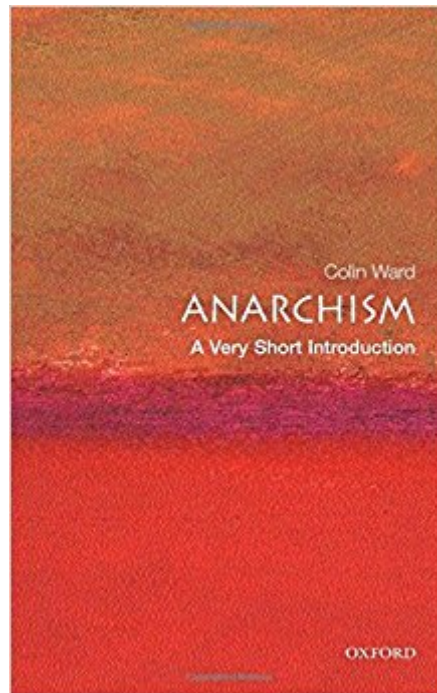




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Anarchism: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

What do anarchists want? It seems easier to classify them by what they don't want, namely, the organizations of the State, and to identify them with rioting and protest rather than with any coherent ideology. But with demonstrations like those against the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund being blamed on anarchists, it is clear that an explanation of what they do stand for is long overdue. Colin Ward provides answers to these questions by considering anarchism from a variety of perspectives: theoretical, historical, and international, and by exploring key anarchist thinkers, from Kropotkin to Chomsky. He looks critically at anarchism by evaluating key ideas within it, such as its blanket opposition to incarceration, and policy of "no compromise" with the apparatus of political decision-making. Can anarchy ever function effectively as a political force? Is it more "organized" and "reasonable" than is currently perceived? Whatever the politics of the reader, Ward's argument ensures that anarchism will be much better understood after experiencing this book.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Colin Ward was probably not the ideal person to write this little book on anarchism--not, as another reviewer has said (in what's a very good review, by the way) because he's an anarchist and hence isn't objective so much as because the book reeks of a very specific kind of anarchism: British, urban, secular, and communistic. The first bias makes a good deal of the discussion either arcane or dull for the nonBritish reader; the second virtually ignores intentional community experiments

away from city areas; the third incredibly ignores Christian anarchists such as Jacques Ellul or Dorothy Day; and the fourth (although a position I personally endorse) gives shortshrif to libertarianism. To give him his due, Ward does discuss the latter more than he does nonurban or religious anarchism. But his understanding of libertarianism is sketchy. This only makes sense, since it's largely an American phenomenon, and Ward is sketchy on American. (On page 63, he and his editor even misspell "Cincinnati". I mean, really!) Ward is strongest in discussing three 19th century European giants of anarchism: Proudhon, Bakunin, and Kropotkin. Moreover, his chapter on education's discussion of William Godwin is both interesting and worthy. But on the other hand, much of the rest of the book falls flat. The most potentially interesting and important chapter in the book, on federalism, just doesn't deliver. Ward fails to follow up, in even an introductory way, on the anarchist claim that regionalism/federalism makes more sense than statism. Instead, he just quotes a couple of stirring but inadequate passages from an 1867 Bakunin pamphlet, doing little to refute the standard criticism that anarchist modes of organization are inadequate with large populations.

Initially, I became interested in reading Colin Ward's book because instances in which I encountered the phrases 'capito-anarchist', and 'minarchist' were growing increasingly frequent. In each of these instances, authors - generally scholarly or pseudo-scholarly authors - were referencing the work of the late Robert Nozick, and others without seeming to appreciate the gravity of the term 'anarchism' as an idea. I should note at the outset that I'm not exceedingly fond of Nozick's "Anarchy, State and Utopia". Ward does a moderate job of outlining anarchy, and many of the major thinkers that evaluated, promoted, and propagated the idea of anarchy as a challenge to liberalism, to communism, to Tsarism, and to statist socialism. He provides brief reviews of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, William Godwin, Michael Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, and in a moment of genuine humor, Ward reveals his thoughts about Max Stirner's "The Ego and Its Own." Ward, quoting Kropotkin, explains that anarchism is "the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government - harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements, concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilised being." If one were hoping for a definition of anarchism - that's essentially it.

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