Part II

Doing

The following four chapters provide a snapshot of a number of debates and critical positions which inform contemporary anarchist practice. The specific areas covered offer unique perspectives on aspects of socialisation – sexuality, education, addiction and mental health – and how this can be challenged at a number of different levels. Each of the contributors comes from a specialist professional or activist background (rather than an established academic one), and to varying degrees the chapters bear out points made in Part I, ‘Thinking’ regarding biographical positioning of the author in terms of carrying out research. This is particularly the case with Jamie Heckert’s chapter on sexuality (chapter 5), which also demonstrates the sensitivity and ethical dilemmas that must accompany any libertarian sociological method. Whilst this is a background consideration of the other authors in this section, the principal threads which run through this part of the book concern taking action on an everyday basis, and the need to move away from outdated models of change.

In different ways, each of the chapters is indicative of the movement away from deterministic theorisation towards more holistic, ecological and complex visions of reality. As we have suggested in our Introduction to the volume, these re-emerging views complement much of contemporary anarchist theory and practice, which has itself always posed challenging questions about the social and natural construction of reality. Although acknowledging the role of particular classes and élites within society in the perpetuation of exploitation and oppression, all these authors explore the complexity of the boundaries of complicity in power relations. Devising useful political strategies therefore requires breaking with classical dualistic categories that posed revolutionary actions against reformist ones, a model of a political world long departed.

The result is not as clear-cut as one would always want it to be, theoretically, strategically or ethically. For example, despite a challenging look at the social construction of addiction, Colin Craig’s chapter (chapter 7) still appears to be supporting ‘liberal’ local courses of action such as harm reduction through needle exchange schemes. He also suggests that sometimes the positions adopted by the Left tend not always to be the most libertarian ones and we

should sometimes listen to other voices. In addition, when one looks at the unpleasant picture of the narcotics trade, political repression and millions of people dying of AIDS, doing something seems better than doing nothing. This sentiment is echoed in James Bowen's chapter (chapter 6) in terms of acting against militarism and racism. Often one actually opposes such forms of power by means of a variety of political alliances, some of which contain libertarian elements and some of which clearly do not. Sometimes one acts in an entirely personal capacity where the effects are perhaps hard to discern. In such instances, the squaring of means and ends does not work for every situation, and there actually might be tactical reasons for opting for less dogmatic 'anarchist' strategies simply to facilitate useful group co-operation.

Of course, none of these situations are at all unique to the era we have identified as that of global anarchism. It is more the case that actions cannot be framed in simple notions of cause and effect, in a world characterised by increasing complexity and uncertainty. Each of the chapters here notes how identities and the construction of reality are equally unstable, often mutually reinforcing concepts. Heckert's chapter (chapter 5) looks at how this occurs through campaigning on issues of sexuality, both in terms of the identity of the individuals concerned, but also how successful the strategies adopted are in conveying a coherent and libertarian message to the rest of society. In her discussion of mental health and creativity, Joanna Gore (chapter 8) taps into a radical psychiatric tradition which has frequently appealed to anarchists for its critique of dominant constructed notions of reality. This is one of the reasons for the attraction of Michel Foucault's work to many anarchists. Certainly the way that Gore looks at the discourses around creativity and art, as well as those of mental health and normality, is reminiscent of this analytic approach. Gore's and Bowen's chapters concentrate on education, age, communication and the importance of art and creativity in the libertarian struggle, something that places them in the tradition of writers like Herbert Read (1970).

The importance of locating young people within the wider debates about anarchist strategy and socialisation is still, as all the authors in this section allude to, highly controversial in the extreme. In the light of the often-paralysing dominant constructions of childhood as representing innocence, naïveté and ignorance, there is a pleasing symmetry in the way that these articles cover young people's protests against war and injustice from school walkouts in 1911 to opposition to imperialism post-9/11.