

**Kropotkin, Peter. *The Conquest of Bread*. Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1995.**

Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) was born a prince of the Russian principality of Smolensk. His mother died when he was three, and Kropotkin little valued his father and step-mother, relying instead on the house servants for social consolation. Kropotkin's brother, Alexander, was exiled to Siberia, where he committed suicide. Peter Kropotkin read widely and voraciously. His education was mostly western. Kropotkin served as personal page to Russian Emperor Alexander II, and chose a military career in east Siberia. There he worked out his opposition to tsarism and the structure of reforms he preferred. Kropotkin led geographical and geological expeditions charting unknown portions of Siberia. In 1867, Kropotkin resigned his commission in the military, and launched into anarchism. He joined the Chaikovsky Circle in St. Petersburg, an intellectually disparate socialist underground movement. Kropotkin advocated replacing government with self-organizing communes, voluntarily federated. The products of labor were to be distributed according to individual need. Kropotkin equivocated on the role of violence in creating such anarchist communes. Underlying Kropotkin's anarchism lay his interpretation of Darwin's work on evolution. Kropotkin emphasized the role of cooperation and social solidarity, not competition, in evolution's effects. In 1874, Kropotkin was arrested for his revolutionary activities, fell ill, and escaped during hospital convalescence. He fled to Great Britain, then moved on to Switzerland where he joined the Jura Federation and founded *Le Revolte*, an important anarchist publication. In 1878, Kropotkin married; the relationship lasted to his death. When the Populist party assassinated Tsar Alexander II of Russia, Kropotkin fled to France. There he was arrested and imprisoned for three years. Upon release, he fled to Great Britain, where he remained until the Russian Revolution. Kropotkin's health grew fragile; he spent time writing and lecturing more than agitating. After his death, the Bolsheviks, now in control of Russia, used the first anarchist uprising to eliminate all anarchist groups.

This epitome utilizes Kropotkin's 1913 English text. *The Conquest of Bread* first appeared as a series of articles in anarchist newspapers in the 1880s, and was substantially revised on three occasions by the author, the last revision in 1913.

**Preface.** Some object that anarchism has never been realized. The attempts of Greeks, Christians, English and French reformers all fell short. Kropotkin cites the hundreds of millions of village farmers who long held their land in common, until governments distributed that land to lords and lieges. Medieval towns harbored socialized trades. All history shows is that the correct combination of communistic principles has not been formulated. The French Revolution sought to redistribute wealth, sell at cost the necessities of life, and control profits on essential goods. It failed when the Jacobins seized power. Kropotkin recounts the revolutionary experiences of Britain and France. Kropotkin seeks in this book to express the ideas of these disparate groups and efforts, each a brick in the construction of a great new intellectual building.

**Chapter I: Our riches.** Civilization amounts to a vast store of capital, both physical and intellectual, inherited by every person born in our times. Poverty exists only because of past crimes and thefts, the effect of which is to leave two-thirds of all production in the hands of a few who squander it. The owners compel the poor to produce things none need; profit is their only criterion. This critique is the essence of socialism. All capital (fields, roads, soil, tunnels, mines) has been purchased in working men's blood and cooperation over hundreds of generations. Every thought, every invention erupts from the insights of long-dead thousands who came before. Each builds on what preceded it, back into the lost past. How can anyone claim that any piece of this great collective enterprise belongs to them alone, and not to all? Though the soil, mines, machines, and railways were created by thousands now dead, some few claim ownership. These permit normal people to work only when it profits the "owner." And so, effort is expended not to meet community needs, but to enrich speculators. Wars are fought to gain or maintain markets. These wars are paid by worker's taxes; the workers fight and die in them, ensuring that wealth remains with the wealthy. Communities thrive in self-respect, sympathy, and mutual aid, and where these are lacking, humanity perishes. Yet, society teaches hypocrisy and pointless sophistry, crippling the moral sense. We must return to truth if we wish to endure. All things

belong to all, since all produced them. None can evaluate who contributed more. If a person works, he has a right to share in all. Every man has a right to well-being.

