

Review - The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism

Written by Benjamin Franks

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BENJAMIN FRANKS, JUL 23 2014

The Impossible Community: Realizing Communitarian Anarchism

By: John P. Clark

London: Bloomsbury, 2013

First, a disclaimer: I am a member of the editorial advisory board for the Contemporary Anarchist Studies series for Bloomsbury Press. John P. Clark's *The Impossible Community* is published within this series. There is no significant conflict of interest, however, as I had no role in the production of this particular text. In addition, the supportive but critical spirit of the series encourages analytic and evaluative engagement from all quarters.

Opening with such an overt account of the reviewer's position to the text being critiqued is consistent with the neo-Hegelian framework of Clark's argument. For Hegel and Clark, concrete values lie within the productive practice of the social realm (2-3). By identifying these standards and seeing how they are produced and operate within everyday activities, it is possible to enhance, challenge, or overcome them (64-5). Critique, properly conducted, as is the case with Clark's admirable volume, opens up 'new possibilities for radical social transformations' (22).

Such radical social transformation is necessary, according to Clark, because 'We are in the midst of unprecedented historical crisis in which reality itself demands the impossible, whether one likes it or not' (28). Crises in the shape of global ecological catastrophes threaten billions of individuals' self-preservation and well-being, as well as large-scale extinctions. They provide opportunities not just for an intensification of domination by capital (Naomi Klein's 'disaster capitalism') or 'disaster fascism' (the escalation of power), but for an ethically-grounded alternative: 'disaster anarchism' (31, 215). Clark's text is a powerful and sophisticated explanation and defence of an ecologically-sensitive 'communitarian anarchism'.

The text can be read as a response to some of the standard contentious portrayals of anarchism from liberals (such as Isaiah Berlin) and orthodox Marxists (such as Georgi Plekhanov, V.I. Lenin and Joseph Stalin) that anarchism is Idealist, utopian (and thereby impractical and unachievable), individualist to the point of egoism, and anti-intellectual. This book does much to address and counter these accusations, without descending into polemic. Clark's ambitious text examines the accusation of 'impossibilism', which has long been identified with anarchism ever since the socialist movement splintered in the nineteenth century. The possibilists – largely identified with parliamentary social democracy – sought gradual reform of society through its dominant structures. In contrast, the impossibilists considered capitalism and socialism to be mutually exclusive, with the latter only achievable through anti-systematic social revolution. Impossibilism, and thus anarchism, became associated with quixotic millennialism against the practical alternatives of social democracy. By contrast, Clark argues that anarchism, whilst having a utopic, transformatory character, is not committed to unachievable social goals ('Impossible Impossibilities', to use Clark's terminology). Instead, anarchists are motivated by 'Possible Impossibilities': goals which are achievable, although their realisation requires overcoming the current systems of centralised political representation and market-dominated production and exchange (2). Nor, in contrast to its dominant representation, is anarchism wholly opposed to reforms. It supports reforms that make people more radical and 'do not betray the more far-reaching visions and indeed revolutionary impulses, of the participants' (268-9).

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Clark demonstrates the practical benefits of anarchism's participatory, anti-hierarchical forms of organisation (210-1). He uses as examples the communal, virtue-rich social organisation of India's *Sarvodaya* and Sri Lanka's *Sarvodaya Shramadana* (217-43), and his own personal experiences of community self-organisation and anti-hierarchical social action in the Common Ground Collective in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, a catastrophe enormously exacerbated by environmentally destructive practices and statist ineptitude (208-9). Clark's account of these practical, communal alternatives, which successfully meet myriad needs, illustrate that there are alternatives to the dominant, oppressive social forms of production and exchange.

The charges of Idealism and anti-intellectualism are challenged through a highly sophisticated Hegelian account of communitarian anarchism. This avoids the closed teleology of some contemporary Hegelians (Fukuyama for instance) and grounds anarchist values not in universal abstract categories, but in the material activities, their contradictions and lacunae, that constitute the social world (17, 31), to bring about the fullest, mutually beneficial social relationships. In developing this ethical account, which in the later sections more overtly echoes contemporary virtue theory (e.g. 264-5, 281), Clark also develops an account of agency. The agents of social change are those who engage in mutual collective relationships which materially overcome oppression and whose actions become generalizable instances for further transformative activity (68-70).

