

# Teaching Anarchy

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There are many anarchist approaches to education from free-schooling to home-schooling to de-schooling and beyond. The experience recounted here occurred in a much less receptive learning environment.

For twenty years I taught a course, entitled “Anarchy and Social Change,” at a university that was at first fairly experimental (student-centered, no grades, interdisciplinary, participatory decision-making and self-designed degrees), but which, over the years, deteriorated (though not without a battle) into the “anywhere USA” franchise of bureaucratic education that is so widespread today.

By the time I left teaching there, I was the only one that still refused to adopt the conventional techniques of academic discipline that were now prevalent elsewhere at the university. However, as a result of increasing corporatization, I could not as easily create an anarchist-learning experience as had once been possible. Moreover, the nature of the student body had shifted because the university was no longer seen as an attractive place by free spirited radicals. Even beyond the classroom, student ideas for community projects increasingly tended to be of the reformist variety.

Aside from the occasional student who identified with anarchy, my classes began to largely be flooded with students who did not really want to engage with anarchist ideas. They were often there simply because they had heard that there were no grades and expected an easy ride. Many of these more opportunistic students were not merely uninterested in anarchy, they were actively hostile to it. Their priorities were elsewhere and their defenses were up whenever transgressive ideas were introduced.

Other students, while somewhat curious about anarchy, were unconvinced that it was possible. Nice idea, but anarchy can't work in practice, they'd say, because “people are just too fucked up.” Implied in this miserabilist analysis were a variety of unexamined assumptions about human nature that led to a “taking care of number one” stance for some or a cynical hipster pose for others.

In effect, these students were telling me that before they would agree to seriously engage in learning about anarchy, they needed to know that it wasn't just pie in the sky. They wanted proof that human nature is compatible with anarchy or else why waste their time. Only by recognizing this challenge as valid and starting from there could the learning process begin. Fair enough. We began experientially by re-imagining and redesigning both the classroom and the learning process along anarchist lines, from creating learning affinity groups to collectively deciding what to study and how to go about it, starting, of course, with human nature.

This was not easy work. Preconceived notions of human nature go deep and prevent us from learning about anarchy in more than a superficial “oh isn't that an interesting heresy” kind of way. This ingrained problem is further compounded by the prevailing post-modernist misreading of the anarchist view of human nature as essentialist and ideological. Yet what is often dismissed as essentialist in anarchy is, in fact, quite nuanced.

Similarly, what is rejected as ideological is frequently seen that way because of the viewer's own unexamined ideological assumptions.

Take Kropotkin. Based on his personal observations of animals surviving under the most difficult circumstances in Siberia, Kropotkin found not “survival of the fittest” in the Social Darwinist sense, but “mutual aid.”

His is a very different story of how species survive than we are accustomed to hearing in capitalist society. As he speculated, like other animals, humans have within themselves the capacity for both cooperative and competitive behavior in solving problems of survival.

Which of these elements comes to the fore in social interactions depends largely on the values inculcated by the larger society. However, while it is an ideological assumption of capitalism that human nature is, in essence, competitive, that is only part of the picture. Even in a capitalist setting, there is no one inherently human way of taking care of survival, much less abundance.

Perhaps it is better for anarchists to think of human nature as encompassing an expansive repertoire of possible behaviors. In so doing, we can release human nature from the narrow confines of an essentialist logic that naively views it as either good or bad (or even evil as in the Judeo-Christian language of original sin). While anarchy emphasizes the potential for cooperative behavior embedded in human nature by referencing solidarity against oppression and for the creation of liberatory alternatives, it doesn't deny the will to power that the state and capitalism tap into so effectively.

In this sense, the authoritarian structures of civilization are not strictly based upon imposition for their success, but are built upon human proclivities for competition and control. It is precisely because you can't expect a system in which imperfect human beings are in positions of power to be free of domination that anarchists seek to abolish hierarchy rather than because they think human nature is necessarily good.

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However, while we must be vigilant about power dynamics, this does not mean that we need to accept a bleak dog-eat-dog conception of human nature. Authoritarian tendencies in human nature, while real, can be rewarded or discouraged. In turn, anti-authoritarian impulses toward cooperation never completely disappear and can be reinforced by an anarchist vision of social change. In my teaching, I used the following story as a catalyst to elicit related tales of mutual aid from my students.

Once I was in a freak accident that resulted in my van being totaled. On my drive home, I started to smell smoke. I pulled over toward the side of the road and saw that the engine was in flames. Not having a fire extinguisher at hand, I started to throw dirt on it to no avail. As I looked up in exasperation, I saw a woman running toward me with a fire extinguisher in her hand. Another car stopped with an extinguisher, then another. Still the fire raged. A guy pulled up, jumped out of his car and started directing traffic around my van. Another called the volunteer fire department. A third helped me grab my sleeping bag, tent, camping equipment and tools out of the vehicle. A fourth offered to stick around long enough to give me a ride home.

By the time the cops finally got wind of it and arrived, everything that could have been done to bring order to this chaotic situation had already been done. The arriving volunteer fire department trucks put out the blaze and I caught a ride home with a total stranger.

In fact, all these people that I've mentioned were total strangers. Yet, they weren't helping me because they were doing their anarchist duty, or because they were being paid to do so, but because they recognized their own vulnerability in my struggle and they acted on their most cooperative instincts. While this story doesn't have a moral, it offers us a lesson about human nature. After all, someone could have stopped, clubbed me with their tire iron, stolen all my possessions from the car, rifled my wallet, and left me for dead. Humans are capable of such things. But this didn't happen. Somehow the people who offered their assistance to me saw their survival as connected to mine, and they were generous instead of predatory in their actions.

What people will do to survive is unpredictable because there is no essential human nature determining how they will act. In fact, against all odds, in a society where people live in isolated nuclear units and competition is the norm, they were cooperative.

Just think what might be possible if we lived in an anarchist society...

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