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The writings of Colin Ward and the legacy of anarchism for housing studies, by Keith Jacobs, Housing Studies 40 no. 6, 2025.

This article summarizes Colin Ward's evolutionary anarchist approach to housing, summarizes existing writing on the topic, and offers some rather inane criticisms based on the author's own state-socialist moralism. The summary is solid enough, but the author's approach does not so much rebut as condemn Ward's anarchism. The author is opposed to anarchism and thinks that local interventions lack the funding needed to address large-scale housing problems. Jacobs is a retired scholar based in Australia but often writing on Britain. He uses discourse analysis and seems to have a socialist politics. More significantly, he's heavily committed to a form of constructivism in which individuals do not have any autonomy, and authoritarian and paternalistic control are therefore seen as justified. This means approaches like Ward's are ruled-out before they can even be considered; they violate

basic dogmas which are beyond question for the author. This fundamentally incapacitates him from understanding or engaging productively with Ward's work.

Ward was an evolutionary anarchist, interested mainly in everyday initiatives which create everyday anarchy, in the sense of mutual aid and Kropotkin's "social principle." He was writing in Britain, in a context where the survival of the welfare state was taken for granted. Much of his work consisted of attempts to show that anarchism can offer alternative ways to achieve the same kinds of things as the welfare state, in better ways. According to Jacobs, his distinctive contribution to housing studies lies in his fundamental reframing of tenants from passive recipients of state assistance to active agents capable of driving meaningful change. In his 1976 open letter to Minister Anthony Crosland, Ward challenged the prevailing bureaucratic mindset that treated homeless and ill-housed people as "inert objects" to be processed by what he termed the "Housing Problems Industry." Instead, he proposed inverting this perspective to recognize ordinary people as "the makers, rather than the victims of policy."

While broadly sympathetic to welfarist objectives, Ward opposed the hierarchical paternalism embedded in postwar social democracy, where politicians and administrators were positioned above welfare recipients. The social democratic system met some needs and provided some solidarity, but it inserted bureaucracy and hierarchy as well. Ward sought practical alternatives. Rather than privatizing social housing, he called for a transfer of control to residents' cooperatives. Ward's advocacy for tenant participation rested on the conviction that expertise already existed within communities but remained unacknowledged by state bureaucrats operating with deficit models of tenant capability. He insisted that meaningful participation required genuine resource control, warning that bureaucrats might otherwise appropriate collective practices and subsume them within expanded welfare state structures, as he believed

are rarely transparent – and certainly less so than community meetings conducted in public.

Observing that people meet their own needs through squatting, self-build, and collectively managed housing is hardly 'romanticizing,' a term which seems to be attached by certain scholars to anything they deem more supportive of something than they are. Anarchists involved in successful squats often realize another world in a manner which lends itself to the type of experiences people 'romanticize' or are nostalgic about. And there's nothing wrong with 'romanticizing' things which are *experienced* in romantic ways, as self-expression and as other worlds. But one can simultaneously recognize that informal settlements meet concrete needs in relatively empowering ways, and also that they are not 'romantic' in that they are often poor, unstable, prone to social problems, and that people living there are politically impure by whatever standard. Supporting practical, DIY solutions is realism, not romanticism.

The real issue here is whether people should be able to live their own lives by their own desires, ethos, and power, or whether they should be shackled to a compulsory "society" which is based on an abstract phantasm. Once people have the power (legal or not) to squat, build settlements, travel and camp, and so on, they are able to evade many of the other forms of state control, to work less or not at all, to evade surveillance, to protest, and so on. The ruling elite – political and capitalist – fears the population exercizing counter-power and comes up with excuses for keeping people powerless and "accountable" to their overlords. Liberation consists in breaking the shackles.

have squatted at some point. If we assume that most squatters would be rough sleeping if they were not squatting, this means that squatting is solving about 50% of the housing problem for rough sleepers and is a common solution for homelessness – hardly negligible, even in extremely adverse conditions. Evidently squatting with political support, a strong squatters' movement, and/or removal of obstacles would have even more of an impact.

