

“Love as the Practice of Freedom”

bell hooks

Social commentator, essayist, memoirist, and poet bell hooks (née Gloria Jean Watkins) is a feminist theorist who speaks on contemporary issues of race, gender, and media representation in America. Her many books include *Ain't I a Woman* (1981), *Talking Back* (1989), *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (1995), *Outlaw Culture* (1994), and *Remembered Rapture* (1999). In *Black Looks* (1994), she writes, "It struck me that for black people, the pain of learning that we cannot control our images, how we see ourselves (if our vision is not decolonized), or how we are seen is so intense that it rends us. It rips and tears at the seams of our efforts to construct self and identify." In *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (1994), hooks advocates a "progressive cultural revolution" by means of repudiating all forms of domination in a "holistic manner." In order to decolonize our minds, suggests hooks, we must begin to "surrender participation in whatever sphere of coercive hierarchical domination we enjoy individual and group privilege." In the essay that follows from that book, hooks proposes an "ethic of love" as the means by which we might be guided to turn away from an ethic of domination.

In this society, there is no powerful discourse on love emerging either from politically progressive radicals or from the Left. The absence of a sustained focus on love in progressive circles arises from a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and an overdetermined emphasis on material concerns. Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination.

Without an ethic of love shaping the direction of our political vision and our radical aspirations, we are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism. It has always puzzled me that women and men who spend a lifetime working to resist and oppose one form of domination can be systematically supporting another. I have been puzzled by powerful visionary black male leaders who can speak and act passionately in resistance to racial domination and accept and embrace sexist domination of women, by feminist white women who work daily to eradicate sexism but who have major blind spots when it comes to acknowledging and resisting racism and white supremacist domination of the planet. Critically examining these blind spots, I conclude that many of us are motivated to move against domination solely when we feel our self-interest directly threatened. Often, then, the longing is not for a collective transformation of society, an end to politics of dominations, but rather simply for an end to what we feel is hurting us. This is why we desperately need an ethic of love to intervene in our self-centered longing for change. Fundamentally, if we are only committed to an improvement in that politic of domination that we feel leads directly to our individual exploitation or oppression, we not only remain attached to the status quo but act in complicity with it, nurturing and maintaining those very systems of domination. Until

we are all able to accept the interlocking, interdependent nature of systems of domination and recognize specific ways each system is maintained, we will continue to act in ways that undermine our individual quest for freedom and collective liberation struggle.

The ability to acknowledge blind spots can emerge only as we expand our concern about politics of domination and our capacity to care about the oppression and exploitation of others. A love ethic makes this expansion possible. The civil rights movement transformed society in the United States because it was fundamentally rooted in a love ethic. No leader has emphasized this ethic more than Martin Luther King, jr. He had the prophetic insight to recognize that a revolution built on any other foundation would fail. Again and again, King testified that he had "decided to love" because he believed deeply that if we are "seeking the highest good" we "find it through love" because this is "the key that unlocks the door to the meaning of ultimate reality." And the point of being in touch with a transcendent reality is that we struggle for justice, all the while realizing that we are always more than our race, class, or sex. When I look back at the civil rights movement which was in many ways limited because it was a reformist effort, I see that it had the power to move masses of people to act in the interest of racial justice – and because it was profoundly rooted in a love ethic.

The sixties Black Power movement shifted away from that love ethic. The emphasis was now more on power. And it is not surprising that the sexism that had always undermined the black liberation struggle intensified, that a misogynist approach to women became central as the equation of freedom with patriarchal manhood became a norm among black political leaders, almost all of whom were male. Indeed, the new militancy of masculinist black power equated love with weakness, announcing that the quintessential expression of freedom would be the willingness to coerce, do violence, terrorize, indeed utilize the weapons of domination. This was the crudest embodiment of Malcolm X's bold credo "by any means necessary."

On the positive side, Black Power movement shifted the focus of black liberation struggle from reform to revolution. This was an important political development, bringing with it a stronger anti-imperialist, global perspective. However, masculinist sexist biases in leadership led to the suppression of the love ethic. Hence progress was made even as something valuable was lost. While King had focused on loving our enemies, Malcolm called us back to ourselves, acknowledging that taking care of blackness was our central responsibility. Even though King talked about the importance of black self-love, he talked more about loving our enemies. Ultimately, neither he nor Malcolm lived long enough to fully integrate the love ethic into a vision of political decolonization that would provide a blueprint for the eradication of black self-hatred.

