Challenges to Marxism - Marxism and Ethics

Marxism has been criticised for its lack of an ethical standpoint. Marx considered that ethics represented the approach of bourgeois ideology and philosophical idealism. Lenin and Trotsky argued that the promotion of the class struggle represented the necessary ethical standpoint. However this approach could be criticised because it could not be sustained by independent ethical criteria and instead expressed the reduction of ethics to the norms of social conduct and the interests of one particular class, the proletariat. The regime of Stalinism indicated the importance of ethics because Stalin justified his political actions in terms of the role of the class struggle and this excused terrible barbarity and cruelty in the name of historical progress and the building of socialism. Marxists who did not support Stalinism responded with a political analysis that attempted to indicate that Stalinism was not Marxism but this was not sustained with an ethical critique which was implicitly considered to be liberal and so opposed to the revolutionary principles of Marxism. This absence of a Marxist ethics is combined with the lack of a Marxist understanding of the self. In other words Marxism has not explained the process of transformation of the self when a person becomes a communist and instead social transformation is generally considered as collective and involving mass movements that are an aggregate collection of individuals. In contrast the approach of Christianity is to have a strong sense of the self in terms of the importance of becoming influenced by the Holy Spirit when a person becomes a Christian. This view is reinforced by the combination of the importance of the Holy Spirit with the ethical doctrine of the Ten Commandments. The point being made is not that Christianity has a superior sense of self and ethics when compared to Marxism but rather that it has a conception of ethics and self which contrasts with the apparent lack of this understanding in the work of Marxism. Hence Marxism seems unable to explain what is meant by the process of becoming a Marxist and instead seems to be a doctrine about the role of mass movements rather than an understanding of inner transformation. This criticism does not mean that doctrines that emphasise the role of the individual are correct because they often indicate the importance of the individual to the detriment of the role of the collective. Instead we have to understand the relationship of the role of the individual to the importance of the collective, and this understanding will provide the basis to develop an ethics of Marxism.

In his book ‘Mutual Aid’ the anarchist Peter Kropotkin (William Heinemann: London 1904) outlined that the process of evolution involved the contradiction between competition and solidarity. He tried to show that this contradiction was integral to the development of nature and society. In relation to historical development he argued that solidarity had been crucial to the attempt of humanity to create a better society and was shown in the middle ages with the building of cities that were effectively free of the control of nobles and monarchs. The suppression of these cities and their institutions like the professional guilds by the role of centralising monarchs and the state did not undermine the prospect of the realisation of solidarity. This is because the aspiration of solidarity or mutual aid has been shown in the struggle of subordinated classes against the state and the domination of capital. In the countryside the peasantry have created the commune and in the cities the workers have developed unions that represent the aspirations of solidarity and opposition to the narrow interests of competition. The actual activity and aims of working people has been opposed to the repression of state and its defence of capital against the interests of labour. Kropotkin has outlined the beginnings of an ethic based on the actual behaviour of subordinated classes which is expressed by the importance of solidarity as the basis of opposition to what exists and which indicates the potential of what could be. Solidarity is not only the basis of an ethic of struggle and the principles of a future society it is also the indication of how humanity can improve and make progress within history. Hence the repression of solidarity is an indication that progress is not always realised by an evolutionary imperative and instead the regressive tendencies of competition and conflict can be dominant. The capacity for competition to be dominant is an indication that the ruling classes of society are able to utilise the state in order to undermine historical progress. The answer to this prospect is not pessimism but is instead development of the forms and content of solidarity in terms of the role of trade unions, political parties and the elaboration of a strategy of solidarity that can facilitate victory over the forces of the state, reaction and competition.

However whilst Kropotkin has elaborated the basis of a ethics of the mass struggle and developed the view that solidarity is vital to the success of the class forces of human emancipation, he has not related this standpoint to the role of the individual. He has obviously suggested that solidarity would be a vital aspect of human conduct in relations between individuals but he has not developed a conception of what this would mean in terms of the transformation of the self. How is it possible for individuals to overcome the tendency to compete and become people based on the principles of mutual support? He is able to establish that institutions can realise solidarity because of the requirements of the class struggle and evolutionary development but the individual self remains a mystery. Why has the individual the capacity to make ethical decisions based on the importance of solidarity? Kropotkin does not analyse the role of the family and personal relations and so cannot outline the connections between individuals and the role of the micro. Instead the Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit remains superior in terms of explaining the changes within an individual in terms of relations to a mass organisation and its faith doctrines. However Kropotkin’s views are still superior to the standpoint of Marxism that effectively denies the role of ethics because it is understood as being opposed to the theoretical capacity to explain society. This is not to suggest that Kropotkin is actually outlining an ethical standpoint but he is elaborating the relation between historical development and the role of ethics. Unfortunately we still have an absence of a sense of self and the neglect of ethical self-conduct at the individual level in his approach. This is because Kropotkin is assuming that transformation at the level of the social is sufficient to bring about related changes at the level of the individual. It is also possible to relate this criticism to the approach of Marxism.

After Marx and Engels the most serious attempt to develop an ethical standpoint was carried out by the Austro Marxists. This resulted in a dispute between Kautsky and Bauer about whether ethics should be reduced to the importance of historical circumstances, or instead should represent timeless moral imperatives of a Kantian character (Steven Lukes: Marxism and Morality Clarendon Press: Oxford 1985 p15-20) The problem with this dispute is that the attempt to elaborate a Marxist ethic was undermined by the influence of Marx and Engels who denied the importance of the ethical approach. Hence ethics was understood as the expression of the influence of the Kantian approach within Marxism and so was generally rejected. Kautsky argued that ethics could not be more important than social circumstances and this suggested that ethics could not transcend historical conditions. But what did this mean about the ethics of Marxism at the given moment? Kautsky was reluctant to elaborate an answer to this question and instead subordinated ethics to the standpoint of the materialist conception of history. This meant his critics within Austro Marxism seemed to be upholding timeless ethical imperatives that had been established by philosophical reason. This debate was inferior to the lessons gained from Kropotkin’s work and his establishment of the relation between ethics and historical development. The debate within Marxism had only succeeded in creating a discrepancy between ethics and the role of history and this meant the importance of ethics was problematical in an ontological sense and instead were imposed on reality as the influence of philosophical truths. This meant that important conceptions like solidarity were drained of their historical significance and instead considered as merely an aspect of timeless and independent moral imperatives.

Instead of the limitations of this arid debate it is important to have the conception of solidarity as the starting point of what is meant by a revolutionary ethics. This is because contemporary liberal ethics is individualist and opposed to the importance of solidarity and instead has an emphasis upon relations between individuals. For example much of contemporary ethics outlines the relations between individuals with the other. These moral obligations are not explained by the role and importance of relations of solidarity between humans and instead are about the obligation to someone who is different to ourselves. It is this difference that defines this moral obligation rather than what we have in common. Consequently the performance of an ethical act does not transcend this difference and instead confirms it and represents the relation of the individual to the difference of the other. Hence acts of charity replace the relations of solidarity as the expression of connection between humans. It is inconceivable that humans could act together to realise the ethical code. This means that solidarity has no basis in reality and so is without ontological justification and as a result cannot be upheld in terms of epistemological coherence. Instead it is assumed that society is based on relations between individuals who lack social connections and empathy, and therefore the assumption that they could combine to realise an ethical code of conduct is effectively defined as an unethical and dogmatic approach. Marxism and revolutionary trends of thought could provide an alternative with the elaboration of an explicit ethics of solidarity. Instead Marxism is reduced to an alternative of implicit moral protest about the social problems that have created the difference between ourselves and the other. However this repressed morality is not an articulated philosophical alternative to the prevalent ethical approach of bourgeois ideology.

In other words the perpetual question remains what is a credible Marxist ethics and how could a Marxist conception of the self replace the sense of difference of the other? The starting point of providing an answer to these important questions is with the important ontological and ethical understanding of solidarity. The role of the other is not mysterious and is instead explained in social and historical terms by the importance of class antagonism and the related conflicts within society. However out of the development of class conflict has arisen an sense of the unity of working people and the common relations of the subordinated classes in global terms. This solidarity has been undermined by the influence of the ideology of the state and of the ruling class but it cannot be definitively overcome because solidarity is structurally generated by the relations of hierarchy of the prevailing mode of production. Furthermore solidarity has been a historical product of social progress and the transformation of society that has made communism a historical reality. Hence solidarity is what can make communism possible and solidarity is what will make communism successful. The very historical importance of solidarity makes it ethically important. Without solidarity both historical progress and communism is not possible and this is why the ruling class attempt to undermine the prospect of solidarity within the subordinated classes. Hence the relation between the self and the other is the outcome of the domination of the ruling class and its attempt to undermine the prospect of the unity required to bring about communism. This means the answer to the fragmentation of solidarity and the creation of relations between the self and the other is not to glorify the other and so consolidate its status as the outsider but instead to develop an approach that can establish inclusivity and so transcend the relations that generate the other. This requires the elaboration of solidarity and the extension of the universality of mutual support and so all will recognise that they have common unity as part of a well being that is being denied by the limitations of existing class relations. The very act of solidarity generated by general struggle against the state and the limitations of existing class relations will overcome the difference between the self and the other.

However Kropotkin’s perspective has important limitations caused by its flawed understanding of the process of transition to communism. Kropotkin’s conception of the importance of solidarity is outlined in his work: “The Conquest of Bread” (Black Rose Books: Montreal Canada 1990) He argues that the causes of poverty are created by the situation of the individual appropriation of products and the denial of collective well being. The alternative is not provided by the importance of the state which would only modify the present situation of poverty and would not result in the promotion of well being. Economic development has created the conditions for the realisation of well being but the private ownership of the means of production generates the creation of the rich who dictate what the poor should produce on the basis of profit and not the realisation of need. Humanity has shown in its genius and invention the capacity to realise well being but the present economic system undermines this possibility. The goal of struggle for a better society should be the realisation of well being: “If the man and the woman have their fair share of work, they have the right to their fair share of all that is produced by all, and that share is enough to secure them well-being.”(p14) Kropotkin outlines a cogent conception of the limitations of capitalism and why it should be replaced by communism. The problem with this standpoint is that the relationship between the moral and historical aspects of the concept of well being is not elaborated. Instead it is assumed that well being is a moral imperative that should be realised because of the limitations of capitalism. This assumption is based on the vague economic premise that abundance is possible because of the development of the productive powers. Hence it is not established whether this principle of well being may have to be diluted and compromised because of possible difficulties in its implementation within communism. Kropotkin argues that expropriation will be the means to realise the end of well being but a means cannot guarantee that the end is achieved and instead it can only represent a potential form of mediation that can enhance the prospect of the success of the ultimate aim. Understanding the pre-conditions that can promote the realisation of the end is not an expression of inevitability. This is because we cannot anticipate the difficulties that may arise and create problems for the realisation of our end. Consequently the very conception of the end should recognise the importance of flexibility and the necessity of policy as the basis of the practicality of the end. In contrast Kropotkin defines the end of well being as a moral instruction and so assumes that the creation of the economic conditions for its realisation is sufficient to realise this aim. The role of the economic is secondary to the importance of the role of moral instruction.

