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Using Geography to Teach Freedom and Defiance: Lessons in Social Change from 'Autonomous Geographies'

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ABSTRACT *This paper is about how the transformatory pedagogical practice of popular/liberatory education can be further articulated within geography. It is based on the experiences of a third-year undergraduate course, 'Autonomous Geographies', in which the author developed some of the core values of popular education, namely engaging with movements for change, making space for emotions, developing strategy and overcoming powerlessness, and building solidarity and cooperation. These were put into practice through coursework involving contact with social movements, a praxis-based reflexive journal, action planning and spokescouncils. The author reflects on how he engaged students with the possibilities of becoming active, critical and defiant citizens engaged in social change, as well as problematizing his own position and aspirations. On the author's part, this paper is a call to re-energize the links between geographical education and freedom, and a plea that we do not retreat from naming and confronting oppression.*

KEY WORDS: Autonomous geographies, popular education, freedom, social change

Introduction

> Education, which must never be neutral, can be at the service either of world transformation and of critical insertion in the world, or of immobility and possible permanence of unjust structures. (Freire, 2004, p. 36)

What we teach, and how we teach it, are battlegrounds in the struggle for social change. In such battles popular education has been used, not just as a set of tools, but as a set of ethical responsibilities based around a political project about how we can engage with the world to change it (see for example Freire, 1974, 1979, 2004; Giroux, 1997; Crowther *et al.*, 1999, 2005). Popular education is not simply about the acquisition of knowledge, but about the teaching of a reading of the world aimed at critique and transformation. Its core values are solidarity, passion, responsibility, defiance and cooperation, as well as the channelling of anger and indignation towards progressive social goals. Such an educational practice has become crucial in these difficult times. We are constantly diverted from debate on issues such

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as war and militarism, the prospects of peak oil and ecological meltdown, the inadequacies of representative democracies, privatization and increasing corporate control, migration and racial tensions, and economic precarity. We lack empathy, understanding and, most important of all, a sense of possibility that we are able collectively to respond to these challenges.

What I reflect on in this paper are a set of engagements I have had with students through a third-year option called '*Autonomous Geographies, Sustainable Futures*'. The course acted as a vehicle to develop geographical education as a practice of freedom, and here I want to reflect on what students thought, how they reacted, and engagements they undertook as a result of collective work we embarked upon. Echoing Cook (2000), this was very much a 'border' experience, placing students in unpredictable spaces that crossed between worlds of the academy and social movements. A 'border pedagogy' is one which eschews fixed notions of us and them or good and bad tactics, and convincing students of certain ideas, but rather foregrounds the marginalized, embraces and questions differences and newness however shocking, problematizes ourselves and our own positions, whilst also empowering one another to explore possibilities for changing our world (see Giroux, 1992; Giroux & McClaren, 1994). In essence, it is an educational project which seeks to extend critical democracy.

As university teaching and research become more oriented towards the values of the business world, this kind of endeavour is crucial. It is an effort, and one which all geographers who claim to be critical should note, to close the gap between what we teach and what we do as much as possible. It is a call to re-energize the links between education and freedom and empowerment; and it is a challenge to those academics who have become counsellors for neoliberal policy and the status quo, especially inside the university, to look again at how they have retreated from naming and also importantly confronting oppression.

The 'Autonomous Geographies' Course

What I want to expand upon here is how the transformatory pedagogical practice, variously called popular/liberatory/radical education, can be further articulated and expanded within geography. It is a practice I have been committed to for a number of years (Chatterton, 2002, 2005a, 2005b), and which I have been developing most explicitly through a third-year undergraduate module I teach in the School of Geography at the University of Leeds called 'Autonomous Geographies, Sustainable Futures.' Its stated aims were:

> The theory and practice of autonomy is a central focus for many groups in the global north and south ranging from high profile examples such as the Zapatistas of Mexico and the Piqueteros of Argentina, to countless community and campaign groups here in the UK. Autonomy, literally meaning self-governing, stems from a rejection of mainstream representative politics, the dominance of global corporations, and unsustainable living practices associated with consumer cultures.
>
> This module aims to introduce students to key issues in the study of autonomy and sustainability such as: freedom and self-management, direct democracy, grassroots organizing, and sustainable lifestyles/communities. Together we are going to look at the possibilities for putting these ideas into practice. We will look at various examples, from the global north and south, including popular histories of resistance, action planning, education, the environment, cities and spaces, work, money, and new media.

Within the themes of autonomy and sustainability we looked at a number of topics including the historical and contemporary anarchist/autonomist movements, liberatory education, independent media, self-managed spaces, money/work, sustainable cities, case studies from Argentina's 2001 uprising, the Zapatistas of Mexico, and the postwar squatting movement. As well as the activities described in this paper, each lecture was coupled with a seminar in which students led discussions on what they thought about the possibilities and pitfalls of what we had discussed.

This module is the crystallization of a number of personal strands. From the outset I need to make it clear that I consider myself an activist-scholar along with numerous others whose praxis spans the boundaries of the academy and engages actively with social movements to work towards social change. My outside engagements include two years working with the base communities of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Chiapas Mexico through which I continue to help coordinate a solidarity group called Kiptik which builds appropriate technology water systems; a year in Argentina where we spent time with the autonomous groups after the 2001 crisis which led to a guidebook to the movement called 'Taking Back Control' (see Gordon & Chatterton, 2004); and several years with the squatting community which culminated in establishing a radical, independent social centre in Leeds called 'The Common Place'. Most recently, my educational work has been informed by my engagement with a popular education collective I helped establish called Trapese (Taking Radical Action through Popular Education and Sustainable Everything!). Since 2004 our main work has been undertaking workshops on poverty, debt and climate change in the lead-up to the 2005 summit of the leaders of the Group of 8 nations in the Scottish hotel resort of Gleneagles.[1]

Through these engagements I have been guided by the ideas of anarchy and autonomy, which privilege possibilities of more horizontal social organization without formalized government or dependency on professionalized politicians, and the ability of people to self-rule through mutual aid and solidarity, a commitment to workable alternatives to wage labour and monetary exchange, and a mistrust of those with blueprints, organizational strategies or vanguardist leadership (see Joll, 1979; Marshall, 1992; Cook & Pepper, 1990; Bookchin, 1991; Blunt & Wills, 2000; Berkman, 2003). I wanted to develop a course that would introduce students to these ideas, not in a doctrinaire or overly theoretical way, but as living ideas which would catch their imagination and can act as possible openings for how we might live more sustainable, just and equal lives.

