

GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

A Structural Analysis of Oppression

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Introduction

Bridging the race and class divide is a tall order — and a critical challenge for our movements. It requires that we dedicate time and space for serious analysis, open conversations, internal struggle and deliberate action. It requires that we carefully explore the centrality of race in shaping the history of this country and its institutions, the legacy of slavery and imperialism, and the persistence of ideas around white supremacy and cultural dominance. Likewise, we need ways of examining the long history of class exploitation and the often hidden injuries of class in our society. We must seek ways of talking about the intersections of race and class that lift up our similarities while honoring our differences.

We are experimenting with a framework based on the writings of Iris Marion Young. What we like about this “Youngian” framework is that it focuses on the ways in which people experience oppressive conditions in their daily lives. It helps us lift up the hidden as well as visible injuries of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and all the other –isms in our society and to name the structural nature of these injuries. This framework offers an alternative way for people to make sense of their experiences and frustrations in our corporate-dominated, market-driven society. Please note that this analysis is **not** a substitute for a careful study of the history of racism and white supremacy, nor does it address the need for taking a closer look at the ways in which our own organizations may perpetuate experiences of domination and oppression.

Defining Oppression

When they hear the word “oppression,” many people think of conditions in distant places and times: it is what brutal dictators and totalitarian governments do to their subjects or to the people they have conquered. People do not think of oppression as something that happens in open and democratic societies, partly because they associate oppression with an ‘intent’ to oppress. And yet,

oppressive conditions exist in liberal, democratic societies, not necessarily as part of intended policies or practices, but as something that has been woven into the fabric of our major economic, political and cultural institutions.

A person lives within structures of domination and oppression if other groups have the power to determine her actions. Individuals experience oppressive conditions because they are part of a group that is defined on the basis of shared characteristics such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, nationality, age, ability, etc. These major social groups have specific attributes, stereotypes and norms associated with them. Individual membership in these groups is not necessarily voluntary. It is not necessarily acknowledged, either.

In some cases, membership in a social group is pretty straightforward because people more-or-less recognize themselves as having something in common with the group as a whole. For example, African-Americans typically have a sense of shared experiences and affinities with other African Americans, and women often see themselves as having some things in common with other women. Within any social group, there are even more layers of divisions and intersections of experience - gay men and lesbians have different experiences depending on class, race, ability, gender, etc. Likewise with people of color and class, and with the intersections and differences among women’s experiences based in race, class, marital status, occupation, etc.

Less straightforward are group identities based in class. This is especially true in our society, where we live with the prevailing myth that we are a ‘classless’ society, and that class does not matter much, if at all, in determining our life-chances and choices.

The ruling class sees itself as, and acts like a social group whose members have shared interests and goals, similar cultural interests and expressions, and a shared worldview. The working class is divided into many ‘segments’ based on occupation, skill level, income level, con-

sumption patterns, race, gender, immigrant status, union, non-union and more. Fragmentation of the working class is related to the ways in which the organization of labor markets creates and perpetuates oppressive conditions for many kinds of workers.

Five Forms of Oppression

As members of certain social groups, people usually experience oppression as one or more of the following conditions:

1. Exploitation
2. Marginalization
3. Powerlessness
4. Cultural Dominance
5. Violence

We will look at examples of each of these conditions. We will seek to understand them in terms of the ways in which they are embedded in social and economic structures of society. We will use this understanding to explore what justice demands of us, as social change activists who are struggle to build a more democratic and humane society.

Exploitation

“This world is ill divided. Them that work the hardest are the least provided.”

English Folk Song, early 19th Century

In a market economy such as ours, labor is a commodity. The people who own the means of production — that is, the owners of the raw materials and the tools, equipment and facilities that convert raw materials into products — need *labor power*, which refers to the time, skills and energies that workers expend in the production process. If you are an owner, most of your profit is derived by getting more from the results of your workers’ labor power than you are paying in actual labor costs. You want to keep the surplus that results from the difference between worker’s productivity and their wages. If you are a worker, then you seek to increase what you get paid for your labor power, and you probably have a different sense of what is a ‘fair’ wage than your boss does. Because of the nature of profit, some degree of exploitation is built into the relationship between owners and workers.

