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Creating an Anarchist Community: How can Students from a Neoliberal University Participate?

Juan Carlos Mijangos Noh

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the experiences of university students at the Canicab Community Centre (CCC) in Yucatán, Mexico. It demonstrates that, in the face of neoliberal university policies, we can nevertheless offer students opportunities to participate in libertarian and emancipatory forms of community. I collected evidence through the participatory action and testimonials of volunteer students at the CCC. Three elements stand out: A) The student volunteers have built a microcosm of an anarchist society with the residents of Canicab. B) As a result of the horizontal relationships they have formed, academic degrees and schooling have less relevance than knowledge with practical utility, which encourages the participation of the local population. C) There is evidence of anarchic direct action on the part of the volunteers. This research shows that it is possible to develop a small emancipatory, anarchist community committed to social and cultural transformation, even though the students participating have been trained in a neoliberal university.

Keywords: *Community, anarchism, neoliberal university, direct action, education*

This article discusses the implications of offering students educated at a neoliberal university the experience of creating anarchist relationships through the CCC in Yucatán, Mexico. It is not the objective of this article to discuss attempts to resist neoliberalism; its scope is rather more modest. Given that resistance to neoliberalism occurs both within and outside educational institutions, particularly those of higher education, my research responds to recent experiences in which

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academics and higher education students have enacted an anarchist resistance to neoliberalism. My research acknowledges that not all forms of resistance to neoliberalism in higher education institutions are anarchist in character, inspiration or philosophy (Tett & Hamilton 2019).

In this article, I recognise the plural character of anarchist thought, and, because of that, I provide a definition that expresses my understanding of anarchy and anarchism. To this end, I turn to Malatesta, who says: 'Anarchy is a form of living together in society; a society in which people live as brothers and sisters without being able to oppress or exploit others, and in which everyone has at their disposal, whatever means the civilisation of the time can supply in order for them to attain the greatest possible moral and material development. And Anarchism is the method of reaching anarchy, through freedom, without government that is, without those authoritarian institutions that impose their will on others by force, even if it happens to be in a good cause' (Malatesta 1995 [original 1925]: p52).

The focus on education in this article also makes it necessary for me to define how I understand anarchist education. The definition of education followed is one that sees it as a 'Process of imparting or obtaining knowledge, attitudes, skills, or socially valued qualities of character or behaviour – includes the philosophy, purposes, programs, methods, organizational patterns, etc., of the entire educational process as most broadly conceived' (Education Resources and Information Center, 1966). With this in mind, anarchist education promotes obtaining the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and qualities valued by anarchism for the construction of anarchy: namely autonomy, freedom, equality, voluntary cooperation, and mutual aid – all of this outside, or at the margin of the State or other oppressive and exploitative institutions.

Drawing on the recent literature, I propose a typology of anarchist resistance to neoliberalism in the context of higher education institutions or resistance in which students and university professors have intervened. This includes the following types:

A) Resistance to neoliberalism which occurs within the framework of higher education institutions themselves in attempts to improve formal educational processes or contribute to important academic debates within a discipline or field of scientific interest. These involve only individuals from a university environment (e.g. Andrason 2022; Andrason et al. 2023).

B) Resistance that involves academics, higher education students and people outside the university in attempts to resist neoliberalism through the use of academic resources and knowledge that support scholarly arguments on the harmful effects of neoliberalism on populations outside universities. The authors of the investigations, articles and reports guided by anarchist theory were not activists in the experiences they report (e.g. Quinn & Bates 2019; Martínez Herrero & Charnley 2020). It is possible that in some cases of anarchist resistance to neoliberalism classified in type B the researchers and authors are in fact activists but hide their participation. This may occur for various reasons, perhaps related to the security of the organisations, the academics' employment situation or a desire on the part of the students involved to avoid trouble with their institutions.

C) Resistance that links academics and university students with communities and organisations outside higher education. Students and scholars contribute to the processes of resistance to neoliberalism and the construction of allied communities and organisations outside the university (e.g. Mott 2017; Baker 2021).

These suggested types do not necessarily operate in isolated or unchanging silos: some transform over time; others are ephemeral and disappear.

My article reports on the experiences of a community and organisation on the periphery of a university (type C); however, when reported in a public academic medium such as *Anarchist Studies*, it acquires some of the features of type B, anarchist resistance to neoliberalism.

