

CHAPTER 7

Spaces of Learning: The Anarchist Free Skool

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Social theorist Michel Foucault used the occasion of his 1967 lecture, “Of Other Spaces,” to introduce a term that would remain generally overlooked within his expansive body of work, the notion of the “heterotopia,” by which he meant a countersite or alternative space, something of an actually existing utopia. In contrast to the nowhere lands of utopias, heterotopias are located in the here-and-now of present-day reality, though they challenge and subvert that reality. The heterotopias are spaces of difference. Among the examples Foucault noted were sacred and forbidden spaces which are sites of personal transition.

Decades later, Foucault’s notion of heterotopias would be echoed by the anarchist writer Peter Lamborn Wilson. Published in 1985 under the pen name Hakim Bey, the book *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* would become an almost instant contemporary anarchist classic. In *T.A.Z.* Wilson/Bey outlines, in often exhilarating flourishes, a lively version of anarchist heterotopias. These anarchist heterotopias, now called TAZ, are the anarchist society in miniature. In them structures of authority are suspended, replaced by relations of conviviality, gift-sharing, and celebration. They are living embodiments of what the anarchist Peter Kropotkin termed “mutual aid.” And they exist, not in a postrevolutionary future of in the distance, but right here, right now.

While Bey’s work put forward some unique visions, and did so in often-provocative language engendering a fair bit of controversy within anarchist circles, what he calls TAZ, or something very close to them, have always been part of anarchist culture and politics, as well as the culture and politics of the working classes and oppressed more generally. These have been, in other

contexts, infrastructures of resistance (Shantz, 2009). To mention only a few examples, one might make note of the culturally vital and politically raucous Wobbly union halls of the 1910s and 1920s, the revolutionary community centers of Barcelona during the Spanish Revolution in the 1930s and the variety of squatted cultural centers of Europe from the 1960s to the present. Indeed Wilson/Bey's inspiration is drawn explicitly from the diversity of heterotopias and intentional communities of history, including pirate utopias, the Munich Soviet of 1919, Paris 1968, autonomist uprisings in Italy during the 1970s, and the radical ecology camps of the 1980s and 1990s.

Over the last two decades, whether aware of this history or not, many young anarchists, punks and artists took Bey's message to heart, building a host of community centers, infoshops, and free spaces in cities across North America, including Toronto. These spaces were intended as something a bit more permanent than the temporary autonomous zone. Envisioned as permanent autonomous zones, or at least potentially durable ones, these anarchist spaces have provided support structures for oppositional cultures, infrastructures of resistance. They have formed crucial aspects of the broader do-it-yourself (DIY) movements which provide alternative cultural and economic infrastructures in music, publishing, video, radio, food, and, significantly, education. Anarchist heterotopias provide important sites for skills development, for learning and practicing those skills which are undeveloped in authoritarian social relations.

Their existence allows for some autonomy from the markets of capital, some freedom from the restrictions of mainstream education. Their *ethos* runs counter to capitalist consumerism: play rather than work, gifts rather than commodities, needs rather than profits. For participants, they provide the imaginal, if not the material, means for undermining state and capital relations and authorities both ideological and structural. Practice often settles for something much less than that.

Contemporary anarchist heterotopias are not to be confused with the intentional or "drop-out" communities that have emerged at various points in North America, most recently the countercultural communes in the 1960s and 1970s. Contemporary anarchists are less interested in dropping out, preferring to build alternatives in alliance with people involved in more mainstream projects rooted in the day-to-day experiences of poor and working-class people. Anarchist heterotopias today are most likely to be located in urban neighborhoods and open and accessible to community involvement, rather than the arcadian spaces of isolated rural communes.

The following provides a glimpse into one such heterotopia, the Anarchist Free Space and Free Skool (AFS). Hopefully the images reveal both the promise and problems that people face while trying to create room for education outside of the confining structures of the permitted. These are

experiences of collaborative learning over several years bridging classrooms and communities, particularly marginalized communities, to highlight opportunities for critically engaged teaching and learning. Through participatory approaches bringing students and street involved people together in contexts in which people are simultaneously teachers and learners these efforts contributed to a teaching/learning praxis informed by critical pedagogy and antiauthoritarian social perspectives contributing to empowerment for learners and communities. Along the way participants tried to effect positive changes in themselves, the skool, and the community.

Anarchy and Education

For anarchists, learning should help people to free themselves and encourage them to change the world in which they live. As Joel Spring (1998, p. 145) suggests: “[E]ducation can mean gaining knowledge and ability by which one can transform the world and maximize individual autonomy.” Anarchist pedagogy aims toward developing and encouraging new forms of socialization, social interaction, and the sharing of ideas in ways that might initiate and sustain nonauthoritarian practices and ways of relating. At the same time it is hoped that such pedagogical practices might contribute to revolutionary changes in people’s perspectives on society, encouraging broader social changes.

Anarchists seek freedom from internalized authority and ideological domination. “In the modern state, laws were internalized within the individual, so that ‘freedom’ merely meant the freedom to obey the laws that one had been taught to believe” (Spring, 1998, p. 40). Internalization of the laws through socialization in school has been viewed as a means to end disobedience and rebellion. Freedom is freedom from *direct* control of the state but only if one acts according to the laws of the state (Spring, 1998).

The protoanarchist Max Stirner referred to the thought that one could not get rid of, the thought that owned the individual, as “wheels in the head.” Such thought controlled the will and used the individual, rather than being used by the individual (Stirner). What Stirner called “the ownership of the self” meant the elimination of wheels in the head. Stirner distinguished between the educated and the free. For the educated person, knowledge shaped character. It was a wheel in the head that allowed the individual to be possessed by the authority of the church or the state. For the free one, on the other hand, knowledge facilitated choice, awakened freedom. With the idea of freedom awakened within them: “the freemen will incessantly go on to free themselves; if on the contrary, one only educates them, then they will at all times accommodate themselves to circumstances in the most highly educated and elegant manner and degenerate into subservient, cringing souls” (Stirner, 1967, p. 23). For the free, knowledge is a source of greater choice

rather than a *determiner* of choice (Spring, 1998, p. 39). Ideas, as wheels in the head, subject people to the ideas themselves. Domination does not refer only to the internalization of ideologies that refer to sacrifice for supposed needs of society, external to the individual. It also refers to moral imperatives that capture a person's creative capacities.

