

# Chaos At Its Heels

Anarchy, Utopia and Education

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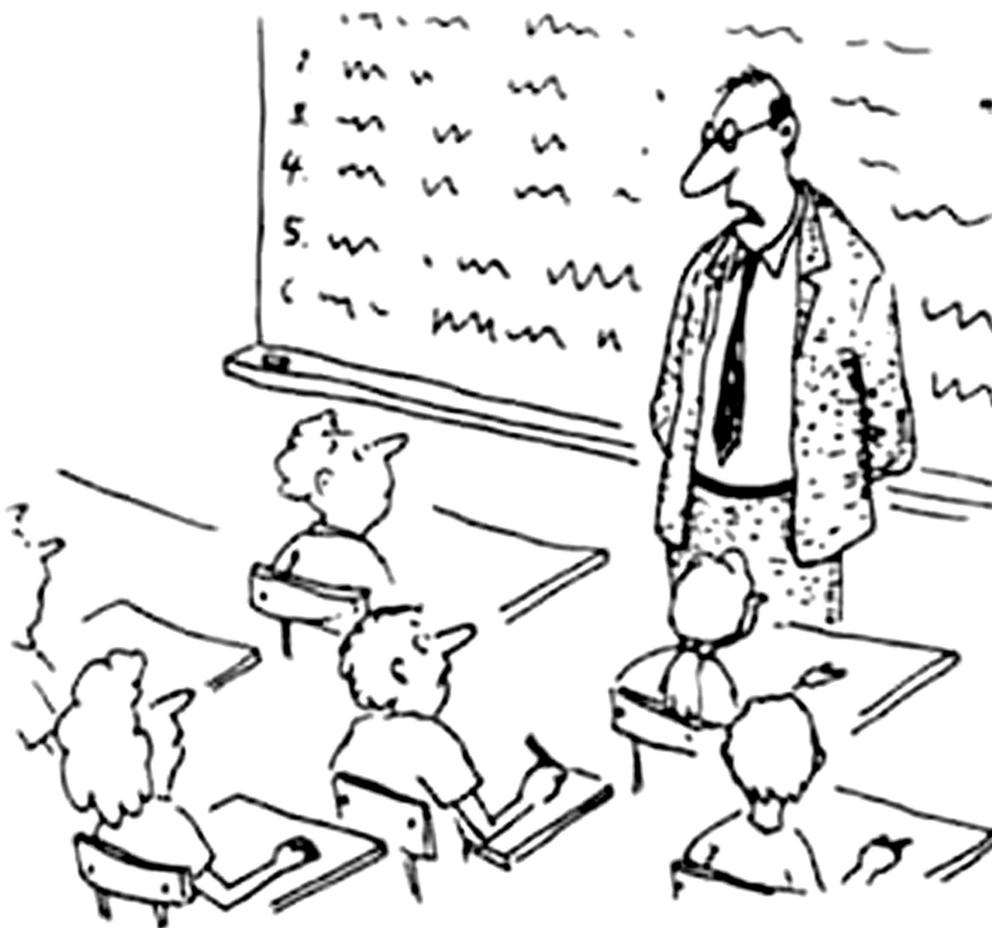
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***“I expect you all to be independent, innovative, critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!”***

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## **We Don't Need No Education, We Don't Need No Thought Control**

In "Ferris Bueller's Day Off" there is a classroom scene where a grey haired, bespectacled teacher stands in front of his blackboard and teaches economics in a long drawn out, dull tone to a classroom full of uninterested students. The camera pans to each student, staring up at their teacher glassy-eyed (and asleep), as he asks questions and requests an answer with "Anyone? Anyone?", to which he knows he is not going to garner any reply so he just carries on regardless. [1] It is a hilarious scene, which sadly enough, is probably true of most classrooms since the beginning of modern education.

The cartoon image above can be compared to this scene; the dull and monotonous voice orating to the tired, weary and uninterested students, "I expect you all to be independent, innovative and critical thinkers who will do exactly as I say!"

So imagine a classroom. What comes to mind? Maybe its thirty or so students sitting in front of a teacher, standing alone at a blackboard reciting what they had prepared from a syllabus they were hired to teach. Why is it this way? Is there any alternatives to this way of teaching?

*"The process through which certain educational values are relegated to a secondary status only adds to the concern that once education follows a business model, the remainder of its autonomy is compromised through excessive control over educators, curricula, and learners."* (Margolis, 2001) [2]

The teacher is working from a syllabus that rewards students for their hard work. Good grades mean better, well paying jobs in the future while lesser grades can mean low-paid jobs or unemployment. The two roads leading to life post-education: a life of hardship or a life of relative ease. The haves and the have nots. Follow the rules,

obey the authority figure and everything will be alright.

