

Anarchist Education

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Abstract

In this chapter I will discuss how the anarchist objection to the state and the defence of central anarchist values, such as mutual aid, autonomy and cooperation, yields a distinct perspective on debates about the aims of education. I will draw on historical accounts of anarchist educational experiments to explore how their pedagogical practices, organisation and content constituted a radical alternative to mainstream forms of educational provision in different historical periods and will reflect on the relevance of these alternatives in contemporary educational contexts. My discussion will incorporate both formal and informal education and will address central issues within educational philosophy and theory, such as the relationship between education and social change, the moral legitimacy of educational intervention and the conception of human nature. I will argue that the anarchist tradition of educational thought and practice, while overlapping in some respects with forms of libertarian, progressive and democratic education and with critical pedagogy, offers a unique perspective on issues such as the above, and a valuable set of resources with which to critique some dominant trends in contemporary educational policy and practice.

Introduction

Many people, on hearing the term ‘anarchist education’, will intuitively respond with a comment along the lines of: ‘Doesn’t that just mean letting children do whatever they want?’ This chapter will show that such a response reflects some common misperceptions about anarchism; that educational questions were central to the work of leading anarchist theorists and activists; and that there is a distinct tradition of anarchist education that, while sharing some features with other radical educational movements, is also significantly different from the more familiar examples of progressive, democratic and libertarian education. At the same time, the chapter will explore some of the tensions at the heart of anarchist educational experiments, tensions that reflect the complex conceptual and political questions involved in any educational project concerned with radical social change.

Anarchist Schools

In 1904, the anarchist activist Francisco Ferrer established the *Escuela Moderna* (Modern School) in Barcelona. In the school’s prospectus, he declared: ‘I will teach them only the simple truth. I will not ram a dogma into their heads. I will not conceal from them one iota of fact. I will teach them not what to think but how to think’.¹

The school took a radically critical stance, in its ethos, curriculum and daily practice, against the dominant educational and political ideas of the time. In the face of a public school system completely controlled by the Catholic Church, the Modern School was co-educational and offered a curriculum that explicitly rejected the dogmatic teaching of the Church on the one hand and the nationalistic education of the capitalist state on the other. Class attendance was not compulsory, students organised their own individual timetables, and there were no grades, prizes or punishments at the school. ‘Having admitted and practised’, wrote Ferrer,

¹ P. Avrich, *The Modern School Movement; Anarchism and Education in the United States* (Oakland: AK Press, 2006), 19.

the coeducation of boys and girls, of rich and poor—having, that is to say, started from the principle of solidarity and equality—we are not prepared to create a new inequality. Hence in the Modern School there will be no rewards and no punishments; there will be no examinations to puff up some children with the flattering title of ‘excellent’, to give others the vulgar title of ‘good’, and make others unhappy with a consciousness of incapacity and failure.²

Although Ferrer acknowledged that some form of assessment may be useful to monitor students’ learning progress, particularly when it came to technical skills, he insisted that, if not conducive to the pupils’ personal development, grades and exams had no part to play in the kind of education he was advocating.

A great emphasis was placed on ‘learning by doing’ and accordingly much of the curriculum of the school consisted in practical training, visits to museums, factories and laboratories or field trips to study physical geography, geology and botany.

Ferrer was also adamant that teachers must have complete ‘professional independence’. Criticising the system by which the educator is regarded as an ‘official servant, narrowly enslaved to minute regulations, inexorable programmes’, he proclaimed that the principle of free, spontaneous learning should apply not only to pupils but to teachers. ‘He who has charge of a group of children, and is responsible for them, should alone be qualified to decide what to do and what not to do.’³

Convinced that all existing school textbooks reflected either the religious dogma of the Church or the nationalistic dogma of the state, Ferrer issued a call to leading intellectuals across Europe commissioning textbooks to reflect the latest scientific discoveries, and installed a printing press on the school premises. The works adopted for the school library included texts on ‘the injustices connected with patriotism, the horrors of war, and the iniquity of conquest’.⁴ Alongside titles such as *A Compendium of Universal History*, *Origins of Christianity* and *Poverty; Its Cause and Cure*, the children regularly read a utopian fairy tale by Jean Grave, *The Adventures of Nono* in which, as Ferrer put it, ‘the happier future is ingeniously and dramatically contrasted with the sordid realities of the present order’.⁵

The children were encouraged to value brotherhood and cooperation and to develop a keen sense of social justice, and the curriculum carried a clear anti-capitalist, anti-statist and anti-militarist message. Pupils were given lessons in Esperanto to promote international solidarity.

Unsurprisingly, the Spanish authorities saw the Escuela Moderna, and Ferrer himself, as a threat. Although Ferrer was not directly involved in anarchist activity during his time at the school, his anarchist sympathies were obvious, and the school was constantly under surveillance and was frequently denounced by the clerical authorities as a nest of subversion. In 1906, after years of official harassment, it was closed down. Ferrer was arrested in August 1909 on false charges of instigating a mass uprising. In spite of attempts by the international liberal community to intervene, he was found guilty at a mock trial, and condemned to death by firing squad.

² F. Ferrer, *The Origins and Ideals of the Modern School* (London: Watts & Co., 1913), 55.

³ F. Ferrer, ‘The Rational Education of Children’, *The Modern School* (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1909), p. 2.

⁴ Avrich, *Modern School Movement*, 21.

⁵ Ferrer, *Origins and Ideals*, 62.

