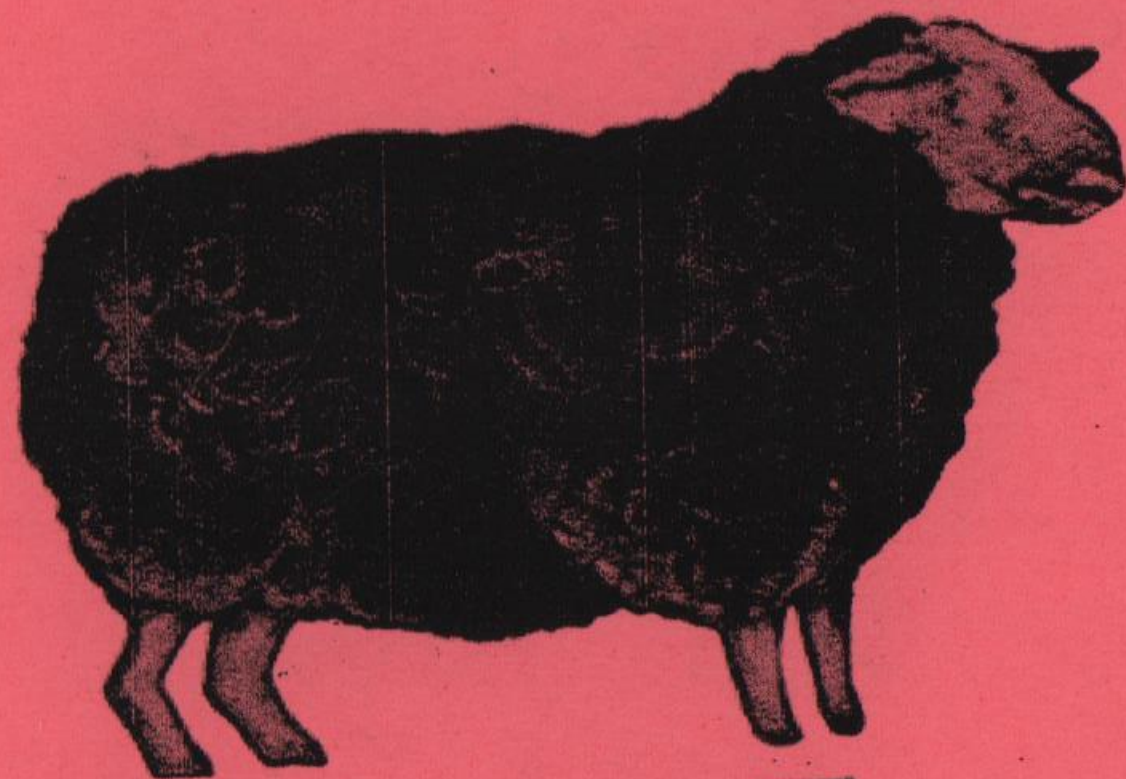


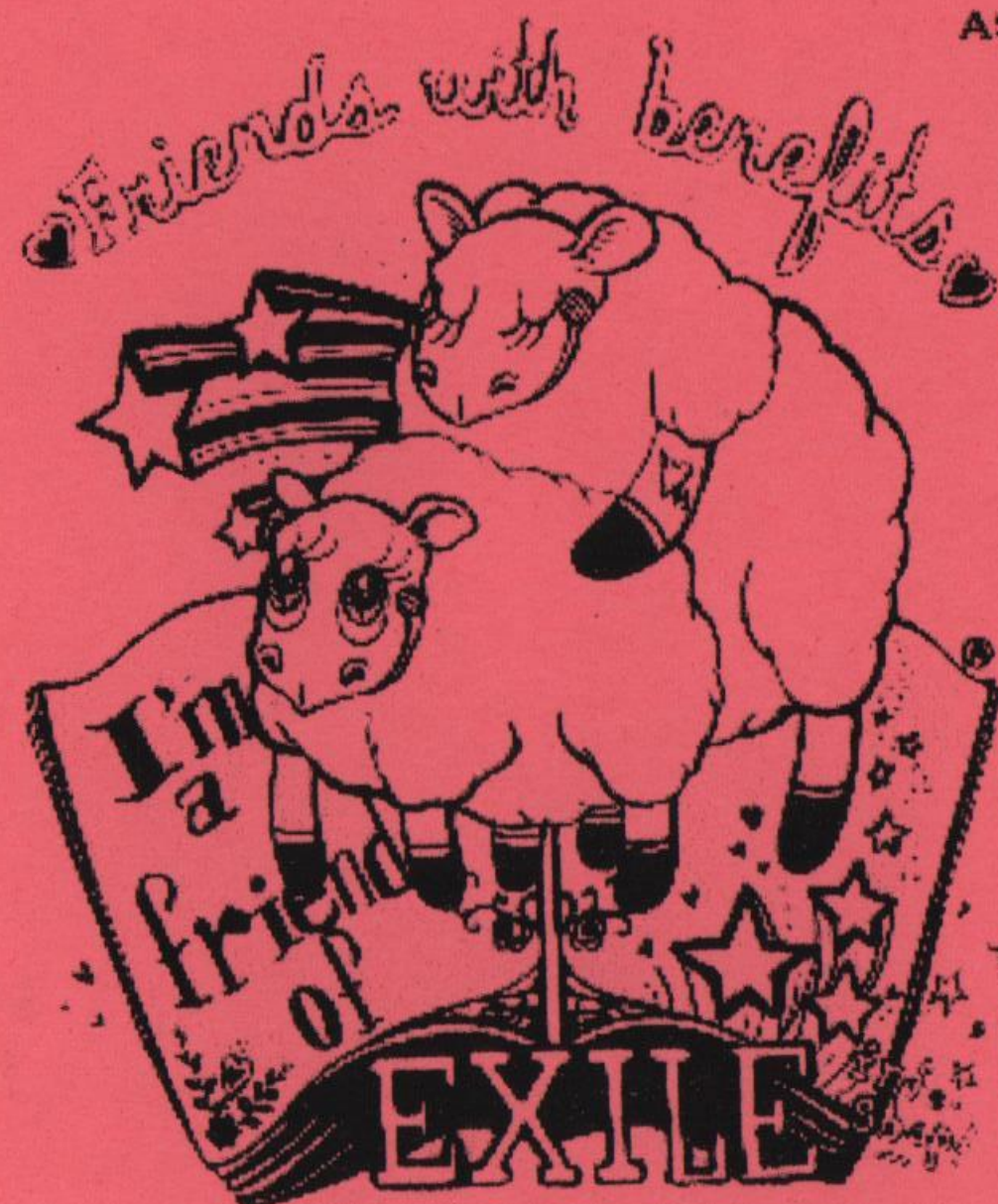
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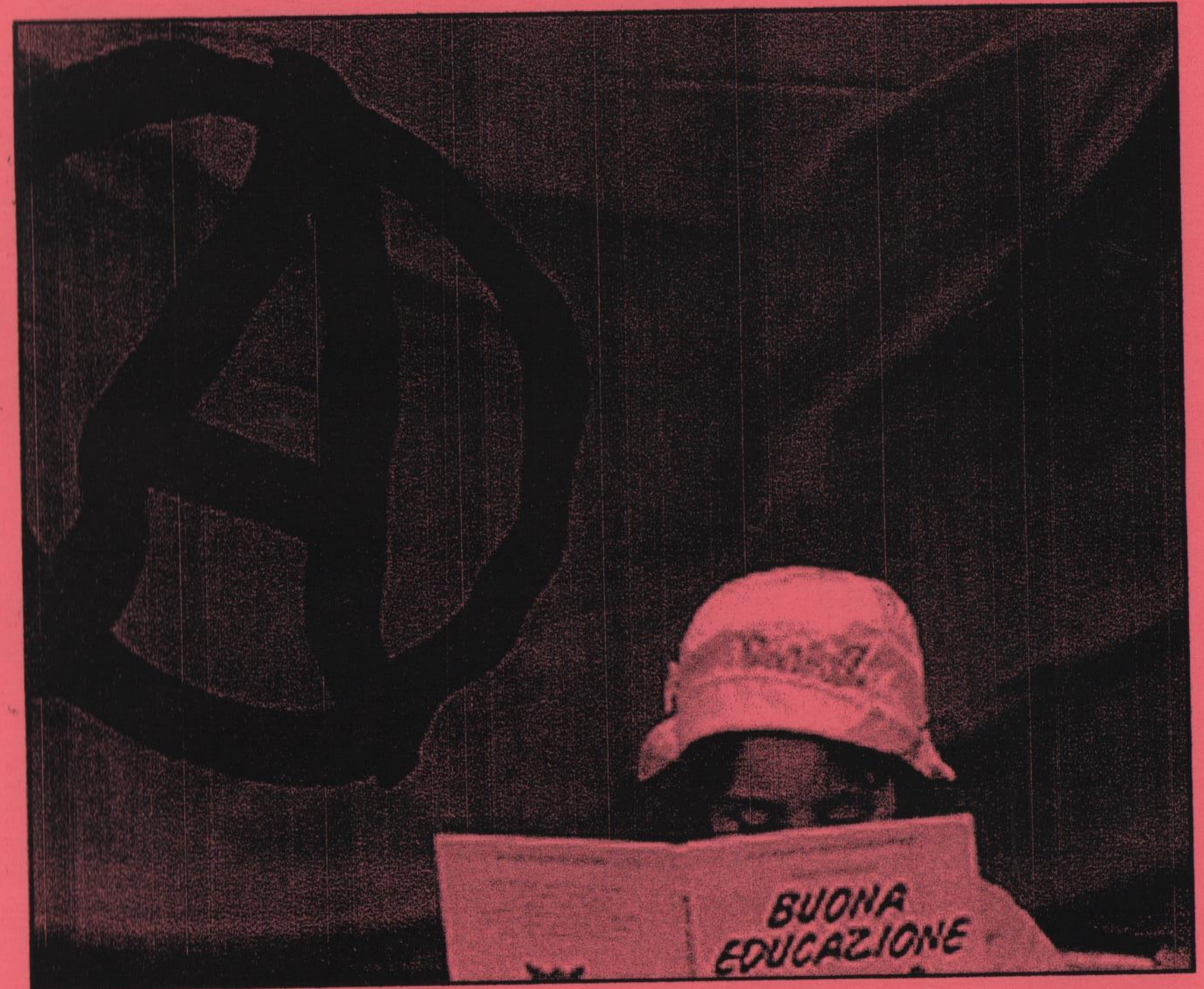
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Educating
for



