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Peter Kropotkin's 1902 *Mutual Aid* theory today

Abstract: Kropotkin's assertions regarding mutual aid, posited in his seminal work, illuminate a fundamental aspect of social behaviour transcending species boundaries. He contended that cooperation and solidarity, rather than mere competition, were integral to evolutionary progress, challenging Darwin's paradigm of survival of the fittest. This perspective underscores the significance of altruism and collective support in the survival and flourishing of diverse communities. However, in the contemporary milieu characterized by individualism and digital connectivity, the applicability of Kropotkin's theory warrants scrutiny. The proliferation of online interactions has reshaped the dynamics of social relationships, raising pertinent questions about the efficacy of mutual aid in a virtual landscape dominated by self-promotion and egotistic pursuits. The transition from face-to-face to digital interactions has ushered in a new era marked by instant gratification and superficial connections. Furthermore, the accountability inherent in online engagements adds another layer of complexity to the evaluation of mutual aid in the digital age. As individuals navigate the intricacies of virtual interactions, the extent to which Kropotkin's principles endure amidst the allure of self-interest remains a subject of inquiry. This paper seeks to explore the viability of mutual aid in fostering meaningful connections and promoting collective well-being within the evolving landscape of digital communication.

Keywords: mutual aid, evolution, culture, individualism.

1. Peter Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) – main points

The 21st century presents a unique backdrop for re-evaluating Peter Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid, first articulated in 1902. In an era dominated by technology, individualism, and the relentless pursuit of uniqueness and recognition, the concept of mutual aid raises questions about its continued significance. The article explores

the fundamental principles of Kropotkin's theory, examining the changing dynamics of cooperation and competition, and the influence of technology and social media on human interactions. The study aims to answer the following research questions: How do Kropotkin's concepts of mutual aid and individual initiative compare to the role of mutual struggle in the evolution of the animal kingdom? Additionally, how are these concepts impacted by modern technological and social media developments? To this end, the concept of crowdfunding platforms, various hobbyist groups, and online forums centered around ideas, beliefs, profession or teams, are analysed and the findings presented in this paper. As Kropotkin posits, "mutual aid (which leads to mutual confidence, the first condition for courage) and individual initiative (the first condition for intellectual progress) are two factors infinitely more important than mutual struggle in the evolution of the animal kingdom." (Kropotkin, 2022, p.24).

The concept of *Mutual Aid* is constructed on Professor Karl Kessler's idea¹ that besides a law of mutual struggle, considered by most Darwinists at that time, there is in Nature a law of mutual aid which is far more important for progressive evolution (Kropotkin, 2022, p.5). Kropotkin develops the issue and elaborates, giving a pool of examples corroborating the theory of mutual aid among some species and its validity in the process of evolution. He disagrees with the works of Darwinists and Social Darwinists of the era on the subject. Kropotkin critiqued the view of 'a law of Nature' which suggested that human intelligence and knowledge could lessen the severity of the struggle for survival among individuals, while simultaneously recognizing a universal struggle for existence where 'every man is against all other men.' He argued that this perspective lacked verification through direct observation (Kropotkin, 2022, p.5). However, based on his own years of observation and research the author declares: "I saw Mutual Aid and Mutual Support carried on to an extent which made me suspect in it a feature of the greatest importance for the maintenance of life, the preservation of each species, and its further evolution." (Kropotkin, 2022, p.4).

