Free Range Egghead
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Juan Carlos Mijangos Noh (2025) Creating an Anarchist Community: How can Students from a Neoliberal University Participate?, Anarchist Studies, 33(2), 82-105.

This is the last of the articles from the two 2025 issues of Anarchist Studies which I've got round to reviewing. It turned out to be much more interesting than I'd expected, and I'll admit I was put off by the title. I was expecting an exercise in reflexive self-flagellation and contradiction-mongering. In fact, this is a very interesting piece about everyday anarchist or anarcho-adjacent practice by the author and their students, in a Mayan community in Mexico.

The article examines the Centro Comunitario de Canicab (CCC) in Yucatán, Mexico, as a lived experiment in anarchist education, community-building, and direct action. In fact, the author is one of the founders and funders of the CCC, who bought land and set up the project in 2012, in Canicab, which

is a Mayan community in Yucatán. He bought out the others involved in 2020 is is now effectively the patron and informal leader of the CCC.

Drawing on over a decade of participatory experience and qualitative testimonies from university student volunteers, Juan Carlos Mijangos Noh argues that anarchist and emancipatory educational practices can emerge within and alongside neoliberal university structures when grounded in horizontality, collective decision-making, and community engagement. The CCC is presented as a microcosm of anarchist praxis in which academic knowledge, popular education, and direct action intersect. A long subsection is also devoted to showing that the university in question fits a particular definition of a neoliberal university – something which, strangely, is done mainly by reference to its bureaucratic structures and declarations (not its everyday functioning).

The CCC has provided wells, irrigation, electricity, internet, and a phone antenna, and organized activities such as trips, movies, football tournaments, theatre, health support, literacy education, sex education for women, and classes in art, radio editing, theatre, and photography. They have a large horticultural garden which they maintain on an ecological basis. The author claims that locals are now taking leadership in CCC activities (i.e. making most of the proposals for activities), with students acting as helpers. In principle, anyone can take part, although there are restrictions that they may not proselytize for partisan views or act on behalf of institutions, and a rather vaguer criterion of treating others 'with respect.' The CCC also uses participatory action research (PAR) in all its activities. The student participants are from the author's own university and are often his own students. He describes them as students of 'altruistic and selfless nature' who freely give their resources, time, effort, and knowledge to the CCC and develop a caring and loving relationship to the local women and children. Most volunteers are women.

Neoliberal universities are problematized in several ways. Firstly, they are based on the "false premise" that there is no alternative to capitalism. Secondly, they embed ideas of "epistemological superiority," i.e. the primacy of certain knowledges over others, the belief that 'higher education sets us apart' as 'superior.' Thirdly – although this is treated as part of the second issue – they are vulnerable to criticisms from alt- and anti-schooling authors such as Ferrer, Steiner, Illich, and Holt.

Central to the analysis is an expanded understanding of direct action, conceptualized not merely as resistance to the state but as any collective activity undertaken without mediation by state, bureaucratic, corporate, or party institutions (i.e. as roughly the same thing as a union of egoists, autonomy, immediatism, or everyday anarchy). Through activities such as popular theatre workshops and collaborative educational projects with children and adolescents, participants co-created learning spaces attentive to play, fairness, creativity, and mutual respect. These practices are framed as anarchist insofar as they emphasize autonomy, consensus, and the transformation of social relations through practice rather than ideology alone.

A significant component of the CCC's work is the protection and revitalization of biocultural heritage through a community garden dedicated to conserving Yucatán's ethnoflora. This project is situated within long-standing Mayan traditions of land stewardship and challenges colonial and capitalist assumptions that devalue manual labour and Indigenous knowledge. By engaging university students in agricultural and manual work, the CCC disrupts the hierarchical separation between intellectual and manual labour, illustrating the anarchist principle of "integral education" (the integration of theory/practice or manual/intellectual learning). Student testimonies are said to reveal processes of unlearning academic superiority, cultivating humility, and developing respect for community-based knowledge (although this does not seem from the account given to be an indoctrination

process, more a direct appreciation of people and places they're working with).