FREEDOM

A talk by **Cindy Milstein**,
presented at the

unSchooling
Oppression
Conference

in November 2007

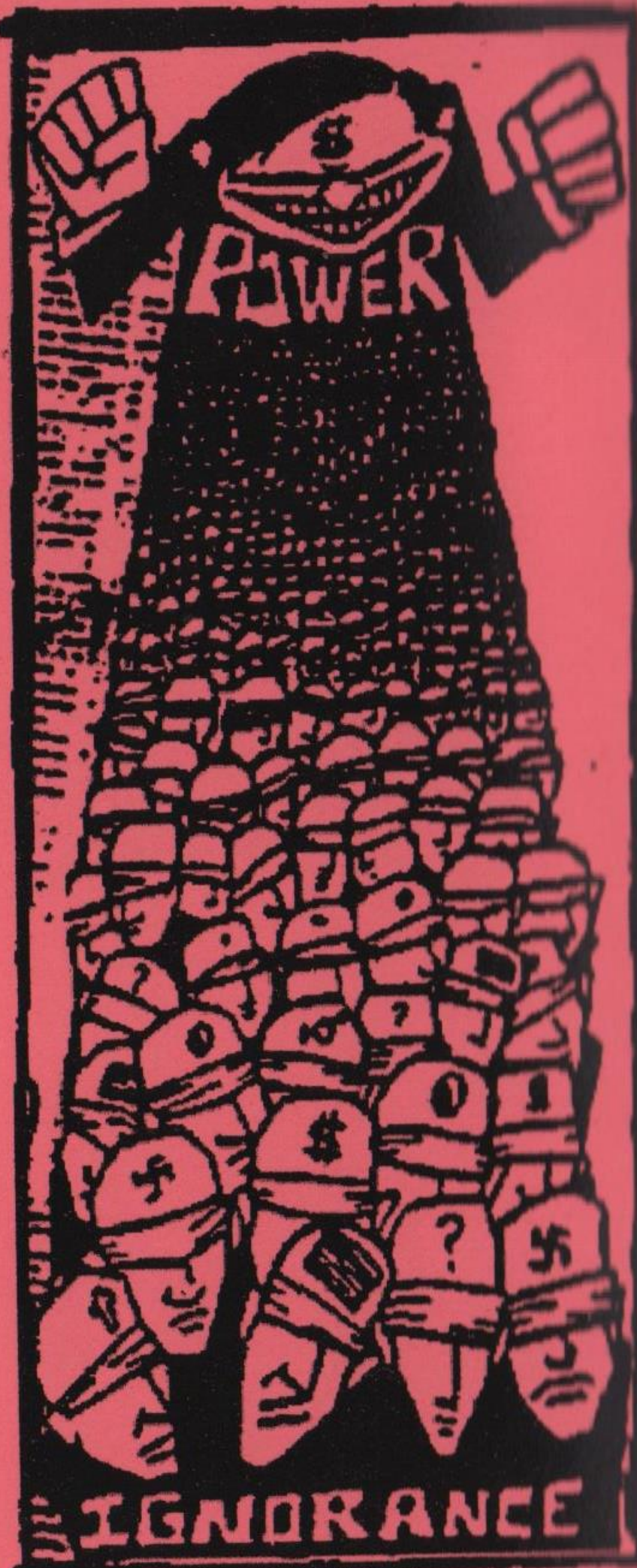
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Educating for FREEDOM

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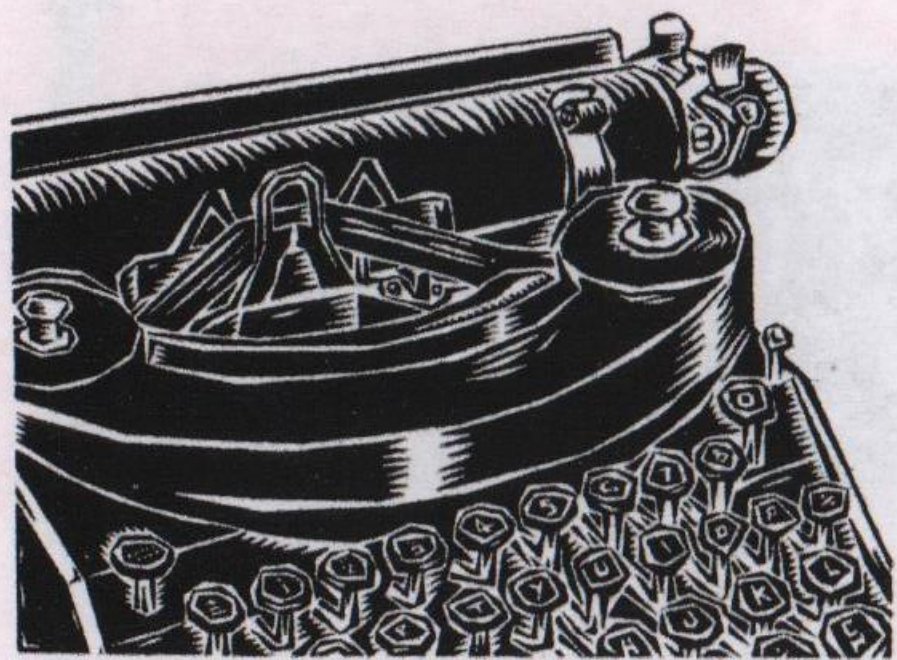
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Editor's Introduction

By Sarah Lawrance

This zine is essentially a talk entitled "Education for Freedom," presented by Cindy Milstein at the Public Library in Ottawa, Ontario, on November 8, 2007, as part of the 6-day unSchooling Oppression conference.

About the speaker

Cindy is a co-organizer of the annual Renewing the Anarchist Tradition conference, a board member of the Institute for Anarchist Studies, and a collective member of both the Free Society Collective and Black Sheep Books in Montpelier, Vermont. For many years she taught at the 'anarchist summer school' known as the Institute for Social Ecology, an independent institution of higher education in Vermont that incorporates directly democratic and non-hierarchical politics into its own structure and operation.

One of the reasons I chose to publish Cindy's talk is her ability to see beauty and potential in moments that might otherwise pass by unnoticed. This is important, I think, because Cindy shows how these mundane moments can actually be full of educational and even revolutionary potential. She then shows how these can be linked to larger projects that can then carry out in ongoing and sustainable ways the potential revealed by those moments.

Another reason why I think Cindy's talk is so important is that it contributes something new to the existing literature on anarchism and education. In my own research I have been unable to find a document that synthesizes various anarchist approaches to education in this way and that links them to larger projects for social change. She highlights, also, the need to constantly reflect on our activities as activists, and to have spaces in which to do so, in order to do what we do better.

Finally, one of the beautiful elements of this talk is that it describes and embraces alternatives to traditional education—alternatives to the alternatives, even. It's easy to find problems with mainstream approaches to education and much has already been published on this topic, so it's refreshing to read about Cindy's experiences with activities that we might not necessarily have understood as educational projects. She emphasizes that these examples of educating for freedom are more than just different ways of doing education; they are necessary parts of the process of prefiguring right now what we want our world to look like.

I love the passion and hope with which Cindy shares anecdotes throughout her talk, and this simply cannot be captured on paper. I strongly recommend listening to the free audio version of the talk via the web-link at the end of this document to see what I mean.

About the editing process

I have transcribed Cindy's presentation from audio recordings of the conference. Because the ways people speak and write are generally quite different—people don't speak in sentences and paragraphs, our speech is very loosely structured, thoughts and sentences are often left incomplete, etc—I have had to do some significant content and structural editing to make the text more readable while trying to maintain its casual spoken feel. In some cases I have had to reconstruct (and sometimes delete or add) entire sentences and paragraphs in order to help it flow. Also, I chose not to include a separate section at the end of this document for the audience's questions and comments. Rather, I have incorporated some of these responses directly into relevant sections of the text.

As a result of these editorial decisions, there might be parts of the talk that I have interpreted incorrectly, and I assume full responsibility for any content errors and thematic awkwardness that result from these edits. Also as a result of these decisions, I fear that some of the wonderful enthusiasm that emanates from Cindy's very being every time she speaks has been lost in the translation to text.

Additionally, the Resources section at the end of this zine is a selection of documents that I think readers might find useful. This list is certainly not exhaustive and does not necessarily represent Cindy's own choices for such a list, so any critiques of these selections ought to be directed to the editor.

About the conference

The unSchooling Oppression conference* was an exciting project. The primary organizers were university students or recent graduates who thought that schooling as we knew it was really screwed up, and we wanted to engage in a public discussion critiquing traditional schooling, and to present some liberating educational alternatives. We created a student club called The Deschooling Society in order to secure some university funding and we began to organize.

The project was entirely a grassroots effort, and we worked hard for every penny we received towards it. In order to make admission free, we asked various student associations, university departments, and labour unions for financial assistance, but only a few of the university-affiliated groups even bothered to respond to us—we assumed this was because of the anti-school nature of the event. Some groups helped generously, while others were far stingier. Even so, we still fell short by over \$1000.

* <http://unschoolingoppression.wordpress.com>

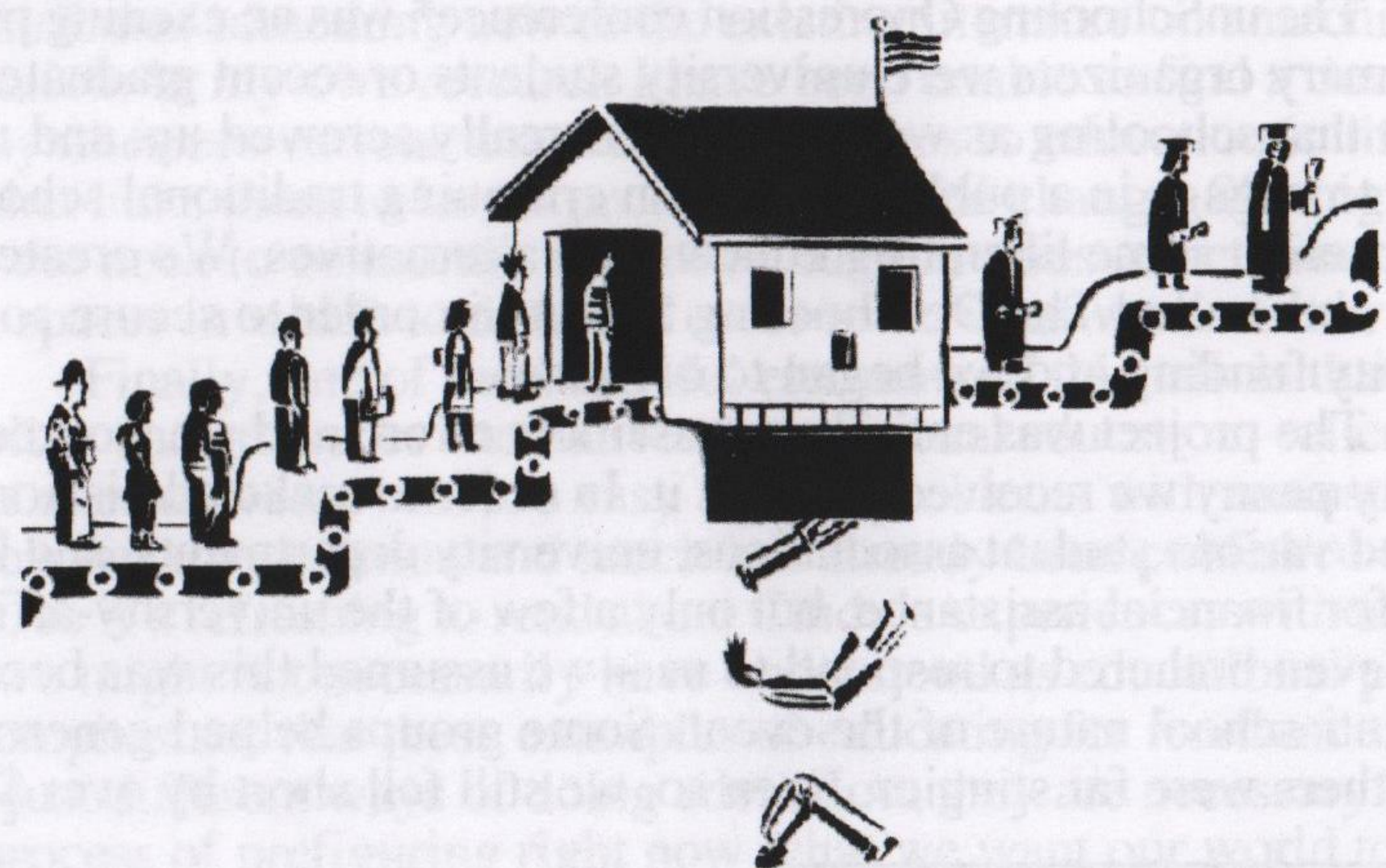
What saved us in the end were the generous (voluntary) contributions of conference attendees throughout the week.

The conference's evening keynote speakers were, in order of appearance, David Noble, John Taylor Gatto, Cindy Milstein, The Miss G_ Project, and Matt Hern. You can find links to audio recordings of each of these talks at the back of this zine.

The event concluded with a participatory caucus, wherein attendees spent a few hours eating and brainstorming together a way forward in applying some of the ideas presented during the conference. Our goal as conference organizers was for this event to catalyze a new movement of projects and campaigns here in Ottawa and elsewhere to directly address the issues presented in order to effectively "unschool oppression."

Unfortunately, by the end of this event all the organizers were completely burnt out and so nothing concrete came out of the concluding caucus directly. However, not long after the conference's conclusion, the local EXILE Infoshop began its own Freedom School programming with a series of workshops, although one year later they're still experimenting with different ways to keep people actively involved in the project. Also, I recently heard that one of our conference's workshop presenters returned home to Milwaukee and actually initiated her own free school project there!

