

# Anarchist Education, Libertarian Education

**a conceptual discussion**

Angela Scollan  
Federico Farini

for the ICCE Conference

Lower Silesia University, Wroclaw, June 15-18, 2015

**The problem:** the terms ‘anarchist education’ and ‘libertarian education’ are often conflated (see Shotton, 1993; Smith, 1983)

**The aim of the presentation:** to argue for a conceptual distinction between libertarian and anarchist position in education

**Thesis:** Notwithstanding similarities in organizational arrangements and pedagogical practice, anarchist and libertarian education stem from different concepts of human nature and theory of the relationship between the individual and society

**Method:** Two educational experiments, one anarchist and one libertarian will be compared, focusing on their differences

## I. Thesis.i

Libertarian and anarchist education are conflated because they:

- reject traditional models of teacher authority and hierarchical school structure (Suissa, 2010)
- agree with the idea that institutionalized education is inherently a kind of coercion

## **Thesis.i *contd*,**

- are intertwined in practice
- Anarchist pedagogists work in libertarian schools and libertarian pedagogical practices are used by anarchist schools (eg. Modern Schools in the USA)
- embrace the model of ‘learning webs’ ( as theorized later by Illich 1971), where ‘convivial’ institutions replace the coercive educational institutions (eg. for libertarian approach, see Cullen, 1991)

## Thesis.ii: conceptual confusion argued

Anarchist and libertarian educational experiments are similar in terms of pedagogical practice but different with regard to **the concept of human nature and theory of individual-society relationships**

Such differences produce (and are reproduced by) different approaches to education and its aims

## II Method

**Thesis.ii** will be supported by the comparison of the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of two educational experiments:

- **Escuela Moderna (EM)** in Barcelona (1904/1907, anarchist)
- **Summerhill School (SH)** in Suffolk (since 1921, libertarian)

### III. Discussion

**Thesis.i: the conceptual confusion between libertarian and anarchist education depends on similarities between pedagogical practices**

**Method:** Analysis of the schools' organization

SH and EM:

- have no rigid timetable or curriculum, teaching is informal, children are free to come and go as they like
- traditional roles of teacher authority are rejected
- **Co-education** of boys and girls, of rich and poor is stated in SH and EM mission
- Absence of grades, prizes and punishment. *'Having, that is to say, started from the principle of solidarity and equality – we are not prepared to create a new inequality...'* (Ferrer, 1913)
- Combination of theoretical and practical education (liberal and vocational)

### III. Discussion

**Thesis.ii:** anarchist and libertarian education are different in terms of the concept of human nature and theory of individual-society relationships

**Method:** Analysis of the schools' prospectus

**SH:** human nature is innately 'good' and must be preserved from the negative influence of a hierarchical, authoritarian, competitive environment such as institutionalized education (influence of Plato and Rousseau)

**EM:** human nature is not predominantly or innately 'good' or 'evil', but is determined largely by social context. Schools can be a positive context of moral and political '*conscientization*'



### III. Discussion. Thesis.ii *contd*

**SH:** human nature is innately 'good' and must be preserved from the negative influence of a hierarchical authoritarian, competitive environment as institutionalized education (Neill)

If the good nature of the child is preserved during the years of psychological development, the child will resist to the negative influence of society

**EM:** human nature is not predominantly or innately 'good' or 'evil', but as determined largely by social context (Ferrer)

Human behaviour and attitudes are contextualized. 'Being good' (anarchist concept of *fraternity*) is not a psychological state but it is an approach to social relationships, a goal to be pursued in face of changing conditions.

**Fraternity is the political goal of the educated child**

### III. Discussion. Thesis.ii *contd*

**EM:** influenced by the Marxists' environmentalist position. It is environmental influences, amongst them education, and not natural capacities which influence human potential

While SH and EM agree in rejecting intelligence-testing and streaming, SH believes that individual potential can be developed outside (or even *against*) society (bubble model) while EM believes that any kind of individual potential develops through the experience of social relationships

### III. Discussion. Thesis.ii developed

From a different concept of human nature descend two different approaches to Education and Schooling

**Method:** Analysis of the schools' prospectus

**SH:** there is something morally objectionable in the very attempt by educators to pass on any substantial beliefs or moral principles (which are inherently corrupted and self-interested) to children

**EM:** education, even schools, are a valuable aspect of the project for social change, rather than simply another objectionable aspect of the machinery of state bureaucracy (see Marxism, Gramsci, Mao: struggle for hegemonization of institutions)

**III. Discussion. Thesis.ii developed.** Anarchist and libertarian education are different in terms of the theory of individual-society relationships

## **Discussion**

**SH: children as individuals.** If the emotions were right the intellect would look after itself, and as regards social structure he seemed to be assuming that, given emotionally healthy individuals, their culture could safely be left to develop. ‘No systematic attempt to introduce the discussion of political values [. . .] and no real attempt to promote cooperative values’ (Smith 1983: 100)

**EM:** view of humans as essentially social by nature and of the impossibility of talking about individual self-fulfilment in isolation from the social context

