

Colin Ward's Anarchism

What Can We Learn from Colin Ward?

Wayne Price

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Colin Ward was one of the most influential British anarchists for sixty years, from the end of the Second World War on. He affected the anarchist movement around the world. His many books continue to be reprinted and widely read. For thirty years he was one of the editors of Freedom newspaper and also the editor of the theoretical magazine Anarchy. Since his death, at 85, in 2010, there has been published a “Colin Ward reader” (Wilbert & White) and a collection of essays by others about his “life, times, and thought” (Levy).

The reader begins, “*Colin Ward...was Britain’s most persistent and articulate defender of the libertarian Left in the second half of the twentieth century.*” (Wilbert & White; v) The essay collection begins, “*Colin Ward was one of the most significant thinkers and activists in the British anarchist movement...*” (Levy; 7)

Not that every anarchist agreed with his views. Albert Meltzer wrote, “*Colin Ward...founded the magazine Anarchy in 1961...and helped set back the movement...[due to] its reformism....Anarchy...helped as much as anything to reinforce the myth of a nonviolent, bourgeois, sanitized ‘anarchism’ that could help capitalism out of its difficulties...in terms of revisionist anarchism...*” (Meltzer; 322)

Personally I am more in agreement with Meltzer’s revolutionary, class-struggle, anarchist-communism than with Ward’s reformist version of anarchism. However, unlike Meltzer, I think that Ward made useful contributions to anarchist theory—contributions from which revolutionaries (and others) can learn.

Anarchism as a Theory of Organization

Colin Ward wrote, “*anarchists...advocate the principle of autonomy as opposed to authority in every field of personal and social life...*” (Wilbert & White; 37) As he saw it, social institutions should be organized in ways which are “(1) voluntary (2) functional (3) temporary and (4) small...Let us find ways in which the large scale functions can be broken down into functions capable of being organized by small functional groups and then link these groups in a federal manner.” (W & W; 48) Consistent with this, “*anarchist theory of organization,*” he wrote, was “*the theory of spontaneous order: that given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of chaos—this order being more durable and more closely related to their needs than any kind of externally imposed order.*” (W & W 49) He brilliantly summarized: “*The social ideas of anarchism: autonomous groups, spontaneous order, workers’ control, the federative principle, add up to a coherent theory of social organization...*” (W & W; 54)

Ward’s strategy was, first of all, to look for ways in which autonomous organizing was already going on, in the cracks and at the margins of the established society. He referred to this (citing Herzen) as “*seeds beneath the snow.*” He discussed the history of squatters, in the city and the country, describing how people built their own housing. He researched the self-help mutual aid institutions from before the “welfare state.” He referred to instances of worker collective sub-management in certain industries. He studied do-it-yourself children’s playgrounds and classrooms. He cited anthropological studies of stateless peoples. He discussed aspects of the Swiss cantonal federation. As Ward pointed out, no system could function without its voluntary associations of families and friends and neighbors, no matter how otherwise authoritarian its structure. He wanted to expand these associations to cover more of society.

Alternately, he looked at systemic evils embedded in our society and proposed anarchistic solutions. “*One of the tasks of the anarchist propagandist is to propagate solutions to contemporary*

issues which, however dependent they are on the existing social and economic structures, are anarchist solutions: the kind of approaches that would be made...in the kind of society we envisage.” (Ward; 124-5) For example, he warned about developing global ecological crises (in 1973!). He referred to the imperial countries using up nonrenewable resources, including fossil fuels, the draining of “Third World” countries, rising pollution, and “the non-viability of future economic growth.” (W & W; 258) He cited the claim of a radical ecologist that the solution lay in building “a network of self-sufficient, self-regulating, communities.” (same) As he noted, ideas for creating relatively autonomous, decentralized, communities had previously been proposed by Peter Kropotkin, William Morris, Lewis Mumford, and others from the libertarian Left.

Similarly, he wrote about “the welfare road we failed to take.” (W & W; 271) Ward condemned the “welfare state” created by the social democratic and liberal Left. It was bureaucratic and overly centralized, as well as stingy and infantilizing. He noted the rich history of mutual-aid self-help insurance programs which the working class had created for itself before the state took over welfare. He felt that support for the poor could be much more decentralized, mutualized, and democratically autonomous than it was, with much better results.

Reform or Revolution?

To my mind, there is nothing intrinsically non-revolutionary about making “anarchist proposals” based on “the kind of society we envisage.” These transitional demands can help people to understand how anarchism would solve existing problems. Nor is it necessarily “revisionist” to point out how anarchist-like activities are being carried on even now in the margins of society (“beneath the snow”). These provide evidence that anarchism is possible. These two approaches are quite worthwhile. The question is whether you counterpose such reforms to anarchist revolution. This is what Colin Ward did.

