

# **IN THE TIME OF THE RIGHT**

**Reflections on Liberation**

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## **DOMINATION POLITICS**

*Movements grow from the beliefs and desires of large groups of people. The Right has found fertile ground in the attitudes of ordinary people, many of whom do not support the Right's agenda but who nevertheless hold beliefs that give it room to grow.*

How did the Right bring about this revolution? For any group to gain power, people must give them access to power, either knowingly or unknowingly. The rise to power does not occur in a vacuum; large numbers of people are usually complicit with it, either through action or inaction, through support or silence. The Right has gained power by placing wedges along the existing societal faultlines of race, class, gender, and sexuality and expanding them into larger divisions. The Right has gained power because it has found a fertile place to grow in the current beliefs and attitudes of the people of this land. This growth has occurred because ordinary citizens have supported individual and institutional politics of domination.

Dominator. Colonizer. Supremacist. Oppressor. Imperialist. These names are interrelated. They describe individuals, groups, and countries that seek power and control over the lives of others.

I believe there are two kinds of politics: the politics of domination and the politics of liberation. With the former, the few seek to have power over the lives of the many, gaining it through systems of oppression and exploitation. With the latter, the goal is for the many to share decision-making, resources and responsibilities for the good of the group as well as the individual. These politics operate on both the individual and public institutional levels. This chapter will explore the politics of domination, the following will give an example of the rise of the Right from this foundation, and the final chapter will present examples of liberation politics.

Domination politics begin with a belief in meritocracy. Meritocracy is the belief that a culture already provides the level playing field that Jesse Jackson mentions in his speeches as a dream yet to

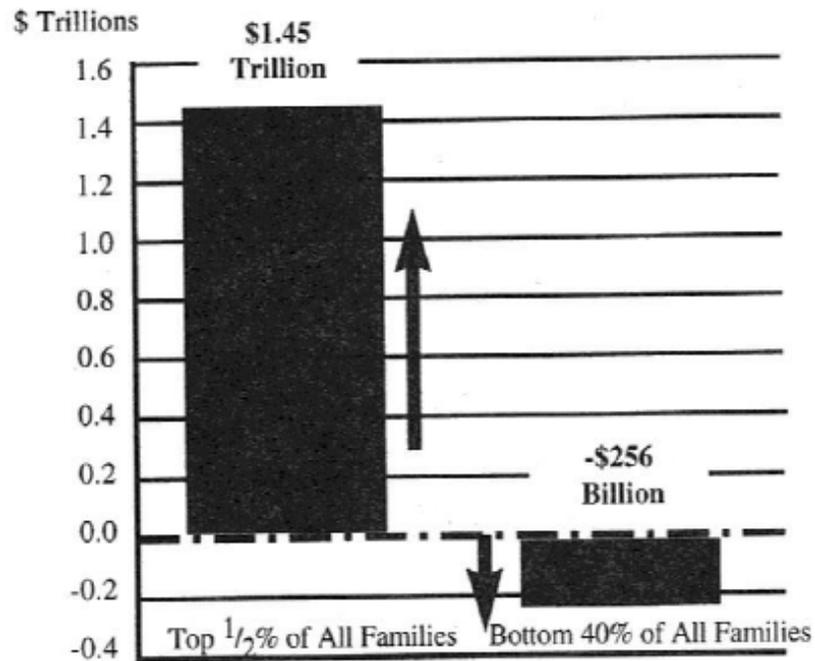
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come true. Because everyone, despite one's race, class, or gender, is thought to have equal access to achievement, one's success or failure is understood to be earned, deserved, or merited ("if she'd only worked harder, she wouldn't be poor") and a result of innate qualities (e.g., muscle, will power, intelligence), not social or cultural structures. From this belief comes a conviction that some people are superior to others and therefore are justified in their efforts to control the lesser folks and to reap the benefits of their labors. In this country, domination politics are founded on the belief that the rich are superior to the poor, men superior to women, white people to people of color, Christians to Jews and other religious minorities, heterosexuals to lesbians and gay men, able-bodied people to people with disabilities.

The last decade provided a fine example of the solidification of domination politics and the surge of economic injustice, oppression, and moral bankruptcy. Not since the 1920s had there been such an increase in economic inequality as there was in the 1980s, the Reagan/Bush years. From 1983-1989, the nation's wealth increased by \$2.8 trillion. The top 0.5% of families gained 54%, the next 9.5% gained 36.%, and the remainder of us (90 % of U.S. families) received *only* 9.7% of this incredible increase in wealth. (Lawrence Mishel and Jared Bernstein, *State of Working America 1994-95*, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1994, p. 247) This increase in wealth and its grossly unequal distribution continue today, brought to even greater extremes by the tax and regulatory policies of the Republican-controlled Congress, unchecked and often supported by "centrist" Democrats.

The distance between the rich and the poor widened enormously as conservatives gave tax breaks to the rich, reducing the tax on the richest Americans from 70% to 28%, the same rate as middle income people are taxed. What is meant by "the richest Americans?" During the decade, the number of millionaires rose from 574,000 to 1.3 million; billionaires, from a few to 52—all taxed the same as those who make \$45,000 a year. While the incomes of the bottom 10% of the population fell by 10.5%, the incomes of the top 10% rose by 24.4%, and the incomes of the top 1% rose by a staggering 74.2%. And the national debt tripled. (*Politics of Rich and Poor*, Kevin Phillips, Random House, 1990)

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### WEALTH OF THE SUPER RICH VS. BOTTOM 40% OF ALL FAMILIES, 1983-1989.

From: *Corporate Power and the American Dream*, The Labor Institute, NY, NY.

Obscene greed and luxury consumption became the standard for rich stockholders as corporations sought greater wealth from increased profit margins gained by cutting back salaries and benefits, downsizing, eliminating full-time employees and taking on part-time workers; moving companies abroad to exploit even cheaper labor; finding every tax loophole and creating new ones; buying up real estate, jacking up prices, then abandoning the property as a tax write-off; receiving the corporate welfare of government bail-outs and tax giveaways, loans and grants—all the while paying minimal taxes; putting little or no significant money back into development and production and the creation of jobs; upping the salaries of CEOs; and leaving the burden of paying for the running of the country to middle and low-income workers.

Meanwhile, this was happening to the rest of us: thousands of jobs were being eliminated or reduced in salary; agencies for temporary workers became the major employers in the country; unions were virtually destroyed; houses became unaffordable and rents skyrocketed; the number of homeless people increased on the streets; federal funds to cities were drastically cut; more affluent white people moved to suburbs, leaving inner cities to the poor and people of color; human services

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to both urban and rural people were either eliminated or cut, leaving low-income people to fend for themselves as best they could.

