

Lessons from CideCI Las Casas

The Potential for Non-Directive Learning Spaces in the United States

Gideon "Guillermo" Mausner

SIT México: Grassroots Development and Social Change, Spring 2009

Academic Director: Jonathan Treat

Project Advisor: Gustavo Esteva



Brothers: Humanity lives in the breast of every one of us, and, like the heart, prefers the left side. We need to find her; we need to find ourselves. There is no need to conquer the world. It is enough that we make it again. We. Today.

The Zapatistas
First Declaration of La Realidad
January 1996

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements...3

Contacts...3

Photo Guide...3

Abstract (English)...4

Resumen (Español)...4

Introduction and Methodology...5

Part 1 – What is Education?...6

Part 2 – What is CIdeCI Las Casas?...11

Part 3 – My Experiences at CIdeCI: Learning on the Road to a Localized Praxis...20

Part 4 – The Predicament of Modern Schooling in America...31

Conclusion – The Potential for Non-Directive Learning Spaces in America...39

Bibliography...42

Endnotes...43

Acknowledgements

The essay that follows would not have been possible without the advice, book recommendations and support of my advisor, Gustavo Esteva. To Gustavo, thank you so much for guiding me on this path despite my swine-flu-instigated setback. I would also like to thank Dr. Raymundo, general coordinator of CIdeCI, for allowing me the incredible opportunity to learn at CIdeCI, mirroring the path and footsteps of its students. I extend my utmost gratitude to maestros Manuelito, Fidel, Jesús, and Rafael for warmly accepting me into their midst and sharing their wisdom; to students Juan, Antolín and Eliezer for their kind words and thoughtful guidance; to Ryan Roseman and Mariel Villareal for their support and friendship as we took our first cautious and unsure steps together on CIdeCI's path; and lastly to Jonathan Treat, the director of SIT Mexico, for his guidance, advice and support at every step on my learning path this semester and also for agreeing to read this document despite being double the required length.

Contacts

Gustavo Esteva, Intellectual and activist. Affiliated with Unitierra Oaxaca and CEDI
Email: GustavoEsteva@Gmail.com Cell Phone Number: 951-199-7970

Dr. Raymundo Sanchez Barraza, Coordinador General, CIDECEI Las Casas
Email: sistemaii_cideci@prodigy.net.mx, unitierra_chiapas@prodigy.net.mx
Cell Phone Number: 967-102-0452

Photo Guide

Cover page: Vista from outside my room at CIdeCI

Page 11: Old Road to Chamula with entrance gate to CIdeCI in the distance

Page 30: The path to the Unitierra building on CIdeCI's compound

Page 41: Ryan and Mariel walking away from CIdeCI into La Colonia Nueva Maravilla

Abstract (English)

The purpose of my project was to observe the informal, non-directive and communal learning space of CIdeCI Las Casas in San Cristobal, Chiapas and consider its potential applications in the United States of America. The following paper presents the results of this project in five sections. In the first section I examine the meaning of modern education and its primary vessel, the school. In the second section I give a detailed background of CIdeCI: its history and purpose and its place within the cultural and political realities of Chiapas. In the third section I share my experiences and observations from CIdeCI, showing how its communal format, the skill training it provides and its pedagogical methods all contribute to a localized praxis. In the fourth section I detail the current predicament of compulsory schooling in America, give a brief history of the development of this system, and mention the existing alternatives to it. Finally, in the concluding section, I discuss the potential for non-directive learning and CIdeCI-like spaces in the US of A.

Resumen (Español)

El propósito de mi proyecto era a observar el espacio de aprendizaje informal, non-directivo y comunal que es CIdeCI Las Casas – localizada en San Cristóbal Chiapas – y considerar su aplicaciones potenciales en los EEUU. El papel que sigue presenta los resultados de este proyecto en cinco partes. En el primer parte examino el significado de educación moderna y su vasija principal, la escuela. En el segundo parte doy un fondo de CIdeCI: su historia y propósito y su lugar en las realidades culturales y políticas de Chiapas. En el tercer parte comparto mis experiencias y observaciones desde CIdeCI, mostrando como su formato comunal, la capacitación proporciona y sus métodos pedagógicos contribuyen a un praxis localizada. En el cuarto parte expongo el predicamento actual de enseñanza obligatoria en los EEUU, doy una historia breve del desarrollo de este sistema, y trato sus alternativas existentes. Finalmente, en el parte concluyente, hablo del potencial para espacios de aprendizaje non-directivo y espacios parecido de CIdeCI en los EE UU.

Introduction and Methodology

I arrived in southern Mexico distraught with the path being set for the world by the process of globalization and neoliberal political economy, and uninspired by the political and economic alternatives being thrown around by the American left. Over the first part of the semester I became increasingly interested in the radically different alternative represented by the APPO¹ movement of Oaxaca, the Zapatista movement of Chiapas, and all their sympathizers and co-travelers. I learned that in their daily acts of living these people are making their world anew, protecting their past so that they may have a future.¹ Confused as to exactly what this might mean yet intrigued by what I could learn from it, I decided that I ought to get a glimpse of this world.

And so on May 20th 2009 I made my way to CIdeCI (The Indigenous Center for Integral Training²) Las Casas A.C., an indigenous living and learning community affiliated with the Zapatista movement, located in the outskirts of San Cristobal Las Casas, Chiapas. Along with two fellow SIT students I enrolled in CIdeCI as a learner, signing up for workshops in vegetable farming, carpentry, guitar and shoe-making. Through being a student in these classes and living in the community, I hoped to observe how the functioning of CIdeCI fosters localized praxis and fortifies autonomous ways of living. I also hoped to find ways in which CIdeCI's example might be applicable in the socio-cultural world of the United States. Unfortunately, my time at CIdeCI was cut short due to the swine flu evacuation, but my one short week still led me to some valuable insights about the functioning of CIdeCI and its power as an alternative to the modern institution of schooling. Nevertheless, the evacuation changed my research methodology, supplementing the week of primary "research" as a participant observer with two weeks of secondary research reading radical critiques of education. It is important to make clear that I did not enter CIdeCI as a

¹ An acronym for La Asamblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca, or the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca

² El Centro Indígena de Capacitación Integral

researcher, but as a learner. My sole goal was to learn from *my* experiences at CIdeCI, therefore: I did not interview anyone at CIdeCI or in a government school to find out what people think of the place, nor did I attempt to critique CIdeCI or study its outcomes.

Part 1 – What is Education?

In the modern world, education has come to be seen as a universal good. For the social majorities, the 1/3 of the modern world's population that is “developed”, the process of education is ubiquitous, supposedly imparted on everyone through compulsory schooling. For the social minorities, the 2/3 of the world's population labeled “undeveloped”, increasing education in the form of schooling is prescribed as the “universal formula for salvation.” But what exactly *is* this schooling that imparts education? And is the passive reception of education actually synonymous with the active process of learning?

Schooling and Society

Schooling is a modern ritual, a rite of passage into acceptable adulthood. According to Ivan Illich, education is the “justification in the sight of society” that is necessary to escape “original stupidity.”ⁱⁱ Without this justification one is condemned as uneducated, barred from positions of respect and authority in society and discounted on issues of importance. As such, “Schooling and education are related to each other like Church and religion, or in more general terms, like ritual and myth.”ⁱⁱⁱ Church is the cure for original sin, and schooling for original stupidity. The *myth* of education is encapsulated in the belief that children must be removed from society through the *ritual* of compulsory schooling, in order to learn and be socialized. The reality behind the myth is that compulsory schooling actually serves to impart on children an institutionalized and commodified set of values, perpetuating the creation of *homo oeconomicus* and *homo educandus* out of *homo sapiens*.

