What Is the East Side Institute?

A Grassroots Think Tank, a Power Center, a Community, a Rhizome, a Mother, a Grandmother, Independent, an Improvisation, an Activity

The East Side Institute is a Grassroots Think Tank

The East Side Institute is a grassroots think tank where thought is never separate from action. It is a think tank where the ideas of the past are constantly being played with and re-mixed to create new ideas and new activities for engaging and transforming the world we have inherited.

The East Side Institute is one of the places where Marxism has been post-modernized; where the *ideology* of Marxism was wrestled to the ground so that the *methodology* of Marxism, dialectics, could be liberated and developed. The East Side Institute is where the discoveries of the early Soviet developmental psychologist Lev Vygotsky about how children learn and develop has grown into an approach to learning and development as a life-long activity. It is where the *study* of performance has evolved into the *activism* of performance; where improvisation has been transformed from a theatrical technique to a way of living life; where the noun "philosophy" has become the verb "philosophizing," where the dead weight of language is constantly being challenged, reorganized and generating new meanings. The East Side Institute is where the individualism of psychology has been challenged by the emergence of a *social* therapy through which the power and passion of collectively recreating our emotionality has been recognized and embraced.

The East Side Institute is a think tank where activists reflect on their work and the innovative social justice work of others. It has produced dozens of books and hundreds of articles, book chapters and talks by activist scholars including Fred Newman, Lois Holzman, Lenora Fulani, Carrie Lobman, Murray Dabby, Luke Perone, and Dan Friedman.

Unlike most think tanks that are funded by and serve political parties, corporations, universities, and governments, the East Side Institute was founded and is funded by and serves those who want to make the world more equitable, democratic, peaceful and developmental. The East Side

Institute is a think tank, and a feeling tank and a praxis tank where what Marx called, "The tradition of all dead generations [that] weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living," can begin to be engaged.

The East Side Institute is a Power Center

The East Side Institute is a power center. It is constantly generating power. What we mean by power is, *the creative social activity of people working together to reorganize our world.* The Institute is about human development, social and emotional transformation. It is ambitious. It is about nothing less than revolutionizing how we humans relate to each other and to the vast network of life that we are a part of on Earth. The East Side Institute's is working to design and redesign the social tools that can enable this transformation. Nothing that the East Side Institute stives for can come to fruition without power.

The word and the concept of power can be confusing. It's commonly used in two very different and contradictory ways. We say, "All Power to the People," and, in the next breath, we say, "Power corrupts." If power corrupts then why give it to the people? How did the same word come to mean such different, indeed, in some ways diametrically opposed, social phenomenon?

In 1965 Colin Ward, a British social historian and anarchist theorist made a simple but profound observation that is helpful in this regard. He wrote, "Everyone knows that there are at least two kinds of organization. There is the kind that is forced on you, the kind which is run from above, and there is the kind which runs from below, which can't *force* you to do anything, and which you are free to join or free to leave alone." (Colin Ward, "Anarchism as a Theory of Organization," 1965) That difference is the key to understanding power.

In 2004, East Side Institute co-founders Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, wrote, "Power (or the world 'power' if you prefer), no doubt, has multiple meanings. But, as we have long argued, the socio-political sense of power is best understood in its dialectical relationship to *authority*. … Authority goes from the top, down. It is imposed. Most importantly, it must be known. Power comes from

the bottom up. It is expressed. It is created. Obviously, in ordinary language, power and authority are often treated as synonymous. Yet nothing could be further from the truth." (Newman, F. & Holzman, L. "Power, Authority and Pointless Activity: The Developmental Discourse of Social Therapy," 2004, p. 74)

The confusion between authority and power is not an accident. It serves the interests of our worldwide authoritarian social and cultural structures to convince ordinary people that "power corrupts." It does not. Power liberates.

Everything the East Side Institute does—from social therapy to educational innovations to organizing Performing the World conferences—is about generating power. When we exercise power, we are creating social environments in which people, from the bottom up, can generate new possibilities for themselves and the world. Because politics is, in its broadest and most basic meaning, about the tension between power and authority, everything about the Institute is political.

