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Teaching against Hierarchies: An Anarchist Approach

Stephanie Spoto, California State University, Monterey Bay

Abstract: The state of California spends more on prisons than on colleges and universities, and the fact that these two budgetary figures are often compared shows the relationship between the two state institutions. Our classrooms, starting from a very early stage, not only prepare children to be productive members of the consumer economy but educate them for complacency in the face of state violence and mass incarceration. In attempting to move away from hierarchical models of education, this article looks at the feminist pedagogical theory of bell hooks and antiauthoritarian and anarchist theorists such as Jacques Rancière and Derrick Jensen in order to begin investigating alternatives to current education systems. It also identifies major problems in attempting to construct antihierarchical classrooms within a larger society that is still suffering from oppression and structural inequality, and claims that, if not paired with direct action, any attempt for revolutionizing education will meet up against repressive state institutions.

Keywords: epistemological anarchism, radical pedagogy, Feyerabend (Paul), hooks (bell), intersectionality, school-to-prison pipeline

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Like so many other children, I loved learning: “All children (and other humans, and for that matter nonhumans!) love to learn. You have to work really hard to beat that out of them” (Jensen 2005, 187). I would stay up late into the night and read science books until my eyes blurred; obsess over amphibian identification manuals; play writer and practice writing poetry after finding a collection by Lewis Carroll. On the weekends, I would build tree houses made from wood that I had stolen from nearby construction sites, invent bizarre “machines” using broken roller skates, or endlessly rearrange model train tracks to create the perfect (that is, most complex) living-room rail system. However, also like so many other children, I disliked school, this dislike increasing when I entered the public high school system, where students were confronted with a series of detentions, suspensions, a horrible prison-like punishment called “Saturday School” (where extra school time was represented as a punishment for even minor transgressions, and which extended students’ weekday incarceration into their only days of freedom), and repeated threats of expulsion. Patrolling the edge of the school’s perimeter were security guards, who would work as hard to keep people in as to keep them out, making sure that we didn’t miss an important lesson. This was a school where demands to “sit down” and “be quiet” were more frequent than invitations to wonder. My aversion to school was more than a simple uninterest in subject-verb agreement or the American Civil War; it was an aversion that went beyond that.

Most people who work in education—either in pedagogical theory or in classroom instruction—understand that schools do much more than teach us how to read and count; that, secondary to introducing us to the natural world and showing us pathways to intellectual development, schools are one of primary producers

of “productive” members of the dominant culture. I understand schools as giving students the experience and tools that they can then use to survive the “real world,” and find work, become consumers, and support the economy; these are tools such as obedience, subservience, and “respect for” (fear of) authority and the state. At this task schools are exceedingly successful, and most students leave the education system having been taught to respect power and money and value consumer goods. And even though teachers do not often make much money, in the classroom they hold positions of power and often unwittingly reproduce systems of hierarchies, which then become influential in shaping the students’ worldviews.

With the promise of learning without state-mandated imprisonment inside the school’s walls, university offered me a greater degree of autonomy, better access to resources, and courses in subjects that were actually interesting and engaging. Indeed, at least in the humanities and social sciences, in departments where critical thinking is valued, much time and a fair portion of the material is spent unlearning many of the lessons that were presented in schools as fact. However, once at university, socialization continues or, perhaps more likely, adult students can begin to reenact many of the social lessons learned in school, from the gendered violence at fraternity parties (and the dismissive responses by university police to reports of rape and sexual assault) to the structured class division made evident in the separation between basic student residence halls and luxury student accommodations within the same university, allowing rich students better resources and housing while poorer students are housed in dated and often substandard dorms. At the faculty level, inequality seems structurally ingrained, with women and people of color less likely to hold tenure-track positions and more likely to hold precarious employment as part-time adjunct instructors, lacking job security, equal access to buildings and university support, and medical insurance (Glazer-Raymo 2003, 100–1). On modern education, Arthur Evans writes:

Modern schools and universities push students into habits of depersonalized learning, alienation from nature and sexuality, obedience to hierarchy, fear of authority, self-objectification, and chilling competitiveness. These character traits are the essence of the twisted personality-type of modern industrialism. They are precisely the character traits needed to maintain a social system that is utterly out of touch with nature, sexuality, and real human needs. (Evans [1978] 2013, 136)

This is the coming together of theory and practice.