The discussion situates these practices within anarchist educational theory, drawing on Suissa, Taibo, Honeywell, and Graeber to argue that anarchist action does not require explicit ideological identification. Even when participants do not label their activities as anarchist, their practices -self-organization, horizontality, non-hierarchical learning, and collective responsibility - constitute anarchist forms of social action. The CCC is thus framed as an "experiment in active democracy," demonstrating how political consciousness and emancipatory values can emerge through lived experience. Mijangos Noh suggests that it is misleading to assume that students trained in neoliberal universities necessarily reproduce, promote, or adhere to neoliberalism.

The article concludes that the CCC's sustained existence demonstrates the feasibility of anarchist educational projects within constrained institutional contexts, while acknowledging the specific conditions—tenure, union protections, supportive administrators, and politically critical students—that enabled its development. Ultimately, the CCC is presented as evidence that anarchist practices foster community, equality, and care rather than disorder, offering a hopeful model for creating emancipatory spaces on the margins of capitalism and patriarchy.

What it means for radicals: Social centres and land projects are longstanding anarchist approaches. In this case, as often in Latin America, these approaches are combined with aspects of leftist organizing and poststructuralist/identity-political thought, creating something with elements of horizontalism.

I'm concerned about the circularity of the argument provided, as the article is effectively someone reviewing their own work. The author is involved in a highly formative way in the project discussed and seems to be its most powerful member. It

ous reality and things the researchers haven't yet discovered. This is partly why local knowledge systems are usually better than western-style scientific knowledge in understanding precise details of local situations. While a person who pays attention to sensuous reality and local variations *and* has a lot of "book-learning" will usually know more and be more skilled, an external "expert" who ignores sensuous reality will not. Unfortunately, these genuine problems with knowledge-claims are all too often indexed to guilt-tripping, ego-bashing, conflations of knowledge with positionality or hierarchy or status, etc. At a practical level, empirical skills matter.

is almost trivial, therefore, to say that the project corresponds to the author's political vision; they are comparing this vision to itself. At best, the author is showing that their vision can be partially actualized in the described ways, or that the project is consistent with the vision behind it.

A CCC lodging house, from the group's Facebook page.

However, I'm worried about the evidence being biased by the author's position in the project studied. We have to rely both on the author's awareness and their honesty with regard issues such as the extent to which the project meets community needs, whether locals are 'taking leadership', whether internal hierarchies exist, etc. Thus for example, locals 'take leadership' in that they propose more ideas for projects, but these projects are then run through the standard PAR process, which is imported from outside. There's lots of versions of PAR, but it seems to have its origins in the Maoist mass line method, in which problems and concerns at the mass level are fed into the party machine and then fed back to the masses as the party line, usually with selections and modifications, and in a constantly repeated dialectical process.

There are also no details of how the 'no politics' and 'respect' rules play out in practice (and this is vital to whether the CCC space is in fact anarchic or dominatory). I have experience with anarchist projects for children and adolescents from poor backgrounds, and my impression is that it is impossible to induce these children to act 'respectfully' towards one another or anyone else, or to refrain from partisan bickering. It's also my experience that, if a group of non-anarchist locals come together around a campfire or in a circle, they will sooner or later start discussing something touching on politics. This might be different in a traditional Mayan village, but I wonder if there is moral enforcement going on. There also seems to be a strange disjunction between the prohibition on partisan politics and the explicitly ethico-political agenda of the project. Perhaps the author only means that participants shouldn't fight over

party politics, or that party-political recruitment is prohibited. Or perhaps the project's own embedded politics are somehow excluded from a prohibition which applies to *everything else* political, creating a political monopoly. It's hard to tell.