In retrospect, there are certainly many things that we wish we had done differently, and there are many things we would change if we were to take on a similar project again. Even so, we were able to reach at least 400-500 different people directly over the course of the week, and countless others indirectly. Now we hope that this zine will take on a life of its own and inspire many new and wonderful projects around the continent and beyond!



Educating for Freedom

A talk by Cindy Milstein

Introduction

I really want to thank the organizers. I was so excited to see a conference specifically on alternative approaches to education, and for a whole week. It's really great. I just finished the Renewing the Anarchist Tradition conference this past weekend and I'm really, really exhausted, so hopefully this talk will be ok. I'm coming straight from one thing to another, but I was so excited to come to this, to be inspired after being exhausted from organizing something myself. So I probably will speak for 45 minutes or an hour, and then we can just open it up for questions and maybe make it a little more informal and I can come down off of this stage and we can do something else. This feels very daunting; feels like the education environment I *don't* like.

I was thinking it's a little odd to lead from "I am an anarchist" and I always hate using that word because people have all sorts of strange and unusual ideas or prejudices about what it means. It also doesn't make sense to me because I don't want to live in a world with only anarchists, so I rarely lead with that. I prefer to live in a different kind of world, and there can be many different types of people in it. The reason I wanted to speak from an anarchist perspective tonight and be really explicit about that is because the projects I'm involved in are explicitly anarchist and I didn't know how else to explain them without that being acknowledged. However, I really don't think you need to be an anarchist to do these kinds of things, and, in a sense, I think all of us should be practicing different kinds of models of how we understand education.

I copyedit books for a living, and I write—that's the first and foremost thing I want to try to do in the world, and the thing that is most difficult to do is to write. So I originally titled this "Education for Freedom," but it should reflect the process of doing education and having it done and continuing to do it, not just the moment when we have this thing called education, as a product. Maybe I shouldn't even have chosen the word *education* because it seems like a thing, separate from the process. Maybe *educating*, is a better way of talking about it and what I want to look at tonight.

I also want to focus on popular education, in the sense that it is not something that is commodified or privatized, especially in the United States. I rail against grad school all the time because pretty much all my friends are in grad school. I'm going to talk a lot about adult education tonight; I'm not talking about kids necessarily, although this could be applicable. In the United States and in Canada, once you've completed a certain number of years of high school formal education then becomes a choice. However, if you want to maintain yourself as someone who learns and is educated and an intellectual, at least in the United States, that becomes equivalent with going on to grad school. Maybe there's a place for grad school in a better society, or higher education institutions, but it's sad to me that it becomes something that is very expensive, that turns people into professionals, that is very privatized and a commodity. It ruins the experience to a large degree, that's why I don't like that all my friends go to grad school—not that it is a bad thing *per se*, I just don't want a life of the mind to become a product that gets bought and sold and that only a few people can own.

The other part that I want to emphasize, as far as it's the opposite of a popular education, is that education is also very statist—it's compulsory until you're a certain age, it's run by the state in terms of private, higher education institutions, and it gets people into careers that fit into the way statecraft and governance work, which is very top-down right now. Popular education for me isn't necessarily free, it is something that is for us, for society, always, forever, for the entirety of our life and spheres of our life, and we might have to put resources toward that, so I want to counterpose popular—not as in necessarily free—to commodified forms of education or forms of it that get you to fit in with the society where we don't have a lot of say. I'm going to start with two things: why anarchism? and why education?

Why anarchism?

I'm doing the "why anarchism" just because that's the kind of projects I'm speaking about. Many of you, whether you are or aren't an anarchist, are familiar with the "circle-A" as the symbol of anarchism [an "A" encircled by an "O"], and what that initially, I think, was trying to replicate was anarchism as social organization, a form of organization without authority. I don't like the word authority so I'm going to replace that with "forms of social organization without domination, or hierarchy, or exploitation." So the question anarchism is asking is: How can we organize society differently? I think anarchists envision a different form of social organization that continually moves toward an egalitarian, non-hierarchical, non-exploitative, non-oppressive society. We must also be aware that we're always doing that, because we'll never get to this perfect moment where everything's wonderful. We hopefully push past one form of domination, and then we'll find another one right after that one, potentially, and we have to fight that, too.

So anarchism is simultaneously, like all political philosophies, a critique and a vision. In this case it's a critique of vertical or top-down power, where a small number of people, or one person, or a group of institutions basically gets to shape the whole world for the rest of us. It critiques that, and it simultaneously replaces it with a vision of horizontal forms of power, where more and more of us, together and in different forms, get to decide increasingly more parts of our lives. This is why I continue to remain an anarchist until some other political philosophy captures this as well. In this way anarchism is almost like an itch; there's something that bothers you as you look at almost everything in the world and ask, "Is this a form of hierarchy that's bringing someone else down, that's limiting someone else's possibility, that's limiting our possibility to be human, to live in good communities? And if it is, then what are we going to do about it?" That dual impulse, I think, is really important for what I want to talk about in terms of education, too.

The second part of why I want to bring anarchism into this is it's not enough to sit back and say, "Well, here's what a better society will look like someday, after some moment of revolution." Anarchism instead says, "No, every day, every *moment*, is the time when we can start to prefigure the world we want," because there isn't going to be this one moment of revolution. We have to start making *now* the world we want to see. As bad and as flawed and as damaged as that will look like, we have to try. And we're all pretty damaged and flawed and hurt as a result of the societies we live in, so that's going to be brought into all the projects we are going to be doing. Regardless, we still have to be able to glimpse moments of possibility, so we need to prefigure and practice now what we want the world to look like. In other words, we need to try to develop processes that reflect the world we want, which is why I probably should have titled this talk "Educating for Freedom."

We need to develop processes toward new forms of social organization that are increasingly more horizontal, where more and more of us get to participate and see ourselves and live in communities we want to live in. We also need to develop processes that help our social relations between each other to be better, where we increasingly see who we can be without forms of hierarchy. We have to practice those again and again and again. We have to educate ourselves into non-hierarchy, which is why I want to talk about education. There's no such thing as perfect, wonderful people who don't have power imbalances and don't hurt other people, so no matter how hard we try we have to continually educate ourselves into that and practice that.

The shorthand for anarchism that you sometimes hear is "a free society of free individuals," where it is neither that I, myself, am free alone, nor that I live in a community that's free, but where the two are continually mixing together. Anarchism is thus about the process of getting there, of continually moving toward making both increasingly more free. And for me, the longer-term vision of what this would look like involves putting the word "self-" in front of everything, so how

would we self-organize together? How would we self-manage together? How would we self-govern? And we can apply those to economics, politics, education, and our personal lives. How would we, together, collectively, remake the world? And ultimately hope for a society where more and more things are directly democratically run, face-to-face? Where we sit down and just decide things together? EXILE Infoshop's a good example of that, as well as other projects where people, together, determine what they want that space to be — whether it's a bookstore space, or an infoshop, or this conference space — and to do so in a way that counters the kinds of power that we don't like. When people, together, get to decide and discuss and debate and educate themselves about the world and together decide about it, the emphasis, again, is on freedom.

There was a really beautiful panel talk on gender at the conference I just organized, and during it a friend of mine — his name is Kazembe Balagun, he's a wonderful speaker if you ever get to hear him speak — said it's not just a matter of being human beings, but always also being human becomings, that it's a process of us becoming who we want to be in the society we want to be in.

So that was my brief “why anarchism,” and I want to end with this: that anarchism first developed in the 1840s, 1860s, 1880s, and the French anarchists called anarchism “The Idea.” What they meant by that was it was a thing that you held out and said, “Here's an idea, always, of a different kind of society, and here's an idea, an ethics of what a different kind of society could look like: cooperation, mutualism, egalitarianism,” we could go on and on, “love, dignity, respect,” and that idea was continually held out. So what you need to do is not force people to be free or force people to come to your idea, but you have to convince people. If you really believe this idea is so beautiful and so wonderful and the values that it espouses actually are about people self-organizing, self-recognizing, self-managing, then you have to involve people. Your projects have to be about trying to do it yourself, but also convincing others of the possibility, by glimpsing in the present what larger things could be like in the future, how things could be better in the future by trying them now. So this is why I think anarchism, more than any other political philosophy, is so intent upon educating people, because you cannot force people to be free. We have to come to it ourselves through self-education, together and on our own, and that has to be through public spaces, dialogue, thinking for ourselves, and then ultimately deciding together what we want the world to look like.

In the description for this talk I quoted an anarchist who I really like, Errico Malatesta — most of his writing is in Italian and if anyone is really good at Italian, I'm so eager for someone to translate more of his work because not enough is translated. He basically ran around the world doing propaganda of the deed, trying to toss a Molotov cocktail in a town square and hope that everyone ran out and would want society to be different, though that always failed for most of his life. But what he did

best was the other kind of propaganda of the deed, where he tossed out pamphlets everywhere he went, and he just ran around the world writing and writing and writing.

If you want, if you ever are depressed and feeling bad, pick up Malatesta's works, there's a collection of some of his writings called *His Life and Times*. Every other page is like, “Oh! Oh!” they're just such beautiful visions of what the world could be like, and it still resonates today. He's really inspirational in terms of someone who has convinced me time and time again, when I'm feeling like there isn't possibility, that there is, and so I'm just going to read this quote again. He wrote that our task as radicals or as people who want to see a better world, whatever you call yourself, our task is to embolden “people to demand and to seize all the freedom they can.” The way forward, in his view, was via “provoking and encouraging by propaganda and action, all kinds of individual and collective initiatives. It is in fact a question of education for freedom,” he asserted, “of making people who are accustomed to obedience and passivity consciously aware of their real power and capabilities. One must encourage people to do things for themselves.”

I just love that sentiment. Whether you understand yourself as an anarchist or not, I think that everybody in this room wants to bring out everyone's, including our own, capability and real power, so we can all see how to do things for ourselves together socially, to remake the world to be better, especially at this historical moment.

What is complementary about anarchism and education to me — which could be complementary with the Zapatistas who do not identify as anarchists, or the Situationists who were actually Marxists — is a sense that we can make how we think about and act in the world participatory acts, acts that are about transforming ourselves and the world. In an anarchist political philosophy those things have to be interrelated, and the reason I bring this to my work is it's actually not only talking about speaking truth to power or challenging power. What's most interesting about it, and almost no other political philosophy does this, is that it involves thinking about what it would mean to include everybody in a new form of power. And that's a very unusual form of politics.

Now, personally, I could care less about whether we hang on to the word anarchism, what I'm mostly interested in is how we would include all of us in both theorizing about and acting in the real world. We could take away the word anarchism — the only reason to keep it is because for now there isn't another word that describes its politics.

I just drove here from Vermont and listened to news shows the entire way, and it's hard to listen to the ongoing ways in which people have no space for themselves to make the kind of world they want. The vast majority of the world, and 75 or 89 or 90 percent of the people in the United States, at this point are against the war, and yet there's a war. We have so little ability to make the kinds of worlds we want to see. So that leads me to the section on education.

Why education?

Why focus on education? This may be a potentially ridiculous question at a conference like this where you're all here for that, but I want to talk about why there's a need to do this, not when you're K through 12, or maybe going on to a degree, but why there's a need to be educated in general for freedom, for ourselves, as something we do for the whole of our lives, in the same way that we eat and sleep and make love and figure out ways to produce things we want and be creative. Education should be a part of what makes us full human beings for the whole of our lives.

I want to give a little summary of what I understand education to be in terms of an education for freedom, or educating for freedom, where it's education for itself, in terms of us not just being people who have massive amounts of information in a briefcase or on our laptop, but education as wisdom, as insight, and the ability to critically examine the world and make it look different. These are all things that happen together that make up what education might be for the whole of our lives.

