

NO! Against Adult Supremacy Vol. 2

Carla Bergman, James C. Talbot, Nathan Goodman

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Youth Liberation and Deschooling, An Interview with Carla Bergman

Carla Bergman is a community artist, curator and writer who mucks around with her partner and two unschooling kids in East Vancouver, unceded Coast Salish Territories. Currently, she is the director of the Purple Thistle Centre and has worked with youth creating projects, mentoring, facilitating workshops and making a variety of publications for the past fifteen years. She is on the Board of the Institute for Anarchist Studies. Carla co-founded the art and activist publication RAIN, worked with car free day Vancouver as a core organizer and co-founded the Thistle Institute, an alternative to university, in 2011. She is currently working on a Film about the Thistle and Youth Liberation, to be completed late 2014. She was one of the editors of the AK Press book: Stay Solid: A Radical Handbook For Youth.

You really center trust when you talk about youth liberation and oppression—why?

C: John Holt has a great quote about this: “Trust children. Nothing could be more simple — or more difficult. Difficult, because to trust children we must trust ourselves—and most of us were taught as children that we could not be trusted.”

I think that kids start off their lives trusting everyone around them; it’s how they learn from others and how they receive love. And then, over time it often gets eroded... I don’t think it’s because they learn to distrust, indeed that does happen, but I think it begins with not being trusted. It’s obvious that a largely accepted notion in society is that kids are not to be trusted. I think this is one of the most damaging and brutal forms of discrimination against kids and youth.

I think trust happens in all kinds of subtle ways, and it’s relational. I can use the Thistle¹ as an example of how it might look in the most obvious, concrete way. One thing that separates the Thistle from many other youth projects is that the youth on the collective each have keys to the space and are free to use them anytime. The youth don’t have to go through some big formal interview process, or sign over their life; we just ask that if they are new to the space to hang out a bit and get to know us first, and sometimes, you get the keys on your first night there. This contributes to a wonderful environment of shared trust and kindness—a space filled with friendship.

Trust is one of the most important foundations for all relationships and communities, and if we are not trusting our kids, the most vulnerable folks in our communities, then we are setting up to fail as radical inclusive humans.

You’ve talked about how power relations between kids and adults can’t just be flattened out or eliminated—can you say more about that?

C: I always say, and it’s deeply sincere, that it has been through the act of parenting that I have been truly radicalized. As anti-authoritarians we have to ask ourselves: how do kids fit into our praxis? I am put to test every single day to not oppress my kids. As one of the adults in my house I hold almost all the power and it’s good, fucking hard work figuring out how to be solid, how to be a mentor, and how to have a thriving life as well. For me this isn’t about just being permissive and nice, because as parents we can do all kinds of fucked up manipulation and oppression with a gentle sweet smile on our faces.

So, we always say that we strive to be a relationship/family centered home. I see that as an alternative to centering kids, which I think can lead adults into the fantasy that we’ve checked our power at the door, and that it’s all good. It’s not that easy. I come to every single day with

my kids with years of socialization and fuckedupness. It's deeply embedded and nuanced, and it takes care and dedication to unlearn and to do well. Mistakes happen, a lot. But those are OK too, because we show our kids that we're not some god(dess) on a pedestal really early on and more than that, we show them that humans make mistakes, and in fact it's how we learn. I think of my relationships with my kids (and all the young folks in our lives) as relationships that matter and that means I don't take it for granted that we're friends just because I say so. I have to work at it, as I would with any good pal. I think solidarity begins at home — we need to be solid, kind, and caring there if we're going to try to extend those values to the broader world.

You have a militant stand against schools and schooling, and people assume this means you won't work with anyone involved in the school system, but your stance is a lot more nuanced. Can you explain how you think about this?

C: My stance is that I am a strong supporter of folks who are school resisters, because folks who resist compulsory schooling (and all its problems) have in almost every case centered kids as a group that deserve liberation. I can really get behind that and I'm passionate about it.

