

## LIBERAL EDUCATION AND THE ANARCHIST INSIGHT

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Higher education, as it is currently constituted, tends to support the political and social agenda of the dominant culture, although this agenda is not typically clearly articulated. The history of higher education and the attitudes toward higher education generally held by the citizenry indicate that education, as a social institution, tends to maintain the *status quo* by teaching the values, beliefs, and reactions of the current "established" order. Although the stated purpose of liberal education is to facilitate open-minded inquiry by exposing students to major works of philosophy, literature, science, and art, this knowledge may also serve to preserve the current social structure. This tendency is strengthened when general education programs are based on the proposition that students must be inculcated in the understanding of, and appreciation for, exemplary works of the dominant culture and when an overly "reverent" attitude is taken toward those works. While such an educational agenda might result in students who are literate in the canons of the culture, they may not be truly liberally educated.

Liberal education, in its most literal sense, should free students from any particular culturally determined approach to life and assist them in developing awareness of a range of perspectives for addressing basic human questions and concerns. This proposition assumes that the role of a liberal education is to facilitate continuing human evolution and development by assisting people to create meaning for the experience of their lives, adapt their beliefs and actions to fit a constantly changing world, and assume leadership roles in a yet unknown future. It assumes further that this goal can be accomplished by demonstrating to students the contextual relativity of any particular point of view and assisting them in recognizing the conditioned biases in their perceptions, reactions, values, and beliefs. These processes will, it is assumed, lead to greater freedom of thought and action.

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## The Anarchist Insight

The philosophy of anarchism provides a metaphorical framework for exploring the liberating potential of liberal education. The term *anarchy* often connotes disorder, chaos, and violence, but it literally means "without ruler" and primarily opposes reliance on the rigid adherence to laws or structure, assuming that the most effective human processes occur in a context of freedom. Use of this metaphor does not necessarily assume advocacy of anarchy as a political system, and not all facets of anarchism are included. The metaphor proposes the use of some components of the central *insight* of anarchism in a metaphorical fashion to demonstrate the dangers inherent in the "institutionalization" of any particular set of ideas or values (McWilliams, 1988a) and the potential of education as a means for facilitating continuing human development.

The central insight of anarchism is that when a human activity is "institutionalized," it inevitably develops into a rigid structure that inhibits human progress. Sarason (1976) suggested that a social institution inevitably becomes a power hostile to the interests of its members by reducing their sense of personal independence, autonomy, responsibility, and community. Even though such a structure, whether governmental, religious, educational, or cultural, may have emerged to serve human needs, if it becomes rigidly institutionalized, it ultimately becomes a force that works against those needs. People begin to look to the structure as the source of initiative and support, promoting dependence and conformity, and ultimately weakening the ability of individuals and the society to respond to the changing environment. Application of this insight to liberal education indicates that the process of continuing evolution can be disrupted when any epistemological *method* or particular *content* of knowledge becomes an unquestioned institution.

Anarchism, while a not monolithic philosophy (Pennock & Chapman, 1978), usually assumes that human progress occurs as a function of increasing differentiation and individuation among the members of a society (Read, 1971). Similar to the theory of evolution of the species, it suggests that the best approach to dealing effectively with the ever-changing environment occurs through development of a wide mixture of new approaches and through responding to the "fit" between these approaches and the environment. Progress, then, occurs as a result of the emergence of variation in ideas, behavior, and values. Anarchism places importance on the need for freedom and equality among individuals, which facilitates this variety by enabling individuals to develop new thoughts, values, and actions. The purpose of the social structure is to provide the secure base of support and nurturance that allows this freedom to thrive. Increasing the variety of perspectives is in the best interests of both the individual and society since it enhances the effective survival of humanity and, ultimately, the universe by increasing the probability of the development of uniquely adaptive approaches to the ever-changing world.

## Epistemological Anarchy

Progress in human understanding involves the development of new ways of seeing existing events, which leads, further, to the ability to see formerly unseen events. True discovery, in the scientific sense, occurs when events that have been perceived as unconnected particulars come to be seen as an expression of a coherent entity (Polanyi, 1958, 1969). This process relies on the ability of the individual thinker to be free from existing rules or "laws" regarding the nature of the events and the methods or procedures through which new understanding may evolve. New knowledge cannot rely on rules or principles derived from old knowledge since it involves a restructuring of understanding that includes a new perspective on prior knowledge. As Polanyi (1958) said, "... we cannot possess any fixed framework within which the re-shaping of our hitherto fixed framework could be critically tested" (p. vii).

Feyerabend (1975) articulated an *epistemological anarchy* that formally applied the anarchist insight to the development of knowledge, particularly in science. He demonstrated that the practice of relying on "institutionalized" methodological rules often hinders progress in science and is not the way it has actually proceeded. He found no support for the idea that science progresses according to unchanging principles and, to the contrary, he discovered that the growth of knowledge often occurred when existing rules were violated. Since there is no rule that cannot be violated, it is evident that such violations are absolutely necessary for knowledge to progress. Yet, the emphasis on teaching particular standards and "canons" tends to create a conformity to existing points of view that will be continued even in the face of their failure. It is difficult for the well-trained thinker to realize that the rational processes being followed are an artifact of prior training and cultural conditioning rather than necessarily the most effective way to gain new knowledge. Feyerabend rejects the idea of any fixed method or theory of rationality: "To those who look at the rich material provided by history ... 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*" (1975, p. 28).

