

## The image of social nature: Kropotkin's corrective and its relevance today<sup>1</sup>

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This summer, an artwork statuette disappeared from its location near a seaside promenade in Stockholm. "Heiling squirrel stolen," the newspapers reported.<sup>2</sup>

The artwork, *Heiling Squirrel* (original title in Swedish: "Heilande ekorre" Wikström 2022), may be interpreted as an alarm, a repulsive greeting from the past, when the interactions of animals in nature presumably followed the principle that the strongest prevails. A principle that was assumed to be the law of nature, and also of man, since humans had proven to be related to other animals.

As is well known, Social Darwinism's misinterpretation of Darwin evolved into ideologies which were used to justify wars of conquest, oppression, persecution, the murdering of minorities, and the worst crime ever on European soil: the Holocaust. Although we may believe that Social Darwinism vanished after the Second World War, and although the prevalent belief today is that scientific facts can be distorted for political purposes, we still perceive social life in nature as thoroughly and solely marked by contempt for weakness and vulnerability. Of this the "Heiling Squirrel" is a reminder.

I have called the phenomenon shown in the artwork *hyper-exploitation* (Gålmark 2005, 67; 2008, 101; 2010, 42). A subordinate group, or a representative of a subordinate group, is deployed to perform something desirable or undesirable, or, in this case, something extremely undesirable: the right arm raised in salute, in the recognizable horrifying historical gesture. In the artwork, the squirrel, as a presumed active

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, *Aftonbladet* 8 August 2025, *Mitt i Stockholm* 8 August 2025 and *Dagens Nyheter* 12 August 2025.



representative of nature's presumed order, by way of their symbolically raised right paw, is transformed into yet another image of an other-than-human, *the scapegoat*, and thus given the blame for human historical actions.

Human supremacy – humanity's power over the nonhuman world – can take such liberties, depicting nature and the other-than-human to fit various purposes, here to transfer guilt or responsibility from the sovereign (the human) to the depicted (the other-than-human, here in the guise of a squirrel). However, Wikström's statuette may also, conversely, be perceived as an expression of critique, in which case the squirrel's salute is showing us humans how humans may appear from the perspective of other-than-humans, namely as capricious tyrants, demanding to be saluted with a raised right paw.<sup>3</sup>

When looking at nature and nonhuman animals, it is for us to keep in mind that interpretations are made from within a social and material culture, one that has long been built on the oppression of animals. Our reflections and conclusions are all somehow marked by the fact that we have, since birth, been surrounded by prejudices towards nonhuman animals in nature, and towards nonhuman animals living in captivity in human society. Our image of the other-than-human, therefore, tends to either correspond to Social Darwinist chauvinisms – nature as an Armageddon<sup>4</sup>, a Hobbesian war of all against all (Hobbes 1651) – or to the opposite, romanticism, in which nature represents the good, as opposed to humanity, which represents the evil. This dualistic strategy illustrates how unjust ideologies, consciously or subconsciously, may relate to 'the Others', who can be celebrated and worshipped, despised and exploited, all at the same time.

Pjotr Kropotkin's (1842–1921) study *Mutual Aid*, published in 1902 (originally from 1890 and 1896 in the journal *Nineteenth Century*), in reply to T. H. Huxley's *The Struggle for Existence in Human Society* (1888, printed in 1893), departs from this dualism (Kropotkin 1955; Huxley 1955, 329–341). In Kropotkin's work, there are tendencies towards tributes to animals, but not towards romantic worship of them. The study thus strives to correct the knowledge position of its time, by documenting a truer, more varied and nuanced image of other-than-humans' social life in nature. After several years of observations, mainly in Siberia, Kropotkin found that reciprocity is an overlooked survival factor "among animals belonging to the same species" (Kropotkin 1902, vii). When faced with difficulties caused by natural disasters, or by other spe-

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3 In the words of Mats Wikström, creator of the artwork: "That a squirrel would become a Nazi is really as difficult to understand as if a human being would become a Nazi. As I see it, the sculpture sends a question back to the viewer about what we humans are doing." Digital Museum, Nacka 2022.

4 The New Testament, The Book of Revelation, 16:16 (NIV).

cies, for example infectious insects, individuals tend to join forces to benefit from each other's capabilities. Kropotkin found that this is how they survive – by combining their efforts and avoiding competition over resources, thus building the best overall defence. Individuals and groups who compete with each other simply fare worse than those who unite, or who are allowed to unite, in the struggle against adversities.

Kropotkin's study modified and added to Darwin's. It also objected to Huxley's interpretation of Darwin concerning other-than-humans. Nature's social life, Kropotkin observed, is driven not by one, but by two principles: self-assertion and competition – and, more prominently, by cooperation and solidarity. When competition occurs within a species in nature, it is not caused primarily by individuals, but by adverse circumstances in the environment. Kropotkin's study showed that mutual support within various species is frequent behaviour and that mutual aid and protection provide the greatest opportunities for survival. This is, he says, "infinitely more important than mutual struggle" (Kropotkin 1955, 15). Kropotkin thought this to be true of humanity's social condition as well.