Drawing on the work of feminist theorists such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde, this article introduces the ideas of anarchist theories of education through the critiques and suggestions of Ivan Illich, Derrick Jensen, and Jacques Rancière, among others. Through working towards an understanding of the way that schools and prisons connect, the teacher’s role in the classroom, and the way that schools and universities operate to strengthen existing hierarchies, I attempt to contribute to the growing discussion of the use of intersectional anarchist praxis as a way to inform and radically alter the methods and outcomes of education. By focusing on the classroom as a site for anarchist struggles, the necessity of intersectional analyses of pedagogical models, and inherent problems associated with being an anarchist educator in a hierarchical state institution, I argue that the transformation of society and the transformation of the education cannot be separated—educators who are serious about fighting against racism, sexism, and class hierarchies should not abandon the feminist and anarchist pedagogical theories either inside or outside the classroom. In our classrooms, we must not only offer antiracist and feminist materials but also model our teaching according to those practices. Furthermore, once we leave the classroom, our dedication to radical social change should not remain amongst the desks and chalkboards—our struggles in the classrooms must also be paired with our struggles on the streets.

Education is an Intersectional Issue

In her influential 1989 essay, Kimberlé Crenshaw outlines a theory of intersectionality, which argues that cultural and biological categories such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and other markers of perceived or actual identity form relationships with each other across intersecting lines. These interplaying axes function through complex networks of systemic oppression and contribute to social injustices that form at the “intersection” of hierarchies. Crenshaw sets up intersectionality to challenge the “problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (1989, 139). In the introduction to their edited collection, *Intersectionality and “Race” in Education*, Kalwant Bhopal and John Preston write:

In recent years, the concept of intersectionality has taken center stage and become a dominant model with which to engage in how differences such as “race,” gender, class, sexuality, age, disability, and religion interweave and intersect upon individual lives in a modern “risk” society. Intersectionality has become a model upon which to understand, analyse and engage with difference in which difference itself becomes a defining feature of “otherness.” Otherness is related to the notion that identity itself is fragmented, fragile even, yet constantly evolving through multiple engagements and relationships in society; and through this complexity, intersectionality helps us to engage with understanding outsiders and what it means to be a “stranger” in modern society. (2012, 1)

Instead of turning towards a presumed neutral category in order to understand and analyze people’s experiences (usually the white heterosexual first-world male perspective), intersectionality recognizes a plurality of perspectives, which can be drawn upon to create a more nuanced and complex understanding of history and events. This recognition of the “rich material provided by history” (Feyerabend 1984, 27–28) and the move away from fixed methods and perspectives have found a home in much of historical theory, especially in the works of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who challenges the methods of white feminists, and whose own practices are “purposeful and ideological” (1988, 62). We also find this recognition in the work of other feminists, such as bell hooks—who states that feminists must understand “the politics of difference” (1997, 2)—and Elsa Barkley Brown, whose work attests to a plurality of histories, perspectives, and paradigms, which can exist simultaneously and operate in varying dialogues with each other. Peter Burke (2012, 479) talks about the “cultural” or “polyphonic turn” when attempting to understand histories, and the feminist journal *S&F Online* had a special issue on “Polyphonic Feminisms” in 2010. Many of these writers and theorists challenge the fixed hegemonic knowledge that is privileged over the marginalized voices and experiences of people excluded from knowledge-making processes (Mohanty 1988, 67).

When addressing the theories and practices of a radical education, concepts of intersectionality must be at the forefront of any conversation about teaching methods and the canon. Opening her article on black feminist pedagogy, Barbara Omolade writes:

Black feminist pedagogy aims to develop a mindset of intellectual inclusion and expansion that stands in contradiction to the Western intellectual tradition of exclusivity and chauvinism. It offers the student, instructor, and institution a methodology for promoting equality and multiple visions and perspectives that parallel Black women’s attempts to be and become recognized as human beings and citizens rather than as objects and victims. (1987, 32)

To move towards intersectional education is to understand that the Western canon is set up in support of this “neutral” category and acts as reinforcement for what bell hooks calls the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (1997, 7) and what Omolade names as the “Western intellectual tradition of exclusivity and

chauvinism” (1987, 32). This intellectual canon, which prioritizes the literature, art, and cultural production of Western European traditions, does more than simply build a recognized common language from which all peoples can draw in order to express themselves in more meaningful ways; by implication, it also says that this language is only meaningful if it draws from Western traditions, all other patterns of art and culture being marginal to the central and highest Culture. Decentralizing epistemological theories and reclaiming “difference” then becomes more than a superficial move towards a more diverse aesthetics; it is—as Omolade claims—necessary for full participation in society as creative agents and “human beings and citizens rather than as objects and victims” (1987, 32).