Kropotkin's interpretation of Darwin's notion 'survival of the fittest' acquires new meaning, as he questions who can be considered the fittest: "those who are continually at war with each other, or those who support each other". Based on his observations he answers: "[...] we at once see that those animals which acquire habits of mutual aid are undoubtedly the fittest. They have more chances to survive [...], the highest development of intelligence and bodily organization." (Kropotkin, 2022, p.17). The author shares examples of mutual aid present in the animal kingdom and among men from the earliest days to the present. He discusses the construct of the village, the significance of guilds, the developments of the first towns and cities. He looks into the past, investigating the impact of the mutual aid

¹ Professor Kessler's 1880 lecture "On the Law of Mutual Aid" delivered at a Russian Congress of Naturalists.

factor on human evolution. The examples he draws on are certainly valid. “The more the individuals keep together, the more they mutually support each other, and the more are the chances of the species for surviving, as well as for making further progress in its intellectual development” (2022, p.18). Kropotkin elaborated further on this view by adding: “[...] in the long run the practice of solidarity proves much more advantageous to species than the development of individuals endowed with predatory inclinations. The cunningest and the shrewdest are eliminated in favour of those who understand the advantages of social life and mutual support” (Kropotkin, 2022, p.26).

Kropotkin posits that the Mutual Aid construct is based on compassion – “a necessary outcome of social life, [...] a powerful factor of further evolution” (Kropotkin, 2022, p.59), an innate instinct to help others that man inherited and extended by his education (Kropotkin, 2022, p.232). Furthermore, the author downplays the significance of the competition factor. He declares that man has reached the position upon which he stands now by avoiding competition (Kropotkin, 2022, p.71).

Kropotkin’s theory is rooted in the idea that mutual aid, driven by sociability, plays a vital role in species’ survival and evolution. He challenged the prevailing Darwinian notion of “survival of the fittest” by highlighting the advantages of cooperation and support within species. His observations of mutual aid across the animal kingdom and human societies led him to assert that those who support each other are the true ‘fittest’. His theory emphasizes compassion, empathy, and the devaluation of competition as essential components of human progress.

Throughout the volume, Kropotkin states the magnitude of co-operation, support and aid to human evolution, at the core of which lie the principles of benevolence, empathy and compassion. However, are those principles at the core of 21st century society? Can human evolutionary progress be credited to Mutual Aid, or can it be attributed to the triumph of individualism and competition, making them new elements aiding the process of human evolution?

2. Media-society

Robert Putman in his work *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, describes weakening community ties among Americans. The author investigates the involvement of Americans in the field of politics, civics, religion and work. He draws attention to social capital “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putman, 2020, p.19). He further explains the importance of social capital adding: “[...] even a poorly connected individual may derive some of the spillover benefits from living in a well-connected community” (Putman, 2020, p.20). Putman presents factual data regarding trends in civic engagement,

i.e. the decline in partisan activities, communal participation, public expression, church membership and attendance and regarding the work place – unionization: “The young worker thinks primarily of himself. We are experiencing the cult of the individual, and labour is taking a beating preaching the comfort of coalition” (Pestillo in Putman, 2020, p.82). Putman connects the declines with a shift from residence-based to workplace-based networks, and from locational communities to vocational communities. The author adds: “Since more of us are working outside the home today than a generation ago, perhaps we have simply transferred more of our friendship, more of our civic discussion, and more of our community ties from the front porch to the water cooler” (Putman, 2020, p. 85). Putman’s research covers data from 1990 to 2020. However, 2020 and the post COVID years have introduced, or in some places increased, a new global tendency – working online, eliminating the ‘water cooler’ interactions mentioned by Putman. In the early days of the pandemic the percentage of people in America spending time online using mobile devices doubled.² Nevertheless, Putman unmistakably noted Americans’ changing behaviour. He picked up on an increasing disconnection between people and how social structures – whether they be PTA, church, or political parties – have disintegrated, leading to broken ties among communities. Another author who noticed the decline in sociality was Seymour. In his book he investigates the impact and addictive nature of social media for the individual. He cites psychologist Jean Twenge’s findings, stating that a modern day person is far less likely than their predecessors to go out, go on dates or have sex (Seymour, 2020, p. 57).

