

# **An Anarchy of Everyday Life**

Jeff Shantz

2012

# Contents

Primitive accumulation: Capital against mutual aid . . . . .	4
Constructive anarchy: Communism as mutual aid . . . . .	6
Lineages of constructive anarchy: Kropotkin and mutual aid . . . . .	8
Constructive anarchy in action: Colin Ward's sociological anarchism . . . . .	11
Theoretical affinities: Rethinking communism . . . . .	13
Conclusion . . . . .	15
References . . . . .	17

Contemporary anarchism offers a mid-range movement organized somewhere between the levels of everyday life, to which it is closest, and insurrection. Rooted in the former they seek to move towards the latter. Anarchists look to the aspects of people's daily lives that both suggest life without rule by external authorities and which might provide a foundation for anarchist social relations more broadly. This commitment forms a strong and persistent current within diverse anarchist theories. This perspective expresses what might be called a constructive anarchy or an anarchy of everyday life, at once conserving and revolutionary.

Colin Ward suggests that anarchism, "far from being a speculative vision of a future society...is a description of a mode of human organization, rooted in the experience of everyday life, which operates side by side with, and in spite of, the dominant authoritarian trends of our society" (Ward, 1973: 11). As Graeber (2004) suggests, the examples of viable anarchism are almost endless. These could include almost any form of organization, from a volunteer fire brigade to the postal service, as long as it is not hierarchically imposed by some external authority (Graeber, 2004).

Even more, as many recent anarchist writings suggest, the potential for resistance might be found anywhere in everyday life. If power is exercised everywhere, it might give rise to resistance everywhere. Present-day anarchists like to suggest that a glance across the landscape of contemporary society reveals many groupings which are anarchist in practice if not in ideology.

Examples include the leaderless small groups developed by radical feminists, coops, clinics, learning networks, media collectives, direct action organizations; the spontaneous groupings that occur in response to disasters, strikes, revolutions and emergencies; community-controlled day-care centers; neighborhood groups; tenant and workplace organizing; and so on (Ehrlich, Ehrlich, DeLeon and Morris 18).

While these are obviously not strictly anarchist groups, they often operate to provide examples of mutual aid and non-hierarchical and non-authoritarian modes of living which carry the memory of anarchy within them. Often the practices are essential for people's day-to-day survival under the crisis states of capitalism. Ward notes that "the only thing that makes life possible for millions in the United States are its non-capitalist elements....Huge areas of life in the United States, and everywhere else, are built around voluntary and mutual aid organisations" (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 105).

Kropotkin (1972: 132) notes that the state, the formalized rule of dominant minorities over subordinate majorities, is "but one of the forms of social life." For anarchists, people are quite capable of developing forms of order to meet specific needs and desires. As Ward (1973: 28) suggests, "given a common need, a collection of people will...by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of the situation — this order being more durable and more closely related to their needs than any kind of order external authority could provide."

Order, thus arrived at, is also preferable for anarchists since it is not ossified and extended, often by force, to situations and contexts different than those from which it emerged, and for which it may not be suited. This order, on the contrary is flexible and evolving, where necessary giving way to other agreements and forms of order depending on peoples' needs and the circumstances confronting them.

Living examples of the anarchist perspectives on order emerging "spontaneously" out of social circumstances are perhaps most readily or regularly observed under conditions of immediate need or emergency as in times of natural disaster and/or economic crisis, during periods of revolutionary upheaval or during mass events such as festivals. Anarchists try to extend mutual aid

relations until they make up the bulk of social life. Constructive anarchy is about developing ways in which people enable themselves to take control of their lives and participate meaningfully in the decision-making processes that affect them, whether education, housing, work or food.

Anarchists note that changes in the structure of work, notably so-called lean production, flexibilization and the institutionalization of precarious labour, have stolen people's time away from the family along with the time that might otherwise be devoted to activities in the community (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 107). In response people must find ways to escape the capitalist law of value, to pursue their own values rather than to produce value for capital. This is the real significance of anarchist do-it-ourselves activity and the reason that I would suggest such activities have radical, if overlooked, implications for anti-capitalist struggles.

For Paul Goodman, an American anarchist whose writings influenced the 1960s New Left and counterculture, anarchist futures-present serve as necessary acts of "drawing the line" against the authoritarian and oppressive forces in society. Anarchism, in Goodman's view, was never oriented only towards some glorious future; it involved also the preservation of past freedoms and previous libertarian traditions of social interaction. "A free society cannot be the substitution of a 'new order' for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of the social life" (Marshall, 1993: 598). Utopian thinking will always be important, Goodman argued, in order to open the imagination to new social possibilities, but the contemporary anarchist would also need to be a conservator of society's benevolent tendencies.

## **Primitive accumulation: Capital against mutual aid**

Capitalist society consists largely of "the accumulation of life as work," to use Cleaver's (1992: 116) apt description. Valorization speaks to the processes by which capital can manage to put people to work, and to do so in such a way that the process is repeated on an ever increasing scale (Cleaver, 1992a). The structure of the wage, the division of labour and surplus value are all mechanisms through which exploitation is organized (Cleaver, 1992a). Notably, the circuit of valorization involves circulation (exchange) as well as production.

