

Thoughts on libertarian education^[1]

This document does not intend to go over all themes and theses about libertarian education or pedagogy, be they contemporary or not. It is a collection of free thoughts based on both readings and practical experience used working with adults in training. Libertarian “Andragogy”^[2] - if we accept this term which comes from Canada – is practised regularly nowadays, but rarely if ever is it described or theorised. My ideas here will be kept general, non-normative, and will be limited to a few reminders, either historical or practical.

Without returning to a fundamental debate about the differences between libertarian education and libertarian pedagogy, it appears necessary to point out that libertarian education is not limited to pedagogy alone (as a set of tools, methods, steps, or attitudes), but that it may be encompassed within it. In any case, education cannot be delegated to any body of specialists, even libertarian. Such education, which includes dealing with professionals and institutions created for such purposes, cannot be confined in such systems. Libertarian education concerns everyone. The pedagogues, that is those to whom we entrust the children’s behaviour (the etymological meaning of pedagogy), cannot—and do not portend to—carry out and accomplish the great educational adventure alone. At first, in terms of education, this requirement implies a plurality of areas, spaces, and actors. Then, once the educational process is underway, it suggests giving each person the tools and resources necessary to follow his or her own trajectory. The teacher becomes more of a “facilitator,” as described by Carl Rogers. It is not enough to use so-called active learning theories. They need to be finalised and made sense of, given a sense, and in short made into a tool rather than an end. They are a sort of pedagogical “trick,” to benefit the autonomy that the “learners” must acquire, in such a way that only the actor him- or herself can put themselves in a position to acquire knowledge. As stated by Malcolm Knowles, “we cannot teach others, we can only facilitate their learning.”^[3]

It is also important to point out here the pragmatic nature of this pedagogy. Indeed, libertarian pedagogy is not a theory of education which appeared *ex nihilo*, that is in the marvellous brain of a German thinker refugeed in London, for example, but like all anarchist theory: it is a permanent theorisation process of diffuse, rich, and occasionally even contradictory practices. Libertarian pedagogy is also born from a long history and asserts itself as the product of many histories, and single and collective thoughts. It is single by the principles that move it and multiple by the practices and spaces that it inhabits.

First, and without trying to be exhaustive, I will discuss a few of the precursors and practitioners of this pedagogical current, almost always tied to real or symbolic experiences or places. Due to lack of space others, often the best known, will be excluded. Then I will discuss a few regulating principles which are the base and driving force behind this pedagogy.

Precursors and practitioners of libertarian pedagogy

Without going all the way back to Ancient Greece, I would like to mention Rabelais: I believe that without a doubt it was he who was the unknowing precursor to this kind of free education. In the 16th century, Rabelais founded the Thélème Abbey^[4]--a highly symbolic place for other reasons--with his innovative (so as not to say revolutionary) pedagogical thoughts on "*Do what thou wilt*" ("Do what you want"). He believed that the primary motor to education—amongst civilised people it should be noted—was an active and free attitude in a place freed from the most constraints possible. It should be a place where education can be built by freedom and freedom by education. To me, it seems that the entire question of libertarian pedagogy seems contained in this dialectical movement.

Another precursor: Charles Fourier who, in the Phalanstère, a living- and workspace, imagined an educational model based on the freedom of one's passions (today we would say desires, urges, motivations or interests). He advocated not only integral education, that written by and dear to the spirit of anarchists – from J. Proudhon to S. Faure – but also the use of discovery and of conducting multiple experiments allowing for trial and error. From this set of experiences, real individual choices emerged with regard to learning and one's future activities. What needs to be noted, and as such Fourier makes education a major stake and an act of collective responsibility, is that education is not artificially disconnected from the life of the city (the Phalanstère) and from production necessary to the economical survival of the organisation. Such education is integrated in the social sense without being submissive to it; it feeds on economic realities without being totally dependent, far from it.

Proudhon inherited this conception of education, and from such pedagogical utopias. The precursor to the idea of self-management, which forms the basis of revolutionary dreams about the working class' ability to be autonomous, states that school should not be cut off from life and the workshop, that the “coupling” of education and production is fundamental, not only to ensure complete and multidisciplinary training, but also to ensure independence from the State and a few other educational structures. A line of thinking that is shared by S. Faure and the Ruche or, more recently, with Bonaventure.

