

Colin Ward : An anarchist approach to urban planning

Forty years ago, when the rivista Volontà was edited in Napoli by my friends Giovanna Berneri and Cesare Zaccaria, they published an article about housing and planning by a young architect Giancarlo De Carlo, which I laboriously and, no doubt, inaccurately, translated for the English anarchist journal Freedom.<sup>1</sup>

Then, as now, anarchist propaganda has been impeded by its insistence that nothing can happen until everything happens. The destruction of both capitalism and the state were the prerequisites for the building of a free society. The problem is that neither De Carlo nor me, nor the millions of people actually involved, then or now, can actually wait for these revolutionary changes. Ask yourself whether they are nearer or further than they were forty years ago.

In looking for alternative approaches, he examined building co-operatives, tenants' co-operatives, rent strikes, and 'squatting', the illegal occupation of empty houses. Now we have seen over these 40 years since 1948 that every one of these techniques of direct action by poor citizens, whether in Italy, Britain or the United States, has led to a wider involvement in urban planning. And in the part that citizens can demand.

All those years ago, De Carlo went on to consider the possible anarchist attitudes to town planning:

"It is possible to adopt a hostile attitude: 'The plan must necessarily emanate from authority, therefore it can only be detrimental. Changes in social life cannot follow the plan - the plan will be the consequence of a new way of life.'

Or, he suggested, an attitude of participation could be adopted: "The plan is the opportunity of liquidating our present social order by changing its direction, and this changed aim is necessarily the preliminary for a new social structure." The first attitude, claimed de Carlo, is based on two main arguments.

~~"The first main attitude is based on two main arguments."~~ "Firstly that authority cannot be a liberating agent - perfectly true; secondly, that man [ and of course today he would say man and woman ] can do nothing until he is free - a mistaken view. Man cannot be liberated, he must liberate himself, and any progress towards that liberation can only

be the conscious expression of his own will. The investigation of the full extent of the problems of region, city and home, is such an activity. To find out the nature of the problems and to prepare their solutions is a concrete example of direct action, taking away the powers of authority and giving them back to men [and women.]"

"The attitude of hostility that really means 'waiting for the revolution to do it', does not take into account the fact that the social revolution will be accomplished by clear heads, not by sick and stunted people unable to think of the future because of the problems of the present. It forgets that the revolution begins in the elimination of these evils so as to create the necessary conditions of a free society."

Giancarlo de Carlo was arguing two important propositions. Firstly that whatever kind of society they live in, it is important for the anarchist to push forward those approaches to personal and social needs which depend on popular initiatives and which present alternatives to dependency on capitalism and the state. Secondly that "urban planning can become a revolutionary weapon if we succeed in rescuing it from the blind monopoly of authority and in making it a communal organ of research and investigation into the real problems of social life."

For me, this point of view from forty years ago, has always been important and helpful, because I became convinced, and I am still, that one of the tasks of the anarchist propagandist is to propagate solutions to contemporary issues which, however dependent they are on the existing social and economic structures, are anarchist solutions: the kind of approaches that would be made if we were living in the kind of society we envisage. We are much more likely to win support for our point of view, in other words, if we put anarchist answers which can be tried here and now, than if we declare that there are no answers until the ultimate answer: a social social revolution which continually disappears over the horizon.

Let me take the first of Giancarlo's points of 40 years ago: the importance of the Squatter's Movement: the illegal seizure of empty housing. At the time when he was writing, we had been through the post-war eruption of squatting in Italy, in Britain and elsewhere. It's history and its lessons were forgotten. Then, many years later, in the 1960s, it became important again, in Turin, in London, in Berlin and in Copenhagen, and in dozens of

European and American cities. Not only was the squatters' movement successful as a tactic for housing oneself, it was also a political education.<sup>2</sup> And it is a fact that the most successful of the housing co-operatives that have flourished in Britain in the past decade, started life as illegal 'squats'<sup>3</sup>

A second point of interest in his argument of 1948 was his use of the phrase "an attitude of participation". Now the word "participation" was not part of the vocabulary of architects and planners in the 1940s, nor in the 1950s. It crept into the language after the phase of post-war reconstruction in the cities of Britain and the United States which was known as "urban renewal".

As we all understand by now, "urban renewal" meant in practice, "driving the poor out of town," and it also meant the destruction of the traditional working class culture of the cities. We have a huge library of books on the implications of this. There are the famous American studies by Robert Goodman and Jane Jacobs<sup>4</sup> and there are English equivalents, of which just one was the work of a socialist councillor, not an anarchist, who declared that "Planning in our society is in essence the attempt to inject a radical technology into a conservative and highly inegalitarian economy. The impact of planning on this society is rather like that of the education system on the same society: it is least onerous and most advantageous to those who are relatively powerless or relatively poor. Planning is, in its effect on the socio-economic structure, a highly regressive form of indirect taxation."<sup>5</sup>

So there grew up a new 1960s ideology of "participation" which was populist, socialist, and to a small but important extent, a rediscovery, by people who had never heard of anarchism, of anarchist values. One of the most important attempts to measure the actual worth of these exercises in participation was made by an American planner, Sherry Arnstein, in what became known as Arnstein's Ladder of Participation.<sup>6</sup> The rungs (~~piuoli~~) of her ladder, climbing up from the bottom, were:

Citizen Control  
Delegated Power  
Partnership  
Placation  
Consultation  
Informing  
Therapy  
Manipulation

I have always found Arnstein's Ladder a very useful measuring-rod which enables us to get behind the barrage of propoganda and decide whether any particular exercise in "public participation" is merely manipulation or therapy, or often deception (which found no place on Arnstein's ladder - but should have done).