21st century society can be referred to as one governed by social media. The Internet has opened new doors for an individual to be able to voice an opinion, to present himself to the world, to be noticed, to stand out from the crowd. The personal interactions model has shifted to on-line platform based interactions. “Over the past generation, media platforms have emerged as a dominant institutional form in the culture industries. [...] in addition to making and disseminating meanings to mass audiences, media platforms rely on the participation of audiences in the production and circulating of meaning” (Carah, 2021, p.5). Feenberg and Bakardjieva saw in this participation in virtual communities potential for “collective meaning making and mobilization around interests and issues that may not be directly political but important to people’s self-realization and well-being. This makes the internet a potential site for developing citizens not just consumers” (Feenberg and Bakardjieva, 2004, p. 26-32). However, as Seymour rightly noticed, on one hand we are confronted with the massification of social media and, on the other hand, it is obsessed with the topic of individual liberation. Moreover, according to the author the flipside to this individual liberation is the idea of a ‘new narcissism’ (Seymour, 2020, p.43). In this view, social sites provide a place

² Nielsen - a global leader in audience measurement, data and analytics. <https://www.nielsen.com/about-us/>

to experience the “exhibitionism and competitive pleasure of being compared to others” (Seymour, 2020, p.48). The author furthermore observes that “a culture that values connectivity so highly must be as impoverished in its social life as a culture obsessed with happiness is bitterly depressed” (Seymour, 2020, p. 56). So, on one hand people crave attention, acknowledgement, the limelight of celebrity status that being noticed provides, on the other hand they want their uniqueness and rareness to be validated by others.

Robert Putman’s work on the decline of community ties and Seymour’s insights into the impact of social media shed light on the changing dynamics of human interaction. Putman’s observations about decreasing civic engagement and Seymour’s exploration of the addictive nature of social media highlight the transformation from face-to-face interactions to online engagement. The rise of social media platforms has given individuals the ability to voice opinions and seek recognition. However, this shift also raises questions about the balance between individualism and cooperation, as social media can foster both self-presentation and competitive comparison.

3. The sociological perspective – from mass communication to mass self-presentation

The notion that individuals are products of social interaction underscores the profound influence of society on shaping our identities, beliefs, and behaviours. From the moment we are born, we are immersed in a complex web of social relationships that serve as the crucible for our development. Language, as the primary medium of communication, not only facilitates interaction but also serves as a conduit for transmitting cultural norms, values, and beliefs. The words we use and the meanings we attach to them are imbued with social significance, reflecting the collective wisdom and shared understanding of our communities. Through language, we not only express ourselves but also negotiate our identities within the broader social context. Education further amplifies the impact of socialization by imparting knowledge, skills, and ideologies that reflect societal values and priorities. From formal schooling to informal learning environments, educational institutions serve as incubators of socialization, moulding individuals into active participants in the social fabric. The curriculum, teaching methods, and even peer interactions all contribute to shaping our worldview and sense of self. Moreover, norms and values serve as guiding principles that govern social behaviour and define the boundaries of acceptable conduct within a given society. Whether explicit or implicit, these norms exert a powerful influence on individuals, shaping their attitudes, beliefs, and interpersonal relationships. Through socialization, we internalize these norms, integrating them into our psyche and regulating our behaviour accordingly. In essence, socialization is a multifaceted process through which individuals

internalize the values, norms, and beliefs of their society, ultimately forging their sense of self. Our identities are not static but dynamic constructs that evolve in response to ongoing social interactions and experiences. By acknowledging the crucial influence of social interaction on human development, we enhance our comprehension of the complex relationship between the individual and society. The language we use, the education we receive, and the norms and values we are taught are all a part of a socialization process through which we develop and embrace a sense of self. We become who we are largely through our social relations with others. In other words, the individual, to varying extents, is shaped by social interactions (Croteau, 2021, p. 15).

As articulated by Greene (2018), our brains have evolved to thrive through continuous social engagement, with the intricacies of these interactions playing a crucial role in advancing our collective intelligence as a species. However, when our participation in social interactions diminishes to a certain extent, it can detrimentally affect our brain's function, leading to a decline in our social acumen (Greene, 2018, p. 49).