Our experience enriches the field of extended epistemologies (Gayá 2021, p169) in the sense of 'decolonising and opening spaces for epistemological diversity and pluriversality within our own identities, practices and heritages'. We accomplished that by working together Maya and university knowledge. As suggested by an anonymous reviewer of this paper, it 'discusses the experiences of ... years of community-based activism – something highly commendable and rare in modern anarchist scholarship (which mostly comprises short-term experiments, initiatives, and projects)'. Our experience at CCC reflects the following expression of anarchism: 'The only political form that is always to be invented, to be shaped before it exists, precisely because it depends on no beginning or command, anarchism is never what it is. That's where its being lies. This plas-

ticity is the meaning of its being, the meaning of its question' (Malabou 2024, p214). I interpret Malabou's idea epistemologically, affirming that each concrete anarchist praxis constitutes a new tool that adds to our resources for the struggle, rather than there existing a model or manual for universal action.

The resistances characterised in the typology described above occur in the context of a global neoliberal tendency in higher education. Universities in Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe and Oceania are facing an onslaught of neoliberal practices and policies (Amsler & Shore 2015; Cone 2018; Hölscher 2018; Park 2018; Cano Menoni 2022) and Mexico is no exception (Lora Cam 2020). Two types of phenomena accompany such practices and policies. The first includes processes of resistance against policies and practices within the framework of the status quo of the capitalist State (Lozano-Díaz & Fernández-Prados 2019; Yang & Hoskins 2020). The second, less common type, is the promotion of forms of socio-political organisation, not simply participation in electoral political action as favoured by the State and the capitalist system. In this paper, I present details of an example of the second type. Specifically, I show how it is possible to enact a programme of direct anarchist action to create an emancipatory community, with the support and contribution of students trained in a neoliberal university.

Freedom, democracy and diversity of ideas are values constantly present in universities' discourse. Without the free and democratic exchange of different – and even conflicting – ideas, the universal character to which higher education institutions aspire is at risk. It is, therefore, strategic to use, defend and expand the space for thought and political action allowed by universities, or we are condemned to the narrow vision of the dominant thinking. However, this does not imply a belief that universities can become solely instruments of popular and emancipatory education. In this sense, I share the view of Lorde (2018), who states that 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house'. In other words, universities in capitalist countries serve capitalism, but it is possible to fight even in the face of these limitations.

Perhaps the main problem of neoliberal universities is that their educational activity is based on the false premise that there is no alternative to capitalism and that university education must, therefore, be guided by the interests and values of capitalism. That discussion lies beyond the scope of this article, so I proceed on the assumption that the basic premise of the neoliberal university is false, and I propose – like many other critical colleagues – that this is reflected in many other areas, including our protection of the natural environment, urban problems and the struggles of young graduates to find employment.

There is another, hidden, problem in the higher education institutions of Mexico, and the fact it is not discussed makes it all the more insidious in the formation and political action of the student body and faculty. It is concerned with the notion of epistemological superiority and the sociocultural status associated with advanced education, which is deeply intertwined with the coloniality of knowledge (Walsh 2023). The belief that higher education sets us apart, superior to the knowledge and capabilities of less-schooled communities and people, is deeply rooted in academic environments (Kuppens et al. 2017). The experience I describe in this article demonstrates that this belief is both unwarranted and harmful to the healthy democratic coexistence of university students with those outside their institution.

Anarchism in education has taken different forms and perspectives drawing on different theorists and activists. We find diverse approaches, from the school proposals of Ferrer Guardia (2018) and Steiner (2004) to the most radical forms of unschooling theorised by Illich (1971) and implemented by Holt (2016; 2017; Holt et al. 2018). Amid this diversity, I take an eclectic stand in the anarchist tradition in educational endeavours. As Kinna suggests, the anarchist interest in education and the development of educational proposals directly relates to the emancipatory process. Thus, an understanding of the complexities of learning and unlearning in different contexts supports the struggle against domination in favour of spaces of freedom and self-government (Kinna 2020, p45).