Homo oeconomicus, or needy man, is a person imbedded in the global culture of modernity that emanated from the West, in which the basic assumptions of economics have become the faith that underlies social interaction. The most central of these assumptions is the “Law” of scarcity, which defines human wants as unlimited and the means to achieve these wants as limited but improvable. Economists postulate that the law of scarcity has existed since the dawn of time, but although true scarcity has (in the sense of shortage, insufficiency, rarity), the law of scarcity is a myth that was created to describe and justify the commodification of the commons and the separation of the economic realm from the rest of social interaction.^{iv} Capitalism and socialism, with all their seeming differences, are nothing more than alternative allocative systems for “solving” the problem of scarcity. However, in many cultures, the law of scarcity does not exist, since wanting more than you have is considered immoral or foolish. Within the spaces of these cultures only the arrival of “needy man” transformed the natural world into natural resources and the people who inhabit it into laborers and consumers, *creating* economic scarcity.^v

This process, which began in the West with the industrial revolution, spread to cover the entire world through colonialism and ‘development’ and now continues with globalization. The shaping of economic scarcity out of former commons resulted in the creation of *homo oeconomicus*, a person whose life is an attempt to maximize utility in the face of the law of scarcity, out of those who formerly dwelt in the commons. For *homo oeconomicus* the “good life” has become an increasingly larger compilation of economic goods, as living well is linked to an accelerating mimicry of desires, and production of demands equals or even outstrips production of goods.^{vi} The logic of scarcity also spread to non-material things: non-economic actions of wo/men, ingrained and self-satisfied in their daily lives within their commons, were transformed into commodified “needs”. The solution to the scarcity of these new non-material commodities was their provision as services through institutions. As a result, for *homo oeconomicus*, the institutionally provided

services of schooling, healthcare, transportation, and policing are believed to satisfy the needs for education, health, mobility, and public safety that had replaced the self-satisfying actions of learning, healing, moving, and security.

However, even within fully “developed” societies, *homo oeconomicus* cannot be born, only created. School is one of the primary loci of this process, a place where neediness is perpetuated and a belief in scarcity is inculcated. The process of schooling teaches children that they need schooling; that they can only learn through the consumption of this institutional service. In a world where learning is valued only in the certification awarded by degrees and licenses, children are taught to confuse process and substance, to believe that the escalation of an institutional service (process) always leads to greater results (substance).^{vii} Once they have succumbed to this belief in the context of schools, “all activities tend to take the shape of client relationships to other specialized institutions.”^{viii} In this institutional cosmivision, the only way forward is progressive consumption, an endless expansion and escalation of institutional services. As such, for *homo oeconomicus* progress becomes ritualized and sanctified, as the holy grail of human salvation.^{ix} In this way, we can see that *homo oeconomicus* and *homo educandus* are one and the same. To be educated is to be subsumed in the logic of scarcity, where wants are unlimited and values are institutionalized and commodified.

Education = Learning?

Now you might ask, what about learning? Isn't school all about learning? Unfortunately, the greatest tragedy of the institutionalization of values lies in the massive gap that exists between the process and the substance that it has come to signify. In reality school does not necessarily correlate with learning; on the contrary, school's separation from the rest of life and its compulsive, coercive and competitive nature make it a place largely unequipped for learning. In the first place, demarcating learning into a separate realm of society and placing it under instruction is usually

detrimental to its successful achievement. According to Illich, “Most learning is not the result of instruction. It is rather the result of unhampered participation in a meaningful setting.”^x People learn about things and how to do things from observing people doing them and participating in them – in real life settings. Yet the institution of schooling, instead of providing such opportunities, does the opposite, removing the process of learning from the doing of the act, and instead creating an elaborate and manipulative plan for teaching it piece by piece. If the counter-intuitiveness of this process isn’t immediately evident, take a second to think about the two major acts of learning accomplished in early childhood, speaking and walking. Children learn to speak and walk in the presence of adults who constantly speak and walk. It would seem quite counter-productive to remove babies from the presence of speakers and walkers and instead prepare an elaborate method for teaching each verbal sound involved in speaking and each muscle movement involved in walking. Yet this is precisely what schooling does for the learning process.

Compulsory attendance, coercive curriculum and competitive role assignment are three other constitutive aspects of modern schooling that help make it incompatible with learning. According to John Holt, learning only occurs well in scenarios in which learners have chosen to put themselves.^{xi} Good learning occurs through joyful and engaging experiences, which do not materialize in a place in which children are forced to be when they would rather be somewhere else. One also only learns well that which s/he is interested in learning. Therefore a forced curriculum dictating what everyone should learn and forcing them to do so through a system of carrots and sticks is not conducive to the natural learning process.^{xii} Instead of supporting children in their own learning pursuits, school typically teaches children to accept that which they are told and obediently follow what other people want them to do. Lastly, schools, because of their social function of ranking and certifying, are inherently competitive. They have to create “losers” in order to create “winners,” because no one can be gifted and talented or above-average unless others are not. For the

great majority who are not labeled or tracked to be winners this process is detrimental to learning because it creates fear and destroys self-confidence.^{xiii} For all three of these reasons modern schooling is not a particularly good way to learn.

World Outlook

Compulsory modern school systems have not yet expanded to cover the entire planet, an imperfection which development experts, human rights activists and state bureaucrats all around the world are attempting to correct. Despite the gospel preached by these experts, for the social majorities at the fringes of the global system, the advent of schooling only formalizes the status of “uneducated.” 60% of 1st graders starting school this year will not finish high school. For those who do manage to become high school “educated,” the competition and scarcity inherent in the system leaves social privilege to determine access to higher education and the professions stemming from it. Even for those who do manage to receive a college degree, opportunities to use it are few and far between. In Mexico, less than 20% of current college graduates will work in the field in which they studied.

So if schooling does not provide greater “opportunities” for the social majorities, what does it provide? According to Gustavo Esteva, schooling teaches the children of the social majorities to turn their backs on their communities. In the first place, just as it does in the world of the social minorities, education inculcates institutionalized and commodified values. For indigenous children in Mexico this entails a radical break from the past. Whereas their elders teach connection to place and community, school teaches them to “aspire for and approach the centers of power” in order to overcome their “marginalization.”^{xiv} Whereas their communities teach respect for elders and the centrality of local and home economies, schooling teaches a dependence on professional expertise and the centrality of national and international economies.^{xv} Whereas their elders teach continuity of language and tradition and a communal cosmivision, school leads the way towards a

homogenized, individualized culture of consumption while teaching contempt for “illiterate” elders and ignorance of traditional language and custom.^{xvi} Therefore it is no surprise that in Oaxaca Mexico in 1997 a forum of indigenous peoples named the schools as the major tool of modern imperialism and even called the indigenous teachers union, which works for multicultural change within the system, a tool of the imperialist state.^{xvii} It is from a similar repudiation of the modern institution of schooling that CIdeCI Las Casas came into being.



Part 2 – What is CIdeCI Las Casas?

In the early 1980's, Dr. Raymundo Sanchez Barraza arrived in San Cristobal de Las Casas, Chiapas to take up an administrative position in the division of the state educational apparatus focused on indigenous peoples. Himself a mestizo, Dr. Raymundo busied himself visiting indigenous communities to find out about their functioning and their educational needs. He quickly discovered that what the communities desired was a place where they could send their children to learn valuable skills and knowledge that they could bring back to their communities. So Dr. Raymundo, now joined by Maestro³ David Gomez Diaz, an indigenous Tzeltal interested in ecological agriculture, began La Barrada in the center of San Cristobal to accomplish these goals with government money. Unfortunately, in 1989 the government stopped the program and pushed Dr. Raymundo and Maestro David out, because, according to Maestro David, they didn't like the concept of indigenous people learning.^{xviii}

In that same year, with help from the then Bishop of San Cristobal, Samuel Ruiz, among others, Dr. Raymundo (who is now general coordinator) and Maestro David (who is now director of the integrated farm) founded CIdeCI Las Casas to continue the work of La Barrada. However, this time it would exist outside the auspices of government and with the explicit intent of being “an indigenous center in its operation, its definition, in its mode of work, in its components, in those who participate.”^{xix} The organization, based at another spot in the center of San Cristobal, set out to develop a network of regional centers for eco-development. The goal of this network was to train people (with a primary but not exclusive focus on indigenous people) in skills they desired to learn, and then assist them in implementing micro-projects with their newly acquired skills.^{xx} In 2003, after 14 years located on the land of a religious organization in San Cristobal, they were asked to leave because of space constraints. So they found and bought their own piece of land on the

³ Teacher in Spanish

outskirts of the city and the students and maestros began to build the current complex. A year later they moved into the new complex and is has been in operation ever since.^{xxi}

The current manifestation of CIdeCI is a partially self-sufficient living and learning community. The majority of the students are indigenous Tzeltal and Tzotzil of both genders, however there are also usually a sprinkling of indigenous Chol and Tojolabal as well as mestizos and extranjeros⁴ at any given time. Anybody is welcome to attend CIdeCI: there are no qualifications (diplomas, certificates, etc.) or prerequisites, not even the ability to read, write or speak Spanish. Some students and most of the maestros live in and commute from other parts of San Cristobal. However, the majority of the students come from communities much farther away, and so they live on the CIdeCI compound. For CIdeCI students, the weekday schedule is as follows, with each session open for the students’ choice of workshop or class:

Breakfast	8-9
Session 1	9-12
Session 2	12-2
Lunch	2-4
Session 3	4-7
Dinner	7-8
Session 4	8-9

All of CIdeCI’s services are entirely free, and the residential students also receive free room, board and health/healing. In return, CIdeCI asks the students to attend to chores and upkeep during the week on a rotating schedule and participate in a communal work period on Saturday mornings. The residential students have limited access to the city due to time and safety concerns, but on Sunday mornings they are encouraged to go for a paseo⁵ in the center. They are also free to come and go

⁴ Spanish for foreigner

⁵ Spanish for stroll or outing

between their communities at will, and many do choose to return to help out with preparing and harvesting crops or for important fiestas, among other reasons.^{xxii}

Mesoamerican Communalidad

Before we delve into the pedagogy and “curriculum” of CIdeCI, some contextualization of the social reality in which it operates is necessary. The majority of the students come from indigenous communities. These communities see through very different eyes than those of a citizen of modernity. They have an entirely different conception of self: rather than an atomized individual, each person is a knot in a web of relationships.^{xxiii} The radically different way of life implied by this web is what Benjamín Maldonado calls Mesoamerican Communalidad⁶. In his lecture on the subject, Maldonado separated this Communalidad into three parts: community structure, the communal way of life, and communal mentality. The community structure of Mesoamerican society is composed of a strong social fabric, of which one part is “parentesco,” a system of strong bonds between families based on inter-marriage and “padrazgo” (literally godfatherism). This “padrazgo” is central, as each family chooses “padrinos y madrinas” (godparents) for each important social ritual of a child’s life. These godparents become “comadres o copadres” of the parents, bonds as strong as that of blood. As such, strong family-like relationships within indigenous communities are numerous and overlapping, firmly binding the entire community.^{xxiv}

The second part of Communalidad is the communal way of life. In Mesoamerican society, land is held in common by the community, with each family having the right to live and farm on specific plots. This right, however, is tied to an obligation of public service. Each male must serve from 10-15 years of public service in various positions called “cargos”, held at different ages and experience levels, in order to retain his family’s land right. Most of these “cargos” are available to

⁶ Communalidad in Spanish

women (this varies from community to community), but women may not be obliged to serve in the same way. However, the most important community decision-making is not made by any public servant, but rather by the community as a whole in the form of Assemblies, in which each family has one vote. Assemblies are called for all major decisions and the appointment of cargos, and run similarly to the radical democracy of the “New England town hall.” Social works (infrastructure, community buildings, etc.) are completed through *tequio*, community work in which many families participate. As well, when families need to build or fix something, the labor is provided by aid from other families. Importantly, both public (*cargos*) and community (*tequio*) service is not seen as a burden, even though the work is unpaid. *Tequio* is done with joy – a day of *tequio* often ends with a small party – and to hold a cargo is considered a privilege and an honor. The last major aspect of the community way of life is the *fiesta*. *Fiestas* are very common in Mesoamerican culture, with at least six multi-day *fiestas* thrown each year in every community. *Fiestas* bring a form of conviviality to the community, but they also serve as a form of wealth redistribution, since even the poorest in the community eat like kings.^{xxv}

The last part of Mesoamerican Communitality is the communal mentality. The central part of this is the indigenous cosmivision, in which the world is composed of the human, the natural and the supernatural. These realms occupy specific physical locations, and life is seen as *coexistence*, a relationship of mutual respect and nurturance among the three. This specifically differs from the cosmivision of Western modernity, in which life consists solely of the human, which continually attempts to dominate the natural, and is fully independent of the supernatural, which, if it exists at all, is omnipresent but ephemeral. Another part of the communal mentality is the zero sum game. Mesoamericans view accumulation as relative: if one accumulates too much then one is inherently impoverishing another. Therefore, moderation in accumulation is valued, and inequality in Mesoamerican society is accordingly less drastic than that of Western modernity. The last part of

the communal mentality is an openness and acceptance of otherness. Throughout the south of Mexico and northern Central America, numerous indigenous tribes with entirely distinct languages have coexisted side by side for millennia, despite varying traditions and the inability to communicate. Openness and acceptance of otherness is also manifest in the place of Catholicism in Mesoamerican communities. Mesoamerican Community was able to incorporate the teachings of Catholicism during the Spanish conquest, rather than rejecting or being overcome by it.^{xxvi}

The radically different way of looking at the world encompassed in Mesoamerican Community informs and permeates the community of CideCI. When talking about CideCI's students, Maestro David made clear that "It's not to leave their communities that students come here. What they learn is to return to their communities: the learning is not just for themselves."^{7xxvii} Although CideCI does not force its students to use their newly acquired skills in any specific way, the majority of them do decide to return to their communities and contribute to their functioning and stability. This is quite a feat in a country where large percentages of young men from marginalized communities migrate to large cities and the United States to look for work – largely as a result of the institutionalized and commodified values that they have been taught in schools. But CideCI is not a school and does not inculcate such values. Even though students often leave with skills that could land them a decent job in an urban setting, few choose to severely stretch or even break their bonds of community by migrating when they are now able to contribute to the life of their community.

The Zapatistas

However, Mesoamerican Community on its own does not fully explain the social context in which CideCI operates. In order to have an adequate feel for the world in which most of CideCI

⁷ "No es sacar de la comunidad, los que vienen aqui. Lo que aprende es que regrese a su comunidad, no es para su mismo"

operates, it is necessary to know a little bit about the Zapatista movement. On January 1st 1994, an army of men and women wearing black pasamontañas⁸ and black rubber boots and carrying a motley array of weapons overran the cities of San Cristobal and Ocosingo in Chiapas. Quickly pushed back out of the cities by the Mexican military, this army of indigenous people, calling itself the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (the EZLN, its Spanish acronym⁹), appropriated and held on to large swaths of land formerly controlled by hacendados.¹⁰ Facing extreme marginalization, neglect, and oppression by the government and neoliberal economics, the Zapatistas chose to take up arms in order to gain a voice and to cover their faces in order to be seen. Within two weeks of their uprising, sympathetic civil society organizations convinced the Zapatistas to switch to non-violent methods that they have stuck to ever since, despite continual harassment and low intensity war waged on them by the government and paramilitary groups. The EZLN has never asked for power, neither within the communities it represents nor on the national scale. Instead they have pushed for a reformulation of power and a return to people and communities of control over their destinies. After the government ignored all the terms of the peace accords of San Andreas signed by both parties in 1996, the Zapatista rebel communities completely renounced the government and its services, turning inward to focus on the processes of regenerating their commons, building democratic forms of government and revaluing their communal arts of living and dying.^{xxviii}

The Zapatistas insist on protecting their past – their various indigenous languages and forms of communality – in order that they may have a future. In the process of remaking their commons they are rejuvenating the acts of learning, healing, and moving, commodified and “scarcified” by the reign of *homo oeconomicus*. They recognize that wherever they have given up community

⁸ Woolen face coverings that very closely resemble ski-masks

⁹ Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional

¹⁰ Owners of large plantations or haciendas

*autogestión*¹¹ in exchange for the modern economy, they have not only compromised cultural values but also become increasingly impoverished, with growing sickness, malnutrition, alcoholism and alienation. Therefore, within their autonomous communities, which operate in ongoing resistance to the government and neoliberalism, their work is focused on redeveloping the *autogestión* they had lost, learning from the past without attempting to return to it.

As such, the work of CIdeCI fits squarely into the Zapatistas' struggle. According to Dr. Raymundo, the current manifestation of CIdeCI is only possible "within the panorama of what the Zapatista struggle has been able to open up: autonomy, self-determination, radical democracy, no to party politics, no to taking power."^{xxix} The Zapatistas have five regional centers called *caracoles*¹², but if you didn't ask you would think CIdeCI to be the sixth. Just like Oventic, the *caracol* for the "Los Altos" region of Chiapas that I visited, CIdeCI's buildings are adorned with revolutionary art (featuring *pasamontaña* wearers prominently), and CIdeCI hosts Zapatista events, such as the recent Primer Festival de la Digna Rabia.¹³ CIdeCI uses the slogan "resistance and autonomy" on its posters, and according to Maestro David, "here, when you learn many things you become *autogestivo*."^{14xxx} As such, the training and atmosphere of CIdeCI is most pertinent and appropriate for people whose struggle is defined by the terms resistance, autonomy and *autogestión*, as the clearly Zapatistas are. Therefore, it is no surprise that more than half of CIdeCI's students (and possibly as many as three-fourths) come from Zapatista communities. For all these reasons, it is essential to envision CIdeCI as a co-traveler along the "other path"¹⁵ set out by the Zapatistas.

