

Anarchism and Education

Exploring the neglected tradition of anarchist education, this book shows how the ideas traditionally associated with anarchism can lend a valuable perspective to philosophical debates on education and offer a motivating vision for teachers and educational policy makers.

In focusing on the educational ideas associated with the social anarchists, Judith Suissa provides a detailed account of the central features of anarchist thought, dispelling some common misconceptions about anarchism and demonstrating how a failure to appreciate the crucial role of education in anarchist theory is often responsible for the dismissal of anarchism as a coherent position by both academics and the general public. The book also establishes that anarchist education is a distinct tradition that differs in important respects from libertarian or child-centred education, with which it is often mistakenly conflated.

Anarchism and Education offers a historical account of anarchist educational ideas and experiments and situates these in the framework of contemporary debates in the philosophy of education and political philosophy. Anarchism is compared with liberal and Marxist traditions, with particular emphasis on the concept of human nature, which, it is argued, is the key to grasping the role of education in anarchist thought, and on the notion of utopianism. The relationship between anarchist ideas and issues of pedagogy, school climate, curriculum and policy is explored, leading to a broad discussion of the political and social context of educational ideas. The perspective arising from this account is used to offer a trenchant critique of some current trends in educational theory and policy, such as calls for free markets in educational provision.

Judith Suissa is a Research Fellow at The Institute of Education, the University of London.

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Anarchism and Education

A philosophical perspective

Judith Suissa

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A philosophical perspective
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In loving memory of my mother, Ruth

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Introduction

'To declare for a doctrine so remote as anarchism at this stage of history', wrote Herbert Read in 1938, 'will be regarded by some critics as a sign of intellectual bankruptcy; by others as a sort of treason, a desertion of the democratic front at the most acute moment of its crisis; by still others as merely poetic nonsense...' (Read 1974: 56).

After several years of working on this project, I think I have some idea of how Read felt. Anarchism is rarely taken seriously by academics, and its advocates in the political arena are generally regarded as a well-meaning but, at worst, violent and at best a naïve bunch. Why, then do I think anarchist ideas merit a study of this scope? And why, particularly, do I think they have something to say to philosophers of education?

Part of my motivation is the need to address what appears to be a gap in the literature. Although the anarchist position on education is, as I hope to establish, distinct and philosophically interesting, and although it has been expressed powerfully at various times throughout recent history, it is consistently absent from texts on the philosophy and history of educational ideas – even amongst those authors who discuss 'radical' or 'progressive' education. Indeed, one issue which I address in this book is the failure of many theorists to distinguish between libertarian education (or 'free schools') and anarchist education. I hope to establish that the principles underlying the anarchist position make the associated educational practices and perspective significantly distinct from other approaches in radical education.

Similarly, both academic texts and public perceptions often involve simplifications, distortions or misunderstandings of anarchism. The typical response of contemporary scholars to the anarchist idea – that it is 'utopian', 'impractical' or 'over-optimistic regarding human nature' (see, for example, Scruton 1982; Wolff 1996) – needs to be scrutinized if one is to give anarchism serious consideration. To what extent are these charges justified? And what are the philosophical and political assumptions behind them? Indeed such charges themselves have, for me, raised fascinating questions about the nature and role of the philosophy of education. In what sense are we bound by the political and social context within which we operate? To what extent should we be bound by it, and what is our responsibility in this regard as philosophers? If philosophy

is to reach beyond the conceptual reality of our present existence, how far can it go before it becomes 'utopian', and what does this mean? And if we do want to promote an alternative vision of human life, to what extent are we accountable for the practicality of this vision? So while the focus of this work is an exploration of the philosophical issues involved in anarchist ideas of education, these broader questions form the backdrop to the discussion.

The bulk of this work consists of an attempt to piece together a systematic account of what could be described as an anarchist perspective on education. This project involves examining the central philosophical assumptions and principles of anarchist theory, with particular reference to those ideas which have an obvious bearing on issues about the role and nature of education. Specifically, I devote considerable space to a discussion of the anarchist view on human nature, which is both at the crux of many misconceptions of anarchism and also plays a crucial role in the anarchist position on education. I also discuss several attempts to translate anarchist ideas into educational practice and policy. This discussion, I hope, serves to highlight the distinct aspects of the anarchist perspective, as compared to other educational positions, and furthers critical discussion of the way in which anarchism can be seen to embody a philosophically interesting perspective on education.

