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Review of Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction

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Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction

Colin Ward

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Colin Ward's new book is an introduction to anarchism, produced as part of the "very short introduction" series of the Oxford University Press. Ward, for anyone who does not know, is one of Britain's most famous anarchists writers. His work, on numerous subjects, is uniformly excellent and, unsurprisingly, this new book is as good as you would expect.

He paints a compelling picture of anarchism as a people's movement, opposed to both the state and capitalism. He covers the major moments of anarchism's revolutionary achievement as well as providing a good summary of its major ideas and ideals. In many ways this little book feels like a sequel of Ward's classic "*Anarchy in Action*" and is as inspiring as that book is. As in that book, he covers federalism and freedom in education as well as discussing ecology and the blights of crime, work, na-

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A review of Colin Ward's recent introduction to anarchist ideas and history.

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tionalism and fundamentalism from a libertarian perspective. Needless to say, he also discusses the Spanish revolution and mentions the anarchist role in the Mexican and Russian revolutions. He correctly notes that the Zapatistas in the Chiapas and the landless peasant movement in Brazil are modern continuations of the anarchist influenced aspects of the Mexican revolution. Sadly there is no mention of Argentina's popular assemblies and occupied factories although Ward does mention the anti-capitalist movement and protests of recent years.

A particularly noteworthy aspect of the book is Ward's mention of non-Western anarchist traditions such as Japanese, Chinese and African anarchism. He uses them to illustrate the tendency for libertarian ideas to develop in different cultures and different times. He also gives over two chapters to specific forms of anarchism, namely green and individualist. He usefully links anarchist ideas to modern ecological concerns and ideas, showing how anarchism has advocated ideas on decentralisation and ecology which predate the "official" green movement by decades.

Ward also summarises the contribution of such notable individualist anarchists like Stirner and Tucker. He also exposes the nonsense that they can be considered forefathers of the so-called "libertarian" right, rightly rejecting any suggestion that the likes of Rothbard and other ideologues for "untrammelled market capitalism" are anarchists. Sadly, not a few "experts" lump these proprietarians (a more accurate description of their ideology) in with genuine libertarians simply because they have appropriated the name "anarchist" and "libertarian" to describe their reactionary ideologies. In reality, genuine anarchists have always been as critical of capitalist property rights as they have been of the state. Any libertarian who considers the "libertarian" right as friends or being related to anarchism really are ignorant of what both sides stand for and, moreover, a total liability to the movement.

Of course no book is perfect. There is no real discussion of why anarchists stress the need for direct action as a means of social change or, surprisingly, why we reject the ballot box. Equally, the anarchist role in resisting fascism in Italy is not discussed in spite of its obvious relevance today. Similarly the major schools of anarchism, namely anarchist-communism and anarcho-syndicalism, are not really defined. The former were as concerned about the organised industrial workers as an agent of change as the latter and both stress the need to organise all workers, not just those in factories.

In addition, when Ward asserts that anarchists “are seldom to be found in the diminishing world of career employment in formal industry or bureaucracy” I have to disagree. In all my time in the movement the vast majority of the anarchists I have met have been either wage slaves (as I am now) in capitalist enterprises or the state bureaucracy or students (as I once was). And, contra Ward, having worked in a small business, I can say that while the owners (as former workers) did not want to be wage slaves they had no problem with being bosses. The workforce was ordered about and exploited as in any larger capitalist firm.

As such, anarcho-syndicalists (like other revolutionary anarchists) will not agree with Ward that small businesses are a haven of co-operative labour between equals and, therefore, consider the classical forms of anarchism in the workplace (class struggle, direct action, unions, solidarity) as still extremely relevant. So while Ward is right to note that “being your own boss” is an important libertarian tendency in society, I feel he has overestimated its potential as it is expressed now. Whether this feeling can be used to promote co-operatives or a desire for a social revolution to abolish capitalism with workers’ self-management is a task anarchists should set themselves.

Which points to a flaw in his definition of an anarchist organisation. Ward argues that they should be voluntary,

functional, temporary and small. Yet surely any genuine anarchist organisation must also be participatory as well. Without self-management, voluntary association simply means picking your master. Little wonder anarchists have supported it from Proudhon onwards. Similarly, when Ward states that anarchist organisations are small and temporary I feel he is simply wrong. Size and permanence are a matter of what is appropriate for what the organisation does. Some organisations may have to be (relatively) large (hopefully achieved by federalism). Other organisations will have to be permanent (the rail network and health care spring to mind). As such, I would suggest that a theory of anarchist organisation must be voluntary, participatory, functional and of appropriate size and permanence.

However, the key problem in the book is easy to see. Ward, correctly, roots anarchism in the activities of people during normal (non-revolutionary) times, showing how some key anarchist ideas (like federalism) have been and are being applied by non-anarchists to meet real needs and solve real problems. His chapter on working class self-help as a potential basis for an anarchist alternative to the welfare state is of particular note. Yet if drawing on libertarian tendencies in everyday life is the great strength of the book, it is also its major weakness. This is because it, almost by definition, excludes situations when “everyday” normalcy becomes questioned, new social organisations and possibilities are created and revolution is, potentially, in the air. While Ward does discuss the social movements and revolutions inspired by anarchism this is mostly limited to the past (or on other continents) and so the vision of anarchism as a movement of collective action and change in the West does not come across strongly. Indeed, the reader may draw the conclusion that anarchism today consists of little more than lifestyle changes, which is radically false.

Ward, rightly, stresses the importance of applying our ideas in the here and now. He indicates how that has, in its own

quiet way, changed the world for the better in a “long series of small liberations that have lifted a huge load of human misery.” He quotes Herzen, for example, on the obvious fact that a “goal which is infinitely remote is not a goal at all, it is a deception.” However, being an evolutionist does not exclude being a revolutionary. Supporting reforms in a libertarian direction within capitalism is something all anarchists should support yet this is not, and has never been enough. Those who think creating or shopping at a co-operative equals social change are just as wrong as those who reject such activity out of hand as irrelevant. Only collective action and organisation can secure change and, just as important, protect it from attempts by state and bosses to erode it. Our task is to work out how to apply of anarchist ideas today in such a way which create alternatives which foster and bolster a revolutionary social movement. While lifestyle changes are important in the here and now, few anarchists consider this as enough in themselves. We also subscribe to the strategy of direct action in social struggles which created the potential for the Spanish revolution Ward summarises so usefully.

Yet while these drawbacks in the book are important, it is still a good introduction to anarchism. Hopefully it will encourage people to find out more about our ideas and, hopefully, inspire more people to help change the world in a libertarian direction.