



## Towards collective liberation

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### review of

Crass, C. (2013) *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy*. PM Press: Oakland, California. (PB, pp.295, US\$20.00, ISBN 9781604866544)

### Introduction

*Towards Collective Liberation* is a collection of separate essays working towards the overall aim of collective liberation from capitalist inequality. The book is engaging and well-researched, combining anecdotal evidence from Crass' personal journey as an activist with historical discussion on various social movements which Crass suggests form strands of the anarchist family. Essays speak directly to activists to encourage them to value their contributions and to offer guidance on how to work collectively, keeping basic principles in mind regarding class, race, and gender equality. As a documentary text on contemporary North American socialist activism, the text is a detailed guide to specific projects, concerns, and challenges. The main strength of this text is its confident assertion of the possibility of a socialist future, in the face of mass media representations of the impossibility of socialist politics.

In addition to chapters focusing on historical discussion in the first section of the book, there are chapters on feminism, with a focus on anti-racism and on ways that men can act within the feminist revolution. This aspect is covered in two chapters. The first chapter asking men to engage with feminism explores the author's own horror when he was accused of being sexist because of the way he

and other men in an activist study group excluded or ignored women, and his reluctance to admit to and deal with this accusation while the second offers men a list of twenty tools to further feminism. Some of these tools include studying feminist thinkers and writers (the list includes Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldua), studying historical social movements led by women, learning from the men who supported those female-led movements, and learning about sexual violence and crime. In addition to these instructions to study, there are reminders to appreciate women in everyday life and to take on 'women's work' and to recruit other men to such tasks which, for Crass, include 'cooking, cleaning, providing transportation, replenishing food and supplies, caring for children' (146). There are tools that aim to overcome the idea that men and women communicate differently, with men as competitive speakers who aim to solve problems and women as cooperative speakers who see their role as to listen and empathise: Crass encourages men to ask for help and to ask questions, and insists that men remember 'you will be needed in the movement when you realize that you are not needed in the movement' (*ibid.*). This is a novel approach that asks men to adapt their behaviour and challenge their mindset and to recruit other men, in order to further feminism. Further chapters focus on liberation movements and organisations and include discussion of white anti-racist movements including the Heads Up Collective and the Catalyst Project, Anti-racist Queer organisation, and the Occupy movement.

Crass has worked in an activist role that he terms 'organizing' for twenty-three years. The nature of this role is peaceful, community-based, and focuses on building relationships and collectives who share a vision of equality. Crass works to nurture groups and individuals, with the intention of identifying those who can provide inspiration and support for others involved in the collective, citing as his own inspiration Lucy Parsons, a Mexican and African-American journalist who began editing *Freedom: A revolutionary anarchist-communist monthly* in 1891 and writers and orators Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman. Goldman is perhaps best known for her expulsion from the US and the well-known quotation which is often attributed to her, 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution', a comment that sounds flippant but actually accords with her focus on highlighting the significance of politics in people's everyday lives and her insistence on women's rights and issues of sexuality and motherhood, as Crass describes. His role models are all American, and his activism focuses on American history, political contexts, and contemporary problems. In this way his work is a departure from Marxist global narratives, and this is reflected in his written style, in the way in which he engages with Marxist principles, and in the methods that he suggests will enable collective organisation against capitalist inequality.

## Crass' aims

With this book, Crass states that his aim is to 'help our movements further develop the visions, strategies, cultures, organizations, practices, and relationships we need to build and win a democratic and socialist society' (15). There are a number of interesting things to say about this comment, which is the first clear statement of aims in the text. Firstly, Crass carefully avoids setting up his own position as any kind of leader, by noting that his book should 'help' to achieve collective goals, goals that are shared by 'our movements', that is, multiple movements rather than one coherent system. The lengthy author's acknowledgements and the long introduction to the book, written by feminist autobiographer and activist Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, also show that Crass aims to avoid presenting himself in a leadership role or holding himself up as an exemplar for others to follow. His tendency to offer a supportive voice to others rather than to lead may appear to contrast with his acknowledgement of his own heroes (Parsons, Goldman, Berkman), and this is one of many apparent contradictions in the book. Rather than suggesting confused aims, though, Crass' approach seems purposeful; he is, perhaps, expressing humility, but at the same time he states repeatedly that his aim is to reach as many people as possible and to encourage everyone who shares the vision to end inequality that their contribution is valid – or, more than valid, vital: 'everyone reading this book is needed' (14), Crass writes, no matter if they are not sure whether they are 'radical enough, involved enough, experienced enough, well-read enough' (13). He continues: 'we need liberation movements of millions of people, from all backgrounds, from all walks of life, with a wide range of experience, playing many different roles' (14).