The thrust of my account of anarchist educational ideas and practice is to show how such ideas are intertwined with the political and moral commitments of anarchism as an ideological stance. One cannot, I argue, appreciate the complexity of the anarchist position on education without understanding the political and philosophical context from which it stems. Yet equally importantly, one cannot appreciate or assess anarchism's viability as a political position without an adequate understanding of the role played by education within anarchist thought.

In the course of this discussion, I refer extensively to other traditions which inform major trends in the philosophy of education, namely, the liberal and the Marxist traditions. While I do not claim to offer a comprehensive account of either of these traditions, nor of their educational implications, this approach does, I hope, serve the purpose of situating anarchist ideas within a comparative framework. I believe it establishes that, while anarchism overlaps in important ways with both liberal and Marxist ideas, it can offer us interesting new ways to conceptualize educational issues. The insights drawn from such an analysis can thus shed new light both on the work of philosophers of education, and on the educational questions, dilemmas and issues confronted by teachers, parents and policy makers.

It is important to stress, at the outset, that this work is not intended as a defence of anarchism as a political position. I believe that philosophers of education and educational practitioners can benefit from a serious examination of anarchist ideas, and that many of these ideas have value whether or not one ultimately endorses anarchism as a political ideology, and even if one remains sceptical regarding the possibility of resolving the theoretical tensions within anarchist theory.

More specifically, I believe that the very challenge posed by what I refer to as the anarchist perspective, irrespective of our ultimate ideological commitments, can prompt us to ask broad questions about the nature and role of philosophy, of education, and of the philosophy of education.

Most contemporary philosophers of education acknowledge that philosophy of education has, at the very least, political implications. As John White puts it (White 1982: 1), 'the question: What should our society be like? overlaps so much with the question [of what the aims of education should be] that the two cannot sensibly be kept apart'. Likewise, Patricia White laments the fact that philosophers tend to avoid 'tracing the policy implications of their work' (White 1983: 2), and her essay *Beyond Domination* is a good example of an attempt to spell out in political terms what a particular educational aim (in this case, education for democracy) would look like. A compelling account of the historical and philosophical context of the relationship between educational theory and political ideas has been notably developed by Carr and Hartnett, who lament the 'depoliticization of educational debate' (Carr and Hartnett 1996: 5) and argue for a clearer articulation of the political and cultural role of educational theory, grounded in democratic values. But even work such as this tends to take the present basic social framework and institutional setup as given. Even philosophers of education such as John and Patricia White, Carr and Hartnett, Henry Giroux, Nel Noddings and others who take a critical stance towards the political values reflected in the education system, tend to phrase their critique in terms of making existing society 'more democratic', 'more participatory', 'more caring' and so on. The basic structural relations between the kind of society we live in and the kind of education we have are, more often than not, taken for granted. Indeed, it is this which makes such theories so appealing as, often, they offer a way forward for those committed to principles of democracy, for example, without demanding an entire revolution in the way our society is organized.

In political terms, the acknowledgement by philosophers of the essentially political character of education seems to mean that, as succinctly put by Bowen and Hobson

It is now clear to most in the liberal-analytic tradition that no philosopher of education can be fully neutral, but must make certain normative assumptions, and in the case of the liberal analysts, these will reflect the values of democracy.

(Bowen and Hobson 1987: 445)

In philosophical terms, what this acknowledgement means is that discussion of 'aims' and 'values' in education often assumes that the kind of social and political values we cherish most highly can be promoted by particular conceptualizations of the curriculum. Richard Pring captures this idea in stating that debates on the aim of education 'take the word aim to mean not something extrinsic to the process of education itself, but the values which are

picked out by evaluating any activity as educational' (Pring 1994: 21). Thus much work by philosophers within the liberal tradition focuses on questions as to how values such as autonomy – argued to be crucial for creating a democratic citizenry – can best be fostered by the education system. Many theorists in this tradition make no acknowledgement of the fact that 'education' is not synonymous with 'schooling'. Even those who do explicitly acknowledge this fact, like John White who opens his book *The Aims of Education Revisited* (White 1982) with the comment that 'not teachers but parents form the largest category of educators in this country', tend to treat this issue simply as a factor to be dealt with in the debate conducted within the framework of the existing democratic (albeit often, it is implied, not democratic enough) state. The normative questions regarding the desirability of this very framework are not themselves the focus of philosophical debate.