Black folks entering the realm of racially integrated, American life because of the success of civil rights and black power movement suddenly found we were grappling with an intensification of internalized racism. The deaths of these important leaders (as well as liberal white leaders who were major allies in the struggle for racial equality) ushered in tremendous feelings of hopelessness, powerlessness, and despair. Wounded in that space where we would know love, black people collectively experienced intense pain and anguish about our future. The absence of public spaces where that pain could

be articulated, expressed, shared meant that it was held in — festering, suppressing the possibility that this collective grief would be reconciled in community even as ways to move beyond it and continue resistance struggle would be envisioned. Feeling as though "the world had really come to an end," in the sense that a hope had died that racial justice would become the norm, a life-threatening despair took hold in black life. We will never know to what extent the black masculinist focus on hardness and toughness served as a barrier preventing sustained public acknowledgment of the enormous grief and pain in black life. In *World as Lover; World as Self*, Joanna Macy emphasizes in her chapter on "Despair Work" that

the refusal to feel takes a heavy toll. Not only is there an impoverishment of our emotional and sensory life . . . but this psychic numbing also impedes our capacity to process and respond to information. The energy expended in pushing down despair is diverted from more creative uses, depleting the resilience and imagination needed for fresh visions and strategies.

If black folks are to move forward in our struggle for liberation, we must confront the legacy of this unreconciled grief, for it has been the breeding ground for profound nihilistic despair. We must collectively return to a radical political vision of social change rooted in a love ethic and seek once again to convert masses of people, black and nonblack.

A culture of domination is anti-love. It requires violence to sustain itself. To choose love is to go against the prevailing values of the culture. Many people feel unable to love either themselves or others because they do not know what love is. Contemporary songs like Tina Turner's "What's Love Got To Do With It" advocate a system of exchange around desire, mirroring the economics of capitalism: the idea that love is important is mocked. In his essay "Love and Need: Is Love a Package or a Message?" Thomas Merton argues that we are taught within the framework of competitive consumer capitalism to see love as a business deal: "This concept of love assumes that the machinery of buying and selling of needs is what makes everything run. It regards life as a market and love as a variation on free enterprise." Though many folks recognize and critique the commercialization of love, they see no alternative. Not knowing how to love or even what love is, many people feel emotionally lost; others search for definitions, for ways to sustain a love ethic in a culture that negates human value and valorizes materialism.

The sales of books focusing on recovery, books that seek to teach folks ways to improve self-esteem, self-love, and our ability to be intimate in relationships, affirm that there is public awareness of a lack in most people's lives. M. Scott Peck's self-help book *The Road Less Traveled* is enormously popular because it addresses that lack.

Peck offers a working definition for love that is useful for those of us who would like to make a love ethic the core of all human interaction. He defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." Commenting on prevailing cultural attitudes about love, Peck writes:

Everyone in our culture desires to some extent to be loving, yet many are in fact not loving. I therefore conclude that the desire to love is not itself love. Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love.

His words echo Martin Luther King's declaration, "I have decided to love," which also emphasizes choice. King believed that love is "ultimately the only answer" to the problems facing this nation and the entire planet. I share that belief and the conviction that it is in choosing love, and beginning with love as the ethical foundation for politics, that we are best positioned to transform society in ways that enhance the collective good.

It is truly amazing that King had the courage to speak as much as he did about the transformative power of love in a culture where such talk is often seen as merely sentimental. In progressive political circles, to speak of love is to guarantee that one will be dismissed or considered naive. But outside those circles there are many people who openly acknowledge that they are consumed by feelings of self-hatred, who feel worthless, who want a way out. Often they are too trapped by paralyzing despair to be able to engage effectively in any movement for social change. However, if the leaders of such movements refuse to address the anguish and pain of their lives, they will never be motivated to consider personal and political recovery. Any political movement that can effectively address these needs of the spirit in the context of liberation struggle will succeed.