Such theoretical and practical proposals on education from an anarchist perspective are relatively general and often specifically refer to basic levels of education, so it is necessary to find a more appropriate frame of reference for the goals pursued in this article. In this respect, I draw on the framework presented by Graeber (2009), who explained that efforts to follow anarchist principles of education today often do not use the label 'anarchist' to identify themselves (Graeber 2009, p105). This is consistent with my experience at the CCC, where only one other participant identifies as an anarchist. This raises the question of whether my anarchist interpretation of the testimonies and actions of the students who participated in the CCC may reflect an imposition of meanings on my part. I do not believe this to be the case and refer once more to Graeber (2009, p104) who recounts his experience as a doctoral student in Madagascar, where the inhabitants of the region he studied lived outside the State and followed anarchist collective decision-making practices yet did not call themselves anarchists. Later, the testimony of two students participating in the CCC will serve as evidence in this regard.

Since this article is concerned with the educational experience of young women, students of a neoliberal university and people living in a rural community, I think it is possible to frame this work in the categories identified by Noterman and Pusey (2012) regarding pedagogical experiments that occur inside, outside or on the edge of academic life. Ours is situated on the rim of university structures and, certainly, an explanation is required of the number and characteristics of the participating students and how their participation came about. This explanation may shed light on the specific ways in which anarchist relationships developed between those within the university community and the natives of the Canicab community. I will dedicate some space in the section on participants and methodology to explain how the students came to be involved in the CCC project.

Our results are the product of twelve years of work in an indigenous Mayan community in the Mexican state of Yucatán. I situate the research findings that led to this article as a contribution to the most recent conversation about education in *Anarchist Studies* (McKee, 2021; Andrason et al. 2023). As part of this conversation, I reflect on the experience related in this paper in discussing elements of various authors' anarchist philosophies of education and politics (Suissa 2010, 2019; Taibo 2018; Honeywell 2021 among others).

Unlike the work of McKee (2021), which targets secondary education, this article focuses on the experience of higher education students, both undergraduate and graduate. The research field examined in this text is similar to that covered by the work of Andrason et al. (2023). From an anarchist perspective, it is worth clarifying more precisely the similarities and differences between these two recent studies in the field of education and the research that I report in this article.

Mckee's work is a profound critique of the flaws in character education in the UK's secondary schools. His focus on a critique of the pro-capitalist implications of the educational offer, organisation and development coincides with the one I make regarding the neoliberal character of the university that is the object of my study. However, it is important to focus on the detail of both criticisms. Unlike secondary education, for which policy in both the UK and Mexico is mainly set by the government, higher education still has autonomous decision-making spaces, and in Mexico, these are protected by academic freedom. These differences are important when establishing strategies and tactics to bring anarchist proposals and projects to the field of formal education.

The work of Andrason et al. in South Africa (2023) allows me to consider

the importance of recognising the scope and character of an anarchist project in a university context in the contemporary capitalist world. The experience I report here occurred on the outer fringes of academic work in a neoliberal university. In contrast, Andrason and his collaborators deploy an anarchist pedagogical proposal in developing an investigation and an article derived from it. The experience on which I reflect in this article centres on the needs of a marginalised community; only by extension or in a tactical way does it produce academic work such as dissertations and research articles that refer to the experience of community organisation.

With these considerations in mind, I now explain the experience at the centre of this article, turning first to the methodological elements.

PARTICIPANTS, PARTICIPATORY ACTION AND TESTIMONIALS

To understand the experiences and testimonies of the student participants in this experience, some background is needed.

In April 2012, seven people bought a three-hectare piece of land in Canicab and founded the CCC; they comprised a psychologist, an education student, two language specialists, a dropout in communication, a sociologist and me, an anthropologist. None of us had been born or previously lived in Canicab before 2012. We planned to have space to build our houses outside the city of Mérida and to create a community centre: two hectares would be allocated to the CCC and one hectare to our houses. The initial conception did not materialise; the other participants abandoned the project, and the initial group dissolved. In 2020, I bought the land from my colleagues and continued working on developing the CCC. Using my savings, I built the CCC's facilities step by step, with the help of constructors from Canicab. We drilled five wells and installed electricity, an irrigation system, internet and an antenna for a telephone signal.

Since 2013, the psychologist and I, both full professors at the Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán (Autonomous University of Yucatán) (UADY), have organised activities in the community, including film exhibitions, football tournaments, theatre performances, and children's literacy and solidarity support during a hepatitis epidemic. We also delivered sexual education workshops for women, graphic art classes for girls and boys, radio editing courses, photography and theatre workshops and guided tours of the CCC garden that we began to cultivate in April 2012, alongside organising trips with those from the commu-

nity to Mayan archaeological sites, and meetings with other organisations that pursue similar objectives. From 2020, however, CCC activities have been developed under the leadership of Canicab native inhabitants with help from UADY students.