The first reason why it's important is that education helps shatter the hegemony of the present, helps shatter the dominant assumptions that exist uncritically in the world. Education shows that things haven't always been this way: we haven't always had capitalism, we haven't always had compulsory education, etc. I think that's very powerful—many people just accept that the world has always been structured this way. My partner, actually, is an adjunct professor at a university and he's teaching a course on Europe. Halfway through the semester he gave a test and all his students did great except they completely didn't know which was east and west Europe, because all of them were born right after the Cold War had ended. He was so astonished because he had assumed everybody knows the Cold War's divisions of Europe, so even we need to be able to completely re-examine our own assumptions, as teachers, in the same way that people must question their assumption that the world has always looked like the world they were born into. I thought that this was an interesting example of him learning from the group he was teaching, and now on the first day of class he has to say, "Ok, I'm not going to get to the Cold War before December, but by the way France is *not* in eastern Europe," which half of the students had said. But you have to take this seriously. For him it was a learning experience, and for them, too, because we're all part of this world that we each see only one way.

So, the first reason was to shatter how we understand the present, but what I'm specifically talking about is forms of domination, forms of power. Shatter how we understand power. The second reason why education is important is to reveal what's going on, to actually understand ourselves.

I hate the slogan "No Blood for Oil" to explain what's happening in Iraq, I think that it so miserably falls short of understanding why the

United States government decided to go to war. It doesn't explain what's happening now, and it doesn't explain changes in the world, and we need to know what we're fighting for. If we turn to a different form of energy and there's still a war going on in the Middle East, we have to have explanations that make sense so we're actually fighting the right things, and fighting *for* the right things, if we want to see a better world. So, for us, education is to try to understand the world in fuller, richer ways that allow us, if we're interested in a better world, to change the world and fight what's actually going on.

Another reason to educate is that it reveals past, present, and future possibilities. If it hasn't always been this way, what other examples are there—even if they're small, even if they failed—that we can point back to and learn from, that we can find in the present, or that we can dream about for the future? It's really important to point beyond those hegemonies and find the examples of the ways we want to live differently, as flawed as they could be, even if they're not complete examples.

Another role for education is constant vigilance about the world and about ourselves. It is the constant need to reflect on ourselves and our most intimate personal relationships as well as on the world, to be able to constantly say, "Ok, we've now got this great free school, but why are half of the kids not participating?" We can't just set things up and then sit back and be congratulatory. We have to constantly be vigilant with everything we do and continually think through what we're doing.

Another role for education is to understand complexities. The world isn't simply male/female, black/white, left/right, us/them. The world is much more complex than that, in terms of both social relationships and social organization, so we must find that interconnectedness and also develop those interconnections and fight the ones we don't like. This can make for a coherent, holistic, and interconnected understanding of phenomena, of how various forms of hierarchies and various forms of freedom relate to, impact, and influence each other.

The last couple of reasons include continually pushing things further, such as categories that we take for granted, so education isn't something like, "Here I'm now reading from this book that says this is what it means to be racist, here's what race is, here's how we've understood race." That is going to change every day, every year, and we have to continually reflect upon things like how we've historically understood race and how that category has functioned in specific places at specific times or globally, and how it has transformed. And the reason to do that is to continually see phenomena as also transforming, rather than reinstitute rigid forms of hierarchies or binaries, so we have to continually come up with new things to educate about. It can't always be the same ideas or books; we have to continually, in a sense, have curriculum as a process, too, where education is a process.

Still another reason is the need to make visible, institute, and have places for this public, popular education, this critical and reconstruct-

ive thinking. We need to actually have places where that happens regularly. You found this place, this is a week where they're having a talk each night and it's great that conferences like this happen, but what happens next week when a bunch of you want to sit together and continue to study and educate yourselves? Where are those places in our communities?

I really want to applaud the organizers for doing this in a public library. What if the public library, every week, had more and more of this popular education? If these public spaces became participatory education spaces rather than simply spaces for passive education? Matt Hern, who's speaking later in the week, used libraries as a great example of what schools might look like in the future. I've always loved this example of a library: it's a public space, it's open certain hours, it's kind of a constant, there's everything you can possibly think about wanting to think about, but it's up to you to decide what you want to do. If you can't quite figure it out, there's someone sitting in a desk with a sign over them that says "Help" and you can go talk to them. The thing that's missing about that is the dialogic part. Like what if you just wanted to all sit down in the lounge every day and start having ongoing interactive forums and decide what you want the space to be used for and to be like? That's the next step that would need to happen with libraries.

The last reason why we need to educate is for freedom, to sustain a sense of hope and freedom and open spaces. To do the things in the ways we want them done. So we're not just educating for something else past the educating, but education in itself is a form of freedom, opening up our selves, our minds, our spaces. It's opening up a sense of possibility and doing it in a way that is part of the better world we want to see; it isn't something in the future, it's now how we want to see it be.



Projects

I'll focus on some projects I've been involved in because that's what the conference organizers asked me to do with this talk, but it also feels awkward because I rarely do this. I'm using this as a frame and I'm not in any way saying that the projects I do are wonderful or perfect or great, in fact, I'm probably the biggest critic of them. I just finished the *Renewing the Anarchist Tradition* conference, which is part of what I understand what I want education for freedom to be, and all I was doing the whole weekend was thinking, "How can it be better, how can it be different?" That's what I mean about critical thinking, we do not need to sit there and say how great our projects are, so it's a little awkward to talk about my projects. I'll probably put a good light on them for the sake of shorthand discussion, but if we want to talk about problems in them there's plenty of problems in everything I do, so that's a good thing to talk about, too, because we also don't want to romanticize the work we do. Please feel free to critique them and also bring up other projects as examples and I'll try to mention other projects as I go along.

Because anarchists are interested in this idea of education for freedom, anarchism as an idea, and a huge percentage of the work that anarchists do—despite the stereotypes of anarchism—is actually about education. And some of it we don't even see as education because it's not how we've understood education to be.

A huge percentage of what anarchists do is public speaking, like this. I learned from someone that what we all need to do is each figure out what we're good at talking about and spend a lot more time bringing that to other people. Then I need to listen to all of you. That's part of the beginnings of dialogues: people need to do a lot of speaking as education, these moments are part of education, and I take that seriously.

So you see a lot of anarchists travelling around and giving talks in spaces and doing writing, but also a huge amount of publishing projects: books, magazines, zines, street art, street theatre; all these projects where the point is to create new ideas people can get engaged with and discuss, propaganda pieces.

Another group of projects that anti-authoritarians or anarchists do are things like skill-shares or free schools or places where you trade what you're good at with someone else. Let's say I know how to make candles, and someone else knows how to grow a certain kind of food, and someone else knows how to make shoes, and we sit around and teach each other various skills or we have the possibility to learn other skills from each other. Things like that. Or actual ideas, we share skills, or ideas we have, or how to do things.

But the other category of anarchist projects are things like EXILE—I'm part of a space in Vermont that I'll talk about a tiny bit, Black Sheep Books—but a lot of anarchists do bookstore spaces. It struck me because

there are hundreds and hundreds, almost every city you go to, at least in North America but more and more around the world, there's always some tiny anarchist bookstore or infoshop space, and anarchists sometimes do bars, and sometimes do dance spaces, and sometimes other things, but by-and-large they do bookstores and infoshops. They always have things to learn from and spaces to talk to each other, and that's a pretty interesting phenomenon in a social movement, that the emphasis is on spaces with ideas in them. It's pretty unique, I think, and pretty remarkable.

And they're not spaces where you have to do anything—the communist party and Maoist groups have had a series of bookstores in big cities and you walk in and they instantly want you to become them—and the difference is that anarchist spaces are about bringing a bunch of ideas to you and figuring it out together, so it often isn't "You have to be like us." At my shop we never use the word anarchist but we're all anarchists in that bookstore project. It's bright, it's cheerful, it's friendly, you don't see anarchism on every shelf, you see lots of other ideas that are completely counter-posed to anarchism, because the point is to create a space that's welcoming and about ideas, to have these debates.

About two months ago a guy came in who had just fought in Iraq, and he was like, "I went to Iraq thinking the US government was right, and it was a good thing for me to do, and I came back thinking things are really wrong and I need to start figuring out why." Now he's doing projects in the community and talking, and I don't think he would have come into the space if we'd said, "Hi, we're anarchists, why don't you come talk to us?" So sometimes that word is useful, among friends and allies, for instance, but in other spaces maybe it's not.

Anarchists also organize tons of bookfairs, and workshops, and conferences like this, so, even though I don't know if all the organizers are anarchists, this is an example of bringing out education into public spaces.

But I actually want to talk about three different "categories" of projects that I'm involved in, and I'll try to use some examples from other people's projects, and then I can stop and we can talk. And the reason I do these is because I think they emulate a structure for how I also want to see society change, like I was saying earlier.

I live in Vermont and there's still a town meeting tradition, where once a year in every town in Vermont—except for a couple now which are just electoral—there's a holiday and everybody (who wants to) meets in a space and you just vote on things. You can talk about anything you want to and vote on anything you want to, and whatever gets decided in those towns is decided. So a huge percentage of the towns last year decided they wanted to impeach George Bush, and people take it very seriously. What's interesting about it is that there was a space where people, for four or five hours in many towns, debated whether this historical moment in the United States was a good one. People talk about war, people talk about whether they need to buy a new fire truck,

and the society I want to see is heading more and more toward where *that* is the decision-making locus, and they connect with each other. So when 40 towns out of the 250 towns of Vermont or something like that—20% of the towns, I think—decided they wanted to impeach Bush, they don't just keep it in their own little towns but they federated later and then they had to try to get a movement from there to talk about it. Like, if this many towns want this then it looks like there's something wider going on, and they actually start speaking with each other.

So this begins to emulate the kind of society I would like to see, where there's more and more face-to-face decision-making, we all get together, we discuss/debate whatever we want, make a decision, and then we federate with the other communities and come up with something larger than we decided, but it's still decided at the local level. So, we must take ourselves seriously about how we would prefigure the kinds of education we would want as people who would want to do that for the whole of our lives not just this narrow span of our lives. Another point is that we need to think about how we bring that about in a way that emulates the forms of organization that we want to see in a different world, and how we bring it out into the real world so that it actually does challenge existing forms of vertical power.

One example of how you can bring this practice into education, of educating in a way that clashes with power, is something a friend of mine did. Where I live, any time there are any public meetings or city council meetings, the public access television films them all. One time, a friend of mine went, took the microphone, turned away from the people of power, spoke into the microphone for the TV and did an educational pitch for the community access TV. So, in the moment, he both denied the power existing in the room and spoke to the wider community.

More recently, a bunch of my neighbours were really upset and angry at the city council because of something they had done. I live in a small town of about 8,000 people and I see the city councillors every day at the grocery store, so it's not like they're far-removed people, but they still did something without asking anybody in town, and nobody was happy with it. So a bunch of people, none of whom had any "isms" and who were from a wide variety of political positions, went into the city council meeting and the city council said, "Ok, we have 15 minutes to talk about this." People just started saying, "No! No, we're angry and we're not gonna take that 15 minutes." Everyone just turned around and faced each other and people started doing an informal teach-in to each other for an hour, because everyone had looked into a different part of what people were upset about and it was really phenomenal for me.

This was such a beautiful moment because I was being educated in multiple ways on an issue I thought I knew something about, and then people stayed there for another two hours trying to figure out what the solution to this problem would be, and came up with a solution, and looked back at the city council—it's now 1:00am, and this was all being

filmed by the local public access—and the city council just said, “Well, it looks like you guys have decided what we’re doing,” and they did it. So we all walked home thinking that that was an interesting moment, where there was both a clash with power—even though the power was on a microscopic level in my community—and we actually came up with something that was proactive and was fair for everybody. To me, that’s a moment of how you can bring education into a space where it clashes and come up with something that’s different, so it involves both theory and practice at the same time.

So one thing I want you to come away with is how do we make our own education beyond just when we’re a certain age? And how do we reclaim that moment and use it in a way that’s also challenging power and building dual institutions that will ultimately replace the institutions we hate? I think there are all sorts of power, personal empowerment, community empowerment, horizontal forms of power, and we have to fight hierarchical, vertical, oppressive, killing forms of power. We have to come up with power that we can share together so that we can all be more who we want to be in communities we want to be. So how can we create those dual institutions that replace the ones we don’t like? We can only do that by practicing them in every place that we live, not just at some place at some moment of time.

