Toronto’s Free School

It Takes A Community

Megan Kinch

2013

Anarchist experiments in education in the Toronto area reflect a history of brief spaces carved out from commercialism, of flowerings of liberation followed by the seeds of the next project to emerge.

Experiments in popular education or free schools have often co-existed with experiments in collective living, and have also been tied to particular waves of activism, following radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire’s theories that liberation education only works when tied to a project of human liberation in general. Anarchist movements in urban areas, like Toronto and nearby cities, thrive in spaces at once marginal and central, and freeschools have emerged along with them.

Some of these projects still live, others have passed on. Anarchist spaces are often temporary, falling slowly to gentrification, eviction or quickly to police repression. If the free schools have also been temporary, they are also signposts pointing to the possibility of the future.

Kalin Stacey, associated with recent freeschool projects in Toronto, connected the idea of physical space and organizing space: “One of the things that’s really critical for a freeschool is that it’s both a decentralized and learning project, but also a community building project.

The best scenario for an established freeschool that sticks around is to have a radical community centre/social space, autonomous space that also is sustainable and can provide a meeting place. That’s something the anarchist free school that happened in the late ‘90s in Kensington had that made it really effective. And, when they lost the space, they lost the school.”

A tucked away multi-cultural neighborhood of Toronto, Kensington Market had been home in the 1980s to anarchist-influenced punks who fought legendary battles with neo-nazis, often organizing by word of mouth from their base in the market. In the 1990s, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty fought militant anti-gentrification battles across the city.

Along with this heightened level of political struggle, the anarchist scene also flourished in Kensington, with anarchists bookstores and spaces such as Who’s Emma, Uprising, and the Anarchist Free Space, where the Anarchist Free School met. The school faltered, but was quickly re-born as the Anarchist Free University (AFU), one of Toronto’s longest-running anarchist projects.

Illogik, (half of the anarchist rap group, Test Their Logik) was involved in the early 2000s, and says, “The AFU was amazing vibrant when I first got involved; multiple classes each semester, lot of attendance. The AFU led me to Uprising [bookstore] and then to a now-defunct collective house which all spawned many different activities. It got me plugged into the community and once in, the vehicle that got me there was less important.”

Maggie, an AFU organizer, noted that freeschool theory needed to be adapted to an urban North American context. She says,

> Friere saw peasants and landowners as the crux of power, it’s definitely a different thing when its in a society where there’s a more urgent understanding of what’s wrong which I think is sometimes lacking in north America.

The AFU, which at one point shared a house with Bike Pirates (a radical bike collective), eventually became homeless. Poor and working class people in Kensington began to lose their battles with gentrification, and high rents meant collectives had trouble keeping infoshops or punk venues open. Anarchism went a bit further underground. Without a geographical space or a strong activist movement, the AFU stagnated along with the dispersed anarchist scene in general.

Although the AFU was decentralized and a bit amorphous, one of the central and persisting figures was a mysterious figure known to everyone as Possum. Science fiction author and blogger, Cory Doctorow described him as the "epitome of happy mutanthood."

A founding member of the AFU, Erik "Possum" Stewart also lived in two important collective houses associated with the free "U." He often preferred to help set up the structure for an open self-regulating system and do the low level maintenance, often in subtle ways helping consensus work or nudging things along, keeping spaces like the Anarchist "U" running.

You could have a deep theoretical conversation about any number of topics with Possum, but never know basic things about him like what he did for a living. It turned out he'd attended an alternative high school called SEED in downtown Toronto, but rejected his diploma in a statement against formalized education. Sadly, this summer, Possum was found dead by his roommates; an autopsy showed that he had a cerebral hemorrhage in his sleep.

New waves of anarchism would arise not out of Toronto itself but from developing scenes in the smaller cities nearby. In Hamilton, an industrial city located an hour to the south-west, a new FreeSkool project was taking off. Peter, one of the founders, told me: "We borrowed the broad concept of FreeSkool, but made up all the details on our own." The project invented its own structure, more organized than the AFU, involving a consensus-based collective of four committed organizers serving 8-month overlapping terms.

