

Freedom in Community: Ōsugi Sakae's Concept of Freedom

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the political ideals of Sakae Ōsugi. Ōsugi argued that it was possible to establish a “society of mutual aid” based on the principle of “expansion of life.” In his view, the hierarchy meant fixing the boundary and every boundary was an expression and exercise of power. That explains why anarchism is a perpetual movement which attempts to transcend every boundary forming the hierarchy. Ōsugi aimed at a free and diversified federal society where life is expanded. Ōsugi's influence stemmed from his articulation of the basic concerns of his generation. That generation confronted difficulties of a different order from those faced by the Meiji leadership. Ōsugi was attracted to the problem presented by the emerging masses: how could they be incorporated into society? His reply to this question was “mutual aid.” This paper focuses on the relation between both notions of freedom and society and analyzes it throwing a light on the principle of “expansion of life” in Ōsugi's anarchism. Similarly to his contemporaries, it might be helpful to enquire into that principle, in a way that is beneficial to the relation between freedom and society.

Keywords

Anarchism, expansion of life, reality of conquest, mutual aid, freedom, self-esteem

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Introduction

Ōsugi Sakae (1882-1923) is Japan's best-known anarchist. His rebellion was directed at an authoritarian government and an oppressive society. He was a pioneer in the struggle for social and political freedom and one of the founders of the anarchist movement in Japan. He was respected by likeminded individuals during his own era, and his reputation spread more widely during the decades following World War II.

Ōsugi made a name for himself as an editor, critic, and translator. But he also became known as a leading anarchist thinker, after translating the works of Kropotkin (1842-1921), and as a charismatic theorist of the anarcho-syndicalist movement that was active within the labor movement. His ideas touched on some core issues confronting those seeking to transform society: the question of how to present a united-front, centralization versus decentralization in labor and political movements, the view workers should take toward intellectuals; the nature of a post-revolutionary society, and non-sectarian organizational tactics.

Ōsugi's influence is not limited to the socialist and communist movements in Japan; his rebellious style has had a major impact that extends to a much wider audience. In 1920, he traveled to Shanghai to attend the Comintern's Conference of Far-Eastern Socialists, as a Japanese representative. Two years later he traveled to Europe to attend a planned anarchist congress there, traveling under a fake passport. He was arrested in France in 1923 for making a speech on May Day at a gathering held outside Paris. After a short prison sentence, he was deported back to Japan, probably at the behest of the Japanese authorities.

He only lived two more months after his return to Japan: in September 1923, amidst the chaos that followed the Great Kanto Earthquake, he and his second wife Itō were abducted and then murdered, along with his nephew Tachibana Munekazu, by the Japanese military police. Although this life that he led did not lead to any concrete political or social transformation, he has won admiration as an early twentieth century rebel who bequeathed a legacy of fighting against the establishment.

Ōsugi's generation confronted some complex issues that were quite different in nature from the problems facing the Meiji political leaders, and his influence stems from the way he approached these problems. The principal issue during the Meiji era had been how to modernize, but the intellectuals of the Taishō era, and Japanese society as a whole, were

confronted by the task of arriving at solutions to a whole range of problems arising from that process of modernization: pollution, worker discontent, rising class inequality, and the emergence of the “masses.”

Ōsugi’s main focus was the question of how the individuals who composed the masses might take their position as members of society, and his proposed solution relies upon his concept of the “expansion of life,” which is related to the idea of “mutual aid.” This paper will consider the relationship between freedom and mutual aid within Ōsugi’s anarchist thought by focusing on his social philosophy, which he characterized as “social individualism.” This examination will then be expanded to consider the relationship between freedom and social relations in today’s society.

‘Reality of Conquest’ vs. ‘Mutual Aid’

Ōsugi held the view that there were two aspects to society: the “reality of conquest” and “mutual aid.” He explains this in the article “My View of Contemporary Society,” published in September 1915:

The great fact of domination runs through the history of human society. The principle of mutual aid that was the norm in primitive society, as it is in the animal kingdom, has been impeded in its development by that reality of conquest, so that society has been permeated and debased by the so-called struggle for existence, even including cannibalism.