I consider that the *Autonomous Geographies* course, an extended conversation in popular education, is based around these ideas. My aim was not just to teach injustice, but to empower students to become active, critical and defiant citizens who are engaged in social change. Not only did I encourage them to challenge themselves, but also to challenge my understandings and those of the movements for change they encountered. I wanted to show how our understandings and skills would develop in particular contexts and that there is not a pre-given set of tools or ideas which should be adopted. Neither was I aiming to impart a set of tools or techniques—rather to develop an educational project geared to developing consciousness and awareness of the need for change.

The key for the course to work was to create a sense of dialogue between equals, fostering a sense of freedom rather than indoctrination. Through the sessions, we not only explain external problems but also confront each other and the social roles we adopt. Dialogue is the key. This does not merely mean discussion, but radically different ways of communicating which allow us to understand together the world around us, and how to act

upon it to change it. Asking questions rather than providing answers is fundamental: What do we accept and reject? How do systems of domination get passed on, be they class, gender, ethnicity or sexuality? How can we challenge these within ourselves? These were key components of the course.

An important aspect is what geography specifically brings to this kind of education. I wanted students to develop a critical spatial sensibility, as opposed to just a critical one. Why do certain ideas or movements happen where they do? What promotes them or constrains them in particular places? What kinds of experiments in autonomy and sustainability are actually happening out there in the world and what are their potentials? Geography's central use of fieldwork and outside engagements provide excellent platforms to develop this kind of engaged radical pedagogy. Doing fieldwork, spending time with outside groups, talking and working with them and evaluating what does and does not work in practice allows students to develop their own ideas and find ways to get involved themselves. I certainly regard maximizing the amount of these types of outside engagements as a core part of radical geographical education.

Cleary, there was no guarantee that many, or indeed any, of my students would subscribe to, or be familiar with, the approach and the ideas of the module. Some felt nervous, intimidated and unclear about the point of it. Others characterized me as a radical, who was overly critical and had high expectations of them. Nevertheless, there was certainly interest in the idea—the course attracted 45 in the first year and was oversubscribed with more than 90 students in its second year. But the key thing for me is that I wanted to know their reactions to these ideas, how they responded to them, whether they thought they were useful, what ideas such as freedom and social change meant to them, and if they would incorporate them into their daily lives. In what follows, I present student voices and reactions to give a sense of what they made of this pedagogical project of freedom and autonomy.[2]

So what is Popular, Liberatory Education?

Before I explain some of the engagements I undertook, I want to expand on the traditions of popular education which inform my work. It is important to acknowledge that it is a fuzzy concept. 'Popular', in particular, has multiple meanings, evoking 'of' or 'from' the people, so it can just as easily be mobilized by the political right and left. As a practice, it has been used by revolutionary guerrillas, intellectual Marxists, liberal adult educators in universities and elite institutions like the World Bank. Within this myriad of uses and users I want to reclaim and promote the radical origins of the political project of popular education which is not a tool for learning or, worse, co-optation, managing poverty or feeling good because we know why the world is so unjust. It is about commitment to visions of a more just and equal world with a focus on how we might achieve this. It is based on defiance ('I'm not going to take this any more'), change ('I want to change things'), struggle ('how do we get out of this mess'), and solidarity ('whose side are you on?'). They express a pedagogical practice that in recent years has been expanded on through ideas of border crossings (Giroux, 1992), hope (Giroux, 1997), transgressions (hooks, 1994), freedom and possibility (Freire, 1994), and defiance (Newman, 2006).

The radical project of popular education is best understood in its manifold contexts, a few of which I outline below. One rich vein takes us through the nineteenth-century Labour Colleges, the Chartist movement of the 1830s for a People's Charter, and before them the

Correspondence Societies during the revolutions in France and the USA, to later experiments such as Co-operative Colleges, Workers Education Association, and Oxbridge colleges such as Ruskin. Many presented a blueprint for the hoped for transformation to a socialist society, based more or less on a Marxist-Leninist perspective. Alongside the workshop and the trade union, Socialist and Communist Party Schools and Communist Educational Associations were set up, often dubbed Marx Schools or Worker's Universities. These sprang up across the world into the twentieth century, offering evening and weekend classes to workers in the basics of Marxist, socialist and communist thinking (Crowther *et al.*, 2005). Such traditions certainly helped to expand self-understanding and socialist agitation amongst the burgeoning industrial classes, as well as to ferment dissent against the geopolitical hegemony of bourgeois liberal democracies in Europe and North America.

The twentieth century also saw similar educational dissent through socialist-inspired nationalist struggles across Latin America and Africa, which drew on popular education to engage with the masses and to challenge oppression, apartheid and colonialism. Liberatory educators in Nicaragua, Granada, Cuba, El Salvador and South Africa embarked upon educational programmes to mobilize the consciousness of the masses, especially the rural poor. Paulo Freire, the Brazilian minister of Education under the left-wing government of João Goulart between 1961 and 1964, is best known here for his work on using education as a dialogical tool for people to uncover the nature of their oppression. Paulo Freire (1998) and bell hooks (1994) called this kind of education 'the practice of freedom'. Paulo Freire's educational project (1974, 1979, 2004) when working with illiterate groups was to insist on the dialectical relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed through which we can unpack relationships and causalities which structure injustice. This is the process of *conscientizacion*, through which we recognize our presence in the world, and, rather than adaptation or adherence, we recognize that history is unfinished business that we can intervene in and change. We come to be aware that we both internalize and externalize oppression—we are subject to oppression and in turn become oppressors who subject others to it.[3]

Experimentation with radical education has also developed through the free or progressive schools movement (see Skidelsky, 1970; Richmond, 1973; Novak, 1975; Wright, 1989; Shotton, 1993; Gribble, 1998). Many had revolutionary potential, not just in terms of challenging state power, but by using education as a way to develop counter-hegemonic ways of living. For example in 1909 Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer was executed for plotting a military insurgency after he opened a 'modern school' that was free from religious dogma. The high point for these types of experiments was the mid-twentieth century in Europe. As part of the New Schools Movement, progressive or free schools emerged, which although they were directly revolutionary movements were based on some very different principles: voluntary attendance, children and teachers as co-governors, absence of compulsory curriculum, libertarian ideas, a focus on creative learning, no streaming, examinations or head teacher, and interaction between different ages and the outside world. Since the 1920s pioneering free schools opened in the UK like Abbotsholme School in Staffordshire, Summerhill School in Suffolk through the ideas of A. S. Neill, Dartington Hall in Totnes, and Wyndham School in Cumbria. The 1970s saw a new breed of more confrontational inner-city free schools emerge such as the Scotland Road Free School in Liverpool, the White Lion School in London and the Leeds Free School.[4] Many 'deschoolers' (see Illich, 1973) have also experimented with education beyond formal schools. The idea of 'Schools Without Walls' has been developed in many places. For example, the Parkway Program in Philadelphia used the whole city

as a resource for teaching about the economy, poverty and the environment. Radical educators such as Paul Goodman also developed the idea of streetwork—using the city as a way to teach people by being in it (see Ward, 1995).

