

Planting the Seeds of Anarchy

Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

Benjamin Carson

In America, the last vestiges of the liberal social contract and public safety net have been virtually erased. Under George W. Bush, the gap between the rich and poor increases at an alarming rate while privatization pushes forward. While Social Security is being slowly eviscerated and replaced by Individual Retirement Accounts, wealthy people can survive growing old while leaving those who cannot to fend for themselves. At the same time, the “richest 1% of Americans,” who, according to Peter Singer, “hold more than 38 percent of the nation’s wealth,” are forming what David Harvey calls “ghettoes of affluence (their ‘bourgeois utopias’),” which undermine “concepts of citizenship, social belonging, and mutual support,” while the poor, who are being “pushed off welfare into a stagnant labor market,” are left to make their way in what, for so many, looks like a post-apocalyptic landscape.

However, the so-called liberal response to privatization expands state-provided welfare, arguing that state interventionism is a “progressive” way to promote social cohesion and rein in the most virulent inequities of capitalism. Importantly and prophetically, Octavia Butler’s speculative novel *Parable of the Sower* offers an alternative vision of society—an anarchy—that does not rely on the State or the market.

Against the drive toward “exclusionary communitarianism, narrow vested interests [...], corporate profit hunger, financial myopia, and developer greed” that David Harvey, in *Spaces of Hope*, argues is so prevalent in contemporary America, anarchists imagine communal spaces where “narrow vested interests” give way to mutual support, mutual aid, and mutual defense. By affirming collective solidarity, Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* provides a rudimentary model for communal spaces that replace “bourgeois utopias” premised on privatization. At the same time, *Parable* refuses State interventionism as a viable alternative, and by doing so, shares the anarchist suspicion that state-provided welfare is, in the words of eco-anarchist Steve Millett, “another tool in the hands of the powerful, a tool which, while perhaps successful as a means of social control, contributes less to issues of equity and justice than many people imagine.”

When Lauren Olamina, the young African American heroine of the novel, and her comrades begin to build Acorn, they know they cannot depend on an interventionist God or State, or leave things to the invisible hand of the market. Acorn is to become a self-governed community founded on the anarchist principles of mutual aid, recognizing, as Kropotkin did, that “the mutual-aid principle is the necessary foundation of every-day life.”

Parable of the Sower presents a post-apocalyptic world where social Darwinism is the order of the day. Life outside walled communities like Robledo means the struggle of each against all. As Olamina says, people “divide. They struggle, / One against one, / Group against group.” States, for example, are “shutting themselves off from one another, treating state lines as national borders.”

Water wars

In *Parable*, limited resources have resulted in the privatization of water and all formerly public services, including the police and fire departments. Water is delivered by water-peddlers, but because it “now costs several times

as much as gasoline,” the peddlers are often brutally murdered for their precious cargo. Violence due to water shortages, though, is hardly the stuff of fiction. Given the fact that a third of all countries lack an adequate water supply, access to clean water is one of the most pressing concerns the world is currently facing. In *Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit*, Vandana Shiva argues that water wars in the Twenty-First century are going to surpass the oil wars of the Twentieth century; and as Diane Raines Ward makes painfully clear, in *Water Wars: Drought, Flood, Folly, and the Politics of Thirst*, the violence has already begun.

Ward writes, “not long ago, eight people [in Yemen] died in a feud over a water well [...] In 1991, in Karnataka [India], eighteen people were killed and another thirty thousand displaced in riots protesting the government’s releases of Cauvery River water.” Water shortages have also led to violence in Bangladesh, India, Congo, Spain, Wales, Slovakia, Hungary, Namibia, Botswana, Canada, and the United States.

Farmers in western New York state, according to Ward, “broke into public pipelines to get water for their crops”; and in Callicoon, New York, “residents organized a broad political assault on a neighbor who wished to sell the water that bubbles up out of the shared aquifer underneath their land to the Great Bear Bottled Water Company. Neighbors accused the man of drying up the watershed, driving out the black bears and raccoons, and wiping out their trout streams.” Ward tells us that Georgia has threatened to call out the National Guard during a feud with Florida and Alabama over the Chattahoochee, and Kansas has sued Nebraska over access to the Republican River.

