

Making the Impossible Community Possible

How do we create new eco-communitarian anarchist structures? What current models exist?

Jim Feast

2014

a review of

The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism by John P. Clark. Bloomsbury, 2013, 272 pp., \$30 paper; \$120 hardback; bloomsbury.com

John Clark's *The Impossible Community* is something of a mixed bag or should I say a treasure trove? Clark describes himself as an eco-communitarian anarchist theorist and activist. He lives and works in New Orleans where his family has been for twelve generations.

While the book's crisp arguments, artistry and clarity of presentation, and the passionate concentration on important issues of social transformation are found throughout, the contents are very diverse. That diversity turns on an ability, as rare as it is estimable, to move from the plane of theory to that of practice.

The first appears in his fencing with academics. The second in how, as an engaged participant, he looks at the reconstruction of New Orleans after Katrina, particularly in relation to anarchist-mutual aid efforts.

Some of the high points of the study, and there are many, include a trenchant critique of the late anarchist theorist Murray Bookchin's idea of libertarian municipalism and an examination of Gandhi's movement, both in India and as it now exists (in a further enriched form) in Sri Lanka.

Clark makes the point that American radicals lament how the fall of communism in the USSR and Eastern Europe led to an orgy of conservative self-congratulations as well as the disembowelment of those states by predatory capitalists, often allied with former party chieftains.

However, he urges turning our gaze away from only focusing on history's recent debacles in Europe and widened the scope to include positive notes which have been struck, for instance, by the Latin American Christian base communities in the 1970s and the Zapatistas today. He writes that these and similar activities "have all been developments of the Global South. American radicals might be in a less dispirited and directionless state were they willing to find inspiration in movements" that took place outside the narrow purview of the West.

Putting this insight into practice, Clark turns to a study of Gandhi's concept of Sarvodaya (the welfare of all) campaign, giving a description that brings out some of the overlooked anarchist elements of this movement. The Indian leader's emphasis on nonviolence is well known, but few have noted the major implication he drew from this.

Clark writes: "Gandhi emphasized the obvious...truth that if violence is a great evil, then there is no greater social evil than the centralized state." Hence, "the central focus of Gandhianism is on replacing a centralized nation-state with a decentralized society consisting of free, self-managed communities working together through voluntary cooperation."

The discussion of India also brings to the fore a second, all-embracing, underlying theme of Clark's study. He lucidly condenses this into one sentence—one so pregnant with possibilities I believe a book could be written on it.

Clark prefaces it by remarking that many radicals fail to connect theory and practice, so when they discuss visions of the future, they never get down to the actual mechanisms that might embed new eco-communitarian anarchist structures in the West's doddering but still lethal capitalism.

He writes: "An effective movement for social transformation must consist of a growing community whose members are in the process of creating for themselves a different institutional framework for their everyday lives, a different social ethos that emerges in the actual living of those lives, and a different social imaginary and...(counter-)ideology expressed in their ideas, ideals, aspirations, beliefs, desires, passions and fantasies."

In light of this, his discussion of Sarvodaya (and later of a similar movement now alive and well in Sri Lanka) lays out both the new institutions, such as village assemblies and ashrams (places for militants to live communally), created by the movement, and the processes of change they guided, which involved giving people new roles and helping them think of themselves and their community in new ways that sparked the growth of an anarchist imaginary.

Complementing such investigations of practical arrangements are Clark's searching investigations of current anarchist and rightist thought. As to the former, on the surface, a forty-page critique of Bookchin's libertarian municipalism might not seem the most engaging read, especially given the lumps the sage of Burlington has already received, for example in David Watson's *Beyond Bookchin: Preface for a Future Social Ecology* (Black & Red; Autonomedia, 1996).

However, Clark is not satisfied with pointing out Bookchin's inconsistencies and other shortfalls, but goes on to rewrite Bookchin's theory in a way that follows its general outlines while giving it a more concrete expression. First, after noting Bookchin's rather naive reliance on municipal assemblies as the linchpins of his envisioned communitarian government, Clark points to some of the unaddressed problems with this concept.

For example, what happens if two neighborhood assemblies in one city can't get along? How do the upper level coordinating committees, formed with representatives from the assemblies, which are supposed to be nothing but conveyor belts transmitting their members' views, flexibly make decisions when they are so constricted in their function? Second, Clark looks at how assemblies have actually functioned in the past, glancing not only at classical examples, such as the Greek ecclesia, but more recent versions, including those in Bolivia, in the Occupy movement, and in post-Katrina New Orleans.

With insights gathered from practices on the ground, Clark is able to explain the more restricted, but still vital part such assemblies could play in a viable communitarian social structure. Thus, in this and other cases, where Bookchin has offered resonant but vague and flawed ideas, giving readers an all-purpose wrench with which he thinks any problem of social plumbing in the city of the future can be corrected, Clark gets down to tinkering with the nuts and bolts that will hold this city together.

There isn't space here to survey the full contents of this rich and thoughtful book, but, perhaps, since I've been posing metaphors, I can improve on my opening one when I characterized the book as a treasure trove. Given the author's ecological bent, it might be better to name it a vegetarian cornucopia, filled with plump fruits that offer much food for thought.

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