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Taking Children Seriously (TCS) and Anarchy

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Fall 2002

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course, authority has utilized *many* different techniques of domestication over the centuries and Gatto's books only discuss some of the more contemporary forms of mass-hypnosis. If we're serious at all about creating and living Anarchy, then we need to start taking a close look at social conditioning and where it begins, and we need to start treating children's liberation as the core issue that it is. In addition to John Taylor Gatto's books, we can suggest some other useful books on anti-authoritarian parenting to our readers:

Summerhill by A.S. Neill

Growing Up Absurd by Paul Goodman

Libertarian Education by J.M. Raynaud and C. Ambauves

What is TCS?

One of the greatest breakthroughs in anarchist theory and practice first appeared six years ago, and hardly any anarchists even know of its existence. Not only that, but most of the anarchists who do know of its existence either disregard it or dismiss it with comments containing hierarchical and authoritarian language. I am referring to the philosophy and practice known as Taking Children Seriously or TCS.

Taking Children Seriously is an educational and parenting philosophy which uses Karl Popper's views on epistemology, critical rationalism and a belief in fallibilism to reach a conclusion that coercion of any form is bad for the growth of knowledge and psychologically damaging to people, especially children. From this conclusion, Taking Children Seriously creates the framework for a methodology through which parents can cooperate with their children to find mutually preferable solutions to problems and disagreements that arise between them. The TCS movement has over a thousand participants all over the world, has produced two books and maintains a journal and a number of active e-mail discussion lists.

The advantages of TCS

TCS takes parenting, a subject which is hardly ever discussed or thought about in anarchist circles, and provides an approach to it which is consistent with anarchist principles that oppose hierarchy and domination. TCS also lends a sharply critical eye towards contemporary authoritarian parenting philosophies and practices.

The lack of such a critical approach to parenting, as well as the lack of an alternative parenting methodology consistent with anarchist principles, creates one of the most discouraging situations within the anarchist movement. Namely, anarchists end up inex-

plicably conveying messages to their children of acceptance of the “necessity” of relationships of domination.

TCS combines educational philosophy, epistemology and parenting and transforms them into a unified and inter-dependent system. This is of great value to anarchists, since most anarchists strive for a holistic outlook and approach towards people and society, and tend to shun laundry lists of forms of oppression and anarchist principles.

Along with providing a holistic approach to child-raising, TCS provides a rational approach, as well as an emphasis on peoples innate fallibility. Given the fact that many defenders of authority often use the inequality of knowledge as a justification for those with the greater knowledge to assume positions of authority, TCS sees the explicit recognition of ones own fallibility as being essential for preventing one from becoming an authority over children. TCS also sees this as vital for the growth of knowledge, since if one realizes that one may be making a mistake, one is left more open to new and better ideas which can be of more use for both parent and child alike.

The TCS approach to learning and parental discipline

Most people, anarchists included, unconsciously view children as being products in the process of being assembled. Schooling, parental advice, life experience and sometimes religious indoctrination are supposed to supply the product with the appropriate software necessary for functioning, while parental control and “discipline” are supposed to ensure that the product does not damage itself or leave the factory during the assembly process. This view of children comes about from a lack of faith in the abilities of children to use reason or make their own decisions.

washing has been. It’s time to try to heal from the wounds the System has been inflicting on us for ten thousand years or at least make sure that the psychosis of civilization isn’t passed on to another generation. *Green Anarchy* would like to include more articles on anarchist parenting in future issues, as it seems obvious to us that the roots of authoritarian culture (and the perpetuation of patriarchy) lie in sadistic cycles of abuse and domination that have been going on for far too long.

John Taylor Gatto has written some thought-provoking books on the compulsory public school system in the United States, such as *Dumbing Us Down* and *The Empty Child*, in which he discusses how one of the State’s main priorities is to control “education” so that all the rest of the aspects of the social engine won’t be destabilized. By getting hold of the children the State *secures its territory* and insures that its factories are well-stocked with docile, house-broken worker drones. Gatto discusses in painstaking detail how the Amerikan public school system is based on an 18th-century Prussian indoctrination model, a system scientifically developed to guarantee certain results, like obedience and the willingness and actual *need* to follow orders. This is done by destroying our ability to think for ourselves by narrowing our perceptual field and dividing life into subjects which had hardly existed before, and then dividing the subjects (botany, math, language, politics) further into units. According to the theory, with enough variations in the course of a day, no one would know what was going on, and would gladly turn to the Bible or the State (or in our modern context, television) for guidance and direction. Judging from what we see around us every day, it would appear this theory works and has been yielding profitable results for the ruling class for quite some time. Once an individual is addicted to fragmented studies and mental confusion, it’s the rare person who can ever get control of their own mind and their own will again. They may get angry and refuse to do something but they don’t know how to write the script of their own lives, the System has destroyed that in them. Of

Towards an Anarchist Parenting philosophy and practice

It is with the goal of integrating the philosophy and practice of TCS into anarchism and anarchism's various analyses of the State, capitalism, racism, patriarchy and other forms of social oppression that I created the anarchist Parenting e-mail list and web-site. I believe that children are a uniquely oppressed and dominated class of people, and that this is largely either ignored or over-looked by anarchists. And when anarchists do pay attention to this, focus is generally just given to the educational system and State laws. The institution and practice of parenting is left largely unexamined and untouched by anarchists. I hope to do my part to help change this.