Between 2012 and 2020, certain processes occurred which are important in understanding the experience recounted in this article. The most salient change has been the growing involvement of local people in CCC activities. At the beginning, initiatives came from external people; now, the natives of Canicab generate most of the proposals and activities. Between 2012 and 2020, a professor and students created the projects; now, my students and I follow the lead and initiatives of the people of Canicab.

From 2012 to 2023, I delivered sixty-two classes at UADY. I taught 937 students during this time, and none were forced to participate in the CCC. When I organised classes hosted by the Canicab community, these courses were optional, never mandatory. To answer the question of how the participants whose testimonies I reproduce in this article were selected, I can say that their involvement embodies the idea of 'the organized activity of free human beings, imbued with the spirit of solidarity, (that) result in the perfection of social harmony, which we call anarchism' (Havel 1910, p26). The specific manner in which this agreement of wills occurred relates to my teaching methods. My research is participatory and linked to the CCC, so I use many examples from my experience with the community in my classes. All the students whose testimonies appear in this article – and all who volunteered at the CCC after attending my classes – chose freely to participate in the project. Thus, the volunteers represent a small number of my students, only 11 of the 937 I taught between 2012 and 2023. Furthermore, my students invited friends from other programmes, on which I do not teach, to volunteer at the CCC, which brought students from chemistry, psychology, engineering and mathematics to the project. In other words, I did not choose the participants; rather, they chose to collaborate out of solidarity with the CCC. For this article, I asked only those who have been most consistently or deeply involved in various CCC activities to authorise me to cite their testimonies and support my argument.

The work of linking professors and students from UADY with the inhabitants of the Canicab community has been effected with the resources of those of us who participate in the CCC. We did not request money or any other support from the Mexican government or State, nor from private corporations or religious organisations. Ours is a genuinely autonomous and communal effort.

According to the recent census in Mexico (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [National Institute of Statistics and Geography] 2021), Canicab has fewer than one thousand inhabitants. Given the small population, living in the town has enabled me to become familiar with the community dynamics in many different areas, while my work as a full-time research professor at the UADY has granted me direct contact with undergraduate and graduate students. Thus, for twelve years, I have served as a bridge to link the students on various educational programmes with the interests and needs of the Canicab community.

The CCC is a secular and inclusive initiative. For this reason, it welcomes people with diverse religious beliefs, political affiliations, nationalities, sexual preferences and gender, ethnic, racial or other identities. The only conditions for people to participate in the CCC are:

- that they do not proselytise partisan or religious views;
- that they do not act on behalf of any branch of the State, church or corporation;
- that they should treat everyone with whom they share the CCC space with respect.

In this context, working together with the population of Canicab, students and university professors, all carry out participatory action research in developing the activities agreed upon.

I understand participatory action as forming two strands, as proposed by Chevalier and Buckles (2019), who suggest that any systematic research in which participants engage in specific enquiry actions for joint problem-solving and goal achievement is participatory action research. However, they distinguish participatory action research from action enquiry since the latter need not involve the extension of knowledge in a specific scientific area. According to the authors, those conducting an action enquiry project may use theories, systematic thinking and causal inference – all academic tools and approaches – but only to address a real-life problem. In other words, they may achieve something as a group but are not obliged to contribute to the development of science, although they achieve their goals with scientific resources.

In this paper, I use testimonies from several undergraduate and postgraduate students involved in CCC activities. With the volunteers' permission, I use their first names.

To collect and interpret evidence, I use the testimony method. Lackey (2008)

attributed importance and meanings to testimonies. Even if speakers have no first-hand knowledge of a given topic, their testimony can be a source of information. Contrary to popular epistemological belief, Lackey demonstrates that testimony is not only a source of transmissive epistemic information but can also generate new knowledge independent of the speakers' understanding. While dominant views in the literature on testimony focus on the speakers' internal epistemic status, such as ways of believing and knowing, Lackey proposes an entirely new means of focusing on the linguistic or communicative elements conveyed in testimonial exchanges. Her approach implies that we learn from others' statements and words rather than their beliefs or knowledge, rather like a person who sings in tune and harmoniously without knowing how to read conventional musical notation. As will be seen in the results and discussion, a student can describe forms of anarchist political and educational relationships without necessarily realising the philosophy and practice that their testimony reveals.