So the three forms of education that I want to see start to connect to carve out spaces for us to self-manage and interconnect with each other in order to hollow-out, ultimately, the large-scale institutions that I don’t like, like capitalism and statecraft, but also large-scale institutions like the way education is structured in society right now, or health care, or all sorts of things that would have to be brought back to a much more self-managed level, so I hope these examples fit into that.

Local collectives

The first category is on the local level, in a sense. How do we educate ourselves in an ongoing way, and have that sense of trust and face-to-face and small-scale so we can continually do that with ourselves? I’m going to give you a couple of examples of some anti-authoritarian or left political groups, collectives. The first, briefly, is a group called Midnight Notes Collective,* and they’re Autonomist Marxists, which means they have a different understanding of capital—for those who don’t know, instead of the history of capitalism being that capitalism compels people to do things they don’t want to and people react to it, this group of Marxists understands that people do wonderful things and capitalism actually reacts to us. It totally reverses it and so it gives people power instead of giving capital power, and they’ve done really interesting work related to that. It’s a small group of people who are friends, some of them are involved with each other, some of them

* <http://www.midnightnotes.org>

live together, they’ve travelled together, lived in other parts of the world together, but for 25 or 30 years they’ve tried to understand together, as a group, what capital is and what would replace it.

That is pretty much all they have. I mean, they do other things in their lives, but this is their project as a group of people, and they don’t do it just because some of them teach in universities for their career. They do it because they want to see a world without capitalism, and they take seriously that if they could understand what it is that is happening now, and could understand what could replace it, then perhaps their work could be compelling enough to get other people to pick it up as part of a social movement. But they can only do good work by being together and having discussions that build and build, and by continuing to educate themselves.

What’s interesting to me about them is they also are completely open to educating themselves. They’re probably all in their 50s or 60s or 70s now, and they happened to take a vacation in Mexico just when the Zapatistas first had an uprising and they didn’t know what was going to happen but they were there right then, and they completely were dumbfounded because it didn’t fit into their theory, at the moment, of what was going on with capital. And instead of thinking, “Oh well, it doesn’t fit into our theory,” they actually went home and spent a lot more time studying together and trying to figure out what was happening, and wrote a whole new series of works explaining things they weren’t be able to account for in a way that was self-reflective and that made their work different and better and more applicable to the world that was going on. Have they changed the world? No, but they’ve also developed a body of ideas that has been influential to people within a certain social milieu, so far. And at some point, potentially, it’ll be wider and have wider influence, but I just wanted to point out the ability to think together really closely and to also change your mind and to continue to put that in writing.

Many of them teach at universities, but all their writing is online and free and accessible. They understand themselves first and foremost as political and public intellectuals. Teaching might be their job, but they understand that how they’re bringing education into the world is through this form of intellectual work. I think this is a really good model if you want to continue your education, but have difficulty finding the spaces for it, and part of this for me is creating our own spaces with people with whom we can build trust and build a sense of ideas and continue to push each other and challenge each other.

Another group I wanted to point to that does this is in the San Francisco area. Their acronym is BASTARD, which stands for Berkeley Anarchist Students of Theory And Research & Development. A group of them have an infoshop in the Bay area, and they have a study group. For six or eight years, every week, the one person who started it is there, even if no one else shows up, but they actually have a collective now that is formed around that. Every week, in this public space they have the study group and say, “Here’s what we’re gonna do, and here’s what we’re

gonna study and anyone can come, but we're not going to reduce the level of the conversation." If you come you might be completely lost, or you might jump in, or you might sit there for 6 months until you catch up, but they want to study together and they don't want studying to be something that's privatized, they want to bring it out into the community. So they are a collective but they do their collective's work together in a public space once a week.

Out of that they decided to do a theory conference once a year, that's also in a public space and open, called the BASTARD conference.* They're also very cantankerous and like to argue, so it's a great acronym.

They also publish *Anarchy* magazine,** which, like their collective, is about being a public education vehicle and is very contentious. What's interesting about this connection is that the person who published the magazine for its first 25 years or so decided they wanted to stop doing that and they looked around and saw this ongoing study group of folks who became really trusting of each other through that, and this person asked if they would take the magazine on as a group and continue to put it on. So it's kind of interesting. They did their work in public, and through those connections ended up making another connection to continue another project. So part of this is bringing our work out into spaces so we can connect up with larger education projects.

The last collective I'll talk about really briefly as a model is my own, Free Society Collective,*** and we've been together for 6 years or so. I've been part of other collectives and they are hard to keep together, so I'm actually happy and I hope these will be my life-long friends and people I study with. What we do is we also meet once every week or two, and usually make dinner together and talk and have fun, and are friends, but we also usually read together and study together and when different ones of us are doing talks or writing pieces, we present our ideas to each other and get criticism. I was going to do a presentation at the conference I organized last week, and I did a 15-minute sketch of my argument two weeks ago in front of my study group and they all looked at me and said, "That's not what you want to talk about," and I was like, "Well, I thought it was," and they were like, "We know it's not," and they know that I wasn't talking about what I did want to talk about because they know me really well. Education has to be about challenging you and pushing you, and, in fact, I came out with a much better talk than I would have if I hadn't had a group with whom I'm reading, studying, and sharing work.

What's interesting about these groups is that they become very non-hierarchical in the sense that when I'm presenting something and other people are giving me advice, who has the power? What we often do is one person wants to read an essay they know a lot about, so we'll read that essay and they might have a lot more to say about that essay

*<http://sfbay-anarchists.org/viewforum.php?f=10>

** <http://www.anarchymag.org>

*** <http://www.freesocietycollective.org>

that week than other people will, so the dynamic shifts and you get used to practicing what it means to not have someone be the teacher and students, but to work together toward critical thinking; that's also leading toward a different type of world. It's really good practice in a place that feels really safe and trusting and comfortable.

But in the case of my group, as an example, it isn't just something that you do that's nice and you have good friends and you have nice dinners together and you have fun arguing with each other, and reading essays; for us, it helps us with how we do our political organizing.

When the war was gearing up in the United States, we were pretty much convinced well in advance that Bush was going to go to war no matter what happened and regardless of how large the social movements were, but we really didn't like the various positions we saw about the war. So we read a whole bunch of different pieces by other groups about what they understood the war to be about, and then we wrote a piece ourselves. When there was a giant demonstration in New York before the war started, we took this flier and what we did all day was use the streets as a school. So we walked around and talked to cab drivers and people selling newspapers and people in cafés and other people protesting and we used this as a moment to say, "Here's what we think, what do you think?" rather than, "Here, we have the right idea." We learned, and we also tried to educate, and the street became a place for public education and discussion and debate, and not a place to shut down, because we didn't really think the war was going to be able to be stopped. That's the kind of society we want to see, where those moments that could be moments of just feeling disempowered become moments to educate all of us together about the world we want to be, and what was especially nice was that the people who were the most responsive were actually the people driving the cabs, who weren't at the demonstration.

My collective's kind of nutty about words, and we actually argued for probably five or six meetings about what the banner should say, because we thought, "How can you encompass complex ideas with a slogan on a banner?" So we went back and forth trying, insisting, "It has to be anti-capitalist, it has to be anti-statist." We wanted to get across the idea of capitalism in this time of war and what the state is doing, "but we don't like negative banners, and we want to talk about a free society, but how do we do that? Ahh!" So we kept having meetings, and each time one of us broke the process we then had to have a process meeting to talk about why, so it was actually an educational project for us in terms of how we function. It was also educational in terms of figuring out how to say what we want to say in the world, and how to express ourselves as public intellectuals in a political space. And it was fun to actually figure out how to do that in a way that doesn't water down our ideas. Whether we succeeded or not, who knows?

But what was interesting is when we were on the street, the number of people just reading our banner—cabs stopped and pulled over

and would be like, "Huh, capitalism, I don't think I like that either, but what would you suggest instead?" And what's fun to us is to have those conversations, to create school spaces or educational spaces, because I actually want to live in a society like that all the time, where education is something that happens together all the time like that and we continually question ideas.

Finally, our group does a lot of education projects. None of us want to be in grad school right now but there are some great people teaching in academia, there are some great people writing books, and some great people who aren't in academia. We did this whole series, which we hope to start up again, where we made a list of 15 people whose books we read who we wanted to talk to, some of whom we knew, some of whom we didn't, and invited them to come for a whole weekend. We each pitched in, whatever, fifty bucks, to pay for the person's transportation or whatever it was, and we just cooked in each other's houses, and we spent a whole weekend with someone we wanted to study with. I have a B.A. and I probably shouldn't even have gotten that, I think I learned everything after that in study groups, in terms of what I wanted to study. But what is interesting to me is that I want to continue to study, and sometimes I do want to study with someone who's written an incredible book. People will pretty much say "yes" if you can figure out a way to get them there if they don't have the extra money. It's worthwhile to create your own spaces and to know that you're putting your money into that. It's an interesting model for continuing to pursue those forms of education that come from books that are hard to study or interpret on your own, or where you want the author there to study with. I mean, most of my friends in the United States in grad schools spend 20 or 30 or \$40,000 a year, while we spend a few hundred dollars a year bringing people we want to hear speak. So we try to do a lot of programming like that.

But it still misses one more point I want to make: why is it so hard for us, as radicals, to imagine actually creating our own intentional spaces for lifelong education, that are not just for ourselves but also for other people? I think it's really important to get together with a group of friends and push and challenge each other, and have the trust to do that, but if you stop there it's all still just a personal expression exercise, it's not transforming the world. This brings me to my last point: creating other public areas of education, spaces like EXILE* and my own bookstore, Black Sheep Books.**

We've been doing that for three years, and we weren't quite sure why we started; a space was available and we just threw it together. I've been really critical in the past of spaces because they often become ends in themselves, where you're struggling so hard to keep the space

* <http://www.exilebooks.org>

** <http://blacksheepbooks.org>

open you have no time for anything else. We, however, decided that this would be simple and fun and if it becomes anything else then we'll stop. What's been interesting to me is that it's really uncomplex, and it's my collective that does it so we know each other really well and don't really fight about anything. The biggest fight we ever had was over the name, and after that there isn't much else to fight about.

So many people come through the space who I can ask great questions of, but also all of us have these experiences time and time again where someone will come in and say, "I'm just interested in this subject, can you point me in a direction?" The number of people who you feel you have the ability to point in a direction they wouldn't have thought about before is great. It's a space of education because there are books, there's nothing else there *but* books! People come in and say, "Yeah, you know, I've been thinking about queer theory but I don't really know where to start, and I'm not even sure if I am queer or if I even understand what that idea is. Ahh!" and then you talk to them for two or three hours or something.

A young woman came in a couple weeks ago and she said, "Oh, in my college I need to write a paper for a year, and I'm thinking of writing about the Situationists, but my professors say they're too academic," and I'm like—I'm actually going to talk about them really briefly at the end—and I was like, "Academic? They were, like, complete radicals who almost transformed a whole society at a specific historical moment! They were scholarly, that's different—they were smart, they were intellectuals—but they were not academic," and then I realized that she didn't know anything about them. I gave her an entire reading list because we just chatted for two hours, and then she asked, "Will you come work at my college?" and I said, "No, I don't want to work at a college, that's why I'm here at this volunteer project." But other people come in and do that for me, they stop by and they're people who are studying incredible things and then I can get a reading list from them. And so they're really powerful spaces for not just reading lists but education.

We need to think about how to structure spaces that aren't just things that involve lots of extra work and break our collectives apart, but that are actually other moments of education that we don't notice, that we don't think of as education spaces. Ok, so this was like the small-scale, get a group of five of your friends and make a commitment for the next 10 or 20 years to actually study together and continually push yourselves about whatever question or questions you care about. I love my collective, I feel so recognized and I recognize them, and we know each other so well that all I have to say is one word and they're all like, "That's not what you mean," and they can say that because they know me so well. We all want to live in a society where there's a group of people and a community that fully recognizes us and we fully feel seen by people—that's crucial for a better world, because

most of us don't feel seen in most of the world. But if we all had our own separate tiny groups, that's not good enough.

