

Review: "Anarchy in Action"

WARD IN ACTION

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Review: *Anarchy In Action*, Colin Ward, Freedom Press (84b Whitechapel High St, London, E1 7QX, U.K.) New Edition 2008, ISBN 978-0-900384-20-2

Although it is an old anarchist favourite read by thousands, and has been an important influence to many anarcho-activists from the 70s onwards, I have never actually read Colin Ward's "Anarchy In Action" before. So I am reading and reviewing this new 2008 edition, conscious of the world as it is today, without being influenced by previous memories of having read it in the 70s or 80s. As a result I can discover for the first time how relevant Colin Ward's message might still be to our world right now.

Colin Ward argues that there are two basic historical approaches that lead to Anarchism as a conscious set of political ideas: "Anarchism as a political and social ideology has two separate origins. It can be seen as an ultimate derivative of liberalism or as a final end for socialism".

I think it would be fair to say Colin Ward himself comes a bit more from the "liberal" approach to anarchism. He was for many years involved with Freedom Press and the anarchist paper *Freedom*, which was often dismissed in the past by the more militant and class-struggle orientated *Black Flag* as "liberal".

I remember, particularly in the 1980s, the cold war rivalry that sometimes went on between *Freedom* and *Black Flag*. But the two claimed approaches to Anarchism, "liberalism" and "socialism", are in fact closely related. Modern ideas of socialism were very much a product of the evolving contradictions and developments of classical liberal ideas and the conditions that went with them. So we shouldn't just dismiss what Colin Ward has to say in his book.

Ward makes clear that "Anarchy In Action" is not about strategies for revolution and it is not about speculation on the way a future anarchist society would function. It concerns itself more with continual social struggles for self-organisation by ordinary people that sort of go on all the time. The book, as he puts it, "is simply an extended, updating footnote to Kropotkin's book *Mutual Aid*".

The core argument of "Anarchy In Action" is that an anarchist society, a society which organizes itself without authority is always in fact already in existence, although half hidden and buried under the weight of state and bureaucracy and capital. The book attempts in a readable way to bridge the gap between present realities and anarchist aspirations.

Ward uses a wide-ranging analysis drawing on many sources and examples. With chapters on a range of subject areas including education, urban planning, welfare, housing, the workplace, the family, and the environment, he demonstrates that the roots of anarchist practise lie very much in the way that people have always tended to organize themselves when left alone to do so. Ward talks from a 70s perspective, there is a significant emphasis as one might expect, on sociology, and he talks primarily but not exclusively from a British perspective. He wrote the book very much in the context of the wave of radical ferment and revolutionary optimism that followed on from the late 60s. The events of 1968, the general strike and student uprising in France, the Prague Spring, protests, riots and revolts in Mexico City, Rome, London, U.S. cities, and many other places all being an inspiration.

Looking back from today's perspective, it seems like Ward was almost still writing in an age of "innocence". His subsequent introduction to the book's second edition, 1982, only brings us up to the early days of the Thatcher regime.

Colin Ward talks a significant amount about workers' self-organisation, workers' control, and sometimes about class struggle. He touches briefly on some of the great workers' struggles in history. But he is not particularly concerned with class stereotypes and reductionist class positions, and he doesn't walk around wearing the ideological label of "class-struggle anarchist".

The first chapter, "Anarchy and State", gives a straightforward restatement of the classical anarchist criticism of government and the state, and then it outlines the historic division between anarchism and marxism. Marx, as Bakunin pointed out, wanted to achieve socialism through centralization and a despotic provisional government, with the state as sole owner of land and capital. Bakunin argued instead for the reconstruction of society from below upwards, by the free federation of all kinds of workers' associations liberated from the state.

Ward describes how by 1918 in Britain the Labour Party had already committed itself to a "socialism" based on the unlimited increase of the state's power in the form of the giant managerially-controlled public corporation. Elsewhere, when state socialism achieved power it created monopoly state capitalism with a veneer of social welfare.

Ward argues that the criticism of the state made by the 19th century anarchists increased in validity in the 20th century, the century of total war and the total state. Today, in the 21st century, we see state corporations openly operating hand in hand with private multinational corporations, imposed "privatization" and state power go together.

In opposition to the state Ward favours the approach of Gustave Landauer who said, "The state is not something which can be destroyed by a revolution, but is a... certain relationship between human beings... we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently."

I would argue that Landauer's approach does have some basis in social reality, but at the same time it is a bit weak. Even when masses of workers and people do make conscious attempts to contract other relationships and behave differently, it doesn't necessarily mean they have the strength to successfully break out, or that the state will fully wither away and just disappear as a result. The entrenched state also involves bureaucratic and despotic elites with stored up surplus power. There is no easy answer to this. In practise, squadism and instant-insurrectionism don't succeed in immediately ending the state either. The struggle is currently stuck in an ongoing "struggle of many struggles". As Landauer admits, there is no final struggle, only a series of partisan struggles on a variety of fronts.

