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# Stephanie Mills, On Gandhi's Path: Bob Swann's Work for Peace and Community Economics

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## BOOK REVIEW

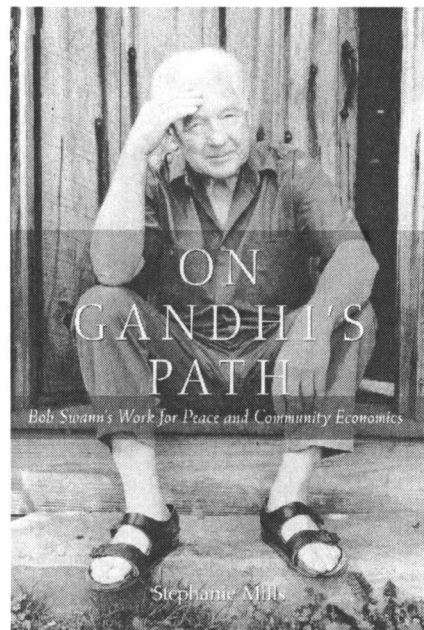
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**ON GANDHI'S PATH: Bob Swann's Work for Peace and Community Economics. By Stephanie Mills. Gabriola Island, BC, Canada: New Society, 2010. 149 pp.**

When I teach the course on Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement at Loyola Chicago, students are introduced to philosophical and practical anarchism. Day, who now is under review for sainthood at the Vatican, considered herself a life-long anarchist. Aware that anarchism commonly is associated with “social chaos,” Day began to use the word “personalism” in its place. As she promoted her “personalist and communitarian revolution” at the Catholic Worker, Day introduced the readers of her *Catholic Worker* newspaper to the anarchist and decentralist thinkers and movements that had shaped her own radicalist Catholicism. Along with Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5), Day promoted the ideas of Kropotkin, Proudhon, Bakunin, Tolstoy, and the “Wobblies” (Industrial Workers of the World), as well as the English “distributists,” Chesterton, Belloc, Gill, Tawney, and McNabb. Like these thinkers, Day viewed anarchism not as lawlessness, but as a form of *self-government*, as a free society of decentralized associations, trade unions, and federated guilds.



## KRUPA: ON GANDHI'S PATH

In her book *On Gandhi's Path*, Stephanie Mills introduces readers to another American champion of decentralism, Bob Swann (1918-2003). A self-taught economist, writer, architect and builder, advocate of nonviolence and opponent of racism, Swann advocated a program of constructive social action along decentralist and anarchist lines. An ardent pacifist in the Gandhian tradition, Swann wrote in *Day's Catholic Worker* (CW, January 1967) that "only an economic program can reach to the heart of the world peace problem." *Satyagraha* for Gandhi and Swann meant active personal commitment to "the task of bringing justice through nonviolent means" (CW). Because he believed that only a reformed economy could lead to world peace, Swann agitated for a worldwide economic reform based on *intentional communities and local economies, universal and local currencies, and land reform*.

The loss of community in the face of global and corporate economic interests, Swann thought, had eroded the sense of personal agency and responsibility not only for one's neighbors but, as well, for the local ecology of the town and village. To right the balance between rural development and urban development, Swann advocated the building up of local economies through reinvestment in farms, rural cooperatives, village industries, local credit unions, and small businesses. "The present monopolistic land and money system" favors huge corporations and urban areas, and "it funds wars," Swann argued. Hegemonic capitalism ought to be replaced by a carefully administered and locally monitored International Fund that would provide loans and credit at reasonable rates worldwide for "those who have heretofore been neglected by governmental and private financial institutions, but who must constitute the backbone of any successful 'self-help' program to eliminate poverty and injustice" (CW / Mills, 95). Insisting that "our vision should encompass the world as a whole," Swann campaigned for "a single international or universal currency of stable commodity value" that would replace the always inflated national currencies based on "debt creation" (CW / cf. 102). Meanwhile, he sponsored the creation of local currencies, that is, regional "commodities-indexed and non-inflating" money sources that would fund diversified local economies in intentional farm and small town communities.

Inspired by Vinoba Bhave's *bhoodan* (land gift) and Jayaprakash Narayan's *gramdan* (village land gift) movements in India, Swann also

promoted land reform as central to regional community development and revitalization, and to world peace (cf. 83). Security and peace worldwide demand that land be considered the common heritage of all people, Swann believed, not a reserved commodity for personal profit. Like the vast technological resources of our time, land ought to be at the service and under the control of human beings, he argued, “instead of serving some abstract purpose such as the ‘free enterprise system’, ‘the state’, and ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’” (84). Thus, Swann called for community landholding, rather than private ownership and land speculation on the open market. His plan for land reform included land distribution to small farmers and local cooperatives through a consensual and global *gramdan* that would hold the land in trusteeship. In the early 1970s, Swann spearheaded the Community Land Trust (CLT) movement in the U.S. CLTs secure land through purchase or gift, hold it in trust through non-profit corporations, and then provide local communities with charters for land use and renewable land tenure. For Swann, such “trusteeship” or “stewardship” of land meant “ownership for the common good” (104). Community land trusts, local currencies, and an International Fund, all enabling the development of stable local economies in small communities would, Swann hoped, “prepare the ground for a significant boycott of the present financial structure involving savings banks, insurance companies, etc., which fund injustices as diverse as the war in Vietnam and segregated housing” (CW).