The Highlander Folk School in the USA was one of the pioneers of popular and liberatory educational practice. It emerged from the needs of various social movements in 1930s Tennessee and Myles Horton was central to the project. For Highlander, it was vital to find bridges and connections between problems and people's lives, including emotional, creative and intellectual experiences. It is not about convincing people of predefined ideas or imparting facts as an expert, but responding to where people find themselves, imparting a sense of possibility rather than dependency. As Myles Horton once said: "If I give you an easy answer today, what will stop you coming back tomorrow and asking me again?" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 124).[5]

Global social justice and anti-globalization education is central to the contemporary practice of radical education and has expanded over the last decade in response to growing movements such as the World Social Forum which have questioned economic globalization, neoliberalism and privatization. Using teach-ins, counter-conferences, day schools, skill sharing, web guides, resource manuals, campaign packs, open source and copyleft licensing, which have become hallmarks of the global social justice movement, a huge amount of freely available information on sweatshop labour, fair trade products, immigration, war and militarization, the effects of genetically modified organisms, neo-colonialism and climate change has been produced and disseminated. Key traits of such educational encounters have become openness, inclusivity, horizontality, respect and equal participation (see Cooper, 1978; Alberta Council for Global Co-operation, 2002; Prokosch & Raymond, 2002; Bigelow & Peterson, 2003; Ruckus Society, 2003; Anderson & Kavanagh, 2004; Trapese Collective, 2004; Solnit, 2004).

The discipline of Geography has made a strong contribution here, naturally lending itself to exploring radical possibilities for and in the world and how we might achieve these. Peter Kropotkin, the nineteenth-century anarchist scholar, used his formal training as a geographer to document tendencies towards mutual aid in an effort to promote it, while Élisée Reclus used geographical education to promote peace and cooperation (Kropotkin, 1972, 1974; Reclus, 1894, 1898; Fleming, 1988). Against a backdrop of anti-war resistance, race riots, and student uprisings in the late 1960s, radical geographers like David Harvey, Richard Peet, Ben Wisner and Bill Bunge looked for ways that geography could address key social questions rather than hide behind the value neutrality of quantitative geography (see Harvey, 1973; Peet, 1977; Bunge, 1988). It was at this time that the radical journal *Antipode* was founded, which became the leading voice of the new methods, practices and hopes for radical geographers. At the same time Bill Bunge pioneered radical fieldwork encounters back in 1969 through the Detroit Geographical Expedition and Institute, where jointly with his students they reclaimed the notion of 'expeditions' as democratic rather then elitist pursuits, offering free classes in poor neighbourhoods and defining issues to be researched. However, these were short lived due to criticisms from university administrators.

Many geographers continue to cross and re-cross the boundary between academe and activism, bringing their campaign work with activist groups into the classroom or using their action research to contribute to social change (see Cook & Pepper, 1990; Blomley, 1994; Maxey, 1999; Lees, 1999; Chatterton, 2002; Routledge, 2003; Fuller & Kitchin, 2004). In my own work I have been jointly developing and promoting the possibilities

of self-autonomous politics through a project called Autonomous Geographies (see http://www.autonomousgeographies.org.uk) while others have pushed the idea of more engaged geography through 'people's geographies' and 'public geographies'.[6] Others have highlighted how our labour is increasingly commodified in the corporate world of higher education and publishing (Castree, 2002, 2006; Blomley, 2006). In many classroom settings, geographers place strong emphasis on not just understanding or imparting radical ideas but on how students can engage in radical social change (Blunt & Wills, 2000; Howitt, 2000; Merrett, 2000, 2004; Featherstone, 2005; Wellens *et al.*, 2006).

Engaging with Students for Social Change: Four Examples from Autonomous Geographies

Putting such wisdom into practice is a difficult task. Where do we begin if we are to envisage a radically different, emancipatory educational project? How can the principles outlined above be incorporated in our teaching? This is a massive task, one that would require changing far more than what we do in the classroom. While I do not assume to have all the answers, this part of the paper explains how I tried to put these principles into action through educational engagements with students. These engagements will be used alongside more conventional 'chalk and talk' methods. However, liberatory educational moments should not be seen as add-ons, or breaks from the real and serious business of education (lectures, examinations etc.). What is required is a leap of faith, and redesigning assessment and curricula as a practice of freedom which inspires and empowers students to understand injustice, and their role in it, and how they can intervene to change it. I focus below on four engagements, each of which develops particular sensibilities that are key to liberatory education: engaging with social movements, making space for emotions and creativity, developing strategy and building solidarity.

(1) Engaging with Social Movements: The European Social Forum

In her work 'Teaching Community' (2005), bell hooks describes the problems of an educational system which lacks connection and closeness with the world outside the academy. Learning in reality is never confined solely to institutions, and the idea that schools and universities offer the best way to educate people has long been challenged by de-schoolers (see Goodman, 1963; Illich, 1973; Ward & Fyson, 1973; Ward, 1995). Confronting and understanding the complex, difficult and unequal relations, overcoming our fears, exploring our differences and finding connections can only fully be done outside the classroom. What hooks (1994) calls 'democratic education' cannot develop when learning only happens within the official institutions and places controlled and funded by the established elite. Getting out of the classroom is about valuing the learning of everyday life, learning outside, listening to friends, playing, at home and in the community—learning that gives us valuable social skills and rounds our knowledge.

