

# How we can exit the era of ecological destruction & affirm life

Peter Linebaugh

2020

a review of

*Between Earth and Empire: From the Necrocene to the Beloved Community* by John P. Clark. PM Press 2019  
**pmpress.org**

John P. Clark is a major thinker, on a par with Wendell Berry, Thoreau, or Rebecca Solnit. He is an anarchist and an eco-socialist but label not required.

The book under review, *Between Earth and Empire*, expresses the hope and the fear. From the Necrocene to the Beloved Community is his subtitle. Necrocene is geological portending death as a result of statist, technocratic, patriarchal society. The beloved community is spiritual. The terms bestride the natural and the social.

Clark knows our epoch might also be named anthropocene, capitalocene, and eleutherocene. The beloved community as a phrase originating with Josiah Royce, the philosophical critic of individualism, but Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave it historical power.

In addition to a foreword, a preface, an introduction, a postscript, an appendix, and an index, the book contains nineteen chapters on the geographer Elisée Reclus, education, Paris Climate Summit, Hurricane Katrina, Chiapas, Rojava, West Papua, the Black Panthers, Occupation, the Solstice, Buddhism, the Spectacle, Castoriadis, the Situationists, Utopia, and a fantastic conclusion on New Orleans.

The book is dedicated "À LA TERRE." New Orleans is a French city, entirely to begin with, and later with franco-phone links to Haiti, the Caribbean, Africa. Given this dedication, no matter how high in the air he soars in flights of imagination, in spiritual strivings, or in theoretical work, we cannot say that it is not grounded.

Clark does not write much about property *per se*, nor for that matter does he write about race *per se*, nor capital or class *per se*. He writes about liberation, fulfillment of needs, mutuality, and the small community. His writing is very much in the solution, not the problem.

Still, Clark minds his theoretical p's and q's. In earlier times he would be called a saint and in times to come he will be called an angel in our movement. He is mindful and dialectical. As a teacher he relies on redundancy and subtlety.

He is an adept. His anarchism is the result of study. Bakunin, Kropotkin, Stirner, Lao Tzu, Godwin, Blake, Gustav Landauer, B. Traven, Nelson Algren, Marcuse, Le Guin. The Buddha, the Dharma, the Sangha (self, knowledge, and community, to put it crudely).

Otherwise his anarchism is the result of years, decades of practice. He will not be boxed in. He has a practice on the Bayou La Terre, and an experience of decades of teaching. He attended Friends Meetings; he worked with the Catholic Worker Movement. He lived in India. There is nothing at all rootless in this worldly anarchist philosopher, seeker, or sachem.

He may take us to China and Lao Tzu's "Way"

To give birth without taking possession

To act without obligation  
To lead without dominating

Or, he may cite Zen Buddhism and its Four Noble Truths. He may give line-by-line interpretation of the Black Panther Party's Ten Point Program. He has numerical mnemonics of his own in these four: the social institutions, the social imaginary, the social ideology, and the social ethos. He lingers with Rumi and Muhammad.

He acknowledges forbears like Gustav Landauer, slain in the Bavarian revolution of 1919. This is a spiritual analysis; it is a materialist dharma; it is both individual and collective. From prophetic wisdom of the axial age to sharp polemical dueling with his peers, Castoriadis, Debord, Bookchin, Clark is a skilled thinker.

As for Turtle Island, he looks to the East and salutes Joel Kovel, or he looks to the West and salutes Gary Snyder. These are spiritual men and practical, incisive social critics in love with the earth and their fellow creatures. As Clark points elsewhere, we look to where he stands—the delta. He is not just from New Orleans, he is of New Orleans, twelve generations back. After reading him we think of the city differently.

Those twelve generations form an historical frame of mind. The noted lepidopterist, Baron Ludwig von Reizenstein (1826–1885) wrote *The Secrets of New Orleans*, a story of mixed race, lesbian love, freedom struggle, black messiah, and total liberation. Lafcadio Hearne (1850–1904), the creole Irishman, who also recounted the crazy patchwork of spirits, ghosts, revenants. Joseph Déjacque (1821–1864) opposed domination in all its forms. Another revolutionary of New Orleans, a sailor, a paper hanger, and an exile from the Paris barricades of 1848, composed *L'Humanisphère* in 1858–9, as “an infernal work, a cry of a rebel slave.” The book begins with a geological question and hypothesis for our times, “Is the terrestrial globe a living being?”

