REVIEW ARTICLE

Imagining the Future: What Anarchism Brings to Education

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The authors review Judith Suissa’s provocative book, Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective, a text that demonstrates the central role of education in anarchist theory. Suissa compellingly argues against the charges that anarchism is overly idealistic and impractical, instead seeing its potential for innovative and liberatory educational change. The authors suggest, however, that an enhanced conversation among critical pedagogy, antiracist pedagogy and anarchist thinking on education can help to show both the continued relevance of radical and creative thinking, and that anarchist thought has been part of the development of oppositional, critical, collaborative, teaching and learning projects.

Judith Suissa’s provocative book, Anarchism and Education: A Philosophical Perspective invites us to use our imaginations to think very critically about what kind of society we would like to have, what education would look like in this society and what kind of educational activities might help to facilitate the realisation of this ideal society (p. 5). She argues that the anarchist perspective does not take any existing social or political framework for granted and focuses instead on envisioning what an ideal social order could be like. While such an approach has often been dismissed as utopian, Suissa takes the view that before we begin to philosophise about education we ought to ‘question the very political framework within which we are operating’ (p. 3).

Given the widespread attention to power and politics in education, it is surprising that, as Suissa remarks in her introduction, we have yet to take anarchism seriously, that our theories as yet have neglected to consider what it might mean to demand ‘an entire revolution in the way our society is organized’ (ibid.). While it seems abundantly clear that many educational theorists, activists and practitioners have envisioned radical or even subtle social, political and economic re-organisation—think here of critical
pedagogy, feminism, antiracist education, poststructuralism—it is none-
theless accurate to say that anarchism is not the first theory to which we turn.
Given her own admitted difficulties in finding consistent theories of human
nature, let alone shared key concepts defining anarchism, it is possible that
the fault is less with our omission of anarchism than anarchism’s own
instability, however laudable in certain respects that instability might be. It is
perhaps equally interesting that Suissa does not examine what we might take
to be philosophical cousins to anarchism—those oppositional political
theories and practices that do cut against the accepted norms or organisations
of social and political institutions. We hope in this review to show the
timeliness of Suissa’s work by putting anarchism into conversation with
critical and antiracist pedagogy.

Suissa is certainly correct that philosophers of education have not, as late,
taken up the question of the state as explicitly and robustly as scholars in
other disciplines, such as cultural studies and political theory. Suissa reminds
us that robustly problematising the state is a crucial feature of education
directed at social change. Certainly of late there has been substantial work on
charter schools, school vouchers and other education-related strategies for
whittling away state power. Suissa distinguishes between the ‘radical
challenge’ of contemporary liberal theorists (p. 110) and the demand for
radical restructuring on the part of anarchist theorists, but we wonder if some
liberals and anarchists are even closer than Suissa suggests, implicitly
problematising state formations, while perhaps not basing their arguments on
doing away with the state altogether. Nonetheless she very rightly
demonstrates that anarchist visions of creating a social order without
illegitimate authority structures, like the unproblematised state, have seldom
been taken seriously. Indeed, given contemporary interest in critiques of the
neoliberal state, Suissa’s invigorating return to, and careful documentation
of, anarchist theory, is all the more important.

Suissa sets out to show us that the anarchist position on education is
uniquely interesting but consistently absent from even the most radical of
educational theories on the history and philosophy of education. This failure
of many commentators to pay adequate attention to the central role of
education in anarchist thought, she points out, has led to much of the
confusion surrounding anarchism, and this helps to explain its continued
marginalisation in educational philosophy. Clearing up prevailing miscon-
ceptions, distortions and misunderstandings of anarchism as overly optimistic
and impractical, or unrealistic and utopian, she demonstrates the central role
of education in anarchist theory. Not unlike the conservative faith in
character education, anarchists hoped that education in core anarchist virtues
of equality and fraternity could enable the anarchist goal of dismantling
the state while maintaining a moral context for freedom and mutual aid.
Anarchist educational practices break down the distinction between
vocational and liberal education. Although these plans may seem reminiscent
of John Dewey’s and recent work in liberal education, Suissa contends that
the distinction of anarchist education lies in its purpose to ‘radically
restructure social and political organization’ (ibid.). At the same time, the
anarchist refusal to posit plans prior to particular contexts and relations

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means that anarchists can also quite reasonably say, ‘There is no such thing as “anarchist education”’—or perhaps more to the point, as Suissa suggests, ‘no single theory’ (p. 77). Indeed, anarchist educational theories, similar to Dewey’s, are critical of positing the aims of education in advance of the educational experience of particular students in specific contexts (p. 100).