I would add that a billion people worldwide find squatting far from a negligible way of meeting their housing needs; poor people in urban areas in the global South often live in informal settlements/shanty-towns. There are also land occupations and defence of undocumented territories, which reach an enormous scale. Brazil's Movimento Sem Terra (MST) is one of the world's largest social movements, with an estimated 1.5 million informal members. Land occupations and horizontal organization have proven quite compatible with militant tactics and political influence in the MST's case.

The author prefers bureaucratic allocation to democratic local decisions because it is 'far more transparent' and 'more just' and does not 'cede too much power to individuals to make decisions that are not accountable.' As usual, he doesn't say what he means by this, but the implication seems to be that someone who houses themselves, does not work, and ignores planning rules is somehow too powerful compared to dictatorial state planners, landlords, and governments. This is authoritarian bullshit which ignores the real balance of power, a paternalistic moralism which thinks individuals' needs are less important than maintaining command authority (though of course the author thinks the state "should" be meeting needs, without its failure to do so discrediting its legitimacy). Planners, technocrats, bureaucrats, and governments also often act "unaccountably," and because of their power, do far more damage than any individual ever could. And bureaucratic decisions

occurred with working-class mutual aid societies at the height of Fabianism.

Ward also saw squatting and self-build as positive solutions. Ward identified squatting as a practical mechanism through which dysfunctional social arrangements could be repaired and renewed, distinguishing between political demonstrations highlighting inequities and personal solutions to housing need. He viewed squatting as fostering sociality and solidarity among individuals united primarily by shared homelessness, creating energizing collaborative experiences through making accommodation habitable.

Despite his anarchist commitments, Ward also saw useful roles for the government, as a source and guarantor of funds rather than a direct service deliverer. He envisioned planners establishing utilities and public amenities while channelling resources for households to build their own properties, describing their role as "indispensable" for providing "sites and services." However, Ward argued that resource allocation decisions should rest with local people who had the most at stake, asking whether the future lay not with "technocrats pushing buttons" but with "a multitude of small activities" by individuals and groups making "their own niche in the world of ordinary needs."

Jacobs also summarizes three previous articles engaging with Ward's housing studies. Hodkinson contrasts anarchist approaches with Marxism, which he accuses of treating housing struggles as a distraction. Anarchism offers practical alternatives such as mutual homeownership. Allen deploys anarchism as a theoretical lens for reflecting on academic research practice, arguing that anarchist approaches can be more democratic and dissolve barriers between researchers and marginalized communities through "mutually transformative" conversation. However, Allen's prescription for academics to step outside the "scholar self" into "genuine personhood" lacks explanation of how this might be achieved.

Bower provides the most detailed study of Ward's engagement with housing through examining his documentation of "Plotlanders," DIY builders in coastal settlements whose informal developments were eventually displaced by bureaucratic planning regulations and rising land values.

Jacobs also mines the literature for critics of Ward. He finds only one he is prepared to cite: another anarchist called Dobraszczyk, who cites Bonanno's view contrasting a local, DIY focus to wider transformative struggles (i.e. insurrection/revolution). Even Jacobs thinks this is simplistic. Harvey doesn't mention Ward, but criticizes anarchism for a lack of understanding of macro-scale structural dynamics and contradictions. Harvey, like Jacobs, is concerned that local mobilization lacks the scale to reconfigure macro-level power.

Jacobs himself thinks that squatting and self-build 'are situated within capitalist relations' and the UK squatting movement has has 'negligible' impact. He accuses Ward of assigning blame to the state without providing empirical evidence. The author prefers bureaucratic allocation to democratic local decisions because it is 'far more transparent' and 'more just' and does not 'cede too much power to individuals to make decisions that are not accountable.' He also thinks that locals don't know as much as technocratic experts, and would discard well-grounded professional advice. In a footnote, he also implicitly criticizes Ward for not taking up invitations to speak outside the UK – which suggests the importance he attaches to academic self-branding.

Jacobs also thinks that Ward 'romanticizes' tenants, small groups, and autonomous individuals and overlooks the scale of response needed to solve housing problems. He is critical of Ward's supposed assumption that dialogue leads to resolution, and he sees Ward's valuation of individual freedom as 'reliant on a narrow conception of what individuality entails and how it is constituted.' In other words, Ward's anarchism violates the ideological maxim that people are simply effects

the general trend is that the state decomposes horizontal relations.

