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The way in which Kropotkin outlined the idea of a private Ethic which contained no elements of coercion or imposition is surprising, and distances him from his contemporaries who saw rules and state legislation as the way in which personal interests could be protected and the moral relationship between I and the Other codified. In Kropotkin's opinion, Ethics did not and could not offer any fixed rules of conduct, because the individual must weigh up for him/herself the value of different ethical arguments. The main purpose of Ethics was not to offer counsel to individuals rather:

it tends to offer all men a supreme end, an ideal that will guide and encourage them to act instinctively in the desired direction. [Its aim] is to create a social climate which is able to make the majority of men understand, in a completely natural, habitual way, that is without hesitation, which acts will contribute to the everyone's well-being.

The moral theory Kropotkin was criticising was that which had isolated the individual from his/her neighbour shutting him/her up in *asocial and monadological solitude*. Hobbes, Locke and other theorists imagined an individual linked to society only for his/her own ends; they believed that social institutions existed only in order to preserve, protect and defend the personal interests of the individual. Hobbes was furthermore convinced that there was a need for an authority, the Leviathan, able to create a social moral and impose it through disciplinary procedures. In this way, the individual was exempted from any obligations towards other human beings. The rights of the individual were, in reality, only defended in the economic sphere, the limits to which spontaneous economic activity could be interfered with were prescribed by the state and political, intellectual and artistic activities were subject to state control. The resulting inadequate development of the individual could not but lead to a 'gregarious mentality', marked by the lack of personal initiative and creativity. Economic individualism and ownership had failed clamourously to achieve its aims as it did not lead to 'the abundant flowering of the personality'.

In Kropotkin's opinion, *sociality* and *mutual aid* were the elements that could build a new social moral. Even as these spontaneous moral attributes developed among individuals and became social custom so they would lead to the development of the sense of *justice* and of its necessary corollary: the sense of *equality* and *equity*. Kropotkin was, however, well aware that the new moral would not be established without radical social transformations. His moral theory quite deliberately avoided formulating a class or party moral: it transcended all social divisions, denied that 'inequality was a natural law' and could only become a reality in the context of a society of equals. The idea that the rights of the individual were as inviolable as were the natural rights of all the others would only develop with the progressive disappearance of class distinctions and with the transformation of social institutions.

Kropotkin argued that thanks to the establishment of social relations marked by the principles of equality and justice, individuals would learn to understand and evaluate the repercussions of their actions on the whole society, starting from avoiding causing any harm to others even when it meant that he/she would have to restrict their own needs. The concepts of *limits* and *responsibility* appear

inner power/force of each individual could not but open its sphere of action to others, reducing the distance between each 'I' indeed increasing the need of every other 'I' to come forward and to exist. Guyau's analysis of the relationship between the social 'I' anticipated some of the more common questions concerning educating individuals in the context of social life. Not only did Guyau admit, like other sociologists of his time, that the 'mind of society' was, basically, the product of the interaction of all individual minds and consciences, which contemporaneously acquired different characteristics, he also added the remarkable statement that each 'I' is made up of an infinity of 'other beings' and of small states of consciousness: thus society enters every mind.<sup>11</sup>

### The social construction of Nature

The attempt to find the principles of a universal ethic within Nature posits a series of questions that have to do with the social and cultural interpretation of Nature itself. The cultural interpretation of Nature is a way of interpreting both the individual and society. Kropotkin's work, like that of Darwin, describes a Nature that behaves like society, animals that behave like human beings, species that have social characteristics. There is no doubt that discoveries in natural sciences, both before and at the time of Kropotkin had brought to light information and knowledge that had revealed a Nature that was regulated by its own laws and was no longer subject to divine laws. However, it would be realistic to think that the categories used to interpret and criticise the social orders of the time could also have been used to interpret the generic world of Nature, in a utopian key. A constructionist vision of Nature is very useful for understanding how it is possible to draw conclusions about individual and society in the human world from this vision of Nature. In this case we could say that Nature is the cognitive mirror of society itself, perhaps even a positive utopia, one which calls for a world of justice equality and freedom.

Nature simultaneously conceals and reveals a culture. Nature is a mask. It reveals its deepest meanings only to those who know how to look, after they have learned how to observe it. In reality, this would mean stating that everything is culture. Roland Barthes formulated the problem in these terms:

To say that culture is in contrast with Nature is ambiguous, because we do not know exactly where the boundaries of either lie: where is the human being's nature? To call himself a man, a man needs a language, that is a culture. In biology? Today, in the living organism, the same structures have been found as in the speaking example: life itself is constructed like a language. In short, everything is culture, from clothes to books, from food to images and culture is everywhere from one extreme to the other of society. Thus culture is a paradoxical object: it has no boundaries, no antithetical terms, no traces/residues.<sup>12</sup>

11. Guyau, *Esquisse ...*, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

12. R. Barthes, *La pace culturale*, in *Il brusio della lingua* (Torino: Einaudi, 1988), p. 93.

ideology conceals the main feature of Nature itself, that is, the fact that it is potential freedom or liberty. Biotic evolution as well as social evolution is characterised by an increase in the internal diversity of the eco-community a process which entails not only greater stability within this eco-community, but also an increase in liberty within Nature in the shape of the number of choices for self-management and participation of life forms within their own evolution. Freedom, or liberty, and the 'incremental' possibility of choices, are the central feature of *participatory evolution* the concept coined by Bookchin which is different both from neo-Darwinian syntheses and from Bergson's mystical creative evolution.

Participatory evolution lays emphasis on symbiosis rather than on struggle, on participation rather than on competition. This concept of nature marks a return to that of Kropotkin, Reclus and Geddes, or to lesser known geographers such as Ernst Friedrich and Alexander Woeikof and, at the same time, rejects all socio-biological determinism, from that of the sociologists of the Chicago School, who speak of a society of *competitive co-operation*,<sup>19</sup> that of the ethologists and socio-biologists who attribute most human behaviour to the genetic pre-disposition of the individual.<sup>20</sup>

Hence, research on the foundations of Ethics must look again at the interface, the surfaces that are in contact, between nature and society. Philosophical and sociological reflection has been built on the rational research carried out on the relationship between society and Nature after the advent of utilitarian, scientific and instrumental thought. In Bookchin's view, the task of social ecology is to place not only the incorporation of the ecological into the economic and social on the agenda, as 'ecological economics' and environmental sociology claim, but also to carry out an in-depth analysis of the way in which society has emerged from Nature, of the continuities and discontinuities that exist between the two, of a science and a technology which agree with these reflections and, lastly, of an Ethics whose foundations lie both in Nature and in Human Rationality.

Murray Bookchin argues that it is possible to found an objective Ethics. His task is similar to that undertaken by Kropotkin: to found an objective Ethics that can make the latent freedom in Nature a reality within Society. An ecological Ethics that can re-establish society's responsibility towards Nature, reawaken the evolutionary continuity between Nature and culture and lay the emphasis on freedom and participation rather than that on competition and hierarchy. In Bookchin's opinion an ecological Ethics should associate society with ecology and culture with Nature, because only in this way can society cease to be the *sui generis* social fact, separated from and antagonist to Nature, as described by Durkheim.

The theoretical views of Murray Bookchin are still some of the more interesting in terms of closing the gap, re-assessing the dualism, between Nature and culture. The approach espoused by environmental sociologists such as William Catton and Riley Dunlap does not offer a credible solution to this

19. R. E. Park, 'Human Ecology', *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. XLII, No. 1 (1936), pp. 1-15.

20. M. Bookchin, 'Sociobiologia o ecologia sociale?', *Volontà*, No. 1 (1982), pp. 70-86.