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Book Review

By Karen Schmidt

Sustainable [R]evolution: Permaculture in Ecovillages, Urban Farms, and Communities Worldwide. By Juliana Birnbaum and Louis Fox. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2014, 368 pp. ISBN: 9781583946480.

In a world where there are growing food and water shortages due to climate change and industrial farming, and where neoliberal politics are increasing the divide between the one percent and the other 99 percent, it is important to be reminded that there are alternative ways of living and thriving. In *Sustainable [R]evolution*, Juliana Birnbaum and Louis Fox provide myriad examples of places where people have taken control of their lives, their food, and their environments in order to reduce or eliminate their reliance on the global economic system. Through well-supported and researched profiles, the authors take the reader on a journey of hope and possibility, highlighting the way that permaculture principles are creating regenerative and sustainable farms, communities, and ecovillages.

Sustainable [R]evolution is a compilation of 60 permaculture endeavours from around the world, including individual property owners, ecovillages, urban farms, and intentional communities. Over 40 people contributed to the 60 profiles, with each profile ranging in length from two to six pages. The intent of the authors is to bring regenerative design strategies to a larger audience to encourage its use as a mainstream approach to community development. As the authors position the book: "*Sustainable Revolution* can be used as a catalogue, reference tool, and guide to the culture of regenerative design around the world" (p. 20). In a nutshell, the book is an introduction to permaculture as a cultural movement. The authors show that by coming together in community, the neoliberal economy can indeed be challenged. "The small brave acts of the many, collected together," the authors emphatically write, "can create the synergy needed for a cultural shift" (p. 14), underscoring how anyone can make these kinds of changes.

The book is a wealth of information and beautiful images perfect for anyone interested in learning more about how to live separately from the global economy. Due to the depth and breadth of the examples, it is inspiring and practical at the same time. The book includes examples of individual homesteaders through to communities of one thousand people. It shows how permaculture can be used in rural as well as urban areas; how permaculture can be effective in areas as small as a few hectares and with as few as a couple of people. Many of the profiles in the book particularly highlight how land that is barren, destroyed by chemicals, or experiencing extreme drought can be



changed into an ecological haven of plant and wildlife using permaculture principles. Given the dire environmental situation today, this accessible and compelling book is a welcome contribution to the discourse on alternatives.

The way in which the book is written allows for an inviting exploration of the many ways permaculture can manifest itself in development. Not all of the profiled sites started with permaculture as a goal. In fact, at many of the sites, the people just needed somewhere to live and food to eat. But by embracing a more sustainable lifestyle, the authors argue, these people have found a way to either remove themselves from the global economy, or at least drastically reduce their dependence on it.

Although the authors share in reporting the book's information with over 40 different experts and practitioners, the authors did an admirable job in maintaining a consistent voice. The format of each profile was just different enough to keep things interesting and to highlight the unique things about each property. Between profiles there are one-to-two-page articles, which go into further depth about an issue or strategy. Examples include passive solar design, local currencies, social permaculture, and biochar (a process that creates a fine charcoal by converting waste for soil enhancement). As the articles are interspersed throughout the book, the reader might experience some frustration in that information is not always directly where you need it. It would be easier if information were presented with the first mention of a new topic. As well, it may have been beneficial to have had a few more articles explaining concepts such as swales or rocket stoves, which are mentioned many times but never fully explained. There is a certain assumption being made that the reader will already be familiar with these terms. Another shortcoming with the book is that challenges and failed projects are rarely mentioned. It would be interesting and useful, for instance, to know how many failed projects there are in relation to successful ones. The book makes permaculture seem almost magical and the reality might be a much different story.

Because permaculture is a series of principles, not a set of rules or actions, it can be difficult to imagine what it might look like, let alone what it might look like in very different climatic regions. *Sustainable [R]evolution* shows us what permaculture looks like at its best in five different climatic zones. Birnbaum and Fox have created an incredible reference for anyone who wants to know what permaculture is and what it can be. They have shown us just how broadly the concepts can be integrated and how permaculture is a very viable alternative to industrial farming.

Permaculture is a viable and efficacious tool that communities can use in their quest for independence from global markets and the neoliberal agenda. In many developing countries, industrial agriculture has destroyed natural ecosystems and left them unable to pay their national debts. By using permaculture principles and stepping outside of the neoliberal economy, communities are building social capital, securing food and water sources, and creating opportunities for growth and development. In this regard the book is an important contribution to the community economic development literature and debates. The book is also particularly relevant to social economy researchers and practitioners in that many of the featured groups can be considered social economy businesses.

We have already seen a shift in the economic practices of countries that can no longer afford to live in a neoliberal society. Unfortunately, as is the case with most change, it only happens when necessity dictates that it must. In *Sustainable [R]evolution*, the authors hope that "change will come through a global design re-evolution, not a bloody revolution" (p. 14). If more people live their lives through the principles of permaculture and sustainable living, we may just be able to avoid global conflict and finally find the peace we are looking for.

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