¹¹ Literally translated as self-management, but more closely meaning self-(in the sense of individual or community)-control over the means of sustenance and living. Very similar to the term "arts of living and dying" utilized by Gustavo Esteva in his work.

¹² Spanish for shell or snail

¹³ Meaning "the first festival of Dignified Rage," this event was a celebration of the EZLN's 15th birthday in December 2008 and January 2009.

¹⁴ "Aquí, cuando aprende muchas cosas se vuelve *autogestivo*."

¹⁵ "otro camino" is a common phrase used by the Zapatistas to describe their struggle.

CIdeCI's Path

With a general feel for Mesoamerican Communalism and the Zapatista struggle we have enough social context to examine what CIdeCI does and why it does it. In the first place, the physical space of CIdeCI contains a handful of different parts. The two with which I interacted (and the only two with which students most commonly engage) are the Indigenous Intercultural System for Studies and Learning¹⁶ (SIIDAE) and the University of the Earth¹⁷ (Unitierra). The SIIDAE encapsulates the “training” aspect of CIdeCI, providing workshops in practical skills of which students can pick and choose three (one for each of the daily sessions). These workshops are in the areas of farming (which includes vegetable, grain, animal, flower, and bee farming as well as forest maintenance and waste treatment), metal work, auto mechanics, carpentry, sewing, weaving, shoemaking, electrics, radio mechanics, typing, computer usage, pottery, decorative painting, baking, cooking, haircutting, and music (primarily guitar, keyboard, accordion, and indigenous instruments). It also includes classes on vernacular architecture, technical drawing, anatomy with a focus on nursing and disease diagnosis, reading and a construction team that focuses on the skills of bricklaying, plumbing and ecological technique. Added to this are two new workshops currently in the process of development, screen-printing and tool-making/appropriate technology. The Unitierra holds a seminar every Thursday evening on various topics related to La Otra Campaña¹⁸, the Zapatistas nationwide political campaign against the electoral party-based political system. These seminars are open to the public as well as all CIdeCI students, and although numerous students do attend, San Cristobal-based activists and Zapatista sympathizers dominate the discussion. It also

¹⁶ El Sistema Indígena Intercultural de Aprendizaje y Estudios

¹⁷ Universidad de La Tierra

¹⁸ The Other Campaign

holds another open seminar on social transformation and systems' theory the first Sunday of every month (which I did not have a chance to attend).

Learning at CIdeCI is non-directive, informal, appropriate and appropriated. In the next section, using my experiences as a student, I will show an in-depth picture of what this type of learning looks like. Starting from a definitional standpoint, non-directive means that no external force is in charge of one's learning process. Students choose the workshops they want to participate in and within these workshops there is no defined curriculum. As well, the maestros don't so much teach as demonstrate for the students, guide them, and provide occasional advice. Informal simply means that the learning is not certified or formalized through the granting of a degree or diploma. Appropriate means that the learning fits within students' cultural world instead of inculcating a homogenizing and disabling set of values. Appropriated means that the learning only includes skills that are usable without the constant support of experts (although the computer usage workshop is an exception to this). In these four characteristics, learning at CIdeCI differs entirely from the schooling of typical modern educational institutions.

Through participation in this form of learning, CIdeCI believes that its students "learn to do, learn to learn, and then learn to be more."^{19xxxix} They first learn how to do one or a few activities. Through this process they learn better how to learn other activities. During this time they begin the "profound formative part: considering the other in his entirety, learning to be more."^{xxxix} CIdeCI hopes that as a result of this three step learning process its students are able to reach the goals of self-sufficiency, self-value and *autogestión* at a personal, group and community level.^{xxxix} Once students have reached these goals, which happens not when their Maestros or Dr. Raymundo tell them they have, but rather whenever they themselves feel so, CIdeCI offers them a small grant to help start a micro-project in their communities. This is the path on which CIdeCI's footsteps follow.

¹⁹ "Aprender a hacer, aprender a aprender, y aprender a ser más"

Part 3 – My Experiences at CIdeCI: Learning on the Road to a Localized Praxis

I was only able to spend one week as a student at CIdeCI, but even in such an incredibly short time I began to learn skills and some valuable lessons about my learning. I also came to see how CIdeCI's functioning as a community, the appropriate and appropriated skills in which it provides training, and the non-directive "pedagogical methods" utilized in its workshops all contribute to the development of a localized praxis, a local orientation in both thinking and action.

Community

The first thing one is struck by upon entering CIdeCI is the functioning of the community. The students, with the guidance and organization of the maestros, maintain every aspect of the place. This maintenance is broken down into two different areas. Simple jobs, such as cleaning buildings, pathways and bathrooms, standing on guard at the gate, and helping out in the kitchen, are assigned to groups of students on a rotating basis. The rest of the work is accomplished by the students in their workshops: the farmers maintain the farm, the construction team builds new buildings, the carpenters make new furniture, the metalworkers weld new doors, the bakers bake the bread, etc. In fact, a majority of the workshops in which students learn are *explicitly engaged in activities related to the upkeep of the community*. The importance of this cannot be overstated. In the majority of CIdeCI's workshops, the students do not just learn a skill, but also how that skill contributes to the sustenance of community. By the nature of this setup, the version of the skills learned is inherently appropriated and appropriate. The construction team students only learn how to build structures that are constructible with the materials available in CIdeCI and that are useful for this community, structures that are similarly feasible and useful in *their own communities*. CIdeCI strives to be self-sufficient, but in money, food and materials it has not yet reached that

point. Nevertheless, its student-maintained setup “teaches” students that, despite claims to the contrary by the government, they do have the power and can learn the skills necessary to sustain their communities and move them towards self-sufficiency. The functioning of CIdeCI’s community certainly had that effect on me.

Appropriated and Appropriate Knowledge

Even in workshops not directly associated with the upkeep of the community, an aspect of appropriation is present. To illustrate this point I draw on a session I spent in the infirmary²⁰ in a class learning anatomy from maestro Jesús, a doctor trained in Western medicine. Even by the estimate of maestro Jesús, his class is the least “decolonized” at CIdeCI, in that it teaches the Western sciences of anatomy and medicine. Nevertheless this anatomy class was unlike any other biology class in which I have ever been. In discussing the digestive tract (the lesson of the week), Jesús focused on what each organ does and how that action fits into the whole. However, rather than *scientifically* explaining how each of these organs work, he used culturally appropriate metaphors. He compared enzymatic processes to the dissolving of paint by gasoline, the relation between amino acids and proteins to bricks in a wall, and the creation of energy in the liver to the creation of heat by burning wood. He also gave a specific focus to what problems can occur in these organs and their processes, specifically focusing on problems that often occur in indigenous communities, and how such problems can be diagnosed by anyone. He taught us how to distinguish appendicitis and inflammation of the gall bladder from normal stomach pain, and how to locate certain organs by knowing their relative densities and checking density with an index finger tap.^{xxxiv} In America, when I leave a biology class I may feel more knowledgeable about the science underlying my body’s functioning, but I am also left with the feeling that I have only touched the tip of the iceberg,

²⁰ I was only a student in the infirmary for one session before I switched to carpentry.

which makes me more dependent on the medical profession and its more-complicated-than-I-can-imagine diagnoses and treatments. On the other hand, after just one day in Jesús's anatomy class I felt empowered with medical knowledge that could be important and useful on a daily basis.

Although I didn't get to confirm by asking, for someone (such as the other students in the class) with zero preexisting anatomical knowledge, I suspect this feeling was magnified greatly. This is what I mean when I say that learning at CIdeCI is appropriate and appropriated.