We're also reliant on the most powerful person in the project for the information that it is horizontal, even though he is writing about it in a sole-authored article. He does not clarify whether the land is now owned collectively by the project, or if he remains in control of the resources the project depends on. If he owns the land and facilities, then the project's horizontalism depends very strongly on his own inhibition in using the resultant power; he is effectively a landlord, in a region where the authority of non-Mayan landlords is entrenched. In positional terms, he doesn't mention whether he's of Mayan ethnicity, but he is a man who seems to be working in a project involving mainly women and children, and has a highly-paid middle-class job, whereas other participants presumably either students or peasants. He also seems very enthusiastic to identify the project with local Mayan cosmologies, and with anarchism, when it seems to have its main basis in participatory leftism. Indeed, he doesn't have much to say about Mayan cosmology beyond its being eco-friendly, which makes me wonder if he's even tried to relate to locals on this level.

He also does not explain why he fell out with the half-dozen or so co-founders, who were initially going to live in houses on one part of the site. This contrasts with the article about agro-ecology I reviewed recently, where the reasons for departures from the core group are clearly described. And it stands out to me because schisms in anarchist and leftist projects often involve political disagreements or fallings-out involving domineering individuals. It is certainly conceivable that the author's other-centric, community-based, participatory-leftist viewpoint contrasted with those of others who were interested either in co-housing to meet their own needs and desires, or in

easy to realise for anyone taking part in a practical task, even if the issue is always empirical and therefore open.

Critiques such as those made by Illich, Holt, Ferrer, and Steiner seem to me largely valid, but they are not critiques based on the idea that all knowledge is equal. Rather, they object to some combination of the desituated context of formal education, the authoritarian hidden curriculum, the arbitrary limitation of positions to "educated" people, the wider social effects of schooling, and/or the tendency for current schools to try to mould people into conformists who think authorities hold the truth. Educational qualifications do not necessarily indicate superior knowledge, but they *sometimes* index greater knowledge or skill in some particular area. After all, someone has usually spent years reading about or working within a particular research area. If they don't know more, then it's either because the course content is false or grossly incomplete, or because they don't engage properly with the course content, or because the form-content contradiction is too sharp. For example, someone who has taken a driving course and a driving test will *usually* be a better driver than someone who hasn't, even though it's quite possible to be a skilled driver without taking a course. Someone with a medical degree will *usually* be better at identifying diseases within a biomedical model and in identifying effective treatments within this model, although there's effective autodidacts and there's qualified doctors who bought their degrees.

The debates around epistemic privilege in fact conflate a number of distinct issues. One of these is the pre-training selection of specialisms; for example, someone with a medical degree will usually be ignorant of ayurvedic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, holistic medicine, local healing practices, etc. They will likely feel superior to others who know these other systems, and there isn't much of a basis for this beyond a faith in a certain methodology. Another is that even the best training and knowledge still runs up against sensu-

commitment is necessarily reactive and self-contradictory, and this is likely to undermine projects both practically and at the level of enjoyment/commitment.

A union of egoists can exist *without* such a service ethos, and still be radically other from capitalism or statism. Indeed, I feel such an ethos tends to reproduce hierarchies in two ways: because it creates an inverted hierarchy built on the "humility" of people defined as less radical because of their positionality (here, the student volunteers), and because it ties the entire group to a phantasm of ethical responsibility which is imposed initially by the outsider leaders. Now, egoists can also have fellow-feeling and desires to help others, leading to what is usually called altruism. But the establishment of altruism as a criterion for participation of certain kinds of people (in this case, students and academics) suggests that it is operating as a phantasm, a compulsory morality which determines whether someone can be part of the group.

