

**PART TWO**

## Alternative Intellectualism

In this week's session of Radical Sunday School, we took time to reexamine the myth that being an intellectual and being involved with universities are one and the same. We started our session with a brainstorm, letting anyone speak up about what being an "intellectual" meant, in their own experience. Right off the bat, someone burst out "elitism", which certainly made us chuckle, but then the conversation started to roll a bit. We talked about how intellectuals usually worked within the written word, reading and writing books and articles and essays. We heard that intellectuals tended to form groups all engaging in the same kind of conversation with each other over time – the word "tradition" and "canon" were common here. One participant pointed out how intellectuals often serve ideological projects. Many of us discussed whether an intellectual needed to have a university degree, or to teach. Are all scientists intellectuals? Are all intellectuals scientists (the answer seemed to be no on both counts). Lastly, we spoke a little bit about public intellectuals, and how those connect to the broader idea of intellectualism.

After our brainstorm, I started my little lecture, reminding everyone that I'm politically opposed to hearing too much of my own voice, and that they should speak up whenever they have a thought. To begin analyzing the relationship between universities and intellectuals, I brought up the Marxian concept of primitive accumulation. While I'm certainly no expert on the topic, my understanding is that primitive accumulation the process that divided society into a capitalist class and a working class. As the story goes, at the tail end of feudalism, the ruling classes of society began to violently gather up resources from their communities and environments which used to be owned in common. These resources, now held in a small number of hands, provided this new capitalist class with the economic and political power they now enjoy.

Primitive accumulation is closely related to other kinds of privatization, standardization, and capitalization that we see in other aspects of society. I discussed how play, the kind of unstructured, spontaneous activity humans engage in everywhere, was standardized into sport, where formal rules, professional equipment, and competition became hallmarks. Exercise, once enjoyed by anyone in a supportive community, was similarly locked into closed gymnasiums, accessible now only with subscription. The most famous example of primitive accumulation in the English-speaking world is the enclosure of the commons. While for millennia, the peoples of what is now England would farm communally on public lands called "commons", beginning in the late Middle Ages, gentry who were "given" land by the king would "enclose" their parcels of land, blocking them from use by the peasantry who supported themselves on the commons (i.e. "commoners"). Now that these peasants had no land to farm on, they'd need to sell their labor as farmers in order to live.

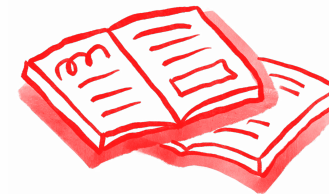
of burnout in testimonies of dozens of struggling academics, university workers, and students, Pope-Ruark gives us a damning indictment of the soul-crushing psychological conditions of modern academia. As we explore the major causes of burnout in the university, we learn how the capitalist pressures of the research community, along with widespread cultural understandings of intellectualism make higher education a minefield of abuse, impostor syndrome, and atrocious working conditions – and that's just talking about tenured faculty!

**Staley, D. (2019). *Alternative Universities*. Johns Hopkins University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1353/book.66169>**

Questioning the traditional wisdom of why we attend universities today, Staley challenges his readers to open their minds to what learning might look like if we were free to try new things. What if universities gave their students hands-on experience in the kinds of jobs they wanted to do? What if our education system understood the importance of play in human life? What if the free exploration of curiosity was something academia actually valued, rather than just co-opted with the buzzword "interdisciplinarity"? Staley asks us to dream big, and live like we're already free.

**Weil, S. (1959). *Reflections on the right use of school studies with a view to the love of God*. Fontana Books.**

Don't be afraid of the Christian language that anarchist Simone Weil uses. Her essay on the use of school studies is an inspiring piece detailing how learning and study practice attention. Attention, to Weil, is no less than the ability to take note of affliction, to reality itself, and the practice of doing Good. If you are wondering what the point of learning might be, this is a beautiful suggestion.



**Haworth, R. H., & Antliff, A. (2012).** *Anarchist Pedagogies: Collective Actions, Theories, and Critical Reflections on Education.* PM Press.

A collection of essays exploring the history, present, and future of anarchist approaches to education. Topics include the connection between anarchist principles and pedagogy, the history of alternative learning within social movements, an ethnology of street medics, a survey of Free Skools, feminist psychology in pedagogy, and reflections on fighting the university... while being employed by it!

**Jacoby, R. (2000).** *The Last Intellectuals.* Basic Books.

A history of how the rise of the research university following WWII wiped out the entire idea of an independent public intellectual in the United States. With cities becoming unaffordable, critical essayists, playwrights, and journalists were forced to look for other sources of income... often settling into academic jobs and losing their radical edge. Where previous generations produced thinkers like Plato, Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx, in the age of the university, intellectual discourse has become technical, specialized and incredibly boring, as academics compete for grants, clout, and citations.

**Meyerhoff, E. (2019).** *Beyond Education: Radical Studying for Another World.* University of Minnesota Press.

Why do so many, even on the Left, take education to be an unalloyed good? Meyerhoff tries to break the spell of the “romance of education” by showing us the counter-revolutionary history of many features of Western education. Drawing on his experience in the Experimental College of the Twin Cities (EXCO) in Minnesota, he also explores practical directions for learning beyond our traditional ideas of “education”.

**Pistor, K. (2019).** *The Code of Capital: How the Law Creates Wealth and Inequality.* Princeton University Press.

Not related to education directly, but an account on the connection between law and capital. Important for discussions related to neoliberalism and the re-regulation of the economy by governments. Rather than viewing government and markets as separate entities, this book shows explains their entanglement.

