

Colin Ward: an Ambiguous Legacy

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I don't remember exactly when I first encountered the work of Colin Ward, but I know he was one of the first anarchists I read, and I will always be grateful for that little piece of chronological luck; which is to say I'm glad that it was Ward's take on anarchism which drew me in and helped shape my own thinking, and which informed my relationship to the anarchist culture which was soon to dominate my life, and the lives of countless others around the world. Within a few years of my first engagement with Ward, anarchism had emerged as a defining feature of the radical social movement landscape; but it was a culture of anarchism which was all the poorer for its apparent lack of interest in one of anarchism's finest exponents. Perhaps a little paradoxically, I want to take this opportunity to honour Colin's legacy by acknowledging the extent to which, whilst his name is still relatively well-known, his influence on contemporary anarchist praxis appears to have faded. I make this argument – which is admittedly somewhat sweeping and generalising – not to overly valorise Ward, nor to be ungenerously dismissive of contemporary anarchists, but to state the case for a renewed engagement with Ward and his work.

Of course, anarchism is a diverse movement, with a long list of tendencies and traditions, some of which are openly antagonistic towards, or seemingly oblivious about, certain others. For any number of anarchists, Ward's work will likely have remained as important as it ever was. It is also true that, as Ward himself stresses in his wonderful book *Influences*, ideas creep around, beyond and between ideology, through generations, separated by time and space – and plagiarism – from those who first expressed them. Ward's influence is certainly all around us, even if it is unknown and indirect. Yet the dominant culture of anarchism – what I have called its *common-sense* – for the past twenty or thirty years has not, I would argue, been especially concerned with Ward, and has neglected many of his most important and insightful lessons. I sometimes wonder how many anarchists below the age of forty would name Ward in their own book of influences, and I wonder what anarchism today might look like

if he had remained as key a figure within anarchist cultures in the twenty-first century as he was in the twentieth.

WARD'S COMPLICATED LEGACY

When Ward first encountered anarchism, its future must have looked pretty bleak. The anarchist movement in the UK had been diminishing through much of the early twentieth century, and its revitalisation at the time of the Spanish Civil War was tempered by Franco's ultimate victory. With such a defeat so recent, and with the entire world then at war, it is not hard to understand why anarchism must have appeared to most as delusional, if not out-right dangerous. Not so for Ward, of course, who seems to have not only taken to anarchism, but developed his own voice within it, in a remarkably short space of time. And it wasn't long before anarchism would rise again, finding levels of support and engagement which had never been seen before. By 1968 it was possible to see anarchist flags flying, not only over the Sorbonne in Paris, but, as Ward informs us, in Canterbury too.¹ As the horrors of state socialism became more and more apparent in the post-war period, anarchism no longer seemed like the naïve utopianism it had often been portrayed as; indeed, for a growing number of people, it started to appear as the only viable way to organise ourselves in a humane and sustainable way. As Ward recounts, 'All of a sudden people were talking [...] about the need for social and political decentralisation, about workers' control of industry, about pupil power in school, about community control of social services'.² These 'new anarchists' – as Ward called them, way back in the early 1970s – were emerging, sporadically but assuredly, all over the world. No doubt inspired and encouraged by this resurgence, Ward was also, as always, alive to the very real possibility that these seeds of anarchism might once again be buried by the weight of the state. Would, he asked in his most well-known book, *Anarchy in Action*, 'people have learned *anything* from the history of the last hundred years'? And, crucially, would 'anarchists themselves [be] sufficiently inventive and imaginative to find ways of applying their ideas today to the society in which we live'?³

The questions anarchists would need to ask were as varied as they were vital, and Ward's work might well be seen as both a constant reminder of the importance of asking them, and as an inventory of their possible answers. How would an anarchist society build and allocate homes? How would its children

be educated? How would it define, and deal with, anti-social behaviour? To examine these, and countless other pressing social questions, Ward looked to some obvious places – to the history of anarchist thought and its many known and lesser-known thinkers – but, always undogmatic and open-minded, he also sought answers from wherever they might be found. This meant reading Marxists and liberals, and it meant engaging with disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, architecture, and urban planning, reading work that had no obvious relation to anarchist thought. As both writer and editor, Ward subtly introduced anarchists to an impressive range of ideas from the world at large, never apologising for taking the useful insights of others and repurposing them through an anarchist lens. Anarchists have too often ceded ideological ground to the right (and, indeed, other parts of the left), abandoning perfectly good ideas once they become sullied by association with those we otherwise disagree with. ‘It isn’t my fault’ he wrote in his engaging collection of essays *Talking Houses*, ‘that bureaucratic managerialism took over socialist politics so that, in the climate of disillusion, slogans like self-help and mutual aid were left around to be exploited by the party of the privileged’.⁴