Jacobs doesn't tell us what he means by 'negligible impact' (of squatting) and 'situated within capitalist relations.' The latter seems to be a dogmatic position based on the idea of capitalism as a totality. Squatting does not operate within a capitalist economics of commodifying, buying, and selling property; it directly challenges or ignores capitalist relations, taking resources directly in a manner similar to raiding or hunting/gathering. And the welfare state does not take place completely outside capitalist relations in a purist sense either; it is very much a partial, local decommodification, run on the basis of wage/salaried labour and designed to strengthen rather than undermine capitalism. Nor does Jacobs' academic output occur in a pure outside from which he can criticize squatters as too complicit. He is making excuses for treating less radical alternatives as if they are more radical than those he denounces.

In terms of negligible impact, the UK squatters' movement has never reached the levels of success of those in the Netherlands, Germany, or Greece (which Jacobs conveniently neglects to mention), which established effective counter-power and autonomous zones for long periods. It is also much weaker today than in the 1980s when Ward was writing. Jacobs probably means that the movement hasn't influenced housing policy, but he's pessimistic about the possibilities of autonomy as well. In a footnote, Jacobs treats Christiania as unsuccessful because of a failure over time to resist gentrification and commodification. This utterly ignores the state pressure on the area and the defeats and compromises which undermined resistance. Recuperation is not destiny but politics.

At the time of writing, there are reportedly 354,000 homeless or temporarily housed people, 12,300 rough sleepers, 12,000 people sleeping in cars, garages, etc., 80,000 people in temporary housing, and at least 20,000 squatters (campaigners believe the real figure is higher), and 39% of homeless people

voluntarity and consent, which operate dialogically and democratically, which involve decisions of the people involved and not models imposed by command, etc. And "best" doesn't have to mean "perfect," either. I take the argument Ward makes as being exactly this: people are relational and bounded, but are better-off in systems where this relationality/boundedness is egalitarian, consensual, human-scale, and non-bureaucratic, even though these systems are also imperfect and complex.

Jacobs seems to be overinvested in the state-versus-market binary, to such an extent as to be unable to give a fair hearing to anything else. Ancoms and mutualists are not pro-capitalist and do not neglect critiques of capitalism or other macro-structures (e.g. the Spectacle). Kropotkin's "social principle" is itself based on an assumption that people are partly relationally constituted and that individual power is increased by particular kinds of relations. However, he sees state command as a type of relation destructive of horizontal connections.

Jacobs writes from a position of idealizing the welfare state and ignoring the extent to which the state today has become a force of atomization. For example, states either ignore or attack communes, eco-villages, land projects and the like, organize planning/zoning around capitalist and normie concerns, build mainly atomized housing, aid capitalists in controlling housing provision and raising housing prices, enforce fascistic laws against homeless people and people meeting their own needs (squatters, unregulated self-build, etc.), securitize public spaces, repress protests, harass people for standing round in groups, and generally create a situation more amenable to dyadic command than to horizontal "reciprocity." Kropotkin, Buber, Landauer, and Ward are right that command hierarchies require the decomposition of horizontal relations which otherwise undermine the dyadic relation between boss and bossed. This is a big general issue and there's doubtless counter-examples, but

of discourses or structures. For Jacobs, this means people are never autonomous but always bounded and relational – a common excuse today for authority. Thinking people can solve their own problems is denounced as 'romanticizing.' Residents can't be trusted to control housing because they might be bigoted or inept. Jacobs also think the state can foster reciprocity. He thinks that human flourishing depends on boundedness and connections with others rather than autonomous existence. While Ward's writings provide valuable resources for considering contemporary housing challenges, his insistence on viewing the state as the primary problem meant overlooking how inequalities operate as main driving forces shaping housing systems, limiting the applicability of his solutions to large-scale challenges operating at city, regional, and national levels.

