

Liberating Love

by Isa Fremeaux & John Jordan

<http://pathsthroughutopia.wordpress.com/2008/03/20/liberating-love/>

“If you went beyond this point they would have shot you” Barbara tells us as we walk past lampposts painted with military looking red and white stripes. “Down there you can see our love huts,” she gestures towards a row of small triangular wooden structures just big enough to hold a double bed, cosily set amongst the pine trees. “Inside them, you’re contained but also in nature - it’s a beautiful place to make love” she says, a broad smile stretching across her serene round face. Barbara is the public relations person for ZEGG -the Centre for Experimental Cultural Design- a “free love” eco-village housed in the shell of a sprawling Stasi base on the edges of a sandy pine forest eighty kilometres from Berlin.

It’s a wonderful historical irony that these buildings which are now covered in solar panels and surrounded by permaculture gardens (grapes and kiwi fruit) used to be Stasi training quarters, where the “Romeo-technique” was taught. This involved training East German men to seduce Western women into romantically dependent relationships, so as to coerce them to become spies in western organisations. After the fall of the wall, the site was bought by ZEGG, and now inside these characterless premises people are living, teaching and practising a very different kind of loving.

Where deceit and sexual control was once taught, seminars and workshops are now run which promote trust and transparency as the foundations of community. Founded on the motto that “There can be no peace on earth as long as there is war in love,” the 80 members of ZEEG are developing innovative techniques for building new forms of collective life.

In our atomised Western societies, living in community has not only been devalued but many of the skills required to enable us to live together have been lost. Thousands upon thousands of radical groups and intentional communities have fallen apart because of internal conflicts, often stemming (whether conscious or not) from issues of love, sex, money and power.

Since its inception 30 years ago, this community has believed that peace and ecological sustainability can only be achieved when such conflicts are dealt with. For ZEGG these conflicts had to be meticulously studied and solutions found. What emerged from the research was the realisation that problem solving and decision making processes are often burdened by emotional baggage. So they decided to split decision making meetings from emotional exploration by setting up a process called “The Forum”.

Forum is a technique for showing yourself and your emotions to others. The community sit in a circle and people take turns to stand in the middle and express what’s going on for them. The key is not to tell but to show, to reveal in the moment of performance what your feeling are, sometimes it comes out as words, sometimes as movement, sounds, a song, a gesture. The others respond in a technique called “mirroring”. “Mirroring is seen as a gift for the person, not a critique” Barbara tells us “ when you realise that by revealing your own weakness it brings people closer to you rather than pushes people away, then you are able to trust.”

Before moving to ZEGG, Barbara trained and worked in psychology. “The people who live here have a more complex understanding of psychology than anyone I had met in my work or my professors at university” she explains with a wisdom and authenticity that many of the people here seem to possess. Isa and I had never experienced a place where love and sexuality felt so healthy, so much part of everyday life, something that was not an individual or couples surreptitious world but something that could be shared between everyone with such dignity and unburdened joy.

Learning Freedom

by Isa Fremeaux & John Jordan

<http://www.peacenews.info/issues/2492-93/249213.htm>

Merida is built on ruins. One of the Roman Empire's most important cities, it sits in the dry south-west edge of Spain. For 29 years this city has hosted what must be one of the world's longest running anarchist schools--Paideia. If Utopias are places which challenge us to close the gap between what is done and the impossible, then our visit to Paideia certainly did this. This world turned upside down, a school without bells or grades, where the children are in charge and where the curriculum is centred around the anarchist values of Solidarity, Justice, Equality, Freedom, Nonviolence, Culture and Happiness, taught us more about how to live free than anything we had ever experienced.

Term has only just started when we arrive. Pepa, heavily built in her early 60s is one of the founders of the school. Despite her bright-red dyed hair she looks like the most normal school teacher. She explains to us that the first few weeks after summer are always different from the normal way the school runs. "Returning from holidays is always difficult," she says. "The kids have been living with their family, who start to do everything for them. They fall again under the influence of consumerism, of competition everywhere. They lose their critical mind, their autonomy."

At the core of the school's philosophy is autonomy and self-management: every aspect of the school is run via assemblies in which all students participate, from the age of 18 months to 16 years. From the lunchtime menu to the timetable, solving personal conflicts to choosing academic subjects, everything is decided collectively without hierarchy and imposition from the staff. The students truly self-manage the school together: they cook, clean and make decisions on how it is run. In Paideia, one of the many things that all (ourselves included!) learn is that being free is fundamentally about taking responsibility and being able to collaborate fluidly in a community. "When they come back they keep asking what needs doing, how to cut carrots, etc. Their minds aren't free" Pepa explains, "It is easier to be told what to do than being free...You can pass on your responsibility to others." As a result the school is under what is known as *mandado* -- to be ordered or demanded. To describe this as a kind of collective punishment would be wrong. In our three days at the school, we never heard anyone raising their voices. Mandado is more of a temporary learning culture that is imposed by the staff. Since the students are no longer able take initiatives, they are *mandadoed*: forced to ask the teachers for everything. "Nobody likes that, and they soon learn to regain their autonomy" expands Lali, another teacher.

In most schools if you don't do what you are told you are in the wrong. Here you are in the wrong if you expect to be told! The Mandado remains until the students decide to call for an assembly where they will reflect, analyse and discuss collectively whether they have returned to a state of freedom and responsibility. If they all vote for its end then it is lifted. "They need to re-find their anarchist values," concludes Pepa. "It doesn't take long. If they want to be free they have to fight for it."

Freetown Christiania

by Isa Fremeaux & John Jordan
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There's an icy February wind pushing us around what feels like a walled medieval city. Eventually we find a small arched opening in this strange city within a city; we step inside. Suddenly we are in a town where looking at the stars is more important than having street lights, where cars are banned and there is no tarmac, where bicycles and pedestrians weave through the streets freely.