The point being made is not that the role of the moral and ethical should be disregarded when conceiving of the process of the realisation of communism. Instead it is important that the moral should act as a guide of progress when considering when and if communism can be realised. In this context if the society envisaged by Kropotkin does not realise the well being of the members of its community then it can be assumed that it is not being successful in the attempt to realise communism. Hence the moral end is also an economic end that is important for defining if communism is being achieved. However the conception of well being should also not become a moral imperative that is neglectful of the importance of the conditions under which the attempt to realise communism is occurring. Instead well being should be adjusted and related to the prevailing economic and political conditions. It cannot be assumed that the realisation of communism will be without its contradictions and the prospect of the intensification of the class struggle. This does not mean that the perspective of well being is nothing more than the pragmatic expression of what is successful at any given moment in time but rather the moral aim of well being is a guide to action and the basis to relate strategy to tactics. These considerations are not recognised as important to Kropotkin. This is not because he denies any difficulties in the realisation of communism instead he cannot envisage how such difficulties would bring about the necessity of flexibility. The realisation of well being is considered to be effectively not problematical and as a result moral premises do dictate the role of economics and politics. He is arguing that society has developed to the point that economics and politics can be subordinated to what is a moral aim.

Marx would disagree with this approach. He would argue that the aim of the construction of communism does not require the addition of moral imperatives and instead the success of bringing about the realisation of communism is based on the unity of theory and practice. Hence Marx does not accept that the moral should act as a guide to theory and practice. This means he ignores the prospect that policy could become merely pragmatic and lacking in moral influence. Hence Kropotkin is making a powerful point that the conception of well being as a moral aim should act as the criteria by which the issue of the realisation of communism is assessed. However Marx is also making a cogent point that the role of the moral should not result in disorientation at the level of economics and politics. The point is to make economics an important aspect of the moral, and to therefore adjust the moral to the importance of the material conditions under which communism is being realised. In contrast, Kropotkin is assuming that the material conditions will be conducive to the realisation of communism and so there is no reason why economics should not be subordinated to the moral aim of well being. This assumption is the element of a lack of realism in his approach and instead Marx has a greater appreciation of the difficulties involved in realising communism. But Marx was one-sided in his equation of moral aims with subjectivism and instead of the rejection of the role of the moral he could have connected the importance of the moral with the role of a guide to action.

Kropotkin is aware that one of the most important problems of past revolutions was that of economic disorganisation and the inability to provide food for the population. The answer is not provided by a state that acts on behalf of the people and instead working people should utilise their own creativity to realise well being: “We must organize without delay to feed the hungry, to satisfy all wants, to met all needs, to produce, not for the special benefit of this one or that one, but to ensure that society as a whole will live and grow.”(p27) Thus: “Let us have the courage to recognize that Well-being for all, henceforward possible, must be realized.”(p27) Kropotkin is arguing that the economic problems of the past were caused by the character of the revolutions which were partial and limited by the domination of the state. He effectively denies that these problems could be an expression of all types of revolution and the problems caused by social upheaval. Instead on the basis of the theoretical importance of moral aims he insists that the primacy of well being should be sufficient to ensure that this aim is realised and that the people are fed and clothed. However a non-dogmatic approach would recognise that feeding the people may be one of the major problems of a post-revolutionary regime and that action would have to be taken to satisfy both the farmers and the hungry people. What is not satisfactory is the assumption that moral imperatives can resolve the situation. Instead moral aims can only be a guide to economic policy, and therefore coercion and repression would not be the answer to a difficult economic situation. But we cannot assume that moral instruction in the importance of well-being would also resolve an important economic impasse and promote the organisation of production and consumption. Instead the conception of well being would act as our ultimate moral aim and the immediate aim would be to feed the people. In other words moral dictates are not irrelevant to the situation and so act as the guide to policy but what form our moral aim is at any given moment in time depends on the type of economic and social problem that has to be tackled by the post revolutionary regime.

The problem with Kropotkin’s approach is that it is based on assumptions. He assumes that the social revolution of the future will have the moral aim of being motivated by well-being. This means the moral aim is identical to the resolution of economic problems. But we cannot make such an assumption. It is entirely possible that the revolution itself could promote conditions that make the realisation of its moral aims very difficult. This is not an argument for the rejection of these moral aims because of the difficulty involved in their realisation but rather that moral aims should guide policy in a flexible manner. The alternative of the rejection of moral aims is not principled because policy could become reduced to the expediency of mere survival and the result could be the rejection of the popular and democratic character of the regime in favour of centralisation and the resurgence of centralised state power. In other words the character of policy becomes reduced to anything that is acceptable to the dominant elite. Hence an important aspect of moral aims is that they represent critique of policy and provide a comparison between policy and the importance of revolutionary principles. In this Kropotkin’s emphasis on well being is important and represents how we could evaluate the social and political progress of a revolutionary regime.

Kropotkin argues that communism is both an expression of moral aims and the logic of economic development: “We hold further that Communism is not only desirable, but that existing societies, founded on individualism are inevitably impelled in the direction of Communism.”(p31) Hence communism is located within capitalism in terms of social and interdependent production and the increasing provision of public services that are not based on the importance of private profit. This means it is the reactionary role of the state that undermines the prospect of the realisation of communism and instead defends the private ownership of the means of production. However he has not established what is most important in the sense of outlining the connection between the moral worthy and historical necessity. Do moral aims guide social processes or are moral aims subordinated to the importance of economic development? Marx has a precise answer to this question in that social development promotes what is possible in historical terms and morality is effectively an expression of the ideology utilised to defend the social order against revolutionary change. Kropotkin is agreeing with Marx about the importance of historical and economic development but he also maintains that moral aims are generated by this process of development. In this context well being is generated by capitalism and the question of the realisation of well being requires communism. Communism becomes the moral imperative promoted by the very possibilities and limitations of capitalism and this indicates the correspondence between moral aims and historical development. The point being made is that people would not be motivated to struggle for communism if it was not morally desirable but that this moral inspiration is generated by the very capacity of capitalism to create the pre-conditions for communism. Increasingly people are organising and acting within capitalism in accordance with the principles of communism such as the ability to act without the role of the state and without the prospect of monetary reward. This very ontological creation of communism within capitalism is creating a consciousness that capitalism is no longer acceptable and that the only principled correspondence of social activity with moral aims is expressed by the prospect of the realisation of communism.

In contrast Marx cannot explain the motivation of working people to strive for communism and instead reduces the role of consciousness to the expression of objective economic laws. Kropotkin has outlined the relation of the objective to the subjective in that the process of social development is actively mediated by increasing support for the moral aim of well being. This is an expression of the attempt to realise communism within capitalism and this struggle will ultimately result in social revolution. In contrast Marx can explain class conflict in terms of the antagonism between capital and labour but he cannot establish why this struggle can result in communism. Instead he can only register a mass movement of working people occurring under capitalism and cannot indicate how and why it could acquire the aim of communism. Consequently Marx’s standpoint would actually be strengthened if it was supplemented by the importance of moral aims such as well being. This would indicate that the alienated character of labour could be challenged by the motivation of what is required to overcome the alienated character of labour. But the rejection of moral aims means that Marx is unable to connect the resistance of labour under capitalism to the perspective of a future communist society. Hence what is required to overcome the alienated character of labour remains problematic. Instead the role of the working class is conceived as the passive expression of objective economic laws. The result of this standpoint was the emphasis on the role of the party by Lenin and Gramsci and only Luxemburg managed to relate Marx’s approach to the dynamism of spontaneity. However even her standpoint could have been improved by its relating the class struggle to moral aims. It was the addition of moral aims that established why communism would be a historical improvement when compared to capitalism and so moral aims were not a diversion from the conception of historical necessity and instead its consolidation and supplementation. The problem occurred when Kropotkin contrasted the moral aim of communism with its historical logic. This problem did not occur when explaining the class struggle and instead was an expression of the dogmatic conception of communist society.

Kropotkin argued that the introduction of communism requires a complete transformation of society: “A new form of property requires a new form of remuneration. A new method of production cannot exist side by side with the old methods of consumption, any more than it can adapt to the old forms of political organization.”(p31) In other words the replacement of capitalism is not based on the introduction of transitional form that provide for the possibility of intermediate stages of progress towards communism. Instead the implementation of communism should be considered as a complete and instant process that reconciles policy with principles. It would be a betrayal of the perspective of communism to envisage any prospect of compromise and this means that the role of wages and private ownership must be rejected and replaced by economic forms that are more compatible with the conception of communism as the demise of individual ownership and reward and the introduction of complete economic equality. Only the introduction of complete communism is compatible with the principle of well being. In this context the role of labour tokens as a replacement of wages should be considered as unprincipled and the continuation of private ownership in agriculture or industry is in opposition to what should be the development of total collective ownership of the means of production.

The author does not accept that society may not be ready for the introduction of communism. There may be a discrepancy between the process of revolution and the maturing of the conditions for communism. The result may be the introduction of transitional measures such as the continuation of the role of wages, markets and private ownership in aspects of economic activity like agriculture. Furthermore Kropotkin does not accept that people would politically object to the introduction of complete communism and so would resist any attempt at instant implementation with resistance. The result would be civil war. Instead of contemplating the consequences of a dogmatic and rigid attempt to introduce communism he argues that only the correspondence of principles with policy can ensure that the result is not a regression towards the restoration of capitalism. He argues that the continuation of private ownership in any significant sense would create a dynamic for private ownership to become dominant. This is why the combination of different forms of production such as socialised industry and privatised agriculture is unprincipled and instead represents a dynamic towards the reintroduction of capitalism. The same argument is applied to the role of wages which are defined as an expression of individual reward and therefore opposed to the necessity of collective means of remuneration. Hence it can be argued that even labour tokens are not a sufficient alternative to the role of wages and instead are a form of wages. Consequently the process of remuneration should reject all individualist aspects and instead be collective. Only in this manner will the institutional forms reflect the principles of communism.

Why is Kropotkin s confident that it will be possible to organise society quickly and smoothly on a communist basis and that the necessity of compromise in economic forms and methods of remuneration can be avoided? His answer is that society has been evolving in a communist manner and that the development of the productive forces has made communism possible. The impetus for communism has been expressed throughout history but the dynamism of capitalism has meant that it can be implemented without any dilution of principles. Historical development has enabled the realisation of the correspondence of moral and political principles with the importance of activity and policy: “How can we doubt, then, that when the instruments of production are placed at the service of all, when business is conducted on Communist principles, when labour, having recovered its place of honour in society, produces much more than is necessary to all – how can we doubt but that this force (already so powerful) will enlarge is sphere of action till it becomes the ruling principle of social life.”(p36) Kropotkin is arguing that the process of historical development is the creation of the economic conditions of communism and the related capacity to realise the moral aim of well being. Capitalism is creating abundance and democratic forms of economic activity that will ensure that communism can be implemented when capitalism is overthrown. Within capitalism the role of labour has become very important and represents the ability of labour to define how society is able to function in economic terms. If labour is able to evolve smoothly and efficiently it will be able to determine how society is organised in communist terms. The confidence of Kropotkin in the possibility to implement communism is because of the emphasis he projects onto the role of evolution in history. This is why he cannot allow for the very complications that revolution will create for the realisation of communism. Furthermore he cannot allow for the importance of politics and the class struggle. Instead society is defined in terms of the capacity to realise its moral end, the attainment of well being. Consequently the difficulties in bringing about the harmonious relationship of the moral aim and historical development are glossed over.

In other words the limitations of the standpoint of Kropotkin are different to those of Marx. Marx rejects the attempt to define history in terms of the realisation of moral aims because the reduction of society to principles like well being represents a dogmatic perspective that glosses over the difficulties posed by the class struggle and the revolutionary process. The result of his approach is to conceive of communism as the outcome of class struggle and to understand communism as the result of transitional stages. But the proletariat is not guided by the importance of moral principles and so the possibility arises that the revolutionary process could degenerate because of the lack of moral instruction and recognition that moral aims sustain the realisation of communism. In contrast Kropotkin argues that historical development represents the realisation of the moral aim of well being. The principle of well being should influence the process of the realisation of communism. This moral aim is not abstract or formal because it instead results from the very character of the development of the material conditions for communism. Hence the increasing capacity to realise well being also represents the growing ability of labour to influence and dominate the relations of production and their progress. Consequently the prospect of an unsuccessful attempt to realise communism cannot be contemplated because it would represent the rejection of the moral aims developed by history and economic activity. The very correspondence of history and morality represents the ability to realise communism. However the important emphasis on the role of moral aims results in the lack of recognition of the necessity of flexibility in policy and also the prospect that success in the class struggle may not always be conducive to the quick and complete transition to communism. Consequently a fusion of the approach of Marx and Kropotkin would be fruitful in order to realise the strengths of both and overcome their limitations.