This issue becomes increasingly relevant given the shift in our social interaction model, from traditional face-to-face encounters to primarily online engagements. The critical question at hand is whether these online interactions predominantly involve one-way communication, wherein individuals present themselves to the world, or if they indeed foster genuine two-way interactions, and if so, what is the accountability level of one's word during such interactions. This accountability level signifies the degree of responsibility individuals take for their words, promises, and agreed-upon actions and proceedings. The digital realm of online socialization offers a sense of security, as individuals can choose not to fulfil previously agreed-upon obligations, hiding behind the screen. In essence, it raises the crucial query of whether this shift towards online interactions is as effective for human advancement as the traditional face-to-face model. If it is, in line with Kropotkin's theory that human progress depends on communication, then Kropotkin's theory retains its validity, emphasizing the immense significance of socializing for human evolution. However, if, as Seymour suggests, our online interactions are primarily self-promotional and addiction-driven, Kropotkin's theory loses its relevance.

The profound transformations in the scope of human existence brought about by the media also bear significant ethical implications. Our perception of Earth as a vast environmental system has fundamentally reshaped our ethical understanding of our actions as inhabitants of this world (Couldry, 2012). The global connectivity offered by the Internet has created a perception of the world as a unified social and cultural entity. Moreover, given the prevalent emphasis on individualism and personal rights in our culture, which promotes self-focus, the Internet has facilitated a shift from mass communication to mass self-presentation. As societies become more individualistic, they also become more narcissistic (Manne, 2015).

These shifts in how we interact and engage with the world, both online and in the broader context of media and culture, have profound implications for our understanding of society, ethics, and the dynamics of human communication. Cooperation, help, solidarity are still present, but their degrees may have changed. On one hand, with the access to a global community that social networks provide, the issue of help, cooperation and working together for the benefit of mankind should be greater. On the other hand, we often use social networks for more egotistical gains, like self-presentation. As stated by Jose van Dijck, social media platforms are not finished products, on the contrary they are dynamic objects that are continually tweaked in response to their users' needs and their owners' objectives (van Dijck, 2013, p.7). Therefore, it is clear that media platforms will always accommodate our personal desires and goals, as it is their purpose. Now, if those desires and goals are only to serve an individual to achieve recognition and acknowledgement, then it is difficult to see the theory of mutual aid applying. Hence, to gain further insights into the concept of mutual aid, in the social media driven society of the 21st century, it's vital to discuss the concepts of crowdfunding platforms, hobbyist groups existing on the Facebook, idea-based or work-based communities, and teams present on the internet in the form of online forums.

4. Kropotkin's concept of mutual aid today

The concept of utilizing technology for communication purposes originated in the 1980s with the advent of Bulletin Board Systems (BBS). These systems enabled users to connect via terminal programs, granting them access to various functions upon logging in. Users could upload and download software and data, read news and bulletins, and engage in communication with others through public message boards, and in some instances, direct chat. This brought about Usenet - a global system of discussion groups. Usenet allowed for the exchange of opinions with a group of people interested in a particular topic, regardless of their location. Initially, the primary beneficiaries of this system were predominantly IT enthusiasts and professionals. The emergence of social media in the 21st century has democratized communication by enabling the average person to express their opinions, ideas and beliefs, additionally granting an individual access to instant information, as a result, shifting the concept of mutual aid into a new dimension. While the fundamental principle remains unchanged - helping others facilitates progress - the form of this assistance has evolved due to widespread access to the internet and social media platforms. Consequently, the focus (direction) of our help also changed as the collaboration in Kropotkin's view understood as: 'us together as a family/tribe/community' because we are 'born into it', and 'for the benefit of our tribe/village/society' is no longer about 'us' governed by relationship/geographical/political boundaries and restrictions. Instead, it is about 'us' belonging to a group/

unit formed around shared interests, hobbies, needs and desires. The first concept that facilitates this is crowdfunding.