In the past, most folks both learned about and tended the needs of the spirit in the context of religious experience. The institutionalization and commercialization of the church has undermined the power of religious community to transform souls, to intervene politically. Commenting on the collective sense of spiritual loss in modern society, Cornel West asserts:

There is a pervasive impoverishment of the spirit in American society, and especially among Black people. Historically, there have been cultural forces and traditions, like the church, that held cold-heartedness and mean-spiritedness at bay. However, today's impoverishment of the spirit means that this coldness and meanness is becoming more and more pervasive. The church kept these forces at bay by promoting a sense of respect for others, a sense of solidarity, a sense of meaning and value which would usher in the strength to battle against evil.

Life-sustaining political communities can provide a similar space for the renewal of the spirit. That can happen only if we address the needs of the spirit in progressive political theory and practice.

Often when Cornel West and I speak with large groups of black folks about the impoverishment of spirit in black life, the lovelessness, sharing that we can collectively recover ourselves in love, the response is overwhelming. Folks want to know how to begin the practice of loving. For me that is where education for critical consciousness has to enter. When I look at my life, searching it for a blueprint that aided me in the

process of decolonization, of personal and political self-recovery, I know that it was learning the truth about how systems of domination operate that helped, learning to look both inward and outward with a critical eye. Awareness is central to the process of love as the practice of freedom. Whenever those of us who are members of exploited and oppressed groups dare to critically interrogate our locations, the identities and allegiances that inform how we live our lives, we begin the process of decolonization. If we discover in ourselves self-hatred, low self-esteem, or internalized white supremacist thinking and we face it, we can begin to heal. Acknowledging the truth of our reality, both individual and collective, is a necessary stage for personal and political growth. This is usually the most painful stage in the process of learning to love – the one many of us seek to avoid. Again, once we choose love, we instinctively possess the inner resources to confront that pain. Moving through the pain to the other side we find the joy, the freedom of spirit that a love ethic brings.

Choosing love we also choose to live in community, and that means that we do not have to change by ourselves. We can count on critical affirmation and dialogue with comrades walking a similar path. African American theologian Howard Thurman believed that we best learn love as the practice of freedom in the context of community. Commenting on this aspect of his work in the essay "Spirituality out on The Deep," Luther Smith reminds us that Thurman felt the United States was given to diverse groups of people by the universal life force as a location for the building of community. Paraphrasing Thurman, he writes: "Truth becomes true in community. The social order hungers for a center (i.e. spirit, soul) that gives it identity, power, and purpose. America, and all cultural entities, are in search of a soul." Working within community, whether it be sharing a project with another person, or with a larger group, we are able to experience joy in struggle. That joy needs to be documented. For if we only focus on the pain, the difficulties which are surely real in any process of transformation, we only show a partial picture.

A love ethic emphasizes the importance of service to others. Within the value system of the United States any task or job that is related to "service" is devalued. Service strengthens our capacity to know compassion and deepens our insight. To serve another I cannot see them as an object, I must see their subjecthood. Sharing the teaching of Shambala warriors, Buddhist Joanna Macy writes that we need weapons of compassion and insight.

You have to have compassion because it gives you the juice, the power, the passion to move. When you open to the pain of the world you move, you act. But that weapon is not enough. It can burn you out, so you need the other – you need insight into the radical interdependence of all phenomena. With that wisdom you know that it is not a battle between good guys and bad guys, but that the line between good and evil runs through the landscape of every human heart. With insight into our profound interrelatedness, you know that actions undertaken with pure intent have repercussions throughout the web of life, beyond what you can measure or discern.

Macy shares that compassion and insight can "sustain us as agents of wholesome change" for they are "gifts for us to claim now in the healing of our world." In part, we

learn to love by giving service. This is again a dimension of what Peck means when he speaks of extending ourselves for another.

The civil rights movement had the power to transform society because the individuals who struggle alone and in community for freedom and justice wanted these gifts to be for all, not just the suffering and the oppressed. Visionary black leaders such as Septima Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Howard Thurman warned against isolationism. They encouraged black people to look beyond our own circumstances and assume responsibility for the planet. This call for communion with a world beyond the self, the tribe, the race, the nation, was a constant invitation for personal expansion and growth. When masses of black folks starting thinking solely in terms of "us and them," internalizing the value system of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, blind spots developed, the capacity for empathy needed for the building of community was diminished. To heal our wounded body politic we must reaffirm our commitment to a vision of what King referred to in the essay "Facing the Challenge of a New Age" as a genuine commitment to "freedom and justice for all." My heart is uplifted when I read King's essay; I am reminded where true liberation leads us. It leads us beyond resistance to transformation. King tells us that "the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption, the end is the creation of the beloved community." The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom.