From Marx it is possible to develop a recognition that we cannot predict the future and this is why it is deterministic and dogmatic to envisage that instant communism is both practical and feasible because of increasing favourable historical conditions. Instead the problem of maturity means that a transitional stage is necessary before communism can be realised and it is necessary to relate moral aims to the circumstances in which the prospect of communism is occurring. Kropotkin has outlined the reasons why moral aims can be compatible with historical development and therefore ethics can act as a guide to political practice in the struggle for communism. Moral aims are important for understanding why political practice should not be contrary to their principles and instead there should be a unity of morality and practice in the process of the realisation of communism. However adherence to moral aims should not be a justification of inflexibility and rigidity and instead we should recognise that morality can only be realised under changing and difficult political conditions. Lenin has taught us that communism can only be realised in terms of the application of strategy and policy and that this may involve compromise and retreat. It is also important to recognise that Kropotkin’s adherence to an instant communism may contradict his moral aims and that adherence to a short-term introduction of communism may result in tragedy. Kropotkin can only gloss over these problems because of his dogmatic adherence to the standpoint of evolution which downplays the importance of contradiction and conflict. His view that history under capitalism is already realising well being and the potential form communism creates a justification for underestimating the difficulties involved in the actual process of transition to communism. Instead of this historical optimism we can argue with more caution that whilst capitalism has created many of the features of communism the process of transition to communism is still conscious and not automatic and will represent many problems and difficulties. Kropotkin’s emphasis on the role of morality can only be enhanced by similar recognition of the practical complexity of the process of transition to communism.

Instead of the recognition of caution in his standpoint, Kropotkin instead argues emphatically that without the limitations of the state, capital and Parliament humanity will be able to realise the moral aim of well being in terms of the communist organisation of society. He does not appreciate that the influence of his moral aim can only be a tendency and that opposing tendencies undermine its realisation. The process of evolutionary development is only being undermined by the continuation of capitalism and so revolution will complete the process of development and realise communism: “Like all evolutions, it only waits a revolution to overthrow the old obstacles which block the way, that it may find free scope in a regenerated society.”(p37) This is a one-sided conception of evolution and so denies the difficulties involved in its realisation. The flowering of well being is distorted by the influence of bourgeois ideology and the economic imperatives of the domination of capital over labour and the importance of alienation. Hence in order to establish the predominance of well being is a conscious process involving the struggle to develop the influence of the theory of communism. In contrast Kropotkin seems to suggest that well being becomes important because of the economic relations between people. The influence of well being is automatic and abstracted from the role of ideological struggle. Hence he is suggesting that revolution is merely the culmination of an evolutionary process creating processes which must be realised. The role of politics and the class struggle is underestimated as a result. However this does not mean that his emphasis on the importance of well being under capitalism and as the most important principle of communism is incorrect.

An important problem with the standpoint of Kropotkin is that he is attempting to define all the aspects of communism in advance of its actual realisation. It is not problematic to try and suggest the principles of communism and what they would mean in practice. In this context the attempt to outline what is meant by well being is an indication of how communism would work and how it would be different to capitalism and its emphasis on the role of private profit. However it is necessary to be careful and to differentiate between what communism means as a collection of principles from the actual practice of a future society. The former aspect can be outlined in detail and the difference between capitalism and communism is established in terms of the difference between a society based on individual ownership of the means of production and a society of the collective expropriation of economic resources. The latter society which is communism can realise well being and the former society that is capitalism can only realise well being in a limited and partial manner. This is why communism is superior t capitalism. These views can be established by theoretical argument and by a careful observation of the historical tendencies of capitalism and its potential for communism. However we cannot argue what communism would be like in its daily practice. This aspect can only be determined by a present that has not yet occurred. For example we cannot outline with precision what the relations between agriculture and industry will be like and so we cannot establish with detail what the relations of production and consumption will be like. This is because whilst industry will be maturing for the introduction of socialised, planned and collective forms of activity agriculture will represent a variety of economic forms ranging from small scale private production to large scale activity that is ready for collective production. In contrast Kropotkin argues in absolutist terms that he cannot envisage any difference between the organisation of production and consumption: “Therefore on the day we strike at private property, under any one of its forms, territorial or industrial, we shall be obliged to attack them all. The very success of the Revolution demands it.”(p58) This justification of absolutism and dogma opposes the necessity of flexibility in the application of policy. It is entirely possible that the very aim of realising communism could mean that it is premature to collectivise agriculture because this would mean transforming the peasantry into a class that is opposed to the aims of the revolutionary regime. Instead it is necessary to introduce intermediate forms that can promote the support of the peasantry for communism but this would mean private ownership of the means of production would remain the prevailing type of economic organisation.

Kropotkin would argue that industry and agriculture should not be organised differently if communism is to be realised and he can provide perfectly sound arguments to support his standpoint. But in practice it is not possible to predict the exact manner in which communism could be implemented and advanced. Instead the process of the realisation of communism is fluid and the importance of flexibility is one important reason why industry and agriculture may have to be treated differently. However Kropotkin can only conceive of the betrayal of the revolution if communism is not instantly implemented in both industry and agriculture. This is why he insists that only collective expropriation is the policy that is compatible with the principle of communism. The principles of communism dictate policy and establish that any compromise with these principles is a betrayal that can result in the restoration of capitalism. But the very unequal development of industry and agriculture and the uncertainty of the conditions in which the process of communism is being implemented means that the policy absolutes of Kropotkin are unfeasible. It is his approach that would result in the resurgence of support for capitalism because it is possible that the only manner in which industry and agriculture could be made exactly compatible and identical in terms of economic activity would be by the method of coercion. Kropotkin ignores this prospect because he can only conceive of the anarchist revolution in terms of spontaneous and unified acts of voluntary will. This perspective of the future is untenable because his emphasis on absolutes can bring about conflict and tensions that make the realisation of communism dependent on the role of a strong state. The important contradiction in Kropotkin’s standpoint is that his support for absolutes means that communism cannot be realised by means of a voluntary process and instead only the role of the state could bring about the overcoming of the limitations of the present and attain the promise of the future. This paradox would also mean the betrayal of the moral aim of well being because the state would justify exclusive reasoning as to what was meant by well being. Hence well being would not be ensured by the development of a voluntary process of revolution and realisation of communism. The question remains as to how the principle of well being can be realised in terms that do not betray the anarchist conception of revolution?

In order to answer this question effectively Kropotkin would have to acknowledge that his conception of the relations between industry and agriculture under communism is dogmatic and inflexible. His theoretical standpoint is flimsy in terms of the flexibility demanded by practice. Hence he would have to acknowledge that the aim of instant collective expropriation of both industry and agriculture is inflexible and instead has to be modified because of complex economic circumstances. Indeed he would also have to acknowledge that the issue of policy concerning agriculture cannot be resolved in terms of absolute principles and instead has to be based on astute empirical observation and the utmost flexibility. Furthermore it will be necessary to listen to what working people within the agricultural sector want and to therefore reconcile principles with recognition of the importance of social conditions. Only in this context will the principle of well being be meaningful and not formal and as a result it will be possible to reconcile policy with principles. The point is not that policy adjustment means the rejection of the end of communism and the attainment of well being. Instead what is being acknowledged is that caution and patience are part of the process of the realisation of communism. It is not possible to bring about communism by instant collective expropriation. Instead sections within the working class and peasantry will support this demand and others will be less enthusiastic. The crucial point is to build support for collective expropriation by conscious mobilisation of working people and to encourage the process of self-activity and creative development. What will be possible is not the instant realisation of absolute principles but instead progress at each given stage of the realisation of communism. It will be important to comprehend the balance of class forces at each moment in order to assess what is possible and what is unrealistic. These aspects are ignored by Kropotkin because the role of principles transcends the importance of policy and strategy. Instead by elaborating dogmatically the method of realising communism, which is collective expropriation in industry and agriculture, he can argue that any deviation from this standpoint is opportunist and unprincipled.

In other words the approach of Kropotkin is utopian in that he still conceives of the future in terms of rigid principles. However this does not mean that his approach towards historical development is also unrealistic. On the contrary he has outlined why and how the prospect of communism is developing within capitalism. The very ability of capitalism to function is based on the promotion of social solidarity and the principle of well being. The complete realisation of this principle requires communism and so the struggle for well being within capitalism is a struggle for communism. If Kropotkin had contented himself with suggesting that what this solidarity and well being meant cannot be determined precisely and in detail when discussing the character of the future society it would not have been controversial. But Kropotkin was determined to argue that well being could only be realised by collective expropriation and without the role of wages and the market and the state would become superfluous. Consequently policy was subordinated to principles and the policy of all other forms of socialism apart from anarchist communism was found to be wanting and unprincipled. But if we evaluate the concept of well being independent of political ideology the result is the rejection of rigidity and instead the generation of the flexible connection of policy to moral principles. The realisation of well being does not necessarily mean the immediate end to wages and the role of markets and instead principles are related to social circumstances. This also means that policy does not become an excuse to reject principles and the ultimate moral aim provides the criteria by which policy should be evaluated. For example it would be questionable to justify state repression and terror because this would not be to the well being of all citizens, and huge wage differentials would be rejected because they could only be introduced to the detriment of the lowest earners. Hence policy would not degenerate to the pragmatic level of what works and is successful, but policy would also influence principles and suggest what is feasible and realistic.

Kropotkin has underestimated the importance of realism because of his dogmatic adherence to principles but he has also outlined the role that principles should have in the process of transition to communism. This understanding has its lessons when evaluating the degeneration of the Russian revolution and his approach represents a credible part of the theory of communism. In contrast Stalinism is the rejection of communism because not only is policy explicitly elevated above the importance of principles but the principles themselves are changed in accordance with the new policies. The new principle is the fetish of the state in order to equate nationalisation with socialism. The working class is excluded from this understanding and instead the role of the party elite is considered sufficient to build socialism. The concept of well being and its universalist content is replaced by the particularist aspects of the new definition of socialism. Communist anarchism can utilise its perspective in order to establish why Stalinism is unprincipled and is a rejection of any sense of building a future based on well being. This is not to suggest that Communist Anarchism is also the most explanatory basis to understand Leninism. Instead Leninism is based on the Marxist critique of Communist Anarchism. Hence Leninism can help to establish what is unrealistic about Communist Anarchism, but we can also utilise Communist Anarchism in order to understand flaws within Leninism. The purpose of this theoretical process is to enhance our understanding of what communism could be like and how it is possible because of historical development.

Kropotkin is aware that one of the most important problems of any revolution is the question of food. He recognises that the failure of past revolutions has been the inability to supply food to the people. The result has been demoralisation and the undermining of popular support for revolution and the result has been the resort to terror or the overthrow of the revolutionary regime. His alternative is that the communist revolution should organise production with the aim of generating the cultivation of food. This process can be realised by the workers producing goods that the peasants will want and the result will be that the peasants will be willing to exchange food in order to obtain these items. Kropotkin is recognising that in order food will be produced for the non-agricultural areas it is necessary to establish a situation of fair exchange. Industry produces what the countryside wants and the countryside produces the food required by the city. The economic system shall be organised in order to realise these aims and it shall be recognised that only the successful attainment of these mutual aims will ensure the successful functioning of the economy of communism. This understanding represents Kropotkin at his most realistic. He is aware of the problem that has undermined the possibility of success of previous revolutionary regimes and is determined to articulate how this problem can be avoided in the future. Consequently it is essential that the interests of the agricultural workers are catered for in the economic system and this aim can be realised by establishing relations with industry. The assumption is that if industry neglected the interests of agriculture the problem of food production will be repeated and the success of the development of communism will be undermined. If industry is not geared to the interests of agriculture then it is entirely possible that the agricultural producers will only be motivated to met their own needs and the result will be the shortage of food for the people of the cities. This is the most important problem and challenge that could result in the ability to realise communism.