**Chapter II: Well-being for all.** To provide well-being for every human is possible, given the great productive capability our ancestors have left us. Population is not a problem because human productive capacity grows much faster than population. This ratio would further improve if the wealthy and middle men started producing something useful. Already, only a small percentage of workers actually produce needful items, and even they are underemployed for the sake of manipulating the price of the goods they produce. Much land lies unproductive, despite millions of unemployed willing workers. Production of war materials further depletes meaningful production. Crime falls when people's lives are tolerable; so, all jails and the criminal justice system are waste. If we recovered only what is squandered in producing luxury baubles, our productivity would double. To achieve well-being for all, we must make common property of what is now monopolized by a few. From them, we must expropriate for the common good. No legislature can enact expropriation; it must come by social revolution. This revolution will be violent; it is imminent. But the violence is not that great, nor does it endure. When violence commences, kings and the rich flee, leaving the people to govern themselves. Yet, the violence and people taking over are not the revolution proper. Revolution consists in the people in the streets; revolution thrives when people are fed. The first principle of revolution is that every person has a right to live, and to share in the means of living. For leaders, this means simply to consider the people's needs before laying upon them duties. This exceeds the "right to work," which amounts only to the right to be a wage slave. All must have a claim on the wealth of the community, and further the right to decide what should be produced in the first place to meet their needs. Now is the time for revolution.

**Chapter III: Anarchist communism.** In abolishing private property, anarchic communism necessarily follows. None can claim rightly that their produce is the result solely of their labor. All are tied in an intricate web of inter-relatedness. None can sort their particular contribution. One cannot pay by the hour, for none can evaluate the value of that hour. Wages should be abandoned. Individuals defend themselves from capital and the state; that is the inevitable direction of communism. To each according to his needs. The ownership system pollutes men's minds with narrow self-centeredness. Many improvements are available to all without charge: bridges, streets, water, illumination, rescues, libraries, and other such benefits. These are communistic sharing in the midst of an individualist and capitalist society. When revolution and expropriation break the repressive powers, communism will immediately flower. Kropotkin's communism is anarchic communism, that is, sharing by all without government. Human progress extends anarchy. Government is limited, liberty of individual expanded. Free men and groups contract with one another in common interests. States tend to injustice and propertied monopolies; they must be abolished. Social habit will replace laws. We have been indoctrinated from the cradle to believe that God established the State. Even at present, governments play a tiny role. The great bulk of human interactions occur without any State oversight or knowledge. Parliamentarianism will collapse in the nineteenth century. The representatives know nothing about making laws. Anarchism is a new phase of economic organization, one in which private property will be impossible.

**Chapter IV: Expropriation.** By expropriation, Kropotkin intends that every child should be able to learn a useful occupation, and exercise it without rendering to a government or master most of its fruit. Expending funds to this end will naturally end the wealth of the exploiters. Wealth begins in abusing poor people. When the poor are gone, so too will be the rich. Ninety percent of the wealthy in American made their fortunes by harsh practices supported by the government. The same in Europe. All fortunes have ugly beginnings. None grows wealthy by frugality and hard labor. One must exploit poor men to get rich. When all share, when none starve, then the rich will have no poor to exploit and no fortunes will be amassed. Kropotkin would expropriate anything that makes another able to coerce others into working for him. Such a revolution will come very soon. Some warn the anarchist not to move too fast. Kropotkin worries about doing too little too late. Half-measures result in disruption without the freedom to reorganize economic

relations. Counter-revolutions would follow, worse than that which was overthrown. In complex society, everything is inter-related. To overthrow one part only portends disaster. The revolution must insure that every worker has room, board, and clothing without capitalist markup.

