

The Safety of Anarchy

By Florence Forbush, 2018

Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) wrote in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) how urban planning in her day leads to the destruction of communities, more crime, more disease and dissatisfied people. Her critique of state intervention in the form of urban renewal projects spear-headed by urban planners leads her to recount personal and public experiences of how and why safety, community and prosperity exists in American cities.¹

While Jacobs' does not argue directly for the abolition of the state, her belief in "eyes on the street" (awareness of and direct watching of the street) as a requirement for ongoing safety ultimately requires an allowance and support of individual liberty and communal ownership in the absence of, or at least independent of, state intervention. The concept of eyes on the street centers around individuals who feel both investment in the local community and a sense of personal liberty to support, heal and push that same community to thrive. That in the absence of individual liberty and communal ownership there are no eyes on the street and as a consequence crime prospers and communities fall. We see this supported in numerous examples throughout the text, although Jacobs never goes so far as to assert a need for complete independence from the state. Yet in each example showing successful street safety it is independent of the state and sometimes in direct opposition to the state². Street safety specifically and community prosperity broadly can only be accomplished and maintained independent of and/or in active opposition to a state³.

1 Jacobs, Jane. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1992. 3-25

2 Ibid., 29-54 112-140

3 Analysis influenced by: Holmes, R. and Gan, B. (2011). *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice*. 3rd ed. Waveland Press.

She illustrates the importance of independent self-governance in both chapter two and six, two addressing the usage of sidewalks for safety and six addressing the usage of neighborhoods. Both of these indicate a need for individual liberty and communal ownership. Her initial articulation of “eyes on the street” begins with clarifying that busy (and therefore safe) streets require three components: clear distinction between public and private, eyes upon the street and continuous usage of the sidewalks. For eyes on the street particularly she notes that the eyes must “[belong] to those we might call natural proprietors of the street”⁴. Natural proprietors being those with a sense of communal ownership over the streets they live on. The need for communal ownership is further articulated when Jacobs writes “you can’t make people watch streets they do not want to watch”⁵. If the streets feel like they are not yours, that they are the mayor’s or the capitalist’s or the priest’s or anyone’s street other than ours, then what motivation is there to watch what is not at least in part, yours?

This communal ownership is not something accorded by the state. It is created by a real and genuine ownership, most practically understood by business owners, Jacobs understands this and points it out directly that “[business owners] are great street watchers and side-walk guardians if present in sufficient numbers”⁶. Note that these locations of production and distribution, be they cobblers, groceries or otherwise, are not state institutions. Jacobs notes that

Trautman, William E & The Industrial Workers of The World. One Big Union 8th ed. Chicago, IL: Industrial Workers of The World, 2001.

Einstein, Albert. “Why Socialism?” Monthly Review. Last modified May 2009. <https://monthlyreview.org/2009/05/01/why-socialism/>.

Kropotkin, Petr. “The Conquest of Bread.” The Anarchist Library. Last modified 2009. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-the-conquest-of-bread/>

4 Jacobs, Jane. The Death and Life of Great American Cities New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1992. 35

5 Ibid., 36

6 Ibid., 37

civic and culture centers are avoided by almost everyone⁷. That the work of a sense of communal ownership cannot be done forcefully, it must arise naturally independent of the state.

Yet communal ownership alone is not enough, it demands a sense of individual liberty strong enough to prompt someone to direct action independent of reliance upon the state. Jacobs articulates that in achieving prosperity in a community is “[success] at localized self-government”, self-government understood to mean “both informal and formal self-management of society”⁸. While one may assume the latter part to indicate an endorsement of a state, Jacobs clarifies through multiple examples the failure of a larger state to do the work of maintaining the kind of safety that most affects us: safety from mugging, street assault, rape, theft and the like. On one hand unchecked crime can be seen as an example of a failed state and not that the state itself always fails, yet in every example of community prosperity that Jacobs documents, not one is funded by the state, not one is planned by the state and not one is carried out by the state⁹. It is the people on the streets and those people alone that make the streets safe.

We can further understand the need for independence from the state when she first notes that we ourselves are “fairly capable at street self-government”, particularly in “districts of poor, or one-time poor people”¹⁰. Which the districts most devoid of state assistance. Jacobs explains that when decisions are made from afar by state officials there is “devastation wrought...by remote decision”¹¹. That when a street in West Side Manhattan in 1955 had an epidemic of heroin usage, citizens “called the police many times” they “[told] the detectives of the squad where the heroin was being sold, and by whom, and when, and what days supplies [arrived].”¹².

7 Ibid., 4

8 Ibid., 114

9 Ibid., 3-54 112-140

10 Ibid., 121

11 Ibid., 122

12 Ibid., 123

What happened then, with such well-informed police? Well, “nothing happened—except that things continued to get worse”¹³. Jacobs notes that even though the police commissioner at the time desired to help, the red tape of the state tied his hands such that “so much good intention at the top comes to so little purpose at the bottom, and vice-versa”¹⁴. In other words, even the most well meaning state will fail.

