

# The Ludic Path to Utopia

Ron Sakolsky

2000

a review of

*Utopian Prospects, Communal Projects: Visionary Experiments in Literature and Everyday Life*, Andy Sunfrog Smith, self-published, 2000, 65 pages, \$12. Available from the author, post paid, at 1467 Pumpkin Hollow Rd. Liberty, TN 37095

As the late Middle Western novelist, Meridel Le Sueur, once advised her younger anarchist biographer Neala Schleuning in relation to a question about her philosophy, "That's the problem with you intellectuals. You constantly want to analyze. Life's not like that. I'm not like that. Writing isn't like that. Not real writing. You have to be in a wholly different place. Get rid of those dead, lifeless forms! How do they teach you to write? Beginning, middle, end? That's not life. And that's not writing." As the illusions of objective scholarly research fell away at Merida's prodding, Schleuning's approach was liberated from the weight of academic posturing, and the insightful nature of her understanding of the subject of her thesis was heightened accordingly.

## Anarchist Communalism

Taking a similar tack in his recent book project, *Utopian Prospects, Communal Projects*, Andy Sunfrog Smith consciously does not seek scholarly distance from communal life. As he puts it, "While scholars who do not participate in the 'lifestyle' of radical activism and anarchist communalism write about utopias with a critical distance I cannot share, my ability to convincingly synthesize theory, literature, and everyday life is increased by my intimacy and my unique perspective on the material." He is a proud member of the Pumpkin Hollow community, and his own subjectivity and personal growth there are very much present in varying degrees in each and every page of his book on communalism. In approaching the book in this way, he evidences a deep awareness that utopia, like life, is a process not a thing, and that the personal cannot be artificially divorced from the political.

For several years now, Sunfrog has been both a participant in this communal endeavor in rural Tennessee and a Master's student in English at Middle Tennessee State University. This book grew out of his final thesis. Yet he states that it is not a final product, but a work in progress. During the course of writing it, he immersed himself in both his immediate communal surroundings and in reading utopian novels set elsewhere. This deliberate combination gave him an opportunity to ponder his own utopian vision in the context of active communal participation rather than the dryly detached participant observation of the visiting anthropologist. Such an engaged scholarship is precisely what makes his book so exciting.

## Politics of Desire

Moreover, the novels he read during the course of his research inform his own very real personal journey in utopia as an anarchist political activist. While Andy is thankfully not an academic utopian, his work will be of

interest not only to anarchists and communards, but to those scholars of utopia whose radicalism is not limited to attending the annual meeting of the Society for Utopian Studies. Beyond those categories, Andy's book is for everyone who knows that writing on utopia must be sensual and adventurous rather than coldly objective or it betrays utopia's own origins in the politics of desire.

The novels which he chooses to write about feature "ambiguous and critical utopias" rather than the smiley-faced cardboard cut-out facades of a stage set for utopia that are all too simplistic in their conceptual blueprinting. Such a choice on his part adds to our understanding of the complexity of the utopian project. For example, the fact that Starhawk's *The Fifth Sacred Thing* has distinctly dystopian elements which must constantly be overcome provides the kind of dramatic tension that a contemporary utopian novel demands. Yet, in spite of the underground popularity of her novel, and hence its widespread impact on not only how we see utopia but on how we see ourselves as utopians involved in political activism, Starhawk's book continues to be largely ignored by the academy.

While Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* is dissected over and over again by contemporary academics, and homage paid to its turn of the century (1888) popularity, *The Fifth Sacred Thing*, likewise a turn of the century (1993) cult classic, has been sadly neglected. Recent developments, however, urge us to reexamine the ripple effect which the book's ideas have had on society at large as we enter the new century. As many astute pundits have pointed out, Seattle's Festival of Resistance to the W.T.O. in 1999 marked a turning point in radical activism and a resurgence of American anarchism. Following this train of thought, even the official date for the beginning of the twenty-first century has been posited not as January 1, 2000, but as N30.

Arguably, the Direct Action Network was likely influenced to some degree by *The Fifth Sacred Thing* in their spirited oppositional stance, and their choice of nonviolent direct action tactics that mirror those from the book. Even ongoing activist controversies over strategic violence and property destruction appear as part of the novel's plot as they did in the streets of Seattle.

Furthermore, Starhawk, herself an anarchist, was a participant in both the Battle of Seattle and the subsequent A16 action against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in D.C., and has written about that experience in the anarchist press. Yet no one so far seems to have publicly connected the ideas in her book to these events. Whether or not the book was a harbinger for the Seattle events to come, it certainly offers food for thought to those who take the potential transformative power of the utopian vision seriously.

Building on the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin and Hakim Bey, Sunfrog understands the Festival as a temporary manifestation of utopia. In a pointed response to Rosabeth Moss Kanter's dreary exercise in academic miserabilism (as evidenced in her standard text in communal living, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*), Sunfrog urges us to instead choose the ludic path to utopia. The book itself is a jubilant welcome to his passionate erotic quest. While not neglecting the imaginative radiance of the mind, to its credit, *Utopian Prospects*, Communal Projects refuses the academic straight jacket. Instead it embraces the spontaneous conviviality of Carnival as an inspirational model for both creating electrifying oppositional actions and the building of vibrant alternative communities.

Fools Paradise

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Ron Sakolsky first met Sunfrog in the magical environs of Dreamtime Village in unglaciated rural Wisconsin. He is the co-editor of three books: *Gone To Croatan: Origins of Drop-Out Culture in North America* (with James Koehnline), *Sounding Off!: Music As Subversion/Resistance/Revolution* (with Fred Ho), and *Seizing The Airwaves: A Free Radio Handbook* (with Stephen Dunifer). His latest publication is a hundred-page introduction to Vachel Lindsay's 1920 utopian visionary novel, *The Golden Book of Springfield* (reissued by Charles Kerr Publishers). He is working on an anthology of writings by U.S. surrealists to be published in Winter 2000 by Autonomedia.

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