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The Libertarians and Education

MICHAEL P. SMITH

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THE LIBERTARIANS AND EDUCATION

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Chapter 1

An Introductory Survey

In this book we shall be concerned with two things: an educational position and an educational movement. The movement began to emerge in the 1890s in France, from where it spread rapidly to other countries. The position cannot be related so specifically to a particular historical moment. It seems to characterise a few educational thinkers in each generation. In later chapters I shall try to sketch links between some of these but often the position seems to be reached independently of the influence of others. It seems to be, that is, an attitude or stance which recurs rather than a tradition which is added to.

The position and the movement are, of course, connected, in that the movement can be seen as an attempt to translate the position into pressure group terms. However, it has always been possible to take up the position and yet not subscribe to the movement; conversely, one can belong to the movement and yet not agree with all the emphases of what might be called the pure position. The importance of the distinction from our point of view is that it leads to an emphasis on different kinds of educational issues. Very broadly, libertarians of the position tend to be more interested in a non-coercive pedagogy, while libertarians of the movement tend to be more interested in an education which does not leave the individual politically helpless. To do justice to the full scope of libertarian thinking about education we need to consider both the libertarian movement and the libertarian position.

First, however, we need to have a working notion of what is meant by 'libertarian'.

In 1897 the great Russian novelist, Tolstoy, wrote to Jean Grave, the editor of the French periodical *Les Temps Nouveaux*, reaffirming his belief in the importance of free education. 'I started my social activity with the school and teaching,' he said, 'and after forty years I am more convinced that only by education, free education, can we ever manage to rid ourselves of the existing horrible order of things and to replace it with a rational organisation.' An emphasis on freedom was a commonplace of reform movements in education in the nineteenth as in the twentieth century; but Tolstoy understood something special by the term 'free education' and that understanding would have been shared by the periodical readers.

2 *The Libertarians and Education*

Les Temps Nouveaux was an anarchist paper and at the time that Tolstoy wrote to Grave it was engaged in a sustained attempt to define and promote a specifically anarchist approach to education. Grave was playing a leading role in the formation of the League for Libertarian Education and was trying, with the support of Tolstoy among others, to establish a school which would put libertarian ideas into practice. His articles on libertarian education were appearing in a variety of journals, and three years later he was to produce a widely read brochure on the subject. When Tolstoy spoke of 'free education' he had in mind something very close to the concept of education that the anarchists were putting forward.

As a first step towards defining libertarian education let us note, then, that it is an approach to education which embodies specifically anarchist principles. The 1890s is a useful point at which to begin our survey of these principles because the period saw the first conscious attempts to relate the principles to each other and to expound them as a coherent position.

The word 'libertarian' was only just coming into use at this time as a direct synonym for 'anarchist'. 'Anarchist' had itself only comparatively recently begun to be applied consistently to describe a particular political position. It had been used fairly extensively in France at the time of the Revolution but only as a loose, pejorative description of the extreme Left. It was first used as a semi-serious political description in 1840 and then by Proudhon as a deliberately paradoxical – but accurate – representation of his own position. His followers did not take up the term and preferred to call themselves mutualists. Not until the late 1870s did a group of people begin to accept the term as a description of their own political stance. After the split in the First International between the followers of Marx and the followers of Bakunin, the latter, somewhat hesitantly, took to calling themselves anarchists (Woodcock, 1975, p. 10).

'Libertarian' was not seriously promoted as a synonym for 'anarchist' until the 1890s, although George Woodcock points out an early anticipation in the 1850s, when Joseph Déjacque used it for the title of an anarchist paper which he ran from New York between 1858 and 1861. Credit for introducing the new usage is usually given to Sébastien Faure, who started in 1895 another paper of that name, *Le Libertaire*. This latter paper became the longest-lived of all nationally distributed anarchist papers and continued until the late 1950s. It was partly its success which established the new usage (Woodcock, 1975, pp. 263 and 298).