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In *Mutual Aid*, there are also problems, as in all texts. It includes obsolete concepts for various historical and indigenous human societies, evident in the chapter headings. Another problem relevant to my line of thought here is Kropotkin's concept of "law". Specifically, the implication that the principle of competition and the principle of cooperation are both laws of nature. This tendency to perceive social behaviour as if it were instituted by a higher power, recurs in many works in Kropotkin's time. But recognizing nature's two main factors of survival does not necessarily mean that they must be obeyed, as if they were immutable natural laws. In a human context, we may instead conceive of these as electable, open to modification and change.

Thus, we may move from observation to ethics, that is to say, towards the opportunity to reflect, make choices and be accountable. To this end, we may consult the philosopher David Hume's distinction between *is* and *ought* (Hume 1739), and observe that one cannot derive what might be in the future from the actual world.<sup>5</sup> Reality may inspire us to detect what has been possible, and may inform us of what currently *is* the case, but it cannot *in itself* provide a solution for social action, because this must be deliberated. As the philosopher Evelyn Pluhar points out in the anthology

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5 In Book III, Part I, Section I, Hume finds that one cannot logically derive a prescriptive moral conclusion (an "ought") from descriptive factual premises (an "is").

*Djur & människor* (Pluhar 1997, 180–202), if it were the case that nature demanded of us to wrong our fellow beings for our existence, for instance by killing them for food, it would still be possible for us to evade those terms by choosing not to comply. Indeed, Pluhar would not be the only one to consider leaving Earth for good, should one's existence require systematic cruelty; without doubt, some of us would agree with Pluhar and start cooperating to minimize such an existential condition, and some by physical strength, but most by combining our emotional and intellectual curiosity, our talent for empathy, our justness, scrutiny and endurance, and our innovation, all to avoid harm and conflict.

With this insight, we may state, firstly, there is no natural social law forcing humans to compete and organize hierarchically, and secondly, that which exists here and now is not what necessarily must be. Instead, for humanity, in our favourable existential condition in this regard, there are choices to be made.

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Subsequent to *Mutual Aid*, another work on the subject of social principles, the American philosopher and abolitionist J. Howard Moore's (1862–1916) *The Universal Kinship*, was published (Moore 1906). Here, facts from Kropotkin's studies about cooperation and solidarity are ethically deliberated, and Moore arrives at the conclusion that humanity is one indivisible species of sisterhood, and that nonhumans also ought to be considered in the development of an expanded circle of solidarity. *The Universal Kinship*, published in 1906 and thus also, regrettably, containing some obsolete statements common in its time, nevertheless advises its readers – most of whom were probably likeminded white men of social standing – to always and without exception follow the Golden Rule of mutuality:

Do as you would be done by – and not to the dark man and the white woman alone, [that is, we insert for clarity in 2026, people of all colours and persuasions] but to the sorrel horse and the grey squirrel as well; not to creatures of your own anatomy only, but to all creatures. [...] Do to beings below you as you would be done by beings above you. (Moore 1906, 327)

At the time of publication, *The Universal Kinship* was greeted with applause by socially progressive people, including feminists, abolitionists, socialists, animal rights advocates

and peace activists, whose thinking it was inspired by.<sup>6</sup> One may wonder: were these two books – *Mutual Aid* and *The Universal Kinship* – perhaps dismissed with time by the well-intended belief that anything inspired by Darwin’s discovery, that humanity belongs to the world’s greater mass of beings, would lead to contemptuous ideologies such as Social Darwinism? The answer to this question is that this belief was mistaken, and that *Mutual Aid* and *The Universal Kinship* stood out in their time in their respective opposition to the Social Darwinist ideology and its contempt for people who were made weak by hardships, discrimination and the lack of financial parity.

Despite Kropotkin’s pioneering of the field of ethology – and the consequent discovery of nature’s diverse social life concerning gender and sexuality (Bagemihl 1999), and social organization (Bekoff & Pierce 2014) – the image of nature as a war against all has remained a popular reference, serving as a justification of retrogressive authoritarian policies as “natural,” and therefore just. This is why studying, choosing and practicing empathy and solidarity is crucial, not least in view of humanity’s deficiently regulated socio-economic relationships. Those who do not secure an acceptable standard of living, companionship, and inner happiness for all, but rather foster ruthlessness and produce spirals of hyper-exploitation. A fact shown, for example, in how the decline of seventy-three percent in the world’s populations of free-living vertebrate species (since 1970) is caused to a large extent by the increasing amount of land demanded to breed the increasing number of captive nonhumans slaughtered for the animal protein market.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, dominant historiographies are expressed as though the opposite circumstances were true, when they omit the voices of the everyday opponents to Social Darwinist economics and politics, the parallel driving actors in human history: the considerate and the cooperative, the free-thinking and the righteous, the critical, the volunteers in associations. Luckily, however, there are also other genres of storytelling.

