Toward an Explanation of the Radical

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In his introduction for Ivan Illich's *Celebration of Awareness*, Erich Fromm defined radicalism not as "a certain set of ideas," but as an approach or an attitude:

> To begin with this approach can be characterized by the motto: *de omnibus dubitandum*; everything must be doubted, particularly the ideological concepts which are virtually shared by everybody and have consequently assumed the role of indubitable commonsensical axioms.
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> To "doubt" in this sense does not imply a psychological state of inability to arrive at decisions or convictions, as is the case in obsessional doubt, but the readiness and capacity for critical questioning of all assumptions and institutions which have become idols under the name of common sense, logic, and what is supposed to be "natural."

To be a radical, for Fromm, is about the cultivation of an open, *curious* mind. The radical confronts social questions at a different order of abstraction, able to zoom out from the particulars of the present to see patterns that span periods longer than just one human life. Fromm explains that radical questioning is only possible "if one does not take the concepts of one's own society or even of an entire historical period—like Western culture since the Renaissance—for granted, and furthermore if one enlarges the scope of one's awareness and penetrates into the unconscious aspects of one's thinking." This is a habit of thought and language that seems rude and impertinent to the non-radical. In confronting the socially-constructed nature of truth, radicals call attention to "the interaction between power and knowledge."[1] They see that our judgments about what is true are "not independent of the power relationships in which we are enmeshed."[2] Rather, our knowledge, so-called, arises from the social context and its relationships of power. Merely to understand this is a threat to those who hold power, a fact of which they are aware.

To the non-radical, the radical appears to indulge a disordered way of thinking, unable to accept the world as it is. Radicals, the non-radical says, chase unattainable goals and impose impossible standards. They seem to want Utopia today. As J. Krishnamurti observed, radicals—people

[1] Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (1994).
[2] Ibid.

who are "beginning to awaken" and "to be discontented"—are "a danger to society." That unique ability to zoom out threatens sources of power whose existence relies on extinguishing the imaginative, creative impulse. If people began to notice that power is socially constructed, not at all a given, then they will start to live in the places beyond its reach or under its radar; they'll begin to disobey orders, thinking for themselves, solving problems at the ground level, with neighbors who are also affected. From small, persistent feelings of discontentment arise new ways of thinking, freed from the limitations of outmoded ideas—from both authoritarian capitalism and authoritarian socialism. The real-life solutions produced by these post-authoritarian ways of thinking may not be like anything we've seen; indeed, they'd better not be.

So radicalism is discontentment with things as they are. Upon opening her mind, the radical perceives that something is amiss, and she finds herself unsatisfied with the existing state of affairs. Yet there must be more, for virtually all people assumedly have at least a vague sense that the way things are could be improved upon; few see the status quo as so completely without flaws that it can admit of no improvement. What makes the radical different, perhaps, are her deep curiosity about humankind's social potential and her openness to decisive departures from the existing order. The radical is able to imagine society as it could be and might be in the future, even after her life has ended. But they share a readiness to challenge existing social, economic, and political institutions. The radical will go "beyond the limits set by conventional political or cultural practice."[3] We might define radicalism "as a measure of how *fundamental* the change might be that one is willing to pursue."[4] As I've discussed elsewhere, the word *radical* comes to us from the Latin word *radix*, which means root. "Thus," as Webster's tells us, "until recently, radical referred to the roots of words, the roots of illness, or even square roots." The figurative use of the term grows out of the idea that radical change means change at the very deepest levels, change at the roots of a system. The radical mind is one that wants to find the roots and then to see them as they are, to see what they look like in the absence of ideological appurtenances. Because radicals are human beings with different experiences and innate inclinations, they see this future from different perspectives, emphasizing what's most important to them. They have their pet causes, and each radical believes hers to be the most important one, the key to unlocking the hoped-for better future. So there are families of radicals, and genuses and species from there. Even within a species of radical, there may be noticeable variations between individuals. We may consider anarchism as one such species.

