

The Geography of Possibility

Simon Springer on the Spaces of Liberation

John Clark

2017

a review of

The Anarchist Roots of Geography: Toward Spatial Emancipation by Simon Springer. University of Minnesota Press, 2016

Anyone who wants evidence that anarchist geography is alive and well today need only read this book. The author, Simon Springer, is one of the most active anarchist intellectuals today. In 2016, he authored two books and edited five, mostly on anarchist themes, and he has written numerous articles, some technical, but many deeply immersed in contemporary struggles.

His lively polemic, “Fuck Neoliberalism,” has over 50,000 hits on one website alone.

The book’s subtitle is a good indication of its purpose. It is committed to the project of liberation of humanity and nature, and to overcoming all forms of domination. With great passion and eloquence, Springer calls for a return to geography’s “radical roots” in anarchist concepts, in which it is a mode of social and political engagement. Through such a geography of autonomy and solidarity, we “configure a radical political imagination that is capable of demanding the impossible.”

Springer relates anarchism to contemporary themes such as biopolitics and rhizomatic theory, but also looks back to the classical anarchist thinkers, showing the enduring value of their critique of hierarchy and domination. He deserves particular recognition for carrying on the legacy of the great French 19th century anarchist social geographer and political philosopher Eliseé Reclus.

Springer is inspired by Reclus’ communitarian anarchist project of a universal geography—in effect, a geography of solidarity—which he compares to Buddhism and Daoism’s ideas of the interconnectedness of all things.

He also follows Reclus in linking the aesthetic and the ethical, proclaiming that “beautiful is something that we already are.” For Springer, utopia is not a distant ideal, but is already present here and now. He echoes Reclus’ belief that “small loving and intelligent societies,” are crucial to profound social transformation, prefiguring the anarchist idea of the affinity group as basic to a free society.

Springer argues that “an ethic of non-violence” is at the core of anarchism. He observes that opposition to the state is based on the rejection of organized violence as the major organizing force within society, and that consistent anarchism will have “an unwavering commitment to nonviolence and the absolute condemnation of war.” He thus carries on the tradition of anarcho-pacifists who have found inspiration in the lives and ideas of great figures such as Tolstoy, Thoreau, and Dorothy Day.

Springer also applies the critique of domination to the issue of colonialism. He points out that the project of the centralized state implied from the beginning a process of colonial expansion (conquest) from a center of power.

Springer writes that “to be ‘postcolonial’ in any meaningful sense requires that one be ‘poststatist or ‘anarchic,’ and look to non-statist traditions for inspiration. We must follow the “least alienated” and “most oppressed” peoples, learning from the traditional wisdom and contemporary revolutionary practice of indigenous movements

such as the Zapatistas, who have a deep historically- and experientially-based understanding of the destructiveness of capitalism and the centralized state.

Finally, Springer applies this critique to urbanism, which he sees as deeply infected with hierarchical ideology and bias toward centers of power and wealth as models of the urban. In an anarchist urbanism, “the values embedded in public space are those with which the demos endows it.”

Public space becomes the space of self-determination by the free community. Springer contrasts the “Disneyfied” space of neoliberal capitalism, “devoid of geographic specificity,” with such a non-dominated space of anarchic community.

Springer concludes with the hopeful thought that “places wild and free” still exist. In such places, new possibilities for realization of beauty, goodness, freedom, and creativity are always present, ready to emerge. We need “a politics of possibility,” based on living an awakened, engaged life in such places, so that we ourselves “become the horizon.”

Springer is optimistic about such a politics for two reasons. First, there is a long, rich history of realizing such creative possibilities, extending from tribal societies to the great revolutions and recent communal experiments. Second, such emergence of possibilities is inherent in the very structure of reality.

We live in a universe of freedom and creativity. We might even say that we are ourselves nature becoming free and self-creative.

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