In my view, radical politics should be conducted as a dispersal of power and of social life, a withdrawal of mana from the system and its cathexis into other phenomena (which either exit, fight, or rearrange/subvert the system). This process becomes more powerful as infrapolitical strength is developed. People certainly need to realise when there are limits to their (present) knowledge or power, but the valorization of humility in a context of authoritarian phantasmal ideologies is extremely dangerous. A humble person all too easily defers to phantasms and authorities. Radicals instead need pride and will, and a focus on capabilities. There is nothing wrong with being, or knowing one is, knowledgeable, strong, capable, etc., as long as the belief is *true*. This doesn't lead to hierarchies or authority in a dominatory sense. It just means someone's more capable of doing certain things. The actual capability to understand or to do something is not simply an epistemic privilege attached to an arbitrarily favoured way of seeing. Some ways of doing things work better than others. This is

other models of development or community, or that the others grew tired of moral browbeating and crypto-authoritarianism. It's also possible that the others were less radical, more sympathetic to the state, more authoritarian, or simply weren't prepared for the difficulties of life in a poor rural area. A number of them were academics from less political disciplines than the author's (he's an anthropologist), and he's brought in students from departments such as engineering, tourism, and mathematics. I wonder if vocational and STEM students share the author's enthusiasm for criticizing modern knowledge.

There is an evidence base other than the author's own experience, because some of the paper relies on testimonies of students. But these interviews are conducted by the more-powerful project founder, and by his own admission, who were often his own students at university. I'm sceptical whether less powerful actors would be honest about shortcomings of the project in such interviews. At the very least, his own university teaching on issues such as humility and social justice will likely have influenced his students, rather than these ideas emerging from experience as he claims. We're not talking here about students who go to work on a land project from their own motives; we're talking about students who have been taught particular political approaches and then recruited by their teacher into an initiative based on these approaches. Also, as in all studies using interviews, we're also reliant on the author's selection of interviewees and of which quotes to choose. I don't usually point this out, but in this case it further complicates the issues with the evidence provided. Because of the relationship between the topic of study and the personal activities of the scholar, the author's claims basically rely on trust. I'm not sure, but this might also be a problem with the participatory methodologies and theory/practice integrations the author advocates theoretically. Participants nearly always develop biases, especially if they are not aiming for ethnographic neutrality, and only some of the participants

will recount their particular experiences in the resultant academic articles and books. One thus ends up with a story told from the standpoint of the more powerful or well-situated people in the "community," to a much greater extent than happens with unconscious biases of purportedly neutral scholars. This quite often ends in a double-bind: the author *admits* they are biased, ethically/politically motivated, part of what they study, so that it is disqualified as a criticism, and yet they still write *as if* their work is some kind of objective scholarship recounting truth (even if they deny this).

I'm perhaps being too cruel to the CCC, which I otherwise know nothing about. It certainly seems to be doing quite a few worthwhile things, in a way which *might* be non-authoritarian. Semi-anarchist projects which also involve aspects of Maoism, service ethos, decolonial theory, communitarianism, and traditional hierarchical leftism are relatively common throughout Latin America, and it's very hard from afar to tell those which are authoritarian ventures with a horizontalist veneer from those which approximate anarchism in practice.

From what we know from the author, it's *possible* that the dynamic involves a dominant male lecturer bringing their mostly female students to do unpaid service work on a project which captures the support of local women and children, but in a manner which displaces and excludes local men and customary authorities through its other-centric ethos and 'respect' policies – something akin to a leftist church mission. Or, this might be my imagination. It's hard to know.

In terms of theory and analysis, Mijangos Noh either does not wish to stray far from anarcho-communist or postmodernist-identity-political concepts, or else is not aware of other forms of anarchism. Hence one finds in the theory section a reliance on Malabou's (Derridean) definition of anarchism, discussions of decolonial theory, other-centric ethics, worries about centring the right social groups, etc. He *does* refer to Graeber's discussion of Scottian autonomy in

patible groups or communities. Also, ideas such as "community" raise issues about whether the initiative in question is fully autonomous. It seems to me that the idea of a unitary community, a community-as-phantasm which never exists and to which participants are subordinate, lurks in the background here.