Ferrer's death, on 13 October 1909, sparked off a wave of international protest and is probably, as Paul Avrich notes, the reason why he rather than anyone else became the most famous representative of anarchist education. In the wake of his execution, anarchist activists and enthusiasts for libertarian education around the world were moved to establish educational projects designed to continue and promote Ferrer's ideas. Schools based on the Modern School model were established, often as part of revolutionary movements for social change, across Western and Central Europe, in many Latin American countries, and in Japan.⁶ As Paul Avrich's research has meticulously documented, an extensive Ferrer movement developed in the United States, where around twenty Ferrer Schools were established, the most well documented and long-lived of which was the Ferrer School in New York, founded in 1911.

The Ferrer School in New York (later known as the Modern School) took Ferrer's educational creed as its inspiration. The school was run on very similar lines to the original school in Barcelona: co-education, an emphasis on 'learning by doing', an anti-authoritarian pedagogy and a heavily anti-capitalistic, anti-statist and anti-religious message throughout the curriculum. Although there was no formal timetable at the Modern School, lessons were offered along the lines of fairly traditional academic subjects and children were free to attend them if and when they wished.

The founders of the school, who included prominent anarchist activists such as Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, Harry Kelly and Leonard Abbott, saw it as a microcosm of an alternative society organised on non-hierarchical, cooperative grounds. They insisted that in order for the children to develop an adequate understanding of ideas such as justice, equality and cooperation, they must experience them first-hand in the fullest possible way:

We hold that children do not and cannot learn the meaning of duties or rights in an economic system composed of masters and slaves. That is why the children of the public schools and the vast majority of children who are pampered and petted by their ignorant or blinded parents know nothing clearly of either rights or duties. Where alone can children, or any others, learn the meaning of rights and duties? In a mode of life which is genuinely cooperative. A life whose products all justly share and whose labour all justly share. This points inevitably to a school which is based upon complete and inclusive cooperation.⁷

Accordingly, the New York school had a communal garden, where children learnt to plan, plant, care for and gather plants communally, and all maintenance and domestic work was shared cooperatively by the children and staff. The New York school also served as a community centre, offering a wide range of adult education courses, public lectures and social gatherings, and as a centre for political activism. In 1915, pursuing their ideal of communal life further, the New York anarchist group purchased a tract of farming land in Stelton, New Jersey, where they set about founding an anarchist colony. The school, which moved there, became a focal point of the colony. Here the community attempted to put their social anarchist ideals into practice, working

⁶ For discussions of Ferrer-inspired anarchist schools around the world, see, for example, Avrich, *Modern School Movement*; K. Shaffer, 'Freedom Teaching: Anarchism and Education in Early Republican Cuba, 1898–1925', *The Americas*, 60:2 (2003), 151–183; M. Thomas, "'No-one telling us what to do": Anarchist Schools in Britain, 1890–1916', *Historical Research*, 77:197 (2004), 405–436.

⁷ H. Kelly 'What is the Modern School?', *The Modern School*, 33:3 (1916).

the land and sharing administration of community matters. Many of the teachers and parents involved in the school were also active members of the colony, and the children naturally combined schoolwork with work in the community.

What Makes Anarchist Schools Anarchist?

Given the many similarities, that I explore in further detail below, between anarchist schools and libertarian or progressive educational experiments, it is important to ask what it is that makes anarchist schools uniquely anarchist. One answer to this question is that the explicitly anarchist character of schools such as the Escuela Moderna consists not in any particular set of pedagogical practices, school governance or teacher-pupil relationships, but in the substantive political ideals and commitments behind these practices.

An obvious way in which this is true is in the very rejection of state education, as a logical conclusion of the anarchist objection to the state, first famously articulated by William Godwin in 1793: ‘The project of national education ought uniformly to be discouraged on account of its obvious alliance with national government. [...] Government will not fail to employ it, to strengthen its hands, and perpetuate its institutions...’⁸

This position, while most closely associated with the anarchists, was also held by J.S. Mill, the forefather of modern liberal theory, who vehemently opposed the idea of universal state education on the grounds that it was ‘a mere contrivance for molding people to be exactly like one another’.⁹

Godwin’s argument was echoed by Ferrer, who wrote, at the time of establishing the Escuela Moderna:

If modern pedagogy means a new orientation toward a reasonable and just society; if modern pedagogy means that we propose to instruct the new generations in the causes which have brought about and maintain the lack of social equilibrium; if it means that we are anxious to prepare a happy humanity, by freeing it from all religious fiction and from all idea of submission to an inevitable socioeconomic inequality; we cannot entrust it to the State nor to other official organisms which necessarily maintain existing privileges and support the laws which consecrate the exploitation of man by man, the pernicious source of the worst abuses.¹⁰

In contrast, while many progressive and libertarian schools exist outside the state system, they generally do so not out of any rejection of the underlying socio-economic structures of the state as such, but out of an objection to the dominant practices of state schooling.

Similarly, while certain pedagogical approaches—notably the idea of ‘learning by doing’ and the emphasis on combining vocational skills, crafts and creativity with traditional academic subjects—are common across a range of ‘alternative’ schools, in the case of anarchist schools, the adoption of these approaches was motivated not by a belief that they would bring about

⁸ W. Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (London: G.G.J & J. Robinson, 1796), 297–298.

⁹ J.S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991[1859]), 117.

¹⁰ F. Ferrer, *The Modern School: Posthumous Explanation and Scope of Rationalist Education* (1910), quoted in M. Bray and R. Haworth, *Anarchist Education and the Modern School: A Francisco Ferrer Reader* (Oakland: PM Press, 2018).

more effective learning, but by the view that they best embodied the underlying political and social values that underpin the ideal of an anarchist society.