Number of U.S. corporations with \$250 million or more in assets that paid no taxes:	1,555
Average size:	\$1.2 billion in assets
Average sales:	\$220 million per year
Percent of giant corporations that paid no taxes:	33.4%
<b>Total federal taxes paid by these 1,555 giant corporations:</b>	<b>\$0.00</b>

**GIANT CORPORATE TAX EVADERS**

From: *Corporate Power and the American Dream*, The Labor Institute, NY, NY.

A great divide began forming. Not only did the globalization of the economy unleash corporate greed and irresponsibility but other factors were at work. We are in the difficult transition from the industrial age to the technological, leading to more automation and fewer workers, and requiring highly trained, educated, and skilled workers. Class divisions are widening through the “professionalization” of the country, with the highly educated and skilled workers making livable incomes and those who have less education left to manual labor, the service industry, and temporary or part-time~ low-skilled jobs—those remaining after the export of production to other countries for cheap labor. This transition carries with it as much disruption and displacement as the earlier transition from the agrarian age to the industrial.

Social disorder increased during the 1980s as the rich escaped social responsibilities such as providing money for jobs and human services through re-investment of profits and payment of fair taxes, and instead opted for luxury spending that showed a concern only for selfish pleasures rather than the survival of all of us. The code of the times changed from one of responsibility, such as Harry Truman’s “The buck stops here,” to one of avarice that goes something like this: “Anything for a buck—the people and the environment be damned.” Their bottom line seemed not to be “Is this good for the country?” but “Will this bring me more money?” Following that creed, television and movies produced

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more and more violence because it was profitable, people were encouraged to run their credit cards up to the limit, and anything such as affordable housing or day care that did not show a great profit was abandoned. Workers' lives were destroyed as the rich eliminated their jobs and lobbied for reduced taxes and regulation and less funding to human needs programs. This pervasive immorality left the less affluent in society to seek survival through dwindling jobs or the violence of the streets. The loss of jobs and livable income broke up families, and communities were destabilized in the shifting economic struggles. By 1990, it was obvious that something was terribly wrong in these United States.

Clearly, for this system of unharnessed greed and affluence for the few to continue, someone other than those responsible had to be blamed. Otherwise we would see a rebellion, a people's revolt. Unjust economic systems foster social chaos and require the imposition of strong methods of control to keep order. Economic injustice requires oppression to maintain social stability. When economic injustice and oppression merge, it is difficult for people to rise up in a collective response to bring about change.

### **THE MERGER OF ECONOMIC INJUSTICE AND OPPRESSION**

During more than two decades of massive economic restructuring and changes in class politics, progressive people have not managed to keep a strong economic analysis in the public debate. Perhaps this failure has come from old fears derived from a history of red-baiting and memories of the fairly recent McCarthy era of anti-Communism. Certainly today, when progressive people point to the growing disparity between the rich and poor, conservatives immediately accuse us of "trying to start a class war." Of course, the answer to this accusation is that it is not progressives who began and perpetuate the ongoing warfare against the poor and middle classes of this country; it is those who have redistributed wealth upward, leaving working people without adequate wages.

I have seen this warfare up close in over fifty years of living and working in the South and traveling this country. People who discuss economic injustice and suggest redistribution of wealth as a remedy are inevitably labeled as neo-Marxists. Unfortunately, I am not schooled in

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Marxism, only in capitalism as it was taught me in school and in the everyday life of this country, but my own lived experience has revealed injustice and made me long for economic fairness. The way I have learned to understand economics is as a value system; an analysis of a country's economic system and government budgeting reveals what it values most. Hence, it is not as an academic or an economist debating statistics and points and studies that I present this discussion of the linkage of economics and oppression, but as a social and economic justice worker reporting what I have learned from my work.

First, some definitions:

*Economic exploitation* is using both people's labor and natural resources for the benefit of the few without adequate compensation for that labor or consideration of the environmental destruction created by the removal and disposal of those resources.

*Oppression* is the exertion of power and control over individuals and groups through discrimination, scapegoating, and violence, resulting in the denial of civil and human rights and the imposition of psychological violence.

For a long while the primary focus of progressive people has been the analysis of and remedies for oppression, and our failure to recognize its connection to exploitation has caused difficulty in both our analysis and in our organizing. For example, exploitation and oppression are almost always combined for people of color, but not always for other groups such as lesbians and gay men where oppression is pervasive but exploitation is intermittent. Thus, one of the most critical and damaging divisions we have among ourselves is along lines of class. Affluent white women are divided from low income women and women of color in the women's movement. Affluent white gay men and women are divided from low income lesbians and people of color in the lesbian and gay movement. These divisions have created our deepest fissures and led us to create incomplete politics based on oppression alone.

It is difficult for systematic economic injustice to be sustained without the backing of pervasive oppression. How does this work? One of the simplest ways I've found of explaining it is through a chart developed from an idea presented by Judith Stevenson to the steering committee of the NCADV in 1982. Since that time, Catlin Fullwood and I have expanded it in racism and homophobia workshops, and hundreds of other trainers and educators have used the "Power/Privilege Chart"

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to get people thinking and talking about the ways economic injustice and oppression work.

<b>A</b> <b>Power/Privilege</b> <b>The Norm</b> <b>Dominator</b>	<b>B</b> <b>Less Power/Resources</b> <b>The Other</b> <b>Dominated</b>
Rich	Poor
White	People of Color
Male	Female
Christian	Jews, Muslims, religious minorities
Heterosexual	Lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender people
Able-bodied	People with disabilities

**POWER/PRIVILEGE CHART**

This chart is a reflection of the -isms of our times (classism, racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia/heterosexism, and ableism) and the struggle for equality and civil rights protections. Because most people have identities on both sides of the chart, it provides a door to understanding which people can walk through according to their experience of economic injustice and oppression, whether that be the experience of the dominator or the dominated. Probably the most important aspect of this chart is that in workshop and classroom discussions it requires participants to do critical thinking, the most important skill for the pursuit of freedom, equality, and justice, and the greatest enemy of authoritarianism. The compelling questions are “How does this work? How do those in column A manage to dominate those in column B?”

