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Paternalism, Authority and Compulsory Schooling in Social Anarchist Educational Thought

Abstract

Paternalism, authority and compulsion are perhaps not the first issues that come to mind when one thinks about anarchist educational theory. Nonetheless, various anarchist thinkers have already concerned themselves with these issues. This paper investigates the implications of some social anarchists’ views on education for thinking about authority, educational paternalism and compulsory schooling.

In the first part of the paper, some key concepts in social anarchist theory will be introduced in order to demonstrate the importance of education for social anarchists. The paper then discusses anarchist educational ideas with regard to the content and process of education. Potential justifications of authority and educational paternalism receive special attention. The final part of the paper revolves around a discussion of compulsory schooling understood as a paternalist practice. It aims to contribute to ongoing debates by evaluating the educational institution of the school, and the practice of compulsory schooling, from a social anarchist perspective. The pragmatic character of this approach is reflected by some final remarks on the feasibility and desirability of compulsory schooling in imagined anarchist societies and in our existing societies.

This paper is aimed at anarchist and non-anarchist philosophers of education. Anarchist theory critically scrutinizes all authority and hierarchy and takes no existing social structure, institution or practice in any area of life for granted. An engagement with anarchist thinking on educational issues such as authority, directiveness, educational paternalism and compulsory schooling may help anarchists and non-anarchists alike to enrich and deepen their own views on certain practices.

Key words: social anarchism, anarchist education, compulsory schooling, paternalism, human nature

1 Introduction

Paternalism, authority and compulsion are perhaps not the first issues that come to mind when one thinks about anarchist educational theory. Nonetheless, various anarchist thinkers have already concerned themselves with issues of coercion in education. In Anarchism and
Education (2010), Judith Suissa explains that although anarchists “advocate a broadly libertarian approach to education, their normative commitments imply a vision [...] of social change” (p. 17). From these commitments a dilemma arises:

Either the education in question is to be completely non-coercive and avoid the transmission of any substantive set of values, in which case it is hard to see how such an education could be regarded as furthering the desired social change; or it is to involve the explicit transmission of a substantive curriculum regarding the desired social order – in which case it would appear to undermine the libertarian ideal. (Suissa, 2010, p. 17)

This paper focuses on arguments for the second approach (explicit transmission of a substantive curriculum) that can be found in the social anarchist tradition. It investigates the implications such an approach may have for thinking about authority, educational paternalism and compulsory schooling.

In the first part of the paper, the focus on social anarchism as a specific kind of anarchism will be explained. The introduction of some key concepts will allow me to show that education is very important for social anarchists. I then discuss anarchist educational ideas with regard to the content and process of education. Here, the anarchist position on authority and educational paternalism receives special attention. The final part of the paper will revolve around a discussion of compulsory schooling understood as a paternalist practice. Justifications of compulsory schooling have already been provided by non-anarchist scholars such as Chamberlin (1989) and Williams (1990), but such a defense seems much harder to give from an anarchist perspective. This paper aims to contribute to ongoing debates by evaluating the educational institution of the school, and the practice of compulsory schooling, from a social anarchist perspective. This evaluation will meet the criteria Schinkel (2014) formulates for a good discussion of compulsory education. It will be concrete and contextual because it mainly has in mind the possibility of compulsory schooling in an anarchist society. It will be principled because it departs from the core ideas of some social anarchists. The pragmatic character of this approach will become clear in the concluding part of this paper, where some remarks are made on the feasibility and desirability of compulsory schooling in imagined anarchist societies and our existing societies.

This discussion aims to contribute to intra-anarchist debates on educational paternalism
and compulsory schooling, but this does not mean it is not of interest to educational theorists who are unfamiliar with anarchist thought. Anarchist theory critically scrutinizes all authority and hierarchy and takes no existing social structure, institution or practice in any area of life for granted. Such a critical approach can have a refreshing effect on ongoing discussions in philosophy of education as well. An engagement with anarchist thinking on educational issues such as authority, directiveness, educational paternalism and compulsory schooling may help anarchists and non-anarchists alike to enrich and deepen their own views on certain practices.

2 Anarchism and education

Demarcation

Although it is difficult to give one definition that applies to all forms of anarchism, it is quite safe to say that anarchism is an anti-hierarchical political theory that rejects, among other hierarchical concepts, the concept of the state (Suissa, 2010). Judith Suissa describes how anarchism is historically connected to the two other major modern political doctrines: liberalism and socialism. For the purpose of this paper, it suffices to briefly mention their main points of disagreement. Although the relation between anarchism and socialism has usually been quite close, one can state that anarchists have always rejected the Marxist idea of a socialist state or a proletarian rule. Liberal theory, on the other hand, registers a smaller, but still considerable overlap with anarchist theory. While both adhere to more or less the same set of core values, anarchists do not believe that a liberal democratic state is the best way to reach a society in which these values can flourish (Suissa, 2010).