Just as our teaching materials do not spring from an unbiased sense of “real history” or “real knowledge,” so our teaching methods must be transformed through radical and intersectional analyses of our methods and places within the classroom. The teacher’s actions and modes of instruction can either reinforce existing hierarchies or work to abolish them. In her article on teachers’ hidden biases, Karyn Wellhousen notes that not only are teachers more likely to call on boys than girls, but when calling on girls, the teacher’s response is more likely to be a single word or noise of acknowledgement (such as an “OK” or “uh-huh”), whereas those same teachers engage more with boys’ questions by offering follow-up questions in response or by supplying a more detailed answer (1996, 36–37). Wellhousen’s example of this subtle misogyny stands out as just one instance of the reinforcement of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and does not represent a direct and conscious act of repression performed by a sexist teacher but evidence of how internalized and externalized oppressions are influencing both the teacher’s instructional style and the students’ sense of self-worth; if these effects remain unexamined, we will end up reproducing the oppressions that exist in the larger society within our own classrooms.

An intersectional approach to education would radically displace the site of focus from the “neutral” category of the Western canon towards a complex and interwoven polyphonic periphery. Given the wealth of research on offer attesting to the importance of this deprioritization of the white heterosexual male experience, it should be alarming that schools still stick so rigidly to the accepted canon. However, the adherence to this model has some potentially very beneficial effects, depending on where in the hierarchy one might be placed: It operates to support the status quo through the emphasis on a centralized perspective which, through its marginalization of difference, acts as an insidious foundation for students becoming immune to injustices around them or accepting of the injustices they must themselves endure.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

Perhaps one of the most tragic outcomes of this systematic oppression in the Western education models is what the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) calls the “school-to-prison pipeline,” a “disturbing national trend” wherein students—kindergarten through high school—are pushed out of public schools and funneled into juvenile and adult criminal justice systems. The ACLU notes that many of the children who eventually end up in jails and prisons have learning disabilities and are often victims of childhood poverty, abuse, or neglect. And while these children would certainly benefit from additional educational services and counseling (which are often offered to their wealthier counterparts), they are instead “isolated, punished, and pushed out” (ACLU 2014). In Salinas, a town near where I live in Monterey, the city council is working hard to build a new juvenile detention center, and there are plans to move the Youth Center—alternative and half-way housing for children—into this new detention site (Cortez 2014, 1). Children of color, children who are immigrants, and children who are poor are more likely to be denied access to alternative resources

and recommended for or forced into detention (Faruqee 2013, 1); once there, they lose educational and employment opportunities as well as the support of their family and community, a network which is then replaced by the trauma of child detention. A recent study has suggested that perhaps over 90 percent of children in detention experience trauma that could lead to PTSD (Abram et al. 2004, 403–10).

In a conversation with Amalia Mesa-Bains, bell hooks notes that “the public school is becoming a holding camp, a kind of symbolic concentration camp before prison, and many of us see a return of racial apartheid with regards to public education” (hooks and Mesa-Bains 2006, 48). Mesa-Bains responds that many black boys in the public school system are traced by educators and administrators in special education, which she points out “has a special relationship to prison”; once in these special-education classrooms, students will not exit until they “hit adolescence, and then many of them make their way into the courts and prisons” (48). In this sense, it is easy to see the coming together of education and incarceration. While in school, poor students and students of color are separated from their more privileged classmates until such a time when it becomes more socially acceptable to move them conveniently into prisons, serving the interests of the expansive prison-industrial complex. Once such children turn eighteen, they are then moved into a jail or a prison as adults and can become contributing members of the prison camp, working for \$0.20 an hour (and sometimes forced to work for nothing) in a labor setting where unionization is illegal, and where there are no alternatives (Wagner 2013). These prisoners produce goods that are sold on the market to profit private companies, which now have access to the perfect workers: unpaid, unable to unionize, and unable to quit. Let us not forget that although slavery among the general US population was abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment to the constitution, there is a provision that allows for the continued enslavement of people if they have been convicted of a crime.