Seconds ago we were in the centre of Copenhagen in a different universe; now we're following streams of people; past old brick warehouses with the warm welcoming glow of bars, restaurants and café. More and more buildings seem to unfold in front of us revealing their brightly painted façades. Murals of sacred Inuit animals, Buddhist deities swirling in smoke, monolithic portraits of dead rappers. Irish folk music bounces out of a wild west-like bar. Ahead of us oil barrels are spilling flames in the middle of the street. Men, some of them in black balaclavas, are standing around trying to keep warm. Others are huddled under makeshift market stalls.

We keep walking and soon find ourselves on the edge of a tranquil lake dotted with dozens of wooden houses every shape, size and colour – some resemble UFOs, others garden sheds on acid – all the realisation of their owners' fantasies, or rather not 'owner' – that is the whole point. We are in the sprawling 'freetown' Christiania, less than 200 metres from the Danish Parliament, where 800 adults, 200 kids, 200 cats and dogs, 17 horses and two parrots live on squatted military land since 1971.

Christiania stretches over 34 hectares of prime Danish real estate, but private property has never existed here; no one owns their own house, even if they've built them from scratch over decades. Everything is based on the right of usage. When you want to move, you don't sell or even decide who moves in. Your house goes to the local neighbourhood meeting (there are 13 autonomous neighbourhoods), people apply and the neighbours decide who is going to be their neighbour.

Of course it's messy and emotionally trying, but for 37 years they have managed this free town through consensus-based democracy. Christiania has everything any town would have – there are bars, restaurants, kindergartens, art galleries, a bike factory, a few shops, a health centre, a blacksmiths, a cinema, rubbish collection, a sauna, a radio station, a recycled materials builders' merchant, a theatre, a weekly newspaper, youth clubs and even their own postal service.

But this refuge for those who want to live free despite capitalism has had to constantly fight to keep its autonomy. Now the claws of the neoliberal system that put property rights in front of human rights, is extending its grip more forcefully. It's threatening to tear down much of the dream-like architecture, force people to buy their homes they built or renovated from ruins, and give up collective ownership.

The city of Copenhagen wants to eradicate what they once tolerated as a 'social experiment' and build new tower blocks, a bland municipal park and yet another trendy cappuccino district. But this oasis against authority has always survived an encroaching desert, mostly through its secret weapon: 'talking'. One of Christiania's symbols is the snail; 'It's the speed of democracy', say the Christianites. Every response to government proposals has to be reached through consensus. With 800 people it takes forever. The government knows they could not forcefully evict Christiania and have to play a waiting game. So far, resistance through slowness seems to be working.

From Socialism to Anarchism via Capitalism

by Isa Fremeaux & John Jordan

<http://www.peacenews.info/issues/2495/2495063.html>

The rain freezes as it hits the windscreen, creating a 1970s dappled frosted glass effect not very useful when you're driving in ice rink conditions on thick snow. It's pitch dark and it would really help to see where we are going. The camper van is encased in a layer of ice that gets thicker with each lashing of freezing rain and added to that the heating doesn't work inside. Not a very Utopian setting. Welcome to Serbia.

We are on our way to the northern industrial town of Zrenjanin. We came because we heard about Jugoremedija, a pharmaceutical factory that, following a four-year struggle, the eviction of its corrupt new private (and Interpol-wanted) owner, a strike and occupation, is now one of the few worker-managed factories in Europe.

The day before we arrived, we were told that there is no longer just one occupied factory in town: inspired by the success of Jugoremedija, two factories about to be closed down have followed suit -- Serbia's largest train factory Sinvoz and a meat processing factory, Bek.

The "Philosopher"

Ivan, a ragged young chain-smoking intellectual activist, called "the philosopher" by the workers, has been organising the resistance together with Zdravko, the charismatic rebel worker from Jugoremedija, known as Zrejanin's "Che".

They met in Ivan's Belgrade government funded office, the Anti-Corruption Council. When Ivan started working there, he was an anti-nationalist and anti-war activist.

He was not critical of privatisation as he saw it as a way of breaking the strong hold of workers who tended to support nationalist policies. But wading through the boxes of files and hundreds of workers' accounts of how privatisation was bankrupting their workplaces, Ivan soon realised that the process of privatisation was as corrupt and violent as any war. Mita, a worker at Shinvoz, described it perfectly whilst showing us around the cavernous ghostly buildings: "We have another name for the transition to democracy and it's called robbery."

None of the workers are nostalgic about the socialist era. But they can't just watch capitalist tycoons buy shares in their factories, only to push them into bankruptcy through dodgy deals, simply to get full control and make a quick buck.

And the point is that in Serbia the factories really do partly belong to the workers: under Tito's rhetorical self-management they became and now remain shareholders of their own factories. "During the struggle for Jugoremedija, this was one of the most frustrating things," confesses Ivan, "the media could not get their heads round the fact that the strikers were not just workers, but actual co-owners of the factory." The workers who refused to be bullied into selling to the market found that if they organised together they had a powerful lever against the new ruthless owners.

From taking direct actions to getting complex factories back up and running, the workers here have shown that they can manage their future.

Their greatest strength is not letting their opponent divide and rule them. Following the hardship of striking, when Jugoremedija workers got their factory back they even gave strike-breakers new jobs.

On our last evening, we witnessed ex-locksmith turned president of the Board, Zdravko, organising a solidarity action for the newly occupied factories, involving blocking the highway with the pharmaceutical company's big branded trucks.

A chink of Utopia amidst the cold dystopia of a country blighted by nationalist and now neoliberal war. The workers are calling for international support, see: <http://www.freedomfight.net>