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Out of the Ruins: The Emergence of Radical Informal Learning Spaces

Edited by Robert H. Haworth and John M. Elmore

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When Occupy Wall Street began on September 19, 2011, I was thrilled. Just out college, September 11th had been a wake-up call for me. I began reading too much on the internet and devoured Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine*, my first exposure to capitalist critique, in a couple nights. In 2007, I became involved in environmental organizing around mountaintop removal. I was drawn to the movement out of a deep-felt compassion for the people and land affected and I stayed involved for several years because of the sense of belonging the movement offered. It was the first time I had found a group of people that seemed to share the disenchantment I had experienced but who were also taking action against hegemonic powers: raising awareness, promoting legislation to end mountaintop removal, carrying out direct actions, and raising funds to bring clean drinking water to affected communities. Understanding the human cost and environmental impact of the legal crime of mountaintop removal forced me to acknowledge the extent to which our current system is not aimed at universal empowerment, health, well-being, and freedom. *Out of the Ruins* is based on the premise that many educators recognize the degree of harm perpetrated by the global capitalist system and believe that traditional education serves that system.

The contributors to *Out of the Ruins* recognize traditional education as cooperating with the capitalist system to produce obedient subjects who will accept the existing system as the best possible reality and raise no challenge to it. Several of the authors throughout the text use the term "deschool," the process of helping individuals unlearn what they have been taught through traditional education, to describe the first goal of their work. But the authors in *Out of the Ruins* go beyond system critique to also share examples of a variety of informal learning spaces both with and without ties to the university. In the introduction, editor Richard Haworth quotes Max Haivan that living within our current system, "our ability to imagine possibilities beyond the confines of market values, especially those thoughts and ideas based in possibly futures outside our current practices is minimized or squashed" (6). *Out of the Ruins*



shows us that the work of critical pedagogy and radical informal learning spaces is to reawaken that imagination and connect with others also seeking what Deleuze and Guattari call “lines of flight.”

The collection moves from critiques of standard education to theoretical frameworks for alternative education and finally to depictions of radical informal learning spaces in cities across North America and the UK. Community literacy educators will find much value in this book, both on the theoretical front and in the examples of radical informal learning spaces that provide both inspiration as well as reflection on the pitfalls and limitations of such spaces. The opening chapter, “Miseducation and the Authoritarian Mind,” serves as foundational for the collection by establishing the need for liberatory education to counter the rise of authoritarian thinking in education and society-at-large. John Elmore takes time to paint a picture of two authoritarian personality types, sadistic authoritarian and passive authoritarian, both plagued by fear of life’s ambiguities, which drives them to seek the safety and predictability of hierarchical structure. By turns dominating those below and submitting to those above, authoritarian individuals affirm the hierarchy and thereby keep anxieties at bay. Elmore writes that traditional education has served the development of the authoritarian personality and ultimately become a “co-conspirator with despotism” (25) and calls for critical educators to “find ways to turn our classrooms into laboratories of critical consciousness” and “lead the way out of the ruins” (33).

In “Don’t Ask, Just Think,” David Gabbard takes up the titular admonition of Slavoj Žižek and directs it at critical pedagogues. Gabbard challenges critical pedagogues to consider their potential idiocy (defined by Žižek as an obliviousness to the dominant order) by admitting to his own. Gabbard writes that he has before “succumbed to the ‘will to believe’ in the redemptive power of schools that is characteristic of critical education theorists” but that this belief was the result of idiocy (36). Gabbard writes that many of his colleagues “do not recognize the actually existing symbolic order,” ignoring that the school *is* the state and the state serves market interests. Gabbard has no big solutions, rather focuses on calling critical educators to wake up from idiocy and abandon “grandiose fantasies of some large-scale transformation of the entire system of compulsory schooling.” Instead, he calls on critical pedagogues to focus on partnering creatively with other teachers toward “more meaningful learning experiences for children in schools” (52).

