

# **NO! Against Adult Supremacy Vol. 15**

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## **Mistrust and Things**

### ***Layla AbdelRahim***

Since the 1950s of Soviet Russia, Lena Alexeevna Nikitina and Boris Pavlovich Nikitin, have been sounding alarm that children's most vicious enemy is, in fact, adults' mistrust that begins with holding the child when she walks, helping her up when she falls, forbidding her to climb "dangerous" stairs even on the primitive children's playgrounds marked "for use between 0-3 years old", picking up the child and sticking her on the slide, constantly telling her what to do or not, what to wear, eat, feel, know, think, and so on, in other words, exercising total control. Mistrust is also manifested in speaking for the child, putting words in her mouth, branding, evaluating, "helping" and "teaching". Finally, it takes the form of siding with the institution in the adult endeavor to reconstruct the child from a curious individual to an obedient consumer of things and of instruction.

Protective behaviour on the part of adults may, at first glance, seem harmless, even benign. In the long run, it affects the physical, emotional, and mental development, where the child forfeits her right to learn to trust her own abilities and limitations. The absence of those inner mechanisms of self-regulation creates outright danger and is at the basis of much stress and "failure" of the future-adult. Moreover, mistrust sends children the following message: adults treat anyone smaller and weaker than themselves as frail, handicapped, even insipid (have you heard that baby-talk-intonation?). People call such behaviour "protective", "caring", "loving". Since this is love, many children learn to suppress their frustration and to accept others' control and their own failure. Later, they reproduce this love, care and protection with younger ones, but also with their own parents by then grown old, child-like and frail and thus continue the cycle.

The Nikitins call for trusting the child, providing her with an emotionally safe and enriching environment rather than limitations and control. Such attitude would raise the curiosity, creativity and confidence levels to the extent that parents would not need consumerism to replace family relations, because an independent child will know how to make toys, invent games or find answers to questions about the self and the world. There is an important distinction to make, though, between trust and neglect or between self-chosen independence or self-reliance and imposed neglect concealed by slaving parent substitutes, vocabulary, and things.

But how could meaning of a child's freedom to investigate experience and choose her own categories appear in a capitalist setting? For example, Françoise Dolto advises parents to pay children for household chores in order to help them become financially autonomous and concomitantly conscientious workers. Or, at the Childhoods 2005 conference in Oslo, numerous presentations focused on the "positive" aspects of consumerism and called for the participation of children in this sphere — they equated participation in consumerism with "empowerment" and "independence".

But the problem is that a child who receives a few dollars for washing dishes does not learn independence, rather the contrary: to succumb to the will of others, to do them services in return for a reward set by the more powerful. In this case, the child does not do the dishes because s/he uses them or to participate on an equal footing in family life. The child does them for a materialistic end in order to get something from materialistic parents. It goes without saying that having children do schoolwork for grades and for the promise of material bliss in the "future" is part of the same strategy that markets obedience, consumerism, misery and mistrust, a strategy

that shuffles meanings, sells 500ml juice in 750ml bottles, substitutes bright packages of favourite monsters on TV with yogurt derived from miserable cows and chemical laboratories, and so on, ad infinitum. In all of this, parents, instead of siding with their children and protecting them, end up being the prime vehicles of capitalist meaning.

## **Rays of Light**

### ***Bina Shah***

In early March I had the privilege of meeting 90 young girls from the outskirts of Malir who had participated in the She Leads Campaign Against Child Marriage. They were trained by Rutgers-WPF, a Dutch NGO, to advocate against child marriage and for girls' education, amongst their friends and families in Jam Khanda, a rural part of Malir with dismal education rates, where many girls are married while still in their teens. Under the programme, 210 girls in Mohammed Bin Qasim town, Malir and Gadap, and another 250 had been trained in Sanghar; they, along with their teachers, had reached another 9,000 girls and their family members through the simple method of door-to-door visits and conversations.

The girls travelled to a five-star hotel in Karachi to participate in a workshop, receive tablet computers loaded with apps dealing with SRHR (sexual and reproductive health and rights), and to celebrate having completed the year-long programme. They had prepared short plays and speeches about the disapproval and difficulties they endured when trying to convince the elders of their communities that child marriage is a grave ill in Pakistani society that robs girls of both their health and their futures.

