

How Soon Is Now?

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Chris Carlsson, *Nowtopia: How Pirate Programmers, Outlaw Bicyclists, and Vacant Lot Gardeners are Inventing the Future Today*, AK Press, 2008

“Be the change you want to see in the world.” Gandhi’s admonition has become a core tenet of the prefigurative politics that have gained many adherents in radical circles in the wake of the summit-hopping global justice movement that announced itself with the 1999 blockade of the Seattle WTO meetings. This prefigurative turn has been expressed memorably by John Holloway and David Graeber. As the U.S. anti-globalization movement dissipated in the paranoid, martial atmosphere created by the post-September 11th Bush regime, many activists turned from confrontational politics of “swarming” the meetings of international neoliberal institutions towards more constructive, locally focused efforts.

In engaging chapters on permaculture, community gardening, bicycle activism, biofuels, the free software movement, and the annual Burning Man festival, Chris Carlsson surveys several such contemporary “DIY” (do-it-yourself) movements, calling them “Nowtopian.” While he never offers a concise definition of what is and isn’t Nowtopian, his term’s meaning emerges through examples of decentralized, anti-hierarchical, environmentally conscious, playful activities engaged in out of enthusiasm (rather than for profit or from a sense of political obligation), and often focused on collectively producing the necessities of life, as food, transportation, energy, information, and entertainment.

The opening chapters situate Carlsson’s analysis in the autonomist Marxism that emerged out of the social struggles in Italy of the late 1960s and 70s, and was developed in the U.S. by the Midnight Notes Collective. After a deft capsule history of class struggle in the U.S. since the mid-19th century, Carlsson deploys the autonomist concepts of class composition to suggest that the working class was decomposed (rendered helpless, disorganized, beaten back) by the neoliberal onslaught that began in the 1970s. Nowtopian practices, Carlsson argues, are the emerging forms of class recomposition by which workers will organize for the social struggles to come, outside the bounds of traditional trade unions, non-profit philanthropies, and political parties.

The chapter on permaculture is perhaps the book’s slightest, marrying a familiar critique of technical-rationalism with an analysis of permaculture that seems to take for granted that the reader already knows what permaculture is. Chapter 5, on community gardens, traces a remarkable history of government-sponsored urban agriculture campaigns during the World Wars, Depression era “thrift gardens,” and the vacant-lot gardening projects that emerged in cities across the country in the aftermath of urban renewal. The most richly detailed chapter, on “‘Outlaw’ Bicycling,” draws on Carlsson’s broad personal experience in the resurgent bicycle culture of recent years. (Carlsson was a co-founder of the “Critical Mass” bicycling movement of monthly group rides that began in the Bay Area in the early 1990s and has spread to cities worldwide). This lavishly illustrated chapter details a bubbling subculture of bike zines, DIYbike workshops, bike messenger organizing, and bike festivals. Chapter 7, on biodiesel, somewhat blithely ignores the limits of vegetable oil as a fuel source, and the implications for people in the global South of massive appropriation of agricultural lands for biofuels production. Chapter 8 examines the potential of the free and open source

software movements for the creation of a “digital commons,” and the final substantive chapter is a journalistic account of his visit to the annual Burning Man festival in the Nevada desert.

Such efforts as these, Carlsson suggests, can be “the key foundations...for commitments to radical change” [p. 53], and even “define the trajectory of exodus from capitalist society” [p. 5]. These claims will seem grandiose to those who are accustomed to thinking of social change in terms of mass organization, ideological and political struggle, and Gramscian “long marches” through the institutional landscape. With caveats sprinkled throughout the book, Carlsson anticipates most of the objections that will be raised to his Nowtopian vision: that he is dealing in lifestyle politics, ignoring the realities of power structures and racial and class privilege, and glossing over the dangers of cooptation of such projects into the capitalist marketplace. Carlsson anticipates such objections, and grants credence to them in varying degrees, but such considerations don’t seem to penetrate to the core of his analysis, don’t seem to have guided his attention as he investigated the outposts of Nowtopia.

As we continue to observe these potentially radical movements and subcultures, Carlsson’s contributions can be augmented by greater historical perspective. This isn’t the first time people have sought to bring about an end to capitalism through “exodus” and the building up of alternative institutions. What lessons can we draw from Nowtopias past? What were the successes and failures of the utopian socialists, the Rochdale cooperative movement, the Modern Schools movement, the repeated waves of back-to-the-land communalism that have arisen in this country with the regularity of economic crisis?

Also in order is a broader attention to the ways “Nowtopian” efforts, past and present, interact with more conventional radical and progressive movements. Murray Bookchin, casting a jaundiced eye on the U.S. anarchist movement, spoke of an “unbridgeable chasm” between what he called “lifestyle anarchism” and “social anarchism.” Such a chasm, if it ever truly existed either in anarchism or in the broader Left, has always been traversed not just by echoing shouts of mutual recrimination, but by many unlikely spans of solidarity and leaps of faith. The German Social Democrats, for example, before the rise of fascism had developed a multitude of social and cultural institutions that in many ways prefigured the new order they aimed for. Similarly, the “heroic years” of Spanish Anarchism, according to Murray Bookchin, coincided with a broad subcultural ferment in which vegetarianism, alternative medicine and education, and nudism were widely experimented with. And in Georgy Katsiaficas’ telling of radical politics in 1970s and 80s Germany, the “Mollis and Müslis” (Molotov throwing Autonomen and anarchist squatters, and granola-eating Green Party environmentalists) existed in kind of antagonistic symbiosis. In a recent analysis of the current economic crisis, the Midnight Notes Collective drew the distinction between struggles inside and outside the system, pointing to the ways each sort of struggle can be enhanced by the other, and indeed the ways each can transform into the other, for better or worse. Attention to this dialectic will prove fruitful as today’s Nowtopia becomes tomorrow’s.