In her careful and detailed analysis of anarchist thought, Suissa shows how the particular concern about education can temper critiques of anarchism. The commonly made claim, for example, that anarchists are too optimistic about the possibility of creating a stateless society does not take into account the central role of education in cultivating, fostering and maintaining the moral foundations needed to sustain such a society. Social anarchists’ vision of statelessness does not entail chaos, disorder, massive social upheaval or violent revolution, Suissa argues, and she demonstrates that the anarchist view of human nature is not naively utopian but ‘embraces a realistic and contextual approach to human virtues and capabilities’ (p. 147). One does not have to reject liberal values or be naively utopian about what it might mean to posit a common human nature that can flourish in a decentralised and self-governed free society based on mutual cooperation. Anarchists do not contend, for example, that human nature is uniquely altruistic. That humans have dual capacities for egoism and sociability only makes it more important for social anarchists to establish social relationships and educational practices that nurture these already present social virtues.

We begin to see that anarchism differs in perhaps only two major ways from Deweyan or liberal educational theory: (i) the hazy and radical goal of dismantling the state (but not authority itself); and (ii) the conception of subjectivity (although not dismissing freedom and autonomy for individuals at all times, anarchist thought does not separate the good of the individual from the good of the community). Suissa notes that anarchism is not ‘opposed to authority per se’ but rather to ‘the idea of an absolute right to command authority’ (p. 59). In a formulation quite similar to Dewey’s (and Michel Foucault’s, for that matter) understanding of the temporal and contextual situatedness of political strategies, Suissa points out that anarchists do understand the need for authority but that it ‘must always be temporary, and always justifiable in terms of the needs of the community in question’ (ibid.). Education is centrally important to the anarchist goal of supporting communes engaged in mutual aid, and as much as anarchism stresses freedom, ‘one cannot consistently talk of the individual good without taking the social context into account’ (p. 115).

We see an opening into the complications of identity and community in Suissa’s discussion of the difference between Marxism and anarchism. Suissa shows that for social anarchists the revolutionary struggle is not a linear progression in which there is a single point of reference. While in Marxism the single enemy is capitalism, anarchists reject the basic Marxist materialist assumption that consciousness is determined by material conditions of life. Here we find the seeds of a more complex and intersectional—that is, one that would take account of how categories of identity and social position overlap—analysis of power and oppression.

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Suissa argues only that the ‘anarchist position implies that at least to some degree life may be determined by consciousness’ (p. 136). But just what those determining factors of consciousness are, from where they arise and how they might be interconnected are not closely examined. That consciousness may determine conditions of life and livelihoods is used to explain the ‘optimism inherent in the anarchist enthusiasm for education as a crucial aspect of the revolutionary programme’ (ibid.). Despite the claim that anarchists do not see the issue of economic production as the primary category for analysis, they do not specifically problematise how arrangements of reproductive labour might contribute to gender inequity and how these relations might be re-envisioned, nor provide theoretical tools for grappling with white supremacy.

Perhaps it is the lack of complex analysis of the way in which power operates that accounts for the omission—in anarchist theory itself and in this text—of feminist and anti-racist critical pedagogies from the discussion. But in her analysis of the central role of education in the anarchist vision of alternative ways of living, it seems surprising that the concrete educational strategies of consciousness-raising and problem-posing, tools that grew out of leftist political movements, are not discussed. In her overview of the practical manifestations of anarchist education, educational experiments that anarchists have been involved in, such as The Escuela Moderna, Barcelona (1904–1907) or The Ferrer School New York and Stelton (1911–1953), Suissa highlights common elements of their projects, such as doing away with grading, timetables and the distinction between manual and intellectual labour, as well as organising non-hierarchically and making the school a microcosmic community providing more freedom to both students and teachers. And yet, these educational experiments remained just that and did not lead to any radical reorganisation of social relations in the broader social context. In other words, those experiments may be less useful at elucidating the relationship between anarchist thought and action than other left and radical educational programmes whose critique of problematic state power, while not specifically anarchist, is nonetheless closely related.

Suissa herself gestures toward the limits of anarchist educational projects, pointing to several weaknesses in the anarchist account. She contends that they paid little attention to the issue of pedagogy (p. 149). That omission of the teacher-pupil relationship is but one issue where critical, feminist and antiracist pedagogy might reasonably enhance the sketchy anarchist plans.

Very much in line with the anarchist notion that education is primarily a moral and political practice, critical pedagogy foregrounds the notion that education is a political endeavour, providing us with practical pedagogical strategies and a very concrete vision of the teacher-student relationship. This addition would add to her discussion of radical and successful educational strategies that directly intervened with state power and that arose from very local initiatives. Freireian pedagogy in Brazil and the Freedom Schools in the US of the 1960s provide us with concrete examples of how education can be central in creating radical social change through local interventions. The progressive and radical conception of
education behind the formation of Freedom Schools embraced the central tenets of a critical pedagogy that shares the anarchist vision of an anti-hierarchical society based on creating social solidarity, but differs in that it formulated and implemented well thought out pedagogical strategies that led to profound changes in the social order.

Through the development and implementation of very localised initiatives, Freedom Schools formulated a radical pedagogy and notion of democratic citizenship that operated outside the state while radically intervening with it. They also began to develop a very sophisticated theory of power that began to address those under-theorised elements of psychological, economic, legal and socio-cultural oppression.