In E.M. Forster’s novel *Howards End*, written in the same decade as *Mutual Aid* and *The Universal Kinship*, a Mr Leonard accidentally ends up next to a Miss Helen at a public Mendelssohn, Beethoven, Brahms, and Elger concert (Forster 1910).<sup>8</sup> When Helen, on leaving the event, inadvertently takes Leonard’s umbrella, Leonard demands

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6 For instance, Bertha von Suttner (1843–1914), recipient of the Nobel peace prize in 1905, peace advocate and author of *Inventory of a Soul* (1883), *The Machine Age* (1888), *Lay Down Your Arms!* (1889), and *Chess of Torment* (a book against animal experimentation published in 1898), used Darwin’s theory to predict a struggle against war, and for welfare, among the nations.

7 *The Living Planet Report* (2024); Humane World for Animals and the statistics of the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO): 92.2 billion (2024).

8 *Howards End* was adapted for the screen by Ruth Praver Jhabvala and James Ivory in 1992.

to get it back. Helen, realizing that Leonard endures a precarious financial situation as a low-paid clerk, resolves to help him get a better paid job. Helen and her older sister, Margaret, consult Margaret's wealthy fiancé, Henry, who hands them a prediction, a tip about the job market. Informed by Helen and Margaret, Leonard follows the tip and loses his job as a clerk, however poorly paid. Now Leonard is worse off than he was before. The sisters' attempt to get Henry to take responsibility for his faulty prediction fails, as Henry – like other wealthy men who made a fortune from the accumulated value of Leonard's and others' low-paid labour – insists on the doctrine of Social Darwinism. Henry says: "There always have been rich and poor." [...] "[O]ur civilization is moulded by great impersonal forces." "I am grieved for your clerk. But it is all in the day's work. It's part of the battle of life." (Forster 1910, 137, 136). Helen protests: "A man who had little money, has less, owing to us. Under these circumstances I do not consider 'the battle of life' a happy expression." And to her sister Margaret: "[Henry] must be one of those men who has reconciled science with religion, [...] and talk of the survival of the fittest, and cut down the salaries of clerks." (Forster, 1910, 137).

Henry was offered the chance to assist a fellow member of society, but on the basis of his option to follow the motto survival of the fittest – moreover wrongly interpreted as survival of the fortunate and well-off – Henry missed out on the opportunity. Because of Henry's view of the world, that is, his employment of Social Darwinism to justify himself in what he imagined to be "the battle for life", nature was made into a scapegoat image for human behaviour, at the same time as Leonard's prospect of leading a decent life came to naught.

As readers of Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*, we may benefit from E.M. Forster's novel and its affirmative testimony. The two sisters' action showed moral courage and solidarity, all in order to support the clerk, Leonard, while Henry's non-action was marked by cowardice and omission, all in order to retain his dominance and power. The story shows how strength can quickly turn into weakness, as when Henry, notwithstanding his self-image of superiority, abstains from taking responsibility for the deteriorating situation he caused Leonard. Conversely, weakness may, in the blink of an eye, turn into strength, as when Margaret and Helen – with the position of the category of women in England in 1910 in mind – try to improve Leonard's conditions and are close to succeeding. In European history, as it is still often told, Henry may be noticed as a potentate and magnate while the legally depending, jobless and politically voiceless sisters, who tried in solidarity to aid a fellow being, will go unnoticed, as will the clerk Leonard, the fellow man.

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In spite of the fact that weakness is a fundamental experience, at birth, in childhood and in adolescence, when affected by sickness, injury, separation, jealousy and envy, misfortune and mistakes, by grief, old age, and in the face of death, the dynamics of weakness and strength is rarely recognized.

However, undressed in the X-ray machine, illuminated skeletons next to each other, it is no longer possible to deny the equal and invaluable nature of all. Actually, it may be that our communalities, our cooperative interactions, originate in the vulnerable situations and moments that give us the chance to discover our capacity for uprising; by reminding us of our interdependency, by generating warmth and care, and by disclosing the weaknesses we tend to hide as our *paradoxical primal force*, the very seed of our united efforts and a deeper meaning in life.

So, one of the most important insights we can gain from Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid* may not be about ethological or sociological observations, since these fields have developed immensely since the book's publication, but rather this: Weakness is not to be despised; weakness is a call to act in solidarity.

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The squirrel, as a statuette, was aided by a passer-by to escape from hyper-exploitation. Henry in *Howards End* eventually realized his dependence on Margaret's existential and practical, though not so political, wisdom. As the lines of the poet Leonard Cohen convey, attracting millions of views on the internet: "Forget your perfect offering. Ring the bells that still can ring. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." (Cohen 1968; 1992).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Note on the use of AI: No generative AI was used in the creation of this work.

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