I could not help reading more of Dejacque though Clark does not write about him here. “For me, “ Dejacque wrote, “humanity is humanity: I do not establish hierarchic distinctions between the sexes and races, between men and women, between blacks and whites.”

He anticipates class war, “From North to South to East to West the lightning of insurrection will thunder. Proletarian war and servile war will crack the States and the bones of the explorers of those states. The flesh of politicians and industrialists, patrons and masters, shopkeepers and planters will smoke under the bleeding feet of proletarians and of slaves.”

He anticipates civil war, “The monstrous American Union, the fossil Republic, will disappear in the cataclysm...Blacks and whites, creoles and redskins will fraternize and found a new and single race. The negrocides and proletaricides, the amphibians of liberalism and carnivores of privilege will swivel back like caymans and bears before the progress of social liberty.” He writes before the word “genocide” was coined in 1944. I am not sure it is an improvement over negrocide and proletaricide.

The wealth of Turtle Island disgorged here, through the tidal estuary of the American continent. The bloody wealth, that lily-white cotton, from the plantations all up river, come down the throat to be digested in the capitalist maw, shipped to Europe across waters now thickened with petroleum sludge.

The delta links continental cultural zones. Nelson Algren told a story of New Orleans called *A Walk on the Wild Side*. What made New Orleans wild? It has more in common with the Caribbean. In 1811, Charles Deslondes, then rumored to be Haitian, organized an uprising of 500 slaves to seize New Orleans. You could participate in the African dance and drums on Congo Square as early as 1817. Up and down that long river there's a working-class of permanence despite the plagues, the electric chair, the hurricanes, and the oil spills. That class harks back to the many-headed Hydra, skilled in the arts of getting by and making do. This past is near. Even the graves are famously shallow.

“We created a crack in history,” says his modern day comrade scoff crow of the Common Ground Collective, referring to the mutual aid, self-defense, and courage in response to that furious combination of wind, water, negligence, politics, racism, and urbanocide known as Hurricane Katrina. Clark will not claim Katrina to be “the dark night of the soul,” but as a teacher he will observe the benefits of trauma to spiritual (kenosis) and political awakening (mutual aid).

The man is a deadly serious and lively wordsmith. Often Clark presents his ideas by means of etymology, or the history of the word. At other times he finds the English language insufficient and will employ a term from French (*l'entraide*, *détournement*, *dérive*), or Latin (*felix culpa*), or Sanskrit (*anitya*, *samsara*), or Greek (*techne*, *poesis*,

oikos, psyche, eros, thanatos, arche, or anarche). He likes to make up words as well or combine old words into something newgeo-ontology, geopedagogy, splace (space + place), dialectical maternalism.

At first I thought it was a game, a game of words and meaning. He explains New Orleans, the Crescent City, arcs from two circles intersecting at two points. He is so skilled, persistent, that it becomes not quite comic, and a lightness of being lifts his prose like the music of the spheres. He is divvying out these words like the counters to a kind of board game which as you come to understand and begin to play, it dawns on you that you are now roped into something deep and real.

Death and destruction holds no fear. He philosophically riffs on interstice finding “interstitial” and “antistitial.” You might be playing tennis, or listening to cosmic vibrations. In the section titled “The Social Ontology of Yat,” he pulls our legs using the traditional New Orleans working-class dialect known as “Yat” and its famous greeting, “Where y’at?” In this last essay, his joy in his city, in its apocalypse, in its interstices and betweenness, dancing on the edge of the abyss. The abyss looks back at him and winks.

To watch him play with the word “crescent” is like beholding a great acrobat or tumbler, and this tragically in the midst of disaster. You are by turns quiet in concentration or jumping up dancing. You hardly know whether to fall reverently silent, shout in jubilation, or scream in righteous prophetic wrath. A master is showing us the way.

Peter Linebaugh writes about British, Irish, labor history, and of the colonial Atlantic. His latest book is *Red Round Globe Hot Burning* reviewed elsewhere in this section.

# fifth Estate

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