Crowdfunding is a method of raising capital to finance a project or business venture by leveraging the collective contributions of a large group of individuals. This approach to financing would have been impossible in the past since it is primarily facilitated online through social media and dedicated crowdfunding platforms, which, in turn, maximize reach and exposure without reliance on traditional banks or typical financial institutions. The effectiveness of crowdfunding fundamentally hinges on access to social media networks and the principle of mutual aid. “In 2023, the global crowdfunding market volume was estimated at 1.17 billion U.S. dollars, marking a slight increase compared to the previous years. According to Statista, the transaction value of the global crowdfunding sector is projected to grow by 1.48 percent between 2024 and 2028, resulting in a market volume of 1.27 billion U.S. dollars in 2028. One of the largest crowdfunding platforms, Kickstarter, launched more than 600,000 projects as of January 2024”.³ Moreover, it has to be noted that apart from profit based type of crowdfunding, there also exists a donation-based model, where “the return on investment is not financial, but a social good or some form of community benefit”.⁴

10 best crowdfunding platforms as it stands for 2024:

1. Best overall: Kickstarter
2. Runner-up: Indiegogo
3. Best for small businesses: Fundable
4. Best for Shopify stores: Crowdfunder
5. Best for content creators: Patreon
6. Best for UK and Europe: Crowdcube
7. Best for personal fundraising: GoFundMe
8. Best for nonprofits: Mightycause
9. Best for real estate crowdfunding: CrowdStreet
10. Best for high-growth startups: StartEngine.⁵

Through crowdfunding, individuals can exploit the reach of the internet to raise money for different purposes, such as starting a business (e.g. Fundable, Indiegogo), developing a new product (e.g. Crowdfunder, Kickstarter), supporting a social cause (e.g. Mightycause), or helping individuals in need (e.g. GoFundMe). As the crowdfunding market continues to evolve and grow, platforms are investigating additional financial and non-financial services that could be integrated into their offerings. However, crowdfunding is not the only concept based on the principle

³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1078273/global-crowdfunding-market-size/>

⁴ <https://stripe.com/en-pl/resources/more/four-types-of-crowdfunding-for-startups-and-how-to-choose-one#donation-based-crowdfunding>

⁵ <https://www.shopify.com/blog/crowdfunding-sites#6>

of 21st century idea of mutual aid. The social media giant Facebook implemented this concept by introducing a feature on the platform known as Facebook Groups.

Facebook was the first social network to exceed one billion registered accounts and currently sits at more than three billion monthly active users. Meta Platform owns four of the biggest social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger, and Instagram), all with more than one billion monthly active users each.⁶ Facebook Groups turned out to be one of the most popular features of the social media platform. Platform's users create these groups for numerous reasons, including connecting with like-minded individuals, sharing information, organizing events, promoting businesses and generally helping each other. As it is stated on the Facebook official site "With new Groups, we made it easy for you to build a space for important groups of people in your life—your family, your soccer team, your book club. All you have to do to get started is to create a group, add friends and start sharing."⁷ It is estimated that over 1.8 billion people use Facebook Groups every month.⁸ Facebook understood human desire to belong and acted on it. Just to highlight the popularity of the 'Groups' concept, according to Facebook statistics, there are over 10 million groups on Facebook at the moment⁹, more than 50% of all users are in five or more groups¹⁰; the average Facebook group has 2300 members¹¹. Moreover, 98% of Facebook Group members say they feel a sense of belonging as they can share their ideas, thoughts and experiences with others who can relate to them.¹² Presented with statistical data above it is hard not to recognise the magnitude of Facebook's accomplishment. In the past it may have been the tribes or clans fulfilling the sense of belonging, nowadays there are hobbyists groups in their millions.

However, there are other idea-based or profession-based groups and teams that thrive on the internet in the form of online forums. Where the advancement of progress through mutual aid is evident. To name a few:

Reddit Communities: Reddit hosts thousands of "subreddits" dedicated to various topics, such as technology (r/technology), science (r/science), and specific hobbies like photography (r/photography) or fitness (r/fitness);

Quora: A question-and-answer platform where users form communities around topics of interest, such as philosophy, education, or entrepreneurship, to share knowledge and insights;

GitHub Communities: Developers collaborate on open-source projects, sharing code, ideas, and improvements, creating a global network of programmers working towards common goals.