This is most obviously so in the case of integral education, which was a key feature of anarchist schools and which was developed and defended by anarchist theorists such as Kropotkin, who wrote, in 1890, ‘Instead of “technical education”, which means the maintenance of the present division between brain work and manual work, we advocate the *éducation intégrale*, or complete education, which means the disappearance of that pernicious distinction’.¹¹

For anarchists, the socio-economic inequalities and hierarchical class structure of the capitalist state were reflected in, and reinforced by, the distinction between manual labour and intellectual work. The only way to break down the resulting inequalities was to provide an education in which, in Proudhon’s words, ‘the industrial worker, the man of action and the intellectual will all be rolled into one’.¹²

So while not generally hostile to ‘book learning’, anarchist educators like Ferrer insisted that pupils should receive an education where academic learning and vocational learning were given equal weight and value. Children at the Modern School not only studied academic subjects but also learnt crafts and practical skills—both in the school workshop and garden but also in visits to factories and laboratories.¹³ The justification for this approach was not some romantic ideal of educating ‘the whole child’, or a philosophical challenge to the conceptual distinction between different forms of knowledge at the heart of the liberal educational ideal. Rather, it was entirely political, designed to break down the ‘pernicious distinction’ between brain work and manual work that was imposed by, and sustained, the capitalist state. As Harry Kelly, one of the founders of the New York Modern School wrote,

The curse of existing capitalist society is its parasitism. It permits idle and useless people to live on the products of its useful members. No society is tolerable in which all are not workers. In the Modern School, all are workers.¹⁴

In insisting on these ways of organising the school and the curriculum, anarchist educators were reflecting the key anarchist idea of prefigurative practice as a means of radical social change; an idea captured in Martin Buber’s remarks that

The anarchist desires a means commensurate with his ends; he refuses to believe that in our reliance on the future ‘leap’ we have to do now the direct opposite of what we are striving for; he believes rather that we must create here and now the space now possible for the thing for which we are striving, so that it may come to fulfilment then; he does not believe in the post-revolutionary leap, but he does believe in revolutionary continuity.¹⁵

¹¹ P. Kropotkin, ‘Brain Work and Manual Work,’ *The Nineteenth Century*, March, 1890, 458.

¹² P.-J. Proudhon, in S. Edwards (Ed) *Selected Writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 80.

¹³ See Avrigh, *Modern School Movement*, op. cit., Ref. 4; J. Suissa, *Anarchism and Education; A Philosophical Perspective* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), 78–88.

¹⁴ Kelly, ‘What is the Modern School?’, 5.

¹⁵ M. Buber, *Paths in Utopia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), 13.

Ferrer and other anarchist educators indeed saw their schools as embryos of the future, anarchist society; as proof that, even within the authoritarian society surrounding it, an alternative society organised on non-hierarchical, cooperative grounds, was possible.

Thus anarchist educators who established schools with no formal structure or schedules, and without the usual hierarchies or systems of rules and discipline, were consciously attempting to embody the non-hierarchical, decentralised anarchist model of social organisation. Likewise, in maintaining only ‘what order we feel necessary’, abolishing school disciplinary rules and largely allowing children to determine their own school schedule, the Modern School founders and other anarchist educators were relying on the anarchist theory of spontaneous order; the theory that, as Colin Ward explains, ‘given a common need, a collection of people will, by trial and error, 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 externally imposed authority could provide’.¹⁶ Although this idea is commonly discussed by anarchist theorists in the context of revolutionary social change, many anarchist educators explicitly or implicitly appealed to it in experimenting with allowing order to evolve naturally in their classrooms.¹⁷

Libertarian Pedagogy and the Freedom of the Child

The period during which the anarchist Modern School Movement was flourishing was also the period that saw the growth of the movement for progressive, or libertarian, education. Many of the schools set up in the wake of Ferrer’s execution were in fact continuing a tradition of libertarian educational experiments that dates back at least to Tolstoy’s school at Yasnaya Polyana, established in the 1860s, and to the libertarian schools of Paul Robin (Cempuis, founded in 1880) and Sebastien Faure (La Ruche, founded in 1904). Many of the anarchist ideas implemented by Ferrer, such as integral education, were central features of these schools. Similar ideas can also be found in the working-class educational experiments that sprung up in Britain in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in opposition to the dominant model of state education. Often taking the form of Sunday schools or supplementary schools, and generally founded by and for working-class communities, these schools, as John Shotton points out, ‘challenge the historical view that the majority of libertarian initiatives in education have only served the privileged few’.¹⁸ Yet the spread of the Modern School Movement in the wake of Ferrer’s execution overlapped not only with this earlier libertarian tradition but with the newer wave of ‘progressive’ schools—schools like Summerhill (1924), Dartington Hall (1920) and Beacon Hill (1927) which, as Shotton notes, are far more well-known examples of libertarian education. The intellectual sources that founders of the new progressive schools drew on were varied, and not consistently libertarian, ranging from Rousseau and Tolstoy to Froebel, Montessori and Dewey. They all, to some degree, emphasised the freedom of the child, although some educators, notably A.S. Neill, took a more explicitly libertarian position. These schools often, like the early anarchist schools, operated outside the mainstream state education system.

¹⁶ C. Ward, *Anarchy in Action* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1973), 28.

¹⁷ For one of the most eloquent, and brutally honest, descriptions of such experimentation, see Tolstoy’s account of his school at Yasnaya Polyana, in L. Weiner (Ed and Tr), *Tolstoy on Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967).