I think it's also important to emphasize that youth and compulsory schooling are not isolated from the rest of society, so I think it's imperative to look at the entire system and how school and youth oppression fits into the entire dominant culture pie and how it intersects into all forms of oppression. For example, when you add capitalism, work, class, race, patriarchy, colonialism and all the rest into the mix, it's really clear that the situation is complex and there isn't room for simple black-and-white judgments. The bottom line is that most parents/caregivers have to work and so kids need some care, some place to be. In many places around the world it is illegal to homeschool/unschool and it's a criminal act to leave your kids at home alone in many places. Just a few weeks ago in the US, a single mom was put in jail because her 9 year old was at the park alone. With all this in mind, I support all movements and struggles of resistance and reform when it comes to creating better conditions for kids and that includes movements to make schools less fucked up places. Most schools are places that warehouse kids and oppress them in terrible ways. At the same time, I have nothing but mad respect for those folks who tirelessly and passionately show up to these institutions daily to support kids and to try and make it better for them.

Ultimately, my personal work and activism is about creating alternatives to school, so I am less interested in the binary between school or no school and more interested in rethinking entirely how we can create free, accessible spaces and projects for and by youth. I want to challenge the conditions that underscore youth oppression by having our communities sincerely engage kids into the architecture of all areas of society, and that's going to mean directly challenging ageism against children and youth. It's worth emphasizing that most folks don't even include youth oppression (childism) on their list of oppressions. We have lots of work to do, and it's going to have to be together and it's going to have to be lead by youth.

Where do you think radical pedagogy and critiques of education go wrong?

C: In lots of cases, critiques or new models of education or of pedagogies can replicate the same kind of ageism and hatred of kids that happens in conventional institutions. If we don't begin from a sincere place of believing that kids deserve the same respect and treatment we'd give any other adult then we are doomed to repeat shitty forms of aggression and oppression.

The equation of learning to education is the crux of the problem; I like to center the idea that kids are learning all the time, and that we can all learn by doing. This isn't a new idea; Tolstoy wrote about it during the rise of modern schooling over 150 years ago. I started using the #checkyourpedagogy hashtag on twitter because I have noticed that a lot of radicals are still

thinking about kids as empty vessels that need to be taught everything. The problem I see a lot is that critical and radical pedagogy methods don't really get to the heart of the problem (childism) and so the practice is often condescending and comes from a place that assumes youth need to be radicalized, or educated about social justice.

I think really sharing power and being sincere about youth liberation means never being attached to an outcome, and most pedagogies are all about an outcome that connects back to the teacher's plans. This is where deschooling can come in. To me deschooling just means having horizontal and friendly relationships between learner and mentor — centering relationships. When it's going well, learning and sharing knowledge moves in all directions, sideways, up and down. It's organic, relationship-based, fluid and deeply nuanced. This may seem super obvious, but the reality is that our entire education system is based on the opposite of that, it's basically just one direction: going down — expert to beginner.

The Thistle project (all the classes, workshops, the buying of supplies, etc) is run by a crew of youth, yet somehow the youth at the Thistle are not seen as folks who can teach anything about organizing, or share the skills that they mentor at the centre. I can't tell you how many times I hear from well-meaning adults wanting to teach the Thistle youth this and that about organizing. In contrast, other than silkscreening, we rarely receive an email asking the youth to come share their knowledge on running a dynamic and vibrant project. That sucks, right?

It really points to how undervalued their work and knowledge is. I think it's probably a (shitty) normal response because it's coming from an internal ageist place of "isn't that sweet, the kids practicing organizing!" I often have to point to all the failed adult-run projects around town just to show that it's ageist to think the youth at the Thistle aren't fucking kicking some serious ass at organizing! I think there are clear parallels with the ways other oppressions play out, like the ways that women's work and knowledge gets systematically marginalized and discounted.

How can folks learn more about deschooling and youth liberation?

C: I say just get busy doing it, get out there and engage with kids, learn together, make shit and have fun! And don't worry too much if you don't know what to do, or how to do it well—just be a good person, follow their curiosity, be open and listen lots! I am constantly learning how to do this work. I fuck up more than I care to admit and I am always learning and sometimes that happens from witnessing other adults do it well, but mostly that learning comes from the kindness of younger folks meeting me where I am at and letting me stumble and learn from experiencing alongside them.