While writing *Parable*, Butler considered the consequences of a lack of water, including “spreading hunger as a reason for increased vulnerability to disease. And there would be less money for inoculations or treatment for disease,” like malaria and dengue. In *Parable* Butler writes, “squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general [...] carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on” immunizations or “water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores.” The veracity of Butler’s disturbing vision is confirmed by Diane Raines Ward, who writes, in India “there are two Delhis, however, New and Old, and the old city is worse, choked with people and vehicles and plagued by persistent outbreaks of typhoid, dengue, and malaria.”

B.G. Verghese, of the Centre for Policy Research, in India, says that “fifty percent of India’s morbidity is because of water. If we don’t have more water, cholera, gastrointestinal diseases, diarrhea, dysentery, malaria, skin diseases, eye diseases, and the epidemics we already have will all become more severe. There will be social and political incidents.” While water shortages in many places around the world are reaching the crisis stage, corporations like Great Bear Bottle Water Co., Coca Cola, and Pepsi are buying up (or stealing) land and draining aquifers to sell bottled water, especially to the United States, which, according to Wikipedia, is the largest market for bottled water, at 26 billion liters in 2004. Consumers around the world, in 2004, drank a total of 154.3 billion liters of bottled water. The privatization of water—and all other natural resources—is fueled, as one might expect, by the profit motive.

While *Parable of the Sower* clearly testifies to the social and political consequences of environmental degradation and unenlightened self-interest, it is also a vision of a community dedicated to mutual support and selflessness. At Acorn, not only is work shared, but also food and water. Privatization gives way to commensality.

In the kind of socio-economic environment Butler depicts in *Parable of the Sower*, “all anybody can do right now [is] Live. Hold out. Survive.” And survival isn’t easy. “Everything,” Lauren asserts, is “getting worse: the climate, the economy, crime, drugs.” Murder and theft are common occurrences. The streets are littered with dead bodies, some of which are headless. Children, raped and bloodied, roam the streets alone or in packs like feral dogs. Lauren, at one point, sees a “naked little boy whose skin was a mass of big red sores; a man with a huge scab over the stump where his right hand used to be; a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old with blood running down her bare thighs. A woman with a swollen, bloody, beaten face.”

Cautionary Tale, Crushing Assessment

Butler’s cautionary tale offers a crushing assessment of class and race war in America. In the thirteen years since *Parable* was first published, her dire speculations have collided with eerily similar scenarios of hope and despair in the streets of post-Katrina New Orleans.

In a passage that could have appeared in almost any newspaper in America on August 30, 2005, Butler writes: “There’s a big, early-season storm blowing itself out in the Gulf of Mexico. It’s bounced around the Gulf, killing

people from Florida to Texas and down into Mexico. There are over 700 known dead so far. One hurricane. And how many people has it hurt? How many are going to starve later because of destroyed crops? That's nature. Is it God? Most of the dead are the street poor who have nowhere to go and who don't hear the warnings until it's too late for their feet to take them to safety." This passage prophetically anticipated by twelve years the reality of the events that transpired in the fall of 2005, events which have been beautifully and terrifyingly chronicled in *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, Michael Eric Dyson's stunning analysis of New Orleans after Katrina.

When writing *Parable*, Butler says she "looked at the growing rich/poor gap, at throwaway labor, at our willingness to build and fill prisons, our reluctance to build and repair schools and libraries, and at our assault on the environment." What Butler saw could not have been heartening. The number of U.S. citizens in prison is now more than two million; 840,000 are black men. In 1993, the Department of Education issued a report on adult literacy in the United States and, according to Benjamin Barber, found that "ninety million adult Americans lacked simple literacy. Fewer than twenty percent of those surveyed could compare two metaphors in a poem." But before we look to the State to "fix" education, we would do well to remember that education—especially higher education—is part of the ideological apparatus of the modern capitalist state; it exists to reproduce society's official ideology. Lauren Olamina, though, as we will see, envisions a libertarian educational environment that is free from the authority of the State.