There were two levels of wheels in the head. The first levelled people through everyday life. One went to church and paid taxes because that was what one was taught; that was the way one lived. On the second level were *ideals*—ideals that move people to sacrifice themselves for the good of the fatherland, that made them try to be Christ-like, ideals that led them to give up what they were for some unrealizable goal. It was this realm of ideals upon which the strength of the Church and State was built. Patriotism and religious fervor were the results of people being possessed by ideals. (Spring, 1998, pp. 40-41)

Stirner objected to notions of “political liberty” because it only spoke of the freedom of institutions and of ideology. Political liberty “means that the polis, the State, is free; freedom of religion that religion is free, as freedom of conscience signifies that conscience is free; not therefore that I am free from the State, from religion, from conscience, or that I am rid of them” (Stirner, 1963, pp. 106-7). This perspective proved profoundly influential for a range of Free Skool participants, as it has for anarchist educators for decades.

The free school movement finds its inspiration in the anarchist Modern School movement begun by Francisco Ferrer in Spain. The free school movement emerged in the 1950s and spread through the 1960s as an effort to develop alternative forms of education and self-development in a context that was considered increasingly alienating, rationalized, and industrial. Anarchists were actively involved in the free school movement and their involvement is seen as crucial to the antiauthoritarian character and direction of the movement. Free schools were viewed as “an oasis from authoritarian control and as a means of passing on the knowledge to be free” (Spring, 1998, p. 55). Indeed, one of the principle proponents of the free school movement was the best-known anarchist in the United States, Paul Goodman, whose works were widely read and discussed during the 1960s and 1970s. Notably, contemporary anarchist activists have rediscovered Goodman's works through recent emerging movements. Free schools were, for Goodman, part of a broader decentralization and de-bureaucratization of social institutions. Goodman argued that schooling had become a process of grading and certification that largely benefited industrial elites who gained trained, and largely obedient, personnel. Education had become more and more geared toward perceived labor market demands. For Goodman (1966, p. 57): “This means, in effect that a few great corporations are getting the benefit of an

enormous weeding out and selective process—all children are fed into the mill and everybody pays for it.” In response Goodman argued for the development of small-scale schools or minischools in urban centers. Through participatory involvement and decentralization, these minischools could allow for direction according to the needs and desires of students and the communities and neighborhoods in which the schools were situated. Goodman also suggested that “in some cases schools could dispense with their classes and use streets, stores, museums, movies and factories as places of learning” (Spring, 1998, p. 56). Indeed Anarchist Free Skool participants pursued such an approach regularly holding classes on the sidewalks in Kensington Market. On other occasions classes were held in laundromats, nearby parks, and at picket lines where workers were on strike.

The Anarchist Free Skool

The Anarchist Free Space and Free Skool (AFS) was begun in April 1999 by artists and activists who had organized a fairly lively freeschool at a soon-to-be-closed hangout, the Community Cafe. When the Cafe shut down some of the freeschool participants, looking to keep things going, set up shop in a roomy storefront location in Kensington Market, a multicultural, historically working-class neighborhood in downtown Toronto.

The Free Space was intended as a venue for committed anarchists, novices, and nonanarchists alike to come together and share ideas about the prospects, difficulties, and strategies for creating new, antiauthoritarian social relations. The primary vehicle for this was an ambitious schedule of classes on diverse issues. The hopefulness of the new collective was expressed in a statement on the front page of its course calendar.

Education is a political act. By deepening our knowledge of ourselves and the world around us, sharing skills and exchanging experiences in an egalitarian, non-hierarchical setting free of prejudice, we challenge disempowering habits and broaden our awareness of alternatives to the inequalities of a capitalist society. The Anarchist Free School is a counter-community dedicated to effecting social change through the application of anarchist principles in every sphere of life. This Space represents and opportunity for the community at large to come together and explore these alternatives. The Anarchist Free Space welcomes all applications for use of the Space.

Courses reflected the desire for openness—they weren’t all about anarchists talking to anarchists about anarchy (though a few of them were just that). Some of the courses included “Love Songs of the 20s and 30s,” “Street Art,” “Understanding Violence Against Women” and “Alternative Economics.” Not just the mind but the body was taken care of in a yoga class and in

shiatsu workshops. For most of the year at least one class was running every weekday evening. Far and away the most successful and long-running were "Introduction to Anarchism" and "Class Struggle Anarchism, Syndicalism and Libertarian Socialism" (See Appendix).

For me, some of the most interesting courses weren't courses at all but more like events. Every Tuesday at 9:23 p.m. sharp the International Bureau of Recordist Investigation gathered for excursions in their particular type of mayhem. The Recordists promised and often delivered "A weekly meeting, open to those with an interest in Recordism, Surrealism, and other currents of the Fantastic and the Absurd in contemporary art and culture (and spirituality, and politics, etc., etc.), for the exploration of those topics via discussion, presentations, game-playing and other collective activities, and general nonsense and tom-foolery." One Recordist evening consisted entirely of a fellow cutting his way out of a cardboard box. Eyebrows were raised throughout the space when one of the Recordists' mummies turned up in the basement. The mummy proved popular, however, eventually garnering its own wardrobe and securing a privileged place in the front window.

Another interesting event-class was the ponderously titled and sadly short-lived "Drifting as Foundation for a Unitary Urbanism." Inspired by the Situationists' *dérive* (or creating spontaneous pathways through the city), "The Drift," as it became known, brought people together to wander through the nighttime city exploring the hidden, unseen, out-of-the-way places of an alter-Toronto.

In addition to classes the AFS tried to revive the anarchist salon tradition. As the course booklet noted: "Salons have a colourful history throughout the world and in particular within Anarchist Communities. Salons are intentional conversational forums where people engage in passionate discourse about what they think is important." At the AFS the third Friday of every month was reserved for lively discussions on various topics decided upon by participants. Often the salons included a potluck dinner and performance. By all accounts the salons were enjoyable and engaging affairs drawing upwards of forty people.

Other memorable happenings ranging from the wacky to the profound included the infamous Satanic Ritual Party which brought the cops and almost made one of our pagan members quit; the Go Guerrilla performances and zine launch; a couple afternoon punk shows organized after Emma closed; and (on the profound side) the Books to Prisoners poetry readings by ex-lifer John Rives.

