

Reaffirming Our Anti-Racist and Feminist Commitments: A Review of Towards Collective Liberation

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Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy

Chris Crass, 2013 (Oakland, CA: PM Press)

xvi + 295 pp, paperback \$20.00 US

ISBN: 978-1-60486-654-4

Anarchism has long prided itself on being one of the few perspectives and movements that is committed to resisting all forms of oppression and domination. Anarchists have participated in many movements that themselves might not be defined as anarchist, and anarchists continue to add their critique of the state, capital, and all forms of oppression to whatever context that they find themselves working in. Despite this wide commitment to root out all forms of oppression and domination, anarchists still have a long way to go to make their theory match practice. Anarchist movements in settler colonial 'North America' and Europe continue to be mainly white dominated, sexism still permeates anarchist movements, and the intersectional nature of anarchist politics is constantly in need of renewal. People of colour, Indigenous communities, and queer and trans* folks, to name but a few, have continued to work with and within anarchism to make anarchist theory meet up with anarchist practice to renew and expand the commitment to resist all forms of oppression and domination.

A key resource in this continuing struggle is Chris Crass' book. Crass has worked within a wide range of social movement contexts from explicitly anarchist groups, to Food Not Bombs chapters, Challenging White Supremacy Workshops, the Catalyst Project, and Colours of Resistance. Many of these projects and groups continue to have a lasting imprint on social movements, groups, and individuals in settler colonial 'North America'. They also continue to serve as further resources for those just entering into political consciousness and for long-time organizers. It is evident that these experiences are what have led to the writing of this book as both a set of reflections on his own movement experiences and also a powerful set of lessons and possibilities for others who are also interested in intersectional struggles for liberation. In this sense *Towards Collective Liberation* is partly a memoir, partly a challenge to current social

movements to do better, and a sort of promise that something better is indeed being built.

Crass has assembled a key resource for anarchists and all those who are committed to, or realizing their commitment to, movements of 'collective liberation'. His work brings anti-racist and feminist struggles front and centre with an eye to building long-term, resilient, and effective movements of resistance and change for all people. His own positioning as a "white, mostly straight, man" means that there are key lessons in this book for those who might share a similar identity. He is candid and speaks from the heart about his own struggles and experiences of coming to consciousness in a world that is rife with oppression and domination and where those with privilege are often able to take the easy way out of ignoring continuing realities of oppression. Crass is clear that his own struggles have not been just his individually but that there have always been a strong number of mentors ready to challenge his own perspectives and help push his own understandings forward.

The main aim of this book is to argue for continued and expanding commitments to building movements for 'collective liberation' based in praxis. Crass defines 'collective liberation', drawing from bell hooks, as the need for movements to develop an intersectional understanding of oppression and domination, otherwise they will continue to manifest oppression themselves and undermine the work they are trying to push forward. Such movements also need to link theory and practice into sustained commitments for change. Most directly, Crass argues: 'If systems of dominance are interconnected, then systems of liberation are also interconnected' (18). This fundamental orientation, though quite simple, is what underlines Crass' book and social movement work, and what is in need of constant renewal within all social movements that are moving towards a free society.

In many ways *Towards Collective Liberation* is a challenge to take resistance to racism, sexism, homophobia, hierarchy and domination seriously within all movements and not leave these realities on the back burner or to be dealt with after victories have been won. Crass argues for this commitment to collective liberation here and now, as a means to creating a better, and more just, society. It requires learning from and being accountable to communities that are at the forefront of struggle and recognizing that it is those who are often the most marginalized by systems of oppression that are the most radical about societal transformation and also the most realistic (160), rather than always those who are most outwardly radical. This observation is a key reminder that movements need to take people where they are at but that they also need to be ready and willing to listen to those they are claiming to support.

A number of points in the book would serve as key lessons for anarchists in particular. Most generally, and similar to the work of the late Joel Olson (2009), Crass argues that anarchists need to look carefully at current and historic struggles for civil rights and against racism and white supremacy. Racism is a fundamental aspect of historical and continued power relations in the white supremacist and settler colonial 'U.S.' and yet many anarchists do not have an anti-racist praxis at the core of their politics. In particular, Crass argues that anarchists need to look to women of colour-led movements to challenge their own politics and begin to develop a more nuanced and sustained anti-racist orientation.

One of the lessons from women of colour-led movements that Crass highlights is the value of leadership. He specifically points to the work of Ella Baker as one example for how effective forms of leadership might be developed. He suggests that the anarchist rejection of leadership carries with it the possibility of opening up potentially more hazardous informal hierarchies within groups. Leadership, he argues, is not something to be feared, but something that might be used to empower members of groups to take on the hard work of developing as organizers. It is also something that we must be attentive to, or else we run the constant risk of informal leadership arising along with informal hierarchies.

An additional point that Crass stresses is that anarchism (and movements for liberation more generally) need to be more 'flexible and constantly evolving' – including participating in reformist and electoral campaigns but also reaching out and becoming more relevant to the contexts and experiences of those that fall outside the typical white middle class milieu. Anarchism, Crass argues, needs to engage with other groups and movements beyond just their 'stated intentions' and see how further relationships of solidarity and support might be built. Electoral and reformist participation are often thorny issues in anarchist circles. Anarchists certainly have tended to steer away from such types of social movement or political work. I think, however, that Crass has an important point.

