

# **Anarchism and the welfare state**

**The Peckham Health Centre**

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## Executive Summary

- Anarchists are normally regarded as a fringe element in British public life but they did engage with mainstream economic, medical and health issues, especially around what they saw as the exemplary experiment of the Peckham Health Centre in the 1930s and 1940s.
- Soon after the Centre's launch, private donations enabled the construction of a specially-designed building to promote healthy activity: including a day nursery, play area, theatre, cafeteria, gymnasium and one of the largest swimming pools in London.
- Participation was open to local families who were prepared to pay a small weekly subscription: consequently they felt it was a club which belonged to them, not an outside charity.
- Its internal organisation was based on real autonomy: people were allowed to make their own decisions about medical treatment and members were encouraged to set up their own activities using the Centre's resources.
- However, it was closed down on the establishment of the National Health Service because it focused on health not illness, required membership contributions and encouraged too much independence.
- This is only one among many examples of the loss of local self-organisation and mutual aid in the face of the increasing centralisation and top-down professionalism of the British welfare state both before but especially after 1945.
- It deserves to be remembered and reconsidered as a valid alternative model - as, indeed does the anarchist tradition more generally.

## Introduction

Anarchists reject the state not only in the status quo but also as the means to a free society, which they envisage as a network of co-operative associations, organized from the bottom upwards and freely federated. Although they advocate the elimination of poverty and the support of the sick and the aged by their fellows, their hostility to statism extends to the welfare state, arguing that it perpetuates poverty and illness, destroys the working-class's institutions of mutual aid and fosters dependency and servility.

Anarchism has never been taken seriously in Britain, although it is a long-established political position and ideology, associated with a substantial body of radical thought. In other countries, such as France and Italy, this is taken for granted and intellectual respect paid to anarchism, even if very much a minority tradition, whereas in Britain and the other Anglo-Saxon nations it continues to be shunned in polite circles, whether social or academic, and assigned a pariah status. Yet there has been a distinguished anarchist - or left-libertarian, if one requires a less emotive term - tradition in Britain stretching from William Morris, Edward Carpenter and Oscar Wilde, through John Cowper Powys, Herbert Read, Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, to Alex Comfort, E.P. Thompson, Christopher Pallis and Colin Ward, and which I discuss in *Anarchist Seeds beneath the Snow*. But this is a predominantly literary lineage, at most concerned with the

visual arts and education, with little engagement with such fundamental matters as economics and finance, industry and agriculture, or indeed medicine, health and welfare.

When Kropotkin moved to England in 1886 he founded *Freedom* along with indigenous collaborators, yet the British movement was so weak that the paper folded in 1927. It was the Spanish Revolution of 1936 and ensuing Civil War that were largely responsible for some revival of interest in anarchism in Britain and the formation of a renewed Freedom Press Group. *Spain and the World* was launched by Vero Recchioni, the 21-year-old son of an old Italian anarchist militant, one of Errico Malatesta's comrades, who had settled in London in the 1890s. Recchioni, who had been expelled from France the previous year for anti-Fascist activity, had promptly anglicized his name to Vernon Richards and begun publication of his first paper, *Free Italy / Italia Libera*, in collaboration with the Italian anarchist intellectual, Camillo Berneri, then in exile in Paris and who was to be assassinated in Barcelona in 1937, almost certainly by Communists. Berneri's daughter, Marie Louise (originally Maria Luisa), also outstandingly gifted, left France to live with Richards in London (until her tragically premature death in 1949 at the age of 31). With the Nationalist victory *Spain and the World* became *Revolt!* for six issues, being succeeded for the duration of the Second World War by *War Commentary*, which reverted in 1945 to the famous old title of *Freedom* - and as such has enjoyed uninterrupted publication down to the present day. It was Marie Louise Berneri who was said to have been 'the principal theoretical influence' behind *War Commentary* and *Freedom*; and she and Richards were at the centre of the new group of energetic young anarchists that had emerged around *Spain and the World*, to be joined in the 1940s by a South London GP, John Hewetson, Tony Gibson (who was to become a psychologist), the writer and historian of anarchism, George Woodcock, and Colin Ward, now the best - although still too little - known member of the group.