“Anarchism” is best understood as an umbrella term for a broad range of political theories that have at least the above in common. One way to distinguish various anarchist viewpoints is to make a distinction between individual and social anarchism. The difference between the two lies in the extent to which they think a community contributes to the freedom and well-being of individuals. Individualist anarchism tends to stress individual autonomy, whereas social anarchists think such freedom can only be fully attained by individuals who are firmly embedded in a community. It is important to note that the kind of anarchism one adheres to has implications for educational thought. The famous individualist anarchist Max Stirner, for example, argues for “personalist” education that aims to create “sovereign characters” (Stirner 2010, p. 12). As we will see, this is quite a different approach from the one taken by some social anarchists.
In this paper, I will reason from the theoretical perspective of social anarchism. Two arguments support this decision. First, it will become clear from a discussion of social anarchist values and the role of education that is derived from this, that social anarchism is a type of anarchism that is comparatively open to the idea of compulsory education. Moreover, as Suissa argues, social anarchists have contributed most to anarchist theory by offering “the most interesting insights into the relationship between education and social change” (Suissa, 2010, p. 14). In what follows, I mean “‘social anarchism’” when I talk about “‘anarchism’”. I wish to emphasize that the claims in this papers are merely about the compatibility of certain concepts in educational theory with some views held by social anarchist authors.

**Core ideas**

The stance against all hierarchies, not the unconditional rejection of the state, functions as the core of anarchism from which most other values can be derived. The hostility towards the state and capitalism are only “incidental byproducts of this primary rejection of hierarchy” (Mueller, 2012, p. 15). Furthermore, it is safe to say that all anarchists are critical of authority whenever they encounter it.

It is a misconception, however, that all anarchists oppose all authority. In particular, especially some social anarchists recognize that social life can sometimes benefit from a rational form of authority. With “‘rational’”, anarchists simply mean that someone who has expertise in a certain domain is a legitimate authority in that domain. Additionally, they acknowledge that “individuals or organisations may have a right to command others, but such a right must always be temporary, and always justifiable in terms of the needs of the community in question” (Suissa, 2010, p. 59). Someone can be is justified to be an authority in certain situations, but not to have authority based on an institutionalized, artificial power relation, the latter being what the term hierarchy designates. This rather nuanced view on authority challenges the widespread myth that anarchists reject all forms of organisation. In fact, concepts like “‘self-organization’” are central to many contemporary anarchist theories.

The social anarchist rejection of hierarchy on the one hand and the acceptance of some form of rational authority on the other both stem from a specific conception of human nature. According to social anarchist Peter Kropotkin, human nature is essentially twofold: it consists
of an egoistic and an altruistic strand. In *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1972), Kropotkin described numerous cases of mutual aid in the animal kingdom and various human societies. Mutual aid is the voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit. Kropotkin emphasizes this factor of evolution in order to refute the assumption made in many Social Darwinist theories that people are selfish by nature. Anarchists like Kropotkin believe that the cultural and social environment of a person determines whether her egoistic or altruistic side will take the upper hand (Suissa, 2010, p. 28).

In his critical discussion of social anarchism, David Morland distinguishes between two kinds of conceptions of human nature: “Either human nature is taken to be a construct of one’s social context, or it is held to possess certain transcendent, universal elements. [...] It is either contextual or universal.” (Morland, 1997, p. 6). The anarchist conception is contextual in the sense that external circumstances determine whether the egoistic or the sociable side of a person prevails. It is universal in acknowledging that 1) every human being is born with both egoistic and sociable propensities and that 2) neither of those can be completely eradicated by environmental factors.

This account of human nature informs the views on education held by some anarchist thinkers in multiple ways. First, it shows why education is so important for creating the necessary conditions for an anarchist society. The importance of the right “‘context’” or environment explains why anarchists oppose hierarchical systems such as the state and capitalism. They believe that being in power will eventually corrupt even the most benevolent ruler. Moreover, the competitive nature of capitalism reinforces our egoistic inclination at the expense of our capacity for mutual aid and sociability. An anarchist society, on the other hand, would have to nurture the propensity for mutual aid (Suissa, 2010, p. 31). Education, understood here as the intentional stimulation of a child’s development in a worthwhile direction, can be seen as the main component of “‘nurture’”. Thus, it is of prime importance for anarchists striving for social change.

Secondly, the fact that anarchism still leaves room for the determination of our traits by nature, explains why the importance of education will not diminish once an anarchist society is in place. Anarchists cannot permit losing sight of the danger our innate egoism poses to a society in which fraternal bonds between people are strong and cooperation flourishes. Maintaining
such a society will thus be a continuous, never-ending process in which education of both
children and adults has an important role to play. This permanent risk is the reason why
anarchist education theory allows for some educational interventions to direct the development
of children in a certain way. This topic will be discussed in further detail in the third section of
this paper.