Naturally the anarchist aim is the very top rung of Arnstein's Ladder, that of Full Citizen Control. It's something worth aiming at, whatever kind of society we live in. We may not win the economic battles, but we can sometimes win the environmental battles! There have been histories of success in the cities of the United States, of Britain, and of Italy, as well as exhausting failures.

But we do have to ask ourselves whether "participation" was one of those words of the 1960s and 1970s, which has been quietly abandoned in the 1980s. You will know that the governments of both Britain and the United States, with their ideology of the New Right, when they talk about the cities at all, talk in terms of "partnership" of business and government. They do not speak of "participation" of ordinary citizens.

The word "renewal", having been discredited, is replaced by new equivalents, like "regeneration" and "revitalisation". We are all invited to see the regeneration of the cities of the United States. I was invited to a conference in Pittsburgh, USA on the theme of "Remaking Cities". There was one speaker there, Alan Mallach of New Jersey, who addressed himself to the issue that concerns you and me. He said, "The concept of a public/private partnership as a relationship between two sectors - government and the private market - is flawed by its exclusion of a third, essential actor - the residents of the community affected. Self-congratulatory messages about entrepreneurial successes and the proliferation of shiny downtown office buildings obscure the reality that many people do not benefit from all this success, and many are deeply and permanently harmed."<sup>7</sup>

In other words, the battle for local citizen participation has to be fought continually, everywhere. Giancarlo De Carlo was right, all those years ago.

But there is a different aspect of the city that needs to be discussed from an anarchist point of view. Anarchism has shared with other political ideologies of the Left, certain assumptions about the growth of the modern industrial city and the modern industrial proletariat. Marx and Engels, whatever the virtues or defects of their concept of history, based it on the first country, Britain, to experience the industrial revolution: the mushroom growth of industrial cities like

Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds or Glasgow, and the proletarianisation of the displaced peasantry and so on.

To fit the real world into this theory, they minimised the survival of the English equivalent of the European peasant economy,<sup>8</sup> and dismissed the huge small-workshop economy as a tedious survival of the "petty trades" of the middle ages. Kropotkin, in his book Fields, Factories and Workshops, attempted to correct this view and to remind us that the vast industrial city was a temporary phenomenon, which happened to begin in Britain. Thus he argued in 1899 that decentralisation was both inevitable and desirable:

"The scattering of industries over the country - so as to bring the factory amidst the fields, to make agriculture derive all those profits which it always finds in being combined with industry and to produce a combination of industrial with agricultural work - is surely the next step to be taken...This step is imposed by the necessity for each healthy man and woman to spend a part of their lives in manual work in the free air; and it will be rendered the more necessary when the great social movements, which have now become unavoidable, come to disturb the present international trade, and compel each nation to revert to her own resources for her own maintenance."<sup>9</sup>

Now Kropotkin was, like me, an optimist. But he had grasped a big truth about the industrial city and about industrial employment.

About the industrial city, Kropotkin's contemporary, the Garden City pioneer, Ebenezer Howard, declared in 1904 that "I venture to suggest that while the age in which we live is the age of the great closely-compacted city, there are already signs, for those who can read them, of a coming change so great and so momentous that the twentieth century will be known as the period of the great exodus..."<sup>10</sup>

Whether or not it happened in the way that Howard anticipated, ordinary demographic statistics of British cities support his view. A British economist, Victor Keegan, remarked a few years ago that "the most seductive theory of all is that what we are experiencing now is nothing less than a movement back towards an informal economy after a brief flirtation of 200 years or so with a formal one."<sup>11</sup>

The huge industrial city, the vast concentrated factory with its army of the proletariat, are a brief episode in the history of cities, in the history of production and in the history of work. You have only to visit the dying industrial cities of Britain or the United States to become convinced of this.

We have a characteristic Anglo-American divide in discussing this particular Italian economic miracle. For example, a British author, Fergus Murray, provides an absorbing account of the recent changes in Italian industry with the explanation that "In the late 1960s labour militancy in many Italian industries reached levels that directly threatened firm profitability, and management undertook a series of strategies designed initially to reduce the disruptiveness of militant workers."<sup>12</sup> One of these strategies was the decentralisation of industrial production into a local, self-employed, small workshop economy. So we can see this whole recent evolution as a conspiracy by the capitalists.