Anyway, I think the author's implicit response to the totalizing position is too sympathetic to this position. A lot of truth has to be conceded to the implied adversary to justify the extent to which the exclusion of the CCC from totalizing critiques is indexed to other-centrism, local leadership, particular methodologies, humility, etc. I was hoping at first that Mijangos Noh was making a general argument that anarchist social centres and non-hierarchical DIY projects are always valuable, but this does not seem to be the case. He's trying to rebut a critique that he takes as stronger than it is – relying on its strength to keep the critique somewhat incomplete. And he's trying to rebut a critique which, on its own terms, cannot be rebutted. If someone dogmatically assumes that everything touched by the system turns into the system (whether we call the system capitalism, state, modernity, patriarchy, etc.), then the kind of rebuttal attempted here is logically impossible. It is therefore always articulated as a a kind of paradox, a "nevertheless…", where something which should ground a rejection of the dogmas is instead used to create self-contradictory exceptions to them.

Worryingly, there seems to be a political vision here in which Mijangos Noh and the student participants take themselves to be in the service of the people, and consciously attempt to subordinate their own will to that of locals who they proactively brought into the project. This is distinctly either Maoist or Christian Marxist, and reflects a masochistic, other-centric way of relating in which one nonetheless remains the vital mediator in triggering the others' "spontaneous" agency. The structure of desire in such a self-abasing

unified totality, and therefore, if one rejects the idea that involvement in a system automatically entails total absorption, then the problem disappears. The question, rather, becomes, "is the dominant system so attractive/seductive/epistemically powerful that someone working in systemic and non-systemic spaces that the systemic spaces are more important?" Since this is an *empirical* question, it provides a basis for studying *when and where* the system tends to overwhelm and recuperate what coexists with it, and *when and where* what coexists with it is more powerful, or simply able to subsist alongside it. The dogmatic totalist critique is easily sidestepped, and shown to be untrue in practice, because it is not true that *in every case* the system absorbs whatever exists alongside it.

Social life is not unitary; "society" as an aggregate does not exist. Rather, social relations exist as properties of multiple individuals, or even of sub-individual units such as the id and the ego. People therefore can and do take part in different and even incommensurable relations. While participating in a neoliberal university, students are participating in a *non-anarchist* community, a society arranged around a spook – with or without some degree of critical distance or subversive activity. They might *also* be participating in unions of egoists, and these might be the focus of their alignment, where they use up more of their mana. They might even be taking part in other groups incommensurable with both of these. For example, I've heard of someone who was simultaneously involved in anarchist groups, fascist groups, and liberal journalism. It caused a scandal when this was found out, but nonetheless, it was possible for a long time. We might never know which (if any) of these positions was the person's primary affiliation, which if any they were committed to, whether they were strategically using all three, held a position with elements of all three, or infiltrated two of them on behalf of the third. But this is a question of the psychological strength of different motives. People can and do take part in distinct and even ideologically incom-

Madagascar as a case of the same phenomenon he's discussing. Maoism is probably somewhere in the background as well, what with the idea of sending students to do farm work and the worries about favouring "book-learning" over the experiences of "the people". PAR also contains elements of Maoist dialectics, though also contributions from Freire, Boal, and others. Although the author talks as if PAR is a strict method, there are actually many different versions and it is unclear which he uses.

Similar ideas of everyday anarchy are already present in the works of Hakim Bey, Colin Ward, James Scott, Martin Buber, Stirner, and Kropotkin among others, and with a different conceptual language, in autonomous Marxism. In Stirner, a "union of egoists," a term encompassing anything from a group of children meeting to play a game to a longstanding social movement, is contrasted with the usual kind of "society," which is organized around and integrated by a spook. The participants don't have to be egoist-anarchists; it only matters that they're acting from desire or will. In Bey, particularly "Immediatism versus Capitalism," immediatist organizations are taken to encompass anything which is not part of the state, capital, or Spectacle, which is done from desire or for pleasure. The simplest of these, such as the bee and tong, are low-level, partial associations for limited purposes which nonetheless do not go by way of systemic mediations.