In any society, the extent of the gap between the wealthy owners and the masses of working people is an indication of the degree of exploitation that exists in that society.

Exploitation creates unjust power relations when

workers’ energies and capacities are controlled by, and appropriated for the benefit of other people — in most cases, a few ‘haves’ who maintain and increase their power, wealth and status at the expense of the many ‘have-nots.’ This is one way that people experience oppression.

As organizers, we need to understand the ways in which different social groups and segments of workers experience exploitation in very particular ways. Here is an overview of how exploitation is related to class, race and gender:

Class:

- | Exploitation and conflict are built into the profit motive and labor relations.
- | Exploitation occurs mainly through the process of transferring the value of worker’s productivity from the workers themselves to owners, managers and other elites.
- | It reflects and reinforces dominant power relations in society as the energies of the ‘have-nots’ are appropriated to maintain the status, wealth and power of the ‘haves.’
- | To counter the power of the ‘haves,’ workers must join together, and see themselves as members of a class that, like the ruling class, has shared interests.

Race:

- | Historically, race-specific exploitation has existed within the capitalist system in the U.S, and elsewhere.
- | Capitalism seeks to keep a segment of the labor market stuck in, or desperate for, low-paying, low-skill jobs. For historic reasons, people of color make up the bulk of this segment of the labor market.
- | Race-based segmentation of workers continues to make it harder for workers of color to get higher paying, higher skilled jobs.
- | For many immigrant communities, social isolation and invisibility reinforces race-specific exploitation.
- | Discrimination in other spheres, such as housing and education, ensures the continuation of race-based labor market segmentation.
- | As better-paying jobs become more scarce, and as competition intensifies, people of color with good jobs experience more resentment from white workers who think they got the job through ‘affirmative action.’

Gender:

- I Historically, capitalist production has joined with patriarchal traditions and beliefs to create gender exploitation.
- I When a man's status, power and independence is supported by unappreciated and undervalued "women's work," paid or unpaid, it is a form of gender exploitation.
- I Occupations that are associated with "women's work" are lower-paying. These jobs often involve nurturing and caring for others.
- I Sometimes women break into a male-dominated occupation. Usually, once women enter in large numbers, the occupation becomes 'de-skilled.' For example, clerical workers mostly were men until the early 20th century. When it became a woman's job, pay levels, job status and autonomy went down.

For a fuller understanding of both the similarities and differences among the majority of people who experience some form of exploitation, we need to look at the ways in which exploitation interacts with other forms and conditions of oppression.

Marginalization

Not everyone is able to participate in the labor market on a regular basis. Some segments of the population do not possess skills, attributes or characteristics that employers are seeking. For the most part, they are shut out of the labor market. Their ranks may include the involuntarily unemployed who have given up trying to find work, the elderly, the physically and mentally disabled, the mentally ill, those who have missed out on basic education and occupational skills-development. These groups of people are experiencing marginalization.

Women on welfare experience marginalization when they are stigmatized as non-productive members of society — even if they care for children, sick relatives or elderly parents. Black and Latino youth who cannot get their first jobs are marginalized in ways that affect their aspirations for the future. Native Americans on reservations may be marginalized by high unemployment rates and limited opportunities to develop marketable skills. People who remain in the prison population for any significant amount of time face marginalization. In many of these cases, race is a factor in peoples' experiences with marginalization. Because more workers get displaced in a changing economy, and as it becomes harder for them to find new jobs, the experience of marginalization is spreading to more and more groups of people, including the white working class.

