

Toronto's Anarchist Free School

Theory into Action

Allan Antliff

1999

During last August's Active Resistance gathering (see FE #352, Winter 1999) a discussion group on Community Organizing came up with a proposal to found a free school in Toronto.

I and others were approached to participate in the effort, and before long a core group of about eight people was meeting twice a week to hammer out the logistics. From the start we envisaged the school serving as a center for anarchist organizing and activism.

To that end we resolved to call our organization the Anarchist Free School and to operate along anarchist lines, with a stated commitment to explicitly anarchist educational projects. Since the school got up and running in October, 1998 it has drawn lots of anti-authoritarians out of the woodwork and radicalized many others.

We've publicized the Free School in newspapers and on the radio, established a storefront locale for our classes in downtown Toronto's Kensington Market, and begun bringing in anarchists from the United States and Canada to speak on various issues once a month at our Anarchist Free School Lecture Series (including a recent talk by FE's David Watson).

Open to Anyone

How do we operate? Courses, workshops, and related projects are proposed and discussed at monthly meetings. Once someone commits to preparing and facilitating a course or workshop they set a time for meetings and write up a description to be added to the school's schedule of courses. We publish a new calendar every four months, but courses can be added at any time. Each event is free and open to anyone to participate.

Over the last eight months we've held a variety of courses including Alternative Health Practices; Art, Anarchism, and Culture; Spanish Conversation; Anarchism and Cities; Wild Plants of Toronto; and The Conflict in Chiapas. The goal is to share our respective skills and knowledge without discriminating between the practical and the theoretical in the belief that any sphere that a Free School participant wants to explore merits exploration.

This fosters a type of education that is profoundly anarchistic, since hierarchy is anathema to the learning process and no one assesses, instructs, or profits from it—each and every individual charts his or her own program as he or she sees fit.

One key to the school's success has been its ability to break down' capitalist patterns of generational division which so often undermine the viability of anarchist communities. Where there is such an intergenerational community, as in the Free School, the benefits are certainly tangible.

Great Solidarity Builder

For example, the oldest anarchist in our group has funded the Lecture Series and generously provided us with a rent-free space from which to operate. Others have chipped in with a myriad of skills in carpentry, lock-smithing, communications, poster-making, painting, and publicity. In short, the school has been a great solidarity-builder, quite apart from its educational purpose.

This brings me to the question of theory. At a symposium on anarchism and education held in Lancaster, England last year, and reported in the Autumn 1998 edition of the Green Anarchist journal, there was general agreement that education was crucial for any long-term strategy bent on creating an anarchist society. Participants felt most anarchist movements are drifting from day to day and neglect the role education can play in this regard.

The sort of education that could further anarchism was also a topic of debate, with at least one person denouncing the very idea of schools for their built-in role as a cultural force in which something abstract is imposed to homogenize and control people ideologically. This critic identified schooling with status quo domestication that suppresses instinctive resistance to dehumanization—this resistance being the primitive force dwelling in every child.

Here we have echoes of the 19th-century Russian anarchist Leo Tolstoy, who likewise condemned the school system of his day in favor of more authentic (and therefore liberated) forms of knowledge. However, unlike his Green Anarchist counterpart, Tolstoy clung to the category of culture, arguing that it resided in the creative knowledge of the Russian peasantry, unsullied by imposed learning and deadening indoctrination.

What unites Tolstoy and the Green Anarchist critic is their shared conviction that schooling itself is at the root of oppressive learning. Green Anarchist's anti-educator puts it this way: "Fundamentally schools are about getting people to accept boredom and discipline and the content of what's taught is pretty incidental to this. We're indebted to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* for pointing out that modern schooling came from the same organizational principles as modern prisons, factories, and military organization."

Fair enough, but we also know that Tolstoy's unschooled "learning-by-doing" peasantry perpetuated oppressive social relations. In fact, Green Anarchist's critic is careful to note that non-schooling is no guarantee of escaping anti-libertarian influences.

The resolution of this issue, as I see it, is to initiate a learning process that fuses anarchist content with anarchist practice. An anarchist education, after all, should strive to reach beyond educational parameters because its ultimate goal is the liberation of society. Toronto's Anarchist Free School is a step in that direction.

Contact the Free School at yolel@yahoo.com.

For further reading see:

Joel Spring, *A Primer of Libertarian Education*, and Russian novelist Maxim Gorky's autobiography of his 19th-century peasant upbringing—*My Childhood, My Apprenticeship, My Universities*.

fifth Estate

Allan Antliff
Toronto's Anarchist Free School
Theory into Action
1999

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/353-summer-1999/torontos-anarchist-free-school>
Fifth Estate #353, Summer, 1999

[fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fiftheestate.org)