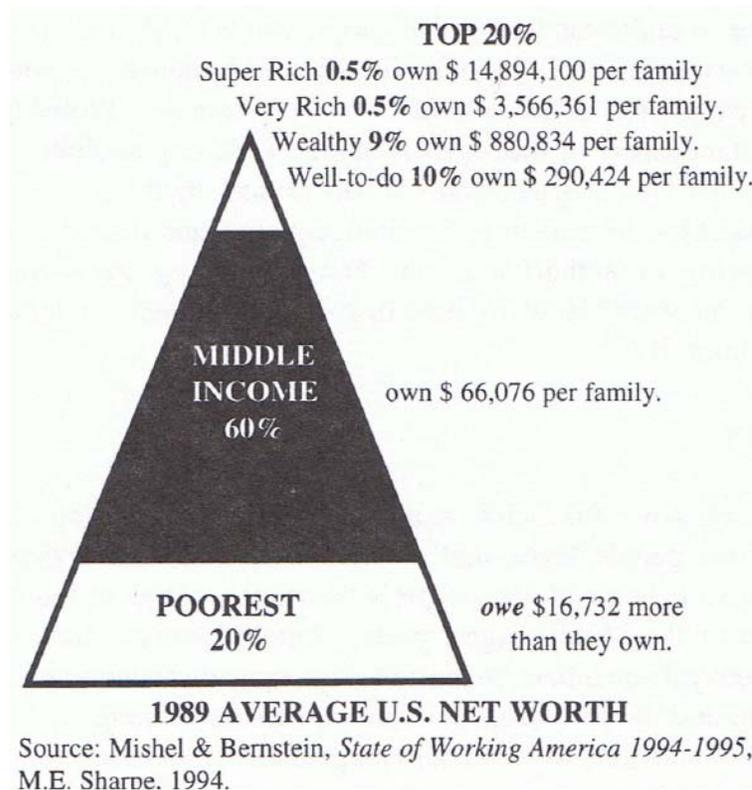
### **Economics**

The most powerful factor on this chart is wealth, the top of column A. Some people argue that economic injustice and oppression occur because it is simply in people’s nature to engage in the seven deadly sins of the Middle Ages: pride, gluttony, avarice, lust, sloth, anger, and envy. I and others, to the contrary, argue that economic injustice and oppression occur because someone benefits from them. It is in the interest of someone to create and perpetuate oppressions. The central question in any analysis of social/economic conditions is “Who

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benefits?" In almost every circumstance, those who dominate benefit from injustice, and those who benefit most are the rich.

When wealth resides in the hands of a few, rather than distributed throughout the population, then those few control the political, business, and social activities of a nation. Our government increasingly is one not of, by, and for the people, but of, by, and for the few. Despite Reagan's touting a "trickle down" theory of wealth, during the Reagan/Bush years the rich amassed greater wealth and the poor got poorer. In the 1990s, the structure of the U.S. economic holdings looks like a pyramid with a sharp narrow point on top. According to Holly Sklar in her extremely helpful book, *Chaos or Community?* (South End Press, Boston, 1995), "The combined wealth of the top 1 percent of American families is nearly the same as that of the entire bottom 95 percent... (They) owned more than half of all bonds, trusts and business equity; nearly half of all stocks; and 40 percent of non-home real estate in 1989. The bottom 90 percent owned about a tenth of all those assets, except non-home real estate, of which they owned 20 percent." Since 1989, that division has grown even wider and at an escalating rate. Wealth has not trickled down; it has been redistributed upward.



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How do the few have so much while so many are scrabbling for so little? Certainly, the wealth of the rich comes not from the sweat of their brows and the work of their hands. Indeed, it is from the labor of others. For so much wealth to be accumulated in so few hands there must be an enormous source of *low-paid* and *unpaid* labor. In this country, that labor is produced by people of color, women, and minimally-educated white men, and in U.S. factories located in other countries, by large numbers of children as well.

A large portion of the unpaid labor which underpins this system is the volunteer work of women in the home and community. Without the free hours given by women we would have few charitable organizations in operation, our battered women's shelters would be closed, our churches and synagogues would be unable to function, our hospitals would be limited in care, programs for children would disappear, and families would not exist as we know them. These hours of volunteer time represent billions of dollars that need to be spent in meeting human needs. If meeting these needs were a high value in our budget priorities, salaries could be paid to these volunteer women for the support of themselves and their families. Everyone would benefit. Currently Congress is severely cutting all funding to support human needs in the name of balancing the budget, and like George Bush before them, the new Republicans are asking people to fill in the gap by volunteering. Volunteerism provides an inadequate buffer for the suffering caused when massive tax cuts that benefit the rich have forced human services to be reduced or eliminated.

An often unacknowledged source of unpaid labor is prisoners. In many states prisoners maintain highways, make license plates, etc., and constitute a portion of the unpaid labor pool. In other states such as Oregon, businesses, by law, can use them as unpaid/low-paid employees.

The lowest paid workers at the bottom of the pyramid are people of color and women (as well as white men with less than a high school education, teenagers, the old, and people with disabilities). They supply a bountiful source of low-paid labor. One-fifth of U.S. full-time workers are falling below the poverty level. (Sklar, p. 26) Despite the efforts of affirmative action programs, people of color and women still comprise the majority of low-income workers. Now Congress and the Supreme Court are at work dismantling affirmative action which has

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been this country's major attempt to give all people equal opportunity. Despite evidence to the contrary brought by the Reagan/Bush years, the prevailing theory remains that there is a level playing field and fairness will reign in a laissez-faire, free market system. Money, they insist, will trickle down from above to those below who do the work. But we ask: How much money? And is a trickle enough for people who are dying of thirst?

Let's look at how this trickle-down theory works for low-income people in this country by scanning the practices of one of the most popular discount chains, Wal-Mart. In 1989, according to *Forbes* magazine, Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, was the third richest man in the world, with \$8.2 billion made from buying goods in enormous quantities and selling them to low and middle income people in small towns and in the working-class suburbs of large cities. Like other businessmen of his time, Sam sought goods that were cheaply made.

Decades ago, factories left the unionized North to settle in the South where "right to work" laws kept (and still keep) unions weak or nonexistent and salaries low. In more recent years, manufacturers found that people in Mexico or the Pacific Rim would work a whole day for what people in the South made in a minimum wage hour, so they moved their production to these countries. That's where Wal-Mart makes the cheap goods it brings back to the U.S. to sell to the working class—who are losing their jobs and their ability to consume because of the overall reduction of jobs and wages in this country. To appeal to these particular consumers, Wal-Mart instituted a "Made in America" campaign—however, the company was accused of buying goods that were made in other countries, where environmental and health laws were not in effect, and then brought into the U.S. for final assembly, where they got a label: "Made in the USA."

The practices of large discount stores affect the overall well-being of the community. Large numbers of women and people of color staff Wal-Mart stores. Many are hired on a less than full-time basis, now a common practice in businesses everywhere. Hence, no benefits, with the resulting higher profits going into Wal-Mart's coffers. Where huge Wal-Mart stores open, locally owned stores often close and small town centers disintegrate. The local shops cannot buy in such large quantities and offer competitive prices. The community is drastically changed when these small, locally owned businesses close down and business/civic cooperation is limited to arrangements with Wal-Mart.