“Pedagogy”

As I stepped onto CIdeCI's integrated farm and into its workshops on carpentry, shoe making and the guitar, I immediately began *doing*. No complicated introductions or drawn out demonstrations took place. Within seconds of arriving at the farm, I joined maestro Manuelito in the harvesting of peas. On my first day in the woodshop, I began the process of building a table. Five minutes into my time in the shoe shop I was cutting leather for a boot. And lastly, before my first music class even began, the maestro had given me a sheet of chords so that I could get started learning them. In these ways it was made viscerally clear to me that “learning to do” is without a doubt the first step one takes at CIdeCI. At first, I stumbled constantly in *doing*, even in the basic activities in which I was engaged – planing a piece of wood and preparing a vegetable bed with a hoe, among others. However, with a little support from my maestros and a lot of perseverance, I slowly improved at each activity. At the same time I began to realize that a large part of the reason for my struggling had to do with the way I was learning. Coming from a background of modern schooling, I was used to being told what to do and how to do it step by step. Repetition of this process had atrophied the natural learning abilities with which I was endowed. Now through the process of learning how to do, I was beginning to re-learn how to learn.

This “learning how to learn” was made possible by the non-directive “pedagogy” utilized by CIdeCI's maestros. I put pedagogy in quotes because this word is usually used to refer to the art,

science, method and practice of teaching, yet the maestros in the workshops at CIdeCI for the most part do not teach in the usual sense of the word. Obvious exceptions apply – such as in the music workshop and the infirmary – but upon closer look, I realized that the majority of CIdeCI’s maestros are just practicing their craft as any shoemaker, carpenter or farmer would. The only difference is that they are open to having less experienced craftsmen around them and are willing to spend a small part of their time demonstrating, supporting and guiding these apprentices in their learning processes. One can only imagine how similar this might be to the general job description of a craftsman in any early-modern European guild.

I was able to discern four distinct and important “pedagogical” methods that greatly facilitated my learning process.

“Asi, mira!”²¹

Every time that we began a new task, Manuelito, my maestro on the farm, would demonstrate the task while excitedly repeating the phrase, “Asi, Mira.” During my first days under his guidance, each time this occurred I would take a quick glance at what he was doing and then try to imitate it. Unsurprisingly, I didn’t do a very good job. Then, a few days later, I began to notice how much time CIdeCI students spent observing others working. In the woodshop, everytime one of the maestros or students would do an out-of-the-ordinary task the other students would crowd around to watch. Even more tellingly, I noticed that two new students, who had started in the woodshop after me, spent approximately half of their time walking around watching others work. Comparing them to myself, I realized how little time I actually spent observing and how imprecise my powers of observation were. Back on the farm I began to change my learning style accordingly. Now understanding that the maestros must believe their students to be constant and studious

²¹ Spanish for “Like this, look!”

observers, I realized that Manuelito would only be excitedly and repeatedly telling me to watch him because his actions were worthy of serious study. And sure enough, as I began to observe Manuelito more rigorously, I finally started to *see* what he was doing. Whereas I had formerly only noted that I had to hoe the entire bed, I now saw the trajectory in which Manuelito swung the hoe, the way he held it and his body, the angle at which it contacted the earth, the depth to which he hoed, and the path he took from one edge of the bed to the other. Doing the task of hoeing proved much easier now that I had a true image of exactly how Manuelito did it in mind. My shriveled powers of observation were sprouting anew!

What is a mistake?

The first task that I had to accomplish in the process of building my table in the woodshop was the planing²² of a piece of wood that would become the legs. I began planing near the end of my first day. On the second day, despite the maestro's absence, I continued the process, successfully (or so I had thought) finishing all four sides by the end of the session. At the beginning of my session on the third day, I showed maestro Fidel my work. He responded by saying that not only had I not leveled the sides to make them perpendicular, but that I only needed to plane two sides, for I would have to cut the other two using the table saw. I immediately exclaimed, "What a mistake I made,"²³ but he quickly corrected me matter-of-factly with "no, you just got some good practice planing."²⁴ I was blown away; where I saw a big mistake and a waste of a day, maestro Fidel saw good practice. I later came to realize that in the workshops at CideCI, the concept of a mistake has no salience: all work, correct and incorrect, is practice. For a beginner at any task this

²² The process of shaving the wood to clean it off and level it out with a tool called a plane

²³ "Que error hice"

²⁴ "No, fue bueno practico cepillado"

realization is incredibly powerful because it removes fear of failure and creates a positive relationship with the entire learning process, not just the end product.

As a matter of fact, upon deeper reflection, I never remember a time when one of my maestros actually told me I was wrong. If they or I seemed to have doubts about my success with a task they would demonstrate it for me again, but they never criticized me. As a result, I was encouraged to see my success separate from the approval or disapproval of my teacher. Although I was not confused as to what I needed to do, I now had to develop my own criteria for self-judgment. For someone with a schooled mind like myself this proved to be much harder than it sounds. I was unfortunately unable to develop a good method for internalizing judgment in my short week at CIdeCI, but provided a similar learning atmosphere over time, I know I would be able to do so.

*“Poco a poco”*²⁵

Not a day, and hardly even a conversation, went by in the music workshop in which maestro Rafael, my guitar teacher, didn't assure me that guitar would come to me “poco a poco.” For many in Mexico, this phrase is somewhat of a life philosophy. The Zapatistas operate entirely under this premise, knowing that the process of building their world anew is necessarily slow. They even take “poco a poco” a step further, declaring that they move at the pace of the slowest in their communities, and that this is the only way to truly move forward.^{xxxv} However, in the learning process, “poco a poco” has special significance. For an unsure and frustrated novice (here I'm referring to myself of course), the repetition of this phrase is not only reassuring but also physically soothing. When a teacher matter-of-factly tells me that everything will come to me bit by bit every time we talk, it drains any frustration, embarrassment or desire to quit that I might be harboring. In comparison, the advice I often get from teachers in America – you need to work harder, practice

²⁵ “Little by little”

longer, study more often, etc. – effectively tells me: the reason you aren't good yet is because you are doing something wrong. This method might light a fire under my ass if I have a competitive spirit or have something to prove, but if I don't have either of these it is likely to lower my self-esteem, make me dislike the activity, and most likely dissuade me from actually trying to learn it.

Humility

On my second to last day at CIdeCI, I had the pleasure of having a class with Maestro David on the theory of ecological agriculture. At the beginning of the class, the maestro, a brilliant man with incredible wisdom in agriculture and many other topics, apologized in advance for his bad Spanish speaking and handwriting, saying that his first and only fluent language is Tzeltal. Maestro David has, of course, a quiet proficient grasp of the Spanish language, but he, like all of the maestros and students I interacted with at CIdeCI, is incredibly humble. Humility is at least superficially valued in most cultures around the world, but among indigenous Mesoamericans it is quite deeply respected. In Western society, humility is not particularly common in those who hold the position of teacher, even though it brings so much to the teaching process. Teachers who think they know everything will end up “educating” students, trying to create copies of their “knowledge” in their students’ minds. Teachers who are humble will only be willing to guide and support their students in their learning processes, sharing what they know but never assuming that they have the right to dictate the “truth.” As well, only humble teachers have the ability to be co-travelers with their students, learning with and from them even as they guide.

For the learning process, a teacher’s ability to co-travel and his/her openness to reciprocal learning are essential. I would like to illustrate this with an example from CIdeCI. Ryan Roseman, a friend and fellow SIT student who was also doing his ISP at CIdeCI, is a really good pianist, who, like myself, was enrolled in the music workshop. One day as Ryan was fooling around on the keyboard, Rafael, the guitar maestro, walked into the keyboard room and asked Ryan what songs he

knew. When Ryan said he only knew some songs he had written himself, Maestro Rafael asked if he could hear one of them. When Ryan finished, Maestro Rafael remarked that he really liked the song and asked Ryan if he knew it on guitar and could teach it to him. Ryan responded that, although he could play it on guitar, he is a self-taught amateur player, and because he doesn't know many chords he had transposed it to a simpler key. Hearing this, Maestro Rafael offered to figure out the chords on guitar by ear as Ryan played them on the keyboard. After about 15 minutes, Maestro Rafael had figured out how to play Ryan's song on guitar in the correct key and he proceeded to show the chords to Ryan. Ryan came out of the situation with a more accurate transcription of his song for the guitar and Maestro Rafael came out knowing how to play Ryan's song. If Maestro Rafael, a very humble man just like Maestro David, hadn't been interested in learning from Ryan despite his position as Ryan's teacher then the entire "learning experience" would never have occurred.

Pedagogy?