Nearly all social systems been created with the aim of preserving and entrenching this reality of conquest. And the ideas and emotions of humanity have been forced to conform to those systems, being twisted and hardened to suit the needs of preserving and strengthening this reality. If we hope to revive a way of living that really suits human beings, we must first, through our own efforts, amend our ways of thinking and feeling, and then try to destroy that reality of conquest.¹

Here Ōsugi points out that the universal social principle of “mutual aid” is distorted by the “great fact of domination,” and that recovering a way of living suitable to human beings requires humanity to rebel against this

¹ Ōsugi (2014b), p.171.

reality and throw off the taint of servility acquired through the process of domination.

According to Ōsugi, “human beings need to appreciate their own greatness, and therefore must awaken to the loftiness of their own will; herein lies our inherent desire.”² He calls this inherent desire self-esteem, and argues that the way to awaken this is “through struggling against one’s self and one’s desires, as well as struggling against material and mental obstacles.”³ He called this process the “struggle of life,” where “life” here refers to the whole system of relations between instincts, which is rooted in the desire expressed as the ego (self-esteem).

Saying fundamentally, “the relationship between instinct and instinct” was trying to expand *jison no honnō* (self-esteem). In this relationship, if you wanted to prove your excellence faithfully to the essence of self-esteem, you would do so by creating and giving your own value, or try to affirm such differentiation.⁴ It was the activity of instinct to differentiate into something transcendental. In this case the instinct for self-transcendence became dominant.⁵ This was the “expansion of life.”

On the contrary, if you either wanted to prove your superiority, mistaking the essence of self-esteem, by wanting the existing value or getting it, or believed that you protected yourself and kept your original identity by not having been pushed actively, you would oppose ones different from you and move in a direction where those were denied. It was the reaction of instinct to differentiate into something conservative. In this case the instinct for self-conservation became dominant.⁶ Ōsugi called this *seifuku no jijitsu* (the reality of conquest):

Since the primitive ages mankind has continued to struggle with the environment and use it for the sake of the expansion of the life. Moreover, mankind has continued to fight against each other and use each other for the expansion of each other’s lives On the contrary, fights and utilization among mankind obstructed the expansion of life of each other. That is, two poles of conquerors and conquests arose among mankind as a result of

² “On the Gambling Instinct” in Ōsugi (2014a), p.229.

³ *Ibid.*, p.229.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.228.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.230.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.230.

fighters and utilization of the wrong means.⁷

When self-conservation is prioritized as the key element in the expansion of life, this leads to the creation of a hierarchy, which Johan Galtung has defined as a system characterized by a relatively stable pattern of interaction founded on differentiating people on the basis of rank in order to create a solid social order.⁸ Thus a hierarchy attempts to construct a vertically discriminated social order from people who are qualitatively the same, establishing firm boundaries between people who are essentially identical.

Throughout history, according to Ōsugi, the instinct for self-conservation has overwhelmed the expansion of life. Social systems establish and maintain reactionary constraints opposed to the expansion of life, and everywhere we can see examples of how such reactionary attitudes prevail in the confrontation between self-preservation and self-transcendence: one clear instance of this is the state. “Society as a system of mutual aid” founded on the expansion of life “is replaced in the course of history by the generation of a parasitical layer.”⁹ Even life itself adapts to this situation, by concentrating on control and regulation, and thus becomes reduced to its secondary elements. Ōsugi uses the term the “reality of conquest” to denote the framework constituted by the welding together of the instinct for self-conservation with reactionary social systems.

Nevertheless, Ōsugi argued that an alternative is possible: he believed that liberation from such authoritarian rule can be achieved by establishing a society of mutual aid based on the principle of the expansion of life. He sees the instinct that he calls the “awareness of human community” as the foundation for such a society:

The foundation for the society that humanity has created is not the emotion of love or compassion, but the awareness of human community. This is the unconscious recognition of the power that can be obtained through mutual aid: the unconscious recognition that the happiness of each person is intimately connected to the happiness of all. This is also an unconscious recognition of the spirit of justice or equilibrium, where each individual respects the rights of others, viewing those rights as being equal to their own. It

7 “The Expansion of Life” in Ōsugi (2014a), p.128.