In terms of the environment, the Bush administration has nothing but disdain for any thing or any one who stands in the way of "progress," which means, of course, developers' greed.

As Peter Singer writes, Bush "has proposed a rule removing federal controls over up to 20 percent of the country's wetlands, which means that many more developers will no longer require a federal permit before filling these wetlands in." More disturbingly, when writing *Parable*, Butler "imagined the United States becoming, slowly, through the combined effects of lack of foresight and short-term unenlightened self-interest, a third world country." But imagining such a scenario is hardly the product of paranoia. As Edward Luttwak argues in *The Endangered American Dream*, the children in America's "inner cities," where "lives are nasty, brutish, and short ... would be better off if they were born in Costa Rica."

Americans, Singer adds, "have the lowest life expectancy at birth of any major industrialized nation, being expected to have lives that are nearly three years shorter than those of Swedes, two years shorter than Canadians, and shorter, too, than those of the Japanese, Germans, French, British, Dutch, and Italians. Matched against the European table, American life expectancy would fall somewhere between that of Greece and Portugal." With Emma Goldman, we might ask: "Poor America, of what avail is all her wealth, if the individuals comprising the nation are wretchedly poor?"

Butler, Bush, and Mars

While Butler's response to America's descent into poverty and the evisceration of the environment includes anarchist mutual aid, another part of it is deeply troubling. Lauren insists that the "Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars." While Lauren (like Butler) recognizes that the world is falling apart, and that people have made a hell on earth, she admits that "fixing the world is not what Earthseed is about." "Space could be our future," she asserts.

In other words, since the planet is dying, we should simply abandon it for Mars. "Mars," she says, "is a rock-cold, empty, almost airless, dead. Yet it's heaven in a way." In a conversation with Octavia Butler, Butler scholar Elyce Rae Helford suggested humanity should be kept glued to this planet so we don't foul up the universe. But Butler insisted the only way humans will evolve is to leave Earth behind. It is worth noting that President George W Bush has enthusiastically endorsed a billion dollar plan to establish a base on the moon by 2020 so that we can eventually make a run for Mars.

But if Lauren and Butler want to build a heaven among the stars, George W. Bush wants to create another hell. When he is through militarizing Earth, he wants to militarize space, as well. As Jim Wolf of Reuters writes, in "U.S. Eyes Space as Possible Battleground," "President Bush's plan to expand the exploration of space parallels

U.S. efforts to control the heavens for military, economic and strategic gain.” And who will gain? Lockheed Martin Corp., Boeing Co. and Northrop Grumman Corp., which, Wolf reminds us, all do “big business with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration as well as with the Pentagon.” Lauren Olamina’s father sanely and forcefully opposes the space program, arguing, “you don’t have any idea what a criminal waste of time and money that so-called space program is.”

Lauren Olamina’s desire to eventually leave Earth behind has the unfortunate effect of making Acorn a way station on the way to something better. Acorn succeeds as a temporary autonomous zone, but the problem comes with Lauren’s final vision of humans abandoning Earth, leaving it to rot and ruin. Lauren does say that Earthseed is about unifying people, and creating a “purposeful life here on Earth, and the hope of heaven for themselves and their children. A real heaven, not mythology or philosophy.” To be sure, Lauren’s heaven is not the heaven George W. Bush imagines—where St. Peter salutes him at the gate and a band of teary-eyed angels plays, triumphantly, “Stars and Stripes Forever.” But, like George W. Bush, Lauren and Butler finally have little use for Earth. (It is worth mentioning, too, that Lauren, in Parable of the Talents, comes to share George W. Bush’s messianism; and it is her hubris which leads to the implied failure of Earthseed.) Earth—for Lauren and George W—is a place to be endured. But Earthseed’s goal should be building mutual aid communities on Earth, while preserving, conserving, and nurturing the environment.