In the US, schools and prisons are often designed by the same architects and contracted out to the same construction companies; the architect for San Quentin State Prison, George Sellon, has also designed several high schools that are still standing, including El Cerrito High School and the McKinley School. As children grow older and increase in grade level, so their schools more often resemble prisons. Allison Arieff argues for the necessity of access to nature in an educational setting, and laments that schools are not often set up to provide natural surroundings:

Many preschools already are: outdoor activities are emphasized—swinging, walking, digging. But as kids get older, in this generation more than any that has preceded it, the time they spend in nature decreases significantly. Throughout the United States, students are installed in institutional, even citadel-like environments early on: they arrive at school in cars or buses (where once they might have walked) and step directly into buildings, where they spend 8 hours in classrooms, interacting with the outdoors only in prescribed spaces and only for allotted amounts of time. (Arieff 2008)

Arieff’s observation sets up the maturing child as gradually being deprived of freedoms and access to nature. However, this gradual shift allows students to become accustomed to the change and accept their new surroundings, since, as William Deresiewicz noted in a lecture at Stanford University in 2010, in which he compared schools to prisons, “people don’t mind being in prison as long as no one else is free. But stage a jailbreak, and everybody else freaks out” (Deresiewicz 2010).

Access to nature, after-school activities, and learning resources are often allotted out in ways that reinforce these intersectional oppressions. In my own county of Monterey, students in Spreckles—a school district of largely students of color from poor families working in the valley’s agricultural fields—receive roughly a third of the educational budget allocated to students in the Carmel Valley school district, an area of largely affluent rich and upper-middle-class white families. These institutionalized hierarchies

within education facilitate the exploitation of poor migrant families, whose children are less likely to be given a high-quality education and more likely to be recommended for child detention, and then eventually sent to jail or prison. The education system has become perhaps the greatest site for the reinforcement of hierarchies and oppression, and so must become a primary site of our struggle.

Classrooms as Sites of Struggle

Derrick Jensen's position regarding the role of the teacher in an institutional and hierarchical education system is rightly skeptical. He makes analogies between sensitive teachers who attempt to alleviate the distress of a prison-like education system and some bureaucrats in Nazi concentration camps who hoped to alleviate the distress of people imprisoned there:

I hate industrial schooling because it commits one of the only unforgivable sins there is: It leads people away from themselves, training them to be workers and convincing them it's in their best interest to be ever more loyal slaves, rowing the galley that is industrial civilization ever more fervently.... I participate in this process. I help make school a little more palatable, a little more fun, as students are trained to do their part in the ongoing destruction of the planet, as they enter the final phases of trading their birthright as the free and happy humans they were born to be for their roles as cogs in the giant industrial machine, or worse, as overseers of the giant factory/enslavement camp we once recognized as a living earth. Doesn't that make me, in essence, a collaborator? Hell, drop the *in essence*. (2005, 190–91)

As I desperately cling to the bottom of the faculty ladder at a local university, I am more often questioning my role as a university educator within a state institution. Like Robert Haworth, pedagogical theorist at West Chester University, I wonder if I am “doing something different in my classroom or just reinforcing and reproducing state and corporate interests” (Haworth 2012, 1). And as I move towards anarchist models of pedagogy, I wonder if my efforts to abolish hierarchies within a state institution are being coopted by those structural hierarchies themselves, reinforcing them by offering the illusion of intellectual and, therefore, personal freedom. I worry that this is contributing to social control and to the socialization of students as consumers and productive workers—placated to acquiesce in institutionalized violence and imprisonment—who will then self-sacrifice to the god called “the Economy.” I wonder, like Jensen, if my work really offers students the possibility of escape or if I am just training the next generation of bureaucrats, politicians, policemen, and real-estate agents, who, like me, are just cogs in the machine, building our own ever smaller metaphorical and literal prison cells. I worry that when I set up prison education projects, while I may be helping the prisoners in some small way, I am doing a great service to the prison-industrial complex, which blatantly uses programs such as mine to legitimize their existence, the prison's role in “rehabilitation,” and the “positive” effects of incarceration on society. Can the radical educator use the classroom to break down the hierarchies that have created that classroom? Can liberatory education theory provide something concrete to the struggle, and not just supply university graduates with a more nuanced vocabulary to justify their privilege?