Contact Info

TCS Web-site: <http://www.tcs.ac>

TCS Journal and e-mail contact: sl@tcs.ac

Anarchist Parenting web-site: <http://www.anarchistparenting.com>

Editorial note: For most modern humans the domesticating process begins early in childhood, if not before birth (as it does for all the mutant by-products of civilization; cows, mass-produced battery hens, etc.). Authoritarian culture reproduces itself in the childhood years, generation after generation, as damaged, psychologically-scarred slaves unwittingly do their masters' dirty work and cut down on capitalism's operating expenses by programming the next generation themselves. Most children entering the world now are born in bondage, just as their ancestors were, from whatever point in time their cultures were hunted down and violently assimilated/swallowed up by civilization—and we've been slaves for so long that very few recognize to what extent we've internalized the System's values or how thorough our own brain-

Instead of this, the TCS approach contends that every action that one does comes from an individual choice, either explicitly or implicitly. The choice one chooses may or may not be the right one, but it is through the use of one's abilities to reason that one is able to eventually find the choice that works best for them at the moment, and as a result create or grow their own knowledge.

TCS says that children can and should live outside the factory/product paradigm of childhood. TCS sees authority of any kind as being detrimental to the growth of knowledge by discouraging one to think for themselves, since such activity is futile under authority. With no certain or secure environment through which one could put ones thoughts into practice and test out the validity of one's ideas, one has no safe grounds on which to grow one's knowledge.

Furthermore, any "education" or "advice" given by an authority figure to a child has no deep value for the child, other than that of being a tool through which the child can appease the authority or use to score points to gain some reward (psychological or tangible) which is offered as an "incentive" by the authority. Outside of the social construct of the parent/ child or school relationships, the "knowledge" or behaviors one is supposed to carry out no longer has any apparent use-value to the child, and therefore can be forgotten without any negative consequences. These behaviors or "knowledge" were never something which the child used to satisfy their own curiosities or interests, and therefore have no personal significance to them.

TCS' role of the parent

TCS' conception of the ideal role that a parent should play is in many ways similar to that of many anarchists conceptions of the role that anarchists should play in society. TCS believes that parental advice can still be very useful to children and that par-

ents should offer their advice and useful information to the child whenever the child is willing to receive it.

TCS sees the role of parents as being that of a “helper” for the child. The parent is not supposed to be a “guide” or set an example, but instead should be a supplier of good ideas, useful information, resources, and materials. Parents should also actively work to make sure that their child does not become trapped in a coercive situation that they do not want to be in and to make sure that their children are well-informed of any potentially coercive situation that they could become involved with, so that the child does not stumble onto a coercive situation without warning. Parents are not necessarily “protectors” of their children, but rather people who use their special advantages of being a parent to help their children live in as open and free an environment as possible. This will probably mean that the parent may end up playing the role of the “protector”, but it would only be done so at the expressed (verbally or otherwise) desire of the child for protection.

Now, some people may look at this and think that TCS asks for the parent to be an amazing, always-working, self-sacrificing saint. TCS is actually very much against that idea. TCS is opposed to parents sacrificing themselves for their children, and sees the desires and preferences of both the parent and the child as being of equal importance.

TCS instead posits that great effort should be made to find mutually preferred solutions to problems and disagreements. With authority damaging a lot of our current abilities for independent and creative thought, the potential for common preference finding may seem small to none. However TCS contends that with lots of practice and discovering what practical and self-imposed barriers exist within ourselves, we can eventually discover how to be creative and be more effective at finding common preferences. The trick is to always honestly strive to find common preferences between parents and children, and not give into the authority-based myths that it is “impossible”.

The failings of TCS

One of the major failings of anarchism is that it has so far overwhelmingly examined and analyzed big picture things like institutions, class, civilization, and society, and has paid next to no attention to smaller scale things, like psychology, epistemology, interpersonal relations and face-to-face interactions. One of the major failings of TCS is that it has had the exact opposite problem.

An example of this problem is the fact that TCS considers parental authority to be something which could be eliminated by the parent simply thinking and behaving differently. This outlook pays no attention to the fact that parental authority is also an institutional creation. With the State using laws that force every child to live under the dictates of a legal guardian, a police force that will find and bring back every “runaway” child, and an economic system that forces every child to be materially dependent upon a parent, a parent will have authority over their child regardless of what parenting style they practice. With this being the case, a child can not genuinely trust a parent to be non-authoritarian with them, for at any time and for any reason the parent could impose rules upon them and have the full force of the State to back them up. To truly abolish and from the practice of parenting, one needs to have a clear analysis of how all the various spheres of life effect and relate to the lives of children and parents. Taking this into account, it could be said that race, class and patriarchy coerce children just as much as the State and schools do, and that parents actions are just as guided by considerations of race, class and patriarchy as they are by the dictates of the State.