Working with the Text

1. Why does progressive politics "desperately need an ethic of love," according to bell hooks? How does she explain its disappearance from contemporary political discourse? Why is it particularly important in the struggle for racial justice?
2. What is "love"? Where does the essay find a working definition of this famously elusive term? What sort of politics derives ideas from the literature of self-help? In other words, does the essay make claims – overt or implied – about where political theory should look for inspiration? What other nonpolitical disciplines furnish ideas to "Love as the Practice of Freedom"?
3. Why does the essay stress love as a "practice"? Consult a good dictionary (the Oxford English Dictionary, if you can) to see which meanings of the word "practice" may be relevant; then consider the relationships among the various definitions. According to bell hooks, what does the practice of love require people to do? And what does it do for them, both collectively and individually?
4. The essay features a number of exemplary characters, from Martin Luther King, who illustrates the vast political efficacy of love, to Tina Turner, whose 1984 hit "What's Love Got To Do With It" expresses a contrasting cynicism. Why do you suppose the

author introduces these figures? What do they have in common, and where do they differ? Given the essay's topic and approach, did any of them surprise you?

5. Identify another ideal not normally associated with politics – possibly one from a completely different value system. You may wish to brainstorm with classmates or look up lists of unusual virtues, such as those embraced by crusaders or geisha. In a timed writing exercise (20 to 30 minutes), consider the possible benefits of your irregular ideal to the specific branch of politics that you know best. The branch need not be national; it can be extremely local—the politics of your college sorority, for example. Write for the allotted time without stopping to reflect or reread.

Transcription of the Speech by James Baldwin

Audio available at:

<http://www.freedomarchives.org/Braden%20Audio.Images/BaldwinWeb.mp3>

The beginnings of this country have nothing whatever to do with the myths we have created about it.

The country did not come about because a handful of people in Europe said, "I want to be free" and promptly built a boat or raft and crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Not at all. Not at all.

The people who settled the country, the people who came here, came here for one reason – no matter how disguised – they came here because they thought it would be better here than where they were. That's why they came, and that's the only reason that they came. Anybody who was *making it* in England did not get on the Mayflower. [Laughter and applause.] This is important. It is important that one begin to recognize this because part of the dilemma of this country is that it has managed to believe the myths it has created about its own past.

Which is another way of saying that it entirely denied its past.

We did several things in order to conquer the country. There was, at the point we reached these shores, a group of people who had never heard of machines or as far as I know of money, and we promptly eliminated them. We killed them. I'm talking about the Indians.

I'll bet you as we say in Harlem, a fat man, that there are not many American children being taught American history have any real sense or what that collision was like or what we really did, how we really achieved the extermination of the Indians, or what that meant. And it is interesting to consider that there are very few social critics, none to my knowledge but I say very few, have begun to analyze the hidden reasons the cowboy/Indian legend is still one of the most popular legends in American life, so popular that it still in 1963 dominates the

television screen.

And I suppose that all those cowboy/Indian stories are designed to reassure us that no crime was committed. We have made a legend out of a massacre.

Now slavery, like murder, is one of the oldest human institutions. So we cannot quarrel about the *fact* of slavery; that is to say we could, but that's another story. But we enslaved him because in order to conquer the country, we had to have cheap labor. And the man who is now known as the American Negro, who is one of the oldest of American citizens, and the *only* one who never wanted to come here, [applause] did the dirty work. Hoed the cotton. Do you hoe cotton? No? Chopped the cotton... whatever you do with cotton, picked cotton. [laughter] Lined track. Helped, in fact, I think it is not too strong for me to say; let me put it this way: without his presence, without that strong back, the American economy, the American nation would have had a vast amount of trouble creating its capital. If one did not have the captive toting the ?? and lifting the bales as they put it, it would be a very different country, and it would certainly be much poorer.

But the people I am speaking of who settled the country had a fatal flaw. They could recognize a man when they saw one. They knew he wasn't, I mean, you can tell, they knew he wasn't anything else but a man. But since they were Christian, and since they had already decided that they came here to establish a free country, the only way to justify the role this chattel was playing in one's life was to say that he was not a man, because if he wasn't a man then no crime had been committed. That lie is the basis of our present trouble. Because that is an extremely complex lie, if on the one hand one man cannot avoid recognizing another man, it is also true then, obviously, that the man, the black man who was in captivity and treated like an animal and told that he was one, knew that he was a man and knew that something was wrong. I prefer to believe that if this society is created by men, it can be remade by men. The price for this transformation is

high.