Fernand Pelloutier participant in Labour Councils and founder, with thousands of others, of revolutionary syndicalism, also adhered to the idea of integral and free education, in the interest of the social uses of knowledge and without wanting to transform children into little, competitive producers too often exploited in the workshops. The sole goal of education was to prepare by the multidisciplinary and multiplicity of techniques for one's future role as a conscious producer. In my opinion, Pelloutier is interesting because he raised awareness in syndicalism circles about education. Fully aware of the stakes that education represented for those in public power or part of the clergy, he thought that it was the best instrument of state domination. As such, syndicalism, which is the working class' natural tool for emancipation, needed to master education in order to free itself from the grasps of power and, as such, work towards the freedom of all. This is why he fought for Labour Councils to become educational spaces for workers and for education to become the work of workers themselves, like the Spanish CNT syndicates tried in due time. It was a question not only of “educating to better revolt,” but also in order to forge consciousness; to qualify to better resist and, in the long term, in order to freely build socialism.

To conclude this quick overview, I will mention the Ruche, a real place if ever there was one to apply the desire to create an educational space that is a tool for humanity and always careful never to succumb to any type of ruling power. Like Bonaventure just a few years ago in France, S. Faure tried to create a mini-educational republic based on economic self-sufficiency and the active solidarity of the social structures and organisations that helped to fund it. This will to “not be dependant” seems fundamental, even if it does not detract from other libertarian pedagogical experiments led here and there, like the Paris Self-Managed High School (Lice autogiro de Paris), the LAP. This will today appears to be the only means to have our own autonomous educational spaces, for now reserved to the libertarian movement. So long as such dissident, marginal,

libertarian educational structures remain a closed affair which are not talked about and which are not part of a strong and organised social movement, the ruling powers—and the state above all, which finances the education system—will be tolerant. It is clear however that they will put an end to such experiments once they start to represent a thorn in the heel of or a danger to their system. That is why economic self-sufficiency is essential in the end and it is surely on its capability to be self-sufficient and anchored in the social movement that the future of libertarian pedagogy depends. May one hundred tiny educational republics see the day and may revolutionary syndicalism work responsibly.

The main ideas behind libertarian pedagogy

I will limit myself to listing a few major invariables which appear fundamental to the principals of libertarian pedagogy. To me it seems that the essential finality of the process of education by freedom consists in the individual gradually, over the course of his or her education, participating more and more in the organisation and production of his or her knowledge. In this way, education is a co-constituent of anarchism since it aims to allow the individual to be productive as an autonomous person, careful to develop through knowledge and awareness of his or her freedom and the freedom of others, and in that it purports to provide a space for one and all in which to excel socially and professionally.

As stated by the Swiss pedagogue Pestalozzi in the 18th century, the educational project attempts to allow each person to “*make themselves free,*” to the best of his or her potential. Libertarian pedagogical theoreticians and practitioners also adhere to this idea. Following J-J Rousseau, before Pestalozzi, who had advocated it for Emile and who he suggested be “*a man first and foremost.*” The Anarchist Encyclopaedia is unambiguous in this regard: “the goal of education is to educate the child to accomplish the destiny that he or she judges best, in such a way that in any situation he or she be able to judge freely the behaviour to adapt and have a will strong enough to confront his or her actions with such judgement.” As such, the goal of libertarian education and especially of libertarian pedagogy is to work towards the elaboration of a free individual—free to act and to think—capable of critically analysing his or her own choices. In such, the anarchist educational project goes beyond the simple accumulation of knowledge and attempts to construct an individual capable of critical analysis and thought.

Towards free and autonomous individuals

If “freedom is the crown prize of the educational edifice,” forming the mind “is to warn it against all subjective causes (personal interest, egoism, laziness, dependence on others, dogmatic principles, tastes) which inhibit us from observing and judging or lead us erroneously in our observations and judgements.”^[5]

Libertarian education is a rationalistic or even scientific pedagogy which refuses to make the child and later the adult a follower or believer of anarchism. Rather, it advocates an individual who upon analysis and reflection will attempt, perhaps with others, to build anarchism. Contrary to many pedagogical doctrines, it is not a machine built to reproduce and brainlessly clone, but rather a means of producing free and autonomous individuals capable of choosing their means of social engagement.