Anarchist values

For anarchists, neutral education is not only practically impossible in reality, but also an
undesirable ideal. In the words of Josefa Martín Luengo, the founder of the Spanish anarchist
school Paideia, one cannot have the pedagogy without the ideology (Fremeaux & Jordan, 2012,
p. 118). This ideology does not only consists not only in of the ideas explained above, but also
in the values of freedom, equality, and fraternity.

When discussing freedom, anarchists often subscribe to a liberal, Kantian notion of
autonomy that involves making one’s own choices based on rational reflection (Suissa, 2010,
p. 41). However, anarchists want more than negative freedom, that is, the formal freedom from
interference. They strive for what Philippe Van Parijs calls “real freedom”, which should be
interpreted as “involving not only the sheer right but also the genuine capacity to do whatever
one might wish to do” (Van Parijs & Vanderborght, 201, p. 104).

Moreover, the anarchist notion of freedom can only be understood in the context of an
account of political and social freedom (Suissa, 2010). Social anarchists would not go so far as
to say that a community is more important than the sum of its members, but they would also
not endorse a society of atomized, formally autonomous individuals. Michael Bakunin states
that he “can feel free only in the presence of and in relationship with other men” (Bakunin, in

Just as anarchists are concerned with the material circumstances that make freedom
possible, they focus on social and economic equality, rather than on the legalistic idea of
everyone being equal before the law (Suissa, 2010, p. 63). Anarchists see equality of conditions
and opportunities not as a goal in itself, but as instrumental for ensuring human flourishing.

Anarchists hold that the needs of different persons cannot be satisfied by treating them the same
and they thus reject radical egalitarianism. As Suissa puts it, “while the social anarchists seek
to eliminate inequalities of rank and hierarchy, they seek to increase those of kind”, because the
latter are a sign of the social diversity they wish to obtain and maintain (2010, p. 64).
Finally, it is essential for an anarchist society that all its members have a well-developed attitude of *fraternity*, or “feeling a bond between oneself and others as equals, as moral beings with the same basic needs and an interest in leading a life of one’s own” (White, 1983, p. 72, found in Suissa, 2010). This fraternal feeling contributes to both the equality and freedom in a society. It can be promoted and developed in multiple ways. First, a relative degree of material equality makes it easier for people to identify with each other. Secondly, cooperation can contribute to fraternal feelings towards those one cooperates with. Finally, a fraternal attitude is developed by coming to hold certain beliefs about others. Suissa concludes that “developing such beliefs and attitudes, then, is clearly a task for education” (Suissa, 2010, p. 68).

3 Directiveness in the anarchist educational process

Prefiguration is an important concept in anarchist theory. Here it means that the best way to reach the goal of an anarchist society is to use means that are consistent with, and even already partly realizing, this goal. Put simply, the processes used in an anarchist school must be anarchist processes, in the sense that they promote the core values of fraternity, freedom, and equality and create a cooperative environment.

How then, can the goal of a social anarchist society consisting of self-governing communities of autonomous, yet cooperative individuals best be attained? The prefigurative answer is simple: by giving students opportunities to govern themselves. An anarchist school can then be understood as a collective of individuals that makes decisions about the rules, processes, and functions of the institution.

This description of self-government as a leading educational process once again seems to bring the pedagogy of anarchism rather close to radically progressivist theories. Indeed, anarchist thinkers have, quite naturally, always attached great value to the freedom of the child. This is not to say, however, that no anarchists would ever accept limitations on the freedom of students. Some recognize important developmental differences between children and adults: this is shown by their emphasis on the necessity of education. Bakunin, for example, does “not claim that the child should be treated as an adult, that all his caprices should be respected, that when his childish will stubbornly flouts the elementary rules of science and common sense we should avoid making him feel that he is wrong” (Bakunin, in Dolgoff 1973, p. 112). Most anarchists would even agree with the contention of the educational philosopher
R.S. Peters that while there must be authority in any social system, “the only question is what sort of authority there should be and what should be its bounds” (Peters, 1973, p. 21).

What kind of authority, then, is appropriate in anarchist education? Most anarchists would not object to saying a teacher is an authority by virtue of her didactical experience and subject knowledge, or, as R.S. Peters does, that teachers have a kind of “provisional authority” (Peters, 1973, pp. 47-48). But a teacher is only allowed to have authority that is rationally justified. For anarchists, this means that the teacher has authority over her students only for a limited period of time and in the function of a specific goal. I argue that the anarchist teacher may limit the freedom of her students in the light of 1) social anarchist values and 2) the wellbeing of her students.

**Social anarchist values**

The first argument for some limitations on the freedom of a student is neither school-specific nor child-specific. It does not exclusively apply to situations that arise in an institutional, educational setting, and it is not even based on specific characteristics of children. Rather, it posits that both the anarchist conception of freedom itself and the interrelation of the anarchist core values place limits on the exercise of freedom for all individuals.