The Freedom Press Group considered as exemplary an institution destroyed by the post-1945 Welfare State, one which had been existent in contemporary London and frequently visited and written about by them. This was the Peckham Health Centre - or 'the Peckham Experiment' as it was frequently called - not a body created by the working-class movement, but one that encouraged the autonomy and self-activity of its working-class members and which was doomed by a number of factors, especially its preoccupation with health and not illness. This concern with a holistic, preventive medicine is just one of its characteristics that anticipated the preoccupations of the early-twenty-first century.

## **The Peckham Health Centre**

The Peckham Health Centre flourished in south-east London, in what was then part of the Borough of Camberwell, between 1935 and 1939 and again between 1946 and 1950. Back in 1926 Dr George Scott Williamson (1885-1953) and Dr Innes Hope Pearse (1890-1979), who were to marry as late as 1950, had acquired a small house in a major thoroughfare, Queen's Road, which they equipped with a kitchen, playroom, clubroom, bathroom, and consulting and changing rooms. They circularized all households within easy walking distance - that is, within reach of a mother pushing a pram - inviting families to join a club. This was called the Pioneer Health Centre since the preferred name, the Health Centre, was already used by a local food shop. They explained that the centre was not for treatment but for the promotion of health: to detect the onset of disease and advise how to obtain any necessary treatment. The only conditions of membership were a

weekly family subscription of 6d (2½p) and a periodic medical examination (later to be termed the 'health overhaul') for each member of the family. The building was open every day except Sundays, from 2 to 10 pm, and the doctors worked the same hours. Members were able to make appointments for their health overhaul to suit their, not the doctors', convenience. Later a large hut was constructed in the garden for use as a playroom by the older children and for dances and whist drives. During 1926-9 the Centre was joined by 115 families (or about 400 individuals).

Peckham had been chosen as a reasonably prosperous area with high employment and few labourers, and was inhabited overwhelmingly by artisans, but with some clerical workers, shopkeepers and small employers. Pearse and Williamson had expected to find reasonably healthy people. In their manifesto of 1931, *The Case for Action: A Survey of Everyday Life under Modern Industrial Conditions, with Special Reference to the Question of Health*, illustrated with designs for a proposed new building, they instead reported: 'Of all the parents over 25 years of age examined by us, we were greatly astonished to find that for all without exception there was something to be done and that in many there was frank disease'. The original premises in Queen's Road were therefore closed in 1929, the Pioneer Health Centre was then registered with the Charity Commissioners, and capital was sought for a new, purpose-built, self-supporting Centre with a membership of 2,000 families. The generosity of Jack Donaldson, a future Labour minister and life peer, who on inheriting 20,000 from his parents transferred half of this sum to the Centre's account, was responsible for inspiring other wealthy individuals to match his gift collectively.

It was thus in 1935 that an imposing modernist building was opened in St Mary's Road, a quiet side street off Queen's Road, designed by the engineer Owen Williams, working closely to Scott Williamson's concept, and singled out for praise by Nikolaus Pevsner - 'Pioneer work indeed, socially as well as architecturally' - and by Walter Gropius on his arrival in Britain in 1935, who acclaimed it as not just the country's best new building but the only one he found interesting. Yet it was shortly to be rivalled by Berthold Lubetkin's Finsbury Health Centre of 1938, an institution that unlike Peckham was later to be incorporated in the NHS.

