

# On (anarchist) Education

(in a world of many worlds)

brush

2004

“Education passes on more than knowledge—it transmits the lore, beliefs, customs, values, rites, and ceremonies that shape a society and govern its functioning. In short, education transmits culture.”

—Randy Bass

We know what culture modern schools reproduce: Empire. Schools are prison-factories, churning out producer-consumers from alpha to epsilon, bastions of patriarchy. The institutionalized authority (as truth and discipline) of “teacher says”: the violent stewing chauvinism of clique and posse, the age-stratified, passive aggressive coercion to conformity. And of course, they are boot camps for capitalism, for learning to repress unmediated human desires (for love and play and learning) to work mindlessly (“for your own good”) under the pallid urging of those damned abstractions through which capital rationalizes life so that grades, with time, become money.

But as anarchists and rebels, as anti-authoritarians building a new world, what is our relationship with the transmission of culture?

Certain answers are familiar. Free schools and unschooling make learners the center of decision-making and motivation, facilitating healthier, smarter, and more autonomous people. These are crucially important; but are they everything? After all, as proponents consistently remind us, such education is so effective at transmitting the dominant culture that many self-directed learners ultimately become “successful” members of the Ivy League-trained upper classes. Why?

Sometimes, I think, we forget that what we learn is as important as how we learn. Our focus on the means by which education transmits culture often obscures the importance of which culture is being reproduced. To understand reproducing freedom, then, let’s look more closely at culture itself

## the nature of culture

It is by culture that we become human and conscious; we cannot exist outside our social relations. Not only how we sing and dress, work and eat is organized by culture, but how we see, understand, and value each other and the world. In the deepest ways, who we are depends on these modes of psycho-social reproduction.

And, because cultures vary so greatly over time and space, so does human nature—that is perhaps our species’ most distinctive characteristic. Within some cultures, people are so strongly interwoven with kin and homeland that individual lives are experienced as secondary to collective life or the life of the land. In such communities, freedom may be defined more as autonomy from external control than as individuals’ rights to deviate from tradition. Indeed, traditions may be considered prerequisite for such freedom; consider those that maintain viable independent subsistence over time by inculcating ecological wisdom.

Our own society provides a deep contrast. The world has seen many ebbs and flows of tribe and empire, but we inhabit the late history of the greatest Empire the world has ever seen. Brought together by Christianity, fueled by capitalism, and maintained by white supremacy, swarming settlers from the shores of Europe and their sciences of domination established the sovereignty of their modes of social reproduction over almost everyone and everything on the planet.

In our cultural world, then, thousands of formerly autonomous cultures and complex local worlds have been conquered, converted, and cajoled into the corrosive universal solvent of commodification and the market. By now, we inhabit a vast post-modern sea of incompletely digested identities and reactionary fundamentalisms. Freedom, here, is the right of the individual not to be bound by the mores of our fore-bearers, the right to be atomized political, economic actors. But this freedom ironically demands enforcement of its legally-constructed balances of power; indeed, it assumes the sovereignty of Empire.

I think we need to open our understanding of freedom to the multiplicity of scales of psychosocial reproduction: from fractured identities within an individual, through families and collectives, communities of a thousand kinds, (neo)tribes and post-states, and the entire social globe.

So, from Buddhist sanghas attempting personal liberation in the enlightened release of all attachment, to punk scenes sharing styles of Empire-defiance written in the body, to Zapatista encuentros calling upon our many communities to learn an indigenous hospitality, freedom becomes a richly articulated interplay between levels of being that we can grow—in ourselves and our children. But how?

## **a world of many worlds**

Social movements around the world point towards new kinds of liberatory culture. We recognize ourselves in our great No! to the globalization of Empire; but I think our movement of movements, our embryonic world of many worlds, is described more deeply by our halting, partial Yeses. As constructed communities finding ways to undermine and avoid the disciplines of imperial reproduction, we tear asunder the political-economic universalism that underlies imperial “multiculturalism” In its place, we find ourselves building local communal autonomy, in solidarity with the indigenous. In the Zapatista imperative: “You will no longer be you, now you are us!”