It is hard to know whether Ward’s vision of anarchism was influenced by his willingness to engage in such a substantial amount of non-anarchist work, or whether it was his vision of anarchism – as plural, diverse, respectful and compassionate – which gave him the freedom to pick and choose from a world full of good ideas often hidden in unlikely places. Either way, Ward was clear that anarchism for him was always to be understood as existing in tension with other political and social tendencies; what matters, as he put it in the final page of *Anarchy in Action*, are ‘those social changes, whether revolutionary or reformist, through which people enlarge their autonomy and reduce their subjection to external authority’.⁵ Those changes, Wards believed, would come about through what he called, following the terminology of his and previous generations, direct action. Direct action meant the creation of ‘parallel organisations, counter organisations, alternative organisations, [...] the demand for workers’ control [...] the deschooling movement [...] the self-help therapeutic group [...] squatter movements and tenants’ cooperatives [...] food cooperatives [...] Claimant’s Unions [...] community newspapers, movements for child welfare, communal households [...] neighbourhood councils ...’⁶ In short, it meant building the new world, as much as possible and wherever possible, in the shell of the old – even if that old world very much continued to exist.

THE OTHER NEW ANARCHISTS

If 1968 was a turning point for people of Ward's generation, it was 1999 which represented a similarly profound shift in the political imagination for those who, like me, grew up in an era in which yuppies had replaced hippies and the prospects of replacing capitalism with anything at all seemed like nothing less than fantasy. The Battle of Seattle in November of that year acted, much like the events of May '68, as the flag-bearer for both a certain political analysis and a strategic manifesto for social change, premised not on the seizure of state power, but on the power of people working together to build a better world. Through the '90s, the term *direct action* had taken on a somewhat different meaning from that used by Ward, as it was increasingly understood as referring to acts of sabotage, obstruction and other mostly illegal actions carried out against specific targets such as road building sites and vivisection laboratories. Around this time, anarchists – and, it should be noted, many non-anarchists – started talking instead of *prefiguration*. Prefiguration, for the generation of '99 (and thereabouts) was that building of the new world in the shell of the old, tirelessly promoted by Ward and generations of anarchists before him, but with a number of contemporary twists. The first and most important of those twists was the widespread eradication of the recent past and the subsequent presentation of twenty-first century anarchism as a fundamentally new phenomenon. Although entirely understandable for each and any individual who, like me, was swept up in a wave of activism which did indeed feel very much new, it should be a source of regret, and reflection, that the idea that this surge of anarchism represented a radical departure from previous generations was able to dominate the popular radical consciousness of the time.⁷ This mis-reading of anarchism's recent past also enabled what was a more genuinely new twist to anarchist praxis. For the post-'99 generation, prefiguration took on a very particular meaning; although the type of direct action promoted by Ward still existed (often under the terminology of DIY politics), prefiguration as popularised by the 'new' anarchists was very significantly geared towards the means of political organising. Protest camps and summit mobilisations became the default tactic, and the way they were organised, through direct, consensus-based democracy, was not only important, but was the fundamental aim of this form of activism; it was the *way* things were organised, even more than what was being organised, which became the focal point of anarchist culture. Put simply, organising through consensus became an end in itself. The emphasis on prefiguration in this narrow but deep way meant that the kind of community-building

which Ward addressed was often abandoned in favour of the creation of spaces which were more 'pure', untainted by the reformism of liberals or the authoritarianism of Marxists. Ward's pluralist and pragmatic take on direct action was lost in the hubris of a generation who believed their refusal to compromise on what they saw as key anarchist principles amounted to a more radical approach to social change. Anything which might mean a compromise on these principles was rejected or ignored.

Of course, neither Ward's generation nor mine changed the world in any profound way, but I often wonder whether we might have really embarked on an anarchist century had Ward's voice not been drowned out and replaced with a vision of anarchism which was, despite its insistence to the contrary, remarkably dogmatic and ideologically purist. Ward's willingness to compromise would have been roundly rejected by many anarchists of my generation, but his pragmatism was not that of a leftist-turned-centrist, of someone whose ideals have slowly been eroded by a belief that the world will never really change.⁸ Ward was as committed to anarchist principles as anyone, but those principles lead him to see the value in engaging with others even when they didn't entirely share his vision of the world. Ultimately, he believed in community organising, but the community in question was not a temporary autonomous zone filled with self-selecting radicals, but the towns where we lived, the schools where we sent our children, the tenants we shared a landlord with.