In a society in which peoples' value and worth is based in their earning power, those who are shut out of the labor market are seen as burdens on society. As a result, the marginalized may feel uselessness, boredom, and a lack of self-respect. They learn that 'dependence' is a dirty word. Dependency is a basic human condition and it need not lead to oppressive power relations. Unfortunately, people who are considered 'non-productive' and 'dependent' on others are treated as second-class citizens. In political as well as economic spheres, they are denied access to the main outlets through which they can develop their capacities to the fullest.

Powerlessness

This aspect of oppression brings in the important dimension of 'status.' When we add 'status' to 'class,' we see that not all working people are the same, in terms of their power and autonomy. Workers experience powerlessness when they are routinely shut out of decisions that affect the conditions of their employment, and, beyond that, the basic conditions of their lives.

By contrast, professional workers may have more relative social as well as economic power because they enjoy the following:

- I Knowledge, expertise and opportunities to use these on the job and in their daily lives, as well as opportunities to expand them.
- I Autonomy, which means they have a voice in the conditions of their employment. They supervise others, and many opportunities to exercise their own judgment and to make significant decisions.
- I Social respectability, which means that, on the job and in life in general, professionals enjoy a high social status. Their opinions are sought after and listened to. They are seen to be in control of their lives.

Respectability — who has it, and who does not — intersects with class, race and gender in many ways. Most people of color have to prove their social respectability — it is not assumed or automatically granted. The same often is true for women. A working-class white man may be afforded respectability based on race and gender biases that work in his favor. But, as soon as it is known that he is working class, then he loses some of his status and respectability. This translates into having less political power — our democracy is distorted by these kinds of power relations as professionals have greater access to political institutions and politicians than do other workers.

Most professionals may be unaware that they have greater political access by virtue of their status, unless or

until they lose their status. Corporate layoffs and downsizing have expanded the ranks of the powerless. With recent attacks on public sector workers, even professional workers are experiencing increasing levels of powerlessness in today's political-economic environment.

Cultural Dominance

The first three forms of oppression that we have examined — exploitation, marginalization and powerlessness — are related to the ways in which economic and social power are distributed based on peoples' positions within labor markets. We have explored how these positions affect a person's ability to develop her or his capacities and to make decisions about her or his life conditions. We have explored the intersections of class, race and gender through these forms of oppression. Now, we want to bring in an aspect of oppression that goes beyond a person's labor market position. We are calling it 'cultural dominance,' or, as Young terms it, 'cultural imperialism.'

Cultural dominance refers to the way that one group's experiences, cultural expressions and history are defined as superior to all other groups' experiences and histories. It is not necessary for anyone to say: "my group's culture is superior;" it simply has to be treated as *universal* — representing the best in all of humanity. It is considered 'normal,' which means that all others are either 'strange,' or 'invisible' or both.

The dominant culture gets reinforced because members of the culturally dominant group tend to control the means of interpreting, producing and reproducing cultural goods and products: art, music, literature, film, etc. Cultural *differences* necessarily get defined as deviant or exotic, which often is coded as inferior. And the cultural differences that the dominant group sees in others are easily ascribed to physical variations, such as skin color, ethnicity, accents, gender, sexual identities, etc.

In the mainstream, we find exotic images of 'the other,' but rarely in ways that portray people's everyday lives. Those outside the mainstream have to fight for cultural space. When they get it, they struggle to hang onto cultural space for more than one representation at a time — we can have one gay movie, one black director, one woman spokesperson at a time.

If you are a member of a group whose cultural expressions are outside of the norm, you may feel 'marked out' as different. In many social situations, you are seen as representing your entire group, while members of the dominant culture are judged as individuals. In other situations, you may feel invisible because your expres-

sions and experiences are not represented. All of this gets internalized: you look at yourself through the eyes of the dominant group. You struggle against stereotypes and the limits that are placed on you. At the same time, you may feel a deeper connection with members of your cultural and social group, and you want to lift up the rich and meaningful expressions that you and members of your group create and experience. Those who fit more neatly within the mainstream culture also miss out — they lose opportunities to know more about, connect with, people who are different from them. They lose some of the richness of the human experience.