In the sense of an art or science one would be hard pressed to justify the classification of these four aspects of the non-directive learning process at CIdeCI as pedagogy. Yet, as the conditions of learning in CIdeCI's workshops, it is their simplicity and existence *in lieu* of any specific "teaching methods" that makes them so powerful. It is not a teaching manual hidden somewhere in CIdeCI's library that explains their existence; the attitudes of "poco a poco" and humility are characteristics common to indigenous Mexicans, and the other two conditions, which we can badly summarize as offering demonstrations and not believing in mistakes, are most likely not self-consciously enacted. Nevertheless, it is these conditions that seemed the most drastically dissimilar from my experiences in modern schooling and that made all the difference in the processes of "learning to do" and "learning how to learn." For me, the outcome of non-directive

learning under these conditions was an incredible boost in self-esteem, and what would in America be labeled a “can do attitude.”

Localized Praxis

All in all, I found that the path of learning at CIdeCI led me towards what I call a localized praxis. The sum effect of learning appropriated and appropriate skills in a non-directive, apprentice-like manner, within the context of sustaining a community, localized my level of thought and action. I came to see that this localized praxis is one and the same with the hopes that CIdeCI has for its students: to revalue themselves and their communities, to strive for self-sufficiency, and to regenerate their communities’ autogestive abilities from the marginalization brought about by the reign of *homo oeconomicus*. In addition, seeing the heady concepts of “resistance and autonomy” played out in the simple acts of living and learning within a local community helped me to realize that this is the *only* level at which these concepts have true significance.

Here it is important to note that this localization of thought and action “taught” by CIdeCI is not parochial localism. Conventional wisdom says that thinking within the paradigm of the global is *necessary* to avoid parochialism. However, according to Gustavo Esteva, “Global proposals are necessarily *parochial*: they inevitably express the specific vision and interests of a small group of people, even when they are supposedly formulated in the interest of humanity.^{xxxvi} Although they claim to be the only way forward from the close-mindedness of past localisms (nationalism, ethnocentricity, etc.), “global proposals” typically express little more than the parochial interests of the ruling capitalist class that put them forth. The only way out from the dual parochialisms of globalization and localism is “localization”, what Esteva poetically defines as: to be rooted in one’s place with heart and mind open to the other.^{xxxvii}

The form of localization exhibited by the Zapatistas is not parochial because they have an explicit focus on openness to the other. Their five regional centers, the caracoles, are points of entry

for outsiders seeking to share and dialogue. In these caracoles they hold numerous Encuentros, meetings open to anti-systemic activists from around the world for the purpose of sharing and comparing discourse and strategy. In a similar manner, CIdeCI's localized praxis also avoids parochialism. Like the Zapatista caracoles, CIdeCI hosts numerous meetings and dialogues as well as Unitierra's weekly and monthly seminars, all of which make an explicit effort to include various perspectives from around the world. Moreover, despite CIdeCI's focus on the indigenous world, Dr. Raymundo attempts to make the community's orientation intercultural, a visceral manifestation of which is the Western classical music that plays in numerous places all over the compound during the week. An explicit focus on interculturalism is what separates localization from its parochial cousin, localism.

Seeing its centrality for the Zapatistas and CIdeCI, I have now come to believe that a localized praxis, an open and inclusionary rootedness, is a necessary part of any successful struggle against the oppressive and destructive forces of globalized modern empire.



Part 4: The Predicament of Modern Schooling in America

Obviously, however, localization will look somewhat different within the socio-cultural world of the United States – at the center of modern empire. American culture is fully immersed in the logic of scarcity, institutionalized values and compulsory schooling. Yet putting aside the broader critiques of schooling for a moment, let's examine the current predicament of modern education in America.

Savage Inequalities

America's compulsory school system provides free public schooling for each child from age 4 or 5 (or younger in places where the Head Start program exists) to age 17 or 18. The public provision of education for each child supposedly leads to an equal footing, an equality of opportunity that is necessary for the maintenance of meritocracy. However, in a survey of this system across the country, Jonathan Kozol discovered that in the suburban schools of affluent, predominantly White communities funding levels per child are double those in the inner city schools of poor, predominantly Latino and African American communities. The resulting disparity is seen in teacher salaries, infrastructure quality, amount and quality of offerings and materials, and levels of support staff in the areas of nursing, guidance and administration. The reason behind this gap is that funding is based on the property taxes of a school district's population, what is widely referred to as a system of "local control" because each district can set its own tax rate. State tax grants are supposed to level out the unequal funding that results, but these are not all channeled into low-income districts for political reasons and those that are only fund such districts to a minimal level, way below that which affluent districts can afford. Outcomes are, unsurprisingly, equally disparate, with dropout rates in inner city schools often as high as 60%, compared with less than 10% in affluent suburbs, with rates of continuation in college even more starkly dissimilar.^{xxxviii}

These inequalities mirror both class and racial lines, and it would be counterproductive to argue over which is more important. Nevertheless the situation is in many ways pre-*Plessy* as far as the Constitution is concerned, with massive and unequal segregation. This point is not lost on many inner-city students, who witness the massive unfairness through television and inter-school athletic competition. Kozol believes that the combination of blatant segregation and the physical proximity of suburban and urban schools is a “killing combination... [in which] destitution is compounded by the sense of being viewed as, somehow, morally infected.”^{xxxix} Children know that in some form this inequality is a choice, “a choice about how much they matter to society.”^{xl} As such, students in inner city schools learn quite quickly that they are not considered worthy of opportunities. Kozol concludes, “What is now encompassed by the one word (“school”) are two very different kinds of institutions that, in function, finance and intention, serve entirely different roles... children in one set of schools are educated to be governors; children in the other set of schools are trained to be governed.”^{xli} Instead of supporting a meritocracy, public schooling in America effectively perpetuates caste divisions.

Reform?

Numerous efforts to reform the system have been attempted over the last 50 years to little avail. The current round of reform is focused on the creation of magnet and charter schools. These schools have proven track records of success, but because of their competitive admissions systems they do not end up benefiting the poorest children: “Because the system rests on the initiative of parents... even in poor black neighborhoods it tends to be the children of the less poor and better educated who are likely to break through the obstacles and win admission [to selective magnet schools].”^{xlii} These systems do have the effect of retaining middle class and affluent families and their accompanying taxes in inner city districts, but this greater tax base mostly goes to support the selective schools that for the most part only benefit the children of the better off.

Upon deeper examination, the reasons why successful reform has proved and continues to prove elusive are to be found in the inherent competitiveness of the system. “Test scores... in America are graded not against an absolute standard but against a ‘norm’ or ‘average.’ For some to be above the norm, others *have* to be below it.” Since schools serve as the certifiers of fitness, for college acceptance purposes as well as job placement, the relative nature of success is essential. As Kozol puts it so succinctly, “Preeminence, by definition, is a zero sum matter.” Therefore, providing equal opportunities to the children of poor people and minorities inherently means that less of the limited number of opportunities will go to the children of the affluent. Few middle and upper class Americans are openly opposed to the idea of equality; however, in justifying “local control” of school funding by saying they “simply want the best for their own children”^{xliii} they are oblivious to their fundamental position in perpetuating inequality.

It is also manifestly clear that any legal attempts to tackle this root inequality will be derided as “Robin Hood” solutions and met with massive resistance by the affluent majority, not unlike that of southern whites to desegregation. In this matter, the example of California is a telling cautionary tale. In the late 70’s, through a series of state civil rights court victories the California legislature was forced to reformulate financing regulations so that schools throughout the state would receive nearly equal funds. The result was a tax revolt that “applied a ‘cap’ on taxing, effectively restricting funding for *all* districts.”^{xliv} It was almost as if the affluent majority said, “If the schools must actually be equal... then we’ll undercut them all.”^{xlv} As well, to avoid feeling the effects of the gutting, many affluent families found funding loopholes through charitable foundations and other means to keep their advantages, and those that couldn’t began to send their kids to private schools. This mirrors a similar cut in taxes and surge in private schooling that took place in the rural South after desegregation. As a result of this series of events, California funds its schools at one of the lowest rates relative to income in the US and its class sizes are the largest in the nation.^{xlvi} True

reform may not be impossible, but the counter-productivity of past attempts and the enormous unwillingness of affluent America to question its privileges make genuine equality of opportunity improbable.

Many would say that inequality of opportunity would still exist even if the public school system could be fixed. This is most likely true, but the greatest tragedy of the current predicament in the public school system is that “the state, by requiring attendance but refusing to require equality, effectively *requires* inequality [...] condemn[ing] our children to unequal lives.”^{xlviii} In the first section of the paper I discussed how schooling confuses process with substance and inculcates commodified and institutionalized values. The ritualization of progress that comes along with this is dangerous in and of itself, particularly because of the homogenization of alternative cultural traditions and massive environmental degradation to which it has led. Yet the most appalling outcome of the American compulsory school system is the melding of required inequality with institutionalized values. Educational losers as well as winners are left with these values, but withheld the key to economic success, “losers” are condemned to a life in which their institutionalized needs can never be adequately met.