It is interesting that Kropotkin does not suggest the importance of the collectivisation of the agricultural system. Instead he is interested in providing incentives and encouragement to the farmers to produce food. The urgent issue is the provision of food because without food the revolution will no longer be popular and the attempt to realise communism will be a failure. Hence he is assuming that the development of communism will begin in the city and the process of transformation in the countryside will be delayed until industry is able to provide goods that the farmers want and which will then encourage them to develop production in accordance with communist principles. However because of his rigid theoretical standpoint Kropotkin does not make explicit this perspective and instead he is still formally committed to the simultaneous transformation of the social relations of both industry and the countryside. But his implicit standpoint is that industry will take the leading role in creating the material conditions for agriculture to respond to the encouragement provided to make food available for the city. The problem in the past is that the city has been unable to establish economic methods to promote the production of food and the result has been shortages. However communism is based on the principle of well being and is dedicated to the realisation of need. Kropotkin is aware that the development of an economy able to met need cannot be established by the utilisation of terror and instead requires incentives. These are provided by the exchange of goods between the countryside and industry. The recognition of the importance of the moral aim of well being is able to provide the methodology of how the problem of food can be resolved. Any dislocation caused by the revolutionary process can be overcome if industry establishes correct priorities. This means that the production of the means of production will be secondary to the production of means of consumption and other items required by the agricultural producers. The assumption is that only after catering to the interests of the countryside will it be possible to devote resources to the modernisation of the economy: “All the same, we maintain our contention: bread must be found for the people of the Revolution, and the question of bread must take precedence over all other questions. If it is settled in the interests of the people, the Revolution will be on the right road; for in solving the question of Bread we must accept the principle of equality, which will force itself upon us to the exclusion of every other solution.”(p65-66)

The history of revolution and the repetition of the regular problem of the inability to provide food is an indication of the profound truth of Kropotkin’s observation. He understands that the ability to provide food is dependent on the development of good relations between the city and the countryside. The problem with revolutionary regimes in the past is that they tried to overcome the problem of food by the utilisation of state repression. However the authority of the state was not adequate to the development of the capacity to resolve the food problem. Instead it led to the contradiction between the aspiration of the people to resolve the food question by their own measures and the state which insisted that only its methods could provide food. The resolution of this contradiction was by the methods of state repression and terror but this was only a formal outcome because the situation was still characterised by the lack of food. State coercion had proved to be incapable of providing food. Instead the population in the cities remained hungry and discontented and the peasantry was repressed and become opponents of the revolutionary regime. The alternative is to replace the domination of the state with the voluntary role of the people. They will gravitate towards the introduction of communism in order to resolve the food problem. In contrast the state will attempt to realise the process of economic domination over the people. This point is historically proven by the role of revolutionary regimes that have assumed the form of extreme state centralisation. Unfortunately it is still a matter of opinion as to whether the role of the people can resolve the problem of food by the introduction of communism. Communism means more than practical measures in order to resolve the food question. Instead Kropotkin reduces communism to its ability to resolve the food question. Consequently we would have to broaden the definition of communism to include the capacity to overcome the economic logic of capital and become a different system of economic organisation. Unfortunately Kropotkin is reluctant to support this type of definition because of his anarchist reluctance to justify any type of authority. Instead communism becomes anything that is compatible with the role of spontaneity. This means the realistic aspects of his standpoint become undermined by the affirmation of rigid anarchist doctrine.

Kropotkin obscures the realistic and practical character of his standpoint in the form of inflexible anarchist terminology. He argues: “Give the people a free hand, and in ten days the food service will be conducted with admirable regulation.”(p74) The suggestion is that the voluntary and spontaneous action of the people in the cities will resolve the problem of the distribution of food. The collective action of the people will create the capacity and willingness to resolve any immediate food problem: “In any case, a system that springs up spontaneously, under stress of immediate need, will be infinitely preferable to anything invented between four walls by hide-bound theorists sitting on any number of committees.”(p75) This argument is flimsy because whilst such action may be satisfactory for a few weeks, and represents the basis to provide rations in order to meet immediate needs, it is not sufficient for any greater length of time. Instead planning and the considered ordering of priorities will be required if the problem of food is to be resolved in relation to the long-term. Hence the role of voluntary action that is based on a lack of reflection and development of conscious planning is inadequate. It may be possible to bring about a redistribution of existing food supplies on the basis of immediate action but the issue of how food is supplied in the longer term will remain a problem. This point is actually recognised by Kropotkin in terms of the development of his perspective of fair exchange and the generation of incentives for food production. In order to be successful at this task it will be necessary for an authority to arise that is able to plan and organise economic priorities. But Kropotkin is ambivalent about this possibility because he is critical of the role of any authority that is not identical to the spontaneous action of the people. His explicit standpoint is the rejection of the role of authority, planning and organisation. But he implicitly allows for planning if the problem of food production is to be resolved. Indeed even in the short-term the urgent problem of the provision of food will require organisation and planning: “There is only one really practical solution of the problem – boldly to face the great task that awaits us, and instead of trying to patch up a situation which we ourselves have made untenable, to proceed to reorganize production on a new basis.”(p68)

The point is that the development of communism cannot be conceived without the role of organisation. This is because the limitations of capitalist relations of production will continue unless an attempt is made to systematically overcome them by the establishment of an authority that is able to promote a different economic logic and order of priorities. Voluntary action is not sufficient in this context because it can only represent a response to the limitations of capitalism and is not organised to the extent that it can bring about a different social relations of production that is able to generate communism rather than capitalism. Hence what is required is a political authority that has the power and influence that can stimulate the methods of the organisation of communism. However Kropotkin obscures the clarity of this perspective because he identifies authority with the role of a state and the related alienation between the state and the interests of working people. He argues that those who support the role of a state – the followers of Marx – also uphold the importance of the wages system and the justification of economic inequality in terms of the differences of rewards that goes to unskilled and skilled labour. This type of authority cannot resolve the urgent problem of food and so its rule will be continued by the role of terror. The only alternative to this situation will be the attempts of the people to resolve the food situation by their own action and the resulting introduction of communism. Kropotkin is not historically inaccurate, as argued above, but the point is that some type of authority will have to develop in order to resolve the food problem. This authority need not be a coercive state and instead should represent the popular and democratic will of working people but it has to be an adequate authority that is able to take decisions and expect that people will freely consent to carry out these decisions. If such an authority is not developed then chaos will prevail and the economic dislocation caused by the revolution will not be overcome.

The problem is that Kropotkin cannot articulate what form the authority of the people should assume. He can tell us what the authority should not be like, which is the form of an unaccountable state based on coercion. But what is the alternative? He makes the valid point that the revolutionary regime cannot bring about the emancipation of the people without self-determination and that as a result there cannot be a distance between the regime and the people. However he has still not established the economic and political authority of the people that would enable the coercive state to be considered an anachronism. It is the very limitations of anarchism on the question of authority that provide alternative support for the Marxist conception of the revolutionary state. Marxism would argue that the state can be democratic and political. This means that a state can uphold authority and yet still be accountable to working people. In contrast the anarchist rejection of the role of the state amounts to a rejection of authority and as a result cannot articulate what is the social organisation that could promote the development of communism. Kropotkin would reject this criticism in the sense that he is arguing that the actions of the people provide for the emergence of authority and organisation. Indeed he argues that only the voluntary actions of the people can resolve the food problem created by the revolution. He is aware that the revolution may unintentionally create social chaos and disorganisation and so the priority of the people is to resolve these problems. The implicit assumption is that the process of authority and organisation is created out of the voluntary actions of the people. The unusual character of this authority is that it is not reduced to the role of a state. However he lacks arguments as to why this type of authority will be superior to the role of a state. This is because of his dogmatic assumption that any revolutionary state will be inherently centralist and repressive. He cannot prove by reference to the actual actions of the people why they will be better in resolving the food problem. Instead this contention is an assumption promoted by his dogmatic adherence to anarchism. However he has outlined the arguments to resolve the food problem in terms of the importance of priorities and exchange between city and countryside. But it is important to recognise that a revolutionary state could also support such measures.

Kropotkin justifies his standpoint in terms of the dogmatic view that a revolutionary state could not resolve basic questions created by the revolution such as the food problem. The resort to terror would only intensify this problem. Historical experience has vindicated his argument but it has still not indicated why a democratic and popular state could not resolve important economic problems and begin the construction of communism. However if we disregard the extreme arguments for anarchism it is possible to recognise that Kropotkin has outlined useful arguments about the complex problems that would arise in the attempt to construct communism. This is an improvement on the standpoint of Marx who glosses over the issue of economic problems in the process of transition to communism and instead only concentrates on the apparently correct aspects involved in the construction of communism. His emphasis in the Critique of the Gotha Programme is on the ideological errors of some of the German Social Democrats and the assumption is that with the correction of these ideological errors it will be possible to promote a smooth process of the transition to communism. In contrast, Kropotkin is suggesting that the attempt to realise communism may falter because of the inability to resolve important economic problems. He does not assume an inevitable realisation of communism. This historical realism is often obscured by his tendency to defend a dogmatic form of anarchist communism.

Kropotkin argues that the immediate distribution of food will take the form of rations that are allocated in accordance with the principles of justice and equality. He recognises that the rich will object to this method of distribution but the poor will welcome rations as a fair basis for the distribution of scarce food. Rations will not be the normal method for the distribution of food but are instead resorted to because of the emergency character of the situation after the revolution. He understands in a realistic and practical manner that the relations between the countryside and city may have been disrupted because of the revolution and the result is the necessity of rations. This situation is influenced by the character and tempo of revolution. Kropotkin is aware that countries are at different levels of economic and social development and this will influence when revolutions occur. The situation is maturing for revolution in Europe because of its high level of social development and the aim will be for simultaneous revolution: “Certainly it would be very desirable that all Europe should rise up at once, that expropriation should be general, and that communistic principles should inspire all and sundry. Such a universal rising would do much to simplify the tasks of our century.”(p82) However the reality of uneven social development and the importance of different national traditions will influence the tempo and character of revolutions. It is entirely possible that the revolution in France will still be influenced by the fact of the Commune of 1871, and the Russian revolution may be influenced by the French revolution of 1789. It is also possible that different countries will have revolutions that represent different types of socialism and communism, and he predicts the possibility of state socialism in one country and anarchism in another. However all of these countries will have the problem of how to feed the population and to organise the economy as smoothly as possible. He recognises that past revolutions have been failures because of their inability to met the aspirations of the majority of the people for food and equality and this means the only basis that revolutions can succeed is if they are able to organise in communist terms. But what he is also suggesting is that because of the influence of levels of social development some revolutions may not yet be able to realise communism. This means that the prospect of realising success is problematic for some countries because the level of the socialisation of production is immature for the realisation of communism.