As was shown before, the ideal of individual freedom becomes somewhat less desirable for anarchists as soon as it is attained at the expense of other important values such as equality and fraternity. These values embody the ideal of a cooperative society. Unlimited freedom for some might result in a very unequal community in which many are unfree and fraternal bonds are underdeveloped. In an anarchist ethics, the closely connected values keep each other in check. When transformed into a guideline for individual behaviour, this interconnectivity of values asks individuals to find a good balance between them. An individual should refrain from exercising her freedom to choose a certain option, not only when this option limits the freedom of others, but also when this option violates the values of equality and fraternity.

**Student well-being (paternalism)**

The term “paternalism” has been the subject of much debate. I use Dworkin’s analysis of paternalism:

I suggest the following conditions as an analysis of X acts paternalistically towards Y by doing (omitting) Z:
1) Z (or its omission) interferes with the liberty or autonomy of Y.

2) X does so without the consent of Y.

3) X does so only because X believes Z will improve the welfare of Y (where this includes preventing his welfare from diminishing), or in some way promote the interests, values, or good of Y.

(Dworkin, 2017)

Anarchists are often highly suspicious of paternalist interference due to the hierarchical relationship that it implies: the second condition can be understood as a certain form of oppression. However, we already saw that they recognize important differences between the rational capacities of children and those of adults. These differences might justify paternalistic interference towards children in situations where such interference towards adults such as their parents would not be justifiable.

Educational paternalism is not rejected by anarchists. First off, the acceptability of paternalist acts is a matter of gradation, just as the development of a child’s (e.g. rational) capacities is. A child of four needs far more guidance in choosing and performing activities during a school day than a seventeen-year-old high school student. That being said, there are at least two possible justifications for educational paternalism possible that are compatible with anarchist views.

a) No harm

More often than adults, children perform actions that (almost) immediately turn out to have unwanted and unforeseen consequences that cause them harm or make them in some way much worse-off than they would have been without acting in such a way. This is the first group of acts that may be prohibited by means of paternalistic intervention. This kind of justification, that is based on the child’s safety, is the one that anarchist philosopher and linguist Noam Chomsky had in mind when telling an anecdote about his daughter. He slapped her hand away in order to prevent her from severely burning herself on the stove in support of his claim that “children do require a certain level of discipline” (Chomsky, 2010).

b) Educational aim

When paternalist action is used to prevent such immediate, visible harm, it is almost always seen as unproblematic and even as a duty. An appeal to such harm is, however, of little use when we try to decide whether teachers should be allowed to act paternalistically in many
educational contexts. Then we need to take the goal of education as a starting point and ask ourselves whether that goal justifies the means of paternalism.

Anarchists are not radical progressivists when it comes to education, because the process of growing up free “is not a relaxed laissez-faire attitude where children can simply do whatever they want while the educators remain impassive and value-free” (Fremeaux & Jordan, 2012, p. 108). An important aim of anarchist education is to develop dispositions towards cooperation in children. That goal can only be achieved if children acquire a specific set of knowledge and skills. The anarchist educator, in other words, cannot be indifferent with regards to the content and processes of education if he wants to reach his goal. Paternalism is acceptable, and sometimes even unavoidable, when it helps to promote the goal of anarchist education.

The freedom of the student is not the absolute criterion of anarchist practices, but rather part of the goal of the educational process as a whole. Not all freely-chosen actions contribute to the child’s development into a person that would thrive in an anarchist society. This is not always problematic since children should be able to learn from their mistakes. But the anarchist teacher can impose boundaries on his students with the aim of his educational project in mind because children are not yet capable of viewing the (long-term) consequences of their actions. In this respect, anarchists would agree with Joel Feinberg’s claim that “respect for the child’s future autonomy, as an adult, often requires preventing his free choice now” (Feinberg, in Curren, 2007 p. 113). Anarchist educators may resort to paternalism if that benefits the development of their students into self-governing individuals.

A fitting example here comes from the anarchist school Paideia. Its founder explains how children often return from the summer holidays with “tendencies towards dependence” because for two months, their parents “do everything for them, they watch a lot of TV, get influenced by consumerism and competitiveness. The children lost their autonomy.” (Fremeaux & Jordan, 2012, p. 109). The teachers deal with this problem by applying a state of exception called Mandado (“to be ordered”):

As students are seen to no longer be able to take the initiative to do things themselves and are asking the authority figures (the adults) what to do, they are mandado-ed, told what to do by the staff. This state of exception remains until the students decide to call for an assembly where they will discuss collectively whether they have returned to a
state of freedom and responsibility. [...] “They need to re-find their anarchist values,” concludes Martín Luengo.

(Fremeaux & Jordan, 2012, p. 109)

4 Anarchist perspectives on compulsory schooling

The findings of the previous sections have shown us that authority and paternalism in education may sometimes be justified from an anarchist perspective. I will now change my focus from paternalist practices within an educational environment to the currently almost universal practice of compulsory schooling. I admit that the distinction between education and schooling is a difficult one that requires justification (Winch & Gingell, 2008). I do not wish to commit myself to an approach that sees the two as very different. I follow Winch & Gingell in their minimal definition of the school as “an institution dedicated to educational purposes, usually for children and adolescents” (ibid., p. 189).