**Pope-Ruark, R. (2022).** *Unraveling Faculty Burnout: Pathways to Reckoning and Renewal.* Johns Hopkins University Press.

Drawing on her own experience with burnout, as well as the anonymous testimonies of dozens of struggling academics, university workers, and students, Pope-Ruark gives us a damning indictment of the soul-crushing psychological conditions of modern academia. As we explore the major causes

We discussed more examples of similar “enclosure” people had seen in their lives. We touched a little bit on what has been called “digital enclosure” when someone brought up the example of YouTube: just a few years ago, there were hundreds of independent, amateur creators making all sorts of amateur videos, but it seems that more and more, the space has become professionalized, with larger, better-funded channels squeezing out attentional space and access to add revenue. I continued along with my lecture, arguing that universities have enacted the same kind of social enclosure on intellectualism. Where there once was plenty of open, public space for people to engage in ideas together, the rise of the university in the 20th century has increasingly become the only game in town (at least in terms of public legitimacy) for people who like to think.

I pulled out some passages which spoke about Scottish weavers in the 1700s who were famous for reading as they worked, and then forming book clubs after their shifts were done, to dismiss the stereotype that, until the rise of mass education and university attendance, no one had the time or energy to engage with ideas. Just like there was football long before FIFA, people of the world have been making time to learn and share knowledge long before classrooms and masters’ theses came around. I brought up as well that plenty of the famous philosophers we know from the Western tradition (like Marx, Freud, Nietzsche, and Plato, to name just a few) had no association to the university. They were independent intellectuals, who made their money by selling their writings to an educated public. This isn’t to say that all of this was unproblematic, of course. The “educated public” they wrote to were almost entirely male, exclusively in Europe, and implicit in all the awful things we associate with this. The only point to make here, however, is that they weren’t specialists writing to get into prestigious journals.

Next, I talked about how this proud tradition of an “intellectual commons”, as we might call it, hit a major obstacle in the early years of the Cold War, when a Western focus on technocratic solutions to political problems drove mass investment in the university system. A whole generation of intellectuals who once lived in cheap, rundown apartments in urban bohemia like New York’s Greenwich Village were faced with a choice: they could either keep living paycheck to paycheck by publishing in newspapers and literary journals, hoping to make an impact, or they could take a cushy teaching job in a college town, teaching a few courses, making good money, and earning the respect of a growing middle class who believed in “better living through higher education”. You can guess what they chose.



I wanted to highlight then that the shift from intellectualism outside the ivory to inside had a number of effects on the work being done. Firstly, radical thought couldn’t survive: a threadbare revolutionary scraping

by in a city can write about and, more importantly do revolutionary activism. The same isn't true of a professor who gets their money from a wealthy, well-connected university. Their career and reputation rely on not rocking the boat too much. As a result, while you can find hundreds of Marxist economists and feminist sociologists writing for specialized journals, few will be storming the barricades any time soon. The second major change was towards specialized jargon. In the hyper-competitive world of professional academia, a researcher needs to differentiate their product from all others, and so the best thing one can do is spend as much time in a niche subsubsubfield as possible. Soon, you'll be the world expert on traditional inland basket-weaving practices in 14th century Anatolian refugee communities! A final effect I brought up was how in this period, we came to believe that "intellectual" was the same thing as "academic". Returning back to our brainstorm at the beginning of our session, I asked everyone to consider whether thinking of these two things as the same was still a good view of the world.

After a short break, I wanted to open up the discussion a bit for envisioning new futures. David Graeber wrote an essay called "Anarchism, academia, and the avant-garde" where he wondered about the relationship between academic competition and majoritarian decision-making processes. Anarchists are usually focused on taking action in the here and now, and the need to bring together a large group of people for actions leads them to focus on less on "winning an argument", but finding a way to synthesize everyone's ideas to come to a conclusion. I wanted to know how we might be able to imagine an intellectualism outside the pressures of academic competition. Our conversation spread out quite broadly.

First, we had some reservations about whether complex language in academic works was always a bad thing. Certainly sometimes it was meant in order to impress other academics (the term "obscurantist" came up), but aren't some ideas just complicated enough that we need complicated language to discuss them? Another person responded that while there are certainly some times when complex language is needed (for example, to get away from the simple terms we usually use, which might have ideological baggage), the question usually comes down to the ends of this language: are we showing off, or does this new language lead to real-world change?

Discussions of change brought us back to discussions we had in the first session of Radical Sunday School, and the way that education resembles a religious conversion. What is wanted from an education isn't just that you've memorized facts, but that you've come to see and interact with the world in a different way. From here, the concept of embodied knowledge came up. While universities insist on a very specific way to know the world, through writing and reading, a very important kind of knowledge is ignored. In this way, the Western epistemologies which inform university education really limit our learning. Outside of the West, more emphasis is often placed on the ways we

**Connell, R. (2019). *Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why It's Time for Change*. Monash University Publishing.**

A hard look at the ways that universities exploit their workers, perpetuate the colonial world order, and continue to keep knowledge away from the communities they occupy. Connell writes widely about the colonial history of the modern university system, which extracts information from the Global South to service institutions in the Global North, all the while excluding Southern researchers and worldviews. They also consider the impact of neoliberal capitalism, university workers outside faculty who contribute invaluablely to the scientific institutions of the West, and what a more just university could look like in the future.

**Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism*. Zero Books.**

A classic anti-capitalist introduction asking why it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. While capitalism has flattened consciousness, there are two pressing issues especially that cannot be subsumed into economic operationalism: the climate crisis and the mental health crisis. These are issues hitting everyone, but especially young people, especially in the university – where rates of mental illness are incredibly high!