Kropotkin concludes that: “Without, however, attaching to these forecasts a greater importance than they merit, we may safely conclude this much: the revolution will take a different character in each of the different European nations; the point attained in the socialization of wealth will not be everywhere the same.” The conclusion is not that the revolution should be delayed in the advanced countries until the more backward countries have undergone a comparable process of social development. Indeed, it is entirely possible that revolution may occur in the cities of the advanced levels of social development like Paris whilst the countryside would remain dominated by the system of private ownership. However the implicit suggestion is that advanced countries would provide an example to emulate and the more backward countries and regions would make attempts at revolution. But the character of these revolutions would be influenced by the level of social development. Hence Kropotkin does not seem to be suggesting in a voluntarist manner that the less advanced country can transcend its historical limitations and attempt to realise communism before the maturing of the social conditions of this possibility. Instead it is assumed that the revolution in the advanced countries would intensify the revolutionary process and therefore European revolution would have an influence on the social and political development of the less advanced countries. What is not predicted is the possibility that a revolution in a backward country would provide an inspiration for the advanced countries to attempt to construct communism. This is because such a perspective would violate the importance of social development as the basis of communist revolution and a low level of socialisation suggests that communist revolution is not possible. However Kropotkin also argues that the influence of political traditions may mean that the form of revolution could be different, and so he allows for state socialism to be successful in some countries. He does not outline what this would mean for the construction of communism. Instead his answer seems to be flexible because he can envisage the prospect of different economic and political forms co-existing in the same country. In other words the result of the revolutionary process is to generate a variety of economic and political forms that do not conform to one conception of the successful realisation of communism. Hence he seems to allow for the success of state socialism because of the prospects of the international character of revolution and the powerful character of the impulses towards the realisation of communism.

Consequently Kropotkin seems to be arguing that the different variety of revolutions can be successful and overcome the reasons for past failure if they are able to feed the population. The prospect for feeding the population will be enhanced if the revolution is organised on communist principles but not every country is ready for communism because of premature social conditions. The suggestion for these countries is that they learn the lessons of past revolutions and therefore avoid problems like the lack of democracy and the resort to terror. If these revolutions are able to provide food to the people then the suggestion is that they can make progress and make advances towards communism. It is also possible that the cities would organise in accordance with communism because the provision of rations is an expression of communist principles. In this context the city would have to come to an arrangement with the countryside that may still organise its economic activity on the basis of the private ownership of the means of production. The perspective is that the example of the city would generate and promote the tendency for communism in the countryside. However Kropotkin is also allowing for the prospect that two different forms of social organisation would co-exist, or that a economic relationship would have to develop between communism and capitalism. This would mean that the task of the city would be the promotion of communism, and therefore it would aim to ensure that the countryside would not undermine this aim. At the level of principles Kropotkin has already argued that two different forms of economic relations cannot co-exist, but in terms of his description of the outcome of the revolutionary process he has accepted that the antagonistic character of different modes of production has to be reconciled. But the tendency would be for the peasants to begin to cultivate the land in a manner that is liberated from the domination of land owners and feudal obligations. They would establish control of the land and presumably would develop amicable relations with the city. The tendency would be to liberate aspects of communal production and exchange that had been repressed under the economic system of feudalism or capitalism. Consequently the result would be to make the organisation of agriculture similar to that of industry in the city. But Kropotkin does emphasise that this process has to be a voluntary process based on the wishes of the peasantry and the dynamic represented by the communal tendencies of their economic activity. The suggestion is that unwanted interference from the city would only retard and undermine the development of communism in the countryside. He is arguing that the revolutionary process has to remain voluntary and an expression of self-emancipation or else it could become counterproductive and the methods of the revolutionary regime would not promote the realisation of the end of communism.

In the last analysis Kropotkin is arguing for the superiority of the principles of communist anarchism as the basis of revolution. How can we then explain his acceptance of the possibility of a variety of forms of revolution such as the prospect of the success of state socialism? The answer is that the results of the revolutionary process may lead to the success of both revolutions of a pre-communist character or the development of a type of communism that does not conform to the principles of anarchism. This will be because either the social conditions are not favourable to communism or else the type of socialism that is influential is not anarchist and instead is based on Marxism or a other type of socialist doctrine. The point being made is that the result of revolutionary upheaval can be complex and diverse and so it would be dogmatic to assume that only one exclusive outcome could occur which is that of communist anarchism. This flexible conclusion is different from Kropotkin’s other view that only on the basis of the principles of anarchism will it be possible to realise a successful form of communism. However this more dogmatic conclusion was the result of analysis of the principles of a communist society but study of the revolutionary process brings about different conclusions. It is possible to argue that a society that is not yet ready for communism could still have a revolution and that this revolution could advance the prospect of progress towards communism. This is because the revolutionary regime could resolve the food problem and avoid the installation of state despotism. Instead it could enhance the realisation of the voluntary will of the people and introduce measures that made advances towards communism. This process would be encouraged by communist revolutions in more advanced countries. In relation to the prospects of the success of state socialism, Kropotkin is already aware of the influence of Marxism in countries like Germany and he recognises that anarchism is marginalised in some advanced countries. Hence revolution could occur before anarchist communism has become the dominant trend and this situation would create the question of whether communism could still advance. His apparent answer to this question is that a Marxist regime would still have to resolve the food issue before all others and then it could progress towards communism. But if real advances towards communism are to be made the revolution will have to promote the voluntary and conscious action of the people to organise industry and agriculture. If the state acts on behalf of the people the prospect of communism will not be realised.

In other words despite the variety of outcomes of the revolutionary process the conclusion at the level of strategy and perspectives still recognises the importance of anarchist communism as a guide to action. He is not denying that other doctrines like Marxism may be important and provide arguments for communism but Marxism is restricted because of its continued support for the role of the state. Whilst the other bourgeois democratic doctrines are limited because of their lack of a communist approach and ultimately the supporters of these doctrines will have to decide whether they support capitalism or communism as the expression of the revolutionary process. The success of bourgeois democracy will be because of the lack of social conditions for communism and not because of any inherent superiority of their standpoint. This means that the justification of capitalism and parliamentary democracy will always be compared with communism and the people will come to realise that the progress of the revolution will require the advance to communism. However it is possible that the regime will itself come to recognise the necessity of communism and so the revolution will become a prelude to communism and this is why Kropotkin was willing to recognise the progressive character of revolutions that did not represent communism. However such revolutions will have to resolve important social questions and reduce the power of the state and this means that they will become transformed into social revolutions. Consequently communism is still the aim of these revolutions. Kropotkin is trying to suggest that if the immediate outcome of the revolutionary process is not communism this does not mean the refutation of his perspective and instead represents a complex and diverse process that will ultimately create the tendencies for communism.

Communism is not a timeless prospect that can ignore social conditions of uneven development and national political traditions and instead is the outcome of concrete circumstances. This means the greater the possibility for communism the higher the level of social development and the importance of the influence of anarchism. He is also suggesting that the ultimate anarchist revolution is the voluntary act of people and that these people have the aim of communism. This possibility is not even present in France where the people are still influenced by the role of the Commune which was the highest form of bourgeois democracy and was not orientated to the realisation of communism. Hence the very dynamic of the limitations of capitalism may produce revolutions that are not yet conscious of the importance of communism and instead represent a fragile form of bourgeois democracy. In this situation the role of communists would be to provide answers to the important food question and to argue for the replacement of capitalism with communism. However only the people can decide if they want communism and the advance of revolution cannot be decided by the actions of elites. The failure of past revolutions is because of the difference between the people and the regime that is established and which decides policy by the role of the state. This means the revolutionary process is determined by coercion and the ultimate result is failure. The prospect of such an outcome is not because of the limitations of the revolutionary process which often has tendencies towards the realisation of communism and is instead because of the limitations of social development and the ideology of national political traditions. Contemporary Europe may not generate the forces of communist revolution but this does not mean that we should reject revolution as an expression of historical progress. Instead we should understand that the diverse outcome of the revolutionary process is an indication of the possibilities for communism and this suggests that defeat of revolutions would restrict the advance towards communism. The very flexibility of Kropotkin’s perspective is still an argument for communism and the role of the revolutionary is to orientate themselves to the diversity of outcomes of revolution and to argue for a standpoint that is an expression of the interests of working people to go beyond capitalism.

The relations between the city and countryside after the revolution have been based on coercion or the attempt to get the peasants to accept worthless paper money in order to obtain grain. The attitude of the peasants has been that this type of exchange is exploitative and therefore refused to produce grain for the cities. The countryside has become the bastion of counterrevolution and coercion has been used to try and get grain for the cities. However this has not succeeded in its objectives and instead the cities have continued to have a shortage of food. In order to overcome this unsatisfactory situation the city will have to produce manufactured goods that are wanted by the countryside. Kropotkin is suggesting that only relations of equality can resolve the problem of food after the revolution. The problem with previous revolutions is that the city has attempted to dictate to the countryside the terms of their economic relations and so has attempted to exploit the countryside. When this relation proves to be untenable – the peasants refuse paper money as the basis of exchange for grain – the revolutionary regime resorts to coercion in order to obtain grain. This approach is also not successful and the peasants still refuse to produce for the cities and instead produce for their own consumption. In other words the question of economic efficiency is about the correspondence between moral aims with policy. If the policy is a direct violation of moral norms such as well being and equality the result is that this policy will not succeed in its objectives. In this context the city cannot exploit the countryside in order to obtain food and any attempt at exploitation will result in the peasants refusing to cooperate with the interests of the city. The result will be the end of economic relations between the city and countryside and this means the prospect of the continuation of the revolutionary regime will be threatened. However if the city attempts to realise the moral aim of well being for all the result will be the production of goods for exchange with the countryside according to the principles of economic equality. Only this ethical approach can succeed in its economic objectives.

The truth of Kropotkin’s standpoint was shown by the historical experience of the Russian revolution. Various attempts were made to obtain rain by coercion in order to feed the cities but instead of being able to obtain the required amount of grain the economic relations between city and countryside were undermined. Only with the introduction of the New Economic Policy were the peasants provided with incentives to produce for the cities and the result was shown in the ability to obtain grain for the cities. However relations of economic equality were still not developed because the cities were unable to produce manufactured goods in exchange for grain and this meant there was an objective limit to the prospect of development of relations between city and countryside. The result of this situation was that the peasants increasingly produced for their own consumption and the process of exchange between town and countryside was undermined. The response of the Bolsheviks was to blame the rich peasants and to favour new methods of coercion. This resulted in the introduction of forced collectivisation but the problem of the grain shortage was not resolved because coercion only undermined the necessity of equality and well being for all as the objective basis to provide grain for the cities. In other words the Bolshevik conception of the peasants as opponents of the aims of the revolution meant a rejection of the connection of moral aims to policy and instead policy became a pretext for the justification of the exploitation of the peasants. The association of the peasants with support of capitalism was considered the basis to justify the condition of antagonism between peasants and workers and this meant only coercion could resolve this situation. However the Bolsheviks had not learnt from Kropotkin’s analysis that coercion could never resolve the food problem and only relations of equality could stimulate the production of grain for the cities. But the Bolsheviks rejected the importance of moral principles and instead considered that the balance of class forces was becoming opposed to the prospect of transition to socialism. The peasants were associated with counterrevolution. However Kropotkin indicated that any support of the peasantry for counterrevolution was the result of misguided policy by the cities. It was possible to obtain support for the revolution within the peasantry if relations between city and countryside were established on the basis of equality rather than coercion. Hence the problem of food was primarily a problem that the city could resolve in terms of the efficient production of manufactured goods that could be of use within the countryside. The countryside was already able to produce goods for the city because it had historically produced grain for trade but the city lacked experience of producing goods for the countryside. This point was made by Trotsky in his critique of the economic planning of the Bolsheviks during the 1920’s. He argued that the scissors crisis was caused by the lack of manufactured goods available for exchange with grain. The result was that manufactured goods were expensive and scarce whilst grain was cheap and plentiful. Hence the problem of the obtaining of grain was a problem about the character of production in the city and not a problem created by the countryside.