For Lena Wånggren and Karin Sellberg, in “Intersectionality and Dissensus: A Negotiation of the Feminist Classroom,” the answer is yes: “Teaching becomes a way of questioning power dynamics and social structures that exist both within and outside of the classroom” (2012, 543). They build upon the critical theory of bell hooks and Jacques Rancière, and understand that the classroom is a microcosm of society (552) and that bringing the struggle into pedagogy becomes a necessity for its success in society more broadly; it is “crucial to a larger emancipatory project” (548). Audre Lorde wrote that “sometimes we

are blessed with being able to choose the time, and the arena, and the manner of our revolution, but more usually we must do battle where we are standing” (2009, 140), and Wånggren and Sellberg ask educators, especially feminist and anarchist educators, “Should not the classroom be one of our main focuses, a central space in which to practice politics?” (2012, 542). Here, Lorde, Wånggren and Sellberg express something vital to the success of any revolutionary movement: There is no waiting for the perfect time and place, and everything that the teacher with a revolutionary perspective does must be done as if the revolution were in progress, because it always is. To Lorde, our battles against hierarchy and oppression are fought every day and on all terrains; we cannot simply wait for structured debates or hope for a supportive academic council, because all small and seemingly insignificant manifestations of gendered, racist, or homophobic dominance are the foundation upon which wars, genocide, and systematic violence are built. Lorde says we must fight where we are standing, because if we wait for the perfect time and place, we will have already lost. Wånggren and Sellberg recognize that for the educator the battlefield is in the classroom, where we have the opportunity either to destroy the prevailing social hierarchies or to reinforce them through complacency. While noting that the classroom is only one of many sites for struggles—the educators must take their fight to the streets as well—it is our focus in the classroom that constructs our education practice as either emancipatory or simply a tool that reinforces the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” and becomes coopted, serving merely to strengthen hierarchies and state power.

Dismantling Power and Teaching Against Hierarchies

When working to create a nonhierarchical model for education, many who draw from anarchist theories of knowledge acknowledge a shift away from the center and towards the periphery. Peter Burke called this the “polyphonic turn” (2010, 479), which is a recognition that the philosophy of history and of science has moved away from positivist notions of universal truth and access to any kind of authentic past or knowledge that is unmediated by social and cultural perspectives.¹ Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, described historical and scientific theories as paradigms that can shift when evidence builds up enough to challenge existing paradigms (2012, 23–24). When that happens, the scientific community might accept the new paradigm as a more adequate representation of truth, at which point scholarly material and textbooks will change to reflect this altered paradigm.

As a rebuttal to this notion of paradigm shifts as scientific revolution, Paul Feyerabend wrote *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge*. Feyerabend’s theory of knowledge draws on a comparison with the political philosophy of anarchism; he writes with “the conviction that anarchism ... is certainly excellent medicine for *epistemology*, and for the philosophy of science” (1984, 17; original emphasis). His theory, called epistemological anarchism, posits scientific progress and development not as the result of paradigm shifts from one system of “normal science” to another, but as what happens when the rules that generally constrict scientific methodology are violated. This breaking away from traditional methodology is “both reasonable and absolutely *necessary* for the growth of knowledge” (24). In using the term “anarchism” to explain his position, Feyerabend writes:

The hallmark of political anarchism is its opposition to the established order of things: to the state, its institutions, the ideologies that support and glorify these institutions. The established order must be destroyed so that human spontaneity may come to the fore and exercise its right of freely initiating action, of freely choosing what it thinks is best. (187)

Applying this belief to science, Feyerabend believes that there should be no privileged scientific method or privileged theories, and that scientists should be open to learning from all perspectives and even times, claiming that there “is no idea, however ancient and absurd that is not capable of improving our knowledge” (1984, 47). Instead of being confined to a single discipline or paradigm, a scientist “who is interested in maximal empirical content, and who wants to understand as many aspects of the theory as possible, will accordingly adopt a pluralistic methodology” (47). If a change in paradigms is the aim and determiner of a scientific revolution, then as scientists, Feyerabend says, “we must be prepared to introduce and articulate alternatives to [a singular theory] or, as we shall express it, ... we must be prepared to accept a *principle of proliferation*” (1995, 139; original emphasis). There can be no completely useful theory of knowledge that is free from exceptions, and such a theory of knowledge should not govern scientific progress. When considering methodologies, it is a hindrance to the evolution of science and to revolutions to have anything but an open and nondogmatic approach to any potential theory; a determined fixation on any one theory or methodology as a universal truth or fixed set of rules, Feyerabend believed, was not only unrealistic but also detrimental to scientific development itself.

This “principle of proliferation” and the polyphonic turn should inform not only how we understand knowledge but how we teach ways of knowing. Regarding a pedagogy based on his call “against method,” Feyerabend claims that teaching should “be based on curiosity and not on command” and that “the ‘teacher’ is called upon to further this curiosity and not to rely on any fixed method. Spontaneity reigns supreme, in thought (perception) as well as in action” (1984, 187). Just as there is no fixed epistemological model, so there is no fixed pedagogical model; the line between the “teacher” and the “student” becomes less rigid, allowing knowledge to flow more freely from peripheral theories and perspectives across a decentralized network of epistemologies.