The Hamilton Freeskool also followed Freire's model of education in connecting courses to praxis, such as the "Radical Practical Solidarity" course that did indigenous solidarity work with the nearby Six Nations of the Grand River, Canada's largest First Nation. Also in line with his model of teaching skills needed for revolutionary organizing was an emphasis on practical skills like language learning.

Niki Thorne wrote her masters thesis on the project, and writes how burn-out from a three-month militant winter strike at Toronto's York University in 2008/2009 was transformed into excitement at the community building possibilities at the Hamilton freeschool.

"In contrast to my terrible strike experience," she writes, "FreeSkool, for me, has always been this warm welcoming inspiring space, a community of caring and creative people, and an example of the concrete beautiful projects and initiatives that we can build out of our ideas and ideals. FreeSkool represents creativity and community, and is part of building the kind of world we want to live in."

Toronto anarchists came together with their comrades from other cities during the 2010 G20 protest there, and brought their slightly different freeschool projects with them. An AFU media course created a team which produced a high-quality independent film of the mobilization, "Tales from the G20." A freeschool on the Hamilton model, The Toronto Free School, ran for a year or so in the post-G20 period, but faltered because organizing became increasingly centered on defending those arrested in the actions and prisoner support.

In 2011, when Occupy erupted, the continuing popular outrage at police actions during G20 meant that Toronto had a bit more space from state repression than in other cities. The encampment at St. James Park, with its many trees and rolling hills, resembled a kind of anachronistic medieval village, but with electrified committee tents, which were joined by three beautiful Yurts.

Occupy Toronto collectively decided that it should provide food and tents to all, and became a self-organized community service as well as a protest. Unfortunately, the General Assemblies, the decision making bodies for Occupy, were particularly non-functional and were associated with numerous incidents of aggression and violence. In such an environment, it was especially important to create an education project that was embedded in the communal living, semi-intentional community that was set up by Occupy Toronto.

Kalin, who had been part of the post-G20 free school, helped set up the infrastructure along with a few other experienced organizers, so that Occupy Freeschool was established in such a way that once it was up and running it was mainly self-sustaining. People simply scheduled classes daily on a whiteboard leaning on the side of the dedicated tent. Many classes went along with organizing projects at Occupy, such as the recurring class on Anar-

chist Communism that was attended by many of the people involved in community safety in the camp, lending a theoretical basis to the practical work of keeping people as safe and free as possible.

Non-anarchists also appreciated the open structure, setting up courses on recycled paper arts, gardening, and even Marxism. Kalin told me the Occupy Free School, "definitely planted some seeds of interest in that type of education project."

The free education framework persisted even once the camp was evicted although the Occupy community fell apart in exile. Now run by people who learned about freeschools experientially, the Free'scool now meets in a downtown park on Sundays, creating a temporary physical space and evoking memories of the Occupy encampment.

Roxy, one of the new organizers with the Occupy Free School says, "We desperately need education that is free for the development of the individual personality. This means education that is culturally relevant, and teaches peace and self-determination."

Illogik says, "Occupy built something that crashed against the walls of the state and then receded;" words that apply in general to anarchist organizing and educational projects in Toronto.

Organically connected with the anti-authoritarian organizing scenes in the city, liberation education has risen and fallen with the tide of militancy in the city. Wresting physical and organization space from capitalism for the projects we need is a difficult task, but it's one that has to be done as we move forward.

We can't always fight the system head on. We also have to build the systems that sustain ourselves and our struggles as we move out of the margins to really challenge capitalism and the state.

Megan Kinch came to anarchism through the Hamilton Freeschool, and was involved with the AFU, the Toronto Free School, and Occupy Freeschool. She is currently involved in building up people's media organizations and is an editor with the Toronto Media Co-op.

fifth estate

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https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/388-winter-2013/torontos-free-school
Fifth Estate #388, Winter, 2013

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net