Compulsory schooling as a paternalist practice

I understand compulsory schooling as a paternalist practice. In order for the paternalism involved in compulsory schooling to fit the general model proposed by Dworkin (2017), two modifications need to be made. First, compulsory schooling is an intervention that is not aimed at one child, but at the class of individual children in a community. Secondly, compulsory schooling can be understood as an instance of impure paternalism, in which “the class of persons interfered with is larger than the class being protected” (Dworkin, 2017), because not only children but also their parents are being interfered with. These modifications yield the following definition of compulsory schooling as a paternalist intervention:

The anarchist community acts paternalistically in an impure way towards the class of children and parents by implementing compulsory schooling iff

1) Compulsory schooling interferes with the liberty or autonomy of the class of children and parents.

2) The community does so without the consent of the class of children and parents.

3) The community does so only because it believes compulsory schooling will improve the welfare of the class of children (where this includes preventing their welfare from diminishing), or in some way promote the interests, values, or good of the class of children.
In the previous section, I explained how paternalist practices in education are not per se rejected by anarchists. While such interventions should be used as little as possible for the sake of the child’s autonomy, the limited capacity of children to oversee the long-term consequences of their actions justifies such interventions by teachers and other educators. Compulsory schooling can also be justified in this way.

One could say that, while the first and second condition point towards negative or rather undesirable aspects of paternalist interference (at least in the eyes of those that care about personal autonomy), the third condition has to do with the positive side of paternalism: the focus on the welfare, interests, values or good of the child.

I propose that a paternalist intervention is justified when the advantages, captured in the third condition, outweigh the disadvantages that are captured in the first two conditions. In what follows, I will evaluate whether the advantages of some kind of compulsory schooling in an anarchist society might outweigh the disadvantages. I will start by listing some merits of schools from an anarchist perspective while engaging with anarchist critics of schooling. I will then look into the weight that should be given to the negative aspect of limitations on the freedom of the children and parents involved. As a way of concluding this paper, I will formulate some reflections on the possibility and desirability of compulsory schooling in an anarchist and in our current society.

**Criticisms of schooling**

Suissa (2010) tells us that “experiments in implementing social-anarchist principles on a community level did not involve abolishing schools altogether, but, on the contrary, often centred around the establishment of schools - albeit schools that were radically different from the typical public schools of the time” (p. 54). Some anarchists seem to regard the school as the optimal place for the realization of anarchist educational aims. Below, I provide some possible arguments for this statement, but first it needs to be emphasized that the practice of schooling has by no means remained free of anarchist criticism. Authors such as Ivan Illich, Paul Goodman, Colin Ward and those involved in de- and unschooling movements have all taken issue with compulsory schooling from a political perspective (albeit not always an explicitly anarchist one). However, I do not believe that their criticisms of (compulsory) schooling always lead them to denounce schools as institutions altogether.

Illich is critical of all institutions that do not support personal growth but instead add to
the helplessness of those who are increasingly made to rely on them (Illich, 1971, p. 3). The thrust of his argument against schools is that they create an artificial divide that impedes learning:

The very existence of obligatory schools divides any society into two realms: some time spans and processes and treatments and professions are “academic” or “pedagogic,” and others are not. The power of school thus to divide social reality has no boundaries: education becomes unworldly and the world becomes noneducational. (Illich, 1971, p. 24)

However, Illich does not seem to think that institutions are intrinsically problematic. He distinguishes between convivial and manipulative institutions and argues that “we need a set of criteria which will permit us to recognize those institutions which support personal growth rather than addiction” (ibid., p. 53). According to him, we should prefer a life of action over a life of consumption and choose our institutions accordingly.

Anarchist thinker Paul Goodman argues that “the compulsory school system, like the whole of our economy, politics and standard of living, has become a lockstep. It is no longer designed for the maximum growth and future practical utility of the children into a changing world” (Goodman, 1966, p. 21). He advises his readers to look into a variety of different solutions, only some of which would involve the abolishment of schooling of any kind: “We should be experimenting with different kinds of school, no school at all, the real city as school, farm schools, practical apprenticeships, guided travel, work camps, little theatres and local newspapers, community service” (ibid., p. 60). Colin Ward, too, primarily seems to take issue with the historical and current authoritarian structure of schools without really wanting to do without them altogether when he refers to Bakunin’s demand for “schools from which the principle of authority will be eliminated” (Ward, 1963, p. 82).

That being said, there is also a group of critics who do think that schooling is inherently problematic. Within this group we can count “deschoolers” who “reject the present schooling system because of its inherently authoritarian nature” (Lyn-Piluso, 2008, p. 83).