“The ideal of the average pedagogist is not a complete, well-rounded, original being; rather does he seek that the result of his art of pedagogy shall be automatons of flesh and blood, to best fit into the treadmill of society and the emptiness and dullness of our lives”. Emma Goldman. [3]. But does this have to be this way? Or are we indoctrinated to think, or not as the case may be, that this is the only way?

This essay will give a brief examination on alternative thinking in education.

In contemporary societies, Paul Goodman believed that, *"It is in the schools and from the mass media, rather than at home or from their friends, that the mass of our citizens in all classes learn that life is inevitably routine, depersonalised, venally graded; that it is best to toe the mark and shut up; that there is no place for spontaneity, open sexuality and free spirit. Trained in the schools they go on to the same quality of jobs, culture and politics. This is education, miseducation socialising to the national norms and regimenting to the nation's needs."* (Goodman, 1966) [4]

## **Anarchy and Utopia**

Anarchy is defined as *"a lack of organization and control in a society or group, esp. because either there is no government or it has no power."* [5]

Arguing this statement, anarchy is more like giving back power to the individual, giving them natural choice rather than having someone tell them what to do.

Armaline (2009) suggests not only that anarchism is *"fluid"* but that *"it changes with the needs and will of those who (re)produce it."* (p. 136) [6]

When applying anarchy to something as societally established as education, one must have imagination. Imagination is defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as *"the ability*

*to form pictures in the mind*”, “*Something that you think exists or is true, although in fact it is not real or true*” and “*The ability to think of new ideas.*” [7]. Emphasis on new ideas.

Imagine a classroom where learning is no longer just training the young to live in a capitalist society, but is based on intrinsic learning. Students learn what they feel like learning, through curiosity and a real desire to do so and not to just make them better cogs for the economic machine. This is schooling in a Utopian society. Students, teachers and parents working together with the broader local community to form a symbiosis of learning. One that will feed into itself. Think local and act global.

*“In anarchist theory the world revolution means the process by which the grip of authority is loosed, so that the functions of life can regulate themselves, without top-down direction and coordination”* (Goodman, 1966) [8]

In this section, I want to give a brief exploration on a few key thoughts in alternative pedagogy, from Commoning and Free Skools, to Children’s Democracy in Summerhill. What has been tried and tested? What does the future of teaching look like?

Summerhill was founded in 1921 by A.S. Neill and is situated in Suffolk, England. It is a democratic and self-governing school, adults and children have equal status on the grounds. Daily life in the school is governed by twice weekly meetings in which everyone has an equal vote. *“The school’s philosophy is to allow freedom for the individual - each child being able to take their own path in life, and following their own interests to develop into the person that they personally feel that they are meant to be. This leads to an inner self-confidence and real acceptance of themselves as individuals.”* [9]

A.S. Neill was a teacher who hated the strict discipline he was expected to put upon pupils, that he came up with a radically different method of education - to allow children to have the freedom to do what they wanted.

*“La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel (1532-1564), describes Theleme, a utopian Abbey in the countryside, built by the giant Gargantua (first book, ch. 52-57).*

*Rabelais tells that the inhabitants of the abbey, the Thélèmites, spend their lives not following laws, statutes, or rules, but living according to their own free will and pleasures. In Theleme one rises out of his bed whenever he thinks appropriate, and eats, drinks, and works when he has a mind to do it. In Thélèmites rules, as Rabelais puts it, there is but one clause to be observed: "Do what you please".” (Marzano, Gilberto. (2013). [10]*

Summerhill reminds me of this vision of a Utopia, “do what you please”. Students could pick and choose what they wanted to learn as they felt like it. They could swear and act on their own impulses, as long as you weren’t harming or interfering with anyone else. The school was an environment that encouraged a natural freedom to grow as an individual. Teachers were not paid very well, so tutelage varied from time to time but the subjects that were taught were varied and the classrooms were open to exploration by the pupils.

Former Education Secretary, David Blunkett, tried to close the school. Complaining, among other things that the school had no separate toilets for boys, girls or staff. The government didn’t know how to handle this “free school” and tried their best to close it down but they were beaten in the courts where the children also showed, again because they were equal members of this democratic school. Being an outsider to the

educational regime meant it was under intense scrutiny by the tabloids, looking for tales of sordid perversions from teachers. Regular inspections by Ofsted, “chaperoned by a Summerhill-appointed expert, as agreed when the court case was settled in 2000 – was more than satisfied. It praised “outstanding pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development”, teaching that was “never less than good with some outstanding features” and “learning ... closely tailored to match pupils’ individual needs. The inspectors also praised “outstanding behaviour” and “positive relationships”. [11]

Despite the odds being stacked against it, Summerhill is still a working school. Run by the same family since its creation, all past pupils themselves, but has it become too inward-looking and complacent in spreading the ideals that A.S. Neill had founded the school on? His daughter Zoe Readhead, who now runs the school says “We keep ourselves to ourselves. I do feel I ought to spread the word, but I have a responsibility to the school too. I suppose I should be writing to the newspapers and things but I haven’t the energy.” [12]

Looks like rebel schooling will live out its days in Suffolk for now.

