Not only do they bathe every morning in the frozen sea, and stand naked on the beach, inhaling the icy wind, but their endurability, even when at hard work on insufficient food, surpasses all that can be imagined. During a protracted scarcity of food, the Aleut cares first for his children; he gives them all he has, and himself fasts. They are not inclined to stealing; that was remarked even by the first Russian immigrants. Not that they never steal; every Aleut would confess having sometime stolen something, but it is always a trifle; the whole is so childish. The attachment of the parents to their children is touching, though it is never expressed in words or pettings. The Aleut is with difficulty moved to make a promise, but once he has made it he will keep it whatever may happen.” (An Aleut made Veniaminoff a gift of dried fish, but it was forgotten on the beach in the hurry of the departure. He took it home. The next occasion to send it to the missionary was in January; and in November and December there was a great scarcity of food in the Aleut encampment. But the fist was never touched by the starving people, and in January it was sent to its destination.) “Their code of morality is both varied and severe. It is considered shameful to be afraid of unavoidable death; to ask pardon from an enemy; to die without ever having killed an enemy; to be convicted of stealing; to capsize a boat in the harbor; to be afraid of going to sea in stormy

weather; to be the first in a party on a long journey to become an invalid in case of scarcity of food; to show greediness when spoil is divided, in which case everyone gives his own part to the greedy man to shame him; to divulge a public secret to his wife; being two persons on a hunting expedition, not to offer the best game to the partner; to boast of his own deeds, especially of invented ones; to scold anyone in scorn. Also to beg; to pet his wife in other people's presence, and to dance with her; to bargain personally: selling must always be made through a third person, who settles the price. For a woman it is a shame not to know sewing, dancing and all kinds of woman's work; to pet her husband and children, or even to speak to her husband in the presence of a stranger." Such is Aleut morality, which might also be further illustrated by their tales and legends. (Pages 99-100.)

Let me also add that when Veniaminoff wrote (1840) only one murder had been committed since the last century in a population of 60,000 and that among 1,800 Aleuts not one single common-law offence had been known in 40 years. (Page 100.)

The customary law which still makes the law of the daily life for two-thirds of mankind, was elaborated under that organization (i.e., the clan organization with its communistic life) as well as a system of habits intended to prevent the oppression of the masses by the minorities whose powers grew in proportion to the growing facilities for private accumulation of wealth. This was a new form taken by the tendencies of the masses for mutual support. And the progress, economical, intellectual and moral—which mankind accomplished under the new popular form of organization, was so great that the States, when they were called later on into existence, simply took possession in the interests of the minorities, of all the judicial, economical, and administrative functions, which the village

community had exercised in the interests of all.
(Pages 151-2. Conclusion of chapters of Mutual
Aid among savages and Barbarians.)

The point of the chapters of Mutual Aid among savages and Barbarians is that man is, in the earliest traces of historic information, a social creature. The basis out of which human society has evolved is not the isolated individual struggling for existence against all the rest of his kind, but on the contrary, the social group, the clan with a communism is the primitive social order. Mankind has risen in the scale of evolution not through mutual struggle but mutual aid, by banding together into an offensive and defensive alliance, for protection, for food and for social life. E.C.D.

Opening of Chap V is as follows.

Sociability and need of mutual aid and support are such inherent parts of human nature that at no time of history can we discover men living in small isolated families, fighting each other for the means of subsistence. On the contrary, modern research, as we saw in the two preceding chapters, proves that since the very beginning of their pre-historic life, men used to agglomerate into *gentes*, clans, tribes, maintained by the idea of a common descent, or by worship of common ancestors. For thousands and thousands of years this organization has kept men together, even though there was not authority whatever to oppose it. (Page 153.)

From these communistic groups the organization of function gradually took place until the arbitrator of disputes developed into the judiciary, and the temporary leader developed into the king, and the protectors of the community, whom the remainder fed while the developing warrior class stood guard, became the privileged members of the new social order, and the feeders of the warriors found themselves serfs. This privileged class thus arising appropriated to their own purposes all the rights formerly vested in the community, taxes, mortmain, duties on inheritances, and marriages. But up to the

establishment of feudalism they had maintained the two fundamental rights of their community life, the common possession of land and self-jurisdiction. E.C.D.

In olden times, when the king sent his vogt to a village, the peasants received him with flowers in one hand and arms in the other, and asked him which law he intended to apply: the one he found in the village or the one he brought with him. In the first case, they handed him the flowers and accepted him, and in the second they fought him. Now they accepted the king's or lord's official whom they could not refuse. (Page 164.)

The explanation for the development of the free Medieval cities is that they are the natural growth from the village community, modified by the new conditions. E.C.D.

In fact, the intellectual movement which has been described as the Twelfth Century Renaissance and the Twelfth Century Rationalism—the precursor of the Reform—date from that period, when most cities were still simple agglomerations of small village communities enclosed by walls. (Pages 168-169.)

In the medieval city, the Mayor and council received imported goods and distributed them at cost to all the citizens. The merchants and sailors were compelled to swear as to the cost of whatever goods they received, and also as to the expense of transporting them. Upon the basis of this information the Mayor and council determined the price for distribution. There are documentary evidences of this in some places (SEE Cross on *The Merchant Guild*, Oxford, 1890, see pages 183-5)³.

