

In his first book, *Towards Collective Liberation (TCL)*, long-time activist and author Chris Crass distills lessons from his personal and political journey to synthesize a strategic, honest and challenging vision for how to build movements on the left. Placing his work within bell hooks's concept of collective liberation, Crass pushes his readers to understand and envision for themselves what collective liberation might look like.

Through each section, Crass's insight and context builds a foundation of transformative politics that push accountable leadership, transformative justice, organizational structure, patience, and praxis to the forefront.

Each essay and interview builds upon the last, presenting a gradual sense of evolution while extending Crass's emphasis far beyond the monochromatic lens of 'why movements fail.' The reader receives a meticulous, well-written and timely book that speaks both to younger activists emerging from the long shadow cast by Occupy, and to the veterans of movements from decades past.

Crass opens his work by telling us who he is, what he believes and how he got there. He establishes himself in the opening pages, including an "I believe..." rundown of his life principles and political commitments that ultimately arrives at collective liberation, the concept that anchors the next 300 pages.

On collective liberation, bell hooks writes, "Until we are able to accept interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle." Crass's political journey has brought him to a point of alignment with her understanding of intersectionality, which he positions as the key to effective organizing strategy and a free society.

In order to understand Crass's arrival at this point we must understand where his political journey began; where he came of age. And for Crass, like many young activists of his generation, it began with Food not Bombs (FNB). He provides context for the organization and a backstory for his early politics with a rundown of the basics of Anarchist philosophy, contemporary organizing on the Left and Anarchist history in the US.

Here Crass delivers a vivid, thoughtful and unflinchingly honest deconstruction of his experiences in FNB, unraveling much of the anarcho-left grounding that simultaneously strengthened FNB and made it accessible, but also helped neutralize it at various points.

With the San Francisco chapter serving as a case study Crass delivers a nuanced organizational critique that manages to avoid placing easy blame on consensus model decision-making, or the fact participation within FNB was very porous, allowing almost anyone to engage at any level, at any time. Instead he calls for an acknowledgement of structure and process; elements that allow for an organization to find its purpose, generate a firm political

grounding and ultimately work to shift power.

A critical issue, which never subsided during his involvement in the SF chapter, was how to achieve the overall mission of the organization. Many, when faced with the overwhelming daily need, felt providing an essential food service was the primary goal. Others sought direct action and constant agitation in the face of a municipal onslaught, while others saw the need for a more formal and structured approach to both the organization and their work as the most effective tactic.

In addition to a lack of tactical clarity, political development and agreement remained hazy within FNB. Political alignment and direction were often implied based on one's involvement and ability to fit within the aesthetic of the political scene. Baseline political agreements did exist, but were often assumed and their ability to shape FNB's work was lacking due to a lack of deeper collective political development within an often-fluid group.

The result was that FNB lacked direction in both its core work and in the politics driving that work. This was complicated further when individuals or splinter groups bucked the collective decision making process at the core of its organizational structure. Even when actions and suggestions were formally rejected in meetings, individuals could easily splinter off and proceed anyway, further pulling away resources while also undermining the process and structure of FNB. These structural flaws indicated inherent gaps in how FNB handled leadership and approached individual and organizational accountability. With no consistent agreement on tactics, FNB defaulted to moving in almost every direction possible, exhausting its capacity over time and diluting its power.

In its decentralized form of self-organization, FNB embraced an ethos of leaderless-ness and a culture of "there are no leaders here." In some ways, these aspects allowed FNB to thrive as a complex network of cookhouses that pulled off logistical miracles time and time again. Conversely, these ethos also generated a glut of other issues, as leadership was always taking place. The inertia of human relationships, coupled with structural privileges and access, were generating both de-facto leaders and an increasing sense of alienation.

Here Crass joins the organizational with the intersectional, delving into the social culture of FNB, which maintained an atmosphere that was most conducive to young white men's participation. Subsequently, those seen and respected as its "driving core" were predominantly working-class white men with class privilege.

This environment generated a consistent grouping of white men who were seen as the ones who "made things happen" or felt like they were the ones "got things done." Although this core was influenced by group conversations and was not immune to the demands of others, it further contributed to an atmosphere where leadership could neither be earned, shared, acknowledged nor effectively challenged.