The recent work of Wånggren and Sellberg makes use of Jacques Rancière’s theories of political dissensus and his notion of the “ignorant schoolmaster” to create a radical pedagogy that “not only challenges the power structure of the classroom, but makes way for a new organisation of power in society in general” (Wånggren and Sellberg 2012, 548). Rancière sets up dissensus to be the opposite of consensus; in this model, no one agrees to a certain perspective, interpretation or action, with each person having different concepts of autonomy, knowledge and power. This “concept of a generative dialogue or productive disagreement remains in Rancière’s political philosophy” (Wånggren and Sellberg 2012, 553n). A pedagogy of dissensus does not centralize all truth to be within the control of the teacher; instead, the teacher merely acts as an informed facilitator who allows students to create meaningful truths on their own terms:

Political dissensus is not a discussion between speaking people who would confront their interests and values. It is a conflict about who speaks and who does not speak, about what has to be heard as the voice of pain and what has to be heard as an argument on justice. And this is also what “class war” means: not the conflict between groups which have opposite economic interests, but the conflict about what an “interest” is, the struggle between those who set themselves as able to manage social interests and those who are supposed to be only able to reproduce their life. (Rancière 2011, 2)

Here, the tension is between the reproduction of a preexisting thought and the tension that arises through dissensus: to effectively wage class war, we must not engage with bureaucrats and the social elite on their terms—entering into debate with them regarding how we might agree or disagree with the distribution of resources, education, culture, etc.—but we must question the very existence of these various forms of material or cultural resources as commodities. As teachers and students, we might not sit to negotiate with

which of the Great Works of Literature we would engage, but instead question the very notion of canon and perhaps even literature.

The temptation to lean towards a standardized canon is something that Feyerabend might understand as a desire for easy intellectual clarity at the expense of genuine exploration:

It is clear, then, that the idea of a fixed method, or of a fixed theory of rationality, rests on too naïve a view of man and his social surroundings. To those who look at the rich material provided by history, and who are not intent on impoverishing it in order to please their lower instincts, their craving for intellectual security in the form of clarity, ... it will become clear that there is only *one* principle that can be defended under *all* circumstances and in *all* stages of human development. It is the principle: *anything goes*. (1984, 27–28; original emphases)

In this theory can be found Rancière's figure of the "ignorant schoolmaster," described by Wånggren and Sellberg as someone whose greatest attribute as an educator is their unknowing (2012, 546); indeed, Rancière writes that "the most important quality of a schoolmaster is the virtue of ignorance" (2012, 1). In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Rancière recites the revelation of Joseph Jacotot, who initially believed that the good and hardworking professor would strive to bring his own students up to his or her own level of knowledge and expertise. However, after leaving his Flemish-language students with a bilingual edition of *Télémaque* in French and Flemish, they were able to learn French without his guidance or explication (Rancière 2012, 1–3). He realized that "uneducated people could learn on their own" and that he or she can be "a teacher who teaches—that is to say who is for another a means of knowledge—without transmitting any knowledge" (Wånggren and Sellberg 2012, 546). Rather than adhering to an educational model that presents students as blank slates upon which the teacher can encode knowledge, in Rancière's model the teacher enters into a dialogic relationship with the students, and instead of merely striving to create an impression of the teacher onto the student, the teacher, as Myles Horton and Paulo Freire say, becomes a tool which the students can use in their own curiosity and exploration: "The teacher is of course an artist, but being an artist does not mean that he or she can make the profile, can shape the students. What the educator does in teaching is to make it possible for the students to become themselves" (Horton and Freire 1990, 191).