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In such common examples, the money does not trickle down but indeed is sucked upward. These practices explain a lot about the economic and social chaos of this country today. Mirroring the 1890s, billionaires such as Walton have become the robber barons of the late 20th century, exploiting people and the environment for the politics of greed and accumulation. Workers become dispensable and disposable, used and tossed away by corporations. However, they do not just disappear. Loss of jobs and income breed discontent. Workers and low-income people have to be repressed. Those who occupy the lower tier of the economic pyramid are yet to rise up to call for fairness in the relationship between wealth and those who labor to produce it. And that, I believe, is because they are held in place by greater forces than the need to make a decent living.

This economic system would not be able to work so successfully if there were not the oppressions of racism, sexism and classism, backed by institutions and the threat of violence, to hold people in place. Racism and sexism and classism are not simply social conditions; they are economic necessities of our times.

### **SCRABBLING FOR CRUMBS AT THE BOTTOM**

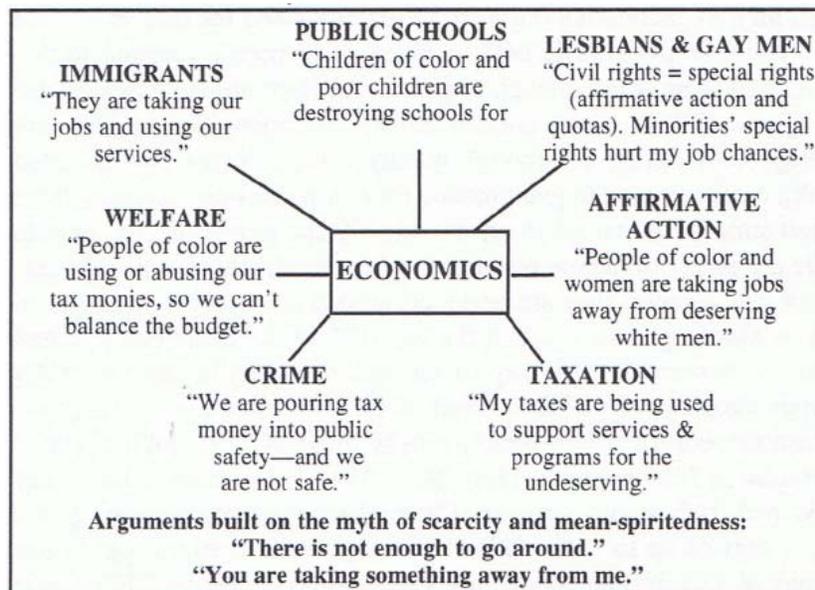
Those who occupy the lower tiers of the economic pyramid are also pitted against one another for scarce jobs and resources. The Right rides high by fabricating the myth of scarcity—and the bottom 90% of the economic pyramid is held in place when people respond to this belief that there is not enough to go around. Here are the messages we are given: “There is not enough money, not enough good jobs, not enough civil rights, not enough quality education, not enough good health care, not enough grant money for non-profit organizations; there is just simply not enough to go around.” (At the same time, we are told there *are* plenty of natural resources to go around, though we know this is not true because they are being consumed or destroyed internationally at alarming rates.) Yet, at the top 10% of the economic pyramid there is no scarcity of money or services or rights. In the June 1995 *Forbes* magazine, Bill Gates, head of the Microsoft Corporation, was named the world’s richest person with holdings of \$12.6 billion. David Sarasohn in *The Oregonian* (July 28, 1995) tells the story of how, after IBM had its best quarter ever, 120 executive secretaries were given salary cuts of up to 36% while IBM’s top five executives split bonus money of \$5.8 million—including a \$2.6 million boost for CEO, Louis

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Gerstner. Sarasohn goes on to cite the *Washington Monthly* (July/August 1995) as stating that in 1972, CEOs of the largest U.S. companies made 40 times their average workers' salaries, and now, in 1995, that figure is 140 times. There is not a scarcity of money in this country, it is simply held in too few hands.

Here's another false notion: if one receives something (from Medicare to civil rights protections) then someone else must lose—others are taking something from me. If economic inequity is to be maintained, it is critical that we believe there is not enough to go around and thus we must fight each other for a little piece of what's left, particularly along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and class. If welfare is provided for poor mothers and children, then there won't be enough money to pay the pittance of Social Security to the old. If women and people of color are brought into the workplace, then white men won't have jobs. If lesbians and gay men receive civil rights protections, then people of color will lose them. If undocumented immigrants are provided services, then citizens will lose money and services. If children receive bi-lingual or special education, then other children will receive inadequate education. The real problem is loss of jobs and the tax base for public services—and the concentration of enormous wealth and power in the hands of the few.

**DIVERTING OUR ATTENTION FROM THE ECONOMY:  
THE RACIALIZATION OF ISSUES**



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We have long had the myth of scarcity, but what's new these days is the addition of mean-spiritedness: "There's not enough to go around—and *you* are taking something from me." These twin falsehoods provide the foundation for the current scapegoating that figures so strongly in ballot initiatives and the "hate" radio and television of people such as Rush Limbaugh.

We are led to believe that people who should be our natural allies are actually our enemies and we must compete with them for the little that trickles down. We are led to believe that we will succeed when we have fought each other hard enough to take our share of what is left over from the pie. The truth is denied; the pie was divided and distributed long before we even reached the table.

We are pitted against each other, both as identity groups and as individuals, for a small (and often temporary) piece of what should be our birthright: shelter, food, clothing, employment, health, education, safety, all dispensed with fairness and justice. Meanwhile, workers are robbed of jobs with livable wages and working conditions, women and children are violently abused, families deteriorate, people of color are marginalized in the social and economic life of the country, the environment becomes less life-sustaining every day, and great numbers experience the degradation of poverty.

The top 10% can go laughing to the bank, own one or more well-guarded and secured homes, send their children to prestigious schools, and take luxury vacations. There is no fairness or justice here.

### **INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT FOR DOMINATION**

Full domination requires the control of both institutions and the workplace, and the two intersect in the development of policy and laws. Those on the left-hand side of the Power/Privilege chart (rich, white, male, Christian, etc.) control both: financial institutions, government, religion, schools, human services, health care, criminal justice, as well as corporations, factories, and the majority of large businesses.

As an example, let's look at this country's major institution, the Congress. If we held up a photograph of the House and Senate, we would see that it is completely dominated by those from column A. Many are millionaires. There are very few poor people, people of color, women, Jews and Muslims, lesbians and gay men, people with disabilities. Is it because they are not capable of serving, of making decisions that

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directly affect people like themselves? Certainly not, but it has everything to do with who can afford to run for office, who can fund their campaigns with a million or so dollars from personal wealth, or from other wealthy people and corporations and those who expect to gain from their tenure. It is virtually impossible for a poor person to be able to run for Congress, and consequently there are few people there who speak genuinely and from lived experience on behalf of the poor when laws and policies are made. Most of the people there speak on behalf of the interests that paid for them to be there. The Congress is probably the most important place for prohibiting or including the participation of those traditionally excluded and discriminated against, for if the members acted genuinely on behalf of their diverse constituencies, then the doors to justice and equality might open. (For this reason, the recent Congressional attempts to limit the right of nonprofits to lobby are particularly disturbing.)