Back on earth, the move toward privatization will inevitably exclude the poor, who, due to their poverty, simply do not have the same opportunities as the affluent. A community based on collective solidarity would ensure that the needs of all of its citizens were met, and that each had the opportunity to, as Howard Zinn puts it, “develop their aesthetic and personal interests as they like.” No one would go without, because, for anarchists, a world of “Haves and Have Nots” is an unjust one. Anarchists, with Martin Luther King, recognize interconnectedness and understand that all sentient beings are “tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

Learned Mutuality

But in the age of a superficial selfishness that passes as enlightened self-interest, too many Americans need to be reminded or even taught that we are indeed “caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” As Ron Sakolsky makes clear, in *Creating Anarchy*, “mutuality” can be taught, not only by exposure to the seminal works of classical anarchists like Petr Kropotkin, Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and Michael Bakunin, but experientially.

In “Teaching Anarchy,” the first essay in *Creating Anarchy* (Fifth Estate Books, 2005, available from the Barn), Sakolsky briefly recounts the story of a “freak accident that resulted in [his] van being totaled”:

“On my drive home, I started to smell smoke. I pulled over toward the side of the road and saw that the engine was in flames. Not having a fire extinguisher at hand, I started to throw dirt on it to no avail. As I looked up in exasperation, I saw a woman running toward me with a fire extinguisher in hand. Another car stopped with an extinguisher, then another. Still the fire raged. A guy pulled up, jumped out of his car and started directing traffic around my van. Another called the fire department. A third helped me grab my sleeping bag, tent, camping equipment and tools out of the vehicle. A fourth offered to stick around long enough to give me a ride home. By the time the cops finally got wind of it and arrived, everything that could have been done to bring order to this chaotic situation had already been done. The arriving volunteer fire department trucks put out the blaze, and I caught a ride home with a total stranger.”

Sakolsky rightfully suggests that this anecdote “offers us a lesson about human nature.” “Somehow,” he writes, “the people who offered their assistance to me saw their survival as connected to mine, and they were generous instead of predatory in their actions.” While “someone could have stopped, clubbed” Sakolsky “with their tire iron, stole all [his] possessions from the car, rifled [his] wallet, and left [him] for dead,” no one did. Instead, a group of cooperating citizens willingly came to his aid, and asked for nothing in return. Here, mutual aid triumphed over mutual struggle.

Throughout history, as Kropotkin among others has shown, mutual aid is a necessary part of everyday life for the poor and working class. A “lady-friend” of Kropotkin’s, who “worked several years in Whitechapel in connection with a workers’ club,” wrote to him, saying: “if, in the working class, they would not help each other, they could not exist. I know families which continually help each other—with money, with food, with fuel, for bringing up the little children, in cases of illness, in cases of death.” The “mothers of the poorer classes,” Kropotkin adds, “cannot stand the sight of a hungry child; they must feed it, and so they do.”

Without sympathy for others, and the willingness to act on it, these hungry children would die. Mutual cooperation among the disenfranchised ensures survival, and this is precisely what Lauren Olamina learns at a very young age. Having relinquished her belief in her father’s God—and with it, the belief in supernatural help—Lauren must depend not only on herself for survival, but on others.

In *Parable*, such interdependence necessitates transcending racial differences. While trekking north, Lauren, Harry, and Zahra come across a family. Travis is black; Natividad is Hispanic-looking; and the baby, Domingo, looks a little like both of them. After each group overcomes its suspicion of the other, they decide to travel together, seeing that they are natural allies—“the mixed couple and the mixed group.” Lauren knows that mixed couples “catch hell out here,” but recognizes, too, that there is strength in numbers, and that they will all be better off if they travel together. “We help each other,” Lauren says. “A group is strong.” Emery Tanaka Solis and her daughter Tori Solis, “the most racially mixed” couple Lauren has ever met, eventually join the group, as well. By this time, there are thirteen travelers in all, representing a wide variety of mixed ethnicities. Tori Solis’s grandfather, for example, was Japanese; her grandmother was black; her father, Mexican. When this group comes together, the multi-ethnic seed of what will become Acorn is being planted. Unlike many cities in contemporary America, the Acorn community will reject segregation of any kind.

