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Grassroots social change: lessons from an anarchist organizer - (review of Chris Crass, Towards Collective Liberation)

Abstract

Many progressives around the world look at the United States and are repelled by its extremes of wealth and poverty, enormous military, massive prison population, excessive gun violence, inhumane welfare policies, reckless environmental destruction, and aggressive and self-interested foreign policy. US trade policies have contributed to impoverishment in many countries; US troops are stationed in dozens of countries around the globe.

The US is the embodiment of a dangerous - even rogue - state, anomalous when compared to European social democracies or even other English-speaking countries. The US is the only wealthy industrialized country never to have had a significant communist, socialist or labor party; there is little articulation of left-wing politics within the political system. Outsiders relying on mainstream news reports have an additional problem: there is hardly any coverage of grassroots activism.

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Grassroots social change: lessons from an anarchist organizer

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Chris Crass, *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013)

Reviewed by Brian Martin

Many progressives around the world look at the United States and are repelled by its extremes of wealth and poverty, enormous military, massive prison population, excessive gun violence, inhumane welfare policies, reckless environmental destruction, and aggressive and self-interested foreign policy. US trade policies have contributed to impoverishment in many countries; US troops are stationed in dozens of countries around the globe.

The US is the embodiment of a dangerous - even rogue - state, anomalous when compared to European social democracies or even other English-speaking countries. The US is the only wealthy industrialized country never to have had a significant communist, socialist or labor party; there is little articulation of left-wing politics within the political system. Outsiders relying on mainstream news reports have an additional problem: there is hardly any coverage of grassroots activism.

Those who have interacted with US activists know there is another side to the country. Within the dominant capitalist world power, there is a vibrant activist scene with an amazing depth of commitment and experience. Prior to the US-government-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, there were massive protests around the world. Yet few would be aware that in some parts of the US there were regular anti-Iraq-war

protests for many months after the invasion. This sort of activism is hardly ever reported in international news.

Indeed, observers might be excused for thinking that the last major US protest movement was in the 1950s and 1960s, namely the civil rights movement. Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. are now revered figures, but popular recognition of leading activists seldom extends to contemporary movements, such as climate change, animal rights and global justice, which are more likely to be ignored or reviled.

Not only is activism for progressive causes alive and well in the US - it has produced some of the most astute analyses of what it takes to be effective in organizing for change. The classic work is Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*, a book about community organizing that has inspired generations of activists.^[1] There are many other valuable US treatments aimed either at the level of day-to-day practice or at a more strategic level. ^[2] To these must now be added Chris Crass's book *Towards Collective Liberation*.

Crass gained much of his experience working with Food Not Bombs, mainly in the large and energetic San Francisco group (SF FNB). He was an active member, later thinking of himself as an activist organizer. He went on to train other organizers. A key part of his book is a close analysis of the activities of SF FNB. He uses the case study approach to extract insights and spell out lessons.

FNB provides free food to homeless people, tying this activity to a radical analysis of homelessness, poverty, inequality, militarism and other issues. Initiated in 1980, the FNB idea spread rapidly, being taken up in hundreds of cities in the US and other countries. FNB groups are autonomous, with different levels of activity and different mixes of food provision and politics.

Crass provides a detailed and insightful analysis of the experience of SF FNB in the 1990s. The group was large and energetic. In the early 1990s it confronted a city government intent on devaluing and punishing the homeless population, as part of an agenda of supporting gentrification. Providing free food in public was made illegal, and numerous SF FNB volunteers were arrested. The dramatic confrontations helped to publicize the issues. Eventually, after years of struggle,

the government allowed SF FNB to undertake its activities unhindered.

This sounds like a classic success story, but is only the prelude to Crass's analysis. He probes into different goals within the group. Some wanted to focus on the welfare function of providing meals; others wanted to combine this with political education; yet others saw building the movement's capabilities as a key goal. Crass examines the tensions arising from differing goals, from the ever changing levels and types of participation in the group, from strategic planning monopolized by a small group of men, from attempts to deal with (or skate over) inequalities in skill levels, and much else.

Overall, Crass addresses the challenges activists face when confronting injustice while trying to build a model of an alternative politics, with participants continually struggling with personal issues, ingrained behaviors, dilemmas of collective decision making, and, for some, how to help build a wider movement. This examination of activist campaigning, organization and internal dynamics will resonate with others who have participated in major campaigns. There is one extra dimension that Crass brings to the mix: anarchist politics.