Removing the authority of the teacher from the classroom is an important part of radical education models for Rancière and Freire, and indeed the current system of hierarchy in the classroom is merely a result of the way that oppressive power relationships perpetuate themselves. In a letter to Derrick Jensen, a woman describes her own experiences in the US education system:

I had a few teachers who cut me slack for my creative approaches to getting by, those who were allies in getting through the miserable bullshit we all had to endure, but never one who loved me into becoming myself. They were all still so damaged from their own debilitating institutional education that few could even see that possibility of what real education is. (Jensen 2005, 187)

Here, the former student recognizes the way that patterns of oppression replicate, maintaining systems of hierarchy and domination. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, this is a central theme in Freire's understanding of how the oppressed might easily transition into the role of oppressor: "The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility" (2005, 45). Later, in conversation with Horton, Freire explains a few of the errors teachers make, often when replicating the education models that were handed down to them:

The other mistake is to crush freedom and to exacerbate the authority of the teacher. Then you no longer have freedom but now you have authoritarianism, and then the teacher is the one who teaches. The teacher is the one who knows. The teacher is the one who guides. The teacher is the one who does everything. And the students, precisely because the students must be shaped, just expose their bodies and their souls to the hands of the teacher, as if the students were clay for the artist, to be molded. (Horton and Freire 1990, 181)

Rancière, Horton and Freire see the process of removing the teacher as a figure of authority as one of the important steps toward challenging all figures of authority and authoritarianism. Indeed, many believe that Freire did not go far enough, and that his model of liberatory pedagogy was far too dependent on “on the notion of betterment through existing educational institutions” (Rouhani 2012, 1729). Contrasting with Freirean notions of pedagogical revolution within a set of parameters, “anarchist pedagogies seek out and affirm a wide range of everyday spheres of learning,” which have no centers as prioritized foci of information and which seek to break down hierarchies within the classroom and in wider society. In discussing the pedagogical theory of Ivan Illich (1971), Robert H. Chappell explains that “the dismantling of the public education system would coincide with a pervasive abolition of all the suppressive institutions of society” (1978, 368).

However, this cannot be accomplished without a radical shift in the way educators see their role in the classroom and in the intellectual development of their students, and this shift does not arrive through revising the methods under which we were educated. By diminishing the legitimacy of the polyphonic voices that offer alternative peripheral perspectives, educators perpetuate a universalist approach to education, which positions progress and development as conformity to the Western canon and which has become synonymous with ideas of what it means to be “modern,” “progressive,” and “democratic.” Under this approach, the participant in such a version of democracy is conditioned to see their personal agency as contingent on adapting to this narrow model, with their own perspectives, experiences, and cultural legacies coming secondary to the “neutral” white, heteronormative, first-world, male Cultural Product. The ignorant schoolmaster allows for knowledge to circulate through complex networks of histories, knowledges and perspectives, and while I would never suggest that the educator be completely neutral in this process (it is the educators’ responsibility to challenge perpetuations of oppression and hierarchy in the classroom—whether stemming from their own actions or those of their students), the teacher committed to abolishing the privilege of a centralized, self-interested perspective must encourage not only the proliferation of ideas but also the decentralization of starting points.

Theory/Practice—Classroom/Society: Educating towards Revolution

In an interview between Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, Lorde says that “the learning process is something you can incite, literally incite, like a riot” (Lorde 2007, 89). In this, the connection between education and revolution becomes central to liberatory education. In her presentation at the Modern Language Association convention in 2013, Mary Gutierrez noted that “believing in equality does not automatically lead to a more equal society,” and that there must be another step (Gutierrez 2013). At the same conference, Katherine Bond Stockton explained that although many “progressive” academics have abandoned the claims of “trickle-down economics,” many still adhere to the idea of “trickle-down theory.” If the educators just present revolutionary theory to their students (or, in some cases, simply ingest it themselves), then the claim of “trickle-down theory” posits that the new theoretical framework will transform the classroom, and therefore also society.

However, just as we have abandoned (or rejected from the outset) the claims of “trickle-down economics,” we must abandon and dispel the myths of “trickle-down theory.” Along with Gutierrez and Stockton, I argue that teachers who are committing themselves to radical education must move beyond theory towards radical pedagogical practice in the classroom, but also—I add—towards revolutionary action on the streets, because there are limits to transformative education, especially within the confines of state institutions. Working towards a liberatory education model within state educational facilities is not enough, since although there might be a minor shift in method, any major revolutionary expansion will meet up against the walls of the state. Even major transformations in a nationwide or international educational paradigm will be short-lived if these internal institutional changes are not accompanied by external social changes. Unless revolutionary change manages to dismantle oppressive power structures—by means of which the state justifies its domination and violence—any move towards a nonhierarchical and more democratic education will be failing to mirror the society that is “supporting” it, and therefore will be forced to buckle under external pressures. If educators fail to join the struggles in the streets and support the international struggles that are working to transform wider society, then any project towards emancipatory pedagogy will continuously challenge the authority of the state. Then there is only so long that this challenge can be maintained if not coupled with a whole network of complex dissidence, direct action on the streets, and projects to dismantle state power and hierarchies across institutions and societies.