Valorization expresses the fact that, from the perspective of capital, the specific character of each productive activity is unimportant, so long as that activity produces something that can, through its sale, realize enough surplus to allow the process to start all over again (Cleaver, 1992a). The enormously diverse range of human activities, mental or physical, that people are capable of are rendered the same in the eyes of capital. What is important is that they can be put in the service of (exchange) value creation (for capital). More recently theorists, including Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, have discussed the way in which contemporary capital makes use of "immaterial labour," especially emotional or psychological capacities that allow people to care for each other, a point that echoes historic anarchist concerns.

If valorization represents the subordination of people's productive activities to capitalist command, Cleaver (1992a: 120) suggests that disvalorisation expresses people's loss of those abilities taken up by capital. This effects a broader impoverishment of social life as the specific qualities of a diversity of skills and abilities are replaced by a narrower range of commercialized, mechanized skills (Cleaver, 1992a).

A central, and ongoing, process in the history of capitalism is “the replacement of the self-production of use-values by the consumption of commodities” (Clever, 1992a: 119). This is in large part what a whole series of practices, from the enclosures through colonialism more broadly, have been geared towards. This separation of people from the capacities for self-production of use-values has entailed the various forms of violence that Marx has called primitive accumulation. An ongoing process, primitive accumulation involves the actual, often bloody, practices by which capitalism takes over and commercializes growing areas of human life. This has included the clearing of peasants from common lands, the destruction of artisanal workshops, the canceling of local rights to the land and the destruction of entire homes and villages. As Clever (1992a: 119) notes, a central aspect of primitive accumulation has been “the displacement of domestic food and handicraft production by capitalist commodities.” Nowhere has the creation of the “home market” been established without such displacements.

But of this we gain little insight from Marx. In his city-boy ignorance of rural life and perhaps in a desire to avoid any backward-looking sentimentalism, Marx seems to have spent little time or energy during his studies of primitive accumulation in England and in the colonies trying to understand what positive values might have been lost. Unlike many of his generation who did worry about the nature of those social ties and communal values which were rapidly disappearing, Marx kept his attention fixed firmly toward the future (Clever, 1992a: 122).

Interestingly, the response to primitive accumulation, and its effects, has been one of the key points distinguishing Marxists from anarchists historically. Anarchists have taken a vastly different, and less sanguine, approach to primitive accumulation from that taken by many Marxists, and certainly from the approach taken by Marx. Speaking about Marx, Clever (1992a: 121) notes:

When we examine his writings on primitive accumulation and colonialism — from the Communist Manifesto to Capital — we often find little or no empathy for the cultures being destroyed/subsumed by capital. He certainly recognised such destruction/subsumption but frequently saw its effects on feudalism and other pre-capitalist forms of society as historically progressive. For Marx, workers were being liberated from pre-capitalist forms of exploitation (they ‘escaped from the regime of the guilds’) and peasants from ‘serfdom’ and ‘the idiocy of rural life.’

Such an uncaring approach found its most widespread and influential expression within Marxism under the Second International view that societies could not be revolutionary until they had entered the capitalist stage. This perspective was used among other things to argue against the possibility of revolution in Russia since it was a feudal rather than capitalist society.

Anarchists have been deeply concerned about exactly the values that have been lost. For anarchists these lost abilities and skills extend beyond tasks of labour to include important elements of social life such as decision-making or social interaction. Clever discusses this loss, and related centralization and professionalization, in terms that are reminiscent of the historic anarchist analysis as discussed below: “The rise of professional medicine, for example, not only produced a widespread loss of abilities to heal, but it also involved the substitution of one particular paradigm of healing for a much larger number of approaches to ‘health’, and thus an absolute social loss — the virtual disappearance of a multiplicity of alternative ‘values’” (1992a: 120). It is

the attempt to identify, to understand and to recover the values that have been lost, overlooked or subsumed under capitalism that has inspired major anarchist projects whether Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*, the works of Elisee Reclus or, more recently, Graeber's *False Coin*.

More than the destruction of villages, workshops, farms or houses, primitive accumulation entails the destruction of entire ways of life, communities and cultures. Primitive accumulation involves fundamentally the theft of people's independent means of production and living. Cleaver (1992a: 124) suggests that the very history of capitalism has been, fundamentally, "a history of a war on autonomous subsistence activities" (what we might at this point call the history of disvalorisation). He suggests that there has been such a war "because such subsistence activities have both survived and been repeatedly created anew — more so in some places than in others" (Cleaver, 1992a: 124). It is in no way simply coincidental that primitive accumulation has been directed specifically at indigenous practices of gift economies, for example.

Related to these processes is the degrading of skills experienced by many workers and the monopolization of skilled labour by higher paid "mental workers" such as engineers. Opposing, and to some extent reversing, this replacement is a crucial, perhaps the key, aspect of anarchist activity today. It is this opposition that underlies anarchist criticisms of the monopolization of learning skills by professional instructors or the monopolization of care-giving skills by professional social workers.