Dressed in school uniforms and bubbling with enthusiasm, these girls struck me by their willingness to put themselves forward as community leaders in order to help other girls in their neighbourhoods. Such is the power of grass-roots action, which is based entirely upon the power of the people. By standing up in this movement, these girls had actually taken the power into their own hands in a society which doesn't want to give power to young women like them. They were creating a revolution together, a grave threat to people who always wanted to keep young girls under their control by robbing them of the right to choose their own lives.

We heard from Sabr-un-Nissa, a 16-year-old student in Class 10, whose mother had died after giving birth to two stillborn children. Despite her personal pain, or perhaps channeling it in order to help others avoid her mother's fate, Sabr-un-Nissa joined the campaign and managed to convince her friend Sadia's family not to get her married off at the age of 15. In Pakistan today, 37pc of its 90 million women are married before the age of 18. And one in 70 out of those young women and girls will die because of early pregnancy, not enough time between pregnancies, and other risks of teenage pregnancy. The risks are especially high for girls who get married and have children before their bodies are fully developed.

Traditionalists, socially conservative and deeply patriarchal, argue in favour of child marriage, asserting that when a girl reaches puberty, she is ready to be married. But her body is still growing, and her brain doesn't reach full development until she is 18. Pregnancy poses health risks for young girls because the foetus will leach off all the nutrients the girl still needs to achieve her full growth, which can ruin her health for life. Many families will press for a nikah while the girl is still in her mid-teens, promising that the rukhsati will not take place until much later so that she has time to finish her studies. Unfortunately, even if the girl's family agrees to this

arrangement, the boy's family starts pressuring the girl's family to pull her out of school, claiming that she won't need an education once she's married to their son. The girl's family gives in to the pressure, fearing the consequences if they don't agree. In Pakistan, girls are still regarded as property, and once they are contracted in marriage to another family, that family hurries to seize that property and secure it in its own possession.

By joining the She Leads campaign against child marriage, each girl declared she was not anyone's property, but a human being with hopes and dreams and ambitions: a person in her own right, with talents, abilities, and potential. They showed courage in the face of the personal risk they faced by espousing this cause, but they knew they were contributing to a major social change and taking responsibility for removing one of the greatest evils in our society. They were, in a word, unstoppable.

The campaign had given a special name to these girls: Kiran, or ray of light. And in that room in that five-star hotel, only a blind person could have remained unaffected by their radiance. Thrilled with the doors that were opening for them, they rushed around the hall afterwards, posing for photographs with their new tablets. Witnessing their new-found confidence, their sense of purpose, and their happiness, I too felt bright about the future of Pakistan.

## **Libertarian Child-Rearing (Excerpt)**

### ***Phil Dickens***

Even within mainstream circles, the issue of educating children is a contentious one. Given "that it is through the channel of the child that the development of the mature man must go," in the words of Emma Goldman, this is understandable. The direction in which children develop affects the path they take as adults, and it is instinctive to want to ensure that our children "turn out right."

But what is "right?" Goldman argued that children should be raised to be "a well-rounded individuality," and not "a patient work slave, professional automaton, tax-paying citizen, or righteous moralist." Few anarchists would disagree. But how do we achieve such a thing?

The vital question in the raising of children, citing Goldman again, is whether "the child [is] to be considered as an individuality, or as an object to be moulded according to the whims and fancies of those about it?" The latter, it seems, fits with convention, whilst even basic and liberal attempts at educational reform are slammed as "trendy."

The TV show *Super Nanny* is a prime example of "traditional," authoritarian child rearing. On its website, it offers "why children need discipline." According to them, "many parents don't set rules for their kids because they don't want to be the villain but setting your child limits is vital for teaching him self-control."

Interestingly, the debate here becomes a microcosm of mainstream political debate on any issue. Many families are "failing to set rules because you don't want to be too tough on your kids," but in the process "they're too soft to enforce boundaries and follow up bad behavior with consequences." The job of the parent, then, is to be to the child what the state is to the citizen. Just as with law enforcement for citizens, parental discipline "helps your child feel secure and determines what kind of person he'll grow up to be." *Super Nanny* advocates a liberal rather than conservative approach of "see[ing] discipline as a way of teaching your child self-control instead

of a way of controlling your child.” However the outcome, namely that the child is “moulded according to the whims and fancies of those about it,” remains the same.