Predictably the same industrial changes were seen quite differently from the United States. The American architect Richard Hatch, who both Giancarlo de Carlo and I remember as a pioneer of participatory planning in that toughest of all environments, Harlem, New York,<sup>13</sup> wrote much more recently that,

"A new form of urban industrial production in Italy is giving new meaning to its historical form. It is based on a large number of very small, flexible enterprises that depend on broadly skilled workers and multiple-use, automated machinery. Essentially intermediate producers, they link together in varying combinations and patterns to perform complex manufacturing tasks for widening markets. These firms combine rapid innovation with a high degree of democracy in the workplace. They tend to congregate in mixed-use neighbourhoods where work and dwelling are integrated. Their growth has been the objective of planning policy, architectural interventions, and municipal investment, with handsome returns in sustained economic growth and lively urban centres."<sup>14</sup>

Well of course, lively urban centres are one of the aims of the urban planning profession, and one which it has been singularly unskilled in providing, ever since the 1940s. Those of us who are concerned with urban planning have every reason to observe what is happening in Italy.

There was, for example, an Italo-American anarchist, the late George Benello, who found in the 'industrial renaissance' of north-eastern and central Italy, "a model that worked, creating in less than three decades, not hundreds but literally hundreds of thousands of small scale firms, out-producing conventionally run factories, and providing work which called forth skill, responsibility, and artistry from its democratically organised workforces."<sup>15</sup>

I learn from the same source, that Benello was "amazed at the combination of sophisticated design and production technology with

human scale work-life, and by the extent and diversity of integrated and collaborative activity within this network. Small cities, such as Modena, had created 'artisan villages' - working neighbourhoods where production facilities and living quarters were within walking or bike range, where technical schools for the unemployed fed directly into newly created businesses, and where small firms using computerized techniques, banded together to produce complex products."<sup>16</sup>

By this point I am sure that many people here, whether they are anarchists, workers, or urban planners, will be acutely embarrassed at the idealized picture I have given you of Italia artigiana<sup>i o</sup> and will complain that daily reality has little relation to this view. Well, I have to embarrass you one stage further, since my subject is an anarchist approach to urban planning. George Benello's own conclusion was that "Italy has taught the world perhaps more than any other nation about urban life and urban form. Once again it is in the forefront, creating a new economic order, based on the needs of the city and on human scale."<sup>17</sup>

Now, even making allowances for sentimental Anglo-American Italophilia, there is a sense in which this comment is absolutely true. Go, not to the cities of northern Italy but to those of Britain and the United States, and you will certainly find the ruins of a factory culture of monopolistic employers who have fled or diversified, and of work-forces dependent upon social security hand-outs, or upon the various alternatives to work devised for British or American cities: garden festivals, museums of our industrial heritage, or shopping malls and aquaria. Anything, in fact, except the opportunity to be involved in productive work.

Comparing the experience of car workers in, say Coventry or Birmingham, and Turin, I was told by a British historian that in English factories, a third generation of skilled industrial workers have been "moulded in worker-resistance to industrial capitalism", knowing nothing except employment for big capitalists, whereas in Torino, with its high "generation-turnover" of new industrial workers from the South, the artisans and peasants who moved north were not "crushed by factory capitalism", and have consequently found it easier to become self-employed workers, or members of co-operatives or employees of small-scale, high-technology entrepreneurs, or to drop out of industrial work almost completely and pick up a living from small-scale horticulture.

Now we anarchists are not Marxists. We belong to a different tradition from the one which saw the steam-engine and the consequent concentration of industrial production as the ultimate factor in human history. We belong to a different tradition which includes, for example, Proudhon's faith in the self-governing workshop and Kropotkin's concern with the decentralisation of production and its combination with horticulture.

It is our tradition which corresponds more closely to the actual experience, both of our grandparents and of our grandchildren. One of the people from a different tradition who has thought seriously about this issue is André Gorz, who argues that the political Left has been refrigerated in authoritarian collectivist attitudes that belong to the past. He says that

"As long as the protagonists of socialism continue to make centralised planning the lynchpin of their programme, and the adherence of everyone to the 'democratically formulated' objectives of their plan the core of their political doctrine, socialism will remain an unattractive proposition in industrial societies. Classical socialist doctrine finds it difficult to come to terms with political and social pluralism, understood not simply as a plurality of parties and trade unions but as the co-existence of various ways of working, producing and living, various distinct cultural areas and levels of social existence... Yet this kind of pluralism precisely conforms to the lived experience and aspirations of the post-industrial proletariat, as well as the major part of the traditional working class." <sup>18</sup>

Now this would be perfectly well understood in the urban fringe of Torino, or of Modena or Bologna or in all the workshop-villages of Emilia-Romagna, or, I imagine, ~~here~~ in Milano.

And of course it has its implications in the world of the physical planning of the environment. It implies a plan which is modest, tentative and flexible, which assumes dweller control as the first principle of housing and which also assumes that the householder has access to a garden, whether this garden is used for horticulture or as a playspace for the children, or as a workshop or a commercial asset. And I take it for granted that there is a nursery and a junior school close at hand, and room for self-governing workshops all around. These are such simple demands that even as anarchists in a society which is hostile to anarchism, we should be able to achieve them!