**Freire, P. (2005). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum.**

Paulo Freire was a radical Brazilian educator. One of the most cited works ever, but none of these ideas are being implemented. Freire practiced an education that resembled the coming together of a community of learners, dialogical engagement over authoritarian teaching, and the stimulation of a critical consciousness.

**Graeber, D. (n.d.). Anarchism, academia, and the avant-garde. In R. Amster et al (Ed.), *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy*.**

<https://libcom.org/article/contemporary-anarchist-studies-introductory-anthology-anarchy-academy>

A brief theoretical discussion about the connection between consensus decision-making and scientific progress, why you don't find many anarchists in academia, how the university turns revolutionary thinkers into cushy academics, and why counter-cultural artists might just be the true revolutionary class...



## STEAL KNOWLEDGE!

These summaries cover some of the things we have discussed. None of our work is finished, we know we are constantly under construction, coming up with new ideas and perspectives. But there is much more to say, of course. As we continue to learning, these writings are going to grow. The connection of fossil fuels and education. The funding of research. The safeguarding of intellectual property. Don't let your schooling get in the way of your education, fellow creatures. Join Radical Sunday School, become a pirate learner. For now, we will leave you with some suggestions for what to read. Feel free to spread this zine around.

Knowledge is to be shared. And if it can't be shared, we shall steal it. Join us or create your own radical learning space now. We are greater than the university.

## TO READ

Ank, I., et al. (2017). *Folk High Schools of the 21st Century: Tradition, Contemporaneity, Challenges for the Future*. ZIARNO.

Not necessarily abolitionist or incredibly radical, but Danish Folk High Schools offer an inspiring alternative mode of learning compared to the traditional university. Education based on community, poetry, and experience. Lots of space for relaxed hierarchies and conscious reflection. Initially proposed in the 19th century as an alternative to the university that would educate a democratic citizenry.

**Berlant, L. (2007). *Cruel Optimism*. Duke University Press.**

Not directly related to education but related to the discourse and affect of neoliberal capitalism. Berlant explains how the economy has eroded social security webs and has now trapped us in a chase for the good life that simply will never come. Constantly chasing the moment where everything is finally okay, we oscillate between heaps of emotion and none at all. Capitalism's optimistic ethos always ends disappointingly.

**Boggs, A., Meyerhoff, E., Mitchell, N., & Schwartz-Weinstein, Z. (n.d.). *Abolition University*. Abolition University. <https://abolition.university/>**

A nifty resource for learning about why and how we should abolish the university system. The movement for university abolition is still quite new, so this website is a living document – we look forward to seeing where it goes!

live in interaction with our communities and environments, and a more expansive definition of intellectual might need to include this perspective.

A final anecdote came from me, relating the story a friend had told me, of a very talented French mathematics student he met when she came to visit his PhD program. This young woman was 21, but had already published dozens of papers in respected journals, and all the best PhD programs in her field (including my friend's) were vying for her affections. In many ways, she was already "winning" at academia, and she hadn't even completed her bachelor's degree. Unfortunately, as my friend told me, this came at a cost: this woman was "miserable to be around". She would spend every conversation boasting about how accomplished she was, complaining that she wasn't getting enough attention from the PhD programs she really wanted to be in, etc. When my friend asked her about her hobbies, she seemed confused by the question: "I study mathematics, and I exercise at the gym," she apparently replied, "you know, a healthy balance". My friend was shocked to discover later on that this student also had taken a number of courses in art history and philosophy, but none of it had seemed to rub off on her personality or behavior. "She just sees it as a game to win," my friend told me, frustrated. Luckily this is just one shocking example, and most academics aren't like this. At the same time, I reminded my friend, he was only meeting this woman because his program had sought her out as a colleague...

Trying to end on a more hopeful note, I was very encouraged by the kinds of conversations we got into during our session this week, and I hope we can keep learning together in coming sessions. As I said to a few people after class had ended, I would love to see us keep imagining new kinds of intellectualism, beyond the narrow model the university shows us. Perhaps we can run skillshares, learn from each other about radical movements around the world, and really build up Radical Sunday School as an intellectual resource where everyone is free to learn, teach, and be together. Maybe we can emulate those Scottish weavers, reading while we work, or the Zapatistas, "questioning while we walk".

## Starting to Build a Free School

In the 28 May session of Radical Sunday School, we began to speak about the future of our collective. So far, we've been spending our sessions reflecting on, exploring, and learning about the ways that formal education and academia reproduce and contribute to a huge number of problems in society. Moving forward, we hope to start engaging in actual concrete actions to fight these problems. While reading groups can be fun, the aim of Radical Sunday School was never to just talk about a better world. We have always wanted to create that better world, by learning defiantly, coming together as a community, and radically changing how we all think about what a school can be!

As a group, we opened the floor to discussing next steps for RSS, and pretty quickly, the conversation turned to the political use of space. One participant mentioned his experience in a Latin American university, where police forces were legally barred from coming onto campus, because this was seen as an inappropriate intrusion of the current political system into what should be a free place to question the status quo. Another participant also brought up the example of UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, or the National Autonomous University of Mexico), which is set up to operate as its own autonomous city, independent of state control.