In other words Kropotkin was very profound when arguing that the problem of food was primarily a problem of the priorities of the production of the cities. He recognised that the city had traditionally produced for the rich and the export market and had neglected the needs of the peasants. This meant that if economic relations were to be established between the city and countryside the economic priorities of the city would have to be changed. The city would have to increase production of goods that would be useful for the countryside. Hence the failure of revolutionary regimes to obtain food was because they failed to introduce this policy and instead based their conception of relations with the countryside in terms of the role of exploitation, coercion and domination. This meant the peasants lacked the incentive to produce for the city and became opponents of the revolutionary regime. However the revolutionary regime refused to make the correct lessons from this experience and instead intensified terror and state despotism. The ultimate result was that the city was isolated from the countryside and the situation became favourable for the success of counterrevolution. This dynamic developed in the period 1918-28 in the Russian revolution. Only the most intense state repression undermined the prospect of the success of counterrevolution. But the food problem was not resolved and so the regime was based on scarcity and the inability to satisfy the needs of the people. Only the intensification of terror could sustain a regime that was unable to solve the food problem. Consequently the material conditions for communism were lacking as the regime was unable to uphold the well being of the people and an emphasis on privilege replaced equality as the dynamic of the economy. Moral aims were rejected and instead policy was based on a type of modernisation that rejected the participation of the people in terms of voluntary action. The rejection of moral aims as the basis of policy indicated that communism was not being established and instead terror was used to uphold the economic domination of the state. Following Kropotkin it could be argued that the inability to establish relations of equality between the city and countryside led to the failure of the regime to realise revolutionary aims and instead the continuation of the food problem justified privilege and the domination of an elite.

In theoretical terms the problem was that the Bolsheviks never conceived of the peasants as a consistent ally of the working class and therefore did not recognise the urgent necessity to produce goods for the countryside. Only Trotsky understood the urgency of this problem but he still did not recognise that the peasants had communist aspirations in terms of the importance of the role of the commune. The Bolsheviks tended to consider the character of the peasant mode of production as capitalist and the city as socialist. Consequently relations between the city and countryside were not described as being between two aspects of production with the potential of communism and instead were conceived as an expression of antagonism between different modes of production. The result was that exploitation of the countryside was justified and often became the basis of policy between the city and countryside. In contrast Kropotkin was aware of tendencies for communism in the countryside and so he suggested that the policy of the city should be to encourage these tendencies and this meant the advocacy of the moral approach of well being and the policy of equality. The very construction of communism meant the perspective of mutual support between the city and countryside. Thus the failure of the city to economically support the countryside would mean the inability to realise communism because it would represent the inefficient utilisation of economic resources and the failure to meet the needs of part of the population. In contrast the Bolsheviks conceived of the realisation of communism as an urban condition and the question of the relation of agriculture to industry remained problematic. This ambiguity led to the support of the exploitation of the countryside in the interests of the city and it was not recognised that the failure to develop agriculture would be an expression of the inability to create communism. But Kropotkin is insistent that the inability for the revolutionary regime to introduce policies that would enable the agricultural sector to thrive is an expression that the despotism of the state is replacing the voluntary will of the people as the basis of economic and political activity. The point is that the peasants should be in a position to promote policies in their interests and so an urban orientated revolution would become both one sided and repressive. But the Bolsheviks would argue that this was a populist standpoint that rejected the leading role of the working class in the creation of communism. However the issue of the leading role is not identical to justification of economic inequality in the relations between workers and peasants and Kropotkin is not arguing for a peasant led revolution. Instead he is only making the modest claim that the relations between peasants and workers in the communist revolution should be based on mutual support.

Consequently Kropotkin argues: “Cheat the peasant no longer with scraps of paper – be the sums inscribed upon them ever so large; but offer him in exchange for his produce the very things of which he the tiller of the soil, stands in need. Then the fruits of the land will be poured into the towns. If this is not done there will be famine in our cities, and reaction and despair will follow in its train.”(P90) He is making the direct point that the revolution will fail if economic relations between town and countryside are not established on a basis of equality. The lack of equality will represent the prospect of famine and the related lack of the material conditions for communism. What is being suggested is that the failure to establish mutual support between city and countryside represents the prospect of economic regression or economic dislocation that undermines the development of the productive forces. In this context economic and social development would no longer represent historical progress and so the conditions to develop communism would be less favourable than the period immediately before the revolution. This situation is not inevitable instead the crucial aspect relates to the policy adopted by the revolutionary regime. If the regime adopts a policy based on economic equality between city and countryside the result will be food for the cities and generalised development of the productive forces. Consequently the material conditions will be enhanced to realise communism. Hence the character of policy is crucial with regards to the prospects for the advance towards communism. Any rejection of the importance of economic equality because of a tendency to justify expediency will not only undermine the development of communism it will also jeopardise the very survival of the regime. The implicit suggestion is that the regime has to be prepared to take tough decisions in order to uphold its integrity and principles. In other words Kropotkin is accepting that the regime cannot be completely spontaneous and instead must have sufficient authority in order to define priorities and to ensure that these priorities are in correspondence with moral aims. The alternative to the role of authority is disorder and this situation can only degenerate into the formation of a state despotism. This would mean that the regime would no longer uphold revolutionary principles and instead policy would acquire the character of expediency. In this situation the regime is not likely to resolve the food problem because it would acquire the tendency to reject equality as the basis of relations between city and countryside.

The anachronistic aspect of Kropotkin’s standpoint is his view that one result of the communist revolution will be the reduction in trade of agricultural goods. His view is based on the principled view that the peasantry will be able to increase their consumption as a result of the revolution and so less produce will be available for trade and export: “But when the revolution comes we must depend on foreign countries as little as possible.”(p90) He argues that countries do not have abundance in agricultural goods and instead the result of export is to increase the hardship of the peasantry. This situation is certainly generated by the condition of economic inequality and the limitations of the character of capitalism and feudalism. But it is entirely possible that the logic of exporting by a country aiming to develop communism is to obtain goods required for further economic development and to promote the increased ability to meet the needs of the peasants. The alternative of self sufficiency would mean that the country would be restricted by its own national economic limitations and this would undermine the ability to realise economic equality. In this context the regime would be under pressure to reject equality and instead adopt a policy of rapid modernisation. This process would actually result in the increased exploitation of the peasantry and food would be obtained from the countryside without a process of equal exchange. In other words what Kropotkin assumes is a policy to realise equality would actually be a policy that achieves its opposite which would be greater inequality and hardship. The relevant point is that in order to bring about economic equality it is necessary for the producers to realise increased control of their activity. This situation will be attained by increased self sufficiency and instead it will be a process in which increased trade is of mutual benefit to all the participants and allows the peasantry to decrease the time necessary for subsistence.

It is true that under the conditions of capitalist production international trade benefits the most advanced economies to the detriment of the less developed. This was the point that Kropotkin was making when he rejects the role of international trade for a communist country. But if communism is based on the most advanced economic development it is possible that the terms of trade with a capitalist country may not be to the benefit of the latter. Instead trade will allow for the most advanced specialisation and the generation of efficient production that is cheap and competitive on global terms.

Kropotkin contends that the initial effect of the revolution will be a decline in food supplies from the countryside and from abroad. This situation will presumably be caused by the increased consumption of the food producers and the hostility of other countries towards the revolution. However this situation need not cause a food problem because the residents of the cities could expropriate unused private land in order to grow food. The urban areas could become an extension of the countryside and become the basis for the production of food. In other words Kropotkin is aware that the revolution will cause problems concerning the production of food. But the answer is not to intensify repression of the food producers in order to obtain food. This is because such a policy would only alienate the food producers from the aims of the revolution. Instead the workers in the cities should utilise the methods of communist expropriation in order to resolve the food problem and utilise what has been private land for the production of food. But Kropotkin does not address the issue of how extra food will be generated for the cities while it is being cultivated on these formerly private lands. His approach will be effective in the long-term but in the short-term it is still possible that food could be scarce. Consequently it will be necessary to provide incentives to the food producers in the countryside to increase their production for the towns and to contemplate the increase of food imports from other countries. This means that the revolution will have to develop a policy of friendly relations with regimes that are still capitalist. The result will be compromise and the acceptance of the production of goods that are required by the capitalist countries. Hence it is possible that Kropotkin’s perspective of self-sufficiency will not solve the food problem and despite his creative attempts to resolve this situation such as the utilisation of land in the cities for food production the ultimate result could be food shortages. This situation would undermine the revolution and the attempt to develop communism unless the regime is prepared to go beyond the limitations in Kropotkin’s approach towards this issue. However the very fact that Kropotkin has recognised that providing food is the most important priority of the revolution is an acknowledgement that the problems of past revolutions are to be overcome by the development of a systematic food policy.

The Bolsheviks could have learnt from the writings of Kropotkin on the food question. Instead they only tolerated the private allotments of the workers and did not integrate them into a plan for the provision of food for the cities. Furthermore they repressed the peasantry with the approach of war communism and did not encourage the peasants to produce for the cities by a policy of the exchange of goods. Only in 1921 did the Bolsheviks recognise that their policies had not resulted in food for the cities and so a change in policy was required. However the Bolsheviks could not realise the standards of Kropotkin’s perspective which was the advance of communism in a creative and voluntary manner that did not alienate any part of the population from the aims of the revolution. Instead the approach of the Bolsheviks was based on the acceptance of polarisation and the utilisation of repression against all those that were considered opposed to the revolution. Hence the peasants were not integrated into the process of the development of communism and communism became considered to be an expression of the role of compulsion rather than voluntary acceptance. Kropotkin is arguing that communism can only be successful if the people in both city and countryside are engaged in its construction and this is a process of voluntary co-operation. In the initial period of the revolution the peasants are reluctant to support the aim of communism they should not be coerced into becoming instruments of the regime and instead should be allowed to act in accordance with their aspirations which may not be those of the revolution. In the last analysis the city and countryside must act in conformity but this has to be a voluntary process and so the question is what policy will encourage the countryside to support the aim of realising communism that is being realised in the city. The city must produce in a manner that would encourage the countryside to also develop communism. Kropotkin is aware of the importance of the worker-peasant alliance as the basis of the realisation of communism. He has anticipated the views of Bukharin.

Kropotkin argues that the question of providing good dwellings for the people is also one of the most important problems for the revolution and the task of realising communism. He maintains that the abolition of rent would immediately prepare the conditions for the communist expropriation of housing. The situation would be created for groups of volunteers to prepare statistics for the distribution of housing in accordance with the principle of equality. He is suggesting that the role of government is not needed for the distribution of housing and the influence of government would only result in bureaucracy and the unequal distribution of housing. The creative role of the people would overcome the ideological problem of egoism and the related attempt to obtain housing that is superior to that of others. Kropotkin is outlining the importance of the voluntary principle for the development of a communist approach concerning housing. The creative actions of the people can be more effective than the role of a state bureaucracy however well intentioned. This does not mean that we can immediately resolve the issue of egoism and the desire to have housing that is superior to that of others but the point is that the conditions are being created for the promotion of equality in the allocation of housing because of the importance of solidarity in the process of its distribution. In contrast a state bureaucracy cannot generate similar levels of solidarity because of the fact that is still an authority imposed on the people and is not an expression of voluntary co-operation. Furthermore the state bureaucracy might attempt to become the new landlord and enforce conditions on the residents of housing that is unwanted and neglect the task of trying to improve conditions. Instead the actions of the people concerned to resolve the housing problem will be superior to that of any state bureaucracy.