At the same time, anarchists are careful not to over-estimate the success of capital's destructive power or to fail to appreciate the tenacity and perseverance of non-capitalist social relations. Indeed, a vast array of struggles against capitalism, both historically and contemporarily, have been based on precisely these supposedly "archaic" relations. Anarchist styles of sociation and organization express the persistence of archaic forms within the (post-) modern context. They reveal the return of the repressed in sociological types exemplary of "mechanical solidarity" and *Gemeinschaft* [community].

Anarchists attempt to organize against dependency on commodities and professional "experts," the manifestations of the commodification of needs and of market supplied services. Anarchists emphasize the significance of autonomous creativity in the struggles against states and capital. Anarchists view these activities in terms of the possibilities for a post-capitalist future.

## **Constructive anarchy: Communism as mutual aid**

In many of his writings the anarcho-syndicalist Sam Dolgoff stresses the importance of constructive anarchism, rich in positive and practical ideas rather than instinctual acts and negative or reactive stances. Still, constructive anarchy does not rely on ready-made plans or "scientific" calculation. The basis for constructive anarchism, as in Cleaver's discussion of auto-valorization, is already available in currently existing social relations, even if these relations are dominated and obscured by the authoritarian society around them.

The anarchist theoreticians limited themselves to suggest the utilization of all the useful organisms in the old society in order to reconstruct the new. They envisioned the generalization of practices and tendencies which are already in effect. The very fact that autonomy, decentralization and federalism are more practical alternatives to centralism and statism already presupposes that these vast organizational networks now performing the functions of society are prepared to replace the old bankrupt

hyper-centralized administrations. That the “elements of the new society are already developing in the collapsing bourgeois society” (Marx) is a fundamental principle shared by all tendencies in the socialist movement (1979: 5).

If society is “a vast interlocking network of cooperative labour” (5) then those networks of cooperation will provide a good starting point, if only a starting point, towards throwing off the bonds of coercion, authoritarianism and exploitation. It is in the relations of cooperative labour, which encompasses millions of daily acts, that one can find the real basis for social life. Without these networks, often unrecognized and unpaid, society would collapse.

What is needed is emancipation from authoritarian institutions OVER society and authoritarianism WITHIN the organizations themselves. Above all, they must be infused [with] revolutionary spirit and confidence in the creative capacities of the people. Kropotkin in working out the sociology of anarchism, has opened an avenue of fruitful research which has been largely neglected by social scientists busily engaged in mapping out new areas for state control (1979: 5).

A beginning step in these processes of emancipation is the abolition of the wage system and the distribution of goods and services according to the old communist principle, “from each according to ability, to each according to need.”

Libertarian Communism is the organization of society without the State and without capitalist property relations. To establish Libertarian Communism it will not be necessary to invent artificial forms of organization. The new society will emerge from the “shell of the old”. The elements of the future society are already planted in the existing order. They are the syndicate (union) and the Free Commune (sometimes called the ‘free municipality’) which are old, deeply rooted, non-Statist popular institutions spontaneously organized and embracing all towns and villages in urban and in rural areas. The Free Commune is ideally suited to cope successfully with the problems of social and economic life in libertarian communities. Within the Free Commune there is also room for cooperative groups and other associations, as well as individuals to meet their own needs (providing, of course, that they do not employ hired labor for wages). The terms ‘Libertarian’ and ‘Communism’ denote the fusion of two inseparable concepts, the individual pre-requisites for the Free Society: COLLECTIVE AND INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY (1979: 6).

Of course, experiences of both the syndicate and the free commune have been greatly eroded, if not entirely eliminated, over centuries of statist imposition. This situation has been addressed by the anarchist Paul Goodman in rather poignant terms: “The pathos of oppressed people, however, is that, if they break free, they don’t know what to do. Not having been autonomous, they don’t know what it’s like, and before they learn, they have new managers who are not in a hurry to abdicate” (Goodman quoted in Ward, 2004: 69). That means that people have to construct approximations in which the social relations of a future society can be learned, experienced and nurtured.

This is part of the impetus behind the creation of “free schools,” “infoshops,” industrial unions and squats. These are places in which the life of the free commune, buried beneath the debris of authoritarian systems, can be glimpsed again, if only in a limited form.

Anarchism envisions a flexible, pluralist society where all the needs of mankind would be supplied by an infinite variety of voluntary associations. The world is honeycombed with affinity groups from chess clubs to anarchist propaganda groups. They are formed, dissolved and reconstituted according to the fluctuating whims and fancies of the individual adherents. It is precisely because they “reflect individual preferences” that such groups are the lifeblood of the free society (1979: 8).

In his discussion of the US labor movement, “The American Labor Movement: A New Beginning”(ALM), Dolgoff reminds readers that the labor movement once put a great deal of energy into building more permanent forms of alternative institutions. An expanding variety of mutual aid functions were provided through unions in the early days of labor.

They created a network of cooperative institutions of all kinds: schools, summer camps for children and adults, homes for the aged, health and cultural centers, insurance plans, technical education, housing, credit associations, et cetera. All these, and many other essential services were provided by the people themselves, long before the government monopolized social services wasting untold billions on a top-heavy bureaucratic parasitical apparatus; long before the labor movement was corrupted by “business unionism” (1980: 31).