Both of these Latin American examples can be seen in contrast with most U.S. and (Western) European universities. These universities are typically placed on the outskirts of cities, and set up as expensive, visually impressive, apolitical spaces. This kind of privileged cloistering reinforces many of the values we've talked about in previous sessions: Universities come across as elite ivory towers, beautiful buildings where intelligent "professionals" --- who've earned their place in this Shangri-La with intense intellectual combat --- discuss their specialized fields, far from the messiness of everyday life and ordinary people in the city outside. At the same time, universities are heavily capitalized and policed spaces, where private security forces keep students in line, and various companies compete for monopoly rights on the food students eat, the books they read, and the buildings they live in.

One area where the distance between life inside and outside the university is particularly noticeable is the realm of activism and radical politics. On the one hand, we've all known radical student activists who give up the fight when they graduate and get "real jobs". On the other, as one participant pointed out, activism is often organized amongst university students, meaning that anyone who isn't studying or working at a university will have a hard time getting involved. All of this lead the group to wonder: How could RSS create a place for radical learning that isn't directly reliant on the university, but instead dissolves the boundaries between the campus and the world outside?

Because we are in Amsterdam, after all, occupation and squatting quickly came up in discussion. One source of inspiration was the Amsterdam Autonomous Coalition. The AAC, an activist group working mostly on the campuses of UvA and VU, occupied two buildings this year, intending to establish autonomous zones where students could freely associate and learn together, beyond the reach of police and profits. Some real enthusiasm for finding a building in the city came up, with the hope that we could use such an autonomous place as a kind of learning hub, hosting various educational programs, as well as directing visitors to other radical organizations in the city.

of Radical Sunday School about media, and no one organizing another session needs to be an expert in order to help everyone learn together.

After another short break, Mohamed from City Rights Radio took the time to speak with us about his experiences moving to Amsterdam, working with undocumented migrants, and setting up a podcast. I'll not speak for him, but I can certainly say that I am incredibly grateful for him taking the time to share his story. Mo is an articulate, compassionate man, and his advice and perspective were wonderful additions to our session of Radical Sunday School. I hope that moving forward, this isn't the last we'll be seeing of Mo or Here to Support.



### Sources

Jonathon Rose (2001) *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*  
Russell Jacoby (1987) *The Last Intellectuals*

that change the world, it's groups of amateurs who choose to try things out together, well aware they don't have all the answers. We don't need to look to heroes and saviors; we have each other.

Second, the failure of indymedia to continue to lead the anti-authoritarian charge of the 2000s tells us a lot about the dynamics of social movements. Todd Wolfson, the author of the book that so much of this session draws on, sees this as a failure of in-person organizing. Real people live in the real world, in real communities; a movement that exists primarily online will quickly become an online discussion forum if it isn't grounded in face-to-face connections or doesn't help solve local problems communities face. This is also something we've talked about here at Radical Sunday School. No matter how interesting our conversations might get, we need to focus on how our actions can create the world we want to live in, and act accordingly. I'm certainly very much looking forward to people moving back to the city in the fall, and more active participation in our communities.

A final, related note to make about the role of alternative media is that we need to keep in mind why we're engaging with media in the first place. As April Glaser writes in her Logic article "Another Network is Possible":

*Local corporate media at the time were either ignoring these issues or, if they were covering them, failed to consistently center the voices of the people and communities affected. Our thinking was that it would be awfully hard to change local policy if our neighbors didn't know what was happening, and we couldn't count on the mainstream media to make people understand enough to care. In this way, as grassroots journalists on Indymedia, our work was tactical. We were reporting with an agenda.*

*Other Indymedia organizers and activists I spoke to felt similarly. "Self-publishing is great. I'm into it," an early organizer of Indybay told me, who asked to remain anonymous. "But I feel like the main strength of Indymedia was this idea about tactical media. There's like a purpose to what you're doing that's not just about publishing your story." If you hung around Indymedia types during the early 2000s, there's a good chance you heard the term "tactical media" batted around. What differentiates tactical media from some imaginary idea of pure journalism is that tactical media is made in support of a political project.*

Moving forward with Radical Sunday School, I think it's important that we keep this spirit in mind. Learning is a political project, and if we can focus on what ends we're aiming at, we can cut past that problem one member mentioned of the ever-expanding reading list. I didn't need to read an entire book on anarchist print culture to organize a session

A number of different proposals were made as to what kinds of programs RSS could run (with varying degrees of enthusiasm coming from the crowd), including:

- Skillshares, where people could learn and teach skills like bike repair, tailoring, plumbing, first aid, conflict resolution, legal work, etc.
- "News of the World", where people could learn about radical activism being done in other places, as well as elsewhere in the city
- Weekly research sessions, where people could pick a topic as a group, then do their own research separately, before coming back together to discuss findings.
- A "Want-Ad" board, where people could post skills and knowledge areas they want to develop, and others could sign up to help teach them
- "Standing Uni", a kind of action in which participants occupy university lobbies to teach classes openly to anyone passing by, showing that we don't need fancy classrooms or enrollment to share knowledge

Moving forward, we came up with a number of suggestions for how to implement some of these new directions for RSS. One idea was to contact a number of organizations in the city who do education outside of the university system, to see if we could add them into our network. A number of groups in Bijlmer and the Javastraat were suggested, as well as collectives like Unbubble Academia and the Wereldhuis.

### Social Dynamics in the Classroom

After our check-in, we had a bit of physical movement in the form of light stretching and such (though of course some members chose to abstain, which is always fine). Ever since our last session two weeks ago, I've been trying out some of the guidelines of Horizontal Pedagogy (HP), a style of radical learning organizing first developed during the Nomadic University/Occupy U from 2011-2012. There were a few giggles of course at the idea of moving around during "class time", but as one member pointed out later in our discussions, trying new things can often be a bit uncomfortable. It will be interesting to see whether the group will continue to put up with my requests for physical education before sessions haha.