Every white citizen of this country will have to accept the fact that he is not innocent. And that those dogs and those hoses, those crimes are being committed in your name.

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.

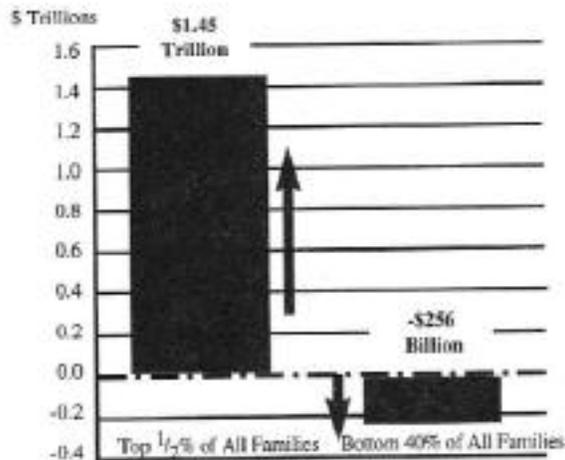
The last decade provided a fine example of the solidification of domination politics and the surge of economic injustice, oppression, and moral bankruptcy. Not since the 1920s had there been such an increase in economic inequality as there was in the 1980s, the Reagan/Bush years. From 1983-1989, the 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 sub-urbs, 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%
Total federal taxes paid by these 1,555 giant corporations:	\$0.00

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 link-age 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.

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

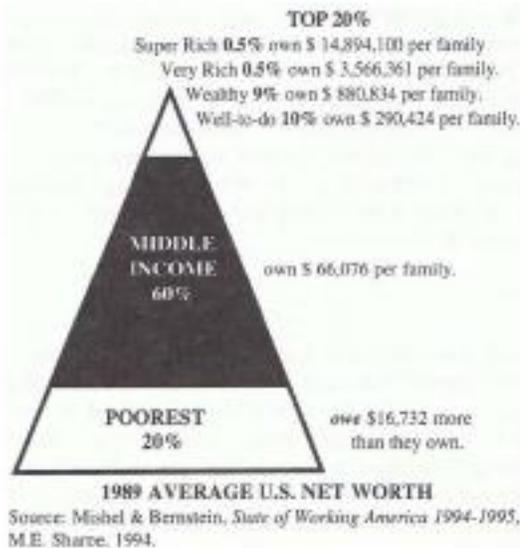
The most powerful factor on this chart is wealth, the top of column A. Some people argue that economic injustice and oppression occur because it is simply in people's nature to engage in the seven deadly sins of the Middle Ages: pride, gluttony, avarice, lust, sloth, anger, and envy. I and others, to 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

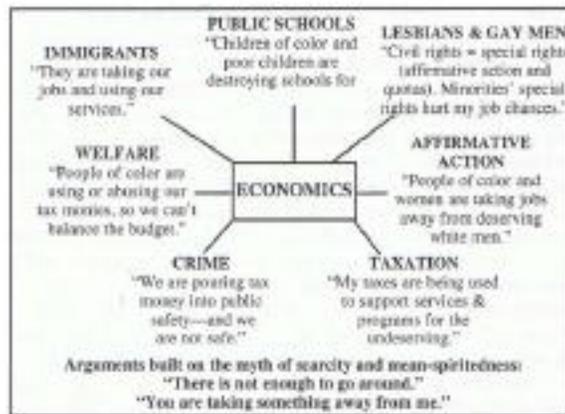
Those who occupy the lower tiers of the economic pyramid are also pitted against one another for scarce jobs and resources. The Right rides high by fabricating the myth of scarcity—and the bottom 90% of the economic pyramid is held in place when people respond to this belief that there is not enough 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, scape-goating 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,

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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 work-ers 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 look 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 separate-ness, 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

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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 accept-ed 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 combina-tion 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.

What is White Supremacy?

by Elizabeth "Betita" Martinez

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***Workshop Definition* White Supremacy** is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege.