A UNIVERSITY'S NEOLIBERAL CHARACTER

My argument draws on two assumptions: a) UADY is a neoliberal university, and b) the students' actions at the CCC and with the inhabitants of Canicab have an anarchist and emancipatory character. I argue that students trained in a neoliberal university can fruitfully participate in constructing emancipatory and anarchist community spaces. This offers them new learning experiences and requires them to be willing to unlearn certain habits and viewpoints enforced by their neoliberal higher education milieu.

Neoliberalism and education are dynamic concepts and realities (Wilkins 2020) and, consequently, must be examined in terms of their complex, changing and often contradictory contextual relationships. Any other approach may lead to dogmatic approaches to anarchist-inspired strategies that prove sectarian when they become rigid by dispensing with a concrete analysis of the concrete situation. It is, therefore, misleading to assume that students trained in a neoliberal university necessarily promote neoliberalism.

Reviewing the literature on neoliberal universities, Ross, Savage and Watson (2020) describe the features of this type of institution:

- The use of market-based techniques, standards and cultural norms within the university as an organisation,

- the increasingly precarious and contingent employment of the academic workforce,
- the intensification of work,
- a reorientation towards income-generating academic programmes,
- corporate links,
- the demand that students pay a greater share of the cost of their education.

All of these characteristics apply to UADY. In terms of market-based techniques, the university's current Institutional Development Plan states that the processes for admission, the provision and administration of school services, the provision of library services, the provision of financial and material services, the provision of clinical laboratory services and the provision of information and communication technology services, are ISO 9001[1] certified according to the 2015 version (UADY 2019). Moreover, since UADY shares the vocabulary of corporate social responsibility, translated into terms of university social responsibility (Vallaeys 2018), it follows neoliberal cultural and symbolic techniques, norms and standards in its organisation.

Regarding the increasingly precarious nature of employment in the academic workforce, UADY has reduced the number of full-time professors from 790 in 2012 to 716 in 2021. These positions are now filled by staff on temporary or hourly contracts. The intensification of work at the university has also resulted in changes to the regulations for academic staff and how these are applied. Since their approval in 1993, at the height of neoliberal policymaking in Mexico, the regulations regarding academic personnel have undergone various modifications, most recently in 2014 (UADY 2014). To give a concrete example, according to the regulations, a full-time tenured research professor, the position I currently hold, must teach 300 hours of class per year. Despite the stipulations of the regulations, in 2023 I taught 436 hours of classes. My case is not exceptional; indeed, it is common among teachers, due to the causes indicated in the literature on work intensification (Creagh et al., 2023). Thus, intensification means longer working hours and little control by the faculty over the time and type of activities conducted. Throughout Mexico, neoliberal financing policies for public universities are exerting pressure on professors' productivity. The government's programmes evaluate productivity in all substantive areas of academic work: teaching, research, tutoring and extension (activities with communities and enterprises). The policies apply regardless of

the type of contract each teacher has. A career professor, whose contract requires him only to teach classes, must also conduct research, tutoring and extension work. According to the type of contract they have, full research professors must dedicate at least twenty hours per week to research, yet they are teaching extra hours not contemplated in the university regulations. They do this to supplement their inadequate salaries. In Mexico, two main economic 'rewards' systems exist for university professors: the economic stimulus granted by the National System of Researchers and the Programme to Stimulate the Performance of Teaching Staff. Both programmes lie outside the control of the universities; the federal government sets the rules. Although university administrators and professors have no power over them, these rules are designed and operated to intensify academic work.

To this day, the Institutional Development Plan in force at UADY states, 'The university's income will be increased by promoting the generation of business models and the creation of university enterprises to contribute to financial viability' (UADY 2019, p98), offering clear proof that UADY is oriented towards generating income.

UADY has a Social Participation Board, a consultative body that supports the university rector and represents a range of corporations and business chambers. However, although Yucatán is a Mexican state with a Mayan-speaking indigenous population of more than 519,167 people (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía [National Institute of Statistics and Geography] 2021), there is no Mayan representative on this board.

With the sole exception of the Faculty of Anthropological Sciences, students in all other faculties and schools of UADY pay registration and tuition fees; for example, in a Master's programme, students pay 5086 US dollars over four semesters. This situation contrasts with other public institutions in the country, such as the National Autonomous University of Mexico, where education is free.

The above demonstrates that UADY displays the features typical of a neoliberal university.