Given the confusion of process and substance, when failing inner-city students drop out – an act which, in their situation, may quite possibly be a logical decision – they are not just giving up on education, they are giving up on their potential to learn. School may be a terrible place to learn in general, but for the system’s losers, it actually undermines learning ability. And unfortunately, even for those few “losers” who have not been totally drained of self-confidence and the desire to learn, hardly any alternative opportunities exist. By demarcating a specific realm of society for learning, school closes off other potential learning paths. Access to work spaces in a majority of fields is limited to holders of degrees and the social category of apprentice has all but disappeared. The only exciting learning paths open to poor inner-city school dropouts (and therefore the ones in which

they excel) are sports and music. As such, not only does compulsory schooling perpetuate a caste system in which only certain people are allowed to become the masters, it also assures that everyone else has almost no option but to serve.

A Little Bit of History

To make matters worse, according to John Taylor Gatto in his historiography of compulsory schooling in America, *The Underground History of American Education*, this was the purpose of the system in the first place. Gatto states that, as its place solidified in the industrialized world in the first decades of the 20th century, the purpose of “modern, industrialized, compulsory schooling was to make a surgical incision into the prospective unity of the under classes.”^{xlviii} In 1819, the Prussian military state became the first nation-state to institute a system of compulsory education, with the explicit goals of delivering: “Obedient soldiers to the army, obedient workers for mines, factories, and farms, well-subordinated civil servants, trained in their function, well-subordinated clerks for industry, citizens who thought alike on most issues, and national uniformity in thought, word, and deed.”^{xlix} To accomplish this the Prussians created a three-tiered coercive curriculum, and within the lowest tier, pedagogy was explicitly designed to limit students’ learning abilities. For all tiers, the curriculum of Prussian schooling was supposed to lead to the obedience, passivity and docility necessary for society to function like a well-oiled machine. Over the next 80 years, versions of this system were adopted throughout the industrial societies of Europe.¹

In America, compulsory education modeled on the Prussian example was first implemented in Massachusetts in 1852 through the influence of a group of utopian Unitarians and other Puritan types, lead by Horace Mann.ⁱⁱ Yet compulsory schooling did not spread around America until after the ascendancy of the coal industry, which transferred control of American capitalism from local entrepreneurs (the yeomanry idealized by Thomas Jefferson) to large industrial tycoons, at the same time beginning the massification of society. It took the influence of a strange mix of “true believer”

utopians, like Mann, and the desire of the new industrial tycoons for a docile consumer and labor force to extend the grip of compulsory Prussian style education over the American landscape.^{lii} Nevertheless, local control of curricula, unwilling traditional teachers, and America's history of "academic" education (in one-room school houses, Latin grammar schools and religious schools) at first limited the effects of compulsory schooling's intended "social engineering." Then, around the turn of the century, scientific management, widely referred to as Taylorism, was first developed for use in factories. Taylorism was spread to schools through the influence of another group of "true believers," the Fabian Social Darwinists, and the desires and monetary resources of the now all-powerful industrialist "Robber Barrons" (primarily Carnegie, Rockefeller and Morgan). Scientific management finally succeeded in homogenizing and "Prussianizing" the educational system, ending local control and bringing us such ideas as standardized testing, massive high schools, bureaucratic school administration, short class periods and bells announcing the end of classes.^{liii}

The following snippet, from a 1906 mission statement of the Rockefeller Foundation's General Education Board, which played a large part in forming the compulsory education system into its current structure, is important to consider in light of the current predicament we face in American education:

"In our dreams...people yield themselves with perfect docility to our molding hands. The present educational conventions [intellectual and character education] fade from our minds, and unhampered by tradition we work our own good will upon a grateful and responsive folk. We shall not try to make these people or any of their children into philosophers or men of learning or men of science. We have not to raise up from among them authors, educators, poets or men of letters. We shall not search for embryo great artists, painters, musicians, nor lawyers, doctors, preachers, politicians, statesmen, of whom we have ample supply. The task we set before ourselves is very simple...we will organize children...and teach them to do in a perfect way the things their fathers and mothers are doing in an imperfect way."^{liv}

Alternatives

The roots of compulsory schooling in “social engineering” alone are not enough to condemn it. However, the continued manifestation of these roots in the gap between learning and schooling, the stagnation of social class, and the perpetuation of a homogenous set of commodified and institutionalized values, makes a powerful case for the abandonment of compulsory, coercive and competitive schooling. Still, is such a rejection possible, and, if so, how can it be done?

In *Deschooling Society*, Illich calls for the disestablishment of schooling as the only acceptable place of learning and the “institutional inversion” of the educational apparatus.^{lv} Illich discursively divides institutions along a political spectrum. In this discursive model, extreme left wing institutions are those that exist to be used as desired but do not manipulate anyone into using them, such as the public park system or the postal service. Extreme right wing institutions manipulate citizens into using them by either creating a demand for their usage or forcing it, such as the military, jails and mental institutions. Schools, by requiring attendance and perpetuating demand for themselves, fall very near the right extreme of the spectrum: “invit[ing] compulsively repetitive use and frustrat[ing] alternative ways of achieving similar results.”^{lvi} However, Illich believes that institutions can be altered to move them from the manipulative (right wing) to the optional or convivial (left wing).^{lvii} In the area of learning, Illich proposes that we replace the school with learning webs, “provid[ing] the learner with new links to the world instead of continuing to funnel all educational programs through the teacher.”^{lviii} These webs should contain open access to ordinary and educational objects, facilitation of skill exchanges, and facilitation of peer matching for co-learning dialogue.^{lix} According to Illich, providing optional and convivial institutional services such as these would be the true provision of public utility, doing away with the problems posed by compulsory, coercive and competitive schooling.

Unfortunately, Illich's colleagues read *Deschooling Society* as a call for the closing of all schools. Rejecting this as unfeasible, they transformed his critique into a "motive for expansion", increasing the input of funding and energy into the creation of alternative and open schools.^{lx} Unable to engage in "biting the hand that fed them", professional educators instead "offered to beautify it, taming or masking its violence."^{lxi} Even had they been willing to experiment with Illich's models, the dedication of these professionals to the *educating* of one group by another group would have insured the persistence of compulsory learning. These realities revealed that the institutional inversion proposed by Illich would not be possible to achieve from within the system and his convivial learning institution would only be feasible in the absence of a pre-existing manipulative institution of schooling.

Sensing the impossibility of inverting the system, Illich's ally John Holt suggested that parents either remove children from school or help them to cope with it. To help kids cope, Holt proposes leading them to see the ways in which school is only a game and then working with them to develop strategies to play the game well.^{lxii} Nevertheless, even the best coping mechanisms can only help to decrease the damage done by schools, they cannot make schooling into a truly good experience. For the best results, Holt proposes removing one's children from school. Although usually referred to as homeschooling, this word is a dangerous misnomer that, if taken literally, can result in the "transmogrifying [of] parents into pseudo-professional teachers, contaminating the natural life of the family."^{lxiii} In removing children from school, parents should not try to administer their own "educational treatments;"^{lxiv} instead, they should provide guidance and support for their child in his/her own natural development.

Unfortunately, in its potential for widespread change, the removal of children from school faces two significant problems. In the first place, access to this option is, just like access to magnet and private schools, dependent on privilege. Single parent families or those in which both parents

work full time will be unable to exercise this option except by giving up wages essential for sustaining a minimal living standard. As such, although schooling may be detrimental for all, the inner city poor for whom it is most disabling and for whom alternatives could be most impactful are those for whom the de-schooling option is most inaccessible. Yet even a child privileged enough to be de-schooled still faces many obstacles. Just like the inner city dropout, outside the home such a child will confront a “social desert,” inhospitable to learning.^{lxv} Even more damaging, he/she will find it very difficult to “have friends and a normal life” without the shared experiences of school.^{lxvi} As such, despite the overwhelming structural problems of the American compulsory school system, the only alternatives that now exist have their own sizeable share of problems.