That Dolgoff learned these often forgotten or overlooked lessons from a critical engagement with the labor movement is telling. As a militant anarchist Dolgoff had little time for those who, seeking comfort or moral privilege in anarchist “purity,” refuse to engage in the real struggles in which people find themselves. Anarchy cannot be abstracted from day-to-day life situations and the difficult choices with which people are confronted.

There is no “pure” anarchism. There is only the application of anarchist principles to the realities of social living. The aim of anarchism is to stimulate forces that propel society in a libertarian direction. It is only from this standpoint that the relevance of anarchism to modern life can be properly assessed (1979: 8).

As Dolgoff concludes, anarchism is no “panacea that will miraculously cure all the ills of the social body” (1979: 10). Anarchism is simply a “guide to action based on a realistic conception of social reconstruction” (1979: 10-11). Far from the economic determinism or workerism which syndicalists are so often accused of, Dolgoff’s vision shares many important insights with the views of recent “cultural” anarchists such as Paul Goodman and Colin Ward.

## **Lineages of constructive anarchy: Kropotkin and mutual aid**

Among the primary historical influences on everyday anarchy, perhaps the most significant is Kropotkin’s version of anarcho-communism and, especially, his ideas about mutual aid. In *Mutual Aid* Kropotkin documents the centrality of co-operation within animal and human groups and links anarchist theory with everyday experience. Kropotkin’s definition suggests that anarchism, in part, “would represent an interwoven network, composed of an infinite variety of groups and federations of all sizes and degrees...temporary or more or less permanent...for all possible purposes” (quoted in Ward and Goodway, 2003: 94). As Ward (2004: 29) reminds us: “A



century ago Kropotkin noted the endless variety of ‘friendly societies, the unities of oddfellows, the village and town clubs organised for meeting the doctors’ bills’ built up by working-class self-help.” Both Kropotkin and, to a much lesser extent, Marx, commented on and were inspired by peasant collaboration in various aspects of daily life from the care of communal lands and forests, harvesting, the building of roads, house construction and dairy production.

Kropotkin’s political archeology, and especially his studies of the French Revolution and the Paris Commune, informed his analyses of the Russian revolutions of 1905 to 1917 and coloured his warnings to comrades about the possibilities and perils that waited along the different paths of political change (Clever, 1992b). This remains an important social and political undertaking in the context of crisis and structural adjustment impelled by the forces of capitalist globalization.

In 1917 Kropotkin saw the dangers in the crisis: both those of reaction and those disguised in the garb of revolution, whether parliamentary or Bolshevik...In 1917 Kropotkin also knew where to look for the power to oppose those dangers and to create the space for the Russian people to craft their own solutions: in the self-activity of workers and peasants...In 1917, as we know, the power of workers to resist both reaction and centralization proved inadequate — partly because the spokespersons of the latter cloaked their intentions behind a bright rhetoric of revolution. Today...such rhetoric is no longer possible and in its place there is only the drab, alienating language of national and supranational state officials (Clever, 1992b: 10).

Kropotkin’s vast research into “mutual aid” was motivated by a desire to develop a general understanding of the character of human societies and their processes of evolution. It was partly concerned with providing a sociological critique of the popular views of social Darwinists like Huxley and Spencer. More than that, as Clever (1992b) notes, his work was aimed at laying the foundation for his anarcho-communist politics by showing a recurring tendency in human societies, as well as in many other animal societies, for individuals to help each other and to cooperate with other members of the species, rather than to compete in a Hobbesian war of all against all.

In several book-length research works, including *Mutual Aid*, *The Conquest of Bread* and *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, Kropotkin tried to sketch the manifestation and development of mutual aid historically. What his research suggested to him was that mutual aid was always present in human societies, even if its development was never uniform or the same over different periods or within different societies. At various points mutual aid was the primary factor of social life while at other times it was submerged beneath forces of competition, conflict and violence. The key, however was that, regardless of its form, or the adversity of circumstances in which it operated, it was always there “providing the foundation for recurrent efforts at co-operative self-emancipation from various forms of domination (the state, institutional religion, capitalism)” (Clever, 1992b: 3).

Kropotkin was not, in a utopian manner, trying to suggest how a new society might or should develop. In his view it was already happening. The instances were already appearing in the present.

Anarchism is not involved in the drawing up of social blueprints for the future. This is one reason that anarchists, to this day, have been so reluctant to describe the “anarchist society.” Instead anarchists have tried mainly to identify and understand social trends or tendencies, even countervailing ones. The focus is resolutely on manifestations of the future in the present.

In major works such as *The Conquest of Bread*, Kropotkin seeks to detail how the post-capitalist future was already emerging in the here and now. His research in this case was concerned with, and indeed managed to offer examples, of practical cases in the present, which suggested aspects of a post-capitalist society. In this way Kropotkin's work, as with the work of other anarcho-communists, offers something more than simply a proposition. Thus his politics were grounded in ongoing, if under-appreciated, aspects of human societies (Cleaver, 1992b).