Some projects never did come together and others suffered a lack of attention. The lending library suffered regular neglect as no one seemed interested in taking care of it. Eventually it fell into complete disrepair. A proposed free table for used goods never really got started. Neither did the

Revolutionary Anarchist Bowling League (RABL). More positively Anti-Racist Action and the Toronto Video Activist Collective (TVAC) continue to make use of the space for meetings and video showings. Others such as Food Not Bombs and the Recordists pulled out before dissolving completely.

Free Skool participants openly acknowledged the example of the anarchist educator Francisco Ferrer who suggested that radical pedagogy should question and challenge the traditional or habitual practices that sustain existing social structures (Ferrer, 1913). Courses emphasized the capacities of people to act and shape society's direction, starting with local environs in which they lived, worked and learned. The anarchist Paul Goodman argued that, within free schools, "The use of certified teachers could be dispensed with and people like the druggist, the storekeeper, and the factory worker could be used as teachers" (Spring, 1998, p. 56). The participants at the Anarchist Free Skool pursued such an approach. In place of instructors who presented information in a unilateral fashion, with a dominant voice, classes involved AFS members who acted as facilitators, taking responsibility to photocopy and make readings available, and ensuring that the space was available and open and people welcomed. Given their initial familiarity with anarchist ideas and texts they helped to fill gaps in knowledge, particularly about specific practices, theories, or histories, where possible and necessary or to suggest texts for future reading. Often new students would ask specific questions about how anarchists had handled particular issues, such as justice or punishment, historically. Typically, responsibility for introducing a topic rotated through the class participants according to their personal interests or availability as they volunteered to take responsibility for specific readings or weekly topics. Following a brief introduction to the readings or cases, classes were opened up to a loosely structured discussion based on individual and collective readings of the topic.

Even more, within Free Skool classes and meetings, anarchists tried to develop active listening, respectful debate and productive disagreement, in a context that recognizes the harm done to many "students" by their previous negative experiences in mainstream schools. Punctuality, passivity, and obedience were in no way promoted at the AFS. Emphasis was on training for community action and the development of critical social consciousness. Some even identified the structures and pace of modern urban environments themselves as barriers to learning.

Organizers realized that there are many barriers people face to free and independent learning. They emphasized efforts to break dependency and inhibition within the learning process. The anarchist Emma Goldman criticized approaches to learning that emphasized the actions of rulers, elites, and governments. Such an approach, still too common today, conditions people to accept a society in which the majority of people are passive,

expecting groups of leaders to direct events. Such approaches typically reinforce authoritarian institutions. Anarchist Free Skool participants saw the impacts of such teaching first-hand. In initial meetings of classes nonanarchist participants often expressed an acceptance of social stratification or presented a view that elites were entitled to the unequal social rewards they received. One of the common responses was that they had “more important jobs” or “greater responsibilities.” The Anarchist Free Skool classes provided an important opportunity to discuss such questions in a constructive and respectful manner. Anarchists noted that often the most important jobs, such as garbage pickup, were least rewarded. Similarly, work with the most responsibility, such as mothering, was not rewarded monetarily at all. Caring work, such as early childhood education and nursing, was not rewarded in terms of status and was often underrewarded monetarily, relative to the work’s importance.

For anarchists, learning should contribute to independence of thought and action and contribute to capacities for self-determination. In the view of Free Skool participants, it is always important to avoid ideological approaches to learning. Anarchist ideas should be subjected to lively criticism and revision like any other ideas. Debate should always be open and welcomed within anarchist spaces. Dogmatic insistence on the rightness of particular theories or ideas must be avoided and tendencies to dogma actively undermined.

Anarchists at the Free Skool did not view the space as a place to indoctrinate or spread a particular ideology. Such an approach would be bound to fail anyway, and furthermore it would contravene participants’ principles of anarchism and antiauthoritarianism. Education should support people in freeing themselves from social dogma and encourage their efforts to change social structures and social relations positively. Rather different varieties of anarchism and other streams of radical thought were presented for debate, discussion and appraisal. Hidden histories of resistance and alternative social organizations were explored.

Classes enjoyed participation from around five to thirty people. Gender was mixed with the proportion of men, women, and transgender participants varying by class. Similarly classes were facilitated by men and women in roughly equal proportion. The AFS was quite successful in overcoming the generational divisions that afflict many activist groups, particularly some of the direct action groups of the alternative globalization movement. The Free Skool provided a space in which children as young as a few months old played while folks in their eighties debated and shared jokes. Participants in classes ranged widely in age, with classes generally enjoying involvement from a range including late teenagers to sixty- and seventy-year olds.

In addition to classes, the Free Skool also served as an information center in which books and other media were available on loan to community

members. More than simply offering courses on alternative and independent media, the Free Skool made cameras and movie-editing equipment available for community movie making. Experimental filmmaker Kika Thorne brought equipment for editing Super 8 film and showed anyone who was interested how to use it.

This was all part of the broader emphasis on skill-sharing. People registered their various skills with the Free Skool so those seeking to learn specific skills could easily contact someone willing to share information and experiences. Larger workshops were regularly held on specific topics, skills, and activities including zine-making, guitar, art, knitting, cooking, and gardening. Sessions were also provided on self-defense. Reflecting holistic approaches to health, classes, and workshops were provided on nutrition, first aid, and basic health care.

“Class” Organizing

Libertarian or anarchist approaches to education emphasize participatory involvement, consensual practices and relations and the limiting of stratifications based on expertise or experience (Spring, 1998). At the Free Skool the educational emphasis was on learning for social justice, learning as social justice. This was not an academic or even purely intellectual pursuit but rather a holistic approach to education in and as practice. For participants learning was geared toward positive social as well as personal transformation. Learners who were also teachers had a commitment to use their opportunities and resources, collective practice, knowledge, to contribute to the betterment of particularly poor communities. The Free Skool encouragement of social justice was not limited to the radical content of courses but as expressed as much in the structure and practice of courses and the space more broadly. In particular this included consensus-based decision-making processes and participatory practices in which learners guided the direction of courses and the space itself.

Anarchists emphasize the school as a site of political, cultural, social, and economic power. Schooling instills a respect for authority and builds a habitual deference and adherence to the laws of the land. In the words of one of the directors of the anarchist Modern School movement in New Jersey in the 1920s, “From the moment the child enters the public school he is trained to submit to authority, to do the will of others as a matter of course, until the result that habits of mind are formed which in adult life are all to the advantage of the ruling class” (Kelly, 1925, p. 115). Criticisms of the government-based public school system include its nationalistic emphasis (with anthems to start school days and flags on buildings and images of presidents or monarchs in every room. Also of concern is training for the demands of the labor market and industrial system rather than for critical analysis or

engaged “citizenship.” It is part of organizing more broadly against patriotism and moral regulation within society as well as school systems.

