A Seed Beneath the Snow: Everyday Anarchism
Paul Dobraszczyk

Colin Ward consistently argued that anarchism was always present in society, rather than a utopia to be realised in the future: 'an anarchist society, a society which organises itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow'. This is an idea of anarchism – and of politics more generally – that has resonated with many others, particularly those seeking to develop a more inclusive and generous kind of politics than partisan ideologies. The late David Graeber has been perhaps the most vocal in this respect: his polemical essay 'Are You An Anarchist? The Answer May Surprise You!' is an anarchist version of a religious tract. It takes examples of everyday behaviour, whether negotiating other people on a crowded bus or working as a volunteer, and turns them into a passionate argument for anarchism as a universal, if mostly unacknowledged, way of simply being in the world. Geographer Simon Springer (*The Anarchist Roots of Geography: Towards Spatial Emancipation*, 2016) has reiterated this emphasis on everyday anarchism, inviting us to see in the most prosaic acts of generosity signs of an emancipatory politics: 'every time you have ever invited friends over to dinner, jaywalked, mowed your neighbour's lawn, skipped a day at work, looked after your brother's kids, questioned your professor, borrowed your mother-in-law's car, disregarded a posted sign, or returned a favour, you have – perhaps unknowingly – engaged in anarchist principles'.

Springer calls this kind of human behaviour a 'prefigurative politics' (a term originally coined by Carl Boggs), meaning that it is revolutionary in a very different way from conventional understandings of that word, particularly in Marxist readings. Here, in the present moment, certain kinds of behaviour literally enact the politics of anarchism, often without their protagonists even knowing it. This is perhaps a secular variation of Jesus' exhortation of unselfconscious virtue: 'do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret' (Matthew 6:4). Ward framed his own interest in prefigurative anarchism – whether seen in the actions of allotment holders, squatters or children in playgrounds, to cite but a few examples of his rich field of studies – as fundamental to broadening the appeal of this kind of politics beyond a narrow group of activists. He wanted to win people over to anarchist ideas 'precisely through drawing upon the common experience of the informal, transient, self-organising networks of relationships that in fact make the human community possible'. In this respect, Ward and those he has influenced point us back to the root of the meanings of politics itself: the Greek word *politeia* describing how citizens in the *polis* organised urban life. Of course, in antiquity, urban citizenship was an exclusive affair (women and enslaved people had no part in this kind of politics); but the Greek definition of politics nevertheless holds open the possibility of a fully participatory organisation of everyday life, if citizenship can indeed be extended to everyone.

I find the generosity of Ward's vision of anarchist politics compelling, but it comes with its own set of problems. First, can it be said that there is any such thing as an unconscious form of politics? Surely, putting the label 'anarchist' on kinds of behaviour that are not acknowledged as such runs the risk of misinterpretation, even solipsism – the belief that what others do is there to merely confirm your own understanding of the world. In drawing attention to everyday behaviour, what Ward, Graeber and Springer argue for is a recognition that there is already a consensus out there as to what people generally recognise as valuable in their lives: namely, freedom, generosity and respect towards others. Some may not hold to these values; but the assumption is that the overwhelming majority of people do. Asserting the near universality of certain values is a powerful way of expanding politics beyond the partisan dogmas that so often characterise political parties of all persuasions. It has the effect of opening up the very meaning of politics to a much wider remit that centres on values rather than policies, on meaning rather than structure. Here, I would argue that the associated risks are far less than the potential benefits, which are no less than a transformation of political life from the roots upwards.

A second criticism of prefigurative politics is that it can only ever operate at a very small scale. There is a world of difference between an impromptu dinner party and the business of

government, especially of large-scale institutions and infrastructure which always transcend individuals. Political theorist David Harvey has been particularly vocal in his criticism of anarchism as a politics of the local than can never realistically negotiate the exceptional complexity that characterises contemporary cities and their governance. In *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution* (2013), Harvey argues that hierarchical forms of governance are always required at larger scales – he cites the mitigation of climate change as an example – because questions of what is held in common are always contested. The more people that are involved in decision-making, the more complex these questions become, consensus becoming ever more unlikely. For Harvey, the solution is a 'nested' hierarchy of governance that becomes more established as the scale of the issues to be addressed increases. The problem with this argument, as Springer makes clear, is that even thinking about scale results in a moving away from lived experience – it's a tool that allows questions of consensus to be sidelined because its very purpose is to distract from those questions. Scale quite literally 'sets things apart' – it is an abstraction of lived reality. Quoting the dictum often attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, 'be the change you want to see in the world', Springer argues that scale is a 'theoretical distraction, a drawing away from the grounded particularities of the everyday'.

In this reading, it is simply not possible to map the future, to know where individual actions will lead – this is an illusion of control. It is therefore an affront to impose political dogmas on any one individual's behaviour. This may seem wildly impractical, even downright irresponsible, but that is because anarchism stems from a radical uprooting of established notions of politics. Almost all of our ideas about politics involve notions of exclusion, whether this is acknowledged or not. To even assert a particular political affiliation is to exclude others, let alone to belong to a political party. It's clear that any organised politics needs to balance the need to belong with that of individual autonomy. Anarchism – conceived as a prefigurative politics – asks if it might be possible for us to remain open to difference in the face of the often forceful desire to exclude. In my view, this 'remaining open' constitutes the primary political force of anarchism; it is abandoned only when absolutely necessary and then, only with regret in the hope that any exclusion can be reversed.

The question of what might be constructed out of such a personal politics is an apposite one to conclude this short reflection. In scientific studies of the buildings made by social insects – beehives, ants' and wasps' nests and termite mounds – it has been demonstrated that complex structures can emerge from very simple behaviours of individual insects (in this case, animals without brains or even neural networks). The reason is that it only takes a small number of rules to produce a higher level of order – what is known as emergence in behavioural studies. Now I am not suggesting for a moment that humans are like insects; rather that complex organisation need not be dependent on the implementation of hierarchical systems of governance. Perhaps the 'simple' values of anarchism – mutualism, self-organisation, autonomy – can operate in a similar way to pheromones in insects – they are the rules that govern behaviours and which, if held fast to and in numbers, can produce the structures that always seem so out of reach. Perhaps the maxim that your left hand should not know what your right hand is doing is not an exemplar of Christian piety, but rather the basis on which a new political and social order might emerge.

Biography: Paul Dobraszczyk is an architectural writer and lecturer at the Bartlett School of Architecture, London. He is the author of many books, the most recent being *Animal Architecture: Beasts, Buildings and Us* (Reaktion, 2023) and *Architecture and Anarchism: Building Without Authority* (Paul Holberton, 2021).