Kropotkin argued that human societies developed through processes involved in the ongoing interplay of what he called the "law of mutual struggle" and the "law of mutual aid." These forces manifested themselves in various ways depending on historical period or social context but significantly for Kropotkin, they were typically observed in conflict rather than in stasis or equilibrium. Neither was this a strictly evolutionary schema, since Kropotkin included critically within his view of the interplay between these forces, periods of revolutionary upheaval.

On the one side were the institutions and behaviors of mutual struggle such as narrow-minded individualism, competition, the concentration of landed and industrial property, capitalist exploitation, the state and war. On the other side were those of mutual aid such as cooperation in production, village folknotes, communal celebrations, trade unionism and syndicalism, strikes, political and social associations (Cleaver, 1992b: 4).

According to Kropotkin, one or the other force tended to be predominant, depending on the era or instance, but it was his considered opinion that forces of mutual aid were on the rise, even as capitalism appeared triumphant. In fact, in his view the sort of industrial development for which capitalism was famous could not be possible without an incredible degree of co-operative labour. Kropotkin argued against capitalist myth-making that presented the rapid growth of industrial development as the result of competition and instead suggested that the scope and efficiency of cooperation were more important factors (see Cleaver, 1992a; 1992b). In this his analysis was remarkably close to that of Marx, who indeed saw the mass co-operation of industrial production as a prerequisite for communism.

Where economists emphasized static comparative advantage, Kropotkin demonstrated the dynamic countertendency toward increasing complexity and interdependence (cooperation) among industries — a development closely associated with the unstoppable international circulation of knowledge and experience. Where the economists (and later the sociologists of work) celebrated the efficacy and productivity of specialization in production, Kropotkin showed how that very productivity was based not on competition but on the interlinked efforts of only formally divided workers (Cleaver, 1992b: 5).

Anarchist sociologists might do well to remember Kropotkin's advice concerning the methods to be followed by anarchist researchers. In his 1887 book, *Anarchist Communism*, Kropotkin suggests that the anarchist approach differs from that of the utopian: "[The anarchist] studies human society as it is now and was in the past...tries to discover its tendencies, past and present, its growing needs, intellectual and economic, and in his [sic] ideal he merely points out in which direction evolution goes" (quoted in Cleaver, 1992b: 3).

This focus on tendencies, or developing patterns of concrete behavior, differentiated his approach from both early utopians and later Marxist-Leninists by abandoning the Kantian “ought” in favor of the scientific study of what is already coming to be. Neither Fourier nor Owen hesitated to spell out the way they felt society ought to be organized, from cooperatives to phalansteries. Nor were Lenin and his Bolshevik allies reluctant to specify, in considerable detail, the way work should be organized (Taylorism and competition) and how social decision-making ought to be arranged (top down through party administration and central planning) (Clever, 1992b: 3).

Marx’s writings offered much less detail than Kropotkin’s works when it comes to the issue of working class subjectivity in contrast to the rather extensive analysis Marx provided with regard to capitalist domination. It was only through the decades of work carried out by various autonomist Marxists that there was developed any Marxist analysis of working class autonomy that came close to a parallel of Kropotkin’s work (Clever, 1992b: 7).

## **Constructive anarchy in action: Colin Ward’s sociological anarchism**

Perhaps the broadest and most sustained vision of constructive anarchy comes from Colin Ward. Ward is best known through his third book *Anarchy in Action* (1973) which was, until his 2004 contribution to the Oxford Press “Short Introduction” series, *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction*, his only book explicitly about anarchist theory. Longtime anarchist George Woodcock identified *Anarchy in Action* as one of the most important theoretical works on anarchism and I would have to agree. It is in the pages of that relatively short work that Ward makes explicit his highly distinctive version of anarchism, what I term ‘an anarchy of everyday life.’

Ward follows Kropotkin in identifying himself as an anarchist communist and has even suggested that *Anarchy in Action* is merely an extended contemporary footnote to *Mutual Aid* (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 14). Still, Ward goes beyond Kropotkin in the importance he places on cooperative groups in anarchist social transformation.

Ward is critical of anarchists’ preoccupation with anarchist history and in his own works prefers to emphasize the here-and-now and the immediate future (Ward and Goodway, 2003). Ward describes his approach to anarchism as one that is based on actual experiences or practical examples rather than theories or hypotheses. Through the responses of readers to articles published in *Anarchy* Ward found that for many people anarchy aptly described the “organized chaos” that people experienced during their daily lives, even at their workplaces. Incredibly, this perspective on anarchism was so outside of the parameters of mainstream anarchism that in 1940, when Ward tried to convince his Freedom Press Group colleagues to print a pamphlet on the squatters’ movement “it wasn’t thought that this is somehow relevant to anarchism” (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 15).

While having no formal background in sociology Ward argues for the importance of taking a sociological approach to the world. In developing a sociological anarchism Ward takes up the call of fellow anarchist and popular sex educator Alex Comfort who was one of the first to argue that anarchists had much to learn from sociologists. In his work *Delinquency* (1951) Comfort called for anarchism to become a libertarian action sociology.