Acorn, by contrast, will not only be classless, but will be, in Paul Gilroy’s words, “undivided by the petty differences we retain and inflate by calling them racial.” Because Lauren Olamina suffers from hyper-empathy—a syndrome that causes her to share the pain of others—if she sees someone bleeding, she bleeds; if she sees someone hit, she feels the blow “as though [she’d] hit [her]self.”

This syndrome is particularly debilitating because the world she lives in is so violent. Butler uses Lauren’s hyper-empathy to communicate the need for individuals to recognize that they are part of a network of mutuality. While Lauren’s condition is congenital, Butler invites us to ask what the world might be like if we all learned to be empathic, that is, if we could literally feel each other’s pain.

“... if everyone could feel everyone else’s pain,” Lauren asks, “who would torture? Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?” Lauren admits that she has “never thought of [her] problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, [she] think[s] it would help.” She wishes she “could give it to people. Failing that, [she wishes] she could find other people who have” hyperempathy, “and live among them. A biological conscience,” she admits, “is better than no conscience at all.”

Because Lauren believes “no one should travel alone in this world,” she, along with her new friends and companions, sets out to build a community based on her philosophy. In this community, “people look out for each other and don’t have to take being pushed around.” Putting petty differences aside, they will defend their community together. Looking out for one another, Lauren and her group go in search of “arable land, a dependable water supply, and enough freedom from attack to let [them] establish [themselves] and grow.” Lauren, who has begun teaching Natividad to write, imagines building a community that can “provide education plus reading and writing services to adult illiterates [...] So many people,” she laments, “children and adults, are illiterate these days.” Here Lauren imagines a libertarian learning environment, an alternative to public, state-sponsored and therefore necessarily coercive—education.

Enclaves of Cooperation

Despite the difficult days and years ahead of her and her comrades, Lauren remains cautiously optimistic: “We might be able to do it—grow our own food, grow ourselves and our neighbors into something brand new.”

As Lauren imagines it, Earthseed recalls nineteenth century anarchist and utopian socialist communities like New Harmony, Brook Farm, and Oneida. Earthseed also resembles contemporary enclaves of cooperation—both those that are only implicitly political along with explicitly radical communes, collectives, bolos, and temporary autonomous zones. An old Oneida song might well be sung at Earthseed: “We have built us a dome / On our beautiful plantation, / And we all have one home, / And one family relation.”

When the group finds their “beautiful plantation,” the land Bankole owns “free and clear,” they christen it Acorn. “Nothing we find farther north will be any better or any safer than this,” Lauren asserts. “It will be hard to live here, but if we work together, and if we’re careful, it should be possible. We can build a community here.” Lauren’s community is a “space of hope.” Making the “possible” a reality necessitates hope. Hope, Ernst Bloch reminds us in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, is essential for building an alternative politics. “Possibility,” he writes, “has had a bad press”; and “there is a very clear interest that has prevented the world from being changed into the possible.” For Bloch, David Harvey reminds us, the “demise, denigration, and disparagement of all forms of utopian thought,” have “meant a loss of hope and without hope alternative politics becomes impossible.” What Lauren Olamina offers in *Parable of the Sower* is a vision of the possible, a vision of hope. Based on mutual aid and mutual support, intentional communities provide a space of hope in the ruinous landscape born of competitive capitalism. No one at Acorn will, in Alexander Berkman’s words, “stand for any one hogging all the good things of life”; but rather “all men will share in the social wealth” and “all will help to produce that wealth.” A community founded to balance the anarchist principles of individual freedom and mutual cooperation, Acorn provides an opportunity for its members to live together in a socially and economically viable space where cooperation is the rule, not the exception. Through Lauren and her comrades, Octavia Butler breaks through the cracks in the decaying concrete of capitalism to plant the seeds of anarchy.

Now, it’s our task to sow those seeds.

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