In many of what are called "new social movements" - such as feminist, environmental, and peace movements - anarchist orientations are evident. The politics of the old left was oriented to class struggle and to action by socialist parties and the wider labor movement. These struggles were often structured following lines of authority, sometimes adopting a version of the Leninist model of "democratic centralism," namely decision-making by a small core of party leaders, usually male. The rise of the new social movements challenged this style through putting other issues on the agenda in addition to class struggle, and through promoting a more participatory style of action and organization.

Other treatments of grassroots organizing deal with tactics and strategies, but less commonly with an explicit political perspective. Crass, however, puts anarchism at the center of his analysis. Prior to his lengthy examination of SF FNB, he provides an excellent overview of anarchism, usefully framed around prefigurative politics, namely acting in ways

compatible with the goal, a longstanding feature of anarchist thought and action. He briefly examines the classical anarchist tradition, giving most attention to the US movement, highlighting issues, organizations, campaigns, and setbacks. He attempts to present anarchism as part of - and central to - left organizing, with an emphasis on inclusiveness. Given that grassroots activism has many anarchist characteristics, but seldom is explicitly linked to the anarchist project, this is a welcome contribution.

Though oriented to anarchism, Crass opposes the tendency to maintain a correct political line. He says "we need a revitalized, dynamic, and visionary Left politics that draws from many traditions, not just anarchism, but also Marxism, socialism, feminism, revolutionary nationalism, and others" (p. 22).

Crass's overview of anarchism is best for readers already familiar with some history. Crass's treatment of SF FNB in the 1990s, on the other hand, is accessible to anyone with any experience of activism and campaigning, given its explanation of the political circumstances in San Francisco at the time, the sorts of people joining the group, the issues regularly confronted, and the difficulties encountered.

One of the challenges the group faced was overcommitment: members would take on more tasks, campaigns, and solidarity actions than they collectively had the capacity to do well, and there was no obvious way to deal with this tendency. Another was the problem of leadership and initiative. As is common in some anarchist-oriented groups, there was an overt denial of leadership, although some members had more power and influence than others. Crass summarizes the challenges:

In FNB, we saw poor people slowly dying on the streets of San Francisco and felt a tremendous call to respond. We threw ourselves against the policies of the state, in some cases literally. We had little in the way of training, resources, infrastructure, and mentorship from older organizers. We often had a narrow conception of who the movement was, which limited our allies and community. Mental illness and drug addiction affected both FNB and the homeless community, yet few of us had any skills to deal with them. The international Left was in disarray, with most of us completely rejecting and alienated from the

Marxist tradition, and we searched for lessons from past movements usually without guidance. The instant-gratification culture of U.S. consumer capitalism made it profoundly difficult for most of us to think about our work even one year in the future, and an attitude of "just do it" prevailed that burned us out. (p. 97)

As well as analyzing FNB in the context of grassroots organizing and anarchist politics, Crass analyzes himself. His reflections on his own development, in terms of his thinking about social problems, his understanding of systems of domination, and especially his awareness of his own privilege as a white middle-class man, are a highlight of his writing.

The rest of the book covers a range of topics relevant to grassroots organizing. Some sections are essays Crass wrote for circulation within the movement. A large section is composed of interviews with anti-racist organizers in different parts of the country, though these are more like edited essays than interactive interviews. Together, this material provides some of the most sophisticated insights available about the challenges of activist organizing in the US.

Leadership

The theme of leadership recurs throughout *Towards Collective Liberation*. Anarchists have long had a conflicted attitude towards leadership. Many of the so-called leaders in government and corporate bureaucracies exercise power based on position. Anarchists, as opponents of domination and associated formal hierarchies, are naturally opposed to such systems and often, by association, to the individuals occupying these roles. Within anarchist-oriented groups, the result can be hostility to the idea of any formal roles linked to decision-making power. Crass titles one of his chapters "But we don't have leaders."

The trouble is that "leadership" has a dual meaning. As well as signifying a formal role in a hierarchical system, it also means an informal role of providing insight, inspiration, support, and direction, without necessarily being linked to formal power. This sort of leadership is greatly needed within social movements.

Within business studies, this distinction is widely recognized: leadership is distinguished from

management, with both being seen as necessary, but leadership more highly prized. However, in workplaces in government and business, the two aspects of leadership are often confused or conflated, with managers assuming that their formal position gives them the authority of leadership.

Therefore, it is no surprise that anarchists, few of whom are familiar with writing on business leadership, [3] should have rejected leadership altogether, throwing out the valuable roles with the oppressive ones. The result, in many cases, has been a system of informal leadership - by those with the most experience, knowledge, confidence and informal connections - that is hard to question because of the rhetoric of "We have no leaders."