Ward draws some of his inspiration from the sociology of autonomous groups. His readings of the now out of print sociology bulletin *Autonomous Groups* contributed to understandings of capacities for influencing social change within informal networks such as the Batignolles Group, founders of Impressionism and the Fabian Society. Notably these groups were incredibly effective, exercising an influence well beyond their numbers. As Ward (2003: 48) notes because anarchists traditionally “have conceived of the whole of social organisation as a series of interlocking networks of autonomous groups.” Thus it is important that anarchists pay serious attention to the lessons to be learned from successful ones.

Autonomous groups that he has studied or participated in are characterized by “having a secure internal network based on friendship and shared skills, and a series of external networks of contacts in a variety of fields” (Ward, 2003: 44). Among these groups Ward includes the Freedom Press Group, A.S. Neill’s Summerhill School of alternative education, Burgess Hill School and South London’s Peckham Health Centre which offered approaches to social medicine. Autonomous groups are distinguished from other forms of organization characterized by “hierarchies of relationships, fixed divisions of labour, and explicit rules and practices” (Ward, 2003: 48). Autonomous groups are marked by a high degree of individual autonomy within the group, reliance on direct reciprocities in decision-making, for decisions affecting all group members, and the temporary and fluctuating character of leadership.

When people have no control over, or responsibility for, crucial decisions over important aspects of life, whether regarding housing, education or work, these areas of social life become obstacles to personal fulfillment and collective development. Yet when people are free to make major decisions and contribute to the planning and implementation of decisions involving key areas of daily life there are improvements in individual and social well-being (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 76). Ward finds resonance in the findings of industrial psychologists who suggest that satisfaction in work is very strongly related to the “span of autonomy,” or the proportion of work time in which workers are free to make and act on their own decisions.

The provisions of the welfare state are, of course, contradictory and most anarchists do not take a cavalier approach to what have been important, and often necessary, services for many people, including many anarchists. In discussing the welfare state, Colin Ward sums up its positive and negative aspects in short: “The positive feature of welfare legislation is that, contrary to the capitalist ethic, it is a testament to human solidarity. The negative feature is precisely that it is an arm of the state” (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 79). Ward points out that the provision of social welfare did not originate from government through the “welfare state.” Rather, it emerged in practice “from the vast network of friendly societies and mutual aid organizations that had sprung up through working-class self-help in the 19th century” (Ward, 2004: 27). This is the same point made by Sam Dolgoff with reference to the importance of mutual aid groups for the provision of education to elder care within the labour movement in the US.

In numerous works Ward has illustrated how, since the late nineteenth century, “the tradition of fraternal and autonomous associations springing up from below’ has been successively displaced by one of ‘authoritarian institutions directed from above’” (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 17). As Ward suggests, this displacement was actively pursued, with often disastrous results, in the development of the social citizenship state: “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” (quoted in Ward and Goodway, 2003: 18). From his

research on housing movements Ward comments 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” (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 18).

Ward’s work is directed towards providing useful “pointers to the way ahead if we are to stand any chance of reinstating the self-organisation and mutual aid that have been lost” (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 18). Ward focuses on recent examples, such as holiday camps in Britain, “in which a key role was played by the major organisations of working-class self-help and mutual aid, the co-operative movement and trade unions” (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 17). A significant theme in the perspectives of everyday anarchy is “the historic importance of such institutions in the provision of welfare and the maintenance of social solidarity” (Ward and Goodway, 2003: 17).

## **Theoretical affinities: Rethinking communism**

The collapse of the “actually existing” socialist states and the crisis-inducing development of capitalist globalization have in various ways impelled a re-thinking of issues of social transformation and the surpassing of capitalism by anarchists as well as Marxists. Various streams of anarcho-communism, most notably those that are part of the stream of everyday anarchy from Kropotkin to Goodman to Ward, can be seen to have strong similarities, or even affinities, with certain traditions of libertarian socialism. This is especially so when one considers the anarcho-communist and libertarian socialist approaches to the questions of constructing alternatives to capitalism in the here and now.

There are striking similarities, for example, between autonomist Marxist writings on self-valorization and anarchist writings on mutual aid and affinity. The types of concrete/actually existing mutual aid activities initiated or supported by anarchists certainly embody the notion of self-valorization and the self-constitution of alternative modes of living, as discussed by Cleaver (1992a). These are autonomous self-valorizing activities which, as discussed again by autonomists, are confronted by capitalist attempts at disvalorization.

As noted above, Harry Cleaver (1992b) finds a great resonance, especially, between the analyses of Peter Kropotkin, and his concern with the emergence of a new society from within capitalism, and the analyses of autonomist Marxists who suggest that the future might be glimpsed within current processes of working-class self-valorization, or those autonomous practices by which people attempt to create alternative social relations, either at work or in their communities. Cleaver (1992b: 11) notes that as “a replacement for an exhausted and failed orthodoxy” the autonomist Marxists offer a more vital and engaged Marxism, “one that has been regenerated within the struggles of real people and as such, has been able to articulate at least some elements of their desires and projects of self-valorization.” Given this close political affinity, Cleaver (1992b) suggests that, against more sectarian positions, those inspired by Kropotkin might do well to pay attention to the libertarian socialists just as the Marxists might find inspiration for their own work in Kropotkin’s efforts. I would agree and suggest that contemporary anarchists, who have tended to eschew analyses of class, can gain much especially through an engagement with autonomist Marxist ideas of auto-valorization. Auto-valorization helps to create some broader

possibilities for people, individually and collectively, to take further actions to act in their own interests and to gain greater opportunities for the self-determination of larger parts of their lives.

