

Anarchism and Youth Liberation

by Marc Silverstein

Children in today's society are uniquely oppressed, but for the most part their oppression goes unnoticed even by people who consider themselves progressives or radicals. The fact that the relations between children and adults are based on inequality and compulsion is considered a separate issue from oppressions based on race, gender or sexual orientation, because it is considered somehow natural. Children are seen as incapable of making decisions for themselves and running their own affairs, due to their supposed lack of experience and immaturity, and therefore it is considered legitimate for adults to exercise some kind of authority over them. Anarchism, which is based on the principles of individual sovereignty, non-coercion, free association and mutual aid, can play an important role in helping to formulate an anti-authoritarian theory of parenting, education and child-rearing, and to begin the process of liberating children from an oppressive society.

The first kind of authority that children face while growing up is that of their parents. Parents have legal guardianship over their children from the moment they are born until they turn 18. Most parents hold an authoritarian and hierarchical view of their relation to their children. They see their kids as their property, who are to be nurtured, protected, kept in line, restrained, disciplined, rewarded or punished as the parents see fit. Anarchists would oppose this conception of the child, since children are not seen as autonomous individuals in their own right, but mere appendages of their parents. Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist, put it succinctly: "Children do not constitute anyone's property: they are neither the property of the parents nor even of society. They belong only to their own future freedom."

Some parents use the justification that they are "over-protective" or they "care about their children too much" to excuse the stifling atmosphere of the nuclear family. It is with the nuclear family that gender roles are created and re-enforced, and where authoritarian ideologies are passed down to the next generation. Neurotic and anti-social personality

traits are also produced in children as a consequence of the nuclear family's puritanical suppression of sexuality. Oftentimes, parents will force their children to follow their particular religion, i.e. Judaism, Christianity, etc. or political affiliation, i.e. Republican, Democrat, etc. In the Jewish religion, boys at 13 are usually pressured or outright coerced into having Bar Mitzvahs, which is the sign of "becoming a man". Hanukkah and Christmas are religious celebrations which children are forced to partake in, and they are not given any opportunity to make up their own mind about their religious or political beliefs.

Around the age of 5, children are shipped off to schools, or "youth concentration camps" as anarchist writer Bob Black accurately called them. In these institutions children are monitored closely by their teachers, who make sure to report any kind of "suspicious" behavior. The purpose of school is to thwart any signs of free-thought or individuality, by forms of subtle or not-so-subtle coercion. If children "misbehave", they are punished by being sent to the office, detention, suspension, expulsion, or bad grades. In most private middle and high schools, and in a growing number of public schools, there is a dress code that children have to follow. Sometimes they are even forced to tuck in their shirts or wear a belt. Tattoos, dyed hair, piercings and other attempts to create an individual identity are often met with the fierce hostility of principals and administrators.

The relation of the administration to the students is almost exactly like that of a boss to his workers. He owns the institution, he sets the "standards of conduct", and tries to create a "productive work environment". It is not considered a good idea to question those in authority, and the anger of the students are channeled into acceptable forms such as student government or the official student union, which are similar to modern AFL-CIO unions in the workplace. Student government may call for minor reforms, but in no way calls into question the very existence of schools, or the possibility of abolishing

coercion altogether, which the anarchist critique calls for.

It is also quite interesting how much schools and prisons have in common with each other. In both prisons and schools, the following criteria apply: an authoritarian structure, dress code, pass needed for going from one part of the facility to another, emphasis on silence and order, negative reinforcement, emphasis on behavior, extrinsic reward system, loss of individual autonomy, abridged freedoms, and little participation in decision making.

This begs the question: what can children do to fight back against the particular forms of oppression they face in their daily lives? The most important thing is to create a subversive atmosphere in the home, school, and workplace (high-school students are often forced to work in shitty, low-paying jobs like McDonalds). Let other young people know how you feel about parental coercion or about how you are treated by adults. Class-consciousness is essential. Children need to recognize that they are a uniquely oppressed class vis-à-vis the oppressing class which dictates the conditions of their existence. To paraphrase the Preamble to the IWW Constitution, the oppressed class and the oppressing class have nothing in common.

Disobedience can be expressed small ways (kind of like sabotage in the workplace) by refusing to pledge allegiance, to participate in prayer (in religious schools), or by choosing to write school essays on, for example, Youth Revolt Throughout History, Emma Goldman, or the case of Katie Sierra (a 15-year old anarchist suspended from school for wearing homemade anti-war shirts and for trying to start up an anarchist club) and deliver them in front of class. Educate yourself outside of school by talking with others, reading, and sharing your ideas and experiences. You can make flyers and distribute them or paste them up around the school. You can start up a zine by yourself or with others, and

distribute it at school. High-school general strikes or Reclaim the Streets can also be planned; even if they are over seemingly reformist issues (curfew, uniforms, etc.), they have the possibility of radicalizing more and more students.

There are many creative possibilities; for instance, a group of anarchists close to where I live took a sign from a kennel that said “Obedience Training” and unfurled it over a local high school. To the extent that such things are successful, parents and administrators must feel like they can not get away with stuff that they could get away with before, that they are being closely watched and monitored by the children they formerly oppressed, that they are slowly losing their grip of power and authority over youth, and that youth are no longer an amorphous mass of docile sheep, but class conscious, intelligent, committed, and organized youth, who are prepared to take their lives into their own hands and to abolish all masters once and for all.

Anarchism has a lot to offer youth liberation. Its basic principles of anti-authoritarianism and non-coercion are powerful weapons in the arsenal to free children from their state of slavery and bondage. Anarchism also offers youth liberation the insight that it cannot be content with just abolishing parental coercion, it must also create liberatory alternatives. This is an example of the revolutionary dual power strategy, where the new society is created out of the shell of the old. Contrary to the official view, education does not equal schooling, and kids can create a whole self-organized infrastructure of counter-institutions for learning, growing, and developing themselves – on a basis of full equality and freedom. Genuinely “free skools” can be created, where classes are strictly voluntary, and children can choose to study a particular subject with others, children or adults, who happen to be an authority on the topic. As Colin Ward put it in his book *Anarchy in Action*, they will be “schools no longer” but popular laboratories of liberation.

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