I started the more verbal portion of the session by asking for two things from everyone: first, I wanted people to try, as we went on with the session, to pay attention to their memories of both classrooms and less formal intellectual spaces (like theoretical discussions), and to speak up if any of the dynamics

we would discuss sounded familiar. Because, as one member mentioned, schools are always embedded within and continuous with our broader society, it shouldn't be surprising that social dynamics at play in classrooms also affect us in the "outside world". The second thing I asked everyone to keep in mind was that this place should be one that encourages us to speak our "half thoughts", and not just the fully formed ones. It's more than likely that if you tell the group one of the "half thoughts" you're having, someone else might have the other half in their head, and we can all learn from their coming together!

The first topic I brought up was the idea of "power". Obviously this is a loaded word, and people will have all sorts of perspectives on what it means, but I focused on the idea of power as "having the permission to speak" (or, put slightly differently, the right to have your opinions heard). In classrooms we can clearly see this concept of power at play: the teacher, traditionally, has priority in talking, and students are expected to share their opinions/worldviews only when the teacher allows them to. We're all unfortunately very aware of how much of our society is based on muffling or ignoring the perspectives of women, queer folks, racialized groups, people with disabilities; the list goes on.

What's interesting is how even in radical spaces which are (as much as possible) free from these kinds of hierarchies, otherwise well-intentioned people can have a hard time resisting the urge to use the kind of "speaking power" that expertise can give us. I recounted the story of Sandra Jeppesen and Joanna Adamiak, two anarchy-feminists who organized a workshop on challenging the notion of expertise. Ironically, they found that,

During the go-around, we spoke to the fact that we resisted the need to reinsert ourselves as experts, to sum things up, or to interpret the go-around through academic frames. Despite the intention to unsettle this performance of academic expertise, we felt conflicting pressures because of the feeling that as anarchist, feminist, female presenters, there was already a structural assumption that we were not experts, and because of this, we would need to assert our knowledge all the more explicitly to be deemed legitimate by participants

As we've talked about before, this coming autumn, Radical Sunday School is going to be moving beyond the kind of weekly discussions we've been having and towards organizing learning spaces on all sorts of topics (a former email listed some, and the discord server has channels devoted to a few already, but the list is very much open, so please feel free to contact us if you'd like to talk about a topic you'd like to learn!). I chose the topic for this week's session because as a collective, we should start keeping our eyes peeled for these kinds of power dynamics in the "classes" we hope to facilitate. After telling the story of Sandra and Joanna, I encouraged members to reflect on their own

Activists invented other media tools to help them in their struggles against capital and the state. In particular, I talked about TXTmob, an early cellphone app that let users send mass SMS texts to groups of protesters so they could communicate in real-time and coordinate demonstrations all over major cities. In 2004, activists swarmed both Denver and New York City, trying to make their voices heard during the Democratic and Republican National Committees meeting there. A TXTmob user could send a short message updating others about where cops were setting up barricades, which streets were safe to move along, and how the mainstream media were covering to protests, and they could organize different conversations using the @ and # symbols familiar from IRC servers on indymedia. TXTmob was a success, but pretty poorly coded, so when primary author of its code, Tad Hirsch, attended a hacktivist gathering later that year organized by the Ruckus Society in Oakland, California, he was happy for the constructive criticism and code review he got from Evan Henshaw-Plath and Blaine Cook, two developers at an early podcasting startup called Odeo. A few years later, Evan and Blaine, along with their Odeo co-worker Jack Dorsey, went on to start Twitter, a massive platform for sending short, real-time text updates to a general public.

In the following decade, we saw the fairly quick decline in indymedia's regular users. By 2008, [indymedia.org](http://indymedia.org) was marginal at best, even within activist circles. A few holdouts, like [athens.indymedia.org](http://athens.indymedia.org), continued to play a serious role in some movements, but the site couldn't maintain the momentum in had in the first decade of the millennium. Meanwhile, what's been called "Web 2.0" took off like a rocket... or a pandemic. Major social media companies like Twitter, Facebook (and its bought-out competitors Instagram and WhatsApp), Reddit, and Tiktok (along with countless others) have rapidly bought up huge portions of the media market, edging out competitors and transforming how we communicate with each other, all while harvesting personal information for use by advertisers and intelligence services. Even despite all the problems these platforms have caused, the genie of participatory media couldn't be put back in the bottle. Movements like Occupy Wall Street, the December Revolt of Greece, the Arab Spring, the Hong Kong Umbrella movement, and the George Floyd Uprisings were all heavily dependent on the coordinated use of social media companies. Even the fact that these various companies subsequently sold protesters personal data to the repressive governments they were fighting doesn't spoil these activists accomplishments.

As something of an epilogue to this discussion, I talked about some of the lessons that have been learned in the decades since Subcomandante Marcos called for an "intercontinental network of alternative communication". First, the history we talked about, of communities coming together to build the networks they needed to fight for themselves and each other, it's a history that harmonizes well with the kind of communal learning we try to emphasize at Radical Sunday School. It isn't solitary geniuses in Silicon Valley garages



public of Chiapas, and publicize their struggle to the broader world, all while evading strict press censorship from the Mexican state.