The notion of auto-valorization, as used by contemporary anarchists and libertarian communists builds upon Marx's discussion of use value versus exchange value. While under communist social relations there will be no exchange value, what is produced will still retain use value. People produce things because they have some kind of use for them; they meet some need or desire. This is where the qualitative aspect of production comes in. Generally people prefer products that are well-made, function as planned, are not poisonous and so on. Under capitalism, exchange value, in which a coat can get two pairs of shoes, predominates use value. This is the quantitative aspect of value that does not care whether the product is durable, shoddy or toxic as long as it secures its (potential) value in sale or other exchange with something else.

And capitalism's driving focus on the quantitative at the expense of the qualitative also comes to dominate human labour. The quality (skill, pleasure, creativity) of the particular work that people do is not primarily relevant for the capitalist (except that skilled labour costs more to produce and carries more exchange value). That is partly because exchange is based on the quantity of 'average-socially-necessary-labour-time' embodied in the product human labour produces. That simply means that if some firm takes a longer time to produce something on outdated machinery they cannot claim the extra labour time they take, due to inefficiencies, compared to a firm that produces more quickly using updated technology, and that is one reason why outmoded producers go under.

Capitalist production is geared towards exchange as the only way that surplus value is actually realized rather than being potential; the capitalist cannot bank surplus as value until the product has been exchanged. Use value plays a part only to the extent that something has to have some use for people or else they would not buy it; well, if the thing seems totally useless the bosses still have advertising to convince people otherwise. Under other non-capitalist "modes of production", such as feudalism, most production is geared towards use value production rather than exchange value.

Surely, if under communism, people are producing to meet their needs, they will continue to produce use values (and even a surplus of them in case of emergency) without regard for exchange value (which would, certainly, be absent in a truly communist society anyway): Unless one is talking about a communism of uselessness. Certainly people would value their work (qualitatively) in ways that cannot be imagined now since they would be meeting their community's needs and would try to do so with some joy and pleasure in work, providing decent products without fouling up the environment.

Anarchists try to avoid a productivist vision of life, emphasizing the great diversity of ways in which human life might be realized. Anarchists again share common ground with autonomist Marxists in arguing that the only way that work can be an interesting mode of self-realization for people is "through its subordination to the rest of life, the exact opposite of capitalism" (Cleaver, 1992: 143, n. 59). Anarchists are attempting to organize their productive activities, and to extend this organization, in order to impede, initially and, eventually, to break capitalist command over society.

What is common in the approach taken by Kropotkin to the issue of superceding capitalism and that taken by the autonomist Marxists is the emphasis on manifestations of the future in the present. The shared concern is with, as Cleaver (1992b: 10) suggests, "the identification of already existing activities which embody new, alternative forms of social cooperation and ways of being."

Autonomist Marxists, like anarchists, emphasize the primary importance of the self-activity and creativity of people in struggle.

The attempt to reconceptualize the process of moving beyond capitalism, as developed in the works of autonomist Marxists, bears quite striking similarities to the approach offered by Kropotkin regarding this question (Cleaver, 1992b). Autonomist Marxists share with most anarchists a rejection of concepts of “the transitional period” or “the transitional program.” In place of “the transition” autonomists and anarchists emphasize some version of what Hakim Bey calls “immediatism,” or activities that suggest the revolution is already underway.

The focus on workers’ autonomy has led to a rejection of orthodox Marxist arguments that the transcendence of capitalism and movement to a post-capitalist society requires some form of transitional order, i.e. socialism, characterized by party management of the state in the name of the people (Cleaver, 1992b). Autonomist Marxists’ emphasis on the autonomy of working class self activity stresses not only autonomy from capital but also autonomy from the “official” organizations of the working class, especially from trade unions and socialist (or more specifically, social democratic) parties. This approach shares with anarchism an analysis of the Russian revolution of 1917 that saw the Bolshevik takeover of the soviets as the beginning of the restoration of domination and exploitation (Cleaver, 1992b). Thus the subversion of the revolution is viewed as occurring much earlier than with the emergence of Stalinism to which most Leninists and Trotskyists point as the moment that marked the revolution’s betrayal.

Autonomists, like anarchists, argue that the process of building a new society must be the work of the people themselves lest it be doomed from the outset. Class struggle has a dual character and its categories can be understood from either the perspective of capital or the perspective of the working class. The shift in focus away from capital, the domain of orthodox Marxist approaches, and towards workers has opened new realizations, including a recognition that the “working class” is itself a category of capital, and, crucially, one that people have struggled to avoid or escape (Cleaver, 1992b: 7).