8 Galtung (1991), p.33.

9 “Mushanokōji Saneatsu and the New Village Project” in Ōsugi (2015a), p.146.

is from this broad inevitability that many sophisticated moralistic feelings arise.¹⁰

Here Ōsugi speaks of “awareness of human community” and the “unconscious recognition of the power that can be obtained through mutual aid,” but what kind of power does he mean? Elsewhere he writes:

Morality, innately speaking, is the affirmation of the power that is indispensable to life. It is the respect for the life instinct toward oneself and others. This respect is the foundation of the social life of animals and of humanity, and is also the basis of the concepts of justice, freedom, equality, and fellowship.¹¹

So Ōsugi views the power that can be obtained through mutual aid as “indispensable to life” by which he means the expansion of life, *i.e.* the relationship between instinct and instinct toward your self-esteem. Ōsugi argues that this expansion of life provides a broad and inevitable basis for the moral feelings of respect that people have for themselves and others. Thus, mutual aid and the expansion of life are in a reciprocal relationship: mutual aid facilitates the expansion of life, and the expansion of life promotes the development of the feelings underlying mutual aid. Ultimately, the two are in accord.

Ōsugi was impressed by the society of ants, who live according to the “principle of voluntary mutual aid,”¹² having a duty to share the food available. Ōsugi saw this as a situation where the reciprocal trust cultivated through mutual aid enhances self-motivation of each individual organism.¹³ Ōsugi knew, of course, that it was not possible to directly apply these insights from biology to the realm of social science. Nevertheless, he insisted that mutual aid was a “social truth” worth believing in, because it fostered the yearnings of humanity for freedom, equality, and fellowship; and he also saw mutual aid as ultimately linked to the new social form of common labor and production. Ōsugi understood mutual aid within the ideology of his day:

¹⁰ “Traditionalism within Human History” in Ōsugi (2014c), p.133.

¹¹ “The Desire for Justice” in Ōsugi (2014c), pp.172-3.

¹² “Mutual Aid within the Animal World” in Ōsugi (2014b), p.166.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.168.

In this society, two different types of rebels appear: those who seek to straighten out the evils of the previous system and then construct a more progressive mode of social organization based on the principle of mutual aid, and those who seek to expand their own wealth and power by destroying the reciprocal system of mutual aid. The real tragedy of history takes place within this three-directional struggle between these two types of rebels and the defenders of the status quo.¹⁴

Ōsugi is referring to the bourgeoisie when he speaks of “those who seek to expand their own wealth and power,” and was thus arguing against contemporary notions of democracy. Ōsugi counterpoised his ideology of mutual aid against “the survival of the fittest” ideology, which was fashioned on the basis of Darwin’s theory of evolution and was used to bolster the prevailing capitalist social organization which, for Ōsugi, was the “reality of conquest.” He saw the ideology of mutual aid as the “common tradition of the oppressed class”¹⁵ and as a contrast to the democracy of the time, which sought to sweep away class conflict through the unification of a bourgeois nation. Ōsugi hoped that syndicalism was the movement which could give concrete shape to this ideology of mutual aid: it sought to bring an end to the dominance of “self-conservation” by advocating a new social organization in which “self-transcendancy” would become primary.

Free Federal Society

Syndicalism is an economic system, as well as an ideology and a movement, which aims to replace capitalism. Labor unions are seen not just as organizations to improve working conditions under capitalism, but also as organs of struggle to revolutionize society, and after the success of the revolution they would play the main role in running society. Syndicalism urges labor unions to carry out sabotage, boycotts, and strikes to this end, working toward a general strike that can bring about a social revolution to fully emancipate the working class.

For syndicalism, a social revolution is not the result of fatal evolution.

¹⁴ “Traditionalism within Human History” in Ōsugi (2014c), pp.133-4.

¹⁵ “The Fallacy of the Ideology of the National State” in Ōsugi (2014c), p.252.

“When the workers are able to administer their own society”¹⁶ by the self-emancipation obtained by persistent efforts of intellectual, inner completion, that is, as his instinct differentiates into something transcendental, a social revolution is achieved.