**Chapter V: Food.** Past attempts at revolution have failed to answer the question of bread. Upon revolutionary upheaval, the poor no longer get their wages and begin to starve. The rich tempt the poor with their wages once more, and the revolution halts. The true revolutionary provides bread to all. For the people have a right to bread; there is enough to go around. When revolution comes, trade and manufacturing are disrupted. Paychecks stop. The poor or unemployed are suddenly without means. They starve. The first task of the revolutionary is to solve the problem posed by the revolution: starvation. Revolutionaries must take their food and ration it out to the population to survive the crisis of transition. Under collectivism, representatives of the people control industry, rather than monopolists. So all laborers under collectivism are wage earners of the State. True revolution renders wage slavery impossible. Failure to feed the people inevitably reintroduces the guillotine, and the revolution dies with the rolling of its leaders' heads. When revolution comes, the people should seize and inventory all food available. Then they should organize its distribution and production. Ten days will suffice. From bread, communism will spread to every other good. The system should be that of agricultural communes; everything is free to the use of all, except for times of shortage, in which case there is rationing. In times of scarcity, the best should be reserved for those who most need it: the sick, aged, and young. In food preparation, it is most efficient to produce large batches. Yet, none should keep others from preparing their food inefficiently, at home, to their own tastes. Share with all. The people will sort who works and who idles later. When work itself improves, the tendency to sloth will attenuate. All Europe will find revolution, but most likely piecemeal and with local variations. It will begin in towns and cities; rural districts will come along at their own pace. Revolutions fail when farmers refuse to sell their produce for devaluing paper money. Exchange, rather, goods the farmers need. Then the cities will have food. In Kropotkin's analysis, the revolution will tend to a general reduction in available food. Residents of cities will have to sow and reap crops themselves. City dwellers will happily exchange their lives for moderate healthy toil in the fields. Once the revolution has survived the initial famine, it has only half-measures to fear.

**Chapter VI: Dwellings.** Houses cannot be owned by one person. They are the fruit of labor of hundreds of persons, and derive their value from their situation in cities, full of amenities and conveniences paid for by all. Rent must be abolished; all should be housed rent free. Housing should be expropriated from its alleged owners. The people will divide dwellings justly. Do not send the question to a committee or arbiter. If you do, all will rankle, for every official allocation neglects a hundred details. There will be self-centered individuals to deal with. That is inevitable. Leave the distribution of housing to those whom are most closely concerned. They will do what is fair and best. There will be those who complain about the injustice of disparities between rural and city dweller's habitations. Such inequities will be transient. Socialism will use whatever space is available, but displace none who make good use of what they presently have. There will be problems. Leave those to the people concerned to work out among themselves.

**Chapter VII: Clothing.** So too clothing should be freely available to all. Stores of clothing should be seized and each take what he or she needs. People will be smart and generous. Though such sentiments are not a basis for ongoing anarchist society, they will help get it started. Luxurious clothing will be deemed superfluous. Individuals will care for the sick and needy, and luxurious clothing might be provided to such persons.

**Chapter VIII: Ways and means.** To make socialism work for all, the means of production, indeed capital of every sort, should be seized and put to work for the community. Capitalists have done what they can do—make money for themselves by increasing labor's productivity. To put that productivity to work for all, the capital of monopolists must be seized. It is true that some workmen do rather well under the capitalist system. But the price is the poverty of millions. Surplus capital (what is left after a product is used as intended, due to the low wages of the producer) should never exist. Workers should get what they produce for as little as it costs to

produce it. Only when society controls capital will as many products critical to human well-being be produced as is possible, with a minimum of waste of human energy. If all men worked, no more than four or five hours daily per person would be required to feed, house, and clothe all.

**Chapter IX: The need for luxury.** After bread, the revolution aims for self-expressive leisure. Every man, once fed, housed, and clothed, expresses very individual preferences, which prove to be the spice of living. Communism has been universally criticized for failing to address this need for exuberance, for the luxury of preferences. The true purpose of an anarchist commune is more than feeding; it must also tend the many shapes of human minds. It may be crude to speak of luxuries when so many languish for lack of necessities. But there will be luxuries, if only an anarchist revolution sweeps society. Men will work five hours daily in manual labor, leaving six or seven hours for other tasks. Many will pursue intellectual tasks of preference. Societies will abound, in which people pursue their various interests. Authors will typeset their own works, and the works will be better for it. More scholarly work will be accomplished when men are universally educated and all have leisure to work on their obsessions together. A collaborative English dictionary is being produced. All learned societies should work to perfect their cooperation, allowing all to participate in the active work of the society. Patents and capitalism conspire to thwart much good work; without them, inventions would proliferate.