The arguments of Kropotkin are very persuasive. He is suggesting that when people come together in a voluntary manner to resolve problems they are more effective and efficient than any state bureaucracy. This is the view that is the basis of the perspective that workers control should be the basis of the development of socialism rather than nationalisation under the control of an elite that dominates the state apparatus. However Kropotkin should also recognise the problems with any voluntary process of co-operation that it could become subject to distortion and excess. This is why the role of voluntary action should be supervised by a legitimate authority that is also popular and democratic. Kropotkin vaguely suggests that the actions of the people are accountable to the commune but the actual functions of the commune are not elaborated. Instead it is assumed that the voluntary actions of the people will result in a principled outcome that represents equality. The argument for equality is that it can only be realised by the method of popular action and so could not be realised by the role of a state bureaucracy: “We are only concerned to demonstrate that expropriation could be effected by popular initiative, and could not be effected by any other means whatsoever.”(p101) Consequently the result of expropriation by the state is to compromise the principles of equality and to therefore undermine the prospect of communist expropriation and so the only alternative is between the unprincipled role of the state and the actions of the people. This alternative may have merit but it does not ensure that equality can be realised. It is entirely possible that the process can be distorted by egoism and the influence of individualism. Hence it is necessary to regulate the process of expropriation and the distribution of housing. Kropotkin glosses over the importance of regulation because this seems to suggest the authority of the state. However this is not the only type of regulation that is possible. Instead there is the regulation generated by the very actions and character of the process of expropriation. In this context the distribution of housing should express the principle that the housing conditions of the people have improved in accordance with the principle of equality. If there has been a failure to realist this aim the principle of communist expropriation will have not been attained. The Commune will then have the authority to criticise the process and to demand that the distribution of housing and the construction of new homes should occur in accordance with the principles of communist expropriation.

The problem with the standpoint of Kropotkin is that it is based on a naïve view of human nature. Kropotkin is right to argue that the process of expropriation should not tolerate the delaying tactics of the state and instead the role of the revolutionary is to promote the realisation of the distribution of housing. However this perspective can have its flaws and it is possible that the actions of the people could be fallible and therefore not realise the principles of communist expropriation. In this context accountability has to be established in relation to the evaluation of the actions of the people but it is difficult to establish this accountability if the concept of power has been ignored and rendered unimportant. Instead of outlining the role of the Commune in relation to voluntary actions Kropotkin reduces the Commune to an ideological influence that lacks regulatory aspects. The Commune can only call for patience or the intensification of the process of the expropriation of dwellings. This means that the Commune seems to lack the capacity to be the effective supervisor of the process of expropriation and so a possible tension is created between the undefined role of the Commune and the voluntary actions of the people. Kropotkin cannot recognise this tension because he cannot envisage a situation in which the role of the people could be flawed and instead the only problems could result from the role of the state. This view may be historically accurate but it underestimates the possible contradictions and limitations of the revolutionary process that could generate a discrepancy between principles and the actions of the people when trying to implement these principles. This is why he asserts in an emphatic manner that the people are motivated by solidarity and equality and that the alternative of individualism and egoism should not distort the process of the distribution of housing under communism.

He insists that the people can act efficiently: “But when they take upon themselves to organize what they know, what touches them directly, they do it better than all of the “talking shops” put together.”(p109) This conception is the basis of participatory and democratic communism and is based on the view that whilst the state acts inefficiently the people can realise organisation in a voluntary manner that indicates the role of the state is superfluous. Kropotkin has outlined an important principle of socialism from below and is contrasting the limitations of the state with the voluntary solidarity of the people and their potential ability to realise tasks and the aims of communism. However we also have to accept that this potential could have its own limitations and is why it is necessary to have regulation and accountability. The absence of this recognition of the importance of regulation is a dogmatic expression of the view that all types of authority are connected to the role of a state. In other words he underestimates the prospect that the voluntary actions of the people could become misguided and require modification. The important task is to develop this type of authority without it becoming an expression of the domination of a state that is unaccountable. Kropotkin does accept that the process of expropriation could result in controversy about the principle of equality of distribution and that inequality will exist between the city and countryside. But he also suggests that the prospect to resolve these problems will be present in the very process of distribution and that it will involve the minimum of upheaval. The point is that he always believes that the solidarity of the people can overcome any problem and so this confidence glosses over the possibility that complications could arise that are difficult to resolve. Kropotkin does not deny the possibility of difficulty in the construction of communism but he always suggests that the people are creative and therefore able to solve these difficulties. This type of confidence could result in dogmatism about the prospects of realising communism. This confidence is not exclusive to anarchism and was probably inherited by the Bolsheviks.

Despite the absence of recognition of the difficulties involved in the expropriation of housing Kropotkin is aware of its importance for the development of communism. He maintains: “For the expropriation of dwellings contains in germ the whole social revolution. On the manner of its accomplishment depends all that follows. Either we shall start on a good road leading straight to anarchist communism, or we shall remain sticking in the mud of despotic individualism.”(p105) This view represents a cautionary appraisal of the prospects of the progress of communism after the revolution. He is arguing that if the process of expropriation of dwellings does not conform to principles of equality the very prospect of communism will have been undermined. Hence in theory if not practice Kropotokin is admitting to the possibility of difficulties developing that would thwart the prospect of communism. However this comment is not theorised and instead all objections to the communist expropriation of housing are refuted and it is assumed that the actions of the people will ensure the distribution of housing in accordance with the principle of strict equality. But Kropotkin has outlined two important reasons why communism could not be realised which are the failure to resolve the food problem and limitations in the distribution of housing. The suggestion is that privilege would develop because of a scarcity of food and the failure to distribute housing in strict accordance with need. In this context the revolutionary process would be shown to be flawed and the experience of the Bolshevik revolution indicates the truth of these comments. The party leaders had the most ample food rations and the right to luxury apartments. In contrast the ordinary workers went hungry and often lived in overcrowded conditions. The Bolsheviks also understood that the failure of international revolution would mean the prospect of international revolution would undermine the prospect of communism. Kropotkin rejects this view because of his faith in the prospect of the self sufficiency of the revolutionary process. He is still astute about the implications of the failure of the revolution to develop in accordance with the principle of equality. If the revolution is able to develop in accordance with equality the prospect of communism can be realised. Indeed the realisation of equality is effectively identical to communist construction. On the other hand if equality is not realised it is not possible to develop communism. This is why wages have to be abolished because wages represent the expression of inequality under capitalism and this situation would be inherited by system after capitalism if wages were still the remuneration for work. The problem with this perspective is that it assumes working people would agree with this strict conception of equality. Marx argued that a form of inequality was unavoidable in the situation of transition to communism. This was because of differences between skilled and unskilled workers and the size of families. Kropotkin argued that these differences could be overcome by the abolition of wages. But some families would still consume more than others and this could result in resentment. The point is how to reconcile equality with aspects of inequality. Bolshevism argued for a wage differential of 1:4 but the problem was that they decided who would be rewarded more than others. This led to resentment and undermined support for communism. Consequently it could be asked was Kropotkin right to insist on strict equality as the only principled basis of communism?

The merits of Kropotkin’s approach are that the possibility of privilege arising because of inequality in distribution and the rewards of labour would be minimised. It would also mean that differences between functionaries and workers would not occur and the functionaries would not have the power to allocate resources. This is one of the crucial points made by Kropotkin, if distribution is the monopoly of the state inequality and favouritism would result and the only alternative is the voluntary action of the people. Only in this manner could equality develop. The role of a state is to realise its interests in a partial manner and therefore true universality is presented by the solidarity of the people. The results are the differences between inequality and equality. This is why a state can only consolidate individualism and undermine the prospect of communism and only the creative action of the people can realise communism. The problem with this approach is that it cannot explain a situation in which the people after a revolution could develop opposition to equality and the principles of communism. It is dogmatic to assume that the voluntary actions of the people will always tend to promote communism. This does not mean that a strong state is required to supervise the process of transition to communism because this type of state becomes differentiated from the people and therefore defends privilege and elitism. Instead what is required is a process of regulation that acts as a supervision of the actions of the people and tries to ensure that these actions are in accordance with the principles of communism. Whether this regulation amounts to a role for a state will depend on the character of the relation of the regulation to the actions of the people but the important point is that this regulation will represent authority and be the guardian of the principles of communism and their realisation.

Kropotkin argues that clothing is also an important necessity. It will be possible to provide clothing on the basis of need without the justification of inequality in the process of distribution. He contends that people will not want the most expensive and luxurious clothes and therefore it will be possible to met needs by the process of mass production. Consequently he is assuming that the process of distribution will be motivated by the sense of solidarity and altruism. This means that egoism will not distort this process and that there will not be conflict and competition for these articles of consumption in a situation of scarce resources. He argues that if there are goods that are scarce the responsibility for distribution will be with voluntary groups of citizens and that it will not be necessary to utilise the mechanisms of the state. Hence he is suggesting that the voluntary action of citizens will always act responsibly and will not attempt to take advantage of the effective control of the process of distribution. This perspective also suggests the importance of regulation and guidelines concerning the process of distribution. If rations have to be introduced it is important that those who control the process do not assume unfair economic advantage. Hence their actions will have to be supervised. In contrast Kropotkin is arguing that moral principles will be sufficient to ensure that no distortions occur within the process of distribution. These moral principles are the outcome of the importance of solidarity in human activity. However this approach represents the underestimation of the influence of individualism and egoism. The possibility of distortion of the process of distribution of items like clothing, which will be of the greatest level of demand, does indicate the importance of the role of authority in order to act as supervision. The point is that authority is not inherently oppressive and concerned with its own particular interests. Instead authority can be democratic and based on the highest level of moral principles. Authority can be the personification of the principle of solidarity and its guidelines can represent the importance of human cooperation. In contrast if the process of distribution lacks these guidelines it is possible that those in control may introduce different principles that justify inequality and individualism. The result may be the transformation of a collective process into the development of trade in accordance with the criteria of individualism. The point is that human beings are still fallible and have a tendency to attempt to take individual advantage. This means that only basis to minimise this prospect is to reconcile voluntary action with the role of regulation. The alternative is the prospect of omnipotent economic power that could translate itself into assuming new forms of domination of the process of production and distribution.

Kropotkin is in agreement with Marx that capitalism is responsible for economic inequality, poverty and exploitation. The possibility for small sections of the workers to obtain good wages does not contradict the fact that capitalism creates constant unemployment and insecurity. However he would dispute the view of Marx that the problem is created by the production of surplus value. The process of the development of surplus value is important for explaining the character of capitalism but what is most important is that this process undermines the possibility for the worker to obtain well being. Hence the character of surplus value is that it represents the wealth of the capitalist on the one hand and the poverty of the worker on the other. This is made possible by the private ownership of the means of production and the alternative of this situation is to expropriate the means of production in a communist manner and make it possible to realise the well being of the workers:

“It is a case of PRODUCING THE GREATEST AMOUNT OF GOODS NECESSARY TO THE WELL BEING OF ALL, WITH THE LEAST POSSIBLE WASTE OF HUMAN ENERGY.

This cannot be the aim of a private owner; and this is why society as a whole, taking this view of production as its ideal, will be compelled to expropriate all that enhances well-being while producing wealth. It will have to take possession of land, factories, mines, means of communication etc, and besides, it will have to study which products will promote general well being, as well as the ways and means of production.”(P118)

It could be argued that Kropotkin’s approach is not actually incompatible with Marx’s analysis of the production of surplus value. This means Kropotkin provides the moral justification of Marx’s viewpoint despite Marx’s own rejection of the role of morality as being opposed to his scientific standpoint. Marx argued that the creation of surplus value was not unjust and was instead the expression of unequal relations of production that enabled the value of production to be greater than the means of subsistence of the workers. However Kropotkin argues powerfully that this process of exploitation undermines the prospect for the worker to realise well being and which means the worker is often unable to obtain the goods necessary for the meeting of needs. On the one hand the capitalist is potentially able to amass great wealth whilst the worker is generally in a condition of poverty. This situation is morally unjust because the relations of production and the generation of surplus value meant that the worker is unable to realise well being. Well being could be realised if the worker was in control of the process of production. This situation could be made possible by the act of the collective expropriation of the means of production. Hence the question of the realisation of moral principles meant an end to the private expropriation of wealth and instead the development of economic activity in accordance with the concept of well being.