When most people think about being political, about exercising power, we think of demonstrations, strikes, occupations, riots, insurrections, and violent revolutions. All of those are, of course, examples of the exercise of power. They are expressions of *deconstructive* power, power organized to change or eliminate what we are *against*. However, there is also *reconstructive* power, the power to bring into being what we are *for*. While we believe that deconstructive power is sometime necessary, the East Side Institute focuses on reconstructive power, helping people exercise the power to build their own activities, organizations and emotional constructs that address their needs and wants and, in so doing, provide alternatives to the authority of established institutions. This is a different way of exercising power, of "doing politics," indeed, of living one's life.

When we are focused on deconstructive power, we run the risk of becoming overdetermined by what we are against and pay too little attention to what, if anything, will replace the objects of our rage. We lose our collective ability to imagine something qualitatively new. As the science fiction writer Ursula LeGuin wrote back in 1968, ""To oppose

something is to maintain it. … You must go somewhere else." (Ursula LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*,1968, p. 151)

The East Side Institute is striving to go somewhere else.

Our approach to activism, which we have in common with hundreds of other projects all over the globe, is to *build something else* that works better. The primarily revolutionary activity going on today is not *destruction* of the past, so much as *construction* of the future. The deconstruction is being achieved in the construction. As we see it, the old authoritarian institutions and oppressive social systems are being relocated in the process of creating something other.

The East Side Institute is a Community

The East Side Institute is a community. It's a community open to all who want to participate in its activities. It's a home to those who are tired of the alienation, the loneliness, the political repression, the poverty and the wars. It is a place to connect with others who are also asking, "What can we build in such times of crisis?"

The East Side Institute is a community consisting of on-the-ground community builders, that is, our community is not ready made. We build it as we go along. Our community attracts political and performance activists, artists, teachers, therapists, helpers and healers, all whose work is moving them beyond "serving the people" to *co-becoming with* the people. The East Side Institute is a community of seekers and searchers—both academic and community-based—who are longing to connect, unite, cross-fertilize and nurture other seekers and searchers.

The East Side Institute, unlike most communities, is not identity-based. It is not limited to people who live in a particular geographic area (such as a village or a neighborhood) or people of a particular ethnic or national group (as in the "Black community" or the "Bengali community") or people engaged in a particular profession (as in the "medical community"). These types of communities can provide a sense of belonging and provide needed social support. Their limitation is they are

closed and organized around a current social identity. They help you adapt to the social and economic circumstance you were born into.

The East Side Institute community is not focused on who we are or where we come from. It's focused on *what-we-are-becoming* and *what-we are-creating-in-the-world*.

It is open and is created and shaped by anyone who chooses to join its work, play, performance. Everyone who chooses to participate in it changes it. It is therefore dynamic in a way that most other communities can't be. It is continually transforming itself through its continually changing activity. It has variously been described as an "activist community," a "developmental community" a "performance community," and an "improvisational community."

Since the East Side Institute is concerned with generating power, why is it organized as a community? Why not a political party or a university or a non-government agency or a social enterprise? Because all those forms of social organization are limited in who can belong and what they can do. Ours is a community constantly being reconfigured by those building it. The East Side Institute is not tied to existing social institutions or to a set of preconceived plans. It is a looser, more fluid, and more independent kind of social unit that is emerging from, and in sync with, this point in history, a time of failed solutions and political and emotional dead ends. This dynamic approach to community makes its path by walking. Like other communities, it provides a sense of belonging and social, educational, and emotional support. Unlike other communities it is open, future oriented, defined by what it is doing, what it is creating.

The East Side Institute is a Rhizome

The East Side Institute is a rhizome. A rhizome in nature is a continuously growing horizontal underground plant stem that acts as a storage organ for nutrients and enables its propagation by sending out lateral shoots from its nodes. Like a rhizome in nature, a social rhizome has no center, no headquarters, no preconceived plan of growth. The fabric of a rhizome is the conjunction, and...and...and. It proceeds horizontally and mostly

unnoticed by those in authority. A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines...The rhizome operates by variation, expansion, offshoots It doesn't grow *up*; it spreads *out*. It's not about getting bigger; it's about becoming multiplicities.