I like to turn to folks like Tolstoy or Emma Goldman — both were staunch critics of compulsory schooling — to emphasize the point that people have been resisting, criticizing, and creating alternatives to modern factory schooling since its inception. I think that's important to realize and to remember. Resisting schooling/schools, or trying to rethink how we can live better with the youngest folks in our lives is not a privileged act: it's a sincere attempt to understand fully what school is about, who it is benefiting and more than that, who it is hurting. Modern schooling is steeped in colonial and capitalist logic and deeply oppressive to children, and there's a long history and vibrant legacy of resistance to the dominant models of education. If it is something you're interested in researching there are lots of books written about school resistance and the problems with compulsory schooling. There are also tons of resources on how to create the alternatives. The core folks I turn to are Ivan Illich (critic of institutions, including schooling), John Holt (founder the term unschooling and creator of alternatives to school), and a super popular book, primarily for youth, is by Grace Llewellyn called: *The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How*

to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education. A terrific go-to reader edited by Matt Hern, Everywhere All the Time, is definitely worth a read and includes a lot of youth voices. There are also tons of free resources online, and so many brilliant projects all over the world. I'd suggest doing a quick online search with keywords like: deschooling, school resistance, youth liberation, free schools and unschooling and you'll find great stuff.

You Did Not Turn Out Fine, by James C. Talbot

In public forums on the internet, we can certainly have lively debates over whether Hitler was a hero, or whether or not the holocaust ever occurred. Oh, yes, we could find a debate over whether slavery ever existed in the U.S.. We might even get an argument that the Earth is flat and always has been. And, given what has also yet to become common knowledge, we can still find arguments in favor of hitting young children as a form of punishment.

For example, those who developed through their formative years having adopted as a part of their belief system that adults hit children as an acceptable practice will take on this treatment of children as a belief not dissimilar to the religious beliefs they've adopted during this same stage of development. And, these are beliefs that tend to become deeply ingrained.

Those who happen to overcome and evolve beyond such irrational belief systems seem to be the exception to the rule. Sadly, it would seem that few children are able to avoid early childhood brainwashing to a particular religion or orientation. Typically, our little ones will buy into what we feed them lock stock and barrel.

Herein lies the problem of change in the face of overwhelming evidence. Let's liken this change to telling a grown man that his name is actually Archibald instead of Joe. Lot's of luck. It's going to take awhile, no doubt and repeated efforts are in order. So, once again, let's try driving home the facts that carry with them the hope of breaking through just a few more of those bigoted obstacles still standing in the way of social progress.

To begin with, I feel it's most important to make it very clearly known to any and all concerned, that the debate on spanking within the scientific and academic communities is dead, and has been for a number of years now. The most substantial indicator of this development is evidenced by the fact that virtually every professional organization in the U.S. and Canada concerned with the care and treatment of children, has taken a public stance against the practice of spanking.

Based on the overwhelming accumulation of research conducted over the past 50+ years linking spanking to a number of risk factors, the professional consensus against this practice has grown to world-wide proportions...even to the extent that Sweden, Finland, Austria, Norway, Croatia, Denmark, Hungary, Israel, Cyprus, Netherlands, Bulgaria, Germany, Latvia, Iceland, Romania, Greece, New Zealand, Venezuela, Spain, Portugal, Chile, Uruguay, and Ukraine have legislated total bans on spanking... with Italy, South Africa, Scotland, Canada, and Ireland apparently in the process of following suit. It should also be noted that every industrialized country in the world has banned spanking in schools. The evidence is in, and the evidence has found against the practice of spanking in a compellingly conclusive manner.

