Living Our Lives

The Communal Basis of Social Transformation

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If anarchist politics, the politics of communal liberation, is to escape from its present historical impasse, it must become, above all, a practice of creating the free community, here and now.

The greatest transformative force is living life together in a community of liberation and solidarity in which the greatest possibilities for personal and communal flourishing are unleashed through mutual aid and free association. A recognition of the power of this collective force must guide our practice.

Certainly, there are other worthwhile forms of political engagement, and this is not a plea to abandon them. However, it is a claim that deeply transformative change is likely to occur only if it is undertaken at once through communal creativity at the most basic levels of social determination: the levels of social institutions, the social ideology, the social imaginary, and the social ethos. This can only be done effectively on the level of the primary community.

The great communitarian anarchist philosopher, Gustav Landauer, argued that for truly revolutionary transformation, it is necessary that we "provide examples of social reality" that can be "realized and lived." Such examples do not constitute the totality of social transformation. However, in their absence, "the hope for transformation of social relations and property rights remains futile."

Landauer believed that such an actually existing realm of freedom would arouse a kind of "positive envy" in the masses suffering under capitalism and the state. Their envy would no longer be directed toward the world of opulence and excess of the few. Rather, they would yearn for the life of abundance, conviviality, and joy that is realized in the free and just community. They would be transformed from masses into a true people, a community of communities.

Landauer was right: communal creation must be our highest priority. For this reason, it is important that we study the history of serious experiments in cooperative community. If we look carefully and critically at these examples of communal creation, we can gain inspiration from the achievements of ordinary people and learn from their successes and failures.

For this reason, I was quite intrigued to discover many years ago that one of the most significant of these communities once existed only a couple of hundred miles from where I live.

This community, New Llano, had its roots far away in Southern California, in the 1911 mayoral campaign in Los Angeles of socialist leader Job Harriman. Harriman, at one point the leading candidate, was defeated through a campaign of lies and distortions.

He and many of his allies became disillusioned with electoral politics and redirected their efforts into social transformation through communitarian creation.

By 1913, the group had bought nine-thousand acres north of Los Angeles and soon established the Llano del Rio Colony. It promised a minimum wage, eight-hour day, free health care, and other benefits that were extraordinary for the time.

Only three years later, it had over a thousand members, two thousand acres of farmland, workshops, warehouses, and a hotel. But because of problems with agricultural productivity, hostility of neighbors, and other difficulties, the members decided to find a more hospitable location.

It is perhaps surprising that this more welcoming destination turned out to be nearly two-thousand miles away in the forests of west central Louisiana. This very conservative area in the rural south might seem a strange choice, but in the early 20th century it was a center of populist, socialist, and Wobbly organizing. The main town in Vernon Parish, site of New Llano, had a socialist mayor, and neighboring Beauregard Parish had been the site of a major IWW strike.

So, several hundred community members loaded everything they had on a train and moved across the country to the new location to establish what they named New Llano. They rebuilt their community on 20,000 acres of timber land on the site of a small abandoned sawmill town.

After a very difficult initial struggle and loss of members, it began to thrive. Over the next two decades it became one of the most successful communal experiments in U.S. history.

At its height, New Llano had about six-hundred members, and many more spent time in the community over its history, with estimates as high as 10,000. Housing was of good quality and was provided with electricity and running water.

Members benefited from such communal amenities as free health care, childcare, elder care, education at all levels, laundry service and three prepared meals a day or food to cook individually. The community carried on a very active social life, which included frequent concerts, dances, magic shows, theater, lectures, and debates.

New Llano engaged in sixty different industries. Its impressive infrastructure included a general store, office building, train depot, lumber yard, sawmill, wood drying kiln, veneer plant, woodworking shop, canning factory, peanut butter factory, broom factory, shoe repair shop, ice house, print shop, sheet metal shop, electrical shop, machine shop, plumbing shop, blacksmith shop, gas station, laundry, restaurant, bakery, library, hotel, theater, school, funeral home, hospital, and nursing home.

The community also harvested timber and raised berries. Three branch communities were started, specializing in raising sugarcane in south Louisiana, fruit production in Texas, and ranching in New Mexico.

Women were full-time workers, had equal voting rights, and the right to hold all offices. They also benefited from the cooperative childcare, food preparation, and provision of other services. There was up to two years' maternity leave for new mothers. Education was influenced by the Montessori method, and stressed both practical and intellectual skills, independent thinking, arts, and music. Children went to school half a day and worked the other half.

New Llano was also the site of the first cooperative college in the country, established the first public library in the area, and gave courses in continuing adult education. It was also active in printing and publishing socialist and progressive literature.

New Llano did not, however, overcome all the evils of the old society. Women still carried out a disproportionate share of the non-collective housework, and despite formal equality, higher positions remained primarily in the hands of males. Another failing was that the community was afraid to accept African and Asian members, though it did have Jewish members. Some argue that racial integration would have resulted in the destruction of the community, though during the same period, the IWW had integrated unions in central Louisiana.

No doubt, New Llano would eventually have had to struggle against the cultural and political changes that undermined many similar communities. However, its downfall resulted from internal conflict. This points to a perennial weakness in nominally egalitarian and democratic organizations that still perpetuate hierarchy and charismatic authority.

George Pickett, successor to Harriman as leader of the community, was a gifted organizer, but had an authoritarian character-structure. His machinations created disruptive divisions within the community and eventually split it into two hostile camps. Increasing conflict, combined with economic problems brought on by the Depression, weakened the community and sent it into financial crisis.

In the end, the local elite was able to take advantage of this predicament, destroy the community legally, and seize its assets by 1939. Thus, a major lesson of New Llano is the fatal dangers inherent in charismatic leadership

and factionalism. The threat of personal power-seeking, present in all social groups, is particularly virulent in the intense atmosphere of a community that encompasses all aspects of its members' lives.

However, the history of New Llano should not be seen as primarily a cautionary tale. Former members of the community who were interviewed about their experiences spoke less about the conflicts than about the admirable qualities of their comrades, and the joyful, creative, and fulfilling way of life that prevailed.

The greatest lesson of the New Llano community is its demonstration of the impressive achievements possible for ordinary people with very limited means, working and living together in a cooperative community. Perhaps it can help us imagine what we are capable of creating.

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