It is the Congress, of course, that approves appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court, and state legislatures that have power over appointments to the supreme court of each state. State legislatures are more open to diverse membership but, like the U.S. Congress, tend to be dominated by wealthy white males, and they set our laws. Who benefits most from these laws? Again, those who occupy the left-hand side of the chart, but particularly the rich ruling class who provide financing for political campaigns and lobbying.

It is Congress and the courts that deal with laws and regulations affecting businesses and the control of the workplace. They can make regulations that protect workers' safety and health or remove them; protect the environment or allow it to be ravaged; provide access to collective bargaining or mandate "right to work" laws; raise the minimum wage, lower it, or eradicate it. But most importantly, they are in control of taxes; who gets taxed at what rate and how tax money gets spent. Or, how much from whom and for what. It is here that government bodies controlled by the rich serve the rich over and over again.

Again we ask, why don't those who experience injustice rise up? We don't because our domination is enforced with violence and the threat of violence. Congress, acting in concert with other branches of government, maintains social control through the criminalization of certain activities, through maintaining the police, the military, and intelligence gathering bodies, and also through what it permits to go unpunished. It oversees that institutional oxymoron, the criminal justice

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system. Certainly there was a chilling effect on those who rose up for justice in the Civil Rights Movement when police and dogs attacked people on the streets, when assassins killed its leaders, when the Klan was permitted to threaten and kill, and later, when police gunned down the Black Panthers. And there was a chilling effect on those who rose up to protest the war in Vietnam when the National Guard gunned down students at Kent State University in the 1970s.

As the fallout from corrupt policies creates worsening economic times and social disorder, legislative bodies respond by

- broadening the use of the death penalty,
- building so many prisons that, for many states, they become a source of major economic development,
- incarcerating large numbers of poor people,
- creating longer sentences and harsher prison conditions,
- increasing the number of police,
- eliminating prisoners' rights in prison and in the courts,
- increasing the number of border patrols,
- trying teenagers as adults,
- imprisoning greater numbers of women for charges such as hot checks or prostitution,
- and creating an overall prison population whose census is predominantly poor and disproportionately people of color.

There are also more pernicious forms of economic violence that keep people from rising up. Union activists report time and again that workers express a desire to join unions but have such a sense of overwhelming corporate dominance and threat of retaliation that they are afraid to act to change their circumstances. Additionally, continued economic deprivation can create need so intense that revolt is unthinkable.

So-called "justice" and money are intertwined. There is a clear message throughout the land: Poor people will be punished for crimes of property as well as passion; rich people can go free even after doing extraordinary harm to all of us through criminal acts such as the Savings and Loans and HUD debacles. In fact, not only will they go free after blatantly destroying our community life and the environment, but Congress will make the workers of this country pay to cover the consequences of the crimes of the rich—as evidenced by the Savings and Loan bailout.

At no time in recent history have we been more aware (and often simultaneously unaware) of the powers of Congress and legislative

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bodies, and it is here that we are observing the Right's revolution take place. We are witnessing a sweeping effort to eliminate taxes for the rich, to deregulate business, to privatize public lands and services, to eliminate the separation of church and state, to demolish the Bill of Rights for the sake of "law and order," to eliminate civil rights and civil liberties, to increase numbers of police, border patrols, and prisons, and to eradicate programs that attempt to equalize access to opportunity and to provide a safety net for basic human needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and safety. And all of this is being done by a group of people representing the interests of those who have power, wealth, and privilege, elected in 1994 by only the 36% of the electorate who bothered to vote.

Other significant institutions reflect the same domination. The health care industry, for example, is maintained by women and people of color; however, the upper 10% who make the decisions, reap profits and high salaries (doctors, administrators, boards, owners) are white men. It is not nurses, technicians, and line staff who are advocating for the development of HMOs and downsizing—eliminating their jobs, destroying their unions, or increasing their already overburdened jobs for less pay—it is the profit-makers within the medical profession and the insurance industry. Management wins; workers and patients lose. Consequently, this enormously rich high-tech country will not provide health care to all of its people because ordinary people cannot afford to pay the outrageously high rates which ensure large profit margins. Healing becomes subservient to profit; illness becomes a source of profit.

Institutions provide us with the information that shapes our lives, and controlling that information shapes how we think and live. We now consider ourselves to be an information society, with a highly developed mass media, electronic communication technologies, and a universal education system. Of those three, the media is probably the most influential, controlled by the businesses that buy advertising or provide the financial backing for movies and plays, television, radio, newspapers, books, and magazines. Because of corporate mergers, media ownership is concentrated in the hands of a few corporations; the theocratic Right owns the remainder. Media information, therefore, is determined by what is profitable to corporate owners or what serves right-wing ideology. Public broadcasting, the least controlled by business interests, is currently engaged in a life or death battle for survival

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in the face of right-wing attacks. Electronic communications are today the most accessible and probably most democratic, limited only by the cost of equipment and on-line time, but Congress is now acting on bills to censor and invade the privacy of these operations. Free speech and access to communication are critical because it is the media, especially television, along with schools that shape our thinking when we are young. In fact, our children are almost entirely enculturated by the media—which does not provide democratic access or discourse.

Schools provide a prime example of how our thinking is shaped. It is the common experience of people in the U.S. that those in affluent neighborhoods have good, well-funded schools, and those in poor neighborhoods get the leftovers. Schools serve corporate interests and are affected when those interests and needs change. In the mid-'80s, Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton convened the Business Council (locally known as the Good Suit Club), which was made up mostly of multi-millionaires, to provide guidance about the state's schools. At this time, Arkansas was ranked 48th in teacher salaries and 49th in per capita income but was listed in the 1988 *Forbes* 400 issue as having 12 multi-millionaires, more than anywhere other than the Upper East Side of New York City. Observing the Business Council, many progressive people wondered what interest chicken baron Don Tyson had in improving public education for his thousands of low-paid assembly line employees working in health-threatening conditions, cutting up chickens for market. They also wondered what interest Sam Walton had for improving the education of his low-paid workers who sell goods, made by even lower-paid workers in other countries, to low-income people in Wal-Mart discount stores in the U.S.

What we are learning is that with the U.S. expansion of capital and production into countries along the Pacific Rim and South America, both labor and the environment can be exploited with few restrictions, leaving corporations here with little need for large masses of educated workers. Instead, they require an educated elite providing management and a small corps of workers providing high electronic skills. Indeed, as corporations downsize, many highly educated and trained workers are being dismissed along with those who provide less skilled labor. Those jobs now most readily available to poor people—in the service industry and tourism—do not require much formal education. Capitalism, in its current international, unchecked movement, no longer needs public schools to provide a large, educated, skilled workforce.