Again, here, while enlisting the support of many different people, Crass is referring to liberation movements in the plural. This is one way in which Crass' approach differs from traditional Marxist, communist or anarchist writing, and it could be viewed as either a failing, or a strength. On the one hand, the route to equality is meandering because of its attention to various voices which include those who champion environmentalism and religious freedom as well as those issues which are closest to Marxist and anarchist principles including race, gender, and, of course, class. At times, Crass locates anarchism in the very slightest of acts, such as community gardens and cooperative childcare (23). Crass justifies this by stating that 'most anarchists do not wear their politics on their sleeves but practice them in their broader political work, families, communities, and organizations' (23). It appears that Crass' strategy to gain support for anti-capitalist organization is to see anarchism at work everywhere. It is likely that by engaging with numerous collectives with slightly differing agendas Crass will reach more individuals and demonstrate the shared vision for

equality amongst diverse groups, while promoting anarchism as a peaceful and natural position, and one that has potential, in contrast with the dominant representation of anarchism as chaotic and violent.

Using the word 'win' rather than 'create' or 'achieve' in his statement of aims is an uncharacteristically competitive or combative, perhaps even a materialistic, term, in an otherwise thoroughly cooperative and non-violent message. And to make a final observation on Crass' statement of aims, I would refer to the position of the word 'socialist' in his sentence, which comes after 'democratic' and as an addition to it rather than as part of the phrase 'democratic socialism'. There is a tendency in the text to introduce terms like 'Socialism', 'Marxism', 'global elite', 'working-class' and 'ruling class' quietly. These terms are used, and Crass leaves no ambiguity about his political commitments, yet his approach is to work gradually towards these recognised terms and to drop them into the text rather than using highly politicised language from the outset. In general, the tone of Crass' work marks it as different from many other collections of essays on political themes. He uses a personal tone and writes regularly of personal incidents, experiences, and emotions.

### **'We can do this'**

Crass engages the reader in his personal journey towards activism by explaining how he has had to confront feelings of 'inadequacy, isolation, and powerlessness' as well as 'denial, fear, guilt, and shame' (14). He describes a vision for 'all of us' and speaks to the reader as an individual, explaining that 'whether you have been involved in social justice work for decades or only a few weeks, the stories and lessons in the chapters to follow can help you on your path' (14). This adoption of a personal and informal tone is an effort to garner support from those people who may feel disenfranchised even by the groups working to support them, people whose ordinary vocabulary does not include words like 'patriarchy', 'imperialism' and 'praxis'. Praxis, though, is used in the subtitle of Crass' book and may be used to avoid using a term like 'political action', in order to break with all discourse of resistance and mobilization. This draws attention to a contradiction in his work which marks his departure from Marxist discourse.

### **Individualism vs. collectivity**

In breaking with Marxist discourse by employing a personal tone and an open, all-encompassing vision for the work of anarchism, Crass seems to struggle with the contradictory issue of individualism versus collectivity. Enlisting support from the reader against capitalism, Crass refers to the emotional effect of