Libertarian education and its corollary, pedagogy, aim to “teach people to think, to discuss, to remember, and to ask questions,”^[6] as W. Godwin suggested. Knowledge, although indispensable, is not an end in and of itself. The final result of education is not a filled-up brain but a working brain, which offers the individual the means to act both in terms of manual labour and in terms of intellectual work and thought. It aims to provide the individual with the tools to build him- or herself, without neglecting or forgetting external influences.

Furthermore, libertarian education—of which Freinet's pedagogy and institutional pedagogy have both been largely influenced—is also a school of life and social workings. Children must educate themselves and be educated in freedom and in respect for other adults and children. J. Guillaume wrote that, in groups, children will be completely free: “they will organise their own games, conferences, and will set-up a committee to direct their work, mediators to mediate their disputes, etc. As such, they will get used to public life, to responsibility, to mutuality. The teacher that they will have freely chosen to teach them something will no longer be a detested tyrant but a friend they will happily listen to.”^[7]

Beyond the modernity and the idealism of this thesis, it is worth pointing out that the libertarian project fundamentally challenges the status of the “knowledge/power” duo in an educational setting. This is why it was and remains bothersome in many spheres and anticipatory of future society. Without fooling ourselves either, power no longer—or no longer fully—remains in the hands of those who know (teachers), but in principal in the hands of one and all. Knowledge is no longer the result of passive assimilation, but the work of a socialised individual or of a collective activity. The teacher no longer exists to transmit academic knowledge, set-out by directives and authoritarian programmes, but to help learners produce knowledge according to their spheres of interest or their current preoccupations. The teacher disappears by decentralising him- or herself and becomes a helper to knowledge. His or her goal is to help learners “find answers to their questions, in experiments, or by working with their comrades, or in books, or, as infrequently as possible, by giving them an answer directly.”^[8] It is simply a question of putting Blanqui's very famous formula into practice: “No Gods (omniscient), no masters (omnipotent).”

An attitude for life

To finish this short enunciation of a few principles of libertarian education, I would like to add two comments. Libertarian pedagogy is not the pedagogy of a tool but the pedagogy of a means and an attitude. It does not found its results on an object of mediation—such and such a book, method, or medium—but on the aptitude of the group and its “leader” (*animateur*) to implement the educational process freely. It is a permanent intention in action, hence its fragility, and not a belief in the infallibility of a method, from whence its strength. Libertarian pedagogy is a pragmatic not a dogmatic pedagogy which rests above all on a few simple principles and, even more so, on the conscious and active participation of those who implement it and on the context.

My second comment, which is probably useless here - consists of insisting on the fact that libertarian pedagogy makes sense only if it is put into action, designed, and led by the learners themselves, that it is done for (and by) those educated and not for (and by) the teacher. It is not simply a question of pleasing oneself, although that is also recommendable, but to act in the interest of the “citizens in training.”

Libertarian education and pedagogy are active principles, but are of course also permanently questioned. It is obvious that they can be practiced everywhere, freely or clandestinely, there are no spaces or times reserved for their application and, even unwittingly, some people who care about the development of adults and children are very good at applying them. That’s why examples such as the team at Bonaventure, Self-Managed High-Schools in Paris and elsewhere, even isolated individuals, Freinet classes, some classes within the institutional system, in priority education zones (ZEP), in adult education courses, or even “without knowing it” like at the *Escola Municipal Amorim Lima* in Sao Paolo, Brazil, can claim it as their own. Libertarian pedagogy, like the proletariat, has no homeland.

Hugues Lenoir
(Traduction Jocelyne Serveau)

Further reading

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- Rogers Carl, *Liberté pour apprendre*, Dunod, Paris, 1971.

[1] Update of an article which appeared in *Le Monde Libertaire* Special Edition #15, 28 July to 25 September 2000.

[2] The author works with adults in training in France.

[3] Knowles M., *L'apprenant adulte*, Paris, Editions d'organisation, 1990, p. 54.

[4] Gargantua, Livre 57.

[5] All of these quotations are drawn for the article "Éducation" by E. Delauney in the *Encyclopédie anarchiste*.

[6] Quoted by J-M Raynaud in *T'are ta gueule à la révo*, Éditions du Monde libertaire. Paris. 1987. p 191.

[7] idem. p 209.

[8] Robin P., quoted by N. Brenand in *Cempuis, une expérience d'éducation libertaire à l'époque de Jules Ferry*, Éditions du Monde libertaire, Paris, 1992.