In “From the Unlearned Un-Man to a Pedagogy without Moulding” Rhiannon Firth and Andrew Robinson make what may be the most significant contribution in the collection for community literacy scholars through their explanation of the process of moulding and exploration of alternative means of education. Moulding, according to Firth and Robinson, is the process by which desired skills are imparted to students “in a direction desired by the knowing subject” (57). The authors write that educational institutions as we know them today have their roots in “nationalist projects” that relied on the moulding process for the creation of loyal subjects. As an example, the authors mention that many universities advertise “graduate attributes” as though their degree can be counted on to deliver a reliable “product” to employers (57). The authors argue that even many critical pedagogues embrace the moulding

technique to argue for the skills and perspectives they deem desirable. Among other examples, they cite Henry Giroux who write that “[i]n order for freedom to flourish in the worldly space of the public realm, citizens have to be formed, educated and socialized” (58). The authors argue that moulding creates a subject alienated from herself and that critical pedagogues committed to the project of dis-alienation must reject moulding practices and attitudes. For guidance, the authors turn to Max Stirner who believed that dis-alienation was “man’s proper home, in which nothing alien regulates and rules him any longer” (60). The authors review Stirner’s model of stages for the ego: hedonism, spook-ridden, and egoist. The first, hedonism, is the stage of children, in which the individual is easily controlled through systems of reward and punishment. The second stage is the spook-ridden stage in which the individual is controlled by ideas supplanted in their heads through education and socialization. Stirner describes people as having a “wheel in the head, a reactive effect . . . which gives fixed ideas and external hierarchies power over them” (61). In the third and final stage, egoism, the individual rises above control through rewards and punishment and above specters and wheels planted in the head, proffering value upon herself. The authors cite Stirnerian Wolf Landstreicher as believing that the transition to the third stage is pedagogical, though existing educational institutions only serve the second stage. The question then becomes what kind of education can serve that passage to the third stage, the “transformation of oneself into a spirited, willful being” (63). The authors turn to Deleuze and Guattari to help answer this question. In Deleuze and Guattari’s “schizoanalysis,” the first step is the breaking down of something akin to Stirner’s wheels in the head, liberating ourselves from outside ideas that have come to own us. From defining our experience relative to internalized spooks, we progress to identifying spooks, gaining “an ability to see and distance oneself from dominant social constructions” (65). From this place, the individual can re-invest materially and emotionally in her social milieu. The subject at the end of this process is unique, self-valorizing, free, and joyous. The authors also turn to the consciousness-raising (CR) techniques of the 1970s, asserting that “theorizing CR using Stirnerian-Deleuzian concepts offers the beginning of a transferable model of pedagogy without moulding” (65). The authors explain that in feminist CR, spooks of patriarchy were taken down through subject to subject sharing of personal experiences. Problems previously viewed as personal problems are understood as part of larger political patterns instead of results of individual dysfunction. The authors argue that “processes like CR provide a basis for emancipatory politics which does not succumb to problematic positions” (69). This is directly relevant to community literacy scholars who are working with writers and learners who hail from marginalized backgrounds and are working to tell their stories. Working against moulding and for dis-alienation are goals to guide the praxis of socially-conscious teachers and consciousness-raising is a technique directly transferrable to many community literacy settings.

In “Creating Transformative Anarchist Geographic Learning Spaces,” Farhang Rouhani contributes ideas from the perspective of radical geography. Rouhani expresses the goal of radical geographers to work against hierarchical relationships, university-community divides, and placelessness. Rouhani provides the first concrete

details of a radical informal learning space in the collection through his discussion of the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute (DGEI) begun in the late 1960s by a group of geographers who “felt compelled to respond to the racial, economic, and political injustices facing Detroit’s African American communities” (76). The project operated simultaneously as a means through which “diverse publics” could learn about marginalized groups and as an institute through which data could be gathered to inform political action and policy (76). The authors note that the original DGEI was founded with an intention of “breaking the cycle of expert knowledge production” (76). Rouhani expresses hope in the potential of an anarchist-geographic pedagogy to “connect pedagogic projects around the world” in a network through which sharing and collaborating could strengthen the collective endeavor (84).