One of the key things I wanted to feature in the course was some tangible and real engagement with the ideas and movements we were talking about. I wanted us to connect with real passions and angers. An opportunity arose when the European Social Forum took place in London in October 2004 and we, as a class, went. Over four days in central London social movements and campaign groups from all over the world gathered across dozens of venues undertaking workshops, speeches, rallies, musical and poetry events, and

stalls, culminating in a huge anti-war rally through central London with 200 000 participants. I asked the students to write up their experiences, reflecting in any way they wanted on what they participated in, their reactions to it and how it affected them. This was the first time I had used more flexible assessment and many were at first concerned about the lack of structure and the amount of freedom I had given them as to how to write it. Most in the end wrote conventional diaries, one wrote a song, while another wrote a poem. The journals were illuminating as students grappled with their surprise, anxieties, fears and hopes. Below are some extracts:

> A few of us from the course got on the train to London and we didn't know what to expect. We were going to the London Social Forum. We had looked at the website and it advertised talks and activities from a huge range of groups—many of which we had never heard of—Indymedia, Dissent Network of Resistance Against the G8, a group called the Wombles, and an anti-authoritarian space. We were intrigued, if not a bit nervous. Why did all these groups exist and what did they want?... (Sara)
>
> On the way back we talked constantly about our experiences. We all felt overwhelmed. The weekend at the Social Forum has really changed my life! How will I be able to drink Coca Cola again, or pass a Starbucks coffee shop or shop at Gap now I have learnt about what they really do. I really want to get involved in things back home and make a difference. I feel inspired that there were also so many other people who think the same. (Simon)
>
> I was really nervous going to London, especially about the big march on the Saturday. My dad said it would be full of dangerous anarchists and crusties. But it was one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I was stood in this crowd of thousands of people—everyone had a banner promoting a cause and giving out a leaflet. I was overwhelmed by their passion for change. It seemed like the whole world on fire with people who wanted to make a difference. Why hadn't I met any of these groups before? (John)
>
> We spent the afternoon going round all the stalls talking to different groups about their campaigns. It was amazing. We picked up loads of leaflets and saw a huge panel discussion on third world debt. People spoke with a real passion. We went to a poetry slam organized by Love Music, Hate Racism in the evening. Me and my brother thought it would be a good idea to write a song about our experiences and I have included it here as part of my journal. (Mary)

Many of the reflections centred on the unknown and a disruption of their world-views: Why hadn't they known about all this? Why were all these people protesting? Was the world really that bad? How could they join in and make a difference? I was as surprised as they were that they had received so little exposure to alternative or radical ideas. I remember meeting a small group of my students in the middle of the rally as we walked through central London. We were surrounded by groups from almost every corner of the world—Israeli peaceniks, a Palestinian Solidarity Group, Kurdish Communists, Greek anarchists. One turned to me and said 'Where have all these groups come from? What do they all want? This is crazy.' Some students felt threatened as it was an unfamiliar world. A few did not engage or see the point. They resented the extra work the outing meant, and

I perhaps had not done enough groundwork to help orient them into what was happening so they could understand it more. Most, though, felt inspired, or at least intrigued, and keen to learn more. For a small group this was well-known territory which they had seen before through student rallies for free education and anti-war demonstrations. We talked at length about the experience back in the classroom. The experience opened up many students in subsequent sessions, but it also made a few withdraw and become more reflexive and less engaged. This may have been to do with too much exposure to the unfamiliar, being overwhelmed, or not having enough support, important themes I will return to later.

(2) Making Space for Emotions and Free Thinking: The 'Autonomous Reflexive Journal'

In year two of the course, I built on the above by formally dedicating 25 per cent of the assessment to what I called the 'Autonomous Reflexive Journal'. For this students had to engage with an outside group, campaign or event which were connected to the course themes and reflect on what happened and what the themes of autonomy and sustainability meant to them in light of these engagements.

I felt this kind of engagement is crucial as it allows us to connect to knowledges which are embedded in everyday emotions. These emotions rarely come from academic books or classroom experiences, but come from direct experiences, especially those laced with an air of injustice. Such emotions are often undervalued or actively discouraged during formal teaching. They do not sit well in the rational classroom, nor do they bode well for assessment. But tapping into these emotions helps us to understand our own positionalities, and to empower people to learn for themselves and uncover their own realities.

In terms of assessment formats, I told them that criteria were rigour of reflection, evidence of engagement and quality of presentation. I told them they could use whatever format or medium they liked for their journals as long as it took about the same time as a 1500-word essay. This caused much disquiet. Many were genuinely worried about what the engagement would mean in practice. Almost all voiced concerns about the level of freedom and lack of parameters. Even though I stressed they could engage with whatever they saw fit, from growing your own food to writing a zine as well attending a meeting or a demonstration, many still thought there was a subtext and what I really wanted was that they get involved with 'anarchists'—or at least something illegal or dangerous. All I wanted was to give them space to genuinely express themselves in the way they wanted. One student reflected on her concerns in her journal:

> I found myself in an unfamiliar situation. Beyond even the course themes, the extra curricular activity and the idea of the reflexive journal concerned me. I appeared to being asked to take part in and subscribe to an ideology I did not share. (Rebecca)

From this kind of starting point, it was clear that many students had to challenge themselves to engage externally. In the end, most students took the task seriously and sought out something to do. Engagements included:

- volunteering in Oxfam for a day;
- helping the student group 'Green action';
- involvement in 'Hands off our Hill' demonstration, Nottingham;
- attendance in anti-tuition fees demonstration, London;

- attendance at anti-British National Party demonstration, Leeds;
- attendance at a Stop Climate Chaos lobby, London;
- Visit to the annual anarchist bookfair, London;
- Creation of a zine about local food;
- a newsletter about anti-fascism;
- a poem about corporate responsibility.

For many students it was the first time they had got involved in a group or a campaign. The breadth of engagements and passions took me by surprise. A few stand out. One student passionate about fair trade embossed her journal on a pair of jeans, the words calling for more action for trade justice spiralling up and down each leg. A group went to an anti-British National Party rally while Nick Griffin, its leader, appeared at a local court for allegations of inciting racial hatred. They made a video of the day and interviewed participants from both sides. One student put up posters in the students' union questioning the role of fair trade in alleviating poverty. Another made an intervention about war and the role of corporate media in our lives. She made a poster depicting a tank with the word 'think' coming out of the gun barrel. Below it she scrawled an adaptation of the classic quote of anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon: "To be governed is to be watched, inspected, spied upon, directed . . . " (Figure. 1). The informal style was used to attract people's attention. I remember seeing the poster and being intrigued, but when I later found out it was one of the autonomous engagements I was thrilled.