SORORITY, POLITICAL ACTION AND RIGHTS

The volunteers at the CCC are male and female; many are undergraduates in Social Communication or graduate students with a Master's in Education Research but students from the undergraduate programmes in Tourism,

Mathematics Teaching, History, Psychology and Food Engineering have also supported the project.

I have taught or tutored many of the volunteers. I am aware of the altruistic and selfless nature of their participation in the CCC, as shown in their contribution of material and financial resources, time, effort and knowledge, and their caring and loving relationship with the girls, boys and women who attend the meetings, workshops and events organised at the community centre. The behaviours mentioned above coincide in many ways with those reported by Zubieta (2020).

Since the vast majority of CCC volunteers have been women, it is important to highlight the actions of sorority and the anarchist political action that they have undertaken alongside the women of the village of Canicab.

As a man, it is hard for me to access knowledge about many of the problems women face in the village. Female UADY students and women from Canicab have been key in developing educational and political actions relevant to physical, mental and social health. In terms of the autonomy of the young female students whose testimonies I cite, I emphasise that they have no affiliation with the State, corporations or religious organisations. They have managed the money, transport, food, instructors, materials and spaces for various activities with the women of Canicab and, at the same time, found new educational experiences with the Canicab women. As one participant, Oscaira, reflects:

> I was always learning something new about their [the women of Canicab] worldview and showing them mine. I loved those good philosophical talks and lots of friendship that accompanied the activities. There were many days when I returned from Canicab, imagining better worlds and peaceful ways to achieve them. Also, because I participated in the CCC, I could go to the United States for a seminar for university leaders. While there, I learned all sorts of things that made sense because of what I had done in Canicab. The CCC helped me to build myself as a more critical, empathetic and conscious woman, both personally and professionally.

The learning processes Oscaira experienced with the women from the village led her to political praxis: she was the principal organiser of the First Mayan Women's Assembly in Canicab in June 2019.

ANARCHIST MICROCOSM AND DIRECT ACTION AT CCC

At the CCC we pose and test an anarchist idea that Suissa (2010) presents regarding social transformation. It posits the importance of educational programmes in anarchist projects. These projects are about more than simply trying to generate a preconceived alternative model of social organisation; they seek to lay the foundations for the natural evolution of such a model. In practice, this involves fostering attitudes that underpin the anarchist ideology and creating a microcosm of an anarchist society (Suissa 2010, p81). I will expand further on this idea in the discussion, but offer now an illustration in the form of Yadisabel's testimony:

> The CCC is a motivating environment. Teamwork is essential in completing projects and activities so it required no great effort for me to collaborate. The work was not categorised as good or bad but was a series of actions that could bring us closer to the goal faster or could stop us from seeing our mistakes and learning from them. My work came from the heart; I was committed to the philosophies held at the CCC and, beyond that, to the girls, boys, women and men of Canicab. I found a pretext to do something with the community in that space, and it was enjoyable, comforting and full of hope. An example was the First Gathering of Mayan Women of Canicab. We discussed preparations for the event for several weeks. We also maintained communication with the women organisers and participants during the meeting.

What stands out in Yadisabel's testimony is the philosophical affinity to which she attributes her commitment to the work of the CCC. This bond and the processual character she attributes to the work speak to the high level of awareness Yadisabel developed through the experience. Her testimony shows how, in the case of the CCC experience, the philosophical, political and moral issues that are, according to Suissa (2020), central to anarchist action, are addressed.

A TESTIMONY ABOUT DIRECT ACTION

Silvia adds a typically anarchist element, direct action, the implications of which I will discuss below in light of the approaches of Taibo (2018) and Byas and Christmas (2021). Silvia describes her experience at the CCC as follows:

> It was a significant and enriching experience in the academic, popular education and direct action spheres. Although, at the beginning, the popular theatre proposal [introduced by Silvia to the CCC] had a certain interest to me as a volunteer, it was re-appropriated by those who were involved in participating. This consensus was a collective creation in which we managed individual interests and allowed them to interact to build a space for exploring popular theatre. The needs of the children and adolescents participating in the popular theatre workshop were listened to attentively, in the sense that the ideas of any of us could be presented and transformed into action. In this way, we satisfied the needs for play, attention, fair treatment without distinction, the exploration of scenic creation devices, knowledge and research. Therefore, I confirm the potential of direct action for collective transformation as a possible way for another education.