⁶ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/10160198316566729/>

⁸ <https://virtual-communities.thegovlab.org/reports>

⁹ https://www.facebook.com/community/whats-new/facebook-communities-summit-keynote-recap/?_rdc=1&_rdr

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/10160198316566729/>

¹¹ <https://www.sociablekit.com/tutorials/embed-facebook-group-posts-website/>

¹² <https://www.facebook.com/notes/10160198316566729/>

There are numerous forums available online. They are set around an idea or a topic, with the purpose of collaborating and interacting with the like-minded people across the world. The topics and ideas can relate to a general subject on health, work, education, entertainment or politics, to name a few; or a niche related topic more often connected to individual's particular experience or a predicament.

According to Statista.com "As of April 2024, there were 5.44 billion internet users worldwide, which amounted to 67.1 % of the global population. Of this total, 5.07 billion, or 62.6 % of the world's population, were social media users"¹³. The statistics demonstrate the overall growing popularity of social media and the internet. Furthermore, analysing the topic closer it has to be noted that the most popular reason for using the internet worldwide as of 1st quarter of 2024 is 'finding information' (62,4%), and in the second and third place consequently 'staying in touch with friends and family' (59,6%), and 'keeping up to date with news and events' (54%)¹⁴. In essence, 'Finding information' can involve participating in online forums; 'Staying in touch with friends and family' indicates the use of platforms such as Facebook; and 'Keeping up to date with news and events' among other things contains checking crowdfunding possibilities.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the ideas presented in Peter Kropotkin's "Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution" and the observations made by Robert Putman in "Bowling Alone" and Seymour in the context of the media-dominated society of the 21st century raise important questions about the advancement of human society and the role of mutual aid, individualism, and competition.

Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid highlights the importance of cooperation, solidarity, and empathy in human evolution. He argues that these principles are essential for the survival and progress of societies and species. However, 21st-century society has undergone significant changes, particularly with the advent of social media and online interactions. In today's society, the rise of social media has created a platform for individualism and self-presentation, where many individuals seek recognition and validation. While there is still room for cooperation and solidarity in online communities, there is also a risk of a "new narcissism" where the focus is on self-promotion and comparison with others.

The sociological perspective emphasizes the role of social interactions in shaping individual identity and values. However, the change from face-to-face interactions to online interactions raises questions about the depth of these interactions. Are online interactions as conducive to mutual aid and meaningful

¹³ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>

¹⁴ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1387375/internet-using-global-reasons/>

cooperation as face-to-face interactions? The answer to this question remains complex and may vary depending on the context and the individuals involved. Analysing data regarding concepts such as crowdfunding, Facebook Groups and online forums, it is obvious that the Kropotkin's theory of mutual aid is still very much present, merely the form and the focus of the help have changed, evolved. Nowadays, people rally around ideas regardless of their political beliefs (for instance: Zrzutka.pl to Help Ukraine).¹⁵ They choose to form or join groups based purely on their individual interests in order to exchange information, for financial gain or to help others. The need for belonging is still present in our society (i.e. amount of Facebook Groups and online forums). However, the internet allowed an individual the choice of 'where to belong' and 'who to help' regardless of political restrictions, geographical boundaries and relationship constraints.

Social media and online interactions offer opportunities for both collaboration and self-promotion, and the balance between these aspects can influence the direction of human evolution. It is essential to continue examining how these dynamics shape our society and whether the race for uniqueness can coexist with the principles of mutual aid, empathy, and compassion. Ultimately, the future of human evolution will be shaped by our ability to strike a meaningful balance between individualism and cooperation in the digital age.

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¹⁵ <https://zrzutka.pl/profile/marcin-strzyzewski-477688>