The increasing adoption of the new term corresponded to a change of emphasis in the anarchist movement itself, certainly in France. The early 1890s saw a dramatic outbreak of terrorist activity in France. Between March 1892 and June 1894 there were eleven

dynamite explosions in Paris in which nine people were killed; the French President was assassinated; and the Serbian minister was seriously wounded. The culminating incident in what was an epidemic rather than a co-ordinated campaign was an indiscriminate bombing of a crowded café at the Gare St. Lazarre in which twenty people were wounded and one killed. Not surprisingly the Government responded with a barrage of repressive measures. The Chamber of Deputies, which had itself been the subject of one of the attacks, passed a series of draconian laws (one made it a crime even to apologise for criminal acts). The police embarked on a massive campaign of harassment of all known anarchists and anarchist sympathisers; and thirty leading anarchists were brought to trial. The severity of the measures proved counter-productive. Virtually all the defendants were acquitted by the jury, and the trial turned out to mark the end not just of the terrorism but also of the reaction against it.

The most decisive reaction, however, came from the anarchists themselves. Many of them were revolted by the actions of the terrorists and felt with the anarchist novelist Octave Mirbeau that 'A mortal enemy of anarchy could have acted no better than this Émile Henry when he threw his inexplicable bomb into the midst of peaceful and anonymous persons come to a café to drink a glass of beer before going home to bed.' They turned away from the negative side of anarchism expressed by 'propaganda through the deed' and towards positive attempts to translate anarchist ideas into constructive practice. The period 1894 to 1914 saw the massive growth of the great anarcho-syndicalist movement in the French trade unions, many attempts to form anarchist communities in the countryside, and a number of exciting social experiments, particularly in the field of education. This shift in emphasis towards the positive was often marked by employment of the word 'libertarian' rather than the older and now somewhat discredited 'anarchist'.

The appropriately named *Les Temps Nouveaux* was a product of the new era. Grave's previous anarchist paper, *La Révolte*, had been obliged to cease publishing in early 1894 by police harassment and the threat of prosecution under a new law which prohibited acts of anarchist propaganda by any means whatever. Within a year, however, Grave was back with *Les Temps Nouveaux*. The new paper was still anarchist in orientation but its wide sympathies and innovative cultural interests attracted a new range of contributors and a broader readership. Among the artists who contributed to the new journal were the two Pissaros, Signac, Van Dongen, Vallotton, Van Rysselberghe, Steinlen and Caran d'Ache, and among the writers such 1890s figures as Octave Mirbeau, Paul Adam, Bernard Lazarre and Laurent Tailhade; while the Symbolist poet Stuart

Merrill was one of the journal's financial 'angels'. There was something of a vogue for anarchism in the 1890s and many intellectuals were drawn to it, attracted not so much by particular policies as by its general libertarian and innovative stance. For a brief period, perhaps twenty years, the French anarchist movement, in its new, positive manifestation, was an important source of creative social ideas; and not least in education.

The period saw a crystallisation of libertarian ideas about education and a number of significant attempts to translate those ideas into practice. The school that Grave and Tolstoy had envisaged was never actually formed, but Madeleine Vernet was soon to start a progressive school on libertarian lines, *L'Avenir Social*, and shortly afterwards Sébastien Faure started what was possibly the most famous of all French free schools, the 'Beehive School', *La Ruche*.

Both Faure and Vernet had been inspired by the example of another French libertarian school, Paul Robin's school at Cempuis. Robin had started his work there as early as 1880 and over the next decade had transformed the school into an impressive example of 'integral' education (of which more later). The school included among its pupils girls as well as boys and Robin sought to develop equally the intellectual and physical capacities of both. One of the distinctive things about the school was Robin's non-coercive approach; but it was this, together with his support for radical causes such as the birth-control movement, which led to his being removed from his post in 1894.

The school continued after his departure, however, and support for his ideas grew. Three years later two of his followers, Emile Janvion and Manuel Degalvès, started the League for Libertarian Education, which was to attract, as we have seen, the support of Tolstoy and Grave, along with that of such prominent anarchists as Kropotkin, Louise Michel and Elisée Reclus. The school which was envisaged was, indeed, to be modelled on the Cempuis school.

One of the people who was positively influenced by Robin's ideas was the Spanish educationist, Francisco Ferrer. Although he never visited Cempuis he knew Robin personally and corresponded with him, and when he himself came to start a school, the famous Modern School at Barcelona, it was Robin's example that he followed.

