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Article

Love among the ruins:
Nonviolent anarchism and the housing question

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Good Planning and the Historic Negation of Violence

Addressing housing and planning from an anarchist perspective is a useful exercise. This is because anarchism posits a world-view so different from mainstream social science that it allows us to ask critical questions of the metanarrative that structures social scientific endeavours. The key point is this: Housing and planning research and policy (hereafter HPRP) are underpinned by a Hobbesian conflict metanarrative, which takes a dystopian view of the 'state of nature' as a war-like struggle for space. Since this tends to be an uneven struggle between the powerful and powerless, the HPRP metanarrative revolves around a moral axis of 'bad' (unfair competition) and 'good' (regulated competition) (Kemeny 2002). Within this framework, the 'free' competition of the market is morally bad because the powerful are able to dominate the weak who suffer or even die at their hands. This is certainly what happened in the industrialising cities of the 19th century and, as a result, led to the emergence of HPRP (Malpass 2005). In this scenario, the emergence of HPRP is a civilizing historical moment: HPPR was a force for 'good' that saved ordinary people from the inevitable violence that ensued when the powerful were allowed to dominate the market (Allen and Marne 2010). Violence is understood here as the 'structural violence' caused by an unregulated capitalism that allows "certain groups [to be] pushed to, or over, the very edge of society" (Gee 2011: 37) but might also include the physical violence that landlords have historically used against poor tenants that threaten profitability (Fainstein et al 1992).

Planning has always been Violence

The idea that HPRP historically negated violence is based on a limiting conception of violence, which we can better appreciate if we consult the nonviolence literature that has strong roots in Christian theology. Since the theologian, Augustine, wrote 'City of God' in the fifth century, Christian theology has made a distinction between Pax Christi and Pax Romana (Fahey 2011). The former refers to the heavenly peace of Christ, which emphasises fraternal love and voluntary cooperation as the basis for a social order in which the state, authority and coercion have no place (Bartley 2006; Christyanopolous 2011). However, the Christian church has long since replaced the Peace of Christ with the latter doctrine. This emphasises 'original sin' and the fact that only an 'earthly peace', enforced by a regulative and coercive state, is possible. Since this 'false peace' is enforced using regulation and coercion, some theologians call it 'pacification' rather than peace (Gee 2011; Francis 2015). This sheds new light on HPRP.

From a nonviolent perspective, HPRP is not straightforwardly 'good'. Rather, the historic achievement of HPRP has been to pacify the struggle for space using regulative instruments rather than to create new spaces of peace and nonviolence. As we have seen, this initially involved containment of the powerful in the wider social interest by a progressive Keynesian planning system (Christophers 2010). But that is not all. As anarchists such as Colin Ward (1976) have pointed out, the apparently 'good', nascent Keynesian planning

system also committed a lot of 'bad' – in the form of violence – against the urban poor. To make his point, he discusses the 'Plotlands' of Essex, where a population of 25,000 self-builders constructed 8,500 dwellings in the first half of the twentieth century (Ward 1976: 81) only to see their constructions stopped and destroyed on the grounds of their lack of conformity with planning 'standards' and aesthetics

> "During the inter war years these developments came under increasingly strong attack from both local planners and national government. Critics argued that the plotlands were unhealthy and an aesthetic blight on rural and suburban landscapes. *Every effort was made to prevent further developments of this kind*" (Harris 1999: 285; *emphasis added*)

In case his condemnation of planning intervention in the plotlands sounds unreasonable, Ward asks us to compare the impact of the planning elimination of self-organised housing in places such as Essex with countries that came to tolerate self-organised housing in the inter and post war periods. Whereas some Latin American countries allowed the urban poor to self-build and improve their own 'grounds for living' that were responsive to their needs (Turner 1976), planning-led societies such as the UK intimidated and attacked self-organised housing movements and, in so doing, consigned the urban poor to renting from "slumlords" whilst waiting for bureaucratic housing (Ward 1976: 79). In other words, 'good', progressive planning stands accused of structural and physical violence.

Perhaps predictably, contemporary HPRP fares no better than the progressive Keynesian planning orthodoxy of the post war period. In fact, it gets worse.