War is the health of the state, and eventually the state will find its perfect expression in total war. The weakening of the state and the strengthening of different modes of human behaviour

is now essential argues Ward, but where do we begin? Obviously we don't begin by joining the state, or joining political parties. Instead, he argues, we have to build networks instead of pyramids.

The classical anarchist thinkers envisaged the whole social organisation woven from an extended network of individuals and groups, such as the commune or council as the territorial nucleus, and the syndicate or workers' council as the industrial unit. These units would federate as a fluid network of autonomous groups.

The second chapter puts forward the theory of "Spontaneous Order", and to illustrate he draws on real historic experiences of social revolutionary situations and the examples of working-class self organization they temporarily threw up, before a new hierarchical order had managed to impose itself in place of the previous one.

Ward describes the libertarian aspects involved in the uprising in Hungary in 1956, during the Prague spring 1968, and in part of the workers movement in Poland in 1980. Most importantly he returns to the Spanish revolution of 1936, and in particular he quotes the example of the village of Membrilla where the land was expropriated and the village collectivized by its own people; "Food, clothing, and tools were distributed equitably to the whole population... The necessities of life were distributed freely..." Here self-organisation breaks out, combined with a basic libertarian socialist agenda addressing the material needs of the community.

I think it is often the case that the strength of the spontaneous order in such examples will significantly depend on how self-ordered the community was beforehand while still struggling under the shadow of the authorities, the landlords, and capitalists. In the 1930s in many agrarian communities in Spain the domination of capital and state, although repressive, was still "formal" and "stand-off" and somewhat external. Internally the community itself was still likely to have a strong autonomous social fabric, together with a strong sense of solidarity, both of which it depended on for survival. When the state and bosses suddenly buzzed off, the vacuum could be filled with a flowering of the spontaneous order, self-organisation, and solidarity that was already there contained under repression.

A problem with a theory of spontaneous order today is that many communities, particularly in the developed world, are so penetrated by the state, and so subsumed and commodified under the predominant capitalist economy, that the social fabric of the community is shattered, fragmented, and broken up. In these circumstances, in a freak situation, if the authorities suddenly buzz off for a while, there is a danger of outbreaks of anti-social violence, spontaneous bullying and abuse, gang war, sectarianism, and so on. But nonetheless mutual aid will also emerge, and it will start to fight back.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 use a variety of non-anarchist sources, including material on some African tribal societies, to set out three key principles of anarchist organization: leaderless groups; diversity rather than unity; and federalist organizations without central authority. In reply to those who might say anarchism can only work for small isolated simple communities, Colin Ward is quite right to point out in chapter 4, "Harmony Through Complexity", that "Anarchy is a function, not of society's simplicity and lack of social organization, but of its complexity and multiplicity of social organizations."

From a hard "socialist" anarchist point of view, the "dodgy" bits in *Anarchy In Action* are perhaps to be found lurking somewhere in the pages of chapter 7 on housing, and also maybe later in chapter 12 about welfare. On housing, Ward starts by celebrating the big history of autonomous urban squatter settlements surrounding many big cities across the world. In the U.K.

he looks at the big squatting movement in disused army camps in the 1940s, the radical revival of squatting in the 60s and 70s, and also mentions the cooperative housing movement. But he falls into an over-enthusiasm for private housing and the owner-occupier. This, together with his slagging-off of public housing, and his stereotyping of council tenants, is bound to provoke a few grumbles, particularly with today's crisis in both public and ordinary private housing.

In the chapter on welfare Ward points out that "there is an essential paradox in the fact that the state whose symbols are the policeman, the jailer, and the soldier, should have become the... organiser of social welfare." And he describes the failure of the big traditional Victorian welfare institutions, like the workhouse, the mental asylum, the orphanage, the care home, the old style hospitals, etc.

Meanwhile it is symptomatic of the 1970s flavour of the book that he optimistically sees claimants unions as an anarchic way forward in the community's struggle to transform the welfare state into a genuine welfare society. Today there are not many claimants unions, despite unemployment and benefit-dependency being far higher than in 1973. Many unemployed and claimants today are too weakened, fragmented, and demoralized to be able to commit time, energy, and enthusiasm to help running unemployed groups and claimants unions.