### III. Discussion, thesis.ii developed. Two concepts of freedom

**SH:** freedom is primarily individual and psychological. Freedom from constraints (**liberal concept of f.**)

The way forward to a better world is **reform at the individual level**. Libertarian education as mass therapy by which we would gradually achieve a society of self-aware, uninhibited, emotionally stable and happy Individuals

**EM:** freedom is not a psychological state, is not an abstract and context-free concept but carries concrete political connotations (**Marxist concept of f., Paris Commune**). It is a social, historical and relational freedom, from oppression and exploitation

**SH:** freedom as a mean for action

**EM:** freedom as the aim of action

### III. Discussion, thesis.ii developed. Two concepts of freedom

Two different concepts of freedom support two different approaches to the political dimension of education

**SH:** a-political, value-relative position. 'Children as free individuals must determine their own values, in culture as in morality' (Neill)

**EM:** committed political position. Although EM allowed free, critical dialogue and encouraged creative independent thinking on the part of pupils, EM had no qualms about stating its own ideological convictions, and designed a curriculum which would reflect the values implicit in these convictions. 'Moral (*Political*) neutrality in the school can be nothing but hypocrisy' (Ferrer)

### III. Discussion, thesis.ii developed. Two concepts of freedom

Differently from SH, **EM does not aim to provide an education which is politically neutral.**

Ferrer (first, prospectus of EM, 1904): ‘It must be the aim of the **rationalist\*** school to show the children that there will be tyranny and slavery as long as one man depends on another’

At EM, children are encouraged to value brotherhood and cooperation, and to develop a keen sense of social justice, and the curriculum carried a clear anti-capitalist, anti-statist and anti-militarist message

*\*Early anarchist educators emphasized the ‘rational’ nature of the education they were proposing, which they contrasted to the dogmatic teaching of the Church, on the one hand, and the nationalistic education of the capitalist state, on the other (Foucault was a long way)*

### **III. Discussion. Thesis.ii applied to vocational education.**

Political differences between anarchist and libertarian education are mirrored by the approaches to **vocational education**

#### **Similarities between SH and EM:**

- challenge the traditional distinction between liberal and vocational education
- Design curricula where theoretical and practical experiential learning are intertwined (*theory from practice, practice from theory*)



### III. Discussion. Thesis.ii, applied to vocational education.

#### Method: analysis of schools' curricula and mission

**SH:** the combination of theory and practice aims to encourage critical, detached reflection in the sphere of vocational training in order to create more reflective, more intellectually developed workers (*see the current emphasis of curricula on critical thinking V critical theorizing*)

### III. Discussion. Thesis.ii, applied to vocational education.

EM applies the anarchist notion of **integral education**, which essentially involves an understanding of the class structure of capitalist society as being reflected in the distinction between manual labour and intellectual work

### III. Discussion. Thesis.ii, applied to vocational education.

Kropotkin ('Brain Work and Manual Work', 1890; 'Fields, Factories and Workshops Tomorrow', 1974): ideological implication of the distinction between 'brain work' and 'manual work', reflecting the divisions between a 'labouring' and an 'educated' class.

Kropotkin's theory was informed by Marxist theory. The distinction between liberal and vocational education allows and normalizes the degradation of **labour**, a central aspect of human life and an element in personal well-being, into **work** which, in capitalist society, becomes merely a commodity

### **III. Discussion. Thesis.ii, applied to vocational education.**

## **The difference between anarchist and Marxist approach to vocational education**

Anarchist theory places a stronger emphasis on well-being. The anarchist concept of integral education, apart from reflecting the anarchist social ideal, also involves a notion of personal well-being.

The anarchist challenge to the typical division of labour in society would help to avoid the sense of monotony involved in working in one occupation throughout life. This is stated in EM mission

**In this aspect, therefore, EM is closer to SH (personal development) than to the class-oriented approach of Marxism**

## Conclusion

- While allowing both children and teachers a great deal more freedom than was common in schools, EM was no libertarian
- EM (and anarchist) position involves more than just doing away with the state by establishing alternative means of social organization; it involves a normative, substantive and ongoing political commitment
- An implicit or explicit form of political (Ferrer: moral) education underpins EM educational process and curriculum

## Conclusion *cntd*

- EM (as other anarchist experiments, cf. Modern Schools in the USA) offered itself as an embryo of the future, anarchist society
- EM constituted a community based on solidarity and equality which was engaged in the political struggles rather than be a protective bubble like SH
- While SH understand education as a way to protect the individual from society, EM understands education as an arena of political struggle

## Conclusion *cntd*

- Differently from libertarian SH, in anarchist EM individual freedom and well-being are **created and sustained in the context of social interaction**; one cannot consistently talk of the individual good without taking the social context into account
- For anarchist theory the individual and the political dimension are conceptually and logically bound

# Thank you!

[a.scollan@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:a.scollan@mdx.ac.uk)

[f.farini@mdx.ac.uk](mailto:f.farini@mdx.ac.uk)