Art has declined, as measured by the Renaissance masters. Art must look forward. Those who create professionally do so for money, and therefore work for reactionary forces. Present society is too corrupt to inspire real art. Museums exhibit nothing but ancient curios. Old masters relied on united cities for inspiration. Now towns agglomerate individuals, each of which seeks to plunder the others. When men share common ideals, then will art be resuscitated. No new art will be sold; it will be integral to the life of the people whose existence it expresses. Art has a propagandistic purpose, to enliven and elevate the common man. If only they have the leisure, artists will again produce great works. And this leisure and its products will make all men happy.

**Chapter X: Agreeable work.** Drudgery and bad working conditions waste labor pointlessly. Kropotkin discusses a well-structured steel foundry and mine improvements. Where men are free to do what work they wish, bad conditions will vanish, since none will do that work unless its circumstances improve. Communal living does not meet human needs; all also require time alone, and time with loved ones alone. In economics, the crucial event is making life pleasant for all, since happy men produce more. Women should be freed to choose work. Kropotkin eulogizes America for its use of machines for drudge work. When women share in emancipation from bone-grinding labor, all will find ways to maintain home life without drudgery piled on women.

**Chapter XI: Free agreement.** Most human groups form without law, and prosper. Lacking law, men will not savage one another. Newspapers ignore non-governmental events. Men, not at odds, cooperate seamlessly. The railways of Europe were constructed in this manner, without government intrusion. No central railway office for European rails exists. The thousand companies simply agreed, and common interests prevailed. Where states intervene, private riches and abject poverty ensue, the progeny of government. It is true that the European railways are capitalist enclaves. Kropotkin offers the example not to promote capitalism, but to demonstrate that men can, on so feeble a motive as money, cooperate without government intervention. True, large companies savage small ones. It is in the nature of capitalism. Still some small companies survive. Where government steps aside, contracting parties improve operations of any endeavor. The same has happened with canals and shipping. Syndicates regulate traffic without governmental intrusion. The English Lifeboat Association saves sailors without a governor, and the Red Cross offers medical assistance without taxation. All these, and many others, prove that free associations agreeing on a goal outperform like institutions ruled by bureaucrats.

**Chapter XII: Objections.** Kropotkin considers objections to communism. A) Authoritarian communists hold that with the reins of government they can manage the smallest details of people's lives for their improvement. Kropotkin answers that even if such an authoritarian communist state arose, it would break up upon the discontent of its people, who desire liberty. B)

Objectors complain that, if not compelled, none will work. Those who make this objection ignore counterexamples (America, for instance) and treat them as nullities. The economic purpose of society is to create the greatest amount of useful goods with minimal wasted energy. Men only produce maximally when free to do so. C) Others argue the only when property is held privately do men work heartily. Kropotkin cites numerous counterexamples. When a man's basic needs are met, then he prefers to work. D) Some seek to free-ride, leaving their necessary labor to others whenever possible. Manual labor is the essence of self-support. But many consider it inferior to brain work. They consider manual labor poorly because it is tied to horrid working conditions. To work a social revolution, one must abolish wage-labor. All must do manual and brain work. The existing system wastes tremendous number of lives and amounts of energy, all for pennies in the owner's pocket. Factory workers have a rule: never work hard or well. By this rule, they express their resentment and independence. E) Even if an anarchist communism prevailed, some argue there would be bad apples in every factory who would lead the bulk of industrious workers astray into indolence. But by recurring to compulsion, Kropotkin argues, one re-introduces a remedy worse than the affliction. Censure of indolent workers emerges from the others; they decline to cover for their lagging companion, and invite him out of the fold. If all freely chose their productive labor, none would need work more than four to five hours daily for necessities. The remainder of his time would be free for his use and enjoyment. For the recalcitrant slacker, a community might feed him, though he does not work. But he will have no honor, and his relations with neighbors plummet terribly. Informal social censure is ever so much more effective than juridical punishments. The rigors of working long hours make even middle managers miserable. Most of what is called laziness is just the response of workers ill-adapted to the tasks set for them. A large number of idlers are persons not well-trained for their occupations. People differ. Adapt their educations to their needs and abilities. Abandon factory schools. Idleness has structural causes. Fix the structures, and idleness will dwindle.