More specifically, the East Side Institute is a node in a global rhizome. In nature a node stores water and nutrients needed to help its underground shoots to grow. A social node stores experiences, methodologies, structures, ideas and energy to help its various shots, roots, pathfinders to grow. Under harsh conditions a node can remain dormant, and it can activate rapidly when environmental conditions and available nutrients favor growth. Any broken piece or section of a rhizome containing at least one node can regenerate and develop into an entirely new plant.

The East Side Institute is a Mother and a Grandmother

The East Side Institute is a Mother and a Grandmother. It has given birth to and nurtured numerous projects, organizations and areas of discovery over the years.

Among them are: The International Class, the Social Therapeutic Group Study Program, Performing the World, Developing Across Borders, Creating Our Mental Health, the "All Power to the Developing" podcast, The Joy of Dementia, Let's Learn, Global Play Brigade, ImprovScience, Yes/And Higher Education Network—not to mention introducing social therapy groups, social therapeutic coaching groups, and informal health and life teams into the daily life of people around the world.

Then there are the grandchildren. The Castillo Theatre gave birth to Youth Onstage! and the Otto René Castillo Awards for Political Theatre. The All Stars Talent Show Network gave birth to the Development School for Youth and Becoming Producers. ImprovScience gave birth to Cultivating Ensembles and the Freedom Festival. The Joy of Dementia gave birth to Reimagining Dementia.

Those are the ones that are alive and kicking. Over the decades there have been many more. Among the most important relative to our development were: the All Stars Talent Show Network, The Castillo Theatre, the Barbara Taylor School, Crisis Normalization, Let's Talk About It, Pregnant Productions, the Developmental Philosophy Group.

And I want to point out that the East Side is a mother and grandmother who loves and nurtures not only her genetic family, she also adopts, nurtures, influences and is impacted upon by many others: Hello Neighbor! in post-civil war Serbia; Play, Perform, Learn, Grow conferences based in Thessaloniki, Greece which served as a showcase for performance activists throughout Europe; the Fred Newman Center in Juarez Mexico; the Institute for Improvisation and Social Action, in El Paso, Texas; Street Project Foundation in Nigeria; Hope for Youth and Let the Girls be in rural Uganda; Turning Point, the pandees theatre, and Shakti Shalini women's shelter, all in India.

And like many grandmothers, the East Side Institute is a matchmaker, always working to bring individuals and organizations together to learn from each other and procreate new possibilities.

The East Side Institute is Independent

The East Side Institute is independent. In 2018, Institute co-founder and director Lois Holzman wrote: "Two guiding principles were there at the start and remain to this day. First, to be independently funded and supported, and not take money or be constrained by government or other traditional funding sources. This involved reaching out to ordinary Americans for financial support and participation, initially by stopping them on street corners and knocking on the doors of their homes. ... Second, to create new kinds of institutions that in their very design and activity challenge the foundations of their traditional 'counterparts.'" It was the first guiding principle—financial and institutional independence—that has made the second guiding principle—creating new kinds of institutions—possible.

We all live under the thumb of authority, politically, socially, culturally, economically and emotionally. To create anything qualitatively *other*, we must, the East Side Institute believes, find ways of establishing and staying as independent as possible of those in authority.

The East Side Institute is an Improvisation

The world changing efforts of the East Side Institute have no script, no map, no syllabus, no blueprint. Not only is the practice of many of its children and grandchildren improvisational, the East Side Institute itself is an improvisation. We are always listening to others, to the world, to history for offers and responding with "Yes/And."

The East Side Institute is an Activity

The East Side Institute is an activity, or more accurately, an entanglement of many activities that are constantly learning and transforming as they move in, around and between each other. We welcome you to the flow....

—Dan Friedman
October 10, 2026