Joseph Todd argues that “homeschooling can be viewed as direct action of the family against the institutional structure of school and deschooling […] could even be viewed as a form of institutional sabotage, another anarchic technique to use against compulsory schooling” (Todd,
2012, p. 75). Anarchists of a more individualist type are generally more hostile toof educational institutions than social anarchists. In an essay entitled *Toward the destruction of schooling* Jan Matthews argues, for example, that the main problem with schooling is that it is “a type of sociological propaganda, aimed at the integration of the individual into the social group” (Matthews, 2004, p. 20).

The merits of schooling

When Paul Goodman rhetorically asks us: “Since schooling undertakes to be compulsory, must we not continually review its claim to be useful?” (Goodman, 1966, p. 9), I imagine most anarchists would be in complete agreement. Critically inspecting institutions and practices that we seem to take for granted is part and parcel of an anarchist outlook on the world, and there is no reason that schools should escape such analysis. Furthermore, I agree with these authors that many elements of our current practices of schooling are problematic when viewed from an anarchist perspective.

However, from this it does not seem to follow automatically that schooling itself should be abolished. If one uses a minimalistic definition of the school as an institution dedicated to educational purposes, schooling does not seem *inherently* problematic. As Goodman, Illich, Ward and others seem to point out themselves, current practices of schooling are primarily problematic because they mirror the undesirable or perverse economic or political aspects of the society in which they are embedded. If one agrees that schooling is a practice that is not inherently problematic, there is still room for the possibility that a *radically changed* school system might be valuable in an anarchist society.

Firstly, the efficiency and simplification of the educational process schools can provide would plausibly still be valuable in an anarchist society. According to John Dewey, who famously argued for progressive, democratic schools, the institution of a school should serve to provide a simplified environment for students. because modern societies are “too complex to be assimilated *in toto*” (Dewey, 1966, p. 20). Perhaps a decentralized anarchist society consisting of a multiplicity of relatively small communities would be less complex than our current society. However, it seems plausible to assume that it would still be true that “our daily associations cannot be trusted to make clear to the young the part played in our activities by remote physical energies, and by invisible structures” (ibid., p. 19).
An educational institution dedicated to the support of learning processes seems efficient in other respects as well. It seems helpful for students to have easy access to educational resources through mediation of, or with the help of, professional educators who have a certain amount of didactical knowledge and pedagogical skills. Schools can and should also be places with an exceptionally high tolerance for mistakes and experimentation. Assuming that an anarchist society would still place at some value on efficiency, it seems for example quite unfeasible to let students master a variety of skills by means of apprenticeships. Furthermore, a school can be a place where children are less restrained by existing societal norms and practices, leaving them more free to experiment in accordance with progressive educational ideals.

This does not mean, however, that the school should be isolated from society. Dewey emphasizes that the school, although being a distinct institution, should not be isolated from the wider social setting in which it functions. The curriculum and organization of the school should ensure that “the artificial gap between life in school and out is reduced” as much as possible (Dewey, 1966, p. 195).

A second set of arguments in favour of anarchist schools revolves around their potential to function as an anarchist democratic learning community. As Dewey sees it, an important task of schooling is “to see to it that each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment” (ibid., p. 20). Illich agrees that school offers children “an opportunity to escape their homes and meet new friends” (Illich, 1971, p. 92) and Goodman admits that “the compulsory law is useful to get the children away from the parents, but it must not result in trapping the children” (Goodman, 1966, p. 17).

Unlike the family, a school community is not solely based on strong attachments or unmediated care. As such it constitutes a better preparation for adult life outside of the home in which one needs to deal with strangers to which “strong family ties are not easily extended” (Strike, 2000, p. 620). Instead of these strong attachments, a feeling of fraternity can arise in schools. Although the diversity in background, capacities, and preferences of children can be enormous, students still have some things in common, usually at least their age and a general shared educational aim.

These characteristics all locate the school as functioning at a meso-level, with the family
at the micro-level and the broader community at the macro-level. This distinct character of the school seems to make it particularly conductive to anarchist educational aims, because it allows for a substantial educational community to arise.

As Ritter (1980) explains, individuality and community do not conflict for social anarchists. Instead, in their view “community and individuality, as they develop, intensify each other and coalesce” (p. 29). Since for social anarchists, relatively small-scale communities are the ideal components of a society, children are well-prepared for life in such a society if they have already fully experienced what it means to be a member of a community in their school. They can develop tendencies towards mutual aid, fraternity and reciprocal awareness in a sheltered community that in a way already requires such tendencies to thrive.

The school being a community is also beneficial to individual learners in a second way.

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Ritter (1980) states that “in arguing for community as a support for individuality, anarchists claim it not only as a constituent of the self, but also as a cause of the self’s growth” (p. 30). This holds not only for emotional development, which is stimulated by social feeling, but also for more intellectual development, while “participants in a community are confident enough to ‘compare their ideas, suggest their doubts, examine their mutual difficulties’ openly, all of which improve their understanding” (ibid.).