Silvia's emphasis on the horizontal, consensual and respectful character of relationships and projects within the CCC is an eminently anarchist idea, covered by the concept of direct action (Taibo 2018, p28; Byas & Christmas 2021, p62). These authors use direct action to affirm only the absence of State influence, but we stretch the concept of direct action to any kind of action in which the active participants become involved without any State, bureaucratic, party or corporate mediation, and it is precisely this kind of action to which Silvia refers.

PROTECTION OF BIOCULTURAL HERITAGE

To reduce political activity to the act of voting, when we live and die in a world burdened by climate change is short-sighted, to say the least (Honeywell 2021, p4). The university members who work in the CCC share the vision of many other groups around the world, that concrete action is needed in the defence, preservation and recovery of our community's natural and cultural heritage.

Since 2012, the founders of the CCC have constructed a garden for the care, conservation and recovery of the region's biocultural heritage. Those who have the opportunity to visit the community centre will be able to learn about more than 200 plant species with medicinal, melliferous, aromatic, edible, ritual, timber and architectural properties. We aspire to include in this space of the community centre most of the registered useful species of Yucatán's ethnoflora

(Arellano Rodríguez et al. 2003). The CCC garden project is part of the Mayan tradition of the use, care, conservation and propagation of useful species that has existed in Mayan lands since pre-Hispanic times. Archaeological research has shown that what the European colonisers saw as uncultivated jungle was, in fact, the product of thousands of years of ingenuity, care and work on the part of the pre-Columbian Mayan peoples (Ford & Nigh 2015). We continue to cultivate and irrigate this land, this heritage of our Mayan ancestors.

In addition to the concrete action of caring for diverse plant species, the CCC garden project has several educational outcomes: it facilitates the passing on of knowledge from older to younger generations of Canicab inhabitants; it shares that knowledge with people from outside Canicab and it creates solidarity between the community and the young university students participating in the projects with local people.

In Mexico, particularly in Yucatán, manual work is considered degrading and indicative of low sociocultural and economic status. At the CCC, to combat this type of prejudice effectively, it is important to recognise the dignity of manual work. That is why, since the start of the work in the CCC garden, we have invited the students to join us in caring for and cultivating our plant heritage. Some, like Carolina and Olga, have participated more than others, but everyone has radically changed their perception of working on and with the land. Of course, this change in perception also extends to an appreciation and recognition of the skills and knowledge of the men and women of Canicab who work the land or create with their hands. Olga's testimony allows us to appraise these changes:

I used to find that I did not understand some of the grammatically faulty expressions [of the Canicab inhabitants]. Also, I felt I had the authority to correct these errors, because I was the teacher. Nevertheless, sometimes one has to learn to keep silent and listen. That process for those of us with degrees can be hard because if you have worked for so many years to get them and what supposedly gave you the 'edge', or power, is taken away from you or you decide to give it up, what do you have left? Very little. You do not know a trade; you do not know how to work the land; you do not know how to embroider. So, academic degrees condition how the community perceives us, but coexistence can adjust this. It also conditions how we perceive and act with the people of Canicab in the community centre, which can also change because, although it can be difficult, it is wonderful in the end.

In her reflections, Olga draws on an important idea for the anarchist view of education – 'integral education' (Suissa 2010, p131). This concept encom-

passes the idea that it is necessary to overcome the capitalist distinction between manual and intellectual labour to receive a good education. The fact that Olga recognises the difficulty of unlearning feelings of intellectual superiority over manual workers that have been instilled by the neoliberal-driven curriculum of her university offers an example of the reflections induced by experience of the CCC.

DISCUSSION

In this section, I discuss the significance of the evidence presented in the context of the literature referred to and in the light of the anarchist ideas that underpin this paper's theoretical argument.

The approaches adopted by Suissa (2010; 2019), Taibo (2018) and Honeywell (2021) to anarchism and education allow me to explain the testimonies shared above as evidence of anarchist action. My analysis revolves around the idea that, in their practice at the CCC, the UADY students display anarchist characteristics that contribute to creating a small emancipatory community.

Lackey observes that testimonies can give an account of knowledge and practices that may even elude their enunciators. In the evidence cited, other than in Silvia's testimony, the students do not use terms from the anarchist vocabulary but this does not make their activity at the CCC any less anarchist. This evidence concurs with Graeber's findings in Madagascar (2009: 104).