We shall be considering some of Ferrer's ideas in more detail later but it is worth sketching something of his background and place in the movement because he was an important means by which libertarian ideas in education came to be disseminated in Europe and even more so in America.

In 1901 Ferrer returned to Spain after sixteen years' exile in France because of his radical activities. The Spanish educational system at that time was in sore straits; two-thirds of the population were

illiterate; only a third of the towns had a school; and those schools which existed were conservative, not to say reactionary, in their teaching and firmly in the grip of a not very enlightened church and state bureaucracy. Defeat in the war against the United States provided the impetus for a national debate about the condition of Spain and in this debate education was often a key issue. Ferrer took a significant part in the debate but his chief contribution was to found a school free from the patterns of dominance which characterised Spain at that time. In it he sought to provide ordinary children with an education which was non-clerical, non-coercive and up-to-date in terms of the curriculum, and premised on the child's rationality and autonomy. The influence of the new school was quickly apparent and by the end of 1905 there were fourteen schools in Barcelona alone which were modelling themselves on Ferrer's school, together with another thirty-four in Catalonia, Valencia and Andalusia (Avrich, p. 26). In 1906, however, Ferrer's own school was closed. Ferrer was implicated in an anarchist attempt on the king's life and, though he was in fact acquitted by the jury, from this time on he was a marked man. In 1909 he was accused of being the chief figure behind the widespread civil insurrection of the so-called Tragic Week, was found guilty at a show trial, and shot.

In the year before his death, following the closure of his school, Ferrer was very active in spreading the libertarian gospel in education throughout Europe. In 1908 he founded the International League for Rational Education of Children, of which Anatole France was honorary president. The League published a journal, *L'École Renovée*, which was a serious and influential review, based ultimately on Paris, together with two other journals, *La Scuola Laica* based on Rome and *El Boletín de la Escuela Moderna* from Barcelona. The nucleus of an international communication system for libertarian education was thus established. The League also helped to promote the formation of libertarian schools, on Ferrer's lines, in various European cities (Avrich, p. 30).

Paradoxically, however, the most impressive expansion of Ferrer's influence came after his death. His execution caused a wave of protest throughout Europe. There were demonstrations in London, Rome, Berlin, Vienna, Amsterdam, Geneva and Paris, and condemnation came not just from anarchists but from liberal groups of all kinds. In London George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells and Conan Doyle were among the public protesters, and in France Maeterlinck, Anatole France and Jaurès. As Paul Avrich points out, because of his execution Ferrer, and not Sébastien Faure or Paul Robin, became the most celebrated representative of the movement for libertarian education. His writings were translated into many languages and schools bearing his name and devoted to his concepts of education

sprang up all over the world. In the next quarter of a century Ferrer schools were started in Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, China and Japan. In Russia, during the Revolution, the anarchist leader Makhno tried to set up a Ferrer school in the Ukraine; and the programme for educational reform which Landauer drew up during the Bavarian revolution in 1919 was based on Ferrer's ideas.

The most vigorous response of all came from the United States. A Ferrer Association was set up and Ferrer schools opened in a dozen major cities, one of which survived for over forty years. The Association was not exclusively anarchist, and, as in France, a number of prominent writers and artists were drawn to the libertarian cause. Jack London and Upton Sinclair served on the Association's first Advisory Board and artists like Man Ray, Alfred Stieglitz and Robert Henri contributed to the New York school's adult education programme. (Adult education was nearly always a significant feature of libertarian schools.)

Ferrer was, then, directly or indirectly, an important means by which the ideas of the movement for libertarian education were diffused throughout the world. But although he certainly added to the ideas himself, they had essentially been already crystallised by the French libertarians before he left France to put them into effect in his school in Barcelona.

A number of different contributions towards that crystallisation can be identified. There were first of all the remarks about education of such figures as Proudhon, Marx, Stirner, Bakunin and Kropotkin, often made incidentally as part of their general social critique. Many of these are to do, as we shall see, with the concept of 'integral education' – an education which, cultivating physical as well as mental skills, would work against social divisions between worker and intellectual, and would at the same time counter the alienating effect of overspecialisation caused by the development of large-scale industry and the division of labour. Secondly, there were the attempts to develop these ideas in terms of specific educational theory and practice by such people as Robin and Faure – Robin published an essay 'On integral Education' as early as 1869 in which he set out the ideas he was later to put into practice at Cempuis. Thirdly, there was the work of journalists like Grave which not only popularised the ideas but also defined them as a coherent educational approach.