Limitations on the freedom of parents

As we saw before, compulsory schooling can be understood as a paternalist practice in both a pure and an impure sense, since it interferes with the freedom of both children and their parents. General arguments for the justification of educational paternalism towards children have already been given in a previous section and will not be repeated here. Instead, I discuss to what extent social anarchists would find the impact of compulsory schooling on parents problematic. It seems that a view on the justifiability of compulsory schooling will in part be informed by one’s views on parental rights. Within the social anarchist tradition, there is widespread agreement that children are no one’s property, as exemplified by Bakunin who writes that children “are neither the property of the parents nor even of society. They belong only to their own future freedom” (Bakunin, in Maximoff, 1953, p. 327). Opinions differ on whether or not it follows from this that parental rights do not have any meaning in an anarchist approach to child-rearing. A rough distinction can be made between Non-Existence Views and Threshold
Views. Both sets of views have their own implications for our discussion of compulsory schooling.

Non-Existence Views on parental rights have been most forcefully defended by anarchafeminist theorists such as Peggy Kornegger (2012) and Carol Ehrlich (1979). Kornegger explains that such feminism is anarchist in nature because it “postulates the nuclear family as the basis for all authoritarian systems. The lesson the child learns, from father to teacher to boss to god, is to OBEY the great anonymous voice of Authority” (Kornegger, p. 26, 2012). Such a stance has led some anarchist thinkers to advocate the abolition of the family and related conceptions of parental rights.

Delving into these views into detail is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it can be claimed that anarchists who opt for a Non-Existence View on parental rights do not need to be particularly worried about the effect that a practice such as compulsory schooling may have on parents, since parents do not have any more rights to influence the development of children than other community members have.

Matters are not so straightforward for those who defend some kind of Threshold View on parental discretion. Measures that limit the freedom of parents to raise their children as they see fit can then only be justified with an eye on the interests of the child. This approach has been defended by various authors working in a rather liberal framework. Roger Marples, for example, thinks that parents have conditional parental discretion, which means that they “must satisfy a minimal threshold of appropriate care towards their children if state intervention is to be withheld” (Marples, 2014, p. 26). This minimal threshold is not reached when a child “is in danger of being either seriously harmed or not having her fundamental needs properly catered for” (ibid., p. 29).

Some anarchist thinkers agree with this approach. For instance, Bakunin seems to agree with this line of thought, as is shown by the following passage:

Parents shall have the right to care for and guide the education of their children, under the ultimate control of the commune which retains the right and the obligation to take children away from parents who, by example or by cruel and inhuman treatment, demoralize or otherwise hinder the physical and mental development of their children.

(Bakunin, in Dolgoff 1973, p. 112)
If one wants to argue for compulsory schooling of some kind in this framework, it needs to be shown that this practice is necessary to cater for a child’s fundamental needs.

Another variation of the Threshold View has been defended by Joel Feinberg, according to whom children have “anticipatory autonomy rights”, of which the “right to an open future” is one (Feinberg, in Curren, 2007). Parents can violate this right of the child to have as many future opportunities as possible before children can even exercise this right. The child’s right to an open future in a social anarchist society could be used to justify compulsory schooling because it is this schooling that prepares the child optimally for a co-operative yet autonomous life in a community. If parents want to give their children as many future options as possible, they need to send their children to school, the argument might go.

The difficulty with Threshold Views in the debate on compulsory schooling is one that plagues every philosophical theory that ultimately revolves around some threshold or cut-off point that should distinguish one part of cases on a gradualist spectrum from another. What exactly falls below the minimal threshold? It is one thing to argue that some kind of education belongs to this set of basic needs of children, but it is quite another to say that compulsory schooling is the only or even the ideal means to ensure that these needs are being catered to. Nevertheless, I think this is a position that could be coherently defended by anarchists. The arguments in favour of anarchist schools (cf. p. 8) can be invoked to argue that formal education serves anarchist educational aims better than informal kinds of education at home or in the community. We may conclude, then, that a defense of compulsory schooling is at least philosophically compatible with the ideas of some anarchist thinkers. As I will discuss in the next section, this does not mean that such a compulsory measure would be particularly desirable or feasible in an anarchist society.

5 Compulsory education in practice

In an anarchist society

Throughout this paper, I have shown that education is crucial for the anarchist project of creating successful communities of autonomous and co-operative human beings. to succeed. At the basis of anarchist educational theory lies the realization that guiding the development of children is always necessary for obtaining desirable results. Even when one does not agree with a specific anarchist goal of education, the realism that speaks from such ideas makes their methods relevant for further research.
Unfortunately, in the anarchist nuance also lies its biggest weakness. What Popper (1995) calls the paradox of freedom, “it takes a constraint to catch a constraint”, lays bare what is perhaps the greatest tension in anarchism. When one wants to create a society of free human beings in a prefigurative way, every limitation on freedom in the process is problematic. While most educational interventions might still be vindicated of this paradox because they concern children, the case of compulsory schooling shows that interfering with the actions of parents is, although not impossible, much harder to justify. One might wonder whether the social censure exercised by a community is after all any different from legal government.