In short, the more we begin to know the medieval city the more we see that it was not simply a political organization for the protection of certain political liberties. It was

³ Earl Davis almost certainly refers here to Charles Cross, *Gild Merchant*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890.

an attempt at organizing, on a much grander scale than in the village community, a close union for mutual aid and support, for consumption and production, and for social life together, without imposing upon men the fetters of the state, but given full liberty of expression to the creative genius of each separate group of individual in art, crafts, science, commerce and political organization. ([Kropotkin] Page 186.)

More than that; not only were many aspirations of our modern radicals already realized in the middle ages, but much of what is now described as Utopian was accepted then as a matter of fact. We are laughed at when we say that work must be pleasant, but -"everyone must be pleased with his work" a medieval Kuttensburg Ordinance says, "and no one shall, while doing nothing, appropriate for himself, what others have produced by application and work, because laws must be a shield for application and work." (Pages 194-195.)

Eight hours per day and Saturday afternoon off was the general provision. Seldom were the hours longer, and more often shorter. Saturday afternoon was recognized as bathing time for the community.

But the development of these free communities into an organized state where the personal touch was eliminated, and system took the place of men, and authority of State and church became paramount, cost the Medieval City its freedom.

The old spirit had gone. By too much trusting to government, they had ceased to trust themselves; they were unable to open new issues. The State had only to step in and crush down their last liberties. (Page 222.)

Chapter vii, Mutual Aid among ourselves.

However before submitting for three centuries to come, to the all-absorbing authority of the

State, the masses of the people made a formidable attempt at reconstructing society on the basis of mutual aid and support. It is well known by this time that the great movement of the reform (Reformation) was not a mere revolt against the abuses of the Catholic Church. It had its constructive ideal as well, and that ideal was life in free, brotherly communities. Those of the early writing, and sermons of the period which found most response from the masses were imbued with ideas of the economic and social brotherhood of mankind. The "Twelve articles" and similar professions of faith, which were circulated among the Swiss peasants and Artisans, maintained not only everyone's right to interpret the Bible according to his own understanding, but also included the demand of communal lands being restored to the village communities and feudal servitudes being abolished, and they always alluded to the "true" faith, a faith of brotherhood. (Page 225.)

But as the State absorbed all the functions of the free citizen, the natural development was towards a narrow-minded individualism.

In proportion as the obligations toward the State grew in numbers the citizens were evidently relieved from their obligations towards each other. In the Guild, and in medieval times every man belongs to some guild or fraternity—two "brothers" were bound to watch in turns a brother who had fallen ill; it would be sufficient now to give one's neighbor the address of the next pauper's hospital. (Page 227.)

Conclusion.

In the Animal world we have seen that the vast majority of the species live in societies, and that they find in association the best arms for the struggle for life; understood, of course, in its Darwinian sense, ... but as a struggle against all natural conditions unfavorable to the

species. The animal species in which the individual struggle has been reduced to its narrowest limits, and the practice of mutual aid has attained the greatest development, are invariably the most numerous, the most prosperous, and the most open to further progress. ... The unsociable species are doomed to decay.

Going over to man, we found him living in clans and tribes at the very dawn of the stone age; we saw a wide series of social institutions developed in the lower savage state. ... Out of the Savage tribe grew up the barbarian village community. (Pages 293-294.)

It is evident that no review of evolution can be complete, unless these two dominant currents are analyzed. However, the self-assertion of the individual or of groups of individuals, their struggles for superiority, and the conflicts which resulted therefrom, have already been analyzed, described and glorified from time immemorial. In fact, up to the present time, this current alone has received attention from the epical poet, the annalist, the historian, and the sociologist. ... It was therefore necessary to show, first of all, the immense part which this factor plays in the evolution of both the animal world and human societies. Only after this has been done will it be possible to proceed to a comparison between the two factors. (Pages 295-296.)

As to the sudden industrial progress which has been made during our own century, and which is usually ascribed to the triumph of individualism and competition, it certainly has a much deeper origin than that ...

To attribute, therefore, the industrial progress of our century to the war of each against all which it has proclaimed, is to reason like the man who, knowing not the causes of rain, attributes it to the victim he has immolated before his clay idol. For industrial progress, as

for each other conquest over nature, mutual aid and close intercourse certainly are, as they have been much more advantageous than mutual struggle." (Pages 297-298.)

However, it is especially in the domain of ethics that the dominating importance of mutual aid principle appears in full. That mutual aid is the real foundation of our ethical conceptions seems evident enough.

Each time that an attempt was made to return to this old principle (of Mutual Aid) its fundamental idea itself was widened. From the clan it was extended to the stem, to the federation of stems, to the nation, and finally—ion ideal, at least—to the whole of mankind. It was also refined at the same time. In primitive Christianity, in primitive Buddhism, in the writings of some of the Mussulmen teachers, the early movements of the Reform, and especially in the ethical and philosophical movements of the last century and of our own times, the total abandonment of the idea of revenge, or of "due reward"—of good for good and evil for evil—is affirmed more and more vigorously. The higher conception of "no revenge for wrongs" and of freely giving more than one expects to receive from his neighbors is proclaimed as being the real principle of morality—a principle superior to mere equivalents, equity or justice, and more conducive to happiness. ... In its wider extension, even at the present time, we also see the best guarantee of the still loftier evolution of our race. (Pages 298-300.)