In his *The Communal Experience: Anarchist and Mystical Communities in Twentieth Century America*, Laurence R. Veysey bravely undertook the question of whether anarchism (here, along with mysticism) may be treated as a part of—or perhaps a result of—some more general tendency. Veysey was interested in defining the radical mind and its impulses, to understand it in its full complexity; but he wanted an explanation that appreciated the puzzling relationship between feeling and reason in the human mind. Veysey suggested that past attempts to define radicalism generally had either treated it as a kind of "psychological syndrome," or they had focused only on the substantive intellectual content of its various ideologies and discourses, ignoring the possibility that some deeper outlook is the truest test for, or most fundamental aspect of, the radical. Veysey thought that an adequate definition would have to find a way to accommodate

[3] Jeremy Gilbert and Jo Littler, "Beyond Gesture, Beyond Pragmatism," in *What* is *Radical Politics Today?*, edited by Jonathan Pugh (Palgrave Macmillan 2009), page 127.

[4] Ibid.

the importance of both substantive theoretical views and "a more general state of mind" underlying the expression of such views. Discussing Victor Yarros, remembered best for his associations with Benjamin R. Tucker and *Liberty*, Veysey notes the practical difficulty of separating the idea of psychological temperament from that of ideological outlook. Further, our pretenses to perfect rationality and empiricism notwithstanding, we don't ourselves know, not really anyway, which of our values are responses to careful inquiry and evidence, and which were created by superstitions and social constructs. Further still, it is yet unclear to science how much of what is associated with human values is encoded in our genetic material; we are, in any case, not total blank slates (a point on which I agree substantially with Steven Pinker, though I'm sure we draw very different conclusions from the observation).

For a time, particularly at the close of the nineteenth century, the anarchists' critical appraisals of capitalism and nation-statism seemed to be rising in influence, and thus demanding a response. In his introduction for *The Anarchists*, Irving Louis Horowitz underscores "how close, in point of origin and inspiration (if not in point of conviction) anarchism and social science once were." Horowitz argues that many of the century's classics of social science were, explicitly or not, engaged in a "critical dialogue with anarchism," indeed that this dialogue is among the major threads of the period's social science. No sooner than did social scientists adopt a more empirical approach than did it become clear that the philosophers had been wrong about political power. Worse than that, they had all along provided the moral and intellectual cover for the violent systems of hierarchical domination that have ruled the world since shortly after the Neolithic Revolution. Of Latin America since the fateful arrival of Europeans, Ernest Gellner once remarked that it seemed to be doomed to continue paying "the price of the Original Sin of being born of conquest in pursuit of loot rather than liberty." Gellner's observation applies no less to the state itself, as a distinct category of human behavior appearing again and again throughout history. Conquest adjusts to accommodate the demands of social change, yet conquest remains in the nature of state power. In his essay "Anarchist's Progress," Albert Jay Nock explains the fundamental character of the state:

> The State did not originate in any form of social agreement, or with any disinterested view of promoting order and justice. Far otherwise. The State originated in conquest and confiscation, as a device for maintaining the stratification of society permanently into two classes—an owning and exploiting class, relatively small, and a propertyless dependent class.

As we gather information and become more sophisticated in our methods of dating, it is becoming more clear that human beings have been more powerful than we thought for longer than we thought. But our growing power and the rise of sedentary agriculture and civilization were not without their costs. Discussing his book *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*, James C. Scott set out to "alert the reader that most of the things that we have been taught or absorbed in our school days about the rise of civilizations in the earliest states around 6000 BC are mistaken in rather fundamental ways." Scott explains that malnutrition and infectious diseases of various kinds were concomitant with the rise of the early grain states. Together with the fact that the transition also meant significantly more labor for everyone but a small elite, the rise of this new system of class stratification and deprivation requires an explanation. Scott concludes that the transition could not have been a voluntary one, that in fact early states hemorrhaged

numbers both because people wanted nothing to do with this exploitative system, and because zoonotic diseases killed large numbers of people. Scott sees no evidence of Steven Pinker's happy thesis that everything is always getting better and less violent.