## Conditions of success

The Peckham Biologists, as they styled themselves - Pearse and Williamson published an interim report on the work of the new Centre as *Biologists in Search of Material* and were now joined by a former biology teacher, Lucy H. Crocker - believed that their experiment was dependent on the fulfilment of five conditions. These were the health overhauls and resultant consultations; the family and local membership; the financial contributions by members to the Centre; the building; and the maintenance of autonomy. The operation of the first three was central to the Centre's original manifestation when it had been in Queen's Road, but with respect to the second it needs to be emphasized that the Centre therefore excluded all single individuals. As to the third, Williamson, the dominant, innovating personality, was insistent that the Centre would only be valued by its members if they paid a subscription however low: in 1935 it was raised to 1s (5p) per family, plus 6d (2½p) for every child over 16 living at home and not still at school who wished to join, with additional small charges for the various social facilities, and from 1946 to 2s (10p) for both families and the over-sixteens. Williamson believed that the provision of charity restricted people's capacity for responsible actions. It was very definitely the case that the members felt the Centre belonged to them, that it was their own club. This third condition

was therefore intimately connected to the fifth, the maintenance of autonomy, which will be discussed after the facilities available in the new building have been described.

The purpose-designed Centre of 1935-50 contained the second largest swimming-pool in London, reaching up through the entire three storeys. On the ground floor there were also a day nursery and substantial play area and the first floors of the two-storey-high gymnasium and of a theatre. A cafeteria looked, initially through glass, over the swimming pool from the first floor where a long gallery, spanning the entire front, provided an adaptable space ideal for dancing. There was further substantial adaptable space on the second floor together with a committee room, dark room, band room, areas for darts, table tennis, billiards and listening to the radio; and it was here also that the consulting rooms and laboratory were located. This unconventional allocation of space decisively indicates that the Centre's emphasis was not on the diagnosis of illness but the promotion of healthy, social, life-giving activity and goes far to explain why it was so loved by the surrounding neighbourhood, whose community centre it became.

On the outbreak of war in 1939 the Centre was closed because of the hazard its great expanse of glass might occasion in air raids on the nearby docks, and it was eventually converted into a munitions factory, but the members clamoured for its reopening. This took place in 1946 with the aid of a three-year grant from the Halley Stewart Trust when, notwithstanding the dislocations caused by the war, no fewer than 500 of the 875 families fully paid up as members in 1939, rejoined immediately. Volunteers knuckled down to repair and clean the filthy, damaged building; a re-launching party was attended by 3,000 people; and as early as the following day the Centre had surged back to full activity.

An infant school (that is, for four- to seven-year-olds) was shortly opened under pressure from the parents and flourished down to the closure of the Centre, when there were around sixty pupils. This was fee-paying, of course, but unusually the payment of 5s. 6d (27½p) was not per child but for each family, since it was argued - by the parents - that as the Centre was a family club so the school would be a family school and while only children needed playmates large families had greater expenses to bear. Mothers and fathers had been much impressed by the confidence, capability and happiness of their children as a result of attending the nurseries and wanted a school that would continue to develop these qualities.

## **Autonomy**

A different age group had caused mayhem on the opening of the new Centre in 1935, when the building was still uncompleted and much of the equipment intended for the children had still to arrive. Each day after school there was an invasion by crowds of kids, aged from seven to sixteen, who ran along the long open spaces and up and down the staircases, screaming, committing minor vandalism and making thorough nuisances of themselves. All the adults urged strong disciplinary measures - all except Williamson, who insisted that order would eventually be implemented by the children themselves as they responded to stimuli provided for them. To this end Crocker was taken on the staff with the brief to resolve the problem. She was to discover that unsupervised children were excluded from the two places in the building, the swimming-pool and the gym, they found most appealing. Her solution was to develop a 'ticket system' whereby children could gain access to a preferred activity on obtaining a signed chit on each occasion from a member of staff cognisant of their physical abilities. This necessitated the children's con-

tinual interaction with an orderly, rational adult society and was found to foster responsibility, apparatus being returned to its designated place without request. 'The child is quick to respond to a mutually sustained order in society', as Pearse and Crocker were to put it. Within eighteen months of the reopening the screaming and running were no more and 'there were at last signs of order', Crocker recalled: 'not the quietness due to external discipline but the hum of active children going about their own business'.