Anarchists, like other radical education theorists, raise concerns about ways in which traditional schooling trains people to accept work that is monotonous, boring, or without personal satisfaction (Spring, 1998, p. 14). There is great, and growing, pressure from policymakers, government officials, bureaucrats, and corporate leaders to direct all education toward the fulfillment of perceived or anticipated demands of the labor market. Education is viewed primarily, or even solely, as career preparation. Learning is placed in the service of a future social role and preparation for that role. As Spring (1998, p. 146) notes: “Knowledge is not presented as a means of understanding and critically analysing social and economic forces but as a means of subservience to the social structure.”

Not simply an abstract or philosophical concern, Free Skool participants were critical of the neoliberal education policies of their own province, which shifted the emphasis of education toward training geared to the labor market almost exclusively. The Ontario government at the time the Free Skool opened had recently legislated the requirement that university programs justify funding on the basis of the employment success of graduates. It forced programs to justify their existence on the basis of vague references to employability. This employability proof shifted emphasis in programs away from critical analysis toward supposedly practical considerations. Sociology programs, for example, shifted from critical theory or social movement studies toward supposedly more marketable areas such as criminology and family studies.

Another concern of anarchists is the contribution of educational discourses to the myth of social mobility within stratified capitalist social relations. Within these popular discourses, educational credentials are uncritically accepted as a basis, even *the* basis, for social rewards, or more as a measure of social worth or standing (Wotherspoon, 2009; McLaren, 2005, 2006). Unfortunately, such credentials are largely distributed along existing lines of inequality and reflect ongoing divisions of class and status. Rather than increasing mobility, education, and the focus on credentials, prestige, and reward reinforces social class divisions (Spring, 1998; McLaren, 2005; 2006). As Spring (1998, p. 29) notes:

The poor are led to believe that schools will provide them with the opportunity for social advancement, and that advancement within the process of schooling is the result of personal merit. The poor are willing to support schooling on the basis of this faith. But since the rich will always have more years of schooling than the poor, schooling becomes just a new way of measuring social distances. Because

the poor themselves believe in the rightness of the school standard, the school becomes an even more powerful means of social division. The poor are taught to believe that they are poor because they did not make it through school. The poor are told that they were given the opportunity for advancement, and they believe it. Social position is translated through schooling into achievement and underachievement. Within the school the social and economic disadvantages of the poor are termed underachievement. Without school there would be no dropouts.

The anarchist approach aims at radically transforming society rather than reforming it. As Joel Spring (1998, pp. 9–10) suggests, while reformist approaches to education try to eliminate poverty by educating the children of the poor to function within existing social structures, radical education tries to change the social structures that support and perpetuate unequal social relations. Reformist approaches can certainly make improvements, and these improvements are not to be dismissed, but they do not make the thoroughgoing sociostructural changes needed to address poverty and inequality. In Spring's (1998, p. 10) words: "The first approach would emphasize changing behaviour to fit into the existing social structure while the second would try to identify those psychological characteristics of the social structure which keep poor people under control." For Free Skool participants, education should be part of processes of social transformation and human emancipation. Individual efforts to succeed within existing structures tend not to end inequality and injustice. Schools should not reinforce the social organization of society. They should challenge and change it.

What must be sought in the future is a system of education which raises the level of individual consciousness to an understanding of the social and historical forces that have created the existing society and determined an individual's place in that society. This must occur through a combination of theory and practice in which both change as all people work for a liberated society. There should not be a blueprint for future change but, rather, a constant dialogue about means and ends. Education should be at the heart of such a revolutionary endeavor. (Spring, 1998, p. 146)

For anarchists, educational alternatives are situated as part of overall attempts, within collective movements, to change broader systems of power, including but not limited to those of education. Anarchists seek a de-institutionalization of the socialization process. For anarchists, schools teach people to trust the judgment of the educator while developing distrust for their own judgment (Spring, 1998; McLaren, 2005; 2006).

Implied in the concept of a society without schools is the end of all other institutions which are breeding grounds for dogma and moral imperatives. In a sense the church and state are themselves schools, with ideas of how people should act and what they ought to be. A society without schools would be one without institutions of mysticism and authority. It would be a society of *self-regulation* where institutions would be a product of personal need and usefulness and not sources of power. (Spring, 1998, pp. 52–53)

For anarchists at the AFS, working toward a new society depends, in part, upon changes in ideas and attitudes. New social relations do not spring into being fully formed from nothing. They must be taught, learned, played with, experienced, revised, and relearned. At the same time, less acceptable or less desirable practices must be unlearned or discarded. This is not done immediately, the outcome of an act of will. Even more, people who are raised in authoritarian contexts, socialized within authoritarian assumptions, will understandably need to learn new ways of acting. They will need to adjust, through trial and error, to new ways of relating to one another. Yet there are relatively few accessible spaces available in which such practices can be engaged. The anarchist Max Stirner (1967, p. 23) was drawn to ask: “Where will a creative person be educated instead of a learning one, where does the teacher turn into a fellow worker, where does he recognize knowledge as turning into will, where does the free man count as a goal and not merely the educated?” The AFS anarchists tried to provide opportunities for people to experiment and struggle with creating new forms of relationship, interaction and understanding one another.

Most Free Skool members struggled under public schooling regimes, finding their education to be constraining, restrictive, and lacking in venues for the expression of creativity. Many of the people who participated in Free Skool classes were decades removed from formal schooling. For them, the Free Skool provided a welcome alternative to their generally unsatisfactory and unsatisfying educational experiences. Many were thankful for the presence of the Free Skool, suggesting that they had searched a lifetime for such engaging learning experiences.

For Free Skool anarchists, the question of content is not the only one. Anarchists also stress the importance of methods. As in other areas of activity, anarchists stress the importance of a correspondence between means and ends, form and content. For anarchists, antiauthoritarian relations and practices cannot come from authoritarian methods. In education there is a link between methods and approaches to learning and the organization of the classroom and the character of the development of relations among participants. Learning can be an end in and of itself and should be an enriching

process that allows for the rewarding experience of nonauthoritarianism in practice.