Ward builds on Kropotkin, Buber, and Landauer to theorize the social and political principles as opposite forces within social life. Loosely, the social principle involves direct voluntary connections for mutual aid, pleasure, meeting needs, etc., while the political principle involves hierarchical dyadic compulsory relationships within social totality-machines. On this basis, Ward argues that everyday anarchy is pervasive – something like the Milton Keynes voluntary music scene is taken as anarchic because it uses the social principle and not the political, even though participants are not political anarchists. I've

seen others use the term "unconscious anarchism" in this case; for example, the early 1970s feminist movement used anarchist structures without much conscious awareness of anarchism and without many members identifying as anarchist. One also gets here into the terrain of whether (some or all) uncolonized and resistant indigenous groups are forms of everyday anarchy – an issue appearing in authors like Gelderloos, Barclay, Clastres, Zerzan, etc. Here too, methods identifiable in an etic (observer-defined) way as anarchist or anarchic exist, but without any basis in (western) anarchist theory or identification as anarchist.

In Scott the overlap I'm thinking of is with ideas of public- and hidden-transcript spaces. People in dominatory societies – peasants, slaves, serfs, subordinate groups in highly racist systems, people oppressed on the basis of caste, etc. – are forced into association on a basis controlled by the ruling group. However, they also form their own spaces from which the ruling group is excluded as much as possible. In these spaces, they articulate their own discourse, the hidden transcript, which forms a basis both for everyday acts of resistance (ranging from grumbling and gossiping to firestarting and sabotage) and for the discourse which emerges in insurrectionary conditions. The people who rise up in the latter case are in a sense a radical community, but up to this point they have always been involved in a range of spaces existing along the public/hidden continuum.

The singularization of "community" causes many of the problems here. Communities are usually regarded in social theory as enclosed entities which contain their members as parts, in a similar manner to bodies and organs, or machines and components. On this basis, it is illogical or at least difficult for someone to entirely belong to the neoliberal community as a continuous totality, and to belong also to a second, anarchist or communist or anti-neoliberal community. In what circumstances can someone say "my arm is also your

arm"? Conjoined twins, perhaps; but otherwise they can only say this metaphorically. So, the question "can students at a neoliberal university – part of community A – also be part of an anarchist community – part of community B?" becomes a difficult theoretical question. Rephrase the question as: "can a person who spends part of their life/time/mana in a neoliberal university also spend part of their life/time/mana in an anarchist space?", and the paradox disappears. The answer is usually yes, unless one space excludes the other either by a strong and enforced prohibition or a monopoly on a person's time/space. It's possible for people to belong to all kinds of microsocial clusters, even utterly incompatible ones (at least one person was simultaneously involved in anarchist groups, fascist groups, and liberal journalism).

Lurking on the edges of this question is the position – taken by certain totalizing theorists like Lukacs, Althusser, Foucault on certain readings, Tiqqun, Derrida, Butler, etc. – that the dominant system is an overarching totality containing (almost or entirely) everything, that it is inescapable and determinant, and that anything that is not a *total* exit from it is not an exit at all. One historical consequence of this belief is Marxists and ancoms denouncing (post-left) anarchists for what they take to be mere "lifestylism" – denying the distinct non-capitalist logic of such phenomena as squatting, social centres, DIY living, Travellers, raves, dropping-out, etc. For totalists, "lifestylists" are actually deeply embedded in the system and are just varying their consumption patterns slightly, or modifying the system around the edges. The older totalist Marxism is rarer today, but it's very common for identity politicians to be totalists in this sense, and I've also come across anti-civ variants which lead to passive or else apocalyptic nihilism. Mijangos Noh is implicitly arguing against this view in the case of social centres and community groups in particular (or at least regarding the CCC).

If one instead thinks of relations as diverse and non-continuous, as taking a form which does not amount to a