Another group of students collectivized their efforts to 'subvertise' a local billboard—literally the process of changing the meaning of a billboard through visual/textual additions. I will return to the legal ramifications later. Together they discussed the process, the emotional connections, their motives and the action. They had targeted the clothing multinational retailer Matalan, and on a billboard which stated 'Expect more' added '. . . child labour' with a stencil and spray can (see Figure. 2). One suggested it was the least they could do, considering the enormity of the inequalities they were learning about:

> From a personal point of view very little was sacrificed in order to support the calls to end child labour and bring changes to the way we look after our planet. (Peter)

What the journal created was a space for their geographical imaginaries—and personal utopias—about the future to be given substance. It gave expression to their own ideas and passions which otherwise would have been absent from their degree work in geography.

(3) Developing Strategy and Dealing with Powerlessness: An Anatomy of a Campaign

Teaching about difficult issues such as nuclear proliferation, climate chaos or migration can lead to an overwhelming sense of powerlessness that little can be done to unravel the complexity of the problems we face. Discussing social change can often mean that participants find taking action more difficult because they are surrounded by apathy and denial, think that the responsibility should not lie at their doorstep, or consider that the potential solutions explored would not make sense in their lives. Others will be concerned about the impact taking 'action' might have on their lives—particularly in terms of jobs, housing and children.

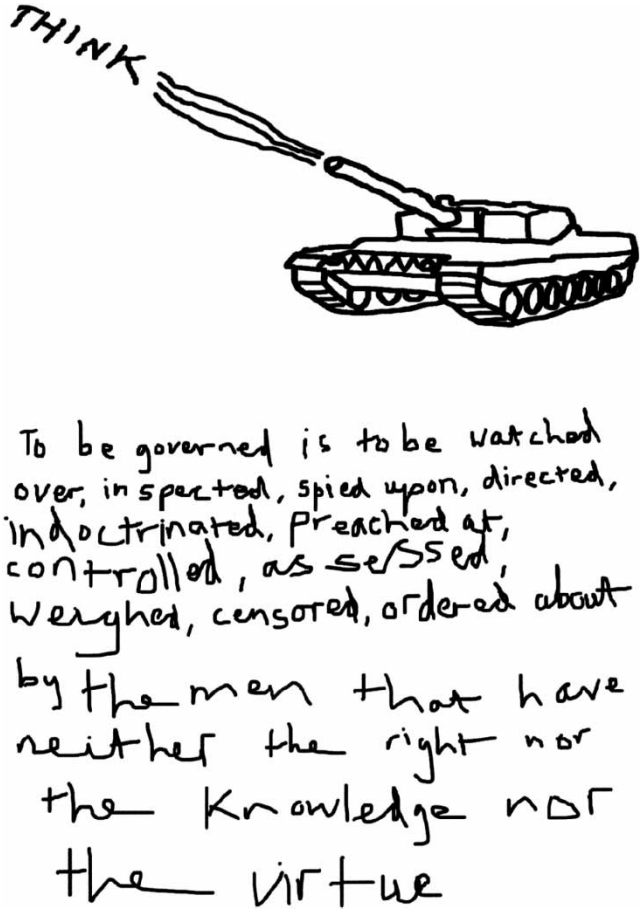

Figure 1. To be governed poster

As Freire (2004) pointed out, while change is difficult, it is possible. Liberatory education must strive to instil curiosity, vision, hope and utopia (Solnit, 2004). It needs to resist the dominant fatalistic ideology that reduces education to technical training rather than a project of self-realization and intervention. Developing our utopias means *denouncing* how we are living and *announcing* how we could live (Freire, 2004, p. 105). There are a number of ways in which we can confront these problems: by collectively building up understandings of issues, discussing examples in which people have struggled and won, focusing on workable alternatives, developing practical action and campaigning plans that identify small achievable aims, breaking down issues into manageable chunks, or providing further resources. The art lies in the ability to make connections and establish bridges between people's everyday realities and what they can start to think is possible in the future.

One of the assessments I set the students was how to construct a campaign. It is important to do this systematically and to think about all the stages and ingredients. In my work with Trapese we have developed a methodology called an 'anatomy of a campaign'. We begin with the outline of a body where different parts represent different phases

Figure 2. The Matalan subvert

of a campaign. I ask the students to identify these and write them on the body. During several sessions we have built up an understanding that the main phases would include: the heart (passion for the campaign), brain (researching it), eyes and ears (listening to and observing the issue), mouth (communicating), arms (outreach), stomach (resources), legs (doing the action), and bum (sitting down and evaluating afterwards). Figure 3 is an interpretation of this structure by one of the students.

I then ask the students to form groups and develop a campaign based on these phases. This gives them an opportunity to think it through from idea to implementation, considering how they would practically formulate, communicate, resource and undertake it. Many campaigns have been proposed over the sessions including:

- closing down US military bases in Yorkshire;
- setting up a food cooperative;
- developing a community TV channel;
- reducing the number of cars in Leeds city centre;
- abolishing student tuition fees;
- a campaign against airport expansion;
- setting up a recycling scheme in student neighbourhoods.

Many of these campaigns were hypothetical but some did arise from activities that students were already involved in such as neighbourhood recycling and the food cooperative.

(4) Building Solidarity and Cooperation: The Course Spokescouncil

Competition permeates education, not merely through how we teach and assess, but also through how education is used to prepare students for compliance within a hierarchical job market. Using teaching to counter this and develop relations based on solidarity is key to any liberating educational project. Solidarity is different from charity and aid. While these often provide essential relief, they are rarely designed to break the chains of dependency and empower people to take control of their own lives. Putting solidarity into practice means wanting to be involved in change, and to be on the side of the marginalized, to work