Concerns over the types of methods pursued in the classroom involve the nature and extent of control and authority (Spring, 1998, p. 26). Radical education critics suggest that classroom techniques have been related to shaping a character that fits within and functions according to existing institutions of authority outside the school (in government or corporations). Modern mass consumer societies, according to critical theorist Ivan Illich, require a citizen character that relies upon, or is dependent upon, the advice of experts, which can be broadly integrated within decision-making processes (see Hardt and Negri, 2009). The society depends upon the consumption of packages expertly planned and circulated according to marketing strategies. For radical critics, schooling prepares the individual by assuming responsibility for “the whole child” (Spring, 1998, p. 26).

By attempting to teach automobile driving, sex education, dressing, adjustment to personality problems and a host of related topics, the school also teaches that there is an expert and correct way of doing all of these things and that one should depend on the expertise of others. Students in the school ask for freedom and what they receive is the lesson that freedom is only conferred by authorities and must be used “expertly.” This dependency creates a form of alienation which destroys people’s ability to act. Activity no longer belongs to the individual but to the expert and the institution. (Spring, 1998, pp. 26–27)

Indeed Free Skool participants were explicitly working to overcome the dominance of experts in social life. This is not to say they reject the knowledge developed by some people in specific areas, such as computers, health care, nutrition, or woodworking, based on experience and training. Rather it is the dominance of broad spheres of social life by experts and the frame of mind that suggests an uncritical deference to authorities. It also speaks against the proprietary character of much expert knowledge, as privileged possession or competitive advantage, within capitalist societies. More specifically, the Free Skool anarchists sought to allow everyone opportunities to develop their own expertise and confidence. This was part of an overall emphasis on do-it-yourself (DIY) or do-it-ourselves (DIO) practices. People were encouraged to formulate answers and develop solutions to problems in a participatory and collective way, brainstorming, experimenting, practicing, and reworking with fellow participants.

Anarchist critics argue that poor people learn in school that they should submit to the leadership or authority of those with more schooling. Those with more schooling, in terms of years and grade levels, tend to be those from more privileged class backgrounds who complete postsecondary education

and graduate school. Thus anarchists seek to subvert this relationship of education and leadership or authority, particularly on the basis of class.

Here the concern is not with order and efficiency but with increasing individual autonomy. The goal of social change is increased individual participation and control of the social system. This model rests on the conviction that a great deal of the power of modern social institutions depends on the willingness of the people to accept the authority and legitimacy of these institutions. In this context the question becomes, not how to fit the individual into the social machine, but *why* people are willing to accept work without personal satisfaction and authority which limits freedom. (Spring, 1998, p. 131)

Anarchists attempt to overcome traditional teacher/student relationships which can inhibit students and reinforce authority structures of command and obedience. For Stirner, education should assist individuals to be creative persons rather than learners. Learners lose their freedom if will in becoming increasingly dependent upon experts and institutions for instruction on how to act. Rather than learning how to act they might determine for themselves how to act.

Anarchists seek educational practices and relations that will contribute to the nurturance of nonauthoritarian people “who will not obediently accept the dictates of the political and social system and who will demand greater personal control and choice” (Spring, 1998, p. 14). This includes experience in the development of collaborative practices, knowledge sharing and mutual aid, rather than the competition, for grades or status, or emphasis on individual knowledge possession, intellectual property, and “originality” that marks much of mainstream, particularly postsecondary, education.

For anarchists, methods of discipline and reward in mainstream teaching undermine freedom and self-determination (Spring, 1998, p. 25). Too often teachers use extrinsic motivation, through grades, threats of punishment, or promises of promotion (Spring, 1998, p. 25). The focus can readily be displaced onto the extrinsic motive, such as grades. This is a common feature of the neoliberal classroom, as grades, a surrogate for wages, become a primary concern of students seeking a specific credential, which can be converted to a job on the labor market. This is similar to the process by which satisfaction in the intrinsic qualities of labor has been displaced toward satisfaction in the wage, even where the work itself is despised or debilitating.

Part of the modern state’s power rests in its awareness of the significance of the “domination of the mind” (Spring, 1998, p. 40). For anarchists, freedom must extend beyond political liberty and equality before the law, to emphasize self-control over one’s perspectives, beliefs, and practices. Most educational systems have been geared toward the internalization of

values and beliefs or the development of a conscience that favors support of existing social structures and relations (Spring, 1998; McLaren, 2005; 2006). Nonauthoritarian practices of education seek to encourage this broader approach to freedom, through people's own efforts and experimentation, successes and failures. Anarchists do not claim to have perfect pedagogical practices or ready-made answers to difficult questions. They recognize that they themselves have much to learn about practices of freedom and radical transformation, socialized within authoritarian systems as they have been.

Anarchist Colin Ward suggests that one of the tragedies of social struggle is that people do not know immediately how to deal with freedom. We all need to learn through experience practices of consensus, direct action, mutual aid, solidarity, and restorative justice. Education is a key aspect in organizing any society, whatever its scale. The goal of libertarian approaches "is therefore an educational method which will encourage and support non-authoritarian individuals who are unwilling to bow to authority and who demand a social organization which provides them with maximum individual control and freedom" (Spring, 1998, p. 131). The DIO approach to education pursued by Free Skool anarchists was driven by a belief that "no social change is meaningful unless people participate in its formulation" (Spring, 1998, p. 132). This convergence of revolutionary organizing and radical education is a key aspect of working to develop infrastructures of resistance. Thus it is an area of some emphasis for anarchists. For anarchists the failure of previous revolutions and their development in conservative directions, relates to the lack of "radically new means of education and socialization by which all people could be brought into the revolutionary movement and become *acting members* of it rather than its objects" (Spring, 1998, p. 133). Anarchist Free Skool members were clear that a nonauthoritarian society could not be wished into existence and it would not happen without organizing, discussion, and engagement. The Free Skool was part of those broader processes. At the same time Free Skool organizers were conscious not to become a therapeutic space and not produce dependency on the Free Skool as an institution.