Those who were in clear leadership roles were not actively building the leadership capacity of others around them. Their choices were only vaguely accountable to the sprawling decision-making process and the vague central political vision driving the group. Schisms and factionalism emerged, along with a counterproductive cycle that kept leadership insular, ineffective, and stagnant while preventing anyone from effectively building the organization.

Accountability to one another individually, organizationally and politically was also an issue within SF FNB. A lack of collective political development, individual maturity and basic political unity meant a dynamic analysis and understanding of privilege was frequently limited. Very rarely, as a group, was FNB able to move beyond basic ideas like, “racist statements are bad” or rudimentary anti-capitalist slogans like, “people over profit.”

As an organization, there was little time or value consistently placed on developing a self-reflective capacity, or a focus on developing an intersectional analysis of power that would mitigate some of the antagonisms inherent in such a diverse group. Instead these antagonisms played out through individual-level conflicts and that often had no resolution. At times these conflicts culminated in individuals or groups leaving the work altogether after continuous frustration or alienation.

Equally problematic was the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and the general air of male superiority within SF FNB. Persistent alienation forced many women out of the group or led to the creation of safer women-only spaces and cookhouses where women’s voices, efforts, capabilities, leadership and bodies were better respected.

The crisis and growing divide caused by frequent gender-based harassment, propelled FNB to develop some of its first semblances of internal organizational accountability. As a whole, SF FNB formally adopted a baseline commitment to challenge male superiority; not just acknowledge that it was “bad” and should not happen.

In order to challenge male superiority meaningfully, SF FNB institutionalized some of its politics and reconceptualized what it meant to participate. A realignment occurred; moving away from the concept of volunteers and towards one of members began to happen. By 1997 a more praxis based to approach to organizing occurred while expectations shifted to demand a level of interpersonal and organizational accountability.

The setbacks and progression towards positive internal growth did not occur in a vacuum. Throughout Crass’s account, he details the disruptive impact of the state repression, particularly the SFPD, which engaged in everything from clever infiltration to tactical and routine physical violence and criminal charges. SF FNB was perpetually hampered, attempting to effectively address internal structure and grow organizationally while simultaneously responding to external emergencies and attacks.

Ultimately, Crass’s observations are striking and poignant, a critical marker in the post-Occupy

left organizing. But they also leave an open-ended and grave question of how do we create movements that are balanced, structured, militant and still open while dealing with the repression that will inevitably come.

In the second section of TCL, Crass puts forth a series of personally reflective essays in response to the gradual evolution of his organizing and his academic studies. As his political consciousness, self-awareness and personal study deepen and shift, so too does the understanding of his whiteness, his class privilege and his relationship to patriarchy. Here he grounds his work and centers on a “prefigurative” approach to his politics. By incorporating a “vision of a future society into the struggle to get there,” Crass embraces the strategy of including and improving upon the practices needed to build the society that you wish to see.

The honesty in this section is both admirable and important, typified in the essay “Going to Places that Scare Me.” There he traces his emerging consciousness and understanding of his relationship to patriarchy and sexism and the challenges that are presented to his previous sense of self.

He writes, “It was terrifying because I could handle denouncing patriarchy and calling out other men from time to time, but to be honest about my own sexism, to connect political analysis/practice to my own emotional/psychological process, and to be vulnerable is scary.”

Crass urges his readers, particularly men, to become allies to one another and act as mentors, building from our own experiences and the challenges that we are confronted with day-to-day. He pushes the envelope for such discussion well into the personal and the emotional, setting a high bar for others to engage with.

This engagement extends beyond challenging one another to acknowledge that sexism exists or to be mindful of the seemingly universal male pastime of taking up space. He challenges men to ask questions and seek the internal answers necessary to challenge and explore what is happening on the outside. He urges that we, as men, ask ourselves- what are our emotions and what are the subconscious feelings we hold that bear the imprint of patriarchy? What do we feel entitled to? How do we feel about our capabilities in relation to others? How are our desires for attention and respect shaped?

Crass proceeds to share and draw out these challenges with a level of honesty that I have seen other men shy away from, myself included. It can be seen in just one example through his examination of his own patterns of objectification and male competition:

“I know that when I walk into rooms full of activists I instantly scan the room and divide people into hierarchies of status (how long they have been active, what groups they have been a part of, what they have written and where it’s been published, who their friends are). I position myself against them and feel the most competitive with men. With those I identify as women, the same status hierarchies are tallied, but heterosexual desirability enters my mind. What is healthy

sexual attraction and desire and how does it relate to my training to systematically reduce women's identities to sexualized objects?"