Historically, the ideology of syndicalism grew out of the tradition of industrial unionism in France and the ideas of Proudhon. As a movement, syndicalism developed in response to the challenges facing French labor unions around the turn of the twentieth century. When Ōsugi made use of this tradition, however, he understood syndicalism in terms of an evolutionary theory, and applied the perspective of his theory of social individualism to envisage a free federal society. But Kropotkin also took a similarly evolutionary view: “[T]his society will not be crystallized into certain unchangeable forms, but will continually modify its aspect, because it will be a living, evolving organism.”¹⁷

Therefore, in order to grasp the distinguishing features of Ōsugi’s interpretation syndicalism, we need to understand its relation to the principle of rebellion embedded within his concept of the “expansion of life”: the rebelling workers, following their self-esteem, engage in mutual aid to that end, and thus build up a syndicalist structure of free associations. As already mentioned, Ōsugi’s understood the power of workers in terms of the expansion of life: for him, a society in which this expansion of life was realized would constitute “justice,” which is synonymous with the free federal society.

The political ideal for me ... is for every individual to reach a consensus with each other that does not create a mutual burden, and for each group comprising these individuals also to arrive at a consensus that is not burdensome; this is the completely autonomous association of individuals and of groups. This ideal is not something lofty that can never be achieved, but rather something that we can already see happening on a daily basis in the relations between individuals and between groups; moreover, this is something that is seen as the true way to live. What remains to be done is simply for us to *enhance and expand* that reality already existing in our daily lives, and for that reality to govern other types of social activity and ultimately the political

¹⁶ “The Creation of Life” in Ōsugi (2014a), p.162.

¹⁷ Kropotkin (1971), p.399.

sphere as well.¹⁸ (Emphasis by current author.)

Thus, Ōsugi's political ideal is the free federal system, in which compulsion plays no role: the object of his respect was not "law," which requires state power to back it up, but rather "justice," which would be supported by social solidarity.

In place of the stable order of a hierarchy, where the boundaries are clearly set, Ōsugi's political ideal envisages an anarchic arrangement of places: law is transcended by the creation of gaps in the social order. The conditions necessary to make this ideal possible were manifested in the reality of mutual aid found "happening on a daily basis in the relations between individuals and between groups." Ōsugi wanted to drive out politics from all realms of society, and to rely instead upon the free associations between economic groups, *i.e.* labor unions. The free federal system thus represents the triumph of economics over politics, in which politics is dissolved within economic organizations. There are clear connections here with Proudhon's ideology of reciprocity, where possession¹⁹ is established through the organization of economic forces according to the principles of reciprocity and contract,²⁰ and the political system (the system of laws) is dissolved within the economic system (the system of contracts).²¹ Ōsugi interpreted these ideas in terms of "social individualism," which is based on his concept of the expansion of life, and

¹⁸ "Individualists and the Political Movement" in Ōsugi (2014b), p.117.

¹⁹ The term "possession" used here is distinct from the concept of "property." According to Proudhon, the former was justified as the usufructuary right stemming from one's own labor, and was indispensable to the flowering of the individual; whereas the latter was an absolute right to "use and misuse" the thing possessed without any social consideration, and it is this kind of right that is employed when a person takes possession of rent for farmland or buildings, annuities, interest, capital gains, profit, and the like. Proudhon described this distinction as follows: "Individual possession is the condition of social life; five thousand years of property demonstrate it. *Property* is the suicide of society. Possession is a right; property is against right. Suppress property while maintaining possession, and, by this simple modification of the principle, you will revolutionize law, government, economy, and institutions; you will drive evil from the face of the earth." See Proudhon (1872), p.287.

²⁰ According to Proudhon, "reciprocity" is a situation where the persons engaged in exchange guarantee the price of the products, and the contract is the legal form that this reciprocity takes when put into practice. A contract is thus an "act whereby two or several individuals agree to organize themselves for a definite purpose and time, that individual power which we have called exchange." See Proudhon (1969), p.113.

²¹ *Ibid.*

he applied this term to his own anarchism.

For Ōsugi, then, the labor movement was working toward the expansion of life. He described the labor movement as being, “in its spirit, a movement for workers to come into full possession of all their capability and personality.”²² By “personality” here, he means “will and power,”²³ through which the workers come to differentiate “the relationship between instinct and instinct” into self-esteem. Thus, the labor movement encourages workers to improve and enrich their own lives, and this is made possible by the solidarity between them, as manifested in their labor unions.