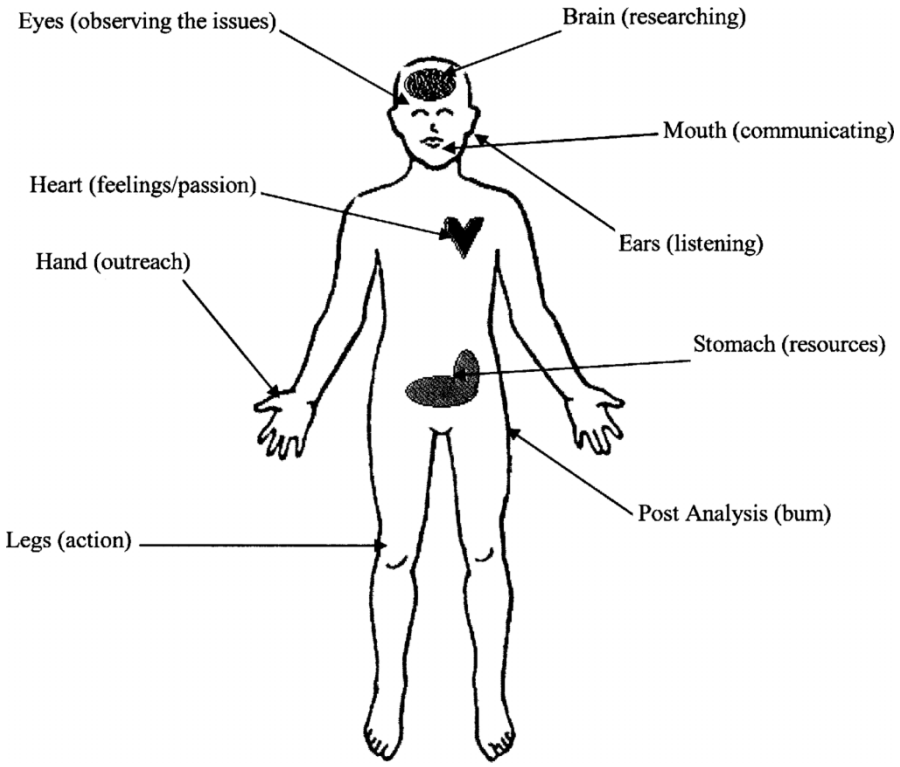

Figure 3. An anatomy of a campaign

with them and develop common goals. By learning about our place in the world it becomes difficult to sit on the sidelines.

In every moment of teaching, we need to ask ourselves: Are we promoting explicit, cooperative ways of interacting which are rooted in a deep desire for mutual aid and group support, to develop a sense of care and responsibility for others, even those we might not even know? What we are asking students is to reject and challenge the taken-for-granted dominant ideology of education based on hierarchy, individualism and competition, not just in themselves but in others as it arises. bell hooks (2004, p. 98) suggests that "the purpose of education is not to dominate or prepare students to be dominators, but rather to create the conditions for freedom". As hooks (2004) strives to point out, teaching the value of connections teaches us the value of community and how we can live in this with others. This is no easy task.

I planned to end the course using a technique called a spokescouncil. A spokescouncil is a way of making decisions by consensus in large-group situations. Because of the need to reach agreement, it is useful for drawing out group solidarity and trust. We explored consensus as a form of direct democracy which seeks to be inclusive and reach agreement without resorting to majority voting or representative forms of democracy. It has been used widely by social movement groups, especially the peace and environmental movements, where large numbers have to discuss and adopt proposals. The spokescouncil was a means by which the students could break into affinity groups of around six people.

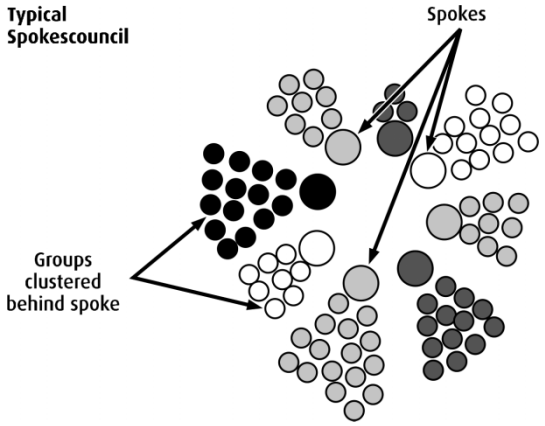

Figure 4. A model Spokescouncil. *Source*: Seeds for Change

Each group chooses a 'spoke' to represent them in the larger discussion, and the spoke rotates during different stages. Figure 4 shows a typical spokescouncil layout.

In these groups they discussed and formulated proposals under the heading: 'How would you design the third-year teaching curriculum in the School of Geography?'. This was chosen as it was something they could all develop proposals on and that they had a shared concern about. I stressed to them that the aim of the spokescouncil was not for each group to try and encourage the other groups to adopt their proposal, but to consider the pros and cons of each proposal and select the one(s) which seemed the most useful, practical and workable. After we had heard 12 proposals, in the final summing up, they opted for merging the best elements into one proposal (see Figure. 5). These were then submitted to our Director of Student Services who took them to the staff–student committee for consideration. Some have been acted upon, including addressing student space in the department, feedback for assessment and interactive sessions. More important than the content was the process. Almost all of the students fed back that they found the chance to debate and discuss proposals in this format hugely rewarding, and that they saw the value of using consensus to find agreement on issues in large groups.

Dealing with Doubt, Insecurities and Institutional Constraints

As students depart and we lose contact, it is difficult to know how our encounters affect them. Rather than give them a recipe book for change, I wanted to instil in them a sense of possibility that they can, and should, intervene in the world around them. The terms of these interventions are key. What also becomes central is crossing borders outside their own comfort zones and privileged lives to those struggling more directly against daily oppression. The students were a particular cohort—all white and from the UK apart from one, mostly 21 years of age, from moderate-income families. Clearly, this group is going to articulate a set of political values mainly shaped by their recent schooling, families, peer groups and consumer cultures rather than extended engagements or experiences with those involved in social struggles. They recognized they were socially comfortable, and also recognized they had the privilege to critique and think. The more vocal ones included

How would you structure the third-year BA course?

Main proposals from the GEOG 3920 Spokescouncil (7 December 2006):

Structure

- Bi-weekly seminars to accompany each module where appropriate (or workshops). These seminars should be compulsory, with a register taken to ensure attendance. If attendance is poor, the students concerned would be penalized.
- A two-hour timeslot to be reserved for every student within the school (or across the university) to ensure there is a generic time available for group work and DSG meetings.

Module Content

- A broader spectrum of modules, allowing for more choice in compulsory blocks especially, and a wider range of optional modules.
- A second *more affordable* field trip, with more spaces available than Chiapas.
- Guest speakers invited from external organizations and especially from other departments within the university (e.g. Sociology, Politics).

Links between departments within the university to offer a list of complementary elective modules and to harmonize assessment.

Assessment

- More time between spacing of exams.
- Dissertation poster: There should be an emphasis from DSG tutors that the *presentation* of the poster will be assessed (not just the academic content). The proportion of assessment should be reduced from 20% to 10%.
- Assurance that all work is and will be double-marked.
- Option to submit work online—user and environmentally friendly!
- Optional assessment—students can choose their proportions of assessment for exams and essays, within reason. For example 40% essay, 60% exam or vice versa.
- Possibly a four-pronged approach to module assessment
    - Essay
    - Exam
    - Presentation
    - Debate

Contact Hours

- A personal tutor for the duration of the degree, with official channels to change tutors/complain. Tutorials should follow clear guidelines to ensure some moderation of content.
- Increase general amount of contact time in third year. Some students only have two hours in university per week! (Expensive!)