In short, the sense in which many philosophers of education regard their work as political is that captured by Kleinig, when he states:

Philosophy of education is a social practice, and in evaluating it account needs to be taken not only of what might be thought to follow 'strictly' from the arguments used by its practitioners, but also the causal effects of those arguments within the social contexts of which they are a part. (Kleinig 1982: 9)

Critical discussion about the desirability of this social context in itself, it is implied, is beyond the scope of philosophy of education.

The anarchist perspective seems at the outset to present a challenge to such mainstream views in that it does not take any existing social or political framework for granted. Instead, it has as its focal point a vision of what an ideal framework could be like – a vision which has often been described as utopian. The question of why the anarchists were given the label 'utopian', what it signifies, and whether or not they justly deserved it, is one which is hotly debated in the literature, and which I shall take up later. But what anarchism seems to be suggesting is that before we even engage in the enterprise of philosophy of education, we must question the very political framework within which we are operating, ask ourselves what kind of society would embody, for us, the optimal vision of 'the good life', and then ask ourselves what kind (if any) of education system would exist in this society.

Of course, any vision of the ideal society is formulated in terms of particular values, and many of the values involved in the anarchist vision may overlap with those promoted by philosophers writing in the liberal-democratic tradition (e.g. autonomy, equality, individual freedom). But it is not just a question of how these values are understood and translated into political practice; nor is it a question of which of them are regarded as of primary importance; the distinction is not, then, between emphasizing different sets of values in philosophical debates on education, but, rather, of changing the very parameters of the debate. Thus the question of 'what should our society

be like' is, for the anarchist, not merely 'overlapping', but logically *prior* to any questions about what kind of education we want.

An anarchist perspective suggests that it is not enough to say, with Mary Warnock, that philosophy of education should be centrally concerned with 'questions about what should be taught, to whom, and with what in mind' (Warnock 1977: 9); one has to also ask the crucial question 'by whom?' And how one answers this question, in turn, has important political implications which themselves inform the framework of the debate. For example, if one assumes that the nation state is to be the major educating body in society, one has to get clear about just what this means for our political, social and educational institutions, and, ideally, to be able to offer some philosophical defence of this arrangement. The view of society which informs the anarchists' defence of this arrangement. The view of society which informs the anarchists' ideas on education is not one of 'our society' or 'a democratic society', but a normative vision of what society *could* be like. The optimality of this vision is justified with reference to complex ideas on human nature and values, which I explore later.

The question for the philosopher of education, then, becomes threefold: One, what kind of society do we want? Two, what would education look like in this ideal society? And three, what kind of educational activities can best help to further the realization of this society? Of course, the arguments of anarchist thinkers do not always acknowledge the distinction between such questions, nor do they always progress along the logical route implied here, and untravelling them and reconstructing this perspective is one task of this book.

Why, then, to go back to the opening quote from Herbert Read, is anarchism regarded as so eccentric – laughable, even – by mainstream philosophers? Is it the very idea of offering an alternative social ideal that seems hard to swallow, or is it that this particular ideal is regarded as so 'utopian' that it is not worth seriously considering? And wherein does its 'utopianism' lie? Is it just a question of impracticality? Are we, as philosophers, bound to consider only those political programmes which are clearly practically feasible? Yet if we are concerned primarily with feasibility, then we have to address the claim, made by anarchist thinkers and activists, that their programme *is* feasible in that it does not demand a sudden, total revolution, but can be initiated and carried out 'here and now'. For the anarchist utopia, as we shall see, is built on the assumption of propensities, values and tendencies which, it is argued, are already present in human social activity. Is it, then, that philosophers believe that this utopian vision of the stateless society goes against too much of what we know about human nature? Yet there is little agreement amongst philosophers as to the meaning, let alone the content, of human nature. Many anarchists, however, have an elaborate theory of human nature which arguably supports their claims for the possibility of a society based on mutual aid and self-government. Is it, then, simply that we (perhaps unlike many radical thinkers of the mid-nineteenth century) are so firmly entrenched in the idea of the state that we cannot conceptualize any kind of social reality