After a few months of fighting, the Zapatistas reached a peace accord with the Mexican government which allowed them to keep autonomous control of a large portion of Chiapas, as well as remain armed to defend their communities. In an international press conference in 1996, a man named Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, acting as spokesman for the EZLN, explained the crucial role that communication networks had played in their revolution, and told activists the world over that the future of anti-authoritarian struggle was going to need a united front, online:

*We will make a network of communication among all our struggles and resistances. An intercontinental network of alternative communication against neoliberalism... This intercontinental network of alternative communication will be the medium by which distinct resistance's communicate with one another.*

(Subcomandante Marcos, 1996; Quoted in "Another Network is Possible" by April Glaser)

Three years later, in protest of a major World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, Washington in the US, activists fighting in the "Battle for Seattle" took Marcos's remarks seriously when they set up the first Independent Media Center (IMC) in an empty storefront. Working out of their office downtown, activists created an entire media network, with cameras, donated computers, a daily newspaper, and a radio station. Importantly, the horizontal nature of the IMC was focused on helping people participating in the protests to tell their own stories in their own words, letting them upload articles to the newly established [indymedia.org](http://indymedia.org).

Indymedia was an instant hit, racking up 1.5 million unique visitors in its first week online - more than [CNN.com](http://CNN.com)! By 2003, there were over 100 IMCs on 6 continents, producing news in 30 languages. Indymedia and its related networks prefigured many aspects of social media we know today. For example, Indymedia sites would feature a central column on their webpages that would act as a "newsfeed", showing recently posted stories (something Facebook would use to arrange their website a number of years later). Internet relay chat servers were some of the first to use @ to signal direct mentions and # to reference ongoing discussions on the server (as we know, these symbols were adopted by Twitter years later). Most importantly, indymedia was committed to participatory journalism, training and empowering thousands to create the news in a radically different way to the one-sided media that ruled the world for centuries before.

experiences with grandstanding, "intellectual combat", and other gross kinds of power dynamics that they'd seen in their lives. A number of feelings and memories came up:

- A member recalled classes where a few students would go on and on about what they knew, which only made everyone else in the room feel stupid, and not really in the mood to volunteer their own ideas.
- One member recalled the fear they used to feel sitting in class, worried about what would happen if they raised their hand and said something "stupid"
- Another member could only motivate themselves to speak up in class (and risk confrontation with an authoritarian teacher) by being so angry at the nonsense they were being told that they simply couldn't stay silent.
- A few members discussed the gender dynamics at play both in classrooms and among people who'd gone through the educational system: both remembered their mothers being too worried about being called stupid to speak up on intellectual matters, especially if these women had to do so in front of their husbands.

After spending some time reflecting on what it is like to live through these dynamics of power and expertise, we began to talk about different approaches to organizing classes that seemed like they could make the experience less competitive and combative. The first suggestion was something called Problem-Based Learning (PBL), where class is centered around a problem that needs to be solved, and students are encouraged to do independent research outside of class in order to look for solutions. In PBL, as it was described, the teacher would sit in the back of class, rather than standing at the front. Instead of delivering information to their students, they would be keeping an eye out for oppressive dynamics and bringing the classroom discussion back on topic if it drifted out of focus. There was some approval expressed for this approach, and it's likely aspects of it could become a part of classes at Radical Sunday School.

Another suggestion was made that perhaps courses should pay much more individualized attention to each student. Instead of waiting until the first student seems to understand the lesson, and they assuming all the other students do too, maybe we should elevate the goal of making sure that every student in the room is really clear on material being taught.

Conversation then drifted back to problems with PBL. Firstly, such a goal-directed environment can still be very competitive, because students have the opportunity to publicly show off in class how they did the "best" independent

research and found out the “best” solution to the problem. A second problem with PBL was quickly raised, however, that even though this scheme seems more practical than simply learning concepts from a textbook or a teacher, the reality is that PBL still isolates students from the real world. This was called the “passivity” of the classroom. Rather than actually going out and doing something about the problems discussed, the format of PBL was just like traditional education in that at the end of class, students would still be able to go home completely unaffected by the experience. It’s as if the classroom is a bubble, a place where problems can be argued about fiercely... but once the bell rings, we’re left only with the impression that the world hasn’t changed at all.

One of my favorite (paraphrased) quotes from this session was “the world doesn’t seem changeable when you look at it from inside a classroom”. As complicated and thorny and important as the issues are, schools can make us feel like the best we could do is write a paper about it, and hope someone reads it. I certainly have felt this “passivity” in my traditional education, and sadly I wasn’t the only one. One member pointed out that though they had taken many classes on feminism, the history of feminist activism, and the intricacies of feminist theory, they still had to go out and find feminist groups in their area, without any help from their university.

This discussion brought up the issue of “learned helplessness”. As many anarchists have pointed out over the years, a life lived under the State teaches one to rely on others to solve problems for them. Is your sink clogged? Call a plumber. Argument with your neighbor? Call the police. Are you being oppressed? Vote hard and get a politician to fix the government for you. As we move forward in the fall facilitating classes at Radical Sunday School, we should try to keep in mind that learning should literally empower students: that is, it should give them tools they can use to make their lives and the lives of their community better.

Of course, all of us have grown up in this kind of world that encourages passivity, so, as one member asked, how can we help each other learn a new ways of learning that aren’t so passive? For instance, this member brought up the question of embodied learning. We’ve all grown up in a society which believes in a clean split between body and mind, and even when we try our best, we often find ourselves behaving in learning spaces as though we’re all just brains in jars, discussing ideas while sitting still and pondering the unponderable. As we saw at the beginning of the session, stepped outside our comfort zones by involving our bodies in learning can make us a little uncomfortable. So how could we make sure the spaces we create at Radical Sunday School are safe enough to let us try new approaches to learning?