Ōsugi did not see revolution as occurring in the future when workers would seize political power, but rather as something to be vigorously actualized at every moment as part of the ongoing evolution of the movement: “The ideal of a movement is not something that discovers itself in its “ultimate purpose.” Ideals usually accompany the movement and advance with it. Ideals are not things that precede the movement. They are in the movement itself. They cut their pattern in the movement itself.”²⁴ Thus, when the workers “are able to administer their own society, then for the first time will come the social revolution” (Ōsugi 1914a: 4).²⁵ There, self-righteousness of Lenin who said “the truth is already in my hands,” and inculcated the sense of purpose of the party in the workers is not seen. The forecast to the future of a labor movement, furthermore to the future of human society, is refused, and he is not arrogantly the only arbiter of history. Ōsugi saw the idea of worker’s self-government as being “completely different from the democratic thought and system generated by bourgeois society, rather than being a copy of it. The ideas of the workers are developed within themselves and through their own organizations and effort, as a completely different ideology and system.”²⁶ For Ōsugi, the ideas of the workers represented a living philosophy which arose within the maelstrom of their actual struggle to live and was informed by their self-esteem; he expected the energy of this “expansion of life” to bring about the social revolution: “Thus a new society, a new nation will spontaneously

22 “To the Intelligentsia” in Ōsugi (2014d), p.69.

23 “The Realism of Idealism for the Workers’ Movement” in Ōsugi (2015b), p.209.

24 “The Creation of Life” in Ōsugi (2014a), p.163.

25 “The Creation of Life” in Ōsugi (2014a), p.162.

26 *Ibid.*, p.163.

grow up. Remodeling of society and nation will be performed spontaneously.”²⁷

According to Ōsugi, society was a “provider” which could support the liberation of individuals, whereas the state was a “robber” which impeded this emancipation. And Ōsugi thought that with the breakdown of the old society, the new society would be born as a free federal society.

Having high self-esteem, that is to say, the “expansion of life” is powerful (to the point where self-transcendancy comes to be the primary instinct), then workers will demand more freedom, which is to say, they will rebel against the existing framework, and need mutual aid to actualize freedom. Then mutual aid breeds freedom and makes it fact. The “expansion of life” evolves in this way. This “expansion of life” is the principle of a “life” that is a structure that has a central core. Ōsugi would make this “fundamental nature of life” the starting point of a new society. This new society is the free federal society as a diversified society in which life is expanded.

The more they try to differentiate themselves, namely to become generous, strong, and great, the more they try to be in solidarity with others in order to realize their differentiation. The method of solidarity is free association which makes it possible to become increasingly diverse, leaving diverse things diversified. Freedom is a diversity, to put it more precisely, expansion, and society is free association organizing diversities as diversified ones. Thus Freedom and society are combined, so that freedom is equivalent to association. Therefore, while the “expansion of life” is the polymerization of freedom and society which makes this relation the central core, it is the principle which combines both.

Conclusion

I want to conclude this paper with a look at the impact Ōsugi’s ideas have actually had on contemporary society. For example:

The thing that left the deepest impression on me was the concluding chapter where Hiyazaki wrote: “Freedom only first becomes something real in relation to other people. No one can become free by cutting off relations with others. It is through our connection to others that we can gain freedom.” I was

²⁷ “Thorough Social Policies” in Ōsugi (2014c), p.284.

impressed by this concept of freedom. It concerns an issue that I have thought about as a young person today. What struck me in reading that part was that freedom — which I had pictured as something achieved by ridding yourself of all impediments — is in fact something that is essentially built up through actively piling up various things.

This comment is from an essay written by a student at Meiji University in response to an article I wrote on Ōsugi.²⁸ As the student remarks, in today's society the image that many people have of freedom is that it is ultimately a state of living for oneself without relying on anyone else. Those who find their daily interactions with individuals and groups irksome are inclined to view freedom as liberation from the shackles of such contacts. In fact, however, no single individual is capable of doing whatever he or she wishes as an individual: in practice this reality is disguised by the ability to use money in place of human relations.