There is, however, another factor which needs to be taken into account. Underlying the approach of many libertarians is a distinctive attitude to the treatment of children and the exercise of authority in social relations. The attitude can exist quite apart from the theory, which is why a distinction was made at the beginning of the chapter

between position and movement; but part of the interest of libertarian theory lies in its being an attempt to translate a sharp moral position (not at all mere woolly emotionalism) into educational terms.

Both the position and the attempt to translate it into theoretical terms can be seen particularly clearly in the work of the English philosopher, William Godwin (1756–1836). For this reason it may be helpful to begin our attempt to describe the libertarian approach to education with a consideration of Godwin's views.

Godwin was, of course, writing well before anarchism emerged as a conscious movement yet he produced what one historian has called 'the most complete and worked-out statement of rational anarchist belief ever attempted' (Joll, p. 31). He had little or no influence on later libertarian writers on education yet he wrote what another historian has described as 'the first modern libertarian text on education' (Spring, p. 15). Looking back on his writings nearly a hundred years later libertarians had no difficulty in recognising a position similar to their own.

So far as education is concerned, three features of that position stand out particularly: his attitude to children, his account of learning and teaching, and his concern about the power of education as a means of social control.

Godwin's attitude to children is distinctive for two reasons: his recognition of the child's right to a certain autonomy, and his rejection of coercion. The child is, he says,

an individual being, with powers of reasoning, with sensations of pleasure and pain, and with principles of morality By the system of nature he is placed by himself; he has a claim upon his little sphere of empire and discretion; and he is entitled to his appropriate portion of independence. (*The Enquirer*, p. 88)

'His appropriate portion of independence'; we normally approach adults with certain assumptions: that they have powers of initiative, capacity for discretion, power to reject, and so on. These assumptions define a degree of autonomy which human beings are presumed to possess. The child is an independent moral being, says Godwin, and is entitled to be treated in the same way.

Godwin uses the language of rights, and it would be easy to see him as making for children claims similar to those which Tom Paine was making for man in general in *The Rights of Man* (1791) and which Mary Wollstonecroft, Godwin's wife, was making specifically for women in *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). However, although Godwin's *Political Justice* clearly belongs with these books, the concept of formulated rights is not really part of his thought in the

way that it is of Paine's (Locke, p. 49). Godwin is working at a more abstract level. The rights he is concerned with are universal moral premises, not codifiable legal and political rights. Nevertheless, the two are connected, and later libertarians will argue that the moral viewpoint has legal and political implications.

Whatever a child's entitlement, he was not receiving it, in Godwin's view. If I want an adult to do something for me I ask him and do not force him. He has a right to refuse and all I can do if that happens is to try to persuade him or in some cases resort to an arbiter. We do not treat children like that; and this can only be, says Godwin, because our relationships with them are not governed exclusively by moral considerations but are influenced by considerations of power.

Godwin believed that coercion entered into adult relationships with the young to a greater extent than adults supposed. It was evident in the peremptoriness and unkindness with which children were all too commonly treated; in the harsh discipline that characterised contemporary schools; and above all in the barbarous punishment to which the young were often subjected.

True respect for a child's autonomy would preclude any such coercion. It also precluded another thing which frequently characterised adult dealings with the young: deception. The point is an important one since it was over this issue that Godwin parted company from Rousseau. Godwin admired Rousseau and was influenced by him but he objected very strongly to Rousseau's view that the teacher should appear to be allowing the child to do as he pleases when in fact the teacher is doing nothing of the sort:

Let him believe that he is always in control though it is always you who really controls. There is no subjection so perfect as that which keeps the appearance of freedom.

This was merely coercion disguised. It was a double affront to the child's autonomy. It denied him genuine independence, and it insulted the rationality on which the child's autonomy was based.

I suspect that many teachers today might take Rousseau's view. However, it is precisely this that would mark off the liberal or 'progressive' teacher from the genuinely libertarian one. And it is, of course, the fact that Godwin took such a strong line on it that puts him so firmly in the libertarian camp.