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Although contemporary HPRP tends to self-describe as a benevolent regulatory activity that serves the 'public interest' over the powerful (Allen and Marne 2010), which is tantamount to pacification of the powerful, this is based on an uncritical view. A consultation with the sociology of HPRP literature alternatively suggests that HPRP serves rather than constrains power (Kemeny 1988; Allen and Imrie 2010), primarily because its key purpose is "persuasion and attempting to convince others … to accept [dominant] understandings and interpretations on particular issues" (Kemeny 1992: 27). An example might suffice. HPRP has been so successful in imposing an ideology that represents home ownership as natural and superior for everyone (Kemeny 1981) that most people now readily self-identify themselves as housing 'consumers' (Gurney 1999) even though, on deeper phenomenological investigation, they may reveal feeling otherwise (Allen 2008). Bourdieu (2000) calls this 'symbolic violence' because it involves the use of knowledge, discourse and myths to coerce people into social roles, such as homeowner, thereby securing domination through consent.

This is interesting because it means that HPRP is not merely an agent of pacification that renders potential conflicts over housing tenure 'latent' (Lukes 1974). It commits symbolic violence to achieve this pacification. Unfortunately, 'critical' housing and urban research does not provide an alternative to this violence. Although 'critical' housing and urban researchers like to think that they are worlds apart from HPRP there is a key similarity. They are also wedded to a conflict ontology, which manifests in the following two ways. First,

since their awakening in the 1970s, with the emergence of the New Urban Sociology, 'critical' housing and urban researchers have never believed that HPRP serves the public interest (Harloe 1977 1981). In contrast to benevolent Hegelian language of 'public' intent that underpins HPRP, critical researchers explicitly use the language of violence which 'tells it like it is'. Since critical researchers acknowledge housing reality to consist of a struggle for resources between the powerful and powerless, in which HPRP routinely serves the needs of the powerful, they reject HPRP claims to objectivity and invoke Becker's (1966) injunction to identify 'whose side we are on'. Critical researchers consequently conceptualise the default reality of HPRP in terms of struggles to be fought, where conceptual violence is explicitly promoted rather than negated (see Hamnett, 2010 on his fractious exchange with Slater, 2010; see Smith, 1996, on 'retaking the urban frontier'; see Paton and Cooper 2016 on 'battling' the frontier of gentrification; see also the petulant introduction and conclusion to Allen 2008).

Nonviolent Anarchism, its ontology of optimism and the housing question

In contrast to the Hobbesian metanarrative that underpins HPRP and 'critical' housing and urban research, anarchism treats Hobbes' insights for what they are – the arbitrary product of their placement in historical time. Anarchist writers such as Kropotkin (1902) correct this arbitrary insight by reaching back into the annals of human history for a broader understanding of human spirit. In

Mutual Aid, Kropotkin (1902) investigates a wide spectrum of animal and human history and finds Charles Darwin's misunderstood point to be that species survival was a consequence of the disposition to cooperate rather than victories in a struggle for survival. In finding that humans' greatest historical tendency was to live in a natural state of peace, Kropotkin rejected the Hobbesian dystopia that accepts conflict as the default social reality and thereby reduces the hope of social harmony to the Augustian state of pacification. Modern anarchists agree. They frequently point us towards disaster situations when the momentary dissolution of the architecture of capitalism reveals a loving, kind and cooperative rather than competitive human nature (Holloway 2010).

The metanarrative of this anarchism is, then, a highly spiritual one that emphasises the subterranean force of love and fraternity that always and already exists; subjugated under the weight of a ruthlessly competitive capitalism (Cudenec 2013 2014). This defines its task, which is not to impose a coercive justice upon a society whose inevitable conflicts and divisions would otherwise preclude it. The anarchist task is to release and work with the subterranean force of love and fraternity that is an integral feature of human being. To do anything else would do violence to the human condition.

This brings us to the definition of violence that anarchists work with and that is much wider than the definition we have been working with so far in relation to

HPRP. For anarchists, violence is more than just its physical or even structural

manifestation in poverty.   Given the spiritual roots of anarchism, which includes

Gandhi as one of its own (Marshall 1993), it is closely associated with the

philosophy of nonviolence.   Nonviolence does not simply mean 'without violence'.

Nonviolence is a life giving philosophy that requires all actions and interventions

to nurture 'being' (Gee 2011; Vinthagen 2015). As such, any actions that attack

the integrity of human being are violent (Hiranandani 2014). So what might this

mean in housing and planning terms?