Conclusion – The Potential for Non-Directive Learning Spaces in America

Faced with this conundrum of an unacceptable status quo and an array of largely untenable alternatives, only one piece of advice comes to mind: look to the South. Having now spent a semester in Oaxaca and Chiapas in southern Mexico, I am sincerely convinced that the most creative and liberating solutions to the predicaments brought about by modernity and the reign of economic scarcity will come from the world’s social majorities, concentrated in the global south. Despite the culturally and politically specific reality in which CideCI Las Casas is immersed, I believe that it is a powerful example for the predicament of education in the United States and that a similar living and learning community would provide a refreshing and potent alternative to the status quo.

The most easily applicable aspect of CideCI’s path is its concept of informal, non-directive learning spaces. The benefits of such spaces, whatever form they might take, could be quite profound. As I experienced first hand at CideCI, the process of learning led me not only to “learn to

do” the specific skill in question, but also how to “learn how to learn,” to redevelop the natural learning abilities that had been atrophied by my time spent in educational facilities. With the added conditions of supportive and humble guidance from maestros immersed in the philosophy of *poco a poco*, my self-esteem was boosted and I developed a can-do attitude. In the form of an after-school program, such a learning space could help kids from loser schools retain their desire and ability to learn despite the damage inflicted in school. A similar program could help dropouts or ex-convicts (since so many dropouts end up in jail) regain a semblance of self-worth and confidence. The learning in such a space could be open-ended and individualized or more akin to one of CIdeCI’s workshops. In the former mode, the “teacher’s” job would be to facilitate an individualized learning process by locating resources, setting up apprenticeships and answering pertinent questions or finding someone who can. In the latter, workshops in specific crafts would be set up and only those who were interested in learning each craft would attend.

Despite the powerful potential of such spaces for school’s losers to “learn to do” and “learn to learn,” they can do very little to replace the societal “justification” provided to school’s winners. At best they can help failing students to finish school and dropouts to get GED’s. Yet even having “learned to do” and “learned to learn,” participants in non-directive learning programs will most likely continue to live by commodified and institutionalized values, and therefore in most cases continue to find their ability to fulfill their “needs” limited.

If, however, we extend such “non-directive” learning spaces, creating communities similar to CIdeCI, we can help people to de-institutionalize and de-commodify their values and move towards *autogestión*. Although the nature of their oppression differs significantly, the inner city poor, locked in a cycle of school failure, imprisonment and economic servitude, are marginalized and impoverished by the economic scarcity of *homo oeconomicus* in a similar way to the indigenous of southern Mexico. Unlike indigenous Mexicans, the inner city poor most likely do not have living

memories of *autogestión* in their communities, but that doesn't mean that its development wouldn't similarly help them to escape the oppression and sentences of servitude they now face.

A CideCI-like learning community could take many forms in the United States, but I would like to put forth one potential vision. The core of my vision is a community of adults dedicated to communal self-sufficiency and representing a wide range of autogestive skills and knowledge sets. The community would run non-directive learning programs targeted to kids in loser schools, dropouts, ex-cons, and deschooled/homeschooled students. These programs would, like CideCI, offer informal non-directive workshops in the autogestive and appropriated skills practiced by its community members, as well as seminars about experiences in oppression, anti-systemic alternatives around the world, and other topics decided by the learners. Participants would not just “learn to do” and “learn to learn,” they would also, just like CideCI's students, “learn to be more” – to use their skills to *be* a member of a community instead of just to *have* material possessions. Learning appropriated autogestive skills and observing an autogestive community in action they would now have the ability to begin to reject scarcity in their own lives. As their institutional needs began to disappear, these students would cease to be the *marginalized* of global modernity, transforming themselves into the *celebrated* of a localized post-modernity.



Bibliography

“CONOCIENDO AL CideCI...” CideCI brochure. Excursión Chiapas Reader, Spring 2009.

Esteva, Gustavo. All day lecture to SIT class, 3/26/09.

Esteva, Gustavo. *Celebration of Zapatismo* (ed. 2). Oaxaca: Ediciones ¡Basta!, 2008.

Esteva, Gustavo and Madhu Suri Prakash. *Grassroots Post-Modernism: Remaking the soil of cultures*. London: Zed Books 1998.

Esteva, Gustavo and Madhu Suri Prakash. *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Cultures*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing 2008.

Gatto, John Taylor. “Against School.” Harper’s Magazine, September 2003, 33-38.

Gatto, John Taylor. *The Underground History of American Education*. The Odysseus Group.

<<http://www.johntaylorgatto.com/underground/toc1.htm>>

Gomez Diaz, David. SIT class visit to CideCI, 4/7/09.

Gomez Diaz, David. Theory Lecture, Integral Farm, 4/28/09.

Holt, John. *Instead of Education: Ways to Help People Do Things Better*. Boston: Holt Associates 1976.

Illich, Ivan. *Deschooling Society*. London: Maryon Boyers Publishing 1970.

Kozol, Jonathan. *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools*. New York: HarperPerennial 1991.

Maestro Jesús. Anatomy class and conversation in the Infirmary, 4/21/09.

Maldonado, Benjamín. Lecture to SIT class, 2/24/09.

Paget-Clarke, Nic. “Interview with Raymundo Sánchez Barraza: A University without Shoes.” In *MotionMagazine*, 5 Sept. 2005 <http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/global/rsb_int_eng.html#Anchor-Radical-33869>

Endnotes

- i Esteva, *Celebration of Zapatismo*, 11
- ii Illich, *Towards a History of Needs*, 76, as quoted in Esteva and Prakash, 1998, 151 footnote 15
- iii Ibid.
- iv Esteva and Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism*, 122-124
- v Esteva, 3/26/09
- vi Esteva and Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism*, 122-124
- vii Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 1
- viii Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 39
- ix Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 38
- x Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 39
- xi Holt, *Instead of Education*, 20-21
- xii Holt, *Instead of Education*, 13
- xiii Holt, *Instead of Education*, 157-159
- xiv Esteva and Prakash, *Escaping Education*, 3
- xv Esteva and Prakash, *Escaping Education*, 6-7
- xvi Esteva and Prakash, *Escaping Education*, 8-10
- xvii Esteva, 3/26/09
- xviii Gomez Diaz, 4/7/09 and 4/28/09
- xix Paget-Clarke, "Interview with Raymundo Sánchez Barraza"
- xx "CONOCIENDO AL CideCI..."
- xxi Gomez Diaz, 4/7/09
- xxii Gomez Diaz, 4/7/09 and 4/28/09
- xxiii Esteva, 3/26/09
- xxiv Maldonado, 2/24/09
- xxv Ibid.
- xxvi Ibid.
- xxvii Gomez Diaz, 4/7/09
- xxviii Esteva, *Celebration of Zapatismo*, 9, 27
- xxix Paget-Clarke, "Interview with Raymundo Sánchez Barraza"
- xxx Gomez Diaz, 4/7/09
- xxxi "CONOCIENDO AL CideCI..."
- xxxii Paget-Clarke, "Interview with Raymundo Sánchez Barraza"
- xxxiii "CONOCIENDO AL CideCI..."
- xxxiv Maestro Jesús, 4/21/09
- xxxv Esteva, *Celebration of Zapatismo*, 19
- xxxvi Esteva and Prakash, *Grassroots Post-Modernism*, 27
- xxxvii Esteva, 3/26/09
- xxxviii Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 54, 98-100, 213-214
- xxxix Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 74
- xl Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 179
- xli Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 176
- xliv Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 60
- xlvi Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 108

-
- xliv Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 220
- xlvi Ibid.
- xlvi Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 221
- xlvi Kozol, *Savage Inequalities*, 56
- xlvi Gatto, "Against School," 36
- xlix Gatto, *The Underground History*, Chapter 7 section 1
- l Gatto, *The Underground History*, Chapter 7 section 5
- li Gatto, *The Underground History*, Chapter 6 section 4
- lii Gatto, *The Underground History*, Chapter 8 section 8
- liii Gatto, *The Underground History*, Chapter 9 sections 2 and 12
- liv Gatto, *The Underground History*, Chapter 2 section 8
- lv Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 62
- lvi Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 56
- lvii Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 52-64
- lviii Illich, *Deschooling Society*, vii
- lix Illich, *Deschooling Society*, 72-104
- lx Esteva and Prakash, *Escaping Education*, 93
- lxi Esteva and Prakash, *Escaping Education*, 94
- lxii Holt, *Instead of Education*, 217
- lxiii Esteva and Prakash, *Escaping Education*, 98
- lxiv Ibid.
- lxv Esteva and Prakash, *Escaping Education*, 99
- lxvi Ibid.