Non-hierarchical institutions

So the next level of what an education for freedom would look like, for me, is actually structuring non-hierarchical institutions that either bring those groups together or have them overlap a little bit, or creating larger spaces for people who don't necessarily know each other and may come and go, places that you can find. For example, you can find the University of Ottawa. I went over there today and thought, "Oh my god, there's so much concrete here," it felt so disempowering to walk in there. I'm sure there are some cozy spaces that I just didn't find today, but we still do need to have those spaces, where you can walk into a town and know that there's a space or several buildings where you can go for education.

There are so few examples. I feel like there's a lot of little small-scale collectives that I didn't mention, beyond the three I did, and there's a lot fewer of these institutional places, precisely because it's expensive, it's hard, it involves a huge amount of commitment, etc. But I'm not going to focus on all the reasons and problems with why they're hard to do, because I think the biggest problem in terms of why they're hard to do is that people, for some reason, think they're hard to do!

I know I keep referring to it but it just breaks my heart that everyone I know who's a radical ends up going to grad school. It's upsetting, not because it's a bad decision for them personally but because if all those people spending all those tens of thousands of dollars and eight years, etc, in school would put that same amount of time—or even a third of it—into something else (and some do), we actually could do other projects that would be there on an ongoing basis. And free schools for children are much better examples of that. I was talking about this just before I came in, that maybe for kids it's easier because kids aren't necessarily the ones organizing all the time, or maybe they are a little bit, but it's a little different for them because once you start getting older you have to make a living, and are busy with organizing, etc. There are also a lot of other reasons that make it hard, but I think the largest reason is just this idea that it seems hard, or not important, or not something that fits into our life, so I actually work hard to try to dispel that.

There are a few other examples, such as the Highlander Institute* in the United States. They're more progressive, they came out of the Civil Rights Union, they've been around for 30 or 35 years, and it's a space where they often do a lot more conference-type stuff. In Toronto, there's the Toronto Anarchist Free University,** I'm not sure it's happening this year, but they basically set up college-type classes, they're completely

* <http://www.highlandercenter.org>

** <http://www.anarchistu.org>

free, they're voluntarily taught, anyone can sign up to come, they run them like regular classes. So there are examples of that, but they're often very short-lived, which is heart-breaking.

So I'm going to talk about two things I'm involved in. The first is the Institute for Social Ecology,* and it is actually not in existence anymore, in terms of what I was involved in. A couple of people think it might reinvent itself, but I'm pretty skeptical at this point. It was basically, for 30 years, an anarchist summer school, and it was a physical place in Vermont where people could come together for two weeks, or three weeks, or a month, and spend pretty much 24 hours a day together, having classes, eating together, cooking, cleaning, staying up all night, making campfires, etc. It was this incredible think-tank environment in a very rural area where there wasn't much else to do except actually focus on each other and discussions and ideas. I think that's a really interesting model. There's a lot of conferences like this [unSchooling Oppression] that happen in cities that are great and they're short and they're wonderful, but even during the conference time everyone runs off to where they live and has other things to do and has jobs or has school.

It was a really unique experience and I taught there for 10 years, but I think I learned more than I ever taught, though I'm not quite sure how that worked. It's such an interesting experience to spend a month each summer with 40 or 50 people who all know they hate the way the world is right now and are totally eager to learn for the sake of learning, and everyone wants to be there. We barely ever slept and we spent time having fun together, but we mostly just spent time talking about ideas and teaching and engaging. Most people who came there were organizers and activists and radicals, people who were interested in social change, from the liberal end of the spectrum all the way to the anarchist end, but everyone there definitely wanted the world to be different. And most people came there saying, "Ok, I know I hate capitalism, but I don't even think I can tell you what capitalism is," and hopefully by the time they left they could tell you a few ideas, three or four theories of what capitalism is and could pick the one or ones that they thought seemed to work the best. Or they'd be saying, "I hate the way politics works, I don't even think I understand what politics is," and we would even problematize that, and explore "what is politics?" and what we understand that to be and what we want it to be; it was a place to have these discussions.

The way it started was around the ideas of someone named Murray Bookchin, an anarchist theorist who never graduated high school and wrote 30 or 40 books. He came out of the time period where if you were a leftist and a radical you understood yourself as a public intellectual so you educated yourself and others. I'm completely influenced by

* <http://www.social-ecology.org>

having known this person, someone who took himself and everyone else seriously. That's what was interesting about this project to me, it was an educational space where everyone has the potential to understand whatever they want to understand, and we can all understand that together, as long as we take the time to do that and take each other seriously. That's a real gift, to create a space where you take everyone seriously, no matter where they're at, and know they can get there.

A friend and I had gotten a copy of Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender*. While reading it we were like, "Oh, this is so clear!" — Judith Butler is really hard to read, really hard, and this is supposedly her most accessible book — and both of us thought it was, we were just, "Oh my god, it's so accessible, it's so clear." A third friend of ours was really excited so we got her a copy, and she read the first page and started crying and said, "I don't even understand the first word on the first page." My friend and I, who had suggested it to her, we sat down with her and we said, "It isn't that you're stupid or you're bad, it's just that you haven't read her before. This word has a specific meaning in her work, in other theories, and here's what this word has meant in other contexts, and that helps you get past that word, but maybe this isn't the book for you to read right now." It's an interesting process, to know that there have been books like that where I've read and thought, "I just don't understand this at all," like Marx's *Capital*, which I had to put away two or three times, and then you pick it up when you're ready and you can get it and it seems clearer than it did before. That's an interesting process for education.

So, for me, the Institute for Social Ecology was a place where you take people seriously. For a month each summer we'd have structured courses for four weeks, generally looking at things like, "What is capitalism?" and "What is statecraft?" I'm trying to think of what some of the other classes were, but it was by and large looking at overarching institutions that we didn't like, and trying to understand what it is that we don't like about them and what we would replace them with. It was a place that examined both the critical and reconstructive sides of things, and it worked through that through movements, so a lot of times we would then say, "Well, if we don't like these forms of economics, what do we like?" There was a lot of experimentation and people doing the actual activist work coming in to describe different forms of economic systems that would look different than capitalist systems, let's say. It was a place where you brought in people doing on-the-ground examples of reconstructive projects, at the same time as you were doing theory.

So, again, I thought it was an interesting model of where you can bring together pretty high theory discussions with on-the-ground

people trying to practice what this looks like in real life, and everyone there was trying to practice it outside of this. Having been around 30 years, it not only provided people with sort of a theoretical framework but it also mentored generations, and that was another part of this project. If you want to build people who understand education differently, can go on to teach differently, can go on to change the world differently, how do you mentor them? So that place took itself seriously as a mentorship place.

Most people who taught there were engaged in other movements, such as the biotechnology movement. The Institute for Social Ecology was really at the forefront of a lot of that: some people who taught there had been really engaged with that movement, and then would come back to the school to re-examine it, and back and forth. It's important to go out into the world and do movements, and be part of movements, and then have places to come back and reflect on them.

I think a lot of times the dichotomy is that we have places where people go to do education — and it's totally the way higher education is structured, it's extremely expensive, but what's worse is it's extremely time-consuming and all-consuming, so people spend most of their time literally just doing things in their heads — and then there are people who are so busy doing the actual hands-on projects or challenging power that they have very little time to reflect on that. Neither approach is right.

Another shorthand for anarchism is "doing it yourself" or DIY or self-organization. We can certainly "do things ourselves," and it seems people are really good at organizing how to grow food, how to do demonstrations, how to shut things down, how to challenge power, and people do a lot of that activist stuff, but we take less time-out to think about it and reflect on it and then reflect back out to it, and have those work together. I don't think the right answer is simply to learn from the real world, learning can be part of that real world and both have to happen at the same time.

What upsets me right now, for instance, is that a lot of academics are writing about the social movements that anarchists have been involved in, and they are writing bad books because they've never been part of those movements, so they often miss what's most interesting about them. They will focus on, for instance, the actual ways anarchists have grown food, but they'll miss that it isn't just the food, it's their relationship to how they think about the ecological crisis, or how they do it as a collective, etc, that it isn't just simply that they're growing food in a local way.

We have to take seriously that if we want to change the world and make it a better place and want to grow food differently and want

to have the world look differently, we have to practice growing food, those of us who want to, we have to practice challenging power, but we also have to reflect on those things and have places for this reflection. We're much, much better at having community garden spaces and free food projects and free kitchen projects than we are at thinking about them. I'm not condemning them, I'm involved in a lot of those projects too, those are projects that we need to do. What we forget is that we, too, can reflect on ourselves and theorize ourselves. I think growing food right now is perhaps one of the things we should reflect on most with the ecological crisis.

Last week, the French president—this far-right-wing, awful person—came out against biotechnologies and GMOs because he's a proponent of stopping global warming. He's taken what the left or radicals have often talked about and spun it in terms of things he wants to shut down, so ecology *per se* can still be racist, homophobic, and hierarchical. What we need is to figure out ways to grow healthy, sustainable, local foods that also involve participatory processes, non-hierarchical processes, inclusive processes, and sustainable ecological processes that aren't about one person saying "Now we're going to" or "Now we're not going to." And where are the places that we spend the time theorizing about that?

Ultimately, my point isn't to turn everyone into an anarchist, I'm just trying to be honest about my own self-identification and understanding how that relates to the work I do. I actually think what's interesting about anarchism, at least the anarchism that I'm more interested in, is that it engages with other traditions, so in all the educational projects that I do I engage with Autonomist Marxists, or people who don't call themselves anti-authoritarian, because I don't think anarchists or Marxists or anyone has the answers. The point is to create spaces where we can have ongoing conversations to reflect on both theories and things, like how the hell we grow food in a society where capitalism has taken over all ecological ways of growing, etc, how we grow food in a way that's actually revolutionary today. We have to do both.

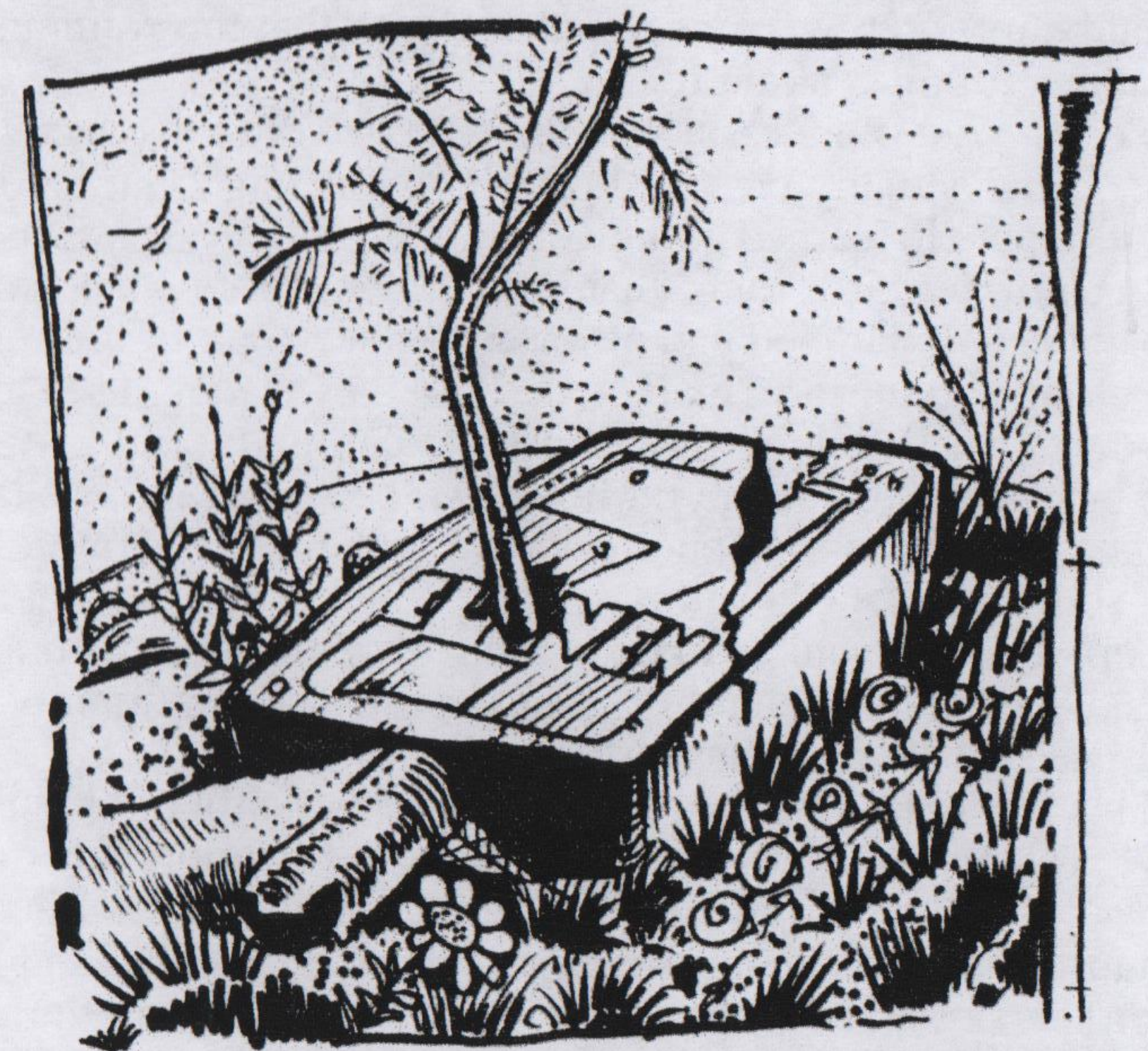


One of the only projects I've done that I've ever been happy with actually came out of the Institute for Social Ecology. We were also in a different collective at the same time and we read a piece that Murray Bookchin had written called "Moral Economy vs. Market Economy," which was a talk he gave in front of some organic farmers. We loved that essay. He was basically talking about what a non-capitalist economy would look like, but it was in the most lovely,