Just as statisticians are with the concept of anarchy, the Super Nanny team is aghast of childhood without rules. Rules, they argue, “impact on his academic success – think about how the discipline he learns from you is the basis for his behavior at school – demonstrate that there are consequences to his actions and keep him safe.” To the contrary, anarchists and libertarians would argue that “the free growth and development of the innate forces and tendencies of the child” is more vital. “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.”

Wilhelm Reich, author of *Children of the Future*, argues that stifling the child’s natural vocal expressions (shouting, screaming, bellowing, crying, etc.) not only affects the child’s psychology but their physical motility;

*Small children go through a phase of development characterised by vigorous activity of the voice musculature. The joy the infant derives from loud noises (crying, shrieking, and forming a variety of sounds) is regarded by many parents as pathological aggressiveness. The children are accordingly admonished not to scream, to be ‘still,’ etc. The impulses of the voice apparatus are inhibited, its musculature becomes chronically contracted, and the child becomes quiet, ‘well-brought-up,’ and withdrawn. The effect of such mistreatment is soon manifested in eating disturbances, general apathy, pallor of the face, etc. Speech disturbances and retardation of speech development are presumably caused in this manner. In the adult we see the effects of such mistreatment in the form of spasms of the throat. The automatic constrictions of the glottis and the deep throat musculature, with subsequent inhibition of the aggressive impulses of the head and neck, seems to be particularly characteristic.*

The effects of such stifling commands are most damaging on that minority of children who are “hyper active,” and whose urge to move and shout is far harder to suppress. As such, Reich concludes “that small children must be allowed to ‘shout themselves out’ when the shouting is inspired by pleasure. This might be disagreeable to some parents, but questions of education must be decided exclusively in the interests of the child, not in those of the adults.”

As anarchists argue with regards to society, self-regulation is much more effective than enforcement from without. Moreover, in children it is a natural part of their development. According to Reich, “psychoanalysts have failed to distinguish between primary natural and secondary perverse, cruel drives, and they are continuously killing nature in the new-born while they try to extinguish the ‘brutish little animal.’ They are completely ignorant of the fact that it is exactly this killing of the natural principle which creates the secondary perverse and cruel nature, human nature so called, and that these artificial cultural creations in turn make compulsive moralism and brutal laws necessary.” Thus the use of punishment, coercion, threats, moralistic lectures and admonitions, withdrawal of love, etc. to inhibit “bad” behaviours overrides instincts towards self-regulation. Reich asserts that this trend has left virtually all adults in our society with some degree of psychological problem. Rather, without authoritarian measures, socialisation and the restriction of harmful activities occurs naturally;

*This close interrelation between biopathic behaviour and authoritarian countermeasures seems to be automatic. Self-regulation appears to have no place in and no influence upon emotions which do not come from the living core directly but only as if through a thick hard wall. Moreover, one has the impression that secondary drives cannot stand self-regulatory conditions of existence. They force sharp discipline on the part of the educator or parent. It is as if a child with an essentially secondary-drive structure feels that it cannot function or exist without disciplinary guidance. This is paralleled*

*by the interlacing of self-regulation in the healthy child with self-regulation in the environment. Here the child cannot function unless it has freedom of decision and movement. It cannot tolerate discipline any more than the armoured child can tolerate freedom.*

Further to which, “one cannot mix a bit of self-regulation with a bit of moral demand. Either we trust nature as basically decent and self-regulatory or we do not, and then there is only one way, that of training by compulsion. It is essential to grasp the fact that the two ways of upbringing do not go together.”

A century before Reich, Mikhail Bakunin anticipated him when he argued that children “do not constitute anyone’s property: they are neither the property of the parents nor even of society. They belong only to their own future freedom” and the “rights of the parents shall be confined to loving their children and exercising over them . . . authority [that] does not run counter to their morality, their mental development, or their future freedom.” From this, “it follows that society, the whole future of which depends upon adequate education and upbringing of children. . . , has not only the right but also the duty to watch over them.” Thus, child rearing is not just a parental but a communal process, and “real freedom – that is, the full awareness and the realisation thereof in every individual, pre-eminently based upon a feeling of one’s dignity and upon the genuine respect for someone else’s freedom and dignity, i.e. upon justice – such freedom can develop in children only through the rational development of their minds, character and will.”