With this attitude, it is not surprising that Godwin's account of learning and teaching should also have some distinctive features. Their general drift is conveyed by his own summary:

According to the received modes of education, the master goes first, and the pupil follows. According to the method here recom-

mended, it is probable that the pupil should go first, and the master follow.

Such a reversal of roles is possible because of the weight Godwin attaches to motivation. Like later libertarians he argues that the single most important factor in learning is a positive 'set' towards it on the part of the pupil. This 'set' is naturally there in most young learners and the task of the educator should be to build on it. But that, in Godwin's view, was precisely what existing schools did not do. Current educational practice, with its emphasis on teacher direction, its discouragement of learner initiative and its heavy use of punishment, together with its generally repressive atmosphere, worked actively against positive motivation towards learning. The 'whole formidable apparatus' should be swept away and replaced by an approach which started from learner motivation and adapted itself to it. Among the things which this would entail would be a change in the role of the teacher. In essence, it would now be defined in complementary terms. The teacher's task would be to stimulate the learner and strengthen his set towards learning; to help him to overcome particular learning difficulties; and to provide the generous and sympathetic support which Godwin believed crucial to the development of the young.

In performing these functions it was particularly important that the teacher should not weaken the pupil's natural drive to learn by substituting his will for his pupil's. He must avoid both the overt direction of the traditional approach and the more subtle assertion of control envisaged by Rousseau. All must be open and above board; and the pupil should have the right to say no.

This respect for the learner's autonomy is obviously an application of the general principle of respect for the autonomy of the child. But there is also a case for it on purely pedagogic grounds. Godwin believed that if education was approached in this way, and the process tailored to the deep psychology of the learner, then learning would be simply *better*. The point is an important one for Godwin's view is shared by later libertarians. The case made for libertarian pedagogy is not just that it is more moral but that it is pedagogically superior.

The third distinctive feature of Godwin's views on education is his concern about the possible use of education as a means of social control. 'Even in the petty institutions of Sunday schools, the chief lessons that are taught are a superstitious veneration for the Church of England and to bow to every man in a handsome coat.' Not everyone went to Sunday schools, however; what would be the effect of introducing mass education and putting it under the control of the state?

before we put so powerful a machine under the direction of so ambiguous an agent, it behoves us to consider well what it is that we do. Government will not fail to employ it to strengthen its hands and perpetuate its institutions.

The role of the state in education was much debated at the time, in other countries as in England, and many radicals – and not just radicals – held views similar to Godwin's. Where Godwin differed from others was in the fact that his uncompromising opposition to state education was rooted in an analysis of the notion of power in society which was distinctly anarchist.

The analysis, which is cogently developed in his book *On Political Justice*, cannot concern us here. Very generally, its principal features are the identification of private property as the key source of social injustice, an interest in decentralised forms of political association, and a preference for the quick of individual intelligence to the petrifaction of institutionalisation – all of which were characteristic pre-occupations of later anarchists.

Since the progression of educational history may appear to have exposed the idiosyncrasy of Godwin's views and made them of historical interest only, it is perhaps worth observing that his views have some validity. State-controlled education systems do reflect, often closely, the views and values of governments. Because in our own country, and in many other Western countries, this is less directly true, the point can be overlooked. The example of Nazi Germany is perhaps sufficiently far off, and certainly glaring enough, to illustrate the potential for government intervention. In Nazi Germany schools were directed by the minister of education to begin racial instruction at the age of 6 and to order their teaching so as to bring out the importance of race and heredity for the development of the German people. 'World history is to be portrayed as the history of racially determined peoples.' (Spring, p. 20). Racial biology became a compulsory part of the curriculum. The case of Nazi Germany may seem hardly a common one, but it is typical in this respect, that the more interested a government is in inculcating an ideology, the more readily it turns to education as a means of propagating and reinforcing its beliefs.

However, what has concerned libertarians rather more are the less overt ways in which education can reflect the interests of particular groups in society. In the nineteenth century they were exercised by the way in which educational systems reflected the interests of the church and the needs of industry. More recently they have been concerned about the extent to which schools reinforce existing social divisions and confirm social disadvantage (as in the case of women and minority groups). It has also been argued, more speculatively, by