vaguest of terms relating to food. Perhaps food and healthcare and housing are the issues that are most fundamental to almost everyone, because we actually ended up trying to turn that essay into a real project. So I think this is how you bring intellectual work into a study group: reading an essay you love, engaging with it, and then bringing it out. It's ok that I'm self-sufficient, can grow my own food, and can heat my house with wood, but we must figure out how everyone in society can be able to have a better and better life.

We ended up doing this project where the farmers were actually farming land that the city owned, so we decided to say that food should be like libraries, where everyone in a community should have food. That would be the first part of our moral economy. If you lived in a certain neighbourhood you got a certain amount of food, checked out of this land. The city should support those farmers just like they support libraries. But do we want the city to look the same? Do we want a mayor? That was also part of what we discussed as well. Eventually that was what we'd want the city to look like as well, we wouldn't want a hierarchy in the city. But for now, if you lived in the city food should be a common good, and since it wasn't we set up a farm market in the poorest neighbourhood, which is the area we happened to live in.

Burlington is the largest city in Vermont but is still a small city, with a population of about 150,000. We actually did this farm market where we asked all the farmers who grew on this land to come to the farm market, and instead of charging what they understood the cost of that food to be relative to what they grew, to come sell the food according



to what they felt was good for the people they were giving it to. In that essay, Bookchin talked about the goods being the goodness in things they make. So people can say, "Oh, you're the person who grew that wonderful carrot, and I'm getting that carrot from you," and it means something to that person. You can look at that person and recognize how much they can afford to pay for that carrot, from zero to whatever it is, so the prices changed based on actual relations with understanding the people who lived in this neighbourhood.

And obviously this was a silly project, in a sense, because it didn't actually reflect what these farmers needed to make a living, this was only one moment of every week for them, but it was the community's commitment to saying, "Well, this is more like how we think economics should function, that I am in relation with the person who grows the food, and I should ultimately be able to go get food out of that section if I live in this community." Maybe we could have community work days for the farms and things like that. So anyway, we set up this farm market. The farms that we asked to be part of this were also run cooperatively or collectively, their internal structures were cooperative so they were showing different ways of structuring how you do economics.

We did it on this ratty old junky green, a little, abandoned area that nobody ever used for anything, and we asked the city if we could use it and they said, "Well, I guess. No one's ever asked to use that space." We then asked people in the neighbourhood who were musicians to come play, we put out a newspaper each week, and we actually had classes in the square. The people in this community adhered to a range of political beliefs, yet we came together to ask that the community transform how it thinks about food.

Coming out of an essay we had read, we did the education in a public space and actually provided people in the neighbourhood with food. A lot of people learned about vegetables, organics, and sustainable farming because we did a lot of that kind of education. Also, half of the people in the neighbourhood had never before seen half of the vegetables that were brought to the farm market, because they weren't used to getting organic vegetables and they weren't used to certain types of vegetables that were brought to the neighbourhood. At the same time, we talked about what a non-capitalist economy would look like and how collectives function. So we did the education not simply about here's what this new food is, here's how organic works, etc, but also, through the practice of doing this, we educated about how you can create a community space. We never used the word "anarchism."

This farm market's still going on, so I actually think this is one of the few projects that's so nice. Another way we thought this project worked was when one of the kids who lived in the neighbourhood was playing punk music really loud—really, really loud music—and he came to the farm market, and we let anyone who wanted to from the neighbourhood who did art stuff come to it. So one day he was playing,

and it was the kind of music most people in the neighbourhood don't listen to—we definitely knew that because I knew all my neighbours—and the police came. This was the one time they came; they shut it down and were trying to drag the kid off because it was too noisy, it was violating the noise regulations in the city. All these people in the neighbourhood, none of whom probably even liked that kind of music, defended the kid against police and told the police to go away and pushed the police away. And the police left. In that moment, the community actually engaged in a way of understanding how hierarchies work and they were like, "This is our piece of land in our neighbourhood now." It was a piece of land that no one had ever even thought to use before, so it was also creating common space that people suddenly saw as valuable and wanted to fight over.

That, in a way, is how I understand theory being brought out into the real world, and also creating a space of education at the same time. We learned a lot from it as well. It was pointing to different kinds of radical ways of transforming society that everybody loved, because everyone in our neighbourhood was like, "We could all get food, and food could work like libraries, that's a great idea." It never came to pass because unfortunately my collective broke apart and nobody took up the project of actually making all the food in our community work like libraries. That was to be our next political project. The joys of collectives being transitory, we never actually continued to push that project, but it created a demand for something different that people wanted in their cities. In this way, I think there is a need for the role of education to be completely transformed in terms of how we understand it and how it functions in our projects.

If we take seriously that practice and theory have to happen together and have to happen in ways that are both about the real world and about our self-making, it's still an interesting phenomenon that within broadly progressive, social-change worlds, regardless of the "–isms," most people tend to focus on the action, fighting, protesting, shutting down, negative, anger—all of which are useful things that have to happen—and forget the other side: what it is we want to reconstruct, what we want the world to look like, how we'll practice it, and why it's so hard to bring those two together.

Another example I use is Seattle's direct action to shut down the WTO. A lot of students who were at the Institute the summer before that spent the whole summer learning about direct democracy and what that would look like for society. They got really excited to go practice it so they all went off to Seattle afterward and hung out with some of the people who had been organizing the demonstration together for a year or two ahead of time. The young folks were so excited, they were like, "We'll write the flier!" So they actually wrote the primary flier for Seattle, and the poster. They ran off to this demonstration and, because they were so enthusiastic and so eager and had spent a month right before

that thinking about nothing but ideas and felt refreshed and eager and ready to write, they wrote that flier and poster, and they kept writing “direct democracy,” because that was all they heard about all summer and they were so excited about it. It’s interesting to see what people do with ideas after they sit there and learn with them; but to then take them someplace else that can potentially influence many other people who think about language like that, what does that do? And then people practice it in the form of that demonstration, not just those students but many, many people.

So the Institute for Social Ecology was a physical place, with classrooms, dorms, camping, and a kitchen. Everyone came to a specific place, and we can talk about the problems with that, of money and boundedness and how it’s hard to maintain. The other project I’m involved in is the Institute for Anarchist Studies,* which is not a physical place. Someone from the Institute for Social Ecology started this because he took seriously that we need more infrastructure for the kinds of education work we want to do, and if you just have a summer program primarily for 18- to 22-year-olds, what happens to the people who want to consider themselves ongoing public intellectuals, who want to continue to do intellectual work that is about social change? So the Institute for Anarchist Studies does not have a physical place.

The person who started this project made it a 501(c)3, which is a non-profit in the United States. I’m not sure if that was a good decision; we call it a “board” but we’re actually a working collective, so we should change the language. We fell into using the language that non-profits use, but it’s a decentralized project in which we meet twice a year as a collective to give money out to writers and translators all over the world. We basically encourage people to write, to do writing that’s about being a public intellectual, we don’t fund projects that someone is going to stick on a shelf, we only fund pieces that people are going to put out into the world for discussion and debate, to encourage ideas.

We also do things like the Renewing the Anarchist Tradition conference,** where we try to create a space where people come together for a weekend, though I wish it would happen more often. Year after year it’s often the same people, most of whom consider themselves anarchists, who try to develop anarchist theory, but face-to-face. That’s been a really important space because there isn’t any other space in North America for people to do that, there’s no space for people to regularly come together and actually talk about theory and try to push it forward, precisely because we understand theory to be important for changing the world.

The conference is very small and we didn’t want to make it big because we didn’t want it to be a spectator conference, we wanted it to

* <http://www.anarchist-studies.org>

** <http://www.homemadejam.org/renew>

be a conversation. Now we’re also trying to do radical theory tracks at conferences where there are younger folks because we really feel that education is about mentoring other people. What’s interesting about the Institute for Anarchist Studies is that it’s not in a physical space but it completely understands itself as an institution, as something that has to exist and has a set of things that it wants to do: it wants to encourage a radical critique of the world and reconstructive visions of the world through writing projects, through publishing projects, through intellectual work outside of institutions that are hierarchically structured. So we are directly democratic, but we also try to encourage directly democratic projects or collective projects, and work to make those things happen.

Regarding the Renewing the Anarchist Tradition conference, I just want to use one example and then I’ll go on to the last section of this talk. In the past we’ve just had an open call for proposals and then we’ve said “yes” to everyone who put a proposal in. This year we thought that this isn’t really what education should be about, that we were losing this opportunity to work together, critiquing and developing our ideas, so the organizers this year rejected a lot more proposals. Also, for every single one we accepted, we worked with and had discussions and debates about them with the people who proposed them, and we learned a lot in the process, and hopefully so did the people presenting. We were like, “Well, why did you ask this question? Do you think this argument is good? What’s the framework for what you’re going to do?” And because of that the conference was much richer and in-depth and at an even higher level than it had been in the past because we’d done work ahead of time to curate the work that went into it.

A lot of anti-authoritarian projects happen with a spirit of openness, but one that misses out on helping to shape things, because we feel like, “Well, who are we to tell people what to do?” The dialogue to make things more shaped is an interesting part of what has come out of this.

Both the Institute for Social Ecology and the Institute for Anarchist Studies understand themselves as institutions, places that are non-hierarchical—or at least try to be—that are about trying to break down the barrier between teacher and student, or speaker and listener, and that try to have collective and cooperative ways of learning. They also take themselves seriously, are trying to mentor future generations, to create public intellectuals, to provide spaces people can find on an ongoing basis, and they want to be there for the long-term. Unfortunately, the Institute for Social Ecology is no longer alive, for various reasons including financial ones. It didn’t transform itself, and after 30 years it forgot to do what it needed to do, such as understanding that it needed to change what it was teaching, among other things.

Larger social movements

This is the last category. All my collectives came out of the Institute for Social Ecology, that's how we met each other, and now we're working together and doing other projects, and so the interrelations between these institutions ends up with people finding each other and going on to do other projects. Another group, a small collective, came out of the Institute for Social Ecology, called the Catalyst project.* They hated the race analysis of the Institute for Social Ecology, so they set up a collective that focuses on nothing except race, white privilege, racism, and anti-racism, and they do really good work. It came from us having debates and discussions and them saying they didn't agree and then going off and doing their own thing—and that's precisely what an institution should do, is spawn new projects, spawn new things. So you have the individual small groups deciding directly democratically, linking up their directly democratic or non-hierarchical institutions that are larger and more open. How, then, do we transform society so that education becomes something more people can have in their lives, on an ongoing basis, to continually figure out ways to transform the world, and continually enlighten ourselves?