“I don’t think you’ll ever see any of my writings...which are remotely demanding a revolution next week,” he wrote. (Levy; 10) In 1958 he explained that his understanding of “twentieth century anarchism...rejects perfectionism, utopian fantasy...[and] revolutionary optimism....It is still an anarchism of present and permanent protest....The conflict between authority and liberty is...not something that can be resolved by a vaguely specified social revolution....The choice between libertarian and authoritarian solutions occurs every day and in every way...” (W & W; 30). Apparently, the point is not to work for a free society but only for a free-er society, by permanently (forever) protesting.

In fact, he declared, “An anarchist society is improbable...because human society is not like that. The degree of social cohesion implied in the idea of ‘an anarchist society’ could only occur in a society...embedded in the cake of custom...[without] choice....I would dislike it...” (W & W; 256) Whatever happened to the vision of a society of federated autonomous groups? Anyway, someone who regards “an anarchist society” as “improbable” and something to “dislike,” is an odd kind of anarchist.

Throughout his writings, Ward was fond of quoting the statement of Gustav Landauer that “The state...[cannot] be destroyed by a revolution, but is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings....We destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.” (quoted in W & W; 15, among other places). Ward counterposed this to the opinion of Kropotkin. “Kropotkin

viewed the state as an external, coercive, institution that could simply [?] be destroyed or smashed in a revolution." (Levy; 83)

I have already commented on this Landauer quotation and its use by anarchists who oppose revolutions (in Price). It is true that all social institutions are composed of people relating to each other through their behavior. An institution is a consistent, repetitive, pattern of mass behavior. No doubt, getting rid of the state is not done "simply" (nor do revolutionaries think so). It requires a large number of people to change their ideas, their behavior, and their relationships. But what if there are other people, even if a minority, who continue their statist behavior and relationships? This will cause a clash between the two sets of people (which may or may not be violent). This is generally called a revolution. (Actually, Landauer participated in a revolution in Germany after World War I. It was defeated and he was murdered by right-wing soldiers.)

Yet in one place (and in one place only, so far as I know), Ward does indicate the possible need for a revolution. After discussing ecological and economic problems, he wrote, "*It is not in the least likely that states and governments...will, of their own volition, embark on the drastic change of direction which a consideration of our probable future demands....Power and privilege have never been known to abdicate. That is why anarchism is bound to be a call for revolution.*" (W & W 260-1) Precisely. But this is in the same essay which begins by saying that an anarchist society is improbable and dislikeable! And he concludes it by denying, after all, that there is a distinction between "*revolution and reform.*" (W & W; 261) A complete muddle.

An Anarchism of his Period

Colin Ward's anarchism (and that of many other anarchists) was an anarchism of the post-World War II "boom," from the late forties to the early seventies. It was an extended period of prosperity (especially as compared to the Great Depression and World War II). The working class was politically quiescent (again, as compared to the 30s). There was no likelihood of a revolution in Britain or most of Western Europe (although there was eventually a near-revolution in France in 1968). While the Communist Party was increasingly discredited, the most radical young leftists were generally attracted to the Marxist-Leninism of Cuba, Vietnam, and China, which seemed to be fighting Western imperialism. All these factors put a damper on the development of a revolutionary, class-struggle, anarchism, in the tradition of Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman, the anarchist-communists and the anarchist-syndicalists (what van der Walt & Schmidt call "the broad anarchist tradition").

It was in this period that some anarchists instead found another way to keep anarchism alive and attractive. They developed a gradualist, reformist (revisionist) version of anarchism. It seemed relevant to many people's daily lives and interests, without having to say, "Wait for a workers' revolution to solve all our problems." Fortunately, Britain, the US, and Western Europe were bourgeois democracies (I doubt that gradualist anarchism would have gone far in a fascist or Stalinist state). Despite its insights and contributions, this school of anarchism was politically wrong in rejecting revolution as a goal. But the turn to reformism was understandable.

As Nicolas Walter summarized (not critically), "*...All Ward's work...is a pragmatic form of anarchism....Ward is calling not so much for a political revolution as for a social transformation—though not all that much of one, since he sees anarchism all around us....*" (Walter; 238)

Many anarchist-minded people continue right now to reject the heritage of revolutionary anarchism, in favor of some version of reformist anarchism. But we are in a much more crisis-ridden situation than in Ward's time. The catastrophe of climate change (and other ecological disasters), the economic stagnation (which may lead to a new Great Depression), the spread of wars around the globe (with the danger of nuclear war), as well as other difficulties, are increasing even while governments are stalled and incompetent. "Power and privilege have never been known to abdicate. That is why anarchism is bound to be a call for revolution." In this period, anarchist reformism has limited use. Ward's concept of raising demands and programs which would fit an anarchist society, as solutions for the here-and-now, continues to be an excellent approach. But it needs to be used in the programmatic context of a revolutionary anarchism.

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