

Cities made differently

This conversation reflects on Dubrovsky's experience at the workshop in collaboration with Kurdish activists, touching on themes of urbanism, community, and imagination. The conference took place in Hamburg, Germany, from April 7-9, 2023, and under the title We Want Our World Back, focused on the arts, education, and construction of democratic confederalism.

What is the objective of the Anthropology for Kids (A4Kids) project, and how was it initiated?

I began A4Kids 15 years ago after meeting my late husband, David Graeber. Since he's the one who actually introduced me to the discipline of anthropology, in a sense, I learned anthropology like a child learning about the world from an adult. Eventually, the project grew out of that relationship.

Throughout its existence, A4Kids has taken different forms, including interactive books and an in-person workshop series. But the purpose has always remained the same: introducing people – as I was introduced myself – to the various ways in which essential social institutions such as Family, City, Museum, and so on, have been perceived in different cultures and at different times. A4Kids invites people to imagine new ways of organizing society around the values they hold dear.

Originally, I imagined the project as being less of a product and more of a community-oriented educational tool. I thought I would create “doodle books” – notebooks, or some sort of collective drawing practice. Something that can be easily integrated into the everyday life of a parent taking care of their kids; that would look like play, without requiring lots of resources – something equivalent to singing songs together. However, that was proven to be very difficult to pitch to publishing houses, and so David and I began adapting the project from doodle books to more traditional educational books. (The doodle designs are still available for download from our website, <https://a4kids.org/>.)

Another project born out of the initial idea was the City of Care Assembly, which David and I designed together during lockdown in London. This time, we were working with our adult friends from the art group and environmental movement Extinction Rebellion. We drew on the pavement with chalk, collectively visualizing urban social alternatives by literally drawing onto the city.

Ever since, lots of international A4Kids workshops have been organized with people of all ages from different cultural, economic, and social backgrounds: 6 and 7-year-old kids from Havana, teens from central London, homeless 18 and 20-year-olds from Berlin, and Romanian teens from Timișoara have all taken part in it. Even though the groups have been very diverse, one aspect that has remained the same throughout has been the gender dynamic: despite being

from very different backgrounds, they have shown a similar behavior pattern of assuming gender roles. The moment when children start to invent social scenarios, boys in almost every country start building robot factories to kill their enemies. They fantasize about taking over the city, building roads in a way that would either cut off supplies from one part of the city or protect the city from future attacks. While the boys were engaged in warfare with each other from start to finish, the girls would look for ways to provide care. Girls would say, "Looks like it will be a war. There will probably be wounded people. Let's build a hospital." Or, "We should make a community garden and a school for our future kids." If they were to build a factory, it would be something like a toy factory. Only in Iceland, a country with an inspiring feminist history, did the girls choose to take over a part of the city and state, not to adapt to the rules created by boys, but to make their own.

How did it happen that a kids' educational project ended up at a conference with such a name like "Challenging Capitalist Modernity"?

Anthropology promises an incredible opportunity to examine our society through the prism of others organized in different times and by different cultures. A4Kids came about as an attempt to create and spread non-academic and egalitarian knowledge with links to practice – meaning, learning by doing. Gradually, the A4kids project changed its audience from kids to adults. A similar process happened with the A4kids book series. They are now being published by MIT Press under the title ...*Made Differently*. The reference to children has been removed from the title.

The invitation to participate in the conference was very personal, as David and I were friends with the organizers. David was doing everything he could to help the most important revolution since the Spanish War: the Rojava Revolution. David was an anarchist like his father, Kenneth Graeber, who, as a young American anarchist, went to fight in the International Brigades during the Spanish Civil War. Just before I left for the conference, I learned that the administration of the University of Hamburg had refused to hold the event. The preparation of an international conference with more than 1,000 guests takes a long time. It is almost impossible to coordinate infrastructure and logistics at the last minute. The conference would have to be canceled.

The interference of the administrative powers in the affairs of an independent university caused outrage among activists and students in Hamburg and around the world. Amazingly, through a collective effort, organizers managed to get the conference going within just a few days.

How was the practice and agenda of A4Kids embedded into the conference?

My experience of delivering the A4Kids workshop at the "Challenging Capitalist Modernity" conference was unlike any other I have had in the 15 years of running this project.

I brought a large piece of paper containing initial outlines of Hamburg and proposed the joint planning of a new city to the 20-some people who had signed up for the session.

Participants were from all over the world: there were Kurds, Germans, Brits, Indians, Romanians, and people from the Balkans. Despite coming from different places, they shared a

lot; it felt like they already had a common language and had known each other for a long time. Thus, it was easy to collaborate. People supported each other in developing ideas. Having come to the conference about "different modernity," they were already geared up to collaborate on building an alternative world. My workshop simply provided a place where they could discuss the details of this world with each other.

An important detail that stood out to me about the workshop in Hamburg was how the participants approached the concept of security. David admired how, in Rojava, collective safety became an integral part of the society, rather than the mission of an outside force set up to police society itself. David recounted how, in his visit to Rojava, there were almost no traffic police. It seemed like adults were just making sure that kids would not attempt to drive cars. The street traffic was pretty safe.

Interestingly for me, at the workshop in Hamburg, participants began creating their city by building a river. When it was time to think about the police, they suggested that the police would be a group of citizens who always float on the river, constantly going from one neighborhood to another. When the police were absent from a neighborhood, they were replaced by local members of the community. This way, the population would remain in control, and the police would only exist for society's protection. I thought that was a brilliantly smart and well-thought-through city design. There were numerous other clever ideas; for example, a girl from India combined a food cooperative with an art space for women. So many brilliant ideas were born about how to build a world where very different people could live freely, respecting each other and the world around them, that it would be hard to recount them all here, but I felt like I had taken part in an incredible crash course in the making of the Rojava revolution.

Even though I was supposed to run this workshop, I didn't actively participate; I simply observed the group as they collaborated on designing this city of freedom and care. Some might describe what I saw as utopian, but I don't think so. Indeed, in my experience taking part in the workshops over many years, when people have lacked ideas for crafting a solution, they tend to create dystopias based on dark fantasies. Many people get a bit lost when asked to join in planning social spaces together since it's not something they've done much in their lives. There was no confusion among the participants at the Hamburg conference, only a cheerful confidence in their ability to build something beautiful together. They were both highly practical and meticulous while thinking most of all about social justice. I couldn't help but imagine how fortunate I would be to have such people nearby when the inevitable catastrophes, environmental or otherwise, hit our part of the world.

This impressive, solutions-focused way of thinking was also present in the approach of the conference's organizers. When the venue canceled the event, it came as a total shock. Despite being faced with this massive problem, the organizers of the conference were results-oriented, just like the way participants in my workshop approached building a city.

The organizers spread the workshops and panel discussions across several venues in Hamburg, so everything went as originally planned: without a hitch!

It looked magical. As if they were being helped by magical fairies or superheroes. But the secret was the solidarity of a large network of activists and sympathizers, ready to react in unusual situations towards a common cause.

The University of Hamburg administration surely didn't anticipate this amazing unity and vibrant spirit from the conference organizers and participants. I wish to think that the Anthropology for Kids project will at least partly follow this example.

Read this interview in Kurdish [here](#).