Petar Jandrić’s and Anna Kuzmanić’s chapter “The Wretched of the Network Society” shifts us to consider digital space and complicates Rouhani’s hopes of a digital global network that could connect place-specific learning efforts. The authors explore digital postcolonial theory and call for digital postcolonialists to create strategies for decolonization. According to Jandrić and Kuzmanić, digital decolonization is “critical praxis aimed at our emancipation from the forces of global neoliberal capitalism, individually and socially, and geared toward the active democratic reinvention of present and future techno-social realities” (88). The authors remind us that our technological tools and platforms, the same ones we use to organize ourselves and communicate outside institutional parameters, are not neutral and value-less, but are colonized just like our geographic spaces.

Sections Three and Four of *Out of the Ruins* offer examples and analysis of specific radical informal learning spaces from authors who were founders and participants in these spaces. These analyses provide a number of models for community literacy educators to consider as well as honest discussions of pitfalls of these spaces. Sarah Amsler, in the chapter “What Do We Mean When We Say ‘Democracy?’” asks “[w]hat types of learning can regenerate democratic possibility within neoliberal contexts today?” As an answer, she looks to The Social Science Centre established in a small English city in 2011, established as a cooperative whose founders were reacting to what they perceived as the degradation of the public university. It was “an attempt to create ‘something new in freedom’ that is at once a counter-capitalist learning space, an imminent critique of neoliberal education, and a contribution to the development of alternative forms of knowledge for democratizing everyday life” (108). The author describes a social science class in which the question was raised: “When people use the word, ‘democracy’ in this class, what do they (we) mean?” (108). Reading this, I immediately thought of my work in first-year writing using George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” to discuss what Orwell calls “meaningless words,” political terms that intentionally resist fixed meanings, allowing politicians and whole regimes to hide behind terms that gain them bland approval. Amsler’s discussion confirms my conviction that alternative learning spaces must include the study of rhetoric and how it is used to gain and maintain power. A discussion about the meaning of democracy can be more powerful when it is understood how certain words are used more as emotional triggers than concrete signifiers. Richard Weaver’s idea of the “god

term” helps us understand how words in politics so often work as spells that confer political favor through the manipulation of feelings of goodness and fear. As Amsler suggests, sensitivities and fears can arise as people voice and grapple over contrasting definitions of terms. Rhetorical study can help in such a process as it allows people to recognize that having different meanings for the same word is a natural result of the intentional instability of certain terms. Any productive discussion of the term “democracy” should start with this understanding. Groups working toward social change could benefit by coming up with their own definitions for key terms, not to re-invent the wheel but to build solidarity in the face of a system of language that colludes with systems of power.

In “The Space Project: Creating Cracks within, against and beyond Academic-Capitalism,” Andre Pusey looks at an autonomous education project called “the Space Project” organized by a group called the Really Open University in Leeds, England. Pusey borrows the term “crack capitalism” from John Holloway to help define the ethos of the Really Open University (ROU). Holloway, Pusey writes, “suggests that through everyday acts of transgression, negation and creation, we create ‘cracks’ in capitalism” (127). Central to this idea is the distinction between “abstract labor” in service of capitalism and “doing.” “Doing” in Holloway’s definition is “activity that is not determined by others or activity that is potentially self-determined” (128). Pusey writes that the ROU founders of the Space Project specifically set out to go beyond perceived limitations of “self-managed social centers” and their “insular activist sub-culture” (130). Meeting minutes state that they wanted to avoid a space that becomes dominated by “lifestyle politics” (130). The Space Project hosted a lecture by John Holloway and courses called “Crashing through Capital” and “Crisis.” The project came to a close after about six months as the planners’ other commitments—child-care, jobs, and PhD work—demanded more of their time.