Crass posits patriarchy as not only a violent and costly systemic privilege that men enjoy, but one that deeply separates them from their own humanity and fractures their ability to maintain basic, healthy and loving relationships; even with themselves. Patriarchy introduces fear and doubt around the possibility of whether men can really build and share power with others.

Crass shifts into discussing his challenges around race. With the racially divided California of the 80's and 90's as his formative backdrop, he traces his sharpest lines around his experience in the rapidly diversifying public university system.

The battlegrounds drawn over ethnic studies within the university system, among other fights, prove to be fertile ground for challenging his internalized white supremacy. Here he develops some of his first elements of an anti racist practice, oscillating fluidly between analysis and personal reflection as he wrestles with the reality of aligning himself, in struggle, with other students of color.

Ultimately he returns to patriarchy to powerfully conclude this section. Crass's essay "Against Patriarchy," lays out a twenty-point recommendation for men to develop a base of feminist politics that challenge male supremacy in their lives.

Several recommendations stood out for me, personally, because of how often they are overlooked. In Crass's seventeenth point he takes time to discuss emotional labor and its role in creating, healing and nurturing political spaces. He writes, "Take time to emotionally support other people and deepen your understanding of the political significance of emotional work to building liberatory culture, community and movement. " It serves as an unambiguous contrast to the male culture that is emotionally closed off and centered on competition.

Crass's eighteenth and nineteenth points roll into one another and present two firm challenges. He asks men to, "Learn about the impact of sexual violence on the lives of women and gender-oppressed people," while emphasizing supporting survivors through generating safer spaces.

Inherent in meeting the challenge presented above, is the nineteenth recommendation, in which he asks men to explore and understand their relationships to one another. Crass acknowledges the logical tendency for men to drift away from other men as they become more allied with women and gender-oppressed peoples. He notes, "[this] makes sense because many of us have experienced male violence, with our political commitments and identities additionally making us targets."

Understanding our relationship to one another and our relationships to violence both as perpetrators, benefactors, bystanders and survivors is critical for building with other men.

Equally important within this, is resisting the urge to fall into the trap of “good men” versus “bad men.” This binary relationship leaves no room for men to make mistakes, be accountable, and receive feedback while also never being cast away.

Although the list is extensive and by no means meant to be comprehensive or flawlessly prescriptive, there are one or two key gaps. Men’s fluid and nuanced relationship (along racial, ethnic and class lines) to their own masculinity and to their own sexuality isn’t directly mentioned or drawn out nearly as well as it could be.

There is also no explicit or detailed mention of parenting, mentoring or understanding the responsibilities that come with the modeling that we intentionally or unintentionally provide to other young men.

It is in the wide range of relationships we hold as fathers, brothers, co-workers, friends, etc. where we often influence and shape one another the most. These relationships are always sites of struggle and change as we negotiate our relationships to one another and a variety of difficult concepts, among them fatherhood and healthier masculinities.

As men, our capacity to support one another in this area of struggle is often overlooked, avoided or couched in reinforcing the hetero-patriarchal tropes that further divide us. A more concerted and deliberate effort towards building supportive communities of critical support is needed.

The third section of TCL further expands upon leadership development and organizational power; centralizing legendary civil-rights leader Ella Baker and her approach to leadership development within a framework that builds movement power and sustainability. Crass also incorporates elements of his experience in FNB as a foil to draw out some of the points explored here.

Crass is succinct in his aim to build a practice of anti-authoritarian leadership. He shrewdly points out the flaws in “anti-power” and “anti-leadership” approaches to organizing and it’s linkage to white privilege. As an alternative, Crass calls for an understanding of power and leadership that actively wrestles with it’s endemic contradictions while still building organizational power.

The alternative he presents is based in Ella Baker’s approach to the politics of empowerment and her aim to “transform the organizer.” A shift whereby leadership is exemplified by someone who encourages participation, skills development, analyzes the self-confidence of others and builds organizational power rather than their own.

Crass doesn’t shy away from difficulties in enacting Baker’s model or the contradictions inherent with leadership itself. Towards the end, he presents a torrent of questions, none of which have easy answers, but each of which embraces the gray areas they introduce and the challenges that are felt in addressing them. Crass moves away from the binary that leads to a total

rejection of leadership and stitches together an outline that confronts the realities of uniting theory and practice.