## **Poverty and the Young Brain**

### ***Madeline Ostrander***

The brain’s foundation, frame, and walls are built in the womb. As an embryo grows into a fetus, some of its dividing cells turn into neurons, arranging themselves into layers and forming the first synapses, the organ’s electrical wiring. Four or five months into gestation, the brain’s outermost layer, the cerebral cortex, begins to develop its characteristic wrinkles, which deepen further after birth. It isn’t until a child’s infant and toddler years that the structures underlying higher-level cognition—will power, emotional self-control, decision-making—begin to flourish; some of them continue to be fine-tuned throughout adolescence and into the first decade of adulthood.

Pat Levitt, a developmental neuroscientist at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, has spent much of his career studying the setbacks and accidents that can make this construction process go awry. In the nineteen-nineties, during the media panic over “crack babies,” he was among a number of scientists who questioned whether the danger of cocaine exposure in utero was being overstated. (Levitt spent two decades examining the brains of rabbit mothers and their offspring that were dosed with the drug, and says that the alarm was “an exaggeration.”) More recently, as the science director of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, he has become interested in another sort of neurotoxin: poverty.

As it turns out, the conditions that attend poverty—what a National Scientific Council report summarized as “overcrowding, noise, substandard housing, separation from parent(s), exposure to violence, family turmoil,” and other forms of extreme stress—can be toxic to the developing brain, just like drug or alcohol abuse. These conditions provoke the body to release hormones such as cortisol, which is produced in the adrenal cortex. Brief bursts of cortisol can help a person manage difficult situations, but high stress over the long term can be disastrous. In a pregnant

woman, the hormone can “get through the placenta into the fetus,” Levitt told me, potentially influencing her baby’s brain and tampering with its circuitry. Later, as the same child grows up, cortisol from his own body may continue to sabotage the development of his brain.

In March, in the journal *Nature Neuroscience*, a group of researchers from nine hospitals and universities published a major study of more than a thousand children. They took DNA samples, made MRI scans of the children’s brains, collected data on their families’ income level and educational background, and gave them a series of tests for skills like reading and memory. The DNA samples allowed the scientists to factor out the influence of genetic heritage and look more closely at how socioeconomic status affects a growing brain. The scans focussed on over-all brain surface area, determined partly from the depth of the folds on the cortex, and the size of the hippocampus, a lumpy, curled structure nestled in the middle of the brain that stores memories. As might be expected, more educated families produced children with greater brain surface area and a more voluminous hippocampus. But income had its own distinct effect: living in the lowest bracket left children with up to six per cent less brain surface area than children from high-income families. At the lowest end of the income spectrum, little increases in family earnings could mean larger differences in the brain. At the middle and upper income levels, though, the money-brain curve flattened. In other words, wealth can’t necessarily buy a better brain, but deprivation can result in a weakened one.

A person whose brain has been undermined in this way can suffer long-term behavioral and cognitive difficulties. In March, a study appeared in the journal *Acta Paediatrica* showing eerie ultrasound images of fetuses that more frequently moved their mouths and touched their faces when their mothers were either stressed out or, even more so, when they smoked cigarettes—likely a sign of delayed nervous-system development. In a longer-term study published two years ago, neuroscientists at four universities scanned the brains of a group of twenty-four-year-olds and found that, in those who had lived in poverty at age nine, the brain’s centers of negative emotion were more frequently buzzing with activity, whereas the areas that could rein in such emotions were quieter. Elsewhere, stress in childhood has been shown to make people prone to depression, heart disease, and addiction in adulthood.

Over the past decade, the scientific consensus has become clear: poverty perpetuates poverty, generation after generation, by acting on the brain. The National Scientific Council has been working directly with policymakers to support measures that break this cycle, including better prenatal and pediatric care and more accessible preschool education. Levitt and his colleagues have also been advocating for changing laws that criminalize drug abuse during pregnancy, since, as they pointed out in a review paper, arrest and incarceration can also trigger the “maternal stress response system.” The story that science is now telling rearranges the morality of parenting and poverty, making it harder to blame problem children on problem parents. Building a healthy brain, it seems, is an act of barn raising.



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