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Anarchy in the classroom

Judith Suissa

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We've become used to the words 'anarchist' or 'anarchism' being casually tossed around whenever the press wish to describe some apparently inexplicable act of violence or to lampoon an idealistic theory of social change. But some intellectuals can be equally guilty of misrepresentation. Anarchism, they insist, has no claim to be considered as a coherent or serious political theory. It is branded as 'utopian' or 'naïve' for proposing that human beings are naturally good, and that this natural goodness is quite enough to sustain a stateless society. Here is Max Beloff, hard at work, ploughing this familiar furrow. Anarchism, he writes: "is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of human nature, on the unproven supposition that given total absence of constraints, or alternatively material abundance secured by communism, human societies could exist with no coercive element at all " Or consider Jonathan Wolff's sweeping assertion in his account of anarchism in his Introduction to Political Philosophy: "to rely on the natural goodness of human beings to such an extent seems utopian in the extreme".

No wonder anarchism is so disregarded in contemporary society. It has become almost fatally tarnished by such thor-

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oughly misleading and partial depictions of its central argument.

If this idea constitutes a gross misrepresentation, then what is the anarchist conception of human nature? Both Proudhon and Bakunin insisted that it was inherently two-fold, involving both an egotistical potential and a sociable, altruistic potential. As Bakunin picturesquely expresses 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.”

There is a very similar recognition of the complexity of human nature in Kropotkin, whose monumental treatise, *Mutual Aid*, written at the beginning of the 20th century, can be interpreted as an attempt to counter the extreme version of social Darwinism put forward by theorists such as Huxley. Kropotkin regarded the simplistic notion of ‘survival of the fittest’ as a misleading interpretation of evolutionary theory, and pointed out that Darwin himself had noted man’s social qualities as an essential factor in his evolutionary survival. *Origin of Species* is full of references to man’s ‘social nature’, without which, Darwin argues, it is highly probable that “the evolution of man, as we know it, would never have taken place.”

Kropotkin’s paradigm case of ‘mutual aid’ as a factor in the evolution of animal species is that of ants. While there may be aggressive fighting for survival between species, within the ant community, mutual aid and cooperation prevail: “The ants and termites have renounced the ‘Hobbesian war’, and they are the better for it.” Although Kropotkin did not deny the principle of the struggle for existence as a law of nature, he ultimately regarded the principle of mutual aid as more important from an evolutionary point of view, as it is this principle which “favours the development of such habits and characters as ensure the maintenance and further development of the species, together

with the greatest amount of welfare and enjoyment of life for the individual, with the least waste of energy.”

The notion that anarchism should be interested in the development of ‘habits and characters’ is clearly incompatible with the notion of some original altruistic state of grace. But Kropotkin was often even more explicit. In a particularly powerful piece written for *Freedom* in 1888, entitled ‘Are We Good Enough?’ Kropotkin directly confronted the common argument that people are ‘not good enough’, or ‘not yet ripe for free, Anarchistic Communism’ by tersely asking: “But are they good enough for Capitalism?”. If people were naturally and predominantly kind, altruistic and just, argues Kropotkin, there would be no danger of exploitation and oppression. It is precisely because they are not that the present system is intolerable and must be changed.

Kropotkin did believe ultimately in the power of the altruistic aspects of human nature to prevail. He contended, against Rousseau, that even a corrupt society cannot crush individual human goodness: even a capitalist state cannot “weed out the feeling of human solidarity, deeply lodged in men’s understanding and heart”. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that people “will not turn into anarchists by sudden transformation”. Even after a successful social revolution which dismantles the state there will still be a vital need for an education which can nurture the social virtues on which an anarchist society might be built. This is a central theme.

And no wonder. It is precisely because anarchists — particularly social anarchists — did not assume human beings to be essentially good that they assigned such an important role to this subject.

But what exactly is anarchist education? Historians of education and educational theorists often lazily conflate it with ‘libertarian education’, an approach which rejects traditional models of teacher authority and hierarchical school structure, and which advocates maximum freedom for the individual child

within the educational process — including, in its extreme version, the chance to opt out of this process altogether. Even writers who are sympathetic to anarchist notions of education include descriptions of anarchist schools (such as the Escuela Moderna, founded by Francisco Ferrer in Spain in 1907, and the Modern School Movement in the United States which followed it) alongside libertarian schools such as A S Neill’s Summerhill.

This is another misconception. The sheer volume of anarchist literature devoted to educational issues, and the efforts invested by anarchist activists in educational projects, shows quite clearly that for the social anarchists, schools, and education in general, are a valuable aspect of the project for social change, rather than something to be dismantled along with the other machinery of state bureaucracy.

It’s true that anarchist schools often share structural features with free schools, such as a non-coercive pedagogy, democratic management, student-led timetables and lesson plans, and informal student-teacher relationships. But there are critical differences. Typical anarchist schools have substantive curricula with clear anti-statist, anti-militaristic and anti-religious messages. Great emphasis is placed on the communal aspects of life in the school, and involvement in broader political issues.

In contrast, the libertarian position associated with educational experiments such as Summerhill makes just the type of optimistic or naïve assumptions about human nature which are often wrongly attributed to anarchism. John Darling quotes A S Neill as asserting that children are “naturally good” and will turn out to be “good human beings if [they are] not crippled and thwarted in [their] natural development by interference”.

Neill indeed had considerable sympathy for Homer Lane’s idea of ‘original virtue’ — reflected in his insistence that all moral instruction perverts the innate goodness of the child. This pure libertarian view is in clear contrast with the anarchist view, which holds that there is nothing morally objectionable in the attempt by educators to pass on substantial beliefs or

moral principles to children. Anarchist schools, unlike schools such as Summerhill, made no pretense at neutrality in their ethos and curriculum.

For anarchists, the ideal society is something that has to be created. And education is primarily a part of this creation; it involves a radical challenge to current practices and institutions, yet at the same time a faith in the idea that human beings already possess the attributes and virtues necessary to create and sustain such a different society. They do not need, therefore, to either undergo any radical transformation or to do away with a Marxist ‘inauthentic’ consciousness. Education is not a means of creating a different political order, but a space in which we experiment with visions of a new political order — a process which itself constitutes an educative and motivating experience both for educators and pupils.

In many standard works on anarchism, education gets barely a passing mention. A pity. For the anarchists’ acknowledgment of the need for a substantive educational process, designed along clear moral principles, goes hand-in-hand with their contextualist account of human nature. It thus turns what what might otherwise be nothing more than naïve optimism into a complex and inspiring social hope.