Though it is easy enough to overlook in an essay which is mostly, and unashamedly, a piece of steadfast anarchist propaganda, Ward's insistence in Chapter One of *Anarchy in Action* that anarchists would need to be 'sufficiently inventive and imaginative to find ways of applying their ideas today to the society in which we live', is just one example of what made Ward such an important voice. As ardent a supporter of anarchism as he was, he was equally a thinker who recognised the need to challenge anarchist thinking, to question its assumptions and occasional dogmas, and to develop an anarchism suited to the complex realities of the twentieth century. Ward's championing of anarchism was always undertaken with an honesty and critical awareness which gave his work an endlessly interesting twist, as his emphatic refusal to compromise on anarchist *ideals* was always coupled with an equally steadfast refusal to let ideological dogma cloud his sociological reading of the social world. Whatever vision of a future society anarchists might have, Ward never took his eyes off the simple fact that we hadn't yet arrived there. He never, for example, considered the state as a potentially progressive social force, but he balanced this assess-

ment with a recognition that the state was unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Fundamentally, Ward was concerned with practising anarchism, with giving it a life, and as much of a life as possible, not once the weight of the state had shifted, but whilst it was still very much bearing down on us.

THE ACTIVIST'S INTELLECTUAL?

Despite what I have argued is a lack of influence within certain contemporary anarchist cultures, Ward's intellectual contribution to anarchism as a whole is not really in question. Part of this is down to the ideas he presented, but it is also worth mentioning the way in which he presented them. Just as admirable as what he wrote was the manner in which Ward went about his work; he somehow managed to critique anarchist ideas, and to introduce new ways of thinking about anarchism, without ever really attacking anyone else's position. He was both humble and persuasive, assuredly staking a claim for his own particular vision of anarchism without seemingly feeling the need to contradict or explicitly challenge those of others.

He was also in many ways the ideal 'intellectual' for anarchists. Anarchism has often had a tense relationship with the idea of the intellectual, and intellectual work. Part of this represents a very reasonable critique of certain intellectual practices and personalities, but it has also turned at times into an unhealthy rejection of intellectual work, however it is produced. In the last few decades, anarchism has become increasingly accepted within elements of the university, with many positive results. It has also led to a growth in academic writing that would raise the hackles of many an anarchist, confirming their view of intellectuals as people entirely disconnected from and uninterested in anarchist practice. Ward's work beautifully connects theory to action, and is extremely well-written, accessible to pretty much anyone who can read. His work requires no prior knowledge, no academic expertise, and commonly addresses very practical issues, yet it does so whilst engaging with a rich theoretical and empirical complexity.

Marking the hundredth year of his birth, it is entirely right that we celebrate Colin and everything he achieved. But I hope the anarchist community can do more than that. The bursts of anarchist activity following 1968 and 1999 were both relatively short-lived, and we are currently in a much-weakened position, compared to just a decade ago. The absolutism inherent in so much of the theory and practice of twenty-first century anarchism worked for a brief period, but

was ultimately unsustainable. Ward gave us a way to think about how we might engage with the non-anarchist world without losing our radical voice, and he argued tirelessly for the necessity for such engagement. ‘I rejoice’ he once wrote, ‘in being an anarchist columnist in the non-anarchist press’.⁹ He also seemed immune to – perhaps even to relish – accusations that he was a reformist, a liberal, even a ‘Labour party stool-pigeon’. Ward had no time for those who interpreted anarchism as a refusal to connect with others of different persuasions, and his work was far richer, and, at the time, far more influential, as a result. Perhaps it is time to revisit Ward and his work and take some lessons from someone who could certainly lay claim – though I doubt he ever would – to having been one of anarchism’s most successful propagandists. As I have argued elsewhere, we desperately need to find ways to work alongside other radical and progressive movements and traditions if we are ever going to tackle capitalist hegemony, and few thinkers can help us more with that task than Colin Ward.

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NOTES

- 1 How much of this resurgence was down to Ward’s tireless work is a moot point, but he was certainly a central figure within the UK scene from very early on in his life as an anarchist.
- 2 Colin Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (London: Freedom Press, 2008/1973), p25.
- 3 Ibid, p38.
- 4 Colin Ward, *Talking Houses* (London: Freedom Press 1990), p9.
- 5 Ibid, p172.
- 6 Ibid, pp165-66.
- 7 To cite just one example, David Graeber, whose work came to be understood as both influential and representative of twenty-first century anarchism, and who popularised the notion that this was indeed a ‘new’ wave of anarchism, failed to mention Ward in his three foundational texts: *Direct Action*, *Possibilities*, and *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*. Whether he had read him, or was aware of the anarchist culture with

which Ward was associated, isn't clear; what is clear is that Graeber and countless others presented the anarchism they were engaged with as being new in ways which would have been very hard to defend. I also asked, in a highly unscientific study, seven anarchists under the age of thirty-five what they thought about Ward: three had never heard of him, three recognised his name but didn't know anything about him, and one replied 'well he's just a bit of a liberal, I prefer Malatesta'.

- 8 In this regard, Ward reminds me of the great Marxist thinker Stuart Hall. I sometimes wonder if they were aware of each other's work – they certainly had more in common than their respective political labels might suggest.
- 9 Colin Ward, 'Notes of an Anarchist Columnist', *The Raven* 3, 4 (1990): 319.