Interview - Judith Suissa

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Judith Suissa is Professor of Philosophy of Education at the Institute of Education, University College London (UCL). She is interested in the intersection between political ideas and educational practice. In particular, her concern is to challenge the narrow focus on state schooling characteristic of so much educational philosophy, theory and research, and to explore the underlying political and moral assumptions of pedagogical relationships outside the arena of institutional forms of education. These include parent-child relationships, educational experiments that challenge the state system, and informal education. Judith recently penned a chapter on anarchist education in *The Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism*, and a co-authored article *Minimal Utopianism in the Classroom* within the journal of *Educational Philosophy and Theory*. Her numerous other publications include *Anarchism and Education*, in addition to *The Claims of Parenting: Reasons, Responsibility and Society*. She has been on the editorial team of the *Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain* since 2017.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Well, sorry to answer this question with another question, but what do you mean by "my field"? I am a philosopher of education, but I see that as a diverse academic field that intersects with other areas of philosophy, the humanities and the social sciences, and in terms of the journals I read and the conferences I attend, these are just as much within other fields where there is interesting work been done on issues I am interested in – for instance political philosophy, utopian studies, and anarchist studies – as in the formally demarcated academic "field" of philosophy of education. For me, the most exciting discussions and debates are those that are using ideas and theoretical frameworks from different disciplinary frameworks to address the most important and urgent political questions of our time.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

Reading anarchist theory has, for me, been an important element in helping me to think about aspects of the social world in a way that differs from some of the familiar paradigms of the mainstream political left and right. In terms of political and educational theory, particularly on issues to do with equality and social justice, reading Critical Race Theory led to a significant shift in my understanding. But most of my intellectual development and shifts in my understanding has come from informal conversations with friends, colleagues and activists who care about the same issues I do, reflecting together about our different experiences and ideas.

What is the role of education in politics and is there still a place for grammar schools in British education?

I see education and politics as intertwined, in the sense that any educational process, relationship, choice or content takes place within a social world that is inevitably shaped by political reality and a political imaginary. Education – by which I mean not just formal schooling – can both reflect and challenge dominant political ideas. I think that selection in education is one of the main ways in which social inequalities are maintained and entrenched in contemporary British society. So no, I am not in favour of grammar schools. But this is not to say that doing away with them will be enough to address the structural inequalities in society.

What did the classical anarchists say about education? Have there ever been examples of anarchist education?

Most 19th century and early 20th C anarchist thinkers, such as Kropotkin, Bakunin, Goldman, saw constructing alternative forms of education to that provided by the state as a crucial part of the project of constructing a different future, based on principles of equality, mutual aid and non-domination. Many of the leading anarchist theorists wrote about education, advocating not the abolition of schools, but the creation of alternative schools that were based on egalitarian and anti-authoritarian principles, emphasising rationality and secular, humanistic values. Kropotkin developed the idea of "integral education" in his 1899 text *Fields, Factories and Workshops*, arguing that children should receive an education that combined manual, practical skills with intellectual work. For the social anarchists, such an education was a means to break down the "pernicious distinction" between "brain work and manual work" that underpinned and reflected the economic inequalities and hierarchical class structure of the capitalist state.

Should parents become more involved in the general tuition of their children? Is this a political or pedagogical issue?

It is a profoundly political issue as you are asking a normative question about who should be in charge of children's education. In one sense, this is a question of rights and duties, and we need to think carefully about whose rights are at stake here and who is ultimately responsible for children's socialisation and upbringing. We cannot answer this question without thinking about the kinds of society we want to live in. But at another level, there is a sense in which parents' relationship with their children, before and beyond the space of formal schooling, is already a pedagogical relationship. There is a moral responsibility involved in this relationship that is not expressed in the language of legal rights and duties, and I have written about this in my work on parenting with my colleague Stefan Ramaekers.

How has education changed with the onset of globalisation? Has it been a largely positive development?

I don't like the phrase "the onset of globalization" as it implies that this is some kind of inevitable or natural process, rather than an ideological position. The word "globalization" can mean all sorts of things, at the level of economic policy, culture, technological development, and political ideology, and all of these have affected aspects of education in some way. There are certainly positive elements in the development of greater possibilities for connections with people and cultures around the world; but there is also a worry that, given the vastly unequal and unjust global distribution of power and resources, the "global village" is actually becoming more and more like a very homogeneous village, and certainly not the kind of place I'd really want to live in. But I love cities! In higher education, certainly what we are seeing is actually, increasingly, a global market in education. I don't think this is a positive development as, like any market, it is far from neutral and it is certainly not equalising opportunities or allowing for greater diversity in the kind of education on offer – quite the opposite.

What are the future trajectories of educational practice? Can education change society?

I don't think I can answer this question. The term "educational practice" encompasses a very diverse range of ideas and practices. I think this diversity is a good thing, and that experimentation in education should be encouraged. At the same time, I think we should be wary of suggestions that we can solve large-scale social problems by making changes to education policy. The everyday practices of educational interactions, in schools, universities and many other informal and formal settings, are one of many sites where people can encounter ideas and ways of thinking that can contribute to positive social change, but this is not a simple means-ends relationship.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Read more books! Talk to more people! Don't be afraid to ask difficult questions.