I. What does it mean to say it is a system?

The most common mistake people make when they talk about racism is to think it is a collection of prejudices and individual acts of discrimination. They do not see that it is a system, a web of interlocking, reinforcing institutions: economic, military, legal, educational, religious, and cultural. As a system, racism affects every aspect of life in a country.

By not seeing that racism is systemic (part of a system), people often personalize or individualize racist acts. For example, they will reduce racist police behavior to "a few bad apples" who need to be removed, rather than seeing it exists in police departments all over the country and is basic to the society. This mistake has real consequences: refusing to see police brutality as part of a system, and that the system needs to be changed, means that the brutality will continue.

The need to recognize racism as being systemic is one reason the term White Supremacy has been more useful than the term racism. They refer to the same problem but:

- A. The purpose of racism is much clearer when we call it "white supremacy." Some people think of racism as just a matter of prejudice. "Supremacy" defines a power relationship.
- B. Race is an unscientific term. Although racism is a social reality, it is based on a term, which has no biological or other scientific reality.
- C. The term racism often leads to dead-end debates about whether a particular remark or action by an individual white person was really racist or not. We will achieve a clearer understanding of racism if we analyze how a certain action relates to the system of White Supremacy.
- D. The term White Supremacy gives white people a clear choice of supporting or opposing a system, rather than getting bogged down in claims to be anti-racist (or not) in their personal behavior.

II. What does it mean to say White Supremacy is historically based?

Every nation has a creation myth, or origin myth, which is the story people are taught of how the nation came into being. Ours says the United States began with Columbus's so-called "discovery" of America, continued with settlement by brave Pilgrims, won its independence from England with the American Revolution, and then expanded westward until it became the enormous, rich country you see today.

That is the origin myth. It omits three key facts about the birth and growth of the

United States as a nation. Those facts demonstrate that White Supremacy is fundamental to the existence of this country.

A. The United States is a nation state created by military conquest in several stages. The first stage was the European seizure of the lands inhabited by indigenous peoples, which they called Turtle Island. Before the European invasion, there were between nine and eighteen million indigenous people in North America. By the end of the Indian Wars, there were about 250,000 in what is now called the United States, and about 123,000 in what is now Canada (source of these population figures from the book, "The State of Native America" ed. by M. Annette Jaimes, South End Press, 1992). That process must be called genocide, and it created the land base of this country. The elimination of indigenous peoples and seizure of their land was the first condition for its existence.

B. The United States could not have developed economically as a nation without enslaved African labor. When agriculture and industry began to grow in the colonial period, a tremendous labor shortage existed. Not enough white workers came from Europe and the European invaders could not put indigenous peoples to work in sufficient numbers. It was enslaved Africans who provided the labor force that made the growth of the United States possible.

That growth peaked from about 1800 to 1860, the period called the Market Revolution. During this period, the United States changed from being an agricultural/commercial economy to an industrial corporate economy. The development of banks, expansion of the credit system, protective tariffs, and new transportation systems all helped make this possible. But the key to the Market Revolution was the export of cotton, and this was made possible by slave labor.

C. The third major piece in the true story of the formation of the United States as a nation was the take-over of half of Mexico by war-- today's Southwest. This enabled the U.S. to expand to the Pacific, and thus open up huge trade with Asia -- markets for export, goods to import and sell in the U.S. It also opened to the U.S. vast mineral wealth in Arizona, agricultural wealth in California, and vast new sources of cheap labor to build railroads and develop the economy.

The United States had already taken over the part of Mexico we call Texas in 1836, then made it a state in 1845. The following year, it invaded Mexico and seized its territory under the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. A few years later, in 1853, the U.S. acquired a final chunk of Arizona from Mexico by threatening to renew the war. This completed the territorial boundaries of what is now the United States.

Those were the three foundation stones of the United States as a nation. One more key step was taken in 1898, with the takeover of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Guam and Cuba by means of the Spanish-American War. Since then, all but Cuba have remained U.S. colonies or neo-colonies, providing new sources of wealth and military power for the United States. The 1898 take-over completed the phase of direct conquest and colonization, which had begun with the murderous theft of Native American lands five centuries before.

Many people in the United States hate to recognize these truths. They prefer the established origin myth. They could be called the Premise Keepers.