Often the ideological or principled rigidity of anarchism leads to dismissing possible fruitful points of collaboration or exchange or leads to anarchists downplaying their anarchism in such spaces. Given the examples that Crass draws from organizing led by women of colour, anti-racist movements, and movements for gender justice, many of which are often not explicitly anarchist, there is clearly room for some increased engagement. Anarchist participation, of course, carries the potential to bring non-hierarchical forms of organizing and praxis into such spaces, but there is also the potential for anarchism to be continually challenged to live up to its purported intersectionality. Electoral campaigns, on the other hand, might be better seen as strategic or tactical engagements based on their usefulness for attaining other more specific goals or for the purposes of movement building. There is no doubt that reformist

campaigns, and changes that happen through the exercise of political power, do affect the lives of many less privileged people in significant ways. Anarchists cannot lose sight of this reality, especially when seeking to build diverse and intersectional movements of resistance.

All the same there does need to be a strong caution or critique that comes from anarchism as to the limitations of such participation or the possibilities for cooptation. Anarchists do critique and reject the state and party politics for a reason, after all; however, at the same time, anarchists cannot lose sight of the improvements of daily realities that such participation might bring. The point here, I think, is to be pragmatic about such engagements and their benefits rather than dismissing electoral or reformist politics wholesale. I think the pragmatism and flexibility that these sorts of possibilities invite are exactly what Crass is arguing for in terms of creating and expanding movements for collective liberation. At certain points we need to meet people where they are at, but also stoke the fires to expand the commitment to collective liberation.

There is one aspect of Crass's work that I do think could be further developed. He traces important links between anti-racist and civil rights struggles in the US and their importance for informing broader movements for collective liberation. A great deal of this work focuses on migrant communities and African-American struggles, and there is no question that these struggles need more attention, especially from white-dominated anarchist movements. However, the one area that seems somewhat absent, or only minimally discussed, is the struggles of Indigenous peoples in the context of the settler colonialism.

First off, I do not think this is an intentional lack of focus. Crass is speaking from his own experiences and the movements/groups/organizations that he has participated in. He speaks from the heart and the value of this book and its lessons cannot be overstated. At the same time, there is little engagement with how the continued realities of colonization continue to influence movements for collective liberation. What are some of the lessons that might be drawn from Indigenous struggles or settler-Indigenous interactions along the similar lines of white-black interactions that Crass discusses? Indigenous struggles, especially recently, have often been at the forefront of resistance movements against environmental destruction and against legacies of colonial violence. They have also been significant in challenging the settler privileges that come to all those who have immigrated to the lands of settler colonial 'North America'. Just as movements need to continue to develop sustained and committed anti-racist and feminist consciousness and action, there needs to be a similar and connected call to develop anti-colonial and decolonizing consciousness and action. The need for this commitment seems incredibly prudent given that movements of resistance and liberation continue to engage in their struggles on land that has most often been stolen from Indigenous nations. The continued

realities of colonization, and emerging movements such as Idle No More, resistance to tar sands development and fracking, and land reclamation and rehabilitation efforts, indicate that it is imperative for settlers to begin to engage in a self-reflexive and self-critical process of decolonization within ourselves and within our movements.

Anarchism has been involved in many solidarity efforts in support of Indigenous struggles and yet there has been little specific and critical discussion of theory, practice and praxis in relation to anti-colonialism and decolonization. Indigenous communities have challenged left social movements to take Indigenous thought and action seriously and work towards critically interrogating colonial privilege. Further, Indigenous feminists like Andrea Smith (2005) have argued for a similar intersectional focus within social movements that looks at the interplay of colonialism, capitalism, the state, white supremacy and heteropatriarchy and the need to build movements that take on all of these realities of oppression and domination. These conversations are starting and ever-expanding but there is some need for a more specific concentration on the realities of colonization, colonial privilege, and colonialism's ties, intersections and overlaps with other forms of oppression and domination. Although Crass alludes to several colonial dimensions of collective liberation, these could have come through more forcefully and explicitly in his work. As a result, a number of questions are left unanswered: Have there been specific instances where he has been challenged on this front? Are there mentors and experiences that have been influential in moving towards anti-colonial consciousness? Are there lessons from Indigenous movements or their challenges to other movements and struggles? What are the connections between anti-colonialism, decolonization, anti-racism and feminism? What are the connections between Indigenous and black liberation struggles and resisting white supremacy? These are some of the questions that we need to begin to ask carefully and more explicitly in all of our work for collective liberation.

Overall, Chris Crass has put together a thoughtful and insightful book that will be a key reference point for building anti-racist, feminist and anti-authoritarian movements for collective liberation in years to come. It speaks especially to white, cis-gendered men and the work we all have to do to reflect carefully and critically on the privileges that we continue to receive from systems of oppression and domination. It challenges anarchist movements to continue to develop more sustained anti-racist and feminist commitments, a more nuanced understanding of leadership and organizing, and connections to people of colour-led movements. Although the realities of colonization and Indigenous struggle, and challenging settler and colonial privilege in anarchism and social movements, could have come to the fore more forcefully in this book, Crass' work on collective liberation provides tools for engaging with such struggles. Debates over leadership, self-critique, mentorship, strategy and tactics, as well

as more sustained efforts to further develop anti-racist and feminist consciousness are critical for all movements. This book presents a wealth of resources and practical examples, especially from the interviews at the end of the book, of how we might continue to struggle for liberation movements for all, in a wide variety of contexts. The task at hand, then, is to begin to do this work, here and now –to build movements and expand struggles, and take theory and put it into practice – in communities, in the streets and within ourselves.

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