Just as one might find supportive views toward spanking being promoted (typically) on web sites sponsored by fundamentalist Christian sects, so can one find supportive views promoting Homophobia, Racism, Misogyny, and other 'hate group' propaganda. Because of the fact that the actual agendas of these sites are often deceptively disguised by organizational titles such

as, 'Family Council', 'People's Choice', 'Rights and Freedoms', etc., people are forced to exercise a highly judicious discernment of the information being made available on the Internet. Some web surfers have had to learn the hard way that the Internet abounds with persuasive presentations of 'facts and figures' that can prove to represent nothing more than religious, political, or philosophical attempts to spread self-serving misinformation.

Having spent 30+ years examining/evaluating the research on this issue of spanking children, I am able to state with a high degree of confidence that there has never been a peer-reviewed study that has been able to establish the efficacy of spanking as a means of longterm behavior modification; as an effective teaching modality; as an effective punishment; or as a means of instilling self-discipline. Nor have there been published research findings in peer-reviewed professional journals that served to refute previous research. This previous research found spanking to be associated with a risk for undesirable emotional consequences; a risk for physical injury; a risk of counter-productive behavioral outcomes; a risk for the onset of dependence on external controls; and a proclivity toward authority-directed behavior. Moreover, there has never been research data produced finding that spanking carries no risk to the quality of the parent-child relationship (and I should add that conservative editorial reviews of previous research findings do not constitute actual research, as is sometimes claimed to be the case).

Nevertheless, there are some spankers who will find reasons to dismiss, ignore, or discount, the research findings of field conducted experimental studies related to the Social Sciences. Well, it's especially these folks that I'd like to address concerning alarming new research findings, which represent the most severe consequences of physical punishment yet discovered...while doing so in the form of documented scientific proof.

These revelations have come through studies in brain research having provided CAT SCAN pictures showing an abnormal lack of brain development (within the portion of the brain responsible for emotional functioning) in children who had been subject to spankings as a punitive measure. For the sake of sample homogeneity, the researchers chose subjects for their study that had been categorized as 'abused' children. Common sense tells us that this does not eliminate the possibility of a lesser degree of brain damage occurring to spanked children who are subjected to a lesser degree of non-injurious violence. In other words, it would be ludicrous to assume that a child must first suffer bruises, cuts, or welts (or other injuries), before brain damage can take place as a result of the physical punishments. Rather, it is much more logical to deduce that acts of physical aggression toward young children can disrupt, or prevent, the optimal conditions necessary to facilitate a normal process of healthy brain development.

As far as I'm concerned, this new area of research (apparently not yet freely available on the Internet) represents the most compelling, undeniable reason that's yet been discovered to persuade parents to stop (or never start) striking their children as a punitive measure. And I hope any pro-spankers reading this feel the same way. It's difficult to imagine any parent who would be willing to treat their child in a way that might carry even a remote risk of causing a measure of brain damage to their child.

But, in spite of having said all of that, we actually shouldn't need research to end the practice of striking children any more than we needed research to end the practice of striking wives. As a society, there was no need for research findings to convince us of the harmful effects associated with the practice of wives being physically punished.

Instead, when society reached the point of being no longer willing to grant social tolerance to the tradition of husbands physically disciplining their wives, our decision to do so was based on

our having progressed socially into the higher morality of a greater humanity. Perhaps, our next step ahead in forward progress should come by way of reaching a decision to begin recognizing children as also being deserving of those same protections against being struck.

No longer do we see any adult members of our society remaining outside the jurisdiction of the protective laws once enjoyed by only the more privileged and 'deserving' (namely white males who made the laws), regardless of race, gender, religion, ethnic group, or sexual orientation. None of our adult citizens remain legally unprotected from being violated through harassment, threats, defamation, discrimination, or being victimized by violence to any degree or form. So, given our heritage of bestowing a greater humanity upon those of a lower social status by welcoming them as our equals in the eyes of the law (in terms of violent treatment), would it be so out of character for us to also shelter the younger, weaker members of our society by allowing them to join those of us already sharing in the security and comfort of safety that's provided under the umbrella of legal protections from violence?