## Human Development

Liberal education is proposed as a vehicle for furthering human development and evolution rather than the inculcation of specific information or facts. Developmental psychology expresses a common theme (Kegan, 1982; Piaget, 1970; Wilber, 1980) regarding the nature of these evolutionary processes. As the ability to reason and guide actions develop, a "self" structure evolves to provide meaning and predictability to relevant processes and events. Further development to more complex and sophisticated levels is marked by the transcendence of identification with the structure or mode of functioning that evolved at the earlier level and its replace-

ment with a new, higher order, structure. Developmental psychologists have described this process in various ways, and common to all is the understanding that what was previously the total mode of understanding becomes a component or part within a new system of interpretation. Successful development, therefore, requires the ability to transcend the absolute reliance on the earlier structure in order for the new structure to emerge. The earlier structure, however, is not abandoned or lost; rather it becomes a component of the new structure: it is included within it. When this process has occurred, the prior view is something the person "has" rather than what the person "is." Each emerging higher order structure is more *comprehensive* (McWilliams, 1987, 1988b), more inclusive, than its predecessor, and more useful because it can incorporate a wider variety of events, some of which have yet to occur, within its range of utility.

The task of facilitating continuing human evolution is the maximum development of each individual's capabilities, and the principle of "anything goes" is relevant to this process. The greatest possibility for generating the range of new responses necessary for the survival of society, and for enabling the individual to seek the coherent entities that provide *meaningful* knowledge is through acceptance and support of the individual (Rogers, 1980). To reiterate, it is in the best interests of society to nurture individual freedom and individuation because it will lead to maximal effectiveness. It is against society's best interest, in the long term, to stifle individual expression in what appears, in the short term, to be the interest of maintaining a social order that will ultimately become an impediment to evolution.

### Epistemological Insurrection

Anarchy is implemented through *insurrection*, the throwing off of structure, the return to free exploration, and the emergence of spontaneous methods. Insurrection is distinguished from revolution (Read, 1971), which is the replacement of one structure with another. Insurrection, in its purest form, acts against all forms of structure:

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 ... Free associations where everyone does what best suits their talents replace the petrified institutions of the day, no function must be allowed to become fixed ... Teaching is to be based on curiosity and not on command, 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 (Feyerabend, 1975, p. 187).

This description emphasizes the destruction of the established order, but, consonant with the processes of human transformation described above, all that is "destroyed" is a rigidly institutionalized order that claims to be universally and permanently absolute. The content within the structure is not destroyed; rather, it is used on an *ad hoc* basis and then becomes incorporated within a newly emerging, higher order structure.

The implementation of a liberal education consistent with this epistemological anarchist framework requires *cultural literacy* (Hirsch, 1987), a common vocabulary and set of "referents" upon which new knowledge can be based. The cultural literacy viewpoint has, ironically, often been identified with an "establishment" view of general education, but is also essential to an epistemological anarchy. Since the development and discovery of new knowledge requires "an intimation of coherence among hitherto uncomprehended particulars" (Polanyi, 1969, p. 131), knowledge of those particulars is essential. Thus, epistemological anarchists must have a rich store of information as a basis for further development, and an effective educational environment must articulate a wide range of content including current "institutionalized" views. It must also demonstrate a range of alternative ways of approaching the same topics by including material from a range of cultural contexts (Simonson & Walker, 1988) and assist students in understanding the relativity and contextual bias of ideas and information. Students must be encouraged to explore new ideas, and recognize and develop emerging higher, more comprehensive structures for incorporating their knowledge. Students must also be cautioned not to allow the new structures to become, themselves, a new "institution."

Although anarchism emphasizes their danger, a particular kind of *structure* is necessary to provide an environment with the safety and support necessary to an anarchist epistemology. The rule of "anything goes" can only be followed within a context of respect and acceptance for individuals and their many forms of expression. It requires a concomitant willingness both to support and to suspend strong adherence to any single point of view and to cherish variety and freshness, even when it does not fit with or even when it contradicts existing viewpoints. It requires a stance of "irreverence" toward the most cherished knowledge and beliefs and great reverence for the process of free expression and inquiry. Finally, and most importantly, it must not allow the development of "rules" about how to create the proper environment or methods of inquiry.

Ultimately, there can be no reliance on rules about how to have a system without rules or how to live a truly liberated life. The greatest challenge to those who wish to become liberally educated lies in taking the risk of the freedom that comes from *not knowing* (Krishnamurti, 1969), the recognition that none of our knowledge is final or ultimate (Kelly, 1955), and the true wisdom that ensues from the acceptance of that understanding (Watts, 1951).

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