Perhaps the greatest injustice of cultural dominance is that it allows the dominant group to impose its own interpretations of social life upon all others. This affects what is invested in, both in terms of cultural products and in terms of economic decisions — how we value some neighborhoods, cities and regions over others, whether we see certain uses of public funds as 'good investments' or 'bad investments,' and whether we value public education enough to invest in all children or just some children. In other words, there are both cultural and material consequences of cultural chauvinism. It reinforces marginalization and powerlessness.

Violence

Some people live with fear of random attacks that are meant to humiliate and/or destroy them simply because they are members of a certain social group. Our nation's history is full of examples where violence has been used to keep a group 'in its place.' Racial segregation was backed up by violence, much of it state-sanctioned. Violence has been used to end workers' strikes, to intimidate workers during contract negotiations and to break up unions.

A few everyday examples of violence as a form of humiliation include:

- | Police brutality against Black and Latino men;
- | The way in which rape and sexual harassment keep women vulnerable;
- | Attacks on Muslims, or people assumed to be Muslim, especially since 9/11;
- | Hate crimes against gays, lesbians and transgendered people;
- | Attacks on immigrants at day-labor gathering places, and the constant threat of workplace raids.

People do not have to experience outright violence in order to feel under threat. Equally effective is the kind of ongoing harassment that degrades and humiliates a

person — it can be verbal, or sexual, it can take the form of targeting, such as racial profiling. Harassment usually carries with it the threat of physical attack.

Beyond a 'Hierarchy' of Oppression

Each of these five forms of oppression overlaps with the other. Each is related to and reinforced by the many ideological '-isms' and phobias that exist in our society: racism, classism, homophobia and heterosexism, xenophobia and extreme forms of nationalism, ageism, and more. It is part of a larger picture that we need to develop about racism and how it intersects with class, gender and other social divisions.

Most people in society experience one or more of these forms of oppression at some point in their lives. Most, if not all, working class people experience exploitation and powerlessness. They may not experience marginalization, class-based violence, or a sense of being a cultural outsider — though one could argue convincingly that working-class cultural experiences are under-represented in the mainstream. People of color experience many of these conditions. Gay men as a group experience cultural dominance and violence, but they may not necessarily experience marginalization or powerlessness. White professional women experience cultural dominance, fear of sexual violence and, too often, powerlessness — especially if they constantly have to prove themselves worthy of their status. And some people experience all five of these kinds of oppression.

Summary

These five conditions are part of a complex analysis that helps us do the following:

- 1 Understand the social structures that create or perpetuate oppressive conditions;
- 1 Look critically at how these conditions and experiences affect us — as members of oppressed groups as well as members of groups that are conferred certain privileges and benefits in relation to oppressed groups.
- 1 Understand more about how different experiences of oppression affect the people we want to stand and fight with for a different kind of society.

Using these five forms of oppression as a tool for understanding the structural causes of oppression (economic, social and cultural) allows us to look at any social group's experiences without necessarily privileging one

particular form of oppression over another, or any groups' experiences over another's. At the same time, these five ways of looking at oppression help us see that people cannot be divided neatly into the 'oppressed' and the 'oppressor' columns. Not all people are oppressed to the same degree. Some do experience more and different forms of oppression than others, often because of racism. Understanding these differences is important for us as organizers. We need to build upon people's experiences of oppression to encourage them to get involved in collective action for social change, and to join with others, whose experiences with oppression may look somewhat different from their own.

Finally, this analysis of oppression can help us see more concretely what justice demands of us, toward finding effective ways to challenge social arrangements that favor a privileged few over the many, and to replace oppressive conditions with relationships and experiences that enable all people to develop their capacities to the fullest.

This essay is based on Iris Marion Young's article: "The Five Faces of Oppression" in Rethinking Power, edited by Thomas Wartenberg, SUNY Press, 1992.