Bringing our little ones into the fold really doesn't seem all that magnanimous if we keep in mind that we've already been willing to share the shelter of our umbrella of Assault laws with even the most vicious of hardened adult criminals. After all, children are the very last segment of our shared human collective who still remain as fair game for being subjected to acts of physical aggression. We display a strange sense of priorities when we don't allow the prison guard to break-out a paddle and start whacking away on the disobedient buttocks of a sociopathic death-row inmate who kills for the rush it gives him, yet we find helpless, defenseless young children as deserving of such treatment.

Fact is, we define corporal punishments of prison inmates as 'Cruel and Unusual Punishment', 'Guard Brutality', or 'Aggravated Assault'. And, should the physical punishments be repeated as a routine punitive measure, such a treatment of prisoners would fall under the definition of 'Torture'. Why would a murderous inmate be less subject to physical discipline than a helpless 3-year-old child? Logically, morally, humanely, and scientifically, the debate on spanking is dead...save for those who would object to further social progress.

As we evolve as a society, we have to keep in mind that historically there was a time when it was acceptable to legally own other people; a time when the mentally ill were generally considered to be possessed by evil spirits; a time when men legally shot each other in officiated duels; a time when public hangings were attended as a family outing complete with picnic basket; a time when public floggings were considered acceptable punishment; a time when it was a gentleman's agreement that husbands should not beat their wives with a switch that was 'bigger-round than your thumb' (which later became known as 'the rule of thumb'); and there was a time when there were no laws against parents severely beating their children (killing children was unacceptable, of course, but an occasional accidental maiming as a result of disciplinary measures was tolerated).

Obviously, we no longer permit these punishments. The time has come for us to yet further our level of social sophistication by coming to a general agreement that any degree of physical punishment used against children is as socially unacceptable and repugnant as those past violent behaviors we have chosen to put behind us.

Stop Caging Kids, by Nathan Goodman

This week marks the 2014 National Week of Action Against Incarcerating Youth. Across the country, actions will be held to protest everything from the criminalization of queer and disabled youth to the isolation of youth in solitary confinement. Ultimately, what activists are protesting is systematic child abuse by the state.

Kids are being locked in cages by the government all across the country. The consequences are devastating. According to a report from the Justice Policy Institute:

A recent literature review of youth corrections shows that detention has a profoundly negative impact on young people's mental and physical well-being, their education, and their employment. One psychologist found that for one-third of incarcerated youth diagnosed with depression, the onset of the depression occurred after they began their incarceration, and another suggests that poor mental health, and the conditions of confinement together conspire to make it more likely that incarcerated teens will engage in suicide and self-harm. Economists have shown that the process of incarcerating youth will reduce their future earnings and their ability to remain in the workforce, and could change formerly detained youth into less stable employees. Educational researchers have found that upwards of 40 percent of incarcerated youth have a learning disability, and they will face significant challenges returning to school after they leave detention. Most importantly, for a variety of reasons to be explored, there is credible and significant research that suggests that the experience of detention may make it more likely that youth will continue to engage in delinquent behavior, and that the detention experience may increase the odds that youth will recidivate, further compromising public safety.

So the state is engaging in violence that scars young people physically and mentally, and hurts their economic prospects; and this practice may even increase rather than decrease the chance of future crime. Moreover, according to the same report, most of these youth are not even a threat to others, as "about 70 percent are detained for nonviolent offenses."

Once incarcerated, youth are subjected to severe abuses. For example, many youth are isolated in solitary confinement, which is widely recognized as a form of psychological torture. According to the American Civil Liberties Union:

Solitary confinement can cause extreme psychological, physical, and developmental harm. For children, who are still developing and more vulnerable to irreparable harm, the risks are magnified – particularly for kids with disabilities or histories of trauma and abuse. While confined, children are regularly deprived of the services, programming, and other tools that they need for healthy growth, education, and development.

The impacts of solitary on adults are harmful enough. "It's an awful thing, solitary," wrote John McCain, "It crushes your spirit and weakens your resistance more effectively than any other form of mistreatment." Subjecting youth to this kind of torture is monstrous.