What it means for radicals: This is a passable summary accompanied by a hatchet-job. Jacobs is so attached to state housing policy (his area of specialism) that he puts it before everything else. Housing does not require expensive interventions. As the Tipi Valley commune shows, a basic home can be constructed for around £1000 in the UK. That's less than a month's rent in London. In addition, there are huge numbers of empty houses and other buildings in the UK. The main barriers to solving the housing problem are land access and planning rules. Homelessness is not a deficit and social problem. It's a programmed effect of the work-system and the property ownership regime. It could be easily solved if the state got out the way. And the state, here, acts as the enforcer of capitalism, not a counterbalance, referee, or judge. A rational state which sought to eliminate the "housing problem" would legalize squatting, stop criminalizing Travellers and van-dwellers, stop homeless "sweeps" and evictions, and leave self-builders and communes alone – *even if* it also had proactive social housing policies. Today's state does neither of these things, and for structural reasons.

Regarding the issue of evidence, Ward is an empiricist and he has written detailed social histories with a strong empirical grounding (e.g. of the Plotlands). However, the work Jacobs surveys is a collection of occasional pieces and not an academic treatise. Rather than test Ward's claims, Jacobs simply dismisses them as not conforming to correct academic presentation. The passage which Jacobs cites as evidence of Ward's lack of empirical evidence is primarily a normative statement (that social-democrats have abandoned the cooperativist origins of socialism and "surrendered" social welfare to the state). The embedded empirical claim – that social-democrats relied on welfare-state mechanisms and not cooperatives – is barely contested, and certainly not by Jacobs.

While Jacobs criticizes Ward for making unsupported claims, he provides no evidence for his objections. They simply express his own political dogmas or stick anathematizing labels on Ward. As with parallel fields such as anti-psychiatry and radical health approaches, the question of whether experts meet needs better than either individuals themselves, or horizontal/small-group collectives, is very much debated. Jacobs simply *asserts* that experts know best and are more just. He believes in a phantasm of abstract justice or abstract human need which an expert can know and provide. In reality, state systems lead to simplification at best, bulldozing reality at worst. States working by rigid rules and tickbox assessment systems never properly appreciate the diversity of individuals, and this reinforces the reification built into capitalism. Why should people want a dictated direction of overall problem-solving that ignores their own needs, and provides only for an imaginary image of "the human" or a normie ingroup?

The issue of autonomy versus boundedness is a distraction. There's a legitimate philosophical debate here, about whether people are individuals with free will or are determined by some factor (psychological, biological, sociological, discursive, etc.); and there's a concrete question as to whether people live better lives socially or not. These are enormous questions which can't be addressed in the space Jacobs gives to the issue. I think Jacobs is wrong about social determinism, at least in the predictable way he requires. He takes relationality too far; people *are* Unique Ones, and this is easily demonstrated in terms of the scale of individual differences, the complexities of individual psychodynamics, and the frequency of social deviance. The result is a preference for systems which meet abstract need of an abstract, idealized human being, but not necessarily the real needs of particular humans beings. On the second point, whether it's more pleasurable or productive to be alone or with others seems to vary among individuals (introverts versus extroverts). Whether it's better to be part of a small voluntary group or a big impersonal macro-society is easier to resolve: people are happier in small groups. This is clear from the ethnographic record and is embedded in the scholarship on "loneliness" (people in mass societies with lots of bureaucracy can still be extremely lonely).

But all of this is rather beside the point. Jacobs isn't arguing against Stirner or Hakim Bey, he's arguing against Colin Ward, who is primarily influenced by Kropotkin, Buber, and Landauer. All four of these anarchists have a general social ontology compatible with the one Jacobs insists on. Ward thinks people's lives are enriched by cooperative social life and mutual aid. The value of autonomy in most versions of anarchism has very little to do with metaphysics. If people are relational or bounded, this applies just as much to hunter-gatherers, squatters, rebels, and drop-outs as it does to anyone else. It doesn't make impossible any of the existing approaches, and therefore, it doesn't show that a state is necessary. If one accepts the premise that people are relational and bounded and not truly autonomous, one can still argue that the best forms of relationality and boundedness are those which create a sense of freedom, which operate at a human scale, which arrange people more-or-less equally, which depend on