**Chapter XIII: The collectivist wages system.** Collectivists err when they retain representative bodies and the wage system. Each is doomed to failure by inconsistencies in its own internal logic. Each is inconsistent with people's rights and common ownership of the means of production. The collectivists say "To each according to his deeds." The labor-note system (a check for each hour of labor) seems unworkable. It re-established private property no sooner than it has been abolished. Professional work cannot be more highly valued than common labor without reintroducing class structure. Wage systems emerge from tax, government regulation, and capital, and serve to perpetuate current injustices. Wage systems should count for nothing. Anarchists oppose all privileges related to education or birth. To render to each according to the service he renders to the community perpetuates classes. One cannot value labor in money or units. One works much and well. Another works little and inefficiently. All depend on the vast labors of those who came before them or work beside them. Needs matter most. All have a right to live and to their well-being. All society depends on people giving more than that for which they are remunerated. Poverty makes capital. Men driven to work for any wage at all generate "surplus value" on which their superiors grow fat.

**Chapter XIV: Consumption and production.** Most economists start with production and only subsequently consider consumption. That is, they start with the result of human needs, rather than beginning at the beginning—the needs that lead to production. Economics should study human needs and how to meet them with minimum waste and cost. Housing, food, clothing: all have enough time to produce more than their own, and yet most lack some or all of them. Why? What obstacle prevents them from meeting their own needs? They lack because the present system wastes vast amounts of human energy. There is no surplus production. Nations export what their populations need, because they need the cash. The poor can starve. Were men to systematize, keep their surpluses, and cease letting the rich steal from them, their needs would be met.

**Chapter XV: The division of labor.** Adam Smith would have workers specialize in order to produce more goods at lower cost. He fails to consider the worker who dies of boredom doing one thing only because it is efficient. Divided labor tends to grow heritable, passing from father to son. And so, division of labor perpetuates classes. All this division of labor collapses as

knowledge spreads technology to other cultures. The industrial revolution crushes the division of labor.

**Chapter XVI: The decentralization of industry.** The means of modern production are spreading throughout Europe and the Americas and India. Capital flows to locations with men poor enough to work for little. So, there is pressure toward decentralization. Every nation seeks to supply its own needs of every sort, while relying on imports to the minimum extent necessary. If revolution comes to a place, its commerce will stop. It will be forced to provide for itself, thereby transforming economic life. A great number of those in cities will have to become farmers. Revolution awakens the minds of men. Inventive, they replace political systems. But it is the mind that is transformed first.

**Chapter XVII: Agriculture.** Economists often argue, falsely, that only narrow self-interest will cause a man to work harder or more productively. They also teach, falsely, that at no time in the future will the wage economy cease. What is true, to the contrary, is that current production is sufficient to supply all, if only real needs are met. Under a communist theory, field production might increase ten-fold. Villages might feed themselves on vastly less land than currently under the plow. Landlords, state taxation, and bankers' interest rob more than a quarter of every farmer's yield. These predations serve to keep agricultural improvements small. Not so everywhere. The American prairies yield dense crops, until farmed out. With intensive agriculture, soils may improve and yields soar. Better technologies make it possible to raise cattle on less pasture. Kropotkin recites the small amount of time required to feed large numbers of people, if all work on agriculture a portion of their workdays. If only men knew what they could do, and will the same, the revolution would no longer founder on their cowardice, but would come to pass. Bold initiative is all the revolution at present lacks. Working the soil together will heal divisions among men. Such inspired society will fear neither internal nor external enemies. Even kings will join the movement, embracing the fresh future that unfolds.