In social and political terms the AFS was at its liveliest, and indeed its most relevant, during its second spring and summer when a number of members managed to bring a community organizing perspective to the space. Tired of the seemingly endless drift into pedantic debates and mystical dreaming the community activists tried to develop the AFS as a useful community resource. Importantly, unlike others in the collective, the community organizers had a clear vision and strategies they wanted to pursue. Taking the view that the AFS could (and should) be a worthwhile organizing and education center they reached out to serious activists in the city. The Ontario Coalition Against Poverty (OCAP) was invited to hold their movie nights at the space every Saturday and held several successful large "screenings."

The anarchist zine *Sabcat* was produced out of the AFS and since its first appearance has met with tremendous enthusiasm locally and abroad. *Sabcat* has presented original artwork, reviews, and articles on such topics as “green syndicalism,” “OCAF,” and “alternative education.”

Trying to overcome the educational divide that separates “citizens” and prisoners AFS members initiated a Books to Prisoners program which became quite successful. Poetry readings and hardcore punk shows brought in hundreds of book donations along with the help of some independent publishers and distributors. Before long the first shipments went out from the Free Skool to inmates in both women’s and men’s prisons.

Whose Market? Against Poor Bashing

Almost everything I’ve ever read about such alternative spaces raises the business of gentrification in North American cities. This story is no exception. At the same time, the educational approach of the Free Skool maintained that members develop a commitment to social justice and community involvement in support of those lacking resources. Putting their education to work members of the Free Skool collectives took leading parts in the battle against gentrification in the Kensington Market neighborhood.

During a general meeting in May of 2000 a member alerted Free Skool participants to a petition which had begun circulation against plans by St. Stephen’s Community House for a soup kitchen and hostel for homeless people to be opened on Augusta Avenue just north of the Free Space. The rather viciously worded petition openly attacked poor people saying they were unwelcome in the Market. This was viewed by Free Skool members as an act of what antipoverty organizer Jean Swanson (2001) calls poor bashing. At the same meeting the collective decided without delay to interview every storeowner or manager in the Market to see who was carrying the petition and who supported the attacks on homeless people and the poor. Enlisting support from the AFS, teams of two spent the next few days talking to people throughout the Market. Where petitions were found, and thankfully very few places had accepted them, it was made clear that such antipoor propaganda was unacceptable. A boycott of a trendy café previously frequented by activists was begun, and perhaps coincidentally it closed by the end of the summer.

At the end of June a leaflet was distributed in the Market which asked, “Do you want Kensington Market to become just one more rundown neighborhood with no hope for its future?” A second leaflet, circulated by the Kensington Market Working Group hysterically raged against the planned soup kitchen suggesting that feeding and sheltering homeless people was simply cover for the real “goal of destroying the family shopping atmosphere that is Kensington.” Members of the AFS organized a campaign to attend the City’s Committee of Adjustment hearing and brought letters of support for

the soup kitchen. Eventually the plans were approved though the Kensington business association has promised to keep up the attacks.

Later in the summer another more directly aggressive battle developed over harassment by the City of Toronto of a few homeless men living in the Market. The situation came to a head when one of the men asked several of us at the Free Skool for help in keeping city workers from taking his stuff to the dump. When we approached the workers they refused to tell us which bylaw they were citing when removing the stuff but implied that they were under pressure from the business association. After some debate we worked out a deal where the city workers promised not to touch anything left in the area fronting the Free Space. The guys hung out at the space and sold their wonderful array of used goods in front of and alongside the Free Space. For a couple of months it was like a real street bazaar. Shoppers loved the piles of stuff and there was always serious bargaining going on. They sold more in those two months than the AFS ever did.

Vision Trouble

The Anarchist Free Skool was open for participation by anyone who had a general agreement with nonauthoritarian and nonoppressive perspectives and practices. Anyone who agreed to these basic principles could take part in membership meetings and involve themselves in the decision-making process. The egalitarianism and participatory democracy of the relatively small collective should allow developing inequalities and grievances to be more readily identified and more immediately dealt with, as many anarchists historically have argued (Hartung, 1983, p. 96). At the Free Skool this was generally, if imperfectly, the case.

At times the Free Skool found it difficult to develop ongoing political projects. Even agreement on short-term actions was difficult to come by. The Free Skool vision, as reproduced above, was a rather vague commitment to “deepening our knowledge of ourselves and the world around us, sharing skills and exchanging experiences.” While promising a dedication “to effecting social change through the application of anarchist principles in every sphere of life” there was little agreement on what these principles were and even less sense of what strategies might be necessary to “effect social change” or even to “challenge disempowering habits.”

The collective took as its model of decision-making process the consensus approach outlined by the Public Interest Research Groups. Consensus, whereby decisions are based upon lengthy discussions and much compromise of positions, is an article of faith for many anarchist groups who believe it to be more participatory, more open, and more likely to lead to better and more satisfactory decisions. It was also viewed as an important part of participatory pedagogy.

Despite the commitment to consensus as a pedagogical tool, there were difficulties with the process. First, the Free Skool was sometimes fractious throughout its history, never quite sure if it was a countercultural “hangout,” an artist colony, or an activist resource center; never certain whether its politics were “lifestylist,” petty bourgeois market socialist or class war anarchist. Art, theory, practice education, or activism? The AFS suffered from a failure to bring these approaches together

Secondly, consensus, because of the long time involved in making decisions and because it always tends toward compromise answers, is in many ways unsuited to a lively activist group which must take quick decisions and may not be able to compromise on principles. Diverse groups with vastly divergent notions of what anarchism is about require a process which allows each vision to be expressed without either limiting or implicating the other members of the larger group. In practice this is very difficult to negotiate and to realize. Free Skool meetings often bogged down in hours of heated discussion over whether activist posters could be placed in the windows because some of the artists found the postings to be unsightly and aesthetically displeasing. Needless to say the activists thought it more important to publicize important events regardless of aesthetic considerations.

The persistent lack of analysis and vision along with a failure to assess the political context for action and develop useful strategies for meeting stated goals consistently undermined the collectives’ capacities to do political work. Clearly good intentions were not enough.

Conclusion

Projects such as the Anarchist Free Skool emerge to meet specific needs, transform as priorities and interests shift and eventually dissolve only to emerge elsewhere as the Anarchist Free Skool has morphed to become the Anarchist University. I prefer autonomist Marxist Harry Cleaver’s suggestion that such spaces are acts of “self-valorization” which can mess with the circuits of capitalist re/production. Certainly they represent places in which people have the time to value themselves and their relationships with each other beyond the commodified time in which much of our lives are contained. Following Cleaver we might understand temporary autonomous zones (TAZ) both as aspects of a refusal of domination and as creative attempts to fill the time, space and resources thus liberated.