The contents of our education have been shaped by the needs of those in power, by the need to reproduce passive obedience in subjects and workers. Anarchism arises in large part to interrogate and revise the historical record, exposing the fundamental mistakes to which Scott refers. A proper system of education would encourage just this approach to social reality and its institutions, so it seems incumbent on us to see whether the current education system does. Radicals also tend to follow William Godwin in seeing culture and education as "far above economic and political action" in their importance to lasting social change.[5] Because radicals, by definition, seek out the root causes of the social phenomena we observe, it is not surprising that they should interrogate current systems of education and their implicit philosophies. We cannot hope to address deeply entrenched social and economic problems without first acknowledging their psychological and cultural bases. The great Colin Ward followed Godwin in understanding the centrality of education, formal and otherwise, in the socialization of children to accept the authoritarian, hierarchical societies in which they're forced to live. It is difficult to imagine the survival of such societies without these focused efforts, without a professionalized, government-run education apparatus that forces children into an oppressive and stultifying environment from the time they're 5 years old to when they've reached legal adulthood. Discussing his total opposition "to the views of the teaching profession," Ward argued in favor of the abolition of compulsory school, as against the raising of its minimum age; he observed that the education profession "wants to eliminate the 'private sector' in education, while I see it as the one guarantee that genuine radical experiment can happen."

The radical seems to be distinguished by the fact that she notices things about compulsory schooling that her peers seem not to: she notices from an early age that schooling depends on the violent containment—internment, if we're honest—of the child's body. The student is controlled, held in the school against her will, forced to accept things without question. Whereas she would prefer to learn through being out in the world, involved in it, a part of solving its problems, the student is instead imprisoned and held away from the world, seated with her fellow students in neat rows. Our schools, and the students that they so mercilessly hole up, are not a part of our communities; they are arranged like objects in a display, inhibited both in body and mind. For many radicals, perhaps most, the first confrontation with authoritarianism is the compulsory government school, and so naturally many become radicals within its walls, quietly detesting it. "The fact that attendance is not a choice, not an autonomous act, means that it starts out fundamentally on the wrong foot as a compulsory institution, with all the alienation that this duress implies, especially as children grow older."[6] The system is a factory system, whose "monochromatic flattening of education" is designed to produce a single product.[7] Uniformity of thought is the goal, which is why periods of war were the birthplace of so many of the compulsory public education system's defining features. Compelled adjustment to authority is the product.[8] The

[5] Michael Henry Scrivener, Radical Shelley: *The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton University Press 2014), page 7.

[6] James C. Scott, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play* (Princeton University Press 2012), page 71.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Paul Goodman, Compulsory Miseducation.

radical cannot accept such a system, even if she knows she is powerless to change it. And even if she has been successful in the cruel competition of this system, she cannot see it as legitimate, rational, or just.

Political power is a belief we share,[9] its myriad ideological justifications so many religious sects. When we study what is called political philosophy, we enter a world of myth, allegory, and theological controversy; the empirical record of political power is anathema to the study of political power, for the study of this record would destroy the shared belief—the reality would appear from behind the facade. Years of focused propaganda, delivered during our most vulnerable and impressionable years, are required to produce the shared belief, the faith in power and the benevolence of those in power. As Kropotkin said, we have been carefully and expertly brainwashed "thanks to a system of education deformed and vitiated by the State." Destructive, abusive power exists first between our ears, as an automatic pattern of thought shaped by trauma. Thus do new social patterns require new patterns of thought, forged from the observed failures of the old, advanced by freethinkers, dissenters, and nonconformists. A great number of us are radicals for the same reason Voltairine de Cleyre was an anarchist: we can't help it—we have to do something with our brains.

[9] Colin Ward asks, "Why do people consent to be governed? It isn't only fear: what have millions of people to fear from a small group of politicians? It is because *they subscribe to the same values as their governors*. Rulers and ruled alike believe in the principle of authority, of hierarchy, of power" (emphasis added).

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