

Anarchy for Kids

A Review of Colin Ward's Essays

Bernard Marszalek

A review of *Autonomy, Solidarity, Possibility: The Colin Ward Reader*

Damian White (Editor), Chris Wilbert (Editor), and Colin Ward, Paperback, 375 pages, AK Press (Edinburgh, Oakland, Baltimore), 2011, \$21.95

This large collection of essays by Colin Ward, his last publishing effort before he died last year at the age of 84, affords those who know him only as the author of the ever-popular *Anarchy in Action* (now in print for almost 40 years!) with an in-depth view of his many interests.

Ward affiliated with the British anarchist movement at the end of World War II, while still a young soldier. Upon discharge he worked as an architect for ten years, went into adult education for another decade and then joined The Town and Country Planning Association as their Education Officer.

Only months after his employment began, Ward started the *Bulletin of Environmental Education*, an innovative periodical for the 1970s that advocated environmental education in secondary schools. Throughout this time he wrote innumerable articles for the anarchist press and edited their renowned English monthly *Anarchy* for ten years.

In the early 1980s, he quit employment entirely to devote all his time to writing, producing a book a year and contributing a weekly column to left-wing opinion journals like *New Society* and *The New Statesman* into the 1990s.

As this collection demonstrates, Ward explored a variety of topics. He wrote about self-built housing and alternative technology, the lives of children in cities and horticulture, water rights and local currency, and much more.

The connecting thread through all his interests was the practical and creative activities of ordinary people. He highlighted these efforts because they showed how people, given half a chance, often succeed in carving out a bit of individuality against the odds, poverty, alienation, commodification, and all sorts of authoritarian social pathologies.

For example, one of his earliest researches took him to the few remaining enclaves workers from London had established on cheap land purchased during a slump in prices after the First World War. On weekends, in those early years of the 20th century, fresh air-starved workers retreated from the city, first to garden and then to build simple housing.

Eventually, after decades, these little makeshift villages evolved from refuges to permanent homes and then to targets for demolition by arrogant local officials responding to the greed of real estate developers. Ward's defense of these communities, as tangible examples of autonomous working-class culture, resonant with the historic legacy of institutions that workers in the 19th Century developed, including insurance societies, health clubs, cooperative stores, and building societies. The latter are member-owned financial institutions devoted to loans and mortgages.

Ward argued that these examples of grassroots economic development could have been the route to a socialist society, one controlled from the bottom up and not the welfare state that evolved in Great Britain, guided by a paternalistic state bureaucracy.

One theme that Colin Ward returned to often, and almost exclusively as a social critic, was the place of children in cities. The city known to previous generations as a commons for creative play, today is an enclosure where we are

held hostage to fear. He approvingly quotes Chicago's pioneer social welfare advocate, Jane Addams, on the failure of modern cities to provide equivalent rituals to "the pageantry, tourneys, dances and festivals" of medieval cities. Ward added that periodically providing a venue for a circus or concert, only solidified the ruthless exploitation of children as consumers.

Colin Ward would have endorsed the recent proliferation of schoolyard and community gardens in the U.S. as a splendid response to children's love of discovery and wonderment for nature. He championed child horticulturists as a step towards their introduction to adult activities. Decades ago, he railed against the domination of cities by auto traffic advocating, beyond slow streets, the outright banning of vehicles as Paul Goodman suggested fifty years ago for Manhattan.

These measures, Ward argued, would lead to cities where children could explore and where they could express themselves. He was not hesitant to recognize the revolutionary implications of his stand; he thought big. To quote: "Rather than throw in a few playthings, shouldn't we help them [the children] climb out of the sandbox and into the city?"

And he thought small—taking a child's perspective proves a good analogy for Ward's emphasis on autonomy for neighborhood-sized groups. The growing popularity today of localism testifies to the appeal for small units of governance that contribute to community welfare directly, without bureaucratic supervision.

Another benefit of thinking small—of devolving social policy to manageable bits—is that it contributes to individual and social well-being. Well-being, as a guideline for social policy, has achieved wide recognition, but it can easily be captured by manipulative agencies, unless, as Ward maintained, the self-managed core retains control.

As an anarchist, he had no illusions about the immense task of removing authoritarianism, but also, as an anarchist, he advocated the anarchist system of organization as a solution.

Historically, anarchists called for the selection of local delegates as revocable members to higher bodies, with that same system reproduced at each layer of federation. As the democratic deficit that accompanies neo-liberalism becomes ever more obvious, Ward's "deep" democracy will appeal as a reasonable alternative.

Government officials have abandoned all pretense of support for civic values and, using the excuse of "tight budgets," have instead pushed a policy of realpolitik—essentially a corrupt policy meant to maintain inequalities of wealth and power.

Ward's work, uncovering historic grassroots institutions and the motivations that led to their creation, anticipated the current move to develop humane metrics for a good society to replace the Gross National Product statistic that merely records the accumulation of material wealth.

Our legacy to future generations should be an ethic of conviviality, as Ivan Illich proposed 50 years ago, and to that inheritance, Ward would add an urban aesthetic. This collection of Ward's essays offers, among other riches, a vision of a city where egalitarianism defines its geography.

Bernard Marszalek is the editor of *The Right to be Lazy: Essays by Paul Lafargue* (AK Press/Kerr Co., 2011) and co-founder of JASecon (Just Alternative Sustainable Economics), a San Francisco Bay alternative economy think tank.

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