One must be careful not to underestimate the rather large amounts of real labor required to keep a TAZ running. While Bey often portrays TAZ as profoundly mystical moments, it is important to remember that they have a substantial materiality. TAZ are constructed of the mundane, the everyday. As a sign in the Free Space proclaims, “Anarchy doesn’t mean dirty dishes.” (Although a glance at the Free Space sink too often suggested otherwise.) In

the end its how well the demands of the everyday are met that can determine the success or failure of autonomous zones.

Still there is always an aspect of the carnivalesque in spaces like the AFS. Whether it be the lively conversations, crass hardcore music, the quirky zines, humorous buttons, joyful camaraderie, or the clarion of agit-prop, the spaces signal their difference from their surroundings, their “otherness.” As liminal sites they are places of transformation from present to future—glimpses of the “new world in the shell of the old.”

Autonomous zones are hubs of do-it-yourself (DIY) culture and politics. In scenes where transience and the ephemeral often predominate free spaces offer some permanence, some rootedness. They provide a space where the underground can move above ground and engage in an everyday discussion with nonactivists, with people who want to find out what this anarchy stuff is all about.

The Free Skool participants were successful at taking anarchist ideas beyond the confines of anarchist subcultures and radical political “scenes.” Unlike many other infoshops and free spaces the Free Skool did manage to bring people from the neighborhood into the spaces. Most just dropped by to chat but many took part in classes and a few even joined the collective. The Free Skool provided a venue, within a working-class neighborhood, for nonanarchists to inquire about anarchism, ask tough questions, and have discussions about anarchist theory and practice. It also provided a community center, a space in which community members could come together to discuss neighborhood issues and organize to address community needs, both through developing their own self-directed activities, but also by preparing collective approaches to local government authorities around aspects of city planning and policy. Without the Free Skool it is certain that the homeless shelter and soup kitchen would have been defeated and an important resource for poor people would not have been available in the neighborhood. It is also certain that homeless people would have faced greater harassment and criminalization.

That the Anarchist Free Skool was able to extend its reach beyond current students to bring in nonstudents, particularly individuals from poor and working-class backgrounds, and those who had long ago left school behind, stands as a testament to the promise of the participants’ commitment to open and engaged learning. It also showed the significant work done by Free Skool members in doing outreach into the local neighborhoods and communities, actively working to build bridges and take anarchism outside of any preexisting subcultural comfort zones. A promising beginning though it still has not grown in the way needed to forge an organic connection with other communities.

This is by no means the final paragraph in this story. New ones are being written at this very moment. Already a number of people involved in the

AFS have worked to start up a new space, an activist resource center geared toward political projects and solidarity work. Rather than simply affirming a commitment to some nebulous notion of anarchy these folks are developing the basis for shared principles and shared work as part of the preparation for opening new projects.

Intended as something a bit more permanent than the temporary autonomous zone, these anarchist spaces provide the support structures for oppositional cultures. They are parts of the broader do-it-yourself (DIY) movements that provide alternative community and economic infrastructures in music, publishing, video, radio, food, and education. Anarchist heterotopias are places for skills development, for learning those skills that are undeveloped in authoritarian social relations.

The existence of TAZ allows for some autonomy from the markets of capital. Their *ethos* is counter to capitalist consumerism: play rather than work, gifts rather than commodities, needs rather than profits. In theory, they offer means for undermining state and capital relations and authorities both ideological and material. Practice often settles for something much less than that.

As always, the challenge is to maintain openness and inclusion while actually working to create “the new world in the shell of the old.” Many at the Free Skool struggled to show that freedom is not some fanciful idea, something for philosophers and mystics to ponder. It only has meaning when it is lived.

Appendix

Course descriptions for the most popular courses at the Anarchist Free Skool:

CLASS STRUGGLE ANARCHISM, SYNDICALISM AND LIBERTARIAN SOCIALISM

Anarchism, as a political movement, emerged as part of broader workers’ struggles for socialism and communism and contributed greatly to those struggles. Contemporary anarchists in North America, however, have generally forgotten this important connection, as anarchism has become a largely subcultural phenomenon. Similarly distinctions between authoritarian and antiauthoritarian traditions within the diverse history of socialism have been obliterated by the horrors of state capitalist regimes calling themselves “socialist.” This course seeks to reconnect anarchism with the struggles of working people to build a better world beyond capitalism of any type. The course is initiated by activists concerned with class analysis and day-to-day organizing and is not intended simply as a study group.

INTRODUCTION TO ANARCHISM

This course will be a broad introduction to anarchist theory and practice, as well as a look at the history of anarchism and anarchist struggles. There will be readings taken from some of the major anarchist thinkers such as: Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman and others. Also, the class will be structured in such a way that the participants may suggest the focus and direction of the readings and discussion topics.

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ANARCHIST FREE SCHOOL FALL SEASON LAUNCH THURSDAY OCTOBER 7 8PM

CHECK OUT THE SPACE, REGISTER FOR CLASS, SUGGEST COURSES
IF YOU WANT AND PICK UP THE FIRST ISSUE OF THE NOTEBOOK.

FRIDAY NIGHT FILMS

Beginning Friday, October 1, the Anarchist Free School will play videos of films that document anarchism, resistance and the integrity of the human spirit. 7pm, couches.
October 1: Kanehsatake: 270 years of Resistance. A documentary about the tense standoff between Mohawk Warriors and the Canadian Armed Forces.
October 8: Soy Cuba (I am Cuba). A Russian take on American imperialism in pre-communist Cuba.
October 22: No Blade of Grass. A feature film projecting the results of a planet suddenly unable to feed its urban population.
October 29: The New Babylon. Russian silent film about the 1871 Paris Commune.
November 5: The Horse's Mouth. A British feature comedy about a dissolute artist.

Friday Night Films will continue with further input. Film and video artists and curators are welcome use this time and space to show. With our couches and casual atmosphere this is an excellent forum to invite an intimate discussion about the work. We can also seat up to 50.

SAVAC South Asian Visual Arts Community BOOK LAUNCH PARTY

Saturday, October 16th, after 10pm is the night to celebrate the publication of the Street Art Postering Project: a series of 3 posters curated by Kevin D'Souza, with essays by Ashok Mathur, in affiliation with Desh Pardesh. DJ Vashti will spin.