## Conclusion

Anarchists argue that for most of human history people have organized themselves collectively to satisfy their own needs. Social organization is conceived as a network of local voluntary groupings. Anarchists propose a decentralized society, without a central political body, in which people manage their own affairs free from any coercion or external authority. These self-governed communes could federate freely at regional (or larger) levels to ensure co-ordination or mutual defence. Their autonomy and specificity must be maintained, however. Each locality will decide freely which social, cultural and economic arrangements to pursue. Rather than a pyramid, anarchist associations would form a web.

Anarchists sometimes point to post offices and railway networks as examples of the way in which local groups and associations can combine to provide complex networks of functions without any central authority (Ward, 2004). Postal services work as a result of voluntary agreements between different post offices, in different countries, without any central world postal authority (Ward, 2004). As Ward suggests: “Coordination requires neither uniformity nor bureaucracy” (2004: 89).

As we have seen, anarchists do disagree over the tactics which they view as necessary to realize a free society. Anarchists also vary greatly in their visions of the libertarian future. Unlike utopian thinkers, anarchists exercise extreme caution when discussing “blueprints” of future social relations since they believe that it is always up to those seeking freedom to decide how they desire to live. Still, there are a few features common to anarchist visions of a free society. While anarchists are not in agreement about the means to bring about the future libertarian society, they are clear that means and ends cannot be separated.

The moment we stop insisting on viewing all forms of action only by their function in reproducing larger, total, forms of inequality of power, we will also be able to see that anarchist social relations and non-alienated forms of action are all around us. And this is critical because it already shows that anarchism is, already, and has always been, one of the main bases for human interaction. We self-organize and engage in mutual aid all the time. We always have (Graeber, 2004:76).

The anarchist future present must, almost by definition, be based upon ongoing experiments in social arrangements, in attempting to address the usual dilemma of maintaining both individual freedoms and social equality (Ehrlich, 1996b). The revolution is always in the making. These projects make up what the anarchist sociologist Howard Ehrlich calls “anarchist transfer cultures.”

Despite the dominant authoritarian trend in existing society, most contemporary anarchists therefore try and extend spheres of free action in the hope that they will one day become the mainstream of social life. In difficult times, they are, like Paul Goodman, revolutionary conservatives, maintaining older traditions of mutual aid and free enquiry when under threat. In more auspicious moments, they move out from free zones until by their example and wisdom they begin to convert the majority of people to their libertarian vision (Marshall, 1993: 659).

Some critics might dismiss constructive anarchy as being “non-revolutionary.” To do so is to repeat the mistake, common in much thinking on the left, of conceiving of revolution narrowly as a specific moment of upheaval or seizure of power (usually in terms of the state). Under this sort of narrow view, which insists on a rather abstract opposition between revolution and reform, a wide variety of anarchists would be conceived as reformists, regardless of their actual practice. Constructive anarchists recognize that revolutions do not emerge fully formed out of nothing. This perspective emphasizes the need, in pre-revolutionary times, for institutions, organizations and relations that can sustain people as well as building capacities for self-defence and struggle.

As Goodman notes: “The pathos of oppressed people, however, is that, if they break free, they don’t know what to do. Not having been autonomous, they don’t know what it’s like, and before they learn, they have new managers who are not in a hurry to abdicate” (Goodman quoted in Ward, 2004: 69). Taking a more nuanced approach to revolutionary transformation one can understand constructive anarchy as concerned with the practical development of revolutionary transfer cultures. Anarchist organizing is built on what Ward calls “social and collective ventures rapidly growing into deeply rooted organizations for welfare and conviviality” (2004: 63). Colin Ward refers to these manifestations of everyday anarchy as “quiet revolutions.”



## References

- Cleaver, Harry 1992a. "The Inversion of Class Perspective in Marxian Theory: From Valorization to Self-Valorization." *In Essays on Open Marxism*, eds. W. Bonefeld, R. Gunn, and K. Psycho-pedis. London: Pluto, 106–144.
- . 1992b. "Kropotkin, Self-valorization and the Crisis of Marxism." Paper presented at the Conference on Pyotr Alexeevich Kropotkin, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Dimitrov, December 8–14.
- Dolgoft, Sam. 1980. *The American Labor Movement a New Beginning*. Resurgence.
- . 1979. *The Relevance of Anarchism to Contemporary Society*. Minneapolis: Soil of Liberty.
- Ehrlich, Howard. 1996. *Reinventing Anarchy, Again*. Oakland: AK Press.
- Ehrlich, Howard, Carol Ehrlich, David DeLeon, and Glenda Morris. 1996. "Questions and Answers about Anarchism." *In Reinventing Anarchy, Again*, ed. Howard Ehrlich. Oakland: AK Press.
- Kropotkin, Peter. 1902. *Mutual Aid: A Factor in Evolution*. London: Heinemann.
- Marshall, Peter. 1993. *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*. London: HarperCollins.
- Ward, Colin. 2004. *Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1973. *Anarchy in Action*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.
- Ward, Colin and David Goodway. 2003. *Talking Anarchy*. Nottingham: Five Leaves.
- Woodcock, George. 1962. *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*. New York: World Publishing Company.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Jeff Shantz  
An Anarchy of Everyday Life  
2012

Retrieved on August 18, 2022 from <https://philosophersforchange.org>

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](https://theanarchistlibrary.org)**