III. What does it mean to say that White Supremacy is a system of exploitation?

The roots of U.S. racism or White Supremacy lie in establishing economic exploitation by the theft of resources and human labor, then justifying that exploitation by institutionalizing the inferiority of its victims. The first application of White Supremacy or racism by the EuroAmericans who control U.S. society was against indigenous peoples.

Then came Blacks, originally as slaves and later as exploited waged labor. They were followed by Mexicans, who lost their means of survival when they lost their landholdings, and also became wage-slaves. Mexican labor built the Southwest, along with Chinese, Filipino, Japanese and other workers.

In short, White Supremacy and economic power were born together. The United States is the first nation in the world to be born racist (South Africa came later) and also the first to be born capitalist. That is not a coincidence. In this country, as history shows, capitalism and racism go hand in hand.

IV. Origins of Whiteness and White Supremacy as Concepts

The first European settlers called themselves English, Irish, German, French, Dutch, etc. -- not white. Over half of those who came in the early colonial period were servants. By 1760 the population reached about two million, of whom 400,000 were enslaved Africans. An elite of planters developed in the southern colonies. In Virginia, for example, 50 rich white families held the reins of power but were vastly outnumbered by non-whites. In the Carolinas, 25,000 whites faced 40,000 Black slaves and 60,000 indigenous peoples in the area. Class lines hardened as the distinction between rich and poor became sharper. The problem of control loomed large and fear of revolt from below grew.

There had been slave revolts from the beginning but elite whites feared even more that discontented whites -- servants, tenant farmers, the urban poor, the property-less, soldiers and sailors -- would join Black slaves to overthrow the existing order. As early as 1663, indentured white servants and Black slaves in Virginia had formed a conspiracy to rebel and gain their freedom. In 1676 came Bacon's Rebellion by white frontiersmen and servants alongside Black slaves. The rebellion shook up Virginia's planter elite. Many other rebellions followed, from South Carolina to New York. The main fear of elite whites everywhere was a class fear.

Their solution: divide and control. Certain privileges were given to white indentured servants. They were allowed to join militias, carry guns, acquire land, and have other legal rights not allowed to slaves. With these privileges they were legally declared white on the basis of skin color and continental origin. That made them "superior" to Blacks (and Indians). Thus whiteness was born as a racist concept to prevent lower-class whites from joining people of color, especially Blacks, against their class enemies. The concept of whiteness became a source of unity and strength for the vastly outnumbered Euroamericans -- as in South Africa, another settler nation. Today, unity across color lines remains the biggest threat in the eyes of a white ruling class.

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In the mid-1800s, new historical developments served to strengthen the concept of whiteness and institutionalize White Supremacy. The doctrine of Manifest Destiny, born at a time of aggressive western expansion, said that the United States was destined by God to take over other peoples and lands. The term was first used in 1845 by the editor of a popular journal, who affirmed, "the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole continent which providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government."

Since the time of Jefferson, the United States had had its eye on expanding to the Pacific Ocean and establishing trade with Asia. Others in the ruling class came to want more slave states, for reasons of political power, and this also required westward expansion. Both goals pointed to taking over part of Mexico. The first step was Texas, which was acquired for the United States by filling the territory with Anglos who then declared a revolution from Mexico in 1836. After failing to purchase more Mexican territory, President James Polk created a pretext for starting a war with the declared goal of expansion. The notoriously brutal, two-year war was justified in the name of Manifest Destiny.

Manifest Destiny is a profoundly racist concept. For example, a major force of opposition to gobbling up Mexico at the time came from politicians saying "the degraded Mexican-Spanish" were unfit to become part of the United States; they were "a wretched people . . . mongrels."

In a similar way, some influential whites who opposed slavery in those years said Blacks should be removed from U.S. soil, to avoid "contamination" by an inferior people (source of all this information is the book *Manifest Destiny* by Anders Stephanson, Hill & Wang, 1995).

Earlier, Native Americans had been the target of white supremacist beliefs which not only said they were dirty, heathen "savages," but fundamentally inferior in their values. For example, they did not see land as profitable real estate but as Our Mother.

The doctrine of Manifest Destiny facilitated the geographic extension and economic development of the United States while confirming racist policies and practices. It established White Supremacy more firmly than ever as central to the U.S. definition of itself. The arrogance of asserting that God gave white people (primarily men) the right to dominate everything around them still haunts our society and sustains its racist oppression.

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