¹⁸ J. Shotton, *No Master High or Low; Libertarian Education and Schooling in Britain, 1890–1990* (Bristol: LibeEd, 1993), 25.

Again, like the anarchist schools discussed above, at the heart of these early twentieth-century experiments in libertarian or ‘progressive’ education is the question of compulsion. As Michael Smith notes, ‘The question of whether attendance at school should be compulsory was widely debated at the end of the eighteenth century and for much of the nineteenth century in other countries as in Britain’.¹⁹ Yet by the early twentieth century, universal, compulsory state schooling was the dominant model in most industrialised societies.²⁰ The insistence that the child should be given the freedom to decide whether or not to attend classes was therefore a radical position in and of itself. This position was common to anarchist educators like Ferrer and to proponents of democratic education such as A.S. Neill, the founder of Summerhill School in Leiston, Suffolk, described as ‘the oldest children’s democracy in the world’,²¹ and probably the most famous example of a school where the freedom of the child is the guiding principle.

So Are Anarchist Schools Libertarian?

The term ‘libertarian education’ is used to refer, broadly, to all educational approaches which reject traditional models of teacher authority and hierarchical school structure, and which advocate maximum freedom for the individual child within the educational process. Yet while the terms ‘anarchist education’ and ‘libertarian education’ are often conflated—not least by writers themselves sympathetic to the anarchist tradition, such as John Shotton or Michael Smith, whose book on the subject is titled *The Libertarians and Education*²²—they are not co-extensive. The overlaps between the traditions, however, mean that many accounts of libertarian education include both anarchist and non-anarchist schools and educators. A commonly cited example here is the school set up by Tolstoy in the 1860s. Tolstoy is often described as an anarcho-pacifist, or a Christian anarchist, and although his emphasis on individual responsibility and freedom places him at some distance from the social anarchists, he shared their objections to the state, the church and the institution of private property. However, he was not part of the anarchist movement and, as Michael Smith points out,²³ his commitment to non-coercive pedagogy stemmed more from an educational and moral principle than a political one. Tolstoy’s chief argument—expressed eloquently in his essay ‘Education and Culture’²⁴—was that ‘for education to be effective it had to be free’.²⁵ In articulating this idea, Tolstoy can be seen to be close to the educational outlook of A.S. Neill, for whom the principle of non-compulsion itself was the very core of the educational experience he wanted to create at Summerhill, and who was driven more by moral concerns about interference in children’s development than by a vision of an alternative, self-governing society.

As Michael Smith explains, there are two elements to the libertarian argument for removing compulsion from children’s education: ‘one is the moral one that any form of coercion is wrong

¹⁹ M. Smith, *The Libertarians and Education* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1983), 70.

²⁰ For an insightful historical analysis of the establishment of compulsory schooling, see P. Miller, ‘Historiography of compulsory schooling: what is the problem?’, *History of Education*, 18:2 (1989), 123–144.

²¹ See <http://www.summerhillschool.co.uk/>.

²² Smith, *The Libertarians*.

²³ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁴ In Weiner, *Tolstoy*.

²⁵ Smith, *The Libertarians*, 64.

and detracts from a person's autonomy. The other [...] is a pedagogical one'.²⁶ The pedagogical principle has to do with the role of motivation in the learning process and the belief that intrinsic, or 'natural' motivation will lead to genuine learning, whereas extrinsic motivation (i.e. the use of rewards, sanctions and authoritarian teacher-pupil relationships) will inhibit learning.

While libertarian educators such as A.S. Neill and John Holt²⁷ were quite explicit in their defence of both the pedagogical and the moral arguments, amongst anarchist educators, there seems to have often been a degree of ambiguity on these issues.

Some anarchist writers seemed enthusiastic about a libertarian pedagogy, linking it explicitly to the anarchist commitment to individual freedom. For example, Emma Goldman, after visiting La Ruche, Sebastian Faure's libertarian anarchist school in France at the beginning of the twentieth century, commented,

If education should really mean anything at all, it must insist upon the free growth and development of the innate forces and tendencies of the child. In this way alone can we hope for the free individual and eventually also for a free community which shall make interference and coercion of human growth impossible.²⁸

Other anarchists involved in educational projects, however, interpreted 'freedom' less in terms of the need to give the child complete freedom within the educational environment, and more—echoing a classic liberal ideal of education—in terms of the intellectual and personal freedom that would result from the content of the school curriculum. Like Ferrer, many of the anarchists associated with the Modern School Movement in the United States saw themselves as offering an education that, being avowedly 'rational' and 'scientific', would thereby liberate people from the superstition and dogma inherent in the state system.

The founders of the Modern School in New York were clearly convinced that a rational rather than a completely libertarian educational approach was the most likely to advance anarchist ideas. Thus the 1914–1915 prospectus for the school states: 'The Modern School has been established by men and women who believe that a child educated in a natural way, unspoiled by the dogmas and conventionalities of the adult, may be trusted in later life to set his face against injustice and oppression'.²⁹

What seems to be clear is that although, as John Shotton notes, 'libertarians were perhaps the first educational theorists to regard children as being equal to adults, with the same need for freedom and dignity', anarchist educators, while sympathetic to these libertarian ideas, did not generally interpret them as requiring that teachers abstain from all intentional attempts to direct the moral and political development of the child.³⁰

A.S. Neill, in contrast, was adamant that teachers at Summerhill should avoid all overt political or moral messages in their teaching and curriculum materials, insisting—with Rousseau—that 'children will turn out to be good human beings if they are not crippled and thwarted in their nat-

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ See J. Holt, *How Children Fail* (London: Penguin, 1969).