*Suissa (2010) recognizes some of the pedagogical vulnerabilities within anarchism: “As far as educational practice is concerned, there are several weaknesses in the anarchist account. Primarily the sparse attention paid by anarchist writers to the issue of pedagogy both exposes this account to theoretical questions about the most appropriate pedagogical approach and opens the door to questionable pedagogical practices” [13]*

Commons are a born from democratic ideals, a real democracy of sorts. The framework of the Commons style education is connected to democratic aims and

democratic education. Commons is about sociality and community, while commons schooling lays the foundation for itself by creating its own future inhabitants.

Commons schools are an instrument to change society, which would already make it too politicised, but also an activity and not for marketisation.

*“The concept of commons and commoning is often connected to anti-capitalistic movements and ideas, and point to what has been coined post-capitalism (De Angelis, 2017) In this movement, the idea is that spaces that are common and processes of commoning point to ways of resisting the prevailing emphasis on growth and exploitation of human and natural resources in capitalist societies. [14]*

Commons schooling is a post-capitalist idea, an education for the sake of education and not as a tool or product for the vast beast of consumerism.

Free Skools exist in the realm of anarchist pedagogy. These classes are set up in small communities, where anyone can be a teacher as long as there are people interested in learning. Outside of any influence from governmental bodies, the classes can range from gardening, to DIY filmmaking...even to mushroom hunting. It gives a community an opportunity to share their skills and knowledge with each other. Classes are to be enjoyed but also arise out of a need at times, as they can become a vehicle for sharing, processing and problem solving. They are run usually by two or three organisers where the classes can be in gardens or parks, community centres or sometimes business donate their shop space. [15]

## **Imagine**

With the image shown at the start of this essay, we can maybe apply the ideas discussed and imagine a different classroom. Anarchist philosopher Paul Goodman's

idea of a class room, de-centralised and independently run, away from any governmental influence seems like a good idea in theory. The classroom itself could be situated in a shop front, a museum or a park - one of many dotted around a town or city. The classes would be small, with twenty five students and taught by one licensed teacher and two college students. Students and teachers would learn from each other, it would be in the community and using experiential learning. (Paul Goodman 1966) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlBhIqmM\\_oE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlBhIqmM_oE)

The image changed would be: a group of children, all holding a different item in their hand connected to whatever it was that they wanted to learn. The teacher would say, "I don't expect you all to be independent, innovative and critical thinkers. I expect everything and I expect nothing. Just be you. ...And I am here if you need me."

### **Hey Teacher, Leave Them Kids Alone**

As a student of St. Conleth's Vocational School, I graduated in 2000. I don't have many memories of my education, it was all "chalk and talk" style classes. Standing in front of the blackboard, have you done your homework? Why haven't you done your home work? Detention. Have you memorised these key dates? Where's your algebra homework? Detention.

The first year of Secondary schooling, I was demoted from "higher" mathematics class to foundation because the teacher didn't think I was any good. I wasn't, I was bored because I didn't understand any of it. Maybe I had a different learning ability? Nobody cared back then. There were a couple of teachers who I liked, who encouraged curiosity. I remember my art teacher told me back then that I wasn't good enough to apply to NCAD but here I am at thirty five years of age, in NCAD.

In retrospect, and after reading some of Paul Goodman for this essay, I can see how advantageous it is to go live a life, go work at those mindless and boring jobs and then re-enter education at a more experienced age.

One of the things I do remember well from our Leaving Certificate was how many people from my class actually became unemployed after getting good grades in their exams. Most never went to college instead started families while working low paid jobs, two joined the army while one or two others started apprenticeships in a trade. A friend of mine, spent most of Sixth Year studying night and day for his Leaving Certificate (much to the amusement of his non-studying friends). On the day of the results, we passed our exams (barely) while my friend failed every subject. He was devastated and didn't know where he went wrong. It's something I'll never forget, I remember thinking how meaningless and futile State examinations were. My friend went on to become an electrician through a FÁS program and now lives in Australia running his own business.

I learned more about myself and the world I live, and interact in, when I left the confines of school. The people I have met, the relationships I have made and the impact that they have had on me and my personality. The experiences of life shape you and school never prepared me for that. If anything, education should be something that teaches you to be a social entity, someone that can be a better part of the local community. It should let you guide yourself to discover who or what you want to be.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have put forth a small amount of alternative pedagogical ideas from a vast topic that might one day change how our children are educated and in some cases, have already begun to change education. Images like the one presented above, will have become an antiquated view of education and education itself will be a more natural occurring entity provided by the whole community and not just State sponsored teachers.

The title of this essay was taken from Alan Moore's *V For Vendetta*, "Authority, when first detecting chaos at its heels, will entertain the vilest schemes to save its orderly facade." [16]

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