Incarcerated youth are also all too often raped and sexually assaulted by guards. According to David Kaiser and Lovisa Stannow, "4.5 percent of juveniles in prison and 4.7 percent of those

in jail reported such [sexual] victimization—rates that ought to be considered disastrously high.” Their risk was higher in youth detention centers, “minors held in juvenile detention suffered sexual abuse at twice the rate of their peers in adult facilities.” Most of this abuse is committed by guards employed and paid with tax dollars:

Some 2.5 percent of all boys and girls in juvenile detention reported having been the victims of inmate-on-inmate abuse. This is not dramatically higher than the corresponding combined male and female rates reported by adults or juveniles in either prison or jail. The reason why the overall rate of sexual abuse (9.5 percent) was so much higher in juvenile detention than in other facilities is the frequency of sexual misconduct by staff. About 7.7 percent of those in juvenile detention reported sexual contact with staff during the preceding year. Over 90 percent of these cases involved female staff and teenage boys in custody.

Government employees are committing child sexual abuse against caged victims. These guards are often repeat offenders. “In juvenile facilities, victims of sexual misconduct by staff members were more likely to report eleven or more instances of abuse than a single, isolated occurrence.” All of this data comes from research conducted by the government’s own Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The impacts of the state’s systematic caging and abuse of children are not equally distributed across the population. The Center for Children’s Law and Policy documents many studies showing the racially disparate impacts of youth incarceration and juvenile justice policies. LGBTQ youth also face disproportionate impacts from the juvenile justice system. According to an article in *The Nation*:

The road to incarceration begins in pretrial detention, before the youth even meets a judge. Laws and professional standards state that it’s appropriate to detain a child before trial only if she might run away or harm someone. Yet for queer youth, these standards are frequently ignored. According to UC Santa Cruz researcher Dr. Angela Irvine, LGBTQ youth are two times more likely than straight youth to land in a prison cell before adjudication for nonviolent offenses like truancy, running away and prostitution. According to Ilona Picou, executive director of Juvenile Regional Services, Inc., in Louisiana, 50 percent of the gay youth picked up for nonviolent offenses in Louisiana in 2009 were sent to jail to await trial, while less than 10 percent of straight kids were. “Once a child is detained, the judge assumes there’s a reason you can’t go home,” says Dr. Marty Beyer, a juvenile justice specialist. “A kid coming into court wearing handcuffs and shackles versus a kid coming in with his parents—it makes a very different impression.”

Queer and transgender youth are treated differently by the justice system before they are even tried and convicted. Once incarcerated, they face brutal violence. From beatings to victim blaming to bigoted slurs from guards, queer and transgender youth are regularly abused in juvenile corrections facilities.

Some of America’s youth incarceration problem begins in the schools. “Zero-tolerance” policies in public schools criminalize violating school rules, producing what is often called the school

to prison pipeline. The racially disparate impacts of this school to prison pipeline are well documented, and they often criminalize minor infractions.

Outside of school, youth are often directly targeted by police thanks to ageist laws like curfews. Laws often restrict freedom of movement and bodily autonomy for youth, and justify this coercion through condescending and paternalistic platitudes. In a particularly appalling recent case of paternalism sending youth to prison, a transgender girl was sent to an adult prison without charges or trial, because the state had power over her as her “guardian.” The desire to protect youth provides ideological cover for the state to treat them even more abusively than it treats adults.

The American state is uniquely punitive in some respects. According to Amnesty International, “The United States is believed to stand alone in sentencing children to life without parole.” Amnesty identifies “at least 2,500 people in the US serving life imprisonment without the possibility of parole for crimes committed when they were under 18 years old.” Before turning 18, these youth were permanently separated from society, permanently sent to violent hellholes.

The essence of imprisonment as we know it is throwing away a human being, treating them as disposable. Prisoners are subjected to violence, abuse, and torture. They are held in austere and inhumane conditions. And they are kept out of the general public’s sight. They are punished rather than being made to make amends or provide restitution to victims. It’s bad enough to treat any human being this way. To treat children this way is unconscionable.

Stop caging kids.

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