# An Anarchic Celebration of the Liberal Arts

What is the relevance of Liberal Arts education for the challenges we face in the twenty-first century?

How can the critical tradition of Liberal Education nurture hope and foster democratic values?

Can Liberal Arts Education lead us to designing better and more sustainable futures for ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities?

I’ve added a slightly different start to the paper after the contributions and conversations yesterday, so I hope this places my work in the context of those earlier pieces and hints at possible points of connection across them. At the beginning of the conference yesterday we heard from Jane about the necessity for students to think about problems wholistically, and from Bryan about how hope is connected to creating the conditions for agency. These themes were picked up, and critiqued, in Joey’s piece about the ISE burden, and then we were given a different take on this through the GSD student contributions about design and hope, and the idea that you can’t guarantee hope, but you can scaffold it. And we had the piece from Olivia, Esme, and Dae challenging us to rethink liberal arts through thinking about the politics of our programmes and the importance of physical space, with a direct reference to Paulo Freire, who also features in my paper. While all these pieces, along with Josh’s, Stuart’s, and Milan’s work, as well as the conversation between Will and Simon, focussed on the institutional and programme-level, I would like to take us right down to the level of module design.

Analysing Contemporary Societies is the final core module of the degree programme, Studium Individuale: a liberal arts programme at Leuphana University, in Lüneburg, Germany. The module is designed to be an open, radically democratic space where the students collaboratively decide on the contents and the pedagogy. It is, in my mind, anarchy in practice. But how did a module of a small liberal arts programme end up with anarchisms as the reference point in its design?

I would like to take you through a series of waypoints exploring the background to my own democratic sensibilities in education and through those lay out what I think anarchisms can offer liberal arts education, and with that, what liberal arts education can offer democracy. We will make four stops along this journey, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, Gustav Landauer, and Jamie Heckert, with each one bringing us a step closer to radical democratic theory and practice in the liberal arts.

Freire gives us the first insights into the relationship between education and democratic practice both in the context of his native Brazil and more broadly. hooks takes that democratic practice into classroom spaces arguing for education **as** democracy, rather than education **about** democracy, and highlighting the necessary participation of staff and students alike. Both Freire and hooks work within the confines of liberal, parliamentary democratic states, but Landauer introduces us to anarchist critiques of the state, and therefore of attempts to reform or use the state as Freire and hooks suggest. Instead, he argues for an understanding of radical democracy detached from statehood and rooted in the practice of alternative relationships between one another. Heckert completes the quartet with a consideration of anarchism as an ethics of direct relationships born of listening, caring, and becoming. This brings us full-circle back to Analysing Contemporary Societies as an anarchist inspired module of radical democratic practice in the liberal arts providing a working demonstration of democracy for all involved, with all the advantages and drawbacks that brings.

Paulo Freire, a key figure in critical pedagogy, was the starting point of my critical understanding of education and the role that I play as an educator. Freire began his work with a critique of traditional educational approaches, referring to it as ‘banking education’, in which students are empty vessels passively waiting for the teacher to fill them with knowledge. The critique here is multi-layered, from the problematic power dynamic this establishes, to questions of who gets to decide what is taught to whom. In response Freire developed an alternative approach that seeks to integrate and build upon the various knowledges students are already bringing to the classroom, and to complement that with the knowledge and skills of the educator. The aim here was to orient education around the life experiences and contexts of those involved, rather than relying on a standardised and centralised curriculum and pedagogical approach.

This reconfigured approach to education was not only about effective pedagogy, it was also embedded in a specific political context and had a specific political aim. Freire was born and raised in Brazil in the early 20th century. During the early years of his teaching in the 1950s and 1960s being literate was a condition of voting, which meant that a vast number of rural communities without access to schooling couldn’t take part in this formal democratic process. This made education a fundamentally political issue for Freire. Indeed, following a military coup in 1964 Freire’s literacy projects were halted because of their specifically political aims, and he was arrested and exiled. For Freire as my first reference point, all education is political, and I can either teach to support the status quo, or I can teach to change the world.

Picking up on this rallying cry to change the world through teaching many scholars and educators banded together under a broad umbrella of critical pedagogy. The loosely defined aim of these scholars and educators was to teach in ways that would make the world more democratic, more equal, and more free. One person who took up this cause was bell hooks.