Suissa (2010) argues that the anarchist perspective suggests that consciousness can govern existence to some extent. This assertion could explain the anarchist enthusiasm for education as a critical component of the revolutionary agenda. From this perspective, Oscaira's testimony shows that her political consciousness broadened and acquired meaning from her experience at the CCC. This testimony is evidence of the anarchist, or in this case pacifist, character of her action with the women of Canicab.

Suissa's studies provide a historical perspective on anarchist educational thought and projects. She recognises in these projects the idea of empowering students through 'experiments in active democracy', which take on a new dimension with the utopian thought experiments she examines (2010, p125). Yadisabel's testimony, cited above, shows that the CCC is an experiment in active democracy which has generated a microcosm of an anarchist society.

Silvia's testimony explicitly includes the concept of direct action, because

Silvia recognises herself as an anarchist militant, and her activity at the CCC follows that political referent. It serves the purposes of my argument to show how Silvia's testimony and practice in and about the CCC coincide with anarchist positions on direct action. Taibo (2018, pp28-29) argues that, for anarchists, direct action is action in which we are active participants without external mediators such as political parties, bureaucracy or other institutions. It references a self-managing practice of life in which we always maintain full control over our decisions. The direct-action approach encourages self-organisation at the local level without institutional mediation. In the CCC, we explicitly fulfil each of these traits and, therefore, the action of the UADY students can be classed as direct action.

Finally, I discuss Olga's testimony on horizontality in the terms that Honeywell (2021, p80) adopts for this concept. For anarchists, horizontality implies the decentralisation of institutions and procedures, because power tends to become centralised and hierarchical. This work is important for activists because it recognises the desire for diversity (including diversity of goals) within movements and society as a whole, as well as resistance to imposed unity (the characteristics of military organisation). The aim is to continue to recreate an open process that can adapt to changing demands and objectives. Olga's testimony allows us to see that, given the roles and assumptions of cultural prestige that exist in our capitalist society, maintaining horizontal relations with the inhabitants of Canicab is a process that requires effort and dedication on the part of the UADY students. As Olga says, it is a delicate task, but one that develops with beauty. Evidence shows that the CCC experience is one of horizontality, not horizontalism (Bray 2018) because horizontalism implies imposition, which is not the case in the CCC.

CONCLUSIONS

My thesis in this article is that it is possible to develop anarchist and emancipatory educational processes with the non-academic community, even with the participation of students trained in a neoliberal university. I have provided proof in the form of evidence of a small part of our twelve years' work in the CCC and the testimonies of student volunteers.

Based on the results I have presented, it is possible to affirm that the UADY students who participated as volunteers at the CCC offer various examples of

anarchist action at the community level. They all recognise this microcosm of a better society, one with horizontality, created through direct action at the CCC.

Some may question the feasibility of repeating this experience in other neoliberal universities. Our experience would have been different if, for example, I was not tenured or my rights were not protected by the academic workers' union. Nor would it have been possible if I had worked in other UADY programmes where students tend to hold conservative political views that reproduce UADY's neoliberal values and ideology. I had the fortune to meet students who had a critical view of capitalism, patriarchy and the university structure even before their CCC experience. Finally, we had the support of university officials who, even without fully sharing the ideas tested at the CCC, allowed our work. They support and protect the pluralistic character that, at least in discourse, is usually recognised at UADY. The CCC might never have existed without these predispositions.

The evidence presented and the fact that we have been able to sustain the CCC for more than a decade and continue to design, develop and implement new, concrete educational activities to bring us closer to a microcosm of an egalitarian and free society can be a source of hope for others. That is the spirit of our work in Canicab.

In that spirit, and based on our experience, we can affirm that, on the margins of capitalism and patriarchy, anarchists' experiences do not bring chaos; in contrast, they contribute to the construction of communities, encouraged by notions of equality, freedom, democracy and justice.

Juan Carlos Mijangos Noh is a Mexican Yucatec Maya, anthropologist, and full professor at the Autonomous University of Yucatan Faculty of Education. He earned his Doctorate in Education in 2002 at the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Havana (Cuba). He also undertook a post-doctoral programme in academic literacies at the University of Buenos Aires (Argentina). He has written books, articles, and book chapters on education and educational topics, mainly about the Yucatec Maya people, published in journals based in Austria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Netherlands, Spain, the USA, and Venezuela.

NOTES

1 ISO 9001 is an international standard for quality management systems issued by the International Organization for Standardization.

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