While engaging in the transformation of education within institutions is vital to the transformation of society, it does not in itself lead to such transformation. In order for a revolutionary education project to succeed, it must manifest as part of a larger revolutionary project that is rhizomatic and anarchistic. The radical historian and educator Howard Zinn understood this when he wrote about the possibilities of anarchism as a model for revolution. Succeeding in the struggle for a more equal society will mean taking part in the struggle on the streets, in our homes, in our classrooms; we cannot be part of shifts towards equality and liberation without adopting a holistic approach to revolutionary social theory—it must inform our teaching materials, our teaching methods, our place in the classroom, and our place in society:

The anarchist sees revolutionary change as something immediate, something we must do now, where we are, where we live, where we work. It means starting this moment to do away with authoritarian, cruel relationships—between men and women, between parents and children, between one kind of worker and another kind. Such revolutionary action cannot be crushed like an armed uprising. It takes place in everyday life, in the tiny crannies where the powerful but clumsy hands of state power cannot easily reach. It is not centralized and isolated, so that it can be wiped out by the rich, the police, the military. It takes places in a hundred thousand places at once, in families, on streets, in neighborhoods, in places of work. It is a revolution of the whole culture. Squelched in one place, it springs up in another, until it is everywhere. (Zinn 2009, 653)

Imagining Anarchist Educations

When attempting to envision the possibilities for an education that lives up to the standards of an almost impossible ideal, most anarchist theorists advocate a questioning of the very nature and purpose of education to begin with. This questioning involves investigating what philosopher Judith Suissa calls “the optimal vision of ‘the good life’” (2010, 4) and then going on to really ask ourselves what would be the purpose of an education system within such a model, or whether the very idea of an education system is incompatible with these visions. There have been many attempts to develop anarchist models of education within universities, creating spaces and conversations that are fraught with “tensions and ambiguity”

(Haworth 2012, 2). Because even though “[on] the one hand the role of the university is (increasingly) about social reproduction: creating docile, debt-ridden workers for capital,” on the other hand “the university is a potential space of community and commons”—a small site of resistance against capitalism (Noterman and Pusey 2012, 180).

However, even an examination of these anarchist university projects cannot provide us with any purely replicable template, since each project of learning must be entirely student-driven and will change shape even as it is in progress. In his experiments in anarchist education models at the University of Mary Washington, Farhang Rouhani attempted to become an active student-participant in the very classes on anarchist theory that he was facilitating, and regarding this experiment he says: “For me, our pedagogical experiments turned me into an anarchist, in ways that have greatly improved my abilities to teach, learn, live, and act in the world” (Rouhani 2012, 1738). In this revelation, Rouhani makes clear that the divisions between teaching and learning or theorizing and acting become diminished, and a transformative education becomes truly possible. For him, there existed a chance of a liberatory pedagogy within university institutions, even if dwarfed by the larger hierarchical model in place: “In this sense, the attempt to build an anarchist pedagogy within the context of an otherwise primarily coercive institution shares many of the same challenges as building an intentional anarchist community in a capitalist society, though on a smaller and more limited scale” (1735).

Though confined by administration and preexisting templates for pedagogical models, the university acted as a launchpad for students to take the antihierarchical practices they had learned in the classroom and apply them to direct action that attempted to transform the city. One student involved in Rouhani’s project explains: “We were ready to take on the city, the university had become too small” (Rouhani 2012, 1735). These testimonials offer me hope that, farcical as our attempts of revolutionizing education may seem, there may develop a method for action from modeling antihierarchical practices and teaching against hierarchies in our classrooms.

Like Rouhani and countless others who have been influenced by anarchist pedagogies, I work to not only bring anarchist theories into my classrooms but to apply the very method of my “teaching” to the aim of removing the authority of the instructor and creating a sense of empowerment as I encourage my students to take control and responsibility over their own learning. And although students seem to respond positively to these methods as part of a larger and more rigid framework, I remain skeptical of the university and school system’s ability to exist in any way resembling its current form if there is to be revolution in education. Inequality and violence seem too entrenched in the system’s very understanding of itself, and imagining a substantial school system where hierarchies are not reproduced is like trying to imagine a fair prison system. To me, the barbed wires around prisons appear analogous to the walls around schools and the gates leading into universities, and perhaps as long as schools and prisons exist there will be that cord which connects them.

Note

1. For a review of this development, see Zammito 1993 and Roth 2012.

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