Figure 5. Proposal from spokescouncil

those who had travelled in a gap year, those from politically aware or active family backgrounds, and one student from Palestine who was politically active on campus. As we often find, the women were more vocal and confident with new ideas.

How did the students respond overall to the module? Early in the course, initial concerns were raised about the ideological subtext of the course—that this was not value-neutral teaching, but almost a form of indoctrination. Some asked me if I expected them to be 'fast tracked as activists within 10 weeks'. Even though I stressed that I wanted to create an open and safe space for debate, most still thought that I was pitching from a particular

base—that of radical activism and anarchism. We talked about this, reflecting on whether they thought any of their other courses had an ideological focus or whether they were value neutral. I wanted them at least to get a sense that I was being honest about my reasons for undertaking this module.

It is fair to say that at least half the class voiced concerns about feeling uncomfortable or inadequate in the first few lectures due to the novelty of both the content and the process. One student reflected in her journal:

> In the first few lectures, I think I probably did a lot of eye rolling and I was a little cynical about the idea of autonomy and the way in which I was going to learn about it . . . When I realized that I partake in an autonomous activity almost everyday, I was shocked. I had never considered myself a rebel! (Sarah)

Clearly, they picked up that there might be a typical student associated with the course, and some felt uncomfortable if they did not fit in with this stereotype. Some of the most interesting comments came from students who felt a real distance from the module content and were the least aware of the political world around them. One stated:

> I am hugely interested in the issues that face the world today, but like many others out there, can turn a blind eye to the problems when it is not put in front of me. It was not an attempt to ignore the bigger picture, but just a case of forgetting. In an attempt to broaden my knowledge and outlook on society and world issues I naively signed down for the 'autonomous geographies' module. If I am to be honest, I felt way out of my depth in the first lecture, surrounded by knowledgeable students voicing genuinely concerned arguments. As they stood up and announced meetings, talks and protests that they were involved with, it all became far too obvious that my excuse of having too little time was just a lame excuse for laziness. (Robert)

Many students remained sceptical or threatened and numbers went down by 10 after the first lecture. Those that stayed did so, I assume, due to either apathy, fascination or a desire to get involved. Throughout the module, there was real evidence of reflection and maturation, especially in terms of the practical engagements that really challenged many of them. One journal entry explained how:

> . . . on reflection I can see that my ideas were simplistic and stereotypical. This course has challenged my preconceived ideas and has enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the issues through discussion, reading and most importantly practical experience. Without this course I wouldn't have engaged with an autonomous group which inspired me to think more about putting these ideas into practice. (Jane)

One fascinating avenue of discussion related to feasibility and implementation. At certain points I felt that the students wanted me to convince them that this barrage of new ideas could actually work. Even the more politically mature students remained sceptical:

> When I first encountered and begun to understand the premise of what Autonomy and Activism was 'all about', I must admit I was sceptical. Although a self

> proclaimed leftie in regard to my political stance, I questioned the practicalities and entire notion of its implementation. (Mark)

In the final lecture, we had an open discussion about the possibilities of the ideas of autonomy, self-management, mutual aid and cooperation. Although there was an agreement that ideas such as self-management should be developed and are workable at a small or local level, there was less agreement that they could be scaled up to higher levels. They saw the worth of consensus decision-making during the spokescouncil, for example, but could not see its applicability or relevance outside a small group. They wanted to see workable, and relatively widespread, alternatives in action and when they could not find many they felt frustrated and questioned the entire feasibility of self-management and mutual aid. The process which some students went through also caused them a certain amount of anxiety and insecurity. One student commented to me: "Looking at the problems of the world, I despair. Ignorance was bliss." Another reflected on how he felt he was not up to the task of social change:

> ... why am I not participating fully in such activities? I'm being selfish and conscious of it ... will I do more in the future? I don't know. It takes brave people (with power) to make a difference. I don't feel brave enough to step out of my normal lifestyle. (Martin)

These are very challenging moments which need responses, and often require more time than the module can offer. A first response involves discussing and finding workable examples now and in history that can inspire and overcome powerlessness, a second requires developing tactics and capacity for campaigning and developing one's own alternatives. The following student journal extract reflects this kind of response:

> My views on the areas covered in this module before we started were that mostly of ignorance and also that a lot of it seemed to be just an ideology that would never happen. I personally felt that either the ideas were fantasy, or that even if the ideas could be used then what difference could 100 people or whatever the number is have any possible effect on the world. But I have realized that this is not necessarily true at all. I have found it hugely inspiring to hear about communities sorting themselves out. (James)

I would like to think that *Autonomous Geographies* has had a lasting influence on some of them. There are some examples of extended engagements beyond the module: a few have now gained careers in full-time campaign groups, acting as researchers or interns with small non-governmental organizations and campaign groups, others are involved in projects like a student-run food cooperative, a local social centre, and a local squat which houses asylum seekers. A few others went on to set up 'Leeds Student Social Forum', which met weekly to discuss and take action on a range of issues, most notably a campaign to stop student unions buying Coca Cola due to their oppression of Colombian Trade Unionists, and involvement in anti-debt campaigning in the lead-up to the Group of 8 summit in Scotland in 2005. Some approached me about teaching this type of material at Master's Level and subsequently I have developed a Master's programme called 'Activism and Social Change', which started in 2007.

Having said all this, there are growing institutional pressures that bear down on this kind of teaching, which makes it more difficult and creates a number of constraints. First, teaching for social change depends on the commitment and passion of those who teach it. It is for those who are passionate about getting students involved in social change, and is not a 'bolt on' to other topics. Moreover, building up awarenesses and competences for social transformation depends on trust, patience and time, much of which may not suit the rhythms of the classroom, curricula and semester. Radical educators need to be aware of this and find ways not to overburden themselves or disappoint students while at the same time remaining connected to the highly engaged nature of liberatory education. Assessment is probably one of the most difficult areas to innovate away from institutionally set norms. To date I have not found ways to promote equality and cooperation through grading whilst at the same time responding to students' real desires for absolute grades and rankings which they will use in the labour market.