capitalism which makes individuals feel ‘inadequate, isolated, and powerless’ (13), and notes that he, as an individual, found strength in the stories told by other activists. Crass notes how he was enabled, through hearing others’ stories, to place his personal experience into historical and systematic analysis of ways that power operates today. Coming from a US perspective, it may be that Crass is so firmly entrenched in the message of individualism that he is unable to avoid it. Alternatively, aware of his audience’s reliance on notions of individual merit, choice and ownership in the US, Crass may find it necessary to acknowledge and build in to his vision some concession to individualism. The sense of contradiction between the need to acknowledge the individual and the effort to work collectively operates throughout the book and restricts a strong message of political organisation in favour of a more emotive call to act ‘from a place of love that helps us honor and respect our own humanity and the humanity of others’ (284). As a result, the definition of ‘government’ within a socialist collective provided by Crass is somewhat vague, based on ‘generating and practicing legitimate authority’, taking collective action against inequality in any appropriate way. This involves doing more than opposing an oppressive system, which might uphold that oppressive system, and instead is an intention to create new systems based on liberation. While Crass implies that the reader should act to govern by legitimate means, he also suggests that this kind of leadership is already in place in the work done in ‘families, classrooms, workplaces, community institutions’. So while his strategy is to encourage people to see their commitments as part of wider political movement for change, he does not offer a strong strategy for achieving the goal of ‘a vibrant and healthy democratic and socialist society’ (284) and instead insists on its possibility. This is, in fact, potentially a very powerful message in the face of media representation, especially in the US, of socialism as an impossible utopia or even a dystopia. The impossibility of socialism is belied by the telling statistics that in Cuba, where a system of state socialism has been in operation for sixty-five years, the average age is 79 (equal to the US; the UK figure according to the World Health Organization’s most recent 2011 list is 80, and the highest figure is Japan at 83); healthcare is among the best in the world; and maternity care is the best in the Americas, with Canada coming second. It is noteworthy that Cuba is not mentioned in Crass’ book despite its continued strength as a socialist society in the face of hostile trade embargos.

Despite this need to grapple with the contradictory messages of individualism and collectivity, Crass does demonstrate a deep-rooted commitment to Marxist principles in a number of ways. He reminds readers of the importance of history by offering detailed summaries of the history of the anarchist movement and of grassroots left-wing movements in the US in the 1990s, and by engaging with the Civil Rights Movement as a historical lesson in organizing. He also expresses very clearly that the first problem that the Marxist activist faces in contemporary

capitalist society is that, as Moyra Haslett has put it in *Marxist Literary and Cultural Theories* (2000), many people are unable, not only to act against capitalism, but even to think against capitalism, and ‘Capitalism’s dominance is thus more ideological than ever’ (Haslett, 2000: 57).

One interesting feature of Crass’ work is his engagement with imperialism in general terms, and with postcolonial thought more specifically. Crass makes the interesting observation that capitalism is a ‘constant process of colonization and exploitation of working people’ (15-16). In this context Crass uses postcolonial allusion to draw on the ideas of a number of significant postcolonial thinkers: He alludes to Ngugi wa Thiong’o (Ngugi, 1981) when he claims that white people must ‘decolonize their minds’ (18), and echoes the ideas of Amilcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon (Cabral, 1993; Fanon, 1993) who insist on the significance of culture to enable freedom from oppression by conveying the importance of cultural and intellectual activity as well as historical study as expressed by South African Black Consciousness leader Steven Biko (15). The title of his book comes from bell hooks’s essay ‘Love as the practice of freedom’ (1994), and bell hooks, a theorist whose work is significant to postmodern, feminist, and postcolonial studies, is an important thinker for Crass.

### **Building liberatory power**

The clearest message that emerges from Crass’ work is his commitment to using a range of strategies and approaches, as he states clearly in his opening statement. A second and related aim is to convey the idea that anarchism is not a discreet or limited political margin, but that in fact it can be witnessed in movements as diverse as the Civil Rights movement and ongoing anti-racism groups, the women’s movement and campaigners for women’s liberation and motherhood rights, queer liberation, pacifism (citing the Left radio station KPFA/Pacifica in this category), and environmental activism. In part, Crass aims to rescue anarchism not just from its hostile media portrayal, but also from the way in which it is sometimes held too preciously by those who work within the movement: Crass notes that the ‘culture of “more radical than thou” isn’t welcoming, supportive, sustainable, healthy, or successful in achieving our goals’ (22). Interestingly, American musician and socialist activist David Rovics has addressed this same tendency to create a hierarchy of activism in the song ‘I’m a better anarchist than you’ (Rovics, 2007). Crass conveys the contribution made by anarchism and anarchist principles to all aspects of life, bringing the term ‘anarchy’ out of obscurity and ambiguity. If sometimes the specific degree to which anarchists or anarchism was behind social change is exaggerated, then this

is justified by the effort to remove the stigma from the term anarchism, and to convey a truer definition of its meaning, function, and aims.

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