Crass was eventually able to recognize the de-facto system of leadership and the fact that it was often dominated by white middle-class men. He credits many women and people of color with helping him understand his own role. He describes how he broke through the assumptions about absence of leadership and came to a different orientation: his task became developing activist leadership capacities, especially of women, people of color, and those with a working-class background.

Leadership development can take a very simple form: encouraging individuals to take on roles involving coordination, initiative, and responsibility, helping them overcome their own self-doubt and reluctance, providing them support in their new roles, and helping them develop their skills and their capacity to reflect on their performance. For Crass, the initial step in activist leadership development is simply to be aware of the damaging dynamics of unspoken interpersonal inequalities.

A further step in leadership development is to formalize the process, with regular events to share skills, promote self and mutual education, and develop awareness of group dynamics. This can happen spontaneously within a group or at the instigation of independent movement organizers and educators. After many years with SF FNB, Crass left to join a collective dedicated to improving the capacity of the movement.

Anarchist theory and practice

Contemporary anarchism can be characterized as opposition to all forms of domination and, instead, support for self-management, namely people collectively making decisions about the things that affect their lives. Anarchist opposition to domination has gradually become more all-encompassing, as the classical anarchist opposition to the state has been supplemented by opposition to capitalism, militarism, patriarchy, racism, heterosexism, and human chauvinism (domination of nature). Tying together struggles against different forms of domination is a key theme in *Towards Collective Liberation*, as its title indicates.

Crass gives most attention to feminism and anti-racism. Because these connect with leadership development, one implication is to encourage and support women and people of color to become leaders. Another key theme is to take action within the more privileged group, specifically for men to address sexist behaviors by other men and for white activists to promote anti-racism among other whites. The lengthy interview section of the book begins with an essay titled "What we mean by white anti-racist organizing."

The accounts of organizing are inspiring. Crass and the organizers he interviews are experienced, highly committed, self-aware and struggling with one of the most difficult tasks: building anti-racism in parts of the country where racism is highly entrenched, such as in rural Oregon and in Louisville, Kentucky. For example, Carla Wallace, a leader of the Fairness Campaign in Louisville, commented:

It is exciting to me that we can take a struggle for a much needed law and wage the battle in ways that provide opportunities for those engaged to learn deeper lessons, become inclusive leaders, recognize that only by building together can we grow power that is freeing rather than oppressive. For those of us in the battles who are white, taking leadership from people of color, and finding our own way to lead while organizing other white people, results in some of the most profound life-changing liberation we can dream of. (p. 222)

Questions and further directions

One area Crass could have developed more is the practical consequences of tensions between struggles

against different forms of domination. Electing Barack Obama is a challenge to racism in US politics, but is this an anarchist goal? More generally, should it be a goal for more women and people of color to be elected to office and rise within government and corporate hierarchies, given the long-term anarchist goal of replacing these hierarchies with self-managed systems?

Crass's primary focus is on the playing out of patterns of domination within social movements, so some of these issues do not arise. Even so, there is potentially a tension between a person's identity and their political practice. What if an African American woman or transgender person is personally domineering? Membership of an oppressed group does not always translate into greater consciousness of oppression and greater capacity to help others. These complications deserve greater attention.

Compared to most other rich countries, the US mainstream political and economic system is remarkably powerful: activists challenge from the margins, certainly having an effect, but seldom being invited to join the power elite. In many other countries, there are more opportunities for radicals to rise within the system, for example as politicians or union leaders within left-wing parties or as senior government bureaucrats. It is conceivable for a prominent peace activist to join the system and become influential within the government or other elite circles.

From an anarchist perspective, this is a process of co-option: concessions and opportunities are used to tempt talented radicals to join in systems of enlightened social engineering, anything from planning commissions to corporatist agreements between governments, business, unions, NGOs, and international bodies. This is a tantalizing lure for many radicals, who see the possibility of having a tangible influence, especially in times of political turbulence when change seems possible.

In the US, co-option seems a lesser risk because the establishment is more prone to use repression and exclusion against challengers. How would Food Not Bombs have responded if its leaders had been invited to join a task force on poverty and homelessness or if the organization had been given government funding

for its work and offered a guaranteed space for its operations?

For anarchists, a recurring occasion for confronting the tension between operating against or within the system comes at election time. Some anarchists oppose voting, whereas others support local election campaigning, or voting in some elections. The basic problem is that voting operates to promote people's consent in the system of rule.^[4] How to undermine the ideology of representative government and promote the alternative of self-management is one of the deepest challenges for anarchists. In the US, though, a more common organizing goal is equal access to the vote, especially given racist and other exclusionary practices in many parts of the country. For an anarchist organizer, is the goal full and fair participation in the electoral process or setting up alternatives to representative government?