²⁸ E. Goldman 'The Child and its Enemies', *Mother Earth*, 2:9 (1906).

²⁹ Kelly, 'What is the Modern School?'

³⁰ J. Shotton, *No Master High or Low*, 13.

ural development by interference'.³¹ Neill believed that 'if left to himself without adult suggestion of any kind, [the child] will develop as far as he is capable of developing'.³²

Harry Kelly, one of the founders of the Modern School in New York, offered a somewhat different interpretation of the principle of freedom in a 1913 editorial for *The Modern School* journal entitled 'The Meaning of Libertarian Education':

Our aim in the Ferrer School is to free both the child and the adult from the false conventionalities and superstitions which now hinder the progress of the race. We believe that these superstitions operate chiefly in the fields of industry, religion and sex, so that we especially direct attention to those three subjects. [...].

Nevertheless, he goes on to state, 'We are not dogmatics in the sense that we teach any oneism or point of view to the exclusion of others. We believe that every human being has the right to make his or her choice of life philosophy'.³³

Whatever the complexities of this approach in practice, it is clear that, *pace* Neill, Ferrer and other anarchist educators rejected the ideal of a politically neutral education as conceptually incoherent and ideologically dangerous. A piece on 'The Rational Education of Children' in *L'Ecole Renovee*, the journal edited by Francisco Ferrer, declared neutrality in the school to be a myth, stating: 'We should not, in the school, hide the fact that we would awaken in the children a desire for a society of men truly free and truly equal, a society without violence, without hierarchies, and without privilege of any sort'.³⁴

This rejection of the idea of a neutral education is conceptually connected to the anarchist view of human nature. For while, as John Shotton argues,³⁵ 'the libertarian critique of national state education is also determined by a faith in the essential goodness of human nature', this is not a faith shared by leading anarchist theorists, most of whom in fact subscribed to what David Morland has described³⁶ as a 'contextualist' view of human nature. As Bakunin put it: 'Man has two opposed instincts; egoism and sociability. He is both more ferocious in his egoism than the most ferocious beasts and more sociable than the bees and ants'.³⁷

The anarchist view of human nature as not predominantly or innately 'good' or 'evil', but as determined largely by social context, goes a long way towards explaining the central role that anarchist thinkers over the ages have assigned to education and educational experiments, and particularly to the moral content and form of these experiments.

As Kropotkin argued in his paper 'Are we good enough?', written for the anarchist journal *Freedom* in 1888, if people were naturally and predominantly kind, altruistic and just, there would be no danger of exploitation and oppression. It is precisely because we are not naturally compassionate, just and provident that the present system is intolerable and must be changed, for the present institutions allow 'slavishness' and oppression to flourish.³⁸

³¹ A.S. Neill, *Summerhill* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 315.

³² A.S. Neill, *The New Summerhill*, Edited by A. Lamb (London: Penguin, 1992), 9.

³³ H. Kelly, 'The Meaning of Libertarian Education', *The Modern School*, 1:5 (1913).

³⁴ Avrich, *Modern School Movement*, 28.

³⁵ Shotton, *No Master High or Low*, 13.

³⁶ D. Morland, D. *Demanding the Impossible? Human Nature and Politics in Nineteenth Century Social Anarchism* (London: Cassell, 1997).

³⁷ M. Bakunin, in G. P. Maximoff (Ed) *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* (New York: The Free Press, 1953) 147.

³⁸ P. Kropotkin, 'Are we good enough?', *Freedom*, 21 June 1888.

Kropotkin's argument is that capitalism and the capitalist state brings out the selfish, competitive side of people's nature. Thus the only way to bring out the cooperative benevolent side is to set up different forms of social life. On this view, schools can and should be a microcosm of a radical alternative to existing society; embodying, in their practice, their ethos and their curriculum, a different way of life.

Anarchists, in short, were suspicious of state education precisely because it would encourage in children the moral and social values associated with the hierarchical capitalist state that they wanted to challenge. The schools they founded were designed to embody and foster a different set of values, thus prefiguring the stateless anarchist society.

Tensions

Although, as discussed, many anarchist schools shared features with libertarian schools and advocated the total freedom of the child, many did not. Questions remain concerning the extent to which a pedagogy that values and respects the freedom of the child can be combined with a substantive curriculum. In spite of their general sympathy for the idea of child-centred education, their belief in the necessity of radical social change often led anarchist educators to express reservations about this approach, suggesting that such change could only be achieved by people 'whose education has trained them [...] to cherish and practice the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity'.³⁹ There is little systematic attempt in the work of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century anarchist educators to address this tension within their practice.

In some ways, the tensions revealed by any attempt to offer a comprehensive account of 'anarchist education' reflect both the tensions that have always existed within the anarchist movement regarding theories of radical social change, and the difficulty of pinning down a single definition of 'anarchism'. While all anarchist schools shared a rejection of the state, the difference between different schools within this tradition and the extent to which they implemented a truly libertarian pedagogy can perhaps be seen as reflecting the distinction between those more on the individualist end of the anarchist spectrum, and those on the socialist end. Matthew Thomas, in his account of British anarchist schools, suggests that individualist anarchists who followed Max Stirner 'rejected the entire concept of the school as an affront to the child's autonomy'.⁴⁰ Yet as Thomas notes, many anarchist educators, believing in the transformative power of education, would have been uncomfortable with this position, and would have sympathised with Stuart Kerr who, writing in defence of the anarchist school movement in the United States, at a time when free public schooling was widely available, noted:

The ruling classes everywhere [...] use the school, often unconsciously, as a means to keep themselves in power, to maintain things as they are. The Modern School, in contrast, is consciously dynamic, aims to cultivate the critical attitude of mind, the indispensable factor in every step forward the world has ever made [...]. The avowed purpose of the public school is to equip the child for his environment. The order of the environment is not questioned [...]. It is the function of the modern school to strip the social system of its economic fallacies and expose its sordid selfishness.⁴¹

³⁹ Kelly, *What is the Modern School?*, 51.