*themselves as participants in a learned international community of sense.*

(Ferguson, pp. 166-169)

Fitting in with the comment one of us made earlier in the session about how stories let us live through the experiences of others, I asked everyone to reflect a little on the situation Ferguson is describing about these lists. We can try to put ourselves in the shoes of some industrial worker back in the 1800s. Maybe we’re in Lyon, or Buenos Aires, New York City, or Rotterdam. It’s been 20 hours of backbreaking labor in some abysmal factory, breathing in toxic fumes, dodging dangerous machinery, and being completely aware that you still can’t afford to pay your rent, because the boss likes wages low. This worker finally gets the chance to sit down and relax for a little time, and he or she chooses to read about making a better world in the pages of an anarchist newspaper one of their neighbors lent them. As awful as their life might seem, they can read this list of other newspapers from all over the world and see they aren’t alone. There are other “bookish poor people”, and would you look at that: they can think and read and write just as well as those cruel bosses and snobby academics! We’ve got a movement together, this worker might think to themselves, and we’re all around the world, fighting the good fight together. If that isn’t an educational thought, I don’t know what is.

After taking a break to drink some tea, use the toilet, stretch and chat, we came back to talk about a second story I wanted to tell, the story of media in our own time: social media. I read a number of interviews that various activists had had with Todd Wolfson, author of *Digital Rebellion: The Rise of the Cyber Left*, and their summaries of his work made it possible to learn quite a lot about the connection between social media and anti-authoritarian social movements.

I began by upturning the classic story we tell ourselves about the origins of social media. We’re all familiar with the image of a single, nerdy white guy (plus or minus a few of his friends) laboring alone in a garage in California, only to explode into the public eye with his invention of Facebook or Apple, Microsoft or Twitter. Instead, as it turns out, it might be more accurate to see social media as ultimately being initiated by a few thousand Mayan peasants throwing a revolution in the early 1990s. On the morning of January 1st, 1994, the day that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) took effect across Canada, the United States, and Mexico, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation) quickly and effectively took control of large portions of Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico. With the logistical support of other alter-globalization activists around the world, the Zapatistas were able to use the internet to coordinate attacks on government targets, communicate with the

to learn and others have to keep their heads down, we take the initiative, come together as communities, and, to quote David Graeber, simply “live as though we’re already free”. As I explained at the time, I’m hoping this rebellious spirit can inspire us as we develop our free skool in the fall: each one of us should feel empowered to come to Radical Sunday School and find a place where they can build knowledge along with their friends, on whatever topics they themselves want to learn about!

The last lesson I wanted to share from *Letterpress Revolution* was about internationalism. Anarchists have always understood that all of our struggles are connected (even if it took them a century or so to realize that by “our” struggles, we mean more than just the struggles of able-bodied White men), so it shouldn’t be a surprise that anarchist media, even in the 1800s, involved journals from all over the world corresponding with each other:

*All three of these journals regularly exchanged issues with dozens or hundreds of other publications, and they periodically published the names of the incoming journals and books. In Keell’s address book from the 1920s, over 350 exchanges were recorded. It is tempting for readers today to just skim such lists or skip them altogether, and to imagine that readers at the time did so as well. Yet I suspect that may not have been the case. Chronically short of funds, why would editors regularly waste paper, ink, and labor on these lists if they were mere formalities? I speculate that these lists, repeated week after week and month after month, in dozens or hundreds of journals in multiple languages, had some political significance.*

[...]



*I find myself drawn to these plain, repetitive lists. Their intellectual weight is palpable. I imagine readers encountering the lists: some would glance past the items, no doubt, but I imagine some readers looking to make sure the material they want to read has come in, maybe making plans to go and read the latest issues or purchase a recently arrived book. I imagine the impact of the weight and cadence of these lists, repeating over and over. The feel of that intellectual heft is part of the anarchist community of sense. These humble lists are an opening to understanding how assemblages work. Substantial time, energy, and resources went into these exchanges, which brought readers of one journal into the network of many journals.*

[...]

*The “bookish poor people” whom Christine Stansell characterizes as the rank and file of the anarchist movement, through lingering on the titles, the languages, the origins of each publication, could locate*

The same member then brought up the idea of Action-Based Learning (ABL), in which we learn by taking part in more traditional activist actions. While this certainly removes the passivity of traditional education, some concerns were raised as to whether this would put too much focus on “getting results”. A problem observed in many activist spaces is the almost capitalistic focus on achieving specific goals, almost as though we have production quotas for activism. If we want to live our lives in opposition to that kind of mindset, then we would need to make space for useless learning as well. If I just want to learn about the history of watercolor painting, am I a traitor to the revolution? And if everything is focused on actions begetting more actions, isn’t there a risk that those who have more experience in activism could end up taking on the role of the enlightened teacher who everyone else needs to listen to, no questions asked?

The final point that was brought up this session was a different perspective on power in learning spaces. Rather than thinking of power as the right to speak, what if we thought about the transformative power of listening? A member brought up the book *Quantum Listening*, which apparently discusses the ways in which a reluctance to listen to other people, to our communities, and to the world at large is one of the main drivers of the injustices we see all around us. First I tied this to some ideas that David Graeber had written about regarding the connection between violence and needing to understand other people (if I need to convince you to do something, I’ll probably have to learn something about your motivations and worldview – but if I can just beat you bloody until you figure out what I want, I’ll never have to understand anything about you). In this way, the kinds of power dynamics we see in classrooms are more explicitly connected to non-metaphorical actual violence. As we’ve seen in the response of police to student protests, clearly the question of who gets to speak is related to armed force, even in our “civilized” “advanced” “developed” country!