Across various pieces of work hooks explored pedagogical practice as democratic practice and reminds me that democracy is something to be actively pursued, not an always present, inert system. Reflecting on the contrast between her own experiences of growing up in an era when segregation was ending, and the experiences of the students she later taught, hooks muses that democracy is now often understood as a birth rite reduced to the act of voting every few years, and nothing more. Challenging this, hooks argues for an approach to education which foregrounds democracy as a continual practice. Alongside Freire’s argument for democratising knowledge by drawing on the students existing understandings of the world, hooks encourages us to practice democracy through a consideration of the classroom as a physical space. Classrooms are often set up with a single elevated point of focus where the educator stands, be that a white board, projector screen, or lectern. This can have numerous implications for pedagogy: it can encourage an approach akin to the banking education critiqued by Freire; it locates the educator in a very literal position of hierarchy; it discourages conversation between students. These are not conducive to democratic practice, and therefore cannot model democracy in action with and for the students, as all these physical cues reinforce the singular power of the educator and the passive position of the students.

While hooks argued for moving out from behind the lectern to reconfigure the physical space of the classroom, she was aware that this alone would not be enough to expose and engage students in democratic practices. Indeed, hooks was quick to point out that any actions or decisions she might make regarding her teaching could only ever go half-way, and that in attempting to instil democratic practice the students would have to step into the space she creates, otherwise it would go nowhere. hooks leaves me a powerful reminder that I cannot create certain democratic conditions by my own force of will alone, but that it always requires the engagement of others too.

While Freire and hooks started me on my journey exploring critical approaches to education, I quickly came up against a limit in their work: for all their inspirational work to establish education as a practice of democracy, both developed their arguements within the confines of liberal parliamentary democracies. It wasn’t that they were only interested in participation in formal political parties, both argued for the importance of local-level democratic processes, the role of unions and other formal and non-formal organisations. But neither Freire, hooks, nor others under the umbrella of critical pedagogy questioned the broader political structures that these democratic processes took place in. Their work aimed to make society more democratic, more equal, more free, but all without troubling existing political systems. To me, this feels like an artificially imposed limit, and ultimately falls short of the individual and collective potential of democracy. To get past this reliance on liberal parliamentary democracy as a political system I turned to anarchist scholars, the first of whom I’d like to draw on here is Gustav Landauer.

At a time when anarchy was closely associated with propaganda of the deed - the use of violence to promote the anarchist cause - Landauer took a starkly different approach. While he shared the general anarchist critique that the presence of the state was an imposition upon the freedom of people, and that the state used various forms of violence to ensure it’s continuation, Landauer was critical of the anarchist use of violence. For Landauer, tables can be overturned, and windows smashed, but the state is not a physical entity which can be destroyed by physical means. The destruction of property and the assassination of political figures could never trouble the existence of the state, because the state is a particular form of social relationship which always acts as a mediator between us. This mediated social relationship may have physical manifestations through parliaments, court systems, police forces, etc., but these are not the state, and their destruction, or reform, will not lead to freedom.

Instead, Landauer proposes that because the state is a particular form of social relationship, it is best countered by people forming other social relationships. As Landauer writes “The entire system would vanish without a trace if the people began to constitute themselves as a people apart from the state.” If I aim for a different form of society I need to act in ways to make that society come about. To bring this into contact with education, formal educational institutions, and their actors like us educators, are already implicated in relationships shaped by the state, and Freire’s and hooks’ approach can’t help me move beyond that. I found that Landauer’s response to the state helped me to start thinking about the limits I found in Freire’s and hooks’ work.

Picking up where Landauer left off, Jamie Heckert proposes that the state is not only a particular form of social relation, but that it is also a particular mindset. Like Landauer, the state here is not a physical entity that can be smashed, but an internalised set of structures which shape how I understand myself and the world around me, and how I interact with myself and the world around me. The point here is that the state is not something ‘out there’ that only exists **between** us, it is also something ‘**in here’**, an internalised condition. This complicates Landauer’s call to simply constitute ourselves as a people apart from the state, and brings in to focus the detail needed for the development and practice of anarchist direct relationships in contrast to state mediated relationships.