Another issue is the vision of an anarchist alternative. Anarchists often say the organization of a future society should be in the hands of those constructing and living in it, but nonetheless there are some models available. The most common is a network of self-managing groups, each of which selects delegates to higher-order coordinating groups.

Given that a key principle of anarchist organizing is embodying the ends in the means, then it makes sense to have some vision, however vague, of the ends. For Crass, the means are better specified: sharing of expertise, rotation of responsibilities, leadership development, consensus decision-making and, for large actions, coordination by groups composed of spokespersons (delegates) from smaller groups. This is certainly compatible with the anarchist project, but it leaves unanswered many questions. How, for example, are global decisions to be made on environmental and other matters? How are fundamental disagreements to be resolved? How can specialist skills, for example in making computer chips, be reconciled with sharing of expertise?

The processes involved in consensus-based activist groups definitely provide a model of cooperative practice. Can these be scaled up to offer a society-wide alternative? If not, what does prefigurative practice look like?

For Crass, grassroots organizing is something occurring in communities in public spaces. There is also another sort of grassroots organizing: inside workplaces and, more generally, inside organizations. Workplace organizing is a longstanding activist project; the syndicalist tradition is built around it. Organizing is also possible inside churches, militaries, police forces, banks, sporting clubs, government departments, international organizations, and high-tech firms. Some of these are workplaces, to be sure, but not commonly seen as places to be doing organizing, which has usually been oriented to working class occupations, especially industry. There are now some new possibilities for organizing. What does it mean to organize among developers of open source software - a dispersed, partially self-managed production process - or among contributors to social media? There are many arenas for grassroots organizing, and it would be fascinating to see what Crass and other organizers have to say about the possibilities and pitfalls.

Crass gives considerable attention to the US civil rights movement as a model struggle, involving grassroots mobilization, transformation of consciousness, skill development, and sophisticated use of nonviolent action. However, from the point of view of anarchist politics, is it the best example? Civil rights campaigners depended, to a considerable extent, on raising awareness of oppression so the federal government would intervene against segregationist laws and practices. Nonviolent action was crucial in the struggle, but so was the role of the US state.

There are other examples of popular nonviolent action internationally in which success came without relying on state intervention. The classic example is the Indian independence movement led by Gandhi. Others are campaigns against repressive governments in the Philippines, Iran, South Africa, Indonesia, Chile, Egypt, and dozens of other countries. Few of these are perfect models for anarchist campaigning, but they can provide lessons for grassroots campaigners.

Crass writes that "Anarchism as a political theory and organizing strategy has been overwhelmingly white and male, and is therefore influenced and shaped by white privilege and male privilege" (p. 152). Given that some commentators see the Gandhian movement as anarchist, [\[5\]](#) it might be speculated that white male

privilege is one factor in many anarchists neglecting the contributions by Gandhians to anarchist theory and practice. Most leading Gandhians have been male but certainly not white.

Crass has provided an exemplary volume for informing anyone interested in strategy and organizing in the US. It should serve as an inspiration for sympathizers in other countries to know what is being done, and what can be done, in the heart of the US empire. It can also serve as a model for organizers in other countries to analyze and document their own experiences. These insights can then be fed back to receptive audiences in the US. Chris Crass will be among them.

1. Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: a Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971). See also Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1969).

2. Virginia Coover, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser and Christopher Moore, *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1981); Robert Fisher, *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* (Boston: Twayne 1984); Ed Hedemann (editor), *War Resisters League Organizer's Manual*, revised edition (New York: War Resisters League, 1986); Eric Mann, *Playbook for Progressives: 16 Qualities of the Successful Organizer* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011); Bill Moyer, with JoAnn McAllister, Mary Lou Finley, and Steven Soifer, *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements* (Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society Publishers, 2001); Randy Shaw, *The Activist's Handbook: A Primer* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

3. For one of the rare treatments bridging these two areas, see Pierre Guillet de Monthoux, *Action and Existence: Anarchism for Business Administration* (Chichester: Wiley, 1983).

4. Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Consequences of Consent: Elections, Citizen Control and Popular Acquiescence* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

5. Joan V. Bondurant, *Conquest of Violence: The Gandhian Philosophy of Conflict*, new revised edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 172-187; Geoffrey Ostergaard and Melville Currell, *The*

Gentle Anarchists: A Study of the Leaders of the Sarvodaya Movement for Non-violent Revolution in India (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971).

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