OBITUARY

The incremental anarchist

Colin Ward, 1924–2010

Colin Ward, who died on 11 February 2010, was the leading anarchist thinker and writer of postwar Britain. Ward's anarchism was at once constructive, creative and immensely practical. It drew critical but sympathetic attention from many outside the anarchist movement, and arguably it still holds lessons for contemporary radical thought.

Born in 1924 in suburban Essex, Ward gravitated to the anarchist movement while serving in the army during World War II. Following the war, he became a regular contributor to the London-based weekly anarchist newspaper *Freedom*, beginning a lifelong association with Freedom Press. From 1961 to 1970, he edited *Anarchy*, easily the most interesting anarchist theoretical journal published in the UK and one of the most interesting of any political stripe in that interesting decade. Through the journal, he laid out the ideas that would culminate in his 1973 book, *Anarchy in Action*.

Ward's anarchism rests on three main ideas: pluralism, the presence of anarchy in existing society, and a focus on problem-solving. First, Ward argues that all societies solve problems using a variety of mechanisms. They use commercial, market-based techniques; they use authority and directive and bureaucratic techniques; and they also use techniques of mutuality – techniques of mutual aid and cooperative self-help. Within this pluralist framework, 'anarchy' refers to the space in which the latter techniques of mutual aid and cooperative self-help predominate. The aim of anarchism should be to try to push society in the direction of greater anarchy in this sense – to shift the balance of society's pluralistic problem-solving in a more anarchic direction.

Second, related to this pluralist perspective, is Ward's claim that anarchy is already very much part of our social world:

> far from being a speculative vision of a future society … [anarchy] is a description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society … the anarchist alternatives are already there, in the interstices of the dominant power structure. If you want to build a free society, the parts are all at hand. (*Anarchy in Action*)

Examples of anarchy in action that Ward gives include Alcoholics Anonymous, Friendly Societies, squatters' movements, tenants' housing co-operatives and efforts to bring workplaces under 'workers' control'. The anarchist aim should be to build out from already existing anarchy in society, extending its coverage to wider and wider spheres of social life: To do this, anarchist thinking must, in Ward's view, have a resolutely practical, problem-solving focus. Anyone wanting to theorize the intricacies of 'autonomy' or 'anarchy' as abstract concepts will look to Ward's writings in vain. His work is overwhelmingly concerned with discussion of concrete issues such as housing, urban planning, education, welfare and transport, trying to show how the anarchic techniques of mutual aid and cooperative self-help might be applied.

Housing was a particular interest – he spent his early career working as an architect – and illustrates his general approach. Here he was highly critical of state-heavy efforts, led by middle-class housing professionals, to provide housing for the working classes. In an open letter to the Labour MP Tony Crosland, then shadow minister for housing, Ward drew out the paternalism he saw in the social-democratic tradition:

> You … see the homeless, the ill-housed and overcrowded and the newly-weds just coming up for membership of the Housing Shortage Club, as the inert objects, the raw material of policy, waiting

to be processed by the Housing Problems Industry. (*Housing: An Anarchist Approach*, 1976)

Against this paternalism, Ward asserted the principle of 'dweller control' of housing, exemplified in tenants' co-operatives, self-build projects and, not least, squatters' movements.

Ward's resistance to paternalism inevitably brought him into conflict with the Marxist tradition. In his 1985 book *When We Build Again*, Ward refers to the 'ludicrous polemics among Marxist pundits'. Reflecting on the claim that council-house provision is 'decommodification', Ward points to the older use of the word 'commodity' to refer to that which is useful or commodious. He then argues that, in this sense, the mass council housing of the postwar period has indeed been a tremendously successful experiment in 'decommodifying' how many working-class people live.

It would nevertheless be quite wrong to see Ward's anarchism only in terms of a series of interventions in specific policy areas. In a 1968 interview for BBC Radio 3, he described himself as 'an anarchist-communist, in the Kropotkin tradition'. And underpinning the various interventions there is indeed a unifying vision drawn from the work of Kropotkin and from Ebenezer Howard's original conception of the garden city. Ward edited a version of Kropotkin's *Fields, Factories and Workshops* for Freedom Press in 1975 with commentary on what he saw as its contemporary relevance in the new era of energy crisis and stagflation.

The vision is of a society in which local communities are the prime political unit and in which economic activity is localized around a mix of agricultural/horticultural and industrial production. The citizen might work on her allotment on Monday, teach for the next three days a week for the Teachers' Guild in a local school (where children's attendance is not compulsory) and then spend Friday in the Community Workshop making items for a Local Exchange and Trading Scheme. One evening a week might be spent at a meeting of the neighbourhood council.

Ward stood, in effect, at the confluence of two traditions. On the one hand, he knew his anarchist classics, particularly Kropotkin's work, and he drew on them. On the other, he was inspired by the diffuse traditions of working-class and popular self-help – resolutely practical traditions concerned to get things done, to make the world better in some simple but important and measurable way, and which have little time for theoretical niceties. He sought to bring the traditions into dialogue, for their mutual benefit.

Needless to say, his ideas were – and remain – controversial. Within the anarchist community, some saw his incrementalist perspective as objectionably revisionist, if not defeatist. On the other hand, anarchist theorists of our own day, such as Uri Gordon, have claimed Ward as a thinker who anticipated the idea of an 'anarchism of present tense' (*Anarchy Alive: Antiauthoritarian Politics from Practice to Theory*, Pluto, 2008). Outside of the anarchist community, Ward's ideas found a receptive but also critical audience. David Goodway, in an important conversation with Ward, published as *Talking Anarchy*, points to the affinities between Ward's ideas and those of the sometime Labour, sometime SDP thinker and policy entrepreneur Michael Young. Ken Worpole, editor of a recent Festschrift for Ward, *Richer Futures* (1999), argues that Ward's work contains valuable resources for thinking about a new kind of politics, but also adds that 'Ward's anarchism has been strongly antagonistic to most forms of state provision, and some writers, myself included, do not always share this particular antipathy.'

Ward frequently appealed to Martin Buber's argument that governments tend to possess

> more power than is required by the given conditions.… The measure of this excess … represents the exact difference between Administration and Government. I call it the 'political surplus'… The political principle is always stronger in relation to the social principle than the given conditions require. The result is a continuous diminution in social spontaneity. (Buber, 'Society and the State', *Anarchy* 54, 1965)

Buber also argued, however, that 'In history there is not merely the State as a clamp that strangles the individuality of small associations; there is also the State as the framework within which they may consolidate' (*Paths in Utopia*, Routledge, 1949). This indicates, in a rough and ready way, the spirit in which some on the Left have acknowledged Ward's contribution while also wishing to affirm at least a potentially constructive role for the state – albeit, perhaps, a radically transformed state – as a facilitator of mutual aid and cooperative self-help. Nevertheless, it is striking just how far Ward's work as an anarchist has found a receptive audience beyond the anarchist community.

Ward's achievement lies in his detailed exploration of what one might call, in an unWardian turn of phrase, a contemporary socialism of the 'lifeworld': a socialism of the local and convivial, of direct mutuality and democracy. His work will continue to provide rich material for reflection for those interested in building a socialism in which the social is not subsumed either by the market or by the state.

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