Ritter (1980) summarizes the arguments anarchists give in favour of social censure. Social censure can control the behaviour of individuals in three different ways: through (1) “penalties, in the form of threatened or actual rebuke, which compel obedience from fear”, (2) “internalization, a process through which censured individuals absorb prevalent standards of conduct” and (3) “reasoned arguments, through which a censurer tries to convince his neighbors that they should mend their ways” (p. 12).

According to Ritter, the most convincing argument anarchists give in favour of social censure is “that censure differs from legal government in ways which make it less coercive on the whole” (p. 18). While admitting that censure curtails liberty to some extent, they argue that it respects the freedom of individuals to think and act for themselves as much as possible, and certainly more than legal government does. This has to do with various features of social censure: since it does not suffer from the remoteness, generality, and permanence that legal government is bound to, it is better able to adjust sanctions to particular circumstances so that “they interfere less with conduct” (p. 18).

The main power of social censure lies in its use of internalization and reasoned arguments instead of coercion. Ritter concludes that “since anarchist censure is distinguished from government by its greater tendency to give reasons of this kind”, anarchists can argue that “so far as censure provides more of them than legal government does, it is the more liberating method of control” (p. 23).

This does not make the tension between means and ends with regards to freedom disappear completely, however. I have argued, for example, that compulsory schooling can be justified for anarchists on the basis of balancing the interests of children and parents. While I
have argued that the negative effects of such a paternalist intervention are much smaller than
the benefits for school-going children, they are nevertheless present and should not be
neglected. This tension might be the inevitable consequence of our inherently twofold human
nature. Since anarchists are not so naïve as to think that the egoistic part can ever be fully
eradicated in everyone, measures that limit a person’s freedom might sometimes be necessary.
For instance, when an individual abuses another person, force can be used against the abuser in
order to protect the victim, regardless of their age. But can and should parents be punished in a
stateless, anarchist community when they decide not send their children to school? As we saw
above, this case is much less straightforward.
The anarchist presumption against forms of community compulsion is naturally very
strong. Continuous awareness of such issues would be crucial to prevent avoid that an anarchist
society from ultimately collapsings back into some kind of state. For this reason, it seems
unlikely that anarchists would be willing to defend something more coercive than “’strongly
suggested education’” in an anarchist society. Unresolvable tensions would perhaps also remain
in anarchist educational processes. A potential worry might be that rationally justified
pedagogical authority and educational paternalism are generative of hierarchy. Whether
anarchist theory, combined with a commitment to continuous reflection and experimentation,
would be able to sufficiently address such concerns, seems an important matter for further
research (see for example Fretwell, 2019, for a good discussion of similar issues).

In our current societies
The more practically inclined reader looking for concrete recommendations for changes in our
current educational system may feel somewhat dissatisfied after reading this paper. After all, it
is a case for anarchist schooling in an anarchist society, a combination that currently does not
exist. However, this paper can still inform a discussion about compulsory schooling nowadays,
because I believe some anarchists might well be prepared to advocate compulsory school
attendance. This would mean that anarchists support a certain institution of a state that they
eventually want to abolish. While this may sound paradoxical, Noam Chomsky explains how
this can work.
In today’s world […], the goal of a committed anarchist should be to defend some state
institutions from the attack against them, while trying at the same time to pry them open
to more meaningful public participation – and ultimately, to dismantle them in a much
more free society, if the appropriate circumstances can be achieved. (Chomsky, 1996, p. 75)

Anarchists who think schools have their merits might perceive state schools with compulsory attendance to belong to this group of state institutions that are to be defended. They are clearly not anarchist, but they might still be seen as the optimal place for nurturing values anarchists find important, such as fraternity and autonomy.

Prying state schools open to more meaningful public participation, then, could first mean making some valuable practices from private schools available to all children. Such practices can range from developing civic virtues in civic education classes to transforming schools into democratic communities where every member is to a certain extent responsible for the provided education. Anarchist educational theorists do not always need to re-invent the wheel; instead, they can use a lot from existing “‘free’” and “‘experimental’” schools.

While I showed how nuanced anarchist educational thought can be, it is important to keep in mind that what anarchists want to achieve in the end is still very radical. Judith Suissa, for example, points out that the anarchist educator Francisco Ferrer’s prefigurative ideal of the school as a “community based on solidarity and equality, seems to go one step further than the liberal humanist ideal that the way to moral progress lies in gradual intellectual enlightenment” (Suissa, 2010, p. 81). And while changing the educational system might be a good start for some anarchists, for most anarchists this will not be enough. Among them is Kropotkin (1912), who does not “cherish the illusion that a thorough reform in education, or in any of the issues indicated in the preceding chapters, will be made as long as the civilized nations remain under the present narrowly egoistic system of production and consumption”. After all, it is still a revolution anarchists are after.

References