Heckert proposes three elements in an anarchism of direct relationships: listening, caring, and becoming. Listening is born of a commitment to people being as directly involved as possible with the decisions that impact their lives, a radically democratic approach which aims to challenge forms of representative decision-making. A central component in collaborative decision-making is the role of listening to yourself and others to understand peoples’ positions and ideas. When we are increasingly surrounded by loud and angry exchanges of opinion over a seemingly growing number of cultural flashpoints, really stopping to listening to yourself and others presents as a radical idea.

Closely connected to listening in anarchist direct relationships is the call to care for one another. Rooted in ideas of mutual aid, caring requires equality, empathy, embodiment, and interdependence. As with listening, caring has both internal and external dimensions of its practice: I cannot sustainably care for others if I do not also take care of myself. In the process of caring I am challenged to engage in a direct relationship which does not individualise issues, nor establish a hierarchical form, but which starts from a position of standing **with** others and understanding how different struggles for freedom are linked.

Becoming is the final element in anarchist direct relationships as an alternative to the state as a state of mind. Becoming shifts our attention from an end point of an idealised anarchism and asks us to instead focus on an on-going practice of direct relationships. This changes the timescale for us to think about from a somewhat distant future, to an ever-present now. What is important here is the on-going attempt to think ourselves apart from the state, and with that, constitute ourselves apart from the state. An anarchist relationship involving becoming is a process that can never end, nor can it ever really fail. There are certainly times when I might fall short in my practice but that does not mean all prior and future efforts are rendered void.

At this point you might be reasonably asking how we get from anarchist considerations of direct relationships back to Analysing Contemporary Societies. Freire provided my initial insight into the role of education in democracy, hooks equipped me with the recognition of education as democracy as a collaborative process, Landauer helped me think beyond the democratically limited state in Freire and hooks, and Heckert gave inspiration for the practice of anarchist relationships involving listening, caring, and becoming, vital elements of radical democratic practice. Analysing Contemporary Societies is my attempt to manifest these lessons and instil and develop radical democratic practise in a Liberal Arts programme.

Analysing Contemporary Societies, ACS for short, is an anarchic celebration of the varied academic paths and knowledges of final semester students in our Liberal Arts programme, Studium Individuale. Aside from 7 core modules, students are free to build their curriculum from modules across the university according to their interests. This means by the time they arrive at ACS there are students who have taken modules in business, psychology, politics, sustainability science, cultural studies, marketing, and many more. ACS then tasks the students with the guiding question: Faced with a wide range of contemporary challenges, how can we draw on our interdisciplinary backgrounds to learn from one another and explore complex responses to complex problems?

To help us answer this question the module is a largely empty space, with 10 sessions put aside for students to design and run on whatever topic and in whatever form they choose. In the first 2 sessions we go through a series of tasks to help them reflect on their areas of academic expertise, their academic skills, and what contemporary social challenges and responses interest them, and from the 3rd session I hand over entirely to the students. Through the module’s focus on contemporary social challenges and responses there is a clear line I can draw to the influences of Paulo Freire and the starting point that all education is political, in content and form. Through the open space for student self-organisation there is the connection to Landauer’s call to organise ourselves without a reliance on the state and other mediated forms of relationship encouraged in higher education spaces. Through the tasks of reflecting on academic expertise and skills, a consideration of topics of interest, and then a collaboratively negotiated process of group formation and topic selection there is a bridge to Heckert’s work as students are encouraged to listen to one another and care for each other and their interests in a display of equality and interdependence. In establishing the module as an open, radically democratic space which requires student engagement as much as my own, we see connections to hooks’ work on as education **as** democratic practice. And finally, in all the ways this running of the module works, and doesn’t, we can see the continual attempts of Heckert’s anarchist relationships of becoming.

The liberal arts are premised upon moving across and between the disciplinary boundaries established in academia, and in doing so, encourage us to engage with a variety of perspectives on topics of interest. This makes liberal arts programmes particularly fertile ground for democratic experiences which require conversation, collaborative decision making, and creative responses to the world. While the liberal arts free us from disciplinary boundaries and encourage us to engage with the complexity of the world, anarchisms can free us from simplified forms of democratic processes and encourage us to explore and experiment with alternative ways to relate to one another through educational practices. Together, anarchism and the liberal arts offer a way to experience a whole host of democratic values, demonstrating the hopeful possibilities of different ways of living with ourselves, our loved ones, and our communities.