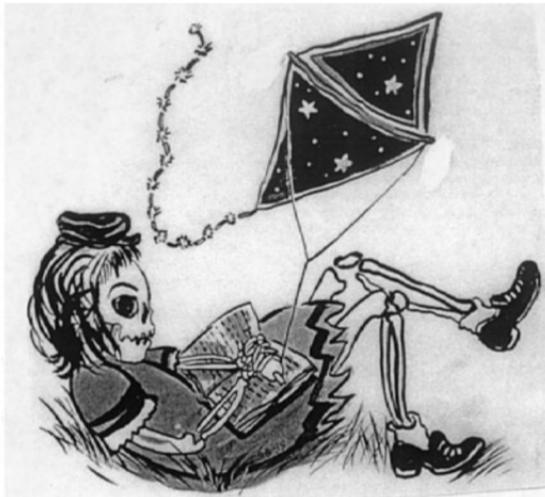
SALONS

Third Friday of every Month at 7pm Oct 15, Nov 19, and Dec 17 after 7pm.
Salons have a colourful history throughout the world and in particular within Anarchist Communities. Salons are intentional conversational forums where people engage in passionate discourse about what they think is important. I am proposing that we continue this tradition here in Toronto with monthly "Salons" at the Free School this Autumn. Look for our first Salon on the third Friday of October. There will be food (potluck), conversation, and performance. The theme will be music. Be prepared to join in an improvisation of drums and other hand instruments. Just show up to participate. At the end of each Salon we can pick a topic or activity for the following month.



anarchist free space

254 Augusta Ave in Kensington Market, Toronto.
(416) 203-0191. S of College, W of Spadina.



ANARCHIST FREE SCHOOL

Education is a political act. By deepening our knowledge of ourselves and the world around us, sharing skills and exchanging experiences in an egalitarian, non-hierarchical setting free of prejudice, we challenge disempowering habits and broaden our awareness of alternatives to the inequalities of a capitalist society. The Anarchist Free School is a counter-community dedicated to effecting social change through the application of anarchist principles in every sphere of life. This Space represents an opportunity for the community at large to come together and explore these alternatives. The Anarchist Free School welcomes all applications for use of the Space.

LOVE SONGS OF THE 20'S + 30'S

Ah, don't we all yearn for fireside comfort with song, not for trained singers as such; the material will focus on American folksongs based on 20's and 30's recordings just for the sake of singing with friends. Songsheets provided. Facilitated by Dave Szigel. Starts October 18, 1999.
Mondays 6:30-8pm

STREET ART

The urban landscape is a monotonous concrete canvas for corporate billboards and elite city planners. It's time to infuse the city with impromptu political art and creative concoctions from the community. This course tries to look at various movements in street art from graffiti to subvertising, while focusing heavily on group work to produce art that will be installed in the middle of the night. Come with an ambitious, creative, agitative spirit. Facilitated by karen okamoto. Starts October 11, 1999.
Mondays @ 8:30 pm



ARTS AGAINST THE MACHINE

This arts group is part of the Coalition Against Technological Unemployment. CATU is working to publicize the fact that advancing technology is the cause of the increase in poverty and accelerating environmental damage. Technology is destroying the economy and making us poorer. The arts group will have supplies and assistance of artists to produce things like: sculptures, giant puppets, paintings, patches, stickers, etc. Starts October 12, 1999.
Tuesdays 1-4pm

CRITICISM OF TECHNOLOGY

We will look at technology as a force in society; development as rejection of one's self; and historical and political battles over technology. Starts October 12, 1999.
Tuesdays 4-5pm

UNDERSTANDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Come and join a feminist discussion group organized to explore issues surrounding violence against women. We will be covering various types of violence: sexual assault/harassment, date/acquaintance rape, emotional/physical abuse in intimate relationships, and the impact of abuse on women and children. Ultimately, all violent acts committed against women are attempts to exert power and control by instilling fear. In addition to dispelling existing myths and stereotypes, we will also examine the patriarchal roots of male violence. By understanding the social climate which sanctions and perpetuates domination over women, it becomes possible to advocate for change. Therefore factors such as the privacy of the home, traditional gender roles, and the media backlash against the battered women's movement, will all be integral topics for discussion. Starts October 12, 1999.
Tuesdays 6-9pm 6 - 7pm (women only) and continues 7 - 9pm (all are welcome)

INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF RECORDISM INVESTIGATION

A weekly meeting, open to those with an interest in Recordism, Surrealism, and other currents of the Fantastic and the Absurd in contemporary art and culture (and spirituality, and politics, etc., etc.), for the exploration of those topics via discussion, presentations, game-playing and other collective activities, and general nonsense and tom-foolery. Never ended but begins again October 12th, 1999.
Tuesdays @ 9:23 pm

superanarchy

Taking up where we left off, we will gather in small groups on a weekly basis until the film is done. Then we can screen it, perhaps at the Safepark itself. Starts up again October 13th, 1999.
Wednesdays @7pm

YOGA

Wear loose comfortable clothing and bring a yoga mat or blanket. No experience necessary. Instructed by Christie. Starts October 14th, 1999.
Thursdays 6-7:15pm

INTRODUCTION TO ANARCHISM

This course will be a broad introduction to anarchist theory and practice, as well as a look at the history of, anarchism and anarchist struggles. There will be readings taken from some of the major anarchist thinkers such as: Bakunin, Kropotkin, Goldman and others. Also, the class will be structured in such a way that the participants may suggest the focus and direction of the readings and discussion topics. Facilitated by Dan and Allan - contact allan.graham@utoronto.ca Starts October 14th, 1999.
Thursdays 7:30-9:30pm



WILD PLANTS OF TORONTO

A hands on course introducing people to plants that grow in ravines and parks and waste spaces of Toronto. As well as identifying the plants, there will be lessons on their uses as food and medicine. The class will meet outdoors, weather permitting. Facilitated by Stu. On October 16th meet at the main gate of Riverdale Farm (Carleton and River Streets). Call for future meeting locations (416) 462-1072.
Saturdays @ 1pm

THE FREE SCHOOL OPENS OCTOBER 7TH @8PM, 254 AUGUSTA AVE IN KENSINGTON MARKET, SOUTH OF COLLEGE, WEST OF SPADINA COME CHECK OUT THE COURSES, MEET PARTICIPANTS, PARTY...