Nonviolent anarchism, being and dwelling

If violence occurs when human beings are purposely distracted from pursuing

their inner need to live in relationships of love and fraternity (Vinthagen 2015),

then capitalism is problematic because it encourages people to transfer the

authorship of their lives to the competitive logic of the market as the means

through which self-discovery and actualisation are sought. The 'dream' of home

ownership is a case in point. Despite the mounting evidence of the harmful

effects of home ownership on well-being, largely as a result of the growing

precariousness and indebtedness of home owners (Ford and Burrows 2001), UK

housing policy has persistently promoted the 'ideal' of home ownership whilst

attacking non-profit alternatives (Kemeny 1995). Yet the violence of HPRP is

not simply a product of policy choices over tenure. As far as anarchists are

concerned, the ontological source of violence exists at the more fundamental level

of state and market because they violate human 'being'. Kropotkin can help us

here: If he is correct in his claim that realisation of fraternal and loving

relationships is axiomatic to human 'being', then state and market are

problematic because they are abstract entities that cannot lovingly relate to

human beings (Zwick and Zwick 2005). As Colin Ward and John Turner point

out, housing in its commodified (home ownership) and socialised (state housing)

forms actually violate human 'being' because they reduce people from humans to

numerical entities to be 'slotted' into one of the multitude of standardised houses

that the state or market provides.

> "The home cannot have any relationship to the state [or market] which
> recognises man not as an individual but as a number, a fraction of some
> greater number" (Ward 176: 9).

So what do nonviolent, loving and life-giving answers to the housing question

look like? First, Ward (1976) offers the idea of 'dweller control' in which

individuals and communities are able to exert control over the production of

their own environment rather than have housing done 'to' or 'for' them: "The

home is an organism in direct relationship to man [sic] … his affirmation in

space" (Ward 1976: 9). This means that tying individual and collective human

experience into the process of creating dwellings is axiomatic to an authentic

process of 'self-discovery and growth' (Ward 1976: 78), which takes place in

relation to one's natural environment and each other rather than the plastic

environments of state and market (Turner 1976).   In this schema, housing and

dwelling become a collaborative process and activity that is ongoing rather than

a finished commodity (Ward 1976: 95).   This is not a Utopian pipe dream.

Anarchists eschew such things. Ward and Turner think 'dweller control' is

eminently feasible and draw evidence from across the world, as well as the UK, to show that most people in the world have been capable of collaborating to build their own environments *over time*; starting with something basic and then constantly upgrading its 'standard' in terms of materials, facilities and space (Ward 1976).

This brings us to a key element in anarchist thinking which is its' nonviolent strategy for achieving change. Since capitalism encourages people to transfer the authorship of housing to market and state, many anarchists argue that 'participatory subordination' of citizens to market and state is the main source of political power (Bookchin 1982). This creates striking similarities with Foucault's (1979) view of power, which similarly rejects the idea that power is something to be 'fought' and 'won', whilst suggesting that genuine change occurs only when people withdraw their consent and cease cooperation with state and market. The anarchist strategy, then, is to dissolve power (which, in our case, means dissolving HPRP) by reclaiming the authorship of housing from state and market.

It is for this reason that anarchists emphasise the potential and desirability of autonomy in housing. This entails encouraging individuals and communities to engage in housing as an independent and organic activity that not only realises their 'being-in-space' but also opens up the possibilities for genuine cooperation in place of dependence on state or market. In doing so, they do not simply seek

to create 'cracks' in capitalism but, more importantly, to prefigure a world of autonomous housing by providing models for others to follow (Holloway 2010). This brings us to the nonviolent anarchist method for achieving widespread changes that extend beyond the specific examples of autonomous housing contained in the cracks of capitalism. Rather than seeking to conquer HPRP to create and enforce widespread change, nonviolent anarchism emphasises making connections between 'cracks' (where relatively small numbers of people engage in housing as an autonomous activity) so that they eventually grow into a network of autonomous spaces that begin to have a life independent or quasi-independent of capitalism (Holloway 2010; Gorz 1999).

So how might this happen in practice? Ward suggests two nonviolent approaches to creating, expanding and connecting housing 'cracks', which involve using or circumventing but not conquering HPRP. In the first instance, he points to the example of pioneer housing cooperatives that have been able to build alternatives by 'act[ing] constitutionally ... instead of taking the law into their own hands" (Ward, 1976: 74). In countries such as the UK, then, a range of institutions support the development of housing cooperatives such as the Homes and Communities Agency (which provides funding), Triodos Bank (which provides mortgages) and Radical Routes (a network of resources for aspiring cooperatives). As if to emphasise the centrality of the nonviolent strategy of creating and connecting 'cracks' in capitalism, cooperative members of Radical Routes do not take advantage of mortgage amortisation in the form of lower rents. Instead, they levy affordable rents at a higher level so they can make

financial contributions to Radical Routes, which uses those contributions to support the development of more housing cooperatives.