This handling of the rowdy schoolchildren exemplifies the fifth condition on which the 'Peckham Experiment' depended: the maintenance of autonomy, autonomy not just for the adults but for their children also. Williamson and Pearse had no doubt that as biologists studying the human organism they had to deal 'with *free agents*', for 'any imposed action or activity becomes a study of authority, discipline or instruction...not the study of free agents plus their self-created environment'. In 1938, possibly foolhardily, they spoke warmly of 'a sort of anarchy', believing that 'a very strict "anarchy"...will permit the emergence of order through spontaneous action...' But although Williamson spoke to the London Anarchist Group on several occasions during the 1940s - chaired by John Hewetson, the GP editor of *Freedom* - he objected vehemently to the paper's coverage in 1951 of the announcement of the winding-up of the Centre (articles for which Colin Ward was primarily responsible), and which pointed to its anarchist, indeed revolutionary, nature. Williamson proclaimed: 'I am not an anarchist, nor do I believe in anarchy - not even the Kropotkin type'.

In truth, Williamson seems like A.S. Neill, the progressive educationalist, to have been an anarchist in both theory and practice, while denying he was one. Frances Donaldson (whose husband Jack was to manage the social floors in the Centre until they were running smoothly) had this to say about his remarkable disposition:

...his lack of paternalism as far as this is humanly possible, was complete. He was not interested in how people should behave, or in how they might be made to behave, but only in how they did behave in any given circumstance...this made for a kind of democracy in the Centre which I doubt has ever been seen anywhere else...He had a rooted objection to the leader in society, regarding him as someone who pushed around the human material he wished to study in spontaneous action, and who exerted the force of his personality to drive more ordinary people out of the true of their natural behaviour into activities unsuited to them and which they half-consciously disliked.

So while the 'health overhauls' enabled individuals to learn what they might be suffering from, the doctors did not direct them what to do, allowing them to make informed, autonomous choices. A visitor, who learned from Williamson that a man had 'a most dreadful hernia', asked why then had it not been treated and was told: 'It's his hernia. It's up to him when he wants to get it fixed up'. The condition of autonomy goes far to explain why the people of Peckham regarded the Centre as their own, filling the building with their autonomous activity. Clubs were formed and run by their members for a great range of pastimes, including camping, badminton, boxing, fencing and tap-dancing, while skills would be shared in, for example, dressmaking, woodwork, first aid and choral singing.

Just as Williamson and Pearse had found the greatest difficulty in sourcing equipment, furniture and even crockery to their standards and had to have them specially designed- all very

reminiscent of William Morris's problems and solution when furnishing his Red House at the close of the 1850s - so the inadequacies of the foodstuffs available in Peckham led them from 1938 to sell milk, eggs, fruit and vegetables brought in from the organic farm they opened seven miles away at Bromley. After the war only wholemeal bread was available in the cafeteria. It should come as little surprise that Williamson and Pearse were in 1946 founding members of the Soil Association.

## Aftermath

There were to be attempts at emulation of Peckham at Winchester, Oxford, Cardiff, Dronfield (the small town between Sheffield and Chesterfield), Glenrothes new town and most impressively Coventry, where the driving force was Dr Kenneth Barlow, who acquired 300 acres for a centre, small farm and 2,000 houses. But that no Peckham offspring ultimately materialized is scarcely surprising given the very considerable expense involved in financing a purpose-built centre, £38,000 in the case of the St Mary's Road building, let alone a farm. There are marked similarities with the vast sums that Robert Owen required for his villages of co-operation to function and also to be raised by philanthropic donation. What was really required was for the wealth of the total community to facilitate the opening of centres on the Peckham model throughout the country. But instead the Peckham Health Centre itself was obliged to close permanently in 1951, for it needed to be admitted to the new National Health Service in order to survive and was repeatedly rejected on account of its five-fold administrative irregularity. It was concerned exclusively with the study and cultivation of health, not the treatment of disease. It was based not on the individual but entirely on the integrated family. It was based exclusively on a locality, having no 'open door'. Its basis was contributory, not free. It was based on autonomous administration and so did not conform to the lines of administration laid down by the Ministry of Health. This last anomaly highlights a wider problem of the general hostility in the years after 1945 from within the structures of the welfare state to any initiative originating outside and hence non-statist and libertarian.