Theoretically speaking, this modern notion of freedom is basically equivalent to the doctrine of liberalism: the fundamental concept for liberals is that only outside of society can the individual be absolutely free. But this is based on the idea that society inhibits freedom because the freedom of other people impedes one's own freedom, and are society and freedom really in opposition to each other? My student was surprised to encounter the notion that a society founded upon the spirit of mutual aid, rather than upon hierarchical domination, could allow true freedom. Bakunin (1816-1876) commented on this point:

Human beings can only realize their own individual freedom and personalities by being supplemented by the efforts of those who surround them and thanks to the labor and the collective power of society According to materialism, which is the only logical and natural system of thought, society is not something that reduces or limits the freedom of individuals, but rather is what creates that freedom. If society is the root and trunk of society, freedom is its fruit. Therefore, in whatever age, human beings must search for freedom at the end of history, not at its beginning, and the true emancipation of every individual is truly the great aim of history and its final goal.²⁹

²⁸ Hiyazaki (2013), p.348.

²⁹ Bakunin (1967), p.247.

As Bakunin emphasizes here, freedom emerges out of society as the inevitable outcome of humanity's collective development. "Far from the freedom of others being a restriction or negation of my own freedom, it is in fact the necessary condition for and the evidence of my freedom."³⁰ In other words, freedom and society are not, in fact, antagonistic: "it is only through society, and through the rigorous relations of solidarity and equality that bind each individual to everyone else, that this can first be realized."³¹

Although from the viewpoint of liberalism, individuals are seen as autonomous, rather than interconnected, in practice, individuals maintain social connections with each other because of their material desires, "therefore, each individual comes to only consider the perspective of the individual and material effectiveness of social solidarity; and each person seeks to contribute to and provide social solidarity in order to obtain the power — not the right — of securing these benefits to themselves, leading them to feel obliged to make their contribution."³²

Ōsugi was seeking a way to revive human personality in a capitalist society that had already developed into such an inhuman system, and for the student quoted earlier, as for the whole younger generation, this has become an urgent issue. How is it that there are young people these days who are full of anxiety and living like recluses from society even though, materially speaking, their lives are not confined by hardship? This was a question posed to me in 2006 by a young audience member at a lecture I gave on Ōsugi in the city of Shibata in Niigata Prefecture, where Ōsugi once lived. It highlights the oppression young people feel despite seeming to be "free" in material terms. This kind of discontent is different in nature from "modern unhappiness," understood as resulting from war, poverty, and hunger: what might be called "contemporary unhappiness" is characterized by low self-esteem.

Ōsugi was quick to perceive this difference between modern and contemporary unhappiness, which was already embryonic in the mass society emerging in the early twentieth century. This difference was correlated with the process by which the old forms of community were beginning to break down as capitalism developed: commodifying and

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.251.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.251.

³² *Ibid.*, p.273.

fragmenting individuals into the roles of worker or consumer, treating human beings in quantitative terms as replaceable “average persons.” Thus, the concept of “contemporary unhappiness” is a characteristic phenomenon of mass society, so it is hardly surprising that Ōsugi was confronted with this phenomenon during the Taishō era (1912-1926), when Japan’s urban working class was rapidly expanding.

Ōsugi solved this problem by linking freedom with mutual aid, securing one’s personality. Living in a communal place where one can recognize one’s precious self, it is possible to cultivate their self-esteem, and cooperate with others. Ōsugi spoke positively of the freedom by which they could realize themselves and guarantee relations with others at the same time. They ceaselessly connect themselves to others, to nature, and oneself in a voluntary realization of the ego (also referred to as the “expansion of life”). He thought it was mutual aid which formed such spontaneity. Ōsugi explained this principle as the “expansion of life,” therefore the communion he spoke of was the totality of the difference (“discord”), and was never the totality of identity (“harmony”).

Today, our sense of community has worn thin, and we confront the limits of a conception of society which considers individuals as independent entities, only interacting through contract relations. In this desperate situation, where the inseparable relationship between freedom and mutual aid has been forgotten, there are valuable lessons to be learned from the anarchism of Ōsugi Sakae, who sought the essential connection between freedom and society and clearly pointed us in that direction through his concept of the “expansion of life.”

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