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Thus, in Little Rock, Arkansas, then-Governor Bill Clinton was asking men who are in the top one percent of the nation's wealthy to make decisions about public education.

It comes as no surprise that both rich and poor schools have curricula representing the people who control them. That is to say, the information children receive reflects the history, the literature, and the values of these people. It is a narrow, one-sided view of the world that reinforces the right of the dominators to dominate. The heroes children learn about are conquerors; the point of view of the conquered and the resisters is rarely presented. Those who lack power and privilege rarely read or hear anything from their point of view; they rarely encounter positive images of themselves. Domination is presented as a standard to aspire to; those who do not dominate or are dominated are seen as lacking and somehow wrong.

This system creates and sustains the idea that those who historically have had power and privilege are the *norm*. They are in control, in charge; the history they present shows they have always been and implies they always should be. Therefore they are right; in fact, they have earned the right to dominate throughout history. (Pat Buchanan, campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination, referred to himself and his followers as the "legitimate" descendants of "our founding fathers.") They are evidence of meritocracy at work. All others are to be judged by the norm; it is what we all should aspire to. Those who are not rich, white, Christian, heterosexual or able-bodied are the *other*. They are someone lesser, marginalized from the major decisions and the inner workings of society.

Institutions are the source of power for oppressions, reinforcing and perpetuating them daily.

### THE TOOLS OF OPPRESSION

Those who exploit and oppress need ways to justify their actions. They need a rationale that shows they are in the right, that the majority both agrees and cooperates with them, and that people get what they deserve through their own merit or lack of merit. Economic and social injustice must become part of a framework of morality, complete with rewards and punishments, with exploitation and oppression entrenched. The superiority of the white race, of men, of Christians, of heterosexuals, of the rich becomes a given, a divine right to rule and dominate. The

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arguments go something like this: “We have always been in charge; therefore, it must be God’s will. We won in the struggle for power; therefore, we must be virtuous. We were the framers of the Constitution and you were not included; therefore, it must belong to us.”

But an ideology of entitlement is not enough. Those in power must get people to cooperate. People are not stupid, nor are we willing victims. Beyond the overt structures of economic and institutional control backed by violence and the threat of violence, there have to be more subtle and insidious social and cultural practices that bring us to act against our own best interest. In order for the privileged few to control the many, there have to be ways to divert attention from the root causes of social and economic problems; to focus instead on symptoms; to shift blame from the perpetrators to the targets of social and economic injustice—and to pit the latter against each other instead of against the perpetrators.

Here are some of those methods of diverting attention, shifting blame, and dividing people who should be allied with each other in the effort to end oppression.

**Stereotyping.** Through stereotyping, groups of people (according to economic status, religion, gender, race, sexual identity, etc.) are thought of as one, and individual characteristics are overlooked or dismissed. In most cases, the negative behavior or characteristics of a few within the group, which may well be the result of institutionalized discrimination, are attributed to everyone in the group, and in some cases, negative qualities are simply fabricated. Also, qualities that go against the stereotype are overlooked—or those possessing them are called exceptions or are rewarded for being like the dominator, e.g., “she thinks like a man.”

Some indicators of stereotyping are references to “*all* (women, Asians, disabled people, etc.),” “those people,” “your people,” “they.” Any time people are lumped together in a group and generalizations made about them, we have stereotyping. Some examples:

“People on welfare are lazy and don’t want to work. They abuse the system to make money. They don’t appreciate nice things and simply ruin them when they are given anything nice. They are not good parents and don’t take care of or control their children. They have babies just to get more money. They are almost all people of color.”

“Jews are money-grubbing. They are loud, demanding, pushy. They control the media and financial institutions. They hate Christians.

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They murder children. Jewish men are effeminate and unable to play sports. Jewish women are princesses.”

“Lesbians and gay men recruit children because they can’t have any. They sexually abuse children. They carry disease. They eat feces. Gay men act like women. Lesbians hate men because they have had a bad experience with them or they want to be men. They are perverted and militant. They all have sex in public.”

“Blacks are lazy, unwilling to work. They want this country to give them something for nothing. They are oversexed. They have low morals and their children kill each other. They are not as intelligent as white people. They don’t do well in schools or jobs. They hate whites. All they are good for is entertainment.”

“Women are too emotional to be leaders; they get hysterical. They cannot do rational thinking and are weak in math and science. They use sex to get what they want and when they don’t get it, they blame men. They are whores. They are manipulative. They are not strong enough to do physical work. They are tied to their biology. They gossip and are petty.”

When commonly held, negative stereotypes become justification for harmful behavior and restrictive public policy toward people in each of the stereotyped groups. Thus the institution of slavery was not seen by white people as evil because Africans were said to be animals who did not have souls. For example, they supposedly did not feel the pain white people would feel when their children were wrenched away from them. Acts of injustice, such as the genocide of six million Jews, were interpreted as acts of social good because Jews were stereotyped as enemies of the Aryan nation. In the recent Texas case of a teenager accused of beating a gay man to death, he testified that he thought he had done society a service by eliminating a social evil. Accordingly, it is in the public good for Congress to eliminate Aid to Families with Dependent Children (what we know as welfare) to poor families because when they receive our tax dollars, they become lazy and avoid work. Individual and collective acts of violence become justified by both stereotyping and public policy.

**Scapegoating.** While stereotyping is a matter of attitude, scapegoating is a matter of blame and works only when stereotyping is solidly in place in public thinking. Scapegoating is the process of shifting our attention away from the source of a problem and focusing it instead on another person or group of people. Jews, then, caused the economic

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problems in Hitler's Germany. Today, "abuses" of welfare by the poor cause the government's deficit spending. Lesbians and gay men cause the breakdown of the traditional family. Women having abortions cause the breakdown of the family and morality. African Americans and Latinos cause the breakdown of law and order in our cities. People of color and women benefiting from affirmative action cause loss of jobs for white men. Women in the workforce cause men to earn lower wages. Asian and Mexican immigrants cause job loss as well as the high cost of public services.

Scapegoating gives rise to violence and discrimination. It also fosters a lack of responsibility for seeking solutions to economic and social problems and for meeting human needs. For example, teenage mothers are currently blamed for straining welfare funds and contributing to the federal budget deficit. Efforts to eliminate welfare for teenage mothers (usually depicted as women of color) with one child suggest that because children are "illegitimate," we have no responsibility toward them.

In the worst of political times public policy is based on stereotyping and scapegoating. Efforts made to equalize opportunity and justice for all people get turned back. In local ballot initiatives, in state legislatures and Congress, and in the courts today we see new efforts to eliminate welfare, to destroy the tax base that provides public services, to eliminate affirmative action, to criminalize abortions, to resist civil rights protections for lesbians and gay men, to refuse to protect the rights of those accused of crimes, to eliminate free speech, to eliminate services to immigrants. And each action is justified by explanations of the harmful behavior of the targeted group, by those who think "these people" are not worthy of receiving the rights and privileges of living in a democracy.