The evidence piles up in the following pages as we consider further ways in which the state infringes upon the continuation of community. Such as when Manhattan engineers went through a ‘routine’ matter of cutting ten feet off the sidewalk to widen Hudson Street, which drew mass condemnation from the community it actually affects, leading to “a thousand signatures...[which] represented most of the adults directly affected” indeed many “businessmen and residents wrote letters and formed a delegation to visit...the elected official responsible.”¹⁵. The agreement and plan of the street cutting all being done in the absence of a public hearing, leaving those whom it directly affects in the dark to the actions of the state.¹⁶ This concealment leading naturally to the assertion of a communal attitude entirely in opposition to the action of the state.

The need for communal ownership and individual liberty is seen further in the inability for the state to police itself, as in New York when the arrest reports are inflated by arresting drug users and ignoring sellers only to be exposed by the community most harmed¹⁷. The question may arise then, what are we to do if the state is unable to assist us? Jacobs gives us clues when she relays the story of the Lower East Side of New York, where the neighborhoods were being

13 Ibid., 123

14 Ibid., 124

15 Ibid., 124

16 Ibid., 125

17 Ibid., 125-126

organized communally by the state in the form of a contract. Yet this is quickly proven problematic when it's made clear that for issues which everyone agrees "such as applying pressure for a new hospital" there is clear consensus¹⁸. Yet when we approach issues such as demolition and construction of new housing units, the written organizational structure contradicts itself, you cannot reconcile the needs of a land-owner demolishing houses and the people living in those same houses¹⁹. The take away here being that the state cannot force a communal attitude, that communal ownership and prosperity must arise naturally independent of the state.

The episode of the Lowest East Side highlights that an attitude of state authority or societal organization wherein one person's needs stand above another person's needs is unworkable. When you attempt to lump large groups of people together with opposing needs you end up with documents which at the same time attempt to "defend...homes...from obliteration by the bulldozers" and accommodate "cooperative projects and various other business interests who wish...to wipe out these residents"²⁰. In this case and in many other cases highlighted in the book, the individual liberty of the residents is ignored in favor of the desires of the land owners, carried out through the power of the state without the engagement of the community. Communities cannot thrive if they are not accorded the individual liberty to live where they are.

If this, then, doesn't work, what does? Jacobs tells us directly that it is "working relationships found among specific people" and not the state²¹. These people are not organized around a religion, politics or craft necessarily for they have little "in common than that they share a fragment of geography" organized in communities such as churches, business

18 Ibid., 125-126

19 Ibid., 126

20 Ibid., 126

21 Ibid., 133

associations, immigrant clubs, civic action groups, sports teams and so on²². This is something we do naturally and without any prodding from the state, as Mrs. Goldie Hoffman, a commissioner of a development agency in Philadelphia learned when she investigated a small section of Philadelphia of about ten thousand people, she found nineteen organizations entirely independent of the state²³. As people come together for whatever their individual desire is these organizations “grow in our cities like leaves on the trees”²⁴. We organize ourselves far faster and more efficiently than any state can make us.

If organizations are how we can come together to serve our interests at the small level for small needs and large organizations can form to serve larger needs, such as a local church for the needs of the spirit and a city-wide organization for the needs of hospitals, then what might motivate these groups to form independent of, even in opposition to, the state? Jacobs makes this point when she highlights what runs American politics “votes and control of the money”²⁵. When people organize together in civic action leagues, or as streets advocating for their needs, they can use the power of votes to halt decisions. Yet as her own situation on Hudson Street and many other examples in the book highlight, this is an ongoing struggle. Even her explanation of the need for districts to organize points to an unspoken struggle between the powers of money and the needs of people. I believe that such an on-going suffering from struggle is unnecessary and a direct product of the hierarchy of the state, that this suffering can be set aside when the state is abolished entirely.

22 Ibid., 133

23 Ibid., 134

24 Ibid., 134

25 Ibid., 131

Ultimately, money cannot protect us or make our communities thrive. As she points out in affluent neighborhoods which have hired eyes on the street in the form of guards²⁶. It is unsustainable for if that community loses money, if the rich leave the area, then it descends rapidly into crime and disease. Both an on-going struggle against the state through votes and persuasion or a continual flow of money is unsustainable beyond a few generations at most. It seems in every example given, the needs of those who are not present, whose desire is money, an orderly state or some vague concept of a well designed city meets the very real and immediate needs of those people who live: to be safe walking home at night, to have a place to “buy a cup of coffee” , to have a sense of belonging and freedom²⁷.

In the end, Jacobs asks us indirectly, how far are we willing to bend ourselves to defend our right to safety, to shelter, to bread? Will we constantly organize in opposition to the state to defend our homes and livelihood? Will we bow our heads as urban-planners tear down buildings and induce crime? Will we expend every resource to keep our home protected? As Jacobs herself notes, “no amount of police can enforce civilization where the normal, casual enforcement of it has broken down”²⁸. If we cannot live together, no one with a gun, no politician and no state can force us to. Safety, prosperity and the end of suffering ultimately cannot be accomplished in the presence of a state. Only we the people can do that²⁹.

26 Ibid., 39-40

27 Ibid., 15

28 Ibid., 32

29 Influenced by: Holmes, R. and Gan, B. (2011). *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice*. 3rd ed. Waveland Press.

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