Sometimes the situation is not so much that we are weak because we are disorganized, but that we are disorganized because we are weak. Part of their role, like benefits advice and legal support has been hijacked by the growth in state welfare agencies anyway. In the introduction to the second edition Ward admits some of the issues he was raising were "unfashionable" and the original arguments had become "complicated" by the emergence of mass unemployment.

When we read the chapter on work and the demand for workers' control, we are struck by how the period in which Colin Ward was writing was such a different world from today. Then life for many in an industrial country like the U.K. was still dominated by mass centralized fordist production and manufacturing, which directly employed many millions. Writing later at the beginning of the eighties, with industries shutting down, unemployment rocketing, and power shifting to finance and the city, he was moved to comment, "This is the chapter which is most in need of bringing up to date."

It is not just that most of the factories have gone to the other side of the world, it is also that many of them have changed shape and been restructured. Much production has been dispersed, heavily automated, and is globally coordinated "just in time" by information technology.

Ward looks at the idea of being self-employed, being your own person, and setting up your own trade. This was quite a popular ambition of many workers in the seventies, and is still an inspiration for many today. But now we see technical "self-employment" being imposed on many by the economy and the state as a way of cutting employers' admin costs, or of massaging the unemployment figures. Many are now pushed to survive by "setting up trade" in the illegal economy, selling dodgy goods, or dealing in drugs! Is this what is meant by a "self-employed society"?

Ward shows how over the years in industry the idea of workers' control, whether in the form of guild socialism, cooperativism, syndicalism, workers councils or assemblies, has always tended to resurface. He also shows how there has always been a battle to co-opt parts of these ideas by the employers in the forms of "workers' participation", "joint management", "works councils", and so on. Today many "professional" workers are expected to take responsible control of their own work and self-manage their own exploitation, and be good self-motivated "team workers". There have always been debates around the notion of "workers' control"; control by

which workers? of what production? and for the workers in the workplace alone or the wider community?

But then what do such questions mean in the harsh face of real history? What do demands and debates about workers' control of the mines mean, for example, if Thatcher and Co. have no hang-ups about shutting down the whole mining industry including profitable mines, and then smash up the miners' communities in the process? How do we keep the idea of "workers' control" meaningfully alive when only a smaller proportion of the population is involved in any meaningful productive work in the first place?

In my opinion, in the future, until there is super-abundance of all needs and resources, there will still be a transitional need part of the time for some social rationing involving some kind of social exchange with some self-managed "necessary" labour, such as half a day a week or whatever. Puritan ultra-leftists might not like this, it isn't perfect total communism, but then nothing ever is.

The closing chapter, "Anarchy and a Plausible Future", raises questions, already being asked at the end of the 60s, about environmental and resource limitations on the growth of the existing economic system eventually forcing dramatic change. But he points out: "Necessity may reduce the rate of resource-consumption but the powerful and privileged will hang on to their share... Power and privilege have never been known to abdicate. This is why anarchism is bound to be a call to revolution. But what kind of revolution?"

Ward returns to the Kropotkinite vision of "industry decentralized, and the competition for markets replaced by local production and consumption while people themselves alternate brain work and manual work." Then, in an odd but accidentally relevant political clanger (page 169), he suggests this was already being realized, at the time he was writing his book, in a political climate different to anarchism, in China! -Well not today it isn't!! If you wanted to sum up many of the traumatic social developments, industrial and economic restructuring, and neoliberal globalising that has affected us all in the last 30 years in one symbolic word, then it might well be; "China".

Colin Ward doesn't see anarchism developing in the context of immediate total social unanimity, but in the context of pluralist development; "So we don't have to worry about the boredom of utopia: we shan't get there." Meanwhile in the present he reminds us: "There are vast areas of capitalist societies which are not governed by capitalist principles,... you might even say that the only thing that makes life live-able in the capitalist world is the unacknowledged non-capitalist element within it..."

As a book, "Anarchy In Action" makes a good "propaganda" tool because in a clear coherent lucid way it begins by telling people what they already know. The book illustrates the arguments for anarchism, not just from theories, but from actual examples of tendencies which already exist in peoples' lives and communities. "Anarchy In Action" is clearly a product of its time and place, the U.K. in the 1970s (my favourite decade), but the basic message of many of the chapters stands the test of time. It remains a good radical social-libertarian propaganda book, and it still beats some contemporary "anarcho-introduction" books. It will continue to have an influence, -even for people under 40!

Colin Ward is still very much alive and kicking today, and having only just read what he was thinking in the 1970s it leaves me itching to know what he thinks NOW, about de-industrialisation, , the illegal economy, the internet, carboot sales, ASBOs, post-modernism, mobile phones, freecycle, credit boom, credit crunch, the minimum wage, food riots, peak oil, global warming,... and all manner of subjects... Paul, Summer 2008.

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