This perspective is not opposed to the analysis of Marx about the character of surplus value and what this means in political terms but it does represent a contrast with Marx’s rejection of morality as an expression of bourgeois ideology. However Kropotkin is not trying to justify moral aims as an expression of timeless truths based on philosophical reason rather his approach is grounded in ontology or the importance of the character of social reality for indicating the importance of moral aims. In this context the point he is making is that the limitations of capitalist relations of production undermine the prospect for the workers to realise their well being. But it is entirely possible to realise well being if society was organised in accordance with the approach of communism and therefore if the moral aim of well being is to be realised it is necessary to transform society. In this context Marx’s theory of surplus value is not sufficient to justify revolutionary transformation because it does not adequately elaborate the importance of well being and why society should be organised in accordance with its premises. Hence Marx’s rejection of the importance of moral principles means he cannot provide adequate justification for the transformation of capitalism into communism. Instead Marx can explain what is in terms of the role of the extraction of surplus value but he cannot justify what should be which is expressed by the importance of well being in human social activity. Kropotkin is making an important criticism of the limitations of Marx’s theory of surplus value. But he is also making an artificial distinction between himself and Marx because there is nothing which suggests that Marx’s approach would not be improved and refined if Marx accepted the importance of the concept of well being. It is entirely possible that Marx could accept the concept of well being as the criteria by which the generation of surplus value is critically evaluated. Indeed it could be argued that the theory of surplus value explains why and how the well being of the worker is not realised under capitalism. In contrast Kropotkin’s dismissal of the importance of the theory of surplus value means that he does not have a theory about the causes of the lack of well being under capitalism except for recognition of the important fact of the private ownership of the means of production. This is why Kropotkin’s concept of well being would be improved and refined if a theoretical connection was established to Marx’s theory of surplus value.

The major theoretical advance would be made if Marxists recognised the importance of the concept of well being. This would establish the moral justification of the theory of surplus value because the generation of surplus value is at the expense of the well being of the worker. Furthermore the argument for communism would be made in moral terms because the question of how well being could be realised depends on the process of the transformation of capitalism into communism. Only a situation of the collective expropriation of the means of production would create the conditions to realise well being. This means the continuation of capitalism denies the possibility to realise well being and so represents the moral, social and economic motive for workers to strive for revolution and the replacement of capitalism by communism. This perspective does not argue for anything that Marx could have deemed objectionable. His differences with other trends of Anarchism are because they did not represent Anarchist Communism and so did not provide adequate moral and political reasons for the overthrow of capitalism. In contrast we can argue that Kropotkin’s version of Anarchism only improves the arguments for communism. This does not mean that important differences are still apparent but the overall conclusion is that Kropotkin has actually improved the arguments for communism. He has outlined how the social activity of humanity is co-operative and based on the principle of solidarity and therefore capitalism is opposed to these important aspects of historical development. The only manner in which social activity can be emancipated from the limitations of capitalism is by the communist transformation of society. This process will also realise the moral aims of well being.

Hence the problem with the approach of Marx is that he has not emphasised sufficiently these evolutionary and moral features in his theory of surplus value. He has outlined the mechanisms of exploitation of the workers but he has neglected answering the questions about how and why the workers can overcome the limitations of capitalist relations of production. In contrast Kropotkin indicates through his detailed study of human evolution and the prospects for communism that the workers represent the personification of the highest levels of social and evolutionary development and this means their collective character represents the ability to both overthrow capitalism and construct a communist society. Furthermore capitalism is a type of society that rejects the importance of the highest moral aims of well being and so provides moral reasons why it should be replaced with a society that can realise well being. Kropotkin is outlining in terms that are more convincing than Marx why the working class is potentially revolutionary and so will translate its discontent into collective political struggle to bring about a communist society. Marx, in comparison, has outlined his theory of exploitation and alienation and so explains why the working class is subordinated within capitalism but these theories do not become a convincing basis for the understanding of revolutionary struggle. This is one reason why the theory of exploitation and alienation has become the reasoning to justify the conception of the decline of the class struggle and the view that the overthrow of capitalism has become unlikely. Possibly Kropotkin’s views can contribute to the renewal of Marxism and the development of the perspective of the communist alternative to capitalism.

The point being made is not that Kropotkin could provide instant answers to questions about the decline of collective class struggle and the importance of affluence in the advanced capitalist societies. However his approach is important for outlining why the very technological achievements of capitalism are connected with a process of social evolution that continually goes beyond the limitations of capitalist relations of production. If humanity is to make further progress the process of social evolution must be reconciled with the relations of production by transformation of the economic and political system. Furthermore capitalism has never realised the well being of the global population and is unable to realise human needs in an adequate manner. This is one more argument for communism. Admittedly Marxists have one outlined these arguments for communism but Kropotkin has still made them the most cogently in terms of the significance of human historical evolution and the moral principle of well being. Capitalism is the defence of individual wealth which is opposed to the logic of human evolution which is based on the principle of mutual aid. However the pessimism of Marxists is because of what they often describe as the bleak prospects for class struggle and the failure of the ongoing economic crisis to translate itself into political opposition to capitalism. Hence Marxism does not become the articulation of an alternative to capitalism and instead has a tendency for pessimism. The approach of Kropotkin provides for historical confidence because the very logic of social activity is based on the principle of solidarity that contrasts to the individualism of the character of the domination of capital over labour. It is the very contrast between human social evolution and the limitations of capitalist social relations that promotes possibilities for revolutionary change. The role of bourgeois ideology is to justify this contradiction and to present capitalism as unchanging.

In other words if communism is in accordance with the dynamism and logic of human social evolution these evolutionary imperatives must manifest themselves increasingly and incessantly. The recent economic crisis is an indication that the generation of surplus capital cannot be utilised to meet human need and that the issue of well being has become profoundly relevant. The question raised by the crisis is the realisation of well being or the continuation of capitalism. Hence the role for Marxists is to reject the tendency for historical pessimism and instead to develop the understanding that capitalism is unable to realise well being. This perspective is important for the prospects of the radicalisation of the working class and the development of favourable conditions for the transition to communism. This development is crucial if the present marginalisation of Marxism is to be overcome. In other words the advance of Marxist theory by the addition of the significance of the ideas of Kropotkin may contribute to the resolution of the crisis of Marxism. This prospect is not inevitable and instead depends on the ability of Marxism to develop ideas and also the confidence involved in its attempt at political renewal.

Kropotkin is also adamant that communism could be based on a shorter working day of about five hours. This is recognition that work can be inherently alienating and that a shorter working day is crucial for the construction of communism. His view is also compatible with the approach of Marx and is one more indication of the compatibility involved in their conceptions of communism. He also argues that once the production of necessities is realised the communist society will be able to devote itself to the creation of luxuries, or the development of works of art and culture. The process of artistic creation will no longer be subject to the limitations of the profit motive and instead will be an end in itself. More people will be involved in the creation and enjoyment of works of art and literature. The principles of democracy and equality will determine what is produced and the resulted will be the enhancement of aesthetic development and enjoyment of works of culture. He is suggesting that the greater access to the process of cultural production will not lower standards and instead the abilities of working people realises a cultural expression. Communism will be defined both by its ability to meet both material and cultural needs. The principle of participation is vital to the successful attainment of cultural aspirations and this will indicate that capitalism has represented the restrictive aspirations of a cultural elite.

This understanding of the importance of luxury and culture in a communist society is an elaboration of how Marx conceived of communism in the German Ideology. Both Marx and Kropotkin assumed that the material success of communism in realising basic needs would establish the pre-conditions for the cultural development of the population. They rejected the elitist view that working people were indifferent about culture and instead argued that communism would enable a the development of mass participation in the production of works with cultural value. Indeed one of the basic aims of communism was the generation of leisure time that would enable the production of works with cultural value. Kropotkin would also contend that this emphasis on the role of culture under communism was an expression of the conception of well being and the rejection of the capitalist view that the working class was only suited to the production of commodities. Instead communism was the realisation of the most creative impulses of humanity in the form of artistic endeavour. What makes Kropotkin’s standpoint very practical and realistic is that he is aware that the emphasis on culture through an increase in the time devoted to leisure would only occur if the process of communist development was able to succeed in meeting material needs. This is why the priorities of the revolution had to be about the production of the means of consumption and the requirements of clothing and housing. Only when these tasks are successfully accomplished could attention be given to cultural production. Kropotkin is aware that cultural production in conditions of scarcity is morally wrong and instead the role of culture should develop when the well being of the people has been realised.

In other words the sense of priorities in the work of Kropotkin is an indication that he is not trying to develop a conception of communism that is unrealistic and yet a good idea. This was the limitation of the past Utopian thinkers who defined the future society in terms of their ability to elaborate details rather than recognise the importance of practical reality. In contrast Kropotkin is aware of the significance of scarcity and the necessity to solve the food problem in the aftermath of the revolution. He is aware that failure to resolve the food problem would result in the failure of the revolution to construct communism. The importance of food is combined with an emphasis on the problem of the fair allocation of housing and the provision of adequate clothing. Only when these basic aspects of well being have been realised will it be possible to concentrate on culture and art. Hence the ability to divide the working day between the production of necessities and culture depends upon the accomplishment of the priorities of the emerging communist society. It will only be possible to describe the society as communist if these basic economic and social tasks have been achieved. Kropotkin does outline the chances of success in the achievement of these tasks as being probable if not inevitable but his methodology also allows for the prospect of failure. He is arguing that any deviation from the order of priorities he has outlined could result in the undermining of the realisation of communist construction.

The degeneration of the October revolution is an indication that his approach has considerable merit. It was the onset of the civil war that meant the Soviet regime prioritised military tasks above the importance of providing food for the population. The result was discontent and the justification of the strong state as the allocator of economic resources. Ultimately this situation led to rebellion and the acceptance that providing food was the priority via the introduction of the New Economic Policy. However fact was distributed by the state rather than in accordance with the voluntary actions of the people and this meant the possibility of communist construction was impossible in the conditions of an isolated country. Furthermore the state had other priorities than the realisation of the basic needs of the people. Industrialisation occurred at the expense of the well being of the people. If the approach of Kropotkin had been applied the regime would have had a more balanced ordering of priorities and its central aim would have been the well being of the population. Instead the aspirations of the people were secondary to the task of the construction of a strong state and only in the period of the NEP did living standards improve. The point being made is not that the approach of Kropotkin is an infallible guide to action and an immaculate conception of the transition to socialism. Kropotkin underestimated the problem of the isolation of revolutionary regimes and he was an effective apologist for socialism in one country. But he did understand that the provision of food is the most important priority of any revolution and that to this end it was necessary to construct the worker and peasant alliance. In the last analysis his standpoint underestimated the problem of the continuation of the class struggle after the revolution and the fact that revolution often occurs in conditions that are not of our choosing. Hence he blamed the Bolsheviks for the situation of counterrevolution and civil war and so unfairly considered that state socialism was responsible for the problems of the revolutionary process. He could not outline the mistakes of the Bolsheviks within the limitations of the adverse circumstances and instead continued to insist that communism could have been possible in a different and more ideal manner. He failed to connect his approach to the actual situation. The result was unfair criticism of the revolution and the theoretical discrepancy between his critique and the problems of the class struggle. This did not mean that the Bolsheviks did not have dogmatic aspects in their approach and they could have learnt from Kropotkin’s understanding of the construction of communism. Instead Lenin and Kropotkin had several meetings and failed to agree. However the realism of Kropotkin’s conception of communism could have improved the policy of the Bolsheviks. This is the historical merit of his standpoint.