Another member described a system called Theory U, which distinguished a number of different “levels of listening”, with basic language comprehension at the top, and profound understanding of the other person at the deepest level. They had found this framework useful in their own life, but worried that bringing up such an “official” perspective might be its own expression of power in our discussion. As we were running out of time, we didn’t get a chance to dive deeper into this idea, but just like all the other ones brought up this session, I hope we can reflect on them soon enough!

### **Alternative Media**

I started the discussion by reflecting a little on all the different ways we learn outside of the traditional institutions of education we so often criticize here at RSS. Learning is such a widespread part of all of our lives, and when we begin

to open our eyes to all the possible ways we could go about learning, the examples never stop. I encouraged the group to brainstorm different kinds of media that we learned through, and got all sorts of responses. We heard about the benefits of stories and other narratives that help us see the world in a new way, about documentaries that literally showed us parts of the world we'd never seen (and perhaps never will see) in person, I spoke of my love of podcasts and how well they fit into my daily life. YouTube came up time and again as an example of an alternative learning medium, and as people familiar with activist spaces, the humble zine was mentioned.

Anarchists, as I've been reading about, have always been experimenting with different forms of media, from the zines passed around at punk shows, to radical newspapers handed around at workers' cafes, to pirate radio run out of old industrial buildings (or literal pirated ships), to posters and stickers wheatpasted around town to remind passersby that they aren't alone in their struggles. My plan for this session was to tell two different stories, and then let our guest, Mohammed from City Rights Radio, lead a Q&A/discussion/chat about his experiences with podcasting and migrant mutual aid. Because there were no other events planned in our space that night, we discussed as a group whether to take breaks between each story, and the consensus seemed to be that breaks were an important part of learning as well. The first story I had prepared to tell at Sunday's session was a very historical one. I'd read the better part of a chapter from Kathy E. Ferguson's new book *Letterpress Revolution: The Politics of Anarchist Print Culture*, and there were some really fascinating parts of this history I wanted to talk with everyone about. First, I talked about the disconnect between our impression of how anarchist ideas were communicated, and how they actually spread around back in the "classical era" of anarchism (1850s-1950s). Quoting Kathy here:

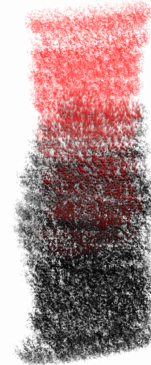
*The classical anarchist movement of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries is known today largely through the work of a handful of thinkers whose writings have remained in, or come back into, print: Peter Kropotkin, Mikhail Bakunin, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Max Stirner, Errico Malatesta, Rudolf Rocker, Leo Tolstoy, Élisée and Élie Reclus, Gustav Landauer, Benjamin Tucker, Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, Voltairine de Cleyre, Lucy Parsons, and a few others. Other anarchist writings often build on these classic works, commonly stating and restating shared principles of freedom, equality, and justice.*

*Yet the daily textual labor of the anarchist movement was done far more in the pages of the many hundreds of journals written and published by small local groups around the world than it was in books. At a few cents an issue, journals were more readily available than books. Journals were carried in reading rooms, bars, and cafés; they were shared by subscribers around kitchen tables,*

*neighborhoods, and worksites. In his autobiography Peter Kropotkin, the grand old man of anarchism, challenges researchers to take up these sources because the movement's "small pamphlets and newspapers" reveal its world: "Socialistic literature has never been rich in books. It is written for workers for whom one penny is money, and its main force lies in its small pamphlets and its newspapers. . . . There remains nothing but to take collections of papers and read them all through—the news as well as the leading articles—the former, perhaps, even more than the latter.*

(Ferguson, *Letterpress Revolution*, pg. 130)

We opened up the discussion here a bit about the pressures we all often feel to read EVERY possible book or article on a given topic before we're allowed to even CONSIDER speaking about it. This kind of pressure often puts us into situations, as one of us noted, where we have an ever-expanding reading list to get through, a situation made even worse by an internet that puts all of these sources practically at our fingertips. I gave myself as an example of this – Kathy Ferguson's book about anarchist print culture is 330 pages long! The prose is pretty dense, so I'm not sure I'd want to read it all, I certainly didn't have the time this week to read it all, and maybe most importantly, there are far more facts in this book than are relevant to the problems I'm facing in my life. I like to believe that "classical" anarchists felt the same way. The next topic I brought up from *Letterpress Revolution* was the way that anarchist media in the 1800s broke down some of the barriers of professionalism that we've talked about so many times here at Radical Sunday School. Again quoting Ferguson:



*Anarchists of letters participated in the break with the world of capitalist labor that Rancière explores in *Nights of Labor and The Philosopher and His Poor*, "a rupture in the traditional division [partage] assigning the privilege of thought to some and the tasks of production to others." Rancière continues, "The French workers who, in the nineteenth century, created newspapers or associations, wrote poems, or joined utopian groups, were claiming the status of fully speaking and thinking beings." Rancière finds in working-class archives not evidence of a separate class-based culture but "the transgressive will to appropriate the 'night' of poets and thinkers, to appropriate the language and culture of the other, to act as if intellectual equality were indeed real and effectual.*

(Ferguson, *Letterpress Revolution*, pp. 133-134)

This kind of knowledge-making really is a kind of direct action, taking the means of learning into our own hands. Instead of following the strict rules laid out by the systems we live under, which tell us that some people are allowed