⁴⁰ Thomas, "No-one telling us what to do".

⁴¹ S. Kerr, 'Ferrer and Montessori', *The Modern School*, 1:5 (1913).

Not only did these early anarchist educators not do much to address the connections, and possible tensions, between their pedagogical practices and the political goals and values underlying their approaches; many paid little attention at all to issues of classroom pedagogy. Robert Haworth, in his work on Ferrer, goes so far as to say that:

Despite the accolades that his admirers have lavished upon him, Ferrer made no significant pedagogical innovations [...]. Concepts such as co-education, student autonomy, a focus on the natural environment, and opposition to rewards and punishments had already been developed by others. Scholars concur that Ferrer was not a pedagogical genius and Ferrer agreed, writing that before founding the Modern School he was ‘conscious of [his] incompetence in the art of pedagogy’ so he ‘sought the counsel of others’.⁴²

It is left to contemporary anarchist theorists to conceptualise and explore the relationship between particular pedagogical practices and anarchist values and ideals, and to try to address some of the tensions implicit in the undeniable fact that many anarchist educators, while committed to the principle of non-coercion, adopted far more directive forms of teaching and classroom practice than those that characterise libertarian schools.

Justin Mueller acknowledges that, in fact, ‘A *laissez-faire* pedagogy is insufficient, then, for the anarchist approach to education’ and that ‘while an anarchist education does not imply any sort of dogmatic instruction, anarchist educators do view the open encouragement and practice of values, like solidarity, as a virtue’.⁴³

Echoing the view of the early anarchist educators discussed above, Mueller goes on to explain that “True “neutrality” on the part of anti-authoritarian teachers in the face of an unjust and repressive social order is seen by anarchist educators as either impossible or “hypocrisy””.⁴⁴ Yet Mueller argues that anarchist educators who go beyond a *laissez-faire* approach can avoid the implied contradiction by seeking to encourage particular anarchist values but not imposing dogma and by openly challenging the social order and its institutions.

Similarly, Nathan Jun notes, in spite of Ferrer’s insistence that he would ‘teach children not what to think but how to think’, that there is a conceptual incoherence in the idea that one can teach children ‘how to think’ without paying serious attention to ‘what students are thinking about, how they’re thinking about it, and to what end’. If students never learn ‘what is worth thinking about, what questions are worth asking, what issues are worth caring about’, then this supposedly critical endeavour can become conservative or even dangerous.⁴⁵

Theorists of utopia who have discussed anarchist utopian theory as a form of ‘process utopia’, contrasted with end-state models of utopia, have made similar points. Erin McKenna, for example, argues that anarchist theorists were of the view that

the belief that values will change simply by restructuring the material and economic side of life is too simplistic. While this may be a necessary condition of re-

⁴² Bray and Haworth, *Anarchist Education*.

⁴³ J. Mueller, ‘Anarchism, the State, and the role of education’, in R. Haworth (Ed) *Anarchist Pedagogies; Collective Actions, Theories, and Critical Reflections on Education* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 22.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ N. Jun, ‘Paedeia for Practice: Philosophy and Pedagogy as Practices of Liberation’, in Haworth, *Anarchist Pedagogies*, 294.

constructing society along anarchist lines, it is not sufficient. It must be accompanied by intellectual persuasion.⁴⁶

McKenna quotes Alexander Berkman in support of this view:

The social revolution means much more than the reorganization of conditions only: it means the establishment of new human values and social relationships, a changed attitude of man to man, as of one free and independent to his equal; it means a different spirit in individual and collective life, and that spirit cannot be born overnight. It is a spirit to be cultivated, to be nurtured, and reared [...].⁴⁷

In short, while anarchist schools share certain features, the extent to which a set of specific educational ideas can be gleaned from an analysis of the central elements of anarchist theory is questionable. This is due firstly to the range of different positions within the anarchist tradition on questions to do with revolutionary strategy, social change and conceptions of childhood, and secondly to the different historical and social contexts within which anarchists find themselves operating. Yet the sheer volume of anarchist literature devoted to educational issues, and the efforts invested by anarchists in educational projects, attests to the fact that most anarchists were of the view that schools, and education in general, are a valuable aspect of the project for social change, rather than institutions to be completely dismantled along with the other machinery of state bureaucracy.

In many ways, the tensions to be found within the writings and practice of those involved in the long tradition of anarchist education reflect the question commonly experienced and articulated by radical educators the world over: namely, is it possible to combine an educational process that embodies substantive moral and political values with a respect for the freedom of the child?

Anarchist Education Today

In an era when universal, compulsory state schooling has, unlike in Godwin's time, become the unquestioned background against which all debates on educational provision, content and process takes place, suggestions for decoupling education from the state are harder than ever to defend. Historically, anarchists' opposition to the state and its institutions has led them to distance themselves from the state schooling system. However, now that many elements of the radical critique of traditional state education presented by early progressive and libertarian schools have become mainstream, and most contemporary classrooms are far less overtly oppressive and authoritarian places than they were in Ferrer's Spain, it may be harder to see what it is in state schooling that calls for questioning and resistance.