## Theory

Forty years on Colin Ward revisited, fleshed out and extended the Freedom Press Group's critique of the Welfare State. He stated his case in 'The Path Not Taken', a striking brief article of 1987; but his analysis over the next decade developed this long-standing preoccupation, as he explored the manner in which 'the social principle' had been overborne by 'the political principle' in modern Britain. (Ward had been deeply impressed by 'Society and the State', a lecture of 1950 which he perpetually cited, in which Martin Buber distinguished between 'the social principle', exemplified by all spontaneous human associations built around shared needs or interests, such as the family, informal groups, co-operatives of all kinds, trade unions and communities, as opposed to 'the political principle', manifested in authority, power, hierarchy and, of course, the state.) Since the late-nineteenth century 'the tradition of fraternal and autonomous associations springing up from below' had been successively displaced by one of 'authoritarian institutions directed from above'. Ward saw a 'sinister alliance of Fabians and Marxists, both of whom believed implicitly in the state, and assumed that they would be the particular elite in control of



it', effectively combining with 'the equally sinister alliance of bureaucrats and professionals: the British civil service and the British professional classes, with their undisguised contempt for the way ordinary people organized anything'. What was the result?

The great tradition of working-class self-help and mutual aid was written off, not just as irrelevant, but as an actual impediment, by the political and professional architects of the welfare state...The contribution that the recipients had to make...was ignored as a mere embarrassment...

Drawing upon several recent historical works, Ward was able to show that the nineteenth-century dame schools, set up by working-class parents for working-class children and under working-class control, were swept away by the board schools of the 1870s; and similarly the self-organization of patients in the working-class medical societies was to be lost in the creation of the National Health Service. He commented from his own specialism of housing policy on the initially working-class self-help building societies stripping themselves of the final vestiges of mutuality; and this degeneration has existed alongside a tradition of municipal housing that was adamantly opposed to the principle of dweller control. Here we are presented with a rich, never more relevant, analysis of the disaster of modern British social policy, with pointers to the way ahead if we are to stand any chance of reinstating the self-organization and mutual aid that have been lost. Ward restated his argument in *Social Policy: An Anarchist Response*, the lectures he gave in 1996 as Visiting Professor of Housing and Social Policy at the London School of Economics and which summarize several of his most important themes.

## Conclusions

Although the Peckham Experiment has been largely forgotten over the last half century, it continued to have determined advocates, among them Barlow and Ward. When the latter addressed a meeting at the Royal College of General Practitioners in 1985 to mark the reissue of Pearse and Crocker's *The Peckham Experiment*, he concluded:

...for many of us the experience of Peckham was a unique laboratory of anarchy, it was a study of the living structure of society, exploring principles of organization applicable not only to health but to every aspect of social welfare, to housing and above all to the organization of work.

A *Freedom* reviewer in 2005 lamented that 'the Peckham model was rejected by the 1945 Labour government that instead created the top-down, state-controlled bureaucratic national sickness system', while urging the transformation of the NHS into 'a decentralized, community-led organization'. But surely the example has much to offer not just to anarchists but all concerned with alternatives to the present health service, with preventive medicine, relations between the young and their elders, community development, and the improvement of food supply and consumption? A press release by the Soil Association in 2006 remembered

Drs George Scott Williamson and Innes Pearse, whose Peckham Health club challenged official health policy by recommending a preventative approach of good diet

and exercise rather than the orthodoxy of prioritizing curative medicine. 60 years on their pioneering work is carried forward in the Soil Association's Food for Life campaign that exposed the scandal of the 37p spend on the average school lunch.

## Further Reading

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