Stephanie Mills presents these essential elements of Bob Swann’s program for the transformation of the social order in eight comprehensive, but condensed, chapters in *On Gandhi’s Path*. The overall portrait of her subject presents Swann as a nonviolent social activist and economic theorist with a much keener sense of the intrinsic relationship between the economy and peacemaking, and with a much grander and detailed scheme for the realization of ‘the just society’, than many other social justice and peace activists, Gandhi included. Chapters presenting Swann’s ideas on the decentralization of land, currency, and the economy, war resistance and racial equality, and the creation of self-regulated intentional communities striving for self-sufficiency, are accompanied by the story of Swann’s remarkable life.

Raised in Cleveland Heights, Ohio, where he lived in a neighborhood that inspired his sense of community, Swann was tutored in his teen

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years by a local Lutheran minister, Joseph Sittler, in the philosophy of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Spengler, the novels of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, and the classical music of Bach. Arrested for conscientious objection to World War II and to the draft after attending Ohio State University, Swann, from his cell in Ashland Federal Prison, enrolled in a correspondence course on the small community with the outstanding American decentralist educator and small community advocate, Arthur E. Morgan (1878-1975), first chairman of the Tennessee Valley Authority and President of Antioch College. Others who shaped Swann's thinking, Mills notes, were Peter Kropotkin, Lewis Mumford, Frank Lloyd Wright (in the 1950s Swann built several of Wright's low-cost Usonian houses in Kalamazoo, Michigan), Bayard Rustin (who was with Swann in Ashland Prison) and Richard Gregg, Dorothy Day and Simone Weil, Mohandas Gandhi and his disciples Vinoba Bhave and Narayan Jayaprakash, and the agrarian decentralist, Ralph Borsodi (1886-1977). Borsodi's "back to the land" writings and practical experiments in self-sufficient living fueled Swann's antipathy to oversized industrialism and his belief that "small is beautiful." With Borsodi, Swann organized the International Independence Institute in the late 1960s to provide credit for rural community land trusts (CLTs). Swann also labored along with black leaders during the civil rights struggle of the '60s to achieve not only political and social justice for black Americans, but also community-based economic justice through the genesis of New Communities, a land trust organization in Georgia that assisted landless blacks in the acquisition of land trusts with secure tenure.

In 1972 Swann met the German philosopher and economist E. F. Schumacher. The publication of Schumacher's collected essays in the influential *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973) provided a national discourse and moral framework (derived from Christianity, Buddhist precepts, the *I Ching*, and Gandhi's writings) for Swann's own vision and projects. Subsequently, Swann became the founder, with his life companion Susan Witt, of the E. F. Schumacher Society in Great Barrington, MA (now called the New Economics Society), a non-profit organization that espoused Schumacher and Swann's decentralist ideas for a new society. Until his death in 2003, Swann guided the Society in its mission to expose "the moral and practical failures of orthodox and macro-economics" (105) while

working to create a society composed of ecologically sensitive regional economies. In the Berkshires, Swann and Witt modeled community self-reliance through a regional system of land trusts, renewable energy, and local currencies.

Among Swann's achievements, Mills points out, was the raising of a family with his wife, the social activist and war resister, Marjorie Swann Edwin, a founding member of the Committee for Nonviolent Action (CNVA). A bonus in *On Gandhi's Path* is the chapter "Marriage and the Movement" in which the author describes the accomplishments and tensions within families where the spouses are committed to social justice, and to the kind of activism that found them both "on the move" and in prison for extended periods, while raising their children. Interviews with the four Swann children, and with Marj Swann as well, reveal the impact within one family from such a life. The dissolution of the Swann marriage, then Bob's life with Susan Witt, is part of this narrative.

Bob Swann's *Peace, Civil Rights, and the Search for Community: An Autobiography*, is now online. **But his many essays and papers are still uncollected** (although a number of articles by Swann are published online at the Schumacher Society). *On Gandhi's Path* is a good start to what this reviewer hopes is the ongoing serious consideration of Swann's important ideas. Mills' compact volume is an informed introduction and tribute to Bob Swann, an American decentralist and radical pacifist, a man whose ideas on the creation of small communities and commitment to localist politics and economics represents a call to a deeper citizenship in our time.