Furthermore, many capitalist states are currently witnessing calls to dismantle state control and provision of education, not from a commitment to the anarchist values of individual freedom, mutual aid and federalism, but as part of a neo-liberal assault on public goods and a belief in the magical power of the market to generate the best and most 'effective' solutions to social needs.

⁴⁶ E. McKenna, *The Task of Utopia; A Pragmatist Feminist Perspective* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 59.

⁴⁷ A. Berkman in *Ibid.*

This puts contemporary anarchists in a somewhat uneasy position. On the one hand, anarchists have always, for good reason, been sympathetic to alternative schools such as Summerhill and Sudbury Valley which, while not explicitly anarchist, share many central anarchist commitments to cooperation, freedom from coercion and experimentation, and which challenge, by their very existence, the dominant model of state schooling. Yet on the other hand, the fact that many proposals for ‘rolling back the state’ come from an agenda aligned with individualism, competition and corporate capitalism means that anarchists may find themselves allied with defenders of public education as part of an attempt to defend values of equality, social justice and local democracy. In the same way as not all schools operating outside the state system reflect and instantiate values of individual freedom, solidarity, cooperation and non-domination, not all state schools are necessarily destructive of such values.

Yet if an important part of anarchism is the ability to understand and criticise the forms of domination present in current social relations, and to imagine a different future, then anarchists should perhaps look to forms of education that, whether within or outside the state system, not only emphasise personal freedom and creativity but encourage an active questioning of current political arrangements and an attempt to imagine alternatives.

Very few alternative schools today explicitly refer to themselves as anarchist. David Gribble has argued that ‘over the last hundred years there has been increased recognition of the merits of freedom in schools, but it has not been under the anarchist flag’,⁴⁸ and notes that ‘the term “democratic schools” is used as a blanket term to cover a range of practice and communities of “non-authoritarian schools” because ‘no government or newspaper could comfortably object to the idea of democratic education, whereas “libertarian”, “free”, “progressive” or “anarchist” education would be under immediate attack’.⁴⁹

In his research into the range of such schools around the globe, Gribble concludes that while they are all different, ‘they share a central core of common values’, which he lists as:

1. Reliance on reason rather than doctrine
2. Self-government or shared responsibility
3. Freedom to choose
4. Equality
5. Respect for and trust in the individual child.

In Gribble’s view, while none of the schools he describes started out from anarchist principles, ‘what they have in common with each other they also have in common with Francisco Ferrer’.⁵⁰

There are, however, many ongoing educational experiments with a more explicitly anarchist orientation, whether in schools, universities, home education groups, adult education projects or as part of social protest movements. For example, the libertarian Paideia School in Spain describes itself as an anarchist school, explaining: ‘We seek a global transformation of society [...] by means

⁴⁸ D. Gribble, ‘Good news for Francisco Ferrer—how anarchist ideals in education have survived around the world’ in J. Purkis and J. Bowd (Eds) *Changing Anarchism; Anarchist Theory and Practice in a Global Age* (Manchester; Manchester University Press, 2004), 196.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 187.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

of an education that seeks mutual aid, solidarity, freedom, equality, collective ethics, dignity and responsibility'.⁵¹

Similarly, the Free Skool Santa Cruz, part of a network of explicitly Anarchist Free Schools across North America and Canada, describes itself as 'a grassroots educational project beyond institutional control', stating 'We see Free Skool as a direct challenge to dominant institutions and hierarchical relationships', and the Anarchist Free School/Skool in Toronto, an adult education project first set up in 1999, describes itself as 'a decentralized network in which skills, passions, and knowledge are shared outside of the hierarchical, and often authoritarian environment of formal, institutional education'.⁵² The Toronto Free Skool manifesto states: 'Inspired by anarchist philosophy and the practices of social change movements, we aim to facilitate horizontal, egalitarian learning, and see this model of education as a form of resistance against our society's stifling culture of disempowerment'.⁵³

Ian Cunningham, who founded the Self-Managed Learning College in Brighton, England, where children and adults are part of non-hierarchical learning groups, explicitly positions this project as part of a tradition inspired by primitive hunter-gatherer anarchies and Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*. He argues that 'democratic education needs to be based on the more natural processes of living that we humans need rather than how democracy has evolved at the macro political level ... it is not about replicating nation state processes and structures. It has to be emancipatory and liberatory'⁵⁴ (Cunningham, 2011: 1).

These contemporary initiatives also illustrate the way in which anarchist theory and practice is constantly evolving and self-reflective, offering, in some cases, explicit criticism of earlier strands in the anarchist tradition. The Free Skool website, for example, notes:

One theoretical limitation to freeskool theory that originates in its anarchist roots is a preoccupation with modernity and rationalism. [...]. Ferrer was deeply concerned with using scientific rationalism as a counter to church teachings that he saw as dogmatic and superstitious. Though this aim was noble and liberatory within its historical and social context, the idea cannot be forwarded to freeskools of today.⁵⁵

Drawing on post-colonial theory and engaging with contemporary feminist and antiracist movements, the authors express sympathy for forms of radical and critical pedagogy rooted in anti-colonial struggles and in indigenous ways of knowledge.