To transform the world, to become the death of Empire, we must build coherence and cooperation without undermining differences. We must weave every fragment and moment, every commune and collective, reproducing liberation into rich interarticulation.

This is true for organizing reasons, so that without central authority we can coherently act to undermine Empire, defend rebellious spaces, and transfer our economic life out of capitalism and into mutual aid. But it’s also true for liberation itself: if freedom is not to be confined within the limited horizons of isolated groups, then it will comprise the ability, first, to choose specific communities, and second, to influence and intertwine them so richly that self and collective become a resonant mutual constitution open to inspiration and spontaneity, wisdom and experience.

This is the multitude: small, decentralized communities woven into coherence by many local, overlapping liaisons between (virtual, ideological, geographical) neighbors, through which flow (partial) communication, coordination, and consensus. From this perspective, the revolution is not a process of transforming the existing society, even radically, but of learning from each other ways to grow our social relations evermore independent of the Empire, so that it is dismembered: in a word, rebellion.

## **rebellion: freely learning freedom**

If our new world of many worlds is to be free, we must effectively reproduce freedom. This, I believe, is the task of truly anarchist education. No matter the autonomy of the process of self-directed learning, a child is always educated into a particular culture. A simple example: traditional Inuit education is often invoked to exemplify learner-direction and freedom. Young Inuits (we are told) play and wander, observing adults and their activities,

free to apprentice with whomever they choose. Expertise is developed in particular areas (shamanism, preparing food, hunting) as young people gravitate to the role they relish most. This is a powerful model, of a village-raising a child, that I think we would do well to emulate; but it should be clear that no matter how free the child, she became an Inuk.

Firstly: approaches that naturalize the skills, values, and knowledges of imperial culture will tend to reproduce Empire, no matter how learner-directed. Secondly: to grow our nascent autonomous spaces into a full parallel political economy capable of absorbing multitudes into decentralized and relatively autonomous communities, we should focus on developing educational structures that effectively transmit our cultures of freedom. For newcomers, for our children, for ourselves, such foci of social reproduction will allow us to gather and share our collective wisdoms in ways that reinforce practices of liberatory organizing. Moreover, a plural multitude requires making strong horizontal relations between communities a key educational value. This means not simply a liberal tolerance of minorities, but reproducing world-views in which incompatible belief systems are recognized as autonomously legitimate. We will mine our various traditions to find stories, values, and skills that build listening and respect across difference. Rather than prepackaged documentaries on exotic peoples, radical education will emphasize immersion in the many cultures that make up our local and global rebellions. Thus, we educate for liberation, providing tools for social agency by which individuals can work together with respect and openness to change the reproduction of their lives.

Finally, we must recognize our power as infectious agents disrupting and subverting the lines of imperial discipline with our contagious liberation. This is not to deny the obvious danger of the mechanisms of glittering imperial psycho-manipulation so visible in advertising, media, and academia. But the critical skills and systems knowledge that allow us to observe the shiny trinkets of bourgeois desire with disdain, can be learned.

Though for the foreseeable future there will be rebel children attending public school, such engagement need be neither drudgery nor trap, but a subversive opportunity to organize learning for liberation. Indeed, once the spell of bourgeois certainty is broken, many fragments of subversive wisdom or useful skill can be cannibalized from the monstrous edifice of Western knowledge. An example is the quote at the beginning of this article, from a Georgetown academic. While he may never use “education transmits culture” to criticize the role mainstream schooling plays in reproducing Empire, the insight is useful for us when we reinscribe it into our own radical context.

Despite the academicians, even bourgeois education can awaken the soul (with a little help from our friends) to the lifelong journey for a world of many worlds of liberation. And aroused, aware, our education becomes rebellion!

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