In “Teaching Anarchism by Practicing Anarchy” Jeff Shantz shares the results of his university-based experiment having students in a Sociology of Anarchism course create their own syllabus and run the course, enacting the spirit of anarchy in the actual structure of the course. Shantz provided his students with 20 pages of ideas toward the content of that syllabus and set up a website using a groupware software system designed by radical tech group we.riseup.net called crabgrass, but from there stepped back to play a passive role throughout the duration of the course. Shantz asked his students to decide what they want to learn, create a syllabus and run the class to find out “if the daily practice of anarchy within a course could actually help students to learn more about anarchism” (153). Reflecting on the experiment, Shantz appreciates that students were able to run the class and that the majority were very engaged and creative. However, he notes still having the constraint of giving grades and that some students, though given more power than in a typical classroom, did not take it. Shantz reports that in a future iteration of the course, he would not hold as strictly to the letter of an anarchic classroom. Specifically, he would intervene more in discussions to encourage the participation of all voices and would not only introduce tools but discuss them again at later junctures in the course to help encourage students to make use of them.

The four contributions in section four provide detailed descriptions of the rise and dissolution of a variety of alternative learning spaces closely tied to anti-capitalist activist efforts. “Toward an Anti and Alter-University” shares the story of the Experimental College of the Twin Cities, a “social justice-oriented infrastructure for supporting free classes that anyone can take or teach.” As with the Space Project, authors Erin Dyke and Eli Myeroff, point out the difficulty of keeping such a grassroots educational project going, of developing different arms of an organization, splintering off then becoming bureaucratized and over-taxed. “What is Horizontal Pedagogy? A Discussion on Dandelions” outlines the emergence of the horizontal pedagogy (HP) group in the Occupy Wall Street movement, and provides an annotated dialogue from an HP session in 2014. Sandra Jeppesen and Joanna Adamiak’s chapter “Street Theory” looks at education efforts directly linked to street activism, specifically the mass mobilization against G20 in Toronto. In the final chapter of the collection “Theory Meets Practice”, Jeff Shantz assesses the life of the Anarchist Free Skool and Anarchist Free University of Toronto. Shantz’s chapter begins with a critique of formal schooling similar to that in the collection’s opening chapter but from a firmly anarchic standpoint, stressing the way modern schooling serves to groom young people for submission in the workplace content. Shantz points out that not only do free schools provide an alternative education, they also provide opportunities for community members to “meet and discuss matters of interest in their lives.” The free school then is a context for collaboration and discussion that is “generally absent for regular folks” (248). In Toronto, the Free Skool arose out of activities connected with the Who’s Emma (Goldman) Infoshop and the DIY punk record shop in the Kensington neighborhood. In these venues, “the anarchists had a significant infrastructural space for organizing, awareness raising and skill development” (250). The Anarchist Free University arose when Free Skool lost its space and ended up contributing to the Occupy Movement in Toronto.

Out of the Ruins serves both as a theoretical and practical guide for those interested in taking part in or already involved in their own alternative educational spaces, whether these be the classrooms in which they teach or non-university affiliated educational spaces. *Out of the Ruins* also helps provide insight into the rise to mainstream visibility of the people in society looking for and living in the “cracks” of capitalism during the Occupy Movement. These authors make it clear that many already active groups and spaces helped manifest Occupy and continued on after its encampments disbanded and news coverage of the anti-capitalist movement faded. In the transcript in “What is Horizontal Pedagogy? A Discussion on Dandelions” of the Occupy Horizontal Pedagogy group meeting that took place near the end of Occupy, the following exchange notes the life-after Occupy that media coverage never considered:

Jacques: It’s just the new chapter, the way I’m looking at it. It’s as if there’s pollen being blown across the wind...

Chelsea: Like the dandelion?

Jacques: Yeah, like we're all going to different places and we're going to see things in different areas and I'm feeling a bit sad about my perceived drop in momentum for certain things, but that's it. Feeling good in general. (200)

One of the recurring themes of the narratives and analyses of the learning spaces in *Out of the Ruins* is the instability inherent in unfunded or little funded educational spaces with non-hierarchical structures. Time, income, "messiness" and lack of space limit many of these projects' life spans. But as the exchange above attests, that does not mean that the individuals who took part in them forget everything they learned or, in some cases, un-learned. The authors featured in *Out of the Ruins* take a critical but never cynical look at attempts to merge education with creativity and personal autonomy rather than social norming and worker obedience. This collection serves to teach, inspire and encourage community literacy practitioners to continue to work inside and outside a system that often limits what education can do for individuals and societies.