It's rare when these moments happen, and I quickly want to point to two examples. I don't want to make any claims that I've been any part of these. I'll first point to the Situationist International.** They were 1950s avant-garde artists and theorists trying to make sense of capitalism, and they came up with this idea that capitalism was a spectacle at present, so Guy Debord writes this book called *The Society of the Spectacle*. They did a lot of really complex writing, a lot of really playful writing, because they were also artists, they were super-super-intellectual, super-geeky, super-inaccessible. In terms of their writing in a very small group, they were highly undemocratic, they kept purging everybody from the group until they finally dissolved because they kicked each other out, so it's an interesting example of not an anti-authoritarian group but a group that was very elitist and very full of themselves, super-brilliant. Their work is so refreshing to read now; I really encourage you to read *The Society of the Spectacle* if you haven't.

Their whole thing was shattering the spectacle, so they were the first to do things that now we see as *Adbusters*,*** you know, change a billboard, change a film, etc. There's a film they call "Can Dialectics Break Bricks?" where they take a kung-fu movie and people are kicking, the proletarians kicking the capitalists, etc, and they just put new words over the whole film. They said that once you've done that to shatter the spectacle, to show that people aren't engaged in their lives, that they're watching their lives, that once you do it, capitalism will take it back over

* <http://www.collectiveliberation.org>

** <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline>

*** <http://www.adbusters.org>

again, and you have to do something different. So they would actually hate *Adbusters* because they'd be like, "Advertisers get that you can make ads that actually encourage people to be part of a spectacle, so that doesn't work anymore." Their point was to break the spectacle, so they came up with all these playful slogans and artistic slogans and art projects to do that. Even though they were profoundly, profoundly elitist, profoundly intellectual, and extremely inaccessible to read, their slogans and ideas resonated because they actually understood the world at their time period, and their ideas were making sense in terms of how capitalism was changing in that moment.

BE REALISTIC
DEMAND THE IMPOSSIBLE

If you don't know about the events in 1968 all around the world, it was a moment of revolutionary spirit, of near-revolution in the world. With this very sensibility of self-management and people wanting to make the world their own, the Situationist International's ideas were picked up in France, and people ended up taking their language, their words, and their ideas, and using them to almost overthrow the government of France at that moment. This almost created a connection between students and workers and the rest of the society to self-manage the society at that moment. Huge amounts of directly democratic—even though the Situationists weren't—moments of self-management, self-governance, self-expression. It was a really beautiful moment where the ideas of a small group of theorists were brought out into the public and created a moment of almost massive social change. It also involved a huge amount of education, because students were a huge component of that, but also they understood that that had to be part of a better world. Their slogans included "All power to the imagination"—that's a very famous one—but they understood education to be completely integral to change in the world.

The last example I want to use is a very familiar one, the Zapatistas.* They spent years and years and years studying together and thinking together and wondering what they want their societies to be like, and asking questions together, and eventually ended up doing all sorts of incredible things like creating autonomous municipalities, building healthcare centres, doing art projects, and surviving in a very difficult space to survive in this world. They're very inspirational in many ways.

* <http://www.ezln.org.mx>

The one thing I want to point out in particular was that we don't really think about how education functions within the Zapatista movement. We don't think in terms of them transforming their societies in real ways that actually affect people's real lives. Many, many people who are part of the Zapatista movement or who live in the communities live very different and qualitatively better lives because of this social movement, so education isn't just this thing you do separately from actually living in a better world.

But I want to point to the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle,* which they wrote in June 2005, and it's a really lovely document and it's online—like everything they do—for free. I think this is the most profoundly interesting theoretical document; there must be a small group of them that sits around debating these, or larger groups and communities where they write and put out statements. I know they have a good process of having discussions, and talking about things before they put them into documents.



This piece says, “Here’s what the past was, and here’s the hegemonic ideas we don’t like and the world we don’t like. Here’s what’s happening now that we don’t like. Here’s what we’ve done that we don’t like about our own movement. Here’s what we want to do in the future, both to transform the world and to change ourselves.” It’s this really interesting, self-reflective, educational document that’s also about educating themselves, educating the world, and explaining what they’re then going to do with those ideas. They often talk about the word being a weapon. I think that piece itself, more than anything in this movement, shows you how they theorize in a way that’s completely accessible and grounded, yet highly theoretical. This has to come out of a process of people, together, educating themselves for freedom. By bringing those ideas out into the public, they actually start transforming the way people respond to the world.

* <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/auto/selva6.html>

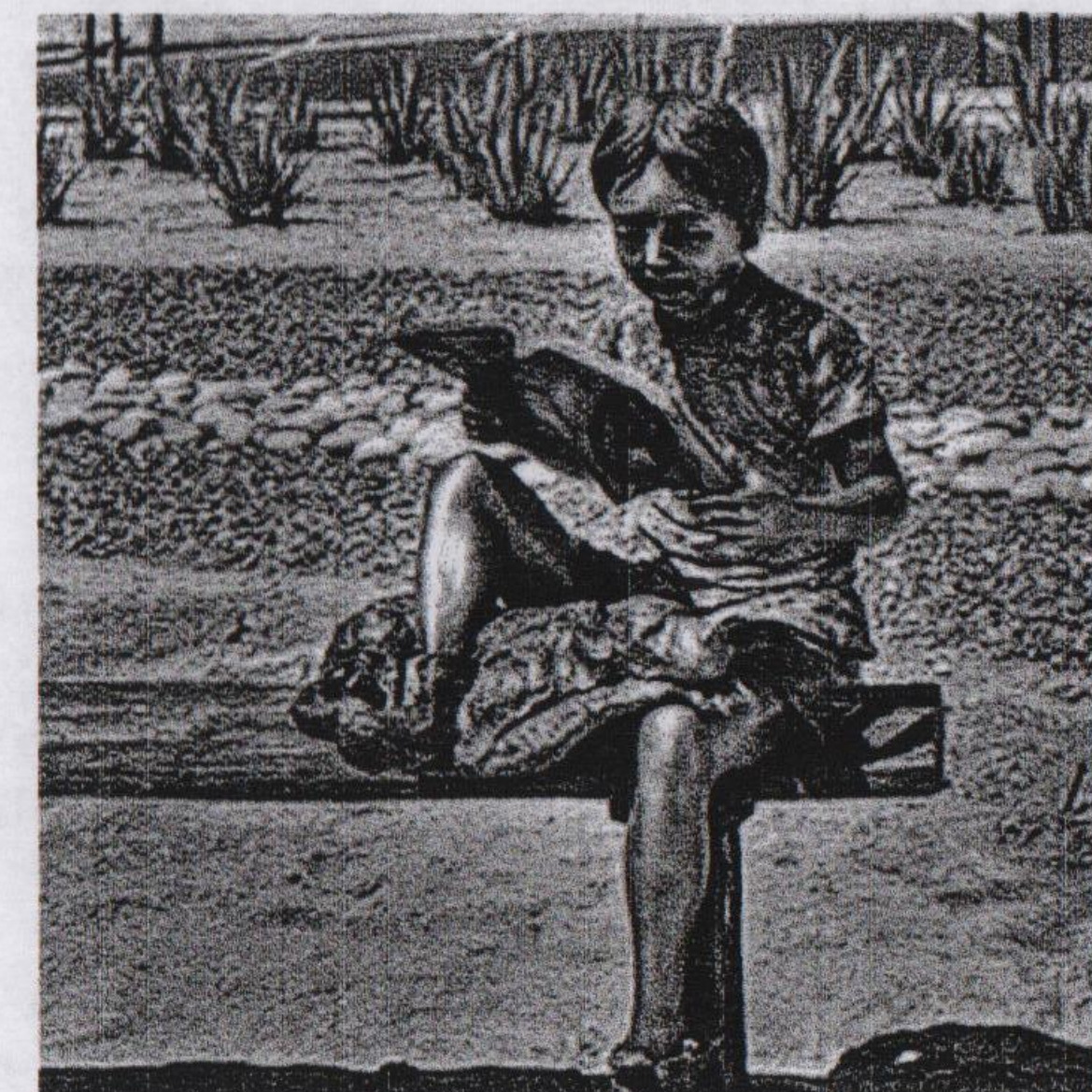
The Zapatistas have recently begun something called The Other Campaign, where they’ve gone from city to city to city to city, have sat in rooms with thousands of people and said, “We are not going to talk, we are going to listen, and we are going to have a discussion and dialogue about what kind of society we want to see.”

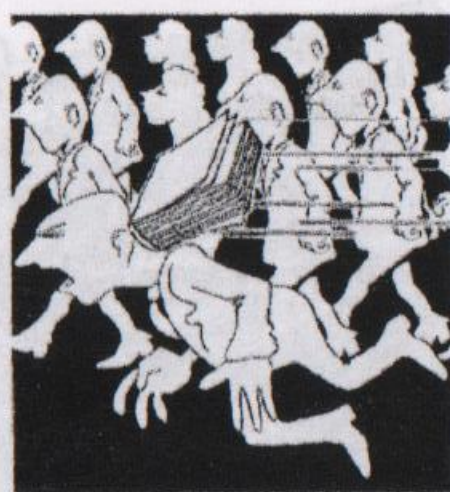
And that, to me, is education for freedom. When we start sitting down and actually talking together and educating each other about the world we each see, the world we each live in, and what kind of different world we want. So it isn’t just that these things happen in small groups, but they can expand and expand and expand out.

Conclusion

I like the idea of deschooling or unschooling, but I was thinking while I was writing this talk that maybe the kind of society I want to see is about *co*-schooling. As hokey as this is, this *co*-schooling would be about schools that happen through community, through collective structures that are also cooperative structures, through structures that are very self-conscious and that try to bring consciousness, and, lastly, that are continuous. *Co*-schooling is about something that happens for all of our lives, everywhere, together, and isn’t something that we put away in a special moment, or in a special building on the other side of town. We need to continually think about how we can bring education into transforming the world and actually make it a better place to live, and a better place to learn from.

Sorry to go on for so long. No, you don’t need to applaud.





Additional Resources

Books

- * *Instead of Education: Ways to help people do things better* - by John Holt
- * *Deschooling Society* - by Ivan Illich
- * *Field Day: Getting society out of school* - by Matt Hern
- * *Reinventing Anarchy, Again* - edited by Howard J. Ehrlich
- * *Utopian Pedagogies: Radical experiments against neoliberal globalization* - edited by Mark Coté, Richard J.F. Day, and Greig de Peuter
- * *Teaching Community: A pedagogy of hope* - by bell hooks
- * *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* - by Paulo Freire
- * *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to quit school & get a real life & education* - by Grace Llewellyn
- * *The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and education in the United States* - by Paul Avrich

Films

- * *Free to Learn: A radical experiment in education*
- * *Living Room: Space and place in infoshop culture*

Links to conference audio

- * David Noble - "Breaking the Rules"
<http://www.archive.org/details/breakingTheRules-DavidNoble>
- * John Taylor Gatto - "Letter to My Granddaughter"
<http://www.archive.org/details/letterToMyGranddaughter-JohnTaylorGatto>
- * Cindy Milstein - "Education for Freedom"
<http://www.archive.org/details/educatingForFreedom-CindyMilstein>
- * The Miss G Project - "12 Million Voices: Intersectionality in Education"
http://www.archive.org/details/12MillionVoicesIntersectionalityInEducation-TheMissG_Project
- * Matt Hern - "Possibility in the Face of Probability"
<http://www.archive.org/details/possibilityInTheFaceOfProbability-MattHern>

EXILE PRESS

EP #1 **UNLEASHING THE IMAGINATION: AN ANARCHIST TOUR OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF CANADA**
BY ALLAN ANTLIFF

EP #2 **Resistance 2010**
by FGA Bloc Ottawa
ISSUE #1

EP #3 **ROCK AGAINST HARPER**
CD / ZINE

EP #4 **UNDER ATTACK!**
The Green Scare and SHAC - Canada

EP #5 **EDUCATING FOR FREEDOM**
A talk by Cindy Milstein