For authoritarianism to take over, the general population has to be moved in broad emotional sweeps against scapegoated groups. Enemies of the people are created. Potential harms and losses are exaggerated. Division and fear are increased. It becomes in the "common good" to eliminate rights and to impose strict social control, enforced by the State through its police, FBI, CIA, and military. Quelling dissent and incarcerating large numbers of the population is mandated. And the people, out of fear and/or anger, must agree to give up much of their freedom in order to control others. When scapegoating is thoroughly effective and groups of people are perceived to be truly threatening,

genocide can become the final solution.

**Blaming the Victim.** While scapegoating is falsely holding a person or group responsible for the wrongs of others, blaming the victim occurs when the *targets* of an injustice are blamed for having caused the injustice. The groundwork for the blame is embedded in stereotyping. The perpetrator of the injustice did it to the victim because there was something wrong with her/him.

Nowhere do we see this false logic more clearly than in violence against women and children. “It’s no wonder she was raped. What did she expect, being out on the street alone?” “I beat her because she would never get the meals on the table on time.” “I had sex with my niece because she came on to me. What was I to do?” “I murdered her because I found her in bed with another man.” “I hit her because she wouldn’t stop talking.” “When a woman dresses like that, she’s asking for it.” “The baby’s crying was driving me crazy. So I beat him to shut him up.” The perpetrator is absolved of responsibility for violence, and women and children come to believe there is something profoundly wrong with them. Even in our language we often shift the victim of violence from being the object of the attack to being the subject of the attack: “a wife was beaten by her husband” or “a black man was shot by the police” rather than “a husband beat his wife” or “the police shot a black man.” This subtle shift in language diverts our attention away from the perpetrator.

Similar results occur in the workplace where we currently see workers blamed for the loss of jobs and income while attention is diverted from the practices of corporate management. “American workers aren’t willing to work hard like those in other countries.” “Workers’ demands for raises have put us out of competition.” “Organizing workers is a sign of disloyalty.” “You haven’t been willing to sacrifice to keep this company going.” “You are lazy, pampered, and spoiled.” “You are too old and outdated to be competitive.” While workers are being turned against each other, there is no collective action to hold management accountable for choosing to compete in global markets by cutting labor costs, and for overworking and underpaying employees (those who remain after downsizing) in order to keep productivity and profits high.

Placing the blame for racial injustice on its victim is traditional in this country. “The Indians were savages. We had to fight and kill them to develop this country.” “We hired one (African American, Asian, etc.),

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but she didn't work out." "If black people would stop killing each other, then the police wouldn't be so rough on them." "We want to hire more people of color, but there just aren't any qualified applicants."

"Generations of welfare and innate laziness have made them unwilling to work." "Their genetic make-up makes them incited to crime and poverty." The current effort to racialize our social and economic problems is filled with blame for those who most often experience the destructive effects of these problems.

Dehumanization and, often, demonization allow the perpetrator(s) to justify the oppression and destruction of human beings. Blaming the victim for injustice against him/her absolves the perpetrator of responsibility, and it combines neatly with stereotyping and scapegoating. Stereotyping, scapegoating, and blaming the victim flourish in the absence of critical thinking and in the presence of rising systemic injustice.

### **THE EFFECT OF SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION**

Stereotyping, scapegoating, and blaming the victim make targeted groups feel there is something wrong with us individually and as identity groups (such as women), rob us of our sense of self and our respect for others, and prevent us from supporting and joining others. However, it is also in this area of individual and group self-worth, responsibility and accountability that we have the most control, the most ability to make change, the most hope for resistance.

**Internalized Oppression.** Internalized oppression requires a book unto itself. It is a profound, complex issue that has attracted much study and can be treated only in a cursory manner here. It is absolutely central to the concerns of people who want whole self-fulfilling lives for themselves and their communities. Freedom from internalized oppression—receiving the negative messages of society and internalizing them as self-hating, self-blaming, self-policing—is directly linked to liberation. Many of us now recognize that we cannot build a liberation movement with people who have diminished hope, pride and belief in themselves.

Internalized oppression is more than low self-esteem, which implies an individualized mental health issue calling for an individualized therapeutic solution. Whereas low self-esteem can be caused by injurious *individual* treatment, internalized oppression originates from

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pervasive negative cultural messages and mistreatment toward a person because of who s/he is *as part of a group* (women, people of color, lesbians and gay men, people with disabilities) within the larger context of society. The elimination of internalized oppression calls for group action on behalf of oneself and one's people.

The damaging effect of stereotyping, blaming the victim, and scapegoating is not only that the general public accepts such negative beliefs, but that the targets of these beliefs also come to accept that there is something wrong with themselves and their people. Not only does the dominant culture absorb these cultural messages, we all do. Hence, it is not surprising that a black child would choose white dolls over black ones or think that his/her friends were never going to be successful—or to think that the best of the black community are light-skinned. Or that lesbians and gay men would worry about being abnormal, or about going to hell for who we are—or would choose invisibility and try to pass as heterosexuals. Or that Jews would “fix” their noses, take on anglicized names or make efforts to pass as Gentiles. We have received strong messages that it is dangerous to be like our own people and therefore different from the norm.

It is also very difficult to be true to ourselves and our uniqueness when the ways we are different from the dominant culture have been labeled as deviant, disgusting, and dangerous. When literature, history books, art, movies, and television show a multi-faceted, positive vision of the dominators and a single, negative vision of the dominated, then a person growing up female, of color, lesbian or gay, etc., has to work against the entire culture in order to develop a sense of pride and wholeness. Most of the images shown us come directly from negative stereotyping.

All our major liberation movements have had a cultural component that builds group pride and demonstrates the diversity of our community attributes. It is an effort to counter stereotyping by presenting the broad range of our differences and achievements. “Black is beautiful” was a theme that ran through the later days of the Civil Rights Movement and was the bedrock of the Black liberation movement; black women and men wore natural hairstyles; African inspired clothing gained popularity; children were provided black dolls and books with black heroes. The Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Transgender Movement celebrates a “pride” day each year with parades, rallies, banners, and all the trappings of lesbian and gay culture. The Women's Movement has

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lifted up women's culture, unearthing women's history, writing books about women's lives and experiences, creating conferences and festivals, women's music, and women's sports. Perhaps its most powerful contribution to the elimination of internalized sexism was the consciousness-raising groups of the early 1970s which gave women an opportunity to talk about the negative messages and social conditioning we had received and to take action together for change.