Freedom Schools set out to support illegitimately and violently disenfranchised black Mississippians in naming the reality of their lives and then in changing that reality; education and political action were to become one, in true pragmatic form. The goal was to transform disempowered and racially marginalised students into active agents in bringing about social change. By drawing on student experience and knowledge in order to develop collectively a more realistic perception of US society, students themselves, the conditions of their oppression, and the conceptualisation of alternatives to the prescribed social order, teachers were to be facilitators who also learned from the process of cultural exchange. The purpose, it must be stressed, was not to impose a particular view upon students but to aid them in articulating their own desires, demands and questions, and to provide them with information and the skills with which to question it. The strong emphasis on student experience, interest and questioning was especially important given that teachers themselves, as socialised members of the dominant culture, could be unwitting perpetrators of oppression, reproducing the very racism they were trying to subvert. Teachers were to be facilitators of the educative process, not figures of authority.

Teaching and learning were practised in an open setting: participants sat in circles in order to disrupt traditional hierarchies of teachers as the authority on the knowledge to be imparted and of students seated in rows, an arrangement that impeded communication and interactive learning. Reciprocity between teachers and students, it was argued, could (and ought to) be established if questions were based on student knowledge and experience. The questioning method would disrupt the traditional assumption that knowledge was static and that students were its passive recipients. In this way, in true democratic fashion, the ends of education and the aims of its participants could be defined and constantly refined through practice. Learning, then, was inseparable from the use made of it. Questioning would provide students with a chance to engage in cultural critique, to expose inconsistencies and to engage in collective dialogue and debate about how to effect change.

Challenging traditional educative practices, Freedom Schools fostered a profoundly ethical notion of citizenship that was not to be based on individual achievement or success but on collective and responsible social action. This conception of citizenship was particularly radical in
that it challenged the way whiteness was an institutionalised and violently enforced prerequisite for citizenship. Disenfranchised black youth were deemed capable of and responsible for finding solutions to community problems. The radical conceptions of pedagogy and citizenship designed for freedom schools put into practice the principle that not having an actively informed citizenry is the greatest challenge for democracy.

Power was interrogated on many levels including the political, the material and the psychological. Not only were students asked to consider how and why they, themselves, might be responsible for the perpetuation of their own subordination, but also to examine the fears that prevented both blacks and whites from changing that system. Unpacking the fears behind the scenes, those that underpin the actions, thoughts and dreams of agents on both sides of the colour line became central to the practice of understanding the obstacles to creating a genuine democracy.

The curricula and pedagogy of Freedom Schools conceived of power as productive, not just repressive, as students were provoked to reflect on the psychic effects of domination in their own minds and in those of the perpetrators of multi-dimensional, unjustifiable privilege. Student opinion was sought, for example, as to whether or not members of the Ku Klux Klan appeared to be happy or free. By inquiring into how the white psyche was distorted and ridden with guilt and fear, the notion that ‘privileged’ whites also had a stake in fighting for justice was fostered, laying fertile ground on which to cultivate social solidarity and responsibility. Here we can see the beginnings of a theory of how to interrogate the multi-dimensions of physical, political, economic and psychic power with emphasis placed on the ways in which it is not just the disenfranchised that are dehumanised in the perpetuation of white supremacy.

Suissa argues that part of anarchism’s appeal is that it perceives every educational encounter as a moment of striving and creative experimentation to create something better: ‘a certain anti-hierarchical stance not only in model for the ideal society but in patterns of thinking’ (p. 150). But by not focusing on the process of education fully enough, anarchism misses a key insight from critical pedagogy: the process of education is itself political. This is perhaps the central difference between anarchism and critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy seeks to change oppressive social relations in the here and now, and it sees education as central to creating personal and social transformation.

In conclusion, Suissa suggests that even if one is sceptical about the immediate feasibility of an anarchist society, ‘the suggestion that it is theoretically possible, together with the belief that that it reflects the true embodiment of some of our most cherished human values make exploring it an educationally valuable and constructive project’ (p. 152). Suissa contends that embracing the challenge of trying to imagine what such a society might be like is an invaluable endeavour in re-examining and re-articulating our values and how they might translate into forming alternative ways of living and into forging new and egalitarian relations (p. 148). However, it seems to us that whether or not one wants to
advocate a more justly centralised or decentralised form of state power, critical pedagogy offers us viable pedagogical strategies to implement, both within the classroom context and in broader social or global relations, the central human values of freedom and equality in solidarity and collective action. We think this enhanced conversation among critical pedagogy, antiracist pedagogy and anarchist thinking on education can help to show both the continued relevance of radical and creative thinking—and to show that anarchist thought has been part of the development of oppositional, critical, collaborative, teaching and learning projects.

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1. For an excellent overview of freedom schools see the special issue of Radical Teacher, Volume 40 (1991).