In the fourth section of the book, Crass gives depth to collective liberation as a working concept through extensive interviews with other collectives and political groupings from around the country. In many ways, it is perhaps the real guts of TCL and by far the densest section; with each interview adding flesh to the bones of the various frameworks that Crass has laid out.

I was immediately drawn to the interview with the Catalyst Project, a group co-founded by Crass, whose work operates as a parallel model to my own within the Challenging Male Supremacy Project in New York City.

Catalyst's mission is to challenge white supremacy through an approach to anti-racist organizing that builds a base of white people who are committed to justice through centralizing anti-oppression organizing in their own work. They move towards this goal through generating a supportive space to develop their political praxis and by working in both short and long term capacities with other organizations.

Political education, as approached by Catalyst, is not merely aimed at teasing out the right behavior, but as an opening to a larger systemic analysis that fosters the emergence of a liberatory vision, strategy, consciousness and cultural shift in white communities. Whites taking on this work are better positioned to fight racism and mitigate violence in their communities and elsewhere.

Their work is generally longer-term in nature in order to help build frameworks for individuals and the groups they are organizing in. In the words of Catalyst, "otherwise, there's a high-risk that one-time trainings will be misused as 'Here's my gold star certifying me as an anti-racist,' or 'Oh we already did that,' in a way that actually undercuts the importance of ongoing commitment, education and action."

Catalyst acknowledges the politics of guilt and shame in relation to anti-racist work, but presses far beyond the momentum of those emotions. Admittedly, many of its members arrived at this work carrying some of that emotional weight, as is natural when unearthing long hidden mechanisms of oppression that drive white supremacy and sustain white privilege. In their words, "Coming from this background, our organization first approached anti-racist work from a fear-driven and damage-control perspective, in which we tried to control our own and other white people's individual behavior without actually tackling the systems and institutions that prop up and perpetuate white supremacy."

To bridge that gap, Catalyst moved from a "strictly anti-oppression" lens to one that embraced the term of collective liberation as laid out by bell hooks. Within that structure, anti-racist work is positioned as a mutual struggle to end racism and not merely a struggle "for or on behalf of" people of color.

For Catalyst, taking action is also critically important and rather than critiquing or sniping from the sidelines it is a central driving force in their approach. In their view, “White anti-racists need to be doing, not just talking. Picking things apart is a skill white people are more interested in, than doing the slow and difficult practice of organizing- meeting people where they are at, bringing people together, building organizations and alliances, developing long-term strategies with short-term plans, and implementing organizing efforts that have the possibility to transform people’s daily lives towards our larger visions of liberation.”

For some traditionalists on the Left, a group doing the work of Catalyst is engaging in what has gradually become, in their view, a pitfall of modern Left. Catalyst is positioned in that framework as a neutralizing force, one that engages with the politics of privilege as a response to historical and structural oppression, in lieu of working towards powerful action.

Catalyst’s work breaks down this simplistic narrative and moves beyond the archetypes that many associate with anti-oppression organizing. They succeed in accomplishing both a balance and tension between self-critique, personal development and political action. Their example provides an image of what collective liberation might look like, while also presenting powerful challenges that extend far beyond shaping the activist, or refining the political culture.

The final and fifth section, entitled “We Can Do This,” is honestly one of my personal favorites, and arguably, may become one of yours too. These short essays, specifically aimed at organizers, serve as radical encouragement that is both appreciative and introspective.

The subsection, “Focusing on Assets rather than Deficits,” reminds us to take stock of what is going right, keeping us out of the negative spirals that contaminate the ways in which we view our actions and efforts as insufficient. An emphasis on developing a “both/and” framework instead of a binary “either/ or” framework is also explored. By incorporating a “both/and” lens we draw out the complexities of situations and ideas. The result is a shift from trying to create perfect “mistake-free” movements towards uncovering the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to organizing.

There is a thoughtful urgency that can be felt throughout TCL. The words bleed onto the reader at times and the desire that is present throughout is often palpable. Like a deeply personal letter to organizers who feel bound towards a different world rather than just existing in a woefully inadequate one.

At the end of TCL, I appreciated the sincerity, integrity and deep emotion that went into its creation. Perhaps most of all, the level of introspection and depth to one’s personal journey reverberates in all of its wonderful complexity. Crass shines, ultimately putting forth a valuable and thoroughly engaging work that displays his distinctive and eloquent voice.