This is what we must be ever mindful of: to create self-hatred and low self-esteem in a people is to weaken their will for survival. It is then a more simple task to dominate them, free of the threat of organized resistance. In order to resist, we have to believe that we are worthy, our lives are worthy, and our people are worthy enough for us to live and die for in the struggle for freedom, equality, and justice.

**Horizontal Hostility.** Internalized oppression and horizontal hostility are closely connected. When we think of ourselves and our people as lacking in value—as being inferior and incapable, as being at fault for our lack of equality—then we begin to hold contempt for one another. That contempt is a reflection of the contempt we have been taught to feel for ourselves and people like us. To strike out at our own kind is to exhibit not only rage and frustration but also despair. Internal community or organizational conflict creates alienation and separateness, and the destruction of hope for working together to make change.

Rather than working together, we strike out against one another instead of against those who control our lives. For many of us, the pain we feel at the hands of our own people (family, friends, neighbors, allies) is far worse than what we feel from the more distant and abstract institutions and forces that harm our lives in dreadful ways every day. It happens in the arena where we care the most—in our daily lives—and with the people closest to us. This is also the place where we feel the most power for fighting back.

Some of our communities are devastated by our violence against each other on the street. Some of our organizations are racked with virulent infighting. We destroy our leaders. We hear statements such as "I'd rather work for a white man any day than for (a woman, a black person, etc.)." We attack each other in the street, in the office, in our organizations, in the press. We falsely identify our enemy as the person next to us (who actually shares the same oppression or exploitation) currently causing us a problem rather than the larger forces (often unseen) that control our overall well-being. We then turn our anger and

outrage at our own people, holding them responsible for all the injustice we have experienced. The true cause of our injustice is overlooked or excused.

Many times I've been in meetings to create strategies for social change and had those meetings break down into interpersonal conflict, struggles for power, accusations of oppressive (sexist or racist, for example) behavior—with people left feeling hopeless because there was so much pain and so few possibilities for resolving conflict and healing wounds. Everyone's history of pain and injustice had been brought to the table, seeking either balm or retribution. Disappointment led to destructive behavior.

Horizontal hostility takes the heart out of us. It strikes where we care the most. Nothing could make the dominators happier; we do their business for them by holding each other down, and they don't have to lift a hand.

**Identification with Power.** We make the politics of domination work by believing in and identifying with those in power rather than with our natural allies—those who also experience inequality and injustice—and also when we dream of having the power to dominate. If we feel a loss of power in certain areas of our life—because we are gay, or female, or a person of color—then we often identify with and try to take our power from the area of our life that is recognized as powerful. Thus, for example, we can find some gay white males acting out the privilege they gain from being white and male and not identifying with women and people of color. Organizationally, we see them holding power over and often excluding lesbians and people of color and refusing to take on issues that would threaten white, male, or class dominance. Or, in some cases, a poor, black woman will take her privilege from her heterosexuality and work against the inclusion of lesbians and gay men in civil rights protections. In the workplace we see workers sometimes identifying their interests with the boss rather than the unionists. In the end, the failure of people to identify with other oppressed groups means that they prevent the possibility of gaining freedom in the areas where they themselves are oppressed. They participate in the same structure of domination that holds them down.

This identification with power interests is evident in many of our organizations that work for social and economic justice. We have internal divisions because we have not overcome our racism, sexism, homophobia, classism. For instance, in a women's organization, one

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might find that the group agrees upon issues concerning sexism but is racked with racism, classism and homophobia, thus alienating the women of color, lesbians and poor women in its constituency. Power is taken from the place where they are dominant—as white, middle-class heterosexuals. When organizations have not recognized and worked internally upon the presence of related oppressions, they are often inclined to fight for turf for their own single interest in coalition work with other identity groups. They subscribe to the belief in a hierarchy of oppressions, wherein not only are some oppressions seen as more important than others, but some are seen as more deserving of attention and resources. Divisive competition rather than cooperation occurs.

This is where the Right has had phenomenal success in moving us to act against our best interests. They have carefully crafted messages that say, “Someone is trying to horn in on the one area where you (an individual, organization, or community) have been successful: that very place where you experience what little power you have.” In African American communities, these messages say, “Lesbians and gay men are trying to hijack the Civil Rights Movement; they are also an affront to your Christianity.” Among retirees they say, “Your real estate tax dollars are being spent wastefully on schools and social services you no longer even require because you have no children at home.” Among working-class white men they say, “Women and people of color are taking your jobs, and despite your hard work, the demands of unions have forced us to close down our factories and move.” When fighting each other we fail to see the complex causes of the injury and injustice we experience.

**Individual Solutions.** Identifying with and joining our natural allies in pursuit of justice would create a strong and unified movement. It is therefore critical to the dominators that we be separated from one another and not recognize our common interests. Rather than identifying with those from whom group power is withheld, people often identify with those who guard the gates because there is the promise of a taste of power for the “deserving” few. The system is held in place by the idea that a few people can cross over or rise up if they try hard enough, are smart, and if they take on the values of those in power. Competition and rivalry between striving individuals or groups will pay off. Individual merit will bring the best to the top. This is the American Dream: the notion that one can be the exception to the rule and, by hard work and good luck, can join the few at the top. It is the carrot that draws many people onward.

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The idea that only individual effort counts makes us believe that if we only please the dominator, then our lives will improve. That is, if we assimilate (drop our cultural differences and beliefs), we will be accepted into the realm of power: A tough “dress-for-success” woman will get a job equal to a man’s; a Clarence Thomas who opposes civil rights will get a place on the Supreme Court; the passing gay man will be a sports star; the low-paid worker who does not join the union can become a manager. For these achievements in tokenism, one is asked to identify with the dominator, not the community. Sometimes people rationalize that, once they get a footing, they individually can change the institution or business from the inside. What they often fail to recognize is that, in their unsupported battle, they are receiving power that is conditionally *given*, not power that is *won* through the struggles of people for equality and justice. What is given can as easily be taken away. Individual ambition and reward are mistaken for social change.

An example of the tension between individual and group efforts can be found within the women’s anti-violence movement. In its early years, many of its workers and leaders were survivors of violence and their work was directed toward helping women heal through group discussion and finding ways to change the system that allows violence against women to continue. When women’s anti-violence organizations began to achieve community credibility in the 1980s, “professionals” sought jobs within them, and the work increasingly focused on delivery of services to individual women and on healing through individual therapy. Much of the focus on collective action and systemic change was lost.

This idea of individual effort and individual solutions can be a major block to building a liberation movement. Of course, individual effort is a good thing, and we want an appropriately balanced combination of individual and group effort. However, if people see all problems as individual and the solutions contingent upon the success or failure of individual efforts, then there cannot be collective organizing. An emphasis on individual effort alone ignores structures of oppression and leaves them intact. We then fail to recognize that there is a conscious and deliberate system of oppression and exploitation affecting the economy and social welfare of our people—and that it is a system that can be changed.