Second, there may have been an element of good fortune to the establishment of this module, and other departments or universities may be less receptive. Radical scholars and centres, both in the USA and UK for example, have been restricted in their activities.[7] In this case, my institution is happy to support me as long as there is evidence of demand. I would urge other radical scholars to develop similar teaching in their institutions. Isolated examples always come under greater scrutiny, while there is safety in numbers. However, as Castree (2002) has noted, academic labour is being restructured in the corporate university and the extent to which radical, unorthodox—or even more engaged—teaching practices can survive in the future is an area of concern. In this sense, there is a raft of new mechanisms which may prove to be obstacles for radical education. The first involves the growing risk assessment culture where all off-campus activities for staff and students is subject to strict risk assessments. Some of the activities mentioned earlier, especially those which verge on the illegal, will come under intense scrutiny in such assessments. Further, the shift from departmental- to faculty-level proposal and review processes for new modules may water down unorthodox module ideas.

Inspiring Hope, Freedom and Transformation

Teaching for social change is not a new tradition, but it is one that has an ambivalent relationship within the contemporary discipline of geography. The work of many geographers falls squarely on supporting the status quo—be it aping and condoning the logic of government policies, corporate profits or policy harmful to communities and the environment. Others have sought to stimulate debate on many critical issues, but leaving students and themselves without the capacity to engage in active social change. Others again have sought to bring campaigning and social change into their teaching, using the world around them, in all its complexity, difficulties and messiness, to both understand and intervene.

This article is a call for our teaching in geography to act as extended conversations between equals concerning the possibilities of change. Rather than fixed answers, I have tried to develop a 'pedagogy of possibilities' where the students do not rely on the teacher as expert but can articulate their futures in unimagined ways (Grossberg, 1994). My students showed me many through our engagements. What I have learnt is to have faith in their desire to engage, and to push them to do so, mainly because it is extremely rewarding. What I saw in my students was proof of a huge amount of talent and commitment which,

if directed towards social justice, can have a real impact on the immediate surrounding world.

These are just starting points. More sustained work needs to be done to build up trust, understanding and empathy about the problems we confront. There are many great online resources that can help.[8] The new MA in 'Activism and Social Change' is also part of this, as is the Trapese book *Do it Yourself: A Handbook for Changing our World* (2007). When learning together with students, there is a huge capacity to critically intervene and learn how to take control of our lives. This does not easily fit into the university curriculum, but for those who do teach in higher education it is still possible. The passion underpinning popular education is in revealing the possibilities for achievable alternatives to what we have now, and building connections between communities for justice, equality and solidarity. As we face unprecedented ecological, social and political crises and the weaknesses of responses to them, building capacity amongst ourselves becomes not just a worthy pedagogical pursuit, but also a matter of survival. In the glare of these crises, it is vital we instil this passion for, and possibility of, change through our educational work.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Kim Bryan and Alice Cutler, co-founders of Trapese, who have helped inspire his educational work. Some of the materials featured here appear on the group's website (http://www.trapese.org)

Notes

[1] The G8 comprises the UK, USA, Canada, Italy, France, Japan, Germany and Russia. As the leaders of these countries met, we embarked upon an educational tour of the UK, Ireland and Europe comprising about 30 dates with students' unions, church, peace and campaign groups. Our focus was not just understanding what was happening, but illuminating workable alternatives and how people could empower themselves to take action and organize themselves where they lived. We helped with action planning, forming campaign groups, and empowering people to get involved in civil society mobilizations in Scotland as well as to develop their own alternatives.

[2] All student names have been changed.

[3] This tradition continues today in Latin America in the popular assemblies, occupied factories and unemployed workers' group in Argentina, the autonomous municipalities of Chiapas, Mexico and the Bolivarian circles of Venezuela. What they are attempting to keep alive in the face of neoliberal economic policies and market-based forms of governance is a sense of the structural inequalities that neoliberalism rests upon, how these pervade our lives, and importantly what the possibilities are for resisting them.

[4] David Gribble has documented free schools all over the world like Mirambika in India, the Pestalozzi School in Ecuador and Sudbury Valley School in the USA. Many were inspired by the Folk or Little School system in nineteenth-century Denmark, where at their height in the mid-twentieth century they accounted for nearly 10 per cent of school children (Shotton, 1993).

[5] The initial work of Highlander connected it with the labour movement, helping workers to organize. By the mid-1960s the school was central to the civil rights movement organizing literacy classes in poor black communities, teaching them to read by using the Declaration of Human Rights. Participants have included Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, the latter sparking a desegregation movement by being the first black woman to refuse to give up her seat on a bus. Through Myles Horton, Highlander has become famous for an approach where ordinary people have the ability to understand and positively change their own lives (see Horton & Freire, 1990).

[6] See for example Kathryne Mitchell's forthcoming special issue in *Antipode* 'Becoming a public scholar', the session at the 2006 at Royal Geographical Society conference 'Public Sociologies, Public Geographies?' and Michael Burawoy's (2005) calls for a public sociology, and the People's Geographies project led by Don Mitchell at Syracuse University (http://www.peoplesgeographies.org).

[7] For example the David Graeber associate professor of anthropology at Yale University, USA, was declined an extension of his contract due to his alleged engagements in politically motivated direct action, Professor Ward Churchill was dismissed by the University of Colorado for comments about victims of 9/11, and the Centre for Human Ecology was closed by Edinburgh University in 1996 for research into mining companies in Scotland.

[8] Useful websites include the following:

2002 Education Facilitators Pack http://www.web.ca/acgc/issues/g8
Trapese Collective http://www.trapese.org
Highlander school http://www.highlandercenter.org/
Pop Ed for human rights http://www.hrea.org/pubs/
Interactive tool kit http://www.openconcept.ca/mike/
Centre for Pop Ed http://www.cpe.uts.edu.au/
Catalyst Centre http://www.catalystcentre.ca/
Institute for Social Ecology http://www.social-ecology.org/
Project South http://www.projectsouth.org/
Education Otherwise http://www.education-otherwise.org
Development Education Assoc http://www.dea.org.uk/
PoEd News http://www.popednews.org/
Laboratory of Collective Ideas http://www.labid.org/
Rethinking Schools http://www.rethinkingschools.org
Eyes on IFIs http://www.ifiwatchnet.org/eyes/index.shtml
Carbon Trade Watch http://www.tni.org/ctw/
Undercurrents http://www.undercurrents.org/
Beyond TV http://www.beyondtv.org/

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