In the second instance, Ward (1976) discusses a variety of forms of autonomous housing that have origins in collaborative human ingenuity and the circumvention of HPRP. For instance, he celebrates the post-war squatting movement, based on ex-army camps, as an example of what is possible when people collaborate to create their own answers to the housing question. John Turner (1976) similarly celebrates the Peruvian barriadas, where he lived and worked for 10 years, as examples of "thousands of people living together in an orderly fashion with no police protection or public services" despite the 'vested political and bureaucratic interests' that represented it otherwise. More recently, anarchists have made a point of celebrating tent cities and tiny house villages as similar examples of human ingenuity in self-build and horizontal social organization (Hebden 2014) whilst also celebrating the numerous other genuine examples of self-build that occur every year using recycled materials rather than industrial brick technology (Hunt 2014). If some of these examples seem idealistic or unrealistic, Chatterton (2008: 423) points out that anarchism offers up its imaginative examples as "ideas about the possibilities for ... people to manage their own affairs through mutual aid and solidarity" rather than blueprints for change.

Pragmatic nonviolent anarchism and post-capitalism

It follows from above that three principles are axiomatic to anarchist resolutions of the housing question:

- Optimism: human beings are cooperative by nature and can cooperate to satisfy housing needs.
- Autonomy: human beings should be free from dependence on policy, state and market. Self-realisation is achieved in the sphere of autonomy.
- Integrity: bureaucratic state and consumerist market housing violate human integrity. Building home is a process of self-realisation.

However, it is important to acknowledge that anarchists can also be pragmatic in dealing with circumstances 'not of their choosing' as they seek to 'build a new world inside the shell of the old'. Some anarchist responses to the current crisis of capitalism exemplify this pragmatic strand and so are worth visiting here.

According to Mason (2015) 21st century capitalism is reaching its outer limits and is in danger of collapsing under the weight of its own contradictions. He argues that the time is ripe to begin to shape social change out of the wreckage of capitalism. In doing so, he stands on the shoulders of giants such as Andre Gorz who saw Mason's vision of a disintegrating capitalism as long ago as the 1970s. Gorz and Mason's key concerns centre on the growth of automation and erosion of work. This poses a problem for capitalism – where will the consumers come from if there is no work? It also poses a challenge to libertarians that wish to

free themselves from the shackles of capitalism: Where will our income come from? And how will we tackle the crisis of housing affordability in a context of eroding work and income?

The manner in which some anarchists and autonomists have resolved these questions has involved pragmatic engagements with the state. For instance, autonomists such as Gorz (1999) have long argued for the state to create a universal basic income but acknowledge that this will be basic and, in the context of climate change and the need to reverse consumption patterns, necessarily so. Anarchists such as Ward are similarly pragmatic about the role of the state in housing provision. He thinks that it can, and has, played a productive role. For instance, he points out how even the 'greatest planning exercise' involving the creation of New Towns was able to accommodate existing autonomous self-build housing, for instance, in Basildon. In fact, Ward quotes Sir Patrick Abercrombie saying that:

> "It is possible to point with horror at the jumble of shacks and bungalows on the Laindon hills and Pitsea. This is a narrow minded appreciation of what was as genuine a desire as created the group of lovely gardens and houses" (Ward 1976: 85).

Interestingly, then, even one of the key architects of post war planning did not perceive a contradiction between autonomous housing and planning. Yet, even if contemporary planning could embrace autonomous housing in the way of Abercrombie, a key question remains unresolved which is: 'How do we facilitate autonomous building in the current context of increasing precariousness?' Ward

(1976) thinks he has the answer. He has long advocated a pragmatic approach to facilitating new autonomous building and dweller control which is uniquely suited to current circumstances of growing precariousness. This pragmatic approach would require a role for the state which:

> "… provided a road, a plot, party walls and a service core of plumbing, bath, basin, wc, sink, and ring-main terminal … and then encouraged people to do their own thing. Self-build housing societies would spring up … the homeless and unemployed could make homes and make jobs, and in a decade we could see a self-made community, freed from the awful dependency we inflict on the municipal tenant" (Ward 1976: 86).

Who is to say these ideas cannot work in the UK now when similar approaches have previously worked on large scales in societies such as Cuba, Austria and Sweden (see Harris 1999)? Moreover, who is to say that they cannot happen in a post-capitalist UK in which a basic income and shorter working hours might facilitate Ward's (1976) call for a 'carnival of construction'?   Ward's thinking in this respect can no longer be dismissed as idealism. It is becoming increasingly relevant and necessary whilst also providing a nonviolent, life-giving alternative to the false choice between state and market. Perhaps anarchists had some of the answers to the housing question all along.

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