Many contemporary anarchist educational experiments are associated, as were earlier anarchist initiatives, with social protest movements and experiments in communal living. The Occupy Movement has been a catalyst for a number of anarchist educational experiments, and it is also important to note that the forms of activism and organisation involved in many radical social movements, which are often explicitly anarchist, have an important pedagogical function.

⁵¹ See <http://autonomies.org/ru/2015/03/anarchy-in-the-school-escuela-libre-paideia/> (accessed 9 August 2017).

⁵² See <http://santacruz.freeskool.org/content/about-free-skool-santa-cruz> (accessed 31 July 2017).

⁵³ <https://torontofreeskool.wordpress.com/about/> (accessed 2 August 2017). See also J. Shantz, 'Spaces of learning: the Anarchist Free Skool', in R. Haworth (Ed) *Anarchist Pedagogies*, op. cit., and 'Theory meets practice: Evolving ideas and actions in Anarchist free schools', in R. Haworth and J. Elmore (Eds), *Out of the Ruins; The Emergence of Radical Informal Learning Spaces* (Oakland: PM Press, 2017).

⁵⁴ I. Cunningham, 'Democratic Education—some notes towards defining the term', Conference Paper for International Democratic Education Conference, Israel, July 2011.

⁵⁵ <https://freeskoolsproject.wikispaces.com/theory> (accessed 2 August 2017).

In the current climate, the explicit target of the anarchist critique reflected in these experiments is often, in contrast to their early twentieth-century predecessors, less the state and its control of educational institutions, and more the pervasive ideology and interests of global corporate capitalism that have increasingly come to characterise the governance and content of public schooling. In a climate in which the commodification of learning, the standardisation of curriculum and the loss of teachers' autonomy signify a close alliance between state education and corporate capitalism, and in which teachers are required to comply with the 'anti-radicalisation' agendas of Western governments, anarchist educational experiments, however small scale, can constitute what Robert Haworth calls 'creative spaces of resistance'.⁵⁶ One can see such ongoing and ever-evolving projects as what Colin Ward referred to as 'seeds beneath the snow'—evidence that, as he put it, 'an anarchist society, a society which organizes itself without authority, is always in existence, like a seed beneath the snow, buried under the weight of the state and its bureaucracy, capitalism and its waste, privilege and its injustices, nationalism and its suicidal loyalties, religious differences and their superstitious separatism'.⁵⁷

Most of the anarchist schools discussed above saw themselves as playing a role in bringing about the future anarchist society. Yet while the anarchist theory of human nature goes a long way to explaining why some form of education will always be essential, there are still many questions to be asked about the form that education would take in a post-revolutionary anarchist society. It is thus important to look not just at contemporary examples of anarchist-inspired schools in Western liberal states but at educational experiments in situations where the state has effectively collapsed, or where self-governing, stateless political communities are being established. One of the most exciting contemporary examples here is Rojava, in Northern Syria, where the Kurdish-led Democratic Union Party (PYD) has established a popular democracy based on Abdullah Ocalan's idea of 'democratic confederalism', which draws directly on the anarchist theory of Murray Bookchin. While it is difficult to obtain accurate information about the ongoing situation in Rojava, which at the time of writing is still in the midst of an armed conflict, education is a key element in the social revolution intended to 'replace totalitarianism, capitalism and patriarchy in the Middle East'.⁵⁸

Janet Biehl, describing her visit to Rojava's first and only institution of higher education, the Mesopotamian Social Sciences Academy in Qamislo, argues that 'For decades, the schools of the Baath regime, with its nationalistic focus, had aimed to create an authoritarian mentality. The Mesopotamian Academy is intent on overcoming this grim past by "helping create free individuals and free thoughts"'.⁵⁹

Of course there are many questions to be asked about the anarchist elements of the Rojavan social revolution and the radical educational projects that form such a central part of it, not least because of their association with the Kurdish nationalist movement, and the concern that the Rojava experiment represents a top-down approach to re-educate people in order to prepare them for Ocalan's vision of democratic municipalism. However, as the above discussion has indicated, some of these questions reflect perennial tensions at the heart of any attempt to theorise the relationship between education and radical social change. Whatever reservations one may have about the anarchist credentials of the Rojava activists and leaders, the mass participation in forms

⁵⁶ Haworth, *Anarchist Pedagogies*, 3.

⁵⁷ Ward, *Anarchy in Action*, 11.

⁵⁸ See Y. Savran, 'The Rojava revolution and British solidarity', *Anarchist Studies*, 24:1 (2016), 7–12.

⁵⁹ <http://new-compass.net/articles/revolutionary-education-rojava> (accessed 3 August 2016).

of local, direct democracy in order to address immediate social needs is clearly in the tradition of social anarchist experiments and itself has an important pedagogic value.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the ‘complex relationship anarchism has with education’, Robert Haworth comments that ‘the more we engage in conversation about these intricate relationships the more we can see that they are filled with tensions and ambiguity’.⁶⁰

Yet in a sense, the tensions suggested by this account of anarchist education are the tensions faced by any educator concerned with issues of social justice, freedom and oppression: how do we address the real needs of the children we are faced with, here and now, in classrooms, homes and universities, while at the same time holding onto the desire to create a better future? All educators, to the extent that they are doing anything more than simply imparting skills and knowledge, face this task. All educators should have the space to reflect on and engage in conversations about these issues, not in order to resolve them once and for all but as part of their continuous struggle to work with them. To leave anarchist voices out of these conversations would be to impoverish our thinking, not just about education but about what different forms of social life and political organisation are desirable and possible.

⁶⁰ Haworth, *Anarchist Pedagogies*, 2.

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