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The Dilemma of Praxis

Anarchism and Education: A Comparative Approach to Theory and Practice

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Abstract

Anarchists argue that public (or state) education is antithetical to the idea of freedom because state education is a central controlling agency in society. This thesis addresses two questions. First, in order to liberate students, what kind of pedagogy did the anarchist propose? Second, in a practical sense, did anarchist educational experiments achieve the libertarian results for which they were hoping? I argue throughout this thesis that while anarchism presents a systematic education strategy to effect radical social change, the practical application of this theory was both contradictory and a failure.

In order to expose this failure, this thesis uses the positive and negative conception of liberty as a navigational tool. I argue that both forms of liberty are equally important to anarchists and this importance feeds into their educational methodology. To anarchists, education possessed a responsibility to remove constraints in the classroom, while education also had a responsibility to fully develop all human faculties. A stress on both forms of liberty led to an irreconcilable tension emerging in their educational experiments because both concepts of freedom could not develop side by side consistently.

This thesis identifies and compares two separate educational traditions emerging in anarchism. The first is integral education and the second is aesthetic education. The First Chapter of this thesis draws together the goals of anarchism and illuminates how these goals feed into their educational theory. Chapter Two develops an exposition on integral education. Chapter Three evaluates an historical attempt by the Spanish anarchist/educator Francisco Ferrer to put some of these ideas (broadly) into practice. Chapter Four develops an exposition on aesthetic education while Chapter Five examines Leo Tolstoy's educational experiment that, (broadly), represents an example of the aesthetic educative tradition. I argue that a close examination of these practical experiments, using the positive/negative liberty model, reveals the inherent paradox evident in anarchist education, at least at a practical level.