Clark develops an account of freedom, separate from that of right-libertarian (or propertarian) negative liberty, but instead based on communal self-realisation. To develop ourselves to achieve goals and become certain types of being, we have to enter into relationships with others. The more mutually respectful and co-operatively communal these interactions become, the more joyous and fulfilling (79) and socially virtuous (264-5) relationships and institutions become. Thus, Clark defends an account of agency that is engaged collectively in shared practices and communal responsibilities, in contrast to the individualist possessive, liberal subject or the non-dominated, republican citizen, which merely supports repressive capitalist social institutions (124-5).

The book draws on current debates and recent scholarship, from an evaluation of the ontological assumptions of post-anarchists (theorists who fuse features of post-structuralism with anarchism) (16-19), to the critique of Quentin Skinner and Philip Pettit's republicanism (93-126), along with references to the works of Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, and Jacques Rancière. However Clark, unlike the postanarchists Todd May and Saul Newman, does not identify his communitarian version as a rupture, but as consistent with the main anarchist traditions. He draws on Gustav Landauer, Élisée Reclus (with whom Clark has a longstanding interest), and Peter Kropotkin to defend and flesh out his account of a dialectical communalism, and its main features – albeit expressed in different ways – can be found in contemporary social anarchist movements and theorists.

The book is not, however, without some weaknesses. The theory-rich, rigorously argued early chapters make Clark's text by no means an easy one for the non-specialist. The solid groundwork in Hegelian and neo-Hegelian thought, often cross-referenced with allusions to Lacan and Žižek, make this no introductory work, especially as some of the links to contemporary theory are not fully explained (see, for instance, 35 and 102). Clarity is further weakened by a number of vital phrases presented only in their original foreign language versions, without translation (see, for instance, 29, 30, 67, 76, and 86). Stronger editorial direction might have helped make this scholarly and pertinent text more accessible. It might, too, have drawn attention to some unnecessary repetition; for instance, there is the same account of Joel Kovel's definition of *spirit*, complete with the identical quotation (90-1, 237). In addition, it would have benefited from a formal concluding chapter to draw the different chapters together and point to this important study's wider implications.

A further problem concerns Clark's interpretation of 'ideology' in an orthodox Marxist, pejorative sense: 'false' or 'distorted' thinking to assist a ruling class (e.g. 2, 36, 89, and 124). It suggests that there are non-ideological social forms, a realm of universal true values, but this in conflict with Clark's own dialectical position, in which new values are historically emerging. It also appears to conflict with his analysis that successful social change requires transformations in ideology alongside institutional structures, the social imaginary and social ethos (32), and thus contains the implicit suggestion that radical change generates (and, in part, is generated by) ideology, so it cannot be reduced here simply to dominant ideas.

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There are similar questions raised by Clark's classification of goals: 'Impossible Possibility', an aspiration consistent with the dominant ideology but actually unrealisable; 'Impossible Impossibles', fantastic demands that are never achievable; and 'Possible Impossibles', goals that are achievable only outside of the distortions of the dominant structures. The question is, how is the difference between these categories known? For instance, Clark assumes that capitalism is based on 'endless material progress... a fundamental utopian fantasy of infinite powers of production and infinite possibilities for consumption' (127), what Clark posits as an 'Impossible Possibility'. But how does he know it is unachievable? Cannot capitalism continually find resources previously unrecognised as exploitable, or equally function by selling minimalism, or immaterial products as preferable consumer options? With classical and Althusserian Marxism, the difference between the 'ideological' and 'non-ideological' was resolved through appeals to science. For adherents of these traditions, a single, properly grounded method based on the natural sciences would enable the elect to see through ideology and identify the deceptions that make it an 'Impossible Possible'. However, as Clark rightly indicates with references to fellow Hegelians from the Frankfurt School, science itself is not value-neutral. Its practices and presuppositions are themselves value-laden and predicated on particular types of power-relationship and institutional infrastructure (103, 128).

But these are minor grumbles for a text that is wide-ranging and challenging in the best sense of the word. It fuses passion, will, and reason. It combines deep theory with practical examples of social transformation. Where there is sustained complex analysis, it is not gratuitous, it is pertinent to the overall argument, demonstrating how anarchism's account of social solidarity alongside a creative individualism is not Idealist, abstract, or contradictory. The intricate arguments are well illustrated by the latter, more descriptive and reflective chapter on the Katrina tragedy, and the sections on contemporary communal movements in the Indian sub-continent. As such, *The Impossible Community* makes a valuable contribution to those interested in the growing anarchistic social movements and how they link the local to the global.

About the author:

Benjamin Franks is a Lecturer in Social and Political Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. He is the author of *Rebel Alliances: The Means and Ends of Contemporary British Anarchisms* (AK Press) and co-editor of *Anarchism and Moral Philosophy* (Palgrave).